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Topos and Topography of Italy in Contemporary German Artist's Prose

Abstract

The article deliberates upon the relationship of artistic creativity and the topos and topography of Italy in German literature in the decades around 2000. Italy is continuously one of the most important references in artist's texts. The writers create characters that enter a dialogue with the multi-layer European cultural space represented by "the Italian narratives". The paper deals with the traditional dichotomy of the topos: North – South, light – darkness, ancient culture – Christian culture, life – death, sensuality – spirituality, nature – culture and civilization. The specifics of the connection between artistic creativity and the Italy topos are examined on the basis of three examples: Hanns-Josef Ortheil *Rom, Villa Massimo* (2015), Feridun Zaimoglu *Rom intensiv* (2007) and Martin Mosebach *Die schöne Gewohnheit zu leben – eine italienische Reise* (1997). The analysis focuses on the palimpsests of space, time and text. It is characteristic that the figures move in a topically charged area of Italy and examine their aesthetic points of view. The character construction goes back to the model of a Flâneur, wanderer and traveller who – in contrast to previous epochs – is equipped with communication technologies that enable him to create his own trans-medial message.

Keywords: artist' novel, Künstlerroman, German literature, Italian Journey, Italy, Rome, palimpsest, Hanns-Josef Ortheil, Feridun Zaimoglu, Martin Mosebach

Literature creates spaces of imagination which are overwritten again and again as projection screens. Italy narratives are one of them. The analysis focuses on texts that were written in the decades around the year 2000. Their main characters are artists. These are artist's novels, artist's stories, travel diaries, the stylized autobiographic and biographic novel, the literary reportage. Artist's prose can look back on a long tradition in Germany. *Ardinghello und die glückseligen Inseln* [Ardinghell and the Blessed Islands] (1787) by Wilhelm Heinse is considered the first artist's novel [Künstlerroman] (Marcuse 1978: 37). The genre is characterised by the protagonist who is an artist or is aspiring to become one and by complex excerpts

of aesthetic deliberations (Wilpert 1989: 489). Its main subject is the search of the creative individual for universal values: aesthetic, religious, political. Most of the important writers in German language tried their hand at these genres, e.g. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Thomas Mann or Thomas Bernhard.

The increased interest of research in the Italian subject area is documented by the new bibliography of 2003, edited by Stefanie Kraemer and Peter Gendolla *Italien: eine Bibliographie zu Italienreisen in der deutschen Literatur* (Krämer, Gendolla 2003). A literary bibliography was published in 1989, edited by Anja Oswald (Oswald 1989). The following article is dedicated to the question of how artistic creativity is shaped as a theme in contemporary literature and what role topos and topography of Italy are playing in this.

The writers create characters that enter a dialogue with the multi-layer European cultural space represented by “the Italian narratives”. They reach for *hypotexts* (Genette 1993: 5) of the Italian travel to identify the position of the individual in the increasingly changing world. The character construction goes back to the model of a Flâneur, wanderer and traveller who (in contrast to previous epochs) is equipped with communication technologies (smartphone) that enable him to create his own trans-medial message. The change also occurs on the side of the reader who has access to digital databases regarding art. He gets closer to the *model reader* (Eco 1994) who is able to reconstruct perfectly the designed network of references in the text and creates his own multimedia text. In comparison to other topographies (e.g. Berlin), *Italianism*¹ is traditionally characterized by references to history of art.

While London, New York and Los Angeles must be regarded as the centres of contemporary art, Italy remains an integral part of narratives of artistic creativity in contemporary German literature. You may find that the flow of Italian literature does not break off. Numerous texts very consciously tie in with the past: with the milestones of German-language Italian literature of the past centuries. The texts present different approaches to this projection space of German writers. It is characteristic of these narratives that figures as Flâneurs, travellers or fugitives move in a topically charged area of Italy. The movement takes place horizontally in space and at the same time vertically in the psyche of the artist figures. Escape and utopia have been fixed motifs since Goethe. Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *Italian Journey* (the journey took place in the years 1786–1788, the text was written much later and edited 1816–1817) is still the most important literary reference. The titles of more recent texts alone make this always up-to-date reference clear – such as Hartmut Lange’s novella *Die Bildungsreise* [The Educational Journey] (2000), Martin Mosebach’s volume of stories, essays and reportages *Die schöne Gewohnheit zu leben – eine italienische Reise* [Living, the beautiful habit – an Italian journey] (1997) or Joachim Fest’s travel book *Im Gegenlicht. Eine italienische Reise* [In the Backlight. An Italian Journey] (2004). A typology of *Italianism* in German poetry was presented by Paul Requadt (Requadt 1962). Peter Gendolla refers to this typology in his recent study *Die Erfindung Italiens. Reiseerfahrung und Imagination* [The Invention of Italy. Travel Experience and Imagination] (Gendolla 2014) which is used in this article. The basic description of the topos Italy in German literature follows this study.

1 The Polish researcher, Olga Płaszczewska, uses this term in her monograph of 2010 *Przestrzenie komparatystyki – italianizm* [Spaces of Comparative Studies: Italianism] (Płaszczewska 2010).

Methodology and Outline

The texts examined in this article were selected according to semantic and temporal criteria. The main characters are artists; the texts were written around 2000. In principle the study is committed to the method of literary hermeneutics as defined by Gadamer. (Gadamer 1972) In order to appropriately grasp the topic of artistic creativity three research fields are specifically focused: the literary figure, space-time relations (*chronotope*) and the aesthetic discourse in the text. Recent narratological studies provide numerous insights in these areas. The time-space relations are analysed both based on Bakhtin's seminal work *Chronotope* (Bakhtin 1981) and with reference to studies in the field of *spation turn* (Hallet, Neumann 2009). Bakhtin's approach is important because it consistently conceives of time and space as a unit. The chronotope is closely interwoven with the plot of the characters and with the history of the genre. Bakhtin analysed in this way, for example, the Hellenistic adventure novel, the chivalric novel or the English horror novel (Bakhtin 1981) and it identifies special units – such as the chronotope of the path (Bakhtin 1981: 22). The Spatial Turn deals with social and cultural processes that shape the spatial structures in the text. This includes, for example, the question of the experiences of proximity and distance, the self and the foreign, the centre and the periphery (Hallet, Neumann: 26–27). This article attempts to analyse modern artist's prose in the light of these findings. In the chronotope of artist's prose topography is brought together as a space for figures within the narrated world, as an artistic landscape in historical change and as formative cultural topoi. Above all it should be noted that the positioning and movement of the characters in space have a real (in the sense of the narrated world) and a symbolic meaning. The movement takes place horizontally in the topography and at the same time vertically in the psyche of the artist figures. This is expressed very clearly in the design of the Flâneur-figures². In the further course of the article this character is explained in more detail using Hanns-Josef Ortheil's novel *Rome, Villa Massimo*. The intertextual practice (which is complex in the artist's prose due to its recourse to literary traditions) follows Gérard Genette's study *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Genette's analysis model examines in detail "five types of transtextual relationships" (Genette 1993: 10): *intertextuality* here means an "effective presence of a text in another text" (Genette 1993: 10), meaning more or less literal borrowings from other texts: quotation, plagiarism and allusion. *Paratextuality* refers to the structure of the relationships in the text as a whole, paratexts control the reading process and function as a commentary: this includes the title, the foreword, notes to the reader, motti, illustrations, cover, chapter headings, etc. For Genette, *metatextuality* is the practice of commenting within the text as a whole: *i.e.*, the text under investigation deals with other texts without necessarily naming them. Metatextual relationships thus mean all forms of commentary in the text. *Architextuality* means the relationship of the text to the genre, whereby the latter can either be named (*e.g.* in the subtitle: novel, story, etc.) but does not have to be.

In this terminology the architext means an original text of the genre. The most important category of transtextual references, which corresponds to the term intertextuality in Julia Kristeva and Michael

2 Andrea Bartl cites Charles Baudlaire's *Le peintre de la moderne* as literary sources for this figure, in particular the third part "L'artiste, homme du monde, homme des faules et enfant." The artist flâneur seeks beauty in the fleeting and accidental, according to Baudlaire, it is the "beauty of modernity." The author names *The man of the crowd* bei Edgar Allan Poe as the second most important text. (Bartl 2009: 148–149) For the German-speaking world, Walter Benjamin's *Passagen* is of particular importance. The essay "Flâneur" is part of "Charles Baudelaire. A poet in the age of high capitalism" (Benjamin 1974).

Riffaterre, is called *hypertextuality* in Genette's work. In order to capture this precisely, Genette introduces the terms hypotext and hypertext. The hypotext is imitated and/ or transformed in the hypertext, the hypertext superimposes the hypotext: e.g. Homer's *Odyssey* would be the hypotext for *Ulysses* by Joyce (Genette 1993: 15). Hypertext is thus the result of transformations and extensive continuations, which Genette calls transposition. Genette describes the main genres and procedures of literary transtextuality: parody, travesty, persiflage and pastiche (Genette 1993: 9–215). The study of aesthetic discourse in this article generally follows the elements of discursive practice identified by Michel Foucault. The objects that are discussed in the discourse are thus examined (what is said/ what is not); the subject positions (who is speaking/ who is not speaking, which institutions determine the discourse/ which institutions control the discourse) and the terms (how is the discourse coded) (Foucault 1972, Foucault 1991). The aesthetic discourse in the texts is analysed on the basis of these questions if this content can be identified in the text. It is conveyed both in the statements of the figures (art talks and artists talks) and via topographical-topical references.

In the second part I will present selected texts. The first two novels by Hanns-Josef Ortheil and Feridun Zaimoglu are characterized by the satirical stylistic register of varying intensity. The other texts by Martin Mosebach are offering an approach to Italian themes between light irony and seriousness. It is characteristic of all examples that the figures move in the topically charged spaces constructed as palimpsests: as a multi-layered structure of culture and text.

The Topos of Italy

The topos of Italy is traditionally characterized by dichotomy: North – South, light – darkness, ancient culture – Christian culture, life – death, sensuality – spirituality, nature – culture and civilization (Gendolla 2014: 59, 81). Contemporary writers use the duality of the topos for their own literary creations.

Within the framework of a narrated story the artist figures can move from the pole of the euphoric enthusiasm for the light/south and the associated eruption of artistic creativity to its opposite pole. It is always the south and Italy where the exit from the creative crisis is sought (e.g. *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann). The sensory and spiritual perception that has been taken to the extreme (which is always stimulated by the great artistic heritage of Italy) is looking for a further development of the work of art that could stand the comparison with the past. Therefore, the story ends with success or failure – overcoming the crisis or self-extinction of the artistic subject.

An even more precise breakdown of the topos also points to its dichotomous character which helps the author to express himself in a strong literary manner. Rome is on one hand the centre of the ancient world and ancient art – on the other hand the city of ruins. The idea of Vanitas is omnipresent in the baroque churches and tombs of Rome and Naples. But on the other hand, there is the sensual splendour of life in the works of art and architectural installations (e.g. fountain installations). The question of the essence of beauty is being provoked constantly.

The dualism of body and mind can be identified as part of the topos. The self-destructive projections of the sensual merging with the ideal of beauty are depicted in literature. The following can serve as examples: in the Romantic period: Joseph von Eichendorff *Das Marmorbild* [The Marble Statue], in early 20th century Thomas Mann *Tod in Venedig* [Death in Venice] and in 2000 Hartmut Lange *Die*

Bildungsreise [The Educational Journey]). Artists from the north hope to overcome an artistic crisis and Italy serves as a projection screen.

Ancient and Christian myths as well as literature itself all belong to the topos (Greek and Roman poetry, Dante, Boccaccio, the characters of the *Commedia dell' Arte* and travel literature). A no less important aspect are the pilgrimages to the religious centre of Christianity and their secularized form – the educational journeys to the places where famous artists lived and worked in Italy and Rome. Their legends are continued in contemporary literature.

Rome and Villa Massimo as Topography and Literary Subject

The literary journey forms the most important narrative. Rome is the centre as the palimpsest city. Just like Gérard Genette focused on the broad intertextual relationships in literature in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Genette 1997) the term *Palimpsest* in cultural and sociological studies combines the material tradition and the processes of memory. The city appears as a changing space of memory that has been overwritten several times. The material historical tradition meets the subjective meanings (Binder 2015). In the literary texts figures move in the topography of Rome presented as a palimpsest city.

Numerous works by the literary scholarship holders of the German Academy in Rome, Villa Massimo, refer to the one-year stay in this institution. Two works are briefly presented below: Hanns-Josef Ortheil with *Rom, Villa Massimo* (2015) and Feridun Zaimoglu *Rom intensiv* (2007). Both fictional artist novels are ironic and satirical in their narrative style.

Rome, Villa Massimo is an artist's novel revolving around a group of artists who received one-year grants at Villa Massimo. The fact that an institution and a group of artists are the focus and not the strong artistic personality can be seen as a postmodern departure from the typical characteristics of the genre. The main character is Peter Ka, a poet from a German provincial town who is allowed to devote himself to his poetic work in Rome for a year. The character does it rather marginally. He is focused on relationships with other scholarship holders and the city of Rome which he would like to explore in his own individual way. The narrative structure with personal narration ensures distance and closeness at the same time. The artists in the novel do not have names but rather epithets given to them by Peter Ka; and they correspond to the types of artistic personalities – from the creative “craftsman” (the architects, the musicians) to the psychopathological type of artistic genius. Deviating from the genre tradition, it is not the man, but the female painter from Studio Ten. The Studio Ten is an intertextual reference to the poet-rebel Ralf Dieter Brinkmann. He lived there in the 1970es and wrote his well-known Rome diary *Rom, Blicke* [Rome, looks] (Brinkmann 2006).

The creative and emotional tension among the characters is linked to the presentations of the works in Villa Massimo. The love story that develops in the novel – a typical motif of the artist's novel – does not end with a happy ending but with the outbreak of mental illness in the painter from Studio Ten and her hasty departure. The love story that was not fulfilled in life finds its fulfilment in the work – another typical motif of the artist's novel. The poet is only able to write the new volume of poetry after his return to Germany. In reference to Goethe's *Roman Elegies*, which he wrote after his stay in Italy, the fictional volume of poetry is called *Elegien, römisch-bergisch. I–LII* (Ortheil 2017: 263). The painter from Studio Ten becomes a muse – It is a traditional twist in the male artist's vita.

The Figure of the Flâneur

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Peter Ka approaches the city as a Flâneur, as a walker and observer. The figure wanders through the city, taking photographs, recordings and making notes. Living and writing become a creative process. Firstly, he examines his immediate surroundings. He observes the people: how they behave, talk, what they read, how they eat. He gets to know everyday culture. It is much later that he looks at the sights of the city – and even these he sees randomly – led by his aesthetic intuition. The synaesthetic access to the city and rejecting the overwhelming knowledge become program:

In the beginning he simply drove the metro lines to the respective terminus. He walks long distances, photographs and records sounds, sounds and conversations with the help of his smartphone. [...] He understands the whole thing as a search for material that is not targeted but as free and random as possible. Images, films, sounds and texts of the eternal city are picked up and assembled into a disordered brew (or mix) as a basis and starting meta for later poems. (Ortheil 2017: 176–177)

The poet visits on his way the early Christian church of Santa Constanza (the mausoleum for Emperor Constantine's daughter). He describes the contemplation of the building and then the outburst of artistic enthusiasm and inspiration (Ortheil 2017: 86–90). The encounter with the city puts the Flâneur in a state of happiness since he can here indulge in the synaesthetic experience. The city is depicted as a Palimpsest, as a multi-layered cultural text and at the same time as a synaesthetically experienced space that the artist figure wanders through and uses creatively. The stimuli in form of art, architecture, food, drink, landscape and light characterize this creative encounter with the city. All senses are activated. The poet is inspired by the city and the city becomes a literary text as the creative process continues – but the final literary result is less important than the creative process itself. The well-known sights of Rome appear in the novel as (literally) “fleeting” when Peter Ka accompanies the sick female painter to the airport by taxi:

They don't talk anything, only the driver speaks, and since he is sure to drive two German tourists to the airport he explains the whole environment. He drives very fast and the great Roman monuments appear like swaying, heavy figures, as if one were in a film by Fellini. Out of sheer helplessness, Peter Ka points his finger out again and again: *San Giovanni, the Circo Massimo, the Via Ostiense!* [...]. (Ortheil 2017: 257)

The Aesthetic Discourse in Rome, Villa Massimo

The aesthetic discourse in the text is composed of the characters' art conversations and a large number of real and fictional works depicted, which has been typical of the genre of the artist's novel since its creation. The access to the eternal city in the form of strolling is an aesthetic statement. As Bartl emphasizes, the artist-flâneur seeks beauty in the fleeting and accidental, it is “the beauty of modernity” according to Baudelaire (Bartl 2009: 148–149).

The novel has an unmistakably ironic undertone. This marks the subject's position. It is up to the reader to assess the aesthetic judgments – whether to share them or not. In the literary field, the broad Classics and the Classics of Modern Poetry clearly dominate. Intertextual references lead back to J. W. v. Goethe. In reference to Goethe's *Roman Elegies*, which he wrote after his stay in Italy, the fictional volume

of poetry by Peter Ka is called *Elegien, römisch-bergisch. I–LII* (Ortheil 2017: 263). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's stay in Rome is noted by the poet. He visits Casa di Goethe but he refuses to read the *Italian Journey*. Goethe's *Italian Journey* becomes an "architext *ex negativo*" – namely in the main character's fear of his influence on his own creativity. Peter Ka declares unbiased seeing to be the poetic method – similarly to Goethe (Ortheil 2017: 166). Well-known authors and texts appear as intertextual references (according to Genette): Catullus, Horace, Ovid (Ortheil 2017: 12), Eugenio Montale, Salvatore Quasimodo, Pier Paolo Pasolini (Ortheil 2017: 11), Gottfried Benn (Ortheil 2017: 16), Stefan George (Ortheil 2017: 16–17), H. C. Artmann (Ortheil: 20) and others. In a satirical passage against novels that are not well composed (Ortheil 2017: 50) Peter Ka proclaims the "ideal of brevity" (Ortheil 2017: 112): a purist poetry that is short, precise and musical. In this context, he mentions Stefan George (Ortheil 2017: 16–17), Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Else Lasker-Schüler (Ortheil 2017: 19).

An important object of the discourse is linked both to the figure of the painter and the figure of the poet: how do modern artists react to the influence of the Italian artistic tradition with which they have to measure themselves in Rome? Peter Ka reports that the painter spent her entire Roman period in the studio or in the immediate vicinity: "But never in a museum or in a church! Because all of this would just have been "talked" into her! Yes, that's how she must have understood the Roman world with its infinite number of references and meanings: as a mighty cosmos that approached her more and more and "talked into" her! So that she barely managed to continue painting. Until the last picture. And after that it was definitely over. Departure, return, end of the permanent threat, flight back to Germany!" (Ortheil 2017: 257). For a long time Peter Ka cannot decide how to approach the city of Rome and all other artistic figures also feel the enormous pressure in confrontation with the great artistic tradition. The only exception is the successful sculptor who inscribed his own art in the cultural text of Italy with the help of professional and targeted PR activities (Ortheil 2017: 115–116). This attitude is easy to see as a marketing strategy, but it does not solve the real problem of the artists, who see themselves more as a footnote to the great art tradition. In context of lyrics, Peter Ka formulates an attempt at a solution that is in line with the aesthetic principles of postmodernism: "You had to parody the great gods, absolutely, you had to worship them and at the same time keep them at bay, you had to walk next to them, whistling, in the best of moods, but under no circumstances could you become their pupils and adepts" (Ortheil 2017: 17). The aesthetic discourse includes the question of modern art institutions. Orteil shows the individual artist figures within the group dynamics. This is characterized less by artistic exchange than by competition. Success in an artistic career depends above all on the extent to which the artists know the principles of art marketing and use them to their advantage. How such "art bubbles" can be produced is shown in the description of the successful show of the sculptor, called "Great Mogul" in the novel and his female partner/ manager (Ortheil 2017: 114–116). The author's diagnosis seems to be that success is not only led to an overall "good work" in terms of craftsmanship – but also to its professionally operated and wordy marketing in the state-private art world. The aesthetic discourse includes paratext references in the form of photos and a bibliography at the end of the novel. The reader can supplement his reading on this basis.

Italian Journey as a Slapstick Comedy³

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The Turkish-born German writer Feridun Zaimoglu received a scholarship from the Deutsche Akademie Villa Massimo in 2005. *Rom intensiv* was published as a book in 2007. Zaimoglu's book on Rome is a parodic genre pastiche (in Genette's terminology: persiflage, Genette 1993: 43) of the Italian Journey and of the artist's prose. Particular episodes take place in historically and art-historically known locations in Rome – some episodes take place in southern Italy. The style is characterized by cinematic clarity: detailed descriptions, rapid changes of images and the spatial movement of the first-person narrator. The preferred forms of comedy in the text are slapstick, situation comedy, satirical reference to national and cultural stereotype (e.g. "Just like all righteous Germans I have stuck to the main principle that you only see what you know: I read a good dozen of city guides wisely" (Zaimoglu 2018: 72) and the hyperbolic style. The focus is on the writer himself and his status as an artist. Feridun Zaimoglu appears in the text under his name (Zaimoglu 2018: 187): his first name is jokingly or maliciously twisted by his interlocutors ["Ferrero" (Zaimoglu 2018: 16), "once Felipe, once Ferrero", (Zaimoglu 2018: 16) "Kill Ferrero" (Zaimoglu 2018: 18), "Fibi Freak" (Zaimoglu 2018: 121)]. The author contrasts the ideal of the artist as a sensitive one – outstanding individual, the artist-genius, with the portrayal of his person in the novel. Let's give two examples: when the first-person narrator walks into a film scene that is being shot, the porter of Villa Massimo comments: "You are so stupid that just looking at it gives me a nosebleed [...]" (Zaimoglu 2018: 31). The narrator describes his stay on the beach – the poet's equipment includes "a cool box in the colours of the German flag" (Zaimoglu 2018: 114) – as follows:

My swimming trunks also make them (the beach visitors, E.M.) cheerful – admittedly, they are in the shape of a trumpet and in the pattern of the kilt. I bought them for two Euros from a toothless black African who told me that these swim trunks were inspired by the swimwear of designers in Milan and that I would be pretty stupid if I didn't buy them. I grabbed them and bought ten of them straight away. Here, at the Piccolo Pevero Beach I don't think it's a good idea anymore. (Zaimoglu 2018: 121)

Rome appears above all as a city besieged by tourists who "march up in troop strength" (Zaimoglu 2018: 147) at well-known sights. During the walks in Rome, the writer fights his way through the crowds with many tricks. The text parodies the well-known topoi of the Italian journey. To include strolling to culturally and historically significant sights and brilliant conversation among friends and connoisseurs. In Zaimoglu's persiflage a penniless emigrant – called Sowjet Sergiej – takes on the role of companion. The hyperbolic style is expressed by the fact that the artist does not "walk" but "run", the figures very often "shout at each other" (Zaimoglu 2018: 13, 20, 23, 24, 31, 40, 52, 54, 57, 58 *etc.*). The cultivated promenading of the educational traveller is parodied. The aesthetic discourse includes the art activities described in urban space. For example, female students, under the guidance of an artist from Villa Massimo, "roll green, pink and orange plasticine balls onto the street" (Zaimoglu 2018: 137) which are run over by cars, leading to a motorcycle accident and general chaos. Denis, the Sicilian friend of the first-person narrator, comments as follows: "[...] in Sicily, such art actions would be ended with a machine gun salvo. The artist, if she didn't bleed from forty holes, would be condemned to sweep the streets for six

3 The reviewer of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Volker Breidecker, formulated the comparison of the plot with a slapstick comedy in his article of 8/8/2007. <https://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/feridun-zaimoglu/rom-intensiv.html> [date of access: June 29, 2022].

months" (Zaimoglu 2018: 139–140). The travesty of art in which the Villa Massimo scholarship holder participates during his year in Rome addresses the lack of aesthetic criteria in the art world of the present.

Palimpsests of Space, Time and Text

Martin Mosebach was a fellow at Villa Massimo in 2014–2015. The volume *Die schöne Gewohnheit zu leben: eine italienische Reise* [The beautiful habit of living. An Italian Journey] had its first edition in 1997. It consists of ten prose texts and a short story marked as a prologue, the centre of which is a fictitious artist talk. The art and artist theme appears in two dominant narrations: the artist talk and the observations of a traveller/ Flâneur. The story (prologue) that opens the volume is entitled *The Coldest Country in the World* and already refers in the title to the dichotomy of the Italy-topos: North and South / Cold and Heat. The narrative is authorial. The main character is referred to as a "young man" (Mosebach 2018: 9) which can be seen as an intertextual reference to James Joyce's early work – the artist's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Joyce 1997). One can assume that the young man who had just arrived in Rome was an artist since the text says that he was endowed with "brilliant letters of recommendation" (Mosebach 2018: 9). The short story recounts an afternoon on a poetess' roof terrace "near the Piazza Farnese" (Mosebach 2018: 9). The artists who talk about Rome, Italy and art are a poet, a painter, an architect and a composer. They have no names and are stereotyped. The story ends with the young artist waking up. The conversation with the artist turns out to be a dream – or rather the young man's nightmare. That is because the last sequence describes a motorbike speeding towards him at the entrance of the poetess' house and his awakening (Mosebach 2018: 16). The interview with the artists in the short story served to convince the young man that his enthusiasm for Italy and Rome was unrealistic. Contrary to the stereotypical depiction the Italians are insensitive, calculating and cold: "Wherever northern people are moved and emotional the Italians remain dull and cold," said the painter. "For an Italian of course we're the cold ones!" the composer exclaimed indignantly. "We are the calculators without a sense of grace and poetry! The non-sensual barbarians who must be ashamed of their rudeness!" (Mosebach 2018: 15). The artists are foreigners living in Italy who have achieved fame and fortune. When the young man asked why they would still stay in Italy they responded with the traditional justifications of Italy enthusiasts since Winckelmann: "You can only build with a view on the Roman walls!" said the architect. "It was only here that I learned to see!" said the painter, "I hear my music here in the air," said the composer (Mosebach 2018: 16). Like many travellers before they lament the contradiction between the expected ideal and reality. In this sense the artist dialogue is a prologue to the following stories because the volume distances itself from the traditional reasons for the Italian Journey: the sources of the great Italian art would therefore be found more in living tradition and rooting of the people in nature and culture of the Italian regions than in ideal-typical conceptions. The stories and reports by Mosebach focus on people whose aesthetic sense as artists, craftsmen, designers or simply Italians is fed by the tradition into which they were born. Living in harmony with the past is her recipe for life and art. In the prose texts dedicated to Venice and Rome *Venice with Five Senses* (Mosebach 2018: 93–106) and *Roman Times of Day* (Mosebach 2018: 107–116) the narrator appears as a traveller and Flâneur who moves in topically charged, multi-layered urban spaces. The Neapolitan narration in the volume *Pompeian Present. An hour in the National Museum of Naples* draws on the second traditional narration of artistic creativity – the art talk. It takes place on

two levels of time and fiction. The figures do not move in space but in time. The authorial narrator who looks at the Pompeian frescoes in the National Museum of Naples quotes excerpts from the conversation between two artists (Eumolpus and Encolpius) of the ancient Roman novel *Satyricon* by Titus Petronius Arbiter (Petronius 2020). He fantasizes its continuation as an art conversation between two artists in the present. The reason for the discussions – both in the past and in the present – is the contemplation of the masterpieces of painting. In both cases these are works of art from a high culture that was wiped out by natural and historical catastrophes. The artists of the *Satyricon* talk about works of painters and sculptures who are only known by name today (such as Appelles and Zeuxis); the works themselves have not survived. The art considerations in the present concern images from Pompeii and Herculaneum – two cities on the Neapolitan Bay that perished after the eruption of Vesuvius. Fragments of the excavations are exhibited in the Museum of Naples. The heyday of a high culture here recalled roughly corresponds to the time when the artists of the *Satyricon* conducted their conversation. They lament great art of the past without being able to suspect that the high culture of their time will perish in near future. In the art talks the respective present is felt to be a time of decline – so achievements in the field of art are more likely to be in retrogression.

Between times there is a dialogue about aesthetic rules that have remained valid: “If I were a young painter I would know what I am doing,” he says [Eumolpo, the Italian successor to the Roman Eumolpus, E.M.] imploringly. “The worship of the lump, of the raw, unfinished, inanimate [referring to gold, E.M.] seems to have triumphed, but in truth the world of colour and form, the marriage of personal handwriting and objective appearance, is as close as ever. [...]” (Mosebach 2018: 90). This formula of authentic art which arose from the imitation of nature, from the artist’s rootedness in his culture and the needs of the art recipients is related to ancient art – but can also be considered normative for contemporary art. Mosebach sees the motivation for the production of art in the immutable principles of sensuality that would underlie artistic expression (Mosebach 2018: 82–83). Pompeian Present draws directly on the palimpsest motif. In the art talk between different times the layers are removed. That is in order to reveal the core of the artistic endeavours which is always current.

Conclusion

The article explored the question of how artistic creativity is represented in contemporary literature and what role the narrative of Italy is playing. German-language literary texts that were written around the year 2000 were examined. Their main characters are artists. The writers create characters that enter a dialogue with the multi-layer European cultural space represented by “the Italian narratives”. The character construction goes back to the model of a Flâneur, wanderer and traveller who – in contrast to previous epochs – is equipped with communication technologies (smartphone) that enable him to create his own transmedial message. The topos of Italy is traditionally characterized by dichotomy: North – South, light – darkness, ancient culture – Christian culture, life – death, sensuality – spirituality, nature – culture and civilization. Contemporary writers use the duality of the topos for their own literary creations which is shown in the article with sample analyses. It is characteristic of these narratives that the figures move in a topically charged area of Italy. Against this background insights into the subject of art and aesthetics are formulated. The analysed novels by Hanns-Josef Ortheil *Rom*, *Villa Massimo* and Feridun Zaimoglu

Rom intensiv are characterized by the satirical stylistic register of varying intensity. The analysed texts by Martin Mosebach from the volume *Die schöne Gewohnheit zu leben. Eine italienische Reise* offers an approach to Italian themes between light irony and seriousness. It is characteristic of all examples that the figures move in topically charged spaces constructed as palimpsests of space, time and text. The art and artist theme appears in two dominant narrations: the observations of a traveller/ Flâneur and the artist talks. The prose texts are deliberately transtextual (Genette, ([1982] 1997)). One of the most important references is still the *Italian Journey* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This can be seen in the titles of the works and in their content. The transtextual strategies refer to a literature and art that is classical in the broad sense (as classical and classical modern). One of the dominant themes is how contemporary artists can make creative use of Italy's great artistic heritage.

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