

NARRATIVE AND THE BODY IN UNIFORM:  
EAST-GERMAN MILITARY MASCULINITIES IN CLAUS DOBBERKE'S  
*EIN KATZENSPRUNG* AND JÜRGEN FUCHS'S *FASSONSCHNITT*

The uniforms of the *Nationale Volksarmee* (NVA) were an all-too-visible presence in the German Democratic Republic. The NVA was founded in 1956, when militarized police units of the *Kasernierte Volkspolizei* were converted into an army. Its foundation was part of an escalation of repressive measures on the part of the GDR government in the late 1950s and early 1960s, culminating in the NVA's role in closing the border to the West in August 1961 and the introduction of conscription in January 1962. The 1962 'Wehrpflichtgesetz' introduced a compulsory eighteen-month military service for men aged eighteen to fifty, but young men were often encouraged or pressurized into enlisting for three or four years.<sup>1</sup> From this point, almost every young man wore the NVA uniform at some time.<sup>2</sup> The GDR

---

<sup>1</sup> The GDR had no civilian alternative to military service. From 1964, conscientious objectors could serve as so-called 'Bausoldaten' (conscripts working for the NVA in non-armed capacities, particularly construction), but relatively few chose, or were permitted to choose, this alternative, which in any case still took place within military units whose members were uniformed and performed drill. See Bernd Eisenfeld and Peter Schicketanz, *Bausoldaten in der DDR: Die 'Zusammenführung feindlich-negativer Kräfte' in der NVA* (Berlin: Links, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Women did serve in the NVA, and from 1982 could in theory even be conscripted in time of war. This provision was never used, however, and NVA uniform was rarely imposed on women.

population generally viewed militarization and uniforms remotely and with scepticism.<sup>3</sup> Most young men saw military service as an unpleasant but unavoidable rite of passage to be overcome before entering the workplace or university.<sup>4</sup> Amidst such widespread scepticism, uniform and the military identities associated with it were viewed as something to be tolerated before being discarded on completion of military service.

This article explores the relationship between body and uniform in two depictions of the NVA: Claus Dobberke's 1976 film, *Ein Katzensprung*, and Jürgen Fuchs's autobiographical novel from 1984, *Fassonschnitt*.<sup>5</sup> Both works explore the place of the individual within the socialist collective, a central concern for East German writers and directors from the 1960s onwards.<sup>6</sup> The NVA offered an extreme example of a collective, with soldiers offered little privacy or leave, and the individual largely subordinated to the efficient running of the military machine. Analysis of these two works is instructive, as they appear to represent opposite ends of a spectrum from broadly conformist to explicitly critical texts. This contrast is clear in the works' titles: the title of *Ein Katzensprung* ironically targets young men who see military service as a mere 'hop, skip and a jump' rather than as an important and beneficial phase of their lives, while *Fassonschnitt* evokes the 'crew cut' as the military's first act of control over the conscript's body and identity. *Ein Katzensprung* was

---

<sup>3</sup> See Detlef Bald, 'Militärpolitische Restauration: Zur Wehrpflicht im geteilten Deutschland', in *Allgemeine Wehrpflicht: Geschichte, Probleme, Perspektiven*, ed. by Eckardt Opitz and Frank S. Rödiger (Bremen: Temmen, 1995), pp. 75-87 (p. 80).

<sup>4</sup> See Sylka Scholz, *Männlichkeit erzählen: Lebensgeschichtliche Identitätskonstruktionen ostdeutscher Männer* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2004), p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> *Ein Katzensprung*, dir. by Claus Dobberke (DEFA, 1976); Jürgen Fuchs, *Fassonschnitt* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> *Spur der Steine*, dir. by Frank Beyer (DEFA, 1966), is a more famous earlier example.

produced by the state film studios, DEFA, in collaboration with the NVA, and appeals to young people by using popular culture to suggest the compatibility of individual identities with military service. However, Dobberke's filmic techniques cast doubt on this apparent message, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between body and uniform. *Fassonschnitt*, written and published in the West, is more explicitly critical of military socialization and presents situations in which civilian masculinities could subvert the military ideal only in order to demonstrate the eventual triumph of military order and discipline. Despite differences in how the works were positioned, as respectively conformist and critical, close analysis of their treatment of uniform disrupts such an opposition and yields similar conclusions from both works.

Uniform is an important device within both texts, acting as an interface between the individual and the military. Both Dobberke and Fuchs compare uniform to costume and imply that the naked body might guarantee a more natural civilian identity unaffected by military service. Yet uniform plays a sinister and disruptive role in both texts, leaving bodies changed and marked. I explore the relationship between body and uniform as an interplay between two competing narratives of masculinity. On the one hand, the body is never innocent of meaning at the moment of enlistment, but bears a narrative of gender built up performatively over the recruit's life to date; on the other, the uniform applies an ideal military masculinity to the soldier's body on entering the military. The NVA's aim was undoubtedly to change men's bodies and behaviour in order to approximate to the military masculine ideal represented by the uniform. However, in *Ein Katzensprung* and *Fassonschnitt* existing civilian masculinities conflict with the military masculine ideal, and the juxtaposition of the two narratives of masculinity has disruptive effects on the soldier and on the text itself. Dobberke and Fuchs exploit uniform's narrative complexity in order to explore and even challenge the transformative and normalizing effects of uniform on military

masculinities. However, neither text successfully subverts the power of uniform. As the narratives of body and uniform come into conflict, the uniform changes soldiers' existing masculinities and undermines any understanding of the uniform as temporary or merely symbolic.

Uniform presents a narrative of ideal military masculinity and relates this explicitly to the wearer. Just as a narrative is positioned within generic conventions and literary traditions, military uniform contextualizes the wearer's masculinity in relation to military values and wider social stereotypes concerning soldiers. In the GDR, the grey uniform, as opposed to the olive of the West German *Bundeswehr*, framed the wearer's military masculinity as East German and socialist on the one hand, but as historically German on the other, because the 'stone grey' deliberately recalled the 'field grey' of Prussian and *Wehrmacht* uniforms, in compliance with Soviet policy that required satellite states to have 'sozialistischer Inhalt, nationaler Charakter'.<sup>7</sup> The uniform's *Wehrmacht* resonances were misjudged by GDR and Soviet leaders, in that parallels between the *Wehrmacht* and the NVA invited scepticism about the NVA's claim to be an 'Armee des Friedens'.<sup>8</sup> Besides the intertextuality between uniforms and uniform's role in delineating a genre of masculinity, uniform shares several other features with narrative texts. It uses a symbolic system governed by dress codes and regulations, much like the syntax and metaphorical and symbolic conventions that in narrative works govern language, characterisation, imagery and other formal aspects.

---

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Niemetz, *Das feldgraue Erbe: Die Wehrmachteinflüsse im Militär der SBZ/DDR* (Berlin: Links, 2006), p. 292. The *Wehrmacht* was the name for the German army under National Socialism. The *Bundeswehr* was, and remains, the army of the Federal Republic of Germany.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Bickford, 'Male Identity, the Military and the Family in the Former German Democratic Republic', *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 19 (2001), 65-76 (p. 66).

Moreover, uniform charts temporal progression and variation, using stars on the shoulder and stripes on the sleeve to show a soldier's rise through the ranks and medals on the chest to document certain successes. In this sense, the uniform's narrative resembles a biography, highlighting key stages of a soldier's military career and bearing marks of achievements and development over time. Like a biography, which is usually concerned with specific or unique aspects of the life it describes, the military career and masculine development described by the uniform is not general but tailored to the wearer as an individual and therefore a more tangible embodiment of the military ideal.

Military uniform claims to present a clear and unambiguous narrative that fixes the individual in a specific military masculine ideal and aims to supersede any existing masculinities. In the GDR context, the qualities associated with ideal socialist military masculinity are described in *Vom Sinn des Soldatseins*, the manual presented to soldiers on enlistment: 'Härte und Ausdauer, militärische Meisterschaft und eiserne Disziplin, unbändiger Kampfwille und der durch nichts zu brechende Wille zum Sieg'. These qualities were to remain through the soldier's later life: 'nicht nur im Katastropheneinsatz bewährt sich der sozialistische Soldat, er tut es auch im Alltäglichen'.<sup>9</sup> Taking at face value the uniform's claim to symbolize a singular narrative of masculinity can result in the complexity of uniform's message being neglected. Nathan Joseph has argued that uniform communicates more than just the 'uniformity' suggested by such descriptions of military values: 'The uniform depicts specialized offices, hierarchical position, internal organizational relationships, and external relationships with the public more accurately than any other

---

<sup>9</sup> *Vom Sinn des Soldatseins: Ein Ratgeber für den Soldaten*, 16<sup>th</sup> edn (Berlin: Militärverlag der DDR, [c. 1975]), pp. 57 and 92.

category of clothing.<sup>10</sup> The complexity of uniform opens it up to readings by uninitiated or resistant observers that conflict with official messages, highlight potentially harmful effects, and unsettle or even subvert the masculine ideal symbolized by the uniform.

In contrast, the body's association with a civilian narrative of masculinity stems from the performative nature of gender. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler defines performativity as 'the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names'. She relates the performative production of gender directly to the body: 'regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the dynamic of repetition and sedimentation that constitutes performativity does not produce gender separately from, but on and through the body. For Butler, the performative constitution of gender depends on reiterations over time, with each performative act 'a repetition, a sedimentation, and congealment of the past'.<sup>12</sup> The body comes to bear a narrative of gender that has been written through reiterations over time and that has been shaped by and in reference to past actions.

Military training is more explicit about the performative construction of bodies than most contexts, with drill and exercises designed to 'make men' out of conscripts not just by teaching military values and regulating behaviour, but by changing the appearance and physicality of bodies in line with the military masculine ideal. Uniform has long been one of

---

<sup>10</sup> Nathan Joseph, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication through Clothing* (New York, Westport, CT and London: Greenwood, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler, 'Introduction', to *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 1-23 (p. 2).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244, n. 7.

the military's tools for transforming soldiers' bodies.<sup>13</sup> Nineteenth-century military bodies in particular were shaped by rigid, unforgiving dress uniforms that cinched in the waist, emphasized the shoulders and padded the chest. Stiff, heavy materials forced an upright posture and made movements slow and cumbersome.<sup>14</sup> GDR dress uniforms were not dissimilar to their nineteenth-century predecessors, and even GDR combat uniforms designed for greater freedom of movement were thick and heavy. Nevertheless, the form a uniform takes depends on the body of the wearer. Bodily deviations from the military ideal are not simply concealed by the uniform, but highlighted by the juxtaposition between ideal and 'real existierende' socialist military masculinities. For example, slight or overweight bodies become more noticeable by contrast with the ideal military stature modelled by the cut of the dress uniform. Moreover, bodily changes are more gradual than changes in uniform, which occur not just with progression through the ranks but with the season, the activity or the time of day: the NVA had different uniforms for exercises, ceremonies, leave, and sport as well as codes governing clothing in the washroom and corridors. In this context, it could be tempting to use the body to represent civilian masculinities that are entrenched performatively over a lifetime and apparently more coherent or authentic. However, the soldierly body is always vulnerable to the performative training techniques of military service and the shape imposed on it by the uniform.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), pp. 21-50.

<sup>14</sup> Elisabeth Hackspiel-Mikosch, 'Uniforms and the Creation of Ideal Masculinity', in *The Men's Fashion Reader*, ed. by Peter McNeil and Vicki Karaminas (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009), pp. 117-29 (pp. 122-23).

Few historians or theorists of the military dispute the formative role of military service for masculinity and subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> Yet the role of uniform as one in a nexus of representations that construct military masculinities alongside military training and discipline is often overlooked. Moreover, analysis of uniform directs attention to interactions between the body and narrative conceptions of masculinity, contributing to attempts in contemporary gender studies to reconcile the role of the body with understandings of gender as socially constructed. A narrative understanding of the relationship between body and uniform suggests that other military narratives, specifically film and literature, will demonstrate the disruptions and transformations that characterize the relationship between uniform and body. Literature and film about the NVA have been largely neglected, and opening such texts to analysis provides important insights into the NVA and military masculinities more generally.

*Ein Katzensprung* was adapted by Walter Flegel from his collection of stories of the same name and premiered in 1976.<sup>16</sup> It is based primarily on the story ‘Der Morgen eines Zugführers’, which describes conflicts between Lieutenant Günter Riedel (also the protagonist of the film) and other officers, notably his company commander, Captain Kaiser, who assumes a more central part in the film than in the original story.<sup>17</sup> The film begins with Riedel’s return from his honeymoon to resume command of his platoon. The plot revolves

---

<sup>15</sup> See demonstrative titles such as David Morgan’s *‘It Will Make a Man of You’: Notes on National Service, Masculinity and Autobiography*, Studies in Sexual Politics, 17 (Manchester: University of Manchester Sociology Department, 1987), and Ute Frevert’s ‘Das Militär als “Schule der Männlichkeit”: Erwartungen, Angebote, Erfahrungen im 19. Jahrhundert’, in *Militär und Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Frevert (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1997), pp. 145-73.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Flegel, *Ein Katzensprung* (Berlin: Militärverlag der DDR, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> ‘Zug’ is similar to the English ‘platoon’.



around his ensuing conflict with the Lance Corporal Gefreiter Weißenbach, who had commanded the platoon in Riedel's absence. Weißenbach focuses on making his own military service as uncomplicated as possible, excusing weaker recruits from exercises to ensure the success of his platoon and then using physical abuse to train and discipline them himself. Riedel, by contrast, sees his role idealistically as to help and support all his men and develop their skills and abilities equally. Riedel struggles to assert authority over Weißenbach, and as punishment for insubordination demotes him from his position as driver, replacing him with an inexperienced recent conscript, in consequence of which the platoon fails on manoeuvres because the new driver floods the vehicle's engine while crossing a river. The conflict between Riedel and Weißenbach is mediated by Kaiser, who is cool and stuffy with little time for Riedel's idealism, and who countermands Riedel's demotion of Weißenbach. Kaiser also limits Riedel's freedom, denying him free time with his wife, Maria, when she visits the barracks, for example.

The film's conflicts remain unresolved. When Weißenbach is imprisoned for unauthorized absence and for brawling, Riedel goes to investigate the brawl without permission. He discovers the apparently mitigating factor that Weißenbach was fighting with a man for sleeping with his wife in his absence, but by not giving scope to explore this situation, Dobberke implicitly, and problematically, appears to condone violence used homosocially between men in a power-struggle over a woman. Riedel's investigations cause him to miss an exercise, which endangers the performance of the company and angers Kaiser still further. However, Riedel's punishment and any final decision on Weißenbach are deferred beyond the film's end. Instead, Kaiser selects Riedel's platoon for a prestigious regimental manoeuvre, leaving the viewer with an emphasis on a show of military efficiency in place of any narrative closure.

*Ein Katzensprung* was no box-office success, but the NVA honoured cast and crew with its Theodor Körner Prize for cultural contributions to the military.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, reviewers praised the film's primary message, which emphasizes pragmatism over idealism, and criticizes soldiers looking for an easy route through their military service.<sup>19</sup> Critics paid less attention to the film's second apparent objective, which is to suggest the compatibility of a certain degree of individualism with military service. Uniform is an important narrative vehicle for Dobberke's two main messages, but it also accentuates tensions between them. Dobberke's emphasis on pragmatism results in the use primarily of functional combat uniforms rather than dress uniforms. The men's combat uniforms do not emphasize but conceal the body in thick, uncomfortable-looking layers (34:37). They thus invite the viewer to read them not as functional but as clumsy and ill-fitting, which conflicts with the film's emphasis on military efficiency. Combat uniforms are also associated with apparently homogenizing effects of military service. Their details are less prominent than the colours and markings of dress uniforms and in *Ein Katzensprung* combat uniforms often appear in wide-angle shots of groups of soldiers which thwart the viewer's attempts to distinguish between ranks or even between the film's main characters. By showcasing uniform's role in military efficiency, Dobberke compromises his other apparent aim, as any articulation of individualism is virtually impossible in these group scenes. The potential for multiple and conflicting readings of the 'Dienstuniformen', that is to say as homogenizing or cumbersome rather than as merely functional, thus casts doubt on the attempts of *Ein Katzensprung* to reconcile individualism with military efficiency.

---

<sup>18</sup> ADN, 'Theodor-Körner-Preis 1978 für verdienstvolle Künstler', *Neues Deutschland*, 1 March 1978, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Günter Sobe, 'Hauptsache, die Karre rollt...? Der neue DEFA-Spielfilm "Ein Katzensprung"', *Berliner Zeitung*, 6 July 1977, p. 4.

Moreover, scenes with men in full uniform often delay or interrupt the storyline by presenting a spectacle of military efficiency. Although uniform draws attention to the military body, Dobberke's heavy, loose-fitting uniforms ensure that not the individual body but the organizational body the uniform represents becomes the object of the viewer's gaze. Laura Mulvey has discussed how in narrative film the woman as spectacle 'tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation'.<sup>20</sup> Military film elaborates Mulvey's concept of the gaze: the male body, not the female, becomes the subject of military spectacle. Nonetheless, creating a spectacle of the military using uniform still runs counter to the storyline as Mulvey describes, as in a training exercise early in *Ein Katzensprung* (5:34-7:46). The exercise is shown as a montage, with abrupt cuts between shots and only incongruous background music to cohere the scene. The montage edit emphasizes the scene's digression from the plot and renders the exercise a pure spectacle of military efficiency and masculinity. The gaze is not allowed to linger on individuals; even the occasional disembodied dialogue is difficult to attribute to individual characters. As part of Dobberke's emphasis on military efficiency in *Ein Katzensprung*, then, the uniform draws the gaze not to the individual male body but to the institution it represents.

One way that the exercise uses uniform as part of a military spectacle is through uniform changes. Uniform changes punctuate the film's narrative, accompanying cuts not just between scenes, but between activities within a scene. Between his arrival at the barracks in the opening scene and the training exercise, Riedel changes his uniform twice: first out of motorcycle gear into his light-grey officer's shirt (3:14-3:20) and then immediately into camouflage for the exercise (4:34-4:55). The exercise itself then includes a change into gas suits (7:00-7:10). Changes do not simply occur unseen in the gaps created by cuts between shots; they are shown onscreen, increasing the profile of uniform itself within the military

---

<sup>20</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6-18 (p. 11).

spectacle. Uniform is thus associated with delays to the action, and telescoping the time between changes results in such digressions taking precedence in this early stage of the film over storyline or characterization. Uniforms consequently become a narrative inconvenience as well as the physical inconvenience suggested by their awkwardness and ill-fitting shape.

The narrative digressions associated with scenes of men in uniform at times suggest a subjective or unconscious dimension to military service. A sharp cut from the exercise to a close-up of a wine glass introduces a scene in a pub. This is one of few scenes with soldiers in dress uniforms and shows the men celebrating success in the exercise and toasting Riedel's marriage. The scene at first appears to be a simple illustration of camaraderie, but it is broken for over a minute by Private Helmke playing the Adagio from Bach's Violin Sonata no. 1 in G minor, BWV1001 (12:05-13:20). Helmke's playing is accompanied by a series of ultra close-ups, which focus on facial expressions and threaten to cut uniforms out altogether: Riedel is shot so closely that even his face exceeds the frame and no uniform is visible (12:25). Forcing Riedel's uniform out of the frame suggests that it otherwise represents a barrier to the portrayal of subjective contemplation. Masculine hierarchies and power dynamics are not absent from this musical excursus: Helmke is a new conscript and plays at the order of Weißenbach, which ironically renders Helmke's individual talent a means for Weißenbach to subordinate him. Making Helmke play also forces him to reveal how his more contemplative, artistic masculinity deviates from the ideal military masculinity embodied in his imposing dress uniform. Yet Helmke's choice of the delicate and moving Adagio presents his violin playing as an admirable talent and introduces an introspection that interrupts the show of military camaraderie. Even though Helmke's playing is located within masculine hierarchies asserted by Weißenbach, it gives space to more personal, reflective and artistic military masculinities that conflict with and open up the uniform's restrictive ideal. The scene's slow-paced pensiveness primarily emphasizes neither camaraderie nor hierarchy, but

personal and subjective aspects of military experience and the problems with representing them.

Dobberke's presentation of the compatibility of existing narratives of civilian masculinity with military service centres on Riedel. Critics have associated Riedel with youthful idealism, but he also represents a stubborn individualism, which conflicts with his military uniform.<sup>21</sup> His individualism is figured instead through civilian clothes, such as his motorcycle leathers (2:30) or stereotypically fashionable 1970s attire consisting of wide-collared shirt, Aviator sunglasses and slacks (44:00). Riedel's civilian dress is presumably designed to show that individualism is not incompatible with military service. However, although the popular cultural references of Riedel's casual clothes suggest individuality, his civvies actually represent other forms of casual uniform. Riedel's leather jacket, for example, recalls countercultural use of the 'James Dean jacket' to denote opposition to the state, so for most viewers it would probably signify opposition to military norms rather than their compatibility with individuality.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Riedel's switching between military and countercultural uniforms – all synonymous with different group identities – denies him any coherent individual identity, because he is shown instead to be moving between pre-defined roles. Moreover, that he is able to wear civilian clothes at all serves to emphasize his power as a junior officer, as such a luxury is not afforded to his subordinates.

Riedel's uniforms could be likened to costumes in their association with set roles, and this comparison is made explicit via the use of theatrical metaphor. Riedel's wife, Maria, is a

---

<sup>21</sup> HU, 'Cowboys, Räuber und Rebellen: Blick auf das Programm der Sommerfilmtage', *Neue Zeit*, 6 July 1977, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> See Mark Fenimore, *Sex, Thugs and Rock 'n' Roll: Teenage Rebels in Cold-War East Germany* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn), p. 138, and films such as *Rebel without a Cause*, dir. by Nicholas Ray (Warner Bros, 1955).

theatrical make-up artist, whose visit to the barracks sets up a comparison between uniform and costume that at first glance belies the transformative power of the uniform. Maria practises for her examinations by applying a bald wig to her husband, thereby exaggerating the military requirement that hair be cut short. Riedel is judged too young for to have a shaven head and the facial hair with which he accessorizes it, the beards and moustaches connoting mature virility (44:13-44:44). By applying the bald wig, Riedel assumes an appearance more traditionally associated with a career officer, but his youthful face betrays his unsuitability for the role. Although Riedel fails to live up to career-officer masculinity, the role is shown to be merely a costume and Riedel's underlying individuality, exposed here through his youthful face, to be more lasting. However, Riedel's comment that he will have to wait until he is a regimental commander to suit the bald head and beard suggests that his body will not always guarantee his individuality, and that it will ultimately be changed and shaped by his military career (44:46-44:49). Moreover, Maria is not a costume designer, but a make-up artist, emphasizing the directly corporeal impact of uniform, which Riedel will ultimately not be able to avoid. Superficially, the make-up scene presents uniform as costume-like and soldierly masculinities as artificial and temporary. Throughout the film, the focus on costume changes and shifting roles suggests an apparent constancy of an individual, civilian self-narrative associated with the body. However, Riedel's comment on the changes his body will have undergone by the time he is a regimental commander implies a more complex interaction between body and uniform. Although his youthful face alters the uniform's symbolism, the uniform will in turn exert pressure on his body, transforming it physically and symbolically.

*Ein Katzensprung* repeatedly shows soldiers under physical pressure from the uniform. In some cases, the uniform itself is shown to be restrictive and suffocating: after running in gas suits during the exercise near the beginning of the film, the men are visibly

pale-faced and gasping for breath (8:44). Dobberke also shows the bodies of new conscripts being marked by their subordinate position and assuming over time the physical attributes associated with the uniform's narrative of ideal military masculinity. One such example is Helmke's beating by Weißenbach after he stands up to him on account of his brutal treatment of another conscript. The bruise Helmke sustains marks his body with his vulnerable and subordinate position in hierarchies of military masculinities. Weißenbach is broad-chested, slim-waisted and hairy, wearing braces which draw further attention to his muscular chest (16:37). He cuts a more forbidding figure than the slim and boyish Helmke, displaying the physically hardening effects of the eighteen-month military service. Weißenbach's beating of Helmke is edited out of the film's narrative. Weißenbach takes him outside the dormitory and the action moves outside the frame, which zooms in on the soldiers still in the dormitory before the door closes leaving a black screen (19:45-19:48). Dobberke does not show the beating. We see only what Riedel sees the next morning: a black eye that no one is willing to explain. Even Helmke is complicit in effacing this incident from the narrative, suggesting a silencing associated with military discipline: 'Ich möchte darüber nicht sprechen, Genosse Leutnant' (20:42-20:45).

Weißenbach explicitly associates Helmke's physical marking with his transgression of the military masculine ideal by creating a contrast between Helmke's violin playing and his role as a soldier: 'Deine Geigenzukunft, Helmke, die beginnt erst, wenn du die Uniform wieder ausziehst. Jetzt wird ein Soldat aus dir gemacht. Und zwar schnell' (18:47-18:55). Weißenbach claims to be contributing to the narrative of ideal military masculinity, which, as long as Helmke is in uniform, supersedes his civilian identity as a musician and makes him a soldier. Yet ironically, Weißenbach's intervention marks Helmke as unsoldierly and highlights the disjunction between his vulnerable body and the ideal masculine narrative that the uniform carries. Moreover, uniform plays a sinister narrative role. The black eye hints at

further physical or psychological damage, but the layers of uniform make it impossible to know the extent of Helmke's injuries. The uniform edits the rest of his body out of the field of vision, just as the violence is itself edited out using cuts and Helmke's silence. This lacuna in conscious perception gestures towards the potentially traumatic, or at least profound, if unconscious, effects of violence and discipline in the military.

Dobberke's film plays with strategies to disrupt the narrative of hegemonic and anonymizing masculinity applied to the male body through military uniform. However, the insistence of *Ein Katzensprung* on the compatibility of an authentic individual self with military service is undone by Dobberke's portrayal of uniforms as part of a spectacle of military efficiency. Moreover, any idea of individuality is compromised by the impression of artificiality created by Riedel's shifting roles and uniforms. Dobberke's costume metaphor for uniform suggests individual identities that are associated with a more or less constant body, but his focus on soldiers' bodies reveals instead how bodies display positions within military hierarchies. Moreover, scenes such as Helmke's violin playing or his beating use techniques of camerawork and editing to suggest subjective and unconscious aspects of military service that exceed the narrative. Uniform as a narrative device is problematic in both scenes, pushed to the margins of the frame in the violin scene, and concealing the extent of Helmke's injuries after his beating. Dobberke does not pass judgement on the psychological effects of uniform suggested in these scenes: instead they show respectively a more positive, reflective experience and a more traumatic experience.

By contrast, Jürgen Fuchs's novel-cum-memoir, *Fassonschnitt*, sets psychological dissonances at its centre: not only does Fuchs explicitly discuss his mental struggle with the NVA, but his text is also patterned by problems of representation. Fuchs served in the 'Grenztruppen' from 1969 to 1971 and again as a reserve in 1972. He was arrested, interrogated and exiled in 1977 after protesting against the forced exile of Wolf Biermann,



and died aged 48 from a rare form of leukaemia, amidst speculation that the Stasi exposed him to radiation.<sup>23</sup> Published only in the West, *Fassonschnitt* is written in the first person and depicts in meticulous chronological detail the first thirteen days of the military service of Fuchs's autobiographical narrator. The level of detail in Fuchs's text, fifteen years after the fact, is disconcerting. It can be partially explained by the integration into the novel of shorter pieces written in the 1970s. On the whole, however, the obsessive detail and rigidly chronological structure point to the profound effects the events had on Fuchs. However, the novel is not presented as memories but as a present-tense narrative, giving Fuchs's work immediacy and allowing for fictionalization in part. Fuchs hinted at his artful construction, explaining that he chose the early stages of military service, bracketing out other important aspects, to foreground the sudden imposition of the military world on the conscript.<sup>24</sup>

*Fassonschnitt* is far from a straightforward autobiographical text, however, since Fuchs's style is just as important as his memories and autobiographical detail. Stylistic aspects were largely neglected by contemporary reviewers, who praised the novel's honesty and authenticity, and it has even been cited by historians as evidence for the impact of the NVA on its conscripts.<sup>25</sup> Recent criticism has focused more on Fuchs's language, and on the canonical function that *Fassonschnitt* plays in post-reunification military writing, but close

---

<sup>23</sup> Peter Wensierski, 'In Kopfhöhe ausgerichtet', *Der Spiegel*, 17 May 1999, pp. 42-44.

<sup>24</sup> Erich Loest, 'Inhaftierte Eroberer: In "Fassonschnitt" protokolliert Jürgen Fuchs den Alltag der Nationalen Volksarmee', *Die Zeit*, 30 November 1984, Literaturbeilage, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> For examples, see Matthias Rogg, *Armee des Volkes? Militär und Gesellschaft in der DDR* (Berlin: Links, 2008), p. 390; Holger Zaunstock, 'Die Zeit bei der "Asche": Erinnerungen von NVA-Soldaten als Gegenstand und konzeptionelle Herausforderung der zeitgeschichtlichen Forschung', *Hallische Beiträge zur Zeitgeschichte*, 18 (2008), 63-79.

textual analysis is still limited.<sup>26</sup> Uniform is more than a sign of repression in the text; it is a stylistic device, a key metonym for the lasting physical and psychic effects of military service.

Although it is unlikely that Fuchs saw *Ein Katzensprung*, since it was released in the year of the Biermann affair that led to Fuchs's arrest, *Fassonschnitt* recalls Dobberke's emphasis on theatricality and artificiality. The film-like atmosphere created by thoughts of uniform and weapons gives the narrator a thrill as he awaits the train to the barracks: 'Es ist auch ein Kitzel dabei: Uniform, Waffen, Schießen... Wie in Kriminalfilmen, wie im Krieg wird es vielleicht, nur ohne Verwundungen, ohne Tod und Sterben' (p. 29). The narrator seems reluctant to acknowledge this apparently naïve thrill, perhaps because it jars with his trepidation and anxiety before conscription. Yet he highlights the incongruity of this sensation by placing his comparison to film and television alongside an ironic comparison to a war 'ohne Tod und Sterben'. The word 'Kitzel', or 'thrill', also resonates with 'kitzeln' or 'kitzelig', a not always pleasant bodily sensation caused by an external irritant, and precisely this dimension, the idea of uniform as an external irritant, is developed when the narrator is issued with his own uniform. It is awkward, pre-worn and dirty: 'in den Taschen sind Krümel, Tabak' (p. 53). The narrator's unpleasant uniform recalls the ungainly combat

---

<sup>26</sup> Ulla Fix, 'Widerständige Sprache in der Literatur der DDR am Beispiel Jürgen Fuchs', in *DDR-Literatur zwischen Anpassung und Widerspruch: Tagungsband zum Jürgen-Fuchs-Literatureseminar am 26. und 27. November 2010 in Jena*, ed. by Martin Hermann and Henning Pietzsch (Jena: IKS Garamond, 2011), pp. 67-95; Andrew Plowman, 'Experience, Military Fiction and the Shameful Self in Ingo Schulze's *Neue Leben*', *German Monitor*, 75 (2012): *The Self in Transition: East German Autobiographical Writing Before and After Unification: Essays in Honour of Dennis Tate*, ed. by David Clarke and Axel Goodbody, 253-66.

uniforms in *Ein Katzensprung*, but instead of the homogeneity of Dobberke's clothing, Fuchs offers an intimate and tactile experience of the uniform's influence on the body. The uniform's narrative bears traces of former soldiers' physical needs and pleasures in the form of food and tobacco. Framing the narrator's experience of the uniform as unpleasant and foreign gives the sense that the close physical contact between body and uniform is oppressive and influences the conscript's experience of his body on enlistment.

The narrator's training in a gas suit demonstrates the oppressive effects of uniform, not just on the body but also on conscripts' control of language. First, the conscripts are fitted with masks, with Corporal Pohl standing on the hose to check the fit: if the conscript struggles to breathe, the mask fits. The narrator is helpless as Pohl cuts off his air: 'Die Luft wird knapp, ich beginne zu zappeln und sehe verschwommen, hinter dem angelaufenen Glas der Sichtscheiben, Pohls lachendes Gesicht' (p. 148). As the men then practise getting into and out of the suits, the narrator watches Pohl bitterly and observes, '[i]hn betrifft der feindliche Angriff mit chemischen Waffen nicht' (p. 151). Once the company commander arrives, the training exercise with gas suits begins. This time, the narrator is 'nicht mehr so aufgereggt wie am Anfang', instead describing the stifling effect of the mask in primarily linguistic terms (p. 155). So as to be able to issue orders, the commander has a mask with a loudspeaker, and his display of power consequently manifests itself not just in the uniform but in his control of language, as the conscripts are unable to speak under their ordinary masks. The uniform thus stifles any chance they might have of asserting their own narratives, which the narrator once again describes ironically: 'Unser Kampf unter diesen Umhängen hat nichts mit Sprache zu tun. Wir haben nichts zu sagen. Wenn wir etwas sagen wollen, wird es ein unverständliches Husten oder Bellen, zuletzt geht einem die Luft aus' (p. 156). Unlike another soldier, who vomits and clings speechlessly to a fence for support, Fuchs's narrator does experience the oppressive nature of uniform in linguistic terms. The sentence '[w]ir

haben nichts zu sagen' describes not just literally having nothing to say but also idiomatically having no influence or 'having no say'. However, his irony and wordplay suggest an attempt to assert distance from the narrator's helplessness and speechlessness, as well as highlighting Fuchs's reassertion of narrative power over the commander through writing.

The effect of uniform on soldiers' ability to assert their own narrative of masculinity is further demonstrated by characters depicted out of uniform. Fuchs uses the naked body to externalize the psychological effects of military service, often by showing the narrative associated with the conscript's body being rewritten by military service, taking on characteristics of ideal military masculinity or even features of uniform. The military's narrative of masculinity collides with the existing self-narratives of Fuchs's conscripts not just with the application of uniform to the bodily surface through the haircut, but with the enforced exposure of the body that integrates it into a military narrative. Fuchs's depiction of the military's appropriation of the body is more explicit than *Ein Katzensprung* in denying that the body can remain unchanged by military service. Whereas Dobberke's film holds out some hope for the compatibility of a narrative of individual civilian masculinity with military service, even as the narrative use of uniform contradicts this message, *Fassonschnitt* appears to have abandoned such hope.

The haircut is Fuchs's central metonym for military control and the crisis of self that occurs as conscripts' existing narratives of masculinity are disrupted. 'Fassonschnitt' denotes a military-issue crew cut, the point where military dress codes are extended to the body.<sup>27</sup> Fuchs begins with his narrator's first crew cut, locating the beginning of military socialization not when he enters the barracks or dons the uniform, but when he visits the barber in his

---

<sup>27</sup> The haircut is a common trope in military narratives, e.g. *Full Metal Jacket*, dir. by Stanley Kubrick (Warner Bros, 1987). Kubrick's film opens with close-ups of bemused and resigned expressions as recruits' hair is clipped short, to the tune of Johnnie Wright's 'Hello Vietnam'.

hometown as instructed in his conscription order. This causes a crisis of identity: ‘Wer bin ich? Wer werde ich sein in wenigen Stunden? Wer ist das da, am Tag der Einberufung, in diesem Friseursessel?’ (p. 8). The string of unanswered questions is the first of many, as the security and coherence of the narrator’s self-narrative is disturbed by entry into the military and the uncertainty and trepidation he experiences. This questioning is gradually internalized: ‘Was wird werden? Dieses bange, geduckte Fragezeichen *ist in mir*’ (p. 26, italics mine). The narrator’s acquiescence in the haircut triggers a spiral of self-scrutiny based on his failure to integrate this complicity with his later dissident identity: ‘Ich war beim Friseur. Ich komme mir gut vor und feige, gehorsam und beschissen’ (p. 13). ‘Gut’ and ‘gehorsam’, conventionally desirable masculine values in the military context, are challenged here by being used pejoratively and coupled ironically with the traditionally unmasculine ‘feige’ and the self-accusatory ‘beschissen’. The language here articulates the tensions between the narrator’s and the military’s conception of his masculinity, presenting a conflict between mere acquiescence and what the narrator truly considers ‘good’.

The centrality of the haircut suggests that, just like in *Ein Katzensprung*, the body in *Fassonschnitt* does not offer a source of resistance to the uniform’s narrative of ideal military masculinity any more than a reduction of uniform to costume does. Nakedness is instead a source of disturbance for Fuchs’s narrator. Whilst describing the physical examination before conscription, the narrator relates a childhood fear of nakedness: ‘Konnte die eigene Blöße nicht ertragen vor anderen, hatte Angst vor “Überraschungen”, Bemerkungen und fremden Augen’ (p. 23). The manipulation of his naked body renders it part of the military’s costuming of its recruits: ‘An- und Ausziehen, wie in Gefängnisfilmen. Mit dem Unterschied, daß ich mitspielte’ (ibid.). However, dressing up and integrating the body into uniform regulations does not give the narrator a sense of power or masculine strength. Instead, he casts himself in the role of prisoner, who ‘mitspielte’ not just as an actor in this role but also

as someone complicit, having inescapably entered the military's zone of influence via its assessment of his naked body. Yet the prisoner comparison chimes with Fuchs's comparisons between the NVA and the *Wehrmacht* throughout the novel. Although the narrator refers to his father's service in the *Wehrmacht* elsewhere, comparing himself to a prisoner here suggests a potentially problematic identification with the victims of Nazism (since 'Gefängnisfilme' evoke first and foremost films of concentration camps) in the light of the frequent parallels he draws between the GDR and Nazi Germany. Identifying with victims here apparently attempts to avoid questions of complicity in military service which the narrative of *Fassonschnitt* struggles with elsewhere.

Subsequent scenes of nakedness provoke shame, narrative disruption and a feeling of objectification, such as when the narrator is subjected to a medical examination after arrival in the barracks: 'Breite Schultern, große Hände ... so kam es mir vor. Ich, ich, ich. Was ist los, was tun sie?' (p. 69). Ellipsis, repetition and staccato sentences in scenes of exposure reflect the disturbance of the narrator's identity and his feeling of violation by the doctors, with his desperate threefold assertion of self, 'ich, ich, ich', occurring twice more in this section. The only exception is a scene towards the end of the novel that takes place in the communal showers. The narrator anticipates the experience with horror: 'Ich fürchtete mich, dachte an die ärztliche Untersuchung' (p. 331). The passage is still elliptical, implying that the narrator's shame remains, but when it takes place the experience appears comradely or even pleasant: 'Viel Dampf, schlechte Sicht, Jugels Rücken waschen, Witze, Bemerkungen, aber doch eher freundliche, unter heißem Wasser, nackt waren wir alle' (pp. 332-33). The narrator does not comment further on this episode, neither confirming nor denying the potential for homoeroticism inherent in the men washing each other. This ellipsis notwithstanding, the shower scene's tacit intimacy and solidarity imply that nudity can create a space for emotions and camaraderie outside the restrictions of the uniform.

One further scene initially suggests that stripping the uniform away can disrupt the military's preferred narrative and re-impose a more natural order. However, this idealized conception of the naked body is ultimately rejected: military hierarchy and even the uniform reassert and re-inscribe themselves on the soldier's naked body. The episode in question takes place in the washroom, where naked torsos were themselves effectively part of a required uniform. One evening there is an altercation between Private Jugel, 'mit Unterhemd und Turnhose' and Lieutenant Meier, 'ein nackter Oberkörper, weiß, zart, unbehaart, mit Sommersprossen' (p. 79). The lieutenant's naked torso does not convey the same power as his uniform, so that Jugel fails to recognize Meier's authority: 'Hast du was zu sagen, oder wie ist das...' (ibid.). The narrator depicts the emasculation Meier experiences when stripped of his uniform, and re-enacts it with the string of feminizing adjectives describing his 'nackter Oberkörper'. Meier's reassertion of his position is phrased in terms of the relationship between uniform and body: "Das werden wir ja sehen! Ich bin Leutnant Meier!" ruft der Oberkörper, richtet sich auf, schnappt nach Luft, seine Schultern zucken, als müßten jeden Augenblick die goldenen Sterne sichtbar werden' (ibid.). Fuchs projects features of the uniform onto Meier's body, blurring the boundary between body and clothing and suggesting – as J. C. Flügel's Freudian analysis of clothing did many decades previously – that consciousness of self and of one's body extends to include garments worn on the surface of the body.<sup>28</sup> In the washroom episode, the body offers little threat to hierarchies, with the narrator imagining how Lieutenant Meier's body assumes the absent starred epaulettes.

The assumption of the uniform's narrative by the body is mirrored in the language of the washroom episode. At first neither soldier is named, referred to metonymically in terms of uniform or synecdochically as a 'nackter Oberkörper', so that the uniform or the body part replaces the identities of the two soldiers. Fuchs recapitulates Meier's initial disempowerment

---

<sup>28</sup> J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth, 1930), p. 34.

by decapitating him but, like his slim physique, Fuchs's representation never fully disrupts Meier's power. This authority is implied by the resonance of 'Oberkörper' with ranks such as 'Oberleutnant' which use the prefix 'Ober-' to signal a position of power within the masculine hierarchy. Fuchs makes frequent use of such synecdochic or metonymic substitution for names and even pronouns, staging in narrative form uniform's claim to offer a self-contained narrative representation of a person. When the conscripts first obtain the uniforms, for example, Fuchs refers to them not by name or by pronouns but as 'vorbeihastende Trainingsanzüge' (p. 50). Fuchs's consistent use of such substitutions is deliberately ironic, but it also recalls the identity crisis set in motion by the narrator's haircut at the opening of the novel, with any existing narrative of self or masculinity not just unsettled but replaced by the uniform.

Whereas the apparent messages of *Ein Katzensprung* and *Fassonschnitt* are substantially different, on closer reading they present a remarkably similar impression of uniform which supports an account of its relationship to the body in terms of competing narratives of masculinity. There is a paradox here. Military uniform was undoubtedly part of a performative transformation of soldiers to reflect ideal socialist military masculinity. Yet of the two works discussed here, it is paradoxically the one less critical of the NVA, *Ein Katzensprung*, that insists, albeit unconvincingly, on the value of the individual. Fuchs's highly critical novel, in contrast, takes the effects of uniform more seriously as part of the military's intended processes of normalization. The military had to foster public acceptance of conscription, to encourage conscripts to serve longer than the compulsory eighteen months to satisfy constant demands from Moscow for increased numbers.<sup>29</sup> *Ein Katzensprung*,

---

<sup>29</sup> Torsten Diedrich, 'Herrschaftssicherung, Aufrüstung und Militarisierung im SED-Staat', in *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR: Forschungsfelder, Ergebnisse, Perspektiven*, ed. by Hans Ehlert and Matthias Rogg (Berlin: Links, 2004), pp. 257-83 (p. 276).



despite its nuanced and at times even critical approach to uniform, was created in collaboration with the NVA and to some extent acts as propaganda encouraging wider acceptance of conscription. For example, the sympathetic and even cool character of Riedel was no doubt intended to present military service as compatible with young men's individuality and their civilian selves. Fuchs, on the other hand, accepts the uniform's transformative effect on conscripts, giving him a platform to criticize it whilst also contextualizing his autobiographical narrator's acquiescence and complicity in military service as unavoidable and therefore more compatible with the dissident identity he developed in later life.

Although both works present the possibility that nakedness or a comparison of uniform with costume might emphasize a civilian narrative of masculinity represented by the apparently more constant body, in practice this possibility is always undermined. Both Dobberke and Fuchs show bodies that are not just physically stifled by uniforms but are changed over time by them as a result of one aspect of a military training regime that seeks to mould bodies to approximate the military masculine ideal. Bodies in both works come to assume symbolic aspects of uniform, which in effect edits or rewrites the narrative of civilian masculinity with which conscripts' bodies had previously been associated.

The suggestion that the effects of uniform are not just symbolic and physical but psychological and narrative is evident in *Ein Katzensprung* but is clearer in Fuchs's representations of the relationship between body and uniform. In both works, uniform is associated with linguistic and narrative disruption: in *Ein Katzensprung* it delays and diverts the plot, while in *Fassonschnitt* its effects include a disruption of syntax in Fuchs's prose. Uniform is further associated with a silencing of conscripts' resistance or self-assertion, as evident in the parallels in *Ein Katzensprung* between the uniform's concealment of Helmke's body and his own refusal to explain his black eye, which combine to make the extent of his

injuries uncertain. In *Fassonschnitt*, the uniform deprives conscripts more explicitly of a position from which to narrate. On the one hand, this is a literal silencing, with conscripts' utterances muffled by gas masks while the only audible speech is the orders of their commanding officer. On the other, Fuchs substitutes features of uniform for conscripts' names or even pronouns, so that the uniform at times even deprives characters of a role as subjects in language.

Uniform in *Ein Katzensprung* and *Fassonschnitt* affects conscript soldiers' masculinities in a number of ways, and these are always interlinked and interdependent. Its symbolic and physical effects are perhaps the most visible, but psychological effects appear more damaging. Above all, both works portray uniform having distinctly narrative effects, not just in terms of linguistic disturbances and silencing but by depriving conscripts of a position from which to narrate. The centrality of narrative to the relationship between the uniform and the body presented by Dobberke and Fuchs should not be understood just as a result of their narrative medium. Combined with their portrayals of the ideal military masculinity associated with the uniform being physically inscribed on the body, the sense from these works is that uniform and the body initially represent two different narratives of masculinity. The conscript's narrative of civilian masculinity, associated on enlistment with the body, has been developed performatively, albeit largely unconsciously, over the conscript's life, and is thus inseparable from perceptions of his own biographical narrative. Ultimately, both works deny the possibility of an authentic bodily subjectivity that can subvert the effects of the military on the conscript. The military harnesses mechanisms of performativity, and from the moment the uniform is acquired – or in Fuchs's text from the point at which his hair is cut – military training attempts to channel conscripts' masculinities to approximate its masculine ideal. Both Dobberke and Fuchs show this process as a succession of narrative disruptions, with conscripts' bodies, identities and narrative

conceptions of self ultimately being influenced by the ideal military masculinity associated with the uniform. The narratives of masculinity come into conflict in *Ein Katzensprung* and *Fassonschnitt*, resulting in disruptions not just to conscripts' identities but also to the filmic and literary text. In both works, the uniform is more than just a symbolic feature of military service: it transforms the body and affects the psyche by rewriting the soldier's self-narrative.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

TOM SMITH

Tom Smith

8-10B Ferntower Road

London

N5 2JG

t.smith.12@ucl.ac.uk