In the second seminar of the fall 2008 semester, Kevin Kennedy presented his video documentary on Peter Paul Zahl, a West German writer who has been living in exile in Jamaica since 1985. Dr. Kennedy introduced the documentary by reflecting on his personal relationship to the subject—he was born in Jamaica and is now a professor of German literature—and by providing background information on Peter Paul Zahl, who is not very well known in present-day Germany.

Zahl, who was born in Freiburg/Breisgau in 1944 and spent his childhood in Mecklenburg and the Rhineland, moved to Berlin in 1964 to evade being drafted into the West German army. In 1966 he joined the literary circle “Dortmunder Gruppe 61”, which attempted to mediate between blue-collar workers with literary ambitions and the rest of the literary world. In particular, the “Gruppe 61” strove for a greater understanding of the working class, including social problems in the workplace, among editors, journalists, and literary critics. After having founded his own small press, Zahl became involved in the extra-parliamentary opposition (Ausserparlamentarische Opposition/APO) and the student movement. In the early 1970s Zahl was caught in a violent police sting that ultimately led to his incarceration. After using his prison term as an extended opportunity to write, Zahl was released in 1982 and emigrated to Jamaica via Grenada, Nicaragua, and the Seychelles.

Zahl remained (and still remains) extremely critical of West German politics and society during the 1950s and 1960s, and he offers a scathing view of other writers active among the “Sixty-eighthers”, such as Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Peter Schneider. By contrast, his literary interests have shifted from political poetry and other primarily political texts to crime stories. In this new genre, he has published a large number of books over the last two decades and has received a number of German literary awards for his portrayal of everyday life in Jamaica.
The discussion focused first on Zahl’s view of recent German history, or more specifically his contention that the Federal Republic was, until the 1970s, dominated by National Socialists, who had only paid lip service to democracy. The discussion then moved to the legacy of 1968 and Zahl’s peculiar position among the “Sixty-eighters”. In contrast to other writers participating in the movement, who later distanced themselves from its utopian and violent aspects—such as Peter Schneider—Zahl has remained an “unreconstructed” 1968er. And yet, some seminar participants argued that Schneider and Zahl seemed to share more than was immediately apparent, and that vanity—rather than political differences—may account for their antagonistic relationship. Lastly, Dr. Kennedy emphasized that Zahl’s questionable political positions had to be separated from his reputation as a writer.

Philipp Stelzel

Number of Participants: 18