

Joachim Sartorius: Welcome to the 8th international literature festival in Berlin

*Esteemed ladies and gentlemen,
dear guests of the international literature festival in Berlin,
dear authors,
esteemed Nancy Huston,
dear Senator Professor Zöllner,
deeply respected audience!*

Because music is that other language, the language beyond words, and because it has always played an important role in this festival, the first minutes of the 8th international literature festival in Berlin were given over to music. Aydar Gaynullin played the bayan. In the Tartar tongue, Aydar means “gift of the moon”. Born in Moscow, he learned to play the accordion from an early age, graduated from the master class at the Schnittke Music College in Moscow and came on a scholarship from Rostropowitsch Foundation to Berlin, where he studied at the Hanns-Eisler-Hochschule. Gaynullin is a musician who combines the classical repertoire with Russian folk music and contemporary influences. He himself composes for the theatre and for film, and is admired and highly decorated with many important international music awards. Together with other musical colleagues, he will bring us musically into this year’s readings. Many thanks, Aydar Gaynullin, for this beautiful musical gift! [Applause]

My most esteemed ladies and gentlemen, I must admit that, in light of the current events which are rocking the world’s financial markets, I feel cold chills run down my spine. Not so much due to the events themselves, the consequences of which are at this time unforeseeable. What disturbs me is more a strange division in perception, a feeling of insecurity as to how we are supposed to understand it all. Following the collapse of the investment bank Lehman Brothers, we saw young men and women dressed in shorts and polo shirts leaving the institute through the glass revolving doors. They held in their hands the belongings which had adorned the desks on which they had facilitated the digestion of billions by the world’s financial markets. They addressed the waiting cameras with rueful smiles: that sort of went wrong, but we’re off to the Caribbean now for a few weeks of sailing. A few hours later, the company was broke, and creditors now fight over the scraps – just

numbers - that remain.

From Germany there was a farewell present: the federal Credit Institute for Reconstruction, hitherto known mostly for supplying credit to home builders, flung 300 million euros of German taxpayers' money into the black hole – apparently a mistake. The American government now plans to inject a billion dollars (that's one thousand millions) into the financial markets, in order to cushion the blow of the rotten credits the banks have been pushing back and forth among themselves without capital cover. Why am I telling you this? I believe we lack the language to describe what is happening here.

It begins with the amounts. Does anyone actually understand what these numbers represent? Does anyone still understand the sheer number of zeros that were annihilated in one morning? These amounts have become completely divorced from reality through the automatic speculations in the international banking system. One could remark, maliciously: The money has sought reality, couldn't find it, and is now running amok. There is a word which describes what happens when systems which are supposed to depict reality no longer have any relation to it: abstraction. We know since Hegel that it expresses a proximity to death.

Today we no longer hear about the hundreds of thousands of Americans who built houses with the help of credits for which they were not obliged to provide security, and who now stand there with empty hands because they are unable to cover the rising interest rates. The language of the investment bankers and financial specialists, from Ackermann to Weber and Steinbrück, is also placatory, convoluted, and unrecognisably distorted. I take this to mean that I am not the only one who doesn't understand. The difference is that language here is a part of the speculating system and is used to disarm insecurities. Language obscures. And whatever anyone may say, tomorrow it's already been disproved.

And while we're on the subject of lies, both white and not white, about which Nancy Huston will shortly be speaking: a stock market crash, I recently learned, is called ›a long overdue correction‹. The destruction of private property by the inability to pay is ›insolvency‹, and the downfall of vast corporations is called a ›necessary purging of the market‹. What is actually behind these events is lost to sight. About lives being destroyed, dependencies reinforced, economic areas drained bone dry – not a word is said. Not a word is said about the enormous damage caused to societies by the uninhibited greed for profit and that – as a direct consequence – people in other countries are kept in a state of poverty. We must try to use language in a way that reveals the lies which can be found in the choice of words.

Why is a literature festival like this necessary? The systems in which realities are described today are disparate and necessarily characterised by mutual incomprehension. Everyone has their own system: the bankers in Manhattan, the Africans making their way to Europe over hundreds of kilometres, the Commissioner in the EU Parliament, the middle class American who needs cheap gas for his Dodge, the Chinese miner, the Turkish boy in Berlin-Neukölln...

These examples could all derive from the books which are read here. Writers give back to the people who become invisible under the massive rush of speculation and the bluster on the world stage their appearances and their stories. They may also explain what is really going on in those corners of the world which are penetrated by the creepers of a globalised economy.

For this reason it gives me great pleasure that our emphasis in this year is on African literature. In 1988, when Berlin was the Cultural Capital of Europe, I invited as director of the Artists' Programme of the DAAD some of Africa's most important writers to Berlin under the banner »Europe seen from outside«: Chinua Achebe from Nigeria, Ngugi wa Thiong'o from Kenya, Jean-Marie Adiaffi from the Ivory Coast. I recall that Ngugi wa Thiong'o talked in his speech about how wealthy Europe was gradually becoming a fortress, after having spiritually, economically, and morally plundered the nations of Africa. Today we must concede that the situation has, if anything, become even worse. Europe has Africa in a chokehold of economic protectionism disguised as liberalisation: the borders between Europe and Africa are becoming increasingly impenetrable, the attempts to seek refuge in Europe are increasingly dangerous, and the number of victims rises steadily. If we had the »nobility« of the great African writers in Berlin in 1987, in this year it is the younger generation of important writers from Africa who are our guests. Their themes range across the misery of corrupt and violent governments, the AIDS issue, the destruction of nature, and questions about African history, and include poetic and playful confrontations with the specific narrative and language cultures of Africa.

They allow the limitless variety of this continent to become reality. I would like to heartily invite you to participate in this life, to experience for yourselves the variety of languages, literatures, forms, and voices. Because we all know how people die in Africa – but not how they live.

Gratitude is in order that the international literature festival can take place. My thanks to the

Foreign Office, which provided great support for Focus Africa. I would most like to express my gratitude to the Hauptstadt Kulturfonds, however, which is now providing support for the sixth year, and Mr. Schreiber and I wish of course that a permanent solution may be found. There are good signs for this, and the State Minister for Culture and the Media is himself working to give this festival a future. For this I would like to express my deepest thanks at this point.

I wish 12 strenuous, exciting days of world literature for you and for us. Take everything with you which you can absorb and retain. Listen, experience!

I herewith open the eighth international literature festival in Berlin, 2008.

Many thanks!