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Felt History: Literary Senses of the Historical
in People's Poland and the German Democratic Republic around 1989

By

Thomas Kamil Sliwowski

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Niklaus Largier, Chair

Professor Lilla Balint

Professor Karen Feldman

Professor Alexei Yurchak

Summer, 2023

Abstract

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Thomas Kamil Sliwowski

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Berkeley

Niklaus Largier, Chair

Articulating an original reading strategy that builds on both American feminist affect theory and anthropological models of historical consciousness, this dissertation advances a new theoretical account of the role played by the sensory or bodily awareness of history in Polish and East German literature. Its argument consists of, on the one hand, an account historical experience in the state-socialist period in People's Poland and in the German Democratic Republic that focuses on specific, qualitative experiences of historical time and that places them in their cultural contexts and historical genealogies. These qualitative temporalities appear as concrete amalgamations of emotion and time. The three such amalgamations on which this dissertation focuses are: Stalinist cheerfulness and its "elastic" sense of history; the empty lateness of pre-*Solidarność* Poland in the 1970s, and the atmospheric depression hanging over Berlin directly before the *Mauerfall*. On the other hand, this argument presents a theoretical account of historical consciousness as such, which uses the example of socialist historical consciousness to argue that the categories of feeling, affect, and emotion are, in fact, central to how history is experienced throughout Modernity. This is, again, a wholly original argument that builds on literary, historical, anthropological, and cultural-studies theory to advance a new understanding of historical time, outside of chronology, simultaneity, and forms of linear ordering. These readings of the Polish and East German literature are, at once, an attempt to deprovincialize the socialist novel by elucidating its universal claims about the relationship of historical knowledge to historical experience.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is the result of six years spent refining the question of how to read literature from the socialist era in East-Central Europe without assimilating it to Western literary-historical frameworks. Like many ideas it began with a wholly irrational conviction—a gut feeling, really—that these literatures have something to teach us: that they contain some object of knowledge the import of which transcends their historical and cultural context. Studying minor literatures in lesser-known languages always presents unique challenges, and it was only at Berkeley that I could have carried out the research and written the dissertation that I did.

I began asking this question in Prof. John Connelly's History 285 seminar, and I thank him for his unflagging support for my inquiry, even as it began to follow a more and more idiosyncratic path. Paweł Kościelny and Lee Hekking, also in this seminar, have been invaluable interlocutors and good friends to me ever since. I was lucky enough to co-organize a panel with both at ISEES in San Francisco in 2019 and to publish a co-written article based on this panel last year. John has additionally been a role model for me as a public intellectual and has encouraged me to hone my writing and to seriously consider writing for a broader audience: this advice has proven decisive in my trajectory at the end of the PhD and beyond. I would not have this dissertation project or the confidence to move towards popular writing without him. All these people I originally met through Berkeley's Institute for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, which was a second home for me at Berkeley both through my participation in talks and colloquia and through the Kroužek and Kruzhok working groups, which showed me how to think like a historian and challenged my ideas about arguments, truth claims, and the role of narrative in scholarship. Others I have met and been influenced by through these circles include Jakub Mikanowski, Kyrill Kunakhovich, Sara Friedman, and Professors Yuri Slezkine, Djorde Popovic, and Victoria Bergstrom.

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Returning to more strictly academic orbits, I want to thank Prof. Harsha Ram, who chaired my Qualifying Exams and who told me to make German my major language rather than French: this single piece of advice altered the trajectory of my research and of my life. I would not live in Berlin had I not listened to his counsel. Of especial importance to me was a seminar I took after my Qualifying Exams with Alexei Yurchak, whose work on the historical anthropology of late socialism has had a greater impact on the direction of my research than any other single body of work. I am indebted to him for teaching me how to critique Western cultural frameworks and for introducing me to ethnographic theories of postsocialism that have formed one backbone of this interdisciplinary, hydra-like dissertation. Thanks to his working group, *Klub Kultury*, I cemented friendships with an interdisciplinary group of thinkers who take the postsocialist world seriously and who delve into its manifold, fascinating contradictions. These people include Rusana Cieply, Lisa Min, Marcos Cisernos, Linda Kinstler, and Sasha Simonova.

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Niklaus Largier has taught me the importance of developing a unique style of philosophical thinking both through his instruction and by his example. His seminar on Imagination, Fantasy, and *Einbildungskraft* introduced me to rare jewels of texts that I continue to think about regularly, in particular Synesius' treatise on dream divination, and he has modeled for me a kind of intellectual disposition that I privately call the "Californian Style:" a gentle openness to the world that does not sacrifice rigor, an intellectual generosity that fosters curiosity, knowing it to be the source of all new thought. Over time I have found my own thinking bearing the mark of his influence more and more, and I will never forget the lesson he imparted onto me when I began writing this dissertation. Namely, to always think through objects: to begin with the description and elaboration of an object, and to let any abstract reflection grow out of it. This advice has proven fundamental to me in realms of life far beyond academic scholarship. It lies at the heart of what I believe it means to be a scholar of comparative literature.

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me and my fellow GSI Kyle Ralston to fill in for her and we lectured to the hall of 120 students from her notes. This was one of the peak experiences of my time in graduate school and I will never forget this exhilaration and good feeling. Needless to say, it was Karen's wry and playful disposition we were channeling. I've learned how to teach, how to write, but most importantly how to think about problems of historical knowledge thanks to her mentorship. If my engagement with historians at Berkeley taught me to think like one, then Karen's seminar on the philosophy of history taught me to ask questions of historical knowledge-claims that no historian could come up with. I never would have devised the project that I did if it hadn't been for her mentorship, encouragement, and support.

I've often joked that an invisible conveyor belt connects Berkeley to Berlin, and I am grateful in general for the chance to travel to Berlin nearly every year since 2017 and for having relocated to Berlin in late 2020, in the middle of the pandemic. The months that followed my move were the most difficult but also the most productive of my life: I wrote the Konwicki and Hilbig chapters in a flurry of some eight months. Some interlocutors and friends from Berkeley have become fixtures in my Berlin world, particularly Camila Yadeau and Spencer Adams, and I am thankful for thinking with me, writing with me, and dancing with me, too. Other friends I've made in Berlin have allowed this city to become a second home to me, and I feel inordinately lucky to have written the entirety of my dissertation in this city at the Staatsbibliothek Potsdamer Platz, a library that will always be a spiritual navel for my thinking.

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Introduction

The famous twenty-third chapter of Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel* recounts the news of Yuri Gagarin's flight into the cosmos as it reaches the middle of a field where Rita, the protagonist, is working together with her factory team. The news comes from "an unknown man, who none of us would see again."¹ Even if he is not an angel, his appearance and disappearance lend the scene a certain aura. With their tools laid down and their faces angled upward, the work team bears witness, and their silent, pious awe seems like the wake left by some miracle. This one is all the rarer for being completely secular. An imponderably vaster timescale has crossed into the afternoon hour, and the gravity of this event has pulled an otherwise realistic scene into a wholly different register:

Wann hörte die Stille auf, die dröhnend den Wörtern des Jungen folgte? Dadurch bekam alles, was bisher geschehen ist, seinen Sinn: daß ein Bauernsohn den Himmel pflügt und Sterne als Saatkörner über ihn verstreut... Wann hört die Stille auf?²

What follows are lyrical passages that describe the feeling of having witnessed the inauguration of a new, collective future. The celestial witness, this unknown man, has brought the good news and this news has bathed the day in redemptive, world-historical significance. As otherworldly as it is extraterrestrial, this occurrence feels religiously transcendent. History has become incarnated as what we could call historical feeling: manifest, palpable, and urgent. Time is suddenly,

¹ Wolf, Christa. *Geteilte Himmel*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999. 170. "Er, ein unbekannter, den keiner von uns wiedersehen wird, überbrachte uns *die Nachricht*. Er stand auf dem Schotter des Nachbargleises und sah zu uns herauf."

² *Ibid.*, 170. "When did the thunderous silence that followed the boy's words come to an end? This gave meaning to everything that had happened so far: a peasant's son ploughing the sky and sowing stars as seeds ... When did the silence come to an end?" Wolf, Christa. *They Divided the Sky*. Trans. Luise von Flotow. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2013.149.

somehow something felt, almost like an emotion, and this specific feeling, in turn, is welded forever to the calendar date. The moment's event horizon encompasses everything.

But the chapter does not wallow in sublime lyricism for long. Soon enough it reveals historical feeling to be something wholly ideological and very much contestable: a question of political orientation, really. The escalating argument between Wedeland, the deep-red foreman, and Rita's boyfriend Manfred, a former petit-bourgeois manager's son, hinges on whether the inaugural spaceflight is, indeed, a significant historical event and a watershed—or whether it will merely provide more dross for the socialist propaganda apparatus. That this even could be debated casts aspersions on the lofty feeling. The cosmonaut landed successfully, but what soared into orbit with him has crashed back down to earth. This is an historical sentiment: fortunately for us, it's wreckage is richly allegorical.

Wedeland and Manfred's heated debate about historical significance plays out against a smaller kind of trial that serves as its counterpoint: as the news of Gagarin's spaceflight arrives, the work team is carrying out a train car brake test. Rita is by this point well-aware that even producing a train car is an impressive technological feat, and this already busy scene starts to feel like it might boil over with all the metaphors about the locomotives of history and their emergency brakes.³ But this brake test fails. How could it have been any other way? The tasks this chapter sets for itself, of showing what it feels like to sense history happening in real-time, are too monumental to be accomplished without issue—and Christa Wolf is too astute a writer to

³ Consider the following passage: “Dieses Dörfchen da, die betriebsamen Arbeiter an der Strecke, der unbewegliche einsame Mann am Waldrand— sind sie jetzt noch dieselben? Während *die Nachricht*, da sie um den Erdball fuhr, wie eine Flamme die schimmelpelzige Haut von Jahrhunderten abfraß. Während unser Zug, lautlos anfahrend, dieses Stückchen Weideland, das Dorf, den leicht geschwungenen Waldrand mit dem einsamen Mann davor für immer verließ...” Wolf, *Op. Cit.*, 171.

simply lean back on socialist-realist convention and bogus transcendence.⁴ Instead of an unproblematic rendering of history appearing crowned in the uppercase, immediate and apparent, we are offered a staging of the failure of historical feeling: a scene that shows just how light, elusive, phantasmic is the touch by which world-historical significance enters into everyday experience.

Let us begin with some naive questions: what would it even mean to sense history happening, to feel historical time unfolding in a moment of intensity? How seriously should we take such sublime invocations of sudden historical significance, as in the passage above, and to what extent can we even talk about historical feeling in any rigorous or consequential manner—that is, as more than a metaphor? This line of questioning could seem at best a provocation, or at worst a confusion of terms: history *itself* is not something that can be sensed, and any attempt to impute an immediate, felt experience of history would yield nothing more than one or another reification of historical reality—with actual history eluding us yet again. For all its virtuosity, Wolf's lyricism feels flimsier with every rereading: we probably don't even know the date of Gagarin's spaceflight, and the chapter is confident enough to not even mention it. (It is April 12, 1961).

And yet we would do well to take seriously this conceit that history affects us—and even that how it affects us, awakens us, or strikes us in the gut might prove to be more important than anything else we can say about it. Christa Wolf's thunderbolts are made of cardboard, but these frail props have been assembled by the cleverest of stagehands. Her novelistic account of the experience of learning of the first spaceflight is certainly more philosophically suggestive than

⁴ For more on the role of socialist realism in Christa Wolf's oeuvre, including in *Der geteilte Himmel* in particular, see: Buehler, George. *The Death of Socialist Realism in the Novels of Christa Wolf*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984.

any stone or marble monument to Gagarin ever could be. If we struggle to find questions to ask of it, then this may be because taking seriously historical feeling involves imagining a mode of historical knowledge for which we still lack a grammar.

This knowledge must be, in part, something negative: it is only by staging the *failure* of historical feeling that Wolf's novel is able to make it an object of political contention. Because it becomes a sticking point, the status of Gagarin's spaceflight as a historical watershed is shown to be neither self-evident nor immediately felt. Against naturalistic conceptions of historical time that would impute onto it some objective measure of significance, historical feeling interrogates the relation between the subjective experience that this is, in fact, a momentous occasion and the objective political and sociological conditions that make possible or foreclose upon this very subjective experience. Quizzically, it is by being understood as a cultural emotion lying on the surface of subjective experience that historical time can be rigorously analyzed—not as one or another chronology, but as a qualitative experience: as something that moves us or that fails to, for manifold reasons.

But if it does fail almost every single time, then historical feeling does, at least, fail in marvelous and bewildering ways. The broader impetus of this dissertation's argument is that paying attention to the failures of historical feeling will unearth for us deeply idiosyncratic forms of historical knowledge. Rather than knowledge about the past structured in narrative chronologies and chains of cause and effect, historical feeling affords us modes of attunement to particular experiences of historicity, such as the awareness of the first human spaceflight's significance. It frames any given moment in history like a monad: a constellation charged with reactivated pasts and imagined futures, with duration and plenitude or emptiness, and with emotional textures—all of which flesh out a given moment and can be unfolded in that

moment's thick description. It is, in this way, necessarily an anti-historicist mode of historical thought: qualities and not chronology, and specific constellation rather than lines of causation, are what historical feeling affords. If the writers and theorists analyzed in this dissertation share anything, it is a desire to think about historical reality outside of narrative, chronological, and linear frameworks.

Although it investigates the original concept that I term "historical feeling," this dissertation appears under a slightly different title. *Felt History* tries to grasp this argument's concrete dimension: namely, that there is something unique about the experience of history under Eastern-European state socialism. It is not merely the case that historical feeling describes a grammar for heretofore ignored dimensions of historical knowledge; this concept also names the specific guise under which history appeared in these cultures and societies. Owing in large part to the legacy of Stalinist culture and the unique role its ideological discourse accorded to history, the experience of post-1945 state socialism in Central Europe gave rise to a unique way of apprehending historical time. History expressed itself by means of complex, qualitative temporalities experienced as if they were bewildering or frustrating emotions. These concrete amalgamations of time and emotion—from Stalinist cheerfulness and its "elastic" sense of futurity to the empty lateness of pre-*Solidarność* Poland to the atmospheric depression hanging over Berlin directly before the *Mauerfall*—become the means by which history as such disclosed itself and made itself into something palpable. In Eastern Europe after 1945, history became felt history.

Abstractly, this register of historical knowledge makes central the categories of feeling, mood, and affect. It represents a return to an older strand of Romantic historical thought, exemplified by historians like Jules Michelet, but it is at once a product of the twenty-first

century's digital environments and their proliferation of cultural moods, 'vibes,' and aestheticized expressions of a past decade's feel. These new forms of historical experience have as yet no grammar and no theoretical framework. Existing terminology, like *Zeitgeist*, nostalgia, or period-feeling, has failed to adequately describe the implications of historical knowledge that takes the affective or somatic register as its starting point. Now, in 2023, historical feeling has become general and ubiquitous.

Memory's Other Names

The critical potential of this dissertation's conceptual apparatus lies in its capacity to relate and interrogate three strands of theory from roughly the past twenty years. Broadly, historical feeling suggests that what have been called memory culture, postsocialist nostalgia, or the heterogeneity of time in the contemporary age, are all, in fact, felt senses of time: qualitative temporalities experienced as bewildering emotions. These attempts to describe local, minor forms of historical consciousness over the last twenty-five years have fallen short of their promise largely because they overstate the universality of their claims. The rubric of historical feeling brings these disparate theories of historical time into conversation with one another, affording a common tongue that can rename and think together wildly heterogeneous forms of historical experience.

The first strand includes theories of the contemporary as a period that attempt to articulate how historical time *itself* seems to operate differently in our present, roughly after 1989, at the end of the "short" twentieth century. These works consider the implications of historical time itself having become something more than the unilinear, progressive, teleological direction, but as nonlinear, plural, heterogeneous, and, especially, as *contemporary*. This includes not only by now classic works like Aleida Assman's *Ist die Zeit aus den Fügen?* but

especially François Hartog and Lionel Ruffel’s writing on *regimes of historicity* and *the contemporary*, respectively.⁵ The key move in these works of theory involves periodization and the difficulties of describing an historical period that seems as if it is of a different order than all preceding historical periods. Perhaps, however, what has changed has not been the structure of historical time itself—whatever that may be, wherever it might be located—but rather our shared, cultural apparatus for perceiving and making sense of historical time.

The second strand includes those works of theory that interrogate experiences of historical time through the categories of collective affect or period feeling, attempting to describe shared, diffuse moods that bear on our sense of a concrete historical past, or of our own historical present. Here, the [?] centering category of feeling furnishes the means for conducting a critique of ideological forms of historical experience. Dealing with American literature and culture from the postwar to the present, Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* asks what it means for “aesthetically mediated affective responses [to (?)] exemplify a shared *historical* sense.”⁶ Taking affect as a privileged site for accessing a shared “historical sensorium,” her book charts, in brief, the decay products of the postwar American fantasy of the good life, charting out a new kind of affective relation, whose name is the book’s title. Taking as its subject postwar West German culture, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s theorizes an affect he terms “emergent latency” in *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present* as the particular collective mood or atmosphere of a generation of West Germans.⁷ These are to be sure very different kinds of works: while Berlant’s methodology borrows especially from Marxist and feminist genealogies, Gumbrecht’s is more

⁵ Assmann, Aleida. *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2013. Hartog, François. *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Points Histoire, 2015. Ruffel, Lionel. *Brouhaha: Les mondes du contemporain*. Paris: Verdier, 2016.

⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 3.

⁷ Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

idiosyncratic, relying at the same time more heavily on autobiographical evidence and his own theorization of *Stimmung*, the emotional atmosphere that marks the texture of a moment in time. Both works think about affect as a kind of collective experience, and both share a concern with historical presence: for John Brenkman, Berlant and Gumbrecht's mobilizations of affect theory to think about historical experience amount to variations on the older concepts of "zeitgeist, period feeling, or generational sensibility."⁸ This somewhat reductive characterization points to the difficulty of theorizing affect as a collective, historical experience without reducing it to a recapitulation of known quantities. Gumbrecht and Berlant's books reckon with this problem by framing their arguments around the rhetoric of discoveries: both coin new feelings, describing novel senses of history, or giving names to affects that did not have any name before, and that could have gone unnoticed. In so doing, they pose provocative questions: what does it mean to feel an historical present? How does the act of naming the affective experience of an historical present ground this emotional experience, opening up a radically different conceptualization of what historical reality might be? And, what kinds of claims can we make about historical affect—those quasi-emotions that seem to be somehow *about* history or historical time—and on the basis of what evidence?

The third strand, closely related to the first, is comprised of the more theoretically reflexive works emerging from memory studies, which take the problem of collective memory as a starting point for developing new languages for representing history. To this latter category belong works like Andreas Huyssen's *Twilight Memories*, Aleida Assmann's work on cultural

⁸ Brenkman, John. *Mood and Trope: The Rhetoric and Poetics of Affect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 22. The juxtaposition of Berlant and Gumbrecht I get from Brenkman, though my treatment differs from his in substantial ways.

memory, and Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*.⁹ How can we understand this gradual evolution from meditations on cultural memory to critiques of the very structure of historical time after modernity over the course of the last 30 years? Tenuous connections between the sense that historical time has somehow changed in nature since the 1980s and the veritable explosion of memory culture abound,¹⁰ and arguments often have conventionally revolved around claims about the status of modernity and attempts to conjure a proper name for a new epoch. One of the earliest instances of this was Frederic Jameson's 1983 *Postmodernism. Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; but this work's key gesture (of naming a new epoch) has been repeated with varying effect dozens of times. Take Boym's nostalgia: by distinguishing between nostalgia as an "historical emotion" rooted in 19th century medical and literary contexts, and nostalgia as a period marker for a new age *of* nostalgia, her argument amounts to projecting a subjective emotional experience onto the fabric of history itself.¹¹ Upon closer inspection, however, there is no "age of nostalgia" to be found. What, then, are the stakes of naming the present epoch or period as the age of postmodernity, or of nostalgia, or of retrotopia?

The ethos of this project eschews grand claims about the status of modernity or the nature of historical time "itself" in the hope that a modest cataloguing function satisfied with identifying some minor senses of time will prove a more durable contribution to the field. Less like a conquistador charting a new age, and more like a stooped-over naturalist collecting some

⁹ Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. London: Routledge, 1995. Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. Assmann, Aleida. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.

¹⁰ We can trace this definitively to Jacques Derrida's 1993 *Spectres de Marx*, whose focus on Hamlet as a figure for thinking the status of Marxism after the fall of Soviet communism is echoed in Assmann's telling book title, *Is Time Out of Joint?* But one need not look far for these conclusions: Huyssens and Boym make the same claims, somewhat cautiously, in their introductions. Most recently Zygmunt Bauman's final publication *Retrotopia*, made an epochal argument for a new, retrotopian, age, building on his original periodization since *Liquid Modernity*.

¹¹ This argument about Boym's nostalgia as a philosophy of history that is, in effect, merely "ontologizing separation" comes from Djordje Popovic. "Materialist Regressions and a Return to Idealism." *Contradictions. A Journal for Critical Thought*. Vol. 1, No. 2. 2017. 80. Footnote 45.

samples, this work will proceed haltingly and carefully. What it will not look for are secret portholes that promise to provide some direct or immediate experience of the past, or of historical reality. This is the fundamental failure of the above works: they all seek to cast cultural or collective memory as some more immediate or vital counterpart to historical representation. As we shall see, many of these books take as their starting point readings of Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*—an essay that, while certainly focusing on the importance of forgetfulness, scarcely even mentions memory itself, much less some collective or cultural form thereof. Memory as such may not be the point—but what memory tries to name certainly calls for further theoretical reflection.

Evaluating memory studies after its tide in cultural studies had begun to recede, Jameson formulates an incisive critique that echoes, as we shall see, Benjamin's own insights about the past and its decay products in the present. Jameson locates the failure of memory studies in its inability to come up with any satisfying meta-theoretical claims about what (collective, cultural) memory is, or does, or how one reads for it. He puts it bluntly: "Memory doesn't exist." Even memories of concrete historical events, real memories of *it happening*, "reduce themselves to empirical detail, their objectivity quickly swallowed up in the subjective and assimilate to autobiographical anecdote." Time's corrosive effect on the felt memories of momentous events "slowly turns into the memory of nostalgia films about the 1950s and the detestable Eisenhower era, now as alien to us as the habits and customs of the ancient Greeks, or of Weimar, themselves also, however, safely out of reach in the sheltering arms of cliché and stereotype." Any historical representation soon enough becomes nothing more than the stale tropes of historical representation: "You are there! A shout in the street! Panicky crowds fleeing the police in the

distance, across a deserted avenue!”¹² Memory studies’ attempts to locate and theorize a sense of the historical past somehow more immediate than that of historical narratives have quite utterly failed, none of them “detecting the carbon dating or the faint atomic signature of historical radiation anywhere.”¹³

Here, we might recall Benjamin’s dictum, that “History decays into images, not stories.”¹⁴ I take this to mean, with Jameson, that with the passing of time, the past finds itself codified in mediated representations: images that circulate, repeat, and reproduce increasingly stylized visions of the past, congealing into clichés. This is, in fact, not the arcane insight that it is sometimes made out to be, but a rather obvious point, and it is the reason why, for instance, a decade can be later “rediscovered” and mined for those surfaces and textures omitted from the reified images of it. The stakes of this insight for memory studies, however, are dire: no immediate porthole to the historical past is to be found anywhere, and any attempt to render or articulate such an immediate sense of the past will turn out nothing more than rhetorical effects, with ‘the Real’ of history itself eluding us once again.

But these rhetorical effects are themselves significant: the testimonial register in which a philosopher like Boym elaborates her theory points to a recuperation of nostalgia as an “historical emotion” of another kind: as an emotion concerned with history, an emotion *about* history, a non-conceptual, somatic sense of the past, one which describes not an age but a mode of relation to past ages.¹⁵ This critical move, which shifts the insights of memory and nostalgia studies from a historical age or the structure of time itself, to subjective experience, can be

¹² Jameson, “Allegoresis in Postmodernity” in *Allegory and Ideology*. New York: Verso, 2019. 334-335.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999. [N11,4]

¹⁵ This reading of the phrase “historical emotion” was recently noted, in slightly different form, by Andrew Gilbert, in his ethnographic theory of chronotopes, historical emotions, and historical consciousness. Gilbert, Andrew. “Beyond Nostalgia: Other Historical Emotions.” *History and Anthropology*. Vol. 30, No. 3. 2019. 293-312.

extended to much of memory theory writing. As the title of this section suggests, what much of memory studies had been up to when it was describing the workings of collective memory as if it were an objective and stable, putatively more immediate sense of the past, was in fact the elaboration of specific senses of time and historical feelings: emotional experiences that take history as an object and that are shaped by qualitative temporalities.

Towards an Anthropology of Historical Consciousness

What would it mean to read these grand theoretical works not as thinking through a contested sense of cultural memory writ large, not as making epochal claims about historical time itself, and to read them instead as earlier instances of an incomplete catalogue of temporal senses and historical affects—of emotions that take the past or the future or the present as their objects? Not simply arguing against the rupture or collapse thesis, that something about the workings of historical time broke down somewhere between 1979 and 1993, I am arguing that what has been described as an objective and collective groundswell in the workings of historical time itself, or the significant explosion of memory cultures, might be better grasped phenomenologically: as a series of heterogeneous “historical emotions” that have come into view in the last thirty years, under the signs of memory studies, or postsocialist nostalgia, or other terms for a collective experience of historical time.¹⁶

It bears repeating: if this dissertation’s theoretical intervention enacts a shift from memory to historical feeling, from epochal claims to phenomenological description, then I am working here with the categories of moods, feelings, and affects that nevertheless place no claims on the immediacy of these non-conceptual and non-cognitive modes of historical experience. The missteps of a project like Frank Ankersmidt’s *Sublime Historical Experience* are

¹⁶ Like Jameson’s “nostalgia-deco,” or Bauman’s “retrotopia...”

worth briefly outlining in order to define my own use of these categories by way of contrast.¹⁷

Ankersmidt attempts to recuperate the category of experience in historical thought as some immediate or direct porthole to historical truth, much in the same way that the memory theorists who were his contemporaries attempted to frame collective or cultural memory as some such point of unmediated contact.

Nevertheless, his focus on experience does, like my own use of historical feeling, take as its object specific historical moments plucked out of the continuum of any linear chronology. These specific moments are, however, made accessible by means of a painting or “a room unchanged for centuries:” forms of aesthetic mediation that nevertheless afford some purchase on access to “the past *itself*,” which “can be said to have survived the centuries and to be still present in objects that are given to us here and now, such as paintings, burial chambers, pieces of furniture, and so on.”¹⁸ In trying to demarcate and define his own specific sense of historical experience, Ankersmidt not only commits the blunder of all memory studies by placing his bets on a form of immediacy and on the primacy of the subject, but also seems to confound mediation and immediacy. Historical experience is at once “a rehabilitation of the romanticist’s world of moods and feelings”¹⁹ and a form of what Marx would call “practical knowledge,”²⁰ distinct from empirical knowledge and any sense-data. It is at once separate from historical knowledge and somehow constitutive of it; beholden to the world of emotions and feelings but mediated by representations of the past that seem to act in some special, unmediated way.

These romanticist categories are, in my usage, always learned emotions: rhetorically structured forms of aesthetic experience that cannot be disambiguated from the cultural contexts

¹⁷ Ankersmidt, Frank. *Sublime Historical Experience*. Stanford, Stanford UP, 2005.

¹⁸ Ankersmidt, 115.

¹⁹ Ankersmidt, 10.

²⁰ Ankersmidt, 111.

and specific forms of ideological discourse that form their conditions of possibility. No general moods or feelings, what I am working with are concrete affective-temporal amalgamations, described by means of devices borrowed from anthropology and ethnography. The work of anthropologists on the concept of “historical emotion,” largely developed in dialogue with Bakhtin’s notion of the *chronotope*— specific articulations of time and space that demarcate the field of action in the novel—has been crucial for how I have developed this particular understanding of emotion as culturally-constrained, rhetorically-constructed, and constitutive of forms of historical consciousness. We could say, in fact, that the chronotope becomes a kind of comparative concept for the project of an anthropology of historical consciousness: it provides the grammar for showing how different cultures experience history and historical time differently.

My argument is especially indebted to recent readings of Bakhtin’s chronotope by anthropologists of post-socialism, particularly Andrew Gilbert and Kristina Wirtz.²¹ Writing after two decades of ever-proliferating scholarship on “postsocialist nostalgia” and related phenomena, itself largely inaugurated by Svetlana Boym’s seminal 2003 book, they reimagine the chronotope as a tool to think about what historical time is doing when it becomes the object of emotional experience. The chronotope is, to these anthropologists, more than an organizing concept for the time-spaces inherent in literary genres and the kinds of narrative action they make possible: it becomes a way to conceptualize different forms of historical consciousness by thinking about how specific configurations of time, space, and voice engender affective

²¹ Gilbert, Andrew. “Beyond Nostalgia: Other Historical Emotions.” *History and Anthropology*. Vol. 30, No. 3. 2019. 293-312. Wirtz, Kristina. “The Living, the Dead, and the Immanent. Dialogue Across Chronotopes. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. Vol. 6, No. 1. 2016. 343–369.

experiences. In this way, Gilbert and Wirtz do not advance beyond Bakhtin's concept so much as they recognize the radical potential already inherent in its original formulation.

It will be helpful to look closely at how they redefine the chronotope. For Gilbert, "Bakhtin's insight was that all of these (time, locale, & personhood) are mutually associating, and the chronotope concept forces us to inquire about the nature of this mutual association. Sorting out these associations is a first step in establishing what kinds of relationships people form with the past, nostalgic or otherwise."²² In similar terms, Wirtz defines the value of Bakhtin's concept thusly: "If the first insight of Bakhtin's concept of chronotope is the irreducible relationality of time and space as semiotic (that is to say, socially meaningful) constructs, the second is that these semiotically mediated spatiotemporal orders shape our *experience* and thus subjective *feel* for history and place."²³ For both, the chronotope allows them to theorize how their ethnographic subjects imagine their own historicity, to create a language for describing the textures of radically different modes of historical consciousness. Significantly, they imagine historical consciousness as a matter of feeling: Gilbert frames his argument as a radical expansion on postsocialist nostalgia scholarship, calling for, in a citation of Svetlana Boym's term, the discovery of other kinds of "historical emotions."²⁴ Wirtz likewise places her emphasis on "experience" and "feeling" in the quote above, and goes on to define chronotopes as "dynamic, unfolding constructions of how such categories as past, present, and future matter in themselves and in relation to the trajectories, disjunctures, and immanences that

²² Gilbert, 301.

²³ Wirtz, 344.

²⁴ As per my reading of Boym in Ch 1., this is a kind of playful misreading of what she seems to have meant by "historical emotion" in *Future of Nostalgia*. To recap, for Boym nostalgia was a "historical emotion" in the same way that feudal monarchies might be termed a "historical form of governance:" it is an emotion *in* history. But her phrasing— and this is what Gilbert picks up on— leaves some ambiguity, allowing the marvelously suggestive formulation of "historical emotion" to be read as *an emotion that takes history as its object*, or one that is in some way *about* history or the historical past.

delineate the very possibilities for subjects.”²⁵ Significant in both formulations is the capacity of chronotopes for meaning-making: the productive semiosis of these configurations of time, space, and voice, which are not static terms but “dynamic, unfolding constructions.”²⁶ I am building on this anthropological reevaluation of Bakhtin’s chronotope in two ways. First, by insisting that the value of this concept lies in the ways that it makes different temporalities available to comparative analysis—not as objects in themselves, but as historically-specific configurations. Second, I am trying to map out the different terms assembled and made relative under the concept of the “chronotope” by suggesting that these historically-specific configurations of space and time become available to experience as “historical emotions” or as “historical feelings.” If I am arguing broadly in this dissertation that late- and post-socialist senses of historical time are structured much like as-yet unnamed emotions or affects—that “lateness” names not an empirical point in time, but a sense of historical time that is at once an *historical feeling*, taking a specific image of the historical past as its object—then an ethnographic understanding of the chronotope and the anthropology of historical consciousness that it makes possible together reveal the stakes of this argument. Through the chronotope, these somatic, affective experiences of time are shown to be the granular material of historical consciousness: what characters and persons are doing when they feel themselves to be historical beings is that they are experiencing the chronotopic configurations that undergird their subjective being. No trivial emotional surplus of historical experience, felt senses of time lie at the very heart of what it means to think of oneself as an historical subject. As a concept, historical feeling underscores the primacy of these qualitative temporalities for historical consciousness.

Outline of the Dissertation’s Chapters

²⁵ Wirtz, 344.

²⁶ Ibid.

The organization of the following chapters aims to elaborate my argument first in its abstract dimension, as the concept of historical feeling, and then in its concrete dimension, as three particular moments of felt history. At the same time, these two dimensions of my argument are continually folded into each other in the hopes that a genuinely dialectical understanding of historical feeling will emerge.

Chapter One traces historical feeling to critiques of nineteenth-century German historicist thought by reading the figure of the past as a weight or a burden in Nietzsche and Benjamin. This first chapter serves at once as a philosophical elaboration of the concept, demonstrating that reading for historical feeling allows us to rethink the bounds of historical knowledge. What brings together Nietzsche's Second *Untimely Meditation* and Benjamin's essay *Eduard Fuchs. Collector and Historian* is an attempt to subordinate historical knowledge about the past to the experiences engendered by these forms of knowledge in the present. Their complementary articulations of the relationship between historical knowledge and historical experience make salient the categories of feeling, attunement, and what we can anachronistically term affect. With the help of Roland Barthes' writings about *The Neutral*, I show how this line of critique emerges from an exhaustion of historicist epistemology and how affect as a category makes it possible to imagine historical knowledge beyond narrative: in enumerated lists, described collections, and discrete encounters with the past.

Chapter Two locates the origin of socialist felt history in the demise of Stalinist culture in the late 1950s. Broadly, we can understand one line of continuity in German and Polish postwar literature written under state-socialism as a shifting relationship to the failure of the official, communist mode of historical consciousness and its sense of historical time. Stalinist culture and socialist realist writing in particular was tasked with disseminating the revolutionary sentiment of

a collective, historical struggle to build socialism in order to rebuild the ruined Polish and East German societies. In the aftermath of Stalinism, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the impossibility of representing a positive relationship to historical consciousness became a kind of fixation for writers and for literary cultures more broadly. Often, the thematic materials of socialist-realist writing were repurposed and laden with inverted or ironic significances, and the failed dissemination of historical feeling was thus transformed into the dissemination of the failure of historical feeling. This formalized or sublimated historical failure came to define late-socialist historical consciousness in both People's Poland and East Germany, forming the kernel of negativity common to both. An expanded version of this argument would include Czechoslovakia, which, after the Velvet Revolution, partakes of the same historical dynamic. In this chapter, readings of Marek Hłasko, Werner Bräunig, and to a lesser extent Bohumil Hrabal, demonstrate the breadth of this pattern across national literary cultures, at once showing how productive a laboratory for formal experimentation the post-Stalinist era had become. This historical argument is necessarily brief, relying on a few exemplary texts rather than on a broad survey of literature written under socialism. The aim here is not to provide an exhaustive account of postwar Polish and East German literature, but to trace the genealogy of a specific way of thinking about historical time.

Chapter Three reads Tadeusz Konwicki's 1979 novel *Mala Apokalipsa* [*Minor Apocalypse*] for its elaboration of a specific historical feeling: the unmoored, *ever-wasted time of being unable to find the right or opportune moment for any meaningful action*. This novel is often read as thematizing untimeliness: my reading develops this line of thought to articulate the novel's manifold untimeliness, including its publication in the unofficial, secondary press just eighteen months before the eruption of the *Solidarność* movement, which quickly rendered the

novel politically obsolete. Allegories of unseasonable weather and of incorrect calendars thematize a sense of time being ‘out of joint,’ but the novel’s chronotope—as a story in which the narrator is only ever finding ways to fill up the day before his sacrificial self-immolation—makes it a story about wasted time and of the inability to discern the right time for anything. This feeling is a frustrating conundrum: a negative spiral in which awareness of the deeper history of Russian imperial domination saps the present moment of the possibility of meaningful action. Unable to tell the right time, the narrator is only able to wander around, half drunk, killing time. While elaborating the above reading, this chapter also asks what it means to read these allegories of unseasonable weather in our own era of global heating, in which such whacky weather events have become at least expected. By finding itself bound up in an unexpected temporal structure of fulfillment in relation to the historical present of climate change, the novel’s untimeliness is elaborate, finally, by its status as a climate change novel *avant la lettre*.

Finally, Chapter Four reads Wolfgang Hilbig’s 1993 novel ‘*Ich*’ for its own elaboration of a concrete historical feeling, this one localized in East Berlin at some point directly before the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Written after reunification and after the discovery of widespread collaboration with the Stasi [I think this is the common writing] by literary writers, including Christa Wolf and Sascha Anderson, this novel follows an *inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* and frustrated novelist who discerns that the reports he furnishes to his handlers and his experiments in fiction are, perhaps, not that dissimilar. Taking place largely in labyrinthine systems of tunnels and basements beneath Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin, this novel traces the noxious, atmospheric depression hanging over the city to fumes emerging from these subterranean spaces. It is, at the same time, bound up in dramas of the secondariness and of false-bottoms: the narrator discovers that the trendy writer he is tracking is himself also an IM paid by the Stasi, and he becomes

plagued by his fear of having come too late in life, even as his handlers assure him that they have all the time in the world to complete their tasks. Atmospheric mood and subterranean topoi are the materials by which Hilbig's great work articulates *the feeling that there must have been a premonitory feeling* of socialism's sudden collapse in East Germany.

The readings advanced in Chapters Three and Four are, in many ways, the dissertation's crowning achievement. Together, they allow me to describe a structure of feeling common to People's Poland and East Germany that moreover bridges the historical chasm of 1989. Both Hilbig and Konwicki, despite never having known each other, tasked their writing with making historical time something tangible and felt. They found a remarkable common vocabulary comprised of meteorological figures, subterranean spaces, first-person narration veering into auto-fiction, and ruined, decrepit fictional worlds. Taken alone, their novels are extraordinary artifacts from another era; together, however, they allow me to craft an argument about how feeling, attunement, and a sense of futility describe a way of thinking about historical time and historical consciousness unique to the experience of Central European late socialism.

I have organized the dissertation's argument into four chapters in order to convey several things at once: the abstract and concrete dimensions of my argument, the philosophical elaboration of historical feeling as a central concept, the practical elaboration of a unique reading methodology, and two examples of specific felt temporalities that make themselves felt as complex, unnamed emotional experiences. We can think about the chapter organization in the following ways. While the first two chapters describe historical feeling's philosophical and historical origins respectively, the last two chapters each elaborate a specific, late-socialist historical feeling through a reading of a novel. Alternately, Chapter One grounds my argument in the philosophy of history by showing how historical feeling problematizes the relationship of

historical knowledge to historical experience. Chapters Two, Three, and Four, then, provide historical elaborations of different moments of felt history, showing the epistemological yield of the conceptual elaboration carried out in Chapter One.

If *Felt History* is on some level an attempt to find a new grammar for making sense of minoritarian or heterogeneous historical truth-claims, then some through-lines across all the chapters show this grammar's salient features. Tactility, from Benjamin's Eduard Fuchs essay to Stalinist Stakhanovite musculature to the bodily metaphors of the alcoholic's perpetual hangover in Konwicki and Hilbig, suggests that history has a special relationship to the sense of touch, over the visual and the aural, in some way that is more than metaphorical. Meteorology forms another through-line and it, too, concerns itself with pressure systems. From the faint sun in Hłasko's story to the laughter-as-wind in Bräunig, to the unseasonable weather in Konwicki, to the atmospheric Depression in Hilbig, figures of the weather imply nonlinear, complex systems of thought which must, moreover, be considered anew in our historical context of global heating. Subterranean spaces, from Bräunig's uranium mines to Konwicki's secret passage to the Palace to Hilbig's tunnels under Prenzlauer Berg, suggests that the knowledge encoded by historical feeling is in some way hermetic, either enclosed or closed-off from the daylight of empirical historical claims. Together, these thematic leitmotifs suggest the shape that a more complete catalogue of historical emotions might take and how the task of assembling such a catalogue would undermine the categories by which we conventionally think about historical knowledge and historical consciousness.

The Christa Wolf scene with which I opened this introduction strings together these three leitmotifs in an exemplary way. Gagarin's spaceflight comes to matter as a world-historical event insofar as it suddenly seems to lift the burden from so much past, historical suffering, lending it

significance inconceivable even the day before. This secular, historical redemption announces itself as a sudden feeling of lightness, and this feeling finds its poetic reflection in what we must imagine as the truly stupendous experience of weightlessness in space. All the backbreaking weight of human toil across the centuries is suddenly *aufgehoben*: released and redeemed in this wondrous, collective human achievement. How so much heavy labor could possibly add up to the marvel of spaceflight calls up a version of the mathematical sublime: heaps of potatoes, piles of grain, timber, quarried stone, coal, heavy machinery and shovelfuls of dirt, all adding up over decades and centuries to this world-historical moment and its awestruck contemplation by workers, suddenly cast as perennial figures.

While they do not, of course, see the spaceflight itself, Rita's fellow workers do bear witness to it, feeling the distant, rumbling echoes of this event, which momentarily transfigures their and everyone's collective labor. At least to the socialist true believers primed to receive it, the event is charged with the boldness of undeniable facticity: the global communist movement placed the son of a Russian farmer into earth's orbit from which he contemplated, famously, the visual analogy of stars in the ether as seeds in black soil. This feeling about history's significance is structured as an affect that renders a temporality (sudden redemption) as a bodily sensation (lifting of burden) incarnated in an image (weightless cosmonaut). But the imaginative contours of this historical event—which moves from the earth's surface to the edge of the cosmos and back to the earth again—also incarnates the vulgar dialectic that underwrites the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Soviet Union and its satellites. This is art as the fruit of a material economic base: the earthy toil that wrought the miracle of spaceflight returns as Gagarin's dream image of seeds in black earth. Conceptually, historical feeling insists that concrete configurations of time and feeling are themselves deeply historical, carrying the imprint of their specific cultural

and political contexts, even as they afford a radical reevaluation of historical knowledge as such. In the chapters that follow, these elaborations of historical feeling will attend to both dimensions of the concept: abstract knowledge claims and concrete cultural-historical contexts. That is, each elaboration of a specific historical feelings in the following chapters will model this historical knowledge as a local, critical epistemology—but the work of modeling and describing this knowledge will serve to expand our understand of what can constitute historical knowledge as such.

*Das beste, was wir von der Geschichte haben,
ist der Enthusiasmus, den sie erregt.*¹

**Chapter One:
Nietzsche, Benjamin, and the Heaviness of the Past:
Historical Feeling against Historicism**

The aims of this chapter are twofold: first, to localize and situate the concept of “historical feeling” in the tradition of continental philosophy with recourse to two canonical essays: Nietzsche’s *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* and Benjamin’s *Eduard Fuchs, Sammler und Historiker*. Reading these essays will demonstrate the extent to which Nietzsche and Benjamin’s critiques of historicism share similar concerns and suggest complementary tactics, despite the two essays’ admittedly substantial differences. Second, this chapter aims to rigorously define and elaborate the original concept of “historical feeling:” its genealogy, its epistemology, and its critical potential. In focusing on Nietzsche and Benjamin, this chapter argues that historical feeling emerges in the receding tide of 19th century German historicism—with the caveat that this emergence only becomes apparent from the vantage point of post-socialism. “Around 1989,” historical feeling finds itself metamorphosed: from a rhetorical byproduct of critiques of historicist presuppositions about time, to an alternative set of rhetorical practices for figuring historical time. Historical feeling, by thinking together time and emotion, furnishes idiosyncratic forms of historical knowledge.

The epistemology of historical affects replaces the conventional focus on knowledge *about* the past with an emphasis on attunement *to* particular experiences of historicity: specific configurations of past-present-future. Moreover: significance, passions, enthusiasm—categories

¹ J. W. von Goethe. “The best we have of history is the enthusiasm it inspires.”

at best marginal to conventional historical inquiry—lie at the heart of the kinds of knowledge that historical affect affords. As Nietzsche and Benjamin’s metaphors will make clear, the historicist accumulation of historical knowledge for its own sake is continually parodied for its inability to conceive of any meta-evaluation of historical knowledge as such—even as the very fact of this accumulation serves as the starting point for their respective critiques of historicism. Out of the heaps of knowledge about the past Nietzsche and Benjamin tease out inquiries into what it might mean for history to matter *now*, in a given present—or, alternately, of how to gauge its different ethical, political, and practical imports. As will become clear in the readings below, the category of historical feeling, as it emerges in these critiques of historicism, continually asks what else we can do with the historical past beyond simply amassing knowledge about it. This serves as a corrective to the perceived excesses and blindspots of an overwrought historicist culture.

What may be at this point less clear is how this concept accomplishes this radical reframing by thinking together emotion and temporality. Preliminarily, we can use and return to the following working definition of historical feeling, of which *lateness*, *secondariness*, and *backwardness* are the prime examples, and of which *nostalgia* is something like the famous sibling. Historical feeling is in a sense always twice redoubled, structured by two separate kinds of mis-recognitions. First, a felt sense of time experienced *as if* it were an emotions: qualities of duration only describable, at first, as kinds of bodily feeling and, what is more, as often unpleasant and even debilitating, appearing, for instance, as hindrances to any meaningful effort, or as engines of futility sapping actions of their significance. But these experiences are belied by what historical feeling makes possible: again and again, its apparent futility is undercut by how it

compels subjects to engage in an unbelievable flurry of activity.² Historical feeling is thus, on a formal level, always oscillating between two uncanny conversions: first, as a temporality experienced as an emotion, and second, as negative futility expressed as remarkable productivity. The shape and contours of this feeling will be elaborated here with recourse to Roland Barthes' writings on affect in *The Neutral*, and, particularly, to his description of the affect he terms "weariness—*fatigue*."

Barthes' writings about affect are helpful for evading the prejudice towards immediacy implied by a theorization of historical feeling. Affect retains for him its traditional link with rhetoric, and the "scintillations" he elaborates in *The Neutral* are always rooted in his eclectic but thoroughly textual readings of de Sade, Lao Tzu, Tolstoy, Benjamin, and others. Barthes reminds us that affects, though they are experienced in the body with all the novelty of felt immediacy, are always learned and rhetorically constructed emotions: though they are really felt, they are *artificial* feelings that emerge from particular historical conditions. Consequently, they are also culturally-specific—even if the concept of historical affect *in general* clearly suggests cross-cultural or comparative potential for describing different modes of historical consciousness.

If historical feeling first emerge in critiques of a hegemonic late-19th-century historicist culture, then they find something like a fulfillment in the twilight of Actually-Existing-Socialism's political hegemony in Eastern Europe. Analogously, just as it grows out of attempts to take seriously the rhetorical effects of historicist discourse, it finds itself transformed into rhetorical implements of late- and post-socialist literary forms that treat writing as a technology for making time felt: for describing qualitative temporalities as sensory experiences. In both its

² Uncanny proliferation being one hallmark shared by Konwicki and Hilbig's writing, which toys constantly with the conceit that all their novelistic content could be mere graphomania.

prehistory and its afterlife, the concept of historical affect bears an affinity with the project of ideology critique insofar as it is predicated on the contention that the experience of historical time is neither natural, nor readily apparent, but is instead an under-acknowledged realm of ideology, mediated by practices, institutions, and beliefs. While this dissertation will not delve into the ideology-critique valences of historical affect, the ways in which this and following chapters' arguments mobilize the concept of rhetoric aims to shed light on the constructed and learned dimensions of historical affect and historical consciousness. Barthes, in this regard, forms a crucial link in the present chapter's argument: like Nietzsche, he takes rhetoric seriously in its capacity to form our minds and emotional lives through textual and reading practices and specific linguistic formulae. Historical consciousness can thus be understood according to this argument as an emergent property of the rhetoric of historical discourse, expressing itself as emotions about history that attempt to make sense of bewildering experiences of historical time.

But, as we shall see in the readings of Benjamin below, rhetoric and the forming power of language return as a strategy capable of rendering visible the above process: describing historical time as if it were a "natural" or immediate emotional experience works to *thicken* historical time, to arrest its apparent flow and to make palpable its textures and qualities. Historical reality thus comes to appear not as a narrative story structured by chronology, but as a sensorium: something that can, however provisionally or speculatively, be sensed after all. The value of historical affect as a concept, then consists in how it affords ways of thinking about historical time as an object of emotional attunement, in the process radically reframing what historical knowledge can be.

Nietzsche's Second Untimely Meditation and its Readers

Many recent readings of Nietzsche's "Uses and Abuses of History" essay frame his argument as a *locus classicus* for thinking about collective memory in distinction to history and historicism.³ These readings proceed, roughly, by positing memory as a more vital or immediate form of access to the historical past than historical representation, treating not the past, but history, as the central problem of the essay, and proposing, as a solution to this problem, a conception of "memory" that amounts to speculative history by another name.⁴ While they are right to note that life, vitalism, and the senses play a significant and unexpected role in Nietzsche's essay, they ultimately fail in trying to appropriate his arguments for their own ends. In broad strokes, the present reading will argue that what is crucial in Nietzsche's essay is his critique of an historicist discourse that unreflectively frames historical time as a linear, forward-moving progressive accumulation of the past. Instead, he shows that historical time is something qualitatively experienced, and, what is more, that modes of experiencing historical time arise as affective byproducts of the rhetoric of historical discourse. By describing and parodying these modes of experiencing historical time—the well-known images of monumental, antiquarian, and critical history—Nietzsche holds them up as *in vivo* trials of the value of historical knowledge itself.

Among the more idiosyncratic characterizations of Nietzsche comes from Aby Warburg, who termed Nietzsche a "historian-seismograph," registering the imperceptible, subterranean waves of memory across historical time. Warburg devised this evocative title while he was recovering from a nervous breakdown at Ludwig Binswanger's sanatorium in Kreuzlingen, and

³ See Introduction, for an overview of some of these readings.

⁴ See, for instance, Aleida Assman's treatment of Nietzsche's essay in her cultural memory primer. Assmann, Aleida. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. 120. Or, for that matter, see Andreas Hyussen's *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. London: Routledge, 1995.

the rhetorical figure of the historian-seismograph names not only Nietzsche's, but also his own mode of relation to the past. This figure's value lies in how it opens up the question of the body as an instrument for sensing history without collapsing this sensing into cognition: a seismograph, after all, registers movements, but what it records needs later to be interpreted. But what does the historian-seismograph record? Or, better yet, what kinds of questions emerge from reading Nietzsche's critique of historicism as emerging from temporal sensations picked up by this historian-seismograph?

Georges Didi-Hubermann reads Warburg's metaphor of the seismograph to argue that Nietzsche's essay doesn't simply pass judgment on its surrounding historicist culture, but that it also suggests that "history itself should be considered a vital question—physical, psychological, and cultural—and not just a question of knowledge."⁵ Critiquing historical knowledge here entails thinking about what kinds of experiences history makes possible: not just historicizing various kinds of experiences (and thereby producing more historical knowledge), but asking what experiences of history—"physical, psychological, and cultural"—become possible through different modes of historical knowledge. To read *On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life* with the image of the "historian-seismograph" in mind involves asking how the essay subordinates historical knowledge to the category of experience, and how it sets up historical knowledge and the rhetorical discourse in which it is rendered as not an effect, but rather a cause of different ways of experiencing historical reality.

From just a cursory glance at Nietzsche's tripartite typology, we can clearly discern that his critique of monumental, antiquarian, and critical history is not about the status of historical

⁵ Didi-Hubermann, Georges. *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms. Aby Warburg's History of Art*. Trans. Harvey L Mendelsohn. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press. 2017. 92.

knowledge produced by these approaches, but rather by the experiences of history and self-reinforcing practices that emerge under these three modes of historicist thought. These experiences and practices are sketched in bodily terms, in caricatures (for instance, of the antiquarian, “eating the dust of biographical detail”) that suggest something peculiar about historical knowledge: namely, its ability to affect its subjects, to structure their experiences of themselves. Unlike other forms of specialized knowledge, which might be embedded in social practices but which are at the same time safely ensconced in them, historical knowledge is unique in its capacity to radically affect the subjectivity of those pursuing it by reframing their historical consciousness. This is why, for Nietzsche, history must to be thought of as a vital question, while, for instance, chemistry does not.

Warburg’s figure of the historian-seismograph here proves helpful. By recasting Nietzsche’s vitalism not as a quasi-political position from which historicism is judged, but as an articulation of method, it suggests that we might take seriously his invocations of sickness, fever, or ill-feeling. More than stylistic flourish, this language points to the centrality of the categories of sense and feeling for carrying out any meta-evaluation of historical knowledge as such. Imagining the body as an instrument for sensing the historical past, bizarre though this image may seem, reframes the *Second Untimely Meditation* as growing out of Nietzsche’s elaboration of a specific, felt experience of historical time. This felt experience is what I am terming an “historical affect,” and in this essay it works by taking a temporality and rendering it as a haptic experience. Against the forward-moving time of progress Nietzsche highlights the sense that there is some weight for force pressing down from the past: a kind of pressure system from which one cannot escape. This is the frustrating, confusing feeling of being affected by too much

history, of being sapped of the ability to act by the sense of so much having already transpired: by fixating on the power of the past, it seems to rob the present of its significance.

Nietzsche first describes this sense at the very beginning of his essay, where he contrasts it with the felt experience of forward-rushing progress. This paragraph reads in a genre somewhere between a self-diagnosis and an auto-ethnography, and parsing the registers in which we should read its invocation of time and feeling will be integral to our reading of it.

Ich habe mich bestrebt, eine Empfindung zu schildern, die mich oft genug gequält hat; ich räche mich an ihr, indem ich sie der Öffentlichkeit preisgebe. Vielleicht wird irgend jemand durch eine solche Schilderung veranlaßt, mir zu erklären, daß er diese Empfindung zwar auch kenne, aber daß ich sie nicht rein und ursprünglich genug empfunden und durchaus nicht mit der gebührenden Sicherheit und Reife der Erfahrung ausgesprochen habe. So vielleicht der eine oder der andere; die meisten aber werden mir sagen, daß es eine ganz verkehrte, unnatürliche, abscheuliche und schlechterdings unerlaubte Empfindung sei, ja daß ich mich mit derselben der so mächtigen historischen Zeitrichtung unwürdig gezeigt habe, wie sie bekanntlich seit zwei Menschenaltern unter den Deutschen namentlich zu bemerken ist. Nun wird jedenfalls dadurch, daß ich mich mit der Naturbeschreibung meiner Empfindung hervorwage, die allgemeine Wohlanständigkeit eher gefördert als beschädigt, dadurch, daß ich vielen Gelegenheit gebe, einer solchen Zeitrichtung, wie der eben erwähnten, Artigkeiten zu sagen. Für mich aber gewinne ich etwas, was mir noch mehr wert ist als die Wohlanständigkeit – öffentlich über unsere Zeit belehrt und zurechtgewiesen zu werden.⁶

Is Nietzsche here deploying an ironic tone to describe an insight, or is he ironizing on the fact that he can claim awareness of a general sentiment which ensnares most Germans, “most people,” even those who would call him “unworthy of the mighty historical movement” of the German world? Is the sentiment or feeling [*Empfindung*] he is describing more like a feeling that something is wrong, or is it more like the wrong kind of feeling? Is Nietzsche talking about his intuition that there is something wrong or sickly about the place accorded to history and

⁶ Nietzsche, Friederich. *Werke in drei Bänden*. München 1954, Band 1. 208-209.

historical consciousness in the German collective imagination, challenging “most people” to defend the hegemony of historicist thought? Or is he, on the other hand, describing an emotional experience at odds with, or against the grain of, a hegemonic experience of historical time?

These questions hinge on Nietzsche’s metaphors and the extent to which we can, or should, take them literally. That he terms this opening a “*Naturbeschreibung meiner Empfindung*” suggests that this paragraph, acerbic in tone though it is, can be read as a kind of auto-theoretical excursus about the feeling or sensation he is describing. Is this a “staged” emotion, constructed for the purposes of his argument, or is it a truthful description of a genuine emotion? This opposition between an immediately emotion and a rhetorically constructed one begins to dissolve once we ask: what would be the difference between an artificially staged and a truthfully described emotion, if both effectively pose questions to historicist culture about what its work on the past feels like, or about the kinds of affective experiences it generates? The stakes of these questions are vast and lead us far from the weeds and thickets of historiographic argumentation: in casting the sense of the past as an overbearing weight on the present as a perverse feeling and a wrong kind of feeling, Nietzsche sets into relief the extent to which historicist culture as a whole has always already been in the business of producing another feeling: that of the light and energizing forward-rush of historical time, which Benjamin will later critique as automatic or mechanistic *progress*. That is, Nietzsche’s staging here of this historical affect as the *wrong* kind of feeling effectively shows the hegemonic historicist culture around 1870 to be involved in reproducing forward-moving celerity as the *right* kind of feeling to have about history. Historical knowledge thus appears inextricably linked to the production of forward-moving historical time as an object of emotional experience.

So when Nietzsche describes the “perverse, unnatural, detestable, and wholly impermissible, feeling” [*Empfindung*], he is opposing it not to history as an academic practice or as a discursive construction (“historiography”), but rather to the affective experience of the “*so mächtigen historischen Zeitrichtung*,” the mighty historical movement which we could otherwise term *progress*, or the feeling of being caught up in history’s forward momentum. Nietzsche is here contrasting not two modes of knowledge but two modes of experiencing history. His bombastic tone might be compensating for the fact that historical affect, as a structure of feeling beneath or behind the “major” sense of historical time as progress, really does feel perverse and unnatural and a little pathetic— but this feeling is nevertheless artificial, learned, and rhetorically constructed to precisely the same extent that the feeling of progress is. Whether this is the hegemonic feeling of history’s collective pull forward, a feeling of lightness and exhilaration, or the comparatively minor, denigrated, perverse feeling of the overbearing weight of history that burdens one downward, both are rhetorically constructed, but somatically felt experiences of historical time. Nietzsche’s point seems to be that neither of these is the “real” one and that both of them are subsumed under the wholly heterogeneous rubric of his vitalism, which asks what kinds of bodily, cultural, and social experiences historical knowledge makes possible. That different forms of historical knowledge engender different experiences of historical time is a radical reevaluation of what history is and what historical knowledge does—rather more radical than what appropriations of Nietzsche for the “bad vitalism” of memory studies would suggest.

How to Weigh Historical Time: Heaviness in Nietzsche, Benjamin, Barthes

Nietzsche often figures the understanding of historical time as an object of felt experience, or what he terms a “*historische Sinn*,” as a tactile phenomenon: as a weight, or a

burden, as something stifling or something pressing down on persons.⁷ In distinction to the cattle herd, which lives wholly in the present, which is honest because it immediately forgets, he describes the 19th century German subject as stymied by an overbearing sense of the past:

Der Mensch hingegen stemmt sich gegen die große und immer größere Last des Vergangenen: diese drückt ihn nieder oder beugt ihn seitwärts, diese beschwert seinen Gang als eine unsichtbare und dunkle Bürde, welche er zum Scheine einmal verleugnen kann, und welche er im Umgange mit seinesgleichen gar zu gern verleugnet: um ihren Neid zu wecken.⁸

The indulgence that Nietzsche affords to this description of the past as a weight, and the prominence of his gestural language, describing this experience in quite specific bodily and spatial terms, is worth dwelling on. No mere flourish, this imagery works to elaborate a particular mode of historical consciousness as an historical affect—but to understand how, we need recourse to Roland Barthes’ writings on affect. If this shift into theory from a century after Nietzsche’s own historical moment seems abrupt, the reasoning behind it is twofold. First, Barthes’ unique attunement to how affect, while experienced through the body, works not as immediate experience, but as rhetorically constructed emotion, is a helpful framework with which to read historical affect in Nietzsche and Benjamin. Second, Barthes makes continual suggestive appeals to temporality: many of his “scintillations” or figures are described in terms of their own temporalities, and as we shall see the entire project of his seminar is conscious of its own paradoxical sense of timeliness. What remains implicit in his account I want to make explicit: our sense of inhabiting a present, or of experiencing a mode of relation to a past, should

⁷ The metaphor of the past as a weight or a burden is, of course, in itself unremarkable. Marx conjures up the most evocative version of this metaphor in the famous first paragraph of *The 19th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, and we will deal with the significance of this metaphor for historical materialist thought in due time. Suffice to say here that what is significant is the role that the metaphor of burden plays for Nietzsche’s argument, allowing him to posit a bridge between historical knowledge and historical experience which lies at the heart of his essay.

⁸ Nietzsche, *Op. Cit.* 210-211.

be understood as an emotional, affective experience, one that is cognized, if at all, only after the fact.

Barthes' *The Neutral* is in effect a series of lecture notes that set themselves the curious task of cataloguing two dozen or so affective scintillations, gestures, and qualities under the sign of the neutral: the third term, the neither/nor. Tact, sleep, silence; color and colorlessness, consistency, and consciousness count among Barthes' figures, and for each he provides ample, eclectic quotations and references: from Rousseau to Tolstoy to Lao-Tzu, Freud, and Joseph de Maistre. The winning wager of this book is that eschewing historical and generic unities can open up the space with which to develop the heterogeneous unity of the neutral, but of interest to us here is the place Barthes accords to language in making sense of affect. Of note as well, however, is the concern he seems to have about the untimeliness of a catalogue made of literary references:

Cette bibliothèque d'auteurs morts [...] Distance critiquée, créatrice : pour m'intéresser vivement à mon contemporain, je puis avoir besoin du détour par la mort (l'Histoire), exemple de Michelet : absolument présent à son siècle mais travaillant sur la « vie » des Morts : je fais penser les Morts en moi : les vivants m'entourent, m'imprègnent, me prennent justement dans un système d'échos — plus ou moins conscient, mais seuls les morts sont des objets créateurs = nous sommes tous pris dans des « modes », et qui sont utiles ; mais seule la mort est créatrice.⁹

The past, and significant work with the past provides the mediation by which to access the historical present—for Barthes, to make himself “vividly interested in what is

⁹ Roland Barthes, “Séance du 18 février 1978.” dans: *Le Neutre. Cours et séminaires au Collège de France 1977-1978*. Paris: Seuil, 2002. 34-35. “This library of dead authors [...] Critical, creative distance: to get myself vividly interested in what is contemporaneous to me, I might need the detour through death (History); Michelet's example: absolutely present to his century but working on the “life” of the Dead: I make the dead think in myself: the living surround me, penetrate me, lock me up precisely in an echo chamber—of which I am more or less conscious—but only the Dead are creative objects...” Barthes, Roland. *The Neutral*. Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978). Trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. 9. (Session of Feb. 18, 1978)

contemporaneous.” Affect, underwritten by references and quotes, seems curiously able to stick together disparate moments in time: it is assembling references and reading them for how they elaborate specific scintillations that allows Barthes to experience these authors’ texts as being at once past, dead and gone, and vividly active in the present moment. After all, it is through the affects he assembles among the sessions that Barthes makes “the dead think in [him]self”—and he does so in order to gauge a sense of his own time. In the same session, Barthes adds the following reflection: “le Neutre, pour moi : une façon de chercher—d’une façon libre—mon propre style de présence aux luttes de mon temps.”¹⁰ If the neutral offers him a way of being present to his own time, this is no sense of immediacy but rather a mediated, textual form of presence, one that envisions the presence as a specific intersection of concrete pasts.

Take Barthes’ entry on weariness or *fatigue*, the one most germane to the present discussion of a sense of the past as a weight or a heft. He associates weariness through its Latin etymology with the gesture of bending down, bending over—“*Labor, Lassitudo, Fatigatio* (or *Defatigatio*)”—before noting that, despite connotations of physical toil, it is “lié mythiquement au travail de la tête, qui se dégonfle, s’exténue.”¹¹ A kind of mental tiredness, weariness is linked to tedium, to those things that weary, and also with endlessness. To feel wearied, in Barthes’ example, by tedious conversation is to feel time become endless: thrice he returns to the image of a tire deflating slowly and without end. But weariness is also a game: a pseudo-excuse that nobody would believe, a pretext the obviousness of which points to its second paradox: it engenders a productivity belied by the pretense that it is the result of too much productivity.

¹⁰ Barthes, *Le Neutre*. 33. “the Neutral, for me: a manner—a free manner—to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time.” Barthes, *The Neutral*. 8.

¹¹ Barthes, *Le Neutre*. 43. “mythically associated with the work of the head, which is exposed to deflation, exhaustion.” Barthes, *The Neutral*. 17.

Here, Barthes riffs off Maurice Blanchot's observation: "On dirait que non seulement la fatigue ne gêne pas le travail, mais que le travail exige cela, être fatigué sans mesure."¹² Weariness is not the conclusion of too much work, but in fact the starting point of work. Don't we see something similar in Nietzsche? His feeling about history doesn't appear at the conclusion of his meditation on history, but instead comes to us at the very start: what continues for forty something pages is the work that becomes possible by his feeling wearied by his historical culture. His sense of the past as a weight is neither equivalent nor even really parallel to Barthes' weariness, but both terms share some curious similarities that push against Nietzsche's later arguments, which tie the feeling of being overburdened with history with an inability to exercise life, to *work*. On the contrary, the apprehension of a sense of time as an historical affect, as an experience of time that turns out to be about history, seems to be the precondition for the critique of historicism that Nietzsche carries out. That Nietzsche is bound up in the feeling he is describing may seem an obvious point: if he did not feel the past as a deeply unpleasant burden, as a force pressing down on his body (in however an imagined, or feigned, or misrecognized manner), then he would perhaps not be compelled to write this essay critiquing his culture's triumphalist celebration of history as a light and vivifying forward-moving momentum.

One final note: the entry on weariness provides a helpful partial definition for how Barthes understands what I have been calling affect:

→ C'est en cela que l'on peut dire que la fatigue n'est pas un temps empirique, une crise, un événement organique, un épisode musculaire — mais une dimension quasi métaphysique, une sorte d'idée corporelle (non conceptuelle), une cénesthésie mentale :

¹² Barthes, *Le Neutre*. 47. "not only does weariness not impede the workout the work demands this being weary without measure." Quoted in Barthes, *The Neutral*, 20. (Session of Feb. 25, 1978)

le toucher, le tact même de l'infinitude.¹³

Weariness, as affect, is the somatic and emotional articulation of a subjective, felt experience of temporality. Could these terms not apply just as well to historical affects? Perhaps with the caveat that they, in how I am treating it here, furnish an entire critique of progress, which Nietzsche at the very start of his essay suggests should also be considered, among other things, a felt experience of time. The critical potential of historical affect in particular becomes clear only when we turn to Benjamin's treatment of the same. While Benjamin merely suggests a sensory apparatus necessary for grasping historical-materialist constructions of time, he does, like Nietzsche, critique the temporality of progress on the basis of the senses of time it engenders. His *Eduard Fuchs* essay shows the extent to which historical affect can be understood as an experiential byproduct of a cultural history founded on bourgeois historicism, or simply universal history.

Benjamin zeroes in on a contradiction inherent to what he terms bourgeois cultural history: on the one hand, it is predicated on an understanding of historical time as forward-moving, automatic progress; on the other hand, it envisions the past as the accumulation of present moments, schools and styles. In this hegemonic model of cultural history, "the past appeared to have been gathered up and stored forever in the sheds of the present,"¹⁴ and the contradiction between forward movement and accumulation is precisely what engenders the sense of the past as a burden weighing on the present. For him, linear, "positivist" historical time

¹³ Barthes, *Le Neutre*. 47. "This is why one could say that weariness does not constitute an empirical time, a crisis, an organic event, a muscular episode—but a quasi-metaphysical dimension, a sort of bodily (and not conceptual) idea, a mental kinesthesia: the tactile experience, the very touch of endlessness." Barthes, 20. (Session of Feb. 25, 1978)

¹⁴ Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian." Trans. Knut Tarnowski. *New German Critique*. No. 5. Spring, 1975. 34.

underwrites a mode of historical knowledge (bourgeois cultural history¹⁵), engendering historical experience in much the same way that Nietzsche's three modes of historicism bring about historical experience. Benjamin, however, frames this relationship between knowledge and experience as a contradiction:

Cultural history, to be sure, enlarges the weight of the treasure which accumulates on the back of humanity. Yet cultural history does not provide the strength to shake off this burden in order to be able to take control of it. The same is true for the socialist educational efforts at the turn of the century which were guided by the star of cultural history.¹⁶

The dialectical image presented here is worth dwelling on: cultural history, at once burden and treasure, is folded over onto the juxtaposition of a weight on the back of humanity and the strength to shake it off. The same sense of the past as a burden provides the negative moment through which the contradiction between the past's effect on us and our ability to reckon with it comes into view. To be sure, this is one possible outcome of any experience of historical time that sees its forward momentum as accumulation— of great works, of knowledge, of rights. But what would constitute “the strength to shake it off?” I think it is clear that this is something similar to what Nietzsche prizes in the ancient Greeks, in a particularly illuminating example with which he closes his essay.

Es gab Jahrhunderte, in denen die Griechen in einer ähnlichen Gefahr sich befanden, in der wir uns befinden, nämlich an der Überschwemmung durch das Fremde und Vergangne, an der »Historie« zugrunde zu gehen. Niemals haben sie in stolzer Unberührbarkeit gelebt: ihre »Bildung« war vielmehr lange Zeit ein Chaos von

¹⁵ It's important to note that cultural history has two meanings for Benjamin in this essay. As he's using it in the above-quoted material, it refers to bourgeois cultural history, or the conventional historicist narration of the history of artworks, artists, practices, schools, etc. This becomes the object of Benjamin's critique in favor of a more totalizing sense of cultural history, which he introduces early on in the essay through a quote from Engels, in which the latter notes that, for historical materialism, all history reveals itself to be the history of culture. To an extent, “culture” in this essay oscillates between these two meanings of the term, which we could sum up as a conventional sense of culture and an anthropological sense of culture.

¹⁶ Benjamin, Walter. “Eduard Fuchs.” 36.

ausländischen, semitischen, babylonischen, lydischen, ägyptischen Formen und Begriffen, und ihre Religion ein wahrer Götterkampf des ganzen Orients: ähnlich etwa, wie jetzt die »deutsche Bildung« und Religion ein in sich kämpfendes Chaos des gesamten Auslandes, der gesamten Vorzeit ist. Und trotzdem wurde die hellenische Kultur kein Aggregat, dank jenem apollinischen Spruche. Die Griechen lernten allmählich *das Chaos zu organisieren*, dadurch, daß sie sich, nach der delphischen Lehre, auf sich selbst, das heißt auf ihre echten Bedürfnisse zurückbesannen und die Schein-Bedürfnisse absterben ließen. So ergriffen sie wieder von sich Besitz; sie blieben nicht lange die überhäuften Erben und Epigonen des ganzen Orients; sie wurden selbst, nach beschwerlichem Kampfe mit sich selbst, durch die praktische Auslegung jenes Spruches, die glücklichsten Bereicherer und Mehrer des ererbten Schatzes und die Erstlinge und Vorbilder aller kommenden Kulturvölker.¹⁷

The same double vision of the past as both treasure and burden appears here, in Nietzsche's invocation of the Greeks and their assimilation of a vast and heterogeneous past, which threatened to overwhelm them, but which they successfully overcame. Here, the historical sense of belatedness is resolved by means of an ordering function: Nietzsche's Greeks learned *how to organize the chaos*. Making sense of the past for themselves, they resolved their contradictory status as epigones of and heirs to Orient by subordinating the past to the present. The proof of their resolution is their having *added* to the treasure of cultural history. Historical affect is recast here as a problem to be solved, and Nietzsche's Greeks' peculiar resolution reveals a second temporal dimension to cultural history: not simply linear, progressing forward, it also cycles through the opposition of burden and treasure. But how to square Nietzsche's resolution with Benjamin's problematic of time as accumulation?

The similarity between Benjamin and Nietzsche's invocations of this temporal-affective contradiction is redoubled by their apparently similar resolutions. But "the strength to shake off this burden in order to be able to take control of it" is different from the necessity of organizing

¹⁷ Nietzsche, Op. Cit., 280.

the weight of the past because it consciously avoids re-inscribing a logic of accumulation. The historical-materialist critique and recuperation of cultural history, which provides this “strength,” resolves what Benjamin saw as a contradiction inherent to bourgeois cultural history by making the past, and historical knowledge, subordinate not simply to the present, but to *political* aims. For Benjamin, the recognition of historical experience as fundamentally political experience is integral to his historical materialism. If Nietzsche was interested in how historical experience makes possible or hinders life, understood as the extension of power, then Benjamin’s concern lies in the extent to which specific experiences of history can be politically advantageous, or regressive.

It is Benjamin’s idiosyncratic focus on historical experience that allows me to read my concept of historical affect into this elaboration of his historical materialism, understanding it to be involved in taking historical experience as the starting point for novel forms of historical knowledge. Elsewhere in the essay Benjamin makes more explicit the centrality of the category of experience to his historical materialism:

Historicism presents the eternal image of the past; historical materialism presents a given experience with the past, an experience which stands unique. The replacement of the epic element by the constructive element proves to be the condition for this experience. The immense forces which remain captive in historicism’s ‘once upon a time’ are freed in this experience. To bring about the consolidation of experience with history, which is original for every present, is the task of historical materialism. It is directed toward consciousness of the present which explodes the continuum of history.¹⁸

Much like the “vital question” Nietzsche poses to history, Benjamin’s historical materialism suggests that history is always fundamentally about the present,¹⁹ and that historical knowledge

¹⁸ Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs.” 29.

¹⁹ Helpful here is Elizabeth Grosz’ gloss of Nietzsche’s essay. She reads Nietzsche as primarily a philosopher of time, and her general read of the Second Untimely Meditation is that it works to correct certain notions about the nature of the past and the function of historical scholarship. She identifies monumental, antiquarian, and critical

must be measured by the rubric of the kinds of experiences it can engender. These insights he mobilizes, like Nietzsche, in the service of a critique of historicism.²⁰ But what is this “consciousness of the present which explodes the continuum of history,” if not a sense of the present as something shot through with pasts it can rescue, and with futures which can be its rescue—as an intersection of other times not unlike the sense of the presence that Barthes invokes? What it means for “a given experience with history” to be “original for every present” is just this: the specific needs of the present—its political tasks—open up specific moments in the past that radiate with significance for that present. In a book devoted to Benjamin, Jameson terms this “the discontinuous nature of our access to the past, [due to which] what is customarily termed cultural history becomes impossible.”²¹ But if conventional cultural history becomes the target of Benjamin’s critique, then the historicity of aesthetic objects and a profoundly heterodox form of cultural history provides him with the tools with which to carry out this critique.

Benjamin’s Historical Materialism: Collecting and ‘Thick’ Time

The *N* Konvolut of the *Arcades Project* assembles materials under the heading, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” including the following helpful rubric of what historical materialism entails for Benjamin:

history with three insights about the nature of the past: “In his understanding of the value and limits of history, Nietzsche claimed that the past can be understood as triply enfolded, bound up with the dynamic movement, the force, of time itself. For the past is not merely a depleted resource, one robbed of its force or will, but is dynamic insofar as it remains the condition of the present surpassing itself. The past is:

1. The necessary condition for the present
2. That through which the present has the resources to transform itself.
3. That which must be moved beyond and, if necessary, forgotten.” Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time. Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. 125.

²⁰ The validity and fairness of this critique, especially in its representation of Leopold von Ranke as the epitome of a triumphalist and unreflective bourgeois historicism, has been compellingly called into question. Cf. Feldman, Karen. “Ch. 5: Not Benjamin’s Ranke: On the Aesthetics of Historicism,” in *The Arts of Connection: Poetry, History, Epochality*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019. My aim here is not to assess Benjamin’s characterization of historicism, but to appropriate his critique for the project of theorizing temporal affects or minor senses of historical time.

²¹ Jameson, Frederic. *The Benjamin Files*. New York: Verso, 2020. 159.

On the elementary doctrine of historical materialism. (1) An object of history is that through which knowledge is constituted as the object's rescue. (2) History decays into images, not into stories. (3) Wherever a dialectical process is realized, we are dealing with a monad. (4) The materialist presentation of history carries along with it an immanent critique of the concept of progress. (5) Historical materialism bases its procedures on long experience, common sense, presence of mind, and dialectics. (*On the monad: N10a,3.*)²²

More than a method for explaining historical events, historical materialism is for Benjamin primarily a methodology for the “presentation of history:” not establishing causation or identifying historical logics but articulating a specific representation of the past is the task of historical knowledge. Moreover, historical materialism’s “immanent critique of the concept of progress” suggests an attempt to grasp historical reality not only outside of the teleologies of any universal history, but, as points (1) and (2) suggest, outside of linear schemes of historical representation. The second point emphasizes that the past exists in the present not as stories, but as crystalized images: not narrative, but specific instances, typified and circulating, perhaps, as clichés of an age, are what the historian has to work with. The aim of historical knowledge is not the establishment of temporal causality, as in any historicist account, but rather the object’s “rescue” [*Rettung*]: with establishing knowledge of the historical object that recognizes itself as, at once, an afterlife of that object.²³

But from what is the object being rescued? Surely not from oblivion: Benjamin’s project here has nothing to do with the simplistic preservation of the past for its own sake. Rather, the object is rescued from the wrong kinds of preservation, all of which substitute the experience of

²² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999. [N11,4]

²³ In the sense that, for instance, Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book is a very heterodox historical study of the Baroque, and also forms, from our perspective, an essential moment in the German Baroque’s afterlife, it’s reappearance in, and translation into, the post-expressionist context of 1920s German culture.

the past in the present with various reified or ideological images thereof. The latter errors he locates in cultural history.

Benjamin's critique of cultural history in the Eduard Fuchs essay and elsewhere can be read as having two aspects. The first of these, encapsulated in the essay's most famous quip, takes aim at any attempt to write about cultural history in isolation, divorced from the economic, social, and political conditions of culture's emergence. "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. No cultural history has yet done justice to this fundamental state of affairs, and it can hardly hope to do so," writes Benjamin.²⁴ Cultural history is unable to reckon with this ultimately simple fact for two reasons: first, because it abstracts the products of culture out of the production process from which they came ("the unnamed drudgery of their contemporaries" mentioned a sentence prior), and, second, because it abstracts culture as a separate sphere of activity, one with its own discrete historical causation, its own temporalities and rhythms. The problem lies, for Benjamin, in the attempt to locate a vantage point from which to ponder culture from the outside, as it were: his is an argument against all forms of canonization, insofar as these gestures take us further away from the actual ways in which history becomes available to us.²⁵

As he intimates several times, history makes itself available to us in the middle of things, in a state of disquiet and unrest: a specific moment in the past moves us in our present, affects us on something other than a purely cognitive level, and the tasks of historical materialism include coming to understand why and how this might be the case.

²⁴ Benjamin, *Eduard Fuchs*, 35.

²⁵ This is not dissimilar from Lukács' critique of "geological history" and articulation of historical standpoint epistemology in *History and Class Consciousness*.

This state of unrest refers to the demand on the researcher to abandon the tranquil contemplative attitude toward the object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in precisely this present.²⁶

Neither the establishment of some pantheon of great works, nor the elaboration of narrative continuity, but a “critical constellation” becomes the goal of the historical materialist. This constellation deals with no mode of causation whatsoever: its historical logic is non-linear, concerned as it is only with determining why a specific past resonates with significance in this specific present. Benjamin is describing here a strategy for converting affective experiences of history into historical knowledge: this knowledge exists not in the past itself as something to be “discovered,” but emerges in the work of elaborating this sense that a past suddenly matters, right now.

An example of such a constellation is “the Baroque:” this idea names not simply an historical period, nor simply an aesthetic style, but also a theological crisis, a natural philosophy, a political imaginary, a mode of historical consciousness, a series of affects, and a dramatic genre, at least.²⁷ By elaborating this constellation in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama* [*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*], Benjamin suggests the resonance of the Baroque for his own historical present. In broad strokes, the Weimar Republic found itself in a crisis similar to that of the 17th century Holy Roman Empire; Expressionist poetics worked with allegory in ways that harkened back to Baroque allegories; and the melancholic vision of history of the Baroque period provided a helpful corrective to the saccharine optimism of an earlier generation

²⁶ Benjamin, *Eduard Fuchs*, 28.

²⁷ For more on the Baroque as a constellation, see Jameson, *The Benjamin Files*, 75-76.

of social-democratic politics.²⁸ What is significant for us, however, is that the Benjaminian critical constellation is really nothing like conventional historical scholarship.

My argument is that this is partly due to the emphasis Benjamin places on attitude and disposition. It is this language that leads me to read Benjamin as a kind of affect theorist and as an ethnographer of historical time: not conceptual propositions, but the promises of emotional attunement are what drives his argument. In a potent reversal of the schema identified above in Nietzsche's essay, historicism finds itself reframed by Benjamin as an emotional attitude toward the past, which can only engender certain kinds of knowledge: "The more one considers Engels' sentences, the clearer it becomes that any dialectical representation of history is paid for by renouncing the contemplativeness which characterizes historicism."²⁹ Disinterested contemplation has its limits, and these have to do with the kinds of historical knowledge that this disposition toward history affords. If Nietzsche's essay critiqued historical knowledge on the basis of experiences it made possible or foreclosed, then Benjamin's approach involves rethinking ways of experiencing history in order to devise new forms of historical knowledge. It is not just the case that the cultures of historicism beget certain structures of feeling; rather, the task of developing new forms of historical knowledge involves first and foremost learning to attune oneself to history in specific ways. Eduard Fuchs' work provides for Benjamin a lesson in what this attunement consists in, and in what kinds of knowledge it makes possible.

The second aspect of Benjamin's critique of cultural history in the service of his historical materialism takes aim at the fragmentation of culture into discrete objects:

²⁸ One prominent and influential reading of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as an allegory for the Weimar Republic can be found in John McCole's 1993 *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP). Jameson also deals with this briefly in *The Benjamin Files*.

²⁹ Benjamin, *Eduard Fuchs*, 28.

If the concept of culture is problematical for historical materialism, it cannot conceive of the disintegration of culture into goods which become objects of possession for mankind. The work of the past remains uncompleted for historical materialism. It perceives no epoch in which the completed past could even in part drop conveniently, thing-like, into mankind's lap. The concept of culture, as the substantive concept of creations which are considered independent, if not from the production process in which they originate, then from a production process in which they continue to survive, carries a fetishistic trait. Culture appears in a reified form. Its history would be nothing but the sediment formed by the curiosities which have been stirred up in the consciousness of human beings without any genuine, i.e. political, experience.³⁰

Culture and cultural history are central to Benjamin's historical materialism because they lay bare two reifications that produce dead-ends for historical knowledge: the false unities of historicism (period, age) and the false fragmentation of antiquarianism (an inchoate mass, a "sediment formed by the curiosities [...] stirred up in the consciousness of human beings").³¹ Against these two dangers, Benjamin holds up the figure of the collector, and specifically Eduard Fuchs the collector, as a solution. The collection assembles objects according to no preexisting unity, instead establishing one that is speculative and fueled by a kind of impulse or passion.³² Rather than a prior concept to be illustrated by a collection, the collection is animated by an idea that emerges from the collection itself. Benjamin is clear from the opening that Fuchs' genius consists in his having a "more or less clear feeling for the historical situation in which he saw himself," adding that this was "the situation of historical materialism itself."³³ No historical

³⁰ Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs." 35-36.

³¹ About this second reification, which for reasons of space here does not get its due, see *Arcades Project* Konvolut H: "Perhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion. Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found. [...]" [H4a,1]

³² See the first line of the essay: "There are many kinds of collectors and each of them is moved by a multitude of impulses." (27). See, as well, Benjamin's later discussion of the figure of the collector. He takes as his example Balzac's *Cousin Pons*: "The figure of the collector, more attractive the longer one observes it, has not been given its due attention so far. One would imagine no figure more tempting to the Romantic storytellers. The type is motivated by dangerous through domesticated passions." (46).

³³ Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs." 27.

materialist, Fuchs nevertheless embodies a sense of his present that just happens to be amenable to Benjamin's historical materialism: a fellow traveller with regards to political sensibility capable of animating a meaningful experience of the historical past.

The proof of Fuchs' correct intuitions Benjamin locates in his ideas, which grow directly out of his collecting practices. His "brilliant defense of orgies," Benjamin counts among "the most valuable tendencies of culture" and as activity that "distinguish[es] us from animals" insofar as—Fuchs' argument goes—the orgy moves far beyond sex as a drive and as an appetite to be sated, making the erotic into a realm of creativity itself. Collecting, for Fuchs, becomes this kind of practical ideology critique: it "enables him to disperse certain petit-bourgeois illusions"³⁴ simply by virtue of bringing into existence a unique arrangement of cultural objects—here, erotic illustrations. These critical and epistemological stakes are fleshed out somewhat more clearly in the *H Konvolut* of the *Arcades Project*, dealing at length with the figure of the collector:

What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this 'completeness'? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection. And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes.³⁵

Here we can see how the collection can lend shape to the "unique experience with the past" earlier identified as the only appropriate object for historical materialist reflection: the idea of a collection constitutes "a new, expressly devised historical system," a speculative unity in which a concrete past can be sublimated into an idea. We should think by way of example of Benjamin's

³⁴ Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs." 52.

³⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*. Konvolut H: The Collector. [H1a,2]

Baroque, or his Paris of the Second Empire. Historical knowledge lies not in any *sui generis* historical system's abstract categories, however, but is immanent to every object comprising this system, once it is refigured as an object in the collection. This is what Benjamin, in this section's first block quote, means by "monad:" objects in a collection express the idea of an age, lending it conceptual content, in turn. To recap briefly, Benjamin identifies in collecting practices a different mode of attunement to history, one which affords a radically different kind of historical knowledge: one based not on determining causation or establishing chronologies, but rather in refiguring a specific past as a sensorium.

Assembling objects, references, or images into a collection renders the past into something palpable: collections in effect work to ritualize their objects, enchanting them with the ability to recreate the collector's experience of a concrete past, conscious of the fact that they are experiences taking place in the present. This kind of historical experience, separate from any narrative structures, Benjamin terms elsewhere a "dialectical image:" it is predicated on a kind of double-exposure of the present moment and a moment in the past. Though the objects amassed index a past moment, their configuration in a collection mark the present moment as unique: it is only in the here and now that *this* particular set of objects could have been amassed to invoke, say, the transition period of 1987 to 1993 in Poland as an idea.³⁶ But these dialectical images are, as Benjamin frequently points out, not to be thought of as visual at all. Writing in the *H Konvolut* about the collector, Benjamin notes this curious opposition:

Possession and having are allied with the tactile, and stand in a certain opposition to the optical. Collectors are beings with tactile instincts. Moreover, with the recent turn away

³⁶ This example refers to Olga Drenda's book, *Duchologia Polska: Rzeczy i ludzie w czasach transformacji*. [Polish Hauntology: Things and People in Times of Transition]. (Kraków, Karakter, 2016). This is an ethnography of everyday life that makes more explicit theoretical reference to Derrida, but which is clearly an example of Benjamin's historiographic methodology, developing and elaborating the time period in question as an idea, which finds expression in the objects, images, and anecdotes assembled by Drenda.

from naturalism, the primacy of the optical that was determinate for the previous century has come to an end. //Flaneur// The flaneur optical, the collector tactile.³⁷

It's by eschewing the desire to visualize historical time as any expanse of space, and historical periods as the division of this space into parts, that collection and *Konstruktion* are able to produce critical historical knowledge. Tactility makes possible historical experience that can actually serve as the foundation for knowledge: no immediate or authentic mode of historical experience, this is simply one that prioritizes the sense of touch over that of sight as a tactic for evading the false unities, facile reifications, and ideological images of the past. The collector touches and handles their objects, holding and embracing what it knows to be of the same kind, even if that kind—the idea animating the collection—does not yet exist as anything more than an expression of their unique present moment.

The past, for Benjamin, is neither a story nor is it a thing—but one way we can access the past in the present is through objects in a collection. Very much like Barthes' collection of figures of the neutral, intended to make him “vividly interested” in his own present, the power of the collection lies in its being born of impulses and passions: a material testament to the capacity of the historical past to move us. The conceptual yield of the collection involves probing these experiences of history to ask questions about the nature of the past's urgency and significance. For Benjamin, however, we can only evade the fetishistic trait that seems to mark objects by making the pasts they invoke subservient to the “genuine, i.e. political, experience” of the present moment. In this gesture we can see, again, an echo of Nietzsche's critique that substitutes a discourse of vitalism with an explicitly political one.

³⁷ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. [H2,5]

Benjamin's critique of cultural history interrogates the contradictions of a linear, progressive temporality (moving forward, accumulating pasts), but it likewise calls into question attempts to establish whatever "timeless" pantheon of great works. Against these false unities, he holds up the collector, the *Konstruktion*, the constellation as tactics for devising speculative unities; and against the sense of empty, spatialized, mathematical time in which conventional cultural history plays out, he holds up the historicity of specific aesthetic objects as a testament to the *thickness* of historical time. In terming his understanding of historical time as something thick, I am not only suggesting that, for Benjamin, every instance of historical time must be described in its concrete specificity, but I am likewise invoking Clifford Geertz' notion of *thick description*. We can understand the task of conceptualizing the historicity of an aesthetic object as the thick description of that object's passage through time. Thickness, moreover, echoes the prioritization of the tactile sense, and it also speaks to the way in which historical time is, for Benjamin, something for which we could always say, *we're in the thick of it*.

What this means is that, because historical time is thick, there is no way to meaningfully theorize it from the outside: no point in trying to describe the workings of historical time "in general" or "in itself." Rather, it is only specific objects that can disclose a partial, local knowledge of historical time. However, any historical knowledge of an object becomes in turn, for Benjamin, a part of that object's afterlife: it leaves its mark on the object, it is something to which the object is porous. Eduard Fuchs' collections of erotic illustrations, for instance, irreversibly alter how anybody after Fuchs thinks about these illustrations: their being assembled into a collection and revalued as aesthetic objects has altered their essential nature retroactively. Benjamin's concept of the origin [*Ursprung*] names this porousness of cultural objects to the gazes bestowed on them over the course of historical time, and it emerges from a retrofitting the

Goethean temporality of metamorphosis, exemplified in the latter's writing about the logic of plant growth.³⁸ *Urplanze* [Ur-plant, or arch-plant] and *Ursprung* [origin] offer a fairly good model for imagining Benjamin's understanding of historical time: once we eschew any trans-historical vantage points and take seriously the perspective of the present moment, any object's passing through history looks less like a shuttling through space and more like the unfolding of a plant's growth: what Benjamin calls its origin [*Ursprung*] is not confined to a point in time (whether the text itself, or the author's intention, or its contemporary reception) but develops over the course of the work's reception over time. The historicity of an object, unfolding through time rather than tied to a specific point in time (which would be its proper "historical context") comprises Benjamin's dialectical understanding of this object's origin. Even if the fundamental thickness of historical time stops us from finding any direct or immediate experience of it, we can nevertheless theorize and even model the local, specific workings of historical time through objects— by arranging them in material collections and theoretical constellations. This insight, perhaps typical of a philosophical cultural critic like Benjamin, lies at the heart of his historical materialism.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how Benjamin and Nietzsche's critiques of historicism hinge on complementary articulations of the relationship between historical knowledge and historical

³⁸ Cf. *Arcades Project* Konvolut N: "On the Theory of Knowledge/ Theory of Progress:" "In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the *Trauerspiel* book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history. Origin-it is, in effect, the concept of *Ur*-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history. Now, in my work on the arcades I am equally concerned with fathoming an origin. To be specific, I pursue the Origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and I locate this origin in the economic facts. Seen from the standpoint of causality, however (and that means considered as causes), these facts would not be primal phenomena; they become such only insofar as in their own individual development-"unfolding" might be a better term-they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants." [N2a,4]

experience. However, the above elaboration of Benjamin's idiosyncratic historical materialism may seem far indeed from the emphasis on sense and affect that had marked Nietzsche's critique of historicism's epistemological blind spots. Historical affect turns out to be a helpful way to frame the two thinkers' complementarity: Nietzsche worked to critique the value of historical knowledge on the basis of the kinds of attunement to the past it can engender, while Benjamin sought to imagine historical knowledge from beyond the contemplative disposition of what he termed bourgeois cultural history.

Benjamin's project thus very much picks up where Nietzsche's leaves off: if sense, feeling, and affect are the levers by which Nietzsche carries out his critique, these same categories serve as the springboard for Benjamin's critical elaboration of radical historical knowledge. Rather than framing the past as a story, he casts it as a sensorium felt with varying degrees of urgency or significance. This kind of historical knowledge moreover finds its expression not in narrative, but in collections that express the idea of a concrete past, and it carries with it an understanding of historical time not as a spatialized expanse in which events occur, but as a cultural phenomenon amenable to thick description. I have demonstrated that emotional attunement, as a critical epistemology, lies at the heart of Benjamin's historical materialism, and I have elaborated "historical affect" as, among other things, a name for the links between his explicit critiques of bourgeois historicism, and his speculative modes of historical thinking.

Here it seems worthwhile to reiterate the striking similarities of Nietzsche and Benjamin's projects: both share a subordination of knowledge about the past to the needs of the present, whether these are expressed in a vitalist tenor, or a leftwing political one. Both, moreover, take seriously the prospect that the most important thing about history might well be

ways it is liable to awaken enthusiasm and vibrate with significance in the present moment, to paraphrase the Goethe quote that forms this chapter's epigraph. These are already significant revaluations of what history is and what it does: if historical knowledge is amassed not for its own sake, but in the services of the present; if history fundamentally discloses itself to us in "dialectical images" that overlay a particular past onto the reflecting present, then Benjamin and Nietzsche both share an impulse to pose questions about the practical efficacy of historical knowledge. My reading these essays is meant to insist that these practical questions are nevertheless epistemological insofar as they are inquiring into the conditions by which historical knowledge comes to feel urgent, relevant, pressing—or uninteresting and futile, as the case may be—in a given present moment. These questions entail a shift in focus from the past "itself" to the ever-changing relation of the past to the present, radically shifting our conception of what it is that constitutes historical knowledge.

Жить стало лучше, товарищи. Жить стало веселее.¹

Chapter Two:

Stalinist Cheerfulness, Post-Stalinist Laughter:

Hlasko, Bräunig, and the Midcentury Origins of Historical Feeling

This chapter reads the notion of “historical feeling” out of some exemplary texts of the post-Stalinist moment in Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia. The aim here is twofold: to argue that the task of disseminating the cheerful feeling of partaking in history was central to the Stalinist project, and to show how this task was turned inside out by literature written in Stalinism’s immediate aftermath. What will emerge in this history of an impossible emotion is a failure all the more spectacular for the byproducts it engendered: forms of writing so fixated on escaping socialist realist convention that they could not help but recapitulate its key features. Stable character types were inverted and typical plot-lines were allowed to meander; obligatory Stalinist cheerfulness corroded into spontaneous ironic outbursts; and the failed dissemination of historical feeling metamorphosed into the dissemination of the failure of historical feeling.

That is, Stalinism’s failure to create and engender a positive form of historical consciousness, wherein collective cheerfulness and heroic goodwill would incarnate a communist futurity, gave way to the elaboration of negative forms of historical consciousness focused on privation, lack, futility, and non-participation. If Stalinist socialist realism failed at making history felt as a personal and collective transformative force, then literature written in its aftermath took up the task of expressing this failure as a ludicrous impossibility. These stories

¹ “Life has become better, comrades, life has become more cheerful.” J. V. Stalin, speech to the Central Committee of the CPSU on 17 November, 1935.

ironize on the abject failures of Central European Stalinism, suggesting that to imagine historical feeling is to indulge in the worst kind of ruse and hypocrisy. Eventually, this inversion finds its dialectical resolution in those late socialist forms of writing, exemplified in this dissertation by Konwicki and Hilbig, wherein history is, again, posited as a felt experience— but, crucially, as a negative force, always sapping the present moment of its immediacy. By the late 1970s and 1980s, historical time piles up not in a radiant future that the present may be able to access, but in a horrible, burdensome past that the present can neither bear nor ever truly escape.

Stalinist cheerfulness, this strange, doctrinal, and obligatory *historical feeling*, functions thus as a transition and as a dialectical counterpoint between the *fin de siècle* critiques of historicism leveraged by Nietzsche and Benjamin and the late socialist melancholias expressed by Konwicki and Hilbig. Rather than a past-oriented sense of lateness, historical feeling appears here—in a brief, flitting instant—as a positive, energetic, and future-oriented amalgamation of emotional experience and historical time. No sooner does it appear in Central Europe than it is compromised, undermined, and turned inside out: its institutional failure converted into a formal fixation with failed feeling as such.

This formula about failed dissemination and disseminated failure will be taken up in this chapter as a shorthand for the midcentury kernel of late-socialist lateness. Even if its significance is flipped from a positive sense of partaking in history to a negative sense of being unable to, the amalgamation of time and emotion that I term historical feeling is contiguous from Stalinism through post-Stalinism and indeed post-socialism. That is, the notion that historical time makes itself available to us through the registers of feeling and attunement emerges from the Stalinist experiment, and in particular from the wake left by its rapid abandonment around the time of Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" in 1956. This notion, which lies at the heart of Konwicki and

Hilbig's writings about temporality, atmosphere, and feeling, carries the imprint of Stalinism's failure as a cultural project. If critiques of German historicism explain the generative potential of "historical feeling" as a concept, then the negativity of lateness as a specific historical feeling must be traced to Stalinism's Central European incarnation.

Historical feeling, and lateness as a specific instance thereof, falls out of the decomposition of this amalgamation of historical time and affect which I term here *Stalinist cheerfulness*. This was another kind of "historical emotion" in the two senses of the term suggested by Svetlana Boym and fleshed out by Andrew Gilbert: it is an emotion located *in* history, understandable only according to its specific political and cultural context, but it is also—and this is the thrust of my argument—an emotion *about* history. Like nostalgia, about which much has been written, or lateness, which forms this dissertation's primary research subject, Stalinist cheerfulness is an emotion that encodes an entire disposition towards the historical: it describes nothing less than an affective texture of historical time. This chapter will excavate Stalinist cheerfulness in midcentury Germany and Poland by reading a short story by Marek Hłasko and a novel by Werner Bräunig for the products of this cheerfulness' decomposition: the acerbic irony² and sarcastic laughter that, like the vats of acid in Hrabal's story "Strange People," dissolve the monumental edifice of Stalinist affect.³

² While this chapter describes an affective shift from cheerfulness to irony, we should take care to differentiate this from Western notions of irony as occupying an external vantage point from which a situation is judged and parodied. Here, rather, we are afforded a culturally specific form of irony best described by Alexei Yurchak's concept of *Stiob*. Cf. Boyer, Dominic and Alexei Yurchak. "American Stiob: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West." In *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 2. 2010. 179-221. In distinction to Western irony, *stiob* is characterized by an ambivalent position within and without the system or situation being parodied. In this chapter, *stiob* emerges as a decay product of Stalinist cheerfulness: an emotive standpoint as acerbic as it is ambivalent. We will see it play out, for instance, in the ironix inversion of Stakhanovite heroism in Hłasko's story.

³ Hrabal plays here the role of a minor counterpoint, to suggest that the terms of this argument can be extended beyond East Germany and People's Poland, to comprise all People's Republics formed in East-Central Europe after 1945.

Socialist Realism's German and Polish Incarnations

Socialist realism, Stalinism's obligatory cultural form, was introduced in Poland, East Germany, and the other Warsaw Pact states around 1948. It was at this point already a severely compromised aesthetic doctrine: as Thomas Lahusen has theorized, even Soviet socialist realism already had within it a "mechanism of increasing self-destruction that emptied it of its artistic 'structures,'" what made it "metaphorically speaking, a literature in ruins from the very start."⁴ As he has shown through painstaking readings of successive reprints of Fyodor Gladkov's *Cement*, which was perhaps *the* canonical socialist realist text, socialist realism was tasked with being excruciatingly contemporary, its rules and strictures constantly revised to fit the politburo's current prerogatives,⁵ and its canonical texts reedited and reissued to reflect current political necessities. For all its apparent doctrinal rigidity, this was a remarkably malleable and even flimsy cultural form—and one all the more dependent on networks of dedicated censors and internal theorists for precisely this reason. The political event that accompanies socialist realism's establishment in the newly-formed people's republics was the 1948 Tito-Stalin split and Yugoslavia's forging of an independent road to socialism. Maintaining Soviet control over the political trajectories of these new states was the primary task of the day, and culture, in the form of socialist realist literature, film, art, music, and dance, was the means by which this control would be ensured.

There exists no shortage of scholarly literature about socialist realism both in its Soviet and in its East-European incarnations.⁶ Here, it will suffice to differentiate German and Polish

⁴ Lahusen, Thomas. "Decay or Endurance? The Ruins of Socialism," in *The Slavic Review*. Vol. 65, No. 4. 2004. 736-746.

⁵ Lahusen, Thomas. "Cement. (Fedor Gladkov, 1925)" in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti. Vol. 2 Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006. 476-482.

⁶ See, for instance: Evgeny Dobrenko, Natalia Jonsson-Skradol, *Socialist Realism in Central and Eastern European Literatures under Stalin. Institutions, Dynamics, Discourses*. London: Anthem Press, 2018. Adam Mazurkiewicz,

socialist realism along ideological and literary-historical axes. If the ideological task of Polish socialist realism was to counteract the Romantic-nationalist tendencies of prewar Polish culture, then East German socialist realism was tasked with battling a formalism that threatened to present an ‘incorrect’ image of reality, as evinced by the *Formalismusstreit* of the early 1950s. Both of these ideological tasks, however, were aimed at demarcating a cultural logic that would be at once distinct from West-European artistic trends, emblemized in the German case by the question of Formalism and abstraction, and from heterodox national variants of socialist culture, incarnated in Tito’s Yugoslavia. What makes Central European Stalinism and socialist realism so fascinating as a cultural-historical period is indeed the extent to which high culture was saddled with political tasks.⁷ Attending to the historical specificity and local conditions of Stalinism’s arrival in these societies, both of them reduced to rubble by the war, makes salient the differences between these two parallel projects of standardization and normalization.

The era of Polish socialist realism is clearly demarcated by the years 1949 and 1956: the year of the *Zjazd Szczeciński Literatów* and the year of Władysław Gomułka’s return to power, the publication of Adam Ważyk’s *Poemat dla Dorosłych*, and, germanely for this chapter, the year in which Marek Hłasko’s “Robotnicy” was first published. After 1956, literature and cultural production more broadly moved in just the kind of national direction that had been ardently suppressed just eight years prior: the Poznań Uprising, which brought Gomułka out of prison and into power, necessitated tangible erosions of the Stalinist edifice.⁸ It is not for nothing

Polska Literatura Socrealistyczna. Łódź : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2020. George Buehler, *The Death of Socialist Realism in the Novels of Christa Wolf*. Peter Lang: 1984. Lahusen, Thomas. *How Life Writes the Book: Socialist Realism and Real Socialism in Stalin’s Russia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997.

⁷ For a comparative study on this question in the German and Polish cases, focusing especially on “second cities” Kraków and Leipzig, see Kunakhovich, Kyrill. *Communism's Public Sphere. Culture as Politics in Cold War Poland and East Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2022.

⁸ One of many puzzles of this historical period involves the question of why the 1956 Poznań Uprising allowed Polish political culture to move in a more independent, nationalist direction while the 1956 Hungarian Revolution’s violent suppression had the opposite effect in Hungary.

that Gomułka, in his famous speech to assembled crowds on October 24, 1956, invoked Tito's Yugoslavia both to lend credence to his claims that he would seek to tread a different road to socialism as a politician, and to admit the possibility of multiple models, as an organ of the Party.⁹

East German socialist realism is more difficult to pin down as a literary historical period, as the era is conventional divided into *Aufbauliteratur*, produced between 1949 and 1961, and *Ankunftsliteratur*, produced after 1961. On the other hand, East German socialist realism was far better theorized than its Polish counterpart, owing to the existence and survival of a powerful German leftwing political tradition, and especially to the productive friendship between Georg Lukács and Johannes R. Becher, who met each other in Tashkent in 1941.¹⁰ Theory led practice with the convening of the first *Bitterfelder Weg* conference in 1961, which sought to bridge the gap between proletarian and intellectual writers, and which formed institutions aimed at effecting a form of literary culture produced by workers. One of these institutions was the Institut Johannes R. Becher, formed in 1955, where *inter alia* Werner Bräunig received his training as a writer. Christa Wolf's 1961 debut novel *Moskauer Novelle* was still a rather formulaic socialist realist text, but, much like her 1965 *Geteilte Himmel*, Bräunig's *Rummelplatz* was already more self-conscious in how it conceived of itself as a uniquely East German kind of socialist realist novel.

⁹ Machcewicz, Pawel. *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956*. Ed. James G. Herschberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009. 209: "People no doubt were glad to hear that there could exist various, and at the same time fully equal, models of socialism. 'It can be the way it was created in the Soviet Union, it can be formed the way we can see it in Yugoslavia, or it can be different still.' The mention of Yugoslavia appealed to the warmth for Marshall Tito and his country, manifested at many rallies and mass meetings."

¹⁰ Soviet internal exile, especially in Tashkent, which had in 1941 perhaps the most vibrant intellectual scene on the continent of Eurasia, was, in many respects, the birthplace of both German and Polish postwar culture: the latter having been recorded in: Shore, Marci. *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Communism, 1918-1968*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006.

However if socialist realism did not name in East Germany a clear epoch as it did in Polish cultural history, then we would do well to remember here Georg Buehler's suggestion that socialist realism be thought of neither as a literary movement nor as a literary period, but rather as "the project of political fiat."¹¹ Socialist realism was, on some level, itself an object: the creation of the Politburo, and of Joseph Stalin personally, on the basis of exemplary novels and artworks, but itself rather like a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to borrow Boris Groys' term.¹² It was at once an object and an occurrence, and as such it leaves a significant imprint especially on those works that attempt to reckon with it. That Bräunig's *Rummelplatz* was swiftly and forcefully censored and banned for depicting an industrial site which had become a state secret—so, for reasons unrelated to its literary or even to its political merits—is a devastating irony of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist cultural apparatuses. Such arbitrary and career-annihilating censorship is what Lahusen refers to when he describes socialist realism's self-destructive mechanism.

In *The Captive Mind*, his literary memoir of Polish Stalinism, Czesław Miłosz, who took part in the 1948-49 conventions, tells us that, while "everybody there regarded socialist realism as a state-imposed theory leading only to dismal cultural products," their support for the doctrine was guaranteed through the force of impeccable and unassailable arguments about history, the role of art, and the social usefulness of intellectual life.¹³ This was without a doubt a form of coercion, albeit a very sophisticated form thereof. Miłosz goes on to explain that loyalty to the socialist realist doctrine was secured by an anxiety-inducing process that evaporated the

¹¹ Buehler, 33.

¹² Groys, Boris. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Trans. Charles Rougle. New York: Verso, 2011.

¹³ Miłosz, Czesław. *Zniewolony Umysł*. Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1980. 26: "Wszyscy uważali socjalistyczny realizm za urzędowo narzucaną teorię, prowadzącą do opłakanych wyników, jak dowodził tego przykład sztuki rosyjskiej. Próby wywołania dyskusji nie udawały się. Sala milczała. Zwykle znajdował się jeden odważny, który przypuszczał atak pełen hamowanego sarkazmu, przy milczącym, ale wyraźnym, poparciu całej sali. Odpowiedź referentów miażdżyła atakującego znacznie lepiej przeprowadzoną argumentacją, i aby wypadła jeszcze mocniej, zawierała całkiem dokładne pogroźki pod adresem kariery i przyszłości niesforne go osobnika."

conditions for creating independent artwork in the first place. The writer lost confidence in the artistic merit of his work because he had no public readership with which to interface, no milieu of other writers with which to openly discuss it.¹⁴ Stalinism and socialism-realism are inseparable from one another in that this mere aesthetic doctrine was predicated upon a radical disruption of what we can call the social economy of writing: the multiple social factors that allow for autonomous, formally individual literary work to be valuable and intelligible.

How, then, can we read for this literary-historical object which is neither a movement nor a school nor an epoch, but a political tool and historical condition of possibility of postwar Central European culture? Here we must remember that socialist realist literature, film, and art were fundamentally pedagogical in nature. The original argument of this chapter is that one major dimension of its pedagogical mission can be understood as inculcating in readers the feeling of participating in history and of historical time being something *elastic*—and that this feeling was inculcated through the emotion of Stalinist cheerfulness. The question of socialist realism’s nature is thus replaced by the question of its function. Central to this function was the figure of the Stakhanovite worker-hero.

The Stakhanovite and his Afterlives

Although more prominently featured in visual arts, the Stalinist worker-hero stands at the center of all socialist realist cultural production. He is, in short, a mythic figure: a stock character and type central to socialist realist media, the central hero of all stories and the model of all statues. If socialist realism works to disseminate the potent, propagandistic historical emotion of

¹⁴ Miłosz, 27: “Gdyby miał pewność, że dzieło dokonywane przez niego wbrew linii oficjalnie zaleconej ma wartość trwałą—zdecodowałby się zapewne i nie troszczyłby się o druk czy branie udziału w wystawach, [...] Sądzi jednak—w większości wypadków—że takie dzieło byłoby artystycznie słabe—w czym nie myli się zanedo. Jak powiedziałem, zabrakło obiektywnych warunków. Obiektywne warunki potrzebne do zrealizowania dzieła artystycznego są zjawiskiem, jak wiadomo, bardzo złożonym: wchodzi tu w grę pewien krąg odbiorców, możliwość kontaktu zimi, odpowiednia atmosfera, a co najważniejsze—uwolnienie się od wewnętrznej, mimowolnej kontroli.”

cheerfulness, then it is the Stakhanovite who is cheerful above all. This worker-hero holds together a peculiar sense of historical time and the obligatory, inspiring emotion that sustains it, and we could say that the symbolic work he is always performing is that of sustaining a uniquely Stalinist form of historical consciousness. History appears weighted towards the future and the past disappears almost entirely: the Stakhanovite faces forward, and his face is illuminated by the future, which is foreshortened and appears always to be nearly within reach.¹⁵ Historical time is, to him, something fundamentally elastic: it can be sped up through heroic exertion or slowed down by nefarious sabotage. Temporal progression is thus collapsed onto industrial development, and chronology measured solely in five-year-plans and in their component parts. The heroism of the worker-hero consists in his exceeding production norms for a given hour, day, or week, thereby accelerating the attainment of the five year plan and accelerating the course of history itself. This is the mythic logic that undergirds Stalinist historical consciousness and its worker-heroes.

As Katerina Clark tells us in her seminal study of the Soviet socialist realist novel, the Stakhanovite's power lay neither in physical strength nor in intellectual brilliance but rather "in his *daring* to discount scientifically established norms," i.e. of how many bricks a bricklayer could lay in one hour.¹⁶ Daring and courage are nothing else than the affective engines of heroic exertion: in the figure of the Stakhanovite, they also enabled the production of new scientific knowledge, pushing higher the production norms that future worker-heroes could endeavor to exceed, and that all workers would be expected to perform. Clark terms this the epistemological

¹⁵ He is the odd, avuncular inversion of Walter Benjamin and Paul Klee's Angel of History: a clunky figure who smooths over his insensitivity with brashness and vivacity. Oblivious to the piling wreckage of the past, he exudes an improbable confidence about the future which we can only understand, totally anachronistically, as camp.

¹⁶ Clark, Katerina. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. 143.

byproduct of the worker-hero's task: he not only exceeds norms but sets new norms, in much the same way that an olympic champion might set a new record for the one hundred meter sprint. The Stakhanovite's herculean toil is nothing less than the application of athletic feats to industrial tasks, but it served a key ideological role as the lynchpin of the Stalinist conception of historical time and its link to an obligatory, collective feeling of cheerfulness.

If courage and daring name the affective engines of these worker-heroes, then cheerfulness names their fundamental disposition. Cheerfulness (*весёлость*) is canonically linked to the Stalinist cult of the Stakhanovite though the full quote of this chapter's epigraph: "Life has become better, comrades, life has become more cheerful... If we lived badly, unattractively, cheerlessly, then there would be no Stakhanov movement in our country." Stalin's dictum frames cheerfulness as both the condition of possibility of the Stakhanov movement of worker-heroes, and as the proof of its significance: a causal loop that sets into relief the economy of affect at work in the heroic acceleration of industrial development and of history itself. In brief: cheerfulness makes possible daring exertion, which, represented and disseminated, generates more cheerfulness in turn. The production of cultural objects, and novels and films in particular, was the institutional engine of this affective economy. Cheerfulness and merriment were "shared, collectively experienced emotions,"¹⁷ inculcated precisely through these cultural objects.

Cheer or merriment are distinct from happiness or satisfaction: not private enjoyment, but shared, outward-facing readiness is what *veselost'* names. It is an emotion, one linked to a sense

¹⁷ "... shared, collectively experienced emotions, engendered—if the discourse was to be believed—by a film comedy such as Grigorii Aleksandrov's musical *Veselye rebiata* (The Happy Fellows, 1934)." Emma Widdis, "Sew yourself Soviet: The Pleasures of Textile in the Machine Age." in *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style*. Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko, Eds. London, Anthem: 2009.

of historical time and to a uniquely Stalinist form of historical consciousness, but it is at once a *disposition toward work*, and toward the work of incarnating the communist future in the here and now. Not only collective, it is also immanent and diffuse: it has no specific object. The Stakhanovite is not cheerful about anything, but rather cheerful in general: put another way, cheer radiates from him. A very general positive affect, Stalinist cheerfulness describes the spirited disposition of the worker-hero as well as the work of inspiring others: the aim of socialist realist cultural objects as well as that which they disseminate among readers and viewers. Cheerfulness does not merely make possible the attainment of the future, it is also the affect by which a sense of historical time as elastic and of the future as attainable through daring effort comes to be disclosed. **I term Stalinist cheerfulness an *historical emotion* because, in its historical and cultural specificity as a midcentury affect, it partakes in the same amalgamation of emotion and time which discloses an entire disposition toward the historical—here, the historical as the work of partaking in and of making history— as do other historical emotions, like nostalgia or like lateness. REWORD THIS**

While cheerfulness as the obligatory collective emotion is already cast in ironic lights by Stalin's death in 1953, the figure of the Stakhanovite remains significant and indeed vital as a way of figuring Stalinism as a past historical moment and of reckoning with this past. Nowhere is the continual vitality of the Stakhanovite as a figure for the Stalinist amalgamation of cheerfulness and elastic futurity better evidenced than in Andrzej Wajda's seminal 1976 film, *Man of Marble* [*Człowiek z Marmuru*].¹⁸ An ironic meta-commentary on the phenomenon of

¹⁸ An East German counterpart, for an expanded version of this chapter, would be Konrad Wolf's censored 1959 film *Die Sonnensucher*, about uranium miners in Wismut. Like Bräunig's novel, this film, a spectacular example of decayed socialist realism, was banned solely for depicting the uranium mines which had become, by the 1960s, a closely-guarded state secret.

Stalinist celebrity and of the Stakhanovite focuses on the fictional Stakhanovite bricklayer Mateusz Birkut, this film narrates his rise to fame and eventual downfall as his story is rediscovered by the student filmmaker Agnieszka. Here, the Stakhanovite bricklayer is given an ironic and inverted treatment in a film that explores the Stalinist star system as an exploitative media process itself.

The very first scene of this film is a fake-archival propaganda short about Mateusz Birkut.¹⁹ The next scene is set in Warsaw's *Muzeum Narodowy*, a splendid architectural example of prewar Polish modernism. Agnieszka and her film crew are led through the main hall, which is filled with colorful abstract expressionist artwork, and down to the basement, where socialist realist paintings and statues are being stored. The symbolic significance of these first two scenes cannot be overstated: this is a film about filmmaking, but also about censorship and the breaking of taboos: both dramatically and conceptually the film is searching through the basements of Polish culture to shed light on a banned topic: the suppressed socialist realist tradition. The use of fake-archival footage is moreover highly innovative in the global history of filmmaking:²⁰ here, however, the short little *filmik* plays a double role: Andrzej Wajda inserts his name into the credits, naming himself as Jerzy Burski's assistant director.²¹ The fake-archival is prominent throughout the film, forming the artificial substrate of the film's drama and method of representation.

¹⁹ Wajda, Andrzej. *Człowiek z Marmuru*. 1976. Zespół Filmowy X.

²⁰ In her book *Poor but Sexy: Culture Clashes in Europe East and West* (London: Zero Books, 2014) Agata Pyzik claims that this film invented the use of fake archival footage; however, I have not been able to substantiate this claim.

²¹ In a later fake-archival *filmik*, a stock propaganda story about Hańka Tomczyk veers into a self-conscious meditation on socialist realist art itself and its superiority to 'degenerate' western art, something that, in reality, no known early-50s propaganda short endeavored to do. Wajda, *Człowiek z Marmuru*, 00:25:00.

While the first hour or so of the film for the most part articulates a particular nostalgic vision of history, the second half works to portray the evasions and machinations of the State: both in its treatment of Birkut and Mietek after their fall from grace in the early 50s, and in its hostility to Agnieszka's film project in the late 70s. This sets up a counterpoint that we can understand as an implicit argument not so much about the historical record as about the meaning of history: like the Gomułka era that preceded it, the Gierek era, too, is haunted by the the epic futurities of High Stalinism. The sense of a large-scale, future-oriented collective project has evaporated and, with it, the feeling of historical progress. "Film... to nie literatura" says the now middle-aged and slick Jerzy Burski to Agnieszka at one point, "nie robi się niczego na *jutro*, wszystko na *dziś*, albo na *nigdy*."²² The cleverness of this line involves the multiple readings it affords: film is made *for today* (the conceit that Wajda's film is about socialist realism's legacy *now*, in 1976); what *is* made for tomorrow is *literature* (a formulation that can be inverted: the future only exists anymore in books, not in reality). Absent from all versions of this line is both the notion of film being made *for* the future, as in socialist realist doctrine, and film being made *about* the past, film as historical representation. All sense of temporality evaporates, leaving only the eternal *now* of actually-existing socialism, itself uncannily similar to the broad present of all late-20th century consumer societies—save for the looming presence of the Stalinist past.

This past appears in the film as a curious mix of an archaic golden age and a trove of secrets and violent suppression.²³ By setting up an elaborate, ironic figuration of the passage between the 1950s and the 1970s as a kind of historical decline, the film articulates a nostalgic

²² Wajda, *Człowiek z Marmuru*, 00:38:00. "Film... is not literature. You don't make it for *tomorrow*, everything is for *today*, or for *never*."

²³ For the filmic trope of the Polish 1950s as a trove of violent secrets, see: Thomas Sliwowski and Paweł Kościelny, "Retrotopia in Central Europe: Anticommunism, Historical Time, and the Uses of the Socialist Past." in *Ulbandus*. Vol. 19, 2022. 3-30.

mood even as it works to invert the terms of Stalinist futurity: the only kind of future that Stalinism succeeded in creating, it seems to say, is the Really-Existing Socialism of the 1970s, which, in turn, cannot help but look back to the Stalinist '50s for the lost epic potentials of its own historical present. If the broad present of the 70s is perhaps common to most global cultures, then this complex interplay between nostalgic retrospection and lost futurity, one in which the smiles of cheerful Stalinist worker-heroes like Birkut appear petrified into grimaces, is absolutely unique to East-European socialist cultures. It is here that the midcentury historical kernel of late socialist lateness is to be found.

Post-Stalinist Humor: Hlasko and Bräunig

Why read Marek Hlasko and Werner Bräunig together? These two writers are different in nearly every sense: Hlasko was a publishing success and a marvel in the Polish literary world circa 1956, while Bräunig's great novel was never published at all; Hlasko's tone and writerly concerns are playfully nihilistic, featuring drunks and scoundrels, while Bräunig is earnest almost to a fault; Hlasko conned and weaseled his way onto the literary scene, while Bräunig was sent up thanks to the pedagogical apparatus of the Johannes Becher Institute. Hlasko's stories are about workers who turn their toil into sad contests of manliness, men who keep finding themselves totally drunk at midday, and women who are only ever misogynistic repositories of fear. Bräunig's great social novel is about various types finding their way in the workers' state, about women who find themselves becoming unlikely heroes, about authentic activists and careerists. We can sum up their differences as two dispositions towards socialist realism as an institutionalized literary form. Hlasko was irreverent, willing to borrow stock characters and situations and to deploy them as comic material; Bräunig was skeptical, willing to amend the formulae in order to craft a uniquely East German socialist literature. Both, however,

introduced irony into a literary form that was bereft of it: ambivalent humor had no place in the hyper-sincere doctrine of Stalinist socialist realism.

It is difficult not to read as an historical irony the fact that Hłasko, the irreverent nihilist, was quickly canonized as a hallmark of Polish Thaw-era literature, while Bräunig, the striving socialist, found his work banned for being of no use to the youth. Walter Ulbricht himself denounced *Rummelplatz* during the 11th Plenum of the Central Committee of the *SED* in December, 1965, during a broader campaign to root out supposed traces of capitalist culture. Christa Wolf herself gave a spontaneous speech in defense of the novel.²⁴

Both Marek Hłasko and Werner Bräunig were alcoholics and both died rather young. Hłasko accidentally overdosed on sleeping pills while meeting with a film director in Wiesbaden, during one of several last-ditch attempts to restart his career from abroad. He had lived in Israel, and then in West Germany; he had travelled to Los Angeles, where Roman Polanski, his friend from his youth, backed out of a film project with him. During a walk in the hills of Los Angeles with the brilliant Polish jazz composer Krzysztof Komeda, Hłasko playfully jostled him, inadvertently causing Komeda to trip, fall, and to suffer a head injury which led to Komeda's untimely death one year later, in 1969. If Hłasko's fate was utterly buffoonish, then Bräunig's was simply depressing. He never saw his novel published despite undertaking extensive edits, resigning himself to minor literary forms as he eked out a living as a semi-blacklisted author. He died of alcoholism in 1976. A short and heavily edited excerpt of his novel was published in 1981, before the novel in its entirety was finally published by Aufbau Verlag in 2007.

²⁴ Drescher, Angela. „Aber die Träume, die haben doch Namen“. *Der Fall Werner Bräunig*. In: Werner Bräunig: *Rummelplatz*. Roman. Aufbau-Verlag Berlin 2007, 653.

Both writers were more or less abject failures by the end of their lives. Failure stalked them, or they it: both fell out of the literary-social ferment of Stalinist culture and socialist realism, bearing witness, in their own ways, to the failure of this vast literary institution. Both wrote texts that recycle certain socialist realist clichés and imbue them with more ambivalent meanings, pushing the boundaries of socialist realist genre forms while never fully breaking free of them. By this I mean that both share the same kind of relationship to their social and historical contexts: their work is best understood through heavily contextualist readings, and I make them here into paradigmatic cases of Stalinist culture's combined and uneven decomposition into the respective socialist cultures of People's Poland and the German Democratic Republic.

Marek Hłasko's "Robotnicy"

In Marek Hłasko's short story "Robotnicy" ("The Toilers"), first published in 1955,²⁵ four workers find themselves building a bridge from nowhere to nowhere. They're surrounded by flat, empty fields: blank vistas in which "The gaze loses itself; you might think that you don't have eyes at all and are blind. It stupefies you." There is not much to see here, and it's this absence that plays tricks on their perception. The narrator, who also gives us very little of himself until the very end, provides these descriptions as if they were reports from the field (and not just from a field), and one is tempted to read into them multiple levels of meaning:

Na szarym niebie od czasu do czasu ukazywało się blade słońce; w kałużach, którymi pokryty był cały plac budowy, wyglądało ono jak oczko żółtego tłuszczu. Podnosiliśmy ku niemu nasze umęczone twarze; słońce zaraz zniknęło.²⁶

²⁵ In the literary weekly, *Nowa Kultura* as "Most" ["The Bridge"]. Republished one year later under its current title, in Hłasko's first short-story collection, *Pierwszy Krok w Chmurach* [*A First Step into the Clouds*].

²⁶ Hłasko, 16. "On the gray sky from time to time appeared the pale sun; in puddles, with which the whole construction site was covered, it looked like a little eye of yellow fat. We raised our worn out/beaten down faces to it—and the sun would vanish."

Their faces are not simply *tired* [zmęczone], but also beaten down, worn out, martyred [umęczone] by their toil: more than exhausting them, building the bridge lends them an unpleasant apotheosis, making their suffering almost mystical in its tenor. The communist horizon is here indiscernible, and the sun radiates almost nothing at all: it vanishes, in fact, the moment they try to look up at it. Work offers no transcendence, but feeling the burden of toil as something at once unbearably heavy and impossibly light lends their weariness a cosmic quality. The work of describing weariness and toil becomes, as we shall see, the central comic and ideological conceit of this story.

Like Adam Ważyk’s “Poemat dla Dorosłych” [“Poem for Grown-Ups”], “Robotnicy” marks a watershed in postwar Polish cultural history, signaling socialist realism’s decline as an aesthetic-political program. Often described as having “inverted” the scheme of a conventional production tale,²⁷ it retains many of the attributes of a conventional socialist realist plot—the characters are workers; the setting, an industrial workplace; the narrative plot is wedded to the completion of a planned task—but turns them on their heads.²⁸ That is, rather than being cheerful and brave, the workers are miserable and pathetic; rather than finding transcendence in their labor, they find it meaningless; rather than aligning their personal growth as communists to the completion of their task, they leave the completed project disappointed both with it and with themselves.

²⁷ “Teraz na przykład opowiadanie Robotnicy zawierało dokładne odwrócenie schematu ‘produkcyjniaka.’” Lubelski, Tadeusz. *Strategie Autorskie w Polskim Filmie Fabularnym lat 1945-1961*. Kraków, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1992. 116.

²⁸ Its place in postwar Polish cultural history is shared as well with so-called “filmy rozrachunkowe”—the settling-accounts films—of the late 1950s, where one also sees the rupture of socialist realist forms (Hendrykowski), and which are likewise tasked with “working through” the experience of Stalinist culture.

To better understand the significance of these narrative tropes, and the significance of their being “inverted,” it’s helpful to note once again the specific function of schemas in socialist realism and in Stalinist culture. Katerina Clark has analyzed the Soviet socialist realist novel as a ritualized literary form: what makes a text socialist realist, its sole measure of quality within the context of Stalinist culture, is its ability to faithfully recreate what she terms the “Master Plot:” a hyper-conventional narrative schema, complete with character types, conflict, epithets, and descriptive tropes.²⁹ Constructing the historical object that is socialist realism as a sort of ur-text or “system of signs” intentionally formulaic, but at the same time inherently “polysemic” (as all language),³⁰ lets Clark to dramatize the tension between Stalinist culture’s extreme conventionality and the appearance, from year to year, of new socialist realist texts. To be a successful socialist realist writer entails following the rules while at the same time exploiting the ambivalence of meanings: telling new stories in the guises of old ones. Very often, this involved an author’s transposition of his own autobiography into the terms of the master plot, metabolizing the events of his life into a replication of Bolshevik myths, largely derived from the tales of heroes from the Russian Revolution.³¹ Clark titles her book *History as Ritual* because her analysis places its emphasis on socialist realism as a fundamentally ritual form: the

²⁹ This mode of writing has an economy of form quite alien to 20th century Western aesthetic ideologies of artistry, creativity, and novelty. Clark compares it, in a colorful parallel, to icon painting: “Just as the icon painter looked to his original to find the correct angle for a particular saint’s hands, the correct colors for a given theme, and son on, so the Soviet novelist could copy the gestures, facial expressions, actions, symbols, etc. used in the various canonical texts. The Soviet writer did not merely copy isolated tropes, characters, and incidents from the exemplars; he organized the entire plot structure of his novel on the basis of patterns present in the exemplars. From the mid-thirties on, most novels were, *de facto*, written to a single master plot, which itself represents a synthesis of the plots of several of the official models (primarily Gorky’s *Mother* and Gladkov’s *Cement*.)” Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2000. 4-5.

³⁰ Clark, 12-13.

³¹ Clark, 44. “This curious aspect of Socialist Realist composition is demonstrated most strikingly in two official classics that are autobiographical: D. Furmanov’s *Chapaev* (1923) and N. Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel was Tempered* (1932-34). In these novels the author’s own life was deindividualized as he patterned it to recapitulate the great legends of the revolutionary hero. Autobiography became autohagiography. It was this biographical pattern that was to provide the formulaic master plot.”

metabolization of historical content into mythic form, through the institution of the Soviet novel, is characteristic of how this mode of writing developed in the Soviet Union of the 1930s.

What it means for this story to be an inversion of socialist realist schemas is quite simply that, on some broad level, the affective charges are reversed: negative affects predominate, and the positive affects encoded in conventional socialist realist plots are nowhere to be found. More than working with some codified or received idea of socialist realism, however, this story also comments on the nature of Stalinist conventionality itself. In purporting to reverse the affective poles, it is in fact creating an image of socialist realism, like a photographic negative or fossil imprint, that we can discern from what this story lacks: heroic exertions, whose expression is cheerfulness; a felicitous marriage of consciousness-formation and collective labors. We would do well, however, to avoid taking this negative image of socialist realism at face-value, as in any way historically accurate. Rather, it functions contextually in the historical moment of 1956 as an index of this story's realism: that is, representing socialist realism in relief is how "Robotniczy" signals that it is more than a successful or failed production tale. Not through indexical descriptions of settings, but through the multilayered representation of another system of writing beneath the one, does the story achieve its "reality effect."

On a still closer level, however, the affects in this story are wholly irreducible to socialist realist schemes or their inversions. Against its place in canonical postwar Polish cultural history, this story is not "working through" the collapse of Stalinist culture in Poland (as if the story's labor, unlike that of its bridge-builders, were somehow perfectly successful). Rather, it is producing a kind of affective excess borne out of its negative representation of an already fossilized socialist realism. The affects that predominate in this story—that cast it as socialist

realism's 'inversion' and that, ultimately, lend texture to the story's representation of historical disappointment, are weariness and silence.

Staying here for two years wears these men out. Before they fall silent for good, they devise the most florid strings of curses; they do this not despite, but precisely because of their daily monotony and immense weariness. These workers are also character-types—the communist, the religious man, the cheerful young toiler from Warsaw—who over the course of the story shed their qualities: the religious man sells his psalms for vodka, the young man beats up the perpetually drunk mailman out of sheer boredom, and the communist curses his fate:

Gdybym nie był komunistą, nienawidziłbym tego miejsca tak, jak nienawidzi śmierci człowiek, który kocha życie. Ja tu umieram. Pochodzę z Sandomierskiego; tam ziemia jest bujna i gorąca. Jak tylko skończymy budować ten przeklęty most, nie wrócę tu już nigdy i zabronię tu przyjeżdżać swoim dzieciom.³²

This construction project saps the workers of their vital energies:³³ as in Platonov's *Kotlovan*, collective labor is no means to attain a higher form of communist consciousness, but only an instance of the general, tedious entropy of the world. Unlike Platonov's great novel, however, this story is still very much a production tale: the bridge does get built, the workers' achievement is celebrated, and the plot is completely tied to the completion of this task. They even look at their work with what could be called a kind of optimism, transposing the dream of completing the task into a dream of, finally, escaping from it forever:

Co, do diabła spuchniętego! Gdybym nie był partyjniakiem, uciekłbym stąd do wszystkich choler. Pojechałbym do swojego brata: on jest proboszczem pod Małkinią.

³² Hłasko, 15. "If I weren't a communist, I would hate this place like someone who loves life hates death. Here I'm only dying. I come from around Sandomierz; there the land is buoyant and hot. As soon as we finish building this damned bridge, I'll never return here. And I'll forbid my children from ever stepping foot in this place."

³³ elsewhere, the landscape is described as "like a polyp sucking out our hearts and souls:" "choć wiedzieliśmy, że pracować trzeba i że piękna rzeczą w życiu człowieka jest praca. Ten most budowaliśmy nienawiścią, rozpaczą, chęcią ucieczki z tej równiny, która jak polip wyssała nasze serca i nasze duszy." (Hłasko, 17).

Zostałbym u niego dziadem kościelnym. Tylko mi wstyd; to jedyna rzecz, która mnie tu trzyma. Myślę o dniu, w którym będę stąd wyjeżdżał: mój wrzask będzie słycać aż w dziesiątej wsi.³⁴

But of course, they won't escape: not until this bridge is built, at least. Striking is the vivacious gusto with which the worker's curse their lot: this work of swearing, and doing so with much comic flair, is the story's central riddle. Like the disappearing sun and its reflection as an eye of oil in a puddle, a dialectical image comes into view between the exhaustion of the workers' vital energies in manual labor and the vibrant energy of the its being described— this is a story about a bridge, but the main kind of work in this story, that from which the workers grow weary, is in fact something else entirely: not the manual labor of bridge-building, but the creative effort of cursing their lot. This tale's economy is predicated on an ironic distance between the boredom represented in the story and the very entertaining descriptions of this boredom. It is in the art of cursing, of *shit-talking*, that the Stalinist trope of heroic labor, of superhuman exertion, finds its expression:

Gdy ktoś z nas użył zwykłego słowa, reszta patrzyła nań ze zdumieniem. Kazimierz gryzł się z tego powodu i klął najbardziej złowieszczo. Stefan doszedł do mistrzostwa budowy: klął przez godzinę i kwadrans bez przerwy, nie powtarzając ani jednego przekleństwa; nazywaliśmy go 'Słowikiem mostu.'³⁵

The Polish language is particularly rich in expletives, obscenities, swears, and vulgarisms— but this is a fantastical exaggeration. Perfectly in line with socialist realist narrative schemas, this seventy-five minute wholly original and incredible curse is the heroic deed that guarantees, in the

³⁴ Hłasko, 17. "What the swollen devil! If I weren't in the Party, I'd run off from here to all hell. I'd go to my brother, he's a reverend near Małkina. I'd become a church goon for him. It's just that I'd be ashamed: it's this one thing that keeps me here. I think of the day when I'll finally get away from here: they'll hear my cries ten villages over."

³⁵ "If one of us used an ordinary word, the rest looked at him with surprise. Kazimierz gnashed his teeth at this and cursed most ominously of all. Stefan became the champion of the construction site: he cursed for an hour and a quarter without stop, never repeating even a single swear; we called him 'Nightingale of the Bridge.'"

last minute, the completion of the plan. Right after it is uttered, in the very next paragraph, the bridge is suddenly completed, and the reader is left to ponder the relationship of these two things. For the workers, cursing takes on the role of magical incantation, offering their toil a transcendence into language that reveals the emptiness and insufficiency of labor alone: to what extent is this even a story about bridge-building in the first place? The reader is given so little description of what the work was like, other than that it was insufferably boring and absolutely interminable. The construction site functions less like a setting and more like an occasion for these comic flights of vulgar braggadocio, contests of who can talk the most smack about their shared plight. The only meaningful work in this story is the work of cursing all work.

Building the bridge did not leave these workers fulfilled, did not take them to some unalienated relation to the object of their labor, failed to raise their sense of belonging to a collectivity or of having a communist consciousness. It's by foregrounding these failures that the story works to construct a negative image, a fossilized imprint, of what a socialist realist short story would have been like. Here, they're simply tired out by the task of building: left exhausted, spent. Nobody in this story is cheerful, not in the least bit, but the story is really quite funny: one cannot help but laugh at its jokes and the reader imagines the workers laughing as well. They must talk smack and laugh it off because their work feels endless, and in this endlessness we can find both the shrinking feeling of communist futurity (like the disappearing horizon line at the story's beginning) and the weariness that links their two forms of work: monotonous bridge-building and elaborate shit-talking.

Nobody is cheerful and everyone is immensely weary: this weariness is precisely what allows these workers to curse their toil with such remarkable gusto. Returning to Roland Barthes's crucial entry in *The Neutral*, weariness's relationship to work is worth considering here

again: while etymologically growing out of the Latin *labor*, *lassitudo*, *fatigatio*, it is “mythically associated with the work of the head.”³⁶ Not the absence of energy, but an affect with its own positive content in itself. And indeed, it’s not as if the workers are somehow saving their energies to be able to curse their toil, nor are they squandering energy that could be spent working. Rather than impeding work, weariness is the precondition for mental work—like writing a lecture, or cursing for seventy-five minutes straight. Weariness does not come *after* work: weariness’ object is not in the past, but very much present. Barthes frequently mentions weariness’ link to the feeling of endlessness, at one point helpfully quoting from, and riffing off, Maurice Blanchot’s observation that “*not only does weariness not impede the workout the work demands this being weary without measure.*”³⁷ Barthes continues:

—> This is why one could say that weariness does not constitute an empirical time, a crisis, an organic event, a muscular episode—but a quasi-metaphysical dimension, a sort of bodily (and not conceptual) idea, a mental kinesthesia: the tactile experience, the very touch of endlessness.³⁸

This is why the workers in Hłasko’s story feel their weariness while the bridge is being built, but afterwards feel like nothing at all. This is also why they curse their toil and then fall silent. It is because their task wearies them that they are able to perform the labor of cursing their work, which is the true “heroic labor” in this story: they at Stakhanovites of elaborate obscenities. These curses are, of course, not written out in the story itself: they exist outside it, and the art of bullshitting appears here as a porthole allowing an escape from socialist realist narrative plots. The one curse that is uttered and written out, the most important one, after which they all fall silent, is *gówno* [“bullshit”].

³⁶ Barthes, Roland. *The Neutral*. Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978). Trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. 17. (Session of Feb. 18, 1978)

³⁷ Quoted in Barthes, 20.

³⁸ Barthes, 20. (Session of February 25, 1978).

Once completed, the feat is celebrated in true Stalinist fashion, with a folk orchestra, a film crew, and a radio reporter. This scene forms the story's climax, representing socialist realism as an object, as a self-contained event that can be treated as a thing. The radio reporter's words are rendered in free indirect discourse, in a separate paragraph that serves as well to hold official ideological discourse apart from the rest of the story, marking off its distressing, saccharine tone. Announcing in short sentences what we are supposed to see (the mass of flowers, the worker's proud and satisfied face), the radio reporter exudes an anxious exuberance, while the film chronicle's cameraman "*clung like a spider to the bridge's railing.*" Words once again save the workers from the humiliation of this most festooned celebration of their efforts.

Kazimierz, the most choleric of the workers, often so enraged by his toil that he can only gnash his teeth, runs up, grabs the microphone, and growls, *Gówno. (Bullshit)*. With this, the occasion is spoiled (*popsuta*). This is not, however, some kind of redemption, some reclaiming of the worker's ability to speak for themselves, to represent their own labor. On the contrary it is nothing at all: they sleep for two days, pack up, and leave the construction site. There is no resolution, no transcendence, no higher form of communist historical consciousness inculcated by their completed task.

Here is a final coda about the story's narrator. Throughout the story he gives us very little of himself: he is like a monitor or chronicler, not unlike the writers sent to the field or the factory floor by early-1950s initiatives to bridge the gap between workers and artists. At the story's end, however, he steps into the foreground, crying out and screaming at the other workers, demanding why they aren't saying anything now that they're finally driving away from the site. But they're insulated from this anger: the most the narrator can get out of them is a little hum: "—M...m...-

wybełkotał betoniarz Stefan z Marymonutu; machnął ręką i umilkł.”³⁹ The narrator very literally steps outside of the role lent to him by socialist realist formulas, and his rage can be read alternately as being directed against Stalinist conventionality, or as being directed against the abyss outside of it. When he remarks, “Brakowało mi czegoś, co pozwoliłoby mi zrozumieć jasno i czysto nasze łzy,”⁴⁰ he is lamenting the muteness that lies outside of the socialist realist paradigm. The entire last paragraph feels more confused the more one rereads it: each sentence seems to be written in a different register, as if the story is grasping for, and failing to find, a way to end this story. The narrator admits that he lacks the means for understanding this sense of loss, only to conclude on a melodramatic, general note that feels like it was borrowed from a sentimental greeting card. The virtue of this confused ending, however, is that the reader is pulled into the position of the workers: the story’s plot, like the bridge they built, receding into the past, leaves the reader confused and unsatisfied. What could be more ridiculous than the notion that this kind of work could be at all transcendent, or that this kind of story could transmit a positive feeling of toil’s transcendence into the work of history-making?

Bräunig’s *Rummelplatz* and the Death of Stalin

The Wismut uranium conglomerate was a peculiar East German-Soviet mining company operating around the border of Saxony and Thuringia. Massive in both area and in production output, it was the most significant source of uranium ore in the entire Second World. Owing to the nuclear arms race in the early Cold War, this enterprise was of unique strategic importance to the USSR: already in 1946, the NKVD was given full authority over the forced labor mines that would, by 1954, become the *Sowjetisch-Deutsche Aktiengesellschaft Wismut*. This was the

³⁹ Hłasko, 19. “—M...m... muttered Stefan the cement worker from Marymont [a district in Warsaw]; waved down his hand, and fell silent.”

⁴⁰ Ibid. “I lacked what would allow me to understand brightly and clearly our tears.”

setting that Werner Bräunig chose for his great novel, and it was for this choice alone that his novel was censored and his career destroyed. By the mid-1960s, the *SDAG Wismut* was a strictly forbidden topic in all official media.⁴¹

A “Rummelplatz” is colloquially an amusement park or a fairground, and in titling his novel thusly Bräunig was conjuring the Wismut sites as a unique kind of *heterotopia*: not only a politically-distinct area within the Soviet Occupation Zone, but also a wild free-for-all where the rules of broader East German society were, if not absent, then at least much more loosely applied. Because they were irradiated somewhat heavily, miners here were paid much higher wages than elsewhere, and so the Wismut mines attracted fortune seekers of various stripes. Much of their wages they spent in the bars and amusements on the grounds of the mining operation: it goes without saying that they were forbidden from leaving the Wismut zone for the duration of their contracts.

In Bräunig’s novel, however, the uranium mines function not only as a fairground but also as a social laboratory in which diverse social classes and backgrounds mix, recombine, and reconstitute themselves. This is something of a trope in Central European socialist realism and its direct descendants: the collective drama of social identities reforged and biographies repurposed.⁴² In terms of socialist realist genre convention, the very same literary framing techniques used in the 1920s and 1930s to represent the transformation of pre- into post-

⁴¹ Konrad Wolf’s 1959 film *Die Sonnensucher*, a magisterial allegory that mixes socialist realist and neoplatonist elements, was also banned already while production was wrapping up for the same offense of depicting the Wismut operation. Unlike Bräunig’s novel, however, this film was screened on television and then in a limited run in cinemas in the late 1970s.

⁴² Again, Hrabal’s “Strange People” incarnates this trope quite splendidly through the allegory of a steelwork plant that recycles salvaged steel from typewriters and crucifixes to produce the raw material for new light and medium industry implements. The steelworks are operated by workers identified only by their prewar professions: thus is the socialist-realist typification of characters repurposed to lampoon socialist realist ideological conventions by telling a story about the recycled pasts instead of about the radiant future.

revolutionary identities are repurposed to depict the forging of socialist postwar identities from compromised, prewar backgrounds.

Thus we have the choleric Peter Loose, one of the novel's main characters, who takes pains to hide the fact that his father was in the SA and who eventually ends up in jail for a bar-fight. Ruth Fischer, another central character, is the daughter of prewar communist Hermann Fischer: she devises for herself a uniquely feminist and East German form of socialist personal identity by becoming the first woman lead operator in the Wismut paper mill. Christian Kleinschmidt forms another primary character: the son of a liberal-humanist professor, he joins the mines to shirk his class background—even as it is this educated background that affords him the language with which to think about his emerging communist consciousness down in the mines.

Die Arbeit überkam ihn wie ein Rausch, plötzlich und ungeheuer. [...] Er ordnete sich einem Rhythmus ein, den er nicht erfunden hatte, der in ihm war, oder zwischen ihm und dem Berg und der Maschine. Er arbeitete. Hätte er sein Gesicht sehen können, er hätte ihm weder die Erregung geglaubt noch die Gelöstheit. Er hätte die Konzentration nicht geglaubt, die Spannung nicht, un schon gar nicht die Freude. Der Schweiß lief ihm übers Gesicht, der Hemdrücken war durchnäßt, er arbeitete, als könne er nie müde werden und als gäbe es keine Erschöpfung. Er fühlte sich imstande, den Berg zu besiegen, fertig zu werden mit dieser Arbeit und mit jeder; in der tiefsten Anspannung fühlte er sich entspannt.⁴³

This scene voices the discourse of the Stakhanovite: intoxicated by the pace and power of work, he finds himself to be utterly beside himself. Communist consciousness takes hold as if

⁴³ Bräunig, Werner. *Rummelplatz*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2007. 115-116. "The work took hold of him. It was sudden and strange and seductive. [...] He matched himself to a rhythm that was not of his invention but was inside him, or in him and the rock and the tool together. He worked. If he could have seen his own face he would not have known it. The look of blissful concentration. He would not have believed the intensity there, and the joy. The sweat poured down his face, his shirt was soaked through, he was working as though he would never grow tired. He felt that he could conquer this mountain, that he was ready for any task; he was utterly absorbed, utterly relaxed." Werner Bräunig. *Rummelplatz*. Trans. Samuel P. Willcocks. London: Seagull, 2016. 96-97.

automatically: it is somatic in nature, muscular and affective, and it fills the workers' heart as his body grows accustomed to labor. It is more mystical than it is discursive, and it is no surprise that Bräunig renders it as something unbelievable to the character experiencing it. This scene comes early in the novel: much of the rest of Kleinschmidt's story will involve him abandoning, returning to, and reworking these preliminary, bodily insights.

Perpetually torn between his bourgeois background and his experience as a miner, Kleinschmidt eventually does make it to university— but he does so, crucially, with the class-minded insight that though he is not himself of the working class he works to serve this class. This is, to be sure, a rather complex character arc, but for all its nuance, it is ideologically sincere in its skepticism that anybody can refashion themselves as a party-minded member of the proletarian class. Kleinschmidt is the mosaic shard that allows this novel to stake its claims against the flatness of socialist realist didacticism and Stalinist cheerfulness: his realization that he is no true proletarian is coupled with a dis-identification with elastic, Stalinist time and with a profound exhaustion with the temporality of uranium mining:

Er begann sein Leben nach Sonntagen zu rechnen, begann zu denken im Zyklus der großen Atempausen an jedem dichten Tag. [...] Es war ein furchtbarer Kreislauf, eine Mühle, die jede Hoffnung zerrieb zwischen ihren schrecklichen, unaufhörlichen rotierenden Mahlsteinen. Die Vergangenheit erschien ihm in hellen, lockenden Farben, die Zukunft aber in düsterem Grau. Und manchmal, wenn er an den Neujahrsabend zurückdachte, sagte er sich verzweifelt: Wahrhaftig, wie lange kann ich das noch durchhalten... Ich bin nicht für den Schlacht gemacht, für das ewige dawai-dawai-dawai, und den Plan im Genick, und die Lohntüte der anderen. Ich muß heraus hier, heraus, so schnell, wie es geht.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Bräunig, Werner. *Rummelplatz*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2007. 207-208. "He began to count off the Sundays, began to think in the rhythm of the seventh day on which he could rest. And on Sunday afternoons the thought of Monday knocked him flat. Round and round went the weeks in their dreadful cycle, grinding any glimmer of hope to dust between their terrible millstones, never stopping. He looked back on the past and saw its bright glowing colors, looked ahead at the future and saw drab grey. And sometimes, when he thought back to New Year's Eve, he asked himself in despair, How long am I going to stick it out down here... I'm not for the pit, for the eternal *dawai-dawai*-

The “eternal *davai-davai-davai*” is, of course, the elastic temporality of Stakhanovite daring, powered and transmitted by a cheer that is, in this novel as in Hłasko’s story, totally absent. In realizing that it is simply not for him, Kleinschmidt is speaking for the obsolescence of this amalgamation of affect and time. Indeed, it is in Kleinschmidt’s internal monologues that Bräunig plays out his subtle dialectical mediation on the ends of Stalinism. Again, as in Hłasko, weariness with manual labor becomes the starting point for more significant mental work. This mental work, here, plays out on several levels: it is Kleinschmidt the character contemplating his identity and his fate as a worker or as an intellectual; it is Bräunig charting through Kleinschmidt a narrative arc distinct from socialist realist formulae; and it is the novel foregoing the Stalinist amalgamation of cheerfulness, daring, and elastic historical time in favor of something different. But to what extent does Bräunig’s polyphonic novel manage to achieve an escape velocity from Stalinist culture? If this manifold dis-identification with the temporality of work—and all that this dis-identification entails—is decidedly anti-socialist-realist, then the insight that Kleinschmidt’s capacity to feel the adherence of work-time and historical-time is ultimately a function of his class position is nevertheless very much Stalinist. By having him become a class-conscious and party-minded university student—a bonafide socialist intellectual—Bräunig is able to, first, have it both ways and to render the very imprint of Stalinism’s decomposition in the post-Stalinist historical moment.

In a crucial return to his hometown, Kleinschmidt finds that he has already traded the time of bourgeois youth for the time of proletarian self-construction and finds his childhood friends, who simper about being “up to date,” to be at once embarrassingly immature and

davai, and the quotas breathing down mu neck and the other men’s pay packets. I have to get out of here, get out as quick as I can.” *Rummelplatz*, 173.

hopelessly archaic.⁴⁵ A temporal quandary if ever there has been one! And, what is more, one in which time discloses itself through the complicated emotions of felt, qualitative temporalities. In the end, he does return to the mines after all—and one of the novel’s final passages is a description of his internal monologue, on the nature of socialist struggle in the atomic age. This is one of *Rummelplatz*’s most explicitly ideological moments and also one of its most brilliant: laying bare something like a dialectical movement between praxis and theory in Christian Kleinschmidt’s character arc, the novel effectively surpasses socialist-realist and Stalinist dogma, locating the grounds for socialist historical consciousness not in “historical feeling” transmitted as affect, but in critical thought informed by praxis. That is, what plays out in Kleinschmidt’s strange, socialist *Bildung* narrative functions as a staging ground for the novel’s reflections on what it means to become a socialist in East Germany in the early 1960s. This passage strains for its epic insight, and it cannot help but fall flat in the face of an ironic reader, but it is nevertheless helpful to trace the movements of Kleinschmidt’s thought. In short, he folds his toil as a uranium miner into his reflections on socialist struggle by grasping the historical and political significance of the atomic bomb: the reality of nuclear annihilation being unimaginable to Marx, one needs to think beyond ossified doctrine and to reach for the kind of thought that Lukács would call orthodox: Marxism as method.⁴⁶ This amounts more or less to an explicit rejection of any notion of an affective historical consciousness—but its own erudition encases it in a specific historical moment. While historical insights informed by emotion and affect necessarily reach beyond their specific context, this form of consciousness, precisely because it is so carefully thought out, appears to us above all as an expression of fears and anxieties particular to the 1960s. It is in the

⁴⁵ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*. 200. *Rummelplatz*, 166.

⁴⁶ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*. 585-586. *Rummelplatz*, 501-503.

final analysis the expression of a mentality proper to its context, one that was impossible in the 1950s and already defunct by the 1970s.

The above analysis would seem to encase the novel in the amber of its historical context. The force and gusto of this polyphonic novel, however, consists in how frequently it manages to stake many different contradictory claims at once. While Kleinschmidt's character arc amounts to a measured rejection of Stalinist cheerfulness, a fantastical passage towards the end of the novel explodes this historical emotion altogether. It is here that the failed dissemination of historical feeling becomes the dissemination of failed historical feeling: unsurprisingly, the scene in which this takes place is at once comic and fantastical. Explosive, wild, superhuman laughter also allows the novel, so much a product of its time, to explode out of its proper historical context.

After narrating the story of Peter Loose's trial for a drunken brawl, the novel mentions that the newspaper article about his trial appeared, fatefully, on 5 March 1953. "We know the rest."⁴⁷ The novel does not even mention Stalin by name at this point, instead voicing a kind of official mourning:

In dieser Sekunde zerfiel die Welt in Einzelnes, die Drohung betraf jeden. Auf sich selbst verwiesen, sahen die Ruderer: es ist keiner neben ihn und keiner, der ihm gleicht. We soll nun die Hand halten über uns und wer dem Wind gebieten, we über den Wassern gehen und uns geleiten nach Genezareth?⁴⁸

Half-biblical, half-elemental, this pompous description of the death of a living god cannot help but burst just a paragraph later. After asking over and over again what will happen, the novel

⁴⁷ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*, 536. *Rummelplatz*, 457.

⁴⁸ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*, 537. "At that moment the world fell into shards, the threat was aimed at all of them. The rowers at their oars were left to themselves and they saw now that there was nobody like him. Who will shelter us now with his hand and who will command the wind, who will walk across the water and who will lead us to Gennesaret?" *Rummelplatz*, 458.

answers its own question: “Life went on.”⁴⁹ But this earlier, elemental description proves to be more than apt when Röttig, until then a minor character, lets out a laugh so powerful that it seems to create its own weather. This plunge into the fantastic register is worth quoting in full. In response to an unnamed joke, he bellows—

...und plötzlich brach das Lachen heraus, ungeheuer, es kollerte, dröhnte, schütterte die Wände, füllte den Korridor, eine Tür flog auf, das spitzmäusige Gesicht einer Stenotypistin fuhr aus den Rahmen, das sah Röttig, er schlug Zacharias auf die Schulter, deutete auf die Stenotypistin, die erschreckt zurückfuhr, immer mächtiger schwoll das Lachen, zu eng das Gebäude der Gebietsleitung, es barst hinaus durch offene Fenster, es grinnten die Kraftfahrer unten an der Garagentür, der Pförtner schmunzelte, Röttig stand, schnappte nach Luft, atmete tief, strotzend vor Lust, Kraft, Unabhängigkeit, ein Frans-Halsscher-Zecher in einer Haarloser Schenke—diese Lachen war legendär.⁵⁰

Needless to say, a bellowing laugh of this magnitude would have been unthinkable even a day prior. The shuddering secretary stands, perhaps, for the fact that the age of simple, quiet, obedient copying has ended— a new and explicitly masculine kind of vitality has returned to this historical present. At once, however, the sheer power of this laugh explodes the historical continuum itself: blasted out of its proper moment, this is trans-historical and, in fact, legendary laughter, shared even by Franz Hals figures from the seventeenth century: a booming carnivalesque laughter that partakes in the eternity of all comedy. Jokes may change, but laughter is, after all, beyond history and beyond language: it is what blasts open all frames of reference.

⁴⁹ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*, 538. *Rummelplatz*, 459.

⁵⁰ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*. 539-540. “... and suddenly the laughter exploded, roaring and rattling, shaking the walls, filling the hallways, a door opened, a shorthand secretary’s mousy face showed in the gap, Röttig saw her, he slapped Zacharias on the shoulder, pointed at the secretary, she darted back, the laughter boomed and built, the Party headquarters was too narrow to hold it, it burst through the open windows, downstairs in the motor pool the dispatch drivers heard it and grinned, the porter smirked, Röttig stood there, gasping for air, breathed in deeply, glowing with good cheer, with strength and life, a roisterer in a Haarlem tavern, a figure from a Franz Hals painting—his laugh was a local legend.” *Rummeplatz*, 460.

This elemental laugh, this ur-laugh that reinvigorates everything that had been smothered by obligatory cheerfulness for the past several years, moves with the power of strong weather. Secretaries and party minded functionaries find themselves suddenly pantsed and utterly lampooned: Röttig's laugh goes on for several more paragraphs still. It chases a functionary out of her office, "following her down the hallway and out of the building, shaking a portrait of Stalin from the wall, bringing an activist advisor out from behind her desk, gusting the ashes out from three ashtrays."⁵¹ This laugh, I argue, incarnates the most significant moment in the novel: its rumbling, gusty, vibrating movement shakes out Stalinist historical emotion and finds it to have always been ridiculously, impossibly empty. It finds Stalinist cheerfulness hollow and absurd and, along with it, the conceit that disseminated emotion can furnish a sense of historical time in any meaningful way.

Conclusion

Although it may have seemed odd to pair readings of Hłasko and Bräunig, it is at this point hopefully clear that, despite their differences, both writers participate in the same broad decomposition of Stalinist culture in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Specifically, both carry out the work of undoing socialist realist schemas by transmuting Stalinist economies of cheerfulness and futurity into post-Stalinist effusions of laughter that partake in a kind of comic eternity. That is, the fantastic register by which Bräunig renders Röttig's laugh is the same fantastic by which Hłasko describes Kazimierz's heroic seventy-five minute long string of curses. Laughter and the fantastic work here by means of a subtle dialectical movement. Describing this movement will

⁵¹ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*. 461. "Da ließ Röttig sein Lachen heraus, lachte die Genossin Melchior aus dem Zimmer, lachte sie Windstärke zwölf den Gang hinunter und aus dem Haus, lachte ein lockeres Stalin-Bild von der Wand und einen Org.-Instrukteur hinterm Schreibtisch hervor, lachte Zigarettenasche aus drei Aschenbechern..." *Rummelplatz*. 541.

show, from another angle, how I have attempted to read the contours of Stalinist culture from the impressions it has left on works of literature written in its immediate wake.

The fantastic in both cases encodes explosions of affect that seek to obliterate the socialist realist frame but which, to our historical perspective, manage only to describe its lack. This laugh is the light thanks to which we can perceive the claustrophobia of obligatory Stalinist cheerfulness; and this laughter is also always laughter at the very notion of Stalinist socialist realism, suggesting how ridiculous it must have seemed already in 1953 or 1956 to think that a simple, obligatory and straightforward dissemination of historical feeling could have ever seemed possible or even desirable. This laughter is, as I have noted, anti-historical: it is transcendent and eternal— but as the explosion of something theretofore suppressed, it carries the imprint of its specific moment. That is, the ideological force of this fantastical laughter is intelligible only against a post-Stalinist, midcentury, Central European context. Although it, like all historical emotion, explodes chronology as such, this chapter has endeavored to describe its significance by reading it back into its proper historical moment.

If “Stalinist cheerfulness” describes a midcentury historical emotion that encodes a disposition towards the historical—one marked by elastic temporality and a future attainable by heroic exertion—then post-Stalinist laughter preserves the very possibility of historical emotion *as such* precisely by obliterating this *concrete* historical emotion. Casting the positive participation in history as something ridiculous and pathetic, post-Stalinist laughter nevertheless insists that emotion and feeling have a nontrivial role in historical consciousness. This is why Hlasko and Bräunig both (and Hrabal too, although this chapter was unable to deal with his stories in any more than a cursory manner) accord laughter and irony the central, climactic roles in their respective stories that they do. It would therefore be insufficient to read these stories as

simply mocking or satirizing socialist realist form. At stake, rather, is a subtle metamorphosis of obligatory and doctrinal cheer into free and spontaneous laughter. This dichotomy itself reproduces, in ironic form, Lenin's dialectic of consciousness and spontaneity—and in so doing, these stories reveal their fundamental debt to socialist realism: one cannot read them without this contextual frame, not despite but precisely because of the lengths to which they go to explode out of their context.

Hłasko's story and Bräunig's novel both seem to suggest that these laughing, giggling, sardonic workers have a better grasp of communism and of history than their doctrinaire and activist superiors could ever hope to attain—and this understanding rings out precisely through their laughter, which mocks any sense of work finding its redemption in a felt sense of history. If these stories incarnate a shift from the failed dissemination of feeling to a dissemination of failed feeling, the the next two chapters, on Konwicki and Hilbig, respectively, will elaborate the byproducts of this compound failure. "Lateness" refers always to the post-Stalinist moment—but it is only by the end of the socialist era that this failed historical emotion actually develops into a negative mode of historical consciousness of its own.

“O nasz warszawski dom
z epoki późnego stalinizmu,
z ery dekadentckiego stalinizmu,
z okresu spolszczonego
i zeszmaczonego stalinizmu.”¹

Я знаю, что после моей смерти
на мою могилу, нанесут кучу мусора.
Но ветер истории
безжалостно развеет ее!²

Chapter Three:

Tadeusz Konwicki's Historical Weather

This chapter reads Tadeusz Konwicki's 1979 novel, *Minor Apocalypse* [*Mala Apokalipsa*] for how it elaborates a mode of historical consciousness that emerges from the experience of East European state-socialism but that is by no means unique to it. No positive sense of partaking in history, this conception of historical consciousness emerges from the rubble of the Stalinist dissemination of revolutionary feeling theorized in the previous chapter. Here, the failure becomes itself generative insofar as it allows Konwicki's novel to frame qualitative experiences of time as if they were collective, emotional experiences. What emerges is an implicit contention that historical temporalities are constitutive not only of late-socialist historical consciousness, but also of historical consciousness in general.

The great achievement of *Minor Apocalypse* consists in how its awareness of the futility of disseminating a positive form of revolutionary sentiment allows it to nevertheless imagine literary writing as a technology for making time felt. This is a novel about the *lateness* of late

¹ Konwicki, Tadeusz. *Mala Apokalipsa*. Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza NOWA, 1999. 9. “Oh, our Warsaw house from the epoch of late Stalinism, from the era of decadent Stalinism, from the period of polonized, ratty, threadbare Stalinism.”

² “I know that after my death, on my tomb, they will pile heaps of trash. But the winds of history will mercilessly scatter it!” —J. V. Stalin, from a plaque in the Stalin Museum in Volgograd.

socialism, but *lateness* here comes to describe both a point in an historical chronology and a quality that I theorize here as a structure of feeling. On the one hand, lateness indicates a chronology of decline from the epoch of High Stalinism: this is a novel obsessed with making sense of the aftermath of the Stalinist project in the Polish 1970s. On the other hand, lateness describes a quality of historical time as universal decrepitude and the sense that all time can only be wasted time. Lateness comes to name the frustrating feeling of time being ever-wasted, filled with junk, and of the consequent inability to ascertain the right time for anything. This is a specific sense of time that the novel expresses through descriptions, asides, chance observations and metaphorical gags. These non-narrative features metamorphose historical content (the golden-crystal doors of the butcher shop; the inedible ragout of a seedy locale) into an allegorical language for the unpleasant, flitting feeling of history itself having somehow run off the tracks.

Minor Apocalypse is conventionally known as a novel about untimeliness: its storyline is shot through with manifold allegories of calendars and freak weather events, all of them expressing every characters' inability to ascertain what year they are in anymore, or even what time of year it might be.³ This chapter's critical intervention involves reading its techniques for

³ Notable among the English-language scholarship on *Minor Apocalypse* is Anita Starosta's chapter on the novel in her 2015 book *Form and Instability*, in which she reads it alongside Walter Benjamin's treatment of Baroque philosophies of history in his *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* to make an argument about Konwicki's use of allegory. (Anita Starosta, *Form and Instability: Eastern Europe, Literature, Imperial Difference*. Durham, NC: Duke. 2015. See Chapter 1: "The Passing of Eastern Europe: Area Studies and Rhetoric." 23-46.) I build on but ultimately argue against Starosta's reading. More significant for my own thinking has been Anna Krakus' 2018 book *No End in Sight: Polish Cinema in the Late Socialist Period*, which reads the novel alongside Konwicki's 1972 film *Jak daleko stąd, jak blisko* [*How Far Away, How Near*], as well as films by Zanussi, Wajda, and Kieślowski, to advance an argument about Polish late-socialist narrative temporalities. (Anna Krakus. *No End in Sight: Polish Cinema in the Late Socialist Period*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018.) The value of Krakus' argument is twofold. First, she identifies Polish late socialism as a worthy object of inquiry, deftly reading films from the 1970s onwards and arguing for substantial continuities surviving into the postsocialist era, and, in her conclusion, to more recent Polish historical films *about* socialism. These continuities are drawn out on the basis of a shared aesthetic, which Krakus grounds in Polish national literary forms and Polish national historical experience. Krakus locates problems of temporality as the site on which to theorize Polish late-socialist film. In Krakus' argument, Polish late-socialism is characterized by a shared aesthetic ethos of narrative *unfinalizability*: a way to

articulating non-linear, qualitative senses of time as ways to reconsider what it means to think historically. The broad, guiding question of this chapter will be the following: how can this novel's expression of temporality make universal claims about the relation of historical time, emotional experience, and historical consciousness? More specifically, how do frustrating emotions about time come to bear on one's feeling of being embedded in history, or of being cast out of it? The world of this novel is marked by an atmosphere of decay and futility; its skeletal narrative is liable to feel like its only ever filled with so much junk and detritus. The narrator's central concern involves concocting various bogus ways to fill up his day; his main trouble involves ascertaining whether it is, in fact, the opportune moment to set himself on fire in an act of political protest. It does not help that nobody can tell him what day, month, or year it is. An anniversary of the Polish People's Republic is being celebrated in Warsaw, but the confusion of banners and signs makes it impossible to tell which anniversary this actually is. Elaborating the philosophical stakes of this novel's treatment of historical time will involve, first, reading against the simple claim that it is a novel about untimeliness in some abstract or general sense.

Untimeliness in Four Contradictions

There is perhaps no topic more amenable to unsatisfying theoretical treatments than temporality and historical time, particularly those that attempt to approach these themes in a general sense. Konwicki's particular brilliance consists in having grasped historical time in its concrete specificity: as a local, culturally-conditioned, historical condition, and as a structure of

frame the kinds of narrative timeframes that emerge towards the *end* of the socialist era in Poland, once Soviet socialist ideology, which had solidified its philosophy of history with the Stalin revolution, and then ossified after Stalin's death into "hyper-normalized" ideological discourse, had lost much of its credence. By Krakus' argument, this opened up the way for less deterministic, more open-ended filmic and novelistic narratives, which are themselves symptomatic of a more open-ended relationship to historical time amidst the decline of socialist ideology in the twilight years of the Polish People's Republic.

feeling. In what follows, I outline the novel's untimeliness not as a running theme represented in the text, but as as four interlocking contradictions.

First, on the level of literary history, *Minor Apocalypse* reads like a high-modernist novel written in the 1970s and published, in the Polish secondary press, on the cusp of the so-called postmodern era in the West. This is a modernist novel of the urban ambler, not unlike Joyce's *Ulysses* or Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, but much shorter than those. Is this because, in the crude frame of 'world literature,' it stands for a smaller, more insignificant literary tradition, Polish, or is it because this is a novel more obsessed with performing its false modesty and continually undercutting itself? This novel is moreover Modernist in Jameson's sense:⁴ it is at first glance concerned with the subject of time *itself*, or time as such: it at least seems to rely heavily on a discourse of authenticity, using strange weather to represent a "natural" order to time that has been disrupted by too many historical-political experiments, five-year plans, and so on. However, the textual images, gags, and asides in *Minor Apocalypse* complicate Jameson's distinction between Modernist allegories of essential time and the mediated, multiple temporalities of the postmodern novel: these allegories are so rudimentary, their roles in the text so redundant, that they *themselves* collectively enact a second temporality within the text, interrupting the forward-coursing plot with moments of pause, condensing the novel's sense of its historical present into an elaborate articulation of this present as an historical atmosphere. The novel's problematization of Jameson's modern/postmodern distinction is, finally, emblematic of its status as a late-socialist novel, written in the institutional shadow not of High Modernism but

⁴ Jameson, Frederic. *Valences of the Dialectic*, Ch. 19: The Valences of History Part 1: Making Time Appear. London: Verso, 2010. In his critique of Ricoeur's *Temps et Récit*. Jameson takes up Ricoeur's three temporal mediations in the text to argue that time as such only ever becomes visible in the intersection of two or more temporalities in the text. This he distinguishes from the Modernist fixation on grasping time itself, the pure phenomenology of time, which yields nothing but allegorical personifications of it: already frozen at the moment of their expression.

of High Stalinism, emerging out from under the ruined project of Eastern European socialist realism.⁵

Second, *Minor Apocalypse*, however, looks back not only to Stalinism but also to the image of an unstable, prewar idyll. The narrator is constantly haunted by his nationalist-catholic past, even to the point of seeming to define “being Polish” as the continual nostalgic rumination over this loss, represented by the narrator’s, and author’s, prelapsarian rural Lithuanian childhood in the Second Polish Republic. But the storyline comes to express the exhaustion of this kind of nostalgic discourse, at once eschewing any discourse of authenticity that would frame nostalgic longing for the national community as longing for unbroken, immediate time ‘in itself.’ The very annoying character Tadzio—an unctuous diminutive of Tadeusz, the narrator’s (and author’s) name—accomplishes this exhaustion. He first appears as an innocent, Catholic young man from the countryside, who had come to Warsaw because he so admires the narrator’s neo-romantic lyrical poetry, published some decades earlier. This is, of course, a stand-in for the narrator’s younger self. The narrator lets this young poet follow him around, and often takes advantage of this ready audience to indulge in nostalgic paeans of his own youth in the Lithuanian countryside, to the “noble chivalry” of Polish men back then, lamenting that nobody anymore “sings of the beauty of Polish women.”⁶ These flights, the most saccharine in the novel, make for almost unbearable reading—until their bogus sublimity is popped like a bubble of chewing gum: Tadzio turns out to be no young poet at all. Instead, he is a rather pathetic failed writer, a forty-year-old man who continually lies about his age and who uses his youthful

⁵ This contextualization comes from Boris Groys’ essay, “A Style and a Half: Socialist Realism between Modernism and Postmodernism.” in Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko, Eds. *Socialist Realism without Shores*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. Groys argument, in short, is that socialist realism played an institutional role analogous to that of Western modernism, but that it was structured by a different set of antinomies, key among them: Soviet/non-soviet, instead of high/low. Socialist realism moreover engaged with the recycling or metamorphosis of cultural content, using a pastiche style for which Western Modernist literary criticism had no amenable theoretical apparatus.

⁶ Konwicki, *MA*. 106.

appearance and his schtick of being a young, rural poet to seduce older women. Never having succeeded in getting his bad verse published, he started working for the security apparatus a few years ago, and his pathetic adoration of Konwicki is just part of his assignment, which he carries out with all the resentment of a jealous, cretinous hanger-on. Having figured this out, the narrator picks up a brick to kill this man, who is at this point nothing but his own guilty avatar. Realizing suddenly that they are just characters in a novel, however, he puts the brick back down and walks off to his self-immolation. Even the unhinged attempt to kill his own impostor is refused by this novel, since it would amount to a sacrifice carried out *in the name of* protecting a sense of authentic identity.

Third, this novel is untimely as an artifact of late-socialism, belonging specifically to the Gierek era in Poland, and to what was known throughout the Second World as the era of “Actually-Existing Socialism.” This chapter has relied heavily on the novel’s historical specificity and its articulation of late socialism as an historical atmosphere, and indeed the novel’s allegorical language is constructed out of conventional meanings tied to a particular moment in historical time, signaled by the presence of the shortage-economy, by what Yurchak, describing a late-Soviet context, termed ideological hypernormalization, and especially by a qualitative experience time unique to this historical experience. Konwicki’s *Minor Apocalypse* represents late-socialism as a fallen world laden with significance, one in which the so-called engines of history have broken and in which a general ambivalence reigns. This world evaporated just eighteen months after the novel’s publication. The strikes in the Lenin Shipyards in Gdańsk, the formation of the free trade union *Solidarność*, the emergence of a widespread, religiously-inflected ‘moral resistance’ against the State, and the imposition of martial law in

response to a rapidly escalating situation— this historical shift rendered the novel’s ironic, cynical vision of late-socialism politically irrelevant.

Suddenly, the novel couldn’t help but seem tone-deaf: in an article from the mid-1990s, Carl Tighe tells us that many even “assumed the book was some kind of provocation set up by the security services to *osmalić* (smear) the underground.”⁷ There is perhaps no worse fate for a novel concerned with capturing its own moment than the transpiring of a sudden, decisive historical event. But how might its ability to become “tone-deaf” work, counterintuitively, to make the novel’s representation of its historical context becomes audible *as* a tone in the first place, lending credence to and perhaps even salvaging its project of registering historical consciousness as a structure of feeling? This sudden obsolescence seems quite fortuitous insofar as it allows us to read it, now, as a novel concerned with making writing into an instrument for historical attunement—rather than one concerned with magically enacting political change through fiction, with raising real political consciousness by means of a fictive self-immolation. In turning out tone-deaf, this novel was saved from the smarmy melancholy of all revolutionary failures: it proves itself to have internalized the lessons of socialist realism’s failure not of its own accord, but because of its totally random inability to grasp the ‘revolutionary development’ that erupted right after its publication. The unexpected emergence of *Solidarność* and of its ‘moral resistance,’ then, has salvaged the novel’s project in some more durable form than as failed literary agitprop. Like tree sap made into amber, the novel’s impudent, ironic verve preserves it, rendering it far more significant today than is the decrepit legacy of *Solidarność*’s ’80s Catholic anticommunism.

⁷ Tighe, Carl. “Tadeusz Konwicki’s ‘A Minor Apocalypse.’” *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 91, no. 1, 1996. 172.

Finally, the novel's fourth untimely contradiction involves its status as a novel of climate change *avant la lettre*. Although the narrator does lug a canister of gasoline through a Warsaw filled with weird metrological phenomena, this is obviously no environmentally novel. That we can impute into this chance detail any significance suggests already that there may be a deeper logic at play. But what can this novel say to the world-historical predicament of global heating as the necessary and catastrophic outcome of industrial modernity? Certain is the fact that we are compelled to read the novel's allegories of weather and of calendars in light of climate change: inhabiting a world full of unseasonable temperatures and constant freak weather events changes the tenor of these figures: it *incarnates the metaphor* in ways that an erstwhile Catholic, erstwhile Stalinist like Konwicki could have certainly appreciated. Besides, what else, if not what we are living in now, could possibly be the "major apocalypse" to which the experience of late-socialist decay is merely the minor counterpart? To read this as a novel of climate change is to engage in a Benjaminian allegorical transposition of two historical moments: it is the smoggy, industrial weather of the 1970s, that "flashes up in a moment of danger" to us during the consistently record-breaking heatwaves today. The difficulty of articulating a historical causality that would link socialist industrial modernity to climate change, of laying bare the merely suggested logic, however, is emblematic of the difficulties of thinking the history of industrial modernity and of fossil fuel driven climate change together.⁸ To insist that the novel's representation of its late-socialist historical atmosphere makes a universal claim involves reading its sense of historical time as a structure of feeling amenable to us today. Does not the sense of time as ever-wasted, as somehow always both procrastinated and thus devoid of anything meaningful, and filled at once with so much junk, does this not describe the experience of our

⁸ I am grateful to Anooj Kansara for this insight.

historical present?⁹ At the very least, it approaches this experience of protracted decline far more closely than the temporalities of Western representations of catastrophe could, fixated as they are on an instantaneous event that changes everything. As a problem for how we imagine historical consciousness in the abstract, this structure of feeling can make its claims only at the moment in which it is transposed from one concrete historical experience into another, outlining the contours of what we might call an historical storm system. In what follows, I will elaborate the kinds of knowledge gleaned from this transposition through my reworking of the notion of “historical weather.” First, however, we must plunge into the novel’s world.

Late-Socialism as a Fallen World

It is not very difficult to summarize the plot of this novel. The first-person narrator wakes up in his apartment, extremely hungover, and is shortly thereafter visited by his two friends, who tell him that he has to immolate himself that evening. The occasion is an auspicious anniversary of the Polish People’s Republic, and, specifically, the much celebrated visit of the Soviet First Secretary. The narrator is reluctant, and he spends the day walking around the city, meeting with various characters, and ruminating on himself, his past, the day, history, and his own ambivalence about having to light himself on fire. At the end of the novel, he travels to the square in front of the Congress Hall, located in the Palace of Culture and Science complex, and the novel ends right as he cries out, right before he pours on himself the gasoline he had been carrying around all day long. While this outline of the plot might make the novel seem very serious and even somewhat melodramatic in its representation of heroic resistance, its tone is rather more ironic and even farcical at times: just as it withholds representation of the immolation itself, it also complicates any clear judgment about the value of this kind of radical

⁹ While this is clearly becoming no longer the case, the historical present referred to here was one in the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the first half of 2020.

political suicide. After all, Tadeusz Konwicki didn't believe in this kind of act enough to actually carry it out: he merely wrote a novel about it.

This is significant because the narrator of *Minor Apocalypse* is, like the novel's author, named Tadeusz. While his main preoccupation involves trying and failing to discern whether he really should self-immolate on this decisive day, he also spends a great deal of time trying to find the right name for the collective mood with which Warsaw is suffused. To access some sense of certainty about his oncoming political suicide, he seems to believe, would have to first involve pinpointing his moment's mood to discern whether his time is the right time for such an act. He comes closest to this in his description of the lounge *Paradyz*, and its style of the *ruined-modern*:

Współcześnie 'Paradyz' prezentował styl modern w stanie ruiny. To znaczy architektonicznie i w wystroju nadał za standardem światowym, lecz przypominał zarazem ruinę tuż przed zawaleniem. Taki był zresztą styl całego państwa. Jakby ci wszyscy ludzie czekali na rychłą przeprowadzkę do nowego kraju.¹⁰

Temporal markers suffuse the description of this lounge's atmosphere, which is a synecdoche for that of the entire country, and which, as the name suggests, functions very consciously as an allegorical construction. It is an obsolete architectural icon, and it shows its age through its shabbiness. *Paradyz* is not only about to collapse, it is also stylistically out of its time: 1979 is at least a few decades since the heyday of *style moderne*, and indeed even the lounge's name is a cacophonous polonization of its sleeker, older name, *Paradis*.¹¹ Lateness suffuses this passage, which attempts to christen as an aesthetic style a bundle of contingent historical experiences.

In this attempt, this key sequence in the novel comes up with some unexpected ways of thinking about time and mood. First, it problematizes the simultaneity of mood, its always-ever

¹⁰ Konwicki, Tadeusz. *Mala Apokalipsa*. 132. "Currently, 'Paradyz' presented the *styl moderne* in a state of ruin. What this means is that, architecturally and in its decor, [the bar] chased after the worldly standard, but it resembled at the same time a ruin right before its collapse. In fact, this was the style of the entire State. As if all these people were just waiting for a quick move to a new country."

¹¹ This earlier name we learn quite a bit earlier, on page 107.

presence, suggesting that to attune oneself to collective mood is to feel the contradiction between incommensurable timescales. Here, this is the seam running between the nostalgic-decaying, which looks back to a plentitude from which the current *Paradyz* had fallen, and the anticipatory temporality of the *right-before*. Notably, it is through this latter temporality that the passage forms a synecdoche between the lounge and the country as a whole, encouraging a reading of this passage as a simple allegory of late-socialism as a decayed paradise. This is a complex juggling act, and there is no question that this passage's congealing of temporalities into an atmosphere, which we could also call an affective experience (of the interior of *Paradyz*) or a collective mood, and which serves, in turn, as an allegory of Warsaw, and then of the country as a whole—is nothing if not *overwrought*. This burdensome, one is tempted to say redundant, or inefficiently *centralized*, allegory of mood and temporality is almost like a discursive version of Stalinist skyscrapers like Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science, designed to function as a

“social condenser” amassing together manifold activities: an architectural and urbanist icon of



*The Palace of Culture and Science, 1960. Most covers of Minor Apocalypse feature an image of this building, of which Konwicki was uncommonly fond.
Photo credits: Romák Ěva, Foto:Fortepan.*

central planning itself.¹²

In many ways, *Paradyz* is like the inverse of what the Palace had been in Konwicki’s earlier novel *Wniebowstąpienie* [The Assumption], in which socialist ideology still worked.

Once his eyes adjust to the gloom in *Paradyz*, the narrator remarks:

¹² A “social condenser,” meaning, a multi-function building, bringing together everything from an artist’s café to a marble swimming pool, explicitly accessible to all and meant to bring into contact disparate social groups. Cf. Murawski, Michal. *The Palace Complex: A Stalinist Skyscraper, Capitalist Warsaw, and a City Transfixed*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019.

Dopiero teraz spostrzegłem, że gdzieniegdzie pod ścianami stoją porzucone transparenty demonstrantów, którzy schronili się w „Paradyzie”

—Czy to nowa sekta, czy w ogóle nowa religia? —pyta Gosia.

—Przepraszam, nie dosłyszałem.

—To, co pan mówi.

Ściany spękane, rdzewiejące złocenia, zdefektowane mrugające oświetlenie.

Nowoczesność umierająca na zawał. Niebiesko-czerwony półmrok pełen wstępnych twarzy. Każda gęba to grzech śmiertelny. Każdy pysk to świętokradztwo. Dudnienie w murach, łomot w głowie, wycie na poddaszach. Głos gniewu bożego.¹³

It is in the dark recesses of this lounge that the novel’s manifold allegories come to rest: all of them, heaped together like the confused anniversary banners heaped up against the wall. Their significance is distilled into the narrator’s fixation on faces. Earlier, looking in the mirror, the narrator asks how it is that, though he had decent and handsome parents, he looks the way he does. Not ugly, but also not beautiful, but rather “just right for the times.”¹⁴ He wears the face of his time, and after bemoaning this momentarily, he reminds himself that, after all, on this day he woke up “in a certain psychological aura.”¹⁵ The narrator finds in the faces of himself and his fellow denizens the traces of ruination, reading their ugliness as an index of some moral degeneration. Physiognomy here invokes another language whereby chronological time and

¹³ Konwicki, *MA*. 135. “Only now did I perceive that here and there against the walls stood the discarded placards of the demonstrators, who had sought refuge in *Paradyz*.”

—Is this a new sect, or an entire new religion? asks Gosia.

—I’m sorry, I wasn’t listening.

—What you’re saying...

Walls cracked, rusted gilding, defective flickering lighting. Modernity dying of a heart attack. A blueish-red half-haze full of nasty faces. Each mouth a mortal sin. Every snout a blasphemy. Rumbling in the walls, a thudding in my head, howling in the attic. The voice of an angry god.”

¹⁴ Konwicki, *MA*. 111. “Przeglądałam się w lustrze. Miałem porządnych rodziców, a mimo to fizjonomia nie za bardzo. Przystosowałem się do otoczenia. Przynajmniej nikt do mine nie ma pretensji, że za stary albo za młody. Za piękny albo za brzydki. Po prostu w sam raz na te czasy. O, Boże, wieczór się zbliża. W co się wplątałem. Głowa ciężka, przewód myślowy rozstrojony. Bo przecież obudziłem się w pewnej aurze psychologicznej, może paskudnej, lecz przecież dobrze znajomej, wypracowanej przez rutynę i w końcu bezpiecznej.”

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

qualitative time intersect. Something “just right for the times” becomes “a sign of the times:” a moment is transformed into a quality, historical material into atmosphere.¹⁶

Lateness and Socialist Ideology

Because historical time forms one of the central themes of the official ideological discourse of all Marxist-Leninist people’s republics, it should come as no surprise that the very materials that express a sense of ever-wasted, frustrated time work at once to comment on the status of the state’s socialist ideology. The exhaustion of the Soviet socialist doctrine of history as centralized industrial modernization finds expression in the novel as a collective mood of decay and degradation, epitomized by the narrator’s catastrophic hangover. This is an almost too-perfect physiological metaphor for lateness: but of what significance is the distinction between a subjective hangover and a world-historical one? From the novel’s first lines, the ambiguity between “*the* end of the world” and “the end of *my* world” is articulated as a productive interstice to think about the body as an instrument for sensing historical time: what do different orders of endings feel like, and of what use for historical thought are phenomenologies of unending time and of lateness? This novel’s power resides in its exploration of these questions not through abstract, ahistorical bodies, but in a very specific, detailed, historical sensorium: late-socialist Warsaw, in which the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Polish People’s Republic had exhausted itself. This positive ideology’s central doctrine was built around a notion of historical time as something objective, linear, and progressive: measured primarily according to the levels of industrial development, and broken up into five- and six-year plans. Stalinist historical time, as I showed in the previous chapter, was something that could be sped up through correct management and the heroic exertions of workers, or slowed down by inefficiency or sabotage.

¹⁶ Analogously, visitors to Berlin around 1990 could note that Ossis were often discernible by their haircuts alone (Thank you to Niklaus Largier for this anecdote).

By the 1970s, in the worlds of “Actually-Existing Socialism,” this ideology of historical time had simply gone awry.¹⁷

Konwicki had practiced for many years before writing his great novel, for which he is today best known, and which has been translated far more widely than any of his other works. The gradual decay of the Polish worker state’s ideology forms a significant arc in the career of this writer, who got his start writing Stalinist reportage in the early 1950s. His 1967 novel, *The Assumption* [*Wniebowstąpienie*], reads like a dress rehearsal for *Minor Apocalypse*. As in the later novel, *The Assumption*’s skeletal narrative circles around a day in the peregrinations of the narrator around Warsaw. After waking up under a bridge, bleeding from the head, he attempts to reconstruct the violent accident that befell him and to piece together his former life. He comes up with many possible stories, but none of them are more than plausible confabulations.

The main character in *Assumption* is also a drunk meandering around Warsaw; there, too, he ends up at the Palace of Culture and Science. Somewhat heavy-handedly, he takes the elevator up to a heaven that isn’t there, to the Palace’s famous viewing platform on the thirty-third floor, where he finds that he and all the other characters have already been dead for quite some time, haunting the city like ghouls cursed with no memory of their terrestrial lives. Here, just under the spire, they ascend into heaven, in a kind of profane apotheosis that ironizes on the heavy-handed ideological symbolism of the Palace of Culture and Science: Stalin’s gift to the Polish nation and to the people of Warsaw— and an impressive and architecturally idiosyncratic building by any standard. Konwicki’s novels always try to end with a flourish: the Palace’s spire is stacked with multiple significances. It points up to the heavens, functioning not just as an actual lightning rod but also as a conduit for the dead—but it also serves as the point of

¹⁷ [a missing lengthy footnote here, quote from Yurchak on this; describe the simultaneous achievement of socialism and distancing of communism...]

condensation for the entire dreamscape of a sixties, socialist Warsaw. Everything in this novel, all the stories and dialogues, ultimately amount to this spire: they all point here, and it points upward.¹⁸

Many of the other themes which make up the intricate atmospherics of *Minor Apocalypse* are already present, in embryonic form, in this earlier novel. Instead of the torn-up anniversary banners, we have in *Assumption* neon signs, which flash fairly good-natured propagandistic messages, like “czytajcie prasę” [read the news] or “ubezpiecz siebie i swoje mienie,” [insure yourself and your property] and, at the end, “nigdy więcej wojny” [never again war]. As the novel progresses, the color of these neon signs bleeds out, and the narrator wonders at the significance of last one having gone from being blue to being grey.¹⁹ These visual emblems express the post-Stalinist state of things, wherein ideological signifiers find themselves evacuated of their Marxist-Leninist content and imbued with various contingent, ironic meanings. But they also serve the same role that calendars and freak weather events will in *Minor Apocalypse*: functioning as little textual emblems, they collectively express a chronotope that might be called an *ominous emptiness* that everyone needs to keep forgetting. It being the late sixties, many characters are convinced that they can sense atomic war on the horizon— but the novel seems to know that such premonitions are projections unto current events of more immediate anxieties. One lyrical passage about the sky, presaging a similar passage in *Minor Apocalypse*, spells this out for the reader:

¹⁸ One might imagine it as the needle of a gigantic scientific instrument, one that registers the ideological integrity and historical power of the Polish worker’s state. This is perhaps why Palace’s spire is never mentioned in *Minor Apocalypse*. In the late 1960s, this ideology still works; but at the end of the following decade, in 1979, something has broken. The instrument that promises to register history itself has either gone haywire, or been exposed as a hoax.

¹⁹ Konwicki, Tadeusz. *Wniebowstąpienie*. [The Assumption into Heaven] Warszawa: Iskry, 1982. 202.

what is the sky? a very thick layer of mixed gases, covering the eternal vacuum. A very old mirror in which play the reflections of our desires, dreams, beliefs. Perhaps this is why we so often look up at the sky...²⁰

Drunks populate this late-sixties Warsaw too, and they serve as stand-ins for the dead: phantoms and ghouls, not fully human, who drink and drink but never get drunk. They are another emblem of directionless proliferation, and they drink in novel's purgatorial world, we find out late in the novel, out of fear of falling asleep and returning to "that place."²¹ Alcohol is, here, the elixir of death, what nourishes the dead as food does the living. All of one's time can be taken up by keeping the world's ominous emptiness out of mind. Oblivion, here, requires a desperate kind of vigilance.

Subterranean Stalinist Time

The dreamscape of secret tunnels and passageways is another aesthetic device practiced in *Assumption*, and brought to fruition in *Minor Apocalypse*. In the earlier novel, Lilek takes the narrator to a nook off the train tracks of Warsaw Central Station, he "tugged on something, which sounded off like wrought iron cover of a grave,"²² opening the way to a passageway. This tunnel, unknown to anybody, was dug, like so many others like it, on the express orders of Joseph Stalin during the reconstruction of Warsaw— after which the builders were all shot. This tunnel leads the narrator and Lilek to, of course, the Palace of Culture and Science. In *Minor Apocalypse*, this passageway becomes the secret tunnel linking the pantries of *Paradyz* and of the inner sanctum of the Palace, where the chef, a colonel who does not know how to cook, leads the narrator and an entire entourage of drunken revelers to the magnificent feast prepared for the Polish and Soviet first secretaries: "On our tiptoes we entered the banquet hall, which while lit

²⁰ Konwicki, *Wniebowstąpienie*, 202.

²¹ Konwicki, *Wniebowstąpienie*. 124.

²² Konwicki, *Wniebowstąpienie*. 40.

with chandeliers in the style of the Joseph Vissarionovich epoch, remained in a golden twilight, a hue that, in the naves between columns, transitioned into the mysterious darkness of coral grottoes.”²³ This, too, is one of Stalin’s secret passageways, leading directly to a kind of sacred space. Of note here is the baroque figuration of Stalin’s sovereign power as something contained in palaces and in grottoes, in inaccessible, lofty sanctuaries and in the underground networks of dungeons that link them. I name this figuration *baroque* because it partakes in an irresolvable oscillation between the sacred and the obscene, between spectacular bounty and unspeakable violence, mobilizing an aesthetic of the grotesque to figure secret knowledge of history.²⁴ This inner sanctum seems to contain the very essence of history, the source of sovereign power itself: or, to turn this conjecture on its head, the figure of the secret inner sanctum seals off the idea of history having a single, essential truth, which could magically provide the secret to power, from the rest of the novel’s fallen, decrepit world.²⁵ When the narrator walks around a bit, he notices that, “by the main wall stands a modest podium, and on it reside the coronation insignia of Polish kings with the famous *Szczerbiec* [the coronation sword]. On the wall, the Party curator hung

²³ Konwicki, *Mala Apokalipsa*. 151-152. “Na palcach weszliśmy do sali bakietowej, która choć oświetlona żyrandolami w stylu epoki Józefa Wissarionowicza, pozostawał z złocistym półmroku, co w nawach między kolumnami przechodził w tajemniczą ciemność koralowych grot.”

²⁴ The importance Konwicki places on these underground lairs immediately brings to mind the peculiar etymology of the *grotesque* that Walter Benjamin brings into his treatment of the Baroque German Trauerspiel. Linking an aesthetics of the grotesque to the esoteric forms of knowledge it expressed, Benjamin notes that the term *grotesque* “is not derived from *grotta* in the literal sense, but from ‘burial’—in the sense of concealment, which the cave or grotto expresses... The enigmatic was thereof part of its effect from the very beginning” (*Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 171.) Here, too, the purported secret knowledge is expressed through a kind of late-socialist grotesque aesthetic localized in grottoes, tunnels, and other underground spaces.

²⁵ We might compare Konwicki’s Stalinist tunnels to the opening scene of Andrzej Wajda’s *Człowiek z Marmuru* (1976), a film which deals explicitly with the legacy of Stalinism in general, and of socialist-realist artwork in particular, in late socialist Poland. Against a slinky, electronic soundtrack, the film’s main character along with her film crew—since this is also a film about filmmaking—walks through the main hall of Warsaw’s National Gallery and is led by a curator down to the basements, where they furtively turn on their cameras to capture footage of the veritable piles of socialist realist statues hidden beneath the main exhibition floor. Here, too, Stalinism is located not in a past behind the present, but in an intricate, closed-off system of subterranean spaces: a grotto fenced off and guarded from the present, which is instead filled with the more timely abstract-expressionist paintings hanging in the National Gallery’s main exhibition space.

paintings— the relics of this nation.”²⁶ Earlier, the narrator mentions that the feast tables bedecked with fine foodstuffs,

Te stoły przypominały czasy Radziwiłłow albo królów saskich na polskim tronie. Okryte historycznymi obrusami, umajone zielenią, obciążone cudowną muzealną zastawą, uginały się pod brzemieniem wyszukanych potraw i flaszek z trunkami.²⁷

The heft of the feast tables could be the heft of historical weight itself. This is the kind of knowledge afforded by Konwicki’s understanding of lateness as an historical atmosphere: a layered, geological vision of history that sees Soviet rule overlaid onto historical rulers of Poland— many of whom, like the 18th century Saxon dynasty, were also not themselves Polish. It is notable that the affective posture of the characters faced with this vision of splendor is one of awe and ambient terror: they know that they are lucky to be seeing something like this, and indeed, they are lucky indeed to be safely ensconced in this sanctum while a wild summer storm rages outside. Tempting though it is to reduce this feast-scene into an ironic commentary on late-socialist privation, such a reading is unnecessary: the drunken revelers who, of course, cannot help but sample this enticing feast already guarantee that the scene dissolves into a grotesque carnival. Within just a few pages, somebody is inhaling the contents of a rare French cognac, while somebody else is vomiting in one of the mystical coral recesses of this inner sanctum. While the carnivalesque profanation is Konwicki’s own, the immense power accorded to Stalin is in line with his role in the ideological discourse of some twenty years prior. In the post-Stalinist era of Actually Existing Socialism, he is a half-suppressed topic: he haunts its world like a god from a defunct religion.

²⁶ Konwicki, *Mala Apokalipsa*, 152-153. “Dopiero teraz spostrzegłem, że przy głównej ścianie stoi nieduży podium, a na nim spoczywa insygnia koronacyjne królów polskich ze słynnym Szczerbcem. Na ścianie partyjny oberkustosz zawiesił obrazy—relikwie tego narodu.”

²⁷ Konwicki, *Mala Apokalipsa*, 151. “These feast tables reminded one of the times of the Radziwiłł monarchs, or the Saxon kings on the Polish throne. Covered with historical tablecloths, decorated with greenery, weighed down with a gorgeous museum cutlery, they aged under the burden of their sophisticated dishes and bottles of liquors.”

Historical Weather

By the time he wrote *Minor Apocalypse*, Konwicki had experienced four different political systems, producing writing suited to each of them. Hailing from outside of Vilnius/Wilno, in what is today Lithuania, he was in his youth a Catholic-Nationalist resistance fighter in the Home Army and wrote bad patriotic poetry. After 1948 he became an enthusiastic Stalinist reporter, publishing as his first novel a production tale about the construction site of the planned city Nowa Huta, located just outside Kraków. He then became a kind of careerist compromiser, trying to eke out his own style of psychological interiority in the scripts he wrote and films he directed as a wayward member of the Polish Film School. Finally, he became a dissident writer distrusted and disliked by most of his fellow dissidents—often on account of his compromised past. He continually changed with the times, revising himself and adjusting his ideological orientation to suit the age. It would not be inaccurate to deride him as an opportunist, but I think there is more to be gained in asking how those shifting experiences and ideological garbs that mark him as an opportunist might also what make him receptive to rather idiosyncratic experiences of historical time.

In *Kalendarz i Kelpsydra* [*The Calendar and the Hourglass*], a serialized, autobiographical novel written in the form of journal entries in 1973 and 1974, he spends over a hundred pages trying to respond to critics of his past:

Przeżyłem tak, jak chciał czas. A właściwie, jak chciała cząstka czasu, drobny wir, co powstał z niczego i skończył się w nicości. Dlaczego mam być mądrzejszy od czasu ja, oduczony wiary w geniusz ludzki.²⁸

²⁸ Konwicki, Tadeusz. *Kalendarz i Kelpsydra*. Kraków: Znak, 2020. 136. “I survived as time had wanted me to. Or rather, as a little piece of time, a tiny whirlpool, which arose from nothing and ended at nothing. Why should I be smarter than time— I who have untaught myself the belief in human genius?”

The tone of this passage reads a little like a shrug: somewhere between refusing to take responsibility and prodding the reader to admit that ethical responsibility isn't always the point. Indeed: the "unlearned faith in human genius" suggests a yield of his shifting allegiances potentially more valuable than an unchanging ethical-political identity could be. If a committed writer could be said to have a strong moral compass, Konwicky was more like a weathervane. Notable is how this historical weathervane figures the shifts in time that it registers: small whirlpools, little rivulets that come into and pass out of being. These half-metaphors dissolve under the weight of our gaze, much like the larger metaphorical field of "historical weather" to which belong not only the Stalin epigraph to this chapter, but more notably Benjamin's famous image of the angel of history, pushed backward by a wind blowing from paradise. How seriously should we take these attempts to figure historical time as wind? What kind of historical consciousness finds its truth in organizing history's radical contingency and through heterogeneity as so many different kinds of weather events? Attempting to speak seriously about the "winds of history" sounds a little like a farce—and yet, this metaphor takes on an uncanny resonance in our own historical moment.

The concept of the anthropocene names not only a new geological epoch standing for industrial modernity, it more significantly, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has convincingly argued, challenges the very presuppositions of historical understanding, like the distinction between an unchanging, eternal natural history, and a knowable human history; or, the imagination of modernity as an era of increasing scientific-rational knowledge and of expanding human freedom.²⁹ The concept of the anthropocene greatly expands our understanding of the capacities of collective human agency—and, in particular, of course, its diabolical and self-destructive

²⁹ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History." *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 35, No. 2. 2009. 197-222.

possibilities. At the same time, it creates a context that attempts, however unscientifically, to map perceived or sensed weather phenomena onto larger, more complex climate systems, which cannot be perceived directly but only abstracted from vast quantities of data. Every meteorologist will remind you that weather is not the same thing as climate: an April snowstorm does not demonstrate anything about the truth or untruth of anthropogenic climate change. This fact notwithstanding, the anthropocene as a geological period marker creates a context in which perceived weather events always threaten to carry the signature of vaster historical forces. This is especially true of catastrophic weather, like the massive fire systems in California, which now occur almost every autumn, but it is also true of floods, storms, droughts, and not only extreme weather systems, but all kinds of unseasonable weather. This is not to suggest that we read the skies for auguries of the self-inflicted demise of our species, but rather to ask how the context of the anthropocene allows us to reread older representations of the weather. In particular, how does Chakrabarty's framing of the anthropocene as a *historical* concept force us to rethink the significance of Konwicki's descriptions of unseasonable weather as allegories of unhinged historical time?

This question suggests a retroactive historical logic mediating the figurative power of the weather as a metaphor: it asks how real history inflects the significance of imagined figures for history. History becomes here both something expressed and the condition that mediates expression itself. An irksome situation, to be sure, but one for which we can find some guidance in another late socialist artifact that has weathered history very well in the meantime: Christa Wolf's 1987 novel *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* [*Fallout. A Day's News*]. The news in question is the meltdown of Chernobyl's Reactor 4, and the novel's narrator counterbalances her reflections on this event with her waiting to hear the news about a lengthy brain surgery her

brother is undergoing. The parallels are manifold: atoms and skulls are unities that scientific reason has learned to split for marvelous and terrifying ends, and both emblemize, for Wolf, the uncertain outcomes of technological modernity, so apparent by 1987. Published just two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, this novel poses the question of what kinds of temporalities, including counterintuitive, retroactive ones, an historical event might engender: how an event doesn't simply demarcate the time of before and after, or reframe the future, or fill the present, but how it seems also to reach back into the past. The first-person narrator muses, while waiting for a phonecall, that words like "cloud" [*Wolke*] or "radiate" [*strahlen*] can never again have a merely innocent meaning that isn't touched by Chernobyl's fallout: consequently, most Romantic nature poetry will probably need to be reread in light of this reactor fire. But this novel also entertains the idea of lexical decontamination with Wolf's own, earlier novels, the plots of which are recapitulated here in fragmentary and heavily revised form.³⁰ Even the title, one commentator suggests, is a reference to the famous montage sequence in Wolf's *Geteilte Himmel* [*Divided Sky*], where the narrator hears news of Yuri Gagarin's inaugural spaceflight.³¹ Whatever dream of a socialist, technological modernity crested with the news of this inaugural spaceflight—this novel seems to suggest—has crashed with the news of the Soviet reactor fire. The example of *Störfall* suggests the questions we can ask pose about Konwicki's allegories of unseasonable weather in an era known as the anthropocene— as well as questions about the possibility of late-socialist cultural objects making broad claims about industrial modernity. Unlike Chernobyl, this is no event that contaminates these figures with its significance: rather it

³⁰ This argument is made by Fox, Thomas C. "Feminist Revisions: Christa Wolf's *Störfall*." *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 3/4, Theme: Literature of the 1980s (Summer - Autumn, 1990), pp. 471-477.

³¹ Fox, 472.

suggests a kind of uncanny fulfillment, focused on the nexus of history and weather. The metaphor simply turns out to be far more apt than Konwicki could have ever imagined.

Unlike the question of *historical weather*, the relation of weather and time has been dealt with in greater detail.³² Moreover, reading the weather for what it can tell us about experiences of temporality has proven itself to be a productive nexus in theories of the contemporary.³³ The present treatment of “historical weather,” however, carries a different emphasis by interrogating how Konwicki’s allegories of weather have come to figure non-narrative and non conceptual modes of historical knowledge. Weather as figure allows us to imagine historical time outside of the categories of continuity and rupture, chronology and event. By emphasizing its retroactive causality, Wolf’s reading of the Chernobyl reactor fire reaching back to her representation of Gagarin’s spaceflight constitutes as a genuine attempt to imagine historical time

³² See, for instance, Eve Sedgwick’s *The Weather in Proust*. (Durham: Duke UP, 2011.) This remarkable essay on the *Recherche*, focuses on the attention Proust’s narrator pays to weather, and to barometric pressure in particular, as a way to think about what Sedgwick calls the “divinity field” in his novel: its neoplatonic resonances, and how these can be read through the object-relations psychology of Kleinian psychoanalysis. Changes in the weather become, for Sedgwick’s Proust, “another great engine of transmigration,” awakening or returning to different selves in an individual, and function as figures of temporality itself, “the very ordinary seriality of weather offers a kind of daily, ground-tone pulsation of the *mémoire involontaire*” (Sedgwick, 24-25). Weather can mark the rhythms that make up experiences of temporality not only as seriality, but in a series of returns to, or reincarnations of, past dream-images.

³³ See, Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. New York: Columbia UP, 2017. For Martin, it is in weather’s seriality and its everydayness that it’s relationship to temporality is most immediately and obviously to be seen. In a chapter on weather and the genre of the Western in *Contemporary Drift*, Theodore Martin suggests generously that, though it may seem empty or trivial, “[t]he social custom of chatting about the weather is best understood as a collective way of pinpointing the shared yet fleeting time of the now” (Martin, 128). That the weather changes every day, that meteorologists get it wrong: these are what allow it to serve as a prop for negotiating a shared sense of the historical present, of a *now* that, all kinds of social differences aside, two interlocutors can be said to share, even if only provisionally. It’s for this reason all the more alarming when the weather goes haywire: “When it rains or snows, in short, we know what *now* means. And when it snows in June or fails to in January, we know, or think we know, that some- thing about the now is different, off-kilter, altered.” (Ibid.) Unseasonable weather becomes the frame through which Martin reads the Western film as a genre which has undergone its own historical “weathering,” becoming far less prominent in American culture than it was even forty years ago. Even as it has shifted to popular irrelevance, its representations of unseasonable weather have ripened into an eerily foreboding theme in much the same way that Konwicki’s allegories of the weather have. But if Konwicki’s novel has “weathered,” it has done so differently from the films Martin reads: congealed as a late-socialist artifact, confined to the museum-like space of its historical context, it is discouraged from attempting to make universal claims about modernity or from producing relevant critiques of anything beyond an iron curtain which reappears as an epistemological obstacle.

meteorologically. Socialist technological modernity, as a cluster of ideological images and desires for agency through the collective, appears not as an analytic category, but simply as an ‘historical weather system.’

When weather figures history, what it zeroes in on is a particular understanding of historical time. The *D Konvolut* of the *Arcades Project*, about “Boredom, Eternal Return,” deals extensively with the philosophical promise of “historical weather,” opening the theme with a kind of halfhearted lament: “Nothing is more characteristic than that this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter.”³⁴ Halfhearted because Proust, of course, takes this up as a magnificent theme in his *Recherche*. Theodore Martin helpfully reminds us in his reading of this fragment that “Benjamin [...] was also attuned to ‘the double meaning of the term *temps* in French, ’”³⁵ meaning, of course, that *temps* means both “time” and “weather.”

Like Romance languages, and unlike Germanic ones, Slavic languages permit time and weather to share an etymology. The tenor of this double meaning is, however, rather different from what we see in the French word *temps*. This shared etymology is most apparent in Czech, where weather (*počasí*) actually contains the word for time (*čas*), but it can also be discerned in the Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian word for weather: *pogoda/nozoda*, which carries the *god*’ root, as in the Polish word for “hour” (*godzina*), or the Ukrainian “hour” [*god*]— or, the Russian word for “year.” In Russian, moreover, “hour” is “час,” cognate with the Polish and Ukrainian words for “time,” which, in turn, in Russian is *время*. This Polish-Ukrainian-Russian cognate of *pogoda* most strongly suggests a more specific connotation for “weather” as “the right time:” in Polish, for instance, *pogodzić* means to agree, to settle, or to bring into accord. The lexical

³⁴ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 102. Konvolut D “Boredom, Eternal Return” [D1,3] Quoted in Martin, 128.

³⁵ Martin, 128. Benjamin, *Arcades Project* Konvolut D. [D2a,3]

relation of terms for weather and for time in Slavic languages, but especially in Polish, brings to mind the ancient Greek distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*: between time as chronological, measured time on the one hand, and qualitative time, felt as the right or proper time for something, on the other. If Romance etymologies simply relate weather to time, then Slavic etymologies relate terms for weather more specifically to time as *kairos*: to the right time, the due season, the opportune or decisive moment for something. In this, Slavic languages are closer to the Greek, where the word *kairos*, which once carried the meaning of a qualitative sense of time as right or appropriate, in Modern Greek serves as the word for *weather*.

Time and weather find expression as a concrete unity in Konwicki's novel through the problem of discerning whether any time is *the* right time for anything. The narrator, tasked with immolating himself on this momentous day, cannot with any sense of certainty say whether this is the right day, the right moment for this dramatic, televised self-martyrdom. The novel is moreover concerned with articulating the relationship between felt or intuited time, as the 'right time,' and measured, chronological time. This concern plays out both in the mixed allegories, which invoke inclement weather and uncertain anniversaries, but also and primarily in the temporality of narrative pause, which shifts from the fixed chronology of the plot's procession towards the scheduled immolation, to the 'emblematic present' of its allegorical asides, descriptions, images, and gags. Often, these moments in the text are set off, appearing as a scene in a window, or as the image on a TV screen.

Astonishingly little happens in this novel, structured as it is like a picaresque populated by episodes not connected by much strict causation at all, but an exception to this pattern is Hubert and Rysio's visit to the narrator's apartment at the novel's start. They inform him that he has been selected from among their friends, the dissident intelligentsia, to light himself on fire in

front of the Party Congress. How he tries to shirk this task is less interesting than what is running in the background, on his little television set:

Bezmyślnie włączyłem stojący na stole telewizorek. Odezwało się wycie wiatru, łopot jakichś płócien, a po chwili wypłynął ze srebrnego punkciku obraz uroczyście udekorowanego lotniska. Kompania honorowa marzła w poprzek ekranu, jacyś cywile osłaniali się paltocikami przed wiatrem, a nad tą kompanią i nad cywilami wzdymały się jak żagle czerwone flagi przetkane gdzieniegdzie, jakby wstydlliwe, biało-czerwonymi standardami.³⁶

Let us look more closely: first, inclement weather is juxtaposed with an official spectacle: honor guards, some crowds, many banners and flags. Delay and waiting, a temporality of empty, frustrated time, is folded over onto itself: first, in the broadcast's lag between its sound and its image, and then in the official spectacle of waiting depicted onscreen. We don't know it yet, but these assembled dignitaries and honor guards are waiting for the arrival of the Polish and Soviet First Secretaries, who will open a congress to celebrate an anniversary of the Polish People's Republic and to announce its candidacy to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: its being folded into the sovereign territory of this fraternal union. Between the televised ceremony and his colleagues' words hanging in the apartment, proposing his self-immolation, the day's significance almost seems to glow. Right after they make their proposition, the narrative returns to the TV set:

W obrazie telewizora nic się nie zmieniło. Wiatr, gwałtowny łopot flag i oczekiwanie. Dopiero teraz wysupłuje się muzyka nadawana ze studia, czcigodna i uroczysta.³⁷

³⁶ Konwicki, *Mala Apokalipsa*, 16. "Absentmindedly I turned on the little television set standing on the table. The wind's howl responded, the flapping of some sheets, and after a while, out of the little silver vanishing point swum out an image of a ceremonially decorated airport. An honor guard was shivering across the street, some civilians braced themselves with trench-coats against the wind, and above the honor guard, above the civilians, red banners inflated themselves, punctured here and there, as if bashfully, with red-and-white flags."

³⁷ Konwicki, *Mala Apokalipsa*, 17. "On the televised image nothing had changed. Wind, the violent flapping of flags, and expectation. Venerable, ceremonial music, transited from the studio, only now emerged."

On the level of narrative, the novel is reminding us of the coincidence of the conversation in the narrator's apartment and the ceremonial events entering the apartment through the TV set. On another level, however, the announcement of his imminent self-immolation reveals itself to be of absolutely no significance: "nothing changed." The wind is still blowing. But the narrator had not yet accepted the proposition: he never actually does, although he does start to go along with it. Once the conversation draws to a close, he turns off the TV set and turns back to the window:

Wyłączyłem telewizor, w którym cywile i wojskowi czekali na kogoś i nie mogli się doczekać. Po balkonie przeleciał grad, strącając w przepaść prezerwatywy więdnącą na żelaznej balustradzie. Te prezerwatywy to były bukiety konwalii, którymi obdarowywali mnie sąsiedzi z górnych pięter w dni wolne od pracy.³⁸

The experience of waiting and the sense of time as devoid of content is given a third elaboration here, in the televised ceremony's inconclusive end. Nothing has happened—but the weather that had provided a shared web for the events onscreen and those inside the apartment has turned strange. First, hail, and then the disgusting image of used condoms raining down from the apartments above. These weather events are not only viscerally off-putting, but also frustratingly non-literal: things are much more frenetic and anxious, and it is hard to say whether a change in the weather changes anything of importance in this novel. Either insignificant or wholly decisive; either the detritus of extra data or a flashing reminder of a shared, if uniquely elusive, sense of the present—the weather here carries the traits of being postwar weather, late-socialist weather. In this, it resembles what Benjamin calls the "weather of war" in the anecdote with which he opens *Konvolut D*:

³⁸ Konwicki, *MA*, 20. "I turned off the television, on which civilians and army types were waiting for someone and couldn't get enough of this waiting. On the balcony hail flew by, flinging into the abyss a condom floundering on the iron balustrade. These condoms were bouquets of lily-of-the-valley, which my upstairs neighbors gifted me on days off from work." *Note*: in Polish the name for this flower is "konwalia," which in this declension makes a pun with "konia walić," literally "to whack a horse," but colloquial for manual masturbation or a hand-job. So, these bouquets could also be liberally rendered as "jackoff bouquets."

Child with its mother in the panorama. The panorama is presenting the Battle of Sedan. The child finds it all very lovely: “only, it’s too bad the sky is so dreary,” — “That’s what the weather is like in war,” answers the mother.³⁹

In war, the weather is dreary, and on anniversaries of the worker’s state, it is uncommonly windy. On the one hand, historical weather presents, like the layered allegory of the Palace sequence, a vision of history as ever-present, cyclical, and non-developmental: history in which no transformative event can occur that couldn’t be reframed as merely another change in the weather. The periodization deployed by Western Sovietologists for the succession of Soviet First Secretaries, as a series of freezes and thaws, immediately comes to mind as a non-literary example of this form of meteorological historical consciousness. On the other hand, the project of figuring and redefining *historical weather* seeks to name a quality of temporal experience that cannot be subsumed into strict linear causality, or to any systematic, developmental model of historical time. Historical weather names the qualitative dimensions of historical time, describing whatever it could be said that time is filled with, the metamorphosis of its heterogeneous contents into “signs of the times.” Especially where it fails, as in the mother’s matter-of-fact clarification to her child that the weather is simply always cloudy in war, it shows us that there is an atmospheric mood in which wartime is disclosed to us as wartime. Historical weather, while unable to convey any knowledge about history, finds a language for those affective experiences that disclose a historical present to us as a unity that will be grasped, in retrospect, as a context.

In the apocalyptic weather of this novel, it is cloudy, it hails, a clear rain falls,⁴⁰ snow lays on the ground,⁴¹ and a late summer heatwave rolls in around evening.⁴² Apocalyptic weather

³⁹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 101. Konvolut D “Boredom, Eternal Return” [D1,1]

⁴⁰ Konwicki, *MA*. 9

⁴¹ Konwicki, *MA*. 106.

⁴² Konwicki, *MA*. 170.

is a confusion of the seasons: all kinds of weather, all at once, suffuse the novel, and the narrator's inability to tell the time of year amplifies his and everyone else's inability to even tell what year it is. More than general allegories of untimeliness, however, the novel's theme of historical weather makes claims about the nature of late-socialist time in particular: its allegories mobilize the specificity of their historical context to express a culturally- and historically-specific sense of time.

Reappearing throughout the novel on the level of plot, in the narrator's frequently asking himself how he will manage to fill up his day before his 8pm scheduled self-immolation, this sense of time as something ever-wasted and devoid of meaningful content reappears as if in miniature in the novel's many descriptions of the weather.

—Znowu pada? —spytałem, żeby coś powiedzieć. Rozmydlili nawet pory roku— rzekła.—Wszystko leci razem: śnieg, słońce, wicher, deszcz. Najlepszy rozpuszczalnik importowany z Nowej Zelandii. Zapałki kupimy w sklepie walutowym i potem doniesiemy. Nadzieźda wprowadziła w szczegóły?”⁴³

“They” have even messed up the seasons of the year, “they” who have absolute power even over nature: the supernatural Polish United Workers Party. This is one of a couple dozen unserious ways the novel relates weather to the ideology of the worker's state, qualitative temporalities to measured, historical time, *kairos* to *chronos*. But this little infelicitous exchange about the weather is significant also contains the markers of the late-socialist shortage economy, historical details that link this passage if not to a specific year, then at least to a specific era. Solvent from New Zealand, matches from the hard currency store (they will turn out to be Swedish). With these two commodities, the passage indexes not only an isolated corner of Eastern Europe,

⁴³ Konwicki, *MA*, 70. “It’s raining again? I asked, just to say something. “They even messed up the seasons,” she uttered, “Everything flows together: snow, sun, storm, rain. The best solvent imported from New Zealand. The matches we’ll buy in the hard currency store and then we’ll bring them to you. Nadzieźda explained the details?”

walled off from the world, but the entire world-system of imported commodities and hard-currency procurement schemes that undergirded the late-socialist political economy. If this piece of dialogue exemplifies the failure of weather-talk to, as Theodore Martin theorizes it might, negotiate a shared sense of the now, then it does succeed in pinpointing a historical context, one in which both the narrator and Halina find themselves, but which only we, 21st century readers, can recognize *as* a context. How this novel manages to actually reach beyond its late-socialist context, to which it has often been resigned as if to a museum basement, becomes clear only in how it abstracts its description of late-socialist historical atmosphere from being a structure of feeling about historical time, to being a portable chronotope of ever-wasted, junk time.

Allegory between Jameson and Benjamin

In her significant reading of *Minor Apocalypse*, Anita Starosta astutely suggests a reading of this novel alongside Walter Benjamin's theoretical treatment of allegory.⁴⁴ She takes up this task with a reading of the novel on the level of its plot, as an allegory for the belatedness of disciplinary forms of knowledge produced in the discourses of Eastern European area studies. But *Minor Apocalypse* is no abstract, ahistorical hero's journey; what is more, its plot is largely unimportant. At times, it seems to serve as little more than a pretext to keep the elaboration going: narrative scaffolding on which to hang the proliferation of allegorical emblems.⁴⁵

The experience of reading this novel is both one of unbearable richness and groaning distraction: it can make any reader into a temporary melancholic. Though it feels vertiginous

⁴⁴ Anita Starosta, *Form and Instability: Eastern Europe, Literature, Imperial Difference*. Durham, NC: Duke. 2015. See Chapter 1: "The Passing of Eastern Europe: Area Studies and Rhetoric." 23-46.

⁴⁵ In this, the novel is similar to some 70's Polish films, like Wojciech Has' *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą*, a very loose adaptation of Bruno Schulz' prewar short stories, which metabolizes their characters, settings, and descriptions into the material for an allegorical language describing its historical present as a haunted, decrepit world. This film has been roundly criticized for departing from the spirit of Schulz' prose, but a more generous reading sees its aesthetic, which has much in common with Konwicki's, to be engaged in a project unique to the Polish 1970s and their late-socialist imaginary: the representation of its historical present as a dreamscape, a decayed and haunted world, laden with ambivalent meanings to be decoded.

with suggestive meaning, it is at the same time a novel where nothing of note happens: the narrator is told that he has to light himself on fire, and at the end this is what he does in front of the Palace—or, at least, this is what he is about to do when the novel ends. Over the course of the day, he worries about how to fill up his time, and the form of the narrative resembles at times that of the picaresque: things happen to him, scenes transpire that barely have any causal connection to one another, but none of them even aspire to eventhood, to the kind of dramatic turning point that his self-immolation would be... if it were even actually represented in the text. Benjamin's dictum that *allegories are in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things*, here finds an uncanny reflection: episodes, scenes, images and emblems and little gags, all of them crop up and are left behind untouched, functioning on the level of plot as so much *junk* filling up the empty time before 8pm. Nowhere is this more apparent than about a third of the way through the novel, on pages 81-85, when the narrator, worried again about what will be left of him after he is gone, plays at being at least useful to the reader and provides his tried-and-true prescriptions for dandruff (in case the reader is too ashamed to ask their own physician) and for constipation (it's prunes). Like the sawdust used to stuff the ornamental anniversary sausages on the following page, all of this is just material used to fill up the day:

Po drugiej stronie ulicy, w salonie mięsny ogromne okno wypełniała wielka liczba „50” ułożona z kiełbas. Przemysł mięsny świętował pięćdziesięciolecie PRL. Ale kiełbasy były atrapami, z niektórych, widać uszkodzonych, prószły się nawet trociny. Pod złotokryształowymi drzwiami drzemał ogonek starych kobiet.⁴⁶

This is one of the novel's calendar allegories: sausage-makers and butchers seem to have made such progress in their industry that, for them, it is already the fiftieth anniversary of the Polish

⁴⁶ Konwicki, *Mala Apokalipsa*. 84. “On the other side of the street, in the meat salon a giant window was filled with the number '50' composed out of sausages. The meat industry was celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the PRL. But these were dummy sausages: from some of them, apparently damaged, sprinkles of sawdust fell. Before the golden-crystal colored doors napped a queue of old women.”

People's Republic that is being celebrated. Discerning the actual, true date, the correct anniversary is, of course, beside the point. What emerges out of this allegorical frenzy populating, and often interrupting, the novel's narrative is the abiding sense of there being *so much* time: of struggling and perpetually failing to fill this time up with something meaningful, and of, consequently, so much contingent historical happenstance becoming nothing more than *junk* to fill the day. There is such an abundance of free and copious time in this world that one might as well queue up with everybody else and nap before the butcher shop. The experience of waiting in queues, and the kinds of sociality made possible by queuing up, was a practice particular to late socialism: a historical detail, like the golden-crystal doors, but one that is taken up here as the 'raw material' for an allegorical image. What is more, this little scene and others like it reside in the narrative as *themselves* fundamentally so much junk with which to fill up narrative time. Whatever it expresses has already been expressed by so many other little visual gags like it, which differ merely in taking up different historical particularities. Taken together, these constructed allegories are how the novel works to render the historical experience of late socialism *as* a set of qualitative temporalities.⁴⁷

These allegories express a sense of wasted, junk-time by virtue of how they mediate between two kinds of materiality. They are made up of historical details, but they also exist in the narrative as mere material—in the sense that a comedian might have so much *material* ready when stepping onstage. But this novel's treatment of the problematic of historical time is just as concerned with theorizing qualitative experiences of time as it is with distilling the historical structure of feeling particular to late-socialist Warsaw. Their function in the text allows these

⁴⁷ On the experience of late socialist time as empty abundance—and on the strategies of the Socialist Republic of Romania to appropriate and “etatize” the abundant free time of its citizenry, which made for a late-socialist experience radically different from that enjoyed in more liberal Warsaw Pact states, see: Verdery, Catherine. *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996.

allegories to make palpable a concrete intersection of qualitative and chronological time as constitutive of the experience of historical time. That is, the novel allows us to theorize historical time as both a set of feelings *about* time, and as a contradiction between felt and chronological time.

On an abstract level, this is the contradiction of *kairos* and *chronos*, or of what Frederic Jameson helpfully parses as “Aristotelian” and “Augustinian” time: empirical, measured time, understood through the binary of before and after, or the tripartite schema of past-present-future on the one hand, and the simultaneity of times in God, or time as a qualitative, nonlinear experience of simultaneity, on the other.⁴⁸ My argument here claims that specific contradictions of these two kinds of time are not only constitutive of how time finds expression in the novel, but also of how Konwicki’s novel imagines the experience of historical time. How can qualitative, felt experiences of time map onto empirical chronologies that measure duration, whether as hours, as seasons of the year, or as decades? If they cannot, then how does this inability or impossibility serve to inscribe the sense of an historical present as a concrete, grounded experience of the *aporia* between these two orders of temporality?

Konwicki’s novel lays bare this concrete *aporia* through its two sets of allegories: metrological and calendrical. First, there is the running gag of unseasonable weather in the novel: the narrator keeps noticing weird weather, and keeps getting foiled in trying to determine the time of year. Second, there are the allegorical images of calendars, anniversary banners, and historical dates: the narrator is just as incapable of discerning what year it is, which anniversary of the Polish People’s Republic is actually being celebrated, and how the year maps onto

⁴⁸ Jameson, Frederic. *Valences of the Dialectic*, Ch. 19: The Valences of History Part 1: Making Time Appear. London: Verso, 2010.

projected completions of the current industrial five- or six- year plan. These two sets of allegorical gags stand in for qualitative, felt time and chronological, historical time, respectively. Because these allegories transmogrify historical detail and index into an allegorical language, and because these allegories *themselves* function in the text as material that hangs on the rudimentary narrative scaffolding, *Minor Apocalypse* renders its concrete contradiction of felt and counted time as a dialectical movement between historical and narrative time.

We can glimpse this movement in the novel's "mixed allegories," which bring together strange weather and stranger anniversaries. Late in the novel, and late in the day, the narrator looks out to the horizon over a grassy field in the city:

Słońce było niskie, słało prawie poziomie promienie. Raptowny, letni przedwieczorny upał, choć łąka wzdłuż której szli moi przyjaciele, dawno zrudziała i umarła. Tylko system rabat kwietnych, ułożonych misternie w liczbę LX, żył jeszcze, informując, że ogrodnictwo miejskie wyprzedziło wszystkie plany i obchodzi sześćdziesięciolecie PRL. A na tej łące, po wyburzeniu wojennych ruin, ktoś miał coś ważnego budować. Ale potem zapomniano, kto i co.⁴⁹

After the novel's other weather events, we have now a heatwave striking long shadows on an already singed patch of grass: an empty lot in the city that itself stands in for the allegory as a moment of narrative pause in the novel. This double-invocation of lateness (late summer, long shadows) contrasts with the well-watered floral arrangement, announcing the country's *sixtieth* anniversary (the Polish People's Republic was founded in 1947). But it's the last two sentences that glow with allegorical significance: what was supposed to be built here and has since been forgotten and abandoned is, of course, the project of socialism itself. This forgotten referent has

⁴⁹ Konwicki, *Mala Apokalipsa*. 170. "The sun was low, radiating almost horizontal beams. A hurried, summertime, early-evening heatwave, although the grassy field along which my friends walked had long ago reddened and died. Only the floral voucher system, arranged intricately in the numeral LX, still lived, informing that municipal horticulture had overtaken all the plans and was now celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the PRL. And on this field, after demolishing the war ruins, somebody was supposed to build something important. But then the who and the what were forgotten."

been replaced by the intricate signification of its ideological flourishes: the urban horticulturalists who arrange anniversary displays. We could read this passage as oddly nostalgic for a return to authentic socialism, or what would have then been called “socialism with a human face,” and, along with it, an authentic relation to time, true seasonality, and correct anniversaries. But this passage’s withholding of its referent, its evaporation into the vague language of *who* and *what* which have been already forgotten, resists this reading. The allegory knows that there is no return to an authentic origin—even its proper names have been weathered away—and indeed nothing more to hold onto than the intricate arrangements of irreducible temporalities left in its wake.

Every scene that seems to suggest a clear allegory of some lost, authentic experience of time, of some primordial timeliness which the novel’s historical present lacks, turns out upon closer reading to transform the discourse of lost origins into just more farcical ‘materials’ or more narrative junk. In a key scene with Kobiałka, the narrator’s neighbor who had been until that day a high-ranking party official, during which they are both locked in a room waiting for their interrogations by the security apparatus, Kobiałka begins to doubt his own heroic act of resistance. On live television, speaking before the People’s Presidium, he had stripped himself naked and begun to declaim a speech he had prepared and practiced for years in advance. The heat of the moment had made him forget this speech, however, and he had managed only to let out some stuttered insults before being dragged, still naked, behind the scenes. When he asks the narrator whether it is worth regretting his actions, the narrator replies:

—Nic nie warto żałować. Przyspieszył pan tylko bieg historii.
—O, cholera— zadziwił się Kobiałka.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Konwicki, *MA*. 129. “—Nothing is worth regretting. You’ve only hurried on the course of history. —Oh... shit, wondered Kobiałka to himself.”

The remains of Stalinist historical consciousness, which framed historical time as something elastic that can be sped up by the heroic exertions of Stakhanovite worker-heroes, or slowed-down by the nefarious efforts of various social “wreckers,” appear here as Kobiałka’s sudden realization that he may have, precisely in failing, already played his part in accelerating a necessary course of events. But it would be a mistake to see the novel’s representation of Stalinist time as a perversion of some natural order. Just a few pages earlier, still in the same locked waiting room, Kobiałka elucidates for the narrator the reasons why neither he nor anybody else can say with certainty what year it is, or which anniversary of the Polish People’s Republic is being celebrated. Asked what the true date is on this day, Kobiałka shrugs and replies:

Oni tylko wiedzą. Bezpieczeństwo. Też chyba nie. Sam minister albo ściśle Kolegium. Importowany kalendarz wisi w sejfie wielkim jak prawdziwy pokój. Codziennie minister z zachowaniem ceremoniału wchodzi tam w ścisłej tajemnicy i zdiera kartkę, którą automat spala na popiół. Nikt nie zna daty, bo przez lata a to prześcigano terminy, a to zawalano. Raz goniono, goniono Zachód i przegoniono, w innym momencie goniono i pozostało w tyle. Każda gałąź przemysłu, każda instytucja, każdy PGR mieli swój kalendarz i z nim się zmagali. Pięć miesięcy do przodu, później dwanaście do tyłu. 1974 w 1972, potem 1977 w 1979. I wszystko się pokićkało. Nikt nic nie wie. Po słońcu panie sąsiedzie, jakoś jedziemy. Ale burdel szalony. —Można na Zachodzie sprawdzać. Dawno nie słuchałem radia wolnego. —Można—zaśmiał się Kobiałka i okropnie w tym momencie zakrztusił. —Oni podjęli wyzwanie. Zaczęli to uciekać przed naszym pościgiem, to zwalniać, kiedy my popuszczaliśmy. Oni też skołowali. Też jadą w kompletnym rozkroku. —Skąd wobec tego ten kalendarz w Ministerstwie Bezpieczeństwa? Kobiałka rozłożył bezradnie ręce. —A ten to i ja nie wiem.⁵¹

⁵¹ Konwicki *MA*, 126. “Only they know. Security. Or maybe not. The minister himself, or maybe the Kollegium. An imported calendar hangs in a safe as large as a real room. Everyday the minister with an air of ceremony goes in there and in absolute secrecy rips a sheet off, which a machine then burns to ashes. Nobody knows the date, because for years—oh! we raced past deadlines, or slowed them down. Once we chased, chased after the West, until we ran right past it, at another moment we chased it and remained behind it. Every branch of industry, every institution, every cooperative farm had its own calendar to reckon with. Five months ahead of schedule, then twelve months behind schedule. 1974 in 1972, then 1977 in 1979. And everything got messed up. Nobody knows anything. Somehow, sir, we go by the sun’s position. But it’s a real crazy bordello out here. —You can always check in the West. For a long time I haven’t listened to Radio Free Europe.

Nowhere can true time, seasonable-time or some sense of time that *wouldn't* be untimely be located. Not even in the West—Kobińska seems to say—which we (meaning, the communists) have successfully befuddled with our creative bookkeeping and compromised timekeeping. The fantasy of a single, true calendar, one that correctly measures historical chronology, is safely ensconced in a closely-guarded safe is fundamentally indistinct from the Palace's inner sanctum laden with a feast of world-historical proportions, which held the secrets of Polish sovereignty. The safe and the inner sanctum, authentic time and true sovereignty, are located somewhere else, held apart: asking where they came from or how they got there elicits the shrug that reveals this entire backstory to be nothing more than another confabulation. Later, Kobińska is carted off to the psychiatric hospital—an arrangement that suits him, he will let the narrator know, as he already knows there several old colleagues and acquaintances from the Party.

I have invoked in this section Jameson's antinomy between Aristotelian and Augustinian time because his critique of Paul Ricoeur's *Temps et Récit* provides the most helpful theoretical framework for thinking through what this novel is up to when it devotes so many different rhetorical devices to representing, lampooning, questioning, and undermining time.⁵² Jameson elaborates Ricoeur's insight about how narrative makes time visible through the irreducible co-presence of at least two temporalities in all narrative: *énoncé* and *énonciation*, which the narrative holds in a "configuration."⁵³ On a most rudimentary level, this is the inevitable co-

—You can, laughed Kobyłka and choked on his phlegm terribly. —They proved up for the challenge. They began to run off from our chase, or slowing down when we let off. They screwed it up too. They're also driving without seatbelts in this.

—Then where does this calendar in the Ministry for Security come from?

Kobińska opened his palms in a sign of helplessness. —This, even I do not know.

⁵² For a lucid and critical analysis of Ricoeur's treatment of narrative and temporality, see West-Pavlov, Russel. "Chapter 4. Language and Discourse" in *Temporalities*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

⁵³ Jameson, Frederic. *Valences of the Dialectic*, Ch. 19: The Valences of History Part 1: Making Time Appear. 497.

presence of the time of narration, and time time of events being narrated. It is only through the intersection of these timeframes that time actually becomes visible as such: the modernist literary and philosophical obsession with grasping time *itself*, with articulating a pure “phenomenology of time” can only ever turn out “like an allegorical personification.” That is, it can only ever create inert allegorical images of time.⁵⁴ This modernist blunder Jameson moreover identifies as “the source of the contested notion of authenticity.”⁵⁵ The postmodern novel, on the other hand, is distinct in its deployment of a variety of strategies for expressing a plurality of temporalities. Key for my uptake of Jameson is his insight that, in the postmodern novel on the other hand, “These multiple temporalities are not primarily distinguished by their content, but rather constitute so many different and distinct forms of time, which can only be superimposed or surcharged on each other, but not fused together in one overarching form or even two opposing ones.”⁵⁶ Not only is it there no available pure phenomenology of time “itself,” which engenders only dead-end discourses of authenticity aimed at recovering this lost purity, but the gap or contradiction between Aristotelian and Augustinian time, or between cosmological and existential time, cannot itself be bridged or resolved: it always remains an aporia. What narrative fiction is merely able to do—and this is no small task, to be sure— is to name contradictions that are concrete expressions of this aporia.

Minor Apocalypse certainly contains Modernist allegories of time itself: these are what the allegories of calendars and of the weather read above fundamentally are. Read on their own, abstracted from the narrative, these allegories function exactly as Jameson suggested they might: as inert personifications of time “itself” as untimeliness— figures that we can make budge only

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Jameson, *Valences*. 529.

with great interpretive effort. Embedded within the narrative, however, and run through the novel's plot, which is continuously concerned with finding ways to fill up the time, to do something with all the time the narrator has before his scheduled self-immolation at 8pm, these allegories of calendars and of weather open up a time outside of narrative time: an space set aside from the telling of the story, or what Ricoeur terms the *énonciation*. Though they are not affective descriptions, they seem to exist in a kind of "affective present," similar to that which Jameson identifies as the generative opposite of narrative in his *Antinomies of Realism*. In the case of this novel, we can term this to be instead an *emblematic present*: a form of writing that enacts narrative pause, striking the reader like a sudden, unexpected vision of history.⁵⁷ This is the narrative time in which the horticultural scene abides, or in which Kobiałka's calendar-rant seems to exist. My attempt here to use this novel's figuration of time as a bridge between Jameson's critique of Ricoeur and his quite distinct theory of affect hopes to suggest that what is so counterintuitive about Konwicki's allegories is how they seem to *both* think about affective experience that takes as its object experiences of temporality, *and also* make time visible through their function as narrative interruption.

The novel's allegorical sequences, then, are defined by a tension: on the one hand, they are simple allegories of untimeliness and of an inability to tell the season or the year. As flights from the time of the narrative however—and as so much content that fills up narrative time—they *themselves* form the material for the novel's allegorical expression of a chronotope marked by ever-wasted duration. Not through the interstice between the story being told and its telling,

⁵⁷ The *emblematic present* as a moment of narrative pause is by no means unique to Konwicki. Much more recently, Katja Petrowskaja's novel *Vielleicht Esther* employed a similar device, where the "sticky" temporality of a first-person narration that appears to progress in realtime is interrupted by descriptive or meditative sequences that seem to open up onto the insulated present of thought, as the narrator considers the resonances of an advertisement for *Bombardier* spotted in the Berlin Hauptbahnhof, for instance.

which in this novel is uniquely tight, often even slipping into present-tense narration, but in the shifts and interruptions between the procession of narrative time towards 8pm and the emblematic present of the allegorical sequences, does this novel articulate the contradiction between chronological and existential time in terms of a specific historical experience. The late-socialist sense of time is, in this novel, time to be filled with anything: it is a time whose problem is its abundance, ever-wasted, it can only be filled with junk. The counterintuitive qualities of this sense of time are a little like the riddle of the hole: *what gets bigger the more you add to it?* Here, it is time that grows emptier, the more of it you have on your hands.

Conclusion

Jameson's critique of Ricoeur shows us how Konwicki's allegories of calendars and weather express a qualitative temporality: not a frozen, abstract sense of untimeliness, but so much figurative junk embedded in narrative time. As repetitive allegories functioning as filler and as mere narrative 'material,' they render the historical atmosphere of late socialist Warsaw as a collective emotional experience of ever-wasted time, of junk-time. To grasp how these allegories make universal claims, however, we need recourse to Benjamin's treatment of allegory in *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. For him, allegory's ability to express historical time is predicated on its being transparently contingent and historical: it does not attempt to recode an experience of time into some stable image, but rather registers historical time through its (allegory's) very materiality, in the effect that the passing of time has on the materials out of which allegories are constructed. This results in a frustrating redoubling of historical time: what for Theodore Martin's reading of the Western is its use of unseasonable weather as the occasion for dramatic action *and* its own weathering as a genre over time; or what, for Benjamin's baroque *Trauerspielen*, is their expression of the decay of meaning as a sense of historical time,

and the decay of their own allegorical meanings over time. No less than the inevitability of mediating the historical vantage point from which we read the text, this redoubling or folding-over marks the impossibility of accessing an historical sense of time, a past historical sensorium, in any immediate way.

Reading the allegories embedded in Konwicki's *Minor Apocalypse*, then, involves noting how they exist in the novel's narrative ultimately as nothing more than so much junk, expressing a sense of time as ever-wasted and devoid of significant, timely content, *and* also how the historical experience of late socialism has itself become so much junk over time, mined for its surfaces to be reused in nostalgic media, or else reduced to simplistic tropes of shortage, privation, and lack. These tropes, integral to Western models of historical time after the "end of history," are tasked with framing late socialist experience as nothing more than a defective and retrograde form of western capitalist modernity. They might crop up when, for instance, this novel seems to invite a reading of its plot as some symbolic instantiation of heroic martyrdom—which it really, emphatically, is not.

The major flaws of her particular reading notwithstanding, the original impetus to read this novel together with Benjamin is Anita Starosta's. She is likewise correct to pose as this novel's fundamental challenge the following question: "Without denying biography and history, how might the novel be made to speak beyond its own proper moment?"⁵⁸ The answer to this question lies not in abstracting from the historical particularities of this novel's late socialist context, however, but precisely in delving into this particularity. This is a novel that traffics in the conventional and historical: while it is certainly allegorical, but it is not *as a whole* an allegory of anything. The way to read its allegories is not to translate their "meaning" into a

⁵⁸ Starosta, 29.

different code: the whole point is that they could be translated into any number of codes, and still they would amount to nothing more than the narrator's prescriptions for dandruff or constipation. Konwicki's allegories speak beyond their proper moment precisely in taking up historical materials and metamorphosing them into narrative material: they devise a strategy for expressing the abstract contradiction of chronological and felt time in its concrete specificity as ever-wasted, junk-filled time, insignificant time in which nobody can ascertain the right moment for anything. This sense of time is wedded to the late socialist context, but in describing late socialist time *first* as an historical atmosphere and as a structure of feeling, this novel makes claims about the experience of historical time more broadly. The novel's quasi-universal insight, in short, is that historical time makes itself available to us as a collective, artificial emotion *about* time: one which casts time as a conundrum to be reckoned with. Borne of the experience of late socialism, this insight comes into view only from a later historical vantage point onto which it can be transposed: the apocalyptic Anthropocene. Here, again, is another similarity to Benjamin's Baroque, which radiated significance only when overlaid onto the context of the declining Weimar Republic.⁵⁹

But to read Konwicki's book as a novel of climate change is also to engage in an act of allegorical transposition, positing a hermetic link between the late-socialist era and our own present of climate change that follows no linear causation. In making such a transposition, I argue that there the novel's late socialist world and our own share a structure of feeling: not only does the novel make claims about the relation of time, feeling, and historical consciousness in general, it is also able, through this universal claim, to speak to the specificity of our own

⁵⁹ That *der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* should be read as itself being a kind of allegory of Weimar Germany is an argument first put forward by John McCole in his book *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

historical moment. Not only are we struck by the same inability to sense any opportune time for political action as was Konwicki's narrator, our historical experience of climate change and global collapse also makes necessary the kind of nonlinear, historical thinking suggested by such speculative transpositions.⁶⁰ This chapter's reworking notion of historical weather seeks to suggest that, more than a narrative rendering of historical time, reading Konwicki's use of the meteorological figure works to imagine novel forms of historical knowledge. "Historical weather," then, describes not only the historical imaginary of Konwicki's novel, but also the mode of nonlinearity, retroactive causality, and speculative unities that allow this novel to think about history beyond historicism. It is only because the novel's proper context has been weathered by history, then, that its allegories of historical weather yield to us their knowledge-content. The inability to sense an opportune moment for political action is a significant insofar as it indexes a possibly productive, but nevertheless failed relationship to historical consciousness itself.

If socialist historical consciousness is always marked by its failure—by the difficulty of actually feeling history or of communicating what this feeling might mean in a given present moment—then discerning the specific forms this failure takes is productive insofar as it shows the extent to which the experience of historical time is not only culturally mediated and structured like a collective emotional experience, but also that it necessarily carries political import. In the above reading, tracing out this dynamic of productive failure has revealed both a concrete experience of historical time—late socialism's lateness—as well its abstract

⁶⁰ A contemporary example of this form of historical thought—one which felicitously also mines the history of 20th century Marxist-Leninist communism, we can find in Andreas Malm's pamphlet *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the 21st Century*. London: Verso, 2020.

counterpart—ever-wasted, junk time—both of which are expressions of the perennial contradiction between chronological and qualitative time, or counted and felt time.

Chapter Four:
Basements, Tunnels, Grottoes, Graves:
Subterranean Time in Wolfgang Hilbig's 'Ich'

*Жизнь наказывает тех, кто приходит слишком поздно*¹

*Denken Sie daran, wir haben viel Zeit hier unten, wir lassen uns was einfallen...*²

In Wolfgang Hilbig's great novel *'Ich'* a surprising number of events seem to occur exactly twice. Consequently, the experience of reading it is marked by a kind of déjà vu. While we are led into the basement tunnels beneath Prenzlauer Berg apartment buildings several times, it is only once towards the beginning and again once at the end of the novel that we encounter, with the narrator, the dark coal-pit containing his torn-up and destroyed red pleather armchair. Twice do the narrator's handlers at the *Staatssicherheitsdienst* assure him that they have plenty of time and that he shouldn't feel rushed: first when he signs a cooperation agreement with them, and again at the very end of the novel. The narrator mentions the *depression* that hung over the city of Berlin-Ost in the 1980s three times, to be sure—but one of those times is to inform us that the term “depression” is a secondhand term, one apparently borrowed from West Berlin and adopted by the literary avant-garde. (So we can count it as a redoubled-redoubling.) Twice the narrative shifts from Berlin to the small town of A., where the protagonist originally hailed from and where he returns to at the end of the story, and twice we encounter the potent symbol of a wristwatch— first, one given to W. by a jailed, unrequited love interest, Cindy, and second, one given to him by his handlers at ‘the Firm’ as a reward, once they take his first watch and use it to

¹ *Wer zu spät kommt, den bestraft das Leben*. Life will punish those who come too late. Mikhail Gorbachev, in a speech given in Berlin, 1989.

² “Just remember, we've got lots of time down here, we'll think of something.” Hilbig, Wolfgang. *'Ich'*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1993. 378. This is the final sentence of the novel.

lure Cindy into another trap. The narrator himself is redoubled by his two names, W. and C., for “Cambert,” which is his codename. (It’s a crude joke that these two initials spell out a polite name for a public toilet, since in one memorable scene, he recounts for the reader in great detail a dream in which he had been a gigantic turd, sliding on a downward slope, into the depths of the earth.) And the narration itself switches between the first and third person over the course of very long passages, compelling the reader to ask whether it really had been a first-person account already before. Finally, this redoubling extends into the story itself, as the feeling of déjà vu is something with which the narrator and protagonist, a minor writer in the Prenzlauer Berg literary avant-garde of the 1980s as well as an informant for the Stasi, is already quite familiar. Spending his days and nights writing backdated reports on the goings-on of the underground literary scene, he comes up against the unnerving insight that the work of the literary writer is perhaps not in essence all that different from that of the secret police informant, insofar as both are tasked with producing a fictional reality after the fact.

Both, writes Hilbig in his book proposal to S. Fischer Verlag in 1992, are forced to pose themselves the same kind of question:

Vielleicht, sagte ich mir, ist auch der Ich-Verlust eines IM, der seine Arbeit an einem Bild von der Wirklichkeit im Geheimen leistet, mit dem Ich-Verlust eines Schriftstellers zu vergleichen, der sich, im Verlauf seiner Arbeit, mehr als einmal vor die Frage gestellt sieht: wer oder was denkt in mir?³

This question only becomes possible if one starts from the feeling of a kind of interior déjà vu.

To ask *what does the thinking within me* involves perceiving one’s thoughts as already having been thought out by something else, as being somehow derivative, and of being oneself late to

³ Hilbig, Wolfgang. “Exposé.” Wolfgang Hilbig Archiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Hilbig 9. “And perhaps, I said to myself, the loss of the ‘I’ experienced by a collaborator, who works in secret on an image of reality, can be compared with that experienced by a writer, who in the course of his work is confronted more than once with the question: Who or what does the thinking within me?” “About ‘I’” (Wolfgang Hilbig’s novel proposal as submitted to Fischer Verlag) in Hilbig, Wolfgang. *I* Trans. Isabel Fargo Cole. New York: Seagull, 2015.

this realization—and perhaps not for the first time, either. But this question also entails a certain kind of digging: indeed, the narrator of Hilbig’s novel becomes increasingly concerned with ascertaining the extent to which his sense of self remains beneath the persona he has adopted in his work for the secret police— and with probing what may lie beneath *this* buried self, in turn.

This novel has the curious quality of being at once a historical novel, representing the twilight years of the GDR, and of having been, at the time of its publication, an extremely timely one. Its subject, and the kinds of questions it poses about vocation and subjectivity, complicity and resistance, spoke to the post-reunification German literary world, which had been rocked by revelations about the collaboration with the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* by literary celebrities such as Christa Wolf or Sascha Anderson.⁴

This chapter will not be about the ethical dilemmas of writers working with intelligence services. Instead, it will take as its starting point the rather surprising relation between the temporal logic of déjà vu, secondhand thought, and redoubling, on the one hand, and the space and setting of basements and underground tunnels, on the other. Together, as I will argue in the following pages, these two devices are what allow Hilbig’s novel to articulate the felt experience of time as a kind of historical consciousness, one specific to the twilight years of the GDR and the heady time following this country’s absorption into the Federal Republic of Germany in 1989. This chapter’s aim is to consider them together through the paradigm of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *chronotope*, originally a theoretical concept meant to historicize configurations of time and space in literary genres and the kinds of action they make possible. Here, however, I will build on recent anthropological theory on the chronotope, which reads it against the background of the

⁴ It bears mentioning here that, though he wrote a novel imagining how an *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* for the Stasi might have seen his work as a literary writer and the difficult choices he would have faced, Hilbig himself never produced any reports for the Stasi— though they had attempted to recruit him a number of times. Instead, he crossed into West Berlin on a travel visa in 1985 and did not return.

veritable explosion of scholarship about postsocialist nostalgia to think about how we might use the chronotope to theorize comparative modes of historical consciousness. The reworked concept of the chronotope will show us how Hilbig's literary elaboration of a sense of time in fact expresses a historically specific *configuration* of time, place, and voice. Lateness and its related temporalities—from déjà vu to the secondhand—find a suitable home in the basements beneath Prenzlauer Berg, and it is down there that they allow Hilbig's narrator to conjure up visions of himself as an historical subject.

I intend this chapter to form a pair with the previous one: though published about fifteen years apart, under very different auspices, Konwicki's and Hilbig's novels have much in common, stemming from their shared use of first-person narration to register felt senses of historical time. Both are concerned with the *lateness* of late-socialism, and both novels dramatize their narrators' respective inabilities to locate themselves in a sense of the right time. But whereas Konwicki's novel is about the feeling of *wasted time*, imagining time as something empty and expansive, its primary problem being that of how to fill it up, and the narrator's various solutions becoming the material that fills up the novel—Hilbig's novel is about the feeling of having *time run out*: here, lateness becomes a burden, something urgent to be described (if it can't be resolved), and temporal experience is marked by shortage and lack—time itself seeming to have been already heaped up somewhere else, in the West or in a walled-off future. On one level this is rather obvious: this is, after all, a novel about an *IM* [informal collaborator] working with a state security apparatus convinced that time is on their side, even as we the readers know this not to be the case at all.

But, as with Konwicki's allegories of calendars and weather events, what's valuable in Hilbig's novel is how he devises ways to elaborate what this experience of time feels like, or

might have felt like. Here, too, writing becomes a technology for making time felt, for lending substance to minor historical feelings and the temporalities that undergird them. The historical reality of socialism's collapse finds itself folded into a sense of time rendered as an object of aesthetic experience, and, indeed, the novel's idiosyncratic power lies in how it frames the event of 1989 as a problem of feeling. To invoke one final contrast with Konwicki: If *Minor Apocalypse* was concerned with registering the present historical sensorium of late-socialist Warsaw, then this novel, written shortly after German reunification but taking place sometime in the mid- to late-1980s, is more concerned with registering *the feeling that there had been some premonitory feeling* of socialism's collapse. This is a kind of affective redoubling: second-order feeling, one charged with taking as its object the memory of another feeling, whose status is called into question by its being remembered. If it had surely been there in the form we remember it to have been, then the feeling that there *must have* had been some prior, premonitory feeling would immediately dissolve: it exists only by virtue of this prior feeling's questionable status.

After all, what has always been so remarkable about the event of state-socialism's collapse was the extent to which neither denizens of the people's republics, nor dissident intellectuals, nor Western observers saw it coming... even if some of them had felt that something was brewing on the horizon. What Hilbig's novel is about is precisely that feeling—as well as the post-1989 memory of it. This is a novel that attempts to straddle the boundary-line of 1989, and it does so by marshaling the twinned themes of affect and temporality to insist not only on certain continuities between the late- and post-socialist worlds, but also to think about how the event of socialism's collapse might be integral to the temporal-affective configuration,

alternately named *lateness*, or *Depression*, or *lag*, and finding its home in basements, tunnels, and other subterranean vaults.

Depression: A Secondary Feeling

For Hilbig, Depression is a feeling fundamentally about time: not only does it describe a sense of time, but it also obeys its own temporality of secondariness. Its invocation in the novel serves as an occasion for the lyrical elaboration of the knotted temporalities of lateness. The novel's characters, unable to sense a shared future, find themselves each individually lagging and having to play catch-up in manifold ways.

Die Depression in der Stadt ließ scheinbar niemanden aus, nur ich hörte langsam auf, ihr zu opfern, mein Schädel begann sich aufzuhellen, auch das Wetter wollte etwas wärmer werden. —Übrigens war *Depression* kein Begriff, der im Osten zu Hause war, er stammte aus dem Westteil der Stadt, aber auch dort hatte er nur zufällig Eingang gefunden, seine Ausprägung mußte ursprünglich aus Bundesdeutschland kommen, aus situierten Gegenden; wenn ich seinen Quell genauer lokalisieren wollte, dachte ich an das autobahnumzirkelte Nürnberg. In Ostberlin war der Begriff von der Szene etabliert worden (er war ein Kulturgut), und wir von der Firma, die wir nicht zu weit hinter dem Mond sein wollten, gebrauchten ihn ebenfalls.

Ich hatte das Wort mit spitzer Stimme aus einem winzigen Mund gehört, der von Zeit zu Zeit blutrot geschminkt war, so daß er den einzigen Schmuck an einer dunkel gekleideten, jungenhaften Person darstellte, er traf mich von der Seite, aus zwei, drei Metern Entfernung: Sie käme bald nicht mehr, denn die Depression fiel schon aus den Wolken, hier in dem Chaos (womit die Polis Berlin, Hauptstadt der DDR, gemeint war).⁵

⁵ Hilbig, Wolfgang. *'Ich'*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1993. 308-309. Henceforth, "Hilbig, 'Ich'." **Translation:** "The city's depression seemed to spare no one, only I gradually stopped sacrificing to it, my head began to clear, even the weather seemed inclined to turn warm. —Incidentally, depression was not a native Eastern term, it came from the Western part of the city, but there, too, it had found its way in by chance, its original manifestation had its stem from Western Germany, from sated regions; when I tried to pin down its source, I thought of autobahn-ringed Nuremberg. In East Berlin the term had been established by the scene (it was a cultural asset), and we at the Firm, not wanting to lag too far behind the times, used it as well. I had heard the word in a pointed voice from a tiny mouth that from time to time was painted blood-red, a dark clothed boyish person's sole adornment; it hit me from the side, from two or three yards away: Soon she wouldn't be coming any more, depression was already raining down in this chaos here (meaning the polis of Berlin, Capital of the GDR)." Hilbig, Wolfgang. *'I'* Trans. Isabel Fargo Cole. New York: Seagull, 2015. 267-268.

Depression moves in like a weather system from the western part of Berlin, and like a rain shower it “spares no one.” As a form of historical weather, this depression is something shared and something in the air: an elastic constituent of the historical present inhabited by the novel’s characters.

As if he were tracking a low-pressure system, the narrator traces it first to the western part of divided Berlin, and then to the Bundesland and, in particular, to “autobahn-ringed Nuremberg.” But what is the significance of his tracing the name for this feeling, the word itself, in place of the feeling? It would seem that this passage’s conceit—that the very word *Depression* carries with it the experience of a kind of public, collective, emotional downturn—accords immense power to language and its ability to engender novel emotional experiences. This name itself, the fact that it became a *Kulturgut*, a cultural asset, carries the ability not to infect persons with this feeling, but rather to make them aware of something that is already around them, or that *seems to have already been around them*. Learning the very word “Depression,” then, constitutes a practical technology for attuning oneself to something already all around: the word enacts a referent retrospectively, inaugurating nothing new but revealing something already latent in the present. Even the word’s transmission into East Berlin is marked by lateness: “The Firm”—the Stasi’s in-house name for itself—learned of *Depression* from the literary scene and began using it themselves, “not wanting to lag too far behind the times.” The dismal solution to feeling behind the times is to find the right name for this feeling of falling behind the times. Thus does the word’s transmission enact a downward spiral that engenders what it purports to describe: the only thing more hopeless than this pathetic game of catch-up is the growing conviction that catching-up may be the fundamental impulse of the moment. This fear of falling yet further behind forms the wakes left by an ever-receding sense of the future.

Wakes, weather systems, vague feelings: these imprecise terms serve to indicate what an ineffable kind of thing Depression is in this novel: the difficulty of describing the temporal operations collected under its sign. The second paragraph offers us some clarity: it links the word's utterance to a specific voice, that of "the Student," a minor figure in the scene who the narrator is observing and to whom he is attracted. We learn elsewhere that she, much like this word, comes from West Berlin regularly to take part in the readings of the literary avant-garde. She appears as if in a cake-slice of this utterance's thick description: we could easily imagine a sociolinguistic ethnography that this tiny fragment—the student with an androgynous, boyish look, dressed in dark clothes, uttering the word at a reading of the underground literary scene—merely indexes. (The conceit of this passage, like so many of the novel's narrations of reminiscence, is that W. or Cambert's reports to his handlers are just those ethnographic vignettes.) The final sentence switches the narration into a strange tense as we shift from a past-perfect narration of a repeated scene into a more vague future, already also in the past. It's worth dwelling on the kind of action being spelled out here: the Student's *to-be-continuous no-longer* coming to these events. The repeated events, and the sense of lag indexed by *Depression*, not to mention this *Depression*'s secondhand origins in the West, are folded into a sense of anticipation: this is, then, not just any such reading in the literary underground, it is one of the last such readings: not a typical scene, but a particular, penultimate one. As if unable to hold these contradictory temporalities of lag and anticipation together, the elaborated feeling transforms into a rain shower falling on the tumult down below. We're localized finally in the conurbation introduced, as if on a map or in a news segment, by its official name.

We can zoom in further, because Depression's spatialization is not only geographic but also architectural. Various kinds of boundaries and barriers—like dreams from which we often

find the narrator just having awoken, or subterranean walls against which he sets his ear—often serve to express the secondariness of the feeling this novel calls “Depression.” In much the same way that *the feeling that there had been some premonitory feeling* blurs the question of that originary feeling’s actuality, these barriers often blur the distinction between what the narrator is sensing and what he imagines himself having sensed; what had appeared in a dream and what was, in fact, a memory bubbling to the surface.

The narrator believes one wall he encounters to be a subterranean extension of the “Antifascist Defense Barrier,” the Berlin Wall, and he either falls asleep beside it or remembers previous visits he had paid to this place in the tunnels:

—Manchmal jedoch suchte ich die Geräusche auf der Gegenseite der Mauer zu erlauschen: ich hörte nichts, offensichtlich gab es drüben keine Geräusche. Ab und zu nur bildete ich mir ein, daß da ein sehr leises Klirren gewesen sei; immer war es schon vergangen, mein Gehör schien es nur nachzuholen: es konnte sich ein großer Kühlschrank eingeschaltet haben; danach drang ein dünnes Summen durch die Wand, wenn es abriß, wieder mit dem kaum vernehmlichen Geklirr, fuhr ich aus dem Schlaf hoch. Und in diesem Schlaf hatte ich das Licht hinter der Wand gesehen: ein warmes helles Licht, das hinter meinen geschlossenen Lidern war, wenn ich im Schlaf an die Zukunft dachte,—drüben auf der anderen Seite, wo die Innenräume hell gekachelt waren und das Licht noch heller zurückgaben; Möbel waren darin, und wahrscheinlich ordentliche Toiletten und Bäder, und vielleicht Vorratsräume, Regale, die mit gefüllten Flaschen vollgestellt waren, und die kleinen Bestelltische davor, mir sauberen Gläsern, die auf Tablett gestürzt waren... es spukte mir der Gedanke an den Tunnel unter der Mauer durch den Schlaf, er spukte durch den Schlaf des ganzen Lands, es war womöglich der Gedanke, den ich aufklären sollte... und es gab dort vielleicht Zimmerpflanzen, dunkelgrüne großblättrige Gewächse südlicher Herkunft, sie gediehen prächtig in der stetigen Wärme und dem stählenden Licht, denn drüben, in den Kellern auf der anderen Seite, war immer Tag, während hier immer Nacht war.⁶

⁶ Hilbig, “*Ich*”. 35-36. “Sometimes, though, I tried to make out the sounds on the opposite side of the wall. I heard nothing; over there, it seemed, there were no sounds.. Only now and then did I imagine there’d been a very faint clinking jitter; it was always gone at once, and my ears merely seemed to echo it— it could have been a large refrigerator switching on; after that a fine hum came through the wall, and when it broke off, again with that barely perceptible jitter, I started out of my sleep. And in this sleep I’d seen the light behind the wall: a warm, bright light that shone behind my shut lids when I thought of the future in my sleep—over on the other side, where the interiors were pale and tiled and reflected the light back still more brightly; there was furniture there, and probably proper

Whether this “barely perceptible jitter” is something he hears, dreams, or imagines himself having heard is left open in order for him to elaborate the fantasy-image of his world’s opposite. Another, complementary system of tunnels and basements, this one well-lit and well-apportioned, stocked with nice things and with tasteful flourishes. This is like a photographic negative of his own, decrepit world, marred by what he will elsewhere call East-Berlin’s atmospheric mood of depression, but what is the boundary-line across which he listens in to this other world? Not merely a fantasy-image of the West, this is also a dreamt utopia, a fantasy of the future after the fall of communism... or at least something that sounds very much like the fantasy of a consumer utopia. It is immensely significant here that the stage lights of this fantasy switch on, with the “warm, bright light that shone behind [his] eyelids,” only “when [he] thought about the future in [his] sleep.” How might we read this passage’s suggestive superimposition of the spatial and political boundary between East- and West-Berlin onto the historical event-horizon of 1989? This dream sequence shows us an inside-out view of the novel’s larger conceit: here, the narrator dreams of a future, but to what extent is this the same future from which this historical novel, as a textual artifact, represents the narrator’s world as an historical past?

The *feeling that there had been some premonitory feeling* is doubly interesting because, folding affect over onto itself and making it a second-order feeling, it also does something strange with any linear sense of historical time. Describing a premonition in the past tense that one tries to unlock or excavate at a future point, it seems to fold time over onto itself as well,

toilets and baths, and perhaps storerooms, shelves stocked with full bottles, and the little end tables in front of them, with clean glasses upturned on trays... it haunted my sleep, the thought of the tunnel beneath the wall, it haunted the sleep of the entire country, perhaps this was the thought I was supposed to bring to light... and maybe there were houseplants there, dark green large-leafed plants from southern climes, flourishing in the constant warmth and the radiant light, for over there, in the basements on the other side, it was always day, while here it was always night.” Hilbig, “I”. 27.

creating the illusion of some direct link between the feeling of a memory and a remembered feeling. Before thought can reflect on the interrelation of these two moments—the premonitory feeling and the feeling of its memory— affect already sticks them together, suggesting something like a tantalizing porthole between two moments in time. This porthole carries the name “Depression.”

Depression names not only the collective mood, the *Stimmung* hanging over Berlin, but also the felt experience of being a latecomer that undergirds this feeling. And the experience of lateness is by no means something that vanishes with the collapse of socialism: as a structure of feeling, this atmospheric depression forms an affective continuity over the world-historical boundary line of 1989. Against the heady, positive affects that marked the *Wende* and the capitalist restoration in the former GDR as a feeling of openness and possibility, depression suggests not only that this may be a dead end, but that, horribly, it is indistinct from the dead ends that confronted East Berliners in, say, 1988. Mark Fisher’s description of depression as a cultural form is here apposite: “depression is the shadow side of entrepreneurial culture, what happens when magical voluntarism confronts limited opportunities.”⁷ It names the failure of the reintroduced market economy to produce any sense of a salient, collective future that would resolve the aimlessness of late socialism. The depressing thing about this continuity of feeling, what compels the question of discovering a premonitory feeling that would have been a harbinger of the *Mauerfall*, is that something essential had not changed at all.

⁷ Mark Fisher, “Why Mental Health is a Political Issue,” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media (16 July 2012). www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/16/mental-health-political-issue Quoted in La Berge, Leigh Claire. “Is There No Time? A Conversation with Mark Fisher” *Mediations* 33.1-2. Fall 2019-Spring 2020. 167-172. Notable as well is La Berge’s gloss of the quote: “...there is certainly something deeply impersonal, un-individual, and deeply uninteresting about depression. And this, I think, relates to time. Depression often generates the feeling of an endless time that is accompanied by an acute enervation. When will this feeling dissipate? Hopefully in the future. But there is no future as depressive time doesn’t seem to advance; it stalls. In the midst of a depression, there is no access to a reparative past nor is there the fantasy of a reparative future.” 171.

Depression binds together a complex amalgamation of temporalities into a kind of feeling: like any named emotion, it brings together diffuse sensations under a more solid structure. Unable to represent the experience of lateness or lag in itself, the narrator needs recourse to some representational medium: be it a metaphorical field of weather and of meteorological mapping, or the “bad vibes,” the *ungute Stimmungen* that have settled over the city. This triangulation of weather, feeling, and temporality is certainly not unfamiliar: Konwicki’s novel brings together the same three terms to express late-socialist Warsaw as an historical sensorium. But Hilbig’s novel goes further to interrogate the peculiar redoubling that seems inherent to the sense of historical time as lateness. Whether it is a *feeling about a past feeling*, or a *temporality about a temporality* (lateness being a feeling in relation to something that would be “on time,” whenever that might be) the novel seems concerned with what we are to make of the redoubled, reflexive nature of historically-specific experiences of temporality. What does lateness or lag have to do with the experience of the second-hand, with that secondariness that, in the novel’s proposal, Hilbig described as *that which does the thinking within me*? It is helpful here to take a cue from Hilbig’s cycling through various ‘representational media’ in his expression of lateness: this sense of time is less like an object to be grasped or something that can be represented, and more like a *configuration* that finds expression in specific moments: in passages in the novel and, as we will soon see, in the underground passages that prove to be such versatile containers for these minor senses of time, in this novel and elsewhere.

Chronotope and Historical Consciousness

By virtue of its relation to spatialized time, *Depression*’s workings in this novel resemble that of Bakhtin’s *chronotope*: a triangulation of space, time, and subject. We can see how *Depression* constitutes an historical feeling by understanding it through this conceptual form.

Not only does *Depression* in 'Ich' name a collective affective experience that takes history itself as its object, creating a mode of relation to the historical present marked by feelings of lag or lateness, and the urge to somehow catch up, but it also marks a historically-specific configuration of place, time, and voice (here, East Berlin, the late 1980s, and the West-Berliner literati who smuggle this term across the internal border) and engenders meaningful temporal relations through this configuration. Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope is useful here for a number of reasons. It imagines time as something inseparable from space in the service of identifying discrete and historically-specific configurations of space-time. As a way to conceptualize different temporalities and the kinds of dramatic action they make possible, the chronotope makes claims about the nature of time as it finds expression in literary texts. Rather than empty time, a line on which coordinates could be planted, "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history."⁸ Thought of as mutually-constitutive categories, time and space both change: they become legible by being relativized. By deploying these physical categories "almost as a metaphor (almost, but not quite),"⁹ Bakhtin is advancing here a radically historicist understanding of time and space, taking it to be a mode of experiencing reality that differs across subjects, societies, and historical eras: as he explains in the essay's first footnote, the chronotope sets Kant's categories of time and space into motion as concrete, historical categories. To grasp the significance of his critical intervention, however, it is worth attending to Bakhtin's language: time grows *thick*, becoming available to cultural analysis, and not merely a precondition for it.

⁸ Bakhtin, Mikhail M. "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics." *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984. 84-85.

⁹ Bakhtin, Op. Cit. 84.

What's more, space becomes *charged*: no longer an inert setting, it is pliable, receptive to movements and impressions left on it by time. Both, taken together, emerge not as dimensions, but as a historically-specific configuration. My contribution to this thinking and to its reworking in ethnographic theory¹⁰ involves the claim that this configuration of space and time makes itself available to characters primarily as a kind of feeling.

How, then, does the chronotope help us understand what Hilbig's novel is up to when it dwells on descriptions of East Berlin's depression, or attempts to unfold the temporal experience of lateness and of lagging behind? First, by forcing us to understand that lateness and lag, subterranean spaces, and the subjectivity of the narrator who describes them to us are no realistic description of a situation, but rather elaborations of this configuration called a chronotope, which expresses itself to the novel's narrator as the historical emotion of Depression. So, what does it feel like for the narrator to imagine himself as an historical being? If so much of lateness has to do with its reflexivity and redoubled nature, then it should come as no surprise that we find some of his most confounding elaborations of this passages about writing, where the narrator is reflecting on the kind of writing he is producing for his handler Feuerbach/Kesselstein. The feeling of *déjà vu*, we will find, emerges directly from the repeated experience of producing backdated reports on everything the narrator had seen or done. This practice in itself already engenders a temporality which seems to appear as the germ-stage of the lateness that envelops this novel's world.

In dieser Funktion wiederholte sich mir alles mehrfach, immer wieder war ich die Zirkel meiner Wege gegangen, schon so oft, daß ich oft genug das Gefühl hatte, der nicht endenden Serie eines *Déjà vu* unterworfen zu sein ... immer weiter unterworfen diesem weg, straßauf, straßab, unten entlang, oben entlang, immer wieder ... ich hatte jeden Stein schon gesehen, ich hatte jeden Namen registriert, jedes Wort schon vernommen, das aus

¹⁰ See, "Introduction," § "Towards an Anthropology of Historical Consciousness."

den Gesichtern fiel... es war Desensibilisierungsarbeit. Die Spitzeltätigkeit war ideologische Arbeit, ihr Wesen war es, so lange immer dasselbe aufzuklären, bis der Anschein des Abweichenden in die Unwirklichkeit zurückgetreten war. Die Spitzelarbeit war eine art Werbung: sie bedeckte ihre Zielobjekte so lange mit immer denselben Attributen, bis die gegensätzlichen Attribute in den Schatten zurückgetreten waren... dann wurde das Objekt von seinem Schatten abgeschnitten: und das ewige Leben des Objekts war sicher.

Die dauernden Wiederholungen dessen, was mir unterlief, in seine Zeitzugehörigkeiten einzuordnen, war mir völlig unmöglich geworden... und es war auch nicht nötig, denn für jede Episode, die wir registrierten, erfanden wir ihre Ablaufzeit nachträglich hinzu. Ich hatte dabei zunehmend das Gefühl, mit allem, was ich dachte, um Jahre (manchmal auch nur um ein Jahr!) hinterherzuhinken. Oftmals lebte ich unter dem Eindruck, die ganze Gesellschaft über mir, über mir in Summen und Dröhnen der Stadt, hinkte ebenso hinterher. Hinter wem oder was... ich wußte es nicht. Und dieses Hinterherhinken (dieses Zuspätkommen im Leben... meiner Absicht nach stammte der Ausdruck von *Cervantes* und bezog sich auf den großen Don Quichotte), diese Angst, für das Zuspätkommen vom Leben bestraft zu werden wie ein Klippschüler, war der Grund für die Depression in der Stadt, die ich immer wieder spürte.

Immer häufiger hatte ich das Gefühl, daß alles, was über unsere Lippen kam, zum dritten, zum fünften Mal gesagt war.¹¹

Here, near the end of the novel, W. or Cambert finds himself in a hell of eternal return, in which everything that occurs comes to feel like it already has occurred many times before. At the same

¹¹ Hilbig, *Tch*. 357. "In this function everything repeated for me, time and again I'd walked the compass of my paths, so many times now that I often felt subjected to the infinite series of a déjà vu... subjected on and on to this path, up the streets, down the streets, above them, below them, time and again... I'd seen every stone, I'd registered every name, heard every word that fell from these faces... it was desensitization work. Informing was ideological work, its essence was to investigate the same thing over and over until the appearance of deviation had receded into unreality. The work of the informer was a sort of promotion: it lavished its target objects over and over with the same attributes until the contrary attributes had receded into shadow... then the object was severed from its shadow—and the eternal life of this object was assured.

I now found it utterly impossible to sort in terms of temporal affiliations the constant repetitions of what I blundered upon... and it was no longer necessary, either, as we invented a retroactive time span for each episode we registered. Here I increasingly had the sense of lagging years behind (sometimes just one year!) in everything I thought. Often I lived under the impression that the entire society oder me, over me in the city's hum and drone, was lagging just as far behind. Behind whom or what... I didn't know. And this lagging behind (this coming too late in life... I believed the expression came from Cervantes, referring to the great Don Quixote), this fear of being punished like a backward pupil for coming too late in life was the reason for the depression I kept sensing in the city. More and more often I had the feeling that everything that passed our lips was being said for the third, for the fifth time." Hilbig, *T*. Trans. Cole. 310-311.

time, he recognizes at this point that the very act of writing these reports is the granular engine of this ubiquitous déjà vu: by continuously describing the same objects, persons, events in the same way, he works everyday experience into cyclical, eternal types from which any dissimilar attributes fall out over time. The ways in which he describes the work of informing are worth dwelling upon: this is *ideological* work, and it is also *desensitizing*. The work of the informant could be ideological insofar as it is creating an ideological image of reality, a separate discursive sphere in which language operates by different rules. This is what has been theorized by Yurchak as the “hyper-normalization” of late-Soviet ideological discourse: the repetition of specific formulations and phrases, their continual recycling and eventual accordance of new meanings encased in old usages.¹² In Yurchak’s account, everybody from Komsomol activists to journalists writing for Pravda learned to compose texts with the same stock phrases, creating a situation in which all reports and speeches come to sound very similar to each other, even as the function and import of these discursive constructions *as a whole* begins to shift, often taking on surprising, ironic or comedic meanings. Something similar is clearly at play in W. or Cambert’s reports: tasked with reporting on the occurrences in the literary scene, they begin to create a hyper-normalized, typified and seemingly very stable image of reality— one in which the objects of his surveillance, shorn from their apparent differences, become “assured” of their “eternal life.”

¹² Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005. In Yurchak’s account, the hypernormalization of Soviet ideological discourse was a direct consequence of the death of Joseph Stalin and the subsequent disappearance of any legitimate position external to ideology from which to comment on ideology. This resulted in a curious series of feedback loops, aptly illustrated in the following observation about changes made to portraits of First Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in the 1970s as the first secretary amassed more orders and medals: “The style of Brezhnev’s portraits, however, remained the same. Any changes to his images were done at night, making the process of change practically invisible to most people. Even though the presence of an additional medal on Brezhnev’s suit was publicly known, this fact was symbolically represented in terms of immutability rather than change, which was an example of the hypernormalization of this authoritative symbol. Visual normalization also affected the depiction of more generic figures: the features, expressions, and poses of Soviet people on propaganda posters, and the colors and techniques in which they were depicted, became increasingly normalized, simplified (with fewer colors, shadows, facial expressions, angles, and details), and citational between images and contexts.” 106.

But much like late-Soviet hyper-normalization, the discursive practice of repeatedly writing backdated reports also engenders an unexpected byproduct, as it were. Here, however, it's an uncoupling from chronological time, a growing sense of cyclical time and an all-encompassing déjà vu: in short, the narrator begins to attune himself to a different felt experience of historical time.

By turning to the other surprising term here, *Desensibilisierungsarbeit*, [*desensitizing work*] we can glimpse here a little dialectic: to what is the narrator being desensitized, if not to the linear sense of historical time that hinges on the continual production of the new? How might we read his description of continual déjà vu, of unsettling cyclical time and a decoupling from any meaningful relationship to chronological measurement as a kind of phenomenology of the temporality of lag and lateness, as the painful process by which he becomes sensitized to another, radically different mode of historical consciousness? It is tempting to consider this account symptomatically: incapable of sorting his new experiences into their correct, temporal affiliations, into some sense of chronological order, he nevertheless notes in himself the sense or impression [*Eindruck*] that his entire society is, in some weird way, lagging or trailing behind. It is as if the narrator's peeling away from any meaningful experience of chronological, linear time brings with it his seemingly-fantastical, newfound capacity to sense historical time otherwise. In the first of this novel's many re-enchantments of the late-socialist historical world, as seen from beyond the "event horizon" of 1989, the narrator's work as a secret police informant seems to endow him with something like psychic or paranormal abilities. Whether he is ultimately misrecognizing some personal sense of lateness for a grander, societal or world-historical lag is ultimately besides the point: like Oedipa Maas' paranoia in *The Crying of Lot 49* (Pynchon is an author especially appreciated by W.'s handler, Feuerbach), it is the feeling of lateness itself, the sense of lag, the affective experience of a temporality, that forms the subject of this novel.

Hilbig's novel goes further than Konwicky's insofar as it poses the question of what vision of history emerges when the task of chronological ordering is forfeited. Of note here is the work of creation in this sense of time as lag or lateness: it is the confabulation of "retroactive timespans for every event we registered" that is responsible for the narrator's increasing inability to order things according to their proper times. The ability to attune oneself to this temporal sense of lateness is neither natural nor immediate: it has nothing to do with returning to some organic or originary experience of temporality. Rather, it is an artificial, constructed experience of historical time, an emergent phenomenon of the repeated, iterative practice of writing reports as an informant—a practice that is, for him, compulsory.

Like a hidden doorway in a dark alcove, it is the passage's citation of Don Quixote that provides us with an object-lesson of what the temporal sense of lateness entails. What an odd parenthetical quote: purporting to trace the origins in literary history of the experience of *Zuspätkommen im Leben*, of coming too late in life, it instead models the kind of historical forced-perspective that the sense of lateness and of lag continually produces. The character of Don Quixote certainly was a latecomer and an epigone of the age of the chivalric romance, Cervantes' comic brilliance hinging in large part on the fact that we know, as Don Quixote does not, that tales of roving knights and their quests are fictions. (The novel is animated by a similar ironic tension: we know, as Hilbig does, but as W. or C. cannot, that this vast police state will crumble in a matter of years if not months). But this is all besides the point, since this expression comes not from Miguel de Cervantes but from Mikhail Gorbachev, who in 1989 came to East Berlin and during a speech made a cryptic warning to the *SED*, the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany, which was so inimical to his *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*' reforms: *Life will punish those*

who come too late. The subsequent sentence confirms that this is indeed the source of the quote: the narrator describes the fear of lateness as “this fear of being punished like a backwards pupil.”

The problem is, of course, that Gorbachev made this speech after the events of the novel take place. On one level, this is a playful metafictional moment in the novel: a gag that, like other devices, reminds us that this novel is stretched over the chasm of 1989 as an historical event. But there is a treasure chest hidden in the weeds of this deliberate misattribution. By taking a quote contemporary to himself and jettisoning it back in literary history, the narrator models for us the compulsive gesture inherent to the feeling of lateness or lag he describes above: seeing in the emerging present nothing but echoes or repetitions of the past. Having just described how his report-writing changes his perception of the objects he surveils, he then performs this for us by a misquote.

But like any good treasure-chest, this one is equipped with a false bottom: this misattribution *also* gestures towards the novel’s composition after 1989, after Gorbachev’s quote had become current, and in so doing it shifts the valence of its referent from Cervantes... to Jorge Luis Borges, who’s story “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” reviews a novel by the fictive, titular author identical in every way to Cervantes’ great book. In Borges’ story, this version is richer than the original, more captivating, by virtue of all that had happened since the original *Don Quixote* was published. To what extent is this very frail reference—and I admit, this is certainly a stretch—asking us to read this novel *explicitly* as a post-’89 novel that, thanks to its historical vantage point, thanks to the fact that it knows the Wall fell, is perhaps *better* able to register those structures of feeling that made up the historical sensorium of East Berlin in the twilight years of the German Democratic Republic? That is, to what extent is the feeling of historical lateness or lag *always* necessarily a secondary feeling, inevitably on closer inspection a

feeling that there must have been a prior feeling (of being on time, or just in time, in *kairos*-time?) that is no longer accessible, but that still might be found somewhere?

Into the Basements

Subterranean spaces allow Hilbig not just to imagine historical time otherwise, but to actually lend shape to a minor sense of historical time, to elaborate and describe it, and, in part, to create and further it. As I have suggested before already, this is no natural or organic sense of time that Hilbig and writers like him have discovered and stumbled upon: it is artificial, created, and a product of specific rhetorical techniques, existing against the background of a specific set of discursive traditions. This is true not only of the falsified, backdated, “hypernormalized” surveillance reports that the narrator produces and which we have identified as the granular engine of lateness and lag, but also of the novel’s subterranean topoi themselves, which themselves reach back at least to the Baroque period.

It will be helpful here to momentarily dwell on this late-socialist chronotope’s earlier antecedents, and in particular on the grotto and the related aesthetic of the grotesque. This brief detour will not only expand on the space’s figural dimensions, but will also make more clear what Hilbig is up to when he sends his narrator, and us with him, underground. Consider Walter Benjamin’s elaboration of the related etymology of grotto/grotesque: he links these half-sunken, sometimes subterranean spaces with hoarded treasures, with the concealed and the buried, and with the enigmatic. Here we can consider alongside each other two citations that will prove remarkably applicable to the underground tunnels in Hilbig’s novel.

Vasari is supposed to have maintained (in his treatise on architecture?) that the term “grotesque” comes from the grottoes in which collectors hoard their treasures.¹³

¹³ Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999. [H4,2]

For even at that time the enigmatically mysterious character of the effect of the grotesque seems to have been associated with its subterraneanly mysterious origin in buried ruins and catacombs. The word is not derived from *grotta* in the literal sense, but from the ‘burial’—in the sense of concealment—which the cave or grotto expresses. For this the eighteenth century still had the expression *das Verkrochene* [that which has crept away.]¹⁴

The etymological link between the grotto and the grotesque also asks us to consider the topos of the underground as a seat of knowledge: the Baroque convention of the grotesque, as in the poetic conceit of a journey into an opened grave, in a poem like Andreas Gryphius’ “Kirchhofsgedanken,” reveals and examines the subterranean contents of a tomb precisely in order to instruct the reader, to impart in her a lesson mortality. The grotto both names the secret hiding place of a very specific kind of buried treasure— that amassed by the collector, a key figure for Benjamin dealt with in Ch. 1 of this dissertation—and figures the buried, the concealed, and the enigmatic as such. I want to suggest here that these Baroque lessons of the grotesque are about attuning readers to a sense of time: to the cyclicity of corporeal decay, and to each reader’s own future as a to-be-buried corpse. Later iterations of the subterranean topos served to localize readers in a sense of *historical* time. No tunnel system demonstrates this better than do the Parisian catacombs, where one might have found the shroud of Marat, hung up in post-revolutionary France, as in Hugo’s *Les misérables*. Benjamin was of course very interested in the figural dimensions of the Parisian catacombs specifically, devoting an entire *Konvolut* to the catacombs and to ancient Paris and reminding us that this repository of historical pasts had earlier housed more diabolical tenants, as when guides in the Middle Ages offered to take visitors “and show them the Devil in his infernal majesty.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Benjamin, Walter. *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama*. New York: Verso. 1998. 171.

¹⁵ “Paris is built over a system of caverns from which the din of Metro and railroad mounts to the surface, and in which every passing omnibus or truck sets up a prolonged echo.. And this great technological system of tunnels and thorough- fares interconnects with the ancient vaults, the limestone quarries, the grottoes and catacombs which,

Perhaps the best historical antecedent of *'Ich'*'s subterranean topos, however, is given to us by the novel's second epigraph: "Wie habe ich mein Leben in einem Traum verloren! sagte er zu sich selbst; Jahre sind verflossen, daß ich von hier herunterstieg..."¹⁶ These words are uttered by Christian, the protagonist of Ludwig Tieck's 1802 fairytale "*Der Runenberg*." His exclamation comes nearly at the end of the story, directly before he meets the fearsome forest-woman, who lures him back up to the mountains and into the old mining tunnels. At the beginning of the tale, Christian leaves his family in the lowlands and wanders into the mountains, where he stays for years living an adventurous and dangerous life. There, he has a visionary experience with a beautiful woman of the mountains: she entrusts to him her magical stone tablet, encrusted with jewels... but he wakes up in a dale, unable to find it and unsure of whether this vision had simply been a dream. Cured of his yearning for adventure, he wanders into a lowland village, marries, works hard, and becomes a successful landholder. But then a kind of madness overtakes him: he begins to doubt the vegetable world of agriculture and to miss his hard life in the mountains. The form this madness takes is, significantly, that of cries and laments emerging from underground, which Christian had learned to hear when once, in his youth, he tore out a mandrake root and heard it cry out. He tells this to the old man, his father, who had wandered over to join him, after having spent years looking for his son, and who now implores Christian to not abandon the successful agrarian life he has cultivated for himself.¹⁷

since the early Middle Ages, have time and again been reentered and traversed. Even today, for the price of two francs, one can buy a ticket of admission to this most nocturnal Paris, so much less expensive and less hazardous than the Paris of the upper world. The Middle Ages saw it differently. Sources tell us that there were clever persons who now and again, after exacting a considerable sum and a vow of silence, undertook to guide their fellow citizens underground and show them the Devil in his infernal majesty." Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999. [C2,1]

¹⁶ Ludwig Tieck, "Der Runenberg." Epigraph to: Hilbig, Wolfgang. *'Ich'*. "Oh how I've lost my life in a dream! said he to himself; years have passed since I descended from this place..." Trans. Isabel Fargo Cole.

¹⁷ Christian's reasoning is notable and uniquely eerie: "Nein, sagte der Sohn, ich erinnere mich ganz deutlich, daß mir eine Pflanze zuerst das Unglück der ganzen Erde bekannt gemacht hat, seitdem verstehe ich erst die Seufzer und Klagen, die allenthalben in der ganzen Natur vernehmbar sind, wenn man nur darauf hören will; in den Pflanzen,

This fairytale is brimming with dialectical energy: Christian is torn between the peaceful gardening life of the flatlands, and the high mountains and their promise of adventure; between the vegetable and mineral worlds; that is, between the physiocratic conceit of wealth grown out of the soil by farmers, and the Faustian marvel of speculative wealth and mined gold and jewels. At stake in this set of antinomies are likewise two competing visions of time: the botanical world of plants is either healthy, natural growth or is troubling, awful putrefaction; either seen through the prism of the agrarian life, allied with the botanical, which sees only the cyclical present of seasons and generations, or set against the subterranean adventures of the miner, a kind of madness that affords a glimpse into deep-time, seeing plants as mere corpses of rock. Value, temporality, and ethics are set into dynamic opposition by this story, but so too is the problem of knowledge: Christian becomes convinced that he knows something that others do not, and in the end he abandons his family and his successful farm to venture back into the mountain mines, looking for jewels. He reappears many years later, himself a ragged mountain-man, carrying a heavy sack, which he tells his wife is full of jewels and precious stones he has dug up. When he pours out its contents, however, his former wife, who has since moved on, sees at her feet only a pile of gravel.

Tieck's fairytale introduces, already in the novel's epigraph, the theme of subterranean space as a repository of hidden, dangerous, suspect forms of knowledge. Like Tieck's Christian, Hilbig's narrator is drawn underground; once there, he discovers an esoteric knowledge of

Kräutern, Blumen und Bäumen regt und bewegt sich schmerzhaft nur eine große Wunde, sie sind der Leichnam vormaliger herrlicher Steinwelten, sie bieten unserm Auge die schrecklichste Verwesung dar. Jetzt verstehe ich es wohl, daß es dies war, was mir jene Wurzel mit ihrem tiefgeholtten Aechzen sagen wollte, sie vergaß sich in ihrem Schmerze und verrieth mir alles. Darum sind alle grünen Gewächse so erzürnt auf mich, und stehn mir nach dem Leben; sie wollen jene geliebte Figur in meinem Herzen auslöschen, und in jedem Frühling mit ihrer verzerrten Leichenmiene meine Seele gewinnen. Unerlaubt und tückisch ist es, wie sie dich, alter Mann, hingegangen haben, denn von deiner Seele haben sie gänzlich Besitz genommen. Frage nur die Steine, du wirst erstaunen, wenn du sie reden hörst." Tieck, Ludwig. "Der Runenberg" in *Phantastus. Erster Theil*. in *Ludwig Tieck Schriften*. Berlin: G Reimer, 1828. Project Gutenberg ebook, 2015. 237.

history that he believes to be immeasurably more valuable than the everyday, street-level ideology of the workers' state above. What's more, this knowledge is predicated on a different understanding of time: on deep-time or geological time, which radically historicizes its own present and sees it as another chapter in the long march of human misery. However, the knowledge held underground, this fairytale-intertext seems to suggest, is not beneficial to life, whether or not it may be true. It leads only to the recognition that, through sheer chance, one is simply a cog in one or another social machine: Christian, after all, becomes simply another forest wretch, carrying around his sack of gravel, trying to insanely show that they are, in fact, jewels. If there is a Rankean insight that sees in all the detritus of history the valuable treasure of unique experiences of the divine, each one already valuable in itself as an object of study, then Hilbig's insight is rather the opposite: it reduces all the treasures of the historical past to mere heaps of gravel, to detritus that accumulates, differentiated only by the fading signatures of what Hilbig, in a novel titled *Alte Abdeckerei* [Old Rendering Plant], named "the shifting bureaucracies of successive power-mad regimes [that] had scattered or absconded with the records and maps of the cavities undercutting the country's treacherous ground.... the castles of each new slave-holding system"¹⁸

When the narrator of Hilbig's novel takes to traversing the underground tunnels of Prenzlauer-Berg, all of these resonances find themselves reactivated: the grotto/grotesque complex, its suggestion of hermetic knowledge, the repository of historical pasts, and even the demonic or supernatural presences haunting these spaces. The tension between the novel's ostensible subject-matter (the dreary reporting of a third-rate writer in the employ of the *MfS*) and these rich, fantastical scenes is made all the more jarring by eruptions of the narrator's

¹⁸ Hilbig, Wolfgang. *Old Rendering Plant*. Trans. Isabel Fargo Cole. 97.

lyrical deep-dives. Exploring these vaults allows W. or C. to begin to think about his surveillance reports as literary writing, to consider his work as an informant as already engaged in the creation of fictional worlds. In a moment of surprising insight, he even considers submitting his reports, unedited, to West German literary journals, where he had already had some poems published thanks to the sponsorship of the Stasi and their network of collaborators in the West.

It is in the basements and the large swaths of time he spends there that the narrator begins to think about the implications of his reporting as something more than mere surveillance. Down there, something happens that effects a re-enchantment of the lifeworld of the German Democratic Republic after the fact. Underground spaces thus become something like sacred, magical zones: in addition to his own personal fears and haunting regrets, which reappear as his fear that someone else is traversing the basements along with him, perhaps observing him, the basements beneath Prenzlauer Berg contain, for Hilbig's narrator, the remnants of Germany's history organized as a kind of decrepit collection. It is here that what I have termed the narrator's vision of the "historical sublime" finds its fullest expression:

Hier unten fand sich alles, was von ihrer Hurerei mit den wechselnden Systemen noch übrig war... hier hatte sie ihre abgelegten Fetische versteckt, hier waren ihre vergangenen Sprachen vergraben, in den Bündeln alter verbotener Zeitungen zum Beispiel, wilhelminische, nationalistische, demokratische, faschistische, stalinistische, nachstalinistische... hier unten in der Düsternis phosphoreszierte das alte verbrecherische Papier wie ungewaschene Unterwäsche... und hier unten wandelten die Toten und die Untoten und belustigen sich an den Überbleibseln ihrer einstigen Obsessionen. Und hier lagen die unausgebrüteten Eier der Stadt: niemand wußte, was aus ihnen noch auskriechen konnte. Und hier faulten die Exkreme der Stadt. —Nachdem er eine Woche in den Gängen ein Versteck für sein Papierröllchen gesucht hatte, fand er zufällig einen sich kegelförmig verbreiternden Platz, der vor einer sichtlich neuen Betonmauer endete. Oben in der wand entdeckte er eine noch brauchbare Lampenfassung, in der Nähe

lag eine stabile Holzkiste herum... Dies, so hatte er gedacht, ist ein sicherer Platz zum Nachdenken...¹⁹

Like the dialectical antinomy of the “grottoes in which collectors hoard their treasures,” these basements contain hordes of forbidden newspapers, “lost languages,” other detritus and shameful remnants, that don’t glimmer as buried treasure might but instead phosphoresce with the energy of cast-off fetishes and obsessions. As much a spatial metaphor for historical time as it is a storehouse for difficult and suppressed affects, they work by means of the same logic of collecting that Benjamin linked to the grotto. That is, they contain no narrated history organized into linear time, but rather objects that express different modes of historicity, the collection of which serves, like ritual objects, to organize a vision of history. The act of exploring this collection serves quite literally to instruct the reader in a way of considering historical time otherwise. But what does it mean to represent historical time not as a sequential course of events, but through a logic of collecting that sets alongside each other various, heterogeneous remnants? What kind of sense of the present becomes possible once the past is figured as heaps of detritus, not behind the present but rather *below* it?

The anthropological reframing of Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope as a way to think about different modes of historical consciousness, and about the “historical emotions” by which they find expression, can help us understand what the novel is up to in passages like these.

¹⁹ Hilbig, *Ich*. 249-250. “Down here was all that remained of her whoredom with the changing systems... here she’d hidden her cast-off fetishes, here the languages of her past were buried, in the bundles of old banned newspapers, for instance, Wilhelmine, nationalist, democratic, fascist, Stalinist, post-Stalinist... down here in the dark the corrupt old paper phosphoresced like unwashed undergarments... and down here the dead and the undead walked, amounting themselves with the remnants of their erstwhile obsessions. And here lay the city’s unhatched eggs; no one knew what might yet crawl out of them. And here the city’s excrement rotted. —After a week spent searching the passages beneath the city for a place to hide his little roll of paper, he happened upon a space that opened out in a cone shape, ending at a visibly new concrete wall. Up in the wall he discovered a still-usable light-bulb socket, and stable wooden crate lay nearby... This, so he thought, is a safe place to think things over...” (214-215)

Bundles of old newspapers, “Wilhelmine, nationalist, democratic, fascist, Stalinist, post-Stalinist,” index not just successive political orders but also distinct, culturally-conditioned, historical experiences of time.²⁰ One should not underestimate the temporal operations inherent in the newspaper as a form of discourse: these become all the more noticeable when it’s old newspapers we’re dealing with. Old newspapers, after all, are perhaps the discursive form best suited to registering senses of everyday time: key technologies of linear, historical time, they disseminate the endless creation of the new, even if not always in the same ways or to the same effect. What’s more, like surveillance reports, they are para-literary, but the problem of how to read them is less significant here than is the question of what we are to do with their sum, with their being assembled here in a collection. The image of bundles of newspapers, I argue, is something like an allegory for the anthropological understanding of distinct modes of historical consciousness. They are placed alongside each other in this subterranean space, and the passage makes no claims as to which one is the *right* or accurate historicity, but attempts to draw a conclusion from their successive presence over the course of the German twentieth century, and their co-presence in the simultaneous time-space of this decrepit collection in a basement that appears suddenly very much like a grotto. But why is it necessary for this vision of the twentieth century to be housed underground, in these basements? Put another way, how does this understanding of the past emerge from the narrator’s own sense of historical time, the feeling of lateness or depression that marks his experience of the present?

This passage poses questions about these successive political orders of historical time not as a past from which one could learn—there is nothing to be learned from these old

²⁰ Each of these political orders entailing, we can imagine, a distinct felt experience of historical time, and a commensurate imaginary of what it means to be an historical subject. We can compare this, for instance, to François Hartog’s construct of “regimes of historicity.” Hartog, François. *Régimes d’historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Seuil, 2003.

newspapers— but rather as a past which is felt to be bearing down on the present. These questions are not unlike those posed by Nietzsche in his *Nutzen und Nachteilen* essay, since what is at stake here is not the problem of historical knowledge, but rather the elucidation of a mode of historical experience. It is the bearing-down, the experience of the past as a hefty collection to be dealt with, that constitutes the narrator’s vision of historical reality. The past makes no epistemological claims on the present, but rather a claim about its significance and its urgency: this is why, I argue, this experience of the historical past can be understood to be structured like an affect, a kind of feeling.

Though it may fall out of the narrator’s practice of producing backdated reports, the historical emotion of lateness or lag precedes any reflection on the vision of history that this basement holds. The feeling of being a latecomer provides the occasion for the narrator’s, and our own, thought, just as the basement (and the wooden crate in a cone-shaped space) provides the “safe place to think things over...” It is as if his overarching sense of lateness, his feeling of the past as a burden weighing on his sense of the now, drives the narrator into Prenzlauer Berg’s basements— but, once in these basements, he finds only further confirmation that his intuitions were right: further expressions of the historical past’s piling itself onto the present, whether in tons of bricks or in piles of newspapers. But if this collection cannot be instructive to the narrator, then perhaps it can allow us to pose a question: is the narrator’s awareness of himself as a historical being merely the subjective experience of another “regime of historicity” like those he enumerates, or is it something of a different order altogether?

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the link between temporalities of lateness or lag and subterranean spaces in *‘Ich’* is necessary and forms a central lynchpin of the novel’s project. If

time finds expression in this particular place, narrated by this particular voice, then it should come as no surprise that the topos of the underground itself affords a kind of ice-core sample of Wolfgang Hilbig's oeuvre. Let us go in for a final dig.

In 1991, Wolfgang Hilbig opened his speech for his induction into the *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung* with an account of his childhood: "Meinen Vater habe ich nicht kennengelernt, er wurde schon 1942 bei Stalingrad als vermißt gemeldet, und ich wuchs in der Wohnung meiner Großeltern mütterlicherseits auf, mit meiner Mutter zusammen."²¹ His was, in his own estimation, one of countless fatherless childhoods in postwar Germany, but one scene that he picks out from his childhood in the Saxon-Thuringian small town of Meuselwitz will prove for us illuminating. Along with the town's other inhabitants, he took refuge in the old coal mines during Allied bombing raids on the industrial region in the last year of the war:

So bin ich schon als Zwei- oder Dreijähriger Hunderte Meter tief unter die Erde gefahren, auf em Höhepunkt der Luftangriffe mehrfach in einer Nacht; und ich weiß nicht, was prägender auf mich gewirkt hat: die Unruhe dieser Zeit, die später, notwendig vielleicht, zur Unbeweglichkeit geführt hat, oder die bewegungslosen Familienverhältnisse, die irgendwann in Unruhe umschlugen.²²

It is almost too fitting that Hilbig's earliest memories involve traveling deep into underground tunnels. Much later, he would come into his own as a writer in another subterranean space:

working in a *Heizkeller*, a basement boiler-room, gave him just the kind of factory job that left

²¹ Hilbig, Wolfgang. *Essays—Reden—Interviews*. Frankfurt a. M., S. Fischer Verlag, 2021. 258. "I never got to know my father, he was already in 1942 reported as missing at Stalingrad, and I grew up in the apartment of my maternal grandparents, along with my mother."

²² *Ibid.* "So I had, already as a two- or three-year-old, travelled hundreds of meters deep into the earth, at the height of the air raids sometimes several times in one night; and I don't know what had influenced me more: the restlessness of these times, which later, perhaps necessarily, led to motionlessness, or the motionless familial relationships, which eventually turned into restlessness."

lots of time open for writing.²³ If the topos of the basement itself carries no necessarily relation to the temporalities of lateness and lag with which it forms a chronotope, then Hilbig's biography provides a more convincing reference point. This early childhood impression glows with significance when we consider the prominence of subterranean spaces across Hilbig's other prose texts. Written sometime in the early 1980s but published first in 1990, his novella *Alte Abdeckerei* [Old Rendering-Plant] takes place in a small industrial town, also called A., and takes as its setting the ruins of an old factory, parts of which are still extant as an animal tallow-rendering factory, where workers who speak only in grunts and obscenities produce low-quality soap. The tunnels and vaults of this factory complex are the narrator's childhood and adolescent playgrounds, and the soap factory, significantly named *Germania II*, his chosen place of employ when he begins to check out of society. A short story in the collection *Der Schlaf der Gerechten* has no human characters, taking place in a basement filled to the brim with old bottles of homemade cider, many of them bursting and overflowing with ferment. Almost like an extended allegorical image of wasted duration, this story finds its delight in lyrical descriptions of rotting apples and the excess of cider into which they're preserved.

Hilbig has been descending underground since his earliest childhood, and it would be facile to read into this an excavation of so-called buried memories. Instead, as this chapter has argued, what is at stake is a unique and complex articulation of a chronotope that described a vision of history. This chronotope affords a form of historical knowledge which this chapter has sought to delineate.

²³ This detail of his life I learned from a talk given by Wilhelm Bartsch, author of the Afterword to Vol. 8 of Hilbig's collected works, published in 2021 by S. Fischer Verlag. The talk was given on 1 September 2021 at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

Something strange happens to the narration when W. or C. enters the system of tunnels and basements beneath Prenzlauer Berg: like electromagnetic instruments going haywire, his straightforward descriptions fizzle and crackle with lyrical interference, picking up on the city's energy, its historical provenance, and its distant pasts. In Bakhtin's language, this is a space charged with time and with history. And, indeed, it's hard to shrug off the notion that something is going on down there:

Die Kellergänge unter den Häusern von Berlin sind in der Regel sauber, und die Mehrzahl von ihnen ist ausreichend beleuchtet. Und sie waren in diesem Winter warm, der Frost drang noch kaum bis auf ihre Gründe hinab. Es gab Plätze dort unten—besonders einen bestimmten Platz meinte ich, den ich häufig aufsuchte—, wo ich stundenlang gesessen hatte, auf einer Holzkiste, Zigaretten geraucht und dem unfassbaren massiv der Riesenstadt Berlin, die mir zu Häuten schlief, gelauscht hatte. selbstverständlich war es still hier unten, man hörte nichts, höchstwahrscheinlich wären hier unten nur Explosionen zu hören gewesen. Es war nur ein leises Summen in der Stille, vielleicht nur in meiner Einbildung, oder vielleicht summte nur die von der Riesenlast über mir zusammengepreßte Luft in meinen Gehörwindungen. Die Stadt über meinem Kopf was wie ein ungeheurer Generator, dessen unablässige Vibration kaum merklich in allem Gestein war, wo sie jenem feinen, fernher kommenden Summen glich, es war unerklärlich vorhanden in allen Beton Fundamenten, die mich umgaben, und in der unvorstellbaren Zahl roter und brauner Ziegel, die zusammengesetzt waren und hinabreichten und das Häusermeer der Stadt Berlin in der Erde verankerten. Seit tausend Jahren—ich wußte es nicht, seit wann—war das Gestein in den Schoß der Erde gefügt, und es war unklar, wievieltausend Jahre die Stadt noch aushalten konnte, und bestehenbleiben konnte, mit dem unvorstellbaren Gewicht ihrer Grundmauern, die in das Herz Europas gepfählt waren. —Und alles, was wir lernen und begreifen konnten, war wir ermitteln und aufklären konnten, oben und unten und mitten in Berlin, war die Erkenntnis, daß wir enden mußten, —nicht aber der urbane Moloch Berlin... daß wir verschwinden mußten wie Kehrlicht, und daß die ins Erdreich gewachsenen Steine von Berlin über kurz oder lang von unserer Ära nichts mehr wiederzugeben wußten.—Dies war es, was ich in jahrelanger Tätigkeit ermittelt hatte: und ich hatte große Lust, das Ergebnis dem Oberleutnant Feuerbach hinzubreiten.²⁴

²⁴ Hilbig, 'Ich'. 20-21. "The basement passages beneath Berlin's houses are generally clean, and most of them are well lit. And this winter they were warm; the frost barely penetrated to their foundations. There were places down there—I thought of one place in particular I often resorted to—where I'd sat for hours on a wooden crate, smoking cigarettes and listening to Berlin's vast mass asleep above my head. Of course it was quiet down here, you couldn't

Perhaps what is most significant about the topos of the sub-basement or the secret tunnel is its being sealed-off from the historical present above. What we are dealing with is no empirical historical knowledge, but something rather more arcane. This space is doubly and triply hermetically insulated: not only from the cold but also from all noises and any street-level clamor. Even the cycles of daylight and nighttime mean nothing in these tunnels, existing as they do in a time-space seemingly apart. Oftentimes, the narrator will exit the basements, surprised that it is already or still light or dark out. All of this sensory deprivation provides just the right environment for the narrator's mental exercises: it's imagining the masses of people asleep above him that allows him to tune into the soft sound, "perhaps only [his] imagination," that seems to be the signal of some kind of world-historical presence. What weird, secret link connects the "quiet hum in the stillness," the sleeping masses, and the flashing vision of Berlin as "an enormous generator?" Whatever it may be, it's certainly massive: the narrator's reverie courses over the feeling that this is something unimaginably vast that he's tuning into—it is "inexplicable" and "unimaginable," "mind-boggling" in its scale. We can glimpse in this Freud's "oceanic feeling," especially when the uncountable bricks turn into an anchor for the sea of houses. But we can just as well note that this scalar reverie is an instance of Kant's mathematical

hear a thing; down here probably nothing but explosions could be heard. There was but a quiet hum in the stillness, perhaps only my imagination, or perhaps it was the air in the windings of my ear, compressed by the colossal weight above me. The city above my head was like an enormous generator, its ceaseless vibration barely perceptible in everything stone, echoing that faint faraway hum, inexplicably present in all the cement foundations surrounding me, and in the mind-boggling quantities of red and brown bricks assembled and reaching down and anchoring the city's sea of houses to the earth. A thousand years long—how long, I didn't know—the stones had been sunk into the bowels of the earth, and it was unclear how many more thousands of years the city could hold out, could endure, with the inconceivable weight of its foundations driven into Europe's heart. And all we could learn and grasp, all we could clarify and reveal, above and below and in Berlin's midst, was the realization that we must cease—but not the urban Moloch Berlin... that we must vanish like street sweepings and sooner or later the stones of Berlin, grown into the earth, would tell nothing of our era. —That was what I had discovered in my years of operation, and I had a great desire to submit my findings to First Lieutenant Feuerbach." Hilbig, 'I'. 14.

sublime, finding delight in its own inability to comprehend the vastness of something which seems spatial or material, but turns out in the final analysis to be temporal.

It's unlikely that these basements had already been dug a thousand years ago, but its clear at this point in the passage that we are dealing not with historical chronologies, but rather with a temporal imaginary that attempts to simultaneously think in the scale of human time and that of deep, geological time. His sense of being a late-comer and a lagging subject engenders a vision of history as something vast, and much of the novel's subterranean lyricism is devoted to elaborating and fleshing out the contents of this vision of history. We can see in it a distant echo of the heavy lateness of the past so significant for Nietzsche and Benjamin's Greeks: here, it has been completely transformed and reappears at the 'end of history' as the cavernous emptiness that is this heavy burden's dialectical antinomy.

The contents of this vision express a specifically East German historical experience, in which the 1989 collapse of communism is but another iteration of sudden and drastic regime changes. The invocation of thousand-year timespans suggests the Thousand-Year Reich, and it will become clear in later passages that the narrator's sense of lateness emerges from the consciousness of this regime's abject and violent failure... along with the dizzying array of all other regimes that had, in Germany's 20th century, attempted to secure whatever form of eternity. What this sublime vision affords is not historical knowledge but a kind of anti-knowledge: the final sentences of W. or C.'s lyrical reverie turn to the masonry and stones themselves (like the pebble that Virginia Woolf's Mr. Ramsay kicks on the beach), attempting to reach beyond human history to some vaster, natural-historical frame— and finding nothing to say there. What would he even report to Feuerbach, if he actually were to “submit [his]

findings”? Like Christian in Tieck’s fairytale, all knowledge of history itself, history as such, history in general turns out to be so many bags of gravel.

On one level, this entire novel is about the narrator’s attempts to find the words that would accurately lend presence to the mode of historical consciousness that he has stumbled upon in the basements and tunnels beneath Prenzlauer Berg. Insofar as these basements occasion lyrical reveries like the one read above, which seem to open up a different dimension of temporal experience, they prove integral to the depressive chronotope that structures the novel. This chronotope is a function of time, place, and voice. As lateness or lag, basements and tunnels, and the narrator’s speaker position as a half-reluctant *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, it constitutes Depression as the novel’s hermetic subject. This chronotope is what affords the novel’s rendering of historical time as a configured experience.

The feeling that there has been some premonitory feeling of socialism’s collapse proves to be itself a ruse: a fault of historical vision that, upon closer inspection, is wholly without content. It is a feeling engendered by the search for historical truth itself: the suspicion of false bottoms and hidden passageways that would, somehow, reveal the precious secret of the twentieth century. This search for buried historical truths is what unites all the regimes of historicity that W. or C. encounters in Prenzlauer Berg’s basements and tunnels, and the dim awareness of the futility and circularity of this search is what sets his own vision of history apart from all of these. It is as if the late- and post-socialist chronotope of the underground takes the promise of knowledge so central to Baroque and Romantic grottoes and mines and turns it on its head: the only lesson to be found in these tunnels and sub-basements might have to do with the futility of mining the past for answers. The underground teaches these narrators nothing, and only generates the conditions for further, deeper, searches.

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