Tim Senkbeil

Time and the Formation of Time in German Literature Dealing with 1989 and the Aftermath

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the so-called 'Wende' (turnaround) mark a central historic turning point, a peripety which holds a special place in collective memory.[1] What happened can be described as a "Zeit-Zäsur" (caesura in time) (Detmers / Ostheimer 2016, 10), an event that requires societies to generate new concepts of time and demands new narratives. In the last 35 years, this peripety remains a popular subject in contemporary literature, and in recent years it has become particularly prominent again, with a focus on the post-reunification years, the 1990s and early 2000s (Schumacher 2023).

My doctoral dissertation uses a corpus of about fifteen German texts, published since the 1990s, and examines the formation of time and its relation to the narrative of radical changes happening during 1989 and the following years. Starting with Käte Hamburger's (1955) elaborations on 'Zeitgestaltung' (formation of time), which state: "Ist die Zeit nicht thematisch, nicht gestaltet, nicht erzählt, so ‚ist' sie nicht in einem Dichtwerk. Sie ist nicht trotzdem da wie in der Wirklichkeit […] (418) ["If time is not topical, not constructed, not narrated, then it 'is' not in a work of poetry. It is not there nevertheless, like in reality […]" (translated by Meister / Schernus 2011, 90)]. Based on an aesthetically reflected understanding of 'Zeitgestaltung,' I would like to pursue an analytical approach that takes into account both the formal design and the semantic thematisation of time in narrative texts. In line with Hamburger, I understand 'Zeitgestaltung' as a feature of literary texts, by which time gains "kompositorische Relevanz" (compositional relevance) (Weixler / Werner 2015, 3) by influencing the texts' composition, figure constellations, and central motifs.

Narratives of the 'Wende' itself, the term being derived from sailing terminology and describing a change in direction, contain a core relating to temporality. Literary texts narrating 1989, the early ones, as well as contemporary novels, show a particular affinity for narrating and forming time. I argue that the changed perception of time after 1989 finds its way into the narratives on a formal level and influences the texts by narrating the 'Wende' as a loss of time, 'in-between-time' or transitional waiting time rather than as an immediate change, a peripeteian moment or an instantaneous event.

Following Aristotle's understanding of peripety and applying the reflections of Viktor Šklovskij, the temporal extension of the 'Wende' exceeds the outlines of one single defining moment. Instead, these years are better described as a transitional period, which then follows or encompasses the peripety. The corpus contains works with a disrupted temporal order, whereas the texts often do not narrate the expected singular peripety but rather seem to shape this in-between-time through their formation of time.

[1] This project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – GRK2560, 413881800.

Works Cited

Detmers, Ines / Ostheimer, Michael (2016): *Das temporale Imaginäre. Zum Chronotopos als Paradigma literaturästhetischer Eigenzeiten.* Hannover.

Hamburger, Käte (1955): "Die Zeitlosigkeit der Dichtung." In: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 29 (No. 3), pp. 413–426.

Hamburger, Käte (1957): *Die Logik der Dichtung.* Stuttgart.

Meister, Jan Christoph / Schernus, Wilhelm (eds.) (2011): *Time. From Concept to Narrative Construct: A Reader.* Berlin / Boston, MA.

Schumacher, Eckhard (2023): "Eskalation erzählen. Nachwendenarrationen als Gewaltgeschichte." In: *Merkur* 895, pp. 16–29.

Šklovskij, Viktor (1984): *Theorie der Prosa.* Trans. by Gisela Drohla. Frankfurt.

Weixler, Antonius / Werner, Lukas (2015): "Zeit und Erzählen – eine Skizze." In: Antonius Weixler / Lukas Werner (eds.): *Zeiten erzählen. Ansätze – Aspekte – Analysen*, Berlin / Boston, MA, pp. 1–24.

Tim Senkbeil
University of Greifswald, Department of German Philology
IRTG 'Baltic Peripeties. Narratives of Reformations, Revolutions and Catastrophes'
tim.senkbeil@uni-greifswald.de