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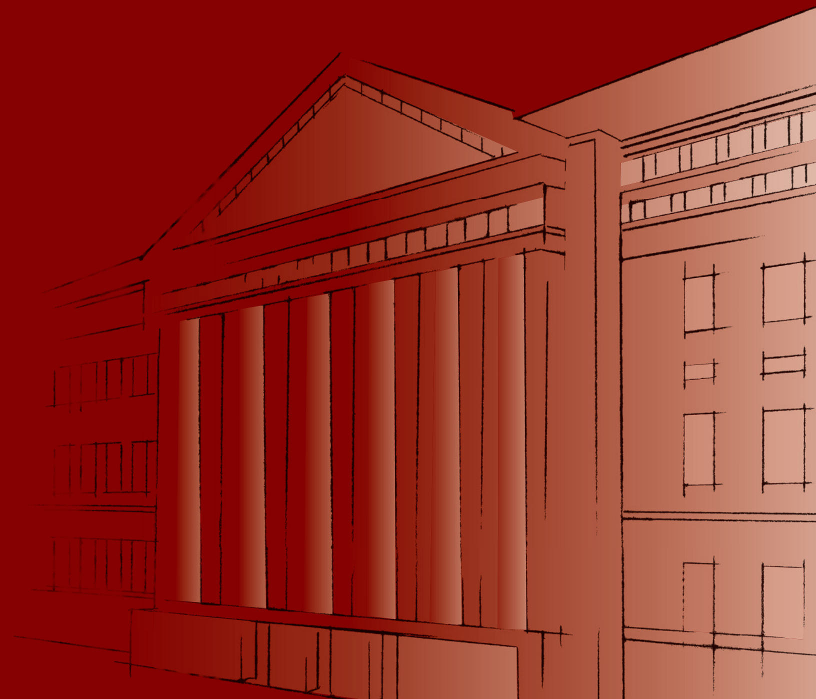

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UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
Press

Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Institute of Cultural Research, Department of Literature and Theater Research, University of Tartu, Estonia

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4. Ostups, Artis. 2026. Sublime Historical Experience, Epiphanic Moments, and Melancholic Narration in Pauls Bankovskis’s *18* and Dušan Šarotar’s *Panorama*. *Letonica* 58: 72–90.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Meaning of Heterogeneous Time

1.1.1. Fiction and Historical Time

The work on this study began with the observation that contemporary Latvian and, more broadly, Eastern European fiction engages with the past in a way that necessitates revisiting its relationship to modernist and postmodernist approaches and expanding the theoretical framework for its interpretation. Similar to modernist experiments with the psychological dimensions of time and postmodern reflections on the constructed nature of history, the novels I discuss in my study blur conventional boundaries between what has happened before and what is happening now. However, perhaps more intensively than modernist and postmodernist fiction, they embody the ambition to deconstruct a particular form of historical time by experimenting with narrative temporality and metaphorical thinking. Historical time, according to an often-quoted definition by Reinhart Koselleck, "is bound up with social and political actions, with concretely acting and suffering human beings and their institutions and organizations" (2004 [1979]: 2; it is shaped also by "cultural norms" (Simon and Tamm 2023: 1)). The form of historical time challenged or deconstructed in these novels is linear and homogenous, which, in socialist states during the 20th century, was turned into an ideological force that favored progress and neglected the traumatic memory of totalitarian oppression. Contemporary Eastern European fiction faces the need to address this historical background if it wants to achieve a more humane conception of historical time, thereby preserving the past from being forgotten. The emphasis on the inner complexity of the present moment and on the specific agency of literature distinguishes contemporary fiction from conventional historical novels, which transport the reader to the past and offer a panoramic view of specific events. Instead, the books I discuss in this dissertation combine modernist and postmodernist techniques to achieve a self-conscious yet affective and emotional connection to the past as experienced by a contemporary person. The temporal distortions in these works are much more than a formal experiment and should be considered as signs of a particular historical experience marked by ruptures.

The complexity of time in Latvian and Eastern European fiction echoes how 20th- and 21st-century philosophers of history conceptualized historical time, including its ethical and political dimensions and its radical turning points, most notably the fall of communism. Throughout the dissertation, I combine insights from the philosophy of history and literary studies with the examination of the cultural and historical context in which the novels are set. Since these novels involve critical and imaginative reflection on time and history, the theoretical framework of the philosophy of history, with its focus on changes in the experience of time, proves helpful in my case studies. However, because I am analyzing literature, I examine historical reflections in close relation to narrative

strategies, something that philosophers of history, for the most part, are reluctant to do in their broad conceptualizations of the contemporary condition. Different theoreticians have suggested a connection between literary and philosophical accounts of time, focusing either on how it pertains to the construction of literary history (Friedman 2019) or on how literary examples can serve as metaphors for historical time, which has little to do with literature in a technical sense (Kleinberg 2013). Still, this connection has not been thoroughly explored in current literary and philosophical studies that address the same historical ruptures.

The task of this dissertation is to explore how Latvian and other Eastern European novels engage with historical time by disrupting the linear progression from the past to the future. It investigates how novels – poetically, narratively, and thematically – extend the present moment beyond a simple transition point, as it would be in a homogenous perception, to reflect and shape the heterogeneous experience of time, aligning it with broader discussions in the philosophy of history. The concept of the present here represents the sense by a living human group that can relate past events to significant changes over time (cf. North 2018: 72). In other words, it is a historical present, a present of a certain and evolving "us", which can be reconceptualized by an individual, in this case, a contemporary novelist. Insights from the philosophy of history are employed to accentuate the ethical, historical, and political concerns of literary writing. Simultaneously, the examination of specific literary techniques reveals the significance of imagination and narrative in constructing and understanding historical time.

1.1.2. Walter Benjamin and the Critique of Homogenous Time

The notion of heterogeneous time comes from Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history (2006 [1940]). While homogeneous time suggests that history unfolds as a continuous, measurable sequence of events, heterogeneous time is seen as fragmented, layered, and plural, reflecting the temporal diversity of lived experience and enabling a more just stance towards the victims of the past. Benjamin introduced heterogeneous time as the antithesis to the historicist conception of history, according to which the past should be represented on its own terms rather than applying present-day values or needs, which would make the investigation too subjective. When Benjamin formulated his views on history, professional historians were still mainly interested in a remote past, "and accounting for the present or the immediate past was dismissed as the task of journalists and publicists" (Mudrovcic 2024: 12). This approach to history, in the middle of the 20th century, might have seemed incompatible with the current events that themselves had historical roots and belonged to specific and oppressive politics of time. Benjamin's ethical-political philosophy of history gained increasing appreciation only in the 1990s, as it resonated with the growing fascination with memory and trauma in Western societies. In the aftermath of the Second World War, however, the philosophy of history was still largely governed by the concept of homogeneous time. This is exemplified by Karl Löwith's thesis that the future is the primary focus of history. He viewed history – both as a broader sensibility and a

scholarly discipline – as "determined by an eschatological motivation," which "provides a scheme of progressive order and meaning" and "gives orientation in time" (1957: 8). As such, history aligned itself with the prevailing feeling in post-war European societies that, to a large extent, they need once again to break away from the past to build a better future.

During that time, Hannah Arendt was one of the few thinkers who stressed that relying on "the modern concept of process pervading history and nature alike" (1961: 63) might be problematic since it could hinder historical self-awareness and responsibility. This is also recognized by Emmanuel Levinas, who developed a diachronic understanding of time to emphasize the obligation to respond to others from the past (Levinas 1987 [1979]; for more on the ethics of time in Levinas's philosophy, see Hofmeyr 2023). Benjamin, Arendt, and Levinas suggest that there is an ethical dimension to time and that some temporal configurations are more just toward the past than others. To discuss the ethics of time means being aware of historical suffering and its impact on the present, as well as the limits of narrative comprehension and cultural forms of remembering or forgetting. Literary narratives, with their ability to radically change our perception of time by representing how others have suffered from particular temporal systems, are well-suited for exploring these questions. As Colin Davis writes, "Ethics is a place where the contest over values takes place, not where it is resolved; and stories are one of the preeminent sites where ethics plays out its dangerous game" (2018: 33). In the light of this statement, contemporary fiction tackling the issues of historical time could be considered as a process of estimating which narrative and poetic strategies can be employed to connect the past and the present in a deeply empathic way. At the most basic level, the writers whose work I analyze in my articles seek to understand what has happened between people in the past and how their experiences relate to the present. This exploration of the past through the lens of the present takes specific forms, including the selection of narrative structures and a more nuanced examination of particular poetic devices. For example, Pauls Bankovskis's novel *18* (2014) consists of two parallel storylines, inviting the reader to find resonances between them. In terms of poetic choices, his work includes metaphors of ghosts and voids to convey the enduring impact of historical events on individual and collective thought, advocating, in a Benjaminian fashion, a sense of intergenerational responsibility.

Critics have typically emphasized the influence of historical materialism and Judaism on Benjamin's thinking (Moses 2009 [1992]). However, the idea of temporal overlapping also aligns with how historical time and memory are explored in literature. It could be argued that Benjamin's ideas on temporal complexity are rooted in literature, given his preoccupation with Marcel Proust's fiction throughout his life. In Proust's prose, Benjamin found the difference between "an experienced event", which is finite and confined to the past, and "a remembered event", which "is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it" (1968: 202; cf. Brockmeier on Proust (2015: 268–272). In his philosophy of history, the same logic is elevated to the level of historical

processes, and a call for a new ethics of time is made. Since Benjamin's death in 1940, his concept of heterogeneous time has gained relevance in many scholarly disciplines, most notably in the philosophy of history, where it helps to explain how the experience of time has changed through numerous historical ruptures. Benjamin's logic also shapes the discussions of the contemporary moment as a distinct historical category, a theme addressed in many fictional works. Echoing Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben claims that "the contemporary is not only the one, who perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times" (2009 [2008]: 53). Here, it is stressed that temporal heterogeneity can have a critical force and agency, meaning that it can intervene in existing conceptions and expose their weaknesses. However, neither Benjamin nor Agamben, who adopted his view, has reflected on historical time in a more thorough manner and in relation to more recent disruptive events and theoretical frameworks. This is why, in my study, I turn to contemporary philosophy of history, which builds on Benjamin's understanding of time by expanding the conceptual apparatus and paying more attention to culture.

Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier, introducing the edited volume *Rethinking Historical Time: New Approaches to Presentism*, observe how "[f]or an increasing number of authors, time has become nonlinear, complex and constituted in part by the preservation of the past in the present," canceling the historicist chronotope (2019: 2). During modernity, the work of historians, for the most part, was "characterized by a progressive development because the past in the light of the future was the modern key category of self-understanding," hence "[t]he present was always conceived as a temporary station between the past and the future-in-the-making" (Lorenz 2019: 24). The newest insights from philosophers of history illuminate the incompatibility of sequential and linear time, essential to traditional historiography, with how time is experienced after the political regimes of modernity have exhausted the idea of progress and left us with the past as something continuing, repeating, and mobilizing. The past here is not simply an object of factual research and linear emplotment, which erases experience by reducing it to mere textuality and the steady flow of history. Instead, the past has a tangible quality; it seems real to those who appreciate it. More precisely, I suggest that the conjunction of philosophy and fiction enables us to recognize how novels, in their thematic and structural features, respond to culturally felt changes in temporality and how they produce new perceptions of historical time. The philosophy of history, which configures changes in temporal experience with respect to humanity (Simon 2019a: 33), is particularly apt for discerning how literary concepts of time relate to broader historical sensibilities, that is, the felt changes in the experience of time at the sociopolitical and cultural levels.

1.1.3. From Modernist Nonlinearity to Presentist Temporalities

The problems and affordances of nonlinear time are well known to writers. Many modernist authors, as Jens Brockmeier points out, explored "nonlinear and non-chronological subjective experience" and "composed polychronic trajectories," thereby creating correspondences between memory and narrative structure (2015: 268). For example, the works of Marcel Proust, studied and translated by Benjamin, can be linked to Henri Bergson's (2001 [1889]) concept of *durée*, which expands the past into the present, while James Joyce warned about the past's ability to disturb the present. Consider the passage in *Ulysses*, where Stephen Dedalus tells Mr. Deasy that history for him "is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." Still, he is also aware of the possibility of that nightmare coming back and giving him a "kick" (2000 [1922]: 42). Here, the past feels threatening and undesirable, but regardless of this quite modern sentiment, it is essential to notice that there is a possibility of engaging with it.

Postmodern writers learned from modernist discoveries and produced texts that "focus on the continuity of the past in the present, on the interplay between different time levels, on forms of historical consciousness, and on the recuperation of history," as Ansgar Nünning maintains in his essay on English metahistorical novels (1997: 224). Whereas such postmodern novelists as Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie stressed the fictionality and the constructed nature of history, contemporary fiction, often appearing less ironic and more sincere and affective than postmodernism (see Demeyer and Vitse 2021), depicts the presence of traumatic events, both reacting to and forming "the emergence of a new historical sense," which, according to Peter Boxall, is determined by "multiple temporal confusions" (2013: 43). One of the few books analyzing the structure of present in prose is Mathias Nilges's monograph *How to Read a Moment: The American Novel and the Crisis of the Present* where he states that the end of the future, brought by the collapse of communism and the growing climate anxiety, puts the novelist in an awkward position, that is, the writer is stuck in the present, unable to imagine a radically different future (2021: 3; cf. Anne Fuch's (2019) argument that temporal heterogeneity is a phenomenon of the digital age, which is not addressed by Nigles). However, Nilges does not elaborate on the idea that this condition initiates not just boredom and fear, but also the continuous intrusion of the past into the present, which is perhaps more characteristic of European fiction, with its focus on traumatic history.

For the past decade, the notion of the present has been actively explored in Latvian and other Eastern European literatures, as it revisits many painful events of the 20th century, seeking to understand what happened and what remains impactful. In Western European and American fiction, this process began as early as the 1960s (see Elias 2001). The specifics of the Latvian literary environment will be discussed in a separate section. Here, it suffices to point out that the Latvian novels chosen for analysis represent the current moment, in contrast to homogenous time, as a medium for rethinking the past and its presence after the socialist and utopian emphasis on the future has lost its power. The present, in

other words, is where time slows down and eventually breaks, revealing that it is made of past experiences that call for reconsideration here and now. I argue that this is done to achieve a new approach to history that is ethically and politically conscious and can be grasped only in relation to contemporary philosophy of history, which offers a more nuanced terminology for heterogeneous time.

At the same time, literature gives meaning to more abstract concepts as detached epistemic questions often do not "recognize ethical situatedness, spoken and lived as if they were situated nowhere" (Elgabsi and Gilbert 2023: 10). The same goes for political contexts, which often involve a struggle between different temporalities that are posited as either good or bad for a society. As Chris Lorenz writes, such temporal demarcations as "progressive" and "backward", "timely" and "untimely" "are as politically contested as the spatial demarcations" (2010: 94). The most obvious example, and the most important one for a discussion of Eastern European fiction, here would be the carefully constructed experience of time in totalitarian regimes. Arendt famously noted how the totalitarian forces of the 20th century were obsessed with "perpetual motion" (1973 [1951]: 306) and attempted to transform "the human species into an active unfailing carrier of a law to which human beings otherwise would only passively and reluctantly be subjected" (1973 [1951]: 462). The law in question, of course, is the so-called law of history with constant progress as its primary mechanism. Consequentially, totalitarian regimes, as Mladina Tlostanova has recently reminded, "are often reluctant to allow and support local communities and individuals in doing the crucial work on memory from below, to critically engage with the troubled relations with the past, with historical and restless ghosts which continue to consume us" (2016: 25). Contemporary Latvian fiction has formed against this background of politically induced amnesia and is still in the middle of decolonizing memory and imagining its own future. It could be said that Latvian fiction belongs to a broader Eastern European literary tendency of taking up the task of remembering, which is not possible without rethinking historical time as such. Or rather, a new conception of historical time in many novels appears as the ultimate goal of writing about the presence of the past and its ethical implications.

I am particularly interested in those cases where the heterogeneity of time is an integral part of the storyworld and is directly experienced by the narrator, who ponders the connection between individual and collective experiences. This should be analyzed alongside the way the idea of nonlinear time is reflected in metaphorical and formal patterns, as structural and poetic aspects often lend increased credibility and depth to more straightforward philosophical observations and statements. Latvian fiction is not the only one undergoing a process of rethinking historical time; this is why, in my research, I have chosen a comparative perspective, bringing together novels that share similar questions and techniques and address recent European history. I examine texts produced in places that, similarly to Latvia, have had periods when traumatic memories of war and terror existed in a latent state. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht defines latency as "what is there, but not in view," and what can be sensed instead of represented at the time (2013 [2012]: 34). This state is later left behind, supported by the

ideology of progress, as specific actors begin reshaping time. A comparative perspective also helps shift the focus on Latvian literature, which is under-represented in the humanities today despite its relevance.

In what follows, I will first discuss the importance and novelty of the present study, formulate research questions and hypothesis, explain my methodology, and then review the most recent debates in the philosophy of history associated with the turn towards presentism as a challenge to the modern obsession with the future. After that, I shall briefly revisit Walter Benjamin's and Jacques Derrida's essays on time and history, which are frequently mentioned today, to demonstrate that the present reflections have a deeper history, capable of discerning the ethical value of heterogeneous time. Moving on, my attention will turn to three influential concepts in contemporary philosophy of history, each supported by references to literature. Namely, I shall focus on Dominick LaCapra's revival of the psychoanalytical concept of melancholy, on Eelco Runia's notion of the presence, and Frank Ankersmit's idea of sublime historical experience, including their connection to narrative comprehension. I approach these three key concepts as modes of heterogeneous time. Each emphasizes a different mechanism by which the past intrudes into the present, testifying not just to psychological but also to material dimensions of experience. Finally, I will address the question of history in contemporary Latvian novels, discuss the main findings of my dissertation, summarize my articles, and give concluding remarks.

1.2. Conceptual Core and Research Approach

1.2.1. Affordances, Questions, and Hypothesis

The importance of the present study stems from the fact that contemporary fiction, as demonstrated through comparative readings of concrete Latvian novels, resonates with specific tendencies in the philosophy of history, thereby escaping the grasp of linear time. Attention to the relationship between literary means, historical experience, and philosophical understanding of history has a twofold affordance. On the one hand, it reveals how fiction is embedded and participates in cultural discussions about the experience of time and its complex fate after the collapse of communism. On the other hand, it informs the philosophy of history by offering a more detailed approach to time and paying closer attention to concrete narrative strategies. Overall, the novelty of this study lies in bringing the philosophy of history and literary analysis into dialogue, moving beyond conventional trauma studies by connecting literary time with a broader discussion on historical time. The study also considers Latvian fiction in a comparative perspective, situating it within Eastern European literature and thereby expanding its scholarly visibility.

Contemporary philosophy of history has paid relatively little attention to the ethical and political contexts of cultural production, focusing on them only recently (Elgabsi and Gilbert, 2023). In contrast, this dissertation places greater

importance on these aspects while still working within the presentist paradigm. The distrust of linear time was signaled earlier by Pierre Nora, who juxtaposed "the acceleration of history" with "real memory," claiming that modern societies are usually forgetful and, if not, interested in controlling memory, as was the case in totalitarian regimes. In contrast, real memory means "nothing more in fact than sifted and historical traces" (Nora 1989: 8). Similarly to other theoreticians with whom I will engage later, Nora seems to stress the material aspect of the enduring past. Contemporary discussions, however, suggest a broader understanding of heterogeneity that, as I demonstrate, can be made more nuanced through literary analysis.

In this dissertation, I aim to address the following research question: How do contemporary Latvian novels represent and conceptualize historical time? What narrative and poetic strategies are employed to evoke a sense of multitemporality? How do these representations correspond to recent debates in the philosophy of history, particularly concerning presentism and historical experience? What is the cultural and historical context behind this turn towards temporal heterogeneity? What ethical and political implications arise from these constructions of time? How does the Latvian case compare to other novels about recent Eastern European history? I hypothesize that contemporary Latvian fiction, in line with the presentist strand of the philosophy of history, challenges the dominance of linear historical time by using formal and thematic strategies that foreground the presence of the past. This engagement with multitemporality serves as both a response to historical ruptures, most notably the collapse of communism, and as a means of constructing new ethical and political relationships with the past. These constructions are grounded in previous literary experiments in modernist and postmodernist literature, which became fully available to Latvian writers relatively recently.

In short, my dissertation examines how novels think about temporal relations and, despite certain limitations of narrative, attempt to capture the past as if it were actually present. Of course, the novel as a genre has always been at the forefront of such thinking as Nilges rightfully notes that "[t]oday, as during the time of its rise, the novel seeks to give us ways of knowing and speaking to the new forms of time that govern our lives," thus "the novel recovers a sense of possibility and hope in midst of the ruins of the future while also forwarding a dazzling argument for its own survival" (2021: 14). A similar claim can be found in recent publications on metamodernist fiction, which, according to a broader conception of metamodernist aesthetics (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010), moves beyond the idea of the end of history and views historical time as a heterogenous phenomenon that can be explored affectively and perhaps more directly than in postmodernism.[1] As telling as Nilges's quote is, a gap still exists

[1] For example, Alison Gibbons reads Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* (2014) as a case where "possible futures generate and overlay onto possible presents, and future outcomes proliferate" (2021: 137; for more on metamodern historicity, see van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen

between literary and philosophical explorations of historical time, despite writers' fondness for reflecting on memory and history, and philosophers' awareness of the diverse ways culture represents the past. To bridge this gap, the present study employs not only a contextual analysis of literary fiction, which describes the historical factors behind the turn to heterogeneous time, but also narratological approaches to literature, enabling a view of the correlation between experience, ideas, and literary form and imagery.

1.2.2. Narrative Between Trauma and Philosophy

Narratological analyses of time, of course, have different traditions, ranging from structural (Genette 1980 [1972]) and hermeneutical (Ricoeur 1984 [1983]; Meretoja 2018) to rhetorical (Booth 1961; Phelan 2017), cognitive (Herman 2002), and phenomenological (Currie 2007). In my close and comparative readings of Eastern European novels, I primarily draw on research concerned with the narrativity of complex experiences, particularly as they explore the elusive quality of time. This focus is chosen because of the natural connection between temporality and narrativity, as defined by Ricouer: "I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent" (2002 [1981]: 35). Elaborating on the function of narrativity, David Herman, in *Basic Elements of Narrative*, identifies four conditions of prototypical stories. These are situatedness in a specific context, sequences of particularized events, disruption in a storyworld created by the events, and the sense of what it is like to be in that world (2009: 9). Traditionally, as Herman notes elsewhere, "[m]aximal narrativity can be correlated with sequences whose presentation features a proportional blending of "canonicity and breach," expectation and transgression of expectation," while in opposite cases narrativity decreases when the story is either too ordinary or too specific (2002: 91). However, some narratives or some slow and fragmented passages, embedded in overall sequential narration, purposely "weaken or diminish their own narrativity" (2002: 103) because of various possible reasons, haunting presence of the past, demanding an ethical response, which is my primary interest in this study.

I refer to Herman's definition of narrativity to set the necessary background for authorial strategies, from overall structural choices, like in Gundega Repše's adoption of dictionary form, to particular episodes, like in Andra Manfelde's imaginative and highly emotional passages, when narrativity is purposely diminished to emphasize the presence of the past as a force that disturbs linear time and demands, both from the narrator and the reader, an empathic reaction. Both Repše and Manfelde, although their works are, in general, highly fragmented, also find value in aspects of prototypical storytelling, most notably situatedness in a specific context and the feeling of being there in the storyworld. However, in

2017). In my own research, I do not consider the foreshadowing of catastrophic future events, although I acknowledge that they belong to a fuller discussion of historical time.

Repše's novel, these aspects are quickly abandoned in favor of highly poetic and essayistic passages, while Manfelde alternates between the impulse to tell the story of her deported grandparents in a more or less coherent fashion and her inability to control the historical material. In both cases, the reader is informed about particular past events that are too unruly to fit into conventional historical thinking, which presupposes the present as merely a transition between the past and the future.

In my reading of Repše's novel, I refer to Brian McHale's notion of "weak narrativity", defined as "telling stories "poorly," distractedly, with much irrelevance and indeterminacy" (2001: 165). Repše has weakened her narrative in this sense to resist the idea that the past and the present can be reconciled harmoniously in the name of moving forward. In contrast, Nora Ikstena constructed her novel *Soviet Milk* (2015) in a more traditionally chronological fashion to tell the story of a daughter and a mother living under occupation and struggling to align themselves with the ideologized rhythm of time. In her work, narrativity is weakened only episodically to generate poetic visions and metaphors that are at odds with historical time synonymous with linear progress in Soviet ideology. These two quite opposite examples suggest that weak narrativity, characterized by gaps, digressions, and unexpected shifts, can vary in degree, scope, and placement. Still, in each case, they point towards a structural affinity between complex historical experiences and experimental formal strategies. Gerald Prince has recognized a similar phenomenon in postcolonial anglophone fiction, where time is often subjugated to "simultaneities, (immediate or proximate) continuities, and (weak or strong) inconsistencies between temporal segments, the relative magnitude of those segments, and the nature of their borders" (2005: 375). While similar approaches to narrative and history can be seen in contemporary Latvian fiction, the novels analyzed, except Repše's, employ weak narrativity only in specific cases, striving more visibly for coherence while also self-reflectively demonstrating the limits of narrative.

In general, I contend that whereas the narrativist philosophy of history, pioneered by Hayden White's thesis (1973) that historical writing is essentially a form of literary or narrative construction, "had little exposure to narratology," as remarked by Mieke Bal (2009: 17), recent work in narratology, especially studies on troubled and slow texts, enables a more nuanced thinking about the nexus of narrative and historical time. Drawing on different philosophers of history, from Walter Benjamin to Eelco Runia, I discern what particular historical sensibility is either implied or directly voiced by novelists and their narrators and for what reasons. Particularly valuable in this regard have been specific insights from trauma studies, as far as they allow me to cautiously connect individual experiences to broader historical perspectives without reducing either to the other.

It should be noted that historians, philosophers of history, and other critics, trying to account for the magnitude of certain events, most notably the Holocaust, have found value in analytical categories derived from psychoanalysis. Maria Inés Mudrovcic claims that "[t]his turn toward the models of psychoanalysis and neuroscience had strong consequences for both the modalities that were adopted

to obtain knowledge of recent traumatic pasts and the discussions around the conceptions of historical time" (2024: 21). One might assume that both psychoanalytically-minded literary critics and presentist philosophers of history view historical time in terms of something from the past returning to the present. However, the former camp, following the writings of Geoffrey Hartman and Cathy Caruth, tends to reduce historical time to a mere mechanism of repetition without delving into greater detail about the tension between melancholy and progress or between individuals and societies. What literary trauma studies can offer to a broader consideration of history in fiction is the ethical aspects of suffering and temporality, which is clearly emphasized by Caruth, who, following Freud, claims "that history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (1996: 25). An ethically refined understanding of time seems to be missing in Runia's writings on presence or in Ankersmit's focus on the sublime but is present in my engagement with trauma as an experience that impact not only individual lives and memories, but historical time.

The aforementioned obsession with solipsistic repetition has provoked, for example, Wulf Kansteiner to argue that "[t]he writings on cultural trauma display a disconcerting lack of historical and moral precision, which aestheticizes violence and conflates the experiences of victims, perpetrators, and spectators of traumatic events" (2004: 193; cf. Radstone 2007). Philosophy of history, I contend, treats the question of trauma more carefully by focusing on the different ways "the recent past is entangled with an extended present" (Mudrovcic 2024: 24), of which repetition is only one specific element that cannot be analyzed in isolation. In addition, literary trauma theory has rendered traumatic experience "inaccessible to conscious thought" in a sense that "the experience cannot be assimilated into the broader cognitive patterns that are central to memory and, through memory, to the possibility of continuous or narrative selfhood" (Barnaby 2018: 31). The main problem is that this conception of trauma privileges modernist and postmodernist techniques, even though not all writers who are writing about the recent traumatic past found them useful. Rather than claiming that trauma is present only in textual lacunae, we should also "seek out evidence of augmented narrative detail" and "focus on depictions of experiences that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted," to quote Joshua Pederson's critique of literary trauma theory (2014: 334, 339). Because representations of trauma in Latvian literature were politically and, therefore, also formally limited during the Soviet era, it is understandable that, after the fall of communism, fiction writers combined both indirect and direct means of expression. The more direct ones clearly elucidate the politics and experience of time that govern the novel's thematic and structural features, situating it within a broader perspective of historical sensibility. This is especially evident in the writing of Repše and Bankovskis, who more extensively than Manfelde and Ikstena, use authorial voice to engage in "reflections, judgements, generalizations about the world 'beyond'

the fiction" (Lanser 1992: 16), thus also creating an unmistakable link between the traumas of their narrators and the movement of time.[2]

In short, I acknowledge that the presentist philosophy of history is partially indebted to psychoanalysis; however, alongside these same philosophers, I also refer to a broader range of temporal modalities with their corresponding, yet largely overlooked, cultural expressions. These modalities, such as presence or sublime historical experience, are indeed linked to traumatic occurrences but seem more attuned to particular historical developments that are dialectical in nature, as well as to specific formal means that would be lost in the emphasis on the unspeakable past. To counter this emphasis, I employ narratological analysis to examine how historical sensibility is explored through concrete narrative strategies, ranging from highly experimental and fragmented narration to a more linear and coherent narration, which is used to highlight the contrast between the force of progress at the core of totalitarian politics and individual traumatic memory that often, but not always, transcends conscious control and conventional formal techniques.

A comparative approach opens up the discussion of historical time in Latvian fiction to examples from other literary environments with a similar historical background. In the first two articles of my dissertation, on Gundega Repše's *Conjuring Iron* (2011) and Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk*, I point out some of the differences and affinities between how Latvian authors engage with history and how similar questions have been addressed in works that belong to either Western or Russian postmodernism and are known more broadly. Namely, Latvian authors have been hesitant to produce metahistorical fiction, but, like many other writers, have generally moved from melancholy to mourning, or from introducing history as the unspeakable to moving closer to coherent historical fiction where historical experience is carefully disclosed. The third and fourth articles adopt a different approach, offering close readings of novels that, as noted before, come from literary environments with similar histories. Thus, for example, it can be seen how a metonymic connection to the past can achieve similar ethical objectives while employing different techniques and strategies. A case in point is my comparison between photography in Andra Manfelde's *The Children of the Dugout* (2010) and actual urban spaces in Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther* (2014), as well as the various degrees of projection and imagination involved in these connections. The comparisons are also intended to serve as a basis for future research, as there remains a lack of broader discussion about the complexity of time in Eastern European fiction (I address this question in more detail in Section 5 of this chapter).

[2] I have explored the relationship between authorial comments and overwhelming experience in my reading of Inga Gaile's historical novel *The Beautiful Ones* (2019), suggesting that narrative erasure can be an ethical act on the part of a secondary witness (Ostups 2022a). Similarly, Repše's highly emotional refusal to narrate coherently and fill in the gaps is ethically charged, whereas Bankovskis, at the end of his novel, employs an authorial voice in a very calm, essayistic mode, as if almost consoling the reader.

Following Koselleck, historical time can be defined as a constructed relationship between the past, the present, and the future. This relationship can favor progress or that can open itself to the past, as is the case today. In historical time, our relations with one another, including those between the living and the dead, are narrativized. The novels I interpret in this dissertation not simply faithfully, chronologically, and panoramically describe past social and political actions and events and human suffering caused by them, as if the authors tried to be as factual as possible, but also, directly or indirectly, advocate for the presence of this suffering, thereby these texts have an ethical dimension. At the same time, these novels are striving for authenticity, which is not the same as accuracy. Authenticity, as David Dean has noted, "relates to the extent to which a text is "truthful to our contexts," and incorporates a sense of "sincerity, credibility, and trustworthiness," while accuracy "can be defined as being faithful to an original" (2017: 257; quoted in Saxton 2020: 129). As I demonstrate in my articles, authenticity extends not only to material reality but also to the way time has been experienced, both under totalitarianism and subsequently.

To disclose the experience of time after totalitarianism, the novels chosen for analysis employ various techniques and strategies, ranging from highly fragmented and poetic means of expression to more balanced and linear narration, which nevertheless includes passages that problematize homogeneity through traumatic recall or epiphanic visions. For instance, Gundega Repše, an advocate for experimental historical fiction, comes from the tradition of Latvian postmodern fiction of the 1990s, when authors reformed plot structures and stylistic approaches established by socialist realism. Repše's novel *Conjuring Iron* could be termed an anti-novel, as it thematizes its refusal to tell a coherent story about the experience of the Soviet occupation of Latvia, instead adopting a dictionary form that includes poetic and highly emotional statements about the nature of time, arranged in alphabetical order. Similarly, Andra Manfelde's work, *The Children of the Dugout,* is a collage of memories without a discernible plot, suggesting that the narrator does not fully control the order in which they appear. Meanwhile, Pauls Bankovskis's *18* and Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk*, on the level of overall structure, move steadily from the past to the future, but, if we look closer at specific passages, then we quickly realize that this general form is conflicted and, in the case of Bankovskis's text, eventually dissolved.

Thus, the Latvian writers I analyze in my dissertation oppose simplified realism that leaves the past detached from the present, as well as self-absorbed postmodern experimentation with language. Instead, they employ various stylistic options to link individual experiences to broader historical processes. The inner workings of these texts could be analyzed by emphasizing the natural connection between temporality and narrativity, including those instances when narrativity is weakened, as mutually informative and reinforcing. Moreover, such an approach helps demonstrate how historical ruptures, such as wars and revolutions, shape our concepts of time, and how the subsequent literary rethinking of narrative strategies and tactics feeds back into how we think about historical time. Like many other narratologists, Ricoeur showed that time in the

narrative is never merely a linear movement, but encompasses dialectics of the past, the present, and the future.[3] While, for Ricoeur, this is a general feature of narrative, I examine cases in which the heterogeneity of time is made explicit both thematically and structurally. In doing so, I aim to establish new connections between narratology and the philosophy of history, as these conceptual frameworks share a fascination with temporal complexity and, when combined, enable us to understand better how fiction conceives time as historically grounded and ethically motivated.

1.3. Overview of the Articles

This dissertation comprises four articles, each including a theoretical discussion of historical time and close readings of resonating Eastern European novels. The articles address specific gaps in existing research on the experience of time – gaps at the intersection of philosophical ideas and formal means – and examine literary works that have not been previously studied in relation to melancholy, presence, and the sublime. Throughout the articles, I also touch on works of Western literature to highlight crucial differences and similarities in how contemporary authors engage with the past. Hence, my research also contributes to ongoing reflections on what distinguishes contemporary fiction from modern and post-modern explorations of history.

The first article, "“The Scar Will Always Be There”: The Post-Soviet Melancholia in Gundega Repše’s Novel *Conjuring Iron*", and the second article, “Progress, Trauma and Narrative Possibilities in Nora Ikstena’s *Soviet Milk*”, are conceptually linked in that they explore the meaning of melancholy and mourning in relation to individual and historical time. In both works, historical time is depicted as that which suppresses traumatic memory, reflecting the modern regime of historicity and its most brutal expression: the totalitarian politics of time. Repše’s work approaches the period of Soviet occupation in Latvia from a contemporary perspective, employing a narrative strategy that resists externalizing traumatic events into a coherent story, thereby highlighting the ethical potential of melancholy. She presents an uncompromising view of the past as an extreme example of cultural memory. Meanwhile, Ikstena’s widely translated novel provides a detailed and self-reflexive account of living during the occupation, illuminating how individual memory clashes with sociopolitical frameworks that endorse the forgetting of its victims. In my reading of these works,

[3] Herman, for example, has noted how the polychronic structure of D. M. Thomas’s 1981 novel, *The White Hotel*, is “ontologically destabilizing” and difficult to model (2002: 220). For an earlier account of heterogenous time in literature, one could turn to Mikhail Bakhtin, who, in his essay on the *Bildungsroman*, addresses Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s idea of synchronism, “the coexistence of times at one point in space” (1986 [1938]: 41). Similar understanding of time and space, as I will show, can be found also in contemporary philosophy of history and further inspected with the help of literature.

I draw on recent studies of temporal experience and trauma that address both the unspeakable and repetitive nature of trauma, as well as the cultural contexts and narrative possibilities for depicting chains of transformative events. These two trends in literary trauma theory – the clinging to the unspeakable and the overcoming of the inexpressible – are explored insofar as they enable a discussion of historical time. Ultimately, I explore the ethics of form to show how different narrative strategies employ distinct, often contradictory approaches to the traumas experienced by historical others.

The third article, titled "Metonymy, Presence, and the Ethics of Imagination in Postmemorial Writing: Andra Manfelde's *Zemnīcas bērni* and Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther*," illuminates the substantial role of metonymy as a trope that reactivates troubling past events and disturbs temporality. My departure point is that, despite its active role, metonymy has been overlooked in the emphasis on the archive as the basis of postmemorial prose. This genre of literature offers valuable material for the study of heterogenous time because postmemory, as it is based on the central tenets of trauma studies, is shaped "by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" and "their effects continue into the present" (Hirsch 2012: 5). Metonymical connections between the past and the present are implied in Marianne Hirsch's notion "points of memory," which is inspired by Roland Barthes's "punctum". However, her concept seems more suited for explaining the affective power of family photographs. At the same time, postmemorial texts are full of all kinds of metonymies: not just images, but also words, dates, and objects, which can evoke the presence of the past. To account for these metonymic signs encountered by autobiographical narrators in their storyworld and also made present on the level of narrative discourse, I suggest turning to Eelco Runia's philosophical conception of metonymy as a transfer of presence, which so far has not entered the realm of literary research, even though it can function, in a narrative, as a connecting link between different ontological spheres. Metonymies enable the movement between the actual present and the virtual past. Thus, to quote a narratological insight into virtuality, metonymies are "extensions, splits, and layerings within a baseline narrative ontology" (Grishakova 2019: 103). Finally, I elaborate on how metonymy enables an ethical imagination of the past, that is, a projection respecting the differences between the narrator and the lost other.

The fourth article, "Sublime Historical Experience, Epiphanic Moments, and Melancholic Narration in Pauls Bankovskis's *18* and Dušan Šarotar's *Panorama*," probes the complex relationship between sublime historical experience and narrative form, which, as Frank Ankersmit argues, filters out experience, diminishing its authenticity. Despite these rather simplistic dynamics, Ankersmit has pointed out that, if anywhere, it is in literature and art that we come closest to sublime historical experience. Since his claims concern the historian's access to the past and the critique of textualism in historiography, Ankersmit did not specify what kind of literary narrative corresponds to the subjective experience of being reduced to one's feelings and moods triggered by a past reality invading the present. Still, Ankersmit suggested that to capture this experience, we need a

language that would be fully aware of its own limits in the face of an overwhelming sensation. In other words, "he is looking for a language to undo language" (Menezes 2018: 59). To make this more nuanced, I connect Ankersmit's idea to Jean-François Lyotard's understanding of the sublime in art and to the way trauma is often sensed in narrative. I suggest that melancholic narration, which bridges the gap between the past and the present and refers to a painful past event, can incorporate a sublime historical experience by mirroring it through slow, meandering, epiphanic, and obscure passages. Bankovskis investigates the past and present bind by exploring photography's qualities, while Šarotar relies exclusively on reflections on memory and space. As discussed in this dissertation, both authors link nonlinear time to intergenerational responsibility in the wake of major historical ruptures.

Overall, the fourth article complements the previous study on presence and metonymy by introducing a new set of formal strategies that evoke temporal heterogeneity. If read side by side, they disclose the differences and similarities between Runia's and Ankersmit's approaches. Although both phenomena have been described as overwhelming, I suggest that presence is more about the sudden intrusion of the past through a minor detail. In contrast, sublime historical experience prefers long, dreamlike sentences in which the narrators contemplate the aftermath of historical ruptures. The ethical implications of melancholy and mourning, discussed in the first two articles, inform my understanding of presence and sublime historical experience, which, in Runia's and Ankersmit's writings, are not linked to transgenerational responsibility. Even though they compare these phenomena to trauma, they do not engage with questions of empathy and identification that are central to LaCapra's investigations. This integrated approach, however, can reveal a broader conceptual network among different philosophies of temporal heterogeneity, diverse literary environments, and various formal strategies, all with the common goal of reshaping time to meet the demands of the past.

2. RECENT DISCUSSIONS ON HISTORICAL TIME

2.1. Changes in the Experience of Time

The critical work of historian François Hartog and memory scholar Aleida Assmann has been especially instructive in comprehending the current formation of past, present, and future, and in firmly distinguishing it from the modern temporal experience. In his book *Regimes of Historicity*, Hartog employs the apt term "regime of historicity" as "a way of expressing and organizing experiences of time" (2015 [2003]: 106). The modern regime of historicity, which emerged with the Enlightenment, was oriented towards the future, established progress as "the first genuinely historical category of time" (Koselleck 2018a: 89; for more on the synchronization of time in modernity see Jordheim 2014), and, in a revolutionary spirit, distanced itself from the past. Within the modern regime of historicity, the objective of the future was to give meaning to the present. Hartog seems to base his view more on significant political developments that span multiple decades and countries. However, in the cultural sphere, one can find essential alternatives to this blind rush towards the future. While Filippo Tommaso Marinetti famously embodied the modern regime of historicity in the founding manifesto of the futurist movement, expressing a wish to destroy museums and embrace the culture of speed (2006 [1909]: 14), modernist writers, like Virgina Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce, embraced multitemporality in their literary works and broader conceptions of history (see Flatley 2009 and Spiropoulou 2010). Contemporary fiction seems to value a more nuanced modernist understanding of time because it is tied to various techniques of splitting and rearranging time, thereby allowing the development of ethically and politically charged temporal constellations that cannot be easily subsumed under the pull of the future. This also allows us to distinguish contemporary fiction from those postmodernist works that demonstrate the waning of historicity (see Section 5 on how Latvian postmodernist authors avoided exploring historical time as a subject during the 1990s, including its potential links to trauma, memory, and justice).

According to Hartog, the modern regime of historicity became increasingly dubious during the second half of the 20th century until it was "irreversibly shattered" by "the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of the communist ideal as the future of the revolution, and the simultaneous rise of a number of fundamentalist movements" (2015 [2003]: 3). Modern regime of historicity, in the wake of human atrocities, failed political projects, and the looming ecological catastrophe, was suddenly, Hartog adds, replaced by "presentism," by a "sense that only present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now" (2015 [2003]: xv). This new temporal reality has a peculiar attitude towards the past, seeking to incorporate it into the present, as evidenced by the ongoing interest in memory and heritage. Echoing Hartog's "omnipresent present" (2015 [2003]: 8), Hans Ulrich

Gumbrecht talks of "our broad present" in "which the present has turned into a dimension of expanding simultaneities," transcending traditional historical boundaries (2014 [2011]: xiii). Although others (Jordheim 2014) have argued that alternatives to the modern temporal regime have always existed, it is hard to deny the pertinence of presentist thinking. Presentism names a shared sense of multitemporality and emphasizes the historicity of time itself. Although this dissertation is primarily concerned with the connection between presentism and literature, it should be mentioned that other creative practices correspond to it as well. Notably, contemporary art has embraced the notion that "the contemporaneity of every past is now available to us, as if each of them was equidistant in space-time from where we are now" (Smith 2019: 299; see also Osborne 2013). Both literature and art are now defined in relation to recent historical ruptures and the rethinking of temporality they have set in motion.

Hartog's diagnosis of our shared present, focusing on the dominance of the now, seems to overlook the benefits of blurring the distinction between different times, a point appreciated by Aleida Assmann in her book *Is Time Out of Joint?* Whereas within the modern regime of historicity, as Koselleck put it, "the divide between previous experience and coming expectation opened up, and the difference between past and present increased" (2004 [1979]: 246), today "the past has an ever-greater hold on us, especially in relation to periods of extreme violence," as Assmann holds with regards to European cultural memory after totalitarianism (2020 [2013]: 5). What is particularly valuable in her analysis of the new temporal reality is the recognition that modern temporality, obsessed with progress and change, justified "all victims of history whom, when faced with the overwhelmingly positive pull of the future, one could mournfully disregard and gradually forget" (2020 [2013: 43). Compared to this kind of perception of time, the presentist rethinking of temporal relations allows us to engage with the past in a meaningful manner, acknowledging the demands of previous generations and experience their presence. Assmann concludes her monograph by writing that "the dead of past times are reawakening" in "books, films, exhibitions, and debates" (2020 [2013]: 229), and will take this remark as the impetus for my research and examine it more thoroughly.

Assmann's more general views could be supplemented with concrete examples from Latvian contemporary fiction, which has moved away from socialist realism, including the dogma of teleological time, which was famously emphasized by Maxim Gorky's call "to depict reality in its revolutionary development" (1977: 20–1) and continued to, at least in part, influence literary production even after Stalin (see Marsh 1986). The goal of this approach was to create an order out of chaos and set the space into motion. Still, the doctrine itself was inherently contradictory, as a text that aspired to historical truth had to describe the current situation in society and envision what was not yet present: the classless society. As far as the past was concerned, it was mostly reduced to "demonstrating the advent of the Soviet regime as the natural result of historical development" (Satkauskytė 2023: 950). Within this model, the painful experiences of the century were often distorted and generalized, as was the case with

the literary representation of the Holocaust, which usually omitted the mention of Jews as a specific victim group and made historical suffering a part of the grand communist narrative. This also meant that more experimental narrative strategies, which would stress the multitemporality of experience and make it an essential part of the storyworld, were discouraged (see e.g. Gūtmane 2022). Today, Latvian and other Eastern European writers employ various modernist and postmodernist techniques to address the traumatic events of the 20th century, either to come to terms with them or to reanimate them, thereby protesting cultural forgetting. In line with world fiction, Latvian writers "revitalize modernist aesthetics for tackling a new spectrum of artistic, cultural, ethical and political demands" (James 2012: 29). Still, the difference is that this return to modernist experiments with time is closely tied with a specific historical context where the examination of trauma began only recently.

In 2003, Fredric Jameson claimed that space is more in fashion than time and that novelists and poets have ditched time "under the entirely plausible assumption that it had largely been covered by Proust, Mann, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot" (2003: 695). However, it seems that Jameson exaggerated the postmodern neglect of temporality in American culture and overlooked the rising interest in trauma and its meaning for temporality. Cathy Caruth, referencing Sigmund Freud (2001b [1920]), stated that trauma, "in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (1996: 4). Thus, she clearly emphasized the connection between epistemology and temporality: only that which was not controlled when it happened can return to haunt the subject. In my research, I utilize certain notions from trauma studies, such as transference and repetition, as far as they can be linked to broader questions about the nature of historical time. This is a welcome strategy, as philosophers of history, most notably Eelco Runia and Frank Ankersmit, acknowledge trauma as a psychological counterpart to their ideas on the present past.

Presentism complements trauma studies by emphasizing the function of the real and broadening its focus to discuss historical time in greater detail. Caruth references historical time only in passing, claiming that "history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (1996: 25), which, as I noted before, is an essential insight in working towards a more ethically conscious philosophy of history. She analyzes traumatic intersubjectivity in her essay on Alain Renais' and Margarite Duras' 1959 film *Hiroshima mon amour*, where a French woman and a Japanese man become paradoxically connected by the fact that they cannot fully express their traumatic past. However, this does not affect historical time, which Caruth still perceives as chronological and progressive, thereby setting the contrast for individual and incurable melancholy. The historical time in her essay is governed by nations that want to move forward and forget the past, and this seems adequate when considering societies after the Second World War, but it appears limited in the current moment. In Caruth's model, there is a sense of temporal rigidity and a lack of agency on the part of cultural production, even though in postcolonial and post-Soviet environments literature and

other art forms often serve as a medium for uncompromising rethinking of temporal relations in their ethical and political dimensions. The most recent tendencies in Latvian fiction offer powerful examples of the respective agency. Still, so far, they have been interpreted more generally, from the perspective of literary history, as "a delayed memory" of totalitarian trauma (Gūtmane 2019: 487), whereas this study pays closer attention to how fiction conveys an experience of historical time.

The novelists whose work I analyze draw on different collective traumas to discuss historical time. For example, Pauls Bankovskis writes: "Wars, revolutions, uncertainty about the future, fear of death, and death, suffering and horror everywhere, despair and loss of hope – these are experiences that are difficult to simply call impulses. I would not be surprised if the imprints and scars – akin to the embankments of lost railways, gardens of destroyed houses and overgrown roads – have reached us from our parents or grandparents without our awareness. Nor would I be surprised if they did not disappear long after we are gone" (2017 [2014]: 169). Historian Tony Judt famously said that in Eastern Europe, "there is too much memory" (2002: 172), and this became especially noticeable after the fall of the Berlin Wall when the most difficult memories entered the public and cultural discourse causing temporal confusion.

2.2. The Multitemporal Present

Over the last decade, several historians and philosophers have increasingly refined and effectively expanded the relevance of historical time, moving beyond historiographical nuances to encompass broader cultural processes. Berber Bevernage and Chris Lorenz, in their introduction to *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders Between Present, Past and Future*, contend that it is crucial to study the relationships between present, past and future not as something simply taken for granted, but as constructions produced by "specific social actors" (2013: 10). Furthermore, they claim, and this is instructive for my research on time in literature, that "[a]lthough both historians and philosophers have emphasized the important role played by catastrophic political events – such as revolutions and major wars – in "breaking up time," the effects of these "transformative events" on notions of temporality have hardly been studied in a comparative perspective" (2013: 11). Consequently, this entails a rethinking of the historicist idea of homogenous time, that is, we should move towards a conception that, instead of being a "neutral medium," historical time, as made by humans, is "inherently ethical and political" (2013: 11). What I find helpful here is the assumption that traumatic past events, as they were, fill the empty time of historicism with haunting experiences, forcing us to reflect not only on the quantitative aspects of time, but also acknowledge its qualitative dimension. Sure, linear and chronological time, as Dominick LaCapra points out, is needed for understanding "the relative importance of certain events" (2018: 56). Still, it is far from a universal structure that could explain our complex entanglements with

the past. Literary narratives enter this picture as sense-making practices that can also take on the role of social actors, negotiating temporal borders and giving meaning to the past by undermining the ideology of progress, which was abused by old totalitarian regimes.

Already in 1995, Koselleck questioned the conception of linear time by asserting that "[h]istorical time consists of multiple layers that refer to each other in reciprocal way, although without being wholly dependent upon each other" (2018c [1995]: 4). The idea of sedimented time has been used, for example, by Helge Jordheim to reinforce Koselleck's "theory of overlapping temporal structures and layers, synchronicities and nonsychronicities" (2012: 157), which problematize periodization. There are practical benefits of heterogeneous time because, as Chris Lorenz writes in one of his essays, it "allows for a pluralization of times and to conceive of the present, past and future as multidimensional and purely relational categories" (2014: 46). *Rethinking Historical Time*, the edited volume I mentioned earlier, grew out of the discussions initiated not only by Bevernage, Lorenz, and Jordheim but also by other theorists on whom I will draw in my thesis, notably LaCapra, Ankersmit, and Runia. Tamm and Olivier effectively sum up the current perspective on historical time by claiming that "[t]he present time is multitemporal or polychronic in the sense that an event does not merely occur in the present, but also simultaneously actualizes sections of the past within itself" (2019: 13), and an even more up to date account of historical time, offered by Victoria Fareld, upholds this conception and defines it very precisely. The interest in multitemporality does not prohibit chronological analysis of history, but "it does give rise to a new temporal consciousness which can help us to more clearly articulate the multiple times that the present harbors and, even more importantly, to grasp how these times relate to each other in a polychronic present" (2022: 28). Similarly, in contemporary fiction, if we look at its processes from a distance, we find novels that linearly describe the past, and we also see experimental texts that do the same in a nonlinear way to achieve a unique perception on historical time.

Fareld's description seems to imply that the new temporal consciousness cannot be a matter of historiography, which is still dominated by chronological time, but rather pertains to a broader experiential realm, including cultural renderings of time. In fact, I would argue that the philosophy of history does not simply give rise to a new temporal consciousness as it recognizes and conceptualizes its traces in how people, after the multiple catastrophic events of the 20th century, experience time. Andreas Huyssen, in an essay titled "Present Pasts," observed that "[o]ne of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years has been the emergence of memory as a key concern in Western societies, a turning toward the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of the twentieth-century modernity" (2000: 21), and, writing twenty-four years after his text, I would specify that heterogenous time does not concern only Western Europe. Thereby memory, contrary to Pierre Nora's famous dictum that "[w]hoever says memory, says Shoa" (quoted in Winter 2001: 52), cannot be reduced to the Holocaust. The historical experience

of Eastern European countries, which witnessed various wars and occupations, should be understood as "polytraumatic" (Epelboin 2015), and the novels that I analyze in my articles clearly testify to this fact. Specifically, they are more concerned with the Soviet atrocities, as the memory of communism in post-socialist countries, according to historian Éva Kovács, is the "hot topos" (quoted in Asmane 2018: 129; see also Asmann 2013 on Europe's divided memory).

Bevernage argues that the emphasis on presence, necessary for many philosophers of history, from Benjamin to Runia, can be effectively linked to "the search for justice". He writes, "it is relevant to a current international political reality, namely, the problematic "presence" of a traumatic and often explosive past in countries trying to recover from violent conflict, such as South Africa, Argentina, Chile, and Sierra Leone," where there are ongoing disputes over reparations and historical truth (2008: 151). Beverage explores this haunted reality by drawing on Benjamin and Derrida, both of whom advocate solidarity between the living and the dead. In the next section of this chapter, I will examine their proposals more closely to address the ethics of time. Similarly, Maria Inés Mudrovcic asserts that the temporality of trauma, foregrounding fragmentation and dominating in recently traumatized societies, "is incompatible with historical temporality, which presupposes a "historical past" that is irreversible, detached, and distant from the present, whether the phenomenon of repetition is treated as the return of the repressed or the return of the literal" (2014: 235). Consequently, one could also attend to the cultural expressions of this reality and analyze how the sense of heterogeneous time is evoked through narrative techniques.

For instance, Inara Verzemnieks, in her acclaimed memoir *Among the Living and the Dead: A Tale of Exile and Homecoming*, demonstrates how the landscape of Latvia, experienced by the narrator in the present, invokes the spectral presence of the past: "[T]here are days when it feels like the travelers of the war roads are out there still, all those ghost armies, advancing, retreating through the landscape, their presence suggested in the graffitied bunkers left to decay in the fields" (2019 [2017]: 18; see my analysis in Ostups 2022b). Basically, the landscape here is subjected to what Bevernage calls "spectral logic," that is, the homogenous time is "frustrated by the reality of the historical process that resists being frozen and always contains delays, survivals, and unfinished projects" (2008: 166), which is something I see happening also in more literary accounts of the past, where the relationship between the past and the present is often defined in a metahistorical or postmemorial framework and has ethical objectives integrated in it.

Unsurprisingly, philosophers of history illustrate the concept of heterogeneous time through literature, which offers multifaceted metaphors and images. However, it is also crucial to inspect complex narrative structures, shifts in perspective, and poetic observations, as these techniques make the patterns of time more dynamic and palpable. Metaphors and allegories extracted from literature and inserted in philosophical accounts risk losing the broader context in which they function. As I noted before, the metaphorical and poetic layers in sophisticated narratives are aligned with structural concerns. Usually, they shape and explain each other, whereas in the philosophy of history, metaphors and images can serve

a more limited function, illustrating certain social tendencies. Ethan Kleinberg revisits the ghost from Charles Dickens's 1843 novella *A Christmas Carol* to remind that, quoting Gumbrecht (2004: xv), "presence effects appeal exclusively to the senses" (2013: 9), while Eelco Runia refers to W. G. Sebald's grainy photographs as metonymies that allow the past to reach the present (2014: 67). Because two of the works that I discuss in my articles use photographs as presence devices, it should be mentioned that they create a fascinating cognitive dissonance: "Viewers of historical photographs often perceive that they can see into the past without barrier as if historical distance were only imaginary" (Crane 2013: 69). However, whereas photography, in the context of heterogenous time has gained more attention, literature seems to be offering something like a rhetorical instrument or a quasi-philosophical idea which could be expanded through more theoretical terms.

In fact, Sebald's fiction, to choose Runia's own example, is much more than that. Sebald employs not just photographs but also the poetics of juxtaposition, allegory, and melancholic digressions as part of an ethical attitude towards a traumatic past (Kaakinen 2017: 207). As this example illustrates, one must subject philosophical ideas about history and time to rigorous scrutiny to gain a more comprehensive understanding of presence. This dissertation takes the necessary step further and conceptualizes literature not simply as an illustration of philosophical reasoning but as an active participant, with its own techniques and objectives, in the construction of the current sense of historical temporality. More concretely, this agency can be observed in how novels employ metaphorical models of time, such as photographs, traces, echoes, ghosts, and wounds, and align narrative patterns with temporal movements posited as existing outside the text. The extra-textual realm here pertains to social and historical contexts that shape specific conceptions of time, ranging from the slow violence of communist sequential time to the more hectic sense of the past and the present overlapping in this century.

I now turn to Benjamin and Derrida and their ethical-political thinking on nonlinear time to properly illuminate the historical background of the contemporary impressions of time and make the ethical and political importance of disturbed temporalities more visible. The moral and political dimensions play a crucial role in my readings of Latvian and other European novels since they address concrete historical events and their painful aftermaths, which have a noticeable impact on culture and society.

3. PHILOSOPHY OF INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

3.1. Images and Echoes

Walter Benjamin wrote his last major essay, "On the Concept of History," in early 1940 when the German army was advancing in the East and the West and when, according to his biographers, Benjamin "had lost all sympathy with the politics of the Soviet Union after the conclusion of the Hitler-Stalin pact" (Howard and Jennings 2014: 658). Benjamin's text, produced during great uncertainty, still shows some strong leftist sentiments, especially when he speaks about the oppressed class as becoming "the subject of historical knowledge" or when he advocates for the "continuum of history" to explode and the time of history finally come to a stop (2006 [1940]: 394, 396). Benjamin expresses disillusionment with the idea of progress as the law of history: "One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm" (2006 [1940]: 392), and this observation pushed him to develop a new concept of history which would take heterogeneity as its structural principle.

More specifically, Benjamin questioned history as a teleological process in which an enlightened individual moves towards a cosmopolitan ideal of freedom as the ultimate goal of history. Perceived this way, history tends to neglect the suffering of previous generations. Benjamin counters historicism by turning to memory as an affective force that influences the historian in his or her materialist orientation: "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing "the way it really was"," instead "[i]t means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (2006 [1940]: 391). This famous definition means that "the physiognomy of historical thought," as it were, is photographic (Cadava 1997: xviii), and the flashing up of memory evokes questions of mourning, shock, and affect, usually discussed in writing on photographic artifacts. Benjamin's emphasis on memory suggests that he sees the past as still present. This is completely opposed to the traditional assumption that "the past is different from the present," that "it is "the other" of the present" (Mudrovcic 2014: 223), and that a historian must be detached from the past as far as possible to remain objective.

In the second thesis of his essay, Benjamin claims that "[t]he past carries with it a secret index to which it is referred to redemption", that "breath of air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well," that our voices contain echoes of "now silent ones," and that it is up to the historical materialist to work with this presence (2006 [1940]: 390). Such ephemeral phenomena as breath and echo, metaphorically referring to the fragile nature of the past, along with the theological concept of redemption, are not the typical elements of historiography, which, until Benjamin's relentless critique, saw time as merely "an accumulation of constitutive moments" (Vardoulakis 2005: 129). By using these poetic terms, Benjamin questions the classic notion, described by Koselleck, that because each generation has its unique set of experiences, there exists a fundamental break between them and that this break is one of the preconditions for history manifesting in

irreversible temporal movement (2018b [1987]: 50–51). Moreover, bridging this gap, as Benjamin seems to imply, is a moral obligation.

Stéphan Mosès notes that Benjamin, in the second thesis of his essay, writing about messianism, follows "the Jewish category of "re-membering," which does not denote the preservation in memory of events of the past but their reactualization in the present experience" (2009 [1992]: 209), potentially empowering political struggles. Later in the essay, Benjamin points out that the historical materialist uses the suddenly seized past to create a temporally heterogeneous construction that would repudiate the homogeneous and empty time by filling it with present worries (2006 [1940] 395). All this amounts to the sense of history as an afterlife of missed or violently oppressed possibilities that originate from the past but manage to touch the present. Or, to put it in even stronger terms, the repressed life constitutes the possibility of history as an ethical endeavor here and now. Following Michel Foucault, who shares Benjamin's fascination with lost hopes and oppressed projects, we could say that "[h]istory is only possible against the backdrop of the absence of history" (2006 [1961]: xxxi). Transposing the same logic to the problem of historical time in Eastern European fiction, it becomes clear that novels, at least to some extent, take up the task of writing history, attending to experiences that were underrepresented under totalitarian control of memory and which, at the moment, are made present through various formal means. Thus, in light of the current fascination with the past, one might infer that nonlinear time offers a more just perspective on history than linear time. To sum up, homogeneous time risks a moral crisis, while heterogeneous time, which brings together past and present struggles, serves as its counterbalance and defines multiple cultural practices.

3.2. Ruptures and Ghosts

Reminding of Benjamin's view on memory as shocking and ethically charged, Jacques Derrida postulated that "[t]he act of memory is also an unpredictable event, an event that calls forth a responsibility and also gestures and actions" (2004 [1991]: 50). Adding to this, Sean Gaston, in his study on Derrida and history, writes that "[m]emory must also take account of what comes from the past and cannot or will not forget "us"" (2019: 227), suggesting that the past, although chronologically absent, still has agency. Reading these statements, one is tempted to connect them to Benjamin's idea of the secret index of the past, which disturbs the ontological dichotomy between past and present by addressing the present generation and seeking the redemption of past suffering. In other words, these parallels enable us to consider heterogeneous time as a phenomenon that becomes significant at various points in history, typically associated with dramatic societal changes, as was the case with Benjamin and the Second World War. Reflecting on the experience of time in the wake of the just-mentioned catastrophe, Lucian Hölscher notes that "[t]o defend the continuity of historical time would mean denying the experiences of those who went through the

atrocities of the war" and that the war marked both the end of an epoch and the end of sequential time (2013: 138).

Another telling example from the modern period is Sigmund Freud's late work *Moses and Monotheism*, which he finished in exile in London and published in 1939. In this text, initially planned as a novel, Freud attempts to show how historical events unconsciously travel from generation to generation, which is a process embedded in fantasy and in the modern idea of national history, namely, the view that national identity is "based on some form of hereditary characteristics" (Confino 2006: 166). Similarly to Benjamin, Freud is convinced that the past invades the present. Recent experience, to his mind, can feel so close to the repressed ones that it can bring them back to the present. This correspondence between two separate events fills the homogenous time of present with "the latent energy of the repressed" (2001c: 95). Derrida joined this discussion on nonlinear time with his 1993 book *Specters of Marx*, written following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, two major ruptures that changed temporality and opened the floodgates of memory.

In an interview marking the publication of his seminal study, Derrida asserts that specter, resurfacing in the present, "exceeds the ontological opposition between absence and presence, visible and invisible, living and dead" (2002 [1993]: 110). Presence and absence are connected when Derrida, in the book, stressing the paradox, asks, "what is the effectivity of the presence of the specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum" (2006 [1993]: 10). Specters are effective in the way their flickering presence disturbs homogeneity of time. They reach our time and are discussed "in the name of justice" (2006 [1993]: xviii). Derrida further suggests that these ghosts originate in the recent traumatic history; they can be victims of wars, political violence, and different forms of totalitarianism. When they reach the present, they make it non-contemporaneous with itself, that is, a ghost desynchronizes the present, "it recalls us to anachrony" (2006 [1993]: 6), it thus helps us to recognize the meaningful connections between temporal domains. Also, as pointed out by Colin Davis, the specter is the figure "of that which in me is other than myself" (2007: 76), or, differently put, the specter testifies to those aspects of oneself that are inherited from previous generations and that make me aware of the responsibility towards the dead and their unfulfilled desires and failed projects.

Presentist philosophers have made use of the specter to acknowledge the limits of historical writing and of what seems possible in the past (Kleinberg 2020: 90), but I would also like to make the ethical aspects of melancholy, presence, and sublime historical experience more evident because they correlate with particular sentiments in literature. In doing so, I subscribe to the recent call in the philosophy of history to emphasize the ethics of nonlinear time. Nathan Elgabsi and Bennett Gilbert, in line with Benjamin and Derrida, note that certain historical events issue "an ethical call – a murmur – that addresses us from afar. In our lives, it calls us to respond to another who has lived. It calls us to ethical action and justice and to seeking how we should continue to live with these voices" (2023: 8). The novels I examine represent this intergenerational responsibility in emphatic and various ways.

4. THREE MODES OF HETEROGENEOUS TIME

4.1. Melancholy

The importance of melancholic attachments to the past was acknowledged already by Benjamin and Derrida. Benjamin was strongly inclined "to consider nothing as irreversibly lost," as Rebecca Comay puts it (1999: 59), while Derrida claimed that there must be "a certain melancholy" to be ethical towards the dead (2005 [2003]: 160). However, it is precisely in the works of Dominick LaCapra that the psychological concept of melancholy becomes a fundamental element of the philosophy of history. To better understand LaCapra's contribution to the ongoing discussions on heterogeneous time in post-traumatic situations, a brief return to Freud is necessary (for an overview of different views on melancholia in modernist thinking and literature, see Bahun 2014: 15–69). Freud characterized melancholy, in "Mourning and Melancholia," as a pathological deviation from mourning because in melancholy, "the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged" (Freud 2001a [1917]: 245), thus transforming the present into a moment in which the past survives through an identification with the deceased other. Later, in "The Ego and the Id," an essay published after the First World War, he revised his initial conception of melancholy and mourning, arguing that identifying with the lost other constitutes the self, especially in the aftermath of traumatic events. "It is only by internalizing the lost other," as Tammy Clewell sums up Freud's postwar analytical position, "that one becomes subject in the first place" (2004: 61), which allows us to attach value to bereaved identification and be more aware of its context.

This perception of the complex relationship between mourning and melancholy is taken up by LaCapra, who defines them as paradigmatic reactions to traumatic loss, encompassing not only individual and silent suffering but also culture and politics. As he argues in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, mourning involves working through trauma and distinguishing between the past and the present. In contrast, melancholy constructs the past as inseparable from the present in acting out the past. "In acting out," writes LaCapra, "the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription," whereas in mourning, one eventually recognizes "its difference from the present" (2001: 70). Nevertheless, there can be instances when acting out becomes a part of working through, for example, when victims engage in political forms of memory, trying to retain the singularity of their experience in the face of totalizing master narratives. One such master narrative is the concept of historical progress, which often implies forgetting the past. Alexander Etkind has applied LaCapra's categories to analyze Russian memory culture, which reveals that "[a]s time passes and generations replace one another, their mournful mimetic performances migrate to the increasingly virtual spaces of theatre, art, and literature, and then to film, television shows, and social media" (2013: 2). While in Russia this process is particularly complex and intense

because of the relatively positive rethinking of Stalin's regime in Putin's politics, it nevertheless illuminates a common mechanism, according to which many writers become melancholic subjects in rethinking the past.

Especially informative for my research is LaCapra's suggestion that experimental and non-redemptive narratives, which resist totalization, harmonization, and closure, are often helpful for coming "to terms with trauma in a post-traumatic context, in ways that involve both acting out and working through" (2001: 179). Correspondingly, in *History, Literature, Critical Theory*, he specifies this idea by writing that "[i]n narrative these problematic negotiations are undertaken most prominently in the structure of narration, including the modulations of narrative perspective and voice, as well as in the words and actions of characters" (2013: 54), to which I would also add the more temporal-oriented properties of narrativity and plot development. In his reading of W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), he notes how the repetitive, circling, and digressing narration employed by the author "has no "dialectical" impetus or movement of "overcoming," much less redemption" (2013: 61). Sebald's technique supports a deeply melancholic conception of history: "Sebald's perspective combines extreme precision with respect to historical details and a transhistorical sense of a vortex-like consumption of history in a movement or retrovirus of devastating catastrophe" (2013: 64). Sebald's novels could be considered as one of the prime examples of creatively engaging with the idea of heterogeneous time, or more precisely, of deconstructing the modern tendency to conflate linear narrative with historical time. Similarly to many works of contemporary Eastern European fiction, his novels demonstrate how temporal concepts both inform and emerge from prose. However, in the case of novels analyzed in my articles, there is a more salient rejection of the totalitarian politics of time as progress and a keener awareness of the importance of constructing new temporalities for particular contexts.

In the first article of my dissertation, I employ LaCapra's views on mourning and melancholy as interacting processes to demonstrate how an excessive clinging to the past, in Gundega Repše's *Conjuring Iron*, both constitutes the ethics of remembering and resonates with narrative form, which is used in experimental ways to keep the memory of Soviet repressions alive and politically charged. However, in the second article, dedicated to Nora Ikstena's novel, I juxtapose fragmentary narration, which foregrounds the unrepresentability of shattering experiences, with less experimental depictions of trauma that demonstrate how past events remain silently active in a totalitarian system that favors forgetting or, at best, controlled memory. Compared to the notions of presence and sublime historical experience, which I will discuss momentarily, the framework of melancholy is better suited to examining the psychological dimension of narrators' experience of time after a traumatic event. It also allows us to naturally integrate specific insights and terms from trauma theory into discussions of narrative structure and the ethics of representation.

4.2. Presence

Eelco Runia's writings on presence belong to the strand of contemporary thought that aspires to renounce the constructivist approach to history and return to the "real." Among his main peers, one finds Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Frank Ankersmit, with their respective monographs on the effects of presence and the sublime historical experience. "All three of them," as Ethan Kleinberg effectively sums up, "call for turn away from seemingly endless interpretations manufactured by "theory" and return to a relationship with the past predicated on our unmediated access to actual things that we can feel and touch and that brings us into contact with the past" (2013: 11). Consequently, Runia makes this transition by questioning the importance of meaning, which has dominated historical theory and which he casts aside in favor of presence. In his most influential essay, "Presence," he defines this specific mode of heterogenous time as "being in touch – either literally or figuratively – with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are" (2014a [2006]: 53). Commentators, as well as Runia himself, have mostly stressed the literal connection (for example, Ewa Domanska speaks exclusively about the agency of things (2006)), although quite often our experience of the past is conveyed through poetic figures, as is evident in the previously quoted fragment from Inara Verzemnieks ghostly memoir. Runia perceives our need for presence as "the existential equivalent of one of the key issues in history and historiography: the problem of continuity and discontinuity". In other words, the need for presence could be seen as an affective experience of time, "as a symptom of the determination to account for the fact that our past – though irremediably gone – may feel more real than the world we inhabit" (2014a [2006]: 54). This point becomes clearer if we link the idea of presence to the one of transference.

In another essay, "Spots of Time," Runia argues that the past travels with our stories like a "stowaway" and that this process is analogous to the "way as in transference the past of a psychoanalytical patient is present in the psychoanalytical situation" (2014b [2006]: 100), which is a direct reference to Freud's essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* The psychoanalytic patient, writes Freud there, "is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" (Freud 2001b [1920]: 18). This conceptual connection endows the idea of presence with post-traumatic qualities. Therefore, the past, in Runia's theory, "is too terrible and chaotic to represent, and it forces itself upon us and makes us behave in a certain way" (Froeyman 2014: 405). Bearing this in mind, Runia concentrates on metonymy as a transfer of presence, as a trope that testifies to the temporal and structural complexities mentioned above. Metonymy is able not only to connect but also juxtapose "different "spheres of appropriateness"," and it can be visualized as a passageway "between two different topoi" (2014a [2006]: 67); thus, it is essentially a dynamic trope that spatializes time. Metonymy is an uncanny detail embedded in a representational scheme that destabilizes it by disturbing the ontological dichotomy between past and present.

For instance, in Holocaust memory, jewelry, shoes, clothes, and even hair can "speak on behalf of past wholeness" (Shallcross 2011: 2), often forcing those living in the present to apply literary means to reveal the experience hidden behind the thing.

The invention of metonymy, for Runia, is one of the most original things literature might accomplish since, by using this trope, "authors can transcend themselves and can suggest that what they describe has a reality independent of them" (2014a [2006]: 72). Because of this reality effect, he appreciates the nonverbal metonymies, like images, train tickets, postcards and other remnants of the past, found in W. G. Sebald's novels: "These illustrations function as fistulae or holes in which the past discharges into the present," each of them is a kind of small incision, creating "a kind of leak" in time through which "presence" well up from the past into the present" (2014a [2006]: 67). However, as I show in my readings of Andra Manfelde and Katja Petrowskaja, it is necessary to expand on Runia's notion of metonymy as a transfer of presence by analyzing how it triggers narrative projection and embodiment and how it can be linked to the ethics of imagination, which respects the singularity of other's trauma. Along with the need to think ethically about time, in my reading of Manfelde and Petrowskaja, I subscribe to Kalle Pihlainen's proposal that, in thinking about historical experience, we need a "more precise reference to general phenomenological opportunities and limitations as well as the effects of materiality," which would allow to interpret presence "in connection with arguments concerning material and embodied affordances" (2019: 621). The narrative structure itself can be metonymic, and in those cases, writes Gerard Steen, "the invitation to connect one conceptual domain with another, either between two parts of the story itself or between the story and the project, is often hard to miss" (2005: 308), meaning that metonymic semantic chains create the literary discourse. However, I see metonymy as something more specific, such as small details, like words and signs, that operate like prisms for refracting one moment through another and setting certain stories in motion.

4.3. Sublime Historical Experience

In 2005, one year before Runia presented his ideas on presence, Frank Ankersmit published *Sublime Historical Experience*, in which he proposes shifting attention from language-related aspects of history, such as epistemology and narrative structure, which had previously governed the philosophy of history, to a direct and affective relation to the past. Although linking the sublime to trauma, Ankersmit seems to ignore the possibility that the "[t]raumatizing activity itself," as noted by Dominick LaCapra regarding, first of all, Nazi crimes against humanity, "may be experienced by perpetrators as somehow elevating and exhilarating, if not as sublime" (2001: xiv). Perhaps this blind spot is explained by Ankersmit's focus on the sublime's temporal aspects, which are rarely represented elsewhere. The difference between sublime historical experience and

presence is that the former is a conscious state of mind, comparable to nostalgia or an aesthetic experience, while the latter is more unpredictable. In other words, while sublime historical experience is overwhelming and leads to a loss of self, presence does not cancel the self but rather penetrates it through surprising metonymies.

In the introduction of his book, Ankersmit claims that historical experience involves both a "discovery of the past as a reality that has somehow "broken off" from a timeless present," which is our loss, and "a recovery of the past by transcending again the barriers between past and present," which, in turn, signifies our love for the past. "The sublimity of historical experience," he continues in the same pages, "originates from this paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that is, of the combination of pain and pleasure in how we relate to the past" (2005: 9), and commentators clarify this complex relationship by calling it a nexus of presence and absence, meaning that that the past is absent from explanatory narrative frames, but is present as an intrusion into our consciousness where it creates chaos (Froeyman 2012: 398; Jay 2018: 436). Ankersmit bases his idea of sublime historical experience on Johan Huizinga's notion of "historical sensation," which he defined in "The Tasks of Cultural History," published in 1929: "This contact with the past that cannot be reduced to anything outside itself is the entrance into a world of its own, it is one of the many variants of ekstasis, of an experience of truth that is given to a human being" (quoted in Ankersmit 2005: 120). The truth of this experience lies behind the textual remnants of the past, "as a response to the call of an author or artifact from the past" (Kellner 2022: 524).

The way this kind of temporal layering might be achieved is not studied in detail since presentist thinking mainly relies on a general notion of presence. It privileges the object from the past as the means for experiencing the past. Reflecting on Ankersmit's idea of sublime historical experience, Jonas Ahlskog too confidently suggests that "the past can have presence only through historical experience of objects from the past in which the past itself, through feelings and moods the objects evoke, breaks through our conceptual schemes and gives us a feeling of unmediated contact with the past" (2017: 191). His assessment ignores other cultural artifacts, including literary examples, mentioned by different presentist thinkers. However, some brief remarks scattered throughout *Sublime Historical Experience* suggest an intimate connection between the epiphanic sense of the past and literary means, if we consider literature beyond the confines of coherence and realism.

This is evident in Ankersmit's conceptualization of the relationship between culture and literature, in which the former is a supersystem and the latter a subsystem. Culture, according to him, could be seen as "fleeting sets of sensations, moods, and feelings," as collectively experienced "pains and sensations" that form, most notably, during traumatic historical changes and are expressed by poets, novelists, and historians without reducing their work to the discourse of historical truth (2005: 196). Their writings, if they are truly aware of the struggles of the time, are "the groanings of civilization, as the texts in which the pains, the

moods, and feelings of a civilization articulate themselves" and essentially aim "at making experience speak" (2005: 197). It is vital to note that Ankersmit employs metaphors related to traumatic experiences, which also provide a clue to how sublime historical experiences might be represented in narrative form, despite Ankersmit's doubts about narrative form. Later in the book, he claims that there is an inevitable overlap between trauma and the sublime since "[i]n both we have to make do with an experience of the world that is too terrible to fit within the matrix of how we "normally" experience it" (2005: 334). Consequently, sublime historical experience, similarly to trauma, challenges coherent narrative representation. Still, it does not mean it is entirely foreign to narrative because narrative can also express our difficulties with ordering temporal experience. As it has been argued concerning presence, the sublime historical experience might enter language when "the representative crust that language places over the past" is thin (Froeyman 2015: 166), or, in other words, when it leaves open symbolic gaps in fragmented and melancholically meandering prose for the past to assert its presence. In my article on novels by Pauls Bankovskis and Dušan Šarotar, I focus on precisely such instances, revealing the affordances of poetic descriptions in capturing heterogeneity.

All three just-introduced concepts from the philosophy of history correspond to one of the most distinct features of 21st century fiction: its interest in historical reality and the rethinking of linear time, which started in modernism. Peter Boxall, in his book on contemporary writing, states that "[t]he historical consciousness which one can trace in the fiction of the new century is one which is grounded in a keen awareness of history as an event, history as a material force which is not simply produced by narrative, but also shapes and determines it" (2013: 41). Moreover, he continues, "there is emerging in the novel now a new ethical relationship to history, a new sense of a *responsibility* to material historical forces that constrain or shape the fictional imagination" (2013: 41–42), and this aspect, as I argue, could be better explored by creating conceptual connections between the main insights of Benjamin, Derrida, and LaCapra, which tie together ethics and time, and works by Runia and Ankersmit who focus more on the real and affective presence of past reality. Latvian fiction, the primary focus of my investigations, aligns with Boxall's description, as it includes instances in which the resurfacing of the past – whether in the minds of deeply traumatized narrators or within their inherited environment – is tied to the demands the past places on living generations and their potential narratives. Therefore, I find it necessary to give attention to the formal aspects of passages that, for example, stress the unspeakable presence of the past through narrative omissions and melancholic digressions that linger over sublime historical experiences, or, conversely, aim to disclose the traumatic past more straightforwardly and realistically.

Whatever strategy or technique a writer chooses should be analyzed in close readings to demonstrate how particular structures, along with thematic, metaphorical, and contextual features, contribute to the development of radical modifications of historical time. For example, Pauls Bankovskis, in his novel, uses a

double plot structure to initiate a comparison between two historical ruptures and their impact on individual experience. The first storyline comprises a journal by a Latvian soldier during the First World War, a period marked by significant political and social turmoil. The soldier flees the army and wanders through Latvia, contemplating such themes as space, time, and freedom. Towards the novel's end, he leaves behind his nihilistic visions about nation-states. He embraces the establishment of independent Latvia, viewing it as a sublime event that distorts time. The second storyline includes reflections on those same questions by an unnamed Latvian intellectual. For him, the main geopolitical shock is the Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, bringing up past traumas and anxieties also among Latvians. In both storylines, the reader encounters poetic and uncanny descriptions of time and space that serve a dual function: slowing down the development of the respective storyline and opening up the possibility of connecting it to the other storyline. Crucially, by creating a kind of wormhole between the two storylines, the novel foregrounds a specific understanding of historical time, in which multitemporality and the sublime character of concrete events are tied with political awareness. In reading other Latvian novels, I have the same inclination to reveal the structural resemblance between specific narrative strategies and historical sensibility.

To summarize the affordances of each mode and the corresponding techniques, I argue that melancholy reveals a way of engaging with the past that favors fragmentations and resists closure. At the same time, mourning is linked to a more coherent approach that could function as an alternative to melancholy. Presence emphasizes the affective and material traces of the past that are intrusive and create temporal confusion. The basic transfer of presence is metonymy, which can trigger narrative projection and ethical reasoning. A sublime historical experience foregrounds the overwhelming and transformative nature of historical ruptures, resisting full integration into coherent storytelling and prioritizing descriptions to slow down the narrative's pace. These three modes align with contemporary Latvian and Eastern European fiction's perception of the past as an active and tangible force that shapes both narrative form and ethical responsibility. In Section 6 of this chapter, I offer a more detailed discussion of each mode and corresponding formal workings.

5. THE LATVIAN NOVEL AND ITS COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The immediate comparative horizon for contemporary Latvian fiction is the literature of Lithuania and Estonia, the other two Baltic countries. This is evident in publications such as *Baltic Postcolonialism* (2006), *Back to Baltic Memory* (2008), and, more recently, Zanda Gūtmane's monograph *Totalitarian Trauma in Baltic Prose* (2019). Gūtmane bases her comparative readings on shared historical experiences that have also influenced the literary history of the three Baltic countries, demonstrating chronologically how fiction survived Stalinism and Stagnation and eventually entered a phase of postmodern experimentation, followed by a more historically aware writing. While I find her analysis, inspired by literary trauma theory and new historicism, valuable for highlighting the historical and cultural contexts of trauma, in my own research, I expand the theoretical and comparative perspective to include concepts also from philosophy of history and present contemporary Latvian fiction as a case of broader historical sensibility that could be effectively termed Eastern European.

Eastern Europe, of course, is not an entirely homogeneous sphere. Anita Starosta has noted that "[t]he very name of this region and its status as a coherent subject of inquiry have been called into question in the course of recent changes, whose outward signs include the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the transitions to political liberalism and capitalism, the eastward expansion of the European Union, and Russia's reassertion of control over parts of its former domain" (2015: 24). At the same time, inscribing Eastern Europe into the global, as Starosta continues, "subsumes it to an order not of its own making" (2015: 25). Thus, Eastern Europe occupies a complex position, and it can be defined as an "impossible space," which is a term offered by Daniella Gáti. She contends that not only does Eastern Europe "not figure as part of core Europe's imaginary of Europe, but this erasure itself is not recognized" (2023: 27). As I have suggested in my dissertation, one way of dealing with this problem is to offer a more nuanced understanding of experience of time, which can be expressed in forms familiar to, for example, experimental anglophone literature, but often deals with different historical material with a strong emphasis on finding an ethical relation to the past.

Natalya Bekhta has recently advocated for a renewed focus on Eastern European literature, which has seemingly lost its appeal: "[A]fter the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, literatures of the former 'Second World' have virtually disappeared from the comparative literary studies" (2025: 12). While it is certainly possible to make comparative constellations between Eastern European and Western European texts, for example, in terms of solely narrative techniques, I agree with Bekhta that it is necessary to consider Eastern European literature in its own right based on its distinctive historical experience. This means making connections between previously disconnected literary environments, thereby also questioning "the problematic concealment of heterogeneity

and inequality" hidden in such ambitious terms as "world literature" (Tihanov 2017: 472). Thus, although my dissertation takes Latvian fiction as its departure point, the scope of the study is broad enough to serve as a groundwork for further discussion of how time is warped in novels and how it both mirrors and shapes our conceptualization of time after the fall of communism. Let me now offer an overview of contemporary Latvian fiction, emphasizing some crucial similarities and differences with other Eastern European approaches to the examination of time.

The troubling experiences of the 20th century, primarily associated with the Second World War and the subsequent years of Soviet occupation, including deportations and censorship, have become a significant subject in contemporary Latvian fiction. This is evident in the historical novel series *We. Latvia, 20th Century*, comprising thirteen works, each dedicated to a specific decade, its key events, and atmosphere. However, the interest in history is a relatively recent phenomenon in Latvian fiction. Before this series, published between 2014 and 2018, most writers engaged in postmodern poetics to problematize the traditional realist desire to conjure "the virtual reality of make-believe" (Ryan 1997: 168), meaning that, for them, the historical past could be represented only indirectly. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period when a new kind of Latvian literature was emerging, realism was radically questioned, thereby aligning fiction and poetry with the ideals of postmodernism. Guntis Berelis, one of the most active writers and critics of that time, devoted several essays to the problem of realism, advocating for a rejection of strict aesthetic formulas in favor of interpretative ambiguity (1989a: 5–6). Berelis claimed that "[e]ach writer creates a more or less closed world with their works, which is formed by a limited number of elements characteristic only to them, combined according to equally characteristic poetic laws" (1989b: 15). Other authors, like Jānis Einfelds, Aivars Ozoliņš, and Mārtiņš Zelmenis, shared his views, creating highly idiosyncratic works, complete with absurdist humor, surreal visions of everyday life, and philosophical ruminations on literature itself. Rereading these works today, one notices that the fragmentation of narrative is not employed to connect the past and the present, reflecting on historical time and the need for transgenerational responsibility.

The main objective of Latvian postmodern writers was to expose the realist ideology, which "asserts that art and literature should reflect life and the world soberly, in precise detail, so that we can learn from or analyze it rather than becoming swept up by idealistic and escapist flights of fancy" (Nicol 2012: 18). Most notably, Aivars Ozoliņš, in his book *Dukts* (1991), influenced by Daniil Kharms and Donald Barthelme whom he also translated, offered highly poetic and fragmented prose pieces that parodied Soviet culture and ideology. Critics praised his collection as "a significant turning point in Latvian literature" (Cimdiņa 1994: 8). Ozoliņš's approach to history, which could be defined as a deconstruction of ideological constraints, captivated other authors. Still, it also meant that particular historical events and their traumatic effects had to wait to be represented more emphatically, systematically, and directly, forming a new experience of time. This hesitancy to address recent history directly, either by

immersing the reader in the past or by reflecting on its connection to the present, is less pronounced in other Eastern European literary cultures of the 1990s. For example, nothing similar in scope, form and overall objective to renowned Estonian writer Viivi Luik's novel *The Beauty of History* (1991), which addresses "the problem of aesthetic representation of violent and traumatic historic events" and in which "metanarrative devices to contribute to a chaotic, disruptive temporality" (Kirss 2006: 271) could be found in the same period in Latvian literature.

During the 1990s, a few more realistic attempts to express the traumatic aspects of Soviet reality were criticized as too simplistic in form and content (Berelis 1999: 304), and this led to hesitation among more experimental authors to engage with history. Consequently, the past, if addressed at all, was an object of fragmentary melancholy, as exemplified by the novels of Gundega Repše, where it exists as an unspeakable backdrop to the present, silently influencing actions and thoughts. Similarly, Egīls Venters, in his anti-novel *Explanatory Dictionary of Melancholy* (2000), addresses the past in a general fashion: "[T]he streets have not yet been cleared of the past, with their ups and downs, the smell of coal and firewood near two-story wooden houses, car wrecks in courtyards, and the equally unnecessary television tower" (2000: 20). In his work, melancholy lacks historical depth and concreteness, functioning more like a highly aestheticized and universal feeling. For instance, the figure of a ghost here is related to autumn, defined as "soul's sorrow for tangible, material things" (2000: 31). In contrast, Pauls Bankovskis's, in his novel *18*, transcends this romantic conception and associates the ghost with a specific historical event that still affects the present. This kind of unspecified melancholy, which we encounter in Venters's text, appears to be a key feature of Latvian postmodern fiction. Meanwhile, in other post-socialist literatures of the same period, melancholy is endowed with ethical and political agency, tying it to a need for more nuanced documentation of reality. For instance, *Natural Novel* (1999) by the Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov, which simultaneously deconstructs realist norms and immerses the reader in Bulgaria's recent history, describes in various parts how the experience of time has changed since the fall of communism. The disoriented feelings of the 1990s are also at the center of Tõnu Õnnepalu's *Border State* (1993) and *Exercises* (2002) and Mikhail Shishkin's *Maidenhair* (2005), suggesting that the turn to fragmentary form had historical reasons and reflected a specific experience of time. The form was at least partially defined by the sheer number of suddenly emerging traumatic memories, as well as by the chaotic transition from communism to capitalism.

Gospodinov's fictional works, when compared to Latvian postmodern experiments, offer a solid basis for meaningful comparison that helps us better understand the narrative possibilities for exploring historical experience. His most successful novel, *Time Shelter* (2022), is built on the idea that "[w]e are constantly producing the past. We are factories for the past. Living past-making machines, what else? We eat time and produce the past. Even death doesn't stop this. A person might be gone, but his past remains" (2022: 116). The main character in the novel is named Gaustine (an apparent reference to St. Augustine

and a nod to the author's own name), who starts a clinic in Switzerland for Alzheimer's patients, enabling them to relive the best decade of their lives in carefully curated rooms. Eventually, there are more and more of these clinics, and this way of existence spreads throughout Europe, with each country holding a referendum to choose which decade of its past it would like to return to. For example, the Baltic countries decide to return to the 1990s, "still intoxicated with their post-1989 independence" (2022: 247). By dividing Europe into temporal zones, Gospodinov critically examines our obsession with the past, demonstrating that the need for presence, along with the possibility of engaging with the dead, also has problematic aspects that could ultimately lead to ignorance, chaos, and violence. Compared to Latvian writers, Gospodinov seems to be more aware of this problem.

What his novel, however, has in common with the works analyzed in my study is the sense of place as a palimpsest of troubling memories. In *Time Shelter*, what initially seems like an innocent return to the past through re-enactment of certain events and customs in particular places leads to a situation when "[t]he presentness of a past catastrophe becomes the new temporal environment in which the protagonists must learn to live" (Tabaszewska 2024: 185). Other contemporary novels, influenced, most notably, by W. G. Sebald's understanding of place as "a temporally and spatially complex *milieu* composed of exiles, crossings, digressions" (Wylie 2007: 181), depict presence nostalgically and melancholically, keeping the violent past in a latent state. This is the case in Augustín Fernández Mallo's novel *The Things We've Seen* (2018), as its narrator embarks on a walking tour of the D-Day beaches in Normandy, pondering: "The living pass by and you may never see them again, whereas a dead person remains, their presence sticks to your skin like the buttery smell does to everything on that stretch of French coastline" (2021 [2018]: 386). Similarly, in Bankovskis's *18* and Petrowskaya's *Maybe Esther*, the narrators encounter the dreadful past in concrete places, and this experience of temporal confusion eventually evolves into a broader historical sensibility that also explains the overall structure of these novels. In other words, the heterogeneity of historical time is reflected in form, or, more strongly, it can be fully comprehended only through the combination of content, plot, and language.

To emphasize the connection between history and form, both Gospodinov and Bankovskis also employ metafictional commentary, carefully guiding their readers toward the idea of disrupted historical time, complete with cross-temporal resonances. However, returning more directly to Latvian fiction and its historical development, it becomes clear that, for the most part, postmodernist strategies have been divorced from reflection on historical time and are now used alongside conventional and sincere ones, characteristic of metamodernist ambiguity. Contrary to fiction written in other parts of Europe, Latvian authors, during the 1990s, did not produce historiographic metafiction, which "challenges hegemonic cultural discourses by recontextualizing them and offering alternative versions, thus foregrounding epistemological and ethical questions involved in writing history" (Nünning 2004: 359). Instead, for the most part, they tried out

new techniques and themes that were previously discouraged. The chief interpreter of Latvian postmodern fiction, Guntis Berelis, claims that the primary response these texts generated among the readers was "[w]hat is this particular text and does it have anything to do with literature" (2001: 29). Therefore, the period from the late 1980s until the early 2010s was primarily concerned with self-reflection and did little to question the dichotomy between the past and the present, including its incompatibility with cross-temporal empathy, which is essential for post-traumatic cultural settings.

The potential of putting the historical time out of joint has been attributed to Anglo-American postmodern fiction and, more recently, to Russian novels of the 1990s and early 2000s, when, as I described, Latvian fiction had other ambitions. Alexander Etkind mentions Dmitry Bykov, Vladimir Sharov, and Vladimir Sorokin, who cannot escape "the repetitive contemplation of the past" (2013: 234), offering melancholic and counterfactual versions of Soviet reality as if to weaken its power. Russian fiction of the 1990s combines the sense of unspeakable trauma with narrative techniques alien to socialist realism, making this version of postmodernism "uniquely sensitive to the problematic of time and history" (Gomel 2013: 310). In contrast, as I noted earlier, Latvian postmodern fiction of the same period was more concerned with playful language, thereby evoking a perception of timelessness and indifference. Boris Noordenbos contends that repetition, supported by the classic trauma theory's distrust of coherent narratives, is crucial for understanding the prose of Russian novelists who "undermine stable plots about Russian history and identity" (2016: 21). However, in analyzing these works, Etkind and Noordenbos risk interpreting literature as merely a symptom of collective trauma and overlooking the nuances of narrative strategies. In my approach to Latvian fiction, I move beyond contemplating history – beyond simply acknowledging that an author writes about the past – and analyze their intervention in cultural perceptions of historical time and the formal means employed.

In Latvian fiction, the attitude towards the history of the 20th century as something that could test the limits of representation and demand an ethically charged response began to change in the early 2010s. This was directly linked to writers getting tired of postmodernist aesthetics. During the 1990s, various literary critics, as summarized by scholar Ausma Cimdiņa, complained that contemporary Latvian literature mimics postmodernism in Western Europe and lacks an original program (2000: 125). At that time, writers had to defend their need for postmodernist techniques and tropes to deconstruct realism. In 2009, Pauls Bankovskis, who himself engaged in postmodern experimentation in his first novels and short story collections, declared that Latvian fiction of the 1990s, in retrospect, "has turned into mainly something one cannot enjoy" (2009: n. p.). Two years later, Repše convincingly argued that post-Soviet culture has not come to terms with its traumas and is stuck in a self-absorbed present, supported by postmodern indifference. In her introduction to a collection of stories about the mentioned time period, written by twelve authors, she urged Latvian writers to address history to disturb the cultural phenomenon she tellingly called "the

comfortable present" (2011a: 6). Essentially, she advocated against the present as a homogenous transition from the past to the future, instead viewing it as a space for rethinking what had happened to the nation and the country.

Repše did not specify what this assignment, which ultimately led to the historical novel series, might imply for narrative form and for different approaches to the past, ranging from immersion in historical reality to meta-reflective assessment of its long aftermath. But she disregarded the fiction of the 1990s for showing a self-loathing modesty when compared to the historical novels of Sofi Oksanen and Herta Müller (2011a: 6). To be fair, her view of postmodern fiction seems limited since one could argue that postmodern fiction in the Baltic countries was already able to combine experimental narration with a new historical sensibility in the early 1990s and that Repše herself expressed the value of postmodern approach to history in her novel *Conjuring Iron*. At the beginning of the story, the narrator suggests that history pulsates in her like "raw meat with torn skin" (2011b: 13), and this statement is tellingly followed by a series of dictionary entries devoted to particular aspects of her family's traumatic past. The fragmentary novel, either adopting the structure of a dictionary or other montage techniques, could be considered a traveling form, "enduring through vast distances of time and space", connecting different literary cultures, and also doing "political work in particular historical contexts" (Levine 2015: 5). In Latvian literature, this form was briefly linked to traumatic history before authors turned to other means.

Drawing on the body of Latvian historical novels, my dissertation analyzes Pauls Bankovskis's *18* and Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk*, published in the series *We. Latvia, 20th Century*, both of which reflect on the problem of melancholy, endowing it with ethical and political potential in times of oppression and crisis. Ikstena's work gradually shifts from melancholy to mourning, depicting how melancholic attachments to the past were hindered by Soviet ideology. Bankovskis elevates melancholy to the level of narration and historical understanding, allowing it to represent the sublime encounters with the dead and their demands. Another work, Andra Manfelde's *The Children of the Dugout*, published in 2010, instead of relying on melancholic and sublime motifs, which it also briefly uses, emphasizes the role of metonymy in accessing the past from a postmemorial position, connecting generations through imaginative projections and empathetic encounters. Manfelde's book belongs to a wide range of postmemorial prose written by authors with Eastern European roots, including writers such as Ruta Sepetys and Saša Stanišić, who write in languages other than those of their parents. Due to their personal connection to past events, these authors feel a responsibility to demonstrate how the past continues to impact the present both psychologically and culturally. Because of this characteristic, which directly resonates with current tendencies in philosophy of history, my dissertation does not pay closer attention to historical novels that immerse the reader in a past reality without reflecting on the present. For instance, Sigitas Parulskis's *Darkness and Company* (2012) and Māris Bērziņš's *The Taste of Lead* (2016), two successful novels about the Holocaust in Lithuania and Latvia, raise a different set of philosophical questions, more closely associated with the limits of repre-

sentation and the historical guilt. My primary focus is on structural correspondences between temporal experience and literary form.

These kinds of correspondences, of course, are not just a matter of Latvian fiction but pertain to other literary environments with similar historical development. In my article on sublime historical experience and melancholic narration, I examine Slovenian writer Dušan Šarotar's novel *Panorama* (2014), which explores the impact of the Yugoslav Wars on historical imagination and temporal experience. Similarly to Petrowskaya's novel, Šarotar's text includes actual photographs, taken by the author himself, of places in Ireland, Belgium, and Bosnia, a few of which are connected to historical suffering. Meanwhile, Bankovskis and Manfelde do not use real images, but, in describing certain visual remnants of the past, manage to turn photography into a metaphor for temporal heterogeneity. Damian Sutton, following well-known views on this technology (see Barthes 1981), has argued that photographs are transhistorical, meaning that they "always disrupt our sense of time and history since they make the remote event current or they make the present immediately historical" (2009: 212–213). In Manfelde's work, this effect is explored at the very beginning, emphasizing the desire to both return to the past and help the dead in their suffering and to feel their presence here and now. The narrator of Bankovskis's novel is less emotional in this regard, suggesting instead that the past is something that inevitably happens also in the present. However, in *18*, the exact temporal mechanism at work in specific photographs is elevated to the level of plot, connecting the experiences of the First World War with the current moment when Ukraine is defending its freedom, while other Eastern European countries, as it is also stressed in Bankovskis's text, fear the return of totalitarianism.

Šarotar's novel, of course, is just one of many literary works from the Balkans that address the recent past (for more on history in post-Yugoslav literature, see Gorup 2013 and Beronja and Vervaet 2016). Perhaps a better-known example is the fiction of Croatian writers Daša Drndić and Dubravka Ugrešić. Similarly to Repše, they have written experimental collage novels, suggesting that this form is chosen because of the historical material they have to come to terms with. Ugrešič writes in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, following Rilke, that "the story of a shattered life can only be told in bits and pieces" (1999 [1996]: 107), and Drndić, with the calamities of Nazism and communism in mind, adds that "[t]there is no longer any point in sewing up, patching, joining, putting more fragments into our panoramic frame, because all the components are rotten, in a state of decay, incompatible" (2018 [2016]: 20). But it is also important to remember that there are other strategies, since works such as Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk* or, more recently, Sasha Salzmann's (German novelist's and playwright's, of Russian-Jewish descent) *Glorious People* (2021) demonstrate how a story can flow linearly, as if mirroring the time of progress in totalitarianism, and still reveal the power of melancholic bonds on a personal level through poetic episodes that slow down narrative and reveal the inner complexity of post-traumatic environments. In short, I explore not only works that, on a macro-level, are highly fragmented, but also novels that appear more conventional yet still

express the disruptive power of the past on a micro-level, for example, in poetic passages and metonymic connections.

To quote David Damrosch, my constellations are based on "similarities in genre, in character and plot, in themes and imagery, and in parallel cultural patterns" (2018: 58) while also paying attention to essential differences in actual events. By paying attention to different levels of narration and various poetic techniques, my study joins the recent trend in comparative literary studies of returning to Eastern European literature. Such a return, I suggest, should be informed not only by narratological scrutiny and the mapping of transnational influences, but also by a philosophical understanding of how time has changed through different historical ruptures. Eventually, an exploration of fiction in relation to the philosophy of history might also diversify research into better-known literary environments. Referring to contemporary Anglo-American novels, Robert Eaglestone observes that the past in prose exists in modes such as fable, memory, haunting, possession, trauma, and rewriting (2019: 312), but, as I demonstrate in my articles, an examination of East European fiction reveals that the past also persists as melancholy, presence, and the sublime, with a clear potential to illuminate recent changes in the experience of time.

In the next section, I would like to discuss the main findings of each dissertation article and explain them in relation to the three research approaches: philosophy of history, narratological analysis, and comparative perspectives. In doing so, I will elaborate on how I have deepened the conceptualization of melancholy, presence, and sublime historical experience and illuminate their mutual relationship.

6. DISCUSSION OF MAIN FINDINGS

6.1. Melancholy Under the Sign of Progress

The first two articles, "“The Scar Will Always Be There”: The Post-Soviet Melancholia in Gundega Repše’s Novel *Conjuring Iron*” and “Progress, Trauma and Narrative Possibilities in Nora Ikstena’s *Soviet Milk*,” examine the psychological and ethical dimensions of melancholic attachments to the past and their narrative representation. The two novels can be seen as exemplifying two radically different approaches to telling the story of historical traumatization and its melancholic aftereffects, even though they were both produced in the early 2010s and refer to the Soviet occupation of Latvia. Repše’s novel is highly experimental, emotional, and fragmented; it is written in the form of a dictionary to cover “myriads of experience” (Repše 2011b: 52). It embodies the sense of temporal confusion and melancholic history in its very structure, which is aligned with the narrator’s wish to contemplate the past in a complex way that rejects mourning as an unethical endeavor.

In *Conjuring Iron*, mourning is considered unethical because the narrator believes that Latvian society has not come to terms with its traumatic past and is too eager to move on. The novel’s narrator initially appears to want to separate herself from contemporary society, but that does not mean she is opposed to community as such. Instead, her rage against political amnesia, as the reader reaches past the middle of the novel, evolves into an attempt to restore the ties between the living and the dead. To borrow Judith Butler’s terms, the narrator’s melancholia “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational dependency and ethical responsibility” (2004: 22). While this kind of relationality through grief is the narrator’s goal, it nevertheless is presented as something uncontrollable, or rather as a feeling that could emerge from a highly fragmented narrative. In contrast, Nora Ikstena’s novel progresses linearly overall, which, as I contend, is done to metonymically embody the historical feeling that, during the Soviet era, time was pushed forward and the past was necessary only to the extent that it informed the striving towards a classless society. Hence, melancholic attachments to the past are discouraged and become trapped within the traumatized subject, without any meaningful connection to cultural or political life. This repression of the past, of course, forces it to resurface in surreal and affective modes.

As I noted in my section on the concept of melancholy, Dominick LaCapra argues that narrative is the best way to explore the relationship between acting out and working through the past. Stories about the past and present nexus that resist linearity, transparency, and closure can convey a sense of melancholy, ultimately expanding it from specific episodes, metaphors, and statements to a broader historical sensibility. LaCapra’s reasoning is in dialogue with a certain tendency in trauma studies that views painful experiences as being beyond direct expression. Earlier, Geoffrey Hartman put forth the term “traumatic knowledge”:

trauma, he claimed, “cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being retrieved or communicated without distortion” (1995: 537), and this essentially meant that trauma could be represented only if language mimics its shattering force. More recent advancements in trauma studies have overcome this notion to study “the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience” (Balaev 2014: 3) and the agency of realist forms (Craps 2013: 42). The main reason why I find LaCapra’s model of melancholy and mourning valuable is that it can account for both experimental and obscure writing and more straightforward approaches to history and also recognize the ethical implications of different narrative strategies. At the same time, it is crucial to refine his ideas through formal analysis.

Drawing on LaCapra, in my article on Repše’s novel, I have introduced the notion of “melancholic narrative”. The narrative can be labeled melancholic when signposts of split experience, co-implication, and ineffability are scattered throughout a text, without leading to a consoling synthesis of the different fragments. Since the early 1990s, Repše has repeatedly claimed that the post-Soviet condition and Latvian politics have betrayed The 1991 Barricades, which the author treats as a sublime event. However, the refusal to describe the historical reality in more detail creates the impression that the years of Soviet occupation are also sublime, conveyed only through emotional, metaphorical statements that stress the continuation of the past.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator, Raina, argues with her lover, Harold, who has roots in both Britain and France. Harold wants Raina to forgive and forget the painful past, but Raina angrily repeats that Latvia is tormented by its history and is always on the verge of losing its freedom. In this way, the Soviet occupation is turned into an absolute and trans-historical force that not only haunts the present but will also define the future. As a consequence, the trauma in Repše’s novel is unnarrated, meaning that it is found in the ellipses and gaps (Prince 1988: 2). It is unnarrated not simply because traumatic events “exceed or transcend the expressive capacities of language” (Warhol 1994: 79), but also because, in the mind of the narrator, there is an ethical objective linked to it. The novel suggests that if there is a particular post-Soviet historical sensibility, its goal should be to oppose cultural forgetting by continuously disturbing historical time.

Ikstena’s novel tells the story of an unnamed mother and her daughter, both haunted by traumatic past events linked to each other. They narrate their lives under the Soviet occupation of Latvia in alternating sections, primarily between 1969 and 1989, which, respectively, mark the birth of the daughter and the death of her mother. The mother also continuously attaches herself to the Second World War and her father, who was deported to Siberia and later drank himself to death. Tellingly, the father is said to be “[d]iscarded on the waste heap of our times” (Ikstena 2018 [2015]: 17). The mother is a profoundly melancholic subject who struggles with depression throughout the novel, affecting also her daughter’s perception of life and history. In contrast to traditional traumatic novels, where “temporality and chronology collapse and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (Whitehead 2004: 3), Ikstena’s novel strives for narrative

coherence by employing straightforward referentiality and constructing clear links between the traumatic event and its belated expression.

Therefore, by restoring temporal order and externalizing trauma, the narrative structure supports mourning rather than melancholy. Simultaneously, Ikstena demonstrates how the mother suffered from the future-oriented historical time, which was instrumentalized by the Soviet power to ignore or even forget its crimes. Whereas in Repše's novel, the narrator refuses to externalize her trauma through dialogical means and thus also implies the ethical value of fragmentation and omission, Ikstena's double-voiced narration introduces a level of self-reflexivity that allows her to come to terms with what happened. The sections narrated by the daughter often function as a commentary on her mother's depression, an empathic way of mourning what the mother was not able to overcome.

Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra have previously mentioned the tension between the temporalities of trauma and progress. LaCapra is one of many scholars who have written about how, in Germany, right after the Second World War, the Holocaust entered a state of latency partly because of the country's need to rebuild and move forward (1998: 9; cf. Judt 2002: 157). More recently, Michael Rothberg has demonstrated how the art of William Kentridge problematizes the idea of progress by making it "stutter" when confronted with historical trauma (Rothberg 2019: 89). My analysis of Repše and Ikstena, however, considers a relatively overlooked historical context and two distinct narrative strategies in dealing with the memory of oppressive progress and the possibility of its return, also reflecting on their ethical implications.

6.3. Questioning the Gap Between Narrative and Experience

The last two articles, "Metonymy, Presence, and the Ethics of Imagination in Postmemorial Writing: Andra Manfelde's *Zemnīcas bērni* and Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther*" and "Sublime Historical Experience, Epiphanic Moments, and Melancholic Narration in Pauls Bankovskis's *18* and Dušan Šarotar's *Panorama*," open the discussion of temporal heterogeneity in fiction to presentist concepts of presence and sublime historical experience, as well as introduce a comparison between Latvian and other Eastern European novels. In the writings of Eelco Runia and Frank Ankersmit, presence and historical experience are conceptualized as beyond the reach of narrative comprehension. Runia's prominent examples of presence are monuments and photographs, whereas Ankersmit speaks more abstractly about aesthetic experience and affective reactions to the past.

While I agree that presence and historical experience, being directly related to traumatic occurrences and overwhelming ruptures in the historical continuum, are challenging to represent, I oppose the relatively narrow conception of narrative used among philosophers of history. Since they suggest that presence and historical experience pertain not only to historians but also to broader cultural

production and particular sentiments in Western societies, viewing narrative in terms of transparency, linearity, and simplification means reducing the conceptual potential of their own propositions. The novels analyzed in the last two articles, both in their narrative structures and in their reflections on time and history, demonstrate how presence and historical experience are introduced into the story through metonymies, poetic descriptions, and plot configurations. The first two strategies can be seen as non-narrative, but upon close reading, they reveal their ability to trigger narration and explain the motivation behind the overall design.

In the article on Manfelde and Petrowskaja, I deal with the essentially heterogeneous temporality of postmemory. Marianne Hirsch defined postmemory as "the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (2012: 5). These cross-temporal attachments are usually mediated by "stories, images, and behaviors" (2012: 5). As Hirsch's own essays and the existing commentaries (Osborne 2016 and Ortner 2017) on Petrowskaja's novel exemplify, research on postmemorial writing has focused chiefly on the role of the archive, thus overlooking the power of metonymies that invite narrative projection and virtual encounters with the past. Hirsch acknowledges visual metonymies when, building on Roland Barthes's notion of the punctum (1981 [1980]), she speaks about "points of memory" as intersections between past and present (2012: 61). However, she does not entertain the idea of textual metonymies, which, in turn, could be noticed and analyzed by drawing on Runia's philosophy. In his account, metonymy is the paradoxical and surprising trope of "presence in absence," functioning as a "metaphor for the entwinement of continuity and discontinuity" (2014a [2006]: 55). Petrowskaja's novel explores different archival materials and sites of historical suffering in hope of learning more about the role of the Holocaust in her family's history; meanwhile, Manfelde is dealing with the transgenerational trauma of Soviet deportations of Latvians. Both novels begin from a position of not knowing enough about the past, which underscores the importance of metonymic connections.

In Manfelde's *The Children of the Dugout*, the autobiographical narrator looks at the photograph of her family in Siberian exile and feels directly addressed by their melancholic gazes (2019 [2010]: 13). This address forces the narrator to consider the ethics of mourning and identification. When she enters the picture, overcoming temporal boundaries, she wants to help her family in their suffering and emphasize her distance from the past. In her poetic phantasy, she obtains a virtual body which, to quote Marco Caracciolo, "can be detached from the here and now, and projected into *another* here and now" (2011: 12). Crucially, the reader is also brought inside the picture and the "presence effects" which "exclusively appeal to the senses" (Gumbrecht 2004: xv) further stress the importance of empathy as a virtual experience (LaCapra 2001: 78). Manfelde seems to suggest that while it is necessary to disturb the historical time through imagination and projection, it is also essential to see the difference. Metonymical jumps, implying both continuity and discontinuity, are suited for that.

While Manfelde's narrator engages in a kind of time travel, Petrowskaja's narrator remains in the present, where she experiences the sudden return of traumatic realities. The metonymies she encounters are composed of words, yet they possess a distinct material presence, as they are inserted into the narrative discourse, allowing the reader to see them. Although metonymic objects might be more enchanting since they lack meaning, metonymic texts can still feel perplexing and question the linearity of historical time. When the narrator visits Kalisz in western Poland, where her great-grandfather's family lived until the Holocaust, she notices a fragment of a Jewish gravestone embedded in the pavement: "Wittingly or unwittingly, everyone who walks down the streets of Kalisz is treading on gravestones" (2018 [2014]: 118). The reader can also see the gravestone as a photograph inserted into the discourse. In contrast to Manfelde's work, where metonymy addresses only the narrator, these enigmatic letters, accidentally found in the pavement, invite us to consider broader questions about society, history, and time. Thus, Petrowskaja's case illustrates Runia's thesis that presence is often felt in a spatial framework and connects it to the ethical problems of forgetting the past.

In the article on Bankovskis and Šarotar, I revisit Ankersmit's distinction between narrative and experience, arguing that a sense of historical presence can be conveyed through specific formal means, such as epiphanic descriptions, melancholic narrative, and complex plot structure. Ankersmit's interest in the direct experience of the past seems at odds with narrative form, which diminishes authentic retention. In his book *History and Tropology*, Ankersmit claimed that "[n]arrative interpretations *apply* to the past, but do not *correspond* or *refer* to it" (1994: 33). However, this statement becomes less noticeable if the ideas about sublime historical experience are transferred to the realm of literature, following Ankersmit's own remarks about the potential of novelistic imagination. Similar to Runia's notion of metonymy as a transfer of presence, Ankersmit views the sublime historical experience as a combination of continuity and discontinuity, placing greater emphasis on the effects of historical ruptures and the fleeting, affective phenomena that ensue among people. In the article, I suggest that the narrative traces of sublime historical experience can be identified by drawing on other theoreticians who have explored similar problems.

Jean-François Lyotard has noted that the sublime can be sensed in representation when language exposes its limits (1991 [1984]: 101); this view aligns with my elaboration on melancholic narrative, which is based on LaCapra's notes on narrative and trauma. More specifically, I have analyzed how narrative time slows down in melancholic and epiphanic descriptions, allowing the reader to see the fabric of historical time. In the case of Bankovskis's novel *18*, which explores the traumatic events of the First World War and the contemporary resonances with past suffering, I demonstrate how descriptions of photographs and space function as sites where the reader makes a meaningful and ethically conscious connection between two seemingly separate storylines. The novel's overall narrative structure becomes photographic, linking the past and the present in a way that induces melancholy. Even more than in Bankovskis's book, the

experience of place in Šarotar's *Panorama* involves the disintegration of linear historical time through spectral and uncanny encounters with the past that seem unspeakable. The different European places the narrator visits resemble epiphanic moments, in which the presence of the past, associated with wars and genocides, is emotionally overwhelming. This sense is enhanced by Šarotar's long, uninterrupted paragraphs, during which the narrator becomes immersed in space and time and, characteristic of sublime historical experience, loses himself.

To sum up, in the two articles on the presence and sublime historical experience, I have enhanced the current scholarly understanding of narrative possibilities by examining how non-narrative forms of visual and verbal metonymy, as well as melancholic and poetic descriptions, are related to the heterogeneity of historical time. Moreover, I have explained how these techniques correspond to more conventional narrative strategies that move the story forward and enable a nuanced, ethically conscious understanding of temporal levels that are especially important and informative now, as Eastern Europe experiences new, deeply traumatic events.

7. CONCLUSION

The dissertation explores the notion of historical time in contemporary Latvian and Eastern European novels within a comparative framework, offering a novel approach by applying key categories and insights from the philosophy of history to literary analysis. Drawing on the concept of heterogeneous time from Walter Benjamin and further enriched by scholars like Reinhart Koselleck, Jacques Derrida, Dominick LaCapra, Frank Ankersmit, Eelco Runia, and Aleida Assmann, this dissertation examines how Latvian literature navigates the fragmented experience of time and memory. The study demonstrates how specific narrative strategies enable particular historical inclinations by integrating philosophical perspectives into literary research. More precisely, I have examined the connection between historical ruptures, from the First World War to the Fall of the Berlin Wall, and the narrative forms employed after these ruptures to understand their impact on the present. In contrast to the impression advocated by trauma studies that narratives after traumatic events must necessarily disintegrate, I have also analyzed more linear and coherent approaches and their relation to melancholic confusion. Latvian fiction is a dynamic site for interrogating the intersections of individual and collective memory, trauma, and temporality. The use of philosophical frameworks offers an innovative lens for analyzing how Latvian literature employs concepts such as melancholy, presence, and the sublime historical experience as distinct yet interconnected strategies for grappling with historical time.

Melancholy, with its reflective and often static engagement with loss, contrasts with presence, which emphasizes the immediacy of historical fragments intruding into the present, demanding recognition and reinterpretation. Meanwhile, the sublime historical experience captures moments of overwhelming temporal disjunction, where history is felt not as a linear continuum but as a visceral, affective rupture. These three modes of heterogeneous time are addressed in a comparative analysis, demonstrating that they can effectively expand the discussion beyond Latvian fiction to include examples from other literary cultures with similar historical developments. The most critical factor in the historical development of Eastern European fiction, from the Balkans to the Baltics, is the clash between two different conceptions of historical time. The first one is linear and progressive, hijacked by the totalitarian regimes of the second half of the 20th century. At the same time, the other, invested in structurally and emotionally complex engagements with the past, has emerged to critique and overcome the first one. The mentioned temporal clash can serve as the ground for further comparative studies. Crucially, such investigations can focus on both highly experimental and more coherent narratives. For example, the current analysis of melancholy and narrative negation in Gundega Repše's fiction could serve as a conceptual guide for a close reading of Daša Drndić's novels that employ non-narrative forms to bear witness to the traumatic past. Or the tension between progress and melancholy, explored in the article on Nora Ikstena's novel, could be

compared to how time is experienced in Jenny Erpenbeck's novels about East Germany, thus covering a much larger territory of socialist realities.

This study examines how the three modes of heterogeneous time operate differently in the selected texts, illustrating the diverse ways in which Latvian authors respond to fragmented historical time and traumatic memory. Collectively, these strategies disrupt linear narratives of historical progress, offering alternative ways to reconcile the past with the present. The concepts of melancholy, presence, and sublime history are not applied uncritically but are expanded and modified, closely following the lead of literary examples. Exploring presence, I have shown how metonymies disrupt the narrative flow with engaging details and introduce new possible paths for the story to develop. According to Runia's elaboration, metonymies connect the past and the present, blurring the boundary between continuity and discontinuity. However, in my research, I have also explored how they relate to the ethics of time, contributing to the establishment of transgenerational responsibility. The closely related phenomenon of sublime historical experience is made more nuanced by illuminating the affordances of poetic descriptions that can absorb the overwhelming feelings created by historical ruptures and support a politically conscious reflection on historical parallels.

In the case of melancholy and mourning, I have explored their connections to specific narrative techniques, ranging from poetic fragmentation to linear narration, and have examined moments of temporal confusion that challenge the ideology of progress. In LaCapra's account of melancholy and mourning, the context of Soviet traumatization is missing. Still, I argue that it fundamentally deepens our understanding of traumatic memory since, in the case of Eastern European history and culture, it is initially tied to a specific and oppressive conception of historical time. The ethics of time can be found in LaCapra's use of psychoanalytic concepts, as he applies them to post-Holocaust thinking. However, they were generally ignored by Runia and Ankersmit, mainly because, to reiterate my point, they do not examine specific historical environments, their political configurations, or memory practices. The focus on ethics also allows us to connect their ideas to earlier accounts of historical time by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida. The latter connection seems especially important, given that, in their objections to the post-structuralist emphasis on the limits of representation, Runia and Ankersmit have overlooked the ethical and political dimensions of time addressed by deconstruction, even though they correspond to the more general terms they have made. The articles compiled in this dissertation bridge this gap in presentist thinking.

This research opens the way for further investigation into how the literary imagination negotiates temporal complexity by bridging philosophical concepts of historical time with literary analysis. Future research on heterogeneous time could also explore how the future, especially when tied to ecological anxiety or technological development, intrudes upon the present, shaping narrative structures and affective experiences (cf. Kaplan 2015). This intrusion, marked by the unpredictability of environmental collapse or transformation, aligns with Zoltán

Boldizsár Simon's (2019) notion of "unprecedented change," highlighting the disorienting break from historical continuity caused by events that resist conventional frameworks of understanding. Such a perspective would expand the discussion of heterogeneous time, illustrating how an alarming future shapes the present and, in turn, creates a dynamic, multifaceted engagement with temporality in literature.

Simon notes that the presentist emphasis on the past is only one side of the coin. Both Hartog and Gumbrecht, in their diagnosis of the contemporary condition, claim that historical time is not progressing, as the past and the present subsume the future. "But without the possibility of future change, without a future different from the past and the present, there is no *historical* time," writes Simon (2019: 73). While I would argue that presentism does not cancel historical time but rather reveals how it breaks and folds when the past is connected to the present, Simon is correct in pointing out the importance of future: "Both optimistic and pessimistic expectations of the future in the technological-scientific domain typically concern changes which are not merely conceived of as unfolding from past conditions" (2019: 78). We can interpret certain phenomena, such as raising temperatures or troubling technological advances, as shadows of time to come. Similarly to an intrusive past, they make the present moment heterogeneous, meaning it is split between itself and its radical other. However, the presence of the past and the future in the narratively constructed present, revealing the coexistence of processual and disruptive temporalities in lived experience, is a subject of a different study, which would not be possible without the current one.

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SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

The dissertation investigates the heterogeneity of historical time in contemporary Latvian fiction through a comparative perspective, aligning literary analysis with insights from the philosophy of history. The study examines how Latvian and other Eastern European novels challenge linear and homogenous historical time by radically questioning the ontological distinction between the past and the present, thus reshaping historical sensibility to meet the demands of the past. The research is positioned within the broader discourse on presentism in the philosophy of history, which critiques the dominance of progress-driven temporality. By integrating philosophical, narratological, and comparative approaches, the dissertation argues that the novels chosen for analysis not simply depict the past but construct new ethical and political relationships with it. These relationships are formed against the historical background of the totalitarian instrumentalization of linear time.

Heterogeneous time is a key analytical category derived from Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history. It is explored to recognize the differences between modernist and postmodernist handling of historical time and contemporary Eastern European fiction. While modernist literature explored psychological time and postmodernism questioned the constructed nature of history, contemporary fiction seeks to reconceptualize historical time by foregrounding its affective, tangible, and ethical dimensions. The study is situated at the intersection of literary studies and the philosophy of history, demonstrating how contemporary novels employ formal and thematic strategies to reflect on historical ruptures, particularly in the aftermath of the collapse of communism. The introduction of this study also outlines the research questions, focusing on how novels represent historical time, the narrative techniques used to evoke multitemporality, and the ethical and political implications of these representations.

The dissertation also offers a critical overview of the recent debates within the philosophy of history. It explains the shift from the modern regime of historicity, which privileged the future, to presentism, which foregrounds the persistence of the past. Scholars such as François Hartog, Aleida Assmann, and Reinhart Koselleck are discussed in relation to the reconfiguration of historical consciousness in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, contemporary fiction is aligned with the presentist paradigm by emphasizing ruptures, memory, and the aftermath of historical trauma. Collectively, these phenomena reshape the experience of time, and Latvian fiction, like other Eastern European literary works, endows this transformation with an ethical significance, considering the victims of history.

The ethical and political dimensions of intergenerational responsibility in historical thinking are explored through the work of Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Dominick LaCapra, who recognize that the past imposes demands on the present, often manifesting in spectral, traumatic forms. Benjamin's materialist approach, which emphasizes the redemptive potential of memory, is placed in dialogue with Derrida's notion of hauntology, which describes the persistent

presence of unresolved historical injustices. The dissertation argues that contemporary fiction engages with these ideas by foregrounding the intrusive nature of the past, which can be represented in various forms, ranging from highly experimental to more coherent narrative strategies.

The dissertation focuses on three modes of heterogeneous time – melancholy, presence, and sublime historical experience – each offering a distinct approach to understanding how novels engage with history. Melancholy, as theorized by LaCapra, refers to a mode of temporal experience in which the past remains psychically present, preventing the clear demarcation of past and present. Presence, a concept developed by Eelco Runia, describes the affective force of historical remnants that intrude upon the present, often materialized through metonymy. Ultimately, Frank Ankersmit's notion of sublime historical experience captures the overwhelming and epiphanic sensation of encountering history as an event that transcends rational comprehension. These three modes are in dialogue with literary analysis, making the presentist thinking more conscious of narrative and ethics.

Latvian fiction is situated within a comparative framework, arguing that its temporal structures and ethical concerns resonate with broader trends in Eastern European literature. The study discusses novels by Pauls Bankovskis, Nora Ikstena, Andra Manfelde, and Gundega Repše, highlighting their use of fragmented narration, poetic descriptions, and metonymic details to disrupt homogenous time. It also stresses that these works differ from Western European narratives of memory and trauma because of their emotional engagement with the legacy of Soviet totalitarianism and its politics of time. The comparative perspective extends to Slovenian and German literature, particularly works by Dušan Šarotar and Katja Petrowskaja, demonstrating how Eastern European writers construct a distinct form of presentism that integrates personal and collective histories in an ethically conscious way.

Overall, the dissertation suggests that contemporary fiction does not merely reflect changes in historical consciousness but actively participates in reconfiguring temporal experience. By destabilizing the separation between past and present, the analyzed novels challenge the ideological function of linear time and propose alternative modes of historical engagement. This understanding is made more nuanced by highlighting how different narrative strategies – such as melancholic digressions, metonymic disruptions, and epiphanic moments – demonstrate the presence of the past. In doing so, the dissertation attempts to make the philosophical approach to history more aware of narrative agencies and literary studies more invested in rethinking the relationship between narrative time and historical time.

The dissertation comprises four articles, each addressing distinct aspects of historical time in Eastern European fiction. The first article, "“The Scar Will Always Be There”: The Post-Soviet Melancholia in Gundega Repše's Novel *Conjuring Iron,*" examines how melancholic narration sustains an ethical and political engagement with Soviet repression. The second article, "Progress, Trauma and Narrative Possibilities in Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk*," explores how the novel

represents melancholic attachments to the past to critique totalitarian temporality, which is mirrored in the novel's linear progression. The third article, "Metonymy, Presence, and the Ethics of Imagination in Andra Manfelde's *Zemnīcas bērni* and Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther*," examines the role of metonymy in evoking the past, linking presence to an ethical imagination that is both empathetic and conscious of historical differences. The fourth article, "Sublime Historical Experience, Epiphanic Moments, and Melancholic Narration in Pauls Bankovskis's *18* and Dušan Šarotar's *Panorama*," examines how literary form can absorb sublime encounters with history, which have been previously conceptualized as alien to narrative. Together, these articles demonstrate that Latvian fiction, while underrepresented in global scholarship, provides valuable insights into the ethics and politics of historical time, contributing to broader discussions on literature's role in shaping temporal experience.

SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Ajaloolise aja heterogeensus: kaasaegne Läti romaan võrdlevas perspektiivis

See väitekiri uurib ajaloolise aja heterogeensust kaasaegses Läti ilukirjanduses, rakendades võrdlevat perspektiivi, mis ühendab kirjandusanalüüsi ajaloofilosoofia teoreetiliste lähenemistega. Uurimus vaatleb, kuidas Läti ja teised Ida-Euroopa romaanid vaidlustavad lineaarselt ja homogeenselt mõistetud ajaloolise aja, seades ontoloogilises mõttes kahtluse alla mineviku ja oleviku eristuse ning kujundades seeläbi ümber ajalootaju ja vastutuse. Uurimus on paigutatud ajaloofilosoofia presentistliku diskursuse konteksti, mis kritiseerib progressiideoloogia domineerimist ajaloolises mõtlemises. Filosoofiliste, narratoloogiliste ja võrdlevate meetodite toel väidetakse, et valitud romaanid ei kujuta minevikku pelgalt mälestuste rekonstruktsioonina, vaid loovad uued eetilised ja poliitilised suhted minevikuga, vastandudes totalitaarsele ajakäsitlusele ja lineaarsuse instrumentaliseerimisele.

Heterogeenne aeg on uurimuse keskne analüütiline kategooria, mis on inspireeritud Walter Benjamini ajaloofilosoofiast. Selle kaudu eristatakse kaasaegse Ida-Euroopa ilukirjanduse ajakäsitlust modernistlikest ja postmodernistlikest traditsioonidest. Kui modernism keskendus psühholoogilisele ajale ja postmodernism rõhutas ajaloo konstrueeritud olemust, siis kaasaegne ilukirjandus püüab ajalugu ümber mõtestada, rõhutades selle afektiivseid, materiaalseid ja eetilisi mõõtmeid. Väitekiri asub kirjandusteaduse ja ajaloofilosoofia kokkupuutepunktis, näidates, kuidas kaasaegsed romaanid kasutavad formaalseid ja temaatilisi strateegiaid, et reageerida ajaloolistele kataklüsmidele, eriti seoses kommunismi kokkuvarisemise järelmõjudega.

Väitekiri annab ka kriitilise ülevaate ajaloofilosoofia hiljutistest aruteludest, analüüsides üleminekut modernistlikult ajalookäsitluselt, mis rõhutas tulevikku suunatud progressi, presentismile, mis toob esiplaanile mineviku püsivuse. François Hartogi, Aleida Assmanni ja Reinhart Kosellecki töid arutatakse Ida-Euroopa ajaloolise teadvuse ümberkujundamise kontekstis. Lisaks seostatakse kaasaegne ilukirjandus presentistliku paradigmaga, kuna see keskendub katkestustele, mälule ja ajaloolise trauma järelkajadele. Need nähtused muudavad ajalookogemust ning Läti ilukirjandus, nagu ka teised Ida-Euroopa teosed, annab sellele muutusele eetilise tähenduse, pöörates tähelepanu ajaloo ohvritele.

Põlvkondadeülese vastutuse eetilisi ja poliitilisi mõõtmeid analüüsitakse Benjaminile, Jacques Derridale ja Dominick LaCaprale tuginedes. Need mõtlejad on näidanud, et minevik esitab olevikule nõudmisi, sageli spektraalsel ja traumaatilisel kujul. Benjamin rõhutab materiaalse ajaloolise mälu lunastavat potentsiaali, samal ajal kui Derrida hauntoloogia käsitlus osutab lahendamata ajaloolise ebaõigluse püsivale kohalolule. Väitekiri väidab, et kaasaegne ilukirjandus suhestub nende ideedega, tuues esile mineviku pealetükkivuse, mida saab

kujutada nii eksperimentaalsete kui ka traditsioonilisemate narratiivsete strateegiate kaudu.

Väitekiri keskendub kolmele heterogeense aja käsitlusele – melanhoolia, kohalolu ja sublimne ajalooline kogemus –, mis pakuvad erinevaid võimalusi mõista kirjanduse suhestumist ajalooga. Melanhoolia, mida LaCapra teoretiseerib, on ajakogemus, milles minevik jääb psüühiliselt kohalolevaks, takistades selget eristust mineviku ja oleviku vahel. Kohalolu, mida arendab Eelco Runia, kirjeldab olevikku tungiva mineviku afektiivset jõudu, sageli metonüümia kaudu. Frank Ankersmiti subliimse ajaloolise kogemuse kontseptsioon kirjeldab ajaloo intensiivset ja epifaanilist tajumist, mis ületab ratsionaalse mõistmise piire. Need kolm käsitlust võimaldavad kirjandusteadusel ja ajaloofilosoofial dialoogi pidada, muutes presentismi teadlikumaks narratiivi ja eetika vahelistest seostest.

Läti kirjandus asetatakse võrdlevasse raamistikku, väites, et selle ajaloolised ja eetilised struktuurid haakuvad laiemate Ida-Euroopa kirjandustrendidega. Analüüsitakse Pauls Bankovskise, Nora Ikstena, Andra Manfelde ja Gundega Repše romaane, rõhutades nende kasutatud fragmenteeritud narratiivi, poeetilisi kirjeldusi ja metonüümilisi detaile, mis dekonstrueerivad homogeenset aega. Samuti osutatakse sellele, kuidas need teosed erinevad Lääne-Euroopa mälu- ja traumakirjandusest, sest need tegelevad otsesemalt Nõukogude totalitarismi pärandi ja selle ajapoliitikaga. Võrdlev perspektiiv laieneb Sloveenia ja Saksamaa kirjandusele, eelkõige Dušan Šarotari ja Katja Petrowskaja teostele, näidates, kuidas Ida-Euroopa autorid loovad eristuva presentismi vormi, mis seob isiklikud ja kollektiivsed ajalooteadvused eetiliselt teadlikul viisil.

Kokkuvõttes väidab väitekiri, et kaasaegne ilukirjandus ei kajasta pelgalt ajaloolise teadvuse muutusi, vaid osaleb aktiivselt ajaloolise kogemuse ümberkujundamises. Destabiliseerides mineviku ja oleviku eristust, vaidlustavad analüüsitud romaanid lineaarsest ajast sõltuva ideoloogilise struktuuri ning pakuvad alternatiivseid ajalookäsitlusi. See arusaam muutub veelgi nüansseeritumaks, kui esile tuuakse erinevad narratiivsed strateegiad – melanhoolsed kõrvalepõiked, metonüümilised häired ja epifaanilised hetked, mis toovad esile mineviku kohalolu. Seeläbi püüab väitekiri teha ajaloofilosoofia teadlikumaks narratiivsetest mehhanismidest ja kirjandusteaduse rohkem huvitatuks ajaloolise ja narratiivse aja vastastikusest mõjust.

Väitekiri koosneb neljast artiklist, millest igaüks käsitleb ajaloolise aja eri aspekte Ida-Euroopa ilukirjanduses. Esimene artikkel, "The Scar Will Always Be There": The Post-Soviet Melancholia in Gundega Repše's Novel *Conjuring Iron*", uurib, kuidas melanhoolne narratiiv säilitab eetilise ja poliitilise seotuse Nõukogude repressioonidega. Teine artikkel, "Progress, Trauma and Narrative Possibilities in Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk*", analüüsib, kuidas romaan kujutab melanhoolseid kiindumusi minevikku, et kritiseerida totalitaarset temporalisust, mis peegeldub ka romaani lineaarses ülesehituses. Kolmas artikkel, "Metonymy, Presence, and the Ethics of Imagination in Postmemorial Writing: Andra Manfelde's *Zemnīcas bērni* and Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther*", uurib metonüümia rolli mineviku tagasitoomisel, seostades kohalolu eetilise kujutlusvõimega, mis on nii empaatiline kui ka teadlik ajaloolistest erinevustest. Neljas

artikkel, *“*Sublime Historical Experience, Epiphanic Moments, and Melancholic Narration in Pauls Bankovskis’s *18* and Dušan Šarotar’s *Panorama”*, vaatleb, kuidas kirjanduslik vorm suudab hõlmata subliimseid ajalookogemusi, mida varem on peetud narratiivile võõraks. Koos näitavad need artiklid, et kaasaegne Läti ilukirjandus, kuigi see on rahvusvahelises teadustöös alauuritud, pakub väärtuslikke teadmisi ajaloolise aja eetika ja poliitika kohta ning aitab kaasa laiematele aruteludele kirjanduse rollist ajalookogemuse kujundamisel.

PUBLICATIONS

CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education

2018–…	PhD, Department of Literature and Theater Research, University of Tartu
2011–2013	MA, Department of Philosophy and History, University of Latvia
2008–2011	BA, Department of Philosophy and History, University of Latvia

Professional Experience

2021–…	Lecturer, Department of Humanities, Art Academy of Latvia
2019–…	Researcher, Department of Literature, Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia
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Selection of Publications

Ostups, Artis. 2026. Sublime Historical Experience, Epiphanic Moments, and Melancholic Narration in Pauls Bankovskis's *18* and Dušan Šarotar's *Panorama*. *Letonica* 58: 72–90.

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Selection of Presentations

Time and Affect in Inara Verzemnieks's Memoir *Among the Living and the Dead*. *The British Association for Slavonic and Eastern European Studies Conference*, April 2023, University of Glasgow

Postmemory, Metonymy and the Ethics of Imagination in Katja Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther*. *37th International Conference on Narrative*, June 2022, University of Chichester

(Un)recognized Temporality: Trauma as Counternarrative in Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk. The 14th Conference on Baltic Studies in Europe*, September 2021, Uppsala University

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"Unfillable Void": Photography and Melancholy in Pauls Bankovskis's Novel *18. 3rd Memory, Melancholy and Nostalgia Interdisciplinary Conference*, December 2018, University of Gdańsk

ELULOOKIRJELDUS

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Valitud publikatsioone

Ostups, Artis. 2026. Sublime Historical Experience, Epiphanic Moments, and Melancholic Narration in Pauls Bankovskis's *18* and Dušan Šarotar's *Panorama*. *Letonica* 58: 72–90.

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"Unfillable Void": Photography and Melancholy in Pauls Bankovskis's Novel *18*. *3rd Memory, Melancholy and Nostalgia Interdisciplinary Conference*, December 2018, Gdański Ülikool

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