

# Phenomenon of Memory: Different Representations, Comparing the Works by Thomas Brussig and Pauls Bankovskis

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**Abstract** Today, as generations change, the interest in the Soviet Era, particularly in the collective and individual memory increases. Literature is one of information about this period. Moreover, literature is no longer just the source of individual meaning-making or the identity and consciousness formation. A literary text nowadays is epochal signs' repository of the codes. In this context, two novel have been analysed in the paper the novel “Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee” (*The Short End of the Sonnenallee*, published in 1999) by the German writer Thomas Brussig and the novel “Čeka, bumba & rokenrols” (*Reds, Rats and Rock'n'Roll*, published in 2002) by the Latvian writer Pauls Bankovskis. The present research proposes the solution for the interpretation of the text, emphasizing the role of the literary text in encoding of cultural memory. For this purpose, two works from the same period were chosen. The focus of the research is on the authors' experience and the the interpretation of the “text experience” meaning. Using the applicability of semiotics and phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology, the different approaches of both writers have been revealed, reflecting the Soviet period from the perspective the childhood - youth memories. The research methodology is based on the insights of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Yuri Lotman (1922-1993), Umberto Eco (1932-2016), Aleida (1947) and Jan (1938) Assmann, Svetlana Boym (1959-2015).

**Keywords** cultural memory; individual memory; semiotics; phenomena<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This research is one part of The Special Program of Zhejiang University “Studies on the Languages and Cultures in the Baltic Countries” supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities.

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## Introduction

The paper focuses on two novels, highlighting the function of the repository of literary memory. Nowadays, literature is no longer just a source of individual meaning-making or identity and consciousness formation. In connection with the period of the Soviet regime, the interest in collective and individual memory as a paradigm of literature and culture increases, where the codes of the epochal signs accumulated in literature from individual memory can influence collective memory. Modern literature has changed so significantly it is not enough to apply the classical methods of interpretation. The present research proposes a solution for the interpretation of the text, emphasizing the role of a literary text in encoding the cultural memory. For this purpose, two works from the same period were chosen: the novel “Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee” (*The Short End of the Sonnenallee*, published in 1999) by the German writer Thomas Brussig and the novel “Čeka, bumba & rokenrols” (*Reds, Rats and Rock'n'Roll*, published in 2002) by the Latvian writer Pauls Bankovskis. The focus of the research is on the authors' experience (events in their lives) and the interpretation of the “text of experience's” meaning. Using the applicability of semiotics and phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology, the different approaches of both writers have been revealed, reflecting the Soviet period from the perspective of childhood-youth memories. The research methodology is based on the insights of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Yuri Lotman (1922-1993), Umberto Eco (1932-2016), Aleida (1947) and Jan (1938) Assmann, Svetlana Boym (1959-2015).

## Description of the Method

The functional value of fiction has been transformed in the process of cultural and social changes. A literary text, as a medium of the particular culture, carries out one of its several communicative functions: informing the addressee; maintaining collective cultural memory; integrating into a certain cultural context as coding

or selection of signs; initiating the addressee's self-knowledge as direct individual knowledge of world phenomena and code creation (Lotman, 2019).

The interaction of cultures is influenced by the factors such as individual experience and the interpretation of phenomena resulting from it. The communication between a work of fiction and a reader allows for unexpected discoveries, creative participation of a reader, as well as the reproduction of familiar but forgotten notions in memory. The interpretation of a text focuses on the conditionality of a human being in the social system and the historicity of experience - the moments before understanding (e.g. traditions, prejudices, perceptions, etc.). According to H. G. Gadamer, philosophical hermeneutics focuses on the study of objective conditions that precede prior knowledge and understanding. Interpretation is an understanding-based process; it depends on language, consequently, on the system of signs and meanings (Gardemer 253). Thus, the assumption may not be confirmed in the course of the reception of a text, but it may also fully or partially coincide with the author's intention, as it depends to a large extent on the reader's knowledge. Prior conceptions and assumptions are important in the reception of any text, and they also contain culturally specific signs.

By creating and interpreting signs, people produce meanings. Thus, signs become signs when they are given meanings. Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) recognized that a sign has not only an object meaning but also a conceptual meaning. A sign is associated with an object and contains information about it. The nature of the information, its, is determined by the system, in which the object is embedded (Frege, 1892). Such a system can be shaped by the context of the particular culture. The set of culturally specific signs forms the text of these signs. Thus, in the process of interpretation, the meanings of signs may be known, but at the same time the combinations of signs may remain unclear. Meanings are created by people according to the codes of which they are normally unaware.

Culture acquires, stores and transmits information through the signs—the signs are used in the communication process. According to Umberto Eco, culture can be studied as communication. Semiotics is thus defined as the communication encompassing cultural processes, where certain objects are designated by certain recognizable signs. Signs are based on the transfer of meaning, and they are divided into the following groups iconic signs (signs based on similarity); indices (signs based on connection); and signs based on cultural traditions (symbols - as a designation of a new object). U. Eco suggests that codes as a conventionalized system are a prerequisite for communication processes and mutual understanding. Readers use their own experience and prior knowledge to perceive and recognize

the cultural sign encoded in a work of fiction. U. Eco claims that the sign created on the basis of transference does not represent the properties of the object, but the conditions of its perception. Encoding, or the principle of sign recognition, is the basis for the selection of text interpretation conditions. U. Eco considers this coding to be a natural and independent process, unrelated to cultural conventions. It is up to a semiotician to determine what in the formation and coding of signs corresponds to the individual's nature and what to collective thinking (Eco, 1972).

The perception of space and time, both in the consciousness of an individual and in the collective cultural consciousness, is embedded in the form of signs. The designations of reality perceptions are embedded in the structure of a particular society, in the tradition of its codes. Each individual, like the society he or she represents, understands the phenomena of the world on the basis of either first-hand, experiential knowledge or a borrowed, traditional opinion. Phenomena are thought to change with time, place and the context of sensory perception. In each act of sensory perception, a new meaning or an invariant of the meaning of the phenomenon under study is discovered. The phenomenon under study is thus fixed and viewed through the prism of consciousness, revealing its meanings. The particular cultural phenomenon is studied using the material that has been uncovered in the process of interpretation. Perception "completes" the phenomenon as a holistic image, however, perception is variable; therefore, the revealed meanings can also be different.

Based on Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, in the interpretation of a text, the meaning of a phenomenon is explained and the significance, which is given by consciousness regardless of experience, is understood. The interpretation focuses on the stream of consciousness, which has no objectivity and which elements are phenomena (phenomenon). According to Husserl's philosophy, a phenomenon is something that reveals itself, acts as an element of pure consciousness and includes a verbal sheath, mental experiences and an object positioned by knowledge (Husserl 429). In phenomenology, a phenomenon that is one's own invention is more consistent with reality than borrowing. In the phenomenologist's version, a constant text of culture is a memory database. Past experiences are the raw material for an individual to create something new. Phenomenologists are therefore interested in the activity of consciousness that stimulates the imagination - the modeling of the future based on the individual's experience. Consequently, the reconstruction of the past and tradition, where it is important to believe in what you remember, is not relevant.

Every text (as a system of signs) can contain codes created and accepted during the particular time, persistent, socially recognizable and also unknown. The joining

up of the text's author in a particular cultural coding tradition creates a mutually understandable communication between an author (as an addresser) and a reader (as an addressee). A writer can use different types of cultural signs within a certain tradition of cultural coding. These can be philosophical abstractions, allusions, oppositions, religious rituals, images from works of art, intertextual quotations, etc.

The interpretation of the experience structures reveals how the interaction of space and time of human existence, an individual and society is understood and perceived. Thus, the relation between old, traditional and new cultural texts, which is grounded in the collective consciousness of an individual and society, is a compelling topic in cultural semiotics and phenomenology. The identification and inclusion of codes in a classification is possible using both semiotics and phenomenology. As one of the basic functions of a text, the transmission of information becomes the part of cultural memory and reveals important starting points for cultural dialogue.

Every memory is an interpretation, and it does not mean that there is no naked truth. Memory is a prop, and by interpreting I learn what they meant to me. The notion of collective memory is not a metaphor, because it is not based on an analogy between personal and collective memory, but on the contact and interaction between the internal and the external, memory carriers and memory triggers (Assmann, "Kollektives ..."). According to Aleida and Jan Assmann's theory, it becomes possible to reflect on the mechanism of the process of collective identity formation by separating memory from the person's experience. If historical facts are fixed, attitudes towards them and perceptions of the past can be socially variable and influenced. J. Assmann made a distinction between the concept of cultural memory and the concept of communicative memory, contrasting them. He suggests that memory is dynamic and only during in communication. Thus, it is the individual memory that is linked to its carrier; it exists only as long as its carrier is alive.

"Both communicative and cultural memory are collective memories that differ in terms of content, form, media and temporal structure. According to Jan Assmann, the decisive criterion of distinction is the relevant time period" (Euler 25). Society/community creates identity-related content, and collective memory is always linked to power. Moreover, the possessor of this power influences both the content of collective memory and the identity of the community. Collective memory is united by the phenomenon of several decades of shared experience. If this experience is linked to the shared dramatic experiences, it becomes unifying for a particular community. This is why the study of collective memory also touches on political contexts, as many experiences are repressed or forgotten in certain cultures.

One of the repositories of collective memory is literature, providing the selective storage of memories' contents. Cultural memory is a phenomenon, in which memory and history are separated. "“Cultural memory” is therefore not a synonym of history and historical consciousness, but an independent form of reference to the past. It is characterized by perspective and conciseness. Rather than the sources and traces one finds, cultural texts define his/her horizons and give him/her an identity-fundamental concision through their function of modelling the world of semantics” (Assmann, “Das kulturelle ...” 17).

Literature is one way of reflecting individual memory, where narratives capture memories and reveal the experience of otherness. The system of text signs allows crossing the boundaries of time and space and makes possible the transition of collective memory into cultural memory. If collective memory dissolves or disappears over time as generations pass, cultural memory of a particular era is stored in texts as part of a common repository (museums, libraries, archives, traditions, rituals, etc.). In addition, cultural memory can be transformed by social or political events, as in the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the liberation from the Soviet influence during the revolutionary period of 1989-1991.

The late 1980s and early 1990s experienced radical changes in the international situation. The positions of socialist power were distorted. The European democratization processes reached the countires, which were under the administration of the Soviet Union. The dictatorial regime had an impact on all areas of life for almost half a century.

Most importantly, totalitarianism influenced people's thinking and value systems. The period from 1990 to 2000 was followed by the “post-socialist period.” During this time the consequences of socialism were overcome. The fragmented social memory preserved in a certain part of society a nostalgic longing for a “life under socialism.” This has contributed to the fact that in the post-Soviet cultural space, the topic “Life during the Soviet dictatorship” was reflected in literature in different ways. Literature is characterized by self-expression and the search for identity in lost time and space. The writers attempt to deconstruct nostalgic myths about social reality during the Soviet era. In addition, a new term appeared in German culture—Ostalgie.

A lapse of time was needed to study how public perceptions of this period of the past are being shaped and transformed. For this comparative research, two works of fiction have been chosen, written more than 10 years after the collapse of the totalitarian regime in Latvia and the former East Germany. Thomas Brussig (Germany) and Pauls Bankovskis (Latvia) were born in the 60s-70s of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. Biographical parallels explain the selection of works by these authors. They belong to the generation of writers of the same era, and their literary activity began in the 90s. Another important aspect connects the authors, namely, the starting point of their works is their own lives. Therefore, their works reflect their dreams, desires, feelings and also disappointments. In addition, the writers reflect the mechanism of dictatorship in a different way and reveal what it was like to live under such conditions and what effect totalitarianism has on personality formation.

The novel “The Short End of the Sonnenallee” by the German writer Thomas Brussig ironically reflects the former East Germany. The action of the novel centers around young people in the GDR. The protagonist of the story is a young man, Michael Kupish. He lives with his family in an apartment on the Street *Sonnenallee* near the West Berlin border. In everyday situations, the young man and his peers have been reflected in confrontation with the representatives of the system and their absurdities. In this context, the repression under the regime in the Eastern Bloc is a particular issue.

The novel “Reds, Rats and Rock’n’Roll” by the Latvian writer Pauls Bankovskis reflects Soviet Latvia in the style of black reality. There are many people from different walks of life in society: an old Cheka officer, a drunken poet, a swimming champion, an agent and countless other typecast characters. They represent themselves and project a broader context of the era at the same time. In the novel, several actions take place simultaneously, until unpredictable circumstances bring the characters of the text together and destroy them both physically and morally. Each of these characters has an associated storyline.

The authors represent a certain socio-cultural space. It is on this “Soviet” stage that events unfold. The actual time period is 11-12 years just before the outbreak of liberation activities in East Germany and Soviet Latvia. The authors describe the recent history: Th. Brussig - of former East Germany, P. Bankovskis - of Soviet Latvia. The time and space of the action are related to the real living space and time of the writers. Various approaches of the authors, which reflect the relationships among a human, society and ideology, have been presented in the context of post-Soviet nostalgia. In this context, the life experience of the post-Soviet individual is explored—the phenomenon of memory and the interpretation of the text meaning in the categories of space, time and human.

### **Phenomenon of Memory in the Novel “The Short End of the Sonnenallee” by Thomas Brussig**

The action takes place somewhere in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The novel is set in the East Berlin in the real street of *Sonnenallee*. The events take place at the shorter

end of *Sonnenallee* next to the Berlin Wall. Right here is one of the seven border crossing points. In the text, the events are concentrated in this street; they take place in different buildings in this street (*flats, school, police station, etc.*). The artistic world in the text by Th. Brussig has been created through the dual spaces between the real world and the world of fantasy, contrasting reality and adventure. This difference is very difficult for the characters to bear, and they try to overcome it in different ways by humor, irony and exaggeration. Moreover, the Berlin Wall is of particular importance, through which the impact on the characters at different levels is revealed: the division of the state at the individual and family level is perceived as absurd.

The text contains the narrative perspective of the author, who is directly connected to the protagonist of the story. The character's system is structured around the protagonist, Michael Kupisch. The other characters are directly related to Michael (family members, relatives, friends, peers, employees of public entities, etc.). The uncle from West Berlin represents the attitudes and opinion of West German citizens towards "society on the other side of the wall." The characters represent different generations and age groups, as well as various social groups. Ideological constraints and politically dictated prohibitions influence people's everyday lives. The situations in the text reveal the absurdity of these restrictions and prohibitions. Moreover, young people's life perception differs from that of their parents' generation. They do not compromise with the ideas of adults and their views contradict to the ideological settings.

Conceptually, the reflection of space and time is based on the writer's life experience. Space is locally concentrated and tied to a specific place that actually exists. Time develops in a spiral vertical movement from the past to the future, where the past influences the present. The period represented is a period in a broader historical context. When creating the characters' system, the generation of parents and the generation of their children (young people) are contrasted. Young people are developing a different way of thinking, which asserts itself by protesting against the existing system and its rules.

### **Phenomenon of Memory in the Novel "Reds, Rats and Rock'n'Roll" by Pauls Bankovskis**

If for Th. Brussig is the shorter end of *Sonnenallee* next to the Berlin Wall, then for P. Bankovskis Riga is as a set of different micro-spaces. The action takes place between the years 1978 - 1989, and the displayed time is specified in the text. The action takes place in Latvia, in different places in Riga. The life beyond the borders of Soviet Latvia has also been revealed. In the text by P. Bankovskis, scenes of real

life intersect with subjectivized memories of the past. They affect current events—life was tragic before, and it is still gray and hopeless. The information in the space *here* is based on false ideologically supportive facts. The information media manipulate the public by “distorting” the facts, for example by hiding the true extent of the Chernobyl disaster. The text reflects the life of confrontation *here* (Soviet space) and *there* (beyond the border of Soviet space), which is associated with longing for a better life. Moreover, movement outside this space is restricted, and in some episodes the Berlin Wall is mentioned as an opportunity to get out of the Soviet Bloc and into the West. The East Berlin motif with the Wall as a border between two opposite worlds, East and West, emphasizes the different lives. A phenomenon such as a workers' strike for better social guarantees is alien to Soviet people.

“Soviet tourists wandered like blinded pilgrims through the disproportionately wide streets of East Berlin, sometimes timidly squeezing through the wall on this side and hungrily absorbing every detail, smell and sound.” (Bankovskis 37)

The text does not reflect any of the main characters; there are many representatives of different social classes, typical of Soviet society, such as an old Cheka officer who commits suicide; a drunken poet who becomes a snitch; a group of degraded young people, and many others. The characters here live their lives, and at the same time they are involved in parallel actions, are dependent on them and at some point their paths cross. People's lives are presented as a tragicomic absurdity of existence: it is the moral degradation of society on the background of greyness and poverty. The story of Eva Kallas, a swimmer and potential champion, is tragic. Her accidental encounter with Joren, an Israeli spy, turns her into the victim of a misunderstanding. The ideological threats against the external enemy are reinforced in the society, for example against America as the “land of the enemy,” but in contrast, the young people Ilona and Josef dream of living in America, which is the land of dreams in their imagination. A peculiar character is a boy with a nylon shopping bag, who has been reflected as a casual passer-by in some scenes and an observer of the situations portrayed. This boy thus links the parallel scenes of the novel. In the epilogue, the author indicates that this boy is he himself. The child is a well-chosen image of a victim, because he is unable to assess intelligently what is going on and is therefore even more vulnerable to destructive attacks.

Conceptually, the reflection of space and time is based on the writer's life experience. P. Bankovskis uses extensively codes of realities to reconstruct it:

specific persons are mentioned (politicians—Reagan and Brezhnev, musicians—“Smokie,” the actor—Alain Delon), the typical Soviet-era TV broadcasts, interior (a straw blanket on the wall with badges and medals pinned to it (Bankovskis 266), clothing details (men in grey and brown suits, ladies in dresses and costumes tailored to “Burda” patterns (Bankovskis 277). A striking code is society's lack of access to household goods: the restricted purchase and scarcity of goods, which led to self-repair or self-manufacture of things from spare parts.

Space is locally vast; it extends beyond the borders of the country and can be applied to life not only in Riga, but anywhere else in Latvia. Time moves in a linear circle: there is the past and the present, and the past constantly influences the present. The perspective of the future is not reflected; it remains unclear.

“Everything is falling apart. People have too short a memory. They only remember what they are told, not what really happened to them.” (Bankovskis 177)

Individuals in society have been portrayed as victims of the degrading system. Their lives are affected by random and absurd situations. Even if some individuals wanted to live differently, they would not know how to do so. The social environment depicted in the novel does not constitute an internal defence mechanism against the contingencies inspired by time and political power. It thus absorbs rather than rejects evil.

### **Conceptual Differences by Comparing the Categories of Texts**

Childhood/youth memories as the individual cultural memory code in the context of collective memory reveal the reconstruction of the past with different approaches in each work of fiction. The representation of reality overlaps with the subjective representation of time, space and human - both writers create their own phenomenon on the background of historical tradition. In both texts, spatial and temporal references have been through the textual references to the historical facts and realities, which link a reader to the Soviet period. For the writers (and readers of their generation), this is a kind of identity consciousness. Moreover, the distance between the experience and the story enables the author to portray it as phenomenal (unique).

Ironizing this time and space, Th. Brussig accentuates the absurd. Tragic situations are presented in a comic context and offer the positive conclusion. The writer's concept of Ostalgia is a part of cultural memory. The reflection of his

experience in a historical perspective is an attempt to deal with this problematic history of Germany, overcome it and also find positive features of this period. He tries to defend his former GDR against accusations and criticisms during the Ostalgia.

P. Bankovskis is different, juxtaposing post-Soviet nostalgia to the scenes of the Soviet realism based on his experience, overlaid with sombre existential topics. These are human being's relations with the past, society, his/her surroundings and self-perception. He tries to emphasize his own experience in contrast to the public memory that "beautifies" the totalitarian regime. His textual phenomenon deconstructs the myth of the harmonious life in the Soviet period. This is emphasized in particular by the image of a Soviet child, who can be identified with the author himself and whose feelings have nothing in common with the traditional symbol of a "happy Soviet childhood." The Soviet country is portrayed as a psychic aggressor that morally undermines the characters in the novel, including the children. The adult world traumatizes them mentally.

Despite the absurdity of the Soviet regime, people lived their lives. It is therefore quite common that collective memory harbors nostalgia for the past. Both Th. Brussig and P. Bankovskis project the time, in which they lived and worked, based on their personal experience. If Th. Brussig's nostalgic meditation is positively ironic, P. Bankovskis ironizes and "paints black" the gloomy reality. Both authors use reflective nostalgia to reveal the specificity of the Soviet experience and to criticize the Soviet regime, but they have different perspectives on the role of an individual in it.

## Conclusion

Transforming real time and space into the artistic one, a writer draws material from personal experience, creating his/her own system of signs. Collective cultural memory holds a set of historically accumulated codes that exist in society and data shaped by traditions. The phenomenon created by an individual thus contradicts society's habitual cultural coding system. Th. Brussig and P. Bankovskis belong to the same generation of writers in different cultural spaces, but they are united by the common topic, artistically representing Soviet space, time and a human. New perceptions and their designations, formed in the writer's experience, memory and fantasy, create different phenomena of the representation of Soviet life. The codes that are nostalgically motivated are preserved in collective memory.

Based on the essays by Svetlana Boym, collective memory is complex and unsystematic, which nevertheless allows us to describe the phenomenology of

human experience. Nostalgia, as a feature of this era, mediates between collective and individual memory. The return of contemporary humanities to the study of collective memory is the restoration of a certain conceptual framework (Boym 41–55). Nostalgia, as a reflection of the past memories, evokes a different understanding of time and space, usually a longing for the time and space that has been lost. A nostalgia-based reconstruction of the past serves to bring feelings of the past back to the present. Social nostalgia can trigger people's dissatisfaction with life in reality.

Reconstructing the Soviet period, Th. Brussig and P. Bankovskis supplement it with their own experience. Their critical thinking and longing are not opposed to each other. Negative and positive representations coexist in both works. The writers' principles of cultural sign selection or encoding can be revealed by the synergy of phenomenology and cultural semiotics, which allows to focus the reader's attention on the mechanism of cultural sign selection. A nostalgic fixation on the past can lead to a lack of openness to the future, but both writers make it possible to discover how the past relates to the present by unravelling the mysteries of history.

Revealing everyday life under the Soviet regime, situations of positive depiction make the view of the past seem nostalgic. However, the negative representation adopts such features of the Soviet regime as resistance and the strategy of survival. The artistic world of Th. Brussig and P. Bankovskis deconstructs the myth of the Soviet social reality and, contrary to nostalgia, recalls things and events that collective cultural memory has forgotten.

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