Haunting memories of the revolution: Hope and despair in East German Lives

Abstract

This paper uses the arguments set out in Bhekizizwe Peterson's article "Spectrality and inter-generational black narratives in South Africa" as a framework to explore East German narratives of transformational change over the past 30 years, based on interviews with key anti-state activists. Of particular relevance for the East German case are Peterson's commentaries on 1) contrasting the 'limitless hope' of the revolution with subsequent experiences of mourning and melancholia – "unresolved grief" and a nostalgia for a future that once could have been; 2) the exploration of relationship between history, the arts and knowledge; 3) the struggle over creating a national 'good story' and the memories that haunt across generations; and 4) the role of radical imagination in social change. Although the presentation will draw on the larger longitudinal project, it will also incorporate a discussion of Lola Arias's play "Atlas des Kommunismus" which offers a retrospective look at the legacy of communism thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with characters playing themselves.

Introduction

Twenty-five years after South Africa's first democratic elections, Bhekizizwe Peterson published his article "Spectrality and inter-generational black narratives in South Africa", a thought-provoking and sobering analysis of intergenerational relations in his country – and a powerful antidote to the story of the rainbow nation in global circulation. That same year marked the thirtieth anniversary of East Germany's Peaceful Revolution, an event that I have been exploring through the eyes of some of its main protagonists for three decades (Andrews 2020, 2019,2017, 2014a, 2014b, 2009, 2003, 1997). Although the

Molly Andrews

Social Research Institute, University College London, London
M.Andrews@ucl.ac.uk
0000-0001-7429-7677

contrasts between the birth of the new South Africa and closing down of the old East Germany run deep; in both places there is a sense in which the present is haunted by the past, not for a world that was, but for a world that at one time seemed possible.

Peterson describes his paper as "a consideration of a limited number of social and creative imaginaries and their pivotal and difficult implications for trans-generational reflections, narratives and cultural memory in South Africa" (2019, p. 345). Since 1992, I have been conducting research in former East Germany interviewing and reinterviewing former leaders of the dissident movement.[1] In our first interviews their accounts were of events which were still relatively fresh in their memories, and for the world at large, the ink writing history was still wet. Today, three decades later, the historical narrative of East Germany appears to be far more settled, epitomized by what has become a global iconic symbol, the fall of the Berlin Wall. And yet this storyline is nearly unrecognizable to many who were most instrumental in bringing about those momentous changes. For the activists in my study, autumn '89 marked the extraordinary crowning moment of their collective efforts which would, they had thought, result in a new and more just social order. Building from Peterson's argument, this article explores what happened to those dreams over the years, and considers the implications for subsequent generations.

Peterson opens his article by anchoring his discussion in the student movements of 2015-2016, and the "difficult dialogic exchange between generations" which they represented. Beyond the particulars that formed the basis of the "Rhodes Must Fall" and "Fees Must Fall" movements, Peterson describes

> a range of dilemmas and questions that are the culmination of a longer and larger trajectory of different groups in South Africa trying to make sense of the contradictions, tensions, ironies and paradoxes that are symptomatic of life under segregation, apartheid and post- 1994 South Africa (2019, p. 345).

The article probes this 'longer and larger trajectory' with all of its 'contradictions, tensions, ironies and paradoxes' across a broad historical pallet. He insists on an engagement with the past to understand the current crises plaguing South Africa. Of particular relevance for the East German case are Peterson's commentaries on 1) contrasting the 'limitless hope' of the revolution with subsequent experiences of mourning and melancholia – "unresolved grief" and a nostalgia for a future that once could have been; 2) the exploration of the relationship between history, the arts and knowledge; 3) the memories that haunt across generations; and 4) the role of radical imagination in social change.

---

1   For more biographical information on the East German project participants described in this article, please visit https://eastgermanhistory.wixsite.com/peaceful-revolution/biographies

Before exploring each of these threads, let us first consider the complexity of placing South Africa and East Germany under the same analytic lens. By way of contrast, there are certain salient facts which stand out. First amongst these is that the countries did not, and do not, co-exist in time, but rather are situated in different historical contexts. East Germany was founded in 1949 as part of the resolution of the Second World War. A dictatorship for forty years, when they held their first and only free election, the result was the dissolution of the country. The Union of South Africa, by contrast – though created in 1910 – had its first nonracial, democratic constitution come into effect in 1994. People were celebrating the birth of the new South Africa at roughly the same time as the affairs of East Germany were being wrapped up. While both countries had official commissions of inquiry to investigate the past, their purpose and process were very different to one another (Andrews, 2003). South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was an exercise in nation-building, attempting to air the wrongs of the past in order to begin anew; the Enquet Kommission, in contrast, had the function of documenting the legal, economic, social and ethical aspects of a country which had ceased to exist. And yet, in both countries, at a very particular moment in time, they were places awash with hopes and dreams, places permeated with a collective sense that it was possible to make a better world. Three decades on, these dreams have been replaced by a 'politics of melancholia'. It is here that we begin our discussion.

"Limitless Hope" and Broken Time

Peterson opens his article on spectrality with a reference to Niq Mhlongo's 2004 novel *Dog Eat Dog* which is set in South Africa in 1994. While capturing the spirit of vitality and hope which characterized that pivotal moment in South Africa's history, the backdrop of the novel is one of pervasive and persistent institutional racism. Peterson writes:

> Far from being the watershed moment of "limitless hope" that 1994 was meant to be, the contestations and conversations have, in some respects, played out as social dramas and ones that are akin to spectral performances where the continuities and discontinuities between the past, present and future continue to haunt the social formation (2019, p. 345).

The idea of a spectral performance – marked by continuities and discontinuities over time – which haunts the present, is a very powerful one. Despite the dominant narrative of radical change – discontinuity with a bloodstained past – nonetheless a legacy of unrealized hopes and dreams lingers. The concrete historical conditions of the present are haunted by the ghosts of the past, who have not been put to rest, and who will not be ignored.

Peterson's use of the language of spectrality and haunting carries with it several layers of meaning. It was Jacques Derrida who first coined the French term 'hantologie' in 1993 in his *Spectres de Marx*, which introduced a boom in critical psychoanalytic and

literary studies. Colin Davis summarises its significance "Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive. Attending to the ghost is an ethical injunction…" (Davis, 2005, p. 373). In Derrida's 1993 work, he repeatedly references Hamlet's line, that "the time is out of joint" – the past is not past, but has bled into the present in ways which are not always discernible, and yet which persist. This condition arises "when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time" (Fisher, 2012, p. 19).

The implications of this for living in the present are that "we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us" (Jameson, 1999, p. 39). Interest in hauntology has grown exponentially in the past three decades, and has been a focus of a considerable body of scholarship in areas such as Film Studies, and more recently in the Social Sciences. Literary critic, philosopher and writer Mark Fisher wrote prolifically on this topic, seeing it as central to understanding our current state of 'being haunted by the remnants of lost futures" (Oli, 2023). In his last lecture series titled "Postcapitalist Desire", which he was only partially through delivering before taking his own life at the age of 48, he poses questions about "what we are capable of wanting and envisioning" (Seaton, 2021). Fisher borrowed Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's phrase "'the slow cancellation of the future' (Fisher, 2014, p. 17) to describe the state in which the present world, and his generation in particular, finds itself.

This line of thought and enquiry is relevant to the argument which Peterson makes, and threads of it run throughout his article. But for Peterson it is not just ideas – hopes, dreams, and promises – from the past which haunt the present, but the very spirit of revolutionary change which once seemed possible, and those who gave their lives for fighting it. While the governmental policy of apartheid legally ended three decades ago, with the repeal of the Population Registration Act in South Africa in 1991 and the first free elections in 1994, as Peterson writes, its legacy persists: "The regular encounter with forms of violence and alienation as well as unresolved grief leave some individuals and families in "a permanent wake" as part of their everyday lives." (p. 346).

Peterson's language – of 'melancholia', 'grief', and a 'wake' – speaks to a depth of loss, an absence, a death. What is it that has been lost? There is virtually none who mourn the end of apartheid – in 1994, with the first democratic elections, many South Africans thought they were looking at a new dawn. But the reality has fallen far short of the dream, and in this chasm a sense of mourning has taken hold.

This is not dissimilar to the experiences told to me by many in my East German study. Having been governed by a dictatorship for four decades, the spring and autumn of 1989 was a time of great promise. East German citizens, for so long largely obedient

and cowered, raised their collective voices, and demanded a conversation with the government. But in the eyes of many leading opposition figures, the prospects for political change were abruptly curtailed on November 9th, 1989, with the opening of the Berlin Wall.

To demonstrate this sense of diminished hope, here I will present an extended extract from my first interview with Sebastian Pflugbeil, in 1992. Pflugbeil was one of the founding members of the citizen's group Neus Forum, and a leading nuclear physicist in the country. He and his family had suffered for their political commitment at the hands of the Stasi, whose presence had infiltrated their home. As the citizen's movement grew, so did his hopes for building a different kind of society; never did he wish to demolish his country, but rather to strip it of its authoritarian leaders.

> The actual uprising here lasted just a few days. That was ... hm, middle of October, beginning of November. And ... hm, there was of course a tremendously strong feeling of solidarity and, and strength and, and hope… Well, we began to think about it and saw this collapse of the old system as ... hm, as a... hm, fantastic chance to build something new on a relatively high level. For instance, my... my main area of consideration was energy, policies of energy, right, the entire area of energy. All power stations in the GDR were scrapped, including all the nuclear power stations. We needed to close them down and that would have presented us with the unique chance, to work out a reasonable, intelligent energy programme on a fresh basis worldwide.

In this passage, Plugbeil clearly delineates a precise moment where radical change seemed possible: 'a few days' between the middle of October and the beginning of November, book-ended by two notable political events. The first of these happened on October 9th – the day of the first large demonstration in Leipzig, and two days after the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the country which had been marked by massive official celebrations. Preceded by the weekly Monday night candlit vigils, on this day, 70,000 protestors gathered, chanting the now famous cry "We are the People." There had been much fear that their demonstration would be met with violence – after all, the leaders of East Germany had only months before been very public in their praise of China's successful suppression of protest in its 'Tiananmen solution' (Shen, 2019). Nonetheless, for the most part this demonstration was peaceful, and helped to pave the way for the even larger demonstrations which followed – most notably on November 4th in Berlin, when at least half a million people demonstrators protested in Alexanderplatz.

One month after the non-violent protest in Leipzig, the Berlin Wall opened, and for many dissidents, this spelled the end of the time in which they could realistically

exercise much influence on the direction of political change that the country would take. It is this month which was for Plugbeil, and other dissidents, a moment which was ripe with hope, presenting a "fantastic chance to build something new on a relatively high level." He then proceeds to describe in detail what happened in his own professional sphere of energy policy. He speaks of the bold steps which were planned: the scraping of all East German power stations which "would have presented us with the unique chance, to work out a reasonable, intelligent energy programme on a fresh basis worldwide." He then elaborates on the early steps in this process, focussing on international collaboration and support:

> We managed to convene two, two big conferences within a very short time, where for the first time in the history of the GDR, probably for the only time in German history... ... where the official representatives of the, the mighty energy policy makers of the former GDR sat down together at a table with people who wanted a, a different kind of energy policy... That had never happened before. And we asked help from, from people in West Germany whom we thought capable and from American friends, from Norwegian, Swedish and English friends. And they all came immediately without, without asking for a single penny ... hm, expenses ... because they all understood what a unique chance had presented itself here.

But this dialogue amongst nations did not last long, and the closing down of the moment where a radical shift in energy policy seemed possible seems, to Pflugbeil, to be paradigmatic of a wider foreclosure on possibility.

> During this time when I was a minister ... all our nuclear power stations here were closed down. ...a first sensible step for a new beginning. And it is really with bitterness that I now see [the revival of] the whole construction programme for the nuclear power industry in the whole of eastern Europe. And this, in a similar way, practically applies to all areas of life. And we do not have... we cannot prevent that.

This last sentence – "we cannot prevent that" – hints of an inevitability of the direction of change, a David and Goliath tale where in the end, Goliath triumphs, despite valiant efforts to challenge him.

Twenty years later, in 2012, Plugbeil again returns to his memories of this very particular and ripe moment of political rupture, and the promise that it held. By this time, many of his biggest fears about what the unification with West Germany might entail for their brethren in the east had been realized (even while compared to many other former eastern bloc countries, they were relatively prosperous). Writing thirty years after the fall

of the wall, Rensmann (2019, p. 43) lists some statistics which indicate the persistence of an uneven distribution of power between the eastern and western parts of the country:

> 464 of Germany's 500 biggest corporations have their headquarters in western Länder, only thirty-six in the eastern regions… there is not a single university president, or any president in higher education, who has an Eastern biography… Overall, eastern Germans hold only 1.7 percent of top-level leadership positions in Germany's administration, politics, and economy.

Nonetheless, "71 percent of East Germans answer "yes" to the question "if you remember your hopes you had in relation to unification, have they been fulfilled?" (Rensmann, 2019, p. 42). Here, Sebastian Plugbeil (along with others in my study) diverge very much from the general population, perhaps because their dreams focused less on economic restructuring and more on the transformation of political accountability and dialogue.

Looking through a rearview mirror of two decades, Pflugbeil describes the events of 1989 and their significance:

> We had the dream, and in a few weeks in autumn '89, the feeling that as a normal citizen, we could discuss and influence the problems of society. It was a clear-cut part of the population that acted as if it were possible. I thought about what one could change in their everyday life, what one had to change in the educational system, in healthcare. For almost every aspect of life there were discussion groups even in the villages, where the people got together and thought about what they could do. That was the most interesting time in my life, those two months. That stopped suddenly on 9 November.

> The revolution, or the end of the revolution, was more of an accident, and therefore no reason to celebrate. …I went home and collapsed into bed, exhausted.

> We had this dream to somehow shape things ourselves, and that put an end to it, that was clear. Looking back now – afterwards, they started these Round Tables. At these Round Tables, we pretended that we could influence things in some way. As if we could have influenced anything at all in a positive way. With my friends, that continued until the summer of 1990. They completely misread the situation, even though it was already clear on the 9th of November that the people from the West would take things over. With November 9th, with the collapse of the Wall, we also lost the support of the population. … The height from which we fell was pretty far above the ground.

Pflugbeil's account in 2012 is different from that he offered in 1992 in one significant aspect, namely the way in which he describes the proceedings of the Round Table (the mechanism through which he negotiated the future of the energy policy). In our first interview in 1992, he describes this as a great moment of opportunity, where radical change seemed possible. In 2012, his framing is different: "we pretended that we could influence things in some way. As if we could have influenced anything at all in a positive way." In time, even this window of (retrospectively attributed) hope has been reduced to an illusion. Another difference is that in 2012, he refers to the window of possibility existing for 'two months'. Neus Forum was founded on the weekend of September 9th and 10th, and one can conjecture that this is the starting date to which Pflugbeil refers, rather than the Leipzig protest mentioned earlier. But whether that window lasted one month or two months is of little matter; more significant is that those dreams, for him, died when the Wall opened – an event that was so swiftly and decidedly followed by the unification of Germany.

Lincoln (2015) argues that current scholarship in hauntology and spectrality owes more to Walter Benjamin than to Jacques Derrida, emphasizing in the former's work that

> the potential for encounters between the living and the dead remains ever open; that such confrontations erupt at moments of crisis and may imply profound consequences; that the living have only partial control over these meetings but bear weighty responsibility for what comes of them; and that the stakes of this are high for the living and dead alike. (Lincoln, 2015, p. 193)

We hear in the words of Sebastian Pflugbeil just how much was at stake, and what the fallout from those unrealized dreams has been. The Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes sums up the acute sense of grief and loss, and the after effects of disillusionment.

> What happens to a dream deferred?
>
> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore--
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over--
> like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

(Hughes, 1951).

"The height from which we fell was pretty far above the ground." Pflugbeil explains to me. This 'dream deferred' haunts the public imaginary in both the former East Germany and South Africa, the backdrop against which the rise of the far right in the former and the everyday violence and disruption of everyday life in the latter is played out.

History, the arts and knowledge

In his 2019 article, Peterson makes a strong case for the use of the arts as a crucial site for the nourishment of the imagination, and a critical vehicle through which to process historical understanding and knowledge. He writes:

> Often, the arts are treated as mere reflections of history with the latter regarded as providing the ultimate political and socio-economic grounding and veracities against which creative and ideological representations are to be contrasted and measured. … Art, through its thematic and aesthetic modalities as well as in its explorations of the politics of melancholia offered the possibilities of imagining and fantasising of another place and time. (Peterson, 2019, p. 348)

For Peterson, history and the arts do not occupy different positions on a continuum of objective truth. Rather, he argues, the arts help us in "making sense of and alleviating experiences of disenchantment." What is perceived as 'real' sits in a negotiated relationship with what is 'not real', including that which never was, that which was once real but is no longer, and that which still might be (Andrews, 2014). The movement between these positions is powered by the imagination – which in turn feeds and is fed by the arts.

Here I would like to develop this point in relation to a play, *Atlas des Kommunismus* [*Atlas of Communism*], which I first saw onstage at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin, in November 2019. The play was developed by Argentinian playwright, actor and director Lola Arias, who has created her own amalgamated style which traffics between documentary and fictionalization of real lives. Her focus has often been on points of political rupture (the Malvinas/Falklands, abortion rights debates, and, in this play, the way in which the Peaceful Revolution is retrospectively narrated). She describes her work as "documentary theatre" produced by an intermingling of "research, documentation, and stories" (Douglas, 2022) and her plays often revolve around ordinary people (i.e. not professional actors) bringing their personal stories to the stage. She describes this kind of dramatic construction as "an encounter… You actually meet people in the theatre

— you are in the same room with other spectators and performers. The here and now is so important…. These are places of telepathy, because we are all thinking together" (Douglas, 2022).

Atlas of Communism tells the story of eight characters who look back on the events leading to and including the revolutionary autumn of 1989. One of the characters is called Mette, and she is played by the well-known East German actress Ruth Reinecke, who is in fact playing herself. I first met Ruth back in 1992, one of the original interviewees for my project. At that time, she was in her mid-thirties, a single mom of a young daughter, and one of the key organisers of the demonstration in Alexanderplatz on November 4th, 1989, where 400,000 people gathered. Ruth had told me to come see the play when I was in Berlin, in the week marking the 30th anniversary of the opening of the wall, but she had not told me anything about the play. Mette's opening lines in the performance are: "I am a 64-year-old actress with Jewish communist roots who became a so-called legacy of East German theater after the disappearance of her country. I defend theater with a sometimes incomprehensible passion, that's why I'm here". Quickly I learn that Ruth is in fact playing (a version of) herself.

Mette's tale, like those of the other seven characters in the play, is interwoven as she both speaks of her own experiences and interacts with others. Ruth, the actress, also plays other minor characters in the play. One of Mette's longer passages concerns the Maxim Gorki Theatre, the very theatre where we are watching the play.[2] "The stage directions indicate that she "looks back", and begins to reminisce.

> We are in a beautiful old country house with an overgrown garden, the plaster crumbling from the walls. In the middle a birthday table. It's Irina's birthday. Wilhelm gives her a globe and groans: I can't travel after all. That was a huge laugh in the GDR. Nobody could get out. Now we have a table and nobody is there, all gone. Naturally. Now we need a chair. This is the original Gorki theater chair. Don't you believe it? Yes, we brought it on the plane with us. But I would love to let you feel why this piece was so important to us. For all the actors, but also for the people behind the stage and for the audience. But that's not possible. And I try anyway (Arias, 2019).

This passage is a window on to another story I have already heard: a story about being in a play that was mirroring life. Mette continues (or is it Ruth)?

---

2   Here, we are reminded of Fisher's description, cited earlier, of hauntology happening "when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time" (Fisher 2012:19). In 1988 Maxim Gorki Theatre staged Volker Braun's Übergangsgesellschaft (The Society in Transition) — to be discussed — and thus had a particular significance as a venue for the play which I attended in 2019.

At that time, I was a 33-year-old actress playing an actress. And now I'm still an actress in the same theater, making myself the subject of the play.

After the performance, everyone gathered in the foyer of the cloakroom for an audience discussion. This performance moved the audience because it suddenly became public what was going on in the GDR. We actors came after removing our make-up and sat down. And then the exchange about our country began…There were no longer any inhibitions about speaking publicly about things that one would otherwise have kept silent about…. Of course we all knew that the talks were being observed by the State Security. But it didn't matter anymore. By the fall of 1989 we had played 70 performances. At the same time, the country was crumbling and I was no longer part of the party (Arias, 2019).

Sitting in the audience, listening to Mette, I am transported back to my very first interview with Ruth Reinecke, in the spring of 1992, where we are talking about her life in the months leading up to the Peaceful Revolution. She says that it is "very difficult for me now [1992] to differentiate what exactly was my political standpoint at that time [1989]." She explains more "It is very difficult for me to analyse this because the events took place so rapidly, one was chasing the next. Not only the events in the street, but the events inside the self." Even in the summer of 1989, she was still a member of the communist party, believing in the possibility of change within the society. And yet, by September, she signed the petition of Neus Forum, and became a member of the planning committee for the protest on November 4th. She repeatedly references the mirroring of the changes on the street with those inside: "I had made a step outward and I was searching for a new way, including for myself, which went parallel with these new events."

She then describes the critical role of the theatre in this moment of acute transition.

Fundamentally there were no spaces in the GDR where an opinion could be formed, except in the church and the theatre. In the GDR, the last years especially, when the political system had become more repressive, the theatre had a special function to play, we call it a valve function. There was no press, no public media which reflected what the population felt and what they were discussing and what they felt on every day issues. And the theatres were converted into the institutions which tried to make public opinion public.

The theatre, along with the church, was considered a safe place where people could come and discuss political matters. At Maxim Gorki Theatre, this took the form of having regular discussions after the productions, where the audience and actors would sit together and seemingly talk about the play, which had obvious parallels to the blistering

political situation they found themselves in. "And after these performances people didn't only speak to us, they also spoke about themselves and it was no longer the case of theatre but people found their own self-understanding and they became aware of how cowardly they had been in daily life." For many in the audience, this was a first experience of 'speaking out' – even while being observed.

> Of course we were all very much observed by the Stasi; these people were always standing around when we had our performances, there were also people inside these discussions, everything was registered. But they did not intervene. The pressure had already become so strong that they had to be very careful to deal with the situation. These were very important experiences.

Ruth describes the example of the play "The Society in Transition" which was performed many times in 1988: "This play was like an oasis for the audience. After performing the play we held regular discussions with the audience in the awareness that … other things … are preoccupying us so much… And so we opened the theatres, like the churches opened up for people who were searching for a solution within the society." And this was the play that was scheduled for November 4th. Despite having helped to organize the demonstration at Alexanderplatz, Ruth says:

> We had to leave this demonstration early because we had a performance at 3:00. The play I spoke about, "The Society in Transition" it was a crazy thing, you didn't have the feeling I am going to work now. People on the stage, people in the audience, it didn't make such a big difference. It was as if we were still appearing on the platform at Alexanderplatz. Everywhere in the theatre, the radios were on in order to listen to the speakers at this demonstration. Well it was really a crazy situation.

The people backstage were also listening to the live radio from Alexanderplatz, and for Ruth "It was like as if we were moving in midair. …. It was absurd. Crazy." "Moving in midair" can here be understood as a metaphorical space where real life and performance blend, becoming virtually indistinguishable. Life mirroring art mirroring life.

Nearly three decades later, listening to Mette, as performed by Ruth, remembering the demonstration of November 4th, 1989, was a multi-tiered experience for me. As she says "At that time, I was a 33-year-old actress playing an actress. And now I'm still an actress in the same theater, making myself the subject of the play." *Atlas of Communism* provided the audience with inroads into the biographies of eight people as they narrated their own experiences of life in the GDR and its demise – a most effective illustration of Peterson's (2019) comment, that art offers "possibilities of imagining and fantasising of another place and time" (p. 345).

Through the play, the audience is invited to traverse between the real and the not-real, in an attempt to make sense of the historical events which have happened. Mette tells the audience "This is the original Gorki theater chair. Don't you believe it?" Here, she is emphasizing material reality of the world she is going to describe. And yet, she immediately acknowledges the limitations of what can be conveyed: "I would love to let you feel why this piece was so important to us. For all the actors, but also for the people behind the stage and for the audience. But that's not possible. And I try anyway. "Even though it may not be fully possible to convey subjective meaning-making over time, it is worth the effort. Her use of the word 'and' rather than 'but' to precede her declaration that she 'will try anyway' is significant; the inevitable limitations of understanding do not demolish the attempt to communicate. Peterson refers to the false binaries between "history/knowledge/theory" and "lived experienced." This theatrical representation of lived experience of the revolution and its aftermath helps to cross that divide.

In South Africa, there is growing landscape of artistic work which explicitly seeks to address social injustice and reimagine possible futures. In the Introduction to *Acts of Transgression* (Pather and Boulle, 2019) the editors describe a movement which advances "a politics of radical action" and which is "a backlash against the rationalist imperative to 'put into words,' a collective assertion that talking has proven ineffectual and that compromise has operated as a cover for 'a regime of forgetting.' (Pather and Boulle, 2019, p. 2). In Gule's contribution to that collection, "To Heal a Nation: Performance and Memorialization in the Zone of Non-Being" focuses on the work of artists who "instantiate counter-narratives of memorialisation and mourning that work against a post-1994 memorial culture, which eclipses and erases complex histories and the influence of traditional practices" (2019, p. 268). He writes of creating "a different kind of commemorative culture," documenting the varied ways in which

> South African art practitioners wrestle with the political, social and spiritual forces that shape our lives. They seek to speak back to western memorial culture and claim a counter-history by redefining spatial relationships, refusing the impulse of capital to erase and forget" (2019, p. 283)

Although different in their specificity, this body of work shares with *Atlas of Communism* a challenge to a universalist dominant narrative of social transformation, and instead insists on remembrance of the localized past, and the disenchantment which followed in its wake.

The search for an intergenerational national narrative

At the heart of Peterson's article lies the question of generational divide: what stories pass from one generation to the next, and how relevant does the past seem in terms of current struggles? In South Africa, the dominance of the 'freedom struggle narrative'

seems remote from the experience of many youth, and for them "where we come from does not necessarily confer insight nor is it a substitute for taking stock of where we are and where we want to go" (Peterson, 2019, p.352). Peterson explains the challenge:

> Engagements with the past are not incorrect or inappropriate in themselves, the challenge is that the knowledge, insights and strategies learnt from the past have to be recalled in ways that do not, in the first instance, create new ossified orthodoxies and silence or delegitimise "'youthful' perspectives" or those who, in popular parlance, lack "struggle credentials". (p. 352)

The dominant storyline of the rainbow nation has served to alienate many young people who were 'born free' yet who experience the problems of their day-to-day lives as far more urgent; for them, the celebration of a post-apartheid era seems hollow when faced with an abundance of violence and financial hardship.

In former East Germany, there is a pronounced gap between generations, but of a different nature. Unlike in South Africa, those who fought against the oppressive regime are not, and never have been, in power. Though leaders of the revolution, their role in the struggle against the dictatorship is only acknowledged in a tokenistic fashion, mostly on commemorative anniversaries. But their actual struggle – what they were fighting for, and what it cost them – has all but disappeared, buried beneath a much more pervasive tale about the fall of the wall. In large part, the root of the generational divide in former East Germany turns on a question of memory: what of the past is remembered – dates, people, events – and what is forgotten? Here the tension between individual and collective memory can be observed, as the accounts of the autumn '89 offered by project participants contrast sharply with the iconic images of people popping bottles of champagne and dancing on the top of the wall.

For many of the participants in my study, history as it is being written does not feel recognizable to the events that they lived through. Jens Reich, physicist and one of the leading voices of the citizen's movement, describes this to me in 2012:

> I have the feeling, whatever is being done [regarding] the official … It's somehow, well, not my unification, not my autumn. Of course, being invited, I speak about these things. But, as I said, I have the feeling something happened that was not my life, although it was. One thing I'm struggling with … is that strange, strange feeling of nostalgia,[3] when at the same time, you are 100%

---

3   What Reich describes here is quite distinct from the 'ostalgie' (East German nostalgia) which has received so much attention. For more on this as it pertains to the current study, see Andrews 2017 and 2014b. Reich's intended meaning is closer to the use of the term as employed by Jacob Dlamini (2009) in *Native Nostalgia* who writes "to be nostalgic is to remember the social orders and networks of solidarity that made the struggle possible in the first place" (p.17).

happy that all this happened and is over. We are in no way homesick for those years. Except that it's a nostalgia for your young life… This was our young life, our adult life, and some nostalgia for the life that you have led. 'Nostalgie de l'irreversible' … nostalgia for the irreversible, for things that are bygone. A strange nostalgia, which has nothing to do with the widespread nostalgia saying things were better. They were not better. And we are happy, happy that we did not spend our whole life in that. It was late enough that we overcame all these things. But very strange nostalgia for something you will not have back.

Reich's description of a "sense of something happened that was not my life, although it was" reveals a chasm between a public narrative about the revolution, and how it was experienced by key actors. The Peaceful Revolution happened during Reich's "young life" when the future seemed to hold so much promise. When he refers to his "nostalgia for things that are bygone" these 'things' are both personal and political. In this passage, he emphasizes several times that he is 'in no way homesick for those years' lived under the East German dictatorship. But there is nonetheless a sense of loss, of melancholia, for a time which will not return.

Although there was a considerable age range amongst the participants in the study, most were born within five years either side of creation of the country (1949). Repeatedly we have explored together the significance of generational location – specifically the intersection of their age with the timing of political change. After describing to me this sense of 'nostalgie de l'irreversible' Reich sums up by saying "it was the heyday of our life." Irene Kukutz – born in 1950 – articulates a similar sentiment. Speaking to me in 2012, she tells me:

Today when I look back I see myself in the blossom of my life. With a lot of power but also very experienced, I could say the climax of my life. And maybe that was quite a good thing on one hand. On the other side I am part of a generation, which had this break up in the middle. Half over there and the other half here.

Konrad Weiss echoes this: "I'm… a child of my time. The conditions under which I lived shaped me. … I was marked by these 40 years, those were the decisive 40 years of my life, and I drew my strength from the active confrontation with this country." Here, he then draws a contrast between his own identity and that of his children: "I'm sure my children see this differently, although they, too – I have three daughters who are all over 20. They spent their childhood and part of their youth in the GDR, and were marked, shaped, and perhaps in part mis-shaped by this."

As these extracts indicate, a pronounced feature of the interviews I have conducted over the thirty years has been the importance of generational positioning. Repeatedly, I

have been told of a chasm with those who either were not born until after 1989 or who were too young to remember their lives in the GDR. Wolfgang Templin feels that the intersection of his biography with historical changes was optimal, as he believes his experiences living under a dictatorship helped him to cope with the radical changes which followed in the wake of unification. In 2012, he tells me:

> I believe … that my generation has the best chances. For the previous one, it was too late, for those people much older than us, and for the younger generation it was too early. [The younger generation]… have to cope with new problems, but without our direct experience. I can't take many of these new problems lightly, I take them very seriously, but I can deal with them in a very different way than the generation of my children. They also have the problem of how to shape their own life.

A number of participants have reflected on how difficult they think it is for those who did not live under the East German dictatorship to imagine what life was like then. Indeed, they even find it hard to imagine it themselves, though they lived the very experience. Reinhard Weisshuhn observes, in 2012,

> Even in the East little is left of what used to be the East. And in the West, they ask – what is the East? [chuckle] Just as we perceived that as a culture shock back then, it's simply a completely different world. And that comes to bear in many ways. … It's breathtaking to see how quickly history disappears. Vanishes from one's consciousness, and becomes wholly meaningless for one's own life. It seems to me like the famous story that you hear time and time again, of the children who cannot imagine life without a mobile phone. Inconceivable. It means the GDR is equally inconceivable, and one has no idea what it actually was.

Seven years later, we return to this topic of intergenerational differences. Reflecting back on our conversation in 2012, I say to him:

> **MA** You said at that time, talking to the younger generation, it was like you were talking about a foreign country, or a place that they could not imagine, when you talked about East Germany.

> **RW** Yes, that is the case. It's not getting any better. Why should it?

> **MA** It doesn't change?

> **RW** [in English] No, of course not. How shall it change? … My impression is that they are hardly interested [in what happened 30 years ago] and their

understanding of the period is [pause] ridiculous. Virtually non-existent. Without having lived in one yourself, it is very difficult to understand a dictatorship. Without the personal experience… for the generation who did not have to go through that, the GDR is like the Spanish Inquisition, or the discovery of America, or the Emperor of China.

These reflections on generational divide and historical location approach the topic from the perspective of the those who are concerned to keep alive a sense of history, not for purposes of preserving the past but rather to take on board its hard learned lessons. In Peterson's article, he identifies a central challenge: "how to grasp, narrate and transcend the unfinished business of colonialism and apartheid and to lay to rest all sorts of ghosts that continue to haunt post-apartheid South Africa" (Peterson, 2019, p. 356). The 'unfinished business' of South Africa and former East Germany are not the same, but the importance of recognizing the ghosts of past in the present is shared by both.

Konrad Weiss summarizes this concern. He tells me that his generation grew up in the shadow of national socialism, and lived under a dictatorship; for him and others of his generation, this memory is 'very, very present.' He contrasts this with a generation which "is growing up … fortunately, untouched by this. But who could also be naïve because of this." He returns to this at the end of our interview, in 2019, when asked to reflect on the thirty years which had passed since the time of the Peaceful Revolution: "What I did not understand or think of back then: that it would be so difficult to keep that important value, that the majority of East Germans also recognised as a great value, freedom and democracy, alive. I did not imagine this back then."

Here we witness concerns of the older generation, that what motivated them in their political activism decades ago might have become lost in time; and that a freedom that was not fought for might also be taken for granted and not guarded as it must be. In South Africa, even while the memory of the struggle is contested and fragmented, it nonetheless occupies a central position in the national narrative. In what was East Germany, it is the struggle itself, the values citizens' movement, that has been marginalized in the national collective memory of the revolution.

Radical Imagination and Social Change
Peterson perceives great promise in the role of narrative and imagination for realizing social transformation. "In contexts of subjugation and exploitation" he writes, "narrative and the imagination also become crucial sites from which the black radical imagination could embark on a wide range of personal and social imperatives aimed at making sense of and alleviating experiences of disenchantment." Through them, there is the possibility to "counter reductive caricatures" and to articulate alternative visions for the future (2019, p.348).

Historically the arts have had a long established role in imagining social change, and it is not different in former East Germany, where some of the key leaders of the revolution were artists – not only in the theatre, but also painters, ceramicists, and writers. In 1992, I interviewed Bärbel Bohley the so-called 'mother of the revolution", in her home, and there we were surrounded by many of her large, abstract paintings. We begin our interview together by talking about her art, and the role it played in her politicization. She tells me that the state tried very hard to regulate what artists produced. "… state defined art… art was exactly defined. This was the case in the performing arts and in literature, everywhere… and my conflict started from this, one lived with it." In her painting this meant

> that for one square metre of red flag I received a bigger honorarium, yes it was measured in square metres. Well an honorarium…. if I painted an abstract mural, I got very little money for it, because it was considered to be decorative only. But if I had put some soldiers into my paintings, then I was paid more, because what I had produced represented the socialist state in an art form.

And for Bohley, herein lay her conflict. "For me, an abstract painting meant more than a painting with flags and soldiers." When I enquire more about this, she asserts that it was in this tension with the state that "over the years one found out that one could do something." And she was not alone. "Not every artist was at the same time a painter of soldiers. Quite on the contrary, there was always a conflict between art and the power of the state, because many people did not want to play the game."

The arts not only were critical as a site for imagining another world whilst living under a dictatorship, but have continued to be so in the years which have followed, as the extended discussion earlier on the play *Atlas of Communism* illustrates. Peterson's critical question – how to "make sense of and alleviate experiences of disenchantment" –resonates deeply with activists more broadly of the former East German citizens' movement, who struggle to retain a sense of hope, despite how far their lived reality is from the 'future' that at one time they had believed possible.

Jill Bradbury encapsulates this sense of narrative imaginings and time travel, writing:

> Perhaps nostalgia is not so much a longing for the way things were, as a longing for futures that never came or horizons of possibilities that have been foreclosed by the unfolding of events. Perhaps nostalgia is the desire not to be who we once were, but to be, once again, our potential future selves. (2012, p. 341)

In this sense, the haunting is not so much for a world that has been lost, as for a world that has not yet been realized. When I speak with East German activists about what they

see as the legacy of the autumn of 1989, it is this spirit of an ongoing project that they turn to. Wolfgang Templin, once identified by Erich Honecker as 'the number one enemy of the state" speaks about this unfinished struggle:

> I never saw '89 as a national event, but as a European one. And '89 is an entirety of which we are only an excerpt. I always say, the chain of peacefully liberating revolutions. It is a happy date, a positive one that has shown how fundamental change is possible in a peaceful way, and which role simple people play in it. … for me, this was the beginning…'89 has not yet been concluded, it's an open end.

When I ask Hans-Jürgen Fischbeck how he would like the revolution to be remembered, he responds with a question:

> Why was this revolution a peaceful one, without violence? What does that teach us about the critical situation in the world today? [Offers an example] Eleven thousand researchers stated that the governments of the world must do something about the climate crisis, because otherwise terrible misery will befall wide parts of the globe. This is one of the critical questions of the day. That is why it is important to find a way out of this crisis, which does not lead into a catastrophe, without violence… We must find a sustainable economy. But how? How?... In the GDR, I think we demonstrated how this can work: at a round table. We must form round tables, where we can discuss the problems of mankind beyond the influence of political parties…

For Fischbeck, the Peaceful Revolution offers an example of successfully moving beyond party politics and pressing for dialogue across differences – a model which has global relevance even thirty years later.

For Pastor Ruth Misselwitz, one of the most important legacies of the revolution is that change is possible through collective struggle.

> We saw how a situation which seemed hopeless, where one always said: there is no alternative, nothing will change – we developed alternatives. That the visions we stood for turned into actual alternatives, and that there was real change. We drove this change actively. This took much commitment, courage and standing up for one's convictions.

Then, echoing Fischbeck, she concludes "We saw a revolution through without violence or bloodshed." She refers to this political engagement as an "existential experience of resistance" which has lasting significance: even when situations seem hopeless, change is possible. Though the dreams of the activists remain unfulfilled, they still feel strongly

that the example of the Peaceful Revolution holds inspiration for others fighting for a more just world. Misselwitz spends much of her time with youth in eastern Germany, trying to build on this sense that they, too, can realise alternatives. For her, and others, this is the legacy of the revolution.

Conclusion

I have used Bhekizizwe Peterson's article "Spectrality and inter-generational black narratives in South Africa" as a vehicle for exploring the complexity of the experiences as told to me by activists in East Germany's Peaceful Revolution, as they try to make sense of this political struggle and its generational legacy during three decades of conversation. Although Peterson's article focusses on the issues facing South Africa, his concern with "social and creative imaginaries and their pivotal and difficult implications for trans-generational reflections, narratives and cultural memory" speaks directly to the challenges currently faced by former East German dissidents who must acknowledge that the context of their political struggle is virtually unrecognizable to those who were born in a unified Germany.

Peterson writes that "the reluctance or the refusal to 'lay the dead to rest'… in and through narrative performs a range of critical tasks." He then elaborates on this:

> In the arts, this refusal inaugurates a testimonial archive and aesthetics that pays homage to those who have passed on; it transmits memories (including those of haunting) across generations that later narrators inherit as a living archive; it reiterates past thresholds of subjection and links them to the present; and, lastly, it binds history to ethical and political … imperatives for social justice. (Peterson, 2019, p. 353)

The project which I have conducted in East Germany is intended as such a testimonial archive, linking struggles of the past to the present and future, "binding history to ethical and political imperatives for social justice." Although Peterson's article speaks most directly to the specific context of South Africa, its resonance is far wider than that, as it demonstrates the fallout across generations of what happens to a dream deferred, and the possibility of creating new pathways of hope.

References

Andrews, M. (2020). The Mystery of the Dangerous Book in Squire, C., ed. *Stories Changing Lives* Oxford University Press.

Andrews, M. (2019). The Narrative Architecture of Political Forgiveness *Political Psychology,* 40(3), 433-447.

Andrews, M. (2017). Popular Representation of East Germany: Whose History is It? in Meretoja, H. and C. Davis, eds. *Storytelling and Ethics: Culture, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative.* Taylor and Francis.

Andrews, M. (2014a). *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Andrews, M. (2014b). The nice Stasi Man Drove His Trabi to the Nudist Beach: Contesting East German Identity in Piazza, Roberta and Fasulo, Alessandra, eds. *When identities are marked: Narrating lives between societal labels and individual biographies*. Palgrave.

Andrews, M. (2014c). Narrating moments of political change in Kinnvall, Catarina, Paul Nesbitt-Larking, and Tereza Capelos, eds. Palgrave *Handbook of Global Political Psychology*. Palgrave.

Andrews, M. (2009). Against good advice: Reflections on conducting research in a country where you don't speak the language (reprinted from 1995 publication in The Oral History Review) in B. Harrison, (ed). *Life story research Volumes 1-4.* Sage.

Andrews, M. (2003). Grand national narratives and the project of truth commissions: A comparative analysis" Special Issue on Cultural Memory, *Media, Culture and society,* 25/1, 45-66.

Andrews, M. (1997). Life review in the context of acute social transition: The case of East Germany *British Journal of social psychology* 36, 273-290.

Arias, L. (2019). "Atlas des Kommunismus" Script [unpublished].

Bradbury, J. (2012). Narrative Possibilities of the Past for the Future: Nostalgia and Hope *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 18(3), 341–350.

Davis, C. (2005). Hauntology, spectres and phantoms *French Studies,* 59,373–379.

Dlamini, J. (2009). *Native Nostalgia*. Jacana.

Douglas, E. (11 September 2022). Lola Arias: 'Everything around you is telling you not to have children" Exberliner https://www.exberliner.com/stage/lola-arias-everything-around-you-is-telling-you-not-to-have-children [website checked 29 July 2023]

Fisher, M. (2014). *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures.* Zero Books.

Fisher, Mark (2012). What is Hauntology? *Film Quarterly,* 66/1,16-24.

Gule, K. (2019). To Heal a Nation: Performance and memorialization in the Zone of Non-Being in J. Pather & C. Boulle, (eds.). *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa.* Wits University Press.

Hughes, L. (1951). "Harlem" from *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem

Jameson, F. (1999). Marx's Purloined Letter in Sprinkler, Michael, ed. *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's 'Spectres de Marx'*. Verso.

Lincoln, M. (2015). "Toward a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts of Ba Chúc *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57(1),191–220.

Oli (December 11, 2023). Hauntology: The Persistent Echoes of Lost Futures and Unfulfilled Promises https://tacity.co.uk/2023/12/11/hauntology-the-persistent-echoes-of-lost-futures-and-unfulfilled-promises/

Peterson, B. (2019). "Spectrality and inter-generational black narratives in South Africa" *Social Dynamics,* 45/3, 345-364.

Rensmann, L. (Sept 2019). "Divided We Stand: An Analysis of the Enduring Political East-West Divide in Germany Thirty Years After the Wall's Fall *German Politics and Society*,37/3, 32-54.

Seaton, L. (January 20, 2021). The Ghosts of Mark Fisher *The New Statesman* https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2021/01/mark-fisher-postcapitalist-desire-review

Shen, Q. (2019). Tiananmen Square, Leipzig, and the 'Chinese Solution': Revisiting the Wende from an Asian-German Perspective *German Studies Review,* 42/1, 37-56.