

Through a Chilly Land – between First-Person Shoot-Em-Up and Tourist Blockbuster.

Jáchym Topol's Fictional Statement on the Possibility of Immersive Remembrance

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Abstract: The new media have brought with them new forms of engagement with history. Jáchym Topol's most recent novel, which plays with a grotesque war of memorial strategies in the Czech Republic and Belarus, reacts to this challenge with intermedial references, including structural imitation and a computer game. This article describes the textual means of creating an immersive experience that include literary modelling of the narrative strategies on the first-person shooter computer games. The article shows how a critical commentary on current practices of engaging with history, from commercialisation through banalisation and political reinterpretation, is transformed into the action of the novel, and how this memory-thriller uses its borrowings from the genre of computer games to fulfil its own mission—the revitalisation of history via immersion in a fictional world, full of both hot and cold sites of memory.

Keywords: Transmediality, fictional immersion, computer gaming, culture of memory, collective memory, representation of history, Jáchym Topol, novel

20th century history is booming—not least because of the decisive changes to who can remember it. The reasons for new interest from a younger generation and for a concomitant entry of recent history into museums do not lie solely in the aging and disappearance of eyewitnesses. Opportunities for engaging with the past through media have been transformed considerably in recent years.

Within the framework of new exhibition concepts, history teaching has made use of new media and the specific conditions under which they are received, and the documentary formats of TV infotainment are re-enacting historical events on screen.¹ For some time, recent history has been interpreted in forms other than documentaries; it has also become the subject of historical feature films and novels, graphic novels and computer games, thus reaching a broader field of recipients. A double shift in the medial externalisation of the collective memory (A. Assmann 2008, 104) can be established. Not only are the originally oral memory practices of eye-witness being spatially and temporally extended by more sophisticated media technologies, but re-medialised images of history are also already circulating in explicitly fictional genres and in the forms of popular culture (Erll 2008).²

Beyond that, however, there is another crucial reason for the current attractiveness of narratives centred on cultures of memory, namely the disruptions to the assumed consensus of a collective European memory since the years 1989/91. Only now are we becoming conscious of how starkly the memories and memorial traditions of East and West differ from one another (Troebst 2008).

The literary text at the centre of this analysis, Jáchym Topol's novel *Chladnou zemi / Through a Chilly Land*³ (2009), is set in East Central Europe, a region in which the memories of war, occupation and of at least two totalitarian systems overlay one another. In a fictional 'East Central Europe', to generalise, the author twice plays through a grotesque war of memorial strategies, once in an imaginary Czech Republic and once in a phantasmagorical Belarus. And for both these cultures of remembrance, it is the case, despite all other differences between them, that the history of totalitarian violence during the war and of National Socialist occupation overlaps with that of the Communist system. Where the remembrance of war and victory was part of the Soviet or Socialist politics of history, however, the crimes of the Communist regimes long remained taboo, being acknowledged only within counter-histories. Their official remembrance has only begun to be negotiated in recent years.

The author, however, not only handles this past and the forms in which the collective memory is still being fought over today, but also deals with the overarching questions of how to remember and how to experience history. Insofar as the novel, in an 'intermedial reference' (Wolf 2005), quotes, describes and imitates a real computer game, it is reacting to the new forms of historical representation, which as multi-channel media, and particularly as war games and first-person shooters, offer an intense if also thoroughly dubious immersion in history (Sandkühler 2009: 57).

¹ Some examples of new media being deployed in historical pedagogy beyond the school context are: the project 'Ways against forgetting 1933 – 1945' in Aachen, Germany, Eisenstadt, Austria and Eupen, Belgium, in which MP3s can be downloaded onto mobile phones at memorial sites in public spaces (www.wgdv.de), or the net-based voice archive Memory Loops, compiled by the media artist Michaela Melián, in which 300 audio tracks set to the locations of the Nazi terror in Munich 1933-45 create a virtual walk through Munich's past (www.memoryloops.net).

² An overview of memory and the new media is provided by the Meyer anthology (2009). See also *Digital Icons* Issue 4. *War, Conflict and Commemoration in the Age of Digital Reproduction*.

³ The English translation by Alex Zucker is soon to be published by Portobello under the title, *The Devil's Workshop*.

Before I articulate my thesis in reference to the complex interrelationship of memory culture, immersion and computer gaming in this novel, we will take a short look at the representation of history in computer games.

Computer Games and Representation of History

As William Uricchio (2005) has shown, computer games can be regarded as systems of historical representation, even though at first glance it seems that the defining component of computer games, interactivity, the pragmatics of active user participation, would rule out both historical accuracy and also the documentation and representation of the past. However, computer games can play a part in the process of understanding history, even if or perhaps precisely because they create 'virtual histories'. According to Uricchio, games concerned with history can be positioned between two poles.

At one pole, a certain historical event serves as the game's starting point, and the more precisely it is imitated, sharpening the setting, details and possible actions, the more the game is limited. The structural assumptions about the past that underlie what is possible in the game can also determine how the history is experienced.

The other, more abstract pole is not oriented on an event, but on the historical process. Games of this type are defined by a speculative engagement with history; they create 'visions of long-term historical development'. But these games, too, are underpinned by interpretations of real history, which make themselves felt either in the basic cause-effect logic of the game or in the texture of surface detail (Uricchio 2005: 335).

In the context of the poststructuralist turn in historiography, it is not the games focussed on accurate historical detail but those that engage speculatively with history that Uricchio sees as providing potential insight. The organisational principles underpinning these games encourage understanding of the structures of historical processes. 'They offer a new means of reflecting upon the past, working through its possibilities, its alternatives, its "might-have-beens," it would seem that they succeed where other forms of history fail'. (Uricchio 2005: 336)

Where Uricchio's interest is in the historical simulation games, the novel examined here, *Through A Chilly Land*, refers, alongside countless other forms of the medial representation of history, to a typical war game against a historical background, the WWII shooter *Hidden and Dangerous*.

My thesis is that the novel's connection of computer game and literary text in the context of history and memory goes far beyond a thematic allusion. It is, rather, that Topol's text orients itself in many different ways on elements of the game and implements them in its own narrative. This occurs firstly in its content, in that the ludic component is explained as a therapeutic means of engaging with history. Secondly, it is a case of structural reference: the units of narration resemble missions; the figures, motifs and plot elements recur in intensifying levels; there are textual simulations of elements from game design, such as a cursor. Above all, however, there exists an analogy with the immersive character of shoot-'em-ups, a particular accumulation of literary techniques that allow the reader a 'fictional immersion' (Voss 2008).

This 'relocation of the recipient', which in the context of the novel also means a successful 'revitalisation of history', is down not only to the tension of the plot, but also to the creation of spatio-temporal immersion through the use of a homodiegetic narrator, the deictic focussing on personal perspectives and present narration, as described by Marie-Lauren Ryan (2001) for immersion in literature and electronic media.

The world called into being in the text and into which the reader is drawn does not, however, merely present versions of the history of East Central Europe under-represented in the European collective memory.⁴ Through the use of Memoria strategies and discourses of recollection, translated into the plot, the novel also offers a commentary on contemporary engagement with history and remembrance.

Dealing with numerous historical and cultural facts on a thematic level, the text itself functions as an *archive*, 'a space that is located on the border between forgetting and remembering; its materials are preserved in a state of latency, in a space of intermediary storage'. (A. Assmann 2005: 204) The novel serves as a storehouse of numberless cold and sometimes hot 'realms of memory'—from *The Song of Igor's Campaign* to Jean Améry's writings and Slavamir Adamovich's scandalous battle poem *Ubej prezidenta / Strike the President Dead*, from the mass graves, the concentration camps and execution grounds of the totalitarian states as well as the new memorials built by state caprice to the symbolic figures and stories surrounding dissidence not just under socialism and including contemporary Belarus.

Through the aesthetic process of immersion, which the text replicates through references, in both structure and content, to a computer game, the novel makes it possible for the recipient to relive the history stored in the text of the novel and thus makes a process well-known in pop-cultural genres such as pulp fiction, action films and computer games (Nell 1988) bear literary fruit.

In the first part of the following examination, the novel and its references to the computer game will be presented in greater detail; the second part will then 'play through' a reading shaped by these intermedial references, in the course of which various 'revitalisation missions' will be isolated. Three of these missions represent current memorial strategies and their problems as acted out on the level of plot; the fourth deals with the text as a whole and its point, however bracketed, which reads: The analogue medium of the book can, if it adopts the techniques of younger, digital media, not only be a historical storehouse, but also offer identifications that 'revitalise' the past and make it possible to learn from the past without being driven out of one's mind by it.

⁴ In an interview with *The Prague Post*, Topol cited as his reason for making the genocide in Belarus a part of his novel that knowledge about those events was either lacking or taboo: 'I went to Belarus by chance, because my book was published there. To put it simply I was shocked there. I didn't know – and no one really does, or no one is interested in – what happened there during communism and nazism or what is happening there today. (...) No one talks about it. People have seen the mass graves, but... (...) no one wants to talk about it'. (Delbos/Topol 2010).

The Novel's Mirror Quality: Must The Past Always Be Repeated?

It quickly becomes apparent in reading that this text has traits of the fantastical and grotesque, and is oriented, like a fairy tale, on the structural element of 'the way'. It is along this way that the individual episodes take place. The individual episodes in the fight against evil can easily be described with Vladimir Propp's categories as narrative functions of a fairy tale. In the performing of the tasks, the typical agents appear, and there are helpers, false and true, who aid the hero to his final goal. In this, too, there are parallels with computer games, for which, particularly at the beginning of game studies, the generative potential of Propp's morphology of the folktale was put to use. (Rothstein 1983, Buckles 1985, Wenz 1999, Alvarez et al. 2006)

In the novel, it is this way that leads ever deeper into the mirror-reality of memory and remembrance culture(s). Mirror-like repetitions organise the text, which is split structurally and territorially in two, the first half set in the Czech Republic, the second in Belarus. The text travels this way while the protagonist is fleeing from one country to the other. En route, he recapitulates in non-chronological order his Czechoslovak past and the recent events in Terezín, the Czech garrison town, where the concentration camp Theresienstadt was located under the Nazi regime, before then finding himself confronted with structurally very similar events and characters in the second, Belarusian half of the novel. Organised around this way as though around a reflective axis, the motifs and episodes reappear in enlarged and defamiliarised form. This formal principle of structural analogy complements the two central questions, of how to remember and how to experience history, with a third, which could be expressed as, 'Must the horrors of the past always be repeated?'

The Novel's Plot: A Short Overview

On the search for answers, the author sends the nameless first-person narrator, and his readers, on a journey eastwards, from Theresienstadt / Terezín and Prague via Minsk into the Belarusian forests, and thus deep into the imagined space of 'Eastern Europe', into the myths and stories that shape this area in the sense of a mental map.⁵ The narrator of this journey, a middle-aged resident of the former garrison-town of Theresienstadt, has grown up in the ruins and catacombs of the concentration camp.

His childhood is spent under the direction of Uncle Lebo—a Jew born shortly before the liberation of the camp—hunting playfully for traces of those interned there. After the fall of the ČSSR, he supports Lebo in finding an ever-wider circle of sponsors among the survivors. With their financial help, a revitalisation programme is to be initiated for Terezín, which has been given up on by the authorities and the official memorial agency. Lebo is also supported by the so-called 'plank-bed tourists', young, third generation people traumatised by their family history, who have headed east 'with rucksacks on their backs and parental credit cards in their pockets' (Topol 2009: 33). These young people, obsessed with the past, find a commune in the town's uninhabited buildings and soon develop a flourishing alternative memorial industry. Their lucrative brainwaves: the 'ghetto pizzas', hand-printed t-shirts with the

⁵ For the concept of a mental map, which has been employed effectively in Eastern European studies, including in reference to cultures of remembrance, see, *inter alia*, Hartmann (2005).

provocative slogan, ‘If Kafka had survived, they would have murdered him here’ (Topol 2009: 37) and the ecstatic raves that take place every evening exert a magnetic influence on a rapidly growing catchment group from all over the world, as well as on sources of funding that are soon a thorn in the side of the state, the academic establishment and the official memorials.

As a result, the confrontation between the various memorial projects in Terezín soon begins to escalate. Thus the suggestion by two Belarusian visitors that he put the learnt know-how of developing a national memorial culture at the disposal of Belarus seems to offer the narrator a good opportunity to duck out in time. The mission to Belarus, however, proves to be entirely shady. The reputed expert on memorials ends up in the middle of a battle for power between the opposition and the president’s supporters, one which is also a battle about history. Also with an interest in this history is the tourism ministry, whose prisoner the narrator soon turns out to be. A group of partisans acting under the orders of the ministry want him to help them construct a totalitarianism-themed adventure park called ‘The Devil’s Workshop’, a unique memorial in the White Russian forests.

But here, too, the events escalate. This time, the narrator is no longer the helpful fellow-traveller he was in the Czechoslovak past, in Terezín. Now he begins to think and to involve himself. Because he cannot accept the perverse methods of conserving history practised here, to which Uncle Lebo has already fallen victim, he starts a second fire in the ruins of the burnt-out Chatyn and so manages to escape. Although the flight from this inferno ends only at the next mass grave, this time the chain of repetitions seems to have been broken. The author lets the novel end openly and with confidence: ‘We rescue ourselves. Yes, that could work’ (Topol 2009: 138)—that is the last sentence.

The First-Person Narrator: A Simpleton Engaged in History

Topol takes real social problems as the material for his storytelling, which are ignited by history and contemporary engagement with it, and to which he has dedicated his own journeys and reports for the weekly periodical *Respect*. To the *Prague Post*, Topol described his orientation on the political as an unavoidable prerequisite for literature in and about East Central Europe:

Here in this fucking Central Europe I cannot run away from politics. I cannot write a village story from the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s or 1980s without Communists or Nazis in it. It would be unrealistic. Here in Central Europe or in Bohemia if you talk to someone you know that he, his father or his grandfather was in a camp, wearing convict’s clothes. Or he, his father, or grandfather stood on the watchtower holding a gun. It is just fucking awful. (Delbos/Topol 2010)

Nevertheless the author takes care that the explicitly fictional use of history cannot be forgotten; he deploys a ‘divine simpleton’ (Janoušek 2009: 90) in his memorial novel. This first-person narrator is one of the many drunken idiots and stoned weirdoes who have in recent years been the protagonists, notably often, of literary and film narratives in East and Central Europe.

The events offered in *Through a Chilly Land* are narrated by a school drop-out whose real vocation is goat-herding and whose attempts at explanation necessarily remain within a narrow framework of outside opinions and simplistically motivated efforts of his own. The life-story that the narrator conveys episodically on his journey to Belarus can easily be read allegorically. It has the characteristics of the homo normalis of the ČSSR, who seems adjusted but has actually been shaped by every imaginable trauma of the 20th century.

He is the late child of a mother who just survived Theresienstadt, but who remained imprisoned in memory until her eventual 'liberation' by suicide. And he is the son of a father who came to Theresienstadt as a child soldier in the Red Army who will not relinquish his martial identity even in more peaceful times.

Since the way out of this childhood hell necessitates an unwilling but nonetheless culpable patricide, the narrator passes his subsequent years in the prison Pankrác, an institution exemplary for totalitarian sanctions against dissenters. Although the narrator cuts a deal while there, namely to lend the executioner a helping hand, the release he has long been promised for his services is not forthcoming until the year 1989. Nonetheless, this collaboration earns him the enduring nickname of 'Kapo' (Topol 2009: 61).

In prison, the narrator not only led the condemned to their execution, but also helps the executioner work on a 'pedagogical' computer game and is, in this sense, but without explicitly knowing it, a computer game developer.

Mára the executioner wants to use a first-person war game to realise his dream of 'preparing humanity, and particularly children, who love everything new, for the global victory over fascism' (Topol 2009: 19). This dream, whose cynicism is not confined to the fiction, and for which Mára will be rewarded in cold hard cash after 1989, refers explicitly to the first-person shooter *Hidden and Dangerous*, which was created by Czech software developers.

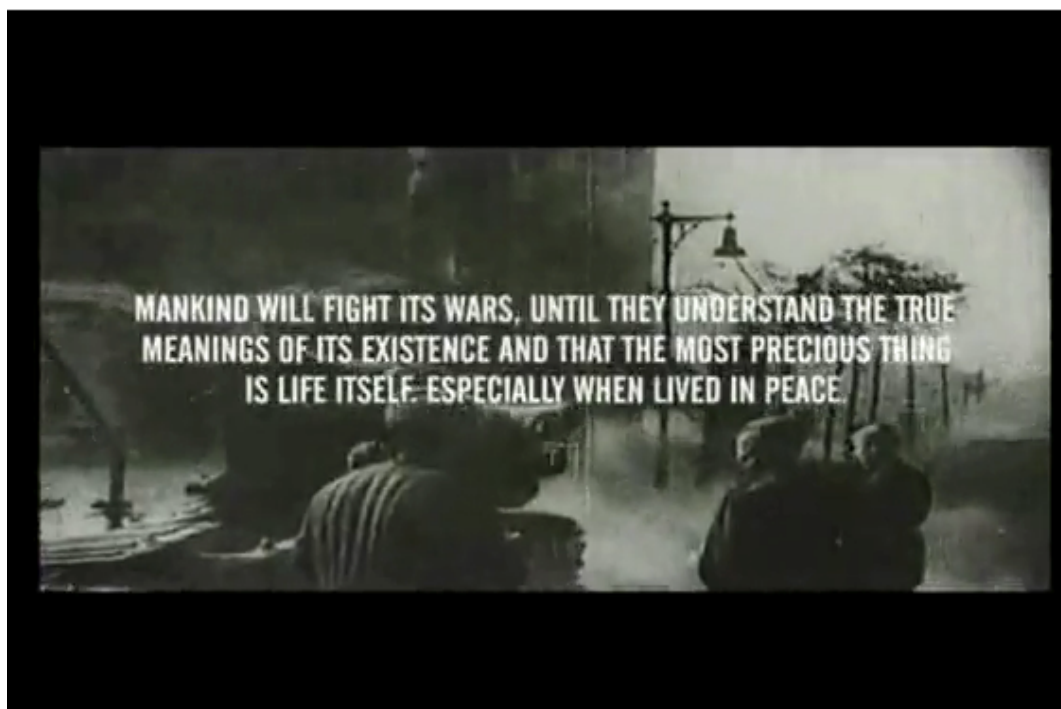
***Hidden and Dangerous* and the Intermedial References**

In the fictional world of the novel, *Hidden and Dangerous* is only one of many vehicles alluded to as serving to represent conceptions of history. And yet in this allusion can be seen the motivation for those structural specifics of the text that are responsible for its immersion effect.

In this game, real historical battles and military operations from the Second World War, particularly those in Eastern Europe, provide the setting for the action. *Hidden and Dangerous*, too, claims in progressive style to be pursuing a commemorative and ultimately pacifist aim, in which the shoot-'em-up is placed in a pseudo-documentary framework and connected to a hopeful message in the outro (figure 1).

In war games as *Hidden and Dangerous*, it is in the first-person character's perspective (usually a weapon's crosshairs) that the represented world appears, something intended to facilitate the recipient's maximum immersion in the virtual world. In this type of game, it is, 'just as in the usual memory-media productions, less about thinking about the Second World War than about reliving and relating to it' (Moorstedt 2005).

Figure 1. Frame of a sequence from the outro of *Hidden and Dangerous 2*



Source: Youtube, <http://youtu.be/270VLQbrTGI>

In Topol's novel, this focussing is taken on by the first-person narrator, who explicitly embarks upon a mission. The analogy to a computer game can be continued: Equipped with useful objects and weaponised objects, and with the varying presence of almost interchangeable (female) helpers, Topol's protagonist also fights his way through his task, just—hardly having successfully survived it—to be confronted with the same mission again, on a higher level of difficulty and under more acute conditions. And this mission is called 'Revitalising Memory'.

In the second part of the novel, the narrative's rhetoric resembles ever more clearly the narration of a shooter, concomitant with which are the action's intensification and the increasing absorbance of the reader. It is first-person shooters, in particular, that command an especially high immersive potential, as described by Gunnar Sandkühler (2009) in his study on the Second World War in computer games. This analogy will be demonstrated with a more comprehensive example (extracts from chapter 8).

In the episode cited, the narrator moves with the help of the suddenly uniformed Maruška, the helper in Belarus, through the streets of the 'Sun City' of Minsk and into the museum—a walk that develops into anything but a touristy stroll. The stated suspense of the situation, the presentation of the setting in the personal perspective of moving forward along the fronts of the buildings, the impression of being exposed to the pursuing gazes of others (representing the enemy scopes and firearms), the (cursor-) hand that points to the helping buzzer, the mission and also the necessity of flight seem to come directly from a war game, which is underscored not least by the appearance of soldiers, at first only acoustically, from out of the mist. Moreover, the narrative at points here becomes second-person, which, ac-

ording to Ryan (2005: 137) represents 'boundary crossing address', drawing the reader into the text.

On it goes. A dead-straight road again as if drawn with a ruler. [...] We walk, walk ever further; other than the fortress where I was born and a few impressions of Prague, I have never seen a city. So why, here in Minsk, am I so alert, always ready to jump to one side? These palaces are wonderful. Even, solid and long-drawn walls. But I know what's putting me on edge. Here you can be seen from everywhere. [...] The blustering wind is punched through by the noise of engines, lorries that appear from out of the fog, stop, bundled figures jumping down, soldiers. [...] We walk along a wall, another road and then another, and here, too, they have already arrived, the lorries, yes, I hear orders muffled by the wind, the loud tramp of military boots as the squad runs off, we pull back into an alley [...] She raises her hand and points at the wall, ah ha, a bell. So let's ring it, I think. [...] We're off, she says into my ear. We've got our mission. We can't stay here. They'll be here any minute, you'll see. (Topol 2009: 76-81)

How similar this way of narrating is to a sequence in a first-person shooter, i. e. a game centred on gun and projectile weapon-based combat, which is played in the first-person perspective (Bopp 2009), can be easily demonstrated with the trailer of *Hidden and Dangerous 2*.

Figure 2. The trailer of *Hidden and Dangerous 2*



Source: Youtube, <http://youtu.be/iLTMjv3XzFI>

The rhetoric of a first-person shooter, however, shows itself not only in the present, personal perspective of the narration and in the motivic form of larger parts of the action, but also, as mentioned above, in the repeating structure, one that depicts an increasing violence.

Where the first level, in the Czech Republic, is still child's play in the catacombs of Theresienstadt, this becomes in Belarus a potentially deadly excavation project in the subterranean corridors of Minsk's History Museum. The military parade in Prague, with its marches and field uniforms, including bayonets, which takes place directly before the switch

of location or level, is replaced by the description of weapons demonstration under the roaring of tanks in the streets of Minsk; and the Holocaust tourists who are merely removed by Theresienstadt's security services in ambulances are, in Belarus, driven by special military units into the arms of a baying anti-Semitic mob that beats them to the ground.

A Computergame-Inspired Reading of Topol's Memoria-Novel

The immersion, typical of game rhetoric, which the novel reproduces by literary devices and which allows the recipient to dive into the textual world, is significant for our reading of the text in a number of ways. If we look at Topol's novel in light of its memorial-mediating function, it soon becomes clear that, despite his action-filled plot, he is reacting to memorial cultures in a reflexive way. What we can see in the defamiliarising mirror of Topol's fiction has its origin in real debates about remembrance and in East Central European memorial culture. If we read the novel counter to the sujet-logic of our limited narrator's fictional mission, we can extrapolate a number of different, narratively unfolding strategies for handling remembrance, which, in reference to the game metaphor, I would like to call 'revitalisation missions'. They are transformed into the novel's plot elements and confronted with one another in such a way that an authorial commentary on the fantastical game of remembrance debate can be recognised. Four of these revitalisation missions are presented below.

Unsuccessful Revitalisation Mission 1: Remembrance as Lucrative Fun

Both the Czech and the Belarusian levels of the novel make a theme of the commercialisation of remembrance at the expense of individual memory, the material traces of which are expunged. This destruction is not only carried out by the official memorial agency but also proves to be a consequence of the alternative memorial projects that want to make a profit from holocaust tourism.

The starting point of the Theresienstadt/Terezín-strand, taken here as an example, is the extra-fictional debate, ending in grandiose failure, at the beginning of the century about the town of Terezín. From the official side, there had been high-flying plans for this small garrison town, whose population since the departure in 1996 of the military forces stationed there has been only around 3000. Investment was proposed not only in the tourism sector; a wide-ranging cultural centre was to be built and a university to be founded with the help of the EU. The mayor, subsequently deposed in 2007, was already looking forward enthusiastically to the years ahead in which his town would be an enormous building site and the money would come rolling in ('Sackgasse Zukunft' 2007). But there was also a whole series of private initiatives to save Terezín, often full of bizarre ideas that provided Topol, as a journalist, with a number of stories.⁶

Topol pieces together his fantastical Theresienstadt/Terezín from these elements, transposing the real parts of the discourse from one person to another, exaggerating them grotesquely and allowing them to reappear in a new light. In the novel, a programme of demolition is supported not only by the town officials but also by the representatives of the

⁶ At a reading in Hamburg in March 2011, the author reported these 'bizarre' initiatives, which in no way fell short of his "fiction".

memorial agency, which leads the residents to suspect them of wanting to supplant a living Terezín full of individual memories with an official memorial project, based on a fairly abstract and self-serving conservation of the past. The established 'Genocide Trail', on which the visitors are meant to 'stroll' (Topol 2009: 33), has been lucratively commercialised through tourism and also, from the official side, fits well with state-sponsored research projects. In the novel, it says: 'And Lebo knew that all that would remain of the whole town would be the memorial and the academics, who, in exchange for their fat benefits, as he expressed it to himself, were eating out of the government's hand and who for that reason weren't bothered if the town was demolished'. (Topol 2009: 22).

The hippies of the alternative memorial-commune, on the other hand, resist the plan put forward by the town in which they hope to find traces of their own family histories. They try to make Terezín into a living centre of education and culture (here Topol takes up in exaggerated form the mayor's dream of an EU-funded university town). Their project, a *schola ludus* in reference to Komenský, is ambitious, even over-ambitious. In their playful project as a means of engaging with history, there is a further parallel with the ludic aspect of historical simulation computer games.

Ultimately, the hippies also contribute to the downfall of Terezín. It becomes clear that they are thinking not only of the remaining residents of this fictive Terezín, the old survivors of the ghettos. In integrating the eye-witnesses into their alternative memorial industry—by having them print the t-shirts, bake the pizzas and sell the worry-stones made of former walls—the young people are acting primarily in their own interest. Their alternative tourist business booms. In this, their commercialisation of the past becomes similar to the academic business of remembrance, equally accused of financial self-interest. The commune also speculates about EU funds and good publicity. It swiftly transforms into what is explicitly called an 'entertainment centre' in which the entrance fee allows visitors to see Lebo, "The Warder of Theresienstadt" and have enormous raves. The hype surrounding alternative remembrance brings to Theresienstadt ever more young people for whom remembrance is one among the many diversions with which they make their lives amusing. The novel directly names playing and blogging on laptops as competing occupations.

The competition between the various, commercially-oriented memorial projects in the novel ends with the clearing of the town, at the expense of the 'bearers of individual recollection'. The professional remembrance-administrators and their memorial win the day. The final destruction, which really endangers the lives of the residents, is, however, initiated by someone from the commune. The narrator himself, who has warned neither Lebo nor his friends, starts a fire in the commune in order to prevent his being connected to this project in the future. All that remains is the memorial, itself dedicated exclusively to death. Around it lie the ruins of Theresienstadt. Of Lebo, the living 'recollection bearer', there is no trace.

Instead all I hear is a quiet rustling in the grass as plants creep over demolished, charred beams; instead of an answer I hear only the echo of footsteps in the ruins and the dropping of water in the catacombs, the end has already come, no one will now be able to answer my question, it has already happened, Theresienstadt has fallen. (Topol 2009: 22)

Topol's literarily packaged commentary on commercial memorial strategies and on remembrance as entertainment thus culminates in the loss of experiences of the past and in the total forgetting of history.

Unsuccessful Revitalisation Mission 2: Outsourcing or Overlaying Places of Horror

In the second type, too, it is about a loss of memory, which Topol presents not as a violent extinguishing of 'second rank' memories, but as a process that will continue to repeat itself. The core of this 'revitalisation mission' is the contrast between Western and Eastern Europe, as becomes clear in a meta-memorial conversation in the first part of the novel. The Swedish student Sarah, a prototypical 'plank-bed tourist' in Terezín and, for the narrator, an exciting lust object, sees in this conversation a distinction between the West, where remembrance is delegated to institutions far from everyday life, and Eastern Europe, where everyday simply covers the past.

[...] normal, as if, she snorted ... and explained to me that in Western Europe the war graves are carefully trimmed and cared for, whereas here in Theresienstadt fascinating, really, that there where people were murdered, old Hamáček now sells his cabbages that in the place from where the trains went east to the death camps, old Bouchalová and old Fridrichová are grumbling about their constantly malfunctioning clothes press and that you as children played in tombs and kissed in bunkers, that really is beyond the pale. You're probably all slightly cracked and don't even know it ... (Topol 2009: 39)

'Slightly cracked' applies, above all, to Sarah, who comes from a place where history is outsourced to—as it is put elsewhere—'clean-scrubbed' (Topol 2009: 102) memorial institutions devoid of meaning. That is why she has had to undertake this journey east towards her roots and the horrors of her family history, in the hope that contact with real locations will allow her to integrate the past into her life. She had—a true child of the outsourcing strategy—set out to search for the other Europe, Eastern Europe, where the people may still have two arms and two legs but are as culturally different as she says in the conversation quoted above. She hoped to find a place in which the horror could be localised—in order to leave it there for good. Since her concept of Eastern Europe is based on exclusion, no one she meets on her journey wants to be an inhabitant of a place to which the Western European collective memory has outsourced the horror, no matter how far she gets. Even in Vladivostok, someone casually explains to her: 'What do you mean, east, young lady, have you lost your mind? This is the west, the true end of the west, this is the edge of Europe!' (Topol 2009: 43).

Topol's novel has Sarah's "western" attempt to outsource history to the most remote possible locations fail—without, however, taking up arms in the East-West contrast on the side of what Sarah denigratingly calls the 'Eastern European tradition of remembrance', i.e. on the side of the narrator's first erotic experiences, in the casements of Theresienstadt or of the pig farm in the former Roma concentration camp. On the contrary, the text presents the main representative of an ignorant approach to history, the unreliable first-person narrator. Treated as a 'memorial specialist', the narrator is actually not at all interested in remembrance work; he is attracted solely by the women obsessed with the past; for him it is about the emotional

kick and not at all about understanding. Because of his historical forgetfulness, he again and again becomes in the course of the novel a fellow traveller in a gruesome history set to 'repeat'.

In this comment on memorial strategies, Topol makes the outsourcing of history to sterile memorials or distant regions, the lack of historical consciousness in the everyday, responsible for the repetition of history.

Unsuccessful Revitalisation Mission 3: Pseudo-Authentic Myth Production

The second part of the novel spins out what could happen if the strategies mentioned already were to short-circuit, that is, if the concept of a memorial-tourism sensation were to encounter a readiness to be the imagined, excluded Eastern Europe or indeed the 'Jurassic Park of Horror'. If, on top of all that, the conserving mummification of history is crossed with immersion-guaranteeing authenticity effects, everything in Topol's model will have to come to a fatal end.

For the Belarusian part, too, of this memorial grotesque, an extra-fictional starting point can be located. This time, it is not the social and political discourse about conserving the past, but an artistic project of the myth-generating Belarusian artist and writer Artur Klinaŭ, publisher of the alternative cultural periodical *pARTisan* and the author of *Minsk. The Sun-City of Dreams* (2006).⁷ Klinaŭ works actively, though not in the sense of official image campaigns, on his city's brand, making use of the layers of meaning in its cultural memory. In an interview with the periodical *Osteuropa*, he formulates his 'socio-mythological' approach in the following way:

[...] it is about creating a myth and about making the [Sun-City] project so well-known that Minsk "Sun-City" becomes a tourist attraction, a recognised brand in the same way as Venice, Prague or Paris. If it succeeds, launching the brand Minsk as The Sun City of Dreams, that could bring in billions of dollars—not for me, but in money that the tourists will take to Minsk and spend there. (Klinaŭ 2007: 99)

Topol takes this up and makes this mythological Minsk and indeed the whole of Belarus into a reified European subconscious with potential for tourism. His Belarus seems to consist above all of the 'underground'.

The "plank-bed tourists" here, young people of a harder sort, are digging directly under the memorial for the official White Russian national myth of a 'Great Patriotic War' in the foundations of the Historical Museum. Kagan, the Belarusian Lebo, explains to the narrator what he will see there. He recognises in a scrap of cloth from an old NKVD uniform the old-

⁷ The original title of this text, written in the months after the presidential election of March 2006, reads *Putevoditel' po gorodu solnca / Travel Guide to the Sun-City*. The nucleus of the text is a short essay on the subject of Klinaŭ's book of photography, *Horad SONca. Vizual'naja paëma pra Minsk / Sun-City. A Visual Poem On Minsk*, which appeared under Minsk's Lohvinau imprint in early 2006. Klinaŭ himself sees his book of photography as only a small building block in an ambitious socio-mythological project. His dream is of a Minsk myth that is to emerge from out of many, various art forms, and on which *pARTisan* is hard at work. A ballet is being planned and the author wants a multimedia exhibition or a Sun-City film that would present the city and its inhabitants with a new consciousness of themselves (Weiler 2007).

est, Soviet layer, and comments: ‘Thousands, maybe ten thousand people. That’s why they built the museum here after the war. To cover up the execution ground’. Then comes the ‘classic intermediate layer of the world war’, the traces of the completely extinguished and subsequently forgotten Jewish ghetto, which had also been located there. And then the next layer, recognisable by the buttons and belt buckles emblazoned with swastikas—the German prisoners who were shot here (Topol 2009: 89).

From this excavation site, subterranean passages lead out of the city to the mass graves in the forests and the burned out villages, to where things are officially not allowed to be dug up. Here the narrator experiences how long-established victim/perpetrator schemata promote forgetfulness and how political arrangements determine the historical narrative: ‘The hundreds of thousands burnt to death are being swept under the carpet because, although the operation was ordered by the Germans, the White Russian villagers were actually killed by Russians, Ukrainian, Lithuanians, for money ... and nowadays no one talks about it because they don’t want to start something with Putin’. (Topol 2009: 108)

It is precisely in these original locations that the memorial partisans want to construct their ‘open air museum of totalitarianism’, in order to win the competition between victims—in the novel, they set themselves against Katyn and Theresienstadt. But it is, above all, in the beautifying of Kлинаў’s myth project that a ‘hit’ is to be landed in the tourist industry, since, after all, who even comes to Belarus at the moment:

It’s high time to change that, says Arthur. Do you know where there were the most war victims? Here! Do you know where the most people were murdered by the Communists? Here! And where are people still disappearing, eh? Right here! Isn’t this country something special? No? The globalised world has already been divided up: Thailand—sex, Italy—seaside and visual art, Holland—clogs and cheese, and Belarus, it’s the horror trip, am I right? [...] Visit the European genocide memorial, the devil’s workshop! Arthur shouts and pours vodka into the beakers. (Topol 2009: 102)

This future tourist hotspot earns its name in two ways. As a memorial to the genocide of the Belarusian population, the memorial partisans set in motion a particular revitalisation programme that aims to facilitate an immersive experience of the past far beyond any worlds of fiction.

To prevent forgetting and to preserve the past, the eye-witnesses are forcibly made ‘imperishable’. In the headquarters of the horror adventure park, the narrator makes a terrible discovery of mummified eye-witnesses who turn into speaking puppets:

An old granny in a headscarf and a long skirt is sitting just by the door. Not living. But it seems to me as though at any moment she’ll move her eyelids behind her glasses and focus her wise eyes on me. There’s a twitch in the old woman’s face, her lips move. *I was in the cellar with my little sister and our mother, we heard them tramping above us, my little sister wanted to scream so I pushed a bit of bread into her mouth so that she would eat, so that she would be quiet. I hold my hand over her mouth, she has suffocated.* She stops talking, just whimpers, cries and wails without ending ... Alex separates the wire, switches the granny off. (Topol 2009: 112)

With their project, which aims at authenticity, the ministry's memorial partisans pervert the aesthetic practice of '*magnitofonnaya literatura*'. This Belarusian memorial genre has a highly immersive function, which emerged from a collection of eye-witness interviews⁸ that Topol here quotes directly and which is still being continued very productively, e.g. in Svetlana Aleksievich's "Novels in Voices". Moreover, with direct reference to the mummified Lenin, Stalin and Gottwald, whose mummification was a failure, the partisans employ a so-called 'eastern tradition' of commemoration. In mummifying the eye-witnesses, the task of revitalising history becomes concrete and is permanently solved: 'the story is always the same, soldiers come into the village and start killing, houses and people burn, it repeats itself and will always repeat itself [...] because Alex holds the leads in his hand' (Topol 2009: 113).

And although the narrator is convinced that this way can succeed in bringing the eyes of the world onto these overlooked stories, onto this devil's workshop of the 20th century, he also knows all at once that they cannot be allowed to deny history its development across generations and to deny the eye-witnesses their deaths. In order to prevent their being made tools in the new memorial projects, between commerce and antagonistic politics, Topol has his narrator, who is beginning to see reason, set the fictive Katyn alight once again.

Revitalisation Mission 4: Immersive Literature as Therapy?

Within the fictive world, this dark fairytale about the efforts at commemoration offers, as if in passing, an alternative to the commercialisation projects, the political entanglements and the strategies of suppression in both East and West. The commune in Terezín, for example, does not conceive of itself, after all, as only a playground, but also as a therapeutic institution. With a specific 'remembrance offer', it provides the 'searchers' with real relief. By slipping into the world of their ancestors, by wandering in their rooms and sleeping on their bunks and by listening to stories told by charismatic representatives of the older generation, the young generation in the novel learns to bear the horror of the past.

In their encounter with the eye-witnesses' oral memory, the textual representatives of a readership born later then experience the immersion and transportation into the past that Ryan (2001) describes for a immersive narrated world. Within the confines of fiction, an effect is then achieved that is also promised to the readers by the text as a whole through its sharp accentuation of fictional immersion and its borrowing from the rhetoric of computer gaming.

For the 'historical revitalisation projects' written into his book, Topol makes use, on the one hand, of effects characteristic of an entertainment medium, computer games. Though computer games occupied with the past can present the immersed gamer with views of history, it is precisely this deep immersion that makes it difficult for the gamer to experience the reflective access to the structures of historical processes hoped for by Uricchio—and nor does it aim to do that. The literary medium, on the other hand, can narrate history and simultaneously comment on engagement and strategies of interpretation. Topol's novel is not pure entertainment; it also makes a 'remembrance offer', which promises to allow readers to ex-

⁸ The initial publication of this "tape recorder literature" under the title *I Come From the Village of Fire* (1975, *Ya z vognennai vėski...*) was by Ales' Adamovich, Yanka Bryl' and Uladzimir Kaleshnik.

perience ‘revitalised’ history in such a way that it becomes a conscious part of the present. The novel sums this up in a striking image: The simple memory expert who presents history is of such high value to his opponents because he is a ‘recollection bearer’. He has swallowed the memory stick that bears witness to the past, in the same way that Topol has incorporated the techniques typical of a younger medium, the computer game, into his Memoria-thriller.

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