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Introduction

From the biological rhythms of birth and death, to the social structures of work and psychological experiences of duration, time is an inescapable fact of human existence. Defining what time is, however, constitutes an impossible task: not only are there “as many subjective times as there [are] thinking, feeling, knowing and communicating individuals,”¹ but equally, despite the astounding reach of systems of measurement, it is accepted that – at the latest since Einstein’s 1905 theory of relativity – scientific concepts of time are founded on increasingly complex parameters. Most theorists agree that the turn to the twentieth century marks something of a watershed: as Stephen Kern outlines in The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918, enormous technological and social changes revolutionized individual and social concepts of temporality at an unprecedented rate.² Our present age seems to constitute another such pivotal moment; perhaps, as Lynn Hunt observes, because of a “similar kind of concentration of technological and cultural causes.”³

Given the complexity and rapidity of our shifting relationship to time it is hardly surprising that expressing this phenomenon requires a “poetic imagination” and that the topic has acquired renewed urgency for those engaged in research in literary, media and cultural studies.⁴ This was reflected in the great diversity of papers, dealing with all periods and genres of literature, as well as with cultural studies and film, presented at the Women in German Studies (WiGS) open conference ‘About Time,’ hosted by University College Dublin in June 2012.⁵ The contributions to the thematic section of this present volume arise from this event and focus particularly on examples of Austrian, German and Swiss literature and thought from the early twentieth century to the present day, reflecting in overlapping and contrasting ways many of the key issues emerging in recent discussions of time.

Modernity’s fascination with the “large variety of proper times,” often regarded as being in “ceaseless conflict” with one another, continues to dominate contemporary discussions of the experience and representation of temporality.⁶ According to Helga Nowotny, notably writing in 1989 even before the advent of the internet and social networking, such discussions acquire a new intensity in view of

⁴ Nowotny: Time, p. 8
⁵ This event was generously supported by the Goethe Institute together with the Austrian and Swiss Embassies. See the conference report by Emily Spiers. In: Germanistik in Ireland, 7 (2012), p. 245-49.
⁶ Nowotny: Time, p. 4.
the contemporary “compactness of the globe with its ethnic and cultural diversity.”

The concern with the clash between subjectively experienced inner time and the constraints of socially determined or scientifically constructed time is visible throughout the papers in this volume, whether they deal with Weimar modernism or early twenty-first-century prose. In many cases, they reflect on the sense of acceleration which has been associated with social and technological change since the industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but which particularly characterizes our own age of immediacy and virtualization.

In addition, the papers collected here contribute to the continued debate on the nature of simultaneity, a key issue in efforts to comprehend our changing relationship to time. In the first place, a sense of simultaneity is essential to the functioning of global capitalism, which relies on the construction of common standards and the immediacy of digital communications. However, such simultaneity is, of course, an illusion, masking deep and widespread inequality and prompting narratives of ‘lateness’ and ‘backwardness,’ reflecting not only the dominance of the market, but also a pernicious ‘first-world’ dominance. Furthermore, the illusion of simultaneity upon which much of contemporary life rests, contributes to a sense of confinement in the present, which Frederic Jameson describes as the end of temporality itself.

For Jameson, this goes hand in hand with a “dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time” and entails the “virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place.”

As the papers collected here testify, the need to contend with such confinement in the present, perhaps to transcend it or to reconcile its relationship to the past, is a central concern in literary works from the turn to the twentieth century up until the present day.

Encapsulated by the well-known phrase “Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigkeiten,” coined by historian Reinhart Kosellek, an awareness of the paradoxical relationship between simultaneity and temporal and spatial fragmentation lies at the heart of modern social and historical experience.

Opening up an awareness of co-existing “Zeitschichten” with varying durations and origins is therefore crucial in understanding time as both intra- and intersubjective experience. Equally important is the relationship between linear time and the cyclical, which Kosellek explores in his meditations on history, and which, according to Nowotny, is essential in addressing the crisis of the present.

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7 Nowotny: Time, p. 4.
10 Jameson: The End of Temporality, p. 708.
12 Nowotny: Time, p. 54.
constellation of issues, including environmental crisis, tectonic shifts in the global economy and the apparent homogeneity of contemporary culture, the question of how cyclical and linear dynamics interact is central to investigations of our changing relationship to time in general. The papers presented here echo Kosellek’s contention that it is precisely the interplay between repetition and singularity, between rupture and continuity, that allows us to construct a temporality: the ‘before,’ ‘after’ and ‘future possibility’ that structure human experience and permit historical narrative. As many of the contributions in this present volume show, this concern resonates particularly in the Germanophone context: the personal confrontation with the horrors of the past, the legacy of trauma for the present, and the impact of the Holocaust on the concept of social progress, are constantly evoked in explorations of German, Austrian and Swiss identity.

Literary narrative and lyric poetry, continue to offer a vital means of exploring how temporality – or, as West-Pavlov would suggest, “multiple temporalities” – are constructed and experienced. That literature from German speaking cultures provides particularly fruitful grounds for such explorations is confirmed by Johannes Pause who has identified, in contemporary novels, “ein Kaleidoskop verschiedenster Motive, Analysen theoretischer Ansätze und ästhetischer Konzepte” as well as “[A]usführliche Reflexionen über das Wesen der Zeit” that reveal our everyday understanding of time to be “überholt” and announce “einen Wandel des menschlichen Zeitbewusstseins, ja sogar der Beschaffenheit der Zeit selbst.” The contributions collected in this volume echo Pause’s findings: defying the prejudice that an explicit concern with time is the concern of a “somewhat faded modernism,” they demonstrate not only the diverse and continually developing means employed by writers in their treatment of time, but also that time is “loquacious” lying as it does at the heart of communication and, as such, at the very foundations of culture.

The thematic section of this present volume proceeds in roughly chronological order, beginning with Elizabeth Boa’s comparison of time in two Weimar-era novels: Thomas Mann’s Der Zauberberg and Vicki Baum’s Die Menschen im Hotel. Boa shows how both texts reflect the changing experience of time in an era of accelerating technological development and socio-cultural uncertainty. She argues that the very structure of Mann’s novel is a metaphor for the difference between a perspectivistic view of time and its fixed, mechanical measurement. Not only does the “blurring of orderly temporal succession” effected in Der Zauberberg serve to

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13 West-Pavlov: Temporalities, p. 4.
15 Pause: Texturen der Zeit, p. 325.
17 Jameson: The End of Temporality, p. 706.
Illumination the gap between these modes of perception, but also, by staging a “trial of curiosity,” Mann’s novel questions wider narratives of progress. Technologies emerging at the turn of the twentieth century (cinematography for example) are thereby revealed as holding the capacity to disrupt linear chronology. At the same time, succession is also displaced by repetition and simultaneity which are built in to the novel by mythic allusions and leitmotivic variants. Whereas Mann’s text, whose mountain setting lies far from the urban and industrial centre, seeks to enact a form of deceleration, Baum’s novel charts the love of speed and desire for spontaneity that characterise city life in the Weimar period, thereby prefiguring our contemporary concerns with immediacy. Boa also shows how, by evoking “extreme contrasts in tempo,” Baum’s novel, filled with intertextual references to Mann, reflects on the nature of progress, revealing how competing cultural narratives do not succeed one another, but rather co-exist.

Janet Pearson’s analysis of Hermann Broch’s 1945 text Der Tod des Vergil explores the author’s use of a historical figure as a means of thinking through the disconnection between personal time, biological time, historical time, and time as a product of human systems of measurement. Underpinning her discussion are Marianne Gronemeyer’s reflections on the modern concern with a lack of time, which arises not only from increasingly dominant perceptions of acceleration, but also the sense that the end of earthly life constitutes an absolute boundary, which is at the root of a fear of death that pervades modernity. Pearson shows how Broch uses the historical figure of the Roman poet to negotiate the dilemmas of non-simultaneity and the finitude of earthly existence by imaginatively enacting a passage ‘out of time.’ In so doing, Broch’s text exploits the potential of death as the point at which internal and external experiences of time intersect. Connecting this to the author’s biographical experience of the Second World War, Pearson shows that, for Broch, this is part of an ethical imperative to turn away from a ‘negative universalism’ and to spiritually re-connect with the wider world.

Jeanne Riou’s contribution explores the implications of Freud’s concept of melancholia and mourning for an understanding of time. Revealing the process of grieving as an “altered experience of internal time,” Riou shows how Freud’s conception of loss implies an alternative notion of temporality to that elaborated by his contemporaries working with mechanistic and philosophical categories. Riou’s discussion is embedded in an understanding of debates about the relationship between energy and force as they were developing at a time of intense scientific activity. Constituting a “denial of the contents of time,” she shows how the attempt to preserve a lost object reveals a form of temporality that, in contrast to scientific time which remains “absolute” and “empty” in its relationship to mathematical constants, is in fact full or “occupied.” This not only has consequences for our understanding of the notion of inner time, but also suggests that social time is populated by a sense of cumulative loss intrinsic to multiple subjectivities. Moreover, Riou argues with Freud that “occupied time” may not only constitute a personal experience, but may be constitutive of culture itself. In other words, if
cultural operations are, at heart, a form of “compensation” for an irretrievable object, an attempt to address a sense of loss through namegiving, storytelling, mythmaking, then the discursive environment itself is “occupied time.”

The notion of aesthetic activity as a form of time underlies Annja Neumann’s discussion of Paul Celan’s poem DAS GESCHRIEBENE, which looks at the way in which temporality is inscribed in and by the poetic process. As such, the poem allows Celan to stage a critical intervention, questioning the historical past as closed narrative. In a close reading of the text, Neumann reveals it to be processual, enfolding in complex juxtapositions that evoke shifting, contradictory and multiple readings, often by way of “retrospective transformations.” As such, it does not embody history by means of a referential strategy, but rather incorporates it by revealing the poetic process as one of becoming. In this way, the text not only acts as a means of communication between ostensibly disparate historical moments, but shows the past to be continually present. For Neumann, this means that the poem is not so much a meditation on time, but, in its becoming, it is time itself.

Katya Krylova discusses Ingeborg Bachmann’s Malina, whose protagonist struggles with the fluidity of the boundaries between past and present. Krylova looks at the way in which in Bachmann’s novel “personal memory and historical trauma” are “indelibly inscribed in the Viennese cityscape,” showing the past as ever present. The need to counter the acceleration of late-twentieth-century life is coupled with the urgent desire to inhabit a present sheltered from the traumatic legacy of the Shoah. However, the protagonist’s attempt to step out of time and exist in such a ‘Heute’ is revealed as impossible, not least because the unassimilable events of the Holocaust cannot be bounded in time, but continue to exist in displaced form. As in other contributions in this volume, Krylova thus shows the close link between time and space: the impossibility of reconciling past and present in a coherent chronological narrative is reflected in the structure of Bachmann’s text, which, Krylova argues, “mirrors the traumatic intrusion of the past in Vienna’s topography.”

Carolin Benzing’s analysis of recent prose narratives by Swiss author Kurt Aebli focuses on the temporal dimension of the trace, which, by marking the presence of something absent, constitutes a particular form of asynchrony. Benzing explores the attempts of Wellenberg, a central character in the novels Der ins Herz getroffene Punkt and Der Unvorbereitete, to resist spatial and temporal assimilation by retreating into an internal world. In so doing he seeks out a non-time (“Nicht-Zeit”), which may offer him a space of potentiality. However, an escape from the control and restriction of time is always shown to be both an opportunity and a danger. Strategies such as unpunctuality, love as a space beyond time, and the potential of multiple lives within a single earthly life, are explored as modes of resistance against the restrictions of time. As Benzing’s discussion shows, Aebli’s text explores the potential of asynchrony in a non-linear narrative that adopts multiple perspectives and reflects on writing as a means of addressing absence and celebrating multiplicity.
In the first contribution to the general section, Sabine Egger explores the evocation of place and the crossing of cultural, historical and aesthetic boundaries in the poetry of German poet Johannes Bobrowski (1917-1965) and of Irish poet Seamus Heaney. Bobrowski, who grew up in a multicultural region of Eastern Europe, and Heaney have in common the influence of a rural childhood and the experience of cultural diversity marked by tensions between different cultures. For both writers, a sense of place serves as a basis for coming to terms with the past, and both develop images and motifs in which concrete and mythical places overlap. Egger’s discussion illuminates the way in which Bobrowski and Heaney poetically reimagine a multi- or transcultural Europe, thereby challenging existing boundaries without ignoring their significance for European history and collective or individual memory.

Rachel MagShamhráin’s article examines the way in which home movies of Adolf Hitler and his inner circle are ‘reprocessed’ in very different ways in two documentary film productions. In both cases, semi-synchronous sound is added to the originally silent film material. However the different strategies employed result in widely different meanings: While one production exposes the footage as an intrinsic part of Nazi propaganda, thus also counteracting a “certain persistent reverence for and susceptibility to the Nazi aesthetic,” the other pulls the spectator into this aesthetic by suggesting an intimacy and authenticity which is heightened by the added sound. This ultimately reinforces the allure of Nazi normality rather than revealing the danger of such over-familiarity.

The thematic section of the next volume of Germanistik in Ireland (volume 9, 2014) will focus on the topic of Utopias-Dystopias-Heterotopias/Imaginerte Alternativen: Utopien-Dystopien-Heterotopien. Articles on other topics, in particular relating to the teaching of German as a foreign language, are, as always, also welcome. Enquiries should be directed to the editors, Dr Gillian Pye and Dr Sabine Strümper-Krobb.

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Gillian Pye and Sabine Strümper-Krobb (Editors)