Strategies of Humor in Post-Unification
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BODY AND GROTESQUE AS SELF-DISRUPTION IN KERSTIN HENSEL’S GOTHIC EAST(ERN) GERMAN NOVEL LÄRCHENAU (2008)

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Born in 1961 in Karl-Marx-Stadt,1 Kerstin Hensel first worked as a nurse, then studied creative writing at the Institut für Literatur in Leipzig in the 1980s. She thus belongs to the generation of authors that Kerstin Reimann has defined as an interesting mixture of the “in das System der DDR Hineingeboren-Werden und in das Literatursystem DDR Nicht-involviert-Sein” (14). According to Reimann, this generation struggled to construct its literary voice outside of the official GDR cultural establishment. Hensel, with her personal style of writing, located between fairy tales and satire, jokes and surrealism, estranging fantasy and the grotesque, succeeds in offering an exemplary, unique vision (Mabee 103; Nentwich 4). Her writing is distinguished by an elaborate language, which features local German dialects spoken by harsh, blunt characters. The combination of extremely diverse thematic and formal ingredients, which result in challenging, disconcerting topoi and images, confers on her novels a dissonance that appears subversive and repulsive and does not conform to mainstream tastes. Not without basis, her novel Lärchenau was described as “maximaler Kitsch und minimale Raffinesse” in a disparaging newspaper review following its publication in 2008 (Apel). Despite receiving mixed reviews, Hensel’s works continue to attract media and scholarly attention because of their quirkiness and the author’s extraordinary ability to create vivid emotional microhistories of her figures that parallel the macrohistory of Germany. By means of this literary strategy she offers a singular perspective on Germany in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

“Lärchenau” is the name of the small, fictional East(ern) German village where the plot of Hensel’s eponymous novel takes place, extending

1 The Saxon city of Chemnitz was known as Karl-Marx-Stadt from 1953-1990.
from the 1940s to the early twenty-first century and showcasing the torment, violent relationship between Doctor Gunter Konarske and his beautiful wife Adele. While telling the village’s microhistory, Hensel embeds her omniscient narrative in the macrohistory of Nazi Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and the turbulent postwar period. Gunter Konarske, born to a single mother as a consequence of an affair with her boss, the respected local doctor, is presented as a strange and lonely child, a brilliant student of medicine, and an ambitious doctor who is successful both in the GDR and in unified Germany. He dreams of recognition, prestige, and power; is fixated on winning the Nobel Prize in Medicine; and does not hesitate to break moral and ethical rules to achieve his goals. Eventually he starts experimenting with unorthodox medical treatments. By contrast, Adele, also born to a single mother on the same day as Gunter, is orphaned at an early age and experiences a poor and unfortunate childhood. Soon after their marriage in 1961—the fateful year the Berlin Wall was constructed—the couple’s apparently idyllic life is revealed to hide a violent, power-based relationship, in which Doctor Konarske physically and psychologically manipulates his wife. Their abusive marriage reaches its climax several years after the fall of the Berlin Wall when, craving international medical glory, Doctor Konarske begins injecting his wife with a new serum he has developed that is supposed to reverse the aging process, but which instead eventually results in her dramatic death. In addition to these two main characters, Hensel portrays their families over the course of four generations in a mostly chronological narrative that produces a disharmonious image of the apparently quiet, but secretly pathological, village of Lärchenau. She thereby emphasizes the persistent impossibility of the villagers to come to terms with their past and to cope with the collective nature of socialist society, as well as with the agitated times of postwar Germany.

As in her previous novellas and novels like Tantz am Kanal (1994), Gispent (1999), and Falscher Hase (2005), Hensel again tackles German unification and the process of change it entails, focusing on her characters’ confrontations with their individual and collective identities while seeming to allow political and historical developments to remain in the background. Foregrounded in Lärchenau are the daily lives of her protagonists, often described as losers, who attempt to come to terms with a chaotically changing reality, as well as psychological and physical pain, paradoxically, by escaping the conscious Self. Hensel acknowledged her interest in the

bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavours to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id. For the ego, perception plays the part which in the id falls to instinct. The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions” (Freud, The Ego and the Id 15). The boundary between “ego” and “id” is not firm, however, as the “ego” also consists of, and is influenced by, unconscious instincts (14).
Lärfencnau is embroidered with a gothic, fantastic, unreal atmosphere of “heterotopia,” in other words, “an effectively enacted utopia” in which the real sites of culture are “represented, contested, inverted” (Botting 9; Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 24). Here unification and its consequences—infrastructural and psychosocial renovation and reconstruction—are represented metaphorically by an artificial reversing of the aging process. Despite its graphic focus on external appearances and transformations, the novel communicates a pessimistic message on the need for individuals to reflect on the inner disruptions caused by German unification.

The Body as Site of the Expression of Power and Alternative Language

The bodies represented in Lärfencnau display a series of symptoms that send undecipherable, disorienting messages to their corresponding subjects. Freudian, Foucauldian, and feminist theories offer fruitful theoretical instruments for understanding these bodies in their dialectical relationship to authority and power. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Sigmund Freud interpreted the bodily symptoms of physical and psychic illness as the language of the unconscious sending a message to the conscious (103-10). Freud’s postulate served as the basis for Michel Foucault and the feminist theorists Judith Butler and Sigrid Weigel to develop the notion of duplicity resulting from images and perceptions of the body. On the one hand, such images and perceptions are determined directly by schemes of mainstream social, ideological, and/ or discursive constructions of the subject. On the other hand, they can be viewed as entities rebelling against forces of power such as rationality, morality, the conscious, etc. (Foucault, Surveiller et punir 22; Butler 145; Weigel, Bilder des kulturellen Gedächtnisses 60-65). Foucault’s observations on the exercise of power and authority over the body as a menace and an instrument of control offer yet another avenue for approaching Lärfencnau. In Discipline and Punish he concludes that the various aesthetic, cultural, moral, judicial, and social precepts that exhort discipline over the body in general, along with the consequently developed mechanisms of control and punishment over the body, such as prisons and schools, show that the body has been considered historically to be one of the most visible means by which an authority may control the individual in his/her soul, heart, thoughts, will, and disposition (Foucault, Surveiller et punir 21-22). Embedded in this process, the body plays an important role, not only as a rebelling subject struggling against such assertions of power, but also as an effective vehicle to manifest (by means of various symptoms) an instinctual aversion and natural inadaptation to their amalgamated domination. Feminist theorists also interpret the act of representing the body in its dual dimensions of material existence and discursive signification as a strategy to confront power discourses defiantly (Butler, Irigaray, Kristeva, Weigel). However, so-called “civilized” human beings are unable to decipher spontaneously or naturally this rebellious message sent out by the body, because, as Weigel points out, the human body has become a stranger to them (Weigel, Bilder des kulturellen Gedächtnisses 52).

Derived from the aforementioned Freudian and feminist theories, Weigel’s concept of the body speaking a “Körpersprache” also applies to Hensel’s use of grotesque bodies in Lärfencnau. “Körpersprache,” or the notion that the body itself can “speak” an alternative language—that is, “eine Schreibweise [...], die eine andere Beziehung zwischen Sprache und menschlichem Körper begründet als die der Benennung, indem etwa Sprach-Körper und Körper-Sprache sich berühren” (Weigel, Stimme der Medusa 112)—appears in literary texts as a writing mode and a technique of writing the Other (Weigel, Stimme der Medusa 111-12). In her analysis of Hensel’s prose texts from the 1990s, Lyn Marven argues that the grotesque as a manifestation of “Körpersprache” represents the fusion of materiality and discourse in the body and demonstrates how bodies can become an alternative, subversive material reality through literary discourse (Marven 29-31). Grotesque representations of the body have also attracted Butler and Julia Kristeva’s attention; both theorists interpret bodily fluids and abject bodies as representing a break with social norms and boundaries (Butler 167-69; Kristeva 69-105). As is the case with Michail Bachtin’s definition of the grotesque,3 both subjectivity and Otherness are present in Butler’s and Kristeva’s theoretical approaches to grotesque bodies, understood as bodies and body parts that destabilize the subject’s body image, because bodily fluids and abject bodies are both a part of the Self and the Other (Kristeva 85; Marven 35). Being in part both objects and subjects, such bodies call the concepts of subject, Otherness, and stability into question. According to Bachtin, the grotesque is an artistic instrument that subverts reality and provides a means of creating literary figures with marginal and deviant identities. The body can appear grotesque if parts of it reach beyond its natural borders, if it extends beyond the limits of what are considered to be natural and harmonious laws, or if the phenomenon of procreation is exaggerated and/or the central focus of a text (Bachtin 359). It can offer an image of the body engaged in

3 Because I refer to the German translation of Bachtin’s work Rabelais and His World (Rabelais und seine Welt. Volkskultur als Gegenkultur) throughout this chapter, I adhere to the German spelling of the author’s name.
a never-ending process of becoming or a body giving birth to another body (Bachtin 358). In reproducing body parts that stand or stick out, resembling a branching image, the grotesque conveys the attempt to overcome natural borders, meld otherwise separate bodies together, and establish bodily connections with the world. Being the central component of an anti-system, the grotesque is essentially linked to Otherness. Engendering disharmony, it provides a subversive perspective on reality and functions as a response to unresolved conflicts (Bachtin 345-412; see also Marven on Hensel 180-243).

Images of Otherness in Grotesque Bodies with Magnified Parts

Grotesque bodies, representing individual and collective Otherness, play an essential role in Lärchenau by questioning the effects of German unification on eastern Germans. Hensel forges deviant, fictional identities for both of the novel’s main characters, Adele and Gunter Konarske, by zooming in on body parts that protrude or can swallow, which appear grotesque because of their distorted magnification. Uncontrolled eating and drinking, tied to emotional and physical suffering, as well as to sexual desire, are actions common to these grotesque figures. Reducing her character to mouth, breasts, and hair, Hensel presents Adele as an insatiable figure. As a child, Adele loves chocolate so much that after giving in to uncontrolled attacks of gluttony, she becomes ill (87), a tendency that persists in adulthood. Such acts of unrestrained eating, vomiting, and sexual intercourse cross the line that defines normal behavior (Bachtin 361). Physically manifesting Adele’s inner distress, they are tied to her efforts to reconstruct her family history and her inability to reconcile her strong need for harmony with the disturbing reality of her life. The passages describing the physical symptoms of her illness and suffering can therefore be interpreted as examples of Weigel’s concept of “Körperspache.” These symptoms represent an alternative discourse on the eastern German experience of daily life in unified Germany, as a form of “writing the Other” (Weigel, Stimme der Medusa 111-12) in the context of the microcosmos constructed by Hensel that includes all of Lärchenau’s inhabitants.

Born in 1944 to a single mother who tells her that Adolf Hitler was her father, Adele discovers years later as a middle-aged woman that her biological father was actually a young boy from her mother’s village. Until she makes this discovery several years after German unification (397-99), the presence of the Führer as a father figure haunts her, hinting that the Third Reich still needs to be confronted more openly in postwall Germany. The ambiguous gaze Adele casts on her mother Liese symbolizes a further, problematic relationship with the past. Both physical and psychological differences and similarities between the two women cause Adele distress. They indicate to her that she cannot develop a separate identity from her mother, and, by extension, from her inherited familial past. Adele is socialized and educated as an orphan in the GDR in an atmosphere of radical silence about the National Socialist past and about the man that a naïve Adele has only seen in a photo and imagines to be her father and a king (106-07). In all of these contexts, be it as a baby, a child, or a (house-)wife, she embodies a passive subject passing through, but not exerting a tangible influence on the various historical phases of sixty years of German history. Adele’s body, reduced to its grotesque body parts, nevertheless reveals a rebellious subject battling internally against a conflict-ridden situation. As a literary projection of these unresolved, microhistorical conflicts (Foucault, Surveiller et punir 21-22; Freud, “El mecanismo” 41-42), Adele’s grotesque body alludes to festering issues in Germany’s macrohistory, which include the repression of the Nazi and GDR pasts, as well as to questions of identity in unified Germany.

This pattern of unbalanced relationships is repeated again and again in the novel, above all in Adele’s marriage to the powerful and successful Doctor Konarske. Especially after her fights with him, Adele is portrayed as an eager mouth seeking comfort:


Such gluttony and its subsequent purgation are recurring images of Adele’s attempts to compensate for the lack of balance in her marital life, accompanied by her feelings of failure and uselessness living in Lärchenau in GDR times. Adele perceives these symptoms as a physical illness that needs healing (195). Bachtin views body parts like the mouth and the stomach, which are related to swallowing or otherwise consuming external objects, as defensive literary images (Bachtin 366). Here, the mouth and the stomach serve as metaphors for their possessor’s efforts to control her life’s difficulties, even to destroy them by swallowing them. Swallowing, from the perspective of grotesque theory, may also be interpreted as an
intercourse and medical treatments. Konarske offers a binary counterpart to the distressed, victimized figure of Adele; he is a powerful man who satiates his sexual desire with her, scaring her with perverse sexual games that at the same time awaken and strengthen his lust. The ubiquitous means by which he controls his wife—as sexual object, patient, and laboratory animal to be injected daily with his experimental drug—fit Foucault’s reflections on mechanisms of control and punishment over the body as affecting the soul, heart, thoughts, will, and dispositions (Surveiller et punir 21-22).

The grotesque reduction of Gunter Konarske’s identity, despite its likely evocation of disgust in the reader, also grants insights into this figure’s inner distress and conflicts with his past and present. Revealing his powerful position at home, or in the private sphere, and in the public sphere to be a façade, Hensel manages to offer hints of Konarske’s Otherness. His character represents the “bandwagon effect,” which is associated with many of Hensel’s figures. As a small child, he displays a fascination with grotesque, protruding instruments, playing devotedly with glass syringes and knives and being considered a strange baby (55-56, 64). Later, however, he manages to become a well-known, respected doctor without belonging to the Socialist Unity Party, renouncing his secret fascination for perverse experiments, or adhering to ethical rules. This powerful figure, who never questions any of Germany’s repressive political systems openly, is presented in clear opposition to his late father, Dr. Rochus Lingott, who serves as a strong symbol of resistance. Dr. Lingott resists predominant social conventions by not marrying Konarske’s mother Rosie and he resists conforming to the dictates of the Third Reich. Konarske is born after his father’s deportation by the Nazis in early 1944, an event described only cursorily by Hensel’s omniscient narrator (19), and the silence and mystery surrounding this chapter of German history prevent Gunter from engaging openly with his father’s image as a local, legendary figure, or with his father’s and Europe’s fate as a whole in the Third Reich and World War II. Only after the fall of the Wall can Konarske face the memory of his father, albeit exclusively in symbolic form. Finding by chance in the 1990s a box containing Dr. Lingott’s correspondence, photographs, and gifts received while he was working as a doctor in Lärchenau before being deported at the age of seventy, Konarske suddenly discovers feelings of inferiority and a self-perception of Otherness in comparison to his father’s respected, admired, and beloved figure as both scientist and man (392-93). At this point, the novel’s plot offers grounds for interpreting Konarske’s grotesque use of his phallus and syringe as the unconscious, irrational attempts of a pathological subject to
confront and defeat the overwhelming superiority of the past, represented by a respected and beloved father figure.

In sum, Hensel’s use of the grotesque in reducing her characters’ identities to exaggerated body parts follows different patterns in Konarske and Adele. Konarske remains a flatter character, as he is constantly reduced to phallicus and syringe, while Adele’s character shows a richer evolution. The grotesque representation of Adele before unification magnifies her mouth, a plastic image of a compensation strategy that compulsively “digests” discontentment, feelings of uselessness, and ennui in GDR society (187-88, 261), where no hope for change seems to exist on the horizon of its closed system. Adele’s hair and breasts, blossoming and becoming unnaturally exuberant as a result of genetic experiments performed on her after the fall of the Berlin Wall, point toward her exotic, objectified role in Lärchenau, but they also stand for the artificially constructed, sociocultural identity of East(ern) Germany after November 1989, when the actual subjects, the citizens, had no chance to lead themselves through the process of reorientation and reconstruction.

Interestingly enough, in August 1990, in the interim period between the fall of the Wall and official unification on October 3, 1990, Adele decides for the first time to lead an autonomous life according to her childhood dreams of becoming a princess, meaning for her a life of “aristocratic” leisure (277). This life actually means a dream world soon to be dismantled again and leaving her without a safe haven, paralleling the macrohistorical level. Her decision corresponds to the interim phase in the GDR, in which important decisions needed to be made on its future as an extinct nation and on the best formula for the actual unification process. Nevertheless, after a brief period in which Adele has been able to live on her own while her husband is attending conferences in foreign countries, the unequal relationship between husband and wife begins anew with Konarske initiating his genetic experiment and thereby assuming even greater power over her (332). If Adele’s reverse aging process can be seen as an extended metaphor for the renovation of the new Länder after unification, then the novel’s evolution as far as Adele’s portrayal is concerned—from focusing on her mouth as a metaphor of consumption to zooming in on her hair and bosom as metaphors of rejuvenation—indicates the unsuccessful efforts of East German citizens to develop their identity in a new context and underpins the inequalities between the new Länder (federal states) and the western authority that appropriated them.

Hensel’s technique of magnifying isolated body parts in Lärchenau offers insights into her protagonists’ power relationships and into their internal questioning of mechanisms of power and control in the Third Reich, the GDR, and postwall Germany. Taken collectively, her characters embody a confrontation of opposing forces, in which victimized, alienated bodies such as Adele’s and Dr. Lingott’s show a defensive attitude toward everyday events, conflicts, and/or historical situations imposed on them externally, while strong authority figures, like Konarske, act with aggression to control others. The perception of Otherness is common to all, especially regarding the relationship between outer body and inner self, as unresolved conflicts are found in both victims and perpetrators.

**Bodily Numbness and Pain as Projections of Historical Awareness**

Hensel’s novel develops biographies that cannot be separated from bodily suffering, be it in the form of physical pain or a numb reaction to daily experiences determined by the appalling mechanisms of power in the Third Reich and the GDR or during key, macrohistorical events. Freud describes the experience of pain and/or physical numbness as potential symptoms of an individual’s problematic confrontations with historical conflicts (Interpretation of Dreamer 103-10). As the plot unfolds in Hensel’s novel, these historical conflicts seem to remain in the background. As in several other postwall films and novels like Wolfgang Becker’s Good Bye, Lenin! (2003) or Hensel’s Falscher Hase (2005), the historical moment of the fall of the Berlin Wall is associated with a feeling of numbness. This reaction may at first seem surprising, because East Germans knew this event would bring about sweeping changes. In such artworks, however, feelings of numbness indicate the difficulty for GDR citizens to apprehend rationally, assimilate, and come to terms with such unexpected and rapid historical changes. Similarly, this historical moment is presented in Lärchenau as closely related to a perception of distance, if not a state of unconsciousness. Doctor Konarske hears the news while attending a medical conference in Chicago—tellingly the most “western” position of all—and Adele spends the night of November 9, 1989, utterly alone and isolated from the world as the result of her television set short-circuiting. Adele interprets the breakdown humorously, as a stroke of fate, then falls asleep after drinking too much alcohol (271). Here Hensel subverts the predominant historical unification discourse by focusing more on the stronger relevance of daily microhistory for the evolution of East(ern) German society, than on key moments such as the opening of the Berlin Wall. Superficially leading a “successful” life that remains unaffected by this historical convulsion, it is only after that fateful night, when the plot thickens as a result of Konarske’s medical experiments, that the couple’s
lives are called into question.

Un consciousness is a common state for another figure in Lärchenau, Gunter Konarske’s mother Rosie, who grows up and works as a nurse in an earlier historical era. Her behaviour that is also filled with changes. Born in the 1920s, Rosie is haunted by an innate state of numbness as a child, which is closely connected to her violent relationship with her abusive father and the suffocating political environment of the Third Reich (9-20). Although portrayed as a victim, Rosie is presented as a more active, rebellious character than Adele. Surprisingly, these female figures do not show any empathy toward each other, even though circumstances lead them to live together temporarily in the same house after Konarske and Adele’s marriage (171-72). On the one hand, the openly rebellious Rosie challenges her father’s authority by loving the much older, anti-Nazi Dr. Lingott and, on the other hand, she rebels against her numb feelings in an effort to confront reality head-on. Nevertheless, as usual in the Lärchenau community, the means she adopts to “stay awake” and deal with conflicts is grotesquely unnatural and unsuccessful: she engages in self-mutilation (17, 65-66, 73, 172). Inflicting wounds on her body, however, does not assist her in solving internal or external conflicts with the oppressive systems of Nazi Germany or the GDR. Rosie’s biography is thus presented as a struggle to escape the Self, as a succession of fits of numbness and self-inflicted pain, indicating that inner tensions caused by external historical changes cannot be released in a spontaneous, healthy way. Instead, they can only be freed by means of an indecipherable, corporeal language (see Weigl, Bilder des kulturellen Gedächtnisses 52).

As an adult Rosie experiences an instinctual numbness when her beloved Dr. Lingott is deported by the Nazis to an unknown destination for refusing to obey orders (19). Later, when a new doctor arrives at the clinic to replace him, a vivid image of her conscious effort to overcome her sadness is conveyed by a phase of self-mutilation (“Ein Toilettenspiegel, den sie auf den Fußboden legte, diente Rosie dazu, um sich, mit entblößten Genitalien über ihn hocken, das Blut mittels Katheder durch die Harträume in die Blase zu injizieren” 73). The strong contrast between Rosie’s active, professional role as a nurse and healer of the other villagers and her impotence when diagnosing, expressing, and treating her own suffering underpins the complexity of the Germans’ psychological reactions to unresolved and silenced historical conflicts. The cycle of numbness and self-inflicted injuries ends symbolically with Rosie’s suicide before the fall of the Wall, committed with hemlock, a poison that induces a deadly but painless narcotized state (183-84). Her suicide conveys a pessimistic, metaphorical message about the hopeless and fatal consequences of the narcotized silence about the Third Reich in the GDR. (Self-inflicted physical pain is not only present in Rosie’s confrontations with her fate as a consequence of persecution in the Third Reich, but it also defines Adele and Gunter Konarske’s relationship in the GDR and the postwall era. Hensel constructs the communication between both characters exclusively through the mediums of physical and psychological pain, as can be seen in the following passage:


This scene, like many others in Lärchenau, demonstrates horrifically how Konarske plays the contradictory roles of sadist and soothing seducer in taking advantage of Adele’s loneliness, a result of his frequent, job-related absences. It also evidences Hensel’s focus on the sexual dimensions of human communication, which Birgit Dahlke has pointed out as a common feature in Hensel’s other texts. Dahlke interprets the author’s literary treatment of sex as a metaphor, not only for relationships between genders, but also for other social relationships (“Weibliche Männer, männliche Weiber” 66-67). From Dahlke’s interpretation one may deduce that Lärchenau transmits a pessimistic view of human social interactions by depicting a violent, pathological mind calculating ways to cause an objectified, victimized Other physical pain and psychological distress in order to intensify his own sexual pleasure. In this context, the grotesque image of a bulging, protruding body crossing the natural, pleasurable borders of sexual intercourse and tormenting a defensive, pain-swallowing figure is used as a literary strategy not only to depict Konarske’s and Adele’s power struggle, but also power struggles in German society as a whole. Dahlke notes in her analysis of Hensel’s earlier novels:
Adele at first displays a disoriented, naïve surprise at the miracle, not recognizing her own body and its language in the mirror (Hensel 390-91; see also Weigel, *Bilder des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* 52). As she continues to grow younger physically, but not psychologically, she adopts an ambivalent attitude of disillusionment and addiction toward her irreversible fate, not unlike that of eastern Germans in the extinguished GDR, who suddenly faced an incomprehensible process of evolution into an unknown future in postwall Germany. Adele’s biography is thus linked to the artificial, grotesque process of rejuvenation following the fall of the Wall, which also appeared to break natural laws of time, symbolizing thus the manipulated and unnatural “rebirth” of the weak, dying GDR into a new, renovated and polished Federal Republic, injected and revitalized with capitalism’s “vitamin serum.”

The literary motif of manipulating the body to achieve eternal youth in *Lärchenau*, and the terrifying, supernatural way this youth is achieved, indicate that it belongs to the genre of the Gothic novel. In *Lärchenau*, as in other famous Gothic novels like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, an immoral scientist challenges the stability and integrity of the human subject with his unscrupulous experiments (see Byron 134). Other common characteristics include the violent relationship between a helpless, victimized, “othered” female figure, who is entranced by an evil male victimizer with immense, at times supernatural powers (Hogle 10); the central role played by antiquated or seemingly antiquated spaces, such as mansions, villas, or rooms in which figures are locked, which convey the sense of hopeless isolation⁴; a perverse plot; and secrets from the past that haunt the main characters (Hogle 2).

The quest to find the “Fountain of Youth” that Doctor Konarske pursues scientifically in *Lärchenau* has a long tradition that can be traced back to an observation recorded by Herodotus in Book III of *The Histories* in 440 B.C.E., based on a trip he took to Ethiopia (22-24). In this original version of the legend, Herodotus testified that the Ethiopians had an extraordinary longevity as a consequence of bathing in water from a particular fountain, the “Fountain of Youth.” Gaining currency, this legend spread to various cultures worldwide, including the Middle East and the Caribbean. It has furthermore been revived at different times, the sixteenth century being a particularly rich era for its reappearance in Europe, as some Europeans believed the Fountain of Youth might be located in the recently discovered New World (see Peck). In *Lärchenau*, however, the

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⁴ After the fall of the Wall, Adele and Gunter Konarske move into an old, expropriated mansion that had belonged to Gunter’s father (292-293, 300).
idealistic, romantic topos of seeking a way to alleviate the suffering of aging is turned into a grotesque, Gothic experiment in manipulating the body and abusing power for personal gain.

A more recent version of this legend offers a fruitful literary analogy for interpreting the meaning of this topos in Lärchenau. In his 1890 novel The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde develops his characters by giving them grotesque, Gothic features and linking the quest for eternal youth closely with immoral conduct, both of which are common topos in Lärchenau. In the earlier novel, Dorian Gray is seduced by Lord Henry's aestheticist worldview, which privileges beauty over all other human ideals, just as the Frankensteian Dr. Konarske places scientific glory above all moral values. Similar to Dorian's desire for eternal youth, Konarske is eager not only to receive the Nobel Prize for his research, but also to have an eternally young, beautiful wife as his possession and as a projection of his identity. As Dorian's wishes are fulfilled and a triad between art, (lack of) morals, and beauty is constructed, this triad allows Dorian to commit several immoral acts and crimes with no consequences for himself, but instead only for his portrait. As his soul becomes darker with each immoral act, his portrait starts showing a subtle sneer and signs of aging, while his own appearance remains unchanged for eighteen years. At the end of the novel, however, Wilde sends the message that no human being can escape the aging process: Dorian dies a disfigured, ugly old man. Similarly, Konarske's diabolical experiments affect his wife's body, rather than his own, as she gradually becomes younger until the experiment escapes his control and the unnatural process continues after he has stopped injecting her with the serum. The experiment ends with Adele's regression to childhood and violent death, rather than her husband's (Hensel 446).

The Picture of Dorian Gray, with its theme of the vain body and its unnatural and immoral quest for eternal youth, has been interpreted as a subversive commentary on the structure of Victorian society, the problematic identity of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in the British and European context at that time, and concepts of colonizers and colonized (King 316-17). With a twofold, self-constructed identity as colonizers (part of the British ruling class) and colonized (because of their Celtic roots), the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy had assumed an ambiguous socio-political and cultural position in Great Britain by the end of the nineteenth century. Related to this position are the topics of identity repression and the (lack of) fulfillment of emotional and physical needs in the Victorian era, which Wilde explored by depicting physical distortions, contrasting them with natural processes, and thereby adhering to a common theme in Gothic literature. As the canvas bearing his portrait had been affected by Dorian's psychological projections, a natural process inevitably occurs again upon his Gothic-style death, his disfigured body finally making the aforementioned moral depravity visible.

Similarly, by means of Konarske's unmanageable experiment, Hensel symbolically depicts the impossibility of hiding repressed and silenced fears, frustrations, failures, and intimate questions related to life in the GDR and the nascent, postwall identities of GDR citizens. Adele's regression to the physical state of a six-year-old girl, the reactions of others toward her childlike body at the end of the novel, and her disoriented perception of the world and life shortly before her death convey the metaphorical, disorienting regression that GDR citizens needed to undergo during the Wende in order to start the learning and socializing process in a new system. Adele's dramatic fate under the control of a powerful figure that annuls her identity, not only in the GDR but also in postwall Germany, serves as a warning about the need for a free, extended, self-reflexive process of questioning the Self, which to date has not taken place, according to the message the plot of the novel sends. In its final passages, Konarske locks his tiny, childlike wife Adele in a room of their mansion, from which she escapes and runs away to the nearby woods, where she encounters three strangers who beat her to death (445-46).

The reversal of the aging process in Lärchenau reinforces the picture of a relationship based on power, obedience, and domestication after 1989, resembling that between colonizer and colonized. In fact, using the motif of the reversal of age taking place in three phases allows Hensel to display a process of colonization based on three stages: as a consequence of her "treatment," Adele suffers first a sexualized, second an infantilized, and finally, an animalized identity. This so-called "colonization process," performed by Konarske on his wife, is manifested from the start in Adele's objectified presence, indicated by the strong sexual identity marks of her exuberant, unnatural hair and bosom. The more the experiment advances under Konarske's control, the more Adele's identity becomes grotesquely sexualized and colonized by Konarske's abuse in postwall Germany:

Und als sie im Badezimmer ihr Haar mit goldenen Spangen feststeckte, drehte sie sich vorm Spiegel und fragte ihn: "Was hat bin ich eigentlich?"
Und der Spiegel antwortete: "Alt genug". Da lachte Adele und strich sich über die Haut, wo gerade ein letztes Fältchen unsichtbar wurde. Und

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5 See Paul Cooke's Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia for a discussion of the extent to which unification can be considered the "colonization" of East Germany by West Germany.

Adele’s reduced, sexualized identity and her astonishment at her rejuvenation process symbolically “reflect” her overall disorientation after the fall of the Berlin Wall. By breaking natural laws of time in his role as a scientist, Doctor Konarske’s crime stresses the subversive function of the grotesque. Adele’s manipulated, subverted, and disoriented life reaches a further stage of the grotesque, when, parallel to her increasing addiction to the rejuvenation process, Konarske loses control over the experiment (431), in a metaphor of unification as a historical process breaking with all expectations. In fact, when Adele’s youth and energy inevitably makes him aware of his own old age and weakness, Konarske can no longer accept her new identity and tries to stop the experiment. At the third and final stage, Adele is treated like a small animal by her husband, who locks her up in their deceased son Timm’s bedroom in order to hide the monstrous consequences of his symbolic, colonizing manipulation (442).

Identity is radically questioned, even subverted, by means of this grotesque narrative strategy as it is applied to the figure of Adele, especially at the end of the novel. Adele’s retrocession to the body of a six-year-old girl, her disorientation, and her tragic, violent ending in a scene reminiscent of one she had experienced in her childhood, destroy any possible association between childhood and natural reconciliation with the authentic, inner Self. Parallels can be drawn between the process of altering East Germany into eastern Germany, which gained momentum over the years, and Adele’s aging in reverse, which in the end progresses uncontrollably. Her violent death implies symbolically that the identity of East Germany has also been kidnapped and eaten, after having been renovated and rebuilt to the point of looking artificially “like new” again.

With such final scenes, Hensel creates a dual Otherness—that is, images of Otherness not only as compared to natural laws and conventional societal mores, but also the Otherness her figures from an extinguished GDR feel toward their inner selves in the aftermath of unification.

Conclusion

By means of grotesque bodies, Lärchenau presents encounters between two opposite, unbalanced forces throughout over sixty years of German history. Its fictional cosmos harbors only victimized, subversive, and alienated characters like Adele, Rosie, or Dr. Lingott, or strong authority figures like Liese and Dr. Konarske. Adele’s body, reduced to mouth, breasts, and hair—performing the grotesque, uncontrollable bodily functions of eating and reproducing—and trapped in an unnatural, age-reversing process, signifies a type of identity forced to displace higher aspirations into the fulfillment of instinctual urges. Like the postwall GDR, her identity is imposed on her by an external, powerful force. Dr. Konarske’s experiments signify this violent, artificial abuse of power, which imposes disorientation and a new, incomprehensible identity on the victim.

This grotesque representation of the body conveys a pessimistic view of humanity and of individual inner conflicts with the past and the present, as does the narrative pattern of episodes of numbness, pain, and unsuccessful healing. The perpetually “bleeding” communication between Rosie and the outside world over many years of traumatic losses, as well as Gunter and Adele’s tortuous relationship, display an exaggeratedly corporeal, sceptical view of internal confrontations with sociopolitical changes in Germany. The novel’s tragic ending stresses Hensel’s characters’ inability to adapt emotionally to these changes, which contrasts with perspectives other contemporary authors offer. As Elke Brun’s writes in Nach dem Mauerfall, a study covering a range of postwall German literary texts, regarding the authors Thomas Hette and Martin Walser:

Hette und Walser erzeugen durch den Einsatz des Körpers als politischer Metapher [...] historische Kontinuität, die auch Anschlüsse zum „heilen“ und „zersetzten“ deutschen Volkskörper mit sich bringen. Im Rekurs auf das Körpersymbol des arystophanischen Mythos evozieren beide Autoren die Vereinigung Deutschlands als gleichsam natürlichen Prozess eines heilenden Volkskörpers. (173)

Lärchenau represents the opposite pole to this affirmation: Hensel’s grotesque protagonists inhabit injured and/or sick bodies that harbor little hope for healing. In this context, Hensel’s microcosmic portrait of a small village projects a negative image of German society before and after unification; her grotesque bodies point toward the collective German body being a hopeless, incurable victim of unnatural processes. Her figures stand for an inner disruption, continuous painful splitting, and a contradictory nature. The grotesque collective body depicted in Lärchenau
cannot come to terms with recent historical events in Germany.

Because Hensel frequently depicts grotesque characters in her texts, her use of them here may contribute to the reception of this novel as having lost its ability to serve as a strong, subversive critique of contemporary German society, culture, and politics. Correspondingly, throughout history critics have vacillated in their view of the Gothic genre, seeing it as both “conservative and revolutionary” (Hogle 13). In fact, Hensel’s grotesque, Gothic humor does possess an ambiguous dimension in its relationship to systems and canons. According to one group of theorists (including Hobbes, Kant, and Bergson; see also Böhn 52-53), humor serves to reinforce prevailing social systems and to ridicule deviant subjects, while those belonging to the opposing group understand humor based on the grotesque and the Gothic as key strategies for provoking a conflicting reflection (Botting 8-9) and a questioning of the system (Bachtin 4-27). Having taken the latter group’s perspective as a starting point for my analyses of Lärchenau, I argue that the grotesque and the Gothic must be taken together as key instruments for understanding Hensel’s probing insights on past and present-day Germany.

Works Cited

Primary Works


Secondary Works


