Hella Liira und Eckhard Schumacher

Narrative Escalation and the Dynamics of Violence in Post-Reunification German Literature

The article aims to show how escalation narratives in contemporary German literature dissect the dynamics of violence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by dealing with outbreaks of violence and making visible hidden forms of violence, both in the modes of latency and drastic depiction. Whereas in *Nullerjahre* (2022) by Hendrik Bolz and *Wir waren wie Brüder* (2022) by Daniel Schulz the post-reunification period is reflected through different modes of escalation, depicting publicly visible violence, Anne Rabe's novel *Die Möglichkeit von Glück* (2023) shifts this setting to the family level, where different forms of violence appear to be a consequence of the structural violence inherent in the authoritarian system of the GDR. Antje Rávik Strubel's novel *Blaue Frau* (2021) addresses similar issues but focuses on the political situation in Europe, describing a young woman's journey from East to West, filled with exploitation and assault. All texts expose narratives of violent (but sometimes invisible) excesses in the post-reunification period in relating them both to past, but in parts still intact forms of structural and symbolic violence that remain visible as traces – or return in the mode of direct, physical violence.

More than three decades after the events of 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the GDR and the Soviet Union, it has become increasingly common to juxtapose 'East' and 'West' in public, academic, and literary discussions in Germany and the Baltic Sea region.[1] In the 2020s, the assumption of an end of the East-West conflict is no longer as prevalent as it once was. The recent rise in narratives of crisis, change, and conflict has turned the region into a dynamic centre of complex debates in which historical legacies, current crises, and long-term transformations have become topical social issues (Schumacher / Heß 2025). This is most apparent in the face of blatant reinterpretations of history, but is also evident in the academic and journalistic focus on aspects of developments that were previously neglected in the years after 1989.

In Germany, for example, the increased presence of right-wing extremists and populists in politics and public discourse, the escalation of right-wing extremist violence (particularly against refugees), and the corresponding shift in what is considered normality have together led to a re-evaluation of the unification process and the developments of the post-reunification years. More notable in this context has been a recent intensification of attention on violent manifestations of the consequences of reunification and related developments since the 1990s. This applies to studies and reports on the escalation of physical violence in the unified Germany of the early 1990s, such as those brought together using the hashtag #baseballschlägerjahre (Bangel 2022) or in the anthology *Brandspuren* (Kössler / Steuwer 2023). It applies further to book publications, such as *Die Übernahme* (Kowalczuk 2024), whose title suggests that the "takeover," through

which East Germany became part of the Federal Republic, could also be interpreted as a process of structural violence.

The relevant insights that have been developed in journalistic, sociological, political, and historical studies have recently been overlaid by an emergent East-West debate, in which a greater diversity of approaches, for example in texts by Steffen Mau (2024) or Ines Geipel (2024), encounter comparatively angry polemics, such as those put forward – with very different thrusts – by Dirk Oschmann (2023) and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk (2024). What can certainly be seen as a gain in different and diverse perspectives now runs the risk of turning into disputes and, on occasions, mutually aggressive exchanges of commentary, over interpretative sovereignty.

The above state of affairs makes it all the more important to take note of the voices that have emerged in parallel in the field of contemporary literature, which not only raise the question of East German identity and, more broadly, take shifts, conflicts, and dislocations in the relationship between East and West as the subject of narratives, but also reconstruct and evoke the post-1989 situation in Europe with striking frequency as a history (or story) of violence. In this paper, attention will therefore be drawn to literary narratives that, with a historical remove of more than thirty years, reflect the consequences of the upheavals of 1989 and the experiences of violence associated with them, by detaching them from the real events through the mode of fiction (or autofiction), while nevertheless – or thereby – keeping them permanently present and rendering them perceptible and discussable in new ways. As we will show, using literary texts by Hendrik Bolz, Daniel Schulz, Anne Rabe and Antje Rávik Strubel as examples, forms of narrative escalation can entail and develop a remarkable sensorium for entanglements of physical, structural, and symbolic violence. By making both overt and covert forms of violence visible, in the mode of latency as well as drastic depiction, these texts also always raise the question of how violence – and how different dimensions of violence – can be narrated.

1. Hendrik Bolz' *Nullerjahre* and Daniel Schulz' *Wir waren wie Brüder*

While the very title of Lukas Rietzschel's novel *Mit der Faust in die Welt schlagen* (2018) indicates that violence plays a central role in a story that begins in the year 2000, Schulz's *Wir waren wie Brüder* (2022) and Bolz's *Nullerjahre. Jugend in blühenden Landschaften* (2022) initially suggest other associations.[2] Yet they too are dedicated to the post-reunification period, making escalating excesses of violence the focal point of their stories. Both books depict the publicly visible violence that characterises everyday life in small East German towns during this period. For both books, the trigger for a revision of the post-reunification period was the rise in right-wing extremism since the mid-2010s, the renewed outbreaks of violence,

and the resulting association with East Germany. To this end, both authors combine research and fictionalisation with recourse to their own experiences.

"I see Chemnitz and wonder: What do you have to do with me? What do I have to do with you?",[3] asks Schulz (2018, 20) in his earlier essay *Wir waren wie Brüder* in light of the 2018 "funeral march" ["Trauermarsch"] organized by far-right groups in Chemnitz, in the context of which violent excesses took place. A few years later, he revisits these questions as the starting point of a novel that tells the story of the emergence and escalation of violence in a slightly fictionalised Brandenburg province, narrated from the perspective of an initially ten-year-old child over the period from 1989 to 2000. In *Nullerjahre*, Bolz too does not observe the rise of right-wing extremist movements and the xenophobic and racist riots in Heidenau, Freital, and Chemnitz from a distanced position. Rather, he finds himself recognising constellations from the noughties, continuities that remained hidden in the meantime, and his own affinity for violence growing up in a panel building [Plattenbau] district in Stralsund, where the largely uncontrolled change of system from the GDR to the Federal Republic was experienced with full force. As stated in many interviews,[4] the author Bolz reacts to the latest escalations of violence as his protagonist Hendrik does in *Nullerjahre*: "confused, hurt and ashamed at the same time" ["verwirrt, gekränkt und gleichzeitig beschämt"] (Bolz 2022, 13). Like Schulz and a number of other writers, he turns to his own post-reunification childhood, not least in order to initiate missing discussions – discussions that expose connections between the current outbreaks of violence and those that occurred thirty years ago.

For both Bolz and Schulz, the project of making the violence of the post-reunification period in East Germany the subject of their stories only seems feasible if they also make violence visible on the level of language. This prompts both of them to preface their books with content notes. Schulz justifies his decision to use "racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, homophobic and otherwise discriminatory words" ["rassistische, antisemitische, sexistische, homophobe und in anderer Weise diskriminierende Worte"] in his book by pointing out that "the brutality of language and the violence that is narrated here are linked ["die Brutalität von Sprache und die Gewalt, von der hier erzählt wird, miteinander verknüpft sind"] (Schulz 2022, 4). In his introductory note, Bolz (2022, 5) emphasizes that his book reports "from a world that is difficult to talk about without linguistically reproducing the racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia and violence that were central organizing principles within it"[5]. With these preliminary remarks, both writers reflect and underscore not merely the problem that a narrative that takes violence as its subject matter can reproduce the very violence it thematises through its language. Rather, they confirm that the violence that is the subject of their narratives has never been limited to physically exercised violence, but has always also taken place at the level of language, through "discriminatory words," through the "brutality of language". For this reason, up to a certain point, both authors opt for a form of storytelling that follows the maxim show, don't tell. At the same time, however, they develop their narratives in such a way that the violence is not simply reproduced, but is always also situated and

contextualised. In different ways, both authors demonstrate through a retrospective framing of the stories and their narrative techniques that physical and linguistic violence are not only closely linked, but are also embedded in other, often less visible, structural or symbolic forms of violence, if not even partly attributable to them.

In a kind of prologue, the adult protagonist of *Wir waren wie Brüder* vividly reports that he beats up a skinhead and then pays 400 euros to avoid having to tell the story that led him to do so in court. This story, a largely chronologically-told coming-of-age narrative, then unfolds in the rest of the novel, in which the always somewhat clumsy, slightly obtuse protagonist from a Christian home is initially involved in minor violent fantasies and school brawls, which quickly develop into what is classified as right-wing violence in his wider circle of friends in the post-reunification period, and which escalates apace as the story progresses. Parallel to a slowly building love story, the nameless protagonist himself becomes a victim of violence, observes various brutal attacks by neo-Nazis from a medium distance, and positions himself as a largely uninvolved bystander between various violent scenes, thus avoiding a "career as a punching bag" ["Karriere als Boxsack"]' (Schulz 2022, 142). Only later does he realize that the boys' meetings he attends are not limited to allegedly stupid slogans, Hitler salutes and mutual internal brawls, but further that his peers often go out at night with the purpose of beating up people they perceive as foreigners and leftists, in the language of the group ["Kanakenklatschen"; "Zeckenklatschen"] (Schulz 2022, 265).

The escalation of violence, which the novel follows on a linguistic level along the chronologically narrated events, is observed and verbalised by the narrator, who always seems somewhat naive and develops a strangely awkward sense of comedy, especially in drastic violent scenarios. In this way, the narrator is able to create a certain distance from the violence that he experiences. The violence is not relativised, but the narrator's perspective, which seems tendentially inappropriate in view of the events, creates a counterweight to the drastic descriptions of acts of violence for the narrative as a whole. It does not function directly as a critical instance, but prevents the narrative from reproducing acts of violence in an unreflected way. Without explicitly imposing the conclusion that the abrupt end of the GDR and the manifold upheavals of the post-reunification period, which affect both the children and their parents, could be the main reason for the outbreaks of violence, it nevertheless becomes clear that these outbreaks can be understood as a symptom of widespread structures that cannot be reduced to the visible excesses of physical violence.

This structural dimension is emphasised even more clearly in Bolz's *Nullerjahre*. The neighbourhood of Stralsund where the protagonist Hendrik grows up, Knieper West, was a prestigious and desirable locale in the GDR as a new development area. After the 1989, however, the district and its high-rise buildings, now more commonly referred to as panel building [Plattenbau], experienced a rapid loss of prestige.[6] They were not only associated with decline, poverty, and brutalisation, but also confronted with them. As a result, unemployment, social

declassification, right-wing subcultures, alcoholism, extreme drug excesses, and a permanent willingness to use violence appear normal among very young people in Knieper West. For the protagonist of the story, which is not identified as a novel and clearly has autofictional traits, the "hero of the day" ["Held des Tages"] is always the one who is "tougher, meaner, nastier than all the rest combined" ["härter, böser, gemeiner als alle anderen zusammen"]. Hendrik, too, relies on projecting a corresponding public image: "The more crappy I feel, the weaker I am on the inside, the tougher I have to look on the outside, the more brutal I have to appear"[7] (Bolz 2022, 277).

In Knieper West, "toughness" ["Härte"] is the all-encompassing paradigm for Hendrik, conveyed and shaped not only by his peers, but also by the maxims of 'toughening', 'being a guy' and 'no crying,' which had already been instilled and imposed by parents, educational institutions, sports clubs, and vacation camps. Bolz presents corresponding childhood memories from the immediate post-reunification period in scenes that are no less exorbitant than the escalating violence and drug excesses of the noughties, which shape an everyday life in which fun, euphoria, and drug-infused highs can hardly be distinguished from dull numbness and paralysing bleakness.

Bolz's language, his literary reproduction of relevant speech acts, and his descriptions of individual acts of violence develop a drive and a flow which vividly convey that, despite all his insecurity, Hendrik unquestioningly fulfils the criteria for toughness. Despite the distance that the retrospective framing of *Nullerjahre* allows and suggests, the story's language and diction also evoke a continued fascination with this time and its excesses. Bolz leaves little room for doubt that the book is narrated by someone who was a perpetrator, albeit at a distance from the neighbourhood Nazis, but fascinated by violence, rush, and their imperatives of escalation. This is not always comfortable to read, but it can be seen as one of the book's strengths. This applies all the more in that Bolz undermines the rhetoric of escalation by rapidly changing pace and switching between different linguistic registers and narrative modes. The narrative flow of the book is due in no small part to the skills developed by Bolz under his pseudonym Testo as part of the hip-hop act Zugezogen Maskulin.[8] Equally important, however, is that the narrative unfoldings of escalating violence are repeatedly contrasted through the measured use of humour and wit, but above all through regular insertions of researched background information and Wikipedia-like sociological basic knowledge.

The drastic scenes of violence and the grotesquely detailed portrayals of brutal thugs are thus juxtaposed with informative reflections, for example on the unemployment figures in the relevant federal state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, on the trivialising reinterpretation of murders by right-wing extremists to disputes between young men, as they were undertaken by the Ministry of the Interior, or on the concept of "accepting youth work" ["akzeptierende Jugendarbeit"], which was developed as part of a state action program against aggression and violence by then Federal Youth Minister Angela Merkel. The idea was to counter East German right-wing youths, who were seen as having lost

out in the face of modernisation, with low-threshold offers and social workers who would not lecture but act as accessible role models. The direct consequences of this program, which Bolz recounts and narrates in detail in *Nullerjahre*, were that right-wing structures could establish themselves undisturbed, right-wing crimes indirectly rewarded with state money through social workers also being able to act as leaders in this regard, and right-wing youths were able to infiltrate and control social institutions, such as the former, now defunct GDR youth clubs (Bolz 2022, 36f.).

The combination of descriptions of physical acts of violence with these facts and figures, which open up perspectives on structural violence, suggests a direct connection between the different dimensions of violence. However, Bolz's book provides neither simple causal explanations nor hasty conclusions, but presents possible connections that are often overlooked and rarely discussed in terms of their ambivalences. In her afterword to the paperback edition of *Nullerjahre*, Manja Präkels (2023, 337f.) describes Bolz's approach in this sense as "a rebellion against ignorance and oversimplification" ["ein Aufbäumen gegen Ignoranz und Simplifizierung"], against the "decades of silence, looking away and not wanting to know" ["jahrzehntelange Schweigen, Wegsehen und Nichtwissenwollen"] and thus also as an attempt to reclaim one's own history.[9]

2. Anne Rabe: *Die Möglichkeit von Glück*

Rabe adopts a similar approach in her novel *Die Möglichkeit von Glück* (2023), in which violence in the post-reunification period again stands out as one of the central themes. In contrast to Schulz and Bolz, however, she focuses less on the publicly visible physical violence on the streets and instead shifts her gaze to less visible spaces, in particular the family sphere – where, as the novel forcefully demonstrates, physical and psychological, symbolic and structural violence are directly intertwined.

Like Bolz, who also was born in the late 1980s, Rabe hardly spent her childhood in the GDR, but as she writes in her essay *Kinderland*, the impact of GDR structures continued to have a formative influence. Particularly in a situation like that of the early 2020s, in which the East and West seemed further apart than perhaps at any time since 1989, writes Rabe, "it is up to us to find a language for all of this" ["liegt es an uns, eine Sprache für all das zu finden"] (Rabe 2020, 40).

Her novel *Die Möglichkeit von Glück* can be read as an attempt in this direction: an attempt to remember her own childhood, her own socialisation, but also as an attempt to ask more fundamental questions about the relationship between family and state, dictatorship and democracy, past and present. "History is so close to me that I cannot get away from it"[10] (2023, 19), remarks the protagonist Stine, who was born in 1986 on the East German Baltic Sea coast, amid images of the fall of the Wall and the possibility of happiness that appears in them. However, her memories of the fall of the Wall are "so fragmentary, so fluttering"

["so bruchstückhaft, so flatternd"] (2023, 20), that they do not form a coherent picture. The uncertainty with which Stine attempts to supplement the memories from the perspective of the present in the 2020s – through conversations with her brother, interviews with school friends and archival research on her deceased grandfather – corresponds to the decision to make Stine appear sovereign neither as a person nor as a narrative instance. The novel does not tell a straightforward story; from the very beginning, Rabe involves her narrator in a conversation with herself, a self-interrogation, conducted in the second person, printed in italics. Reminiscent of the narrative style of Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuste*r (1976), she makes Stine appear remarkably polyphonic and reflective, but also fragile and fragmented. Stine follows various tracks and discovers connections, but also loose ends, as she studies files in the Stasi records archive and elsewhere. She expresses doubts, also about her own memory, always questions herself and, when she hears about "Hohenschönhausen" or "Torgau", prisons and youth work camps in the GDR, is swept away by a "wave of shame" ["von einer Schamwelle"] (Rabe 2023, 130).

The tentative approach in the narrative mode and in the narrator's reflections stands in sharp contrast to what the questions, research, and attempts to remember produce: "*It was all violence, you think, full of violence. And how should one organize it? How should one put the stories in relation to each other?*"[11] (Rabe 2023, 270). In order to pursue questions that she did not put to him during his lifetime, Stine endeavours to reconstruct the life of her grandfather, Paul Bahrlow. Through a series of archival searches, she comes across a continuity of experiences of violence that links his life in the "lumpenproletariat" ["Lumpenproletariat"] of the Weimar Republic and his "life as cannon fodder" before Stalingrad with his life as a propagandist for the GDR state party SED (Rabe 2023, 367), as a defender of the shoot-to-kill order as well as the entry in the cadre file of the Minister of Education, which had serious consequences for him, in closing off his intended path to becoming a university lecturer for the scientist with a doctorate. The structural violence of dictatorship is not revealed here, as in many other stories, in the form of appropriation by the state security. Rather, if less scandalous but hardly less serious, it is exposed in the supposed normality of a life that developed close to the state and yet was massively damaged.

"What is violence, do you think? And why does it last so long? Why don't you just forget it?"[12], Stine asks herself and, by using second-person pronouns, inevitably also the reader (Rabe 2023, 270). Various stories come together which, for Stine, relate to each other as stories of violence that do not always follow a simple perpetrator-victim logic: Robert Steinhäuser's excess of violence in a school massacre in Erfurt, the NSU's series of murders and, above all, the violence in her own family, which is repeated many times. The drastic educational measures of the mother, who beats her children, forces them into a much-too-hot bathtub and, years later, tries to exert a massive influence on the upbringing of her daughter's child, become as visible as the mother's silence on what she knew, as an educator herself, about the re-education measures in a neighbouring former GDR youth work camp. Reflecting on her break with her parents and

the memory of domestic violence leads Stine to research educational institutions in the GDR, which once again reveals the dictatorship as a violent system on many levels and raises questions about the connections between authoritarian education and right-wing extremist violence in the post-reunification period and the immediate present.

Rabe's decision to approach this in the mode of fiction in no way relativises the status of her book as a contribution to the ongoing public debate. This point is all the more valid in that her fiction does not preclude recourse to own experiences, while also incorporating factual knowledge from archival research. In view of the many stories of escalating violence that are the subject of the novel, it is particularly striking that Rabe does not escalate in her narrative style. She limits the depiction of excessive violence to a few brief, almost casual sentences that have consequently convey a more violent impact. Rabe's approach thus differs from the books by Bolz and Schulz not only in the way it focuses on the family. While Bolz and Schulz present the escalation of violence in the mode of narrative escalation, which is nevertheless repeatedly reflected upon and contrasted with other techniques, Rabe's novel brings the escalatory dimension to light precisely by consistently eschewing drastic depictions. And yet the three books are very closely related. They unfold narratives of violent yet partly invisible excesses in the period after reunification by linking them both to current discourses on the 'East' and to past, but still partly intact, forms of structural and symbolic violence that remain visible as traces of an authoritarian state.

3. Antje Rávik Strubel: *Blaue Frau*

The 2021 German Book prize winning novel *Blaue Frau* by Strubel continues the author's literary programme of dismantling everyday myths and centring characters who are easily marginalised or robbed of agency, as well as being a highly reflective and systematically meshing writer. Novels such as *Unter Schnee* (2001), *Tupolew 134* (2005), *Sturz der Tage in die Nacht* (2011), to name a few, showcase a plurality of voices and perspectives as well as providing a poetically well-crafted commentary on the influence that political systems have on the lives of individuals. The novel *Blaue Frau* recounts the sexual assault of a young Czech woman by a German politician and her subsequent attempts to hide from and eventually confront her attacker in Finland. Strubel stretches this dynamic and tension outward toward the discussion and negotiations after 2004, when the Czech Republic and Estonia, along with ten other countries, had just joined the European Union. Strubel accentuates how both issues – the assault and the power imbalances – are interconnected (Hensel 2021). As the initial focus and reviews of the novel in the media revolved around the #MeToo-Movement and the exposure and focus on the persistent invisible border of power between the East and West of Europe (Schellbach 2021; von Sternburg 2021), *Blaue Frau* is bound to infant

itself at the centre of the research about the representation of violence in literature (Daldrup 2024, 187f). The novel's structure and play with fragmentation, repetitions, and transformation of textual segments stands out, as they interweave the discussions of human rights and power structures into the narrative, while showcasing the struggle to narrate violence. The young woman's story unravels as she is divided among three names – Adina, Nina and Sala – which changed as she did in the face of structural, symbolic, and direct violence.

Different forms of violence shape the main character's choices and highlight the constraints imposed by limited resources. The novel is formally divided into four parts, following the coming of age of Adina from the Czech Republic in the 1990s, into the early 2000s in Germany as Nina, and to Finland, the easternmost part of Western Europe, as Sala. Each name of the protagonist carries a story and an expected role: one name given by a mother, one by a lover, one by the men who exploit her (Schröder 2021).

The first part of the novel is filled with analepses to Adina's childhood. Her biography is revealed in internal analepses and form an origin of the main character: she is Adina Schejbal, born in 1984 Harrachov, now the Czech Republic, then Czechoslovakia, and was the only teenager in her village (Strubel 2021a, 14, 21, 27). Here structural violence is made visible: in Harrachov, she is confronted with the decline of local industry, the absence of a younger generation. Her prospects are either to leave or to be forced into seasonal employment, while falling victim to the capitalist dynamic of demand and supply, but here in the form of demand accompanied by humiliation (Strubel 2021a, 21, 24f., 150). It is here that she looks for the answer to the claim that she was a nervous child (Strubel 2021a, 19). Among the examples of structural violence, the one with the school bus is repeated: Adina is the inconvenience, for as the first and last passenger and the only one on this part of the route, she can be discarded and ignored (Strubel 2021a, 13, 21, 138). Adina's existence hence becomes weighed down by isolation. The school bus segment is repeated three times, reiterating the burden of being utterly dependent on and exposed to their authority

> Sie setzte sich immer ganz nach hinten und machte sich klein. Dann war im Bus niemand mehr, auch von ihr war nichts mehr zu sehen. Aber sie war trotzdem noch da, und solange sie noch da war, war es nicht das Nichts, was im Bus war, auch wenn es den Anschein hatte, und glücklich machte es nicht. (Strubel 2021a, 138)
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> [She always sat down at the very back of the bus and made herself small. Then there was no one on the bus anymore and there was no sign of her either. But she was still there nevertheless, and as long as she was there, it was not nothing, that was on the bus, even when it seemed so, and it did not make one happy.]

The awareness of her existence as an exceptionality, also paired with some sense of being different, transforms into shame. In addition, Adina experiences direct violence – an unwanted and forced kiss by a resort visitor paired with verbal humiliation: "stupid cunt" ["Blöde Fotze"] (Strubel 2021a, 25) – and becomes partially aware of possible underlying issues that affect the community beyond her persona. It is therefore the environment that is seen to limit Adina's aspira-

tions, guiding her choice to abandon the village as soon as possible and to explore a possible self and the prospects elsewhere: "She was young and curious about the things that lay hidden in the hazy distance, beyond the mountains"[13] (Strubel 2021a, 136).

In the second part of the novel, Adina ventures to Berlin, following the exploration narrative: the world is to be explored, conquered, and made useful (Strubel 2021a, 137). Adina does not register her own exploitation by the androgynous photographer Rickie, because she thinks there is nothing to exploit while letting herself be photographed (Strubel 2021a, 165). It is also in Berlin that Strubel sets the scene of a table tennis game between Rickie and Adina's friend Kyrill. Adina perceives that there are two experiences, that Kyrill seems to be from GDR and Rickie not (Strubel 2021a, 189), but she fails to gauge the weight of this perception. Only one hundred pages later in the third part of the novel does she realise how her heritage, her identity presumed by the mere fact of where she was from, was meant to be hidden (Strubel 2021a, 274).

In the third part of the novel, Nina finds herself on an internship in the Uckermark, a rural area in northeast Germany. Nina is an abbreviation of Adina for the convenience of the mansion owner Razvan, "because he didn't remember her real name" ["weil er ihren richtigen Namen nicht im Gedächtnis behielt"] (Strubel 2021a, 207), but as she shows agency and takes on responsibility, she initially assumes, in Bourdieu's term, that she possesses symbolic capital that she, by default, does not have. While, according to Bourdieu, "symbolic capital is nothing other than economic or cultural capital when it is known and recognized […]" (1989, 21), here on the other hand, her status is merely that of an asset to be exploited. Nina is the investment: "An eastern European woman in tow is the best forging material. You sail smoothly into the funding programs"[14] (Strubel 2021a, 208). The shared social space Adina assumes with the mansion's owner is based on shared ambitions and heritage / history – the GDR and Czechoslovakia – but it is a perception, a deception. Razvan capitalises on Nina's origin, and on her willingness to pose as a posterchild for investors and guests. Yet, when funding becomes scarce, Nina's competence becomes a form of coquette opposition, because as a woman (and particularly as an Eastern European woman), she is assigned lower status and even assumed to accept and welcome assault. Strubel uses harsh language very sparingly, as the snowboarding teenagers' insult to Adina is now in stark contrast with the language used by the rapist, Bengel, when addressing Nina, which is coddling and lulling: "so nice, so nice" ["so gern, so gern"], "open (your little beak) wide" ["Schnäbelchen auf"], "Swallow nicely. So shy, so shy" ["Schön schlucken. So scheu, so scheu"] (Strubel 2021a, 227, 241, 260), while in the context of the following rape, the language becomes sinister. The symbolic capital she presumes she has fails to save her from the direct violence, and this perplexes her:

> "Manchmal muss man Dinge tun, die einem nicht gefallen, weißt du."
> "Ich nicht."
> Da griff Razvan Stein nach ihrem Arm. Es war ein Griff, den sie schon kannte.
> (Strubel 2021a, 260)

> ["Sometimes one has to do things, one does not like, you know." "Not me."
> That's when Razvan Stein grabbed her arm. It was a grip she already knew.]

As an investment, Razvan finds another use for Nina: "One does not die from it" ["Davon stirbt man nicht"] (Strubel 2021a, 261), and delivers her to her assailant. The second and third parts of the novel are mostly lineally narrated in one timeline, and make use of the analepses / prolepses dynamic for the purpose of disorientation, through repetitive narration, which does not quite overlap and reveals itself lamented as a recurrence of the same scene. Although the assault itself in the third part is seemingly omitted ("Razvan Stein was right, she was still there"[15]), it is still narrated through Adina's body:

> Adina lag im Sumpf […]. Beim Versuch sich aufzurichten, zog es sie tiefer hinab. Ein überwältigender Geruch nach Moder stieg auf. Über ihr schwebte ein Gesicht, lächelnd. […] Als sie die Augen wieder aufbekam, sah sie, im Anbau lag, in ihrem Bett. Im Unterleib spürte sie eine dumpfe Bewegung, als würde ein Gegenstand dort hin- und hergeschoben. (Strubel 2021a, 261)
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> [Adina was lying in the swamp[...]. As she tried to sit up, she was pulled down deeper. An overwhelming smell of mold rose up. A face hovered above her, smiling. [...] When she opened her eyes again, she saw that she was lying in the annex, in her bed. She felt a dull movement in her abdomen, as if an object was being pushed back and forth.]

Bodily sensations of drowning and suffocation recur, all already foreshadowed in the first part of the novel and here finally revealed. The mansion sets the scene for bringing together different characters with different levels of social capital, and while Nina is looking for connections, she is made powerless. "There were reasons to question the meaning of one's origin"[16] (Strubel 2021a, 274), is the conclusion she draws, because she feels like the power to impact reality is taken away from her:

> Die Wirklichkeit liegt außerhalb von uns und ist nicht unsere, hörte Adina von fern jemanden sagen.
> Es hätte auch heißen können; Die Wirklichkeit wurde vom Strohhalmblick der Schweizerin nur punktuell erfasst. (2021a, 265)
>
> [The truth lies outside of us and is not ours, Adina heard someone say from far away. It could have also been said; the truth was captured at by the Swiss lady through a straw and only selectively.]

In the words of the Swiss investor – "our young Czech colleague seems a little overwhelmed"[17] (Strubel 2021a, 266) – we are again reminded that in the struggle of worldmaking, "the power to produce and impose the legitimate vision of the world" (Bourdieu 1989, 20) lies in the differentiations and language that can rephrase reality, while Nina's is declared a fairy tale or fiction: "Should she tell fairy tales […], he'd find her anywhere"[18] (Strubel 2021a, 112). In a moment of defeated outcry, the men put her in a refrigerator and the reader sits with her and the narrator for three pages in the oubliette (Strubel 2021a, 272–274).

The first part of the novel begins with Sala, who is in the process of reporting the assault. Sala has a fear of opening refrigerators, which she has started to overcome during an almost year-long relationship with an Estonian professor and EU delegate, Leonides Siilmann. Helsinki is her hideout, and while the relationship brings her forward, back to the world, it also brings her to her assailant.

In the first part of the novel in Helsinki, Sala is left to be observed in the process of self-preservation. In the last part of the novel, in her reinvention by the reader as well as the author, a fictional one, who is in Helsinki on a scholarship to write her novel (cf. ibid., 36) is now again accompanied by the blue women in the interruptive chapters. Whereas the gap between the fictional and non-fictional author and the initially ethereal blue woman and a possible prototype of the character Sala is at first a wide span, in the last part of the novel these figures are brought extremely close:

> *Sala* geht mir plötzlich durch den Kopf. […]
> Sala hält sie für passend. Sie kann es sich vorstellen: es könnte ihr Name sein.
> Ich sage ihr, dass mich das freut. (Strubel 2021a, 313)
>
> [Suddenly the name Sala goes through my head. […] She thinks it is fitting. She can imagine it: the name being hers. I say I am glad.]

While narrating violence, Strubel also sets out to bring into relief the difficulties of and about narrating violence. The first and last part of the novel are interrupted by shorter and longer chapters with and about the blue woman. In the first part, these interruptions are frequent, statistically after every seventh page. The relation between narrated violence and the blue woman is evident and exemplified by her withdrawal in the second and third parts. The narrative escalation in this novel comes in the form of an intersection or extension of narratives into each other.

4. *Blaue Frau*: From Fragmentation to Escalation

On page 16, the blue woman "appears" ["erscheint"] on the coastline to a first-person narrator: "When the blue woman emerges, the tale must pause"[19] (Strubel 2021a, 17). The blue woman's presence is introduced as ethereal, pulling the reader momentarily out of the initial story. Strubel's figure creates a sense of otherness in the first part of the novel, an atmosphere of mystery: "The blue woman is connected to the water, but also to ink, that's why she's blue, so again, it has something to do with writing"[20] (Strubel 2021b, 01:17). The blue woman's chapters interrupt at junctures between potential escalations, because they follow immediately after the narrative could move on either with new information or a negation, so that the further content and resolution is delayed. While the blue woman passages interrupt the novel almost forty times, they act in the first part of the novel like short and long breaks, as if coming up for air amidst drownings – or perhaps the reverse, the drowning into ink, in writing. And Strubel does follow up the sentiment: "The writing is what bears witness"[21] (Strubel 2021b, n.d. 1:24).

The blue woman could be interpreted as a reflecting a part of the writing process itself: the act of distancing (through shoreside walks, observing the seascape) and creating a sense of separation from the novel's character, while drawing us, the reader, closer to the writer.

The blue woman transforms from a mythical figure into a person, who accompanies the writer into her living room. Hence through direct speech ("Wait!" ["Warte!"], (Strubel 2021a, 311)), the blue woman materializes in the narrator's storyworld. In the beginning, there is a sense of distance with her figure from Adina's story. This is a distance from the fictional violence, in a fictional safe space, which calls into question the concept of safe spaces. The blue woman feels life should be protected from narration and the writer in contrasts, that narration should be protected from life, as the mundane and fleeting (Strubel 2021a, 147). But when the blue woman is asked why she didn't kill him, possibly referring to the cliffhanger in Sala's storyline, she answers: "Why me?" ["Warum ich?"], while "the eyes become narrow, the face a smiling mask" ["[d]ie Augen werden schmal, das Gesicht eine lachende Maske"] (Strubel 2021a, 426), echoing in the end Susan Sontag's assertion that "the mask is the face" (1994, 18).

The first chapter focuses on holding on to a sort of presence, suggesting already that there are several names, or several different experiences that, because of the violence, belong together, but also scatter. The novel begins with observations which are followed by an indentation and a summarizing single sentence: "These are the sounds. […] These are the pictures"[22](Strubel 2021a, 9). These matter-of-fact types of declarations move from sounds and objects to the past, the gaze, the body, the clothing, the memory, the fear, the habits, the sky and so forth, while the distance between the statements widen gradually throughout the first part of the novel. Their function is to establish a presence, a way to resist the spinning descent into disorientation, and the desire to achieve stillness. They form a rhythm, first firmly, later sporadically, to bring Sala, as well as the reader, back to the apartment in Helsinki. The narration alternates between analepses into two different timelines, delving into memories paralleling teenage memories and meeting Leonides, an Estonian guest professor in Helsinki. Both timelines are connected through the search for solace or explanation, while the direct violent encounter is woven into the first part of the novel indirectly. But instead of solace, Leonides' timeline is less than a year apart and moves closer to the reencounter with the rapist, while Adina's is additionally moving towards leaving home. Both times are marked with structural violence, while promising the possibility to change these circumstances, which makes the present state of Sala in Helsinki more haunting.

The act of opening the refrigerator is mentioned at various points. On page 57 in the presumed present, Sala opens the refrigerator and takes out Estonian vodka. However, on the following page, we learn through an analepsis that at her job at the hotel, she struggles with anxiety related to opening refrigerators and must constantly delegate this task (Strubel 2021a, 58). In the analepsis up to when she meets Leonidas, she regains the ability to open the refrigerator without anxiety when they are together (Strubel 2021, 80). Then again, while a new analepsis has begun to narrate the lead-up to the moment in the conference reception where she recognises her assailant, and she opens the refrigerator again to put the vodka back, the two separate timeframes – past and present – first run parallel and then collide:

> Sie hält die Kühlschranktür fest. Sie umklammert die Tür, die die Tischkante ist, die der Tisch mit dem makellos weißen Touch und den Tellern und den Plastikklammern und das Tischende ist, das ihre Hände ertasteten, um sie von dort hineinzustoßen in den Saal, den sie schwankend durchquerte, in einer Richtung, in der die Stimmen leiser wurden. (Strubel 2021a, 93)
>
> [She holds the refrigerator door tight. She clutches the door, which is the edge of the table, which is the table with the spotless white cloth and plates and the plastic clips and it is the head of the table her hands are feeling, to push herself into the hall, which she crossed staggering, in a direction, where the voices became more quiet.]

These two moments overlap, creating a doubling of the traumatic experience. This amplifying effect mirrors how trauma works – not only in the event itself, but also by being repeatedly confronted with its memory, causing the pain to resurface and intensify: "He multiplied the pain" ["Er multiplizierte den Schmerz"] (Strubel 2021a, 263). The narrative enforces this by blending different timelines together, where the trauma is a recurring narrative. The blue woman has to interrupt, and only after the refrigerator is closed can Sala's escape from the reception be narrated further (Strubel 2021a, 95f.).

This exemplifies the dynamic in the text as it works in parallel with the question of narrating violence, and about violent encounters which must be narrated to overcome them. This disorientation in time is part of the violence. There is something disjunctive in the language, in the pacing of sentences, and in the way it jumps and jolts through memories and registers. These quick shifts, in small sections, flag the moments of narrating violence.

The text itself engages with the question of how to narrate violence, and this type of fragmentation is intended to emphasize the difficulty of representing violence in life, which the author aims to do.

Strubel is praised and criticised for the constructive nature of her novels (Norman 2021, 513; von Sternburg 2021, para.7). The *Blaue Frau* continues this path in delivering a complex piece of literature and a complex treatise on violence. The novel was written over eight years, as the author expressed her frustration while researching sexual violence and the related difficulties of achieving justice (Hensel 2021, n.p.). *Blaue Frau* examines what happens when structural violence and direct violence collide, when a person falls through and gets stuck in between, and when the valve opens, whereto will it be directed? The central question posed is who can tell the story, why, and when.

In *Blaue Frau*, Strubel creates space and deviates from the withdrawal and passivity towards the victim, while bringing forth East-West issues of different power registers in which the characters must operate. The three older men in *Blaue Frau*, Razvan, Bengel and Leonides, articulate discussions about this topic, but as opportunists and beneficiaries, they only contrast with and entrench Adina's exclusion. The topic of a divided Germany and a unified Germany that remains divided, as well as a Europe that is unified yet still divided, is very much programmatic – a frequent subject in the author's work. *Blaue Frau* by Strubel could be an escape novel, a European novel that grapples with the rough process towards unity and equity. It is a novel about division, violence and dangerous complexes of superiority and minority. With unification being discussed as

"overtaking" (Kowalczuk 2019) – terms that weren't used in the 1990s – retrospective questions have been posed. In the process of reunification, had East Germany wanted to maintain its allegedly socialist values, and imagine some would prevail? The restructuring and change into the capitalist system led to a deep disappointment in both systems (capitalism and socialism) for people who did not know or did not have the resources to take advantage of the open market and who did not have a chance to negotiate the process, perceiving both systems as essentially draining their opportunities and resources. The novel opens this dialogue and voices the experience of the imbalance, intertwining the author's own experience with these imbalances into the chapters of the blue woman.

Different times and temporalities also characterise the novel's dynamics as time and social space, social capital and symbolic violence collide into direct violence. The first-person narrator draws from her encounters with Eastern European political scientists. The most important aspect here is the relation to the past, as with the belated opportunity for memory work on the Second World War and the subsequent Soviet regime, which denied that the West had already moved onward, leaving them behind (Strubel 2021a, 329). *Blaue Frau* enforces the notion that the repercussions of imminent and long-term violence can and must be explored and made comprehensible through narration.

5. Conclusion

In addressing narrative escalation and different dynamics of violence in contemporary German literature, this article has shown that there is a need to tell stories of the turmoil and change, which have not yet been told, not to relativise or equate, definitely not to justify, but to add to a memory work that engages with the present outcomes and seeks answers in the structures of the past, while shedding light on the previously hidden, overlooked or suppressed narratives. As art and literature can give momentum to slow processes, uncover hidden cynicism, or connect cause and effect, they create a bridge between otherwise unlinked events. In Rob Nixon's terms, literature and art have the capacity to render slow violence – often linked to structural violence – perceptible by framing it as a process with identifiable causes and effects, which might otherwise remain unnoticed (Nixon 2013, 15).

By examining how violence and different dimensions of violence can be narrated, the works by Bolz, Schulz, Rabe and Strubel underscore not only the importance of the subject, but also the potential of literary narration to reveal and make comprehensible the connections between different dimensions of violence. These texts show how closely structural and symbolic violence, which often remains invisible at first, can be related to outbreaks of physical violence – even if it is only in after-effects that become tangible years or decades later. The authors all unfold a sensorium for entanglements of structural, symbolic, and physical violence, develop literary strategies through narrative means, while also

grappling with the subject matter itself: the problem of narrating violence, avoiding relativising and reproducing violence in an unexamined way.

Bolz and Schulz show that even drastic depictions and modes of narrative escalation can be productive for a reflective literary engagement with violence. However, it becomes clear how important changes in linguistic register, perspective or narrative style are in order to avoid falling into a simple reproduction of violence in the medium of narration. In Rabe's and Strubel's case, the narration also moves into a different narrative register, to intertwine the historical and the fictional violence with each other. What is striking about both is that they refrain from detailed descriptions of acts of violence. However, the extent of violence is emphasised in the most drastic way by casual, brief, but repeated remarks or by means of fragmentation, and the effect on the reading is hardly any less intense than in the books by Bolz and Schulz.

The different dimensions of violence are interconnected and exposed through the recollections of the author's own experiences, making the direct violence and implied violence visible in language and contextualizing it. Therefore, working towards a broader understanding of violence as a symptom of widespread structures that potentially enable and reproduce forms of violence is a worthwhile avenue for further exploration.

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Hella Liira
University of Tartu
E-mail: hella.liira@ut.ee

Prof. Dr. Eckhard Schumacher
University of Greifswald
E-mail: eckhard.schumacher@uni-greifswald.de

How to cite this article:
Liira, Hella / Schumacher, Eckhard: "Narrative Escalation and the Dynamics of Violence in Post-Reunificatin German Literature". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 14.1 (2025). 1–18.
DOI: 10.25926/vznj-v566
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20250703-091141-2
URL: https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/559/759

[1] The article is a collaboration within the framework of the International Research Training Group "Baltic Peripeties" at the Universities of Greifswald, Tartu and Trondheim. We (HL and ES) translated the literary texts from German. We would like to thank Louise Curtis for proofreading the article.

[2] In the following paragraphs, considerations are further developed that were first outlined in Eckhard Schumacher's essay "Eskalation erzählen. Nachwendenarration als Gewaltgeschichte" (Schumacher 2023).

[3] "Ich sehe Chemnitz und frage mich: Was habt ihr mit mir zu tun? Was ich mit euch?"

[4] See for example, Orlowski / Bolz (2020-2021).

[5] "aus einer Welt, von der man schwer erzählen kann, ohne den Rassismus, den Antisemitismus, die Misogynie, die Homophobie und die Gewalt sprachlich zu reproduzieren, die in ihr zentrale Ordnungsprinzipien waren."

[6] In his study Lütten Klein, Mau (2020) examines a comparable process from a sociological perspective using the Rostock district of the same name as an example.

[7] "Umso beschissener ich mich fühle, umso schwächer ich im Inneren bin, umso härter muss ich von außen aussehen, umso brutaler muss ich auftreten."

[8] In the lyrics of the track "Plattenbau O.S.T." by Zugezogen Maskulin, released in 2015, Bolz already integrated scenes that closely resemble those of the later book (see the reprinted lyrics in Bolz / Zugezogen Maskulin 2020/21).

[9] In her novel *Als ich mit Hitler Schnapskirschen aß*, Präkels (2017) addresses similar constellations from the 1990s from the counter-perspective of those who were subjected to acts of violence and neo-Nazi terror.

[10] "Die Geschichte ist mir so nah, ich komme nicht von ihr los."

[11] "*Es war alles Gewalt, denkst du, alles voller Gewalt. Und wie soll man das ordnen? Wie soll man die Geschichten miteinander ins Verhältnis setzen?*"

[12] "Was ist Gewalt, denkst du? Und warum wirkt sie so lange nach? Warum vergisst du sie nicht einfach?"

[13] "Sie war jung und neugierig auf das, was sich in der diesigen Ferne hinter den Gipfeln verbarg."

[14] "Eine Osteuropäerin im Schlepptau ist der beste Schmiedstoff der Welt. Du segelst geschmeidig in die Förderprogramme."

[15] "Razvan Stein hatte recht. Sie war noch da."

[16] "Es gab Gründe, die Bedeutung der Herkunft in Zweifel zu ziehen."

[17] "[u]nsere junge tschechische Kollegin wirkt ein wenig überfordert."

[18] "wenn sie Märchen erzählte […], fand er sie überall."

[19] "Wenn die blaue Frau auftaucht, muss die Erzählung innehalten."

[20] "Die Blaue Frau ist mit Wasser verbunden, mit Tinte, deshalb ist sie blau, deshalb hat sie mit dem Schreiben zu tun."

[21] "Das Schreiben ist was das Zeugnis ablegt."

[22] "Das sind die Geräusche. […] Das sind die Bilder."