University of Bamberg Press

Berndt, Katrin

Writing on the Wall : The ‘Second World’ in Contemporary British Writing

In:

Susan Brähler; Kerstin-Anja Münderlein (Hrsg.), “When men are unprepared and look not for it”•: in Memoriam Christoph Houswitschka, Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, S. 369-382. DOI: 10.20378/irb-96531

Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-105213

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 04.12.2024

Rechtehinweis:
Dieses Werk ist durch das Urheberrecht und/oder die Angabe einer Lizenz geschützt. Es steht Ihnen frei, dieses Werk auf jede Art und Weise zu nutzen, die durch die für Sie geltende Gesetzgebung zum Urheberrecht und/oder durch die Lizenz erlaubt ist. Für andere Verwendungszwecke müssen Sie die Erlaubnis der Rechteinhaberinnen und Rechteinhaber einholen.

Für dieses Dokument gilt die **Creative-Commons-Lizenz CC BY.**

Die Lizenzinformationen sind online verfügbar:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Writing on the Wall: The 'Second World' in Contemporary British Writing

Katrin Berndt, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg 0000-0003-1696-2477

This contribution investigates contemporary British writing that has been published since the fall of the Berlin Wall, but whose narrative focus lies on the East-Central European past of the Cold War period – the so-called 'second world.'[1] It will give an overview of narrative fiction that can be thus categorized and discuss selected novels that exemplify major characteristics and developments of this corpus. The presence of the 'second world' in post-1990 British writing will be considered as demonstrating the cultural significance of the Cold War as a shared history and also as a literary response to persistent philosophical and more recent social, cultural, and political concerns that invite imaginative comprehension through the lens of this particular historical experience.

In the decades of the Cold War (1947-1989), characters, motifs, and settings of the 'second world' were popular in British writing and helped to define genres like the British thriller and the spy narrative. Prominent among these were the novels by Len Deighton and John le Carré, as well as Ian Fleming's *James Bond* series, whose globally successful film adaptations established the eponymous protagonist as an icon of twentieth-century popular culture within and beyond British borders. Patrick Major attributed the leading role British writers had in the production of Cold War spy novels to a particularly British "love of secrecy" (339), which was thriving in the period not least because it "permitted the fiction that individuals could make up in quality what Britain's modest military-industrial complex could no longer achieve in quantity" (340-41). The distinctive masculin-

[1] See Berndt and Wells 11. While

> First World countries were . . . the industrialized states of Europe, the United States, Canada, Greenland, Australasia, . . ., and Japan . . . with multi-party, parliamentary systems of government[, the historical] Second World societies meant communist countries of what was [during the Cold War] the Soviet Union (USSR) and Eastern Europe, including, for example, Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, and Hungary. Second World societies were centrally planned economies [. . . in which] the Communist party dominated both the political and the economic systems. (Giddens 42)

The terms can reflect both ideological and economic meanings. For example, the ordinal numbers can reflect the belief that democracy, pluralism, and freedom from totalitarian oppression are valuable achievements; in this regard, the historical 'First World' can be considered as preferable to the historical 'second world', a belief that appears to have been shared by those individuals and communities who initiated the downfall of the Communist systems in East-Central Europe. In this chapter, the 'second world' designation is used in lowercase and inverted commas as an umbrella term for the past and present representation of these now historical times and regions of Cold War Central and Eastern Europe in British writing.

ities of their leading characters – both the suave, "mindless patriotism" of Fleming's Bond (Hawthorn 105) and the modest, scrupulous intellectualism of le Carré's George Smiley – provided appealing combinations of "[e]scapism and realism" (Major 340) that allowed Britain to come to terms and reconcile with its diminished military and economic power.[2]

A different kind of imaginative East-West encounters were dystopian novels that addressed totalitarianism and "what they considered the ideological failures of socialism" (Hammond 15), most notably *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) by George Orwell, "whose surname has [subsequently become] transformed into an adjective for the attributes of modern dictatorship" (16-17). Moreover, the political and ideological separation of Europe into 'East' and 'West' contributed to an interest in travel writing, and in fantasy (see Heyl 305-06). Similar to dystopian fiction, these genres enabled the exploring and investigating of the present in an 'elsewhere' but, like espionage fiction, combined them with an affirmative, escapist appeal.[3]

During the Cold War period, literary-cultural exemplifications of the 'second world' provided entertainment, a foil to post-imperial Britain's national identity, and motifs to comprehend ideologies and mass phenomena in the twentieth century. As a consequence of their popularity, considerable research on these imaginative travels to, and encounters with, the 'second world' has been conducted before and since 1990.[4] In noticeable contrast, scholarship has paid much less attention to the ways in which British writers in the three decades since the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' have continued to engage with what had been, and arguably still is, viewed as a possible alternative to both capitalism and democracy for many in Britain as well.

This observation has been the point of departure for an investigation whose preliminary results will be presented in this contribution. The research has been further motivated by a number of questions. To begin with, if the now historical times and regions of the 'second world' are still visited by contemporary British writers, have the particular formal and thematic attributes of its Cold War representation also been continued? Or has the imaginative depiction of 'second world' places, characters, and motifs, for example, become either nostalgically romanticized, or much less escapist? Would it be possible to argue that the continuing

[2] "The Suez crisis of 1956, in particular, rubbed home the message that she [Britain] was now a second-rank power. By default, however, the realities of nuclear stalemate and systemic competition also created a renewed demand for human agency in the face of such anonymous forces" (Major 340).

[3] If nostalgia is "but one member of the rather extended family of affectionate relationship with an 'elsewhere'" (Bauman 3), then travel writing and fantasy are its first cousins.

[4] See, for example, Korte, Pirker, and Helff (2010), Frenk and Krug (2011), and Hammond (2017).

engagement of British novels with the Eastern Bloc is (still) indicative of Britain's role in Europe and on the world stage? And has the historical failure of European communist dictatorships encouraged new utopian fictions – or further (and dystopian) evaluations of old ideas? Has British fiction responded to the fact that the collapse of 'second world' authoritarian societies, in which fulfilment was supposed to be obtained not as individual happiness, but through structurally institutionalized commitment to the well-being of the community, was brought about by their communities? Have British writers after 1990 portrayed the 'second world' and its notions of engagement, autonomy, privacy, work, and civic virtues (to name but a few) in ways that appear meaningful for their present-day society, in which both the "idea of 'progress'" and "the prospect of human happiness" arguably have become "individualized, privatized and personalized" (Bauman 4)?

The following overview will identify and briefly characterize developments in post-1990 British fiction that has re-imagined settings, characters, and motifs of the 'second world.' It will also suggest a preliminary typology based on narrative genre, themes, and significance for contemporary British culture. To begin with, the fascination with secrecy is still a prominent feature of British fiction that draws on Cold War Eastern Europe. Likewise, genres like the spy novel and the espionage thriller are also still important forms for its depiction, chosen by both established writers such as John le Carré (*A Legacy of Spies*, 2017) and by new arrivals to the field like Henry Porter (*A Spy's Life*, 2001; *Brandenburg*, 2005) and Jack Grimwood (*Moskva*, 2016; *Nightfall Berlin*, 2018). And their agents have got company: conventional espionage narratives have been joined by a number of works that also feature intelligence characters but belong to other suspense genres. These include David Young's popular 'Stasi' crime fiction series, and psychologically complex novels with pronounced gothic features such as Ian McEwan's *The Innocent* (1990) and *Black Dogs* (1992) and Anthony Underhill's *The Killing Strip* (2010).[5]

Moreover, the motif of secrecy itself has become formally and thematically more diversified. In addition to various secrets in characters' stories, also in the form of pasts haunting the present, manifestations include actual or anticipated encounters with members of the secret service (foreign and/or domestic); concealed identities (of agents and civilians); surveillance as an overall atmosphere and mood, or as the lived experience of a character under observation; and an element of mystery or danger in otherwise realist depictions of love stories in 'second world' settings. In novels such as McEwan's *The Innocent*, Philip Sington's *The*

[5] David Young's series on (the fictional) GDR People's Police Oberleutnant Karin Müller includes six books so far: *Stasi Child* (2015), *Stasi Wolf* (2017), *A Darker State* (2018; the e-book edition was published under the title *Stasi State*), *Stasi 77* (2019), *Stasi Winter* (2020), and *The Stasi Game* (2020).

Valley of Unknowing (2012), and Fiona Rintoul's *The Leipzig Affair* (2014), the motif also informs topics, character psychologies, and plot. The character constellations of some love stories have been informed by secrecy as well for a considerable number are conceived as love triangles between romantically involved partners from both the 'East' and the 'West,' with at least one of the three usually engaged in some kind of conspiracy or informal intelligence work.

Several of these attributes are well represented in one of the few texts of the corpus that has already attracted some scholarly attention: Ian McEwan's *The Innocent* (1990), an early example of post-Cold War British 'second world' fiction.[6] The full title of the work – *The Innocent or The Special Relationship* – points to one of its major themes, the relations between the UK and the US. The novel contributes to a debate that occupied Britain in the second half of the twentieth century, when it responded to the challenge of finding a new role on the world stage as a post-imperial nation. As such, it had entered a cautious and often conflicted alliance with the new imperial power – the US.

The Innocent is set in Berlin – East and West – in the mid-1950s and features several of the characteristics that would come to distinguish 'second world' fiction in subsequent years. It combines established narrative conventions of the spy novel with historical fact and a tragic love story (including a 'triangle' constellation). In addition to the title, the novel's main themes, characters, and their constellation can be read as symbolizing the development of UK-US-relations after the Second World War. The story fictionalizes "a joint CIA-MI6 venture and operation" (McEwan, *The Innocent* 227), the historical "Operation Gold (MI6 labeled it Operation Stopwatch) . . . one of the greatest tunnelling operations devised within Berlin's boundaries, many years before the Wall was constructed" (MacGregor 176). The main (fictional) characters involved in this mission are Leonard Marnham, a young English technician in a British-American surveillance team; his love interest, Maria Eckdorf, a German woman who works for the British army; and Leonard's superior, the US-American intelligence officer Bob Glass, who will eventually marry Maria. The novel's predominantly realist form is enhanced with an element of crime, and with gothic aesthetics – Leonard and Maria are shown to dismember the body of her former husband Otto, whom Maria had killed in self-defence. Set immediately before "the notorious double-agent George Blake" betrayed the operation, the story combines "real history and spy fiction" and "invites the reader to investigate its source materials and to revel in the intertextual play they represent" (Brown 77, 78). The story raises fundamental questions about innocence, courage, loyalty, and the human potential to violence.

[6] McEwan had written the novel before but published it after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Scholars have analysed the main couple's relationship and the dissection of the corpse as metaphor and allegory, respectively, which demonstrate how private lives become politicized (see Heiler 105). The partition of the dead body was also understood to signify the "division of Berlin, Germany and Europe after World War II" (104). According to Dominic Head, "the novel's dismemberment scene [. . . figuratively represents] the domination of weak nations by strong ones" and "makes a gruesome point about the carving up of the global body politic" (Head 91). This reading is corroborated by Lars Heiler, who understands "the relationships between the main characters [as] indicative of the links between their countries of origin," an interpretation confirmed by "the fact that Leonard eventually loses Maria" to a US-American agent, whose position alludes to "Britain's fading influence in the post-war world order" (Heiler 104). The characterization and typified behaviour of Leonard and Glass in particular reflects British perceptions of their own nation's post-WWII role and the concurrent rise to global dominance of the US. While young Leonard is not only drawn as an idealized, self-effacing gentleman, whose ingénue qualities render him feminized, the uncouth and occasionally bullying masculinity of his US-American superior Glass provides a stark contrast and antagonism. Glass's language is permeated with slurs and vulgarities, for example when he introduces the purpose of their collaboration with boastful glee:

> "This operation is costing the government, the US government, millions of dollars. You guys are making a useful contribution, especially with the vertical tunnelling. You've also supplied the light bulbs. But you know something?"
>
> They were standing on either side of the Beetle, looking at each other over its roof. Leonard felt obliged to make his face quizzical. He did not know something.
>
> Glass had yet to unlock the driver's door. "I'll tell you. It's all political. You think we couldn't lay those taps ourselves? You think we don't have amplifiers of our own? It's for politics that we're letting you in on this. We're supposed to have a special relationship with you guys, that's why."
>
> They got in the car. Leonard longed to be alone. The effort of being polite was stifling, and aggression was, for him, out of the question. (McEwan, *The Innocent*, 22)

Like his nation, Leonard is shown to have accepted a subordinated position but as also having retained a now outdated understanding of civility. Interestingly, the apparent transparency of the US-American turns out to be not openness but a clever deflection, for "Glass was serious in a punchy way" (35). The secret to his – or, allegorically, to US-American power – is grounded not in the belief in his nation's cultural superiority, but in his belief in the irrelevance of civil values. The idea of cooperation among allies is not inherently valued but merely has to fulfil the purpose to ensure economic and military dominance. When the operation is threatened by an error made by one of Leonard's British colleagues, Glass is swift to denounce their partnership: "We should have done this thing alone.

Collaboration leads to errors, security problems, you name it. . . . We let you in on this for politics, for some half-assed trade-off we'll never know anything about" (111). In his response, Leonard's resentment of his US-American superior becomes palpable; his defence makes a moral rather than a strategic case: "No one fought Hitler for as long as we did. We saw the whole war through. . . . We gave it everything, so we have the right to be in on everything, and that includes the security of Europe. If you don't understand that, you belong on the other side" (111). Interestingly, his 'othering' of (the) US-American(s) condemns their pursuit of dominance as not dissimilar to that of their common enemy, the Eastern Bloc. Again, Glass does not pretend to be motivated by any ethical considerations. His concluding remarks simply state their power imbalance, placing Britain's importance firmly in the past: "you were formidable. It was your moment. And this is my point. . . . That *was* your moment, now *this* is ours" (112; emphases added). In their exchange, Britain and the US are personalized, their global roles and dominance – or lack thereof – represented: like Leonard in divided Berlin, Britain has to accept second rank in the Cold War hierarchy.

The novel concludes with a "Postscript" episode set in June 1987, which tentatively suggests a happy ending for the main couple and, symbolically, for the divided city; it also includes a cursory retrospective glance at the Cold War decades, with references to locations, ideological squabbles, and events signifying the period. In the episode, Leonard returns to Berlin after having received a letter from Maria, who is now widowed. Back in the still divided city, Leonard imagines a reunion with his former lover and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The choice of location is again "emblematic" for the national histories involved in the story: whereas the Wall was "the starkest and most corporeal symbol of the division and incommunicability between nations and their beliefs," the tunnel that Operation Gold had tried to build "represent[ed] the squalor and confusion of latter twentieth-century society, illustrating that individuals prove to be little more than pawns mired in the cataclysmic struggles of arrogant and unredeemable powers" (Slay 135). In his 2005 introduction to the English translation of West German novelist Peter Schneider's *The Wall Jumper* (1982), McEwan describes how in the context of his research for *The Innocent,* he had learned that there were hardly any West German novels about the Berlin Wall: "[W]riters, whose politics were generally well to the left of centre, found the Wall an embarrassment as a subject, an intractable problem posed by socialism. Merely to describe the Wall was to attack it, and thus appear to be a stooge of the CIA" (McEwan, "Introduction" xii). The temporal setting of the "Postscript" chapter is as significant in this regard as McEwan's selective adaptation of historical facts: in June 1987, celebrations for Berlin's 750th birthday took place separately in both parts of the divided city. US president Ronald Reagan gave a famous speech in which he demanded that the then leader of the Soviet Union, "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" (Hoyer

373). The historical context of Reagan's imperative was Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, which was supposed to bring the Soviet Union (and, subsequently, the Eastern Bloc) economic transformation, more democratic transparency, and freedom of expression. In the final episode of *The Innocent*, however, this speech and the 1987 celebrations are not mentioned; only the hope that the Wall would indeed be torn down is included, and it is expressed here by "students [who] were demonstrating in East Berlin" and who were attacked by the GDR police because they were "shouting . . . the name of the Soviet General Secretary," which is now considered "a provocation in East Berlin" (McEwan, *The Innocent* 214, 215). The novel, in other words, concludes not only with a possible happy ending for the British-German couple. It also includes a 'second world' setting where the original demand and initiative for change is made by its people. In line with the novel's allegorical quality, this 'second world' representation suggests that the recognition for the eventual bringing down of the Berlin Wall must be theirs as well.

Another novel that exemplifies developments in contemporary British 'second world' writing is Carl Tighe's *Burning Worm* (2001), whose formal diversity excels at the "particularly intriguing forms of genre crossing" that "historical novels" set in Cold War East-Central Europe regularly "exhibit" (Szczekalla 398). The subtitle "memoirs, notes, and diaries" (Tighe 7) announces the work as a compilation of several modes of autobiographical fiction. Together, they form the embedded story, whereas the frame story purports to be editorial in kind: it includes a foreword and postscript by a fictional editor, contents in the style of visual poetry, a chronology of the temporal setting's historical events, and extensive footnotes which provide political, historical, and linguistic information as well as general annotations, not all of them factual. The novel's formal design produces an overall metafictional quality that is further substantiated by the inherent subjectivity of the memoir, the quixotic narrator-protagonist, and the self-conscious endeavours of the editor, "a professor at the University of Cracow, [who is presented as] a generous man mildly puzzled by some of [the protagonist's] crankier judgments" (Szczekalla 399). Occasional intertextual insertions of poetry and prose quotations round off this postmodern allegory that personifies the struggles of its particular 'second world' setting as well as post-Cold War British disillusionment with failed utopian promises.

The *Burning Worm* documents the experiences and contemplations of Eugene Hinks, who works as a university teacher of English in Kraków, Poland, in the months between the Gdańsk Agreement that ended the shipyard strikes in August 1980 and the declaration of martial law in December 1981. The embedded narrative is a collection of loosely connected encounters, observations, "judg-

ments and . . . aspersions cast on his host country" (Szczekalla 400) of a psychologically evasive protagonist, whose personal frustration and disillusionment coincide with and reflect the political chaos and economic deprivation in Poland in the early 1980s. The frame story is set in the post-communist period twenty years later and so offers a historicizing view on the autobiographical fiction. The foreword and postscript appear to authenticate the story, with the editor claiming that "[i]n Poland we take *Burning Worm* to be an accurate personal account of the year 1980-81" (Tighe 14). The editorial footnotes mainly substantiate this view, but also include information which would not be necessary to understand Hinks's narrative, from random miscellanea ("food coupons were not introduced until April of the following year"; Tighe 32 fn2) to somewhat petty corrections of the protagonist's figurative language ("[s]lightly misused Polish idiom. 'Under the slipper' actually means 'hen pecked'"; 40 fn3). Such editorial comments subvert the suspension of disbelief and are a recurrent reminder to readers that they are engaging with a historical world whose understanding of mundane, but also abstract concepts such as betrayal, idealism, and opportunism – all notions reflected on by the protagonist – might be different from their own.

The central motif is the metaphor of the worm, through which the difference between resistance and subjugation – and to what – is explored. In addition to the main title, the motif is used several times as a term of abuse (Tighe 43, 149) and later as a self-description (140), further illustrated by a poem written by the protagonist (153). Whether Hinks alleges his own position is indeed "vermicular" (Szczekalla 399) or whether, as one of his Polish acquaintances suggests, it is the Polish people who are "worms" (Tighe 43) remains unclear. The editor, in his attempt to "solv[e] the riddles surrounding the enigmatic Eugene Hinks" (220), claims that the metaphor "speaks of the stress of being caught up in a massively important political event, but at the same time captures the agony of unresolved personal issues" (224). This reading puts a rational spin on Hinks's otherwise fatalistic and cynical responses to an overall situation beyond his control and helps to clarify it, as the passionate conviction displayed by some of Hinks's Polish acquaintances indeed appears to be towering over him. Therefore, it is not so much his personal (means of) resistance that is explored, but the everyday living situation in a brief period in which the Polish government had allowed political opposition. Hinks documents the straitened supply situation, tries to comprehend the resistance narratives of Polish union members, artists, and ordinary citizens, and judges the romanticized idea of resistance fantasized about by Western communists. While the Polish opposition "wished to hear . . . that resistance to Communism was romantic, noble, inspired, popular with the West" (37-38), Hinks's French visitor Marie-Therese, a communist union member, fancies herself as heroine in her own utopian romance. To support the "first genuine workers' revolution" (138), she smuggles expensive French-language publications

about Solidarność into Poland to learn not only that they are now legal, but also that basic commodities might have been a better "manifestation of solidarity with the Polish worker" (138):

> She could not get it into her head that her beautiful books were no big deal, that there was no risk in bringing them to Poland or in touting them about the place. She threatened to take them out onto the street to sell them on the Black Market. But I think she had begun to appreciate that the Black Market was busy with other things: the books remained in a sloppy heap on my sitting room floor, a sackful of political pornography. (139)

In one of his few decisive moments, Hinks eventually forces Marie-Therese to leave after she ate all of his honey out of sheer boredom, neither realizing nor caring that the jar had been his one and only treasured sweet.

According to Jeremy Hawthorn, the preoccupation with what John le Carré once described as "the moral search of a lonely man" (Murphy) is "one of the most familiar elements in the serious spy novel" (Hawthorn 105). Unlike le Carré's George Smiley, Tighe's protagonist Eugene Hinks is not an intelligence agent; but he is a humble and intellectual character, whose self-conscious presentation of Poland and its people culminates in the confession that

> [t]he landscape I presented was also that of my mental state. I saw Solidarność and Poland through my own frustrations, depression, loneliness and hunger. Perhaps it was a state of mind, after all. But there is another way to look at it. Perhaps what I wrote was accurate enough, and the country merely reflected, by some odd coincidence, the feelings I had. Perhaps this was the state of Poland. Is it possible for a country to read a state of mind? (Tighe 126)

This subjective assessment is seconded by the fictional editor, who suggests that Hinks's "narrative [is] made up of recollections and stories about a society revealing itself to itself, turning itself inside out, recognizing what it had become, seeing itself for the first time in over forty years. It is a portrait of a state and a state of mind" (14). Read as an allegory of Britain in the years leading up to the turn of the millennium, this 'state' does not have to be Poland after all. The novel's often sarcastic humour and cynicism ridicule the group thinking and opportunism of both Western left-wingers and Polish Solidarność supporters, as well as naiveté towards and romanticization of workers' struggles and liberation movements in general. Their salvific potential, Hinks tentatively suggests in his concluding observations, has always been the result of a projection – and that we remain "housed in dreams" (219).

To a greater extent than the novels discussed so far, Fiona Rintoul's *The Leipzig Affair* (2014) foregrounds common experiences and personal encounters in the quotidian, social life of ordinary characters. While McEwan's *The Innocent* and Tighe's *Burning Worm* fictionalize politically significant episodes in which their

characters are placed, *The Leipzig Affair* does not dwell on extraordinary events of Cold War history. Some incidents are referred to, but they are encountered in line with the overall focus on ordinary life. The Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986, for example, is dealt with briefly, but only to comment on differences between the coverage in East German news and the BBC (Rintoul 113). The novel draws a detailed picture of everyday culture in the last decade of the GDR, including material and ideological aspects, with an emphasis on recreating the complex, conflicted mood of its citizens about both their society's socialist achievements and its deprivations. Significantly, the main 'second world' setting is Leipzig, an East German city that offers a more typical, average environment than Berlin and that is therefore more suited for an exploration of ordinary 'second world' life. Leipzig also would become a centre of the protests and demonstrations of the 'Peaceful Revolution' in 1989, a development which the novel foreshadows:

> The sunshine changed things. Not only did the city look shabbier in the bright spring light, suddenly there was nowhere to hide. Roaming Leipzig's dark streets muffled in winter coats and hats, it had been possible to feel anonymous. . . . Spring has also brought a flurry of political activity that made it harder for us to forget where we were. (112)

The novel describes the experiences of Robert McPherson, a Scottish PhD student in Leipzig in the 1980s, who becomes involved with Magda Reinsch, an East German woman and fellow student, who has become disenchanted with the system. Magda is planning her escape from the GDR and uses her acquaintance with Robert as a smokescreen to shield her, and her partner Marek's, preparations from the Stasi. The novel alters the love triangle that can be found in many 'second world' novels (and much espionage fiction) into a cycle of treason that lays bare a morally corrupt society. All of the major characters are shown to betray one another, and sometimes themselves, at some point, and for various reasons: to serve their own ambitions, to pursue a hidden agenda, to secure an exit permission, or simply because they give in to fear. What begins as romantic, secret longing is corrupted by the circumstances and by the decisions characters make under them. The plot element of the love triangle shows how totalitarian ideology informs and permeates people's private lives, and their civic virtues, as well.

Another genre convention is the narrative perspective, which "presents history mediated through the personal experience of a young Briton" (Szczekalla 399), a popular device of historical fiction since Sir Walter Scott had Edward Waverley join the Jacobite rebellion. In the three novels discussed here, all protagonists – Leonard Marnham, Eugene Hinks, and Robert McPherson – are young British men in their twenties who find themselves in morally challenging situations in an unfamiliar culture, which forces them to confront their own capacities for courage, and for cowardice:

> The "hero" of a Scott novel is always a more or less mediocre, average English gentleman. He generally possesses a certain, though never outstanding, degree of practical intelligence, a certain moral fortitude and decency which even rises to a capacity for self-sacrifice, but which never grows into a sweeping human passion, is never the enraptured devotion to a great cause. (Lukács 32)

In *The Leipzig Affair*, Robert is such a "hero": a somewhat inexperienced but decent man who, while not committed to a particular ideology, is willing to protect others he cares about, but who fails to fully comprehend the totalitarian system and the corrosion of personal loyalties and trust it effects. When he is arrested and interrogated under the suspicion of assisting an escape, his initial attempt at bravery soon deflates under pressure and intimidation:

> I stuck to my story and felt quite proud of myself. Here I was standing up to the Stasi to save the woman I loved. Then they asked me about Marek. I was tired by then. Five hours or more had passed. I hadn't had anything to eat or drink. [Their] tactic was to wear me down . . .
>
> [The officer] moved away from me and stood for a moment staring at the wall. Then he came over, put his hands on the arm rests and leant his face in closer than before. His breath smelt of cigarettes and onions. I waited for the next instalment, but it didn't come. He leant back and punched me hard in the stomach. (Rintoul 143, 144)

After this assault, Robert gives in and betrays what he believes to know about Marek's plans for escape. He is expelled from the country after the incident, and returns to Scotland, where he soon learns that Marek was shot in the back when trying to cross the border. The second temporal setting of the novel, about fifteen years after the events in Leipzig, shows Robert still struggling with his betrayal: he is in therapy to conquer his alcoholism and eventually returns to the now reunited Germany to confront his past and to meet Magda again.

The two temporal settings in *The Leipzig Affair* alternate between the 'second world' GDR past and the early twenty-first century, with locations in both Germany and Britain. Through this device, the reader learns about the impact his actions have had on Robert before he commits them. It allows the novel to allegorize Robert's personal experience in both settings: his struggles also critically reflect on concerns of present-day society, such as emotional isolation, drug abuse, and the equation of meaning and fulfilment with economic success.

The literary device of two temporal settings is mirrored in the novel's two narrative perspectives that alternate as well: in addition to Robert's first-person account, the text presents Magda's, rendered in the rare second-person perspective. These modes of narration invite considerations of the possibility of autonomy, responsibility, and the persistence of subordination, albeit to different pressures and norms. Through her second-person narration, Magda, a lapsed communist whose political disillusionment impairs her sense of self-worth and her personal relationships, refers to herself consistently by the pronoun 'you.' She addresses

herself, and so renders herself an object of her own story, illustrating the emotional corruption she has had to allow in order to conceal her escape plans:

> [Robert] looks into your eyes and smiles. "We could get married, you know." He takes your hand. "I mean, I love you, so why not?"
>
> *I love you*. For a moment, you're tempted. There are thousands of East German girls who pray for an offer like this every night. But it's impossible. . . . You've told the westerner too much. It's time to stop talking.
>
> "I'll think about it," you say, leaning over and kissing him. "Thank you for the offer." (Rintoul 126)

Magda's second-person perspective, a "communicational device [. . . that is] a form of narrative self-address" (Schinko et al. 300), foregrounds the emotional and moral impact of an authoritarian system that is creating its own others. The lack of transparency and openness of this 'second world' alienates those who had supported its original, utopian promise and who consequently find themselves as 'others' in an environment which should have been very much their own – as individuals and as citizens of their community. Instead, systemic corruption is shown to have permeated various levels of social and personal engagement, preventing rather than realizing happiness and progress.[7] The novel appears to echo some post-1990 assessments of the British intellectual left, who believed that Eastern European communist states failed because they were Stalinist rather than socialist, and therefore "could not have been reformed from within without collapsing under their internal contradictions and conflicts" (Berg 21). It recalls the hopes that had been invested into building a better society but expresses solidarity with those who had been the guinea pigs of this experiment: "Things happened that can't be excused" (Rintoul 229).

To conclude, in the last three decades, British fiction has indeed continued to depict the 'second world' of the Cold War period. Using both established genre conventions and an increasing variety of forms and themes, contemporary British writers have employed its settings, characters, and motifs to explore failed utopian ideas, notions of secrecy, loyalty, and betrayal, and they have deployed its 'otherness' to discuss past and present notions of individualism, responsibility, and the validity of political convictions. What is more, they have validated the importance of imaginative embraces of the past as a shared history. The epilogue in *The Leipzig Affair* invests a minor character with a third-person perspective, a friend of Magda's who looks back on their friendship before the Wall had been torn down, "where it all began. An innocent time, that seems like now. A simple time. When

[7] In fact, East German oppositionist Rudolf Bahro famously stated that "there is no area in which really existing socialism has made greater progress than in the breadth, depth, and diversity of the process of bureaucratization" (Bahro 187; translated by the author of this chapter).

the enemy was clear. Or so it seemed. And an exciting time. Romantic" (294). Whatever it seemed, or whether it seems like now: having become past, the 'second world' can be written.

Works Cited

Bahro, Rudolf. *Die Alternative: Zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus*. Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1977.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Retrotopia*. Polity, 2017.

Berg, Sebastian. *Intellectual Radicalism after 1989: Crisis and Re-Orientation in the British and the American Left*. transcript, 2016.

Berndt, Katrin, and Andrew Wells. "Introduction." *The 'Second World' in Contemporary British Writing*, edited by Katrin Berndt and Andrew Wells. V&R unipress, 2024, pp. 11-22.

Brown, Richard. "Cold War Fictions." *The Cambridge Companion to Ian McEwan*, edited by Dominic Head, Cambridge UP, 2019, pp. 75-90.

Frenk, Joachim, and Christian Krug, editors. *The Cultures of James Bond*. WVT, 2011.

Giddens, Anthony (with the assistance of Simon Griffiths). *Sociology*. 5th rev. ed., Polity, 2006.

Grimwood, Jack. *Moskva*. Penguin, 2016.

---. *Nightfall Berlin*. Penguin, 2018.

Hammond, Andrew. *Cold War Stories. British Dystopian Fiction, 1945-1990*. Palgrave, 2017.

Hawthorn, Jeremy. *Studying the Novel*. 8th rev. ed., Bloomsbury, 2023.

Head, Dominic. *Ian McEwan*. Manchester UP, 2007.

Heiler, Lars. "Unleashing the Black Dogs. Cathartic Horror and Political Commitment in *The Innocent and Black Dog*." *Ian McEwan: Art and Politics*, edited by Pascal Nicklas, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009, pp. 103-17.

Heyl, Christoph. *Englische Literaturgeschichte*. J. B. Metzler, 2020.

Hoyer, Katja. *Beyond the Wall: East Germany, 1949-1990*. Allen Lane, 2023.

Korte, Barbara, Eva U. Pirker, and Sissy Helff, editors. *Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film and Culture*. Rodopi, 2010.

Lukács, George. *The Historical Novel*. Penguin, 1976.

MacGregor, Iain. *Checkpoint Charlie. The Cold War, the Berlin Wall and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth*. Scribner, 2019.

Major, Patrick. "Coming in from the Cold: the GDR in the British spy thriller." *Britain and the GDR: Relations and Perceptions in a Divided World*, edited by Arnd Bauerkämper, Philo, 2002, pp. 339-52.

McEwan, Ian. *Black Dogs*. Jonathan Cape, 1992.

---. "Introduction." *The Wall Jumper*, by Peter Schneider, translated by Leigh Hafrey, Penguin, 2005, pp. v-xiii.

---. *The Innocent or The Special Relationship*. 1990. Vintage, 1998.

Murphy, Dwyer. "John le Carré and the Most Interesting Author Interview You Will Ever See." *Crimereads.com*, 10 Dec. 2020, https://crimereads.com/john-le-carre-and-the-most-interesting-author-interview-you-will-ever-see/.

Porter, Henry. *A Spy's Life*. Orion, 2001.

---. *Brandenburg*. Grove, 2005.

Rintoul, Fiona. *The Leipzig Affair*. Aurora Metro Books, 2014.

Schinko, Carsten, Jens Kiefer, and Christian Huck. "A 'Bizarre Love Triangle'. Pop Clips, Figures of Address and the Listening Spectator." *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature*, edited by Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, DeGruyter, 2010, pp. 290-317.

Sington, Philip. *The Valley of Unknowing*. Norton, 2012.

Slay, Jack. *Ian McEwan*. Twayne Publishers, 1996.

Szczekalla, Michael: "'Under Western Eyes' – Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the Fiction of Martin Amis, Nicholas Shakespeare and Carl Tighe." *Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film, and Culture*, edited by Barbara Korte at al., Rodopi, 2010, pp. 397-410.

Tighe, Carl. *Burning Worm*. IMPress, 2001.

Underhill, Anthony. *The Killing Strip*. Matador, 2010.

Young, David. *Stasi Child*. twenty7, 2015.