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Underground Modernity. Urban Poetics in East-Central Europe, Pre- and Post-1989. By Alfrun Kliems.

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Underground, neo-avantgarde, alternative art, dissident culture—just a few of the terms often used as synonyms that usually refer to the non-conformist, uncensored culture of the Cold-War era in Eastern and Central Europe. Although we are supposed to understand them, these terms are semantically ambiguous and difficult to disentangle. The situation is even more complicated if the concept of the 'underground' is considered to include the phenomenon of political dissent. A new book by the German literary scholar of Slavish Studies, Alfrun Kliems, can help us with this.

In many pieces of academic work that focus on the East-European history of art, 'underground' is used as a catch-all term for marginal, deprived, illegal, subversive, non-conformist artistic activities and products. Therefore, in such cases the underground primarily points to the preconditions of the given artistic milieu. It appears as a marginalized scene, deprived of its resources, and forced to devote its creative energies to partially replacing these resources or just simply exploiting its own preconditions. This approach also involves the thesis, articulated most radically by the legendary figure of the Czechoslovak underground, Jáchym Topol, that with the end of the cultural monopoly of state socialism, which forced certain artists underground, the main reason for the underground was essentially gone and by the year 1989 it had ceased to exist in Eastern and Central Europe.

Both approaches are essentially criticized in Alfrun Kliems' book. The author does not focus on the material determinants and preconditions of the underground but entangles the term with the self-regenerating aporia of modernity, which is marked by the subject-object split, alienated subjectivity, the irredeemable promise of inclusion, fragmentation, and epistemological splitting. In other words, the underground's vertical topography is an answer to the modern revolutionary fantasy which bears the promise of an inclusive and horizontal society. The underground, as Kliems

argues, “should be understood as the performative articulation of the accusation that there continues to be something that is ‘below’ or ‘underneath,’ and not just in terms of being incrementally worse off, but that is rather fundamentally excluded.”

This hypothesis has important implications for the spatial/geographical and temporal framework of the study. First, the author examines the underground in a transatlantic context, expanding the scope to American Beatniks, punks and New Agers, including Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Neil Young and Crazy Horse, and Brian Eno. Second, Kliems does not limit the analysis to the Cold-War framework, but also explores the literary traditions of vertical fragmentations from Dante to Dostoevsky until recent times. This also means that Kliems does not end the analysis with 1989 but explores the question whether post-1989 underground art might have the chance to survive.

The first part of the book, entitled Typology, is a theoretical introduction, drawing a semantic web around the term ‘underground.’ The underground as a reflection of the aporia of modernity is highlighted in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s story, *The Poet and the Composer*. The core of the story is an art-historical discussion that represents a conflict between “art as life versus politics and alienation,” while it is situated in an embattled city where the composer, with other locals, finds shelter in a basement. The basement is a concrete utopia where people can experience true togetherness through aestheticized activities (dancing, storytelling, etc.) – therefore the story suggest that happiness cannot be achieved horizontally, only vertically.

Beyond this vertical topography, what seems to be essential for Kliems is the fact that the underground always connects itself to urban spaces. “It is always a cityscape that sets the structure of the narrative space,” argues Kliems, adding that this entanglement organizes other dichotomies exploited by underground poetics, such as center versus periphery, city versus country, and settlement versus wilderness. In general, “the underground requires the circumstances of a split to operate, and it reproduces them aesthetically and performatively.” In underground poetics Kliems also observes the essential aesthetic play with other space categories such as peripheral places, non-places (in the terminology of Marc Augé), heterotopias (by Michel Foucault), third places (Homi Babha), and junkspaces (Rem Koolhaas).

The epistemological splitting of modernity, as Kliems points out, is also reflected in paranoid schizophrenia which plays an important role in underground poetics. Schizophrenia as a mental condition of “illegal” activity was entangled with the everyday life of the underground, and often persecuted by authorities in Eastern and Central Europe during state socialism. Consequently, schizophrenia feeds on the distinction between “me,” “us,” and “them,” but Kliems points out that sharply divided public spheres (official public sphere, exile culture, samizdat) could also cause the same effect.

Beyond these factors, Kliems aims at situating the underground by casting light on the similarities with popular culture and avantgarde art. It is above all the blurring of the boundaries between life and art, and between creation and creator, that makes the underground akin to the latter. At the same time, both underground and popular culture have a subversive attitude towards mainstream culture, usually expressed by ritualized, anarchic gestures, while they both tend to cross the boundary that exists between high and low culture. They also share the danger that in the case of being successful they push their way to the center, or even to the "overworld," and in doing so, threaten their own identity. These shifts also imply terminological uncertainty and diversity, of which Kliems is of course fully aware.

The book's second part, entitled Figures, Works, Groups, includes fourteen chapters which analyze various underground poetics from the Czech, Slovak, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian and German languages. The book is characterized by a predominance of case studies about Czech and Polish authors, on the one hand, and literary texts on the other. The Slavic dominance is due to the interest and (in this realm, diverse) language competence of the author, while the dominance of literary texts is the result of the fact that the aporia of modernity was articulated primarily through literature. The book's literary case studies are completed, however, with important examples of music, film, visual and video art. The chapters in the book's second part introduce a diverse set of underground poetics, exploring the network of their interconnections and intertextuality, mapping the reception and impact, reflexivity and creative renewal of underground work. Kliems always carries out her analysis with a broad comparative-literature and cultural-studies horizon.

Kliems starts with the Czech underground writer Egon Bondy's *Total Realism*, which parodied and vulgarized the discursive patterns of the "overworld." Among others, through a six-line poem dedicated to his close friend, the Prague beatnik Milan Koch, who was run over by a tram car, Kliems casts light on the underground strategies of self-mystification, mythmaking, and breaking down the walls between life and art. Furthermore, by transforming the paradigmatic figure of modernity, the observant prowler of urban spaces, to an "anti-flâneur," Bondy's characters penetrate the "majestic" center of the city, deconstructing the myth of Magic Prague.

In the second chapter, Kliems discusses Ivan Martin Jirous' prison poems, *The Swan Songs*. By the very fact of the author's imprisonment and his friends living in exile, as articulated in the series *My Lovers Are Over the Oceans*, the notion 'homeland' is seriously questioned in these poems. As Kliems argues, this criticism results in the poetic speaker's disintegration and urban disaffiliation. From Prague and Moravia Kliems moves to Bratislava. The ruralized, socialist city plays an important role in the poems of Vladimír Archleb, a radical figure in the Bratislava underground. In Archleb's poetry Kliems examines "how a flâneur figure can survive as a dandy in

an inescapably vulgar world." The next chapter centers on Marcin Świetlicki's poetry, the latter whose self-reflections on underground enable Kliems to discuss the transition between socialist modernity and capitalist postmodernity, on the one hand, and the relations between pop and underground on the other. The fifth chapter, which returns, or at least tries to return, to the figure of Egon Bondy, raises the question of underground generations and (dis)continuity in urban poetics. The Polish writer Jacek Podsiadło's road story, published in 2008, depicts a fictitious pilgrimage to find Egon Bondy, the "father" of the Prague literary underground—however, the first-person narrator never does get to meet him in person.

The German writer and artist Peter Wawerzinek's 1991 novel *Moppel Schappik's Tattoos* is the subject of the sixth chapter. The book, written by one of the Beatniks of the East, is illustrated with many black-and-white collages depicting Berlin's important underground district, Prenzlauer Berg. These collages subversively present the city's landscape, disorienting and irritating the viewer at the same time. One of the collages, consisting of a city map with a painted window on it, modifies the axes of underground poetics, thus the horizontal and vertical axes happen to be intertwined within the same structure.

In the seventh chapter, Kliems discusses underground music from the perspective of lyrics and performance. She draws a parallel between the underground music band of the two brothers Filip and Jáchym Topols, the Dog Soldiers [*Psí vojáci*], on the one hand, and the Hungarian shamanist punk group, the Galloping Coroners [*Vágtázó halottkémek*], on the other. The author also compares the Topols' 1979 song *Cities*, which depicts cities as civilization's monsters, to a rock ballad by Neil Young, *Cortez the Killer*, which articulates colonial violence. It is no coincidence that the older brother, Jáchym, is the protagonist of the next chapter, since Kliems argues that his novels, *City Sister Silver* from 1994 and *Angel Station* from 1995, contradict his own pronouncement of the natural death of the underground in 1989.

In the following chapter, Kliems takes the reader to underground Moscow. As Kliems highlights, Vladimir Makanin's 1998 novel *Underground, or A Hero of Our Time* is assembled around a radically verticalized spatial metaphor where the underground—functioning as society's subconscious—highlights the aporia of modernity, while the author's previous novel entitled *Escape Hatch* portrays the subterranean—the omnipresent underground—as a failed alternative.

In the next three chapters of the book's second part, Kliems focuses on the work of the Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukhovych, and the Polish Andrzej Stasiuk. In the first chapter of this sequence the main axis of comparison is drawn between Andrukhovych's 1993 novel *The Moscoviad* and Venedikt Erofeev's 1973 novel *Moscow: To the End of the Line (Moskva-Petushki)*. In Kliems' view, while "Erofeev inscribes the underground into his protagonist, Andrukhovych externalizes it."

Furthermore, *The Moscoviad*, as Kliems illuminates, functions as a consummate dystopia, or, in other words, a utopia collapsed into entropy. This interpretation is situated in the context of the term "junkspace," which is what remains after the modernization process, referring to "the entropy of sprawling urban proliferation." In the next chapter Stasiuk's underground novel, *Nine*, interpreted as a social novel of the city, casts light on the tension between city and country within post-socialist Warsaw. The novel portrays the city, which consists only of transit zones in Marc Augé's terminology, "as the junction of axes, the intersection of the horizontal and vertical traumas of marginality." In contrast to their novels *The Moscoviad* and the *Nine*, Stasiuk's and Andrukhovych's essays (co-published) take a different position, as analyzed in the book's following chapter. This position is described by Kliems as "aggressive locality," which represents an attitude of writing that in an authoritarian way privileges the local over the global. These essays are not located any more in urban spaces surrounded by the countryside, but in the region of Central Europe. Kliems interprets this vision of Central Europe as a postmodern third space, an unstable, fluid and independent space, which is, however, in a position of existential exposure.

In the last two case studies, Kliems presents the Dadaist tradition in underground poetics, discussing first the Wrocław-based Orange Alternative [*Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*], which began in 1981, and the Transitory Tot Art Formation [*Formacja tranzytoryjna Totart*], which was active in the second half of the 1980s. Organizing happenings, performances, readings, and concerts, both artistic groups were characterized by their "inconsequential games with absurdity and non-sense." This chapter primarily serves as an introduction to the last of these, presenting the aesthetics of Berlin's Club of Polish Losers, and at the same time mapping the circumstances the underground had to face after 1989. In Kliems' view, the aesthetics of Polish Losers—which transform "'conventional' underground themes and techniques into hyper-redundant, post-ironic entertainment"—is a response to the loss of the validity of traditional underground poetics that exploited social failures to articulate the scandal of vertical exclusion.

Through the insightful analysis of various and diverse underground poetics (in the English translation of Jake Schneider) Kliems successfully shifts the concept of the underground out of its position as an umbrella term for non-conformist art. But one or two critical remarks about the book are worth making.

First, in addition to exploring the links between texts and analyzing the language of underground poetics, perhaps more attention could have been paid to the materiality of the analyzed artworks. This argument is derived from the fact that materiality was a very important and reflected-on aspect in the East-European context. In many cases, the issues of materiality were incorporated into underground

aesthetics, and are therefore difficult to ignore. It is enough to quote Béla Hap's 1973 underground manifesto from the Hungarian underground scene, which locates material resources and the underground aesthetics that exploit them on a vertical axis: "What are the underground's information channels? Pencils, pens, brushes, nails, typewriters, photographic cameras, magnetophones, private homes, forests, glades, dens, air, anything, mouths, ears, telepathy, etc. [...] It makes films from film scraps, from what the surface world has discarded." In analyzing this "material hierarchy/topography," the underground preconditions mentioned at the beginning of this review might have been incorporated into the larger framework of underground poetics—not to mention the semiotics of samizdat, which in themselves embody a kind of "material schizophrenia" and semantic rupture in that they entrust aesthetic values to the medium of ephemeral and worthless materials.

Second, in the theoretical part of the book Kliems analyses the underground in the context of political dissent. One small but meaningful element is missing, however. With regard to the spatial embeddedness of the underground, the etymology of the word *dissident* could have been mentioned. *Dissident* is the child of the Latin word *dissidere*, meaning 'to sit apart from'. In this way it also articulates a spatial self-distinction/exclusion – thus can potentially be in dialogue with the spatial metaphors of the underground, especially with the term *un-joinability* in Marcin Świetlicki's poetry (which in the Polish original—*nieprzysiadalność*—refers to 'someone who prefers to sit alone in public').

Despite these brief critical remarks, it is certain that Kliems' book opens up new perspectives for the research of underground poetics and therefore should attract the attention not only of scholars interested in Slavic literature, but also of researchers of alternative and non-conformist cultural scenes. By navigating the reader through the underground world—through basements, caves, tunnels, and subways—Kliems' book brings to the "surface" new insights and concepts that help us to take an even "deeper" dive into the history of the underground.

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