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## Feeling Historical: Postsocialist Affect in Estonian Fiction

### Abstract

In this article, building on the work of Lauren Berlant (2008, 2022) and Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), I ask what it means to feel historical in the context of today's pervasive crisis of ordinariness, whether it is possible to talk about a particular postsocialist affect, and what aesthetic forms the affect takes in fiction. The analysis of two Estonian texts will follow the theoretical discussion: Tõnu Õnnepalu's novel *Border State* (1993) and Maarja Kangro's story collection *Õismäe ajamasin* (2021).

### Keywords

Postsocialism, Affect, Neoliberalism, Estonia, Fiction

### Introduction

Lauren Berlant opens her article on feeling historical with the following sentence: “these are not ordinary times” (Berlant 2008, 4). The times of the writing of this article are not ordinary, either, especially for a person from Eastern Europe contemplating postsocialist affect. Russian aggression in Ukraine, economic precarity, and systematic populist attacks on democratic freedoms have created an uncanny affective effect of returning to the 1990s, but with a twist. While the 1990s in Eastern Europe were optimistic, the dire economic situation alleviated by a promise of joining the West, the 2020s seem bleaker. The promises of economic prosperity have not been fulfilled for many who now fill the ranks of various populist movements taking power in different countries. The promises of parity with our Western partners

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have been frayed by Western politicians who treat Eastern Europeans as, at best, supporting characters with limited speaking rights on the world stage. The West itself has lost some of its luster: while for some segments of Eastern-European societies, its promise of inclusion and dignity continues to be a dream, for others, it is this very inclusiveness that makes them protest against the decadence of the West (e.g., for the so-called “anti-gender” movements (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017)). Postsocialist reality forces us to confront diverse specters of futures past: specters of economic prosperity, democratic inclusion, and globalization (cf. Derrida 1994). We have again been made to reflect on a specific postsocialist Eastern European identity in the past year, something many had thought unnecessary after EU and NATO accession. Yet, the revival of Cold War tropes in international policy circles has been accompanied by patronizing speeches and multiple colonial gestures that ignore the history, lived reality, and agency of countries on Russia’s borders (cf. Smoleński, Dutkiewicz 2022). We are once again feeling not European but distinctly Eastern European. Berlant (2008, 5) states that “a situation has changed the ordinary into something they can no longer presume.” Indeed, the ordinary has become extraordinary, creating new ethical challenges. Today, to echo Heather Love (2007), we seem to be feeling backward and bad—but in a historically specific way.

These are not ordinary times because of the fraying of the ideal of a rational public sphere and its replacement with fractured and fractious affective publics. Although in the 1980s, Fredric Jameson (1984) mourned the waning of affect under late capitalism, now we are drowning in affect. Paranoia is “the *ordre du jour*” across the political spectrum (Apter 2006, 369). This affective flood needs critical attention that is both socially and historically informed. Thus the present article is attuned to the affects of the present, but also their ideological context.

This article is positioned at this precise historical and affective point to ask whether we can locate a particular postsocialist affect forged in the context of historical rupture, nationalism, and neoliberalism. As generalizations on topics like these are often untenable, despite the Western tendency to lump the region into one unified whole, the focus of the article will be postsocialist Estonia, whose struggles with neoliberalism I have traced in multiple publications (e.g., Marling 2010, 2015; Marling and Põldsam 2022). I will build on the work of Lauren Berlant (2008, 2011, 2022) and Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), but my claims will be illustrated with an analysis of contemporary Estonian fiction. As I have argued elsewhere, artistic texts can “access the visceral truth of experience better than scientific and critical methods”

(Barnwell 2020, 14). I argue that fiction is especially invaluable in accessing ambiguous affects. While Tõnu Õnnepalu's *Piiririik* (1993, translated as *Border State* in 2000) is an almost stereotypical example of the postsocialist love-hate relationship with the West, Maarja Kangro's recent short story collection *Õismäe ajamasin* (*Õismäe Time Machine*) (2022) expresses a more self-confident and ironic commentary on the failure of Western modernity. I argue that the two texts trace the historical shifts in the specifically Eastern-European postsocialist affect.

### **Affects of Feeling Historical**

Like Ahmed (2004, 40), I maintain that a sharp differentiation of affect and emotion “negates how that which is not consciously experienced may be mediated by past experiences.” The fact that something produces precognitive bodily intensities does not mean that the underlying cause is not socio-historical or cultural. Many of our visceral dislikes are generated by cultural prejudice, as Ahmed has shown in her analysis of racist hate. Often affect has been valorized as something untouched by ideologies, but, like Clare Hemmings, I believe that affects may act as a mechanism of social reproduction rather than a radical challenge to it (Hemmings 2005, 551). Affective attunement encourages us to conform, to maintain allegiances to our social networks whose orientations towards people and ideas we embrace as part of our being, consciously or unconsciously. This attunement is also temporally and intersectionally specific, with notable distinctions between generations, social classes, metropolitan and peripheral regions, and majorities and minorities. Tracing collective affects is challenging, as what one feels strongly depends on the place and the time of this feeling.

This article analyzes emotional responses to what Rob Nixon (2013), speaking about anthropogenic climate change, has termed “slow violence.” This type of violence is gradual, delayed, dispersed, and not necessarily recognized or recorded as violence (Nixon 2013, 13). In the case of postsocialist countries, the fall of the Berlin Wall can be used as an example of a history-making spectacular event, while the postsocialist restructuring of the economy in which many found themselves redundant is an example of slow violence (cf. Majstorović 2021). If violence is not a significant event but a daily trickling of small acts, the violent acts only register as distinct in their aftermath when it is often too late to take action. We must be taught to recognize slow violence in today's heightened emotional public space. Representability is thus a vital issue related to slow violence, as we need to be taught to no-

tice, respond, and act (cf. Marling 2019). Aesthetic tools are well positioned to register the often opaque flat affects and social frictions that slow violence creates. They can also create affective reactions in the readers, inviting them to engage with issues and perhaps even “see not an event but an emergent historical environment that can now be sensed atmospherically, collectively” (Berlant 2008, 5). Fiction makes it possible to experience what is hard to put into statistics.

Postsocialism is not a geographical concept in this article, but a temporal one, an “ontology of time” (Buck-Morss 2006). In other words, it is not limited to people in the former Soviet Block, as the fall of the Soviet Union radically transformed lives across the globe. Nevertheless, being postsocialist also specifically positions Eastern Europeans, not in a specific decade, but in an unusual temporal dislocation, forever “lagging behind” the West in a futile attempt to catch up, to join a shared sense of time (cf. Koobak and Marling 2014). So, I use the term “postsocialist” to indicate a specific relationship with time: being positioned in the aftermath of significant historical events and locked into a past that the West has left behind. The adjective “post-socialist,” in this conceptualization, is not a tool of easy periodization but an example of “looping temporality” (Martin 2021). The end of socialism was supposed to return us to a shared time, but our temporalities have not been synchronized (Atanasoski, Vora 2023). The sense of running out of time, being haunted by an unwanted past and futures past, creates a unique affective atmosphere characterized by melancholy, pessimism, and a certain world-weary nihilism. The Eastern European of this stereotype is not just situated outside a temporal order but also alienated from the affective norm like an affect alien who rubs against the future orientation and the forced optimism of neoliberal capitalism.

This stereotype is not the only type of Eastern European, however. The post-soviet transition mainstreamed a kind of neoliberalism that has been embraced avidly by the Estonian elites since the 1990s. This neoliberal affective regime requires eternal optimism about a future that is promised to arrive if only one tries hard enough. However, the latter phrase is already telling, as this promised happiness requires labor and constant vigilance, resulting in anxiety, if not dread. Bruno Latour (2014, 3) has explained this tension well: “One of the *affects of capitalism*, that is, of *thinking* in terms of capitalism, is to generate for most people who don’t benefit from its wealth a feeling of *helplessness* and for a few people who benefit from it an immense enthusiasm together with a dumbness of the senses.” Neoliberalism has been associated with not just cruelty, but “optimistic cruelty,” in which “feel-

ings of resentment, fear, anger, and loathing are enacted against the weak, who are a drain to the worthy” (Duggan 2019, 84). Yet, the fear and anger are not that far from the happy veneers of the strong either, as neoliberalism requires constant vigilance. Even the happy elites are haunted by the uneasy proximity of the melancholic losers that they, too, might become, especially in the eyes of the Westerners.

Thus, neoliberalism is affective, as Ben Anderson (2016) has argued, producing affect. Neoliberalism is based on the belief in a “hopeful performative,” a sense that by performing happiness, we will magically conjure up happiness, success, and perhaps even the future (Ahmed 2010, 200). Affects help to “shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” by orienting us towards social issues and helping ideologies and social structures to “get under our skin” (Ahmed 2004, 1, 216). Once these ideological orientations are under our skin, they become part of our being, moving us unconsciously, without intervention from our reasoning. In postsocialist contexts, these ideological internalizations can be contradictory and dependent on age, gender, and social class. The winners of the transition are affectively oriented in a manner that is radically different from the putative losers in their affective attunement to the pursuit of profit, self-optimization and being an entrepreneur of oneself (Foucault 2008).

For Ahmed, happiness is temporal in this neoliberal mode of thinking: negative emotions are placed in the past, and the promise of happiness in the future (Ahmed 2010, 199). The normative happy subjects, thus, are in a different temporal plane than the affect aliens who are forever stuck in the past. However, this temporal delay gives the latter a chance to pause and reflect on the promises of happiness (Ahmed 2010, 218). We can replace Ahmed’s melancholic migrant with a melancholic Eastern European, a fixture of 1990s popular culture.<sup>1</sup> One example could be an underpaid Eastern European intellectual who holds an ambivalent position between the center and the margin, the present and the past. She remains an other to the Western self (e.g., in her attachment to national ideals) yet is uncannily able to imitate the self (e.g., in competing for EU research funding). This doubling makes the Eastern European affects a necessary critical correction to the often ahistorical affect theories that treat the world as a flat unified plane. Like Da Costa (2016), I want to invite a historically specific look into dispossession and depression in a context where there was no good life to lose, like in Berlant’s theorization, but just a promise of a good life.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, when writing this article, I was given Google recommendations of sad memes from both Facebook and TikTok.

## **Fictional affects**

This affective-temporal conundrum, however, is a representational challenge. It is relatively easy to represent the happiness of neoliberal winners and the plight of its losers. But what about the people in between, who hustle to get by and manage to do so just barely, albeit at an emotional cost? Berlant argues that “it’s very hard to produce a satisfying aesthetic event about the drama of not mattering where not mattering is a general historical condition” (Berlant, Greenwald 2012, 81). This redundancy is not a position that neoliberalism prepares us for; thus, Berlant believes that “suffering from disbelief is a prime affect of the contemporary moment” (Berlant, Greenwald 2012, 81). This disbelief can easily be seen in Eastern Europe, where many people have played by the rules of neoliberalism since the fall of the Soviet Union and are incredulous at not having arrived in the West and not being accepted as part of the Western self. This disbelief that can be articulated and punctured in fictional representations enables writers to capture the breakdown of life and to make it possible to inhabit this breakdown.

Although affects are subjective and intersubjective, they are also mediated, “dependent on past interpretations that are not necessarily made by us” (Ahmed 2004, 171). Literary archives are “repositories of feelings and emotions”; they encode preferred cultural orientations and affective responses but potentially can also be spaces where abrasive, counter-normative affects can be evoked (Cvetkovich 2003, 7). Affects live on the pages of books and can jump from them to the reader when they “move, stick and slide” (Ahmed 2004, 14). The affects often remain ordinary, but they “pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds” (Stewart 2007, 3). This very ordinariness of the breakdown of life and the affective attunements it creates interests me in this article, not the dramatic intensity of typical trauma narratives.

Affects recall the “inconvenience of other people” (Berlant 2022, x). While Berlant (2011) otherwise warns us against attaching ourselves to fantasies that prevent us from recognizing our lived reality for what it is, she also hopes that we can find “granular ordinary ways to lose, unlearn and loosen the objects and structures that otherwise seem intractable” (Berlant 2022, xi). I argue that fiction can also be a space of chafing against the inconvenient granularity of other lives to feel—even if in tension—with others. Being in relation with others is accompanied by tension, but this tension forces us to “shift a little while processing the world” (Berlant 2022, 2). This tension is part of being human and inhabiting a historical time—as well as becoming conscious of being either in or out of time.

## Feeling Postsocialist in Estonia

Estonia has been a neoliberal success story since the 1990s, when economic restructuring was undertaken, following the Reagan-Thatcher model, as the most obvious antidote to Soviet past. The human cost of this restructuring and the sharp increase in inequality were treated as regrettable but necessary sacrifices on the road towards becoming a prosperous Western-European country. This suffering was accepted across the political spectrum until the rise of populism in the 2010s. The celebratory public discourse ignores the fact that Estonia has not done very well on the OECD Better Life Index and that, for a long time, it had the most significant gender pay gap in the EU (the second-highest at the time of writing the manuscript.) The hopeful performative can be seen in the desperate search for signs of success at national and personal levels, and what Lauren Berlant (2011) called “cruel optimism” thrives on.

The two authors discussed below are among the most celebrated and, one could even say, canonical living Estonian writers. Tõnu Õnnepalu might be Estonia’s only author of literary fiction whose novels are widely bought and read by the general public and praised by critics. *Border State*, the novel analyzed here, is probably an essential literary representation of the post-socialist transition, with its extensive reflection on East-West tensions, and has been translated into more than 15 languages. He has perfected an impressionistic, highly affective, sensory-experiential writing style (Marling and Talviste 2022). His overall affective mode is not necessarily nostalgic but resigned: he seems to be a sensitive spectator of his own life and experiences. Maarja Kangro, in contrast, is one of the most celebrated female authors who has created her writing persona by assertively breaking norms of femininity by being aggressive and (often sexually) explicit. At the same time, her texts are cosmopolitan and casually reference both theory and international fiction classics. Her writing, too, is highly affective, like Õnnepalu’s but she dwells on experiences of the physical breathing, sweating, and drinking body. Although Õnnepalu is ten years older than Kangro, they both started to write in the transition period and are highly aware of the historical time they have been thrown into, although they engage with it differently.

*Border State* is written as an epistolary novel in which an unnamed and gender-ambiguous narrator (in Estonian, it is almost impossible to identify whether the narrator is male or female; in the English translation, this ambiguity vanishes, but I will use the pronoun “they” here to recognize the ambiguity of the original). They have received a scholarship to go to Paris for

a translation project and have an affair with a wealthy French academic whom they kill. The narrative, however, is intriguing in its temporality. The narrative does not unfold chronologically, and the narrator struggles to find the beginning (Önnepalu 2000, 2). More pertinently for the present article, the narrator consistently refers to being not just from a distant, unnamed country, but from the past, from “that distant, unreal century” and, in a different location, “that dying century” (Önnepalu 2000, 9, 7). The narrator explains their escape from this time as “headlong, yet looking back” (Önnepalu 2000, 6). This belatedness and schizoid movement in opposite directions can also be seen in their relationship with Franz, who chose the narrator, they believe, because “who else would have listened as reverently to his rebellious tirades? Who else would have given a hoot about his philosophy, which was based on delights of deconstruction, or about any philosophy, for that matter? Here, where everything has been discarded long ago!” (Önnepalu 2000, 20). Being from the past elicits superficial sympathy: “when they hear you’re from Eastern Europe, they look at you with pity and speak with hollow words as if you were a dead relative” (Önnepalu 2000, 45). The last image is especially telling as, in many ways, Eastern Europeans often are made to represent what the West wants to believe it has buried in the past (like nationalism or religiosity) on its path to a postmaterialist enlightenment. Yet, the narrator’s temporal looseness allows them to be critical of their country of origin and the West they love and hate.

The novel seems to create a stereotypical vision of Eastern-European bleakness that the narrator has fled for the West, where there is always hot water and well-stocked refrigerators. Their hometown is represented as “a gray cluster of forsaken houses by the edge of a bleak landscape” (Önnepalu 2000, 6). People’s faces are gray; they “lurch,” and trams alone are “carriers of transcendence” (Önnepalu 2000, 6, 7). Some hints signal the fact that we are not in the nineteenth century but in the period of postsocialist transition: “On the next corner, one can buy fake American cigarettes, made in Poland, and Chiquita bananas, which are generally considered the symbol of the coming new prosperity” (Önnepalu 2000, 6). The promises of prosperity are never fulfilled but create a further consumerist need. The East-West relationship behind this bargain is purely transactional: “All Eastern Europe has become a prostitute. From governments and university professors on, to the last paperboy, they are all ready to listen to wonderful speeches about democracy, equality, whatever you please, whatever the customer wishes! As long as he pays” (Önnepalu 2000, 21).



The narrator disdains their compatriots whom they see glued to store display windows, “criticizing the display, while secretly lusting for it, lusting for all the merchandise and wealth that their poor eyes were seeing for the first time” (Õnnepalu 2000, 68). However, they recognize themselves and their wants in the tourists, in their sneakers and sweatpants. The narrator is also highly aware of their affect-alien status: “I live a life that doesn’t interest me, say things I don’t believe, spend money that isn’t mine. Who does it belong to, by the way? Who owns my life? To whom has it been pawned? To heaven or hell, to the European Bank for Development and Reconstruction?” (Õnnepalu 2000, 56). They know they are a part of the same transactional economy, if only as a different class, with their elegant clothes and cultural affectations. Some people desire bananas, some Michel Foucault.

The West is sunny and functional, but at the same time, Westerners are regularly described as childlike and sterile (Õnnepalu 2000, 45). The narrator muses that “here people don’t even start to smell after death, because everything they’ve eaten is so clean and sterile,” although the denatured character of the food is mentioned, like apples that “taste of death,” in contrast to the nostalgically evoked childhood fruit (Õnnepalu 2000, 53). The past is not always something negative to leave behind. Western life is safe and satiated but, as Franz, the narrator’s lover, admits, too dull. Franz seems to envy the narrator because “at least in your country, something real is happening” (Õnnepalu 2000, 75). The narrator adds, “I assured him that one can do very well without reality and history being made. It’s even a lot more comfortable” (Õnnepalu 2000, 75). The thoughtless exoticization of the suffering of the others shows how thin the veneer of kindness is and how convenient it is to thrust Eastern Europeans back into history and to remove them from the shared temporal plane.

Kangro’s short stories represent the postsocialist affect 30 years later, when Estonia is in Europe, perhaps almost in time, but at the same time at a distance from the dominant regimes of happiness and self-righteousness. Time, here, is ambivalent. Usually, the negative is in the past, and we strive to prevail over it in the future. In Kangro’s stories, the present is not necessarily happy but livable, while the future might not be, if we refuse to surrender our illusions. She observes, tellingly, in one of her stories, “at that moment we were better than the rest of the world, we were ahead of them because we already knew that everything is pointless, but they still believed in meaning and progress”<sup>2</sup> (Kangro 2021, 176). The Eastern European characters

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<sup>2</sup> Here and in the following, the translations of Kangro’s texts are mine.

have been disillusioned long ago, unlike their Western counterparts, and hence they can even accept the end of the world: “The world might be ending, sea salt might contain plastic, but this does not prevent one from enjoying the autumn sun” (Kangro 2021, 168).

The stories’ characters no longer have the desires that plague the narrator of Õnnepalu’s text, partly because of the improved material circumstances: “There were resources, one no longer had to behave like an asshole to other people. There was no need for the anxious post-Soviet superiority game: only Bvlgari jewelry, only peaty whisky; suppose you have a used Audi, I have deconstruction” (Kangro 2021, 59). The material needs that both tempted and tortured Õnnepalu’s protagonist are now available, like to Westerners, but the affective distance of the characters allows them to be aware of their complicity without the embarrassment or ethical grandstanding of some Westerners (quite scathingly portrayed in Kangro’s take on tourism to the Third World).

The characters, precarious as they are, have sufficient income to be plagued by the specters of neoliberal life, like the fear that one’s life is going down the garbage chute, an image recurring in the collection’s opening story. The protagonist observes that “anxiety and comfort create a rather unpleasant, corrosive mixture.” Nevertheless, she still congratulates herself on being able to take herself apart, and she “fell asleep, peacefully, convinced of the illusory nature of herself and the world. OK, not illusory, but arbitrary, random, sleep came” (Kangro 2021, 13-14). This behavior is part of a typical, ironic distancing strategy that Kangro uses, combining sardonic social critique with affectively effective comparisons. She is going through the motions of enjoying life because “you have to live life to the fullest. If not, you may later feel that living life to the fullest could have been truly awesome” (Kangro 2021, 10). The fact that your life is pointless is a given, and one might as well enjoy it. So, she travels but still cannot sleep as “she seems to have wasted her life so far, and as a result, she’d better waste the rest as well” (Kangro 2021, 25). The characters find pleasure in the physical aspects of life: food, coffee, running, and sex, but they, like Õnnepalu’s narrator, also seem to be spectators of their life. Now the contrast is not only with the West but also with the philistine fellow Estonians. The stance, though, is self-ironic: we might be in an impasse, stuck in a crisis ordinariness of contemporary life, faced with the precarity of the cultural industry, but we are alive. The past is gone, the present is here—and we know the future will be bleak. We know that we inhabit a different temporality from the West, but this gives us an advantage over those who still chase hopeful performatives.

Instead of Berlant's cruel optimism, we get something that could be called cruel pessimism, which allows the characters to confront the present and survive.

### **Conclusion**

The two texts highlight Eastern Europeans' temporal delay in their own and Western eyes. However, this temporal dislocation affords a critical distance from the West. Eastern Europeans drift in time and, in a way, remain in multiple times. When we compare the stance of Õnnepalu and Kangro, we see that this temporal dislocation has ceased to be a source of anguish and has, instead, become almost a privilege. Kangro's characters know one can never catch up. This realization creates a flat affect, a numbed irony that recognizes the optimistic cruelty of contemporary neoliberal life.

The two Estonian writers engage particularly with Eastern European affects and experiences of time. The times represented are not ordinary in either case, as significant historical events have stormed through the narratives, leaving the characters to engage with the aftermath. This singularity allows the two authors to focus on minor affects created by being delayed in time. The world may be ending, but at least there are no illusions, and one can still, at least, enjoy lived experience, however transitory. This attitude creates contradictory affects—not just flatness and resignation but also a joy of how our bodies are attuned to the world, where we can catch affects from the surfaces of other bodies and the pages of books. These feelings are not always cozy and safe. They chafe and abrade, but they may also evoke strange intimacies with others.

The Eastern Europeans of these texts are like the inconvenient others that Berlant (2022) describes. Their discrepant awareness makes them distinct from the putatively unified postmaterialist Western self to remind it of the illusory nature of many of its promises. They feel backward, but this temporal dislocation allows them to recognize the slow violence that has transformed Eastern European life and left the many promises of happiness unfulfilled. Eastern Europeans accepted Western promises in the 1990s but are increasingly aware of the limited effects of their patient mimicry. Recent history reminds us that Eastern Europe remains not so much an Other to the West, like during the Cold War, as an ambivalent third space between the dominant and the subaltern. It is also a space with an ambiguous temporality, lagging behind the past and out of a future. However, this unbelonging creates a slowing of time that permits a critique of the optimistic cruelty of the neoliberal end of history and universalized approaches to affects. We feel historical in culturally specific ways, especially in extraordinary times.

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