11 Anatomy Collections in and of the Mind: Science, the Body, and Language in the Writings of Durs Grünbein and Thomas Hettche

Published by

Lehleiter, Christine.
Fact and Fiction: Literary and Scientific Cultures in Germany and Britain.
University of Toronto Press, 2016.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/109071.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/109071
PART V

Displaying: Scientific Collections
This chapter is part of a larger set of episodic investigations I have been undertaking into the ways that anatomy exhibitions and medical collections have been deployed in German literary texts over the past 125 years. Insofar as these texts were penned by writers as diverse as Gustav Meyrinck and Gottfried Benn around 1900 to Durs Grünbein, Thomas Hettche, and Thor Kunkel in recent years, it is perhaps not surprising that they are not united by a single topos or references to a single institution or mode of display. It is all the more striking, then, that following the fall of the Berlin Wall, several prominent German literary texts sought to articulate concerns arising in the wake of German unification using the surviving anatomy specimens collected and displayed in institutions such as the Humboldt University and Berlin’s Charité. As scholars have been quick to recognize, the long history and pre-eminent place of these institutions of Berlin’s scientific and cultural landscape make them rich vehicles for probing how the contours and fault lines of today’s thought, art, and culture are shaped by the complex legacies of the German past. The fact that the Charité itself underwent a thorough institutional reorganization in the 1990s – part of which saw its pathological collections reopened to the public with a good deal of sensation in 1998 – helped to make it a revealing (excavation) site in a city whose post-Wende transformations became a shorthand for so many effects of German unification. Perhaps not surprisingly, texts that deploy Berlin-based medical collections have been read by scholars such as Katharina Gerstenberger, Doerte Bischoff, and Birgit Dahlke primarily in terms of Berlin and its real and imagined contributions to a changing gendered German national identity.

Yet as crucial and productive as these readings are, framing texts narrowly in terms of Berlin’s history and institutions threatens to obscure the
nuanced engagement some of them make with a number of key issues connected to the creation and display of medical and science collections, on the one hand, and what their deployment in literary texts accomplishes, on the other. Where these issues become particularly acute is in the work of Durs Grünbein and Thomas Hettche. At a time when a turn to the medicalized and often dissected body manifested itself in a surprising number of high-profile texts by writers such as Reto Hänn, Ulrike Draesner, Ulrike Kolb, and Marcel Beyer (Magenau, “Der Körper” 12–20), Grünbein and Hettche stand out for their respective and highly revealing uses of historical medical collections and (in Hettche) the anatomical theatre in the Charité as privileged points of entry into the core aesthetic and medial parameters of their work and thought. As I will show, profound resonances exist between Grünbein’s and Hettche’s literary engagements with scientific display practices and their respective underlying conceptions of the body, language/thought, and science.

Exploring these resonances, as I will do in this essay first with Grünbein and then with Hettche, provides not merely deeper insight into what scholars such as Andrea Bachner have described as the development of a highly medicalized “wound aesthetic” specific to the past twenty years (“Hettche’s Wound Ethics” 212–14). Rather, the resonances also help to recognize that material collections of medical specimens present unrivaled means of studying how past scientific conceptions and practices have impacted the body and the human sensory apparatus as a function of particular media, including literature and technological media such as film. If I may put it another way, with this approach I aim to show that the scientific and physiological discourses linked to the body represent not a mere borrowing of scientific and medical words and metaphors, but rather operate as an integral discursive and conceptual framework in which scientific (“fact”) and linguistic-literary (“fiction”) categories mutually contribute to an illumination of human thought and existence. What is perhaps most critical about the explication of this framework is not the generation of new literary interpretations in and of themselves, important though they may be. Rather, it is the realization that Grünbein’s and Hettche’s approaches to writing and conceptions of discourse allow them to create fictional medical museums whose operations transcend the capabilities of physical collections on their own. In other words, these fictional modes will be shown to represent indispensable ways of probing the place of science and scientific knowledge in our existence as biological beings at the turn of the third millennium.
Museums, Science, and Literature

Because my project introduces considerations of museums in addition to those of (scientific) fact and (literary) fiction, I will begin with some general remarks about how I am conceiving of literature, science, and museums. Museums, as I conceive of them, emerge as an integral product and driver of modernity in Western society. As such, museum operations involved in the preservation, categorization, and display of past objects are inseparable from modernity’s generation of innovation, novelty, and obsolescence. At the same time, public museums’ rise in political, social, and cultural importance from the nineteenth century on takes place at the same time as many modern disciplines such as the natural sciences, history, national literatures, and art history begin to take the forms they will have for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rather than exist side by side with each other temporally, museums, the sciences, and various forms of writing and image making are held to develop in dialectical relationship to each other.

As the modern arts and sciences differentiated over the nineteenth century, distinctions were increasingly made between the material repositories and material practices deemed relevant to a particular field and the particular imaginative aspects of those fields, be they narrative, historical, or theoretical. As they have become naturalized, these divisions have tended to obscure our sense of the contiguities that exist in thought and practices as they span the museum and the laboratory on the one side and the areas in which writing and imaginative processes take place on the other. This is particularly true for museums, which prior to 1800 tended to be understood, as Wolfgang Ernst argues, as a “cognitive field of ideas, words, and artifacts whose semiotic inventorying operations made the world readable” (“Archi(ve)textures” 18). In conceiving of the museum in this way, I therefore wish to construct a new optic through which I can examine complex exchanges of ideas and practices between fields and institutions that change dynamically over time, not only in relation to each other but also in response to the development of new media based on photographic, cinematic, or digital technologies.

Anatomical Collections in the Writing of Durs Grünbein

I want to argue that precisely these considerations permeate Durs Grünbein’s analysis of scientific collections and displays. Indeed, awareness of
Berlin’s anatomical collections entered public discussion in no small part due to an essay Grünbein wrote for the 1992 volume *Periphere Museen in Berlin* (Marginal Museums in Berlin), later republished under the title “In the Museum of Malformations.” As Katharina Gerstenberger has shown, *Periphere Museen* was explicitly designed to draw attention to exhibitory institutions in Berlin with non-mainstream offerings, both as a means of increasing knowledge of Berlin’s dizzyingly diverse cultural landscape and out of concern that the transformations affecting the city might cause these out-of-the-way museums to “fall victim to the unification process” (“‘Only the Wall’” 130). Gerstenberger’s global observation, that the essays in this volume sought “to preserve in writing the legacy of institutions that might not survive otherwise despite the fact that their primary mission is to protect their content against oblivion,” is especially apt with respect to Grünbein’s contribution, even if Gerstenberger portrays Grünbein’s essay as effectively announcing the ultimate demise of the collections (130). As I will show, this perspective only partially unlocks the ways museums, science, and literature relate in his work.

In his essay “In the Museum of Malformations,” Grünbein discusses two of the historically significant collections in Berlin’s history: a collection founded by Friedrich the Great that was later known as the Gurlt Collection of Anatomical Malformations, and a separate collection founded at the Humboldt University. What is crucial is that Grünbein prefaces his discussion of Berlin’s surviving anatomical displays with a framework that explicitly situates literature with respect to the uncertainties that collections of physical objects can face in modernity. To accomplish this, Grünbein sets the essay’s key considerations with its first three sentences:

How do you write about a museum that no longer exists? What kind of language is appropriate for something like this here, something so obviously wretched, damaged, deplorably neglected, a tiny pile of grotesque junk? Of a collection that was once unique in Europe, that burned in an air raid in the Second World War and whose better surviving pieces were then scattered to the winds, what remains is only a chimera. (221)

Faced with a collection largely in ruins and a need to work in largely imaginary registers, Grünbein frames his project as an act of literary recovery, reconstruction, and preservation. Key to this project, I want to suggest, is a choice of discourse capable of achieving at least two things at once: it must be able to evoke the material specimens themselves in all their complexity at the same time as it enables a precise historicizing of the collection in
its socio-political disciplinary contexts from its moments of creation, its transformations, and its ultimate demise, as Grünbein already begins to sketch out here. Though the notion of a “chimera” clearly has resonances reaching back to Greek mythology, the kind of chimera Grünbein has in mind is in fact a specifically scientific one. As Grünbein immediately explains about his discourse in a crucial aside, “(biology imposes itself on the discussion of its own accord. Aren’t chimeras living beings whose bodies possess cells with divergent chromosomal structures; organisms built out of genetically separate cells?)” (221; original emphasis). As a writer with extensive training in medicine and biology (Ryan, “Das Motiv” 301–15), Grünbein’s invocation of a biological idiom as the best way to recover and preserve this anatomy collection is highly meditated and a key to unlocking his writing and thought.

What deserves immediate attention are the registers this deliberate choice of discourse makes available for thinking about science, literature, and museums in the destructive flow of modernity. Grünbein’s turn to biological discourse serves as a way of plotting the functions of the anatomical and zoological collections with respect to the categories and methodologies variously prevailing in the modern life sciences. With a thick history-of-science perspective, Grünbein demonstrates that the collecting of biological specimens formed the living backbone of the nineteenth-century life sciences. “It is no wonder,” he writes, that the collection grows rapidly around 1800. It is at this time that Europeans “are starting to amass great osteological archives, obeying a mania that sees the skulls of primitive man placed next to those of Greek statuettes, cat skeletons placed next to torsos in the display vitrines. The age of the taxonomies and bloodlines has begun” (221–2). As science moves from Goethe, Lavater, Gall, and various late-eighteenth-century projects of morphology, comparative anatomy, and teratology to phylogenetic, Darwinian, and anthropological perspectives many decades later, the collections expand, shift, and recombine in what Grünbein portrays as a living part of life science research. “Soon,” he writes, “the collections will massively branch out, indent like joints (Gelenkteile) or fuse organically to support phylogenies, Darwinism, anthropology” (222). As Grünbein explains, life-science research programs depend on collections so deeply at this time because collecting’s core operations work to make biological phenomena visible and thus comprehensible: “But before all this can happen, people collect, prepare specimens, make inventories, a provisional sense of order comes into being” (222). Insofar as the processes of collecting and exhibiting feed knowledge production, the collection’s ability to create order relative to
prevailing research programs lends the collections their scientific vitality and viability.

Worth emphasizing about the museum qua life form that Grünbein sketches out is that he connects the collections and their disciplinary formations to a substrate of select but revealing political and cultural impulses. Thus, it is not some abstract quest for knowledge in the life sciences that propels the founding of the veterinary institute and its collection, but rather a specific recommendation of Friedrich the Great. Though Friedrich saw fit to clad the school and museum in grand architecture created by the designer of the Brandenburg Gate, Carl Gotthard Langhans ("Im Museum" 222), Friedrich’s motivation for pushing veterinary and biological research was openly instrumental, if not militaristic: namely, to improve breeding and treatment of the animals used by the Prussian cavalry (224). But if this legacy is still brought to mind by the fact that the skeleton of Friedrich the Great’s horse Condé has managed to survive the tribulations that have befallen so much of the other objects in the Gurlt collection, most of the political impacts in Grünbein’s account relate to moments of complete loss and destruction. Of the two main branches of the life science collections Grünbein discusses, one was decimated by an air raid in the Second World War (223), while the other fell victim to the “Marxist-Leninist” priorities of the GDR regime (225). In the long view, then, the upheavals wrought by German unification would appear to present only the latest round of disciplinary and professional processes whose end effect would seem to be the inevitability of the specimens’ ultimate destruction.

Paradoxically, it is the palpable and highly specific obsolescence of these anatomical collections that directly bears on their contemporary value. One thing the Berlin collections can hardly avoid is a kind of historical reflexivity that demands to be noticed.³ So scarred and miserable are the collections today that they obtain a kind of meta-significance and self-referentiality, as Grünbein indicates when he says today’s “collection of malformations is simultaneously a malformation of what such a collection could be. And what it once was, at its high point in the age of inventorying and classifying! That this age has passed is something one grasps at one stroke, perhaps only now and in this space” (224; my emphasis). As the last sentence makes clear, the apprehension of historical rupture available in this exhibition space involves much more than a realization that this particular collection has seen better days or even that the life sciences have in many ways abandoned collections-based research inquiry. At stake in the experience of this exhibition space is, rather, the awareness that an entire
age has passed, precisely due to the disruption of the historically appropriate mode of display. It is precisely what Grünbein calls the “diorama” that is violated through the East German remaking of the display space. As a result of the destruction, “theological disputation took the place of the direct examination of nature and illustrated research. It is as if they wanted to replace the diorama with official regulations and the display vitrines with a wall newspaper of unfocused *Heimatfotos*” (225). The offence caused by Marxist-Leninist ideological interference is not merely that it destroyed accumulations of evidence and impeded research based on scientific principles, but that its sense of “progress” entailed the destruction of the antiquated modes of exhibition Grünbein regards as so characteristic of natural history collections, display vitrines and the diorama, terms with particular valence in Grünbein’s writing.

The preservation of these antiquated modes of display is crucial to Grünbein for the way they structure personal and collective memory in the larger crush of modern media and historical processes. As he writes in the essay “Childhood in the Diorama,” his ecstatic experiences gazing at the animal dioramas in Dresden’s Natural History Museum represent core moments in how he learned to view and organize his knowledge of the world. Looking back at the museum epiphanies he had as a child, he writes,

> Today it seems to me that in such moments, my entire childhood entered the diorama. Like the Chinese painter of whom legend has it that he was absorbed into his finished landscapes, the child’s imago slipped into those fantastic middle realms of near and far, its ideal place to be. As if a magic word had been uttered, everything that was there, the exotic and strange and the familiar objects from home, was intermingled with the fragments of lived experience (*Erlebnisfragmente*) from my early years … Here in the museum they were inventoried as archetypal dream images, and it had to be possible to call them back up when their time came. The diorama was the “open sesame” [realm] in which my memories lie stored as primal geographical motifs. (122–3)

Elsewhere I have worked with the Benjaminian resonances in this passage in order to reveal that for Grünbein, the diorama operates as a key site for the intermingling of personal and collective memory as Benjamin describes them in his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (Benjamin 159; McIsaac, *Museums of the Mind* 37–8). Important about this argument for this discussion are two related sets of considerations. The first, which
I will return to as I turn to Thomas Hettche’s uses of anatomy collections, involves showing how the diorama becomes a shorthand for the way that memory, language, science, and museums relate in Grünbein’s thought and what they might suggest about the relationship of science and literature, fact and fiction. The second set involves the recognition that Grünbein’s Benjaminian conception of the diorama can help to articulate the stakes of maintaining and encountering antiquated modes of knowledge production such as natural history displays. From this perspective, and in accordance with my analysis of Grünbein’s writing above, natural history displays represent an occasion, to use Benjamin words, to “awaken ... the world from the dream about itself” (*Arcades Project* 456). That is, the continuing existence of the diorama presents the opportunity to recognize that many of the worn-out forms of the nineteenth century – in this case, antiquated forms of natural history display – continue to structure our thinking without our full awareness and without their corresponding in a productive way to the dynamics of modernity as they exist today.⁴

Seen this way, the highly damaged form of natural history display as it exists at the Humboldt University’s veterinary faculty is valuable for the way it resituates the past in relation to the present. Thus, while the displays manifest once prevailing organizing principles and modernity’s destructive effects, their mode of presentation puts them at a remove from the dynamics of the present day. As a result, a distanced perspective is enabled on forces whose workings otherwise remain imminent and thus difficult to apprehend.

Just such a perspective is what Grünbein is looking to develop when he situates the collection’s “historical examples” of biological malformation relative to their “modern variants” (“Im Museum” 227). If, as Grünbein writes, today’s malformations “for good reasons are never shown” in museums like their historical counterparts, this is not because the malformations themselves have ceased appearing. Indeed, when Grünbein writes that what separates the historical examples from today’s variants is “the statistical magnitude of mutations today,” he sees malformation as an increasing tendency (227). But in explaining the differences between past and present using notions of statistics and mutation, Grünbein also points to shifts that have taken place in biology and medicine, as morphological typology has given way to population biology and genetics. In the context of the Humboldt museum, the absence of modern specimens in museums would seem to be justified scientifically speaking, with the collections’ obsolescence figuring them as a kind of dead-end in the evolution of those disciplinary practices. Yet what is easily overlooked, and what Grünbein’s rich
discourse strives to recover, is the sense that the earlier specimens fulfilled functions in the realms of “myth, religion and science” (226). Unwilling to grant that advances in science mean the end of myth and religion, Grünbein tracks their movement into institutions and media such as film whose aesthetic functions work to assuage the anxiety presented by “the evolutionary horror vacui” (226, 227). Without collapsing categories of evolution and culture, Grünbein’s biological-Benjaminian discourse likewise pushes the conclusion that whatever progress science and medicine may make in preventing the malformations that once ended up in the Humboldt’s collections, natural means of generating evolutionary variation and thus malformation will be massively accelerated in modern human culture. In Grünbein’s polemical horror vision, these trends will outpace contemporary habitual norms of life and ethics to such an extent that genetic manipulation will soon permit people to follow the dictates of fashion, spinning out ghastly visions that will become consumable in ways that make today’s collections of “ever new phenotypes” resemble “Paris’ semi-annual fashion shows,” and making contemporary horror film look quaint in the process (228). A key point about this logic is the notion that unlike old-fashioned collections, prevailing mainstream media such as film and digital special effects offer less and less distance from the phenomena they are depicting, leaving precious little in the way of media that enable deep reflection on what makes us human. Seen this way, film and other technological media exert pressure on collections, but not in a straightforward way.

In my reading, Grünbein’s concern is therefore not so much that film will simply displace collections, as Katharina Gerstenberger has argued, but that emerging media configurations promise fewer and fewer opportunities to gain perspective on modernity’s flow (133). The seeming obsolescence of physical life-science collections such as the Humboldt’s – and here it is worth mentioning that Grünbein makes similar arguments about obsolescence in zoos and natural history museums generally (for instance, in the essay “Before Mankind Is Alone with Itself”) – is thus something to be highly prized, particularly when they are probed and engaged by literary means. At stake in this notion is more than just a validation of Grünbein’s practice of writing about collections; there is also a recognition of the physiological bases of what links and valorizes material collections and literary and other modes of writing. A brief discussion of this point will help to explicate the place of the diorama in Grünbein’s conception of fact, fiction, and human thought.

One of the fascinating things about Grünbein’s notion of the diorama is that it manages to place personal and collective recollections into a kind
of mental inventory. In Grünbein’s thinking, the capacity of museum displays to organize thought stands in direct relationship to the neurological underpinnings of all human cognition. As critics as diverse as Wolfgang Riedel, Amir Eshel, and Andrea Bachner have respectively argued, human thought works in a kind of post-post-structuralist way for Grünbein. In contrast to notions such as the Derridian “hors-texte,” which recognize no ontological reality outside language, Grünbein’s theorization insists that the only reality that exists for us is generated by the brain situated in the body. The result is an ascription of a biological reality to all cognitive activity – what Grünbein calls imagination – that precedes the generation of images and language. The implications of this “neurological realism” are not merely that “the body determines what the method is. Behind the semantic order stands the anatomical,” as Grünbein once put it in the essay “My Babylonian Brain” (33). Rather, human mental activity, and especially image production and memory, tend to work in terms of spatial images that are then transformed into forms appropriate to specific media and discourse such as painting, film, or poetry. Thus, while each medium retains particularities in Grünbein’s thought, each shares a fundamental basis in psychic acts whose neuro-physiological bases allow them to intersect and draw on each other’s techniques. Crucial is that spatial-representational layouts such as museum displays figure again and again as key paradigms for Grünbein’s exploration of the organization of the human psyche and how it makes sense of the world with all the tools at its disposal. For this reason, Grünbein states in interviews, “In museums you can see without interference how the battles of memory have been fought (Schlachten der Erinnerungsarbeit). Where else could I, in the briefest amount of time, learn more about the way my brain works?” (68).

It follows from Grünbein’s conceptions that language and literature are capable of intervening profoundly in the neurological responses related both to the experience of museum space and to its imagining. This, I would argue, is precisely what makes his project of “writing about a museum that does not exist” more than a documentary or nostalgic exercise. Indeed, it is only when literary techniques invest museum remnants with knowledge that that which is old, forgotten, damaged, and destroyed can best be explored in the mind’s eye. But more than this: Grünbein’s selection of biologized discourse for his discussion of the Humboldt’s life science collections deserves particular attention if neuro-physiological acts are posited as the basis of all human thought. For in addition to the functions I have tried to illuminate, this discourse also works to signal that scientific modes of thought can be thought of as integral to every
Medicalized Bodies and Anatomy in Thomas Hettche’s Prose

Though anatomical media and related commentary surface at many points in Thomas Hettche’s texts, his 1995 *Wenderoman Nox* is probably the one best known for the prominence of its anatomical collections. Yet perhaps because the malformed bodies and organs in the pathological museum and the eerie trappings of the adjoining anatomical theatre seem to provide an almost too perfect backdrop for a novel that stages a graphic murder, violent sado-masochistic sex acts, and a casting of recent German history in terms of wounds, pain, and scars, key features of Hettche’s literary museum have escaped critical notice. When read with an understanding of how literary techniques can intervene in and exploit museum practices, these features can be shown to illuminate many of Hettche’s core aesthetic and ethical concerns. These, as I will review in a moment, include the way the interaction of science, language, and visual media in modernity structure and maintain a problematic mind-body split. If these have been productively analysed in terms of what Andrea Bachner has called a “wound aesthetic,” some of the functions of the museum in *Nox* are to depict, in performative terms, chief conflicts that accompany humanity’s attempts to grasp itself and where it is ultimately going as a species in terms of science, language, and culture.

As *Nox* is a novel whose investment in anatomy cannot be separated from its basic narrative premises, it will be helpful to say a few words about that relationship before analysing the anatomical collection’s functions in the text. Taking place on 9 November 1989, *Nox*’s peculiar anatomizing of the text turns on the brutal killing of the narrator. Following the murder, the narrating mind is radically separated from the body, which, the text is careful to stress, becomes solely a disembodied object. This conceit allows the narrator not only to describe his decaying body using biochemically and medically precise terminology (79), but also to move omnisciently through the city and relate four interlocking narrative strands: the actions of his murderess, an escaped guard dog from the East German border, the director of the Charité medical collections, and
several other protagonists whose stories intertwine via the fall of the Berlin Wall. At the same time, the separation of narrativizing mind and body qua object breaks the bonds of post-Cartesian subjectivity. As the narrator remarks once death has set in,

The body in which we exist only acts as if it obeys our minds. It alone, however, actually decides at what we gaze, and we do not notice that the things we glimpse are what the body wants to see, through eyes indifferent [to our will]. Only when one is dead does one hear how everything eats away at the stone in a city. [With my body] now a thing among things, the city opened itself into my head, and my body reflected its noise. (31)

No longer (mis)perceived as an object to be controlled, the body’s dominance becomes a force to be reckoned with and reimagined in relation to subsequent acts of seeing, naming, and narrating in the text.

With the body posited as a key determinant in this narrative logic, anatomical “facts” can be shown to be a, if not the, key register in which the text attempts to depict the consequences of disrupting the traditional mind-body split. A major consequence of death opening the narrator’s body to the movements of the city is that, as several critics have noted, the city becomes assimilable in bodily terms. Accordingly, areas around the Berlin Wall, for instance, develop as skin adapts to a wound, producing “new layers of skin” and “scar tissue” (89–90) in response to the Wall’s erection, and then pain when the breach of the Wall reopens the wound (96–7). That the female protagonist wanders the city without a name, coherent memories, and the ability to close herself off to the bodies and experiences and also the anatomized city, signals a peculiar kind of crisis in identity. Yet as Andrea Bachner and Doerte Bischoff have both noted, this crisis can be read in terms of narrative perspective that is in the process of being renegotiated (Bachner 214–20; Bischoff 134). Conceived with an awareness that it is impossible to simply erase the long history of the medialized and medicalized body, the renegotiation also moves to the anatomized body in an underappreciated form: the novel’s harnessing of the Charité’s medical collections.

Key to grasping the “work” the medical collections perform with respect to this renegotiation is the registering of the parameters with which the collections are subtly deployed in the text. Though critics focusing on bottled, stillborn fetuses and malformed organs have tended to overlook it, the collection first appears in the text through interaction with its fictional director, Professor Matern of the Berlin Charité. When the reader first
meets him, Matern is immersed in the active augmentation of the collection, interestingly enough not through human specimens, but rather medical technology. Having just received an advanced Japanese pacemaker, Matern’s immediate response is to position it within the medical collections: “In the morning, Matern had had the pacemakers brought from the display cases, where they were normally exhibited next to the internal prostheses and the artificial organ implants. For today, after extended correspondence and great difficulties with bureaucratic approvals, the little package Matern had been awaiting for over a year had come in the mail” (17). As this passage reveals, Hettche’s text takes great pains to situate the Charité’s collections with respect to prevailing cultural and technological developments. Confirming the text’s preceding identification of him as the “Director of the Institute for Pathological Anatomy of the Berlin Charité, Capital of the GDR” (17), the text places Matern in the privileged position of being able to have historical artefacts taken off display for his own personal use. Matern has managed to obtain his prized, foreign-manufactured display piece after pushing his request through channels that, as a post-Wende reader might suspect, would have required compelling rationales for the use of precious hard currency. This marker of his perseverance testifies to his embeddedness in GDR power structures as they are linked to a manifest relationship to the objects on display.

A notable aspect of this situation is that a presumably fully operational, cutting-edge pacemaker goes not into medical use (where it could save or prolong a life), but straight into a museum collection. A strong driver of this logic is a particular mode of display that, when rendered in textual form, helps to delineate what museum dynamics contribute to the aesthetic argument Hettche mounts in the novel. To see this, it is helpful to start with the literary strategies. “Professor Matern,” the text reads as it registers the unfolding museum scene, “pushed the small cardboard boxes laid out with surgical cotton on his imitation walnut desktop. Pacemakers from twenty years of medical engineering (Medizintechnik), its progress legible in the diminishing size of the apparatus. Tiny stickers noted the years of their introduction into the marketplace” (17). Only after establishing the presence of the display context in the mind’s eye does the text shift attention to the set of pacemakers, with their sense of existence as a grouping of undistinguished elements reinforced by descriptive equivalency (they all hail from the past twenty years) and the lack of a verb that imparts a sense of synchronous stasis. What the pacemakers represent – the progress of medical technology – emerges only upon the introduction of ordering criteria that, in spite of appearing to inhere in the objects
themselves, rely on both a particular sequential sweep (big to small) and the temporal vector (1969–89) established by the tiny labels to valorize and ascribe meaning to the arrayed objects. Through its use of grammar and sequence, the text translates display techniques into linguistic equivalents that invite one to notice the operations that work to generate object-based narratives not as pre-existing entities, but in the performative moment of reading. One result of this literary strategy is to reveal the idea of technologically driven medical progress to be a powerful museum effect simultaneously reflected and illuminated by the text.

The development of the strategy reveals that the desire to make an even more compelling display of technological progress underwrites Matern’s acquisition of the foreign pacemaker. After arraying the museum’s extant collection, Matern

carefully took the device made by the MATSUSHITA ELECTRIC INDUSTRIAL CO LTD OSAKA JAPAN from the tiny, polyethylene-lined box no larger than a box of matches. According to what he had read, the device used the patient’s body warmth [as an energy source] and so for the first time no longer required the batteries that had prevented further miniaturization of pacemakers up until that point. (17–18)

The latest in pacemaker technology in terms of size and performance, Matern’s new model dramatically expands the argument made by the “front room” display: medical technology continues to beat back limits of man and nature. An instantiation of a general Enlightenment trope, this narrative of progress resonates in particular with prevailing GDR valorizations of science, technology, and medicine, insofar as they, in the hands of socialism, were purported to deliver mankind from myth and the fickleness of nature (Assheuer). 8

But if one point of relating the arrival of Matern’s acquisition is to mark it as being capable of substantiating a particular GDR narrative, a crucial aspect of this scene is how it works to show that Matern’s museum manifests the contours of contemporary medicine, economy, and culture in ways potentially at odds with the prevailing ideological dictates of the day. By introducing the collections via Matern’s “behind the scenes” perspective, the text constructs a display in which the identity of the most advanced model figures prominently (“the MATSUSHITA ELECTRIC INDUSTRIAL CO LTD OSAKA JAPAN”). If placed on an exhibit label, this information might well shift the pacemakers’ narrative about “humanity’s inexorable march towards progress” to one in which capitalist entities
play an important, if not the leading, role. Yet in the “front room” version of this narrative as it is depicted on display labels, the centrality of capitalism as a driver of late-twentieth-century modernity is literally made small, appearing on tiny labels showing devices’ “year of introduction into the marketplace” (17; my emphasis). It is in the margins, Hettche’s text guides the reader to see, and not in the main display, that this GDR museum has its finger on the pulse of modernity, a modernity whose ubiquitous, market-driven realities cannot be denied, only pushed into the background. But only for so long: for, in a kind of dramatic irony the post-Wende reader can readily grasp, that very modernity is about to render the “front room” version of things prevailing on 9 November 1989 itself a kind of museum piece.9 With dynamics captured in textually unique ways, Nox’s museum is made to show itself as an assemblage of specimens and artefacts dialectically indexing the conditions that have promoted its making and use, as well as its destruction and abuse, throughout its existence.

Yet what enables Hettche’s narrative to harness the revelatory capacities of the museum (and later also the anatomical theatre) for its own intellectual and aesthetic purposes is its sustained attention to Matern’s interactions with those environments. Taking a variety of forms, these interactions repeatedly showcase the ability of exhibitory environments to generate narratives shaped by the minds and knowledge of those who engage them. In the case of the pacemaker display, the information that clinches the new device’s seamless fit into the extant array originates in Matern’s head (“according to what he had read”).10 Once revealed as an essential element in the textual display’s construction of sequence and meaning, cognitive acts become possible and in fact highly flexible sources of components and information, creating a form of composite discourse capable of referencing subjective and objective registers at the same time.11 This double-voiced quality is precisely what is manifested when, for instance, Matern leads students through the Charité’s historical collection. By keeping signals that Matern is moving and speaking with an audience to a minimum (an exception is the “you can see” reported on p. 25), long passages become indistinguishable from interior monologues (23–4; also 83–8). While not strictly necessary in terms of plot – the routine and nature of guided tours means readers would otherwise probably grasp them as containing a subjective dimension – this strategy of inscribing an interior dimension accomplishes three interrelated things. First, in showing Matern in a position of recognized authority, it demonstrates his extensive knowledge of the collections and their functions in a textually economic way. Second, this dimension foregrounds Matern’s thorough personal identification
with the collections (including his obsession with anatomy and museum icon Rudolf Virchow). Together, these help to naturalize several passages in which Matern is in effect interpreting and activating the collection for the reader when no audience is involved. In important ways, Matern is thus the conduit through which the collection is activated and passed into the present in the text, with the text also working to make the pathological collection and anatomical theatre museums of his mind.

Such a condition is important in no small part because it is through Matern that the novel spells out many of the historical features that help connect the plotlines of 1989 to the fault lines of (malformed) body and (wounded) city reaching back to the early nineteenth century. But if these emphases make the Charité, as Katharina Gerstenberger aptly puts it, into “a center of monstrous exchanges” that describes the ways in which humanity’s darker tendencies will anything but disappear in the present day (138), it is crucial to recognize that Matern’s comments often refer, in self-reflective fashion, to important functions the museum has in the text. When, for instance, Matern explains the museum’s value as “a piece of cultural history of humanity” (25), he articulates the premise that I have shown underwrites the museum’s operation from the moment it appears in the novel. Along similar lines, after showing Matern in the act of expanding the collection, the text explains that his pet project consisted of “the reconstruction of Rudolf Virchow’s collection, which had been nearly completely destroyed in the war” (23). But more than confirm these aspects of the museum’s function in the text, Nox has Matern perform and also comment on acts related to dissection and reanimation of organic tissue that, when understood in terms of the performative process, yield fresh insight into the place of anatomy in Hettche’s approach to science, narrative, and media.

Crucial scenes involve a dog skeleton that Matern keeps next to the desk in his office. Symbolically rich, the skeleton carries particular significance because it connects to the core topoi in the text. The remains of a German shepherd that had once guarded the Wall, the skeleton references both the topic of German-German division as well as the living animal that follows the murderess through the city of Berlin. More crucial still is that the skeleton became a specimen as part of Matern’s only partially successful plan to reconstitute the museum as it was maintained by its founding pathologist, Rudolf Virchow. As the text recalls,

There was too little room for the human skeleton that can be seen in the old photos of Rudolf Virchow’s offices … and that stood next to the high window as if it were looking out into the summer light. But Matern had a new
dog specimen prepared like the one that had sat on Virchow’s desk for some thirty years. He had thought of a small dog, a terrier perhaps, that would not be too large for the desk. When a dead German shepherd was brought to him, he had to put it on the floor. (18)

Bowing to what the space and situation will allow, Matern’s attempt to emulate Virchow is significant for how, in museal terms, it works as a metaphor for the impossibility of achieving anything like seamless restoration of a lost condition. For what Matern (or anyone familiar with these canonical photos) must see in entering his office are the gaps left by the missing skeleton and the almost farcical reincarnation of Virchow’s dog. A synecdoche for the near total loss of Virchow’s legacy, these gaps function as a kind of museal scar that testifies to the forever altered state of tissue marked by a cut or wound. Though no doubt also meant to represent Matern’s outsized and malformed ego, the distorted reinstallation of Virchow’s office works to capture the contours of his larger museal ambition in ways that perfectly align with what Andrea Bachner has called Hettche’s “wound aesthetic” (212–14). For no matter what Matern does, his restorative project cannot but express that he is working on terrain—both literally the Charité collections, buildings, and grounds the text depicts as ruins (124–6) and the state of German culture, figuratively—that will carry the marks of what has come before even as it is reworked as an embodiment of the present. A metaphor that captures the thrust of the wound aesthetic in the physical and spatial registers of the museum as a dialectical index of its day, the dead guard dog shows its difference vis-à-vis Virchow’s day not only in size and location, but also in being the deadly by-product of the Berlin Wall.

Especially striking in this context is Hettche’s focus on Matern’s cognitive responses to the dog:

Matern did not know that when it came to the cadaver, it was that of a dead guard dog from the border that one had taken to the rendering facility near the sewage fields in the north-eastern part of the city. When Matern looked down at the dog skeleton, he always involuntarily completed its form with muscles, fat, coat, ears, eyes and flews. And there was always a moment of uncertainty in the process, when it also seemed possible that he was constituting a completely different animal in his head. (18–19)

Highly significant as a general comment on how meaning is made in museums, Matern’s mental restoration of the dog to full form inflects several of Hettche’s core concerns. The covering over of an object whose origins are
imperfectly known can be read in one register as an allegory of the fate of the past transmitted in museum contexts. Crucial, too, is the seemingly irresistible propensity to seek wholeness out of parts. In this sense, this museum scene resonates with a variety of related subtexts, most prominently the Platonian “one out of two” myth of sexual origins retold by none other than the living counterpart of Matern’s specimen, the escaped guard dog that follows the murderess as she wanders the city (158–9).

Yet in being unable to avoid feeling like he might come up with the wrong animal altogether, Matern, in his mental animation of the dead canine, does more than urge caution with respect to the “fictionality” of cognitively produced wholeness in historical or sexual registers. Animation and its discontents, rather, tie directly into Hettche’s larger diagnoses of what ails modern society and culture in terms of media, thought, and knowledge. As explored in Hettche’s correspondingly titled 1999 book Animationen (Animations), the idea of “animation” serves as a way of referencing the socio-scientific problems posed by embodiment in representation and media, particularly in the aftermath of the Cartesian mind-body and subject-object splits (94–5). Whereas in Nox these splits are explored in the topography of a divided Berlin as I began to describe above, in Animationen they are excavated in the context of Venice, a terrain marked by not only divides such as between land and sea (43–51) but also by a long, intertwining history of publishing and medicine (82–101). Read in terms of how gaze, word, and image work to disentangle the problem posed by a body whose inner workings cannot be grasped without destructive dissection (88–9), Hettche’s Venetian-centred genealogy seizes on the innovations of Andreas Vesalius’s De humani corporis fabrica and early-modern anatomy theatres as the first instances when the dissecting, scientific gaze seemed to evade the aporias of the dead body (98). Marking not just what Hettche considers to be “the beginning of modern science” (83; original emphasis to show quote from O’Malley and Saunders, Illustrations 19), in this account the schooling of the gaze offered by scientific anatomy decisively set the coordinates of modern word, image, and media. Insofar as media “following the anatomical theatre” are tasked with “supplanting the opened dead body” (98), the history of media involves not ways of producing “fictions,” as Hettche goes on to write, but rather “feats of engineering” that align representations (Abbilder) so as to defeat awareness of the dead or dissected body (98).

Seen this way, acts of animation as Matern performs them on the dead guard dog need to be regarded not as departures into falsehood, as commonsense understandings of fiction might have it. Rather, such acts stand in
relation to techniques of medial representation whose practice will be historically conditioned. As a repository of specimens preserved according to prevailing conventions and practices, the medical museum thus emerges as a paradigmatic site for plumbing the past and present techniques of “animation.” As was the case with Grünbein, however, museum techniques’ ability to generate insights of this kind get significant boosts when translated into literary registers, revealing the processes of exposing and hiding (Hettche’s “feats of engineering”) that enable objects and bodies to signify in comfortable or scientifically appropriate fashion. It is in literary discourse, that is, as fiction, that Hettche mobilizes the museum as dialectical index of modernity.

At the same time, it might be too simple just to ignore literature’s complicity in the violence and suffering it clearly works to explore. As if to drive home the point that the production of image and narrative in the present day and age remains tethered to the ongoing cutting and fragmenting of bodies, Nox stages a second animation scene. Set in the middle of a long interior monologue in which Matern reconstructs in his mind the forces that brought Virchow and countless bodies from the east to Berlin until being stopped by the Wall (86–7), Matern again turns to the dog on the floor:

Standing at the door, he looked as always once more at the dog skeleton on the floor and tried to stretch skin over the bones. And in fact saw for a moment coat and ears and snout and how the animal panted and moved and looked up at him. It has yellow eyes Matern thought as they gazed at him. He hastened over to the anatomical theatre, as the dissection lecture rooms used to be called. (87)

Though similar to the act of animation in the opening pages, this instance works to introduce the anatomical theatre not only as physically proximate to the medical collection, but also as conceptually part of the same scientific-medial complex. Though standing in the tradition of the old theatres in “Bologna, Amsterdam or Cracow” (87), Nox’s anatomical theatre functions in medial terms the text likens to those of cinema. Outfitted with penetrating lights and a finely wrought stainless steel table so as to become the equivalent of a giant, mechanical eye (87–8), the theatre also works such that Matern believes that “the soundtrack (Synchronisation) in the theatre of anatomy is the scream” (88). One reason for this association might be that, as an institution always in dialogue with the dominant media of the day, Nox’s theatre might be expected to generate images in line with today’s dominant media, film, television, and digital imaging.
That these media are no less implicated in the production of pain than earlier media is perhaps one point of making the anatomical theatre the site not just of a cinematic sado-masochistic orgy, but also of the transfer of Charité footage of decaying bodies that most critics take to be of Nazi human experimentation (87, 102–3, 128; Gerstenberger 138).

What literature might achieve through this kind of gesture is a reversal of what Hettche calls the “feats of engineering,” the medial adjustments that render the suffering intrinsically wrought by representation imperceptible. Seen that way, the deployment of museum and anatomical theatres as self-reflexive indices of modern science and media might be regarded as showing that the inclusion of cuts and wounds and pain represents the only ethical way to produce images and narratives. That critics until now have yet to fully grasp the self-reflexive and media-critical work done by medical collections in Nox perhaps reveals the limits of such a strategy, if the key question is whether a text can be made less complicit in the images it produces by its demand that readers notice its self-reflexivity. However that question of complicity is answered, what cannot be overlooked is that Hettche’s writing, like that of Grünbein, shows that literary techniques remain uniquely capable of showing why fiction matters, precisely in the context of biology and medicine.

NOTES

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
2 Precisely these developments inform the phenomena Dana Weber, in her chapter in this volume, explores with respect to the ethnographic uses of mannequins in the nineteenth century.
3 Dana Weber’s reading of nineteenth-century mannequins picks up on this dynamic, in which death, absence, and memory are involved in a complex interplay that becomes more apparent with changing historical conditions (see Weber, chapter 12, below).
4 On the mimetic conventions and mechanisms that accompany this kind of display using human figures, see Dana Weber’s chapter in this volume.
5 The argument in this paragraph rehearses points I have made on p. 31 in Museums of the Mind.
6 Most treatments of the museum and anatomical theatre in Nox, while thoughtful, nonetheless focus on thematic and plot-related resonances. See Magenau 18; Dahlke, “Sexing Berlin” 89–90; Gerstenberger 137–8; Bischoff, “Berlin Cuts” 134; Bachner 226–7.
7 Though often theorized as institutions that obtain objects whose usefulness has expired, the Pathological Museum defies this expectation.

8 This subtext resonates with Matern’s belief that the Charité collection had been swept into the city by two centuries of superstition.

9 The text’s rendering of small but telling details in the construction of the displays also contributes to this irony. Though appropriate on some level to the idea of surgical intervention, a notable contrast nonetheless exists between the use of cheap surgical gauze to present the pacemakers and the device’s increasing technological sophistication (17). Similarly, the text draws attention to the use of tiny nails and fishing line to construct a display of historical surgical instruments in the space behind Matern (17). However functional, these approaches belie a museum left to scrap and scrimp as it struggles to do justice to the historical and monetary value of the artefacts and possessions in its collections.

10 The original German ("Das Gerät, wie er gelesen hatte, nutze …") implies Matern had read this information before his unpacking of the device, but a cognitive dimension would still be in operation, even if the scene were taken to refer to an act of reading commensurate with the opening of the box.

11 It is worth observing that cognitive registers are not limited by material constraints in the way that exhibit labels are (which often cannot exceed more than a few hundred words), even as they are capable of supplying context in comparable ways. In other ways, cognitive registers can be used to represent information the museum visitor takes in or associates with a display but whose multivalence is not fully grasped, creating contexts that suggest unconscious and other complex cognitive operations.

12 These processes are nicely unpacked in the context of past and present displays of human mannequins in Dana Weber’s chapter in this volume.

13 Through this doubling, Hettche also seems to shows an awareness of the enlivening dimension involved in his own act of storytelling.

14 In the original, “ersetzen” carries a range of meanings including “displace,” “restore,” “replace,” and “compensate for,” all of which shade Hettche’s point in different ways. “Und alle Medien in der Nachfolge des anatomischen Theaters suchen wesentlich, diesen geöffneten Leib zu ersetzen.”

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