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Werner Bräunig's *Rummelplatz*: Reading for Socialist Infrastructure

Werner Bräunig closes his novel *Rummelplatz* with the question: “What is left when a worker dies?” Bräunig himself does not seem to have a ready answer. “His work? What he has created?,” he speculates, and then the novel breaks into the first person: “[...] but this I have seen: that there is no one, however poor he may have been, who doesn’t leave something when he dies.”¹ A Marxist answer would be perhaps to say that the worker precisely does not leave their work behind; rather their living labor disappears into the product of that work, which is to say into dead labor. And yet, as Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge point out, “labor is the category of social transformation.”² If this is so, it is a deep historical claim, and if we think of Bräunig’s question as one directed less at a specific character than to the collective proletarian subject of the historical workers’ movement, then, we might reframe it as one of the legacy of the political and cultural movements of social emancipation based on what Anson Rabinbach characterizes “utopias of labor.”³ This would be a contribution to what Michael Denning as proposed as a “labor theory of culture,”⁴ a study of the ways that labor both founds and evades cultural representation, as well as thinking about the material conditions of cultural production. The socialist Second World provides an abundance of examples of both the possibilities and limits of attempts to anchor culture in labor directly, and in that sense Bräunig’s question of what remains, posed already in the mid-1960s, is perhaps a bridge to our current situation, in the light

¹ Werner Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*, Samuel P. Willcocks, trans. (London and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2016), 528. This is a translation of Werner Bräunig, *Rummelplatz. Roman*, Angela Drescher, ed. (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2007). I will be citing the translation throughout this essay, while occasionally amending it. The word *Rummelplatz* itself is German for fairground.

² Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, Devin Fore, ed. Richard Langston, trans. (New York: Zone Book, 2014), 143. The translation substantially condenses the original German text, and I will cite the German where the translation omits passages. See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Zweitausendeins, 1981).

³ See Anson Rabinbach, *The Eclipse of Utopias of Labor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

⁴ Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of the Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004).

of a emergent general consensus that wage-labor can no longer function as a basis of social integration.⁵ This article examines one file from the archives of these utopias of labor, reading *Rummelplatz* in terms of a utopian tendency in the early literature of the German Democratic Republic toward the representation of an emergent socialist anthropology of labor, or a biopolitical horizon of socialism, where the laboring body would no longer be “proletarianized” in the Marxist sense but would be the foundation of both social solidarity and cultural values. At the same time, I will argue that the fragmentary, unresolvable character of the novel can be read out of this utopia’s unresolved contradiction between labor’s historical infrastructures, both material and ideological, and its project of social emancipation. In this article, I will lay out the place of *Rummelplatz* and, with appeal to the political economy of labor power formulated by Negt and Kluge the stakes of reading it as a novel about socialist infrastructural and biopolitical practices at a point of historical impasse and representational crisis for the socialist project.

Rummelplatz is a deeply infrastructuralist novel in the sense developed by Caroline Levine, one which attends “closely to the jostling, colliding, and overlapping of social, cultural, and technological forms,”⁶ taking place mostly in and around the vast Soviet-run uranium mining complex Wismut during the decisive early years of the GDR from its founding to the violent events of June 16, 1953.⁷ At the opening of the novel, the old Communist partisan Hermann

⁵ Wolfgang Engler asserts that “the social question of the twenty-first century is the question of the fate of millions of people for whom contemporary capitalism apparently has no more use for. What will happen with these surplus people?” *Bürger, ohne Arbeit. Für eine radikale Neugestaltung der Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005), 183. There is of course an extensive literature on the “end of work” and the decline of wage labor as a structuring principle of social and economic life, but see, beyond Engler, André Gorz. *Paths to Paradise. On the Liberation from Work*, Malcolm Imrie, trans. (Boston: South End Press, 1985) and Robert Kurz, *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung: Vom Zusammenbruch des Kasernensozialismus zur Krise der Weltökonomie* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1994).

⁶ Caroline Levine, “Infrastructuralism, or the Tempo of Institutions,” in *On Periodization: Selected Essays from the English Institute*, ed. Virginia Jackson (Cambridge: English Institute, 2010) **PAGE**

⁷ On the Wismut, the cultural imaginary of which we will return to below, see Angela Drescher’s afterword to *Rummelplatz*, “‘Aber die Träume, die haben noch Namen.’ Der Fall Werner Bräunig,” in Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*.

Fischer, now master miner, or *Steiger*, and Party Secretary in Shaft 412, contemplates the landscape around Bermsthal, a thinly fictionalized village in the central German Ore Mountains, “people had lost all sense of scale once the mines appeared, a conglomerate carving itself into mountainsides across a vast stretch of landscape, from Saxony through to Thuringia, remaking the map almost overnight. Wismut.”⁸ Wismut is a material network, spread not only over these old German mining villages, but across a world shaped by Cold War geopolitics:

In these first few years after the war, the fate of the world depended on the quotas of German uranium mines. The world hung in the balance, for a second that lasted forever, and Fischer was one of the few who knew. Atomic power meant life or death. The world had seen Hiroshima.⁹

Wismut is a figure of Cold War temporality in *Rummelplatz*, of a “second that lasted forever” on the edge of Rosa Luxemburg’s classic alternative of socialism or barbarism, in a world suspended between socialist construction and nuclear Armageddon. At the same time, *Rummelplatz* is a novel; a direct analysis of the work of hard infrastructure is off the table here. Rather Bräunig’s text depicts a kind of infrastructural imaginary, one where, to quote Lauren Berlant, “infrastructure is defined by the movement or patterning of social form. It is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure.”¹⁰ The work on socialist infrastructure is at once the work on socialist subjectivity by characters who may or may not be

Roman, 2007, 643-646. See also Juliane Schütterle, *Kumpel, Kader, und Genossen: Arbeit und Leben im Uranbergbau der DDR: Die Wismut AG* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), Rainer Karlsch, *Uran für Moskau. Die Wismut—Eine populäre Geschichte* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2007), and Karl-Heinz Bommhardt, *Uranbergbau Wismut 1946-1990 in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone und in der DDR* (Bad Langensalza: Verlag Rochstuhl, 2011). On June 16, 1953, when workers lay down their tools and went into the streets to demand lower production norms and free elections, see *Die Klasse im Aufbruch. Der 17. Juni 1953 in Berliner Betrieben*, Jürgen Hoffmann and Annette Neumann, ed. (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 2003) and Hans Bentzien, *Was geschah am 17. Juni? Vorgeschichte, Verlauf, Hintergründe* (Berlin: Verlag das neue Berlin, 2003). Finally, on the rich tradition of mining as a trope in East German literature, see Karen Lohse, *Schattenwelten: Romantische Montan-Diskurse als Medien der Reflexion über Arbeit in der DDR(-Literatur): Hilbig. Fühmann. Bräunig*. (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2011).

⁸ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for troubling Times.” *Society and Space* 34.3 (2016), 393.

convinced Communists, but who are nonetheless involved in the “lifeworld” of socialist structures. Bräunig’s novel, however, refuses a simple affirmation of those structures. Indeed, the official slogans of East German state socialism receive little attention in *Rummelplatz*, instead the novel is concerned with how a politics might emerge from the feeling of life and work under socialism. While wagering on socialism as an affective infrastructure of connection, connection, mutuality, Bräunig does not hesitate to portray Wismut, and by extension East German socialism, as an instance of what Michael Truscello refers to as “infrastructural brutalism,” infrastructure that “isolates, toxifies, dispossess, and immobilizes.”¹¹

Finally, what is it that the infrastructural imaginary of *Rummelplatz* is organizing, in ways either bio- or necropolitical? Here, I will argue that Bräunig’s novel is concerned with what Negt and Kluge describe as labor capacities. Negt and Kluge’s account of labor power locates the ways in which human needs, skills, and characteristics are shaped as labor capacities, which are either commodified as labor power and congealed into the dead labor of capital or abjected, left unvalued and marginalized.¹² Furthermore, Negt and Kluge insist on the ways in which labor capacities extend beyond and through individuals in ways not dissimilar to those described in contemporary affect theory.¹³ Labor capacities thus form the arcane surplus of collective labor that Marx refers to in *Capital* as the “animal spirits” of cooperation itself, the affective excess that arises from any coming together under the sign of a shared task that is in itself a force of production.¹⁴ These capacities, from trust to violence, from luck to obstinacy, remain partially

¹¹ Michael Truscello, *Infrastructural Brutalism: Art and the Necropolitics of Infrastructure* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 2.

¹² Kluge and Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, 120-148.

¹³ Here I follow Lauren Berlant’s development of a materialist theory of affect as exemplifying a “shared experience of time.” Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 15.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 443. On “animal spirits” in *Capital*, see also David Harvey, “The Body as an Accumulation Strategy,” in *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 103.

realized within the capitalist labor process and public sphere. In this sense, capital is itself a short of meta-infrastructure,¹⁵ shaping and structuring labor capacities through patterns of reification, separation, and exploitation. Bräunig's novel asks if there could be a different socialist infrastructure of labor capacities.

Like many East German writers of his generation, Bräunig made his literary reputation during the so-called Bitterfeld Way, initiated at a 1959 conference in the industrial town of the same name. Under the slogans "Greif zur Feder, Kumpel!" [Grab that Quill, Pal!] and "Schriftsteller an die Basis!" [Writers to the Base, i.e. into the workplace], the Bitterfeld Way was the GDR's most ambitious cultural-political moment. The Bitterfeld Way aimed at overcoming the division of labor between art and work through a compensatory extension of literary communication: not only sending writers into the production sites of the Republic, but also encouraging workers themselves to take up writing in Circles of Writing Workers.¹⁶ Scholars have debated the role of the Party and the state in the Bitterfeld Path,¹⁷ but Ursula Heukenkamp describes the double character of the Bitterfeld movement as at once an orchestrated cultural political spectacle and an attempted democratization of the world of work through the consolidation of the cultural dominance of the working class.¹⁸ In many ways, the

¹⁵ See the comments on Louis Althusser's account of Marxism's base-superstructure figure as an infrastructural metaphor in Hannah Appel, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta, "Introduction: Temporality, Politics, and the Promise of Infrastructure," in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, Hannah Appel, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta, ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 8-9.

¹⁶ For East and West German analyses of the Bitterfeld Way, respectively, see Therese Hörnigk, "Die erste Bitterfelder Konferenz. Program und Praxis der sozialistische Kulturrevolution am Ende der Übergangsperiode" in *Literarisches Leben in der DDR 1945 bis 1960*, Ingeborg Münz-Koenen, ed. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1979), 196-243 and Ingeborg Gerlach, *Bitterfeld, Arbeiterliteratur und Literatur der Arbeitswelt in der DDR* (Kronberg Ts: Scriptor Verlag, 1974). On the Circles of Writing Workers, see William J. Waltz, *Of Writers and Workers. The Movement of Writing Workers in East Germany* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018).

¹⁷ Werner Mittenzwei, *Die Intellektuellen. Literatur und Politik in Ostdeutschland 1945-2000* (Leipzig: Verlag Faber & Faber, 2001), 177-180.

¹⁸ Ursula Heukenkamp, "Proletarisch-sozialistisch-arbeiterlich? Arbeit und Arbeiter in the DDR-Literatur." *Argonautenschiff* 15 (2006), 69.

Bitterfeld Way stood for the project of a critical socialist public sphere in the GDR. By the end of 1965, this project had run aground following the disastrous Eleventh Plenum of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED), which saw the unexpected condemnation of this nascent critical socialist public sphere and the targeting of contemporary authors and filmmakers for their putative negativity, immorality, and corruption of the East German youth.¹⁹ Wolfgang Engler has argued that the lasting result of the Eleventh Plenum and the restrictive cultural atmosphere of the late 1960s was the breakdown of connections between writers and the Party, between writers themselves, and between writers and workers: “the only thing that continued through all of the crises was the breaking off of contacts, experiences, commitments.”²⁰

Werner Bräunig, the former factory worker and miner who in fact coined the “Grab that Quill, Pal!” slogan, was the face of the Bitterfeld movement, and his sprawling novel in progress became the lightning rod for the Party’s critique of the putative immorality and skepticism of much of the GDR’s contemporaneous cultural production after a chapter appeared under the title “Rummelplatz” in the prestigious journal *Sinn und Form* [Meaning and Form].²¹ Bräunig was fired from his teaching position at the Johannes R. Becher Literary Institute, lost the publishing contract for his novel, which he never finished, and died in 1976 at the age of 42.²² An excerpt of the novel *Rummelplatz* was published in a posthumous collection of Bräunig’s texts in 1981,²³ but the full manuscript would not be available until 2007. The setting of the *Rummelplatz* is

¹⁹ Indeed, the entire 1965 run of films by the DEFA, the state-owned film studio, was banned. These films were later released in the early 1990s as the so-called rabbit films, or *Kaninchen-Filme*, after director Kurt Maetzig’s *Das Kaninchen bin ich* [The Rabbit is Me], which drew the particular ire of the Party. See *Kahlschlag. Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965. Studien und Dokumente*, Günter Agde, ed., 2nd edition (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2000).

²⁰ Wolfgang Engler, *Die Ostdeutschen, Kunde von einem verlorenen Land* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1999), 106.

²¹ Werner Bräunig, “Rummelplatz.” *neue deutsche literatur* 1965:10, 7-29.

²² On the campaign against Bräunig in the context of the *Kahlschlag* of 1965, see Drescher, ““Aber die Träume,”” *Rummelplatz. Roman*, 646-666.

²³ Werner Bräunig, *Ein Kranich am Himmel: Unbekanntes und Bekanntes*, Hans Saches, ed. (Halle-Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag), 9-180.

particularly significant for the playing out of the thematics of labor and history. The “wild East” of the GDR’s mines and construction sites is a common setting for Bitterfeld literature, which often stages the arrival of young protagonists in these scenes of everyday toil and follows their development into mature socialist subjects even as the Party slowly builds structures of socialist labor discipline in the workplace, much as the sheriffs of US westerns bring law to the frontier.²⁴

Wismut occupied a special place in this imaginary. Established across the territory of central Germany’s late medieval silver mines, the Wismut was run by the Soviet occupation forces and operated under military jurisdiction as a “state within a state.”²⁵ Named after an innocuous mineral as a distraction from its actual purpose, Wismut was central to the USSR’s attempt to address its “uranium gap” in the Cold War context of nuclear confrontation with the imperialist west.²⁶ Wismut soon grew into a massive and largely improvised mining infrastructure stretching across the mountainous south of the Soviet Occupation Zone cum GDR, requiring a massive labor influx, one which was met both by a mass migration of workers from throughout Germany and central Europe and by the generous employment of forced labor. This “mixture of refugees and those expelled, of those returning from war, released detainees, and adventurers” were met with unsafe, precarious work conditions, inadequate food and housing, and military discipline.²⁷ At once a prison workcamp and a kind of “East German El Dorado,” the decaying and environmentally devastated villages around Wismut became notorious sites of

²⁴ The classic example of such a novel is Brigitte Reimann’s 1961 novel *Ankunft im Alltag* [Arrival in the Everyday], which takes place, as many Bitterfeld texts do, in the legendary Schwarze Pumpe {Black Pump} open face coal mining and refining complex near Hoyerswerda, and lent its name to the socialist subgenre of the novel of arrival, or *Ankunftsroman*. See John Urang, *Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 61-93. On the notion of the “Eastern,” see Karen Rouff Kramer, “Representations of Work in the Forbidden DEFA Films of 1965” in Seán Allen and John Sandford, *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 137.

²⁵ Schütterle, *Kumpel, Kader, und Genossen*, 29-30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

debauchery and criminality, the GDR's own "little Texas."²⁸ Wismut is thus, following Michael Ostheimer, a particularly East German chronotope, a mythological origin space for the Republic and an occluded site of socialist extractivism and disciplinary biopower, where the displaced postfascist rabble of what one of Bräunig's characters sarcastically describes as "the Greater German close-out sale" are forged into socialist laboring subjects,²⁹ but which remained under a partial taboo in the East German public sphere.³⁰

In what follows, I would like to trace less the depictions of labor in *Rummelplatz* themselves than the ways in which Bräunig's novel fragment projects Wismut as a figure for socialist infrastructure running through the GDR's regimes of labor and the biopolitical imaginary grounded therein. If, as Christopher Breu argues, "infrastructure is not content, but the form that makes content, including the content of biopolitics, possible,"³¹ we can analyze the depictions of infrastructures in *Rummelplatz* as figures for a possible post-capitalist reshaping of historically formed labor capacities. In his discussion of the contemporary infrastructural turn in criticism, Dominic Boyer evokes capital itself as an infrastructure for the storage and expenditure of the productive powers of labor, but in a way that is not simply additive, but complex; an "ontological transformation" of "animal spirits" and human activities into what Marx refers to as *Gallert* of abstract labor, "a recipe of different fleshy forms rendered through heating and cooling into a single sticky material: human labor-in-the-abstract binding commodities, people,

²⁸ Ibid., 33-34.

²⁹ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz* (Aufbau-Verlag 2007), 86. Willcocks renders this as "when Germany shut up shop and sold the lot" (70). The original phrasing is "de[r] großdeutsche Schlußverkauf."

³⁰ Michael Ostheimer, "Chronotopos Wismut. Der ostdeutsche Uranbergbau im Forschungsfeld der DDR-bzw. Post-DDR-Literatur" in Viviana Chilese and Matteo Galli, ed. *Im Osten geht die Sonne auf? Tendenzen neuerer ostdeutscher Literatur* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015), 204-223.

³¹ Christopher Breu, "Biopolitics and/as infrastructure" in *Biotheory: Life and Death under Capitalism*, Jeffery R. Di Leo and Peter Hitchcock, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), **page?**

machines, and ‘nature’ together with its glue.”³² If Marx approaches the problem of labor power as a category for the capture of labor itself as capacity and process in order to produce surplus value in production, approaching it in its abstract and qualitative aspect, Negt and Kluge see labor power from the other side, as a reified form that contains what is in itself an “‘immense accumulation’ of prehistoric characteristics.”³³ Labor power, they point out, is unique as a commodity in that the laborer must themselves produce it and expend it. At the same time, the *potential* for labor depends on workers’ *capacities* for labor, which involve historically generated characteristics from care to culture. Labor power as a commodity is, in other words, composed from the other side by a vast array of capacities, which are both corresponding and contradictory, conscious and somatic, socially cultivated and repressed, and which are intra- and trans-subjective, which Marx refers to as “real essential powers of man and nature” or “real essential powers and facilities [*Vermögen*].”³⁴ At the same time, this “abundance of collective labor capacities [...] is paid for by the individual impoverishment of productive forces.”³⁵ Furthermore, Negt and Kluge’s observations on labor capacities are not specific to waged labor, but extend to the labors of social reproduction, fantasy, thought, love, and war.³⁶ Labor

³² Dominic Boyer, “Infrastructure, Potential Energy, Revolution,” *Promise of Infrastructure*, 227. Boyer is drawing out Marx’s figure of congealed labor as the substance of the value of commodities, which in the original German reads as “bloße Gallerten menschlicher Arbeit,” or a kind of gelatin or jelly of human labor when translated more literally. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politische Ökonomie, Erster Band* (Hamburg: Nikol Verlagsgesellschaft, 2016), 22.

³³ Kluge and Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, 122. I explore early East German literature in terms of Negt and Kluge’s political economy of labor power more thoroughly in Hunter Bivens, “Affective Labors of Socialist Construction in Early East German Literature,” in *Back to the Future: Tradition and Innovation in German Studies*, Marc Silberman, ed. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 147-172, from which some of this discussion is drawn.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 121. The phrasing of Marx that Negt and Kluge cite here is from Marx’s early *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Dirk J. Struik, ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 169. The translators of *History and Obstinacy* point out that the standard English translation of the passage renders *Vermögen* as “faculties,” whereas I follow their own preference for “capacities,” both because it is used in the MECW translation of *Capital*, but also because of its connotations of “ability, quality, and power” (Kluge and Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, 484, n. 3).

³⁵ Kluge and Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, 126

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 395.

capacities thus often appear in the form of feelings, affects, moods, and situations, that cut through and across the individuals that participate in them.

Labor capacities, understood in this way, are the material of life and labor, experience and biopower, and thus a privileged locus of East Germany's early socialist literature, with its ideological horizon projecting a whole new anthropology around the trope of "becoming human through work."³⁷ Early East German *Aufbau* literature asks if there could be a different socialist infrastructure of labor capacities, one based on freeing these capacities from the commodity labor power so that they could become the basis for a reciprocal surplus economy of forces both individual and collective, echoing Brecht's speculations in this period about socialism as "the great production," whether the products in question "be bread, lamps, hats, pieces of music, chess moves, irrigation, character, games etc etc."³⁸ For Heukenkamp, the typical constellation of socialist literature involves the identity of biography with a journey of self-discovery for laboring subjects; time recedes as measure of labor in the face of commitment and enthusiasm, as labor time becomes itself the time of life, and "work" becomes the site of the shaping of life practices, as what social reproduction theory would call the labors of reproduction migrate into the sites of productive labor and vice versa.³⁹ Heukenkamp locates the double limits of this socialist literature: first, in a crisis between the "whole person" and the division of labor characteristic of industrial production, and secondly, in socialist literature's further conflation of

³⁷ Ursula Heukenkamp, "Proletarisch-sozialistisch-arbeiterlich?", 64. See also the chapter "Seeing Socialism" in Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkel, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015), 78-100, on the promises and limitations of socialist infrastructural imaginaries, which develops the question more around relations of value and equivalence, whereas I am here more concerned with the historical dimension.

³⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, Hugh Rorrison, trans., John Willett, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 136.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

the socialist project with what would later be called actually existing socialism, foreclosing the emancipatory horizon of the overcoming of wage labor itself.⁴⁰

In her reading of Bräunig's novel, Silvia Fischer draws attention to the prevalence of metaphors of motion, oscillating between figures of a utopian setting out and "being under way" and those of blocked, circular motion.⁴¹ Through this latter figure of blockage, *Rummelplatz* offers a powerful critique of historical proletarianization, not so much at the direct point of production, but as a proletarian condition of modernity that persists into East German socialism. This critique is largely focalized through the unskilled laborer Peter Loose, through what he understands as "pit fever," or "*Schachtkoller*," a dispensation that draws its pathos from "the howling misery... of having four walls of a barrack room and eight hours of shoveling ore and nothing more," where "... the boredom creeps through the loops of your brain and fills your skull with lead until it bursts, until you have to break something or get drunk or roar like a bull." But for Loose, pit fever is not just about the circuit between mine and barracks (where the titular fairground occupies a heterotopic position as both escape and as a kind of disciplinary training ground), but "this whole stinking, miserable life the hopelessness, the dead end."⁴² Indeed, the heteronomy of working class experience is repeatedly described in *Rummelplatz* through metaphors of repetition, moving in circles, movement without direction, "what goes around comes around."⁴³ The infrastructure, as it were, for this proletarian dispensation is as much the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 66.

⁴¹ Silvia Fischer, *Dass Hämmer und Herzen synchron erschallen: Erkündigungen zu Heimat in Literatur und Film der DDR der 50er und 60er Jahre* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), 228. On figures of blocked movement in post-socialist German culture, see Julia Hell, "Wendebilder: Neo Rauch and Wolfgang Hilbig." *The Germanic Review* 77:4 (2002), 279-303.

⁴² Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*, 64-5.

⁴³ Ibid., 66.

village fairground as it is the Wismut mine itself—the *Rummelplatz*, with its beer tents and swing boats:

The tinsel and the colors and the bright lights—round and round. You get up in the swing and over you go right to the top, but you always come back down again, and everything’s just like it was. That’s all. He wished it wasn’t like that, but he didn’t know how else it could be.⁴⁴

This going in circles is not only inescapable, but the fantasy of escape is in fact what sustains it, as Peter Loose well knows: „Get away, he thought. He’d spent his whole life getting away. But had he ever got anywhere? A different town, different streets and different faces, but nothing really changed, he knew all that. The names were different but that was all.”⁴⁵ At the same time, Bräunig also relates this trope of running in circles to the gendering of labors in capitalist modernity, from which the factory worker Ruth is plotting a line of flight by mastering a paper manufacturing machine:

The narrow, unchanging life, the life of a dependent woman who from the age of twenty-five, thirty at the least, sees nothing change, at least never for the better. A life where nothing happened, there was nothing to hope for and nothing to look forward to. A life of growing older and getting by, of keeping hold of what you’ve got, of clinging tight to past memories, to the happiness that had once been. It was a world empty of anything but husband coming home from shift and the rent, cooking, housework, heating, nothing but laundering the clothes, scrubbing the floor, darning socks, and perhaps sometimes a new dress or a trip to see the family on Sunday, a birth or a death. She saw the maidens and the women and the mothers and the crones come and go, a constant crowd, she saw the long chain of days, weeks and years marked only by Sundays and holidays... --and she saw her own fate in the fate of these women, saw her life shackled to the parade of what had always been, for centuries now, inevitable unless some miracle intervened.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid. 79.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 253.

Here we see another side of capitalist modernity as an infrastructure of labor capacities, that of what is relegated by wage labor into the arcane of the domestic, a kind of repletion and wearing down that is at once shared and un-sharable.⁴⁷

What the nature of this miracle might be is glimpsed in *Rummelplatz*, but only fleetingly, in two moments of the novel. In the first, the bourgeois student-cum-uranium miner Christian Kleinschmidt experiences a moment of the ecstasy of labor after months of drudgery as his body is seized suddenly by “the sudden and seductive and strange” rhythm of the work. This is something that Christian *feels*, “he saw how his body could be put to work,” Bräunig writes, “understood the play of forces, the rise and fall, clench and loose... He matched himself to a rhythm that was not of his invention but that was inside him, or in him and the rock and the tool together.”⁴⁸ What emerges here is a vision of dis-alienated work as an experience neither personal, nor intersubjective, but *social* and affective—properly “in-between,” with a nod to Brian Massumi,⁴⁹ an interplay of body, technology, and nature. In the second, Ruth joins a group of young FDJers to build a soccer field.⁵⁰ Bräunig writes,

When Ruth was at work, she often felt that work was what it always used to be, getting through the hours as they passed by. Work was necessary and monotonous and tedious and uncreative, an anachronism. Sometimes, though she felt that it was work in the new sense, an adventure, fulfilment, a game, a challenge. And this was something else again. The thought that what she was doing here with her friends, in the midst of this landscape, might count as work would seem almost absurd to Ruth. She did it for the pleasure of it, to show who she was, she had chosen to do it because they had made a plan together, nobody had ordered them. They had all an equal share and they would all lend their strength and their imagination, for they had both to spare.⁵¹

⁴⁷ On reproductive and feminized labor, see Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Extended Conception of Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 86 (2014): 55–72, and Maya Gonzales and Jeanne Neton, “The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres,” in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, eds. Andrew Pendakis et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 149–74. For perspectives on social reproduction theory, see *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁹ Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 48.

⁵⁰ The *Freie deutsche Jugend*, or Free German Youth, known as the FDJ, was the youth organization of the SED.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 190-1.

Work in the new sense is figured in this passage as a liberation and horizontal articulation of labor capacities, no longer immobilized in the gelatinous relations of capitalism, value production, and gendered toil, but now set free and brought into motion in a collective labor process that is itself also an example of what Christine Schwenkel describes as “...the affective capacities of infrastructure as political matter at the intersections of technology, materiality, and intimate sociality.”⁵² This is to say that work in the new sense is precisely possible here, in socialism, and that this new dispensation of work is itself a biopolitics based on the reciprocal circulation of surplus capacities, of the strength and imagination that these young people have to spare. This infrastructural figure is exemplified in a sequence in which a number of the novel’s characters find themselves on a train, each headed to different destination and for different reasons. Peter Loose regards a woman across the compartment and thinks to himself,

... we have nothing to do with each other but we make the same little movement every time the train rattles over the tracks, and we got in somewhere at the same time and we’ll probably get out in Berlin at the same time [...]. Yes, he thought, we’re not doing anything, but we’re getting ahead all the same.⁵³

This is the novel’s utopia vision, which Fischer describes as a “being underway together” in a socialist society as a “field of tension” between openness and borders, where “the sum of single movements, each following their own paths, but still striving in a common direction, make for the productivity and social forward movement.”⁵⁴

What is interesting about *Rummelplatz* is that these moments are not sustained, they do not bind the characters to the institutionalities of East German socialism, and they are themselves un-institutionalized. Of the three characters mentioned, Christian Kleinschmidt leaves the mine

⁵² Christina Schwenkel, “The Current Never Stops: Intimacies of Energy Infrastructure in Vietnam,” *Promise of Infrastructure*, 104.

⁵³ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*, 243.

⁵⁴ Fischer, *Dass Hammer und Herzen*, 226.

to study, Peter Loose is arrested at a hot-jazz concert and sent to prison, and Ruth becomes—possibly, since the unfinished novel becomes unclear on this point—the unhappy wife of the dogmatic Party functionary, Nickel. Indeed, the novel closes with the Old Communist activist Fischer lying dead at the foot of a monument to JS Bach, martyred on June 17th by a band of rowdies and fascist provocateurs. He is the dead worker, the question of his legacy the question with which this paper began. The traces that he has left behind, the bloodstains of the antifascist struggle, are illegible to the workers, “again following the false leaders, and why, nothing learnt again, and wherefore, following appearances and not truth.”⁵⁵ It seems that the GDR allows for the posing of the question of liberation, but not for its solution. Both in its devastating critiques of Party dogmatism and narrow-mindedness and in its powerful invocations of the still-fertile womb of German fascism, and I’m taking that somewhat objectionable metaphor from Brecht, *Rummelplatz* seems to suggest that Germany’s catastrophic history with its habitus of domination and servility, the so-called German misery, along with the political economic and gender limits of a utopia of industrial labor, have overtaken the promises of the socialist utopia of labor even at its inception.

Bräunig’s novel figures this impasse less as a political failure than as a historical blockage, and, again, this is rendered through portrayals of the infrastructure of the early GDR. Returning to the train journey passage, we see that Peter Loose’s musings about being underway together can be read in a less utopian vein than implied above:

Except that wasn’t entirely true, because we’ve paid money for it, and we worked for that money. And there are people here working for us, the engine driver, the stoker, and we move only as fast as they keep us going. Of course they can’t do whatever they like either, because they have to stick to a timetable and they can’t just decide to go somewhere else, because there are the rails and the points. [...] So everything depends on something else and nothing’s completely free.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*, 523.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

Here, infrastructure becomes a metaphor of history itself, which as Marx famously wrote, is made by people, “but not just as they please.”⁵⁷ Bräunig’s *Rummelplatz*, then, searches for the fingerprints of Marx’s dead hand of history upon East German socialism. Or, to use Bräunig’s own metaphor: “writing,” Bräunig, a self-styled miner himself, declared at the First Bitterfeld Conference, “is like the work of the miner,” an exploration of the “*unter Tage*,” or “beneath the day,” as the subterranean world of the mine is referred to in German, of living labor capacities in their deep formation by the dead labor of history, a “bringing to light of what secretly germinates,” in the “galleries of life.”⁵⁸ If history does not have a predetermined destination in the sense of the afternoon train to Berlin, it shares the characteristics of interdependence and constraint that Peter Loose ascribes here to “everything.” The Wismut mine becomes the perfect figure for this problem, as an infrastructural trope that is anything but flat, but rather deeply vertical and subterranean.⁵⁹ It is a deeply historical site in the traditional mining region of central Germany that is, like the GDR itself, radically new, an improvised and highly top-down reshaping of the postwar lifeworld, which initially appears to the characters as dirty, shabby, and makeshift, as in the opening pages: “Christian Kleinschmidt thought, So this is Wismut. Barrack blocks, mud, rickety-looking towers at the pitheads, more mud...”⁶⁰ Kleinschmidt is struck by the irony of the technological noncontemporaneity of the work at Wismut, “big talk about nuclear physics. But here were it all starts, they work the face the way it was done two thousand

⁵⁷ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.

⁵⁸ Werner Bräunig, “Greif zur Feder, Kumpel!” in *Ein Kranich am Himmel: Unbekanntes und Bekanntes*, Heinz Sachs, ed. (Halle-Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1981), 355. Bräunig is evoking a trope in socialist literature going back to Vladimir Mayakovsky’s famous lines from “Conversation with A Taxman About Poetry” to the effect that “Poetry / is like mining for radium.” Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Poems*, James H. McGavran III, ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 130.

⁵⁹ On flat models of the social, see Michal Murawski, “Marxist Morphologies: A Materialist Critique of Brute Materialities, Flat infrastructures, Fuzzy Property and Complexified Cities.” *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 82 (2018): 16-34.

⁶⁰ Bräunig, *Rummelplatz*, 7.

years ago. Smash it to bits with pick axe and shovel.”⁶¹ Rather than a site of emancipation, Wismut appears in the novel as a massive assemblage of biopolitical compulsion, as a kind of prison camp,

Tools and machinery lay around in heaps, rusty mine carts, carbide barrels. A tangle of pipes split out from a brick building. The air above the main pithead was trembling. The noise of trucks, winding gears and heavy machinery split down the slopes. Now Christian saw that the main mine workings were surrounded by a fence, higher than a man, topped with a rusty coil of barbed wire. There were watchtowers everywhere. Coming from the barracks, they could see the whole extent of the mine.⁶²

Like labor itself, the mine is figured as, to return to Negt and Kluge’s formulation, a “immense accumulation of prehistoric characteristics,” the yawning abyss of the accumulated dead labor that socialism must put into motion to break with the past, but which again and again asserts its claim.

In *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung* [The Collapse of Modernization], Robert Kurz argues that the unravelling of the state socialist model at the end of the twentieth century presaged the crisis of industrial modernity itself, not least in its market-capitalist mode.⁶³ Read this way, the historical failure to develop an alternative socialist infrastructure plays out in the ongoing wearing down and collapse of our own. Indeed, as Susan Buck-Morss had pointed out,

It could indeed be argued that the Soviet experiment failed because it mimicked the models of Western capitalism too faithfully. In retrospect, one can only imagine how far ahead the Soviet Union would have been today if it had chosen to develop alternative forms of modernization, not those that have led to the ecological disasters and global warming that are so threatening to the planet in our time.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., 93.

⁶² Ibid., 18.

⁶³ Kurz, *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung*, 117.

⁶⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, *Revolution Today* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 25.

Rummelplatz, a novel that shaped East German literature precisely in that it could neither be published or even written in the GDR, a mythical text for the socialist cultural revolution and the critical socialist public sphere that the Bitterfeld program promised but never achieved even before its abrupt foreclosure in the winter of 1965, stands in an exemplary relationship to Buck-Morss's ponderings on what socialist modernity could have been if it had been something else. Wismut, and mining itself, becomes then also a figure for this search for other paths forward in the occulted realms of history. For Negt and Kluge, a socialist practice would entail "a proletarian public sphere" which would be "in the first place the making public of the production process of dead labor in relation to living labor,"⁶⁵ and this proletarian public sphere was precisely blocked in the GDR, even as the transformations of socialism put this project urgently on the agenda by the early 1960s.

⁶⁵ Negt and Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, 102.