

# LIZARDS & FROGS



The interplay of censorship and literary resistance  
in Herta Müller's *Niederungen*

Merlijn Barkema  
Student nr. 6176186  
m.j.barkema@uu.nl

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# Abstract

This thesis answers the question why *Niederungen* by Herta Müller could be published in 1982 and was not blocked by the Romanian censorship, despite its critical content. The answer to this question can be found by studying the interplay of censorship and literary resistance in the text of *Niederungen*. Censorious interventions were prompted by the communist regime in Romania, but took shape through the interactions between various actors. The interactive process gave wiggle room to dissident authors, who reshaped their texts to make use of the ambiguity of the censorship system. Writers could gain knowledge about the workings of the system from their connections. They were thereby able to employ strategies of Aesopian language accordingly and hide their criticism on the totalitarian regime from the censor. *Niederungen* exemplifies that censorship is not only about the text that was removed, but also about the form of the finished work; informed by the rules of censorship and modified by the successful employment of strategies for literary resistance.

# Introduction

A frog that never becomes a prince, but is swallowed by a cloud. Barking parks, hopping broomsticks, tiny tottering men. Taken out of their context, all these things make no sense at all. Yet, in Herta Müller's *Niederungen* absurdities are used to make a poignant political point about her time and place. She wrote the collection of stories around 1980 in Romania, where the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu was in power and normality seemed a distant dream. Under this repressive regime that lasted from 1965 until 1989, it was nearly impossible to speak your mind. Censorship permeated society, from television to music and literature.<sup>1</sup> This was justified, ideologically, by stating that the Romanian regime was opposed to 'bourgeois literature' and materials that were 'anti-democratic, anti-Marxist, or hostile to peace.'<sup>2</sup> Only politically 'correct' texts were allowed.

Some Romanian intellectuals resisted this repression. Compared to other East-European satellite states, however, the opposition was relatively weak and unsuccessful. The statement 'Romanian dissent lives in Paris and his name is Paul Goma' summarises this.<sup>3</sup> Most researchers explain this contrast with other countries under communist totalitarianism by looking at the system and rules that were in place. For example Cristian Vasile names the efficiency of the Securitate as one of the explanations for the lack of rebellion, together with the political culture in Romania.<sup>4</sup> Matei Călinescu gives three reasons for the lack of literary dissent. First and foremost the fear of repression, but also the pressure on dissidents to emigrate and the possibility throughout the Ceaușescu years to publish (essentially) apolitical books.<sup>5</sup>

Although Călinescu takes a step in the right direction, fact remains that most research still focuses on the rules of censorship and their consequences. This is an underestimation of the agency authors had in dealing with the system by (re)writing their

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<sup>1</sup> Rada Cristina Irimie, "Daily Life under Communism. The Case of Romania," *SEA - Practical Application of Science* 2 (2014): 1, 274.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Marino, "Romania," in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, ed. Derek Jones (London: Routledge, 2001), 2046.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Shafir, *Romania. Politics, Economics and Society: Political Stagnation and Simulated Change* (London: Frances Pinter Publishers, 1985), 168.

<sup>4</sup> Cristian Vasile, "Propaganda and Culture in Romania at the Beginning of the Communist Regime," in *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, ed. Vladimir Tismăneanu (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), 384; another prominent researcher who defends this position is Dennis Deletant, see for example: Dennis Deletant, "Cheating the Censor: Romanian Writers under Communism," *Central Europe* 6 (2008) 2: 122-171.

<sup>5</sup> Matei Călinescu, "Romanian Literature: Dealing with the Totalitarian Legacy," *World Literature Today* 65 (1991): 2, 245.

texts. Possibilities existed for political writers to publish, if they had an informed network and were adept at hiding their criticism using various textual tactics. Of course the strict system of censorship in Romania and the sanctions of the Securitate made publishing such texts difficult and dangerous, but this does not give a complete image of censorship and literary dissent under the Ceaușescu regime in the 1980s.

It is necessary then, to look at both the top-down pressure from censorship and the bottom-up resistance from literary writers, as I will do in more detail in the first two chapters of this thesis. In the middle ground, the dynamic of the two determines the outcome of censorious interventions. This outcome can be traced in the published book. This text can be like a multi-layered map of the censorship process. If you are lucky, comparison material is available for finding removed words and passages, but even without that, the results of the censorship process can be traced. With knowledge of the tactics of censorship evasion authors employed, we can find these in the text and unpack the criticism hidden under layers of distraction and dubious imagery. The research question of this thesis therefore is, why could a critical, culturally resisting text like *Niederungen* be published in Romania in the 1980s and was it not blocked by the censorship?

The process described above will be the method followed in this thesis for studying *Niederungen*, because the dynamic of censorship and resistance is what explains the successful publishing. The results of the interplay of the mechanisms can be traced in the book. In order to do this, some steps have to be taken first however. The first chapter is an investigation of what censorship is, resulting in a theoretical framework. Chapter 2 explores the strategies of censorship evasion or Aesopian language that authors had at their disposal. How were they able to hide meaning from the censor, but communicate their criticism to the right readers? As it will turn out, many of these strategies could even be used in combination with one another for a strengthening of their effect.

In chapter 3, the shift from theory to practice is made and the daily realities of writers' lives under the Romanian censorship are shown. Special attention is paid to the publication process in the 1980s, the ways to manipulate or circumvent that process and the risks involved in doing that. Subsequently, all the tools and insights provided in the previous chapters are put to use in chapter 4 for the study of *Niederungen*. Here, an attempt is made to explain the criticism on the communist regime *Niederungen* contains and why it was able to get published despite that criticism. Although the life of Herta

Müller and context in which the book was written are considered, the main source of explanation is the literary analysis of *Niederungen*.

My method thus consists of analysing the structure and content of a text published under censorship in order to understand the interplay of censorship and literary resistance. Literary analysis of the text, similar to close reading but informed by theoretical frameworks and historical context, provide the key to do so. Even though this is a 'soft' way of analysing, it is the only way of comprehending the censorious interventions and the reactions they provoked. Interpretation of a censored text is the best approach if you want to get a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of censorship and literary resistance. Working literary analysis into historical research is why this thesis fits the goals of the Humanities Honours Programme, to be exact the interdisciplinary broadening the programme values.

There are various reasons why Romania, and specifically the story collection *Niederungen*, are suitable as a case study. First of all, as chapter 3 will argue, the boundaries of what could and could not be written were obscure in Romania in the 1980s and moved with political shifts. Ambiguity was built into the system. At the same time, the punishments for crossing the lines were relentless, meaning that interactions between actors were crucial in determining the censorship process. This included authors brave enough to make use of the opportunities they had. Apart from that, *Niederungen* is a relevant source, because some removals in the text compared to later editions prove that it went through the official publishing system.

Nonetheless, the stories of the collection tell the reader of repression, economic mismanagement, despair and depict an overall negative worldview. These critiques went against the grain of literature permitted by the communist totalitarianism, so they had to be hidden to various degrees using combinations of textual tactics. Herta Müller's writing style aided this, another reason why the book is compatible with my method of research. Müller's style has been praised by critics and even got her a Nobel prize in 2009 for writing 'with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose'.<sup>6</sup> Although her sentences seem uncomplicated structurally, their true meanings are hidden under the surface, making interpretation of the text necessary in order to make sense of the stories.

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<sup>6</sup> The Nobel Foundation, "Herta Müller - Biographical." *The Nobel Prizes* (Stockholm 2010), <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2009/muller/biographical/>, accessed on Mar 31, 2021.

In short, in this thesis I will argue that researchers have to look at the interaction between both censorship and literary resistance in order to understand the final form of a written text that went through the censorship system. The most useful source for this is the text itself, in this case *Niederungen*, since it contains the results of negotiation between all the actors involved; censors and authors among them. The goal of the author was to communicate their politically precarious opinions to an audience, the goal of the censor was to stop them from doing so. While the prevailing view in research is that in Romania writers preferred to 'get around the system rather than confront it', we must examine the full picture.<sup>7</sup> It must be taken into account that by employing textual strategies, writers could still accomplish their goal of voicing their opinion, albeit encrypted. Dissident authors confronted the system exactly by getting around it.

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<sup>7</sup> Marcel Cornis-Pope, "Critical Theory and the "Glasnost" Phenomenon: Ideological Reconstruction in Romanian Literary and Political Culture," *College Literature* 21 (1994): 1, 132.

# 1. Censorship

## Constricting, constitutive, or both?

What censorship is and, maybe even more importantly, what it is not, has been under scrutiny for as long as there have been authorities trying to suppress dissident, improper or undermining voices. The debate on censorship remains relevant as we can see in current discussions about social media, fake news and polarisation. This chapter traces the main positions in the scholarly debate on what censorship is. After summarising the historiographical development of the field, I will combine elements from different scholars' work to make my own conceptualisation of censorship. In my fourth chapter I will use the insights from the literature on censorship to analyse the way censorship is present in *Niederungen*.

### **From the traditional to the 'new censorship'**

The starting point of the censorship debate is what has been called the 'traditional' or 'Manichean' view on censorship. This interpretation of the term focuses on institutional acts of prohibition, external silencing from 'above', by some kind of authority.<sup>8</sup> This silencing can be done by preventive censorship, so for example by banning certain books before they are published, or by repressive, post-publication censorship. The prohibitions are always imposed through rules, so formally. This view is nowadays often presented in a caricatural way. Actually, it has been presented with nuance by its defendants and not quite as naive as the scholars who criticise this position suggest.<sup>9</sup>

The traditional view has been challenged by the 'new censorship' scholarship, that based itself on the thought of Michel Foucault. In the 1970s, he changed the focus of the debate with his new view on power. According to Foucault, power is a productive force, constructing knowledge and social practices. Power is disciplinary and works through discursive practices, meaning in short that social norms and behaviour, that what is 'acceptable', is determined by acts of communication that define and construct their subject. This has been translated to the way censorship works.

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<sup>8</sup> Helen Freshwater, "Towards a redefinition of censorship," in *Censorship & Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, ed. Beate Müller (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2004), 218.

<sup>9</sup> Freshwater, "Towards a redefinition of censorship," 218.



Advocates of 'new censorship' see censorship as something more complex than had been thought before. Researchers such as Nora Gilbert, Richard Burt and Annette Kuhn are interested in constitutive forms of speech control, meaning they look at the ways texts are shaped from the inside out by not only censorship rules, but mainly social forces or taboos.<sup>10</sup> These are in a way part of Foucault's disciplinary power. Scholars who refer to censorship's constitutive nature draw on Foucault heavily by seeing censorship as a productive network of powers, consisting of complex interrelationships between censors and the censored.<sup>11</sup>

Besides Foucault, 'new censorship' scholarship has taken inspiration from philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler. They have asserted that selection is inherent to all communications; saying one thing means leaving something else unsaid.<sup>12</sup> The combination of all these insights has led to a more complex understanding of censorship. We now have more distinctions in kinds of censorship than just preventive or repressive. Both of these forms of censorship focus on the prohibiting of an 'original' text that was uncensored before the silencing by an outside authority. Now, the most important difference made is between regulative and constitutive censorship. The idea of the latter being that no text is uncensored. As Michael Holquist has stated: 'Censorship is. One can only discriminate among its more and less repressive effects.'<sup>13</sup>

Apart from the forms of censorship added to the definition of the term, some scholars have stressed the fact that, since censorship is a structural necessity, it should not be seen as a bad thing. The antithesis between the children of the light defending free speech and the darkness of censorship that the 'Manichean' view of censorship is named after, dissolves in this new view. Stanley Fish is one of these scholars, as becomes abundantly clear from the title of his monograph *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech...and it's a good thing too*. He argues that all texts are generated by a process of

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<sup>10</sup> See: Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925* (London: Routledge, 1988); Richard Burt, "(Un)censoring in detail: The Fetish of Censorship in the Early Modern Past and the Postmodern Present," in *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation*, ed. Robert Post (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1998) 17-42; Nora Gilbert, *Better Left Unsaid: Victorian Novels, Hays Code Films, and the Benefits of Censorship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Freshwater, "Towards a redefinition of censorship," 221.

<sup>12</sup> Nicole Moore, "Introduction," in *Censorship and the Limits of the Literary: A Global View*, ed. Nicole Moore (Bloomsbury: New York, 2015), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Holquist, "Corrupt Originals: The Paradox of Censorship," *PMLA* 109 (1994): 1, 16.

exclusion and selection and that it is therefore useless to separate freedom of speech as a category.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, with the concepts of constructive and productive censorship, a whole new line of investigation has been opened, letting go of traditional moral frames of reference and instead concentrating on implicit structures of silencing. Sue Curry Jansen for instance has taken up this new way of defining censorship:

My definition of the term encompasses all socially structured proscriptions or prescriptions which inhibit or prohibit dissemination of ideas, information, images, and other messages through a society's channels of communication whether these obstructions are secured by political, economic, religious, or other systems of authority. It includes both overt and covert proscriptions and prescriptions.<sup>15</sup>

From her definition it becomes clear that censorship basically exists anywhere there is communication, since constraints and social codes are present all through society. This inclusivity solves some problems, namely that censorship is not just obvious intervention by an authority after the creation of a text, but creates a new one. In this definition, what is not censorship? How can social codes and aggressive oppression belong to the same concept, without that concept becoming an empty umbrella term?

### **Separating the constricting from the constitutive**

The criticism that the 'new censorship' runs the risk of eroding the meaning of censorship has been voiced by Beate Müller in 2004. She finds the addition of the constitutive element to the definition misleading, 'because it runs the risk of equating very different forms of control by confusing censorship with social norms affecting and controlling communication.'<sup>16</sup> Instead of being useful, the broad definition could become 'cheap currency', the identification of censorship everywhere a hindrance to analysis. Her proposition is to narrow the term again, to include only cases in which there is authoritarian control over what reaches the public sphere by someone other than the sender and the intended receiver of a message, operating through regulation, institutionalisation and administration of the control procedures in place.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Darnton, *Censors at Work. How States Shaped Literature* (London: The British Library, 2014), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Freshwater, "Towards a redefinition of censorship," 219.

<sup>16</sup> Beate Müller, "Censorship and Cultural Regulation: Mapping the Field," in *Censorship & Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, ed. Beate Müller (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2004), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Müller, "Censorship and Cultural Regulation," 12.

Beate Müller thus wants to bring back the definition to its roots, but does see a role for the other, constitutive, forms of speech control in research. She argues that scholars should pay more attention to differences between censorship and other examples of discourse regulation, such as self-regulation and social control.<sup>18</sup> Instead of uniting these under the term 'censorship', she suggests adopting Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance for the analysis of different forms of cultural regulation.<sup>19</sup> This is not only a solution for what is and is not censorship, but also for the historical contingency of it. By speaking of family resemblances, analysis becomes flexible enough to encompass different kinds of censorship, its historical developments and local variants, without glossing over the differences or losing track of its key characteristics.<sup>20</sup>

Another proposed solution to the problem in defining censorship comes from Robert Darnton. To prevent a 'meaningless' definition that 'would erase all distinctions', Darnton suggests embracing both the Manichean and the 'new censorship' view, but lifting them to another, 'anthropological' or ethnographic level of analysis.<sup>21</sup> He further describes this way of looking at censorship as a system of control, present throughout society, but always in the hands of the state.<sup>22</sup> From the top down, it pervades institutions, influences human relations and even manages to invade people's souls.<sup>23</sup> With his holistic, anthropological approach, Darnton refuses to give a strict definition as Müller does. He narrows the wielding of censorship down to the state, but pays more attention to the wider impact of censorship on society, relations and individuals.

A similar tendency can be seen in the article 'Towards a redefinition of censorship' by Helen Freshwater. She puts more emphasis on the experience of the censored author or artist, something according to her concepts of censorship often fail to acknowledge.<sup>24</sup> Theories on censorship should allow more space for specific cases, and specific victims, by working with provisional conclusions. To that effect, more attention should be paid to the historical specificity of censorship. She sees how different types of censorship stem from decisions made by censorious agents and the interaction between them.<sup>25</sup> This means Freshwater moves away from the focus on political censorship or even just the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Darnton, *Censors at Work*, 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>24</sup> Freshwater, "Towards a redefinition of censorship," 217.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 223.

state. Her proposal is similar to Müller's idea of family resemblances, with the important distinction that for Freshwater the different kinds of cultural control and silencing can be united under the term 'censorship', while for Müller they cannot.

Based on the different threads in the debate on censorship, I will use a theoretical framework that draws inspiration from Müller, Darnton and Freshwater. Censorship in my view is done by an authority, often the state, attempting to silence dissident voices. This control is instigated from the top down, but realised through numerous processes. These processes are negotiated between various censorious agents, with each interaction possibly altering the process or end result. The consequences of the censorship process are profound, even reaching into people's minds and souls. Self-censorship for protection or as an effect of internalised regulations is in its own way part of the top-down control mechanisms. State rules thus do not affect a work of literature directly, but indirectly, through ministries, managers, censors or sometimes even the interpretation of the author himself. The different ways texts are censored have to be combined in one framework and seen in their historical context to understand how censorship shapes communication.

This theoretical framework will be useful for studying Romanian censorship in chapter 3 and the ways *Niederungen* was censored in chapter 4. Before moving to the historical context of Romania, the next chapter will first investigate literary resistance, the opposing force of censorship. It has already been established that many kinds of speech control mechanisms exist and that censorship is a process of negotiation between various actors. These negotiations between actors helped to make censorship something that could be evaded. I will investigate with what strategies authors can circumvent and avoid regulative censorship.

## 2. Smoke and mirrors

### The mechanisms of literary resistance

A widespread practice in East-Central Europe during communism was ‘writing for the drawer’, a phrase used for authors who wrote literature that was unacceptable to the state-controlled publishing system. These writings were kept in a drawer until the freedom to publish them returned. However, many writers did not accept this fate and looked for ways to circumvent censorship using literature’s capacity for ambiguity, allegory and allusion. They hid criticism between the lines of their text or left enough room for interpretation to avoid the often serious repercussions of dissent using Aesopian language. This means a text is written in such a way that it includes authors and readers in the same interpretive community, while excluding censors. You can only understand the true meaning of the text if you are ‘in the know’.

In this chapter, the mechanism of literary resistance is researched through the tactics writers of literary fiction could employ to avoid a censorious intervention by the authorities. First, possible strategies within the text are examined using the framework of Violeta Kelertas, who specialises in Soviet Lithuanian literature and criticism. This framework is an overview of the most prominent forms of Aesopian language.<sup>26</sup> In my discussion, I will make some suggestions to for improvement, so that the framework is the most suited to my case study. To illustrate the broad employability of the tactics I will use examples from (mainly Eastern European) prose fiction, poetry and plays. The discussed strategies for writing otherwise banned literature will show how people could take advantage of any latitude in the strict publishing systems of totalitarian states, as authors in Romania could.

#### **Evasion strategies in the text**

Kelertas gives seven categories of Aesopian language for hiding political meaning to get a literary work past the censor. Her first textual strategy is historical displacement: the transposition of the present to a safely distant historical moment that readers can decode

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<sup>26</sup> Violeta Kelertas, “Strategies against censorship in Soviet Lithuania 1944-1990,” in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. 3, *The Making and Remaking of Literary Institutions*, ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 131-134.

as a commentary about the present because of its similarity to their conditions.<sup>27</sup> In some cases, authors use an undefined setting or imaginary place and time to the same ends. Therefore, displacement in my opinion is not necessarily historical. This is exemplified by Václav Havel's play *Zahradní slavnost* (The Garden Party, 1963) about a man who successfully adapts to an absurd bureaucratic system after visiting a garden party with officials. Place nor time are defined, but the play is recognisable as a commentary on communist rule: two characters speak in language that seems to come straight from Soviet propaganda, linking the imaginary setting to the audience's present.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, censorship can be avoided through gaps and elisions. A reader who understands the author's point of view can fill these in. Romanian writer Ana Blandiana takes this tactic to extremes in her poem *Totul* (Everything, 1984). The whole poem reads like a grocery list, Blandiana sums up various elements of daily life under the communist dictatorship. Her choice of words is meaningful, because she contrasts recognisable pain points for Romanians with propaganda clichés. For example 'tin cans' is meaningless out of the context, but actually criticises food shortages: canned food often was the only thing left in the store. The phrase 'well known portraits' seems neutral as well, but points to the portraits of the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu all over the streets and media, and is oblique criticism on the personality cult surrounding him.<sup>29</sup>

According to Kelertas, a third method is magic realism. This genre entails possibilities for criticism or hidden didactics. It adds magic subtext to recognisable, visibly real daily lives of people, making it unclear what of the text is serious or 'real'.<sup>30</sup> As with Kelertas' first point, I would like to suggest a broadening. Magic realism is not the only genre that can conceal criticism. A genre like comedy achieves the same effect in a different way. Writers of dark comedies for instance inflated the strict conventions of socialist realism to such extremes that they became 'unreal' and ridiculous, making it hard to take the text or the official conventions seriously.<sup>31</sup> Genre could also help to avoid such

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<sup>27</sup> Kelertas, "Strategies against censorship," 132.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Trenskey, "Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 13 (1969): 1, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Ana Blandiana, Chrisula Stefanescu and Inta Moriss-Wiest, "Everything," [1984] *The Iowa Review* 21 (1991) [1984]: 2, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Hart, "Magical Realism: Style and Substance," in *A Companion to Magical Realism*, ed. Stephen Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2005), 3.

<sup>31</sup> Cristina Șandru, "A Bakhtinian Poetics of Subversion: The Magical Realist Fiction of the 1980s in East-Central Europe," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 50 (2008): 1, 22.

conventions altogether, as Romanian writer Nina Cassian explains in an interview about why she chose to write for children:

The first children's book I wrote was not really written by choice but from necessity. It was in 1950, during the dogmatic period in Romania. Socialist realism was, unfortunately, characterized by the restraining of structures and styles and vocabulary. (...) I tried to do my best, but after awhile, I switched to literature for children because it was the only field where metaphors were still allowed, where imagination was tolerated and assonance was permitted.<sup>32</sup>

As she makes clear, genre does not only define how the readers, including the censor, understand a text, but also to which conventions an author is bound.

Another strategy is the reduction from a macro to a micro structure and vice versa, hiding what the actual subject of the narrative is. A prime example of this is the novel *Morčata* (The Guinea Pigs, 1973) by the Czech Ludvík Vaculík.<sup>33</sup> In this novel, omnipresent corruption is presented as an inescapable consequence of living in a totalitarian society.<sup>34</sup> This theme is brought to the fore through the story of one man: Vašek, a bank clerk and family man. At work, the bank clerks are untrustworthy: they regularly steal money without being punished. At home, Vašek starts to experiment on and finally torture the guinea pig he bought for his son, revealing his own corrupted nature. This story thus makes the corruption under totalitarianism doubly visible in an absurd and coded way, on a micro scale.

Fifth, the questioning of grand narratives can be a hidden criticism in works of literature prone to censorship. Communist states depended on all-encompassing stories to legitimise their power. Authors could expose the falseness of these narratives, either by writing texts that debunk one communist myth or more radically by thematising the impossibility of extracting 'the truth' from multiple stories and perspectives. That would be inherently political, because in doing that the author would expose the ideological interventions in reality and contradict official representations.<sup>35</sup> This resistance would

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<sup>32</sup> Geraldine DeLuca and Roni Natov, "Writing Children's Literature in Romania: An Interview with Nina Cassian," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 10 (1986): 108-109.

<sup>33</sup> Ludvík Vaculík, *The Guinea Pigs*, trans. Káča Poláčková (New York: Third Press, 1973 [1970]).

<sup>34</sup> Bronislava Volek, "The Guinea Pigs by Ludvík Vaculík: Codes, Metaphors, and Compositional Devices," *Slavic Review* 43 (1984): 1, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Şandru, "A Bakhtinian Poetics," 28.

easily be obfuscated in a work of literature that includes the party line as well as doubtful or even contradicting voices.

Moreover, criticism can be obscured through the presentation of facts by an unreliable narrator. The author is with this strategy exempted from blame in the case of accusations, because he could always claim the contested things he wrote don't reflect his own views, but are only a consequence of the unreliability of the narrator. One example of an unreliable narrator can be found in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), in which the narrator is a paedophile and has a history of stays in psychiatric institutions.<sup>36</sup> While mental instability is one factor that can make a narrator unreliable, there are many more, such as age, intoxication or distance in time from an event memorised.

The last strategies of Aesopian language from Kelertas' framework are subtexts and intertexts. Subtexts are implicit meanings you can only get from reading between the lines and are therefore difficult to identify, especially if your background and views are not the same as the author's. For an example of this we can look back to *Totul*, with its gaps that have to be filled in by the knowledge of the reader. Intertexts are references to other texts that draw on a shared cultural frame of reference.<sup>37</sup> All works of literature are reliant on other texts in a way, for instance when they play with genre conventions or use a common trope, but dissident authors can use intertextual referencing consciously to only let the readers who share their standpoint know the real meaning.

Apart from connections with other texts, connections within the text can also be added by the author to disguise criticism. In the existing theoretical framework these are missing. Therefore, I would like to suggest adding image linkages as a strategy of Aesopian language. These are described by Beverley Driver Eddy as 'thematic guides throughout the work' that 'provide a key to the apparently random ordering of scenes' and 'underscore the main themes' using repetition and variation.<sup>38</sup> They can create layers of meaning on their own, provide direction to the reader or be as a key to understanding other textual strategies. A censor would have to pay very close attention to catch the meaning that comes from the connection between seemingly random imagery, while a

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<sup>36</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 2006 [1955]).

<sup>37</sup> Kelertas, "Strategies against censorship," 134.

<sup>38</sup> Beverley Driver Eddy, "A Mutilated Fox Fur: Examining the Contexts of Herta Müller's Imagery in *Der Fuchs war Damals schon der Jäger*," in *Herta Müller*, ed. Brigid Haines and Lyn Marven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90.



recurring image would stand out immediately to someone who understands the position of the author and is a part of their interpretative community.

To summarise, many possible forms of evading censorship enable literary resistance. Within the text, using displacement, gaps and elisions, translation to a micro or macro structure and subtexts can hide from the censor what exactly is being criticised. Authors can also question grand narratives in general to make their point without overstepping boundaries. Furthermore, intertextual references or writing within a specific genre can help a dissenting writer to evade censorship while using their voice against the authorities. Image linkages could be used to supplement or complement the other strategies an author chose to use.

Now that the opposing mechanisms of censorship and literary resistance have been discussed, it is time to shift from the theoretical debate to the daily realities of Romanian writers. Among themselves, they called these strategies of Aesopian language 'lizards' and used their connections to use them most effectively against the censorship system.<sup>39</sup> In chapter 3 it will become clear in what way and to what extent textual strategies were helpful to Romanian authors under the Ceaușescu regime in the 1970s and 1980s. How did the implementation of these strategies work in practice, what criticism were they supposed to hide and how did authors know when to use which strategy? The framework of textual strategies will be referenced in chapter 3 but is particularly useful for chapter 4, where it will be the skeleton of my analysis of *Niederungen*.

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<sup>39</sup> Lidia Vianu, *Censorship in Romania* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998), 137.

### 3. 'The secret police of the word'

#### Censorship and its sanctions under the Ceaușescu dictatorship

How can you write in a land where even typewriters are under control of the government? And how can you write truthfully if not only your wellbeing, but also that of your family, friends and neighbours is under threat? This chapter explores how the fine-meshed net of censorship functioned in communist Romania in the 1970s and 1980s. It will be shown that the Romanian censorship apparatus was strict and inherently ambiguous. This made the system difficult to understand, but also created holes in the net that authors could take advantage of. The ordeals of three authors are woven through this chapter, in order to keep sight on the impact of the historical developments in publishing and punishment on author's lives. These authors are Norman Manea, Dan Verona and Ana Blandiana. The information about them is based on an autobiographical essay in the case of Manea, and interviews from 1991 conducted by Lidia Vianu in the cases of Verona and Blandiana.<sup>40</sup>

Their experiences indicate that there were possibilities, but also definite perils when attempting literary dissent in Ceaușescu's Romania. Censorious interventions existed in many shapes and forms, some more far-reaching than others. The most common measure was removal of parts of the text, anything from a word to an entire chapter, followed in occurrence by the more drastic rejection of the entire text.<sup>41</sup> If some material had escaped the attention of the censor, withdrawal from circulation was a logical step. This could be accompanied by a ban of an author's oeuvre, a show trial or an 'unmasking,' discrediting an author in public.<sup>42</sup> The secret police or Securitate was responsible for these corrections when a critical book had been published. Attention will therefore be given to this organisation as well, after an exploration of the functioning of censorship and the publishing system.

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<sup>40</sup> Vianu, *Censorship in Romania*, Dan Verona 169-188 and Ana Blandiana 132-139; Norman Manea, *On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992).

<sup>41</sup> Marino, "Romania," 2047.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

## Censorship in communist Romania

Romania has a long history of censorship, divided into phases with varying levels of restraint.<sup>43</sup> When Nicolae Ceaușescu rose to power as general secretary in 1965, there was a thaw in censorship, instigated by the end of the Russian occupation. Under his rule, however, a turn was made with the July Theses of 1971. Most historians see the theses or ‘mini-cultural revolution’ as an aftereffect of Ceaușescu’s visit to China and North Korea, where he was inspired by the social engineering and personality cults.<sup>44</sup> An index of prohibited books and authors was re-established and the Council for Culture and Socialist Education became the administering body for censorship.<sup>45</sup> Where in the 1960s ‘writers could at least negotiate with the censorship,’ in the words of writer and dissident Paul Goma, censorship was intensified and its bureaucracy extended in the 1970s.<sup>46</sup> The anthropologist Katherine Verdery characterises this shift as one ‘from a politics of incipient reform to one of ideological control.’<sup>47</sup>

Given this strict system of control, it might come as a surprise that in 1977, the ‘Conducător’ Ceaușescu announced the abolishment of censorship.<sup>48</sup> In reality, it was only the replacement of one system of control by another. Instead of imposing policy from above, the Party seemed to count on self-censorship. The idea was that the internalised ideological control – the conditioned ideas of three decades of totalitarian rule – taken together with mutual surveillance and a fear of sanctions would be enough to replace the professional censors.<sup>49</sup> De facto the censorship was transferred from bureaucrats to the artists themselves: publishers, editors and authors were held accountable as individuals and in their collective committees for what appeared.<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, although not surprisingly, autobiographical accounts from writers like Norman Manea show that the Council for Culture and Socialist Education still was very much involved in controlling the literary sphere. On top of that, the old censors were

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<sup>43</sup> For a good periodisation, see: Adam J. Sorkin, “The Paradox of the Fortunate Fall: Censorship and Poetry in Communist Romania,” *The Literary Review* 45 (2002): 4, 888-910.

<sup>44</sup> Sorkin, “The Paradox,” 888; Andru Chiorean, “Inside the Romanian Communist Party Apparatus: An Anatomy of the Institution of Censorship in the 1960s,” (master’s thesis submitted to the Central European University History Department, 2009), 34.

<sup>45</sup> Marino, “Romania,” 2046.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995), 114.

<sup>48</sup> Chiorean, “Inside the Romanian Communist Party Apparatus,” 7.

<sup>49</sup> Marino, “Romania,” 2047.

<sup>50</sup> Chiorean, “Inside the Romanian Communist Party Apparatus,” 29.

absorbed by the new system and given positions where they could still exert control, indicating that the claimed abolishment of censorship actually meant a duplication of its mechanisms.<sup>51</sup> Speech control diversified and became a mixture of controlling institutions and individuals censoring themselves or their colleagues. This 'strategy of control through co-optation' was quite effective, even more so because of the vagueness of the system.<sup>52</sup> Nobody really knew what was allowed and what not, and most Romanians were unwilling to explore the limits and risk sanctions.

Following a period of tight restrictions, the Romanian censorship system in the late 1970s and 1980s thus was an entanglement of different censorious agents with their own interests and fears, exemplifying the insight from chapter 1 that censorship is defined by interactions. In 1977, the 'abolishment' of the censorship apparatus made the publishing system inherently ambiguous. Parts of the apparatus remained, while at the same time, accountability officially shifted to lower levels of literary production. This put pressure on for example editors, who now had to decide if they wanted to take the risk of publishing texts that went against the party line. Since there were officially no rules, nobody knew when they could expect to be punished for breaking them. This led to cautiousness, but also brought opportunities for those refusing co-optation.

### **Literary dissent: surviving the publishing process**

As with any shift in the system, the change in 1977 was a double-edged sword for dissident authors. On the one hand, some Romanians could make good use of the ambiguity of the system. This was especially the case for established authors, who could make use of their network. They were not only better assimilated into the system, but also kind of celebrities, which gave them leeway with the censors and the opportunity to flirt with taboo subjects and styles.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, the strategy of co-optation meant that building a network of confidantes was harder. Everyone involved was held accountable if a text slipped through the censorship, not to speak of the ubiquity of Securitate informers.

Connections in the literary world could be of great help, even in the very first stages of publishing. It could take years for a literary work to go through the system of censorship in communist Romania, during which the political situation and thus what you were

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>52</sup> Cristina Petrescu and Dragoş Petrescu, "Resistance and Dissent under Communism: the Case of Romania," *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* 4 (2005): 2, 338.

<sup>53</sup> Sorkin, "The Paradox," 892.

allowed to write, could change. The first step for an author was to find an editor, who could place their work on a list of suggestions for the publication plan. Then, the editor and author worked together to guess what the censors would object to in the book. This meant that the editor could be either the first external censor or a valuable accomplice in publishing a book.

The Romanian poet Dan Verona has written about the help from his editor in the publishing process of his manuscript *Dați ordin să înflorească magnolia* (Order the Magnolias to Bloom, 1977), the title of which already was a daring hint to the dictatorship. His favoured editor, Alexandru Paleologu, was forced to retire during the process, almost leaving Verona without one. No one wanted to 'get into trouble.'<sup>54</sup> Luckily, his manuscript was taken over by Florin Mugur, an editor with a reputation as 'rescuer of books.'<sup>55</sup> Verona and Mugur went over the manuscript of *Dați ordin să înflorească magnolia* to make it acceptable to the censorship, applying strategies of Aesopian language. Together, editor and author tried to determine how cryptic the poems had to be in order to be published, what strategies or lizards would be the most effective and how much of the original had to be sacrificed.

Dan Verona and his editor mainly aimed for the strategy of displacement. They inserted allusions to the West, by ending some critical poems with 'Paris, 1970'.<sup>56</sup> The word 'subway' is added in places as well, another reference to Western reality. A disadvantage of this strategy was, that it was historically dependent. One had to be well aware of current politics and plans for the immediate future. For example adding 'subway' did not work anymore when plans for the Bucharest subway substantiated. If something went wrong in the steel industry, you could not write about steel and so on.<sup>57</sup> Apart from employing the textual strategies, an editor could also be helpful in their writing of the report on the book or poems. This report gives an interpretation of the manuscript – if the author is lucky an optimistic one – and has to be signed by the head of the publishing house before the book can be sent to official censorship.

When a manuscript went to official censorship, there usually was a back-and-forth between the publishing house and the Council for Culture and Socialist Education. This could be a long process, as the case of Norman Manea's *The Black Envelope* (1986) proves.

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<sup>54</sup> Vianu, *Censorship in Romania*, 170.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 187.

The main obstacle for him was the fact that, since censorship was officially abolished, he was not able to get a censor's report when the majority of his manuscript was marked as unacceptable. The results of the reports were given to the head of the publishing house, not to the author, 'who was thus unable to hold a dialogue with the (nonexistent) institution or the (invisible) censor'.<sup>58</sup> Fortunately, his publisher brought him into contact with a 'consultant', a former censor who would write a substitute report with modifications that would make the text acceptable for the censor's office.

This report offered some tricks and rhetoric to the author, so that he and the editor could work out a strategy of complicity and get the book published.<sup>59</sup> The content of this substitute report shows exactly what duplicitous messages a censor decoded or imagined in Manea's book. The book suggested a resurgence of fascism, while according to the regime there never was support for the fascist movement in Romania.<sup>60</sup> It also gave a negative image of daily life, which went against propaganda that life was worse in the West. Specific changes – including page numbers – are suggested among other things for images of dirty streets, shortages and caricatures of political language.<sup>61</sup> Manea had attempted to use displacement as a way to hide the criticism of his daily life, but the substitute censor saw right through this.<sup>62</sup>

Knowledge like this was crucial for authors to be able to reshape their texts and make sure they survived the system. If the text came through official censorship (altered or not), it could be sent to the printers for a first copy, that had to be sent to the Council again. The first copy also went to the publishing house, that sent another copy to the Council. At any point in this process, censorious interventions could still be made. To avoid more removals or even rejection of the text, writers tried to make things run smoothly by finding out where the book was sent, contacting the printers and perhaps bribing them.<sup>63</sup> When the first copy was printed, the author could not do much more than wait until the book appeared in the bookstores and hope it was not cancelled after all, with the official reason 'No paper.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Manea, *On Clowns*, 70.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 76-78.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>63</sup> Vianu, *Censorship in Romania*, 177.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 174.

Could authors not avoid this tedious negotiation and surpass the official channels of publication? In Romania, as in other Central-European countries, there were options for underground dissemination of texts. The first of these is called *samizdat* ('publishing on one's own') and entails self-publishing, the clandestine copying of banned literature.<sup>65</sup> This could be done with primitive printing machines, typewriters or even by hand. The second is *tamizdat* ('publishing there'), referring to publishing literature abroad using an intricate transnational network of actors such as smugglers, publishers, translators and émigrés.<sup>66</sup> The stakes and the risks were high in both cases however, making them unattractive as alternatives to the official system. Home searches complicated self-publishing, and all Romanians living abroad were automatically censored. Furthermore, writers who published abroad had the rest of their work banned.<sup>67</sup>

Attempts to publish abroad were made nonetheless, among others by Herta Müller. At the time of the *tamizdat* attempt, Müller was already being shadowed by agents of the Securitate. This meant that contacts with international actors had to be discrete. To meet the German editor of Rotbuch Verlag about *Niederungen*, an elaborate plan was necessary. Müller and the editor would travel separately posing as skiers and meet at Poiana Braşov, a ski resort. The ruse only partly worked; on the way Herta Müller was threatened and forced to hand over her train ticket and ID by Securitate agents.<sup>68</sup> This shows the vulnerable position of authors that wanted to publish abroad; every meeting was a risk. Fortunately, Müller had avoided much worse consequences by giving the manuscript to her husband before the trip.<sup>69</sup> Eventually the original *Niederungen* manuscript reached Germany through a friend.<sup>70</sup>

To summarise, Romanian authors in the 1970s and 1980s were pressured to write optimistic texts, but had little reason for optimism themselves. Many steps had to be taken by authors who wanted to get published, since alternatives to the official system were incredibly risky. First of all finding an editor and, secondly, going over the text with them. Then, the editor's report had to be signed by the head of the publishing house. The fourth step was official censorship by the Council for Culture and Socialist Education. After that,

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<sup>65</sup> Thomas Lindenberger, "Foreword," in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism*, ed. Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), xii.

<sup>66</sup> Lindenberger, "Foreword," xii.

<sup>67</sup> Marino, "Romania," 2047.

<sup>68</sup> Herta Müller, *Cristina und ihre Attrappe oder Was (nicht) in den Akten der Securitate steht* (Göttingen: Wallstein 2009), 22.

<sup>69</sup> Müller, *Cristina und ihre Attrappe*, 22.

<sup>70</sup> Barbara Taferner, "Der fremde Blick in Herta Müllers Werk," *Germanistische Beiträge* 26 (2010): 71.

the manuscript was sent around to the actors involved, from the printers to the publisher and the censors. During all of these steps, connections could bring badly needed help to navigate the process. In the cases of Dan Verona and Norman Manea, people from their network helped with the effective employment of codes. These were a necessary tool to protect the criticism for the readers, while hopefully deceiving the Council for Culture and Socialist Education and other censorious agents.

### **The Securitate**

A major role for discovering and punishing this kind of deceit and other types of dissident behaviour was played by the secret police, officially called the State Security Department but better known as the Securitate. It was a key instrument in establishing and keeping control for the Romanian dictatorship and according to Claudia Moscovici ‘the main way in which they kept their people living in fear, for their well-being if not actually their lives.’<sup>71</sup> Founded in 1948, the Securitate grew to be one of the largest secret police forces in Eastern Europe relative to the population of the country, not even including the approximately half a million informants.<sup>72</sup>

The organisation kept an especially watchful eye on Romanians who had any kind of contact with the West or expressed nonconformist political views, such as dissident writers.<sup>73</sup> Its possibilities for spying on, threatening, assaulting and otherwise harming people were unimaginably far-reaching. The secret police had installed hidden microphones in every telephone sold in Romania by 1977, for example, causing writers like Herta Müller to keep their phones in the fridge in attempt to avoid being overheard.<sup>74</sup> There were more impactful aspects of the secret police however. The Securitate searched the houses of suspect people, making *samizdat* and even writing for the drawer a dangerous practice. Another branch of the State Security Department controlled all travel and emigration in and out of Romania.<sup>75</sup> There are also cases of assault, the children of dissident intellectuals being beaten.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Claudia Moscovici, *Velvet Totalitarianism: Post-Stalinist Romania* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 14.

<sup>72</sup> Moscovici, *Velvet Totalitarianism*, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.; Valentina Glajar, “Essays,” in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 95.

<sup>75</sup> Moscovici, *Velvet Totalitarianism*, 14.

<sup>76</sup> Călinescu, “Romanian Literature,” 246.



The system of sanctions consisted of a wide range, including everything from ‘a cup of coffee with my interrogator,’ as Ludvík Vaculík ironically called the absurdist questioning practices of the communist secret police, to imprisonment or even staged suicides.<sup>77</sup> The justification for these reprisals was in the case of dissident writers often not their actions against the communist regime. Oftentimes, they were supposedly being sanctioned for such crimes as sexual deviance, trumped-up charges of rape, drug possession, or other morally disqualifying deeds.<sup>78</sup> These allegations could be part of one of the aforementioned ‘show trials,’ or of a less public whisper campaign that made use of informants in the victim’s personal network. Colleagues, family members and friends were offered incentives to ‘cooperate’ with the Securitate; this meant becoming an informant and making often false and exaggerated allegations to incriminate the dissident in question.<sup>79</sup>

Ana Blandiana, who is considered one of the most prominent voices against the dictatorship in the 1980s, has personally experienced punishment for her writing when she was interdicted in 1988.<sup>80</sup> Her works were removed from all libraries and all books in the publishing process that even mentioned Ana Blandiana were cancelled.<sup>81</sup> Apart from that, she was put under surveillance. A Securitate agent was waiting in a car outside her house constantly, making a point of being seen while they were listening. This caused the neighbours to stop visiting, they were terrified of the car. Blandiana was socially isolated and did not dare to speak louder than a whisper in her own house.<sup>82</sup>

This combination of sanctions is a great example of the State Security Department tactics in the later stage of Ceaușescu’s dictatorship. Instead of relying on terror, like in the 1950s and 1960s, the way the Securitate worked enforced the strategy of co-optation that was adopted in the 1970s and 1980s. If a writer found loopholes in the censorship system, or if a book that was acceptable earlier became dangerous due to political developments, the Securitate was there to protect the communist regime after all. In the

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<sup>77</sup> Kees Mercks, “Censorship: A Case Study of Bohumil Hrabal’s *Jarmilka*,” in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. 3, *The Making and Remaking of Literary Institutions*, ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 102.

<sup>78</sup> Călinescu, “Romanian Literature,” 246.

<sup>79</sup> Moscovici, *Velvet Totalitarianism*, 15.

<sup>80</sup> Vianu, *Censorship in Romania*, 134.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

sanctioning of dissidents, their literary network and even their entire neighbourhood could be threatened.

The censorship apparatus in the 1980s is a clear example of the 'totalitarian absurd', as Marcel Cornis-Pope has dubbed the strange reality of living under the Romanian dictatorship.<sup>83</sup> As policy shifted from terror to co-optation, censorship was officially abolished. This could give an author more freedom or more uncertainty, depending on their existing connections and their ability to use textual codes. Romania shows 'the unpreventable wiggle room in any system of thought control', but also that this latitude had its conditions and limitations.<sup>84</sup> The holes in the net of censorship could only be used for literary resistance by authors willing to put their work, their life and their network of people at risk of sanctions by the Securitate.

This chapter has thus shown the situation dissident writers in Romania were in when attempting to publish their work. It has also given some practical examples of criticism that was not condoned by censors and the codes Dan Verona and Norman Manea (successfully or unsuccessfully) utilized to hide the relevance of their texts from 'the secret police of the word', as Manea called censorship, as well as from the actual secret police.<sup>85</sup> With these clear ideas of the workings of the publishing system, the possibilities to circumvent it and what was at stake if an author was caught, it is time for a more in-depth case study. In the fourth chapter the knowledge of the Romanian system and the boundaries it provided for dissident writers will be applied to Herta Müller's *Niederungen*, just as the theoretical insights from chapters 1 and 2.

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<sup>83</sup> Cornis-Pope, "Critical Theory," 133.

<sup>84</sup> Sorkin, "The Paradox," 889.

<sup>85</sup> Manea, *On Clowns*, 64.

## 4. Niederungen

Wenn man das Detail ansieht, sieht man zwar nur einen Teil, aber ich glaube, aus diesem Teil heraus sieht man tiefer, als wenn man das Ganze an der Oberfläche sieht. – Herta Müller<sup>86</sup>

It is time to bring together the insights of all previous chapters for the analysis of the primary source of this thesis. It will be demonstrated how the mechanisms of censorship and literary resistance functioned within the context of communist Romania to shape *Niederungen* into the book it became, filled with critiques of society that are hidden in various degrees. This chapter argues that *Niederungen* could be published because of a combination of Herta Müller's good connections in the publishing world and, most importantly, the successful application of censorship evasion strategies. Müller made use of the ambiguity and wiggle room in the Romanian censorship in order to resist against the regime and criticise the daily reality of living under the Ceaușescu dictatorship.

The first part of this chapter provides context on the writing and publication process of *Niederungen*. The publication intensified the persecution of Müller by the Securitate, including extreme invasions of privacy, many interrogations and numerous instances of abuse. Before she published books however, Müller already was of interest to the Romanian authorities. She was connected to dissident literary circles, namely Aktionsgruppe Banat and the Adam Müller-Guttenbrunn Kreis. Her connections were favourable to get *Niederungen* published in 1982, as will become clear. I will also briefly touch upon differences between the Romanian and West-German editions.

What follows is a literary analysis of *Niederungen*. The first part focuses on three themes throughout the stories, as well as the special use of language in *Niederungen*. Then a selection of stories will be analysed more extensively. These have been selected for their points of criticism that would have been relevant to the totalitarian regime and therefore had to be hidden. The focus of my analysis will be the strategies of Aesopian language discussed in chapter 2. Some of these, such as displacement, purposefully hid the setting and relevance to the present time and place from the censors. Others encrypted criticism or made the meaning of a text ambiguous. By employing the theory from previous

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<sup>86</sup> Beverley Driver Eddy, "Die Schule der Angst': Gespräch mit Herta Müller, den 14. April 1998," *The German Quarterly* 72 (1999): 4, 330.

chapters and immersing myself in the background of the stories, I will uncover the textual strategies used in the text and attempt to uncover the political and therefore dangerous criticism *Niederungen* contains.

## CONTEXTS

### **Dissident connections**

When Herta Müller was 15 years old, she went to the city of Timișoara for her studies. Müller herself attributes it to two important aspects of her city life that she later survived the psychological terror of Ceaușescu Securitate: books and likeminded friends.<sup>87</sup> Although she never officially joined the group herself, many of her closest friends were active in Aktionsgruppe Banat. The group had progressive views on literature and politics, especially when contrasted with other Romanian-German writers.<sup>88</sup> The Securitate noticed this, and intervened in 1975. A few members were arrested under the pretence that they wanted to travel abroad illegally and, as fits in the system of co-optation, other members and allies were branded enemies of the state and punished in various degrees.<sup>89</sup>

The disbandment of the group after 1975 did not stop the dissident writers, however. Although the Aktionsgruppe Banat had found its end, many of its former members joined the Adam Müller-Guttenbrunn Kreis in Timișoara. The work they did within this literary circle was tolerated by the state.<sup>90</sup> One possible reason for this is that this group was more mixed and less obviously critical of the Romanian regime. Johann Lippet, who was a member of both literary groups, remembers this time as one of the most productive for the dissident German-Romanian authors.<sup>91</sup> More authors joined, Herta Müller among them. They were able to voice their opinion in readings, even though the audience included informers and, as it later turned out, the room in which they were held was bugged.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Glajar, "Essays," 100.

<sup>88</sup> Jürgen Brokoff, "Herta Müller (2009)," in *Nobelpreisträgerinnen. 14 Schriftstellerinnen im Porträt*, ed. Claudia Olk and Susanne Zepp (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 235.

<sup>89</sup> Fokke Joel and Johann Lippet, "Drangsaliert von der Securitate," *Zeit Online*, last modified Nov. 19, 2010, [https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2010-11/johann-lippet/seite-2?utm\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2010-11/johann-lippet/seite-2?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F), accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Norbert Otto Eke, "Biographische Skizze," in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 6.

<sup>91</sup> Joel and Lippet, "Drangsaliert von der Securitate," [https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2010-11/johann-lippet/seite-2?utm\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2010-11/johann-lippet/seite-2?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F), accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*



Nikolaus Berwanger und die "Aktionsgruppe Banat"

Fotos: N. Gyurcsik

1. Young authors from the Banat in the AMG-Kreis. Left to right: Herta Müller, Helmuth Frauendorfer, William Totok, Nikolaus Berwanger, Horst Samson, Richard Wagner, Rolf Bossert, Werner Söllner und Bettina Gros. Photo: N. Gyurcsik.



2. The awarding of the AMG literature prize in 1983. Left to right: Franz Binder, Herta Müller, Jakob Mihailescu, Horst Samson. From the photo archive of Horst Samson.

## Writing under threat

Around this time, a troublesome period began for Herta Müller, in which she also wrote *Niederungen*. The Securitate approached her at her job as translator in a factory, presumably because of her artistic connections, but Müller refused to collaborate with them.<sup>93</sup> This triggered interventions, such as taking her desk, designed to make Müller co-opt. Müller knew the factory would fire her if she did not show up or work, so she carved out a space for herself on the stairs to work every day from 6:30 until 17:00.<sup>94</sup> Here, she started writing as a kind of coping mechanism:

Ich habe mir die Treppe angeschaut. Angst macht große Augen, die Dinge werden fremd.  
Und weil sie fremd werden, beobachtet man sie genau, beobachten hält auch beschäftigt.  
Und die Beschäftigung hilft. Arbeiten hilft. Und um von sich selbst wegzukommen,  
beschäftigt man sich mit dem Wort Treppe.<sup>95</sup>

As it turned out, the secret police was more inventive than just taking away a desk. Ironically, the Securitate successfully spread the rumour that Herta Müller was an

<sup>93</sup> Eke, "Biographische Skizze," 7.

<sup>94</sup> Susanne Beyer, "»Ich habe die Sprache gegessen«," *Spiegel*, last modified Aug. 26, 2012, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/ich-habe-die-sprache-gegessen-a-dae553c3-0002-0001-0000-000087908042>, accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Beyer, "»Ich habe die Sprache gegessen«," <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/ich-habe-die-sprache-gegessen-a-dae553c3-0002-0001-0000-000087908042>, accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

informer, socially isolating her as a spy, because she refused to be one. This was more impactful than even death threats for Müller, because she felt surrounded and powerless, robbed from her very soul.<sup>96</sup> She lost her job at the factory in February 1980, officially due to 'Individualismus, Nichtanpassung ans Kollektiv und Fehlen sozialistischen Bewußtseins'.<sup>97</sup> Afterwards, the allegations were expanded to criminality. She was accused of being a 'parasitic element' earning her money with prostitution and black market trade.<sup>98</sup> The Securitate interventions inspired Müller to write *Niederungen*. It was a way to reflect on the gap between rumour – or language – and reality she had experienced. The author herself however sees the death of her father, with whom she had a difficult relationship because of his Nazi past, in 1978 as the main reason. Writing was a way to come to terms with herself in a complicated personal and political situation.<sup>99</sup>

### **The publishing process**

Getting *Niederungen* published after writing it turned out to be a long process, despite a few advantageous circumstances. Kriterion, the publishing house of the book, was dedicated to minority languages, one of which was German.<sup>100</sup> Its director from 1970 until 1990 was Géza Domokos. He was known to skirt the edges of what was allowed and was committed to the survival of Kriterion, even when the political tide was against the cultural rights of minorities, causing the Securitate to keep a file on him.<sup>101</sup> Also connected to the publication of *Niederungen* was the editor Rolf Frieder Marmont. According to statements from a friend, Marmont was one of few in the publishing business who wasn't an informant for the Securitate or even member of the communist party.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> "Daß ich nun als Spitzel galt, weil ich mich geweigert hatte, ein Spitzel zu werden, war schlimmer als die Anwerbung und Todesdrohung. [...] Selbst an Todesdrohungen gewöhnt man sich. Sie gehören zu dieser einen Lebensweise, die man hat, weil man keine andere mehr haben kann. Man trotz der Angst bis tief in die Seele. Aber durch die Verleumdung wird einem die Seele geraubt. Man ist nur noch monströs umzingelt. An dieser Ohnmacht erstickt man fast." Müller, *Cristina und ihre Attrappe*, 18-19.

<sup>97</sup> Herta Müller, *Der König verneigt sich und tötet* (München: Hanser, 2003), 153.

<sup>98</sup> Eke, "Biographische Skizze," 8.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>100</sup> Ágnes Kiss, "Documentation Centre – Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities," last modified Feb. 26, 2020, <http://cultural-opposition.eu/registry/?uri=http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n80990>, accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

<sup>101</sup> Kiss, "Documentation Centre," <http://cultural-opposition.eu/registry/?uri=http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n80990>, accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Wolfgang Knopp, "Nachruf auf Rolf Frieder Marmont," *Siebenbürgische Zeitung*, last modified Dec. 4, 2018, <https://www.siebenbuenger.de/zeitung/artikel/interviews/19416-nachruf-auf-rolf-frieder-marmont.html>, accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

The design of the cover is by Edmund Höfer, who was against the communist dictatorship as well and made a whole series of book covers for dissident authors like Herta Müller, Richard Wagner and William Totok at Kriterion.<sup>103</sup> In an interview, Höfer has said he enjoyed translating authors' critical thought into a symbolic cover image.<sup>104</sup> One day, he was picked up by the Securitate and interrogated for hours, until he signed a confession that he had participated in subversive activities and promised to make more 'optimistic' images.<sup>105</sup> These stories of Domokos, Marmont and Höfer show that Kriterion was a publishing house that bravely went against the grain and thus provided a relatively good chance for a critical book like *Niederungen* to make it into print.

The censorship process of *Niederungen* took four years.<sup>106</sup> After that, the book was 'stilistisch entstellt und inhaltlich verkrüppelt' in the words of Herta Müller.<sup>107</sup> Despite this, and many researchers referring to the Romanian edition as 'heavily censored' versus later editions as 'uncensored'<sup>108</sup>, there are few noticeable censorious interventions in the first one in comparison with the West-German edition from 1984. All of these have to do with Russia, replacing 'in Rußland' with 'im fremden Land' or 'im fernen fremden Land' and replacing 'ein Russe' with 'ein Nichtdeutscher'.<sup>109</sup> Other textual differences have to do with spelling or exact phrasing, or are actually sentences, paragraphs, even pages from the Romanian edition that have been cut in the German one.

Apart from these disparities, the selection of stories is different in the Rotbuch than in the Kriterion edition, revealing a distinct emphasis. The stories 'Damals im Mai', 'Inge', 'Herr Wultschmann' and 'Die Meinung' are only printed in the Romanian *Niederungen*, while 'Faule Birnen', 'Drückender Tango' and 'Das Fenster' are excluded. In 1984, 'Faule

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<sup>103</sup> Herta Drozdik-Drexler, "Es kommt nicht nur auf die Kamera an. Gespräch mit dem Presse- und Kunstfotografen Edmund Höfer," [http://laender.freepage.de/cgi-bin/feets/freepage\\_ext/41030x030A/rewrite/banat/hoefer.htm](http://laender.freepage.de/cgi-bin/feets/freepage_ext/41030x030A/rewrite/banat/hoefer.htm), accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

<sup>104</sup> Drozdik-Drexler, "Es kommt nicht nur auf die Kamera an," [http://laender.freepage.de/cgi-bin/feets/freepage\\_ext/41030x030A/rewrite/banat/hoefer.htm](http://laender.freepage.de/cgi-bin/feets/freepage_ext/41030x030A/rewrite/banat/hoefer.htm), accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

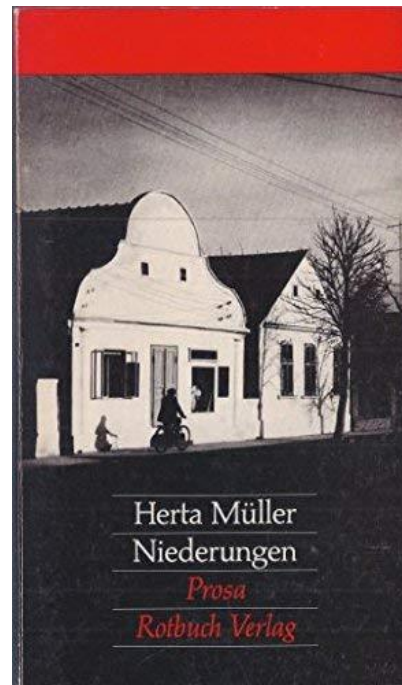
<sup>106</sup> Nadja Marx, "Poetica 6. Herta Müller," last modified Jan. 14, 2020, <https://stellwerk-magazin.de/magazin/artikel/2020-01-14-herta-muller>, accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Herta Müller, *Mein Vaterland war ein Apfelkern. Ein Gespräch mit Angelika Klammer* (München: Hanser 2014), 41. Cited in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 8.

<sup>108</sup> See: Thomas Cooper, "Herta Müller, Between Myths of Belonging," in *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe: A Compendium*, ed. John Neubauer and Borbála Zsuzsanna Török (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 476; Gabriela Glăvan, "A Way of No Return: Flight to the West in Herta Müller's Novels," *Caietele Echinox* 38 (2020): 154.

<sup>109</sup> See: Herta Müller, *Niederungen* (Bucharest: Kriterion, 1982), 75 and Herta Müller, *Niederungen* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1984), 93; 85 (1982) and 11 (1984); 91 (1982) and 116 (1984).

Birnen' and 'Drückender Tango' were printed in Romania after all.<sup>110</sup> Surprisingly enough, the Romanian edition is more political. It concerns itself more with the communist totalitarianism than the German one, that focuses on family life in the Banat. This difference in emphasis is reflected in the cover design, as Wiebke Sievers has also noted in her exploration of the two editions. While the Romanian edition features a frog on the cover, a symbol for social control but also (state) surveillance and repression in *Niederungen*, the cover from Rotbuch shows a picture of a village.<sup>111</sup>



3. The covers of the Romanian edition (left, Kriterion 1982) and the West-German edition of *Niederungen* (right, Rotbuch 1984).

<sup>110</sup> Julia Müller, "Frühe Prosa," in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 14.

<sup>111</sup> Wiebke Sievers, "Von der rumäniendeutschen Anti-Heimat um Inbild kommunistischen Grauens: Die Rezeption Herta Müllers in der BRD, in Großbritannien, in Frankreich und in den USA," in *Local/Global Narratives*, ed. Renate Rechten und Karoline von Oppen (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2007), 302.



## LITERARY ANALYSIS

In this part of the chapter, I will first outline some overarching themes in *Niederungen*.<sup>112</sup> Then I will pay attention to the interesting use of language throughout the book, before presenting a selection of censorship evasion strategies in specific stories. These specific story sections all start with a short summary, before discussing themes within the story and tactics of literary resistance. The stories I have chosen most clearly contain examples of diversion from or disguise for political criticism.

### 1. The cruelties of village life

The brutality of the Romanian Banat is an important theme in *Niederungen*, as Müller sheds light on the dark, dirty, dishevelled parts of the village. In 'Dorfchronik', Müller describes various bleak village scenes and criticises the communist agricultural system: 'Manche Bauern sagen, daß es seit der Verstaatlichung, die im Dorf Enteignung genannt wird, keine richtige Ernte mehr gegeben habe. Seit der Enteignung, sagen die Bauern, ist auch der beste Boden nichts wert' (97). Although the blow is softened by letting the farmers say these criticisms, these words are critical of one of the key policies of communism: redistribution of land. And Müller does not even stop here. In the next part, it is described how the people with power over the land and the state farms are all related in one way or another (97-98).<sup>113</sup>

The negative outlook on rural life and state policies in 'Dorfchronik' and other parts of *Niederungen* did not go unnoticed by the Securitate's German-speaking source 'Voicu'. He was a Romanian-German writer and publisher, who gave the secret police information on Herta Müller and her friends in exchange for money until he emigrated in 1983.<sup>114</sup> In one of the first entries in the released part of Müller's Securitate file, he wrote that the book contained only criticism and more criticism, and asked himself what its purpose was.<sup>115</sup> Apart from 'Dorfchronik', he was appalled by 'Das schwäbische Bad' and 'Meine Familie', that according to him depicted the moral degeneration of Swabian

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<sup>112</sup> All page numbers in brackets in the text of this analysis refer to the Kriterion edition of *Niederungen* (Bucharest 1982).

<sup>113</sup> In the book the abbreviation LPG is used, which means Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft; C. Sporea and K.-E. Wädekin, "Arbeitskräfte in der Landwirtschaft Rumäniens: Gesamtzahlen und Organisation," *Osteuropa* 27 (1977): 3, 227.

<sup>114</sup> Glajar, "Essays," 98.

<sup>115</sup> ACNSAS, FI, Akte 233477, Bd. 1, 5. Cited in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 98.

families in the countryside.<sup>116</sup> Possibly 'Voicu' focused on the negative depictions of Swabians in his report because he as a Romanian-German himself was more offended by these stories than the ones that were more against the totalitarian regime.

Apart from economic hardships and corruption, more private troubles are told in *Niederungen* as well. There is the father, who is an alcoholic, the mother, who is lonely and distant – she hits her child when it cries, with the words 'na, jetzt hast du auch mal endlich einen Grund.' (31) Not much more warmth can be expected from other family members, like the grandfather who gives out warnings such as 'vom Ringelgras wird man dumm, das darf man nicht essen. Und du willst doch nicht dumm werden.' (5) These warnings, the coldness in all the relationships, as well as descriptions of a cruel treatment of animals, bring a negative, tense feel to the reader.

## 2. Shifts and reversals

Beverley Driver Eddy has signified the use of shifts and reversals as a prominent stylistic device in the works of Herta Müller.<sup>117</sup> In *Niederungen*, shifts, but especially reversals are used to depict a world that is out of balance. This is best exemplified by 'Arbeitstag'. The story consists of the description of a working day by a first-person narrator. The whole sequence is twisted however: the narrator puts on their pyjamas in the morning, combs their hair with a tooth brush, gets off the tram three stops before getting on and says goodbye before remaining in the office and working eight hours (125). This signals that a regular day in the Romanian dictatorship was not 'normal' at all, but 'wrong' in a way. Likewise, in 'Die Straßenkehrer' there is a pervasive sense of reverse reality, that appears in the form of barking parks, dreams hiding in the bushes and piles of stars that have been swept from the night sky (104). These kinds of reversals can be found in other stories in *Niederungen*. Especially 'Inge' and 'Die Grabrede' include similar imagery and a similar 'unheimlich' feeling.

## 3. Surveillance and repression

Another overarching theme is surveillance and repression. At the level of the village this mainly takes the shape of social pressure. The common conception of what a Banat-Swabian should be comes across in the book as very tight and religiously guarded. The

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<sup>116</sup> Kiss, "Documentation Centre," <http://cultural-opposition.eu/registry/?lang=en&uri=http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n2504&type=masterpieces>, accessed on Mar. 31, 2021.

<sup>117</sup> Eddy, "A Mutilated Fox Fur," 90.

norms are given to the narrator, a child in most village stories, by anyone that can be regarded as being higher in the social hierarchy: mainly the parents or grandparents. Other disciplining voices are that of Herr Wultschmann in the story that bears his name (121) and the eulogist in 'Der Grabrede' (84). Stories like 'Meine Familie' and 'Der Überlandbus' also point to gossip as a way people were condemned and excluded in the small German community.

A symbol that is tied up with this theme is, as mentioned, the frog. It is mainly linked to this theme in 'Niederungen', where the closest thing to an explanation of the symbol can be found:

Jeder hat bei der Einwanderung einen Frosch mitgebracht. Seitdem es sie gibt, loben sie sich, daß sie Deutsche sind, und reden über ihre Frösche nie, und glauben, daß es das, wovon zu reden man sich weigert, auch nicht gibt. (75)

The frog, sometimes specifically called 'German frog', is brought in connection with everyone ('alle Lebenden und Toten dieses Dorfes') and their silence about something (75). Herta Müller has given her own explanation of this metaphor in another one of her books, *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel*: 'Der deutsche Frosch aus den Niederungen ist der Versuch, eine Formulierung zu finden, für ein Gefühl – das Gefühl, überwacht zu werden.'<sup>118</sup>

The frog is explained as the feeling one gets as a result of surveillance and, as I would argue, repression. The feeling of being unable to speak your mind and being silenced, be it by strict social norms within the village community, repressive laws of the communist state or, as was probably the case in Herta Müllers own life, by a combination of both. For that matter, criticism on totalitarianism is translated to the micro context of the village throughout the book. Especially the repression of the individual on behalf of the community – or in the macro context: the communist state – is presented as functioning the same way in the village and in the city stories.

#### **4. The use of language**

The language of *Niederungen* has many interesting aspects to it. The first of these is particulation, breaking imagery or descriptions down into details. According to Beverley Driver Eddy, the particulation of object perception in Müller's writing 'reflects the fearful

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<sup>118</sup> Herta Müller, *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel. Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet* (Berlin: Rotbuch 1991), 20.

isolation of the individual'.<sup>119</sup> Müller's description of her lonely staircase in the factory is a case in point for this interpretation. The author uses sentences with deceptively simple structure and vocabulary to tell a complicated story; the reader is forced to fill in the gaps that she makes by her minute description of only some parts of the object of her description. Particulation is more than an extended form of synecdoche, whereby part is used to stand for the whole, because it is not solely used to identify, but also to dissect the described object.<sup>120</sup>

This style of writing itself as an instance of 'ästhetische[r] Widerstand' or aesthetic resistance has political implications.<sup>121</sup> Müller's radical attention to detail is antithetical to grand narratives and as such resists the rhetoric of the Romanian totalitarian regime. Where the dictators of this world rely on grand narratives, Müller breaks these down in her writing by allowing for, even demanding, interpretation by the reader. The words in the descriptions are deceptively simple, but the word combinations do not make sense without interpreting the relations between them. This is supported by the use of parataxis, that leaves the connections between words open to completion according to the reader's vision. As Morwenna Symons argues, Herta Müller coaxes the reader into a state of critical awareness by making her critique almost entirely implicit from a narrative point of view.<sup>122</sup>

Apart from demanding interpretation, Müller calls the reader to attention by using contradicting language. In 'Damals im Mai', the exaggerated and misplaced use of the word 'schön' makes the reader pay extra attention to all the ugly things that are described. This is most clear in the use of oxymora such as 'schönen Leichen der Fische' and 'schönen schleimigen Quallen' (112). These turn all the statements into the opposite.<sup>123</sup> Likewise, 'Mutter, Vater und der Kleine' ironically starts with the cheerful text of a postcard, before a description of a frustrating and failed vacation (108). Both stories show a disparity between the narrator's language and their reality, questioning representations through language.

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<sup>119</sup> Eddy, "A Mutilated Fox Fur," 93.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>121</sup> Hiroshi Yamamoto, "'Überall, wo ich bin, hat alles, was sich da befindet, den Reiß.' Kontamination, Komposita und Parataxe bei Herta Müller," *Neue Beiträge zur Germanistik* 158 (2018): 139.

<sup>122</sup> Morwenna Symons, *Room for Manoeuvre. The Role of Intertext in Elfriede Jelinek's 'Die Klavierspielerin', Günter Grass's 'Ein weites Feld', and Herta Müller's 'Niederungen' and 'Reisende auf einem Bein'*, Bithell Series of Dissertations, vol. 28 (London: Maney, 2005), 110.

<sup>123</sup> Christine Vogel, "Rumänische Literatur," in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 133.

The metaphors in *Niederungen* function in a comparable way, contradicting each other so their meaning has to be deciphered. Oftentimes the ground of a metaphor, that which connects the image with the intended message, is unclear and can even change every time the same image is used. This 'flexible' functioning of metaphors complicates their understanding.<sup>124</sup> They are like picture puzzles, in which one reader can see a certain interpretation and another reader a different, but equally legitimate one. The metaphor has multiple possible meanings, that together form a full picture, consisting of all these associations with a certain image. Every use of the image, connected to the others with image linkages, illuminates a new interpretative layer of the metaphor.

Such 'flexible' metaphors rely on interpretation and are thus another method for instilling suspicion of grand narratives and going against the use of totalitarian language with their 'play of constantly deferred meaning'.<sup>125</sup> The contradictions in 'Damals im Mai' and in the metaphors are actually completions, adding layers to the reader's understanding of the story or the imagery. On the one hand, this enables the hiding of messages from the censor, because criticism on the totalitarian regime is harder to detect in language that is so open to interpretation. On the other hand, this is a kind of literary resistance in itself. Herta Müller's style in itself goes against grand narratives, calling the reader to attention and using her critical voice without falling into 'totalitarianism's trap'.<sup>126</sup>

## **Die Grabrede**

The first story I will analyse more extensively, 'Die Grabrede', has quite a complicated structure. At first, we get a description of a train going to war, which turns out to be on the television. Then, some pictures on the wall are presented to the reader. They depict the narrator's dead father that lies in a coffin in the same room. What follows is the story of the father's funeral and the stories about him told by those present. Strange things happen however; the reader is confronted with surrealist images like a man that has 'einen Kopf wie ein Schlauch und kein Gesicht' (84). The other people present at the funeral sentence the narrator to death. Then, the dream sequence appears to be over, until

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<sup>124</sup> Monika Moyrer, "Herztier," in *Herta Müller-Handbuch*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 38.

<sup>125</sup> Alexa Stoicescu, "Herta Müller and Hafid Bouazza. Two Supra-National Writers," *Journal of Dutch Literature* 8 (2017): 1, 34.

<sup>126</sup> Paola Bozzi, "Facts, Fiction, Autofiction, and Surfiction in Herta Müller's Work," in *Herta Müller. Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. Bettina Brandt and Valentina Glajar (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 110.

the mother of the narrator also starts acting strangely and aggressively. The story ends with an alarm ringing at half past five, Saturday morning.

The interlinked stories of the father's cruelties and the mother's suffering are at the core of 'Die Grabrede'. From the pictures on the wall, we learn the father was part of the Schutzstaffel (SS), given his pose and uniform: 'Sein Hand war über den Kopf gehoben zum Gruß. Auf seinem Rockkragen waren Runen.' (82) More of his misdoings are told to us by '[z]wei kleine wankende Männchen' (83). The father had 'viele Tote auf dem Gewissen' (83) and raped a woman in a beet field, apparently without regret. It is insinuated that this woman was the mother. The setting of the rape of the father and violence against the mother are described with the same sentence: 'Es war Spätherbst, und die Rübenblätter waren schwarz und zusammengeklappt vom Frost.' (85)

At the time, the mother was 'In dem fernen fremden Land' (85), or as the 1984 edition of *Niederungen* states: 'In Rußland'.<sup>127</sup> Her hair was shaved and she was hungry; at night she risked her life by hiding in a beet field. This description makes it likely that the mother was part of the deportations of Romanian-Germans to Russia as reparation after the Second World War; the fact that Herta Müller's mother suffered this fate, makes it convincing. The German minority was generally supposed to stay silent about the deportations. In some periods of easing of the censorship measures there was a book or play that dealt with these, but they were prone to censorious intervention in the memory of Peter-Dietmar Leber, who lived in the Banat until the 1980s.<sup>128</sup> The removal of Russia is an example of this here, although it is telling of the inconsistency in Romanian censorship that earlier in the text a reference to the raped woman as a 'Russin' (83) did make it into the Kriterion edition.

The surrealistic imagery is a way of hiding that the story deals with such a silenced part of the past. 'Die Grabrede' confronts us with an entanglement of television images, pictures, dreams, the fictional reality and references to Herta Müllers lived reality that is

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<sup>127</sup> Müller, *Niederungen* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1984), 11.

<sup>128</sup> Peter-Dietmar Leber: "Das hat man auch bei bestimmten rumänischen Büchern gemerkt. Auch dort hat es Bücher gegeben, die waren mal verboten, später wurden sie mal zugelassen. Dann ist auch mal oft diskutiert worden, wenn ein rumänischer Schriftsteller ein bestimmtes Thema behandelt, das der Kriegszeit oder unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit kritisch behandelt. Warum kann das nicht auch für die ein solches Thema der deutschen Minderheit nicht auch behandelt werden z.B. die Russland Deportation? Und dann hat es auch schon mal ein Theaterstück gegeben oder in bestimmten Passagen von solchen Büchern, wo darauf hingewiesen worden ist und wo das thematisiert worden ist. Und das konnte in einer bestimmten Phase möglich sein. Es konnte dann zehn Jahre später vielleicht verboten werden oder gefährlich sein.", interview conducted by the author on Mar. 5, 2021.

impossible to unravel. The strategy of Aesopian language that best fits this stylistic choice is that of the unreliable narrator. What seems to be real, turns into surrealist imagery. There is no clearly delineated dream sequence: the impossible is mingled with the possible, making it unclear which parts of the story are true. The mental instability of the narrator makes the story absurd and therefore protects the parts that refer to actual historical events.

### **Die Meinung**

'Es war einmal ein Frosch' (105) is how we are introduced to the frog that is the main character of 'Die Meinung'. The frog is an engineer that has an opinion, but the worst part is that this opinion is his own and not the same opinion as that of his co-workers or bosses (105). Since it is not the opinion of most people, it is considered a wrong opinion. Initially, the director of the engineer's business tries to convince the frog with whiskey, cigarettes and kind words, but when that does not affect the frog, the director becomes a lot less kind and transfers the frog to the weather department (106). When the frog points out that the forecast is false, it is sent away and swallowed by a cloud. Another frog notices that this 'tragischen Unfall' (107) was in all likelihood not that accidental, but does not voice this concern.

The entire story is a satire on being a dissenter under Romanian totalitarianism. Having your own opinion instead of simply following others is not accepted, even if your opinion is unmistakably right. This is the case in the story when the former engineer says the forecast of good weather was wrong after getting completely wet in the rain. The other frogs don't even care: 'Da sagte der Frosch, daß der Wetterbericht eine Lüge sei. Da zuckten die anderen Wetterfrösche die Schultern und schauten stumm auf die Stadt hinab.' (106) Instead of telling the truth, the frog was supposed to have same opinion as its colleagues, the chief engineer, the director, the general director and the minister (105). The story satirically suggests that this is how opinions are dealt with in the dictatorships. The truth does not matter, only what the people at the top of the regime say is the truth. If you openly contradict them, you stand alone and suffer the consequences.

In 'Die Meinung', this historical reality is brought to life in an absurd way through satire. It is a great example of displacement. Throughout the story there are exactly enough hints to connect the imaginary land of frogs with the Romania Herta Müller lived in, comparable to how Havel used displacement combined with linguistic references to

Soviet propaganda in *Zahradní slavnost* from chapter 2. The vanishing of the frog into a cloud reminds readers of the disappearance without a trace of actual Romanian dissidents. Another of these hints is the use of the obviously communist 'Genosse' (105), and the strict hierarchy. Displacement is not the only strategy of Aesopian language used in the story however. Genre, in this case dark comedy, brings the story into the territory of the absurd through the use of incessant repetitions of words and phrases. With reference to gaps and elisions, what stands out is that we never learn what the opinion of the engineer frog is, making it more difficult for a censor to disagree with the content of 'Die Meinung'.

### **Inge**

In this story, a woman named Inge visits the 'Schulinspektorat' (117) where she meets an inspector. It remains unclear why she went there, but she clearly cannot expect any help from the inspection. In an expansive explanation with many intricate gestures, the inspector says that Inge has come to the wrong place: she worked as translator at a machine factory, so the ministry for machine building is responsible for it, and not the ministry of education, which the inspection belongs to (118). On the way to this meeting, Inge met many strange characters, and she does so again on her way back. Furthermore, both at the start of the story when she wakes up in her apartment and when she returns there after the meeting, she has the feeling she is being watched. In the afternoon, she can even see herself do a headstand on a television screen (120).

The first theme in 'Inge' is being watched, or surveillance. It is brought into the text by imaginative metaphors, such as: 'Das Zimmerfenster war die Scheibe eines Aquariums, und das Zimmer stand unter Wasser.' (116) Inge's room is the inside of the aquarium and Inge is the fish: 'Inge tastete die Wände mit den Augen ab wie ein großer, irrer Fisch.' (116) Usually the fish in an aquarium are there to be watched by people, the glass making it easy to follow the fishes every move. At the end of the story, the roles have shifted: it is Inge who is able to watch herself on a screen: 'Inge sah auf dem Bildschirm ihr Zimmer. Inge sah Inge in Inges Zimmer auf Inges Bett liegen. Inge sah Inge auf einem Bildschirm auf einen Bildschirm schauen.' (120) The repetition of her name and the verbs in the third person create a distance between the watching 'real' Inge and the Inge on the screen.

Secondly, the story contains multiple military references. The most notable instances of this are repetitions of the phrase 'links-rechts, links-rechts, links-rechts'. The



first time we encounter this phrase is when a 'dicke grüne Mann' with 'ein verquollenes Gesicht' (116) yells it to a group of soldiers with green uniforms and green faces. Then, it is brought outside of a military context, when a woman on the street says 'links' and 'rechts' as she walks (117). Inge hears it in the clattering of her footstep as well, as she walks the stairs in the 'Schulinspektorat' (117). Lastly, a man uses the phrase as he walks – or marches – behind a stroller (119). It seems that the people on the streets march like the soldiers, keeping in line and following the imposed pattern, not resisting or questioning comments given to them.

Both these themes are quite obscure, also because they involve a lot of unclear metaphors and surrealist imagery, comparable to the nightmares from 'Die Grabrede'. The green man who instructs the soldiers is one example, but there are many more instances throughout the story. Inge for example walks upside-down at one point and then gets pierced through by a tree (116). Sometime later, the butterflies from a print on another woman's dress suddenly fly away (117). Contrastingly, the criticism on bureaucracy comes across more plainly. The conversation between Inge and the inspector is told in realistic detail, making it a good example of particulation. The inspector is dissected through the description of his movements, that is comical in its extreme detailedness.

'Inge' makes strategic use of image linkages to add meaning to certain 'flexible' metaphors. This happens for example with the description of the inspector having a 'birnenförmige Kopf' (118). The exact same thing is said of the father's head on a childhood photo in 'Die Grabrede' (82). In the German edition of *Niederungen* and in the Romanian *Drückender Tango*, there is also a story titled 'Faule Birnen'.<sup>129</sup> In all cases, the pears are connected to negative traits: unhelpfulness of the inspector, the later cruelties of the father and infidelity in the case of 'Faule Birnen'. Another example is when Inge says her bed looks like either a grave or a casket (116). In 'Niederungen' the grandmother uses the same comparison when the child narrator is taken to a funeral: 'Von diesen Betten sagte Grossmutter, es seien Särge, und von denen, die darin lagen, sagte sie, sie seien tot.' (12) These image linkages thus work very well for conveying hidden messages by adding more layers to certain metaphors.

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<sup>129</sup> Müller, *Niederungen* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1984), 95-103.

## Schwarzer Park

At the start of 'Schwarzer Park', it is unclear about or by whom the story is written. Only later does the narrator appear to be a woman, talking about herself as '[b]lauäugiges verrunzeltes Mädchen' and asking herself: 'wo gehst du hin am Morgen über so viel Asphalt. Jahrelang durch den schwarzen Park.' (114) Even this is never confirmed, but can be deduced from the narrator's knowledge of the girl's emotional life. The whole story is a kind of soliloquy or monologue, someone asking herself desperately, perhaps even hopelessly, why the situation is this way and what can be done about it. Different scenes in the story depict parts of life, like empty bottles on the stairs, dogs in the park, photographers on the street and people laughing hysterically.

The beginning of the story is almost exclusively told through infinitives and some verbs in the third person, which creates distance and uncertainty.<sup>130</sup> An example of this is the sentence: 'Immer glauben, daß jemand kommt, und dann ist es Abend und zu spät für diesen Besuch.' (114) It remains unclear who was supposed to come or why. Despite being difficult to understand, the threatening feel of the story can be picked up by the reader through its metaphors and comparisons, even though the ground that could give their exact meanings remains mysterious. Life is described as 'erstickend schön und zerrüttelt' like a bunch of flowers (114). The comparison of furniture with a grave that we have seen in 'Inge' is repeated, although in this case it is a wardrobe instead of a bed (114). Death recurs as a motif throughout the story, for example in: 'Wenn das Lachen schallend ist, wenn sie sich biegen vor Lachen, wenn sie sich zu Tode lachen, was hilft da noch.' (114)

'Schwarzer Park' as a whole is a sketch of a bleak situation, a daily life filled with coping mechanisms such as drinking alcohol or laughing incessantly that are necessary to deal with a constant feeling of fear or dread. 'Was hilft da noch, wenn die Angst in den Weingläsern hilft gegen die Angst und wenn die Flasche immer leerer wird.' (114) The narrator does not see a way out of this, unless people resist: 'Und wenn die Leute sich nicht wehren, was kann da noch geschehn.' (115) Certainly, a call to resistance against bad circumstances is dangerous to write in the context of an established totalitarian dictatorship.

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<sup>130</sup> Alena Jarošová, "Stilmittel in der Prosa von Herta Müller 'Niederungen'. Ein Vergleich des deutschen Originals mit der tschechischen Übersetzungen 'Nížiny'," (dissertation submitted to the Masaryk University Philosophy Department, 2015), 72.

Some elements can be seen to place this story in Romania, while others explicitly set the story somewhere else. At first reading the 'Stadt [...] aus Stein' and the 'Schwarzer Park' with 'so viel Asphalt' (114) imply that the setting of the story is just a city. No specific city name is used, but it might not be coincidental that under Ceaușescu there were major renovations of Bucharest that involved the demolition of green areas and replacing them with stone apartment buildings and wide asphalt roads.<sup>131</sup> These megalomaniac construction projects would be in the mental archive of any Romanian, meaning they could easily make the connection between the general urban backdrop of this story and Romania.

Then, shockingly, Herta Müller even puts the word 'Diktator' (114) in this negative text about life in Romania. She was able to do so because of her good use of the strategy of displacement. The passage in which the word is used, is: 'Und ein Diktator ist wieder gestürzt, und die Mafia hat wieder einen umgebracht, und ein Terrorist liegt im Sterben in Italien.' (114) First, the fact that the dictator is supposedly in Italy is introduced by the use of the word 'Mafia', then this is confirmed at the end of the sentence. This might be the best example of displacement in *Niederungen*; a clearly dangerous message is hidden by superficially setting it in a country you could criticise.

The two sides of my analysis, censorship and literary resistance, can be found intertwined in the image of the frog that adorns the cover of the Kriterion edition of *Niederungen*. The frog symbolises surveillance and repression, both in the village by the Banat-Swabian community and elsewhere by the state. As an image, it is heavily shaped by the censorship and represents it this way. On the other hand, the frog is used in *Niederungen* to evade the censor as a symbol that requires interpretation to understand as criticism. In 'Die Meinung' it is an engineer voicing its opinion, while in 'Niederungen' it is a silent companion of everyone in the German minority. These meanings might be different, but they are linked. The linkages reiterate the importance of the frog and thus repression as a main theme, while the contradicting use of the 'flexible' metaphor makes its exact meaning oblique and open to multi-layered interpretations.

With the use of metaphors like the frog, that are unclear at first but meaningful after analysis, *Niederungen* can definitely be seen as a multi-layered book that demands

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<sup>131</sup> Darrick Danta, "Ceausescu's Bucharest," *Geographical Review* 83 (1993): 2, 181-182.

involvement from its reader. The stories paint a gloomy picture, the negativity of which was already unwanted by Romanian censors. Despite some favourable circumstances for its publishing, this meant that criticism had to be hidden using the strategies of Aesopian language. Language was a way to resist the regime as well, by employing devices that stylistically went against their grand narratives, such as particulation and 'flexible' metaphors. *Niederungen* refuses a single interpretation; it is purposefully ambiguous and could be published because of this. The duality of obvious negativity and vague imagery, of surrealism and realism, of pointing towards the author's own life and away from it, can be seen as a consequence of the fact that Herta Müller wrote under the watchful eye of the Romanian censorship apparatus.

# Conclusion

Ultimately, publishing a book despite strict censorship was a game of lizards and frogs, tactics of literary resistance and censorship. I have argued that it is necessary to look at the interplay of both censorship and literary resistance to explain why a critical, culturally resisting text like *Niederungen* was published in Romania in the 1980s and was not blocked by the censorship. The main method used to research this interplay is the close reading of the stories in *Niederungen*. The interactions between authors and the censorship could be traced in the text of the book with the use of theoretical and historical contexts, that have been discussed in the first three chapters of this thesis.

In chapter 1, a theoretical framework was presented that considers censorship a process that works from the top down, but is defined by the negotiation between different actors. Their interactions determine the consequences for the dissident voice that the authority at the top attempted to silence. In Romania, this was certainly the case. As part of a shift towards co-optation, censorship was 'abolished' at the end of the 1970s, which led to a vague, officially non-existent censorship apparatus. This meant confusion and fear, since one could never know exactly what was forbidden or allowed, but also gave wiggle room to the actors involved in a censorious intervention.

Two things were essential for authors to find the wiggle room in the system and make careful use of it, as chapter 3 has shown: connections and textual codes. Connections from dissident circles or the publishing world could provide insight in the current state of the censorship system and the most effective ways of implementing strategies of literary resistance. These strategies took the form of codes – also called lizards – that attempted to communicate criticism to the interpretative community while excluding the censor. In chapter 2 an overview of these strategies of Aesopian language has been discussed. They keep criticism in the text, but obscure it; be it through strategic gaps and elisions, subtexts, by questioning grand narratives or a combination of these and more tactics, using image linkages as a guide for the attentive reader.

The strategies of Aesopian language were exceptionally important for authors in Romania. The Securitate obstructed alternatives to the state-controlled publishing process that were used throughout East-Central Europe, like *samizdat* and *tamizdat*. Even 'writing for the drawer' was perilous, given the regular house searches. Therefore,

Romanian literary dissidents usually attempted to work with the undefined boundaries of the official publishing system by hiding the critical meaning of their texts or making sure the criticism was not directly applicable to their own context using codes.

Chapter 4 combines the insights of the first three chapters and applies it to Herta Müller's *Niederungen*. The meanings behind the unsettling images of a frog swallowed by a cloud, barking parks, hopping broomsticks, tiny tottering men have been explored as being deliberately vague as part of the successful application of censorship evasion strategies. This is the most important reason for the publication of the book, despite its negative feel and critical content. Although obviously censorious interventions have made for a few removals, the textual strategies protected the criticism the stories contain, among other things condemnation of the communist bureaucracy and of the way people with a dissenting opinion were treated under the Ceaușescu regime.

Various tactics were available to Herta Müller and many of these can be recognised in the stories of *Niederungen*. Some strategies have to do with the setting of the story, such as displacement, or with the genre. Others are focused on leaving information out, so that the censor cannot pinpoint the negative feeling the stories convey. Then, some strategies specifically focus on form instead of content for their literary resistance. Herta Müller's style, that makes use of language as a kind of 'ästhetischer Widerstand', is very suited for this. Without even describing something particularly problematic, the use of articulated language is an expression of doubt of the grand narratives used in communist rhetoric. 'Flexible' metaphors contribute to this doubt, since they also demand interpretation from a critically aware reader and are multi-layered. This explicitly created place for critical thought and interpretation goes against the style of the totalitarian regime, with its propagandistic one-liners. The language in itself is therefore a form of literary resistance.

The best guides for the reader in their interpretation are image linkages and their own background. Image linkages are a textual strategy that provide a key to understanding the obscured meaning of certain images. They give the reader a sense of what the central themes are and thereby clarify the literary work. Whatever gaps remain have to be filled from the reader's textual and historical background. That is also the main weakness of the 'soft' method of literary analysis I have chosen for this thesis. My background differs greatly from that of the intended interpretative community of *Niederungen*, therefore I will interpret metaphors differently from most readers from Romania and some of the work's meanings will remain hidden to me. Still, a number of

gaps can be filled with the acquired knowledge of the work's context. Furthermore, literary analysis is the most feasible approach for research into a text like *Niederungen*, that requires interpretation to make sense and contains many layers.

Through analysis of the texts, it can be concluded that adaptations in the text using strategies of Aesopian language are the reason *Niederungen* could be published in Romania in 1982. On the side of the frog, that symbolises repression and surveillance in *Niederungen*, the censors did not have clear boundaries. A censorious intervention is always a process of negotiation, but in the ambiguous Romanian system of the 1980s especially. This gave authors like Herta Müller a limited amount of leeway. Their texts made use of lizards that enabled hidden literary resistance, the opposite force of censorship. The interplay between censorship and literary dissent, frog and lizard, shaped the entirety of the text. The codes were tailored to the censorship apparatus using knowledge from connections, for example dissidents from Aktionsgruppe Banat or the Adam Müller-Guttenbrunn Kreis, editors or publishers. These people could expedite the censorship process, but only if a critical book like *Niederungen* was ambiguous enough to move through the system without attracting notice.

For further research, two lines of investigation would be very interesting in my opinion. First of all, the impact literary resistance had. Who belonged to the interpretative community that read and understood the critical texts in Romania? And did the hidden criticism influence their thinking, or perhaps even inspire them to take action against the totalitarian regime? While this thesis focuses on the production of *Niederungen*, the reception of such a text could also be a topic of research. Secondly, comparative research could enhance our understanding of literature and dissent in totalitarian societies. The shift from the focus on institutions of censorship to the interplay of literary resistance and censorship could open new ways of researching, for example comparing the ways literature from dissenters of various East-Central European communist countries use the strategies of Aesopian language against a certain censorship system.

Like my thesis, this kind of research can bring the focus back on the agency of authors. The rules and institutions ultimately did not determine how censorship worked in Romania or elsewhere. The power of a totalitarian regime is not absolute, but relies on the cooperation or co-optation of people. This gives dissenters wiggle room to take action. Authors had the power to reshape their text and beat the system, even though they took

major risks in doing so. To pay tribute to their resistance, research should closely read the literature authors produced. In their work, we can find that censorship is not only about removals, but also about the way a text is written. Outsmarting the censorship was a way of resisting the totalitarian regime. We have to look beyond the loudly croaking, dictatorial frogs and recognise the silent resistance of darting lizards to see the full picture of censorship and dissent.



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## IMAGES

Cover image made by the author.

1. Young authors from the Banat in the AMG-Kreis. Left to right: Herta Müller, Helmuth Frauendorfer, William Totok, Nikolaus Berwanger, Horst Samson, Richard Wagner, Rolf Bossert, Werner Söllner und Bettina Gros. Photo: N. Gyurcsik. <https://adz.ro/banater-zeitung/artikel-banater-zeitung/artikel/ti-welt-is-varuckt-wuan>

2. The awarding of the AMG literature prize in 1983. Left to right: Franz Binder, Herta Müller, Jakob Mihailescu, Horst Samson. From the photo archive of Horst Samson. Via Landsmannschaft der Banater Schwaben, <https://www.banater-schwaben.org/nachrichten/kultur/details/636-der-einfall-der-dichter-zum-40-geburtstag-der-aktionsgruppe-banat-iii/?type=98>

3. The covers of the Romanian edition (1982) and German edition of *Niederungen* (1984).

Romanian edition: blog by literary researcher Lyn Marven, <https://lynmarven.wordpress.com/2011/07/08/highs-and-lowlands-desperately-seeking-romanian-publications-by-herta-muller/>

German edition: Abe Books,  
<https://www.abebooks.com/9783880222854/Niederungen-Prosa-Rotbuch-3880222851/plp>