Memory as Environment

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Abstract

This article attempts to identify the relationship between memory, time, and environment, and to answer the question of whether (and how) memory can be perceived as a form of human environment. The paper, by elaborating on the already established notions of environmental memory and temporal environments, connects different diagnoses regarding our current temporality (Hartog, Chakrabarty, Malm) with the research on the Remembering-Imagining System (Conway et al.) and indicates that they may be useful to define how collective RIS works. Finally, by analysing three different literary examples (Gospodinov, Dukaj, Szczerek), it addresses the question of why does it seemingly become more difficult to understand our temporal environment and imagine our collective future?

Keywords
memory studies – ecocriticism – environment – temporal environments – Hartog – Gospodinov

1 Temporal Environments and Environments of Memory

This article attempts to identify the relationship between memory, time, and environment, and especially to answer the question of whether (and how) memory can be perceived as a form of human environment. Though the term “environment” was initially defined in relation to the physical surroundings of
human beings, and in particular – as the first wave of ecocriticism has shown – to nature that has not been altered by a human hand (Buell, 1996), its meaning has been broadened and complicated many times over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The record of these changes can be found both in the subsequent waves of ecocriticism (Buell, 2005; Garrard, 2004; Kerridge, 2014) as well as among other currents of environmental research (Chakrabarty, 2021; Clark, 2015; Morton, 2013; Morton, 2016). From the point of view of the current paper the most important are those repositions, which indicated the possibility of defining environment beyond the strictly material context and have used it to describe such spheres as, for example, the social (Barnett & Casper, 2001) and temporal environment.

The expression “temporal environment” was initially used in psychology and in time management to describe the daily structure of routines, activities, and transitions (Yaker et al., 1971; Pol et al., 2016), though it was later broadened and used to reference every environment whose metric is time. The connection between temporal environment and the category of memory, and specifically with supra-individual memory (notably: collective, social, and cultural) that constitutes the fundamental source of our ability to navigate time and position ourselves in relation to its flow (Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011), is therefore worth investigating. The first steps in this direction were taken through the formulation of ideas such as environmental memory and the environmental history of the Holocaust (Ubertowska, 2017; Cole, 2016; Rapson, 2017), though, in my opinion, these do not seem to exhaust all the possibilities offered by thinking about memory and environment as interconnected by a web of mutual dependencies.

In this paper, I would like to explore if (and how) memory can be treated as a certain type of human environment and what role in this definition would be played by the environment understood as the material surroundings of human beings. In order to answer this question I will analyse two sets of research from the field of cognitive science and neuroscience, which inform how the physical environment can influence memory. This analysis, together with the interpretation of François Hartog’s (2022) concept of the presentism regime, leads to the theory that a disrupted orientation in the current time environment negatively affects the ability to imagine the future. The main argument of the text, regarding the possibility of treating memory as a specific, temporal environment, will be supported by the analysis of three literary examples problematising the relationship between the physical environment and the temporal environment. The first, *Time Shelter* (2020) by Georgi Gospodinov, describes the transformation of the human temporal environment caused by the erosion of memory, while the other two – *Lód* [Ice] (2007) by Jacek...
Dukaj and *Siwy Dym* [Pale smoke] (2018) by Ziemowit Szczerek – exemplify how the environment can be conceptualised as a reservoir of specific memory mechanisms.

2 Environment and the Experience of Time in Light of the Work of Memory and Imagination

It is best to begin the discussion of the relationship indicated in the title of this section by referencing the conclusions of three studies on the functioning and disorders of individual memory. The first of these relates to the changes in the functioning of memory in older people, especially those suffering from neurodegenerative diseases. The simplest definition of this state was given by Elizabeth Loftus (1980):

> The typical senile man or woman can usually recall past events or information that has already been stored in long-term memory before senility sets in. However, [...] recent events stay a very short while in short-term memory and then are lost, never making it into long-term memory.

*Loftus 1980, p. 104*

This change in the workings of memory is especially pronounced in the daily functioning of people afflicted with dementia: if in a well-known and predictable environment they can still perform relatively well, then any disruption to the familiar surroundings results in growing problems with adaptation. Although only recently did a possible explanation of this phenomenon come from the field of neuroscience, pointing to the damage in areas of the brain known as multiple demand networks (Cope et al., 2022) as the cause; the anecdotal observations have been quite unvarying for a long time: people with dementia when exposed to unfamiliar surroundings are usually disoriented and display a significant decline in their coping ability; though the targeted redesign of the novel environment may offset this negative effect (Wiener & Pazzaglia, 2021). Consequently, one of the most efficient ways of preventing disorientation is by making the surroundings as familiar as possible (preferably known by the patient from memory, custom tailored to what is still remembered).

What is interesting is that the correlation between familiarity with the surroundings and increased memory performance is observable also among the general population, even young and middle-aged adults: on the one hand there is confirmation of increased detail and vividness in imagined and remembered events as a result of increased spatial contextual familiarity, and
on the other it has been shown that spatial context can substantially influence the ability to remember and imagine the future (Robin & Moscovitch, 2013; 2017; Enric et al., 2016).¹

The second set of research that has interesting implications for my argument refers to the relationship between the subjective and objective age in individuals. These studies indicate that there are certain differences in the experience of subjective age: to simplify things somewhat we can summarise that initially, that is until the mid-twenties we feel older than we really are, but afterwards, from our early forties onwards, we begin to feel younger than our ID cards indicate; what is more, the greater the gap between those two values, the older the desired age to which a given person would like to live to is declared (Chopik et al., 2018). This phenomenon is interesting enough to be described in an accessible way by The Atlantic (Senior, 2023) and The New York Times (Laber-Warren, 2019), still its most fascinating aspect relates to the correlation between subjective age and actual brain dexterity – there are first studies suggesting that people who feel younger actually exhibit greater brain health as measured by tests (Kwak et al., 2018).

The perception of time, and here also of one’s own temporality, and embeddedness in a particular environment are associated with the functioning of memory in at least one other way. As research on the so-called remembering-imagining system (RIS) has shown, the ability to imagine the not-far-away future is closely linked with the ability to recall the not-far-away past (viz. short-term memory, Conway et al., 2016) and to form episodic memory. The research paper The Remembering–Imagining System analyses, among other things, the case of patient HCM, who had a partially intact intellectual capacity and “reasonably good language skills, an impaired working memory, but spared short-term memory” (Conway et al., p. 261). Patient HCM was able to express certain assumptions about the future, but those were highly improbable as they were based not on the proper recognition of the current situation (hospitalisation and the inability to lead an unassisted life) but on a past vision of the self – yet still physically fit and capable of leading an independent life. The relationship between the ability to remember the past and imagine the future also underlies theories defining episodic memory as a form of mental time travel (Perrin & Michaelian, 2017), in which “the subject imaginatively re-experiences past events, just as, in future-oriented mental time travel (fmtt) he imaginatively ‘pre-experiences’ future events” (p. 228). Although, according to researchers, the question of whether there are indeed

¹ The connection between memory and environment was already known to ancient Greeks, as some of the mnemonic system shows (esp. the place system).
fundamental differences between episodic memory and FMTT (so-called continuism) still remains open (the answer depends on whether the causation is necessary for episodic memory [p. 235]), the ability to imagine future scenarios in the case of individual subjects is now mostly defined as correlated with the episodic memory (Michaelian et al., 2019). Subsequent research also suggests the possibility of expanding the theoretical reflection on this issue by exploring it on the collective level, especially by analysing the relationship between collective memory and collective future thought (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016), which, to some extent, can be understood as collective FMTT.

I recall this research, especially the ris theory, because it suggests that in the case of individual subjects the proper recognition of the temporal environment (that is – the ability to form both episodic and long-term memory) is crucial for the potential to imagine probable future scenarios. I surmise – partly in connection to the theory of collective future thought (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016) – that the correlation described should be treated as a certain suggestion for thinking about collective and cultural memory: most probably dysfunctions in the work of collective memory relating to the past can radically inhibit the ability to imagine the future. Moreover, the hampered recognition of the temporal environment can result in the formulation of improbable presuppositions and opinions not only relating to the future, but also – at least to a certain extent – the past, as well as have a bearing on the perception of our relationship with the physical environment.

Another theory that describes the relationship between the ability to properly recognise the temporal environment and imagine the future at a collective level – though using completely different philosophical and historiographic reference points – is the concept of the presentism regime (Hartog, 2022). The presentist time regime comes from the Christian understanding of time, for which two categories were crucial: Krisis (it refers to both judgement and to the dichotomy of health and malady) and Kairos (a specific timeframe, in this case shaped by two events – the first and the second coming of the Saviour). Although according to Hartog the primacy of Christian temporality has ended, the presentism regime survived because of two secular events: the first was the use of a nuclear weapon and the second was the onset of the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Birs, 1982; Crutzen & Stoemer, 2000). Both these events opened up a new “in-between” – between now and a possible apocalyptic disaster, provoked by certain events from the past. In the analysis of these two events, it is worth taking a closer look at Günther Anders’s (2002) observations about the sur-threshold character of nuclear catastrophe and its irreversible, apocalyptic nature. The climate disaster is perceived similarly – according to
some scholars, it is not so much our future (Malm, 2018; Mościcki, 2020) as a not as yet fully realised present, which inadvertently works towards realising the full extent of disaster.

The examples of the nuclear and climate catastrophe also reveal the conceptual connections between the categories of presentism, RIS, FMTT, and the physical environment. The fulfilment of apocalyptic future scenarios (which, to some extent, can be interpreted as a collective FMTT), as outlined by Malm (2018), only becomes possible as a consequence of the disruptions in the functioning of RIS on the collective level and the failure to create a collective future thought that responds to the needs of the present. Translating this statement into Hartog’s philosophical language: the distinctive feature of the presentist time regime is the misunderstanding of what secular Kairos is, and, consequently, the failure to recognise that Krisis may mean the complete destruction of the physical environment. Failure to remember the threat of disaster and failure to think about the collective future therefore poses a real threat to any type of human environment.

3 Memory as Environment

The relationship between imagining the future and remembering the past, as well as between the perception of temporal and physical environment is explored not only by theory but also by literature. Literature as a unique medium of collective memory (Erll, 2011) is capable of mapping specific mechanisms of memory, among them the interdependence between memory and human temporal environment. A particularly interesting example, which describes the temporal environment as memory-dependent, is the recently published novel, already translated into a number of foreign languages, titled *Time Shelter* (2022) by the Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov. The novel escapes easy classification because it meets certain criteria associated with the classic fictional novel as well as some that are rather associated with science-fiction. Its main protagonists are a brilliant psychiatrist called Gaustine (which is both an obvious reference to St. Augustine and a play with the author’s own name) and his friend, who gives the first-person narrative of the sudden spread of Alzheimer’s disease in contemporary times and an attempt to curb it through the construction of a special “time shelter”. Though at the end of the novel it becomes much less clear if the narrator and Gaustine are two distinct people, and whether the whole narrative is not merely the figment of the narrator’s
imagination sparked by the onset of Alzheimer’s disease. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to look at the novel as if its premise was realistic.

The idea of the time shelter is clearly inspired by studies in the field of psychology that have been mentioned in the previous section of this paper. Gaustine concludes that because it was established that patients suffering from Alzheimer’s improve when they find themselves in familiar surroundings, then the best course of action in the face of the spread of this disease is to create a special environment where they can live in accord with the time that they are still able to remember:

The point of the experiment was to create a protected past or “protected time.” A time shelter. [...] The idea was for them to stay together in the same year, to meet up in the only possible “place” – in the year that still glimmered in the parent’s fading memory.  

Gospodinov, 2022, p. 100

At first the experiment is modest in its scope: special sanatoriums are created, where patients can live in “their” own time. Nonetheless, shortly after this initial phase things gradually get more complicated. First and foremost, not all patients want to inhabit their past. Some patients remember only the things that they did not actually experience, instead their memories are of the things which they most desired, like living “in the West”.

The experiment, envisioned as a lifeline for patients and their families, soon gets out of hand: it turns out that the need to relive the past, to change the temporal environment into one that is already familiar, is not limited only to those afflicted with the disease. It seems that whole societies suffer from a specific disorder of ris and are therefore unable to imagine any future. Though initially the situation escalates in the countries of the former Soviet Bloc (it is there that politicians first don traditional folk garments and a strain of nationalism develops in the key of traditions from the beginning of the twentieth century), eventually the whole of Europe is faced with the fundamental question:

Can you make anything else out of past besides past? Could it be recycled in reverse into some kind of future, albeit secondhand?  

Gospodinov, 2022, p. 116

In the face of the crisis of collective imagination relating to the future (Gospodinov does not use these exact words but it is quite clear that he refers more or less intentionally to the idea of collective future thought [Szpunar &
Szpunar, 2016]) the answer to the above question is affirmative: a version of a once lived past is to become the future, as the European Union agrees upon holding a referendum to choose the particular moment in time to which the present will be reset.

The referendum on the future becomes the litmus test for social attitudes: which memory of the past will be considered important enough to become the new temporal environment for the whole of Europe? Straight away it becomes evident that no single one will be chosen, but all nations agree to pick their own from the twentieth century. The selection of a particular point of memory can be a helpful clue in the process of diagnosing the state in which a certain society finds itself at a given moment. Mindful of this, the narrator claims – echoing the famous passage from Anna Karenina – that each country is unhappy in its own way (Gospodinov, 2022, p. 220) and typically chooses from the past the last moment when either the present still seemed worth the effort or at least the future was something to look forward to. This diagnosis stands in surprising agreement with the theses of thinkers (Fukuyama, 1992; Huyssen, 2000; Gumbrecht, 2014) who have pointed out that the end of the 1980s and the fall of Communism marked the end of history and the beginning of a new presentist regime: the great majority of European countries decide to return exactly to that period of the 1980s. Several post-Communist countries decide on the 1990s and the only country that chooses a later time-point is Switzerland, which declares temporal neutrality (the country remains in the present time).

The referendum is followed by heavy disappointment: for some of the voters the temporal change was supposed to be purely aesthetic in nature but instead it turned out to be all encompassing. Hence, the whole environment is transformed: post-Soviet countries turn back into regimes where former terror returns and store shelves are once again vacant – even toilet paper disappears from the shops alongside most of the groceries. Despite the choice of the relatively close past (from the 1970s to the 1990s) attempts to reconstruct earlier times proliferate, going as far back as the mythical past, which lay at the foundations of the identity-forming processes in the history of a given nation. Some of these attempts turn bloody, as reconstructions inevitably turn into re-enactments of the past, once more with very real victims. What is nonetheless most unsettling, is the returning interest in the Second World War; an interest which at first is mostly voiced by Gaustine, who attempts to more or less realistically “travel” in time (it remains unclear on the narrative plane whether the hero really travels in time, or does he, for example, study the archives and behaves in accordance with the mores and norms of the corresponding time).
This temporal-environmental-political dimension of the novel is juxtaposed with the “small history” of the narrator's loss of memory, who with each passing day becomes less and less certain of whether Gaustine truly exists or whether he is an alter-ego that he himself has created. It is also worth bearing in mind that we do not know the narrator’s name and we do not know how “real” he is in relation to the world of the novel. Similarly, we do not know the names of most characters, probably so that we do not forget them – as Gospodinov jokingly notes in the afterword. Limiting the number of named places and people, as well as identifiable details, is surely meant as a device reflecting the limitations of memory experienced by the narrator, who is increasingly uncertain of what is reality or its memory, and what is a figment of his imagination.

The relationship between people, time, and memory that is drawn in *Time Shelter* is similar to that of a web of interdependencies found in an ecosystem: though the narrator initially asserts that all living beings feast on time and memory, he later changes his thinking, acknowledging that it is us who “are food for time” (Gospodinov, 2022, pp. 288–289). Moreover, the dominance of the past is directly linked to the loss of memory: when the past ceases to be remembered as an element in a chain of events, when temporal relationships change and become complicated, then that what was becomes a possible future which should be relived to become *finally* remembered.

This paradoxical nature of temporal relationships is evident both on the individual and collective level. In the case of individual histories this is easiest to grasp through the mechanism of denial and the adoption of the artificial temporal environment as the “true” and “natural” one. When one of the patients escapes from a temporally controlled settlement and finds himself in the outside world where he is confronted with people living in contemporary circumstances, he considers that reality to be extremely unrealistic. He assumes that “they were playing out the future” (p. 93), and hence he perceives that environment as superficial, as a space of a scientific experiment. On the collective level things become even more complicated: on the one hand the referendum on the preferred past was supposed to secure the needed time to find a common future for Europe, to be a way to solve the problems associated with the necessity of envisioning that what is to come; on the other hand, though, the referendum fails as it is still necessary to reconstruct events of the past. The need to replay the past is so strong that it leads to the re-enactment of the start of the Second World War: the novel closes with a sinister passage about what will become the recycled future of Europe:
We are re-creating this war so as to end all wars, someone will say on the radio, and this absurd tautology will unleash everything.

Tomorrow was September 1.

Gospodinov, 2022, p. 302

The past re-enacted in the hope that it does not repeat in the future turns into the present. The presentness of a past catastrophe becomes the new temporal environment in which the protagonists must learn to live.

In summary, Gospodinov’s novel asks in a literary form some of the same questions that arise in theoretical discourse relating to temporality: what is our present? How do we experience it, while stretched between the past and the future? Why does it seemingly become more difficult to understand our temporal environment? Does the blame, at least in part, not lay with the disorders in the working of collective ris? Does the only way of escape from the inability of imagining the future lead back to a temporal environment that is known from memory?

To most of these concerns Time Shelter gives an affirmative answer, suggesting that it is exactly memory which is our principal environment and that when this environment becomes foreign or otherwise opaque to us, then we become capable of sacrificing anything and everything to claim it back, even if that means forfeiting the chance for a possible new future.

4 Environment as Memory

The understanding of memory as environment proposed by Time Shelter can be further broadened by another aspect of the entanglements between memory and environment, that is, by the conceptualisation of environment as a type of cultural memory. To illustrate this, I will turn to examples in the form of two novels by contemporary Polish writers, Jacek Dukaj and Ziemowit Szczerek. Both these examples are quite unusual in that they do not turn to the familiar way of thinking about nature as a reservoir of memory, which characterises, for example, pastoral literature, and neither are they examples referring to traumatic events in which the environment is not merely a witness but also the record of memory, like in the case of the environmental history of the Holocaust. They both reach deeper, down to the very mechanisms that guide memory, which is possible as both books are rather formally complicated alternative histories.
The first of these books is a monumental novel, totalling over one thousand pages, titled *Lód* (2007 [Ice]), that was written by Jacek Dukaj, one of the preeminent Polish writers in the fantasy genre. This first-person narrative is delivered in language styled after nineteenth-century Polish (Gorliński-Kucik, 2013). This stylistic device is particularly meaningful in light of the novel's plot: the events described within it start in July 1924, though this is an alternative year 1924. The First World War never occurred here because of an unexplained explosion that happened in Siberia on June 30, 1908 (Dukaj, 2007, p. 417), triggering a sudden fall in global temperature and the emergence of new organisms called Frosts (Pol. Lute). Frosts are mysterious creatures that lower the environment’s temperature and change the physical surroundings of human beings, on the one hand (the world looks vaguely similar to how it should during a glacial period), and, on the other, alter history itself. The change of history in this case encompasses something more than a mere reshuffling of historical events in relation to history as we know it. The fundamental consequence of the emergence of Frosts is the freezing of history and memory, which on the narrative level is depicted through the mentioned use of archaic Polish.

It is worth dwelling a little longer on the idea of the freezing of history and memory. The main protagonist of the novel is Benedykt Gierosławski, a self-described mathematician of history, who tries to explain the influence of permafrost on the course of history. And it seems – at least to a certain point – that this impact comes down to the change of an accidental order of events to a necessary one, in the sense of logical necessity. The freezing of history is therefore a kind of ordering, the elimination of chaos for the sake of a symmetrical binary alignment, in which when we come into possession of the relevant knowledge and memory of the past, we become able to predict the future. To once again draw a comparison with the theory relating to the ris: in this case ris can work perfectly well, akin to mathematical equations – if the information on the past is complete, then the future outcome is absolutely predictable. The advantages coming with the ability to predict the future are obvious, even more so in a world that is to a certain extent dominated by the Frosts. These organisms are in constant flux and they are able to freeze everything that stands in their way: people, objects, the whole inanimate nature. Predicting the paths that are taken by the Frosts is therefore crucial for survival in this reality.

The whole plot of the novel and the actions of its main protagonist are therefore based on the premise that in the regions affected by permafrost the very functioning of time was somehow altered. Gierosławski assumes that if what is underneath the ice has frozen, then time must have stopped flowing...
there as well, getting trapped in the permanent “now”, and thus, in fact, removing from the field of possibility the formation of a changing, unforeseeable future. The observations made by the hero are in agreement with his philosophical convictions: even before the hypothesis about the possibility of predicting the future is formulated, he already ponders the question of why logic is applicable only to the past (Dukaj 2007, p. 99). Here the narrator references the classic problem of two-value logic, which assigns one of the truth values of either true or false to declarative sentences describing the past, and at the same time he posits theories analogous to those behind intuitionist logic – that is, proposing the application of logic to utterances relating to the future (the development of intuitionist logic took place roughly around the start of the twentieth century, and therefore Gierosławski’s reflections are correlated with the developments in actual science). Because if it is truly the case that history freezes under the ice, and the workings of logic should not be limited to the past, then the future becomes the domain of logical necessity; it is something that not merely can be foreseen, but more than that, something that can be calculated (alongside human fates and actions).

The philosophical references in Lód are not limited to those associated with logic. Another important – and to some extent contradictory – source of inspiration comes from the phenomenological theory of perception developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012/1945) and from the distinction of perception and imagination made by Jean Paul Sartre (2012/1936). In line with these theories, at a certain point the narrator of the story comes to the conclusion that there is no fundamental difference between imagining something and the memory of an actual experience (which interestingly corresponds with significantly later theories on the correlation between episodic memory and fMTT). This, in turn, causes a radical break in thinking about the future as possible to calculate: there is no longer anything to base those calculations on if the memory of the past is tainted and mixed with phantasms that have no basis in reality.

The ending of the novel suggests that a change in the functioning of time and ris really did take place, though it was different from what was suspected. Though both time and the material environment underneath the ice were frozen, this did not result in the reinforcement of a singular version of history. On the contrary, multiple versions of its memory were preserved. The “thawing” of the world, which occurs alongside Gierosławski’s narrative and his numerous adventures, therefore activates the previously inactive versions of both the past and future, excavating from underneath the ice their various counterfactual versions. Hence, the permafrost in Lód becomes a metaphor for memory storage, which houses the manifold versions of the past, and its
thawing is a process analogous to the transfer of stored versions of the past by communicative memory. In consequence of this process temporal perspectives are multiplied: the suddenly expanded communicative memory activates – as Reinhardt Koselleck (2014) would characterise it – various spaces of experience relating to the past and horizons of imaginations relating to the future.

Another conceptualisation of environment as memory can be found in Síwy Dym (2018 [Pale Smoke]), a novel by Ziemowit Szczerek. This is a tale of the fate of Poland that takes place in a not-so-distant future, around the year 2040. In this future the European Union no longer exists, its place being taken over by a more selective entity with much greater internal cohesion, the New European Union. It is opposed by countries that have decided to support local nationalism, with Poland among their ranks. The country is ruled by a conservative neo-aristocracy, that draws upon traditions of Slav tribalism and Christianity. The uneasy political circumstances enfolding Europe are further complicated by “pale smoke” – it plays a somewhat similar role to the Frosts from Lód, and is both a reference to the smog that descends on Poland each winter, and a wordplay with a Polish expression roughly equivalent to the English phrase “beyond the pale”. The workings of smoke are mysterious and chaotic: it appears in various places and the only principle guiding its behaviour seems to be the utter lack of logic and defiance of all boundaries: geographic (it can transport whole towns to other areas), and physical (breathing under water is possible in “pale smoke”). The smoke cuts off from other spaces (it is not always possible to break through it, and there is a constant danger of being relocated together with a given town) and from other people, obstructing communication. The smoke also cannot be documented or otherwise captured on film, and the only confirmation of its existence comes from testimony of witnesses, who describe it from memory.

The main hero and narrator in the novel works as a journalist on a mission to determine the effects the smoke has on whatever it comes into contact with. He emigrated from Poland as a child but knows the languages and is familiar with the country’s realities. His perception of “pale smoke” is particularly interesting as it is shaped by a specific way of remembering Poland, which he registered as the experience of travelling through a barren landscape, forest, or darkness (Szczerek, 2018, p. 66) and at the same time as a palimpsestic space, where immediate experiences of the environment are juxtaposed with stories about the country’s past as related by his father (“Father spoke all the time of hussars, of hetmans who [...] galloped over these fields, these forests, on their nimble stallions and spoke in some half-Polish, half-Latin dialect,” Szczerek, 2018, p. 67). This palimpsestic space appears before the hero as something formless, fluid, and fleeting.
The very same traits which the journalist ascribes to Poland (or at least to what he remembers of the country), are also attributed to “pale smoke”. The main difference is merely in that the smoke not only possesses them itself but is also able to pass them onto any space it comes into contact with: changing the form and location of objects, people, and towns. It interferes with temporal relations – seemingly, in an environment where it appears time begins to flow differently and memories are formed in a strange way, the chronology of events gets confused and time fluctuates, accelerating and slowing down at random.

The semi-realistic, semi-oneiric narrative describing the work of “pale smoke” (and numerous plot twists) suggests that it can be interpreted either as an atmospheric/physical phenomenon, which actually holds the power to alter both the physical and the temporal environments, or as a kind of metaphor for the ways in which memory works. According to the former interpretation, the smoke really does change both environments and all of the heroes’ adventures within the presented world are real. But according to the latter, the smoke is a metaphor for disorders of memory, disorders that are once again perfectly captured by the RTS theory.

Disorders in the perception of the present, signalled through the formlessness of the described country, as well as by the difficulties with remembering the past (overlaying of collective memory by dreams of the future), and the inability to become rooted in any real environment (perceived as hollow and barren), result in the inability to predict the future. The future in Siwy Dym therefore becomes a somewhat fantasised repetition (and nothing more) of the past with all of its corresponding mistakes, such as the development of nationalisms, destruction of supranational structures, anarchism, local terrorism, closing of borders to migration, and finally with the threat of another world war. The past repeats itself in Siwy Dym because – similarly to Gospodinov’s novel – its memory has already become blurred, just as smoke blurs the silhouettes and restricts the view of things. The fragmented, illogical physical environment originating from the smoke is in this case a metaphor of a broken, corroded memory, which can no longer sound the alarm in the face of history getting ready to repeat itself.

In conclusion, in the case of both novels the environment stores numerous versions of collective memory and the malfunctions in the respective environments signal that something is wrong with the work of memory. But as far as Lód depicts the dangers inherent to the conviction that it would be
best to exercise complete control over memory and history, turning them into a stilted, frozen form that would permit “calculating” the future, Siwy Dym exposes opposing risks that stem from understanding national memory as a palimpsest to which further layers might be added on a whim, in order to freely manipulate the current identity of nations.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to show how memory can be treated as a certain kind of human environment – the temporal one. Most of the examples and theories described here focus on disorders in its functioning, disorders which – what is crucial – are not merely limited to difficulties with remembering the past, nor even to problems with navigating the present, but which also result in serious problems with thinking about the future.

The literary examples analysed in this paper rely on fictional devices and sometimes turn to science-fiction to present intuitions similar to ideas found in neuroscience: disorders in the workings of collective and individual memory, the inability to comprehend the surrounding environment and the processes which occur within it (among them those related to the degradation of nature and climate disaster). The difficulties with recognising the “proper” temporal moment, or – as Hartog would say – Kairos, result in such profound dysfunctions in RIS that they render imagining and predicting the future almost impossible. The diagnosis of the presentist nature of current times, in all of its numerous incarnations, is here not merely descriptive but also evaluative – pointing out possible hazards: the inability to remember the past and imagine a collective future might lead to the annihilation of that very future; and not merely in the political dimension (as through the repetition of old political mistakes or the return to supposedly ended wars) but also in the ontological-ecological realm, as the failure to fully grasp the catastrophic outcomes of the Anthropocene might bring about its most radical consequence – the one that will spell the end of all and any human activities.

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