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INTRODUCTION

Cultural heterologies and democracy: culture in the Baltic countries in the 1990s

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ABSTRACT

This special issue represents one of the first attempts at comparative analyses of cultural processes in the three Baltic countries during the post-socialist transition period. A transition period is here understood as the decisive and radical transformation of the political and economic conditions of a specific geographical area (a country or region), resulting in complete systemic change within a timeframe comprehensible within a human lifespan. In this introduction to the special issue, we outline the general conditions of a transition period and highlight three key characteristics that define the interplay between cultural and societal processes during the Baltic states' transition period.

KEYWORDS Baltic states; Baltic cultures; 1980s and 1990s transition period; democratization in the aesthetic sphere; heterology in culture; transformed perception of time

The cultural phenomena of the late 1980s and 1990s were shaped by the emergence of new opportunities, a particular intensified perception of time, a surge of new ideas and ways of thinking, the intertwining of political and cultural practices, and also the exploration of boundaries and limits in artistic activities. While these processes may initially seem similar, they unfolded with significant local variations. The political and social events in the Baltic countries that influenced cultural developments did not occur with perfect simultaneity and manifested itself in varied forms, shaped by distinct historical trajectories and cultural conditions. It is important to note that many of these processes had already begun in the late Soviet period, since the second half of the 1980s, or even earlier. Furthermore, although the restoration of independence was generally met with optimism in the Baltic States, the subsequent social and cultural changes were experienced differently and, for many, were accompanied by considerable challenges and hardship.

What is a transition period?

Something was bound to happen (Unt 1985, 3).[1]

The interplay between cultural and societal processes has long intrigued its interpreters. Text-centered approaches often disregard this potential dependency, focusing

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instead on the autonomous qualities of the text. Conversely, (neo)positivist or cultural-sociological perspectives may lean toward the opposite extreme, emphasizing the dependence of creative work on social conditions and milieu. The analysis might foreground either dependency or autonomy, depending on the subject of research, methodology, researcher interest, and the prevailing theoretical frameworks of the time. In totalitarian societies, this choice is often predetermined by the government-mandated ideological framework. There are, however, certain periods when connections between social backgrounds, cultural phenomena, and arts are more evident and even unavoidable – or at least, when disregarding these would require a deliberate act of exclusion. One of the most characteristic examples of such periods are periods of transition.

In recent decades, the political and economic aspects of transitional periods, as well as their influence on social attitudes and human behavior, have garnered significant attention. The field of so-called 'transitology' primarily focuses on the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, examining the transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic societies and from planned to market economies. Most research has concentrated on central and eastern Europe, where the transition was relatively successful, while former Soviet republics in Central Asia or the South Caucasus, for example, have received far less attention.[2] Existing studies tend to be based on specific national examples rather than seeking to establish universally applicable definitions and models. As a result, the concept of a transition period is often understood intuitively and inductively, which has hindered broader temporal and geographical comparisons. Such an attitude is understandable, as the collapse of the state-socialist political system in central and eastern Europe, supported by the Soviet Union, has indeed been one of the greatest geopolitical changes of the past half-century.

In addition to social sciences, the post-socialist transition period has been a focal point of historical research. In most cases, however, political and social changes remain central, and there is always no clear boundary separating it from the social sciences.[3] Studies focusing on cultural transformation have been less common, and comparative analyses remain scarce. Typically, research examines changes within a single domain – such as theater, literature, or visual culture – within a specific country or region. The few broader studies stand out as exceptions (for example, Erjavec 2003; Forrester, Zaborowska, and Gapova 2004; Piotrowski 2012; Sztompka 2004; Tlostanova 2017, 2018; Warner and Manole 2020).

In this special issue, the transition period is understood as a decisive and radical transformation within a specific geographical area (country or region), marked by a complete systemic shift in political and economic conditions that occurs within a timeframe comprehensible within a human lifespan. Thus, the transition period is defined both temporally and spatially, though these boundaries may be somewhat fluid and open to debate. Several criteria determine the transition period, with the most significant being political regime change and economic transformation. As previously mentioned, transition periods are most commonly associated with shifts from totalitarian or authoritarian regimes to democratic governance, accompanied by inevitable institutional, social, and cultural changes.

The driving forces behind a transition period can vary – the collapse of an empire, in some cases prior wartime conditions, economic crises triggering societal restructuring, or environmental factors influencing social processes (climate change, pollution, floods, droughts; see, for example, the Arab Spring – Werrell, Femia, and

Slaughter 2013). A crucial characteristic of a transition period is that changes do not occur in just a single domain; rather, society as a whole undergoes a transformation, affecting not only the political and economic system but also culture, ideology, and sometimes language use. Consequently, a transition period is not only a combination of external factors but also deeply affects individuals on a subjective level – it influences everyone and is inevitably experienced by all members of society. At the individual level, transition can be experienced as positive (for example, new opportunities, freedom of speech, open borders, restoration of historical justice) or negative (for example, economic hardships, loss of one's previous status and prestige, sense of exclusion). No one, however, remains unaffected.

The duration of the post-socialist transition period is subject to interpretation. For the Baltic states, the transition period may be traced back to General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika in the Soviet Union, a particular locally significant social or cultural event (for example, the Baltic Way), the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the declaration of national independence. A common reference point for marking the end of the transition is the Baltic states' accession to the European Union and NATO in 2004 (for example, Kalmus et al. 2020; Lauristin and Vihalemm 2009; Vihalemm et al. 2017).

Changes in different domains are, however, not necessarily linear or causal. Cultural transformations often precede political changes. Moreover, transition periods are rarely triggered by a single precipitating event; rather, they erupt as a preexisting societal expectation for change and accumulated tensions that can be released in various ways and for different motivations.

We, therefore, propose that the transition period can be characterized by three distinct levels of change.

- Societal level: a transition period involves a collective expectation for change, which is activated by key events that lead to political and economic transformations. These, in turn, resonate across other domains, prompting ideological shifts and also linguistic changes.
- Cultural level: cultural changes during transition periods are heterogeneous and do not necessarily align chronologically or causally with political transformations. Societal expectations for change may manifest in artistic works and cultural events significantly earlier than they appear in the political sphere.
- Subjective level: a transition period affects all individuals directly, altering their lived experiences, perceptions of time (for example, reevaluating history, a sense of time compression), and extending their spatial possibilities (for example, opening of borders).

When drawing broader comparisons, one must consider how transition periods differ from revolutions or transitions driven by important transnational agreements (for example, the Brexit transition period). Based on previous studies, three additional characteristics can help distinguish transition periods:

- They are generally viewed through a modernist, progress-oriented lens, typically framed as a departure from authoritarianism and a movement toward democracy.

- Although transitions can be initiated by random events, their political development relies on deliberate social reforms.
- While some transition periods may be triggered by revolutions, they are not inherently violent – hence the description of post-socialist transitions in central Europe as 'velvet revolutions.'[4]

Drawing from the above, it is apparent that despite certain shared characteristics, transition periods exhibit significant variation across different regions and time periods. Social scientists have observed that transitional reforms do not follow a single pattern; rather, the dynamics of post-socialist transformation varied widely, ranging from remarkable success stories to traumatic ethnic conflicts and catastrophic economic and social consequences (see, for example, Ghodsee and Orenstein 2021; Lauristin and Vihalemm 2020, 33; Titma, Tuma and Silver 1998). A transition period may be preceded by a revolution, but this is not a prerequisite – likewise, not every revolution results in a transition period (for example, Russian Revolution of 1905). Based on the set of characteristics outlined above, Brexit does not fit the definition of a transition period, or at most it could be conceptualized as a minimal form of transition.

Examples of transition periods can be found worldwide and across different historical contexts. The collapse of empires after World War I led to dramatic transformations, while democratization processes in Taiwan, South Korea, and South Africa – occurring around the same time as the Soviet Union's dissolution – exhibited cultural processes with significant similarities to central and eastern European transitions. Thus, although the comprehensive and even radical nature of the transition has been emphasized above, it must be acknowledged that more moderate variations also exist, sharing only some characteristics with the transition period discussed in this analysis.

Key concepts

No one knows, of these republics, whether they really exist. Life in them is incomprehensible and mysterious (Luik 2007, 10).[5]

To return to the interactions between cultural and societal processes during the transition period, as outlined at the beginning of this introduction, it is evident that these interactions manifest quite differently across various regions and countries. The regaining of independence in the Baltic states and their shedding of Soviet socialism occurred more or less simultaneously. In all three countries, the cultural sphere was influenced by similar economic factors, the opening of borders, and a transformation of the information sphere. On a global scale, the development of personal computers and the internet played their role, too.

Each Baltic state had relatively similar networks of Soviet cultural institutions and funding structures. Soviet cultural policy was based on state-controlled publishing and theater systems, art and research institutions, creative unions, and higher education institutions with their standardized curricula. The overall re-independence processes in the Baltic states were characterized by rapid efforts to break free from the Soviet system, privatization of state-owned enterprises, reliance on the experience of their interwar independence, and the restoration of pre-Soviet institutions. Nevertheless, several Soviet-era institutions in the cultural sphere remained intact, including the systems of creative organizations. In Estonia, for example, all state-funded cultural periodicals and

theaters were preserved, while in Latvia and Lithuania, independent academic research institutes remained (whereas in Estonia, such institutes were mostly integrated into universities).

Despite many historical commonalities and similar patterns of development among the Baltic states during their transition period, cultural processes were also marked by asynchronicity and diversity. The desire to engage with contemporary Western cultural developments became intertwined with nostalgia for the pre-occupation, independent state. Radical reforms, societal upheavals and crises, and the simultaneous abundance of new opportunities and economic constraints during the transition period contributed to an uneven development across different cultural fields and art forms, leading to the multiplicity of discontinuities and continuities – though the pace, rhythm, and extent of the changes varied significantly.

These differences and dissonances, however, should be understood as characteristic of the interaction between culture and society, forming one of the basic principles of the autonomy and development of the cultural sphere. In what follows, we examine these relationships through three key concepts.

1. Political democratization is accompanied by *democratization in the aesthetic sphere*. This can be interpreted as a defining feature of cultural processes during the transition period, yet it also differs from political democracy in fundamental ways.

Democracy of the aesthetic field (see, for example, Docherty 2006; Greiman 2023) conditions what is possible (visible, expressible, and doable) within a new cultural situation and conditions the distribution of meaning in cultural communication. This allows us to consider various aesthetic discrepancies – discordances, interferences, and conflicts between different elements – as parts of the broader politics of aesthetics within a given dynamic cultural situation. The process of democratization also involves a new organization of the relations between private and public spheres.

The social role, its transformation, and the intensity of different fields – such as theater, visual arts, literature, music, and film – varied at different points in time, even within the borders of the same country, creating diverse social constellations. A set of politically significant turning points, institutional configurations, and economic factors, on the one hand, and artworks and texts that resonated beyond the cultural sphere, on the other, all played a role. The intensity of such artistic activities is one factor that disrupts any coherent view of the 1990s.

This is why this special issue focuses on individual events and works that resonated beyond the cultural sphere, exposing tensions and rifts in society, prompting public debate, and sometimes animosity toward culture. The potential for such cultural acts and events to transfigure social reality may have been unintentional, but it also drew power from a certain utopian intention, inevitably raising the question of the democratic position of culture in contemporary society.

2. Second, we make use of the concept of heterology, arguing that it has significant potential to make sense of the transition period

The term heterology has been used from somewhat different perspectives. One starting point is Georges Bataille's largely undeveloped theorization of heterology.[6] Bataille considered heterology as a possible science that focuses on the 'excluded part' (*partie exclue*) – the heterogeneous, the radically other (*tout autre*) – something unresearched or deemed unworthy of scientific inquiry and thus left out, as lacking value for

the ambitions of science (as well as politics, ideology, and other social structures) in creating a coherent worldview.

Another incomplete attempt to define heterology was made by Michel de Certeau (1986) in his late essays, compiled and translated into English as *Heterologies: Discourses on the Other*. De Certeau, too, saw heterology as a science of *Otherness* or *alterity*, 'of things of the other life' (93), a way of thinking against the grain, a disruptive intellectual field, which 'operates at the juncture of scientific discourse and ordinary language, in the same place, where the past is conjugated in the present, and where questions that are not amenable to a technical approach reappear in the form of narrative metaphors' (215).

Finally, there are several authors for whom heterology is rather an intuitively understood phenomenon, without necessarily forming a science or discourse. One example is Jacques Rancière's understanding of the notion of 'heterology,' 'that refers to the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed,' thus signifying disruptions and displacements within a framing predetermined by policy (Rancière 2004).

Despite their differences, these approaches share a common concern: bringing forth the heterogeneous – the other, the ignored, the suppressed, the structurally inappropriate. This means challenging the homogeneity of society and the cultural sphere, exposing the constructed nature of its supposed homogeneity, together with its inevitable inconsistencies, and the conscious or unconscious exclusion of the unknown, the strange, the inappropriate, and the different from its aspirations to homogeneity.

The transition period inherently involved the emergence of the previously hidden, missing, or the yet-to-exist. This process from nonexistence to existence should be understood rather literally, whether it involved the past, the repressed due to external pressures or traumatic experiences, exclusions based on gender, ethnicity, race, or disability, or texts that were censored, removed from general circulation, or destroyed. Exclusion might encompass entire nations, languages, and territories, such as the Baltic states themselves, which for decades were erased from political maps. Their reappearance may have even caused confusion and discomfort in the 'old' countries with their apparently well-established political constellations. Representations of such feelings of nonexistence can be found in numerous works and reflections from the transition period. Conversely, the transition period also brought about new cultural others, new exclusions and marginalizations, and new heterogeneities.

Here, we understand heterology as the recognition of perceptible incoherence, unevenness, otherness, and absence – of the heterogenous. This heterogeneity is manifest on many levels, from the micro-scale of personal experiences, trauma, and exclusion to the systematic erasure of entire peoples, classes, and groups from the fabric of history or society. As Kevin Kennedy suggests, art can be precisely the sphere where heterogeneity – indeterminacy, the negative overflow – becomes visible (K. Kennedy 2018): the same conclusion can be applied to the many cultural practices of the transition period.

In short, the concept of heterology makes it possible to describe the incoherencies, conflicts, and fragmentation among different elements of a given cultural situation. At the same time, it enables the identification of connections, relationships, and implicit or explicit otherness within this fragmented cultural fabric. Moreover, it reveals aspects hitherto hidden, excluded, forbidden, or censored in ordinary practice.

3. A third defining feature of cultural relations during the transition period is *the transformed perception of time*. If the socialist world system, from the post-Stalin era to perestroika, was ideologically rooted, on a state level, in a faith in modernist progress, Mikhail Gorbachev's concept of stagnation introduced a clear disruption within this linear sense of progress.[7]

During the transition period, the perception of time became even more complex (see also Tomlinson 2007; Vihalemm et al. 2018, 706–707; West-Pavlov 2013, 137–157). In the Baltic states, this was first characterized by a focus on memory work, the rewriting of the repressed past. Since there was an unbridgeable gap between official Soviet historiography and personal experiences, glasnost began with the gradual unveiling of silenced historical events. In the Baltics, this process was accompanied by micro-history writing, the collecting of personal memoirs, and the restoration of family histories, in addition to varied combinations of memory work and artistic practices. At the state level, the restoration of independence largely involved the reestablishment of pre-World War II institutions and legal frameworks (see also Tamm 2013).

At the same time, the transition period opened a completely indeterminate range of future possibilities. It was clear that everything was changing, but the scope and particulars of this change remained impossible to foresee. The openness of the future and the infinite potential it held created a sense of detachment from ordinary time at the individual level. For this reason, the transition period, or at least parts of it, can be described as an interregnum (see Bauman 2012): the old had disappeared, while the undefined new had not yet arrived.

On an individual level, these different temporalities were characterized by a distinctive density of time-experience and the coexistence of multiple temporal scales: people simultaneously relived a suppressed past, envisioned a plethora of future potential, and experienced radical societal transformations. As Estonian writer Ene Mihkelson put it,

> A day had a year, a number, and a time, and yet this day marked both an end and a beginning, and the multiplicity of events became an experience I had never known before. For the first time, I almost physically felt the rebirth of the present into a future that had yet to be named. (Mihkelson 1994, 6)

Thus, the transition period can be characterized by a unique form of multi-temporality, which functioned in a disjointed manner across different scales – personal, local, regional, and global.

Transition culture in the Baltic states: openings and interruptions, intersections, and multi-temporality

The nine articles compiled in this special issue were inspired by a seminar of the same name held in Viinistu in northern Estonia in 2021.[8] The contributors include cultural researchers from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, representing various fields such as literature, visual arts, and theater.

Several articles examine, from different perspectives, the impact of rapid changes in transitional societies upon cultural processes, or how cultural transformations relate to societal developments. The focus is on cultural policies, institutional dynamics, and interactions between the public sphere as it emerges in the democratization process and artistic practices, including the visual arts, theater, and literature. The profound

economic and political reforms of the transition period also marked the end of Soviet cultural policy. At the institutional level, existing cultural institutions were either abolished or restructured, while new ones were established through both state and private initiatives. Legislative frameworks and cultural funding models were also transformed. The ambivalence and contradictions of transition culture placed cultural policy makers in a complex situation: they had to keep pace with the explosion of cultural practices freed from Soviet-era restrictions and to engage in dialogue with a democratizing cultural sphere.

Polish art historian Karolina Łabowicz-Dymanus examines the cultural policies of the transition period in the field of visual arts in Estonia. She analyzes the interplay between neoliberal economic policies, state-level cultural strategies, and efforts to ensure artistic freedom and diversity in Estonia's transition period. The article explores the conflicts and challenges accompanying institutional restructuring (such as the establishment of private galleries), discussions around the development of new cultural policies and shifts in art discourse, and the impact of the collapse of the previous state funding system on the visual arts. The changing role of culture in a society in transition is closely linked to changing models of identity, particularly the tensions between nationalism and internationalization, which the article also explores.

Estonian art historian Ingrid Ruudi examines the dynamics between art and public space during the transition period, using Tallinn's Freedom Square for her case study. The square served as the central arena of an emerging public sphere. The article provides an overview of the history of the square's use and conceptualization as an urban public space. Architectural projects, art events, and installations, including works by Jaan Toomik, Raoul Kurvitz, and Tõnis Vint, help to uncover the heterogeneity of the public sphere in the transition period and to highlight certain social antagonisms and conflicts of the time. The transformations of public space analyzed by Ruudi vividly reflect the internal dynamics of transition culture.

Lithuanian literary scholar Dalia Satkauskyté examines the editorial strategies of *Pergalė* (Victory), a key Lithuanian 'thick' literary journal, in 1988, a year that marked the transition from Soviet perestroika to the national movement for Lithuanian independence. *Pergalė* (published from 1942 to 1990) was the official publication of the Lithuanian SSR Writers' Union. Satkauskyté's close analysis shows how the complex transitional political situation, including democratization, influenced the publishing policies and the rhetoric of literary criticism in a journal established under Soviet rule. The ambivalence of the literary politics reflected the broader discursive contradictions of the era.

The contribution by the Latvian theater researcher Zane Kreicberga, who passed away before this collection went to press, examines and compares the theater festivals established in the first half of the 1990s across the three Baltic countries: *Baltoscandal* in Estonia, *LIFE* in Lithuania, and *Homo Novus* in Latvia. These festivals played a significant role in the cultural politics of the transition period: they served as agents of internationalization, provided connections with Western theaters, and offered new possibilities for artistic innovation. Using Willmar Sauter's model of a theatrical event, Kreicberga analyzes the cultural contexts, aims, and functions of the festivals. The article also introduces their leading figures (Peeter Jalakas, Rūta Vanagaitė, and Pēteris Krilovs) and their programs. Kreicberga's analysis demonstrates the similar role each played in the cultural change of the transition period, while also identifying distinct artistic emphases.

Culture operates through mechanisms that preserve traditions and continuity while also supporting cultural renewal. During the transition period, the latter dominated, characterized by the rapid and extensive influx of new cultural phenomena, intellectual currents, and cultural imaginaries from the West. These processes were linked to shifts in identity models, including the desire to reconnect with the European cultural sphere and to synchronize with Western cultural developments. The tension between new ideologies and lingering Soviet-era discourses shaped the patterns of transition culture.

Perhaps the most significant new cultural and intellectual movement of this period was postmodernism, which dominated Western cultural discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. Two articles in this issue examine postmodernism from different perspectives. Estonian cultural researcher Epp Annus compares two key socio-cultural impulses of the transition period: postmodernism and the emerging neoliberal ideology. Within the broader framework of the decolonization of Soviet Estonia, Annus explores how the rise of postmodernism and neoliberalism shaped era-specific value-systems, economic discussions, and culture. To illuminate the tensions and contradictions between them, she analyzes the debates around the economic proposal IME (Self-Managing Estonia) in the media of the late 1980s and she unravels postmodernist modalities in literature, particularly in Mati Unt's novel *Diary of a Blood Donor* (1990). This comparative analysis reveals the heterogeneity, internal contradictions, and complexity of transition-era culture and society.

Latvian literary scholars Eva Eglāja-Kristsone and Pauls Daija, in their study, trace the emergence and evolution of postmodernism in Latvian literature, architecture, and music from the late Soviet period (late 1970s) into the new century. They define postmodernism as a cultural movement with specific stylistic characteristics and identify its three stages of development, from so-called retrospective postmodernism (which was incorporated only later into the canon) to mature postmodernism and its conceptualization. The article examines the use of the term across various artistic fields, with a particular emphasis on literature and literary criticism. The focus is on the relationship between (Latvian) national identity and the influence of Western cultural models and discourses.

Alongside the influx of new cultural phenomena and theoretical currents from the West, the transition period also saw the emergence of original cultural concepts rooted in local traditions. One such concept analyzed by Estonian art and cultural scholar Virve Sarapik describes the emergence of the term *ethnofuturism* in 1989, initiated by the Tartu literary group *Hirohall*, and its development in Estonian culture. The article focuses on the relationship between ethnofuturism and Estonian transition-era culture and considers possible frameworks for defining ethnofuturism. A central question is whether ethnofuturism is a phenomenon specific to early transition-era Estonia or whether it has broader applicability in describing transition periods elsewhere in central and eastern Europe.

At the beginning of the transition period, all Soviet-era censorship was abolished (officially in 1990, for all three Baltic countries). This allowed literature to address issues that had previously been ideologically or morally censored. With the restrictions lifted, transition-era culture and literature began to explore themes that had hitherto been off-limits. The 1990s saw a surge in discussions of historical events that had been silenced or addressed only obliquely during the Soviet period.

In addition to previous taboo topics concerning writings about history, new themes related to sexuality also emerged in the art fields, with queerness receiving particular attention. Homosexuality was criminalized during the Soviet period and decriminalized

in the Baltic states in the early 1990s. In the wake of broader liberalization, this allowed queer themes to enter literature. Two of the articles in this special issue examine how queerness manifested in Estonian and Latvian literature at the beginning of the transition era. Estonian literary scholar Piret Viires provides a brief overview of Estonian queer literature in her article, focusing primarily on the depiction of queer themes in Estonian literature during the transition period of the 1990s. In addition to outlining the historical context and describing social and legal attitudes toward homosexuality in Estonia from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, the article introduces examples of queer literature from the interwar independent Estonian Republic and Soviet Estonia. The central focus, however, is on the novel *Border State* (1993) by the Estonian writer Emil Tode (Tõnu Õnnepalu), analyzing its portrayal of queer themes and the novel's controversial reception in Estonia during the transitional period. The article also introduces some examples of twenty-first-century Estonian queer literature and discusses potential future research directions.

Latvian literary scholars Kārlis Vērdiņš and Jānis Ozoliņš continue the analysis of queerness in Baltic literature. Their article examines the works of Latvian writers Andra Neiburga and Eva Rubene, whose short stories were published in the early 1990s, and compares them with Emil Tode's aforementioned novel *Border State*. The central concept of the article is melancholy; the identities of queer protagonists are shaped by a complex combination of various losses, leading to persistent melancholic states. Vērdiņš and Ozoliņš observe that the depiction of the protagonists' psyches in Neiburga's and Rubene's works is similar to that of the protagonist in *Border State*. The authors argue that these similarities point to a certain trend in the early 1990s Baltic literature, where the construction of queer characters was influenced by more widely disseminated knowledge about sexuality, and where curiosity and empathy were mixed with homophobic discourses widespread in the Soviet Union.

This special issue is one of the first attempts to bring together scholars from different countries and cultural fields to discuss the cultural processes of the post-socialist transition period in the Baltic states, highlighting both their similarities and their differences. It is clear that extensive research in this field still lies ahead. While numerous individual studies have been published in various countries, comparative and broader analyses remain scarce. The aim of the international seminar that served as the foundation for this special issue was to create an open space for dialogue and to explore how and with what methods such complex cultural phenomena can be studied. Articles in this special issue offer new theoretical frameworks, provide suggestive comparative analyses, and propose directions for future collaborative research.

Notes

1. The first sentence of one of the best-known novels by Estonian author Mati Unt *Autumn Ball* (Sügisball), published in Estonian in 1979 (Unt 1979).
2. This was particularly the case in the analyses published in the immediate period of transition (for example, Bunce 1999; Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998; Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley 1998; M. D. Kennedy 2002; Offe 1996; Stark and Bruszt 1998), while the scope and level of generalization of later approaches has broadened (for example, Berglund et al. 2013; Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner-Weiss 2009; Gill 2002; Kollmorgen 2013; Lane and Myant 2007; Mays 2024; Vihalemm et al. 2018; the journal *Studies of Transition States and Societies* since 2009, http://publications.tlu.ee/index.php/stss/).

3. Several historical studies focus either on the collapse of the Soviet Union and other events that led to the disintegration of the Soviet system (for example, Kotkin 2008; Zubok 2021) or on more narrowly defined regions. Their perspectives on these events can vary significantly. Some broader studies have been published in the fields of intellectual history and political narratives (Kopeček and Wciślik 2015; Vogt 2005).
4. The phrase originally used to refer to the November 1989 events in Czechoslovakia (see for example, Sebestyen 2009, 397) has later been extended to other powerless transitions, especially in central Europe (for example, Nikolchina 2013; Priban 2002).
5. Viivi Luik, *The Beauty of History* (Ajaloo ilu), published in Estonian in 1991 (Luik 1991, 5–6).
6. Bataille first discussed heterology in his essay *La Valeur d'usage de D.A.F. Sade* (Bataille 1970b, 1985a), and it is also mentioned in several of his other writings (including *La Structure psychologique du fascisme*, Bataille 1970c, 1985b, and "Dossier 'hétérologie", Bataille 1970a.) and in unpublished sketches, including 'Definition of Heterology.' This text, dating from the 1930s, was most likely intended as part of a longer essay and was published in 2018 in English translation, along with several interpretations of heterology, in the special issue of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*, 'Bataille and Heterology' (Bataille 2018). See also Hewson and Coelen (2019).
7. The 'era of stagnation' (*zastoia*) was introduced in 1986 by Gorbachev to describe the economic and social stagnation of the preceding period and to justify the need for innovation – perestroika.
8. The seminar 'Cultural Heterologies and Democracy: Culture in the Baltic Countries in the 1990s' was held in Viinistu, Estonia, from 17–19 August 2021 (see also https://nyydiskultuur.artun.ee/sundmused/rahvusvahelised-konverentsid/viinistu2021/). In addition to the seminar, the same range of topics was addressed in two special issues of the academic journal *Philologia Estonica Tallinnensis*, compiled by Luule Epner and Piret Viires (2024; Epner and Viires 2021).

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Luule Epner is a theatre and literary scholar, an Associate Professor of Estonian literature at Tallinn University. She also teaches at the Drama School of Estonian Music and Theatre Academy. She has investigated Estonian literature during and after the Soviet era, as well as Estonian theatre history and contemporary postdramatic theatre practices. She is the author of Mängitud maailmad (Worlds in Play, 2018) and the co-author of Eesti kirjanduslugu (Estonian Literary History, 2001) and Eesti sõnateater 1965–1985 (Estonian Dramatic Theatre 1965–1985, 2015).

Piret Viires is a literary scholar and professor of Estonian literature and literary theory at Tallinn University. She defended her PhD (2006) in Estonian literature at the University of Tartu. Her main areas of research are Estonian literature of transition period in the 1990s as well as contemporary Estonian literature, postmodernism and digital literature. She has published several articles on these

topics as well as books on Estonian literature and postmodernism, such as Postmodernism in Estonian Literary Culture (2012). Piret Viires is a board member of the Estonian Writers' Union and has also published fiction.

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