

Bodily Disability and Ecological Disaster: Eco-Crip Reflections in Christa Wolf's *Störfall*

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Abstract

This paper proposes a (re)reading of Christa Wolf's *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987) through the lens of eco-crip theory, focusing on how the text juxtaposes bodily illness and ecological disaster to challenge normative conceptions of health, temporality, and resilience. Written in the aftermath of the Chornobyl¹ catastrophe, *Störfall* records a single day in which two *accidents* occurred: the narrator's brother undergoes brain surgery, while radioactive clouds spread across Europe. This temporal coincidence enables Wolf to trace a web of shared vulnerability between human and more-than-human bodies, exposing the porous boundaries between individual suffering and planetary crisis. The narrator's reflections resist both medical normalisation and state-sanctioned technocratic narratives, engaging instead in a form of eco-crip witnessing that affirms interdependence and care. Drawing on disability studies and post-Chornobyl environmental humanities, this paper argues that *Störfall* articulates a temporality of crip latency—a suspended time in which futures are uncertain, and bodies remain exposed to delayed, invisible harm. Wolf's hybrid text, blending diary, reportage, and personal meditation, performs a cultural critique of Western ideals of control, productivity, and bodily integrity. It thus contributes to an eco-crip ethics that values fragility not as lack, but as a condition for alternative ways of inhabiting damaged worlds. In doing so, *Störfall* prefigures twenty-first-century discourses around environmental illness, slow violence, and toxic embodiment.

Keywords: Christa Wolf, Chornobyl, eco-crip theory, crip latency, critical disability studies.

Resumen

Este artículo propone una (re)lectura de *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987) de Christa Wolf desde la perspectiva de la teoría *eco-crip*, centrándose en cómo el texto yuxtapone la enfermedad corporal y el desastre ecológico para cuestionar las concepciones normativas de la salud, la temporalidad y la resiliencia. Escrito inmediatamente después de la catástrofe de Chornobyl, *Störfall* registra un único día en el que se producen dos accidentes: el hermano de la narradora se somete a una operación cerebral, mientras nubes radiactivas se extienden por Europa. Esta coincidencia temporal permite a Wolf trazar una red de vulnerabilidad compartida entre cuerpos humanos y más-que-humanos, poniendo de relieve los límites porosos entre el sufrimiento individual y la crisis planetaria. Las reflexiones de la narradora resisten tanto la normalización médica como los relatos tecnocráticos legitimados por el Estado, y se inscriben, en cambio, en una forma de testimonio *eco-crip* que afirma la interdependencia y el cuidado. A partir de los estudios de la discapacidad y de las humanidades ambientales posteriores a Chornobyl, este artículo sostiene que *Störfall* articula una temporalidad de latencia *crip*: un tiempo suspendido en el que los futuros permanecen inciertos y los cuerpos quedan expuestos a daños diferidos e invisibles. El texto híbrido de Wolf, que combina diario, reportaje y meditación personal, lleva a cabo una crítica cultural de los ideales occidentales de control, productividad e integridad corporal. De este modo, contribuye a una ética *eco-crip* que valora la fragilidad no como carencia, sino como condición para formas alternativas de habitar mundos

¹ Throughout this article, it will be used the spelling "Chornobyl" rather than "Chernobyl," as the latter is the transliteration from Russian which has become less common in English texts.

dañados. Al hacerlo, *Störfall* anticipa discursos del siglo XXI en torno a la enfermedad ambiental, la violencia lenta y la corporalidad tóxica.

Palabras clave: Christa Wolf, Chornobyl, teoría eco-crip, latencia crip, estudios críticos de la discapacidad.

The Accident and Crip Latency

April 26, 1986, marks an epistemological and ontological rupture in recent European history, a moment—defined by its delayed manifestation—when the invisible manifested itself with unprecedented violence.

In *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987; *Accident: A Day's News*), written between June and September 1986, Christa Wolf does not merely chronicle the macroscopic event of the Chornobyl disaster; rather, she engineers a radical juxtaposition of two seemingly distant scales of destruction, anticipating what Emily Jones defines as the representational challenge of the “hyper-disaster” (94). Drawing upon Timothy Morton’s concept, Jones frames Chornobyl as an event operating on the scale of “hyperobjects”, which are entities “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (93). Consequently, the nuclear catastrophe outstrips anthropocentric scales of understanding and representation, “resisting our comprehension” (93), precisely due to temporalities and geographies that exceed immediate phenomenological experience. While a radioactive plume traverses national borders, ignoring political customs of national sovereignty and ideological demarcations of East and West, the narrator’s brother undergoes a delicate operation for a brain tumour. The incipit of Wolf’s text immediately establishes an atmosphere for this collision. Before mentioning the specific events, Wolf enacts an epistemological rupture within language itself, rejecting the metaphor of *explosion* for the blooming nature:

On a day about which I cannot write in the present tense, the cherry trees will have been in blossom. I will have avoided thinking, “exploded”, the cherry trees have exploded, although only one year earlier I could not only think but also say it readily, if not entirely with conviction. The green is exploding. Never would such a sentence have been more appropriate in describing the progress of nature than this year, in this spring heat, following the endlessly long winter.² (3)³

² This and all subsequent English quotations from Christa Wolf’s text are taken from *Accident: A Day's News*, translated by H. Schwarzbauer and R. Takvorian (1989). Quotations in the original German refer to *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987). The page numbers refer to the respective original German or translated publications.

³ “Eines Tages, über den ich in der Gegenwartsform nicht schreiben kann, werden die Kirschbäume aufgeblüht gewesen sein. Ich werde vermieden haben, zu denken: “explodiert”; die Kirschbäume sind explodiert, wie ich es noch ein Jahr zuvor, obwohl nicht mehr ganz unwissend, ohne weiteres nicht nur denken, auch sagen konnte. Das Grün explodiert: Nie wäre ein solche Satz dem Naturvorgang angemessener gewesen als dieses Jahr, bei dieser Frühlingshitze nach dem endlos langen Winter” (9).

On the one hand, there is the explosion of reactor four, the apotheosis of technological failure unearthing the nucleus of matter; on the other, the surgical opening of the skull, the necessary violation of bodily integrity to excise a malignancy: “That goal in a very distant future toward which all lines had run till now had been blasted away, was smoldering, along with the fissionable material in a nuclear reactor. A rare case... Seven o’ clock. Where you are now, brother, they begin punctually” (4).⁴ On this specific day, the *Nachricht* (news) is not singular, but dual and entangled: the body of the Earth and the human body are simultaneously opened, rendered vulnerable, and penetrated by forces that elude immediate sensory control. Wolf constructs her narrative upon this agonising simultaneity, where the bright blue spring sky of Mecklenburg conceals lethal isotopes, and the silence of waiting by the telephone conceals the precariousness of the brother’s life: “This immaculate blue sky, this incarnation of purity, where the uneasy glances of millions are meeting today, is lost to you” (19).⁵ This parallelism serves as the initial point to dismantle the binary distinction between the external environment and the internal body. In Wolf’s reflections, the event of April 26 becomes a point of rapture where biology and technology, the personal and the planetary, collapse into one another. This collapse reveals a truth that modernity had attempted to suppress: the absolute porosity of boundaries.

To fully grasp the magnitude of Wolf’s narrative project, it is necessary to situate *Störfall* within the cultural and ideological context of its genesis. The ideology of the GDR at the time was predicated on a teleological narrative of linear progress. As scholars like Julia Hell and Anna Kuhn have noted, the healthy, productive, and hermetic body represented the microcosm of an efficient State (Hell 19-21; Kuhn 9), protected by secure borders; parallel to this, nature was conceived as a resource to be mastered through technology, culminating in nuclear energy as a symbol of autonomy and so-called peaceful power. The very concept of security relied on the illusion of immunity: the notion that the human being could exist as a separate, closed entity, impermeable to unwanted external agents (Klocke 151). Within this framework, Wolf’s chosen title, *Störfall*, assumes critical theoretical relevance. In German, the term designates an incident, a technical malfunction, an interruption of regular flow. However, read through the lens of systems theory and cybernetics, the *Störfall* is a *glitch*: an error that not only halts the machine but reveals its internal architecture, exposing its structural fragilities (Kuhn 210). Chornobyl acts as the definitive glitch in the operating system of anthropocentric modernism. It ruptures the narrative of control over nature and, simultaneously, invalidates the rhetoric of bodily integrity. The brother’s body under the knife and the citizens’ bodies exposed to radiation are no longer sovereign entities, but open bodies, subject to a toxic

⁴ “Jenes Ziel in einer sehr fernen Zukunft, auf das sich bis jetzt alle Linien zubewegt hatten, war weggesprengt worden, gemeinsam mit dem spaltbaren Material in einem Reaktorgehäuse ist es dabeigewesen zu verglühen. Ein seltener Fall—Sieben Uhr. Da, Bruder, wo du jetzt bist, fängt man pünktlich an” (10).

⁵ “Dieser makellos blaue Himmel entgeht dir, dieses Sinnbild von Reinheit, auf dem sich heute die bangen Blicke von Millionen treffen” (31-32).

interdependence. Writing from the heart of this crisis, Wolf documents the failure of the Promethean promise: the technology meant to liberate humanity (nuclear power) now threatens it with invisible death; the medicine meant to save (surgery) requires an invasive intervention that, while clinically necessary, disrupts bodily integrity and suspends life on a razor's edge. *Störfall* is, therefore, the text that records the moment when the culture of immunity collapses under the weight of its own hybris, giving way to a reality of inevitable contamination.

Reading *Störfall* today requires a theoretical apparatus capable of navigating this complexity without reductionism. Traditional ecocritical readings risk focusing excessively on the external environment, neglecting the somatic and medical dimension of the brother's experience; conversely, a purely biographical or medical reading would miss the structural connection to the ecological disaster. It is here that an eco-crip perspective becomes methodologically advantageous. Eco-crip theory emerges at the intersection of environmental humanities and critical disability studies. While ecocriticism interrogates the relationship between the human and the non-human, and disability studies deconstruct bodily normativity and the ideology of "compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 2), the eco-crip approach fuses these concerns.⁶ It allows us to analyse how the categories of natural and healthy have been historically constructed to exclude deviant or vulnerable bodies, and how the ecological crisis produces new forms of disability and shared vulnerability. In the context of *Störfall*, the eco-crip lens offers a particularly interesting approach. Wolf presents a world where the distinction between the able and the disabled body, or between the healthy and the sick body, becomes untenable in the face of the radioactive threat. As suggested by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), there is no such thing as a "closed body" in a toxic environment (15). We are all, potentially, crip bodies—impaired, invalidated, vulnerable—before the agency of uncontrollable environmental forces. By utilising this lens, we can read the brother's body not as a tragic exception, but as the materialisation of a universal condition in the Anthropocene: "trans-corporeality" is the recognition that the environment is not merely what surrounds us, but what *crosses* us, *constitutes* us, and, in the case of Chernobyl, *alters* us at the cellular level (Alaimo 2).

Through the application of the eco-crip lens to Wolf's text, the central thesis of this article emerges: *Störfall* is neither a narrative of healing nor an apocalyptic chronicle of immediate end, but rather a phenomenology of latency. I propose to define this state as crip latency. Unlike heroic narratives that anticipate a return to the previous state of health, or tragic narratives culminating in death, Wolf constructs a suspended space-time. Latency is the invisible interval between exposure to harm and the manifestation of the symptom. It is the time during which Cesium-137 settles in the grass and milk, invisible to the eye but lethal in the long term; it is the time

⁶ Being crip means occupying a position of non-compliance with rehabilitation regimes that seek to fix bodies to make them productive for capital: "*Crip Theory* comes along to show that another world is possible" (McRuer XI).

during which the brother lies in the operating room, in a state of unconsciousness, suspended between life and death, with an outcome that will not be immediately clear even upon waking. This phenomenological suspension is grounded in what Barbara Adam calls the “timescape” of hazards, where “time acts as an invisible ‘other’ working beyond the reach of our senses” (1).⁷

This paper argues that Wolf uses writing to give form to this invisibility. Crip latency is the refusal of narrative closure. In *Störfall*, the damage has already occurred (the reactor has exploded, the tumour has grown), but its consequences are deferred. This concept resonates with the slow violence theorised by Rob Nixon, a violence that occurs out of sight, dispersed across time and space (2). However, Wolf brings this violence inside the domestic and familial sphere. Crip latency challenges the normative temporality of progress: one does not move forward toward improvement, but stays in uncertainty, inhabiting a body and an environment that have been irrevocably altered. It is within this latency that the author unmasks the precarity of the human condition, forcing the reader to look not at the after (resolution), but at the during (exposure).

This study, thus, states that crip latency operates as the supporting structure of *Störfall*, redefining our conceptions of the body, time, and ethics. The first section will analyse how latency unmasks the illusion of immunity. Through an analysis of Wolf's descriptions of contaminated food, and the surgical intervention, it will be shown how the text deconstructs the idea of the hermetic body, proposing instead a subjectivity that is porous and radically exposed. The second section will examine how latency alters the perception of narrative and existential time. It will be highlighted how Wolf contrasts the time of news (frenetic, immediate) with the time of radiation (geological, slow) and the time of illness (suspended), creating a crip temporality that rejects the productive rhythms of industrial society. Finally, in the third section, it will be discussed how this awareness of shared vulnerability and temporal uncertainty establishes a new ethics of care. This care is not understood as the technical repair of a malfunction, but as a practice of attention and responsibility toward the other (human and non-human) precisely in the moment of incurability or waiting. In conclusion, *Störfall* emerges not only as a testimony to a past disaster but as a manual of ethical survival for the ecological present.

Spatial Porosity: Dismantling the Fortress Body

If the concept of crip latency defines the temporal suspension of *Störfall*—time between exposure and symptom—then this latency is ontologically grounded in a specific spatial condition: porosity. The anxiety that permeates Wolf's text arises from

⁷ Adam identifies a radical disjuncture between the “Merkwelt” (the world of perception) and the “Wirkwelt” (the world of latent impacts), noting that nuclear hazards are characterised by a temporal gap where causes and symptoms are severed (22). In the case of Chernobyl, she poignantly observes that “the injured of Chernobyl are today, years after the catastrophe, not even all born yet” (36), a reality that underscores the intergenerational magnitude of crip latency.

the realisation that the modern ideal of the “fortress body” (Nelkin and Andrews 16; Martin 30)—the autonomous, bounded subject, securely separated from its environment—has been rendered obsolete by the material realities of the atomic age.⁸ In the Western humanist tradition, and particularly within the hygienic narratives of modernism, health was synonymous with integrity and closure. The healthy body was a sealed vessel, and the environment was an external stage upon which human agency acted. *Störfall* systematically dismantles this topography. The glitch of Chornobyl reveals that spatial safety is an illusion. The danger can’t be shut out because the very mechanisms of life—breathing, eating, the cellular exchange of fluids—are the vectors of contamination: “One was supposed to shower the children after they had been outside. Bathing relaxed the skin, opening the pores and washing the radioactivity into the body with a vengeance. Exaggerated? If only one knew” (16).⁹ This collapse of the fortress body resonates with Alexis Shotwell’s critique of the “metaphysics of purity” (16). Shotwell argues that in an era where beings are “born pre-polluted,” the pursuit of personal purity is not only impossible but represents a “de-collectivizing politics of despair” (7-9). In this light, the porous body is the starting point for an ethics of “toxic interdependence” (79) that refuses the illusion of being separate from the environments that sustain and, simultaneously, sicken us.

Wolf maps a geography of radical openness, where the boundaries between the biological self and the toxic landscape dissolve. To understand this dissolution, we must turn to the framework of material ecocriticism, specifically Stacy Alaimo’s concept of “trans-corporeality” as a theoretical site where “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world,” and that emphasizes that “the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (2). Unlike the abstract interconnectedness often celebrated in romantic nature writing, trans-corporeality in the Anthropocene is a perilous intimacy.¹⁰ It acknowledges that we are permeable to flows of toxicity that rewrite our biology. Wolf writes of the isotopes cesium-137 and iodine-131 not as abstract scientific data, but as physical entities seeking habitation within human tissue. This perspective shifts the locus of the narrative from the event (the explosion far away) to the contact zone (the skin, the digestive tract, the exposed brain). By juxtaposing the brother’s surgery with the

⁸ The concept of the fortress body refers to the biopolitical and socio-cultural construction of the body as a sealed, autonomous unit, protected by boundaries against external threats. Dorothy Nelkin and Lori Andrews (in *Homo Economicus. Commercialization of Body Tissue in the Age of Biotechnology*, 1998) used this term to describe the legal and defensive enclosure of the body in the age of biotechnology. Similarly, Emily Martin (in *Flexible Bodies* 1994) analysed the historical shift from a fortress model of the immune system to a more flexible and porous one. In this article, the term is used to signify the collapse of the humanist illusion of bodily integrity when faced with the pervasive, invisible infiltration of radioactive particles.

⁹ “Das Bad weiche die Haut auf, öffne die Poren und schwemme die Radioaktivität erst recht in den Körper” (27).

¹⁰ Wolf observes about the difficulty of writing nature poetry after Chornobyl: “But now, I thought while peeling the boiled potatoes, it should be interesting to see which poet would be the first to dare sing the praises of a white cloud. An invisible cloud of a completely different substance had seized the attention of our feelings—completely different feelings” (55).

radioactive fallout, Wolf illustrates two distinct but related modes of bodily breach. The brother's body is opened by the scalpel, a deliberate, localised, and visible violation of the fortress body that the procedure is meant to heal. The narrator's body, conversely, is permeated by the invisible penetration of ionising radiation, a diffuse, involuntary, and toxic violation. While the brother, is not directly affected by the radioactive fallout in the same immediate sense, his body is subjected to another form of radical exposure through surgery, which involves a deliberate and invasive intervention into bodily integrity. While clinically necessary, this medical opening of the body suspends the boundaries of the self, rendering the organism dependent on external technological and human intervention, and thus producing a structurally comparable condition of vulnerability.

This systematic dismantling of the fortress body finds its theoretical counterpart in Ursula K. Heise's analysis of how global risk is integrated into the ordinariness of the everyday. Heise argues that the Chernobyl disaster represents a crucial turning point where the natural and domestic can no longer be decoupled from the technological and transnational (185-186). The most poignant application of this spatial porosity occurs in Wolf's treatment of the domestic garden in Mecklenburg. The countryside, traditionally a *locus amoenus* of retreat and healing in German literature, is transformed into a zone of cognitive dissonance (Goodbody 19). Wolf constructs a stark contrast between the visual evidence of health and the material reality of toxicity. The garden, once a space of separation from the industrial world, reveals itself as thoroughly entangled with the technosphere. There is no away to which one can retreat; the global circulation of toxicity has abolished the concept of a safe space:

How am I supposed to know with which sense, or senses, you may be taking in everything I am imagining ever so furtively. Seeing hearing smelling tasting touching—and that's all there is? Who believes that, anyway. We can't have been sent on our way with so little sensitivity back then. Although the demand for a built-in Geiger counter does sound rather pretentious, even humorous. Who could have predicted all those millions of years ago that it would one day enhance our species' chances of survival, although, on the other hand, I wasn't really dying to know how the lush green meadow in front of the house would have registered on a Geiger counter today. (14-15)¹¹

The transformation of the Mecklenburg garden into a zone of toxicity reflects what Christine L. Marran terms the "domestic turn in Environmental Literature" (91). Wolf shifts the focus from a distant, spectacular disaster to the "unremarkable world

¹¹ "Woher soll ich wissen, mit welchem Sinn oder mit welchen Sinnen du vielleicht alles, was ich mir noch so verstohlen vorstelle, in dich aufnimmst. Sehen hören riechen schmecken tasten—das soll alles sein? Wer glaubt denn so was. So unempfindlich wird man uns einst doch nicht auf den Weg geschickt haben. Wenn auch das Verlangen nach einem eingearbeiteten Geigerzähler eher anmaßend klingen mag, sogar humoristisch. Wer hätte vor diesen Millionen von Jahren voraussehen sollen, daß gerade er einmal unsere Überlebenschance als Gattung verbessern würde—obwohl ich andererseits nicht dringend habe wissen wollen, wie die überaus saftige grüne Wiese vor dem Haus sich auf der Skala eines Geigerzählers heute ausgenommen hätte" (25-26).

of any home" (105), where the kitchen and the garden become the primary sites for witnessing the "systemic inundation" of chemical and isotopes (101).

Within this domestic sphere the radio news reports a world of invisible danger:

But they can search for a long time, they won't see anything. It is only the suspicion gnawing within them that colors the innocent sky such a poisonous shade. The malignant sky. So the mothers sit down by the radio and attempt to learn the new words. Becquerel. Explanations by scientists who, unimpeded by any sense of awe as to what holds nature together there at its innermost core, wish not only to know but also to implement. Half-life is what the mothers learn today, Iodine 131. Cesium. Explanations by other scientists who contradict what the first ones said; who are furious and helpless. Now all of that was drizzling down upon us together with the carriers of radioactive substances, such as rain, but you, brother, and may the steady hand of your surgeon preserve your eyesight, will no more get to see it than we will. (27)¹²

This disconnect creates an epistemological crisis. The inferred enemy has no shape, no smell, no sound. It is here that the porosity of the body becomes terrifying. The narrator recounts her desire to eat a fresh salad or drink milk, fundamental acts of nourishment that connect the human body to the earth. Yet, in the wake of the fallout, this connection becomes a death sentence. Wolf dwells on the ritual of washing the salad:

However, I did decide to throw away those few dandelion leaves, the smallest and most tender, that I had automatically picked in passing, as I did every other day, for my noonday salad. That is also what both the small and large radios, which were tuned to different stations, again advised unanimously on the hour: no green. No fresh milk for the children. A new name for danger is being circulated: Iodine 131. It turns out that thyroid is one of our most sensitive organs for storing radioactive iodine. (15)¹³

She describes the water running over the leaves, a frantic attempt to cleanse toxic contamination off the food. But the possibility of contamination exceeds what can be fully controlled through ordinary acts of cleansing. The lettuce, the milk, and the soil become vectors of gradual trans-corporeal harm. When the narrator eventually eats, she does so with the consciousness of ingesting the disaster. The boundary of the mouth, the ultimate threshold of the fortress body, is breached. The outside (the

¹² "Aber da können sie lange suchen, sie sehen nichts. Allein der Verdacht, der in ihnen bohrt, macht es, daß die unschuldige Himmelsfarbe diesen giftigen Ton annimmt. Der böse Himmels. So setzen sich die Mütter vors Radio und bemühen sich, die neuen Wörter zu lernen. Becquerel. Erläuterungen dazu—von Wissenschaftlern, die, von keiner Ehrfurcht gehemmt, was die Natur im Innersten zusammenhält, nicht nur erkennen, auch verwerten wollen. Halbwertszeit, lernen die Mütter heute. Jod 131. Caesium. Erläuterungen dazu von anderen Wissenschaftlern, die, was die Ersten sagten, bestreiten; die wütend und hilflos sind. Das riesele nun alles, zusammen mit den Trägern der radioaktiven Substanzen, zum Beispiel Regen, auf uns herab—aber du, Bruder, dem die sichere Hand eines Chirurgen das Augenlicht erhalten möge, wirst es so wenig zu sehen kriegen wie wir" (43-44).

¹³ "Aber die paar Löwenzahnblätter, die kleinsten, zartesten, die ich aus Gewohnheit im Vorbeigehen abgepflückt habe, um sie, wie all die Tage schon, zum Mittag als Salat zu essen, habe ich dann doch lieber weggeworfen. Dazu haben auch nochmals das kleine wie das große Radio, die auf verschiedene Stationen eingestellt gewesen sind, einmütig zur vollen Stunde geraten: Nichts Grünes. Keine Frischmilch für Kinder. Ein neuer Name für Gefahr wird in Umlauf gesetzt: JOD 131. Die Schilddrüse, hat sich herausgestellt, ist also eines unserer sensibelsten Organe zur Speicherung radioaktiven Jods" (26-27).

reactor's core) becomes the inside (the narrator's cells). This scene is crucial for an eco-crip reading because it invalidates the ableist assumption that one can control one's health through proper choices. In a trans-corporeal reality, the environment dictates the body's condition (Alaimo 22). The narrator, despite being healthy in a clinical sense, is forced to inhabit a body that is chemically compromised.

Parallel to the invisible permeation of the narrator's body is the literal, graphic opening of the brother's body. If the radiation represents the insidious porosity of the skin and gut, the brain surgery represents an invasive exposure of the body's core, producing a comparable condition of bodily vulnerability and suspension. Wolf describes the operation with a mixture of clinical detachment and profound empathy:

After the clean, hook-shaped incision above your right eyebrow, after all the blood vessels have been meticulously clamped, the scalp stretched apart as far as possible to both sides, the brain pushed aside and wrapped in foil, your doctors are presumably concentrating on getting as close to the root of evil as possible without damaging the pituitary gland. Namely because, as the young nurse informed you, even personality changes can result from damage to certain parts of the brain. (19)¹⁴

The removal of the skull bone—the helmet designed by evolution to protect the brain—is the ultimate dismantling of the fortress. The brother lies exposed, his most intimate biological machinery laid bare to the gaze and the instruments of the surgeons. Here, the boundaries of the individual are suspended by the medical apparatus; he is kept alive by machines, his blood circulated by pumps, his consciousness extinguished by anaesthesia. This surgical opening serves as a somatic echo of the exploded reactor. Just as the reactor's lid was blown off, exposing its radioactive core to the world, the brother's cranium is opened. Wolf draws a subtle but powerful line between the technological fix attempted on the brother and the technological failure of the reactor. Both scenarios involve a perilous navigation of the interior. However, from an eco-crip perspective, the brother's state is not just a metaphor. It is the materialisation of absolute dependency. His survival depends on the permeability of his body to oxygen, and the surgeon's hands. He is not the autonomous liberal subject of the Enlightenment; he is a porous assemblage of flesh and technology. Wolf seems to use this extreme vulnerability to stage a comparison between two distinct regimes of bodily openness: the surgical exposure of the brother's body and the environmental exposure of the population under the radioactive cloud. While the brother's body is opened in a controlled clinical setting with the aim of saving his life, this openness nevertheless entails a temporary suspension of bodily sovereignty, in which survival depends on external intervention.

¹⁴ "Deine Ärzte, nach dem säuberlichen haken förmigen Schnitt über der rechten Augenbraue, nachdem sie alle Blutgefäße sorgfältig abgeklemmt, die Kopfhaut nach beiden Seiten so weit wie möglich auseinandergezogen haben, die Hirnmasse beiseitegeschoben und in Folie verpackt, konzentrieren sich vermutlich darauf, dem Kern des Übels so nahe wie möglich zukommen, ohne die Hypophyse zu verletzen. Wenn nämlich, hat die junge Schwester dich wissen lassen, bestimmte Teile des Gehirns beschädigt werden, können sogar Persönlichkeitsveränderungen vorkommen" (32).

The citizens, by contrast, are exposed to an uncontrollable and non-therapeutic form of permeability. What links these two conditions is not equivalence, but the shared destabilisation of the fantasy of bodily closure under radically different conditions of exposure.

By establishing this spatial porosity, *Störfall* effectively attacks the normative categorisation of bodies. In the pre-disaster narrative, there was a clear distinction: the brother is affected by a severe medical condition (a brain tumour) requiring surgical intervention, while the narrator and the wider population are initially healthy (able-bodied, autonomous). The spatial collapse caused by the radioactive event erases this binary. If we accept Alaimo's premise that we are "trans-corporeal", and we accept Wolf's depiction of an environment saturated with invisible poisons, then the normal, hermetic, healthy body is revealed to be a fantasy. In a toxic ecosystem, impairment is not an exception; it is the latent baseline of existence. The radiation acts as a universal crippling agent. It introduces a level of biological compromise into every living organism. In Wolf's text it is suggested that the very idea of health—understood as independence from the environment—is a dangerous myth. The narrator is no less vulnerable than the brother; her damage is simply slower, more insidious, less visible. By dismantling the fortress body, Wolf forces us to rethink disability not as a deviation from a norm, but as a shared condition of ecological entanglement. We are all impaired by the industrial alteration of our biosphere. The brother's body, rendered open and dependent through surgical intervention, thus becomes a powerful figure through which to think the broader condition of embodied vulnerability in the Anthropocene: a condition of radical exposure in which the illusion of immunity is finally, irrevocably, collapsed.

Temporal Suspense: Crip Time and Slow Violence

If the spatial dimension of *Störfall* is defined by porosity, its temporal dimension is defined by suspension. The glitch of Chornobyl does not merely break the machinery of the reactor; it derails the linear progression of time itself. Wolf constructs a narrative of crip latency that fundamentally resists the normative, productive temporalities of Western modernity. The text forces the reader to inhabit a distinct temporal mode: a state of agonising waiting where the future is not promised but indefinitely deferred. To understand this, we must first contrast the two temporal regimes that collide on April 26, 1986. On one hand, there is "industrial time" (or "normative time") (Kafer 27; Adam 7-10). This is the time of the news bulletins, the train schedules, the surgical appointments, and the socialist state's demand for progress and productivity, which in the GDR was linked to a planned economy that organised time through logics of efficiency, discipline, and teleological development. This time is linear, segmented, and teleological; it moves forward toward a resolution. On the other hand, there is the time of the disaster and the body. This is a recursive, sluggish, and unpredictable temporality. In disability studies, this non-normative experience of time is conceptualised as crip time. Theorists such as

Alison Kafer and Ellen Samuels describe crip time not merely as slower time, but as a bending of the clock to meet the needs of the body rather than the demands of production (Kafer 27). It involves “acceleration, deceleration, and the reorganization of the stages of life” (Kafer 27). In *Störfall*, Wolf seems to expand this concept beyond the individual body to the planetary scale. The radioactive cloud imposes crip time upon the entire population. It forces a deceleration of life (children are kept indoors, food is discarded, movements are restricted) and traps the narrator in a waiting room-like existence.

Wolf masterfully orchestrates the friction between these temporalities through the motif of the radio. Throughout the day, the narrator is tethered to the broadcast, seeking information. The news cycle operates on a hyper-accelerated industrial time. Updates are promised every hour, creating a rhythm of frantic consumption:

It also makes it difficult to hear the NEWS on my little Sanyo transistor radio chopped up and refashioned every hour into the news. The wayward trout. Fish for storing radioactive waste. Depending on his affiliation with one of the factors into which the public has predictably divided, whether he was an optimist or a pessimist, the expert would say: No. Under no circumstances will the core melt down. Or: But of course. Yes, yes. Even that eventuality cannot be excluded [...] As long as the fire hasn't been extinguished—and, brother, you probably don't know that although it may be hard for graphite fires to start, we have been forced to learn that it is incredibly difficult to put them out—as long as the chain reaction continues, the reaction core can remain active, melting through the earth's core until it reemerges in the antipodes. Transformed, perhaps, but still glowing. (5-6)¹⁵

The media attempts to package the catastrophe into digestible, chronological units—an accident that happened is being managed and will be concluded. However, the material reality of the disaster refuses this pacing. The radiation operates on a geological and biological timescale that mocks the hourly news bulletin. This is the domain of slow violence, defined by Rob Nixon as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). In *Störfall*, the event of the explosion is instantaneous, but the violence is “incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussion playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2). The latency of the radiation effects—the cancer that might develop in ten or twenty years—introduces a disconnect between the *now* of the experience and the *then* of the consequence. Wolf juxtaposes the frenetic now of the radio (which insists on immediate answers) with the silent forever of the isotopes.

¹⁵ “Auch erschwert es, aus dem kleinen Radiogerät Marke Sanyo die Nachrichten zu empfangen, in welche DIE NACHRICHT jede Stunde umgemünzt und zerkleinert wird. Die launische Forelle. Speicherfisch für radioaktive Zerfallsprodukte. Je nachdem, welcher der Parteien, in die auf vorhersagbare Weise die Öffentlichkeit zerfällt, der Experte angehört hat und ob er Optimist oder Pessimist gewesen ist, hat er gesagt: Nein. Keinesfalls wird der Reaktor kern durchschmelzen. Oder: Aber doch. Doch, doch: Auch das ist gar nicht ausgeschlossen [...] Solange der Brand nicht gelöscht gewesen ist—und Graphitbrände, Bruder, das wirst du nicht wissen, sind, so schwer sie entstehen mögen, unglaublich schwer zu löschen, haben wir erfahren müssen—, solange die Kettenreaktion weitergeht, kann der Reaktorkern, sich durch den Erdmittelpunkt schmelzend, aktiv bleiben, bis er, verwandelt sicherlich, aber immer noch strahlend, bei den Antipoden wieder herauskäme“ (12-13).

This clash produces a sense of unreality. The narrator is stuck in the middle, in the crip time of suspension. The text documents the psychological violence of having to live in this temporal gap, where the damage is done but not yet felt. In *The Future of Fallout* (2021), Joseph Masco further theorises this temporal gap as the “politics of lag,” the defining fallout of the nuclear age where subjects live in the interval between an environmental event and the eventual embodied experience of injury (12). This lag creates a “nuclear uncanny,” a condition in which a world that appears sensory-normal is simultaneously infused with totalising, invisible danger (3).

In Wolf's text, this temporal and perceptual disjunction is not only represented as an environmental condition but is also inscribed onto the human body, where uncertainty, exposure, and delayed consequences become equally central experiences. The radiological suspension is mirrored perfectly by the neurological suspension of the brother. If the environment is suffering from the slow violence of radiation, the brother is suspended in the crip time of anaesthesia and coma. The surgery is a profound interruption of biography. For the duration of the operation, the brother ceases to be a subject with a future; he becomes a body in a state of precarious immediacy. The narrator, waiting by the telephone, shares in this suspension. Waiting is, in both the capitalist and socialist imagination, a waste of time. It is unproductive, passive, and empty. However, Wolf reclaims this waiting as an intense, laborious activity. In the framework of crip theory, the time spent in waiting rooms, in recovery, or in the management of chronic illness is often dismissed as dead time (Wendell 37-40; Samuels). Wolf subverts this by filling the waiting time with the labour of memory and care. While her brother's brain is being operated on, the narrator reconstructs him through memory, effectively holding him in existence through her thought-work:

Now I summon up your head before my inner eye and seek out the most vulnerable spot where my thought can penetrate to your brain, which they are about to expose [...] Effortlessly, they [the beams] penetrate the powerful force field of the glowing, pulsating core. They retard the ebbing flow of your strength in a way which defies language. (4)¹⁶

The parallelism is striking: just as the scientists watch the reactor (hoping the core doesn't melt), the narrator watches the telephone (hoping the brother doesn't die): “I've opened all the windows wide, not only to let in the heat but also to be sure of hearing the telephone” (21).¹⁷ Both are vigils over a volatile, damaged system. The latency here is the terrifying interval between the incision and the waking. Will he wake up? Who will he be if he does? Wolf refuses to speed up this process. The narrative dwells excruciatingly on the hours passing, forcing the reader to endure the

¹⁶ “Jetzt lasse ich deinen Kopf vor meinem inneren Auge erscheinen, suche den verletzlichsten Punkt, den mein Gedanke durchdringen kann, um dein Gehirn zu erreichen, das sie gleich freilegen werden [...] Mühelos durchdringen sie die dichte Abwehr deiner Bewußtlosigkeit, auf der Suche nach dem glühenden, pulsierenden Kern. Auf eine Weise, die sich der Sprache entzieht, stehen sie jetzt deiner schwächer werdenden Kraft bei” (11).

¹⁷ “Alle Fenster habe ich aufgerissen, nicht nur, damit die Wärme Eingang findet, auch, um in jedem Fall das Telefon zu hören” (35).

same uncertainty as the narrator. This refusal to cut to the chase is a stylistic enforcement of crip time: we must endure the duration of the trouble.

Regarding the brother, the surgery is technically successful, but the text does not end with a triumphant return to able-bodied normalcy. He survives, but he is altered. He enters a new state of being that will require adaptation, as the surgery, while technically successful in removing the tumour, leaves him in a condition of heightened neurological vulnerability. His recovery is marked not by full restoration but by uncertainty regarding cognitive and bodily functions, requiring ongoing adjustments in perception, memory, and bodily coordination, as well as a sustained awareness of physical and existential fragility. He has become a crip subject, one who has touched the limit of life and carries the mark of that encounter. Regarding the environment, the rejection of the cure is even more radical. There is no cleaning up Chernobyl in a way that restores the past. The glitch has become a permanent feature of the system. The radiation has merged with the soil and the genetic code. By ending the text without a false resolution, Wolf insists that we must learn to live *within* the latency, *within* the contamination. This is the ultimate ethical implication of crip latency. It demands that we abandon the fantasy of total immunity and eternal progress. Instead, we must inhabit the crip temporality of the aftermath. In this suspended state, the narrator finds a new way to relate to the world: not as a master of time who directs the future, but as a witness who attends to the fragile, unfolding present.

Fragility as an Ethical Resource

If *Störfall* diagnoses the breakdown of spatial boundaries and the suspension of temporal progress, its ultimate intervention is ethical. Having established that we live in a state of crip latency—porous, exposed, and waiting—the text poses a fundamental question: How should we act? The answer Wolf offers requires a radical rejection of the archetype that has dominated Western modernity: the Faustian controller.¹⁸ In the context of the GDR, the prevailing response to crisis was the technological fix. This mindset, deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, views both the human body and the natural world as machines that, when broken, can be repaired by the imposition of superior will and technical expertise. Wolf frames this drive to master the secrets of matter (nuclear fission) and life (brain surgery) as a modern Faust variation, characterized by a desire to reach the innermost core of nature to achieve a god-like invulnerability (Kuhn 220-221). However, *Störfall* exposes the

¹⁸ Wolf embodies this archetype in the figure of Peter Hagelstein, the real-life scientist involved in the Star Wars defence initiative, whom the narrator reads about in a magazine. Hagelstein represents a nuclear-age Faust: unlike the Goethean model driven by a thirst for knowledge, he is motivated by ambition—specifically, the desire to win the Nobel Prize. Hagelstein illustrates the negative dialectics of the Enlightenment: his original goal of creating a peaceful X-ray laser is co-opted for military ends, turning a potential benefit for humankind into a tool of destruction. Through him, Wolf questions the evolutionary crossroad where humanity “coupled the satisfaction of our desires with the compulsion to destroy” (65).

catastrophic failure of this impulse. The nuclear engineers—the ultimate fixers of energy scarcity—have produced an unfixable disaster. The clean energy has become dirty matter that no amount of engineering can scrub from the soil. Similarly, while the surgeons are depicted with respect for their precision, Wolf subtly critiques the societal reliance on the medical miracle: “For some reason the belief in a technological solution to each and every problem kept being resurrected” (54).¹⁹ The surgeon cuts and repairs, but he operates in a sealed room, disconnected from the fallout outside. His method is one of domination: he conquers the pathology of a brain tumour, treating a condition that, even after surgical intervention, leaves the brother in a state of neurological vulnerability and uncertainty. Wolf suggests that this model of *Unterwerfung* (subjugating) is precisely what led to Chornobyl: “intelligent humanity creates the means of subjugating nature and its own kind. It seeks to break the rules and norms which it has imposed upon itself by means of open or concealed aggression, even at the cost of self-annihilation” (45).²⁰ The desire of the technical system to dominate nature creates the risk; the desire of the doctors to fix the body obfuscates the necessity of living with mortality.

Against the figure of the hero/scientist/fixer, Wolf positions the narrator. She is not an expert; she is a sister, a consumer of news, a gardener. She feels helpless. Yet, within the eco-crip framework, this helplessness is not a deficit; it is an ethical resource. In a culture obsessed with strength, immunity, and fitness (both biological and political), admitting fragility is a subversive act. To be crip (i.e. to be impaired, vulnerable, or dependent) is usually seen as a failure to be corrected. However, *Störfall* flips this script. It is precisely the narrator’s sense of vulnerability that allows her to perceive the reality of the situation. The scientists in charge of the reactor deny the danger to protect the system’s image; the narrator, feeling the danger in her own anxious body, acknowledges the truth: “it is only the suspicion gnawing within them that colors the innocent sky such a poisonous shade” (27).²¹ Fragility, therefore, becomes an epistemological tool. It is a way of knowing. This conception finds significant theoretical support in Emily Jones’s analysis of the “hyper-disaster” (99). Jones suggests that Wolf recognises the female body, specifically the paradigm of motherhood, as a crucial medium for Haraway’s term “situated knowledge” (97). In *Störfall*, this corporeal focus acts as a bridge between the abstract world of the men of science, who often view nuclear risk as a manageable statistic, and the devastating material reality of environmental harm. Jones argues that Wolf’s narrator practices a form of “feminist objectivity” (97), a rationality that validates subjective bodily experience as a means of witnessing the invisible.

¹⁹ “Aus irgendwelchen Gründen stehe der Glaube, daß es für all und jedes eine technische Lösung gibt, immer wieder auf” (83).

²⁰ “Der intelligente Mensch schafft sich die Mittel zur Unterwerfung der Natur und seiner Artgenossen. Die Regeln und Normen, die er sich selbst auferlegt hat, sucht er, und sei es um den Preis der Selbstvernichtung, unter Anwendung offener oder versteckter Gewalt zu durchbrechen”. (70)

²¹ “Allein der Verdacht, der in ihnen bohrt, macht es, daß die unschuldige Himmelsfarbe diesen giftigen Ton annimmt” (43).

By recognising her own body as penetrable and precarious (a crip body), the narrator is able to recognise the precarity of the ecosystem. This aligns with Sunaura Taylor's argument in *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Operation* (2017) that the devaluation of disabled people and the devaluation of nature are linked (201). Both are seen as lacking or mute resources to be managed. Wolf disrupts this by suggesting that the healthy desire for invulnerability is a form of self-delusion. Only by accepting our shared fragility—our “trans-corporeal” openness to harm—can we begin to act ethically. The crip subject, who knows they cannot control their body or environment fully, is better equipped to survive the Anthropocene than the Faustian subject who deludes themselves into thinking they are in charge.

This re-evaluation of fragility leads to a shift in the definition of care. In the medical/technocratic model, care is often synonymous with cure—the restoration of the norm. But what happens when the cure is impossible? The radiation can't be removed from the earth; the brother's brain has been irrevocably touched. Wolf proposes an ethics of accompaniment: if we cannot fix the world (in the sense of returning it to a pristine state), we must care for it in its damaged state. The narrator's actions throughout the day serve as a model for this. She does not wear a hazmat suit to clean the garden (a futile attempt at control); instead, she observes the garden with a mixture of grief and love. She does not try to intervene in the surgery; instead, she accompanies her brother through the labour of her thoughts and memories. This form of care is non-productive in both capitalist logics of accumulation and socialist logics of planned productivity, but it is ontologically vital. It acknowledges the interdependence of all living things. The narrator realises that she is allied with the brother (vulnerable under the knife), with the cherry trees (vulnerable under the cloud), and with the contaminated milk (vulnerable to industrial misuse). In this alliance, the ethical act is to remain present in the face of the unfixable, to bear witness to the damage without looking away, and to maintain a relation of love toward a world that has become hostile. Wolf calls for a humility that stands in stark contrast to the arrogance of the atomic age. This humility recognises that human agency is limited and that our survival depends not on mastering nature, but on aligning ourselves with its fragility. The brother's survival depends on the care of others; the narrator's survival depends on the mercy of the wind direction. This creates a horizontal web of responsibility.²²

In conclusion, the ethics of fragility found in *Störfall* suggests that the only way to counter the “Störfall” (the accident/glitch) of modernity is to embrace the crip body—the body that knows it is part of the mess, the body that hurts, and therefore,

²² This notion of mutual responsibility is reinforced by Wolf's opening reference to the ethologist Konrad Lorenz (“The long-sought missing link between animals and the really humane being is ourselves”, 13). As Anna K. Kuhn observes, Wolf quotes Lorenz to establish a link between self-knowledge and moral agency, suggesting that human survival relies on redirecting our capacity for invention: we must counteract the destructive trajectory of progress and engage our imagination “to make the world a proper home for truly human beings” rather than utilising it for “inhuman ends” (225).

the body that cares. It is an ethics grounded not in the power to change the world, but in the responsibility to cherish the damaged remains of it.

Conclusion: Inhabiting the Glitch

In the opening pages of *Störfall*, Christa Wolf presents the accident, the *Störfall*, as a rupture that interrupts the normality of a spring day. However, through the eco-crip reading proposed in this article, it becomes evident that the accident is not a temporary deviation from the norm, but the revelation of a new norm entirely. By superimposing the exploded reactor onto the opened skull, Wolf does not merely narrate a double tragedy; she constructs a unified theory of vulnerability in the late modern age. This article has traced the contours of what I have termed crip latency: the suspended state of existence between exposure and consequence, between the incision and the scar. By analysing the collapse of spatial boundaries (in the first section), we have seen how the fortress body of the humanist tradition is rendered obsolete by the trans-corporeal reality of radiation. By examining the distortion of time (in the second section), we have observed how the slow violence of isotopes and illness resists the productive, linear temporalities of industrial society. Finally, by interrogating the ethical response to this condition (in the third section), we have argued that Wolf rejects the Faustian impulse to conquer nature, proposing instead an ethics of accompaniment and shared fragility. The trajectory of *Störfall* thus leads us to a stark ontological conclusion: vulnerability is not an accident of history, nor is it the exclusive domain of the disabled minority. The glitch is no longer a bug in the system; *it is the system*. Wolf demonstrates that in the nuclear age, there is no such thing as an able-bodied subject, if being able-bodied implies an autonomous existence free from environmental contamination. We are all, to varying degrees, crip bodies—chemically altered, genetically exposed, and dependent on a biosphere that we have ourselves wounded.

The crip latency that the narrator experiences—the anxiety of breathing invisible poison, the waiting for symptoms, the distrust of the senses—is now the collective psychological baseline of the Anthropocene. Wolf's text serves as a genealogy of our present predicament. It anticipates the collapse of the distinction between natural history and human history. Reading *Störfall* through the eco-crip lens engages with an already circulating vocabulary in environmental studies and disability studies for navigating this permanent crisis. The radiation did not disappear; it decayed and dispersed, becoming part of the background radiation of our lives. Similarly, the climate crisis is not a problem to be solved in a way that restores the past; it is a new condition to be inhabited.

Ultimately, *Störfall* leaves us with a difficult but necessary pedagogical imperative. Wolf teaches us not to turn away. Throughout the text, the narrator fights the urge to close her eyes, to ignore the news, to retreat into the illusion of the idyllic garden. She forces herself to use her intellect and her empathy to comprehend the invisible damage. She cultivates instead a sustained form of attention, what Rob Nixon

might call a mode of “apprehension” (14-16), that binds perception to uncertainty, delay and distributed causality. This act of paying attention, of witnessing the glitch, is the foundation of a new form of community. In this light, the figure of the brother, the patient and crip subject not just during the actual surgery, but also in the immediate aftermath, becomes the guide. He survives not because he is invincible, but because he is cared for in two ways: first via a medical-technical form of care oriented toward the removal of tumour; and, second, through an affective, relational form provided by the narrator, who accompanies rather than corrects bodily vulnerability. He represents the necessity of interdependence, which is intensified by the brain surgery: although already dependent on medical intervention before the operation, his post-operative condition makes this dependence more visible and ongoing. The eco-crip ethic derived from *Störfall* suggests that our survival as a species depends on extending this care beyond the human family to the more-than-human world—to the soil, the water, and the air which constitute our own porous bodies.

To inhabit the glitch is to accept that we are damaged but not destroyed. It is to reject the stunned despair of the apocalypse and the arrogant optimism of the technological fix. In the suspended time of latency, where the outcome is uncertain and the danger is invisible, this shared capacity for care is the only immunity we have left.

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