



**Geschichtstheorie am Werk**  
**Theory of History at Work**  
**La théorie de l'histoire à l'œuvre**  
**La teoria della storia all'opera**

# Zeitschichten: Translating Koselleck across disciplines

*Sean Franzel*

**Cite as:** Sean Franzel, "Zeitschichten: Translating Koselleck across disciplines," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 24/10/2023, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/19184>.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/19184>

License:



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

# Zeitschichten: Translating Koselleck across disciplines

## Some personal reflections

I came to translating Koselleck via a rather circuitous route. As a scholar of German literature and philosophy with an emphasis on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, I had been familiar with *Kritik und Krise* from graduate school, but I started examining Koselleck's work in more detail through a growing interest in nineteenth-century ideas of time, and a mentor encouraged me to read more and to embark upon a translation project. After starting this project, I soon learned that Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann had conceptualized a similar undertaking targeting untranslated essays by Koselleck, and we decided to team up in what would become a very productive and enjoyable collaboration. Stefan: an historian born in Germany who studied with Koselleck in Bielefeld and was intimately familiar with his work; me: a native English speaker with training in the intellectual traditions of modern Germany and with less initial knowledge of the intricacies of the historical debates that Koselleck was involved in. Our process involved frequent consultation and passing translation drafts back and forth, resulting in what we hope will remain an important touchstone for Koselleck's international reception: *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*.<sup>1</sup>

As I worked my way into Koselleck's essays, I realized that my background in German philosophy and the era of German idealism was quite useful for thinking about how to translate his at times rather abstract formulations. The early nineteenth century was a time with which he was perhaps most familiar as an historian. His first two books dealt with the period between the mid-eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the 1848/49 revolutions, and he frequently cited and evoked authors from this period in his theoretical writings. It is important for scholars encountering his work in translation to realize that working through this intellectual legacy is an essential part of much of his writings. But the original language in which Koselleck thought and wrote emerged from post-World War II Germany. Born in 1923, he experienced the Nazi period as an adolescent and young man, served in the German army, and was a Soviet prisoner of war in Central Asia until the fall of 1946; he then studied in postwar Heidelberg under Hans-Georg Gadamer, Karl Löwith, Viktor von Weizsäcker, Karl Jaspers, and others. Koselleck's intellectual concerns were formed by the experiences of World War II and its

aftermath, and by the attempts to process these experiences in an academic landscape shaped by the Cold War division of Germany and the world.

Like Martin Heidegger and his students Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith, Koselleck developed his thought in dialogue with the language of German idealist and existential philosophy, an idiom that has often proved challenging for translators into other languages. Like his teachers and their nineteenth-century predecessors, Koselleck tended to avoid Latinate formulations, accounting, for example, for the temporal structure of historical events using German terms like *vollziehen*, *sich ereignen*, or *sich zeitigen*, rather than via cognates of “realize” or “manifest,” and preferring *Zusammenhang* (constellation or connection) to *Kontext*.<sup>2</sup> He likewise built on the centrality of structures of anticipation or priorness in Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s hermeneutics, as expressed by the “Vor-” or “pre-” in words like “preconception” (*Vorgriff*), “prejudice” (*Vorurteil*), or “pre-understanding” (*Vor-Verstehen*). At the heart of Koselleck’s theory of possible histories is an emphatic notion of structural “pregivens” (*Vorgaben*) that have formed experiences and events, and this term was not always easy for us to translate into English.

My personal academic background came in handy here. As a college student I read Heidegger intensively during a study abroad program at the University of Tübingen, where I took a year-long seminar dedicated solely to the first part of *Being and Time*. I returned to the United States to finish my undergraduate degree in philosophy and German at Reed College in Portland, Oregon and wrote an undergraduate thesis on Heidegger’s philosophy of language. When I got to graduate school, I moved onto other things, but Heidegger’s engagement with the historicity of language and his close readings of philosophical and literary texts remained productive impetuses for my scholarship. As I later got to know Koselleck’s work better, I was struck by how intently Koselleck read Heidegger as a young man in the late 1940s, and I recently had a chance to look at the extensive notes in Koselleck’s estate in Marbach from his engagement with *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism*, and other essays from the 1930s and 1940s. Steffen Kluck and Richard Pohle have incisively explored Koselleck’s reception of Heidegger at this stage of his life, but there is certainly more work to be done on how this early engagement with Heidegger’s elaborate conceptual apparatus shaped Koselleck’s approach to work with concepts and with notions of time and of historicity that both Heidegger and Koselleck see as grounded in certain anthropological pregivens.<sup>3</sup>

#English / KOMPOSITA / Theory of History (Re)read

In my graduate studies at Cornell University, it was the theoretical traditions of the Frankfurt School and German media theory rather than the stylistically wrought and politically fraught writings of the late Heidegger that shaped my thinking and writing. My dissertation work on shifting conceptions of the scholarly lecture around 1800 sought to understand changes in educational institutions, rhetoric, and public speech in the Romantic period, as I explored notions of publicity and configurations of the relative effectivity of print and oral communication. Here, it was Habermas's philosophical-historical surveys, Adorno's *The Essay as Form*, and Friedrich Kittler's polemical, essay-length interventions that helped me appreciate the role of style and presentation for critical argument. Embarking in later years on the project of translating Koselleck, I quickly came to appreciate his understated, yet immediately apparent skill as a stylist and essayist. Working through his essays sentence by sentence attuned me to the pace and rhythm of his argumentation, to his adept combination of deliberate terminology with pithy quotations or sayings, and to his suggestively laconic way of beginning and ending essays. One of the things I relish most from having undertaken this translation project was being exposed on a very close level to Koselleck's approach to shaping arguments, and I hope that some of his rhetorical felicities have seeped into my own writing. Koselleck certainly deserves recognition as one of the leading twentieth-century practitioners of the essay as critical form.

## Translating Koselleck's thought across disciplines: Übersetzen and Einsetzen

To translate Koselleck means introducing his intellectual activities into new cultural contexts, and this is something that Stefan addresses in relation to the English-speaking academic world in our introduction to the Stanford volume.<sup>4</sup> Translation can also involve bringing different disciplinary perspectives to bear on a given thinker's activities: "*Übersetzen*" literally means to carry or put across, to transport from one language to another, but it can also imply a kind of application or operationalization, a form of "*Einsetzen*," or putting to use. In an important essay for Koselleck reception, the American historian John Zammito asks how his work can be "operationalized" by historians,<sup>5</sup> and we might extend this methodological question by asking how Koselleck's historical thought can be adapted by other disciplines, including literary studies, art history, cultural and media studies,

memory and museum studies, and more.<sup>6</sup> Though Koselleck was always keen to situate to his work as probing the possibilities and limits of the discipline of history, his thought lends itself to myriad applications across different disciplines. More so than most historians, he was open to literary and visual material as historical sources, and scattered across his writings are important reflections on media, genre, and format that are of interest to scholars working in literary, visual, and media studies. Although many interdisciplinary inroads into Koselleck's thought readily present themselves, three possible avenues come to mind.

As Koselleck notes in the introduction to *Zeitschichten*, the work of theorists of time always involves representing notions of time through spatial metaphors.<sup>7</sup> The process of visualizing time can be understood as a kind of basic work of translating the experience of time into different modes of representation. Koselleck's work is replete with different **techniques of visualizing time** and serves as an important model and resource for a variety of disciplines. Many of the central formal metahistorical concepts coined by Koselleck seek to visualize complex temporal processes via spatial imagery.<sup>8</sup> These include "sediments of experience" (*Erfahrungsschichten*) and "sluices of memory" (*Erinnerungsschleusen*), which describe how flows of experience, events, and memories are shaped, regulated, or redirected. Another good example is the conceptual pairing of "space of expectation" (*Erwartungsraum*) and "horizon of experience" (*Erfahrungshorizont*), which both establish ideas of a spatial outside or beyond in order to track different kinds of temporal unfolding, including the eclipse or overriding of past experiences by utopian expectations. The concept of "sediments" or "layers of time" (*Zeitschichten*) is another good example, for it provides an inroad into the ever elusive notion of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*).

As Helge Jordheim has recently pointed out, Koselleck's engagement with metaphorical constructions spurs new theoretical work,<sup>9</sup> and this is especially salient in his concepts that are intended to visualize time. Within the discipline of history, Koselleck's student Lucian Hölscher has recently explored the relevance of visual metaphor for modern historiography.<sup>10</sup> The visualization of time is an important topic for a variety of other scholarly endeavors, including in studies that address the complex historical temporalities of viewing and display at work in museum exhibitions,<sup>11</sup> in scholarship that explores the historiographical and representational challenges of maps and cartography,<sup>12</sup> and more. Studies of how specific forms of publication manifest temporal patterns can also benefit from

Koselleck's work on representing time, a line of inquiry that I pursue in my work on nineteenth-century periodical culture. Temporally specific activities of writing and rewriting that Koselleck identifies at work in Goethe, among other writers,<sup>13</sup> can be understood as creating certain temporal patterns, and I find the idea that a given publication or writer's output produces certain "shapes of time," to borrow George Kubler's term, a fruitful one for literary historiography.<sup>14</sup> Koselleck's work also resonates in certain ways with recent media theory; Wolfgang Ernst, for example, shares an interest in multi-layered temporalities, though temporalities that are produced first and foremost through the operations of media technologies.<sup>15</sup> Media theorists share an interest with Koselleck in how certain patterns of mediation help to make temporal structures visible; polemical theorists such as Ernst argue that such structures exist prior to historical meaning making, while others pursue media histories (*Mediengeschichten*) that include both human and non-human actors.<sup>16</sup>

To turn to a second avenue for interdisciplinary crosspollination: It is in Koselleck's work on the visual image and political iconography where he engages most intently with other disciplinary traditions, including art history and iconology. Recent work has done much to explore this aspect of his work,<sup>17</sup> and much remains to be done both to explore how his work on visual material comes to bear on his broader historical thought and relates to other scholarship in visual studies and art history. Koselleck had a longstanding interest in visual culture, and his intense study of iconography began early in his career and continued to captivate him late in his career. Essays and unpublished essay fragments, drafts, and notes on the arts, monument culture, and different forms of representation span his entire career (such as the only recently published *Zur politischen Ikonologie*, for example),<sup>18</sup> and part of the challenge of this material seems to be to translate Koselleck's particular research interests into debates that have been going on in art history, cultural studies, and media studies. How is Koselleck's interest in the individualization of the image—through caricature, photography, and televisual media—compatible with theories of the [mass media](#)<sup>19</sup> and [technical reproduction](#)?<sup>20</sup> What does Koselleck's work on war memorials have to say to [post-colonial engagements with the monument culture of the past](#)?<sup>21</sup> How might Koselleck's expressly anthropological approach to the sense experience provided by different media be complicated by the post-human bent of recent German media theory? How does Koselleck's theory of history (*Historik*) come to bear on (or diverge from) the methods of media historiography? These are all questions that could operationalize Koselleck's writings for cultural and media studies

Koselleck's photo collection also is an interesting possible avenue for situating his work in a broader context beyond the discipline of history. Koselleck was an amateur photographer and integrated photographs of certain monuments and other objects into his essays, accumulating an extensive collection of over 30,000 objects, which are now digitized and searchable at the *Deutsches Dokumentationszentrum für Kunstgeschichte* in Marburg. This collection is both idiosyncratically personal and representative of a particular historical epoch, both a quasi-private record of his different travels and research stays (in the US, France, around Germany, etc.) and an inventory of the shifting visual terrain of post-war Germany up to and after the *Wende*. His activity as a lay photographer and collector is a fascinating and still underexplored aspect of his work and it has the potential to show how his specific scholarly and medial practices resonate with other research and artistic agendas. This collection also represents an opportunity to bring new techniques of digital research to engagement with Koselleck.

One final interdisciplinary angle to Koselleck's work that should be (and is being) operationalized is his work on the history of concepts. Conceptual history is a useful tool for many humanistic disciplines and the tools of analysis developed by Koselleck lend themselves to application beyond the focus of the GG lexicon, which centered primarily on social and political concepts. Indeed, with the project to undertake a conceptual history of twentieth-century concepts currently being undertaken in Berlin<sup>22</sup> the contributors are quite clear about the need to expand their focus to include concepts from a variety of realms, including technology, the environment, culture, and the sciences.<sup>23</sup> Interdisciplinary methods for tracking the development and transformation of lead concepts are being developed that, as organizers of a coming conference state, go "mit Koselleck und über ihn hinaus" (with and beyond Koselleck). Of course, important conceptual encyclopedias in the realm of philosophical and aesthetic concepts have been completed; along with the conceptual history of the twentieth century project, another ongoing project worth mentioning is the *Goethe Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts*, which investigates the central role played by concepts in Goethe's development as a philosopher, and has been developed as a web-based repository for ongoing interdisciplinary conceptual-historical work.<sup>24</sup> It seems clear that conceptual-historical work has the potential to remain an important part of a variety of scholarly discussions, and one can hope that scholars will make the most of a variety of digital formats (as in the case of Koselleck's photo collection, as well as of

the delightful *Komposita* blog) to make this work accessible and open to “operationalization.”

---

Sean Franzel is an Associate Professor of German at the University of Missouri. Together with Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, he translated and edited a collection of Reinhart Koselleck’s essays, which was published as *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories* (Stanford University Press, 2018). He is the author of *Connected by the Ear: The Media, Pedagogy, and Politics of the Romantic Lecture* (Northwestern University Press, 2013) and *Writing Time: Studies in Serial Literature, 1780–1850* (Cornell University Press, 2023).

---

**Tags:** interdisciplinarity / metaphors / time / Translating Koselleck

---

<sup>1</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, translated from German and edited by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> On Koselleck’s idiosyncratic usages, see in this same blog series Willibald Steinmetz, “Reinhart Koselleck’s metaphorical language: an application of historical semantics to one of its founding figures,” *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (Issue: KOMPOSITA), 24.1.2023, URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/11421> (24.10.2023).

<sup>3</sup> See Steffen Kluck and Richard Pohle, “Koselleck, Heidegger und die Strukturen geschichtlicher Situationen,” in *Reinhard Koselleck als Historiker. Zu den Bedingungen möglicher Geschichten*, ed. Manfred Hettling and Wolfgang Schieder. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021, 61–86.

<sup>4</sup> See Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Sean Franzel, “Translating Koselleck,” in Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*, xi–xxxi.

<sup>5</sup> John Zammito, “Drilling Down: Can Historians Operationalize Koselleck’s Stratigraphical Times?” *Configurations* 23, no. 2 (2015), 197–213.

<sup>6</sup> The forthcoming volume *Concepts of Culture* (Berghahn, 2024) edited by Michael Lipkin and Mattias Pirholt addresses this in the realm of literary and cultural studies.

<sup>7</sup> “Wer über Zeit spricht ist auf Metaphern angewiesen.” Reinhart Koselleck, “Einleitung,” in *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Britta Hochkirchen, “Differenz: Anmerkungen zu einem analytischen Leitbegriff Reinhart Kosellecks,” *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (Issue: KOMPOSITA), 21.2.2023, URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/12804> (24.10.2023).

<sup>9</sup> Helge Jordheim, “Sattel, Schicht, Schwelle, Schleuse: Kosellecks paradoxe Sprachbildlichkeit der pluralen Zeiten,” in *Reinhard Koselleck und das Bild*, ed. Bettina Brandt and Britta Hochkirchen. Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2021, 217–242. [↔]

#English / KOMPOSITA / Theory of History (Re)read



---

<sup>10</sup> See Lucian Hölscher, *Zeitgärten: Zeitfiguren in der Geschichte der Neuzeit*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> See Kerstin Barndt, "Layers of Time: Industrial Ruins and Exhibitionary Temporalities," *PMLA* 125, no. 1 (2010), 134-141.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010; and Kären Wigen and Caroline Winterer (eds.), *Time in Maps: From the Age of Discovery to Our Digital Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck, "Goethe's Untimely History," in id., *Sediments of Time*, 60-87.

<sup>14</sup> See Sean Franzel, *Writing Time: Studies in Serial Literature, 1780-1850*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> See Wolfgang Ernst, *Chronopoetics: The Temporal Being and Operativity of Technical Media*, translated from German by Anthony Enns. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> See my review essay on several books on media historiography; Sean Franzel, "Ambivalent Media Histories," *Configurations* 25, no. 1 (2017), 109-119.

<sup>17</sup> See Hubert Locher and Adriana Markantonatos (eds.), *Reinhart Koselleck und die Politische Ikonologie*. Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2013; Adriana Markantonatos, *Geschichtsdenden zwischen Bild und Text. Reinhart Kosellecks "Suche nach dem (...) Unsichtbaren"*, Marburg: Hochschulschrift, 2018; and Brandt and Hochkirchen (eds.), *Koselleck und das Bild*.

<sup>18</sup> Reproduced in Locher and Markantonatos (eds.), *Koselleck und die Politische Ikonologie*.

<sup>19</sup> Sean Franzel, "Seriality," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (Issue: KOMPOSITA), 12.9.2023, URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/12066> (24.10.2023).

<sup>20</sup> Sébastien Trembley, "Bygone!" *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (Issue: KOMPOSITA), 21.3.2023, URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/13894> (24.10.2023).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See Ernst Müller, Barbara Picht, and Falko Schmieder, "Theorie und Konzept einer interdisziplinären Begriffsgeschichte," ZfL Berlin, URL: <https://www.zfl-berlin.org/projekt/begriffsgeschichte.html> (02.08.2023).

<sup>23</sup> Ernst Müller, "Introduction: interdisciplinary concepts and their political significance," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 2 (2011), 42-52.

<sup>24</sup> *Goethe Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts*, URL: <https://goethe-lexicon.pitt.edu/GI> (02.08.2023).