THEORY AND INTERPRETATION OF NARRATIVE
James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and Robyn Warhol, Series Editors
An Aesthetics of Narrative Performance

TRANSNATIONAL THEATER,
LITERATURE, AND FILM
IN CONTEMPORARY GERMANY

CLAUDIA BREGER
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Parts or earlier versions of individual readings have been previously published in the following contexts (see works cited for full references): “Angebissene Bockwurst mit gefrorenem Ketchup: Zur Poetik der Essensreste in Emine S. Özdamars Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde” presents a differently framed German version of the Özdamar reading (chapter III); and “Moral Play? Poetics, Ethics and Politics in Juli Zeh’s Spieltrieb” an early, also differently framed version of the Zeh reading in chapter V. A German version of the Der Kick reading in chapter VI first appeared as “Ästhetische Erkundungen von Empathie und Identifizierung in Andres Veiel’s Der Kick.” Finally, “After Orientalism? Performing Post–September 11 Culturalist Discourses” provides a variation—again, in a different context—on the Bambiland/Perser readings of chapter V. All of this material has been significantly revised for this book.
The prestige of the theater has all too often been invoked to contrast, or even to oppose, the performance arts with those, such as fictional or historical narrative, that ‘report’ and do not mime their events: theater and narrative, mimesis and diegesis, performance and text, the body and the word—as if the one would purge the other the better to colonize an exclusive domain. Yet this opposition always fails . . . narrative and theater are more like ‘fraternal enemies’ than mutually exclusive opposites.

—Nelson, Freadman, and Anderson 9–10, quoting Marie Maclean

The Starting Point
OVERLAPPING ‘PERFORMATIVE’ AND ‘NARRATIVE TURNS’

When I arrived in Berlin in the beginning of 2008 on a fellowship to research and write this book, one of the first theater productions I saw was Stefan Bachmann’s Liebe Kannibalen Godard (Love Cannibals Godard), a visiting performance by the Hamburg-based Thalia Theater at the Maxim Gorki Theater. As suggested by its title, the play by Thomas Jonigk, on which the evening’s performance was based, is a loose adaptation of Jean-Luc Godard’s Week-end from 1967. With its famous closing declaration of the “end of tale” as the “end of cinema,” Week-end has entered the canon of European art cinema history as the film that marks the end of “narrative”—or conventional narrative form—
in Godard’s oeuvre and, by extension, in the cinematic counterculture of the new wave (e.g., Dixon 88–89, 99; see Wollen). On the verge of the student revolution in Paris as well as Berlin, Berkeley, and Istanbul, avant-garde aesthetics found its politically radical form in the turn against a series of overlapping concepts associated with narrative, including ‘plot,’ ‘fiction,’ ‘representation,’ ‘ideology,’ ‘text,’ and ‘language.’ Building on the respective critical legacy of European and American modernism—from futurism and Dada to Antonin Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty” and John Cage’s *Untitled Event*—the arts now seemed to have lost even any “nostalgia for the lost narrative” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 41). Retrospectively, this shift was associated with the aesthetics of postmodernism, which replaced (already contended forms of) ‘narrative’ with ‘process/performance/happening.’¹ As elaborated by cultural theory in the following decades, narrative served the formation of—individual or collective, actual or phantasmatic—identities in time.² More specifically, it was taken to enable the kind of ideologically problematic identity formation that had dominated European culture throughout the modern era. Having made “History” into “the fundamental mode of being” (Foucault, *The Order of Things* 219), this era constituted its hegemonic masculinities in apprenticeship novels and founded European imperialism on the claim that the (African) ‘other’ presumably had no history (Hegel 163; see also Soja 164–74).

Against the legacy of such narrative coherence building, the modernist avant-gardes “spread the . . . gospel of performance” (Blau 159), before their postmodernist successors in the arts as well as academia further enthroned the opposition between narrative and performance by theorizing performance through its emphasis on space and the present rather than history, “as a site of social transgression” and artistic “subversion” and (Jackson 14, 30). Importantly, there are alternative traditions—for example, building on the early anthropological work of Victor Turner—in which performance has been conceptualized in analogy to narrative, as a vehicle of individual or collective identity formation.³ A number of performance scholars have emphasized that its workings are not always subversive vis-à-vis the forms of social cohe-

¹. Hassan 123. On the association between performance and the postmodern (as well as the need to qualify it on historical grounds) see Carlson, *Performance* 137, 139.

². For an overview of the ideology-critical takes from the 1970s into the 1990s see Mark Currie. More recently, the discussion of narrative and identity has veritably exploded under new, mostly positive premises. See, e.g., Brockmeier and Carbaugh; Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*; Holstein and Gubrium; Hutto; McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich; Strawson and the following debates, e.g., Battersby.

³. Reminiscent of classical plots, Turner in fact describes ritual (with van Gennep) as a three-step process of “separation, transition, and incorporation” (24, italics in original).
sion and textual authority associated with narrative (e.g., McKenzie; Tyler; Worthen). Overall, however, the “former-activists-turned-professional-intellectuals” who shaped the field have, as Shannon Jackson comments with a gently polemical touch, been much more interested in the undoing of identities (174). Reminiscent of the happenings of the 1960s (see Silverman and Farocki 91, 96), Godard’s road saga certainly contributes to such undoing with the ways it celebrates the spectacle of burning cars, slapstick fights, and cinematic blood and gore while accompanying its bourgeois couple on their way to some (murderous) family business in the provinces. Furthermore, the film showcases flashy intertitles that declare disrespect for hegemonic temporal and logical norms, or “the end of the grammatical era and the beginning of flamboyance in all fields, especially the cinema.”4 Labeling itself, in another intertitle, as “found on the scrapheap,” the film is “itself made of scraps, of quotes both filmic and textual,” which violate the “linear development” of the text.5 A “mise en scène . . . of expenditure” in Bataille’s sense, Week-end is governed by “the logic of excess” (Westbrook 348–49), culminating in the cannibalistic feast highlighted in Bachmann’s title, which in the film is accompanied by ‘barbaric’ drum rhythms along with the ritualistic chants of Arthur Rimbaud’s modernist poetry.

Although attesting to the continued appeal of Godard’s imagination, the recent theater adaptation I saw in Berlin signals also that times have changed. To be sure, Western society looks just as self-destructive as in 1967. In an introductory speech, the cannibal chief, masked as an urban restaurant chef, compares the state to the mythical Cronos, who devours his own children, and emphasizes that “contemporary man” is a “commodity” consumed by its peers (Liebe Kannibalen Godard 2). While revolution no longer seems as imminent as in 1967, one of the loudspeaker voice-overs replacing Godard’s intertitles in the theater insists that “A SINGLE NONREVOLUTIONARY WEEKEND IS MUCH BLOODIER THAN A MONTH OF REVOLUTION.”6 However, already the cook’s introductory monologue with its mythical references and grand-scale analytics also suggests that narrative—as a means of ordering and evaluating the world—might be back with a vengeance. Toward the end of the night, the ch(i)ef addresses the audience with, as a slightly dismayed critic put it, “flaming speeches” against “all-consuming relativism” (Kaempf). The cook’s analysis of contemporary society is organized around the critically humanist

4. My translation (differing from the subtitles of the video edition used).
5. Westbrook 345, 347, quoting George Bataille (italics in original).
6. Liebe Kannibalen Godard 33. Translations from this script and all subsequently discussed materials not available in translation/with subtitles are my own. I include the German original wherever the translation is not entirely straightforward.
motif of “man’s” metamorphosis into a “monster” who does not even sense his inability to feel for others any longer (Jonigk 36–37). Whereas the concluding scenario of Godard’s film took place in the lush ‘wilderness’ of the forest, Bachmann’s cook serves his “heavy moral fare,” which the critics found to be out of tune with the otherwise “pleasurable evening,” at what the sparse set design indicates to be a Last Supper table (Kaempf; see similarly also Briegleb). To be sure, the cook’s speech receives an ironic tint from the fact that he is himself thoroughly implicated in the cannibalistic feast on which he comments. Nonetheless, the critics’ responses suggest that his explicit ‘grand’ narrative about the loss of humanity may have fulfilled a didactic function in guiding the audience’s meaning-making process.

The adaptation’s respective emphasis is, perhaps, not surprising in that it fits with a familiar tale about the present moment. More than once, critics have announced that the cultural reign of performative subversion—sometimes associated with “ludic” postmodernism (Morton)—has come to its end, and narrative has returned onto the stage of contemporary Western culture. At the latest, it seems, the forces of more or less authoritative telling and ethically motivated coherence building have gained a newly hegemonic status after September 11, but the move ‘beyond’ postmodernism certainly was proclaimed already in the nineties (e.g., see Adam and Allan). In fact, conservatives called for “a return to ‘moral fiction’” as early as 1978 (Clayton 378, quoting John Gardner). But the diagnosis gets even murkier once we tune into the interfering echoes of narrative’s early returns—or simply its perseverance?—in quite different contexts of later twentieth-century politics and aesthetics. In the realm of performance art itself, many alternative—African diaspora, feminist, gay and lesbian—productions even of the late 1960s and 1970s dissented from the antinarrative purism that shaped its hegemonic conceptualizations, exploring history, “myth,” or the “self,” for example, through autobiographical forms (see Carlson, Performance 162). While the “happenings” of Allan Kaprow, Richard Schechner, and others sought “to stage absolute reduction” and “primal” experiences of presence, their colleagues from the Harlem New Lafayette Theater “made no effort to avoid signification” (Jackson 131–32). From the perspective of social marginalization, such reduction would simply not do; the experience of being written out of dominant history complicated matters when it came to narrative (see also Carlson, Performance 130; Benston 21, 29).

In fact, the narrative-vs.-performance opposition, which is so commonplace in mainstream theory and criticism, makes significantly less sense specifically from the angle of African diaspora aesthetics. Closely aligned in the
conceptualization of African oral expression and storytelling (see, e.g., P. Johnson 7), both performance and narrative have been significantly racialized in the modern European imaginary. While on the one hand, narrative has been conceptualized as a dominant mode of modern European identity formation, it has, on the other, figured as a traditional, “customary” form of knowledge (Lytotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 19). Meanwhile, the ‘non-European,’ presumably ‘premodern’ forms of oral performance became the basis of ‘modern-ist’ rebellion against the narrative regimes of (European) ‘modernity.’ In short, a closer look suggests that the dominant discursive figuration itself is overdetermined to the effect that both narrative and performance have functioned as signs of the modern and its other, virtually unraveling exclusive definitions of the modern/ist. Postmodernism (as theorized by the term’s various proponents) then complicated matters further, rather than bringing a simple victory of performance over narrative.7 Whereas on the one hand, the modernist critique of representation was radicalized and metanarratives were programmati
cally replaced with “a discourse of fragments” and “an ideology of fracture” (Hassan 125), postmodernism has, on the other hand, also been characterized as reinjecting worldliness, or “historical actuality,” “figuration,” and “narrative” into modernist “formalist self-reflexivity.”8 In epistemological terms, narrative simultaneously had a grand cultural entrance as a mode acknowledging the contingency, and constructed nature, of thought also in the ‘hard’ sciences (see Kreiswirth). This postmodernist interest in narrative as a tool of critical reflexivity vis-à-vis the comforts of ideological cohesion9 doubtlessly coinduced the transdisciplinary spread of narratological approaches since the 1990s (e.g., see Herman, *Narratologies*), even if these new narratologies are today—as I will demonstrate in detail—more dominantly allied with a turn beyond postmodernist reflexivity paradigms.

Given these multiple and diverging, albeit intersecting, (re)appearances, it is impossible to tell a simple story of how narrative returned to master the performative excess of revolutionary, variously avant-garde–affiliated aesthetics. As the critical catchwords of narrative and performance have come to stand in for very different, sometimes contrary things, it rather seems that

7. Although hard to avoid altogether, these notions of periodization are consequently only moderately useful for conceptualizing aesthetic trends. Modernism and postmodernism do not only overlap (see also, e.g., Richardson, *Unnatural Voices* 137) but are also more appropriately discussed in terms of modernism’s and postmodernism’s with respect to the multifaceted, often divergent aesthetics associated with each of them.


9. See McHale, *Constructing* 4; Brockmeier and Carbaugh 3.
more than just one “narrative turn” (Kreiswirth) has coexisted and intersected with the performative turns that were initiated by earlier twentieth-century modernisms, and reiterated in both arts and theory across the humanities in the later decades of the twentieth century (see Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power*). At second glance, my introductory comparison between the aesthetics of *Week-end* and *Liebe Kannibalen Godard* becomes less clear-cut as well. Jonigk’s very choice of intertextual reference point indicates that German experimental theater of the 2000s—some of which will be discussed here, along with film and literature—is far from united in any definite move beyond performative excess. Following Godard’s filmic assemblage of cultural scraps quite closely over major parts of the evening, the production congenially adapts the film’s visual feast to the sparser means of the stage in a continued celebration of performative excess of various kinds. Thus, the audience is treated with onstage sex, a generous dose of theater blood, deafening gun shots, and plenty of smoke. Furthermore, the theatrical “Slapstick-Clownerie” (MN) makes ample use of performative self-reflexivity techniques, not only by having the cook comment on his own moralistic tone early on (Jonigk 2), but also by integrating the filmmaker, who is mentioned in the play’s title, as part of its own world. A playfully metaleptic interview scene, which is iconographically modeled after Godard’s later documentaries, invites the theatrical audience to reflect on the violence inscribed in—by extension also Bachmann’s own?—artistic production, as it opens with the filmmaker’s violent attempts to silence his characters and ends in him being shot by one of them.

Vice versa, *Week-end* itself remained multiply implicated in the production of the narrative it denounced (thus, e.g., Sontag, “Godard”). Even the closing title signifies, of course, ambiguously, as it pronounces narrative closure precisely in reiterating the avant-gardes’ famous call to the aesthetic weapons of antinarrativity. Albeit loose and fractured by spectacle, the film’s plot is quite classical in that it sends its protagonists on a journey that effects a reversal of conditions: from city to forest and ‘civilization’ to ‘barbarism.’ *Liebe Kannibalen Godard* is actually less narrative in that respect, as it has the cook appear already in its expository restaurant scene and reuses the dining motif in the concluding cannibalistic Last Supper feast. The narrative-generating opposition between civilization and barbarism seems to have become flattened into a diagnosis of virtual sameness. However, this diagnosis itself—which was, arguably, implied also in the ways *Week-end* linked its apparently antagonistic worlds by “the same principle of serial consumption” (Farocki, in Silverman and Farocki 109)—constitutes a different kind of narrativity, namely that of the ‘grand’ explanatory gesture creating a coherent world.
TOWARD AN AESTHETICS OF NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE \ 7

An Aesthetics of Narrative Performance

As indicated by the explicit surfacing of diverging definitions of ‘narrative’ and ‘performance’ in the preceding paragraphs, I will have to clarify my own story here by developing the notions at stake more explicitly. The rhetorical purpose of not doing so immediately was, quite simply, to underline this study’s point of departure: the bewildering critical proliferation and fuzziness of the narrative-vs.-performance opposition. This opposition’s diffuse and shifting contours, and the lack of analytical specificity promoted by its pervasive use in mainstream aesthetic and cultural theory throughout the last decades, have hampered critical conceptualizations of the aesthetics of modernist and contemporary art in different media, and the cultural work it performs. Arguing that we can best grasp the complex processes of imaginative world-making, identity formation, and critique in contemporary culture by studying the productive interplay, and overlap, of different narrative and performative forms, I outline an aesthetics of narrative performance. Through a comparative look at individual productions in three different media—film, theater (as live performance), and (print) literature (in the digital age)—I map a range of aesthetic configurations of narrative performance in contemporary culture. My use of the notion of aesthetics in this context is intended to function as a media-inclusive analogue to the (predominantly literature-associated) notion of poetics. That is, I employ it to designate a project of talking about form “as the particular fashioning of the elements, techniques and structure” of a particular work “in the service of a set of readerly engagements” (Phelan, Experiencing Fiction 3) and to the effect of coshaping those (both affective and semiotic) engagements, if not always in the way intended by the artist.

In many respects, I claim, the aesthetics of narrative performance receives its contours only in the plural form: as a configuration of quite different aes-

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10. For early critiques of this opposition see, in particular, Maclean; Nelson, Freadman, and Anderson (as quoted in the epigraph on the first page of this chapter). The opposition’s fuzzy and shifting contours have contributed to its persistence often also beyond its explicit critique. However, even partial modifications of the binary are instrumental for my own undertaking—see, e.g., Taylor on the “rift,” but also the interaction between the “archive” and the “repertoire” (19), as well as recent work on the narratology of drama. Even while some of this research remains explicitly opposed to a narratology of performance (especially Jahn, “Narrative Voice”), contributions by Monika Fludernik (“Narrative and Drama”), Ansgar Nüning (Nüning and Sommer, “Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity”; Nüning, “Mimesis des Erzählens”), and Brian Richardson (“Voice and Narration”) have also begun to transcend that dichotomy (for details, see below).

11. My use of the notion thus differs from those recent definitions that position aisthesis, as the doctrine of sensual perception (see, e.g., Krämer, Medium 270), against semiotic models of cultural analysis.
thetic techniques. One of the few things performance scholars seem to agree
on is that performance is an “essentially contested concept.”12 The diagnosis
implies that performance studies not only provides a plurality of definitions
of its central term but, more fundamentally, is informed by conflicting, at
least partially incompatible theoretical models (see Jackson 4). A number of
scholars have also argued that we should refrain from the attempt to over-
come this condition of essential contestation with yet another, be it an inten-
tionally inclusive or an explicitly partisan definition, and instead embrace the
concept’s “rival uses” as “of permanent potential critical value” to our own
deployment of the notion.13 The same, I suggest, holds for narrative as well: the
plurality of diverging, at times contradictory definitions provided by different
scholars can be cleared up with a single definitional gesture only at the price
of reducing productive complexity. Developing my own aesthetic theorizing
in a historicizing vein, I therefore begin by delineating, in the following parts
of this introductory chapter, some of the competing concepts of narrative and
performance with their different foci, implied epistemological claims, and aes-
thetic politics.

As this overview demonstrates, diverging definitions of both narrative and
performance align some of their respective uses more closely with each other
than with alternative definitions of the same concept. The ‘essentially con-
tested’ nature of performance appears perhaps most strikingly in the ways in
which performance theories have shown the “tendency to inhabit the essen-
tialist as well as the antessentialist side of any conceptual binary” (Jackson
37). Alternatively participating in the “language” of the “authentic” as well as
that of “theatre’s fakery,” performance has served to “ground the ‘real’” in a
production of presence, but also as a metaphor for the vicissitudes of represen-
tation (14, 37). Similarly, narrative has been defined both through the crite-
ron of mediation (diegesis, as opposed to mimesis) and as a mode of mimetic
world-making that renders mediation invisible. Building on these conceptual
differentiations, I begin by defining, for my own purposes, not narrative or
performance as such but two clusters of techniques of narrative performance.
From the angle of narratology, we can, as I will explain in detail, distinguish
scenic (highly ‘mimetic,’ presumably immediate) narrative and theatricalized
narrative (narrative that dramatizes the process of narrative mediation); from
the angle of performance studies techniques of (narrative) ‘presencing,’ or pre-
sentification, and (narrative) theatricalization, whereby the brackets aim to
account for the strength of antinarrative motifs in performance studies. In this

13. Strine, Long, and Hopkins (referencing W. B. Gallie); to similar effect see Reinelt (“The
Politics of Discourse”).
way, I draw on the conceptual richness built into the architecture of theoretical conflict in order to articulate a more flexible aesthetics: a set of conceptual tools specific enough to allow fine-tuning interpretations beyond standard recipes while also heterogeneous and inclusive enough to facilitate adequate, multifaceted responses to very different works. Thus specifying techniques of narrative performance, I argue, helps unravel the apparently contradictory moves interwoven not only in Godard’s film and Bachmann’s production. Moving beyond the dichotomy of ‘identical-critical performance vs. identity-building narrative,’ and eventually also beyond the associated vocabularies of ‘subversion vs. affirmation’ as such, this aesthetic specification allows me to develop a complex, but simultaneously clear, understanding of the cultural work that contemporary novels, films, and theater productions undertake in critically producing affect and meaning.

Without compromising my commitment to complexity, however, I will also develop two layers of argumentation in which the concept of narrative performance gains some contours in the singular form. The first of these two layers unfolds primarily on epistemological terrain, that is, on a general level of discussion that is ultimately not at the center of my interest in this study but nonetheless grounds its intervention. It is on this level that readers may be familiar with my title notion of narrative performance, as it marks the conceptual point at which the narrative-vs.-performance dichotomy has in fact been undone from the angle of narrative theory. Although my review of narratological discourses will demonstrate that (in part even recent) narrative theory has had its role in developing this critical dichotomy, the ‘performative turn’ across the humanities has also left its imprint. In recent decades, scholars from otherwise diverging narratological camps—including rhetorical and reader response criticism, deconstruction, socionarratology, anthropology, and cognitive theory—have insisted on the dimension of narrative practice (e.g., Herman, Story Logic 23), the “action” of telling (Phelan, Narrative as Rhetoric 4) and the Act of Reading (Iser). In effect, most narratologists would probably agree today that “narrative is performance” (Jacobs, “Preface,”

14. For a similar call to flexibility see Richardson, Unnatural Voices 10. My methodology thus remains informed by the metacritical reflections on knowledge formation we associate with postmodernism. Rather than in deconstruction as such, however, I am interested in the productive function of the outlined theoretical turbulences for developing better accounts of aesthetic forms and their cultural implications. Instead of substituting the categories of narratology—or performance theory—with new notions (see Gibson, Towards 15, for the context of narratology), I build on the variety of available concepts and terminologies, balancing context-sensitive formalism (Meister, Kindt, and Schernus, “Narratology” xv–xvi) with form-sensitive contextualism (my rewording of the methodology suggested by Mieke Bal in “Close Reading Today,” 23).
x), that is, always (also) a performative act in John L. Austin’s sense of an act ‘effecting’ an action (6–7), and perhaps even that narrativity is based on (felicitous) performativity (Rudrum). In this context, the notion of narrative performance has been specifically established as a designation for the act of narrating (see already Labov and Waletzky 31). As indicated above, my own intervention seeks to move beyond this structural inclusion of performance into the architecture of narratology by turning the notion into a vehicle of aesthetic specification. Thus, my readings focus on techniques that actively unfold the general condition of narrative’s performativity—and, vice versa, the narrative dimension of performance. From the angle of narrative theory, I am, then, interested in developing the analysis of narrative practice—or the act of narration—in terms of how it produces specific forms of narrative performance. Nonetheless, this work of specification builds on existing conceptualizations of the necessary epistemological and structural implications of narrative and performance. For my own purposes, I further develop these implications in the following critical discussion of diverging notions of narrative and performance. Challenging, in particular, the pronounced antinarrative gestures of phenomenological and deconstructive performance theories, I demonstrate that even according to their own (if polemically backgrounded) epistemological concessions, performance can be defined as narrative performance through the necessary interplay of de- and recontextualization in the process of configuration that characterizes communication principally in and through all media.

While I thus forcefully assert the overlap between narrative and performance even on the level of general theoretical conceptualization, I argue that this overlap develops a specific significance for the context of modern and contemporary—by which I mean turn of the twenty-first century—aesthetic theories and practices. Contemporary literature, film, and theater are best mapped through an aesthetics of narrative performance also on the historical grounds that here, the performative legacies of European modernism and postmodernism intersect with ongoing—African diaspora, feminist, postmodern, and ‘beyond postmodernism’—returns to narrative. As developed at this intersection, the aesthetics of narrative performance is an aesthetics of the contemporary moment. Notably, it variously draws on earlier forms: rather than as something radically new, it unfolds in the intricate ways in which (even ancient) forms continue to be reworked and reconfigured. Some of these lines of influence have been highlighted in those existing narratologi-
cal contributions that have moved beyond the epistemological and structural layers of conceptualizing narrative performance toward questions of aesthetics. Drawing on sociolinguistic approaches, on the one hand, and media-theoretical investigations of orality, on the other, Irene Kacandes’s *Talk Fiction*, for example, has transposed discussions of orally inflected forms of narrative in premodern cultures into the contemporary context. Starting from Walter Ong’s concept of “secondary orality” and Erving Goffman’s interaction analysis, Kacandes conceptualizes a postmodern poetics of literary addressivity primarily based on (what I call) techniques of theatricalized narration. As acknowledged by Kacandes (36), the ‘talking book’ is, of course, also a trope prominently developed in African diaspora literary theory. More generally, work from the latter field, prominently including Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s classic *The Signifying Monkey*, has equally developed important building blocks for my project. In response to the association of African and African diaspora cultures with orality, scholars working on these cultures have taken the aesthetics of narrative performance beyond its presumably marginal sites, underlining the ways in which European modernisms drew on the aesthetics of non-European cultures—most radically to the effect of rewriting the ‘big story’ of twentieth-century modernity as the “story of black innovation and white imitation” (Mercer, “Diaspora Aesthetics” 146; see also Taylor 10).

Against the background of these connections, my study positions the aesthetics of narrative performance in contemporary culture as the product of transnational modernisms and postmodernisms. Along these vectors, its distinctive shape has been modeled by dominant twentieth-century cultural concerns. In this context, I argue that the aesthetics of narrative performance receives its contours in the singular form in a second respect, which indicates the critical gravity center also of my own intervention. Although widely divergent in their effects, most of the techniques I subsume under the label of the aesthetics of narrative performance have been significantly associated with modernist, and postmodernist, challenges to narrative authority and coherence. My careful wording seeks to underline that this association does not translate into a straightforward claim such as ‘the aesthetics of narrative performance undoes, or forfeits, (even certain forms of) narrative authority and coherence.’ Rather, the contemporary aesthetics of narrative performance finds its identity as a multifaceted response to the fact that narrative author-

16. Kacandes explicitly uses the concept of performance for one of her modes of literary talk, namely that of apostrophe. Indirectly, however, apostrophe comes to stand in for ‘talk fiction’ overall, in that its “duplicitous address” dramatizes the necessarily fictive dimension of ‘talk’ in literature (147, 145). On the literary impact of orality see also Fludernik’s *Towards*; Maclean; Nelson, Freadman, and Anderson.
ity and coherence cannot be taken for granted, or ‘innocently’ reasserted, any longer. In its multifacetedness, it includes techniques, and configurations of techniques, that primarily effect the deconstruction, or critical complication, of authority claims, as well as others that creatively develop various alternative forms of narrative power and connection. Imaginatively, the aesthetics of narrative performance explores the redistribution of narrative authority across our complex sociosymbolic maps of the contemporary world, variously authorizing (very different) marginalized voices, insisting on the impossibility of clearly distinguishing between marginalized and hegemonic articulations, or ‘simply’ searching for new legitimations of narrative world-making. In what follows, I spell out these claims in more detail. In a first step, I back them up with a fuller discussion of existing concepts of narrative and performance, as well as adjacent notions such as representation and mimesis.

Narratological Drama

In his canonical *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette set out by distinguishing “three distinct” ways in which the notion of “narrative” has been used. One of these, namely, the notion of “the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating” is the basis for the narratological concepts of narrative performance discussed in the previous section. The other two, however, lead us onto terrain where narratologists have, sometimes vigorously, participated in constructing the critical dichotomy of narrative vs. performance. In a spirit of playful provocation, the story of classical narratology—and to a lesser degree even contemporary narratologies—can thus be cast as a story in which the hero, “narrative,” is characterized through his conflictual encounters with his antagonist “performance” in her various guises, including those of “mimesis,” “scape,” etc. Genette’s first definition of narrative, which is at the center of his own project, along with that of the German narratological tradition from Käte Friedemann to Franz Karl Stanzel, has the notion refer to “the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse” representing an event, or a series of events. Genette conceptually unfolds this notion by going back to the ancient distinction between diegesis and mimesis. As quoted by Genette, Plato distinguished “pure narrative,” where “the poet himself” is speaking, from where he speaks through a character, which is “properly” called “imitation, or mimesis” (*Narrative Discourse* 162; italics in original). Following this asymmetrical distinction, Genette essentially conceptualizes narrative through its diegetic “mode” and, in fact, insists on “the truly insurmountable opposition between dramatic representation and
narrative" (Revisited 16, 41). Not surprisingly, this rhetorical forcefulness masks precisely the opposition’s instability. As Genette himself notes, Plato’s foundational distinction was one between “two narrative modes” (Genette, Narrative Discourse 162; see Plato 79–81). Genette turns one of them into narrative’s ‘other’ by foregrounding Plato’s language of hybridity: metaphorically highlighting the essential difference between poetological ‘species,’ he insists on diegetic ‘purity,’ as opposed to “everything that creeps into narrative along with dialogue, thereby making narrative impure—that is, mixed” (Genette, Revisited 18, italics in original). But even while his presentation tries to fend off these ‘alien’ invasions, Genette knows that the described hybridity constitutes a virtually insurmountable condition: “[N]arrative is almost always a mixed genre” (ibid., 42).

If this is true in general (Plato himself pointed to the in-between status of epic poetry, 81), the condition of ‘hybridity’ is intensified in modern(ist) poetics, where experimentation with dramatic dialogue has been pushed “to its extreme” (Genette, Narrative Discourse 173). With reference to Percy Lubbock’s terminology, Wayne Booth analyzed this modern tradition of developing narrative as an art of “showing” and consequently underlined the “radical inadequacy of the telling-showing distinction” already in The Rhetoric of Fiction (16). Through the increasing dominance of free indirect forms as well as (often untagged) direct dialogue and autonomous monologue (see Cohn, Transparent Minds), much modernist literature from Henry James and Virginia Woolf to Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin reduced the visibility of diegetic mediation, staging, as Booth summarized, the “exit” of the narrator (he actually uses the word “author,” 271). The forms thus developed have been variously called “scenic” (Otto Ludwig; Henry James), “cinematic” (e.g., Chatman, Story and Discourse 75), “oral” or “orally inflected” (e.g., Gates), simply “dramatic,” or, more recently, “performative.” For my own project of specifying different forms of performative narration, I use the notion of “scenic” narrative for this cluster of techniques approaching immediacy of

17. Similarly, Stanzel defines “mediacy of presentation as the generic characteristic of narration,” which distinguishes it from “the direct form, drama” (A Theory 4), although he also emphasizes different degrees of narrator audibility on a diegesis–mimesis scale.

18. In modern racial theory, the ‘hybrid’ was the result of interbreeding between ‘species’ considered too different to be mixed successfully (see Robert Young, first 6–9). Genette explicitly refutes the translation “simple” instead of “pure,” which is given also in my Plato edition (79). See, similarly, Stanzel on dialogue as, “[s]trictly speaking,” a “foreign body in the narrative genre” (A Theory 65–66).

19. Ibid., 199; see also Chatman, Story and Discourse 74; Coming to Terms 115–16; Stanzel 19.

20. For example, Bucher; Schumacher; Hempfer. Another related category is that of the “spatial” form of modernist novels (Smitten and Daghistany).
presentation, as it more appropriately resonates across media boundaries than “dramatic” or “cinematic” and carries less media-theoretical and epistemological baggage than “oral” or “mimetic.”

Importantly, most twentieth-century performance theorists would not agree to the approximation of mimesis and performance implied here, and this conceptual fork will be carefully attended to in my study. Plato scholarship, however, has insisted that in the ancient Greek context, his suspicion of mimesis was directed at the implications of oral performance associated with drama at the dawn of literary hegemony (see Havelock; also Potolsky 20–21, 72–73). The motif of media competition thus implied in the mimesis-vs.-diegesis opposition is actualized also by Genette when he unfolds his antimimetic argument in media-theoretical terms: “[I]n contrast to dramatic representation” (read: ‘visual performance’), he asserts,

no narrative can ‘show’ or ‘imitate’ the story it tells. All it can do is tell it in a manner which is detailed, precise, ‘alive,’ and in that way give more or less the illusion of mimesis—which is the only narrative mimesis, for this single and sufficient reason: that narrative, oral or written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitating. (Narrative Discourse 164)\(^2\)

The theoretical affect underlying Genette’s insistence can be understood in the context of the emerging poststructuralisms of his time: his narratology critically exposes the realist, or immediacy, pretenses of scenic modernisms. As much as he tries, Genette insists, Booth’s “author” cannot simply exit: the “main point of Narrative Discourse . . . reflects the assumption that there is an enunciating instance—the narrating—with its narrator and its narratee, fictive or not, represented or not, silent or chatty, but always present in what is indeed for me, I fear, an act of communication” (Revisited 101). Consequently, Genette analyzes the narrative mode of “showing” as a set of techniques that generate—in Barthes’s terminology—a “reality effect” (Revisited 46).\(^2\) But if Genette’s insistence on enunciation aligns his argument with contemporary critiques of ‘mimetic’ concepts of representation—or concepts of representation understood as reproduction of a prior presence\(^3\)—the irony is that his

21. Unless, Genette adds, the object narrated itself is language (Narrative Discourse, 164). But even then, he later insists, it is not imitated but “transcribed” (see Revisited 43). Alternative—media-inclusive—contemporary definitions of narrative, e.g., by Roland Barthes, did not greatly influence the subsequent development of classical narratology (see Ryan, “On the Theoretical Foundations” 1; Herman, “Introduction” [2007] 5).

22. Barthes himself also insists on the antinarrative nature of this effect, contrasting the “insignificant” forms of notation and description with the predicative structure of narration (“The Reality Effect” 142–43).

23. See Ricoeur, Time and Narrative 1, 45 on Platonic mimesis; Rimmon-Kenan, A Glance 7.
media-ontological articulation of the argument exclusively for language as the basis of literary narrative also aligns it with more recent turns against postmodernist critiques of representation. Whereas in the 1970s Christian Metz discussed *Film Language*, Gregory Currie’s cognitive film theory in the 1990s reintroduced the claim that “certain media,” including theater and film, belong “to something like a natural kind” because they signify iconically rather than conventionally (2, 197).

We can begin to disentangle the epistemological, media-theoretical, and aesthetic layers of argumentation mixed up in these divergent media purisms by recalling that the early German narratologist Käte Friedemann described “the mediacy of narration” as “sort of an analogue to our experience of reality in general” (Stanzel 4), that is, an analogue of the (post-)Kantian epistemological insight that we grasp the world through the medium of an “observing mind” (“betrachtenden Geistes”; Friedemann 26). Unless we intend to completely discard this modern perspectivist stance, questions of enunciation cannot be restricted to literature. Perception in and through all media is necessarily embedded in an act of communication in Genette’s sense, even where we are—as Metz soon specified for film—not dealing with linguistic forms of utterance in a narrow sense (“On the Notion”); and this is doubly true for the perception of artworks as operating in a socially framed sphere of rhetorical design and presentation. While the difference made by the use of iconic vs. linguistic signs in specific works deserves detailed consideration, it should not be overdrawn (e.g., see Currie xvii) to the degree where it overshadows the unnatural—both conventionalized and actively creative—uses of iconic signs in the composition, selection, and arrangement of film images or theatrical poses. On this general level, then, film and theater performances are always composed by acts of narration as well, even while the instance of narration does not usually come in a unified, anthropomorphized form. The arguably more interesting question, however—which is at the center of the following

24. In his more complex alternative mapping of cognitive film theory, Noël Carroll discusses such “medium specificity talk” (1) in terms of legitimation strategies, which “[m]ost often . . . turn out to be . . . briefs in favor of certain styles, genres and artistic movements” (19).

25. In the respective film studies controversy, Bordwell insisted that film has no narrator, instead locating the process of narration in the spectator’s act of performing coherence (*Narration* 62). While this emphasis on spectator activity is welcome, Chatman has objected that there is no need to forgo specification also on the side of composition, that is, in Bordwell’s own words, “the organization of a set of cues” that solicit spectator activity (ibid.; Chatman, *Coming to Terms* 126). As a process of communication, film does have narrational agency on the level of “transmission” (132–33), or a number of instances who “manage the exposition” (Jahn, “Narrative Voice” 670)—including but not limited to the camera. Bordwell’s more recent *Poetics of Cinema* moves toward the composition side as well, if by underlining the role of the “filmmakers” (see 121–33).
readings—is the question in which ways this act of narration is made aesthetically visible, or invisible, in any work in any medium, through (the absence of) a narrating figure or other techniques marking mediation (see Chatman, *Coming to Terms*; Grünzweig and Solbach 6).

Back on the epistemological level, insisting that a production in any medium is never just an act of mimesis in the sense of reproducing a prior presence does not yet imply subscribing to Genette's full-fledged antimimetic stance. More recent scholarship has recuperated the concept of mimesis by incorporating post/modernist critiques of representation into the notion. Rather than drawing on Plato's notion of mimesis as an attempt to copy the world (which is doomed to failure already in Plato, see 325–35), these recuperations rely primarily on Aristotle. With Aristotle, mimesis has been conceptualized as an active process of (re)configuration, which includes a moment of “break” with “preexisting reality” (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I* 45), or even, in more “radically constructivist terms,” as an “artificial and illusionary projection of a semiotic structure, which the reader recuperates in terms of a fictional reality,” in short: “performance” in Austin's speech-act theoretical sense. For my own work, thus conceptualizing mimesis as a process of active reconfiguration coshaped by available sociosymbolic scripts is crucial in that it allows for moving beyond antirepresentational post/structuralist purism (see Herman, *Story Logic* 4) without sacrificing the productive aspects of later twentieth-century critiques of representation. In this sense, not only visual media but also literary narratives include a “mimetic component” (Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* 5) as their productive figurations tend to somehow grapple with histories and experiences, even if those histories and experiences can (in epistemological terms) never be immediately represented in any work, and (in aesthetic terms) find their way into these works variably by virtue of an artist's interest in or defiance vis-à-vis the laws and issues of the outside world.

The return to mimesis within narrative theory opens onto the other narratological plot to be discussed here. In its background, we can locate the tradition summarized in Genette's second (and, in my presentation context here, last) definition of narrative as the “succession of events” itself, that


27. To avoid misunderstandings, let me underline that my compromise formula differs significantly from the ways in which phenomenological and cognitive theorists have, despite their general commitment to different degrees of constructivism, reintroduced an “ontological presupposition of reference” or “referential or ‘vertical’ conception of meaning” in stark opposition to twentieth-century linguistics (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I*, 78; Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 91–92).
is, the “story” or “narrative content” (*Narrative Discourse*, 25, 27; italics in original). Within this tradition, “minimal,” “temporal,” and “causal” definitions of narrative have competed (see Richardson, “Recent Concepts” 169), but whatever the details of the criterion, they share a focus on the connection of events. The philosophical implications of this motif were developed by Paul Ricoeur, whose phenomenological discussion influenced more recent cognitive approaches. For Ricoeur, narrative is a “work of synthesis” through which “poetic composition” refigures “our confused, unformed . . . temporal experience,” or the art of “making discordance appear concordant” (*Time and Narrative* I, ix, xi, 43). While Ricoeur’s analysis is still focused on the (Aristotelian) notion of plot, or “muthos” as the “organization of events” (33), cognitive narratologists have partially displaced the central status of plot in favor of more inclusive concepts of narrative “world” and “experientiality.”28 In direct contrast to the definition of narrative in Genette and Stanzel, this scholarship “roughly equate[s] mimetic with narrative texts,” defining the “mimetic text” as one “devoted to the representation of states of affairs involving individual existents situated in time and space, as opposed to those texts that deal exclusively with universals, abstract ideas, and atemporal categories.”29

Also in contrast to Genette, the cognitive narratologies of the 2000s have been emphatically developed as intermedial approaches. In response to the literary bias of classical narratology, Marie-Laure Ryan suggests making optional “the prefix re” in definitions of narrative as “*the representation of an event or a series of events*”; Narrativity is to be found in the mimetic presentation (and audience reconstruction) of consciousness or events through “a certain type of mental image.”30 As recent approaches thus locate the “transmedial identity” of narrative “on the side of the signified” and background the level of discourse or mediation in folding the mimesis-vs.-diegesis distinction,31

28. For example, Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*; Fludernik, *Towards*; specifically (Ryan) 244–46 vs. (Fludernik) 13; see 27 on their disagreement regarding the significance of plot. Drawing on both (as well as Jerome Bruner), Herman integrates the traditional plot criterion of “disruption” in a “storyworld” with the need for “human-like agents” and the conveying of “the experience of living through this storyworld in flux” (*Basic Elements of Narrative* xvi; italics in original).


30. “On the Theoretical Foundations” 4 (with Abbott), Ryan’s emphasis.

31. Ibid. This does not mean that mediation is entirely disregarded here. While Herman defines “stories” as the “blending of (certain kinds of) semiotic structures with (certain kinds of) cognitive resources” (“Introduction” [2003], 11), Ryan’s compromise formula defines narrative as both “textual act of representation” and “cognitive construct” built by the interpreter (“Introduction” 9). The emphasis in these definitions, however, is quite contrary to that in Genette or Stanzel.
it would seem that the narrative-vs.-performance confrontation has run its course. In fact, already Mieke Bal (see *Narratology* 9) and Seymour Chatman had argued for the inclusion of drama within narratology based on the shared story component (*Coming to Terms* 109). Now Monika Fludernik’s *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* made the point based on its portrayal of human experience (333, 49; see also 26), and since then, new narratological work on drama has begun to give more sustained “attention” to “the site” where “narrative” and “performance” are “fused.”32 Beyond drama (or the theater text)33 as a genre, David Herman has even posed the intriguing question of whether his own notion of narrativity is slanted toward modern (read: ‘dramatic’) narrative in that it privileges the “first-person character” of experience vis-à-vis the “third-person” terms afforded by scientific discourse; underlining how narrative “[e]nact[s] and not just represent[s] ways of experiencing” (*Basic Elements* 146, 157; see 138, 140).34

Dramatic narrative, however, does not yet equal performance. In some places, the narrative-vs.-drama dichotomy has been replaced by the (still curiously Genettean) opposition between text and performance.35 Even Ryan’s *Narrative Across Media* falls short of fully implementing her emphatically intermedial commitment when she surprisingly continues to assert that “narrative has a medium of choice, and this medium is language” (“Introduction” 13). The hierarchical operations at play here can be explained by going back, once more, to Aristotle’s conception of mimesis. As critics have suggested, Aristotle defended mimesis against Plato by “taking it out of the theatre,” that is, by excluding “spectacle” as the performative element of dramatic art (Potolsky 73; see Aristotle 51, 53–55, 75). Similarly, phenomenological and cognitive

32. Richardson, “Voice and Narration” 690; see also Fludernik, “Narrative and Drama”; Jahn, “Narrative Voice”; Nünning and Sommer, “Die Entwicklung.” Beyond the early attention to plot, also the “discourse level of drama” has now come under investigation as variably developed through diegetic and/or mimetic means (Fludernik, “Narrative and Drama” 361; Nünning and Sommer, “Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity” 332; Rabinowitz analogously on music in opera: “Music”).

33. In the tradition of Peter Szondi’s *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, German theory tends to reserve the notion of drama for the plot-driven, programmatically nontheatricalized form of bourgeois ‘fourth wall’ theater.

34. Nonetheless, drama continues to metaphorically figure as an “Emu” rather than a prototypical bird in the new concepts of narrative based on “membership gradience” (Herman, “Introduction” [2007] 8, quoting Lakoff): Herman’s *Cambridge Companion to Narrative* includes drama, along with film and new media, in a section on “Other Narrative Media” following a detailed introduction to “Narrative Fiction.” Even Fludernik’s recent *Erzähltheorie* only hesitantly acknowledges the inclusion of (film and) drama (13; see 15).

35. See Jahn, “Narrative Voice” 675, 662; less categorically Fludernik, “Narrative and Drama” 358, 378.
critics have been struggling with the ways in which performance functions ‘in excess of’ mimetic world evocation.\textsuperscript{36} Once more layering epistemological, media-ontological, and aesthetic argumentations, they have located this performative excess both on the screen or theater stage (as the excess of the nonlinguistic) and in the literary—dramatic or other—text itself (as an excess of form over realist world configuration). For Ryan, language—and thus literature—is “the native tongue of narrative,” because in order to qualify as narrative, a “text must allow the reconstruction of an interpretative network of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations,” which provides “the narrated events” with “coherence and intelligibility.”\textsuperscript{37} While Ryan thus describes “dramatic structure” in the Aristotelian sense of plot as “the fullest form of narrativity” (Narrative as Virtual Reality 246), Fludernik ascribes “low degree narrativity” to “action-oriented spectacle with little focusing on a central character” (Towards 353). In that sense, it is classical (for Ryan) or modern consciousness dramas (for Fludernik) that become narrative ‘proper’ here. However, these narratological delineations no longer take the form of fervent exclusion they had in Genette. Explicitly interested in experimental, provocatively “anti-mimetic” texts, Fludernik strives to incorporate them by emphasizing readers’ recuperation efforts.\textsuperscript{38} If “natural” narratology, nonetheless, finds its limits at the point where “overall textual coherence” is “at risk” (317), the growing interest in “Unnatural Narratology”\textsuperscript{39} has stepped in, continuing the exploration of both experimental fiction and “postdramatic” (Lehmann) theater work.

In part, the challenges to coherence building at stake here are created by radically scenic forms, for example, contemporary fiction’s broader-scale experiments with concurrent narration, which sacrifice overview, potentially turning the act of narration into a verbalizing of “the (unconfigured) particulars of the visualized spectacles ostensibly passing before” the narrator’s eyes.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{36} Ricoeur echoes Aristotle in underlining that “spectacle” is not essential to tragedy (Time and Narrative I, 36).

\textsuperscript{37} “Introduction” 11, 9. Visual media, Ryan argues, “lack the code, the grammar, and the syntactic rules necessary to articulate specific meanings” and thus to “convey possibility, conditionality,” or “causality” (10–11). However, Ryan herself complicates this picture by acknowledging that most literary texts do not make causality explicit, while filmic editing conventions allow the viewer to infer causal connections (ibid.).

\textsuperscript{38} See Towards 35, 313; also Nünning’s discussion of metanarrativity in terms of ‘second degree mimesis’ (“Mimesis” 22).

\textsuperscript{39} See Richardson, Unnatural Voices, and the “Unnatural Narratology” Project (http://www.nordisk.au.dk/forskningscentre/nrl/unnatural; accessed 09/12/09).

\textsuperscript{40} Fleischman 11; see Margolin 151. Vis-à-vis these challenges, some critics have continued to insist on a retrospective viewpoint or even the past tense as a mandatory condition of narrativity (Fleischman 11; see 23, 6, 10; Martínez—with reference to Arthur Danto—121,
Cognitive narratology’s biggest integration challenge, however, is a second cluster of performative techniques. In passing, these forms surface also in Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, when he comments on how his main literary example, Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, in a “decisive transgression” of “the millennial opposition between mimesis and diegesis,” combines its practices of ‘showing’ with “the presence of a narrator”: “utmost immediacy” meets “[e]xtreme mediation” (168–69, 210). More fully, these techniques of highlighting mediation were conceptualized by Booth as the ‘dramatizing’ of the narrative process, specifically in those modernist forms that answered scenic poetics with a rediscovery of aesthetic distance, culminating, for example, in Kacandes’s ‘talk fiction’ and more generally in postmodernism’s playful emphasis on “metanarrative” commentary.41 Potentially leading to the deconstruction of tellers and characters, such contemporary literature makes “the play of the narration” into a “significant drama in its own right” (Richardson, *Unnatural Voices* 135). As Eco put it through a late modernist example, “narrative becomes very similar to theatre” when Thomas Mann (thus Eco) says “I,” and this “I” does not designate (the flesh-and-blood or implied author42) Thomas Mann, but Serenus Zeitbloom (116). With the implicit performative statement “I am Serenus,” the novel duplicates the speech act, thereby preventing words from functioning as transparent signs and instead highlighting the process of their configuration. Although principally a condition of all fiction (Eco 116), narrative’s virtual affiliation with theater is aesthetically developed

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41. Fludernik, *Erzähltheorie* 75; Fludernik, *Towards* 271, 314; Ryan, “On the Theoretical Foundations” 6. Ambivalence also vis-à-vis modernism is most pronounced in Ricoeur (*Time and Narrative* 2, e.g., 8, 22).

42. With reference to the ongoing narratological controversies on the matter (see, most recently, the spring 2011 issue of *Style*; also Kindt and Müller; Phelan, *Living to Tell* 38–49), I prefer to see the existence of the implied author as less a matter of belief—and theology in theory—than simply of terminological decisions and methodological emphasis. I do find the notion—or a more explicitly constructivist equivalent such as (projected, dynamic) “author image” (thus Herman and Vervaek 12)—helpful for designating the (personified, but human rather than godlike) instance to which we attribute responsibility for the overall design of the text. While the terminological choice admittedly implies a “loosely intentionalist” approach (Lanser, “The Implied Author” 155), this instance is different not only from the narrative agents directly speaking (or, in the case of film, framing, etc.) but also from the flesh-and-blood author in that its contours emerge only from the “feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader-response” (Phelan, *Living to Tell* 18). In other words, my plea for granting agency to both authors and readers in the process of constructing meaning situates my approach between their respective defenders (see Phelan, ibid.; as well as Rabinowitz, “‘The Absence,’” vs. Herman and Vervaek).
in Mann’s foregrounding of a narrator persona “as a performative figure in the configuration of narrative.”

Following Eco’s cursory remarks, I use the notion of theatricalization for the cluster of performative techniques that highlight narrative mediation. In this case, the traditional narratological concept—Booth’s notion of dramatization—is not only confusing because of the term’s alternative usage for the reduction of distance but also limiting because of the association of ‘drama’ with ‘literature.’ Since “theatricalized” arguably has stronger implications of play than “dramatized,” however, I hasten to underline that the theatricalization of narrative is a matter of both degree and specific technique. While Booth suggests that dramatization occurs “as soon as” the narrator “refers to himself as ‘I’” (152), a single such “I” does not yet amount to very much theatricalization (while at the same time, it is not the only available technique of theatricalization even in literature). However, theatricalization becomes more pronounced where such an “I” designates—for example, in character narration as an “art of indirection” (Phelan, *Living to Tell*)—a narrator “radically different from the implied author” of the text (Booth 152). Here, theatricalization develops a range of possibilities for ironic, bivocal, and other forms of indirect representation that actively question, and reconfigure, narrative authority. Importantly, this pronounced function of contemporary theatricality cannot be taken for granted. Historically, Susan Lanser demonstrates, the narrator’s overtness has been used as a means precisely of making strong claims to authority (if especially in heterodiegetic forms, *Fictions of Authority* 17). Today, the legacy of post/modernist authority critique presents a forceful backdrop for arguably all of theatricalization’s uses, but this still does not translate into a guaranteed antiauthoritative bent. The relationships between poetic technique and political effect need to be individually untangled through text analysis.

As indicated here, my initial replacement of the narrative-vs.-performance dichotomy with a distinction between two clusters of narrative performance techniques is too simple to capture the multiplicity, and multifacetedness, of individual aesthetic procedures. Pace Genette, scenic and theatricalized narrative also do not form a neat opposition; their regular coexistence in individual works attests to the limits of narratological system-building in the complex field of aesthetic theory and practice. While the opposition between immediacy and linguistic mediation is constitutive of the modern episteme in Foucault’s sense, which sharply contrasts physical ‘nature’ and ‘authenticity’ with language and ‘theatrical’ rhetoricity, aesthetic modernisms have equally, and

often simultaneously, invested in both. The respective overdetermination of the term performance—to which I attend in detail in the following section—is indicative of these double allegiances, while simultaneously pointing to the ways in which contemporary aesthetic theory and practice have challenged, if not fully overcome, this modern episteme. Individual narrative features—like orality and the present tense—are associated with both scenic and theatricalized narrative, and the two directly overlap where, for example, character narration presents “self-dramatization” through commentary in the form of direct thought report or interior monologue (see Fludernik, Towards 292). My readings explore how different scenic and theatricalizing forms are configured in a variety of relationships—from conflict to harmonious parallel and interplay—in contemporary aesthetic works. Nonetheless, I hold on to my initial distinction as a heuristically useful one—not only for analyzing theoretical controversies, but also as a first step in mapping the complex aesthetics of narrative performance with more specificity than provided by previous scholarship in the name of the performative.

Finally, I do not intend to suggest that between the scenic and the theatricalized, all narrative forms are equally performative. Rather, there is a relatively nonperformative area ‘between’ (or, given the limits of theoretical mapping, ‘beside’) these only partially opposite forms. Specific combinations of narrative distancing techniques—for example, the use of the past tense—with an untheatricalized act of narration work to erase a sense of narrative’s performative character to authoritative effect, projecting order and coherence. Perhaps, this ideal of nonperformative narration is best captured by Hayden White’s classical historiographic definition. In contrast to scenic forms, White’s narrative (in the narrow sense) arranges events chronologically from a historical distance to the effect of establishing authority and morality; in contrast to theatricalized forms (and, notably, in direct opposition to diegesis-based concepts), it is defined as the very mode of representation that makes representation invisible, or erases the “performative index” of speaking (Stempel 327), as it “feigns to make the world . . . speak itself as a story.”44 The aesthetic contours of such narration have perhaps been most extensively developed for the medium of film, namely as those of Classical Hollywood Cinema. As Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson outline in the volume thus titled, this cinema’s narration operates covertly, as “narration-through-character-interaction,” or character-centered causality and “seamless editing” (30, 13, 24). Although generally omniscient, it does not usually flaunt its omniscience (e.g., through

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44. White opposes narrative to ‘discourse’ as an explicitly perspectivized form (“Narrativity” 2).
This example of ‘Classical Hollywood Cinema,’ however, is instructive not least because film scholars have argued that upon closer investigation, it turns out to be a conceptual abstraction more than actual cinematic reality. Not only is this ‘classical form’ multiply circumscribed in geohistorical terms, as it receives its contours only against the ‘preclassical’ and ‘postclassical’ cinema of ‘attractions’ (Gunning; see below) and against the challenges of auteurism and avant-garde production. Even the concept’s proponents also acknowledge that ‘Classical Hollywood Cinema’ is rather heterogeneous in itself; for example, the rules of causally tight, covert narration are regularly transgressed in a number of genres (including musical, comedy, melodrama). Taking the critique further, Geoff King questioned the very concept of relatively nonperformative narration by arguing that “throughout” all of cinema history, “narrative and spectacle have existed in a series of shifting relationships in which neither has been entirely absent” (3; see also Elsaesser, “Discipline” 216). A similar case can be made for literature. While premodern forms of narrative from various cultural contexts have been multiply associated with performativity (e.g., P. Johnson; Fleischman), the European canon was dominated by theatricalized narrators also throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and, despite the intensification of Antitheatrical Prejudice (Barish), to some degree into nineteenth-century romanticism and even realism. Simultaneously, scenic forms began to take shape with the development of internal focalization, as well as realism’s own calls for “objective,” “impersonal,” and explicitly “scenic” narrative. Even to the degree that the realist novel still emerged as programmatically nonperformative, its failure to altogether escape the theater is indicated by the fact that Adorno later compared it to the illusionist bourgeois theater of the ‘fourth wall’ (33). As we have seen, twentieth-century modernisms and postmodernisms radicalized scenic forms while also bringing the return of theatricalized narration. In the sign of overlapping performative and narrative turns, the aesthetics of narrative performance finds a particularly rich development as that of the contemporary moment, continuously inflected by modernisms and postmodernisms even in moving beyond them.

45. See Stanzel 144 on romanticism. In the German context, decidedly playful versions of theatricalized ‘realist’ narrative can be found, e.g., in Wilhelm Raabe. For Victorian literature, Nünning cites the prominence of metanarrativity, the function of which he primarily describes as that of establishing normative consensus for this context (“Mimesis des Erzählens” 41).

46. Classically, the technique is associated with Jane Austen (see Genette, Revisited 54), but it had its beginnings certainly as early as in Aphra Behn (Fludernik, Towards 169).

47. As summarized by Stanzel 122; see, e.g., Spielhagen.
If the plots of narratology can, in a playfully polemic spirit, be read as staging encounters with shady antagonists from the performance family, it requires less hermeneutic effort, or critical energy, to discover an analogous drama in the discipline of performance studies. According to most of its theorists and practitioners, what makes performance interesting is precisely its radical break with narrative. Genealogically, this insistence can be explained with the central role that avant-garde theory and practice assumed within the otherwise dispersed cultural and disciplinary origins of performance studies (which included impulses from anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, rhetoric, gender, and critical race studies as well as theater studies; Jackson 159). Even when theater studies were formed as such in the context of modernist practices in the first decades of the twentieth century, directors and authors such as Max Reinhardt, Filippo Marinetti, Max Herrmann, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Sergei Radlov variously advocated emancipation from the dominance of the literary text in nineteenth-century European theater. A few decades later, performance studies won its contours by radicalizing this critique through a turn now also against theater, not only as the institutional practice still based on “Eurocentric drama” but even as theatricality in Eco’s sense of highlighted mediation, to the effect, not least, of creating fundamental ambiguities in the field’s simultaneously theater-based conceptual development.

A crucial point of reference for later twentieth-century conceptualizations of performance was Antonin Artaud’s powerful version of the antinarrative argument (see Carlson, Performance 100), which assembles the theoretical motifs to be unpacked in this section. Attacking Western theater for its concentration on “dialogue,” Artaud championed Balinese and other non-Western forms as models for a future theater in which “a new bodily language no longer based on words” (92, 88) would defy European drama’s traditional functions of “defin[ing] a character” or “resolv[ing] conflicts of a human, emotional order” (95). From the vantage point of the narratological discourses outlined in the previous section, Artaud targets narrative as both mimesis—the constitution of narrative worlds—and Genettean diegesis: a mode of mediated presentation specifically associated with language. While often summarized under the label ‘critique of representation,’ these two moves obviously have


49. Jackson 23, with reference to Schechner; see Worthen 1093.

quite divergent implications. The radical concepts of performance developed by Artaud and other avant-gardists thus attain their specific contours through the ways in which they merge a critique of mimetic realism with a critique of linguistic mediation, forfeiting representation as figuration in the sense of both world-making and (‘theatrical’) rhetorical process. In effect, the intended “‘destruction of imitation’” (Jackson 125) often proceeded as a search for ‘non-representational’ immediacy, or the ‘Real.’

Paradigmatically developed in much of the arts of the 1960s (see Carlson, *Performance* 103–8), these antinarrative avant-garde concepts shaped performance theory particularly in its phenomenological variants. In contrast, semiotic approaches—generally cited as the second major paradigm in the field (see Carlson, “Semiotics”)—offer building blocks for my project of mapping the aesthetics of narrative performance. From Barthes’s classical discussions of Brechtian epic theater to more recent feminist performance scholarship, they have explored rhetorical mediation on the theater and acknowledged the importance of narrative and narratology (e.g., see Pavis 219; Brandstetter, *Bildsprung*). At the same time, the antinarrative theme in performance studies reaches beyond phenomenology.51 While semiotic approaches often share the critique of narrative as mimetic world-making, the opposition between phenomenology and semiotics itself is troubled by the emergence of deconstructive approaches (as closely allied with gender, postcolonial, and queer studies in performance theory), which were shaped by impulses from both sides. My discussion here proceeds from the radically antinarrative acts of phenomenology to the more complicated, if partial parallel, conceptualizations developed by deconstructive and cultural studies approaches. Unlike in the narratology section, this procedure does not correspond to historical chronology, in that early phenomenological impulses from the context of the mid-twentieth-century avant-gardes resonate vibrantly also in much recent theoretical work. While in part indicative of the ongoing process of ‘disciplining’ the ‘anti-discipline’ of performance studies (see Jackson 30), this resurgence of phenomenological themes in the 2000s is also part of the broader intellectual configuration of the new millennium (as often delineated against the postmodern culture of the 1990s), a different strand of which I have discussed in the section on cognitive narratologies.

In particularly clear-cut ways, this topical brand of performance theory is represented by the influential work of German performance scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte,52 in critical dialogue with whom I therefore—while cross-

51. On the other hand, some phenomenological scholarship has recently turned pronarrative under the influence of cognitivism (Rozik).

52. Fischer-Lichte initially became known for her contributions to semiotics, but she has increasingly underlined phenomenological perspectives since the 1990s.
referencing other authors—position my own investigations here. Re- 
miniscent of Artaud and his contemporaries, as well as early American 
performance studies (see Féral, “Performance and Theatricality”), the 
leitmotif of Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* 
(German original: Ästhetik des Performativen, 2004) is that performance is “not representational” (11). 
Her focus in this study are later twentieth-century practices that, instead of developing “a fictive world,” find their concept- 
tual core, Fischer-Lichte argues, in a “generation of materiality” and mode of 
highlighting the “actors’ bodily being-in-the-world”—in short, as a *Production of Presence*, to quote the title of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s epistemologically 
focused analogue to Fischer-Lichte’s aesthetics. Fischer-Lichte’s Frankfort- 
based colleague Hans-Thies Lehmann, who has discussed contemporary per- 
formance as *Postdramatic Theatre* (German original 1999), elaborates how it aesthetically develops the “level of the real,” which had always punctured the process of theatrical representation (99–100). As a “theater of the present,” postdramatic performance replaces “story”/“history” (Geschichte) with (dynamic) “formation” (68). If this process can be discussed with reference 
to mimesis, Lehmann qualifies, mimesis does not signify “‘to imitate’” here 
but, as it did originally, “‘to represent through dance” in a process of display 
or presentification.

53. Jackson maps the discontinuous field of performance theories through diverging in- 
stitutional narratives (NYU vs. Northwestern). My own narrative adds a third ‘school’: that of 
German performance theory. Fischer-Lichte’s leading position in this context is indicated by 
her position as the chair/speaker of the large transdisciplinary, Berlin-based research network 
(Sonderforschungsbereich) “Kulturen des Performativen” (active 1999–2010; see http://www2. 
u-berlin.de/performativ/; accessed 08/17/11). While a number of scholars affiliated with the 
network have developed ‘dissenting’ positions more in line with the deconstructive and cul- 
tural studies–inflected positions discussed below, most of them are based in literary studies 
(see, e.g., Lehmann, Mattenklott, and Woltersdorff, and the Munich-based theatricality study 
group loosely affiliated with the Sonderforschungsbereich: Neumann, Pross, and Wildgruber; 
Matala and Pornschlegel). From within German theater studies, Gabriele Brandstetter has ar- 
ticulated an alternative position, including explicit consideration of narrative in performance 
(Bild-Sprung; “Tanztheater”).

54. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power* 20, 75, 82. Lehmann underlines this aesthetic- 
ic’s avant-garde genealogies in Michael Kirby’s notion of “non-matrixed acting” (*Postdramatic 
Theatre* 135; see Kirby: *A Formalist Theater*) and Lyotard’s ‘energetic theater’ (37; see Lyotard, 
“The Tooth, the Palm”). Gumbrecht comments on performance as such only in passing (30–31), 
but Lehmann explicitly quotes an earlier version of his argument (*Postdramatic Theatre* 141).

55. 143, italics in original, with reference to Karl Heinz Bohrer’s “absolute present” as the 
time/lessness of the aesthetic. See Féral on performance as having “neither past nor future” 
(“Performance and Theatricality” 177). In reverse analogy to exclusive definitions of narrative 
through the past tense, many linguistic definitions of performative speech require the “dra- 
matic” present tense (e.g., Bohle and König).

56. Lehmann references Adorno’s mimesis (and Roger Callois’s *mimétisme*) as a “presymbolic, affective ‘becoming-like-something’” (38). See also Potolsky 16.
Lehmann’s use of the verb ‘to represent’ in this context (in German: *darstellen*; *Postdramatisches Theater* 69) signals that the opposition between presence and representation emphasized in these phenomenological accounts does not function neatly. In fact, both Fischer-Lichte and Lehmann explicitly acknowledge that the outlined production of presence can only be conceptualized in an interplay with representational dimensions. In this sense, the gesturing beyond representation develops its significance on a rhetorical level; it signifies their methodological commitment to move away from (presumably dominant) “concepts [such] as ‘text’ or ‘representation’” (*The Transformative Power* 90). My critique foregrounds the epistemological tensions produced by this persistent privileging of phenomenology over semiotics, while indicating that Fischer-Lichte’s model also offers possibilities for interlocking both in more productive ways.

The first part of Fischer-Lichte’s argument is about media difference. In a move that inversely corresponds to Genette’s distinction between literature and the visual arts, Fischer-Lichte contrasts the “presentness” of theater, which portrays events “immediately,” with the stories of faraway events and places told by novel and epos (94). But this immediacy does not go by the name of mimesis here. Rather than a ‘copy,’ theater presents what Roland Barthes called an “emanation” of “reality” for photography, although of present, not (as in Barthes) “past” reality (*Camera Lucida* 88, italics in original). As a “passage of the present,” Fischer-Lichte’s theater affects its audience through the “bodily co-presence of actors and spectators” (*The Transformative Power* 94, 38). In stark contrast to Eco’s definition, theater here is the medium that overcomes the conditions of mediation in producing “an intense experience of presentness” (96), an “appearing” (or epiphany: *Erscheinen*), as opposed to the mere “presence effects,” or “appearance” (*Schein*) produced by electronic media.

The theoretical tension produced here resides in the ways in which Fischer-Lichte’s aesthetic theory, while introducing performance in the sense of a public event within or beyond the institution of theater as the central category of

57. See, e.g., Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theater* 38. Fischer-Lichte begins her discussion of the body in performance with Helmuth Plessner’s account of the “tension between the phenomenal body of the actor . . . and their representation of the dramatic character” (*The Transformative Power* 76). Criticizing bourgeois literary theater for attempting to abolish this tension in favor of character representation, Fischer-Lichte then tilts the balance in the other direction herself in her discussion of contemporary performance.

58. Fischer-Lichte’s *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, which reframes major themes from *The Transformative Power* in the context of a historical argument, integrates semiotic perspectives more fully (for the respective commitment see 25). Even here, however, the dominant rhetoric is one of deemphasizing semiotics (e.g., 77, 98, 258).

59. 101; *Ästhetik* 175, with reference to Martin Seel; see also Lehmann, “Postdramatic Theater” 102.
her theory, de-emphasizes precisely the significance of the aesthetic framing that constitutes this event—explicitly so in the theater or with a performance in an art gallery, but virtually even in the case of an unannounced street performance. Fischer-Lichte’s insistence on the undoing of mediation in theater thus problematically backgrounds the dimension of communication inherent, as I argued above, in any artistic production: the orchestration of effects in its design as well as its perception by the audience. From a media-theoretical angle as well, Cormac Power has developed a more convincing proposal for intertwining phenomenological and semiotic perspectives: with reference to post-Husserlian phenomenology, he casts presence as “a function of theatrical signification” (8, emphasis in original). Power speaks of the “presencing” of objects in performance (the slightly awkward verb nonetheless nicely underlines the process at stake): simultaneously showcasing the complex status of actuality on the stage, theater puts presence “into play” (190, with Stanton Garner; 146).

Fischer-Lichte herself provides an alternative to the fraught topoi of her media-ontological argumentation by venturing onto the terrain of aesthetic technique. Namely, she foregrounds the techniques of rupture and disconnection through which contemporary performance art undoes the narrative structures of classical drama. This decontextualizing of individual performance elements, Fischer-Lichte argues, has an effect that makes them “appear de-semanticized” in a certain sense: the aesthetics of performance thus allows its elements to be perceived in their “specific materiality,” their “phenomenal being” (140–41).

My own readings build on this specification of (onstage) ‘presencing’ as a crucial element of contemporary aesthetics. In designating the respective cluster of techniques as those of (narrative) “presencing” or (with Gumbrecht) “presentification” (94, Gumbrecht’s emphasis), however, I hold on to the claim

60. The Transformative Power 29; the German notion is “Aufführung,” Ästhetik 41.
61. Philip Auslander has warned that such media-ontological assertions are often based on little more than clichés (2), positioning himself specifically against Peggy Phelan’s deconstruction-inflected variation on the motifs of presence in the early 1990s (Unmarked). Phelan later revised her take, now emphasizing the “technologies always already at play in live performance” (“Introduction” 9). While I share Auslander’s hesitations, his own critical story about the dominance of the televisual in our age does not completely circumvent ontological topoi (see, e.g., 52). In her discussion of Auslander, Fischer-Lichte claims (too generally) that the use of reproduction technologies in contemporary theater primarily serves to establish its specific medial identity (73).
62. See Rebentisch 73–77; Pihlainen. Despite his own fascination with bodily copresence (see, e.g., 130–31), Gumbrecht further acknowledges that we are always already in the grip of semiosis within a culture that is “predominantly a meaning culture” (106). Consequently problematizing the distinction between presence and presence effects, he locates their (re)creation not least in digital cinema (140).
that even intentionally decontextualizing and desemanticizing techniques do not altogether escape the processes of representation and configuration they bracket.

In Fischer-Lichte, the issue is foregrounded when she herself cross-references linguistic vocabulary, namely—on the one hand—Walter Benjamin’s early twentieth-century linguistic theory and—on the other—the discipline’s most prominent contribution to the performative turn, Austin’s speech acts. With Benjamin, Fischer-Lichte’s decontextualized things in performance “reveal their ‘intrinsic meaning’” through “a kind of contemplative immersion,” whereby materiality operates as the signified: “Materiality, signifier and signified coincide.”63 As the performative gesture thus becomes visible in its “self-referentiality” (The Transformative Power 141), it specifically corresponds to Austin’s “so-called original performatives,”64 in their quality of what Austin himself would later call the “illocutionary” act, that is, the act performed “in saying something.”65 Crucially, this assertion of self-referentiality conflicts with the antimimetic motif (recurring across the entire field of performance studies) according to which performance is defined precisely through its “oppositional relation” to “[e]xpressivity” (here Fischer-Lichte, The Transformative Power 27). Rather than against all meaning, Fischer-Lichte turns against representation in the (post)modernist sense of a play of signs that brackets reference, or, as I will elaborate, against the interplay of difference and similarity in figuration. Surprisingly, this move allies contemporary performance with its declared ‘arch-enemy,’ the antitheatrical bourgeois theater of the ‘fourth wall.’66

63. Fischer-Lichte, The Transformative Power 141; see Lehmann 96, 104. This effect is not the only one Fischer-Lichte sees operating in performance (see below), but she asserts its primacy both temporally (e.g., 142) and conceptually, declaring semiotic interpretations as “incommensurable” with the performative event itself (16).

64. Fischer-Lichte, Ästhetik 31 (“ursprünglichen Performativa”). The English translation uses Austin’s notion “explicit performatives” (The Transformative Power 24).

65. Austin 99 (italics in original); see Fischer-Lichte, The Transformative Power 32. Along with her Sonderforschungsbereich colleagues from linguistics, Fischer-Lichte would probably insist that the performative cannot actually be identified with the illocutionary, but this means primarily not with the illocutionary dimension of language in general (see Bohle and König 17–18, referencing Searle). Defining the performative through more specific formal criteria (ibid., 18), these recent conceptualizations reverse Austin’s move of generalization (see similarly also Sedgwick, Touching Feeling 4–5) in favor of a definition in which the performative transgresses “the borderline between sign/non-sign” (Krämer and Stahlhut 57). My point is that this notion of the performative implicitly aligns itself with the post-Austinian tradition of emphasizing illocution over perlocution, an emphasis that has become a prime target of deconstructive criticism (see below).

66. See, e.g., Wild on the history of this antitheatricality. Fischer-Lichte affirmatively quotes German director Peter Stein—generally identified with the representational theater despised by the aesthetics of performance—on the “‘miracle’ of theater” as constituted by the actor “not imitating anything, but ‘embod[y]ing’” his role (The Transformative Power 94).
performances also with Austin’s linguistic acts is consistent in this shared anti-
theatricality, but nonetheless ironic, given how Austin (in)famously delineated
his notion of performative speech by excluding aesthetic uses of language as
nonserious or “parasitic”: “a performative utterance will . . . be in a peculiar
way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem,
or spoken in soliloquy” (22, italics in original).

In opposition to this move, semiotic and especially deconstructive
approaches had set out to theorize performance precisely by emphasizing
the productivity of Austin’s “void”—as ‘gap,’ ‘distance,’ etc. (e.g., see Wirth,
“Der Performanzbegriff” 17–25). While Austin’s wording underlines that
the targeted condition of framed speech virtually defines all aesthetic prac-
tices (see also Rebentisch 37), the concept has been specifically developed
for the theater and, beyond its institutional context, through the concept
of theatricality (see Jackson 13; see also Samuel Weber 3–4). Thus, perfor-
manence has been conceptualized as a “foregrounding of the actor-spectator
relationship” and “mode of communicative display” that highlights “the way
in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential
content.” Deconstructive criticism generalized the gap between signifier
and referent as a feature of communication per se by epistemologically tying
it to the conditions of symbolic mediation (or rhetoricity) as such. Leveling
Austin’s distinction between “normal” and “parasitic” speech acts, Derrida
established “iterability”—“the possibility” of being repeated, or “of extrac-
tion and of citational grafting”—as a structural feature of all signification,
which becomes manifest in writing (Derrida, “Signature” 315, 320). Also on
the theater, Derrida underlined in reading Artaud, presence thus remains
necessarily haunted by “representation,” or “the necessity of repetition” (57)
that initiates a play of absence and presence, past, present, and future, figu-
ration and defiguration, similarity and difference. From the angle of this epis-
temological critique, “theater,” as involving both mediation and repetition,
“haunts all performance” (Blau 143, his emphasis)—and operates as “the
repressed of performance” (Diamond, Performance 4) in its phenomenologi-

cal conceptualizations.

67. Carlson, “Resistance” 241, quoting David Marshall; Bauman, Story, Performance and
Event 3; A world 9; Eco (as quoted above). See also Goffman’s theatricality-based model of com-
munication as an exchange of moves “characterized by an orientation to some sort of answer-
ing” and moves “being seen as an answering” (24; see 4).
68. The performative is then defined through its “necessarily ‘aberrant’ relation to its own
reference” (Parker and Sedgwick 3, with reference to de Man).
69. See, e.g., Menke; Franko and Richards 1–2; Blau 143.
70. The “oblique intersection between performativity and . . . performance” (Parker and
Sedgwick 1) thus postulated by deconstructive scholarship has often been conceptualized all
This poststructuralist critique has troubled phenomenological performance theory (see Carlson, *Performance* 149). In Fischer-Lichte’s account, the cultural influence of poststructuralism can be detected in the quotation marks through which she brackets Benjamin’s substantialist language (‘‘intrinsic meaning’’) and in her distancing herself from his theological philosophy of language by grounding the emergence of this meaning in ‘‘the subject’s perception of things in their phenomenal being’’ (*The Transformative Power* 145). In this sense, Fischer-Lichte’s insistence on intrinsic meaning seems to function in the way in which Bert States describes ‘‘The Phenomenological Attitude’’: as an explicit decision for ‘‘methodological solipsism’’ (with Maurice Natanson) in bracketing context, to the effect of creating the conditions of perceptual ‘‘insularity’’ through which aesthetic experience has been characterized.71 Even such bracketing, however, does—as States, significantly, spells out by quoting the semiotician Eco—not erase meanings but merely turns referents into ‘‘extremely ambiguous texts’’ (31). By quoting Benjamin in ‘bracketed’ form, Fischer-Lichte ambiguously inserts herself into his theological narrative about the fall of meaning in modernity. Within the postmodern epistemological field, her theory of performance as a mode of ‘‘magically’’ (also in quotation marks, 98) producing the essence of the thing72 carves out an aesthetic niche for Benjamin’s critique of representational contingency.

More generally, Fischer-Lichte’s antinarrative performances are articulated through the theoretical narratives of philosophical phenomenology (Plessner, Merleau-Ponty) and German critical theory (Benjamin, Adorno), in combination with more recent impulses from cognitive science: the presence generated in performance, she words, highlights ‘‘the nature of man as embodied mind’’ and ‘‘fulfils the civilizing process’s promise of happiness’’ (99) in working toward a ‘‘reenchantment of the world.’’73 Her insistence on ‘‘nature’’ positions Fischer-Lichte’s approach in a distinct tension with the cultural studies–affiliated, deconstructivist performance scholarship of the 1990s, which investigated performance for how it engages sociosymbolic figurations, specifically of gender, sexuality, race, and class. In discussing an experimental

too vaguely, inviting charges that ‘literary’ deconstructivism effaces the specificity of embodied performance (see, e.g., Worthen). However, epistemological, media-theoretical, and aesthetic questions should be kept apart here as well.

71. States 26; Gumbrecht 103 (with Bakhtin’s notion), 101. If only half-explicitly, Gumbrecht ultimately grounds his presence effects in interpretation (see Claude Haas).

72. In ‘‘Diskurse,’’ Fischer-Lichte explains her use of the notion of magic by asserting that the experience in question can be explained rationally after the fact, but at first presents a radical loss of control (‘‘Erfahrung von Unverfügbarkeit’’ 25). For the pervasiveness of the topos, see also Krämer and Stahlhut (41) and Gumbrecht’s reference to the Catholic Eucharist (29).

73. 168, 181. See, similarly, Krämer and Stahlhut 58, and Gumbrecht xv.
1996 Berlin production (Frank Castorf’s *The Devil’s General*), for example, Fischer-Lichte argues, with indicative rhetorical forcefulness, that the cross-casting of the protagonist produced an “irrevocable divergence between the undeniably female body and the unmistakably male behavior” of the performer, “unmistakably” pointing to her (female) “bodily being-in-the-world” (88). As Fischer-Lichte also insists, this effect had “nothing to do with Brecht’s alienation effect” (213). Like Fischer-Lichte’s performer, Brecht’s actor breaks open the diegetic cosmos of bourgeois theater by not allowing himself “to be wholly transformed into the character played” at any moment (*A Short Organon* 193–94). His epic style, however, is designed to expose the theatricality of theater and thereby render legible the (nonnatural) signs of ideological narrative.74 Performance scholarship of the 1990s variously built on Brecht’s suggestion that cross-casting allows to highlight the “social gest” (*Gestus*), which shapes bodily and facial expressions: “played by somebody of the opposite sex the gender of the character will be more clearly brought out.”75 As the presentation of a ‘copy’ makes the “original” visible as “‘figure,’” the “serious play of drag” in Fischer-Lichte’s example would thus not present the actor’s physicality but theatricalize the historical masculinity of the general.76

From the angle of cultural studies–inflected approaches, Fischer-Lichte’s insistence on ‘unmistakable’ physicality can thus pose the question whether the return of phenomenology in the 2000s amounts to a political backlash. As States suggested early on, phenomenology presents an “alternative to the radical skepticism of deconstruction and postmodernism” (27), and the quest for such alternatives has certainly found resonance in postmillennium academic culture. However, the political allegiances of these new phenomenologies are diverse, ranging from an explicit move beyond radical politics (e.g., in Gumbrecht) to the attempt precisely of finding new epistemological foundations for large-scale leftist projects.77 Recent work in feminist phenomenology has also pondered nonessentializing ways of responding to the ‘given’ experience of gendered physicalities (e.g., Stoller), and performance scholars such as Eve K. Sedgwick and Jill Dolan have undertaken the methodological shift toward phenomenology without abandoning their explicitly antiheteronormative and

74. See *A Short Organon* 194; “The Street Scene” 122 and, e.g., Barthes, “Diderot” 74.
75. *A Short Organon* 197–98 (my translation; see German edition 88); see Diamond, *Unmaking* viii.
77. Thus, e.g., Benjamin Robinson, one of Gumbrecht’s own students. Robinson, notably, works not with the concept of a self-referential performative but with that of the “index”—as a “sign based on presence” (Robinson 60–61) and a “direct physical connection” (Peirce 183) that points to something other than itself.
radically democratic politics.\textsuperscript{78} While my reading has demonstrated that I remain unconvinced of the epistemological proposals of exclusively phenomenological paradigms, I take these contrary political charges as an invitation to pursue with critical curiosity how precisely the aesthetics of presence—along with the no less politically versatile aesthetics of theatricality\textsuperscript{79”—functions in individual texts.

First, however, I need to spell out the epistemological layer of my own concept of narrative performance more fully. A final glance at Fischer-Lichte’s self-demarcation from 1990s performance theory, specifically Judith Butler’s influential approach, guides me toward doing so. In Fischer-Lichte’s own argument, the victory of nature in performance is not the victory of hegemonic gender regimes, either, but that of aesthetic alterity as, she claims, a more radical difference from ideology. In her reading of Butler’s early article “Performative Acts,” Fischer-Lichte suggests that Butler’s (everyday as well as aesthetic) performances function as “the staging of a given text” circumscribed by “given stage descriptions,”\textsuperscript{80} whereas her own aesthetic performances in their singularity (and thus unscripted nature) “significantly” alter rather than merely repeating [sic] “historical pattern” (28). Notably, Fischer-Lichte’s own wording implies that even intentionally unscripted performative acts operating in the bracketed sphere of aesthetic experience do not actually escape social script (in the broader sense) or cultural narrative. However, she rhetorically disavows the significance of citation (or, in the register of bodily performance: mimesis) with the—nonsensical—opposition of ‘repetition vs. unscripted alteration’.

\textsuperscript{78} Sedgwick, \textit{Touching Feeling} 3; Dolan, \textit{Utopia} (explicitly, e.g.) 21. Like Fischer-Lichte, Sedgwick also turns away from language here, if not quite as radically. Dolan, who focuses on aesthetics (and whom I engage in more detail in subsequent chapters), does not distance her model from Brecht in the way Fischer-Lichte does (see 7). Given such differences, we may wonder whether Fischer-Lichte’s theory reflects a specifically German articulation of performance theory, a question that Geoffrey Winthrop-Young has asked with respect to German media theory and \textit{Kulturwissenschaft} (vs. Anglo-American cultural studies) more generally. While insisting on the transnational dimensions of knowledge production as well as the heterogeneity of German academia, I agree that hegemonic approaches within German \textit{Kultur-} and \textit{Medienwissenschaften} have been shaped by theoretical narratives underlining the forces of homogeneity and heteronomy, in opposition to Anglo-American cultural studies with their interest in social differences and the agency of audiences (see Winthrop-Young 118, 122).

\textsuperscript{79} Already Barthes critically underlined that the ‘grand narrative’ of Brecht’s Marxist (capital H) ‘History’ shapes the cultural work of his Gestus (“Diderot” 73), suggesting that it is “the Law of the Party which cuts out the epic scene” (77). In this sense, the only respective difference between the paradigms of presence and theatricality is that the implicit narrativity of modernist performance is acknowledged more openly by the latter.

\textsuperscript{80} Ästhetik 39. The English translation (see 28) is imprecise here. Butler’s own wording is that “the gendered body . . . enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (277).
and thus forestalls investigations into how exactly sociosymbolic scripts in the broader sense also coconstitute aesthetic performance. As readers of Butler know, Fischer-Lichte’s possibilities of significant alteration—or the rewriting of cultural scripts—are at the center of her interest as well. In Butler, however, this interest is combined with an interest in how performance functions as, in Richard Schechner’s words, “restored behavior”: “[N]ever for the first time” (36–37), it always involves “mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model” (Carlson, Performance 5). Rather than functioning just self-referentially (or even self-reflexively), theatricalized performance thus attains its significance by virtue of how it repeats, or restages, its models. Tracing these restagings, Butler outlined the twofold role of performance in the making as well as unmaking specifically of gender identities: On the one hand, it constitutes gender through “the repeated stylization of the body” congealing “over time to produce the appearance of substance” (Gender Trouble 33); on the other hand, it implies the chance of critically replaying the figures of gender.

After Gender Trouble had been misunderstood as advocating a “volitional” model of gender performance (e.g., see Rothenberg and Valente), Bodies That Matter supplemented the model of bodily drag with that of linguistic reiteration and potential resignification. Adding another minichapter to the history of (even deconstructivist) antitheatricality, Butler unfortunately worded this reorientation as a turn against theatricality. But while this demarcation was unnecessary, there is, conversely, no need to reject the linguistic model for the analysis of theater or other visual arts, as long as we proceed to specify media-

81. In this context, see also Fischer-Lichte’s discussion of a second (and, in her account, in fact secondary) mode of signification in performance, in addition to the process of ‘dese- manticization’ discussed above. Precisely the isolated phenomena perceived in their material- ity, this argument runs, “trigger a wealth of associations” in the spectator—associations that “interweave unique subjective experiences with intersubjectively valid cultural codes” (The Transformative Power 140, 143). Insisting on aesthetic alterity, however, Fischer-Lichte proceeds to downplay the role of these codes (see, e.g., 250). While her first mode of (de)signification in performance generates (natural) identity, the second one thus in effect generates primarily difference from cultural narratives—or ‘ideology’ (see, e.g., 69)—at the expense of similarity.

82. See Reinelt, “Politics of Discourse,” 206. Self-reflexivity is to be distinguished from self-referentiality. Whereas the latter concept arrests the play of signification, the former focuses attention on the process of representation (see, in different words, but to similar effect: Wirth, “Der Performanzbegriff” 27). However, even self-reflexivity has, in some deconstructiv- ist scholarship, been developed as a gesture of quasi-‘pure,’ paradoxically nontheatrical theatricality (“the speech act speaks of nothing but itself”). For a critique of the flight from theatricality implicit in these totalizing moves, see Geulen (“Erziehungsakte”).

83. As “a reiteration of a norm” rather than “a singular ‘act’ (Bodies 283), the performative “is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated” (12; see—critically—Dolan, “Geographies” 420; Jackson 189).
specific forms of signification on the next level of analysis. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler specified how the social ‘text’ is given to, and can nonetheless be rewritten by, the performing subject, by developing Austin’s distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. The concept of the illocutionary, Butler argues here, develops “a fantasy of sovereign action” (17).\(^8^4\) As I suggested above, Fischer-Lichte’s self-referential performative works in this way: its “magical” short-circuiting of signifier, signified, and referent implies a ‘monarchical,’ or theological, model of signification in which the performative directly “enacts domination,” at the expense of imaginative room for (be it the artist’s or the audience’s) critical agency.\(^8^5\) In contrast, the perlocutionary act, the temporality of which is not exhausted by a simple present tense, “merely leads to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself” (*Excitable Speech* 3; see 9). Thus, the perlocutionary can be used as a model for theorizing the ways in which acts of (for Butler, particularly social) script writing themselves are vulnerable to failure and open for (aesthetic and social) reinscription. The agency of rescripting thus emerges, “within a linguistic field of enabling constraints” (16), as the agency in citing with a difference.

With respect to the aesthetic works of literature (and specifically the interpellative act of apostrophe as a mode of literary ‘talk’), Kacandes has introduced an analogous distinction between the, as she words, “limit case” of the (illocutionary) “literary performative” that does not leave the reader any choice (‘you are reading this sentence’) and the reader’s overall deliberate performance of the text’s inscribed ‘you,’ which makes visible her agency as an active participant in the exchange with a (nonsovereign) text (183–84; see 3–4). For the theater itself, Elin Diamond (implicitly) answers Fischer-Lichte’s concerns by describing aesthetic performance as “the site in which . . . the ‘concealed or dissimulated conventions’ of which acts are mere repetitions might be investigated and reimagined” precisely because “performativity materializes in concentrated form” here.\(^8^6\) In her *Unmaking Mimesis*, Diamond explicitly redevelops the latter notion—otherwise often shunned in deconstructive

\(^8^4\) The illocutionary model, Butler spells out, adequately captures actual linguistic processes only under circumscribed institutional conditions—see Austin’s example of the judge (17). This constitutes a pragmatic version of the poststructuralist critique of the illocutionary act (see, e.g., Cohen; Campe; de Man).

\(^8^5\) 21, 18, italics in original. If, as Fischer-Lichte herself cautions with respect to Benjamin, God no longer guarantees such short-circuiting, the theorist, performer, or spectator must usurp his role—but she effaces her own interpretative act in identifying, e.g., nature as the ultimate referent of a performance. A more definite championing of (metaphorically primarily divine and monarchical) heteronomy is developed by Sybille Krämer—one of Fischer-Lichte’s colleagues in the *Sonderforschungsbereich*—in the 2008 *Medium Bote Übertragung*.

CHAPTER I

Performance theory as well—for this context. Conceptualizing (Aristotelian) mimesis as an interplay of difference and similarity in performance, Diamond associates this interplay with both the Brechtian “gestus,” which imitates “only so much as gives a picture” (ii; Brecht, “The Street Scene” 123), and with Luce Irigaray’s feminist mimicry as that “what Plato most dreaded, impersonation” (v). For my project of differentiating aesthetic techniques, the plurality of theatricalizing forms indicated here is crucial: while in Brecht’s sober worlds, the process of differential repetition—or also, with José Esteban Muñoz’s work on minority performance, disidentification—has been developed as a form of presentational restraint, advocates of camp and queer theory have located the critical potential precisely in “unnatural, . . . affectedly dramatic” behavior or presentational excess and playfulness.87

Furthermore, techniques of decontextualization come into play here as well. Attesting to their shared antinarrative bent, deconstructive performance theories have underlined the motif as prominently as their phenomenological counterparts. If “citational grafting” is implied in every sign (Derrida, “Signature” 320), to be sure, it would seem that signification generally proceeds through the double move of “decontextualization and recontextualization of discourse” (Bauman, A World 9). However, deconstruction-affiliated scholarship has rhetorically privileged the former of these moves, describing the sign through its “force of breaking with its context” (Derrida, “Signature” 317) and variously emphasizing the moment of “radical rupture,” the performative’s affinity with “failure” or (in analogy to Fischer-Lichte) “the singularity of the theatrical event,”88 as well as the ‘modernist’ Brecht who emphasized cutting (e.g., Dialoge 100), and with whom narrative itself can be conceptualized as a technique of rupture (Brandstetter, Bild-Sprung 120).89

Butler’s Excitable Speech challenges this one-sided emphasis on the break with an argument for the relative stability of meanings by supplementing Derrida’s theory of language with Pierre Bourdieu’s accounts of how social force operates in language. Although Butler acknowledges Derrida’s insistence on rupture as a precondition for theorizing the “insurrectionary ‘force’” of counterhegemonic speech acts, which is foreclosed by Bourdieu’s conceptualization of performativ force as “the effect” of “established . . . authority” (141–42),

87. The quote is from Case, “The Emperor’s New Clothes” 187 (citing The American Heritage Dictionary); see also Carlson, “Resistance.”
88. Felman 100, 44; Samuel Weber 7 (italics in original); see also (e.g.) 323.
89. Of course, there is another Brecht who, to the dismay of his later twentieth-century readers, sided with Aristotle in privileging plot as the “soul of drama,” over the ‘excess’ of spectacle and the actor’s presence (A Short Organon 183; see, e.g., Diamond, Unmaking Mimesis 45; Puchner 156).
she criticizes Derrida for overemphasizing the arbitrary character of the sign vis-à-vis the force of established tropes and topoi. Historically ‘sedimented’ through repeated use (148), these meanings are referenced in the act of performative citation and may significantly inflect even intentionally highly aberrant uses. Moving beyond the fetishized dichotomy between ‘expression’ and ‘nonexpressive’ performance, Butler’s project of thinking “the logic of iterability as a social logic” (150) thus charts the complexity of resignification as a process that proceeds through the intertwined forces of narrative and performance. However, even Butler entangles herself in the dominant mappings of performance against representation and narrative, and she fails to take this conceptualization all the way. This is indicated by the ways in which the body—surprisingly, in the context of Butler’s earlier work, but reminiscent of Fischer-Lichte—returns in Excitable Speech as a figure of otherness vis-à-vis sociosymbolic inscription. To avoid misunderstandings, the renewed emphasis on the body as such would be welcome news if it helped correct the often criticized deconstructive tendency to dissolve this body into textual play.90 When Butler, however, draws on Shoshana Felman to describe the nonsovereign nature of the speech act through the “body” as “a sign of unknowingness” (Excitable Speech 10; see Felman 67) and charges Bourdieu with failing to understand how “what is bodily in speech resists” (142), she reinvokes the body’s traditionally oppositional relationship with “language” and conceptualizes the “subversive, and self-subversive, potential of the performative” through the “incongruous,” if simultaneously “indissoluble” relationship between the two (Felman 5, 43; see Butler, Excitable Speech 10, 155).

Extending Butler’s own critique of the illocutionary, I have argued elsewhere that this move points to the specters of sovereignty in Butler’s conception of language (Szenarien). To summarize this argument, Butler’s account of the perlocutionary as the nonsovereign dimension of language advocates, in Foucault’s famous words, for cutting off “the head of the king” in the realm of theory (The History of Sexuality I 89), but in the tradition of avant-garde performance theory, her contribution remains stuck in 1789/1792. Still struggling with a ‘monarchical’ imaginary of language, Butler imagines the performative act as a (metaphorically extralinguistic) gesture of radical insurrection, thus reinscribing precisely the fantasy of a revolutionary break that she herself problematizes in Derrida’s account of dehistoricized linguistic play.91 Instead, I argue for fully conceptualizing performativity as a ‘democratic’ process of

90. See, e.g., Jackson 216, also 107; Case, The Domain Matrix 14–17. However, Butler’s own use of the model of linguistic reiteration did not actually do so in previous argumentative contexts, either.

91. A similar critique of Butler has been developed by Lois McNay.
(linguistic or other) signification, in which power is negotiated at the dynamic intersection of multiple, dispersed vectors of force (see Foucault, *History of Sexuality* I 92–95), or (with Bakhtin) in the “play” of “heteroglot social opinion” (277). In this process, context—or sociosymbolic narrative—not only operates as a restraining force (as outlined by Butler) but also contributes to the critical potential of performance itself in the move of productive reconfiguration. For example, Butler cites Rosa Parks’s insurrectionary act of “laying claim” to a right not guaranteed to her “by any of the segregationist conventions of the South” (*Excitable Speech*, 147). This does not mean, however, that Parks did so with “no recourse to a prior authorization” at all (158). Rather than fueled just by the mythical exhaustion of her body (a trope that, I should clarify, is not cited in *Excitable Speech*), Parks’s act of resistance drew on alternative human rights narratives: despite the latter’s dominantly exclusive articulations throughout modernity, they also provided a vision of universalized equality. With respect to this interplay of conflicting narratives—or, with Bakhtin again, the ways in which any utterance is always already entangled in a web of “points of view” (276)—performance is a mode of (variously more or less) critical refiguration rather than simply a break with available figures of sociosymbolic articulation. Further developing Butler’s own gestures into the same direction (see, e.g., 40), I thus conceptualize narrative performance on the most fundamental level as this intertwining of break and configuration always already inherent in signification, which develops a range of divergent effects in complexly interwoven gestures of dissent and affirmation.

As a point about figuration, this notion of narrative performance can be supported with a glance at the theory of metaphor. Based on its structuralist conceptualization as the vertical domain of discourse (see Jacobson), metaphor has been theorized as an antinarrative performative, “a semiotic principle of rupture,” which suspends reference and breaks up coherence (thus Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema* 155) or, for the context of literature, poietic “event” (*Ereignis*), which deviates from the text’s conceptualization pattern and thereby functions as an interruptive distanciation mechanism, if not a “terrorist figure” (Biebuyck, *Die poietische Metapher* 187, 189, 235). If this performative act, however, in decontextualizing always also recontextualizes and, in

92. See Butler’s own, more complex later account in *Undoing Gender* 224.
93. “I would have to know for once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen of Montgomery, Alabama” (Parks, in a 1956 radio interview with Sydney Rogers, quoted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa_Parks; accessed 07/07/09). Butler’s *Precarious Life* (see chapters IV and VI) suggests that she would herself concede to this reevaluation of modern concepts of equality.
94. See, e.g., Carole Anne Tyler’s *Female Impersonation* on how critical restagings of gender in subcultural contexts are often fueled by hegemonic significations of race and class.
citing cultural narratives, produces new ones in the given context of articulation itself,95 the ‘violent’ gestures of metaphor can instead be conceptualized as integral elements of narrative understood as a (constitutively theatrical) form not restricted to a ‘horizontal’ domain of linear plot unfolding, but always developed through a play of configuration including contrast, analogy, and similarity.96

A concluding glance at Butler’s 2005 *Giving an Account of Oneself* returns me to the project of specifying this general process in terms of aesthetics. In response to the broader comeback of narrative in the 2000s, Butler now explicitly addresses the narrative dimension of self-constitution, but her conceptual frame and argumentative rhetoric still remain marked by insistence on the limits of narrativization and the performance-vs.-narrative dichotomy (see, e.g., 63, 66). I completely agree with the message of Butler’s theoretical story in *Giving an Account*: holding on to a moderate version of the poststructuralist ethics of alterity, she argues against violent demands “for self-identity or . . . complete coherence” (42) as “a fantasy of impossible mastery” (65). However, the rich sewing kit of narratology allows for retelling this story as a story about different kinds of narration. As Butler points out, I cannot claim authority over and authorship for all of my actions (see 79), but that does not mean that I cannot function as a narrator. Without any doubt pathetically unreliable at moments, I am, once I concede this possibility, able to participate in an intersubjective, democratic process of narrative configuration. Rather than remaining altogether “fabulous” in the sense of a complete foreclosure of reference, my non-“final” (= nonsovereign) account can be (evaluated by others as) more or less “adequate” to my communicative purpose,97 and rather than the “moment of failure in every narrative effort to give an account of myself” (79), the first-person pronoun designates, as indicated above with Booth and Eco, simply one technique of foregrounding theatricality within narrative—a moment in which “the seamlessness of the story” visibly yields to the complexity of productive rearticulation enabled by “moments of interruption” (64). Like Kacandes’s second-person pronoun, and the aesthetics of narrative performance more generally, this moment marks a chance or, from an alternative angle, the necessity of rethinking narrative authority in contemporary culture. As I have suggested, it rarely effects the simple undoing of such authority; instead, the various techniques outlined here enable, as I will

95. Biebuyck’s more recent work has moved toward integrating tropes into narrative through the (still somewhat hesitant) category of the “paranarrative” (“Figurativeness”).
96. On the concept of narrative configuration, specifically with respect to intertextual frames (or topoi), see Pier.
97. 37 (with Keenan), 67: Butler all too quickly parallelizes ‘final’ and ‘adequate.’
spell out in detail, a range of nonsovereign and more or less egalitarian forms
of (partial, limited, negotiable) authority in representation.

The Aesthetics of Narrative Performance at ‘Location Germany’

In this study, I unfold this turn-of-the-twenty-first-century aesthetics of
narrative performance through a case study of contemporary German cul-
ture. Given my insistence on the transnational dimensions of aesthetic pro-
duction, this national delineation may seem counterintuitive. However, the
underlying methodological claim is that the national and the transnational
are not to be positioned in opposition to one another. Rather, the constitu-
tion of national imaginaries, identities, and institutions has always been an
effect of transcultural flows, even more so at the “interlocking contours of
nation, transnation and postnation” in today’s self-consciously globalized age
(Adelson, The Turkish Turn 2). For example, in analyzing how Godard’s films,
North American performance theory, and practices of African storytelling
are adapted in literary texts, films, and theater productions created, read, and
watched in contemporary Germany, I am pursuing an essentially compara-
tive or, better, transnational project. At the same time, localizing my endeavor
is methodologically crucial as well. Aesthetic productions attain their spe-
cific contours—their thematic preoccupations and concrete forms, modes of
address and cultural effects—in their sociopolitical, linguistic, discursive, and
institutional contexts of production and reception. In this sense, I assert that
aesthetic theory needs to incorporate the cultural embeddedness of its objects:
a ‘thick’ aesthetic description can be developed in a (political) context only.98
Framing the project in geopolitical terms thus enables me to untangle the
cultural work accomplished by aesthetic practices of narrative performance
against the background of specific memory cultures and claims to collective
identification—cultures and claims that, again, attest to the indelible interar-
ticulation of the national and the transnational.

The contemporary culture of the so-called Berlin Republic presents an
intriguingly rich, as well as highly complex, reservoir for this project. The

98. Recent scholarship has underlined that we should not fuse aesthetics and politics all
too quickly. I agree that form is not “inherently” ideological in the sense that a formal feature
could be short-circuited with a particular function or meaning (Carroll xv; as, importantly,
acknowledged also by earlier, explicitly ‘ideological’ criticism, e.g., Lanser, Fictions of Author-
ity 23). However, form is not ‘nonideological,’ either. In configuration-dependent and flexible
ways to be disentangled by detailed analysis, it is always coshaped by, as well as coshapes, the
sociopolitical context of its emergence.
The desire to reassess collective memories and identities at the turn of the twenty-first century as such won particular urgency in a context in which the transition from the Cold War into today’s age of global insecurity included the task of overcoming forty years of split political and sociocultural development, as well as the lingering legacy of a preceding national history that, in 1945, for many seemed to have undone the possibility of any positive collective identity. In the 1990s, ongoing debates about the significance of the Holocaust for Germany’s political memory and the reconstitution of national identity vis-à-vis continued socioeconomic inequalities between East and West, furthermore, met with reassessments of postwar labor immigration, especially from Turkey. Simultaneously, the reform of the welfare state started to unravel the relative social security with which not only the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR) but also the West German island of postwar European ‘social market economy’ had provided its citizens, and the formation of the European Union (EU) began to supersede national sovereignty and respective political identifications.

Between the rise of racist hate crimes after unification, ongoing conflicts about Turkey’s EU membership, and the attacks of September 11, 2001, the country’s political representatives and majority citizens have, in particular, struggled to face postnational realities of cultural diversity. Prevailing definitions of national belonging in ethnic, implicitly racialized ways had long denied these realities, as indicated by the established political credo that Germany was ‘not a country of immigration’ and the ius sanguinis–based citizenship law responsible for the fact that a majority of Germany’s third-generation descendants of labor immigrants continued to be foreigners. At the turn of the
twenty-first century, the Social Democrat–Green Party government elected in 1998 eventually challenged this state of affairs. Almost as soon as the revised citizenship legislation and the increasing sociocultural visibility of Germans of color began to open up a space for new imaginations of identity and belonging (see Adelson, The Turkish Turn 14), however, September 11 and the following wars also fortified a “climate of ethnic tribalism and fetishization of cultural difference” (Göktürk, “Strangers” 121). The anti-Islamisms accompanying the War on Terror provided transnational contexts for a refashioning of the racialized discourses of national identity that had dominated twentieth-century German culture since their decisive formation in the country’s—short but gruesomely violent—colonial period. Between these contrasting trends, questions of race and cultural identity mark a particularly highly charged socio-symbolic terrain in contemporary German society. Compared to the United States of the Bush administration years, issues of gender and sexuality have as such been less publicly contested, although they have taken center stage in arguments about cultural and religious difference (e.g., in headscarf debates), as well as shaped ongoing reforms of same-sex partnership and transgender rights legislation.

My study situates itself at these crossroads. In my choice of texts, I emphasize cultures of migration and transnational exchanges in an increasingly connected, if English-language–dominated, world of cultural production. Mapping contemporary German culture—or contemporary culture at ‘location Germany,’ as we can reword with a catchphrase from economics (see Halle, “German Film”—requires acknowledging that twenty-first-century German literary bestseller lists feature a majority of translated titles (see Gerstenberger and Herminghouse 2), that film production can hardly be discussed in national categories any longer, and that international traffic has become increasingly constitutive also of the comparatively protected world of heavily state-subsidized art theater, beyond its traditionally open borders within the German-language realm (that is, with Austria and Switzerland). At the same time, German feuilletons not only continue to count the market shares of ‘German’ films in precisely these national terms but have also been filled with new assertions of cultural identity in the above-specified tradition of the Kulturnation. Tracing transatlantic and inner-European exchanges of themes, scripts, tropes, and audiences as well as local clusterings, my study strives to account for the complexities of this—to use the trendy shortcut once—‘glocalized’ configuration (see Taberner, German Literature xxii).

The following chapters map the aesthetics of narrative performance in contemporary culture through close readings of individual texts and productions. The procedure reflects my insistence on context also with respect to the
aesthetic work as the articulation context of a specific formal feature. Rather than a comprehensive typology of techniques (thus, e.g., Nüning and Sommer 114), I unfold exemplary configurations as they are developed in individual production and reception processes. In doing so, however, I am guided by two—intersecting—larger hypotheses. On the one hand, I postulate that my initial distinction between two clusters of techniques, those of presence-oriented vs. theatricalized narrative, is useful also in mapping cultural trends. Thus, I argue that the theatricality-affiliated (‘postmodern’) culture of the 1990s is superseded by the resurgence of presence-oriented forms in the 2000s. On the other hand, I show that this diagnosis has to be differentiated with respect to the trajectories of specific media cultures. In chapters II through IV, I therefore focus individually on the three media under discussion: film, literature, and theater. In doing so, I also acknowledge the significance of media-specific arguments in the theoretical discourses outlined so far, including traditional literary narratology as well as the nontraditional field of performance studies shaped by anxieties about its disciplinary status (see Jackson 30–34). While taking media-specificity arguments seriously, however, my readings in these chapters also move beyond them. As indicated by the high number of intermedia productions and adaptations in the contemporary cultural landscape, the aesthetics of narrative performance receives its concrete contours prominently in the intermedia transfer of concepts and techniques. Pursuing those and, more generally, establishing “analogues for techniques and effects” (Rabinowitz, “They Shoot Tigers” 181) of narrative performance in literature, film, and theater, the close readings undertaken in chapters II through IV problematize generalized media distinctions, without thereby falling prey to “medium blindness” (Ryan, “Introduction,” 34). Instead, my discussion develops a smaller-scale account of how exactly the aesthetics of narrative performance can be conceptualized for individual media contexts.

In chapter II, I begin with film as the most straightforward case to make. In the outlined theoretical encounters between narrative and performance, film has generally been located on a middle ground: as a “mixed form” combining elements of the literary art of time with the spatiality of visual media, it has often been subsumed under the ‘nonverbal,’ ‘mimetic,’ or ‘performative’ forms contrasted with narrative but has simultaneously been more broadly acknowledged as a narrative form in its own right than theater and performance. This discursive in-between location does not mean that the con-

99. Thus Stanzel, Theorie 156 (not in the English translation).
100. For example, Chatman, Story and Discourse 25. In part, this difference in emphasis reflects also on film’s—and film scholarship’s—more substantial association with the realm of the popular, in that the latter notion has often been used almost synonymously with ‘narrative’
ceptual dramas discussed in the previous sections have been absent from film theory. More substantially so than in narratology or performance studies, however, they have been identified as such early on, and the charged intersection of narrative and performance became a major locus of film-theoretical conceptualization. These discussions on how ‘spectacle’ and the aesthetics of ‘monstration’ work in classical vs. pre- and postclassical cinema (the early ‘cinema of attractions’ and that of the digital age), in various genres (comedy, musical, melodrama) as well as avant-garde films have provided us with a significant body of work specifying different aspects, degrees, and forms of narrative and performance, and detailing how narrative performance proceeds through the “large and complex variety of communicating devices” that constitute narration in the complex audiovisual medium of film, including (on and offscreen) music and voices as well as lighting, color, camera, and the use of editing (Chatman, Coming to Terms 134; see 135). In chapter II, I begin my own project of aesthetic specification by drawing on some of this conceptual work and translating it into the context of film ‘made in Germany’ around 2000.

My second reason for beginning with film is that the postulated overall cultural dominance of theatricality paradigms in the 1990s (and around the turn of the twenty-first century still) gains its clearest contours here. At that moment, not only, as in previous decades, politically and aesthetically avant-garde film but also popular cinema develops a multifaceted aesthetics of theatricality, in which gestures of presentification are not entirely absent but more clearly framed by—and thus subordinated to—techniques of theatricality than

in film-theoretical discussions. To be sure, this identification becomes highly precarious upon closer investigation.

101. Metz set out to deconstruct the “great argument of the 'breakdown of narrativity’” and "blindly antinarrative myth" in avant-garde-affiliated cinema in his Film Language (185, 188).

102. See various contributions by Mulvey; Gunning; Geoff King; Crafton; Elsaesser and more; for details see below: The most highly charged theoretical fault line in film studies separates cognitive approaches from the semiotics-affiliated, ideology-critical psychoanalytical framework of ‘classical’ film theory since the 1970s. Dominantly pronarrative, cognitive film scholars have supplemented previously dominant discussions of the subversive character of film spectacle and attractions with accounts of their often smooth integration into film narrative. From a more critical angle, however, this very point has also been made by various contributions to the study of ideology in film. More generally, the fierce rhetoric of theoretical distancing employed by some cognitive film scholars (e.g., Carroll xviii; Gregory Currie xiv) is only partially indicative of significant conceptual shifts (especially regarding the status of ideology, the unconscious, and difference); partially, it hides unexpected overlap. For example, Carroll’s media-ontological argument about movie images being recognized through “reflex” rather than “reading” (83) recasts 1970s insistences on the passivity of the spectator, which have otherwise been forcefully criticized by cognitive scholarship (e.g., Bordwell, Narration 29–47; Smith, “Film Spectatorship”).
in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century literature or theater. I explain this particularly clear-cut development through the confluence of intermedially influential theatricality paradigms with a media-specific trajectory, namely, the ways in which cinematic production, in the cultural moment of postmodernism, responded to the dominance of (relatively) invisible narration in popular cinema throughout much of the twentieth century. As I associate the film aesthetics to be outlined in chapter II with postmodernism, I have to underline, however, that the films to be discussed here—Kutluğ Ataman’s Turkish-German queer drama *Lola and Billy the Kid* (1999), Leander Haußmann’s GDR comedy *Sonnenallee* (Sun Alley, 1999) and Wolfgang Becker’s internationally acclaimed counterpiece *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003)—are more interested in the (playful) making than in the deconstructive unmaking of history. Programmatically combining theatricalization with narrative integration, they show that a theatricalized aesthetics does not equal the prioritizing of self-reflexivity over other forms of sense-making often associated with postmodern culture. Instead, I demonstrate how these techniques of narrative performance redevelop—rather than merely contest—narrative authority in enabling the process of (more or less critical) reconfiguration conceptualized above. Crucially, their divergent effects depend on the specific combination and contextual deployment of various forms of theatrical narration in the individual films, ranging from the genre aesthetics of melodrama and comedy to montage, voice-over, and metalepsis.

While film has been theorized as a ‘mixed’ medium in itself, the aesthetics of narrative performance can be developed for the medium of literature by looking at its programmatically intermedial affiliations in the contemporary age. Chapter III begins with the figuration of the so-called new pop literature—new as opposed to its avant-garde–affiliated predecessors in the 1960s—which arguably dominated the German literary scene, and certainly its representation in the feuilletons, around 2000. (Although not all of the texts discussed in this chapter have been classified as pop ‘proper,’ I argue that they can be located in its poetological vicinity.) The controversies around these texts underscore the degree to which the traditional medium of literature has been the focus of postunification demands for the creation of collective identity in the *Kulturnation*. Generally described as ‘performative,’ the new pop develops its challenge to dominant concepts of ‘high’ literature—and authoritative narrative—specifically through a radical development of scenic narration, or techniques of presence, as indicated by its diary formats, its poetic affiliations with new media aesthetics, photography, hip-hop, and visual performance, and its variously backgrounded or disoriented narrators. Thus, media-specific trajectories compete—rather than ally themselves—with
the overall prominence of theatricality paradigms across the larger cultural landscape of the 1990s here. However, the influence of these theatricality paradigms is visible in the ways in which the analyzed texts simultaneously explore techniques of self-reflexivity and epic distancing, resulting in intricate configurations of im/mediated intensity. Poetologically detailing these configurations, I show how Rainald Goetz’s Internet diary *Abfall für Alle* (Trash for all, 1999), Feridun Zaimoğlu’s *Kanak Sprak* (Kanak Speech 1995), Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* (Strange Stars Are Staring to Earth, 2003) and Juli Zeh’s successful debut *Adler und Engel* (*Eagles and Angels*, 1999) each develop their own distinct challenges to hegemonic demands for authoritative literary identity constitution and the memory culture of postunification Germany.

Equipped with more state funding than its international counterparts, German art theater overall insisted on its distance from the—variously: ‘popular’ and ‘literary’—worlds of narrative at the turn of the twenty-first century. Because of this strength of avant-garde-inflected, also primarily presence-based conceptualizations of performance, chapter IV begins at the (transnational and popular) margins of the contemporary theater scene, where an interplay of presence- and theatricality-affiliated forms has been variously developed in programmatically narrative form. My readings of “This is not about sadness,” a script fragment by Nigerian German, London-based performance artist Olumide Popoola, and of a (primarily commercial) Berlin adaptation of Doug Wright’s and Moisés Kaufman’s 2003 Broadway success *I Am My Own Wife* about an East German transvestite and Secret Service informant develop the analysis of such presence-theatricality interplay in the theater context. Specifically, I discuss how Popoola’s African diaspora-inflected techniques of onstage narration and call and response productively interrogate notions of (theatrical and social) community. For the sake of an all-too-facile audience community experience, in contrast, the transatlantic move of *I Am My Own Wife* displaces Wright’s and Kaufman’s empathy-based investigation of authority in autobiographical performance with a presentified queer spectacle of transvestism. Moving on to the center of radical German theater experimentation, the second part of chapter IV then traces how the project of narrative explicitly resurfaces in René Pollesch’s 2003–4 *Zeltsaga* (*Tentsaga*) tetralogy, in response to the discontents having developed in Pollesch’s own antinarrative, insistently decontextualizing aesthetics. At the intersection of post-Brechtian critique and the serial poetics of Brazilian telenovelas, the tetralogy explores new forms of egalitarian world-making with its highly original techniques of affective commentary, epic mimesis, and phenomenological figuration.
As chapters II through IV thus unfold various techniques of narrative performance through a focus on individual media, they also concentrate on a particular cultural moment in that they explore dominant forms around the year 2000. In chapters V and VI, finally, I discuss the emergence of new trends since then. The starting point of this investigation is the claim—variously articulated by cultural critics—that September 11, 2001, marked a decisive break in the cultural landscape, bringing the end of pleasure-oriented pop culture, flamboyant cinematic comedy, and the deconstructive splatter aesthetics of avant-garde theater, in favor of a return to 'narrative,' morality, religion, and political commitment in the sphere of art (see, e.g., McBride 86). As indicated by the fuzziness of my timeline—a number of works discussed in chapters II to IV were produced after September 11—I qualify this claim as too simple. In part, the critics’ rhetoric of rupture suggests that September 11 has been used as a topos in ongoing debates about politics, ethics, and aesthetics, whose pre–September 11 enactments included discussions about the end of postmodernism as early as in the 1990s. Nonetheless, I argue that the aesthetic forms discussed in chapters V and VI do in fact signal shifts in the cultural landscape, even if these are in some respects more appropriately labeled as shifts from the episteme and aesthetics of the 1990s to that of the 2000s. Importantly, these shifts cannot be summarized as a move from performance to narrative; rather, they foreground different techniques of narrative performance.

While chapters V and VI move beyond a focus on media-specific categories, the diverging trends explored in them have nonetheless been dominantly associated with literature and visual media, respectively, attesting to the relative media-specificity of aesthetic developments in cultural context. Thus, chapter V overall focuses on the return of ‘larger’ novels and authoritative, presumably ‘omniscient’ forms of literary narration that have displaced the dominantly scenic aesthetics of pop and related forms discussed in chapter III. My central claim, however, concerns the actual poetological hybridity of this trend, which has been coshaped by both ‘leftover’ postmodernist theatricality and the new century’s interest in presence. Thus, I demonstrate how in Zeh’s 2004 novel Spieltrieb (Playdrive), the programmatic return to ‘God’-like form remains haunted by an ambiguously legitimizing and deauthorizing game of theatricalization, and how Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek’s 2003 theater text Bambiland fuses scenic with ‘god(like)’ narration in the chorus monologue through which it restages the Iraq war. Here, I venture on intermedial terrain as I compare the text with two theater productions: Christoph Schlingensief’s (almost text-free but intermedially congenial) premiere at the Vienna Burgtheater and Dimiter Gotscheff’s 2006 production of Jelinek’s
intertext, *The Persians*. The latter, I argue, develops a narrative challenge to divine authority—as the performative fundament of war ideology—through the experiential authority of the messenger’s scenic evocation of war suffering. The chapter’s concluding reading, of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), more fully conceptualizes such a human alternative to ‘heavenly’ authoritative narrative. At first glance rather a parody of authoritative narration, the highly theatricalized as well as highly scenic narration of Foer’s child narrator unfolds as an ambitious project of sense-making, which becomes increasingly adequate as a result of learning and dialogicity and thus offers readers a nonsovereign alternative to God’s power in narratively working through the trauma of September 11.

Finally, chapter VI tackles a complementary trend that I locate primarily in visual media. Often discussed in terms of ‘new realism,’ film and theater of the 2000s have increasingly departed from the theatrical techniques of the 1990s. While in mainstream contexts this shift has occasionally been combined with a return to authoritative forms, it has more characteristically been developed through the dominant use of presencing techniques: as an aesthetics of proximity. For the context of theater, I chart its contours in the emergence of new documentary forms: Feridun Zaimoğlu and Neco Çelik’s *Schwarze Jungfrauen* (Black Virgins) presents monologues by Muslim women identifying with radical positions, and Andres Veiel’s *Der Kick* investigates a neo-Nazi murder in the East German provinces. A surrender of narrative authority, their aesthetics of proximity produces disturbing affective encounters with the first-person testimonies on stage. In the realm of film, the new forms began to crystallize in works of the so-called Berlin School that have replaced the playfully theatricalizing aesthetics of the turn-of-the-century productions discussed in chapter II with a sober analytics of observation and a new programmatic interest in presence. Christian Petzold’s *Yella* explores a radically phenomenological approach, which brackets coherence and demands that spectators develop their own stories—however, with a classically narrative twist. In line with U.S. productions on September 11 and the War on Terror from *United 93* to *The Hurt Locker*, finally, Brigitte Bertele’s 2008 *Nacht vor Augen* (*A Hero’s Welcome*) develops the aesthetics of presence as a way of aligning its audiences with the experiences of trauma, affectively bringing the war home to its spellbound audiences.
Film historians have suggested that the 1990s mark an 'unspectacular' era of German film. After the New German Cinema of the 1960s through early 1980s, on the one hand, and the East German DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) cinema, on the other, had come to their respective ends, the stage was left to light comedy fare. Revealing in mainstream-compatible, ultimately heteronormative gender trouble, and presenting the struggles of the 'new federal citizens' (i.e., East Germans) “as an entertaining comedy of errors” (Cook 206), mainstream 1990s German cinema found its political identity as a “Cinema of Consensus” (Rentschler). In certain respects, German cinema as such had come to its end. While the notion of ‘national cinema’ arguably overall only makes sense “as a category of contestation” (Hake 3) in that production and distribution industries as well as film languages had had significant transnational dimensions throughout the twentieth century, processes of globalization fully caught up with the German film industry after unification. The “state-subsidized ‘high cultural’ didactic system,” which had enabled the artistic experimentation of New German Cinema in the West, gave way to “a market-oriented popular cultural entertainment system” characterized by a rising number of international coproductions.
and the establishment of Hollywood affiliates in Germany (Halle, “German Film” 251).

Precisely these developments, however, also allowed for a new diversification of film production. With funding available from emerging EU subsidy systems, smaller production companies began to make “‘smart films’ for the international market” (Halle, “German Film” 254), which are perhaps better designated as films “‘made in Germany’ or from ‘location Germany’ [Standort Deutschland]” than as “German films” in that they preserved ‘national cinema’ only by recontextualizing it and “radically changing its significance” (252–53). Various crossing the boundaries between entertainment and “European art house” styles (254), these films began to initiate an international comeback of films made in Germany, as indicated by the growing number of international awards won by productions such as Good Bye, Lenin! or The Lives of Others (Das Leben der Anderen) in the early 2000s. As suggested above, I begin with this ‘smart’ popular cinema because it provides the most straightforward case for exploring the aesthetics of narrative performance. First, I can draw on existing film-theoretical discussions about the interplay of narrative and performance and develop them for my turn-of-the-twenty-first-century German context. Second, the case of cinema at the turn of the twenty-first century is less complex than that of literature or theater in that I diagnose a confluence of intermedial trends with media-specific trajectories. That is, the overall prominence of theatricalized forms in the larger cultural landscape of the 1990s, as shaped by postmodern epistemologies and artistic projects, finds its most clear-cut form in this particular medium, in response, not least, to the dominance of invisible narration in popular cinema throughout most of the twentieth century.¹

Camp Reconfigurations

LOLA UND BILIDIKID

Kutluğ Ataman’s Lola und Bilidikid (Lola and Billy the Kid 1999) exemplifies the trend toward a transnational cinema from “location Germany.” Born in Istanbul, the director graduated from UCLA and has since lived in Barcelona, London, and Istanbul; beyond researching and shooting Lola und Bilidikid, he has not spent significant time in Germany. The film itself, however, is set in Berlin and was filmed there with mostly Turkish-German actors and a Ger-

¹. On contemporary cinema’s overall affiliation with theatricality, see also, e.g., Samuel Weber 314.
man producer. After opening the “Panorama” section of the 1999 Berlinale, it was “received in Germany as part of a mini-boom of Turkish-German cinema” (Clark, “Transculturation” 555), and at the Istanbul film festival later that year, it won the “people’s choice award” in the international competition. Ataman’s decision for “location Germany” points to the equally deep and troubled interlocking of contemporary Turkish and German histories. When the so-called economic miracle in 1950s West Germany produced labor shortages, the government negotiated recruitment treaties with a number of Mediterranean countries. Although the recruitment was explicitly intended as temporary, the long-term interests of both workers and German employers conflicted with this design. After the oil crisis prompted a ban on new recruitments in 1973, many ‘guest workers’ decided to stay and made use of their right to bring in their families. Due to continued economic pressure and the politically instable situation in Turkey, Turkish ‘guest workers’ were particularly likely to immigrate, and the Turkish-German community became Germany’s largest ethnic minority—as well as Turkey’s largest emigration community. Since Germany’s citizenship legislation was based on the principle of *ius sanguinis* until 2000, many third-generation immigrants continue to be politically disenfranchised, with their lives shaped also by social marginalization and the postunification resurgence of neo-Nazi violence. After subsequent governments had held on to the official credo that ‘Germany is not a country of immigration,’ the Social Democrat–Green Party coalition elected in 1998 eventually challenged this state of denial and initiated overdue reforms.

In the world of scholarship, analogous moves toward inclusion mostly replaced earlier vocabularies of ‘cultural hybridity’ as an encounter between presumably incompatible, essentially distinct worlds with those of transnationalism and transculturalism. However, Ataman’s film has been described as “a hybrid” (Hillman 45) in terms of its intertextual and generic references. Already in its title, Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Lola* meets a hero of the American West, albeit one who is linguistically ‘Turkizised’ in the German

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2. Martin Hagemann, with Zero Film GmbH (Berlin).
3. Quoted from [Internet Movie Database (IMDb)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137079/) (accessed 06/25/09); see also Clark 560.
4. In the early 2000s, there were approximately two million Turks plus half a million naturalized Germans with a Turkish background living in the country (see Şen 209–11).
5. Children born in the country to immigrant parents with long-term residence permits now automatically become German citizens, but eventually they have to choose between their German and their parents’ citizenship because Germany does not officially support dual citizenship.
6. On *Lola und Bilidikid* specifically, see Blumenrath et al.
7. And indirectly also its intertext, Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* (see Mennel 298).
title *Lola und Bilidikid*. Additional intertexts include Fassbinder’s *In a Year with 13 Moons* and Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Conformista*. Thus, European art house film is wedded to American genre cinema: in addition to the Western and the model of melodrama with which Fassbinder himself was playing, Ataman’s mixture also includes comedy and the thriller (see Clark, “Transculturation” 562). The film’s reception indicates continued scholarly discomfort with those popular worlds. While critical voices among reviewers perpetuated “the traditional devaluation of melodrama” by complaining about the film’s “insufficiently ‘realistic,’” stereotypical narrative worlds (as summarized by Clark, “Transculturation” 562), or its “perhaps too ornate” character (Faller), Christopher Clark himself praises Ataman’s “performance of competence in conventional narrative cinema” as (merely) “strategic” (562).

My own reading instead insists on the actual productivity of the generic match, underlining its perhaps less ‘hybrid’ than ‘syncretistic’—that is, non-conflictually productive—character in creating the film’s complex aesthetics of narrative performance. In the scholarly debate on *Lola und Bilidikid*, the issues at hand have been explicitly conceptualized in terms of narrative vs. performance. The background for this discussion is formed by film-theoretical arguments about the role of spectacle in narrative, as exemplarily—although far from exclusively—developed in, and in response to, Laura Mulvey’s canonical 1975 essay on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey’s argument is well known and has been debated and amended in a myriad of ways. What is important for my context, however, is the overdetermined way in which the notion of “erotic spectacle” (11) is positioned in Mulvey’s text. On the one hand, spectacle is the mode of “to-be-looked-at-ness” through which “woman” is objectified by the “controlling and curious gaze” of (Freudian) “scopophilia” (11, 8; italics in original), that is, performance as framed by the filmic apparatus into a mode of domination, or, as Samuel Weber puts it, “a certain kind of theater,” which “presents itself as a non-theatrical reality.” On the other hand, spectacle is also a subversive performative in Mulvey’s account, an “alien presence,” which tends “to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (11). Based on a Freudian notion of sexual pleasure as an antisocial force, spectacle in

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8. In fact, a debate about this particular film constitutes one of this book’s points of origin. I would like to acknowledge my productive exchange about our diverging readings with Barbara Mennel. My own early take on the film is published in German as Breger, “Queering Macho Identities.”

9. See, e.g., Doane; Kaplan; de Lauretis; Neale; Rose; Bukatman.

10. Samuel Weber 12, on Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (first published 1967), which develops a related—although ultimately pronarrative—argument beyond the realm of film only. Regarding the latter, see also Bukatman 76.
this second sense stands in for “another kind of theatricality” (Samuel Weber 12), or the “pleasure of disruption” (Bukatman 76, italics in original). As indicated here, psychoanalytically informed discussions of film spectacle have not positioned presence and theatricality against one another but rather imbricated them in celebrating those forms of framing that expose physicality as an obstacle to diegetic continuity. Thus, Mulvey spells out, Sternberg’s fetishistic scenarios break “the powerful look of the male protagonist (characteristic of traditional narrative film) . . . in favor of the image in direct erotic rapport with the spectator” (14). At the height of antinarrative avant-garde sentiments in 1975, however, her overall argument for the “Destruction of Pleasure” in “narrative fiction film” (7, italics in original) underlines that Hollywood generally neutralizes this potential for subversion by integrating spectacle “into cohesion with the narrative” (11), paradigmatically through (for example, Hitchcock’s) sadism as a narrative investigation and punishment of spectacle.11

Scholarly discussions of Lola und Bilidikid have focused on the relation between stage spectacle and narrative. Clark’s dissertation positions the film in the context of Berlin’s real-life Turkish-German queer subculture, namely, the cabaret performances of the Salon Oriental in the part immigrant, part radically left-wing district of Kreuzberg. As we are shown during the film’s exposition, Lola is part of a drag performance group that calls itself “The Guest Workers,” thus referencing the early model of postwar labor immigration that continued to shape hegemonic perceptions of Turkish immigrants as ultimately nonbelonging, culturally ‘foreign’ and ‘backward,’ paradigmatically symbolized by the headscarf-wearing woman. As the film’s “Guest Workers” play with the headscarf on stage while expressing their sexuality through dance and audience address (“Dear friends, I am burning”), Lola und Bilidikid embeds this icon into a subversive spectacle, developing “a queer utopia of sexual and cultural freedom” in which seemingly incompatible identities can coexist.12 Deniz Göktürk, however, argued that the promise of these drag acts is not sustained by the film’s narrative worlds. While the “Guest

11. The debates about the “cinema of attractions” have unfolded the ambiguities inscribed in Mulvey’s notion of spectacle. While Gunning elevates performance into a medium of “Utopian promise” and “revolutionary possibilities,” which “precedes and subtends the system itself” (Bukatman 71–72; Gunning, “Attractions” 32), this emphasis on subversion has been challenged by subsequent critics analyzing how attractions and narrative can be “effectively imbricaded, even integrated” in early cinema (Musser, “Rethinking” 395) as well as the Spectacular Narratives of the contemporary cinema of digital “attraction” (Geoff King) or the commercial worlds of the American musical (e.g., Feuer).

12. Clark, quoted from Mennel, “Masochism” 291. Clark’s more recent “Transculturation” differentiates the point (and is, in many details, consonant with my own reading), but it remains conceptually primarily interested in the film’s politics of drag.
Worker” performances “succeed . . . in dissolving essentialist identities,” the film’s overall “exploration of family relations and machismo,” Göktürk cautions, “seems exaggerated and does fall back into ethnic stereotyping at some points” (“Turkish Women” 74).

Conceptually developing the conflict, Barbara Mennel suggested that the film’s “contradictory trajectories emerge from the tension between camp and narrative”—with “camp” defined as the “‘non-narrative components’ in ‘film spectacle: the film image parsed, however momentarily, from its situation within a larger diegetic world of events, temporality, and causation.”’ Queer theory of the 1990s had emphasized the critical potential of camp (as the “essence” of which Susan Sontag once described as “its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration,” 275), championing it as a mode of theatrically undoing identities “at the intersection of social agency and postmodern parody” (Meyer 9). Against this overestimation of “camp as a form of resistance,” Mennel, in the spirit of Mulvey’s original analysis, insists on investigating how camp’s potential is contained by narrative integration. Whereas on stage, Lola performatively deconstructs ‘guest worker’ femininity, her offstage life is circumscribed, and eventually taken, by the joint forces of heteronormative, racist, and culturalist violence. As Mennel argues, the film becomes unwillingly complicit with these forces as it reproduces “the aesthetic conventions and traditions associated with” hegemonic concepts of gender (“Masochism” 292). My own reading amends—and partially displaces—this account in a twofold way. First, I underline that the ideological work of sustaining hegemonic identities—to which the film, in fact, contributes—is based not on the ways in which narrative simply contains performance but on the active interplay of these nonantagonistic forces. Second, I supplement this analysis of the film’s ideological work by arguing that Lola und Bilidikid does also critically challenge the heteronormative and culturalist orders it evokes, and that it equally does so by joining the forces of narrative and performance in a mode of playfully explorative, and in effect democratically dialogic, reconfiguration proceeding through the intertwined forces of difference and similarity.

Already the introductory drag performance in the club is complexly embedded into the film’s narrative exposition. While Lola dances on stage, the film doubles this act—that is, contrasts but also associates it—with that of a German man who tries to seduce her “husband” Bilidikid with an offstage dance. Bili responds affirmatively to the playful invitation, but later he beats up the German in the bathroom when he is unable to pay for the sex,

which, as it turns out, was “labor” for Bili, as opposed to the playful and creative identity “work” of camp. Upset about Bili’s violent behavior, Lola leaves by herself in her drag outfit. As Bili follows her, trying to force reconciliation with—still rather violent—caresses, the film associates his ‘attack’ from behind with another attack, which Lola expects fearfully at the very moment: a group of young neo-Nazis has been threatening her. With an eye on the German adolescents, Lola eventually gives in to Bili’s advances, but their relationship is threatened by his proclivity to violence on a more fundamental level. The (as Lola puts it) “macho,” whose straight peers find Lola “weird/queer” (komisch) even in male attire, tries to talk her into a sex reassignment surgery. Fantasizing about a “normal” life in Turkey, Bili dissociates himself from the Berlin subculture in the name of his cultural identity: “We can’t live together like these German fags.”

With his demands, Bili becomes involuntarily complicit in Lola’s death, as he pressures her to get money for the sex change by reclaiming her inheritance from her family of origin. Many years earlier, they had thrown out the adolescent Lola after she showed up at the dinner table in a red wig. Lola is now surprised to meet her brother Murat, who was, as his mother tells him, conceived to “replace” her. The teenager, whose own coming out is another focus of the film, found the wig in his mother’s closet and now returns it to Lola as a token of bonding. Lola seems to struggle with the memories the gift brings back. As Murat and the spectator eventually learn, her provocative drag act at the family table was a desperate gesture of protest against her older brother Osman, who had raped her after finding out about Lola’s homosexuality. Fearing that Lola might disclose the incest, Osman now kills her—in place of the neo-Nazis, as the film suggests with a dramatic narrative ellipsis. After another fight with Bili, who jealously inquired about the origin of the red wig, Lola had walked off into the night by herself again. In fact attacked by the neo-Nazis this time, she tried to save herself by stopping a cab—which, as we find out at the end of the film, must have been the cab Osman drives for a living.

14. Tinkcom, as quoted by Mennel, “Masochism” 293, with reference to Hannah Arendt’s categories of work vs. labor.
15. The English subtitles translate the notion with an ellipsis: “He looks a little . . .”
16. While Lola’s male birth name is never mentioned in the film, and her friends use female pronouns, she herself has no desire to become a biological woman. The film’s critics have charted her and her friends’ identities differently: whereas Yekani pleads for analyzing transfemininities beyond drag (265–66), Clark tries to salvage their ‘inessential’ playfulness as he insists that Lola’s coperformer Kalipso cannot possibly be serious in fantasizing about real breasts (571). However, her fantasy does find its representation alongside Lola’s contrary position. Showing how both negotiate the relations between their drag personae and their everyday identities differently, the film bridges the critical gap between drag- and identity-focused approaches.
In ultimately locating “homophobic violence” in the “patriarchal . . . Turkish migrant family,” Mennel argues, the narrative underwrites a culturalist view (“Masochism” 304). Reifying the gender “roles taken on by Lola and Bilidikid,” the film sadistically identifies her with “sacrificial femininity” while fetishizing his violent “Turkish masculinity” (300–301, 296). In the brutal showdown, Bili literally performs the act of castration he fantasized about on one of the neo-Nazis whom he believes to be responsible for Lola’s death. Meanwhile, her camp femininity has found its narrative integration in the sight of her dead body: the film relates Lola’s death by showing her corpse, still adorned with the red wig, as it floats in the Berlin river Spree, next to the Oberbaum bridge connecting (the Western) Kreuzberg with the formerly East Berlin district of Friedrichshain. This symbolic location may implicitly remind the knowing spectator “about the potential consequences of German unification for those who do not conform to narrow definitions of ‘Germanness’” (Clark, “Transculturation” 566), to the effect of figuratively blaming the neo-Nazis after all. Literally visible, however, is the spectacle of death, mediated for us by the gaze of a kid, who asks twice: “Are you a mermaid?” As Mennel argues, the film aestheticizes this image through a static shot from above, with the face “surrounded by the fake curls of the red wig untouched by the water,” inscribing Lola into the iconographic tradition of dead femininity analyzed by Elisabeth Bronfen in Over Her Dead Body (Mennel, “Masochism” 302).

In my view, this scene highlights that narrative proceeds precisely through spectacle also in the production of the ideological effects targeted by Mennel. The arrestation of movement does not yet amount to the overall “scarcity of . . . mise-en-scène” Mennel locates in the corpse shot as well as the preceding confrontations between Lola and Bili, in contrast with the “cinematic excess during cross-dressing performances” (“Masochism” 299). Rather, the heightened artificiality of the corpse image indicates the ways in which the film theatricalizes not only its liberated designs of gender. In this context, the film’s use of melodramatic form—noticeable, in particular, in its emphasis on color, decor, and acting—is significant. In genre studies, melodrama has served as a film-historical site for exploring what presents itself as “states . . . in excess of” narrative from the angle of narrow horizontal definitions (Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination 2) but can instead be conceptualized as narrative marked by “more complex forms of symbolization” than “linear externalization of action” (Elsaesser, “Tales” 10). Psychoanalytically discussed in analogy to, if not as, Freudian dream work (Elsaesser, “Tales” 11) or “acting out” (Brooks, “Melodrama” 19), the loaded images of melodrama open up spaces for articulating dramatic conflicts that cannot be directly expressed in words or simple storylines (see Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination 4;
Elsaesser, “Tales” 7). In this way, melodrama’s “rhetorical excess” or “theatricality” in both mise-en-scène and editing casts its diegetic world as a world marked by the presence of conflicting ideologies and desires.17

As melodrama scholarship suggests, the effect of these visual ‘excesses’ is twofold: the mise-en-scène both contains and questions the presumed naturalness of the portrayed identities. Lola’s wearing of a wig in death indicates how the film’s onstage drag performances quite literally cross over into the offstage narrative world. The scene of her preceding fight with Bili is dominated by close-ups of Lola. Along with the red wig, she wears an equally bright blue jacket and scarf, the fabric of which resonates with the curls on her head (see figure 1). Focusing on that spectacle, the camera ‘listens’ attentively while Lola tells Bili about their love in the form of a parable. The sex reassignment surgery—a deadly solution to unrequited homosexual love, as audiences familiar with Fassbinder’s In a Year with 13 Moons may recall—would destroy their relationship, Lola warns, because the woman Bili would marry would no longer be “the man he had fallen in love with.” While her story conjures up the housewife femininity to be embodied by Bili’s fantasy woman, tears run down her face, smearing and thereby highlighting the makeup that whitens her skin. In this way, the scene visually superimposes the narrative of naturalized heteronormative femininity with the theatrical spectacle of drag.18

But the theatricality of gender thus explored provides not only a critical counterpoint to the film’s narrative. Rather, it is also one of its critical

17. Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination 36, 13; see 10–11; see Elsaesser, “Tales” 7–8, and Mulvey’s revision of her spectacle argument for melodrama (“‘It Will Be’” 128, 131). In their book Theatre to Cinema, Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs make a closely related point for the narrative forms developed in cinema around 1910 through the notion of a pictorial conception of the image. As they claim, this notion had remained influential in melodrama after its general devaluation in the wake of Diderot, as traced by Fried. The pictorial image, Brewster and Jacobs argue, undercuts “present-day” oppositions between narrative and performance (18) in that it is not self-contained, as it (a) acknowledges the spectator’s presence, and (b) presents a specific state of affairs within a narrative context, thus creating narrative as “a series of” emphasized “situations” nonetheless “anticipat[ing] or sum[ming] up a series of cause and effect relationships” (18–19, 22).

18. Another encounter between drag and hegemonic femininity is explored in a scene in which Kalipso, one of Lola’s coperformers, leaves her Kreuzberg apartment in flamboyant drag attire, shocking both her friends and a middle-aged neighbor wearing a traditional headscarf. Whereas for Mennel, the scene contrasts the film’s “performative” drag “femininity” with that inscribed as “authentic” in its “one-dimensional” narrative portrayal of Kreuzberg’s “patriarchal and heterosexist” Turkish spaces (“Masochism” 296, 305), I think that authenticity itself becomes precarious with drag’s infiltration of these everyday spaces. The film satirizes most of its (German as well as Turkish) minor characters as part of its also comedic agenda (discussed below), and when the cliché neighbor theatrically spits at Kalipso in response to her sexual mockery while both are watched by Kalipso’s friends, she comes across as an integral part of the film’s hilarious stage personnel rather than an image of authentic Turkish femininity.
Figure 1
Film still, *Lola und Bili-dikid*. Copyright Martin Hagemann; zero fiction film GmbH.
sources, that is, a force of reconfiguring identities. This productivity can be pursued with respect to another form of ‘drag’ crossing over into everyday spaces, as explored in the first scene of confrontation between Lola and Bili. Here, we see them naked on a bed with red and golden blankets, in a room adorned by candlelight and flowery wallpaper. When Lola asks rebelliously why Bili wouldn’t do the sex change himself if he is so keen on it, he theatrically stretches out on the bed. The camera positions his muscular upper body in the center of the frame as he replies: “Because I am a man, and you are not.” In line with the modern European convention that naturalizes masculinity, Bili’s muscles rather than a wig make him into a spectacle here, but the background decoration implicitly adorns him, too, putting his gender identity on display. Through the ways in which Lola und Bilidikid thus stages not only femininity but also masculinity as an—erotic and openly theatricalized—spectacle, the film investigates Bili’s violent gender performance. Still unaware of Lola’s death, Murat later waits for her at a German fast-food booth, “Hella’s joint,” which Lola had specified as a meeting point when he brought her the wig. Bili hangs out there as well, waiting for johns next to the adjacent public bathroom. Trying to cope with Lola’s disappearance after their fight (which upset him, as underlined by repeated close-ups of his face), he is drinking with a buddy, and the alcohol functions as a diegetic explanation for the ways in which he, artificially cheerful, exaggerates his overall mode of self-presentation in this scene (see figure 2). With his fitted leather jacket, white t-shirt, his glossy, heavily styled hair, big grin, self-aggrandizing rhetoric, and playful poses of street and toilet competence, Bili performs a seductive coolness through which the film casts his masculinity as a form of spectacular (‘drag’) hypermasculinity.

On the diegetic level, the seduction works on Murat here. Oscillating between playful eroticism, brutality, and mentorship, Bili initiates the boy—who ran away from home after his meeting with Lola and is now as hungry as apparently enticed by Bili’s performance—into sex work. After learning that Murat is Lola’s brother, Bili softens his address into that of a—as he says, still flirtatiously—“brother-in-law.” Sternly, Bili now wants to know: “You are not gay, are you?” When Murat remains silent, Bili orders him to deny that if necessary and insists that it be crucial he doesn’t allow himself to be penetrated: “A man is a man. A hole is a hole. . . . Never be a hole.” Bili’s machismo is a masquerade that functions to deflect stereotypes of effeminacy (or unmanliness as ‘nothingness’), a strategy of generating status against the background

19. While Mennel initially cites this scene for scarcity of mise-en-scène as well, the reworked version of her argument acknowledges its “baroque” quality (The Representation 165).
I don’t cheat people, so they don’t cheat me.
of his marginalized, economically dependent positionality, which is abject in the eyes of both ‘respectable’ Turks and racist Germans, who may associate his ethnic background with effeminacy in orientalist tradition (see Mennel, “Maso-ochism” 289). Half playfully, the—ultimately good-natured but rough—Hella just called him a “Nütte,” that is, “slut” or “whore,” after he had answered her insistence on the immediate payment of drinks with references to the harm her German “race” had wrought historically. In his drunken cheerfulness, Bili had acknowledged her interpellation by replying: “Takes one to know one.” The theatricality of Bili’s masculinity performance does not make his violence any less real, but the film employs its artificiality for narratively (re) developing its genealogy. When Bili advises Murat not to be a “hole,” he references what has been cited as “Turkish culture’s traditional understanding” of homosexuality (Clark, “Transculturation” 559, with reference to Hüseyin Tapiç). However, the film does not present this ostensibly national masculinity performance as the product of a closed tradition. Although spectators with respective background knowledge may associate Bili’s advice to Murat with traditional Turkishness, this link is never explicated in the film. Instead, the evoked image of Turkish masculinity is situated in the realm of transnational media discourse and self-stylizing mimicry when Bili himself points to the film’s title in introducing himself to Murat: “My friends call me Bili. It’s short for Bilidikid. The Western hero!”

If such cultural transfers constitute identity, its national(ized) performances are the product less of local traditions such as ‘Turkish patriarchy’ than of transnational media cultures of heteronormative masculinity. The controversial analogies between Bili—as well as Osman—and the German neo-Nazis established in the film receive a new significance from that angle as well. The difference between Bili, on the one hand, and Osman and the neo-Nazis, on the other, however, is that Bili is also a Western hero. Unattractive throughout the film, Osman is reduced to a pathetic—in hegemonic parlance, emasculated—state at the end of the film when he begs Murat, who just charged him with murder, not to tell their mother, who is actually listening at the door and will shortly slap Osman in the face. In contrast, Bili’s theatrical hypermasculinity effectively functions as seductive masculinity; he just had another grand entry in the film’s violent showdown. To be sure, the film clearly criticizes Bili’s performance of the outlaw’s vigilante justice. After he has castrated one of the neo-Nazis, Bili’s white T-shirt is half red. A spectacle of excessive violence, he is shot and dies along with the second one of his antagonists. But while the film sentences Bili’s model of heroic masculinity to death, it has also restaged him as an object of queer desire with countless close-ups on his upper body strength. Falling from the empty factory building where the showdown is
located, Bili dies in the water of an adjacent river—thus symbolically reunited with Lola who, as her parable emphasized, “loved” him. Thus, the film narrative integrates the spectacle of heroic Western masculinity through the two-fold articulation by which Linda Hutcheon characterized postmodern parody: it simultaneously deauthorizes and performatively reinstalls the spectacle of the hero (see Politics 101).

The notion of parody is to be understood more literally here than it may seem so far. The remainder of my argument about Lola und Bilidikid concerns the way in which the film supplements its prevalent melodramatic tone and tragic spectacles with comic doubles and, in presenting these repetitions (in the sign of both difference and similarity), develops alternative narrative figurations of—livable—queer Turkish-German identity. In film studies, the “physical gags” and “acts of anarchy” constituting comedy, especially slapstick (Crafton 108; Gunning, “Crazy Machines” 103), have served as another generic locus for working through the relations between spectacle and narrative, in a scholarly conversation closely connected also to that about the early “cinema of attractions.”

In Donald Crafton’s discussion of slapstick, the “non-narrative gag elements” function analogously to metaphor in its antinarrative conceptualizations (cited above), as they intrude “antagonistically” into the narrative as a “violent, embarrassing gesture” (107). Tom Gunning countered by drawing on Crafton’s own metaphoric descriptions of these gestures as “the potholes, detours and flat tires encountered” by an automobile during its (narratively fueled) journey (Crafton 111); as he suggested, these “potholes” are precisely what “Barthes and the Russian Formalists would call the ‘delays’ of narrative”: elements disrupting an initial stasis that constitute “even the most conventional narrative.”

Crafton himself concedes that the single gag often contains “its own microscopic narrative system” (109), and Gunning develops this point for the “mischief” gag characteristic of early cinema, which follows the “basic” cause-and-effect “structure of mischievous preparation and laughable consequence,” with an optional third element of “counteraction” or “punishment to the rascal” (“Crazy Machines” 90). The optional status of such
punishment points to just one of the ways in which gags can be employed to
tell “the story . . . differently,” or to configure different stories—with be it sadist
or more gentle content.23 Conceptualized, in line with my general suggestion,
as performative acts of reconfiguration, gags both provide alternative (small)
stories and form elements of larger, complexly figurative narratives ‘fueled’ by
funny deviations.

In Lola und Bilidikid, comic dialogue and sights are specifically condensed
in a plot thread I have not yet summarized. Early on, Iskender, another hust-
tler and admirer of Bili’s coolness, meets Friedrich von Seeckt, an aristocratic
middle-aged German architect. Subtly theatrical in itself, Friedrich’s quiet per-
formance of distinction in his old-fashioned suits and elegant scarves turns
hilarious through the incongruity between his and the hustler’s demeanor.
In his encounters with Friedrich, Iskender initially imitates Bili’s aggressive
coolness, differing from him only through the more nervous and flagrantly
inappropriate—funny—character of his rough performance. When Friedrich
asks what gives him the privilege of a shared dinner, Iskender responds: “I like
your car.” This ‘pothole’ for his performance of professional distance, a splen-
did old Daimler that actually belongs to Friedrich’s mother, has already been
presented to us by the spectacle-hungry camera in a sustained, slowly panning
close-up, if not without narratively motivating the indulgence with Iskender’s
interest by halfway aligning the shot with his gaze. When Iskender later, in
the midst of half-naked wrestling, declares that “The rich should be shot” and
“borrows” the Daimler for Lola’s birthday outing without Friedrich’s consent,
Iskender becomes both subject and object of a humorous rebellion against
social inequality—we are invited to laugh with as well as about him. While the
presentation of Iskender’s awkward aggressiveness will probably distance the
spectator to a degree, she may still take pleasure in his little acts of anarchy
when, for example, Iskender returns the Daimler with an excessive bouquet
of white calla lilies—a metaphoric quasi-proposal by virtue of their associa-
tion with weddings— which he stole from a German flower lady duped by his
appearance in the expensive vintage car. No punishment follows.

At Lola’s funeral, Iskender’s and Bili’s tough masculinity performances part
company. After he has observed Bili hitting his hand against a wall repeatedly
in violent agony, Iskender walks to a phone booth, calls Friedrich and admits,
in an awkward pose of understatement, for the first time that he “like[s]”
him. From there on, the Friedrich-Iskender love story more fully reconfigures
Turkish-German relations at the intersection of ethnicity and class. Short of

23. The quote is from Teresa de Lauretis’s response to Mulvey’s condemnation of narrative
(156). Based on structuralist conceptualizations of plot as a negotiation of norm and excess, she
suggested early on to rethink the “work of narrativity” as “a mapping of difference” (121).
presenting any utopian resolution, the comic narrative probes subtle shifts that make power relations ‘playable’ and thereby less deadly. Thus, narrative performance imaginatively reconfigures the social by making use of the mode of fictive theatrical hyperbole, which creates a twofold distance from real-life worlds while still winning some of its humorous force from its virtual referential link with actual scenarios of social inequality.24

As critics have noted, Friedrich’s character presents a multilayered embodiment of German histories. His last name recalls a Prussian monarch who headed the German army in Turkey in 1918 (see Hillman 48), and his first name the Prussian king Frederick ‘the Great,’ who is associated with homosexuality as well as heroic masculinity and the road to fascism in German cultural memory. In bringing such associations into play, the Friedrich-Iskender plotline unfolds a fantasy of resignifying these histories. Although light in tone, it is not ahistorical25 but rather builds on the ambiguity of historical signifiers. Namely, kings, queens, and other aristocrats (beyond just Frederick II) became available as models for queer appropriations of power by virtue of the ways in which they have been discursively associated with queerness in opposition to models of bourgeois respectability in the modern European imagination (see my Szenarien). The film humorously develops the liberatory potential of these historical associations when Friedrich’s mother (Inge Keller26), apparently completely out of sync with her time, conceptualizes her son’s love for Iskender exclusively in terms of class. As she hilariously reigns on her son’s sofa with her lapdog in the color of her mink, her ‘inappropriate’ insistence performatively undoes the issue of sexual orientation that plagues the film’s major characters: “It’s nothing more than this chauffeur thing . . . that gets us from time to time . . . It’s completely normal.” Making fun of established authority, her role portrait thus simultaneously draws on it for authorizing queer desire. Underscoring her concerns regarding Iskender

24. This wording responds to critics of queer performance who have insisted on the difference between aesthetic fantasy and social reality (see, e.g., Tim Edwards). Obviously, a refiguration such as the one discussed here does not offer a solution that can be directly translated into extrafilmic lives, but the theatrics of identity is not played out at the expense of the social (see Morton 373), either.

25. See also Blumenthal et al. 217. Implicitly positioning playful performativity against a properly serious engagement with history, Hillman argues that the film defies “historical gravity” (47). However, other layers of the film, including the neo-Nazi subplot, precisely underline such historical gravity. More generally, see the critique of “ludic” postmodern theatricality politics in terms of its presumed ahistoricity (thus Morton 375).

with dramatic gesture, the mother proceeds to warn, insisting that she knows what is going on in the world: based on new legislation, the two lovers could be married soon, and “then he’ll become the sole heir to the Seeckt fortune.”

Friedrich, whose own aristocratic positionality is presented as inverted also by the fact that he lived in the socialist East (where, as he reminds his mother, “[w]e were the servants”), angrily responds: “Why not, goddamit.” At this very moment, Iskender honks outside, waiting to play chauffeur, that is, to drive Friedrich’s mother home in the Daimler at Friedrich’s request. While the lapdog loudly articulates her owner’s hostile feelings toward her son’s “impossible” partner, Friedrich’s mother proposes a “deal” in the car: she offers Iskender an expensive brooch in an attempt to bribe him out of her son’s life. Enraged, Iskender throws the piece of jewelry out of the window and affirms his “love” for Friedrich in front of both her and Lola’s coperformers Kalipso and Şehrazat, who sit in the back. Be it in response to this declaration or to Iskender’s accompanying threat that he will otherwise chop her up into dog food and poison the barking mutt with it, Friedrich’s mother ‘shuts up’ and later apologizes. Tenderly stroking Iskender’s hair, she requests “peace,” only to reassume a hierarchical pose after he consents, ‘allowing’ him to carry her bags inside.

While this satirical resolution of historical baggage into outrageous behavior (“Unbelievable!” Iskender mutters to himself) presents a less deadly alternative to the violent encounter between Bili and the neo-Nazis, the ending of the film also doubles the family (melodrama with a different Turkish-German scenario. Most critics have focused on the former: the mother of Murat, Lola, and Osman, who has until now struggled to negotiate her own feelings with the acceptance of Osman’s authority she deemed proper, finally rebels. Walking into the street, she throws off her headscarf in what appears to be a highly symbolic gesture in support of the ostensibly feminist mainstream discourse of Western liberation from Turkish ‘backwardness.’ To be sure, Murat, who follows her in solidarity, picks up the headscarf, supplementing her energetic gesture with a less striking one, which does not seem to imply any decision about the scarf’s future use, but arguably a moment of respect for the metonymy of identity it presents.

More definitely, the fact that the screen now fades to black for a moment does not yet signal the end of the film. In what is in fact its concluding scene, Şehrazat and Kalipso are riding in a cab, both of them in full drag. On one level, this ending stages a comical fantasy of redistribution. Recognizing the place where Iskender threw the brooch out of the window, Kalipso asks the

27. See Mennel 307; also Yekani on the film’s reproduction of gender clichés.
driver to stop and retrieves it at the risk of ruining her tights. No less significantly, this incident is embedded in a scene of flirtation. Speaking in Turkish, Şehrazat makes conversation with the cab driver, who is thereby marked as Turkish himself. Charmingly, he asserts that he has remained unmarried since he never “met a beautiful woman like you.” Upon returning to the cab ecstatically after locating the brooch, she responds by warning him: “Listen, I am a woman with balls. Don’t say I never told you.” We cannot be sure whether he understands this declaration metaphorically or literally, but this very uncertainty mediates an inclusive blending of feminist, queer, and transgender agendas in the playfully accepting smile with which he acknowledges her self-identification. Thus replacing Osman with another cab driver in a final act of doubling (as, again, a repetition balancing difference and similarity), the film ends on the note of asserting a diegetic space for livable formations of Turkish-German identity short of, or beyond, the assimilation marked by the charged headscarf gesture. In the closing shot, Kalipso and Şehrazat ride—not quite into the sunset, but “towards a clearly lit symbol of the city to which they all belong” (Hillman 53): the Siegessäule (Victory Column), an overdetermined Berlin landmark of Prussian militarism and queer desire (the phallic column gave its name to the city’s major gay magazine).

Diplomatically, Mennel suggests “to keep as an open question” whether “this coda queers the narrative or whether the narrative closure contains the camp” (“Masochism” 308). I agree that we still need to account for the weight of the previous scene and the overall effect of those acts of narrative performance in the film that configure its tragic outcome. However, the “coda” itself is part of the film’s narrative. Even while the preceding fade-out marks it off as supplementary rather than the film’s one valid ending, the final scene is not an unrelated ‘extra’ to an otherwise coherent story. Rather, it grows out of one of the film’s major plotlines, multiply interwoven with the tragic thread through parallels in characterization, props, and overall mise-en-scène. Through the ways it connects its different plot elements, Lola und Bilidikid presents images and counterimages, dialogically configuring them into a complex commentary on contemporary Turkish-German identity politics. While aesthetically underscoring the artificiality of all the identities it stages, the film does not simply claim that—as the postmodern politics of theatricality has been charged with claiming—the figuration of gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity is a matter of voluntaristically choosing your drag outfit of the day. Rather, its narrative (melo)dramatically underscores the force of (diegetic) real-life constraints and violence while simultaneously probing possibilities of intervention in a mode of comic replay—whereby ‘replay’ designates a mode of sociosymbolic operation intertwining change and continuity. Performative
reconfigurations of identity find their contours only within, and through, the
differential repetition of the narratives provided by society.

Performing Subversion through Narrative

SONNENALLEE

Leander Haußmann’s comedy Sonnenallee (Sun Alley), the biggest German box office hit of 1999 and simultaneously winner of a government-issued screenplay prize (see Cafferty 253–54), introduces us to a different facet of ongoing processes of collective identity formation in postunification Germany—as well as a different narrative reconfiguration of the subversion fantasy that has permeated both performance theory and cultural practice. The film’s title refers to a street in Berlin that was divided by the wall until 1989. A border checkpoint allowed West Berliners but not generally East Berliners to cross.28 As specified by the title of the novel, Thomas Brussig’s literary variation on the screenplay that he coauthored with Haußmann, the narrative world is actually located Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee, on its literally and metaphorically “shorter end”: in the East.29 Like Good Bye, Lenin!, Sonnenallee is part of the “sub-genre” of “unification comedy” (Allan 106). With their relatively light tone, these films differ from both preceding and more recent filmic takes on the GDR focused primarily on the legacy of the surveillance state.30 The success of the unification comedies has been contextualized as part of the concomitant emergence of ‘ostalgia,’ that is (perceived) nostalgia for the East.31

Ostalgia itself is a highly contested phenomenon. Associated, in particular, with resurging fascination for GDR material culture, it has been described, with respect to film form, as the use of “the texture of the past as a source of visual attractions” (Kapczynski 80, quoting Koepnick on heritage films). In this sense, the aesthetics of ostalgia undertakes what Gumbrecht has described

28. Since the early 1970s, West Germans and West Berliners were able to visit the GDR on day visas. GDR citizens, however, were generally allowed to travel to the West only after reaching retirement age.

29. As Wehdeking points out, this configuration of film and novel exemplifies the new intermediality that overall characterizes turn-of-the-twenty-first-century poetics (41). I focus on the film, though, which I find much more interesting. Employing a comparatively conventional third-person, past-tense narrative form, the novel inserts explicitly didactic narrator commentary in place of the film’s intricate first-person commentary format.

30. This includes, e.g., Margarete v. Trotta’s 1995 Das Versprechen and Das Leben der Andere- ren.

31. See Cooke 157 for an overview of respective voices on Sonnenallee; Kapczynski; Cook; Jozwiak and Mermann on Good Bye, Lenin!; Hell and von Moltke on both as part of a larger, not exclusively East German nostalgia trend.
as “the presentification of past worlds,” that is, an attempt to make the past “tangible again” (94; italics in original). In political terms, Gumbrecht contrasts the implied phenomenological gesture of bracketing context with techniques of “learning from the past,” thus specifying presentification as a mode of letting ourselves “be attracted by” it and “indulge” in it (123, 125). In the nostalgia context, such (presumed) absence of a critical attitude has translated into morally charged images “of East Germans as deluded ingrates longing pathetically (if understandably) for the socialist past” (Bach 546), and, in turn, provoked alternative conceptualizations of nostalgia as a legitimate reaction to the asymmetrical process of unification also known as West German “take-over.”

Thus, nostalgia has been read “as a form of resistance to colonization” (Bach 543) or an “attempt to reclaim a kind of Heimat” (home) that “does not entail an identification with the former GDR state, but rather . . . with different forms of oppositional solidarity” (Daphne Berdahl, quoted from Kapczynski 84). Yet other critics have interpreted nostalgia as having originated in West German stances and desires: a depoliticizing, pseudo-ethnographic rescue operation for the lost ‘other’ culture (see Bisky 119, 127), if not a means of deferring the burden of the German past by claiming “East Germans’ neurotic entanglement with authoritarian pastness” (Boyer 363). Instead emphasizing mediation and distance, Jonathan Bach has distinguished a “modernist” form of n/ostalgia, which he describes as “less a longing for an unredeemable past as such than a longing for the fantasies and desires that were once possible in that past,” from “a (p)ostmodern” n/ostalgia “of style” through which “ironic westerner[s]” or also “sophisticated’ easterner[s]” value “the artifact . . . precisely for its lack of emotional attachment to a specific past” (546–47). A “capitalist nostalgia,” the latter is organized around “a highly aestheticized and decontextualized sense of camp” (554).

Bach’s twofold conceptualization is the most relevant for my reading of Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! Specifying these films’ evocation of nostalgia as a configuration of such modernisms and postmodernisms resonates with how they frame the presence of their nostalgia objects. Rather than an aesthetics of presentification, Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! develop a highly theatrical game of narration. Some critics have in fact qualified their reading in terms of “nostalgia” by asserting that through the “the use of irony,” the films “actually deconstruct . . . the phenomenon of ‘Ostalgie’ itself” or self-reflexively parody their own engendering of it. Looking more closely at the

32. Jozwiak and Mermann 781. The controversial procedure basically established East Germany’s “Beitritt” (accession) to Western law rather than a joint effort in recreating political and legal identity.

33. Uecker 192; Cooke 163, 158; Cormican 251; see similarly Kapczynski on Good Bye, Lenin! 82–83.
aesthetics of theatrical narration employed in both Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin!, I develop these readings but also underline that irony and self-reflexivity account for only part of the ways in which the films bracket a nostalgic attachment to the past. Analyzing the unfolding of diegetic worlds through the process of theatricalized narration, I show that both films displace (certainly nonmodernist) nostalgia also through the ways in which they contextualize GDR spectacle within their plots. Developing ‘excessive’ theatricality not as a counterpoint to narrative but as a source of powerfully creative, if ambiguously (un-)authoritative world-making, they offer their heterogeneous (East and West German) audiences complex configurations of critique and pleasure, which I describe in terms of identification-at-a-distance and acentral empathy.

Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! do so in overlapping but also partially contrary ways. Critics have associated these differences with the different positionalities of the filmmakers: whereas Sonnenallee’s director Leander Haußmann and screenwriter Thomas Brussig grew up in East Germany, Wolfgang Becker and much of his team are from the West. Without discrediting these biographical explanations, my reading focuses on aesthetic distinctions, underlining how generally similar techniques of narrative theatricality develop highly divergent effects in specific configurations. Although not simply advocating “n/ostalgia,” Sonnenallee in fact resists hegemonic notions of history in postunification Germany through the ways in which its playful narration explores notions of subversive performance, both formally and thematically. While the film satirically displaces the fetishization of (antinarrative) spectacle and insistently draws it into the realm of political complicility, Sonnenallee still champions its own fantasy of narrative performance as a means of counterhegemonic memory fueled by the longing for resistant subjectivity. Good Bye, Lenin!, in contrast, is not primarily interested in subversion at all. Although the film satirizes both the GDR and postunification society, it ultimately enlists the powers of narrative performance for a project of integration: interrupting nostalgia (by putting it on theatrical display), Good Bye, Lenin! reconfigures both Western and Eastern emotional attachment to the past into a narrative foundation for postunification society (see Cook).

Whereas Lola und Bilidikid theatricalized its narrative primarily through the means of mise-en-scène and acting, Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! emphasize film discourse much more flagrantly through voice-over narration, metaleptic camera work, manipulations of film speed, and the montage of nondiegetic materials. Voice-over, to begin there, was dominantly shunned by film theory and criticism throughout much of the twentieth century. Various cast as too ‘theatrical’ and too ‘literary,’ it was sometimes positioned as a descendant of early cinema’s live commentator; its use would be critiqued as an authoritarian device, especially in the heterodiegetic variations prominent
in epics, Westerns, and documentaries (Kozloff, here 9, 17, 80–81; see 74). Until postmodernism redeemed the technique precisely for its challenge to presumably unmediated forms of storytelling, and specifically its ironic potential in the play of unreliability introduced where image and voice make divergent truth claims (Kozloff 110; see also Chatman, “New Directions” 332), its mainstream uses were subject to significant constraints: homodiegetic rather than heterodiegetic, Hollywood voice-over narration would be typically concentrated in the films’ exposition and at their end (see Kozloff 41; Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 26–27).

Although the use of voice-over in Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! still gestures at these constraints, these films severely stretch the limits of the conventionally acceptable by having their narrators surface also at various moments in between, and thus making their presence into an ongoing feature to be integrated with the spectator’s immersion into the filmic world. Even more flamboyant, however, is the way in which the voice-over operates specifically in Sonnenallee. Almost throughout in the present tense, it does not function as the epic framing device introducing personal memory known, for example, from the mid-twentieth-century worlds of film noir. Thus lacking the straightforward indications of temporal distance that naturalize first-person narration, Sonnenallee’s voice-over also mostly does not follow the other “classical fictional model” (Bruzzi 55) of presenting an interior monologue, which would immerse the audience directly into a seemingly self-contained personal world. In fact reminiscent of the “exhibitor” of the early “cinema of attractions,” Sonnenallee’s narrative voice instead operates as an explicit tool of commentary throughout most of the film. Acknowledging the viewer and thus soliciting “a highly conscious awareness of the film image” (Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment” 121), its operation of showing as (de)monstration (see Gunning, “Attractions”; Kessler) underwrites the theatrical distance that is also generated by the “stage-like nature” of the set intentionally made to look artificial (Rinke 33; Cooke 164, quoting Haußmann).

“I live in the GDR,” the voice of the film’s adolescent protagonist explains during the introductory credit sequence. Throughout the exposition, the narrator presents individual elements of his world to the audience, for example, by introducing his family members as the camera shows them in characteristic poses. While his father is watching West German television, his mother warns his sister to be “careful” (vorsichtig)—the mother’s favorite word, as the narrator informs us—since the frosted glass door to her room gives away that she is passionately kissing her boyfriend of the week. Critics have argued that

34. See Cohn, “‘I Doze and Wake,” as discussed in chapter III.
we are thus presented with the horizontal panorama of a society rather than ‘properly’ plot-driven cinema. However, Sonnenallee is not just a postmodern “Nummernrevue” (Wehdeking 42), in that this expository sequence also plants the seeds of narrative conflict by introducing personnel, props, and motifs. But narrative exposition happens almost casually, with the function of story development ostensibly subordinated to the presentation of spectacle. “Other than that,” the narrator adds after explaining that he lives in the GDR, “I don’t have any problems.” His world is parodistically sketched as a predominantly comical one. As shown by the interplay of voice-over and camera, it is not presentified for straightforward enjoyment, with the exception perhaps of the (notably Western) jeans proudly showcased by one of the narrator’s friends and fetishized in camera close-up in the introductory sequence. Instead, the objects of the GDR are remembered as media of humor, including the gross slapstick effects generated by the (malfunctioning) “MuFuTi” (multifunction table) in the family’s living room. Arguably presenting “the GDR as a zoo” (Cooke 161), the film invites its audience to view a more or less ‘exotic’ spectacle. Thus, we watch from a position doubling that of the Western tourists who peek into the shorter end of the Sonnenallee from the viewing platform erected on the other side of the wall in an introductory mise-en-abyme of the film’s narrative setup.35 “Guck mal, ’nen Ossi” (Look, an Easterner), a Western girl shouts from up there as the protagonist walks onto the street at the end of the introductory sequence, adding sneeringly, “Isn’t he cute, you could almost get a crush on him.”36

The film’s regime of presenting its narrative world as a comical attraction complicates matters of identification. While the explicitly presentational function of the voice-over recalls the sensationalist ‘exhibitor’ of early cinema, who would “engage the viewer’s curiosity” rather than creating “empathy with character psychology” (Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment” 121), Sonnenallee’s homodiegetic narrator does show his own world, resulting in an intricate constellation of distance and proximity. In the introductory encounter with the Western tourists, the steep camera angles highlight the spatial hierarchy inscribed in the situation, aligning us first with the protagonist, then momentarily with the Western adolescents while they look down upon and, as the voice-over explicates, “humiliate” him. For the Western spectator, this

35. See Baßler 51 on the analogous scene of the novel.
36. “Da könnt’ man sich ja glatt verlieben.” As Cooke has pointed out, the derogatory notion “Ossi” is a postunification term (161). Implicitly, the film thus acknowledges historical distance here. The DVD edition supplements an explicit historical framing by adding a sequence before the actual start of the film: we see the neighborhood cop from the film, with his family all in national colors, changing back into his GDR uniform as the decision is made to re-erect the wall. Thus, Sonnenallee is set in the world of historical time undone.
configuration of voice-over and camera work thwarts her enjoyment of ‘exotic’ GDR spectacle with a critical reminder of the power relations inscribed in the judgmental gaze onto the GDR that acquired overall discursive hegemony in postunification society. But also the East German spectator, whose “sense of an East German group identity” is generally played to the film’s cultural references (Rinke 36), is interpellated at a distance. Although the Eastern subject of narration, with whom she has already been aligned for a couple of minutes, clearly comes across as more sympathetic than his torturers on the platform, the protagonist’s narrative act of exhibiting his world locks the audience into the role of (potentially critical) spectator, creating acentral empathy through identification-at-a-distance.37

In response to the Western adolescents’ complacent “We are doing well, and how are you?” the narrator explains that he isn’t doing “so badly,” although he won’t tell “them.” As he elaborates, his tone slowly changes from annoyed self-defense to propagandistic cheerfulness: “At any rate, no one is homeless here, and no one is starving, either. Staple foods are inexpensive, prizes stable.” In comically eager support, the camera underscores his discourse by presenting a store’s street display of local vegetable fare. The narrator’s twofold position of a commentator simultaneously embodied as part of the spectacle makes it difficult to decide whether we are invited to read his tone as a signal of intentional irony or if we ought to charge him with lacking critical distance to the ideological discourses of his society—thus inviting questions about the relationship between narrator and implied author. But perhaps, these very questions suggest my overinvestment in narratological systematicity as a viewer. Because of the narrator’s function and position, the narrative situation created in Sonnenallee is structurally haunted by specters of metalepsis, and the interplay between camera, voice-over, and music explicitly unfolds such exchanges between diegetic world and discourse level in a number of scenes, to the effect of flaunting the contingency of narrative authority. In what has been described as prototypically postmodernist fashion, this contingency enables a fantasy of sovereign narrative play here. In Derridean manner, that is, narrative authority is located exclusively in the act of narrating when, for example, in the described introductory scene the protagonist now buys a head

37. In the attempt to combine cognitive and psychoanalytical approaches, I use the notion of empathy for what Murray Smith, with Richard Wollheim, calls “acentral imagining” (and defines as “sympathy” himself) while I prefer the psychoanalytic notion of “identification” (which Smith discards entirely) for “central imagining” (i.e., Smith’s empathy, “Emotional Response” 36). Identification-at-a-distance (a notion developed by Kaja Silverman in Threshold of the Visible World) overlaps with empathy, but the psychoanalytic notion describes the process in terms of its identity-generating (or -dissolving) impact on the subject, whereas cognitive discussions of empathy are primarily oriented toward intersubjective processes.
of cabbage and uses it to play ball with his friend Mario, until they throw it at a surprised border guard.

But if this playfulness confounds my questions about the narrator on the level of narratological system building, they still make sense here. Namely, the protagonist’s twofold relationship to his society is developed also diegetically as the narrative unfolds. During the credit sequence, the narrator introduced himself as Michael Ehrenreich, that is, Michael “Rich-in-Honor.” Beyond indicating his lead role in the film, the name designates an overdetermined formation of heroic subjectivity. A camera pan during the credit sequence gave us initial hints by presenting the paraphernalia of his adolescent identifications—at first glance, a surprising configuration of transnational affiliations. Posters on the wall feature the “victorious Indian native hero” played by the GDR’s most popular actor (Rinke 29), through whom the state-run film company aligned its socialist spectators with the fight against white imperialist America, next to declarations of allegiance to a world of (imperialist?) “rock and pop” visualized by stars in the colors of the American flag. As the narrator explains, he always wanted to be a pop star. Whether pop star, native American or outlaw ranger (like Bilidikid), however, the ‘Western’ hero develops his contours in his rebellion against the law and norms of mainstream society—including those of the socially (in many respects) conservative GDR. As the narrator explains, we join him in the process of copying a song that is “verboten.” Having grown up in a society where “they like” to ban and interdict, and “do so a lot,” his pop star fantasy finds its form in the antirestrictive theme of becoming someone who “moves something” (the German “etwas bewegt” translates also as ‘making a difference’). Half-hearted rather than radical, however, the narrator immediately considers that most pop stars die early. Reminiscent of his mother, his cautiousness positions the heroic designation inscribed in the family name as ironic. A bunch of “ordinary conformists” (Cafferty 260), the Rich-in-Honors gain their diegetic contours also as model citizens of their society, which constructed its hegemonic subjectivities along the model of the socialist hero always ready to sacrifice personal happiness for state and community.

Casually introduced in the expository sequence, the film’s central narrative conflict revolves around precisely that demand. “Today,” the voice-over explains when Michael first joins Mario on the street, they have “only one topic of conversation,” namely, whether they should pledge three years of army service in school the next day. Whereas Mario, who unlike Michael dares to cross the street on a red light, resolutely protests such consent to the—officially optional—extension of required service time, Michael worries that saying “no” would likely prevent him from pursuing university studies. Com-
bining cautious complicity with rebellious desire, the heroes of Sonnenallee are neither the oppressed victims and guilty perpetrators of hegemonic postuni-
fication memory culture, nor do they present a self-confidently “irreverent” countermodel (thus Rinke 36). Rather, the film’s adolescent protagonists are subjects of a longing for resistant identity. Their presentation provides Bach’s modernist n/ostalgia with a critical twist. Bach’s concept of longing for the fantasies—rather than realities—of the past concretely targets a fusion of “the socialist projection of a harmonious future” and “‘fully developed Self’” with their capitalist analogues induced by television advertising (547). In Sonnenal-
lee, the fantasies at stake find their form as a fusion of Eastern and Western fantasies of individual heroism qua political subversion.

The film unfolds these fantasies through the themes—and means—of comedy, musical, and sexual spectacle. After the introductory debate about the imminent army service decision, Michael, Mario, and their friends start dancing on the street to the song just copied by Michael, the 1968 hit “Mosc-

ow” by the West German band Wonderland. When they are interrupted by the local police officer, the ABV (Abschnittsbevollmächtigter), who has over-
heard their conversation about how “verboten” the song is, the adolescent boys shrewdly defend themselves by claiming that the notion was merely an expression from youth language, a presumably harmless adaptation of an already contained oppositional gesture. Does this strategic reading veil the song’s subversive potential, or does it suggest that ultimately nonpolitical pop is easily contained, if it could ever be radical in the first place?38 Without fully coming down on either side of this debate, Sonnenallee emphasizes the contingency of subversion within the system of control that frames it. Half convinced, the police officer confiscates the tape but announces that he will make a copy for himself and play it at one of the police parties where he functions as a DJ (Schallplattenunterhalter in GDR language). When doing so later in the film, he will in fact get in trouble, but only by producing the subversive nature of the musical act through a performative attribution of illegal status. Imitating the cool poses of youth culture, he introduces the song as “verboten” and thereby triggers an old officer, who had been sleeping through the police party.

38. Part of the scene’s comical effect results from the circumstance that the content of the song remains unspecified. Before the arrival of the police officer, Micha’s friend Wuschel had claimed with an air of knowingness that the song was banned because of the English lyrics. Vis-
à-vis the police officer, he now asserts that they don’t understand the text anyway; after all, they learn only Russian in school. The film sparked online discussions about why and whether the song was in fact banned in the GDR, or perhaps only thought to be banned. http://de.answers.
Comedy diminishes its objects, here both the youngsters’ resistance poses and the state’s response. Some of the nostalgia charges raised against Sonnenallee were based on the film’s ‘trivializing’ representation of GDR authorities and oppression practices.39 If we subtract the anticommunist hysteria fueling them, they translate into questions about the effectiveness of the film’s comical critique. With Bakhtin, Sonnenallee’s representation of the ABV reads as a carnivalesque subversion of authority. In close-up, the film audience gets to enjoy the spectacle of the police officer as he struggles to find the “eject” button on the boys’ simple tape recorder, with the tip of his tongue in the corner of his mouth to signal great concentration. Then the camera cuts to a border guard lifting up his binoculars, and back to the police officer in a shot on his ass as he leans forward in his struggle with the recorder. As the continuity editing-trained audience will likely conclude, the border guard enjoys the spectacle of ‘anally exposed’ authority as well. Although it seems rather far-fetched to tag this playfulness as nostalgic, the “triumphant postwall recollection of the comic side of GDR absurdity” (Cafferty 268) is, in 1999, politically subversive only to the degree to which laughter about authorities is still, or newly, “verboten” in postunification Germany. While some indignant reactions to the film could almost suggest so, the gag itself is old in that it draws on an established topos of political critique in twentieth-century German discourse, namely, the association of totalitarianism (traditionally, fascism) with homosexuality (see Hewitt). As if imitating its heroes’ cautiousness, moreover, the film immediately contains the ABV ass spectacle through an act of narrative correction. While we look at the police officer’s behind, the onset of extradiegetic music signals that something is happening. Shortly, this event is specified as the appearance of Miriam, the heroine of our romantic comedy—who, as the film audience is now invited to conclude, may have been the actual target of the border guard’s initially maladjusted gaze. Although once more underlining the contingent nature of narrative authority, this corrective act gestures less at the sovereignty of (Derridean) narrative play than at the constraints imposed on it by social and cinematic norms (as underlined in Butler’s critique of Derrida; see chapter I).

Shot in soft focus and slow motion, Miriam’s appearance, which normalizes the carnivalesque sight of the police officer, is staged as a truly grand spectacle disrupting the flow of action everywhere around. While Michael’s

39. See Cooke 159; Jozwiak and Mermann 788. The film was even compared to comedy under National Socialism, which not only downplays the historical differences between the two regimes but also ignores the circumstance that Sonnenallee provides precisely the sort of political satire of which NS comedy fell short (see Cafferty 254–55). If playfully, the film targets the GDR system of oppression rather than eliding it.
voice-over introduces her as the object of his fantasies, his desire metaleptically infiltrates the overall mise-en-scène, as other men around stall their cars and walk against walls in staring at Miriam. Beyond containing the preceding spectacle of authority, the scene receives its significance as one of Sonnenallee’s most excessive moments of theatricalized narration. Hyperbolically literalizing Hollywood conventions, it not only mocks the scripts of teenage love (thus Cooke 162) but quite forcefully showcases the notion that (musical, sexual, comedy) spectacle interrupts narrative as such. And importantly, it thereby marks a transition point at which the film’s seemingly undirected playfulness molds into a more clear-cut project: the scene’s hyperbolic theatricality prepares the ground for a narrative interrogation of precisely that notion of subversive spectacle. The political dimensions of Michael’s desire for Miriam begin to unfold when she kisses “the class enemy”—a young man from West Berlin—at a school party, a ‘subversive’ act presented as nearly as disruptive to the film’s narrative flow as her initial entrance. Consequently, Miriam is sentenced to prepare a “self-critical contribution” for the next state youth organization election conference. In an attempt to trump his rival, Michael begins to depart from his conformist ways, sentencing himself to give such a speech as well after he took the blame for one of Mario’s classroom jokes, which had transformed the working class’s “vanguard”—in German, Vorhut—into its “foreskin” (Vorhaut). While Michael’s ‘subversively’ private intentions are beyond doubt, the mechanism of self-critique is a tool designed to recuperate challenges to the state through their theatrical restaging in narrative context—and as narratively configured in Sonnenallee, this tool works effectively. With Michael’s enthusiastic speech, spectacle is recuperated for hegemonic ideology (see variously Feuer; King; Musser, “A Cinema,” “Rethinking”): fueled by flirtation behind the scenes as well as the rhetorical training provided by the professional actor whom his sister is dating that week, Michael has the full attention of his diegetic audience as he passionately praises Marx’s, Engel’s, and Lenin’s “love” for the working class. To be sure, this effect of containment is counteracted on the extradietetic level, as the audience of the film is invited to laugh at Michael’s hyperbolic use of official language, before his words are altogether drowned out by music underlining his enthusiasm. On the diegetic level, however, Mario fumes: “First, you commit to a woman, and then you commit to the system quite quickly.”

While thus narratively bracketing the fantasy of resistance through sex and music, the film does salvage it to a degree with the further development of Michael’s love story—if only through the intervention of narrative, or more precisely, a heroic act of narrative performance on the diegetic level. After Michael had one of the drug cocktails of Mario’s existentialist girlfriend, Mir-
iam expresses disgust with his stoned behavior and declares that she is fed up with such “superficialities.” His face and shirt still smeared with pie after a slapstick insert, the desperate lover promises Miriam to show her his diaries as proof of his presumed ‘deep’ oppositional thinking. Since these diaries don’t exist, Michael now needs to retroactively fabricate them during a long night shift. Self-reflexively thematizing the production of memory in the process of representation (Cooke 166), the film diegetically doubles its production of a longing for past fantasies of resistance. Going back to the moment in which the first grader deems it worthwhile to begin a diary because he can finally spell “shit,” Michael’s writing produces a subversive autobiography. With his voice mostly functioning as interior monologue rather than external commentary in this scene, the film allows us to get close to the protagonist here; however, theatricality is recuperated when he flaunts his diaries’ artificiality by titling them “the early years” and “the present.”

With its comically besmirched origins, Michael’s autobiography produces theatrical agitation that seems initially fake but turns real in the course of the performative process, aided by some more play with metaleptic exchanges. As the nightly writer imagines an attempt to escape to the West, a short-circuit created by a border guard’s attempt to play music on a confiscated Western stereo recorder causes an alarm outside. In panic, Michael’s friend Wuschel runs into the border zone, trying to protect the precious “Exile on Main Street” album that he has finally acquired on the black market, and is shot by the ABV. Since Sonnenallee is a comedy, the double album pressed to his chest stops the bullet and saves Wuschel, but nonetheless, Michael, who witnessed the incident, returns to his writing with the insight that resistance is “not a game.” In the next scene, he officially objects to military service: not just the three-year extension, but armed service as such, which would have put a definite end to his hopes regarding university studies in the historical GDR (Schult).

The reaction of the official in the film is less definite but simultaneously more menacing. Michael’s defiant insistence that his decision places him “outside” the system is answered with a cynical “That’s what you think.” The implied threat is concretized when on his way out, Michael runs into Mario, who is expected by a Stasi (secret service) official. Mario, whose record had been shaky before, was suspended from school earlier for the drug experiments, and the resulting “freedom” did not last. When his girlfriend got pregnant, the Stasi capitalized on his desperate situation; at the end of the film, their wedding in traditional dress cements the recuperation of their rebellious poses (“The family is society’s smallest cell,” reads an inscription at the door of the civil registry office). The threat of Mario’s fate indicates that, in the reality of the film’s socialist world, the dialectic of subversion and containment is
not yet undone by the stabilization Michael’s act of resistance received from its autobiographical contextualization. Nonetheless, the film suggests that his narrative production of depth did make a difference: For a moment, its overall comic narrative is interrupted by sad musical-acrobatic spectacle. Shocked by Mario’s Stasi involvement, Michael beats him up until both of them sit on the floor crying. Drowning out diegetic sound, the melancholic Graeme Jefferyes guitar music gives us a glimpse at mourning as an alternative mode of memory, in acknowledgment of the limits of fantasy.

To be sure, this disruption does not last, either. With the subsequent, comically staged death of the Ehrenreich family’s Western uncle Heinz, the aroused sadness is rechanneled and the film’s overall humorous mode resumed. Negotiating the official’s (realistic) threat regarding Michael’s future with his, and the film’s, own fantasy of (real) resistance, Sonnenallee concludes by displacing the spectacle of subversion into the realm of play once more. The film’s grand finale affirms the fantasy, if not without emphasizing its counterfactual-ity already on the diegetic level. Inspired by love (diaries in hand, he finally got to kiss Miriam), Michael once more resorts to the “power” of his productive “imagination” (Allan 115) when Wuschel despairs upon discovering that the replacement “Stones” album he acquired on the black market had a fake label. Stubbornly insisting that the music they hear is authentic Western rock, Michael performs the “verbotenen” song with an imaginary guitar. Reluctantly at first, the friend joins in and, standing on a Sonnenallee balcony, they finally become pop stars. In musical fashion, their performance inspires the diegetic audience to go along. Soon, almost the entire cast of the film dances on the street, ‘rocking’ toward the wall in an imagined gesture of social liberation. Still comical rather than heroic, this concluding fantasy scenario includes Mario with his wife in their wedding clothes and the police officer, who was cleaning the street in underwear, having been degraded after the border incident with Wuschel.

Flamboyantly antirealistic, the presented image of ‘verbotenen’ pleasures presents less the GDR as “Hippie-Republik” than a ‘Hippie’ fantasy of its performative dissolution into a realm of social liberation. As we have seen, Sonnenallee is overall not nostalgic in that it champions the fantasy of a better society, but at best in Bach’s ‘modernist’ sense of a nostalgia for the long-
ings of the past—critically twisted, however, into a fantasy of historical resistance (see Jung 275 on the novel). Through the ways in which Sonnenallee mixes these longings with ‘postmodern’ detachment in its theatrical aesthetics of spectacle, as well as its narrative configuration of that spectacle, the film deglorifies rebellion and insists on the power of social containment in actual life. Simultaneously, however, Sonnenallee’s celebration of playfully productive theatricality also endorses the fantasy of subversive performance—as a forceful fantasy—by imagining it as victorious in the end. Thus, the power of ‘free’ narrative play is defended, if only for the realm of the imagination, against the knowledge of how it is constrained by convention even here, and channeled into an imaginative intervention into postunification historiography. The liberties taken in freeing the film’s concluding fantasy from the weight of historical reality constitute the major difference between Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin!, where the GDR is not dissolved into an imaginary realm of liberation but into the regime of D-Mark and McDonalds.

**Historical Integration**

*GOOD BYE, LENIN!*

While Sonnenallee to some degree united East and West German audiences in their shared post/modernist appreciation of GDR spectacle, it was not taken up internationally; distributors argued that the film contained too many evaluating what we have seen in terms of personal memory: “Once upon a time, there was a land and I lived in it. And . . . it was the best time of my life, for I was young and in love.” However, the seemingly immediate (not-so-modernist) nostalgia of these words is bracketed not only through their fairy-tale framing but also by the accompanying music and camera work. As we hear East German star Nina Hagen’s 1974 hit “Du hast den Farbfilm vergessen” (You forgot the color film), which bemoans the resulting grey memories of a beautiful vacation on the Hiddensee island in the Baltic Sea, the film color fades into black and white as well. If thus apparently claiming the colorful ‘truth’ of the past lost in its ‘deficient’ representation, this concluding play of sound and image simultaneously highlights the decisive character of technological mediation. Furthermore, audiences with a GDR background could decipher additional layers of irony transforming the scene’s seemingly straightforward longing for the past into another example of Sonnenallee’s modernist longing for the (resistant) longings of the past. Namely, neither Hiddensee vacations nor color film were readily available in the controlled, shortages-afflicted economy of the GDR, and the song’s seemingly personal drama could thus be read as a veiled political critique. (If I recall correctly, this reading was first suggested by Cathy Gelbin; personal conversation.)

43. Cafferty describes Sonnenallee as a “unification-text” (269) because the film found one-third of its audience in the former West (254). However, precisely these statistics also point to substantial asymmetries, given that the former Western German part of the country has roughly three times as many inhabitants as the former East.
specific references for non-German viewers (see Rinke 26). However, the significance of such references has also been noted for Wolfgang Becker’s 2003 *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Allan 118), which was not only the biggest German box office hit since the fall of the wall but also became a global trademark of contemporary German cinema. Rather than as a simple matter of access, my reading explains *Good Bye, Lenin!*’s transnational marketability with the ways in which it aesthetically, and politically, departs from *Sonnenallee*, making it into a better fit for the (projected) desires of global mass audiences in the first years of the twenty-first century.

In many respects, both films are very similar in their combination of humorous spectacle with historical fantasy and their flamboyant theatricalization of narrative discourse. Nonetheless, history plays a different role in *Good Bye, Lenin!* , mediated by—and mediating—different forms of narrative integration. Whereas *Sonnenallee* embedded plot development into its unfolding spectacle of GDR society, *Good Bye, Lenin!* embeds GDR spectacle into its unification narrative. As readers may remember, the film plot spans the year between the political protests at the occasion of the GDR’s fortieth anniversary in October 1989 to unification. Alex, the teenage protagonist and homodiegetic narrator, relates these events through the focus on a family drama. Alex’s mother was on her way to the state’s official birthday celebrations when she accidentally observed her son’s arrest during the accompanying protests, leading her to suffer a heart attack and fall into a coma. When she finally awakes, having missed the fall of the wall and major parts of the unification process, the doctor warns that all agitation could be fatal. Alex decides to protect his mother by shielding her from the changing historical realities. More and more inventive, he reconstructs the GDR on their apartment’s “79 square meters” (as the film’s tagline has it). Rewriting current events in homemade television programs, he fights the intrusion of ongoing systemic change by means of the counterfactual imagination. In this way, the film intricately interweaves the restaging of the GDR as spectacle with its focus on a chain of public events that audiences know as actual unification history.

The representational claim advanced through this construction does not straightforwardly come at the expense of theatricalizing playfulness. No less than *Sonnenallee*, *Good Bye, Lenin!* highlights film discourse. While techniques of metalepsis are less prominent, the homodiegetic voice-over is even more regularly present than in *Sonnenallee*, and the film flagrantly uses montage techniques—that is, the other major paradigm of overt narration in mod-

44. With more than six million viewers in Germany alone, *Good Bye, Lenin!* was sold to more than sixty countries (Finger 44), won multiple European awards, and was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film.
ernist film—for developing its historical satire. Furthermore, self-reflexivity is also generated by the extensive presentation of television and film as representational technologies on the plot level. In seemingly paradoxical fashion, however, this heightened theatricality is bound up with a realist project. Previous scholarship has discussed the latter primarily in terms of the film’s alleged nostalgia, citing Becker’s use of documentary and pseudodocumentary GDR footage in its consumption with “authentic details” (Kapczynski 86). However, much of the film’s apparently authentic GDR footage is, in fact, explicitly theatricalized—and ultimately deconstructed as ‘false’ memory trapped in the ideological self-representation of state-supported socialism. Meanwhile, the film’s own project of (differently ideological) realist narrative does draw on techniques of documentary authentication in individual scenes, but primarily it employs the number one Hollywood formula of realism: ‘classical’ narrative form in the sense of White’s mode of historical representation, which “feigns to make the world . . . speak itself as a story” (“Narrativity” 2). My reading details how this narrative realism in part competes with the film’s flamboyant discourse theatricality, and in part—short of simple dichotomies—is also supported by it, as the film develops, but ultimately subjects the postmodern game of (phantasmatically sovereign) narrative to the naturalized authority of history.

A major difference between Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! is the operation of the voice-over. In the past tense throughout, Alex’s commentary constantly underlines the distancing force of time. Thus, Sonnenallee’s humorous exhibition of enjoyable attractions is displaced with a harsher satirical critique. As a teller, the narrator uses his distance from the events and memories shown for problematizing and ridiculing them much more systematically than Sonnenallee’s self-exposing narrator. Also in contrast to Sonnenallee, where voice-over and images worked primarily to support each other, this satire unfolds through incongruity. In the montage sequence that summarizes the eight months Alex’s mother spends in a coma, for example,

45. In analogy to Brecht’s epic theater, Eisenstein’s concept of a “montage of attractions” (inspired by early cinema) programmatically underlines the “tendentious selection of, and comparison between, events,” and thus admits to rhetoric as a means of intended persuasion (Eisenstein 26; Bordwell, Narration 238; see 235). Eisenstein develops narrative performance as an explicitly conflictual configuration by juxtaposing “incompatible elements,” knotting “motifs into clusters” and employing repetition to create “echoes . . ., amplifications and insistencies” in the “play of associations” (Rohdie 33, 36, 42).

46. While only the unfolding of the film performs this deauthorization (see below for details), already the introductory sequence explicitly frames its grainy home footage by introducing it on a small screen surrounded by black. Like/as a photo album come alive, it slowly expands to take over the entire film screen, drawing the spectator into a world of personal memory ultimately shown to be unreliable (see also Böhn 253).
Alex’s voice-over narration labels the documentary footage shown in ways considered inappropriate by mainstream postunification discourse. Cross-referencing GDR language, he disrespectfully verbalizes the dismantlement of the wall as a “gigantic . . . recycling campaign [Altstoffsammlung]”\textsuperscript{47} and describes footage of Western politicians singing the national anthem as a “classical concert.” In other moments, an ‘inappropriate’ image accompanies Alex’s inconspicuous—that is, mainstream postunification—discourse. Thus, “the first free elections” in March 1990, which to the surprise of many were won by Helmut Kohl’s conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), are represented through footage of flag-swinging crowds hailing the unification chancellor.

The critical narrative developed through such contrast between images and voice-over discourse is directed at both the GDR and the process of unification. While the figure of the ‘sleeping’ mother repeatedly evoked in Alex’s narrative summary contrastively accentuates the overwhelming speed of historical change evoked in the quick succession of images, the montage also unfolds the ironic counterpoint that the new social forms fall short of bringing true change. When Alex relates how the socialist “Helden der Arbeit” (heroes of work) became unemployed and his sister dropped out of business school for a job at Burger King, for example, her Employee of the Month picture (see figure 3), which the interventionist camera ‘proudly’ pins onto the apartment wall, highlights the capitalist ‘discipline and reward’ techniques that replaced the socialist dispositif of worker distinction.

Similarly, the film satirizes East as well as West German society, and consumerism in general, through its framing of GDR material culture. Unlike Sonnenallee, which juxtaposed fetishized Western jeans with malfunctioning East German household technology, Good Bye, Lenin! in fact features prototypical objects of ostalgia, notably the famous Spreewald pickles Alex tries to organize at the request of his mother. But while the references to familiar brand names may enable glimpses of enjoyment (see, e.g., Kapczynski 80, 83), the narrative contextualization and visual mise-en-scène of Alex’s search for Spreewald pickles parodistically diminishes the longing at stake and disables any sustained indulgence—not to mention any “identifying with the products” (thus Finger 54)—on the spectator’s part. With the intention of repackaging Western pickles for his mother (a scheme that will work just fine; authenticity is not in the product itself), Alex searches for a GDR pickle jar in the trash. In this scene, the elderly neighbor, an actual diegetic agent of ostalgia who

\textsuperscript{47} “Altstoffsammlung” specifically connotes the GDR’s state-prescribed efforts at heroic resource collection. In West Germany, recycling would have generally been referred to by the English term.
Figure 3
Film still, Good Bye, Lenin! Copyright Wolfgang Becker, X Filme Creative Pool GmbH.

Worker of the Month
ARIANE and RAINER
misunderstands Alex’s search as a desperate search for food, becomes the object of our laughter. The parody reaches its climax when Alex finally finds his jar in an unexpected place. Practicing for her nursing exam, his girlfriend had put him into a cast and left him helpless in the bathtub in a fit of rage about his constant preoccupation with the family charade. In one of the film’s few slapstick scenes (this form of humor is overall less pronounced here than in Sonnenallee), we observe how Alex struggles to get out of the tub—and, in the process, accidentally spots a dirty old Spreewald pickle jar holding some used painting utensils in a bathroom corner (see figure 4). Theatrically highlighting the dramatic moment, a series of still shots draws us closer and closer to the—absurdly banal—spectacle of the desired object.

Whereas the longing for GDR products is thus staged as contingent and laughable, Good Bye, Lenin!—like Sonnenallee—acknowledges the difference made by the (explicit) narrative development of performance in that it supports the identity-constituting pleasures of historical fantasy in a more sustained way. With the help of Dennis, a Western friend with filmmaking ambitions, Alex more and more imaginatively realizes a fictive “third way’ between real existing socialism and western capitalism” (Böhn 255), creating “the GDR I might have wished for.” After Alex’s mother has escaped onto the street, for example, where she could not avoid noticing the influx of things Western, their homemade GDR television evening news rewrites the 1989 exodus of GDR citizens via West German embassies as an exodus of frustrated, unemployed West Germans into the GDR. When despite all of his antiagitation efforts, Alex’s mother later ends up in the hospital with another, probably fatal heart attack, he decides to “end the charade.” “[I]n contrast to real life,” he turns another birthday celebration for the GDR into “a dignified Good Bye”48 by having Erich Honecker resign in favor of Alex’s childhood idol, the cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn, whose experience in space has, as Alex imagines, provided him with a different perspective on the world. Lovingly staged with flea market props, Jähn’s first speech declares the opening of the wall because socialism is “about reaching out to others”; relabeled November 1989 footage follows. Whereas Michael Ehrenreich fantasized about political subversion, Alex’s narrative video performance thus resists history in a more ‘positive’ way. As he, in fact, imagines a different society, he pays tribute to the significance of past GDR experiences. Primarily concerned with his mother’s health, however, he does so as a means of quieting rather than stirring political discontent—arguably also in himself, and in effect both Eastern and

48. “[E]inen würdigen Abschied.” The subtitles translate too loosely: “the send-off it deserved.”
Figure 4
Film still, Good Bye, Lenin! Copyright Wolfgang Becker, X Filme Creative Pool GmbH.
Western audiences ‘unhealthily agitated’ by the unification process or its capitalist outcome.

Alex’s rescue fantasy for new and old Westerners dissatisfied with the historical downfall of a systemic alternative to capitalism is enabled by the force of media technology and theatrical rhetoric. Implicitly drawing on postmodernist critiques of representation (and concomitant fantasies of free play), the voice-over muses at some point that historical “truth” is a “rather dubious concept” that can be “easily adapted” to established perception with the help of a video camera, some editing equipment, and immersion into GDR news program rhetoric. The trouble is that, in the logic of the film’s narrative, Alex is wrong here. Overall, to be sure, Good Bye, Lenin! endows the eloquent and male (if young) past-tense voice of its protagonist with a significant amount of authority, especially where it operates—like in the above-quoted montage sequence—in quasi-documentary, momentarily disembodied fashion. However, the attribution of such authority goes against the convention that, in cases of doubt and incongruity, “seeing is believing” in film’s two-track representational system (Chatman, Coming to Terms 136). In several crucial scenes of Good Bye, Lenin!, the film’s images in fact work to question Alex’s take on the story—and through their configuration, the film ultimately develops its narrative in part against its narrator.

Arguably, this deauthorization begins as early as in the film’s exposition. While the narrator, from his retrospective vantage point, diminutively describes the military parade at the occasion of the GDR’s fortieth anniversary as the “last performance of an oversized shooting club,” this banalizing insistence on the mere theatricality of state power is counteracted by the staging of the parade as rather threatening in its strict military formation. The sequence on the crushed protests later the same day unfolds the implicit suggestion of reading GDR state power in more serious terms than suggested by the narrator, whose take is in line with Sonnenallee’s comedy approach. Here, the film follows a code of restricted theatricality. While the narrator momentarily provides mere explanation instead of flamboyant commentary, the visual presentation of the events emphasizes dark colors in what the accompanying film book describes as meticulously reconstructed lighting. Only the melodramatically accentuated red dress of Alex’s mother betrays the film’s claim to reality for its “ghastly” mise-en-scène of the march and the following lineup of protesters in jail in an “almost uncanny” atmosphere of “fear and insecu-

49. See, e.g., Bruzzi 52; Nichols, Introduction 107, on such authority generators.
50. My translation. The English subtitles (“the members of the world’s last great shooting club paraded outside our house”) do not capture the theatrical implications of the original German: “die letzte Vorstellung” of an “überdimensionierter Schützenverein.”
In the course of the film, this serious take on the GDR is further authenticated by plot development. Alex’s mother herself eventually confesses that she has performed her role as a committed socialist out of fear rather than actual devotion to the East German state. As the audience now discovers, Alex’s narrative has not just been linguistically inappropriate on occasion but also unreliable in crucial diegetic matters. When his father stayed in the West in the late 1970s, he did not do so because of another woman, as Alex told us, but because of the parents’ shared emigration plan that the mother did not dare to follow through with in the end. The mother’s confession—of “the biggest mistake of my life”—dramatically reemphasizes the theme of oppression in the film’s representation of the GDR, counteracting any indulgence in more conciliatory memory we may have entertained in the meantime.

However, both Alex’s onscreen behavior and his voice-over narrative, which is never adjusted to accommodate the new information, suggest that he is reluctant to learn. Apparently, he has become so enamored of his own fantasy that he is unwilling to part with it even after his mother’s confession has shattered the legitimation basis of his charade. Despite his own political disillusionment with the GDR featured earlier in the film, the ways in which Alex unfolds his historical fantasies suggest that he has not fully moved beyond the heroic ideologies of his childhood. Back then, the film’s introductory scenes showed, Alex was a television spectator himself, the arduously watching subject of ideological interpellation, eager to serve “the benefit of mankind” in the footsteps of his idol Jähn, the country’s heroic space explorer figure. Later, as his charade gets out of hand, he comments that he “felt like the commander of a submarine in the North Atlantic whose trusty [kampfer-probe] steel coat is leaking” while he is fighting a “sharp west wind.” Alex’s ‘inappropriate’ rhetoric of military heroism positions his effort at rewriting history as an adolescent fantasy of omnipotence; in this way, the voice-over’s theatricality deconstructs Alex’s own undertaking in the film. His accompanying rhetoric of nature, however, is indirectly backed by the film’s overall narrative. Thus, the heroic fantasies of a megalomaniac youth are outdone by “the powerful tide of Westernization” (Kapczynski 82), the (quasi)natural force of history’s facticity (rather than the force of social convention, as in Sonnenallee). Stating what the film has already shown to be obvious, the narrator himself eventually contradicts his earlier claim to the adaptability of historical truth by emphasizing that the land of his fiction was “a land that in reality never existed in this way.” Thus, the interplay of plot development and narrative discourse reintroduces the distinction between fact and fiction with a vengeance.
Nonetheless, Alex’s voice-over continues to be ethically as well as factually unreliable (see Kapczynski 85); more precisely, he is misreporting as a consequence of misreading and misevaluating (see Phelan, Living to Tell 51). While he justifies himself with the words “I believe it was a good thing she never learned the truth. She died happy,” the audience has caught a glimpse at how without his knowing, Alex’s girlfriend tried to explain the situation to his mother before her death. Lara was critical of the charade throughout the film not only because it took so much of Alex’s time. When, for the mother’s birthday, Alex had adapted not only the biography of his sister’s Western boyfriend as needed but also Lara’s—solely for additional effect—she charged him with deliberate lying. Whereas in Sonnenallee, the counterfactual imagination served to produce liberation gestures, it invites moral charges of ‘false’ theatricality in Good Bye, Lenin! Thus, Alex’s performance of socialism, which is well intended but turns autocratic in moments of stress (see Boyer 376), doubles his mother’s long-term conformist charade, which she retrospectively evaluates in terms of her having “lied” to her children as well. In line with Hayden White’s classical discussion of historical narrative, the narrativization of events thus subjects the protagonist to a moral order—although the film’s judgment constitutes gentle admonishment rather than harsh rejection. Despite her anger, Lara remains on Alex’s side, and the mother’s initially confused, then inquisitive and tentatively amused glances at Alex during the performance of his final television show suggest that she may have in fact died happy, if in appreciation of her son’s loving care and imagination rather than in historical ignorance.

In this way, the film narrative develops its project of phantasmatic integration through the “work of mourning” (Uecker 194). At the end, the united film cast—including the Westernized father and the nostalgic neighbors—assembles to disseminate the mother’s ashes with a fireworks rocket visually resembling the one that Alex built as a kid. The scene simultaneously puts Alex’s fictive GDR “to rest” and includes its memory into a “founding myth” that unites “Germans in the new Federal Republic into an imagined community” (Cook 211; see also Uecker 190). Thus, there is some space for counterfactual memory, as long as it is ‘properly’ framed and narratively integrated.\(^51\)

Politically, the conciliatory conclusion allows for some continued flirtation with the anticapitalist fantasy that Good Bye, Lenin! has offered its (national as well as transnational) audiences exasperated with contemporary neoliberal realities and ideologies. However, the film’s configuration of such dissatisfac-

\(^{51}\) The film’s concluding shots return once more to the pseudo-archival home video footage from the beginning, which showed the mother’s devotion to socialist life, while the voice-over situates the images as coming from the protagonist’s own fictive motherland.
tions quenches any desire for rebellion, channeling (modernist) nostalgia—for the hope for a different future—into the acceptance of actual history as a path toward national unity and capitalist order. Sonnenallee, in contrast, refused ‘armed’ historiographic service, instead indulging in the (explicitly phantasmatic) imagination of spectacular rebellion.

The difference is, thus, in the detailed configuration of techniques of narrative performance in the individual films. In Good Bye, Lenin! flamboyant theatricality enables historical play but is also put to the service and—at moments—contained in favor of authoritative narrative realism. The intricate combination is summarized in the film’s use of the title-giving bust. One of German cinema’s first digital attractions (see Good Bye Lenin: Ein Film 154–55), Lenin’s spectacular flight is observed by Alex’s mother during her unsupervised walk on the street. An instance of playful excess, the scene seems to lack proper narrative integration in that it is never worked into Alex’s imaginative rewritings or otherwise contextualized through any discussion of Lenin’s role as a founding father of socialist ideology. However, the sight of the flying bust, which for a moment approaches the spectator—aligned with the mother—with its hands stretched out in an inviting manner, only to then be flown away into the remote distance of the sky, presents a succinct mise-en-abyme of the film narrative as a whole. In that sense, it does fulfill its diegetic role as a spectacular sight that entices the audience to accept the dismantling of the East.

Conclusion

My readings in this chapter have begun to develop the aesthetics of narrative performance by specifying different techniques and effects of theatricality. All of the films discussed programmatically combine theatricalization with narrative integration, underlining that a theatrical aesthetic does not equal the prioritizing of self-reflexivity over other forms of sense-making often associated with postmodern culture. While even more radically avant-garde productions have remained marked by the intimate interlocking of “[r]epresentation and skepticism about representation” arguably characteristic of postmodernism itself (Gibson, Towards 71), these ‘smart’ films made in Germany around 2000 are clearly more interested in the (playful) making than in the deconstructive unmaking of histories and thus develop their techniques of narrative perfor-

52. See also Kapczynski 86 and Cook 211. This does, however, not equal “Free-Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism” (thus Cook’s title). As argued above, consumerism is parodied in all of its versions.
mance in the service of an imaginatively rich, layered storytelling. I started with Kutluğ Ataman’s Turkish-German drama *Lola und Bilidikid*, which presents not only a paradigmatic case of transnational cinema from ‘location Germany’ but also an exemplary site of film-historiographic debate on the function of spectacle in narrative. Working through these debates (in order to move beyond them), I unfolded the twofold operation of such spectacle—here specifically in the forms of gender drag and the theatricality of melodramatic and comical mise-en-scène—as it both constitutes sociosymbolic narratives in the service of—in this case culturalist—ideology and critically reconfigures them. As I argued, these reconfigurations are developed as a Bakhtinian dialogic play of images through the film’s emphasis on visual artificiality (including the performance of masculinity as well as femininity), which puts claims to realism on hold. Furthermore, techniques of doubling—that is, the production of difference in similarity—in characterization, the use of props, etc., serve to superimpose the film’s tragic scenarios with comically livable, if outrageous, alternatives.

The chapter’s following two readings pursued how widely the effects of narrative performance can diverge even within the frame of the aesthetics of filmic theatricality pursued in this chapter, and within a subgenre of thematically related films, in this case the so-called unification comedies. While both *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* similarly highlight film discourse through prominent voice-overs (along with metalepsis and montage, respectively), “Sun Alley” configures its techniques of flamboyant commentary into a joyful fantasy of subversive—notably, narrative—performance as a medium of defiant countermemory, even as the film insistently analyzes the ‘real life’ power of convention and containment. In *Good Bye, Lenin!* by contrast, the protagonist’s imaginative assertion of narrative authority enabling such freedom of fantasy is subjected to the moral order created by the naturalized—and thereby authoritative—narrative of official history. As the pleasures of counterfactual historical performance are thus integrated into real-life historical plotting, the film’s evocation of historical fantasy eventually facilitates imaginative reconciliation, to the effect of providing a narrative foundation for post-unification society.
WHILE THEATRICALIZED comedies such as Sonnenallee and Good Bye, Lenin! dominated the national film charts, literary critics and audiences focused on a related—and yet poetically quite different—figuration at the turn of the twenty-first century. Identified, by both its adherents and its opponents, as “the key to the present condition,”1 this figuration was the “new German pop literature.” The designation underlines both its continuity with and its distance from the explicitly avant-garde–inflected, politically radical 1960s German pop of Rolf Dieter Brinkmann and Hubert Fichte that had been influenced by the beat generation and Andy Warhol; Leslie Fiedler’s 1968 plea for “the arrival of the ‘postmodern’” (quoted from Ernst, “German Pop Literature” 171); and the French nouveau roman and concrete poetry. In addition, the new pop also drew on contemporary English-language fiction (Bret Easton Ellis, Nick Hornby, ‘chick lit’) and intermedia art such as the poetry slam, which had only recently been imported to Germany (see Neumeister and Hartges; Preckwitz). Contended in the feuilleton circuit while successful with audiences (see Taberner, German Literature 10), the new pop revitalized the battles around ‘high’ vs. popular culture waged before in the

1. “der Schlüssel zur Gegenwart” (Assheuer, “Im Reich des Scheins”).
1960s. Simultaneously, Brinkmann and Fichte had achieved canonical status in German literature and had become the yardstick against which the new forms were charged, by some, with being depoliticized, if not politically conservative, and aesthetically inferior.²

The charges gain their significance against the background of broader debates on literary form and cultural identity. In the process of unification, conservative critics had launched wholesale attacks against the literature of the GDR, on the one hand (starting from the debate around Christa Wolf’s complicity with the state), and politically engaged, aesthetically (post)modernist literature in the West, on the other.³ Their antimodernist pleas for a return not just to ‘aesthetic criteria’ but also to ‘narrative’—read: relatively nonperformative forms of authoritative narration—drew on the historical significance of literature for creating German national identity. Faced with the legacy of the Holocaust, forty years of separation, and ongoing processes of globalization, these critics initiated a postunification quest for reaffirming the Kulturnation as a basis of collective identity. Against this backdrop, I am interested in the new pop literature for the ways in which its allegedly Americanized forms explore performative narrative.⁴ With its techniques of copying and its “detailed, precise phenomenologies” (Schumacher, Gerade 37), the new pop specifically develops highly scenic forms of writing. This difference from (dominantly theatrical) turn-of-the-twenty-first-century film aesthetics points to the ways in which literature’s traditional association with media- tion continued to invest presence-oriented techniques with promises of radicality. Conceptually informed by the performative turn and the emergence of new media, the new pop presents contemporary variations—and in some respects radicalizations—of modernist quests for immediacy and presence. At a cultural moment overall significantly inflected by postmodernist theatricality paradigms, however, these texts simultaneously explore elements of self-reflexivity and epic distancing, resulting in intricate configurations of im/ mediated intensity. In untangling these techniques, I am ultimately less interested in (any narrowly delimited concept of) pop as such than in the ways in which it, in fact, becomes a key to present forms of writing, insofar as the boundaries around the pop phenomenon are porous, and crucial elements of

². See, e.g., Ernst, Popliteratur; Liesegang. In subsequent publications, Ernst has distinguished mainstream from underground pop, to which he attributes “rudiments” of a “subversive” form (“German Pop Literature” 170).
³. Selected texts from the debate are documented in Köhler and Moritz; see also Taberner, German Literature 1–8.
⁴. On the charge of Americanization see Taberner, German Literature 16. The most substantial critical contribution on the performative aesthetics of pop literature is Schumacher, Gerade Eben Jetzt.
the pop “method” of writing are shared also by adjacent literary forms in the literary landscape around 2000.

The trajectory of my close readings in this chapter unfolds this claim. Rainald Goetz’s Internet diary Abfall für alle (Trash for all) is generally seen as one of the key texts of the new pop movement, although it is hardly representative for all of it in that Goetz belongs to the new pop faction that remains closest to the politics and aesthetics of the previous, avant-garde–associated generation. The status of Feridun Zaimoğlu’s Kanak Sprak is more ambiguous in that the work of the Turkish-German author became associated with pop literature only in the years following Kanak Sprak’s release in 1995. This was also the year in which Christian Kracht’s Faserland was published, the text usually credited with launching the new pop—as well as representing its mainstream, that is, white, male, upper middle-class, more or less depoliticized faction. Through its primary reference to the model of rap, Kanak Sprak provides the new pop literature with an alternative—or supplementary—genealogy. My third and fourth example, Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde (Strange Stars are Staring to Earth) and Juli Zeh’s Adler und Engel (Eagles and Angels) are not generally categorized as pop literature at all; as I show, however, their performative aesthetics of memory can be productively conceptualized in terms of a broader aesthetic configuration of which the pop hype around 2000 perhaps presents but a glimpse.

Managing New Media Snapshots

GOETZ’S ABFALL FÜR ALLE

A blog avant la lettre later published as a print novel, Goetz’s Abfall für alle is the diary of—a little less than—a year, February 1998 through January 1999. The title announces a gift of worthless refuse (‘trash,’ ‘garbage,’ ‘scrap’) as a gesture of refusal. Presumably casual output (see 45), the production of Abfall is introduced by the diarist as an everyday task like that of walking one’s dog, in opposition to the writer’s “proper” work on other projects (129). For the German high modernist Arno Schmidt, whom Elke Siegel quotes in her read-
ing of *Abfall*, the diary as a genre was “einer der Abörter der Literatur” (Siegel 240), literally an ‘off-place,’ and a ‘toilet of literature.’ Goetz’s pop project receives its dehierarchizing contours by working through these cultural gestures of abjection. Drawing on the defiant gestures of the twentieth-century avant-gardes—from Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 “Fountain” urinal to the literary scraps of Hubert Fichte, who receives an explicit opening “Salut” (14)—*Abfall* transforms the “Abort” of literature into the very *Ort* (place) of post–avant-garde art: early on, the diarist finds himself taking notes for the consequently no longer casual *Abfall* output (50).

Starting from the very oppositions that delineate the sphere of ‘high’ art in the German *Kulturnation*, however, the diarist distinguishes the genre from “literature” in terms of its less ‘mediated’ way of writing (627; see also 14). While his poetological reflections privilege the scenic forms of modernism (see, e.g., 485, 489–90, 522), the diary itself radicalizes their challenge to narrative coherence by assembling heterogeneous materials bound together simply by a date. The diarist protocols the completion of shopping tasks, the neighbor’s disgusting smoke fumes invading his apartment in the lower-class district of Berlin Wedding, and bits and pieces of daily news (including the Monica Lewinsky scandal in Clinton’s America and the year’s Iraq bombings), along with reflections on his literary projects and a series of poetological lectures he is invited to give at the University of Frankfurt during the spring of that year. As he records untagged store dialogues (e.g., 68) or his—characteristically nervous, if not panicky—thoughts (e.g., 84), much of the text in fact radically performs the ‘exit’ of the narrator through the exclusive reliance on direct speech and interior monologue. Qua genre, the diary “speaks in the present of present emotions” (Abbott 16) rather than creating overview from a past tense angle. Scribbling things down even in public, at what seems to be the very moment of observation (each entry begins with the exact time of day), our diarist strives to maximize “the effect of immediacy: that is, the illusion of being there, of no gap in time between the event and the rendering of it” (28).

Goetz conceptualizes this procedure of writing as recording through intermedia metaphors. Drawing, in part, on the reservoir of older electronic media, he employs the notion of the “snapshot,” which was used by Rolf Dieter Brinkmann before (see Schumacher 126): the diarist is producing “a kind of Polaroid” of be it the outside world or “a mental state” (*Abfall* 200). Indirectly, he references Roland Barthes’s indexical theory of photography as a technol-

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8. The notion was also used very prominently in the Nazi period in an effort to rid German language of French influences (*Toilette*).

9. See Baßler on sampling and archiving as the aesthetic signatures of new German pop.
ogy transmitting “literal reality” without intermediary (“The Photographic Message” 17) in describing his writing as a predominantly passive process of “reception,” coded as feminine along the lines of the modern European order of gender (Abfall 232; see 352). Of course, Barthes himself freely admitted that the “common sense—” based ascription of “objectivity” to the photograph “has every chance of being mythical” (“The Photographic Message” 19). Like him, the diarist is fully aware of the “FICTIVE” dimension of realist representation (685; he uses capitalization for emphasis and affective charge). Furthermore, the very opposition between immediacy and active mediation breaks down where direct thought or speech functions as self-reflexive commentary. Precisely his obsession with immediate recording turns Goetz’s diary also into a space of heightened self-reflexivity (see 622) when he decides to include the text of his poetological lectures as part of the assembled scraps of life, in the place where “the text happened for real” (621), if—in the reality of the writing process—retrospectively and apparently in corrected form (see 375).

As self-reflexivity is thus folded back into the diary’s programmatic “materialism of the real” (477), however, the project remains focused on the notion of the ‘present,’ a central category not only in Goetz’s aesthetics but more generally in the 1990s pop movement.10 As Schumacher spells out, the notion attains its significance in the play between three layers of meaning: the present tense as a temporal form (Präsenz), the present (moment) as a point in time (Jetztzeit), and the idea of (physical or metaphysical) presence (Präsenz, 16, 127). If a photograph, as suggested by its indexical theory, always “carries its referent with itself” (Barthes, Camera 5), the snapshot metaphor not only outlines a realist representational project (see Abfall 234, also 268) but also promises “a certificate of presence,” radiations from “a real body . . . touch[ing me]” (Camera Lucida 87, 80). In Goetz’s text, the reproduction of the lectures is significant also as a recording of oral speech, which, according to its romantic conceptualization, has not yet “lost all connection with things as things” (Ong 91).11 The diarist entangles himself in what Derrida would diagnose as phonocentrism when he opposes “dead TEXT” to “the life of words in oral speech” (255);12 reminiscent of Fischer-Lichte, he praises the theater, in contradistinction to the other arts, as a space of bodily presence (270). However, Goetz also shares the concerns vis-à-vis such presence articulated in poststructuralist

10. Schumacher 10, linking back also to Andy Warhol; see Abfall, e.g., 654. Abfall was also published as part of Goetz’s five-volume, intergenre and intermedia project Heute Morgen (the title translates ambiguously as Today Tomorrow or This Morning).

11. On the historical genealogy of these immediacy mythologies as an effect of media technology see Koschorke.

12. See also 271, 549; compare Ong 81–82; Derrida, Speech and Phenomena.
scholarship. In particular, he posits the “authoritarian structure” of speech as opposed to writing: in the asymmetrical power configuration of the university lecture, for example, he suspects that physical presence serves to authorize the speaker’s words and to mediate collective affirmation (518–19; see also 327, 463).

It is the new media dimension of the diary project that is to reconcile these contrary charges of presence and im/mediacy. Part of the new media discourses of the 1990s, which variously conceptualized electronic literature with reference to experimental print literature and philosophical deconstruction, the diarist translates medial properties into poetological promise. Reminiscent of Ong’s discussion of “secondary orality,” that is, an orality sustained by “electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print” (11), he describes the practice of writing on the Internet as “typed speech” or “talk.”14 On the one hand, the Internet promises heightened immediacy (Siegel 241; see Abfall 357) by extending the diary’s writing principle of relative contemporaneity to the process of publication; on the other hand, presence is “Möglichkeit” (possibility, virtuality) only here in that the “specific publicity form of the Internet” consists in an “almost abstract availability” actualized only “at the request of an interest” (Abfall 357): in an interactive process of communication with the reader.15 On the writer’s side, the ‘fluid’ (see 315) mode of ‘typed speech’ accommodates a “testing, fumbling, but also impulsively explosive kind of utterance and notation that corrects, revokes itself the next day in case of doubt” (357; see Chafe on speech vs. writing): words, it seems, are ‘alive’ in a less authoritarian way in the realm of ‘secondary orality.’ Importantly, this realm is not primarily imagined as a hybrid “third space” (Bhabha; see Kacandes xx on talk fiction) in which divergent elements clash, be it to the effect that the force of simulated orality undoes


14. “getippte[s] Sprechen,” Abfall, 185. On contemporary Talk Fiction in general—as "a particular trend in contemporary prose fiction” that can be positioned as “responding to secondary orality”—see, again, Kacandes (here xii). From this angle, the diarist’s practices of capitalization reproduce patterns of speech (see Weingart 59; more generally Kacandes 21–23, drawing on Robin Tolmach Lakov).

15. See Hayles 31 on the significance of interactivity in early hypertext theory, e.g., with Landow and Bolter; also Ryan, Narrative as Virtual Reality, part III; Kacandes on interactivity as the most radical form of talk fiction, as defined through its revealed “’addressivity”’ (xiii, with Bakhtin, xvii). While incorporating the concept into his university lectures (Abfall 351), the diarist, however, does not unconditionally share the early hypertext theorists’ hopes for democratization through interactivity. Repeatedly, he also conceptualizes virtual space as one that interpellates the user into a world policed by, e.g., demands for password identification and, more generally, technological obedience (see 747, 764).
written literature, or, vice versa, that the resistance of writing undermines orality’s authenticity pathos (see Schumacher 137–39, 23). Working through the oppositions he started out with, the diarist instead conceptualizes a syncretistic space in which the blurring of media boundaries (see Schäfer and Siegel 196) allows for the emergence of new forms of literature. Looking for “textual equivalence[s]” to the features of oral speech and ways of “TRANSLATING” them into, rather than simply reproducing them in, writing, the diarist hopes to create the “Real-Lebendigkeit” (‘real-liveliness’) associated with the oral “in the text itself, directly, in the realm of mediation” (457, 668). More generally, he imagines that the “collective practice” of typed online speech will slowly change “printed speech” as well, resulting in new convergences of speaking and writing—convergences he already observes in the nonelectronic literature of, for example, the Austrian postmodernist Thomas Bernhard (185–86).

This merging of utopian immediacy with explicitly endorsed mediation (see Schumacher 32; Weingart 58) also inflects the ways in which the diarist unfolds his concept of realism in the process of writing. Supplementing his thoughts on the passivity of recording, he discusses the importance of critically revising one’s text afterward, in a process of “active, almost furious, ruthless and radical”—in short, he underlines, ‘masculine’—editing (352–53). More generally, such “energy of abjection” (53) as a force of creative production forms the other side of the diarist’s avant-garde-inflected poetological coin (see also 201, 339). In analogy to deconstructive concepts of performance, the recording (snap)shot finds its remediated contours as a hypertex\textsuperscript{t}tual act\textsuperscript{17} through the ways it is conceptualized as the “rupture of narrative” (Hayles 84). In the tradition of beat generation “Cut-Up” techniques as well as modernist shock aesthetics more generally (Schumacher 121), Abfall develops a theory and practice of “Diskurszerreißung,” of “ripping up discourse” with its radical reference to the “now” (330, 328). The electronic diarist resolves to write in a ‘more jumpy’ way, in “[b]its and pieces” (312, English in original) even in his poetological lectures, and this commitment to fragmentary organization is supported—although not invented—by the digital medium (see Aarseth, “Narrative Literature” 857–58): his hopes for the webpage design include that readers will be able to “BOUNCE in time” (97).

\textsuperscript{16} See, again, Kacandes; also Tabbi and Wutz, on the ways in which modern literatures have responded to changing media ecologies throughout the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{17} With reference to Mike Sandbothe, Wirth postulates the (necessary) theatricality of digital linking practice in poststructural terms, i.e., qua performativity of editorial arrangement (“Performative Rahmung” 403, 424). In Goetz’s text, this latent theatricality is actualized when the diarist, e.g., stages a metacritical dialogue between “Ich” and the personified voice of Abfall (182).
The critical horizon of these conceptualizations is indicated when the diarist elaborates on his “BROKEN relationship” to narrative (245) by commenting, reminiscent of Hayden White, on the “POLITICS OF FORM” (717). Necessarily doing violence to its object (737), “the formal ideal of narrative” conceals the “dispersed” side of reality perception, suturing every “rupture of reality” with a “fiction of continuity.”18 The novel specifically, he suspects (with implicit reference to the German apprenticeship novel), fulfills an affirmative function in that its typical plot interpellates the reader into the hero’s “sad story” of learning to accept his place in the world upon returning home from his adventures (351; see also 670). Vis-à-vis such impositions of social order, the diarist experiments with forms reminiscent of the medieval annals and chronicles that White analyzes as alternatives to full narrativity, recording ‘empty’ moments of time—or inassimilable experiences?—as a column of data without corresponding entries (616).

Strictly as formal play, however, such “experimental buffooneries” quickly bore the diarist (833). Like his quest for presence, his critique of narrative constitutes merely one pole of his poetological universe: Abfall für alle finds its own way of working through the antinarrativity of avant-garde performance concepts. Thus, the diarist’s rejection of narrative is complicated not only by the analytical insight that the practice of Diskurszerreißung necessarily operates in the “echo chambers” of words spoken earlier, that is, a field of meanings constituted through their usage (290),19 but also by the political concern that the radical gesture of undoing narrative does not necessarily have progressive implications. Aware that Diskurszerreißung happens also on the right-wing end of the political spectrum (432), the diarist comments rather cynically on the rhetoric of subversion advanced by cultural practice and theory in the avant-garde tradition.20 Furthermore, he finds himself psychologically challenged by the modes of the ‘fragmentary’ that he conceptually champions; “humans,” he suspects, may need “narratives, feelings, roles and dreams” (746, 219). Consequently, he supplements the model of the subversive performative breaking up narrative, discourse, and society with a plea for making “Echtgeschichten und Realerfahrungen”21 the basis of political art. Dignified by the

19. The very first diary entry marks the tension by contextualizing the programmatic gesture of “ABREISSEN” (RIPPING UP) with the writer’s simultaneous entry into “this institution—see Foucault—of everything said so far” (13; see Schumacher 128–31).
20. For example, he ironically muses whether the live techno acts of “Underground Resistance” would have had any impact whatsoever under the name of “OVERGROUND ACCEPTANCE” (141). See also 334, 357.
21. The phrase roughly translates as “authentic narratives and real experiences,” but this
authenticity modifier, it seems, narrative itself may operate in excess vis-à-vis ideology by creating productive “disorder” (450). Although the diarist’s argument is not fully developed here, it resonates with the notions of critical reconfiguration developed in chapter I: as the recording of the present rearranges oppositions in generating metonymic and metaphoric connections, ideological system is transformed into (open-ended) ideological process.22

More than just an amendment to the radical projects of performance, the diarist’s revised concept of narrative integrates the promise of performance itself, as indicated by the emphasis on ‘real’ disorder. Challenging continuity and coherence requirements, such narrative operates through the arrangement—or, with another intermedial metaphor that seems highly apt here, montage—of disruptive performative gestures of presencing; in short, as a management of leaps: “To set in [Einsetzen]. To break off. When, where, how. That is what narrative is about. . . . Narrative bounces. In the way it moves, in where it pauses [verharrt], omits, insists and finally breaks off, and sets in again, etc., it shows most strongly, both completely abstractly and in concretely visible form, how it sees the world” (188).

Virtually, this reconceptualization of narrative (as performance) also collapses the opposition between Abfall and literature. Later in the year, the diarist makes the connection: “Abfall—I suddenly think—is, strictly speaking, my second novel. . . . Characters [Personal], adventure, world, hero, life” (648). Thus, it may not be exclusively for the sake of his bank account and status with the literary establishment that the diarist retrospectively publishes a print version of his programmatically transient and dispersed web diary with his usual publisher, the renowned Frankfurt-based Suhrkamp Verlag. Subtitled, in fact, Roman eines Jahres (Novel of a Year), it presents, as a publisher’s inlay elaborates, a “diary,” “construction site for reflections,” and “existence-experiment” as well as a “history of the moment” and “novel of 1998.” To be sure, the print edition sacrifices crucial elements of the online design, as it provides a permanent version of the text in a definite, chronological order, whereas on the website, the visitor was first presented with the most recent entry. For the late twentieth-century diarist, however, whose digital experiments are of a conceptual more than sophisticated technological nature, the significance of media hardware is ultimately secondary to the poetics of production and reception.23

English rendering does not quite capture the rhetorical effect of the way Goetz emphatically fuses the adjectives with the nouns.

22. See specifically also Stierle, “Zum Status narrativer Oppositionen” 527; “Geschichte als Exemplum.”

23. The design of Goetz’s actual web diary was very minimalist; it did not make use of any images, sound, or even hyperlinks (Schumacher 113).
As he insists, not only a hypertext but also a book can be read in a mode of “floating” and “leaping” (155).

The interesting question, then, is in which ways and to what effect the print novel, which certainly continues to be part of digital literature in the sense that most contemporary literature is: by virtue of its initial electronic production (see Hayles 43), develops its hero and his adventures through its digitally inspired poetics. How does the diarist’s day-to-day snapshot montage invite the reader to construct the book’s narrative? Brigitte Weingart tackles this question in her discussion of *Abfall für alle* as a postmodernist update of the modernist “Berlin novel,” that is, a text that can be contextualized as part of the postunification search for a narrative representation of the new German capital preoccupying German feuilletons in the later 1990s. While Weingart also warns of all too quickly embracing the genre label for fear that such “centralist” readings (65) reduce the text’s dispersed character as the provocative heap of garbage as which it announces itself, my argument implies that we can, in fact, productively superimpose the two labels. The textual trash-construction site generated through narrative bouncing functions as a quest for evoking the dispersed “Realrealität” (‘real reality’) of the new German capital, which was not only quite literally an ensemble of construction sites throughout most of the 1990s but is also, in the diarist’s avant-garde-inflected language of abjection, a “VERSCHISSENE STADT” (SHITTY/FUCKED-UP CITY, 23). Insistently pointing to its “SWATHES OF FECES” (23), the diary finds its—ruptured—identity in this repeated gesture of abjection.

The diarist’s practices of capitalization evoke the intensity of his “vital sensation” of disgust, which has been phenomenologically conceptualized as “the violent repulsion *vis-à-vis* . . . a physical presence” (Menninghaus 1 [quoting Kant], 6). As Winfried Menninghaus has argued, the themes of disgust obsessively evoked in contemporary culture mediate a “return of the real” (393). In contrast to Gumbrecht’s aesthetics of presence, the ‘Real’ evoked in the mode of disgust defeats the quietist implications with which Gumbrecht charges his own theorizing. If experiences of presence ‘impose’ their relevance upon us, the diarist’s poetics of abjection does not invite feelings of “redemption” (Gumbrecht 103). Rather, presence serves an affectively grounded critique of the social (“POVERTY CREATES AGGRESSION,” 24), in which the diarist’s poor, desolate neighborhood becomes a synecdoche of the larger city (“Fucking Wedding. VERSCHISSENE STADT,” 132) or even the country (“Dreck-deutschland” 605; see also 420, 699). Moving through this space, in which “the eternal *Herrchen*”—this diminutive of “master” is the German notion for “dog

24. Weingart 50; on the Berlin novel more generally see Gerstenberger.
owner”—parade “with their Nazi-faces,” the diarist rants: “this is all simply so REPELLANT—I hate them all” (23).

Given the diary’s globally ‘networked’ character (see Weingart) and transnational pop affinities, the presence of the national theme is conspicuous. Even an election poster of Joschka Fischer, the soon-to-be first Green Party secretary of state who had initially become known for wearing tennis shoes in the political arena, is maliciously described with a rhetorical reference to Hitler’s 1933 rise to power: as showing him “shortly before (his) takeover” (Machtergreifung 479). “[S]orry,” the diarist adds, underlining the historical association precisely by marking it as inappropriate. With these references to Germany’s fascist past, Goetz positions himself in ongoing debates about national ‘normalization.’ In the course of the 1990s, claims for such ‘normalization’ had begun to shape public discourses beyond their earlier association exclusively with right-wing thinking (see Taberner, German Literature xiv, xxi). Established novelist Martin Walser provoked a controversy on the status of Auschwitz in Germany’s political memory with his acceptance speech for the 1998 Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels, in which he translated his desire to no longer be confronted with painful memories of German fascism into charges of instrumentalization. Explicitly commenting on the affair, the diarist evaluates Walser’s call for closure as premature, pointing to the continued presence of the past in everyday life, for example, the name and demeanor of his building’s janitor, Adolf (709). Cynical about the possibility of political change in his country, the diarist does not feel like getting out of bed on the day after the actual election that ended sixteen years of conservative government (615; see 611). Writing in a pre–September 11 world of pop-cultural affiliation, he, at best, locates hope on the other side of the Atlantic: emphatically, he describes the Frank Sinatra line “and did it / my– / way” as the essence of “DEMOKRATIE. American style” (313–14).

“In German,” the diarist adds, “this sentence reads, equally beautiful in its own way: not me / I didn’t [ich nicht]” (314). Implicitly, the performative aesthetics of rupture as abjection as such is provided with a national tag here. In doing so, however, the diarist also points at his own embeddedness in the postfascist configuration he analyzes—and, as I will suggest in closing here, the limits of his own critical reconfiguration project in Abfall. While he clearly articulates his dissent vis-à-vis the national normalization projects of his contemporaries, the diarist cannot configure his hero’s resistance but through the

25. Kreienbrock, whose Abfall reading exemplifies the deconstructive preferences of most performance scholarship, uses the Walser controversy (documented in Schirrmacher) as proof of his claim that Goetz is interested in “formal qualities” rather than “content” (230). This opposition simply does not hold.
'German' insistence on negative gesture. Correspondingly, he also insists on the 'asocial' nature of writing (e.g., 128) and opts against the "path of social entanglement [gesellschaftlichen Verstrickung] and intervention" that he discerns, for example, in the quintessentially national poet's—J. W. Goethe's—classical quest for the "novel of life" (361). Repeatedly articulating his aversion against all collective identifications (e.g., 138, 150, 221, 295), the diarist turns not only against new affirmations of the national but, with his favorite theorist Niklas Luhmann, also against alternative assertions of any "particularity of difference—I am gay, black, woman" (167). While the 2000s have brought a transnational comeback of this position, its Luhmann-based, antihumanist articulation in Goetz's text from the late 1990s indicates less a move beyond postmodernism than the ways in which significant factions of the German intellectual scene resisted the emphasis on difference throughout its academic career elsewhere. Although the diarist does acknowledge that the "insistence on marginality" has a political function, he insists that it fails to make sense of the (implicitly general) situation at hand (167)—and thereby forecloses the path of imagining democratic narrative acts that would reconfigure collective identity through difference and similarity.

Insisting on the analytical marginality of questions of gender, sexuality, and race, the Abfall diarist unwillingly aligns himself with precisely the national configuration he rejects so forcefully: the dominant tradition of conceptualizing national identity in terms of homogeneity and the simultaneous "denial and obsession" specifically with matters of race in postfascist Germany (El Tayeb 29). Racism never really comes into focus in the diarist's critically realist snapshots of either his thoughts or his daily affairs around the neighborhood, which is, next to the Kreuzberg featured in Lola und Bilidikid, one of Berlin's traditional immigrant districts. In recording the presence of Germany's past, he mostly bounces across—elides—the signs of transnational traffic constituting it, and the contemporary Realrealität of the Turkish-German minority in Berlin Wedding can be inferred only from a few, mostly nega-

26. On these national inflections of theoretical discourse see Winthrop-Young, as referenced in chapter I. Without, again, underestimating the transnational dimension of theory production, it seems significant that (postmodernist) constructivist positions found their most influential articulations in German academia through theories that deemphasize group difference, namely, apart from Luhmann, Friedrich Kittler's media theory, and Jan and Aleida Assmann's theories of cultural memory.

27. The few exceptions provide hints rather than full-fledged discussion. An entry titled "Dauerkolonie Togo e.V." ("Permanent Colony Togo Registered Association," 439—technically the name of a local gardening association) seems to present an implicit commentary on the nationalist responses to a World Cup soccer game recorded the previous day. While West Berlin's weekend and summer garden settlements are generally called "Kolonien," this specific association was founded in 1939 as part of the Third Reich's colonial propaganda (see Aikins).
Evoking Presence—In Mediation

To his credit, the diarist also repeatedly reflects on the role of “ressentiment” and “hatred” in his own thinking (123, 137, 703). Nonetheless, his “mad” realism of writing “photographic ecstasy” (Barthes, Camera 119, italics in original) in the mode of abjection does not escape the German predicaments he diagnoses.

Posing for Presence

The Voices of Zaimoğlu’s Kanakstas

Although Goetz’s 864-page recording of 1998–99 overall reads as a quasi-encyclopedic compendium of contemporary German literature, Feridun Zaimoğlu is not mentioned anywhere—unless the nameless “Türken-Dichter” (literally, “Turk-poet”) “lolling in a chair” on television on page 155 happens to be he. This would certainly seem plausible. A few years after the publication of Kanak Sprak (Kanak Speech), Zaimoğlu was on his way to broader fame, with his image about to be transformed from that of an ‘ethnic’ voice in German literature to the provocative enfant terrible of new German pop (see Cheesman 83–85), before his most recent novels, especially Liebesbrand (2008), would bring him a more serious literary reputation (see Greiner). The story of the new pop literature itself, however, has generally been written as a story that begins with Faserland (1995) by Christian Kracht, whom Goetz met during the Abfall year (555). “Christian” and his friends form the “Kiepenheuer” faction of new pop literature (based on their Cologne publisher, and as opposed to the more radical “Suhrkamp” group to which Goetz himself belongs, 647). After hanging out and drinking with them, the diarist is full of admiration for their suits and overall sense of style. Through a marketing focus on the Kiepenheuer group, new German pop literature was established as the sound of a generation interested in sex and drugs more than the Holocaust or political activism. In fact, the Kiepenheuer faction’s works present a highly exclusive subgroup of this generation, as they stage primarily the voices of affluent (or at least credit-worthy), Western, educated, white males. In left-wing responses to the conservative postunification calls for a return to ‘narrative,’ these texts have been criticized for ‘selling out’ to precisely such new narrativity (Ernst, “German Pop Literature,” 177–78). The charge is at best partially accurate insofar as their scenic, everyday-recording–based poetics resists tighter forms of plot construction. Not quite as apolitical as

28. See the theatricalized, albeit programmatically unironic, group ‘manifesto’ Tristesse Royale, which was reviewed very critically by Zaimoğlu (quoted from Ernst, “Jenseits von MTV” 148).
it claims to be, however, this Kiepenheuer pop variously explores the possibility of affirming collective identities in postunification society (see, e.g., Liesegang): the title *Faserland* is a word play on the English ‘fatherland.’ Along with the national leitmotif in Goetz’s ‘Suhrkamp’ online diary, this summary indicates that to a degree, the new pop in fact receives its contours as a specifically German trend also thematically. A closer look at Zaimoğlu’s *Kanak Sprak* confirms this diagnosis in some respects but simultaneously allows me to tell a supplementary story, emphasizing those often elided transnational relations of contemporary pop literature that exceed reference to popular Anglo-American ‘chick lit’ or Andy Warhol.

While later Zaimoğlu works were picked up by Kiepenheuer as well, *Kanak Sprak* was published—in the same year as *Faserland*—with the leftist Hamburg Rotbuch Verlag. It presents precisely the kind of political project from which the *Abfall* diarist distances himself: the assertion of difference as group identity. “Kanak” is a German hate speech term for “foreigners from a Southern country” or “brown-skinned people.” As Zaimoğlu claims in his preface, it has been resignified by the “guest worker children,” who use it with “proud defiance” (9) for constructing an ethnic identity in response to immigrant experiences of social exclusion and ghettoization (11). Often used to refer to Italian, Spanish, and Greek ‘guest workers’ in the early phase of post-war West German labor immigration, the notion “Kanak” has more recently been directed primarily at people of Turkish and Arabic descent, thus pointing to the superimposition of general xenophobia with more specific racialization processes. As the marker of a new, albeit still “primarily negative” self-confidence and collective identity, Zaimoğlu suggests in 1995, “Kanak” identities can be seen in analogy to the Black consciousness movement in the United States (17).

*Kanak Sprak* presents these identities through a series of first-person portraits. Variously identified by name, age and their socially marginal occupations (“garbage worker,” “unemployed,” “drug dealer”), different “Kanakstas”—as Zaimoğlu also words, extending the African diaspora analogy—thus speak in ‘their own voice.’ The category of (literary) “voice” has been controversial in narrative theory. In highlighting “the act of narrating” (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 26), it inscribes the drama of political representation into narrative theory: it poses questions not only about who speaks but

30. Ibid. Sociological studies highlight statistically low educational achievements and exceptionally high unemployment rates in Turkish and Arabic immigration communities, compared to both their peers in other European countries and other immigrant communities in Germany (Şen 221; Stanat et al.).
also from what spatial, temporal, and ideological location, with what authority, and in which language something is uttered in a text. The prominence of the category in African diaspora (see Jablon 112) and feminist literary theory challenges the poststructuralist critique of voice as a ‘phonocentric’ metaphor that carries “implications of possession, property, authority, identity, source, or origin.” Thus, Derrida’s account of the Western tradition as one privileging orality over writing downplays the ways in which orality has also critically functioned as a site of racialized otherness in the grand narratives of modernity (see Julien; also Jackson, *Professing* 200). In African and African diaspora studies, the often damnatory, sometimes romantic attribution of orality has been rewritten as a source of authenticity but also critically repositioned for the contemporary age of ‘secondary orality’ (see Julien). As long as we remember that the notion of voice is in fact a metaphor with respect to literature, it does not have to privilege oral performance as a locus of presumed immediacy. Zaimoğlu’s construction of literary Kanak voices specifically acknowledges the poststructuralist warning that ‘writing’ — as both media technology and, metaphorically, the weight of discourses preceding the speaker — is always already “interior to” voice. However, the metaphor of voice also supports the complementary move of insisting that — as my reading of *Abfall* has begun to explore — modernist and contemporary forms of scenic and theatricalized narrative are coconstituted, rather than merely disrupted, by orality in the sense of a poetological insistence on presence, embodiment, spontaneity, addressivity, and articulation context.

Conceptualizing voice as a “composite and quotational” entity (Aczel, “Understanding” 598) and “a site of crisis, contradiction, or challenge” (Lanser, *Fictions of Authority* 7) also answers the poststructuralist concerns about authority and identity. Rather than holding on to models of presumably sovereign speech, the staging of narrative voice in Zaimoğlu’s text brings into focus how “‘discontinuity . . . and alterity’ are always ‘working upon’” literary voice, as the poetic act of *prosopopoeia* figures the marginalized (Kanak) subject by evoking “a deictic center of subjectivity.” With Bakhtin, the voices

31. Gibson, “And the Wind . . .” 645; see also *Towards*, 166–72. Lanser begins by underlining that “for the collectively and personally silenced the term has become a trope of identity and power” (*Fictions of Authority* 3). Gibson himself acknowledges that his plea against the concept is complicated by feminist critiques (see *Towards* 156–65).

32. See also Aczel, “Hearing Voices” 494; Blödorn and Langer 54 — if, arguably, a “metaphor we live by” (Jahn, “Commentary” 695).

33. Gibson, *Towards*, 169 (he does not make the complementary move of emphasizing also the ‘hybridity’ of writing; see, e.g., 146).

34. Ibid., 169 (quoting Derrida); Aczel, “Hearing Voices” 467; see Blödorn and Langer 74, 80.
of Zaimoğlu’s Kanakstas read as complex acts of internal dialogism (see Julia Abel) in that they appropriate words “overpopulated” with “the intentions of others,” ‘ventriloquizing’ (Bakhtin 294, 299; see Aczel, “Understanding” 599). In resignifying hate speech concepts for Kanak articulation, Zaimoğlu’s text explores a multifaceted terrain of “double-voiced discourse” (Bakhtin 324, italics in original), the effects of which include not only an assertion of agency against hegemonic voices but also more complicated interlockings of dominant and marginalized discourses.

In his preface, Zaimoğlu announces a variation on the aesthetics of recording by describing the following texts as “‘protocols’” from the “Kanak ghettos” (15). The notion of protocol comes with quotation marks in Zaimoğlu’s text. Rather than programmatically claiming (‘photographic’) transmission without mediation, the author states that he provides “translations,” or “free adaptations,” of “Kanak Sprak”: a “construction” of “reality” undertaken in his desk chair (17–18). This embrace of theatricality in the sense of active mediation does not prevent him from making a claim to ‘authenticity’—if in quotation marks as well (18). More fully than the Abfall diarist, Zaimoğlu displaces the tension between mediation and the real that governs modern European epistemologies. In describing the authentic through the attribute of coherent, and thereby visible, aesthetic form (18) rather than the rawness of direct recording, he also provides the dominant uses of realness in African diaspora culture with a twist.35 Folding presence and theatricality into one another by basing the authority of “presence” on the act of ‘showing’ (14) rather than the identity presented, Kanak Sprak asserts authenticity as the effect of—culturally mediated and artistically developed—stylization. Dominantly in the present tense, the monologues are more systematically theatricalized than the Abfall diary not only through their authorial framing as “Kanak Sprak” but also in that the individual monologues have the form of explicit self-dramatizations addressed to an audience. That is, they are written as—within in the presented fictional frame, oral—commentaries on Kanak identity and experiences. Whereas critics have categorized the (not primarily plot-based) monologues as only a ‘weak’ form of narrativity or even “dissolution” of narrative (thus Julia Abel 301–2), their heightened experientiality certainly justifies describing them as a specific form of narrative (performance). Crucially, my insistence allows me to show how the monologues not only attest to the particular identity troubles of minoritized subjects (ibid.) but quite forcefully assert identity—through the authority of reconfiguration—from within the (general) condition of its postmodern critique.

35. For a critique of this notion see Lewis.
The aesthetic model credited for this narrative production of minority presence is the “Free-Style-Sermon” of “Rap”—a form of performative speech that the author explains to his readers as generated by a “pose” complete with suitable facial expressions and gestures (13). In the written form presented in the book, this theatricality of speech is produced through radical abandonment of all capitalization (usually required also for nouns in German), except at the beginning of sentences; a loose regime of punctuation, which generates a breathless rhythm; highly colloquial language; and flamboyant metaphors. Notably, very few of the unusual linguistic images are translated Turkish idioms. In order to avoid the “folklore trap” (12), Zaimoğlu intentionally restricted linguistic import from that language, instead ‘creolizing’ German through the interplay of regional dialects with standard German and the transnational lingua of rap (13; see Yildiz, “Critically ‘Kanak’”). If Kanak Sprak has, from a retrospective vantage point, coconstituted new German pop literature, its reference to the model of rap implies a critical challenge to the—only presumably dehierarchizing and inclusive—forms of hegemonic pop (see also Ernst, “Jenseits von MTV” 157). Thus, the first ‘protocol’—titled “Pop is a fatal orgy”—presents the voice of a rapper who describes the “egalit” created by pop as an “illusion” based on standardized “cheap” dreams (19–20). In contrast, another voice (identified as “Ali” from Da Crime Posse, an actual German hip-hop group) argues, “public enemy” signaled the glimmering of “the epoch of true culture” (27). Emphatically, Ali defines this true culture through its communication of a political “message” and highlights the importance of hip-hop’s oral form in a social situation in which reading and writing amounts to “luxury” for many, “in yankeeland . . . in the ghettos” (27–28).

As indicated here, rap provides the Kanaksta with “a direct connection to the black man” (27). Zaimoğlu’s figuration of cultural identity through African diasporic reference underlines recent conceptual reworkings of diaspora as a conscious practice of transnational articulation marked by differences as well as similarities rather than an orientation toward a shared “homeland” (Brent Edwards 11–15). Through their (metonymic) link to ‘the black man,’ Zaimoğlu’s Kanakstas (metaphorically) articulate shared discrimination experiences based on ongoing racialization processes. Using American hate speech terminology, a flea market dealer heftily words that

we are all niggers here, we have our ghetto, we carry it everywhere, we steam foreignness

36. Zaimoğlu does not use the more politically inflected notion of hip-hop. On the significance of the model in Kanak Sprak see, e.g., Loentz.
"ländisch" . . . our own style is so damned nigger that we scratch our skin like crazy, and in doing so understand that it is not the pitch skin which makes the nigger, but a ton of being different and a different life. (25)

Along with commonality, this performance of racial abjection indicates difference: despite the racialization of Turkish-German bodies, hegemonic regimes of looking do not identify them with those of the African diaspora, who have been the primary targets of racist violence in postunification society. While Zaimoğlu’s Kanakstas articulate their solidarity with the “Africa brothers” thus targeted by “white-ass-grumblers” (80), they also distinguish their own “Kanak” identities from them precisely by reiterating racist abjection. Immediately after the passage quoted above, the flea market dealer describes the “nigger tour” as the “dirty” version of the “kanak tour” (26).

In both academic and political discourse, Zaimoğlu’s theatrical constitution of identities in Kanak Sprak has been charged with reinscribing racist hate speech, including also Nazi vocabularies of dehumanization, which surface when, for example, a Kanaksta derogatorily describes himself as “a poor kanak louse” (89; see Cheesman 94; Hobuß on the debates). On the most general theoretical level, the debate underlines the political instability of performative resignification processes as such. Since the act of displacing an established meaning is always necessarily incomplete, the quotation of hate speech to different ends risks reiterating hateful effects. In line with some theoretical discourse on resignification, Zaimoğlu responded to the charges by pointing to the importance of positionality, defending his right to use the words in question because of his own ethnic background (see Cheesman 97). Without downplaying the significance of positionality as such, this answer can be productively complicated by moving the theoretical problem of performative resignification into the more concrete realm of aesthetic practice. Here, we have to not only distinguish the positionality of the author from that of his textual voices; we also must take into account that the Kanakstas’ use of hate speech may resonate differently where they speak about African bodies and identities as opposed to their own. More generally, it is crucial how precisely the rhetoric of hate is arranged in a text—voice matters with respect not only to who is speaking but also to the narrative configuration this speech establishes.

The quoted passage in which Akay, a flea market dealer, first associates and then distances his own positionality with and from the ‘n-word’ in fact reemploys classically racist—and fascist—discourse by defining a positive

37. Butler, Excitable Speech; see Cheesman 93–94, specifically on Zaimoğlu.
group identity through the opposition of cleanliness vs. dirt. Arguably, his gesture of abjection also points at the composition of the entire book in its aggressive construction of an exclusive community. While heterogeneous in some respects, the different Kanaksta voices sound like a unified chorus in others. For example, they construct their ethnic identity through performances of ‘vigorous’ male masculinity, with the exception of one male-to-female transsexual. 38 However, the narrative context established in the flea market dealer’s monologue, as well as the larger book, also brackets the Kanakstas’ gestures of exclusivity and abjection by positioning them as a (helpless) response to the dominant climate of German society. Creating some distance from the “posited author or teller” (Bakhtin 312), the (implied) author showcases the genealogy of Akay’s aggression in his despair about not being able to escape the force of discriminatory projections, which invade even his dreams (25). 39 Immediately following the attempt of distinguishing a “clean kanakentour,” Akay himself acknowledges the fruitlessness of that endeavor by adding, “whatever you do, you can never wipe the foreigner [fremdländer] off your puss [aus der Fresse]” (26). Linguistically defined as a stranger even in the Kanaksta’s ‘own’ speech (always already invaded by “alien” utterances; Bakhtin 294), the immigrant subject himself is figuratively identified as dirt that needs to be washed off. Zaimoğlu highlights this sentence, which performatively undoes the preceding attempt of conceptually ‘cleansing’ Kanak identity, by making it the title of the entire monologue, which finds its conclusion in the diagnosis that “the country depresses [drückt] your own style” (26).

As hateful “contexts inhere in certain speech acts in ways that are very difficult to shake” (Butler, Excitable Speech 161), the words used here may “stubbornly resist” their reappropriation (Bakhtin 294) for more positive configurations of identity. In this situation, the Kanakstas’ theatricalized commentary on the processes of discrimination, the negativity of which deeply resonates with the Abfall diarist’s poetics of abjection, produces violent revisions of identity short of any grand-scale liberatory gesture. Because of the ways in which Kanak Sprak combines emphasis on the theatrical pose—as the very precondition of the immigrant subject’s powerful presence—with a clear-cut narrative of marginalization, I nonetheless believe that the text

38. In response to respective criticism, Zaimoğlu published a supplementary, somewhat more intellectual all-female volume in 1998: Koppstoff. For a critique of the misogyny and homophobia inscribed in Zaimoğlu’s literary masculinity performances (mostly in other texts), see Schmidt.

39. Distancing herself strictly from the notion of the implied author, Julia Abel discusses the distancing at stake as irony (308, 311). However, we are certainly not dealing with oppositional irony (or even parody) here. Only partially distancing, the theatricalization of Kanak abjection instead provides explanatory contextualization.
is overall successful in critiquing, rather than merely repeating, racist hate speech, with the caveat that the potentially hurtful effects of violent language can never be determined outside their concrete reception by flesh-and-blood readers. However, several of Zaimoğlu’s more recent texts—specifically *German Amok* (2002) and *Leinwand* (*Canvas/Screen*, 2003)—offer much more disturbing reading experiences. From one angle, these texts present radicalized aesthetic and political experiments: with protagonists and narrators who uneasily negotiate the claims of different collectives, they critically question precisely the production of exclusive, ethnicized communities undertaken—if self-reflexively—in *Kanak Sprak*. But in conjunction with an aesthetic shift toward more mainstream models of pop, precisely this reconfiguration of narrative voice also increases the risk that the racist utterances featured in the text are understood as plain hate speech.

*German Amok*, which I will use as my example here, is the character narrative of an artist with a Turkish background whose primary group of affiliation is a (postunification) West Berlin, mostly majority-German alternative art community. Unlike the Kanakstas, this narrator uses hate speech not primarily for describing his own marginalized positionality but in ranting against (other) people of color. Unable to identify with either the majority-German art crowd or the Turkish-German community, as well as frustrated by his lack of success as an artist, he articulates violent revenge fantasies. Like the *Abfall* diarist, he hates the city he lives in, but unlike the *Abfall* diarist, he neither self-critically reflects on this hatred nor conceptually develops it as a (post) avant-garde strategy of aesthetic abjection. Instead, his sermons unfold a full spectrum of fascist rhetoric, targeting Berlin’s ostensibly multicultural, “decadent” art scene for its “gender traitors” (10) and “social (security) parasites” (13) as well as for its exoticist fascination with what it hails as ‘primitive’ non-European culture. While African diaspora immigrants are described as hypersexualized drug dealers (see 20–24, 43), religious Turks draw the narrator’s hatred as much as East German neo-Nazis; in fact, the text insistently associates these two groups of ‘Eastern’ “barbarians” (e.g., 112) in a play with overlapping discourses of orientalism, in which the former GDR features as the “Eurasian Democratic Republic” (110).

*Kanak Sprak* features a commentary that helps make sense of the configuration of hatred staged in this later text. “No seeds sown bear fruit as quickly as the seed of violence,” the poet among the featured Kanaks reminded us (111). He analyzed the aggressively masculinist reputation of his community as a result of the “obsession” to be “better than the [German] native who hammers into us very early on that only particularly beautiful, diligent, or
intelligent kanaks will make it. We have swallowed the message and obey it like the last prussians. . . . We want to adorn ourselves with the insignia of the blond supermen [übermenschen]” (113). In thus describing the psychological effects of discrimination, the garbage worker featured in the early volume even used the title notion of the later work: “the word amok is not sufficient to describe what is ranting inside me” (124). With this in mind, German Amok can be read as staging the legacy of hatred from the perspective of a narrator who has traded Kanaksta-identification for a (re)German(ized) version of fascism.

However, the later text itself does not feature an effective analysis of the mechanism in question. Where Kanak Sprak staged rap-inspired poses of ethnic self-presentation, German Amok aesthetically approaches the mainstream pop of the Kiepenheuer faction. In place of the systematic reflexivity of Kanak Sprak’s self-expository discourse, the character narrator ‘simply’ records a mixture of everyday observations and casual thoughts. This is not to say that his voice is not at all deauthorized in the text’s more exclusively scenic poetics. If character narration in general is “an art of indirection,” which “by definition creates some unreliability in the narration” (Phelan, Living, 1, 7), these virtual disjunctures between narrator and implied author are actualized in German Amok through the use of direct, untagged dialogue—that is, the insertion of other voices—as well as plot development. In particular, the narrator is explicitly called a “fascist” by others (114), and his violent homophobia is exposed as an apparent defense against his own queer desires through the series of narrated events. In rudimentary ways, narrative discourse is also theatricalized even here, for example when, halfway into the book, the part of the novel set in the former GDR opens with a passage in italics, suggesting a different narrative voice or format (110–12). However, the location of this speech act remains unclear, and since it is rhetorically congruent with the main narrating voice, no truly alternative discourse emerges. Overall, the unsystematic development of bivocality in this novel fails to effectively challenge the character narrator’s voice, whose violent rhetoric is so overwhelmingly dominant that the novel offers a highly uncomfortable reading experience. With its critical agenda remaining diffuse, Zaimoğlu’s experiment in staging hyperbolic narrative voice at best presents a drawn-out satire on contemporary German society as shaped by various interlocking processes of racialization and violent discrimination. Even more so than the Abfall diarist’s ‘Drecksdeutschland,’ this society does not seem to leave any room for productive reconceptualizations of personal or collective identity.
Emine Sevgi Özdamar is mentioned more identifiably than Zaimoğlu in Goetz’s casual encyclopedia of the German cultural world of the 1990s—although not any more positively, when he comments on the reception of the new book by “this Karawanserei-woman”: “All this shit about flowery, metaphorical language, Turkish-German, made to sound artificially naïve on top of it. horror” (389). In 1991 Özdamar had received the renowned Ingeborg Bachmann prize for her first novel, Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei . . . (Life Is a Karawanserai . . .). Seven years later, Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn (The Bridge of the Golden Horn) presented the second part of the author’s fictionalized autobiography in between Turkey and Germany. Focused on the student movement in Berlin, Paris, and Istanbul, and the resistance against Turkey’s military regime in the early 1970s, Die Brücke actually featured significantly fewer ‘flowery’ metaphors and Turkish-German linguistic play than the earlier novel with its magical realism-inflected narrative about a child growing up in mid-twentieth-century Turkey. However, the diarist’s response captures the ways in which Özdamar reception in Germany has been haunted by the orientalist tropes she had playfully evoked in her first novel ever since.

The title of the 2003 Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde (Strange Stars Are Staring to Earth), the third part of Özdamar’s fictionalized autobiography, presents an implicit metafictional commentary on these reception trends. It is a quote from Else Lasker-Schüler, whom Özdamar’s protagonist reads in the opening scene as she lies awake at night, freezing, in an unheated floor of a West Berlin factory building, home of her 1970s alternative student Wohngemeinschaft (literally, ‘living community’). On the cover of the protagonist’s edition, the early twentieth-century German-Jewish poet is praised for her “oriental” imagination (15). The cover of my own Seltsame Sterne edition shows Özdamar as she opens a bright red curtain. In conjunction with the visually reproduced star motif of the title, the image evokes less the theaters of 1970s East Berlin, in and around which much of the novel is set, than the notion of an oriental storyteller whose “marvelling eyes” (staunende Augen, back cover) suggest a lack of familiarity with, if not a naïve admiration for,

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40. With its origins in the communes of the student movement, the Wohngemeinschaft (WG) became a widespread alternative to traditional family, couple, or single households, well beyond one’s student years.

41. Konuk reads this reference more straightforwardly as proof of the protagonist’s identification with Lasker-Schüler; however, Mani also points to the distanciation effect of the cover’s invocation in this passage (Cosmopolitical Claims 104).
the German world of the novel. In response to the legacies of exclusion thus haunting the reception of Özdamar’s work, more recent scholarship has correctly underscored the importance of reading her texts in aesthetic terms rather than as primarily sociopolitical documents of migration. More than once, this scholarship has emphasized the ‘performatif’ character of Özdamar’s poetics, for example, by characterizing her style through its reliance on the conventions of comedy (Shafi 207) or by highlighting her use of the Turkish forms of meddah (storytelling) and Karagöz (shadow play), in the encounter with Brecht, in Die Brücke (Mani, “The Good Woman”). However, the aesthetic turn in scholarship does, by itself, not yet suffice to escape established culturalist reception schemata, as indicated by the repeated characterization of Özdamar’s transnational poetics as a connection of (Turkish) oral tradition with (European) modernity and literariness.

Against the background of these expectations, Seltsame Sterne has puzzled critics. More directly than other Özdamar works, this text defies the established reception clichés. Reading it as another Berlin novel, I specify its poetics of performative narration as a poetics of (critical) presentification-at-a-distance and thus situate Seltsame Sterne within the (broader) field of the German pop (rap, etc.) literary scene discussed in this chapter. I hope to have demonstrated by now that this national contextualization does not erase but merely resituates the work’s transnational genealogies. Continuing my dis-

42. For the respective reception of Özdamar’s earlier novels, see my discussion in “Meine Herren.” Although the topos of this naïve gaze has been broadly criticized in Özdamar scholarship, it has resurfaced also in the new century (see Beil 9, as well as the Seltsame Sterne reviews quoted below).

43. Most fundamentally Adelson, “Touching Tales”; see also Sheila Johnson; Shafi.

44. See Viehöver; Sheila Johnson’s comments on Karawanserei’s use of the “archaic element of Turkish traditions” (44). Venkat Mani does not entirely escape oppositional terms, either, when he words that in Die Brücke, the “centuries-old Turkish aesthetic tradition of Meddah and Karagöz” meets the “Western texts that populate the intellect of the first person narrator,” especially Brecht’s theater theory (“The Good Woman” 35).

45. Several of them have tried to read the text through and in basic continuity with the earlier novels (Pizer; Konuk). Through the protagonist’s identification with Lasker-Schüler, Konuk argues, Seltsame Sterne presents Özdamar’s continued self-inscription into a discourse of orientalism in terms of both content and style. Eliding the circumstance that Seltsame Sterne uses fairly standard German (see Mani, Cosmopolitical Claims 103), this reading is also based on problematic inferences (e.g., features such as the transgression of genre boundaries cited by Konuk are too widespread in contemporary literature to serve as indications of a specific intertextual relationship with Lasker-Schüler; see 240–42).

46. Azade Seyhan has warned of replacing orientalist exotifications with an appropriation of Turkish-German literature for German culture and historical memory (“Is Orientalism in Retreat?” 214). Whereas she therefore continues to emphasize the Turkish dimension of Özdamar’s writing, I argue that particularly with respect to Seltsame Sterne, a broader emphasis on the transnational constitution of all local cultures is needed.
cussion of contemporary German literature in the light of transnational avant-gardes, my reading specifically underlines its intermedia connections with the performative aesthetics of late twentieth-century theater (only hinted at in Goetz’s diary) as well as (post)modernist object art. Unhinging Özdamar’s transnational aesthetics from the binaries of ‘Turkish-vs.-German’ and ‘European-vs.-oriental,’ I position Seltsame Sterne in the multidirectional traffic not only across the (black and white) Atlantic but also across the Mediterranean and along the routes to Asia explored, if often in appropriative ways, by Brecht, Artaud, and their contemporaries.

Supplementing the Abfall diary and Zaimoğlu’s Kanak Sprak with a historical perspective, Seltsame Sterne is set in the divided Berlin of 1976–77. Depressed by the political situation in Turkey, the protagonist has returned to Berlin where she had lived before, during the late 1960s. While Turkey remains present as an emotionally important backdrop (see Mani, Cosmopolitan Claims 108; Ette 185–88), the thematic emphasis of the book’s memory work is on German—specifically East-West German—scenarios, 47 in the broader context of transnational politics as conceptualized from the protagonist’s emphatically internationalist perspective. Having pursued a theater degree in Istanbul, where she was introduced to various twentieth-century avant-gardes, the protagonist now intends to ‘learn,’ as the narrator puts it, “das Brechttheater” (28). As an intern, she participates in the post-Brechian experiments of East Berlin directors Benno Besson, Heiner Müller, Manfred Karge, and Matthias Langhoff. Operating on the basis of short-term (often for just one day) visas for the GDR (and for a while, after her tourist visa has expired, without one at all for West Berlin), the protagonist moves back and forth between the two parts of the divided city. In the East, she meets theater people and dissidents whose names the educated early twenty-first-century German reader mostly recognizes; in the West, she lives in the postrevolutionary student culture that, in the later 1970s, seems to gain its historical significance—especially from the perspective of the police, who pay regular visits—primarily from its connection with the terrorist Red Army Faction: “In this roof garden, there had been secret meetings between Horst Mahler and Ulrike Meinhof” (68). Depending on her generation, as well as systemic and (sub)cultural background, Özdamar’s early twenty-first-century reader may easily share the protagonist’s ‘wondering’ gaze at these worlds in that the featured milieus may be as unfamiliar to her as they initially seem to be to the...

47. On Özdamar’s earlier novels as “a complex site of German memory work,” see Adelson, “The Turkish Turn” (328); on Seltsame Sterne as an instance of Turkish migration ‘into the German past,’ see Konuk.
Turkish traveler. In other words, the trope of ethnic difference highlights the heterogeneity of national histories (see Ette 191).

In the introductory scene, the protagonist recites Lasker-Schüler’s modernist poetry in an attempt to drown out the insistently barking dog in the neighborhood who woke her up. Hoping that some water will help her fall back asleep, she then gets up. The factory floor apartment, which regularly remains unheated on weekends and holidays, is not only cold but also deserted because all the revolutionary students have left to spend Christmas with their families of origin. It is, furthermore, so big that one of her roommates has the habit of biking to the bathroom “on the cold days” (12). On her long way to the kitchen the protagonist turns on the light in all of the rooms to comfort herself and looks at the traces of her departed roommates’ daily life and habits:

In Susanne’s room there was an ashtray full of frozen butts next to the typewriter, in Inga’s room an open water bottle; the water was frozen. With Janosch, a nibbled-at \( \textit{angebissene} \) chocolate bar lay frozen on the key-pad of his typewriter, I saw the impression of his teeth on it and thought he is smiling at me. When I opened the door to Rainer’s room, the radio suddenly came on. How warm was the voice of the man speaking at the moment! I put my hands on the radio, but the cold metal was burning. On a plate, there was a bitten-into bockwurst with frozen ketchup, looking like pop art. In Barbara’s room, a box full of frozen-together candy and chocolate stood next to her typewriter, and it seemed to me as though the candy was grinning of the cold \([ \textit{als ob die Bonbons vor Kälte grinsten} ]\). In front of all doors there were shoes filled with Barbara’s candy and chocolate. (12–13)

The frozen leftovers of the students’ collectively uncommunicative junk food consumption in their work spaces and their disorderly play on holiday rituals (boots full of chocolate three weeks after the December 6 Nikolaus holiday for which they were presumably filled) give us a first glimpse at how the novel portrays their subcultural life. More generally, the introductory narrative arrangement of frozen junk food exemplarily illustrates how \textit{Seltsame Sterne}, ‘feeding itself’ on the transnational exchange of intermedia avant-garde poetics, approaches the German 1970s through a scenic presentation of perceptions, things—and, in later parts of the book, also dialogue fragments and political slogans.

As Bill Brown has suggested, the persistent fascination with objects in twentieth-century avant-garde art was driven by the “desire to make contact
with the ‘real’” (2). By virtue of their materiality, things can come across as “warrantors of presence” (Ecker and Scholz 9). The three-dimensional thing at first presents itself as an object apparently free of significations, a “place of origin unmediated by the sign” (Brown 1). In the historical context of Özdamar’s writing, such programmatic affirmations of presence have been revived not only in the Abfall diarist’s poetics but also in the postdramatic aesthetics of performance that had its local genealogy, not least, in the post-Brechtian experiments Özdamar’s protagonist saw in the making. It seems almost self-evident to position Özdamar’s poetics, with its focus on perceptions, bodily sensations, and things, at the (historical and conceptual) point where transnational pop art meets the theater forms traced also thematically in the book: as a literary analogue to Fischer-Lichte’s antinarrative aesthetics of presencing more or less desemanticized, self-referential bodies, gestures, and things (see chapter I). In Özdamar’s text, the poetological connection to the featured theater forms is hinted at when the narrator quotes critiques of Heiner Müller’s writings as “too simple” (118) and comments on Brecht’s naïveté (42), associating them with the very qualities critics have used to characterize Özdamar’s presumably foreign signature.

Quite in accordance with familiar Özdamar readings, the introductory scene’s leftovers thus read, on a first level, as unwieldy materialities that resist being mediated within the frame of fictional or historical narratives. Rather than telling stories about either heroic revolution (as the hagiographers of the 1968ers would have it) or violent extremism (as their political opponents have claimed increasingly loudly in the 2000s), they foreground fragments and layers of history traditionally excluded from political narratives. Through the force of their—imagined—sensual presence, Özdamar’s material traces of everyday life enable a bodily “countermemory” (Pizer 137), ranging from discomfort and privation—everything is frozen—to lust: in passing, the protagonist eats a piece of chocolate she found in the boots of her absent lover. But while media-ontological protocols have eased the acceptance of antirepresentational presence claims for the ’live’ encounter with bodies and objects on the stage or in the museum, the realm of literary mediation is less conducive to them, as indicated by the Abfall diarist’s reflections. Furthermore, the objects of German histories present a highly charged terrain quite obviously overpopulated with cultural significations. Like the retroworlds of the unification comedies discussed above, literary arrangements of preunification objects—not only in Özdamar—have aroused critical suspicions of uncritical surrender to nostalgia, or presentification in Gumbrecht’s sense. For the films, I argued that the complex framing of n/ostalgia clearly defies these charges, but the

48. In a particularly controversial way, Götz Aly—himself part of the movement in earlier years—has underscored the 1968ers’ unwilling complicity with their fascist fathers.
programmatic emphasis on presence in turn-of-the-century literary aesthetics complicates matters. Some critics have resolved the issue by distinguishing the (‘proper’) “method pop” with its focus on the present in both content and form from nostalgic, affirmative memory literature, for which they cite texts such as Florian Illies’s portrait of growing up in the saturated late years of the old Federal Republic (Generation Golf, 2000) and Jana Hensel’s East German equivalent Zonenkinder (2002). Moritz Baßler’s identification of archiving, or a positivistic “mania for collecting” (184), as a crucial aesthetic technique of pop literature in general, however, questions this opposition. In conceptualizing Özdamar’s literary dwelling on objects as part of her aesthetics of presentification-at-a-distance, I explore how historical memories are constructed precisely through the methods associated with pop.

In addition to the junk food leftovers of the opening narrative arrangement (to which I will return), Özdamar’s Seltsame Sterne also archives cultural objects more directly reminiscent of Illies’s Playmobil toys and Hensel’s pioneer scarves, in particular those evoking the irretrievably lost everyday culture of East Germany. For example, the narrative highlights the “five mark bill Ostgeld” with a Thomas Müntzer portrait (33), which the protagonist exchanges at the border, and the “small bottle” of mineral water “with its fat belly” (47) she buys in East Berlin. Unlike in Generation Golf or Zonenkinder, however, the procedure is not developed in a way that emphasizes comprehensive collection or representative selection. Instead, Özdamar’s practice of archiving resembles the Abfall diarist’s casual snapshots, to which it adds—metaphorically speaking—the more substantial use of a teleobject. Özdamar’s narrative camera takes ‘print pictures’ of its objects. Capturing apparently random detail in an exact fashion, it records, not least, the text written on the objects themselves and graphically arranges it through italics, paragraph breaks, and indentation:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spree Quell</th>
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49. See Schumacher 9–10, quoting Thomas Meinecke, a fellow Suhrkamp-faction colleague of the Abfall diarist.

50. Like Goetz’s diary (and unlike Zonenkinder), the text does not include pictures of the recorded daily world. It does include theater production drawings.

51. “VEP” (“Verbraucherendpreis”) translates as “final consumer price,” here attesting, of course, to the GDR’s inexpensive staple foods praised by Michael Ehrenreich.
Although Spreequell mineral water does not have the symbolic value of Spree-ewald pickles in postunification discourse, a superficial glance can in fact suspect such ‘fetishizing’ close-ups of nostalgia, especially in conjunction with Özdamar’s narrative recording also of the protagonist’s enthusiasm for the socialist project as such, which, in the mid-seventies, still constituted a shared ideological horizon for both the West Berlin radicals and the majority even of the GDR dissidents she lived with. Presentifying their revolutionary slogans along with their things, Seltsame Sterne indirectly associates the realist method of recording itself with the political struggle at hand: “Long live our awareness [das wache Bewusstsein]. Long live objective observation!” (126).

While a positive review praised how much of Seltsame Sterne was “of yesterday in an almost sensational manner” and underlined the enchantment effect of the narrator’s “warm eyes” (Bartmann), a less enthusiastic voice reiterated the complaint about her “naiven Gestus,” which refused any analysis of what is shown (Hartung). In fact, Özdamar’s character narrator seems to never operate “from today’s perspective” (Geisel). As she takes her ‘snapshots,’ the retrospective autobiographical narrator almost disappears behind the younger, experiencing self in an apparent abdication of narrative authority. Although the narration begins in the past tense, it is fairly consistently focalized through the protagonist. Occasionally, even her voice interferes through free indirect speech or direct thought recording, including momentary tense switches and deictic shifts.52 Thus, the narrative situation effectively changes very little when after a third of the novel, a shift in format is introduced, which explicitly refers us back to Abfall. As the narrator explains, she started to write a diary at that point of the story (84), with which we then are presented, to the effect of formalizing the spatiotemporal alignment of narrator and protagonist. While the reader is thus transported back into the 1970s, the effects of immediacy and—potential—nostalgia remain, nonetheless, transitory and fragile. Significantly, critics diagnosed not only ‘warmth’ and a ‘lack of distance’ but also their very opposite: “Volitionally [gewollt] naïve and cold, childlike and distanced” (Farsaie). A closer look at the text shows that the apparently hardly present retrospective narrator—who can overall be aligned with the implied author here—is quite active in the background. While her critical activity does not unfold through explicit commentary, the text features a complex management of distance that frames the diagnosed presence effects, both interrupting and configuring them. Its primary technique is the arrangement of things—or, more generally, montage—through a narrative practice

52. For example, see in the introductory scene: “Ich muss Wasser trinken” 12; “Wenn jetzt die anderen hier wären” (9, italics added).
that is less visibly jumpy but therefore not any less artful than that of the Abfall diarist. In its support, subtle modulations of rhetoric occasionally give away the critical voice mostly operating in hiding.

The introductory junk food arrangement exemplifies this management of distance. If nostalgia emerges at all here, it does so only against the background of contrary impulses, in that the sensations recorded are highly contradictory.53 The icy factory building is anything but homey, and with its half-eaten sausage as well as, in the further course of the protagonist's nightly excursion, the unwashed dishes in the kitchen and a bathtub full of used water (13), the scene participates in the aesthetics of abjection so central for the overall literary configuration discussed here. In the reader's mind, the associations evoked by the featured objects may effect the very opposite of a longing for this past, especially as mediated through prevalent cultural narratives about the precarious cleanliness standards of West German alternative culture. Of course, the reaction of the protagonist herself, which is privileged by the dominant interior focalization, is precisely not disgust. For her, the traces of the absent roommates instead transport remnants of closeness and community. Putting a finger into the cold bathwater, she recalls that her lover Peter last used it, and as quoted earlier, the impression of teeth in the chocolate on Janosch's typewriter produces the idea that he is smiling at her. Furthermore, the potentially disgusting effect of the arranged leftovers is balanced also by the (itself distancing) theme of cold: its frozen state stops the imaginatively associated decay of the sausage and makes it enjoyable again—as (pop) art.

In this play of contrary associations, Özdamar's poetics of things unfolds an excess of signification; rather than grouping into one coherent narrative, the objects multiply rearrange themselves in the process of reading (see Ecker and Scholz 13, 11). More clearly than the jumpy Abfall diary, their arrangement nonetheless invites the construction of narrative meaning. The poetic significance of the introductory scene results, not least, from the fact that the backgrounded retrospective narrator has provided the novel with more of a critical plot than will strike the reader at first glance. Reading on (or rereading), she may notice that the introductory arrangement of frozen things also serves as an exposition of the novel's larger political configuration: it finds its allegorical contours somewhere between Heinrich Heine's satire Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen (Germany: A Winter's Tale, 1844)54 and the notion of

53. Sonja Klocke has suggested that the novel's distance management targets the West German subculture more critically than the idealized East. There are in fact moments of such confrontation, but the overall configuration of critical distance and fond reminiscence is still quite balanced.

54. The repeatedly censored and banned work, which loosely documents a trip of Heine's
“German Autumn,” which was coined for the escalation of Red Army Faction (RAF) terrorism and the state’s security regime in the fall of 1977 by the film Deutschland im Herbst (Germany in Autumn, 1978). The national narrative developed here—notably through Alexander Kluge’s montage techniques—contextualized the terrorist attacks and state responses with Germany’s fascist past. In Seltsame Sterne, such a ‘national weather connection’ is explicated by Heiner Müller who, in a recorded dialogue, summarizes the contemporary political situation with the words: “Kalt ist es in Deutschland” (202)—“It is cold in Germany.”

Not unlike the Abfall text scraps, the things, dialogues, and theater scenes arranged in Seltsame Sterne sketch the image of a land shaped by the specters of authoritarian regimes on both sides of the wall. The emphasis is on the terrorist hunts of the West Berlin police and the Eastern authorities’ spying on the oppositional artists, but it is not restricted to these state-sponsored forms of violence. For example, the narrator hints at the authoritarian dimensions of the West Berlin counterculture in portraying the members of the “AA” (Aktionsanalytischen) commune of the Viennese actionist Otto Mühl, who lived on the protagonist’s West Berlin factory floor for a while. While apparently neutrally reporting on their beliefs, the ‘undercover’ narrator subtly intervenes by amassing verbs such as “sollen” (ought to) and “müssen” (have to, 10–11). This implicit commentary is underscored by the montage of plot fragments: abhorred by their conversion, the official tenant beats the commune members out of the factory floor apartment, only to afterward fall for Mühl’s charismatic authority himself (73). When the free-spirited protagonist later laments the fact that she has not found a lover in East Berlin yet, her friend Gabi Gysi55 laconically comments that “Germans like to stay among themselves” (193). On both sides of the wall, the Turkish visitor repeatedly has to cope with leftover fascist ideologies in old as well as young brains. Toward the end of the novel, Besson advises her, “Save yourself from Germany” (236), and she accepts his offer to work with him in Paris. The novel finds its closure with a narrative snapshot of ethnic and cultural diversity in the Paris Métro (247). Without explicit argument to that effect, this resolution can be read as a response to the national narrative constructed by the preceding arrange-

55. More certainly than with this successful GDR actor herself (who would leave the country in 1985), postunification German audiences are familiar with her brother Gregor Gysi, at the time one of the few independent lawyers in the GDR, who defended political dissidents, and after unification was chairperson of the reformed socialist party PDS (Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus), today Die Linke (The Left).
ment of textual snapshots. Insistently, the montage narrator’s transnational perspective has foregrounded the exclusionary force of national(ist) and racist normalcies on both sides of the wall—normalcies that belie the internationalist rhetoric used by both the East German state and the radical West German subculture. At the end, even the leftovers of revolutionary work from the opening scene may resonate as signs of cultural identity: typically German sausages and chocolate associated with a Christian holiday.

But despite this accumulation of clues for a national reading, the novel’s aesthetics of narrative performance does not provide a coherent explanatory metanarrative that would firmly ground authoritarianism and violence in national mentalities. Also, the narrator refuses to surrender to the force of negativity exerted by the analogous accumulation of fascism clues in Goetz and Zaimoğlu as well as Heiner Müller’s work. As she develops her (indirectly self-reflexive) poetological commentary by arranging Besson’s theater notes, Özdamar’s narrator champions the active, thinking recipient (43–44). Her technique of generating critique primarily through montage provides this reader with opportunities to repeatedly reevaluate the complex, overdetermined constellations unfolded. Thus, she also records warnings vis-à-vis the tendency to analyze everything in national terms, which merely fortifies existing boundaries (see 51) and supplements her presentation of German normalcies with an insistent deconstruction of any politics of national identification.

As indicated by the introductory junk food arrangement, the novel’s overall evaluation of left-wing histories is no less complexly balanced. The frozen state of the revolutionary leftovers certainly forestalls any immediate idealization of the 1970s: it reads as an allegory of political absence, or the musealization of political culture. The stalling of revolution is the topic also of the Karge-Langhoff production of J. W. Goethe’s farm burlesque Der Bürgergeneral (The Citizen General) at the East German Volksbühne, which is featured prominently in the novel through the protagonist’s rehearsal notes and drawings. In this production, which was politically scandalous at the time with its barely concealed critique of GDR authoritarianism (see Stuber 239–40), even the turkey fears the “Liberty Cap,” the symbol of the French Revolution (Seltsame Sterne 170). Beyond merely analyzing the failure of revolution, however, theater in Özdamar’s novel also functions as a sphere of play and the carnivalesque (see 88, 91, 148), which aligns it with the French Revolution, against

56. Most notoriously, see the Goldhagen controversy (Shandley).

57. For example, there is a satirical scene in which a Kurdish nationalist insists that the protagonist must be Kurdish, too, because of her beauty. He is clearly deauthorized by his subsequent fantasies about German women, along with a German who intervenes into the conversation with racist generalizations (41).
the misery of German authoritarianism. Thus, Gabi Gysi advances the claim to “expression and life” born in the French Revolution against Heiner Müller’s pessimist reading of history (202; see 117). The diarist herself quotes Müller’s famous conception of theater as a ‘dialogue with the dead’—with a difference. While he emphasizes that theater can become a space of “resurrection” only by also rendering the daily presence of death (see Heeg 91), the diarist underlines that “the dead want to live on, in order to intervene into the future plots/histories [Geschichten] of the world” (170). Not confined to the theatrical institution, this model of political theater also comes into play when the diarist praises her dissident friend for never simply railing against the state but instead asking what the state is “playing,” and what “we” can “play against it” (230). Gabi fantasizes about founding an East German “female retiree mafia” (Rentnerinnenmafia, 189). Aided by their postretirement travel privileges, the old ladies could fight injustice with uncommon means, for example, by idealistically robbing Western banks.58 Whereas Özdamar’s Müller answers this playfully anarchistic fantasy with the cynical vision of a (male) “retiree militia” that would discipline the old ladies (189), Gabi and the protagonist imagine sending them out to fight the military regime in Turkey or even that of compulsory heterosexual promiscuity into which the sexual revolution has turned in the West Berlin communal apartment toward the end of the novel.

As developed by Özdamar’s narrator with recourse to the Volksbühne milieu of the 1970s, this model of theater gains its significance as a means of ‘resurrecting’ protest life at the intersection of Brechtian and Fischer-Lichtean vectors. Although championing bodily presence—or anarchic physicality—against the strictures of representation, Özdamar’s theater does not turn against mediation, or the “word,” which, as the narrator quotes Heiner Müller, has “a great effect” specifically in the East (215). On the level of poetic technique as well, it may be this model of theatrical activation—rather than ‘unmediated’ nostalgia—that ‘revives’ the novel’s introductory verbal arrangement of frozen revolutionary leftovers. The protagonist’s ‘warm,’ loving associations, which counteract the (cold, if not disgusting) situation, are narratively developed through—implicitly theatrical—images of bodily action and lighting effects. Thus, the narrator recalls the momentary warming effect of communication within the Wohngemeinschaft: the “hot breath” of the speaker, which is personified and thereby endowed with agency, would “rip apart” the cold for a moment (10). Reminiscent of plane condensation trails, the “seven breath streets” of all seven roommates59 would function “like the light rays of

58. This may be an indirect reference to the bank robberies of the anarchist faction of the West German terrorists, the Movement 2 June.

59. The repeated evocation of the magic number adds a fairy-tale touch: realism finds its limit here.
seven flashlights in a dark [*finsteren*] night” (ibid.). Although critically balanced by the following evocation of the “yelling breath” of the AA commune (11), the scene creates a—fragmentary—fantasy of present community. Its theatrical contours emerge at the metaphorical crossroads of the (a)live body with technology (planes and flashlights). In the introductory passage quoted above, the radio voice similarly functions as a source of warmth, even while the cold metal surface of the apparatus creates a ‘burning’ sensation on the protagonist’s hands.

Thus short-circuiting contrary semantic fields, the narrator’s rhetoric implements Özdamar’s poetic solution to the dilemmas of im/mediacy with which the other diarist was struggling in the mode of explicit reflection. In her model of theatrical reanimation, physical presence and technological mediation conspire to revive the ‘dead’ things of revolution with a caveat of aesthetic and political distance. While criticizing the utter negativity of Müller’s concept of theater, Özdamar’s narrator does subscribe to this model herself insofar as the concept of a ‘dialogue with the dead’ displaces unqualified notions of performative presence with a (Derridean) insistence on the ‘ghostly’ absence always already inscribed in it. Simultaneously, Özdamar’s move beyond deconstruction can be explained by associating another famous literary arrangement of colliding metaphors of cold and warmth: the scene from Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* that served as a starting point for Paul de Man’s reflections on the undecidability of diverging readings in the literary process (*Allegories* 59–62). Whereas de Man offers a gesture of interpretative resignation, Özdamar’s complex arrangements of simple things create aesthetic space for imagining different futures implied in the memory of the past. With her unwieldy images of grinning drops and the warm smile of teeth markers on icy chocolate—in short, the presentification of frozen revolution leftovers as pop art—Özdamar undermines the polarizing grid of political evaluations that dominates postunification memories of both the GDR and the West German counterculture. Balancing presentification with historicization, *Seltsame Sterne* disrupts nostalgia but also counteracts wholesale attacks on the political heritage of the left on both sides of the wall. In their place, Özdamar’s narrative montage inserts a seriously imaginative play with colliding images, in which warm enthusiasm for the egalitarian ideals of twentieth-century Eastern and Western socialisms is fused with a cooler look at the ways in which both failed to overcome the authoritarian legacies of modern German—and transnational—culture.

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60. See Lehmann’s reading of “Heiner Müller’s specters” with Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. 
Epic Recording
ZEH’S EAGLES AND ANGELS

Decorated with almost a dozen prizes and translated into twenty-eight languages (see Herminghouse 271), Juli Zeh’s 2001 literary debut Adler und Engel (Eagles and Angels) turned its author, who was born in 1974 and already had degrees in both law and creative writing, into a literary shooting star. While critics were overall enthusiastic, the German feuilleton reviews also feature an occasional note of arrogance vis-à-vis such unusual success in the sphere of international marketing. Written according to “the tested models of the suspense novel,” Eagles and Angels, for Stephan Maus, shows Zeh’s training at the Leipzig Literaturinstitut that teaches creative writing “American style.” “Perfectly constructed” and “readable,”61 the novel departs from the ways in which contemporary ‘high’ German literature has been characterized by its critics and defenders alike, but also from the pop authors’ preference for diary-style, loose arrangements of everyday routines and objects over conventional plot figuration. The reception of Zeh’s novel as something other than pop had the positive effect of rescuing her work from being labeled as part of the so-called Fräuleinwunder (‘literary girl wonder’), through which most of the female voices associated with the new pop were trivialized (see Herminghouse 269). Without papering over the differences in poetic technique, my reading none-the-less underlines that Eagles and Angels’s narrative form resonates with the performative ‘method pop’ in important regards, showing that pop’s recording of the now is more compatible with storytelling than has been assumed.

In contrast also to Zeh’s more recent Spieltrieb, discussed in chapter V, Eagles and Angels performs its return to narrative as a return precisely not to the authoritative forms for which conservative critics called in the wake of unification. Rather, its multifaceted aesthetics of narrative performance recovers narrative as a problem. Unfolding the “hallucinatory spell of a nightmare” with its ‘breathtaking,’ “excitingly precise” prose and images “reminiscent of a Quentin Tarantino movie,”62 Eagles and Angels is both highly scenic and quite theatricalized. Narrated mostly in the present tense by a character whose memory is affected by drug use and trauma as well as intentional repression, the novel’s poetics of physical sensations awards its readers

61. Andreas Nentwich, Neue Züricher Zeitung, 6 September 2001; quoted from: http://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/6943.html; accessed 8/30/09); Maus.
62. “halluzinatorische Bankkraft eines Alptraumes,” Der Spiegel, quoted from the publisher’s website (http://www.schoeffling.de/content/foreignrights/fiction-163.html; accessed 09/04/09). The other quotations are from the German reviews quoted in the English edition (Hamburger Morgenpost; Abendzeitung).
more intense presence experiences than Goetz’s self-reflexive recordings, Zai-
moğlu’s stylized poses, and Özdamar’s implicitly distanced memories. Simul-
taneously, *Eagles and Angels* highlights narrative construction to the effect
of configuring these bursts of presence into larger narrative experiences. My
counterintuitive wording indicates the claim to be unfolded, namely that what
I describe as the novel’s aesthetics of epic presence ultimately serves less to
distance readers than to fortify their immersion into a world in which sense-
making is more terrifying than the loss of overview signaled by the protago-
nist’s elliptic gestures of narration.

Everything begins with a “Whale” (1). This title of the first chapter refers
to a comparison used by the character narrator, whom we join as he looks
through the peephole in his apartment door into “a giant pupil” (1): an eye
belonging to an unexpected visitor at his door trying to spy on him. Thrown
directly into this scene of ‘bilateral’ voyeurism, the reader only gradually
makes sense of the situation. Eventually we understand that the visitor, ini-
ially referred to only as “she,” is Clara, host of the late-night radio talk show
“A Bleak World” (55), which she herself advertises as a show for “the desperate,
the nihilistic . . . , atomic scientists, dictators and any jerk off the street” (49).
Clara has come to learn more about the story that one of her listeners, the
narrator Max, started to tell her anonymously on the phone. Max, a success-
ful lawyer and specialist in Balkan and Eastern European integration law, had
begun to self-destructively devote himself exclusively to his coke habit after
his lover Jessie died. Apparently, Jessie, the psychologically—and, according to
some of the novel’s voices, also mentally—instable daughter of a drug dealer
involved in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, shot herself while on the phone with
Max. Now that Clara has found him, she entangles Max into a sadomasochist
relationship organized around the fight for Jessie’s story. While he is desper-
ately struggling to forget but simultaneously obsessed with the past, she per-
sistently plays his need for communication against his resistance. Clara, who
is also a student of psychology, wants the material for her thesis. The novel
combines the present-tense account of their struggle with the results of the
initiated process of memory work: the past-tense tapes that Clara makes Max
record.

Retrospectively, the whale-eye moment of bilateral voyeurism thus turns
out to be the foundation of narrative, a gender-balanced variation of Mul-
vey’s sadist story. Prior to all larger connections, however, it finds its form
as the introductory close-up on an (imagined) ‘live’ object or grotesquely
distorted body part (in the German original, the giant pupil is also ‘wide-
angled and twisted,’ 9). More so than Özdamar’s object close-ups, Zeh’s fore-
grounding of physicality produces effects of decontextualization through the
delay of narrative information. At least momentarily presenting—as Fischer-Lichte would have it—the desemanticized object in its “phenomenal being” (*The Transformative Power* 141), the novel attests to the power of literature to produce such effects through aesthetic technique beyond the condition of physical copresence. On one level, *Eagles and Angels* receives its nightmarish spellbinding force from this foregrounding of the body. The prominence of the organic continues to be indicated by chapter titles, which feature, for example, “Moths,” “Piglet[s],” “Snails,” “Flies,” and “Pigskin.” Throughout, the novel aligns us with the perceptions of Max, who rarely reflects on things and instead indulges in recording physical processes (see Falcke), including the presences of snot, sweat, blood, etc., abundantly produced in the course of his days devoted to cocaine intake (e.g., 11, 20, 31). Zeh’s (authorial) reader thus actually experiences the sensations of abjection that the *Abfall* diarist observed in himself. Repeatedly, we are reminded that its entire present-tense plot is set not in ‘German winter or autumn’ but in unbearable summer heat, thereby fully developing the aesthetics of disgust in which, along with trauma, Menninghaus has located the “return of ‘the real’” in contemporary culture (393). In contrast, again, to Gumbrecht’s quieting presentification, the novel thus produces thorough discomfort. If disgust, as Menninghaus suggests with Aurel Kolnai, implies a “normative and quasi-moral moment,” as it apprehends “something that *should* not be, at least not in proximity to the one judging” (5, italics in original), Zeh’s spellbinding gestures of presence may simultaneously produce distance, initiating a critical response mediated by emotion rather than rational insight.

If triggered by (the) presence (of the abject), however, this critical response is developed through the ways in which Zeh’s presence stimuli are combined with techniques of theatricalization and plot configuration. Gradually, the spellbound reader understands that its organic images, many of which are introduced as comparisons in the first place, also have decisive metaphorical functions in the emerging story. A second group of images points to violence with indicative chapter titles that name predators: “Tiger,” “White Wolves,” “Eagles.” Both snails and tigers are featured in the stories that Jessie tells, and of which the reader hears, although they are never fully related to us, even while Jessie herself is introduced as an embedded narrative agent, whose discourse is directly reproduced on Max’s tapes in long, partially untagged paragraphs. As it turns out, Jessie’s animal tales configure horrors that by far surpass the implications of their literal meaning: during the Bosnian war, her father abused her innocent appearance by making her prepare war refugees and rape victims as drug carriers (see 226–28). Be it in response to her traumatic experiences or because of her alleged ‘sickness’ (see 90), Jessie has
developed an alternative method of relaying her experiences. As she fails—or refuses—to ask “any questions about what it meant,” or to connect her memories to media information to which she must have had access (224), significance and connection are established poetically, through the fragile, argumentatively inexplicit links of metaphor, metonymy, and simile. This practice of poetic recording, however, shapes the entire novel because Max lovingly recalls Jessie’s world and systematically numbs his own conventionally analytical faculties, and even the editorial instance (whom we can hold responsible for the chapter titles) mimics his discourse.

Pursuing the tracks of figural connection, the reader herself participates in assembling the novel’s stories. Thus, the introductory whale prefigures the corpse in a garbage bag that Max finds at the end of the novel (281), and the tigers, of whom Jessie talked on the phone right before dying, point to the Serbian paramilitary units operating under that name, whom she had to watch doing their murderous business during the war (10, 37, 221). They may or may not have returned in the embodied form of headhunters: if Jessie has not in fact committed suicide, she was killed by her father’s own troops after she sided against him in an internal drug ring conflict (see 301). The title-giving eagles are established as a metaphor of highly sensitive, traumatized perception when Jessie claims to have “the ears of an eagle” (234). “Eagles,” Max objects, “don’t have ears” (234)—a feature that links them to the Bosnian victims whose ears Jessie saw being cut off, as well as Max’s own ear that was injured when he heard the shot killing Jessie through the phone. Angels, meanwhile, feature as a metaphor for blandished, possibly euphemistic speech (“the tongue of angels,” 127), antithetically integrated into Jessie’s world when she describes nudibranchs, which look like cut-out tongues to her, as “[t]ongues of angels” (139). “Eagles and angels” is the image Max associates when Clara looks as though her consciousness was communicating with heavenly forces after he fed her with coke (248). The association is foregrounded not only as the title of the book but also as that of one of the chapters. In this chapter Max and Clara visit with an artist who uses corpses delivered by Jessie’s father as models for his plastic busts, which are famous for their “anatomical realism.” In this way, Zeh’s poetic practice of configuration becomes a medium also of metanarrative self-reflexivity, suggesting that the novel’s own artistic recording is implicated in the gruesome world it depicts through its intensely physical presentification of deadly affairs. Beyond these metaphorical hints, such self-reflexivity is developed also in the overall plot.

63. The novel’s particular obsession with comparisons is observed by Maus.
64. German edition 333; the English translation has “hyper-realism” (245).
configuration in that the scene of detective-style investigation is unfolded as a plot in its own right, which takes up more narrative space than the uncovered story itself and revolves around narrative also thematically.65

Zeh’s techniques of theatricalization, however, are not limited to the foregrounding of narrative construction through highlighted figuration and such play with self-reflexivity. The most conspicuous element of the novel’s form is the way in which Max’s (and, by an additional degree of mediation, Jessie’s) traumatic re-enactments66 are developed through diegetic rather than straightforwardly mimetic discourse. Despite the occasional use of interior monologue and untagged dialogue, the reader is not primarily provided with direct “enactment” (Chatman, *Story and Discourse* 182)—except on the tape recordings that short-circuit the mimetic and the diegetic by delivering Max’s monologues as the novel’s primary instances of ‘proper,’ past-tense narration. The almost constant visibility of narrative mediation explicates the act of communication within the novel’s scenic poetics. While most of the dialogue is tagged, the novel’s most characteristic feature is indicated in the introductory door scene. Rather than directly presenting thought or perception (‘What is that? A whale eye!’), we get an action and perception report: “I approach the peephole with one eye and look directly into a giant pupil.”67 Occasionally, Max’s voice even goes beyond the function of reporting, indirectly addressing the audience with, for example, an explanatory comment about coke consumption: “There are times when it just doesn’t kick in, when you have to take a break” (22).

Using J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* as her case study, Dorrit Cohn has begun to conceptualize the “deviance” of such simultaneous character narration, which emancipates “first-person fictional narration from the dictates of formal mimetics, granting it” a “discursive freedom that we take for granted in third person fiction: the licence to tell a story in an idiom that corresponds to no manner of real-world, natural discourse” (“‘I doze and wake’” 19). As Phelan points out correctly, the “mimetic standard” at work in Cohn’s account can be questioned (“Present Tense Narration” 227), but Zeh’s reader might in fact wonder about the circumstances of enunciation and the exact spatiotemporal relationship between the action and the act of narration. At moments, the use of temporal summaries can tempt us into natural-

65. Pyrhönen suggests that detective fiction as a genre “invariably includes an overt preoccupation with its own formal and thematic characteristics” (103).
66. See Kacandes, “Trauma Theory” 616, on how such reenactment has been contrasted with narrative memory.
izing the present tense as a historical present simply chosen for the effect of added immediacy. However, the proliferation of “now[s]” (e.g., 3) characteristic of pop literature (see Schumacher 51) and of elliptic cuts (withholding summary) insistently reconnect the act of speaking to the moment of action. Later in the novel, the narrator’s reflections on his inability to remember not only the events around Jessie’s death but increasingly even the time spent with Clara foreground that the reader—who has just read what he claims to have forgotten (249, 214)—in fact needs to imagine the process of narration as a simultaneous recording: a second layer of ‘tapes’ nowhere pragmatically anchored in the fictional world.

In not only consistently foregrounding narration but also repeatedly underlining its precarious nature (see, e.g., also 254), Zeh’s novel departs from the rule of “discretion” about the circumstances of enunciation that, according to Cohn, generally facilitates the acceptance of simultaneous narration (“I doze and wake” 20). Consequently, the reader may be startled, and it seems that Zeh’s aesthetics of diegetic recording would likely produce Brechtian distancing effects. Furthermore, the reader’s immersion is endangered by the fact that Max’s reliability is repeatedly questioned, even beyond his forgetfulness. Thus, he himself comments on the fact that regular coke consumption leads to paranoia, as well as affecting one’s ethical judgment through pathological personality changes (51, 167). In a moment of anger, Clara calls all of his memory work the “ramblings of a psychotic junkie” (310), and in fact, the reader needs to account for the possibility that the entire nightmare unfolding in the book could be a drug-induced phantasmagoria. However, it is difficult to sustain such fundamental doubts throughout the reading process; after all, *Eagles and Angels* is, like Zaimoğlu’s *German Amok*, dominated by the voice of its problematic character narrator. More likely, the reader will naturalize the strangeness of the narrative situation—including the disorienting play with approximation and distance between narrator and protagonist—by explaining it in terms of drug- and trauma-related splits within the experiencing and narrating self.

68. For example, “I have kicked her out, but the door bell rings again ten minutes later” (17). See Fludernik, *Towards* 250, 263; Cohn, “‘I doze and wake’” 16, on that strategy of resolution.

69. Thus, momentary effects of ‘external’ focalization in Genette’s sense (which, as narratologists know, is unsystematic; see Bal, *Narratology*; Phelan, *Living to Tell* 110–14) can be explained by the fact that Max sees himself from the outside: he has trouble controlling and feeling sensation in his own body as well as accessing his mind, and he self-protectively derealizes his perceptions (e.g., 2, 6, 93).
report as a more ‘immediate’ recording. In this way, the book may achieve its spellbinding power not only despite but also through its techniques of distanciation. In the long run, the reader’s suspension of disbelief—the concept from theater and cinema studies nicely underlines the novel’s ‘filmic’ poetics (see also Wehdeking)—is also supported by her story construction results: Max’s apparently paranoid conclusions about narrative connections (51) are verified as diegetically correct observations on the state of the world.

Max is obviously unable to perform as an authoritative teller, but the (authorial) reader makes do with him as a recorder of bits and pieces of story information—and in doing so constructs the presented world as a nightmare. Beyond the national confines of Goetz’s and Zaimoğlu’s German miseries, it unfolds as a terrifyingly globalized world in which drug traffic financed the war and genocide in former Yugoslavia, before the routes of that traffic moved north in conjunction with the “EU expansion into Eastern Europe” (318). All of this happened under the protection of the major EU- and UN-affiliated law firm for which Max has worked. In the attempt to cover up and, in the moment of disclosure, justify the cooperation, his boss resorts to the rhetoric of “non-intervention” and “human rights,” “international law,” and the prevention of “World War Three” (228, 274–75). Since Max is barely on better terms with such newspaper language than Jessie was, the significance of these implications of transnational institutions and humanist discourse into genocide is not analytically evaluated in the novel. Perhaps the reader will merely experience that the “calming” function of “the workings of the law,” which the boss highlights in the beginning of the novel (14; see also 269), dissipates. Her reaction would then resemble that of Max, who answers the disclosures by recording physical experience: “The air in the room was growing thin. I felt slightly dizzy” (275).

Under the spell of dizziness, the effects of the Brechtian epic are thus drawn back into the orbit of phenomenological presencing, and the techniques of approximation and distanciation, desemanticization, and configural sense-making converge in a poetics of disturbance, in which a critical response—in contrast to Brecht’s program—is produced in the mode of sensation rather than thought. After the conversation with his boss, Max, who is deeply implicated in the horrors uncovered himself, stays put, “simply breathing, hoping never to form another coherent thought again in my life”.

70. In addition to his work for the firm, Max is also directly (co)responsible for the death of one of the drug dealers, Shershah. Jessie loved Shershah, but one night she asked Max to shoot him, either because she didn’t recognize him (and felt threatened) or because she felt betrayed by him (see 321). When Max, who did recognize the rival, in fact tried to shoot him, Shershah ran into a truck on the street and was killed.
In one of his few philosophical moments earlier on, he had mused that “it’s human nature always to want to know everything,” but that “it really should be common sense to refuse to comply with that demand” (195). Max’s turn away from forms of narrative that generate conscious, coherently articulated knowledge is certainly understandable. In addition to the sheer terror inscribed in the uncovered connections and the specter of personal guilt overshadowing them, he is also confronted with Clara’s abuse of narrative’s power. Cynically, she worries that the healing effect of narration, about which she has learned in school (that’s “first-semester material”), could rob her of her pathological object before she is done with her thesis (128). Highlighting the cold function of narrative in the generation of institutional knowledge, which is, in Clara’s person, furthermore indissolubly intertwined with the commercial worlds of popular entertainment, the novel inverts the affirmative conception of narrative in contemporary psychology and medicine. As it turns out, Clara has even made a deal with the drug dealers to protect her work environment (see 309).

By staging this configuration, Zeh’s novel holds on to ‘postmodernist’ distrust vis-à-vis narrative even as it powerfully returns to plot making. The few clues given that invite a more analytical evaluation of the configured story fit with the postmodernist label as well, as they gesture toward a Derridean deconstruction of legal institutions as invariably estranged from any idea of justice but performatively affirmed by their employees as a quasi-religion (83, 125–26; see Derrida, “Force of Law”). The “higher meaning of world order” is available exclusively with chemical support—upon doing cocaine again for the first time after taking a break.71 Through the ways it balances the unmaking and making of sense, however, Eagles and Angels certainly does not propagate the kind of postmodernism that advocates radical play or subject dissolution for their own sake. Instead, the novel works through deadly serious affairs of narrative world constitution and subjective identity. Zeh’s aesthetics of epic recording thus attains its contours as an aesthetics of precarious narration, in which the artfully immersive configuration of epic gesticulates any comfort there might be in closure. To be sure, there is an element of symbolic closure: the novel ends in a powerful thunderstorm that finally washes away the oppressive summer heat. Max, however, just stares into that rain while he waits for the drug dealers. He has accidently found the computer code with which Jessie had locked everybody else out of the drug ring’s central information database before her death (Max had forgotten about all of

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71. German edition (“Sinn der Weltordnung” 58); not quite captured by the English translation as “proving that all is right in the world” (36).
this until now). By delivering the code to the police, he could have caused a major scandal that would have made “a few people get jailed for genocide” but would also have been the end of the EU (322). Faced with this imbrication of justice with institutional dissolution, Max instead tries to bribe the drug dealers into returning Clara, who may have simply left him after she finished her thesis, to him. Whatever the outcome of his foggy scheme, the ‘bad guys’ will certainly not end up in jail—and Max himself not safely in drug rehab, either. In Zeh’s brutal, apocalyptically tinted narrative world of war and globalization, there is, in fact, little promise for healing, and no poetic justice can make up for Max’s failure to translate dizziness into critical action.

Conclusion

This chapter has pursued the ways in which turn-of-the-twenty-first-century German literature, as dominantly characterized through the poetics of pop, along with adjacent forms, challenges authoritative forms of narration. It does so through its performative aesthetics, which is distinguished from that of contemporary film through its programmatically scenic, presence-oriented forms, but also interweaves these with techniques of theatricalization indicative of the latter’s overall cultural influence in the 1990s. My readings underline metaphors from the visual and new media arts used in the texts themselves or by their reviewers, to the effect of conceptualizing these configurations both in analogy to and as constituted through the active exchange with medial forms that have traditionally been described as performative. Simultaneously, I show how these intermedia affiliations serve to constitute contemporary literature as such—as an ensemble of techniques of narrative performance with widely diverging effects on its readers’ affective and critical engagement. A blog *avant la lettre* later published as a novel, Goetz’s Internet diary *Abfall für alle* draws on the model—more than the actual technologies—of new, as well as older, electronic media in developing its project of a recording of ‘the Real’ of unified Germany’s ‘shitty’ capital; his gestures of abjection gain their significance as a dissenting alternative to Gumbrecht’s quietist conceptualization of presentification. On its quest for presence—developed, not least, through poetological self-reflexivity—the diary showcases but also works through the critical narrative-vs.-performance opposition and conceptualizes its own ‘secondary orality’—writing as a discontinuous practice of narration: a ‘snapshot’ montage.

The limits of this particular poetics of narrative performance, however, are in its negativity: the emphasis on gestures of rupture over reconfigura-
tion, and the figuration of these gestures as acts of abjection. Indirectly, the diarist himself provides his procedure with a national tag, and in fact, Goetz’s critical variation on the postunification Berlin novel fails to free its diary voice from dominant (national) conceptualizations of collective identity by foreclosing democratic acts of reconfiguring collectivity through alternative group imaginations. In contrast, Zaimoğlu’s *Kanak Sprak*, a collection of first-person ‘protocols’ from what the author calls the Turkish-German ‘ghetto,’ makes the play of voices in the act of narration into a site of political struggle by having his Kanakstas pose for presence in the exclusive German public sphere. Referring the model of rap music, Zaimoğlu undoes the charged oppositions between presence and theatricality by basing the protocols’ claim to realness not on their presumed rawness but explicitly on his own construction of the Kanakstas’ highly stylized self-presentations. This interweaving of presence and theatricality authorizes imagined acts of counterhegemonic refiguration (specifically, provocative resignifications of hate speech), which do not simply escape the negativity of racism, either, but investigate its genealogies more successfully than both Goetz’s diary and Zaimoğlu’s later, more mainstream contributions to the pop genre.

Reading Özdamar’s *Seltsame Sterne* in the broader context of the pop configuration allowed me to reposition her transnational poetics beyond the dichotomy of Turkish vs. German, or, worse, ‘oriental’ vs. Western aesthetics, which continues to inflect her reception in German studies. Drawing on the models of postdramatic theater as well as pop art, Özdamar’s fictionalized memoir on 1970s politics and theater on both sides of the wall subtly intervenes into heated postunification discourses on the politics of memory with its carefully arranged close-ups on radical left-wing histories. Özdamar’s critically affective practice of presentification-at-a-distance—that is, her backgrounded narrator’s indirectly evaluative montage of highlighted objects, sensations, and political slogans—allows her to displace both nostalgia and summary condemnation of left-wing histories in contemporary memory culture. The poetics of Zeh’s debut novel *Eagles and Angels*, finally, which has been described as filmic, radicalizes the project of nonauthoritative sense-making with its technique of epic recording. Developed through the psychological themes of the character narrator’s drug addiction, trauma, and memory loss, this form of disoriented, perception-focused present-tense narration awards its readers intense presence experiences in radicalizing the aesthetics of abjection that characterizes the entire literary configuration discussed in this chapter, while opening it up into a thematic framework of Europeanization and globalization. But the text also develops self-reflexivity and epic distancing, if not primarily to a Brechtian effect of rational evaluation. Instead, Zeh configures
disgust and shock into a larger narrative experience of disturbance. If Zeh’s novel, as elaborated by its critics, recuperates plot-knitting more fully than the ‘antinarrative’ pop ‘proper,’ it holds on to a turn-of-the-century suspicion vis-à-vis authoritative narrative by immersing its readers in a world of horrors in which sense-making is more terrifying than the character narrator’s loss of overview.
AS I HAVE spelled out, the interplay of narrative and performance is almost self-understood for the medium of film (even while the details of their interaction have remained controversial), and the performative character of much modernist and contemporary literary narrative has been broadly acknowledged as well. With respect to theater, and specifically contemporary German theater, my case needs to be argued much more fundamentally. In part, this difference reflects a particular sociocultural configuration: German theater has been the “the most heavily subsidized in Europe” (Barnett, “Text as Material?” 137). Supported by relative financial freedom, artistically serious stage performance has been thoroughly shaped by the gestures of radical antinarrativity I highlighted in the discussion of Fischer-Lichte’s and Lehmann’s theoretical works in chapter I. Until only a few years ago—that is, until the emergence of the trends I tackle in chapters V and VI—the most influential directors and playwrights strove to realize (neo) avant-garde imperatives in creating Postdramatic Theatre (Lehmann) beyond plot, character, or dialogue,1 and to varying degrees, if never consistently, beyond theatricality as such. In the Volksbühne in Berlin Mitte, which shaped

1. See also Poschmann 4, referencing an early text by Andrzej Wirth.
German theater culture during the 1990s, Frank Castorf’s juicy ‘destructions’ of classical texts, Christoph Schlingensief’s interactive political performances, and Christoph Marthaler’s audience hit, the slow, grotesquely comical music revue *Murx den Europäer!*, defined the artistic standard of stage production in unified Germany (see Hahn).

In analogy with my theoretical readings earlier, it would, of course, be easy to prove that these experimental productions continue to make narrative sense despite all their intent of undoing narrative, be it by including small narrative genres (anecdotes, jokes, etc.; see Brandstetter, *Bild-Sprung*), by arranging materials in a certain way, or by using epic forms of commentary even as their directors declare their distance vis-à-vis all Brechtianism. In this chapter, however, I make a less negative case by starting elsewhere. Rather than in the “Berlin center for deconstruction” (the Volksbühne; see Berger), I begin with works located on the periphery of a conventional topography of contemporary German theater, if with the intent of rewriting precisely this topography. First, I engage an African diaspora aesthetics-inflected dramatic fragment by Olu-mide Popoola, a Nigerian German artist who lives in London today, and, second, a production of Doug Wright’s and Moisés Kaufman’s Broadway success *I Am My Own Wife* on the East German transvestite and Stasi agent Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf in a primarily commercial Berlin theater venue. At these margins of contemporary German theater, where narrative does come into play on the programmatic level, I begin to explore the encounter between media-specific insistences on presence and the heightened theatricality of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century culture for my third medium.

To be sure, Popoola’s short, and unperformed, piece suspends me for another moment in the realm of dramatic literature—or at least text-based virtuality—before I fully enter the worlds of multidimensional theater production. Nonetheless, its experiments in narrative performance allow me not only to further pursue the intermedia exchanges constituting contemporary culture, which are in fact crucial here as well, but also to introduce media-specific concerns. Particularly, Popoola engages the ways in which theater—“potentially the most social of all the arts” (Neal 279)—has been conceptualized as a forum for constituting community, in pronounced contrast to Goetz’s conceptualization of literature as an antisocial realm (although principally in analogy with Zaimoğlu’s and Özdamar’s literary gestures toward community). The transfer of Wright’s and Kaufman’s—as critics insisted, uncharacteristically intellectual—Broadway production to a commercial Berlin venue foregrounds different layers of these community questions, as ‘queer’ and ‘mainstream,’ ‘American’ and ‘German’ concepts and fantasies of collectivity collide.
Simultaneously, my readings of Popoola’s fragment (with its stage directions) and the transatlantic transfer of Wright’s and Kaufman’s production allow me to begin developing questions of narrative authority in (complexly counter)hegemonic assertions of voice for the context of theater, specifically regarding their intricate uses of onstage narrator figures. In the second part of the chapter, I then pursue this issue of counterhegemonic voice in turning to the abovementioned center of contemporary German experimental theater, the Berlin Volksbühne, where the question of narrative explicitly resurfaces in the work of René Pollesch—in response to the discontents developed in his own radically antinarrative pieces. In exploring this return of narrative, I also resituate contemporary German art theater within the broader genealogy of modernist and contemporary practices sketched with Popoola’s African diaspora aesthetics and the worlds of Wright’s and Kaufman’s transatlantic popular entertainment. Specifically, Pollesch fuses post-Brechtian techniques with the popular forms of Brazilian telenovela in his search for new, more egalitarian forms of narrative, which combine radical theoretical critique with an equally radical affirmation of affect.

**Evoking Community in Onstage Narration**

"THIS IS NOT ABOUT SADNESS"

It seems hardly coincidental that Richardson’s overviews of twentieth-century dramatic experiments with narrative voice (Unnatural Voices 106–13; “Voice and Narration”) feature a range of postmodern plays associated with queer and minority discourses—ranging from Ntozake Shange’s Spell #7 (1979) to David Henry Hwang’s M Butterfly (1989) and Paula Vogel’s The Baltimore Waltz (1992). As discussed in the introduction, the critique of narrative constituting twentieth-century avant-gardes was complicated for those whose exclusion from dominant history created the need for “reclaiming” their past (Sell, Avant-garde Performance 250). Aligning “disruptive play with cultural reconstruction,” African diaspora theater has striven to resituate rather than deconstruct the subject in creating “collective experience” and political intervention (Benston 26; see 29), and participation in modernist antinarrative themes2 has competed with reworkings of the overlap between narrative and narrative...

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2. The emphasis is usually on antitextuality here, but textuality is occasionally aligned with narrative along the lines of dominant avant-garde–inflected discourses, e.g., when Gilroy recommends a methodological “orientation to the specific dynamics of performance” as contrasted with “approaches to black culture that have been premised, exclusively, on textuality and narrative” (The Black Atlantic 75). For a critical response to such antinarrativity see Sell, Avant-
performance offered by African traditions (see, e.g., Benston 35). Thus, Black Theatre has been characterized through the “marrying of impersonation and narrative art” (de Graft 25). While Brecht conceptualized his respective union through the ways in which epic theater disrupts imitation with (rational) explanation (“The Street Scene” 126), the confluences between his stark modernism and those of the African diaspora have enabled a range of different configurations of the epic and the mimetic, critical commentary and affective presencing. Both directly and indirectly, these confluences have shaped the multifaceted ways in which “narrative” and “performance” are “fused” in contemporary drama and stage production through a “complex mix of diegetic and mimetic modes,” or “mutual crossover techniques of dramatization and epicalization.”

“This is not about sadness (a fragment)” was published in a 2004 anthology documenting selected submissions for the first May Ayim Award, or “international black German literature prize” competition, which was established as a medium of publicly acknowledging the broadening Afro-German cultural scene within a contemporary diaspora framework. The publication context is indicative of the positioning of African diaspora productions within German culture. In conjunction with the long-term neglect of German colonial histories, the country’s legacy of ethnic definitions of citizenship has burdened Afro-German identities with a very specific form of invisibility between the apparently incompatible signifiers of blackness and Germanness. Unlike in the United States, where the civil rights movement facilitated broad debates about race in the national imagination, the category overall remained taboo in Germany after 1945. Even today, more than two decades after the political formation of the Afro-German community in the 1980s, the public presence of African diaspora culture is still mostly limited to the worlds of sport and hip-hop—and, notoriously, the United States, which has been closely, in left-wing contexts often positively, associated with blackness ever since the post–World garde Performance. Sell complicates the relationship between the Black Arts Movement and ‘the avant-garde;’ and his point regarding the racism prevalent in the white avant-gardes is well taken (278). I nonetheless opt for an inclusive notion of—heterogeneous—avant-gardes. Sell’s own reading indicates how the Black Arts Movement drew on surrealism, modernist primitivism, and Artaud as well as African American theater theory and the pretextual culture of West Africa (see also Sell, “The Black Arts Movement” 60, 65; Fabre 60, 62; Neal 285 on LeRoi Jones).

3. On the reception of epic theater in African diaspora aesthetics see Fabre 66.
5. In the German context, the notion ‘African German’ conjures specters of racial hybridity and is not used.
6. See, e.g., Campt, Other Germans 22; El Tayeb, “Dangerous Liaisons” 29.
War II occupation.\textsuperscript{7} Thus, German theater scholars and audiences today may be more familiar with “Obama’s dramatists,” that is, the contemporary African American theater scene,\textsuperscript{8} than with Olumide Popoola.

Born in Neuss, (West) Germany, in 1975, Popoola, who lives in London today, describes her work as inspired by African storytelling traditions, but she also underlines that she redevelops African diaspora aesthetics in conjunction with other influences. She specifically contextualizes her dramatic production with the contemporary African British theater scene (from Debbie Tucker Green and the Red Room Theatre Company to Kwame Kwei-Armah) as well as with performance art, for example by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña.\textsuperscript{9} In the May Ayim award competition, the fragment “This is not about sadness” was included in the “narrative”/“epic” section. On the one hand, this attests to the absence of a drama or theater category (the other categories were “multimedia” and “poetry,” where Popoola won with a different piece); on the other hand, the categorization succinctly indicates the intergenre nature of Popoola’s aesthetics of narrative performance. Composed from stage directions and different voices, one of whom is privileged as the “narrator” both by direct designation and the space afforded to her, “This is not about sadness” reads alternatively as a script or a narrative text in “\textit{playscript mode}.”\textsuperscript{10} Without playing these choices against one another, my reading underlines the piece’s virtual dimension as a performable text.

The introductory stage directions specify location—a “small, residential street in North London”—and indicate the situation at hand: police tape marks a crime scene, and a “few reporters from a small local press” are “looking for a story . . . , not sure what the incident is” (41). Such, if not these, media investigations are marked as also affecting the fragment itself: “Sometimes we see people talking, sometimes we see the footage of them on a big screen” (41). For the theater director, these specifications provide the option of privileging some of the following voices as less (technologically) mediated—and consequently more reliable?—than others. For the reader, however,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{7} For a detailed analysis of these histories and discourses, see Fehrenbach.\textsuperscript{8} In 2008 the major German theater journal \textit{Theater heute}, which overall focuses on the German language scene, presented a feature with this title as its front-page story. Joined with a photo reportage on an everyday “Black Community” in New York and focused on the politics, rather than the aesthetics, of the contemporary dramatic scene, the article (Schreiber) indicates the multilayered mechanisms of racism still in effect.\textsuperscript{9} In addition to her webpage (http://www.olumidepopoola.com; accessed 06/09/12), I am drawing on email communication with Popoola (07/21/08).\textsuperscript{10} Jahn, “Narrative Voice” 673 (italics in original). While Popoola categorized the fragment itself as a script in conversation with me, she then developed and has by now published a longer version as a narrative text, this is not about sadness.}
they overshadow all of the following dialogue and narration with a specter of mediation. Making use of technological metaphors (and, in the envisioned onstage realization, apparatuses), Popoola’s fragment thus designs its space of performance as one in which the immediacy of physical presence cannot be taken for granted. In contrast to Fischer-Lichte, for whom the contemporary aesthetics of performance overcomes mediation by enabling “an intense experience of presentness” (*The Transformative Power* 96), Popoola begins by emphasizing that representation shapes the affective experiences of readers and potential spectators.

This emphasis on mediation initially seems to come with some hesitation also toward narrative as a media product sought out by reporters. However, the introductory stage direction continues by pointing out that not only the reporters but also simply “[p]eople” are trying to find out what happened (41). Unfolding—while simultaneously complicating—the rhetorical promise of authenticity inscribed in emphatic notions of ‘the people,’ the fragment itself engages in such a narrative project. As it turns out, a woman has died, some hooligans are apparently involved, and the question is how to name and understand the incident: was it a hate crime? Rather than a coherent, authoritative account of what happened, the different voices presented in the text provide us with glimpses from various angles. Reminiscent of *Kanak Sprak*, “This is not about sadness” explores the encounter of hegemonic and minority voices in an attempt to authorize alternative models of collective identity. Unlike *Kanak Sprak*, however, Popoola’s fragment in fact arranges radically heterogeneous voices. In that sense, it more fully unfolds “the democracy of the call-and-response style of storytelling . . . where people with very different views . . . explore and play the expressive possibilities of” a theme (Wideman, in Baker 271). To be sure, the context of the play departs from the informal settings of conversation (“barber shop,” “kitchen”) often associated with the call-and-response technique (ibid.). While the media are present already on the diegetic level, Popoola also creates a textual arrangement in which a superordinate narrative instance implicitly evaluates the different voices in assembling them. Not designed to look spontaneous in all respects, the democratic potential of Popoola’s process of narration also lies in how it calls on the reader, and virtual audience member, to become actively involved in the process of sense-making (see Callahan 17 on call and response in writing). In this process, the investigation of the woman’s death turns into a broader investigation of the significance of race and community in Europe at the turn of the twenty-first century.

To begin, there is the voice of a “British, male,” in his “late 30s,” who has slowed down out of curiosity and comments on the theme of football that he
has picked up on, emphasizing his love of the game, “because really it unites us” as a “nation” vis-à-vis all the divisive “politics” around (42). While the man’s complaint of generally having to walk “around on eggshells” these days with respect to matters of cultural difference may make us visualize him as a white guy, his sentiment about football and national unity is echoed by another voice explicitly described as that of a “Black British female” of the same generation. Differentiating matters a bit, she emphasizes how important it was that the Union flag was replaced by the “so much more accessible St. Georges flag”: “I mean we can feel united now, at least when we play. I mean Asian, black British, we can be part of it too” (43). The Union flag had become a symbol of racism; sung by football fans, the rhyme “There ain’t no black in the Union Jack” served as a grim reminder of The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (Gilroy). Echoing the sentiment articulated by Popoola’s character, Gilroy more recently argued that its replacement thus functioned as the “signature” of a shift toward “more habitable” formations of national identity in Britain (Postcolonial Melancholia 106). In “This is not about sadness,” we may nonetheless remain skeptical vis-à-vis this optimistic voice for whom the fragment specifically insists, in addition to the general introductory comment, that she is “on screen, . . . obviously being interviewed” (42). Furthermore, the interview occasion itself casts doubt on the fiction of unity highlighted by the media. A woman was killed, possibly by right-wing soccer fans; the divisive legacy of racism in football and the larger national community may be quite alive.

While Popoola’s piece is set in Britain, its publication as part of the German award competition—if not the author’s biographical background—inves cross-references to the German context as well. Here, flag debates were stirred two years later when widespread fan displays of the German flag during the Berlin soccer World Cup (2006) put a visible end to the apparent postwar consensus that this symbol had been severely compromised by Nazi abuses of the nation. Media reports highlighted images of participating Turkish-German immigrants (Turkey did not compete that year), suggesting the newly inclusive significance of the flag as a sign of multicultural belonging (Deutsche Presse Agentur [dpa]; no author given). Afterward, however, the Bielefeld Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence cautioned that post–World Cup statistic data did not indicate any loosening of the link between majority nationalist attitudes and racism (Heitmeyer). In the academic context, the growing interest in positive collective identifications resonates in Fischer-Lichte’s Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual, where the significance of “community” in twentieth-century political performance is conceptualized, with Emile Durkheim, as a response to the social disintegration of modernity.
(in the singular form, 29–30, 209). But while Fischer-Lichte postulates the aesthetic generation of collectivity as *promesse de bonheur* fulfilling a “deep yearning for communal experience” in modern society (90, 198), she also draws on René Girard’s theory of sacrifice in an attempt to account for the practices of violent exclusion that seem to regularly accompany it—from the Nazi *Thingspiele* to 1960s avant-garde performances. Overall uninterested in semiotic distinctions between different forms, scales, and contexts of political community, Fischer-Lichte thus finds her concept plagued by a fundamental ambivalence. Consequently, she confines community to the stage, as a distinctly “aesthetic experience” temporarily undoing differences between audience members, made politically safe by its reversibility (254).

Popoola’s fragment instead interrogates the notion of community by asking about alternative figurations of collectivity. As the narratives of nation continue to be compromised, “This is not about sadness” investigates competing claims to collective “unity” on the uneven terrain of early twenty-first-century European society, where promises of inclusion meet the continued presence of racial discrimination and violence. Importantly, the nationalist position of the quoted black British female—the fragment’s only voice explicitly marked in terms of race—indicates that such an alternative definition of ‘the people’ cannot be taken for granted: skin color or ethnic background certainly does not automatically translate into belonging to (a different) community. In fact, the very concept of such an emphatically coded alternative is presented only indirectly—through its explicit questioning—in “This is not about sadness.” The narrator, a “Jamaican” and neighbor of the dead woman, relates what yet other people have been saying, for example, that the dead woman “was an activist, she was involved in the community” (43). She herself disapproves of this evaluation:

If they ask me she was kinda troublesome too, but I wouldn’t say that loud though. I don’t want no one thinking I’m talking behind her back. 

Activist . . . (tschups) . . . Involved in the community . . . didn’t anybody hardly know her. . . . This is not about sadness, nobody here really miss her at all, except her brother maybe. We just want to get on with our lives. Everybody should take care of their own business. (43)

Establishing the contested character of ‘community,’ the neighbor challenges both the dead woman’s belonging in her dominantly immigrant neighborhood and her activist concept of collectivity, while simultaneously signaling the narrator’s own affiliation with the (or a) community through her concern about people thinking she was talking behind the woman’s back. But who does this
narrator speak for? Once more, the stage direction preceding her words specifies that we see her as “a recording” (43). Given this bracketing, can her act of telling still produce, in readers and (virtual) audiences, the kind of “affective synthesis” that not only Fischer-Lichte but also African diaspora theater studies have sought in performance as a process of “postdeconstructive mimesis” (Benston 41)?

Whereas the voice of the black British female is bracketed mostly through its framing in the text, the much longer elaborations of the narrator are presented as internally multivocal in the Bakhtinian sense that different voices, and discourses, are speaking through her. Thus, her last statement begins with the assertion, “It was an accident. Everybody said so,” only to relate afterward that internal injuries suggested “some outside interference” and thus the interpretation “racial violence,” which, however, the narrator does not want to accept (43). In combination with her defensiveness (“Don't you be repeating this to nobody but somebody has to say it, right!” 43), these inconsistencies suggest the unreliability of our theatricalized narrator. Concluding that we are in fact dealing with a hate crime that she is trying to deny for the sake of her fiction of apolitical community, the reader may interpret the title claim as ironic, understanding that the implied author, against the foregrounded narrator, does invite us to mourn both the victim and her emphatic notion of political community.

However, it would be too easy to disregard the negative wording of the title claim. Rather than a straightforward use of antithetical irony, Popoola's fragment develops a complex negotiation between its diverging articulations. Although the onstage/screen narrator is a character among others in this fragment, subject to the implicit evaluation of the higher-level narrative instance, she is also the fragment's major voice—about 70 percent of the text is hers. The use of dialect and the indicated gestures of speech highlight her immigrant, working-class positionality to the effect of allowing us to bracket the content of her (so obviously context-bound) speech, but they simultaneously invite imaginations of embodiment that establish a forceful (virtual) onstage/screen presence. While suggesting doubt, Popoola thereby also asks her audiences to listen to her immigrant, socially marginalized voice. The heterogeneity of voice in the narrator’s text passages partially works in her favor, too. After evaluating the victim as “a bit unbalanced” because of her activism, the narrator starts reflecting on her own tropes:

That is interesting though, ‘cause if you think about it everything is full of balance nowadays. All them drinks and pills and little things, which help restore balance. There must be a whole industry out there, holding
up scales to prove they can give us balance. As if we couldn’t do that ourselves...

All they should do is provide proper transport and housing, much of my balance would be restored, thank you! (41–42)

Juggling point and counterpoint (Wideman, in Baker 27), Popoola’s narrator is not just subject to but also an agent of critical political commentary. Of course, she is very different from a prototypical Brechtian narrator, who interrupts mimesis with his past-tense discourse to the effect of producing an authoritative “knotting-together of the events” (A Short Organon 194). Popoola’s narrator is not designed to do that, or to give anything resembling the concluding didactic speech of Amiri Baraka’s narrator in A Black Mass who, in 1966, declared war on white society. Rather than providing closure, Popoola’s narrator puts the bulk of sense-making activity instead on the reader, who in some respects knows more than her. In a production of the piece, the exact affective exchange between narrator and audience would crucially depend on the details of her staging. The script itself struggles for its own kind of balance: distancing us from the apolitical inclinations of its diasporic subject, it aligns us with her wit as a political commentator with specific insights into dominant discursive tropes.

The work of community generation undertaken here is thus premised not on the erasure of difference in a liminal aesthetic experience but on a complex intertwining of affect with critical thinking. Refusing a simple resolution, “This is not about sadness” charges its audience with finding their own answers to the series of questions into which its title claim may transform in the process of reception: What precisely can sadness mean for different audience members in response to this death of a woman whom some of ‘us’ may have known well and others not at all? What is, or what could be, the significance of (political, local, transnational) community in the multiply divided societies of early twenty-first-century Europe, in which promises of inclusion across the boundaries of race and cultural background sharply contrast with the deadly legacies of racism? What does community mean when no “assurance of collective voice” gives “untroubled authority to speak” any longer (Bowen 200), while the need for a political articulation of collectivity is not yet history? Popoola dramatizes these tensions by highlighting the mutual implications of black and white communities as well as the social and political heterogeneity of the African diaspora population. Rather than advocating nostalgia for a simpler notion of community, the fragment’s double call to and beyond sadness speaks out against perpetuating “the old, modern idea of ‘race’” (Against Race 6) while underlining the continued significance of
collective identity in a world in many ways still dominated by the twentieth-century “problem of the color-line” (Du Bois vii).

From Self-Reflexive Testimonial to Housewife Spectacle

*I Am My Own Wife*, Doug Wright’s drama on the East German transvestite and Stasi informant Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf, premiered at Playwrights Horizons (May 25, 2003). Directed by Moisés Kaufman, the production then moved to Broadway and played in the Lyceum Theater for almost a year (starting November 11, 2003) before touring widely. In some respects, the 2007 Berlin adaptation, titled *Ich mach ja doch, was ich will* (roughly: “I do what I want to do anyway”), lived up to the promise of this success story. For the previously struggling Renaissance Theater, the production became a financial highlight in an overall good season (Standke). Wright’s and Kaufman’s ‘own wife’, however, was a major critical success, too. “In fact,” a reviewer comments on the potential tension, “it feels un-Broadway, which is what makes it so special: In some ways it is too simple, too honest, too political and too academic” (Connell). Enthusiastic reviewers praised the play’s “moving and intellectually absorbing” story (Bruce Weber) as well as Jefferson May’s “thoroughly mesmerizing” performance (Bruce Weber); and *I Am My Own Wife* won “every award that Broadway has to offer, as well as the Pulitzer Prize” (Folliard). In contrast, the production in the primarily commercial Renaissance Theater in the bourgeois, former West Berlin neighborhood of Charlottenburg remained—symbolically as well as geographically—in fact on the margins of the German capital’s theater scene. Critically engaging the cultural distinctions at play, my comparative reading investigates this transatlantic displacement through the diverging configurations of narrative performance techniques in both versions.11

An anecdote from the night I first saw the Berlin production (on April 12, 2008) can serve as a starting point. As in the American production, the entire cast of *Ich mach ja doch, was ich will* is performed by one actor. In Berlin, he first enters the stage as the playwright’s excited friend who reports on having spotted “the most singular [eigenartigste], eccentric individual” ever birthed

11. In addition to the print edition of the play (which is intimately interwoven with the production; see below), my reading of the American production draws on the collection of reviews and production photos on www.iammyownwife.com, as well as production clips, e.g., http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1026418307574479427, accessed 06/09/12.

I have seen the German production twice at the theater. Since the Renaissance Theater was not willing to provide a script or audiovisual documentation of the performance for my research purposes, I reference the German text based on the notes I took during my visits.
by the Cold War in the liminal Berlin of 1990. In front of the closed curtain, the actor then changes into the Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf costume. When he took off his pants on that particular night and slipped into black tights, there was fairly loud and sustained whistling in the audience. Later, the friends accompanying me that night debated whether to attribute this response to the gay men present or to the exoticist fascination of straight bourgeois audiences. “Probably, it was all of them together,” I suggested with a smirk, thinking of Fischer-Lichte’s aesthetic communities with their alleged power to unite heterogeneous crowds for the duration of the performance, but also my political suspicions about that process, as conceptualized without regard for its semiotic layers. Obviously, my (lesbian) friends and (snobbishly critical) I excluded ourselves from any such community with our retrospective gestures of discursive distinction. The following reading probes my spontaneous interpretation.

Before all sociological questions of attribution, the audience whistle—the only one I recall having heard in any Berlin theater while researching this book—announces that the atmosphere in the Renaissance Theater that night included an element of cabaret, or perhaps of that proverbial “Broadway vulgarity” sometimes associated with American theater in general (Jackson 89–90, quoting John Gassner), not least from the perspective of German ‘high’ culture. On its way back across the Atlantic, Wright’s German-themed, ‘un-Broadwayish’ Broadway success became “Boulevardtheater,” a notion that connotes the worlds of vaudeville, burlesque, and crude comedy. Of course, the possibility of this displacement suggests the fragility of the borders by which we separate cultural spheres. Investigating it allows me to map the terrain of narrative performance beyond the binary ‘avant-garde and modernist art vs. popular entertainment,’ underlining the degree to which both the antinarrative gestures and the narrative forms of contemporary theater and performance art have been shaped by popular traditions (see, e.g., Lehmann 61). However, this does not mean that production contexts, venues, and audiences do not make a difference. As I argue, the whistling in the Renaissance Theater in fact points to the ways in which the overall similar interplay of theatricality and presence techniques in both versions is developed to produce significantly diverging effects in the productions’ respective audiences.

Michael R. Schiavi discusses Wright’s play and the American production in terms of an encounter between (what I call) the aesthetics of theatricality and that of presence, or the pursuit of ‘the real.’ His starting point is the

12. See Wright 13: the order of events differs from that in the American screenplay.
playwright’s ambivalence vis-à-vis his protagonist: *I Am My Own Wife* juggles “hagiography,” the “drag dramaturgy of choice” for more than twenty years (Schiavi 201), with the critical investigation prompted when the author, in the midst of the writing process, found out that his “bona fide gay hero” had not just “lived openly as a cross-dresser under the twentieth century’s two most conformist regimes—the Nazis and the Communists” (Wright xi, ix) but had also been actively collaborating with the East German Secret Service. Schiavi links this predicament to the production’s central formal tension. On the one hand, *I Am My Own Wife* authorizes Charlotte’s voice through an aesthetics of presence, as it caters to audiences’ “thirst for the performance of lived truth” (203) and seduces them to accept the fictions it presents as “the fundamental truths of Charlotte’s singular life” (Wright xxiv). On the other hand, Schiavi insists, in line with many postmodernist scholars’ critical preferences for theatricality, *I Am My Own Wife* develops its strength precisely in aesthetically unfolding the fundamental condition that biographical truth is presented by an “imposter” on the stage (207). It does so not only through the distanciation effects of the one-actor format but also through the onstage presence of an additional instance of mediation—that of the author as a character. While this technique of theatricalization was the production’s one feature discussed critically in a number of American reviews, Schiavi emphasizes that it turns *I Am My Own Wife* into a complex work about “the unreliability of historical narrative,” which positions its “adult” spectators “as active, thoughtful, flexible decoders of a character and a story” (197, 219).

Although at first glance quite plausible, Schiavi’s opposition between ‘adult’ reflection and seduction does not do justice to the ways in which the diverging forces of presence and theatricality are intricately bound up with each other in Wright’s and Kaufman’s aesthetics—as well as, to different effect, in the German production. To start with, Schiavi himself acknowledges that the playwright figure contributes not only to theatrical disruption but also to the production of story verisimilitude, as it brings on stage a “figure who, because he is based squarely on the author, will provide more immediate knowledge than even an omniscient narrator” (209). The latter comparison is, of course, misleading. Far from omniscient, the figure of the playwright is not even the play’s privileged narrator. As indicated by the stage directions of the print edition (in italics throughout), it is rather Charlotte herself who is most successful in repeatedly “taking over” the narrator position as she tells her life’s “tale” or—with respect to the doubts arising from her Stasi files—her “many tales” (53, 67). As the extradiegetic playwright outlines in his introduction, he chose his arrangement of voices in response to the fear that he had “absolutely no authority—moral or academic” to write about the complex
European histories into which his subject had entangled him (xv, quoting a friend’s words). Thus, he resorts to techniques of immediacy in reenacting the process of investigation as much as Charlotte’s life itself. Rather than the past-tense account of a writer arranging materials from a distance—the kind of account produced in the introduction—the play itself presents the story of discovering Charlotte’s life mostly mimetically, in the present tense and direct mode of the interview materials (see xvi).

No less radically than in Popoola’s fragment (or Zeh’s Eagles and Angels), the authoritative power of narrative is thus dissolved into an ongoing process of collecting and evaluating data.14 Reminiscent of Zeh’s novel (and Goetz’s diary), the explored intersection of presence and theatricality is channeled into the intermedial trope of recording, which turns into I Am My Own Wife’s leitmotif. Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf was a passionate collector of late nineteenth-century antiques, specifically early music recording technologies; and for the extradiegetic playwright, her “Edison Amberols” align with “my ever-growing stack of microcassettes. . . . Wasn’t the whole play—at its core—about the process of recording?” (Wright xvi). As a writing technique, the recording of ‘raw’ materials allows the torn author to superimpose the diverging genres of “love letter” and “Stasi files” (xxiii) in assembling contradictory material. As indicated by a reviewer, the theater audience, too, is “torn between admiration and suspicion” (Cox) for Charlotte, whom the diegetic playwright hails as the one “teaching” him “a history I never knew I had” (28) while reporters from all over the world accuse her of lying whenever she “opens her mouth” (74).

Beyond simple juxtaposition, however, the aesthetics of recording also becomes a tool of working through these contradictions in the original production (on which the play itself is, according to Wright’s introduction, based as much as the production on the play).15 In response to the drama of diverging truth claims, the diegetic playwright eventually redefines his role through the concept of “curating” (76). Explicitly modeling himself after his collector subject (and enlisting Charlotte’s object expertise), he finds a way of reconciling the uncertain matter of tales with history’s solid objects. In response to Doug’s questions about what she does when “a piece loses its luster” (76), Charlotte answers that she never “refinish[es]” anything, preferring to “show” everything “as is”: “Stains” and “Cracks” as “proof” of a piece’s “history” and the fact that it “was used”: “a record, yes? Of living. Of lives” (77–78).

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14. Wright comments on the similar technique used in Kaufman’s documentary The Laramie Project (xvi), which I reference more extensively in chapter VI.

15. He details how the cooperation with director and lead performer helped him overcome his writer’s block (xvi–xxiii). Thus, text and staging can be treated as largely consonant here at least in intention (and, if we believe the critics, also effect).
As a technique of preservation, curating thus mediates a less heroic notion of history, which does not require a ‘stainless’ gay hero. Instead, it enables a “postpositivist understanding of authenticity” that displaces “obsession” over sorting out “invention, performance and the genuine” by incorporating “process, the subjective, incoherence, as well as error.”

Partly reminiscent of Zaimoğlu’s literary rap aesthetics, this notion of authenticity differs from the latter in that it emphasizes performative process over theatrical pose. Thus dovetailing immediacy with the act of narration, Wright is able to move beyond the popular usage of transvestism “as a foil for political (specifically communist) duplicity” (thus Schiavi 202, on *I Am My Own Wife* and *M. Butterfly*). When the round dance of journalist charges against Charlotte culminates in the question “Is it true that you’re really a woman after all?” (74), *I Am My Own Wife* answers it with a narrative, the point of which is the title-giving performative gesture of identification. “[S]tunned” by the reporters’ questions, Charlotte tells the story of how her mother, as she was dealing with her adult child’s stockings in the laundry, asked her when she would eventually grow up and get married. “As I said to her, ‘Never, my dear Mutti. *Ich bin meine eigene Frau.* I am my own wife’” (75).

The original German “Frau” signifies both “woman” and “wife.” In performing the slippage from gender to sexuality, Wright’s translation displacement the binary logic of female vs. male = true vs. false suggested by the fervor of political investigation. Next, a psychiatrist “steps forward to ‘settle’ the matter with science” (75). His “diagnosis”—“autism”—replaces the rhetoric of truth with an emphasis on performative function: Charlotte’s “stories aren’t lies per se; they’re self-medication” (75). The diagnosis seems to correspond to the stage direction, which specifies that Charlotte tells the ‘I Am My Own Wife’ anecdote “with quiet intensity, as a balm to soothe herself” (74). However, the quotation marks around ‘settle’ indicate that the extradiegetic playwright is not altogether willing to, in fact, settle for the pathologizing verdict that arrests the narrative play of concepts in a gesture of scientific closure. The diegetic playwright asserts his own “need to believe in her stories as much as she does” (76). Recentering the power of narrative in its psychological performativity rather than its representational accuracy, *I Am My Own Wife* thus through all political doubt holds on to the hope that v. Mahlsdorf’s stories might prove “curative” also for “a community too often besieged by public condemnation and internalized self-loathing” (Wright xi).

16. Thus Giersdorf 187, drawing on Peter Kivy, Helen Thomas, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Giersdorf makes this point for Rosa v. Praunheim’s earlier (pre–Stasi disclosure) film about Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf, but I am intentionally adopting it for Wright’s version, which he discusses in more negative terms.
Jens R. Giersdorf accused Wright’s and Kaufman’s ‘pronarrative’ version of making Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf “safe for mainstream consumption” (171), especially as compared to Rosa v. Praunheim’s flamboyantly camp film portrait from the early 1990s. Praunheim’s version is, in fact, more radical in its presentation of queer sexuality—if less complex, since its pre–Stasi disclosure production still allowed for simple homage. The divergent effects of the Broadway-vs.-Berlin versions, however, underline the inadequacy of general charges of ‘mainstreamification.’ In New York, theatricality is attenuated through the ways in which the poetological tropes and objects of recording knit the production’s very self-reflexivity to the political promises of indexicality. When Charlotte, “chat[ting] directly to her audience-visitors,” presents an enormous Edison phonograph, theatrical showing offers “material authenticity for her personal tales” (Schiavi 210; see Wright 9). The stage design of the American production provides “a glimpse of the treasure trove” (Malcolm Johnson) through a translucent wall behind which the audience sees “carefully arranged rows of antique furniture, clocks and gramophones gleaming in the soft glow of David Lander’s lighting” (Isherwood). The highly theatrical effect of this design was to be moderated so “that visual pyrotechnics were never allowed to upstage the content of Charlotte’s own remarkable stories” as “a record of lives lived through the objects that were left behind” (Wright 6).

Analogously, the attenuation of theatricality in Charlotte’s New York persona creates “authenticity” (e.g., Gardner). “Doesn’t look like a drag queen at all,” the diegetic playwright notes during the first meeting (24), and reviewers have echoed that impression. Wearing “a black kerchief for the head, a loose blouse and full skirt, black stockings, sensible black shoes,” and a “string of pearls,” the onstage Charlotte makes an “austere, ladylike” impression with her slow movements (Malcolm Johnson) (see figure 5). While the “character could lend itself easily to flamboyance . . . or, worse, a grotesque joke” (Shapiro), the production makes her “[m]ore granny than trannie” (Blanchard) and “more androgynous than feminine” (Connell; see also Dougherty). With all her cracks and stains, this Charlotte is “solid and functional” (Miller). Importantly, flamboyance is not completely absent from I Am My Own Wife. For the diegetic playwright, it metaphorizes—just as for v. Praunheim a decade earlier—the political promise of defiance inscribed in his protagonist’s life stories: “I need to believe Lothar Berfelde [Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf’s birth name] navigated a path between the two most repressive regimes the Western world has ever known . . . in a pair of heels” (76). In a world that sensationalizes heels on male feet, however, his discovery that Charlotte didn’t actually wear any also undoes the othering that constituted the “eccentric” sight initially announced by his reporter friend (13). Charlotte’s ‘natural’ realness (“No makeup . . . she
Figure 5
Production photo, *I Am My Own Wife* (Jefferson Mays in the Playwrights Horizons production of *I Am My Own Wife*. Photos by Joan Marcus).
says she 'doesn't need it'”) facilitates a focus on her agency as a subject, rather than the object of representation: “She’s got piercing eyes—really smart eyes” (24).

In this sense, Wright’s and Kaufman’s channeling of theatricality into realness in the very place in which everybody, including the playwright himself, expects flamboyance bridges the gap between stage and auditorium, producing affective exchanges toward the kind of inclusive community-building Jill Dolan has theorized as a “utopian performative” (Utopia 164). At the end, Doug momentarily assumes the role of a more distanced third-person narrator, gesturing toward closure by reporting on Charlotte’s death and “the single photograph, sepia with age” she had sent him right before. The portrait shot, blowups of which make Charlotte present to departing audiences in the lobby once more (Malcolm Johnson), shows her as a ten-year-old boy between two lion cubs at the zoo. While describing it, the diegetic playwright is standing in “a pool of light,” theatrically highlighted as the curator of his extraordinary ‘piece.’ Then he walks over to the phonograph and plays a recording of Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf’s physical voice, thus presenting her as she presents a phonograph from her collection. With this final scene, theatricality once more folds into presence—without entirely annulling itself.17 The conflict between seduction and evaluative responsibility has been displaced into the possibility of responding “emotionally to” the experiential authenticity of “what we know to be fictional” (Smith, “Film Spectatorship” 118). The playwright has learned that the two “dangerously alert” lions may point to parts of Charlotte’s personality as well as the regimes she has been fighting, but he still describes with “awe” the image of the child hugging them (79). Self-reflexively aware of the fallacies of communication (“was I merely informing on her?” xiv), he displaces judgment (see Wright in Stanescu 102) with an ethical pose of receptivity, of being affected by the beauty of his fallible hero and the sounds of her music. The play ends with Doug “listening” to the “glorious sound of an old-fashioned waltz” introduced by Charlotte in the recording that featured the character’s physical voice.

In Berlin the interplay of presence and theatricality is developed to very different effect. Simultaneously more critical of the protagonist and less serious about this critique, the production keeps its spectators at a distance from Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf. The stage design gives a first hint at the character’s deauthorization in the course of the evening. While initially we are shown her beautiful museum (in a realistic setting without the translucent wall),

17. The original recording highlights also the fictionality of the ‘imposter’ on stage (who has sounded different throughout), but “none of that matters. He’s gotten her essence simply, thrillingly right” (Cox).
the demolition of Charlotte’s imagined ideal world through the Stasi accusations in the second act is underscored through the set’s—partially surrealist—decomposition, with one of the antique doors relocated high up on the wall and the objects all covered in a corner. Rather than affirming the “raw power” of Charlotte’s narration (Wright 71) through all doubts, the Berlin production also cuts and rearranges Wright’s text to the effect of suggesting that the protagonist’s favorite stories serve the purpose of deflecting answers to the charges against her. For example, the ‘raw power’ quote is from a scene in which Charlotte appears in a talk show, where even the “pathologically upbeat” host is “momentarily wiped out” by her story of how neo-Nazis attacked the museum during a queer garden party in the early 1990s (71). In the German adaptation, the talk show is cut and the story of this attack told by Charlotte in direct response to Doug’s questions about her Stasi affiliation, to the effect of minimizing its impact as a chilly reminder of the continued presence of fascism in postunification Germany. In the end, the audience is not treated to a recording of Charlotte’s authentic voice, or even the news of her death, but rather with a (quasi-historical) reappearance of the upbeat, not yet challenged Charlotte who initially presented her museum to the theater audience. Visually underlined by the return of the white wig the actor wore in the beginning of the play (known to German audiences as a characteristic Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf ‘insignia’), Charlotte’s concluding gesture declares the irrelevance of the charges to her: “I don’t have any problems—it is always only the others who do.”

Hovering somewhere between mindless defiance and, with Wright’s scientist, autism, this ending summarizes a reading of the protagonist that is implied in the performance throughout and discursively developed in program booklet and reviews. As authoritatively as condescendingly, Gabriele Brang, a member of the association that supports the v. Mahlsdorf museum today, speaks of the “tough glue of legends” through which v. Mahlsdorf, always eager to publicly assert herself, “tailored” her ideal self-image (Ich mache ja doch 2). To a similar effect, the conservative newspaper Die Welt cites the actor, Dominique Horwitz, as having said that he feels sorry for the “ambivalent” (“zwiespältiger”) character he plays (Barz). At the same time, the article concludes by emphasizing that, all pity aside, it seems Charlotte v. Mahlsdorf was “a happy person” in “her own way.” It is precisely this twofold distancing attitude that is conveyed in the production’s final sentence: in place of Doug’s awe for Charlotte’s humanity, the Berlin adaptation inserts—a spectacle of the crazy queer.

Whereas the American production attenuates its fantasy of flamboyance as political defiance through the insistence on realness that has constituted
subjective authenticity in Western modernity, the Berlin version disconnects Charlotte's flamboyance from the notion of political resistance and ties it, instead, to the (by traditional implication, 'false') theatricality of drag. The choice of costumes is significant here. While the dress of Wright's transatlantic Charlotte balanced simplicity, practicality, and elegance (with the pearls), the Berlin production produces two divergent images. During part of the second act, the promise implicit in the initial play with the black tights is redeemed as the Berlin Charlotte teases capital glamour desires with a more elegant version of the black New York dress—at the price of connecting the sexualized image of the transvestite to the drama of political complicity unfolding in this act.\(^\text{18}\) For major parts of the evening, however, this image is superimposed with that of another Charlotte who comes into being when the actor, after putting on the tights in the beginning, covers his legs with a loose, decidedly inelegant black-and-brown skirt, a conservative off-white blouse, and a light blue apron, in short, an very unglamorous housewife costume.

Of course, this image of an unglamorous Charlotte, who describes herself as living "like a maidservant" in her museum, is present in Wright's and Kaufman's multifaceted recordings as well (18).\(^\text{19}\) For their queer history project, it fulfills a twofold function. On the one hand, Charlotte cites her hard work as a source of respectability: when awarded a federal medal of honor for her preservation work after unification, she accepts it with a curtsy, as proof to "other people . . . that a transvestite can work" (40). On the other hand, the American version also holds on to the empowering fantasy of a more heroic interpretation, which Giersdorf developed for the historical Charlotte. Her curtsying—here specifically in an encounter with the Secret Service—Giersdorf asserts, was an "eminently subversive gesture" in the sense of Bhabha's mimicry, which mocks "the socialist standard body" through an "excessive performance of the wrong kind of feminine labor" (Giersdorf 178–79). Wright directly links Charlotte's housewife preservation skills to the subversive recovery of queer history: he inserts the award ceremony immediately after Charlotte's retrieval of the "Mulack-Ritze," a queer bar closed by the GDR authorities, which she recreated in her basement (39–40; see x). The German production cuts the reference to this bar in the honorary speech and disconnects the two events by inserting another scene—featured later in Wright's play—in between. When first visiting West Berlin after the fall of the wall,

\(^\text{18}\) Thus, Giersdorf's critique of Wright for desexualizing his material has to be balanced with a reminder that the politics of sexualization is not necessarily critical of hegemonic regimes of knowledge.

\(^\text{19}\) The German text transforms analogy into identification: she introduces herself as "das Dienstmädchen."
Charlotte quotes from a queer travel guide announcing a subcultural paradise for “homophiles, nancies, pansies, sissies, trannies” and more (the list continues; see Wright 42). In place of the subterraneous history of queer life, the audience is thus treated to a spectacle of exotic diversity. Whereas in Wright’s play, the reporter underlines the dignified atmosphere at the award ceremony (“Nobody laughed. No catcalls”; 41), the Renaissance Theater audience (on the night of my second visit) did laugh during this scene.

Ultimately, the downplaying of Wright’s politically resistant Charlotte also helps contain the effects of her showcased political complicity, allowing for an authentication of the housewife costume as a sign of Charlotte’s real nature. According to the program booklet, v. Mahlsdorf was basically a “somewhat eccentric [schrullige] nice old lady” (Brang 3), whose simpleminded harmlessness is attested to even by her Secret Service cooperation files: while unable to say no, she did not put anything worthwhile on record, only the “prettiest” commitment declaration ever.20 On the Berlin stage, Charlotte’s harmless eccentricity finds its expression in her housewife ecstasy. During the initial presentation of her phonographs she dances happily across the stage in her blue apron (see figure 6); photos of this scene are featured on both the title and the center page of the high-gloss program booklet.

Not antinarrative per se, the Berlin Charlotte’s dancing ecstasy is performative defiance in the service of historical restoration, rather than the preservation of historical lives. The rearrangement of the introductory sequence works to downplay the self-reflexivity of Wright’s play;21 theatricality is thus confined to the spectacle of queerness. In New York, Charlotte’s treasures were intended to give “the play an epic scope” by indexing the lives of their owners (Wright 6), making it into a play “about the entire twentieth century” (Kaufman, as quoted by Schiavi 211). In contrast, the Renaissance Theater production, where the extended presentation of Charlotte’s treasures interpellates the theater audience as the museum audience (see Wildermann), primarily contextualizes the objects through an art-historical narrative. As Charlottenburg audiences may know (or learn from their program booklet), Charlotte specifically collected “Gründerzeit” (Wilhelminian) furniture, that is, the historicist, ‘representative’ decor items through which the bourgeoisie

20. Osang, quoting a representative from the Gauck administration, which processed the Stasi files after 1990. Wright quotes this evaluation of Charlotte’s file, too, but only as one among several possible readings, intentionally refraining from rendering Charlotte “benign” (xxi).

21. In the American version, Charlotte’s introductory “Lecture on the Phonograph” is repeatedly interrupted by scenes from Doug’s and John’s investigation process, to the effect of forcefully introducing the poetological significance of recording. In Berlin the shortened introductory scenes with Doug and John simply prepare the audience for the spectacle about to unfold. When Charlotte is all dressed, the curtain opens onto her museum.
of the unified German Reich displayed its “new self-confidence” in the late nineteenth century (*Ich mach ja doch 5*). For the ‘museum’ visitors at the Renaissance Theater, Charlotte’s objects evoke Gumbrecht’s presentification of past worlds rather than a project of historical testimony. Making these worlds “tangible again,” their presentation invites audiences to “simply enjoy” their “contact with” the German empire’s foundational period (Gumbrecht 94, 125).

Of course, the postunification Berlin bourgeoisie drinking champagne in the Renaissance Theater foyer also knows about their distance from this past. In the midst of the Bush administration’s new culture wars, American critics found it “nearly impossible” to believe v. Mahlsdorf’s autobiographical reports on how she successfully won “tolerance” even in the postwar East (Schiavi 199). In contrast, the Berlin of 2008 is a city governed by an openly gay mayor, whose upper- and middle-class theater audiences dominantly constitute their metropolitan self-image in terms of up-to-date inclusivity with respect to sexuality. In short, it is a place in which it seems plausible that gay and straight men—and perhaps even straight women and queer girls with a sense of humor—would joyfully whistle together at a pair of muscular thighs in tights. Interestingly, there was no whistling during my second visit, in the beginning of the following season (September 19, 2008). Having noted that
the night’s crowd looked less diverse and overall older than the first time, I speculated that it included a significantly higher percentage of tourists, after most interested Berliners had probably seen the production during its first season. Rather than whistling, this crowd merely produced laughter when the actor slipped into the tights.

In this sense, one could argue that Wright’s serious queer history project simply felt less urgent in Berlin. However, not only the communal act of laughter but also that of whistling affirms the distance between the audience and the ‘object’ of exposition on stage, the overcoming of which is so central to the critical workings of performance conceptualized by Fischer-Lichte and others. Wright’s play itself dramatizes the onstage object-subject slippage by playing with Charlotte’s German-inflected English: “I became this furniture” (18, bekommen = “to obtain”). In the Berlin production, the joke is taken at face value: the program booklet offers a ‘twin biography’ of the collector and the Mahlsdorf farmhouse she restored for her museum (2–3). Whereas the New York production managed “to defy the exotic artifactuality that otherwise defines staged or filmed male transvestism” (Schiavi 214), the Berlin Charlotte became the “rarest artifact” indeed22—if not a truly valuable one. With the ironic—although not critical—distance that defines camp in Sontag’s classical essay, the new Berlin bourgeoisie enjoyed its Gründerzeit object as a “kitsch figure” with a “kitsch aesthetics” (Osang 11), in what a snobbish German reviewer characterized as a “plushy [plüschiges] play staged in a plushy manner” (Wengierek).

Orientalist Camp

When Pollesch’s Der Leopard von Singapur (The Leopard of Singapore) had its premiere in the fall of 2003, several critics described the aesthetics of the production in vocabulary reminiscent of these responses to Ich mach ja doch, was ich will. One of them contrasted the stage and auditorium design with what audiences had previously seen by the director, whose career had begun as an insider tip among pop-affiliated hipsters in the 1990s:

In the last season, the audience had been sitting on swivel chairs and was confronted with smart houses in turbo capitalism. In this season, the spectator takes a seat in an oriental kitsch tent [orientalisch verkitscht], in an

22. Wright 36; see Wengierek on the German production.
ethno-cuddle-land [Ethnokuschelland] with lamps from Morocco and draperies from India. From the rough cold of occidental alienation, the Pollesch caravan has moved into the kitsch of a movie world.23

The movie world mentioned here is that of Fritz Lang’s 1959 The Tiger of Eschnapur, the first part of Lang’s postwar reworking of the Indian Tomb story for the silent version of which he had, together with Thea Harbou, written the screenplay in 1921.24 Pollesch, who believes in explicit intertextuality, had originally announced his production directly under the name of Lang’s late work, but at the last minute it had to be renamed due to legal complications (see Heine), and the title metamorphosed in animal form and location just to the degree necessary to avoid further charges. But why, the critics wondered, did Pollesch get himself into this world in the first place? I argue that their irritation is based on a misreading. Unlike the discussed Berlin production of I Am My Own Wife, Pollesch’s presumably kitsch aesthetics does in fact develop a project of critical camp, designed to disassemble the tradition of orientalist narratives unfolded in Lang’s film, as they resurfaced in the post–September 11 Wars on Terror. But although this critical intention is, at closer inspection, unmistakable, the reviewers’ confusion indicates the limits of Pollesch’s aesthetic choices in this particular production. While queer theorists were justified in questioning Sontag’s summary condemnation of camp sensibility as apolitical (277), they have not always been successful in specifying how precisely camp’s theatricality works as a mode of performatively undoing identities “at the intersection of social agency and postmodern parody” (Meyer 9).

Critical intentions do not guarantee critical effects; and, as I have begun to spell out, the actual workings of camp crucially depend on the concrete aesthetic reconfiguration of ‘kitschy’ elements in an individual performance as well as the context of that performance that influences audience response. In the case of Pollesch’s Leopard, the cited newspaper reviews suggest that communication during the performance was not eased by preexisting agreement on the mode of reading invited by the production’s props.

While part of these challenges can be attributed to the production’s thematic focus on the construction of cultural and racial difference (a less comfortable terrain for Pollesch’s young audiences than the critiques of gender and sexuality in his earlier works), I argue that they are also created by the production’s form. Pollesch, who was trained within the emerging postdra-

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23. Spreng. Another critic speaks of “colorful exoticism junk” (Bazinger, Exotikramsch).
24. The silent film itself, the second part of which was also called Der Tiger von Eschnapur, had been directed by Joe May. Together with Richard Eichberg’s lesser-known 1938 version, these films form a veritable ‘cinematic German orientalisms’ series.
matic scene of avant-garde–affiliated German theater theory and practice,\textsuperscript{25} has characterized his own work in terms of the radical critique of narrative and representation discussed in chapter I. Sharply distancing himself from the “representational theater” produced by 1968-generation political directors (Dürr and Höbel 155), he insists, for example, that the contemporary world and its subjectivities can “certainly” not be represented “through characters who interact and are involved in a plot.”\textsuperscript{26} Unlike in Fischer-Lichte’s theoretical works, however, the critique of mimetic world construction through traditional narrative form is not bound up with a critique of mediation as a process of sociosymbolic (re)figuration here. Described as post-Brechtian by one of his mentors (A. Wirth 126), Pollesch’s “discourse theater” (Dürr and Höbel 155) instead thematizes precisely such processes of figuration in the variously mediated worlds of contemporary life. Specifically, Pollesch samples theory (as he reports, productions often develop out of ensemble discussions about theoretical texts; see Braun 55) with fictional reference points from the worlds of popular entertainment, like Lang’s film, within highly stylized multimedia settings. As indicated by the famous shouting and screaming orgies of Pollesch’s actors (see, e.g., A. Wirth 126; Langston 250), theory is dissected by, and rearranged through, the physicality of acting on stage, but rather than fetishizing an opposition between language and the body, this confrontation dramatizes the multifaceted interplay between bodies and discourses.\textsuperscript{27} Pollesch’s characteristic configuration of theatricalizing and presencing techniques is indicated in an interviewer’s—seemingly contradictory—description of his practice of staging theory as having an “extreme distanciation or mimetic transformation effect.”\textsuperscript{28} As my reading of Leopard outlines, Pollesch’s unique method of connecting epic commentary with flashes of passionate impersonation productively responds to both contemporary critiques of Brechtian rationality (see, e.g., Lehmann 33) and the neglect of sociosymbolic processes in presence-oriented approaches to performance. Unlike Popoola’s and Wright’s works, however, (the early) Pollesch shares performance theory’s overall preference for moves of radical decontextualization. As I argue, the critics’ irritations

\textsuperscript{25} Born in 1962, he studied theater production at the University of Gießen in the 1980s with, among others, Hans-Thies Lehmann and Andrzej Wirth. Visiting professors also included Heiner Müller and George Tabori.

\textsuperscript{26} Pocai, Saar, and Sonderegger 126; see also Pollesch in Katrin Müller.

\textsuperscript{27} Pollesch’s insistence on uncoupling physicality from speaking can invite misunderstandings here. However, the emphasis is on breaking up the traditional unity of stage characters: discourse is not smoothly sutured with feelings and actions (see in Pocai, Saar, and Sonderegger 114).

\textsuperscript{28} “extremen Verfremdungs- oder Anverwandlungseffect” (Pocai, in Pocai, Saar, and Sonderegger 121).
indicate the limits of Leopard’s undoing of narrative (plot, location, and character) specifically for the project of thematizing the production of racialized subjectivities in the contemporary world: the production struggles with articulating specificity and positionality.

The “Oriental kitsch tent” in which Pollesch’s Leopard was performed was located at the Prater, a second Volksbühne location in the then-hip neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg in the former East Berlin that had temporarily housed the theater after the war and was (re-)acquired by it in 1994. Under the direction of Frank Castorf, formerly known as the “enfant terrible of GDR theater” (see Hahn 38), the Volksbühne had reestablished itself after unification not only as ‘the Berlin center for deconstruction’ (Berger, as quoted above) but also as a “different kind of political theater” or “interfering transmitter East [Störsender Ost] and fun guerilla” (Hahn 42, 45). Its unique mixture of anarchically revamped retro-GDR self-marketing, youth-cultural event management, and postdramatic theater experimentation redeveloped the left-wing avant-garde aesthetics for which the Volksbühne had stood in the era of Erwin Piscator many decades earlier. The Prater location (a beer garden and performance hall going back to the nineteenth century) added to this flair by linking the theater with a history of public space at the intersection of popular entertainment and politics (see Kohse). Initially designed as a forum for young directors, the Prater had its moment as arguably the “most innovative theater laboratory of the German-speaking area” (Der Standard, quoted from Kohse 123) after Pollesch, on his way to broader fame in the German theater scene, had become its director in 2001.29

Produced by the Volksbühne designer Bert Neumann, the Leopard tent could provide Pollesch’s 2003–4 tetralogy with its name (Zeltsaga) because it was put in place for the entire season. Initially adopted in order to save money (Kohse 126), this established Prater practice became a crucial ingredient of Pollesch’s performative technique. The reuse of a single decor provides the space of theater production and consumption with its own weight, potentially disturbs immersion into what might otherwise look like a coherently fictive world, and underlines the serial nature of Pollesch’s theater. When later in the season the tent became the set for discussions of labor and social relations in postindustrialist Brazil and Germany, it encouraged abstract, figural

29. In 2002 Pollesch was awarded the title Dramatist of the Year in the annual polling of German-language critics undertaken by Theater heute; in both 2001 and 2006 he won the renowned Mülheimer dramatist prize. Since then, he has produced his work at most major institutions of the German-speaking theater world, including conservative venues such as the Salzburger Festspiele, along with the theaters of Luzern, Basel, and Stuttgart, the Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg or the Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen. Nonetheless, his continued affiliation with the Volksbühne remains crucial for the contextualization of his oeuvre.
readings—for example, as a metaphor of postmodern ‘nomadisms’ produced by globalization. *Der Leopard von Singapur*, however, was the first Pollesch production of the season. Thus, even spectators generally aware of the annual set rule could easily be tempted to connect the new design specifically with the production they saw that night, with which it seemed to resonate quite well. With its nomadic connotations, the abundant use of colorful fabrics, and the sand on the ground, the tent contributed to interpellating audiences into (something that certainly looked like) orientalist fantasy.

As part of Pollesch’s critical project of dissecting such fantasy, his use of the tent specifically explored themes of veiling and imperialist structures of the gaze. When the spectators entered, the theatrical space was partitioned by curtains. Sitting in small “rooms” (Pollesch, *Zeltsaga* 26), they were dependent on television screens for visual access to the performers, until—about fifteen minutes into the performance—one of them opened the curtains. Dressed in a (half-transparent) burka, he addressed audience members of all sexes with flirtatious gestures and touch. Transforming them from media consumers into performance participants, who were variously seduced or rendered uncomfortable by their sudden repositioning as objects of physical address and the gaze, the use of (un)veiling devices thus redeemed the promises of participatory performance aesthetics, as it rearranged relations of the gaze, the secret, distance, and proximity in connecting the referenced ‘oriental’ world to the extradiegetic space of performance.

Beyond the production title, the audience was not immediately introduced to Lang’s world specifically. Instead, they were first presented with excerpts from Bollywood films on their television screen, and then ambiguously interpellated into a world of joyfully self-reflexive American performance culture by the *Singing in the Rain* soundtrack with which the actual performance set out. Those with respective cineast background may have also felt reminded of Stanley Kubrick’s *Clockwork Orange*, where that very soundtrack is linked to acts of assault and rape. Meanwhile, two Pollesch actors searched for gold in the (‘desert’) sand of the tent with metal detectors, and a third one presented a microphone-supported voice-over comment supplementing the musical soundtrack: “The police are always present. Police wars are not won. Police wars are the wars waged in the domestic space of global capitalism. . . . This shitty space is a suspension of order! But they want to reinscribe order into life, into a life that can be less and less inscribed into order, in other words MY LIFE AND YOURS!” (26).30 This contextualization of the War on Terror within

30. For consistency, I quote the *Zeltsaga* text from the book edition. I saw performances of *Leopard* and *Telefavela in Berlin, Svetlana in a Favela* in Basel. In addition to the commercially available *Pablo in der Plusfiliäle* video, the Volksbühne kindly provided me with tapes
contemporary regimes of globalized biopower introduces the audience to the play’s major theoretical reference point, which is also announced in the production title through an acknowledgement of intertextual coauthorship: “The Leopard of Singapore, by René Pollesch after Katja Diefenbach” (25). Specifically, *Leopard* draws on Diefenbach’s article “Just war [English in original]: New Forms of War; Police Law, Camps, and the State of Emergency,” in which the Berlin-based journalist and philosopher Diefenbach engages Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and (from a more critical perspective) Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*.

Technologically amplified, the microphone-supported monologues over music are the moments in which Pollesch’s technique comes closest to the use of an authorized epic narrator who explicates didactic messages. “These two India tear jerkers are a disaster,” a later comment directly on Lang’s film runs, “They have made much money everywhere. But I for my part hate them. A colorful adventure tale with upright heroes, helpless women and dark villains” (35). Even in these monologues, however, we find the characteristic grammatical signs of Pollesch’s use of theory as well as pop culture: ‘Taking them personally,’ the performers transpose their reference materials into the “first person” (Diederichsen 58). As Genette reminds us, every narrative is at least virtually told in the first person (*Narrative Discourse* 244); the “I” indicates the performative presence of any narrator rather than necessarily the character narrator with whom the first person has traditionally been identified. Pollesch’s onstage subjects of theory and pop culture are positioned ambiguously in relation to these layers of narratological system-building. Sometimes described as mere “text carriers,” they are identified by means of actor rather than character names and thus kept at a distance from the narrated world—to the degree such a world is even unfolded in *Leopard*. However, the performers’ costumes signal that they are not occupying a space of ‘pure’ (Western or academic) theoretical commentary, either. Variably composed from elements including burkas—which the performers repeatedly slip into and out of—fez-style headscarves, military gear, and colorful shawls and dresses, the costumes establish a space of contextual bricolage. The dialogues—and, to a lesser degree, even the ‘voice-over’ monologues—soon confirm that the performers are no sovereign commentators but rather are subject to theory as well as the cultural practices it seeks to describe. Unfolding as a discontinuous, associative sampling process (see Diederichsen 60–61), the dialogues are colloquial

of *Leopard* and *Telefavela*. While not always completely identical, the text spoken in the taped performances is overall very close to that in the book edition (like Wright’s *Wife*, Pollesch’s plays are generally shaped in the process of developing a production).

31. Thus, e.g., Barnett, “Political Theatre” 33, referencing Poschmann.
in tone, often vulgar, pun-heavy, and highly emotional (the capitalization used in the print version indicates text to be shouted). Repeating, displacing, and rearranging fragments of analysis, Pollesch’s performers seem to be desperately struggling to understand the experiences they perform, that is, the ways in which contemporary technologies of subjectivity are shaped by political, economic and socioimaginary regimes.

“What happened to the nation states? They used to have borders, and now they run directly through my life. THOSE DAMN BORDERS” (27; italics in original). In some respects, the “domestic space of global capitalism” described by Pollesch’s performers corresponds to Hardt and Negri’s ‘determined’ world of Empire: while the modern order of imperialism relied on “fixed boundaries,” “Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command” (Hardt and Negri xii). With Diefenbach, however, Pollesch’s performers also question the rhetoric of radical change that fuels Hardt and Negri’s ultimately messianic vision of liberated multitudes: “but what is really that new about your new wars? What, please tell me, is that new about THIS SHIT?” (Zeltsaga 27).

Whereas Hardt and Negri discuss empire in contrast to imperialism, Pollesch’s Leopard investigates how contemporary productions of subjectivity remain haunted by specters of imperialism, as precisely the instability of borders provokes obsessive attempts of differentiating “between inside and outside,” and to determine “what can be integrated into this shit” (27). Diefenbach’s article spells out these “increasingly differentiated regimes of inclusion and exclusion” (181) in a discussion of Black Hawk Down, Ridley Scott’s 2001 Somalia film with which the director, as she suggests, “just in time for September 11, unwittingly presented Hollywood with an ideological-theoretical introduction to the question of new wars” (180). Emphasizing the continued importance of racialization, she critiques the film’s naturalization of war in ‘the South,’ as summarized in the film’s introductory intertitle, a quote from Plato, according to which “only the dead have seen the end of war” (see Diefenbach 191).

Apparentlly haunted by imperfect memory, Pollesch’s performers repeatedly misquote this line, suggesting that it says “something like ‘Only the dead have seen the end of the US’” (Zeltsaga, 27ff.) before correcting each other. In the form of a corny joke, Black Hawk Down’s anthropological narrative about the presumed natural inevitability of war is thus transformed into a reference to contemporary structures of political hegemony.

Moving on, Pollesch’s performers shift the focus from Diefenbach’s Somalia context to Iraq, and to Lang’s orient. Generalizing from Scott’s intertitle (“films always begin with you having to read something first” [27]), they start talking about credits, complaining that in The Tiger of Eschnapur, for exam-
ple, they have to read names such as that of “Richard Angst, who made the images”: “This asshole you have to read first” (28). Through double entendres of this kind, the vulgar discourse of Pollesch’s performers develops an implicit analysis of popular culture, reminding us that images are always framed by narrative and authorship, and that the ideological work of film can be detected by looking at the fantasies, including the ‘angst,’ inscribed in its production. A few minutes later, the theme is developed into a reflection on the modern notion of authorship as artistic individuality:

PETRA: They worked on this film and contributed their own visions.
TINE: That is, something like knocked-out Indians or girls with veils and stuff.

... PETRA: The visions of artists are in fact peculiar, and they have to be.
TINE: And they developed at some point, like during the [artist’s] studies and that crap.
PETRA: That’s quite common in films that people contribute their visions of the world which they acquired during their studies.
INGA: It is a miracle, Sahib!
TINE: ... Ridley Scott, who acquired racist visions, during his studies at a British film academy! (31–32)

Lang’s film begins with a white man saving a half-European dancer, first from the sexual advances of Indian men, a couple of whom he knocks out, and then from the attack of a tiger. The woman in distress comments on the latter heroic deed with the line quoted by Inga, addressing the white man as an authority capable of wonders in a classical colonial lingua. Pollesch’s dialogue passage contextualizes such “visions” as the product of imperialist schooling: stereotypically racialized, and gendered fantasies of violence and subordination, which resurface in the contemporary imagination of war against “the depoliticized figure of the evil other” (32), whether tiger or terrorist.

In these passages, the critical effect is achieved primarily through the montage of dialogue fragments, which are spoken while the performers sit in a circle on their colorful low stools in the sand. More clearly than the monologue fragments quoted above, the indirect form of commentary developed through the performers’ associations and puns reflects the later twentieth-

32. See Spivak’s classical analysis of the trope “White men saving brown women from brown men” (297).
century critique of explicit Brechtian commentary as authoritarian. At the same time, it is ‘excessively’ Brechtian in that Pollesch’s performers do not merely interrupt impersonation with theoretical commentary but, vice versa, intersperse the dominant mode of commentary with just an occasional glimpse of film impersonation: “It is a miracle, Sahib!” While Brecht insisted repeatedly that his epic theater does not actually shun emotion and identification entirely, he specified that empathy (Einfühlung) should be used only in specific places, or “very, very weakly, and mixed with forceful other operations” (Dialoge 73). In Pollesch, the dialogue fragment from Lang is spoken in the same quick, relatively sober way that dominates the entire film-analytical passage quoted above. A quote rather than full-fledged mimesis, the momentary shift from commentary to impersonation does not correspond to a break in critical discourse. As a rhetorical counterpoint (‘That’s quite common’ vs. ‘It’s a miracle’), it serves to question the self-evidently ‘normal’ character of what is, in fact, common in the imperialist world. However, film impersonation is not the only form of mimesis at stake here. Identifying with the bodies subjected to discipline in the European metropolis (according to Diefenbach’s Foucault-inflected analysis), a performer desperately shouts, pointing at herself: “THIS SHIT HERE OUGHT TO BE PUNCTUAL” (34). While such ‘flashes’ of impersonation do not last and thus avoid creating representational continuity, they transgress the Brechtian bar against gestural and emotional ‘excess.’ Yet differently, Marc’s direct commentary on Lang’s tearjerkers quoted above is accompanied by a grotesquely antirealistic tiger impersonation (see figure 7). More or less gently, he whips the three female lead performers who are crawling through the sand. When he finally hits one of the ‘tigers’ on the head with his microphone, she attacks him in response to that—theatrically announced—provocation (36).

A critic complained that Pollesch takes Lang’s “Indian sobstuff” more seriously than, allegedly, the famous film director himself (Bazinger). She has a point in that Pollesch is seriously interested in the affective resonances of the filmic scenario that continues to play on German television. Even Marc’s critical analysis of Lang’s problematic tale with its “helpless women and dark villains” is followed by the commentator’s confession of his own affectability:

33. Only wholesale critiques of postmodernism, however, will identify the absence of a narrator or learned chorus in Pollesch’s plays with the loss of a direction for change (thus Barnett 40).

34. It is not that the actor “must himself remain cold,” but “only that his feelings must not at bottom be those of the character” (A Short Organon 193).

35. This parody of a lion tamer’s pose also references the then-recent Las Vegas incident of a tiger attack on the magician and entertainer Roy Horn.
Figure 7
Production photos, Der Leopard von Singapur, as printed in Zeitsaga 14–15. Copyright LSD-Bilderdienst (Leonore Blievericht).
“simply adorable, this shit. I love this shit” (35). Rather than just deconstructing film discourse, Pollesch’s theater of affective commentary engages desire in ways that classical Brechtian aesthetics failed to address. Assuming that the persistence of imperialist fantasy cannot be undone by critical analysis alone, the production interpellates spectators into this fantasy, working through its power in its ongoing replay. From the postmodernist angle, Brecht’s concept of epic distance merely radicalized the Enlightenment tradition of disciplining mimesis by separating it from the (physical) gestures of mimicry variously associated with animals, women, and ‘savages’ in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse: “imitation” had to be a “process of the mind”; otherwise, it would function as the “caricature” of a “parrot or a monkey.”

Pollesch’s performers turn into such animal caricatures momentarily. In another scene, one of the performers comically attacks the prompter, who is always visibly on stage in Pollesch’s anti-illusionist theater, for impersonating the monkey who steals the hero’s toothpaste in Lang’s film. Their dialogue suggests that the prompter’s identification with Lang’s ‘decivilizing’ Indian animal other may be mediated by the fact that she wears a burka (29)—although the director actually wanted her to wear a miniskirt, but “she thought that shit was too sexist” (30).

Combining theoretical analysis with the slapstick force of physical impersonation, Pollesch, like Fischer-Lichte, turns against the containment of the onstage body in bourgeois, as well as Brechtian Marxist, theater. Unlike Fischer-Lichte, however, who champions the (‘natural’) self-referentiality of this body at the expense of cultural scripts, Pollesch’s theater lets the body ‘run loose’ precisely in the process of figuration. The glimpses of impersonation in *Leopard* resemble the critical practices of mimicry foregrounded by postcolonial theory, in that their ‘inappropriateness’ “problematises the signs of racial and cultural superiority” (Bhabha 86–87). As the human stand-ins for animals undo the figuration of animals as markers of racial difference in Lang’s film, (neo)colonial ideology is analyzed through a reverse literalization of its tropes. If Bhabha’s double-voiced figures of “compromise” (86) undermine colonial authority from within its narrative unfolding, however, their appearance in Pollesch’s radically incoherent, ambiguously extra/diegetic world produces an ‘untamed’ play of critical signification. Juxtaposing, and layering, the images of monkey, burka, and miniskirt, the interplay of text and performance produces a farcelike, metaleptic encounter of discourses and levels. As Lang’s movie personnel is superimposed with contemporary figures

36. Brecht, *A Short Organon* 196; see my “Meine Herren” on the discursive history of mimesis/mimicry.
of Muslim femininity ‘in need of Western help’ as well as the ‘real’ of gender relations in the performative process at the Volksbühne Berlin, positions of authority and subordination lose their distinct contours.

“History, tradition, and attitude dissolve. You are nothing any longer, not a gawker [Glotzer], not a perpetrator, not a victim, not a helper,” a critic summarized (Mustomph). While Pollesch’s production allows for almost unlimited analysis of the complex connections between the imaginaries of orientalism, contemporary politics, the regimes of biopower, and culture industry, its excess of reference points and continuous mixup of levels makes it difficult to develop this analytic potential into larger critical narratives. As I struggle even at my desk, equipped with my archival performance tape, the text, my Internet connection, and access to an excellent university library, I am not surprised that for some critics writing in response to their experience at the theater, the “firework of references badly slipped into the diffuse.”

Mixing up their points of reference, Pollesch’s performers dissolve even Diefenbach’s theoretical narrative. Whereas the theoretical text juxtaposes (Foucauldian) regimes of modern European discipline with (Agamben’s) zone of the camp as historically developed in colonialism and fascism (182–83), Pollesch’s performers indistinguishably impersonate the subjects produced by both forms of power (e.g., 34). Despite occasional attempts to reintroduce the distinctions thus lost with deictic markers (e.g., 46), the production does not systematically develop the significance of location and positionality even in today’s globalized world, the importance of which it started out to claim with Diefenbach against Hardt and Negri. Defensively, Pollesch’s performers instead end up emphasizing the fragility of boundaries after all: “Well, ok, of course I am not black now, but the camp comes into the city, too” (40).

Short of a critic’s hostile conclusion that the production dwelled in performer narcissism, and that September 11 and the new wars are simply not “pop-compatible” (Laudenbach), I do think that Pollesch’s Leopard shows the director struggling with navigating the complex terrain of his antirepresentational project. While he aims to sever signifier, signified, and referent (“I don’t want black people to play black people, and women to play women”; quoted from Braun), Pollesch also insists that it is impossible to convincingly represent experiences that are not your own (see, e.g., Dürrr and Höbel 156). In Leopard, this twofold imperative implodes in the dissolution of positionality

37. Laudenbach; see, similarly, Spreng. This is not to say that we should methodologically fetishize the one-time live experience as the reception norm also for academic writing on theater (thus, e.g., Pavis 216–17). Repeated exposure and contextualization are necessary even for methodologically controlled guesses about how other spectators respond when first seeing a performance.
along with character, narrative space, and plot. In an explicit gesture of self-reflexivity, one of the performers admits defeat, in response to another’s question about redrawn boundaries: “No idea—I can’t make out any difference any longer” (43). Pollesch’s subsequent productions of the same season provide an answer to this dilemma.  

Pablo’s Stories, or Complexity Soap in Telefavela and Plusfiliale

When Telefavela, the second Pollesch production of the 2003/4 season, had its premiere in the Prater on January 15, 2004, critics reacted with surprise once more, but this time they were mostly pleased. Suggesting that Telefavela combines “discourse” and “drama” with more “diligence” than usual, one of them adds, a bit snippy still: “We are even told a story.” 39 When in March, the following episode, Svetlana in a Favela, opened in Luzern (Switzerland) before it was brought to the Prater as well, another critic highlighted as a “novelty” that the typical Pollesch “text-carriers” are “endowed with biographical detail” (Berger). In fact, even a cursory glance at the title page of Telefavela confirms a noticeable shift regarding the status of a fictional story world. If only in brackets, the actors are associated with character names—and for major parts of the production, they in fact impersonate these roles. This does not mean that Telefavela and the following episodes of Pollesch’s theater simply turn away from his critique of representation and narrative. 40 Already the first words spoken on stage (as another microphone-supported soundtrack–voice-over commentary) underline that epic distanciation techniques still figure prominently: “There is Pablo, and there is his dog” (66). The deictic gesture is presented by the actor associated with Pablo’s role, but it is not accompanied by any physical gesture and thus implements nonrecognition within the act of identification. Furthermore, the character of the protagonist remains an intelligibility challenge within mainstream sociosymbolic

38. With Pollesch’s Leopard, September 11 and the War on Terror thus became the occasion for developing discontents within the radically antinarrative configuration of German performance theory and practice. In nuce, however, these discontents were discernible much earlier in Pollesch as well as elsewhere (see, e.g., Barnett, “Political Theatre” 37; more generally, Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre 93, on the ‘return’ of the text; similarly, Brandstetter, Bild-Sprung 117; Poschmann 37).

39. “Es wird sogar eine Geschichte erzählt” (Heine; see also Göpfert; Seidler).

40. See, e.g., 164, for the performers’ continued declaration that they refuse to do “representational theater.”
protocols by virtue of the production’s multilevel play with gender. Despite his male name and pronoun identification, Pablo is persistently called a “maid-servant” (“Dienstmädchen”); and the “classically beautiful” (Braun 55) female actor, Caroline Peters, wears long hair in combination with a men’s jacket and pants. This is not simply cross-casting: Pablo/Peters presents gender ‘hybridity’ in an image of feminine masculinity rather than a split between semiotic and phenomenal body.

Reconfiguring the interplay of epic and mimetic techniques, Telefavela supplements the affective commentary that remained dominant in Leopard with a technique of epic mimesis, an onstage equivalent to Zeh’s literary technique in Eagles and Angels. Holding on to the oppositions structuring performance studies, a critic suggested that the entire action was “narrated more than performed” (Mansmann). As I argue, Telefavela undoes precisely this opposition, but the critic’s words point us to the ways in which the dominantly analytic functions of epic discourse in Leopard have been supplemented with a significantly higher percentage of fabula (event-, character- and setting-related) statements here. In this way, the production’s acts of epic theatricalization produce (flashes of) a ‘proper’ narrative world. Through the extensive use of temporal and spatial markers, the performers also establish some orientation for the audience, who, seated on their cushion in the sand of the tent, continue to be exposed to—more or less ‘nomadic’—moves in time and space. The production title itself—a composite of favela, that is, a poor urban neighborhood, and telenovela, the Latin American model of television soap opera41—indicates that the thematic focus has shifted from the east-west to a north-south axis, and from the discourse and practice of political empire to the processes of socioeconomic deregulation in a neoliberalist world. Pollesch wrote Telefavela during and after a stay in São Paulo in November–December 2003. The action is set mostly there as well, but the extradiegetic space of the theater production as well as other ‘diegetic’ settings still interfere, such as when a theory reference takes us to Argentina for a moment (Zeltsaga 69; see Altvater and Mahnkopf 28), without clear-cut demarcation through scene cuts, announcements, or the distribution of performance space.

Starting from the deictic gesture quoted above, the introductory monologue proceeds by balancing orientation and identification with disorientation and abstraction, as it relates fragments of the story world interwoven with theoretical discourse:

41. Pollesch had long been fascinated with the model of soap (e.g., his 2001 World Wide Web-Slums 1–10 [book edition 2003] had been announced as a “theater-soap-project”), but this fascination is given a new status now.
Pablo will inherit an empire once! That is very far away from here! From this favela here!

This city may still look like a city, but it develops and grows only from its function in the global network. . . .

A process becomes informal when laws and regulations exist which are not followed.

Everything began when Pablo was almost a child still. (66)

At first glance, this juxtaposition of theory and fictional story may not look that different from what we encountered in Leopard. In fact, the story at stake is even more elusive in that Pollesch arranged individual genre motifs into his own plot rather than substantially referencing an actual telenovela. However, we are nonetheless presented with the fiction of a particular telenovela: a relatively stable configuration of plot fragments and characterizations, which are much more substantially referenced than Lang’s plot in Leopard. In the beginning of Svetlana, one of the performers offers a one-sentence summary: “This saga is about family members who destroy themselves/each other [die sich vernichten]” (105). Pablo “mysteriously” disappeared in the favelas as a kid (66), apparently in order to protect him against Usnavy, his aunt who wants to kill him and inherit the huge empire in his place (yes, she is named “after a ship of the US navy” [67]). Unaware of his potential fortune, Pablo works as a servant for the “contessa who loves Pablo, her subordinate” (152).

Certainly new are the ways in which theory and plot fragments are developed into one configuration as the production proceeds. Telefavela specifically draws on several German essays on economic deregulation and the “informal” development of contemporary city space and work relations (Altvater and Mahnkopf; Jachnow).42 As the audience soon learns, Pablo embodies precisely this contemporary condition initially characterized as one of “[i]nformal living and working, which is bypassing the law, and thereby also the market, in order to find work somehow, that is, something that no one yet knows or performs as work” (Pollesch, Zeltsaga 66). In Altvater and Mahnkopf’s analysis, informal work is an effect of structural unemployment combined with insufficient social security systems. A heterogeneous phenomenon, it ranges from (usually female) caretaking labor to illegal and “criminal activity” (22). In “the crisis of regular work relations,” Pablo’s body in fact “flexibilized itself” into “crime” (Pollesch, Zeltsaga 72, 77). “Bypassing all laws,” as the saga action is once more summarized in the beginning of the final episode, he uses his

42. Neither of them is elevated to the status of coauthorship, but the quoted materials are referenced in the print edition.
maid servant position with the contessa “for getting hold of her property and leaving these ‘crimes’ open as a possibility of love” (152–53). That is, Pablo argues that he steals the contessa’s credit cards in order to have something that reminds him of her. Faced with this claim, the contessa “slowly goes mad! She cannot think anymore!” (153).

Whereas in Leopard, theory was primarily employed for dissecting the orientalist world of Lang’s film, it now serves to coconstitute the invented telenovela. Through the more sustained process of figuration, the former ‘talking heads’ haunted by glimpses of impersonation turn into multilayered agents who build soap into theory and theory into soap. In commenting on his own acts, Pablo develops his character: “Some people call it a feminization of survival techniques; I call it love!” (72; see Altvater and Mahnkopf 23). Reminiscent of Popoola’s neighborhood narrator (if more flamboyantly anti-realistic), this merging of commentator and agent functions democratizes epic discourse. Instead of authoritative narrators, on the one hand, and struggling subjects overwhelmed by the complexities of contemporary life (see Diedrichsen 59), on the other, the production sketches nonsovereign but active participants in an ongoing process of sense-making.

The process of epic mimesis also interweaves speech and bodily acting more closely than Leopard’s practices of affective commentary. As he talks about survival and love, Pablo kneels in front of the contessa, pleading his boss and lover to consider the romantic reading of the committed transgression, while she sits on her high chair, awkwardly clinging to the purse in her hand. All uptight authority, she protests: “Our work relationship is not in crisis. You have stolen from me!” (72). However, the contessa is also really attracted to Pablo. In bed with him, she later explains her resistance as her personal lagging behind the realities of contemporary informal life: “My social reality is still in the formal sector. Or at least that is what I fancy” (81). In a world in which “actionable laws or rules” no longer exist (68), the conventional concept of “true love” faces the social reality that “you can’t live anything permanently any longer” (109), and the notion of a “coherent” life may be but a “bourgeois fantasy” (172). The contessa’s (fantasy) world is one of classical narrative form, the critique of which is woven into characterization here. While the contessa’s “old[-style] thoughts” resonate with the ninety-minute romantic plots offered by Hollywood, Pablo “can’t pick up the film that is my life at the movies any longer.” If anything, a coherent story will be concocted by the forces of discipline: as the contessa warns Pablo in a hysterical fit of aggression, beating him

43. 81, 129; see 116. I attribute this particular statement from Svetlana in a Favela to Pablo. Once established, the follow-up productions loosen the bonds between character and actor again.
with her purse, the police will summarize his life in two or three sentences when he is caught (72; see 129). \(^{44}\)

While the contessa’s hysterical holding on to outdated love stories thus dramatizes her class position, it simultaneously voices broader discontents within the diagnosed postnarrative condition of contemporary society. Like Popoola’s narrator, the contessa is ambiguously authorized despite her problematic position—partially by virtue of her text, which, like Pablo’s, configures theory into characterization, and partially through her performance. The contessa is played by the star of Pollesch’s ensemble, Sophie Rois (see figure 8), who is praised by a critic as the “sun” around whom the others circle like planets in *Telefavela*, “heating almost half of the text with her solar energy to cosmic fervor” (Heine). With her melodramatic performance style, which contrasts with the others’ usually cool, succinct text delivery, the contessa/Rois provokes most of the audience’s laughter and, mediated through performance appreciation, also a respect that might otherwise not be invited by her role. Thus empowered, the star contessa voices desires that ultimately cut across social position. In a moment of despair, Pablo himself shouts that “[t]his formless shit is so complex, you don’t know the ropes any more and wish for a coherent love story” (90).\(^{45}\) This desire for narrative cannot be simply opposed to intellectual insight, either. Thus, Pollesch’s performers fear that the contemporary impossibility of creating coherence may be no less ideologically suspicious than plot and characterization. As suggested by Altvater and Mahnkopf, the subject who adapts too well to the informal condition by developing neoliberalist “technologies of the self” from “below” is easily controlled in the sense of Michel Foucault’s concept of *gouvernamentalité* (28). Although no longer able to be a “transparent [übersichtliches] subject,” Pollesch’s performers also don’t “want to be an opaque [unübersichtliches] subject that is well governable” even with her “criminal” activity (172–73, 114). “That’s simply too close to the government’s position [zu sehr Regierungsposition]” (118).

The solution to this dilemma, *Telefavela* suggests, may consist in telling new stories, and telling stories differently, making them into more appropriate tools for conceptualizing contemporary society and subjectivity. On the verge of madness, the contessa changes her coping strategy, trying “to create a story

\(^{44}\) Occasionally, Pollesch’s performers still resort to grand antinarrative gestures: “I don’t want to know you as a narrative, but as a process of reflection” (129). Later, however, a performer rewords: “I don’t want a bullshit story to narrate this, I want my mind to narrate this to me” (166).

\(^{45}\) Already *Leopard* hinted at related dilemmas. There, flashes of an ‘old-style’ humanism seemed to contradict the analysis of ideological narrative in both interventionist human rights discourses and Lang’s orientalist scenarios: “Sometimes I am glad that film exists, in order to tell me that we are both humans” (48).
Figure 8
Production photo, Telefavela, as printed in Zeltsaga 60–61. Copyright LSD-Bilderdienst (Leonore Blievernicht).
that would enable her to understand his [Pablo’s] reality” (124). Attempting to make different sense of his “abusive” use of words that don’t mean anything to him, such as “love” (110), she tries to accept his unconventional use of romantic vocabulary as an act of catachresis in the sense of an empowering response to the lack of a literal term for his marginalized desires and survival strategies (see Butler, *Excitable Speech* 144, referencing Spivak). Configuring these acts with Pablo and the contessa, Pollesch and his team “invent a story,” something “coherent, telling of love, and life, and work,” in order to “create an image” of his “reality” and that of São Paulo (109). In ‘grafting’ a theoretical narrative onto the fictive soap opera world and, vice versa, a soap world onto the theoretical narrative of neoliberalism, they make sense of Pablo’s subjectivity in a way that merges complexity with critical orientation and passionate understanding. Importantly, the notion of grafting—which is used in Birgit Lengers’s discussion of Pollesch’s references to television soaps in terms of media “hybridization”—needs to be understood along the lines of the antiesentialist, productive concept of hybridity developed in postcolonial theory (see Bhabha), if not replaced, once more, with a concept of syncretism that avoids the historical baggage of hybridity metaphors (see Young). In Lengers’s own discussion, the notion still indicates lingering critical reservations vis-à-vis intermediality when she argues that Pollesch’s plays resemble soap opera only in “superficial” ways, undertaking a “subversive medial masquerade” rather than functioning as “an affirmative copy of the television format” (150).46 But rather than just an ‘artificial’ means of improving the ‘species’ of theater, Pollesch’s onstage complexity soap is an intermedia and intergenre act of (ontologically valid, if not therefore politically affirmative) performative constitution, which allows him to integrate the (post)modernist critique of narrative into his response to the discontents produced in the postnarrative condition.

“Maybe a love story,” Pablo/Caroline continues after his outbreak of despair about the complexity of the contemporary condition, “in order to fit into the complex informal frame around us, would have to be a story in which transient characters briefly profit from each other” (90). But how does the telenovela specifically promise such new stories? In some respects, the genre hardly presents a convincing alternative to Hollywood’s narratives. Outside Pollesch’s productions, its worlds are created by large media corporations

46. Similarly, many reviewers responded to the narrative experiments in *Telefavela* and its follow-up pieces by doubting the seriousness of experimentation with the narrative worlds of soap, variously suggesting that the adaptation operates as a “theatrical hijacking of a televisual genre” (Sieg 120, 123) and that plot and identificatory offers function as “traps” only (Seidler) or are “simulated” and “of no importance” (Tobi Müller).
(with Rede Globo as Brazil’s major player), and when speaking programmatic-
ically, his performers associate the making of new narratives with alterna-
tive production contexts instead: Svetlana shoots her own films in the favelas
(see, e.g., 106). In the beginning of Svetlana, however, a performer curiously
speaks of “this Brazilian telenovela or investigation of Brazilian reality” (106).
Has she bought into some ideological promise of the telenovela’s social real-
ism? Maybe not quite. Scholarship on Brazilian telenovelas has stressed the
close, bidirectional connections between the worlds of the show and those
of its viewers, from the flow of fashions to the negotiation of topical social
issues (e.g., Machado-Borges; Tufté). Unlike North American soaps, Brazil-
ian telenovelas dominate prime-time television, thus occupying a much more
central (and arguably less feminized; see Warhol) sociosymbolic place. Also,
they prominently feature class conflict. Pablo embodies one of the telenovela’s
most prominent hero types: the “malandro,” an “anti-hero from a favela” who
“uses his charm on women to get their money” and who is not a revolutionary
or rebel but “a specialist” in escaping the law (Tufté, 98, 103, in part quoting
Vink). However, the telenovela’s potential to participate in the negotiation of
social realities is based on its serial form as much as its content and sociosym-
bulic position. Telenovelas are ‘open works’: not fully shot when first broad-
cast, they unfold in a process depending on audience response (Tufté 87).
Emphasizing repetitions over simple linearity, they also feature a form of tem-
porality conducive to psychological processes of ‘working through’ issues and
fantasies—and to Pollesch’s repetitive sampling practices. Even while Brazilian
telenovelas often end after five to eight months, they present an alternative to
classically Aristotelian plots in that closure—the moment of resolution stabi-
лизing a particular plot move—is deferred almost endlessly.47

Due to their medial context, Pollesch’s productions do remain haunted
by the format of the one-evening show; audiences still need to pay individu-
ally for each night at the theater. The real-fictional conflicts at hand, however,
cannot be put to an end that quickly. Despite her attempts to make new sense
of Pablo’s realities, the contessa fails to entirely work through her class posi-
tion. Still fantasizing about having Pablo interned, she visualizes herself on
her deathbed, “praising the police and apotheosizing the psychologists” for
erasing Pablo “from the memory of this planet and mine” (93). Rather than
concocting a happy end for the unlikely love story, the director grants her
this deathbed scenario, if only in a hyperbolic implementation that parodies
any notion of resolution. Without diegetic motivation beyond the contessa’s
fantasy, Telefavela spreads sudden death to all of its characters within the last

47. See Carroll 121 on soap, referencing Dennis Porter.
five minutes, including the prompter. The scenario mocks us with a notion of poetic justice as Pablo, not Usnavy, inherits everything, if only to die himself (96). In fact, playful performativity inherits everything in this teletheater episode: the characters variously enact death only after being declared dead (Pablo), or they keep reawakening (the contessa), making extended room for Rois’s glorious deathbed performance (see Heine).

Having replayed Telefavela’s major themes in a less defined setting, Svetlana in a Favela similarly ends with a mutual shooting that dramatizes the violent contingency of narrative closure after the performers have complained that no one is telling them “when this is finally over” (132). However, the final episode, Pablo in der Plusfiliale, which loosely translates into U.S. culture as “Pablo in K-Mart,” takes matters in different directions once more. Circling back to some of the issues of Leopard, the season’s concluding piece in fact gestures at ways of resolving them—if precariously and through an ongoing process only. We are now in Germany, where Pablo has “gotten lost” in the “Plusfiliale” with the help of well-paid smugglers and the “artful [schlauen] strategies” (159) needed for crossing borders irregularly in the contemporary world, as outlined in the production’s additional theoretical reference text from an anthology on neoliberalism and migration (Diminescu). The German Plus store specifically is mentioned in Altvater and Mahnkopf’s article (21) as an example of an average low-wage, minimum-security job in the (metaphorical?) “Third World” of discounter company “cities.”48 The evening begins with one performer’s request, “Show me [Zeig’ mal] how you live!” (152). In response to this invitation, we are presented with the interior of a closed onstage container, a trailer perhaps, in which “quite a few people” (152) sleep (see figure 9), and in the course of the production also stack shelves.

The showing itself is undertaken by a camera, which functions as a crucial instance of narration in Plusfiliale. Whereas Telefavela and Svetlana merely supplemented mostly unobstructed audience views of the performers with video clips, Plusfiliale returns to Leopard’s more substantial use of live video—but now as a means of intensifying the process of showing (as well as the shown) rather than primarily a means of thematizing obstructed vision. The arguably most characteristic feature of the production is the video close-up (see Mustroph). With the camera, the faces and (mostly upper) bodies of the characters sitting, talking, lounging, and sometimes moving around in their container are projected onto a big screen that provides an intimacy not

48. Zeltsaga 156. The names of different market competitors are also mentioned (e.g., 154–55, 161). One of the performers articulates relief that at least, Pablo didn’t end up at Lidl, Germany’s Walmart equivalent in terms of particularly scandalous work conditions (159).
Figure 9
Production photo, Pablo in der Plafonniere, as printed in Zetsaga 148-49.
Copyright ISD, Bilderdienst (Leonore Bievernicht).
usually afforded by technologically unenhanced theater performances—or also the small television sets used in Leopard. To be sure, traditional settings afford closeness to spectators in the first rows, and Pollesch’s various alternative arrangements mostly allow for relative intimacy anyway. However, the superior respective potential of the camera is dramatized in Plusfiliale through the ways in which the dominant video close-ups are contrasted with in-between scenes on a directly visible part of the stage. In this “unequal competition,” the actors appear on the open stage not just reduced in size but also “turned into dark, dull silhouettes” through the production’s use of lighting (Sieg, Choreographing 129).

Blending “the associations normally associated with live theatre and film,” the production complicates media-theoretical debates through the ways it thus plays with physical and virtual bodies, “reality and illusion, presence and absence, distance and empathy” (Carlson, “Has Video Killed,” 23, 29). Under the spell of the screen enmity that characterizes much of contemporary German performance theory, Katrin Sieg has read this “evacuation of the live actor as the last referent of embodied, material sociality” as an instance of postmodernism’s “failure . . . to imagine change or opposition” (Choreographing 121, 137). To the contrary, I argue, the use of the camera in Plusfiliale critically counteracts neoliberalism’s brutal regime. Making unconventional use of cinema’s most powerful technique of creating empathy and identification (see Murphet 90 on the close-up), it presents bodies as marked by socio-symbolic scripts but simultaneously not reducible to the latter’s categorizing impact. My concluding notes on Pollesch detail how Plusfiliale’s camera close-ups thus develop alternative figurations of the human, and collective solidarity, as a tender counterpoint to the body’s commodification in the store. Thereby, the production moves beyond the impasses of postmodernism without betraying a critical stance on contemporary society’s exclusionary regimes of representation.

One of the production’s musical interlude scenes literalizes the process of commodification by showing, one after another, the performers while an onscreen pen writes expiration dates onto their bodies, ironically accompanied by the German pop band Alphaville’s 1980s hit “Forever Young.” When shown in close-up as they talk, in contrast, the performers often gently hug one another, cuddling and occasionally kissing. With Altvater and Mahnkopf’s article, which tentatively envisions the informal sector as “breeding ground [Keimzelle] of a solidary economy” and “counterweight to the destructive tendencies of neoliberalism” (28), they discuss possibilities of counterbalancing their neoliberally deregulated life conditions through
equally informal relations of solidarity, mutual care, and—ideally ungendered (165)—sexuality. To be sure, Pollesch’s performers still impersonate the contessa along with Pablo (e.g., 175), and their dialogue—as well as, at moments, their performance—also emphasizes the pervasiveness of violence and calculation even in the ‘private’ realm. Like the Plus employers, they ask each other for urine samples as a precondition for care (173). Nonetheless, the camera-presented images also tell a different story, as they capture (very un-Hollywoodlike) tender gestures across the boundaries of hetero- and homonormative orders, in defiance of hegemonic protocols of age and beauty. Ethnicity, and immigrant background, are simultaneously thematized and undone through theatricalization: the artificial bodily signifiers of Pablo’s ‘foreign’ masculinity, a dark wig and a mustache, migrate from subject to subject, with the latter in particular turned into an instrument of light, caressing touch.

This camera-presented story is no coherent, classical narrative. Precisely by virtue of its fascination with close-ups, the camera shows the world of Plusfiliale in a “gestus of the disrupted, dispersed, and incoherent” (Mustroph); through counterpoint (violence vs. tenderness), it develops an open-ended process of figuration. In the language of rhetoric, its work is that of propopoeia: the camera ‘gives face’ to the individual’s struggle with asserting ‘life’ against exploitation. Definitively no longer mere ‘text carriers,’ the subjects of globalization become visible as individuals who worry whether they should see each other as opponents but simultaneously love each other (157). As indicated by the fluctuating identifications, this technique of giving face also explores an alternative to the relatively clear-cut character profiles through which Telefavela solved Leopard’s issue with positionality. Rather than categorizing subjects through consistent character name and ethnic background attribution, the slow, themselves tender movements of the camera offer specificity in a phenomenological mode, without forgetting the power of the symbolic.

Giving face to the irregularized subjects of the neoliberal world, Plusfiliale also reads as a declaration of love for (a new notion of) the human. In the beginning of the season, Leopard’s critical commentary had included reflections on how discourses of “human rights” have been developed as “administrative knowledge” in the new wars (53). Simultaneously, Pollesch’s performers found themselves longing for a moment in which “human dignity is not only administrated” (47). Unable to resolve the dilemma implied in these contrary evaluations of humanism, they suspected that they did not yet “have the theoretical debates [needed] at [their] disposal” (42). Supplementing insuf-
ficient theory with soap and film technology, *Plusfiliale* champions a different notion of the human that can, actually, be associated with (at production time) emerging theoretical moves. In response to hegemonic post–September 11 discourses, Butler’s *Precarious Life* revisits the notion of universalism, which her earlier works had critiqued for its exclusionary workings. Although still starting from an analysis of these workings—specifically the ways in which Muslim lives have been made less mournable than ‘ours’ in the War on Terror context—Butler now argues for an ethics based on “an apprehension of a common human vulnerability” (30). Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, she specifically discusses the “‘face’ of the other” as a medium of “convey[ing] the human” and “the precariousness of life” in a way different from hegemonic media representations (131, 143–44). In *Plusfiliale*, Pollesch gestures at this collective human vulnerability when his performers ask, for example: “Why do we get stressed so much more easily than money” in the deregulated flow of resources across borders? (161). In line with Pollesch’s general preference for the first-person singular, however (and resonating with Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*; see chapter I), the ‘we’ is used much less prominently than the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ in both dialogue and camera address. Both the tenderness and the anger of Pollesch’s deregularized subjects are thus shown as a phenomenon of personal intersubjective relationality: “And why do I react to you in the first place? Why do I shout at you, when you lie there and hurt?” (170). Short of summarily “question[ing] the tenability of theater’s commitment to collective thought” (Sieg 141), Pollesch thus reworks its collectivity promises through a ‘bottom-up’ approach, developing relationality by working through difference and conflict in nonetheless loving (or, for the audience, empathetic) encounters.

The political promise of these relations remains uncertain, but *Plusfiliale* ends on a note of hope even on the level of dialogue. Shortly after identifying himself as the contessa, Volker decides to give his partner the benefit of the doubt: “If you wanted to fuck me over yesterday, that doesn't mean that you want to do so today” (176). In the uncertain temporality that characterizes irregular life, it is possible, albeit far from guaranteed, that “people change” (176). Hoping for such change, Volker emphasizes the productivity of continued exchange about ongoing affective processes: “Perhaps we should integrate this negotiation about what we feel—and that is something different in any moment of existential insecurity thwarting us—into our sexuality!” (176). Tine echoes him, and the season finds its closure in the performers’ collective resolution to integrate theory more fully into their lovemaking (176): the configuration of complexity soap is to be continued.
Conclusion

This chapter has investigated some of the forms that the contemporary aesthetics of narrative performance takes in the realm of theater. In response to the particularly clear-cut antinarrativity of artistically serious, experimental German theater at the turn of the twenty-first century, I began by looking at the transnational and popular margins of this theater culture, if with the agenda of rewriting the genealogies of its artistic center through precisely these connections. Further pursuing the interplay of presence and theatricality techniques that chapter III traced in the variously defiantly or subtly unauthoritative, and (from hegemonic angles) unauthorized narratives of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century literature, I outlined partially analogous techniques in the medium of theater, even while insisting on the individuality of each production as well as the impact of media-specific discourses and technologies. Thus, Popoola’s African diaspora aesthetics-inflected fragment “This is not about sadness” is reminiscent of Zaimoğlu’s Kanak Sprak in the ways in which its (mediated, ‘secondary orality’ style) call-and-response technique develops the conflict of sociosymbolic narratives in the voice of its onstage narrator. Marked as unreliable through critical theatricalization, this narrator is nonetheless invested with affectively forceful presence and her own experiential authority. The difference from, and greater egalitarian, dialogic potential of this piece vis-à-vis Zaimoğlu’s monologues is in how Popoola uses the configuration of this voice, and its configuration with a range of other, truly heterogeneous voices, for an investigation of competing concepts of community. Challenging homogeneous community concepts of both white and African diaspora performance theory, this investigation nonetheless calls on the audience to consider the importance of collective identifications in contemporary European society at the crossroads of multicultural inclusion and the continued violence of racialization.

In Wright and Kaufman’s intellectual Broadway success I Am My Own Wife (2003), a queer history project emerges from the fusion of presence-based testimonial aesthetics with theatrical self-reflexivity in the tropes and material objects of recording. With their help, the—diegetic as well as extradi-egetic—playwright is able to work though his experience of radical deauthori- zation in writing about European history and to reconcile the contradictions between admiration for his gay ‘hero’ and suspicion vis-à-vis the tales of an East German informant in a de-heroicized notion of narrative-performative authenticity. In producing empathy and mourning, the performance bridges the distance between stage and auditorium in a gesture of (overall) inclusive queer-straight community-building (if at the expense of flamboyant sexual-
ity). At the Berlin Charlottenburg Renaissance Theater, where the German adaptation was received as lowbrow, variety-inflected Boulevardtheater, principally similar techniques of presence and theatricality are reconfigured to very different effect. While the empathetic bond between stage and auditorium is cut, the audience is (more or less) united in their enjoyment of a theatricalized spectacle of transvestism oscillating between politically duplicitous flamboyance and housewife ecstasy, and the theatrical presencing of queer histories is displaced with an uncritical presentification of Charlotte’s (kitsch) collections from the foundational era of the German national state.

The fact that confused critics described the first part of Pollesch’s 2003–4 Zeltsaga tetralogy, Der Leopard von Singapur, in similar (kitsch) terms points to the significance of popular traditions for his experimental productions, but also to the dilemmas inscribed in Pollesch’s initially antinarrative aesthetics. Hugely different from the Renaissance Theater production in artistic design, Pollesch’s camp project employs post-Brechtian techniques of affective commentary to unravel the orientalist narratives resurfacing in the War on Terror. While reminiscent, for example, of Özdamar’s ‘undercover’ narrative in their indirectly evaluative montage practice, Pollesch’s configurations of first-person epic discourse with flashes of passionate pop cultural mimesis are radically metaleptic and decontextualized; consequently, the production struggles with articulating historical specificity and positionality. Pollesch’s subsequent productions of the 2003/4 season find an answer to this dilemma by programmatically reopening the question of narrative. The technique of epic mimesis developed in making Telefavela’s soap theory worlds recalls the ways in which Zeh’s present-tense character narration in Eagles and Angels imbricates distanciation with immersion, but it does so less to the effect of configuring radically deauthorized narrative than to that of democratizing epic discourse in sketching nonsovereign yet active participants in an ongoing process of making sense of the world. Finally, Pablo in der Plusfiliale devises an alternative to Telefavela’s relatively clear-cut character portraits with its technique of phenomenological figuration: a practice of camera-enhanced tender showing, which offers tentative answers to Leopard’s unresolved dilemmas regarding the status of the human in the War on Terror with its emphasis on shared human vulnerability and potential solidarity in the violently racialized and gendered worlds of neoliberalist survival.
Like God’s Voice?

THE RETURN OF
AUTHORITATIVE NARRATION

IN 2003 Florian Illies, whose bestseller *Generation Golf* had established him as the representative West German archivist of pop culture a few years earlier, declared: “It’s all over. The New Economy. The fun society. Pop literature.”1 With a renewed programmatic insistence, his colleagues instead began debating the function of literature, and specifically the novel, in society. In the summer of 2005, a “Manifesto” for “Relevant Narration” called for building “bridges” between “morality and aesthetics.”2 After decades of suspicion vis-à-vis the ideological functions of narrative, the authors, including well-known novelists Matthias Politycki and Thomas Hettche, turned the tables on these verdicts. Reminiscent of Hayden White’s classical definition, but with an affirmative intent, they declared:

Narration is the moralist’s form of expression in disguise [*die verkappte Äußerungsform des Moralisten*], exercised with the pathos of someone who does not simply indulge in a pleasure in fabulation but acts on his duty

1. Illies, *Generation Golf* II 62 (quoted from Taberner 82).
2. Dean, Hettche, Politycki, and Schindhelm. The authors actually distanced themselves from the 1968-inflected word “manifesto” apparently chosen by the *Zeit* editor (see Politycki, “Dies ist kein Manifest”).
to actively engage with his time [sich der Pflicht entledigt, Zeitgenossenschaft . . . zu betreiben] from the midst of his generation, from an aesthetic perspective, which is always also a moral one.

To be sure, others begged to differ. The critical responses provoked by the “Manifesto” included, for example, a programmatic plea for aesthetic autonomy (Dieckmann). Still, times in fact seemed to have changed. Various critics insisted that the reality of terror ought to have or simply had foreclosed the world of surfaces, irony, sexual decadence, dandyism, and drug excess thematically and stylistically foregrounded in the performative realm of pop-affiliated works. Of course, a closer look at the German feuilleton debate shows that the bashing of ‘fun culture’ and even the declaration of its end, did not start in September 2001. Rather than marking a simple break, the attacks and subsequent wars served as amplifiers or catalysts (Krekeler) and new rhetorical resources in ongoing disputes on literary value and social norms that had accompanied the emergence of pop itself in the 1990s and, more generally, the rise and fall of postmodernism. Furthermore, Illies’s reference to the “new economy” indicates that the intellectual momentum now gained by lingering discontents in the postmodern episteme was coinduced by socioeconomic insecurities, including the effects of Germany’s lasting unemployment crisis and the so-called rebuilding of the European welfare state. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of cultural reorientation both points to and helped bring about shifts in the cultural landscape. Large-scale ‘politics’ and ‘history’ came back on the literary agenda, along with ‘values’ and religion (see, e.g., Krekeler; McBride 86). Written shortly before September 11, Christian Kracht’s 1979 is still designed according to the “method pop,” but it performs pop’s end on the plot level by having its Western, ‘decadently’ individualist character narrator convert to collectivism in a Chinese labor camp in the wake of the revolution in Tehran. Meanwhile, Jonathan Franzen’s The Corrections (published in September 2001) had its major success in the United States as well as abroad with a rather different mode of narration—a mode not unprecedented, even in contemporary literature, but about to make a major comeback.

3. For an explicit such plea shortly after September 11, see Heilmann; for an overview of the debate on the end of pop literature: http://www.single-generation.de/debatte/debatte_golf.htm (accessed 11/05/09).
4. For example, Assheuer, “Im Reich des Scheins” (in the spring of 2001, the epochal significance of pop is established in terms of its presumed crisis here); for a retrospective qualification of the timeline (but simultaneous affirmation of the importance of September 11) see also Krekeler. Furthermore, the death proclamations for pop did not equal its actual end (see Schumacher, “Ende” 158); the complex literary landscape of the 2000s is in part also characterized through continuity vis-à-vis the 1990s.
5. The role that September 11 came to play in this emerging trend was far from self-
While a German critic framed the phenomenon as one of “American geeks” (Diez), this chapter starts from the observation that the trend in question developed in the German production context as well. With reference also to a parallel theoretical debate, Paul Dawson describes it as “The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction”—a return he charts as a move beyond but nonetheless developed through postmodernist experimentation (151). While Jonathan Culler had argued for abandoning the concept of omniscience with its implied divine analogy, Meir Sternberg launched a spirited defense, and Barbara Olsen cautioned that Culler’s “resistance” might itself be “theological” (341), suggesting that the concept could well describe ideologies and experiences of both actual writers and readers. As I argue in this chapter, the God analogy is in fact significant for the poetological developments at stake insofar as divine figures explicitly come into play on the textual level. However, I side with Culler in insisting that the concept of omniscience—as it is used also by Dawson—comprises different textual phenomena that are not necessarily combined in actual narrative form and more usefully disentangled in analyzing it, including “the performative authoritativeness of many narrative declarations,” on the one hand, and the narrator’s (theatrical) flaunting of “her godlike ability” in direct communication with the implied reader (see 26), on the other. Furthermore, I argue that the God analogy has its significance for contemporary writing only in the mode of being actively questioned. In short, the concept of omniscience quickly reaches its limits in unfolding the trend at stake. Significantly, Dawson himself gradually shifts the emphasis of his argument to the notion of “a specific rhetorical performance of narrative authority” (146) and concludes by introducing the alternative diagnosis of recent novelistic ‘maximalism’—a trend toward “the big ambitious social novel”—suggested by Laura Miller (Dawson 156).

Starting from these different terminological suggestions, I take a closer look at the forms that, in many works of the 2000s, have displaced the radically performative aesthetics of pop literature. I begin by returning to Juli Zeh, who explicitly—if not without an ironic twist—argued for a turn to past tense, ‘third person,’ and ‘authorial,’ godlike narration in a post–September 11 poetological essay. While in fact very different from Eagles and Angels (see evident, as indicated, e.g., by V. S. Naipaul’s proclamation of the ‘end’ of the novel in his Nobel Prize speech in December 2001 (see Krekeler).  

6. In addition to the texts discussed here, a striking example is the tremendous success of Uwe Tellkamp’s monumental Der Turm (2008). See my “On a Twenty-First-Century Quest” on its (not actually throughout authoritative) form.  

7. See Dawson 147–48 on the importance of textual signals.  

8. Sternberg points out that Culler does his own ‘package dealing’ (687), but for my purposes, Culler’s distinctions are more relevant than Sternberg’s.
chapter III), the narrative form of her 2004 Spieltrieb (Playdrive) allows me to develop my claim that the programmatic return to authoritative narrative does not bring the end of the aesthetics of narrative performance. A general complication is, of course, indicated by Culler’s inclusion of narrative theatricalization as one of the techniques effecting ‘omniscience.’ More specifically, Zeh’s novel shows how in contemporary literature, such theatricalization remains haunted by the postmodern legacy of problematizing—rather than forcefully asserting—narrative authority. My subsequent readings, furthermore, question the clear-cut boundaries around the trend at stake by presenting poetologically ‘hybrid’ examples. In discussing the ex machina divine voice in Elfriede Jelinek’s simultaneously highly scenic Bambiland as a failure of ‘human’ (nonsovereign, democratic) narration, and contrasting it with the ‘earthly’ alternative to divine authoritativeness developed in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, I pursue the ways in which contemporary literature has productively responded to the diagnosed discontents in the postmodern episteme without abandoning the challenge of critically reworking narrative authority for the twenty-first century.

The Quest for Heavenly Guidance

Zeh’s Spieltrieb

As the Spiegel reviewer worded somewhat summarily, Zeh’s second novel, the 2004 Spieltrieb (Playdrive), asks “how harmless students can turn into terrorists.”9 In slightly more exact terms, the novel pursues the genealogy of a high school ‘game’ (as the students put it), in which a teacher is sexually seduced by the fifteen-year-old Ada and afterward blackmailed into ritualized repetitions of the secretly photographed act. Even while the Spiegel’s identification between students and terrorists is a bit rash, the novel does in fact embed its local events into the War on Terror context through characterization as well as plot construction. In developing this configuration, Spieltrieb “drove the bored hedonists of pop literature off the couch”: Zeh’s second novel asks “the very big questions: about meaning, values, purpose in life.”10 To be sure, I demonstrated that Eagles and Angels had also been more interested

10. Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung, quoted from Zeh’s webpage: http://www.juli-zeh.de/spiel-rezensionen.php (accessed 06/10/12); Kraume (‘die ganz großen Fragen: Sinn, Werte, Lebensinhalt’). While Spieltrieb did not have the overwhelming international success of Eagles and Angels, it was translated into a number of mostly European languages and reviewed very favorably in the German feuilletons, with equal praise for both content and form.
in politics and plot than mainstream pop. In this respect, Spieltrieb arguably attests as much to its author’s continued project of making sense of the contemporary world as to the changed sociopolitical and literary configuration. However, Eagles and Angels could hardly have been described as “acute prose” (scharfsinnig, Kunckel) or in terms of its “epic stamina” (Dell). The two novels are strikingly different in narrative form: whereas Eagles and Angels had required its reader to actively develop narrative coherence by connecting the pieces of information recorded by its drugged character narrator, Spieltrieb presents an overall coherent, linear, past-tense account, provided by a voice that—all complications to be unfolded notwithstanding—in crucial respects acts in ‘authorial’ fashion.

Zeh’s 2002 essay “Sag nicht Er zu mir, oder: Vom Verschwinden des Erzählers im Autor” (“Don’t Call Me ‘He,’ or: On the Narrator’s Disappearance in the Author”) signals that this radical reorientation reflects an explicit poetological decision. Using the dated, but in the German context still influential, terminology of Franz Stanzel’s Die typischen Erzählsituationen im Roman, the essay critically targets the dominance of ‘first-person’ narratives in contemporary German literature, which, Zeh argues, subliminally and against all narratological insistence to the contrary identify (character) narrator and author at the expense of aesthetic distance. The only alternative to the first person considered viable by contemporary authors, Zeh continues, is Stanzel’s “figural” situation, in which the protagonist dominates narrative perspective by “carrying” a “camera with him” or her. Suggesting that the radically perspectivist epistemologies corresponding to these forms are not really cutting-edge any longer, Zeh attributes their dominance to their creators’ “fear of heights.” In their place, she recommends new experiments with “authorial,” or, as she also words explicitly, “God”-like forms of narration.

Zeh’s presentation of the authorial narrator, who is the “master/lord [Herr] in the world of his story,” corresponds quite closely to Dawson’s discussion of omniscience in contemporary literature. While “the ‘universal’ narrative authority of the classic omniscient narrator is indeed no longer available to contemporary writers,” Dawson suggests, it has been replaced by “more specific relativised modes of narrative authority,” like that of a “public intellectual” with the ability to talk to general audiences about a variety of issues “from a base of specific disciplinary expertise” (149–50). Zeh, who has herself been praised as a “public intellectual” par excellence (Herminghouse), describes her authorial narrator as the kind of intellectual “expert” that contemporary society, she suspects, tolerates only outside literature. Rather than exclusively reporting on the world of his own creation, such a (literary) narrator also claims to know a little “of the real world”; perhaps, she adds, “he in fact knows
LIKE GOD’S VOICE?

[versteht] something.” While Zeh’s tentative syntax underlines that she is aware of how epistemologically precarious such claims have become to contemporary audiences, she implicitly sides with Olsen, suggesting that “a large part of contemporary readers seem to be longing for this kind of narration.” While Zeh does not sketch the moral dimension of authorial narrative as programmatically as the “Manifesto” for “Relevant Realism,” she hints at the issue by speculating, in reverse, that the “unlimited playing field” opened up by authorial narration11 is experienced as threatening in a historical moment in which “morality and ethics don’t dictate to us what we should write” any longer, and in which “political intentions” are generally regarded to be “for ostalgic Ossis and left-over feminists.” In short, she concludes, the trouble may be that contemporary society lacks the equivalent of “narrative authority.”

Unfolding its author’s authorial thoughts, Spieltrieb introduces a narrative voice that answers to precisely this diagnosis. With a grand rhetorical gesture, an ambitious narrator begins by contextualizing her tale in the realm of modernity gone astray with the loss of its ethical foundations:

What if the great-grandchildren of the nihilists had long moved out of the dusty devotional objects store that we call our Weltanschauung? If they had deserted the half-emptied warehouses of valences and importances [Wertigkeiten und Wichtigkeiten], of the useful and the necessary, the real and the right, in order to return on game trails into the jungle, to a place where we can’t see, not to mention reach them any longer? What if bible, constitution, and criminal law had never been [gegolten] anything to them but an instruction manual for a parlor game? (7)

Having read Zeh’s essay (as summarized so far), we may expect the narrator to counter this loss of orientation through a performance of narrative authority, which would reassert society’s foundational texts. However, the quoted introductory passage also suggests first complications. Metaphorically describing “our Weltanschauung” as a store of dusty devotional objects, the narrator keeps some distance from the realms of morality. Interestingly, the essay’s primary example for the creative possibilities afforded by the “long arm of epic distance” is The Man without Qualities, Robert Musil’s famous novelistic account—and performance—of the loss of clear-cut orientation in European modernity. As a literary obsession shared by the students and their otherwise quite different teacher, Musil’s novel provides a crucial intertext

11. On Zeh’s reference to Friedrich Schiller’s ”Spieltrieb” concept see Geulen, “Laudatio”; Öhlschläger.
for Spieltrieb as well. Does Spieltrieb also restage its modernist predecessor’s historicizing, arguably relativizing take on matters of ethics and social order? In Musil’s novel, the moral ambiguity of narrative voice is effected by the narrator’s intimate, albeit shifting, relations with his ‘qualityless’ protagonist who relentlessly questions everything. In other words, The Man without Qualities does not actually constitute a straightforward example for ‘authorial’ narration, but rather underlines the inadequacy of Stanzel’s early categories with its extensive exploration of character focalization and intricate play with narrative distance. As I show, Spieltrieb undertakes similar negotiations of narrative voice, but their significantly different inflections also attest to the vicissitudes of asserting narrative authority after postmodernism.

More casually than Spieltrieb with its weighty introductory sentences, The Man without Qualities begins with an elaborate meteorological discussion. Commenting on a “depression” over the Atlantic, the narrator playfully displaces the old-fashioned introductory formula “it was a fine August day” (3). Indirectly, the narrator’s introductory use of scientific discourse reflects on the process of representation, as it seems to answer implicit doubts about literary originality with a reference to extraliterary expertise. At the same time, these doubts are not made explicit. As he freely traverses discourses and narrative spaces, Musil’s narrator clearly fulfills Culler’s first criterion for omniscient narration—that of performative authoritativeness—but matters are less straightforward with respect to the ‘flaunting’ of such authority. Although the narrative voice is prominent in that it openly exercises commentary functions and asserts its presence through its rich tropological arsenal, this voice remains anonymous (Martens 177–78). Musil’s narrator does not point to himself through the use of the first-person singular. Thus, he does not get any personal contours and is certainly not theatricalized as an imaginatively embodied agent—my act of gendering ‘him’ is based on association with the name given on the book cover and stereotypical inferences regarding narrative authority (see Lanser, Fictions of Authority).

In contrast, Zeh’s narrator introduces herself on the first page of the novel. “All this,” she sums up in her introductory reflections, “I wrote into a court opinion” (7). With the first-person pronoun, the narrator establishes her own presence in the narrative (see Genette, Narrative Discourse 244). The gender assignment is explicated later in the novel—if notably not immediately. On

12. The protagonist Ada herself is repeatedly compared to the ‘qualityless’ protagonist of Musil’s novel (278, 448). Simultaneously, her name evokes Vladimir Nabokov’s ‘big, ambitious’ novel Ada, or Ardor.

the story level, it seems, “I” is the judge in the case resulting from the reported high school events. After the end of the trial, she proceeds to explain, she wants to use the court recess for writing up a longer version of the “facts of the case” (“Tatbestand”), “in the way in which they must have really come about” (“so, wie er sich wirklich zugetragen haben muss,” 7). Albeit with some grammatical hesitation, the narrator thus begins with a grand claim to narrative authority, historically going back, beyond Musil’s modernist reflections on the process of representation, to Leopold v. Ranke’s famous motto of nineteenth-century objectivist historicism. As Lanser suggested, the “extrarepresentational acts” of “overt authoriality” can support such grand claims (Fictions of Authority 17, italics in original). Thus, our narrator’s introductory insistence on her professional qualifications might help balance not only the contemporary lack of narrative authority diagnosed in Zeh’s essay but also the continued liabilities of female authorship (and female ’authorial narratorialship’) in the German public sphere, in which Zeh’s escape from being categorized as part of pop literature’s ‘literary girl wonder’ has been noted for its exceptionality (Herminghouse 269). However, Lanser immediately qualifies her thesis, citing Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s reminder that the narrator’s overtness also diminishes her chances of being “fully reliable” (Fictions of Authority 17; see Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction 103) even before the historical advent of post/modernism. In distinguishing different components of overttness, my mapping of the aesthetics of narrative performance allows me to specify that it does so especially when a narrator her- or himself is theatricalized through first-person self-introductions.

To be sure, Zeh’s own dramatizing of the opposition between narrative authority and the first person targets primarily character narration in its “strong” version, that is, Genette’s autodiegetic narrative (Narrative Discourse 245). As Zeh qualifies, the authorial narrator may have a role, “even as an ‘I,’ in the text,” as long as at the moment of narration, s/he leans back, having “overcome everything” and looking at the events as someone who knows both “beginning and end.” The judge in her court recess seems to fulfill this criterion. Immediately after announcing her intention to write up the story ‘as it really came about,’ however, she surprisingly asks “who should tell the story” (8), indirectly pinpointing the artificial conceit inscribed in authorial narration by declaring her authority limited precisely because she was not part of (most of the) actual events. Since “I” had announced her intention to write up the story before, a reader with narratological background may try to make sense of her question either as one of level (the extradiegetic narrator reflecting on whether to introduce a diegetic narrator) or of focalization rather than voice. However, the narrator’s extended reflection on the matter culminates
in the announcement “I leave it open who I am” (8). Apparently, the question does concern her actual identity, which does not seem to be sufficiently determined by the preceding designation of her professional positionality. “Who is ‘I’ after all? Or ‘us’?” With another grand gesture, the narrator suggests that this “problem has preoccupied humankind for thousands of years” (8).

The reader, of course, may associate its articulation in the form chosen by the narrator more specifically with a certain epistemological condition that plays a major role in the novel. With its diagnosis of legitimation problems and game metaphors, the narrator’s introductory reflections echo Lyotard’s classical account on *The Postmodern Condition*. As the configuration of events unfolds, we will be told repeatedly that the teacher’s relative weakness in the ‘game’ played with him results from his Polish background. Brought up behind the Iron Curtain, “he had missed out on postmodernity” (*Spieltrieb* 92, see also 355–56). The extraordinarily intelligent student protagonists, Ada and Alev, on the other hand, have imbibed that condition from their infancy. And so, apparently, has the narrator. Reminiscent of her Musil predecessor, her authorial ambitions do not prevent quite intimate relations with her characters. But while in the modernist novel, the absence of any direct commentary on the narrator’s identity put the burden of disorientation thereby caused on the reader, the explicit self-reflections of Zeh’s narrator turn her into the locus of trouble. Staging her struggle, at moments her inability to properly dissociate her own voice from that of the students—and, thus, her failure to truly occupy the laid-back position demanded in Zeh’s essay—the novel dramatizes what seems to be the impossibility of escaping the first person of narrator self-reflexivity from within the contemporary condition.

The respective trouble begins on the first page as well. According to the narrator’s thought process, the possibility that the actions of the nihilists’ great-grandchildren are not based on any moral foundations affects her own right to judge them:

What if we didn’t understand their motivations any longer because there aren’t any?

From where would we then get the authorization to judge, to convict, and, especially, whom? The loser of the game—or the winner? The judge would have to turn into a referee. (7)

In the concluding parts of the novel, this virtual association of voice is concretized when the “I” of the narrator-judge resurfaces, after many chapters in fact devoid of narrator self-dramatization in either narrated world or text, in the context of the trial over which she presided. In a chapter titled “The Cold
Sophie,” the judge relates that ever since high school, she has been going by this nickname, which designates one of the Frost Saints named after a third-century Christian martyr (517). Just a few chapters earlier, the same name was associated with Ada (485). After an extended first-person reflection on the narrator’s upbringing and her professional reputation for being merciless, the following chapter features a temporary break in voice. Dissociating judge and narrator, the shift works to contain the preceding move of narrative subjectivization, as it introduces an alternative instance of narration that remains anonymous. At the same time, precisely this shift allows the reader to see the main narrator—or, more precisely, the judge whom she will likely keep identifying with the main narrator—as an embodied subject, with her “flat-blond short haircut” (523). Still in touch with the judge via character focalization, we now also explicitly learn about the kinship she feels with Ada (527, 557). Before the voice of “the Cold Sophie” takes over again at the end (565), Ada herself usurps narrative authority for several chapters, as she transforms her court testimony into the lengthy plea of a quasi-attorney. She speaks on behalf of Smutek, the teacher, who had eventually retaliated, brutally beating up Alev, the student who had initiated the entire affair. In its course, Ada herself has developed something resembling love for Smutek, and she now summarizes the events in a way intended to exculpate him.

The judge-narrator’s fascination with Ada alerts us to the fact that her own speech may be a similarly partial act of intended persuasion. Its rhetorical status is indicated already by the title of the first chapter, “Exordium,” that is, in the ancient system of rhetoric, the introductory part of a speech that strives to effectively establish communication with the audience. In the modern episteme, however, the artful speech of rhetoric has become associated with ‘unnatural’ artifice. In accordance with this modern critique as well as later deconstructive reappraisals of rhetoric, the novel associates its speech acts of intended persuasion with the realm of theater. Thus, Ada suggests in her testimony that a degree in theater studies would be “invaluably helpful” for legal professionals (543), and when the judge is afterward disoriented by Ada’s effective rhetoric, the narrator postulates that her “vestment turned into masquerade” (554). In this way, the novel’s act of theatricalizing narrative voice through the twofold move of ambiguating and embodying it results in an emphasis on representational play. After a sleepless night, the judge concludes that “reality was a different word for what witnesses remember” (540). Apparently, all rhetoric of narrative authority cannot undo the perspectivist epistemology characterizing the postmodern condition, dated as it is according to Zeh’s essay. Whether she likes it or not, her Spieltrieb narrator reiterates that authority, as Derrida famously worded (with some help from Pascal),
finds its ‘mystical’ foundation in the force of its performance (“Force of Law” 13).

However, this does not mean that the novel abandons the project of renewing representational authority. Within its diegetic world, Ada’s belief in the “gleich-gültig[en]” status of conflicting norms (thus hyphenated, the German notion means both “indifferent” and “equally valid”; Spieltrieb 292) does not result in self-reflexive poses. Rather, she tends to argue radical positions that, we are told, become seemingly self-evident simply by virtue of how she utters them (108). If not altogether consistently, the narrator does follow her lead throughout most of the novel, claiming authority for her version of the story. At the end of the introductory reflection on narrative voice, she ironically apologizes to readers for any “discomforts” (“Unannehmlichkeiten”) resulting from her inability to determine her identity, and she continues, in a new paragraph: “At least the weather fulfills expectations. It is neither too warm, nor too cold for the season” (8). Even if the educated (authorial?) reader understands the implicit nod to Musil’s opening paragraph as an invitation to keep the play of signs in the intertextual archive in mind, the statement also introduces a new matter-of-fact way of reporting seemingly unquestionable events. Throughout most of the novel, this apodictic gesture governs the text. In fact, the narrator asserts a scope of knowledge approaching omniscience through a complex management of focalization, which combines moments of assimilation to several character perspectives with gestures emphasizing the limits of their respective views.14 While statements such as “all those involved felt” (248), in claiming simultaneous access to more than one mind, continue to call attention to the artifice of narration, they boldly contend, rather than question, sovereignty for the narrator. Repeatedly, the narrator presents herself as the only instance able to make narrative connections that, nonetheless, are introduced as objectively given. For example, at the occasion of Smutek’s failure to understand the first signs of the unfolding events, she comments: “Nobody knows how often in a year, in a week, or even in an hour he witnesses incidents which constitute a preparation for, a sequel to, or a small detail of an event which may end terribly, perhaps even [be] deadly. . . . Our inability to interpret such fragments protects us from becoming guilty” (57). The narrator’s first-person plural ‘us’ includes herself in the collective she simultaneously soars above by performing the narrative act of interpretation allegedly unavailable to her protagonists. If representational authority thus remains ambiguous at a closer look, the novel overall suggests

14. Rarely, the narrator points to the limits of her overview. Supplementing alternative sources of authority, she asserts, e.g., “for reasons of logic we have to assume that” (130).
that it may be less its effectiveness as authoritative speech that is in trouble than its legitimation. Even while the narrator rhetorically includes herself in the collective of the innocent, the implication of her argument is that in rising above her protagonists, she might become guilty. Zeh’s poetological essay touches upon this issue of ethics as well. Having mockingly designated the first-person narrator as a “democrat,” Zeh admits the question whether the “God” narrator is “somehow ‘undemocratic,’” uncomfortably associating his pose of authority with the kind of leadership that Germans have learned to question in their high school history lessons. If the benefits of epic distance, as Zeh argues, include the narrator’s “total freedom,” might the game of the novel’s ‘God’ narrator not double the violent game on which it reports?

Although haunted by that analogy, the novel—like the essay—does not fully develop it into a critical reflection on narrative authority. In part, it rather buries the hinted-at critique in its narrative God game. While the narrator reflects on her affinity with Ada, the more threatening implications of this structural association are deflected by complementary gestures through which she radically distances herself from Ada’s coplayer Alev. To a degree, both students are characterized through their similarities, but only Alev is burdened with the disquieting associations about historical leadership explicated in the essay. Like Ada (and the narrator), Alev is rhetorically talented; in his case, however, the narrator comments that this gift made him into one of “those beings whom humans obey like water obeys the words of the sorcerer” (123). Even Ada, whose intelligence allows her to easily deconstruct his truth claims, and who generally has a reputation for emotional coolness, is seduced by Alev’s poses (see 140); her cooperation in the game is ultimately motivated less by her own fantasies than by her desire for his love and recognition. In contrast, Alev—for all the narrator tells us—seems to in fact exemplify his philosophy according to which “most things in life are a question of will. Of the will to power” (122). Even where the narrator focalizes events through Alev, the reader is not generally provided with access to his feelings.15 Instead, we hear that upon reading Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and Derrida, he has concluded that he himself must be God, since “he was not suited to be an atheist due to his great susceptibility to the attraction of power” (212–13; see 170). Having just recently moved to Bonn, the postwar West German capital, Alev waits for the “right moment for takeover” (“Machtergreifung,” 147), confidently assuming that “[i]t wouldn’t take long” because he has won the game in other places before, and “in this country it was, according to experience,

15. This is accomplished, e.g., by denying himself that access, with the effect of metaphorically dehumanizing him: “Alev himself didn’t exactly know why that was the case. . . . Alev operated like a secret service that does not know the overall plan behind his assignments” (167).
easier than everywhere else. This was a nation without fathers, models, masters [Meister], kings, or gods, without beliefs, wishes for the future, even without viable memories” (168).

The free indirect speech used in this passage is indicative. Fusing character and narrator speech, it introduces an ambiguity as to whether it is only Alev, or also the narrator, who believes that the loss of (fictions of legitimate) authority necessarily translates into new longings for submission. Instead of developing these possible allegiances, however, the narrator describes Alev as a “foreign body” (“Fremdkörper,” 154). In his characterization, the historical associations with fascism are channeled into the contemporary configuration marked by the Wars on Terror, in the wake of those in the Balkans. Alev introduces himself as “half Egyptian, a quarter French, brought up in Germany, Austria, Iraq, the United States, and Bosnia Herzegovina” (122). Although the fuzzy political allegory implied here potentially disperses the genealogies of violence, the narrator’s presentation of Alev overall contains these scattered genealogies, to the effect of coding them in ethnic terms. This move needs to be contextualized within the post–September 11 climate of anti-Islamic hostility, which variously conjoined with more or less dormant legacies of racism all over Europe and redramatized German discourses on immigration into an increasingly aggressive “culture-clash-climate” (“Kulturkampfklima,” Siemes). According to Zeh’s narrator, Alev’s father is a Muslim, who somehow makes a lot of money with unspecified “business” since September 11 (173). To be sure, Alev’s father is, like himself, also a “habitual atheist” (173). Rather than subscribing to a simple ‘clash of civilizations’ narrative, Zeh’s novel highlights the role of secularization and globalization. In line with Alev’s and the narrator’s reflections on the loss of values, the characterization of Alev’s background implies that violence emerges on the unstable ground of suspended foundations that characterizes modernity and its postmodern radicalizations. But this does not prevent the narrator from racializing Alev in line with (neo-) orientalist genderings of cultural difference. While his name feminizes him as a 'burning Turkish beauty,' the narrator repeatedly mentions his ‘Egyptian,’

16. Ada herself provocatively theorizes terrorism as the response of the underdog, whose uprising is involuntarily legitimized by the West’s own foundational fictions: “On September 11, David invented the slingshot” (82). Similarly, the beginning of the novel hints at the possibility of situating the students’ own terrorist-like game as a response to an authoritarian school regime itself caught in historical legacies of violence (20, 23).

17. See Brown on post–September 11 discourse, with reference to Samuel Huntington’s and Bernhard Lewis’s notions from the 1990s (298–99).

18. The German edition of Wikipedia traces the (female) name (Turkish: flame, fire) back to the Koran and a legendary destructive beauty (http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alev; accessed 03/15/10).
“slit” eyes as the primary marker of his ‘devilish’ personality (121; see, e.g., 139, 357, 412). Indoctrinated by these gestures of narrative othering, the reader may in the end welcome Smutek’s act of retaliation, which permanently disfigures Alev and reduces him to human proportions (524), as an act of poetic justice.

Can we conclude that Zeh’s narrator becomes unreliable by—as it looks—having thus succumbed to Ada’s effective rhetoric? As the (authorial) reader understands, Ada’s version of the story, which results in the forceful assertion that “nobody but Alev” is responsible (554), is fueled by disappointment with her former crush object. But are we also invited to analogously psychologize the theatricalized narrator, to the effect of reading her disturbing racist gestures in the midst of a much more complex narrative configuration as violent acts of distinction intended to deflect from her own structural association with Alev’s power games? Whether or not the (implied) author would actually be willing to take things that far (or whether, instead, she remains closer to her authorial first-person narrator than the essay author Zeh might be comfortable with), an active reader may conclude that the narrator’s assertion of representational authority is ethically compromised by her bias. Significantly, Zeh’s essayistic plea for the ‘God’ narrator ends on a tongue-in-cheek note. Having considered the German army as an institution where we could refamiliarize ourselves with the hierarchical structures missing in contemporary first-person narrative, she concludes with the words “Ich meint ja nur”—“I just fancied.” Despite all discontents, the essay thus resumes a ‘democratic’ narrative position, bracketing its plea for authority by humorously tying it back to a position of subjective desire. In her response to the “Manifesto for Relevant Realism,” Zeh—a few years later—even explicitly argues for “avowing oneself to the ‘I’ in a relaxed, playful way” (“Gesellschaftliche Relevanz”).

The novel, however, ends on a very different note. Acquitted by our susceptible judge for the time being, with revision on the next juridical level pending, Smutek goes on vacation with Ada. Having thus abdicated her professional judgment functions in favor of her narrative freedom, the narrator concludes with an image of them ordering champagne and seafood, summarizing the uncertain future in a little declination exercise, which replays the game topos by referencing Monopoly, the quintessential board game of neoliberal society: “I go to jail. You [sg.] go there directly. He, she, it does not pass over ‘Go’ on the way. We didn’t know anything. You [pl.] don’t get four thousand marks [the equivalent of the $200 salary in the pre-Euro German

19. For Geulen, the narrator positions herself “beyond morality as well as law” here (“Laudatio”).
edition]. Just wait for them to see [Sie werden schon sehen]” (566). Immediately after this quote, the narrator declares, seemingly out of context:

After all, it’s always only about a, about the story/history telling itself [dass eine, dass die Geschichte sich selbst erzählen kann; italics in original]. We, all of us, are nothing but low voices in a cacophonic chorus, occasionally playing a cheeky [vorwitziges] solo, but never for more than a few seconds, a few lines.

And with that, everything is said. (566)

Categorically submitting individual voice to the asserted primacy of a chorus—who seems to voice a rather Hegelian Weltgeist here—this concluding gesture purports to erase the narrator’s own agency. Despite the apparent disconnect between the two narrative moves, the previous declination exercise contains a hint at her motivation for ending on this note. The non-Monopoly-related “We didn’t know anything” (“Wir haben nichts gewusst”) is, of course, the stereotypical gesture of German ‘coming to terms with the past.’ By virtue of its topical status, its insertion arguably suggests that the narrative game does not escape the themes of responsibility and guilt even, or precisely, with the rhetoric of collective nonagency. Simultaneously, it marks the point at which the godlike narrator’s authoritarian desire tilts into a desire for submitting to some higher order. Haunted by the ‘I,’ which makes her narration accountable for its subjective, potentially violent takes, our narrator longs for the erasure of the performative index that constitutes (‘third person’) narrative as a “discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself” (White 2).

Following Butler’s post-Adornian reflections in Giving an Account of One-self, we might argue that such ‘third-person’ narration is quintessentially ethically problematic in that there is “no morality without an ‘I’” reflecting on her own position in the social network of norms (7). With the concluding abrupt narrative ‘leap’ following the Holocaust reference, which draws attention to the process at stake, Zeh’s novel then performs the failure of ethically responsible narration. However, I am not sure that we are invited to read the ending as ironic in a straightforward oppositional sense. Rather, the novel’s concluding passage might in fact endorse precisely the violence implied in such third-person narrative, as it imposes the “moral universe” projected by ordering the world (White 21). By holding on to the attempt of recreating authoritative narration despite all ethical doubts, the ending does present a consistent development of the narrative project advocated also in Zeh’s essay, despite its tongue-in-cheek ending. Throughout the novel, our narrator’s desire for a guarantor of closure beyond herself has announced itself not only in her
characterization of contemporary society as marked by a loss of legitimation but also in her preference for tropes and topoi of fate (e.g., 28, 158, 242) and (Christian) religion. Shot through by these mythic and divine dimensions, the order of nature manifests itself in the weather, which—after still ‘fulfilling expectations’ in the introductory passage—soon develops apocalyptic dimensions. The chapter following Alev’s arrival at the school begins with a reference to the “infernal heat” and “drought” of that summer, 2003, which appeared, “after the year of the flood, 2002, like yet another biblical herald of the Last Judgment, even if it was perhaps only one of those weather phenomena which have to come across as grotesque threats against the background of air-climatized station wagons and breathable sports jackets” (125). As an analogy (Musil’s favorite trope), the apocalyptic image mediates a play of references rather than a straightforward religious reading. However, the alternative offered does not emphasize human agency in explaining the described extremities, either. Instead of providing the hint at global warming that the reader might expect in the given context, the narrator’s reflections underscore the futility of technological protections against the force of weather, leading to a description of the observed anomalies as an “experiment” of which “European mankind” is the object, not the originator: “Someone high up there was taking notes” (125).

The arguably most important cluster of religious references, however, is provided by the frost saints, of which we have already encountered “the Cold Sophie.” Providing a series of chapter titles, these references narratively structure the dramatic escalation of events during the cold early May days of the following year. Imaginatively embodied, one of the saints, Pancratius, provides orientation to Ada. At the crucial juncture at which she eventually resists Alev’s orders as she discovers her feelings for Smutek, Ada feels “the proximity of the small, cold body” of the day’s saint on her way to school. The narrator’s commentary provides the novel’s theme of representational authority with a crucial twist: “Since his execution, which he had suffered in silence, Pancratius avenged the stupidity and lies of all those who did not want to accept that you couldn’t know anything if you didn’t believe in anything, because a belief had to underlie every true declaration” (479). Rather than with Derrida, who set out to deconstruct the ‘mystical’ foundations of authority, the narrator’s evocation of Pancratius allies itself with his early modern interlocutor, Pascal, who advocated the performance of belief and subjection as generators of authority (see Derrida, “Force of Law” 10–12). Within the postmodern condition, this act of affirmation does not present a gesture of epistemological naïveté. As a great-grandchild of Nietzsche, our narrator knows that ‘God is dead,’ just like her protagonists (e.g., 260)—for Ada, in
fact, “religion is nothing but the doctrine of how to obey free from cognition [Erkenntnis]” (548). At the same time, the narrator explicitly suggests, “nothing is nicer than supraindividual responsibility” (137). Apparently entertaining the possibility of God’s resurrection for precisely this reason while still enjoying her own authorial sovereignty, she concludes with a playful twist: “It is for this purpose that God invented the weather” (137).

The balancing act condensed in this sentence summarizes the novel’s overall—poetological and political—intervention. With the narrator’s fascination for heavenly agency, the novel fits with the diagnosis of a return of religion in post–September 11 society, or, more precisely, with that of a “post-secular” condition in the sense of “a change in mindset of those who, previously, felt justified in considering religions to be moribund” (de Vries 2–3, quoting Hans Joas). Considering the seductive force of divine power without simply leaping into faith, Zeh’s novel develops the dilemmas implied in her poetological plea for an inescapably compromised authority through the ways it juggles self-reflexivity with closure. Too caught up in Alev’s Machiavellian vision for imagining alternative—democratic or, alas, first-person—investigations into ethics and politics, the narrator instead opts for the model of “the ironic moralist,” one of Dawson’s modes of contemporary ‘omniscience’ (152, italics in original). Thus, she remains torn between asserting the undecidability that provides Spieltrieb with its motto: “Summum Ius, Summa Iniuria,” and the fantasy of redemption that seems to provide the only route of escape. “Justice is executed in hell. Heaven is ruled by grace” (521), “the Cold Sophie” arrogantly declares apropos her own intervention in court. While uniting Smutek and Ada in love (for the time being), the heavenly armored judge-as-narrator does not bless Alev with analogous mercy. Consequently, he haunts her as her unacknowledged alter ego (Ada indicates the connection: she sees herself as a character in the novel he will once write [558]), casting his ‘devilish’ shade over her godlike narration.

Jesus W. Bush and His Embedded Couch Potatoes

IN BAMBILAND (WITH THE PERSIANS)

If the grand gestures of Spieltrieb’s narrator thus unfold the early twenty-first-century return of authoritative narration as a drama in its own right, the trend itself has not won the same clear-cut contours everywhere. Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek’s 2003 theater text Bambiland was written roughly at the same time as Pollesch’s “Tent Saga” and could, in some respects, have found its place in this book alongside the latter in chapter IV (or, in its quality as a
literary work, in chapter III). Discussing its scenic authorialism, and Jelinek’s *ex machina* production of a divine narrative voice, in this chapter, however, allows me to further describe how the new century’s fascination with narrative authority has remained inflected precisely by the forms of its undoing we describe with the name of the performative: both the flamboyant theatricalization techniques particularly associated with postmodernism and highly scenic, presence-oriented narration. Furthermore, I develop an intermedial layer of my argument in this chapter overall focused on literature by comparing Jelinek’s text, which is itself poetologically inflected by performance theory, with two (very different) theater productions: Christoph Schlingensief’s premiere at the Vienna Burgtheater and a Berlin production of Jelinek’s intertext, Aeschylus’s *The Persians*. From the angle of performance theory, both Jelinek’s text and Schlingensief’s (almost text-free) production underline how the twenty-first-century resurrection of narrative authority summons the specters of sovereignty I located in the antinarrative concepts of performance (chapter I).

Previous Jelinek scholarship analyzes the critical procedure of her dramatic works in fairly unanimous terms. In the tradition of twentieth-century avant-gardes, it receives its contours as an attack on the “theater of representation” by undoing classical dramatic form, including character (and with it, modern concepts of subjectivity) as well as plot, or “narration and figuration” (Lücke 230; Beuker 57). Like some of Jelinek’s earlier theater texts, *Bambiland* specifically foregoes dialogue form in favor of a long monologue, which is, however, explicitly dialogic in Bakhtin’s sense. Classical stage directions are absent, as if to underline the text’s position in between medial contexts: like Goetz’s diary, *Bambiland* was first published online and later in book format. Instead, the text begins with the flaunting of intertextuality by a cranky authorial voice: “My thanks to Aeschylus and the ’Persians’ . . . you can add a pinch of Nietzsche. The rest is not by me either. It’s lousy. It’s by the media.”20 As it samples the Iraq war coverage of CNN and comparable news programs with the language of classical Greek drama, the following monologue unfolds as a polylogue in the integrated form of a chorus (see Lücke 244). That is, the fused voices are not formally demarcated from another, and the first-person plural pronoun “we” dominates significant parts of the text, arguably suggesting a collective recital on the stage—although Schlingensief’s premiere does not implement that suggestion.

20. I quote the English text from the translation available on Jelinek’s webpage, but add the respective page numbers from the German book edition for the sake of allowing cross-references.
The return of the chorus onto the contemporary German stage since the 1990s has received significant critical attention. As the formal ancestor of the epic onstage narrator (see Nünning and Sommer, “Die Entwicklung” 113), the chorus differs from such a singular narrator in that it challenges modern concepts of individuality, and critics have worried about the political implications of the staging of mass formations, for example, in Einar Schleef’s work, including his 1998 production of Jelinek’s *Sports Piece/Play* (Sportstück) at the Vienna Burgtheater. Fischer-Lichte defended Schleef’s use of the chorus against such charges by arguing that his *Sportsstück* dramatized the conflict between individual and collective, thematizing “the condition humana as a tragic condition” without legitimizing the violence of sacrifice on behalf of the collective (Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 249). Nonetheless, choral forms continued to stir controversy when they found a broader renaissance in the explicitly political theater of the 2000s, for example, as the aggressively populist collective voice of the unemployed in Volker Lösche’s Dresden production of Gerhart Hauptmann’s naturalist drama *Die Weber* (Hodonyi).

The speaking collective in Jelinek’s *Bambiland* finds its representational contours in the vicinity of this charged terrain. Critics have variously described the voices contributing to its monologue as those of the “German-Austrian crowd” of Jelinek’s “internal regular’s table,” as “American patriots,” “American Persians” or, in functional terms, both television spectators and embedded journalists in the war zone. Beuker’s alternative suggestion, according to which the author “herself” speaks from “a continuously shifting perspective” (62), remains narratologically vague and overall unconvincing but nonetheless points to the ambiguity of voice at stake here. Between its merging of diverging codes and positions, and the fact that the heterogeneous monologue does include individual statements that the reader may be tempted to attribute to (a) Jelinek (figure), it partially functions in authorial fashion. Notably, the ‘immersion journalist’ is another one of Dawson’s modes of contemporary omniscient narration, as exemplified, for example, by John Updike’s *Terrorist*. With its genealogy in the forms of “New Journalism,” this particular form of authoritative narration combines “scenic construction” with “explanatory commentary” (Dawson 155). Including the *Bambiland* monologue in this category requires the qualification that the effect of apparent omniscience is explicitly based on the recording of multiple voices here. However, the divine does have its entrance: at the end of the text, there is a formal variation in voice

21. “deutsch-österreichische Volksmasse,” “inneren Stammtisch” (Kümmel); Lücke 244, 246; Schlingensief, “Unnobles Dynamit” 10.

22. Already in the nineteenth-century novel, Culler argues, ‘omniscience’ often can be decoded as the “voice of a collective subject” (*Omniscience* 31).
in that “GOD, WHICHEVER ONE APPEARS IN A CLOUD AND FINALLY SPEAKS THE TRUTH” (77). Although thus announced as an instance of heavenly correction by the authorial commentator, this God does not sound very different from the previous chorus of Western media voices with his interest in the GBU-28 bombs that he “specifically developed . . . to be able to hit the Iraqi command centres hidden deep under the earth” (80). My reading unravels this poetological approximation.

Thematically, *Bambiland*'s sampling of media voices evokes, and critically dissects, the new culturalisms that have revitalized modern orientalist binaries. For example, the chorus juxtaposes the “whole world of feelings which only we in the West know” with the “wave of hatred which only they know,” and Western “civilization” with the ‘past’ “culture” of the East, which has degenerated into the barbarism of—in plain hate speech terminology—“sand niggers” (35). Only “we query religion,” Jelinek’s Austrian American crowd continues, “only we know God and have recognised that we don’t want him,” unlike “this people who has no notion of the primacy of the individual” (18–19). As Wendy Brown elaborates theoretically, it was this differential construction of religiosity that presumably distinguished former President Bush’s prayers “from the—dangerous—devotion to Allah of a Muslim fundamentalist” (301): whereas the East is subject to a political theology, the Western commentator claims a proper management of the charged relation between politics and religion for himself. Or ‘ourselves’? In Jelinek’s text, this discursive configuration is virtually undone by the dominance of the first-person plural pronoun, through which the chorus lays claim to the primacy of the individual. The monologue’s aberrant, often pun-generating flow of associations further undermines Western legitimacy claims, creating a counterdiscourse within the monologue itself (see Blödorn 153). In asking God to “bring a new law so that, at last, we can do something, anything in your name” (25), Jelinek’s Western voice simultaneously dramatizes the absence of higher legitimation and the unacknowledged conflation of politics and religion also in the Christian world. “At this point, Jesus W . Bush refuses being called equal to God,” the speaker continues in a gesture of parodistic hyperbole, “but we will convince him sooner or later” (26).

Specifying the diagnosis of performative form offered by existing Jelinek scholarship, *Bambiland* can, in a first step, be described as another merging of theatricality and presence in an immersion commentary “game with signification” (Lücke 235; see also Blödorn 143, 148), which makes strange the collective identifications it evokes.23 Compared to Pollesch’s first-person

23. Richardson underlines that we-narratives in fact do so quite “routinely” (*Unnatural Voices* 37).
commentary in *Leopard*, however, the plural form produces a quite different affective pitch. In contrast to Pollesch’s post-Brechtianism, furthermore, *Bambiland’s* commentary conceptually affiliates itself primarily with presence-based performance theories by unfolding—as its critical plot—a materialist narrative marked by a melancholy longing for the (more or less inaccessible) real of the body (see Vander Lugt). At the end of the text, the voice of God explicates this narrative by combining Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra (“Real and unreal, they are both one, I have made this too by inventing television”24) with a Deleuzian critique of war as the displacement of ‘becoming’ with ‘being’: “Everything comes round again and again, especially war. But that there are wars over and over again is the extreme approximation of this world of becoming to the world of being” (84).

Drawing on these very terms, Jasbir Puar has called for a methodological orientation at “becoming/s beyond being/s” in her theoretical critique of the War on Terror (128). Thus, Puar confronts “enduring modernist paradigms”—namely, orientalisms—with “postmodernist eruptions” and “emergent corporealities”: “spatial, temporal, and corporeal convergences, implosions and rearrangements,” which can “befuddl[e] the ‘us versus them’ of the War on Terror” (121, 128). *Bambiland* develops a negative of this theoretical plea by conceptualizing a critique of war—in its fundamental identity with (orientalist) media representation—as a critique of the deadly transformation of ‘becoming’ into ‘being.’ In evoking this murderous process, the concrete materialities that form the text’s critical horizon primarily surface as displaced by violent abstraction. For example, an embedded reporter voice half-concerned, half-cynically urges an unspecified “you” to protect their child from the warfare because “[w]e already got one . . . dripping with blood and blown apart, . . . on the hard drive” and thus “don’t need another one” (54).

Between this negativity and *Bambiland’s* pun-ridden game of signifier displacement, however, does the text not itself perform the very process of representational abstraction that it discursively critiques? From the angle of presence-oriented performance scholarship, this predicament is, in fact, a necessary one: Jelinek’s critique of abstraction must remain contradictory in the chosen form because *Bambiland’s* linguistic nature itself entangles it in the work of violent mediation. Indicative of these hesitations, Jelinek’s work has created significantly more interest in contemporary German literary than in German performance studies. More strikingly, Schlingensief’s *Bambiland* premiere at the Vienna Burgtheater quotes only a very small portion of Jelinek’s

24. The translation is very loose here. The German is: “Das Sein ist immer nur ein Grad von Scheinbarkeit, und der Schein kommt aus diesem Fernsehgerät, welches ich ebenfalls erschaffen habe” (82).
text. Informed by the Volksbühne aesthetics of the 1990s—which Schlingensief’s earlier oeuvre coconstituted—he instead opts for a feast of presence. Showcasing “floods of blood, paint, excrement, and violence,” Schlingensief intends to produce “immediate affects” rather than “meanings.”

Jelinek herself, who had explicitly wished for Schlingensief to stage the premiere of Bambiland, publicly endorsed his procedure: “Even while he does not use as much of the text,” she argued, “the production corresponds to my method of writing. This text is an amalgamation of media reports on Iraq, and Schlingensief amalgamated it once more with this overwhelming visual intensity” (quoted from Sichrovsky and Augustin 119). In fact, in its different medial form, Schlingensief’s stage ‘sampling’ of images, bodies, and sound corresponds in many respects quite closely to Jelinek’s textual project (see Beuker 66). The production visually reproduces her critique of media dominance by configuring overwhelmingly big (and, in contrast to Pollesch’s Plusfiliale, anything but tender) film images on a half-transparent screen with comparatively minuscule live actors variously operating in front of it, behind it, and next to it. The verbal orgasm pun in which Jelinek’s text finds its conclusion is translated into the porn scenario that dominates the central big screen for significant parts of the evening, at moments accompanied by war footage on smaller screens on both sides and culminating in male ejaculation onto an American flag.

Although a number of critics acknowledged this congeniality of procedure, Schlingensief’s production received overwhelmingly negative reviews, whereas Jelinek, of course, was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2004—not specifically for Bambiland but for her “musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that, with extraordinary linguistic zeal, reveal the absurdity of society’s clichés and their subjugating power.” Doubtlessly, part of this discrepancy points to the continued privilege awarded to literature vis-à-vis the radical experiments of performance. Nonetheless, my reading offers a different argument that displaces the mediatized text-vs.-performance opposition with a focus on aesthetic practice. Through his specific narrative choices, I claim, Schlingensief radicalizes precisely the gestures of violent abstraction that mark the limits also of Jelinek’s critical undoing of neo-orientalisms. In her overall positive reading of both versions of Bambiland, Beuker has located these limits in the liability of radically postmodernist form, which undoes
both the author’s critical voice and figuration and empathy. Following my attempt to differentiate these matters with respect to Pollesch’s *Leopard* above, I counter Beuker’s charge: not actually as radically antinarrative as Pollesch’s production, *Bambiland* performs the failure, specifically, of human—that is, nonsovereign and localized—figuration. In this sense, both the voice of God at the horizon of Jelinek’s text and Schlingensief’s visual aesthetics return to authoritative narration by conjuring the specters of sovereignty lurking in presence-oriented performance theory.

Mainstream feuilletons are easily troubled by experimental performance’s programmatic antinarrativity, and thus it is not surprising that Schlingensief’s production was criticized as an “amateurish collage without center” (Schütt) or “a collection of hyperlinks” (Cerny). However, the production was also criticized as all too obsessed with a few—reductive—central motifs. Jelinek’s text itself, Christopher Schmidt argues in the *Süddeutsche*, ultimately reiterates all-too-well-known ‘grand narratives’ about imperialism, chauvinism, and the “perpetrator presumably inherent in us all. Schlingensief,” he suggests, “has additionally simplified this cheap approach of exposure psychology by discovering the perpetrator [*Gewalttäter*] in himself as an artist.” Although unduly polemical and probably driven by political resentment, the review serves as a reminder that radically experimental performance does not escape the power of cultural narratives any more than the performative text, demanding that both be evaluated in terms of their concrete narrative choices.

With respect to Jelinek, Schmidt blames the relative simplicity of the text on the “‘positional disadvantage’” of its media chorus: “Unlike, at the time, the ‘embedded’ journalist [English in original] Aeschylos, Jelinek does her research in her comfortable but unproductive TV-chair.” In narratological terms, Schmidt targets the text’s failure to position its voices locally, or to create a sustained fiction of spatial presence on the scene. This criticism is only partially fair. As indicated above, *Bambiland*’s chorus does gesture toward such immersion-localization. Deictic statements such as “far south where we now are” occasionally situate the speaker(s) in time and space (62; see also 77). The original Internet edition of *Bambiland* introduces an additional layer of localization with its images and hyperlinks, which point to, for example, Abu Ghraib torture scenes and statistics on “U.S. casualties in Iraq” (see Vanderlugt 221). However, Schmidt has a point in that the overall monologue form of the text itself also produces a contrary effect. As individual voices are not demarcated against one another, the localizing impulse of deictic inscriptions competes with an effect of mediated omnipresence and, in fact, omniscience: the flow of the text (re)produces the ‘God’s-eye’ gaze of the combined media network, which has its cameras everywhere at the same time (see, more posi-
Schlingensief himself diagnoses precisely this oscillation when he summarizes the narrative position, in his preface to the print edition of Jelinek’s text, as that of “Embedded Couch Potatoes” (10). Failing to flash out specific situations and agents—except, notably, for God—*Bambiland* does not “give a voice” to the victims in a sustained manner, but mostly evokes the suffering created by the war “from a cosmic perspective.”

References to particular places and events remain characteristically vague (“a city, Basra, I think”; 57), as if part of an ongoing flow of recurring violence ever since Aeschylus’s time (see, e.g., 19).

In this way, Jelinek’s restaging of the orientalisms resurfacing in the War on Terror itself reiterates the sweeping time-space generalizations performed by classical orientalist discourse. Whereas the ‘positionality failure’ in Pollesch’s *Leopard* was produced by the ways in which the first-person singular sampling of theory and media images by decidedly nonsovereign performers ‘confused’ everything—including the us-vs.-them binaries of hegemonic discourse—the force of the (Western) *Bambiland*-we instead asserts the quasi-divine power of this discourse, ultimately staging a Barthean conception of language as a—fascist—“reservoir of violence” (Blödorn 149) in which heterogeneity cannot develop into critical dissent. As even “we from the peace movement” set out to ‘adopt’ “Babylonian earth” in imperialistic fashion (42), the text enshrines the war’s local victims as the muted other: “What? What? They don’t want to be understood? So why do we bother? It’s all the same to us. We do what we want anyway” (17).

In its own medial way, Schlingensief’s production radicalizes this aesthetics of subjection through the overpowering force of ‘globalizing’ abstraction. In a prologue on the front part of the stage decorated as part family living room, part studio, Schlingensief himself self-reflexively performs the sexual (oedipal) motivations of the artwork. Then the scenario opens onto a setting dominated by a watchtower ambiguously pointing to ‘war,’ ‘border,’ and ‘concentration camp.’ On its top, the director poses for a moment as a conductor-star before down on the ground, a ‘veil dance’ for the camera, directed by an actor in military clothes, evokes an oriental/ist war context. Afterward, a Schlingensief commentary resumes the topic of fascism in art by playing on the notion of Austria’s 1938 “Anschluss” (‘accession’) to Nazi Germany, and we are treated with a “party convention” in front of a swastika morphed into Bambi-deer. In passing, the speeches given at this convention mention

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28. Both quotes are from Blödorn (146, 145). Again, the text itself also critiques this procedure of abstraction (e.g., also 53, 63) and self-reflexively comments on the failure of voice: “As always I want to talk about the losers, and yet I end up enthusing about the winners”—to the effect of ending up “so far westward” (29).
German unification, the social security reform of the 2000s, and questions of Turkish minority representation, before the screen images are foregrounded again, including, for example, KKK images (see figure 10).

This assemblage of associations does not enable a sustained critique of dominant war discourses and practices. Rather than creating complexity, the overload of undeveloped references effects a loss of specificity. Whereas Jelinek’s sampling of war coverage remains fairly specific at least thematically, Schlingensief’s feast of liquid presences simultaneously unfolds as one of signifier displacement; his sweepingly generalizing gestures suggest that in the global-domestic realm of fascist violence, all topoi are interchangeable. Or almost all topoi: in contrast, again, to Pollesch’s Leopard, Schlingensief’s theatrical space is not truly chaotic but held together by the metanarrative of (oedipal) artistic violence, which is imposed onto the stage by the ongoing presence of the director as both commentator and character. This metanarrative systematically stalls localization: “It would have never occurred to me to relocate Jelinek’s Bambiland to the desert,” Schlingensief comments. “The war that I read out of Bambiland is raging within everybody. The war is purely a family matter.” 29 Unlike in Wright’s I Am My Own Wife, the onstage presence of the artist is thus not oriented by the project of telling another’s (specific) story. Rather, aesthetic theatricality is centered in self-reflexivity. Although the artist’s onstage performances of violent sovereignty are ironically delegitimized, they continue to dominate the process of signification through their sheer (omni)presence. Consequently, the ongoing repetition of the same becomes one of the production’s leitmotifs on the levels of both onstage discourse and performative practice. Even while Schlingensief’s narrative outwardly displaces questions of collectivity (individual actors and loudspeaker voices render the little Jelinek text that he quotes), the production does not create any space for the articulation of difference.

Thus trapped within a closed circuit of representation, the director’s only way out is the gesture of reversal performed also by Zeh’s narrator: the act of subjecting his conflicted sovereignty to a higher authority. Announced as “on behalf of the Church of Fear” (Bambiland: Uraufführung 2), the production makes ample use of topoi of the sacred and religion. As the production booklet explains, the “Church of Fear” is Schlingensief’s “half-serious, half-parodistic church of awakening of ‘believers’ who avow themselves to their fears”; it was founded to thematize the discursive conjunction of fear, terror, and religion in the post–September 11 world “without disavowing the longing

for true religiosity” (93). Ritualistically, Schlingensief’s *Bambiland* performs belief with an ongoing display of the (filmed) ‘procession’ of the Church of Fear through Vienna on the central screen and the live actors’ shouldering of a cross beneath it, accompanied by the sound of both music by Richard Wagner and music of church bells. In this respect, the production produces an effect quite different from that of Jelinek’s *Bambiland*, which, even in similarly restaging the force of Christianity, consistently deconstructs its legitimacy talk. For example, when God, in the midst of his bragging about ‘our Western’ weapons, adds that “[o]n the other hand, . . . I had never planned that they should cast themselves as bombs” (78–79), the programmatic affirmation of Christian nonviolence is twisted into a partisan condemnation of suicide bombing. In Schlingensief’s *Bambiland*, this text is spoken by the ensemble’s star actor, Margit Carstensen, particularly known for her earlier work with Fassbinder. Positioned as a miniature figure in front of the huge film screen, she then throws herself onto the floor in despair; spotlighting presents her as a lucent figure of powerless rather than cynically sovereign belief. Visually counteracting Jelinek’s sarcasm, the production thus gestures at the alternative notion of humble Christianity rising at its ideological horizon.

An intriguing counterpoint to both Jelinek’s and Schlingensief’s aesthetics is developed in a recent production not of *Bambiland* itself but of Jelinek’s Aeschylus intertext: at the renowned Deutsches Theater in Berlin Mitte, Dimitr Gotscheff’s 2006 *The Persians* perform the demise of God—as the performative fundament of war ideology—through the experiential authority of the messenger’s scenic evocation of the enormity of suffering created by the war. The production is minimalist in aesthetic design. Mostly dressed in black, the actors operate on an empty stage. In this way, attention is focused on their performance of the text, Heiner Müller’s Witzmann-based adaptation—albeit not to the effect of creating the kind of classical representational theater against which proponents of performance (including the text-friendly Müller; see chapter III) have defined their work. Part of the difference from such representational theater is, in fact, to be found in the drama itself. Almost entirely displacing mimetic event representations into diegetic event report, Aeschylus’s *Persians* make the chorus and the messenger, who tells back home of the complete defeat of the Persian army by the Greeks, into protagonists. With its “distanced [distanzhaft] formalism” (Dreyer 163), Gotscheff’s production multiplies the layers of theatrical framing thereby created. Most of the text is spoken frontally to the audience. The chorus is evoked by one female actor only, whose mimicry and gestures in the course of her speeches quasi-experimentally explore different registers of presentation. Thus, the spectator is not invited to mentally travel to Persia through mimetic immersion here,
either: rather Brechtian in some respects (see Pilz), the production does not create presence effects of that kind. However, the—here entirely metaphorical—narrative camera of war coverage zooms in on detail. Striving to grasp the specifics of the situation, the queen insistently asks the messenger, who is forcefully voiced by two men, for more information. As they give longish particulars on the events and the fate of individual men, the production creates a different kind of presence effect: the Barthean effet de réel of highly scenic narration—resulting, as Genette put it, from the narrator’s (apparent) “abdicating his function of choosing and directing the narrative” and allowing himself to be governed “by the presence of what is there” (165). In the diegetic world of The Persians, which historically precedes media networks, the authority of relating these events is based on the messenger’s own presence on the scene of war.

To be sure, it would be inappropriate to construct a complete opposition between Schlingensief’s Bambiland and Gotscheff’s Perser. The latter production, too, performs gestures of generalization, notably by framing its diegetic world with an introductory parable on the origins of war (see Dreyer 162). Two actors dressed in modern Western business attire perform an initially civil and presumably humorous, but then increasingly fierce fight—without words, but with guttural sounds and violent gestures—over territory marked by a wall in the center of the stage. The audience may understand this introductory scene to be presenting the production’s guiding ‘grand narrative’—of civilization’s ‘fall’ back into barbarism. Furthermore, they may keep reading, throughout the production, for clues that would allow for an allegorical interpretation of the staged scenario: should we associate the Persians’ religiously motivated, “tower-destroying” wars with the Taliban?30 On the other hand, don’t the blue and orange t-shirts of the messenger, with their sudden import of color onto the overall black and white stage, perhaps rather recall the American red, white, and blue? And does the warlord Xerxes not somehow resemble George W. Bush in his self-aggrandizing, naïve poses? Either way, the evidence for such readings is rather subtle. As a reviewer put it, “everybody is responsible for their own brain activity” (grauen Zellen, Wille). Certainly, we cannot organize the diverging political clues into a coherent allegorical interpretation, as we listen to the reports of how the ‘American’ Persians have set out to conquer the Western land of democratic order, where—as the chorus explains to the queen—people are subject to no one. (To be sure, the queen bursts into bitter laughter upon hearing this.)

30. I quote from the DVD performance reproduction provided by the Deutsches Theater. However, the conspicuous notion “türmezerstörende” is from Müller’s text (688).
Merely hinting at its possible contemporary references, Gotscheff’s production develops the world of ancient Greek-vs.-Persian war as a relatively self-contained narrative universe. Making mental connections, we can compare it to our own worlds without thereby collapsing both into each other in the frame of transhistorical orientalisms or a global East–West discourses and realities. The evocation of possible but never quite definite meanings in the circulation of performance signs produces traffic in similarity rather than identity.

The specific narrative world of Gotscheff’s *Persians* develops its significance for this activity of the imagination by virtue of how the production intertwines a critique of authority with a process of mourning in configuring its techniques of theatricality with those of presence. Specifically, this happens in the realm of (rhetorical) *actio*—that is, the performance of speech through voice, intonation, mimicry, and gesture—as foregrounded through the production’s minimalist design. The chorus in particular unfolds a truly Bakhtinian heterogeneity of voices despite, or precisely in, its individual embodiment.31 In her but also in her co-actors’ varied speech, rhetorical delivery travels a rich spectrum from cool understatement to utter despair, and naive, presumably faithful intonation of ideology to explicit parody (see figure 11). Through this complex regime of speech, theatricality is developed not simply as a means of self-reflexivity but as an undoing of (divinely self-legitimizing) authority. While the Greek pretense at democracy is not excluded from this performative unraveling, the emphasis is on the local Persian court, where the chorus, directed by the queen’s hand signals, remains frozen in a bowing gesture when first greeting her—a hyperbolic gesture (qua length) that, in its stiff formalism, simultaneously falls short of the explicitly proclaimed act of ‘throwing’ herself down ("Ich werfe mich nieder"). The decidedly nonsovereign critical agency of this chorus emerges from the ways in which she (un)faithfully performs the voice of the subjected ‘people.’ When her introductory speech declares Persian invincibility, the accompanying shift in her voice from its previously faltering, reflexive into hard staccato mode exposes the ideology she reiterates, anticipating its imminent dissolution. In the constative mode, she later performs this end of authority, speaking slowly, almost autistically, on her knees and with her back to the audience: “Namely, royal authority, the strong one, has perished.” Meanwhile, the queen herself has exposed the backing of this authority in religious discourse by proclaiming, in an extra thin voice: “Everything we leave to the gods.”

31. Dreyer describes her delivery as “choric speaking” in that it is simultaneously distanced and hypnotic (163), but part of that apparent simultaneity is in fact produced through the ways intonation changes from line to line.
In this process of critically undoing authority, performative presence plays a supporting role, for example, through the frightening hyperbole of aggression variously breaking through, momentarily, in the monologues of the queen, the messenger, and Xerxes himself. At the same time, techniques of presence take center stage in endowing the production with an intensity of affect, which supplements its critical bent with a second, no less important focus. Most prominently perhaps through the shouts of despair, which resolutely transgress the Brechtian rules of acting with restraint, these *Persians* evoke the enormity of sorrow created by the war: the “abundance of suffering,” as the messenger summarizes, following a moment of silence after the bulk of the war narrative, “which I could not fill in, not even if I were to tell about this for ten days.” When the messenger leaves the stage soon after these words, the queen follows him—screaming.

By thus combining a discursive critique of the genealogy of a specific—but possibly also other—war(s) with an affective engagement in a specific—and virtually different—process(es) of mourning, Gotscheff’s production presents an alternative to both Jelinek’s and Schlingensief’s *Bambiland*, which do not escape the fallacies of (pseudo)divine voice in their engagements with the
War on Terror. While their recirculation of culturalist tropes restricts them to the very orbit of orientalist generalizations they are critiquing, Gotscheff’s *Persians*, although attentive to the deadly consequences of oppositional identity formations and the significance of positionality, find their (‘earthly’) horizon in the notion of shared human vulnerability we first encountered in Pollesch’s *Plusfiliale*. As the queen underlines in her dream report, the fight is one between two equally beautiful women, “sisters from the same dynasty/race [gleichen Geschlechts],” who happen to inhabit Hellas and “the land of the Barbarians,” respectively, by the contingency of fate. Based on this critically humanist ethos, the production channels its twofold power of analysis and affect into the invitation that its audiences imaginatively transgress—but not ignore—the boundaries of specific histories.

**Smart(ass), Nerdy, and Google-powered**

**EARTHLY SENSE-MAKING IN FOER’S *EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE***

A fuller development of such human sense-making is provided by a strikingly different text: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). The German translation, *Extrem laut und unglaublich nah*, was published, in the same year, with the pop-affiliated press Kiepenheuer and Witsch (see chapter III). In both countries, reviews registered a mixture of heightened admiration and harsh criticism: the novel was praised for “moments of shattering emotion and stunning virtuosity” (Kakutani) or “breathtaking fabulation skill” (Gilbert-Sättele) but charged with a ‘mannerist’ use of “razzle-dazzle narrative techniques” (Kakutani). Especially in the German press, Foer also drew significant criticism for crafting a politically delicate, if not downright “obscene” equation of September 11 with the World War II bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima.\(^{32}\) Combining both charges, one critic polemically suggested that Foer’s heaping of literary techniques created the impression he was “personally commissioned” by George W. Bush to induce “literary retaliation” for the attack with “all the available means” of the genre.\(^{33}\)

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32. The quote is from Hannah Pilarczyk’s review in *Die Tageszeitung*; see also Hubert Spiegel in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (both quoted from http://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/21882.html; accessed 03/18/10); Mangold.

While especially this latter wording amounts to a clear misreading in terms of its political implications, the charges of postmodernist artificiality certainly point to a question of relevance. Poetologically closer to Foer’s earlier novel *Everything Is Illuminated* than Zeh’s *Spieltrieb* is to her *Eagles and Angels, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* at first glance hardly fits into the trend at stake in this chapter. Rather than a serious attempt at authoritative narration, does it not unfold a parody of such authoritativeness? The novel’s highly theatricalized character narrator certainly likes to flaunt his (presumed) authority, but does his embodiment not strongly suggest that theatricality operates to deauthorizing effect here? Reminiscent of the bragging Alex of *Everything Is Illuminated*, Oskar, the ten-year-old main narrator of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, begins, on the novel’s first page, by declaring “entomology” to be “one of my raisons d’être, which is a French expression that I know,” and proceeds to fantasize about training his anus to talk, so that it could deny responsibility for any farting activity, which, should it ever occur “in the Hall of Mirrors, which is in Versailles, which is outside of Paris, which is in France,” would “obviously” require that it say: “*Ce n’était pas moi!*” (1). Showing off his knowledge of things that educated adults may find too obvious for requiring explanation, and drawing it into the orbit of gross physical humor, the narrator immediately exposes his childish positionality. Furthermore, Oskar himself is a literary quotation. With the tambourine that he plays on his long walks through New York City, he (‘obviously’) references Oskar Matzerath, the institutionalized character narrator of Günter Grass’s 1959 *The Tin Drum*. Defying modern protocols of subjectivity, Grass’s drumming Oskar introduced his exceptional positionality by claiming that he decided to stop growing at age three after he had escaped his mother’s womb completely developed (64).

Precisely in establishing this literary connection, however, Foer’s novel also articulates its own ‘maximalist’ claim (in, again, Laura Miller’s words for the twenty-first-century trend toward authoritative narration). Grass had set

34. Hiroshima is featured only in a school presentation by the protagonist, the implications of which are questioned by the narrative arrangement of that scene (see below). Much more substantially integrated into the plot of the novel, the Dresden bombings are in fact implicitly compared, if not equated, with September 11. Rather than aligning the text with the Bush administration, however, this configuration combines a pacifist insistence on the experience of mourning across positional boundaries with a politically oppositional reminder of the deaths brought about by the United States themselves in twentieth-century history (Mullins 300).

35. The question of Oskar’s exact age has confused reviewers. Early on, he mentions his ninth birthday “last year” (3). Covering a span of about two years since Oskar’s father’s death, the story is told retrospectively at the end of this time period. Thus, the early events show him at age eight, but the narrator is about ten.
out to compose one of the ‘big’ attempts of coming to terms with the history of Nazi Germany by developing the tensions inscribed into the voice of his adult child, (in)sane ‘freak’ and apparent ‘retard’ (see 65). Foer’s highly gifted twenty-first-century Oskar tries to stunt his growth with excess coffee consumption (194) but is bashed as a “retard” only by a mean classmate, for his lack of age-appropriate familiarity with the Harry Potter film cast (192). Starting from this intertextual configuration, my reading seeks to demonstrate that a closer look at the narrative design of Foer’s novel, the “central topic” of which is “the fragile conjunction of communication and agency” (Däwes 529), does in fact contribute to our understanding of the trend targeted here. As charted by Dawson, this trend has further developed rather than simply abandoned postmodernist techniques. Although at best partially authoritative, Oskar’s narration embarks on a grand, and ultimately successful, excursion of his own. Since he is in need of help in particular in the historical domain, the voices of his grandparents fill in a crucial experiential dimension, to the effect that the novel, in some respects, simply develops dialogic sense-making on a larger scale than the texts discussed in chapter III. As presented by Foer, however, this sense-making is framed by Oskar’s own, therapeutic act of narrative performance. Rather than as primarily a reader construction (like in Zeh’s Eagles and Angels or Özdamar’s Seltsame Sterne), narrative connection and evaluation in Foer’s novel emerge to a significant degree as the effect of Oskar’s learning in the process of his becoming a—fallible, but seriously engaged character—narrator.

Questioning the scale of the novel’s project, some reviewers argued that Foer is not actually interested in history or politics, but only in the subjective experience of fear and mourning.36 In fact, neither George W. Bush nor the War on Terror makes a direct appearance, and the larger political context of Oskar’s attempts to work through the loss of his father in the towers is invoked mostly by a few self-reflexive comments on how, for example, the traumatic event instilled fear in him, not only of “showers, for some reason,” and “elevators, obviously,” but also of “Arab people on the subway (even though I am not racist)” (36). Through Oskar’s character discourse, the novel closely aligns its readers with his experiences. The narration is not only theatricalized but also highly scenic: often focalized through Oskar’s even younger, experiencing self, it heavily relies on dialogue at moments. Additionally, the novel’s aesthetics of presence is supported through graphic design and intermedial experimentation, in particular the insertion of photographs, many

36. Thus Ulrich Sonnenschein in the Frankfurter Rundschau (as excerpted at: http://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/21882.html (accessed 03/18/10); see also Meijas.
of which show close-ups of various objects Oskar encounters on his travels through New York.

Through its lens of subjective experience, however, Foer’s novel, no less than Zeh’s Spieltrieb, also poses the “great” philosophical “questions” about love, life, and religion. The night before the attack, Oskar had asked his father how the universe itself came into being: “[W]hy do we exist?” (13). The answers—involving sperm and eggs and, upon Oskar’s insistence, the father’s laconic “We exist because we exist”—were not to the kid’s satisfaction. Remembering his discontent, Oskar, the narrator, explains: “Just because you’re an atheist, that doesn’t mean you wouldn’t love for things to have reasons for why they are” (13). His desire for causality and motivation refers Oskar to the concepts of the divine, which have been reactivated in the new century’s search for authoritative narrative. “I used to be an atheist,” Oskar commented earlier, “which means I didn’t believe in things that couldn’t be observed” (4). The loss of his father, however, has intensified his longing for something that could transcend strictly scientific answers: “It’s not that I believe in things that can’t be observed now, because I don’t. It’s that I believe that things are extremely complicated” (4). When Oskar’s father was still alive, he tried to counteract the fact that his atheist teachings gave his son “heavy boots about how relatively insignificant life is” by insisting that he, Oskar, could nonetheless change the Sahara by moving a grain of sand. “I changed the course of human history!” Oskar joyfully joined into the fantasy scenario, concluding, “I’m God!”—and, upon being reminded of his atheism, “I don’t exist!” (86).

Megalomaniac fantasies aside, the presumption of divine prerogatives such as omnipotence, or omniscience, cannot seriously be upheld. By making Oskar into its main narrator, Foer’s novel insistently counters the desire for ‘heavenly’ authoritative narration. His status as a character bans him from exaggerated authority claims, and his age is employed as a fairly constant reminder of the limits of his perspective. In particular, we may be surprised by Oskar’s comparative ignorance about twentieth-century histories (e.g., see 153–54), which have clearly not been the focus of either his official schooling or the additional education provided by his father with his primarily scientific interests. As indicated by the inexplicable-to-himself shower association, the autodiegetic narrator is not in control of the larger historical connections charted in the book. But if Oskar thus paradigmatically embodies Butler’s insistence in Giving an Account of Oneself that the ‘I’ is not the master of his or her story, this does not mean, as I argued in chapter I, that we can’t take him seriously as a narrator. Oskar certainly knows how to help himself. An

encounter with his old neighbor is indicative here. Literally, it shows Oskar’s respective skill as a character, but allegorically, the scene also gestures at his narrative performance. A journalist who “had reported almost every war of the twentieth century” (154), the neighbor is positioned as a veritable embodiment of Walter Benjamin’s famous narrator archetype, whose authority rests on his experience spanning vast amounts of time and space. During their first conversation, the embarrassed Oskar decides to “Google Winston Churchill” rather than “mentioning that I didn’t know who he was” (153). And in fact, it turns out that the Google archive—as activated by Oskar’s quick brain—itself, he jokes, a “learning computer” (5)—is far superior to the old media-based knowledge that the well-traveled neighbor has been able to collect. Assembled over many years, the neighbor’s “biographical index” written on cards reduces every “Great Man” to a single word, with Mahatma Gandhi and Mohammed Atta categorized together under “war” (156–59). Oskar, who has probably Googled these two before, objects: “But he [Gandhi] was a pacifist” (157).

Although gently parodied as well, Oskar’s own nerdy and smart(ass) generalizations certainly do not fail as bluntly in their representational ambitions as the neighbor’s representational project. At the occasion of (unsuccessfully) trying to kiss an adult woman, for example, Oskar strategically offers a grand-scale definition of humans as “the only animal that blushing, laughs, has religion, wages war, and kisses with lips,” which would suggest that “the more you kiss with lips, the more human you are” (99). In narrating this encounter later, Oskar acknowledges his failure by admitting that her response “And the more you wage war?” left him silent (ibid.). Nonetheless, Oskar’s multifaceted definition of human nature clearly wins out in the novel against the reductive approach, for example, of his therapist, to whom he is forced to go because his allowance depends on it. Reminiscent of Özdamar’s montage narrator, this scene temporarily almost effaces Oskar’s retrospective narrator self, here arguably to the effect of authorizing his report through the foregrounding of documentary evidence, and certainly to that of communicating the intensity of his frustration. Extensively, Oskar quotes their dialogue and develops it into a fantasy of calling the therapist a “fucking asshole”—which, however, he politely refrained from doing in fact, as the resurfacing narrator afterward assures us (203). Oskar was exasperated by the therapist’s apparently exclusive interest in the sexual, specifically oedipal, etiology of his emotional troubles. Unsuccessfully, Oskar had tried to object that he was struggling not with hair growth on his private parts but with his dad having “died the most horrible death that anyone ever could invent” (201). Even while Oskar’s previously reported interest in kissing mother figures seems to somewhat back the therapist, his apparent failure to acknowledge the significance of Oskar’s loss
makes the reader side with Oskar in this montage, not only emotionally but also cognitively. In this way, the parody effected through dialogue recording framed by Oskar’s retrospective report targets less his age-induced limits than the rigidity of psychoanalytic doxa. Attesting to his lack of a reasonable therapy strategy, the therapist afterward discusses possible hospitalization with Oskar’s mother. In staging this encounter, the implied author aligns himself with the ‘affective turn’ that has brought a move away from psychoanalysis in much twenty-first-century scholarship: affects, he communicates through Oskar’s emotional report, cannot be reduced to drives (see Sedgwick, Touching Feeling 18).

The failure of the therapeutic profession forces Oskar to develop his own cure, which motivates his development from character into narrator: the quest for sense-making. When his father died, Oskar was, on top of everything else, left with an unfinished Reconnaissance Expedition game. Without further instructions, Dad had given him a map of Central Park, arguing that there didn’t always have to be clues. When Oskar protested that he could never be “right” under these circumstances, the father had added, “‘Another way of looking at it would be, how could you ever be wrong?’” (9). Embracing his lesson in perspectivist epistemology, Oskar had experimented with marking places on the map where he found various things and connecting the dots, realizing that he “could connect them to make almost anything” (10). Now his father’s death had not only robbed him of the chance to ever “know what I was supposed to find” but also left him with a desperate need to “know how he died,” in order to escape the compulsion of “inventing” horrible scenarios (10, 256). Transposing his desire for clues to his father’s closet, Oskar finds a conspicuous key in a blue vase and makes the mission of finding the lock it fits into his “ultimate raison d’être” (69). Guided by the word “Black” on the envelope the key was in, he begins to investigate every single New Yorker with this last name, just like the random things he found in Central Park (see 143).

Of course, the adult, father-equivalent-trained reader may suspect that this all-too-classic narrative quest for a secret to be unlocked must fail. In fact, the protagonist’s design for achieving narrative closure produces, in his own retrospective evaluation, “‘negative knowledge’” in that he skips his French classes for the search (255). Many months later, Oskar, in his function as narrator, admits that the key has “nothing to do with” the death of his father (302), who had just accidentally acquired the vase as a gift for his wife, unaware—like the seller himself—of the key hidden in it. However, there is more to this outcome of the search than its literal solution. Its significance for Oskar’s mourning process—and the configuration of the novel—is in how it confronts Oskar with a different father-son story, a “long . . . story” (296) sum-
marized in a lack of emotional connection and its replacement by material gifts. Even while the seller of the vase contrastively underlines that Oscar was “lucky to have a father like” his (300), his narrative balances the ideal father imago that death enshrined for the eight-year-old protagonist and thereby allows him to address the less-than-ideal facets of his own father story. Moved to tears by the seller’s narrative, Oskar relates the concluding piece of his own traumatic experience, which he has not been able to communicate to anyone—including the reader—up to this point of his life and its restaging in the novel: he himself had witnessed, if only through the telephone, how his father died. Repeatedly, the father had tried to call from the tower, and Oskar, who had been sent home from school, was sitting in front of the phone, too paralyzed to respond to his father’s urgent address (“Are you there? Are you there?” 301, italics in original), when the last message on the answering machine was cut off at the exact minute the building came down. Earlier in the novel, when Oskar had reported on listening to one of these messages again (without fully spelling out the situation), he had asked: “Why didn’t he say ‘I love you’?” (207). Thus, Oskar’s trauma is not only characterized but also coinduced by a failure of communication. As indicated in the encounter with the seller of the vase, working through it requires breaking out of this circle in the performance of telling, or narrative address to a listener. In place of his father and his family, Oskar then asks the seller of the vase for forgiveness. “[F]or not being able to pick up?” he asks, and Oskar answers, almost wisely, by displacing the guilt into the sphere of communication with the living: “For not being able to tell anyone” (302).

The novel as a whole extends the project of narrative healing thus explicated by Oskar’s intradiegetic telling performance. In part, it does so by supplementing Oskar’s voice with those of his grandparents, whose inserted, fragmentary narratives contextualize Oskar’s story, not by virtue of any superior narrative authority (highly scenic as well, they are, in themselves, also at best partially authoritative), but by filling in the experiential dimension of histories that Oskar could access through Google merely in abstract terms. With their thematic focus on trauma, the loss and recovery of communication, however, the grandparents’ voices also reflect back on and help contour Oskar’s learning process, through which he emerges as an ethically engaged and more adequate narrator. In Oskar’s initial, heightened rhetorical register,

38. “Dad wasn’t a Great Man,” Oskar had earlier said, registering his disappointment in ambiguously focalized free indirect speech after realizing that his father was not listed in the neighbor’s biographical index (159).

39. See Kacandes, Talk Fiction 92, 94 (referencing Dori Laub), 145. Codde’s analysis of Foer’s aesthetics of trauma ignores this development.
overcoming trauma means overcoming the condition in which “everything was incredibly far away” (36). Early on, a dialogue with his mother alerts the reader to the fact that the limits of his rhetoric are not exclusively induced by age or excess emotion. “You sound just like Dad,” she says, who also tended toward “definite,” “nothing”—“everything” world-making (43, italics in original). As we learn from the grandparents’ letters, Oskar’s father grew up without his father, who had failed to work through the loss of his first love in the Dresden bombings of World War II. The trauma is literally written onto his body: after September 11, he eventually returns with his “yes” and “no” tattoos on his hands designed to compensate for his loss of speech. While Oskar himself has been affected by the legacy of rigidity passed down in the family, his learning process includes embracing the possibility that, as his mother suggests, “things might be more complicated than they seem” (171). When he now meets his grandfather, Oskar challenges his binary code: “What about ‘I’ll think about it,’ and ‘probably,’ and ‘it’s possible?’” (257).

In his own attempts at working through his trauma, Oskar himself draws on but gradually works through the paternal legacy of binary opposition. As part of what emerges, in the overall novel, as an intricate play with media properties, for example, he experiments with the presencing power of visual media technologies as a way of counteracting ‘farawayness.’ On top of the Empire State Building, he discovers that the “binocular” brings “things that were far away incredibly close” (Foer 245). However, he also learns that thus compensating for distance does not necessarily translate into enhanced perception: Oscar’s attempts to employ digital technologies for scrutinizing images of a man falling from the towers in extreme close-up only make him see less and less (293). More frighteningly, the actual abolishment of distance in physical contact can be deadly, too: his research on the Twin Tower windows has uncovered that “[t]en thousand birds die every year from smashing into windows” (250). Oskar, whose business card introduces him as an “INVENTOR” (99), and who overall puts his compulsory brain in the service of creating safety and connection, responds by imagining “a device” that points us to the novel’s full title. Detecting “when a bird is incredibly close to a building,” it would “trigger an extremely loud birdcall from another skyscraper,” drawing them there (250).

As indicated by the echo of these words in the novel’s title, Oskar’s larger imaginative project—his poetic storytelling performance—doubles the birdcall device as a potentially lifesaving technology of communication across the gap opened by trauma. However, the narrative act also improves on the—still binary, back and forth—balancing design of the technological solution. Toward the end of the novel, a letter from Stephen Hawking, to whom Oskar
himself has written often, develops the connection between the different forms of imagination. Predicting Oskar’s “bright future in the sciences” (304), Hawking underlines the creative potential of what we may have been tempted to dismiss as mere PTSD symptoms (guided by Oskar’s own retrospective evaluation: “It was worst at night. I started inventing things”; 36), but the scientist also crosses disciplinary boundaries by “confessing”: “I wish I were a poet” (305). Furthermore, Hawking’s endorsement of Oskar’s narrative fabulation contributes, by virtue of its letter format, to the novel’s overall discourse on the properties of different media. In both Oskar’s reflections and his grandparents’ story, the distance technology of writing (preelectronic paper) letters is established as the posttraumatic medium par excellence. On the one hand, anxieties attach themselves to it when Oskar, in analogy to his grandmother with respect to the Dresden bombings, worries whether it was all “the paper that kept the towers burning” (325; see 76, 83). On the other hand, precisely the distance communication of traditional letter-writing may imply the best chances for effectively building connection within the condition of an (irre-vocable) loss of immediate contact. In addition to Hawking’s letter, those that Oskar’s grandmother addresses to him help him work through his trauma by filling in “the point of everything,” the “I love you” that his father failed to say in his messages (207, 314).40

With its intermedial design, Oskar’s own storytelling does not merely balance the forces of distance and proximity but interweaves their promises by combining the presencing power of the image with language’s capacity for expressing virtuality and complication. In the novel’s concluding scene, he explores the healing power of the (counterfactual, poetic) imagination with a narrative montage.41 In reverse order, Oskar arranges pictures of a man, whom he associates with his dad, falling from the towers, to the effect that flipping through them made him float upward. Imaginatively, he extends the experiment beyond his material possibilities: “And if I’d had more pictures, he would’ve flown through a window, back into the building” (325), would have left his messages backward and returned to his son the previous evening: “We would have been safe” (326). The following—final—pages of the novel present Oskar’s arrangement of images. The effect of this design is not only that the reader is, once more, aligned with Oskar’s experience but also that we are

40. Writing certainly communicates more effectively than the “one-way algorithm” code through which the speechless grandfather tries to communicate via the phone, and which, as graphically reproduced in the novel, evokes the unrepresentability induced by trauma also for the reader (Hayles 166–67; see Foer 269–72).

41. Codde’s insistence that the scene ultimately demonstrates the “impossibility of closure” (250) is not altogether mistaken, but his privileging of images over words in working through trauma misses its complexity.
invited, more directly than by the previously often loose associations between images and text (see Däwes 534), to imagine that he had, or could have had, a decisive hand in the composition of the overall book. To be sure, the factual basis of such a conclusion is uncertain by accepted mimetic standards. While the grandmother’s letters are addressed to Oskar and can easily be imagined to have been at his disposal at the moment of writing, it remains unclear how he would have gotten hold of the grandfather’s (collected, never sent) letters to Oskar’s father. After all, they have presumably been buried in the father’s coffin prior to Oskar’s full understanding of the connections, when Oskar and the grandfather, after Oskar’s conversation with the seller of the vase, dug up the grave in another attempt to find closure by filling its “dictionary definition of emptiness” with the legacy of interrupted distance communication (321).

Amidst such persistences of displacement, which underline the novel’s continued inflection by the themes of postmodernism, authorial agency certainly cannot be guaranteed. But perhaps we don’t need definite proof, or even an ‘everything-or-nothing’ solution. In any case, the novel creates imaginative room for Oskar’s narrative agency. With his thoroughly human—nonsovereign, vulnerable, and cooperation-dependent—sense-making, Oskar may have offered the best earthly equivalent to God’s power: “the 9/11 story we need,” as a reviewer put it (Jain). Or perhaps, in a less definite rhetorical register, just one good instance of “the story,” in which the old and wise neighbor believes—unlike in the “afterlife” (164). As the novel makes clear through the highly theatrical act of Oskar’s highly scenic narration, his exceptional brain-power and limited retrospective view do not enable him to ‘lean back in’ Zeh’s chair to the degree where he could become a ‘master’ of his story. More honest about his abundantly foregrounded emotional implication than the Spieltrieb narrator, however, Oskar is simultaneously much more engaged in making sense of his own life than the drugged protagonist of Zeh’s earlier novel, or also the other backgrounded, focused-on-the-moment narrators we encountered in chapter III.

Oskar’s experiential authority unfolds as a partial command over his words. At moments, we cognitively evaluate his report as unreliable even while remaining emotionally aligned with him. Thus, we may conclude that Oskar’s ‘inexplicable’ shower association is understandable as a posttraumatic anxiety symptom, but nonetheless historically inadequate as an implicit Holocaust comparison, and that his fear of ‘Arabs on the subway’ remains caught in racist patterns despite his better intentions. Similarly, the Hiroshima comparison implied (if never explicated, even by the character) in Oskar’s school presentation on the topic is foregrounded for—potentially critical—reader evaluation by his own report on the enunciative situation. Both classmates and
teacher had responded with a severe lack of understanding to the way Oskar combined direct exposure to the voices of survivors with a morbid fascination with scientific detail. His telling of this situation withholds retrospective interpretation and evaluation (and thus ‘underreads’ and ‘underregards’; see Phelan, *Living to Tell* 52); however, it is not factually unreliable and also preserves some of Oskar’s authority as a perceptive observer. When, eventually, one of the classmates turns the situation into an occasion for sexual jokes, Oskar, as he says, “didn’t get what was so hilarious” but “could tell that inside,” the teacher “was cracking up, too” (190). In following Oskar’s journey through all the things he does not initially understand but makes it his project to learn in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, we ‘obviously’ sometimes chuckle at him as well, but increasingly, as I have argued, we also develop respect for his thoroughly human agency in engaging with his perceptions, emotions, and, more generally, experiences. Rather than dominantly despite Oskar or at his expense, sense-making in Foer’s novel unfolds through the reader’s engagement with the character narrator’s project. It is an engagement based not on the unconditional trust we would have in heavenly authority but on the credit we may find ourselves more and more willing to give to Oskar’s resourceful intelligence and emotional seriousness in his efforts to tell us his—significant—story.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has pursued the aesthetics of narrative performance in a (dominantly literary) twenty-first-century trend that, at first glance, seemed to signal its end: the return to ‘omniscient’ or at least authoritative voice and the ‘big’ form promising social or ethical cohesion. Engaging the narratological debate on omniscience, I argued that divine metaphors are in fact relevant here in that they are referenced in the poetological and literary pieces at stake, but that they simultaneously fall short of describing the complexity of poetic technique used in the very texts gesturing at them. In my reading of Zeh’s *Spieltrieb*, I demonstrated how the author’s programmatic, if also self-reflexively ironicized return to ‘godlike’ narration remains haunted by (post) modernist critiques of narrative authority. Unable to escape the first person that theatricalizes the process of narration as a double of the violent games played on the plot level, Zeh’s (human, if professionally authorized) narrator alternates between fantasies of sovereignty and fantasies of submission to a divine instance that could unburden her from the guilt of passing narrative judgment.
For the chapter’s subsequent readings, I intentionally chose texts that represent the trend toward narrative authority in less clear-cut ways but, precisely with their poetic hybridity, allowed me to sketch a range of contemporary answers to the discontents with radical critiques of narrative authority, discontents that have doubtlessly gained momentum in the new century. Written roughly at the same time as Pollesch’s “Tent Saga,” Jelinek’s Bambiland similarly continues to be shaped by avant-garde-inflected performance concepts, but it also resonates with the scenic commentary of the ‘immersion journalist’ that Dawson has characterized as one of the contemporary forms of narrative omniscience. In contrast to Pollesch’s, Jelinek’s affective commentary on the Iraq war operates in the first-person plural, and it is also provided with a crucial twist in that an (ex machina) divine voice at the end takes over the chorus monologue. As I argued, this concluding turn to the divine foregrounds the failure of human—nonsovereign and localized—figuration inscribed in the text as a whole. Given the intermedial affiliations of Jelinek’s theater text, I contextualized it not just with the return of authoritative narration but also with the specters of sovereignty I diagnosed in presence-oriented performance theory with its foreclosure of critical agency in signification. As I suggested, the failure of human figuration finds its intermedial analogue in Christoph Schlingensief’s premiere at the Vienna Burgtheater, which had scandalized reviewers precisely for cutting almost all of Jelinek’s text. In contrast, Gotscheff’s 2006 production of Jelinek’s intertext, The Persians, at the Deutsches Theater Berlin performs the demise of God—as the fundament of war ideology—through the experiential authority of the messenger’s more fully scenic evocation of war sufferings.

Finally, I unfolded the alternative of thus asserting human—experiential, processual, clearly limited, and dialogic—authority in the concluding reading of Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. At first glance, Foer’s novel, which connects the representation of September 11 to the World War II bombings of Dresden through the simultaneously highly theatricalized and highly scenic narration of its ten-year-old character narrator in conjunction with the voices of his grandparents, may seem to unfold a parody of authoritative narration rather than a serious attempt at it. But as I claimed, things are—to quote Oskar’s learning process—actually more complicated. With his past as a declared atheist—if playful God imposter—and his present limits, Oskar embodies a clear choice against any fantasy of more or less divine authority. However, the loss of his father in the towers has intensified Oskar’s need for things to be connected and have reasons, and in the attempt of working through his trauma, he emerges as a—gradually learning—autobiographical narrator with both a clear-cut project and, all chuckling aside,
a to-be-respected voice. Powered by his nerdy giftedness as well as his social privilege, including access to formal as well as informal (Google-mediated) education, Foer’s sensitive child narrator invites readerly empathy even where we evaluate him as unreliable, but overall, his imperfect narration is in fact authorized as a worthwhile engagement with his own story in the shaping of which he does not have complete control but significant agency. In this sense, I assert that Foer’s Oskar offers an earthly and, in Zeh’s words, democratic substitute for the divine figures often evoked by contemporary calls for overcoming the postmodernist crisis of narrative authority.
A New Aesthetics of Proximity

THE TURN TO PRESENCE

In memory of Don Belton

NOT ONLY Foer’s Oskar tried to work through the trauma of September 11 with the help of pictures. While people around the world remained glued to their television sets in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Diana Taylor describes the use of photography as a technique of archiving the events on site, in downtown Manhattan. As an alternative to the “linear plotline” and sense-making structures of tragedy emerging on television, the private practices of photography, she argues, became a means for the “witnesses without a narrative” to “save the images to understand them at some future time” (239, 237, 241). In Taylor’s account,

1. A gifted writer, dedicated professor, warm-hearted colleague, and proudly unapologetic African American gay man, Don was murdered in his own house in Bloomington, Indiana, on December 27, 2009—while I was writing this chapter—by a man he considered to be his friend. The perpetrator, an Iraq war veteran who was turned in by his girlfriend, defended himself by claiming that he had been ‘sexually assaulted’ two days earlier (by a man who had, apart from his most gentle spirit, perhaps half the murderer’s physical strength). Some of the media reactions following the murder demand its contextualization with racism in addition to homophobia. My readings of Der Kick and Nacht vor Augen attempt such contextualization for resonant scenarios.
this move of delaying sense-making is not positioned as antinarrative but as a—democratic—means of (everybody’s) “piecing together my own narrative,” which would eventually enable people “to see connections and larger frameworks” cut off by the dominant structure of tragedy (244, 255, 263). Kathrin Röggla’s really ground zero, a report on the German author’s stay in New York in September 2001, zooms in on this space of delay. Like Foer’s Oskar, Röggla responds to the experience of an event defying integration into an existing structure of experience with a desire for narrative, or situating it in a “larger context” (8). Unlike Foer’s novel, however, Röggla’s diary-style text from the immediate aftermath of the events, which is also accompanied by personal photographs, overall stops short of implementing this need for ‘grander’ sense-making and instead adheres to Taylor’s method of archiving impressions, observations, and discourses. In line with what I have been arguing throughout this book, larger narrative frames do still interfere in this programmatic space ‘before’ sense-making. In Röggla’s text, however, this happens primarily through the rhetoric of the Real: “so i have a life now, a real one” (6) is the opening sentence of the report whose title lays claim to a place of ‘true’ rawness as the absence of cultural structure.

In the context of literature, this may strike my reader as anything but new: does Röggla, whose literary reputation in Germany situates her in the configuration pop discussed in chapter III, not simply adhere to the presence (effect)-generating methods of recording that dominated turn-of-the-twenty-first-century literature? Arguably she does. Nonetheless, the quest for the Real also announces the second twenty-first-century trend to be discussed here. As an actual trend, it took on its contours more distinctly in the field of visual media, if sometimes in productions based on literary texts, which have gradually returned onto German stages in the 2000s. In stark contrast to the trend outlined in the previous chapter, the turn to the Real—or, as I will conceptualize it, presence—in crucial respects reaffirms the programmatic abdication of narrative authority that constituted the turn-of-the-century aesthetics of narrative performance. However, it develops its own forms of evaluative sense-making in an era that overall bade farewell to the radical gestures of critical dissolution.

Recent scholarship has noted the return of the category of “reality” after decades of its ‘repression’ in German theater.² While this trend started as early as the 1990s, it was initially strongly shaped by a postmodernist insistence on the staged and artificial character of reality. With the crash of the “dot-com bubble” and September 11, however, Kathrin Tiedemann suggests, the

² ‘Reality’ is programmatically distinguished here also from the “realism” claimed by pre-postmodernist political theater in the 1960s (Tiedemann 6; Karschnia 149).
playfulness of these takes became increasingly flat (6–7). Framed by feuille-ton debates on the over-the-top aesthetics—of deconstruction, splatter, and gore—in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century theater (see, e.g., Assheuer, “Der Theaterkampf”), the tone on German stages began to shift. While critics demanded, and some directors in fact returned to, less deconstructive, ‘narrative’ stagings of classical pieces (see ibid.), postdramatic experimental theater took a marked turn toward new forms of documentary. A much-discussed example is the “reality-exploration-theater” of the group Rimini Protokoll, whose particular trademark is the use of “experts of everyday life”: lay actors stand in for the programmatic promise of representing “authentic humans” as they tell their own stories. Significantly, Alexander Karschnia notes, the group’s self-presentations still use quotation marks in unfolding these promises. From a critical angle, their “real-people-shows” may read as yet another attempt to do justice to the representational function of theater as a medium constituted precisely through the gesture of doubling performed by these quotation marks, that is, the opening of the gap between representing and the represented (152, English in German original). In this (epistemological) sense, theatrical ‘reality’ simply cannot escape the rhetorical frame that constitutes various programmatic returns to the Real.

Acknowledging this irrevocable frame, however, does not make the trend at stake any less significant in terms of its aesthetics. In mapping it, I begin with the 2006 production Schwarze Jungfrauen (Black Virgins) at the Kreuzberg Theater am Halleščen Ufer (HAU), which presents a series of provocative monologues by Muslim women identifying with radical religious and political positions. The uncomfortably close encounter with these identifications produced by the production’s scenic format is intensified in Andres Veiel’s Der Kick, a documentary theater—and later film—investigation into a murder committed by neo-Nazis in a small town in the East German provinces. While the HAU production is partially still inflected by a postmodernist aesthetics of artificiality, Der Kick demonstrates the reemerging interest in universalism and empathy that has coshaped the new century’s epistemology and cultural politics. By focusing on the hi/stories of the murderers, the thoroughly disturbing production explores the possibility of affectively approaching its adolescent perpetrators without inadvertently legitimizing neo-Nazi worldviews.

In the realm of film, the label of realism has been used for conceptualizing recent moves beyond the theatricalized aesthetics of the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century cinema discussed in chapter II. “The Great Laughter is dead.

Long live Realism,” a 2006 headline announces (Elterlein). In mainstream contexts, this trend has occasionally produced a return to relatively classical, authoritative forms—a filmic equivalent to the literary God games discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, Florian Henckel v. Donnersmarck’s Academy Award–winning *The Life of Others* displaced *Good Bye, Lenin!* as a stand-in for transnationally successful commercial German cinema. Critics, however, would not sum up recent developments in German cinema by referencing this film. Rather, critical attention has shifted from turn-of-the-century comedy to the emergence of the so-called Berlin School, whose alternative realisms have also triggered the label of a *nouvelle vague Allemande* (see Suchsland; Marco Abel, “Intensifying Life”). More successful in the festival circuit than at the box office, the films grouped under this label have replaced the playfully theatrical aesthetics discussed in chapter II with a more sober analytics of close observation.\(^5\)

While many of them combine their directors’ programmatic focus on “experience” (Hochhäusler 313) and “presence” (Heisenberg, *Gegenwart* 401) with a continued, if more subtle, foregrounding of the workings of representation, Christian Petzold’s *Yella* (2006) shifts the emphasis more exclusively toward presence by moving the camera radically close to the protagonist.\(^6\) In stark contrast to *Der Kick*, *Yella* foregoes character exploration and empathy in favor of a phenomenological approach to its underdetermined world, bracketing narrative coherence through its focus on the visible—although, as we shall see, with a twist.

In the international circuit, the new aesthetics of presence has prominently won its shape in films on September 11 and the subsequent wars, where it can be contextualized also as a repoliticization of 1990s action aesthetics.\(^7\) First

4. *The Life of Others* allows more complex readings as well. As Wendy Graham Westphal argues in her dissertation, the film’s aesthetics of hyperrealism and reliance on theatrical metaphors make the contrast with *Good Bye, Lenin!* less striking than immediately apparent. Overall, however, the film functions within realist protocols.

5. Marco Abel’s discussion of the school’s “esthetics of reduction” as a “visual intensification of normality” in the sense of Bazin’s “true realism” captures some crucial elements of this trend (“Intensifying Life”). However, Abel’s analysis remains limited by its overreliance on dichotomies such as “content-based” politics and “representational realism” vs. performative, “a-representational realism” (emphasis in original).

6. Although Petzold is often cited as one of the major representatives of the Berlin School, critics have also insisted that he has a signature of his own. While *Yella* is in fact aesthetically unique, his previous film, *Gespenster*, in my view constitutes a rather straightforward example of Berlin School aesthetics.

7. This idea evolved in a dialogue with Lutz Koepnick, based on his (in progress) work on 1990s action film aesthetics. While not in the center of my own analysis, such a contextualization is certainly compatible with it.
exemplified by Paul Greengrass’s *United 93*, this aesthetic reduction of distance serves the project of rendering experiences of violence, fear, and trauma as ‘immediately’ as possible. My last reading compares a somewhat more moderate post–September 11 film, Paul Haggis’s 2007 *In the Valley of Elah*, to Brigitte Bertele’s *Nacht vor Augen (A Hero’s Welcome)*, the first German film that tackles the violent impact of the Afghanistan war back home. The concluding irony developed here is that Bertele’s much more radical aesthetic simulation of trauma, which brings the experience of war home in powerfully disturbing ways, proceeds in some respects more authoritatively than Haggis’s comparatively conventional Hollywood form.

**First-Person Spectacle**

*SCHWARZE JUNGFRAUEN*

As indicated in chapter V, the newly heated post–September 11 discourses of cultural difference revitalized old exclusive mindsets. Nonetheless, they differ from their twentieth-century counterparts in that the focus is now on religion rather than ethnicity or nationality: the figure of difference dominating the public stage is no longer the ‘Turk’ (or ‘Kanaksta’) but the ‘observant’ or ‘radicalized Muslim.’ Feridun Zaimoğlu’s play *Schwarze Jungfrauen* (Black Virgins, cowritten with Günter Senkel), which was commissioned by the HAU for the 2006 festival “Beyond Belonging—Migration” and staged there by the filmmaker Neco Çelik, presents a response to these developments. Zaimoğlu’s own career underlines the outlined shift in public discourse. While his most recent novels (especially *Leyla* and *Liebesbrand*) brought him a mainstream literary recognition that has severed the ethnic identifications surrounding his Kanak Sprak debut (see chapter III), he has continued to draw media attention with provocative interview positions that criticize anti-Islamism, defend religious immigrants, and polemicize against ‘boring secularism.’

*Schwarze Jungfrauen* presents the monologues of young women who have been labeled as “Islamists” or “neo-Muslims” because of the ways in which they advocate radical religious and political positions: not from within some presumably unbroken tradition but in a process of actively making religion one’s new identity. The five characters (of the stage version) include one German without immigrant background converted from Catholicism, a young Turkish-German who initially rebelled against her parents’ Islamic faith but

8. “stinköder Säkularismus” (Zaimoğlu, “Für all das”; see also Bahners).
9. The text printed in *Theater heute* as a documentation of the production does in fact only feature four out of the five monologues (plus a different one).
then reconverted, a Bosnian who underlines the formative importance of her German experiences, a woman in a wheelchair who articulates her radical observance—including a facial veil—as a response to her environment’s half-pitying, half-disgusted looks, and finally a law student who develops her vision of an Islamist movement from a perspective of social privilege. The foregrounding of female voices corresponds to the dominant genderings of twenty-first-century European discourses on Islam: the (stereotypically drug-dealing and rapping) male Kanakstas\textsuperscript{10} have been displaced by head-scarf-wearing women. Indicative of its topicality, the production received a tremendous amount of media attention. Visiting performances, for example, by Rimini Protokoll had already developed a new insider reputation for the HAU as the emerging successor of the 1990s’ Volksbühne—Berlin’s new address for ‘young,’ experimental, and political theater—but the opening of Schwarze Jungfrauen made, as a reviewer notes, “journalists request entry into the theater in the attic who had never before strayed into the HAU 3,” the smallest of the theater’s stages (Meierhenrich). The press documentation provided to me by the theater includes reviews in provincial papers I had never even heard of, and Theater heute, Germany’s major journal of contemporary theater, devoted a front-page story and extensive dossier to the production.

A majority of these reviewers underlined the documentary nature of Schwarze Jungfrauen: the monologues were characterized as “authentic life confessions” representing the feelings of “real people” rather than “artificial characters.”\textsuperscript{11} On the Internet, reviews of the production were illustrated with documentary images of young women wearing headscarves (“Rebellion im Alltag”), and it was praised for how it presumably puts “reality” over political correctness (Wahl). While this authenticating reception needs to be qualified in more than one respect, it is supported by the artists’ own presentation of the project. Thus, Zaimoğlu implicitly quotes Peter Weiss’s influential definition of documentary theater from the 1960s—as a theater using “authentic materials,” “unchanged in content” but “edited in form” (“Notizen” 599)—when he claims that he translated the young women’s “life confessions” into his “form and artistic language [Kunstsprache]” without changing their “content” (quoted from Behrendt 41). Çelik for his part declared in an interview with the Islamischen Zeitung that the production wanted to give a voice to “the Muslim woman” (“Die Polemik”).

\textsuperscript{10} The Kanakstas’ more intellectual ‘sisters’ from the follow-up volume Koppstoff did not stir an overwhelming amount of interest in the 1990s.

\textsuperscript{11} Behrendt 41; see also, however, this reviewer’s following questions about this categorization (41–42); “real existierende[r] Personen” vs. “Kunstfiguren” (Herzinger 9, referencing Zaimoğlu).
Çelik’s pocketing claim to female cultural representation in the singular form points at the most problematic layer of the documentary classification. Thus, the case of Schwarze Jungfrauen highlights how the new interest in documentary forms feeds into old habits in the reception of the art and literature of migration, namely its notorious public evaluation in sociological rather than aesthetic terms (see Adelson, “Touching Tales”). But even if it is understood in general that documentary techniques constitute aesthetic projects, which frame on-stage bodies and voices of the theater to the effect of incorporating them in a complex economy of signification (Eco), the aesthetics of Schwarze Jungfrauen in particular probes the boundaries of at least some definitions of the documentary. My reading locates the production at the transition from more flamboyantly theatricalized forms (in fiction and turn-of-the-twenty-first-century ‘performative’ documentary alike) to the emerging aesthetics of methodologically sobered twenty-first-century documentary. A minority of reviewers actually did question the documentary character of Schwarze Jungfrauen. The bone of contention was, specifically, the emphasis that all of the monologues, while ostensibly organized around the topic of religion, also put on issues of sexuality. In doing so, they present different perspectives on the intersection of “Sex & Islam” (thus the Theater heute title). While the Bosnian immigrant emphasizes her propriety by triumphantly relating how she shamed a lesbian who came on to her, the newly reconverted Turkish woman, who describes her own appearance as that of a “party girl,” has integrated her (hetero)sexual rebellion into her religious identity: “I still fuck because I know it doesn’t hurt my faith” (Zaimoğlu and Senkel 51). In an interview with Theater heute, Çelik reports the reaction of an “intellectual Turkish woman” who suggested that the monologues are Zaimoğlu’s “male phantasies” rather than accurate renderings of young women’s identities (“Mal sehen” 44).

In this context, Çelik adds that we should refrain from dissecting the play “under the documentary or authentic magnifier” because Zaimoğlu took “tatters” from the “mental world” of these women, which he then “pushed and brought to effervescence” through his artistic translation (ibid.). Çelik’s qualification pays tribute to stricter definitions of documentary form, which seemed outdated during the heyday of late twentieth-century postmodernisms but have since had their comeback. If the category of documentary, as Carroll argues for film, is clearly delineated by intersubjective standards “of reasoning and evidence gathering” (231), Schwarze Jungfrauen is at best “semidocumentary” (Behrendt 40). My primary interest here, however, is in mapping this border territory of docufiction with respect to the ways it blends and configures specific aesthetic techniques—of narrative presence and theatricality.
Overall, the new wave of documentary moving onto German stages has been measured against the yardstick of but also characterized through its difference from Weiss’s work. If in the 1960s, he could still claim with some authority that his artistic shaping of documentary material distilled the conflicts objectively contained in it, postmodernism has since taught audiences that it was his Marxist metanarrative that allowed him to thus organize his material. The documentary productions of the 2000s have tended to forego the explicit ‘tribunal’ character of Weiss’s work. As if protesting against the “presumption of interpretation [Anmaßung der Deutung],” they have instead given “representations [Abbildungen] of the very real chaos” of historical life that “cannot be reduced to any model” (Sorrento; see also Karschnia). More specifically, the “reality fever” (Sorrento) on German stages has been described as giving voice to the outsiders of contemporary society—its “losers and figures of misery” in the age of neoliberalism (Laudenbach, “Das 5 Millionen-Spiel”), as well as political extremists and terrorists.

Schwarze Jungfrauen fits these descriptions with the ‘first-person’ format of its monologues, the feature in which the claim to presence and immediacy finds its strongest base here. Narratologically, Çelik is quite correct in asserting that Schwarze Jungfrauen ‘gives a voice’ to Muslim women, if in the plural: the production exclusively features the voices of the five outlined characters, assembled without any noticeable interviewer intervention or verbal commentary by a superordinate instance of narration (see also Laudenbach, “Halbmondsüchtig”). Whereas Weiss’s Die Ermittlung configured its Nazi voices with those of victims and judges, Zaimoğlu’s text, and Çelik’s production thereof, do not analogously question the presented Islamist positions. Nor are they narratively composed into a larger form—like, again, in Weiss, who used the structuring models of the oratorio and the Dantean descent into hell. Given the lack of such narrative commentary, some reviewers have concluded that Schwarze Jungfrauen allows its radically religious characters to hold on to “their self-image” (Riesselmann) or, as underscored by Zaimoğlu himself, presents the voices of the women “without moral evaluation” (as quoted by Behrendt 42). However, the radically scenic form of the monologues does not yet mean that evaluative narration is in fact absent from the production: Schwarze Jungfrauen certainly cues its audiences through the montage of text fragments as well as through stage design, costumes, and performance.

In a way characteristic of many documentary but also cabaret forms (see above on I Am My Own Wife), the actors frontally address the audience (see figure 12). The five women speak their text on a stage divided into six boxlike rooms—three on top, three below. After they are initially shown as the “black virgins” of the title, in black clothes and headscarves, the evening begins with
them undressing in the flickering light and to the monotonous sound of fast visual-musical beats. Throughout the performance, the women are then presented in visibly unnatural nakedness: with heavy makeup, fake bald heads, and in ‘flesh’-colored all-body men’s underwear. Thus, the production playfully restages a gesture of “unveiling” (see Draeger). While the introductory visual presentation promises the “shockingly revealing [freizügige] confessions” we are to hear (ibid.), the decidedly artificial aesthetics simultaneously underlines that we cannot in fact hope for ‘naked truth’ and contradicts documentary protocol to the degree to which the latter is still associated with naturalism in contemporary aesthetics. Suspending any pretense at classical realism, the production is theatricalized in that it foregrounds its own presentational character, aesthetic framing, and audience relation. The effect of Çelik’s mise-en-scène has been compared to a lineup of mannequins as well as a peep show (e.g., Alanyali; Draeger). Like the Berlin version of I Am My Own Wife, Schwarze Jungfrauen thus cites a tradition of cabaret in the sense of sexual spectacle, but it simultaneously undercuts sexualization, here through
the neutralizing effect of the artificial baldness and male underwear (thus Behrendt 42).

In a contribution to the *Theater heute* yearbook, cultural critic Richard Herzinger argues that the introductory striptease disposes of “folkloristic . . . accessories” (11), namely, the headscarf, and instead uncovers modern subjects struggling with the realities of secularization. Reminiscent of Zeh’s *Spieltrieb*, Zaimoğlu and Çelik, according to Herzinger, replace the ‘war of cultures’ paradigm with an analysis of fundamentalism as having grown on Western soil (8–9). Although mostly convincing, this reading of *Schwarze Jungfrauen* fails to make sense of the production’s theatrical aesthetics of visual display. As highlighted by reviewers, the figures on stage also act like “mannequins” with their unnaturally stiff body language (Bender); and their artificially ‘inhuman’ appearance is that of “aliens” (Behrendt 42; see also Herzinger himself, 12). Even without folkloristic accessories, the women on stage remain ‘strangers’ of some sort (Behrendt 42). The central question to be answered in interpreting the production is: strangers in which ways and for whom exactly? Or, how exactly does the theatricalizing, (post-)Brechtian aesthetics of distanciation work here?

One reviewer suggests reading the visual presentation of the women on stage as Çelik’s restaging of the alienated gaze of majority society (Oberländer). As a tool of political satire, it would then provide a hyperbolic visualization of prejudice with the goal precisely of undoing the specularizing effect of the dominant discourses it mimes; the distancing visual aesthetics would serve as a critical relay indirectly mediating the spectator’s approximation to the (thus authorized) voices on stage. This reading is crucially supported by the immediacy aesthetics of the monologues themselves, as well as their argumentative wit and drastic language.12 For example, the Kreuzberg audience on my DVD reproduction provided by the theater laughs appreciatively when the young Bosnian relates how she exposed the moral double standard of an acquaintance who insisted on female virginity but not male premarital abstinence. Drastically inverting his vocabulary of purity, she argued that “when you pour clear, pure water into the sewer that water gets dirty after all . . . you are a cesspit [du bist Kloake] because you import an untouched village girl from the provinces down there but have whooped it up [die Sau rausgelassen] here yourself. What kind of Islam is that?” (Zaimoğlu and Senkel 46). Thus critically commenting on the gender inequalities inscribed in contemporary articulations of Islam, and conceptualizing their religion in different,

12. Several reviewers underline that the specific form of Çelik’s production gives a lot of weight to the text (e.g., Oberländer; Herzinger).
at moments explicitly feminist ways, Zaimoğlu’s and Çelik’s satirical ‘virgin’ voices in fact counter dominant conceptions of the presumed homogeneity of political Islam. Interlocking self-confident identity construction with religious and political radicalism, the monologues insist, in Çelik’s words, on the “complexity” of the staged life “stories” (“Mal sehen” 45). At times, their hyperbolic rhetoric also presents a biting critique of anti-Islamist discourse. For example, the law student discusses books published by “renegade bitches,” referencing, as the informed audience member can fill in, bestsellers such as Necla Kelek’s 2005 *Die fremde Braut* (The Foreign Bride), which made its Turkish-German author into one of the token voices on religious difference in mainstream German public discourse with its wholesale damnation of Islam in the singular form. Sarcastically, the student summarizes the “narratives of liberation” offered in these books (“Yes, I was so badly oppressed . . .”) and describes them as simplistic “comics for uneducated petit bourgeois [Comics für bildungsarme Spießer],” “propaganda,” “polemics and bad writing.”

Thus probing a reversal of post–September 11 dominant discourses, the production arguably invites us to empathize, if not side, with the witty, self-confident positions presented by its character narrators. But if that is true, does the production implicitly legitimize the radical positions advocated? While precisely this question has been asked with respect to other ‘first-person’ theater documentaries of the last few years, for example, the controversial Dresden *Die Weber* production by Volker Lösch mentioned in chapter V, the charge is strikingly absent from the reception of *Schwarze Jungfrauen*. Given the broad range of reviews, this suggests that the production clearly produces a supplementary effect: the women on stage do, in important respects or significant measure, remain strangers also for the audience. In fact, critics have underlined that the production does overall not invite audiences’ “compassion and understanding.” Çelik himself uses the “aliens” comparison in the context of commenting on how the angry women “partially say a lot of bullshit, too”: “For example, when they approve of the Twin Towers being leveled” (“Mal sehen” 44). Underlining the strangeness of their opinions, the stylized visual presentation of the speakers also distances the audience from

13. “abtrünnigen Schlampen.” Since the voice of the student is missing in the *Theater heute* issue, my quotations are transcribed from the performance DVD provided by the theater.

14. Kelek, who is sometimes compared to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, was not only distinguished with the annual *Geschwister Scholl* prize in 2005, which has generally been awarded for Holocaust-related works, but was also invited to participate in the Islam conference initiated by the German government. Her populist takes have been harshly criticized by a number of German migration scholars (see Terkessidis and Karakasoglu). See also Sieg, “Black Virgins” on this aspect of *Schwarze Jungfrauen*.

15. “Mitgefühl und Verständnis” (Behrendt 41).
them. Framed in their box display, they voice their opinions only partially as subjects immediately addressing us, and they simultaneously become a “self-distanced, somewhat spooky work of art [gespenstisches Kunstgebilde]” (Meierhenrich).

While pondering dangers of legitimization, critics have also located an opposite tendency in the documentaries of recent years: even in the first person, the onstage display can still produce a “zoo effect,” that is, cement the object status of the spectacle for an audience reaffirming their own middle-class, majority German identities in the visual confrontation with the other on stage.16 Schwarze Jungfrauen clearly produces such distance as well. Nonetheless, the posited process in which the spectator reasserts her identity is arguably made difficult by the ways in which the production configures its techniques of distancing and approximation. Constantly, the audience is forced to renegotiate their position vis-à-vis the talking spectacle. On the level of monologue configuration, this effect is produced by the production’s alternation, for most of the evening between the harshly political statements of the law student and the German convert and the primarily private narrations of the Bosnian immigrant and the “party girl” (see 52); listening to the latter, the audience gets to laugh and relax. Toward the end of the evening, however, the overall emphasis shifts onto the political plane. Uncertain rather than appreciative, the audience on my DVD reproduction votes as the Bosnian woman now connects the sexual with the political dimensions of the identities at stake: she was “badly in favor of both jihad and love,” she declares.17 Even the apparent “party girl” now confesses her “super tough views” and predicts the growing popularity of Islam in Germany (52). So does the concluding monologue of the student, which culminates in a reference to the title of the play, phrased as a question: “Who is afraid of the black virgin? Who is afraid of us?”

Unlike the others, the student had been using the first-person plural pronoun throughout the entire production. As she speaks these final words now, she stands by herself in the central box in the bottom row, while the other four characters become visible, for the first time together as an actual group, in the top central box, which had not been previously used for their individual monologues. After the student’s question, the spectacle starts flickering again. Certainly spooky, the concluding tableau once more distances the audience, as it seems to stage a victory of the Islamist collective over the more complex, individual identities of the women developed throughout their monologues.

17. Zaimoğlu and Senkel 49 (emphasis based on performance only).
While this victory was implicit in their identical outfits throughout the night, the fact that the student remains alone in her separate box now ironically counterpoints it as well. Like the overall production, the concluding reference to the popular German racist children’s game (“Who is afraid of the black man?”) thus functions in a twofold way. On the one hand indexing the racism of majority society, the figure is, on the other hand, reinscribed to the effect that the production to some degree affirms the scenario of Islamist threat governing mainstream discourses. These aesthetic distancing gestures certainly eased the production’s mainstream reception in contemporary German society. However, the overall effect is not reassuring. Although for a minority of reviewers, the safety net of aesthetic distanciation in conjunction with the witty monologues produced primarily “fun” (Alanyali), for the majority, the immediacy of confrontation with a self-asserting spectacle rather worked to unsettle, or even “like a fist kick into the stomach.”18 Jumbling familiar positions, the production discomfortingly refuses to provide readymade answers for its Kreuzberg attic audiences.

Humanist Close-Ups

*DER KICK*

Andres Veiel’s *Der Kick* increases this discomfort. When the production was invited to the Berlin Theatertreffen, an annual festival showcasing the year’s best work in German-language theater, a critic remembers, it “hit the smoothed surface of the theater enclave, shaped by posh but frictionless productions, like an explosive” (Sorrento), thus arguably performing an act of violence also in the sense of ‘effecting’ it. As underlined in the program booklet for the original Berlin production, *Der Kick* is based on “a real case” (*Der Kick . . . Programmheft* 4). In Potzlow, a rural village in the East German province of Brandenburg, the sixteen-year-old Marinus Schöberl was brutally beaten, humiliated—for example, through the order to self-identify as ‘a Jew’—and murdered by his friend Marcel Schönfeld, Marcel’s older brother Marco, and a shared acquaintance in the summer of 2002. While the documentary form chosen by Veiel invites a comparison with Moisés Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project* on the Matthew Shepard murder in Wyoming, an additional transatlantic connection is inscribed in the incident itself. Marinus was murdered according to the model of the curbstone kick featured in Tony Kaye’s 1998 neo-Nazi drama *American History X*. Kaye’s film, which thema-

18. Joerdens; see also Laudenbach, “Halbmondsüchtig”; Beyer 2.
tizes the transatlantic reception of European Nazi culture, thus unintentionally initiated a reverse reception vector: interviewed social workers said they showed the film to young right-wing leaning audiences with a critical intention.\textsuperscript{19} To different degrees, all three involved youth had previously drawn attention in their environment for their neo-Nazi slogans, outfit, and, in the case of the older Schönfeld brother Marco, also ideologically motivated acts of violence. Marinus, who did not actually have a Jewish background, had modeled his appearance in line with the alternative hip-hop scene.

Veiel, previously known as a documentary filmmaker especially for his \textit{Black Box BRD}, wrote the play in cooperation with the dramaturge Gesine Schmidt. It premiered on 23 and 24 April 2005 as a coproduction of the Theater Basel and the Berlin Gorki Theater, an established theater in the former East that has been noticed in the 2000s especially for its high number of socio-politically ‘topical’ premieres, often intermedial adaptations of contemporary literature and film. Later, Veiel also shot a film version, with the same actors and in the same location in which the theater production had opened in Berlin (before playing also on the actual Gorki stage): the Gewerbehof in der alten Königsstadt, a former brewery building currently used by a range of businesses and artists. While this transposition from stage to screen indicates the decidedly intermedial aesthetics of the present cultural moment, it served, as we will see, also as an opportunity for exploring media differences. The documentary claim of the project is extensively unfolded in a range of accompanying texts, including the program booklet, interviews, the web presentation of the film, and \textit{Potzlow Geschichte X}, a television documentary on Veiel’s productions. \textit{Der Kick}, audiences thus learn, is based on six months of research and 1,500 pages of interview transcriptions, in addition to interrogation and court minutes and the funeral speech given by the local priest. The authors shortened these materials, cleared them of redundancies, “and sometimes reduced dialect” (Veiel, “Raus”). Unlike Zaimoğlu or Weiss, however, whose programmatic text on documentary theater is excerpted in the program booklet, they did not subject the transcriptions to any comprehensive process of stylization but presented them with the intent of “preserving the person’s linguistic character [\textit{Sprachkörper}]” (ibid.). The accuracy of these accounts of procedure sets \textit{Der Kick} apart from Zaimoğlu’s (semi-)documentary poses. In a fuller turn away from playful postmodernist border crossings tolerant of epistemological ambiguity, the identity of documentary form

\textsuperscript{19} It is unclear whether Marcel, who apparently suggested the deadly kick, actually saw the film in such a context or simply on television; however, he clearly describes it, in his police interrogations, as a “film against right-wing violence” (quoted from Veiel, \textit{Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück} 150).
is based on the adherence to established procedural standards (see Carroll, chapter 15).

As Veiel renounces the forms of theatrical intervention that, to a degree, still inflect the mise-en-scène of Schwarzene Jungfrauen, his ethos of authorial restraint radicalizes the aesthetics of scenic immediacy. In analogy to Schwarzene Jungfrauen, Der Kick backgrounds narrative coherence by overall dispensing with a higher-order narrative voice. Providing a sharp counterpoint to the return of authoritative narration discussed in chapter V, Veiel and Schmidt almost exclusively sample the voices of those interviewed. In this respect, Der Kick is quite different also from The Laramie Project, which includes the voices of the interviewers and an (explicitly Brechtian) narrator (see Kaufman, “Introduction” 12). The impact of Veiel’s and Schmidt’s formal decision is particularly striking when compared with the television documentary on their project, which uses extensive voice-over commentary for authoritatively ensuring distance from the positions and events shown. In the original theater and film versions, the spectator is instead confronted with a range of local voices that are heterogeneous in that they include family and acquaintances of both sides as well as involved professionals, but—as a reviewer put it—all have in common that they ask the “wrong questions” and give the “wrong answers” (Kühn, “Das Unsägliche”). Thus, Marco and Marcel’s parents defend their children by accusing the victim of having disrupted the local community with criminal activity, while the prosecutor arrogantly declares that the entire village was falling short of “civilizational standards,” and Marinus’s mother asks whether politicians care more for “foreign” hate crime victims than for her “German” son—signaling that she, too, shares the right-wing ideologies that motivated the perpetrators. Veiel himself summarizes his intention for thus configuring the play’s voices as that of taking audiences onto a “dramaturgical roller-coaster ride” and disrupting the “well-known templates” they brought along (Der Kick . . . Programmheft 6). The roller-coaster metaphor underlines the distance from Weiss’s mid-twentieth-century documentary theater: an intense experience of sliding and disorientation has displaced the interpretative act of structuring the “chaotic material of outer reality” into a simple “model”; instead

20. On the production’s minimal gestures of narrative framing see below.
21. I quote the text from the book edition (here Veiel, Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück 24, 18, 43). Comparing it to the performance reproduction provided by the theater (28 April 2006) and the film version, I have noticed small variations in grammar, dialect, etc., but no larger discrepancies. Overall, the versions differ in length, but all passages discussed are in all of them. My own first impressions of the production’s overall effect in the theater are based on the performance I saw in the Gorki Theater, on 24 June 2007.
of any “central motif” or narrative “key” to the events, the production presents a complex netting of “fragments” (Versatzstücke) and the search for those “facets” of “the truth” that “cannot be relevant for a verdict.” Despite the familiar antinarrative topoi, this aesthetics of scenic disruption does not, once more, equal the absence of narrative. Unlike in most turn-of-the-twenty-first-century productions, this now holds also on the programmatic level, where “irritation” finds its positive correlate in a project of narrative approximation, namely, the attempt to “find a language for the structures and biographies behind the act.” Veiel wants to “imagine the perpetrators,” who have been “locked into a monster cage” by the media, “as humans”: “We provide them with a biography. That’s the real provocation” (Veiel, “Raus”).

As indicated in my readings of Pollesch’s Plusfiliale and Foer’s novel (chapters IV and V), the reemergence of humanist motifs is one of the major characteristics of the contemporary intellectual landscape that emerged in the turn away from postmodernist paradigms. While scientific fashions have brought a new focus on empathy as the foundation of the “human condition” in “We-ness and intersubjectivity” (Gallese 776), feminist and queer performance scholars have revisited their own earlier critiques of universalism. Thus, Butler’s response to the War on Terror asks for ways of apprehending “a common human vulnerability” beyond our familiar political allegiances (Precarious Life 30–31), and Dolan’s Utopia in Performance suggests that “reanimating humanism . . . might reinvigorate a dissipated Left” (21). In this context, Dolan also discusses The Laramie Project with its “attempt to create a ‘we’—from the odd collection of people who comprise the play’s community to the performers and spectators who come to participate in its dialogue” (114). Although Dolan cautions that the ethnographic approach of the play and its original New York staging risk “condescension to the local” by proceeding “from the perspective of outsiders” (117), she praises an Austin production of the play for more successfully enacting this “promise of human community” (114) through its empathetic, warmer acting style.

However, if The Laramie Project succeeds in “staging a conversation about a deeply divisive event,” it does so as it tries to “say it correct” (thus the words of the local priest, “a voice of measured reason throughout the play”; Utopia 118–19; Kaufman 65). In contrast, Veiel’s roller-coaster ride through ‘wrong’ questions and answers does not even attempt to do so, and thereby, in fact, becomes much more provocative with its analogous project of creating

23. Reinecke and Veiel; FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG review (quoted from the film webpage, Der Kick: Piffl Medien).

empathy—for neo-Nazis? The Brechtian Laramie Project balances identifications with both the investigating actors and townspeople of truly diverse positionalities to the politically, as Dolan cautions again, perhaps too conservative, effect of letting us see “from an omniscient and omnipotent point of view” (Utopia 121). Der Kick emphatically declines such a godlike, or even just authoritative, position of integrative understanding and reconciliation. Instead, its project of sense-making focuses particularly on Marco and Marcel’s family and their own experiences of victimization in a social cosmos marked by the omnipresence of violence. Whereas Laramie is a college town with a, by regional standards, diverse population (see Kaufman, e.g., 22–24), Potzlow is a small, thoroughly depressed East German village. When Marco’s parents report on the humiliation to which he was subjected by Potzlow’s closed community after the family’s move there during his early adolescence (Veiel, Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück 49), does Veiel’s insistence still hold that his approaching the perpetrators should not create “understanding” (Verstehen) in the sense of “sympathy” (Verständnis) and “belittlement” of the deed? 25 As assembled by the authors, the interview fragments locate the genealogy of murder in a chain of violent precedents, beginning with the Russian occupation experienced by Marco and Marcel’s grandfather and culminating in the villagers’ loss of social status and perspectives after unification. The chain of debasements is perpetuated in mainstream reactions to the murder, when the priest’s funeral speech labels the murderers as “inhuman creatures” and the mother of the victim declares, in direct contrast to Matthew Shepard’s father, that “these beasts” do not “deserve mercy.” 26 Veiel’s and Schmidt’s text challenges these statements with those of Marco’s girlfriend, who talks about his “soft hands” as well as his ability to show his feelings (Veiel, Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück 54). In the name of our “common human vulnerability” (Butler, Precarious Life 30), the production’s universalizing notion of humanity thus counters the violence of mutual exclusions from the collective discourses of village life.

Moving beyond the level of the text, the humanizing effect is generated also by the emphasis the production puts on the actors’ faces. Veiel opts for aesthetic minimalism, or “formal and performative [darstellerischen] asceticism.” 27 All of the different roles are spoken by only two actors, Susanne-Marie Wrage and Markus Lerch. The distribution of roles seems to have happened almost without regard to gender. Thus, the production dispenses with the radical gender trouble produced by the theatricalizing aesthetics of the

25. Interview statement in Potzlow Geschichte X.
1990s: when Marco and Marcel’s parents are on stage together, Wrage unobtrusively impersonates the mother, and Lerch the father. However, Wrage also embodies the adolescent perpetrators, and Lerch the victim’s mother. The actors, dressed in simple black clothes, are not visibly made up; at first, we may not even notice that Wrage wears combat boots—a visual hint at the social positionality of the adolescent perpetrators (see figure 13). The production’s most prominent visual effect is thus the contrast, underlined through spot-lighting, between the actors’ similarly blond hair, white faces, and hands, and the overall bare, dark surrounding stage.28 This aesthetics is depersonalizing in the sense it does not strive for photographic representation (see Gregory Currie 13). The individual physicality of the represented characters is indicated only through typical gestures or postures, for example, Marcel’s halfway defiantly, halfway helplessly pitched shoulders. While we will see below that this abstraction produces also a hint of distanciation, ‘depersonalization’ does not at all mean ‘disembodiment’ here, as indicated by Veiel’s concern that the close-ups of the film version might foreground the actors’ bodies in distractive ways (“Raus”). ‘In’ and ‘beyond’ their representative function, the theater production itself highlights the actors’ faces, in line with Fischer-Lichte’s concept of performance (see chapter I). Backgrounding the characters’ specific identities, Veiel’s aesthetics of highly physical abstraction underlines the common denominator of a shared humanity as the designated ‘Real’ of the performance. Once more, this effect is particularly marked in comparison with the television documentary, which, in one place, contrasts photographs of perpetrator and victim: an adult-looking neo-Nazi in pseudomilitary outfit with the face of a delicate, innocent-looking boy.29

While the dominantly positive German reviews overall bypass the provocative dimension of Veiel’s aesthetics, he was in fact charged with producing “too much compassion and sympathy” for the perpetrators when he took the production to a theater festival in Chile (see Veiel, “Auch in Chile”). In the background of this controversy lurks, of course, the erstwhile

28. Although just as bare in design, the Gewerbehof space is not as unstructured as the Gorki stage in that it has columns. Also, windows add some natural light, making the contrast between faces and environment less stark in the film and original theater version, as captured in the illustration. However, the film uses the medium’s potential for foregrounding faces through close-ups.

29. This is not to suggest that one version is more authentic than the other, but precisely to underscore that, intentionally or not, both versions imply their own argument. The photographic representation of Marinus as an innocent boy could itself be questioned with reference to interview statements emphasizing his robust physicality, especially as compared to Marcel, who was teased a lot for his presumed lack of masculinity (see Veiel, Der Kick. Ein Lehrstück 100, 140).
Figure 13
Production photo, 
Der Kick. Maxim 
Gorki Theater/ 
Gewerbehof in der 
alten Königsstadt. 
Copyright Wilfried 
Böing Nachlaß.
question that once motivated the postmodernist turn away from universalism: how can notions of the human be salvaged, if their articulation has been so thoroughly implicated in the exclusionary ideological regimes of modernity? Veiel’s particular aesthetics of approximation dramatically heightens this concern: on his stage, the perpetrators and their families attain their human contours precisely in the course of their racist speeches. Dolan and Butler answer the larger question by integrating the postmodernist critique of differential, exclusionary conceptualizations of the human into their new ethics of shared humanity. The critical Chilean responses to Veiel’s production indicate that *The Kick* falls short of fully accomplishing such a combination of (normative) universalizing gestures with an (analytical) insistence on the continued sociosymbolic production of difference. In fact, Veiel develops the theme of empathy partially at the expense of a specific analysis of those racist masculinities that dominate the public sphere of Brandenburg villages such as Potzlow. Indicatively, his later book on the project, which narrates the events through more explicitly explanatory discourse than the theater and film versions, touches only briefly on the legacy of the NS ideology never fully worked through in the officially antifascist GDR (see *Der Kick: Ein Lehstück* 249). Overall, Veiel’s generalizing narrative about the omnipresence of violence in Potzlow does not award a central place to the fascist identifications that provided the label ‘Jew’ as a catalyst for murder—and fueled yet another hate crime, Marco’s attack on the Sierra Leone refugee Neil Duwhite, before the body of Marinus was discovered and prosecution initiated. Veiel develops the theme of empathy partially at the expense of a specific analysis of those racist masculinities that dominate the public sphere of Brandenburg villages such as Potzlow. Indicatively, his later book on the project, which narrates the events through more explicitly explanatory discourse than the theater and film versions, touches only briefly on the legacy of the NS ideology never fully worked through in the officially antifascist GDR (see *Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück* 249). Overall, Veiel’s generalizing narrative about the omnipresence of violence in Potzlow does not award a central place to the fascist identifications that provided the label ‘Jew’ as a catalyst for murder—and fueled yet another hate crime, Marco’s attack on the Sierra Leone refugee Neil Duwhite, before the body of Marinus was discovered and prosecution initiated. Veiel’s written narrative has a very different effect than his theater and film productions: as it strives to provide a complex, multidimensional explanation for the event, the text reassures rather than disturbs. The violently disquieting dimension of Veiel’s theater production and film is, then, not primarily a matter of his choice in analytic categories but in fact one of aesthetics, specifically of the lack of any narrative voice that would critically explicate the topic of racism at all.

In the remainder of this section, I argue that it is precisely this aesthetics of disturbance that also constitutes the specific productivity of Veiel’s project—an affective productivity that exceeds the production’s limits in discursively analyzing the murder. For the unfolding of this affective productivity, it is crucial how *Der Kick*, with all its emphasis on presence, still supplements empathetic approximation with the distancing forces of theatricality—a balancing

30. Fortunately, Duwhite survived. Nonetheless, one may wonder (reversing the question asked by Marinus’s mother) whether the sustained media and artistic interest specifically in Marinus Schöberl is related also to the fact that, unlike in the vast majority of neo-Nazi attacks, it was a white majority German youth who died here.
act that, in fact, ensures that our “immediate” placement into the environment and psyche of the perpetrators does not “excuse” the deed but merely renders it comprehensible (Sorrento). Although overall significantly less Brechtian than Kaufman’s *Laramie Project*, Veiel’s minimalist aesthetics does itself draw on a concept of epicalization. The Nazi reception of *American History X*, he argues, shows that events such as the curbstone kick cannot be simply mimetically restaged; the seemingly naturalist iconography of the film functions as a heroicizing aestheticization. Whereas the presumably immediate showing of violence may thus in fact invite murderous reiteration, Veiel’s own minimalist staging intends to enable distanced reflection by focusing attention on language.  

As it blurs the boundaries between individuals, the lack of photographic realism also underlines the theatrical frame of the production: the circumstance that it evokes a different world on stage. In fact, there is even a—minimal—dose of onstage epic discourse after all. At the occasion of their first entrance (only), the characters are identified by name to the effect of reducing, if not altogether preventing, audience disorientation. In the film version, this technique marks, for example, the moment in which Marco’s girlfriend begins to sing of the “German people” in a thin voice. On the one hand shockingly immediate, this first-person presentation of her fascist ideology, on the other hand, becomes strange in the thus emphasized, decontextualizing frame of citation. A crucial medium of regulating distance through framing is also the one large piece of stage design used in *Der Kick*: a container opening toward the front of the stage. Functioning as both dock and prosecutor stand, it visually explicates a situation of (the audience’s) taking both parties to task. Unlike Veiel’s community interviews, the play’s reproduction of Marcel’s police interrogations also includes the questions asked, spoken by Lerch in the front of the stage and to the audience.

In the film version, which can additionally use camera positions for regulating distance, we at first see Wrage/ Marcel as a minuscule figure far away in the dock, stylized into light-darkness abstraction by virtue of this distance. The overall frequent cuts between close-ups, medium-long, and very long shots dramatize the constant readjustment mentally required also of the theater spectator, who is thrown in and out of an empathetic relation to the staged voices through the configuration of text montage and body language. To be sure, camera close-ups do not yet automatically translate into an invitation to empathize. Murray Smith’s distinction between two components of

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cinematic alignment—“spatial attachment” vs. “subjective access” to the character—is useful here (“Altered States” 41). Thus, the close-up can function as a medium of comprehension primarily in the sense of analytic dissection, for example, when Marcel himself recalls the sequence of events on the night of the murder in an apparently completely unemotional fashion. A different effect, however, is produced when at the end of his testimony, Marco, who is generally marked as unapproachable by virtue of his withdrawn body language, says that it was “a real shock” for him, too, when Marcel jumped onto Marinus’s head (Veiel, Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück 60). As he recalls the sight of Marinus’s disfigured face in death, emotion is signaled by his verbal hesitation (in particular in the film version) and (in the theater version) the raising of his head into a pose of introspection (he glances at an unspecified object in the distance = his memory).

The configuration of this scene inextricably links empathy and horror. As the murder dehumanizes the victim, the perpetrator’s recalled experience of precisely this process allows us to approach his humanity at (with another one of Smith’s distinctions) “a tangent,” that is, without fully identifying with his perspective, and without thereby diminishing our emotional alarm about the recounted act, not to mention morally or ideologically allying us with him in any way (see Smith, “Altered States” 39–42). This production of empathy (in Smith’s terminology, sympathy) less despite than as our horror, I believe, significantly contributes to the production’s unsettling roller-coaster effect—or, in the alternative words of a reviewer, its creation of a “circulatory collapse” in the audience (Kühn, “Das Unsägliche”). However, the effect is intensified by the fact that at moments, Der Kick also unsettles the distance from the perpetrators still inherent in the described acentral alignment with Marco. About halfway into the production, for example, the monologue of Heiko, an as-yet-unknown character introduced as one of Marcel’s acquaintances, seems designed to entrap the spectator who is, if I can tentatively generalize my own initial response here, by now desperately longing for a reliable voice suitable for identification. In an initially fairly neutral pose, the actor begins by signaling distance from, and apparently analyzing, Marcel’s fascist poses (“Marcel is a follower [. . .] Mitläufer”; Veiel, Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück 38). A little further into the monologue, I began to understand that Heiko distances himself because from his perspective, Marcel is not reliably fascist enough. My initial desire to identify with his voice now increased the disturbance I felt as Heiko proceeded to render the worst racist comments of the entire production. The configuration of this particular monologue underlines the contradictions within Heiko’s worldview and thereby ensures that the possible momentary audience identification is thoroughly broken again. However, the
production denies its audience the comfort of shared distancing provided by the television documentary, which shows how the impact of Heiko’s monologue is dissolved by the actors with verbal commentary and laughter during rehearsal.

The intensity of emotional confrontation generated by Veiel’s production in the ongoing process of audiences’ renegotiating their distance vis-à-vis the presented voices is described as ultimately “healthful” (heilsam) by the reviewer who used the “circulatory collapse” metaphor (Kühn, “Das Unsägliche”). The implication of a cathartic effect, however, is hardly sustained by the production’s resistance vis-à-vis authoritative narrative. To be sure, there is a moment of formal closure: Marinus’s mother’s obviously ‘wrong’ concluding plea against any mercy with the ‘beasts’ is followed by a short external commentary—a loudspeaker voice in the theater, and a combination of voice-over and concluding title in the film—which announces her death from illness along with the court verdicts. Rather than dissolving the previously created tension, however, this combination of information once more underlines the lack of an appropriate response to the diverging claims of both empathy and distance for and from both sides. In this sense, the extradiegetic character of the concluding commentary merely underlines its deficiency; it has factual but no evaluative authority. Healing, then, is not anywhere in sight. By insisting so forcefully on the humanity of the perpetrators whose inhuman acts it shows so clearly, Veiel’s production displaces closure in favor of an affective process that exceeds the duration of the performance. With its precarious configuration of approximation and minimalist, nonplayful epicalization, Der Kick creates an unsettling experience of empathy as a challenge to the spectator’s self-positioning within the racist normalcies of contemporary rural Brandenburg.

Phenomenological Bracketing

_YELLA_

“Wittenberge on the Elbe,” a reviewer begins,

Half-way between Hamburg and Berlin, is a former industrial town. Before reunification, it had plants for sewing machines, cellulose, and oil. Today, all that is left over is a repair shop of the German Railway Company. Industrial ruins frame the city center like a fortress belt. Since 1989, the number of inhabitants has shrunk by more than a third. The official unemployment rate is at fifteen percent. “Shrinking demand increases the risk threshold
for constructional investments,” a 2005 report states succinctly. In other words: Where no one wants to go, nothing is built any longer. It is in this town, half-way between heaven and hell, that Christian Petzold’s film ‘Yella’ is set. (Kilb)

As suggested here, Yella continues the exploration of East German despair undertaken in Der Kick. However, the film itself does not explicitly give its audiences the social data cited by the reviewer. In the beginning, to be sure, we get a glimpse of old factory buildings through the window of the train on which the protagonist enters the town, and during her following walk through Wittenberge we may notice crumbling houses next to beautifully restored ones. But these visual clues are not unambiguous, and neither do they form more than a backdrop for the story about to unfold. Of Wittenberge’s other inhabitants, we only meet Yella’s father and her ex-husband. The father, a hulking guy who works in an apparently busy restaurant beautifully located at the lake, is predominantly characterized by how he tenderly wakes Yella and then carefully peels an orange at the breakfast table—a gesture presented in close-up—the morning she has to leave for the job in (West German) Hanover for which she successfully interviewed before the film’s outset. Yella’s ex-husband Ben is in fact in a desperate situation, not only because he is still in love with Yella, but also because his company is bankrupt. The audience themselves, however, have to supplement the statistics that contextualize his situation within postunification East German misery. Furthermore, the film later indicates that the crisis shown cannot be that easily circumscribed in geographical terms. When Yella arrives in Hanover at the job she was offered, she sees how the office furniture of her putatively solid employer is carried out onto the street. The manager who hired her has been banned from the premises, and he makes her a juicy offer to go out for oysters. Instead, she accepts an alternative job offer by her hotel acquaintance Philipp, who pays in cash and, as we will see, cheats on his company—whose, in turn, rather dubious business it is to lend money to prospective investors with bad credit at exploitative rates.

Shot shortly before the economic crisis seriously hit its audiences’ extrafilmic lives, Yella thus presents an overall highly unstable world on the verge of collapse. Depending on our preferred theoretical narratives, we can evaluate it as the world of a nation in crisis (see, e.g., Rodek), excessively deregulated global late capitalism and “white collar crime in the age of Black-Berrys” (Abel, “Imaging” 266), or apocalyptic destabilization toward the end of history. In any case, we have to do the labor of narrativizing because the film itself does not contextualize the presented world fragments either discursively or through techniques of visual generalization. That is, there are no explana-
tions for the bankruptcies shown, no references to larger economic trends, not to mention politics or institutions. Interested in cinema’s “moments of physical presence” (Petzold, “Am Wegessaum” 7), the director instead shows us the visible phenomena of individual movement—and shipwreck—in a crisis-ridden world. The film's very first shot is a subjective one; it captures the world flying by from the angle of the protagonist sitting in a train compartment. Next, we see her face in an (almost extreme) close-up. It is indicative that the film, while nominated in various categories for the Deutscher Filmpreis, only actually won in the category of best actress. Nina Hoss not only delivers an outstanding performance, but she is also at the center of the film's attention. With countless close-ups, the camera radically approaches the protagonist.

This camera regime implies an aesthetic shift also vis-à-vis a number of earlier films associated with the Berlin School, including Petzold’s own. Yella has been described as the third part of his “Gespenster” trilogy, after his terrorism film Die innere Sicherheit (The State I Am In, 2000) and the 2005 Gespenster (Ghosts or Specters). In Gespenster the camera dominantly remained at a certain distance, in a position of observer created by a variation of classical shot–countershot technique. With the camera positioned diagonally, or even in a straight line, behind one of the characters to the effect of making his or her head or torso more fully and centrally visible than the respective shot according to classical protocol, this technique ‘blocked’ the gaze, underlining the nontransparency of vision. Albeit stern, visually reductive, and worlds apart from the flamboyant theatrical excess of narrative commentary in the unification comedies, this camera work was still theatricalizing in that it underlined the process of perception as a matter of perspective. In Yella the technique has mostly been replaced by shots that claim to position us either directly in the position of the listener or even closer to the speaker (see figure 14). Thus drawing us in, making us as if ‘present’ in Yella’s world, the film renders its protagonist “mesmerisingly intense” (Romney).

The fact that it is mostly Yella’s face thus captured in close-up seems to invite our approaching her as a human being. In contrast to Veiel’s Der Kick, however, Petzold’s film does not gives us any—or certainly not any definite—access to her biography, psychology, or other dimension of ‘inner depth’ (see Glombitza, “Phantom des Ostens”). There are no interior monologues, the film’s acting technique is rather minimalistic (Matheou), and it only sparingly uses individualizing music or analytical dialogue explicating anything. Thus, the character of the foregrounded protagonist remains as undefined as the law of the world in which she moves. Whereas Der Kick could be charged with backgrounding sociosymbolic specificity in the service of its universalist call to empathy, the workings of presence can therefore not be summarized in
an analogous way here, for example, as a privatization of politics. In line with what States describes as the “phenomenological attitude” (see chapter I), the film’s presenting techniques, rather, invite audiences to focus on what they see, bracketing any narrative context of the faces and gestures shown.

Since bracketing does not equal ‘canceling,’ the technique of reduction does, again, not escape sociosymbolic scripts. Along with Yella’s ex-husband Ben, the audience may, for example, be seeing what he describes as a “beautiful” woman. Some of the cultural associations surrounding that label are indicated by the fact that Ben uses it as part of the charge that she left him because of his financial crisis, preferring to “show her beautiful legs” in Hanover—that is, to realize her professional ambitions by using her femininity. The film does not explicitly analyze this trope (any more so than others) and thereby runs the risk that we follow Ben’s evaluation, as indicated by a reviewer’s use of the notion “femme fatale” for Yella (Matheou). Such narrativization within sociosymbolically established templates—including, in this case, the fictions of horror and film noir—is a risk arguably inscribed in the phenomenological method as such. It has, analogously, also been performed in theoretical discourse. To provide a thematically relevant example, Arnim Nassehi’s phenomenological analysis of the ‘glass ceiling effect’ in contemporary society argues that the “plain experience of the appearance [Auftretens]” of men and women as men and women guarantees the stability of asymmetrical gender roles in modernity, because it is virtually impossible “not to see a woman” (101, italics in original).

However, recent feminist and queer phenomenological theory also provides counterexamples by striving to theorize the ways in which we can see differently (e.g., Oliver), and the method itself is certainly not exhausted by the short-circuit that evidentializes the input of hegemonic protocols. As States elaborated, phenomenological bracketing does not suspend signification but introduces a gap between what is visible and the (retrospective) processes of interpretation, thereby referring “perception back to a stage where referents are no longer confronted as explicit messages but as extremely ambiguous texts” (Eco, from States 31). The fact that States quotes the semiotician Eco here indicates a moment of theoretical complexification in which phenomenology itself ties its interest in presence to theatricality as the explicated

32. Reviewers have noted Petzold’s references to American genre as well as German auteur film. *Yella* specifically infuses a documentary by Harun Farocki, one of Petzold’s professors (*Nicht ohne Risiko*), with Herk Harvey’s horror classic *Carnival of Souls* (see Knörer; although Petzold himself relativizes the significance of the latter intertext, Nord) and Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (see Glombitza, “Phantom des Ostens”). Arguably, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the major intertext of Petzold’s subsequent *Jerichow*, already overshadows *Yella* as well.
process of generating presence. In Yella, such theatricality is, as indicated above, minimalized on the level of mise-en-scène (in the broader sense). Nonetheless, the film’s views of its protagonist exceed Ben’s act of interpretation. In fact, I argue that it does invite us to see differently through its work of narrative configuration, that is, the ongoing repositioning of its beautiful protagonist in the sequence of views established in the, with all its bracketing, at least loosely, or, as Abel has it, ‘critically’ narrative film (see “Imaging” 262).

At first, Yella’s new acquaintance Philipp seems to see something akin to what Ben sees; when he offers Yella a job, he specifically asks her to support his negotiation skills with a prearranged game of looks. After their first collaboration, however, he apologizes. To our surprise no less than his, Yella changed Philipp’s script in the midst of the meeting, directly intervening in the negotiations with a verbal move based on her analysis of the other party’s weaknesses, which proves to be much more effective than any game of looks could have been. “You really do know financial statements,” Philipp concludes, and so may the audience, without knowing whether Yella’s performance of the tough professional is backed by a degree in accounting or what prior experience exactly she had (beyond her exchange with Ben that provided a relevant thematic clue earlier). She certainly looks like a professional: in the beginning of the film, Yella’s restrained body language still seemed to signal hesitation and withdrawal, if not a lack of self-confidence, but now, her cool demeanor presents authority (see figure 15).33

The film does not consolidate this process of emancipation into a determinate narrative that would provide the bodily phenomenon of female authority with any clear-cut conceptual contours—be it as a twenty-first-century update of the femme fatale, a narrative of heroic female emancipation, or a gendered story of East German self-liberation after all. With the clues provided remaining ambiguous, reviewers have disagreed as to what motivates Yella’s forceful entry into the world of high-risk capital in the first place. A moment of despair we saw after the initial loss of her regular job fits into a social story of hardship; however, Ben’s comment about Yella’s merciless ambition may be supported by the fact that later she smiles, apparently acknowledging, when Philipp suggests apropos her consistently tough negotiation performance, that she must be enjoying this. Nonetheless, she will, toward the end of the film, confess her love for Philipp precisely in the moment he has lost his job. Meanwhile, the two have had sex, and the camera suggested the intensity of the experience by lingering on Yella’s head and naked upper body, which Philipp kisses tenderly

33. To be sure, Ben claimed even in the beginning of the film that her gait signaled she did get the Hanover job.
Figure 15
Yella. Production still. Copyright Schramm Film Körner & Weber.
the next morning after peeling an orange, echoing the father’s earlier gesture. Still, the only ‘proof’ we get for Yella’s love is that, behind Philipp’s back, she now acts even more ruthlessly than he has throughout the film by blackmailing a desperate potential client, who, as a consequence, commits suicide the next day. In fact, that Yella even does this for Philipp is indicated merely by the circumstance that she asks for precisely the amount of money he needs for his investment plans. Between the divergent clues, we might want to settle for the minimalist, gender-themed reading provided by the director himself. Whereas usually, he comments, women traveling by themselves in a film have a psychosis, Yella “simply does something that men do as a matter of course in cinema” (quoted from Glombitza, “Phantom des Ostens”). Thus, the film’s techniques of narrative presencing may—both with and against Nassehi—just create the ‘plain experience’ of professionally authoritative femininity.

To be sure, this reading finds its limit in the way the film ends, or—depending on our reading—the way it is framed. If we are willing to follow the director’s own interpretation once more, Yella’s professional performance ultimately will have been only a dream: a dream, he suggests in his preface to the script, she has in the moment of dying (Petzold, “Vorbemerkung”). As I omitted in my earlier summary of the film, Ben had talked Yella into allowing him to drive her to the train station the morning she left Wittenberge. After a fight and dramatic confession of his continued love for her, he drove the car into the lake while crossing a bridge. We saw Yella as she resurfaced, collapsed at the beach for a moment, and then ran, still completely wet, for the train. After her victim’s suicide at the end of the film, she sits in a cab, apparently shocked by what happened. Through an aesthetically inconspicuous montage, this situation is tied back to the initial situation: following a simple cut (see Petzold, “Making of Yella”), Yella again wears the clothes and sits in the position in which we saw her earlier in Ben’s car. Once more, we see the fall into the lake, but this time, a rescue team finds her dead body. Within the bounds of its overall aesthetics of presence, the film thus provides closure by bringing the—previously bracketed—dimension of narrative plotting back with a vengeance. As read through the director’s own interpretation, this closure derealizes the protagonist’s experiments with professional self-fashioning, or subjective agency, in the world of high-risk capitalism. Arguably, it also functions (with Hayden White) as a technique of narrative moralizing through the authority of voice made invisible. During those cinematic wanderings matter-of-factly available to men, the woman went too far, and now she has to die—or rather, in the naturalized form provided by the film’s techniques of ‘feigning the world telling itself,’ will have been dying already.
However, this holds only if we do in fact follow the director in recentering our viewing experience. Whereas most reviewers accepted it, I argue that the film itself resists this particular narrativizing. By virtue of its presumably transparent aesthetics of presence, the film never provided clear-cut hints at the dream status of the world we have allegedly been in throughout most of the film.\footnote{This marks a major difference vis-à-vis Carnival of Souls. Admittedly, audiences who immediately recognize the citation (iconographically inscribed particularly in a couple of the lake shots) are nonetheless alerted to Yella’s possible death early on. As someone not into horror, I wasn’t.} To be sure, the proponents of the dream thesis have presented evidence, including the repetition of motifs (such as the orange) and several scenes in which Yella is haunted, or threatens to be gripped by, the “otherworldly” (thus Abel, “Imaging” 267) sounds of the lake: a tree in the wind and a crow. Upon first viewing the film, however, I felt invited—much more unambiguously so than in most of its other moments—to narrativize these scenes within a frame of trauma. More closely than usual, they align us with Yella’s perception through sound and camera perspective, suggesting, for once, (realist) glimpses at the protagonist’s inner life in a moment of psychological intensity. In making its ‘dream’ “real,” precisely the fact that the film has operated throughout as “a film without tricks and quotation marks” (Kilb) has the effect of later foregrounding the—unexpected—film trick needed for closure, despite all of this trick’s visual minimalism. Suddenly no longer sure on which level of reality she has been and is operating (see Göttler), the spectator may not immediately come up with a new reading—or come up with her own, for example, by narrativizing the second fall into the lake itself as a dream: a visualization of the mortified Yella’s fantasy that she had died earlier. This reading is supported also by the moments of variation in the repetition: the images after the cut ‘back’ are not identical with those we saw before; namely, Yella cries now and does not try to prevent the fall by gripping the wheel, as she had done earlier.

Certainly, we are for a moment struck by the fact that the film is playing with us. In this sense, precisely the aesthetics of presence produces the reappearance of theatricality here. Reassessing our prior viewing experience, we may also notice earlier cracks in the film’s aesthetics of realism, if not necessarily to the effect of epistemologically recentering it in line with the director’s instructions. For example, an ominous, foreshadowing sound effect is introduced already when Ben first asks Yella to allow him to drive her to the train station. Along with the presumably diegetic but obtrusive and unrealistically repetitive music dramatizing selected moments, it may underline Yella’s
status as a product of artful composition, marking the (structural) point where the heightened emotional intensity produced by the aesthetics of presence easily tilts into the ‘excess’ of theatricality. The film’s deadly outcome then becomes visible as the effect of artificial narrative grafting, the reality of which remains irreducibly uncertain (thus Knörer). While the film’s presumed dream world keeps some of its own weight, its deadly real world is made unreal to a degree—creating leeway for the spectator, who can bracket her moral evaluation of the ambiguous phenomena she has seen. In this way, the aesthetics of presence and the aesthetics of theatricality converge to enable the productivity of narrative process vis-à-vis the force of closure. Nonetheless, Yella’s ending in death underscores once more that the aesthetics of presence does not escape the narrative forces of social scripting. Specifically, the (moralizing) closure that is, if only precariously, grafted upon the individual’s wanderings through a deregularized world has its significance as part of larger contemporary longings for authoritative narrative. As my reading has demonstrated, the film’s radically phenomenological development of the aesthetics of presence has the potential to both support and resist their clear-cut solutions.

Bringing the War Affectively Home

A HERO’S WELCOME

Indicative perhaps of how the film remains haunted by the themes of postmodernism, Yella’s play with epistemological uncertainty leaves the reality status of its presences undetermined. In contrast, recent films about September 11 and the War on Terror have forcefully developed the aesthetics of spatial and temporal proximity, as well as emotional intensity, as an aesthetics of the Real of trauma. A paradigmatic example for this trend is Paul Greengrass’s United 93 (2006), which powerfully aligns its audiences with perpetrators, victims, and witnesses alike through its (partially real-time) cuts back and forth between the plane and the flight supervision staff on the ground, its underlit takes, its off-angled, disorienting close-ups at the expense of establishing shots, and its shaky camera operations culminating in the final blackening of the screen, which corresponds to the deadly crash of the plane. A year later, Paul Haggis’s In the Valley of Elah continues the exploration of trauma with respect to the war in Iraq. Haggis’s film does introduce a layer of distance and mediation by focalizing the investigation—of a returned soldier’s off-base murder by, as it turns out, his own comrades—through the victim’s father, a strict Vietnam veteran whose patriotic, masculinist beliefs in military honor and discipline are confronted with a reality of torture and
comrade murder. Simultaneously, *In the Valley of Elah* draws on the aesthetics of presence through its tribute to documentary form (an introductory title explicates that it is “inspired by actual events”). Its techniques of recording include the prominent use of the ‘raw,’ fragmentary video footage that the son shot on his cell phone while in Iraq, footage that both protagonist and audience have to actively make sense of in the course of the film. Brigitte Bertele’s *Nacht vor Augen* (literally, Night in Front of Eyes) (re)radicalizes this War on Terror investigation through its take from the perspective of the traumatized soldier himself. To my knowledge the first German film that tackled the impact of the German military operation in Afghanistan back home, *Nacht vor Augen* premiered in the Forum of the 2008 Berlin Film Festival and has since won numerous national and international prizes, including the Preis der deutschen Filmkritik 2008 for best feature debut. Nonetheless, *Nacht vor Augen* has not found theatrical distribution, whereas *In the Valley of Elah* was released in Germany and, in fact, reviewed more favorably there than in the United States (Bodmer; Kamalzadeh; Kühn, “Kopfüber”). To the degree that this configuration does not just reflect continued gender discrimination in the film world, I suggest it can be explained through a closer look at the aesthetic similarities as well as differences between the two films. More uncompromising than *In the Valley of Elah*, *Nacht vor Augen* refuses to comply with a number of mainstream (‘Hollywood’) scripts, and perhaps, its radical aesthetics of narrative presencing was all too effective in disturbing the peace on the ‘home front’ of the War on Terror for projected mainstream compatibility. My respective suggestion, however, comes with a twist: I argue that *Nacht vor Augen* with its radically scenic aesthetics is not only much more mimetic and psychological than *Yella*, and not any ‘less narrative’ than *In the Valley of Elah*, but in some respects even produces more authoritative effects than the latter.

*Nacht vor Augen*’s official English title is *A Hero’s Welcome*. It tells the story of a returning soldier by focusing on his trauma, and violent acting out, in the context of his home community in rural southwestern Germany. As the plot unfolds, the audience begins to understand that this local community is deeply implicated in the spread of violence, not only through its inability to face the realities of the war but also through its culture of hegemonic masculinity. Early on, the stakes are developed through the film’s use of dialogue, which has a more directly characterizing function than in *Yella*. Upon David’s return in the beginning of the film, Kirsten, his excited, extrablond girlfriend

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35. Although fictionalized, the film is based on the story of Richard T. Davis, an Iraq war veteran murdered in 2003; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_the_Valley_of_Elah (accessed 01/12/09).
greets him as her “desert tiger”; he calls her “princess” in return. While David’s friend Felix says he looks like a “young god,” Kirsten admiringly suggests that he is “a real hero now” when he shows her a decoration he received. As David told her, he proactively arrested a terrorist suspect, thus preventing an attack and saving twenty-two lives. However, this heroic story was—as David will confess at the end of the film—concocted by his superiors as a cover-up for his early return. In a mixture of panic and aggression, David had killed a little boy throwing stones during what was actually an American-led combat mission, rather than the kind of humanitarian activity that David’s community believes him to have been engaged in.

With this plot, the film targets the very center of German discourses about the Afghanistan operation. Against the background of postwar legal restrictions as well as negative public opinion on German military operations abroad, Germany’s participation in the ISAF and Enduring Freedom operations had been packaged as ‘peacekeeping’ rather than ‘combat’ since 2001. While the realities of transnational cooperation and the unstable situation in northern Afghanistan, for which the German troops were assigned responsibility, increasingly challenged this distinction, Berlin began to “gradually” adjust “the semantics” only at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century (Hilpert). Shot and released during the debates preceding these revisions of political rhetoric as well as combat rules, Nacht vor Augen has its protagonist experience the tensions at stake on a personal level. Hailed as a heroic peacekeeper by his environment, David is haunted by the dead boy every night. While he tries to cover up his bedwetting and his inability to perform sexually, the audience—kind of—knows. That is, we do not have the full story, but only access to glimpses of David’s experience: him waking up in his bed, being triggered by the sound of branches knocking on the apartment windows, seeing a small, dark-haired kid out there, frantically doing laundry in the tub. The film has aligned us mostly with David from the beginning, in terms of both narrative focus and spatial attachment. In analogy to Yella, its very first shot is one onto the bare German landscape into which David returns, from the car seat where the camera next captures his face in close-up. It proceeds to follow him, sometimes with directly subjective takes, and often lingering on his face where we detect, more so than in Yella, signs of his apparent fears, frustrations and thought processes.

Upon first viewing the film, the camera’s staging of David’s psychological process can be confusing, not only because the moments of flashback we see are highly elliptic (fuller scenarios are developed only toward the end of the film) but also because time and space become blurry in the layering of memory images with those of the current moment. The camera’s abrupt cuts
and angled close-ups at individual body parts or objects require a significant amount of spectator activity for the construction of a coherent scenario. However, my point is not that Nacht vor Augen prevents us from doing this work of coherence generation. Whereas in Yella the apparent trauma restagings are later radically recentered as, possibly, indicators of death, the images in Bertele's film eventually add up to a coherent story. In the language of cognitive narratology, the spectator’s use of the trauma frame in naturalizing the film images works smoothly. Rather than challenging a mimetic reading, the film develops it through the camera’s simulation of trauma, giving its audiences glimpses at the experience of fear, disorientation, and loss of connection that characterizes PTSD.

To be sure, Nacht vor Augen is influenced also by the aesthetics of the earlier Berlin School and incorporates moments of these films’ techniques of observation. However, even the use of distance and mediation in Nacht vor Augen ultimately reads as a presentation of David’s psyche. For example, a cut makes the camera ‘step back’ from a close-up into a medium shot (with both upper bodies fully visible in the frame) when David’s friend Felix, after an initial warm hug and welcome, lets David know that he has professionally advanced during David’s absence and is now his boss. From the greater distance, we now see David in a pose of defense. Later, David’s confrontations with both his sergeant and the army psychologist begin with the camera capturing their backs in the center of the frame (and David behind them), to the effect of delaying the humanizing process of giving them a face. In assuming such poses, the camera does draw a certain amount of attention to its workings, but these moments of theatricalization seem to be subordinated to the diegetic function of presenting David’s inner distance, underwriting his refusal, or inability, to connect.

Thus simulating the psychological immediacy even of its obviously mediated takes, the film brings the experience of war affectively ‘home’ to its captivated spectator. Uncomfortably, we are aligned—too closely— with David’s fear, performance anxiety, and humiliation. The discomfort arises, specifically, from the fact that, in analogy to Der Kick, the film invites empathy with David while simultaneously focusing on his violent acting out. This includes both his acts of self-mutilation (the camera lingers on how he cuts into a wound in his arm with his knife) and his physical as well as psychological abuse of Benni, his eight-year-old half brother. As signaled by his longish hair, Benni initially ‘lacks’ masculinity; he is tormented by his peers on a daily basis for presumably not being brave and humiliated on the soccer court by his father, who sends him for training purposes to David, who is in Benni’s own words a “soccer god.” Apparently reminded of the kid he shot, David
is initially very distanced and rough with Benni, but then he lets himself be
tempted by Benni's admiration to initiate the boy into the culture of violent
heroism he himself was interpellated into in the war. Through a mixture of
tender bonding and brutal violence, he teaches Benni to overcome his fear,
making him defend the frogs that he claims to eat alive and 'play' a 'game' of
wild running through the forest with a paper bag covering his head, restaging
newspaper torture iconography from Iraq that David had showed to Benni.
Under the terrified glances of the spellbound spectator, the situation gets
increasingly out of control. Benni not only starts wetting his bed as well but
also dangerously hurts one of his peers in restaging the paper bag 'game' the
day after David has almost killed Benni in a moment of trauma reenactment,
choking him while apparently mistaking him for the (apparition of the) dead
boy.

As Benni tries to explain to his parents at some point, David teaches him
"Endorin Friedman." During the frog-eating game, David had argued that an
attack is a "peacekeeping mission" if it serves to save someone—and that it
would lead to "Enduring Freedom" for the frogs if Benni actually killed the
aggressor David. By thus quoting public war talk in a private diegetic con-
text, the film integrates a dimension of discourse analysis into its emotion-
ally intense viewing experience. To be sure, it does so indirectly in scenically
arranging discourse fragments, in character dialogues almost exclusively
between an eight-year-old kid and a traumatized adult. Toward the end of
the film, David himself reproaches Benni for obeying his orders, thus indi-
rectly exposing the double bind of contradictory demands for (individual)
autonomy and (military discipline–based) heroism, as well as peacekeeping
and murder, which constitute hegemonic masculinity in the War on Terror
context. However, David's critical analysis of their relationship unfolds from
within its continued violent dynamics: by charging Benni with having lost his
"honor," he tries to provoke the boy into shooting him. As a deeply implicated
character commentator, David remains ethically as well as interpretatively
unreliable even in uncovering some of the truth of his own acts.

Like Der Kick, Nacht vor Augen thus does not feature an authoritative
voice of critique, but unlike the former, it does not play affect against repre-
sentation by advocating universalist empathy at the expense of a closer look
at sociosymbolic identity constructions. Rather, its montage of sights and
quotes invites the spectator's narrative production of a clear-cut critique of
the culture of heroic masculinity sustaining the War on Terror, and Germany’s
ambiguous participation in it through the official 'peacekeeping only' man-
date. In contrast also, for example, with Zaimoğlu's politically diffuse German
Amok (chapter III), the film thus shows that a radically scenic aesthetics does
not have to imply a loss of political specificity. As announced above, however, there is a twist to that argument, which is indicated by the relative discursive simplicity of *Nacht vor Augen*. The film compensates for the disorienting effects of its elliptic trauma technique by drawing on familiar, clear-cut oppositional motifs we associate, not least, with classical Hollywood form, in particular in staging the regime of gender at hand (the warrior-princess binary, Benni’s haircut). Even without an authoritative (be it verbal or camera) voice, the development of narrative from such stereotypical building blocks guides audience evaluation by ‘borrowing’ authority for its world-making from contemporary society’s dominant narratives.

*Nacht vor Augen*’s relative oppositional simplicity can register as a loss compared to the richly layered, flamboyant scenarios of both twentieth-century avant-garde films and the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century popular takes discussed in chapter II. It may also strike the audience as reduced in comparison to Haggis’s less radically scenic *In the Valley of Elah*. Here, the investigation of the war is focalized through the character of the father, that is, from a position of emotional affectedness and genealogical implication, but at a generational distance from the contemporary experience. In the film, this distance is used for generating critical reflection within the—here diegetic—detective endeavor: as configured, the father’s process of sense-making muddles narrative oppositions. Doubling his son (or, biographically speaking, having reproduced himself in his son), the father himself embodies the contradictions that constitute hegemonic military masculinities, in the tradition of American frontier narratives in which collective ideals of individual heroism have been articulated precisely through transgressive violent behavior at the border (see Dyer 30–40). For this father, solving the mystery of his son’s death—that is, making first-person sense of the brutality that haunts American heroism—requires a learning process. For the audience, this process develops both his character and those of the people around him. Thus, the Vietnam veteran has to challenge his stereotypes, as well as his own proclivity toward unchecked violence, in the confrontation with a suspect Latino soldier who turns out to be innocent, as well as the female police investigator whose competence he—along with her openly sexist colleagues—entirely disregards at first. Aligned with him, the spectator gradually builds respect for her initially stifled but increasingly sharp work. Drawing on his own military experience, however, the veteran himself does overall outstanding detective work, and in focalizing through him, the film questions but does not entirely debunk the heroic father imago he represents. More analytic than any of the characters in *Nacht vor Augen*, his wife (played by Susan Sarandon) directly charges him with responsibility for the son’s death (“living in this house he could have never
felt like a man if he hadn’t gone [into the military]”). At the same time, the camera’s attention to the father’s grief, which at moments breaks through the controlled surface of his body, makes it easy to believe the police officer who reassures him that he was a “good father” and doesn’t “have to prove that you loved him.”

Much more so than Nacht vor Augen’s scenic variation on authoritative narrative, the film thus yields authority to its characters in renouncing strong evaluations. Politically, the complexity developed through this (re)configuration of character perspectives effects both moderation and an imagination of change. When at the end, the father mounts the badly tattered American flag that his son sent home from Iraq upside down, the film still communicates respect for his bruised ideals in affirming the national community as such.

As the veteran explained to an immigrant from El Salvador in the beginning of the film, this gesture of reversal is an “international distress signal,” but he now also insists that the damaged state of the flag means that it has been put to “good use.” Intertwining similarity and difference in repetition (see chapter II’s discussion of Lola und Bilidikid), the film’s reconfiguration of political motifs outlines this community’s possible future foundations by editing its heroic title narrative. When invited to the police investigator's house one night, the Vietnam veteran tells her son—who, like Benni, is bad at sports and afraid of the dark—the heroic story of David and Goliath. Also like Benni, the child responds with eagerness to grow into the model of masculinity offered to him: he later asks his mother to buy him a slingshot. At the end of the film, however, we see his mother at his bed, now telling the story herself, presumably at the son’s request, but modifying it in dialogue with him: yes, she asserts, David likely would have been very scared. Dedicated “to the children,” the film closes by gesturing at “the sound of a baby’s first breath” through the accompanying soundtrack of Annie Lennox’s “Lost.”

In Nacht vor Augen, such emotional conciliation through a process of collective learning and mourning is absent. To be sure, David might be on the way toward working through his trauma in the end. He confesses to his drinking buddies and consents to a stay in a psychiatric clinic after the traumatized Benni has qualified his previously unconditional admiration for him. Upon return home, David is gentle and subdued—but the only motivation for this change provided is the drugs we see him take. If, short of observing an actual learning process, we are invited to somewhat empathize with David as both perpetrator and victim of the heroic culture he was forced to internalize, certainly none of the other adult characters provides any emotional anchor. The distant stepfather, the uptight therapist, and David’s slimy military superior as well as the pale mother and girlfriend remain clear-cut negative characters.
Thus not creating any investment in the represented community norms, Nacht vor Augen effects a more radical critique of the war’s subjectivities than In the Valley of Elah despite, if not precisely through, its—intellectually, for me, dis-satisfying—simplistic narrative guidance. In this sense, the film’s strengths are indicated by the ‘phenomenological’ German title (“Night in Front of Eyes”) rather than the ‘discourse-analytical’ A Hero’s Welcome, even as both titles reflect one of the film’s dimensions outlined here. The effect of narrative closure that the audience achieves cognitively by responding to the film’s clues comes as a deeply disturbing experience. During David’s stay in the clinic, Benni has fully internalized the lessons he was taught. In the absence of character learning, reconfiguration thus channels difference into a repetition of the same: in the film’s concluding scene, we see the kid with cropped hair and a newly tough demeanor, as he asks his mother to leave so that he and David can eat the frogs that he caught and apparently put into the freezer earlier, in order to save them for the occasion of David’s return. In his subdued state, David responds helplessly to Benni’s ‘healthy appetite’ (“they don’t feel anything any longer,” the kid comments reassuringly) and his showing off about his recent soccer career. For the audience, for whom the film does not provide an aesthetic numbing aid comparable to David’s drugs, this moment of narrative closure opens onto the chilling threat of the future to come: of Benni’s growing up into the violent masculinity he was taught, as well as the uncertainty of David’s own development beyond the immediate chemical effects of his treatment. The war does in fact continue at home.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored a recent trend quite different from, and in some respects contradicting, the return of authoritative narration discussed in chapter V. Primarily, although not exclusively, developed in visual media, the diagnosed turn to presence does overlap with the reclamation of authoritative narrative in that both programatically reject postmodern theatricality. On the spectrum of variously in/visible practices of narration, however, the trend discussed in this chapter constitutes forms that forfeit (direct) authority in favor of effects of ‘the Real,’ without therefore necessarily being motivated by the radical antinarrativity of twentieth-century quests for presence. While I argue that this focus on (more or less narrative) gestures of presencing forms a constitutive element of the twenty-first-century episteme that has emerged in the course of the last decade, my four readings have also underlined the heterogeneity of both techniques and effects assembled under this heading.
In contemporary theater, I argued, the trend found its perhaps most prominent development in the renewed interest in documentary forms. Moving beyond postmodern playfulness, many of these productions have specifically approached the perspectives of (mainstream theater audiences’) social ‘others.’ At the transition from postmodern form, Schwarze Jungfrauen combines scenic, first-person monologues with a design that balances authenticating intimacy with artificial spectacularity. Thus still allowing for some distanciation (which certainly helped make the production acceptable to mainstream audiences), the production simultaneously produces an uncomfortably close encounter with the radical voices presented on stage. Such audience discomfort is dramatically intensified by Veiel’s Der Kick, which explores the possibility of affectively approaching its adolescent perpetrators in investigating a neo-Nazi murder in the East German provinces. Like Schwarze Jungfrauen, but in contrast to Kaufman’s much more Brechtian Laramie Project, Der Kick forgoes any attempt at authoritative narration by exclusively assembling analytically insufficient, mostly downright racist voices. Veiel’s programmatic foregrounding of the hi/stories of the murderers, which I contextualized with the resurgence of humanist paradigms in the early twenty-first century, dramatizes the question where the creation of empathy with perpetrators risks inadvertently legitimizing their worldviews. However, precisely the decidedly nonphotographic mode of representation that contributes to the production’s humanizing take also infuses the project with a small dose of (stern) Brechtian epicalization. Combined with the overall dominating techniques of presence, this moment of distanciation creates a thoroughly disturbing affective experience, which urges spectators to confront their own implication in the multifaceted acts of exclusion constituting contemporary society.

A counterpoint to Veiel’s aesthetics of empathy is provided by Petzold’s Yella, my example from the context of the new filmic ‘realisms,’ or (neo-) avant-garde–inflected, programatically presence-based explorations of contemporary worlds that have been labeled the Berlin School. Programmatically still closer to the antinarrativisms of twentieth-century avant-gardes than the other works discussed in this chapter, although intertextually informed also by popular genre film, Yella foregoes character exploration in favor of a radically phenomenological approach. Bracketing narrative coherence through its focus on the faces and things it presents in close-up, Yella requires audiences to develop their own narratives in evaluating the protagonist’s increasingly ruthless acts. Precisely the film’s uncompromising aesthetics of presence, however, tilts, perhaps unintentionally, into an effect of theatricality when at the end of the film, all of these readings are existentially recentered through Yella’s death with an act of narrative correction that, in my reading, dramatizes the film’s
equivocal participation in conflicting epistemes by ambiguously imposing moral order while highlighting the instability of basic frames of perception. Like Yella, Bertele’s German Afghanistan film Nacht vor Augen requires significant spectator activity for the construction of a coherent scenario. Unlike in Yella, however, the images through which it simulates trauma—as a visual and aural approximation to a state of (antinarrative) disorganization—eventually add up into a coherent story, and to a clear-cut political critique of military masculinities in the War of Terror context. Within the frame of an aesthetics of presence, and without an authoritative voice (in the broader sense including visual and sound design), the film thus generates an effect of authoritative narrative, namely through its reliance on relatively simple oppositions, including stereotypes. Haggis’s thematically and, to a degree, also formally comparable In the Valley of Elah develops a more complex take on the War on Terror and its hegemonic masculinities. Less radically scenic, it focalizes the investigation of war trauma through its (all-American) father figure. The layer of narrative distance thus introduced is employed for authorizing the film’s diegetic agents as subjects of their own critique emerging in a process of change. The two projects come with their own strengths and weaknesses: less democratic than Haggis’s politically cautious empowerment of its diegetic agents, Bertele’s (audience-activated, but in effect authoritative) critique has a more forceful impact that cancels the affective conciliation provided by Haggis in bringing the experience of war home to its spellbound audiences.
In Summary

GESTURES OF CLOSURE

THROUGH A close-up on contemporary culture at ‘location Germany,’ this study set out to map the aesthetics of the present moment as an aesthetics of narrative performance: a set of techniques that develop narrative in performative and performance in narrative forms—widely different in many respects but also attesting to shared preoccupations. The argument for thus conceptualizing contemporary culture was made on both theoretical and historical grounds. In theoretical terms, I demonstrated that the critical opposition of narrative vs. performance, which shaped the mainstream arts as well as cultural theory throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and continues to do so even beyond its explicit questioning in different contexts today, does not hold up to a closer look at the ways in which narrative as well as performance have been conceptualized. On the most general level, the performative turn in narrative theory has by now brought widespread acknowledgment that narrative is always also a performative act. Although the same does not hold vice versa, I argued that even radical affirmations of performative antinarrativity in phenomenological and deconstructive performance theory have remained haunted by their proponents’ implicit concessions that aesthetic acts of communication in any medium necessarily proceed as acts of (narrative) reconfiguration, even
under the conditions of intentional bracketing characterizing much contemporary performance. This overarching epistemological point constitutes the basis of my intervention; it enabled me to define my concept of narrative performance, on the most abstract level, as this process of reconfiguration, which develops, or minimally allows audiences to develop, new narrative connections in variously challenging existing tropes, topoi, and larger socio-symbolic scripts while also drawing on them. Moving beyond this general point, however, the focus of my study was on the level of aesthetic conceptualization. Here, I demonstrated that diverging definitions of narrative and performance—privileging diegesis and theatricality vs. mimesis and presence, respectively—align some of these two notions’ respective uses more closely with each other than with other conceptualizations of the same notion. Based on these conceptual divergences, I began my own project of mapping the aesthetics of narrative performance by distinguishing two clusters of techniques from the respective angles of narratology and performance theory: on the one hand, those of scenic (= highly mimetic, presumably immediate) narrative and theatricalized narrative (= narrative that dramatizes the process of narrative mediation), on the other hand, those of (implicitly narrative, or mimetic) presencing and presentification, and (implicitly or explicitly narrative, or diegetic) theatricalization.

In historical terms, I argued that the aesthetics of narrative performance develops a particular significance for contemporary culture around the turn of the twenty-first century, which has been shaped by overlapping ‘performative’ and ‘narrative’ turns. At this moment, where modernist and postmodernist critiques of narrative meet both its alternative reconceptualizations and increasingly dominant calls for a return to more classical forms of narrative, the aesthetics of narrative performance finds its center of gravity, as I suggested, in its affinity with the critique of narrative authority. Widespread associations of both scenic/presencing and theatricalized forms with challenges to authoritative narration do not, however, translate into a clear-cut diagnosis such as ‘the aesthetics of narrative performance undoes’ or even primarily ‘questions narrative authority.’ Rather, this aesthetics enables a range of responses to the fact that such authority cannot be taken for granted at the turn of the twenty-first century, while it still forms the vanishing point of both playful assertions of (contingent) narrative power and serious cultural investments in narrative’s orientation functions, as well as a foil for a range of attempts to democratize narrative authority by empowering marginalized voices and developing explicitly nonsovereign, dialogic models of telling. My readings pursued this range of responses by analyzing individual texts and productions in three different media, detailing the effects of specific tech-
niques and configurations of techniques in concrete artistic projects shaped by their medial and cultural context.

Using my initial distinction between presence-oriented and theatricalizing techniques as a rough historical mapping tool, I characterized the—in prevailing critical lingua, postmodern—culture of the 1990s as shaped by an overall dominance of scholarly as well as aesthetic theatricality paradigms. In my primary materials, this influence is most directly visible in the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century films with which I began in chapter II. Drawing on film-theoretical investigations into the relations between narrative and spectacle, as well as the aesthetics of attraction, I returned, once more, to the promises of performative subversion that 1990s scholarship located in the workings of theatricality. I did so with the twofold intent of severely complicating these promises and also, as I write at a cultural moment in the early 2000s (and now 2010s) in which the diagnosed critical career of theatricality seems to have come to its end, halfway ‘rescuing’ theatricality paradigms by specifying in which ways and contexts they do in fact unfold a significant critical productivity. My readings in chapter II concretized the theoretical notion of narrative performance as (more or less critical) reconfiguration outlined in chapter I by detailing the ways in which the analyzed films combine various techniques of flamboyant, playful theatricality—the melodramatic mise-en-scène and comedic replay of cultural tropes in *Lola und Bilidikid* and the exhibitionist and parodistic voice-overs, the metaleptic and montage practices of the unification comedies—with an emphasis on plot development. The effect of such narrative theatricality then depends not, as critical cliché has it, on the absence or presence of narrative integration as such but on the details of the established configuration of techniques and motifs. While *Lola und Bilidikid* stages both the power of hegemonic figurations and the possibility of challenging them with comic doubles, the two unification comedies *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*—although at first glance quite similar, develop opposite effects by championing a playful fantasy of (sovereignly contingent) narrative performance in the realm of the imagination vs. the force of real-life history, respectively.

The counterpart to these readings can be found in chapter VI, which traces the aesthetics of—in part now also programmatically narrative—presence that, as I argued, overall displaced that of theatricality in both theoretical and cultural trends of the 2000s. In detailing the workings of new filmic realisms and no longer playful documentary forms in the theater, I discussed the heterogeneity of forms enabled by this aesthetics of presence. Thus, Petzold’s *Yella* pursues a radically phenomenological approach that renounces interiority and, in continuity with some aspects of postmodernism, unsettles
epistemological securities by bracketing, although not undoing, narrative. In contrast, Veiel’s Der Kick pursues his protagonists’ interior lives, producing empathy by aesthetically approaching them under the guidance of the narratives of universalism that have returned onto the critical stage in the 2000s. Despite these divergent findings, my readings in this chapter found a gravity center in the diagnosis that the new aesthetics of presence, which I suspected of political quietism in my initial theoretical readings, develops its potential strength and, in fact, its own critical productivity in the creation of affective disturbances. In different ways and to different degrees, the films and productions discussed in this chapter probe a surrender of narrative authority to the voices—and faces—of contemporary society’s radicals and perpetrators: Zaimoğlu’s Islamist “Black Virgins,” Veiel’s East German neo-Nazi youths, Bertele’s traumatized, violent Afghanistan veteran, and even Petzold’s ruthless player in the sphere of crisis capitalism. However, the critical productivity of the discomfort thereby effected also crucially depends on the details of how this audience alignment is nonetheless configured with narrative guidance—be it in Veiel’s minimalistic gestures of distanciation or in Bertele’s explicit clues toward a clear-cut critical narrative.

The second larger vector of my investigations unfolded along the hypothesis that the overall shift from the aesthetics of narrative theatricality to that of presence is complicated by media-specific trajectories. These divergent trajectories attest to the relative importance of institutional frames as well as aesthetic traditions in a cultural landscape that is, as I argued, simultaneously constituted through the prevalent use of intermedia analogies and transfers of aesthetic techniques. On the one hand, strong conceptual investments in presence—indicative of their creators’ (neo)avant-garde–inflected agendas—shaped both literature (chapter III) and mainstream experimental theater (chapter IV) even during the heyday of postmodern theatricality paradigms. On the other hand, the subsequent twenty-first-century trend toward more authoritative forms of narration in literature (chapter V) brought a certain resurgence of theatricality precisely in the ostensible move beyond postmodernity. While these complications are crucial for my argument regarding the overarching, and lasting, significance of narrative performance for the contemporary moment, they do not flatten the historical diagnosis regarding an overall shift from theatricality to presence since 2000.

Thus, my readings in chapters III and IV demonstrated how in both literature and theater at the turn of the twenty-first century, programmatic affiliations with presence paradigms were nonetheless amalgamated with theatricalizing techniques, to the effect of creating complex configurations of narrative performance. In their different production contexts and through
their specific forms of signification, literary texts and theater works produced intriguingly resonating configurations. For example, the imbrication of (electronic media–inspired) recording techniques with theatricalizing self-reflexivity in Goetz’s (Berlin) diary/novel Abfall für alle compares to Wright’s and Kaufman’s use of the tropes and objects of recording for their queer history theater project in I Am My Own Wife. Inspired by African diaspora forms, Zaimoğlu’s Kanak Sprak and Popoola’s “This is not about sadness” pursue overlapping projects of (Bakhtinian) double-voiced sense-making through the ways they invest their explicitly theatricalized narrators with the power of (virtual) bodily presence, and Zeh’s technique of epic recording in Eagles and Angels presents a literary analogue to Pollesch’s use of epic mimesis in Telefavela. However, none of these analogies detracts from the fact that similar configurations of techniques and topoi may produce strikingly diverging effects in different works and contexts. Most dramatically, this was evidenced by the transatlantic adaptation of Wright’s and Kaufman’s intellectual Broadway success at the commercial Renaissance Theater in Berlin, which twisted the empathy-driven investigation of Charlotte’s experiential authority over her life stories into an uncritical presentification of German memory objects—spiced up, for liberal Berlin audiences, with a spectacle of crazy queerness. Less surprisingly, Wright’s and Kaufman’s use of objects and metaphors of recording for enabling affective engagement with Charlotte’s (questionable) life stories differs radically also from Goetz’s aggressive recording of Berlin’s abject Real. Between these two poles, Özdamar’s technique of autobiographical montage narration as presentification-at-a-distance in Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde interweaves the aesthetics of abjection with a loving take at left-wing German histories.

With respect to media-specific trajectories, I framed chapter III’s literary forms as critical responses to postunification calls for a return to (implicitly authoritative forms of) narrative as a possible foundation for the Kulturation, as well as chapter IV’s theater productions around complementary discussions of (theatrical and social) community and collective identity. Except for the Berlin adaptation of I Am My Own Wife, all the texts and productions discussed in these chapters share a commitment to probing alternative approaches to narrative sense-making and identity configuration—variously with egalitarian intent or from marginalized positions, emphasizing discontinuity or heterogeneity, and bottom-up or indirect procedure. My readings spelled out, and contextually evaluated, the range of forms thereby developed: Goetz’s individualist, perhaps all-too-exclusively negative focus on narrative leaps; Zaimoğlu’s similarly aggressive assertion of group identity through the reconfiguration of hate speech; Özdamar’s ‘undercover’ commentary on
polarized postunification memory discourses; Zeh's configuration of physical presence and epic alienation into a reading experience of sense-making horror; Popoola's dialogic exploration of the vicissitudes of layered collectivity formation; and Wright's and Kaufman's affective authorization of Charlotte's narratives for the project of inclusive theatrical community building. Finally, the deconstructive power of Pollesch's practices of affective commentary is supplemented with an explicit search for new narrative forms in Telefavela's theory soap, configured through epic mimesis, and Plusfiliale's homage to alternative notions of humanity and bottom-up community formation through phenomenological figuration.

Rather than bringing the end of the aesthetics of narrative performance, the return of authoritative narration in the 2000s (chapter V) was shown to develop new configurations of narrative performance in response to growing discontent within the postmodern episteme. My reading of Zeh's Spieltrieb demonstrated how the author's programmatic call for godlike forms of narrative voice remained haunted by the legacy of twentieth-century critiques of narrative authority, as played out in the interwoven moves of authorizing and deauthorizing the novel's theatricalized narrator. The chapter's subsequent readings underlined the poetological impact also of the new century's fascinations with presence on the search for newly authoritative forms. The argument developed in these readings critically positioned (imaginary) effects of God-like power and sovereignty against what I conceptualized as more productive explorations of experientially grounded, explicitly first-person sense-making. Thus, I charged both Jelinek's Bambiland and Schlingensief's (almost text-free, but intermedially congenial) premiere of the piece with developing, despite their critical intentions, an aesthetics of pseudodivine subjection, in Jelinek's case through the God-summoning arrangement of the text's omnipresent media network chorus voice, in Schlingensief's through the overwhelming force of dispersed visual and aural clues centered around a metanarrative of self-reflexively unhappy artist sovereignty. In contrast, Gotscheff's Berlin production of Jelinek's intertext, The Persians, gestures at an alternative form of nonsovereign human authority in the messenger's scenic war report. A playfully serious development of such—strictly limited and fallible, or, in a nonmedical sense, borderline—authority is provided, I argued, by Foer's equally theatricalized and highly scenic September 11 novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. The point of including Foer's novel in this chapter was to emphasize that its main voice, although in some respects flamboyantly nonauthoritative, significantly differs from that of the narrators I pursued in chapter III. In focusing on the protagonist's project of working through his trauma both with his diegetic quest for sense-making and its sub-
sequent displacement into his extradiegetic narrative performance, the novel offers an explicitly earthly, democratic answer to the new longings for orientation that motivated twenty-first-century quests for authoritative narration.

The set of techniques, configurations, and effects thus unfolded in the course of my readings does not come with any claim to sovereign conclusiveness or closure. Rather, I hope that my ‘thick’ readings developed in cultural context usefully contribute to emerging conversations about the cultural forms of the present moment—a dialogue I have intended to move along on the preceding pages by remapping theoretical discourses and developing my intervention in terms of the aesthetics of narrative performance.


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