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 “Manifsto” included, for example, a programmatic plea for aesthetic autonomy (Dieckmann). Still, times in fact seemed to have changed. Variously, 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, Asheuer, “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 poietological 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 authoritativenseness 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.” 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.”

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
[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 narration 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 nostalgic 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.\textsuperscript{12} Does Spieltrieb also restage its modernist predeces-
sor’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’ protago-
nist 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.\textsuperscript{13} 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 dis-
places 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 lit-
erary originality with a reference to extraliterary expertise. At the same time,
these doubts are not made explicit. As he freely traverses discourses and nar-
rative spaces, Musil’s narrator clearly fulfills Culler’s first criterion for omni-
scient 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 func-
tions 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

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{13} See Martens on the reception of Musil’s novel with reference to ‘stream-of-conscious-
ness’ techniques (“Musils gesprächig-schweigender Erzähler” 153).
LIKE GOD’S VOICE?  \  191

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 narratorship’) 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 overtess 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 overtess, 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-blonde 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-gültigen" 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. 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. 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”).
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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 Ourselves, 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 Aeschylos 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.”

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 polyplogue 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 *Sportstück* (Sports Piece/Play) at the Vienna Burgtheater. Fischer-Lichte defended Schleef’s use of the chorus against such charges by arguing that his *Sportstück* 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 Löscht’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.21 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.22 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

25. Sichrovsky and Augustin 118; Schlingensief, “Man muss” 74. However, the full Jelinek text is reprinted in the program booklet.

26. I work with the DVD provided by the Burgtheater, which documents the performance of January 12, 2004.

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 orientalist 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

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.”

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 topos 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

Figure 10
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, Dimitar 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? 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. 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. 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.

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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

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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.\(^{37}\) 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

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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 blushes, 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. “‘For 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 ironized 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.