A New Aesthetics of Proximity
THE TURN TO PRESENCE

In memory of Don Belton

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

1. A gifted writer, dedicated professor, warm-hearted colleague, and proudly unapologetic African American gay man, Don was murdered in his own house in Bloomington, Indiana, on December 27, 2009—while I was writing this chapter—by a man he considered to be his friend. The perpetrator, an Iraq war veteran who was turned in by his girlfriend, defended himself by claiming that he had been ‘sexually assaulted’ two days earlier (by a man who had, apart from his most gentle spirit, perhaps half the murderer’s physical strength). Some of the media reactions following the murder demand its contextualization with racism in addition to homophobia. My readings of Der Kick and Nacht vor Augen attempt such contextualization for resonant scenarios.
this move of delaying sense-making is not positioned as antinarrative but as a—democratic—means of (everybody’s) “piecing together my own narrative,” which would eventually enable people “to see connections and larger frameworks” cut off by the dominant structure of tragedy (244, 255, 263).

Kathrin Röggla’s really ground zero, a report on the German author’s stay in New York in September 2001, zooms in on this space of delay. Like Foer’s Oskar, Röggla responds to the experience of an event defying integration into an existing structure of experience with a desire for narrative, or situating it in a “larger context” (8). Unlike Foer’s novel, however, Röggla’s diary-style text from the immediate aftermath of the events, which is also accompanied by personal photographs, overall stops short of implementing this need for ‘grander’ sense-making and instead adheres to Taylor’s method of archiving impressions, observations, and discourses. In line with what I have been arguing throughout this book, larger narrative frames do still interfere in this programmatic space ‘before’ sense-making. In Röggla’s text, however, this happens primarily through the rhetoric of the Real: “so i have a life now, a real one” (6) is the opening sentence of the report whose title lays claim to a place of ‘true’ rawness as the absence of cultural structure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

**First-Person Spectacle**

*Schwarze Jungfrauen*

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

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

---

8. “stinköder Säkularismus” (Zaimoğlu, “Für all das”; see also Bahners).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 12
Production photo, Schwarze Jungfrauen. HAU Berlin. Copyright Ute Langkafel/Maifoto.
the neutralizing effect of the artificial baldness and male underwear (thus Behrendt 42).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\(^{16}\) Ostermeier, quoted by Laudenbach, “Das 5 Millionen-Spiel.”

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

Humanist Close-Ups

*DER KICK*

Andres Veiel’s *Der Kick* increases this discomfort. When the production was invited to the Berlin Theatertreffen, an annual festival showcasing the year’s best work in German-language theater, a critic remembers, it “hit the smoothed surface of the theater enclave, shaped by posh but frictionless productions, like an explosive” (Sorrento), thus arguably performing an act of violence also in the sense of ‘effecting’ it. As underlined in the program booklet for the original Berlin production, *Der Kick* is based on “a real case” (*Der Kick . . . Programmheft* 4). In Potzlow, a rural village in the East German province of Brandenburg, the sixteen-year-old Marinus Schöberl was brutally beaten, humiliated—for example, through the order to self-identify as ‘a Jew’—and murdered by his friend Marcel Schönfeld, Marcel’s older brother Marco, and a shared acquaintance in the summer of 2002. While the documentary form chosen by Veiel invites a comparison with Moisés Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project* on the Matthew Shepard murder in Wyoming, an additional transatlantic connection is inscribed in the incident itself. Marinus was murdered according to the model of the curbstone kick featured in Tony Kaye’s 1998 neo-Nazi drama *American History X*. Kaye’s film, which thema-
tizes the transatlantic reception of European Nazi culture, thus unintentionally initiated a reverse reception vector: interviewed social workers said they showed the film to young right-wing leaning audiences with a critical intention. To different degrees, all three involved youth had previously drawn attention in their environment for their neo-Nazi slogans, outfit, and, in the case of the older Schönfeld brother Marco, also ideologically motivated acts of violence. Marinus, who did not actually have a Jewish background, had modeled his appearance in line with the alternative hip-hop scene.

Veiel, previously known as a documentary filmmaker especially for his *Black Box BRD*, wrote the play in cooperation with the dramaturge Gesine Schmidt. It premiered on 23 and 24 April 2005 as a coproduction of the Theater Basel and the Berlin Gorki Theater, an established theater in the former East that has been noticed in the 2000s especially for its high number of socio-politically ‘topical’ premieres, often intermedial adaptations of contemporary literature and film. Later, Veiel also shot a film version, with the same actors and in the same location in which the theater production had opened in Berlin (before playing also on the actual Gorki stage): the Gewerbehof in der alten Königsstadt, a former brewery building currently used by a range of businesses and artists. While this transposition from stage to screen indicates the decidedly intermedial aesthetics of the present cultural moment, it served, as we will see, also as an opportunity for exploring media differences.

The documentary claim of the project is extensively unfolded in a range of accompanying texts, including the program booklet, interviews, the web presentation of the film, and *Potzlow Geschichte X*, a television documentary on Veiel’s productions. *Der Kick*, audiences thus learn, is based on six months of research and 1,500 pages of interview transcriptions, in addition to interrogation and court minutes and the funeral speech given by the local priest. The authors shortened these materials, cleared them of redundancies, “and sometimes reduced dialect” (Veiel, “Raus”). Unlike Zaimoğlu or Weiss, however, whose programmatic text on documentary theater is excerpted in the program booklet, they did not subject the transcriptions to any comprehensive process of stylization but presented them with the intent of “preserving the person’s linguistic character [Sprachkörper]” (ibid.). The accuracy of these accounts of procedure sets *Der Kick* apart from Zaimoğlu’s (semi-)documentary poses. In a fuller turn away from playful postmodernist border crossings tolerant of epistemological ambiguity, the identity of documentary form

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

As Veiel renounces the forms of theatrical intervention that, to a degree, still inflect the mise-en-scène of Schwarze Jungfrauen, his ethos of authorial restraint radicalizes the aesthetics of scenic immediacy. In analogy to Schwarze Jungfrauen, Der Kick backgrounds narrative coherence by overall dispensing with a higher-order narrative voice. Providing a sharp counter-point to the return of authoritative narration discussed in chapter V, Veiel and Schmidt almost exclusively sample the voices of those interviewed. In this respect, Der Kick is quite different also from The Laramie Project, which includes the voices of the interviewers and an (explicitly Brechtian) narrator (see Kaufman, “Introduction” 12). The impact of Veiel’s and Schmidt’s formal decision is particularly striking when compared with the television documentary on their project, which uses extensive voice-over commentary for authoritatively ensuring distance from the positions and events shown. In the original theater and film versions, the spectator is instead confronted with a range of local voices that are heterogeneous in that they include family and acquaintances of both sides as well as involved professionals, but—as a reviewer put it—all have in common that they ask the “wrong questions” and give the “wrong answers” (Kühn, “Das Unsägliche”). Thus, Marco and Marcel’s parents defend their children by accusing the victim of having disrupted the local community with criminal activity, while the prosecutor arrogantly declares that the entire village was falling short of “civilizational standards,” and Marinus’s mother asks whether politicians care more for “foreign” hate crime victims than for her “German” son—signaling that she, too, shares the right-wing ideologies that motivated the perpetrators.

Veiel himself summarizes his intention for thus configuring the play’s voices as that of taking audiences onto a “dramaturgical roller-coaster ride” and disrupting the “well-known templates” they brought along (Der Kick . . . Programmheft 6). The roller-coaster metaphor underlines the distance from Weiss’s mid-twentieth-century documentary theater: an intense experience of sliding and disorientation has displaced the interpretative act of structuring the “chaotic material of outer reality” into a simple “model”; instead

20. On the production’s minimal gestures of narrative framing see below.
21. I quote the text from the book edition (here Veiel, Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück 24, 18, 43). Comparing it to the performance reproduction provided by the theater (28 April 2006) and the film version, I have noticed small variations in grammar, dialect, etc., but no larger discrepancies. Overall, the versions differ in length, but all passages discussed are in all of them. My own first impressions of the production’s overall effect in the theater are based on the performance I saw in the Gorki Theater, on 24 June 2007.
of any “central motif” or narrative “key” to the events, the production presents a complex netting of “fragments” (Versatzstücke) and the search for those “facets” of “the truth” that “cannot be relevant for a verdict.”23 Despite the familiar antinarrative topoi, this aesthetics of scenic disruption does not, once more, equal the absence of narrative. Unlike in most turn-of-the-twenty-first-century productions, this now holds also on the programmatic level, where “irritation” finds its positive correlate in a project of narrative approximation, namely, the attempt to “find a language for the structures and biographies behind the act.”24 Veiel wants to “imagine the perpetrators,” who have been “locked into a monster cage” by the media, “as humans”: “We provide them with a biography. That’s the real provocation” (Veiel, “Raus”).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\(^{29}\) This is not to suggest that one version is more authentic than the other, but precisely to underscore that, intentionally or not, both versions imply their own argument. The photographic representation of Marinus as an innocent boy could itself be questioned with reference to interview statements emphasizing his robust physicality, especially as compared to Marcel, who was teased a lot for his presumed lack of masculinity (see Veiel, *Der Kick. Ein Lehrstück* 100, 140).
Figure 13
Production photo,
*Der Kick. Maxim
Gorki Theater/
Gewerbehof in der
alten Königsstadt.
Copyright Wilfried
Böing Nachlaß.
question that once motivated the postmodernist turn away from universalism: how can notions of the human be salvaged, if their articulation has been so thoroughly implicated in the exclusionary ideological regimes of modernity? Veiel’s particular aesthetics of approximation dramatically heightens this concern: on his stage, the perpetrators and their families attain their human contours precisely in the course of their racist speeches. Dolan and Butler answer the larger question by integrating the postmodernist critique of differential, exclusionary conceptualizations of the human into their new ethics of shared humanity. The critical Chilean responses to Veiel’s production indicate that The Kick falls short of fully accomplishing such a combination of (normative) universalizing gestures with an (analytical) insistence on the continued sociosymbolic production of difference. In fact, Veiel develops the theme of empathy partially at the expense of a specific analysis of those racist masculinities that dominate the public sphere of Brandenburg villages such as Potzlow. Indicatively, his later book on the project, which narrates the events through more explicitly explanatory discourse than the theater and film versions, touches only briefly on the legacy of the NS ideology never fully worked through in the officially antifascist GDR (see Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück 249). Overall, Veiel’s generalizing narrative about the omnipresence of violence in Potzlow does not award a central place to the fascist identifications that provided the label ‘Jew’ as a catalyst for murder—and fueled yet another hate crime, Marco’s attack on the Sierra Leone refugee Neil Duwhite, before the body of Marinus was discovered and prosecution initiated.30 However, Veiel’s written narrative has a very different effect than his theater and film productions: as it strives to provide a complex, multidimensional explanation for the event, the text reassures rather than disturbs. The violently disquieting dimension of Veiel’s theater production and film is, then, not primarily a matter of his choice in analytic categories but in fact one of aesthetics, specifically of the lack of any narrative voice that would critically explicate the topic of racism at all.

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

30. Fortunately, Duwhite survived. Nonetheless, one may wonder (reversing the question asked by Marinus’s mother) whether the sustained media and artistic interest specifically in Marinus Schöberl is related also to the fact that, unlike in the vast majority of neo-Nazi attacks, it was a white majority German youth who died here.
act that, in fact, ensures that our “immediate” placement into the environment and psyche of the perpetrators does not “excuse” the deed but merely renders it comprehensible (Sorrento). Although overall significantly less Brechtian than Kaufman’s *Laramie Project*, Veiel’s minimalist aesthetics does itself draw on a concept of epicalization. The Nazi reception of *American History X*, he argues, shows that events such as the curbstone kick cannot be simply mimetically restaged; the seemingly naturalist iconography of the film functions as a heroicizing aestheticization. Whereas the presumably immediate showing of violence may thus in fact invite murderous reiteration, Veiel’s own minimalist staging intends to enable distanced reflection by focusing attention on language.\(^{31}\)

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

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

---

\(^{31}\) See Veiel, “Raus”; also Kühn, “Das Unsägliche,” and the interview with Veiel in Potzlow *Geschichte X*. 
cinematic alignment—“spatial attachment” vs. “subjective access” to the character—is useful here (“Altered States” 41). Thus, the close-up can function as a medium of comprehension primarily in the sense of analytic dissection, for example, when Marcel himself recalls the sequence of events on the night of the murder in an apparently completely unemotional fashion. A different effect, however, is produced when at the end of his testimony, Marco, who is generally marked as unapproachable by virtue of his withdrawn body language, says that it was “a real shock” for him, too, when Marcel jumped onto Marinus’s head (Veiel, Der Kick: Ein Lehrstück 60). As he recalls the sight of Marinus’s disfigured face in death, emotion is signaled by his verbal hesitation (in particular in the film version) and (in the theater version) the raising of his head into a pose of introspection (he glances at an unspecified object in the distance = his memory).

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

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

Phenomenological Bracketing

YElla

“Wittenberge on the Elbe,” a reviewer begins,

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

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

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

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

The fact that it is mostly Yella’s face thus captured in close-up seems to invite our approaching her as a human being. In contrast to Veiel’s *Der Kick*, however, Petzold’s film does not gives us any—or certainly not any definite—access to her biography, psychology, or other dimension of ‘inner depth’ (see Glombitza, “Phantom des Ostens”). There are no interior monologues, the film’s acting technique is rather minimalistic (Matheou), and it only sparingly uses individualizing music or analytical dialogue explicating anything. Thus, the character of the foregrounded protagonist remains as undefined as the law of the world in which she moves. Whereas *Der Kick* could be charged with backgrounding sociosymbolic specificity in the service of its universalist call to empathy, the workings of presence can therefore not be summarized in
Figure 14
Yella. Production still. Copyright Schramm Film Körner & Weber.
an analogous way here, for example, as a privatization of politics. In line with what States describes as the “phenomenological attitude” (see chapter I), the film’s presenting techniques, rather, invite audiences to focus on what they see, bracketing any narrative context of the faces and gestures shown.

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

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

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

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

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

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

To be sure, this reading finds its limit in the way the film ends, or—depending on our reading—the way it is framed. If we are willing to follow the director’s own interpretation once more, Yella’s professional performance ultimately will have been only a dream: a dream, he suggests in his preface to the script, she has in the moment of dying (Petzold, “Vorbemerkung”). As I omitted in my earlier summary of the film, Ben had talked Yella into allowing him to drive her to the train station the morning she left Wittenberge. After a fight and dramatic confession of his continued love for her, he drove the car into the lake while crossing a bridge. We saw Yella as she resurfaced, collapsed at the beach for a moment, and then ran, still completely wet, for the train. After her victim’s suicide at the end of the film, she sits in a cab, apparently shocked by what happened. Through an aesthetically inconspicuous montage, this situation is tied back to the initial situation: following a simple cut (see Petzold, “Making of Yella”), Yella again wears the clothes and sits in the position in which we saw her earlier in Ben’s car. Once more, we see the fall into the lake, but this time, a rescue team finds her dead body. Within the bounds of its overall aesthetics of presence, the film thus provides closure by bringing the—previously bracketed—dimension of narrative plotting back with a vengeance. As read through the director’s own interpretation, this closure derealizes the protagonist’s experiments with professional self-fashioning, or subjective agency, in the world of high-risk capitalism. Arguably, it also functions (with Hayden White) as a technique of narrative moralizing through the authority of voice made invisible. During those cinematic wanderings matter-of-factly available to men, the woman went too far, and now she has to die—or rather, in the naturalized form provided by the film’s techniques of ‘feigning the world telling itself,’ will have been dying already.
However, this holds only if we do in fact follow the director in recentering our viewing experience. Whereas most reviewers accepted it, I argue that the film itself resists this particular narrativizing. By virtue of its presumably transparent aesthetics of presence, the film never provided clear-cut hints at the dream status of the world we have allegedly been in throughout most of the film.\textsuperscript{34} To be sure, the proponents of the dream thesis have presented evidence, including the repetition of motifs (such as the orange) and several scenes in which Yella is haunted, or threatens to be gripped by, the “otherworldly” (thus Abel, “Imaging” 267) sounds of the lake: a tree in the wind and a crow. Upon first viewing the film, however, I felt invited—much more unambiguously so than in most of its other moments—to narrativize these scenes within a frame of trauma. More closely than usual, they align us with Yella’s perception through sound and camera perspective, suggesting, for once, (realist) glimpses at the protagonist’s inner life in a moment of psychological intensity. In making its ‘dream’ “real,” precisely the fact that the film has operated throughout as “a film without tricks and quotation marks” (Kilb) has the effect of later foregrounding the—unexpected—film trick needed for closure, despite all of this trick’s visual minimalism. Suddenly no longer sure on which level of reality she has been and is operating (see Göttler), the spectator may not immediately come up with a new reading—or come up with her own, for example, by narrativizing the second fall into the lake itself as a dream: a visualization of the mortified Yella’s fantasy that she had died earlier. This reading is supported also by the moments of variation in the repetition: the images after the cut ‘back’ are not identical with those we saw before; namely, Yella cries now and does not try to prevent the fall by gripping the wheel, as she had done earlier.

Certainly, we are for a moment struck by the fact that the film is playing with us. In this sense, precisely the aesthetics of presence produces the reappearance of theatricality here. Reassessing our prior viewing experience, we may also notice earlier cracks in the film’s aesthetics of realism, if not necessarily to the effect of epistemologically recentering it in line with the director’s instructions. For example, an ominous, foreshadowing sound effect is introduced already when Ben first asks Yella to allow him to drive her to the train station. Along with the presumably diegetic but obtrusive and unrealistically repetitive music dramatizing selected moments, it may underline Yella’s

\textsuperscript{34} This marks a major difference vis-à-vis Carnival of Souls. Admittedly, audiences who immediately recognize the citation (iconographically inscribed particularly in a couple of the lake shots) are nonetheless alerted to Yella’s possible death early on. As someone not into horror, I wasn’t.
status as a product of artful composition, marking the (structural) point where the heightened emotional intensity produced by the aesthetics of presence easily tilts into the ‘excess’ of theatricality. The film’s deadly outcome then becomes visible as the effect of artificial narrative grafting, the reality of which remains irreducibly uncertain (thus Knörer). While the film’s presumed dream world keeps some of its own weight, its deadly real world is made unreal to a degree—creating leeway for the spectator, who can bracket her moral evaluation of the ambiguous phenomena she has seen. In this way, the aesthetics of presence and the aesthetics of theatricality converge to enable the productivity of narrative process vis-à-vis the force of closure. Nonetheless, Yella’s ending in death underscores once more that the aesthetics of presence does not escape the narrative forces of social scripting. Specifically, the (moralizing) closure that is, if only precariously, grafted upon the individual’s wanderings through a deregularized world has its significance as part of larger contemporary longings for authoritative narrative. As my reading has demonstrated, the film’s radically phenomenological development of the aesthetics of presence has the potential to both support and resist their clear-cut solutions.

Bringing the War Affectively Home

A HERO’S WELCOME

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Much more so than Nachtf vor Augen’s scenic variation on authoritative narrative, the film thus yields authority to its characters in renouncing strong evaluations. Politically, the complexity developed through this (re)configuration of character perspectives effects both moderation and an imagination of change. When at the end, the father mounts the badly tattered American flag that his son sent home from Iraq upside down, the film still communicates respect for his bruised ideals in affirming the national community as such. As the veteran explained to an immigrant from El Salvador in the beginning of the film, this gesture of reversal is an “international distress signal,” but he now also insists that the damaged state of the flag means that it has been put to “good use.” Intertwining similarity and difference in repetition (see chapter II’s discussion of Lola und Bilidikid), the film’s reconfiguration of political motifs outlines this community’s possible future foundations by editing its heroic title narrative. When invited to the police investigator’s house one night, the Vietnam veteran tells her son—who, like Benni, is bad at sports and afraid of the dark—the heroic story of David and Goliath. Also like Benni, the child responds with eagerness to grow into the model of masculinity offered to him: he later asks his mother to buy him a slingshot. At the end of the film, however, we see his mother at his bed, now telling the story herself, presumably at the son’s request, but modifying it in dialogue with him: yes, she asserts, David likely would have been very scared. Dedicated “to the children,” the film closes by gesturing at “the sound of a baby’s first breath” through the accompanying soundtrack of Annie Lennox’s “Lost.”

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

**Conclusion**

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

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