

Echoes and Oscillations: Poetics, Public Intellectualism, and Contemporary Literature
in the Work of Juli Zeh

by

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Abstract

Since the publication of her debut novel in 2001, German author Juli Zeh has established herself as an important figure within the landscape of contemporary German-language literature. *Echoes and Oscillations: Poetics, Public Intellectualism, and Contemporary Literature in the Work of Juli Zeh* examines the work of Juli Zeh with respect to how her poetological positions, her work as a public intellectual and the incorporation of modes of realistic writing in her narratives result in an interplay between diegetic and non-diegetic realities that, in turn, have an impact on the question of what role literature can play in the present cultural landscape of Germany and beyond.

Through the analysis of Zeh's poetological writings and her work as public intellectual, *Echoes and Oscillations* defines Zeh as a politically committed author who revives the long-standing model of author as public intellectual and transports it into the twenty-first century. The analysis of selected novels with respect to echoes of traditions of realistic writing from German literary history leads to a re-conceptualization of the term 'contemporary German-language literature.' Exemplified through Zeh's texts, the dissertation proposes a model that regards contemporary literature as being embedded *in*, being mindful *of*, and commenting *on* their time via the tight interconnection between sociopolitical discourses and her fictional and nonfictional work.

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Introduction

Wozu gäbe es denn die ganze Literaturwissenschaft, wenn die Autoren selbst wüssten,
was es mit ihren Texten auf sich hat?

Juli Zeh, *Treideln*

The above quote, taken from contemporary German author Juli Zeh's 2013 poetics lecture, puts anyone setting out to write a dissertation dedicated to the work of this author in a comfortable position. In her statement, Zeh invests literary scholars with the authority to read meaning into narratives that the author herself might not necessarily perceive, thus allowing for considerable leeway with regards to the analysis and interpretation of her work.¹ Zeh makes this statement at a time when she had firmly established herself as a respectable figure within Germany's cultural and literary landscape. By 2013, Zeh had published five novels, several plays, numerous essays, two books for children, a travelogue, and a book-length essay written in collaboration with fellow author Ilija Trojanow. Moreover, Zeh had also made a name for herself as a public figure who not only operates within the literary market but—by virtue of being an essayist, politically engaged public intellectual, and frequent guest on a number of German talk shows—in the public sphere as well. This is noteworthy insofar as this dual role of being author and public intellectual sets Zeh apart from the majority of her contemporaries who, like Zeh, entered the literary market around the turn of the millennium, such as Judith Herrmann or Karen Duve.² In light of these

¹ Literary scholars writing on Zeh have in fact made good use of this leeway. The analytical and thematic focus in articles analyzing Zeh's texts range from transnationalism (Klocke 2011, Richter 2015) to intertextuality (Breger 2008, Klocke 2011, Brockmann 2011) to political authorship (Wagner 2015) to affect theory (Smith-Prei 2015).

² The assumption that younger authors are disenchanted with politics is one that was commonly expressed in light of the dominant so-called "Popliteratur" of the 1990s. However, it is an assumption that also always has been a contested one. Tanja Dücker, for example, states in an essay called "Die Literarisierung des Politischen" from 2004 that "die Diagnose Politikabstinenz" (153) is inadequate and lists Ingo Schulze, Kathrin Röggla, Jakob Hein, and not the least Juli Zeh as examples for politically committed literature.

briefly sketched properties of Zeh's popularity, one would think that academic scholarship would have dedicated attention to her work early on. However, when I first started to present my analyses of Zeh's work in the context of major German Studies conferences like the annual meeting of the GSA (German Studies Association) in 2012, the reaction was always the same. After having been asked the inevitable question "What are you working on?", my response "I am working on Juli Zeh" was—in nine out of ten cases—unfailingly met with a puzzled "Who?" After my presentation, the reaction was always the same as well: the questioner would come to me and tell me that she or he must add Zeh's novels to their personal reading list. In the few years since, this reaction has significantly changed. The anticipated "who?" has been replaced by detailed, informed questions about Zeh's work which demonstrates, if anecdotally, that her work has gradually become part of academic literary discourse.

Despite the fact that there are more than twenty academic publications devoted to analysis of Zeh's work, to date a monograph is still to be produced. *Echoes and Oscillations* aspires to close this gap. The title of this dissertation is informed by the conviction that the two nouns—echoes and oscillations—are descriptive for my analysis of Zeh's body of work as well as for my, but more importantly Zeh's own analytical approach that might even be called a methodology. When I use the term "echoes" in the context of how Zeh employs modes of realistic writing to first create a strong connection between the non-diegetic world she and her readership inhabit to reflect on it in the diegetic reality she creates in her narratives in chapter four, echo is not to be understood as imitation but rather as reverberation. Additionally, there are echoes between texts from different stages of her work. To give but one example, the architectural term "fliegende Bauten," which denotes structures like a Ferris wheel that are designed to be repeatedly constructed, dismantled and reconstructed, is first used in an

eponymous essay in 2003, reoccurs as the title of a novel in Zeh's second novel *Spieltrieb* one year later, and then once again in 2012 as the title of yet another novel written by one of the novel's protagonists. Similarly, a character named Sophie appears as a criminal judge in *Spieltrieb* (2004) and again, this time in a more emphatic characterization, in *Corpus Delicti* (2009). Not the least, there are content-related echoes within Zeh's work with respect to the fact that she addresses sociopolitical issues like the loss of privacy in her fictional texts as well as in her non-fictional work. The echoes to which I will refer throughout this dissertation, then, are to be understood as reverberations within her own work as well as between her work and other literary texts or traditions.

The second term in the title, "oscillations," refers to the fact that Zeh moves back and forth between different roles. First and foremost, Zeh is an author of German-language literary fiction in a variety of textual forms ranging from novels to books for children to plays. In addition, she also assumes the role of an author of non-fictional texts both long and short, which in turn establishes and cements her role as a prominent and highly visible public intellectual. While Zeh's primary role as author of literary fiction is predominantly defined by the act of writing, her role as essayist and public intellectual is, in addition to the production of texts, arguably equally characterized by her public appearances, be it on talk shows, panel discussions, or during concrete protest actions like the demonstration in front of the German Federal Chancellery in September 2013. Against the backdrop of these different roles, the term oscillations communicates how Zeh moves between them; however, it is at times difficult if not impossible to neatly differentiate them as Zeh's work as public intellectual echoes in her fictional texts and vice versa. Furthermore, the use of the term oscillations is not limited to Zeh's movements between the positions of public intellectual and author, as the latter can be further

subdivided. In today's media landscape, an author of literary texts is prompted to promote them publically in interviews, public readings, appearances on television, or through an online presence in order to ensure visibility and—not least—sales. Accordingly, Zeh in her poetics lecture *Treideln* (2013) states that “jeder Autor weiß, dass das Schreiben von Büchern hierzulande nicht genug ist. Er muss sich seine Leser verdienen, indem er Auskunft gibt” (15). The role of the author can accordingly be regarded as being comprised of a private and public component. The private aspect of being an author allows for the writing of texts in a space that is to a large extent located outside of the literary public whereas the public aspect includes all activities within the literary market that help to promote the finished textual product. Again, the boundaries between the two are permeable and therefore hint at the fact that I use the idiom oscillations to reference its fluidity and flexibility.

This dissertation cannot aspire to be a conclusive monograph, for no analytical work on a contemporary author like Zeh who continues to publish regularly and extensively can. The features pertaining Zeh's literary and non-fictional writings as well as her work as a public intellectual analyzed in *Echoes and Oscillations* are considered to be substantial enough to be relevant for future phases of her career; however, it is still an intermediary work in the sense that it contains analyses of selected works up until the publication of Zeh's poetics lecture *Treideln*, which results in excluding her most recent fictional publication *Unterleuten* (2016). The reason for this selection is that I suggest to regard *Treideln* as a caesura in Zeh's work, not in the sense of a turning point but rather as a point at which Zeh had established herself in the literary market and utilized the form of the poetics lecture to clearly pronounce her positions on authorship, text, literature, writing, and the literary market.

Methodologically, *Echoes and Oscillations* takes Zeh's self-proclaimed and to some extent provocative 'anti-poetological' approach of not adhering to poetological principles as a springboard to define her texts, both fictional and non-fictional, as politically committed and genuinely contemporary in the sense of being of, in, and on their time. In order to achieve this analytical goal, the dissertation is divided into five chapters. Following this introduction, the first chapter provides the background for the subsequent analysis of Zeh's work. The chapter strives to delineate the landscape of German-language literature in the new millennium in order to accentuate the way in which Zeh's texts stand out against those of her contemporaries. The chapter highlights how transformations of the literary market prior to Zeh's first literary publication with respect to the conceptualization of authorship inform her career in addition to identifying thematic commonalities and trends that help to define the multi-faceted field of contemporary German-language literature. This demarcation of the literary landscape is followed by an overview of Zeh's oeuvre as well as the development of the author's profile with respect to recognition from within the literary market. Last but not least, "Echoes and Oscillations" contains an overview of academic scholarship on the work of Juli Zeh that will help to determine central thematic aspects of her fictional and non-fictional work and, furthermore, emphasize what this dissertation can contribute to the growing body of research.

The second chapter, "Poetocetamol 500mg – The Anti-Poetics of Juli Zeh," in contrast to its title, focuses on Zeh's poetological positions that she has expressed over the years in programmatic essays like *Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg* (2004) based on her acceptance speech to the *Ernst Toller Preis*, interviews in major German newspapers and, most significantly, her 2013 poetics lecture at the Goethe Universität in Frankfurt, *Treideln*. The chapter begins by analyzing selected essays and interviews by Zeh prior to her 2013 poetics lecture, including her

contribution to the short-lived debate surround *Relevanter Realismus*, initiated by an essay written by Thomas Hettche, Matthias Politycki et al that was published in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* in 2005. The majority of the chapter, however, focuses on Zeh's poetics lecture from 2013. After delineating the form and multiple narrative voices of the text, which is entirely comprised of fictitious email exchange with a whole range of fictionalized addressees, I turn to Zeh's self-proclaimed "anti-poetics." Throughout the lecture, Zeh maintains the position that she in fact does not possess a poetological framework that she applies to her narratives, a position that I analyze as being poetological notwithstanding the author's claim. Significantly, Zeh has chosen the rather unusual form of an epistolary text to transport her poetological statements and enriches this textual form even further through the use of a plethora of narrative voices. Not the least, the chapter also aspires to demonstrate how the title of this dissertation, *Echoes and Oscillations*, can be turned into a productive analytical approach when I trace the complex and multitudinous oscillations between author, reader, and text that Zeh delineates in her poetics lecture.

The title of the third chapter, "A Portrait of the Author as Public Intellectual," is programmatic in that it encapsulates the chapter's aim to analyze Zeh's work as public intellectual. As already mentioned, Zeh has established herself not just as an author who is active in the literary market but in the public sphere as well and is reviving the model of author as public intellectual that has a long tradition within German literary history and is generally associated with authors such as Heinrich Böll, Martin Walser, and Günter Grass. In order to support this claim, the chapter begins by delineating the configuration of the public sphere in the twenty-first century as well as different approaches to the role of the public intellectual in society as expressed by Edward Said and newer contributions that take into account the drastically

changed media landscape of the new millennium. Having set the theoretical background for Zeh's work as public intellectual, I will analyze the demonstration in front of the German Federal Chancellery in Berlin that Zeh co-organized in the context of her protest against the NSA affair. Borrowing a term from Sara Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* (2014) to define Zeh's public persona as willful, the chapter will conclude by applying willfulness to Zeh's critique of contemporary public discourse and her own will to become active in the public sphere through her corporeal and linguistic interventions.

While the preceding three chapters predominantly focus on more general aspects pertaining to Zeh's work, the fourth chapter, "Polishing the Borders of Everyday Life – Modes of Realistic Writing," eventually engages with two of Zeh's literary works, her novels *Corpus Delicti* and *Nullzeit* (2012). In this chapter, I argue that it is through modes of realistic writing that Zeh achieves the effect of tying the non-diegetic world tightly to the diegetic worlds she creates in her texts. In order to contextualize my reading of Zeh's narratives as being in line with traditions of realistic writing, the chapter revisits literary programs and debates surrounding the relationship between the diegetic and non-diegetic world from *Bürgerlicher Realismus* of the nineteenth century and the politically charged realistic literature of the 1970s as well as theoretical approaches towards realistic writing as a technique of simulation developed by Dieter Wellershoff. A brief recapitulation of the status quo of contemporary literature at the end of the 1980s, characterized by a de-politicization of literature and a rift between intra- and extra-literary realities, then sets the stage for an analysis of *Corpus Delicti* and *Nullzeit* that will illustrate how Zeh's texts bridge the above-mentioned gap between the lived-in world we inhabit and their literary representation.

The fifth and final chapter, “Literature of, in, and on its Time: Re-conceptualizing Contemporary German-Language Literature,” synthesizes the analysis of Zeh’s literary and non-literary work developed in the previous chapters while simultaneously going beyond the work of this particular author by suggesting a re-conceptualization of what contemporary German-language literature means in the twenty-first century. Strikingly, the term “contemporary literature,” while often used, remains relatively vague with respect to its theoretical definition. This is true for the evaluation of post-millennium German-language literature in the feuilleton as well as for scholarship on the topic. While the former paints an overall bleak picture of the status quo of literary production, the latter receives literary texts of the new millennium much more favourably. Both agents of literary assessment, however, often appear to operate with an intuitive conception of the very term “contemporary literature,” with notable exceptions. After addressing definitions of the term developed forth by Michael Braun and Elisabeth Herrmann, I propose a model of contemporary literature, as exemplified by the work of Juli Zeh, that defines it as being of, in, and on its time. Through an analysis of Zeh’s travelogue *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* (2002) and her novels *Spieltrieb*, *Corpus Delicti*, and *Nullzeit*, I define her texts as being *of* their time in the sense that they are influenced by literary currents and topics virulent at the time of their creation. Zeh’s narratives are furthermore *in* their time in that they are firmly embedded in the sociopolitical realities of their time and establish this relationship through clearly discernible intra-textual markers. Lastly, Zeh’s work is literature *on* its time in that it not merely represents realities of the twenty-first century but actively comments on them through the development of the narrative’s personae. The advantage of this model of contemporary literature as being of, in, and on its time is that it is not limited to a specific linguistic background, but rather takes into consideration the increasingly globalized realities of our world in the first two decades of the

new millennium by not exclusively being associated with historical benchmark dates that pertain to a specific national background.

As indicated at the beginning of this introduction, Juli Zeh asks: “Wozu gäbe es denn die ganze Literaturwissenschaft, wenn die Autoren selbst wüssten, was es mit ihren Texten auf sich hat?” (*Treideln* 18). One aspect of literary studies doubtlessly lies in reading meaning into texts, and in the following chapters, I will read meaning into those written by Juli Zeh in order to explore what her novels and essays contribute to literary and political discourse in Germany and beyond. Another aspect of literary studies is to determine what literature can achieve beyond textual borders by virtue of being part of a broader sociocultural discourse located at the intersection of intra- and extra-textual realities, art, and politics in the broadest sense of the word. *Echoes and Oscillations* is equally located at this intersection and will investigate through the analyses of selected works by Juli Zeh how literature engages in a dialogue between author, text, and reader to enable and encourage critical thinking that impacts—in a mediated way through the reception of texts—our lived-in world and what we mean when we talk about ‘contemporary literature.’ Just like this dissertation, then, the work of Juli Zeh is likewise situated at the intersection of intra- and extra-textual realities, art, and politics, and I aspire to accept Zeh’s invitation pronounced in *Treideln* and explore what *her* texts are all about.

Chapter 1: Echoes and Oscillations

In preparation of the analysis of Zeh's work, the purpose of the first chapter of this dissertation is threefold. The first is to contextualize Zeh's work within the broader literary and cultural landscape of Germany at the beginning of the twenty-first century in order to accentuate how and why her texts stand out. Providing an overview of the literary landscape of the new millennium will be particularly useful with respect to literary debates in the German feuilleton that precede Zeh's first publication as well as trends and thematic commonalities that help to describe the wide and diverse field of contemporary German literature. This sketch of the German literary market of the first two decades of the new millennium will help to define Zeh as an author who on the one hand benefits from developments like a general rejuvenation of the literary scene while on the other hand managing to maintain a unique position that defies being subsumed under easily marketable labels within a quickly changing literary public. One of the main tenets of *Echoes and Oscillations* is the conviction that the work of Juli Zeh is influenced and arguably even made possible by a set of changes in the literary market but, more than a decade into Zeh's career, has evolved into something that justifiably can be called a category of its own. Zeh's status as both author *and* public intellectual enables me to analyze her body of work as a distinct one within the context of contemporary German literature; distinct enough, in fact, that it allows for a re-conceptualization of the very term 'contemporary German literature' at the end of this dissertation. Prior to this re-conceptualization, though, it is imperative to provide a brief overview of her publications from 2001 to 2014 in order to illustrate the breadth and scope of Zeh's literary and non-fictional textual output. Not the least, this overview of her oeuvre prepares for the close readings of selected texts throughout the dissertation. A review of academic

research on Zeh's work forms the end of this chapter. This literature review will not only outline those topics that academic literary critics have determined as being central for Zeh's narratives, but eventually also help to accentuate my own contribution to the in terms of numbers of publications small, yet steadily growing research on Zeh's work.

The Landscape of Contemporary German-Language Literature

It is tempting to dismiss the attempt of sketching the landscape of contemporary German literature as a futile endeavour with the help of Theodor Fontane's famous expression "ein weites Feld" from *Effi Briest* (1894). The numbers Michael Braun lists at the beginning of his book *Die deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur* with respect to the amount of publications are not particularly encouraging either: "94.000 Titel erscheinen jährlich auf dem Buchmarkt, jedes sechste Buch zählt zur Belletristik, darunter jedes Jahr etwa 7.000 deutschsprachige Romane" (7). While these numbers have decreased—the *Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels* for the year 2014 lists 87,134 new publications, 10,487 of which in the category "Deutsche Literatur," which includes both fiction and literary criticism ("Buch und Buchhandel")—they are still daunting enough to make one realize that the best an overview of contemporary literature can hope to achieve is to outline broad trends and thematic commonalities. Large numbers come hand in hand with great variety. Accordingly, Katharina Gerstenberger and Patricia Herminhouse in the introduction to their co-edited volume *German Literature in a New Century: Trends, Traditions, Transitions, Transformations* (2008) write about German literature that "the perspectives have become wider, more varied, less rigid, and more inclusive" ("German Literature" 9). As a result of this broader and more flexible scope, the literary scene in Germany today is a very diverse one. Stuart

Taberner has therefore pointed to the fact that instead of looking for one all-encompassing German novel, “it is surely better to speak of *The Novel in German*” (“Introduction” 4).³

Any exploration and analysis of thematic commonalities of novels in German today is faced with the challenge of determining a starting point that defines what belongs into the category contemporary literature as opposed to texts of the past. I will return to a more detailed definition of the term “contemporary literature” in the final chapter of this dissertation; for the purpose of drawing a map of the landscape of contemporary German literature in order to contextualize the work of Juli Zeh, the years 1989/1990 serve as a suitable starting point. On the one hand, the years 1989/1990 are an appropriate point of departure because they set major historical benchmarks in post-World War II German history with far reaching implications for the landscape of German literature as well. Moreover, the geopolitical changes in Europe that ultimately led to the expansion of the EU in 2004 are tied to the work of Zeh in that her work has an explicitly European or even transnational component to it. While this is not the place for a historically accurate reconstruction of the transformation of Germany and Europe at the end of the 1980s, the importance of the years 1989/1990 is undisputed—and this is not the least true for the literary sector. Accordingly, Michael Braun can justifiably call the year 1989 the “sichtbarste Epochenschnitt im Sozialsystem Literatur” (*Die deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur* 26) and highlights the implications of the sociopolitical and cultural transformation of German reunification for authors who started their careers in the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany respectively. Not surprisingly given its historical significance, German unification

³ The desire for *one* novel that comprehensively defines life in post-Wende Germany is exemplified in the yearning for the definite “Wenderoman” and the critical disappointment that followed the publication of Günter Grass’ highly anticipated *Ein weites Feld* (1995). For an exploration of the call for a “Wenderoman” twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin wall, see: Wagner, Sabrina. “Der Wenderoman im Wandel der Zeiten.” *Tagesspiegel.de*. 17 October 2015. Web. 28 April 2016.

and its aftermath became subject to literary representation—prominent examples range from Thomas Brussig’s *Helden wie wir* (1995) to Günter Grass’s *Ein weites Feld* (1995)⁴ to Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Storys* (1998) to Christoph Hein’s *Landnahme* (2004) to Uwe Tellkamp’s *Der Turm* (2008)—, but it also radically altered the literary market. Braun rather tendentiously writes that “das gesamte, von Zensur, Protektionismus und sozialistischer Mangelwirtschaft bestimmte Literatursystem der DDR” (*Die deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur* 26) became obsolete while authors from West Germany had to adapt to a “verschärften Konkurrenzdruck” (26). Given the turbulent transformations of the literary market, it is maybe not all that surprising that the manner in which contemporary German literature was discussed in the German feuilleton during that time is equally tempestuous.

The publication of Frank Schirmmacher’s article “Idyllen in der Wüste” in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on October 10, 1989 marked the beginning of a debate between literary critics that continued well into the 1990s. At the heart of Schirmmacher’s harsh and often generalizing critique lies the claim that younger authors suffer from a remarkable “Talentschwäche” (21) whereas noteworthy texts are absent: “Die letzten Werke von weltliterarischem Rang, die im deutschsprachigen Raum erschienen, stammen von der Generation der heute Sechzigjährigen” (16). In light of the fact that two widely-read novels published shortly before Schirmmacher’s essay, Patrick Süskind’s *Das Parfum* (1985) and Christoph Ransmayr’s *Die letzte Welt* (1998), had entered the cycle of world literature through their translations, Schirmmacher’s assessment is debatable at best. Significantly, though, Schirmmacher’s provocative claims kindled a debate about the state of contemporary German literature in the late 1980s and who would be the authors considered to be representative for it.

⁴ The title of the novel refers to the previously quoted expression from Theodor Fontane’s *Effi Briest* and includes further references to the Fontane’s novel, for example by giving protagonist Theo Wuttke the nickname Fonty.

Two major assertions lying at the core of the debate led to two central claims. The first one was to close the seemingly insurmountable gap that had ostensibly opened between authors and a general audience in the 1980s. The reason for this perceived gap and the lack of interest⁵ in the works of young German authors was seen in an increasingly self-reflexive and artificial language, which in turn was regarded by scholars as a result of a scepticism towards the representational qualities of language that the reception of poststructuralist and postmodern theories had brought along: “Je anspielungsreicher, künstlicher und konstruierter Literatur ist, desto anstrengender wird sie, wohl auch elitärer” (Scheitler *Deutschsprachige Gegenwartsprosa seit 1970* 76). While literature has always used allusions and by its very definition is an artificial construction, literature of the 1980s was perceived as having overstepped the mark, resulting in textual products considered to be fragmentary, disjointed, and not accessible. In addition, and in sharp contrast to politically engaged literature of the 1970s that had put great emphasis on the interrelations between the subject and society as a whole, another dominant strand of literary texts of the 1970s and 1980s was an often inward turn and a predominant focus on the inner world of their characters. Honoring literary critic’s affinity to label literary currents, a tendency that at times borders on the obsessive, texts like Peter Handke’s *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung* (1975) or Martin Walser’s *Ein fliehendes Pferd* (1978) were subsumed under the label “Neue Subjektivität”: “Gemeint ist vor allem die Literatur eines monomanen Monologisierens im Medium einer personalen Erzählinstanz, die sich nach außen abschottet und nur noch Einblicke in das eigene Innere zuläßt” (Freund and Freund *Der deutsche Roman der Gegenwart* 77). To put it in deliberately exaggerating terms, this inward turn at times resulted in

⁵ Uwe Wittstock describes this circumstance in bitter and blunt words: “Von einem kleinen Kreis Eingeweihter abgesehen, interessiert sich für ihre [die jungen Autorinnen und Autoren] Texte kein Mensch” (“Ab in die Nische” 86).

the consequent rejection of coherent narrative structures, ultimately resulting in a growing frustration among readers, critics, and authors alike.

This frustration or, to put it more mildly, growing fatigue with excessively subjective, fragmentary, and inaccessible textual products⁶ in the late 1980s/early 1990s eventually led to a second claim, namely the call for a return to storytelling. Popular US-American authors like Philip Roth, Raymond Carver, Cormac McCarthy, or T.C. Boyle were called on as role models for how the combination of a wide readership and the relationship to extra-textual realities could be accomplished in a way that also lives up to aesthetic requirements placed on literary texts.⁷ Arguably, this call for a return to storytelling has been answered. Once again yielding to the urge to create and attach labels to literary strands, the term “Neue Lesbarkeit” was created. Denoting the accessibility of a text rather than its actual readability, Lyn Marven calls “Neue Lesbarkeit” “one lasting development” of the “many literary trends in the 1990s” (“Introduction” 3). More significantly, though, Marven underscores that “Neue Lesbarkeit” can be considered to be “a distinct literary strategy and narrative technique” (“Introduction” 3) that not automatically comes at the expense of thematic depth: “style or form [...] do not necessarily follow from content—difficult subject matter in no way entails a difficult narrative strategy—and indeed, the disjunction of these two elements can be a productive further dimension to a novel’s style” (“Introduction” 3). While the label “Neue Lesbarkeit” is no longer in use—after all, texts like Judith Herrman’s *Sommerhaus, später*, published in 1998, Thomas Brussig’s *Helden wie wir*, or Tim Staffels’ *Terrordrom* (1998) are not that ‘new’ anymore—, it could be attached to Juli Zeh’s

⁶ I will return to this aspect in greater depth in chapter four, it is important to note at this point, though, that one crucial aspect of this debate was the discursive dispute between authors who see literature as being embedded in and representative of extra-literary realities and those who regard texts as autonomous, self-contained entities.

⁷ See for example: Altenburg, Matthias. “Kampf den Flaneuren. Über Deutschlands junge, lahme Dichter (mit Nachsatz ‘Aus dem Souterrain’).” *Maulhelden und Königskinder: Zur Debatte über die deutschsprachige Gegenwartsliteratur*. Ed. Andrea Köhler, and Rainer Moritz. Leipzig: Reclam, 1998. 72-78. Print.

work as well, particularly with respect to Marven's claim that thematic complexity can be conveyed with the help of accessible narrative strategies. One would be hard pressed, for example, to justifiably call the negotiation of moral values or rather the lack thereof in *Spieltrieb* banal. However, the thematic complexity of the text does not translate into a "difficult narrative strategy," as Marven calls it. Instead the narrative strategy Zeh employs in her second novel is that of a coherent, linear, and not the least suspenseful plot accessible to a wide readership. Still, despite the fact that Zeh's texts could be subsumed under the category "Neue Lesbarkeit," the author has been spared this label as well as the patronizing "Fräuleinwunder".⁸

The label "Neue Lesbarkeit" coincided with another literary trend of the 1990s, German "Popliteratur"⁹. Novels like Christian Krachts' *Faserland* (1995), Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre's *Soloalbum* (1998), Thomas Meinecke's *Tomboy* (1998), or Alexa Hennig von Lange's *Relax* (1997) are prominent representatives of a literary strand characterized by being immensely popular with the reading public while at the same time being almost unanimously rejected by literary critics. Notably, one of the points of critique—the comparatively simple syntactic structure of the narratives—was an intrinsic component of what had been welcomed as "Neue Lesbarkeit." In addition, though, Frank Degler and Ute Paulokat underscore that the topics authors chose to address in their texts as well as the way in which they addressed them previously had been largely excluded from literary representation in Germany. Therefore, texts subsumed under the label "Popliteratur" were met with suspicion: "Zudem ästhetisierten die

⁸ Literary critic Volker Hage had introduced the notorious term in an article published in *Der Spiegel* in 1999. With the help of "Fräuleinwunder," Hage attempted to categorize literary texts by rather diverse authors like Judith Hermann, Karen Duve, and Nadine Barth based on the fact that these authors are female. See: Hage, Volker. "Ganz schön abgedreht." *Spiegel.de*. 22 March 1999. Web. 24 March 2016.

⁹ For an overview and analyses of German "Popliteratur", see for example: Baßler, Moritz. *Der deutsche Pop-Roman: Die neuen Archivisten*. München: C.H. Beck, 2002. Print; Degler, Frank, and Ute Paulokat. *Neue Deutsche Popliteratur*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2008. Print; McCarthy, Margaret. *German Pop Literature: A Companion*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015. Print.

Texte Gegenstände der jugendlichen Lebenswelt (Musik, Konsum, Partys, Drogen) in einer Form, die in Deutschland bisher als nicht ‘literaturfähig’ gegolten hatte” (“Einleitung” 7). One aspect of the critical rejection of “Popliteratur” is arguably the generational shift that revealed itself in the sense that a majority of the critics opposed to this trend in literary fiction had been socialized during the far-reaching sociopolitical transformations of the late 1960s. Stuart Taberner draws attention to the fact that the political demands and expectations towards literature that had been characteristic for the late 1960s and well into the 1970s were not shared by younger authors: “Just as the former student protesters had become the new establishment of the recently reunited Germany, [...] they found themselves under attack [...] and discovered that their most cherished value, political engagement, now appeared irrelevant, particularly for younger Germans” (“From ‘Normalization’” 211). To put it in different words, whereas political engagement had been an integral part of the self-conception of authors in the wake of the student revolts of the late 1960s, representatives of “Popliteratur” looked elsewhere to define what it meant to be an author—this ‘elsewhere,’ though, to the dismay of critics, was located not in opposition to consumer culture. Instead, authors like Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre embraced consumer culture, incorporated it into their narratives, and also did not shy away from turning themselves and their textual products into ‘brands’. “Die Vermarktung des Popromans als Kult und ihrer Urheber als Popstars,” Degler and Paulokrat write, “ist eines der wichtigsten und markantesten Kennzeichen in der Produktion und Rezeption von Popliteratur der 90er Jahre—ebenso wie die Selbstverständlichkeit und Virtuosität, mit der sich Produzenten und Rezipienten von Populärkultur innerhalb der medialisierten Welt bewegen” (“Einleitung” 9). Arguably, it is the latter aspect—the author as confident agent within media society who knows how to use its inner workings to his or her advantage—that echoes in Juli Zeh’s function as an author as well.

While there is little to no thematic overlap between texts from “Popliteratur’s” peak during the mid- to late-1990s and Zeh’s first novel *Adler und Engel* (2001) that was published only shortly thereafter, the way in which authors of “Popliteratur” stage their public persona has been influential not only for Zeh, but for a whole new generation of younger authors. Accordingly, and this goes back to the rejuvenation of Germany’s literary market mentioned above, Zeh expresses a certain degree of gratitude towards authors who rose to popularity in the late 1990s—not so much for the texts that they had produced, but for the way in which they paved the way for those younger authors who started to publish after them. “Ob man die Popliteratur der Neunzigerjahre mit Vertretern wie Stuckrad-Barre oder Judith Hermann mochte oder nicht,” Zeh writes in *Treideln*, “dieser Strömung ist es zu verdanken, dass junge Autoren in den Fokus der Verlage gerückt sind” (72). In addition to setting the stage for a self-conception of the author as someone who is well-advised to be media-savvy in order to ensure visibility, another long-term legacy of “Popliteratur” of the 1990s would be a change of public opinion with regards to authorship. In other words, while one would be hard pressed to claim that “Popliteratur” fulfills Frank Schirrmacher’s call for novels of a quality worthy of being canonized as world literature, it rendered the idea that contemporary German literature is predominantly represented by male authors well into their sixties obsolete.

This shift from established authors like Günter Grass and Martin Walser to younger, often debuting authors like Judith Hermann and Juli Zeh as representatives of contemporary literature points to broader generational changes characterizing cultural discourse after the turn of the millennium. The discourse surrounding Germany’s genocidal past, for example, was subject to significant transformation after the turn of the millennium. Instead of putting an end to explorations of the past, though, younger authors continue to revisit the hauntings of World War

II, but they do so in different terms. In 2002, author and essayist Tanja Dücker published an article called “Der Schrecken nimmt nicht ab, er wächst” in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in which she outlines why authors of her generation¹⁰ defy expectations of the second post-war generation¹¹ of authors and public figures when it comes to approaching Germany’s past. While Dücker perceives a hope in public opinion that her generation will leave Germany’s past dormant, she demonstrates a great awareness of the relevance of a historical-moral consciousness that insists on persistently interrogating the past as well as German citizen’s involvement. Despite the fact that the victimization of Germans during World War II had become part of narratives revisiting the past¹², Dücker explicitly disappoints any hopes that her generation is willing to relieve perpetrators of their responsibility: “Der Anspruch, jetzt von der Vergangenheit Abschied nehmen zu können, ‘einen anderen Umgang’ öffentlich einläuten zu können, kann noch nicht eingelöst werden” (“Der Schrecken”). In fact, Dücker sees her generation—or at least those who are willing to engage with the subject—as pivotal for Germany’s memory discourse: “Mir scheint, uns fällt eine große Rolle zu im Verständnis und der ‘Aufarbeitung’ der Vergangenheit, da wir die erste Generation darstellen, die nicht direkt selbst oder noch angrenzend durch die eignen Eltern beteiligt sind” (“Der Schrecken”). Whereas she expresses the hope that the dialogue with the past will be of a more objective and sober nature, Dücker

¹⁰ Dücker was born in 1968 in West-Berlin. Significantly, she uses the term “generation” with reluctance and puts the personal pronoun “we” in quotation marks because she depicts “her” generation as one that was raised in a social environment characterized by individualism, personal autonomy and less rigid social conventions and is less inclined to be subsumed under one generational header.

¹¹ In my use of terms like “second generation,” I draw on the three generational model as outlined in Cohen-Pfister and Vees-Gulani’s *Generational Shifts in Contemporary German Culture* (2010): “members of the first generation rely on their status as historical witnesses, while those of the second generation often qualify their texts as written out of conflict with this generation and its attitudes. The third generation, for its part, has been deemed to view this legacy with a new sobriety in its attempt to balance official and private frameworks of remembering the war and its aftermath” (“Introduction” 6).

¹² See Katharina Gerstenberger and Patricia Herminghouse, who claim that “the collective rejection of the war generation as perpetrators [...] has given way to stories that bring into focus their victimization as well” (“German Literature” 6).

expressively rejects labeling this dialogue uninhibited: “Dennoch würde ich diesen aufgrund der historischen Distanz nun möglich gewordenen Umgang jedoch nicht als “unbefangen” bezeichnen” (“Der Schrecken”). Notably—and regardless of being uninhibited or not—, texts like Dücker’s *Himmelskörper* (2003), Julia Franck’s *Die Mittagsfrau* (2007), or Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Heimsuchung* (2007) use the genre of the family novel to revisit and interrogate the past. Accordingly, Gerstenberger and Herminhouse claim that “the family novel in particular has become an important vehicle [...] to reflect on not only the historical realities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but also on how this history has shaped familial relationships” (“German Literature” 6). Therefore, these novels establish a significant counterbalance to “Popliteratur” texts like *Soloalbum* or *Relax* from the mid- to late 1990s that showed negligible interest in the past or, for that matter, anything beyond the immediate surroundings of their protagonists. Novels like *Die Mittagsfrau* or *Heimsuchung* are therefore indicative of a return to more politically and historically anchored topics by both younger and well-established authors.¹³ In addition, it is noteworthy that novels like the ones by Franck, Dücker, and Erpenbeck also serve as a counterbalance in the sense that they “offer corrections of sorts to a literary genre closely related with male writers” (Gerstenberger “Fictionalizations” 95). Seen from this angle, these texts are not only a reaction to or, if you will, correction of apolitical “Popliteratur” but to what has been labelled “Väterliteratur”¹⁴ as well.

¹³ Examples would include Günter Grass’ *Im Krebsgang* (2002) or Uwe Timm’s *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003).

¹⁴ See Veas-Gulani and Cohen-Pfister: “This genre of *Väterliteratur*, or father literature, was written by second-generation authors and emerged in the 1970s and 1980s” (“Introduction” 6). For an analysis of masculinity and *Väterliteratur*, see: Kosta, Barbara. “Väterliteratur, Masculinity, and History: The Melancholic Texts of the 1980s.” *Conceptions of Postwar German Masculinity*. Ed. Roy Albany Jerome. State University of New York Press, 2001. Print; for a detailed investigation of the transformation of memory discourses in contemporary German culture, see: Fuchs, Anne. *Phantoms of War in Contemporary German Literature, Films and Discourse: The Politics of Memory*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2008. Print.

With respect to the works of Juli Zeh, two aspects of recent literary memory discourses as represented in the novels listed above are of importance—and notably, these aspects have little to do with thematic concerns. None of Zeh’s literary texts reference Germany’s genocidal past; at the same time, in light of a novel like *Corpus Delicti* that explicitly builds bridges between the past of the Early Modern period and the present, there is no reason to accuse her of historical amnesia. The return to political, historically anchored topics and the move towards protagonists who are aware of and interested in their sociopolitical surroundings, however, is very much present in Zeh’s texts, even if she inscribes these features into her narratives *ex negativo*.¹⁵ Secondly, the increased visibility of female writers in the landscape of contemporary German literature, as exemplified by Jenny Erpenbeck and Julia Franck, is to be seen in relation to Zeh’s role as an author and public intellectual as well. That being said, the fact that Zeh does not partake in memory discourses once again highlights her unique role within the literary market of the twenty-first century. The fact that the labels I have mentioned so far, be it “Fräuleinwunder,” “Popliteratur”, or even “Neue Lesbarkeit,” do not or only partially apply to Zeh’s work suggests that the author might not be a principle, as Volker Weidermann claims in his portrait in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*¹⁶, but a category of her own instead.

Claiming that Juli Zeh is an author who incorporates literary currents into her narratives without fully subscribing to trends as exemplified in the case of memory discourses would also ring true with respect to the repeatedly mentioned increasing transnational character of contemporary German literature. The fact that especially younger authors locate their texts in spaces that are not confined by Germany’s geopolitical borders is highlighted in the majority of

¹⁵ I borrow this expression from Patricia Herminghouse’s article on Juli Zeh quoted elsewhere.

¹⁶ Weidermann, Volker. “Das Prinzip Juli Zeh.” *Faz.net*. 1 August 2012. Web. 13 April 2016.

collected volumes—at least from the North American market—that provide an overview of German literature in the twenty-first century.¹⁷ Lyn Marven underscores the interrelation between local and global contexts when she applies the term “glocal” to a set of German-language novels of the new millennium (see “Introduction” 2), whereas Gerstenberger and Herminhouse see contemporary German literature very much in synch with its times: “At the beginning of the twenty-first century, German literature, highly commercialized and more cosmopolitan than before, has arrived in the age of globalization” (“German Literature” 9). Considering the fact that a large number of prominent contemporary German-language authors have a transnational background—Terézia Mora was born in Hungary, Alina Bronsky in the Soviet Union, Ilija Trojanow in Bulgaria, Saša Stanišić in Bosnia, to name but a few—the literary landscape of present-day Germany is a lot more versatile than any *Leitkultur*-debates cares to admit. Accordingly, Stuart Taberner asserts that “the profusion of transnational motifs in German-language novels today reflects a contemporary reality characterised by the interrelated phenomena of economic globalisation, mass migration, the huge growth of travel and tourism, and the universalising immediacy of the internet and new communication technologies” (“Introduction” 13). I will return to the aspect of transnationalism in Zeh’s texts in chapter five in greater detail; at this point, it may suffice to underscore that transnationalism is a textual attribute in contemporary German literature that is not limited to those authors who have a non-German background. Moving away from the traditional perspectives of exclusively focusing on authors with a minority background like Feridun Zaimoğlu or Emine Sevgi Özdamar, it was once again Taberner who has emphasized that texts that effortlessly transgress borders are also written by

¹⁷ In addition to articles collected in volumes that address the aspect of transnationalism in contemporary German literature and culture, see also the monograph: Biendarra, Anke S. *Germans Going Global: Contemporary Literature and Cultural Globalization*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012. Print; and the volume solely dedicated to transnationalism edited by Herrmann, Smith-Prei, and Taberner quoted elsewhere.

authors who come from within German borders. “Nonminority Germans [...],” he states, “are as itinerant as anyone else” (“Transnationalism” 625). This is true with respect to the choice of geographical setting as in Christian Kracht’s novels *Imperium* (2012) or Judith Hermann’s *Nichts als Gespenster* (2003) as well as intermingling global and local contexts, as demonstrated in Juli Zeh’s *Spieltrieb* through the incorporation of globally significant events like 9/11 into local settings.

At the end of this brief overview of some of the most important characteristics and thematic trends of the literary landscape of Germany at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one is yet again tempted to return to Fontane’s “ein weites Feld.” Following the debate about the state of contemporary German literature initiated by Frank Schirrmacher’s article “Idyllen in der Wüste,” the literary landscape presents itself as broad, versatile, and differentiated. The dominance of “Popliteratur” of the 1990s has been carried over into the new millennium through a discernible rejuvenation of German literature that resulted in debutants having a firm place in the literary market today next to well-established authors. Moreover, there has been a return to more accessible, commercially viable texts subsumed under the label “Neue Lesbarkeit.” The accessibility of literary texts, however, does not necessarily entail the choice of lightweight topics, as illustrated in family novels revisiting or reimagining Germany’s genocidal past. Concomitantly, there has been a move away from largely self-centered, ahistorical, and apolitical texts like those of the mid- to late 1990s towards politically engaged texts that demonstrate a renewed interest in the interrelationship between the lived-in world and intra-textual realities. More often than not, this lived-in world reveals itself as increasingly globalized with permeable borders for those privileged enough to travel without effort.

Almost of all the literary labels, currents, and trends mentioned above stand in relation to the work of Juli Zeh; however—arguably with the exception of politically committed literature¹⁸—none of them fully apply to her texts. Rather, one is well-advised to locate Zeh at the intersection of these trends and discourses. Elements of “Neue Lesbarkeit” echo in Zeh’s texts in that a novel like *Nullzeit* employs accessible narrative strategies just as there are echoes of transnationalism in texts like *Spieltrieb* and *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch*. To put it in another way, Zeh’s texts as well as her public persona oscillate between the literary currents outlined above without completely coming to rest in any particular camp. The task of this dissertation, then, is to trace the echoes and oscillations of the work of Juli Zeh within the context of contemporary German literature and to analyze in what fashion it is a category of its own.

Echoes in the Literary Market: The Work of Juli Zeh

In an interview with two of the editors of the collected volume *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature*, author Ilija Trojanow, a close friend of Juli Zeh and her collaborator on *Angriff auf die Freiheit*, has the following to say about her: “When we make fun of one another, I am the world citizen¹⁹ and she’s the German, even West German, bourgeois, local girl [...]. She would always say, I know nothing of the world, I write very German-centered books” (Herrmann and Smith-Prei “Appendix” 268). There is little to argue about Zeh’s reported self-description of being West German and bourgeois²⁰, as she was born in

¹⁸ For a lucid and detailed analysis of Juli Zeh as a distinctly political author, see Wagner 101-124.

¹⁹ To explain briefly, Trojanow was born in Bulgaria, has lived in Germany, Kenya, and South Africa and currently resides in Vienna. Trojanow’s world-citizenship is also expressed in his novels, e.g. in *Der Weltensammler* (2006) which is set in India, East Africa, and Arabia.

²⁰ In *Treideln*, Zeh even uses the hyperbole “Oberbürgerliche” (13) to describe her social background.

Bonn to an upper middle-class family. Her father, Wolfgang Zeh, had worked for the administration of the German Parliament and served as its administrative director from 2002 to 2006. Accordingly, Zeh grew up in an environment that indeed can be labeled West German in the sense that it was located in the heart of the political centre of pre-unification Germany. However, after having completed her *Abitur* in Bonn, the rest of the author's education is much less West German-centered. The very brief biographical sketch on Zeh's homepage lists her law studies in Passau and later Leipzig, as well as unspecified "längere Aufenthalte in Krakau und New York" ("Autorin"). Heinz-Peter Preußner's entry on Zeh in the *Kritische Lexikon der Gegenwartsliteratur* goes into further detail: "Praktika, Arbeitsstipendien, Studien und andere Auslandsreisen führten sie nach New York (Vereinte Nationen), nach Krakau, Polen (Osteuropastudium; Stipendium der Villa Decius), Zagreb, Kroatien (Deutsche Botschaft) und nach Sarajewo, Bosnien und Herzegowina (OHR) sowie nach Peking" ("Juli Zeh"). This suggests that Zeh's knowledge is quite a bit more cosmopolitan than she cares to admit in her self-description reported by Ilija Trojanow. It also suggests that she may have been born in a very traditionally West German environment, but does not share a view of her country of origin as being isolated from the rest of the world. In fact, it is a characteristic of Zeh's texts that they may be "German-centered" in the sense that they are set in a German context, but also go beyond national borders, either quite literally through characters who travel (*Adler und Engel*) or temporarily leave Germany (*Nullzeit*) or through the incorporation of events of global significance (9/11 in *Spieltrieb*) or discourses of marginalization that could be labeled universal (*Corpus Delicti*). In the end, then, Zeh not only "knows more about the world" than she admits, but her texts also say more about the world than the author's reported self-description of writing "very German-centered books" proposes.

Arguably a very German-centered aspect of Juli Zeh's education are her years at the *Deutsche Literaturinstitut (DLL)* in Leipzig. The institute was founded in 1955 and, since 1959, was known as the *Institut für Literatur 'Johannes R. Becher'* (see *deutsches-literaturinstitut.de*). Since 2005, the institute has been running under its current name and since 1995 has been offering its students a university diploma in literature.²¹ The *Deutsche Literaturinstitut* is a unique entity within the cultural landscape not only because of its history as a state-funded facility including all ideological implications that such funding entails, but also because it is still one of the most prominent university-affiliated facilities of its kind in Germany²². Another specificity of the *DLL* is the fact that the lecturers are authors themselves. Currently, Austrian author Josef Haslinger serves as director of the institute, the list of guest lectures includes names such as Kerstin Hensel, Christoph Hein, Herta Müller, Terézia Mora, and not least Juli Zeh herself. The list of graduates from the *DLL* is no less impressive and includes, among others, Clemens Meyer (graduating with *Als wir träumten*, 2006), Saša Stanišić (publishing his first novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon reparierte* in 2006), Judith Zander (*Dinge, die wir heute sagten* being her debut in 2010), and Simon Urban (graduating from the *DLL* with *Plan D* in 2011). Again, while the *DLL* is not the only facility of its kind, it is influential enough that Michael Braun in his study *Die deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur* writes about the professional development of budding authors in Germany: "Jeder kann prinzipiell Schriftsteller werden, im Selbstverlag, durch den Besuch von Schreibschulen. Am bekanntesten und am meisten

²¹ According to the institute's website, students have the opportunity to gain a "BA Literarisches Schreiben" as well as an MA in the form of a writing workshop for novels (see *deutsches-literaturinstitut.de*).

²² Michael Braun in his study *Die deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur* lists similar programs situated at the University of Heidelberg and Tübingen as well as other creative writing programs like the *Literarische Colloquium Berlin* (41-43).

erfolgsversprechend ist der ‘Leipziger Weg’” (41).²³ Braun refers to the fact that the program at the *DLL* generally results in the publication of a fictional work, as was the case with Zeh’s debut novel *Adler und Engel*, which she started writing while being a student at the *DLL* between 1996 and 2000. Hence, Zeh is part of a post-World War II tradition of professionally trained GDR and after 1990 professionally trained post-reunification authors who are familiarized with the workings of the literary market right from the start by virtue of being taught by authors as well as by being students of an institution that is an influential component of the literary market itself.

Being part of a group of professionally trained authors also comes with its drawbacks, though. In her poetics lecture *Treideln*, Zeh dedicates a section to her time at the *DLL* that reads as a defence of the institution itself and of the idea that it is possible to acquire creative writing skills by learning it within an academic setting.²⁴ “Der Hass, der jahrelang über dem Literaturinstitut ausgeschüttet wurde,” she writes, “war nicht von real existierenden Missständen befeuert” (62).²⁵ Instead, the institutionalization of the acquisition of creative writing for Zeh has a profound effect on the self-perception of authors and has furthermore significantly contributed to a rejuvenation of the post-unification literary market as a whole: “Als ich vor 16 Jahren anfang, am Institut in Leipzig zu studieren, gab es noch keine gesamtdeutsche Popliteratur. Es gab überhaupt keine jungen Autoren. Nach allgemeiner Auffassung befand sich ein Schriftsteller unter vierzig in der pränatalen Phase seiner Existenz” (64). While this assessment can be read as

²³ Here, Braun alludes to the “Bitterfelder Weg,” a term referring to two conferences held in Bitterfeld (Saxony-Anhalt) in 1959 and 1964. The purpose of these conferences was to create a closer relationship between authors and workers in order to foster a new cultural politics in the GDR. Braun reference to Bitterfeld once again emphasizes that the *DLL* originated in the GDR.

²⁴ Zeh has repeatedly revisited her time as a student of the *DLL* in her essayistic work, see for example “Genie Royal” (2002) and “Von der Heimlichkeit des Schreibens” (2005), both of which are included in her first collection of essays, *Alles auf dem Rasen*.

²⁵ Just like Michael Braun, Zeh clearly references the history of the *DLL* as originating in the GDR through her use of “real existierenden Missständen,” an allusion to the GDR’s self-proclaimed “real existierender Sozialismus”. Not the least, her reference to the institute’s origin also evokes its history as an academic facility for politically trained authors.

a simplification for the sake of provocation—Christian Kracht, for example, was only 29 years old when he published his highly successful debut novel *Faserland* in 1995—, there is still something to be said for the fact that the term ‘contemporary German literature’ was predominantly associated with authors such as Günter Grass or Martin Walser, who were both in their late sixties in the mid-1990s. According to Zeh, it is not the least due to institutions like the *DLL* that introduces young authors to the literary market that, over time, publishing houses, the feuilleton, and not the least the reading public have gradually changed and re-adapted their preconceptions of what it means to call someone a contemporary author. “Inzwischen,” Zeh continues to argue in *Treideln*, “ist es normal geworden, dass in den Verlagsprogrammen jedes Jahr Debütanten erscheinen, nicht nur *obwohl*, sondern *weil* sie Anfang zwanzig oder auch erst sechzehn und womöglich noch weiblich sind” (72-73). As a result of this changed attitude towards younger authors, debut novelists accordingly adapt to the professional demands of the market: “Viele junge Autoren sind heute Profis, noch bevor ihr erster Roman erscheint. Manch einem scheint nicht einmal ganz klar zu sein,” Zeh adds sarcastically, “dass man einen Roman verfassen muss, bevor man ihn veröffentlichen kann” (73). Against this backdrop, Zeh appears as a professional author in more than one sense of the word: She has entered the literary market quasi from within after absolving professional training, but also belongs to a generation of authors who “use postmodern media with virtuosity” (Preußner “Dystopia” 104), thus demonstrating a professional attitude towards the conditions of literary production in today’s media landscape.

Juli Zeh is not only an author who, due to her professional training and her career so far, is familiar with the workings of the literary market, she also is a writer who has gained significant acknowledgement from the literary market in the form of numerous prestigious

literary awards. Even before the publication of *Adler und Engel*, which was awarded with the *Deutsche Buchpreis* in the category best debut in 2002, Zeh had been awarded with the *Caroline Schlegel Preis* for her essayistic work (*juli-zeh.de*). Since then, the list of awards has only grown and includes the *Ernst Toller Preis* received in 2003, the European *Per Olov Enquist Prize* in 2005²⁶, the *Prix Cévennes* in 2008, the *Thomas Mann-Preis der Bayerischen Akademie der Schönen Künste und der Hansestadt Lübeck* in 2013, the *Hoffmann-von-Fallersleben-Preis für zeitkritische Literatur* in 2014, and the *Hildegard von Bingen Preis* received in 2015. Notably, the earlier prizes awarded to Zeh recognize not only the literary potential of the at that point relatively new author, but also the apparent political and, in the case of the *Prix Cévennes*, and the *Per Olov Enquist Prize*, European or transnational perspective of her work. It is particularly the political attribute of Zeh's work that finds recognition in the most recently awarded prizes that acknowledge the dense interrelationship between Zeh's narratives and the lived-in world in which they are embedded. Recognition for Zeh's work is not only limited to awards, though. Not least, Zeh is also an author whose texts sell well. One month after the publication of *Unterleuten*, *boersenblatt.net*, a portal for the literary market in Germany, lists the novel as number four on their bestseller list ("Bestseller Belletristik"); on the bestseller list of newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, the novel ranks even one position higher at number three ("Hardcover 17/2016"). Contributing to her visibility beyond the German literary market, her novels, according to the author's profile on the homepage of her previous publishing house Schöffling & Co.²⁷, circulate in translation in 35 languages ("Juli Zeh").²⁸

²⁶ Zeh was in fact the first author who has been awarded this prize.

²⁷ Juli Zeh has published with Schöffling & Co. since the beginning of her career, for her most recent publication *Unterleuten*, Zeh has switched publishing houses and is now under contract at Luchterhand.

²⁸ The *Prix Cévennes* combines the aspects of translation and literary recognition. Zeh received the award for the French translation of *Spieltrieb*, which was published under the title *La Fille sans qualités* in 2007.

One further aspect that characterizes Zeh's role within the landscape of contemporary German-language literature in addition to her professional training and familiarity with the configurations of the literary market and the amount of recognition her oeuvre has received through literary prizes is her remarkable productivity and the versatility of her textual output. In his entry on Juli Zeh in the *Kritische Lexikon der Gegenwartsliteratur*, Heinz-Peter Preußner acknowledges the author's productivity at the outset (see "Juli Zeh"). The list of major fictional publications alone is indeed impressive for a career that has so far spanned fifteen years. In addition to her debut novel *Adler und Engel*, Zeh has published six further novels to date, with a length ranging from 250 to more than 600 pages. *Adler und Engel*, a novel that connects the aftermath of the Balkan Wars of the 1990s with the personal struggles of the protagonists was followed by her second novel *Spieltrieb* in 2004, a text that combines reflections of the erosion of moral and ethical values in contemporary society with a thriller plot set in a boarding school in Zeh's hometown Bonn. In 2007, Zeh published her third novel *Schilf*. Similar to the way that *Spieltrieb* merges a suspenseful plot with theoretical elaborations on questions of ethics and morality, *Schilf* utilizes the story of a kidnapping to weave reflections on quantum physics and multiverse theories into the narrative. Two years later, in 2009, Zeh published *Corpus Delicti*, a novel set in the near future whose plot evolving around an oppressive governmental system based on health discourses of our present borrows from dystopian traditions established by the likes of George Orwell and Margaret Atwood. *Nullzeit*, published in 2012, returns to Zeh's by this point well-established narrative technique of using a suspenseful thriller in order to address broader sociopolitical questions, in this case matters of exile and political indifference in Western and neoliberal societies. Her most recent—and most voluminous—novel *Unterleuten* was published in the spring of 2016. Set in a small village just outside of Berlin, the novel

dissects the microcosm of small communities, thus confirming Preußner's claim that in Zeh's novels "Mikrokosmos und Makrokosmos [einander] reflektieren" ("Juli Zeh"), a narrative technique that the author had already established in her debut novel and to which she has remained faithful ever since.

As previously mentioned, yet another distinguishing characteristic of Zeh's work and her public persona within the field of contemporary German literature is the fact that she has established more than one profile. In addition to being writer of literary fiction, Zeh has also made a name for herself as an essayist whose texts are regularly published in major German newspapers from *Die Zeit* to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* to *Die Welt*. Again, productivity and versatility may not be meritorious in itself, but they are characteristic features of Zeh's essayistic work. A selection of her essays from the years 1999 to 2005 has been published as *Alles auf dem Rasen: Kein Roman* in 2006; selected essays from the years 2005 to 2014 have been published as *Nachts sind das Tiere* in 2014. The table of contents of her first essay collection *Alles auf dem Rasen* divides the contributions into the categories politics, society, law, writing, and travel²⁹, and, as a consequence, highlight the wide range of topics Zeh covers in her essayistic work. Within these categories, Zeh's texts cover everything from criticism of capitalism ("Der Kreis der Quadratur" (2005)) to musings on the term "Heimat" ("Fliegende Bauten" (2003)) to reflections on narrative perspectives ("Sag nicht ER zu mir" (2002)) to matters of child raising ("Wird schon" (2013)) to a call for a legally binding set of digital civil rights ("Wo bleibt der digitale Code Civil?" (2014)). At first sight, the range of topics seems arbitrary and may create the impression that Zeh contributes to public debates randomly. However, and this goes back to the aspect of echoes and oscillations in Zeh's work, a closer look reveals that one crucial aspect

²⁹ This categorization has been replaced by a chronological listing in *Nachts sind das Tiere*.

of Zeh's non-fictional texts is that they are more often than not companion pieces of her literary fiction and therefore not as randomly chosen with regards to their topic than would initially appear. Her first major non-fictional publication for instance, the travelogue *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* (2002), depicts the author's travels through Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Serbia and revisits one of the geographical settings of Zeh's debut novel *Adler und Engel*. When Zeh describes the war-torn region, its inhabitants and their struggles to overcome the devastation caused by the Balkan Wars of the mid-1990s, the text addresses the aftermath of the war that forms the background of her literary debut from a non-fictional perspective and in this manner offers a multi-perspective representation of the region.³⁰ Similarly, *Angriff auf die Freiheit: Sicherheitswahn, Überwachungsstaat und der Abbau bürgerlicher Rechte* (2009), written in collaboration with Ilija Trojanow, addresses issues like the erosion of privacy and civil rights in the wake of the implementation of anti-terror laws following the 9/11 attacks. Thoroughly researched and written in a deliberately provocative fashion, the text reads as the companion piece of Zeh's novel *Corpus Delicti* from the same year, a novel also dealing with the loss of privacy and terrorism. Particularly with respect to the corrosion of civil rights and efforts to monitor body data, a number of Zeh's shorter essays also echo topics on which she focusses in both *Corpus Delicti* and *Angriff auf die Freiheit*. "Der vermessene Mann" (2012), for example, analyses the Quantified-Self movement whose efforts to monitor body data in order to optimize bodily performance bears resemblance to the principles of the governmental system depicted in

³⁰ For a reading of Zeh's travelogue in conjunction with other texts that revisit the region in the aftermath of the war, see: Von Oppen, Karoline. "Nostalgia for Orient[ation]: Travelling Through the Former Yugoslavia with Juli Zeh, Peter Schneider, and Peter Handke." *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*. 41.3 (2005): 246-260. Print. For an analysis of *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* with respect to the ever-present danger of rape during her travels, see: Smith, Jill Suzanne. "Sounds of Silence: Rape and Representation in Juli Zeh's Bosnian Travelogue." *German Women's Writing in the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Hester Baer, and Alexandra M. Hill. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2015. 175-196. Print.

her novel. In “Es geht um etwas anderes”³¹ (2013), Zeh examines a speech by German chancellor Angela Merkel in which she had described the internet as “new ground” despite the fact that the German government had been using social media for years. Drawing attention to the fact that the surveillance of personal data in order to prevent terrorist attacks became common practice after the 9/11 attacks, the essay reads Merkel’s speech as “taktische Ahnungslosigkeit” (“Es geht um etwas anderes”) in order to conceal that Western governments want to ensure the continued collection of private data in the future.

Reading Zeh’s essayistic work as companion pieces to her literary fiction in the sense that she revisits the same topics in a different textual form equally works for her plays—and once again, *Corpus Delicti* serves as prime example. Originally, the novel was conceptualized and written as a play and was first performed in 2007 at the art festival *Ruhrtriennale* in 2007. Prior to *Corpus Delicti*, both *Spieltrieb* and *Schilf* had been adapted for the stage in 2006 and 2007 respectively. While dramatizations of Zeh’s novels add to the different channels through which texts are disseminating in today’s literary market—in addition to the traditional print version, her novels are available as audiobooks as well—, writing plays opens up a whole new market of mediating content. In the case of *Corpus Delicti*, Waltraud Maierhofer and Virginia McCalmont speculate that Zeh distributes the narrative “in a variety of media, possibly with the intention of reaching a different and younger audience than might be expected to attend subventioned theater productions or purchase the latest newspaper-reviewed hardcover” (“Juli Zeh’s *Corpus Delicti*” 383). While this claim is not verifiable, it is certainly not far-fetched to assert that the theater audience differs from the literary audience despite any potential overlap. Therefore, in her role as a playwright Zeh has the opportunity to reach an audience to which she might have no access as

³¹ This essay was republished under the title “#neuland” in the essay collection *Nachts sind das Tiere*.

a novelist or essayist. The topics she addresses in her plays are similar to those of her fictional work and, as a result, turn the plays into companion pieces of her novels that negotiate interrelated themes in a different form. Generally speaking, Zeh's plays tend towards satirical exaggeration in order to achieve the effect of critical reflection on the—more often than not: political³²—topic at hand. In *Der Kaktus* (2009), for example, the eponymous plant is taken in custody on charges of being a terrorist suspect or in *Yellow Line* (2012), written in collaboration with Charlotte Roos, in which security checks at airports are treated as arbitrary and taken to comical extremes. *203* (2011), like *Corpus Delicti*, borrows from science fiction and depicts an absurd and at first inscrutable scenario involving an apartment whose inhabitants voluntarily subject themselves to state surveillance and control. While these three plays are directly linked to topics Zeh focused on at the end of the first decade of the new millennium, *Good Morning, Boys and Girls* (2010) tackles a high school shooting, a topic on which Zeh had already briefly touched upon in *Spieltrieb*. Her most recent play, *Mutti* (2014), returns to political satire by using German chancellor Angela Merkel's nickname as an entry into a farcical comment on contemporary German politics.

At the conclusion of this brief portrayal of Juli Zeh's body of work, the question remains if there is a common denominator that not necessarily unites but at least links her texts regardless of whether they enter the literary market in the form of novels, non-fictional essays, or plays. Arguably, if there is indeed one commonality to all of her texts, it is what Claudia Breger has defined as the "project of making narrative sense of the contemporary world in its social and political dimensions" ("Moral Play?" 108) and Sonja Klocke as "literarische Form der

³² In her analysis of the reception of Zeh's plays, Sabrina Wagner also highlights that critics focus on the political component of the plays: "Betrachtet man die literaturkritische Rezeption der Theaterstücke insgesamt, wird sichtbar, dass sie—noch deutlicher als bei den Romanen—das Politische in den Mittelpunkt stellt" (*Aufklärer der Gegenwart* 92).

gesellschaftlichen Selbstbeobachtung” (“Das Mittelalter” 187). In addition, though—and I consider this as a central characteristic of Zeh’s oeuvre—, it revolves around the simultaneously simple and exceedingly complex question of how we—as individuals, as a society, and even as a species—want to live in the realities of the twenty-first century. Accordingly, all of her texts address questions of morality, ethics, and political involvement that concern the structural configuration of the contemporary world. The formal versatility of her textual output means that it is essential to pose this question in different media as well as to different reading publics. To be sure, the question of how we want to live corresponds to Zeh’s choice of “big topics” (Herminghouse “The Young Author” 269)—and, potentially, it is the considerable size of themes that helps to explain the suspicion with which Zeh’s work and public persona is occasionally confronted. In 2012, literary critic Volker Weidermann stated about Zeh that “sie kennt sich mit fast allem aus und hat zu allem eine Meinung” (“Das Prinzip Juli Zeh”). These words are ambiguous in that they allow for a reading with both positive and negative connotations. This ambiguity with regards to Weidermann’s words that present Zeh, depending on the angle one chooses to take, either as a well-informed individual who valuably contributes to public discourse or as someone who shares her opinion on all kinds of topics even if nobody asked for it, is indicative of the insecurity, suspicion, if not disdain with which Zeh and her work is confronted. Sabrina Wagner concisely summarizes this aspect of Zeh’s position within the literary public: “Wie kaum ein anderer Gegenwartsautor polarisiert Juli Zeh: Die einen halten Zeh für eine ‘ganz ungewöhnlich begabte Schriftstellerin’ und loben die ‘kenntnisreiche Erzählerin’, andere nennen sie altklug oder eine Streberin, wieder andere fühlen sich gar so provoziert, dass sie in ihrer Kritik jegliche Sachlichkeit vermissen lassen” (*Aufklärer der Gegenwart* 136). Notably, Wagner here exclusively concentrates on the reception of Zeh in the

German feuilleton. The reception of Zeh's texts in academic discourse paints a different picture, one that is arguably less enthusiastic due to the alleged objectivity of academic writing but no less full of provocative readings.

Echoes in Academia: Scholarship on Juli Zeh

In 2008, Patricia Herminhouse introduced Zeh to academic literary discourse with her article "The Young Author as Public Intellectual: The Case of Juli Zeh." True to the title of her article, Herminhouse succeeds in providing the reader with a succinct yet comprehensive overview of Zeh's work up until that point and focusses specifically on the author's non-fictional work.

Herminhouse is particularly interested in delineating what differentiates Zeh's public persona as well as her literary works from other authors of her generation, an interest expressed in the question how Zeh "managed to escape the trivializing label *literarisches Fräuleinwunder* [...], which Volker Hage had introduced in 1999 to characterize a generation of popularly successful women writers" ("The Young Author" 269). To answer this question, Herminhouse mentions "the big topics" (269) that Zeh addresses in her first two novels in addition to the author's intellectual profile, which includes a PhD in international law, her frequent contributions to public discourse via essays and not least her studies and subsequent teaching experience at the *Deutsche Literaturinstitut* in Leipzig. While these features in themselves draw a portrait of Zeh as an exceptional figure within Germany's literary and cultural landscape, the "big topics" Herminhouse refers to cement this impression with respect to her narrative fiction. In a brief analysis of Zeh's first two novels—*Schilf* is again eerily absent—, Herminhouse predominantly focuses on the lack of moral and ethical values in the characters. The erosion of social values

appears as a red thread, at least in Zeh's earlier texts, and accordingly also lies at the centre of other academic publications on Zeh like those by Claudia Breger and Stephen Brockmann. Significantly, Herminghouse highlights that Zeh first and foremost presents the negative consequences of said erosion of ethical and moral values exemplified in characters like Max from *Adler und Engel* and Alev from *Spieltrieb*. The depiction of negative consequences draws the reader's attention to what is missing in society today, or, as Herminghouse poignantly puts it, "one might say that the values she [Zeh] seeks to advance in the public sphere are inscribed *ex negativo* in her literary productions" (277). This narrative technique is a characteristic of her texts on which the majority of other scholars writing on this author have focussed as well, and—next to raising ethical and moral questions—emerges as a second thematic commonality of Zeh's oeuvre.

The same year that Herminghouse published her introductory article on Zeh, Claudia Breger in "Moral Play? Poetics, Ethics and Politics in Juli Zeh's *Spieltrieb*" presents a close reading of Zeh's second novel that resonates with some of the characteristics Herminghouse determined as being characteristic of Zeh's work. Breger's arguably most important innovation, however, is the fact that she is the first one to explore the poetological dimension of Zeh's work, more specifically poetological differences between Zeh's debut novel and its successor. Instead of being written in the first person like *Adler und Engel*, *Spieltrieb* utilizes "an overall coherent, linear, past-tense 'third person' account" ("Moral Play?" 109), a decision that, as Breger outlines, for Zeh does not come without moral and ethical implications. To unravel her analysis, Breger supports her reading of *Spieltrieb* with poetological positions that Zeh develops in the essay "Sag nicht ER zu mir" (2002). In this essay, Zeh elaborates on authority of third person narrators that she likens to having god-like powers over the narration. This implementation of an

auctorial narrative perspective, however, is counterbalanced with reservations concerning the fact that such a position is also inherently undemocratic. Against the background of this friction between the wish to be “Herr in der Welt seiner Geschichte” (110) and its ethical repercussions, Breger, in her careful narratological reading of Zeh’s novel that also considers the intertextual allusions to Robert Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*—which appears in Zeh’s novel as well as in her poetological essay—, investigates how “the novel develops the dilemmas implied in Zeh’s poetological plea for an inescapably compromised authority” (122).

Shifting the focus from form to content, Sonja Klocke in her analysis of *Spieltrieb* “Transnational Terrorism, War, and Violence: Globalization and Transborder Exchanges in Juli Zeh’s *Spieltrieb*,” (2011) addresses the complex interrelation between the local setting of the novel and its global context of the twenty-first century. More specifically, Klocke focuses on how “political incidents of global significance” (“Transnational Terrorism” 521) like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have an impact on the character constellations in *Spieltrieb*, thus highlighting the strong ties between non-diegetic realities of our present and their literary negotiation in Zeh’s novels. In Klocke’s own words, her article investigates “how national and international politics, global economy, migration, and international terrorism affect individuals in a personal way” (521). Serving as a qualifier to Zeh’s own claim that she writes very German-centered books, Klocke demonstrates how Zeh’s narrative depiction of the microcosm of a school in Germany at the beginning of the millennium is embedded in a global context. Through a close reading of the three main characters of the novel, the students Ada, Alev, and their teacher Smutek, the article unravels the complex transnational network in which these characters are situated as well as the generational divide that separates them. While Klocke, very much in line with other analyses of the text, sees the students as representatives of a “new, global imagined world explicitly devoid

of morals” (525), she sees Smutek, who due to his Polish background bears transnational characteristics of his own, as opposing the students’ nihilistic convictions. This trait, however, makes him the perfect target for the game Ada and Alev devise. In a further step, the game the students ‘play’ with their teacher is seen as a manifestation of “the corrosion of the welfare state [...] in favour of a transnational economy driven by the desire for profit” (531). Klocke characterizes this development in negative terms, while she at the same time repeatedly highlights that *Spieltrieb* avoids the trap of falling back into a “good/bad dichotomy” (535) and establishes a challenging narrative that prompts the reader to challenge his or her own belief system.

Stephen Brockmann in “Juli Zeh, *Spieltrieb*: Contemporary Nihilism” engages, as the title of his article suggests, with the question of “nihilism and the possibility—or impossibility—of creating functioning human relationships and social structures in the context of a world perceived by large numbers of its inhabitants as devoid of meaning” (“Juli Zeh” 63) in a selection of Zeh’s novels. The thematic focus on contemporary configurations of nihilism allows Brockmann to draw illuminating parallels between *Adler und Engel*, *Spieltrieb*—the main focus of his analysis—, *Corpus Delicti*, and *Schilf*, a novel that is often neglected in research on Zeh.³³ All of these novels, as diverse as they might be with respect to their content, are unified by being narratives on “the contemporary crisis of values and moral hypocrisy” (66), as Brockmann puts it in the context of his reading of *Adler und Engel*. While focusing on the erosion of values and the way that this erosion is exemplified through characters like Alev, one of the protagonists of

³³ One notable exception was published in an issue of the yearbook *Gegenwartsliteratur* in 2015, see: Könneker, Carsten. “Kopenhagener Deutung versus Multiversum: Narrativierte Physik in Juli Zehs Roman *Schilf*.” *Zeitkritische Autorinnen/engaged Literature of Female Authors: Gegenwartsliteratur - Ein Germanistisches Jahrbuch/A German Studies Yearbook (14/2015)*. Eds. Jennifer Kapczynski, Paul M. Lützel, and Erin McGlothlin. Tübingen: Stauffenberg Verlag, 2015. 103-120. Print.

Spieltrieb, Brockmann emphasizes that Zeh's second as well as her other novels on which he focuses are ultimately not nihilistic themselves. What Zeh's texts demonstrate, Brockmann argues convincingly, is that the nihilistic worldview that a character like Alev promotes ultimately leads to his downfall. Put differently, the world that Alev creates for himself ignores "the existence of a real world that lies beyond his control" (72). A character entrenched in his individual worldview to such an extreme, however, is bound to fail because, as Brockmann argues, it is imperative to bring "our conceptions of the world into conformity with the world" (72). However, Brockmann's article does not suggest that leading a conformal life is the golden path to successfully make it through the realities of the new millennium. Rather, his analysis implies that an excessively individualistic worldview devoid of "morality and values" (72) is not sustainable in the long run and that Zeh's characters have to "learn to make a distinction between liberalism and indifference" (73) in order to offer "a glimpse of hope" (72) for the grim realities Zeh's characters inhabit.

Zeh's fourth novel *Corpus Delicti* has gained equally high attention from scholars as *Spieltrieb*. In light of the fact that the text is set in the middle of the twenty-first century, it is not surprising that questions of genre classification play a role in articles devoted to an analysis of this text. Carrie Smith-Prei combines questions concerning the classification of the text as utopian or dystopian and issues of corporeality to the *Relevanter Realismus* debate spawned by an essay published by Thomas Hettche, Matthias Politycki and others in *Die Zeit* in 2005, a debate that will re-emerge throughout this dissertation. In her 2012 article "Relevant Utopian Realism: The Critical Corporeality of Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti*," Smith-Prei coins the term "hyperrelevant utopian realism" (111) to capture the often hyperbolic references to "DNA testing, chip implantation, and in-toilet bowl analysis of urine" (111) found in the novel that,

significantly, go beyond a “mere mimetic portrayal of politics” (111). The truly relevant aspect of *Corpus Delicti*, Smith-Prei argues, is the way in which Zeh encourages “politically or ethically aware reading” (111). By over-emphasizing the negative aspects of a potential future, Zeh challenges the reader to have an impact on his or her environment in order to prevent the sociopolitical developments taken to the extreme as presented in the novel: “Negativity,” as Smith-Prei states, “must be understood, like ambivalence, as sparking critical reasoning” (112). Smith-Prei shows how Zeh employs this narrative technique through the depiction of corporeality in *Corpus Delicti*. Set in a society that has established biological well-being as the highest possible good, healthy bodies are representative of systemic principles of society whereas “the natural or unhealthy body [represents] the rebellious norm” (115). In her analysis of the novel, Smith-Prei demonstrates how bodies are used as means of social control in an attempt to eradicate all non-normative bodies from the public sphere. In an act of individual, private, and even intimate rebellion, *Corpus Delicti*’s protagonist Mia is able to regain possession of her body previously controlled by the repressive system: “By the end of the novel, her body is no longer an instrument, but biological and genealogical material, and thereby solely belongs to her” (119). The intimacy of the private body is turned into an act of individual political rebellion against a system that has abolished privacy in order to govern its citizens. This act of individual rebellion challenges the norms of the society depicted in the novel and suggest that they must not be taken as unalterable. Similar to Stephen Brockmann’s reading of *Spieltrieb* that highlights that the literary representation of negative character traits ultimately instigates hope in the reader, Smith-Prei also emphasizes how negativity in Zeh’s text can be turned against the system from which it stems. Both essays, then, are indicative of the fact that society in Zeh’s

diegetic world may be repressive, but also subject to change if a protagonist like Mia Holl does not accept the rules of society as fixed normalized constituents.

As I will further investigate in chapters four and five, *Corpus Delicti* is a text that utilizes different timelines to unravel its narrative. Klocke as well as Maierhofer and McCalmont have focused on the interrelation between past, present, and future in the text. Klocke uses a quote from the novel³⁴ as the title for her essay that examines the features “Aufstörung, Verstörung und Entstörung” (“Das Mittelalter” 185) in *Corpus Delicti*. Using the ability of literature to intervene in and perturb public discourse as an analytical lens, Klocke states that Zeh literally forces “die Rezipienten ihrer Schriften [...], sich mit den von ihr beklagten rechtsstaatlichen Fehlentwicklungen auseinanderzusetzen” (186). The purpose of this, analogous to Smith-Prei’s claim that the depiction of negativity sparks critical thinking, is for Klocke to raise awareness for “die gegenwärtige Gefährdung der bestehenden rechtsstaatlichen Grundprinzipien” (187) in the readership, fueled by the hope that Zeh’s readers might become active and prevent the future society depicted in *Corpus Delicti* from becoming reality. Klocke, and this is another analogy to Smith-Prei’s article, argues that the unhealthy body within the world of the narrative attacks the very principles of normativity established by the governmental system. “Der kranke Körper wird somit zum Politikum, und Krankheit wird assoziiert mit Schuld,” (191) Klocke states and uses the link between sickness and guilt to describe protagonist Mia as ‘guilty’ in the sense that she suffers from the loss of her deceased brother. The ensuing legal case, as Klocke convincingly shows, bears similarities to witch trials of the Early Modern period and Mia is in fact repeatedly referred to as witch. For the reader of the novel, the effect of the connection between the past of the Middle Ages and the dystopian future is one of disturbance, an effect even heightened by the

³⁴ “Das Mittelalter ist keine Epoche. Mittelalter ist der Name der menschlichen Natur” (Zeh *Corpus Delicti* 235).

fact that the text further links the events of the plot to terrorist trials of the present as well. In consequence, Klocke argues, the reader is prompted to recognize patterns of marginalization that have been established centuries ago. This recognition of patterns has the effect of disturbing the reader and stands in close relationship to the objective of the text in general that Klocke defines as “Versuch der *Entstörung* der *gestörten* und von *Zerstörung* bedrohten Demokratien” (201). Once more, the scholarly analysis of one of Zeh’s texts highlights how her narratives motivate the reader to take a critical stance towards the literary representation of reality, even if it is heightened to an extreme as in the case of *Corpus Delicti*. A disturbance of the reader’s perception of sociopolitical realities and societal norms usually taken for granted consequently appears as a thematic thread in Zeh’s novels.

Accordingly, the disturbance of the reader also is part of Maierhofer and McCalmont’s analysis of *Corpus Delicti*. In their article “Juli Zeh’s *Corpus Delicti* (2009): Health Care, Terrorists, and the Return of the Political Message” (2012), the authors focus on several aspects already covered by Smith-Prei and Klocke, such as questions of genre classification and the interdependency of the novel’s different timelines. With regards to the inclusion of the analogy between the diegetic future world of the text and the Early Modern Period, Maierhofer and McCalmont conclude that “basic [civil and human] rights gained through a long and complex historical process and taken for granted today, are fragile and in danger of being lost due to the unchanging human nature” (“Juli Zeh’s *Corpus Delicti*” 387), thus once again underscoring the novel’s cautionary qualities. One aspect McCalmont and Maierhofer explicitly address that is only covered tangentially in other articles on *Corpus Delicti* is the role of science and religion. In their reading, Zeh’s novel appears as a warning for those who believe that “the victory of science and reason in societal thought would usher in a new era of peace and stability” (388).

Necessarily going back to the witch motif woven into the narrative, the authors dedicate a section of their article to decoding religious symbols like veils, crosses, and martyrs, coming to the conclusion that the text does not reiterate the traditional separation of science and religion. Instead, the authors claim, “Zeh portrays science and religion as two sides of the same coin, the two endpoints of a broad spectrum that are more similar to one another than either endpoint is to the middle of the spectrum” (389). This specific focus of analysis aside, McCalmont and Maierhofer come to a conclusion that reads very similar to those by Brockmann, Smith-Prei, and Klocke: “The novel educates and seeks to mobilize the reader as a critical political thinker” (390). The characteristic of Zeh’s novels to instigate critical thinking in the reader is directly connected to Zeh’s other major roles within the literary market and the public sphere, the roles of essayist and public intellectual. Aware of the field of tension between the desire to convey a political message via literary means and the implied danger of a loss of aesthetic merit, Zeh clearly favors the form of the essay when it comes to explicitly political writing. “Um dem Ausschließlichkeitsverhältnis von Literatur und Politik zu entgehen, wird ein zeitgenössischer Autor, wenn ihn das Sendungsbewusstsein packt, regelmäßig nicht zur Form des Romans, sondern zum Essay greifen” (135), she writes in her poetics lecture *Treideln*. Zeh has done the latter frequently and continues to do so. While almost all scholars writing on Zeh mention and/or briefly discuss the political component of Zeh’s essayistic work³⁵, Smith-Prei in her article “Juli Zeh and the Desire for the Political in Contemporary Literature” (2015) explores the aspect of the political and its implication for how the reader experiences the contemporary in greater depth.

³⁵ See for example Herminhouse 277-281; Brockmann 62; and Preußner (n.p.).

Using Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) as the analytical lens of her article³⁶, Smith-Prei investigates how Zeh's texts as well as Zeh as a public intellectual cling to the political sphere even if it, to quote Berlant, "appears as a shrunken, broken, or distant place of activity among elites" (*Cruel Optimism* 227). Smith-Prei, again borrowing a term from Berlant, reads this continuous attachment to the political as the expression of a "desire for the political" (227) that appears as an attribute of Zeh's writings. The article then suggests that "literature in particular might be a space in which to develop such a new practice [of politics], particularly through the reader's affective experience of the reading act" (Smith-Prei "Juli Zeh and the Desire for the Political" 89). The latter aspect is exemplified by an analysis of narrative techniques employed in *Angriff auf die Freiheit* (2009), a text in which Zeh and her co-author Ilija Trojanow directly address the reader and "establish an intimacy with their readership" (92) that in turn results in an affective attachment with the political agenda the book pursues. In her conclusion, Smith-Prei highlights that texts like *Angriff auf die Freiheit* and *Corpus Delicti* through their narrative construction suggest and certainly direct, but not necessarily prescribe, a definite interpretation of the text. This task ultimately remains in the hands of the reader, which goes back to Zeh's project to initiate critical thinking through her narratives. "Zeh's reader is faced with assessing his or her position toward understanding contemporary literature as engaged literature," (97) Smith-Prei writes at the end of her article, eventually closing her article by stating that Zeh's texts vividly display "their own ardent belief in politics" (97), regardless of how cruelly optimistic this attachment to literary politics might be.

³⁶ Even though I will come back to Berlant's text at a later point of my analysis, it is imperative for my discussion of Smith-Prei's article here to provide a definition of "cruel optimism." In Berlant's words, "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (*Cruel Optimism* 1). The optimism inherent to holding on to, for example, a specific political project is "cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (2).

Notably, all scholarly articles discussed above emerged from North American academia. On the one hand, this can be explained by the simple fact that this dissertation is conceptualized within and written for the same context. On the other hand, and more importantly, the themes German academics have chosen to analyze in Zeh's work are of lesser importance to my contribution to research on this author. The relevance of articles focussing on specific topics like emotional insensitivity³⁷, the manner in which *Schilf* incorporates physics into the narrative³⁸, or didactic reflections on how to incorporate *Spieltrieb* into a skill-based curriculum³⁹ notwithstanding, they contribute little to a dissertation that is primarily concerned with Zeh's poetics, modes of realistic writing, the political component of Zeh's work, and reflections on the conceptualization of contemporary literature. One notable exception, however, is Sabrina Wagner's study *Aufklärer der Gegenwart: Politische Autorschaft zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts* (2015) that dedicates a chapter to Juli Zeh. Setting out to develop a "Typologie gegenwärtiger Modelle politischer Autorschaft, die die Selbstthematization sowie die Fremdverortung von Autoren als Intellektuelle in öffentlichen Diskursen erfasst" (17), Wagner focuses on Zeh, Uwe Tellkamp, and Ilija Trojanow. To conceptualize the configuration of contemporary political authorship in the case of these three authors, Wagner chooses the headings "Blick aus der Mitte" for the 'West German local girl' Zeh, "Blick von außen" for the Bulgarian-born Trojanow, and "Blick von oben" for the more highbrow Tellkamp (25). Given that Wagner puts great emphasizes on poetological statements from all three authors, there will

³⁷ See: Schertler, Eva-Maria. *Tod und Trauer in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2011. Print.

³⁸ See: Könneker, Carsten. "Kopenhagener Deutung versus Multiversum: Narrativierte Physik in Juli Zehs Roman *Schilf*." *Zeitkritische Autorinnen/engaged Literature of Female Authors: Gegenwartsliteratur - Ein Germanistisches Jahrbuch/A German Studies Yearbook (14/2015)*. Eds. Jennifer Kapczynski, Paul M. Lützel, and Erin McGlothlin. Tübingen: Stauffenberg Verlag, 2015. 103-120. Print.

³⁹ See: Wernisch, Christa. "Wie Literaturgeschichte in einen kompetenz-orientierten Unterricht integriert werden kann am Beispiel von Juli Zehs *Spieltrieb*." *Informationen zur Deutschdidaktik: Ide: Zeitschrift für den Deutschunterricht in Wissenschaft und Schule (4/2012)*. Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag, 2012. 95-101. Print.

necessarily be an overlap between her analysis and my own investigation of Zeh's self-proclaimed "anti-poetics" in chapter two. However, in line with the chosen methodological approach, *Aufklärer der Gegenwart* does not engage with Zeh's literary fiction on an analytical level whereas *Echoes and Oscillations* combines the analysis of general characteristics of Zeh's work (including her public persona) with close readings of her fictional and non-fictional texts. Nevertheless, Wagner's study is a central contribution to scholarship on Zeh, not the least because it veers away from focusing on the interrelationship between Zeh's professional training as a jurist and her body of work⁴⁰ and highlights the more general—and arguably: longer-lasting—political aspects of her writing. This feature of Zeh's writing necessarily plays a key role in what Wagner calls the "poetologische Selbstentwurf" (101) that Zeh has developed over the years. While Wagner investigates Juli Zeh's poetics lecture at the University of Tübingen in 2010 in great detail, the following chapter concentrates on the author's second poetics lecture, held in the summer of 2013 at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, and published under the seemingly curious title *Treideln*.

⁴⁰ See for example: Weitin, Thomas. "Ermittlung der Gegenwart: Theorie und Praxis unsouveränen Erzählens bei Juli Zeh." *Postsouveränes Erzählen*. Ed. Thomas and Niels Weber. *LiLi Zeitschrift für Literatur und Linguistik* 42.165 (2012):67-86. Print; Haberland, Detlef: "'Denk ich an Deutschland ...' Juli Zehs ästhetisch-politische Position im Politik-, Mentalitäts- und Wertewandel." *Literarische Koordinaten der Zeiterfahrung*. Ed. Joanna Ławnikowska-Koper, and Jacek Rzeszutnik. Wrocław: ATUT, 2008. 116-131. Print.

Chapter 2: Poetocetamol 500mg – The Anti-Poetics of Juli Zeh

In the summer of 2013, Juli Zeh held the annual poetics lecture at the Goethe Universität in Frankfurt and published the script with the title *Treideln* prior to the first lecture in June of the same year. The lecture marks a fitting starting point for the analysis of Zeh's poetological positions for a number of reasons. Firstly, by holding the lecture in Frankfurt, Zeh joins a number of well-established authors⁴¹ who have held the lecture before her and who have made the Frankfurt poetics lecture a staple of literary discourse in Germany that is located at the intersection of academia and the literary public. Secondly, the publication of the script of *Treideln* with Zeh's former publishing house Schöffling leads to a wide dissemination of her opinions on poetics. The easily available *Treideln*—also published on DVD in 2014 and as a paperback in 2015—thus stands in stark contrast to Zeh's first poetics lecture *Aufgedrängte Bereicherung* (2010) that she held at the University of Tübingen.⁴² While the latter is also available in print, it was published on a much smaller scale and, with the exception of Sabrina Wagner's *Aufklärer der Gegenwart*, finds little to no recognition in academic research on Zeh. In short, *Treideln* may not be the first comprehensive compendium of the author's positions on aspects of literature and literary production ranging from narrative perspectives to elaborations on the roles of the author, the reader, and the function of literature for the society within which it circulates, but it is arguably the most visible one. Given this visibility and prominence within her list of publications, *Treideln* can be considered to be a caesura for the author's work as a whole.

⁴¹ The first Frankfurt poetics lecture was held by Ingeborg Bachmann in 1959. Since then, the list of authors lecturing about their perceptions of and attitudes towards poetics includes Heinrich Böll, Jurek Becker, Rainald Goetz, Marie Luise Kaschnitz, Marlene Streeruwitz, Uwe Timm, Martin Walser, Christa Wolf, Monika Maron, and many others. For a full list, see: <https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/44355962/archiv>.

⁴² For an analysis of Zeh's poetological positions developed in her Tübingen lecture, see: Wagner 106-115.

While being presented and advertised as an original text, *Treideln* in fact contains new as well as revised material that Zeh had previously published in a number of newspapers as well as in the context of her first poetics lecture *Aufgedrängte Bereicherung*. Issued a little more than a decade after Zeh's literary debut *Adler und Engel* and at a point where she had firmly established herself within the German-language literary market⁴³, it is a comprehensive poetological and narratological work that I propose to read as an intermediate résumé of her reflections on literary production. In this sense, *Treideln* serves as the caesura mentioned above: it marks the moment in Zeh's career where the focus is not on producing new texts or their commercial promotion, but instead on looking back at her work and, additionally, on shedding light on how this work has been conceived.

Before shifting the focus to Zeh's poetics lecture, however, I begin this chapter by delineating poetological and narratological positions Zeh had expressed in a selection of essays that precede *Treideln*. Published scatteredly over the course of several years, these essays will also be taken into account for the reading of the poetics lecture because they at times illustrate Zeh's take on authorship and the relationship between author, reader, and text in a way that complements the arguments laid out in *Treideln*. The chapter then turns to the structure and multiple voices of *Treideln* that challenges and broadens the very form of a poetics lecture. Zeh achieves this effect by presenting her ideas in fictitious email exchanges to a number of recipients instead of following a more traditional format that would devote one lecture to narrative perspective, one to authorship, and one to the role of literature, for example.⁴⁴ Rather than

⁴³ As outlined in the introduction of *Echoes and Oscillations*, in addition to the five major novels and numerous essays Zeh had published by the time she wrote *Treideln*, the literary industry had acknowledged her work with a number of prestigious awards, the *Ernst Toller Preis*, *Per Olov Enquist Prize*, and *Carl Amery Literaturpreis* among them.

⁴⁴ In *Aufgedrängte Bereicherung*, Zeh had chosen a slightly more traditional format by dedicating one lecture to writing under the title "Warum schreiben? Eine Anti-Poetik" (*Aufgedrängte Bereicherung* 7) and one to publishing under the title "Warum veröffentlichen? Eine Verteidigung" (69) respectively.

choosing this approach, Zeh breaks up thematic blocks and organizes them parallel to each other, thereby not only avoiding hierarchies but also allowing for a demanding reading experience for the recipient. For the sake of comprehensibility, I will re-transform the parallel presentation of themes in Zeh's lecture into thematic blocks and focus on her elaborations on the author, the reader, and, finally, texts. Concomitant to these close readings and at the heart of this chapter lies the exploration of the seemingly paradoxical "anti-poetics" of Zeh's lecture. *Treideln* does not contain a definition of the term. In her first poetics lecture *Aufgedrängte Bereicherung*, however, she attempts to define what is "anti" about her elaborations on writing, literature, and publishing: "anti' deshalb, weil ich den originären Schreibantrieb in einer halbbewussten Sphäre beheimatet sehe, die viel zu wenig logisch und planvoll funktioniert, um poetikfähig zu sein" (69-70). In this definition, Zeh links poetics with the incentive to write that, according to her, defies being forced into the logic of poetological rules. Additionally, Zeh links the term "anti-poetics" in *Aufgedrängte Bereicherung* to the relationship between author and reader, a relationship to which she devotes considerable attention in *Treideln* as well: "Anti' deshalb, weil Ihre Bereicherung (als Leser) und meine Bereicherung (als Autor) zunächst einmal in keinerlei Verbindung zueinander stehen" (13). Without going into further detail about the idiosyncracies of Zeh's description of the author-reader relationship at this point, the important thing to note is that the prefix "anti" hints at Zeh's adversarial approach towards traditional definitions or preconceptions of literary terms like "poetics" or the author-reader relationship and strives to work against them. The same can be said for *Treideln* in which "anti-poetics" remains self-proclaimed and, less elaborately than in *Aufgedrängte Bereicherung*, simply denotes that Zeh throughout her lecture maintains the position not to have a poetics at all. The "anti-poetological" aspect of *Treideln* can therefore be described as the fact that Zeh expressively rejects the term

poetics for herself and her own writing. This does not mean, though, that Zeh generally rejects the concept “poetics” in itself. Zeh’s position to not have a poetics is on the contrary a poetological one in the sense that she is not willing to allow a set of rules that regulate how to construct a text to interfere with her writing process. To put it in different words, the analysis will show that Zeh’s approach to make poetological rules only to immediately break them is a poetics in itself that guides the creation of literary fiction and non-fictional texts alike.

Poetological Beginnings

In a 2003 article published in *Der Spiegel*, Juli Zeh recalls her experiences of being a student at the *Deutsche Literaturinstitut* in Leipzig from 1996 to 2000. She writes, “es käme der Quadratur des Kreises gleich, ein starres Instrumentarium an Regeln und Bewertungskriterien auf literarische Texte anwenden zu wollen” (“Schreiben wie Goethe”). Ten years later, now a well-established author within contemporary German-language literature, her skeptical perspective on poetics that she expresses in the quote above had not changed. When invited to hold the 2013 poetics lecture at Goethe University in Frankfurt/Main, Zeh’s response, albeit polite, was markedly dismissive:

Sehr geehrte Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt am Main, herzlichen Dank für die Einladung zur Frankfurter Poetikvorlesung. Ich fühle mich sehr geehrt. Trotzdem muss ich leider absagen. Im Jahr 2013 werde ich mit dem Verfassen mehrerer Romane, Theaterstücke, Essays, Drehbücher, E-Mails, Steuererklärungen, Tagebucheinträge und

Einkaufszettel so beschäftigt sein, dass mir zum Ausarbeiten einer Poetikvorlesung leider die Zeit fehlt. Mit freundlichen Grüßen, Juli Zeh. (*Treideln* 7)

This statement, the first entry in the collection of fictitious email exchanges that form the textual body of *Treideln*, is a curious one to make at the beginning of a poetics lecture, arguably leaving her readership wondering what to expect on the following two hundred pages. The form of the entry, not least by virtue of its formal address “Sehr geehrte” and farewell expression “Mit freundlichen Grüßen,” simulates a level of authenticity that prompts the reader to take it as factual. However, there is no evidence here or anywhere else in her poetics lecture that this or any of the following correspondences had actually been sent. At the same time, the salutation “Sehr geehrte Goethe Universität” in addition to the content of Zeh’s response also marks it as humorous, even slightly mischievous in the sense that the author deems the writing of tax returns and shopping lists more important than developing a poetics lecture. The beginning of *Treideln* demonstrates that what the reader can expect from the remainder of the text is going to be playful. Playful is not to be understood in the sense that the poetics lecture mocks its subject matter, but rather in a way that keeps the term “poetics” at a distance. Choosing a fictional written form in addition to a comical beginning differs greatly from what the audiences might expect from the opening words of a lecture and hints at a provocative poetics that promises to undermine preconceptions of what it should or must be.

These formal aspects aside, what Zeh’s opening statement demonstrates most clearly is that the prospect of squaring the circle by theoretically reflecting on the rules of construction of her own writing was not on her agenda at the time she received the invitation, even within a respectable framework like the Frankfurt poetics lecture. The reason for this rejection is

surprisingly simple: “Ich habe keine Poetik. Niemand hat eine Poetik, jedenfalls nicht, solange er Bücher schreibt” (11). Still, the fact that Zeh does not adhere to or even has an elaborate “starres Instrumentarium an Regeln” when it comes to writing does not mean that she refuses to reflect on the creation of literature and its functions and purposes. On the contrary, over the years Zeh has published a number of essays in which she outlined her take on the role of the author in particular and the possibilities of literature in general. Her first collection of essays, *Alles auf dem Rasen* (2004), for example, includes the programmatic text “Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg,” a modified version of her acceptance speech after being rewarded the *Ernst-Toller Preis* in 2003. In this text, Zeh addresses the oft-repeated lament that fiction written by authors of her generation is apolitical, an issue to which she would eventually return in greater detail in *Treideln*. In “Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg,” Zeh claims that members of her generation are characterized by a heightened sense of individualism and therefore much more hesitant to identify themselves with political factions. As a consequence, while authors certainly do have opinions on political matters, these do not necessarily find their way into the authors’ texts. In other words, political matters are discussed by authors in private, but not necessarily in a literary public, a fact Zeh deems to be “unendlich paradox” (“Auf den Barrikaden” 217). Notably, this statement is generalizing and stands in contrast to Zeh’s claim the she belongs to a generation less willing to be categorized. The point she makes, however simplifying it might be, is that texts written by authors of her generation do not necessarily contain a sociopolitical component as a defining factor of what literature should be. The fact that literature does not rely on political content in order to be consumed by the reading public inevitably has an impact on the role of the author within society as well. Accordingly, Zeh states in “Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg” that public discourse no longer depends on the voice of authors, contrary to

the past when for example prominent authors like Günter Grass were very much part of shaping public opinion.⁴⁵ This development, according to Zeh's perception, was facilitated by indifference on the side of the authors with respect to the dismissal of writers from public opinion and the concomitant replacement of the author as public voice with the expert: "Die öffentliche Meinung hat die Schriftsteller aus dem Dienstverhältnis entlassen, und Letztere haben nicht einmal versucht, Kündigungsschutzklage zu erheben. Wenn heutzutage ein Bedarf nach Meinungen entsteht, fragt man einen Experten" (217). Zeh sees the cause for this change in self-centered fiction written by younger authors, a fiction whose narrative perspective more often than not does not allow for an inclusion of broader sociopolitical issues. "Wir," Zeh writes in her essay "Sag nicht ER zu mir" that is also included in *Alles auf dem Rasen*, "leben zwischen eigenem Bauchnabel und Tellerrand und schreiben darüber. Unsere Texte sind ICH-bezogen wie wir selbst" (223). However, just like "Sag nicht ER zu mir" is—in opposition to a dominance of "I"-narrators in the works of Zeh's contemporaries—a plea for the use of an auctorial perspective in fiction, "Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg" offers an alternative perspective on the relationship between politics, public opinion and literature. Contrary to the practice of writing literature that is centered on an often apolitical self, arguably a legacy of German *Popliteratur* of the 1990s, Zeh promotes the view that literature by definition has a social, and thus political role: "Mehr als rechts und links, rot oder schwarz stützt mich der feste Glaube, dass der Literatur *per se* eine soziale und im weitesten Sinne politische Rolle zukommt" ("Auf den Barrikaden" 218-19). Against the backdrop of such an understanding of literature, Zeh delineates her role as an

⁴⁵ To name but two examples, Grass was heavily involved in electoral campaigns for the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the 1960s and served as speechwriter for Willy Brandt who became chancellor in 1969, an involvement that Frank Finlay calls "unprecedented" ("Günter Grass's Political Rhetoric" 36). In addition, Grass contributed to public political discourse with essays and open letters, a selection of which can be found in Wagenbach et.al. In addition to selected texts by Grass, this volume compiles interventions from a broad range of German authors in the time period from 1945 to 1994.

author as providing her audience with ideas instead of fixed opinions or even solutions to sociopolitical problems. These ideas open up a view on the world that is not limited by the constraints of journalism, but political still: “Ich möchte den Lesern keine Meinungen, sondern Ideen vermitteln und den Zugang zu einem nichtjournalistischen und trotzdem politischen Blick auf die Welt eröffnen” (219). In other words, rather than disseminating her own opinions or prescribing a certain interpretation of her texts, Zeh’s intention is to open up perspectives on the realities of the twenty-first century that are political in nature, but leave enough room for the reader to form his or her own opinion on the respective subject matter of Zeh’s texts.

One year after the publication of “Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg,” in 2005, Zeh contributed to the short-lived debate surrounding *Relevanter Realismus*. The term was coined by Matthias Politycki, Thomas Hettche and others who, in an article published in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, demarcated the possibilities of realist fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁴⁶ Similar to what Zeh had postulated in her acceptance speech for the *Ernst Toller Preis*, Politycki et al. see the role of the novel—the literary form they focus on—as inherently social. It is the purpose of the novel, the authors claim, to address those questions of contemporary discourse that have been either forgotten or denied. An inclusion of these topics—what exactly they would be remains vague—into novels would result in a form of “relevante Narration”: “[Der Roman] muss die vergessenen oder tabuisierten Fragen der Gegenwart zu seiner Sache machen, er muss die Problemfelder, ob in lokalem oder globalem Kontext, in eine verbindliche Darstellung bringen” (Dean et al. “Was soll der Roman?”). This “verbindliche Darstellung” is linked to the literary tradition of realist fiction which is understood in this essay as an “Abbild der Realität” (“Was soll der Roman?”) or, more precisely, as what the reader could

⁴⁶ See: Dean, Martin R., Thomas Hettche, et al. “Was soll der Roman?” *Die Zeit*. 23 June 2005. Web. 7 December 2014.

perceive as such. Below the surface of an accessible representation of our present, the text works on a different level, namely on that of aesthetics and moral: “Darunter freilich wirkt das, was wir als Standpunkt von jedem wesentlichen Buch fordern, wirkt die ästhetisch-moralische Verantwortung eines Schriftstellers, der alles Stoffliche arrangiert, um damit ein erzählerisches Ziel zu erreichen” (“Was soll der Roman?”). The moral impetus behind relevant realism is described as “die beständige Sichtung unsrer untergehenden Welt und das Ringen um neue Utopien” (“Was soll der Roman?”).⁴⁷ In her response to this essay, Zeh very much welcomes the idea of countering the at that time still prevalent *Popliteratur* with texts that she would consider to be more substantial: “Es ist sehr erfreulich, [...] der nachrückenden Larifari-Pop-und-Befindlichkeits-Literatur etwas Handfestes entgegenzusetzen” (“Gesellschaftliche Relevanz”). In addition, she also does not object to a suggested generational shift in the relevant realism essay in the sense that established authors like Günter Grass and Martin Walser should no longer dominate political literary discourses in Germany. Still, she calls for more than a mere statement of purpose and a fixed perspective from which to address sociopolitical realities in literary representations. Concomitantly, Zeh calls into question the personal pronoun “wir” because she sees its use as not being grounded in a clearly-defined referent: “Man kann aber nicht einfach wir sagen und nichts Bestimmtes damit meinen. Man muss sagen: wir Kommunisten, wir Materialisten, wir Antimaterialisten, wir Liberalisten, wir Anarchisten—oder was auch immer” (“Gesellschaftliche Relevanz”). On the one hand, this statement foreshadows the question “Which Side Are You On?” that Zeh, in reference to the 1931 folk song written by Florence Reece, puts at the heart of her 2009 novel *Corpus Delicti*. Just like the fictitious Ideal Inamorata

⁴⁷ See also Carrie Smith-Prei’s analysis of the relationship between the relevant realism debate, utopia and Juli Zeh: Smith-Prei, Carrie. “Relevant Utopian Realism: The Critical Corporeality of Juli Zeh’s *Corpus Delicti*.” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*. 48.1 (2012): 107-123. Print.

forces the novel's protagonist Mia Holl to decide whether or not she wants to oppose the dictatorial regime depicted in the text and choose a side, Zeh challenges the authors of the essay to give up the indeterminacy exposed in their wording for an assertiveness that expresses a clear position. On the other hand, Zeh's statement ignores the fact that Politycki and his co-writers *do* see the authors who adhere to the principles of relevant realism as a "we" in the sense that authors promoting relevant realism form a group that shares a specific perspective from which to look upon our realities. Despite this, Zeh continues to take issue with the vagueness she perceives in the essay. She particularly calls into question the connection between aesthetics and morals that the essay constructs. The authors of "Was soll der Roman" claim that a prerequisite for a text that would fall into the "relevant realism"-category is that a text is able to combine "moralische Valeurs mit ästhetischen Mitteln" ("Was soll der Roman?"). However, it is precisely this call for a combination of morals and aesthetics that Zeh classifies as too nebulous. In her reply, Zeh suggests that relying on the fact that an artful literary construction of content will automatically result in a moral effect on the reader is not sufficient if the literary construction is not based on the decision which side the author is on: "Es reicht nicht, Ästhet zu sein, wenn man ein moralisches Konzept erschaffen will. Jeder politischen oder moralischen Wirkung muss eine Grundentscheidung vorangehen: für das, was man will, oder wenigstens das, was man nicht will" ("Gesellschaftliche Relevanz"). In other words, an author needs to answer the question "which side are you on" before starting the writing process because he or she cannot trust aesthetics alone to lead to a moral framework supporting the text.

In a number of publications prior to *Treideln*, Zeh has positioned herself as an author who strives to transmit ideas instead of fixed opinions while, at the same time, a pre-set perspective from which to write appears as indispensable for literature that addresses sociopolitical

discourses. Literature as a whole, on the other hand, is bestowed with a social and political role in the sense that it is always linked to the sociopolitical realities in which it is written. “Es ist ein natürliches Bedürfnis der Menschen zu erfahren,” Zeh writes, “was andere Menschen—repräsentiert durch den Schriftsteller und seine Figuren—denken und fühlen” (“Auf den Barrikaden” 219). In this statement, Zeh names one reason why people read; the question why and how people *write*, however, is not addressed.

A few years later, though, Zeh undertakes a somewhat evasive attempt to explain her motivation to create literature in her acceptance speech for the *Carl Amery Literaturpreis*. “Weil ich darf, will, kann oder muss, je nach Situation,” (“Plädoyer” 104) she answers with the help of a number of modal verbs, fully aware that a response like this one may sound eloquent but only leads her audiences to react with “Dauernicken, begleitet von viel Aha, Soso und Jaja” (104) but no deeper understanding. The key to such an understanding for Zeh lies in displaying her poetics, a term that she here comprehends as an answer to the question “Warum schreiben Sie?” (104). Despite the fact that disclosing her poetics would be a service to her audience, the term causes anxiety. Not only because Zeh is under the impression that, as an author, the literary public expects her to have a sophisticated set of rules how to create literature but, more importantly, it also expects her to apply it to her texts. However, the opposite is the case. Zeh writes, “wenn ich in mich hineinhorche und lockend ‘Poetologie?’ rufe, kommt *nichts* zurück” (105, emphasis in original). Even if calling upon a poetics of her own is a futile endeavor at this point, Zeh realizes that her figurative call might be answered one day. More importantly, the poetological silence she experiences must not keep her from writing: “Eine Poetologie ist wohl etwas, das man entwickeln muss. Was entwickelt werden muss, ist logischerweise noch nicht da, es kommt erst zu etwas anderem hinzu, und dieses ‘Andere’ ist wohl der wahre Grund, aus dem man schreibt”

(105). Regardless of the fact that condensing the scattered and occasional poetological and narratological remarks examined above into a more coherent form of poetics was not a project Zeh was initially interested in, it is precisely what happened in 2013 with her poetics lecture in Frankfurt. Through the lecture, Zeh eventually started the process she had alluded to in the quote from her acceptance speech mentioned above and was curious to see if now something called back.

At the outset of this project, however, Zeh remains sceptical about its feasibility. Returning to her initial rejection of the university's invitation cited at the beginning, her skepticism might explain in part why the tone of refusal becomes exponentially more abrasive: "Mein lieber Verleger, das kannst du vergessen. Kommt nicht in Frage. Man ist entweder Autor oder Poetikbesitzer. Ich bin doch nicht mein eigener Deutsch-Leistungskurs. Ohne mich" (*Treideln* 8). Even more so than at the very beginning of *Treideln*, Zeh uses humour and ironic distancing in order to express her uneasiness with the project of developing a poetics. In light of the fact that the Frankfurt lecture is not the first time that she had been approached by a German university to publicly reflect on the processes of writing—as a reminder, Zeh had held a poetics lecture in Tübingen in 2010—the above quoted passage reads as coquetry, but also reveals *Treideln* as a highly staged text that is less authentic than its epistolary form suggests. The use of humour is once again demonstrated when Zeh's rejection of the idea that authors possess a poetological framework with which they approach literary production goes so far that she feels compelled to suggest a pharmaceutical solution:

Bestimmt gibt es Poetik auch in Pillenform! Poetocetamol 500mg! Davon schlucke ich dann die ganze Packung und sterbe an einer Überdosis, und dann stehst du [der Adressat

dieser E-Mail] weinend an meinem Grab und auf dem Grabstein steht: Freu dich doch!
Ich übertreibe? Das ist mein Beruf! (9)

Significantly, while still denying to have any poetics whatsoever, Zeh's linkage of the verb "übertreiben" with her profession as a writer of literary and non-literary texts already constitutes the first step of delineating the "principles and rules of poetic composition" (Harmon "Poetics" 336) or, even more generally, "the creative principles informing any literary, social or cultural construction" ("poetics. n."). In other words—and without acknowledging it—Zeh at this point already is where she did not want to go by recognizing exaggeration as one of the principles of her work.⁴⁸ Two other factors come into play that led Zeh to eventually accept the Goethe University's invitation and hold the lecture in the summer of 2013. The first factor, examined below, is finding an appropriate form to adequately convey her poetics, the second—arguably more surprising one—a writer's block.

The red thread of *Treideln* can be described as a look over Zeh's shoulder as she is in the process of developing a literary text that originates from Zeh reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Hans-Ulrich Treichel's *Grunewaldsee* (2010) on her newly acquired electronic reader at the same time. This simultaneous reception inspires her to write a new novel. Not any novel, though, but "den großen Gatsby des frühen 21. Jahrhunderts. Eine Zeitgeistnovelle, die anhand einer Figur ein ganzes Jahrzehnt erzählt" (*Treideln* 23). Zeh envisions the protagonist of this admittedly ambitious literary project as an archetypal

⁴⁸ In fact, exaggeration had already been addressed in a statement published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2012. In the context of a portrait of Zeh following the publication of her novel *Nullzeit*, she states, "Ich poliere gern die Grenzen der Alltagsrealität so ein bisschen blank. Dann scheinen die auf einmal auf, und man hat das Gefühl: Es stimmt irgendwas nicht mit der Welt" (Freisfeld "Geschichten"). The idea of polishing the borders of reality—in other words, exaggeration—will lie at the heart of the chapter that discusses modes of realistic writing; however, it reappears in *Treideln* as well when Zeh discusses in detail the relationship between literature and politics.

representative of the generation of urban male forty-year-olds and, once again inspired by Treichel's text, quickly finds a name for her character-to-be: Treidel. She describes the name as the end of a loose narrative thread that she picks up, not knowing at this point where it will lead her:

Der Erzählende ertastet ein loses Ende—pathetische Gemüter nennen das Inspiration—und beginnt, vorsichtig zu ziehen. Reißt der Faden, ist der Spaß vorbei. Hält er aber und wird länger, fängt man an, den Faden um die Hand zu spulen, und was sich da buchstäblich *ent-wickelt*, ist dann die Geschichte. (37, emphasis in original)

It turns out that the thread Zeh picks up, while not breaking, in this case does not lead anywhere. Or rather, it leads her to a point where she is unable to continue writing her new novel and uses this writer's block as the opportunity to accept the invitation to hold the poetics lecture in Frankfurt. In her acceptance letter, Zeh lists a number of definitions of poetics that still reflect her rejection of the term. "Poetik ist, wenn man eine Schreibkrise hat," (42) she writes and, at the end of her letter,

Poetik ist für jene fatale Mischung aus Adabei und Drückeberger, die sich lieber mit Poetikvorlesungen wichtig macht, als einen neuen Roman zu verfassen. Also für Aufschneider, Quacksalber, Schwächlinge, Oberlehrer, Zivilversager und andere Scharlatane. Mit anderen Worten: Ich bin dabei. (43)

Zeh's enumeration of negatively charged nouns—"Aufschneider, Quacksalber, Schwächlinge, Oberlehrer, Zivilversager und andere Scharlatane"—speaks to her evident discomfort with the task at hand. The use of "Adabei," a person eager to mingle in all kinds of affairs in order to reassure him- or herself of his or her (nonexistent) importance, furthermore underscores the self-irony with which Zeh approaches the poetics lecture. Not the least, the term demonstrates that Zeh is all too aware of her own reputation as an author who frequently and willingly uses public media to spread her opinions. Beside the discomfort and self-irony, though, Zeh sees the poetics lecture as a potential way to save her own *Great Gatsby*. Allowing the reader a look over the shoulder of the author is established as the narrative device that will help Zeh to both finish a new literary project and reflect on writing in a form that, at this point, had yet to be determined.

The Form and Voices of *Treideln*

While the form, that is the "pattern that gives expression to the content" (Harmon "Form" 237), is certainly of significance for any given text, it appears that it gains special relevance in a genre that is intended to reflect on the very rules of literary production itself. This is not to suggest that the form of a poetics is more important than other literary forms of textual production. The point is rather that the form for a text that focuses on how texts are produced requires a level of reflection on the part of the author that already is part of the author's poetological considerations itself. In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* following the publication of *Treideln*, Zeh answers the question of how she started writing the poetics lecture in the following way: "Wichtig war die Idee, es in E-Mail-Form zu machen. Es hat mich am meisten Zeit gekostet, eine Form zu finden, in der ich meinem Unbehagen mit Selbstironie Ausdruck geben

und es analysieren konnte” (Balke “Im Gespräch: Juli Zeh”). In addition to highlighting the aspect of self-irony that is marked in the text, this quote indicates that *Treideln* entirely consists of email exchanges between the author and a number of anonymized recipients. However, for those readers with background knowledge on Zeh’s professional and private life, some of the addressees are lifted from their anonymity. For example, given a certain familiarity with her work and biography, the references to Zeh’s publisher Klaus Schöffling as “mein lieber Verleger” can be decoded just as easily as those to Zeh’s husband David Fink as “der Chef.” In addition, Zeh communicates with a friend called Wanda, her tax accountant, the office of waste disposal in Mittelbrandmark, someone only referred to as “alter Schwede” and others. For each of these recipients, Zeh assumes a new persona and, concomitantly, a new narrative voice: she becomes “deine liebe Autorin,” “dein Vorzimmer,” “Frau Zeh,” “Zeh,” or simply “J.” This approach results in a text constructed of many narrative voices that range from serious to critical to defensive to passionate. A further effect of this narrative strategy is that the reader is presented with a personal, at times even intimate framework that decreases the distance between narrative voice and recipient despite all sarcasm and self-irony that permeates *Treideln*. As a result, the reader of *Treideln* is put into a position that creates the effect of accompanying Zeh while she is in the process of writing, an effect further reinforced through Zeh’s choice to present the reader with fictitious emails that accompany her work on her yet to be written novel inspired by *The Great Gatsby*.

The use of personal correspondence in order to discuss literature and its meaning is not without precedence in literary history. *Treideln* resumes the tradition of epistolary texts⁴⁹ such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* (1759-1765) and, by using

⁴⁹ Rather fittingly, the title of the Dutch translation of *Treideln*, published in 2014, is *Briefroman*.

the form of the email rather than letters, transports it into the twenty-first century. The inherently personal nature of letters—with the necessary limitation that it is not documented whether or not all emails from *Treideln* were ever sent, meant to be or even written as emails in the first place—is carried over to Zeh’s text as well. Moreover, the inpermanent nature of the email mirrors Zeh’s attitude towards the fact that a poetics is intrinsically preliminary as well. In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, she names the realization that the development of a poetics is only temporary as the most important insight she gained while holding the lecture. Zeh writes, “Das ist vielleicht sogar die Kernerfahrung: Dass, [sic] was man Poetik nennt, kann immer nur eine Momentaufnahme sein” (Balke “Im Gespräch: Juli Zeh”). The reason for Zeh is that the writing process changes according to the change of the author’s personality (see Balke). Given this preliminaryity, her choice to present the poetics in a personal yet inpermanent form seems more than apt because the personal form of the email also allows Zeh to create a proximity that in turn enables the authentic recreation of the writing process. Keeping the balance between distance in order to allow for reflection, and proximity in order to allow for an accurate description of the writing process was in fact central for Zeh prior to writing the lecture. In an interview with *Deutschlandradio Kultur* following the publication of *Treideln*, Zeh elaborates on this balance between distance and proximity as follows:

Also schon, wenn ich versuche, den Schreibprozess zu dokumentieren, mache ich ja doch wieder etwas Berichterstattendes, was sich davon automatisch schon wieder distanziert, also Distanz einnehmen muss, um überhaupt darüber sprechen zu können. Aber ich hab eben probiert, es so nah wie möglich stattfinden zu lassen durch eine wirklich

schonungslose Ehrlichkeit im Umgang mit allem, was das Schreiben ausmacht. (“Ich habe meinen Roman”)

I suggest to regard the postulated “schonungslose Ehrlichkeit” with caution, though. While Zeh does indeed include passages in which she describes activities like household chores that either keep her from writing or are made productive as strategies to overcome being stuck in a text⁵⁰, these sections are of course part of a self-staging of the public persona Juli Zeh and belong to the category of “Autoreninszenierung” dealt with below. Still, the epistolary form Zeh has chosen is privileged in order to provide the reader with a degree of proximity that permits a detailed insight into the creation of the author’s texts. Therefore, *Treideln* is, generally speaking, less concerned with literature but the process of *writing*. Zeh highlights this point as one of the goals of her lecture:

[W]as mir eigentlich wichtig war beim Reden über Literatur, war der Versuch zu zeigen, wie der Schreibprozess tatsächlich verläuft. Weil ich denke, über Literatur sprechen können eigentlich die Germanisten viel besser als die Autoren. Die Literaturwissenschaftler sind eigentlich dazu befugt, und wir Autoren, wenn wir überhaupt was Spezielles wissen, was besser wissen als die anderen, dann doch eigentlich nur, wie sich das Schreiben anfühlt, weil es das ist, was wir eben täglich tun. (“Ich habe meinen Roman”)

Ironically, Zeh puts herself into the position of her favorite enemy, the expert, when it comes to writing. While there is no extual evidence suggesting that Zeh entirely refuses the idea that a

⁵⁰ See for example *Treideln* pages 47-48.

person has specialized and deep knowledge of a topic, she is very critical of the way in which experts have come to dominate public discourse. Again, there is no reason for Zeh to reject expert opinions if they enhance public discourse; however, she bemoans the fact that authoritative statements by experts tend to leave little room for the general public to develop their own opinion. Not surprisingly, she assumes the role of being an expert on writing hesitatingly by using the qualifying “wenn überhaupt,” thereby demonstrating her dismissal of authoritative positions she sees prevalent in what she calls “Expertokratie” (*Treideln* 147). Moreover, the qualifier attests her insecurity at the outset of her anti-poetics about whether or not this was the right project for her at all.

The appropriation of epistolary forms in *Treideln* serves as a vehicle to overcome Zeh’s initial reservations about holding the lecture. True to Susanne Komfort-Hein’s characterization of Zeh as a “Querdenkerin” (*Treideln* DVD) in her introduction to the first lecture, the author has found an unusual way to convey her reflections on writing, literature, authorship, and the reading public that does not follow established structures and conceptions of what a poetics lecture is supposed to look like. Through the many voices of her text that go hand in hand with a non-linear chronology, Zeh challenges and expands the possibilities of poetics, which is of particular relevance in light of her original reservations. While she might not have squared the circle yet, Zeh has at the very least bent the rules of the Frankfurter poetics lecture to her advantage. She on the one hand re-emphasizes her contempt towards a rigid instrumentarium of rules applied to literature and, on the other hand, weaves this contempt into the lecture, thus gaining momentum for her own take on the principles and dynamics that play a role in the process of writing.

Squaring the Circle: The Anti-Poetics of *Treideln*

“Das ist nun einmal die anti-poetologische Wahrheit,” Zeh writes towards the end of *Treideln*, “falls wir beim Schreiben Gesetze machen, dann nur, um dagegen verstoßen zu können” (155).

While this conclusive statement can be read as a linear continuation of her initial uneasiness with writing her poetics, the text—supported through its many narrative voices—takes many detours and sideway movements before arriving at this declaration. The first detour in fact turns out to be a dead end.

Treideln is a retrospective poetics. Throughout her lecture, Zeh maintains the position that the author is not aware of what he or she is doing while being in the process of producing a literary text. Instead, any knowledge about a literary product—and this includes any poetological knowledge—results from a perspective in hindsight. Zeh states, “Erkenntnisse, die ein Autor in einem solchen Rahmen präsentiert [Zeh bezieht sich hier auf den Rahmen einer Poetikvorlesung] entstammen nicht der Schreibpraxis. Sie sind *nachträglich* verfasst worden, und das macht einen entscheidenden Unterschied. Poetik klingt, als wüsste der Autor, was er da tut—dabei weiß er bestenfalls, was er *getan hat*” (*Treideln* 20, emphasis in original). This statement correlates with Zeh’s above-quoted conviction that she is first and foremost an author and not an owner of a poetics. By looking back at her own texts, Zeh switches from being an author to being a reader or, as she puts it, Zeh experiences “die Metamorphose vom Autor zum Exegeten der eigenen Texte” (18). When writing a text, though, Zeh claims to have no fixed conceptualization of where the narrative will take her, thus eradicating the idea of an author’s intention: “Beim Schreiben habe ich wenig gewollt und noch weniger *gemacht*” (19, emphasis in original). The oscillation between the different positions of being an author in the process of writing a text, an

author in the focus of media attention while promoting the finished product and an author as reader of his or her own texts is once again supported through the appropriation of different narrative voices. Significantly, Zeh not only differentiates between writing and literature, she also uses a distinctly different language when talking about them. While the passages that pertain to aspects of writing are written in a pragmatic, matter-of-fact tone, the passages considering literature and its possibilities have a more emphatic quality to them.

In order to exemplify the above-mentioned lack of conceptualization when approaching a new literary text, Zeh develops the idea of “Nur-So” (69), a textual form without a clear narrative direction that is a collage of textual snippets, isolated sentences, scenes, and short dialogues that—at least in theory—bear the potential to result in a publishable text. Zeh stresses the point that “writing ‘Nur-So’” must not be confused with the plan to “write a novel” because the reading public is, at this stage of textual production, left out of the equation: “Es [Zeh bezieht sich auf die oben erwähnte Textcollage] bleibt trotzdem ein Nur-So. Beim Roman ist die Bestimmung zum Gelesenwerden Teil der Gattungsdefinition” (69-70). This quote not only illustrates a high awareness of the characteristics of literary forms—in this case, the novel—but it also introduces the three main components that play a role in the production of literature: author, reader, and text. In the following passages, I will examine Zeh’s explorations of these three components, starting with the creator of the “Nur-So,” the author.

The Privileged Citizen: Author

At the beginning of *Treideln*, at a point where she is still convinced that writing a poetics is a pointless endeavor, Zeh names two pillars on which literature is based. The first one is ambiguity

and the second one, as mentioned above, is exaggeration, a quality that Zeh perceives as ambiguous in itself in the sense that it bears the potential of being misunderstood. Zeh postulates, “dass Mehrdeutigkeit neben Übertreibung die zweite Säule ist, auf der die Literatur ruht. Mit anderen Worten: Laut zu sein und trotzdem nicht verstanden zu werden, ist mein Job” (*Treideln* 16). The last sentence marks the beginning of her reflections on authorship within her poetics lecture. Significantly, she begins her elaborations with an aspect related to the figuration of today’s literary market, thus speaking to Zeh’s role as an author in the spotlight of our media society. Accordingly, and this will be examined in greater detail with respect to Zeh’s role as public intellectual in chapter three, Zeh emphasizes that being an author today entails the obligation to publicly reflect on producing literature that more often than not results in a conflation of the literary text with the public persona of the one who has written it. She writes, “jeder Autor weiß, dass das Schreiben von Büchern hierzulande nicht genug ist. Er muss sich seine Leser verdienen, indem er Auskunft gibt. Über sich, über das Schreiben. Aus Urheberrecht folgt Urheberpflicht” (15). According to Zeh, this obligation of adding an “Autoreninszenierung” (15) to the “Textinszenierung” (15) adds another level of fiction to the textual product, “eine Fiktion hinter der Fiktion” (15). At this point of her career, Zeh has mastered the mechanisms of the literary market to an extent that she has established herself as a prominent figure in the literary landscape of German-language literature. Still, her words in *Treideln*—arguably the most elaborate “Autoreninszenierung” she has undertaken so far—reveal a certain uneasiness with the fact that today, a literary text obviously is no longer sufficient in itself and needs to be supplemented by a public persona that, at the very least immediately following a publication, is drawn into promoting it, thus potentially distracting from the literary product that arguably should be at the center of media attention. Moreover, Zeh sees what she calls the

“Geheimabsprache zwischen Autor und Leser, genannt: Fiktionalität” (“Zur Hölle”) in jeopardy of being abolished altogether. Instead of accepting the difference between *dramatis personae* and real life individuals it might be based on, Zeh identifies a growing readiness on the side of the audience to blur the lines between reality and fiction in the sense that the reader is willing to equate the author of a text with his characters based on the biography of the author.⁵¹ While Zeh does not deny that inspiration for literary texts stem from the life of the author—“Das Leben eines Schriftsteller [...] gleicht einem Steinbruch, in dem er das Material für seine Geschichten abbaut” (“Zur Hölle”)—she insists that this method must not be confused with autobiographical writing. She coins the neologism “metrofictionality” for the tendency to confuse narration with reality, “als Etikettierung eines Literaturverständnisses, bei dem die Verwechslung von Erzählung und Erlebtem nicht Lapsus ist, sondern Programm” (“Zur Hölle”). This hunger for authenticity is traced back to popular forms of entertainment like reality shows that simulate the effect of no discernible boundary between the narrative content and the realities of the recipient. Instead of adhering to the amalgamation of diegetic and non-diegetic worlds, Zeh makes a case for the Aristotelian principle of mimesis that she describes as a “Zielvorstellung,” more specifically as “Interpretation des Wirklichen durch literarische Darstellung” (“Zur Hölle”). While the author necessarily weaves experiences and events from her or his own life into the narrative—another example would be that the graffiti “Alles ist Wille” Zeh had seen while being on Lanzarote (*Treideln* 77)⁵² found its way into her novel *Nullzeit* (44) and later into *Unterleuten*—Zeh is adamant to defend that literature makes no claim for truth: “Wir [Zeh bezieht sich an dieser Stelle generell auf Autorinnen und Autoren] haben die Sprache, wir haben

⁵¹ Academic research on Zeh, particularly in Germany, is not immune to this phenomenon, hence the prominence of articles that investigate the relationship between Juli Zeh’s professional training as a jurist and her work as an author. See also: Wagner 65-68.

⁵² A picture of the graffiti can be found on the author’s facebook presence.

die Idee, wir haben das Privileg, keinen Wahrheitsanspruch behaupten zu müssen—*mon Dieu, stay fictional*, und zur Hölle mit der Authentizität!” (“Zur Hölle”, emphasis in original).

“Privileg,” not only in the sense of not having to tell the truth, becomes another catchword for Zeh’s anti-poetics, in spite of her expressed discomfort with the mechanisms of the cultural and literary industry. Privilege additionally refers to Zeh’s ability to work as self-employed author: “Schriftsteller zu sein, ist eine Auszeichnung. Ein Privileg. Das hat mit Freiheit zu tun und mit drei Dingen, an die ich glaube: Liebe, Literatur und die Liebe zur Literatur” (*Treideln* 48). Part of the freedom of the author stems from the possibility to raise her voice publically qua her profession. While Zeh understands literature as something that transcends the author, as outlined below, her conception of the author is one that defines her or him as a ‘normal’ citizen equipped with a public voice. She states, “der Künstler ist dem normalen Bürger am allernächsten, er ist quasi der normale Bürger plus der Möglichkeit, öffentlich zu sprechen” (“Ich hab meinen Roman”). The opportunity of public speech still bears the dangers of being misunderstood—“Laut zu sein und trotzdem nicht verstanden zu werden ist mein Job” (*Treideln* 16)—but the benefits Zeh sees seem to clearly outweigh this detriment.

An indispensable requirement to enjoy the privileges of being an author is what could be labeled as literary privacy. In her study *Der Wert des Privaten*, Beate Rössler defines “something” as private “wenn man selbst den Zugang zu diesem ‘etwas’ kontrollieren kann. Umgekehrt bedeutet der Schutz von Privatheit dann einen Schutz vor dem unerwünschten Zutritt anderer” (23). In this context, the ominous “something” or literary privacy is defined as a space where Zeh acts as author *without* being in contact with the literary public, be this in the form of publishers, critics, or readers. In fact, literary privacy has to be actively defended against any thought of the reader in order to be able to write at all. It is therefore imperative for Zeh’s

elaborations on authorship to differentiate between author as a private individual that is engaged with the process of writing and author as public figure who comes into play once the literary product has been published. The author as public figure then becomes subject to the “Autoreninszenierung” Zeh mentions, whereas the author as private individual remains elusive. Significantly, the space of literary privacy is a space free of authorial intention. Zeh’s position on the idea of the author’s intention is, at first, unmistakably clear: “Das Schreiben bringt nicht einen, sondern unzählige Texte hervor, nämlich mindestens einen pro Leser,” (172-173) she writes towards the end of *Treideln* and entirely yields the floor of literary reception and interpretation to the reader. Earlier in the text, she specifically addresses the author’s intention in the context of having been invited to visit a high school. In her response to a teacher of German who invited her—simply referred to as “Herr D.” which opens the possibility to read the letter “D” as an abbreviation for anything from “Deutschlehrer” to “Deutschunterricht”—she not only dismisses the intention of the author as a parapsychological phenomenon but as an invention of high school teachers:

Sie [Zeh bezieht sich auf die gymnasiale Oberstufe in Deutschland] zeichnet für die Erfindung eines parapsychologischen Phänomens verantwortlich, das man ‘Autorenintention’ nennt. Die Autorenintention wird, und das ist das Parapsychologische daran, nicht vom Autor, sondern vom Deutschlehrer hervorgebracht. (76-77)

If there is something parapsychological or metaphysical about literature, it is, from Zeh’s point of view, not provided by the author and even less intended. According to her, the idea of the author as a “mit Händen greifbare, mit Fingern zeigbare Subjekt” (78) is a mere fiction looming

behind the fictionality of the text. Accordingly, she reminds the fictitious German teacher and the reader of her anti-poetics that the author as an individual who produces a text never coincides with the public persona of said individual and remains a concept in the mind of the reader that is as fictitious as the text itself. In turn, from the author's perspective, the reader is equally fictitious: "Lieber Herr D., so wie Autoren für fiktive Leser schreiben, so lesen Leser die Bücher fiktiver Autoren. Das ist ein Zaubertrick. Ein Wunder. Es ist schön" (84).⁵³

Still, in line with Zeh's anti-poetological truth that all rules are made to eventually be broken, she re-introduces the author's intention later into *Treideln* when she addresses the field of political literature. In this section, she answers the questions of a journalist called Würmer who shares his name with a character of the same profession from *Corpus Delicti*. It turns out that the questions Würmer asks Zeh are precisely those she hates to answer the most, "Frau Zeh, warum schreiben Sie politische Romane?" (131) being one of them. In her saucy response, Zeh dismisses the question as one sounding clever but being foolish nonetheless (131). From her perspective, the prerequisite for political literature lies in—and here the previously rejected notion of the author's intention finds its way back into her line of argument—a specific goal the author has in mind prior to writing a text that only in retrospect can be dubbed "political": "Echte politische Literatur liegt nur dann vor, wenn der Autor beim Schreiben ein konkretes politisches

⁵³ Here, Zeh evokes the the figures of the implied author and the implied reader that have become canonical terms in narratology ever since Wayne C. Booth introduced them in the early 1960s. In a nutshell, the implied author can be described as an "entity positioned between the real author and the fictive narrator in the communication structure of narrative works" (Schmid "Implied Author") or, in another configuration, as a mental construct in the mind of the reader. The implied reader, on the other hand, "designates the image of the recipient that the author had while writing or, more accurately, the author's image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs" (Schmid "Implied Reader"). While the end of Schmid's definition does not pertain to what Zeh is expressing in the quote above, the beginning of his explanation—the image of the recipient in the author's mind while writing a text—is of note in this context insofar as Zeh actively blocks out any thought of the reader while conceiving a text. For a more detailed exploration of implied reader and implied author, see: Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961. Print; for Wolfgang Iser's work on the implied reader, see: Iser, Wolfgang. *Der implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett*. München: W. Fink, 1972. Print.

Ziel verfolgte” (133). Notably, the reader is left out at this point. The omission of the reader comes at the expense of a rather limited definition of political literature, precisely because the reader’s ability to read potential political meaning into any given text is blanked out. This apparent contradiction is resolved when put into the context of Zeh’s definitions of political texts and political authors. Even though she is often perceived as such, for Zeh the notion of ‘political author’ is non-existent due to the difference between the individual, who is to be situated in the private sphere, and author, who by definition is at least in part a public figure. She states,

es gibt überhaupt keine politischen Autoren. Es gibt politische Menschen und politische Texte. Gewährt man einem politischen Menschen die Möglichkeit zur Veröffentlichung, ist die Wahrscheinlichkeit hoch, dass früher oder später auch mal ein politischer Text dabei herauskommt. Dadurch wird jedoch das Politische nicht zur Funktion der Autoreneigenschaft, und auch nicht alles, was dieser Mensch schreibt, zu politischer Literatur. (134-135)

The expressed concept of the author as a—at least potentially and partially—*homo politicus* who by virtue of literary publication produces political texts is echoed in the interview with *Deutschlandradio Kultur* quoted above. When asked if authors are by definition obliged to critically intervene in public discourse, Zeh replies that she definitely feels the urge to do so but does not go so far as to expect all her colleagues to do the same. However, against the backdrop of her view on the author as a citizen with a public voice, she expresses the strong belief that public discourse benefits from the participation of author-as-citizen that counters and qualifies statements by appointed experts. Zeh affirms that “das [Zeh bezieht sich auf die Beiträge von

Autorinnen und Autoren zum öffentlichen Diskurs] für die Gesellschaft unschätzbar wichtig ist, dass dieser Diskurs nicht nur von professionellen Politikern und professionellen Journalisten geführt wird” (“Ich habe meinen Roman”). She maintains the privileged status of the author—“Schriftsteller zu sein ist eine Auszeichnung. Ein Privileg” (*Treideln* 48)—but situates her or him in a place where the line has been crossed between literary privacy and literary public in favor of the latter.

The notion of author as privileged citizen similarly echoes in a passage that best elaborates on Zeh’s take on authorship in *Treideln*. Drawing on her professional training as a jurist, Zeh envisions a fictitious courtroom scene in which she stands accused of charges presented by the addressee of this passage, Holger, who acts as plaintiff. The context for the accusation is a previous exchange with Holger in which Zeh had described the process of writing as a private, intimate, and even embarrassing activity that is also characterized by the urge to cross the line between literary privacy and literary public through the publication of texts (97-103). Against this backdrop, summarized in the plaintiff’s question “Warum erst nur für sich—und dann plötzlich nur noch für den Leser arbeiten? Ergibt das irgendeinen Sinn?” (111), Zeh is accused of three charges: idleness, cowardice, and vanity. Idleness refers to the allegedly luxurious economic conditions of working as a self-employed author devoid of the constraints of more traditional modes of employment. Cowardice denotes the assumed flight from the realities of the traditional world of employment into the ostensibly lofty world of art that is presented as an end in itself: “Hier [Zeh bezieht sich auf die Welt der Kunst] kann man lästigen Fragen nach dem Sinn mit einem frechen ‘Alles Selbstzweck!’ begegnen” (112). Lastly, vanity addresses the inherent contradiction between writing in the seclusion of the literary private and looking for recognition if not appreciation in the literary public: “Kaum sind die angeblich in größter

Selbstvergessenheit entstandenen Texte fertig, rennt Frau Zeh damit in die Welt wie ein Kind, das den Eltern ein selbst gemaltes Bild präsentiert: ‘Guckt mal, was ich Tolles gemacht habe!’ Sie will Lob, Bestätigung, Erfolg” (112). Zeh’s anonymous defense lawyer, and his speech might as well be read as a once more self-ironic self-defense, counters the charges of idleness, cowardice, and vanity with an urge for artistic freedom, faith in the possibilities of art, and the desire to communicate. According to the defense, an author does not flee the challenges of today’s world of employment but, rather, leads a life that is inextricably linked to the author’s function to keep an open eye to sociopolitical developments, thus resulting in a life in which work and life fall into one: “Ein Künstler arbeitet *immer*. Durch Lesen, Fernsehgucken und Computerspielen hält er sich auf der kulturellen Höhe seiner Zeit. Was nach Urlaubsreisen aussieht, sind in Wahrheit Recherchefahrten. Lange Spaziergänge und stundenlanges Rumhängen auf der Couch dienen der Kontemplation” (113, emphasis in original).⁵⁴ Charged with self-irony, these words on the one hand speak once again to Zeh’s endeavours to strike a balance between proximity and distance in *Treideln*. On the other hand, they also hint at the previously established difference in language when it comes to speaking about the author and literature. Whereas Zeh’s reflections on literature are written in an extremely serious, occasionally even pathos-laden tone, her musings on the life of an author clarify that the person behind the words on the page must not be taken too seriously, precisely because he or she is “just” a citizen, albeit a privileged one.

The privilege of the author furthermore includes the freedom to engage with “den großen existentiellen Fragen: Wo geh ich her, wo komm ich hin, und was hab ich eigentlich den Kritikern von der *FAZ* getan?” (113). While the latter question can be read as being informed by

⁵⁴ Despite the tongue-in-cheek quality of Zeh’s response, a holiday on Lanzarote indeed resulted in her novel *Nullzeit* from 2012.

twelve years in the literary industry, the former two questions had already appeared as the “ultimate Frage” in Zeh’s debut *Adler und Engel*. More than a decade prior to *Treideln*, Zeh had put it into the mouth of radio host Clara and, instead of wondering about the antipathy of literary critics, had affixed to it a more existential addendum: “Wo geh ich her, [...] wo komm ich hin und was zum Teufel soll der ganze Scheiß” (*Adler und Engel* 221). Taking up these questions years after first posing them in one of her narratives illustrates their importance for Zeh’s motivation to create literature in the first place, in addition to constructing a trajectory and cohesion for her work as a whole. As previously quoted in the literature review of scholarly publications on the work of Juli Zeh in the introduction of *Echoes and Oscillations*, Claudia Breger has defined Zeh’s project as “making narrative sense of the contemporary world in its social and political dimensions” (“Moral Play?” 108). The creation of fictional and non-fictional narratives therefore was and remains an attempt to negotiate these questions, particularly in light of the fact that Zeh has yet to find satisfactory answers. According to Zeh’s fictitious defense lawyer in *Treideln*, continuously engaging with this set of questions is a demonstration of courage and not cowardice. Zeh’s endeavours to nurture and preserve her “tiefes Vertrauen in die sinnstiftende Kraft der Kunst” (*Treideln* 113)—a faith she had expressed with less pathos earlier by confessing her “Liebe zur Literatur” (48)—even have a redemptive quality. Once again with a healthy dose of irony, the defense lawyer’s narrative voice remarks: “Ihre Werke trägt sie wie Opfertiere zum Altar der Öffentlichkeit, auf dass sie dort geschlachtet, gefressen oder verehrt werden. Dazu gehört nicht Feigheit, sondern Mut” (114). Therefore, the final charge of vanity is countered by explaining that what appears as vanity is—and this is connected to Zeh’s expressed faith in literature as being meaningful—the impulse to become part of a global discourse that

strives to find answers to the existential questions of where we come from, where we are going, and what the fuck it is all about. The defense lawyer claims:

In der Angeklagten webt und wirkt das tief empfundene Bedürfnis, ihre geistigen Produkte in das große Menschheitsspiel namens Kommunikation einzuspeisen. Sie möchte Teil des erdumspannenden Selbstgesprächs werden, in dem unsere Spezies sich immer wieder neu erschafft. (114)

Zeh's desire to communicate with her readers through the circulation of literature oscillates between her conception of literature as world-reflection in the sense of attempting to find answers to existential questions on the one hand, and world-making through the creation of narrative structures that I will analyze in greater detail below on the other. All three points of defense—the urge for artistic freedom, faith in the meaningfulness of literature, and the desire to participate in a global discourse—must be read as components of Zeh's self-conception as author. The verdict about whether or not these points of defense suffice in the fictitious indictment in the end lies in the hand of the jury, in other words, Zeh's readership.

The author in Zeh's anti-poetics appears as a privileged citizen who, due to the figuration and economic necessities of today's media society, is prompted into oscillating between literary privacy and literary public. At the same time, this oscillation leads Zeh to seeing the author as not being entirely entrenched in what she labels the "mediale Wanderzirkus" (148). Rather, the possibility to temporarily withdraw into the seclusion of literary privacy on which the author has to rely in order to benefit from artistic freedom allows for a unique condition from which the author engages with the sociopolitical realities of his time (149). With respect to engaging with

“den großen existenziellen Fragen” (113), Zeh insists that this is not tied to a specific authorial intention—with the notable exception of a deliberately political text. Last but not least, and this once again pertains to the oscillation between literary privacy and literary public, Zeh presents the author as an effectively elusive figure that is just as fictitious as the characters he or she creates. From Zeh’s point of view, the image of an author that readers create as well as the public image of an author act like a translucent veil that keeps the privileged citizen hidden behind the words on the page.

The Defenseless Recipient Rehabilitated: Reader

Considering that *Treideln* is predominantly concerned with the process of writing and that this process is dependent on the exclusion of the reader, it is not surprising that Zeh dedicates less attention to the reception of literature in comparison to its production. It is also the very private nature of writing that motivates Zeh to contradict any assumptions that see writing as a benevolent act of public giving. She writes,

Ich schreibe doch nicht, um dem Leser etwas zu *geben*. Wenn mein Schreiben überhaupt etwas mit dem Leser zu tun hat, dann insofern, als dass ich etwas von ihm *will*—seine Aufmerksamkeit, sein Lob, seine Liebe, sein Geld. Wobei an dieser Stelle strikt zwischen *Schreiben* und *Veröffentlichen* zu trennen wäre. (31, emphasis in original)

Even if the reader does not play a role in the process of textual production itself, she or he still lingers in the background as the one who eventually purchases, receives, and—potentially—

praises the finished product. From Zeh's point of view, and this aspect is once again tightly connected to the necessity of a literary privacy, the reader must not be the primary goal or target of writing but of *publishing*. While the reader is instrumental as an entity in the literary public in the sense that she or he guarantees the continuation of Zeh's work through financial support, she or he can have the opposite effect in the literary private with respect to the process of writing. In line with Rössler's definition of privacy, Zeh states that she has to defend her literary privacy against any intrusion by the reader in order to avoid getting stuck: "Ungewohntes Terrain für mich [Zeh bezieht sich darauf, beim Verfassen eines Textes an ihre Leserschaft zu denken], die ich beim Schreiben [...] den Gedanken an mögliche Leser mit Gewalt unterdrücken muss, um nicht ins Stocken zu geraten" (89-90). The privacy of literary production Zeh had stressed as vital for the process of writing is defended against the fictitious reader's intrusion. Accordingly, Zeh does not believe in the sincerity of authors who claim that they are exclusively writing for their readership with a specific intention in mind. In her understanding, any intended effect devised by the author is akin to an attack on the reader: "Autoren, die behaupten, für den Leser zu schreiben, die also wehrlose Rezipienten bereichern, belehren, aufrütteln, unterhalten, bezaubern oder in fremde Welten entführen wollen, sind entweder famose Lügner oder Verfasser von Groschenromanen" (31-32). Instead of constructing texts aimed at a specific effect, the author has to be aware that the reader has infinite freedom when it comes to reception because reception is an element of the author-reader relationship the former cannot influence. Banishing the reader from the author's mind for the duration of the writing process for Zeh is therefore more than merely desirable in order to prevent writer's blocks. It is the prerequisite for an aesthetically successful outcome of writing: "Es ist gerade die Definition von ernsthafter Literatur, dass der Autor vorne nicht weiß, was beim Leser hinten rauskommt. Gute Literatur ist

Kunst, und Kunst ist kein karitativer, sondern ein narzisstischer Akt. Käme Kunst von Wollen, hieße es ‘Wulst’” (32).

In addition to the “general” reader, there are two other kinds of recipients Zeh addresses in *Treideln*, namely the author as reader of her or his own texts and the literary scholar. While she does not dwell too long on either of them, it is worth mentioning that in the case of the author reading her own texts, Zeh finds herself confronted with the problem of having not only to read, but also to interpret her literary output. This “Metamorphose vom Autor zum Exegeten der eigenen Texte” (18) that she involuntarily experiences during the promotion of newly published texts puts Zeh in a position in which she has to read meaning into the composition of her texts, an endeavor that interferes with the previously established technique of writing “Nur-So.” Significantly, the engagement with her own texts in the role of exegete results in a feeling of insecurity about the validity of her own principles. Zeh states:

Das Verblüffende daran ist, dass ich zu diesem Zeitpunkt [Zeh bezieht sich darauf, dass sie für einen längeren Zeitraum als Leserin ihrer eigenen Texte agieren musste] selbst zu glauben beginne, jenes zwischen den Buchdeckeln Vorgefundene sei von mir [...] in genau dieser Weise erst gewollt und dann gemacht worden. [...] Und trotzdem ist diese Annahme falsch. Beim Schreiben habe ich wenig gewollt und noch weniger *gemacht*. (19, emphasis in original)

In an exchange with the fictitious journalist Würmer, Zeh disassembles one of her most dreaded questions—“Was will uns der Autor damit sagen?” (77)—and rejects the notion that there is a clear divide between the readership and the author. At first sight, this might stand in contrast to

her insistence on blocking the reader out for the duration of the writing process. At the same time, though, Zeh differentiates between “writing” and “publishing,” and after a work has entered circulation—in other words: the literary public—the temporary boundary between author and reader is necessarily dissolved. Through her text, the author communicates with her audience, but this communication does not rely on a clearly outlined intentionality embedded in the text. To highlight this point even further, Zeh remembers her own German classes at school during which the teacher uses a graphic representation of the relationship between author and reader that Zeh rejects vehemently:

Links stand ‘Sender’, rechts ‘Empfänger’, dazwischen befand sich ein Pfeil, dessen Spitze drohend auf den Empfänger zeigte. Heute bohrt sich dieser Pfeil mitten durch mein Autorenherz. Die Vorstellung, ich könnte als ‘Sender’ Geschosse auf einen wehrlosen Empfänger abschießen und das Ganze sei dann Literatur, führt zum sofortigen Wunsch nach Kapitulation. [...] Mit anderen Worten: Schreibkrise. (79)

The humorous dissection of this popular communication model reveals that, for Zeh, the seemingly simple relationship between author, text, and reader conveyed in this model is reductive in the sense that literature is more than what an author “shoots” in the direction of the recipient. Once again, directionality is not linked with intentionality. Conversely, Zeh is comfortable with the thought that her readership reads meaning into her texts as they see fit. This is particularly true for the literary scholar who finds her or his *raison d’être* in the engagement with literary texts. “Wozu gäbe es denn die ganze Literaturwissenschaft,” Zeh writes, “wenn die Autoren selbst wüssten, was es mit ihren Texten auf sich hat?” (18).

In the end, though, the reader is not as defenseless as Zeh describes in her school memory. While the reader is barred from the literary privacy Zeh depends on, it is the reader who guarantees that Zeh is able to lead a life as an author through attention and reception in the literary public—and not least through the purchase of her texts. In other words, as outlined above, the reader is not the addressee of writing but of publishing. At the same time, the reader is also an unknown factor in the dynamic relationship between author, reader, and text because the author has no control over the reception of his texts, a fact Zeh even calls the definition of serious literature (32). In this way, the reader is rehabilitated as a powerful, even indispensable component of literature. Initially shut out from the process, it is less through publication that a text written in literary privacy becomes literature but through the reader's reception. There remains, however, one particular reader to whom this ironically does not apply: Juli Zeh. When confronted with the role of exegete of her own novels during their promotion, Zeh finds herself in the uncomfortable position of reading meaning into her texts, a task she would rather leave to her readership and professional readers like literary scholars.

The Theory of Practice: Text

“Ein guter Freund von mir,” Zeh writes towards the end of *Treideln*, “formulierte vor Jahren einen Satz, der mich nie wieder losgelassen hat: ‘Literatur ist die Theorie der Praxis’” (171). This statement highlights once again Zeh's conviction that literature is embedded within the sociopolitical realities in which it is written rather than being an autonomous entity. Just like I have discussed the lines between author and reader as being blurred in the previous sections, in this section I will analyze the borders between more general statements about the history and

current state of German-language literature, textual production, and published literary works as being equally permeable.

At the beginning of this chapter, I have described a fragile narrative thread as the point of departure for Zeh's texts, even if an arrival at a finished textual product in the sense of completion is by no means guaranteed. In addition to this thread that, as Zeh admits, could also be dubbed "inspiration," the choice of an appropriate narrative perspective is another vital component to the writing process. Even if neither plot, character motivation nor the end of the story is determined at the outset of the writing process, the perspective from which to tell the story is indispensable: "Ich kann auf Kenntnisse über viele Dinge verzichten, wenn ich mit dem Schreiben beginne (Plot, Thema, Motive, Nebenfiguren, das Ende der Geschichte—nichts davon muss am Anfang feststehen). Ansonsten ist es wie in der Resozialisierung: Ohne Perspektive geht gar nichts" (54).⁵⁵ Zeh goes on to recount the familiar differences between a personal and an auctorial point of view that do not add new aspects to what narratology has already analyzed in greater detail.⁵⁶ Zeh's thoughts on the narrator's perspective, in addition to its relevance for her own prose, is noteworthy still because they illuminate a stylistic shift she has undergone from the beginning of her literary career to the point at which she writes her poetics lecture. Moreover, they summarize general positions within German-language literature and inform the way writing was taught during her time as a student at the *Deutsche Literaturinstitut* in Leipzig. At the beginning of her career, more specifically in her second and third novel *Spieltrieb* and *Schilf*, Zeh had used an auctorial narrator that she characterizes in *Treideln* as "Besserwisser, Oberlehrer, Alleskönner, Drübersteher" (55). The affinity for this

⁵⁵ The choice of a perspective from which to write a text had been central to Zeh's contribution to the *Relevanter Realismus* debate as well.

⁵⁶ See for example Martinez, Matias, and Michael Scheffel. *Einführung in die Erzähltheorie*. 8th ed. München: C.H. Beck, 2009, especially pages 80-84.

narrative perspective had originally led Zeh to write her debut novel *Adler und Engel* from this perspective as well. However, the only reason she ended up using a first-person narrator for her debut instead was that she did not feel up to the task of taking an auctorial narrative perspective at the very outset of her career:

Das größte Scheitern [Zeh bezieht sich auf ihre Suche nach einer zeitgenössischen auktorialen Erzählerstimme] stellt mein erster Roman ‘Adler und Engel’ dar, den ich auf halber Strecke in eine Ich-Erzählung umschrieb [...] Mein erzählerischer Metabolismus war der Vielschichtigkeit und den unendlichen Möglichkeiten der Auktorialität noch nicht gewachsen. (56)

While her “narrative metabolism” developed so well that she was able to write her second novel, *Spieltrieb*⁵⁷, from an auctorial point of view, Zeh lists another reason why she had initially chosen this narrative perspective for *Adler und Engel*. In a rejection of a popular trend in the late 1990s, especially in texts of younger authors of German *Popliteratur*, Zeh criticizes the predominance of the first-person narrator: “Man wollte keine Autorität sein, sondern ‘ich’” (57). She illustrates her point with the fact that, at the very least among her fellow students at the *Deutsche Literaturinstitut*, the prevalent attitude was individualistic and all forms of omnipotence, be they social, political or literary, had been abandoned. In accordance with this abandonment, all texts written from an auctorial perspective at the *Deutsche Literaturinstitut* were viewed with suspicion if not contempt. “Eines Tages hatte sich ein Dozent zu der Behauptung verstiegen, auktoriales Erzählen sei ‘nicht mehr zeitgemäß.’ Seit diesem Moment

⁵⁷ In 2006, Zeh had called *Spieltrieb* as “sprachversessen” and as “mein bislang wichtigstes Buch” (Kemper “Werteverlust”).

herrschte Krieg” (55), Zeh recalls, and her choice to at the least attempt to re-establish the omniscient narrator becomes a way to challenge fixed poetological dogmas at the literary institute. Whereas there is no reason to argue that narrative perspectives are subject to the audience’s taste, there is for Zeh equally little ground to regard them as subject to obsolescence: “Trotzdem weigerte ich mich zu glauben, dass eine Erzählhaltung veralten kann” (56). Another factor that comes into play is that her literary role models—she mentions Honoré de Balzac, Robert Musil, and Thomas Mann—are prominent representatives of texts with an auctorial narrator and, as a result, this perspective was an integral part of what Zeh regarded as “real” literature: “Es war einfach so, dass ich nur auktoriale Erzählungen für ‘echte’ Literatur hielt” (57). As a result of this conviction, Zeh launches into writing a five hundred page long novel told from an omniscient perspective as soon as she graduates from the *Deutsche Literaturinstitut*, a manuscript that eventually would be published under the title *Spieltrieb*.

Over the years, Zeh has allowed other narrative perspectives into her texts⁵⁸, which not only speaks to the continuous development of her narrative metabolism, as she calls it, but also to her awareness that she is a different author by the time she writes *Treideln* than she was when *Spieltrieb* was published in 2004. Looking back, she charges the description of her style at the beginning of her writing career with the same self-irony that pervades the majority of her poetics lecture: “Ich badete in Adjektiven, Abstraktionen, Alliterationen, soff Metaphern, warf mit rhetorischen Fragen um mich, sang Arien in indirekter Rede” (58).⁵⁹ Zeh’s assessment is also self-reflective because, even though she does not bathe in adjectives in this sentence, there is one alliteration and two metaphorical expressions. Equally self-reflective and self-ironic, Zeh states

⁵⁸ *Corpus Delicti*, for example, combines passages told by an auctorial narrator for the exposition and interludes with a personal narrator for the passages told from the point of view of protagonist Mia Holl.

⁵⁹ See also Preußner: “Ihre metaphernreiche Sprache loben manche als kühn, andere kritisieren sie als überladen oder schlicht misslungen” (“Juli Zeh”).

that the metaphor-laden style of her prose belongs to a younger configuration of herself and has little to do with Zeh in 2013: “Die Jugend stürmt in den Himmel, das Alter senkt den Blick zu Boden und studiert die Erde, unter der es demnächst zu liegen kommt” (60). Here, Zeh critically comments on her own development as a writer and dismisses her style as a younger writer as “was für ein Schwachsinn” (60). Moreover, she welcomes a growing independence that comes with maturity. “Ich [...] muss nicht mehr auktorial erzählen,” (60) she states, not only confirming her progress as an author but once again asserting that rules like the self-imposed one of “having to” write from a first person perspective are no longer important for her when it comes to the creation of fiction.

For her yet-to-be-written novel *Treidel*, her own *The Great Gatsby*, Zeh chooses a synthesis between personal and omniscient narrator, “ein auktorialer Ich-Erzähler” (60). Her description of this narrative perspective is at odds with the—at least for the German-speaking context—influential introduction to narratology by Matias Martinez and Michael Scheffel, which is notable chiefly because Zeh and Martinez and Scheffel use the same examples from literary history to illustrate their point. In Zeh’s understanding, the omniscient first-person narrator is a chronicler following the model of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Dr. Watson: “Ein personales Ich [...] Und doch heimlicher Chef der Hauptfigur, weil uneingeschränkter Herrscher über das Erzählgeschehen” (60). Notably, Zeh detects the same narrative perspective in Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, which served as inspiration for her new novel: “Und siehe da [...] Fitzgerald hat es genauso gemacht. Der Große Gatsby gibt Titel und Hauptfigur, der kleine Nick [Carraway] den Ich-Erzähler” (60-61). According to Martinez and Scheffel’s model, the relationship between narrator and narration is a little more complex. In their gradation of the narrator’s involvement in the plot, both Watson and Carraway belong to the same category—the

“homodiegetische Erzähler” (*Einführung in die Erzähltheorie* 81-82), i.e. a narrator who is involved in the plot to various degrees—but to a different degree of involvement.

In her interview with *Deutschlandradio Kultur*, Zeh notes that the writing process is one of the few aspects about which the author can make authoritative statements: “[...] wir Autoren, wenn wir überhaupt was Spezielles wissen, [...] dann doch eigentlich nur, wie sich das Schreiben anfühlt, weil es das ist, was wir eben täglich tun” (“Ich habe meinen Roman”).

Choosing an appropriate narrator for each respective text, as exemplified above, is part of this everyday activity, and one would assume that the freedom of making narratological choices in conjunction with the opportunity to make a living off one’s creativity would be experienced as empowering. Significantly, despite all privileges of being an author Zeh acknowledges and appreciates, the creative act of writing itself does not appear enticing at all: “Natürlich macht Schreiben keinen Spaß! Wie kommst du denn auf so etwas?” (*Treideln* 45) Zeh asks her friend Wanda, a literary scholar and author of poetry. More often than not, the process of writing for Zeh is accompanied by a feeling of deficiency and dissatisfaction that stems from a discernible gap between the words on the page and the content they are supposed to transmit, a gap Zeh feels she is only infrequently able to close: “Erfolg beim Schreiben ist das Gefühl, einen Satz geschrieben zu haben, der das Gemeinte tatsächlich enthält und auch noch gut klingt. Solche Momente sind selten” (45). In addition to a congruence between content and form, there is also a component of aesthetic beauty to which Zeh only vaguely attends. In reference to the guessing game “I Spy,” Zeh describes the process of writing as the attempt to describe actions and emotions that, for the most part, remain ineffable: “Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst, und das ist—unbeschreiblich. Nicht umsonst sind wir sprachlos, [...] wenn uns etwas besonders heftig bewegt” (46). Paradoxically, the space where language apparently fails is discerned as the place

were literature is supposedly located: “Und ausgerechnet dort will Literatur stattfinden: wo das Unsagbare, Unbeschreibliche, Unaussprechliche beginnt” (46). This is less of a paradox than Zeh assumes, though, because the location she refers to, the seemingly intangible “dort,” can be defined as the place where the reader enters the circulation of literature by reading meaning into the text. “Dort” becomes a locale of oscillation between author, text, and reader, and perpetuates a dynamic relationship the author had started, yet over which she or he has little to no control anymore at this point. Arguably, this space of oscillation is also the point where the differentiation between *writing* and *literature* that Zeh highlights can be located. Writing is reduced to an almost technical level, a skill that can be learned and mastered to a higher or lesser degree. Literature, on the other hand, goes beyond both author and the skill of writing through the contribution of the reader:

Es gibt einen großen Unterschied zwischen *Schreiben* und *Literatur*. Der Literatur wohnt im besten Fall eine Größe inne, die man übermenschlich nennen darf, weil sie den Autor transzendiert. Das Schreiben hingegen ist nur eine Tätigkeit, die man besser oder schlechter beherrscht. [...] Sie [Literatur] vermag Ähnliches wie die Musik: das Unsagbare, Unaussprechliche, nicht zu Beschreibende wahrnehmbar machen. [sic] [...] Literatur enthält Dinge, die der Autor nicht hineingetan hat. [...] Nur weil das so ist, weil Literatur größer ist als das Schreiben, lesen Menschen Bücher. (172-173)

In addition to the triangle of author-reader-text, Zeh creates a triangle of writing, publishing, and literature; three aspects that are mutually dependant but looked at as separate entities. As far as the process of writing is concerned, Zeh not only connects it to a feeling of deficiency but also

embarrassment and, going one step further, even situates embarrassment at the heart of the process. The embarrassment she talks about does not refer to potential public shame in case one of her texts does not receive favorable reviews, nor does it refer to the exhibitionism that is inherent to the process of publishing by allowing the reader a peek into the author's mind (98). True to Zeh's reputation to deal with "großen, philosophischen, [...] anspruchsvollen Themen" (Preußner "Juli Zeh"), she understands embarrassment as being at the core of human existence itself. The act of writing is described as nothing less than an act that attempts to counter the ephemerality of human life. Writing is a "Versuch, die Flüchtigkeit aufzuheben. [...] Das Peinliche des Schreibens entstammt der Peinlichkeit des Lebens selbst" (98). The awkwardness of life, in turn, results from our mortality or, more specifically, the futile attempts to escape it. According to Zeh, the act of writing is one of these attempts: "Schreiben ist eine konzentrierte Form des Kampfs gegen die Vergänglichkeit. Wir wissen, dass es umsonst ist. Und kämpfen trotzdem. Peinlicher geht's kaum" (*Treideln* 99). For Zeh, the act of writing becomes an existential, if futile, process that can be read as a means to at least temporarily cheat death. In this context, Zeh also reveals one facet of the meaning of the title of her anti-poetics that goes beyond its previously established association with Hans-Ulrich Treichel. Rather, it leads back to the title's etymological roots. According to the *Duden*, the verb "treideln" means "einen Lastkahn vom Treidelpfad aus (mit Menschenkraft bzw. mithilfe von Zugtieren) stromaufwärts ziehen, schleppen" ("treideln"). The verb "treideln" thus becomes a metaphor for writing itself in the sense that it is seen as moving against the current of time: "Wir stemmen uns, die Last unserer Biographie hinter uns her ziehend, gegen den Strom der unerbittlich auf uns zufließenden Zeit. Treideln voran, obwohl es kein Ankommen gibt" (*Treideln* 102). Once again, the act of writing does not appear as a particularly attractive enterprise. However, this section is arguably

the point in her anti-poetics where writing and literature—usually strictly kept apart—fall into one in the sense that both have a transcendental quality with respect to their ability to go beyond the lifespan of the author. Literary works by definition outlive the author by becoming cultural artifacts; the process of writing appears as a way to counter the ephemerality of the author’s life through a simulated command over time.

The above quotation and its engagement with time echoes in a passage in which Zeh expands her characterization of writing by labeling it “Zeitarbeit” (34). Notably, Zeh does not engage with narratological terms like flashbacks or prolepsis when she addresses the aspect of time, in contrast to her reflections on the modes and perspectives of narration outlined above. Instead, her contemplations on time apply to both narratives and life itself because she recognizes a tightly-knit relationship between the two. The polysemy of the term “Zeitarbeit” does not escape Zeh and tempts her to use it as an “Angebortitel” for her at this stage yet-to-be-written poetics lecture: “Ich könnte mir einen netten Angebortitel einfallen lassen—‘Zeitarbeit – Realität, Relativität und Roman’—und [...] erklären, [...] warum Schreiben nichts weiter ist als das Erzeugen eines Zeitkondensats” (19).⁶⁰ However, the usage of “nichts weiter” belittles the fact that, next to her claim that all poetological rules are only set up to be broken, the idea of “Zeitarbeit” is central to her understanding of writing and therefore to her self-proclaimed anti-poetics as well. She declares that the difference between life and a novel is not as grave as one would expect. In fact, it is only constituted in a variance of duration: “Der Unterschied zwischen dem Leben und einem Roman besteht ja nicht im Grad der Fiktionalität, sondern in der Tatsache, dass der Roman kürzer ist” (34). She elaborates on this later on in *Treideln* and paints a more

⁶⁰ In the context of an interview in which she answers questions by the readers of *Die Zeit*, Zeh has called the process of selecting material from present discourses in order to incorporate them in her novel *Corpus Delicti* as “Gegenwartsverdichtung” (Horn “Fragen an Juli Zeh”).

detailed picture of the relationship between the extra- and intra-textual world, simultaneously revealing her opinion about why people tell and read stories in the first place: “Deshalb lieben wir Geschichten. Bei der Geschichte gibt es ein Außerhalb. Sie ist ein (fiktives) Stück Lebenswelt mit einer anderen Lebenswelt drumherum. Die erste Lebenswelt (Geschichte) kann enden, und man kehrt in die zweite (sogenanntes echtes Leben) zurück” (102). Hence, the appeal of narratives for the reader lies in the possibility to return to the extra-textual lived-in world if the intra-textual lived-in world has ended, a feat that is impossible in the extra-textual world when the reader’s life story ends.⁶¹ More importantly, the possibility to return to the extra-textual world allows both author and reader a level of reflection on the diegetic world in a manner Zeh does not deem possible in the extra-textual world because the latter continues after the intra-textual one has ended. In simplified terms, the end of the extra-textual world—death—is a point of no return whereas the end of the intra-textual world allows continuity. The creation of textual worlds therefore bestows upon the author godlike qualities. In an uncharacteristically metaphysical passage in *Treideln*, she writes: “Der Roman simuliert ein Vorher-Nachher, ein Innen-Außen und ein Anfang-Ende. Wer schreibt, schwingt sich auf zu einem Gott, der Welten erschafft, um sie erkennend überdauern zu können” (102-103). Given that the literary worlds Zeh creates in her texts are rooted in the sociopolitical realities of the twenty-first century, her texts become of way to engage with and reflect on them. The same is true for the reader as she or he shares the possibility to oscillate between the intra-textual world the text creates and the extra-textual realities the reader inhabits as well. Following Zeh’s declarations, her anti-poetics therefore present literature as both world-making and world-reflection.

⁶¹ Zeh highlights that death is neither a goal (“Ziel”) nor an end but nothingness (“Nichts”) (102).

Towards the end of *Treideln*, Zeh further elaborates on the validity of literature in society by making a comparison between narration and memory. Zeh goes so far as to claim that narration is less tied to literature than it is to memory because, she states, “in erster Linie ist es [Erzählen] Erinnerungstechnik” (181). She asserts that we organize our memories by following narrative patterns with which we are familiar from texts. Once again, this procedure is linked to a command of time in the narrative process: “Genau wie beim Erinnern werden auch beim Erzählen die Gesetze der Zeit aus den Angeln gehoben. Man dehnt Augenblicke in die Unendlichkeit, nur um gleich darauf ein ganzes Leben in einer einzigen Sekunde zusammenzuraffen” (134). In a second step, the construction of memories as narratives result in a coherent notion of the self and the world we inhabit, an idea that echoes Zeh’s previous claim that textual production is world-making:

Wir ordnen erinnerte Erlebnisse nach narrativen Mustern und konstruieren auf diese Weise ein konsistentes Bild unserer selbst und der uns umgebenden Welt. Nicht in ihrer zerstreuten, unterhaltenden oder bildenden Wirkung liegt der Grund, warum es Literatur seit Tausenden von Jahren gibt. Sondern in der originären Nähe literarischer Verfahren zum menschlichen Welt- und Selbsterlebnis. (187)

Especially with regards to the self, narration and, by extension, the reception of literature serves a further purpose that harks back to the idea of the perfectibility of human existence of the Enlightenment, that is “die Überzeugung, daß der Mensch moralisch, intellektuell und körperlich verbesserungsfähig sei, ja am Ende zur Vollkommenheit gelangen könnte” (Karthaus and Manss *Sturm und Drang* 21). There is nothing in Zeh’s texts that suggests she believes humankind will

ever achieve perfection; narration and literature, however, function as ‘training units’ that aid us to arrive at a coherent and elaborate construction of self and the world around it:

[...] wenn wir also in aller Kürze sagen können: ‘Ich dichte, also bin ich’ – dann ist Erzählen ein Trainingsprogramm in Sachen Menschwerdung und die Literatur ein Fitnesscenter, in dem wir unsere narrativen Erinnerungsmuskeln stählen, um zu möglichst kunstvoller Selbsterschaffung in der Lage zu sein. Ein Übungslauf nicht nur für das Leben, sondern für das Sein. [...] Deshalb ist die Literatur nicht totzukriegen, ganz egal, wie oft man ihr noch über Jahrhunderte und Jahrtausende hinweg den Untergang prophezeihen will. (*Treideln* 192)

This optimistic outlook on the possibilities and the future of literature is yet another expression of Zeh’s previously expressed “Vertrauen in die sinnstiftende Kraft der Kunst” (113).

Significantly, literature once again appears as something that transcends the author. On the one hand, literature is the very thing that calls the author into existence—“Ich dichte, also bin ich”—; on the other hand, it goes beyond her or him in the sense that the reader is dependent on the reception of narratives for a coherent construction of the self as well.

The Text is Dead, Long Live the Text!

“Treidel ist tot. Es lebe das Treideln!” (197) By declaring the protagonist of her *Great Gatsby*-inspired novel dead while affirming the validity of *treideln*, Zeh finishes her poetics lecture on a note that is at the same time sad and hopeful. After allowing the reader of *Treideln* a look over

her shoulder while conceiving her new novel, the narrative threads Zeh had picked up eventually lead nowhere and she buries the idea of writing the zeitgeist novella. Ironically, the development of the poetics lecture, a textform intended to bring clarity into the construction of literary products and, in the best-case scenario, even work as a guideline to writing them, has had the opposite effect. Documentating the evolution of her planned novel *Treidel* from an idea to the point where Zeh includes excerpts from the yet unfinished text into her lecture has not made the novel obsolete; however, it makes it impossible for Zeh to write it. “Ich glaube,” Zeh writes, “ich würde das Buch gern lesen. Aber ich habe keine Lust mehr, es zu schreiben” (196). In addition to the careful planning of *Treidel*—an approach to the composition of a text that led to her dissatisfaction with her third novel *Schilf* (196)—, reflecting about the process of writing reveals itself to be incompatible with Zeh’s technique of writing “Nur-So.”

Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the last sentence of the lecture, the death of *Treidel* means the birth of *Treideln*, and being left with a text as challenging as this is an apt consolation for the fact that her readers will not get to read her *Great Gatsby* at this point. In her Frankfurt poetics lecture, Zeh set out to provide her readers with an insight into the mechanisms of the writing process, a goal she achieves by documenting the technical steps and underlying convictions as well as the obstacles that inform her writing in a detailed fashion. Textual production is described as an artistic skill dependent on what I have called an undisturbed literary privacy, in other words, a place only inhabited by the author alone. For Zeh, this literary privacy is especially important as any thought of a potential readership inhibits the writing process. Moreover, literary privacy is the condition for the opportunity to find out where the narrative threads Zeh picks up might be leading. Without a clear conception of the finished text in mind, Zeh follows these threads “nur so” and, granted the narrative threads do not break,

eventually arrives at a point where the finished story enters the literary public through publication. Once the text has entered circulation, it transcends the author and, via the reception by Zeh's readership that includes reading individual meaning into the text, "becomes" literature. Concomitantly, the author switches roles from being a writing individual to a public figure that is, due to the rules and expectations of today's literary market, prompted to provide information about the text at hand. The reader, on the other hand, switches roles from being an obstacle for textual production to a powerful entity that not only transforms Zeh's texts into literature through reception, but also ensures her future as self-employed author by purchasing her books.

At the outset of her lecture, Zeh had declared that any poetological remarks are necessarily made in hindsight. With this statement in mind, *Treideln* can be read as both an inventory and a review of a literary career that at the point of writing spans twelve years. At the same time, *Treideln* does at no point seek closure and leaves the door wide open for Zeh's future. For one, she has yet to write a text told from the perspective of the chronicler, i.e. the auctorial personal narrator based on the model of Conan Doyle's Dr. Watson or Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway. Even if this experiment failed in the case of *Treidel*, the poetics lecture suggests that this narrative perspective is not one Zeh has completely given up on yet. The reason this is not just a speculative claim but a genuine possibility is given by Zeh herself: "Weil ich mich gerade an der Schwelle zum Mittelalter befinde. *Midlife* ohne *crisis*. Das Zeitalter des Chronisten" (61). In addition, Zeh expresses her awareness that *Treideln* is necessarily a snapshot of her take on the dynamics of writing at a specific point in time. As a result, her statements do not claim to be universal truths, certainly not for authors in general, but also not even for herself:

Es ist eher so, dass ich, wenn ich den Text vortrage, schon wieder denke, das stimmt alles überhaupt nicht. Was du da vor einem halben Jahr alles gedacht und aufgeschrieben hast, wäre heute schon nicht mehr gültig. [...] Weil der Schreibprozess sich mit der eigenen Erfahrung so stark verändert. (Balke “Im Gespräch: Juli Zeh”)

Accordingly, the emphatic “es lebe das Treideln!” at the end of her lecture is an assurance that Zeh will not only continue to stem herself against the flow of time but to continuously commit to critically engage with contemporary discourses as well. While still avoiding to apply any rigid rules to literary production, the reading public can count on Zeh to commit herself to provocative and critical statements if the circumstances call for them.

The question that remains, though, is whether or not *Treideln* can justifiably be labeled an anti-poetics as Zeh maintains. At the very least, her approach towards the concept of a poetics has left a discernible mark on the tradition of the Frankfurt poetics lecture. Terézia Mora, who followed Zeh in holding the lecture in 2014, for one, emphasized the deep impression the way Zeh handled the task of publicly speaking about literature had left on her: “Im Grunde war es für mich wirklich Juli Zeh, die das Ganze aufgelockert hat. Ich dachte, endlich mal eine Frau, die sieht das alles viel pragmatischer. Das hat der Sache das Überkandidelte genommen und ihr sehr gut getan” (Balke “Im Gespräch: Autorin Terézia Mora”). Seen against the background of Mora’s statement, *Treideln* can be regarded as an anti-poetics in that it challenges and expands notions of what poetics have to and can be.⁶² The verb *treideln* that describes the action of forcibly towing something against the current, is therefore charged with meaning with respect to

⁶² In *Aufklärer der Gegenwart*, Sabrina Wagner makes a similar point about Zeh’s poetics lecture at the University of Tübingen: “Zudem ist die Benennung ‘Anti-Poetik’ als ein Spiel mit den jeweiligen Leserwartungen zu verstehen” (108).

the task of outlining a poetics as well. Instead of meeting expectations, Zeh chooses to quite literally move against the current and delivers a poetics lecture that goes in an unanticipated direction. At the same time, Zeh's central anti-poetological credo—"Das ist nun einmal die anti-poetologische Wahrheit: Falls wir beim Schreiben Gesetze machen, dann nur, um dagegen verstoßen zu können" (*Treideln* 155)—is of course a poetological approach in and of itself. *Not* knowing where the narrative will take the author and *not* knowing if the process of writing will result in a finished text at all has a poetological quality to it as well, at least with respect to the content of narration. Still, Zeh has all the right reasons to maintain her position that writing while simultaneously reflecting about the underlying principles of textual production in her case is mutually exclusive, as the death of *Treidel* confirms. After she had finished the lectures, Zeh in an interview reflects on her experiences and on her assumption that she does not have a poetics. She states,

Und das hat das für mich einfach wieder belegt, was ich am Anfang eigentlich schon vermutet hatte, dass ich nämlich jemand bin, der nicht gleichzeitig abstrakt über meine eigene Literatur reden kann und dann aber trotzdem schöpferisch tätig sein, das sind einfach zwei total verschiedene Ansätze für mich. ("Ich habe meinen Roman")

Squaring the circle consequently continues to remain a futile endeavour. *Treideln* demonstrates, though, that Juli Zeh is nonetheless capable of leaving a number of illuminating dents in that circle. Not the least, *Treideln* also exhibits her proficiency as a writer of non-literary texts, and particularly those passages of her poetics lecture dedicated to the relationship between literature and politics clear a path towards an analysis of Zeh's intellectual work outside of the literary

market. Unlike those authors who are exclusively known for their literary production, Zeh is arguably equally known for her activities as a public intellectual. In the following chapter, I will therefore turn to an examination of Zeh's work not in the literary but in the public sphere and explore the question if—despite the fact that she claims not to have a literary poetics—there is something that could be labelled the poetics of Zeh's public intellectual work.

Chapter 3: A Portrait of the Author as Public Intellectual

The following are the first lines of Harold Pinter's Nobel Lecture "Art, Truth and Politics," held on December 7, 2005:

In 1958 I wrote the following: 'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.' I believe that these assertions still make sense and do apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false? (Pinter 1)

Pinter makes the clear distinction between writer and citizen and highlights that his approach to truth differs depending on whether he is speaking as the former or the latter. As a writer, Pinter is comfortable with accepting that there is no absolute truth, or rather, he acknowledges that "the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art" (1). As a citizen, however, Pinter feels the compulsion to not be satisfied with a plurality of truths. Instead, he calls on his fellow citizens to "define the *real* truth of our lives and our societies" (12, emphasis in original) by which Pinter means to challenge those in power if their political actions are morally unjust. Such a clear-cut distinction between author and citizen as Pinter suggests is blurred in the case of Juli Zeh who defines the author as a privileged citizen with the opportunity to make his or her voice heard publicly. This public is first and foremost the literary public where Zeh is entering a dialogue with her readers through her fictional texts while at the same time being caught up in the mechanisms of today's literary market through publication and promotion.

This chapter focuses on the way Zeh takes on another role, namely that of a public intellectual who is navigating the public sphere.

When analyzing the role of public intellectuals, one is prompted to engage with a set of dichotomies. On the one hand, there is the dichotomy between private versus public which, as Michael Warner emphasizes, is a lot less definite than one would expect: “Public and private sometimes compete, sometimes complement each other, and sometimes are merely parts of a larger series of classifications that includes, say, local, domestic, personal, political, economic, or intimate” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 28). On the other hand, there is the dichotomy between intellectual and expert that is central to a definition of the public intellectual. While theorists like Edward W. Said and Zygmunt Bauman, who have contributed to the conceptualization of the role of the public intellectual, favor the intellectual over the expert due to the former’s independent voice, the difference between the two is twice as important for the case of Juli Zeh in the sense that the expert repeatedly appears as her favorite enemy. While she denies her readers a clear-cut definition of what precisely she means with the term, the contexts in which Zeh agitates against the expert suggest that her issue is less the expert’s participation in public discourse but rather the way in which the expert has come to dominate or even monopolize it. The “cult of expertise,” as Said calls it (“The Public Role” 22), is for Zeh not only a questionable development based on the fact that experts are often bound in economic obligations that potentially influence their opinion. Additionally, the dominance of expert opinions in public discourse today have an impact on citizen’s willingness to engage in said discourse because they might feel a lack of legitimacy that would entitle them to do so. Zeh therefore recognizes “Expertokratie” (*Treideln* 147) not as a fruitful addition but, on the contrary, as a threat to a thriving and multi-vocal public discourse she attempts to re-establish.

Last but not least, there is, within the German-speaking context, a peculiar friction between a call for politically committed authors and artists in the feuilleton that is often followed by harsh critique if authors indeed comment on extra-literary affairs. This phenomenon has not escaped Zeh, who is generally perceived as the most prominent representative of the author as public intellectual of her generation. “So sehr in den Feuilletons nach einer Renaissance [...] des politischen Schriftstellers geweint wird, so wenig stößt die Manifestation in Fleisch und Blut bzw. Papier und Druckerschwärze auf Gegenliebe” (142). In light of this observation, I will examine reasons why the almost automatically ensuing critique of an author’s publicly demonstrated political commitment is not an obstruction for Zeh but rather motivates her to continue her work as public intellectual.

In addition to authors like Said and Bauman, who define the profile of the intellectual’s voice with the help of the adjectives reminding, dissenting, and correcting, I will add the adjective “willful” to the list to delineate Juli Zeh’s public persona and her actions as public intellectual. The analysis draws on Sara Ahmed’s *Willful Subjects* (2014) in which she undertakes the project of creating a “willfulness archive” (13). This archive, in Ahmed’s understanding, “would refer to documents that are passed down in which willfulness comes up, as a trait, as a character trait” (13). It is predominantly the latter that allows for an inclusion of Zeh’s public persona in this archive; however, her non-fictional work, especially 2009’s book-length essay *Angriff auf die Freiheit*, could also be subsumed under the category of the willful. Ahmed starts the assembly of her willfulness archive with a recount of the Brother Grimm’s “Das eigensinnige Kind” (The Willful Child).⁶³ The eponymous child disobeys her mother’s

⁶³ For the story’s full text, see: Grimm, Jacob, Wilhelm Grimm, and Heinz Rölleke. *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm. Band 2*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980. 156. Print.

commands and, as punishment, is struck ill by God. The child dies and is buried, yet even after death, willfulness prevails: the child's arm repeatedly reaches out from the grave. Only after her mother visits the grave and strikes the willful arm with a rod, the child comes to her final rest. From reading this short story, Ahmed draws the definition of willfulness as "a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given" (1). In the case of "Das eigensinnige Kind," the authorities are the mother and God, but they might as well be governmental agencies or whole states, i.e. institutions and their representatives whose authority is given through the organization of our society. Additionally, the notion of persistence is key to Ahmed's understanding of willfulness: "Willfulness involves persistence in the face of having been brought down, where simply to 'keep going' or to 'keep coming up' is to be stubborn and obstinate. Mere persistence can be an act of disobedience" (2). Persistence evokes the hope to achieve a goal or to fulfill a political project or, more generally: that towards which the persistence of an agent is directed. In spite of this hope, with the aid of Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Zeh's public actions as an intellectual will be read as having merit even if they may not necessarily achieve what they set out to do. In other words, as is often the case, the journey will appear as its own reward.

The Public Sphere

In her essay "Gute Nacht, Individualistinnen," written in 2006 but published for the first time in her 2014 collection of essays *Nachts sind das Tiere*, Zeh presents the reader with the following fictitious scenario: During a reception following one of Zeh's appearances on a TV talk show, she is approached by three women who confront her about not using the female suffix when Zeh,

during the talk show, described herself as “Autor” instead of “Autorin.” In the ensuing conversation, Zeh ensures the women that she did this unintentionally and calls for an uninhibited use of language: “Verlange, nicht auf ein *role model* reduziert zu werden und reden zu dürfen, wie mir der Schnabel gewachsen ist” (“Gute Nacht” 19). The women’s reaction is prompt and sharp: “Auf einem öffentlichen Podium sei ich eine öffentliche Person, heißt es, und hätte mich dieser Verantwortung zu stellen” (19). Zeh’s reply, equally prompt and sharp, denies that an appearance in her role as public figure automatically has to adhere to specific preconceptions: “Das verpflichte mich nicht zu einem Auftritt als feminisische Frontfigur, gebe ich zurück” (19). This short excerpt illustrates the ambiguous expectations with which Zeh finds herself confronted when oscillating between her roles as author, author as public figure, and author as public intellectual. While this chapter predominantly analyses Zeh’s role as public intellectual who moves in the public sphere, it is crucial to underscore that this role is always intertwined and more often than not impossible to distinguish from her role as author as public figure.⁶⁴ As public intellectual, Zeh does not—or only partially so—move within the literary public but within the broader discursive field of the public sphere of which the literary public is but a segment.

One of the most influential texts that conceptualizes a modern understanding of the public sphere is Jürgen Habermas’ *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, first published in 1962 and later revised in 1990. In this text, Habermas delineates the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in the late seventeenth century and predominantly attributes its formation to the flourishing of print media, critical reflection on art, transformations in traffic and commerce, the

⁶⁴ See also Sabrina Wagner’s assessment of the interrelationship between Zeh’s different roles: “Die engagierte Bürgerin ist bei der Lektüre ihrer Romane ebenso wenig wegzudenken wie die politisch denkende Juristin” (*Aufklärer der Gegenwart* 136).

development of a widespread mail delivery system, and structural changes within domestic life.⁶⁵ Concomitant to these broad socioeconomic and sociopolitical shifts, Habermas sees a re-evaluation of the importance of the private sphere as an area that is recognized by the bourgeois as a constitutive element of its own formation that requires protection from state intrusion. In Habermas' words, the bourgeois public sphere develops "in dem Maße, in dem das öffentliche Interesse an der privaten Sphäre der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft nicht mehr nur von der Obrigkeit wahrgenommen, sondern von den Untertanen als ihr eigenes in Betracht gezogen wird" (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* 82). Put differently, the appropriation of the private sphere as a space worthy of protection from the state results in the discursive formation of the bourgeois public sphere that, if threatened by state interference, provides the space for a critique of sovereign power.⁶⁶ The discursive tool that enables the public to negotiate the inner regulations of the emerging bourgeois society with regards to its economic and sociopolitical structure in dialogue with sovereign power is, according to Habermas, public critical reasoning. He states,

Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit läßt sich vorerst als die Sphäre der zum Publikum versammelten Privatleute begreifen; diese beanspruchen die obrigkeitlich reglementierte Öffentlichkeit alsbald gegen die öffentliche Gewalt selbst, um sich mit dieser über die allgemeinen Regeln des Verkehrs in der grundsätzlich privatisierten, aber öffentlich relevanten Sphäre des Warenverkehrs und der gesellschaftlichen Arbeit auseinanderzusetzen. Eigentümlich und gesellschaftlich ohne Vorbild ist das Medium dieser politischen Auseinandersetzung: das öffentliche Raisonement. (86)

⁶⁵ For a concise overview of Habermas' line of argumentation, see Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* 46-52.

⁶⁶ Habermas claims that "um die öffentlichen Eingriffe in den privatisierten Haushalt bildet sich schließlich eine kritische Sphäre" (82).

Habermas continues to state that citizens had been educated in public reasoning, the very same discursive tool that Immanuel Kant sees as a way out of a postulated “selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit” (“Beantwortung der Frage” 452), in a precursor of the bourgeois public sphere: the literary public. In part made possible through widely circulated print media and public spaces like coffeehouses and salons that brought citizens together, the literary public did not have a political function yet. Instead, it provided a training ground for the political public sphere that followed. The literary public “ist das Übungsfeld eines öffentlichen Rasonnements, das noch in sich selbst kreist—ein Prozeß der Selbstaufklärung der Privatleute über die genuinen Erfahrungen ihrer neuen Privatheit” (Habermas *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* 88). In other words, the literary public Habermas speaks of enabled citizens to practice “sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen” (Kant “Beantwortung der Frage” 425) and to develop the discursive instruments that would eventually lead into the formation of the public sphere as defined above. So even if discourses on commerce and traffic lie at the core of early debates within the now politically functioning public sphere, philosophical Enlightenment principles led to its formation. We can therefore trace the importance and value that Zeh attributes to a multi-vocal public debate in particular and the public sphere as its genuine location in general back to the Enlightenment, an assessment that is confirmed by a statement made by Zeh that her view of humanity is indeed tightly linked to Enlightenment principles. In a 2012 interview with *Neues Deutschland* that predominantly revolves around state intrusion of the private sphere, she states: “Der Mensch in meinem Kopf folgt einem sehr altmodischen Bild, nämlich dem mündigen Bürger der Aufklärung” (Wallrodt “Man muss schon”). Even if one is willing to accept the responsible citizen as an old-fashioned concept, Zeh’s use of the term old-

fashioned must not be confused with out-dated in this context, as she transports it into and transforms it according to the conditions of the twenty-first century.

Populated by enlightened citizens⁶⁷, the newly established public sphere as a space for public reasoning that allows for open critique of sovereign power is charged with enormous emancipatory and democratic potential. However, this potential for Habermas was never fulfilled; instead, he sees the public sphere caught up in the tension between expanding on the one hand and simultaneously losing its power on the other: “Tendenzen des Zerfalls der Öffentlichkeit sind unverkennbar: während sich ihre Sphäre immer großartiger erweitert, wird ihre Funktion immer kraftloser” (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* 57). In his discussion of Habermas’ thesis, Michael Warner singles out “the asymmetrical nature of mass culture,” and “the growing interpenetration of the state and civil society” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 49) as the two main factors that lead to the loss of emancipatory potency. The former “makes it easier for those with capital or power to distribute their views but harder for marginal voices to talk back,” (49) and describes what Habermas calls the development from a “kulturräsonierenden zum kulturkonsumierenden Publikum” (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* 267). The latter point arguably has a graver impact on the political function of the public sphere in that it transforms the critically reasoning citizen into one who is reduced to affirming state politics: “Public opinion comes less to generate ideas and hold power accountable and more simply to register approval or disapproval in the form of opinion polls and occasional elections” (Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* 50). Habermas argues that in the course of this development, the public sphere takes on characteristics of feudal times it had once overcome: “Die bürgerliche

⁶⁷ Habermas emphasizes that the public sphere only deserves to be denominated “public” when equal access to it is at least theoretically guaranteed: “Öffentlichkeit ist dann garantiert, wenn die ökonomischen und sozialen Bedingungen jedermann gleiche Chancen einräumen, die Zulassungskriterien zu erfüllen: eben die Qualifikationen der Privatautonomie [...] zu erwerben” (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* 157).

Öffentlichkeit nimmt im Maße ihrer Gestaltung durch public relations wieder feudale Züge an: die ‘Angebotsträger’ entfalten repräsentativen Aufwand vor folgebereiten Kunden”

(*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* 292). In other words, the hard-fought-for emancipation from the citizen’s “selbstverschuldeter Unmündigkeit” in the sense of Kant still appears to hover over the public sphere, threatening its functionality and transformative potential in the process.

“Habermas’s analysis has been the subject of voluminous debate,” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 50) Michael Warner reminds us⁶⁸, the critique by Harold Mah being a recent one. In the 2013 volume *New Public Spheres: Recontextualizing the Intellectual*, Mah criticizes Habermas’ model as “an idealization of intellectual activity” (“The Intellectual in the Public Sphere” 16) that neglects the fact that all “people, even the most rational, are always embedded in some social context, and that inescapable fact [...] produces numerous tensions and contradictions” (16). Instead of clinging to an all-encompassing model of the public sphere, Mah calls for an acknowledgment of the fragmented and particularized character of this discursive field. For him, holding on to the idea of “Habermas’s universal Enlightenment public sphere” is no longer feasible in the twenty-first century which is better grasped when accepting the reality of “multiple, conflicting arenas of discourse” (20). Mah’s critique of Habermas seems unjustified with regards to the latter’s alleged ignorance of the social context for engagement in the public sphere. The very formation of new social contexts is at the core of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* and established as being indispensable for the creation of the public sphere. However, Mah’s insistence on discursive tensions, contradictions, and various locales of discourse is still helpful in that it reminds us of the network-like structure the public sphere has

⁶⁸ See for example the volume *After Habermas* that collects explorations of Habermas’ theory with regards to feminism and the digital sphere: *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*. Eds. Nick Crossley, and John M. Roberts. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2004. Print.

taken on since its expansion into the digital realm. Seen against the dramatically altered configuration of the public sphere through the advances in technology, both citizens and public intellectuals have participatory possibilities not conceivable at the time Habermas wrote his analysis. As Peter Dahlgren states, “the Internet has become a central institution of the public sphere; for those citizens who are in fact focused on news and discussion of politics, the possibilities are truly impressive” (“From Public to Civic Intellectuals” 59). Juli Zeh goes yet one step further than calling the possibilities of the digital sphere merely impressive. In a letter addressed to German chancellor Angela Merkel that requests a clear direction of the German government in light of online surveillance, Zeh writes: “Wir erleben einen Epochenwandel, der aufgrund seiner politischen, gesellschaftlichen und wirtschaftlichen Implikationen mit der Industriellen Revolution verglichen werden kann” (“Offener Brief” 272). Zeh’s political engagement demonstrates not only her frustration in light of the German government’s inertia towards the NSA affair but also the considerable time and effort she has invested in outlining the importance of the digital revolution.⁶⁹

In the same manner, Dahlgren underscores that digital technology potentially allows for a move from the “kulturkonsummierenden” back to the “kulturräsonierenden” citizen in the sense that instantaneous responses and discussions of media reports etc. are now possible. Provided the digital extension of the public sphere is granted the same rights as the ‘traditional’ public sphere—freedom of expression, security from state intervention, censorship, and so forth—it gives the audience more, and especially more immediate, agency to engage with media content and transforms the role of the audience as a result. “Citizens are no longer just positioned as

⁶⁹ In addition to the quoted letter to Angela Merkel, Zeh’s essay collection *Nachts sind das Tiere* among others includes the texts “Digitaler Zwilling” (2013) and “Wo bleibt der digitale Code Civil,” (2014) both of which specifically address the necessity to politically react to the structural changes brought about by the evolution of the digital sphere.

audiences, but can become active participants, ‘*producers*,’ as it is sometimes called. This can become empowering, both in subjective and objective terms, especially as citizens generate networks, mini-public spheres, social movements, and engage in mobilizations” (“From Public to Civic Intellectuals” 59). The possibilities Dahlgren describes leave open the answer whether or not this new agency for active citizens in the digital realm brings about targeted structural changes in the ‘real world.’ While the digital public sphere allows for debates that are instantaneous, hopefully vivid and ideally multi-perspectivist, the drawback of this development is that it will potentially be harder than ever to reach points of consensus that can be translated into political action. Still, Dahlgren optimistically regards the advantages as being more promising than the disadvantages. He states, “if ‘truth’ cannot be guaranteed by any one voice, we will have to hope that the collaborative, participatory, interactive, interventional environment of the Internet will at least promote a sense of the open and provisional” (63). This brief description of the way knowledge is organized today in the public sphere echoes Juli Zeh’s take on the same issue. In the interview with *Neues Deutschland* quoted above, she states that public discourse today is defined by a “riesigen Graubereich” (Wallrodt “Man muss schon”) that might be frustrating in the sense that it muddles the yearning for clear positions that lead to equally clear political directions. This demand for clarity and the absolute, however, is no longer a feasible claim to uphold. Zeh states, “das Absolute gibt es nicht. Das müssen wir Menschen aushalten können” (Wallrodt “Man muss schon”). Just as Dahlgren emphasizes the advantages of the collaborative nature of the internet as a locale for public debate, Zeh goes on to highlight that the loss of absolute positions is a catalyst for a renewed interest in discourse: “Deswegen brauchen wir so viel Diskurs und so viel Nachdenken und so viel Verständigung” (Wallrodt “Man muss schon”). Discourse, reasoning, and communication are pillars in Zeh’s understanding

of the public sphere today that go back to Enlightenment principles as well as acknowledging that the public sphere in the twenty-first century is of a very different configuration than it was in the past. By virtue of being an author, Zeh is privileged to raise her voice and make it operational for her role as a public intellectual. Through her active engagement in public discourse and by performing the role of the public intellectual, Zeh acts out and embodies the way ‘doing politics’ is still possible today, even if it may be messy and incoherent.

Traditions of Speaking Truth to Power: Approaches to the Role of the Public Intellectual

In his 1993 Reith Lectures *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward W. Said develops a detailed and influential model of the public intellectual that, despite having been written two decades ago, still offers a valuable perspective for the context of the twenty-first century. Revisiting previous explorations of the role of intellectuals by the likes of Antonio Gramsci⁷⁰ and Julien Benda, Said uses the phrase “speaking the truth to power” (*Representations* 8) to define the intellectual as someone who raises her or his voice in dissent and is, other than the proverbial lone voice in the wilderness, hopefully heard. Three terms are key to Said’s understanding of the public intellectual. As the title of his lectures suggest, one of them is representation; the other two are embodiment and articulation. Said states that “the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public” (11). Representation is charged with meaning in Said’s definition in two ways. On the one hand, the intellectual has the linguistic means of

⁷⁰ Said mainly engages with Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual,” i.e. intellectuals Gramsci defined as “directly connected to classes or enterprises that used intellectuals to organize interests, gain more power, get more control” (*Representations* 4).

representing an opinion in a manner that is comprehensible and accessible to and for a wide public. The latter is of special importance because, according to Said in reference to Alvin Gouldner, the diversification of discourse into countless specialized fields has entailed an increasingly specialized language that no longer speaks to such a wide public. Accordingly, the intellectual runs the risk of using a language that is exclusive and consequently shuts out understanding and participation from large portions of the audience: “Each intellectual [...] speaks and deals in a language that has become specialized and usable by other members of the same field, specialized experts addressing other specialized experts in a *lingua franca* largely unintelligible to unspecialized people” (9). The development Said describes subverts the definition of *lingua franca* as “a means of communication between populations speaking vernaculars that are not mutually intelligible” (“*lingua franca*”) in the sense that intellectuals run the risk of no longer being able to fulfill their role of speaking to and for a non-specialized public if they literally do not share the same language. On the other hand—and this is not only equally important but also counters to some extent the risk of using overly specialized language—the intellectual ‘embodies’ his or her linguistic message, that is the corporeality of the intellectual stands in for what is otherwise either uttered vocally or written on a page. The practices of a public intellectual are therefore not limited to linguistic performance but extend to performances of the body as well.

Crucially, Said’s intellectual represents not hegemonic positions of those in power—in opposition to functionaries working for government think tanks, for example—but speaks for those who otherwise have no voice in public discourse. It is, according to Said, even the intellectuals “*raison d’être* [...] to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (11). The conviction underlying these linguistic and corporeal

representations is “that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations” (11) and that all endeavours to undermine or erode them must be opposed. In this manner, the public intellectual appears both as a *reminder* of universal principles of humanity on which the governance of nation states should be based and as a *corrective and dissenting* voice in case these principles are jeopardized. Given his reservations towards the use of specialized language when in dialogue with a wide public, the expert command of language is pivotal to Said’s model of the intellectual’s work. In fact, the skillful use of language at the right moment leads to language *becoming* action: “Knowing how to use language well and knowing when to intervene in language are two essential features of intellectual action” (20). Intervening, reminding, and raising one’s voice in dissent are not exclusively linguistic actions as they are intrinsically tied to the intellectual’s body, thus adding a component of performative corporeality to the intellectual’s work with which Said does not engage in greater depth.

The aspect of bodily performance, however, is expressed in Zygmunt Bauman’s elaborations on the intellectual that appeared in 1995, two years after Said’s Reith Lectures. Similar to Said, Bauman puts emphasis on the obligation and even duty the public intellectual has with respect to society. Bestowed with “exceptional knowledge not available to ordinary people” (*Life in Fragments* 224)—a perspective that stands in stark contrast to Juli Zeh’s definition of the writer-intellectual as “normal” yet privileged citizen—the public intellectual has both the right and the duty to intervene in public discourse:

Taking a stance in matters of public policy, particularly in matters of ethical significance, becomes a *duty* of such persons whenever the politicians, the professional managers of the

public area, fail in their care. As a group, the intellectuals hold a *responsibility* for monitoring and scrutinizing the actions of the appointed wardens of public values; and an *obligation* to intervene if they find those actions below standard. (224, emphasis in original)

The obligation of the public intellectual to intervene, just like in Said's elaborations, is not limited to linguistic actions but includes corporeal performances as well. In fact, the aspect of performance takes center stage in Bauman's elaborations on the public intellectual in the sense that he or she performs a role: "Being an intellectual means *performing a peculiar role* in the life of society *as a whole*. It is this performance that makes one an intellectual" (225, emphasis in original). In comparison to Zeh's point of view regarding the author as public intellectual, it is important to note that both notions of responsibility and obligation are no longer inherent in her understanding of the writer-intellectual's role. Contrary to Bauman's assertions, Zeh no longer sees a responsibility or obligation for authors to engage in public discourse. In an interview with *Deutschlandradio Kultur*, she states that "da [ist] schon sowas wie eine Verantwortung," ("Ich habe meinen Roman") but immediately qualifies this statement by adding "von meiner Seite aus," thus modifying what could be read as a general call for action into an individual one only pertaining to herself. This statement can be read as being informed by recurring debates within German literary criticism that on a general level engage with the question whether or not literature has a sociopolitical function beyond its aesthetic qualities, as I will discuss below. At the same time, Zeh's statement illustrates how she is very much part of a generation of writers who see themselves as primarily individual and independent from distinct political factions. Moreover, the qualifying "von meiner Seite aus" highlights that Zeh is unwilling to make an

assertion that could be misinterpreted as an “unzulässige Verallgemeinerung” (*Treideln* 157); a “danger” to which I will return later in this chapter.

In the already mentioned *New Public Spheres: Recontextualizing the Intellectual* that brings the debate evolving around public intellectuals into the twenty-first century, Patrick Baert and Alan Shipman pay tribute to the altered conditions for public intellectuals in our increasingly digitized media society. While particularly Said’s elaborations remain authoritative⁷¹, Baert and Shipman broaden the discussion by introducing “new *types* of public intellectual, made possible [...] by institutional and cultural changes” (“The Rise of the Embedded Intellectual” 28, emphasis in original) while Peter Dahlgren highlights how “the transition from the mass media to the newer digital media is altering the communication ecology” (“From Public to Civic Intellectuals” 51) of public intellectuals at work today. Notably, Baert and Shipman dedicate a significant amount of space to a contestation of the “declinist’ thesis,” i.e. the notion that the influence of public intellectuals has waned considerably. Following this thesis, intellectuals, due to an ever-increasing specialization of fields of knowledge, have migrated “to the more restricted role of ‘expert’ or ‘technocrat’” (Baert and Shipman “The Rise of the Embedded Intellectual” 30), an issue already taken up by Said as well when he speaks of “specialized experts addressing other specialized experts” (*Representations* 9). The differentiation of knowledge, according to the declinist thesis, leads intellectuals away from their commitment to a wider public by, among other factors, cutting the linguistic ties of an accessible language that ideally would connect them. On a more general level, the authors state that knowledge itself is created and perceived differently today and that “specialization has undermined previous holistic and ‘grand’ theories

⁷¹ Carol Becker for example goes back to Said’s definitions in her analysis of predominantly visual artists as public intellectuals: Becker, Carol. *Surpassing the Spectacle: Global Transformations and the Changing Politics of Art*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. 11-20. Print.

[...] and the multiplication of scientific effort has tended to prevent any unanimity, with conflicting results or dissenting interpretations always available” (Baert and Shipman “The Rise of the Embedded Intellectual” 33). To put it in different words, the public finds itself within a multifaceted media landscape that no longer provides easy-to-reach consensus. Accordingly, the voice of the public intellectual in such a landscape is but one amongst many and arguably harder to distinguish against the backdrop of a plethora of other voices. Whilst there is no point in arguing that especially the online world offers each individual with the technical means the possibility to publish his or her opinion⁷², the contributors of *New Public Spheres* do not miss a chance to emphasize that both the role and the practices of the public intellectual might be changing but remain far from being obsolete. Particularly Dahlgren emphasizes that precisely those technologies of today’s media landscape that appear to drown the public intellectual’s voice in the multitudinous cacophony of the online world should be utilized to enhance the “traditional”⁷³ public intellectual’s profile. The opportunity to publish immediate reactions to current events offers the “digitally enhanced, updated version of the traditional” public intellectual “both status and visibility” (“From Public to Civic Intellectuals” 62). In addition to online versions of print-based newspapers—for the context of Juli Zeh, her regular contributions on *Zeit online* and her short stint as “Die Klassensprecherin” in a column for *Spiegel* (also part of the news magazine’s online content) are worth mentioning—blogs or social media like Facebook are other possible outlets for the contemporary public intellectual. A post on Zeh’s Facebook

⁷² Dahlgren particularly engages with the expansion of the public sphere into the digital realm and, as quoted above, calls the possibilities “truly impressive” (“From Public to Civic Intellectuals” 59). However, he is not blind to potential drawbacks of this development and mentions the ongoing debate about “whether or not society benefits from [...] allowing more people to engage in whatever project is at hand, or whether it would be better off to letting the experts stay in charge” (64). Given Zeh’s less than favorable opinion of today’s “expertism,” it is safe to assume that she would be in favour of allowing as many people in as possible.

⁷³ When he talks of “traditional public intellectuals,” Dahlgren refers to those who have their roots in print-based media.

page from July 2015 suggests that, having established herself as public intellectual and using the *Facebook*-page regularly, her followers at this point in time even *expect* Zeh to be active on social media and voice their disappointment in case the time between posts has been what they regard as too long: “Frau Zeh, was ist passiert? Sie scheinen sich nicht nur hier, sondern insgesamt aus der gesellschaftlichen Diskussion zurück gezogen zu haben. ☹” (Klöpfer “Frau Zeh”).⁷⁴

Prior to this post from July 2015, however, Zeh had been extremely active in her role as public intellectual. Particularly the years 2013 and 2014 were busy ones for Zeh as she was heavily involved in national and transnational protests against state security agencies like the NSA. One culmination point of this protest was a march on the Federal Chancellery in Berlin which I will discuss in the following.

The Public Intellectual as Willful Subject: The March on the Federal Chancellery

Public demonstrations of dissent are nothing unusual, particularly in German’s capital Berlin. Almost on a daily basis, a wide variety of political groups gather in public places or take their concerns to the streets. A number of these demonstrations are covered in Berlin-based media like the *Berliner Zeitung*, *Tagesspiegel* or the local TV station *Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (RBB)*; only larger demonstrations that concern significant portions of the population find coverage in national media like the *Tagesschau*. It is comparatively rare that national media will cover a demonstration of little more than twenty participants. However, this is precisely what happened on September 18, 2013 when Juli Zeh and a group of fellow authors marched on the Federal

⁷⁴ This post was deleted later and can no longer be found on Zeh’s *Facebook*-page.

Chancellery located in Berlin's government district in close proximity to the Reichstag. The fact that this small-scale gathering was covered nationwide points to the fact that something noteworthy was happening that went beyond the actual concerns of the demonstrators. While these concerns justifiably can be considered newsworthy in themselves—the participants gathered to protest against Chancellor Angela Merkel's restrained behavior in the NSA-affair—what contributed to the significance of the gathering is that all demonstrators were authors.

Civic engagement by authors is not a new phenomenon in Germany; in fact, a substantial part of literary discourse of the mid-1960s to the late 1970s was determined by questions of how, to what extent, and by what aesthetic means literature could be made operative to reach sociopolitical goals.⁷⁵ Moreover, there have been numerous cases where individual authors or loosely organized groups of writers have published statements, open letters, or essays that either commented on current events or called for immediate political consequences.⁷⁶ Confirming the “declinist thesis” previously outlined in the discussion of the public sphere—and apart from occasional interventions by authors like Günter Grass⁷⁷—writers seem to have refrained from making political public statements from the 1980s onwards. So much so, indeed, that the very idea of literature, and by extension authors, having an influence on the extra-literary realm of its perception had slipped from the public's mind by the late 1980s/early 1990's. “Auf die Idee,” Hubert Winkels writes in an article published in *Der Spiegel* in 1989, “mit Literatur ließe sich

⁷⁵ For a concise overview of the most important debates pertaining the relationship between authors and politics from the 1960s to the 1980s, see: Bullivant, Keith. “Literatur und Politik.” *Gegenwartsliteratur seit 1968*. Eds. Klaus Briegleb, and Sigrid Weigel. München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1992. 297-301. Print.

⁷⁶ To give but one example, following the shooting of student protester Benno Ohnesorg in 1967, a group of prominent authors—Günter Grass, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Peter Schneider among them—issued a statement that condemned the act and demanded Berlin's mayor Albertz as well as Senator for Inner Affairs Büsch to step down from their office (see “Zum Tod des Studenten” 247). For a comprehensive overview of statements, manifestos, and open letters from authors, see: Wagenbach, Klaus et al. *Vaterland, Muttersprache. Deutsche Schriftsteller und ihr Staat seit 1945*. Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1994. Print.

⁷⁷ See for example his infamous “Kurze Rede eines vaterlandslosen Gesellen” (1990); for the full version of the essay, see Wagenbuch et al, 438-40.

eingreifen in die symbolischen Prozesse, über die sich ein modernes Gemeinwesen selbst organisiert, kommt niemand mehr” (“Was ist los” 47). For critics like Winkels, the bridges between literary content and the sources it draws from in our sociopolitical realities had been burned. This take on the possibilities of literature or rather: the lack thereof to have any influence on the way society organizes itself arguably makes the idea of an author as public intellectual obsolete. While Winkels still clings to literature’s function as sociocultural memory by stating that “die Funktion der Literatur als gesellschaftliches Gedächtnis ist unersetzbar,” (51) literature has become “eine minoritäre Angelegenheit” (50) and but one particular interest among many. Concurrently, Winkels claims that, in West-German-language literature of the late 1980s, the negotiation of political, moral, and social norms are no longer a topic of literary reflection: “Von politischen oder moralischen Normen redet kaum noch jemand” (50).⁷⁸ In other words, issues that had determined the literary production of the 1960s and 1970s, thus shaping an understanding of literature as having a sociopolitical role, had been excluded from literary discourses. “Mit ihr [Literatur],” Winkels concludes, “ist kein Staat zu machen, und das mag gut sein so” (47). If statements like Winkels’ are indicative of the literary landscape of which he speaks, there is indeed little room for the function of the author as public intellectual. In a climate that neglects the possibility of literary production to have any sociopolitical impact and in which literature is solely seen as a particular interest, the author is reduced to the role of being an expert for and of literary production—but nothing more. As a consequence, authors are

⁷⁸ See also Uwe Wittstock’s assessment that the perception of the author as a necessarily politically committed artist is typical exclusively for the German context: “Die Idee, die Arbeit eines Schriftstellers müsse, um auf Interesse zu stoßen, jederzeit irgendeine sozialtheoretische Relevanz nachweisen, scheint mir eine sehr deutsche zu sein” (“Ab in die Nische?” 103). See also Carrie Smith-Prei who engages with this quote and sees it as an illustration of the “German literary market’s longstanding ‘desire for the political’” (“Juli Zeh and the Desire for the Political” 3).

shunned from public discourse and only participate in discussions in the literary public insofar as they talk about literature and their literary products.

However, in September 2013, authors returned into the general public sphere with a vengeance and gathered in front of the Federal Chancellery to at the very least punctually revive the tradition of the engaged literary intellectual that had been characteristic of Germany's cultural landscape in the post-World War II period. Now, the authors were carrying cardboard boxes with a red sign that read in huge white letters "67.407 Menschen sagen: 'No, you can't!'" (fig. 1).⁷⁹ Other boxes showed a picture of Angela Merkel's mouth with a red cross across the picture and, again, the caption "NO, you can't" (fig. 2) in a reversal of Barack Obama's famous slogan "Yes we can!" during his electoral campaign in 2008.



Figure 1: Demonstrators in front of the Federal Chancellery.



Figure 2: Cardboard boxes with the slogan "NO, you can't".

The imagery and lettering of the posters on the cardboard boxes is strikingly pithy which, given that the public performance in front of the Federal Chancellery has to be seen first and foremost as a performance for those media representatives present, is not all that surprising. Bold and simple statements like "No, you can't," however, inherently run the risk of appearing oversimplified if not kitschy, because they have to stand in for the more elaborate content of the open

⁷⁹ The screenshots are taken from footage that was broadcast in the *Abendschau* of the *Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg* as well as, in edited form, in the *Tagesschau*.

letter addressed to Angela Merkel that was read out loud in front of the chancellery as well (see “Schriftsteller-Demo”). In this letter, which had simultaneously been published on the website *change.org* and in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on July 25, 2013, Zeh and her co-authors⁸⁰ bemoan the passivity of the German government in light of the revelations made following Edward Snowden’s exposure of the National Security Agency’s (NSA) practices in 2013. After delineating how, in the course of the PRISM-program, international security agencies have unlimited access to personal communication data, and individuals have neither control over the extent of data that is being collected nor any knowledge about how this data is being used, Zeh confronts Angela Merkel with an arguably uncomfortable and definitely provocative assumption: “Es wächst der Eindruck, dass das Vorgehen der amerikanischen und britischen Behörden von der deutschen Regierung billigend in Kauf genommen wird” (“Angemessene Reaktion”). She follows this assumption, which calls into question the extent to which democratic principles and the protection of the private sphere of citizens is being taken seriously by the sovereign powers, with a set of questions that demand an adequate answer to the practices of foreign security agencies within the borders of Germany: “Ist es politisch gewollt, dass die NSA deutsche Bundesbürger in einer Weise überwacht, die den deutschen Behörden durch Grundgesetz und Bundesverfassungsgericht verboten sind? [...] Ist die Bundesregierung dabei, den Rechtsstaat zu umgehen, statt ihn zu verteidigen?” (“Angemessene Reaktion”). Two months later, with the support of 67.407 people who had signed the online petition, Zeh and a group of authors assembled in front of Angela Merkel’s offices, now turning the set of questions that had dominated the open letter into exclamatory sentences like “No, you can’t” that, for the

⁸⁰ The petition was signed by prominent authors like Ilija Trojanow, Tanja Dückers, Sten Nadolny, Ingo Schulze, and Feridun Zaimoglu, among others.

sake of raising media attention, reduce the content of the petition to a political performance that potentially could be perceived as superficial.

However, this risk of being perceived as kitschy and possibly over-simplifying is one Zeh is not only aware of, but also willing to take. Furthermore, kitsch is, from Zeh's point of view, even a necessary component of contemporary mediated politics. She addresses the differences between literature and politics with respect to kitsch in her poetics lecture *Treideln*: "Während Literatur Kunst sein will, kommt Politik nicht ohne Kitsch aus" (132). As a consequence, literature is by definition ambiguous, a luxury politics is not able to afford because it needs to rely on the unambiguity of kitsch: "Kitsch hingegen ist eindeutig. Er setzt auf schlichte Symbolik und berechenbare Effekte. Und genau diese Eindeutigkeit ist für das Politische unverzichtbar" (133). Seen from this perspective, the cardboard boxes used during the demonstration in front of the Federal Chancellery are charged with political significance by virtue of their unambiguous imagery. In fact, the boxes can be read as literally emblematic for the political message they were made to transport in the sense that their visual structure—a header, an image, and a caption—imitate and update the historic design arrangement of emblems.⁸¹

If an unambiguous use of imagery or language is indispensable for conveying a clear political message and forms the linguistic component of the intellectual's work in the public sphere, the physical presence of the individual forms the corporeal component. "For politics to take place, the body must appear," Judith Butler writes in her 2011 lecture "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,"⁸² thus setting the stage for theorizing what happens when individuals like Juli Zeh and her fellow marchers on the Federal Chancellery take to the streets.

⁸¹ See "Emblem" in: Meid, Volker. *Sachwörterbuch zur deutschen Literatur*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1999. 131-132. Print.

⁸² The lecture was held in Venice as part of the "The State of Things" lecture series organized by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (Butler "Bodies in Alliance").

Drawing on her previous seminal work on the body, Butler elaborates on the relationships between bodies at mass demonstrations, the bonds between bodies and politics and, as the title of her lecture implies, the material configuration of the space of political action performed by bodies. Butler's analysis, through its focus on corporeality, serves as an important addition to the discussion of what demarcates the public intellectual's actions in the public sphere, even if she is more concerned with mass movements. During these mass demonstrations, Butler asserts, "bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action" ("Bodies in Alliance"). Whilst nowhere near being comparable to the number of people that formed the demonstrations of the Arab Spring Butler refers to among others, her observations still offer assistance in reading the events in front of the Federal Chancellery. Significantly, she not only brings the body into the discussion of political action but does so using the notion of persistence that is also crucial to Sara Ahmed's concept of willfulness. Indeed, the bodies performing the political actions Butler describes can justifiably be called persistent and willful, even persistently willful. Butler writes,

The persistence of the body calls that legitimacy [of hegemonic power] into question, and does so precisely through a performativity of the body that crosses language without ever quite reducing to language. In other words, it is not that bodily action and gesture have to be translated into language, but that both action and gesture signify and speak, as action and claim, and that the one is not finally extricable from the other. (4)

Action, gesture, and language fall into one and can be read and interpreted. The media reports of the march on the chancellery shows images of a group of authors in front of the building but kept off the premise by a high security fence (see fig. 1). The demonstrators are kept at bay and kept out from the space inhabited by the addressee of the march, Chancellor Angela Merkel. It is not only the bodies of the demonstrators that are kept out, it is their concerns as well. The actions of at least one participant further confirm Butler's statement about making the material configuration part of the demonstration by attempting to lift one of the cardboard boxes over the fence (see fig. 3).



Figure 3: Demonstrator trying to lift a box over the security fence.

The media footage does not show whether or not the endeavour is successful. Its symbolic meaning, however, leaves little room for interpretation. Lifting the box over the fence is an attempt to overcome the fence in an effort to extend the space of the demonstration to the barred off space of the interior premises of the chancellery as well as a comment on the uncomfortable state of being kept out as well. It is also a movement of reaching up, a movement Ahmed reads as potentially contesting the balances of power. While she, like Butler, stresses the importance of the body for political actions by stating that “a willing subject leans toward what is being willed. To get behind something is to orientate the body that way,” (*Willful Subjects* 35) specifically reaching up constitutes a disturbance “by the very effort of reaching, [...] of reaching for something that is not present, something that appears only as a shimmer, a horizon of possibility” (204). The media coverage of the demonstration reveals that this willful disturbance of authority is indeed recognized and countered by the state. Another shot in the same footage shows a policeman (see fig. 4) addressing the group of demonstrators,

his hands and stern expression in a gesture supposed to regulate the protesting citizens while at the same time supporting the state's sovereignty over the space and manner of protest.



Figure 4: Policeman at demonstration in front of Federal Chancellery.



Figure 5: Demonstrators reacting to policeman's orders.

The pan shot immediately reveals the reaction of the demonstrators: while complying with the policeman's commands, which are inaudible because of the newscaster's voice over commentary, they laugh about these very commands (see fig. 5), evidently bemused by a state representative's demonstration of power at such a small-scale event, and, cardboard boxes as evidence that their claims are still valid still in hand, follow the policeman's orders only hesitatingly.

Not the least, even if the concern of the participants predominantly refers to the seemingly disembodied space of digital virtuality, the march on the chancellery was performed by bodies. Put differently, even if the action started online with Juli Zeh's petition and an open letter to Angela Merkel that was posted on *change.org*, it was the congregation of bodies in front of the chancellery a few months later that made its way into the national media. This fact does not only speak to the importance of corporeal performance with respect to the public intellectual's work in general, it is also testament to the fact that the public sphere, despite its expansion into the online world, is far from being disembodied in the present. Butler insists that media coverage still depends on the body to have something to cover: "Although some may

wager that the exercise of rights now takes place quite at the expense of bodies on the street, I disagree. The media requires those bodies on the street to have an event, even as the street requires the media to exist in a global arena” (“Bodies in Alliance” 9). The coverage in major German media supports Butler’s claim, and the fact that many international writers had signed the petition takes the local action into the global arena to which Butler refers. Despite the fact that Zeh and her colleagues optimistically referenced the famous “March on Washington” on August 28, 1963 with more than 200, 000 participants (“March on Washington”) for their own march on the Federal Chancellery, though, the outcome was nowhere near as impactful: To this day, Chancellor Angela Merkel has not replied to the demonstrator’s claims and the question as to what strategy she and the German government pursues with respect to the revelations of the NSA surveillance of German citizens has been left unanswered.

Zeh’s Critique of Contemporary Public Discourse and the Will to Intervene

In her poetics lecture *Treideln*, Juli Zeh differentiates between politically committed individuals and political authors, stating that the latter category is virtually non-existent because there are only political individuals and political texts. If a subject is politically invested and has the opportunity to publish his or her views by feeding texts into the literary public, Zeh sees the chances as comparatively high that at least of a number of these textual products can be perceived as political (*Treideln* 134-5). In the same section, Zeh engages with a question she is constantly being asked, once again by the fictitious and hapless journalist Würmer: “Frau Zeh, steht hinter Ihrer politischen Einmischung eine mediale Strategie?” (142). Her dismissive answer, characteristic for her exchange with Würmer, is sharp in tone:

Sie glauben also, dass mir irgendein Corporate-Identity-Consultant dazu geraten habe, die ‘Marke Juli Zeh’ als eine politische zu ‘etablieren’? Als gehirngewaschener Sklave des kommerziellen Meinungsbetriebs kommen Sie gar nicht auf die Idee, dass jemand einfach sagen könnte, was er für richtig hält, ohne dabei in Vermarktungskategorien zu denken. (142)

The use of the derogative “gehirngewaschener Sklave” expresses the frustration of being confronted over and over again with assumptions of following a cunning media strategy through her political commitment, but also the inherent cynicism of such postulations. Zeh’s language suggests a considerable weariness with the assumption that every political remark by an author is supposedly linked to the hopes of increasing sales numbers. For Zeh, this attitude reveals an ignominious view of audiences, particularly readers: “Gott sei Dank ist Bücherverkaufen nicht so einfach und der Leser weniger dumm, als Sie annehmen” (142). The underlying cynicism of such claims that arguably say more about the mindset of the person making such assumptions than the politically engaged author has been criticized by Edward W. Said in his elaborations on the public intellectual as well. “To accuse all intellectuals of being sellouts just because they earn their living working in a university or for a newspaper,” he states, “is a coarse and finally meaningless charge” because it is “too indiscriminately cynical to say that the world is so corrupt that everyone ultimately succumbs to Mammon” (*Representations* 69).⁸³ At the same time, Said

⁸³ In 2002, Said takes up this thought. With regards to the seemingly ubiquitous desire of getting or at the very least getting *near* political power, he states: “The public realm is so taken up with questions of policy and government, as well as with considerations of power and authority, that even the idea of an intellectual who is driven neither by a passion for office, nor by the ambition to get the ear of someone in power, is difficult to sustain for more than a second or two” (“The Public Role” 22).

is of course aware that a public intellectual can also not be regarded as “a perfect ideal, a sort of shining knight who is so pure and so noble as to deflect any suspicion of material interest” (69).

What Zeh’s reaction to the journalist’s questions reflects in addition to her disdain of the conveyed cynicism is her apparent anger about the supposedly sorry state of contemporary mass media. Indeed, the picture she paints of the media landscape is bleak. Governed by economic pressures and the necessity to sell news and opinions as commodities, media—and by extension the audience—pay a high price, namely a reduction in plurality: “Pluralismus und Meinungsvielfalt verwandeln sich in eine homogene Stampede. Der Hype ersetzt den Dialog, die Kampagne den Streit” (*Treideln* 144-5). Concomitant to this reduction in plurality, Zeh perceives a reduction in quality that she sees not the least based on an ignominious view of media audiences:

Fernsehprogramme und Magazine versuchen, sich gegenseitig durch Niveausenkungen zu unterbieten, immer ausgehend von der seltsamen These, das deutsche Volk habe in den letzten drei Jahrzehnten einen so massiven kollektiven Intelligenzverlust erlitten, dass es nun leider nicht mehr in der Lage sei, sich länger als drei Minuten auf ein Thema zu konzentrieren. (145)

While bemoaning the loss of quality standards in media is a popular if not populist approach hard to qualify, Zeh seems to ignore the fact that the ways people are reading today is indeed

changing and will continue to change in the future.⁸⁴ Her point is arguably not a balanced consideration of contemporary reading habits but rather a warning against underestimating audiences and instead aiming for the lowest common denominator. In a similar fashion, Patrick Baert and Alan Shipman invest a lot more trust in media recipients than Zeh's fictitious journalist. The authors rather optimistically remind us of the fact that the public today is indeed a highly educated one in the sense that audience members are trained in directly participating in mediated public discourse predominantly through online media. As a result, the public is less inhibited to challenge and question statements made by public intellectuals. The authors state,

an increasingly educated public is more resistant to being talked-down to, and more inclined to demand a voice in conversation involving professional intellectuals.⁸⁵ [...] 'Lay' audiences become more competent at assessing the nature, coherence, and effectiveness of intellectual arguments, and more confident in expressing scepticism or demanding clarification. ("The Rise of the Embedded Intellectual" 43)

At the same time, a point could be made that audience members use the anonymity of online media to resort to "unfiltered" and often derogatory statements that either ignore or consciously violate etiquette in general and netiquette in particular.

⁸⁴ In his exploration of the role of the public intellectual in the context of today's media landscape, Peter Dahlgren asserts the point that the ability to process information from longer written texts "seems on the decline in many parts of the Western world" ("From Public to Civic Intellectuals" 57). However, he also makes a point in highlighting that this apparent loss of skill can be seen as a shift to new skillsets: "it can be argued that many young people today have information competencies via computers and the Internet that put them far ahead of their peers 50 years ago" (57). In any case, Dahlgren states that it is yet too early to come to final conclusions and that "the final verdict will probably have to wait a generation or two" (57).

⁸⁵ Baert and Shipman define the "professional intellectual" as those commonly affiliated with an academic background and who are "steeped in a particular discipline, gaining attention through expertise, peer review and institutional support" ("The Rise of the Embedded Intellectual" 37).

Zeh's accusation of a decline in journalist quality raises the question of the relationship between public intellectual and his or her audience, particularly the potential set of expectations the public intellectual and his or her audience share. In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said directly addresses the issue of the intellectuals' responsibility towards his or her audience. He writes,

every intellectual has an audience and a constituency. The issue is whether that audience is there to be satisfied, and hence a client to be kept happy, or whether it is there to be challenged, and hence stirred into outright opposition or mobilized into greater democratic participation in the society. (83)

Even though Said does not directly answer the question, it is clear from his line of argument that he is very much a proponent of the latter option. I argue that the same can be said for Juli Zeh. She not only strongly objects the opinion of media producers that audiences are no longer able to focus on complex content, as indicated in her quote above, but goes one step further and deliberately provokes her readers in order to instigate critical thinking. True to Virginia McCalmont and Waltraud Maierhofer's assessment that "Juli Zeh wants to leave her audience disturbed" ("*Juli Zeh's Corpus Delicti*" 380), Zeh in a 2010 interview following the publication of *Angriff auf die Freiheit* answers a question about the intentions behind this text as follows:

Der Wunsch ist, das Podium zu geben, die Diskussion zu nähren. Eigentlich gibt es sogar zwei Intentionen, die eine war sozusagen das Aufrütteln, deswegen ist das Buch auch so provokant gestaltet. Wir wollten den Leuten mit dem Arsch ins Gesicht springen und sie

auch ärgern. Weil Ärger eine gute Voraussetzung dafür ist, das Gehirn einzuschalten.
(Tigchelaar “Wir wollten den Leuten”)

This statement directly addresses Zeh’s role as public intellectual in the sense that stirring up, provoking, and animating her readership is central to her understanding of her non-fictional texts. Moreover, the statement foreshadows what Zeh three years later confirms in her poetics lecture *Treideln*, namely that the essay is the preeminent literary form when it comes to achieving the effect of provoking her readers. The reason for the suitability of the essay to convey political messages on the one hand lies in the fact that it allows Zeh to be as plain as she feels she needs to be. On the other hand, the essay is also a way to circumvent what Zeh calls the “Ausschließlichkeitsverhältnis von Literatur und Politik” (*Treideln* 135). A contemporary author, she states, “wird [...], wenn ihn das Sendungsbewußtsein packt, regelmäßig nicht zur Form des Romans, sondern zum Essay greifen” (135). Instead of risking to reheat the discussion surrounding the immediate political effects of literature, the essay can be unambiguously labeled a political text without necessarily taking its aesthetic qualities into consideration. The writing of essays for Zeh has the further indispensable advantage that, by providing information that will feed a more substantial public discourse, she can hope to raise awareness and interest in her readers that potentially motivates them to form opinions and draw their own conclusions about the subject matter at hand, a strategy that also informs her fictional work and therefore marks a point of convergence of Zeh’s role as author and her role as public intellectual. Zeh sees a thriving public discourse as essential for a democratic society and refuses to believe that citizens today are no longer willing to participate in it. Instead, she nourishes the hope that an educated public who shares certain values and beliefs results in a feeling of togetherness that counters the

sense of individualism she recognizes as the cause for a withdrawal from public discourse. A passage in *Treideln* in which she discusses the catchword *Politikverdrossenheit* encapsulates this hope best. Zeh writes,

Vielleicht kennen Sie das Gefühl: wie sich Beklommenheit beim Lesen eines guten Essays schlagartig in Euphorie verwandelt. Welche Erleichterung es darstellt, wenn sich ein Text nicht vor der angeblichen Dummheit der Leser verbeugt. Wenn um des Nachdenkens willen nachgedacht wird. (147)

In this passage, which is affectively charged by directly addressing the reader through the use of the personal distancing pronoun “Sie,” Zeh issues an unmistakable call for discourse and debate for debate’s sake. This take on the value of public discourse echoes in Lauren Berlant’s analysis of a “desire for the political” (*Cruel Optimism* 227) I will discuss below.

A Call for Willful Dilettantism

It is yet again Zeh’s email exchange with the fictitious journalist Würmer in *Treideln* that sheds the clearest light on her take on the problems of being a public intellectual today, more specifically on what might keep any civil agent from engaging in public debate. Continuing the journalist’s practice to pose Zeh those questions she hates to answer the most, Würmer inquires: “Frau Zeh, warum sind außer Ihnen so wenige Autoren zu politischen Äußerungen bereit?” (*Treideln* 155). While Zeh considers the question to be “beknackt,” (155) she still answers in detail. On the one hand, her response is informed by her bleak view on the state of the media,

particularly her dismissal of the dominant form of sensationalist journalism she labels “Spektakeljournalismus” (156). On the other hand, she once again takes up the prevalent individualism of the twenty-first century she had already referred to in her essay “Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg” when she had addressed the allegedly apolitical literature written by younger authors. Not least, Zeh returns to kitsch as being a necessary component of politics mentioned in the context of the march on the Federal Chancellery.

In fact, kitsch, or the “schlichte Symbolik und berechenbare[n] Effekte” (133), Zeh characterizes as indispensable for politics run contrary to a critical reflection on any sociopolitical issue at hand. Zeh as an author of *literary* texts engages in critical thinking in an attempt to avoid over-simplifying kitsch at all cost. In literature, kitsch would not only harm the literary merits of her texts but also undermine the ideas she hopes to transport. To achieve a political goal, however, or even only to draw the readers’ attention to a sociopolitical problem, the author has to give in to kitsch to some extent. The art of writing political literature, then, according to Zeh, is to walk the fine line between simplifying complex issues to make them accessible without over-simplifying them in a manner that would run contrary to her intention of raising awareness:

Deshalb besteht die Kunst des politischen Schreibens darin, sich genauso deutlich, aber möglichst nicht genauso hirnerbrannt zu äußern wie ein Stammtisch. Man muss durch ein gerüttelt Maß Provokation die Aufmerksamkeitsschwelle überwinden, darf dabei aber nicht so platt werden, dass man dem eigenen Anliegen schadet. (156)

The fear of sounding superficial or “platt” (157) was indeed one Zeh experienced in the process of writing her long essay *Angriff auf die Freiheit*: “Jeder unmissverständliche Satz klang in meinen Ohren wie eine unzulässige Verallgemeinerung, jede Zuspitzung wie schamlose Übertreibung” (157). This uneasy feeling, in turn, led Zeh to realize that differentiated reflection, while valued and cherished, appears to oppose taking a clear-cut stance: “So sehr ich mich zu Differenziertheit, Selbstkritik und Skeptizismus bekenne—so sehr erschwert diese Haltung das Einnehmen eines schlagkräftigen Standpunkts” (157). As previously mentioned, Zeh locates the reason behind the uneasiness and reluctance of taking an unmistakably clear point of view in a broader development that characterizes Western societies in the post-World War II period, namely the tendency towards a heightened sense of individualism. Within contemporary German literature, Zeh sees the dominance of the first person narrator in texts written by younger authors as indicative of said heightened individualism. The self-centered narrative perspective, however, now appears as but a literary symptom that mirrors the view on politics many of Zeh’s contemporaries share, and has more far-reaching implications. With respect to the sociopolitical situatedness of the individual, she diagnoses the loss of responsibility for the society of which the individual is a member as one effect of this heightened individualism. Devoid of strong national, religious, or ideological ties, the contemporary individual has lost the ability of perceiving him- or herself as part of larger social structures that go beyond the borders of the individual’s private needs: “Anscheinend fällt es dem Menschen schwer, sich als Teil von etwas Größerem zu fühlen, wenn man ihm keine ideologische, religiöse oder nationalistische Karotte vor die Nase hängt”

(157).⁸⁶ The problematically generalizing use of “der Mensch” notwithstanding, the feature Zeh describes has a fatal effect on political participation in society and dramatically alters the way politics is perceived: “Statt zum mündigen Bürger wird er [der Mensch] zum Politikkonsumenten” (158). In this passage, Zeh’s words almost verbatim echo Habermas’ lament that the audience has undergone a shift from a “kulturräsonierende” to a “kulturkonsumierende” (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* 267) public; reflection is replaced by mere reception. Seen from this perspective, politics is reduced to one of countless other products offered for consumption in a market-oriented neoliberal society. If politics is indeed perceived the way Zeh describes it, it is robbed of the possibility of active participation by those for whom politics is—ideally—produced, to stay within the economic terminology Zeh chooses. This development marks a point of intervention for the public intellectual in the sense that Said and Bauman describe it, and I argue that Zeh, by virtue of being persistent in her political involvement, articulates and performs these interventions as willful in the sense that Ahmed uses the term.

The consequence of the reluctance to associate oneself with larger sociopolitical structures for Zeh is that all political statements by social agents like authors are necessarily particularized as well. Just like there is only little sense of community on a social macro-level, there is equally little sense of community when it comes to political statements: “Wer sich öffentlich äußert, spricht nur für sich selbst. Anders als vor vierzig Jahren steht heute hinter dem

⁸⁶ It is debatable how much longer Zeh’s assessment will be viable in light of the resurgence of populist nationalistic rhetoric across the world we are witnessing right now. Additionally, the military conflicts of the early twenty-first century can be read as being underpinned by a strong religious motivation; see for example Sonja Klocke who calls the events of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing so-called War on Terror “religiös-fundamentale Versuche [...], überkommen geglaubte dichotomische Schemata zu (re-)aktivieren und in großen Teilen der Weltbevölkerung zu manifestieren” (“Das Mittelalter” 185). To avoid misunderstanding, it is also crucial to note that Zeh by no means calls for a return to said ideological, religious, or nationalist frameworks as she sees them to be diametrical to critical thinking in themselves: “Natürlich wurde uns aus guten Gründen beigebracht, dass die Identifikation mit ideologischen Weltbildern das kritische Denken hemmt und in die Katastrophe führen kann” (*Treideln* 158).

einzelnen Intellektuellen keine applaudierende Gruppe mehr; er fühlt nicht die Nestwärme einer politischen Denkgemeinschaft” (*Treideln* 158). Here, Zeh evokes the “Gruppe 47,” arguably the most influential intellectual literary group of post-World War II West-Germany. In addition, the reference to forty years ago, i.e. 1973, calls to mind authors like Heinrich Böll, Peter Schneider or Dieter Wellershoff who, in the wake of the sociopolitical upheavals of the late 1960s, can be seen as a more loosely-associated group of writers engaged in politics both inside and outside of the literary realm.

In addition to a heightened sense of individualism and the effect it has on how politics is perceived and talking about politics is performed, Zeh mentions the figuration of today’s media society as a determining factor why comparatively few contemporary authors are willing to make political statements. At the heart of Zeh’s argument here lies the considerable risk individuals take by making a political statement in light of the potential backlash and immediate reprimands any such statement can provoke, particularly in online discussion forums, social media like Facebook, and the like. However, according to Zeh’s rather dreary assessment of the state of journalism, the infamous ‘shitstorms’ the internet creates in response to, not only, political statements are not that different from the practices of the “Spektakeljournalismus”: “Während das Internet ob seiner Shitstorms gescholten wird, sind die herkömmlichen Medien längst daran gewöhnt, den Shitsorm als Kern des journalistischen Auftrags zu begreifen—auch wenn sie es anders nennen” (158). Here, Zeh resorts to using an “unzulässige Verallgemeinerung” she otherwise tries to avoid for certainly not all traditional media can justifiably be accused of being overly sensationalist. While even a cursory look at yellow press publications like *BILD* might lead to easily finding evidence of Zeh’s assertion, one would be hard-pressed to find an equally sensationalist journalism in other German newspapers like *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Moreover,

Zeh's statement is problematical in light of the fact that she uses traditional print media like *Zeit* or *Die Welt* as well as broadcasting companies like *Deutschlandfunk* as an outlet for her non-fictional publications and indirectly supports the present configuration of journalism she so vigorously scorns. Still, the fact remains that Zeh perceives the risks of falling prey to sensationalist journalism and backlash as high enough to keep social agents from making political statements that do not fall into their area of expertise. "Zu gewinnen gibt es wenig," she states, "zu verlieren viel. Am Ende ist man eine lächerliche Figur, steht als Karikatur des engagierten Intellektuellen mutterseelenallein in der medialen Schusslinie und fuchtelte mit der stumpfen Lanze" (159-60). In this quote, the public intellectual appears as a comically sad and lonely figure, a travesty of what it once was, hopelessly continuing his or her work in a manner that is reminiscent of Don Quixote's fight against windmills. Only that in today's media society, the windmills are capable of fighting back.

Nonetheless, Zeh's take on the role the public intellectual can play in today's society is not as defeatist as it appears. She optimistically clings to the hope that the state of things will change for the better: "Ich weigere mich zu glauben, dass wir uns ausgerechnet jetzt, in der Blütezeit von Demokratie, Aufklärung und Frieden, in eine Gesellschaft aus entertainmentsüchtigen Schein-Bürgern verwandeln. Das kann nur ein Durchgangsstadium sein" (160). This statement speaks not only to Zeh's firm conviction in the advances Western societies have made in the post-World War II period with respect to democracy, civil rights, and the continuous validity of Enlightenment principles. It is also a fervent rejection of any declinist perspectives that "the normative political sphere appears as a shrunken, broken, or distant place of activity among elites" (Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 227). As Carrie Smith-Prei highlights in an article engaging with the relationship between Zeh's writing and politics, Zeh's "political

engagement [...] is driven by a critical take on systemic structures and a competing optimism in their potential to be transformed” (“Juli Zeh and the Desire for the Political” 87). The systemic structure Smith-Prei refers to hints at the impasse, to borrow a central term from Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, in which the public intellectual along with other social agents seems to be stuck. Whereas a declinist perspective implies a downward movement that, if taken to the end, will result in the disappearance of the public intellectual altogether, Berlant’s approach to perceive the present as an impasse leaves the door open for a continuation of intellectual and political work. In the introduction of *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant defines an impasse as “a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects materials that might help to clarify things” (4). This perception of moving in the present without getting anywhere, however, is not necessarily passive. The “absorptive awareness” Berlant speaks of can be understood as inspiration to take action. Berlant clarifies that, instead of giving in to the seemingly inescapable situation of a stalemate, an impasse

marks a delay that demands activity. The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading. That delay enables us to develop gestures of composure, [...] of being-with the world as well as of rejection, refusal, detachment, psychosis, and all kinds of radical negation. (199)

Particularly the desire to “be with the world” allows the individual to continue in political actions, even if these actions take the form of a critique or even rejection of the status quo. As

Berlant highlights, we might not know where our actions are leading, but, significantly, this might no longer be the point. Seen against this background, the public intellectual's work today might be to *inspire* or *animate* the public to engage in political action, thus creating a "shared worldness, apart from whatever aim or claim the listening public might later bring to a particular political world" (224). The outcome of political actions—for example protesting against the impassivity of the German government in the NSA affair and the call for a clear statement on how the government intends to act—no longer lies at the core of why people engage in such actions. Instead, Berlant values political action in the impasse of the present as "the action of not being worn out by politics," (262) and envisions doing political work for the sake of doing political work. Describing "a collective attachment to the political [as ideally being] an attachment to the process of maintaining attachment" (260) would be, ironically, a willful action in the sense Ahmed uses the term. In the case of Zeh, her mere persistence to constantly serve as a reminder that another form of public discourse is not only possible but worth striving for can be read as an act of protest. "The arm that keeps coming out of the grave [Ahmed is referring to the willful child in the Grimm story] can signify [...] persistence *as* protest. We need to give the arm something to reach for" (Ahmed *Willful Subjects* 203-4). In this manner, Zeh's persistence appears as protest and willfulness, in this case seen as *not willing* to give up on the principles she cherishes and regards as indispensable for a thriving democracy.

Similarly, Said also expresses the optimistic hope that the public is still very much looking to the author as public intellectual as someone who is particularly qualified to make sense of what Berlant calls the impasse of the present. "Many people," Said states, "still feel the need to look at the writer-intellectual as someone who ought to be listened to as a guide to the confusing present" ("The Public Role" 20). The question remains, *why* exactly the writer-

intellectual is able to fulfill this role. Part of the answer lies in the fact that writer-intellectuals are more likely to avoid the “generally hermetic, jargon-ridden” (23) or highly specialized language to which experts and academics more often than not resort simply because it is the discourse they have been trained to use. In addition, though, the answer appears to lie in the specific and arguably privileged working conditions of an author that Juli Zeh delineates in *Treideln*. Once again, her description of the privileged role of the author is tightly connected to the state of today’s media landscape that Zeh sees infused with neoliberal economic principles of marketability. In fact, she considers the media to be so tightly enmeshed in neoliberal paradigms that every statement by a writer-intellectual is automatically subsumed under and accordingly perceived with regards to its selling power. This not only echoes the above mentioned cynicism Said detects in statements that assume “considerations of power and authority” (22) behind any intellectual’s work, it also has a fatal effect on the audience. According to Zeh, the dominance of economic discourse has resulted in a process of unlearning public discourse: “Offensichtlich mussten sich die Menschen so sehr daran gewöhnen, hinter jeder politischen Äußerung eine mediale oder ökonomische Strategie zu vermuten, dass sie verlernt haben, eine Meinung als solche zu rezipieren und vielleicht sogar darauf zu erwidern” (*Treideln* 144). In this sentence, Zeh diagnoses a very troublesome and undemocratic development in the sense that she sees the very principles of public discourse jeopardized by the workings of today’s media. Given her faith in the changeability of systemic structures that informs both her literary and extra-literary work, though, this diagnosis opens possibilities for her to intervene in her role as public intellectual. Indeed, the fact that she criticizes the influence of the media on public discourse can already be read as a provocation that potentially disturbs her readers and make them reassess their own views and opinions.

However, the main point of Zeh's diagnosis is the fact that a political statement made by an author is above all else his or her personal opinion and detached from economic concerns. According to Zeh, it is this independence from questions of status, influence, money, and power that clearly separates the professional expert from the author as public intellectual. The author—in contrast to the professional expert—first and foremost remains a privileged citizen. Therefore, with regards to her or his intellectual work, the author is to be situated outside of economic pressures and the need to promote his opinions in a way that adheres to neoliberal standards of commodification. “Er [der Schriftsteller] hat keine Kommunikations-Management-Schule besucht. Er besitzt keine Anzeigenkunden, keinen Chefredakteur, keine Einschaltquote” (145). In the case of Zeh, this is only partially true because she has been trained at the *Deutsche Literaturinstitut* which, due to its embeddedness in the literary market, prepares its students well with respect to communication and marketability. Regardless of Zeh's individual situation, instead of advertiser, editor-in-chief, and audience ratings, an author has readers, a publisher, and sales numbers and is not as independent from the literary market as this quote may suggest. However, Zeh's main point here is that the author's intellectual work—and this includes his opinions that concern the extra-literary—is indeed not bound up in the need to reach a certain sales quota.⁸⁷ “Diese Subjektivität,” Zeh claims, “ist [...] Ausdruck der Tatsache, dass der Schriftsteller und seine Auffassung niemandem gehören, was in einem System, in dem nicht nur Dinge, sondern auch Menschen und Meinungen immer jemandem gehören, einen Wert an sich darstellt” (146). Having an independent voice, a voice that Zeh in this statement defines as a

⁸⁷ In fact, Zeh flat-out denies that there is any correlation between her performances as a public intellectual and the sales numbers of her books. “Vermutlich gehen Sie [she is referring to the journalist Würmer] auch davon aus, dass ein Autor an politischen Talkshows teilnimmt, weil er danach 10 000 Bücher verkauft. [...] Ich habe sogar schon davon gehört, dass politisches Engagement für die Verkäuflichkeit eher schädlich sei. Auch eine interessante Diagnose” (142).

value in itself and as therefore indispensable as a corrective voice against the dominance of neoliberal norms, is also the very reason why she and some of her fellow authors engage in public political discourse. In Zeh's understanding, public discourse depends on a plurality of voices and must not succumb to the idea that any form of legitimacy is required to participate in it. Given that Germany is a country that guarantees its citizens free speech, the notion of legitimacy for Zeh is beside the point.⁸⁸ Similarly, leaving public discourse solely to experts who base their participation in public discourse on the legitimacy connected to their professional training, has a critical impact on public discourse as a whole. "Die Delegation von kritischem Bewusstsein an die Befugten der Expertokratie," Zeh proclaims, "ist heutzutage wahrscheinlich die häufigste Form von selbstverschuldeter Unmündigkeit" (147). On the one hand, the reference to Immanuel Kant's definition of Enlightenment from 1784 not only highlights Zeh's own confidence in the value of Enlightenment principles she has repeatedly expressed.⁸⁹ On the other hand, it emphasizes the extent to which she sees public discourse jeopardized in the twenty-first century. If Zeh references Kant with respect to the fact that the public has delegated public discourse into the hands of experts, she evidently sees, to use Kant's words, "das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen" ("Beantwortung der Frage" 452) as a characteristic at work in today's media audiences. This withdrawal of citizens from public discourse, however, is not an option for Zeh. Instead, she insists and persistently intervenes in public discourse as public intellectual to remind the public that it relies on a plurality of voices. "Das politische Mitreden von Autoren ist wichtig," she states, "um den frei schwebenden Dilletantismus gegen die alles verschlingende Professionalisierung des

⁸⁸ "Eine solche Legitimation," Zeh states, "ist in einem Land, das sich der Meinungsfreiheit verpflichtet hat, gar nicht erforderlich" (146).

⁸⁹ See for example the interview with Christoph Borgans and Michaela Meißner in which Zeh elaborates on her belief in freedom and Wallrodt "Man muss schon".

gesellschaftlichen Diskurses zu verteidigen” (*Treideln* 146). Dilettantism must in this context not be understood in the dictionary sense of the word as a lack of skill and expertise. Instead, as exemplified by the use of “frei schwebend,” Zeh uses the term with respect to the level of independence the author as public intellectual possesses and contrasts it with the voice of the professional expert. Notably, Zeh’s language in this sentence is charged with emotions. While one could read the participle as adjective “alles verschlingende Professionalisierung” as oversimplifying kitsch, I suggest to read the uncharacteristically emotive language Zeh employs as an expression of concern and care for the quality of public discourse at stake. The change in tone confirms Said’s description of the public intellectual as an individual who knows how and when to intervene in language. Moreover, Zeh’s use of language is in line with Said’s definition of amateurism as an “activity that is fueled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialization” (*Representations* 82). In turn, the care and affection Said mentions, in this case care and affection for vigorous and multi-vocal public discourse, echoes Berlant’s explorations on the desire for the political that Zeh manifests in both her texts and performances as public intellectual. As Berlant claims, “confirmation of the transformative effectiveness of one’s political actions” (*Cruel Optimism* 260) is no longer a prerequisite for “doing” politics. Instead, Zeh performs political actions because her independence as writer-intellectual allows her to do so and because political actions in a democracy are a value in themselves that must not be neglected. Add to this Zeh’s conviction that systemic structure can be transformed, her outlook into the future of public discourse is hopeful. And once again, she charges her words with emotions that express Zeh’s sincere affection for what she is attempting to reclaim: “Wir werden die herumliegenden Fäden des öffentlichen Diskurses wieder aufnehmen, auf dass das große Selbstgespräch der Gesellschaft ein möglichst vielstimmiges sei” (*Treideln* 160). Notably, she

uses the personal pronoun “wir” and thereby expresses that the desire for the political as well as the optimistic outlook on the future of public discourse is not solely her own but shared by many.⁹⁰ Quite literally, Zeh in this case fulfills the role of public intellectual that Edward W. Said has in mind in the sense that she serves as *representative* for those who do not go in accord with hegemonic power. In addition, the use of the stylistically rather ostentatious “auf dass” in conjunction with the subjunctive “sei” infuses a good amount of kitsch into her words. In *Treideln*, Zeh defines kitsch as being synonymous with unambiguity and argues that a political message relies on the latter in order to be powerful. Accordingly, Zeh’s hopeful exclamation can be read as a political project for as many people as possible and for the benefit of society as a whole.

Involvement instead of Staying out of it

Following the publication of the essay collection *Nachts sind das Tiere* in 2014, Ines Wallroth in *Neues Deutschland* draws a portrait of Juli Zeh that concisely encapsulates the author’s activities in the public sphere. Wallroth writes,

Juli Zeh ist mit gerade 40 Jahren ein altmodischer Mensch. Anders als die meisten Schriftstellerkollegen ihrer Generation hält sie nichts von der bequemen Pose, stets über den Dingen zu stehen, für nichts wirklich Partei zu ergreifen und selbst von nichts ergriffen zu werden. Zeh will sich nicht raushalten, sondern einmischen. (“Freiheit und Risiko”)

⁹⁰ See also Carrie Smith-Prei’s “Juli Zeh and the Desire for the Political” for a similar reading of the concordance between Zeh and her readers in this respect.

Regardless of the fact that these lines, just like the glowing review as a whole, clearly transport the admiration of the reviewer for Zeh's work, they capture key elements of Zeh's role as a public intellectual. Whether or not political commitment for authors is to be labeled "altmodisch" or not is as open to debate as the explicit reference of Zeh's age. However, Wallroth's use of "altmodisch" hints at the commonly held notion that today, the author as public intellectual appears to be an outmoded model for writers. Zeh's activities in the public sphere, however, impressively demonstrate that this needs not to be true and that there are ways to rekindle the "desire for the political," as Lauren Berlant calls it. Zeh revives the tradition of the author as public intellectual for the German-language literature context and, particularly by currently focusing on the digital sphere, adjusts it to the sociopolitical conditions of the twenty-first century. Therefore, in addition to subverting the perception of the author as public intellectual as being an old fashioned role model, Zeh can to some extent be described as a "civic intellectual" as Peter Dahlgren defines it. "The concept of civic intellectual," Dahlgren writes, "emphasizes the origins of politically motivated intellectual communication in the broad and diversified tapestry of politically committed citizens" ("From Public to Civic Intellectuals" 64). This characterization fits Zeh only partially, though, because she still very much relies on traditional print media as an outlet for her intellectual work, a feature that Dahlgren sees as less important for the civic intellectual. Zeh thus appears as a public intellectual who for the time being keeps traditional and more contemporary intellectual communication channels in balance.

Moreover, and this is crucial for Zeh's work, the corporeal aspect of the public intellectual's efforts come to the fore. As Wallroth states, "sie ist sich nicht zu schade, mit selbst gemalten Schildern [...] vor dem Kanzleramt gegen Überwachung zu protestieren" ("Freiheit

und Risiko”), in other words, Zeh’s corporeal presence in German media and on German streets is as important for her profile as public intellectual as her linguistic contributions. Her willingness to appear on the street to support her intellectual work can in turn be read as willfulness as Ahmed describes it. Part of being willful, Ahmed elaborates, is getting the body behind something – a ‘something’ than can be a political project, for example. “The feeling of getting behind something,” she writes, “is a bodily feeling that is not necessarily always intended to influence an outcome. The feeling of influencing might be satisfying even when it is separated, or perhaps *because* it can be separated, from being influential” (*Willful Subjects* 35). This quote demonstrates the same attitude of doing politics for politics’ sake that is expressed in Berlant’s desire for the political. It also articulates that the actual political outcome of the public intellectual’s work might not be as high or even measurable as hoped for. With regards to Zeh’s protest in front of the German chancellery, this is particularly true given that Zeh and her fellow protesters are still waiting for an official response from the German government.

However, Zeh’s involvement in the protest against mass surveillance underscores that authors can still play an important role in the public sphere today, particularly if their protest is organized in a way that travels from local communities to the global. In the opening quote by Wallroth, the author states that Zeh “will sich nicht raushalten, sondern einmischen” (“Freiheit und Risiko”). After having focused on Zeh’s work as a public intellectual, I will return to Zeh’s primary role as an author of literary texts in the next chapter. Through an analysis of her literary figures, predominantly the protagonists of her novels *Corpus Delicti* (2009) and *Nullzeit* (2012), the next chapter addresses that “Raushalten” (*Nullzeit* 40) is not presented as a viable option in her fictional work either. Instead, the willfulness the characterizes Zeh’s work as a public intellectual prevails in her literary texts as well.

Chapter 4: Polishing the Borders of Everyday Life – Modes of Realistic Writing

Prior to the publication of Zeh's novel *Nullzeit*, journalist Caroline Freisfeld portrayed the author for the "Beruf & Chance"-section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2012. In accordance with the rubric's focus, the portrait mainly spotlights Zeh's career path from jurist to author; however, the text also includes a quote that expresses Zeh's stance towards the relationship between literature and the extra-literary domain in which it is situated. Remembering the time when she was preparing for her first juristic state exam and started her first attempts at writing literary fiction, Zeh, as cited above, exclaims: "Ich poliere gern die Grenzen der Alltagsrealität so ein bisschen blank. Dann scheinen die auf einmal auf, und man hat das Gefühl: Es stimmt irgendwas nicht mit der Welt. Und das Gefühl habe ich, seit ich klein bin – das irgendetwas mit dieser Welt nicht so richtig stimmt" (Freisfeld "Juli Zeh").

This metaphor of polishing the borders of everyday life is an apt one for her work as, indeed, all is not well within the diegetic worlds Zeh creates in her narratives. In the case of *Spieltrieb*, for example, Zeh addresses the erosion of moral values within society, embodied by the two protagonists Ada and Alev. *Corpus Delicti* focuses on state surveillance and the concomitant loss of privacy of citizens in addition to mechanisms of marginalization of those who oppose governmental systems. *Nullzeit* spotlights the desire of its protagonist to withdraw from society altogether. Additionally, Zeh's approach to polish the borders of everyday life contains a whole poetological program with respect to the relationship between the textual world she creates in her narratives and the extra-literary realities in which they are embedded. This relationship, as the analysis will show, is a tight one in Zeh's body of work and allows the author to negotiate sociopolitical developments of her time through their literary representation. Instead

of being hermetic or autonomous works of art, Zeh's texts are deeply interwoven with the broader context in which they are written; and this is true for all of her fictional and non-fictional textual production.

It is through modes of realistic writing that Zeh establishes this relationality between text and context. These modes of realistic writing, further, revisit or rather echo different periods of Germany's literary history and their respective conceptualization of what realistic writing means and can achieve. In order to make the functions of modes of realistic writing relevant for an analysis of Zeh's work, the chapter begins by re-examining selected positions on realistic writing and the function of literature proposed in the nineteenth century, when realism entered German literature in the form of the *Bürgerlicher Realismus*. While the context of the nineteenth century differs drastically from the one in which Zeh is writing, it is still fruitful to look back because the literary program resulting from debates about the interrelation between reality and literature of the mid-1800s start a poetological discourse that is still ongoing today. The fact that this discourse that started more than one hundred fifty years ago has not been concluded will become all the more evident when I turn to similar debates of the 1970s. In the wake of the far reaching transformations of the late 1960s, authors like Heinrich Böll and Uwe Timm had either been part of or sympathized with the student movement that promoted sociopolitical change. Not surprisingly, then, these authors instrumentalized literature politically and concomitantly, the role of the author changed from being 'merely' a creator of literature to that of a public intellectual with a strong voice and influence in public sociopolitical discourse. Notably, the debate of the 1970s surrounding the relationship between the non-diegetic world and its literary representation also establishes a new perspective on reality in the sense that was no longer regarded as monolithic but as fragmentary instead, a perspective that still determines our view of

reality today and has not been without effect on the way reality is literarily depicted. The third and final section of the literary historical contextualization will lead to the late 1980s and hence to a time when, so to speak, the pendulum had swung back and literature was predominantly seen as being devoid of the sociopolitical function with which it had been invested in the 1970s. As a result, the author as social agent in public discourse had all but vanished as well. This development can be seen as preparing the stage for the return of the politically committed author roughly a decade later at the turn of the millennium.

Following this literary historical contextualization, the chapter contains an analysis of two of Zeh's more recent novels: *Corpus Delicti* (2009) and *Nullzeit* (2012). The choice of the former is not the least informed by Zeh's claim that she considers it as her only true political novel (see *Treideln* 133) and therefore a rich source for an exploration of how contemporary realities are recoded in a literary text. *Nullzeit*, on the other hand, at first sight appears to be the opposite of its overtly political predecessor in that it focuses on a protagonist who strives to withdraw from society and politics. However, *Nullzeit* is of no lesser relevance within Zeh's oeuvre, not the least because it is a text that contains a number of poetological passages that reflect on literary realism and the way it is able or unable to capture the world. More importantly, though, it is a novel that draws attention to how we, both as readers and individual subjects, perceive reality in the diegetic and the non-diegetic world we inhabit.

Echoes of Realistic Writing: From *Bürgerlicher Realismus* to the 1980s

In the context of discussing the political components of her textual output, Juli Zeh in her poetics lecture *Treideln* references the dominant strand of realistic literature in the nineteenth century as still having an impact on literature written today:

Seit im 19. Jahrhundert das Soziale in den Roman kam, ist Realismus im Grunde die einzige Form, unter deren Bedingungen Literatur in Deutschland geschrieben und rezipiert wird. Auf diese Weise haben wir uns die Gesellschaftskritik zum integralen Begleiter der Schreibkunst und den Schriftsteller zum Zwangsvisionär gemacht. (*Treideln* 132)

In this statement, Zeh goes so far as to determine realism as the only mode of literary production and reception in Germany, only qualifying it with a rather feeble “im Grunde.” This is a surprisingly and uncharacteristically simplistic claim to make for Zeh that excludes entire eras of German literary history like the Expressionism of the early twentieth century as well as any more experimental texts. However, the point can be made to determine *Bürgerlicher Realismus* as that moment in German literary history where the still ongoing debate about the relationship between intra-literary and extra-literary realities has its origin. Moreover, the use of the word “Zwangsvisionär” not only highlights the fact that, at least in Zeh’s assessment, authors are obligated to introduce a visionary or utopian component into their textual products, but also that she does not adhere to this role. Read in conjunction with her statement that polishing the borders of everyday life reveals the cracks and contradictions of society, the author’s role is

rather to put these contradictions at the core of his or her narrative but for Zeh does not automatically result in the responsibility to offer ways to resolve them. The tensions between the sociopolitical realities and their literary representations are a staple of German literary discourse, as exemplified in the already mentioned *Relevanter Realismus* debate when Matthias Politycki and a number of his colleagues had asked in a 2005 essay in the *Zeit*: “Was soll der Roman?” To briefly reiterate, Politycki and his fellow authors answered their own question by calling for novels that address the “vergessenen oder tabuisierten Fragen der Gegenwart” (“Was soll der Roman”) in the form of an engaging literary representation. Sadly, the authors fail to further define what the adjective “engaging” is supposed to denote and leave the question whether or not engaging means accessible for the reader or compelling in terms of aesthetic composition unanswered. They do, however, express the belief that said engaging representation would be perceived by the reading audience as a loosely defined “Abbild der Realität” (“Was soll der Roman”) while simultaneously conveying the “ästhetisch-moralische Verantwortung eines Schriftstellers” (“Was soll der Roman”) who is the one to organize his topics in order to achieve an equally loosely defined “erzählerisches Ziel” (“Was soll der Roman”). In sum, Politycki et al call for a combination of aesthetic “Kunstherrlichkeit” (“Was soll der Roman”) that they aim to borrow from avanguardist traditions and sociopolitical relevance with regards to the topics that authors address in their narratives. In her response to “Was soll der Roman,” Juli Zeh takes issue with the assumption expressed in the essay that aesthetics inherently contains a moral and furthermore asks to clearly define whose moral is being transported through aesthetic means (see “Gesellschaftliche Relevanz”). Moreover, Zeh demands to clearly delineate the author’s own political or moral position prior to the writing process. Without making this decision, she claims, the textual result would remain as vague as the position outlined by Politycki and his fellow

authors: “Es reicht nicht, Ästhet zu sein, wenn man ein moralisches Konzept erschaffen will. Jeder politischen oder moralischen Wirkung muss eine Grundentscheidung vorausgehen: für das, was man will, oder wenigstens gegen das, was man nicht will” (“Gesellschaftliche Relevanz”). While being a strong proponent of an individual political point of view, Zeh is more skeptical about the use of “wir” in the essay. Again, the issue for Zeh is that the personal pronoun lacks a clearly defined referent: “Man kann aber nicht wir sagen und nichts Bestimmtes damit meinen. Man muss sagen: wir Kommunisten, wir Antimaterialisten [...] oder was auch immer” (“Gesellschaftliche Relevanz”). Connected to this last point is her conviction that an individual point of view is by no means intrinsically one that is detached from society. On the contrary, the individualism that Zeh favors is one that is not anti-social but rather one in close dialogue with the society of which the individual is a member: “vielleicht sollte man sich lieber entspannt-spielerisch zum ich bekennen, das ja nicht notwendig gesellschaftsfern sein muss” (“Gesellschaftliche Relevanz”). In sum, Zeh favors a model of the author as an individual with a clearly defined moral and political point of view who is at the same time in close dialogue with the society around him or her.

At the heart of this debate lies the question of the social role of literature in general and, more specifically, the question of the role or responsibility of the author within society. These questions have been raised over the course of German literary history; and while individual authors were certainly able to answer them for themselves⁹¹, as indicated by the example of the

⁹¹ Arno Holz as a representative of German Naturalism, for example, in *Die Kunst, ihr Wesen und ihre Gesetze* (1891) coined the in his words “niedliche kleine Formel [...] Kunst = Natur - x” (112) that attempted to capture the interrelation of art (*Kunst*), the non-diegetic world (*Natur*) and artistic representation (*x*) channeled through the author’s subjective perception. In light of Zeh’s unmistakably forceful rejection of a “starres Instrumentarium an Regeln und Bewertungskriterien” (“Schreiben wie Goethe”) when it comes to the creation of literary texts, there is little to no ground to assume that she would agree with Holz’s equation.

Relevanter Realismus debate, the fact that they reappear regularly hints at the fact that a conclusive answer will likely not be found.

The negotiation of the relationship between literary portrayals of the world and their connection to the world they represent is inextricably linked to the question how to define literature itself and how to characterize its functions. In her essay “Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg,” Juli Zeh has answered these questions by allocating literature a “soziale und im weitesten Sinne politische Rolle” (218-19) by definition. She explains this intrinsically social function of literature by saying that humans, by virtue of being social beings, are interested in those around them and the world they live in: “Es ist ein natürliches Bedürfnis der Menschen zu erfahren, was andere Menschen – repräsentiert durch den Schriftsteller und seine Figuren – denken und fühlen” (219). In this statement, the author takes on the position of an intermediary between the lived-in world she or he shares with the audience and the intra-literary world created in a text. Thus, Zeh sets up a tight relationship between the lived-in world, herself, her readers, and the narrative worlds she develops in her fiction that is indeed social in the sense that the membranes between the different aspects are highly porous and permeable. The effect of this tight relationship is that literature *becomes part* of everyday social life with the author as the node situated at the point of intersection between readership and text.

It is this convergence of extra- and intra-literary realities that allows for a reading of Juli Zeh’s work in relation to traditions of realistic writing in German literary history. Rather than creating the impression of an uninterrupted trajectory that smoothly leads from the nineteenth century to her works, I suggest to once again use the image of an echo to analyze Zeh as an author who is at the very least influenced by traditions of realistic writing. In order to consider her novels *Corpus Delicti* and *Nullzeit* as texts in which these echoes resonate, it is imperative to

briefly revisit the programs in German literary history from which they emanate. The following is not meant to be a history of realistic writing because I do not propose a direct line of tradition starting at *Bürgerlicher Realismus* that leads to Zeh's writing. Rather, the following section briefly revisits three different points in time where questions pertaining to the relationship between literature and literary representations of the world have been raised, questions with which, as the *Relevanter Realismus* debate, her programmatic essay "Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg", and not the least her poetics lecture *Treideln* demonstrate, Zeh engages as well.

When Matthias Politycki et al called their collaborative essay "Was soll der Roman?" in 2005 to initiate the *Relevanter Realismus* debate, they referenced a similarly titled text written by one of the most prominent representatives of realistic literature in Germany more than a century earlier. Theodor Fontane in his review of Gustav Freytag's *Die Ahnen* had engaged with an almost identical question.⁹² "Was soll der *moderne* Roman," Fontane rhetorically asks only to provide the answer himself: "Der Roman soll ein Bild der Zeit sein, der wir selber angehören, mindestens die Widerspiegelung eines Lebens, an dessen Grenze wir selbst noch standen oder von dem uns unsere Eltern noch erzählten. [...] Noch einmal also: Der Roman soll ein Zeitbild sein, ein Bild *seiner* Zeit" ("Rezension" 186-187, emphasis in original). "Modern" can arguably be read as "contemporary" in Fontane's statement, based on the fact that he is concerned with the time span with which a 'modern' novel should be concerned, namely the present of the author and his or her readership or the present their parental generation experienced as such. The broader context of Fontane's statement is a poetological debate evolving around the question of what the literary form of the novel in particular was supposed to achieve in the time period between roughly 1848 and 1900, a time period that has entered German literary history under the

⁹² The review first appeared in the *Vossische Zeitung* but since then, it has been frequently reprinted for it captures poetological ideals of Fontane's time.

label *Bürgerlicher Realismus*.⁹³ Rather than reiterating all aspects of the discussion, which has been well-documented by literary scholars⁹⁴, the focus here lies on aspects that highlight characteristics of what realistic writing entailed for authors writing in the nineteenth century, what it excluded, and how at least some of these features echo in Juli Zeh's narratives more than a century later.

Firstly, realism in nineteenth century Germany did not mean a mere reflection of reality in the sense of a reduced understanding of the Aristotelean principle of mimesis⁹⁵, but rather that a literary reproduction of reality entailed an aesthetic recoding. In other words, a realistic depiction did not mean a one-to-one reproduction, but instead was intended to assure that the “Thematisierung von Wirklichkeit dieselbe gleichsam an der Schwelle ihres Übertritts in die Literatur ästhetisch umcodierte – das Reale also in ein ästhetisches Konstrukt transformiert wurde” (Plumpe “Einleitung” 49). This is of significance for Zeh's work more than a century later insofar as she is very much aware that the aesthetic quality of literature potentially suffers if a text privileges content over its form. Particularly with regards to conveying political content, Zeh sees the danger that an exaggerated emphasis on content robs literature of its intricacies:

⁹³ While I use the term *Bürgerlicher Realismus* to—in a reductive manner—subsume authors who have written their realistic texts in the nineteenth century, it is imperative to note that realistic literature of that time period is to be further subdivided. In his study dedicated to the German-language literature from the years 1870 to 1900, Peter Sprengel emphasizes that authors like the already mentioned Holz or Gerhart Hauptmann, who defined themselves as Naturalists, also were considered to be representatives of realism in their time (see *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur* 99). To differentiate between Naturalism and diverging forms of realistic literature, literary history has introduced the terms *Programmatischer*, *Bürgerlicher*, and *Poetischer Realismus*. “Beide [bürgerlicher und poetischer Realismus] werden vielfach synonym gebraucht – als unterschiedlich akzentuierte, mehr das Ästhetische oder Soziologische betonende Benennungen desselben Phänomens,” Sprengel writes and continues, “wer stärker zwischen ihnen unterscheidet, wird den Bürgerlichen Realismus vor allem mit der Gründungsphase der realistischen Bewegung um die Jahrhundertmitte identifizieren, die auch als Programmatischer Realismus bezeichnet wird” (100).

⁹⁴ Among others, Gerhard Plumpe has made substantial contributions in this respect. For a concise yet well-rounded introduction to different poetological positions, see his introduction in McInnes and Plumpe; for a collection of the most important source texts, see: Plumpe, Gerhard. *Theorie des Bürgerlichen Realismus: Eine Textsammlung*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1985. Print.

⁹⁵ In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the task of the author to not put into words “was wirklich geschehen ist, sondern vielmehr, was geschehen könnte, d.h. das nach den Regeln der Wahrscheinlichkeit oder Notwendigkeit Mögliche” (quoted in Plumpe “Einleitung” 45).

“Also, ich finde, dass Literatur in ihrer Offenheit und Vielschichtigkeit und in der Erlaubnis zur Interpretation sich so nem krassen politischen Auftrag eigentlich widersetzt, oder dass sie daran zusammenbricht und ihre poetische Dimension verliert” (“Ich habe meinen Roman”). In other words, the tradition of German nineteenth-century realism to write literature with a strong relation to reality while at the same time cultivating the aesthetic aspects of texts is carried over into the twenty-first century in Zeh’s body of work.

The aesthetic transformation of reality into a literary product does not entail that all aspects of life were seen as being suitable for literary presentation. To put it in a different way, representatives of *Bürgerlicher Realismus* were not only concerned with questions concerning the way how a story is told, but additionally *what* any given author chooses to tell. As Gerhard Plumpe clarifies, nineteenth century realist authors replaced mimesis with idealization (see “Einleitung” 54) of reality and unravels how this term is in fact an ambiguous one: “*Verklärung* funktionierte [...] nicht nur als formaler Index von Poetizität, sondern zugleich als massive Zensur in Hinsicht auf mögliche Themen” (55, emphasis in original). *Verklärung* marks the representation of reality in texts as “literarische Kommunikation” (54), thus emphasizing textual poeticity, while simultaneously imposing limits on what said literary communication could address. Topics that fell prey to this self-imposed censorship were those that contradicted a presumed harmony of ideal and reality. Reality was perceived as being intrinsically beautiful and it was literature’s function to present the beauty of reality in an aesthetically pleasing manner: “realistische Kunst ‘läutert’ oder ‘reinigt’ das ‘Real-Schöne,’ um es in der Fiktion ‘verklärt’ repräsentieren zu können” (66). A ruthless depiction of poverty or mental illnesses, therefore, was not deemed as being worthy of literary representation. Literary historian Julian Schmidt, who significantly contributed to the conceptualization of realistic writing in the nineteenth

century, was a prominent representative of this school of thought. In his negative verdict on Georg Büchner's novella *Lenz* (1839), Schmidt writes, "die Darstellung des Wahnsinns ist eine unkünstlerische Aufgabe, denn der Wahnsinn, als die Negativität des Geistes, folgt keinem geistigen Gesetz" (quoted in Plumpe "Einleitung" 70). While being central to poetological conceptualizations of the nineteenth century, such idealization of reality is absent in the works of Juli Zeh and hence a mode of writing she does not carry over into our present. An idealization of reality stands in contrast to her previously quoted statement that polishing the borders of everyday life reveals that there is something wrong with this world; moreover, there is no textual evidence in her body of work that would suggest that Zeh perceives reality as being inherently filled with beauty. However, the concept of *Verklärung* still echoes in Zeh's novel *Nullzeit* in the sense that a number of poetological passages explicitly address the question of how adequately literature is able to represent the world.

To return to the self-imposed limitation of topics for representatives of *Bürgerlicher Realismus*, the above is not to suggest that amoral behavior and the like were completely non-existent, the depiction of adultery in Fontane's *Effi Briest* being a well-known example. However, such behavior was first and foremost presented "als Hintergrund oder Konturierung positiver Einstellungen" (76). Seen from this point of view, the literary program of *Bürgerlicher Realismus* stands in contrast to conceptualizations of realistic writing that instrumentalized literature in order to advance sociopolitical progress. When Zeh presents amoral or socially discredited behavior in her novels, she radically transforms the line of tradition from *Bürgerlicher Realismus* to depict undesired behavior as a mere backdrop and instead draws attention to the negative behavior's counterpart. With respect to Zeh's earlier novels, Patricia Herminhouse has noted what still stands true today: "one might say that the values she seeks to

advance [...] are inscribed *ex negativo* in her literary production” (“The Young Author” 277).

One might want to add in light of the literary historic background discussed here, that Zeh could be labelled a negative idealist.

The period of Germany’s *Bürgerlicher Realismus*, then, is only of significance to Zeh’s work insofar as it marks the foundation stage for realism in German literary history. While the majority of her protagonists can be defined as being part of the bourgeoisie—be it the lawyer Max from *Adler und Engel*, the physicist Oskar from *Schilf*, the biologist Mia from *Corpus Delicti* and even the scuba diving instructor Sven from *Nullzeit* who is a trained jurist—the major difference to the nineteenth century is that there is no indication in any of her novels that there is still a determinable class conscience that may have been present in texts written by the likes of Gustav Freytag, Theodor Fontane, Gottfried Keller, or Wilhelm Raabe. More important than being representatives of a particular social stratum, Zeh’s characters are representatives of individual character traits or even broader sociopolitical questions that are not necessarily determined or even tied to their social background. Still, *Bürgerlicher Realismus* deserves a place in an analysis of Zeh’s work, not the least because she acknowledges its importance for the literary tradition of situating narratives in the lived-in world she shares with her audience, a tradition she is continuing in the twenty-first century.

The fact that Zeh anchors her texts in the non-diegetic world leads back to the question of the function or role of literature with respect to sociopolitical change. In other words, the question is if literature’s role is to “merely” represent the social, cultural, and political conditions of its time in order to create awareness in the reader, or if a critical reflection of society in literature is supposed to have an immediate impact on the direction in which society develops. In the 1970s, authors like Uwe Timm, Günter Grass, Peter Weiss, Dieter Wellershoff, Joseph Peter

Stern or Hans Christoph Buch had engaged in debates that circled around these questions and thus continued the discourse about the possibilities and limitations of realism in literature that had started roughly a century earlier. Given the often left-winged rhetoric of the participants, the debates of the 1970s can arguably be seen as echoing and adapting positions of the *Expressionismusdebatte*⁹⁶ of the late 1930s during which Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, among others, had passionately disputed about whether literature was supposed to capture an objective reality in its totality or whether literature rather should pay respect to a subjective perception of reality that allows for fissures and cracks. Lukács was profoundly convinced that there is an objective reality and that this objective reality needs to be literature's primary referent: "Für Lukács ist Kunst Widerspiegelung einer objektiven Wirklichkeit, die in ihrer Totalität zu erfassen ist" (Powroslo "Erkenntnis durch Literatur" 45). The idea of an objective reality, however, was a concept rejected by some of Lukács' contemporaries, Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht being prominent ones. While Bloch rejected the conceptualization of reality as an objective and monolithic unit (see Powroslo "Erkenntnis durch Literatur" 47), Brecht focused on the problem that such a perspective on reality is diametrical to the idea of social change through literary means: "Was von Lukács als Wahrheit der Wirklichkeit ausgegeben wird, setzt eine Endgültigkeit der Erkenntnis voraus, durch die das Denken und verändernde Handeln stillgestellt werden" (47). Underlying this position is, just like with Bloch, Brecht's rejection of the view of reality as being devoid of cracks, fissures, and contradictions. Similar to Zeh's assertion that the textual practice of polishing the borders of everyday life uncovers what is not well with society, Brecht sees the representation of contradictions in society as being realism's first and foremost

⁹⁶ For a collection of the most important contributions to the debate, see: Schmitt, Hans-Jürgen. *Die Expressionismusdebatte: Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp-Verlag, 1973. Print.

characteristic: “Nicht die Erhebung über Widersprüche, sondern Darstellung der Widersprüche kennzeichnet den Realismus” (47).⁹⁷ It is particularly this change in perception of reality as being inherently subjective and contradictory that finds its way into the literary debate on the possibilities of realistic literature in the 1970s. Not surprisingly, the far reaching transformations West-German society witnessed in the late 1960s/early 1970s had an impact on literary debates about the possibilities of literature to represent and reflect on said changes as well. Particularly the instrumentalization of literature to promote political change is of significance in this context, as these decades mark the point in time when the author as public intellectual with a strong voice in sociopolitical discourse returned to the spotlight in the post-World War II-era. This is all the more important as Zeh revives this model for the present of the early twenty-first century after the author as social agent with a strong voice had become outmoded in the 1980s. In the 1970s, however, the politicization of literature not the least shows in the fact that authors who contributed to the debate were either part of or openly sympathized with ideals of the notorious 68ers, however generalizing this term might be. Roughly a century after representatives of Germany’s *Bürgerlicher Realismus* had tackled similar questions, a new generation of writers felt the urge to address the question what realism in literature means for the respective present, if only for the realization that realism in art, just like the way a society understands or perceives reality, changes its meaning over time. Therefore, the title Peter Laemmle chose in 1976 to collect diverging positions on realistic literature in the wake of the late 1960s is a uniquely appropriate one: “Realismus – welcher?”

⁹⁷ In the midst of the *Expressionismusdebatte*, Brecht had stated that it is not enough to simply reflect society in literary texts without aspiring to create insight into society’s working on the part of the reader: “Kein Realist begnügt sich damit, immerfort zu wiederholen, was man schon weiß; das zeigt keine lebendige Beziehung zur Wirklichkeit” (“Praktisches” 307).

With respect to the explicitly political content of this strand of literature of that decade—Peter Schneider’s *Lenz* (1973), Uwe Timm’s *Heißer Sommer* (1974), Heinrich Böll’s *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (1974), Franz-Josef Degenhardt’s *Brandstellen* (1975), Bernward Vesper’s *Die Reise* (1977), or Peter Weiss’s monumental *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (1975-81) serve as a few representative examples—it is noteworthy that literature was seen by politically committed authors as an instrument to promote social progress and thus in their texts established a very close relationship between literature and the society in which it is embedded. Uwe Timm, for example, at this early time in his long career was a strong proponent of what he suggested calling a *politischer Realismus* (“Realismus und Utopie” 143, emphasis in original). While this label certainly is testament to the politicization of literature in the 1970s, Timm put distinct emphasis on the necessity to focus on individual subjects in literary representations of reality, the point being that characters with agency are suitable to demonstrate that the society they live in is subject to change. He writes, “wenn Menschen in der Literatur als handelnde Personen dargestellt werden, kommt notwendig Veränderung, sowohl thematisch als auch formal, als Handlung, in die Literatur” (143-144). This moment of change for Timm introduces a utopian element into literature in the sense that texts have the possibility to depict social change that has not yet been achieved, but for which, from the point of view of Timm, it is worth striving. He insists that literature’s possibility to outline new perspectives for the society in which it is written is an inherent characteristic of the political realism he favors: “Literatur vermag mehr als nur eine platt naturalistische Abschilderung der bestehenden Verhältnisse zu liefern, sie kann Perspektiven aufzeigen, die über das Bestehende hinausgehen, indem sie diese als veränderbar darstellt oder doch darauf insistiert, daß es verändert werden muß” (145). Put differently, it is the role of realistic writing to represent society as being subject to change and, in

a second step, to explicitly *demand* sociopolitical change or progress. This arguably optimistic outlook on the possibilities of realistic writing or literature more generally, however, is of course itself subject to change. Accordingly, it has lost a lot of its utopian momentum and authors like Zeh arguably do not share Timm's optimism to the full extent. Zeh's novels are a lot more ambiguous when it comes to the representation of social change, it even appears that her texts stop short of that moment in the narrative when change is *about* to happen. As a consequence, she leaves the final verdict about whether or not society, represented through her characters, is able to change for the better in the hands of her readers. At the end of *Nullzeit*, for example, the reader cannot be entirely sure that the main character Sven has really changed or whether he will fall back into his old habit of secluding himself from the world. Similarly, while doubtlessly being a narrative about the politicization of its main character Mia, *Corpus Delicti* ends at a point when the protagonist is seemingly defeated and it is not clear what she will do next. In sum and in accordance with Timm's claim, society in general and social subjects in particular *are* presented as changeable; however, the major difference in all of Zeh's narratives is that the author denies them closure.

Ultimately, the issue of closure that Zeh denies her characters and the concomitant responsibility of the readership to form its own opinion comes back to the question of the perception of reality. A narrative offering closure for the protagonists is not unlike a literary representation of a monolithic reality in the sense that all conflicts have been resolved and no contradictions are left unexplored. In opposition, a narrative like *Nullzeit* that leaves the reader in doubt about the protagonist's further character development draws attention to the subjective and fragmented nature of not only subjects but, ultimately, our perspective on reality as well. This, in turn, leads back to the literary debate of the 1970s that marks the point when the idea of a

constructivist perception of reality is maybe not introduced but firmly established. In simplified terms, authors like Joseph Peter Stern and Dieter Wellershoff acknowledge the seemingly banal fact that reality can no longer be seen as a monolithic unity. According to Stern, it is precisely this acknowledgment that privileges realism over other manners of literary representation: “Dass sich die Realität verändert, weiß der Realismus besser als jede andere Darstellungsweise der Literatur: was er jedoch implizit verneint, ist, daß es in dieser Welt mehr als eine Realität gibt” (“Über oder eigentlich gegen eine Begriffsbestimmung” 26). In addition to adhering to a multifaceted perspective on reality, Stern’s statement underlines that realism is a manner of representation and much more than a literary historical era. He further convincingly specifies: “Der Realismus ist ein *Modus des Schreibens*, der eher dem Sichtbaren als dem Unsichtbaren gilt. Es ist der Name für ein wohl unzerstörbares Interesse für die Formen und Beziehungen der Welt, in der wir alle leben” (30, my emphasis). Looking at realism as that mode of writing that arguably best represents the relationality of our world, to regard it as a “Methode oder Grundhaltung” (Schmidt “Realismus: ja” 42)⁹⁸, appears productive as it firmly situates literature within its broader sociocultural and sociopolitical context without adhering to a potentially restrictive ideology. Neither the modes of realistic writing in the 1970s nor the ones employed by Zeh poses a claim for universality. Subject to literary representation are fragments of life, for example individual struggles or selected sociopolitical questions. However, these fragments are not represented as isolated but rather in a broader social context that not necessarily determines, but at all times influences and shapes the lives of literary characters. To recap and rephrase Joseph Peter Stern’s words, realistic literature is interested in its characters, but it is equally

⁹⁸ See also Uwe Timm’s similar definition: “Realismus, das ist eine Methode, Realität darstellerisch zu erfassen und zu verstehen” (“Realismus und Utopie” 139).

interested in their relationship to the world they inhabit and that they share with the reading public.

Just a decade later, the strongly knit ties between the extra- and intra-literary world appear a lot looser and, concomitantly, authors for the most part seemed to have lost faith in literature's immediate impact on society. Well into the 1990s, authors and literary critics once again engaged in a lively discussion evolving around the relationship between literature and its social context, spawned by the publication of Frank Schirrmacher's essay "Idyllen in der Wüste" in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1989. Schirrmacher notoriously bemoaned the "Talentschwäche" ("Idyllen in der Wüste" 21) of younger authors writing in German, an assessment to which Uwe Wittstock added that contemporary German literature had lost its audience (see "Ab in die Nische" 86). Additionally, as Wittstock elaborates, the model of the author as an agent with a strong voice in public discourse that had been a crucial component of how authors were seen by the literary public in the 1960s and 1970s had lost its appeal: "Die Idee, die Arbeit eines Schriftstellers müsse [...] jederzeit irgendeine sozialtheoretische Relevanz nachweisen, scheint mir eine sehr deutsche zu sein" (103). In short, when comparing the contributions of the late 1980s and 1990s to those of the 1970s, one of the most striking aspects is that in approximately twenty years, the author as a relevant voice in sociopolitical discourse had to a great extent become silent. Accordingly, literature itself appeared to have lost its social meaning with which Zeh explicitly reinvests it in her essay "Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg" in 2008. "Die Literatur hat ihre öffentliche Rolle aufgegeben," (Hage "Zeitalter der Bruchstücke" 30) Volker Hage diagnoses in 1989, and he does so without reproach, as his words appeared in an essay that reads as a defense of contemporary German literature of the time. Similarly, Hubert Winkels one year later states that literature is devoid of an "aktuelle

gesellschaftliche Funktion” (“Was ist los” 47) and continues to say that, “von politischen oder moralischen Normen redet kaum noch jemand” (50). This prevailing opinion can arguably, at least in part, be explained with the disillusionment that ensued when the high hopes that authors writing in the late 1960s/1970s had invested into the possibilities of literature with respect to social change as outlined above were not fulfilled. As a consequence, the author as citizen with political agency or even a publicly discernible voice in the late 1980s had become a discontinued model and the pendulum of literary production had swung towards highly subjective and fragmentary texts that mainly rested in themselves without having taken their wider social contexts into consideration. Not the least, this is of importance because, roughly ten years later, Zeh—together with contemporaries like Ilija Trojanow—would force the pendulum to swing back and revive not only the tradition of a socially committed literature, but the model of the author as public intellectual as well.

Traces of realistic writing, however, still persisted even at a time when literature in Germany was for the most part considered to be depoliticized. Just like authors struggling to define the possibilities of realistic writing in the 1960s and 1970s had realized that reality itself can no longer be perceived as a monolithic entity, the debate of the late 1980s is equally characterized by the acknowledgement that talking about one monolithic “contemporary German literature” was no longer a feasible construct. Instead, literary critics underlined the fact that literary landscapes are by definition fragmentary. In the already cited essay by Volker Hage, he suggests replacing the singular “contemporary literature” with the plural “contemporary literatures” to more accurately capture the diversity of literary production. This point of view allows Hage to acknowledge that even seemingly historical or fantastic narratives stand in relation to the time of their publication. In reference to some of the bestselling novels of the late

1980s—Patrick Süskind’s *Das Parfum* (1985), Christoph Ransmayr’s *Die letzte Welt* (1988), and Gisbert Haefs’s *Hannibal* (1989)—Hage states, “Historische Romane, Erzählungen aus dem Mittelalter, selbst Märchen und Mythen haben, wenn sie denn nicht pure Historiengemälde sind, mit unserer Zeit zu tun, sie zielen auf all ihren entrückten Pfaden und phantastischen Umwegen unsere Gegenwart an” (“Zeitalter der Bruchstücke” 35). Notably, Hage only speaks about these novels in the sense that they aim at the present of their publication, thus highlighting that, while existing, the ties between the diegetic world of these texts and the non-diegetic world in which they were published and read were a lot weaker than they used to be in past periods of German literature. Against the background of a drastically changed perception of literature with respect to its sociopolitical role between the 1970s and the 1980s, it is therefore not surprising that the de-politicization of literature during the 1980s would eventually lead to a re-politicization of contemporary German literature. In other words, if literature during the 1980s had for the most part severed the ties between the diegetic and non-diegetic world and predominantly focused on individuals that seemed to exist in what could be called a social vacuum, this trend of the literary market set the stage for Juli Zeh and other authors to strengthen said ties once again.

The following analyses of Zeh’s novels *Corpus Delicti* and *Nullzeit* is informed by the echoes of realistic writing that Zeh incorporates in her texts and accordingly demonstrate how the above mentioned ties between the diegetic and non-diegetic world are bound. In addition to the situatedness of her narratives in the lived-in world she shares with her readership, Zeh’s novels also echo literary programs from the nineteenth century that centered around keeping the balance between aesthetics and the representation of the lived-in world in literary texts. The analysis will show that Zeh is very aware of the fact that particularly political writing in its aesthetic transformation of reality into literature runs the risk of suffering “ästhetische Verluste”

(*Treideln* 133) when content is favored over form. Nevertheless, a novel like *Nullzeit* is a prime example of a text that manages to keep this balance, not the least because the mode of realistic writing Zeh employs draws attention to its own literaricity. Far from attempting to capture reality in an objective totality, Zeh's narratives rather adhere to a conceptualization of reality as contradictory, subjective, and fragmentary. Arguably, this perspective on reality harks back to debates of the 1970s; what is absent in Zeh's texts, though, is the belief that literature has an immediate impact on social reality. Instead, in a combination of Dieter Wellershoff's writing on the function of realistic literature and Zeh's poetics lecture *Treideln*, I will analyze the modes of realistic writing in *Corpus Delicti* as a simulation of reality.

***Corpus Delicti*: Modes of Realistic Writing as Simulation of Reality**

Corpus Delicti, published in 2009, has an exceptional place within Zeh's oeuvre for a number of reasons. Firstly, the text marks Zeh's debut as a dramatist. *Corpus Delicti* was originally written as a play in 2007 for the art festival Ruhrtriennale, where it was first performed in Essen on September 15.⁹⁹ Two years later, Zeh published the novelized version of the text¹⁰⁰ in conjunction with the release of the album *Corpus Delicti* with German rock band Slut. This album, promoted as a "Schallnovelle" by Zeh's publishing house ("Juli Zeh *Corpus Delicti* CD"), blends elements of audio book, rock album, spoken word performance, and sound collage,

⁹⁹ For an analysis of *Corpus Delicti* as a play, see: Schmidt, Christopher. "Die Erfindung der Realität: Über Juli Zehs Erstlingsstück *Corpus delicti*." *Sprache im Technischen Zeitalter* 46. 187 (2008): 263-269. Print. While the script of the play was not included in Zeh's collection of plays *Good Morning, Boys and Girls* (2013), it is available upon request by the Rowohlt Theaterverlag.

¹⁰⁰ For an analysis of differences between the dramatic and the novelized version with regards to its temporal and spatial setting, see my article "'Wo geh ich her? ... Wo komm ich hin?': Delineating Transnational Spaces in the Work of Juli Zeh." *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature*. Eds. Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Stuart Taberner. Rochester, New York, 2015. 228-246. Print.

and transfers *Corpus Delicti*'s plot, which had already made its way from the stage to the page, from the visual medium of the book to an audio medium. The fact alone that Zeh has treated the content of *Corpus Delicti* in three different media points at its central importance within her body of work, an importance that by now has spread beyond the literary market in that the text has been didacticized for implementation in German classrooms.¹⁰¹ As Maierhofer and McCalmont notice, *Corpus Delicti* is the one text in Zeh's oeuvre that has been adapted and transformed from one media to another most often in order to widen its reach and potential audience: "Clearly, Zeh was pursuing the distribution of her work in a variety of media, possibly with the intention of reaching a different and younger audience than might be expected to attend subventioned theater productions or purchase the latest newspaper-reviewed hardcover, spreading her political message as much as possible" ("Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti*" 383). Said political message comes in the form of a warning call: *Corpus Delicti* depicts the potential results of legislative developments of the early twenty-first century such as the ever increasing restriction of civil rights in favor of state surveillance in order to prevent terrorist attacks. Significantly, the restriction of civil liberties that the novel presents to the reader—examples would be the control of all household waste and the obligation to submit reports that document one's performance in state-prescribed fitness exercises—is a voluntary one because the prime principle behind state governance in Zeh's text is one that few people would reject as undesirable: physical health. Over the course of the novel, the seemingly benevolent governmental system reveals its dictatorial nature; at a point, however, when all efforts of protagonist Mia Holl to resist have proven to be in vain. The character of *Corpus Delicti* as a

¹⁰¹ The publishing house Cornelsen, specialized in textbooks and complementary didactic material, published an issue of their *LiteraNova*-series dedicated to *Corpus Delicti* in 2011; Klett followed suit in 2015 with the publication of an unabridged and annotated version of the text tailored for classroom usage: Reclam issued a "Lektüreschlüssel" for *Corpus Delicti* in 2016.

warning against voluntarily giving up civil rights for which humanity had fought long and hard was further supported by the book-length essay *Angriff auf die Freiheit*, written in collaboration with Ilija Trojanow and also published in 2009; a text that can be read as *Corpus Delicti*'s non-fictional companion piece in that it tackles similar topics, particularly the implementation of anti-terror laws in the wake of 9/11 and the concomitant erosion of civil liberties. While these issues are only in part directly addressed in Zeh's novel, they belong to the broader context of how Western societies that are commonly perceived as strongholds of democracy—and like to present themselves as such—at the beginning of the new millennium increasingly restrict civil liberties in order to uphold the impression of safe and secure societies in the face of global threats.

Corpus Delicti is arguably the text in her body of work in which the extra-literary and intra-literary world converge most visibly, a convergence that Zeh transforms into timely and undisguised political content. In *Treideln*, Zeh acknowledges the poetological implications of following the narrative strategy of bringing the political undercurrent of a text to its surface. From her point of view, the risk such texts take is to trade aesthetic merit for clarity:

Wer sich politisch äußert, kann es sich nicht leisten, missverstanden oder auch nur abweichend gedeutet zu werden. Geübte Autoren mögen sich zutrauen, beim politischen Schreiben die durch Eindeutigkeit erzeugten ästhetischen Verluste durch besonders kunstvolle Gestaltung auszugleichen. Bei einem solchen Balanceakt ist das Risiko des Scheiterns aber ziemlich hoch. (*Treideln* 133)

In this quote, Zeh reveals that she shares the common reservation put forth against overtly political literature that a clearly deductible, politically unambiguous meaning is potentially

harmful to an aesthetically felicitous literary construction. These considerations are reminiscent of the analysis of Zeh's stance with regards to political literature in chapter two of this dissertation as well as the necessity to simplify political coherencies when acting as a public intellectual analysed in chapter three. I consider the strong relationship between the intra-literary world of *Corpus Delicti* and extra-literary discourses prevalent at the time of the novel's publication as a mode of realistic writing in the sense that the literary modification and aggravation of the sociopolitical conditions of state surveillance, the concomitant erosion of privacy, and marginalization of oppositional views sheds light on said conditions in a way that literature is privileged to represent. In the process, the strong didactic tone the novel possesses certainly places content over form, and arguably minimizes the aesthetic value of the text as a result. However, this alleged loss is counter-balanced by a gain in immediacy and urgency.

Rainer Moritz in his review for *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* finds the verdict that the balancing act between aesthetic value and content-related unambiguity Zeh mentions in the quote from *Treideln* did not succeed. While Moritz patronizingly admits that the topics covered in *Corpus Delicti* are "bedenkenswert," he does not hide that he regards the literary representation of said topics as failed: "[Es] rührt sich schon nach wenigen Kapiteln Unmut darüber, mit welchen bescheidenen literarischen Mitteln Juli Zeh ihr Ziel verfolgt" ("Unverträgliche Immunsysteme"). Moritz admits that utopian or dystopian literature lends itself to a discrepancy between form and content; still, in his opinion, the gap between aesthetics and subject matter is too wide and in the end works against the text: "Zu offensichtlich ragt der mahnende Zeigefinger in die Höhe, zu papierern wirken viele der Figuren. [...] Juli Zeh hat keine überzeugenden Mittel gefunden, ihre bedenkswerten Botschaften formal adäquat zu gestalten" ("Unverträgliche Immunsysteme"). Significantly, Zeh uses the exact same vocabulary to describe *Corpus Delicti* that Moritz applies

to the text in his last sentence. In stark contrast to Moritz, though, Zeh expresses her relief about having been able to find a form that has allowed her to transform the text from its initial configuration as a stage play into a novel: “Ich selbst habe mich erst einmal im Leben an einen politischen Roman gewagt. Er heißt *Corpus Delicti* und war zunächst ein Theaterstück, was das Finden einer *adäquaten Form* erheblich erleichtert hat” (*Treideln* 133, my emphasis). That author and critic do not agree when it comes to the assessment of a given text may not be surprising. The fact, however, that they use the same language to describe features of a text from opposite points of view is noteworthy and hints at the fact that the term ‘balancing act’ might indeed be best suited to describe the difficulties of balancing form and content.

One aspect that Moritz highlights positively in his review, namely the timeliness of the novel¹⁰², has been noted by other reviewers as well. *Zeit*-critic Evelyn Finger for example hailed *Corpus Delicti* as “Buch der Stunde,” and continues to describe the novel as “negative Utopie, die den Sinnkrisen der Gegenwart entspringt und uns zwingt, deren Folgen zu bedenken” (“Das Buch”). Similarly, Christian Geyer in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* acknowledges *Corpus Delicti* as “ein Buch, das an den Nerv unserer zutiefst verängstigten Gesellschaft rührt” (“Geruchlos”). As already indicated, *Corpus Delicti* engages with the present by taking the detour of setting its plot in the future, vaguely specified in the first chapter’s title, “Mitten am Tag, in der Mitte des Jahrhunderts” (*Corpus Delicti* 11). In addition, *Corpus Delicti* borrows from classical predecessors of the dystopian novel¹⁰³ such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), a feature that has led academic research to repeatedly

¹⁰² He writes “[Man möchte] Juli Zeh lauthals dafür preisen, wie sie in ihrer Anti-Utopie den ‘Gesundheitswahn’ unserer Tage auf die Zukunft [...] projiziert und eine erschreckende Gesellschaftsvision zeichnet” (Moritz “Unverträgliche Immunsysteme”).

¹⁰³ The literary tradition to which Zeh alludes has of course not escaped literary critics. Wolfgang Höbel in *Der Spiegel*, for example, describes the text as reminiscent of the works of Huxley, Orwell, Ray Bradbury, and Swedish author Karin Boye (“Hexe”) whereas Geyer labels *Corpus Delicti* as “neue Ausgabe aus dem genre ‘Brave new world’” (“Geruchlos”).

address questions of genre with regard to this text. Classifications range from simply “science fiction” (Brockman “Juli Zeh, *Spieltrieb*” 67) to “critical dystopia” (McCalmont and Maierhofer “Juli Zeh’s *Corpus Delicti*” 376) and “hyperrelevant utopian realism” (Smith-Prei “Relevant Utopian Realism” 111). Zeh herself, in a video posted on *Zeit.de* in which she answers questions posed by her readers, downplays the associations with the science fiction genre. “Also, das ist zwar in der Zukunft angesiedelt,” Zeh states, “und lehnt sich deswegen ein bisschen in diese Science-Fiction Gattung hinein, aber ich habe dort eigentlich nichts erfunden” (Horn “Fragen an Juli Zeh”), thus confirming McCalmont’s and Maierhofer’s claim that “science fiction is always about the present not about the future” (“Juli Zeh’s *Corpus Delicti*” 376). Questions of classification aside, the novel once more confirms Zeh’s reputation as a politically committed author in that *Corpus Delicti*, like her second novel *Spieltrieb* and, to a lesser extent, her debut *Adler und Engel* before, can be read as what Sonja Klocke terms a “literarische Form der gesellschaftlichen Selbstbeobachtung” (“Das Mittelalter” 185).

What the novel observes at first sight appears to be a thriving society devoid of the crises, fears, and anxieties that appears to characterize contemporary Western liberal democracies. The first chapter, mimicking the establishing shot of a movie camera, depicts an idyllic landscape free of pollution and complete with white clouds that are testament to the fact that “eine zur Ruhe gekommene Menschheit aufgehört [hat], die Natur und damit sich selbst zu bekämpfen” (Zeh *Corpus Delicti* 11). The novel mirrors the tranquility of the landscape in the system governing the people who have come to rest. This system, only referred to as the “METHODE,” can best be described as an allegedly benevolent mixture of biological principles and rationality. “Wir haben eine METHODE entwickelt,” the editor-in-chief of the state-run newspaper “Der gesunde Menschenverstand” and main representative of the “METHODE,” journalist Heinrich

Kramer, elaborates, “die darauf abzielt, jedem Einzelnen ein möglichst langes, störungsfreies, das heißt, gesundes und glückliches Leben zu garantieren” (36). The utopian project of the “METHODE” comes at a price, though. In order to guarantee its subjects the promised good life, citizens have to adhere to a set of prescribed actions that intervene in and concomitantly erode their privacy. Among those actions are routine fitness exercises, the submission of sleep and dietary reports as well as the measurement of body data such as blood pressure. The failure to submit this data to the “METHODE” on a regular basis results in immediate repercussions, based on the conviction that the well-being of the social body is of higher value than that of the individual. The novel’s protagonist, inconspicuous biologist Mia Holl, gets into conflict with the governmental system because she has failed to present the mandatory health reports to the authorities. The reason for her transgression is her mourning for her brother Moritz, a declared opponent of the “METHODE,” who has committed suicide while being imprisoned. Mia’s grief, however, requires privacy that life under the “METHODE” no longer allows its subjects. Using this conflict as a starting point, Mia takes on the “METHODE” in a lawsuit to defend herself against allegations of terrorism as well as to prove the innocence of her deceased brother with the help of her lawyer Rosentreter, who has his own personal feud with the system. Over the course of the plot, Mia develops from a follower of the system to *homo politicus* and, eventually, *persona non grata*. At the end of the trial, Mia is convicted and sentenced to be frozen permanently. Instead of granting her the privilege of the martyr status that could potentially fuel the resistance against the system Mia’s trial has created, she is pardoned before the sentence is carried out and condemned to being rehabilitated into society through educational measures.

The future setting of the novel notwithstanding, certain aspects of the “METHODE” bear uncanny resemblance to contemporary models of health insurance already in place or soon to be

implemented. In 2014, Swiss-based health insurance company Generali announced a new model of calculating the insurance rates of its customers based on voluntary health reports that clients are prompted to transmit digitally via a telemonitoring software.¹⁰⁴ Generali CEO Mario Greco makes no pretence about the intended effect of this software: “Damit stärken wir die Bindung zu unseren Kunden,” he states and continues to say, “außerdem beeinflussen wir das Verhalten unserer Kunden, und gesündere Kunden sind besser für uns” (“Generali”). In Greco’s statement, thinly veiled behind the posturing of binding the customers to the company, having direct control of customers’ lives in order to minimize costs for the insurance company appears as the true reason behind developing this model. Just like in Zeh’s novel, the individual’s actions with regards to retaining a healthy lifestyle have immediate consequences. Whereas in *Corpus Delicti*, the failure to submit health reports results in reprimand, the submitted data within the Generali-model results in potentially higher costs. The major difference between fact and fiction in this example, though, is that Generali is a privately owned, globally acting corporation who through the implementation of their model gains significant control over their customers’ lives. For Zeh, however, this difference is of increasingly less significance in the present conditions of neoliberal capitalism. Given the similarities between the Generali-model and the society depicted in Zeh’s novel, the author was interviewed by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* about her take on the insurance company’s practices. Asked whether or not surveillance through a corporation might possibly be easier to circumvent than that through a state, Zeh replies that the difference is at best marginal. She states,

¹⁰⁴ See “Generali”: “Verbraucher, die sich für eine Lebens- oder Krankenversicherung nach dem neuen Modell entscheiden, müssen Generali regelmäßig Daten zu ihrem Lebensstil übermitteln. Das funktioniert mit einer App, die Vorsorgetermine dokumentiert, Schritte zählt oder sportliche Aktivitäten misst.”

Ich fürchte, das macht kaum noch einen Unterschied. Auch hier zeigen sich neue Mechanismen: Im 20. Jahrhundert gingen Unterdrückung und diktatorische Methoden von Staaten aus. Inzwischen erleben wir, wie große Konzerne immer mehr Macht gewinnen, sich zum Teil gar nicht mehr an Politik und Gesetze gebunden fühlen. Totalitäre Strukturen kleiden sich heute ins Gewand von Serviceangeboten. (Janker “Wir werden manipulierbar”)

The shift Zeh perceives in the sources of totalitarian structure, that is a move from totalitarian states that exert power over their subjects to globalized corporations that exert totalitarian power over their customers, should not so much be understood as a shift but as an addition in the sense that, in the twenty-first century, it is both states *and* corporations that act in a totalitarian manner. Disguised as offers that promise benefits and reduced insurance rates, models like the one developed by Generali do not offer more freedom and choice but rather limit the individual’s freedom in regulating their everyday practices, thus leading to a loss of control while feigning that the individual gains control.

In addition, models like these in the end undermine the very principles on which the German health insurance system is based, which is solidarity among those who are part of the collective body of the insured. Asked about whether she sees the solidarity within society endangered through the Generali-model in the interview in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Zeh answers, “die Idee der Individualisierung von Tarifen—der ‘Gesunde’ soll weniger bezahlen als der ‘Kranke’ oder ‘Anfällige’—widerspricht komplett dem Solidaritätsgedanken” (“Wir werden manipulierbar”). At the core of this perceived decreasing solidarity, which appears the flipside of the same increasing individualism Zeh repeatedly acknowledges as one of the key features of

twenty-first century society, lies the false promise of a “good life” (Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 2) that can be achieved by simply following a set of predetermined steps. *Corpus Delicti* therefore can be described as a novel that utilizes its future setting to mirror the present of its publication in the sense that sociopolitical discourses of the late 2000s are taken one step further or, in other words, condensed—a narrative strategy I propose to label as a mode of realistic writing. In a 2010 interview with the *Zeit*, Zeh elaborates on the tight relationship her allegedly futuristic novel has with the realities of the still new millennium. Asked about the dystopian qualities of *Corpus Delicti*, she states,

Ich habe dort eigentlich nichts erfunden, sondern ich hab nur Dinge, Tendenzen, Entwicklungen, die wir heute schon erleben, auf einen Haufen gekehrt, und das Dystopiehafte entsteht allein durch die Selektion, durch die Auswahl, also quasi durch selektive Wahrnehmung von bestimmten Phänomenen. Es ist nicht wirklich in die Zukunft gedacht, sondern es ist eine Gegenwartsverdichtung. Und deswegen ist es auch kein Pessimismus, sondern es ist einfach nur Diagnose. Das ist, wie wir heute, jetzt schon denken und wie wir auch anfangen zu entscheiden, und auch nur darüber wollte ich sprechen. (Horn “Fragen an Juli Zeh”)

Notably, Zeh mentions the selection of material on which she chose to focus, which harks back to the significance of selection for realist literature during the time of the *Bürgerlicher Realismus*. In contrast to this strand of literary realism, though, Zeh focuses on negative aspects of current social developments in order to question or challenge them through her narrative. Quite literally, this can be seen as the polishing the borders of everyday life she speaks about in

the opening quote of this chapter: Zeh polishes the borders of our present time, but not to make them shine, but rather to reveal that developments like the loss of autonomy and agency in a time of neoliberalism must not be accepted without intervention.

It is the delineated relationship between sociopolitical realities of the time in which the text is written and the intra-literary world of the novel which allows for describing Zeh's narrative strategy as a simulation. In her 2013 poetics lecture *Treideln*, Zeh describes the process of narration as "Spielen im Kopf" (191) and goes on to say that "Spielen [ist] vor allem Training" (192). Narration and its textual products in Zeh's understanding appear as a form of simulation of what is or, in the case of *Corpus Delicti*, what could be in a (literary) space that is unique in the sense that it is quite literally the playing field of the author's—and in the moment of reception: the reader's—imagination. However, the simulation that takes place in this space is never entirely self-contained as it always upholds the connection to referents in the extra-literary world which are the starting point and incentive for this simulation in the first place. As previously mentioned in the chapter devoted to Zeh's poetics, she furthermore describes narration as "ein Trainingsprogramm in Sachen Menschwerdung" (192) and literature as "ein Übungslauf nicht nur für das Leben, sondern für das Sein" (192), both of which are metaphors closely related to that of literature as simulation.

The concept of literature of simulation leads back to theoretical positions of the late 1960s and 1970s. In addition to the remarks on the operability of literature in the 1970s sketched out above, it was particularly Dieter Wellershoff who contributed significantly to the conceptualization of realistic writing with respect to the perception and literary transformation of reality. In 1969, Wellershoff in an essay published in the literary magazine *Akzente* engages with

the relationship between society and literature and concisely sums up the core of the debate that is ongoing to this day:

Aber wie verhält sie [Literatur] sich zu ihr [Gesellschaft], unter welchem Begriff kann man sie beschreiben? Sind ihre erfundenen Ereignisse und Vorgänge, ihre Assoziationsmuster, ihre Wortszenarien interpretierbar als Mimesis der gesellschaftlichen Praxis, oder, um mit Lukács zu reden, als Widerspiegelung der gesellschaftlichen Realität und der in ihr schon gegenwärtigen Zukunft, oder ist Literatur im Gegensatz dazu ein autonomer Bereich, mit eigenen selbsterfunden Regeln und Maßstäben, eine neue unabhängige zweite Wirklichkeit von Artefakten? (“Fiktion und Praxis” 17)

In order to avoid the dichotomy of literature as autonomous versus literature as related to social realities, Wellerhoff suggests introducing the term ‘simulation’ into the debate. “Literatur,” he writes, “ist in meinem Verständnis eine Simulationstechnik” (18). Similar to Zeh’s conceptualization of narration as a playing field and literature as a training unit, Wellerhoff describes literature as “Spielfeld für ein fiktives Handeln, in dem man als Autor und als Leser die Grenzen seiner praktischen Erfahrungen und Routinen überschreitet” (18), thus particularly highlighting the expansion of one’s perception textual products have to offer. The example Wellerhoff mentions for this appeal of literature are adventure and travel novels that, in his opinion, tend to maintain conventional views on reality and merely offer a form of escapism for the reader or convey new content in previously established categories.¹⁰⁵ The expansion of perception through literature Wellerhoff mentions can have an even deeper impact, though.

¹⁰⁵ Wellerhoff writes, “aber Abenteuer- und Reiseroman sind bloß extensive Überschreitungen der Lebenspraxis und bleiben in ihrer Sichtweise meist konventionell, sie bringen neuen Stoff in gewohnten Kategorien” (18).

Taking this idea one step further, Wellershoff claims that literature has the possibility to challenge, perturb, and potentially change the ways in which we perceive the extra-literary world. In his understanding, one central attribute of realistic literature is that it

vor allem die gewohnten Schemata der Erfahrung angreift und verändert. Sie versucht den Leser zu irritieren, ihm die Sicherheit seiner Vorurteile und gewohnten Handlungsweisen zu nehmen, sie macht ihm das scheinbar Bekannte unvertraut, das Eindeutige vieldeutig, das Unbewußte bewußt und öffnet ihm so neue Erfahrungsweisen. (“Fiktion und Praxis” 18-19)

In consequence, realistic literature is not mimetic because, instead of striving for an accurate representation of extra-literary reality, it aims at questioning or de-normalizing the way in which the reader perceives this reality. The bedrock for this understanding is a constructivist view of reality that presupposes that reality is not a fixed entity but rather the result of a cognitive construction. “Das menschliche Bewußtsein,” Wellershoff writes in his programmatic essay “Realistisch schreiben” in 1976, “ist nicht nur eine Widerspiegelung der Realität, sondern es ist deren Widerspiegelung in Form einer Konstruktion” (“Realistisch schreiben” 13). The way we perceive reality is therefore subject to a constant process of reconstruction and updating: “wir haben die Realität nicht ein für alle mal, sie muß immer wieder neu aktualisiert werden” (“Realistisch schreiben” 16). Accordingly, if realistic literature has an aspect of mimesis to it, it is reflecting or, rather, simulating this constant reconfiguration and adaptation of perception. For Wellershoff, it is a futile endeavour to determine realistic literature in terms of a fixed set of formal or content-related categories: “Realistische Literatur ist inhaltlich und formal nicht

festzulegen, denn sie erweitert dauernd ihren Aufmerksamkeitsbereich und ihre Darstellungsformen, sie ist eine unabschließbare Entdeckungsgreise” (“Realistisch schreiben” 16).

The constructivist view of reality Wellershoff describes in the late 1960s/mid-1970s finds its echo in Zeh’s reflections on how literature constructs reality and how reality itself is perceived in the early twenty-first century. In her poetics lecture, Zeh recounts how she is in the process of developing the first-person narrator Alice for her proposed novel *Treidel*. Zeh chooses to turn Alice into an unreliable narrator, a choice that Zeh justifies by connecting it to our perception of reality. “Sie [unzuverlässige Erzähler] passen zu unserem Weltbild,” Zeh writes, “dass die Wirklichkeit doch eher als eine Schichtung von subjektiven Perspektiven, Erzählungen und Erfindungen betrachtet denn als allgemeinverbindliche Angelegenheit” (*Treideln* 151-152). The perspective that reality is a subjective construct and cannot lay claim to being generally binding goes hand in hand with a remark Zeh makes in a previously quoted interview with *Neues Deutschland*. Here, Zeh asserts: “das Absolute gibt es nicht” (Wallrodt “Man muss schon”), and further confirms her outlook on reality as an unstable entity that, as Wellershoff has pointed out, is entirely dependent on individual construction and, as a result, interminable. Going back to Wellershoff’s concept of literature as a technique of simulation and Zeh’s concept of literature as a training unit, the effect literature can have on its readers is, once again, to challenge preconceptions and, furthermore, to simulate ways of thinking and acting that are not initially those of the reader. In Wellershoff’s words, “die Simulationstechnik der Literatur erlaubt es ihm [dem Leser], fremde Verhaltens- und Denkweisen in seinen Erfahrungsspielraum mit einzubeziehen, also weniger borniert zu sein, und in bezug auf den gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhang weniger normenkonform” (“Fiktion und Praxis” 19). Therefore, the function of literature first and foremost appears as exposing the reader to new perspectives that will, at least

potentially, impact or even alter his or her view on the sociopolitical realities of the reader's present.

One prominent example in *Corpus Delicti* where Zeh employs this mode of realistic writing is a chapter called "Wie die Frage lautet." Only two pages long, the chapter is one of the most central ones in the sense that it marks the moment when the novel's protagonist Mia Holl publicly turns from follower of the "METHODE" into declared opponent. Written in the form of a manifesto that is published in the state-controlled newspaper "Der gesunde Menschenverstand," "Wie die Frage lautet" consists of list of declarative sentences that all follow the same pattern: Mia declares that she refuses to trust the governmental system and its underlying ideology, following by a rationale for her distrust. The chapter begins with the sentence, "ich entziehe einer Gesellschaft das Vertrauen, die aus Menschen besteht und trotzdem auf der Angst vor dem Menschlichen gründet" (*Corpus Delicti* 186). In contrast to the rest of text, the chapter is written in the first person and every sentence begins with the first person pronoun "I." The effect this has on the reader is twofold. On the one hand, Zeh establishes a close connection between narrator and reader in that she merges the narrative with the recipient's perspective. Consequently, this technique forces the recipient to read Mia's declaration of independence from the state through his or her own eyes, bringing the first person perspective of the narrator and recipient into unison. As a result, sentences like "ich entziehe einem Recht das Vertrauen, das seine Erfolge einer vollständigen Kontrolle des Bürgers verdankt. Ich entziehe einem Volk das Vertrauen, das glaubt, totale Durchleuchtung schade nur dem, der etwas zu verbergen hat" (186) challenge the reader to question his or her own take on these statements very much in the way that Dieter Wellershoff describes. This is particularly the case because sentences like the two quoted above are identical to those used in contemporary discourses on surveillance of digital data justified

with the pretense to fight crime or, even more frequently, international terrorism. Instead of uncritically accepting these normalized assumptions, readers of *Corpus Delicti* are forced into a position to—at least for the time of reading—make the negation of said assumptions their own and thereby expanding their scope on these political issues. To stay within the medical and biological jargon that determines the backdrop of the novel, this mode of realistic writing and, in extension, literature can serve as an antidote against conformist and normative sociopolitical discourses.

With a simple linguistic sleight of hand, the declarative statement “Wie die Frage lautet?” can be transformed into a question and would then read “Wie lautet die Frage?” Neither Zeh nor *Corpus Delicti* deliver the answer, but a possible one could be how we want to live and what measures we have to take in order to prevent the undesirable future presented in Zeh’s anti-utopian text. Answering this question remains in the hands of the reader; the mode of realistic writing Zeh employs in *Corpus Delicti*, however, potentially delivers the cognitive tools that allow the reader to start working on it.

***Nullzeit*: Modes of Realistic Writing as Perception Change**

While some of the modes of realistic writing Zeh employs in *Nullzeit* work in a similar fashion as those analyzed above, the text expands these modes with regards to the fact that it draws attention to its own literaricity. It does so through the creation of doubt in the reader with respect to the intra-literary reality that both narrators of the text create. Published three years after *Corpus Delicti*, *Nullzeit* appears at first glance to be a step back from the overtly political content of its predecessor. Accordingly, some critics were irritated if not disappointed that Zeh did not

deliver what the reading public had come to expect from her at this point of Zeh's career. While Vladimir Balzer of *Deutschlandradio Kultur* bemoans the novel's "literarische Glattheit" and continues to state that both language and plot appear to be "allzu kalkuliert" ("Dreiecksgeschichte unter Wasser"), Hubert Winkels in the *Zeit* on the other hand commends Zeh's language specifically with regards to its realism: "Das [Zehs Beschreibungen der Tauchgänge] gibt kraftvolle realistische Stellen, eine Art Fachsprachenpoesie, die das ganze Buch durchzieht" ("Ein Mädchen"). Without specifically referencing them, Winkels refers to passages where the narrator uses technical jargon to describe scuba diving equipment that does not necessarily advance the plot of the novel, which is reminiscent of Hugo Aust's definition of "Detailrealismus:" "Realistisches Schreiben zeichnet sich durch eine Fülle von Detailinformationen aus, die mitgeteilt werden, ohne daß sie unbedingt zum Gang der Handlung gehören" (*Literatur des Realismus* 34). Despite this partial praise, though, Winkels in the end comes to a slightly more negative verdict due to his assessment that the text loses momentum at the end and spreads out the plot too bold and simple. "Am Ende haben wir es, wie so oft bei Juli Zeh," Winkels writes, "mit einer komplizierten Parabel zu tun, der die Lebensgeschichten und -programme der Figuren wie Bleistücke in den Tauchertaschen hängen, damit sie nicht nach oben treiben. Sie [Juli Zeh] hat es sich für ihre Fähigkeiten zu leicht gemacht" ("Ein Mädchen"). In his scathing review of *Nullzeit* in the *Tageszeitung*, Jörg Magenau makes no effort to conceal his disapproval of Zeh's assumed change of direction away from a clear political content: "Juli Zeh, die doch zu den politisch engagierten Autorinnen ihrer Generation gehört, scheint in 'Nullzeit' die Haltung ihres Helden zu teilen [...] und sich eine Auszeit in sommerlicher Kulisse zu gönnen" ("Psychothriller"). Contrary to Magenau's assessment, a more careful look at the novel reveals that it is far from being devoid of political content, the difference to *Corpus Delicti*

perhaps being that in *Nullzeit*, political discourses are negotiated a little deeper under the narration's surface. There is, however, truth to Magenau's words that the novel's geographical setting can be described as a "politikferne Urlaubsregion" ("Psychothriller"), even if not in the way that the critic uses the term. Rather than using the adjective "politikfern" to label the novel's setting—a volcanic island in the Atlantic Ocean only referred to as "die Insel," but easily deciphered as Lanzarote¹⁰⁶— it can be applied to protagonist Sven Fiedler.

Sven migrated to the island fourteen years before the plot of *Nullzeit* begins with the arrival of aspiring actress Jolanthe Augusta Sophie van der Pahlen, who goes by the name of Jola, and her partner, the rather unsuccessful author Theo Hast. Sven runs a scuba diving school on the island with his girlfriend Antje and has taken on Jola and Theo as exclusive customers for two weeks. Jola, who has risen to celebrity status via her starring role in a television series¹⁰⁷, is taking diving lessons to increase her chances of being cast for the role of diving pioneer Lotte Hass in the adaptation of her memoir *Ein Mädchen auf dem Meeresgrund* (1970), hoping to escape the light weight characters she has portrayed so far. Written from Sven's point of view, the novel recounts the events that unfold during the two weeks that the three spend together on the island and during their mutual diving lessons underwater. On the one hand, their relationship is based on the erotic attraction between Jola and Sven, who is fascinated with the actress. On the other hand, the triangular character configuration is heavily impacted by the rather sadomasochistic relationship Jola and Theo lead, fueled by Jola's humiliations of the author because he has not written a single word in a long time. In turn, Theo humiliates Jola because,

¹⁰⁶ The novel includes references to the towns Arrecife and Tinajo, furthermore the texts mentions César Manrique and his influence on the island's topography.

¹⁰⁷ The television series is called *Auf and Ab*, a clear reference to the popular, infamous, and long-running German series *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten*. The reference to GZSZ, as the series is commonly abbreviated, proves that Zeh uses subtle humor a lot more often than credited for, because if one applies the same abbreviation to the fictitious series *Auf und Ab*, it reads *AuA*, the onomatopoeic word used in German to denote pain.

from his point of view, her desperate efforts to break free from her soap opera career are futile. Over the course of the plot, the trio engage in a destructive *ménage à trois* that almost gets one of them killed and, in the end, instigates Sven to leave his island paradise lost.

Jola's aspirations to break free from constraints of her previous life are mirrored in Sven's motivation to leave Germany for the island in the first place. The humiliation he experiences during an oral exam before achieving his degree in law leads him to from this day forward label Germany "Kriegsgebiet" (Zeh *Nullzeit* 40) to which he cuts all ties. Sven's disgust with being permanently evaluated and judged results in a complete withdrawal from all affiliations with his native country: "Mit Deutschland, das ich seitdem 'das Kriegsgebiet' nannte, wollte ich nichts mehr zu tun haben. Als ich wenig später auf der Insel ein neues Leben begann, war 'Raushalten' das Fundament, auf dem ich meine Weltsicht erbaute" (40). While Sven leaves no doubt that he sees leaving Germany and his exaggerated individualism as a distinguishing trait, Theo is proof that Sven's attitude is not quite as exceptional as he would like to believe. On the contrary, in his acclaimed debut novel, Theo has reflected on emigration and that it is, at least potentially, a futile endeavor: "Auswandern, dachte er. Das ergäbe doch nur Sinn, wenn das Land, in das wir fliehen, nicht immer nur wir selbst wären" (27).¹⁰⁸ In addition to foreshadowing early on in the novel that Sven will eventually return to Germany, the narrative juxtaposes two characters that represent two diverging perspectives on the same topic: Theo, who maintains the point of view that there is no escape from oneself, and Sven, who at this point of the plot is convinced that emigration is indeed a way to detach oneself from sociopolitical entanglements.

¹⁰⁸ This quote from a fictitious novel echoes what Zeh has written about the assumed effects of travelling in her 2002 travelogue *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch*: "Immer meint man auf Reisen, sich völlig verändert zu haben. Dass nichts mehr ist, wie es war. Zu Hause wartet das alte Selbst im Sessel und bietet einen gierigen Empfang" (220-221).

The scuba diving instructor appears as a paradigm of the catchword adjective *politikverdrossen* that has had a discernible impact on political discourses in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century.¹⁰⁹ Broadly defined as a general and oftentimes rather diffuse fatigue with the workings of parliamentary democracies, the term was quickly normalized in the sense that it was widely accepted without necessarily being questioned itself. Juli Zeh, however, does not attune to the voices that decry a general *Politikverdrossenheit*, primarily because she believes the term is the result of a misconception. In her previously quoted essay “Auf den Barrikaden oder hinterm Berg,” she comes to a rather surprising conclusion regarding political apathy: “Es gibt sie [...] nicht. Das Problem beruht allein auf einem terminologischen Missverständnis. Gemeint ist nicht die Politik-, sondern die Parteienverdrossenheit” (“Auf den Barrikaden” 215). Similar to *Corpus Delicti*, *Nullzeit* is once again an example for Zeh’s strategy to represent sociopolitical discourses of her time and negotiate them through her characters, thus establishing a strong connection between the diegetic and non-diegetic world.

As mentioned above, Sven’s frustration with the setup of Germany’s society leads him to reject all associations with regards to his national background and instead start a new life on the island. Additionally, Sven expands this retreat to all interpersonal relationships as well, his still rather distanced liaison with his girlfriend Antje seemingly being the only exception. Notably, Sven prides himself with avoiding the very thing that led him to move to the island, namely judging others. In fact, he sees this behavior as the reason why his diving school is flourishing and he gets along well with his fellow-expatriates on this island: “Weil ich mir angewöhnt hatte, keine Urteile zu fallen,” he states at the beginning of the novel, “kam ich mit allen gut zurecht”

¹⁰⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of the term and its meaning for the sociopolitical discourse in Germany, see: Arzheimer, Kai. *Politikverdrossenheit. Bedeutung, Verwendung und empirische Relevanz eines politikwissenschaftlichen Begriffes*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002. Print.

(*Nullzeit* 9). However, the very next paragraph of the text undermines his self-assessment. While waiting at the airport for Jola and Theo, Sven scans the arriving tourists and points out his nearly flawless hit rate when it comes to guessing the tourists' nationality: "Ich hatte Übung im Erraten von Staatsangehörigkeiten. Deutsche erkannte ich mit einer Trefferquote von fast hundert Prozent" (9). The stark contradiction between Sven's claim that he does not judge others and his judging of the arriving tourist solely based on their physical appearance escapes Sven but, due to the close proximity of these passages, it does not escape the reader. Before Zeh even introduces her character in more detail, she furnishes Sven's self-image with clearly discernible fissures. From the very beginning, Zeh foreshadows the unreliability of her narrator(s), which is one of the narratological characteristics of *Nullzeit* and directly relates to modes of realistic writing discussed in this chapter.

The main narrative feature that instigates doubt about what really happens between the main characters is Jola's diary whose entries are inserted into Sven's main narrative at various points of the plot. The accordance between how Sven depicts events and how Jola writes about them in her diary decreases over the course of the novel in correlation to the rising tensions between the three main characters. One significant example of how Sven's and Jola's narrative differ from each other is an erotic encounter between the two that appears in two starkly different versions. During a diving trip without Theo, who is sick and did not join them, Sven in his account openly admits that he desires Jola: "Jola hingegen wollte ich so sehr, dass ich fast das Bewusstsein verlor" (97). Back on land, the two quickly undress and it is Jola who is presented as the agent in the scene. Sven, about to give in to his desire, stops before having intercourse with Jola, though: "Es ging. Es wäre gegangen. Aber etwas stimmte nicht. Es war die Art, wie sich Jola nach mir umdrehte. Ihr fragender Blick. Geil und aufreizend. Worauf wartest du. Sie

sah dabei wie eine Schauspielerin aus” (97). In Jola’s diary, the same scene ends with the two characters having sex, the only accordance being that Jola also describes their mutual desire as being inspired from their non-verbal understanding under water: “Zwei Wassertiere, die an Land kommen, um die Paarung zu vollziehen” (101-102). This non-verbal understanding is informed by Jola’s different perception of Sven that depends on whether she regards him above water or below: “An Land fällt es mir schwer, Sven ernst zu nehmen. [...] Aber unter Wasser ist er ein anderer Mensch. Falsch: ein anderes Wesen” (100). While this scene is of significance for the plot in that it strengthens the bond between Sven and Jola, it also marks the first time in the text when the unreliability of the narrators’ perspective comes unmistakably to the fore.

An unreliable narrator does not automatically equal a realistic mode of narration, though. Rather, I suggest to take into consideration that this scene—as well as those with diverging depictions of the action that follow—draws attention to the way *Nullzeit* creates diegetic reality and, at the same time, at how reliable this depiction is. In an analysis of *Spieltrieb* and *Corpus Delicti*, Thomas Weitin poses a similar question with respect to the relationship between literature and law. He writes, “die Leitfrage lautet nicht: können wir der erzählenden Instanz vertrauen, sondern: kann und will sie ihre Aussagen beherrschen – oder agiert sie bewusst oder gezwungenermaßen unsouverän und bedient sich dabei der Techniken des unzuverlässigen Erzählens?” (“Ermittlung der Gegenwart” 85, emphasis in original). With respect to *Nullzeit* and the novel’s two narrators, an answer is not hard to find. Neither is the reader able to trust Sven’s account of the story, nor is there any reason why the reader should rather believe in Jola’s perspective on what has happened instead. Both narrators, however, are authoritative in the sense that they provide the reader with their perspective in a manner that, if considered in isolation, is convincing. The reader’s doubt about Sven’s and Jola’s reliability is therefore created in the

moment in which the reader juxtaposes the narratives and is left in the field of tension between them. Similar to her narrative approach in *Corpus Delicti*, then, Zeh once again confirms that reality is “eine Schichtung von subjektiven Perspektiven” instead of being a “allgemeinverbindliche Angelegenheit” (*Treideln* 151-152). Arguably, *Nullzeit* demonstrates the literary technique of undermining the narrator’s reliability by adding a second, equally unreliable narrative voice, to an even greater extent than *Corpus Delicti* because the construction of diegetic reality lies at the core of the novel. The term construction leads back to Dieter Wellershoff’s elaborations on modes of realistic writing. “Das menschliche Bewußtsein,” he writes in “Realistisch schreiben,” “ist nicht nur eine Widerspiegelung der Realität, sondern es ist deren Widerspiegelung in Form einer Konstruktion” (13). Furthermore, Wellershoff highlights that our understanding of what is realistic or not is dependent on our presupposed notions that are repeatedly confirmed.¹¹⁰ Previously established knowledge or experience of the reader is therefore determined by Wellershoff as the benchmark for realistic writing. The ‘reality effect,’ to borrow Roland Barthes’ term, for Wellershoff lies not in a detailed representation, however, but in creating tension with said established prior knowledge: “Der Leser erfährt die Realitätshaltigkeit eines Werkes durch den Widerstand, den es seiner Vorerfahrung entgegensetzt” (17). With respect to the two narrators of the novel, this is precisely how *Nullzeit* implements this mode of realistic writing; in other words, the friction the reader experiences through the juxtaposition of Sven’s and Jola’s accounts direct the reception to how diegetic reality is created as well as how we tend to perceive reality in our everyday lives.

The text also highlights that the way we perceive reality is not purely individualistic but always stands in close relation to the world around us, a fact that Sven realizes at the climax of

¹¹⁰ See also page 14: “Ansichten der Wirklichkeit, die im gesellschaftlichen Handlungs- und Kommunikationssystem vorausgesetzt und bestätigt werden, gelten als realistisch” (“Realistisch schreiben”).

the novel. On his birthday, Sven undertakes a diving trip to a sunken ship off the coast of the island that has never been explored before. At the bottom of the ocean, after exploring the ship, he recognizes that the weeks he spent with Jola and Theo have had an impact on him that challenges his worldview of staying away from social commitments. “Da oben gab es keinen Ort mehr,” he states, “an den ich fliehen konnte. Die ganze Insel war ein Schlachtfeld. Ich konnte mich nicht mehr raushalten. Mein Lebensraum war vernichtet worden wie der einer aussterbenden Art” (*Nullzeit* 230). Quite literally, this passage speaks to the proverb that one can run but one cannot hide; Sven accepts that his credo to ‘stay out of it’ has been rendered obsolete. His new-found appreciation of the fact that emigration does not automatically lead to the anti-social peace and quiet he had been looking for is put to the test when, upon slowly moving back up to the surface, he notices an unconscious Theo, who had apparently been thrown into the water and left to drown by Jola. Faced with the decision to either let Theo drown or come to his rescue, Sven experiences an epiphany about who he had become in the years spent in isolation: “In diesem Augenblick geschah es. Ein winziger Moment, der mir zeigte, wer ich in den letzten vierzehn Jahren war” (236). After a brief moment of final hesitation, Sven decides to help Theo and, in a movement that is a literal rebirth for Theo and a symbolic one for Sven, both safely return to the surface of the Atlantic.

This resurfacing can not only be read with respect to Sven’s, for lack of a better word, resocialization, but as a poetological comment as well. Just like the scuba diving instructor acknowledges that life is defined by being engaged in social relations, the same relationality can be postulated for literature. In conjunction with and addition to the above, reading *Nullzeit* as a text that negotiates a variety of poetological questions with respect to modes of realistic writing is a fruitful project. Not surprisingly, Zeh commonly uses the struggling writer Theo as a

mouthpiece for these passages. In addition to reflections on the characteristics of the literary market the legitimacy of literary critics (see *Nullzeit* 55-56) that mirror Sven's discomfort with constantly being judged and assessed, the novel contains passages that more or less directly reflect on the possibilities of literature to represent the world. In her first diary entry, Jola harshly criticizes her partner Theo for his efforts to put his impressions during their first day on the island into words. "Die erhabene Ästhetik des Kargen! Alles klar, alter Mann," she writes, "entspann dich doch einfach mal. Die Welt wird nicht schöner, wenn du deine Poesie drüber kippst. Auch nicht größer, wichtiger, oder besser. An der Welt prallst du einfach ab" (21). Read on a poetological level, Jola denies any literary capability to adequately represent reality. For the context of Germany's *Bürgerlicher Realismus*, Sabina Becker defines literature as "ästhetische Codierung der Wirklichkeit" (*Bürgerlicher Realismus* 100), a coding that, according to Jola, fails not just out of her spite for her partner, but also because literature is not able to add something to reality. Theo's attempts to linguistically represent the characteristics of the island, particularly its geographical features, echo German literary debates of the nineteenth century when authors were negotiating the relationship between realism and idealism within the context of the then developing *Bürgerlicher Realismus*. In a nutshell, the discussion evolved around the question if it is the aim of art in general and literature in particular to, so to speak, get to the core of the matter and elevate objects and actions through artistic representation. "Ein solcher ist ein Idealist," Karl Lemcke writes in 1865, "ein Künstler, der das Reale bis zum Ideal zu verfolgen versteht. Er schafft das Bleibende, Unvergängliche, nie Alternde" ("Kunst und Ideal" 73). Seen against this backdrop, Theo appears to adhere to this idealistic strand of realistic literature, a strand that in Lemcke's opinion is in no way opposed to realism because an idealistic

representation is, after all, a realistic one.¹¹¹ According to Julius Hermann von Kirchmann, writing in 1868, it is even more and something that comes even closer to Theo's choice of vocabulary in his description of the island. "Die Idealisierung hat eine *reinigende* und eine *verstärkende* Richtung; jene beseitigt die bedeutungslosen und störenden Elemente des Gegenstandes; diese verstärkt die seelenvollen" ("Der Begriff der Idealisierung" 75, emphasis in original). It appears that it is this cleansing and enhancing quality of idealism that Jola bluntly rejects. What this short passage of *Nullzeit* emphasizes is that, no matter how elaborate or artistic our choice of words is—and Theo's "die erhabene Ästhetik des Kargen" (21) easily fits both categories—there are limits to representation; or, in simplified terms, no matter how big the words we are using, the world will always be bigger.

In addition to the passage quoted above, another statement by Theo sheds light on poetological questions. After his successful and critically acclaimed debut novel¹¹², Theo has not published a text in a long time. He has not been idle, either, but rather kept himself busy with the conceptualization of a voluminous social novel. "Ich [arbeite] an einem großen Gesellschaftsroman," he tells Sven, "ob in drei oder vier Bänden, ist noch nicht sicher" (Zeh *Nullzeit* 77). An ambitious undertaking to be sure, the reason for which Theo sees in the, from his point of view, sorry state of literary products of his colleagues: "Seit Jahren sehe ich den Kollegen zu, wie sie durch den Morast der eigenen Befindlichkeit waten, bis zur Erschöpfung bemüht, aus Matsch eine Skulptur zu formen. Ohne mich. Mir geht es ums große Ganze" (77). Descriptions of Zeh's work like those of Heinz-Peter Preußner who label her "eine politische

¹¹¹ He states, "es gibt keinen bedeutenden Realisten, der nicht Idealist wäre" ("Kunst und Ideal" 73.) unfortunately failing to name a few examples to cement his claim.

¹¹² In an intertextual echo resonating within Zeh's work, Theo's novel is titled "Fliegende Bauten" (*Nullzeit* 26). Within the diegetic time of *Nullzeit*, it was published in 2001, the same year Zeh published her debut *Adler und Engel*. In Zeh's second novel *Spieltrieb*, she had already introduced a fictitious novel by the title "Fliegende Bauten," with the difference that it was written by a young female author.

Autorin, [...] der es immer um die großen, philosophischen, die anspruchsvollen Themen geht” (“Juli Zeh”) are very close to Theo’s self-description, and it is therefore not hard to read Theo’s statement as a self-ironic insertion by Zeh, an author who is very much aware of her reputation within the literary market.¹¹³

Nonetheless, Theo’s statement in *Nullzeit* is also a comment on the state of contemporary German literature in the early twenty-first century. It is thinly veiled as an admittedly hyperbolic critique of texts that focus on individual sensitivity, a topic that in Theo’s understanding is quite literally not solid enough for artistic representation and leads to murky and shapeless results. Instead of committing himself to this kind of fruitless artistic endeavor, Theo concentrates on his own yet equally futile project for the ambitious plan to capture the realities of the still young century has yet to leave its conceptual stages. This passage, then, can be interpreted as looking for a middle ground between the two extremes. Rather than on the one hand exclusively focusing on the individual as an entity isolated from the world or, on the other hand, attempting to capture the zeitgeist of a century or represent it in its complexities, the poetological undercurrent of this passage appears as a call for literature that depicts individuals *in relation to* the complexities of their time. *Nullzeit* therefore can be described as a text that, arguably not surprisingly, honors this call through the depiction of protagonist Sven’s indifference towards politics discussed above. Characteristically for Zeh’s fictional output, the novel has an open ending. The reader learns that Sven has sold his equipment and closed his scuba diving school with the declared intention to return to the “war zone” Germany. Whether or not Sven truly rejoins society including all its

¹¹³ With respect to the term *Gesellschaftsroman*, reality has caught up with fiction. Zeh’s novel *Unterleuten*, published in March 2016, is advertised on her website with the tag line “Der neue große Gesellschaftsroman von Juli Zeh” by the author’s new publishing house Luchterhand (*juli-zeh.de*).

interpersonal, social, and political struggles, at the end remains an open question the reader is prompted to answer for her- or himself.

Swinging Back the Pendulum

In the context of analyzing the echoes of *Bürgerlicher Realismus* in Juli Zeh's work, I have quoted her statement that literary realism is "im Grunde die einzige Form, unter deren Bedingungen Literatur in Deutschland rezipiert wird" (*Treideln* 132). In addition to this, Zeh postulates that, again from the receptive point of view, a critique of sociopolitical realities is an integral component of writing and the author accordingly forced to become a "Zwangsvisionär" (132). Despite the negative connotation of the word "Zwangsvisionär" and the impression Zeh creates in her statement that she does not necessarily see herself as belonging to the tradition of literary realism, her text fulfills both conditions—a literary representation of the non-diegetic world through modes of realistic writing and a concurrent critique of sociopolitical conditions—with remarkable ease. Arguably, Zeh's narratives include more echoes from different traditions of literary realism than she is willing to admit. All of her novels are characterized by balancing form and content in the sense that Zeh is aware that a literary representation of the lived-in world is at all times an aesthetic construct with a strong poetic component, a realization that can be traced back to debates and literary programs of the nineteenth century. Devoid of poetic idealization characteristic for *Bürgerlicher Realismus* that resulted in a self-imposed limitation with respect to the author's choice of topics, Zeh is conscious of the fact that a selection of certain phenomena guides the reception of her works. In other words, when she in *Corpus Delicti* polishes the borders of everyday life by highlighting and magnifying problems of state

surveillance and the ensuing loss of privacy, the text does not draw attention to the sheen of the borders of everyday life after they have been polished but rather to the smudge that is left behind on the cloth. In this fashion, Zeh challenges her readers to engage with the topics she addresses in her texts and urges them to develop their own point of view. Her narratives achieve this goal by not providing closure for the characters, thereby leaving the final verdict on their fate and further development in the hands of the reader. This literary technique is informed by Zeh's view on reality as an unstable and far from objective entity that finds its narrative equivalent in her texts. Similar to Dieter Wellershoff's approach towards realistic writing as a technique of simulation that is equally influenced by a constructivist worldview, Zeh challenges her audience's experience and perception on the issues she thematizes in her texts by questioning normalized attitudes as well as providing her readers the discursive instruments to reformulate their own positions with respect to the problems addressed in novels like *Corpus Delicti*. The constructivist worldview is also of importance for *Nullzeit* in that the text presents two perspectives on the plot of the novel by having two narrators, Sven and Jola. In light of the fact that both versions of the action are necessarily subjective, Zeh draws attention to the way our reality is perceived and highlights the novel's character as a literary construction of diegetic reality. Like in the case of *Corpus Delicti*, *Nullzeit* does not offer closure for the characters nor is there any indication of which version of the story is the "real" or "true" one. Once again, the final verdict lies in the hands of the book's audience.

To conclude, in contrast to dominant strands of literature of the 1980s, Zeh swings back the pendulum from the focus on individuals who live in hermetic worlds to individuals who stand in close interrelation with their broader social environment. This is exemplified in the protagonist of *Corpus Delicti* who explicitly attacks the governmental system as well as in the

protagonist of *Nullzeit* who wishes to distangle himself from all social, political, and emotional commitments, but eventually realizes that he cannot uphold his self-imposed isolation from the world around him. Through the inclusion of Theo, the struggling author working on a social novel, Zeh furthermore introduces a poetological component into the narrative. While Theo's attempts to capture society in its totality are failing, he also rejects to solely focus on individuals who exist in a social vacuum. The novel in which this character appears can arguably be read as the middle ground between both extremes, in other words a narrative firmly anchored in the non-diegetic realities of its time that focuses on an individual who is closely bound to his sociopolitical surroundings.

The aspect that Zeh's novels are tied to the time of their creation ultimately leads back to Theodor Fontane's statement about the goal of the modern or contemporary novel. Zeh's novels can be read as 'Zeitromane' in that they not only represent the time of their creation through literary means but, additionally, are comments on the sociopolitical issues they address. In this sense, they are *contemporary* in the truest sense of the word. However, the question what contemporary German-language literature encompasses and what it can achieve is—with a few notable exceptions—a comparatively blank space in research and will therefore be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Literature of, in, and on its Time – Re-conceptualizing Contemporary German-Language Literature

In the previous chapters, I have focused on Juli Zeh's poetics, her role as public intellectual, and modes of realistic writing she employs in her narratives in order to position her in the broader context of contemporary German-language literature in the twenty-first century as well as to underscore her distinctive position within it. With this in mind, in this chapter I turn to a re-conceptualization of what contemporary German-language literature means in the present. Using Zeh's work as an example, I suggest adding a model to the body of research that has been conducted on this topic that, while certainly being inspired by previous attempts, proposes a shift in focus from emphasizing historical benchmarks like the year 1989 towards intra-textual characteristics that mark a narrative as contemporary. Despite the fact that the field of German Studies dedicates a significant amount of attention and time to contemporary literature through research¹¹⁴, scholarship devoted to a definition of what contemporary literature encompasses is surprisingly scarce. Definitions of the term "contemporary literature," if they exist at all, frequently focus on historical benchmarks like the years 1945 or 1989 in order to separate the past from the present moment. While historical watersheds will still have a place in the conceptualization of contemporary literature that I propose, they move more to the margins of the definition because they provide more often than not extra-textual reference points instead of intra-textual characteristics. In other words, while definitions of contemporary literature

¹¹⁴ Predominantly, collected volumes on contemporary literature, to some of which I will return in my analysis, bear titles that are indicative of their temporal scope. See for example *The Novel in German since 1990* (2011), edited by Stuart Taberner; *After the Berlin Wall: Germany and Beyond* (2011), edited by Katharina Gerstenberger and Jana Evans Braziel; or *German Literature in a New Century* (2008), edited by Katharina Gerstenberger and Patricia Herminhouse.

frequently use extra-textual frameworks and apply them to literary products, I suggest to analyze selected texts by Juli Zeh with regards to intra-textual markers that allow me to characterize them as being contemporary.

I will build this reconfiguration of contemporary German-language literature around three prepositions. These prepositions are conceptualized in close relation to the historical time in which each respective text was written. I will define Zeh's texts as being *of* their time in the sense that they are influenced by discourses pertinent at the moment of their production. The point here is that her texts do not exist in a vacuum unfazed by social, political, economic, or cultural debates but rather are influenced by these discourses even if the texts do not explicitly reference them. To illustrate this, I will analyze Zeh's travelogue *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* and her novel *Nullzeit* against the backdrop of debates surrounding transnationalism and transnational literature, a concept that looms large in the background of both texts but is touched upon only indirectly in the narratives themselves.

I will then turn to define her texts as being *in* their time in the sense that Zeh's narratives are firmly situated in the time in which they were written. Through the analysis of selected passages from Zeh's second novel *Spieltrieb*, I will investigate how Zeh anchors her narratives in the contemporary moment through explicit and discrete references to historical events, in the example of *Spieltrieb* the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. and the Erfurt high school shootings in 2002. It is important to highlight that, while these references situate the narrative in their time of production, they also go beyond the contemporary moment through more general reflections that are not exclusively specific to the beginning of the new millennium. In other words, Zeh's texts are in their time but they are by no means stuck in it. The latter is all the more important because I argue that it is precisely this going beyond the

moment of textual production that bestows contemporary literature with what could be called longevity or staying power. On account of making statements that pertain to the contemporary moment while at the same time transcending it, Zeh's text move from being "merely" timely to timeless.

Lastly, I will define Zeh as a representative of literature that is *on* its time. In the case of Juli Zeh, this last point is of special importance because it can be understood in a two-fold manner. Firstly, she writes literature on its time in the sense that Zeh comments on current sociopolitical debates through her characters. Secondly, and this is of equal importance, she writes texts on their time in her role as public intellectual as outlined in chapter three of this dissertation. In the section dedicated to literature on its time, I will once again focus on Zeh's novel *Corpus Delicti* and highlight how she uses different timelines within the text to comment on discourses central to the first decade of the twenty-first century while simultaneously drawing historical connections between the Early Modern period, the present, and the future setting of the novel. The effect of bringing together mechanisms of marginalization and ostracizing that span a period of several centuries is once again proof that the novel does not exclusively linger in the contemporary moment but rather transcends it and ensures its continuous impact and relevance. To contextualize my own re-conceptualization of what contemporary literature can mean and achieve in the twenty-first century, though, I will begin by revisiting discourses on the state of contemporary German-language literature in the German feuilleton as well as previous attempts of defining this remarkably elusive term.

Inventories I: Discourses on Contemporary German-Language Literature

“Die Literaturkritik,” Michael Braun writes in his study *Die deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur* (2010), “markiert die typisch deutsche Trennlinie zwischen Literaturwissenschaft und Gegenwartsliteratur” (19), thus highlighting that discourses on contemporary German-language Literature are more likely to be found in the feuilleton sections of major German newspapers than in academic writing.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, this may not be all too surprising when considering that it is part of the professional duties of a literary critic to familiarize audiences with new publications and that these reviews are published in great temporal proximity to the publication date of any given literary text.¹¹⁶ To put it in another way, after the publication of a literary text, the critic writing for the feuilleton is the first authority of the literary public that critically engages with the text and forms a fairly immediate node between contemporary literature and its potential readership. When using the Germany feuilleton as a measure for contemporary German-language literature, one cannot help but to think that contemporary literature not only is currently in a lamentable state, but has been for the past fifty years. “Die letzten Jahre von weltliterarischem Rang, die im deutschsprachigen Raum erschienen,” Frank Schirmmacher wrote in his 1989 essay “Idyllen in der Wüste,” “stammen von der Generation der heute Sechzigjährigen” (16).¹¹⁷ According to Schirmmacher’s verdict, literature of the late 1980s is—particularly in comparison to Germany’s glorified literary past—characterized by a

¹¹⁵ Braun explicitly bemoans this lack of scholarship on contemporary literature: “An wissenschaftlichen Monographien über die Gegenwartsliteratur herrscht nach wie vor Mangel” (19). It is crucial to emphasize that Braun is talking about the German context; as indicated in this chapter, the situation in the field of North American German Studies is considerably different.

¹¹⁶ To give but one example, Zeh’s novel *Unterleuten* was published on March 8, 2016, Jörg Magenau’s review of the novel in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* appeared only twelve days later on March 20.

¹¹⁷ Without specifically mentioning them, Schirmmacher is referring to authors like Günter Grass and Martin Walser who were both 62 in 1989.

“Talentschwäche der nachwachsenden Schriftsteller” (21). Whether or not one agrees with this assessment—Volker Hage, for one, responded to Schirmacher’s essay with a much more positive evaluation¹¹⁸—the fact remains that the majority of German literary critics before and after Schirmacher’s time appear to be rather disappointed with the overall shape of contemporary German literature, and this regardless of what specific “contemporary” we are talking about. Twenty years after the literary debate of the late 1980s, for example, weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* issued a three part-series “Zur Lage der Literatur,” as Iris Radisch called it in the first contribution in 2010.¹¹⁹ With the notable exception of the final article of the series written by Ina Hartwig, things were still looking bleak. Radisch was particularly concerned with the language that authors used and comes to the conclusion that German-language literature at the end of the first decade of the new millennium is predominantly characterized by an “aktuelle Sprachohnmacht,” (“Zur Lage”) leading to what Radisch labels “Erzählen in niedriger Flughöhe” (“Zur Lage”). Stylistically, the result of this kind of narration is an “Ernüchterungsstil” (“Zur Lage”), which Radisch defines as accessible, unobtrusive, and, in the end, conventional. In the second part of the series, Ursula März shifts the focus from the way texts are written to the question of what content they are conveying to the reader. She mainly laments that the majority of contemporary German-language literature around 2010 was only tangentially interested in the realities that inspired it. Instead, März determined looking back into the past as being strikingly characteristic: “Nostalgie, jener Historismus, in dem Friedrich Nietzsche ein Kennzeichen restaurativer Epochen sah, dürfte eine Tendenz der Literatur sein, wie wir sie seit ein, zwei Jahrzehnten kennen” (“Ewige Mittelstandsparty”). In addition to this retrospective look, for

¹¹⁸ See: Hage, Volker. “Zeitalter der Bruchstücke.”

¹¹⁹ See Schöll and Bohley “Das erste Jahrzehnt” 9-11 for their reading of the series.

März primarily represented in family chronicles¹²⁰, she is irritated with the predominance of middle class protagonists, which, in turn, appears to rob literature of topics that are unrelated to the concerns of this particular social class: “Literatur wird mit Vorliebe, was den Bewahrungsbedürfnissen der Mittelschichten, pessimistisch gesagt, was ihrer reduzierten Zukunftsbereitschaft entspricht” (“Ewige Mittelstandsparty”). In sum, both Irisch Radisch and Ursula März detect a lack in what to a large extent constitutes literature in terms of its production, namely form and content. As Johanna Bohley and Julia Schöll point out in their reading of the debate, however, the quality standards Radisch calls for—an aesthetically ambitious form that simultaneously transports “welthaltige, gesellschaftlich relevante Erkenntnisse” (“Das erste Jahrzehnt” 11)—in themselves do not correspond with the originality the critic demands from literary products. With respect to März’s point of critique of the choice of topics in contemporary works of fiction, she fails to elaborate what exactly she thinks will be gained with the inclusion of “Gangstermilieu, Ermittlungs- und Justizbehörden, Beerdigungsinstitute, Haftanstalten” (“Ewige Mittelstandsparty”), especially because some of these topics are covered by genre fiction that evidently has no place in her understanding of contemporary literature.

In the *Zeit*-series, Ina Hartwig is the only critic who comes to a positive assessment of the state of German-language literature around 2010. “Längst erfüllt die Literatur ihre genuine Aufgabe,” Hartwig writes, “Seismograf zu sein. Sie liefert Bilder, die über den Moment hinaus bestehen und die mehr wagen, auch mehr wagen müssen, als der klügste Leitartikel; Bilder, die ins Herz der unbekannteren Gesellschaft treffen, in der wir leben” (“Bilder für jetzt”). Notably, Hartwig repeatedly labels the texts she discusses “Zeitbilder,” thus going back to the formula

¹²⁰ März mentions Judith Zander’s *Dinge, die wir heute sagten* (2010) and Sabrina Janesch’s *Katzenberge* (2010) as but two of many examples.

Theodor Fontane used in 1875 when he discussed what the contemporary novel of the nineteenth century was supposed to accomplish. Equally significant, however, is a rather surprising demand that Hartwig identifies as a condition for these *Zeitbilder* to be effective: “Man muss allerdings bereit sein, als Leser (und als Kritiker) selbst zum Deuter zu werden, [...] um den Interpretationsangeboten zwischen den Zeilen auf die Schliche zu kommen” (“Bilder für jetzt”). At first sight, this request appears to state the obvious as both reader and literary critic are by definition interpreter of the text with which they engage. With respect to the literary critic, however, Hartwig’s comment can be read as a harsh critique of her own trade. The critical reception of Juli Zeh’s work offers at least two examples to illustrate why Hartwig would even consider reminding her colleagues of what is arguably the core of their work: the interpretation of textual production. With regards to *Corpus Delicti*, Rainer Moritz in his review of the novels, as cited above, bemoans the “bescheidenen literarischen Mittel” (“Unverträgliche Immunsysteme”) that dictate the novel without considering that a reduced and concise language might indeed be best suited for a novel that puts greater emphasis on content than on form. Likewise, in his review of *Nullzeit*, Jörg Magenau heavily criticises the absence of political content¹²¹ while at the same time completely ignoring the politically charged subtext of the novel. Returning to Ina Hartwig’s essay in *Die Zeit*, one gets the impression that a strand of literary criticism that has forgotten what its objective is—in Hartwig’s words, “den Interpretationsangeboten zwischen den Zeilen auf die Schliche zu kommen” (“Bilder für

¹²¹ See: Magenau, Jörg. “Psychothriller ohne Psyche.”

jetzt”)—contributes in no small part to the dominantly poor depiction of German contemporary literature in the feuilleton.¹²²

Even literary criticism on an academic level is not immune to the temptation of joining the choir that bemoans the shape of contemporary German-language literature. In a recent publication in *Merkur*, literary scholar Ingo Meyer in at times vitriolic language sweepingly taunts the state of contemporary German-language literature, more specifically the state of the novel. Meyer diagnoses “Verfallstendenzen” (Meyer “Niedergang des Romans?” 965) and principally reiterates the oft-repeated debate evolving around the two apparently irreconcilable poles form and content.¹²³ One section of Meyer’s article is dedicated to the works of Juli Zeh that he analyzes in both exceptionally and exclusively negative terms. At the beginning of this section, Meyer states that “Stefan Gärtner hat das intellektuelle Porträt von Juli Zeh [...] bereits geliefert,” (969) thereby referring to an article published in Germany’s leading satire magazine *Titanic* in 2006.¹²⁴ This starting point sets the tone for Meyer’s own engagement with Zeh’s work that, curiously, is of equal subtlety as the “intellectual portrait” published in the *Titanic*. In light of Meyer’s approach to making assumptions about Zeh’s creative process that are treated as fact¹²⁵ as well as making factually erroneous statements about her novels¹²⁶, one is tempted to

¹²² In *Treideln*, Juli Zeh launches her own attack against literary critics. “Früher glaubte ich,” she writes, “Literaturkritik sei so etwas wie eine Partnerschaftsvermittlung zwischen Mensch und Buch. Dazu würde als Grundhaltung allerdings ein wenig mehr Liebe zur Literatur gehören. In der zitierten Form [Zeh bezieht sich auf eine Reihe von Verrissen ihrer Romane] ist Kritik ein Versuch der Literaturverhinderung” (122).

¹²³ The death bell for literature has been tolled over and over again, and it is therefore not surprising that already in 1968 Hans Magnus Enzensberger appeared slightly weary when he wrote, “Jetzt also hören wir es wieder läuten, das Sterbeglöcklein für die Literatur” (“Gemeinplätze” 441).

¹²⁴ See: Gärtner, Stefan. “Die Allerunausstehlichste.” *Titanic-Magazin.de*. May 2005. Web. 2 March 2016.

¹²⁵ He states, “wer mehr als eines dieser Bücher gelesen hat, bemerkt sofort ihren Entstehungsprozess, das jeweilige Handlungsgerüst, das das Ideenkonglomerat transportieren muss, wird ganz offensichtlich am Schreibtisch als Organigramm und dann wohl nach Zeitplan prompt exekutiert” (“Niedergang” 969).

¹²⁶ Meyer writes, “oftmals sind die Heldinnen toughe, fleißige Karrierefrauen, ihres Zeichens Naturwissenschaftlerinnen oder Juristinnen” (“Niedergang” 970). The only character in all of Zeh’s novels that fits this description is biologist Mia Holl from *Corpus Delicti*. The judges named Sophie from *Spieltrieb* and *Corpus Delicti* are not justifiably to be labelled “Heldinnen” because they are secondary characters.

dismiss Meyer's essay as an exercise in polemics without significant analytical merit. However, at the end of his essay, Meyer makes a demand that deserves more attention than his critique of Zeh and her colleagues. What is missing, according to Meyer, is a contemporary answer to Fontane's question "was soll der moderne Roman?" "Soweit ich aber sehe," he writes, "mag keiner mehr im Alleingang dazu ansetzen, die Prämissen der Gattung aktuell zu bestimmen oder auch nur zur Disposition zu stellen" (977). Meyer does not undertake this either, his essay, however, suggests that for him a look back to the "Errungenschaften der Moderne" (977) would prove to be fruitful, even if he is stuck for an answer. In the end, his critique of the novel is similar to the previously quoted article by Iris Radisch who had lamented the aesthetically unsatisfactory language that dominates contemporary German fiction. With regards to Meyer's call for a "Metareflexion des gesamten Gattungsgefüges," (977) the question remains how meaningful a definition of the novel with a claim to universality can possibly be within the differentiated literary market of the twenty-first century. Rather than asking what the novel *should* do, I suggest to ask what the novel—and literature in general—*can* do. This is not to give in to the legacies of the oft-lamented postmodern arbitrariness, but rather to acknowledge the fact that authoritative definitions run the risk of being more restrictive than the subject matter they attempt to delineate, therefore leading the debate into a cul-de-sac instead of towards new, productive directions.

Inventories II: Definitions of Contemporary German-Language Literature

The above analysis of contemporary German literature in the feuilleton has demonstrated that the overall impression one gets is one of crisis with regards to content, language, form, and genre.

The most striking feature about these discourses, however, is the fact that a definition of the term “contemporary German literature”—in other words, a definition of the very subject matter of the discourses—is curiously absent. In his 2002 study *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner writes about the terms private and public that they “seem to be preconceptual, almost instinctual,” (23) and the same appears to be true for contemporary German literature as well. If at all, literary critics appear to define contemporary literature by exclusion in the sense that they focus on the many perceived shortcomings of literary products without first outlining what their analytical framework for the apparent failures of contemporary German-language literature encompasses.

Notably, academic literary research also appears to have, to borrow Warner’s words again, a ‘preconceptual’ and instinctual understanding of the term contemporary literature. Particularly in North American German Studies, there have been quite a few collected volumes in the first decade of the new millennium that focus on explorations of the present literary landscape in Germany. Instead of engaging with a definition of the term contemporary literature itself, though, the merit of these volumes is that they are dedicated to what Katharina Gerstenberger and Patricia Herminghouse name in the subtitle to their co-edited volume *German Literature in a New Century* (2008): “Trends, Traditions, Transitions, Transformations” (“German Literature” 1). Gerstenberger and Herminghouse in their introduction highlight that the US background of the majority of the contributors necessarily shapes the selection of topics, stating that “the sorts of contemporary literature that American Germanists seek out [...] do not correspond directly to what most Germans are actually reading” (2). With that in mind, the volume aspires to present predominantly works of “a younger generation, [...] the role of women and minorities on the cultural scene” (2). Gerstenberger and Herminghouse offer an overview of

Germany's cultural and literary landscape that is concise yet rich in content, but do not attempt a definition of the term contemporary literature that potentially could have paid respect to the trends and transformations to which they refer in their subtitle. Lyn Marven and Stuart Taberner in their co-edited volume *Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century* (2011), choose a slightly different approach while, as the title suggests, equally focusing on younger authors like Terézia Mora, Clemens Meyer, Saša Stanišić, or Alina Bronsky. Each chapter is dedicated to one of more works by one author and consequently offers a kaleidoscopic perspective on the literary landscape of contemporary Germany that is preceded by an introduction that summarizes relevant literary currents ranging from memory discourses to the Turkish and Eastern turn. Notably, Lyn Marven at the very beginning of her introduction emphasizes that German literary fiction of the twenty-first century is "distinctly globalized and transnational in outlook" ("Introduction" 1). Again, while this is an important addition, the volume also does not provide a delineation of the term contemporary literature, opting for a mosaic overview instead that is informed by literary currents and trends. A narrower approach towards contemporary German fiction is chosen in the volume *German Women's Writing in the Twenty-First Century* (2015), edited by Hester Baer and Alexandra Merley Hill. As the title suggests, the volume focuses solely on the works of female authors like Antje Rávic Strubel, Helene Hegemann, or Judith Schalansky and offers an important if particularized perspective on the landscape of contemporary German-language literature. Given the concentration on women's writing, it is not surprising that this volume also only indirectly contributes to a conceptualization of contemporary literature by analyzing the works of diverse female authors. Ultimately, then, the volumes mentioned above offer explorations of contemporary German-language literature that vary in scope and focus and adequately represent the complexity of any

given literary market—but are unified by the fact that they steer clear of any direct efforts to expand or even pin down a clear definition of contemporary literature. None of these volumes fail to achieve what they set out to do; on the contrary, they are important and crucial additions to the research on the cultural and literary scene in Germany in the twenty-first century. My point is rather to highlight that these volumes also operate with a preconceptual understanding of the subject they seek to explore, leaving the term contemporary literature in a peculiar definitional void.

Academic literary criticism has of course undertaken attempts to delineate the “often used but not precisely defined term” (Herrmann “How Does Transnationalism” 19) to make it operational for its purposes. The entry in the *Metzler Lexikon Literatur* proves to be a good starting point. Not surprisingly, the category time in the form of the relational term “contemporary” takes centre stage in the lexicon entry. It states that contemporary literature is “ein relationaler Begriff, der eine Teilmenge des Gesamtbereichs ‘Belletristik’ bezeichnet. Seine Bestimmung ist abhängig davon, was der Betrachter als seine Gegenwart erfährt und wie er ‘Gegenwart’ definiert” (Bluhm “Gegenwartsliteratur” 267). The entry goes on to argue that the contemporary is commonly demarcated from history with the help of sociopolitical watersheds—for the German context, pertinent examples, the first three of which are in fact mentioned and legitimized in the lexicon, would be the years 1945, 1968, 1989, and 2000.¹²⁷ While a definition like this is useful with respect to the extra-literary background of textual production in the sense that literature more often than not stands in a close relation with dates like the ones listed above,

¹²⁷ While the first three dates reference specific points in (not only) Germany history with significant transformational power—the end of World War II, the transformations of the late 1960s, and the fall of the Berlin Wall—the year 2000 is rather included because of its symbolic meaning as the beginning of a new millennium. Johanna Bohley and Julia Schöll, for example, begin their collected volume *Das erste Jahrzehnt* by stating their “These, die Jahrtausendwende als ‘Stunde Null’ aufzufassen, in deren Zuge Literatur mit neuen Inhalten und narrativen Verfahren bestückt wird” (“Das erste Jahrzehnt” 9).

the fact remains that it is not concerned with categories or features that are exclusively immanent to the literary texts of a respective contemporary period. Additionally, what a definition like this excludes completely is a transnational perspective that is characteristic for a significant number of contemporary German-language novels. Within Juli Zeh's body of work, *Adler und Engel*, for example, transcends the German-national framework by using the Balkan Wars from the early 1990s and has little to do with the sociopolitical events that shaped Germany in 1989/1990. Similarly, *Nullzeit* arguably makes substantial statements about life in Germany through its protagonist who disassociates himself from sociopolitical entanglements but is neither set within German borders nor does it contain any markers that would allow for a definite determination of its temporal setting. In sum, entries like the one in the *Metzler Lexikon Literatur* serve as a good point of departure but at the same prove to be insufficient in that they either omit aspects like the increasing transnational character of contemporary German literature or are too limited in the sense that they determine specific historical dates—regardless of how important they might be—as extra-literary markers that invariably are supposed to shape intra-literary worlds.

Michael Braun has developed a more refined conceptualization of contemporary German literature. At the outset of his study *Die deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur*, he mentions three criteria that define the term: “Wandelbarkeit,” “Zeitgenossenschaft von Autor, Kritiker und Leser,” and “Zukunftsorientierung” (14-15). The mutability of contemporary literature refers to the relativity of the term “contemporary” itself, denoting the fact that the contemporary moment is always defined in opposition to what is no longer considered to be contemporary. The contemporaneity of author, critic, and reader, on the other hand, denotes the simple fact that all three live at the same time and therefore perceive “die neue Literatur als Ausdruck [ihrer] Zeit” (14). Lastly, the future-orientation of contemporary literature, curiously, designates the recognition of literary

production as being part of contemporary literature in retrospect.¹²⁸ In addition to establishing these three criteria, Braun understands the term “Gegenwartsliteratur” in a two-fold fashion in that the contemporary can both be object and subject of literature. As *object* of literature, the contemporary is “die Zeit, in der die Gegenwartsliteratur entsteht” (15), regardless of whether or not the texts explicitly address the contemporary. “Literatur in der Gegenwart” (15), as Braun defines it, includes all texts irrespective of their temporal setting, i.e. historical novels or science fiction are also considered to be part of contemporary literature. As *subject* of literature, the contemporary is treated “als Impuls, als Motiv und als Thema” (15) of literary texts and, accordingly, contemporary literature seen from this angle would be considered to be “Literatur über die Gegenwart” (15).¹²⁹ Significantly, the latter aspect of contemporary literature as being on the contemporary introduces an element into the definition that concentrates on intra-textual characteristics on the level of content. Braun’s model offers an interesting approach that expands the notion of contemporary literature with respect to the criteria mutability, contemporaneity, and future-orientation, but it is especially the last category that, in my reading, does not appear substantial enough to justify turning it into a necessary component of a definition of what contemporary literature encompasses.

In addition, it still for the most part disregards the above mentioned increasingly transnational character of texts. With respect to transnationalism, the conceptualization of contemporary German-language literature has, however, been refined very recently. In her contribution to the volume *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature*

¹²⁸ The example Braun gives for the future-orientation of contemporary literature is the work of Reinhard Jirgl. Unable to publish his texts in the GDR, Jirgl entered the literary market after 1989 and was only then recognized as an author of contemporary literature. Braun states, “Man kann es der Gegenwartsliteratur manchmal erst später ansehen, dass sie sozusagen eine Literatur der Gegenwart gewesen ist” (15).

¹²⁹ In my re-conceptualization of contemporary literature, I will also focus on literature *in* and *on* its time; however, I use the prepositions differently than Braun.

(2015), Elisabeth Herrmann defines the term against the backdrop of “the changing conditions of literature in times of globalization” (“How Does Transnationalism” 19). Instead of solely focusing on “temporal, spatial, and linguistic parameters,” (21) Herrmann emphasizes the importance of a “joint horizon of experience” (22) within a community that would serve as the basis of an understanding of contemporary literature. Rather than to dispose of the components space, time, and a shared language altogether, however, Herrmann proposes to add this common ground as a defining feature. She writes:

Determining factors for this common denominator are first of all a common history and historical context, or more specifically, a collectively recognized benchmark in history to which the current self-definition of a nation or culture refers in its collective memory. Furthermore it is the current political, societal, and cultural developments, changes, and turnarounds that influence and shape our present. (22)

The temporal markers with strong symbolic meaning for a culture’s identity that already appeared in the definition in the *Metzler Lexikon Literatur* are introduced as crucial for the background of Herrmann’s definition as well. In addition to this historical component, however, Herrmann emphasizes the importance of current societal discourses as they are equally relevant for the way we perceive the times in which we live. Once the commonly shared horizon of experience is set in place, Herrmann continues to delineate contemporary literature by stating that it

proves to be the product of a community or collective—which can, but does not necessarily, refer to a nation—articulating itself and the topics of its time in multiple and various ways. In this respect, contemporary literature comes to serve as a means of identity formation that refers to a specific time and collective center of reference, the latter of which can be located within or across nations. (22-23)

Significantly, this definition is concerned with what is missing from the lexicon entry, namely the fact that writing in the twenty-first century is to a lesser extent dependent on the national background of the author or even on his or her linguistic background. In addition, contemporary German-language literature is by no means exclusively set within German national borders but instead prone to travel far and wide.¹³⁰ Therefore, Elisabeth Herrmann's definition of contemporary literature productively expands the general understanding of the term, not the least with respect to literature's role as a means to construct the identity of a community no longer necessarily bound by national borders.

What neither the *Metzler Lexikon Literatur*, Michael Braun¹³¹ nor Herrmann take into account, though, is the receptive side of literature. In other words, the mechanisms of the literary market, to a large extent the most significant determining factor with respect to the public visibility of any given author, plays no role in these definitions. In light of this, it is arguably not too surprising that the literary market is pivotal for the definition of contemporary literature Zeh herself delivers in her poetics lecture *Treideln*. She writes,

¹³⁰ In addition to Zeh's novels *Adler und Engel* and *Nullzeit*, further examples would include Judith Herrmann's *Nichts als Gespenster* (2003), Ilija Trojanow's *Der Weltensammler*, Daniel Kehlmann's *Ruhm* (2009), and Terézia Mora's *Das Ungeheuer* (2013).

¹³¹ Braun dedicates a whole chapter to "Gegenwartsliteratur im Kulturbetrieb" that includes a more detailed analysis of the reader as contemporary of the author but ultimately does not incorporate the receptive side of literature in his definition of "Gegenwartsliteratur."

Gegenwartsliteratur, also die Summe nicht der geschriebenen, sondern der wahrgenommenen Texte, ist das Ergebnis einer merkwürdigen Auslese von Zufall, Publikumslaune und Kritikergeschmack. Ein Haus, aus dem man jederzeit wieder hinausgeworfen werden kann. Zumindest glauben das die Autoren. (*Treideln* 14)

In Zeh's characterization, texts have to be recognized, more specifically: favorably read, in order to be subsumed under the category contemporary literature. In addition, they have to be reviewed by literary critics, in other words, texts have to be evaluated by an authoritative body comprised of what could be called a professional readership, be they academic literary critics or those who work in newspapers' feuilleton departments. The final factor in Zeh's description, coincidence, is arguably the biggest variable because it is by definition indeterminable. At the same time, adding coincidence or chance to the equation opens the door to account for explaining why certain authors are being widely read whereas others, who might write comparable texts, spend their careers in obscurity. Notably, the contemporary, while not specifically mentioned elsewhere but in the term *Gegenwartsliteratur*, appears to be the underlying formative factor for coincidence as well as for the reading public's and literary critic's taste. In other words, the selection process of which Zeh speaks is dependent on the temporal context in which it occurs; put differently, the choices made by publishers, readers, and critics alike are influenced by a plethora of social, political, and cultural factors—sociopolitical discourses put forth in media debates, the overall global-political climate, the socioeconomic situation, the prevalence of certain topics and tropes, among others—outside of the literary market that leave their mark on the reading public's choices all the same. The definition of contemporary literature Zeh offers is flexible in the sense

that it inherently offers the possibility to perhaps not explain but at the very least pay respect to changes in the audience's and critic's preferences bound to extra-literary causes. At the same time, it is more open than the definitions of contemporary literature analyzed above in that it is only indirectly influenced by historical benchmarks, even if the impact of watershed dates like 1945, 1968, or 1989 is still potentially included. Most significantly, the categories with which Zeh measures contemporary literature are vastly different than those offered by the lexicon entry, Braun, or Herrmann. They shift the attention from factors outside of the literary market to those within—at the same time, they still very noticeably stay outside of literary texts.

In order to add to the conceptualization of contemporary literature, the analysis of selected works by Juli Zeh strives to define it with the help of categories that can be traced in the text without having to rely on extra-literary features like historical benchmarks. The advantage of such a model is that it can be applied to contemporary literature in a global sense as well as to more specific contemporary literatures that may be delineated by linguistic or political borders, regardless of how permeable these might be. Even if identifiable historical benchmarks like 1945 or 2000 do not find their way into my definition of contemporary literature, the notion of time in the sense of the temporal context in which a text is written is central to this re-conceptualization. As mentioned above, I propose to define contemporary literature with the help of three prepositions: Firstly, contemporary literature is literature *of* its time in that it is mindful of, influenced by, and incorporative with regards to literary currents that are virulent during the time of textual production. Secondly, contemporary literature is literature *in* its time in that the narratives are firmly embedded in sociopolitical discourses as well as the temporal-cultural context of textual production. Thirdly, contemporary literature is literature *on* its time in that the narrative either through its form or content noticeably contributes to these sociopolitical

discourses, in other words, texts that fulfill this attribute are negotiations of or comments on the temporal-cultural context in which they are written. It is important to highlight that the way I conceptualize contemporary literature must not be understood as being immovably stuck in the present moment, just like the seemingly discrete differentiation between literature of, in, and on its time is to be understood as at times overlapping and at all times oscillating. My analysis will demonstrate that contemporary texts like those written by Juli Zeh are heavily influenced by their time, but at the same time go beyond the moment of textual production by making statements that are applicable to and charged with meaning for individual events or endemic structures that are prevalent at other points in history. Put differently, through the combination of being of, in, and on its time, contemporary literature develops considerable staying power that ensures its circulation beyond the moment of its creation.

Literature of its Time: *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* and *Nullzeit*

In her article on Juli Zeh, Patricia Herminghouse emphasizes that Zeh managed “to escape the trivializing label literarisches Fräuleinwunder” (“The Young Author” 269), a label introduced by Volker Hage¹³² only two years prior to Zeh’s debut *Adler und Engel* to lump together publications by the likes of Judith Hermann and Karen Duve who had just published their literary debut or first novel respectively. Notwithstanding that one would be hard pressed to put *Sommerhaus, später* (1998) and *Regenroman* (1999) into the same category other than the little convincing one that they were written by female authors, Herminghouse argues that it is Zeh’s choice of “big topics” as well as her “intellectual credentials” (269) that make it hard to attach

¹³² See: Hage, Volker. “Ganz schön abgedreht.” *Spiegel.de*. 22 March 1999. Web. 24 March 2016.

the label *Fräuleinwunder* to her. However, the fact remains that the texts Zeh writes as well as the reception of her texts naturally do not exist in a vacuum. The production and reception of her work takes up literary labels and currents of its time, even if it is only to reveal them, as in the case of the *Fräuleinwunder* or “Neue Lesbarkeit,” as being not applicable to her oeuvre. While her texts may not directly address said labels, they indirectly address questions that such discourses pose. It is this indirect relationship with literary, social, cultural, economic, or political discourses that are pertinent to a definition of Zeh’s work as being contemporary literature of its time. In opposition to directly referencing historical events, the following section turns to debates that form a broader discursive background of Zeh’s texts; in other words, they can be defined as literary currents that her texts may only touch on tangentially, yet to a degree that still allows for a substantial analysis of her text with regards to them.

One of these literary currents that Lyn Marven and Stuart Taberner emphasize in their volume *Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century* is how transnationalism and transnational practices are represented in literary texts; moreover, it is one that is usually not used in connection with the work of Zeh.¹³³ Academic scholarship has recently devoted significant attention to literary border crossings of various configurations.¹³⁴ As Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Stuart Taberner state in their introductory essay to the volume *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature*,

¹³³ Part of the following analysis is based on my article “‘Wo geh ich her? ... Wo komm ich hin?’: Delineating Transnational Spaces in the Work of Juli Zeh.” *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature*. Eds. Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Stuart Taberner. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2015. 228-246. Print.

¹³⁴ See for example: Biendarra, Anke S. *Germans Going Global: Contemporary Literature and Cultural Globalization*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012. Print. See also the co-edited volume by Herrmann, Smith-Prei, and Taberner; as well as: Taberner, Stuart. “Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Fiction by Nonminority Writers.” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*. 47.5 (2011): 624-645. Print.

economic globalization, instantaneous electronic media, and the movement of millions around the globe today appear to be rendering national borders—and the cultures, politics, and frameworks of understanding that they are imagined to contain, more porous than ever before. (“Introduction” 1)

While what Herrmann, Smith-Prei, and Taberner state still rings true for those privileged enough to have access to the technical and economic means of effortless border crossing, the increasing number of refugees and particularly the refugee crisis of 2015 with its ongoing political implications on (not only) EU-politics have re-introduced the notion of borders as a means to restrict the flow of migration with a vengeance. Concomitantly, there is an increase in nationalist rhetoric across the globe, Hungary just being one prominent example within the context of the refugee crisis the EU-zone is currently facing.¹³⁵ One might say, then, that in the globalized twenty-first century, space is characterized by a dialectic relationship of having lost a lot of its meaning by virtue of the possibilities of increased mobility, advances in travel, and instantaneous global communication while it at the same time regains significance through the realization that the ideal of a borderless global world is revealed to be an imaginary one for millions of people without the necessary resources to benefit from it. Given that Juli Zeh is an author who situates her narratives in the lived-in world she shares with her audience, her literary texts can be read as literary representations of its time in the sense that they are situated in a world characterized by the increased mobility and migratory flows. Just like the category space in the sense of traversing

¹³⁵ In October 2015, *Amnesty International* has issued a briefing that condemns Hungary’s policy of erecting barbed-wire fences in order to prohibit refugees to enter Hungarian territory and calls on the EU to warn the country over its human rights violations: “Amnesty International is calling on the EU to hold Hungary to account for its human rights failures and to protect people on the move by creating safer, legal routes before winter hits” (“Hungary”).

borders has gained new significance in our globalized present and literary representations thereof, it is central to Zeh's work as well.

In an article that moves the focus of the discourse on transnationalism in German-language literature from writers with a minority background to nonminority authors who were born and raised in Germany, Stuart Taberner highlights that “nonminority Germans [...] are as itinerant as anyone else” (“Transnationalism” 625). Zeh, born in Bonn to an upper middle-class family and consequently as nonminority as possible within the German context¹³⁶, is no exception as her texts from the outset of her career have been highly mobile and by no means limited to the confines of German national borders. Already in her first novel *Adler und Engel*, she not only lets her protagonists oscillate between Leipzig and Vienna but includes the broader European background of the Balkan region as a space of action. Just a year after the publication of her debut, Zeh would return to the region as a traveler and publish the account of her journey in the travelogue *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* in 2002. The travelogue, according to Ottmar Ette, is the text form that is exceptionally suited to represent and negotiate movement across geographical borders: “Der Reisebericht ist im Grunde jene Art des literarischen Schreibens, in dem sich das Schreiben seiner Raumbezogenheit, seiner Dynamik und seiner Bewegungsnotwendigkeit am deutlichsten bewußt wird” (*Literatur in Bewegung* 25). As a consequence, Zeh's travelogue not only contains descriptions of the author moving through Serbian and Bosnia-Herzegovinian landscape but also addresses the crossing of borders itself. Zeh's expressed goal at the beginning of her travels was to explore whether the maps she takes along will match the geographical realities of the countries she is about to encounter: “Ich will sehen, ob Bosnien-Herzegowina ein Ort ist, an den man fahren kann, oder ob es zusammen mit

¹³⁶ See also the previously quoted description of Zeh by her friend Ilija Trojanow who labels her a “German, even West German, bourgeois, local girl” (Herrmann and Smith-Prei “Appendix” 268).

der Kriegsberichterstattung vom Erdboden verschwunden ist” (*Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* 11).

Once on the road, Zeh’s observations and descriptions are accordingly striving for great geographical accuracy by frequently mentioning the names of town and villages or even by inscribing herself on an imaginary map: “Vor dem Bahnhof lege ich mich auf die Wiese, breite Arme und Beine aus, bis ich ein Kreuz bilde, mit mir selbst die Stelle auf dem Erdball markiere, an der ich liege” (17). Over the course of the text, however, this anchoring of the self in geographical realities changes to the realization of spatial vagueness and eventually results in the willingness to become quite literally lost on the map. Notably, borders that on a map appear as rigid and immobile are the first items to in reality reveal themselves to be much more intangible: “‘Das ist die Grenze,’ sagt Dario, aber zwischen was und was?” (25). The elusiveness of borders is paired with rapidly altering landscapes that make it hard for Zeh to get a steady grip of the terrain through which she travels: “In diesem Land wechseln die Städte sekundenschnell das Gesicht, genau wie Landschaft und Wetter” (70). Ultimately, Zeh accepts to have lost the ability to mark her location on an imaginary globe as expressed in the quote above. Instead of a source of frustration and forlornness, though, giving in to drifting freely across territories is re-signified as a source of encounter and delight:

Das Gefühl, sich verirrt zu haben, in die falsche Richtung voranzustreben, sich sonst wo zu befinden und nirgendwo anzukommen, habe ich auszuhalten gelernt. Gerade im Moment, wenn ich innerlich aufgebe, wenn es zum Umkehren zu weit ist [...] taucht das nächste Schild auf. Oder ich stelle fest, dass ich schon da bin. (163)

If read out of context, passages like this suggest that *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* paints an idealistic or romanticized picture of traveling in a transnational Europe without borders. Zeh qualifies this impression, though, by offering a more multilayered depiction of traversing borders by questioning the alleged transformative effects of travelling on identity construction: “Immer meint man auf Reisen, sich völlig verändert zu haben. Dass nichts mehr ist, wie es war. Zu Hause wartet das alte Selbst im Sessel und bereitet einen gierigen Empfang” (221). Both quotes underscore how Zeh’s travelogue is a text of its time in that it draws attention to the ambiguities of the term transnationalism itself. While the blissful free-floating movement across the map that Zeh describes in the first quote highlights the *trans* in transnationalism and therefore the idea of going beyond the confines of national borders, the latter quote returns to the concept of not only the old self read with regards to identity construction to which one necessarily returns but also to the nation as being an integral part of the old self. Put differently, just like the term *nation* is an integral part of the label transnationalism, it remains part of transnational practices like the ones Zeh describes in her travelogue as one framework against which these practices are measured. In short, even in the twenty-first century where the traversing of borders has become easier as never before if one is lucky enough to have the necessary economic and technical means, the nation persists as part of one’s individual background which cannot be discarded easily, if at all.

The persistence of the nation is also of significance for Zeh’s novel *Nullzeit* whose protagonist Sven Fiedler leaves his native country Germany—the “war zone”—to start a new life on the island. Similar to the above quote from *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch*, Sven sets out to leave his ‘old self’ behind and settles down in a discernibly more deterritorialized environment only to return home at the end of the narrative. In contrast to the negative connotation of Germany as an imagined war zone, the island is at first devoid of such harmful interferences. Mirroring Sven’s

attempts to escape all social, emotional, and political commitments in the geographical setting of the novel, Zeh lets his protagonist settle in a place that is quite literally at the end of the world: “Lahora [der Ort, in dem Sven mit seiner Freundin lebt] besitze keinen Bauplan. Keine Straßennamen. Keine Kanalisation. Genau genommen besitze Lahora außer mir und Antje auch keine Einwohner. [...] Ein Ort des Stillstands [...] Das Ende der Welt” (*Nullzeit* 15). In addition, the fact that Lahora is located on an island and therefore detached from the mainland further emphasizes that Sven is serious about his self-proclaimed credo to ‘stay out of it.’ So serious, indeed, that the place where he feels most secure and at home is the underwater realm, a region even further removed from human society. Arguably a transnational space in the sense that it geographically and politically belongs to a nation without necessarily being associated with a particular national territory, the subaqueous environment is also uninhabitable for humans and incongruous with our standard means of communication, i.e. spoken language. Therefore, as I have argued elsewhere, “the underwater world of the Atlantic [...] serves as an idealistic transnational mirror image of the world above the surface and constitutes a perfect haven for his [Sven’s] world-weariness” (Richter “Wo geh ich her” 241). As mentioned in chapter four, Sven is not able to uphold his worldview to stay out of it, and significantly his moment of epiphany occurs underwater, that is in that region where he feels the most comfortable and in control. After having to choose between letting the unconscious Theo, whom Sven encounters floating in the water while re-surfacing after a scuba dive, drown or save him instead, Sven comes to the realization that his seemingly utopian space of the island, a space that Sven imagined to be immune to all interferences from the rest of society, has quite literally been invaded by the outside world. Not surprisingly, the “invaders” in the form of his customers Jola and Theo come from the “war zone” Germany, i.e. from the very territory that Sven had attempted to escape at

all costs. Analogous to the persistence of the nation in *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch*, Sven's despised country of origin eventually comes to the fore and reveals Sven's desperate attempts to "stay out of it" to be futile. While the text tells us that Sven will return to Germany at the end of the novel, the reader is left in the dark about whether or not his experiences on the island—in other words, his transnational practices—have changed him or whether he will simply take a seat next to his old self in the armchair waiting at home.

Returning to the claim that both *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* and *Nullzeit* are to be classified as contemporary literature of its time, I argue that both narratives negotiate the meaning of the term 'nation' and 'transnationalism' in a time in which both terms have gained importance both in literary-academic and political discourses. Without specifically mentioning either of these terms in her texts, part of the contemporaneity of Zeh's travelogue and her novel is that they take up pertinent questions of its time—what significance does a national background have in today's globalized world and can it be escaped; what do borders signify and who can cross them under what circumstances without discernible effort; what effects does the expansion of the EU have on its original member states with respect to border policies and flows of migration—and indirectly address them. Both texts show that the nation is a concept that lingers in the background of transnational texts, be it in the form that Zeh during her travels in Bosnia-Herzegovina is repeatedly reminded of her West-German background¹³⁷ or that Sven, despite all efforts, is not able to uphold his deterritorialized utopian island paradise beyond all national affiliations. Significantly, there is no evidence in either text that Zeh favors the nation over transnationalism. In other words, even when one returns to the old self waiting at home, said old

¹³⁷ One such instance occurs when Zeh is confronted with the poverty in the war-torn region that stands in diametrical opposition to the prosperity of her West-German upbringing: "Ich kenne das Gefühl nicht, durch alles, was man braucht, einem anderen etwas wegnehmen zu müssen, Nahrung, Wasser, Kerzen, Brennholz, Öl" (*Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* 75).

self will do well to listen to stories of what happened abroad as these transnational experiences are central for an individual's identity construction. Politically speaking, the nation is simply acknowledged as a fact and integral part of the present moment's social, political, economical, and cultural configuration. This pragmatic view can be read as an indispensable counterweight to balance out exaggeratedly optimistic views of the possibilities of transnational practices in today's world.

Last but not least, the analysis demonstrates that the lines between the prepositions chosen to delineate characteristics of contemporary German-language literature are deliberately blurry. While the indirect negotiation of the term transnationalism in *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* and *Nullzeit* defines both texts as being of its time, the aspect of transnationalism also situates the texts *in* their time. Reading a text through the lens of literature on, in, or of its time is therefore first and foremost a matter of emphasis or, put differently, of the angle through which one chooses to look through the analytic lens. In the following section, I will shift the focus from literature of its time to literature in its time through a close reading of the text that followed Zeh's travelogue, namely her second novel *Spieltrieb*.

Literature in its Time: *Spieltrieb*

“Effektheischend,” “prätentiöse Geschwätzigkeit,” and full of “oft schiefer Metaphern” (“Im Literatur-Leistungskurs”) are but three of the unfavorable labels the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* found to describe Zeh's second novel *Spieltrieb* after its publication in 2004. A lot less vitriolic, Claudia Breger in her analysis of the novel states that it “continues to engage in what could be described as Zeh's project of making narrative sense of the contemporary world in its

social and political dimensions” (“Moral Play?” 108). While the former statement focuses on the surface of language by criticizing its alleged loquacious tone and overuse of extravagant metaphors¹³⁸, Breger successfully manages to look under the surface and highlights the agenda of the novel while at the same time emphasizing the narrative’s firm anchoring in the contemporary. It is this anchoring or embeddedness in the temporal and sociopolitical context of its publication time that allows for using *Spieltrieb*, sometimes regarded as Zeh’s major work so far¹³⁹, as a prime example for an analysis of how Zeh writes literary texts that are *in* their time.

Regardless of whether or not *Spieltrieb* is to be considered her major work, the novel continues to have special significance for the author herself. In a short interview in *Die Welt* following the publication of Zeh’s novel *Unterleuten*, the author answers the question which book she would never want to miss and why as follows: “‘Spieltrieb’ von Juli Zeh. Nicht, weil es unbedingt das beste Buch der Welt ist, sondern weil es mich bis zum heutigen Tag glücklich macht, dass ich es geschrieben habe. Es musste einfach raus” (Heidrich “Nur drei Fragen”). What had to get out is a voluminous work of almost six hundred pages with the admittedly ambitious agenda to combine the depiction of a whole generation’s mindset with reflections on the erosion of moral values through the form of a boarding school novel filled with literary allusions ranging from Robert Musil to Jorge Luis Borges to Friedrich Nietzsche.¹⁴⁰ The novel tells the story of gifted students Ada and Alev who blackmail their German and physical

¹³⁸ In *Treideln*, Zeh looks back the language of *Spieltrieb* with a healthy dose of self-criticism: “Scharfkantige Wolkenschatten krümmten sich zusammen – was für ein Schwachsinn, aber [...] so dachte, fühlte, klang ich damals” (60).

¹³⁹ Ingo Meyer, for instance, calls *Spieltrieb* “das vorläufige Hauptwerk” (“Niedergang des Romans” 969) in his negative analysis of the novel. Heinz-Peter Preußner uses the same term, albeit more carefully with the help of the subjunctive, in his essay on Zeh in the *Kritische Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur* (“Juli Zeh”).

¹⁴⁰ Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930-43) is covered in teacher Smutek’s German class as well as having inspired the French translations’ title of *Spieltrieb*, *La Fille sans qualités* (2008). The character Alev borrows his first name from Borges’ short story *El Aleph* (1945) and Nietzsche is referenced repeatedly throughout the text, see for example page 122.

education teacher Smutek into a sexual relationship with Ada that gets videotaped by Alev. After Alev, who frames the triangular relationship in terms of the titular game, ends the “game,” Smutek channels his desperation in an outburst of violence and beats up his student Alev heavily. The ensuing trial, led by a judge referred to as “die kalte Sophie” (*Spieltrieb* 517) who begins and concludes the novel as frame narrator, ends with the morally ambiguous acquittal of Smutek while Alev, the plaintiff, is sentenced on probation on charges of extortion, coercion, and sexual abuse.

Spieltrieb has been analyzed with respect to its reflection on morals and aesthetics¹⁴¹, its negotiation of “contemporary nihilism” (Brockmann “Juli Zeh, *Spieltrieb*” 62), the impact of the network of relationships between “national and international politics, global economy, migration, and international terrorism” (Klocke “Transnational Terrorism” 520) on the characters, as well as the complex liaison between corporeal desire and politics.¹⁴² Going back to Claudia Breger’s statement that, like Zeh’s oeuvre in general, *Spieltrieb* sets out to make sense of the world through its narrative construction, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the way that the novel addresses the contemporary. It does so through the character Höfling, a history teacher who, despite being introduced as a teacher with the reputation of being a “Bluthund” (*Spieltrieb* 13) due to his biting sarcasm and contempt for intellectual dullness, learns to appreciate the solitary Ada for her high intellect and challenging contributions to in-class discussions. Early on in the novel, the teacher, who is mostly referred to by his nickname Höfi, confronts one of his classes with his theses about the nature of the contemporary, which, according to him, can only be understood in terms of the past:

¹⁴¹ See Breger “Moral Play?”

¹⁴² See: Smith-Prei, Carrie, and Lars Richter. “Politicising Desire in Juli Zeh’s *Spieltrieb*.” *Transitions: Emerging Women Writers in German-Language Literature*. Eds. Valerie Heffernan, and Gillian Pye. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. 187-209. Print.

Die ganze so genannte Gegenwart lasse sich überhaupt nur historistisch begreifen, nämlich als ein Stück zukünftiger Vergangenheit. In der Ignoranz kontemporärer Analysen diesem Umstand gegenüber liege der Grund für die inflationär auf allen Kanälen erhältlichen Torheiten, produziert von dem Versuch, auf direkte Weise etwas über unsere Zeit auszusagen. [...] Gegenwart sei undurchdringliches Chaos, die Vergangenheit ein stromlinienförmiges Ding. Um ein wenig Zucht in das gegenwärtige Durcheinander zu bringen, müsse man es als Geschichte und damit als etwas Vergangenes behandeln. (46)

Following this line of thought, the contemporary moment is inextricably intertwined with the past and future in the sense that its present elusiveness can only be grasped by transforming it into a narrative that we can read and interpret. According to Höfi's theory of the "Historizität der Gegenwart" (46), the elusiveness of the present also renders it impossible to make any quantifiable statements about the contemporary if it has not been turned into narrative just yet. A result of the fact that we cannot perceive the present moment as a narrative, leads to our conceptualization of the contemporary as chaotic.

There is, additionally, a poetological consequence of this view on the contemporary that applies to this and other novels written by Zeh. On the one hand, the contemporary must be altered into a narrative by turning the perceived chaos into a coherent, discernible textual entity. On the other hand, though, in order to make the contemporary visible in said textual entity, it needs to be marked. In other words, the text must include clearly detectible referents that allow the reader to connect the words on the page with a specific moment in time, a moment that used

to constitute the contemporary but now has become part of the legible past the text constructs. In *Spieltrieb*, the contemporary is predominantly marked by explicit references to social, political, or cultural events that unmistakably situate the plot of the novel within approximately three to four years of the novel's publication year 2004.

One example of such a reference that allows for a classification of *Spieltrieb* as literature in its time is a violent fantasy Ada enjoys. Sitting in class, Ada gives in to the fantasy of decapitating her classmates with a two-handed sword. More importantly, though, are Ada's thoughts on how the public, represented through journalists, politicians, and psychologists, would react to her fantasies should they become known: "Der Gedanke daran, was die Psychologen, Ministerialbeamten und Journalisten zu sagen gehabt hätten, wenn ihnen eine solche Phantasie zu Ohren gekommen wäre, brachte sie zum Lächeln: ERFURT" (198, capitals in original). The city of Erfurt in this case is a placeholder for the events of April 26, 2002, when Robert Steinhäuser, a former student of the Gutenberg-Gymnasium, returned to his old school and killed more than fifteen people, among them teachers, administrative staff, students and a policeman. More than a mere reference to a high school shooting¹⁴³ that in 2004 was still very much present in Germany's collective consciousness, highlighted in its importance by the use of capital letters, Ada's musings about the assumed reaction towards her violent phantasies is also a comment on the predictable retorts following events like the killings in Erfurt, and leads beyond this particular instance. Instead of looking at quick and easy answers for the killer's motivation

¹⁴³ A few years after the publication of *Spieltrieb*, Zeh would return to the topic of high school shootings in her play "Good Morning, Boys and Girls" that premiered in 2010 at the *Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus* (Zeh "Good Morning" 237).

like the affinity for violent computer games¹⁴⁴, Ada suggests looking at the very setup of society to find answers for such violent acts (see 199). The public debate following a school shooting like that in Erfurt, however, is dominated by seemingly prefabricated statements: “Sprechzeit gab es nur für jene, die auf egal welches Ereignis die immer gleichen Antworten parat hatten: Wir sind geschockt und tief betroffen und hoffen, dass die Regierung etwas unternimmt” (199). With respect to the notion of *Spieltrieb* being a text in its time, the effect of this passage is two-fold. On the one hand, Zeh locates the plot of the novel in the first years of the new millennium by referencing an event powerful enough to have found its way into what Elisabeth Herrmann calls the “joint horizon of experience” (“How Does Transnationalism” 22) of a community. At the same time, though, the more general reflections on the often foreseeable public reactions in the wake of such events make this passage comprehensible for readers who—due to a different cultural background, for example—do not share the joint horizon of which Herrmann speaks. The marking of the contemporary becomes more than a mere reference point and ensures that, while still being located in its time, a text like *Spieltrieb* is not stuck in the present of its writing and publication time but rather allowed a continuous traveling through literary circulation.

Moving from the local to the global political level, Zeh integrates the September 11 attacks into the narrative of *Spieltrieb* in a fashion comparable to her reference of the Erfurt shooting. In the chapter “Die Amerikadebatte,”¹⁴⁵ it is once again history teacher Höfling who initiates a discussion by confronting his students with one of his signature controversial theses.

Against the background of the 2003 invasion of Iraq that followed the attacks on the World

¹⁴⁴ Following the news that Robert Steinhäuser frequently played the first-person shooter *Counterstrike*, there was a debate about putting the game on the index (see “Killer-Spiel Counterstrike”). The responsible *Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Schriften* voted against this option. Zeh takes up the discussion around the effects of violent video games in *Spieltrieb* as well, however, she rejects the notion of a simple causality: “Ada hatte noch nie Counterstrike gespielt und schaute [...] kaum noch fern” (*Spieltrieb* 198).

¹⁴⁵ For a reading of the chapter with respect to the transnational background of Alev and its implications for the politicization of desire, see Smith-Prei and Richter.

Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001¹⁴⁶, the teacher postulates that every military invention at its core is an “Eroberungskrieg” (*Spieltrieb* 146) and, furthermore, that non-governmental agents like environmentalist activist groups like Greenpeace or terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda share structural similarities: “Er spreche von Strukturen. Von kleinen Gruppen, die in Gegnerschaft zu staatlichen Einrichtungen stünden” (146). Not surprisingly, the discussion triggered by this comparison is a heated one and therefore very much to the teacher’s taste. While Alev does not participate in the discussion, evidently waiting for the right moment, Ada joins the debate after a nonverbal prompt from her teacher: “Wer sind denn die Gefährten im Lord of the Rings¹⁴⁷,” she asks, “Sie marschieren als Einzelkämpfer gegen ein wohlorganisiertes, hochgerüstetes Staatswesen. Man könnte auch sagen: Sie sind Terroristen” (147). Ada’s statement bears similarities to her reflections on the aftermath of the Erfurt school shooting in the sense that it clearly references specific historical and cultural events—the 9/11 attacks, the beginning of the Iraq war, and the release of the film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*—but at the same time goes beyond these events in that they are aimed at underlying sociopolitical structures. She continues to say,

Die Nervosität der Vereinigten Staaten und das laute, weltweite Geschrei rühren daher, dass die angreifende Supermacht Angst hat und sich heimlich im Unrecht glaubt.

Hollywood und Bibel sind Träger der amerikanischen Kultur, und beide Quellen lehren, dass David siegt und Mordor untergehen muss. (148)

¹⁴⁶ For a detailed account of the consequences of the so-called War on Terror on civil rights in the form of a non-fictional book-length essay, see Zeh’s and Ilija Trojanow’s *Angriff auf die Freiheit* (2009).

¹⁴⁷ Rather than J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel, Ada is referring to the first part of Peter Jackson’s movie adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, which premiered under the title *Die Gefährten* in December 2001, just three months after 911, in German cinemas.

According to Ada, the problem of the United States can no longer assume the role of David, so to speak, but rather, as Carrie Smith-Prei and I have argued, represents “the evil empire itself” (Smith-Prei and Richter “Politicising Desire” 199) instead of the insurgent fighting for freedom. Analogous to Ada’s thoughts on the Erfurt shootings, her reflection on the political consequences of 9/11 and what she calls the dramaturgical problem of the West (see *Spieltrieb* 147), Zeh marks the contemporary moment with a clearly discernible reference in order to move it beyond the present. As a result, the text is rendered contemporary in that it is anchored in its time; at the same time, the narrative is given longevity beyond the signpost that marks it as having been written at the beginning of the millennium. In both examples—the Erfurt shooting and the invasion of Iraq—, reflections on the underlying meaning of these events elevate the text from being stuck in the contemporary, not the least because events like school shootings and military interventions will happen again, and in fact have happened many times since the publication of *Spieltrieb*.

To return to teacher Höfling’s theory on the imperceptibility of the present moment, the two chosen examples that mark the contemporary in *Spieltrieb* can be read as narrative implementations of the teacher’s call for turning the present into a narrative in order to make it legible. What Zeh achieves through Ada’s remarks is nothing less than rendering the “undurchdringliche Chaos” of the present into the “stromlinienförmige Ding” (46) as that we perceive the past. She bases the narrative in its time through carefully selected references taken from the seemingly chaotic contemporaneous moment and invests them with a narrative interpretation that shines light on the event itself, but also on similar events that will happen in the future. Once again, Zeh employs narration as a “Trainingsprogramm in Sachen

Menschwerdung” (*Treideln* 192). Contemporary literature as literature *in* its time, seen from this perspective, can assist the reader to impose discipline on the incomprehensibility of the present moment by transforming it into a comprehensible narrative and prepares her or him for what will happen in the future. Quite literally, the approach to regard literature as a means to prepare readers for what can happen in the future pertains to Zeh’s novel *Corpus Delicti*. The novel, set roughly fifty years into the future, will be the focus of the next section when I analyze the text as an example for contemporary literature on its time.

Literature on its Time: *Corpus Delicti*

In the previous chapter, I have analyzed Zeh’s novel *Corpus Delicti* with respect to modes of realistic writing, particularly pertaining to Dieter Wellershoff’s approach towards realistic literature as a technique of simulation. Additionally, I have highlighted the timeliness of the novel that has been favorably recognized by critics like Evelyn Finger in the *Zeit* who has labeled *Corpus Delicti* “das Buch der Stunde” in her eponymous review (Finger). It is indeed this timeliness of the text that makes Zeh’s fourth novel a perfect example to investigate how contemporary literature is literature on its time. While Finger’s positive verdict suggests that *Corpus Delicti* is contemporary to an extent that implies the danger of becoming quickly out dated once the ‘hour’ the critic finds the text to capture so adequately has passed, Zeh employs strategies that ensure the novel’s longevity beyond the immediate years following its publication.

The governmental system referred to as “METHODE” that Zeh depicts in the novel can be described as a mixture of biological and rational principles based on the conviction that the

unifying factor all living beings share is the will to survive.¹⁴⁸ As previously quoted, the “METHODE” promises its citizens “ein möglichst langes, störungsfreies, das heißt, gesundes und glückliches Leben” (*Corpus Delicti* 36), in other words this governmental system makes the promises of “that moral-intimate-economic thing” (Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 2), ‘the good life’ that forms the self-declared centre of Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*. Striving for the good life can justifiably be labeled as a desirable project, however, Berlant poses the question why this is indeed still the case in contemporary neoliberalist societies when the price for all attempts to reach this good life is unjustifiably high. She asks, “Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life-fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?” (2). The relations resulting from this continuous attachment to good-life-fantasies that come at a high price and can in fact never be fulfilled, Berlant calls cruelly optimistic. The mechanism of cruel optimism “exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). Berlant goes on to explain the generically cruel aspect of these attachments by stating that “subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being” (24). The reason for this configuration of attachment is seen in the fact that holding on to the object of desire “provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on” (24). When applied to the governmental system in Zeh’s novel, this means that subjects of the “METHODE” cling to the promise of the good and healthy life made by the state—an object of

¹⁴⁸ Heinrich Kramer, chief-ideologist of the state, explains this amalgam of biology and ratio as follows: “Wir gehorchen allein der Vernunft, indem wir uns auf eine Tatsache berufen, die sich unmittelbar aus der Existenz von biologischem Leben ergibt. Denn *ein* Merkmal ist jedem lebenden Wesen zu eigen. [...] Der unbedingte, individuelle und kollektive Überlebenswille” (*Corpus Delicti* 36).

desire if ever there was one—not realizing the cost at which struggling to achieve it comes: the complete loss of personal autonomy and privacy.

I argue that the “METHODE” works as a cruel optimism within the narrative world of *Corpus Delicti* in the sense that the text presents a seemingly desirable object—a healthy life devoid of illness and pain—that, while subjects of the system strive to achieve it, comes at the expense of privacy. *Corpus Delicti* comments on its time because it serves as a warning call to protect privacy in a climate where privacy becomes increasingly eroded through either state measures or by citizens who voluntarily abandon it. In chapter two, based on the definition of privacy provided by Beate Rössler, I have highlighted the importance of literary privacy for the creation of literary works because this is a space in which Zeh can act undisturbed as an author without any contact to the literary public in the form of readers, critics, or editors. One component of literary privacy is arguably what Rössler in *Der Wert des Privaten* denotes as “local privacy.” In Rössler’s words, local privacy is more than just the protected locality of the home. In a more encompassing manner, it can be described as “ein Lebensbereich, eine Lebensform, die sich damit verbindet [Rössler bezieht sich auf private Räume] und die sich [...] der Existenz privater Räume konstitutiv verdankt” (*Der Wert des Privaten* 255). Rössler sees the reason why local privacy is of such vital importance for human beings in the fact that domestic spaces that are protected from outside surveillance are central to the way in which subjects create images of the self or, equally important, test these self-images: the protection of local privacy “garantiert Bedingungen dafür, Weisen des Sich-zu-sich-Verhaltens auszuprobieren, die verstanden werden können als Versuche der Selbst-Definition” (261). In *Corpus Delicti*, protagonist Mia is in desperate need of local privacy because her self-image, and this explicitly includes her former allegiance with the “METHODE,” has been shattered through her brother’s

politically motivated suicide. It is a wicked twist of the narrative, then, that Mia's apartment, the space that is supposed to guarantee her local privacy, is to be found in a building indicative of the workings and efficacy of the "METHODE's" principle of constant mutual surveillance. Mia resides in a so-called "Wächterhaus," an apartment complex whose tenants adhere to the principles of the "METHODE" so obediently that they receive special rewards in return. These privileges are willingly bought by taking on jobs usually done by the state such as the disinfection of all public areas within the house or a regular control of the tenants' waste. Consequently, this form of successful self-governance encourages the rigorous surveillance of everyone living in a "Wächterhaus," a thorough monitoring of the fellow residents in order to maintain the desirable status of privileged treatment by the state. In depicting the apartment building as a disinfected and sterile space whose residents keep a close watch on each other, the "Wächterhaus" serves as microcosmic representation of society and its mode of governance as a whole. The rigid guardians of conformist behaviour within the confines of the "Wächterhaus" is a trio of female characters named Lizzie, Driss and a third woman only referred to as "die Pollsche." Equally frightening and amusing with their never ending chitchat and blind obedience to the "METHODE's" code of conduct, the three women introduce the element of gossip into the narration. The intersection of local and informational privacy¹⁴⁹ plays a significant role in *Corpus Delicti* as the gossip spread by the three guardians of the "Wächterhaus" helps to undermine the feeling of a secure domestic space on which Mia has to rely in order to recreate her self-image. Gossip, as Wolfgang Sofsky underscores in *Verteidigung des Privaten*, has the function of reinforcing the righteousness of those who gossip: "Indem sich die Schwätzer [...]"

¹⁴⁹ Beate Rössler defines informational privacy as follows: "Im Kern geht es hier also darum, wer was über eine Person weiß, also um die Kontrolle über Informationen, die sie betreffen; und zwar Kontrolle mindestens in dem Sinn, dass sie in vielen Hinsichten in der Hand hat, in anderen Hinsichten zumindest abschätzen kann, was andere Personen jeweils über sie wissen" (*Der Wert des Privaten* 201).

über Anrühiges erregen, bestätigen sie einander die eigene Rechtschaffenheit” (115). The same is true for the three guardians: by spreading false information they confirm their own allegiance to the “METHODE’s” principles in opposition to Mia’s deviant behavior. Moreover, gossip can further be characterized as a weapon of social separation because it draws a distinct line between the gossipers and their targets. The three guardians of the “Wächterhaus” employ mechanisms of social exclusion on the scale of the apartment building in the same manner that Heinrich Kramer employs these mechanisms on a broader societal scale.

Zeh illustrates the extent of loss of privacy within the narrative world of the novel in a scene in which the guardians confront Mia after the latter had caused a fire alarm in the building by lighting a cigarette. Mia is trying to avoid the interrogation, but one of the three women points out: “Hier kann man nicht einfach weglaufen!” (*Corpus Delicti* 77) In other words, there is no escape from the principles of the “METHODE,” and even the four walls of Mia’s apartment do not provide domestic shelter. More than that, the three guardians insist on invading Mia’s allegedly private matters and accentuate how little privacy is valued in the society depicted in the text. Even after Mia assures the trio that she does not need any help, “die Pollsche” states: “Doch” (77). Lizzie, the most aggressive of the three, aids her colleague: “In einem guten Haus wie diesem kümmert man sich umeinander. Besonders, wenn es einem Mitglied der Gesellschaft mal schlecht geht” (77). On the surface, this statement appears to be an offer of neighbourly help; coming from one the guardians, however, the idea of “being taken care of” sounds like a threat.

Corpus Delicti is a warning against the erosion of privacy and a call to arms to actively protect it against all forms of intrusion. By setting the plot fifty years into the future, Zeh presents the potential results of the loss of privacy contemporary societies are currently experiencing. The text can therefore be classified as literature *on* its time in the sense that it

comments on the present of its production, namely the first decade of the new millennium, by imagining where the increasing loss of predominantly informational privacy can lead. However, as Sonja Klocke has emphasized, the text does not limit itself to issues of privacy but rather expands its words of warning towards matters that pertain the very basics of constitutional states: “Zeh nutzt [...] die literarische Form, um sowohl auf die graduelle Aufweichung (noch) bestehender Normen von Rechtsstaatlichkeit als auch auf die mit einem Aufweichen dieser Standards verbundenen Gefahren hinzuweisen” (“Das Mittelalter” 200). *Corpus Delicti* is therefore a text on a specific period in history—the early 2000s—but it addresses issues that are not exclusive to this particular timeframe. Rather, it can be characterized as a text that is simultaneously tied to a time period and independent of it. In the section on literature in its time, I have analyzed how Zeh’s references in *Spieltrieb* to the Erfurt shootings and the invasion of Iraq locate the plot of the novel at a specific point in time while, at the same time, general statements about these events detach the text from it to ensure the text’s longevity. I argue that literature *on* its time like Zeh writes it follows a similar pattern. One major difference between *Spieltrieb* and *Corpus Delicti* is, not least due to the latter’s futuristic setting, that there are no direct references to historical benchmarks in Zeh’s later novel. In other words, when *Spieltrieb* was first published in 2004, the present of the intra-textual world and the present of the extra-textual readership was identical, whereas there is an estimated fifty-year gap between the two in the case of *Corpus Delicti*.¹⁵⁰ However, *Corpus Delicti* negotiates topics prevalent at the time of its publication, in other words, it is *in circa* 2057 but also *on* 2009 and beyond. In fact, the novel is also on times *before* the moment of its publication due to the fact that the narrative interweaves three different timelines. Through its reflections on structures of marginalization,

¹⁵⁰ One notable exception is a direct reference to the year of publication of *Corpus Delicti* made by Heinrich Kramer during a TV interview, see *Corpus Delicti* 85.

processes of defamation, and mechanisms of ostracizing individuals that are traced back to the Early Modern period, the novel draws connections between what we commonly refer to as the Middle Ages, the end of the first decade of the new millennium, and the not so distant future in which these mechanisms are expected to still be found at work.

During the trial against protagonist Mia Holl based on her alleged association with the terrorist group *Recht auf Krankheit*, in short: R.A.K., with which her deceased brother Moritz had also been linked, the main representative of the “METHODE,” journalist Heinrich Kramer, pulls all available strings in order to initiate a campaign of defamation against the previously inconspicuous biologist. This campaign, which starts early on in the novel during Kramer’s appearance on the TV talk show with the telling name “Was alle denken,” bears all characteristics of a moral panic: “A moral panic may be defined as an episode, often triggered by alarming media stories and reinforced by reactive laws and public policy, of exaggerated or misdirected public concern, anxiety, fear, or anger over a perceived threat to social order” (Krinsky “Introduction” 1). Without directly mentioning Mia, Kramer uses her example—a woman in her mid-thirties who has suffered a personal loss in the death of her brother and who therefore sees her individual needs at odds with those of the “METHODE,” which as a consequence leads to a critical perspective on the system—to delineate how a law-abiding citizen is drawn towards oppositional groups like the R.A.K.. Würmer, a devoted disciple of Kramer and host of the talk show, approves: “Es ist verblüffend, wie Sie eine hochkomplexe Materie zu einfachen Erkenntnissen ordnen” (*Corpus Delicti* 87). The problem with Kramer’s publicly stated seemingly intriguing conclusions is, though, that he trades accuracy for simplicity and therefore places Mia in the vicinity of the terrorist group to which Mia has no affinity at all. In this fashion, Kramer not only applies pertinent steps in the creation of a moral panic that Stanley

Cohen has outlined in his seminal study *Moral Panics and Folk Devils: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1972)¹⁵¹, he also ensures that Mia becomes ostracized and marginalized as an opponent of the “METHODE”.

As mentioned above, the mechanisms of marginalization that Kramer employs are traced back to the Early Modern period. The significance of the figure of the witch—arguably the most prominent victim of marginalization during the Early Modern period¹⁵²—and the witch craze resulting from it for Zeh’s novel has been analyzed to great effect.¹⁵³ To briefly summarize, Zeh uses the etymological roots of the German *Hexe*, *hagazussa*, to define the witch as a hedge-riding spirit, in other words a spirit that lives in the in-between that a hedge demarcates. Mia’s state of mind at this point of the novel—torn between her loyalty towards the “METHODE” and her beginning opposition to its claim to universality and infallibility—is likened to a position of the in-between, a position Mia needs to abandon if she is to escape Kramer’s campaign of denunciation. The character of Heinrich Kramer is yet another link to the past in that he is the namesake of Dominican monk Heinrich Institoris, author of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), a widely published compendium used to detect, prosecute, and eventually exterminate predominantly women accused of witchcraft. In her analysis of the novel, Sonja Klocke has identified the similarity in the pseudo-scientific tone of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and Heinrich Kramer’s best-selling *Gesundheit als Prinzip staatlicher Legitimation*, a text both outlining and

¹⁵¹ Cohen states, “a condition, episode, a person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible” (quoted in Krinsky “Introduction” 3-4).

¹⁵² “Die überwiegende Mehrheit der Hexenprozessopfer war weiblich (Forschungsüberblick Bender-Wittmann 2002). Die Quellen sprechen völlig selbstverständlich in weiblichen Pronomina von den Mitgliedern der Teufelssekte, Kramers Buchtitel *Malleus MaleficArum*, der dezidiert die weibliche Form setzte, war Programm” (Dillinger *Hexen und Magie* 119).

¹⁵³ See McCalmont and Maierhofer; and Klocke “Das Mittelalter”.

justifying the “METHODE”: “Das als Vorwort zu ‘Corpus Delicti’ fungierende, fiktive Zitat aus ‘Gesundheit als Prinzip staatlicher Legitimation’ greift den pseudo-wissenschaftlichen Ton seines dogmatischen Vorgängers auf und etabliert somit ideologische Nähe zwischen Hexen, Kranken und Methodenfeinden” (“Das Mittelalter” 193). The ideological proximity of which Klocke speaks is evident throughout the novel, for instance in a scene when Mia, after suffering torture, claims that she is subject to a “Hexenprozess” (*Corpus Delicti* 243) or when Kramer counters an aggressive verbal attack by Mia with the sarcastic retort: “Nicht doch! [...] Ein Hexenfluch! *Vade retro!*” (232). If Mia indeed takes on the role of a witch within the world of the novel, or is at the very least perceived as such by representatives of the governmental system, the question remains what the equivalent of her deeds of magic would be. To address this question, it is productive to look at the imaginary character of the “Ideale Geliebte” or Ideal Inamorata.¹⁵⁴ Serving as a bridge between the deceased Moritz and Mia, the former has given his sister the Ideal Inamorata as a gift before committing suicide. For the remainder of the novel, the Ideal Inamorata stays with Mia as both a reminder of Moritz’s convictions and the voice of her own budding political consciousness.

Against the backdrop of regarding Mia as a witch, I furthermore suggest reading the Ideal Inamorata as fulfilling the role of the demon, in other words the magical creature—invisible to human eyes just like the Ideal Inamorata is invisible to everyone except Mia—through which the women accused of witchcraft would perform their magic. Medieval conceptions of the witch proclaimed that witches were not able to perform magic by their own volition as God had not invested human beings with this power: “The ‘classical’ witch [...] could do nothing through her own energy, but had to rely on her demon’s power” (Dinzelbacher “Demons”). Analogously, the

¹⁵⁴ I’m borrowing the term from the translation of *Corpus Delicti* by Sally-Ann Spencer published in 2012.

Ideal Inamorata in *Corpus Delicti*, by virtue of her being a representation of Moritz's opposition to the "METHODE," convinces Mia to literally get off the hedge and take a stand against the system:

Schritt eins: Du begreifst, dass Moritz der METHODE zum Opfer gefallen ist und dass dieser Kramer daran beteiligt war. Schritt zwei, du sprichst folgenden Satz: Die METHODE hat meinen Bruder getötet und sich damit als Unrechtssystem offenbart. Schritt drei, du rufst Rosentreter an. Schritt vier, ihr verklagt Kramer wegen böswilliger Verleumdung. Schritt fünf, ihr sucht nach einem frei denkenden Journalisten und gebt ihm ein Interview, in dem du erklärst... (*Corpus Delicti* 142-43)

The quote demonstrates that the Ideal Inamorata is instrumental in Mia's development from faithful follower of the "METHODE" to its most prominent opponent. Moreover, if we think of the Ideal Inamorata as Mia's demon, the act of "evil magic" is to challenge the hegemonic power of the governmental system, just like witchcraft was seen to challenge clerical and secular power in the Middle Ages. Mia's pledge for a self-determined life free of state surveillance—represented through the mandatory health reports that citizens under the "METHODE" have to submit to the authorities on a regular basis—within the context of the novel can be read as an act of heresy, and therefore a threat to the very foundations of society, politics, and governance. Moreover, the idea of leading an autonomous life turns upside down the tenet of the "METHODE" that the social body is of higher value than the individual one. The public call for personal freedom is accordingly not only turned into a demonic act, but, even worse, into a demonic act that is contagious. Following the publication of Mia's pamphlet "Wie die Frage lautet" in the state-run

newspaper *Der gesunde Menschenverstand*, in which she openly accuses the system for being responsible for the death of her brother as well as challenge its basic foundational principles, Mia gains significant support from parts of the public. During a visit in prison, Mia's lawyer Rosentreter breaks the news: "Zehntausende demonstrieren für die Freilassung von Mia Holl.' [...] Sie stehen da draußen mit Sprechchören und Plakaten. So etwas hat das Land seit Jahrzehnten nicht gesehen" (196). The growing support for Mia's cause literally spreads like a virus which, in a society that is based on principles of health, is of course a most serious threat. Through the image of thoughts and actions that are perceived as evil by the hegemonic power spreading like a disease, Zeh yet again connects the present and the Middle Ages as this metaphor of spreading evil had already been established during the time of the witch craze. "When Evil was linked to a certain way of life," Johannes Dillinger states in an article that draws illuminating connections between the present discourse on terrorism and the witch craze of the fifteenth century, "it was thought of as quasi-contagious, evil people were victimizers and victims at the same time" ("Terrorists and Witches" 177). In *Corpus Delicti*, the 'evil' of independent thinking and envisioning a state that does not control its citizens has a comparable effect. Mia is victimizer in the sense that she inspires others to question the principles of the "METHODE" and take to the streets; accordingly, she describes herself at this point of the plot as a "eine Freiheitsstatue, geformt aus Fleisch und Knochen" (198). At the same time, Mia falls victim to her budding political activism because she comes into the firing line of the state and, as a consequence, suffers imprisonment and torture.

Despite its self-proclaimed progressive nature, the "METHODE" does not shy away from implementing what Kramer labels "veraltete Maßnahmen" (234) to force Mia to admit her affiliation with the terrorist group. Needless to state that the implementation of torture to extort a

confession harks back to the witch craze; moreover, though, Zeh uses it to tighten the relationship between the past and the present of the novel's publication. In Mia's prison cell, Kramer prepares her for what is to come: "An den technischen Details hat sich wenig geändert. Da funktioniert im Wesentlichen alles wie vor fünfzig Jahren. Man stellt sie auf eine Kiste, nackt, versteht sich, und zieht ihnen eine schwarze Kapuze über den Kopf" (235). When read in the early 2000s, the imagery of a prisoner on a crate wearing a hood immediately brings to mind similar images of detainees in the US military prison Abu Ghraib¹⁵⁵, the abuse of whom was covered by major media like *The New Yorker* or *Associated Press*.¹⁵⁶ Zeh emphasizes the similarities in the discourses on witchcraft and terrorism as well as drawing a bleak, albeit uncannily accurate connection between the Middle Ages and the beginning of the new millennium via the detour of setting her novel approximately fifty years into the future. Mia Holl accordingly states: "Es hat sich nichts geändert. Es ändert sich niemals etwas. Ein System ist so gut wie das andere. Das Mittelalter ist keine Epoche. Das Mittelalter ist der Name der menschlichen Natur" (235). *Corpus Delicti* in this way manifests itself as literature *on* its time in that it makes the strong statement that power structures and modes of marginalizing deviant subjects today are not only similar to those employed centuries ago but just as effective—and most likely will remain to be in the future. The way in which Zeh interweaves the three different timelines of the novel—the Early Modern period, the present of the novel's reception, and the future temporal setting of the plot—creates the effect of a text that is, similar to *Spieltrieb*, contemporary in the sense that it comments on discourses like health and the threat of transnational terrorism while it is at the same time making statements that ring more generally

¹⁵⁵ See also Klocke "Das Mittelalter" 197-98.

¹⁵⁶ See for example: Hersh, Seymour M.. "Torture at Abu Ghraib." *Newyorker.com*. May 10 2004. Web. 22 March 2016.

true to the setup of human society and, perhaps, even human nature. Just like *Spieltrieb* can be regarded as an example for literature in its time that is not firmly bound to its immediate historical context, *Corpus Delicti* is simultaneously expressively *on* its time but not stuck in the present of its inception or reception. In fact, the intricate interweaving of past, present, and future—in conjunction with the conclusions the reader is encouraged to draw from the intermingling of discourses on witchcraft, terrorism, and the need for personal freedom—explicitly inscribes the notion of timelessness into this otherwise timely text.

Contemporary Literature as *Zeitarbeit*

In her poetics lecture, Zeh writes “Schreiben ist Zeitarbeit” (*Treideln* 34), in reference to the freedom an author has to modulate narrative time as she or he pleases while writing a text. I suggest to transfer the formulation from the process of writing to the product of writing and, eventually, its reception as well in order to emphasize how Zeh’s texts are narratives of, in, and on their time. Contemporary literature can be considered to be *Zeitarbeit* in the sense that it is the product of its time, as exemplified in my analysis of Zeh’s *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* and *Nullzeit*, with respect to the incorporation of literary currents and broader sociopolitical discourses into the narrative. It is *Zeitarbeit* in its time insofar as a novel like *Spieltrieb* demonstrates how firmly embedded Zeh’s narratives are in the contemporary moment of their creation. Lastly, Zeh’s texts can be read as *Zeitarbeit* on their time as well in that a text like *Corpus Delicti* is a literary comment on the sociopolitical questions and developments on which the novel focusses.

The advantage of these three criteria of a re-conceptualization of contemporary literature is that the notion of literature being in, of, and on its time is not dependent on a specific linguistic background. While I naturally analyze Juli Zeh's work as *German* contemporary literature because it is written in that language and alludes to what Herrmann has labeled "collective center[s] of reference" ("How Does Transnationalism" 23), the model could be transferred to other 'national' literatures as well. Moreover, the model also allows for a temporal transfer, in other words, it could be applied to an examination of what contemporary literature meant in, for example, the 1960s or earlier decades. Crucially, the prepositions used as a framework to analyze contemporary literature are intrinsically linked to markers within the text itself, i.e. they are independent of non-diegetic markers like historical benchmark dates. The notion of time, however, is of course not absent from the model. Quite the contrary, it is vital because it is the convergence of literature being in, of, and on its time that ensures a text's longevity or staying power. Novels like *Spieltrieb* and *Corpus Delicti* are indicative of the contemporary moment in that they are literary representations of and reflections on the first decade of the twenty-first century—at the same time, it is equally important to emphasize that they are not stuck in this decade because Zeh makes statements that go beyond the immediate point in time of the novel's creation. In this way, the notion of timelessness is introduced into a conceptualization of contemporary literature, a notion that at first sight appears paradoxical for literature addressing the present. Timelessness, however, is understood in this context as going beyond the time of the text's production and reception, or as the resilience of a text that ensures that it is not only of relevance for the contemporary moment but in the future as well.

The notion of timelessness ultimately also leads back to the question of the purpose of literature, a question put into words by Theodor Fontane and quoted previously: "Was soll der

moderne Roman?” (“Rezension” 186, emphasis in original). To reformulate the question slightly, the question is what contemporary literature is supposed to achieve and what role and function it has in the twenty-first century. With regards to *Corpus Delicti*, the analysis has shown that contemporary literature can be seen as a means to challenge normalized views on the world, thus preparing the reader for what can happen in the future. With regards to the present moment, the role of contemporary literature is debatably slightly different. I suggest that texts that fall into the category of contemporary literature by virtue of being in, of, and on their time are able to achieve on a broad level what I have analyzed for literature in its time with respect to *Spieltrieb*: They are a way to transform the apparent chaos of our present into a legible narrative. Making the world legible opens the door for interpretation. As a result, the reader is empowered to engage with the literary representation of the lived-in world and, hopefully, transfers this engagement back to act upon the world of which she or he would otherwise only read.

Weitertreideln: Conclusion

True to the title of this dissertation, this conclusion echoes the anecdotal character with which I have started the analysis of Juli Zeh's work. Just a few days before writing these lines, I had a conversation with a colleague from the University of Frankfurt during which she shared her impression that the reception of Juli Zeh within Germany—within the literary public, the public sphere, but within academic circles as well—is to a significant extent characterized by annoyance or nuisance, an impression confirmed by other conversations I had during my stay in Germany. In the spring and early summer of 2016, Juli Zeh is indeed very present in German media, due to the publication and subsequent success of her novel *Unterleuten* in March 2016, a voluminous work marketed and received as “Gesellschaftsroman”¹⁵⁷. Enhanced media presence, however, does not explain or even justify nuisance. The anecdotal nature of these introductory observations aside, an author like Juli Zeh evidently is a figure who causes provocation for and challenges to the audience, not only because she uses many available channels to promote her newest book but also because she has again taken up her role as public intellectual. In a post on her *Facebook*-page from July 10, she delineates her project of developing a draft of a charter of European digital rights:

Gemeinsam mit einer Gruppe von Experten und Interessierten arbeite ich gerade am Entwurf einer Europäischen Charta Digitaler Grundrechte, die noch in diesem Jahr von

¹⁵⁷ The term not only appears on the promotional homepage of the novel *unterleuten.de* but also in nearly all reviews of the novel. See for example: Jacobsen, Dietmar. “Die Idylle trägt.” *Literaturkritik.de*. 5 April 2016. Web. 14 April 2016; Schröder, Christoph. “Windkrafträder auf Misthaufen.” *Tagesspiegel.de*. 12 March 2016. Web. 14 April 2016; and Magenau, Jörg. “Großbauer trifft auf Windparkinvestor.” *Deutschlandradiokultur.de*. 5 March 2016. Web. 14 April 2016.

Martin Schulz ins Europaparlament eingebracht werden soll. [...] Welche Rechte/Schutzziele/Anliegen sollten eurer Meinung nach in einer solchen Charta enthalten sein? (“Vorsicht, hier kommt ein etwas längerer Text...”)

As illustrated in the last sentence of the quote, Zeh directly asks her followers to contribute to the draft by making suggestions and continued the discussion by summarizing the received answers on *Facebook* one day later on June 11. In short, following a longer period of silence that must be attributed to the project of finishing and preparing the publication of *Unterleuten*, Zeh has very actively and ambitiously returned to the literary and general public and continues her engagement with her audience. Previously, I have quoted a now removed post from Zeh’s *Facebook*-page in which one of her followers had expressed his disappointment with Zeh’s absence, thus highlighting the close connection authors writing today are able to sustain with their audience and, more importantly, the expectation Zeh’s audience has towards her with respect to the frequency of her public work. In *Representation of the Intellectual*, Edward W. Said poses the question whether the audience of a public intellectual—and in extension the audience of a writer-intellectual like Zeh—is to be satisfied or whether it needs to be challenged and maybe even mobilized into direct political participation (83). In Zeh’s case, a combination of the two appears to be the answer in the sense that her audience expects to be satisfied by being challenged. Fifteen years into her career, Zeh has established a reputation within the literary and general public that creates the expectation in her audience to be confronted with provocative and politically charged statements and actions. At the same time, the persistence of her, to once again borrow Sara Ahmed’s terminology, willful interventions also create rejection and animosities

among those members of the public who do not perceive an author—or at least not Juli Zeh—to be a legitimate representative or even participant of political public discourse.

As established throughout *Echoes and Oscillations*, Zeh's persistence to enrich public discourse with provocations and perturbations is not limited to her non-literary activities like the development of a charter of digital rights or previously mentioned march on the Federal Chancellery. Persistence, provocation, and perturbation also pertain to Zeh's literary work, again with regards to content and extra-literary actions like the promotion of texts or the publication of essayistic companion pieces like *Angriff auf die Freiheit*. The fact that Zeh continues to meet expectations by causing disruptions is lucidly exemplified in media coverage in the wake of *Unterleuten*. First of all, Zeh creates an echo within her own work by choosing to open her latest novel with the words "Alles ist Wille" that had already appeared in *Nullzeit* (44) and previously as a photograph on her *Facebook*-page. More importantly, though, Zeh puts these words into the mouth of one Manfred Gortz, author of *Dein Erfolg* (2015), a short guide to success that develops dubious categories like "killjoy" and "mover" (7) in order to provide the reader with strategies leading to a successful life. Shortly after the publication of Zeh's novel, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published an article¹⁵⁸ that revealed that Manfred Gortz is in fact an invention of Zeh to accompany *Unterleuten*'s entry into the literary market and that many of Gortz's personae from *Dein Erfolg* reappear as characters in Zeh's novel. Therefore, *Dein Erfolg* can be read as a companion piece to *Unterleuten*; however, it is a companion piece that complements the primary literary text on a different level than, for example, *Angriff auf die Freiheit* complements *Corpus Delicti*. Rather than providing the reader with additional information about topics like state surveillance and the loss of civil rights for the sake of terror

¹⁵⁸ Lehmkuhl, Tobias. "Hat Juli Zeh für ihren aktuellen Roman abgeschrieben?" *Süddeutsche.de*. 14 April 2016. Web. 11 June 2016.

prevention in the shared lived-in world, as is the case for *Angriff auf die Freiheit, Dein Erfolg* is directly linked to both content and anticipated reception of *Unterleuten* in that both are tightly interwoven through shared terminology and characters. Notably, the initial confusion created by Zeh with respect to truth versus fiction in her two complementary texts has to some extent overshadowed the novel itself and can be read as having backfired. At the same time, the fact that *Unterleuten* is promoted and received as a “Gesellschaftsroman” suggests that the extensive media coverage on the intertextual relationship of the two texts was part of Zeh’s strategy all along. On the one hand, the coverage reveals the configuration of today’s literary journalism as being fixated on sensationalist news like Zeh’s initially alleged plagiarism.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand—and arguably more importantly—the coverage on *Unterleuten* exposes contemporary society’s tendency to be engrossed with sensationalist stories to the disadvantage of more substantial content. Accordingly, Zeh’s brief reflections posted on her *Facebook*-page after the true identity, or rather non-identity, of Manfred Gortz had been revealed, are considerably critical:

Seit Manfred Gortz ‘geoutet’ ist, werde ich ständig gefragt, ob es sich dabei um eine ‘Marketing-Strategie’ handele, und zwar immer so, als wäre ‘Marketing’ per se etwas Böses. Schon das ärgert mich: Schön mit allen Vorzügen des Kapitalismus’ [sic] leben, aber ‘Marketing’ schlimm finden – bigotter geht’s kaum. [...] Oder rührt diese ‘Marketing-Frage’ daher, dass niemand mehr auf die Idee kommt, jemand könne heutzutage noch Dinge einfach der Kunst zuliebe tun oder der Satire zuliebe oder dem Spaß zuliebe oder sogar auch einer ernsthaften thematischen Auseinandersetzung

¹⁵⁹ See Lehmkuhl. See also: Kämmerlings, Richard. “Echt gelogen.” *Welt.de*. 1 May 2016. Web. 12 June 2016; Vogel, Sabine. “Im Netz mit Romanfiguren.” *Fr-online.de*. 5 May 2016. Web. 12 June 2016.

zuliebe? Kann das nicht sein? [...] Was ich von Gortz alles gelernt habe – das wollte ich zum Teil gar nicht wissen. (“Seit Manfred Gortz ‘geoutet’ ist...”)

While the statement clearly expresses Zeh’s indignation about the alleged bigotry of those who complain about marketing while at the same enjoying the benefits of a neoliberal capitalist society, it also conveys the feeling that Zeh can no longer command the spirits that she has cited. This might explain why, in the second part of her post, she focuses heavily on her role as an artist and the freedom this role entails. However, Zeh also—and this encapsulates the meaning of the term oscillations throughout this dissertation—mentions the aspect of “kritische Auseinandersetzung,” which in this context can be read as referring to her primary roles as author *and* public figure or intellectual. The way in which Zeh expands the reception and debate about a traditional print media like a book into the digital realm certainly deserves more detailed investigation in the future, the main point here is that she manages to hold a mirror up to mechanisms of sensationalist journalism and, more specifically, the literary market whose image agents of said market might not be too eager to confront. In this fashion, she once again confirms and adds to the image of a persistently willful author-intellectual that *Echoes and Oscillations* has established and analyzed on the previous pages.

Juli Zeh’s earlier as well as her current work suggests that there is no reason to assume that she will stop being willful and provocative anytime soon. In consequence, her readership can rely on continuously being challenged through politically charged fictional and non-fictional texts that are of, in, and on our time and therefore *contemporary* in the truest sense of the word. In light of the fact that Zeh can justifiably be regarded as a polarizing author and public figure, this can, depending on one’s point of view, be understood as a threat or a promise. In *Treideln*,

Zeh assures her readers that a continuation of her project of going against the flow and to meet expectations by destabilizing them is exactly what she has in mind for the future with respect to both her literary and her non-literary work: “Weitermachen. Warmschreiben. Ranschreiben. Weibertreideln” (162). *Weibertreideln* must indeed be read as Zeh’s motto for the future, as the brief analysis of the reception of *Unterleuten* has demonstrated. It can also be read as a call to her readership to continue to engage with the realities of our shared sociopolitical circumstances and to actively shape them. Last but not least, *weibertreideln* can be read as carrying meaning for academic literary criticism as well. I started the analysis of the work of Juli Zeh with her question “wozu gäbe es denn die ganze Literaturwissenschaft, wenn die Autoren selbst wüssten, was es mit ihren Texten auf sich hat?” (18). In the introduction of this dissertation, I have mentioned that reading meaning into texts is part of the answer in addition to analyzing what literature can achieve beyond textual borders. For politically charged texts like those written by Zeh, reading meaning into them becomes an analytical-political act in itself. In this way, academic literary critics can become accomplices in Zeh’s project of making our present legible and, by virtue of being part of the general readership, they—we—can find satisfaction in being challenged. In *Treideln*, Zeh expresses the hope that citizens—“wir”—will heed the call to participate in the “große Selbstgespräch der Gesellschaft” (160) in order to make it as polyphonic as possible. There is no reason to assume that Zeh is excluding academics and we would do well to heed her call and raise our voices in society’s soliloquy as well. *Nur so*.

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Image Notes

Figure 1: Demonstrators in front of the Federal Chancellery. “Endlich handeln! Schriftsteller
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Figure 2: Cardboard boxes with the slogan “NO, you can’t.” “Endlich handeln! Schriftsteller
marschieren zum Kanzleramt.” *Rbb-online.de*. 18 September 2013. Web. 23 July 2015.

Figure 3: Demonstrator trying to lift a box over the security fence. “Endlich handeln!
Schriftsteller marschieren zum Kanzleramt.” *Rbb-online.de*. 18 September 2013. Web. 23 July
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Figure 4: Policeman at demonstration in front of Federal Chancellery. “Endlich handeln!
Schriftsteller marschieren zum Kanzleramt.” *Rbb-online.de*. 18 September 2013. Web. 23 July
2015.

Figure 5: Demonstrators reacting to policeman’s orders. “Endlich handeln! Schriftsteller
marschieren zum Kanzleramt.” *Rbb-online.de*. 18 September 2013. Web. 23 July 2015.