

Mediamania? Contemporary German Poetry in the Age of New Information Technologies: Thomas Kling and Durs Grünbein

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What is the intellectual position of those German poets who succeeded in developing an astoundingly fresh tone in contemporary poetry and discovered new topics in view of the emergence of new information technologies—do they still maintain that their poetry occupies a domain different from the public sphere of newspapers, radio, and television? Have contemporary poets inherited the critical position of their predecessors of the 1960s—or did they finally give up their resistance to the demonized mass media because of the transformation of an intellectual environment that became strongly influenced by advanced technologies of storing, manipulating, and distributing data? Perhaps only in its most extreme, autonomous form, poetry might depend solely on the “gravitation of language away from meaning” (Adorno, “Correspondence” 190)—thus resisting the shrill jargon of mass media and repudiating the categorical imperative of communication. However, since Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s legendary volume *landessprache* (“native language” 1960) and his polemics against the “industry of consciousness,” German poetry has become almost synonymous with an openly hostile attitude toward the mass media. From Enzensberger to Nicolas Born, poets have attacked the press and TV for their lack of truthful communication.¹ Do the younger successors share these critical positions of nonconformity with the culture industry and its journalistic appendage? Certainly, this antagonism has prevailed well into the 1980s, at least as far as the public discourse is concerned.² Comparable to the invectives against the established institutions during the 1960s, some contemporary writers also seem to

despise the mass media with their hawking of biographical trifles and their lack of response to the phenomenon of poetry itself: "The poet who enters the media degenerates, he becomes feeble-minded. With unrestricted necessity the poet becomes ridiculous due to his performance in public—if he does not, stupidly enough, appear ridiculous to the audience, then he emphatically does so in view of the general condition of the poem" (Falkner, *Über den Unwert* 105).³ Considering the long tradition of critical negativity and austere disapproval of the popular in postwar literature, any rapprochement of the two antagonists seemed unlikely in the 1970s. And yet, recent German poetry indicates a growing interest in the materialities of communication. Notwithstanding the rare voices of sharp criticism, we notice a rather strange curiosity or even a fascination with the new technology and its terminology among German poets. The omnipresence of electronic devices, indeed, seems to impose global information as a dominant thematics. In reading German poetry of the last 15 years, one can easily detect the preoccupation with new media—but also the signs of a fascination with its counterpart, the "*morbidezza auf schönem Fleische*," the softness of beautiful flesh, as Friedrich Nietzsche once called it (839). The poetic exploration of human physiology instead of the mental disposition of the subject sheds some light on the fundamental literary approach in the age of electronic information technology: what really matters is not the mind but the material condition of the possibility of speech, thought, and desire.

New media technologies, most visible in electronic gadgetry, have left their mark on our historical consciousness to such a degree that we are tempted to see them as signs of an epoch-making transformation. Incontestably, the electronic media have influenced the present poetic idioms, which adopt the scientific terminology. This appropriation, aiming at linguistic precision, is similar to the complementary relation of modern poetry to the exactitude of science, as Adorno pointed out: "Sensibility becomes an experimental procedure, indeed an arrangement designed to grasp the basic stimuli which otherwise elude subjective domination and make them legible on the scale of sensation" ("Correspondence" 191). The high expectations of postmodern theoreticians and essayists are typically expressed in a euphoric tone. According to David Tomas, "there is reason to believe that these (new) technologies might constitute the central phase in a post-industrial 'rite of passage' between organically human and cyberpsychically digital life-forms as reconfigured through computer software systems" (qtd in Bukatman 145).⁴ Less

effusive but similarly observant, the peculiar diction of the young urban poets shows the deep impact of the “telematic” instruments, combining TV (*télévision*) with computers (*informatique*).⁵

The question, however, remains whether the spirit of a new epoch contributes to an appropriate form of expression which might help poets to wriggle out of the rusty triangle of epigonal modernism, Viennese experimentalism, and New Subjectivity. Historically, the relationship between poetry and media has indeed drastically changed since the turmoil of the late 1960s and the discussion of a *littérature engagée*. One way to overcome the exhaustion of authentic everyday language in poetry was the reappraisal of the classical modernists. Paradigmatically, Gerhard Falkner’s references to Rilke and George aimed at the invigoration of the poetic form at the beginning of the 1980s, when the two modernists were rather disregarded. A well-read commentator, Hermann Korte, who examined the trends of postwar poetry, described these reactions as a return to tradition in his *Geschichte der deutschen Lyrik seit 1945*. Although it is true that conventional means such as rhyme and rhythm were reintroduced and used again by Falkner (as well as by Peter Rühmkorf or Andreas Koziol), the Nuremberg-based poet, in his volume *wemut*, convincingly demonstrated what a vast variety of poetic modes was at his disposal. For instance, he invented unconventional genres such as a paradoxical telephone soliloquy, “ich, bitte antworten” ‘I, please answer,’ or a polyphonic composition, entitled “materien” ‘substances,’ whose split-level columns display the disintegration of language caused by data processing. Korte does not consider this postmodern plenitude of styles in one poet; nor does he, more generally, acknowledge the ground-breaking achievements of the 1980s, established by several poets. The authors who are directly confronted with the new media, such as Gerhard Falkner, Durs Grünbein, Thomas Kling, Barbara Köhler, Brigitte Oleschinski, Peter Waterhouse, as well as the prior innovators, Friederike Mayröcker, Reinhold Priessnitz, Felix Philipp Ingold and Paul Wühr, need to be mentioned here. At the end of the decade, the newly developed discordant and lacerated forms were the most radical response to the spreading of high-tech media, accompanied by quasi-philosophical reflections on technical terminologies. After this climax, the radical infringement of syntactical, orthographical norms and of lexical integrity was easily available to the youngest poets, those beginning their careers in the 1990s. Most of these phenomena are closely linked to the sound and vision of portable

taperecorders, Polaroid cameras, laptop computers, compact discs, phone-answering machines, video cameras and recorders. The impact of these new media on our ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the world as a "global village" can be seen as an obsessive theme running through many poems written during the last few years (1990-1995).

The shifting alignments of forces in recent poetry are evident. What was once the indispensable ingredient of poetological argument, namely the poet's political attitude, has been replaced by a sober and sophisticated diagnosis of a complex hyperreality that cannot simply be affirmed or negated: "While affirmation merely affirms what is and negation merely negates what is not, simulation means to affirm what is not and dissimulation means to negate what is" (Kittler 64).⁶ The massive critique of the manipulatory power of mass media, as it was most prominently formulated by Hans Magnus Enzensberger after the student protests of the 1960s, has been taken up by popular discourse—but not by the young poets and the unorthodox media-theoreticians (Norbert Bolz, Jochen Hörisch, Friedrich Kittler, Klaus Theweleit). Those "heretic" academics discovered media as the *apriori* of literature—a thesis formulated and programmatically developed by Kittler—even as the ruinous effects of television were being widely discussed as a moral issue in the 1980s. A position like the one enunciated in Enzensberger's pivotal "Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien" ("Construction Set for a Theory of Media"), published in *Kursbuch* 20 (1970), was no longer productive for those writers starting their careers in the middle to late 1980s. Except for a few critical voices, the media have been accepted as a warehouse of motifs for those poets who replaced critical negativity by ironic affirmation, cynical mockery, and shrewd playfulness. On the part of the reader, it is often a futile endeavor to determine the position of the poet. Since the poetic means are such that each phrase with a fixed meaning has dissolved into a web of truisms, puns, quotations, and dissected words, the very notion of authorial intention has become obscure. What really counts is the aesthetic density and uncertainty of the text in an effort to overcome the obtuseness of a *poésie engagée* and the *quotidiano parlando* of the New Subjectivity.⁷

The slow transformation of an aesthetics of resistance can be observed in Hans Magnus Enzensberger's contributions to a debate on the role of media. Enzensberger, well-trained in polemical rhetoric, conceives of teaching literacy skills as a strategy to exploit the

“brains” of the illiterate.⁴ With regard to the 1870s, those explosive years of ground-breaking inventions by Edison, Siemens, Linde, Bell, and Otto, he argues that the term “Analphabetismus” ‘illiteracy,’ created in the same period, proves the point that technology is the very condition for an even more radical exploitation than the one during the pedagogical reforms at the end of the 18th century. According to Enzensberger, a new illiteracy is in the offing because of the irresistible seduction of television; he maintains this new stage could even bring about a voluntary occupation with literary texts, an obstinate reading of literature that would no longer be a symbol of status, social code, or educational program (“Lob” 72).

And yet, even Enzensberger, apparently rejecting Jean Baudrillard’s or Paul Virilio’s diagnosis of contemporary civilization, shares the common cynical attitude in his essay on the “Bild-Zeitung”: “an den manipulativen Techniken der Zeitung [the newspaper *Bild*, e.g.] gab es nichts zu ‘entlarven’ ” ‘Concerning the manipulative techniques of the newspaper, there was nothing to be “unmasked”’ (“Triumph” 80). According to this bold remark, everybody knows about the structure and the effects. Therefore, the readers have developed a guilty conscience which is already taken account of by the press (“Triumph” 83). Due to this uncanny manipulation, any critical intervention is superfluous since information functions as the complement of advertisement. Because both are equivalents, the critic concludes that one means the other, and therefore all means nothing (“Triumph” 88).

Enzensberger developed his deeply suspicious position even further in his refined contribution to an analysis of mass media. In his essay, entitled “Das Nullmedium oder warum alle Klagen über das Fernsehen gegenstandslos sind” (“The Zero Medium or Why All Complaints about Television are Pointless”), he distinguishes TV’s manipulatory effects from its power to stimulate immoral identification or stupefaction and, finally, to confuse the senses by simulation. The mass media, television in particular, tend to reach the stage of a “zero medium,” which has neither program nor content. “Neu an den neuen Medien ist die Tatsache, daß sie auf Programme nicht mehr angewiesen sind” (“What is new about the new media is the fact that they no longer depend on programs”) (“Nullmedium” 95). Enzensberger’s sarcastic interpretation of the TV monitor as our vehicle for contemporary nirvana points out the viewers’ lack of critical consciousness; he even notes that the absentmindedness

of an infant or the contemplation of Malevic's abstract painting *Black Rectangular* ("Nullmedium" 102-03) resembles the numbing effects of TV. Interestingly enough, the critic's essay anticipates Durs Grünbein's interpretation of the screen, as we shall see, even though the polemical verve is absolutely missing in the latter. Clearly, Enzensberger's remarks reveal his cynical resignation. After the crisis of the critique of ideology, his mode of thinking has apparently lost its vigor. The poet's response to the shift from the manipulation (intentionality) to the materiality (discursive structure) of mass media marks the loss of a clear-cut target for a negative-dialectical critique of manipulatory forces. Paradoxically, the essay even suffers from its brilliant rhetoric. Enzensberger not only fails to analyze the technicalities of TV, he even falls behind Adorno's acute observation: "There are no more ideologies in the emphatic sense of false consciousness, only advertisements for the world through its duplication and the provocative lie which does not seek belief but commands silence."⁹

In retrospect, it seems that the new tone of recent German poetry came into existence in the shadow of the mass media, unobserved by the general literary audience. Current poetry, one might contend, has a hidden previous history since most of the now prominent writers were closely linked to a semi-professional production of literature since 1977/1978, when less institutionalized channels of distributing poems such as collaborative painter-poet books gained significance and various alternative journals were founded.¹⁰ While on an academic level the merits and drawbacks of the New Subjectivity were still being discussed, young poets seem to have directed their energies towards poetry as art. Most of the writers born in the 1950s and 1960s had already published their poems in low-budget publications for a small group of enthusiasts before they were accepted by prestigious publishing houses. This is true not only for the unofficial literature of the former GDR—which gained much attention after 1989—but also for certain regions in the West. In 1977, Thomas Kling, for instance, had collected 35 poems for a volume called *der zustand vor dem untergang* ("the conditions before the downfall"), followed by his second publication *amptate* in the early 1980s, while Gerhard Falkner's *so beginnen am körper die tage* (thus begin the days in the body, 1978) and *ich verlasse, julia, dein land* (I'm leaving your country, Julia, 1980) appeared in small editions, co-produced by artists. At the same time, in the East writers such as Frank-Wulf Matthies, Sascha Anderson, Bert

Papenfuß-Gorek, and Uwe Kolbe distributed their poems in combination with drawings and paintings in a number of art books. Almost ten years later, in 1986, a younger group of writers began to participate in the production of those journals and started their own production of poems in cooperation with artists. In East Berlin, first Frank Lanzendörfer and Leonhard Lorek, then Ulrich Zieger and Johannes Jansen were engaged in editing the unofficial art-and-poetry journals *schaden* (damage, 1984-1987), later continued in Egmont Hesse's *verwendung* (use, 1988-1990), while in the West Norbert Hummelt's volume *oh an-anatomie* (1987) and Marcel Beyer's *Kleine Zahnpasta* (Little Toothpaste, 1989) appeared in a limited number of copies in small publishing houses. As these rather unpretentious titles suggest, technical terms, puns, distorted phrases, and trivial slogans from advertisements are used equivocally. In addition, an artist book such as Durs Grünbein's *Gettohochzeit* (Ghetto Wedding 1988) which combined anatomical collage-drawings by Via Lewandowsky with texts by the poet, used oxymoronic combinations to ridicule political taboos.¹¹ The provocation of literature was no longer a political offense directed against the establishment. On both sides of the border, a reconsideration of poetry as art and a reflection on the aesthetic properties of language had taken place so that the literary vacuum of the mid-seventies left by the charismatic Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, the James Dean of German poetry at the time, could slowly be filled. The paralyzing effects of the *arte povera* of Born, Delius, or Theobaldy, poets who cultivated an unpretentious *quotidiano parlando*, were strongly felt by those who set out to create their own "artistic" idiom in the early 1980s.

As Michael Braun, one of the most astute and knowledgeable commentators of contemporary German poetry, notes in his "Poesie in Bewegung," the topics of recent German literature since the New Subjectivity have not dramatically changed but undergone a subtle modification. The prosaic tone and the energy have intensified; however, neither simple narrative logic nor the inclusion of documentary snapshots were accepted by the poets of the early 1980s. Subliminally, the aesthetic credo of "authentic experience" is even ridiculed since strategies of simulation, dissimulation, and a cunning alternation of roles have replaced the undisguised "I," a subject lamenting his or her manipulation by the mass media (Theobaldy, "Räume" 135). Instead of sensory data and the "gravitation of language" (Adorno) the contemporary poets rely on theo-

retical concepts—indeed, some of them already establish a model of the phenomenon being described before even encountering it. Since elaborate theoretical concepts or flippant essayistic reflections on phenomena of our time are already part and parcel of a general cultural disposition, the writer can adopt different idiosyncratic authorial voices. An eclectically construed model, borrowed from biology, anthropology, cybernetics, and postmodern thought, has replaced the empiricism of snapshots à la Brinkmann. The fascination with an artificial and electronically mastered world is a feature which can also be easily discerned in narrative prose, as Hubert Winkels has demonstrated in “Einschnitte” (“Incisions”). To some degree, the popular prose texts by Peter Glaser, Niklas Stiller, or Bodo Morshäuser have anticipated the less accessible “techno sound” of poems of the 1990s. Apart from sharing some incidental technical key terms, writers of narratives have noticed the fundamental loss of power that literature suffered owing to the emergence of the new media. They did so, however, without any solicitude—instead, they professed a sober, clinically detached interest in a new era of postmodern information technology (Winkels 269-70).

In the beginning of the 1980s, German poetry had already reacted sensitively towards the ubiquity of the new media. Probably the most remarkable representative of a “phonocentric” mode is Thomas Kling. The challenging poems of this Cologne-based poet and captivating performer consistently assault the notion of text as an organic entity. Stanzas and lines are mutilated and disfigured; even smaller units such as words are truncated and their syllables arbitrarily “hyphenated”—chopped into single letters. This radical treatment of the written text undermines the optical identification of homogeneous forms and shifts the focus to the reconstruction of words. Because of the text’s chaotic appearance, one has to constantly hunt for fragments of information. The breakdown of a conventional structure requires multiple readings in order to recognize minimal patterns. Neither landscapes nor bodies, the classical topoi of more conventional poems on nature and love, are kept as imaginative resources to stimulate the visual fantasy of readers and their subliminal desire to make out a *gestalt*. Apparently, the poet aims at overwhelming and at the same time attracting his readers through the *aprosdoketon*, the rhetorical attack by the “unexpected.” As an emblem of his strategy, Kling uses the wasp, to allude to the danger and confusion his readers have to be prepared for.

Programmatically, in a poem from *brennstabm* (*fuel rods* or *stinging letters*), Kling's much acclaimed second collection of poems written between 1985 and 1988, an anonymous voice insists on a prosaic tone to extract the sentimentality from languages: "den sprachn das sentimentale / abknöpfn" (168).¹² Kling chooses various tactics to keep this promise. Most prominently, he uses cut-up techniques (comparable to e.e.cummings' method) in such a radical fashion that the juxtaposition of fragments appears conspicuously oblique. Nevertheless, a frame of references to the history of "cuts" in modern media alludes to the precursors Buñuel and Eisenstein. As in avant garde film, the rapid flow of juxtaposed units creates a spectrum of meanings. Cuts, cracks, or splits refer not only to events in Kling's poems. As important signals, they name and describe the poetic technique itself, that is, a tearing apart of lines as if a recording tape or a vocal chord were damaged. Unlike a purely phonetic poem, in his poetry Kling isolates the channels so that the reader has to distinguish voice from vision. A title such as "foto photo" (23) neatly illustrates the confrontation between pronunciation and writing. Due to this distinction, the layout regulates the intonation rather than the rhythm; it leaves the impression of a strangely marked visual pattern. The truncation of words indicates the accurate articulation of a single letter for the reading/performance, similar to music notation. At the same time, it contributes to a writing with strange attractions for the reader. The secret of Kling's poems is the calculated effect of surprise or even bewilderment; that is how these random signifiers defy the notion of systematic "experimentalism." Thereby the poet does not suppress the moment of chance as a vital force of his poems. This is a clear rejection of the academic style of "Concrete Poetry," the free combination of acoustical-optical signs.

In Kling's "love" poems, the poetic voice describes the separation of a couple in relation to their personal idiom: a clean "cut" can be as painful as it is revealing. Interestingly enough, the loss of language is considered more important than the emotionally disturbing effects of such a breaking apart of the couple. In "aber annette," for example, the lover first alludes to the mutual distancing. Finally, the poem's last four lines note the fading of the amorous vocabulary previously used: "entglitten die nicknames für herzen! und / das fällt ins gewicht, und schon wieder / sind zwei um eine tote sprache reicher / (verlernt), ein kaputtes pidgin mehr" 'the nicknames for hearts slipping away and / this is of great weight

and again / two are enriched by a dead language / (forgotten), another pidgin ruined' (12). This poem illustrates the uncompromising attack on sentimental or melancholic feelings.

In general, direct access to another person, but also to a mere thing or a landscape, seems to be impossible for the speaker of the poems. The objects of interest are obscured; for instance, a certain European scenery is not presented by images of nature but rather reconstructed as a multilayered, historically formed terrain of language. As a surveyor and archeologist, Kling's persona targets two historically significant regions, the Rhineland and the Alps. His childhood in the Rhine valley between Bingen, Düsseldorf, and Cologne is evoked by cryptic references to well-known photographs; the past, however, cannot be remembered since the landscape of those years is reduced to a "überflogener, beabsichtigter sprachraum" 'domain of language, flown across, intended,' as the poem "notgrabun" 'emergency excavation' demonstrates (205). The poem uses a pun playing on the connotations of the verbs, namely "to skim a page" and "to inspect or survey a region," thus identifying the landscape with paper. Nevertheless, the archeological digger succeeds in finding *linguistic* traces of the epoch of the grandparents. For instance, the idioms of wine-growers and craftsmen refer to an old Rhenish culture. Acting as a geometer of foreign territories, Kling's persona is concerned with the history of the Alps from the early poetic surveys by Albrecht von Haller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to the ideological concepts of "Heimat" in Leni Riefenstahl's early film, *Das Blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light* 1932).¹³

In a remarkable cycle entitled "stromernde alpm schrift" 'rambling alpine writing,' eight poems dismantle these images. The word "strom-" in the German title alludes both to electric current and to roaming like a tramp in the electronic network. In search of unspoiled nature, one is confronted with the presence of computer technology even in this field. The hallucinatory space of the poem is situated in the high Alps where the individual experiences both a blackout, a "firn-/riß" ('glacier crevice'), due to his consumption of alcohol, and an avalanche. The melting of this icy granular snow, the "Firn"—which means "glacial snow" or "névé" but also 'well-seasoned wine'—breaks the silence and loosens the tongue. In the second poem of the series "rambling alpine writing," the alpine landscape is put on stage with all the cinematic effects to create the perfect illusion of real nature. In reality, however, the top of

the Alps is already reached by those who carried along the latest developments of technology, the mountaineers with their laptops:

riß. restartn, stromernd. stromernder
rest- und alpgartn; lautlose, wenn keiner
stolpert, draufsicht; angeworfne vorstrom-
ernde nebelmaschine, lautlosigkeitm im o-
ton. hier sagt man: winddurchstromertes
andachzbilt und, siehe obn, erstesahne-
want ("trag du dich schon mal ein"), a-
rnikalitanei ("arnikalitanei?"), gamsjäger-
am-laptop.

fissure. remaining species, rambling
rambling alpine garden and its remainder, silent
view from above if nobody stumbles, scout-
ing fog machine, started up, silences in
the original. here one says: devotional picture
blown through by the wind, and, see above, first-
rate steep face ("go on and put your name down"), a-
rnica litany ("arnica litany?"), chamois hunter
at laptop. (214)

In his poem "rambling alpine writing" Kling takes issue with the illusion of splendid isolation in the high mountains or, rather, the ideology of nature-as-landscape since the Renaissance.¹⁴ The apparent contrast of alpine nature with the technologies of the new age, meticulously itemized in the ground-breaking compendium of modern media, Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, illustrates the spirit of pioneering in both fields. It is worth mentioning that the topography of the Alps and the Rhineland is no isolated theme in Kling's work. Instead, the poetic cycle presenting the glacier mountains ("alpm") as a media event in the cold age of electronic networks is inextricably linked to a previous cycle called "mittel rhein" 'middle of the rhine.' In one of the poems, "normale sage" 'standard legend' (209), allusions to "platzenden albn" 'bursting photo albums' which are being looked at while drinking wine at home anticipate the avalanche in the Alps. The distant past and a remote landscape, we might infer, is only experienced in a delirium which makes things alive and connects one with the other. This "virtual" reality of the poem, an associative web of information, allows the

poetic persona to gain access to those remembrances of days lost and disconnected.

Thomas Kling notes that the forgetting of idioms (and languages) in a postmodern environment is defined not only by the omnipresence of electronic devices which record, store, and transfer data but also by the disappearance of certain fields of knowledge. The subject as receiving medium follows these traces. The arbitrary movement of particles in a virtual space of information indicates the autonomy of the part within the whole; similarly, each of the body parts has its own life. For example, the tongue, not the brain with its rational faculties of control, is the organ responsible for mixing up and connecting semantic units with each other. After all, it is not logic but language that matters in Kling's poems. The cloggy title "ssfinng-uuinngx" of the following poem is a fine example of Kling's most radical concoctions. Various lexical units, for instance sphinx, wings, penguin, Finnish, phoenix, form an obscure chain of signifiers which are ultimately grafted to one motley word. This poem also contains an illuminating description of Kling's linguistic approach:

ssfinng-uuinngx

rein in den kopfbahnhof, drängend.
jungezungen: di sprachn di argots ab-
schreitn. Die abgeschrittenen bahn
steige, flackernden liverpool-scarfs JETZT
WIRD ALLES PLÖZZLICH VERSCHRECKT UND LÄUFT
in fasanenfarbn goldfasanfahm, eine art
feinwaschmittel, vor unseren augen ap.
schwarze serie. russige zungen, entladungen,
russische argots in schellack in wartesälen
während, nachthustn in turnhallen, dringend
eine reichsbahnlok einfährt versichern wir
ihn das, rein sprachlich, bei abge
schnittenen verbindun'

comin' into the terminus, pushing.
youngtongues: reviewing the languages the
slangs. the platforms being paced up and
down, the flickering liverpoolscarves NOW
ALL OF A SUDDEN EVERYTHING IS JOLTED AND RUN-

NING OFF

in pheasant-like colors golden pheasant colors, a kind of
 delicate laundry detergent, right before our eye.
 black series. sooty tongues, discharges,
 russian slangs in shellac in waiting-rooms
 while, night-coughs in gyms, aggressively
 a reichsbahnlocomotive enters that we assure
 ya, in pure linguistic terms, with se
 vered connections. (164)

The poem ends as abruptly as it begins, giving a glimpse of a confusing situation. It portrays the coming and going of young people in the interior of an Eastern train station, filled with a hubbub of voices and foreign idioms. The poem uses a technical image to show how various strands of language overlap at a given moment and how they are assembled in the brain. Metaphorically speaking, the skull serves as a mere "train station" for all idioms entering it through the ear.

In Kling's most recent collection of poems, *nacht.sicht.gerät* (*night.vision.apparatus*), written between 1990 and 1993, postmodern devices provide the imagery: fax machines, vocoders, tape recorders, a blackbox, an Aeroflot's voice recorder, and "ai" (artificial intelligence) illustrate the significance of connections and quick pattern recognition. These electronic devices are decisive factors in creating realities that escape human interpretation because they produce no meaning other than facts. It is the digital logic of machines that dictates the real decisions. If electronics, as well as genetic engineering, degrade the human body to hardware, the only *modus procedendi* that proves the existence of humans is a cut into the flesh. A precise scission makes one aware of this region underneath the skin which is hidden to the mind. Ultimately, the body's instincts, its responses to external stimuli between pain and imagination—the "framing events" of the human psyche, according to Elaine Scarry (165)—are more valid than rational judgments. Kling's poems provide us with various hallucinatory images of those vivisections inflicted on our weak bodies, for instance medical surgery of the larynx or the cerebrum. As the message of these poems seems to suggest, cutting one's throat is more revealing than recording phonemes, and trepanning one's skull more effective than the speech cure of psychoanalysis. These images indicate a general shift from the immaterial factors—social and psychic deviancy as represented by Lenz, März, Kaspar Hauser, those

famous emblematic figures who experienced their literary *hausse* in the 1960s/70s—to material factors such as functional disorders of the brain or the organs of articulation. The exploration of purely physiological aspects of speech and thinking accompanies the interest in hardware. The poets emphasize the multifunctional region of the throat (larynx) where life and death, speech and breath, language and silence are determined. For the poet, this kind of introspection gives the opportunity to explore the synthetic or artificial systems of everyday existence, or, in other words, the engineering of life. This provocative materialism illuminates the conditions of communication: the fading trust in the survival of the soul converts the individual into a medium who speaks in tongues. The lyrical subject is deprived of its authoritative status. Notwithstanding his transformation into a telematic device, this “technical” voice allows Thomas Kling to mock, mimic, and review a wide variety of present or past idioms and sound patterns.

By the end of the 1980s, a strikingly different way of responding to the issue of new communication technologies in relation to poetic language had been developed by Durs Grünbein, one of the most successful representatives of a conceptual mode of German poetry. His poems display fatal errors in human behavior while using a more conventional form of spoken prose, thus avoiding the intricacies and the playfulness of Kling’s linguistic cut-up techniques. In his first volume, *Grauzone morgens* (*Gray Zone in the Morning* 1988), Durs Grünbein emphasized the surreal atmosphere of daily life in the GDR while developing a model to grasp the specific characteristics of socialist society in order to overcome the preconceived political categories.¹⁵ The poet portrayed the unchanging dreariness of Dresden’s dilapidated cityscape with a sensitivity for the nuances of gray, but without letting himself drift into the depressing scenery. One is reminded of a similar topic treated by Jürgen Theobaldy who began his “Gray Poem” in 1974 with feelings of futility and resentment: “Besonders grau der Tag (diesiger Himmel, / Nieselregen usw.) und ich frage mich, / ob ich darüber ein Gedicht schreiben soll, / . . .” ‘Particularly gray this day (hazy sky, / drizzle etc.) and I ask myself, / whether I should write a poem about that’ (“Graves Gedicht” 346). In Theobaldy’s melancholic view, utopian colorfulness can only be found in the fake world of advertising posters. Grünbein, instead, finds an alternative in tactical behavior and quirky jokes. He illustrates the common mentality in “the East” with anthropological generalizations. Thus the em-

pirical data and the historical background of the GDR can be transformed into an existential situation in which the eastern individual gains the status of a different species. In *Schädelbasislektion*—perhaps best rendered as ‘Skull Crash Course’—Grünbein’s highly acclaimed, second volume from 1991, an appropriate image was found in the Pavlovian dog.¹⁶ The canine behavior mirrors a form of eastern submission to the state which Grünbein seems to trace back to the Prussian mentality in “Hegels Schmalland” ‘Hegel’s narrow country’ (S 143). The subject in East Germany, in other words, was defined by the lack of a curable psyche in the Freudian sense and, consequently, by the effects of a completely different socialization. According to the poet’s survey of his childhood spent in the suburbs of Dresden, the technological standards of the prewar era were kept alive in a grotesque open-air museum. And yet, the poet does not aim at evoking sentimental images of those early years; he rather reconstructs the past according to a model of frozen time as if the individual existed in a state of hibernation. For this distant “I,” the intrinsic qualities of the tramway or the bunkers around the Saxon city made all belief in progress meaningless. Consequently, western civilization that served as a repository of themes for Grünbein’s conceptual way of approaching his environment gained even more significance in the following volumes. Therein, the ever increasing mass of electronic equipment in the West, an indicator of the post-industrial age, is reflected in many facets. Electronic appliances, the most apparent indicators for the interest in new media, are more frequently mentioned in cycles written after 1989. In “Falten und Fallen” ‘Folds and Traps,’ the poem of a volume with the same title, we are introduced to the lifestyle of the young urban professionals:¹⁷

Falten und Fallen

Leute mit besseren Nerven als jedes Tier, flüchtiger, unbewußter
 Waren sie’s endlich gewohnt, den Tag zu zerlegen. Die Pizza
 Aus Stunden aßen sie häppchenweise, meist kühl, und nebenbei
 Hörten sie plappernd CDs oder fönten das Meerschwein,
 Schrieben noch Briefe und gingen am Bildschirm auf Virusjagd.
 Zwischen Stapeln Papier auf dem Schreibtisch, Verträgen, Kopien,
 Baute der Origami-Kranich sein Nest, eine raschelnde Falle.
 Jeder Tag brachte, am Abend berechnet, ein anderes Diagramm
 Fraktaler Gelassenheit, später in traumlosem Kurzschlaf gelöscht.
 Sah man genauer hin, mit der aus Filmen bekannten Engelsgeduld,
 Waren es Farben, verteilt wie die Hoch- und Tiefdruckzonen

Über Europas Kartentisch. Sie glichen dem Fell des Geparden
 Im Säugetier-Lexikon, den Blättern fixierten Graphitstaubs
 Mit Fingerabdrücken in der Kartei für Gewalttäter. Deutlich
 War diese Spur von Vergessen in allen Hirnen, Falten, Gesichtern,
 Flüsternd, bis auf den Lippen das dünne Apfelhäutchen zerriß.

Folds and Traps

People with stronger nerves than any animal,
 More fleeting, less aware,
 Became at last accustomed to the dissection
 Of daytime. They consumed
 The pizza made of hours in chunks and mostly
 Cold and at the same time
 Heard CDs while they prattled, else, blow-dried
 The guinea-pig or dealt with
 The E-mail, went a-hunting on their screens
 For viruses. Among
 The piles of paper on the writing desk,
 The contracts and the copies,
 Was built the nest of the Origami-Bird,
 A rustling trap. Each day
 Brought, as could be reckoned up in the evening,
 Another diagram
 Of fractal calm that later in a dreamless
 Catnap would dissolve.
 A closer look—with the patience of an angel
 Familiar from movies—
 And they were colors, spread like zones of pressure
 Across the chart of Europe,
 Like cheetah fur in an encyclopaedia,
 Or reams of fingerprints
 On graphite dust in a file of criminal records.
 These traces of forgetting
 Revealed themselves in every brain, each wrinkle,
 Each face, only as whispers,
 Until that time the softest apple skin
 Tore on the lips.
 (Grünbein, *FF* 97; trans. Glyn Maxwell)

The poetic appeal of this text draws on an exotic and yet popular
 vocabulary of the postmodern household; neither the *origanum*
~~vulgaris~~ on pizzas nor the apple skin on lips are indicators of a sen-

sual experience. Instead, this converging of archaic instincts and habits in a postmodern environment indicates the intellectual fascination with the temporality of being, underscored by the perspicuous and indifferent tone of the poem. We might say that each line is folded onto the other, thus creating an exquisite, artificial composition comparable to *Origami*. This defies our notion of clear-shaped organic beauty and corresponds with Deleuze's definition of an artifact that "is no longer defined by an essential form" but rather by "a modern conception of a technological object," characterized by variation, modulation, and the replacement of a simple edge by complex folds.¹⁸

Durs Grünbein's medically detached view is often directed toward the human body. In the following poem (without title) from the cycle "Variation auf kein Thema" ("Variation without a Theme"), the skull is seen as a complex "technological object," is filled with inner voices, the remote echo of the past. Like frequencies broadcast by a radio, the memories are heterodyned so that the speaker cannot find the familiar sound pattern of his or her mother's voice. The comforting sounds that once welcomed the newborn and accompanied the infant still reverberate in the adult's ear as a reminder of his or her primeval desire to be caressed:

Unterwegs zwischen Mutter und Äther
 Auf Sendersuche, den Pulsschlag
 Des blutigen Hasen im Ohr, anästhetisiert
 Wie unterm Handschuh die Haut
 Von tausend Innenstimmen—wer weiß
 Wer da jedesmal sang, klanglos
 Wie im genetischen Chor der Refrain.
 Großmutter's Ach oder das Hhm
 All der steinernen Gäste im Keller . . .
 Bis den Mauern der Schweiß
 Ausbricht und du dich flüstern hörst:
 Was für ein Aufwand an Panik
 Für ein wenig abgeleckt werden, nachts.

En route between mother and ether
 On station-search, the pulsebeat
 Of the bleeding rabbit in my ear, anaesthetised
 As under a glove the skin
 Of thousands of inner voices—who knows
 Who it was who sang each time, soundless
 As the refrain in the genetic chorus.

Grandmother's *Oh* or the Hhm
 Of all the stone customers in the cellar . . .
 Until the walls break out
 In sweat and you hear yourself whisper:
 What a lot of panic to put yourself through
 For a spot of suction, at night
 (Grünbein, *FF* 13; trans. Michael Hofmann)

The resistance to panic or any kind of uproar has always been a general feature of Grünbein's poems. In the cycle called "MonoLogische Gedichte" ("MonoLogical Poems" *G* 79-89) the addressees are urged to keep their light mood despite the messages of upcoming disasters. A simple confirmation, not the rejection of bad news, will maintain one's peace of mind. The speaker's voice recommends getting rid of a "rotten pathos." The poet's crafty rhetoric is aiming at the destruction of a common belief in the apocalyptic end of history. A slight shift of positions might be able to turn "hot" news into "cold" poetry: "Es gibt heiße Medien und / gibt kalte Medien Gedichte / egal in welchen Brüchen auf was für Zeug gedruckt / bleiben kalt (und wenn sie / noch so heißgekocht sind) 'There are hot media and there / are cold media Poems / no matter in what pattern of lines / on what stuff they are printed / remain cold (and even if they / were boiled hot)'—this is the opener to Grünbein's series of "prints" that count on their singularity like monotype—hence the title "MonoLogical Poems" (*G* 81).

In this cycle, the poetological position is clearly expressed: the difference between various media is a subtle one, although the dimension of the event has drastically changed from an inescapable fate to the arbitrary movements of poetic particles: "was ist schon die Surrea / listik der Ängste gegen die / maßlos zufälligen kleinen Tricks eines Gedichts" 'what is the surrea / listics of fears vis-à-vis the / excessively accidental little tricks of a poem' (*G* 82). Apparently the subject of such poems cannot be identified with an individual capable of gaining access to his or her own fears, memories, and experiences. The subject always appears to be subjugated to the state; that is to say the *subjectum* is an anonymous product of eastern socialization practices. The poem "Inside out outside in" (title in English) describes the existential conditions in the former GDR where we encounter a Mr. Nobody, the "X-ist" (*S* 39). This male Eastern homunculus is blinded by his illusions in the aftermath of 1989: a bizarre mixture of a Marxist and sexist, an alien

from Mars descending to the western consumer society. In contrast, the “I-figure” of the poem, being observed from an external point of view, prefers a contemplative mood: “In einer Schlafmohnkapsel lag ich und träumte / Um meine leere Mitte gerollt, das metaphysische Tier” ‘Resting in a capsule of an opium poppy, I dreamed / while lying curled round my middle / me, the metaphysical animal’ (S 39). Such an ironic self-description illustrates the dissociation of Plato’s *zoon logon echon*, an animal gifted with words. A deep split runs through the subject, dividing it into the illusory self-consciousness of humans and the alleged somatic existence of an animal. The faculties of our mind, such as memory, make us believe that we could survive the “elektronischen Schneesturm,” the ‘electronic snow storm’ (S 39) which eventually will leave no trace of humankind. The monitor is an early sign of the fading subjectivity:

Ultra Null

Vom Schirm einmal abgesehen, wie du siehst,
Ist das Schirmbild ein Nichts.
Alles was recht ist wird hier gebrochen,
Gebündelt und ausgestrahlt. Nicht ein Bild
Überlebt seine Einschaltzeit (Einsamkeit).
Zeile für Zeile grassiert das Vergessen,
Brillanz hinter Glas . . . Besser Kontrolle
Sagt die Logik des Monitors. Lange
War nichts so ungreifbar wie dieses Licht.

Ultra Zero

Apart from the screen, as you can see,
the image of the screen is a nothing.
All that is right, here it is taken apart,
Focussed and broadcast. Not a single image
will outlast the period between switch-on/switch-off (called solitude)
line after line, forgetting prevails
Brilliance behind glass . . . Better control
the logic of the monitor. For a long time
nothing was so intangible as this light.
(Grünbein, S 138)

The poem contemplates artificial memory in the age of the computer and thus underlines the rapid decline of durability and materiality. The individual is relegated to an external power, very much like “the dog” in eastern society—but now the user of the network joyfully participates in the carnival of global mutual exchange. Similar to other poets of his generation, Grünbein sees this *conditio posthumana* as a prerequisite to clearly analyzing our era: we live, so to speak, in the best of all virtual realities. The random access memory of those who are hooked up to their TV sets and almost instantly forget their “televisions” (G 89) is seen as a paradigmatic existential situation of a generation which lost its abilities to act and interact. Whereas the person-in-the-street does not question this apathetic stage, the authorial voice of the male “ego” reflects his status by monitoring himself in various scenarios, such as in the streets of Dresden or the tunnels of the Berlin subway. In these situations the subject wonders about his intermediate status: “wer war ich: / ein genehmigtes Ich, / Blinder Fleck oder bloßer Silbenrest . . . (-ich)” ‘who was i: / an approved I / blind spot or a mere part of a syllable . . . (-i)’ (S 31). A lack of self-supervision distinguishes the trivial *vita activa* of the masses submerged in their daily routine from the poet’s *vita contemplativa* located in the eye of a hurricane. All cynicism, sarcasm, and silliness is part of the game, since a sincerely critical attitude is already integrated and immunized in the discourse of “Geist” and “Macht.” Therefore, Grünbein’s poetry can be seen as a storage of data and attitudes that were collected, reduplicated, and newly arranged with the following result: “Die Existenz erklärt sich und wird Heiterkeit” ‘Existence is explained and becomes serenity’ (S 131). In other words, insouciance will replace all fears of the individual. Patience, cunning, and the art of playing roles protect the male poetic persona from the media sirens and help to sustain his blithe mood.

Thomas Kling’s and Durs Grünbein’s “media-poems” are no singular phenomena. They are rather the most original, ingenious, and eloquent examples of a diction that set a precedent for writers beginning their careers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some poets are more reluctant to disassemble and disrupt the material; others do not focus as much as Kling and Grünbein on the ubiquity of high-tech devices. Most of the younger generation, however, find their topic in this realm of the artificial “bios,” the basic input-output system of bodies and machines. With respect to the use of language, even in more conventional prose poems, a sudden pun, an asso-

nance or etymological joke—typical of Grünbein’s poems—is a means to expose the material. Essentially, the forms have become more sophisticated, technical, and self-referential in comparison to the “authentic” diction of the 1970s, as in poems by Karin Kiwus, F.C. Delius, Jürgen Theobaldy, or Nicolas Born. In more radical cases, mute signs such as brackets, slashes, and the ampersand indicate the abstract level of exchangeable units; this second layer is used to formulate comments and questions in parenthesis which are interpolated into the line. Often, the interlacing of lines puts the emphasis on the segmentation of a word—namely its arbitrary juxtaposition of letters—with little effect on rhythm or intonation. The laminar consistency, as Gilles Deleuze would put it, a structure of folded delicate layers, is even more visible in poems that incorporate heterogeneous, polyglot material. Quite commonly, phrases in foreign languages interlard the poems. In contrast, traditional means of constituting a sound pattern are reduced; therefore, rhyme is an almost humorous means of presentation whereas elements such as the *figura etymologica* or *metalepsis* simulate semantic connections. Those poetic texts, which resist axiomatic articulation as Kling’s texts do, investigate a linguistic field characterized by indeterminacy. As John Lechte has convincingly shown, contemporary scientific theory of open systems helps us to understand the “amorphous style” of this kind of textuality. In a system with loosely connected elements, “aleatory effects become important: the effects of disorder, chance, and random distribution” (Lechte 101). Most readers would confirm that one has to root about among these elements for a missing link to establish specific contexts taken from geography, botany, history, fine art, or even hagiography.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that the detached or “cool” tone of this poetry, its sophisticated terminology, its thematization of the body in relation to the artificial environment of new media, needs to be seen in the light of the most recent development. The fresh tone and creativity of the innovators has already been transformed into a fashionable jargon of the early 1990s. Thomas Kling and Durs Grünbein, as well as Friederike Mayröcker, Peter Waterhouse, Felix Ph. Ingold, or Gerhard Falkner (whose work could not be discussed here), have left a deep impact on the youngest poets. Regrettably, their idiom, which has been contextualized in a culture which values poems as precious “high-tech” consumer goods, has instigated a trend that already shows some considerable shortcomings. For instance, the originality of Kling’s decompositions has left a great impression on writers seeking a career on the

art-and-literature market of Cologne/ Düsseldorf. The common usage of cut-up techniques, the harsh, unsentimental tone and the frequent references to an electronically produced voice and vision give the false impression of an entire school of media poets of Cologne. Not surprisingly, the latest volumes published by Dieter M. Gräf or Norbert Hummelt bear a striking resemblance to Kling's poetry, as the beginning of Gräf's rough-hewn "LANDUNG AUF KRETA" ("LANDING ON CRETE"), shows:

Gewehr, in das Licht fällt: Ende der Grab
 funde, ein Schwinden des Drucks auf den
 Körper. Druck auf den Auflöser: die Wand
 erung zeretzter Gewebe, nun Kino, Mus- . . .

Rifle into which the light is cast: the end of making dis-
 coveries in graves, a fading away of pressure on the
 body. Pressure on the disintegrator-button: the move-
 ment of torn-up tissues, now movie theater, mus- . . . (67)

The description of an obscure still life gives a strong sense of inertia; the poem does not rivet its readers to an action at a given location, but paralyzes them through the oblique idea of the first line. An urge to connect a historical object, the rifle, with a "media event" clearly distinguishes these lines from Thomas Kling's approach. The latter evokes an easily recognizable geographical space while building up the report of an action as a linguistic movement. Each built-in "difficulty" makes the readers pause in their ascent toward the climax of the poem. Moreover, for readers of Siegfried Giedion's or Friedrich Kittler's histories of media technology, Gräf's subject is too stale and academic a motif. The poet even feels compelled to explain in an annotation how Etienne-Jules Marey's invention, a photographic rifle, anticipated the camera.¹⁹ Thus, strangely enough, the poem seems to illustrate the academic findings. In comparison, the warp and woof of Kling's poetic textures is tighter, the rhythm more impetuous and yet well controlled, the thematic range of each cycle much more expansive than those of his successor. Gräf's technique of remixing the "techno sound" of the 1990s is no exception. For instance, even poets with strong ties to the Romantic tradition like Barbara Köhler gave in to mediamania in her latest volume *Blitz/Blei* (title originally in English).

In conclusion, we see a drastic turning away from the critical negativity and cynical skepticism towards the new media and their “manufacturing of consent” (Noam Chomsky) in the 1970s and early 1980s. The polemical position maintained by Hans Magnus Enzensberger might still be valid, but it is evident that for the younger poets, the spreading of electronic technology with its power of simulating events brings about new opportunities to transcend historical and biographical boundaries. Clearly, the aim is to create a virtual reality by simulating personal experience—simply because “mass media have become the most effective (and least acknowledged) institutional vehicles for shaping historical consciousness” (Kaes 196). Therefore, the critical analysis of manipulation is replaced by the ironic manipulation of the past. The new “media poems” borrow their energy from this process of technological transformation, thus sharing Jean Baudrillard’s or Marshall McLuhan’s “desire for ultimate transcendence,” a desire “to get beyond the real, beyond the body, beyond history,” as Andreas Huyssen has pointed out (190). This recharging of batteries might be useful insofar as it helps to overcome trivialized sentimentalism and peevish taciturnity. If only the most striking features of this poetry are resynthesized, the strength and vitality of a new conceptual groundwork is easily lost. Then, the preoccupation with our postmodern electronic environment will indeed become a very fashionable trend, a “mediamania,” in contemporary German poetry.

Notes

1. See Theobaldy, “Das durchlöcherchte Ich,” 126.
2. See Eurich and Würzburg, Postman, and Meyrowitz, *Die Fernseh-Gesellschaft. Wirklichkeit und Identität im Medienzeitalter*.
3. For a critical account of the technofrenzy see: Collins 6.
4. See Virilio 149; cf Huyssen 176.
5. See Falkner, *wemut* 147-58, 159-66, and Grimm, “Zwischen Sprachkörper und Körpersprache. Gerhard Falkner’s *wemut*.”
6. For a brief introduction to Kittler’s approach toward media, see Holub 97-107.
7. See Theobaldy’s definition of the *parlando-tone* in “Offene Räume” 136-38.

8. See "Lob des Analphabetentums."
9. See Dienst.
10. See Michael and Wohlfahrt. See also my brief account of the previous history of unuttered East German poetry: "Der Hohlkörper des Gedichts: Zur Poesie des Prenzlauer Bergs" 93-94.
11. See also Eckart.
12. All poems quoted from: Thomas Kling, *erprobung herztärkender mittel, geschmacksverstärker, brennstabm, nacht.sicht.gerät*. All translations printed without attribution are mine.
13. See Kaes. Even though Kaes does not directly address this film, his study sheds light on the relation of the concept of Heimat to media and memory. The annotation provides useful references for further information on Riefenstahl's early films 213-14 n. 6.
14. See Burckhardt 192-93.
15. Reprinted in *Von der üblen Seite* 5-85. For an explanation of this title see: Grünbein, "'Poetry from the bad side'" 442-49. In all subsequent notes Grünbein's works will be referred to by the first initial of full title only: *Grauzone* = G. All translations printed without attribution are mine.
16. Reprinted in *Von der üblen Seite* 87-236. Abbreviated as *S*.
17. Abbreviated as *FF*. For an explanation of this title and Grünbein's discussion of the poem as a concept see Grünbein, "Drei Briefe" 172-80.
18. See Eisenman 425.
19. cf. Giedion 21.

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