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Spectral Soundscapes in Elfriede Jelinek's Post-Holocaust Novel *The Children of the Dead* and Its 2019 Film Adaptation

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How should we approach *Die Kinder der Toten* by the Austrian Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek today? And how does the 2019 film adaptation by the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma change the text's reception through focus on intermedial and intertextual elements? So far, the most insightful reviews have centered on the conceptual, contextual and textual—and thus also political aspects of this work. By focusing on intertextual and intermedial components, I hope to illustrate a few aspects of the novel that have yet to be analyzed in the scholarship on Jelinek. Drawing on Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and on elements of sound studies, literature studies, and film studies, I hope to demonstrate how sound can have a significant spectral presence that connects with other literary texts and media, different world regions in the past, the present and the future.

Keywords: spectrality, intertxtuality, intermediality, sound, silence

Spectral Plot and Spectral Characters

Jelinek's novel is populated by the dead, presenting us with spectral characters whose language, whose entire selves are made up of others, populated by alien entities and the uncountable dead of the past. Their thoughts, speech, and the sounds they make become an externalized form of communication that constantly reminds us of the horror of that past, specifically the Holocaust.

Karin Frenzel, the main character, a childless, middle-aged woman, is revealed as belonging to a group of three zombies roaming around near the Alpenrose hotel in Upper Styria, next to Gudrun Bichler, "the doubtful philosophy student", and Edgar Gstranz, a former skiing star turned salesman and right-wing politician (Jelinek, 1995, pp. 29-30; p. 115).

An unceasing rain causes a landslide that buries the Alpenrose with its guests. The search and rescue teams are puzzled. Not only does the number of recovered bodies exceed the number of registered resort guests, but the condition of the corpses suggest these people were dead for a long time. At the novel's end, the government declares the area off limits, and Frenzel dies in the hospital from the severe injuries she suffered in the car accident at the beginning of the novel (Jelinek, 1995, pp. 666-667). The movie's plot is based very freely on Jelinek's novel, representing a flowing narrative that splits off into small tributaries but always finds its way back into the main current, a sequence of small stories that combine to become a larger narrative. Though it starts in the same setting as the novel and also centers around Frenzel, it then has her bring the dead to life in a cinema owned by a Nazi, which becomes a stage, almost a theatre of collective mourning. The

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setting and plot are largely created using sound, and sound is used to summon the immaterial traces of the past to the surface—thus preceding the imagery of the film. Though through a different medium, the novel also uses sound to say more about the events of the plot and the past it conjures than merely the semantic aspects of language could. Silence and stillness also play a role in this; the dead are portrayed as silent, and yet are brought to life through changes in perspective (he/she to we/they) and the use of first person auctorial narration. At the same time, dialog of and with the dead serves to bind them to the living, speaking through their bodies, both individually and collectively. The living thus also connect to a past world, of which they no longer have their own consciousness.

Spectral Silences and Spectral Sound

> This first, and at the same time last letter, shall nonetheless become writing, a script of the unarticulated, not an image, no, the images would only ever represent themselves and only ever proclaim themselves (the unarticulated: the sound of a scream, continuing to this day?). It must first be learned, this script. (Jelinek, 1995, p. 388)
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> […] diesen ersten und gleichzeitig letzten Buchstaben, der dennoch zu einer Schrift werden soll, einer Schrift des Unartikulierten, keine Bilder, nein, die Bilder würden immer nur sich selbst bedeuten und immer nur sich verkünden (das Unartikulierte: der Ton eines bis heute anhaltenden Schreis?). Sie mußerst erlernt werden, diese Schrift […] (Jelinek, 1995, p. 388)

In the novel, the landslide seems to set the scene for a linguistic soundscape made up of the sounds and silences of the past. Jelinek postulates a "script of the unarticulated" (Jelinek, 1995, p. 388) which takes the form of a prolonged scream.

This scream dissolves above all the difference between the living and the dead, disrupting the continuity and the seemingly harmonious silence about Austria's complicity in Nazism with literary representations of the disjointed particles that this cry embodies: severed heads and hands. This cry, however, does not lament the landslide itself, instead giving voice to a half-forgotten past which desperately wants to be written. The noises and sounds of the past manifest in the narrative, visually dispersed, fragmented, and spectral, as blood issuing suddenly from the walls of a church or piles of hair, unexplained, seemingly out of context.

Here Jelinek both describes and evokes something that resembles what Hélène Cixous has called the 'cry of literature', which remains open like a gaping wound, or, perhaps better, a gaping mouth, crying out and yet somehow also ghostly silent.

In its cultural specificity and allusions to philosophical and literary works as well as other media, such as advertising language, this novel encompasses sounds and silences beyond the realm of literature. Sound itself becomes a theme of the novel as well, as the specters of the dead and past events can very often be evoked only by the sound of words, that is, the sound of language and its ambiguities: "they attain a wavering constancy in the end, the dead, only their path is quite arduous at times, they have to wade through their own sludge and noise, so that they aren't lost sludgelessly and noiselessly" ("schwankende Beständigkeit erlangen sie letztlich doch, die Toten, nur ist streckenweise ihr Weg recht mühsam, sie müssen durch den eigenen Schlamm und Klang waten, damit sie nicht schlamm- und klanglos untergehen") (Jelinek, 1995, p. 322).

The visual cartography of the film is similarly aided by aural elements, as minute sounds like flies buzzing or the rustling of leaves are layered over each other and enhanced to place vivid focus on them, and to assert the autonomy of the backdrop throughout the film as a force constantly shaping the figures that pass through it.

Silence, in this world of noises and unheard voices, is then used to reflect certain passages of the novel, such as in one scene close to the end of the movie, a close up of screaming mouths behind a window pane, their

screams unheard, which corresponds to the "stummes Schauspiel stummer Münder" ("silent play/acting of silent mouths") of the book. This jarring reversal of the heard and the unheard folds together the uncertainties of the present and future with those of a hazily remembered past, and loosens the formal constraints of the film, muddying the contours of diegetic and nondiegetic sound, collective voices and space.

Spectral Landscape and Spectral Soundscape

But how do these spectral sounds and landscapes relate to each other? How is landscape conceived using spectral elements of noises and silences?

In film, of course, the visual and auditory elements of a landscape are essential in planning a shot. What kind of language creates this spectral soundscape in literature?

By soundscape in a novel or film, I mean the specific representation of sounds that accompany landscapes. The novel, as an artificial literary construct, opens a channel of communication, not to the dead, but for the dead, through the bodies of the undead protagonists.

This means that every sound or utterance by the characters is in fact a combinatory speech, of the living and the dead, the past and the present, of Holocaust survivors and victims, of perpetrators and apologists.

This dialog is the most important, constituent element of the novel, as the moments of interruption, of transfer and contradiction propel the plot of the novel forward. Behind these moments, so to speak, the landscape of the novel is formed, as the competing languages, or forms of speech of the figures speaking through the main characters, manifest within the language of the text. The novel's language is a multiplicity of languages within the same language (that is, German), like several parties living under the same roof. I argue that two distinct voices, or groups of voices, can be recognized in the "human mass, a human massif, greater than the snowy alp there ahead" ("[…] Menschenmasse, ein Menschenmassiv, größer als die Schneealpe dort vorne […]") (Jelinek, 1995, p. 105); on the one hand, the voices rooted in Austrian culture or German-speaking culture as a whole, and on the other those voices which have been cut out or excluded from this culture are in and after the Second World War. In this quote, we see also the kind of alliteration Jelinek uses to make associations and shifts in meaning, quite literally making a mountain landscape out of a giant pile of bodies, sounds and multiple overlapping voices. Sound, then, is thus also a part of the linguistic fabric of the novel, not only something to be described, but embedded in the choice of words and the sentence structure itself.

The film seeks to transport this kind of shifting of meaning through modulations in sound and noise, similar to the sound of a radio being tuned, linking the images shown in a fluctuating stream that is constantly changing and deforming. Sounds are exaggerated, just as the actors exaggerate their gestures, as if they were in a silent movie, blurring the line between verbal and nonverbal expression, or are carried over from one scene to another, creating continuities where there are no connecting visual elements.

Spectral Language or Linguistic Spectrality

> [...] das müssen wir uns noch überlegen, sogar das würden wir uns noch her vorstellen können als die Wahrheit: Hirn im Glas. Hunderte Kindergehirne in unversiegelten Einmachgläsern! Das ist für uns, fast so normal wie das völlige Verschwinden von Menschen, zumindest ist noch was von ihnen übrig: ihre eingerexte Gedenksteine! Und was wir, was sie denken, das geschieht deshalb ja noch lange nicht. (Jelinek, 1995, p. 448)
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> [...] we still have to think about that, even that we would still be able to imagine her as the truth: brains in jars. Hundreds of children's brains in unsealed jars! That is for us, almost as normal as the complete disappearance of people, at

> least there is still something left of them: their submitted memorial stones! And what we, what they think, that happens therefore still not for a long time. (Jelinek, 1995, p. 448)

Linguistic spectrality, as we shall see, blurs the boundary of sound and silence. Silence in literature has to be described, and indeed sound and speaking or silence and silencing are the topic of many passages in the novel.

Through repetition, paraphrase and antithesis, the themes permeating the novel are interwoven and critiqued, both from a linguistic and from a historical perspective, that is, not only what is said, but also the ways of speaking and the ways of being silent about a theme are questioned.

Silence as an action of the characters, specifically of the perpetrators of the Holocaust as a refusal to admit to their own crimes, is a way of suppressing feelings of guilt, of denying involvement.

Jelinek comments on this as follows: "The silence became ever more persistent, ever longer" ("Es wird immer ausdauernder, immer länger geschwiegen") (Jelinek, 1995, p. 665). The more time that passes, the less visible these crimes become, and thus also the guilt disappears. And yet this silence is also filled with soundscapes and spectral voices, an echo of the crimes so readily forgotten.

This is achieved through what Hermsdorf, in reference to Kafka, calls the "principle of varying repetition" ("Prinzip der variierenden Wiederholung"). According to this principle, phrases central to the theme of the novel are repeated in different contexts and with slight changes. These repetitions and quotations are constantly changing their relationship to one another, and thus juxtapose opposing concepts in a way that often appears illogical at first, but through variation are given a new and unexpected twist. For example, the claim: "The dead are only drafts of us" (p. 134) is slowly transformed into "We are only designs of the dead" (p. 134).

Spectral Intertextuality/Intermediality

Intertextuality and intermediality play an important role in the linguistic variations I already mentioned. Jelinek not only utilizes quotations from well-known literary and philosophical works, but also snippets of familiar songs, reporting, and advertising slogans or alludes to well-known horror and mystery movies, interleaving the ideas presented in the quoted texts in the novel, and sometimes mimicking their styles. This diversity of sources, or "linguistic productivity", as Julia Kristeva calls it, generates a space of intersection between the textual and the contextual, a montage of quotations, deconstructions and manipulations, interspersing many voices, each expressing divergent perspectives and sometimes indiscernible from the voice of unreliable narrator.

In metacommentaries, the narrator also reflects on the visibility of those brought back to life by texts, intertexts, and intermedial prostheses. It is this uncertainty in combination with textual and medial self-reflexivity that makes the style of this novel "spectral", in that it distorts the individual, questioning individuality as a whole by making obvious the collectivity of influences and ideas that are inherently present in the thought of the individual.

Spectral intertextuality would then be the way the text itself problematizes its relationship to the pre-texts and uneasiness about its integration combined with the urgency or necessity to refer to the source text by implicit or explicit allusions, citations, repetitions, and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier works. Jelinek refers to Kafka and Celan, as well as Heidegger, Hölderlin, and Goethe in this novel, and these two groups of sources represent two distinct ways of acting, thinking, and speaking that become apparent in the speech and actions of the individual characters in the novel, or in the collectivities of the dead to which they lend their voice.

Paul Celan, like Jelinek in this novel, thematizes silence in his poetry, and uses language as a place of encounter or provocation. This self-referentiality also points to the politics of remembrance (Erinnerungspolitik), implicitly asking what it means for a Jewish author to write in German in a post-Auschwitz world. Jelinek takes up his meta-linguistic inclination and revives it in her work. In doing so, she invites the reader to view present-day Austria more critically, and to see the continuities there that stem from Austria's fascist past and involvement in the Holocaust.

On the one hand, key quotations from Celan's works (Luft/air, Grab/grave) establish a continual link to the themes of his poetry, and on the other, the use of words like roots, blood, soil, and earth connects both to the canonized classics, as well as to the Nazi ideology, which readily manipulated the language of the classics for their own ends, and in the process, tainted the German vocabulary.

Kafka's works are less directly involved in the novel, but entire sequences seem to mirror Kafka's works in a way that cannot be coincidence. In the self-reflexivity of language and the artistic process common to all three, the Austrian landscape is transformed into a stage, its cultural heritage into the performers.

Spectral Perspectives and Spectral Modes of Representation

On this stage, perspectives and modes of representation become the primary focus. As we have seen, the individual characters in this narrative do not signify only themselves but rather a collectivity, a continuity that is constantly shifting and transforming.

Much as the actors in the film give additional meaning to their lines and differentiate themselves through gestures, so too does the novel present a kind of gesturing in its intertextuality in the relational interplay of references, shifting perspectives, and narrator's commentary.

As I have mentioned, I see two primary voices or groups of voices that can be isolated: First, the voices that are rooted in German and Austrian culture. They become visible as a collective voice and are apparent only as a negative, as the apparently natural turns of phrase and viewpoints of the characters, and represent the primary cultural hegemony, or at least the hegemonic claim of these cultural attributes. Second: Disrupting this harmonious culture are the uprooted, the un-rooted voices that were either silenced during the Second World War or were never really rooted in German-speaking culture. These moments of disruption are jarring, they are sudden cuts in a movie scene, breaking through what was a static perspective and reorganizing it.

Jelinek specifically uses filmlike techniques to achieve this, and there are passages that resemble the shifting camera positions in a scene, focusing on individual objects and body parts as with close-ups or slow zooms.

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, there are frequent changes in perspective, not only between the characters, but also in shifts from first to third person, and from singular to plural forms. Each of these forms has a role to play in the structuring of the narrative, as you can see on the slides:

The 3rd person limited narrative perspective is used for the perception of the three main characters, and can be likened to the diegetic elements in film. This represents what is truly a part of the scene as the characters are conscious of it. The 1st person singular is the voice of the narrator, an auctorial perspective that sees beyond that of the characters and can be likened to the non-diegetic aspect of film, such as the soundtrack, which exists only for the viewer and as the connecting medium in the narrative. Jelinek also uses this voice ironically, pointing to herself and her own role as author within the dense polyphonic structure of the novel, and at times even interrupts the other voices, blurring the boundary between that which can be articulated and "the unarticulated".

Lastly, breaking the fourth wall, the "we"-voice is introduced. This, and other direct appeals to the reader, serves not only to connect the characters and the voices of the dead, but also to create a collective that reaches out from the supposedly closed narrative of the novel and into the real world. In a central scene of the movie, the illusion of the screen bursts into flame, leaving behind a hole, the characters stagger through, passing the fourth wall and entering the cinema, where they form a brass band parade, a march of the undead of Austrian history toward the film's finale.

The (Inter-)Text as Spectre

This breakdown of the fourth wall changes the meaning of the overall novel and movie as well. I have shown you how the main characters of the plot and the intertexts together become vessels for the spectral voices of the past, and how these voices are in turn inhabited by Austria's rooted and uprooted cultural heritage, both that which it accepts, and that which it attempts to deny, all in that tense zone between speaking and silence that Jelinek, in reference to the film *Carnival of Souls*, calls "Geistersehen", a "seance", or literally "ghost-sighting".

Conclusions

In fact, the whole text can be seen as specter of the works of Kafka, Celan, Herta Müller and others, a perspective on these texts that seeks to understand them in today's world, while also guiding the reader to new insights into them, and into the novel. In this sense, Jelinek's novels but also Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel* does not belong to the literature of the present, nor to that of the past, it is itself a child of the dead, reviving the past in a new, "novel" way. It transforms the past, reconstructs the future and thus influences the way we perceive the literature it references. In the same way, the novel has projected itself into the future, as a specter that inhabits the literature of our present, like in Raphaela Edelbauer's 2019 novel *Das flüssige Land* and Marie Gamillscheg's *Aufruhr der Meerestiere* or texts by Marlene Streeruwitz. Finally, it has projected itself into the future as a specter that inhabits other media, as not only Liska's and Copper's film adaptation shows.

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