

# Framing Infinity in Print

## Germany's Lasting Literary Gesture

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To those who believe in the perpetuity of the written word, there lurks a danger of ephemerality in this dawning era of digitalization where words are no longer expected to be preserved as letterpress on paper. The amorphous circulation of literary scripts, regardless of its genesis as calligraphy performance on papyrus or as smartphone note-taking praxis, threatens to turn the bibliophilic wish of reading and preserving the materiality of printed text into a historical dream, saved on an online cloud-server. One may recall Walter Benjamin's aura-lament in the age of mechanical reproduction, where the mystic power of the artwork – the *Kultwert* – is reduced to its mere potential of exhibition and acquisition – its *Ausstellungswert*.<sup>1</sup> Literature, the artistic word-ensemble with diminishing *Kultwert* ever since Gutenberg's printing revolution, is now transforming its last shrine of analogue into a niche of virtual exposition. Easily accessible and immediately retrievable, the electronic medium finds massive readership for literary writings and provides the newly deified cyberspace for their production, distribution and reception. Literary practices are swerving towards the digital formlessness, where writings are no longer expected to be printed in order to remain. In the end, there will be no physical form needed for literature, or as some may fear, no literary writings will be lasting at all.

It is then perhaps not surprising to find some of the most tenacious modern-day opponents against this literary *Gestaltlosigkeit* – the notion that the formless cyberspace can be a suitable abode for literature – from the same *German* cultural background of Gutenberg and Benjamin. When the aspiring German author Judith Schalansky pronounced the foremost importance of the »format« for literary works, she has recognized the spellbinding, menacing force of digitalization in the contemporary literary industry. A former art student turned professional book designer and zealous typographer, Schalansky celebrates almost all her literary successes within the corporeal boundary of physical books of her own »making« – writing, illustrating, and designing – including her 2009

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1 | See Walter Benjamin: Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. In: Idem: Gesammelte Schriften. Vol. I,2. Ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 435-467, here p. 443-445.

international bestseller, *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln*<sup>2</sup>, as literary as cartographic compendium filled with an artist's dream of making the »perfect« book for both intellectual and material delight. What bothers Schalansky in the rise of e-books, on the other hand, is the argument that the content of a book is all that matters: so long as words remain the same, the reading experience will not alter much, not even when the rendering format changes or disappears. »Ich habe in meinem ganzen Leben noch nie einen Inhalt ohne Form gesehen.«<sup>3</sup> So avowed Schalansky in an FAZ interview shortly after having bored off the Most Beautiful German Book Prize in 2012. The prize was endowed for her authoring – writing and making – of *Der Hals der Giraffe*<sup>4</sup>, a star product in the contemporary German book-market by the famous Suhrkamp Publisher. In effect, it was an aesthetic acknowledgement of Schalansky's effort in framing literature in print. There is also a digital form of the book but its virtual nature demands much less, if at all, from its equally virtual format. In contrast, a paper book incorporates for Schalansky certain totality or even some totalitarian fullness, »einen rührenden Ewigkeitsanspruch: dass es bleibt«.<sup>5</sup> Books shall remain, forever and in print.

Schalansky's vision for the eternal life of books in print is an authorial one, which is as personal as it is cultural. On the one hand, her praise for the »totalitarian« character of the paper book echoes Walter Benjamin's whimsical comparison of a writer to an authoritarian book collector: »Schriftsteller sind eigentlich Leute, die Bücher nicht aus Armut sondern aus Unzufriedenheit mit den Büchern schreiben, welche sie kaufen könnten, und die ihnen nicht gefallen.«<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, her haptic choice of using the linen material for the hardcover of *Der Hals der Giraffe* reveals certain nostalgia from her East-German childhood, whereas her literary debut *Fraktur mon amour* in 2006 was essentially a typographical love-confession for the Gothic German blackletter typeface evolved from the Gutenberg galaxy. Largely, Schalansky's call for a materialistic frame for literature in print aligns with the German book tradition. Apart from being the historical homeland of some renowned bibliophiles, Germany has an essentially European book culture that is inseparable from its elitist literary tradition. The responsibility of cultural development under *Bildungsbürgertum* makes

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**2** | Judith Schalansky: *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln. Fünfzig Inseln, auf denen ich nie war und niemals sein werde*. Hamburg: Mare 2009.

**3** | Andreas Platthaus: Judith Schalansky im Gespräch »Wie tut man Büchern Gewalt an, Frau Schalansky?« Feuilleton Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, September 12, 2012, online at [www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/autoren/judith-schalansky-im-gespraech-wie-tut-man-buechern-gewalt-an-frau-schalansky-11882564.html](http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/autoren/judith-schalansky-im-gespraech-wie-tut-man-buechern-gewalt-an-frau-schalansky-11882564.html).

**4** | Judith Schalansky: *Der Hals der Giraffe. Ein Bildungsroman*. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2011.

**5** | Platthaus, Judith Schalansky im Gespräch.

**6** | Walter Benjamin: Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus – Eine Rede über das Sammeln. In: Idem: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. IV, 1. Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 390.

the reading and discussing of literature a cultural imperative, if not a political engagement as argued in Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. This tradition has contributed to the shaping of the contemporary German reading culture and literary industry, which has not yet deviated much from the center of literature in its physical format. Even though the current market for paper books in Germany is declining like everywhere else, it has maintained a relatively slow downhill pace, especially in contrast to its Anglo-American counterpart. While e-books accounted for 4.6 % of all book sales revenue in Germany in 2017, the same percentage figure in the U. S. has long superseded 14 %.<sup>7</sup> Within all this 4.6 % market share, however, 82 % of the e-books sold can be classified as »Belletristik«, a German book-publishing category in between, and thus may include, both light literature (*Unterhaltungsliteratur*) and high literature (*Hochliteratur*). Yet, despite its contribution to the boom of digital reading, literary books also claim the greatest share in the physical book bazaar, notably in its latter and »higher« form, since German book market reports usually separately include »Deutsche Literatur« as more literary, and is usually the second largest category in the print market besides »Belletristik«. In this regard, the circulation of literature in Germany today retains the traditional gesture of framing books in print, especially when the printed words are neatly marshalled in accordance with the demanding literary culture.

This literary gesture, nostalgically persistent and effectively resistant against digitalization, is preserved and reinforced by multiple players in the contemporary German literary field. Authors like Judith Schalansky who strive for artistic and sensory perfection of the reading layouts are unlikely to find virtual publication particularly promising. Likewise, traditional book publishers seldomly give up their printing mandate in the wave of digitalization. Even though the sprouting online self-publishers have already put the existence of many small publishing houses at stake, survivors of the off-line publishing world insist on the physicality of the book with its artistic appeal. For instance, the Berlin-based publishing house Matthes & Seitz has commenced a fruitful project in cooperation with Schalansky to make non-fiction books of high material and aesthetic quality. The market potential of these books, however, mostly lies in the fact that they are suitable for collections or gifts. Here comes the role of the German readers, who would usually appreciate an exquisitely shaped hardcover as a Christmas present, leaving electronic books at a competitive disadvantage in this actual »gift« marketplace. Preceding the Christmas market is also the

<sup>7</sup> | Buch und Buchhandel in Zahlen 2018 (für 2017). In: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, online at [www.boersenverein.de/sixcms/media.php/976/Zusammenfassung%20BuB%202018%20f%C3%BCr%202017\\_deutsch\\_final.pdf](http://www.boersenverein.de/sixcms/media.php/976/Zusammenfassung%20BuB%202018%20f%C3%BCr%202017_deutsch_final.pdf); AAP Library Journal: Book sales revenue in the United States in 2017 and 2018, by format (in million U. S. dollars). In: Statista - The Statistics Portal, online at [www.statista.com/statistics/473144/half-year-book-sales-revenue-format-usa](http://www.statista.com/statistics/473144/half-year-book-sales-revenue-format-usa).

most important literary event in Germany, the annual *Frankfurter Buchmesse* in October. Again, with a historical tradition dating back to Gutenberg's time in Mainz, this world's largest book fair symbolizes the lasting industry of literature and book-in-print. It is also during this event that some of the most important literature awards in Germany are presented, including the German Book Prize, an accolade among publishers for bringing about the best novel in book-form of the year. In addition, like most other renowned literary prizes for books, the electronic format is excluded. Within the German institution of literary canonization, »books« are books in hardcover or bound paperback, and literature is not to be taken seriously without being rendered in print.

As universal as the obstinacy with print media in German literary industry may seem to be (the world is *also* full of authors, book collectors, academics, Christmas shoppers, publishers, prize jury members, or book fair flaneurs who refuse to give up the paper comfort or prestige), one shall not forget one other quintessentially German literary terrain of print media: the newspaper. Literary reviews and criticisms are not only to be found on blogs and periodicals, as is the case for most English-speaking countries, but also within their traditional territory inside the daily newspaper. Feuilleton, the newspaper section covering cultural discussions in German terms, has reserved a salon room for literature until today. Even though this literary »salon« is also turning digital, the fact of it having defined physical boundaries bestows considerable sense of materiality to this kind of writing. As Lothar Müller, the editor in chief for the feuilleton section of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, observes, the physical border of the printed newspaper not only shapes the content of the text, but also defines its reading experience. Unlike writings on a web page, feuilleton articles that are printed and confined to a piece of paper overrule the possibility of further »linkage«, and hence avert from the fate of becoming encyclopedia conglomerates.<sup>8</sup> To Müller, online presses have a very different framing structure than that of the newspaper, which resembles the distinction between scrolls and codex if viewed from the elementary level. Unlike the essentially »self-contained« medium of the newspaper in print, digital news platform is no real medium but a reservoir of media.<sup>9</sup> In other words, what the internet can provide is an all-inclusive universe for indefinite linkage and immediate publicity, yet not necessarily the perfect fit for salon discussions on literature.

Now, the rivalry between digital and print media is turning back into the *de facto* competition of the battleground: which *place* is better for literature – a rectangular codex limited in its totality, or in an infinitely scrolling search-engine? Where should literary criticism take place – in periodical print media, or a digital reservoir? For critics like Müller, the best locus might simply be wherever to generate the best criticism. In one of his numerous feuilleton articles »Salonfähig-

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<sup>8</sup> | Lothar Müller: *White Magic. The Age of Paper*. Cambridge 2015, p. 259.

<sup>9</sup> | *Ibid.*, p. 260.

keit«, Müller re-develops the »salon« metaphor from the Romantic tradition of Lessing, who believes in the communicative and collectively »self-enlightening« nature of literary criticism, and of Schlegel, for whom the critics are really panorama-sighted physiognomy specialists for the literary world.<sup>10</sup> While the literary salon is bound to be filled with voices of different levels of sophistication, it is the critics' job to moderate the discussion through various »salonfähig« writings, either some well-founded literary assessments or mainstream pop culture reviews in the form of book-characterizations.<sup>11</sup> Müller's bitter tone against the flourishing of the latter kind might resonate Karl Kraus' ironic bemoaning of an age of German feuilleton resulted from the contagious literary superficiality of »Franzosenkrankheit«<sup>12</sup>, whereas his preference for platform principally depends on which one can steer criticism towards the former sort, towards higher quality that is usually associated with print rather than the internet.

Müller has not opted for the print media *par excellence*. In fact, he has applauded, for example, »tell-review.de«, a newly emerged online literary salon's effort for attaining high standards of literary criticism in the very same article. What he did appreciate about the German literary criticism in the paper press is rather the physical »boundary« that a newspaper section draws to assemble all *salonfähig* critics, feuilletonists, and readers in a strictly circumscribed room of literature to keep the imaginary dialogue of fictive orality inside this bounded space. No hyperlink to relate authors and works; no »smartness« for keyword search anew. Newspapers, as Müller emphasizes, are founded on the principle of heterogeneity, with its mosaic arrangement of various pieces alongside one another, and in precise framing.<sup>13</sup> To find what one has *not* searched for, which is alarmingly disastrous for any online database, is the promise of the traditional newspaper. It is perhaps also the best outcome of a literary conversation, since the most inspiring insights from salon discussion are usually the unexpected ones, rarely resulting from intentional probing through endless portals and links. By denying limitless access to infinite information, newsprint offers a serene nest for the most ingenious literary opinions of an age, neither too distant from Lessing's ideal of collective self-enlightenment, nor overly remote from Schlegel's wish to make sense of characteristics in literature and men.

Once again, what makes newsprint a lastingly reassuring resort for German literary criticism is what the electronic form of literature lacks, namely the physically fixed boundaries for the presentation of every single piece of writing. Open boundaries are unsettling enough, not to mention a literary storage – an electronic reading device, for instance – with no formal boundaries at all. It is

**10** | Lothar Müller: *Salonfähig*. In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 16, 2016, p. 17.

**11** | *Ibid.*

**12** | Karl Kraus: *Heine und die Folgen Heine*. In: *Idem: Werke*. Ed. by Heinrich Fischer. Vol. 8, München/Wien 1954, p. 189.

**13** | Müller, *White Magic*, p. 259-262.

within certain borders that literary interactions may flourish, as Müller's testimonial on the contingent encounters for conscientious newspaper readers suggest. It is also within these borders that a sense of infinity may arise – infinite not as countless volumes of literary works, but as infinite possibilities of literary interpretation to be framed and preserved in an undisturbed realm. For some, the infinite literary realm exists only in the physical boundary of the print, as for Judith Schalansky, who has once recounted being »appalled« by a slogan for a library scanning machine on how to »eternalize« physical books through digitalization.<sup>14</sup> Schalansky's apprehension of losing typographic materiality for the sake of eternal yet amorphous preservation might be well understood in the contemporary German literary field, where the gesture of framing words in print continues to be well preserved. There, the fate of the book is bound with German cultural legacies, while the destiny of literature is not yet to be conceived without being physically bounded in print.<sup>15</sup>

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**14** | Talk with Judith Schalansky at the Literaturhaus Berlin, Notre Dame Seminar Berlin (11. Juli 2017).

**15** | This paper arose from Gu's participation in the Notre Dame Berlin Seminar: see [www.notredameberlinseminar.org](http://www.notredameberlinseminar.org).