Meeting Christoph Hein
Preface

Cecilia Novero

This interview with writer Christoph Hein was conducted in 2008 and focused on his 2000 novel *Willenbrock*. It was motivated by Andreas Dresen and Laila Stieler's 2005 film adaptation of the novel. The conversation with Hein takes up those issues that were most pertinent to the novel's rendition of post-unification Germany, in the 1990s. However, the interview's contexts of (i) the changed European landscape of the early 2000, as it also features in the film, and (ii) the global impact of 9/11 and the war on terror on the one hand and financial crisis in 2007-2008 on the other, inform the questions I asked Hein at the time. Below is a short introduction to Hein's work, and how I came to meet him, in Chicago in the 1990s.

Keywords: Christoph Hein, Andreas Dresen, Laila Stieler, adaptation, *Der fremde Freund*, *Willenbrock*, *Frau Paula Trousseau*, *Trutz*, *Der Tangospieler*, memory, *Wende*, *Literaturstreit*, Christa Wolf

Christoph Hein is a contemporary German writer whose fiction, drama, essays and speeches have received much attention and numerous literary prizes. Hein was born in 1944 in Silesia. At the end of the war, his family moved near Leipzig. The son of a minister, he was not allowed to pursue his studies at the lycee, in the GDR. Young Christoph then moved to East Berlin, in 1958. When the Wall was built, he returned to the GDR where he took up various jobs, including as actor and assistant director. At this time, he managed to complete his high school

diploma and subsequently to enrol at Leipzig University. He majored in Philosophy and Logic from the Humboldt University, in 1971. The Volksbühne in Berlin hired him as "in-house author." It was here that Hein's first play was staged, in 1974 ("Schlötel oder was solls"*). Due to the censoring of 15 of his plays, Hein left the Volksbühne in 1979 to devote himself fully to prose.*

Hein, whose texts have been widely translated, made himself known in and outside of Germany as a sharp and subtle critic of the GDR. Yet, his critique has always extended beyond German real socialism. His texts, since at least his novella Der fremde Freund *(1982, published in the FRG as* Drachenblut*), have indicted the pervasiveness of instrumental reason in modern society. The characters in Hein's texts live in a state of individual self-alienation, often without a sense of place, purpose, and "agency." They act (or not) in an incapacitated public sphere.*

As noted by many a critic, Hein's unwavering and punctilious writing style is akin to that of a "chronicler" of the contemporary. Yet, his fiction –while concentrating on the present – always excavates this present's roots. More or less overtly, his texts delve into the elusive and complex ways in which the socio-political genealogy of the present intertwines with the existential condition of the individual, how history and story come to cross and thereby shape dense, contradictory, and meaningful destinies that are both unique in their responses and eminently "situated" in the legacies of Germany's (and Europe's) recent past, such as, for Hein, the 1950s. For Hein, the mechanisms of painful yet escalating practices of forgetting crystallised in these years, in the GDR. His texts depict how both society and the individuals wherein, who are isolated from society's fabric, anaesthetize themselves against such pain. Repressed memories of repressed historical events thus return in Hein's fictional accounts, and do so through unlikely

connections, encounters, or clashes, through incidents and violent accidents that manifest as passing yet significant moments, or as instigators of traumas and tragedies to unfold. The stories come to show the enduring and time and again pernicious effects of the characters' actions –but also of their inactions: for example, a narrator may witness the characters' passive acceptance of "loss," day in day out, or, alternatively, how history shuts down the characters' wilful practices of a historical remembering. This is the case in Hein's novel Trutz *(2017), which tells the story of the repeated suffering of two families 'members, living through the 1930s, Stalinism in the Soviet Union, and the GDR due to their acquired ability to remember*[1].

The scrutinizing gaze that Hein has cast over the years on modern Western civilisation has never left out of its scope real-existing socialism, one of Western civilisation's utopias that has gone awry. On the one hand, Hein's publications during the GDR years used art and literature in order to attack those ordinary and petty –i.e., bourgeois, Biedermeier – habits that had survived and even privately thrived under real socialism. On the other hand, and perhaps most significantly, his texts, in fact the printed words that make them and fill the pages of very "physical" books, have endowed the arts (from literature to painting to photography) with the task of "storying" (as both storing and storying) sensate and uncontainable memories, memories that the official archives have not and cannot stockpile. Or for that matter, as Hein shows in Frau Paula Trousseau (2007), *computers.*

[1] For a detailed and insightful account of the novel, see Katrin Hillgruber, "Das Rätsel der Mnemonik," in *Deutschlandfunk*, 30.4.2017. Online at https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/christoph-hein-trutz-das-raetsel-der-mnemonik.700.de.html?dram:article_id=384985 Accessed 25 October 2020.

In this sense, Hein's books after the Wende have postulated narrative accounts –rather than records or data– of the eventuation of the loss of the GDR. Hein's book-objects/projects since unification thus offer themselves as the material (counter)archive of the sensate legacy left by the Augenblick[2] *of 1989.*

On this view, 30 years since the Wende, books such as Frau Paula Trousseau *(*FPT*) and the above-mentioned* Trutz *might counterintuitively stand for precisely the alternative legacy and counter-memory of the sensate, imaginative political fervour – Hannah Arendt might call it "power" – that had animated the spontaneous politics leading up to 1989, a political libido that, un-storable in the state archives, might be awaiting to be re-membered, i.e., embodied once again and thereby reactivated, through "material" stories. First, as for instance the memoir in* FPT *shows, narrative involves plural, imperfect and unending memories. In turn, these are set against the utopian/dystopian dream, whether in science or politics, of total accessibility to an omni-comprehensive (more-than-human) mnemonic apparatus, precisely, the archive. The archive is the place of forgetting, against the sites where human memory comes alive (This is most evident in* Trutz*). Second, the books' very own* Blätter *–a ubiquitous and crucial word/figure in Hein's fiction—morph into the actual material remainder, namely, the physical incarnation, of the "prints", papers, and canvases through which the stories encapsulate and pass on to others the characters' missed opportunities. The books' pages/sheets remain as witnesses: they are the sensate legacy from the past that is*

[2] *Augenblick*, meaning literally 'In the blink of an eye', describes a 'decisive moment' in time that is fleeting, yet momentously eventful and incredibly significant. See K. Ward, *Augenblick: The concept of the 'decisive moment' in 19th- and 20th-century Western philosophy* (Aldergate, UK: Ashgate, 2008).

bequeathed to the community of readers/recipients. Always coming after the printed book, this is a community or world to come (Agamben). In a nod to Walter Benjamin, Hein's post-Wende "sheets" of inscribed paper –these "leaves"–insist on the sensate materiality of storytelling as the craft and repository at once of those counter-memories that are always awaiting to fall into the open hands of future recipients.

I met Hein for the first time at the University of Chicago, in the early 1990s. This was shortly after an animated colloquium devoted to the GDR and its legacy that had taken place in 1992. Heated and unfinished conversations among international scholars, writers, poets, journalists, and academics that hailed from both the GDR and the FRG succeeded one another: heart-felt concern was shared about the legacy of the GDR, whether its literature, culture, art, but especially about the legacy and future of socialism beyond its Stalinist manifestation. At that point in time, the discussion very much focused on the broader implications of the Literature Debate*, or else, the controversy that had sparked in the German media following Christa Wolf's publication of her novella* Was bleibt *(published in June 1990, written in 1979).*[3] *Importantly, this debate was a first since the incensed controversy, in the mid 1980s, that had flared up in the media, namely, the so-called* Historikerstreit*. Then, leftist intellectuals (Jürgen Habermas) had argued against conservative historians (Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber) for the Holocaust's unique role in German history, against its normalization –and that of German guilt—within a more diffuse history of genocide that included, for example, the Stalinist purges.*

[3] On this debate, see Thomas Anz, editor, "Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf": *Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1995 (first printed Munich: Spangenberg, 1991).

The publication of Wolf's text, in 1990, had prompted conservative literary critics to fiercely attack Wolf as opportunist, and, by extension, to insist on the lesser aesthetic value of her oeuvre, and GDR literature as politically committed literature (Gesinnungsästhetik). While Wolf and other GDR writers came to epitomize the faults of such political aesthetics, papers such as die FAZ *and* die Zeit *broadened the discussion of the merits of literature to include other committed writers, since 1945. Here it may be worth mentioning that much earlier debates on committed literature had variously taken place in the 1930s and again since the 1960s.*[4]

To return to those exciting if anxious days in Chicago: I remember well my conversations with journalist Gabriele Dietze and poet Uwe Kolbe among others, during the conference in Hyde Park. At the time, we shared our worries about what we thought were the missed opportunities and wrong starts of German unification –the issue with the annexation of the GDR to the FRG was paramount. [5] *We –and the other participants– engaged the problematic framing of GDR history within that which already then clearly transpired to be a retrospectively teleological narrative of socialism's "failure" contra the equally teleological obviousness of real-existing capitalism's "victory". Furthermore, and I think significantly with regard to the anxious mood, all this was being discussed in the context of the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia (end of June 1991), and*

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[4] Fredric Jameson, editor, *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso, 1980; Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignments in Postwar Critical Theory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991.

[5] Following these conversations, I translated and published Gabriele Dietze's paper for the conference and then a poem by Kolbe in Italian. The former came out in the cultural studies journal, edited by Goffredo Fofi, *Linea d'Ombra* 75 (1992), pp. 33-38. The latter in *Poesia contemporanea tedesca*, edited by Anna Chiarloni. Torino: Einaudi, 1994, p. 355.

the aftermath of the first highly mediatic Iraq war: operation Desert Storm (January 1991). It was then that the US returned with a vengeance and no shame to its strategy of exporting democracy through war, to which strategy, and its intensification, we can still testify to this day.

While most of these conversations are engraved in my memory, I only vaguely recall Christoph Hein's visit sometime later. I know I accompanied him on a walk on campus, during which I talked about my year in East Berlin, in 1986-87. Yet, it seems to me now, that on that visit to Chicago he had been shy of words, almost circumspect, possibly pondering carefully what to say. As a young doctoral student, confused and slightly distressed by the historical events, which definitely had repercussions on my friends' lives, in the former GDR, I can't deny that I was underwhelmed and a little disappointed by what I then considered a kind of self-imposed political restraint. Perhaps, I told myself, this was Hein's reasonable reaction to Hein's preceding political activism and his very vocal commitment in 1989-1990. Suffice it to mention here, in this regard, his (disputed) call for reform and a democratic socialism in November 1989, as well as his grounding –with Christa Wolf– of an independent committee to investigate the brutality employed by the Volkspolizei *and the forces of the* Ministerium für Staatssicherheit *in the quelling of the October 1989 peaceful demonstrations against the official celebrations of the state's 40th anniversary. When Hein came to Chicago, in 1991, both these actions had clearly not yielded the expected outcomes. In Wolf's view, however, the latter of the two undertakings had contributed to the evolution of democratic forms among the former GDR citizens and social actors; or, in Hein's retrospective assessment, to an important moment of democracy-making, a moment that bypassed both state and party interests (Niven 690). After the Western press' vitriolic attacks against the writers and intellectuals from the GDR*

since 1989, I could understand Hein's reticence, especially when it came to conversations about issues such as socialism, and, more broadly, "politics," in an academic setting that was not Germany. After all, while well-versed in all matters surrounding Stalinism, the Cold War, Marxism and Leninism, and what have you, scholars in the US could not have experienced and felt the vast implications for one's life and work brought on by the loss of one's own "country" and Western modernity's grandest utopias.

What I do remember though is that Hein was always immaculately dressed, in garments that shone in the light leaving in his trail a trace of the man's theatrical appearance. A residue of Hein's dramatic persona, from his days spent at the Volksbühne, perhaps; I interpreted this demeanour as a kind of subdued statement: distance, irony, positioning, the dress indexed, for me, a performance that exceeded the role of witness he might have been compelled to impersonate. In short I read into this a "dressing act" that oscillated between the affirmation of authenticity and its elusiveness, or impermanence. Maybe this gesture, a Brechtian Geste*, helped me, in the end, to confront my own ideological –and affective– projections, through which I was the one trying to keep alive the GDR of my "imaginary socialism."*

Only years later did I meet with Christoph Hein again. And that was when he graciously agreed to have a chat with me about his novel Willenbrock *(2000), in his Pankow apartment. The meeting had been facilitated by my dear friend, editor and producer Andreas Leusink, and Laila Stieler. My conversation with Hein took place in December 2008, after the release of Andreas Dresen's film adaptation of* Willenbrock*. Because we are publishing an interview with Stieler on her collaboration with Dresen's most recent film,* Gundermann *(2018), in this volume, and because Stieler also wrote the script of Dresen's*

screen adaptation of Hein's novel, I believe the time is ripe to publish this interview.

While the interview speaks for itself, let me just add here that at the time it occurred, namely in 2008, my questions were informed by two distinct discursive frameworks: first, the financial crisis that had swept across the world; second, my academic interest at the time to come up with a theoretical model through which to read the traces of a former acculturation in the GDR in united Germany's cultural scene (film and literature in this case). The former socio-political context led me to pay renewed attention to the unresolved issues left behind by unification. Specifically, it spurred me on to consider how, first, Hein had taken these issues up in his novel Willenbrock *–set in the 1990s– and, second, how Dresen had in turn reworked such issues in his 2005 film. Dresen's film, interestingly, is set away from Berlin, in Magdeburg. With this shift in location, Dresen updates, and revises the provocative issue of Western civilisation versus the "Barbarians" from the East that features prominently in Hein's novel. The new location helps to recontextualize the issue by triangulating the relations among FRG, GDR (in 2005, at the time of the film, included if dissolved within the FRG borders) and the EU, which expanded its borders to include former socialist countries in Eastern Europe (for example, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, among others, in 2004). Somewhat sideways the transposition of such concerns from the novel to the film, from the centre of unified Germany to the Eastern margins of the EU, inspired my theoretical musings about adaptation. I saw this genre and form as it returned in post-unification Germany as the expression of a collective enunciation of precisely those cultural traces that the passing of the GDR had left behind. Adaptation as collective enunciation provided me with the framework to conceptualise postsocialist cultural production as minor, in Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the term. While at the time*

of my interview with Hein these ideas had not yet crystallised, it was thanks to this conversation, and that with Stieler on the film, that I could pursue this theoretical path in oral presentations and a publication on the topic.[6] *Since that time, 10 years ago, other scholars have engaged the concept of minor literature to account for literary and cinematic productions by formerly trained GDR cultural practitioners (in particular Dresen's) in fruitful ways. Derek Schaefer and Jean E. Conacher have taken their analyses to a whole new level….*[7]

[6] Cecilia Novero, "Adaptation as Palimpsest of Collective Memories: The Case of the Two *Willenbrock*" Proceedings: *Creative Imitations and Appropriations: From Cinematic Adaptations to Remakes* (University of Otago, 2011), pp. 31-35.

[7] Derek Schaefer, *East German Literature in the 21st Century: Minor Literature and Alternative Memory*, PhD Dissertation (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016); Jean E. Conacher, "Adapting Hein's *Willenbrock*: Andreas Dresen and the Legacy of the GDR 'Ensemble' Tradition." *Adaptation Considered as a Collaborative Art: Process and Practice*. Edited by B.Cronin, R. MagShamhráin, and N. Preuschoff. Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 193-213.

A Tête-à-Tête about *Willenbrock*
Christoph Hein and Cecilia Novero in Conversation (2008)

Cecilia Novero: When did you come up with the idea for this novel?

Christoph Hein: In the mid-1990s, just a few years before I wrote it.

N.: Why did you choose Berlin as the novel's location, e.g. was this a city of choice?

H.: I saw it as a *Schnittpunkt*, Ost-Europa/West-Europa crossed in Berlin. The film adaptation moves the setting to Magdeburg for filmic reasons… That choice had nothing to do with my book. When I wrote *Willenbrock*, Magdeburg was not a pivotal city: Berlin, was at that time: the Russians, the Poles, the Spanish, the English, the Italians, they all came to Berlin. Berlin had been a divided city and, now, in the 1990s it was open, it was more exciting. It was clearly the *Entwicklungstadt*.

N.: As is clear from its very beginning, the novel takes place in the present; however, the novel references the past more so than Dresen's adaptation. I would like to ask, "how does one find the GDR in the novel, or –rather– which of its traces resurface in the novel?

H.: Two things: the prehistory of the main character, Bernd Willenbrock, is one trace; the other is the *Umbruchzeit*, the transitional phase. It is clearly about *Ostdeutschland*, *Ost-Berlin*; this *Umbruch*, of which

Willenbrock partakes, is typical of East Germany not of West Germany.

N.: While reading the novel the first time, I thought that the GDR mattered precisely because of the conspicuous absence of its past, in the novel. The past emerges only through singular instances, moments, as it were, that appear as the belated effects of one or other traumatic event, all to do with violence. In the film, in my view, it was harder to show the momentous and momentaneous irruption of the past in this way.

H.: Yes, that is correct.

N.: As a writer who has enjoyed success both during the GDR's existence and in the post-unification years, and as far as your texts are concerned, would you say that one could detect traces of this previous work in your recent writing? Am I mistaken for example to identify resonances of *Der Fremde Freund* in *Willenbrock*?

H. Really? Interesting. I would not have thought so. But it could be. Authors are always the least congenial people to speak about their work. I never thought about this earlier novella, not for a second. And I would not speculate on the connections there might be between *Willenbrock* and the earlier novella. Yet, it is likely that an author remains somewhat tied to his own world. For example, some characters of particular interest in one story may resurface here and there in another. But it is up to others to decide, not to the author himself.

N.: In reading contemporary German literature, what are your thoughts about the role that earlier GDR

literature may be playing, in the new millennium? I really mean GDR literature, rather than GDR history.

H. I don't see it as any different than any other historical period or, as far as authors are concerned, as for any author from any other period. The point is whether a writer will survive the next ten or hundred years. The likelihood that this happens is doubtful. Percentagewise there are very few such authors, no doubts. In any case, it is never about belonging to a political system or a political structure. Take Nievo, an important Italian writer, well, his novels are interesting to this day. Yet, this interest has nothing to do with his work's political background and information, both strongly present in Nievo. Indeed, the politics of Nievo's literature are of no interest to anyone, today. The same is true of German Literature, overall. Look at Heine or Lessing. The political system is not important, other than yes on a few instances here and there; what is essential is the text itself.

N.: Should we speak of GDR studies today as the studies of a particular country, or a particular time-period?

H.: Listen, when I read Thomas Mann I don't place him as Weimar author, even if he of course wrote during this time, or Bertolt Brecht. They have worked in the course of three or four systems, Weimar, Nazi, Post Nazi…I don't want to reduce any work to a single "epoch." The work is always a carrier of meaning, even if one issue, for example, unemployment, may be more crucial at one time than another, as it was during the Weimar Republic. Unemployment thus became important for Brecht, and yet it is still an issue of general interest. In contrast, it was less

important for Thomas Mann, who mostly took the bourgeoisie as his subject.

N.: Then, to go back to *Willenbrock*, how do he (the character) and it (the novel) relate to his/its time? I believe he is very much a figure of his time.

H.: Yes, no doubt.

N.: He belongs in the 1990s, even more so than in the new century/millennium. Don't you think that were you to invent Willenbrock today, in 2008, he would be a different character?

H.: yes, definitely, he belongs to the nineties, I see it the same way.

N.: How do you place him in this time, more specifically? What does a "man of his time" do, if this time mean the nineties and the *Wende,* that a man of the new century would not do?

H.: It is precisely the specific traits that mark the *Umbruch* (of revolutionary change, of change over). The time that immediately followed the *Wende*, as both German states were being reunited. That is: two different systems which come together or rather one that has to adapt to the other, that had to join the other. It is always individuals, ultimately, who experience such events, but also the life as it was lived in one's own state is experienced as an individual. In this sense *Willenbrock* is a pretty precise chronicle of the 1990s. And this makes it a novel of its time; today it is already different. A couple of stories from that period of *Umbruch* might hold up to the

test of time but, shortly, I believe, they will "expire," and in 10 or 20 years they will resonate differently than at the time they were lived and conceived, and differently too from our current moment, eight years after the novel's publication.

N.: Let us take a look at the film *Willenbrock*, then. The latter was adapted from your novel in 2005. Its focus seems to me to be on the impact of globalization on united Germany, with of course important hints to its recent divided past (as mentioned before). While also touching on globalization, however, the novel rather concentrates on the particulars of the intercultural relations between Eastern European citizens (Russian and Polish in particular, who acceded to the EU in 2004) and Berlin/ers, both the city and its people, with their past experiences of "division", at all levels, personal, "intellectual", social and political, a history of "submerged" if not repressed clashes. The film I believe is interested in depicting globalization from a more "economic" point of view, wouldn't you agree?

H. Yes, absolutely.

N.: It goes without saying that your "Berlin" novel also touches on the increasing speed of neoliberal globalization in the 1990s, when, as we remember, the *Treuhandanstalt* bought out the former GDR state-owned companies (a much opposed operation that, ending in 1994, counts among its consequences the assassination of the organization's chairman, on April 1, 1991). Real-socialist Eastern Europe in Berlin clashes with Real-capitalist Western civilisation in Berlin. The former –dangerously— reappears on the maps of the European Union. The issue

of civilisation or its collapse, its decay, looms large on the novel's horizon. Why was such topic relevant in the 1990s, is it still? The decline of civilisation, does this correspond to a decline of (Western) Reason? (*Aufklärung*).[8]

H.: The novel is not intended to advance an argument or a theory or even to give a speech. I only tried to depict what was happening in the 1990s, what was there for anyone to see, including the fast developments and rapid changes. We experienced the consequences of these changes very starkly, including of course the financial and economic globalization that came with these developments. This was (is?) globalization that has gotten out of hand, run amok. For Willenbrock himself, the assaults he suffers in Berlin emerge from the depths of Eastern Europe; in the novel, Eastern Europe marks the brutal beginning of a history that if not deal with may bear brutal consequences. But, again, I did not develop a theory in the novel, which simply described everyday life in Germany or, rather. Berlin, as it unfolded. I tried to take notes, so to speak, on how an individual, this character named Willenbrock, lived here.

N.: I liked that both the terms *Zivilisation* and *Barbarismus* pop up in the novel, mostly on Krylow's lips, but are never exhaustively explained. They appear here and there with the clumsy and dangerous lightness as

[8] The conversation could have steered in the direction of how the civilisational discourse returned to be central to political interpretations of 9/11, as evinced from the revival of Samuel P. Huntington's theses and the heated debates that his theses provoked. See Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisation and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Norton & C., 1997).

other such terms may take in ordinary people's speech, as stereotypes.

H.: This has to do with the fact that Krylow –but also Willenbrock– have both been somewhat "liquidated", de-classed. Theirs is the story of East Germany, Eastern Europe's story: in the recent past, these individuals were functionaries. Krylow, quite high in the hierarchy, had worked for the government; Willenbrock was an engineer, in some kind of senior position. We experience such stories often in our day, having interesting conversations with a taxi-driver who, as it turns out, has a higher degree. And this testifies to how entire societies have been liquidated. Suddenly, one finds oneself conversing with a formerly important figure, say, a general, or a politician, or even someone who had been employed at a slightly lower level, just like Willenbrock and Krylow. Their conceptual world has not changed, it has remained "there." Hence they feel they can express themselves on such "cultured" issues, and they do so. And we don't expect this from a taxi driver. With the de-classing and liquidation of the entirety of Eastern Europe and East Germany, a whole lot of people have "become" taxi-drivers, or car dealers, or, like Krylow, some kind of business mediators, import-export businessmen.

N.: The same happens in New York, or other cities today. But in your book it has to do with Western and Eastern Europe. What I find most interesting in your novel is how the issue of civilisation appears to be tied to that of violence. Namely, it is poignant that the decline of civilisation is connected with the breaking down of all kinds of borders and boundaries, including those of the subject. For example, at the beginning of the novel,

Willenbrock is sure that he is not and will never be a violent person. This self-image collapses, and he in the end resorts to violence. This might have to do with the boundaries of the self, and/or with other sorts of borders, perhaps thresholds such as between the present and the past, internal and external realities. In this regard, the word *verschwinden* (vanishing, disappearing) returns often in the novel. My question is: is this loosening of the boundaries/borders that produces uncertainty a political statement? Again: Willenbrock does not want to partake actively in his new contemporary world, whether politically or as violent agent, etc.: Yet, he ends up being involved in all of this against his better judgment. He finds himself unwittingly in the midst of things. There is no escape to getting involved, no matter what; one ends up having a responsibility.

H. No, I disagree. This is too much theory. I have no philosophy. I just describe.

N.: But don't you think that this novel is ultimately about the state or perhaps the significance of "civilisation" in his/our time"?

H. Yes, it is about all that, but without theorizations or philosophizing.

N.: Within this framework, what literary references may you have harked back to in the novel? I couldn't help but think of Heinrich von Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas* and the eponymous main character. He was a horse-dealer who in his struggle for justice takes up arms thus becoming violent. Is Willenbrock the Kohlhaas of Germany's 1990s?

H.: No, I disagree, again. Willenbrock does not want what is happening, Kohlhaas instead lets himself be provoked by every little affront and finally goes on a rampage. Willenbrock laughs about what happens or, at least, tries to, the entire time. He does not want to engage with his former colleague, that would be too much of a hassle. The first assaults interest him very little. Only when it reaches the point of excess, when it is too much, when he loses his peace, does he "react." Unlike Kleist's Kohlhaas, Willenbrock tries not to be robbed of his *laissez faire*, his nice and good life. It is very different for Kohlhaas. He wants vengeance after the very first injustice. Willenbrock tries to avoid this, to avoid becoming like Kohlhaas.

N.: But accidents happen in Willenbrock's life that against his will make him buy and use a gun…

H.: yes, that is true.

N.: With regard to this, some think that the novel, especially with its ending, could be read as cynical.

H.: What do you mean by cynical?

N.: I am not sure. It is not really my point of view. Perhaps because he has to come to terms with –accept— that he will use violence, with the fact that he now has a gun and that possibly he will have to use it. And that this has nothing to do with "justice". So, yes, he puts the gun away, but he has decided to keep it…what matters is just self-defence.

H.: He never wanted the gun, though. I don't see what this has to do with cynicism, why this would make him a cynic…He never wanted the gun, surely not at the beginning; he wanted to get rid of it but then there is an assault followed by a series of other assaults, and he shoots the gun; he unwittingly injures someone. He does not want to throw away the gun, so, possibly, probably, he will fire it again, at some point. This is a scenario that the novel allows one to imagine. It could very well be. But "cynical"? No. He defends himself <u>from</u> this gun. What is cynical about this? What would I do if I were in his shoes? According to the German Law, one has the right to self-defence. It is a violation of such right when one uses excessive force or violence. If one has experienced an assault, one will understand Willenbrock's excessive use of violence. He should not have shot the gun, obviously… but he does not know what is happening, whether he is going to be assaulted again. Previously, at the first occurrence of violence, he had waited; on this other occasion, he shoots first. This is not cynicism, not at all: he does not want violence, the assaults, or the weapon; he does not want to deal with any gun. Remember, when he had joined the Army, he had refused to carry a gun. The circumstances compel him to. It is not for me to judge <u>him</u> on these grounds.

N.: Does Willenbrock change in the course of the novel? Doesn't he develop new thoughts about violence, due to these circumstances that affect his life? He must think about it now, and about the law (he has to engage with lawyers). Also, his relation with his wife is affected by it.

H. There are changes, yes…due to this weapon, which he <u>never</u> wanted.

N.: Yes, he rails against Krylow who gave it to him.

H. Exactly!

N.: But does he change or is he the same at the end of the novel as he was in the beginning of the story?

H. These assaults affect his life, he has a new life in the end, this "lightness", which he always wanted (i.e., he wanted to be relaxed, have a lover every once in a while, drink a glass of champagne), this carefree way of living, well, this life is over. Now he owns a weapon, which he always keeps near. I think if I were to walk down the street with a weapon on me, well, I believe it is very different than walking without a weapon. And this change happened to him, he did not want it.

N.: Does all this relate to Willenbrock's will to "forget"?…A will that is clearly very strong at the beginning of the novel.

H.: He does not want to work through issues, no old stories, he just wants a life lived through laissez-faire, that is why he is not interested in the old stories.

N.: Is this really the case also at the end of the novel? The novel starts with an emphatic "I want to forget" but it ends with Willenbrock stating "I cannot forget anything." And he says this after the visit from Feuerbach, his former colleague…

H.: Yes, this is a good way to describe the way Willenbrock changes…

N.: Through violence?

H.: Through the circumstances. The novel's depiction of the circumstances.

N.: The relations between forgetting and remembering, absence and presence seem to me to crystallize through the use of photographs, e.g. photography, in the novel. I was interested in the references to actual (material) photos, in the narrative. In particular, it seems to me, the novel combines one photo with "violence". This one photo –it returns several time in the novel—combined with the gun, both shooting weapons, appear in one "take," as it were, towards the end of the novel: this photo appears at that point as *deplatziert* (displaced, out of place). Further, Willenbrock defines it a *Fremdkörper* (a foreign body). A few pages before this passage, Willenbrock even aims at the same photograph with his gun. *Der Fremde Freund* also features photography, for instance, one knows that Claudia, the protagonist, is an amateur-photographer who roams the countryside shooting black and white photographs. In addition, the photos she shoots in this novella capture so-called *nature morte*, still life, thus immediately eliciting the thought that photography, and killing, thus violence are closely associated practices.

H.: Yes! All true.

N.: Willenbrock seems to be prone to such thoughts, himself, I believe. Why is this one photo from Willenbrock's life of importance in this novel, but also photography more generally?

H.: You described it very well. There is no more to say really. Perhaps only the fact that this photo, which used to be so important to Willenbrock, has now become, or has morphed into, a cover for the safe where he keeps his gun. I believe this shows a nice change in the photograph's function: the function of the photo now is just to hide the safe, to shield it. It is somewhat strange.

N.: Yes, safe and safety: safety from dangers but also the safety offered by the photo itself that just prior to the assaults stood for both a happy past and an unhappy memory, a way to remember and to forget at once. Because of how intricate and complex all these motifs are I too don't agree that Willenbrock is simply cynical. The photograph, the changes in its function –perhaps its liquidation, its own *abgewickelter* status in Willenbrock's present– as you just remarked, show how difficult it is for Willenbrock to extricate himself from the contradictions in which he ends up being caught. The photograph is an index of the lack of solution, and consequently of the novel's rejection of closure, when it comes to ordering all these themes we have just discussed.

H. Maybe, yes.

N.: To return once more to a possible parallel between Willenbrock and your novel/la *Der fremde Freund* (and perhaps its meaning), besides photography and photos, another commonality is "dreams". Both novels start with dreams, and in both texts, these dreams include the figure of a bridge.

H. Yes, true!

N.: In *Willenbrock*, the man whom Willenbrock pursues in his dream stands for a "foreign friend". I would like to think that this foreign friend who escapes him could be the novel's own literary past, the past constituted by all those predecessors of *Willenbrock* in your work, whether other texts or characters in them. These both linger on and lose their contours in the character Willenbrock's present and in the novel's new "location," that is in unified Germany. *Der fremde Freund*, this early and important novella, is the estranged / stranger friend of the novel *Willenbrock*, and Willenbrock the character runs after his strange and increasingly distant forerunners (Note: the novella was translated into English as *Distant Lover*).

H. Yes, interesting…right. That is compelling, but I had not thought about it…

N.: In film, dreams are often a technical means to bring back some kind of indistinct past or, alternatively, they often signal the future. They are seldom rooted in a very specific and identifiable moment in time. Is this true also of Willenbrock's dream?

H.: Yes, and it is also not possible to really interpret the dream either, it may be due to his situation; in any case, it is not clear.

N.: The dream itself –which opens the novel—is almost literally juxtaposed with porn magazines. Later, we read of gangsters, guns, assaults. Here the novel appears to mix literary and pop genres…including perhaps a nod to the classical gangster films of the Thirties in addition to other sorts of current revivals such as pulp fiction, or comic

books…do these or other pop "genres" play a role in this "book"?

H.: Yes, it is possible, I didn't think about it…

N.: I don't mean explicit references, but rather images that come from disparate texts and contexts.

H. Yes, but if you are thinking of Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction* –well, this is certainly not comparable to Willenbrock! My novel is about Berlin in the 1990s.

N.: I would like to return to the novel but this time to discuss the other, i.e. minor, characters in it. Let us start with the women, and then discuss the figure of the artist, if that is ok. The artist is of particular interest to me because of the different roles he has in both the novel and Dresen's film.

First, however, let me ask another related question: In the film, the artist and friend of Willenbrock utters the following sentence, or quote: "if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you". (Note: the quote is from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, §146). In the novel, instead, the same sentence is spoken by some lieutenant who, in the past, had been charged with "deliberate and reckless dereliction of duty." (P. 319, translation). Willenbrock remembers this sentence from having read it in some history text on World War I (not in Nietzsche's oeuvre!) Why does Willenbrock read so passionately these war-books? Why this interest in war, not just of course in pilots and the history of flying?

H.: I am not quite sure; perhaps it is because the history of flying has always been linked quite strongly

with military history. But I don't want to offer any interpretation…

N.: in my view, this interest in war-books that, as you say, is certainly motivated by Willenbrock's love of flying, a dream which was not fulfilled in his life, links up with thoughts of death. This seems to me appropriate especially in light of the Nietzsche quote…A loose connection between flying, the taking off of dreams, and dying, the death of dreams, the fall into the abyss of resentment …the abyss of death, of loss, of fear, of danger that could paralyze…

H.: More simply, the history of flying was connected to military history, and even today it is …quite strongly so. The history of civilian flying is a by-product of military flying.

N.: Like that of computers…

H.: yes…it was a great opportunity to fight new wars, the military had very much the lead in these matters, the majority of pilots were also associated with the military.

N.: The current context of "global terrorism"(I am thinking of the attacks in the last few days in Mumbai, not just of 9/11)[9] brings home and points up that pervasive feeling of terror or fear that one associates with the

[9] When I interviewed Hein on December 1, 2008, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, otherwise known as 26/11, had just occurred. An extremist Islamist organization based in Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, carried out 12 shootings and bombings over the course of 4 days, between November 26 and 29, in Mumbai, killing 174 people and wounding at least 300.

experience of being constantly at war. This *Angst* that we, privileged citizens of the West, would have liked to have outsourced "elsewhere" at no cost has now come back to haunt us, as it were. And this is in essence Willenbrock's predicament, that of a man who wishes to live quietly, and carefree, in this West/ern land of opportunities, only to find out that he cannot because to live today, in Berlin, means unavoidably grappling with the socio-political consequences of the global spread and effects of neo-liberalism –including fear, terror, and other violence. The narrator states this quite plainly: "he had the impression he was arming himself for a war."[10]

H.: Yes.

N.: In this regard, the book's key issues have not become obsolete, in the new millennium…Many of us live our lives in this fashion (armed), perhaps without knowing it; in contrast, Willenbrock becomes aware of this in the course of the novel.

H.: Yes, correct.

N.: Perhaps then gazing into the abyss involves, in Willenbrock's case, looking into his past, his memories. These memories in turn resurface and confront him, assault him; they are a source of "terror." The abyss, indeed, also appears in his dream …

But let us change gears, now. Let us touch on the women figures. To me, they are all different. They each offer a different view of Willenbrock, that is, one can see

[10] My translation. *Willenbrock,* Ch. 16, page 234 (German edition).

him in his "plurality," so to speak, through these women's eyes. What could you say about these figures?

H.: I have just described women whom I see, I have seen. I don't want to interpret my work. I have only attempted to describe the women that could be of interest to Willenbrock and that perhaps are or could be somewhat interesting.

N.: What about the entomologist?

H. Well, overall, you are right, they do show the many faces of Willenbrock, indeed, there are many Willenbrocks, as you well put it.

N.: A la "Being John Malkovic"…

Laughter

H.: very nice, very nice.

N.: They all are very strong women. They are set on making it in the world, they are independent, self-assured and they don't seem to get exploited. While these strong women might enjoy a good degree of freedom and autonomy, the costs of which are not explicitly revealed in the novel, yet there are instances in the novel that show the world where these strong women move to be sexist.

H.: Very right, it is not Willenbrock, but the environment in which the women –and he—live that is. This agrees with the reality of today.

N.: In conclusion, a word or two on the ways the novel was received. The reviews vary but what struck me is that for some reviewers *Willenbrock* has become the *Wenderoman* or, if it hasn't, this is because no novel to-date qualifies as such. But what is the *Wenderoman*?

H. Nonsense, every two years the press decides, "that is the *Wenderoman*!". I spent no time thinking about it. As I just said, every two years a new novel is taken to be the *Wenderoman*. This is stuff for journalists…no word should be wasted on the topic…

N.: Would you say though that your novel is a "historical novel" of the contemporary, a paradoxical definition?

H: No idea. It is not for me to decide. Thank God I don't have to think about this in my line of work! This is for academics to decide. All I try to accomplish is to write a little story in the most accurate way possible.

N.: Yes, precision, acrimony, is always the strongest feature of your work. That is why Kleist comes to mind, not necessarily for the themes you tackle but, rather, for the transparency of your and his style. Just briefly, and really this is my last topic: you obviously saw Dresen's film, *Willenbrock*. How did you go about the adaptation process and the final outcome?

H.: I encouraged the screenwriter and the director to work freely with the text, unlike the case of *Der Tangospieler*. On that occasion the film faithfully followed the book, one on one, so to speak; I did not like that approach, filming page by page. When filming

Willenbrock, an adequate distance was taken from the novel and that was the right thing to do. Willenbrock is also a different character in the film than he is in my novel. One may speak less of an adaptation than a feature film in its own right. In my view, adaptations are not always a good idea. I found this film good, however. It was a good experience. And I was pleased that my novel inspired this film. I appreciated the distance between the two, and I think it is indeed necessary when translating a text into the very different medium of film.

N.: Ah, Laila Stieler –when I spoke with her earlier— suggested that I ask you about the meeting you all had with the public prosecutor prior to filming that scene…if you have any thoughts about the sequence where the meeting takes place, please…

H.: It was a great chance for me to meet that attorney, while he was busy at work, in his office, outside of Berlin. In the book, I describe the prosecutor in a luxurious way, with a secretary, a nice office etc. The conditions at the office we visited were terrible! The office was stacked with documents, there was no room left for anything, anywhere. I had been more generous in my description, which came from my experience with attorneys in the capital, in Berlin. I did not know this was the situation in the provinces, when the film was being shot. It was an important correction of my previous view, it was eye-opening for me.

N.: Maybe this is another indicator of the liquidation of an "old" or rather "other" world and its people, as you mentioned earlier; it points to the lack of power of the state officials in the 'ignored' provinces. The forlorn

province, without means, is an indicator of an extended precariat that knows no limits, and anticipates the "failing" bureaucracy of the future.

H.: they have no chance…these attorneys have five minutes per case…then the case is thrown out, over. No chance…no money…

N.: And on this note, let me close this engrossing conversation. Thank you for your precious time!

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