

EPILOGUE

*Presentist Dystopias or the Case
for Environmental Humanities*

In 2017 the renowned German writer Juli Zeh published *Leere Herzen* (Empty Hearts), a dystopian novel that imagines life in postdemocratic Germany and Europe.¹ Regula Freyer, the leader of the Besorgte Bürger Bewegung (Concerned Citizens Movement), has taken over from Angela Merkel, who was forced to leave the political stage eight years previously, suddenly looking like a sad old woman. Modeled on various current right-wing movements, the BBB is a democratically elected party that, on its journey to power, successfully exploited the electorate's widespread political apathy. Besides introducing a basic income for all to keep protest at bay, the ruling party has launched various "Effizienzpakete" (efficiency packages), which, in the name of economic efficiency, have

1. Juli Zeh, *Leere Herzen* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2017).

already massively curtailed civil rights and undermined central democratic institutions. For example, the German supreme court is now made up of only three judges (instead of sixteen), and the newly established Bundeszentrale für Leitkultur (Federal Agency for the Lead Culture) oversees the government's identitarian politics. Arabic tearooms have been closed down, and the Qu'ran has been banned from bookshops. On the European stage Frexit (the departure of France from the EU) and Spexit (the departure of Spain from the EU) sound the imminent death knell for the EU; in the international arena Trump and Putin have forged an autocratic transatlantic alliance, ending the war in Syria.

Pervasive postdemocratic attitudes and political indifference have enabled Britta Söldner and her business partner Babak Hamwi to develop a new business model. Their company Brücke (Bridge), ostensibly a therapeutic practice for patients with suicidal thoughts, is in reality just a front for an employment agency for suicide bombers. With the help of data mining they identify potential suicide candidates, who, after a careful algorithmic selection process, sign up for a tough psychological and physical "evaluation program" that establishes suicidal intention on a scale of 1 to 10. Nine candidates leave the program in the early stages and resume their ordinary lives, but every tenth candidate reaches level 10 and is thus deemed to be suitable for a suicide attack. The Brücke's clients include radicalized eco and animal rights groups as well as splinter Islamic factions who pay high fees to contract suicide bombers. As a company director, Britta lives in complete harmony with the zeitgeist: the reintegration of nine out of ten potential suicide candidates has produced declining suicide figures, and the careful management of the rare suicide attacks is preventing collateral damage. In a nutshell, Britta embodies a form of "pragmatic nihilism" that has long abandoned the common good in favor of her narrowly defined interests, which revolve around her business, her family, and a few friends.

Zeh's novel does not rank among her highest literary achievements. Many reviewers have criticized the schematic and wooden characterization, her handling of dialogue and clichéd plot elements

that too easily reveal their anchorage in current affairs.² And yet, from a temporal perspective, *Leere Herzen* is an intriguing novel: it places what one might call a “plausible dystopia” within close reach of our disillusioned age. Dystopia no longer designates the final apocalyptic catastrophe that dramatically unfolds in the distant future but rather the gradual erosion of democracy in the here and now. Some critics have read Zeh’s book as a riposte to Michel Houellebecq’s controversial *La soumission* (2015; *Submission*, 2015), which imagines the step-by-step islamification of France by democratic means.³ There is, however, a second allusion that illuminates the profound foreclosure of the future that has featured so prominently in my book. Overtly, the title of Zeh’s novel refers to a pop song that, in the novel, is at the top of the charts and sung by Julietta, a young woman from a middle-class background who commits a spectacular suicide attack at the end: “When the future has passed, the past will return. One day you’ll be asked what you did, baby. Full hands, empty hearts, it’s a suicide world” (LH, 232). But the recurring leitmotif “full hands, empty hearts” also alludes to Fritz Lang’s iconic film *Metropolis*, which, as I have shown in chapter 2, projected the revolutionary potential of modern technology onto the figure of the female robot. *Metropolis* reins in its dazzling depiction of a sci-fi future through its conservative handling of class conflict. Intertitles translate the clash between the master of the metropolis and the exploited workers into the fairly conventional dichotomy of “Hirn und Hände” (head and hands) that requires the female heart as mediator. The death of the female robot at the end safeguards conventional gender roles as embodied by Maria, the real woman with a real heart. And so the final intertitle reinstates a traditional vision of social harmony: “Mittler zwischen Hirn und Hand muss das Herz sein” (The mediator

2. See Jacqueline Thör, “Gibt es noch Hoffnung in Dunkeldeutschland?,” *Die Zeit Online*, 14 November 2017; Julia Encke, “Wo geht’s zum Abgrund?,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 November 2017; Gustav Seibt, “Jede Gesellschaft braucht eine Dosis Amok,” *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14 November 2017; Björn Hayer, “Im Inneren der Wohlstandsblase,” *Der Spiegel*, 13 November 2017.

3. Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, trans. Lorin Stein (London: Vintage, 2016).

between head and hand must be the heart). Evidently, Zeh's novel overturns this version of social harmony. Britta is an entrepreneur with a cool and calculating head who skillfully exploits the business opportunities of postdemocracy—her heart only beats for her most private affairs. By contrast, Julietta, the suicide bomber, is a disillusioned moralist who becomes the willing hand in Britta's brainy scheme that will see off a rival suicide agency. There is no place for mediation by the heart: "It's a suicide world, baby."

Fritz Lang's futurist vision was separated from the world of 1927 by 100 years; Zeh's political dystopia is set in 2025 and thus less than ten years from 2019. It shares its shrunken timescale with other recent apocalyptic narratives that also place the catastrophe within our sight.⁴ These "presentist" versions radically reduce the temporal horizon and narrative arc of the secular apocalypse that, as Eva Horn has so brilliantly shown, stages a dramatic tipping point as the point of no return.⁵ The embodiment of the missed tipping point is the last human being on earth. A genuinely modern figure of thought, he/she is the only survivor on the planet, who inspects the totality of destruction, while realizing the belatedness of this insight.⁶ As Horn argues, postapocalyptic narratives look back at life in the future perfect in order to mobilize prevention. Prevention, explains Horn, relies on the fictional emplotment of events that must be stopped from unfolding.⁷ The double structure of prevention recasts the present as a point of bifurcation, thereby envisaging two futures, one in which the catastrophic has been prevented and one in which the tipping point has been surpassed.

4. See also Karen Duve, *Macht* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2016), which is set in Germany in 2031. Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik*, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), is set in Russia in 2028.

5. See Eva Horn, *Zukunft als Katastrophe* (Frankfurt a. Main: Fischer, 2014). See also Silke Horstkotte, "Die Zeit endet und das Ende der Zeit: Apokalyptisches Erzählen in Thomas Lehrs 42 und Thomas Glavinics *Die Arbeit der Nacht*," *Oxford German Studies* 46/4 (2017): 403–15.

6. "Der Letzte Mensch ist die Antizipation einer späten, endgültigen Einsicht, deren ganze Trostlosigkeit darin liegt, dass diese Einsicht nichts mehr nützt." (The last man anticipates a late and definitive insight which is so despondent precisely because it is useless.) Horn, *Zukunft als Katastrophe*, 29.

7. Horn, *Zukunft als Katastrophe*, 304.

The question then is to what extent this preventative logic still applies to the presentist dystopias that I have sketched above. By radically shrinking the temporal gap between now and the future, Zeh's dystopia suspends the future perfect as an enabling perspective that can mobilize preventative action. By contrast to the apocalyptic staging of the tipping point that terminates life on this planet, presentist dystopias envisage the future as unfolding incrementally and cumulatively in our extended present. "The future is now" no longer designates the emancipatory desire of political activists but blocked bifurcation in the present.

Adopting a broader perspective, then, these plausible dystopias could be read to amplify the collapse of the modern time regime that, as this study has argued, preoccupies historians, philosophers, social scientists, cultural theorists, artists, filmmakers, and writers alike. We have seen that the modern experience of historical time required sufficient distance between the experience of the real world and the horizon of expectation. The idea of historical progress thus presupposed the systemic asymmetry between experience and expectation, which, in turn, produced various modern speed fantasies. However, in the Anthropocene this model has spectacularly crashed, leaving us stranded in an omnivorous present with no vision of a stretching horizon. In a manner of speaking we are all gazing at the ominous gray and laden horizon that, in Ulrich Wüst's iconic photograph from 1989, seemed to foreclose the future of the East Germans with their baggage on the beach. For François Hartog and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, we are moored in a presentist experience of history that is "shadowed by entropy, consigned to the immediate, the instantaneous, and the ephemeral."⁸ While these critics mourn the loss of historicity, others welcome the end of the Western time regime precisely because it brutally promoted linear development at the expense of alternate temporal models in other parts of the world. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz remind us that the modern

8. Hartog, *Regimes*, 203.

time regime and vision of history were inextricably based on the Cartesian split between nature and culture and the ensuing objectification of and abstraction from nature.⁹ The outsourcing of human history from the history of the earth and the epistemological partitioning of the human species from the animal and plant worlds gave rise to and legitimated the anthropocentric worldview that seemingly emancipated human time from the time of nature. The original Cartesian sin also manifests itself in a system of knowledge that completely separated the natural sciences from the social and human sciences, thereby further obfuscating the precarious interdependence of all life on the planet. It is one of the great ironies that the so-called Anthropocene finally unmasks the unsustainability of anthropocentrism. Bruno Latour, Bonneuil, and Fressoz are among those who propose a different ecology of knowledge:

The new geohistorical epoch signals the irruption of the Earth (its temporality, its limits, its systemic dynamics) into what sought to be a history, an economy and a society emancipating themselves from natural constraints. It signals the return of the Earth into a world that Western industrial modernity on the whole represented to itself as above earthly foundations. If our future involves the geological swing of the Earth into a new state, we can no longer believe in a humanity making its own history by itself. . . . The Anthropocene thus requires the substitution of the “ungrounded” humanities of industrial modernity by new environmental humanities that adventure beyond the great separation between environment and society.¹⁰

Indeed, environmental humanities steeped in the planetary consciousness of the precariousness of all life systems would be a project worth pursuing. Part of this new project should be a way of

9. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017).

10. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, 32–33. See also Bruno Latour, *Das terrestrische Manifest*, trans. Bernd Schwibs (Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, 2018).

thinking about time and temporality that, instead of denigrating alternative trajectories and timescapes, views them as potential sites of Other time(s). The analysis of diverse aesthetics of *Eigenzeit* in works of art and literature, in films and performances, illuminates alternative ecologies of time that, precisely because they are precarious and inconclusive, can attune us to an ethical planetary consciousness.