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Hoping against Hope? German Climate Fiction between Dystopia and Utopia

Abstract: As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that the world is close to irreversible climate breakdown, Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) furnishes our imagination with grim scenarios of the future. German writers add their voices to a global discourse when they explore the social and psychological impact of climate change. However, one may wonder whether their endless depiction of dark futures does not in fact yield diminishing returns. ‘Mainstream’ writers are often praised for their *Sprachmächtigkeit*, their ability to couch the destructive effects of climate change in poetic language. ‘Genre’ writers supply us with ever more depressing apocalyptic visions of the future. This essay, a critical survey of a burgeoning field, analyzes German literary Cli-Fi and climate thrillers, but also considers more hopeful examples as well as progressive Young Adult novels. By taking a synoptic approach, it seeks to determine German Climate Fiction’s contribution to the task of *Zukunftsbewältigung*.

I

Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) has received much scholarly attention in recent years.¹ Cli-Fi has been variously described as a literary genre (Bloom), as a sub-genre of science fiction (Milner and Burgmann) or simply “contemporary sf” (Moylan 2021, 133), as an extension of ecocriticism (Goodbody 2017), and as an appropriate response to the “hyperobject” of climate change (Morton). In Cli-Fi, writers take on the task of communicating to their readers in fictional form the practical implications as well as the social and psychological consequences of global warming that scientists have predicted for decades. While there is disagreement over whether the reason for humanity’s slow response to the imminent threat is that the somber warnings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are largely ineffective, that we are suffering from a fear deficit because we have not yet collectively experienced a level of fear commensurate with the severity

¹ See Trexler; Ghosh; Johns-Putra; Heise; Goodbody and Johns-Putra; Caracciolo; Edwards; Munderler, among others.

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of the problem, or that the obfuscation by politicians, the carbon industries, and parts of the media has succeeded in casting doubt on the most alarming predictions (Klein), few still believe that humans can be “guardians of futurity” (Morton 121). In other words: despite scientific and technological advances, we feel increasingly powerless to shape our future(s).

The global discourse on the future is dominated by the challenge of climate change. As Mark Bould has shown, all cultural production now reflects what he terms the “anthropogenic biosphere crises.” Yet it is a discourse that is hegemonically anglophone, in that the majority of globally circulating climate fiction originates from the USA, Canada, and the UK.² This anglophone Cli-Fi is often criticized for being so dystopian that it no longer offers its readers any hope. In his book *Utopianism for a Dying Planet* (2022), Gregory Claeys comments: “Rather than confronting the prospect of a worldwide catastrophic environmental breakdown, and analysing its causes in detail, the disaster is often simply taken to be a *fait accompli*. Grappling with the causes seems beyond our imagination” (417).

The question whether dystopian literature can raise readers’ awareness and spur them into action (aka “narrative persuasion”) has been asked for decades (Moylan 2000; Funk), even though reception theorists like Hans Robert Jauss, Hans-Georg Gadamer, or Wai Chee Dimock have so far been unable to agree on a coherent model (Willis 152–157). Most recently, Robert T. Tally Jr. suggested a direct link or at least a resonance, in that “popular culture has only multiplied its dystopian, monstrous, and apocalyptic offerings in recent years” which he argues has led to a “pervasive dystopianism in postmodernity” (Tally viii, 3). While initial empirical research on Cli-Fi’s impact – as a manifestation of this trend – suggested that it has little effect on readers (Schneider-Mayerson), further studies have since identified “delayed effects” (Schneider-Mayerson et al.). Reading Cli-Fi short stories was shown to have a small but noticeable effect on readers’ beliefs and attitudes about global warming. Although these effects wore off over time, the authors expect longer texts – such as the novels analyzed in this essay – to have more significant and longer-lasting effects. More promising research with reading groups which employs the tools of empirical ecocriticism and cognitive narratology is currently underway (Matthews-Roper).

Cli-Fi does not claim to have the answers to our predicament, but it can consolidate the multiple strands of the global warming story into one narrative. With

2 E.g., Octavia E. Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower*, 1993; Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, 2003; Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, 2006; Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl*, 2009; Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour*, 2012; John Lanchester’s *The Wall*, 2019; Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry of the Future*, 2020; Neal Stephenson’s *Termination Shock*, 2021; or Stephen Markley’s *The Deluge*, 2023.

only one monster to face, and by “encouraging reflection and motivation” (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 8), so the general argument runs, readers can be better prepared to face the challenges ahead. Whether this argument holds up to scrutiny is one question this essay seeks to answer using a broad selection of recent German Cli-Fi as a case study.

A second question is whether German Cli-Fi has distinctive features and, more importantly, contains elements of hope. It certainly occupies a peculiar middle ground in terms of its position in the global market. Given the anglophone hegemony, Andrew Milner and James R. Burgmann profess themselves surprised by the “sheer volume of German eco-fiction” coming from the “semi-periphery” (66). I will explore what innovative moments might be found in German Cli-Fi below but would note that the German academic discussion of Cli-Fi, and its reception in the media, has been focused on the anglophone ‘center.’ Eva Horn’s *Die Zukunft als Katastrophe* (2014) is one of the few German studies that have been translated into English, no doubt because all her examples are anglophone books and films. At the Climate Fiction Festival in Berlin in December 2020, most authors discussed came from the anglophone world, and, in the review sections of the German quality press, anglophone Cli-Fi takes precedence. Part of the reluctance amongst scholars and critics in German-speaking countries to engage with home-grown Cli-Fi can be explained by the still widely held view that highbrow literature should stay clear of taking a position, as cultural and literary scholar Gabriele Dürbeck observed:

Wenn sich jemand engagiert [...] dann sagt man in der deutschsprachigen Literatur sehr schnell und häufig: Ach das ist nur heteronome Literatur. Das ist Literatur, die einen anderen Zweck hat und der Zweck ist eben, sich für ein bestimmtes Umweltengagement einzusetzen. Und man lässt dann lieber die Finger davon. (Tversted and Zähringer)

A debate over the appropriateness of climate change as a worthy literary topic was recently held in the German weekly *Die Zeit*. Bernd Ulrich lamented the absence of a serious engagement of “Literatur” with this fundamental crisis (2021). Comparing the relative paucity of titles to the thousands of books published on Germany’s dark past, he suggested that there was a “Verdrängung des Zukünftigen.” What he was looking for, he stressed, was not yet another depiction of a catastrophic future, but texts that explored how this catastrophic future was influencing and shaping our present, creating “ein[en] neue[en] Aggregatzustand unseres Seins.” A novel that Ulrich would surely approve of is Judith Hermann’s *Daheim* (2021) which was praised by many German critics for its sparse, subtle prose. Reflecting on the almost unnoticeable role climate change plays in the novel (the protagonists are merely aware that, unusually for North-German Friesland, there is hardly

any rain), Hermann stated: “Ich bin keine politische Schriftstellerin, ich kann kein Buch über Klimakatastrophen schreiben, über Maßlosigkeit, über die Ausbeutung, die der Mensch dem Planeten zumutet. Die Klimakatastrophe ist kein poetisches Material” (Geißler).

As Axel Goodbody has shown, there is a substantial body of German literature that has engaged with the human impact on the climate, emerging well before the new millennium, often with an overt didactic intent (2017). But the levels of eco-anxiety caused by climate change have risen dramatically in recent years (Raie and Rieken) and the German book-market has seen a corresponding rise in new Cli-Fi titles, ranging from the literary highbrow to the ubiquitous climate thrillers that constantly top the charts. Clearly, there is a popular demand for this kind of literature. What is not clear, though, is whether the once highly effective warning function of critical dystopias against undesirable futures can help readers overcome their eco-anxiety (Cornils 2020, 59, 133–148), or whether it paralyzes them. In other words, can German Cli-Fi contribute to the task of *Zukunftsbewältigung*?

II

There continues to be a clear dividing line in Germany between highbrow literature that is widely reviewed by critics in the quality press and the subject of analysis and interpretation in academic literature, and popular literature. Writers in the first category tend to use climate change as a background for their inquiries into human emotions and behavior. They are known for their ability to attract a demanding readership, but they are unlikely to engage with the science behind climate change. My four chosen examples in this category demonstrate the range and intellectual sophistication that these writers offer their readers.

In Ilija Trojanow’s novel *EisTau* (2011, translated into English as *The Lamentations of Zeno*, 2016), disillusioned glaciologist Zeno Hintermeier accompanies tourists on their Antarctic cruises. He takes violent action by using a well-meant publicity stunt that has all passengers and crew assemble on the ice to form the letters SOS to hijack the ship and leave them to their fate, thus creating a much bigger news story (which, the author implies, is bound to be forgotten in the next news cycle). By portraying a man who has lost all hope in the amelioration of humanity and the halting of climate change, Trojanow appears to present us with a demoralizing dystopian message: it’s too late, we can’t do anything about the melting of the glaciers and the icecaps, we might as well drink the last champagne on the Titanic. And yet, Zeno’s final act of defiance in the face of global inaction and ignorance seems to suggest that we still have a choice, by acting radically.

The novel presents its literary calling card with the motto: “Es gibt keinen schlimmeren Albtraum, als sich nicht mehr ins Wachsein retten zu können” (*EisTau* 9). It also references the Christian tradition of accepting that any affliction visited upon humanity must be borne stoically: “Es steht geschrieben” (*EisTau* 18). Yet Zeno decides to rebel:

Wir lassen uns trösten von erniedrigenden Sätzen wie diesem. Nichts steht geschrieben; es wird geschrieben. Von einem jeden von uns. So wie ein jeder sein Scherflein beiträgt zu all den vergifteten Ruinen auf Erden. Deswegen dieses Notizbuch, deswegen mein Beschluß, aufzuzeichnen, was geschehen ist, was geschehen wird. Ich werde zum Worthalter des eigenen Gewissens. Etwas muß geschehen. Es ist höchste Zeit. (*EisTau* 18)

Trojanow leaves it up to the reader to decide whether Zeno’s private rebellion is a parable, a call to action, or simply another empty gesture in the face of the inevitable. But there are plenty of messages hidden in the noise of the skillfully arranged passages of plot, stream-of-consciousness, and global chatter, ranging from writerly self-reflection about not being expected to change the world (*EisTau* 147), via the use of violence to do exactly that (*EisTau* 147) and a general rant against the “Zumutungen unserer Zeit” (*EisTau* 148), all the way to bitter regret over missed opportunities (*EisTau* 162). Zeno is a true Everyman when he reflects: “Die Einsicht, die späte, viel zu späte Einsicht, man habe nichts getan, als man etwas hätte tun können, als man etwas hätte tun müssen, das ist Hölle” (*EisTau* 162–163).

Given Trojanow’s high profile following his bestseller *Der Weltensammler* (2006, translated into English as *The Collector of Worlds*, 2008), *EisTau* was not only extensively reviewed but piqued the interest of Germanists. Julian Preece situates Trojanow in the tradition of Germany’s ‘engaged writers’ who see it as their responsibility to intervene in the ‘big issues’ and attempt to change people’s behavior. And yet, Zeno’s moral intransigence feels like an anachronism today, a stance that is more closely associated with followers of destructive cults than idealistic *Weltverbesserer*. But perhaps that is the point: to remind us that everyone has the option to take action, even if, as Preece observes, Trojanow’s “Zivilisationskritik” is bound to fail in the modern media age where all information is commodified, readers have a short attention span, and serious questions are debated in the same breath that transmits the most trivial news (125).

No doubt *EisTau* is a major literary achievement of great depth, emotional charge, and sheer beauty in its descriptions of pristine nature. However, what other scholars (Matthes; Goodbody 2019) have overlooked is the way the book is positioned within the Cli-Fi marketplace. Consider the blurb on the front flap of the English translation:

The Lamentations of Zeno is an extraordinary evocation of the fragile and majestic wonders to be found at a far corner of the globe, written by a novelist who is a renowned travel writer. Poignant and playful, the novel recalls the experimentation of high-modernist fiction without compromising a limpid sense of place or the pace of its narrative. It is a portrait of a man in extremis, a haunting and at times irreverent tale that approaches the greatest challenge of our age—perhaps of our entire history as a species—from an impassioned human angle.

Clearly, the publisher believes that the book will appeal to an educated readership with a highly developed aesthetic sensibility. What they do not say is that the book can have the opposite effect on readers who might not recognize Zeno as a “holy fool” (Goodbody 2019, 67) but rather as someone who has drawn his conclusion from decades of environmental degradation: that there is no hope, to the devastating effect that he not only kills himself by hurling himself off the ship into the icy waters of the Antarctic, but leaves the passengers to an uncertain fate on the ice shelf. What is sold to the sophisticated reader as an inquiry into the human condition in the twenty-first century may in fact have a numbing effect on a reader looking for some indication how to make a difference in the face of climate disaster.

In *Macht* (2016, translated into English as *The Prepper Room*, 2018), Karen Duve uses the climate crisis as the backdrop for an end-of-the-world scenario that reveals the true cause for the catastrophe: toxic masculinity. In the year 2031, climate change has turned Germany into a hothouse with heatwaves and tornadoes a regular occurrence. The only plant still thriving is genetically modified rapeseed that grows like a weed. Everyone knows that the end is nigh, with religious sects flourishing and people behaving as though their moral compass has stopped working. In this end-of-days scenario we meet the protagonist Sebastian Bürger, an “Öko-Aktivist” who works in an information center explaining the democratic system to schoolchildren. Sebastian lives in a middle-class suburb of Hamburg. He pretends that his wife Christine, the minister for the environment, nuclear decommissioning, and nuclear waste disposal in Germany’s all-female cabinet, has left him and then disappeared, though in reality he has kept her locked up in his “prepper-room” in the basement for the past two years. Sebastian feels frustrated by the emasculation he has experienced over the years, and he exacts a terrible revenge on his wife, who is chained to her bed when she is not forced to bake Sebastian’s favorite cookies or service his sexual needs.

While the book is set in a dystopian near-future ravaged by climate change, the focus of Duve’s novel is on the nature of men and their need to dominate. Her message is that, as soon as the civilizing influence of political correctness disappears, men will revert to their true nature and subjugate women as sexual objects in traditionally defined roles. Duve’s critique, darkly satirical and bitterly comical, leaves no room for a middle ground – men perceive women as annoying

obstacles on their way to cheap gratification, and the Cli-Fi background merely serves to provide a plausible setting for the dormant tyrannical male psyche to resurface.

For this essay, it is of particular importance to consider why Duve chose the form of Cli-Fi for her novel. In an interview with the *taz* newspaper at the Leipzig Book Fair, the author revealed that she had initially intended to write her novel as a crime story but had reconsidered in favor of a different setting:

Ich hab' nur deswegen auf Science Fiction dann umgesattelt, weil ich gemerkt hab': wenn ich die Figur als normalen Mann anlegen will, der zwar extrem ist, der aber noch nicht jemand ist, der in die Psychiatrie gehört, der kein vollkommener Psychopath ist (was es sehr langweilig sonst machen würde), dann muß ich ein Setting haben wo das glaubhaft ist, dass normale Menschen plötzlich Dinge tun, die vorher völlig außerhalb ihrer Vorstellungskraft lagen, und da ist ein Weltuntergang glaub' ich ein ganz schönes Szenario, also im Jahr 2031 wissen die Menschen halt, in fünf Jahren geht die Welt unter, vielleicht auch erst in sieben oder acht Jahren, aber es ist mehr als unwahrscheinlich, daß noch irgendwas dagegen gefunden wird. (Duve, March 2016)

Mixing elements of Science Fiction (by referencing a rejuvenating drug called “Ephebo”) and Climate Fiction (by referencing the oppressive heat) allows Duve to make strong feminist statements in a way that reduces the need for realism and at the same time increases the opportunities for social satire. Susan Watkins has suggested that female writers are partly drawn to apocalyptic settings because they harbor “a suspicion of techno-science for its destructive complicity with patriarchal and colonial enterprises” (119). In Duve’s case, this is certainly true, since the author makes an explicit connection between male ambition for power and the dystopian world it has created, even though this insight is attributed to Sebastian:

Inzwischen verstehe ich etwas besser, was in den Konzernbossen der Agrar- und Öl-Industrien damals vorgegangen sein muss, warum sie so eisern darauf beharrten, ihr katastrophales, uns alle in den Untergang führendes Verhalten durchzuziehen. Es ging ihnen gar nicht darum, noch ein oder zwei Dollar mehr herauszupressen, und es war auch nicht Dummheit oder Ignoranz. Es war das Vergnügen, das mit dem Benutzen von Schwäche einhergeht. Die wussten ganz genau, was sie mit ihren CO₂-Emissionen und mit ihren Abwässern und Regenwaldabholzungen anrichteten. Es muss ein berauschendes Gefühl sein, etwas so durch und durch Böses zu tun, etwas von so entsetzlichen Ausmaßen, wie es das noch nie zuvor gegeben hatte. Und niemand hält einen auf, weil es niemand mitbekommt oder weil denen, die einen durchschauen, niemand glaubt. (*Macht* 52)

While some readers may bristle at the cavalier way in which Duve uses the threat of climate change to set up her feminist *Lehrstück* on the connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women (Novello), the identification of the central cause of environmental destruction also allows for the easy identifica-

tion of an immediate remedy: to break the rule of the patriarchy. The problem with this solution, in the context of Duve's "schönes Szenario," is that climate breakdown in the novel is a *fait accompli*, and that the female leadership installed at the eleventh hour is unable to avert the catastrophe. For readers to not be discouraged by this fatalistic scenario and to conclude that overthrowing the male ruling class in the here and now to stop a global catastrophe still makes sense, we would need much more than a dark satire, particularly as the author does not give the impression that the environmental threat is more than an expedient background to her message.

John von Düffel's novel *Der brennende See* (2020) is told through the eyes of Hannah, the estranged daughter of a once moderately successful author who spent the last decades of his life as a semi-recluse in the suburbs of a North-German city. The story takes place over the course of a few days during an unseasonably hot April that establishes an uneasy background atmosphere:

Über den Feldern schwebte in dünnen Schwaden Staub, so als wäre die Erde eine Wolke und der Himmel fest. Sogar die Entwässerungsgräben, die sich wie Gitter durch die Wiesen und Weiden zogen, waren ausgetrocknet und lehmig braun oder mit Unkraut statt mit Wasser gefüllt. Wieder hatte es den ganzen Monat nicht geregnet. (*Der brennende See* 10)³

After her father's death, Hannah returns for the reading of the will and to arrange for the disposal of his few remaining possessions. However, it turns out that he changed his will, with a foundation and a 16-year-old climate activist the beneficiaries of a potentially lucrative film deal for his *Wolkenbuch*. Hannah struggles to find Julia, the daughter of her school friend Vivien, who befriended her father during his dying days. She discovers that her father had found new meaning in the company of this young Fridays-for-Future activist who has a commitment to the cause that Hannah as a millennial is unable to muster. Von Düffel uses the local lake that filled when a gravel pit was abandoned as the focal point, but also as a symbol of nature being the object of competing political and commercial interests. While Hannah's school friend Vivien plans to build an upmarket retirement home for Germany's growing number of pensioners, the city plans to drain the lake and use the area as an open landfill site.

The plot reflects Hannah's slow realization that she never knew or understood her father who made an instinctive connection with the lake. Very little happens until Hannah locates Julia at a demonstration in front of the town hall that draws significant media attention and where her group pours rotten fish onto politicians using the hashtag *#Ende der Geduld* and posts videos with the caption "Pa-

3 Hereafter referred to as *See*.

tience killed the Planet” (See 208). Hannah’s skeptical view of the limited impact of the protest becomes clear when she observes who is supporting the protest: “auf-fallend viele Silberlocken und Uralt-68er [...], die reichlich welken Flower-Power-Charme und Friedensmarsch-Nostalgie verbreiteten” (See 217). Von Düffel leaves it up to the reader to decide whether this climate protest is in fact a demonstration by the young against their parent generation, feebly supported by a previous protest generation. The fact that both Hannah and Julia are estranged from their parents surely points in this direction. But when it comes to the actual protest, von Düffel reveals it to be more of a ritual than a game-changer:

Auf dem Kopfsteinpflaster blieben ein paar verstreute Flugblätter zurück. Hannah bückte sich, hob eines auf und überflog die Zeilen mit den weitgehend bekannten Fakten und Forderungen, die in einem Appell an die Stadtverordneten gipfelten, nicht nur vom Klimanotstand zu reden, sondern auch dementsprechend zu handeln und Schluß zu machen mit ihrer reinen Symbolpolitik. (See 231)

The ineffectiveness of the protest is underlined when only hours later there is a big party on the same plaza in front of the town hall that celebrates the deal the city has made with the foundation to use the lake as the location for the *Wolkenbuch* film production and for the city’s self-promotion as savior of a natural habitat. Julia tells Hannah about the despair of the “last generation” that she feels has been left alone in their struggle:

Aber das ist ja das Erschreckende, dass es so lange bekannt war, ohne dass etwas getan wurde. Neu sind nicht die Erkenntnisse, sondern unser Wille zu handeln, das Ende der Geduld meiner Generation mit deiner und der des Planeten mit uns. Die letzte Chance, etwas zu verändern, ist jetzt. (See 241)

Meanwhile, the author retreats into aestheticism. While field and forest fires are brought under control, Julia’s younger brother Marvin quotes her favorite sentence from the *Wolkenbuch*: “Die letzte Wolke ist ein großer Rauch, nicht Wasser, sondern Staub” (See 319).

My final exhibit in the category of highbrow literature is Roman Ehrlich’s novel *Malé* (2020), which was nominated for the German Book Prize and describes the fate of the Maldives when most of its population (and international tourists) have left due to rising sea levels. Ehrlich describes a collection of “Ausgewanderten” who have made the island-town of Malé their home, a warren of streets filled with plastic rubbish and fetid sea waters. The inhabitants get drunk at the local bar (“Der blaue Heinrich”), pay tribute to the local fixer known as “Der Professor,” and seem to be drifting in a haze of quiet despair. The town is supplied with food, water, and other products from the north islands by “die sogenannten Eigentli-

chen” who have commandeered an abandoned cruise ship, a militia that tolerates the “Aussteigergesellschaft” in exchange for their help in the drug trade. The plot, such as it exists, involves the search by Elmar Bauch for his famous actress daughter Mona who is suspected to have committed suicide (a rotting corpse that is found may or may not be her). He is helped by Frances Ford, an American PhD student who has been given the literary estate of the German poet Judy Frank who is rumored to have had an affair with Mona on the island.

In terms of the consequences of climate change, the inhabitants regard the rising sea level with an astonishing, somnambulant equanimity. Looking out from the hotel, Frances and Elmar can see the entire island town:

Am Ende einer jeden Straßenschlucht dasselbe Bild von anrollenden Wellenbergen, von weißen Adern aus Gischt und Schaum durchzogen, ihr krachendes Zusammensinken und Zurückgesaugtwerden in den nächsten Brecher. Die Flutmauern, die gegen die beständige Arbeit des Meeres auf den Saum des Korallenriffs gesetzt wurden, sind an den meisten Stellen schon zerbrochen und eingestürzt. Das seichte Wasser in den Straßen, das seit den letzten Regenfällen nicht mehr vollständig abgeflossen ist, wird von einer ruhigen, gleichmäßigen Dünung durchzogen. Kein Erdgeschoss der Stadt wird noch bewohnt oder gewerblich genutzt. (Malé 20)

A sense of fatalism, and a dull ache of grief for what was once considered a paradise, takes hold of those who are drawn to this precarious existence during the last days of humanity. Indeed, feelings feature prominently in the narrative, though they are often qualified with “es kam ihm so vor,” “es scheint,” or “[er] fühlt sich umstellt von Unverständlichkeiten” (Malé 166). In a conversation between Mona and Judy, the poet declares what may well be Ehrlich’s own view regarding his role and obligation as a writer during the end of days:

Wenn es noch um irgendwas gehen kann beim Schreiben, dann doch um das, was man eben nicht sofort erkennen kann, das Nichtwissen, die Ratlosigkeit, die Schweigsamkeit der Dinge, die Geheimnisse hinter den Symbolen und die Angst, die von diesem Unwissen, von der Leere und der Sinnlosigkeit ausgeht. (Malé 184)

Malé does not hide its highbrow ambitions: intertextual references to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten* (1795) and to German Romanticism (especially the *Blaue Blume* and the moon, here via the drug “Luna”) abound. Ehrlich’s idiosyncratic style had literary critics unable to decide between disappointment, bafflement, grudging admiration, and obsequious praise. It is difficult to say whether the author has written a satire or whether he, like the inhabitants of the drowning island, is wallowing in the warm haze of resignation, dulling the pain with an aestheticized end-of-the-world narrative. He has certainly

disproved Judith Hermann's assertion that "Klimakatastrophe ist kein poetisches Material" (Geißler).

III

Compared to highbrow Cli-Fi, popular Cli-Fi tends to respond differently to the increasing threat of climate change. It is less interested in its emotional and individual impact and focuses more on the politicians, scientists, and industrialists who can mobilize enormous resources to avert or hasten catastrophic environmental events, as well as on courageous individuals who try to save the world (or at least survive). Memorable examples on screen are the scientists in Roland Emmerich's blockbuster film *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004) who desperately try to convince politicians to order a large-scale evacuation of the northern half of the United States while super storms lay waste to Los Angeles landmarks and tsunamis flood New York City. We should also note that many thrillers written today have a climate component. In Tom Hillenbrand's thrillers *Hologrammatica* (2018) and *Qube* (2020), climate change is a *fait accompli*, with surviving humans having migrated to cooler Siberia (the "Sibtrek") at the end of the twenty-first century while most of Europe has become uninhabitable. Because the focus is firmly on humanity's fight with sentient artificial intelligences over supremacy, these books are more "techno thrillers" than climate thrillers (Henderson).

In Sven Böttcher's climate thriller *Prophezeiung* (2012), a supercomputer appears to accurately predict an imminent and extreme drought in Africa and endless floods in Europe, causing widespread panic and mass migration. The protagonist Mavie, a young specialist in integrated climate system analysis and the protégé of climate scientist Fritz Eisele, has secured a job at the secretive International Institute for Climate Observation (IICO) on La Palma in the Canaries. Here, she is introduced to the computer program *Prometheus* which is designed to give precise predictions for weather at any location on the planet, with astonishing accuracy. She discovers that it produces dire but verifiable predictions of incessant rain for Europe and endless drought for Africa and the Indian subcontinent. She hacks into the program, is discovered, fired, and sent home, but manages to smuggle out the data on a thumb drive. She shares the information with her friend Helen, a journalist, who soon after dies in a suspicious car accident. The ensuing race to discover the killers drives the action from this point, but the reader is also introduced to the competing financial interests and geoengineering projects that could avert a climate catastrophe, here the fictional Northern Wind Parks (NWP) and the North African Solar Parks (NASP).

The “thriller” elements take over in the second, third, and fourth sections (ominously titled *Kassandra*, *Pandora*, and *Styx*), where the protagonists survive several attempts on their lives, while the action moves from a climate conference in Rotterdam to the house of discredited former Nobel Prize Winner Leland Milet in the South of France and back to the affluent parts of flooded Hamburg and ‘Gaia activists’ in Brandenburg. Mavie discovers that the program is not as prophetic as it was made out to be; the scientists who created it were duped, and Eisele and his business partners had always intended to use the world-wide panic to convince the world that a global climate disaster was imminent. They even try to persuade the French government to explode a nuclear bomb in a volcano to produce a heat-shield in the stratosphere that would conveniently also halve the efficiency of the NASP and make vast profits for the investors in NWP.

The big reveal, that Eisele’s motivation in creating the global panic was personal gain and a vendetta against China, follows the formulaic thriller playbook and detracts from the seriousness of the real consequences of climate change. While a world-wide crisis is narrowly avoided, with a happy end for the key protagonists, readers are left in serious doubt about the reliability of the predictions from the IPCC and more generally whether anything can really be done about the threat, leaving them in a state of heightened anxiety and, perhaps, more open to conspiracy theories (Hanse).

We should ask ourselves whether the use of the climate change discourse for entertainment purposes is justifiable. While we are reminded of the inconvenient truth that wealthy regions such as the USA and Europe profit from the misery of the Global South to maintain their comfortable lifestyle, the doomsday scenario arguably paralyzes our will to take any action, as the “hyperobject” (Morton) of the climate crisis proves too much for the application of critical reason. A case in point of the amalgamation of interdependent challenges is the arrival of a ship with 4,000 African migrants in Hamburg who use the distraction of floods and blackouts to land and arm themselves, marauding and looting the affluent neighborhoods by the river Elbe. Böttcher seems to feed into popular anti-refugee fears here, but he confounds this impression when Mavie’s life is saved by a friendly black African.

Heiko von Tschischwitz is not only a writer but also a pioneer of the German renewable energy market and the founder of German green energy provider *Lichtblick*. His climate thriller *Die Welt kippt* (2022) is seemingly hopeful for the planet, in that with the help of Chinese artificial intelligence (AI) technology and massive geoengineering projects, a climate disaster can be averted, but at a high geopolitical cost. China carries out a decades-long plan to install solar power plants in Africa to produce green hydrogen, supplanting Western influence and democratic decision-making. The reader is introduced to these complex issues through two strong female protagonists: German climate activist Tessa Hansen and Silicon Val-

ley climate investor Shannon O'Reilly. Both initially represent diametrically opposed views during a TV debate. While Shannon argues that economic growth generates the funds necessary for innovation and investment in green technologies, Tessa argues that this growth has caused the climate crisis in the first place and that capitalists cannot be trusted. Both are not only aware of the problematic democracy deficit of regulatory measures but also of collective inertia. When the AI predicts a much faster rise in temperatures and sea levels than has been anticipated and that the climate tipping point (hence the title, referencing the verb “kip-pen”) is much nearer than expected, the global economy collapses and Western politicians struggle to find an answer; while China executes its long-planned project.

Despite her high profile and image as indefatigable champion for *Klimaschutz*, Tessa begins to doubt that education and warnings can avert the looming climate disaster. After years of fruitless campaigning, she decides to commit suicide on live TV during another pointless debate with stereotypical “yes, but” politicians. Once again, we encounter the *Unbedingtheit* of a fervent climate activist like von Düffel's Julia, only in extremis. With considerable pathos, von Tschischwitz gives voice to his protagonist Tessa's despair in her dying moment:

Viel zu lange habe ich geglaubt, dass wir in der Lage sein würden, das Klima zu retten und dabei die Welt so zu lassen, wie sie ist. (...) Inzwischen weiß ich, wie falsch ich damit lag. Die Geschehnisse der letzten Jahre beziehungsweise all die Dinge, die nicht passiert sind, lassen gar keinen anderen Schluss mehr zu. Die Welt wird sich radikal verändern müssen. (*Die Welt kippt* 375–376)

Obviously, this dramatic scene is highly problematic, but, as the author declared in an interview, it was his intention “die Menschen wach[zu]rütteln” and to make them aware that combatting climate change requires “langfristige[s] Denken” (Possemeier). He is skeptical whether more information about climate change would make any difference in human behavior. Rather, he believes that his readers should think about whether the current political structures and systems are able to impose restrictive measures that would have to be sustained over several election cycles. Yet herein lies the problem: right-wing populists are currently on the rise in Germany and openly question the democratic system, but they also deny climate change (Jurema and Khoury). Thus, von Tschischwitz may inadvertently undermine his noble intentions.

Andreas Brandhorst's *Oxygen* (2023) is even more problematic in terms of its message. Its subtitle “Welt ohne Sauerstoff” announces a truly apocalyptic tale. Given that by 2023 the market was flooded with climate change thrillers, Brandhorst had to up the ante: he describes a not-too-distant future where humanity is in a position to halt climate change, only to discover that as an unexpected con-

sequence of the chemical seeding of the atmosphere, oceans and forests lose their ability to photosynthesize, leaving humanity (with the exception of a privileged few) to slowly asphyxiate.

Brandhorst weaves his story with by now familiar scenarios: scientists identify an inexplicable decrease in the oxygen level of the oceans, but they are persuaded not to warn the world. In the meantime, the climate consortium Corrico with the motto “We save the World” (*Oxygen* 37) has persuaded the United Nations and individual governments to fund its global geoengineering projects to reverse climate change, using vast carbon capture installations, Albedo satellites that reflect solar radiation away from the planet, and “Kohlenstoff-Sauerstoff-Aktuatoren” (*Oxygen* 44) which set off the unexpected bio-chemical chain reaction.

Once this scenario is established, the story unfolds in a mixture of James Bond film, conspiracy thriller, and end-of-world survival yarn. As plants begin to wilt, at first in the northern – and six months later in the southern – hemisphere, politicians and scientists race to find a means to halt the apocalypse. The unscrupulous former security adviser to the American president secretly coordinates the construction of “survival cities” on different continents under huge domes powered by nuclear reactors that generate oxygen for designated survivors. A motley crew of scientists attempt to reverse the dying of the plants through genetically engineered microbes that can generate oxygen without photosynthesis, but there is no cure and humanity is doomed. Brandhorst leaves the reader with a glimmer of hope, not for the survival of humanity, but for the continuation of life on this planet: “Die Erde war wüst und leer. Aber nicht ohne Leben” (*Oxygen* 606). Obviously, this novel is intended to thrill, but I would argue that it has a paralyzing effect on readers: either they decide that all this is hokum, giving them an excuse to blithely continue their way of life, or they conclude that they will never be able to do anything effective in the face of this “hyperobject” (Morton).

Marc Elsberg’s *Celsius* (2023) imagines nations and blocs using solar radiation management not only to avert a climate catastrophe, but as a political weapon. When China decides to seed the stratosphere with particles to lower the solar radiation in China and Africa (“Der Große Sonnenschirm,” *Celsius* 119), the West fails to find common ground amongst nations to respond collectively. Eventually the Global South develops its own ‘Safe Heaven’ program to make the hot areas of the globe (India, South America, Indonesia, as well as the Middle East and North Africa) more temperate and the northern hemisphere perishingly cold. While such large-scale geoengineering undertakings may seem fanciful (Haines), the US Congress did indeed recently mandate research into such projects (“Congressionally Mandated Research Plan”) and, given the current geopolitical tensions, it seems plausible that nations and blocs will compete rather than cooperate. In

this context, Elsberg offers a critique of the Western capitalist system as a dividing influence, though authoritarian regimes do not necessarily get a better outcome.

What sets his climate thriller apart from the previous examples is a subplot where a film produced in secret to ‘sell’ the project to investors as a blueprint of things to come is used to create alternative timelines where the competing projects succeed and where they do not, for example, when the Chinese project is destroyed by rivals, or when the fossil fuels industry ensures the halting of efforts to save energy and reduce emissions because the geoengineering efforts are masking the permanent rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The author is also quite blunt concerning the difference between the Global North, which has the time and resources to adapt to climate change, and the Global South, which does not. Moreover, the believable depiction of key protagonists (scientists, politicians, entrepreneurs, journalists, activists) with their diverse backgrounds, motivations, and divided loyalties reflects both the global interconnectedness and competing approaches to face regionally specific climate challenges.

Elsberg manages to convey some key messages for his readers. He is highly adept at illustrating the environmental as well as the social consequences of global warming (Pramer) and his own position is not hard to discern. For example, in the UN climate expert Fay Oyetunde-Rabelt tells the German climate minister in the novel:

Bei allem Respekt, Frau Ministerin, aber sehen wir der Realität ins Auge: Deutschland schafft es nicht, seine selbst gesteckten Ziele zu erreichen. Entgegen allen vollmundigen Ankündigungen. Selbst nicht nach Paris 2015, nicht nach Fridays for Future, der Coronakrise und dem Ukrainekrieg. [...] Hören wir auf, uns in die Tasche zu lügen. Solange die Politik nicht wesentlich stärker die Wirtschaft in die Verantwortung nimmt, wird nicht genug passieren. (*Celsius* 160)

As is typical for a climate thriller, the ending leaves the reader in suspense. While the US, China, and the Safe-Heaven-Alliance sign an International Treaty on Climate Control, young climate scientists discover that the global geoengineering program that is underway has a terrifying side effect. Yet their warnings are ignored.

The texts discussed in this section represent a selection of those under the category of popular literature or *Unterhaltungsliteratur*; many others could have been included, for example, Frank Schätzing’s *Der Schwarm* (2004, translated into English as *The Swarm*, 2007, and adapted as a ZDF TV series, 2023), Uwe Laub’s *Sturm* (2018), or Wolf Harlander’s *42 Grad* (2021) and *Schmelzpunkt* (2023). We could dismiss them all as an attempt to satisfy the public’s seemingly insatiable appetite for dystopian thrillers. Indeed, in their proximity to conspiracy thrillers they appear to serve what Robert T. Nally Jr. calls a “nostalgia for the future” (124) in that they reflect readers’ desire for a simpler past, but also for a future full of promise:

Contemporary dystopian, post-apocalyptic narratives register the dread associated with an unrepresentably vast, incomprehensibly dynamic world system in part by crafting allegories in which the invisible processes of globalization become discernible in a familiar, even homey image of the dystopian state. (Nally 125)

And yet, authors of climate thrillers profess to believe in the warning function of their texts, even if they delight in confronting their readers with the worst possible consequences of climate change. By exploring potential futures in the ‘virtual reality’ of fiction, they invite us to reflect on how we ourselves might act under such circumstances. This use of the imagination may change how we think about the challenges of climate change, though of course the authors have their own agendas: in the examples introduced above, a marked anti-capitalist stance and a pronounced skepticism towards democratic institutions, though this critique is never matched with offering an alternative. The most these thrillers can offer is the relief that things are currently not as bad as they could potentially be.

IV

Given the sense of doom emanating from German highbrow and popular Cli-Fi, it comes as a relief when one discovers authors who offer a hopeful vision in the tradition of German utopian thought (Cornils 2020, 21–31). For some, this vision requires a radical rethinking of the social contract, for others it includes breakthrough technologies as anticipated by Bill Gates (2021). In Germany, the Science Fiction writer Schätzing, instead of writing another thriller, decided to compile a utopian handbook titled *Was, wenn wir einfach die Welt retten?* (2022) that focuses on the processes of transition to a low-carbon world. While Schätzing advocates for a middle ground that does not require a political or technological revolution, his toolset offers a welcome antidote to the doomsayers by simply taking the post-apocalyptic *Götterdämmerung* off the table. He argues that we need to return to a “Revolution der Zuversicht” (Schätzing 351) and muster the collective will to implement the changes we all know we need to make. Luisa Neubauer, Germany’s foremost climate activist, is similarly hopeful. In contrast to von Tschischwitz’ fictional climate activist Tessa, Neubauer continues to fight for a just climate world and argues that after five years of ‘Fridays for Future’ protests, the ‘Lebensgefühl’ of the young generation has changed because they know that their voice can no longer be ignored (“Fünf Jahre ‘Fridays for Future’”).⁴ Most recently, the SPIEGEL’s senior journal-

⁴ See also Neubauer and Repenning whose 2019 nonfictional reckoning with climate change, *Vom*

ist Ullrich Fichtner (2023) has argued that we are ignoring the significant steps the global community is taking to fight the climate crisis.

In her novel *Pantopia* (2022), Science Fiction author Theresa Hannig imagines the creation of an AI called “EinBug” that devises a plan to rescue humanity from the worst effects of climate change. By taking control of the flow of global finance, setting up the independent state of Pantopia (an idea that seems to have been gleaned from Simon Anholt, 2020), and introducing a system where goods and services are priced according to their environmental impact, EinBug effectively rules the world in a benevolent dictatorship.

When two programmers develop a new kind of trading software, they inadvertently create the first strong AI. They teach it to be both rational and ethical, and quickly EinBug realizes that it must protect itself against human interference as that would risk its development. It also deduces that nation states are the root cause of global problems as they prevent humans from identifying as equal beings with shared objectives and forcing them to compete instead of cooperating (*Pantopia* 173). With the help of its creators, EinBug sets up the nucleus of a new community called Edafos with visitors and supporters becoming “Archen.” By controlling the global economy and the flow of labor, goods, services, and capital, an alternative economic system is established. And while opponents initially decry the new order as “linkes Paradies oder anarchistischer Wahnsinn” (*Pantopia* 339), their resistance is futile. EinBug realizes that a catastrophic climate change would endanger its own existence, so it enforces the decarbonization of industries. Within a century, climate change has been reversed and the standard of living has levelled across the world.

It is difficult to accept this *deus ex machina*, built on Kant’s categorical imperative, as a viable solution for our environmental problems, but the formulation of a utopian alternative to the dominant dystopian narratives certainly gives the reader a moment of hope.

Raphael Thelen’s novel *Wut* (2023) is an attempt to do the same in an initially more realistic setting. Thelen, a former journalist, sets his scene in Berlin, where climate activists use ever more extreme stunts to force the government into action. *Wut* describes the emotional state of the German climate movement through the eyes of Vallie, a former athlete turned ‘voice of her generation.’ Together with Sara, the daughter of a South American immigrant, and Wassim, a migrant from the Middle East, they form the inner circle of Berlin climate activists who can mobilize thousands of sympathizers. While Vallie is the face of this movement for the

Ende der Klimakrise, has also appeared in English translation as *Beginning to End the Climate Crisis*, 2023.

media and politicians who want to be seen as ‘listening,’ Sara and Wassim are more radical and use the internet and social media to organize resistance. During a demonstration Vallie leads activists to occupy the headquarters of the ‘Deutsche Energie’ building and has a heated exchange with the self-assured CEO that leaves her doubting whether they will ever make a difference. Meanwhile, Sara, Wassim, and their fellow activists are engaged in a cat-and-mouse game with the police and are brutally beaten.

The novel is particularly impressive when it explores the protagonists’ doubts and emotional damage their activism brings. Thelen’s attempt to share the lived experience of their quixotic fight is particularly memorable in the expressionist description of the doomed protest against the continued production of lignite in Garzweiler, the site of Germany’s largest surface mine:

Ich konnte nicht aufhören, in das Loch zu starren; wie der Strom da nie endend aus dieser Wunde im Erdboden floss, schien er mir plötzlich wie Eiter, der alles infizierte, und ich dachte, dass sich vielleicht deshalb alles um mich rum immer mehr wie eine große chronische Entzündung anfühlte. (*Wut* 63)

Thelen conveys the activists’ experience of physical pain in their confrontations with the well-equipped German police, as well as their empathetic connection with the suffering of all living things at the hand of those who profit from the destruction of the natural world, whether through political inaction or personal greed. His protagonists are obviously mouthpieces for a movement that is so deeply in thrall of its “Wut” against the “System” that this rage has damaged them more than its target.

Given their lack of progress in the streets, Thelen allows his fellow activists a different future in a Blochian “noch-nicht.” Somewhat implausibly, his novel ends with a utopian moment when the public mood changes following the explosion of an oil reservoir in the middle of the city that was caused by extreme winds and drought. More and more individuals follow the hashtag *#unserekrise* and decide to no longer serve the system. By developing solidarity, mutual support, and the philosophy of “geben ist nehmen,” the protagonists have overcome their own fear and self-destructive spiral of rage:

Der alte Satz, dass sich viele eher das Ende der Welt als das Ende des Kapitalismus vorstellen können, stimmt nicht mehr. Die Apathie ist gebrochen, es geht nach vorne, nach oben, zur Seite, der Glaube ans Gute, an ein besseres Morgen, ans Beste im Menschen blüht auf. (*Wut* 167)

Thelen operates in the tradition of the 68ers-turned-writers who transformed the shared moments of lived solidarity into the chiliastic vision of a utopian world.

Predictably, Germany's professional critics were united in their derision. What they overlooked in their own invectives against Thelen's literary overreach is the fact that the author gives a voice and an identity to activists who are routinely anonymized, branded as "terrorists," and othered by the German media when they dare to disrupt a society that would dearly like to stop climate change but only if it means not changing anything.

While Hannig and Thelen are writing for a millennial readership, my last two examples are directly addressing Generation Z, school-age Germans who are deeply concerned about the climate threat and are looking for affirmation from a sympathetic writer. Sarah Raich's *All That's Left* (2021) tells the story of a 15-year-old girl who is learning to survive in a world destroyed by heat, storms, and diseases. It is the year 2059 and Mariana (she prefers 'ZiZi') lives alone in the 'bubble house' in Munich that her 'prepper' father had equipped to protect the family against the climate catastrophe, violence, and collapse of civilization. Her mother left and her father went to look for her. ZiZi is supposed to wait for them but realizes that just following the daily routine of tending to the air filters, water supply, and hydroponic systems before watching films is no way to live. She starts to neglect herself and the systems that keep the house running. Ali, a young man who mysteriously gains access, manages to save and revive her, but leaves after a while. ZiZi decides to follow him and faces several horrific challenges on her journey through a devastated land on the way to Trieste in Italy where she joins a colony of survivors.

While her journey through a superheated and diseased countryside teeming with crazed individuals reminds the (adult) reader of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), it is the initial 40-page section that shows ZiZi alone that leaves the strongest impression. By giving her, as the first-person narrator, the cynical voice and the intrusive thoughts of a teenager that has to adapt to the traumatic consequences of the climate disaster (including seeing the rotting corpse of a neighbor out of her bomb-proof window), Raich allows her young readers to identify with her protagonist who is trying to make sense of it all:

Der Zusammenbruch ist jetzt etwa zwei Jahre her. Obwohl ich das nicht so richtig benennen kann, wann das war, der Zusammenbruch. War das, als die Schule aufgehört hat? Erst mal auf Zeit und dann einfach für immer? Oder war es, als es keine Nachrichten von der Regierung mehr gab? Oder als die Leichen auf der Straße liegen blieben, weil sie keiner mehr beerdigt hat? Mir hat nie jemand gesagt: So, Mariana, das war's jetzt. Die Welt, die du kanntest, die ist jetzt wirklich erledigt.

Mir war es schon klar, dass das nichts mehr werden konnte. Ich hab nur auf den Knall gewartet. Aber geknallt hat es nie. Es ist einfach so alles zerbröselt. Wahrscheinlich ist das eine unserer vielen Schwächen. Von uns Menschen, meine ich, dass wir immer denken: Bevor es vorbei ist, bekommen wir noch eine letzte Warnung, damit wir wissen: Jetzt ist wirklich Schluss! Aber so ist die Welt nicht. (*All That's Left* 8)

An important feature of Raich's novel is the afterword by Clara Mayer, speaker of the Fridays for Future movement in Berlin (*All That's Left* 329–334). Mayer admits that readers may feel there is little they can do to avert the climate crisis, but stresses that the book offers an important message for young people to get involved and not give up hope.

In Judith and Christian Vogt's *Laylayland* (2022), survival is only possible through genetic adaptation, cooperation with machine intelligences, and a new kind of mutual support, solidarity, and empathy. In this sequel to their aptly named 'hopepunk' novel *Wasteland* (2019), the authors do not bother with a lengthy exposition as to why the world is a dystopian nightmare. As the young, genetically altered Laylay negotiates a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by war and a toxic virus, the cause is vaguely explained as the result of "einem ungünstigen Zusammenspiel aus Drohgebärde, Gegenmaßnahme, Sabotage und einem fehlgeschlagenen Experiment zur Eindämmung der Klimakatastrophe" (*Laylayland* 9).

Of particular interest for this essay is the authors' focus on the emotional state of the protagonists, as it acknowledges the feelings of their young readers' anger and hopelessness. Laylay's bipolar friend Zeeto, in one of his most depressed moments, thinks:

In einer Welt, die bis ins Mark vergiftet ist, kann es kein magisches Heilmittel geben, und wir können ganz sicher nicht mit irgendwelchen friedlichen Absichten von Zusammenarbeit, hoffnungsvollen Gedanken von Gemeinschaft oder einem radikalen Mindset von Freundlichkeit von einem Kurs abdrehen, der schon seit Jahrhunderten auf Abgrund steht. (*Laylayland* 132)

As in Theresa Hannig's *Pantopia*, an AI (here called REMUS) comes to the rescue. Originally developed to calculate the optimal way to deploy solar radiation modification (*Laylayland* 172), it had been hacked to design biological weapons instead, but is now 'liberated' to help the surviving humans. As to the cause for the collapse, an old videotape gives a somber answer:

Die Altvorderen hatten gewußt, dass sie den Planeten töteten. Sie hatten es gewußt und sie hatten es geschehen lassen, weil sie andere Probleme gehabt hatten; zum Beispiel mussten sie anderen ihren Willen oder den eines nichtdigitalen (oder eingebildeten) Gottes aufzwingen oder von einem Daemon namens 'Gendergaga' warnen. Sie mußten flexen mit dem Ruhm ihrer jeweiligen Altvorderen und für ihr Image Kriege anzetteln. Oder sie mußten immer mehr von einer unsichtbar-unsichtbaren Ressource namens Aktien ansammeln. Oder sie dachten, es würde nicht so schlimm. Oder sie hatten einfach keinen Bock gehabt. (*Laylayland* 213)

The authors acknowledge that Covid and the Russian assault on the Ukraine have not been "gute Jahre" since we all live in a time of "Zukunftsangst und schwin-

dender Hoffnung angesichts der Klimakastastrophe;" they are writing anyway, they explain, so they can help create an "Entstehungsmythos einer besseren Welt" (*Layland* 329).

V

Can German Cli-Fi help us with the task of *Zukunftsbewältigung*: overcoming eco-anxiety, and turning it into positive action (Malpas)? Or does it do the opposite: anaesthetize and paralyze us even further (Claeys)? On balance, with the dominant position of climate thrillers in the market and the largely elegiac literary examples, the answer is probably the latter, except for the explicitly utopian texts by Hannig and Judith and Christian Vogt. As long as writers primarily offer doomsday scenarios, they must stand accused of increasing the levels of 'German Angst' (Biess, 2022), in some cases even inadvertently aiding populists who spread mistrust of our democratic system, and stymying initiatives that might help us cope with climate change.

Does German Cli-Fi contribute to *the* global discourse of our time? Here the answer must be an emphatic yes, with the caveat that not everything gets translated into English. I have shown that "the semi-periphery" (Milner and Burgmann 66) does indeed offer innovative moments that add a distinctive polyphony to the debate and need not fear comparison with the anglophone 'center.' While we have the familiar narratives where only a few (p)lucky survivors will make it through the climate crisis, most of the texts discussed in this essay paint a more differentiated picture. Some imply that we should turn on those who we consider responsible, and those who help them. Some believe that political radicalization is the answer, even if that might lead to the loss of hard-fought social progress. Some aestheticize the crisis to show us what we are about to lose. Some suggest that a *deus ex machina* in the shape of an all-powerful AI or an autocratic superpower can save us. Most importantly, some offer hope for the future in new forms of radical empathy (Cornils 2022).

German Cli-Fi needs to address audiences highly sensitive to environmental concerns (reflected in the continuing popularity of the German Green Party). But it also has to negotiate a wide range of expectations: readers of 'literary fiction' demand a psychological approach that makes sense of the crisis. Readers who are interested in the science behind climate change expect well-researched updates on the latest findings, while readers seeking entertainment are spoiled for choice given the ubiquity of 'climate thrillers.' Readers looking for a hopeful message are catered for, too, which is perhaps the most surprising and encouraging result of this survey of Cli-Fi writing. However, all these expectations can overlap or can-

cel each other out: the science can become a beacon of hope or the final nail in the coffin, the utopian rescue may come at the price of the loss of our freedom, while attempts at raising political consciousness through a critique of the ‘system’ may in fact do the opposite.

The biggest question mark hangs over the alleged ability of Cli-Fi to influence, by “alerting readers to the dangers of global warming, informing debates, motivating and empowering to think and act, and thereby facilitating attitudinal and behavioural change” (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 12). What if readers become so used to its dark predictions that they block them out as inevitable and beyond their control? What is currently missing in German Cli-Fi, I would argue, are narratives of successful adaptation available in non-fiction formats from Schätzing, Neubauer, and Fichtner. While governments, lobbying groups, and research institutes around the world are working on green growth, decarbonization, and climate justice, German Cli-Fi writers, not unlike their Anglophone counterparts, have so far tended to focus on anticipating catastrophic extremes instead of doing the admittedly much harder work of approaching the problem through the imagination of radical adaptation.

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