

William Collins Donahue

“Paradigmatic” Novels of Political Strife: Juli Zeh’s *Unterleuten* (2016) and *Über Menschen* (2021)

Abstract: Arguably no one among contemporary German authors is better known than Juli Zeh for thematizing contemporary political and social issues. *Unterleuten* (2016) and *Über Menschen* (2021) memorably – and to some readers, controversially – depict the economic exploitation of Eastern Germany as well as the rise of the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland*, neo-Nazism, and right-wing populism more generally. Yet simultaneously – through a variety of literary techniques that “thicken” and complicate her deployment of popular realism – Zeh illustrates a disturbing retreat from politics. Through extensive use of intertexts, figural voicing (via narrated monologue), and plot segments questioning a naive faith in traditional *littérature engagée*, Zeh draws not only a compelling portrait of the present, but also lodges a critique of longer-term trends toward the apolitical itself.

What does fictionalizing German right-wing populism and placing it in imagined Eastern German villages add to what we already know – or could know – about this hot-button issue of contemporary German politics? Particularly when it comes to popular realism – which, if Moritz Baßler is right, has eclipsed all other forms of current literary life – we need to ask what literature of this kind supplies that we wouldn’t otherwise possess. This is a genre, after all, perennially charged with redundancy: epistemologically, it is said to ride on the coattails of other ways of knowing (Dowden); alternatively, and more frequently, it is accused simply of replicating a prior, given social reality, constituting an essentially parasitic aesthetic. Baßler includes science fiction and fantasy in his more capacious definition, because for him the key factor is the reader’s unproblematic move from “sign” to “story.” But for him, too, “repetition” of a certain kind is a blemish, a marker of “weak,” or what he more diplomatically calls “unterkomplex,” realism that simply reiterates received wisdom and conventional truths from extra-literary authorities, a literature that assertively reverts to “ein Immer-schon-Gewusstes als Sinnzentrum des Erzählten” (296), rather than exploring and negotiating new territory with readers (Donahue 2023b).

William.C.Donahue.36@nd.edu

This essay explores three ways in which Juli Zeh constructs the latter, more interactive kind of literary engagement, a more ambitious form of realism that Baßler terms “paradigmatic” narration. She does so first by incorporating several prominent intertexts that provide a perspective both on the political issues at hand and on the ambivalent capacities of realist engagement. Second, and in partial coordination with those intertexts, she draws attention to the hermeneutic gap between the “objective” surface of realist narration and the subjective perspectives lurking therein, consciously and artfully incorporated via a technique known as “narrated monologue.” Concretely, this means that we are asked to question – not merely to adopt or repeat – the (political) judgments of key figures in these novels. Third, both of the novels in question – *Unterleuten* (2016) and *Über Menschen* (2021) – stage a kind of “performative contradiction” insofar as they offer critical insights on political and social arrangements while simultaneously drawing attention to the ways in which literature is frequently unsuited to this very task, offering escapism or the mere “feel” of engagement instead of the real thing. In this way, Zeh offers fresh perspectives both on select issues of contemporary German politics – e.g., the worrisome rise of the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), the continuing economic disparities between Western and Eastern Germans – and on the capacity of popular realism actively to engage readers rather than simply to reaffirm them in views they may have possessed prior to reading these novels. Taken together, these three strategies offer readers fresh modes of engagement rather than “[d]iese Art von Immer-schon-klar-Sein” (Baßler 304).

Despite unmistakable depictions of the rise of right-wing populism and economic exploitation of Eastern Germany in both *Unterleuten* (2016) and *Über Menschen* (2021), critics have noted, sometimes with puzzlement, that Zeh consistently diverges from familiar postwar models of realist engagement (Klocke). This reception is surely complicated by an ongoing ambivalence about realism within literary studies, whereby a deviation from realist convention may on the one hand be deemed a technical flaw (a writer’s alleged failure, for example, to parrot an East German village dialect),¹ while a more fully consistent form is simply deemed another – and perhaps more egregious – kind of failure on an epistemological and ideological level (Donahue 2023a). Zeh, in other words, is either *insufficiently* realist, or *too* realist.

¹ This was Baßler’s comment on Zeh when I asked him whether he thought she qualifies as an author of “paradigmatic” popular realism. Conversation with the author, 11.11.2022 at the Fritz-Hüser-Institut, Dortmund.

The very titles of this paired set of novels – *Unterleuten* and *Über Menschen* – are meant to express the bimodal capacity of realist literature both to capture and conceal, to distill and distort political reality. Alternately reminding us of realism’s conflictual capacities, Zeh offers in both novels a persistent critique of the attempt to transcend politics altogether. In *Unterleuten* and *Über Menschen* a number of characters display memorably objectionable political sentiments; yet the ultimate object of critique, I argue, is their questionable attempt to place themselves entirely beyond politics within some “purer” realm of human interaction. The tripartite strategy adumbrated above – the one that earns these novels Baßler’s moniker of greater (“paradigmatic”) narrative sophistication – deftly navigates the great antinomies of politically engaged literary realism: the prevalence of personal discord (especially in character-driven prose) versus the depiction of structural determinants of political conflict; radically divergent subjective perspectives versus a more objective, overarching consensus on broad politico-historical narratives; and, finally, the paradox of realism’s ability simultaneously to enable and obstruct political insight.

From the perspective of plot, *Unterleuten* is the far more intricate of the two, but becomes manageable by focusing upon the protagonist Linda Franzen, who with her partner Frederik, is a transplant from the Western German city of Oldenburg (though Frederik remains importantly connected to Berlin via his brother’s wildly successful video game and software company, *Weirdo*). Franzen is determined to transform a dilapidated farmhouse in the Eastern German village of Unterleuten into a small horse ranch, and because land rights constitute the novel’s central dispute, this dream brings her into direct conflict with the locals, especially the feuding pair Gombrowski and Kron. The former is the head of a local company that bought up the town’s ailing German Democratic Republic (GDR) agricultural cooperative; the latter, Gombrowski’s sworn enemy and an unrepentant Communist, was quite possibly an informant for the East German secret police (*Stasi*); he remains an outspoken critic of the new democracy. Another urban transplant couple (this one from Berlin) will also be of particular interest in our analysis: The failed sociology professor Gerhard Fließ and his much younger wife Jule Fließ-Weiland (a former student of his) flee the capital to start a new life with their baby in the ‘unspoiled’ East. The second novel, *Über Menschen*, has a much simpler storyline: essentially, it traces the flight of left-liberal Dora from Berlin, who leaves the city to escape both the Covid lockdowns and her self-righteous, politically correct boyfriend, Robert. She buys a dilapidated house in the village of Bracken that during the GDR served as a kindergarten. The novel essentially tracks the unlikely relationship that develops between her and the right-wing, neo-Nazi neighbor, Gote.

In writing scenes of representative West German encounters with Easterners, Zeh (particularly with respect to *Über Menschen*) has been charged with distorting the very reality she evokes. Decrying the naivete of Zeh's politics, the incredulity of the plot, as well as the novel's schmaltzy, conciliatory resolution, critics have characterized the story in the second novel as a "Rührstück" that displaces politics and ideology with a murky "humanity," ultimately proffering a fairy-tale not to be mistaken for reality.² Critics generally do not doubt that she *intends* to represent contemporary, post-*Wende* tensions as they play out in rural Eastern Germany. She just hasn't gotten it quite right, they complain. What they have rarely considered, however, is that she aspires both to realistically conjure a plausible Brandenburg-based conflict *and* to estrange it via a string of literary inter-texts that alter and, I will argue, creatively reframe narratives otherwise familiar to us (possibly over-familiar to the point of habituation) from political and journalistic discourse.

Let us begin with *Unterleuten*, wherein the figure who turns out to be the lynchpin in the plot, Linda Franzen, alludes almost heavy-handedly to Jonathan Franzen, whose influential novel *Freedom* (2010) presents a clever and productive intertext to Zeh's novel. As in *Unterleuten* (set in the same year that Franzen's novel was published), the advocacy for an endangered bird species offers in *Freedom* a plot device to satirize the political commitments and compromises of an enlightened, progressive elite (Venzl 715–720). Barely have we planted our feet, as it were, on the good earth of Mark Brandenburg, and we are already (also) in America. In Franzen's widely acclaimed novel, it is the high-minded environmentalist lawyer, Walter Berglund, who indulges his activism at the price, ultimately, of his larger principles: In order to secure the safety of the cerulean warbler – the bird that adorns the cover of Franzen's bestselling novel – Berglund ends up signing off on a massive strip mining project in rural West Virginia and enlists a body armor firm (involved in supplying troops for the Iraq war that he strongly opposes) essentially to buy off with offers of employment obdurate families who are otherwise unwilling to relocate from the mining site.

Not coincidentally, it is Linda Franzen who focalizes the narration about Gerhard Fließ, the failed Berlin academic, who has given up his ambitious political ideals for structural change and replaced them with the advocacy for endangered birds – narrating "wie er vom Menschenforscher zum Vogelschützer geworden war" (*Unterleuten* 263). In this case, the bird in need of particular protection is the "Kampfläufer," which humorously alludes to the political "fighter" Fließ apparently once was. As a young, committed academic, he was engaged in the good

² Each of these viewpoints and more are to be found in the selection of feuilleton reviews on *Perlentäucher*.

fight, for "die gute Sache," as leftists frequently referred to their larger aims.³ But he has traded that for creature comforts and for the "Kampf für eine gute Sache" (*Unterleuten* 20), reducing his political engagement in scale to a boutique, almost comical concern, the threatened ruff. "Unterleuten bedeutet Freiheit," declares Gerhard Fließ (via an extra-diegetic motto introducing part two of the novel), not knowing, of course, how right he is.⁴

Unterleuten extends the critique initiated by Franzen's novel to reveal a particular inequity in post-Unification Germany in which Easterners – perhaps the region's principle "endangered species" – are overlooked in favor of rare birds. Further, the Franzen-intertext helps to focus the larger issue of disputed land use, property rights, and the betrayal of the local population, all of which will dominate the novel. Like *Unterleuten* (as we will see in some detail below), *Freedom* is a highly perspectivized novel that does not thereby lose its hold on larger currents of socio-economic reality. Rather, the subjectivity of the narration enacts legitimately divergent views on human relationships without placing in doubt the larger narrative of neo-liberal economic exploitation, symbolized most palpably by the ever-expanding West Virginian strip mine. And as in *Unterleuten*, Franzen's novel both deploys and critiques the use of individual relationship narratives to tell the story of social and structural conflict. Romance, marriage, and infidelity both draw us into the story and threaten to eclipse the social critique. Indeed, both novels illustrate the importance and incommensurability of the personal and the social, without making either absolute. The return of realism, the revival of the *Gesellschaftsroman*, and the resurgence of literature with unabashed socio-political dimensions – all of this is celebrated in the Franzen intertext. Thus, while looking at Eastern German society and politics with one eye, we are looking to America, to neo-liberal globalization, and to larger trends within world literature with the other. The intertext functions both to focus the novel's concerns and as a pressure release valve allowing readers, at least temporarily, to rise above intra-German political anxieties and to place themselves within a broader, international

3 On Fließ as a (self-styled) critic of capitalism, see *Unterleuten* 335.

4 The alleged extra-diegetic nature of the citation, as if Gerhard Fließ were an actual authority outside of the fiction, draws attention to the intertextual relationship even more, as does the ongoing fascination with the meaning of "freedom" to various characters. Indeed, the word "Freiheit" appears in prominent and sometimes otherwise unexpected or unmotivated contexts, thickening the web of intertextuality. See, for example, Kron (*Unterleuten* 392), Kron-Hübschke (*Unterleuten* 450–451), Franzen (*Unterleuten* 469), and Fließ-Weiland (*Unterleuten* 578). The intertextual relationship is richer than I can detail here and worthy of an essay in its own right.

economic, political, and literary context. The move into and beyond Brandenburg, in other words, is quite intended.⁵

And there is more to remind us that we are always also in the world of created fiction. The repeated, even insistent references to Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's *Die Judenbuche* (1842) allow the author to raise pertinent and timeless questions about the prospect of justice and the possibility of truth within a broadly realist narrative that does not question its fundamental ability to reference the external world. In *Unterleuten* it is also an old beech tree that stands for a mysterious death, quite possibly a murder, not to mention an unexplained injury. With the intention of setting things straight once and for all, Kron visits the scene of the (alleged) crime with his daughter, Kathrin, who attempts to focus his mind by reminding him, "Buchen sollst du suchen" (*Unterleuten* 491). She thus reminds the reader too (as do numerous other passages) that this "Lichtung," upon which converge so many painful stages of recent German history (*Unterleuten* 613), is a privileged locale where too great a focus on individual criminality and personal guilt may obscure larger social concerns regarding the just use of natural resources thought to be held in common.

In *Die Judenbuche*, of course, the question is the fair use of timber, with the aristocracy silently asserting its traditional rights on one side, and the outlaw *Blaukittel* band raiding the forest by night. In that narrative, the baron famously seeks to put an end to the mystery surrounding the murder of the Jew Aaron by sonorously asserting the identity of the corpse hanging in the eponymous tree at the end of the novella to be that of the protagonist Friedrich Mergel. Yet the lone-standing beech tree at the story's conclusion is a testament as much to Aaron's unsolved murder as it is to the surrounding systematic spoilage of the forest by the baron and his cronies. In *Unterleuten*, the natural resources in dispute are not trees but wind and land. As in Droste-Hülshoff, the matter of who profits (or suffers) from the planned resource exploitation (here the proposed wind farms) and how these decisions are made is very much center stage.⁶ Given the fundamental analogy between *Die Judenbuche* and *Unterleuten*, and the fact that greed seems to win out in both cases, we are left to wonder what difference (if any) democracy makes in deciding the question in the present. Drawing at regular intervals on Droste-Hülshoff's famous story, surely familiar to many German readers from their school days, Zeh's novel thus re-frames its own emphasis on the feud plot, prompting readers to recognize the well-worn trick of displacing structural with

5 Apart from Venzl, the Franzen intertext has been noted in passing by März; Twellmann (74); Moser (132); Richter (147).

6 On the centrality of environmental concerns to *Unterleuten*, see Zemanek 352–355.

lurid individual crime (or to play one off the other). At the same time, the intertext temporarily removes us from the pressure cooker of contemporary German politics and the perhaps irresolvable accusations of this claustrophobic rural community, lending the text a transtemporal and trans-geographic dimension somewhat at odds with conventional expectations of realism (cf. *Unterleuten* 559, 563). Finally, insofar as *Die Judenbuche* itself represents a literary re-working of an actual historical event and a substantial documentation thereof, the intertext can be read as a poetological sign that Zeh, too, does not wish to be bounded exclusively by the socio-political parameters of her Brandenburg story. Like Droste-Hülshoff, she raises larger issues about human behavior that transcend the local setting, while subjecting this very inquiry into the *conditio humana* (as Dora from *Über Menschen* will call it) and its relationship to politics to further scrutiny.

Furthermore, the artificial nature of stock narrative plot units is openly – and I think quite humorously – thematized when Kathrin (who happens to be married to Wolfi, an author currently writing a realist drama about the village of Unterleuten) is shown reading a novel in which a child disappears. It is the familiar trope of the “missing child” reprised recently in Elena Ferrante’s wildly popular novels – e.g. *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015) – as well as in the Netflix films based upon them. Kathrin seeks in fiction a respite from reality but ends up finding in the novel her very own situation. “Kathrin spürte,” Zeh writes, “wie sich in ihrem Inneren der Raum öffnete, in dem die Geschichte angesiedelt war. So real, als könnte sie sich selbst darin bewegen” (*Unterleuten* 360). And, behold: at that very moment, her own daughter, Krönchen by name, goes missing. It resembles a passage from German Romanticism in which the interior story seamlessly becomes “external” reality; one thinks of Tieck’s *Der blonde Eckbert* (1797) among other worthy candidates. Now, Krönchen (whose very name is humorous, and seems drawn from the nomenclature of fairy tale literature) may have been abducted as part of the decades-long feud between Kron and Gombrowski that has its roots in the expropriation of farmers during the GDR, continued on into the questionable selling off of state-owned property after unification, as well as into the more recent battle over the placement of large wind turbines in the vicinity of the town. By moving so abruptly – and humorously – from fiction to reality (or from fiction to the reality within a fiction), Zeh is serving both masters, creating a credible simulacrum of an Eastern German village with all its lethal legacies while puncturing it at regular intervals to release readers from the immediacy of events to give them access to other worlds. Which is to say she offers the opportunity for critical distancing.

More specifically, we are made aware of the questionable practice of mirroring ourselves too neatly in prose, or, more worrisomely, elevating prose that happens to reflect our particular convictions or identity to the status of unquestioned

authority. The use (and abuse) of literature for understanding society becomes, as we will see below, a major concern also in *Über Menschen*. For now, we note that the “abduction of Krönchen” episode, which generates so much intradiegetic excitement and at first promises to bring so many divergent plot strands to a head, in fact ends in pervasive opacity. We can choose to fault Zeh for deploying such “implausible” plot devices – as some have done – or take stock of the foregrounded technique and ask what it achieves. The latter, more productive route allows us to see Zeh not only as a compelling storyteller of contemporary issues, but also as an author offering a meta-reflection on popular realism itself.

Zeh’s deployment of the “lost child” motif, then, both advances the political narrative (inevitably pulling the West German/Berlin immigrants to Unterleuten into its critical orbit) and draws attention to its artifice. As such, it constitutes serious play. And the same could be said of her portrayal of the central figure Gombrowski, who is at once both a somber figure of East German decline and a figure of fun, the “old dog” whose characterization as a physically abusive husband and father owes a recognizable debt to the notorious “der gute Vater” episode from Elias Canetti’s darkly humorous interwar novel, *Die Blendung* (1935). Though today treated by literary critics principally as modernist, the novel remained in the eyes of the author essentially realist (Canetti 1981), and thus distinctly relevant to Zeh’s paradigmatic engagement with realism. As director of the agricultural collective “Guter Hoffnung” during the GDR, and CEO of its successor company, Ökologika, after unification, Gombrowski transcends the literary allusion to attain the status of a much-maligned would-be savior figure who is hated because (as he sees it) everyone is in some way in his debt. But what he persistently blocks out from all this alleged beneficence (very much recalling his literary precursor in Canetti’s *Blendung*, Benedikt Pfaff) is a pervasive but unacknowledged use of physical violence.⁷ Gombrowski succeeds fabulously – but only up to a point, until his principal victim “speaks” – thanks to a stylized form of focalized narration developed to new levels by Canetti.

The literary technique that enables this highly selective self-characterization is called “narrated monologue” – “narrated” because it appears in the third person (the so-called tense of narration), and “monologue” because it is focalized exclusively by a single character. As a result, highly subjective, personal, and prejudicial views appear formally in the third person, and can be read (or misread) as an independent, objective narrator or even the authorial voice (Cohn 99–140). When

7 “Der gute Vater” episode is discussed within the context of Canetti’s dispute with Freud in Donahue 2020, 137–173. Canetti insists on the social reality of father-daughter abuse (as opposed to the Freudian view of a daughter’s displacement of sexual desire onto the father-figure).

Dorrit Cohn first defined this technique, otherwise known as "free indirect speech," she insisted that the focalization be accompanied by an identifiable "idiolect," that is, a set of vocabulary, turns of phrase, and perspectives that allow the reader to identify the speaker from the novel's cast of characters. Careful reading can more or less dispel the confusion intentionally created by subjective viewpoints lurking within the "objective" third-person voice of narration because they are marked.

But Canetti had already begun to play with this technique long before Cohn defined it by attenuating the linguistic identifying markers. In *Die Blendung* one finds long stretches of ostensibly objective third-person narration that have the feel of subjectivity (via their vehemence or argumentativeness, for example), but often without a clear or proximate clue as to the speaker's true identity, though this can frequently (but not always) be determined *ex post facto*.⁸ Zeh takes this a step further by strongly focalizing the third-person narration, but rarely providing a distinctive linguistic "thumb print" that aligns consistently with a particular figure. In *Unterleuten*, chapter titles (consisting of characters' names) may be meant to substitute for this, but even these do not fully dispel the impression of "objectivity" generated by third-person narration, nor do they consistently identify the figural voices.⁹ The great exception to this rule is Gombrowski, who of all the characters is given an intermittent idiolect linked to his "folksy" misogyny.¹⁰ So we may feel that we know him and like him (as many in the village do, including newcomer Jule Fließ-Weiland). But this is in no small way linked to the narrative technique described above because the allegedly "objective" and largely positive view of Gombrowski not only emanates from his psyche, so to speak, but is also governed by his gaps and proclivities to suppress self-incriminating information. Because the third-person narrator is not a fully independent voice or observer, she does not, on her own, fill in the gaps. We must wait until one of his victims "speaks" via the method described above. This happens first in chapter 50, when Gombrowski's wife Elena reveals: "Viele Male hatte er sie in der Vergangenheit ge-

⁸ I refer to this as "ascriptive narration" (Donahue 2020, 30–42).

⁹ Neither do they consistently render a single perspective, let alone the one indicated by the respective chapter title. It would, for example, constitute quite a stretch (and assume an improbable degree of self-awareness and perhaps even self-loathing) to imagine that the critique of Gerhard Fließ emanates from his own psyche (see, e.g., *Unterleuten* 472 and 557).

¹⁰ He deems Jule, for example, "typisch Frau und typisch Wessi" (*Unterleuten* 246); refers to women by the color of their hair (*Unterleuten* 149); and opines "Frau-Sein bedeutete nichts weiter als die Erlaubnis, sich jederzeit für unzuständig zu erklären [...]" (*Unterleuten* 312). On this issue, see Mitterer (92–97) and Knorr (425–432).

ohrfeigt, quer durchs Zimmer geschleudert, die Kellertreppe hinuntergestoßen" (*Unterleuten* 518).¹¹

These narratological observations may seem abstruse, but they have great relevance for the way we read these (and other Zeh) novels that are so prominently marked by a fiction/reality polarity. Critics account for this tension in a number of ways, some going so far as to maintain that Zeh (or the novel itself) promotes radical skepticism at a philosophical level, suggesting that there is no such thing as truth or objective reality, only perspectives.¹² This is at best only partially true. One cannot deny the extensive use of strongly perspectivized narration, as I have just described. But the line critics like to quote in this regard – "Es gibt eben keine Wahrheit ... sondern immer nur Perspektiven" – actually emanates from Frederik, who voices this postmodern truism while aroused and clutching the breasts of his overbearing partner, Linda Franzen (*Unterleuten* 533). The critics may have missed the joke. Poor Frederik is either submissively parroting a line from Linda (which she in turn has taken from the fictional Manfred Gortz, and he, in turn, from Nietzsche), fully in sync with his usual subordination to her every wish,¹³ or clinging to it as a form of self-preservation (because if it is true, then she can't be any more "right" about things than he is).¹⁴ At any rate, the point is that the context of any claim needs to be taken into account. And while there is much that will never be resolved or agreed upon in the realm of human affairs (and key passages richly illustrate this point), the novel is in no way radically skeptical about social reality as such, or of realism's ability to capture its basic contours.¹⁵ That would be to depart the plane of realism entirely, to invalidate the project per se, and thus effectively to endorse the very apolitical attitudes that are in question. A fairer reading

11 There are corresponding gaps in the focalized narration associated with Elena Gombrowski, née Niehaus, but they are differently motivated: for her it is not a matter of suppressing an unacceptable truth, but rather of having fallen unconscious as a result of the beatings (*Unterleuten* 519).

12 Reflection on the narratological polarity between "reality" and "fictionality" comprises one of the richest veins of literary scholarship on Zeh; see Juster; Navratil; Schenk; Stubenrauch; Wisotzki. Agnes Mueller approaches the question – quite helpfully – from the perspective of paratextuality. Zeh has been charged with skepticism because various passages in her works promote this view, perhaps above all the "Ambivalenz" chapter of *Corpus Delicti* (126–129). Such assertions overlook the way in which skepticism is held in tension by opposing strategies.

13 See, for example, *Unterleuten* 139–140.

14 He may also be reflecting his own imperiled sense of reality insofar as he seems to enjoy the status of a merely "literarische Beschreibung" in Linda's eyes (*Unterleuten* 533).

15 The view of Zeh as a radical skeptic has been fueled by the author herself (cf. 2017 interview quoted in Guiffroy). But this has to be seen in light of Zeh's rich deployment of intentionally misleading paratexts (Mueller) and her extensive (and often equivocal) acts of self-stylization (Ziganke).

of certain unresolvable mysteries in *Unterleuten* would need to take account of the afterlife of officially propagated GDR "legends" (often highly orchestrated *Stasi* lies and false identities),¹⁶ not to mention individual malice and ignorance. 'Indeterminacy' in these novels is not tantamount to epistemological inscrutability per se, but due rather to particular political, economic, historical, psychological, and moral factors thematized in the texts.¹⁷ This paradoxical ethos of "indeterminate realism," in which mystery and doubt coexist with a firm sense of social reality, has been amply prepared for by the *Die Judenbuche* intertext.¹⁸

No, the point lies elsewhere. The articulate, "respectable" narrative voice often leads us to premature political conclusions. This voice tells us, for example, about the many deprivations and disadvantages of Eastern German village life and concludes that the federal government doesn't give a damn about this area. This may sound quite reasonable at first, and the first part of the claim is indeed fairly uncontroversial. But wait: As we read, we discover this judgment emanates from Jule's consciousness, the same person who unironically seeks an expanded "Lebensraum."¹⁹ Jule repeatedly refers to her disabled neighbor as an animal ("das Tier!"), and seriously suggests to her husband Gerhard that he just kill the guy, which he ultimately very nearly does, prompting her to leave him.

16 The character Mayor Arne Seidel makes this point compellingly (and again: he would know, given that his wife was an *inoffizielle Mitarbeiterin* of the *Stasi*, *Unterleuten* 152). On lies due to ill-will (or possibly even entertainment value), see Gombrowski (*Unterleuten* 408), and on the unreliability of village gossips in general, see Fließ (*Unterleuten* 607).

17 No treatment of this theme would be complete without an accounting of the figure of Lucy Finkbeiner, who appears first in a motto about the kaleidoscopic nature of perception: "Man dreht ein wenig, und alles sieht anders aus" (*Unterleuten* 426). She reappears as the first-person author of the epilogue with the same message, highlighting incompatible narratives even she can't unravel, and informing us that Frederik did not in fact die in the car crash, as Linda Franzen thought (*Unterleuten* 630). Similarly to Schaller's daughter, she functions as someone outside the principal diegesis who is trying to get a handle on the action, acting as a proxy for the reader. But her authority is humorously qualified insofar as she describes herself as a figure in a novel (*Unterleuten* 633).

18 The broader field of literary criticism has had no trouble holding these binaries in tension, understanding that Zeh both evokes and problematizes a familiar socio-political reality. See, for example, Maaß 45, 47–48.

19 Jule is not alone in this by any means – the figures Kathrin Kron-Hübschke and Gombrowski do the same (see, for example *Unterleuten* 449 and 541 respectively). The Nazi-era meaning indicating expansion eastwards cannot, in this novel about East Germany, be overlooked. Meiler, for example, references the Nazi period explicitly, as does Gombrowski extensively, not to mention, of course, the very overt reference to Nazi-era locutions in the title of the second novel, *Über Menschen*. Additionally, "Lebensraum" possesses a poetological dimension: In the context of novels concerned with realism, it references the "life room" of the realist simulacrum, the place we can imaginatively inhabit, suggesting a desire for something beyond the constraints of quotidian reality.

In the successor novel *Über Menschen*, West German immigrants like Jule will be accused explicitly of being arrogant, “überheblich,” considering themselves “above” the Easterners, and thus *Übermenschen*, as it were. In a way that is typical for both novels, but particularly for *Unterleuten*, we are pulled up short – drawn in first by apparently undisputed facts, and then confronted with temptingly categorical conclusions that turn out to be attributable to a very quirky or flawed character. Zeh is playing with us, tempting us to ally ourselves with this or that seemingly morally secure position, only to have the rug pulled out from underneath us as we discover that the respective view is voiced by someone who is not so trustworthy or authoritative after all. In questioning diegetic and extradiegetic voices, textual and paratextual authority figures, Zeh moves us decidedly away from what Baßler derides as a weak form of realism reliant on external, non-literary authority.²⁰ In other words, the novel seems to be saying again and again: I cannot think for you; that you will have to do for yourself. Very few, if any, of its articulately and admirably formulated positions are adoptable “as is.” It is not, in other words, a “know-it-all” realism that provides pre-packaged answers to the problems it raises.

This bears powerfully upon the “flight from politics” thesis that is often treated reverentially as an unquestioned traumatic legacy of East German communism. Accordingly, it can harbor a condescending view of Easterners (as helpless victims of history lacking in agency) and foster a kind of resignation that presents itself as historical understanding. Not coincidentally, this view is represented in both novels mainly by Western “immigrants” in whom we witness a gradual complication and interrogation of the “antipolitical” thesis. Let us begin with Dora from *Über Menschen*, whose experience of populism and right-wing politics allows us to consider both apolitical abstraction and literary escapism as two sides of the same coin.

When Dora first arrives in the village, the widespread disgust with politics that she observes is not yet her conviction, but an attribute of the locals, and it is less the fault of the old GDR than the current federal government, and occasionally the European Union (EU). She makes the discovery that her gay neighbor Tom votes for the AfD, and she wants to know why. After intoning a litany of wrongs perpetrated by “die da oben” upon the rural locals, and specifying the culprit as “Die Regierung. In Berlin,” Tom reveals his fundamental objection: “Das Problem

²⁰ Baßler decries this kind of popular realism as “eine selbstbezügliche Schließung im Sinne des Immer-schon-Rechthabens und des Ressentiments” (217). This brand of “midcult” derivative realism assiduously eschews original, interrogatory thinking: “An ihre Stelle tritt im Neuen Midcult die autoritative Beglaubigung von Diskriminierungserfahrungen, deren Bedeutsamkeit und Ursachen einfach vorausgesetzt werden” (Baßler 216). See also Baßler 171–227.

sind nicht die Maßnahmen,’ [...] ‘Sondern, dass sich die Leute verarscht fühlen” (*Über Menschen* 128).²¹ “And the people,” Dora inquires, “that’s you?” Tom confirms, thereby underscoring the classic populist identification of “real people” with his own kind, while denying that status to others (Mudde and Kaltwasser). The centrality of populism in these two novels is further conveyed by a perhaps too clever self-citation in the assertion that the rural village of Bracken (Dora’s new home since escaping Berlin, the Covid lockdowns and her self-righteous boyfriend Robert) has a lot to teach her about “real people.” The German echoes the titles of the two novels almost verbatim: “In Bracken,” says Tom, “ist man *unter Leuten*. Da kann man sich nicht so leicht *über die Menschen* erheben” (*Menschen* 128, emphasis added).

Later, when she meets Sadie (the single mother who is working multiple jobs), Dora becomes a more eloquent mouthpiece for what is essentially Tom’s position:

Dora empfindet Ehrfurcht vor der jungen Frau. [...] Außerdem spürt sie Verwunderung. Als blickte sie auf die geheime Unterseite der Nation. Kaum zu glauben, dass sich ein stinkreiches Land Regionen leistet, in denen es nichts gibt. Keine Ärzte, keine Apotheken, keine Sportvereine, keine Busse, keine Kneipen, keine Kindergärten oder Schulen. Keinen Gemüseläden, keinen Bäcker, keinen Fleischer. . . . Irgendwie, denkt Dora, hat Deutschland die AfD beim Universum bestellt und bekommen. (*Menschen* 218)

Here Dora spells out what being “verarscht” means practically, and she, who continues to abhor the AfD, actually makes a better case for its existence than Tom ever did. In taking up Sadie’s cause so passionately, however, she remains blind to her own complicity; for, in buying up a former GDR kindergarten and turning it into a private home, she is clearly part of the very privatization process that she more readily recognizes and deplores in others. But she stops short of affirming Tom’s (and of all of populism’s) core binary, which pits the authentic “Volk” against an inauthentic ruling elite.

In fact, she does just the opposite. Throughout the novel, Dora builds bridges connecting groups typically divided by politics and stereotyping, often using herself as the starting point for self-examination and self-critique. She expands her sympathy for those who feel cheated and who are really suffering, charting a potential political trajectory of understanding rather than judgment. A sense of commonality arises also by recognizing bigotry on the left as well as right. When Tom inveighs against a government incapable of responding adequately to the climate crisis, implicitly pushing his we-they doctrine (we: the good, aggrieved people, they: the evil elite), Dora sees in him a mirror image of her ex-boyfriend, Robert:

21 Henceforth abbreviated as *Menschen*.

“Der letzte Satz hätte von Robert stammen können. Die Politik hat den Verstand verloren, *how dare you!* Nur dass Robert das Gegenteil eines AfD-Wählers ist” (*Menschen* 127). The mirroring of Tom and Robert (and, by extension, Greta Thunberg!) in Dora’s imagination, suggesting that in some respects professed political enemies may be more similar than they (or we) would like to admit, is both humorous and provocative.

Finding the common humanity in presumed enemies may seem like a quaint humanistic endeavor – of value, perhaps, in approaching the likes of poor Sadie, who explicitly abjures violence, yet dubious in coming to terms with an ex-convict neo-Nazi like Dora’s neighbor, Gote. What kind of trivial reconciliation is it that renders Dora and Gote “verbunden durch die Mauer, die sie trennte” (*Menschen* 404)? By bringing them together in friendship or love, or whatever it is, does Zeh descend to the sentimental or worse?²² When Dora and Gote finally discuss the events that landed him in prison for his involvement in a stabbing at what seems to have been a neo-Nazi rally, Gote is clearly more eager to turn the conversation toward what they have in common – namely that they are both misrepresented and misunderstood, he the alleged neo-Nazi, she the uptight “Großstadt-tante”: “‘Da haben wir wohl etwas gemeinsam’, sagt er und hebt die Bierflasche, um anzustoßen. ‘Wir sind nicht das, was die anderen denken’” (*Menschen* 308). Here the “common ground” claim – undeniable though it in some ways is – seems more like evasion than insight.²³

It is surely no coincidence that just as Dora is summoning the courage to confront her neighbor on the very afternoon he and his cronies are guzzling beer and singing the antisemitic Horst Wessel song, she plunges into a lengthy reflection on the topic of contemporary literature.

As the men next door grow louder, Dora withdraws, seeking solace in the many novels she has downloaded onto her smartphone. Having shifted her attention to those texts, she is now overwhelmed not by right-wing rowdies, but by the sheer bulk of contemporary literature she feels obliged to keep up with: “Die

22 Necia Chronister clearly thinks she does (535–538); yet she comes to this conclusion in part by reading Dora as an unproblematic extension of the author’s political views (537). Brockmann, who keeps the public intellectual’s commentary distinct from the author’s literary production, is more sanguine. Mueller and Ziganke show how Zeh consciously – and provocatively – intermingles the two roles.

23 This motif is reprised several times in the novel. At one point, for example, Dora seems to be giving in once more to the reductive temptation we noted above, that is, to generalize in a manner that reduces political commitments of all stripes to various kinds of elemental fear (*Menschen* 295–296). She ends up propagating a questionable equationism, placing Robert on par with AfD supporters.

Aufgabe, mit der Gegenwartsliteratur Schritt zu halten, ist zu groß. *Eine weitere Menschenunmöglichkeit*, gegen die man sich instinktiv sträubt" (*Menschen* 172, emphasis added). The humor of incongruity – comparing neo-Nazism with the proliferation of contemporary literature as commensurate "impossibilities" that one must cope with – jumps off the page. Here it is particularly comical with reference to Zeh herself, who is known not only as a prolific author, but also one who produces substantial tomes daunting simply in their heft and scope. So, readers holding one of these fat novels in their very hands – or reading it digitally like Dora herself – cannot help but chuckle in recognition.

Considering reading as a potential new hobby she might take up in her new "country" home, Dora comes upon a novel praised for its topicality and social relevance, promising "crystal clear engagement with the modern world" and, in addition, "a poetic analysis of the current *conditio humana*" (cf. *Menschen* 172). Already on the first page of the novel, however, she is disappointed because the author writes a naively unrealistic scene: women wake up across the United States to alarms ringing simultaneously. Her reservations go beyond the technical error of overlooking obviously diverse time zones (the failure of properly-deployed referential mimesis); she objects rather to the author's generalization about gender, her assertion of a particular female fate implicit in that opening gambit. (She does not comment upon the oxymoronic phrase "aktuelle *conditio humana*," leaving that pun to the reader to savor.) We witness Dora engaging reflectively on matters of gender, labor, and consumer society; and while one could say that, in her, Zeh models a figure interacting critically with realism (saying "no" to the novel she is reading), that very engagement is in this case tantamount to escapism. For she is deploying literature to divert her attention (and ours) from the much more pressing, proximate phenomenon of drunken, neo-Nazi revelers right next door. Ultimately she cannot block that out with literature – or with videos for that matter. The strains of the Horst Wessel song, which she initially misinterprets as the communist *Internationale*, ultimately filter through the literary barrier she had attempted to erect between herself and Gote. By this point, if not before, it is clear that while Dora may in some ways serve as a model for self-reflection and political enlightenment (when it comes to expanding our sympathies for marginalized Easterners, for example) and a good critic of the liberal-progressive clique from which she hails, she is not infallible. Far from it. When she finally "stands up" to Gote at the end of the chapter, all she can muster is a refusal to accept his gift of garden chairs. She is proud of this, as if she had actually spoken out against the hateful sentiments of the song he and his buddies belted out. But she has not, and we are meant to see this as a very modest achievement indeed, if not an outright failure.

It is perhaps superfluous to remark that in this passage Zeh is, of course, flagging the limitations and caveats pertinent to her own work as well: No novel can possibly provide what that hyperbolic reviewer promised to Dora, namely “crystal clear engagement with the contemporary world.” No matter how faithfully it reproduces and comments upon contemporary society, such literature can always be deployed – as Dora humorously demonstrates – to deflect from yet another reality. Just like Dora, we can use thick novels (like *Über Menschen* and *Unterleuten*) to insulate ourselves from the very world they depict, if we choose to do so. Even Émile Zola’s *J’Accuse...!* (1898) can be used in this manner. Perhaps, as Adorno warned in his widely read essay “Commitment” (1974), we must be alert to the assumed goodness and efficacy precisely of *littérature engagée*.

This particular proclivity of realistic fiction to offer escapism cloaked as “engagement” had of course already been prefigured in *Unterleuten*, where Frederik (the nerdy, submissive partner of Linda Franzen) uses his genius in software design to create a computer game called “Naturschutz,” which allows players to “rescue” endangered birds without any of the real-world cost or risk. This digital simulacrum of *Unterleuten* – a town he himself barely knows – becomes the epitome of “bad” literary realism: inviting gamers to withdraw from the very world that is being so expertly simulated for their amusement. Ever the humorist, Zeh allows Frederik to perceive a cock crow noisily just as he experiences his great Eureka moment (he sees his name in lights, as it were, celebrating a huge market success: “Traktoria *nature*, by Frederick Wachs”). But instead of understanding the crowing cock as the classical biblical signal of betrayal (here, a betrayal also of realism), he takes it as an inspiration for the audio “Startzeichen” of a new level in his computer game (*Menschen* 535–38). As Baßler has observed, it is especially the immersive, non-reflective aspects of popular realism that pass seamlessly into video games of this sort.

But Frederik’s game is no more or less escapist, we can’t help noticing, than the “real world” social activist Gerhard Fließ himself, who has made a dubious choice to begin with (the *Kampffläuter* bird being only mildly at risk in some areas of Europe, but not really endangered overall), and who of course betrays the cause – as did Jonathan Franzen’s Walter Berglund – when it suits his needs. Yet we are meant to see Frederik’s video game not merely as a negative foil to “higher” literature, but also as fundamentally similar. After all, all those intertextual moments noted above (Jonathan Franzen, Ferrante, Droste-Hülshoff, Canetti) are themselves a kind of game; they can only be “activated” if readers intervene in the same animated way that gamers typically do. And they possess the same Janus-faced set of readerly options: opportunities for richer, more critical engagement, on the one hand; or literary allusiveness as a kind of trivial pursuit recognition game, a gratifying amusement, but little more. One can even view the

audience participation of gamers with envy, especially in light of the charges of passivity made against allegedly acquiescent consumers of popular realism. Fredrik's video game is thus both model and antimodel, as we can perhaps deduce from Zeh's own turn to the internet to further market her novels.

Returning now to the village of Bracken, Zeh gives the satire yet another self-reflective turn by having Dora wonder, in the wake of her reading, if politics is not in the end reducible to a mass sense of dissatisfaction. The reflection is both serious (because broad based dissatisfaction does indeed appear to underlie all manner of threats to the political system), but also a bit suspect, insofar as it reduces complex political phenomena to the common, relatable human feeling of discontent. The very brevity of the remark leaves both options open:

Die Tragik unserer Epoche, pflegt Jojo zu sagen, besteht darin, dass die Menschen ihre persönliche Unzufriedenheit mit einem politischen Problem verwechseln. Vielleicht ist das nicht nur ein typisches Jojo-Bonmot. Vielleicht ist es die Wahrheit. Womöglich liegt nicht einmal eine Verwechslung vor. Die Unzufriedenheit der Leute ist ein politisches Problem, und zwar von gigantischem Ausmaß. Die Unzufriedenheit ist in der Lage, ganze Gesellschaften zu sprengen. Man braucht nur ein wenig Zündstoff, Flüchtlinge oder Corona, und schon droht das ganze Gebilde auseinanderzufliegen [...]. (*Menschen* 173–174)

But for the reader there is yet a third: for in Dora's musings we witness the novelist's self-reflective strategy that in a sense anticipates (but does not neutralize) the very same criticism that will be made against her novel – namely that it reduces politics to "mere" humanity. Yet this very reductive move is repeatedly placed in doubt. For example, trying to make sense of her relationship with Gote, Dora reflects on the surfeit of images of love and friendship that we have been served up by literature and film. She concludes that these works are not such reliable guides after all. "Aber meistens denkt sie, dass Romane und Filme eben lügen" (*Menschen* 404). Paradoxically, the only way we can take her observation seriously is if we believe that novels can also tell a larger truth, especially when they reflect on the propensity of literature (and reading practices) to distort reality.

For if we feel called to critique the conciliatory movement of *Über Menschen* – or to accompany precisely those movements with a critical gaze – that is perhaps a very good thing, and one that is entirely foreseen and encouraged by the author herself. First, however, let us note that an actual reconciliation is kept at bay because Gote is characterized in key respects in the subjective rather than declarative mood. There is never any "crystal clear" understanding of his role in the violence that landed him in jail, for example. He denies being a neo-Nazi, claims the stabbing was in self-defense and maintains that he had no direct role in the events that precipitated it. He seems unaware of the Nazi provenance of the *Horst Wessel Lied*. Is he lying, deluded, dense, or just deliberately not forthcoming? The possibil-

ities abound and one can of course take issue with Zeh's characterization of him, but only if he is to "stand" for something less ambiguously than he actually does in this novel. Ultimately, any resolution is rendered moot by his fatal illness and ultimate suicide. In other words, Zeh gets him off the narrative stage and returns our focus to Dora, who is much more the reader's concern and (provisional) identification figure. Perhaps we are in this manner encouraged to redirect our focus to rich Westerners who buy up Eastern property at bargain-basement prices, encouraged, in other words, to contextualize the sensational individual crime (Gote's) within the context of larger, pervasive, and "silent" structural injustices, just as in *Die Judenbuche*.

In the end, Dora is presented less as an exemplary figure than as one who problematically "resolves" political problems in her imagination rather than in the real world. This becomes particularly evident in her reworking of the horrific murder of George Floyd in 2020, an African American man who suffocated while Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, despite Floyd's repeated cry, "I can't breathe." In her imagination Dora takes the ingredients of this event and radically rearranges the narrative units, re-purposing them to "punish" Gote and to visualize herself as an avenging figure kneeling on his neck until he dies. This reversal, in which Gote (as the Chauvin figure) becomes the victim of his own brand of brutality, is both remarkable and frankly confusing. Transplanting this iconic scene of American racial injustice to the German context raises all manner of questions. On the one hand it can remind – perhaps reassure – German readers that racism, hate crimes, and populism are transnational phenomena. This, after all, has been a strategy of numerous intertexts all along: to reframe the German story within a larger, often international context. Yet the appropriation of this particular narrative, and the reversal of that murder into one of vigilante vengeance perpetrated upon a German neo-Nazi racist, seems, in this context, above all to bespeak a helplessness, if not desperation. After all, Dora's most clearly articulated response to neo-Nazism in Germany is merely imagined. It is fleeting and fizzles out – in other words, it is merely fictional. Here, too, Zeh is calling out the limits of fiction, and not only of the explicitly literary kind. Yet, here too, there is nuance. Dora is not subject to ridicule; readers may still admire the way in which she exposes herself directly and personally to the very societal phenomena – populism, right-wing violence, and the AfD – that many of us go out of our way to avoid. The irony of course – one fully in line with Juli Zeh's self-reflectivity – is that we are learning this lesson about the importance of immediacy and proximity, about the necessity of actual human relationships over the abstraction of ideology and politics, by way of a highly stylized novel, which as Zeh is at pains throughout to show us, is itself a form of highly mediated discourse.

Dora reflects repeatedly on the seductiveness of the AfD slogan "Frei. Wild.": "macht eigentlich gar keine schlechte Musik," she muses, "*Exit grübelnder Skeptismus, Enter sorglose Engstirnigkeit*" (*Menschen* 296, cf. 193). It will remind readers of a similar prominent locution from *Unterleuten* – the town that the character Gerhard Fließ had deemed the very epitome of "freedom" and about which the aspiring writer Wolfi Hübschke (Kathrin's husband) had planned to write a play with the very similar title "Fallwild." But his title, while semantically interlocking with the AfD slogan "Frei. Wild.," stakes out decidedly darker territory than the exhilarating "freedom" referenced above, namely a diagnosis of self-inflicted victimhood (*Unterleuten* 526). Wolfi maintains that his drama captures the essence of "Mikrokosmos Unterleuten," a realist claim if ever there was one, and one often made, as numerous critics have observed, in the context of the *Dorfroman* (Klocke; Wahlster). He explains that the title (and we have no reason to believe he has gotten much beyond the title) refers to wild animals who meet their demise entirely on their own, without the intervention of a hunter. "Irgendwie sind hier doch alle Fallwild," he posits (*Unterleuten* 357–358), suggesting, as we saw above, that this applies to all of East Germany. It bears enough import to be repeated, almost verbatim, in the epilogue and to serve as the title for Part VI of the novel (*Unterleuten* 634, 525).

Here too, we are confronted with a potential, if limited, insight paired with a serious poetological caveat: On the one hand, the tangled internecine battles of village life, as depicted in the larger novel, would seem to confirm his point. But this is, after all, Wolfi, who, rather than engage with the locals and get to know his environs, chooses to stay home to cut (and re-cut) his lawn, day in and day out, because he suffers from writer's block. More importantly, perhaps, he is a Westerner, a "Wessi," who seems predisposed to conclude that all the suffering in the East is essentially self-imposed, and thus not the responsibility of transplanted Westerners like himself. It is not just readerly practice (as in the case of Dora's escapism), but writerly prejudice that can compromise the truth claims of realism.

The same kind of circumspection seems called for in the discussion of the allegedly "anti-political" East. Above, we witnessed Grombowski's fairly sympathetic invocation of GDR paternalism, on the one hand, and Dora's citation of post-*Wende* federal neglect, on the other – both cited as explanations of a pervasive Eastern suspicion of and exhaustion with politics. These can count as valid insights, to be sure; both possess some explanatory power for the disaffection of voters in Eastern Germany, where voter turnout is lower than in the West (Reiser and Reiter). But both novels complicate these explanations from the very beginning. It may be true, for example, that rural towns in the East lack everything Dora says they do (train stations, drug stores, post offices, etc.). But surely not all of that is due to political neglect at the federal level, and surely some, if not all, of

this is true of rural towns almost anywhere, as indeed research on this novel has repeatedly shown (e.g., Wahlster). What's more, while it may seem outrageous that her new acquaintance Sadie has to work several jobs just to get by, this is no less true of the working poor in Berlin, Detroit, or Sheffield, and hardly news to those struggling economically, whether in West or East Germany (or West Virginia, to return to Jonathan Franzen's novel). Nor is the charge of Western "colonization" of East Germany, at least as a monolithic explanation for East German political disaffection, left unchallenged.²⁴ Dora's great awakening is thus simultaneously a document of her own political naivete. And, to her credit, Zeh does not reduce one to the other.

Early on, perhaps well before we are aware of the technique of narrative focalization described above, we encounter this gnomic-sounding assertion: "Dörfer wie Unterleuten hatten die DDR überlebt und wussten, wie man sich den Staat vom Leib hielt. Die Unterleutner lösten Probleme auf ihre Weise. Sie lösten sie unter sich" (*Unterleuten* 28). The authoritative tenor of this declaration – attributable we retroactively learn to Fließ's sociological 'expertise' – at first seems to leave room for little doubt, and the town hall meeting held to discuss the windfarm proposal would seem to stand as a case in point *par excellence*. Because, despite all the opposition and reservations voiced at that gathering, the project will, in one way or another, proceed. The public discussion is apparently mere window-dressing, a classic proof-text for the much maligned "democracy deficit" diagnosed by Ivan Krastev in his widely read *After Europe* (2017).²⁵

But there is more to it. It is not just a matter of rapacious Westerners and duped Easterners. The mayor himself seems to suggest that the villagers may not quite be up to democracy. After all, Elena Gombrowski enthusiastically applauds the young Wessi, Pilz, who makes the windfarm presentation, but not because she actually supports or even fully understands it, but rather as a reflex from the GDR days when applause was the expected response to "Zentralkomitee" speeches (*Unterleuten* 143). At one point, the specter of a capitalist conspiracy is raised (when Fließ's boss, Kaczynski, informs him that the wind turbine promoters have intentionally preempted democratic procedures behind the scenes, *Unter-*

²⁴ See, for example, *Unterleuten* 192, where this thesis (unification as a thinly veiled form of Western "Kolonisierung" of the East) is challenged. Moreover, one could say that the entire Gombrowski-Kron competition challenges this simple narrative merely by having exploitation be perpetrated by an Easterner, namely, Gombrowski, as well as by the more recognizable Western culprit, Meiler (the rich real estate speculator who wreaks havoc on the lives of many Easterners he will never know).

²⁵ Krastev argues that such democracy deficits, particularly in Eastern Europe, undermine the EU's core mission and ideals and thus pose a serious threat to the future of Europe.

leuten 206), but by then mayor Seidel has already suggested that the locals are somehow both embarrassed and relieved by their “Entmachtung,” since they never really wanted, practiced, or understood democracy in the first place (*Unterleuten* 160). Raising an even more delicate issue, Elena suspects that a root cause – though one that is elusively unquantifiable, and frankly even difficult to discuss – is a widespread lack of self-esteem among Easterners (*Unterleuten* 304). All this in turn tends to undermine Jule’s categorical conclusion regarding Unterleuten’s utter alienation “von aller Staatlichkeit” (*Unterleuten* 217), because she had based that judgment solely on all the alleged deprivations and neglect the village suffered at the hands of the post-*Wende* federal government, forsaken by “die da oben,” to speak in the populist parlance of *Über Menschen*. Not only that, her grand generalizations about “the political class” (“Die Politik interessierte sich nicht die Bohne für Unterleuten [...]”), are introduced by an assertion of knowledge that readers by now have come deeply to distrust: “Das Dorf war ein Lebensraum, den sie überblickte und verstand” (*Unterleuten* 217). The ensuing plot, and specifically her own ultimate flight from the village, suggest the exact opposite.

The novels’ discourse on politics, and specifically on political alienation, turns out to be less univocal and far more differentiated than one might at first think. While Easterners and Westerners in both novels appear to converge upon an explanatory model that passes blame for political disaffection upward (either to Berlin and/or the EU in the present, or to the GDR regime in the past), they appear thereby to conceal their own failure to master and practice *local* politics. Instead, locals persistently misconceive their own conflicts as merely personal grievances, as long-standing feuds, and as problems that can be worked out “among themselves.” But such conflicts are precisely what local politics is meant to adjudicate, suggesting that all our informants are in a sense replicating Dora’s error: evading politics in favor of a murky “human nature,” seeking explanations for behavior in individual motivation and character traits (as Linda Franzen is forever doing with her addiction to [the fictive] Manfred Gortz’s platitudes), instead of learning to ply the tools of local democratic politics. But even this refusal of politics may have a profound *political* point, because populism, as Mudde does not tire of reminding us, rests upon that dichotomy between the corrupt elite, and the good and authentic “people” (Mudde 2021). There is possibly no more effective way of establishing one’s purity in this dyad than seeing oneself as thoroughly *apolitical*.

Teeming with competing, provocative, and seductive narratives of political analysis, Zeh’s novels need therefore to be avidly engaged with, not passively consumed. Fitted out with rich networks of literary allusion, mercurial narrated monologue, and plot segments that mirror our own problematic interactions with literature, *Unterleuten* and *Über Menschen* offer readers far more than the standard fare of “midcult” popular realism. They arouse curiosity, provoke disa-

greement, elicit assent, and all the while tease us with uncertainties and a series of textual trapdoors. Zeh is in other words playing with us, and in this sense wishes to make “gamers” of us all.

Works Cited

- Baßler, Moritz. *Populärer Realismus: Vom International Style gegenwärtigen Erzählens*. Beck, 2022.
- Brockmann, Stephen. “Eine tragfähige Version des Liberalismus – die zeitgenössische Autorin Juli Zeh.” *TEXT+KRITIK*, vol. 237, edited by Heinz-Peter Preußner, 2023, pp. 13–22.
- Canetti, Elias. *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1: *Die Blendung*. 1936. Hanser, 2016.
- Canetti, Elias. “Realismus und neue Wirklichkeit.” *Das Gewissen der Worte: Essays*. Fischer, 1981, pp. 72–77.
- Chronister, Necia. “Introduction: What do we do with Juli Zeh?” *German Quarterly*, vol. 96, no. 4, 2023, pp. 533–539.
- Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton UP, 1978.
- Donahue, William Collins. *The End of Modernism: Elias Canetti's Auto-da-Fé*. U of North Carolina P, 2020.
- Donahue, William Collins. “‘Truths That Cannot Be Offered Outside of Art’: On Stephen D. Dowden's *Modernism and Mimesis*.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 5, 2023a, lareviewofbooks.org/article/truths-that-cannot-be-offered-outside-of-art-on-stephen-d-dowden-s-modernism-and-mimesis/. 20 March 2024.
- Donahue, William Collins. Review of *Populärer Realismus: Vom International Style gegenwärtigen Erzählens*, by Moritz Baßler. *Arbitrium*, 2023b, pp. 237–243.
- Dowden, Stephen. *Modernism and Mimesis*. Palgrave, 2020.
- Droste-Hülshoff, Annette von. *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 1: *Die Judenbuche. Ein Sittengemälde aus dem gebirgigten Westphalen*, edited by Winfried Woesler and Walter Hüge, Niemeyer, 1978.
- Franzen, Jonathan. *Freedom*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.
- Guiffroy, Cathy. “Politique environnementale dans la littérature: Fiction ou vérité ?” *Germanica*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2021, pp. 89–104.
- “Juli Zeh: Über Menschen.” *Perlentaucher*, perlentaucher.de/buch/juli-zeh/ueber-menschen.html. 6 March 2024.
- Juster, Alexandra. *Eine kontrafaktische Lektüre von Juli Zehs Roman Über Menschen: Gesellschaft, Politik, Ethik*. Lang, 2023.
- Klocke, Sonja. “Die Provinz als Austragungsort globaler Probleme: Juli Zehs *Unterleuten* (2016).” *Das Politische in der Literatur der Gegenwart*, edited by Stefan Neuhaus and Immanuel Nover, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 497–514.
- Knorr, Sebastian. “Gender-Konstellationen im deutschsprachigen Dorfroman der Gegenwart: Dörte Hansens *Altes Land* und Juli Zehs *Unterleuten*.” *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2022, pp. 413–433.
- Krastev, Ivan. *After Europe*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2017.
- Maaß, Sarah. “Ein literaturpolitischer Sisypchos: Juli Zeh und ihre Preise.” *TEXT+KRITIK*, vol. 237, edited by Heinz-Peter Preußner, 2023, pp. 42–50.

- März, Ursula. “‘Unterleuten’: Jedes Dorf ist eine Welt.” *Die Zeit*, 17 March 2016, zeit.de/2016/13/unterleuten-juli-zeh-roman. 20 March 2023.
- Mitterer, Cornelius. “Stereotype der Männlichkeit in Juli Zeh’s *Unterleuten* (2016).” *Revista de Filología Alemana*, vol. 30, 2022, pp. 83–100.
- Moser, Natalie. “Dorffroman oder *urban legend*? Zur Funktion der Stadt-Dorf-Differenz in Juli Zehs *Unterleuten*.” *Über Land: Aktuelle literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf Dorf und Ländlichkeit*, edited by Magdalena Marszałek, Werner Nell, and Marc Weiland, De Gruyter, 2018, pp. 127–140.
- Mudde, Cas. “Cas Mudde Explains Populism.” *Youtube*, 1 October 2021, youtube.com/watch?v=CHbnKcJhJHA. 6 March 2024.
- Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2017.
- Mueller, Agnes. “Paratext und Autorschaft: Mein Brief an Juli Zeh.” *TEXT+KRITIK*, vol. 237, edited by Heinz-Peter Preußner, 2023, pp. 51–58.
- Navratil, Michael. “Jenseits des politischen Realismus: Kontrafaktik als Verfahren politischen Schreibens in der Gegenwartsliteratur (Juli Zeh, Michel Houellebecq).” *Das Politische in der Literatur der Gegenwart*, edited by Stefan Neuhaus and Immanuel Nover, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 359–375.
- Reiser, Marion, and Renate Reiter. “A (New) East-West-Divide? Representative Democracy in Germany 30 Years after Unification.” *German Politics*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–19.
- Richter, Lars. “Juli Zeh: Literatur und Engagement unter Leuten.” *Protest und Verweigerung/Protest and Refusal: Neue Tendenzen in der deutschen Literatur seit 1989/New Trends in German Literature since 1989*, edited by Hans Adler and Sonja Klocke, Wilhelm Fink, 2019, pp. 129–155.
- Schenk, Klaus. “Narrative Kaleidoskopie: Zur Virtualisierung des Erzählens bei Juli Zeh.” *Juli Zeh: Divergenzen des Schreibens*, edited by Klaus Schenk and Christian Rossi, edition text+kritik, 2021, pp. 89–119.
- Stubenrauch, Eva. “Semantik v. Struktur: Divergenz zeitdiagnostischer Verfahren in/zwischen *Leere Herzen* und *Neujahr*.” *Juli Zeh: Divergenzen des Schreibens*, edited by Klaus Schenk and Christian Rossi, edition text+kritik, 2021, pp. 120–140.
- Twelmann, Marcus. “Idyll aktuell: Was eine Geschichte vom Dorf über die Gesellschaft verrät.” *Merkur*, vol. 70, no. 805, 2016, pp. 71–77.
- Venzl, Tilman. “Postdemokratie in *Unterleuten*? Was in Juli Zehs Gesellschaftsroman auf dem Spiel steht.” *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, vol. 50, 2020, pp. 711–733.
- Wahlster, Barbara. “‘Rückzug ins Überschaubare?’ Das Dorf in der zeitgenössischen deutschsprachigen Literatur.” *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2022, pp. 369–383.
- Wisotzki, Nadine. “Das volle Orchester: Zur Ambivalenz von Einfachheit und Komplexität in Juli Zehs Erzählweise.” *Juli Zeh: Divergenzen des Schreibens*, edited by Klaus Schenk and Christian Rossi, edition text+kritik, 2021, pp. 79–88.
- Zeh, Juli. *Corpus Delicti: Ein Prozess*. Schöffling, 2009.
- Zeh, Juli. *Über Menschen*. Luchterhand, 2021.
- Zeh, Juli. *Unterleuten*. Luchterhand, 2016.
- Zemanek, Evi. “Pour une écologie littéraire: Changements environnementaux, innovations (éco-)poétiques et transformations des genres: le cas du nouveau récit de village (Dorffroman).” *Revue d’Allemagne et des pays de langue allemande*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2019, pp. 343–356.

Ziganke, Jana. ““Und was, wenn sich alles ganz anders verhielte?": Schüler/-innen hinterfragen Juli Zehs *Corpus Delicti*.” *andererseits – Yearbook of Transatlantic German Studies*, vols. 11/12, 2022/23, edited by William Collins Donahue, Georg Mein and Rolf Parr, 2024, pp. 203–226.