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Diffusions in Public Space and Memory: Mapping Vienna onto Los Angeles in Marlene Streeruwitz's *Nachwelt*

ÜBERKREUZUNGEN  
INTERSECTIONS

Verhandlungen kultureller, ethnischer, religiöser  
und geschlechtlicher Identitäten in österreichischer  
Literatur und Kultur

Negotiations of cultural, ethnic, religious,  
and gender identities in modern Austrian  
Literature and Culture

In her novel *Nachwelt* (1999) Marlene Streeruwitz depicts historical memory as constructed and contrived, problematic and inconsistent, yet at the same time essential to the biographical enterprise of the narrative's central figure Margarethe, who spends 10 days in Southern California researching the life story of the sculptor Anna Mahler, the child of Gustav and Alma. Streeruwitz's text foregrounds the natural human desire to impose a coherent narrative on a past that resists totalizing description, the implications of the diffuse nature of contemporary information networks for human consciousness itself (here, the intrusion and rendering of the biographer's subjectivity in the titular afterworld), and ultimately, the visual and physical analogues that inform the construction of historical memory. The text functions on at least three narrative levels: as a travel diary of mundane and transporting moments in a ten-day trip to Southern California; as a collection of biographical details about Anna Mahler that, though they do not cohere in the manner of a traditional piece of biographical writing, do indeed give the reader a critical collage of the biographical subject; and finally, as a narrated monologue filled with associative musings about connections—some historical, others quite personal and idiosyncratic—between Vienna and Southern California.



In the following essay, I will explore the some of the stylistic vocabulary of Streeruwitz' text, examining how it depicts the nature of the biographer's task, particularly its emphasis on the problem of the misguided imposition of a coherent narrative on that which cannot be coherent, the implications of the contemporary diffusion of information networks for human consciousness (in other words, the rendering of the biographer's consciousness), and ultimately, the text's particular insights into conceptions of identity and human subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> Streeruwitz' text, I argue here, successfully renders the depiction of historical memory as both constructed and contrived, problematic and inconsistent, yet at the same time as essential to the ability of the individual to understand the embedded nature of social and cultural codes in Austria and among the émigré community in Southern California, codes that still exert a powerful influence on social and political identity-formation, and are often at odds with the more objective narratives imposed by the biographer.

Los Angeles has in many ways become the *locus classicus* for the effacement of historical memory (cf. Ruth Klüger's memorable afterword to

<sup>1</sup> On the conflation of autobiography and fiction in Austrian literature, see: Nicholas Meyerhofer, ed. *The Fiction of the I: Contemporary Austrian Writers and Autobiography* (Riverside: Ariadne, 1999). I am interested here in the construction of the human subject attendant to the biographical genre and how the two texts under discussion render this endeavor as one fraught with pitfalls.

her Holocaust memoir *weiter leben*, in which she explains that that is exactly why she likes to live in Southern California<sup>2</sup>) and the creation of a virtual historical analogs and wish fulfillment through Hollywood's image factory. Streeruwitz approaches this apparent paradox in a narrative at once highly personal and suggestive in its evocation of memory's representations in the physical world. Margot's thoughts are not rendered in complete sentences, but as ready-made linguistic bits and bytes of diverse origin, from the self-accusatory idiom of mass-marketed women's guides to living, to the internalization of the language and physical spaces of the patriarchal order back home in Vienna, and, ultimately to the oral history that she compiles among Anna Mahler's acquaintances in LA, but which do not yield a linear account of her biographical subject. The novel's stylistic underpinnings allow all of these narrative registers to confront each other in a way that suggests less a linear unfolding of time than the simultaneity of external stimuli.

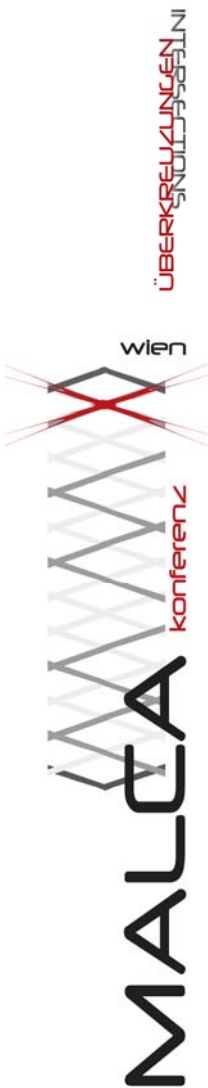
Margarethe's associative musings lend the narrative a multi-dimensional and

<sup>2</sup> "Inzwischen bin ich wieder zu Hause, in Südkalifornien, in Orange County. Das ist ein Land, dessen Geschichte darin besteht, dass die Einwohner hierher flohen, um der Geschichte zu entrinnen, der europäischen und der asiatischen, und schließlich auch der amerikanischen Geschichte ... ich lebe gern hier. Diese von Erdbeben bedrohte Meer- und Wüstenlandschaft, mit Sonne gesegnet, von Wassernot geplagt, hat sich die törichte, tragische Aufgabe gestellt, die Vergangenheit abzuschaffen." Ruth Klüger, *weiter leben*. (München: DTV, 1994): 280-81.

multi-media quality, with important implications regarding human subjectivity and over-prioritizing linear narrative coherence.

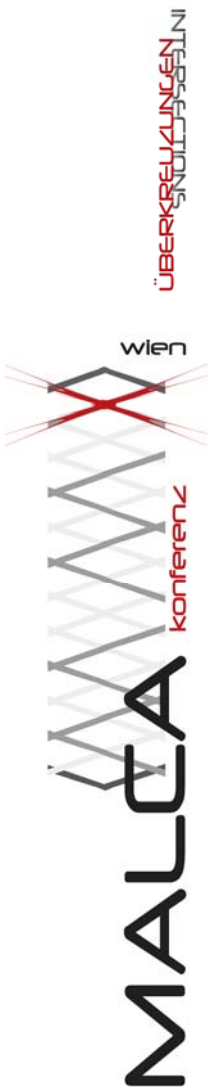
Margarethe's interview partners are drawn heavily from the community of Austrian émigrés that settled in Southern California after 1938 (a community that included, among many others, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Arnold Schönberg, Gina Kaus, Salka Viertel, Alma Mahler, Franz Werfel, Erich Korngold, Ernst Krenek, and Otto Preminger), yet their first-person accounts—set apart in the text by the name of the interview partner—are no more internally consistent or edifying than Margarethe's attempts to order and classify them.

There is a certain resonance here with the potentially problematic privileging of witness testimony in historical literature about the Holocaust, that is, the conferring on oral history and personal testimonials a status somehow more authentic than that of the historian and not subject to the vicissitudes of memory, self-stylization, and linguistic cliché that might plague the descriptions of chroniclers like Margarethe herself. In fact, the oral histories presented here are subject to the same diffusion as the biographer's diverse thought bubbles, and do not yield a more coherent picture of the biographical subject; quite to the contrary, Margot confronts the difficulty of



imposing a coherent narrative on disparate experience and contradictory testimony.

A more powerful subtext in Streeruwitz's novel is the physical submersion of Austrian, and particularly Viennese, culture within the diffuse space of Southern California, the re-mapping of Vienna in the physical space of Los Angeles and its environs. Margot abandons her biographical project in large part because she cannot find a common thread in what she hears and sees in Southern California, and yet her ability to approach her subject with open heart and mind is inhibited by the highly ritualized physicality of memory in Vienna that she brings, if subconsciously to the task, its tangible quality and—even if after-the-fact as a project of collective repression and denial—centralized presence. The appeal of Southern California's diffusion to Austrian émigrés—its decentralized physical aspect, effacement of collective memory, and ultimate fragility—may in part be seen in its reflection in negative form of Vienna's historical stasis, the ultimately phony aspects of the Imperial city's projected image of historical coherence. (One may see here a productive analog in the depiction of physical space in the novel, the contradictory aspects of Southern California's decentralized sprawl and sense of anti-hierarchical community—the fashioning and re-fashioning



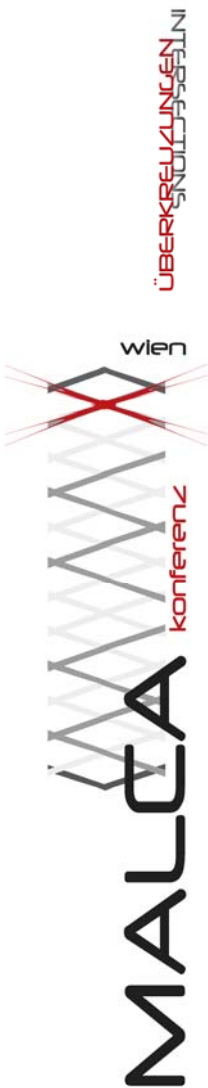
of communities based on a high degree of mobility—with the still quite rigid sense of social hierarchy and centralized spaces of power—in the novel associated strongly with patriarchal structures—that Margarethe has left in Vienna.)

The biographical genre has often been associated with a notion of human subjectivity emphasizing the stability of identity and the development of the human subject in a logical narrative structure informed by heredity, socialization, and other external influences. Having much in common with the artistic vocabulary of nineteenth-century poetic realism and the socially integrative aspects of the *Bildungsroman*, the edifying function of such a life well-explored and well-executed by the biographer has a didactic function, valorizing the dominant culture while showing the model of how the individual becomes part of the collective (or how, alternatively, the individual portrayed is marginalized without threatening the reader’s position as representative of the dominant culture). Yet as early as the insights of postmodern and postcolonial critical paradigms, and indeed in much of the fiction of Rilke, Musil, or Broch, one sees a questioning of the stability of identity and an exploration of the possible benefits of a more hybrid, transgressive, and cross-cultural constitution of identity. The aspects of the



dual monarchy that accommodated a more diffuse conception of human subjectivity, that is, one not immediately beholden to paradigms of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, or class, have received renewed attention in an Austrian political culture that has struggled with the question of what aspects of its complicated historical legacy it chooses to emphasize at any given time. Such a critical approach to biography is of a piece with positions coming from gender studies, such as here formulated by Erica Barroth: “Traditional conventions of the writing of lives, such as the claims to objectivity, accuracy, truth, accountability, validity, and worthiness of the subject, prove inadequate in view of feminist projects that question whether so-called scientific objectivity is possible or even desirable. Instead, the blurring of borders between history and fiction is acknowledged, and what used to pass for historical fact is regarded as the biographer’s construct. An awareness of the biographer’s personal involvement in the process of telling another’s life story, be it as research or editor, reveals to the reader the unavailability of bias in the process.” (Barroth)

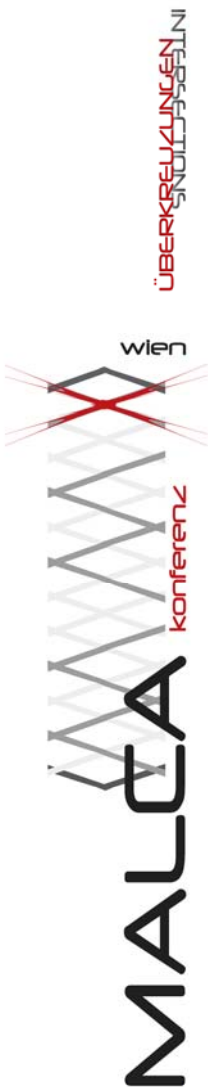
Streeruwitz’s principle narrated figure, Margarethe, has increasing difficulty separating the subjects of her biographical inquiries from the vicissitudes of her own life; the intrusion of mundane, petty, and



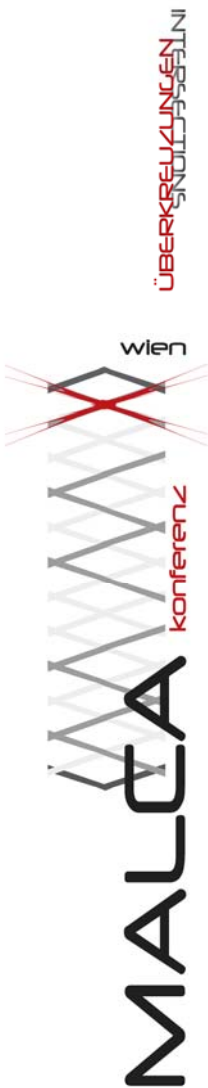


contradictory concerns suffuse the narrative and clash—often within the same sentence or paragraph—with the putatively more lofty and important work of recovering lost and forgotten fates, i.e. contributing to the construction of historical memory, and ultimately undermines her ability to bring the biography of Anna Mahler to its conclusion.

Such professional frustration is an adequate complement to aspects of the contemporary Austrian public sphere, in which discussions of historical memory so quickly become part of the everyday landscape as to become invisible and inaudible for their very omnipresence, almost as if they occur in a parallel level of consciousness. The point made by Stefan Templ and Tine Walzer in their book *Unser Wien*, namely that much of the post-war discussion of the past in Austria, even after the turning points of 1986, 1989, and 1999, has not transcended a certain antiseptic cliché-ridden quality because it has refused to break the taboo on naming actual names (their specific focus is the largely untold story of who benefited from the Aryanization of whose property), is an important subtext that emerges through the many interviews that Margarethe conducts with members of the Austrian expatriate community in Southern California.



The artistic vocabulary of Streeruwitz's text is, on the surface, quite mundane: not much happens, and the narrative is generated by the depiction of Margarethe's consciousness, approximating the technique of narrated third-person monologue as described by Dorrit Cohn (and well-executed in certain texts by Arthur Schnitzler and Odon von Horvath, among many others). Margarethe's thoughts are not rendered in complete sentences, but as kind of ready-made linguistic patterns of diverse origin, from the self-accusatory idiom of mass-marketed women's guides to living, to the internalization of the gaze and condescension with which her ex-husband and current boyfriend treat her, to the internal voice cataloging the difficulty of negotiating traffic in L.A., and finally the conversations that she has with acquaintances of Anna Mahler. The juxtaposition of these various registers is sometimes jarring and often seems random, yet provides a formal correlative for the description of the biographer's task in the afterworld. Embedded within the depiction of Margarethe's thoughts are frequent first-person transcripts of her interviews with people who knew Anna Mahler, many of whom were part of the vibrant Austrian émigré community in southern California that included Billy Wilder, Arnold Schönberg, Gina Kaus, Otto Preminger, Alma Mahler, Franz Werfel, and Friedrich Torberg, among



others. Yet these first person accounts are no more internally consistent or edifying than Margarethe's attempts to order what she finds out; there is seemingly little authenticity in these embedded oral histories, if by authenticity one means a more immediate access to what made Anna Mahler interesting. There is a certain resonance here with the potentially problematic privileging of witness testimony in historical literature on the Holocaust, that is, the assessment of oral history as somehow more authentic than other accounts and not subject to the vicissitudes of memory, self-stylization, and linguistic cliché that might plague the descriptions of the observer or chronicler. In fact, the oral histories compiled in *Nachwelt* are subject to the same diffusion as Margarethe's associative musings, and do not yield a more coherent picture of her biographical subject; quite the contrary, Margarethe begins to confront the reality of the difficulty of imposing a coherent narrative on disparate experience and contradictory testimony.

Streeruwitz's Margarethe is bombarded throughout the narrative, literally by the aerial spraying of pesticides that is going on in southern California throughout her visit, and figuratively by the almost non-stop external stimuli of professional and social engagements, television, bits and pieces of auditory stimuli from conversation, radio, and the hum of LA life.

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In a different context, Streeruwitz has described this essential contradiction as follows: “It is probably one of the more deplorable burdens of our time that we are equipped with the desires of the past century, yet compelled to live in the reality of our own time.”<sup>3</sup> Much of these stimuli trigger associations with aspects of her life in Vienna, where she works in the theater as an editor *Programmhefte* and negotiates a professional and personal life undermined by casually condescending modern men. The formal aspects of the narrative undermine any readerly expectations of development, cohesion, or, ultimately, the creation of Anna Mahler as a historical figure. Nevertheless, it is in the very diffuse nature of Margarethe’s consciousness, as depicted in Streeruwitz’s text, that the authenticity lies: far from invalidating the need to describe historical figures from the vantage point of subsequent generations, Streeruwitz’s text shows the effort to conjure identity in the afterworld to be fraught with ambiguities and uncertainties, ones that need not render the effort itself meaningless, but rather hold out the hope that in the biographer’s reflection of his or her own subjectivity and openness to chance encounters

<sup>3</sup> Marlene Streeruwitz, “Passion. Devoir. Consistency. And No Time.” In Willy Riemer, ed. *After Postmodernism: Austrian Literature and Film in Transition* (Riverside: Ariadne, 2000): 211.

and fleeting insights lie a rather more personally democratic and empathetic approach to the creation of historical memory.

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Juli 2010

1945 Austria. Recent work has included articles on Austrian cultures of memory and film (on Haneke's *La Pianiste*, Glück's *38*, and Reichart's *Februarschatten*), and the development of a book manuscript, tentatively titled *Vienna and Hollywood: Dream Factories and Cultural Transfer*.

