

Schirmmacher-Preis: Jonathan Franzen – 12. Oktober 2017

By weird curricular accident—it was a matter of having no alternative—I was a German major in college. I studied in Munich for a year, and then, after college, I spent a year in West Berlin on a Fulbright grant. When I returned from Berlin, I got married and proceeded to lead the isolated life of a poor, aspiring novelist. My wife and I didn't have a television, and so our main source of news, and of contact with the larger world, was newspapers—the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*. I depended on those papers, but I also hated them. I was trying to be a rigorous writer, trying to become a novelist, and the clichés and the sloppy language in even a good paper like the *New York Times* enraged me. The *Times* didn't seem to hate Ronald Reagan as much as I did, and it didn't pay enough attention to the issues I was passionate about: to the environment, to nuclear weapons, to the malignancy of consumerism. From where I sat and read the newspaper, in an underheated apartment in a student slum of Boston, it seemed to me that everything was wrong with the world and that no one could see it except me. Me and Karl Kraus.

I'd encountered Kraus's work in college and then again in Berlin. I was attracted to him because I recognized myself in him, and because I wanted to learn to write the way he did. Kraus was absolutely convinced of his moral rightness, and his critique of Vienna's bourgeois press was rigorous, angry, and funny. He attacked the press's corruption generally, and he focused on a particular contradiction: even as a small number of media magnates were getting extremely rich, the newspapers they owned kept reassuring their readers that society was becoming ever more democratic. More empowered, more enlightened, more communal. It enraged Kraus to see these naked profit-making enterprises masquerading as great equalizers—and *succeeding* in their fraud, because people were addicted to newspapers.

Kraus was so smart and funny and fanatical that he developed a cult-like following in Vienna, with thousands of people coming to his readings. Seventy years later, I became kind of a virtual cult follower of his. His sentences were difficult to understand, but they really popped. There's nothing like moral certainty to give an angry edge to the prose, and I fell in love with Kraus's prose, because I was looking for that kind of angry, funny edge in my own writing, and because I felt so alone with my anger at the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*. I was also attracted to Kraus's conviction that the world was heading toward an apocalypse. For me, at the time, this meant nuclear apocalypse, because we were still very much in the saber-rattling late stages of the Cold War. As long as I remained obsessed with apocalypse and convinced that I was right and the world was wrong—basically, throughout my twenties—I was under Kraus's spell. I went so far as to translate two of his most famous and difficult essays, with the intention of unleashing his fury on an unsuspecting America as soon as I'd made a name for myself as a novelist.

But then, in my thirties, I entered a dark wood, and everything that had seemed black and white to me began to look more gray. As newspapers became embattled by the Internet and journalists started losing their jobs, they no longer seemed like my cultural enemy. I recognized, belatedly, that the journalists at the *Times*, and even at the *Globe*, were hardworking professionals doing their best to cover news responsibly—that they weren't pretending to be something that they weren't, and that it had been wrongheaded of me to fault them for their petty linguistic crimes. My parents were dying, and I was going through a painful divorce, and you really can't go through those things—if you're honest—and remain convinced that you're right about

everything and that everyone else is wrong. It was demonstrated to me quite plainly in my mid-thirties that many of the things I'd been absolutely certain of, in my personal life, I'd actually been quite wrong about. And once you're wrong about one thing, the possibility is open that you might be wrong about everything.

So I lost interest in Kraus. I abandoned my translation project and left it in various drawers and storage facilities for twenty years. It might never have seen the light of day if I hadn't gotten to know a couple of serious Kraus fans, Daniel Kehlmann and the American scholar Paul Reitter, who encouraged me to go back to my translations. When I did, I was astonished to discover that Kraus had even more to say to me about the world in 2010 than he had in 1983. His critique of the nexus of media and technology and capital now seemed unbelievably prescient. You could apply his critique directly to the blogification of the newspaper, and to the rise of Google and Apple and Facebook—he really had seen all of this coming a hundred years ago. And so, although I'd outgrown his fiery brand of moral certitude, I decided to finish my translations and try to make his writing accessible to an English-reading audience.

If you engage with Kraus's language, as I did, it gets permanently stuck in your head. Back in the mid-nineties, when I'd started to worry about the future of literature in the age of three screens—movies, television, and computers—and to worry about the increasingly materialistic view of human nature that psychopharmacology was producing, and to give voice to my worries in a long and furious essay, I needed a way to describe how technology and consumerism feed on each other and take over our lives. How seductive and invasive but also unsatisfying they are. How we go back to them more and more, *because* they're unsatisfying, and become ever more dependent on them. How the groupthink of the Internet, and our constant electronic stimulation by our devices, begin to erode the very notion of an individual—an individual who is capable of, say, producing a novel. To describe all these phenomena, I found myself reaching for a phrase of Karl Kraus that had stuck in my head: "Ein Teufelswerk der Humanität." *An infernal machine of humanity*. I took the phrase to mean a thing that is definitionally consumerist, a thing that's totalitarian in its exclusion of other ways of being, a thing that appears in the world and manufactures our desires through its own developmental logic, a thing that causes great harm but just keeps perpetuating itself. The sentence I used to sum all this up was "Techno-consumerism is an infernal machine."

I was by no means the only writer alarmed by the infernal machine. David Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, for example, can be read as a gigantic response to the problem of techno-consumerism. David imagined an electronic entertainment that, once you started watching it, you could never stop looking at. Already, in the nineties, it seemed as if machines were overpowering us—beginning to command us with their logic, rather than serving us. Whether we liked it or not, Moore's Law dictated that computers would double in power every two and a half years. Today, twenty years later, we're reaching the limits of Moore's law, but in the nineties the law was in full swing. Applications were developed, and then people had to throw away their old machine because a new generation of machines and applications had come along. Without our ever giving our active consent, this just became the way we lived. Became the way *I* lived, despite my strong misgivings. Was the new technology a good thing? A bad thing? It developed so rapidly that—to quote Karl Kraus—the culture couldn't catch its breath. There was never any time for real discussion. If we *could* do something with technology, we *would* do it. If the potential existed, it

would be exploited. It would be marketed, it would be sold, and we would buy it. This was the infernal machine.

And then there's the second part of Kraus's phrase, "der Humanität"—*of humanity*. I didn't pay much attention to it in the nineties, but when I went back and reworked my translations and thought harder about what Kraus was actually saying, I was struck by the strange word "Humanität." He had a different word available to him, "Menschlichkeit," which he didn't use. I suspect that he chose the Latinate word for its associations with liberal Enlightenment thought, and here too I'm struck by his prescience. What I find particularly troubling about our own technological moment is that I hear people saying again and again—happily and proudly and excitedly—that computers are changing our notion of what it means to be a human being. The implication is always that humanity is changing for the better. To me, though, it seems as if the Internet and social media are transforming a world that used to have adults and children in it, with the adults firmly in charge, into a planet-sized eighth-grade school cafeteria. A world of name-calling and intolerance. A world in which, if you don't want to be bullied or shamed, you have to be strictly conformist. A world in which it doesn't matter who you really are or what you're really like: what matters is your image, and the highest goal is to be liked.

Taken as a whole, Kraus's line suggests to me that the logic of techno-consumerism is inseparable from the Enlightenment rhetoric of freedom and human rights and human self-realization, and that the coupling of these two elements is a fraud. Because who is profiting? And who is being pauperized? To Kraus, who was something of a conspiracy theorist, it was no accident that profit-mad plutocrats spoke the benevolent language of "Humanität." In his time, in Vienna, this self-congratulating discourse was found on the newspaper editorial page. Today it's the watchword of Silicon Valley: "We're making the world a better place." The grotesque thing for Kraus was not just that the machine was infernal, and that its logic had nothing to do with humane values, but that it presented itself as humanity's greatest friend.

Is Silicon Valley making the world a better place? The Internet certainly can be useful. It's a fabulous research tool. It's great for buying stuff, for streaming television, for bringing together people to work on communal projects, or people who share a passion or suffer from the same disease and want to find each other and communicate. It's wonderful for that. I'm a birdwatcher and a bird conservationist, and a lot of the information I have about birds now comes through the Internet, where I can instantly tap into data from tens of thousands of citizen scientists all around the world. That's a good thing. Email is a good thing, too. I used to be suspicious of it, but now it's part of the way I live; for most kinds of communication, it's clearly superior to talking on the phone.

But I'm also a slave to my email. I can go three days without a shower, a week without physical exercise, a month without reading a book, but if I don't devote ninety minutes a day to my email, seven days a week, I'm in trouble. It's almost mythological—it's like battling the Hydra, or like the Sorcerer's Apprentice. It calls to mind another prescient line of Kraus's: "Wir waren kompliziert genug, die Maschine zu bauen, und wir sind zu primitiv, uns von ihr bedienen zu lassen." *We were complicated enough to build machines, and we're too primitive to make them serve us.* When I walk down a street in New York, surrounded by people staring at their phones and moving like sleepwalkers, I wonder what a person from the eighteenth century would make

of it all. I think it might look as if the planet had been conquered by a tiny, shiny extraterrestrial master race with a strange rectangular shape and amazing powers of mind control, and that human beings were its servants.

Kraus's prescient line, which appears in the essay "Apokalypse," is followed by an even more penetrating line: "Wir treiben einen Weltverkehr auf schmalspurigen Gehirnbahnen"— *We operate a world-wide system of traffic on narrow-gauge mental tracks*. Kraus was instinctively suspicious of the rhetoric of progress. The early years of the twentieth century, when he was writing the essays I translated, were a period of tremendous optimism about science and technology and their potential to transform the world. There were airplanes and automobiles, breakthroughs in physics and chemistry and medicine. The world seemed to be growing more enlightened, in a straightforward scientific sense, and more liberal politically as well. The liberal consensus, expressed in Vienna's bourgeois press, was that humanity's future was bright, and that humanity should be congratulated for its progress. And then the most horrible war in human history broke out. And then Hitler and Stalin rose to power, and the world fought an even more horrible war, which ended with atomic bombs.

Kraus was proved wrong about a lot of things, but he was right in his distrust of the rhetoric of progress— particularly in his insight that technological advances had far outpaced the moral and emotional development of humanity. He was present at the wedding of modern media and technology, ridiculing their language, exposing their fraudulence, and the course of history has continued to prove him right about them. Back in the nineties, the techno-utopianists of Silicon Valley promised that the Internet would create a world of universal peace and understanding. They really did say that kind of thing, using that kind of language— you can look it up. Mark Zuckerberg is still saying it, despite the mounting evidence that social media are, in fact, making the world a much worse place. As good as technology can be in uniting the world, it turns out to be even better at dividing it. Digital technology is very, very good at creating wealth inequality, and at electing a racist reality-TV star as president of the United States, and at spreading fake news and inflaming hatred, and at recruiting and mobilizing terrorists, and at destabilizing and delegitimizing the democratically elected governments that might serve as a check on our worst impulses.

The problem now is the same as it was a hundred years ago: the *schmalspurigkeit*, the narrow gauge, of the brains that are using the technology. Only now the technologies are vastly more powerful than they were in Kraus's time. It seems to me that, if we're going to survive, we need to identify undesirable aspects of technological development and begin saying no to them. It's extremely unlikely, but not entirely inconceivable, that after an unintended nuclear explosion and a few more power plant disasters people will say, "We *can* split atoms, but we're going to choose not to. We're going to get together as a planet to ensure that this thing we can do, we're never going to do again." Already, with genetically modified organisms, with recombinant DNA in all its forms, we're beginning to hear people say, "Just because we *can* do it doesn't mean we *should* do it."

Our embrace of digital technology, however, continues to be headlong, despite its obvious negative consequences. To take one small example, dear to Frank Schirrmacher's heart, the Internet is in the process of destroying journalism. How can you have a functioning, complicated

democracy of a hundred million people, or three hundred million people, without professional journalists? The techno-utopianists will tell you that journalists can be replaced with crowdsourcing, with leakers, with the pictures that citizens take with their iPhones. To the utopianists, this isn't just a solution to the problem. It must surely be a great improvement, because, after all, Silicon Valley is making the world a better place. Expertise, however, can't be crowdsourced, or leaked, or replicated by neural networks. There is no replacement for the journalist who has been working a beat for twenty years and knows how to make sense of what he or she learns. If democracy is going to survive, we need to think critically about the consequences of our machines. We need to learn how to say no, and how to support the vital social services, such professional journalism, that we're destroying.

It has been encouraging to see, in recent months, that the plague of fake news and the election of Donald Trump have prompted this kind of critical questioning. But techno-consumerism is still an infernal machine. Digital technology is capitalism in hyperdrive, injecting its logic of consumption and promotion, of monetization and efficiency, into every waking minute. Social media claim to be communitarian enterprises, but they're also a particularly brutal manifestation of free-market economics. Their fundamental mode is self-promotion— if you don't post, you don't exist. This may not be so terrible if you're a person or a company selling a product, but it is bad for the life of the mind. It is especially bad, I would argue, for anyone who aspires to write serious fiction.

Young writers are told, nowadays, that it's not enough to write a book. You also have to establish a social-media presence, in order to promote yourself. It's true that writers have always been expected to do some self-promotion. I'm promoting myself right now, by delivering this speech. Even Thomas Pynchon self-promotes, by so famously refusing to self-promote. But if I look at the really great writers of the recent decades in North America— Alice Munro, Don DeLillo, Denis Johnson— I see individuals who established strict boundaries. Alice Munro doesn't make herself completely invisible— I've seen her interviewed— but she has more important work to do than posting on Facebook. She has the work of being Alice Munro to do. The writers who have become models for me are the ones who maintain some kind of public life—we're all communal—but a very limited one. Writers have audiences and responsibilities to those audiences, but we also have a responsibility to remain ourselves. It's a balancing act. And the Internet and social media are so seductive, so immediately gratifying in their addictive-substance way, that you can easily get carried away from yourself.

Where Karl Kraus spoke of an imaginative space, or implied that there was an imaginative space, he used the word *Geist*—the good old German word “spirit.” He considered technology antithetical to that spirit. Only a German can use the word *Geist* without embarrassment, but there are American ways to apply Kraus's critique to the Internet— to the Internet as a way of life, a way of being a human being. The Internet in general, and social media in particular, foster the notion that *everything* should be shared, everything is communal. When sharing works, it can be very useful. But it specifically doesn't work in the realm of literary production. Good novels aren't written by committee. Good novels aren't collaborated on. Good novels are produced by people who voluntarily isolate themselves, and go deep, and report to the world from the depths. It's true that their published reports are communally accessible, communally shareable— but only at the consuming end, not at the production end.

What makes a good novel, apart from the skill of the writer, is how true it is to an individual subjectivity. When writers talk about “finding your voice,” they’re not talking about finding a group voice. Don DeLillo once told me that, if the world ceases to have serious fiction writers, it will mean that the very idea of an individual no longer makes sense. We will only be a crowd. And so the writer’s responsibility nowadays is very basic: to continue to try to be a person, not merely a member of the online crowd. This is our primary assignment. Even as I spend half my day on the internet—doing email, buying plane tickets, ordering stuff online, looking at bird pictures—I need to be careful to restrict my access. I need to make sure I still have a private self. Because the private self is where my writing comes from. The more I’m pulled out of that, the more I simply become another loudspeaker for what already exists. As a writer, I’m trying to pay attention to the things the people *aren’t* paying attention to. I’m trying to monitor my own soul as carefully as I can, and to imagine things that exist nowhere else but inside me.

No one here has asked me why I’m not on social media. But this is my answer to that question.

Although I didn’t have the pleasure of knowing Frank Schirrmacher, I have some idea of how large the loss was—for the world generally and for German culture in particular—when he died at an early age. There are all kinds of journalists, and Schirrmacher was the best kind. He was good at selling newspapers, yes, but he was dedicated to selling them right way: by eschewing ideology and making the newspaper a forum for the sophisticated debate of crucial contemporary issues. I might add that I feel a more personal kinship with him. Like him, I began my writing career with a passionate engagement with the work of Franz Kafka, I consider science to be an essential part of modern culture, and I have a profound distrust of the technology monopolies that have taken over the world. I wish I could have even just one evening in Schirrmacher’s company. It’s a great honor to accept a prize in his memory.

Jonathan Franzen