

Paul Youngman, "Pulling History or Pushing an Agenda? Twentieth-Century German History and the World Wide Web in Erich Loest's *Reichsgericht (Supreme Court)*"

When I talk about computing technologies, I proceed from the following hypothesis: Despite our embrace of these technologies and all of their exciting capabilities, there remains, barely beneath the surface, a degree of romantic unease regarding computing technologies. One sees this unease most often in German literary fiction, but now and again one runs across a positive portrayal of the capabilities of networked computers. Erich Loest's 2001 novel *Supreme Court* is an example of just such a positive, albeit naïve depiction.

One strand of our romantic unease lies in our conception of "reality." A colleague in Germany, Stefan Porombka, writes in his book called *Hypertext*, that his work is based on the idea that there is "one reality." That is, reality has not, vis a vis Baudrillard, been killed off at the hands of media technologies, and there are not, vis a vis Segeberg, some fully functioning secondary realities afloat thanks to the Internet and virtuality. No, reality remains very much alive and unified in the media age according to Porombka. From that foundational idea, it becomes easy to understand and accept computing technologies as just another part of that one reality and not something that can alter that reality in the startling ways often attributed to it in the 1990's.

While I don't go as far as Baudrillard, I do suggest that the Internet and historical reality often make for a problematic duo when it comes to an accurate assessment of what happened. Loest's novel offers his analysis of a hoped-for relationship between the World Wide Web and what he understands as "historical reality." *Supreme Court* depicts an historian protagonist with access to a magical URL that allows him to interview

German historical figures in his quest to detail the history of the German High Court from its inception in 1879 to its dissolution in 1945. Through the use of the fantastic URL, Loest offers his hopes for digital technology and the role it can play in Germany's stridently contested past. DESCRIBE GRASS. In a manner that comes across as wish fulfillment for those who have tried for years to come to terms with Germany's dark history, Loest portrays a World Wide Web that allows for the virtual reanimation of the dead through a powerful amalgamation of past and present unique to the Internet in an effort to reveal the reality of twentieth-century German history. The central question I address in this paper is: Can the Internet serve as effective an arbiter between past and present allowing the user to "pull" an accurate understanding of history from its pages, or is the Internet so powerful a medium and the information offered by it so easily manipulated that it can "push" an agenda-driven history even further into German cultural consciousness than more traditional media can, thereby muddling any possibility of historical understanding?

Set primarily in turn of the twenty-first century Leipzig, *Supreme Court* tells the tale of Stefan Hellker, an East German born professor of history out to set a story straight. Loest incorporates various media accounts like newspapers, magazines, and a nascent documentary film, but it is the Internet in this work that plays the role of interest for me. Hellker of course has access to regular Internet search engines like Infoseek, but thanks to the power of three interconnected computers, he can access a mysterious Internet archive based in Iceland (Loest 10). Through the archivist Yattoo, who serves as an intermediary, Hellker can speak directly with the most important figures who were involved with the high court in the twentieth century with two twists. First, the person

with whom he wishes to speak must have at least a 2% “Degree of Recognition” among the German population or that historical figure faces deletion from the archive. Second, the novel is set in December 1999 and the archive will be “cleaned out” with the beginning of the new millennium in January 2000 (Loest 77, 25). Loest’s depiction of the computer as a “Miracle Box” suggests a more positive understanding of the roles the computer, the Internet, and information play in establishing a semblance of German historical reality. In the end, however, even Loest’s mystical Internet connection can only paint a partial and not entirely clear picture of the events of the early 1930’s.

In Loest’s novel, the Internet is less of a playground, as Günter Grass refers to it in his Nobel acceptance speech, than Ouija board. His protagonist, Hellker, dreams of becoming a “literary historian” and a “poet among historians” – an acknowledgement that compelling history involves more than simply the objective reporting of facts (Loest 16). Loest, the author who would be a historian among poets, therefore affords Hellker the magical URL. Even with the advantage of the mystical Yattoo arranging interviews with major historical figures, however, Loest’s message is mixed. The Internet is a remarkable repository of information and its ability to tie past and present together is helpful in assessing the complex history of twentieth-century Germany, but it, too, can only tell part of that elusive historical reality. Thus Loest does not even try, as the critic Anne Stefan points out, to depict “the single truth” or “the one right answer” (Stefan ix). Even with the help of the Icelandic archive, the fact remains as Hellker says, “that which was not at one time stored in the computer cannot ever be fished out.” (Loest 9). What one finds in the Internet is a medium for organizing and presenting information in a manner as subjective as any other medium. Even if it were Marinus van der Lubbe’s own

personal, never-before-told narrative as posthumously related from the mysterious online Icelandic archive, one is still presented with a ‘partial and approximate’ story, to use the description of Kant’s understanding of human perception. It is one of a multitude of stories that exist as information available on the Internet for the historian Hellker or the author Loest to weave together as they tell their tales.

On the surface, Loest’s depiction of the role of information is traditional. Information patterns as depicted in *Supreme Court* seem to be entities that have their own meaning and, like pieces in a puzzle, if one places these entities together in the right spots, one will come up with an accurate, but not necessarily complete picture of historical reality due to human subjectivity. The websites visited by Hellker, both mystical and non-mystical, appear to be earnest purveyors of factual information, the meaning of which need not be questioned. It seems at first glance that Hellker and his machine are two distinct entities, that is, there is no reflexive relationship between user and computer. Hellker merely gleans information from the computer which he need not even place into a context in order to create meaning because the information is verifiable and understandable in itself, to quote Benjamin.

There is however one critical passage in the beginning of the text that suggests perhaps Loest’s understanding is more sophisticated. In it, Hellker expresses some doubts about his mystical web-based archive. He muses, “the input of one’s own imaginings could elicit unusual feedback from the computer” (Loest 15). “Imaginings” and “feedback” are the two key words in that quotation. Hellker essentially recognizes and reminds himself that Yattoo, his archive, and most importantly the information Hellker derives from the archive is impacted by his own subjective imagination. The

implication of this for Loest's understanding of information is profound. It suggests that he does comprehend that information on the Internet can be influenced by the user.

Further, a feedback relationship may exist between user and machine within which the reception of the information is what gives the information further meaning. Even though it is written in the subjunctive, this critical quotation is an indication that Loest has some understanding of the relationship between user and computer as a reflexive one.

Unfortunately, this is the only indication. In the remainder of the novel, it appears that Hellker simply gathers semanticized information from the various forms of media with which he works.

Given this depiction of the networked computer as an "honest broker," it is the other competing media Loest identifies as the most troubling. Loest does not yet perceive of computers as universal media. The work begins with Hellker conducting research for his book dealing with Weimar Germany and the rise of the NSDAP. His work on the Nobel Prize-winning journalist Carl von Ossietzky is going so well that Professor Herbert R. Präbenstaff, currently of the University of Leipzig and former West German, entices him to co-author the definitive work on the German High Court. At the same time Hellker is being wooed by Präbenstaff in an academic direction, his fiancée, Ariane Krub, is pulling him in a commercial one. She is trying to convince him that they should work together on a documentary film about any of the central figures of the era like Max Hoelz the communist Robin Hood or Ossietzky. In the end, however, Präbenstaff's personal life is in shambles, and he has difficulty finding publishers interested in the work on the High Court. Regarding the documentary, funding coupled with arguments over legal rights undermine the film project. The only work that

succeeds is Hellker's tenure monograph dealing with the rise of the NSDAP and the German High Court.

And he succeeds thanks to the mysterious URL. Loest, who also does all of his work on a typewriter, embellishes the capabilities of the computer in great contrast to other German writers of literary fiction. He has invented Yatoo and his Icelandic archive to serve as a metaphor for the element of imagination in the creative process of historical writing. The archive serves as a kind of imaginary cultural memory bank and in that sense, as Yatoo points out "less of a search service than a warning service" (Loest 25). The warning comes in the form of who has an "archive life" and who does not, and how that is determined. In order to exist in this digitized cultural memory, a historical figure must enjoy a certain "degree of recognition" (150 Loest). If a figure does not exist in the memory of more than 2% of all adults in a given country as determined by a survey conducted by the archive, then the figure is deleted from the database. By way of example, Ossietzky enjoys a 6% recognition profile, whereas Hitler exists in the memory of more than 72% of the adults in Germany. The warning service provided by the Archive is that, with the exception of wildly famous and infamous characters, Germans are slowly losing their ability to gain any understanding of their twentieth-century history as it temporally fades further and further into the distance.

The idea of the "degree of recognition" as a measure of cultural memory is one instance where Loest's view of the power of the computer and its network differs greatly from Günter Grass's. Loest's archive operates on a more democratic level, so to speak. Rather than Yatoo and his board of directors pushing historical figures on the population of users that the directors believe are important, they, in a sense, give the users what they

want; they allow the users to pull history based on interest and recognition. The Internet archive is in essence a passive reflection of German historical awareness. Loest's work suggests that if there are aspects of history Germans choose to forget, they can make a clean break with the past if they wish. It is as if the World Wide Web does not have the power to impact the recognition of historical figures. In the case of *Supreme Court*, the World Wide Web is merely a faithful reflection of what is. The way Loest tells it, the historical figures must already enjoy a certain degree of popularity in order to be represented on the web. As a further indication of its impotence regarding recognizability, Yattoo informs Hellker that if he wants to interview some of the figures with a lower rating, he must do so before the new millennium because after that the archive's database will be cleansed of such figures. Twentieth-century history essentially will be lost at the new millennium, and in order for historical figures to continue in the German historical consciousness, they must be pulled along by the public for a ride, so to speak, on the Internet.

Other, more traditional media are also of interest to Loest. Unlike Grass however Loest sees the primary danger in them. Enter Ariane Krub, Hellker's fiancée characterized by his aging landlady as a "Pumaweib" (Loest 46). Whereas Krub shares Hellker's quest to depict historical reality in a palatable way to as broad an audience as possible, she and her company *Spreemedial* are also interested in profiting from history. It is important to note that in this work, no film is ever made, but in the process of trying to develop a historical documentary, Loest makes known his concerns about this medium which, not surprisingly for the author of fiction, are largely negative. The conversation between Hellker and Ariane's producer from *Spreemedial* is emblematic of Loest's

derisive feelings toward the television and film industries. Like two prize fighters sizing one another up, Ariane notes that Motzowski, the producer, is wearing a three-piece suit and her fiancée is wearing a sweater with leather shoulders – “the film industry man meets the modern historian” is how she would classify them in a film pitch (Loest 93). Loest however is commenting on the hegemony of the former West Germany over the former East Germany. Motzowski, the former West German, is not even sure if he wants to do this film as non-fiction or fiction or a combination of the two. He asks Hellker, the former East German, what he has so far on Ossietzky and Hellker plies him with the details, but the producer is not interested in facts. Ariane gently nudges Hellker to give his ideas on “how they can capture that on film” (Loest 94). That Motzowski’s only interest lies in the theatrics is Loest’s point regarding this form of media. Those in charge of this type of media are interested in a story, embellished or not, and the bottom line profit. Loest is also suggesting that the victorious capitalist West has the power to buy and alter the history of the heroes of the former East. The unease this creates in Loest lies in his recognition of the power of film and television to influence the public. It is somewhat similar to his depiction of the Internet, in that television will only give the viewer what they want to hear. In other words this media, like Yattoo’s archive, requires a certain degree of recognition in order for a historical figure to be depicted – a degree not likely to be recognized by Motzowski when it comes to figure like Ossietzky.

Needless to say, Motzowski and Hellker do not see eye to eye on many things, but especially on the representation of historical reality. Even the topic of the film becomes a subject of dispute – Ossietzky or the Rathenau assassination. After some disagreement, the film deal goes sour for Hellker when he receives the contract with wording that is too

much for Hellker. This contract says to him that a giant media conglomerate can force the historian to make changes to the historical record in terms of figures, events, and even conversations so that the theatrical effects are maximized. Most telling is the use of the word ‘characters’ to refer to historical figures. The conglomerate can even change around the sequence of historical events. Thus the “history” made available to the viewing public may pique their interest, but it will not necessarily correspond to historical reality. Further, the conglomerate, the epitome of the capitalist system, can purchase and rewrite history any way it chooses. Hellker knows that even he, the historian, will not write something that depicts the absolute reality, but he knows that he will come closer than *Spreemedia*.

By aligning the computer with Hellker the hero, Loest sets the computer up as a medium that is ethically superior to the television and film industry run by the Motzowskis of the world. The computer is also however not as potent. Loest makes it clear “that which is not on TV, is not.” That may have been true in the twentieth century, but in the twenty-first, as Steven Shaviro makes clear in other words, “that which is not online, is not.” Loest misses this point. Unlike Grass who recognizes the danger of the Internet as pusher of historical reality, accurate or not, Loest’s verdict seems to be that the computer is a much more accomplished and purer purveyor of history, but not as influential. The reality of the matter is just the opposite. The fears Loest has of the television and film industries as represented in Hellker’s contract should apply doubly with regard to the internet. The power to impact historical reality on television or in film lies in the hands of the corporate media conglomerate, and Loest is correct in fearing any version of a corporate manufactured and controlled reality. The power to impact

historical reality on the Internet by contrast lies with anyone with a connection and the ability to construct a website. In an Internet related paradox, this situation can be extraordinarily democratic or just the opposite depending on the approach. If the connected user is like Hellker and interested in as close a depiction of what actually happened as our subjective human consciousness will allow, it will empower the public. If the connected user is like the one depicted by Grass, the power is dangerous due to the ignorance and fear it spreads.

Loest's work seems to force a return to Baudrillard by begging the question: Has our mediated society killed reality? Does it even have the potential to do so? Loest would both probably answer "no" to the former and "yes" to the latter. He could envision the impending death of reality because even without the computer as a medium, reality is a matter of subjective perception yielding many truths influenced by older forms of media. With an army of *Spreemedias* companies out there creating their own historical realities, more and more layers of subjective perception are added. In other words, it intensifies the subjectivity surrounding Porombka's "one reality." Given the right level of intensification, a break could occur that could be characterized as a death of reality. More likely however we will come to understand it as a gradual erasure of historical understanding as Dietmar Kamper describes it, that is, modernity and its reliance on media have caused a widespread fictionalizing of the world that will, bit by bit, erase historical understanding (Kamper 85). Whether this state of affairs differs greatly from the destruction of reality, remains to be seen.