‘NICHT DIE KUNST DARF SICH VEREINNAHMEN LASSEN’:
FRANZOBEL, LITERATURE AND POLITICS IN THE ‘NEW AUSTRIA’

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ABSTRACT

In the 1999 Austrian ‘Bundeswahl’, the FPÖ polled 27% of the vote, plunging Austria into political turmoil (Armin Thurnher). ‘Kulturpolitik’ assumed a pivotal role in the election, and continues to be an area of conflict in the ‘New Austria’, where there is evidence of the ‘aestheticisation of politics’ (Walter Benjamin). Benjamin argued that this could be countered only by the ‘ politicisation of the aesthetic’. Political commentators have identified re-politicisation as a marker of life in the ‘New Austria’, and this extends to the literary sphere. A new generation of writers is emerging that has not been involved in the protracted lambasting of the Social Partnership seen in the work of established Austrian literary figures, such as Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek. Franzobel, who came from avant-garde circles to win the Bachmann prize in 1995, is one such writer. He commands the respect of those involved in experimental literature, while also being acclaimed as a popular playwright and a novelist. Through an analysis of his political essays and literary works, this article discusses the role of the writer in the recently re-politicised Vienna within the context of the often controversial, often productive relationship between politics and literature in modern Austria.

It might appear that the concept of ‘ emerging’ German writers is being stretched rather to include the young all-round literary star, Franzobel, who by now seems to be firmly established in the Austrian literary scene. In 2000 he published his second novel, Scala Santa oder Josephine Wurzbachers Höhepunkt (Zsolnay), following Böselkraut und Ferdinand (Zsolnay) in 1998. In 2000 he also saw three of his dramas performed for the first time: Olympia by the Klagenfurter Ensemble, Volksoper by the Landestheater Linz/Kammerspiele, and Mercedes stirbt, by the Staatstheater Stuttgart. A fourth drama, Mayerling, had its première in the Volkstheater in Vienna in June 2001, and the Volkstheater has commissioned another work, Jandls Männer, which is to be staged in 2001–2. Franzobel has also contributed to numerous anthologies, and in 1999 he was one of fifty-two prominent German writers invited to contribute to the Zeitroman, serialised in Die Zeit. He is a regular contributor to Spectrum, the review section of the Austrian daily newspaper, Die Presse, and, since September 2001, he has collaborated with the writer, Eyed Gstaëttner, on a column entitled ‘Literatur und Sport’ for the sport section of the same newspaper. He has also appeared on Austrian radio and television. Indeed, Franzobel satirises his own position as media darling in Shooting Star. Stefan Griebal bildet sich ein, der Dichter Franzobel und von lästigen Verehrerinnen verfolgt zu sein oder die allerneuesten Leiden einer jungen Wertherin (2001).

Since Franzobel does seem to be omnipresent in the Austrian literary scene at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is easy to lose sight

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of the fact that his emergence has been rapid. It was only during the latter half of the 1990s that he became well known. In 1991 he decided to channel his creativity more towards the production of literature. Before then he worked in the visual arts, enjoying modest success in 1990 with an exhibition at the Galerie ArtStart in Vienna. His first literary efforts were self-published, before, in 1993, the Klagenfurt-based edition selene brought out three volumes of prose. He did not rise to prominence, however, until 1995, when he was awarded the Bachmann Prize for Krautflut. Erzählung. As a literary phenomenon, Franzobel is remarkable for having emerged from ‘avant-garde’ circles, and continuing to enjoy the respect of those involved in long-running journals for experimental literature such as Manuskripte, or Perspektive, while also receiving popular acclaim with his novels, plays and essays. Reflecting his double status, Franzobel’s work has been published by both small and large publishers: while works such as Elle und Speiche. Modelle der Liebe. Gedichte und Prosa (1994) were published by Das Fröhliche Wohnzimmer (1994), Kafka (1997) and Nathan’s Dackel (1998) by edition selene, and Unter Binsen (1996) by edition gegensätze, Die Krautflut (1996), Das Beuschelgeflecht. Bibapoh. Zwei Stücke (1996) were published by Suhrkamp.

Krautflut, the work with which he won the Bachmann Prize, is ‘ein Text in der Tradition der klassischen Wiener Avantgarde, einer Wundertüte aus Schüttelreimen, Palindromen, Klangkaskaden, Assoziationen und Assonanzen’. As Thomas Eder remarks, Krautflut engages with ‘Geschichte’ both as plot and also as literary history: ‘Sie setzt die verschiedenen literarischen Verfahren aus der experimentellen Poesie, aber auch aus der traditionellen Erzählung so ein, daß sie sie im Textverlauf gleichzeitig gebraucht und kommentiert’. Franzobel’s literary style combines the will to experiment and the desire to narrate. It is a style that has stood him in good stead. His success in the production of prose works was followed by successes in theatre, especially with the extremely well-received Kafka, first performed at the ‘steirischer herbst’ in 1998. Within a decade, Franzobel had been transformed from unknown artist to an acclaimed and popular writer well on his way to achieving media saturation in Austria.

Franzobel’s dramatic change in status took place in a decade in which Austria itself underwent radical change, culminating in the rise to power of the political right. The language used to describe events in Austria around 1999/2000 reflects the extent of the shift in the socio-political climate. The 2000 edition of the Österreichisches Jahrbuch für Politik, a publication of the ‘Politische Akademie der ÖVP’, refers to the 1999 ‘Bundes-


wahl’ as Austria’s ‘Wende’.

And from the left, the political commentator, Armin Thurnher, editor of the Viennese weekly, Fäler, subtitled his astute assessment of political change in contemporary Austria ‘Nachrichten aus dem neuen Österreich’ (my emphasis), recalling the language used to describe political changes in the wake of Austria’s liberation in 1945. When Franzobel first began his literary career in the early 1990s, the government in Austria was formed by a ‘grand coalition’ between the ‘Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs’ (SPÖ) and the ‘Österreichische Volkspartei’ (ÖVP). By that time, the SPÖ had been in government for twenty years, since Bruno Kreisky had come to power in 1970. Until 1983 the SPÖ had formed a majority government, then between 1983 and 1986 it ruled in coalition with the ‘Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs’ (FPÖ). However, when Jörg Haider took over as leader of the FPÖ in 1986, the then Chancellor, Franz Vranitzky (SPÖ), dissolved the coalition and called a general election, which took place in January 1987. That election returned an SPÖ/ÖVP coalition. However, although the ‘grand coalition’ was in power once more, Austria had embarked upon a period of socio-political change, as the consensus politics of ‘classical consociationalism’ gave way to greater competition in the political arena.

Political commentators were not slow to seize upon the signs of change. In an essay first published in 1995 Robert Menasse welcomed the chance of a sea change in Austrian politics, arguing that ‘wenn alles ins Rutschen kommt, könnte man doch gestaltend eingreifen’. In the same year, but with far greater caution, Armin Thurnher wondered whether Austria, ‘ein fast ganz normales, westliches, demokratisches Land’, would be equipped to deal with a crisis: ‘Wie viel Krisenhysterie wird die hysterische Öffentlichkeit dieses Landes entfalten können, liegt tatsächlich einmal eine Krise vor? Ich fürchte, dann werden die Worte fehlen’. Four years later, in the 1999 federal election, the populist far-right, in the shape of the FPÖ, increased their share of the vote to 26.91%. Although the ÖVP gained the same percentage share, it polled 415 fewer votes than the FPÖ and so was pushed into third place. Before the election the ÖVP had declared that it would go into opposition if it did not make either first or second place. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the election, the ÖVP was persuaded to enter into coalition negotiations with the SPÖ. These, however, broke down in December 2000, and when the SPÖ refused to negotiate with the FPÖ, the way was paved for the first ÖVP/FPÖ coalition govern-

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3 The third section of this issue of the Jahrbuch bears the title ‘Etappenziele in der Wende’ and includes articles on the economy, social security, retribution payments, the Austrian media, and cultural politics in the New Austria.


5 For details of the changing political climate in Austria in the 1980s, see Karl Richard Luther and Wolfgang C. Müller (eds), Politics in Austria. Still a case of Consociationalism?, London 1992.


7 Armin Thurnher, ‘Apartes Österreich’, ibid., p. 35. (Further references appear in the text.)

ment, which took office in February 2000. Depending on the perspective adopted, this chain of events either plunged Austria into crisis, or brought about a long-overdue change in the political climate.

Whether diagnosing the rise to power of the populist right in Austria as a crisis or a necessary change, commentators are more or less united in applauding the ‘repoliticisation’ of the country since the election of 1999. It has been argued that the ‘grand coalition’ could only function properly in an almost completely depoliticised climate; its demise then paved the way for a newly politicised public sphere.8 As Thurnher observes in ‘Apartes Österreich’:

Die Kids, die sich die Strasse und die neuen Medien holen, die Älteren in neu formierten Salons, das Gesumm in den Hörsälen und Kaffeehäusern, die Diskussionen in Theater und Kunsthallen – hier entsteht, hier findet und festigt sich eine neue Öffentlichkeit. (p. 43)

Despite the counter-arguments of commentators such as Franz Schuh, who regards ‘repoliticisation’ as no more than the ‘Umkehrung der alten Konzenspolitik’,9 the idea of ‘repoliticisation’ has become a central component of the mythology of ‘New Austria’. It is backed up by anecdotes of intense political debate in Vienna’s coffee-houses, and by the presence of new pressure groups such as ‘Gegen Schwarz-Blau’, ‘Nein!’ and ‘Widerstand’, which joined forces with more seasoned campaigners such as ‘SOS-Mitmensch’.

Other signs of ‘repoliticisation’ include the demonstrations which took place in Vienna and other locations throughout Austria, before, during and after the coalition negotiations between the ÖVP and the FPÖ. During the larger demonstrations in late 1999 and early 2000, Franzobel was a visible presence. On 12 November 1999, he spoke at a demonstration organised by ‘SOS-Mitmensch’ and the ‘Republikanischer Club’ under the motto ‘Keine Koalition mit dem Rassismus’.10 The event attracted 70,000 demonstrators and, as Robert Misik and Doron Rabinovici note in their preface to a collection of essays on the event, moved the SZ to write of the ‘Geburtsstunde der österreichischen Zivilgesellschaft’.11 On 19 February 2000 Franzobel shared a platform with H.C. Artmann, Klaus Maria Brandauer, Johanna Dohnal (former SPÖ minister), Alfred Dorfer (cabaret artist), Helmut Konrad (former Rektor of the university of Graz) and others at the next major demonstration organised by ‘SOS-Mitmensch’, in which 1/4 million demonstrators took part.

8 Thurnher, Heimniederlage, p. 220.
11 For details of the aims and essays related to this event see Robert Misik and Doron Rabinovici, Republik der Courage. Wider die Verhaiderung, Berlin 2000. This also contains the text of the Aufruf, ‘Keine Koalition mit dem Rassismus’.
In such a repoliticised climate, writers interested in influencing political developments will find that their readership is becoming more receptive to critical literature, which, at least in part, accounts for Austrian literary criticism’s new interest in the ‘repoliticisation’ of literature. The July 2000 issue of Literatur und Kritik focused on a group of young writers in Austria that it labelled ‘Die Dreißigjährigen’. The first contribution to the volume is the transcript of a round-table discussion, held in Salzburg in January 2000, in which young Austrian writers discussed their economic situation, poetic self-understanding and socio-political role. Although he did not take part in the discussion itself, Franzobel sent in written responses to questions raised on the evening. In reply to the questions ‘Sind Sie ein politischer Mensch? Politischer Schriftsteller? Laßt sich das trennen?’ Franzobel’s answer is a decided, but ultimately ambivalent, ‘Dreimal sicher’.12 And indeed, Franzobel not only took part in demonstrations against the ÖVP/FPO coalition, but also joined other writers, artists and cultural critics – such as Thurnher, Jelinek, Steeruwitz, Menasse and others – in publishing critical articles and essays on the political situation in the ‘New Austria’.

The following analysis focuses on one such essay by Franzobel, ‘Chronik der laufenden Scheiße’, which was first published on 4 October 1999 in the Austrian weekly, Profil, under the title ‘Schlange im Fuchspez’, and was reprinted in part in the Tagesspiegel three days later. The version cited here is, however, the one contained in Österreich. Berichte aus Quarantanien, a collection of literary responses to the new government in Austria.13 In his essay, Franzobel provides an aesthetic and polemic response to the political developments in Austria in 1999–2000, while also reflecting on what it is to be a political writer. Like his story, Krautflut, which is driven by both narrative and meta-fictional reflection, his essay works on at least two levels. This kind of dual purpose, as Adorno points out in ‘Der Essay als Form’, is typical of the essay genre. The essay is both an art form, in that it is based on an awareness of the non-identity between representation and object, and a discursive form that absorbs theory, concepts and experience. Indeed, it is in the form of the essay that literature and politics combine most easily.14

From the title of Franzobel’s essay, his first point of reference would seem to be Peter Handke’s 1971 screenplay Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse.15 Yet while Handke’s title reserves value judgement and merely refers to a series of undetermined events, Franzobel’s title clearly identifies the events he sets out to describe as distasteful and grotesque. And while Handke’s aim is to provide a chronicle of events, Franzobel seems to want

merely to determine chronology. Indeed, the initial reference to Handke reveals itself to be something of a red herring, since it is of no further significance for Franzobel’s essay. Although it might at first appear curious that Franzobel invokes Handke’s work, only to distance himself from it immediately, this technique is typical of the essayist. As Lukács noted in his 1911 study of the essay form, *The Soul and the Forms*:

> The essayist speaks of a book or a picture, but leaves it again at once, why? Because, I think, the idea of the picture or book has become predominant in his mind, because he has forgotten all that is concretely incidental about it, because he has used it only as a starting point, a springboard. 16

From this springboard, Franzobel sets out to provide a chronology of events. In so doing, he appears to be setting up a linear structure to his work that would undermine one of the central features of the essay form, in which, as Adorno argues, ‘der Gedanke schreitet nicht einsinnig fort, sondern die Momente verflechten sich teppichhaft’ (p. 21). However, a close analysis of Franzobel’s essay reveals the formal complexity of his diagnosis of the aestheticisation of politics and of his call for a corresponding politicisation of the aesthetic. He weaves this dual concern into the chronological framework to create a richly textured work.

To illustrate the aestheticisation of politics in contemporary Austria, Franzobel employs metaphor, parody, quotation and word association. In his essay, the FPÖ becomes a snake, ‘ein schönes Tier, faszinierende Ornamente auf der Haut’. The reader is left to imagine the snake’s ornamentation, which would, however, surely reflect the whole spectrum of the Right’s fascination with signs and symbols. This is a snake, we are told, which was fished out of the slough by the ‘großer Kapazunder-Hai’. This constellation is typical of the word-play in which Franzobel continually engages. Jörg Haider, still leader of the FPÖ at the time this essay was published, becomes a shark, representing danger. This danger is all the more sinister in that Franzobel locates it at the centre of Austrian history, with his playful allusion to the burial place of the Habsburg monarchs, the ‘Kapuzinergruft’. In other words, here he hints at a critique of the underlying continuity of Austrian politics, which is a phenomenon he explores in some detail in his suggestively titled production for the Vienna Volkstheater, *Mayerling*. 17 Volatility and (symbolic) violence are also contained in this constellation, since ‘Zunder’ can refer to both tinder and the idea of ‘a good beating’. Franzobel then extends the metaphor to claim that the FPÖ as snake tempted the Austrian people with an apple marked ‘Österreich zuerst’ (a reference to FPÖ election campaigns which

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relied on the rhetoric of nationalism), before consuming its victims. While at the beginning of the essay, it is the Austrians as a collective that assume the role of Eve, later Franzobel becomes more specific in his application of the biblical story, when the reader is introduced to ‘Viktor Adam’ and ‘Wolfgang Eva’. These figures, parodies of Viktor Klima, leader of the SPÖ and Chancellor of Austria from 1997 to 2000, and Wolfgang Schüssel, leader of the ÖVP, and Chancellor of Austria since 2000, are indicted for failing to tame the snake with reason and being unable to compete with the snake on its own poisonous terms.

Biblical mythology is, however, not the only metaphorical source employed by Franzobel in his diagnosis of the complexities of the political scene in contemporary Austria. In his essay, the snake quickly sheds its skin to become a ‘gar nicht linder Tatzlwurm’, changing from reptile, representing danger from without, to parasite, representing a danger firmly embedded in the body politic. By way of word association, the ‘gar nicht linder Tatzlwurm’ also serves to point the finger at Carinthia, the Austrian ‘Bundesland’ of which Haider is Governor, for its symbol is the dragon. At this point in Franzobel’s essay, biblical mythology metamorphoses into Austrian mythology, and the story of man’s fall from grace is given a contemporary twist, alluding to Austria’s fall from grace in the eyes of the European Union. Continuing with this theme, Franzobel reminds the reader of Haider’s self-mythologisation, in television interviews, as the fox out to get the EU chickens. This, he claims, has allowed the snake, now signifying the libido of the charismatic Haider (‘von dem nächtens, habe ich mir vorschwärmten lassen, sogar Serbinnen und Kroatinnen träumen’ (p. 61)), to proclaim in biblical style, ‘seht, ich bin gar keine windige Schlange ... ich bin ein Fuchs, einer, der die fetten Gänse (Staatsreserven) mit euch teilt’ (p. 60). The ‘Schlange im Fuchspelz’ revels in the role of tempter.

A recurrent feature in Franzobel’s diagnosis of the aestheticisation of politics is the idea of a ‘Talkshow-Democracy’, which is predicated upon self-presentation, soundbites rather than sustained debate, and the ability to create a sense of inevitability about the way that events unfold. Here, his analysis moves from the metaphorical to the literal, as he discusses Haider’s success in terms of his charisma. ¹⁸ A telling representation of the way in which a sense of inevitability can be created in a ‘Talkshow-Democracy’ is provided at the beginning of Franzobel’s essay, in a passage that underscores his literary affinities with the ‘Wiener Gruppe’. ¹⁹

¹⁸ This is an approach which has been taken by a number of academics studying the ‘Haider-Effect’. See, for example, Walter Ötsch, Haider Light, Vienna 2000.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the affinities between Franzobel and the ‘Wiener Gruppe’ see Thomas Eder, ‘Nachwort’.

1993. Allez allez!

The type of government ushered in by the domination of ‘Talkshow-Democracy’ is described at the end of Franzobel’s essay as one which represents ‘feschistisches und humanitätsverachtendes Gedankengut’ (p. 71).

In this indictment, he is referring to a central concept in Armin Thurnher’s analysis of the ‘New Austria’: ‘feschismus’. ‘Feschisten’, Thurnher states in ‘Apartes Österreich’, are

Leute, die ihr Aussehen und ihre Körper bewußt als fit und neu gegen die abgeschlafften Körper der alten politischen Säcke positionieren. Sie bedienen sich dabei der alpinen Siegersymbolik und deren Milieus . . . Ihr Ziel ist nicht die Erneuerung, sondern die Abschaffung der repräsentativen Demokratie. Es gilt nicht mehr der Ausgleich von Interessen zugunsten der Schwächeren, der Anderen, der Fremden. Gelten soll das Diktat des Siegers, der physisch Stärkeren. Der sieht fescher aus, lächelt frecher und hat immer recht, weil er sich um die Wahrheit nicht schert. (p. 43)

‘Feschismus’ depends, above all, on looking good in order to conceal the unpleasant and dangerous political agenda which lies behind the facade. Like fascism, ‘feschism’ represents the ‘aestheticisation of politics’. It was Walter Benjamin, in ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’, who famously coined the phrase, ‘the aestheticisation of politics’ to describe the way in which fascism played on the increasing self-alienation which allowed humanity to view its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. Benjamin argued that fascism was, in fact, the culmination of ‘l’art pour l’art’, and he maintained that the only way to counter it was through a corresponding ‘politicisation of the aesthetic’ (Benjamin, p. 508).

A sense of the potential power of the ‘politicisation of the aesthetic’ can be gleaned from an analysis of the struggles in the field of cultural politics that have accompanied the change of government in Austria. As early as 1995, the FPÖ announced their awareness of the political impor-

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20 On 23 January 1993, 300,000 people took part in a candle-light vigil on the Heldenplatz and other locations in central Vienna in protest against the populist scaremongering of Jörg Haider’s ‘Völkisches Begehren’, which was aimed at whipping up xenophobia. The protest was organised by ‘SOS-Mitmensch’. See M. Kargl and S. Lehmann (eds), Land im Lichtermeer. Stimmen gegen Fremdenfeindlichkeit, Vienna 1994.


tance of art in their infamous poster campaign for the Viennese local elections held that year. As posters appeared throughout the city containing the rhetorical question, ‘Lieben Sie Scholten, Jelinek, Häupl, Peymann, Pasterk . . . oder Kunst und Kultur’, it became clear that questions about the definition of ‘good art’ and the control of artistic production were becoming increasingly important in a political arena in which style triumphs over substance. And it was not only the FPÖ that acknowledged the centrality of art for politics. When he took over as Chancellor in January 1997, Viktor Klima dismantled the Ministry for Art and assumed responsibility for this area himself. In order to quell disquiet amongst those who saw this move as an attempt to undermine the importance of the arts, the slogan ‘Chefsache Kunst’ was developed. During the 1999 Bundeswahl and the coalition negotiations that followed, ‘Kulturpolitik’ continued to be a controversial issue, although partly in order to mask the political nature of the argument, the debate over the role of art in the twenty-first century was being couched in financial terms.

Indeed, the new ÖVP/FPÖ coalition government was pushing for a paradigm shift in art funding. In December 2000, the new State Secretary for Art, Franz Morak (himself well-known to the general public as an actor, director and singer), used the presentation of the government’s Kunstbericht 1999 as an opportunity to outline his position on cultural politics. He maintained that his political role was to find new structures and possibilities for the funding of art and culture, and ‘das zeitgenössische Kulturschaffen unseres Landes im nationalen und internationalen Umfeld noch sichtbarer zu machen . . . vor allem aber auch neue Märkte und neue Publikumsschichten für Kunst und Kultur zu erschließen’. The rhetoric of the free market is increasingly being employed in the ‘New Austria’ to justify changes and cuts in arts funding. As governor of Carinthia, Haider is responsible for culture in that ‘Bundesland’, and has delivered a number of radical actions in the field of cultural politics, including withdrawing financial support for the ‘Ingeborg-Bachmann Prize’, probably in reaction to the decision by Bachmann’s heirs to stop her name being connected with the prize in protest at the new coalition government. In an interview with Die Brücke magazine, he outlined his views on arts funding, maintaining that, ‘in Österreich sehe ich derzeit keine Gefahr, dass

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22 By linking the names of their political opponents in the SPÖ, Rudolf Scholten (then Minister for Science, Research and the Arts), Michael Häupl (then Mayor of Vienna) and Ursula Pasterk (then Vienna City Councillor in charge of Culture), to Jelinek and Peymann, the FPÖ’s poster campaign was designed to highlight what they saw as the close, and dangerous, connections between politicians and critical artists.


zuviel Markt in der Kunst ist’. Arguing along similar lines, Wolfgang Schüssel stated, in answer to a parliamentary question from an SPÖ member, that the government aims to seek arts funding from the private sector, ‘wie international üblich’. No matter how this move is justified, the effect of allowing the logic of the free market to reign in the cultural sphere is, however, to introduce an element of control which has the advantage of appearing to be objective. If art is defined solely as a commodity, then it is simple to define ‘good art’ as art that sells in large quantities, or art that commands high prices. Art that does not sell can then be labelled ‘bad’ and effectively negated. In other words, the debate over the funding of art is also, by definition, always a debate over the nature of, and control over, art.

In the struggle to define what art is and what it should do, and to exercise control over its potentially powerful critical force, the strategy of politicians in the ‘New Austria’ has been to insist on a strict separation of art from politics. In Heimniederlage, Thurnher focuses on the ‘Schlingensief Aktion’, a piece of street theatre bearing the title ‘Liebt Österreich’ which formed part of the ‘Wiener Festwochen’ in 2000. Christoph Schlingensief set up a ‘Container-Stadt’ on the Herbert-von-Karajan-Platz in Vienna, next to the ‘cultural temple’ of the State Opera, which housed asylum-seekers for the duration of the ‘Festwochen’. On top of the container he placed a banner bearing the slogan ‘Ausländer raus’. As Thurnher notes, Schlingensief’s action placed Austria in a double-bind: ‘Wer gegen die Entfernung des Transparents “Ausländer raus” war, sprach sich für dessen Inhalt aus; wer es entfernen wollte, gegen die Freiheit der Kunst’. The solution that the FPÖ’s party newspaper, the Neue Freie Zeitung, came up with was to insist on the separation of art from politics: ‘Wie selbst der Intendant der Festwochen, Luc Bondy, zugab, hatte diese Aktion nichts mit Kunst zu tun, sondern war laut Bondy eine politische Veranstaltung’ (Thurnher, Heimniederlage, p. 215). Only by insisting that this was not art, could the subversive potential of the aesthetic be kept in check.

The ‘politicisation of the aesthetic’ is, then, a potentially powerful tool, and Franzobel uses his essay – a form which, as we have noted, by combining literature and politics, itself represents the performance of the politicisation of the aesthetic – to reflect on the ways in which art can politicise. His first instinct, however, is to sound a note of caution, arguing that in a ‘Headline-Republic’, where the sound-bite is all-important, it is no longer original to be simply against Jörg Haider. Here Franzobel is allud-
ing to the fact that the basis upon which the critical literature of the Second Republic was able to function has now changed. In the Austrian context, ‘politicisation of the aesthetic’ is not a new concept. Thus, Matthias Konzett argues that Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, and Elfriede Jelinek are all concerned with producing a ‘rhetoric of national dissent’, and the work of artists such as Michael Scharang, Peter Turrini, the ‘Wiener Gruppe’, and the ‘Aktionisten’, is also informed by a concern to challenge the status quo upon which the Second Republic was established. This was symbolised above all by the ‘Proporz-System’, the process by which leading corporate jobs are distributed between executives with close ties to each of the biggest Austrian political parties, and by the Social Partnership, a system of cooperation between government, labour and industry that operated in virtually all fields of economic policy. The problem facing these critical intellectuals now is that the object of their criticism is also the object of the FPÖ’s attacks. As Menasse (p. 12) pointed out in 1995, the irony is that Haider has enjoyed much greater success than his fellow artists ever did in challenging the status quo.

The key task for established and emerging Austrian intellectuals and artists alike is to redefine the ‘politicisation of the aesthetic’. As she explains in ‘Meine Art des Protests’, Elfriede Jelinek chose to prevent her work from being performed in Austria while the FPÖ are in power. Franzobel, however, is critical of this method:

Einen Österreich-Bojkott wie Elfriede Jelinek könnte ich mir schon finanziell nicht leisten. Obwohl ich diesen Schritt bewundere, halte ich ihn auch für falsch – wird doch damit genau das freiwillig eingelöst, was die grausigen FP-Plakate vor Jahren forderten . . . (p. 66)

As well as criticising Jelinek’s mild form of ‘inner emigration’ for playing into the hands of those who are seeking to redefine ‘art’, Franzobel also declares himself suspicious of the blurred boundaries that exist between forms of protest which have the ability to cut the revenue brought by cultural tourism, and those which might raise or at least justify such revenue: ‘Auch meldet sich zur Zeit aus dem Kunstbetrieb ein bisschen gar viel Volk zu Wort . . . Und wenn Festspielleiter, Volksopern- und Operndirektor ihren Verbleib mit der besonderen Subversion ihrer Arbeit begründen, bekomme ich Schluckauf’ (p. 66). Before offering his thoughts on the nature of political art, Franzobel dwells on the trap of appearing to be ‘political’ while producing artefacts for the market. Here he grasps something of Adorno’s critique of cultural criticism. Adorno

32 Here Franzobel is referring to the election posters for the 1995 local elections in Vienna that were mentioned earlier in this article.
argues that there are two interrelated control mechanisms that ensure that cultural criticism works to uphold the cultural structures that ostensibly form the object of its critique. First, and most transparently, the products of the cultural critic are commodities and therefore subject to the controls of the cycle of production and consumption. Second, the ideology of free speech has its own dialectic, which ensures, through anonymous mechanisms, that critique functions within certain limits. The cultural critic objectively affirms existing structures even when not subjectively appearing as a commodity. Therefore, Adorno concludes, with a passing reference to Marx, ‘[die Kritiker] weben mit am Schleier’.33

Notwithstanding his misgivings about the integrity of critical gestures, Franzobel does make a number of suggestions in his essay about the ways in which the ‘politicisation of art’ might be brought about. The first of these is based on the assumption that those Austrians that are intolerant and xenophobic are also those who most vociferously denounce contemporary ‘politicised’ art and culture. Since this is the case, Franzobel suggests that his fellow artists should stop protesting against Haider – something which can only play into his hands – and instead should begin to perform for him: ‘Sauschlachten für Jörg, Übermalungen, Schützbilder, Kakophonien, konkrete Poesie, modernen Tanz usw’ (p. 67). In other words, ‘nicht die Kunst darf sich vereinnahmen lassen, sondern einmal umgekehrt, die Kunst muss vereinnahmen’ (p. 67). Perhaps, suggests Franzobel, returning briefly to his point of departure, Handke could turn his attention from the troubles in the Balkans that he explored in Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien34 back to the situation in his native country and write a ‘Gerechtigkeit für Haiderreich’ (p. 67).

This remains rhetoric. In other literary and dramatic works, however, Franzobel does indeed develop strategies for countering the aestheticisation of politics. In the same essay, he mentions his recent drama, Olympia, subtitled, with a nod towards Nestroy and the tradition of Viennese ‘Volks-theater’, a ‘Zauberposse mit Strip Tease’. As Franzobel maintains, this play, which was premièred in Klagenfurt on 2 February 2000, ‘läßt sich sogar ganz eindeutig als Parabel auf die gegenwärtigen politischen Geschehnisse verstehen’ (p. 66). Like many of his other texts, it puts the spotlight on the grotesque, the weak and the excluded. Franzobel consciously exposes the ugly and brutal side of life in an attempt to strip away the veil of illusion that is ‘feschismus’. His recent drama, Volksoper, which was premièred in the Linz ‘Kammerspiele’ in 2000, provides such a relentlessly brutal image of life in contemporary Austria, focusing on right-wing

violence, that following the première, there were calls for this work to be taken off the stage. In ‘Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse’ Franzobel slips into dialect for two sentences in order to underscore the way in which brutality lurks under the apparently acceptable face of the New Austria: ‘Wos is do los, wos wird do gespült, im gonzn Lond koa Hitlerbült? Is jogg net owar, im Kölle hängeh eh nu zwoa-Millionen’ (p. 59).

At times in his essay Franzobel seems ready to yield to the forces of brutality, mentioning suicide as a possible form of protest: ‘Der einzig wirklich wirksame Protest aber wäre ... mir die Pulsader aufzuschlitzen und rotweißrot mich auszubluten’ (p. 68). However, the key to understanding his conception of the politicisation of the aesthetic comes immediately after he rejects this course of action because, we are told, he enjoys laughing too much. Laughter, he suggests, is the ‘Ergebnis einer tiefen Traurigkeit’, but it could, perhaps, also represent a ‘Form von Widerstand?’ (p. 68). The tentative nature of this suggestion is made clear in the text by the question mark which follows ‘Widerstand’. Yet it does reveal something of the premise upon which many of Franzobel’s works are constructed – the interplay of the grotesque and the comic that can often be found within language itself. And it is this characteristic of his work which serves to situate him in the context of a number of Austrian writers who, over the past 150 years or so, have explored the connection between humour, the grotesque and language, as a source of socio-political critique. As Louise Adey Huish argues, there is an ‘Austrian comic tradition . . . that arises when belief in a coherent and benevolent world breaks down [which] uses the existing forms and conventions to create a very different kind of comedy: witty, bleak, satirical, even anarchic’. It is this ‘comic tradition’ that links Franzobel’s work not only to Nestroy and the ‘Wiener Gruppe’, as has already been noted, but also to Karl Kraus.

If Brecht is the writer in the German literary tradition to which others refer when debating the nature of ‘engagierte Literatur’, in the case of Austria, it is as likely to be Karl Kraus. We can trace a number of affinities between Kraus and Franzobel, such as their mutual admiration for Nestroy, and their fascination with language. In particular, throughout the *Fackel*, Kraus makes great use of the game of naming, and this is something that Franzobel deploys with great aplomb in passages such as the following: ‘Im Prinzip ist die Schlange ja ein Schönes Tier, faszinierend Orname unden auf der Haut, einen Gifzahn in der Westentasche, vorne drauf ein Horn und hinten rumpolt es’ (p. 59). Here, he is alluding to a number of leading lights in the FPÖ: Ing. Peter Westenthaler, chairman of the FPÖ’s parliamentary group and former personal secretary to Jörg Haider.

35 *Neue Vorarlberger Tageszeitung*, 10 June 2000, p. 42.

Gernot Rumpold, Party Chairman, and Franz Hornegger, Member of Parliament since 2000. From his stormy involvement with the _Cabaret Nachtlicht_ in 1906, to his popular public readings and one-man performances of Nestroy and Offenbach (Timms, pp. 175–80), Kraus remained fascinated with the possibilities for critique presented by the theatre. Similarly, Franzobel continually experiments with the force and critical potential of performance. Just as Kraus’s readings from his work were studied performances, so Franzobel’s readings are also carefully-staged events.

At a literary round-table organised by _Literatur und Kritik_ in January 2000, Bettina Balaka identified (and criticised) Franzobel as a leading representative of a new direction in Austrian literature whereby ‘das Kabarett dringt ein in die Literaturszene’ (_Literatur und Kritik_, p. 36). Indeed, Franzobel’s fascination with cabaret is evident not only in the performance-related aspects of his work, but also in the form of some of his texts. A close analysis of the form of his essay, ‘Chronik der laufenden Scheiße’, for example, reveals that it is a montage of a wide variety of fragments including a piece of text based on word games, one sentence in dialect, a protracted and complex rehearsal of myth and legend, discursive logic, anecdotes (the tale of a Polish cleaning lady who works for an ORF cameraman, and is made to greet Haider’s image in a golden frame before she commences work for him), a personal defence (in reaction to an article in _Der Standard_ which seemed to suggest that Franzobel was left unmoved by political changes in Austria), cultural criticism, a call for international sport to boycott Austria and a poem. In form as well as content, this essay suggests that the appropriate model for a politicised aesthetic is to be found in a blend of satire and the rapidly changing form typical of cabaret.

But how effective are satire and the cabaret form in challenging the dominant socio-political discourse at any particular time? Kraus conducted a number of highly successful attacks on situations or people that he regarded to be unjust, or just plain wrong. His targets were varied, ranging from Hermann Bahr and his circle at the turn of the century, to the corruption of the police, World War One and the _Neue Freie Presse_ (Timms, pp. 47–59). During the 1920s, he conducted a long-running campaign against Johann Schober, who was Chief of Police in Vienna from 1918 to 1932, and Chancellor in 1921–2, Vice-Chancellor and Foreign Minister in 1929–30, and Member of Parliament in 1930–2. Kraus’s campaign included articles in the _Fackel_, the performance of the satirical cabaret song, ‘Das Schober-lied’, his play _Die Unüberwindlichen_, and also direct action in the form of Kraus plastering Vienna with posters demanding Schober’s resignation in the wake of the fire at the Palace of Justice in 1927, and the bloody repression of the rioters, for which Schober was...

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responsible.\footnote{For further details see Gerald Stieg, \textit{Frucht des Feuers. Canetti, Doderer, Kraus und der Justizpalastbrand}, Vienna 1990.} However, by 1934, Kraus had nothing left to say. As he explained in a short poem that appeared in \textit{Die Fackel} in October 1933: ‘Man frage nicht, was all die Zeit ich machte./Ich bleibe stumm;/und sage nicht warum’.\footnote{Karl Kraus, ‘Man frage nicht’, \textit{Die Fackel}, 888 (1933), 4. In addition to the short poem, ‘Man frage nicht’, this edition of \textit{Die Fackel} contained only the text of his speech held at the grave of Kraus’s friend, Adolf Loos.} Franzobel, like many of his fellow Austrians, has not (yet) retreated into silence in the face of political developments in his country. However, at the end of the interview that appeared in \textit{Literatur und Kritik}, Franzobel summarised the difference between Austrian and global politics by describing the former as an ‘Operette’, the latter as a ‘Katastrophe’ (p. 53). It is difficult to imagine how satire might provide an effective form of resistance to the threat posed by global politics.