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*Sonne / Luft / Asche*

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# A Climate Activist Reading of Elfriede Jelinek's Trilogy *Sonne / Luft / Asche*

Sabine von Mering

As a climate activist, I was intrigued when I heard that Elfriede Jelinek had written a trilogy about the climate crisis. No doubt in part due to my somewhat limited familiarity with Jelinek's work, I began reading *Sonne, Los Jetzt!* (2022), the first part of the trilogy, with the perhaps naïve expectation that she would highlight how the sun is both the agent of global warming and an important part of the solution to the problem. I expected her to break through people's apathy with this play: they would watch the play and join the climate movement, Brechtian style. But after reading the first part of the trilogy, *Sonne, Los Jetzt!*, and the second part, which was initially called *Sonne/Luft* (2022, later just *Luft*) before the third part, *Asche*, was known, my initial reaction was disappointment. Jelinek's self-indulgent voice, I felt, is not the voice we need at this urgent moment in time when everyone really should just be rolling up their sleeves and getting to work. What disappointed me most was that, by seemingly wallowing in gloom and doom and agreeing with those who say "Es ist zu spät" (Jelinek, *Sonne, Los Jetzt* 3), Jelinek appeared to embrace a position that comes close to a form of climate denial, in that it promotes paralysis and inaction at a time when action is most needed. This turned out to be even more pronounced in the final text, *Asche* (2024), the third part of the trilogy. At nearly eighty years of age, Jelinek can look back on a life of activism. Since she was grieving the loss of her beloved husband of almost five decades at the time<sup>1</sup> and since she is known to filter optimism through a thick prism of irony or cynicism, it is perhaps understandable that Jelinek's text is haunted by the futility of action and that she is focused far more on the past than the future. Still, I felt that she should offer more.

It wasn't until I heard inspired presentations by co-authors for this volume at the *Elfriede Jelinek and Sustainable Development Mini Symposium*, organized by Britta Kallin at the Georgia Institute of Technology in March 2024, that I was encouraged to re-read Jelinek's trilogy in search of clues that she does see climate activism as possible and urgent. Although it would go too far to declare Jelinek's trilogy a hopeful example of climate activist drama, there is, upon closer inspection, at least ambivalence vis-à-vis the possibilities. While literary critics who are much more familiar with Jelinek's work are able to situate her texts within her broader aesthetic practice, I humbly submit this climate activist reading of the trilogy at this moment of accelerating global heating and dangerous climate disruptions as a reflection on Jelinek's unique ability to articulate glimpses of hope that point toward action.

I am inspired to do so by scholars like my Brandeis colleague Tom King, who analyzes the contributions of dramatic performances for climate action in "Performing Transformative Climate Justice," a chapter he contributed to our *Routledge Handbook of Grassroots Climate Activism* (2025). In it he explored "the capacity of theatre and performance, ranging from scripted plays to interactive installations, to engage and support transformative climate justice" (King 155). King's analysis is focused on impromptu performances and activist theater rather than productions in traditional spaces, and he does not include German-language plays. Still, he makes a convincing case for the important function of dramatic performances for climate activism and organizing:

As a shared withdrawal of time, space, and energy from other activities [. . .] the *collective* (this is crucial) action of imagining, relating, exploring dependencies and vulnerability, and caring does more than propose a future; it creates here-and-now a spacetime alternative to the hegemonic spacetime of fossil capitalism. Brought to the level of discursive consciousness, and thus to the level of a proposition or demand, we might organise around the infrastructures needed for supporting and sustaining these alternative spacetimes. (King 169)

Jelinek, I propose, does offer such "alternative spacetimes"—not in Albert Einstein's sense but in the literal sense of space and time devoted to considering alternative modes of action in light of the climate crisis. Jelinek's version of "hope" is certainly not the cheery kind propagated by a born-again religious preacher or the nowadays ubiquitous life coaches. Hers is more attuned with the hope articulated by Rebecca Solnit in *Hope in the Dark: Untold*

*Histories, Wild Possibilities* (2019), which inspired the 2022 publication *Jenseits von Hoffnung und Zweifel* by the group of climate activists from the collaborative *ausgeCO2hlt*: “Wer hofft, kann enttäuscht werden. Aber lieber werden wir enttäuscht, als nicht hoffen zu können” (*ausgeCO2hlt* 41). The activists also felt inspired by the late American writer Ursula K. Le Guin’s unique concept of utopia: “Die Utopisten wollen in der Zukunft alles neu schöpfen, anstatt an dem teilzuhaben, was in der Gegenwart ist. Dem setzt [Ursula Le Guin] einen Utopiebegriff entgegen, der nicht gefestigt ist, sondern vieldeutig; nicht progressiv, sondern zyklisch; nicht aggressiv, sondern partizipativ, nicht linear, sondern rund” (*ausgeCO2hlt* 42). This cyclical notion of hope connects with Jelinek, as we shall see, who introduces it through musical references. Another inspiration comes from the Czech playwright, dissident, and president Vaclav Havel, whose interpretation of hope is a commitment to keep going even against all odds:

Hoffnung ist nicht dasselbe wie Prognose. Sie ist eine Orientierung des Geistes und des Herzens. [. . .] Hoffnung, in diesem tiefen und mächtigen Sinne, ist nicht die Freude darüber, dass sich die Dinge zum Guten wenden. Auch nicht der Wille, Ressourcen in Dinge zu investieren, die Erfolg versprechen. Statt dessen ist Hoffnung die Bereitschaft, für ein Ziel zu arbeiten, nicht weil es das vielversprechendste, sondern weil es das richtige ist. (*ausgeCO2hlt*, 56–57)<sup>2</sup>

In other words, hope is when people do what must be done.<sup>3</sup> Like Havel, Jelinek, too, has shown remarkable consistency in her commitment to advocate for social justice causes over the years. Such commitment can also be compared to “unbequeme Hoffnung,” as Luisa Neubauer defines it in her newest book, *Was wäre, wenn wir mutig sind?* (2025), that is, hope as a *practice* that continues even in the face of prolonged frustration. We shall see below whether and if so how this manifests in *Sonne, Los Jetzt!, Luft*, and *Asche*.

Bendix Fesefeldt, the dramaturg who worked on the production of *Sonne, Los Jetzt!* at the Schauspielhaus Zürich in 2022, said in his statement about the production on the theater’s website: “It’s not easy to put the climate crisis on stage—because it’s not easy to deal with the climate crisis in the real world.”<sup>4</sup> That may well be. But to paraphrase John F. Kennedy, in a crisis we must do things not because they are easy but because they are hard. And as Nicole Rogers of the faculty of law at Bond University in Australia writes in the wake of extreme climate disruption: “All academics, and not only the academics of a

university already experiencing the ravages of climate change, have an overriding obligation to be climate activists. There is no possible justification for neutrality, dissembling or prevarication in light of what we know, and have experienced, at 1.1 degrees of global warming” (Rogers 133).<sup>5</sup> The same should apply to dramatists.

And indeed, theater artists in German-speaking countries have been experimenting with different forms of sounding the alarm and mobilizing for climate action. They range from Arne Vogelsang and Marina Dessau’s *Es ist zu spät* (2021) to the nationwide *Theaterstaffellauf fürs Klima* organized by thirty German stages across the country in May 2022 that involved readings, poetry slams, concerts, and panel discussions, and led to a network for artists devoted to sustainability in the German creative arts called “Performing for Future.”<sup>6</sup> Tobias Rausch’s *Die Welt ohne uns* (2010) gives plants a voice, and his *Tornado* (2020) was inspired by Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2017). Although at the 2019 “Klima trifft Theater: Zur theatralen Erzählbarkeit der Klimakrise” conference in Potsdam Rausch went further even than Ghosh and worried that creative artists simply do not have the aesthetic means to tell the story of the climate crisis, even then he insisted that artists need to keep trying. Rausch is not alone. Other German theater artists and theater directors like Kevin Rittberger (*Der Entrepreneur*), Philipp Preuss (Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Der Untergang der Titanic*), and Marie Bues (Thomas Koeck, *Klimatrilogie*) have tried to put the relationship between humans and nature on stage, and the *Fridays for Future* youth climate movement has mobilized many more artists to do so (Branner). So, when Elfriede Jelinek came out with a contribution to German-language “climate drama”—if we posit that such a genre now exists—with her trilogy *Sonne/Luft/Asche*, she did so within that broader context. Unsurprisingly, she also put her unique stamp on this new genre.

In the following I attempt a reading of Jelinek’s trilogy in search of “inconvenient hope.” I will show that glimpses of it can indeed be found in the first two parts of her trilogy and even, albeit in a more muted way, in the third part. By making such traces hard to find in a text that is otherwise drenched in gloom, doom, and cynicism, Jelinek seems to spur her readers/viewers into actively embracing “inconvenient hope.” She also, as often happens in her work, uses music to articulate her idea of a commitment against all odds. Jelinek infuses her serious moral message with layers of humor, turning what might otherwise be received as didactic patronizing into educational entertainment, thus

using the theater as the “moralische Anstalt” in the Aristotelian as well as the Schillerian and Brechtian German theater traditions.

### 1. *Sonne, Los Jetzt! and Luft*

The first part of the trilogy, *Sonne, Los Jetzt!*, was published together with the second part, now renamed *Luft*, in *Theater heute* in 2023. All three parts of the trilogy were written, like many other plays by Jelinek, as a long monologic “Textfläche.” This means there is not really a plot in the traditional sense, nor are there interruptions by dramatic traditions like acts, entries, or character designations (Skasa). Jelinek initially seems to take a rather distant view of humanity, especially in the first part of the trilogy, as a consequence of her choice of vantage point: by speaking from the position of the sun, she is removed from all the constituting injustices that propel the climate crisis. From the perspective of the sun, we are simply tiny human creatures existing in the distance. Although the young Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg gets a cameo role in the play, Jelinek’s sun is solely intent on its destructive role in the climate crisis. Jelinek chose not to embrace the idea that the sun is both—the catalyst of global warming and the engine of a decarbonized renewable energy economy. Instead, her character of the sun brings only heat, death, fire, drought, and panic in this play, and does it gleefully. The sun seems to be enjoying liberating planet earth from the human species while humans are mainly busy attempting to flee: “So macht es mehr Spaß. Gewordenes zu zerstören ist lustiger. Jedes Kind, das vor seinem drei Meter hohen Legoturm steht, weiß das.” (Jelinek, *Sonne, Los Jetzt* 3) In short, the play celebrates global warming as a form of nature’s revenge against humans.

Some of the media reactions to the production highlight this interpretation. “Ein großer Gesang auf das von Menschen verursachte Verlöschen der Natur,” writes *Spiegel Online*, and Franz Wille writes in *Theater heute*, “In einem rasenden Textsturz arbeitet sich (Jelineks) Sonnengöttin durch die finalen Merkwürdigkeiten unter ihr. Alle wissen Bescheid, was kommen wird—und machen doch im Großen und Ganzen weiter wie bisher.” Others detect something more interesting: “Vielleicht der bislang theatereigenste Beitrag zur Klimafrage . . . weil man die Jelinek-Sonne vor keinen Karren gespannt bekommt,” writes Janis El-Bira in *Nachtkritik*. “Theater, das uns aus der Komfortzone rausrütteln will,” contributes Andreas Klauui in *Der Standard*. None of the reviewers highlight this play as one that encourages climate action or activism. In their eyes,

Jelinek seems uninterested in providing hope. However, as stated above, even though often clouded in cynicism, we can identify glimpses of hope in the text.

First: humans need a healthy planet to survive. Jelinek reminds us of our dependence on planet Earth by referring to it as “Unsere Schwester Mutter Erde” (Jelinek, *Sonne, Los Jetzt* 3, 7). This idea also reappears in *Luft*: “Die Mama Erde [...] die gute Erde [...] Gaia, die Erdin” (*Luft* 87). This Earth acts toward humans like an exasperated mother of tiring unruly teenagers: “Ich werde hier noch Ordnung in die Elemente bringen, und wenn es das letzte ist, was ich tue.” (Jelinek, *Luft* 10) In this way, Jelinek scolds the viewer/reader for not acting responsibly but also asserts the basic necessity of functioning ecosystems for humanity, as well as our emotional connection to the planet, which serves as a reminder of our vulnerability. At the same time, the exasperation of the mother who takes charge and cleans up her children’s mess hints that the earth’s ability to compensate for human recklessness has its limits.

Second: humans still have the capacity to do good and to save the world. Jelinek sprinkles words of encouragement into her text. She reminds her audience repeatedly that humans are responsible for the crisis: “Wir sind der Schaden der Welt, doch die ist eh nicht mehr zu retten. Machen Sie sich keine Sorgen, Sie werden mit Sicherheit der allerletzte Mensch sein, der noch lebt und das geniessen kann, ich kann Ihnen nur nicht sagen, wann die andren alle weg sein werden” (Jelinek, *Luft* 12). At the same time, and with much skepticism, she hints at the human ability to act differently: “Doch für Menschen sind viele dankbar, für Menschen, die menschlich wären, das ist aber bei den meisten ein Widerspruch in sich” (Jelinek, *Luft* 15). Referencing a poem by Johann Gottfried Seume (“Wo man singt da lass dich ruhig nieder [...] böse Menschen kennen keine Lieder”), Jelinek pokes fun at the notion that there is comfort in doing the right thing and that all we have to do is avoid the wrong crowd: “Wo ich spreche, wollen sich nicht viele niederlassen, gute Menschen kennen bessere Lieder” (Jelinek, *Luft* 16). Instead, for us to realize our capacity to do/be good may well mean having to sit with discomfort and accepting that we might not deserve praise every time we do the right thing.

Finally, Jelinek’s *Sonne, Los Jetzt!* and *Luft* also reflect her understanding of the concrete steps that are needed to address the climate crisis, and it should be easy for a director to visualize those steps on stage in spite of—or precisely because—the text, with its cynical undertones, seldom mentions them directly. Jelinek provides four distinct examples of actions we can take. Three of them

directly impact decarbonization: consumption reductions, especially of animal products; an exit from coal; and a “transportation transition” (*Verkehrswende*). The fourth element is a climate activist movement that takes to the streets. In the following I will briefly introduce each of these in a bit more detail.

#### A. THE NEED TO REDUCE CONSUMPTION, ESPECIALLY OF ANIMAL PRODUCTS

According to Paul Hawken’s *Project Drawdown*, reducing food waste and adhering to a plant-based diet are the most cost-effective measures to address climate change.<sup>7</sup> Jelinek, embracing a vision of a golden vegetarian age, appears to be aware of this: “In diesem goldenen Zeitalter, in dem ich hoffentlich gelandet sein werde, werden alle Obst und Gemüse essen im Überfluss, man wird absolut frei sein von blutigen Opfern” (Jelinek, *Luft* 19). Vegetarians not only avoid killing animals; “Das Feuer reinigt uns vom universellen Tötungsverbot, das wir mit einer feinen Gemüseplatte mühelos umgehen können” (63). A future-oriented food system also extends to the way we produce and conserve our food—or what the “transition town” movement co-founded by Rob Hopkins in the United Kingdom calls “re-skilling,” that is, relearning ways to reduce waste and energy that humans practiced for centuries, such as canning and preserving: “muss auch noch vieles eingekocht werden” (Jelinek, *Sonne, Los Jetzt!* 6).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, a significant portion of Jelinek’s text is concerned with the overconsumption of resources and the excesses of capitalist societies, including the obsession with perfect bodies, fast cars, and global travel. In this way, Jelinek succeeds in holding up a mirror to society that urges her audience to change its ways.

#### B. THE NEED TO END FOSSIL FUEL DEPENDENCE

Although Jelinek does not highlight the benefits of renewable energy in this trilogy, she does mention resource use and the need to reduce carbon dioxide emissions: “Schauen Sie auf die Ressourcen, schauen Sie auf die Nachhaltigkeit, diese Schuhe waren nachhaltig, wurden aber, kaum getragen, schon wieder ausgesondert, damit kriegen Sie keine CO<sub>2</sub> Punkte” (Jelinek, *Sonne, Los Jetzt!* 52). In fact, at one point in *Luft* she references the need for an exit from coal in detail:

Wenn Sie die Kohle fragen würden: Bist du es, welche zum Diamanten wurde? Dann antwortet Ihnen die Kohle, oder sie antwortet nicht, weil sie nicht mehr heraus darf. Man muss heute schon weit reisen, um noch welche zu finden, und dann muss man kämpfen, damit man sie wieder verbirgt unter der Erde, denn diese Erdfülle enthält viel Schädliches für uns, das nicht frei werden sollte. Außerdem hat es sich an seine Gefangenschaft längst gewöhnt, die Kohle, das heißt: finden kann man sie noch, doch arbeiten darf sie bald gar nicht mehr und in dreißig Jahren ist sie ganz weg, wetten? Man ist dann aus ihr ausgestiegen, für diesen Gedanken werden sie sich früher oder später erwärmen müssen, oder Sie werden sich anders erwärmen müssen. (Jelinek, *Luft* 20)

Jelinek here cheerfully reminds her viewers that exiting coal and fossil fuels in general (“viel Schädliches”) is inevitable, though she is undoubtedly aware that the fossil fuel industry is still actively resisting its demise by supporting climate-denying politicians on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>9</sup>

### C. THE NEED FOR A TRANSPORTATION TRANSITION

In the longest part of the trilogy, the second part, *Luft*, Jelinek promotes the benefits of public transportation: “Mit Straßenbahn und Bus doch leicht zu erreichen” or “Hätten Sie die Eisenbahn genommen, wären Sie jetzt schon zu Hause” and “Ich nehme lieber den nächsten Zug” (Jelinek, *Luft* 9, 11, 13). She pokes fun at those who will not give up their cars by reminding her viewers/readers that even electric cars are still cars that still require streets and parking lots, hence restricting pedestrians and wildlife, not to mention consuming immense resources in their production, upkeep, and fuel—even if renewably sourced (26). Riffing on the racist slogan “the only good Indian is a dead Indian,” Jelinek writes, “Nur stille Autos sind gute Autos” (13). Jelinek questions the elitism of those who have decided that the purchase of an electric car in any way makes them a better person. By calling electric cars “naturnahe Elektroautos” or even “gesund,” she ridicules the promotion of electric vehicles, which, although more climate-friendly than gas-powered cars, are indeed far less climate-friendly investments than public transportation (26). Jelinek acknowledges the need to decarbonize transportation and shift from private gas-powered cars to electrification and public transit.

## D. THE NEED TO TAKE TO THE STREETS

Jelinek seems to agree that a climate movement is needed to make things happen, and she reserves high praise for the Fridays for Future youth climate movement that the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg initiated with her school strikes in 2018. Indeed, she speaks of the young activists notably without cynicism: “von Kindern, die sich am Freitag sammeln, um für die Luft und das Wasser zu kämpfen” (Jelinek, *Luft* 13). The young people are “klug” and willing to take on a fight even when it seems unwinnable: “Die Demos zur Reinerhaltung der Elemente werden von klugen jungen Elementen durchgeführt, ein schöner Gedanke, dass sie das böse Wasser und die böse Sonne und die giftige Erde retten wollen” (14). Children recur several times in the play, and they tend to be positive figures, in contrast to the adults, who are characterized by an inability to learn: “Die Zeit ein Kind, ein Kind beim Brettspiel, aber erst muss es uns das Brett vorm Kopf wegreißen, hoffentlich gelingt es, dann sitzt ein Kind auf dem Thron. Das wäre echt das Beste für uns” (20). Fridays for Future in particular is presented in a very positive light in this play—although the adult voice immediately discredits their efforts:

Die Kinder, Schulkinder noch, ich liebe sie, die auf der guten Erde herumtrampeln, damit sie sich endlich wehrt, doch davon wird sie auch nicht besser, die Kinder also haben ihre Transparente selbst geschrieben. (17)

Jelinek emphasizes that it is thanks to the efforts of the kids in the youth climate movement that people are finally beginning to take the climate crisis seriously, but she also acknowledges that this is coming rather late in the game:

Wir danken den Kindern, denen wir zu wenig Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt haben, dass sie uns drauf aufmerksam machen, sie setzen sich für die gute Luft ein [. . .] die Kindern wandern andre Straßen ab, auch unerforschte, sie finden immer neue [. . .] mit magischer Energie, die wir ja auch erst produzieren mussten, mit den bekannten Folgen, und die die jungen Menschen auf die Straßen treibt, weil es ihnen drinnen nicht gefällt und weil die Energie von woanders kommen soll, vielleicht aus ihrem Inneren. Sie wollen dazu beitragen. Ihre Stimmen, ihre Transparente, ihre Omas, die sie mitsamt deren Selbstverstrickungen mitgenommen haben [. . .] Jeden Freitag. (20)

She expresses gratitude to the youth activists and their “magical” energy, who are seeking new sources of energy for the economy and who are committed to go out and protest every Friday. The climate movement can mark it as a success to have made it into the play of a Nobel Prize–winning author—even though the author is choosing to foreground an annoyed adult “we,” located between the children and their grandmas, whose support for climate action comes across as veiled criticism or at best lip service. But Jelinek gratefully supports the “Bewegung” and demonstrates its dramatic potential: Only if we are moved (whether by violence, reason, or compassion) we will get moving, and time is of the essence: “Nichts bewegt sich einfach so, es muss immer ein Bewegendes vorhanden sein, das uns anschubst oder zumindest zu Tränen rührt. So wie Greta, die unseren kommenden Untergang so bewegend und einleuchtend schildert, danke dafür” (25). Again she expresses gratitude to Greta Thunberg for giving the initial push to get things moving. This reflection on the idea of “Bewegung” that unites stage performance and political activism provides a perfect opportunity for a director to use movement on stage in various ways to reflect the many meanings of “bewegen,” for instance by showing slides or video footage of historical movements (suffragettes, labor activists, LGBTQ, and the feminist movement, and the like) while at the same time setting characters in motion on stage in various ways.

Like all social movements, the climate movement also occasionally engages in direct action or even civil disobedience. In *Luft*, Jelinek encourages those who wish to enact change to act forcefully against those who resist it: “Wir müssen ordentlich ausholen können, wir müssen mit dem Vorschlaghammer viele gute Vorschläge dazu machen und dann dreinschlagen, damit sie auch wirklich ausgeführt werden” (Jelinek, *Luft* 26). With her typical playfulness with words, Jelinek uses the symbol of a hammer that hits nails but also generates suggestions for improvement that must be enacted if needed with force. Of course, civil disobedience often leads to confrontations with the police, who frequently use water cannons (“Wassermotoren”) to disperse protestors. Already in the first paragraph of *Sonne, Los Jetzt!*, Jelinek’s narrator compares this practice to a woman’s experience of sexual assault: “Da fahren sie schon wieder mit ihren Wassermotoren herum, so zeigt sich ihr umweltliches Besorgen. Mit Wasser wollen sie es mir besorgen. Dass ich nicht lache!” (Jelinek, *Sonne, Los Jetzt* 3).<sup>10</sup> The narrator’s defiant tone in this passage expresses solidarity with the protestors and their commitment while distancing the authorities.

Although Jelinek also mentions signing a petition as another form of pro-

test (*Sonne, Los Jetzt* 14), in many parts of the trilogy the dominant mood of the first-person narrator seems to be one of resignation in view of the futility of any action: “Die Massen haben sich bereits erhoben und sind schon wieder in sich zusammengefallen” (18). Her positive depiction of the young people in the streets contrasts sharply with the apathy of the self-pitying narrator who complains that she is just sitting around doing nothing: “Im Gegensatz zu mir, die leider nur herumsitzt, eine von denen, die sich nicht erheben, die kein Flugzeug betreten oder als kämpferisches Proletariat oder umweltschützerische Aristokratie oder als Kinderkönige auftreten” (22). But the voice of resignation is not presented as an attractive one—quite the contrary: Jelinek seems to portray her narrator rather negatively in order to encourage the readers/viewers to reject her apathy and opt to align themselves instead with the (more positively connoted) young activists.

## 2. *Asche*

In the third part of the trilogy, *Asche*, at first glance Jelinek seems to have lost her interest in providing these glimpses of “inconvenient hope.” They can still be found, however, albeit in a much more muted form.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the text reflects on god and guilt, fate and loneliness, death, grief, the elements, fire, decay, wasteful consumption, and again and again, the narrator’s own aging body. Unlike in *Sonne, Los Jetzt*, the dependence on planet Earth is no longer associated with anything positive: “Wir alle stammen von Mutter Erde ab? O Weh!” Earth is clearly better off without humans: “Die Erde ist, endlich ohne uns [. . .] Was waren wir doch für böse Gäste!” And yet, although humans are reduced to “evil guests” and her strength is waning, the narrator is committed to continuing the work: “Ich mache weiter, sogar in der Wüste würde ich noch weitermachen” (Jelinek, *Asche*). What exactly “weitermachen” entails is not elaborated here, but it is clearly connected to environmental protection. Nature, we learn, deserves space—in the form of renaturalized waterways, for example. By connecting such efforts with the nostalgic yearnings of song, Jelinek reminds her audience of the power of poetry and music to reach both into the past (“fahrenden Gesellen”) and into the psyche (“Lust und Leid”): “wie gern möchte es fortwandern, das Wasser, des Müllers, des fahrenden Gesellen Lust und Freude und Leid durch die Lust und Leid ohne Lust, doch die Mauer läßt es nicht.” Only the wall keeps the water from flowing.

Up to this point climate activism mentioned in the text is entirely nonviolent. Only in this third (darker) part of the trilogy is there a hint at the possibility of sabotage or violence: “Wer stellt sich da so blöd ins Halteverbot, anstatt den Damm zu sprengen? Das muß leider dahingestellt bleiben.” Here Jelinek references the conflict over the dams that prioritize electricity production over land rights of rural communities: “Das Wasser mußte schon einmal Abschied nehmen vom allerliebsten Platz und dort Platz nehmen, wo die Elektrizität es benötigt.” This is a conflict that has energized ecofeminist movements worldwide for decades, starting with the Chipco movement in India during the 1970s.

But in this final part of the trilogy, darkness prevails; nature’s beauty and music have lost their power to lift our spirits: “Weiß es der Vogel, der singt auf grüner Heide? Wenn er noch singt, kann er es unmöglich wissen.” and “Kling, kling, schönes Ding! Wie mir doch die Welt gefällt! Nur ich gefalle keinem mehr.”<sup>12</sup> The last sentence, “Nur ich gefalle keinem mehr,” hints at the connection between the resignation and the narrator’s old age. There is no more mention of the young climate activists in this third part. Instead, people’s apathy and their resistance to change leads nature to give up on humans: “Da die Menschen sich nicht ändern, muß sich also die Natur ändern.” This brings us back to the beginning of the first part, in which nature was trying to rid itself of humans. There seems to be no more interest in a new beginning: “Ein neuer Anfang? Das geht nicht.” Jelinek even goes back to the very beginning of the biblical text: “Gott will uns nicht. Kein Gott will uns.” And yet, even at this stage the “I” continues its work: “Nein, so kann man das nicht sagen. Denken Sie noch mal nach, und lesen Sie die Schrift, aber nicht meine! Seien Sie froh, daß Sie die überhaupt noch lesen dürfen! Woanders ist die Schrift schon verboten.” Instead of changing our ways, a new Earth can now only be imagined as a substitute planet: “Diese Erde ziehen wir uns nicht an. Wie schaut denn die aus! Eine neue Erde oder was? Wäre praktisch. Ich würde sofort zu ihr hinüberhupfen.” And in conjunction with a “new” Earth there is the option for a “new” perfected humanity, without aging and death:

Was ich aber vorziehen würde, ist, daß das vollkommene Lebende entstehen müßte, aus vollkommenen, keinesfalls künstlichen Teilen bestehend, ohne Blutpropfen, ohne Ibuprofen, ohne Pumpenschäden und Atemziehen und Gehumpel, die überall auftreten können, ob alternd oder unalternd. Keinem Siechtum unterworfen. (Jelinek, *Asche*)

There is something strangely static about this perfected humanity. Whereas there was palpable enthusiasm for “Bewegung” in the first two parts, part three has lost its ability to move or sees movement going in circles: “Ist da noch Bewegung? Indem also die Menschen gleichmäßig in ein- und demselben Raum herumgeführt werden, entsteht ein Kreis, der sich seinerseits im Kreise dreht. Ohne störende Einwirkung von irgendwas sind wir nichts als drehende Kreise.” As a trained concert pianist, Jelinek often infuses her texts with musical references, and, as mentioned above, this trilogy is no exception. The image of the circling circle can be interpreted as a senseless repetition—as in Schubert’s / Müller’ “Leiermann” who, ignored and forgotten, keeps playing the same music over and over.<sup>14</sup> *Asche* ends with a farewell to the beautiful world: “Schöne Welt. [. . .] Und war alles, alles wieder gut! Alles und überhaupt alles. Doch alles Singen ist nun aus. Und abends, wenn wir schlafen gehn, was machen wir dann? Nicht singen, nicht blühen. An unser Leid denken. Sonst nichts.” This is a tired ending, overwhelmed by grief, characterized by the loss of song and poetry, but also of strength and youth.

There’s no question that the few glimpses of “inconvenient hope” I have tried to identify do not make this an optimistic trilogy about climate activism. Indeed, Jelinek scholars would likely reject the notion that the author had any intention of writing one. In her 2007 master’s thesis about language in the work of Elfriede Jelinek, Martina Möseneder points out that Jelinek, though highly political in her work, explicitly denies art the ability to improve reality. She quotes a letter of Jelinek’s from 1969: “Du wirst endlich zur Kenntnis nehmen müssen, dass durch Kunst NICHTS verändert werden kann, weder das Bewußtsein noch sonst etwas.” Even though that was over fifty years ago, the trilogy discussed here does not suggest Jelinek has changed her mind. Still, since Jelinek leaves the realization of the theatrical production of her texts in the hands of the directors without any stage directions, she allows for productions that may visually counter the dominant futility of action in the text with a wealth of suggestions for action, for example through video montages or audio installations. Overall, Jelinek’s text provides both: a sense of resignation and the commitment to keep going. It’s up to the viewer/reader to resolve this ambivalence and decide whether commitment ends up in circling futility or effective action. A stage production of Jelinek’s trilogy would do well to incorporate works by climate activists and ideally would involve young activists themselves for whom resignation is simply not an option. In their book, Neubauer and Repenning call themselves “possibilists” and urge readers to em-

brace new utopian visions. As we have demonstrated in our 2025 *Handbook of Grassroots Climate Activism*, millions of people are indeed working on realizing alternative visions worldwide—in Transition Towns and neighborhood resiliency groups, and in grassroots climate organizations like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, 350.org, and many other initiatives.<sup>14</sup> There are many who defend people’s right for climate protection and confront those who are ignoring or violating those rights. Their work is a reminder that we must not allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good.

Luisa Neubauer is a geographer, not a dramatist, but she has produced a powerful performance piece with her “speech in E-flat major.”<sup>15</sup> Neubauer wrote her speech to be performed in conjunction with Beethoven’s “Cavatina” from his string quartet No. 13, op. 130, which was included as one of the samples of Earth’s sounds, languages, and calculations sent out into the universe with the unmanned Voyager probe in 1977. Like Jelinek, Neubauer aims with her piece to remind us of the responsibility we have for humanity’s existence on this small planet. Unlike Jelinek, she does so enthusiastically, reminding us that our possibilities are endless:

Zusammen sind wir zu den größten Ungerechtigkeiten fähig, das hat man gezeigt. aber eben auch zu den größten Großartigkeiten. Wir sind alles, was wir haben, und so sind wir auch alles, was wir brauchen. Die Kosmologie hat es möglich gemacht, das Universum zu verstehen. Und es ist eben diese Kosmologie, die uns die Mathematik für das Ende der Hoffnungskrise bereitstellt. Und diese Formel geht so: Wir können die Zukunft nicht berechnen, denn die Möglichkeiten sind unendlich. Fantastisch. (Luisa Neubauer, *Rede in Es-Dur*, quoted from a manuscript)

Encouragement to take action can take many different forms, and performers have an important role to play in our efforts to address the climate crisis.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Jelinek’s trilogy can serve as an invitation to confront our apathy and inaction in the face of climate disruption, especially those among us who have benefited the most from the fossil fuel age. The American youth climate movement known as the “Sunrise Movement” sings a version of an old Leonard Cohen song to energize climate activists at its protests: “Forget your perfect offering. Just ring the bells that still can ring. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”<sup>17</sup> The darkness of *Asche* notwithstanding,

there are these “cracks” in Jelinek’s text that allow the light of inconvenient hope to get in.

As long as the threat of global heating continues to increase, climate activism will continue to evolve. Climate drama must evolve alongside it. Jelinek’s text provides dramaturges with plenty of opportunities to encourage climate activism on the stage and beyond. One idea could be to produce the three parts in reverse, for example, beginning with *Asche*, moving through *Luft*, and ending with a positive interpretation of the sun’s role in powering the world with *Sonne, Los Jetzt!* This could more easily be combined with a post-performance workshop or action than the current chronology, which ends in death and despair and thus leaves the viewers with the difficult work of engaging in “unbequeme Hoffnung.” It could also be productive to see a staging of Jelinek’s trilogy paired with Neubauer’s speech. After all, despite its ambivalence, Jelinek’s text too allows for endless possibilities.<sup>18</sup>

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## Notes

1. Jelinek’s husband, Gottfried Hüngsberg, died of cardiac arrest on September 2, 2022. They had been married since 1974.
2. The recording of the “CGES Webinar” with two of the authors: [https://www.brandeis.edu/cges/news-events/spring-2023/230309\\_climatecrisis.html](https://www.brandeis.edu/cges/news-events/spring-2023/230309_climatecrisis.html).
3. This is also powerfully articulated in a song by the band Brother Sun (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZhfPirrXHM>).
4. See recording at <https://www.schauspielhaus.ch/de/kalender/23910/sonne-los-jetzt>. [My translation]
5. During the pandemic, members of the German Studies Association in the United States crafted a petition demanding that the GSA take the emergency declaration of our climate scientist colleagues seriously and take action. As a result, the GSA created the Climate

Emergency and Technology Committee (CLEAT), and the committee issued a report that is available on the GSA website. In this report we made concrete recommendations for how German Studies could embrace decarbonization in an intersectional way that would at the same time address a number of injustices within our organization. At the GSA conference in Montreal in fall 2023, a group held a seminar to move that conversation forward, and they are in the process of planning their third online summer conference in July 2026. The Jelinek symposium was a good example of that as well—held in hybrid format—a format often difficult to facilitate, but it meant we could have meaningful exchanges without flying all over the place.

6. <https://performingforfuture.de/>.

7. <https://drawdown.org/>.

8. See also Kehnel and Hopkins.

9. See Oreskes and Conway.

10. Jelinek's hometown, Vienna, is also one of the cities experimenting with hydrogen-powered buses. Although those are not typically referred to as "Wasserwagen," this could suggest a different interpretation of the passage.

11. The text is available on Jelinek's website, but without page numbers.

12. Here Jelinek references Gustav Mahler's "Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen."

13. Thanks to Luise Pusch for alerting me to this interpretation.

14. See von Mering et al.

15. She premiered the piece with the Resonanz ensemble at the opening of the Lesingstage in Hamburg on January 21, 2024, and also performed at the Berliner Theatertreffen in May 2024, at the Beethovenfest in Bonn on September 6, 2024, at Brandeis University in September 2024, and at the Goethe Institut Boston in November 2024.

16. Theater would ultimately benefit from climate action, too. As a low-emissions undertaking it should be one of the institutions to thrive in a low-carbon world.

17. See for example <https://soundcloud.com/sunrisemvmt/light-gets-in>.

18. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers as well as my dear "BigWigs" colleagues, Luise Pusch, Katharina von Hammerstein, Anjeana Hans, Joey Horsley, and Christiane Zehl-Romero, for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

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