Sickness unto Death in the Age of 24/7:
Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Arbeit und Struktur*

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> One cannot live without hope, I
> wrote some time ago here. I erred. It
> just isn't as much fun.
> Wolfgang Herrndorf, *Arbeit und Struktur*

"Schluss: Wolfgang Herrndorf hat sich am Montag, den 26. August 2013 gegen 23.15 Uhr am Ufer des Hohenzollernkanals erschossen." 'The End: Wolfgang Herrndorf shot himself on Monday, August 26, 2013, around 11:15 pm at the Hohenzollern canal.'[1] The message that announced the death of German author Wolfgang Herrndorf is pithy. Counting exactly 125 characters, it was short enough to be disseminated on Twitter. That his friend and fellow writer Kathrin Passig chose to inform the public about Herrndorf's suicide on a social media platform seems both strange and strangely appropriate. On the one hand, death appears to be too grave a subject to tweet about. Cultural critics of the contemporary may go even further and contend that there is something sacrosanct about the ending of life, which gets violated when the news of someone's passing is compressed into a hashtagged message of 140 characters or less. Herrndorf, on the other hand, was involved with online writing from the dawn of the digital age, publishing short stories on the Internet forum *Höfliche Paparazzi* ('Polite Paparazzi'). These first attempts at prose fiction paved Herrndorf's way from the fine arts into literature. He was a painter by training and worked as an illustrator for the German satirical magazine *Titanic*. When Herrndorf made his initial forays into writing, he could not have known that the end of his life would be intricately entwined with both literature and the digital realm.

In his blog *Arbeit und Struktur* ('Work and Structure'), Herrndorf documented his three-year battle with brain cancer and raised issues that are not only of existential significance but also of social relevance. How to live with terminal illness is the central question around which his online journal revolved. The title gives away the survival strategy that Herrndorf chose—the blog is a manifestation of the constant work and ceaseless writing with which he intended to withstand illness. Herrndorf was a generous blogger. Remarkably disinclined toward sentimentality, he gave his readers a sober look into his everyday life: the emotional rollercoaster of living between hope and despair, from one medical test to the other; the intense beauty that life can suddenly acquire in light of its

waning; his vivid dreams and worst nightmares; and how the most mundane activities turn into obstacles when the body breaks down. He describes, for instance, the experience of playing soccer with a limited field of vision, and he recounts several nights wandering around in Berlin for hours, not finding his way home because the tumor deteriorated his sense of direction as well. Herrndorf also relates in painstaking detail how cancer renders him increasingly silent, directly impairing his ability to communicate, to find language, to write.

Arbeit und Struktur not only propelled illness and suffering into the consciousness of its continually growing readership, but by doing so also raised decidedly ethical issues. As a text that both chronicled Herrndorf's bodily decline and testified to his struggle to keep mentally afloat, the blog inadvertently asked what dignified life toward death may look like, and if—and under what circumstances—assisted dying might be acceptable. Since terminal illness made Herrndorf increasingly reliant on the immediacy of the blog form to foreground these ethical concerns, *Arbeit und Struktur* gives occasion to revisit and rethink some of the most vitriolic criticism leveled at the digital. The age of 24/7, as Jonathan Crary calls the contemporary era, at once promotes and demands incessant activity, leaving only modicums of time for sleep and recuperation. Crary's assessment of the logic of 24/7 appears to be indebted to Walter Benjamin's assertion that "capitalism is the celebration of the cult *sans rêve et sans merci*" ("Capitalism as Religion," 259, emphasis in original). In his attempt to capture the homogenization of time that the digital contemporary instigates, Crary draws on Benjamin's insight that in capitalism there is "no 'weekday,' no day that would not be a holiday in the awful sense of exhibiting all sacred pomp" (259), but reverses its premise. Rather than turning every day into a religious holiday, capitalism in the age of the digital induces precisely the colonization of holidays as putative "normal" hours of work, Crary argues. If we follow his characterization, the question arises how sickness is negotiated and represented in a time that fosters doing away with even regular pauses for rest. Illness, defined in this context precisely as the inability to be constantly on, after all, appears to defy the ethos of ceaseless work that Crary regards as the driving force behind the neoliberal regime of time. In the contemporary, the struggle against sickness thus (also) becomes a battle against 24/7, which insinuates the very impossibility of downtime. As an involuntary interruption of the steady flow of permanent work, illness forces its own distinct temporality upon us and by doing so shatters the illusion that complete control over time at all times is, in fact, attainable.

But how does one die, then, in the digital age? Putting this question at the center of this essay, I examine *Arbeit und Struktur* in two contrasting ways. Focusing on work, and its attendant concept of self-administration, the first part opens up a dialogue between Crary and Herrndorf. Reading Herrndorf's blog through Crary's *24/7*, and vice versa, allows us both to see the limits of Crary's

critique of the digital age and to examine *Arbeit und Struktur* in relation to theories of the contemporary. Heeding, however, the fact that Herrndorf was not only sick in the age of the digital but also mediated this existential experience in an online journal, I examine the different modes of writing that intersect in Herrndorf's digital text in the second part of this essay in order to identify core features of his poetics, which are located at the intersection of illness narratives and digital writing.

Literature and the Blog

"Am besten geht's mir, wenn ich arbeite" (44) 'I am at my best when I work,' Herrndorf states one month into chemotherapy and radiation.[2] Unsure how much time he had left to complete his projects, Herrndorf started to work at a manic pace: "Ich werde ein Buch schreiben, sage ich mir, egal wie lange ich noch habe. Wenn ich noch einen Monat habe, schreibe ich eben jeden Tag ein Kapitel. Wenn ich drei Monate habe, wird es ordentlich durchgearbeitet. Ein Jahr ist purer Luxus" (107) 'I will write another book, I tell myself, no matter how much time remains. If I have only one month, I will write a chapter every day. If I have three months, I will revise the book thoroughly. A whole year is pure luxury'. According to the American Brain Tumor Association, the median survival rate for adults with aggressive glioblastoma—the form of brain tumor from which Herrndorf suffered—is 14.6 months. If luck is an appropriate term to use in the case of terminal illness, we can say that Herrndorf was fortunate to outlive this prognosis by more than two years. It was a tremendously productive time for him: between February 2010, the time of the terminal diagnosis, and his death in August 2013, he finished two books. *Tschick* (2010; *Why We Took the Car*, 2014), his novel for young adults, was an immense success not only with its target audience but also beyond it. The story about two teenage boys who steal an old car to embark on a road trip from Berlin to the German countryside made Herrndorf "a six-figure author" (*Arbeit und Struktur*, 199), won numerous book awards, and was translated into twenty-four languages. *Tschick* catapulted Herrndorf, already the author of two volumes of fiction by then, from the margins of the literary marketplace right to the center of it. A year later, his postmodern thriller *Sand* (2011; 'Sand') appeared to similar critical acclaim. *Bilder deiner großen Liebe* (2014; 'Pictures of Your Great Love'), his last novel, remained a fragment and was published posthumously.

In *Arbeit und Struktur*, Herrndorf provided a meticulous documentation of the progress he made on his novels. In this sense, the blog is a work journal that complements his works of fiction. *Arbeit und Struktur*, however, was also an undertaking in its own right, or to be more precise, it evolved into one slowly over time. Finishing *Tschick* and *Sand* left Herrndorf without a further project whose

completion would have been within reach. Upon the submission of *Sand* to his publisher, it was the horror vacui of vacant time that set in: "Vorläufige Version des Wüstenromans zusammengeschraubt und an die ersten Korrekturleser geschickt. Danach sofort Gefühl der Leere. Was als nächstes? Ich weiß es nicht" (219) 'Sent it out to the first proofreaders. Then immediately, the feeling of emptiness. What's next? I don't know.' The blog was next, as long as Herrndorf was able to write, until about a week before his death.

I use the genre designation "blog" as a shorthand here, which does not reflect the generic changes that occurred while *Arbeit und Struktur* developed into a blog; nor does it take into consideration the blog's history beyond the digital realm and how its publication as a book—under the same title—may have impacted Herrndorf's aesthetic decisions regarding the blog itself. I have chosen to adopt the term, in part, for the practical reason that *Arbeit und Struktur* has been identified as a blog in public. Moreover, the identification represents a strategically reductive move that is to highlight what *Arbeit und Struktur*, in fact, shares with the digital genre and how it diverges from it.

A blog, Jodi Dean explicates, is "a collection of posts (each with its own permalink), appearing in reversed chronological order, time-stamped, and archived. Posts can be texts, images, audio, and video. They may feature links to other blogs and sites on the internet. They may offer visitors the opportunity to comment" (84). Leaving aside for a moment the specifics that Dean mentions, returning to the ways in which *Arbeit und Struktur* violates some of these features at a later point, I begin with something that she takes for granted, namely that the blog is a public genre. Although it shares certain properties with the diaristic mode, blogging happens under the eye of the public. If we take the accessibility on the internet as the genre's *sine qua non*, the entries from the first six months of what was to become *Arbeit und Struktur* were not conceived as blog posts. Initially, the blog was a digital journal that Herrndorf set up to inform his friends about his condition, the results of medical tests, surgeries, and the minutiae of everyday life with cancer. Not yet available to the public, the journal occupied a liminal space between private diary and online blog. Geared toward a specific readership, it primarily served the purpose of effective communication. Herrndorf hoped that channeling information about his illness via this semi-public medium would allow for other discursive realms—conversations, email exchanges, and the like—to remain unaffected by the disease.

About six months into digital journaling, a significant change took place: after Herrndorf's friends had established an online platform for him, he made *Arbeit und Struktur* publicly accessible. Considering the gravity of this decision, it is rather surprising that Herrndorf never explicitly elaborated on his reasons for doing so. Because he commented frequently on the imbecility of public discourse on assisted dying, however, it seems plausible that he regarded the blog as his

timely and necessary contribution to the discussion on euthanasia—necessary in the sense that the blog lent voice to someone whose life was directly affected by terminal illness.

But what kind of contribution is *Arbeit und Struktur*? While the target audience broadened from friends only to the unknown mass of digital readers, the posts show remarkable continuity both in terms of content and form. From the vantage point of retrospective reading, the shift from restricted to public access, from digital journal to blog, is barely noticeable. The transition that *Arbeit und Struktur* undergoes over time is not related to audience and accessibility but to a dilemma regarding the representation of brain cancer: How can the blog both chronicle the progression of illness and maintain its integrity as a text? In what follows, I argue that *Arbeit und Struktur* harbors different modes of writing, modes that are in tension with one another. Revealing the generic instability that the digital medium accommodates, I first turn to *Arbeit und Struktur* as a blog and to the ways in which it relates to work and the production of the self. In a subsequent step, I examine how Herrndorf also breaks away from the documentary and diaristic mode to which the blog subscribes and opts for the literary as well.

Working Unto Death

Work and labor have been key categories of social thought from Marx to contemporary leftist theory. Crary summons this critical tradition in a somewhat disguised form. In *24/7*, it is not work per se that he employs as a central concept but rather its very other: sleep. To refocus our attention from work to the time of rest and recuperation is a subtle move to bring to light something that, according to Crary, has been constantly eroding in the age of the digital: his critique works to rehabilitate sleep, to make it central against the onslaught of ceaseless labor that the 24/7 demands of digital natives. In the world of unregulated and rampant work, it is sleep—long thought of as the most indolent of activities—that harbors the potential of resistance, Crary implies, because it is "an irrational and intolerable affirmation that there might be limits to the compatibility of living beings with the allegedly irresistible forces of modernization" (19).

In Crary's bleak view of the digital age, as being fed by and feeding into neoliberal economies of time, there are few "significant interludes of human existence" that have not yet been annexed as (potential) work time (21). He is cautious, however, not to advance an argument based on technology alone because the nonmaterial changes that new media effectuate by far outweigh (and outlive) their initial technological base. More important than new devices, networks, or digital platforms are the "rhythms, speeds, and new formats of accelerated and intensified consumption" (Crary 43) that emerge in their wake.

The temporality of 24/7 thus not only renders work ubiquitous but by doing so also makes incessant inroads against the natural rhythms of the body, including patterns of sleep and rest. Individuals—a notion gradually hollowed out because of these changes—are constantly interpellated by techniques of "digital personalization and continual self-administration" (Crary 47).

Blogging is a technology of digital self-management par excellence. As Dean asserts in *Blog Theory*, it appears as a "way of documenting, reflecting on, and hence managing oneself" (61). Herrndorf seems to be acutely aware of how the production of the self is entwined with blogging when he explicitly alludes to digital writing—essentially in the same vein as Dean—as "der Versuch sich selbst zu verwalten, sich selbst fortzuschreiben" 'the attempt to administer oneself, to write oneself forth' (Herrndorf 214). When administration and management are applied to social processes, they capture the rationalization that modern societies have undergone. Max Weber's concept of disenchantment expresses the ambivalence inherent to this process: while the rational organization of society bestows order, stability, and predictability, the attempt to control by means of reason comes at the price of magic and wonder being banished from our belief systems. If administration and management are used in relation to the self, this ambivalence fades. The undertone pertaining to these terms becomes decidedly negative, for they convey that rationalization is not constrained to the systemic organization of society but becomes a principle that governs all realms of life, permeating also to the innermost spheres of individuals. Both Crary and Dean contend that new technologies of the self that emerged in the digital age have detrimental effects: they render us affectively numb, isolate us socially, and therefore make us politically ineffective. Technologies that tamper with our sense of time thus have far-reaching consequences, Crary suggests, and goes so far as to call them "strategies of disempowerment" (47).

Arbeit und Struktur invites us to shift our perspective and to examine these theories from a vantage point that takes into account the physical body and its conditions. Herrndorf wrote with the certainty that his days were numbered and with the uncertainty of when, and how, the tumor would start to damage his brain, affecting functions that are key in maintaining a sense of self such as language, perception, and memory. Under such precarious conditions, blogging represented a deliberate effort on Herrndorf's part to administer the self. Continuous public writing was a way for him to gain assurance that there was still a self left, able to think, capable of lending language to thoughts, and thus to communicate in spite of the declining body. The position of the sick body makes apparent the hidden premise that underlies Crary's argument. Crary assumes a wholeness of the self that gets compromised by various forms of digital personalization, labeling them as "insubstantial electronic surrogates for the physical self" (99). *Arbeit und Struktur* is precisely such an "electronic surrogate" but one that becomes central

in counterbalancing the disintegrating effects of cancer. While for Crary the digital, and the regime of 24/7 that it has ushered in, has a life-defying quality, Herrndorf's blog represents an example where the electronic management of the self becomes a life-sustaining practice precisely because the time sensitivity of new media allows for a continual production of the self. Blogging no longer appears as an insufficient proxy that cannot but fall short of rendering adequately the real self that exists in flesh and blood. When a sense of wholeness—be it either tied to the physical self or to a more comprehensive notion of selfhood—is not, or cannot, be taken for granted, the valence attached to digital personalization and electronic self-management shifts. The digital simply becomes yet another realm in which the fragmented self leaves its footprints.

Herrndorf, in fact, does not distinguish between technologies of the self that have already existed before the digital age and novel possibilities opened up by new media. Trying to capture the elusive quiddity of the self, he inquires into consciousness: "Was ist das Bewusstsein? Man spürt es nicht. Um es zu spüren, fehlt das Organ" (214) 'What is consciousness? It cannot be sensed, the organ for sensing it, is missing.' For lack of an actual body part in which consciousness materializes, Herrndorf conjures up an image that appeals to our imaginative faculties. He likens the self to "ein Buchhalter, der die Inventarliste schreibt" (214) 'a bookkeeper who is writing the inventory.' This imaginary figure is something like an administrator (of the self) insofar as she is in charge of assembling all the thoughts, feelings, impressions, and memories that lie scattered around, entrusted to "flüchtigen Medien, Tagebüchern Freunden, Floppy Disks und Papierstößen" (214) 'ephemeral media, diaries, friends, floppy discs, and piles of paper.' Herrndorf's bookkeeper ought to assemble a totality out of those shards of the self that are stored in different media, but all attempts to create the "security back-up of the whole endeavor" are in vain. The bookkeeper cannot but fall short of writing the "full inventory" because a unity of the self that the metaphor implies is essentially unattainable. What the poetic image of the failing bookkeeper thus stands for is a decentered notion of the self.

Herrndorf operates on the assumption that the self is always already outsourced to and existent in various media. Moreover, he does not distinguish between different media but boldly lumps together various material ones—including floppy disks and paper—with immaterial and elusive platforms such as the memory of friends. Rather than a radically new way of administering the self, the digital is in line with other techniques that have been extant before the digital age, all instituted to "sich selbst zu verwalten, sich fortzuschreiben, der Kampf gegen die Zeit, der Kampf gegen den Tod…." (214) 'administer oneself, to write oneself forth, in the battle against time, the battle against death.' From the perspective of death, both non-digital and digital writing appear as an effort to outlive the frailness of the embodied self and to transpose it from the transiency of

the human flesh into various media that may not be everlasting either but are perhaps more durable. This nondiscriminatory understanding of blogging that regards digital writing as yet another technique of (linguistic) self-management may foreshadow and explain the ease with which Herrndorf shifts from blog mode into a more explicitly literary register in *Arbeit und Struktur*.

"To Be a Master in One's Own House"

The most common symptoms of glioblastoma are headache, nausea, vomiting, and drowsiness. Depending on the location of the tumor, the disease may also limit certain functions of the brain ("Glioblastoma"). Herrndorf suffered from epileptic seizures, altered vision, and hallucinations; the tumor also impaired his ability to speak and disrupted his sense of orientation. Invoking the lack of control and conscious life that is attributed to plants, he mockingly called his brain restricted in its normal functioning "Gemüse" 'the veg.' What lurks underneath the ironic moniker is Herrndorf's personal ethics regarding a life that is worth living. The question of quality for him, the normative moment that distinguishes mere life—sustained by organs that have not ceased to function yet—from meaningful life is based on language and the ability to communicate. The nickame 'veg' functions as a shorthand for the former, for biological existence. Life in an emphatic sense, however, becomes possible only, for Herrndorf, when the individual is able to reach beyond the confines of the self by means of language. "Menschliches Leben endet, wo die Kommunikation endet, und das darf nie passieren. Das darf nie ein Zustand sein" (224) 'Human life ends where communication ends, and that can't ever happen. That can't ever be a state,' he writes after a seizure that rendered him unable to speak for some time. Despite its descriptive form, this is a clearly normative statement for it is often enough the case that life drags on even though meaningful communication has become impossible. What Herrndorf implies is that life *ought to* end when communication ends. That he defined a state without language as "not doable" points us to the animating force behind *Arbeit und Struktur*. The blog mutated from an informational medium about Herrndorf's physical condition—with restricted accessibility—into a more comprehensive digital diary because it was the platform where Herrndorf's (public) battle for language took place.

If the ability to communicate was the *differentia specifica* of meaningful life for him, we may as well go further and surmise that dignified life with terminal illness was to exercise some control over death. He confessed prior to the first MRI: "[…] ich wollte ja nicht sterben, zu keinem Zeitpunkt, und ich will es auch jetzt nicht. Aber die Gewissheit es selbst in der Hand zu haben, war von Anfang an notwendiger Bestandteil meiner Psychohygiene" (50) 'I didn't want to die, never ever, and I don't want to now either, but the certainty that I have

control over death was from the very beginning a necessary part of my psychohygiene.' Herrndorf wanted an "Exitstrategie" (50) 'exit strategy,' as he called it, a safe way of ending his life at a moment when cancer had not yet seized complete control over his brain. Since doctors were unwilling to assist him, he obtained a "357er Smith & Wesson, unregistriert, kein Beschusszeichen" (80) '357 Smith & Wesson, unregistered, no official proof mark.' The ownership of a gun granted Herrndorf control over the method and place of his death: "Ich weiß, wie, ich weiß, wo, nur das Wann ist unklar. Aber dass ich zwei Kategorien kontrolliere und die Natur nur eine—ein letzter Triumph des Geistes über das Gemüse" (198) 'I know how, I know where, only the when remains unclear. But that I control two categories and nature only one—a last triumph of the mind over the veg.' In determining the time of his suicide, *Arbeit und Struktur* played a key role.

Rather than merely a medium for chronicling his illness, the blog became a means for Herrndorf to gauge his own mental capabilities. Akin to MRIs that measure tumor growth with the help of medical imaging, his changing ability to write and work served as Herrndorf's personal diagnostic tool. The mastery of moods, feelings, thoughts, and passing sensations through language signified that the possibility for dignified life—communication—still existed. Yet the extent to which language left Herrndorf is, in fact, difficult to discern from the text: "Ich möchte etwas sagen und kann es nicht. Ich denke darüber nach, was ich sagen will, und weiß es nicht" (222) 'I want to say something but can't, I think about what I want to say and I don't know,' he writes as early as August 2011. And almost two years later, Herrndorf notes that "Kann mich mit C. kaum sinnvoll unterhalten. Sie versucht meine Sätze zu erraten und zu ergänze" (417) 'I can hardly have a meaningful conversation with C., she tries to guess and complete my sentences.' Language became increasingly unavailable to him not only in oral discourse but also in writing: "Beim Schreiben fehlen mir die passenden Verben. Und wenn ich sie habe, fehlt mir die Konjugation" (417) 'I blank on the verbs when I write. And when I find them, I can't conjugate them.' The trajectory of gradual demise is inscribed into these sentences, yet at the same time, they encapsulate the fundamental paradox that underlies Herrndorf's endeavor: the breakdown of language is communicated in the form of impeccable sentences.

After a while, chronicling life with brain cancer would have had to turn into the documentation of the decease of language, the waning ability to stem the progression of illness and the passage of time. If Herrndorf had rendered the damages that the tumor caused directly in language, his text would be riddled with mistakes of all kind. Posts with missing words or without grammatical markers would be incomprehensible. The principal decision that Herrndorf must have faced at some point was whether to opt for a representation of brain cancer, disclosing not only through content but also in form how the mastery over words

and sentences slipped away from him, or to maintain what we could call the literary integrity of the text. His text—freed from errors, typos, and grammatical mistakes with the editorial help of friends—bespeaks that Herrndorf opted against such a violation of the code of the literary. Thus we may conjecture that while *Arbeit und Struktur* may not have started as a literary endeavor, it became one over time.

This embrace of the literary, however, represents a shift away from the continual production of the actual self, the self that breaks down and struggles for language. Or, to be more precise, the literary refers to this self only through content but extracts it from the form because it is precisely formal intactness that vouchsafes for the literary. While the digital surface of *Arbeit und Struktur* remains unaltered, the text shifts over into the literary mode, relinquishing the blog's initial raison d'être of evidencing whether or not dignified life was still tenable. These two modes of writing—the documentary, which motivated the blog in the first place, and the literary, which evolved into a concern once the integrity of the text would have been affected by the symptoms of brain cancer—are in tension with each other. The blog's afterlife in the non-digital sphere asks us to not only to examine this generic instability in relation to representational concerns but also to shift our attention to the literary marketplace and how it may have influenced aesthetic as well as strategic decisions regarding the blog.

The fact that Rowohlt published *Arbeit und Struktur* in print after Herrndorf's death in 2013 calls attention to the presence of the literary mode within the digital. This rare instance of a blog's offline publication in its entirety raises the question to what extent Herrndorf's explicit wish for *Arbeit und Struktur* to appear posthumously as a book may have motivated his decision to side with the literary rather than the documentary when his life—and by extension the blog—was nearing its end. Herrndorf's stance toward the standards of language become abundantly clear in Kathrin Passig and Marcus Gärtner's afterword to the print edition, where he is quoted to have said: "*Ich wollte, dass dieses Buch wie der Code civil geschrieben sei. In diesem Sinne sind alle dunklen und unkorrekten Sätze zu korrigieren*" (444; italics in the original) '*I want this book to be written like the Napoleonic code. To this effect, all unclear or incorrect sentences are to be corrected.*' The offline edition thus emerged with the editorial assistance of friends who sifted through the digital text once again to ensure that it would meet the standards of the print medium, but it may well be that the blog was conceived already with one eye toward its posthumous publication.

The subliminal presence of the literary within the blog—highlighted by the blog's afterlife in the realm of print—raises the question of what kind of reading *Arbeit und Struktur* in its digital version, in fact, engenders. One of the defining features of the blog, as Dean notes, is its reversed chronology. In its current setup, however, the opening post to *Arbeit und Struktur* is a preface of

sorts, stating that initially the blog was not publicly accessible, which then turns into a signpost that tacitly advises the reader to adhere to a chronological order in her reading. Accordingly, the arrangement of the links on the page encourages her to navigate to the first actual entry, "Dämmerung" 'Dawn,' from which the blog unfolds in a temporal order. The chronological reading, favored by the current architecture of the blog, brings to the fore the volatility that pertains to the organization of digital material. While the printed page locks whatever is printed on it into a particular position, the digital offers malleable platforms. Content can be shifted around, reorganized, and archived in various ways, impacting not only the presentational side but also the act of reading and meaning-making. A glance at the archived history of *Arbeit und Struktur* reveals that while the blog was still active, the posts followed a more or less reversed chronology, thereby emphasizing time and up-to-dateness. Moreover, each new entry to the blog was imbued with a heightened or a special kind of significance because updates signified survival—that there was still life left.

Herrndorf's death, however, obliterated the immediate purpose of such a temporal ordering: the newness that is highlighted by the blog's reversed chronology became irrelevant, if not inappropriate. The posthumous reorganization of the posts bespeaks the generic malleability or instability for which the digital allows. The current chronological setup, and the attendant reading that it necessitates, construct the text in a very different way, further undoing the blog mode and pushing *Arbeit und Struktur* into the direction of the literary. It is at this point that we have to examine the text from the vantage point of illness stories, in order to see how Herrndorf, while ensuring the literary afterlife of his blog, also fundamentally challenges conventional illness narratives.

Arbeit und Struktur as Illness Narrative

Terminal illness inevitably calls attention to time. It lends sudden intensity and acute relevance to a question that hardly ever comes to the fore under normal circumstances: how much time is there left to live? It is the imminence of death that links many disparate posts in *Arbeit und Struktur*. The possibility of a life cut short reveals the assumption that lurks in the most mundane episodes of everyday life: that there is a future. When Herrndorf laconically notes on December 15th, 2012 that "Das Verfallsdatum auf dem bei Kaiser's gekauften Ciabatta zum Aufbacken ist der 17. Februar" (375) 'the expiry date on the ciabatta from Kaiser's is February 17th,' he alludes to the possibility that the bread may, in fact, "outlive" him. He exposes how such diverse things as next year's tax return, the acquisition of a winter coat, or moving into a new apartment all rely on the same sense of trust that is placed into the fact of a future. This heightened significance

of time manifests on the thematic level of *Arbeit und Struktur* but is also entwined with its very form, digital writing.

A particular temporality pertains to blogs, namely immediacy. Not only do blogs predominantly revolve around the present, the various aspects of the contemporary, but they also make content available without a significant time lag. Adhering to a different temporality than non-digital publishing, the time that passes between the completion of a digital text and its publication can be minimal. *Arbeit und Struktur* relied on the genre's double entwinement with the present. The immediacy of the digital genre allowed for the chronicling of swiftly changing bodily conditions, momentary moods, and passing sensations, enabling Herrndorf to "[arbeiten], um zu arbeiten" (85) '[work] in order to work,' as he termed his survival strategy. Moreover, the possibility of instantaneous publication exceeds the temporal dimension and impacts the formal properties of Herrndorf's illness story as well. In what follows, I focus on *Arbeit und Struktur* as literature in order to determine how the blog diverges from conventional illness narratives and to ascertain the ways in which the digital contributes to a novel form.

Approximately a year into blogging, Herrndorf sums up his first twelve months living with brain cancer: "Bilanz eines Jahres: Hirn-OP, zweimal Klapse, Strahlen, Temodal. 1 ¾ Romane, erster großer Urlaub, viele Freunde, viel geschwommen, kaum gelesen. Ein Jahr in der Hölle, aber auch ein tolles Jahr. Im Schnitt kaum glücklicher oder unglücklicher als vor der Diagnose, nur die Ausschläge nach beiden Seiten größer" (197) 'Balance sheet of a year: brain surgery, twice in the loony bin, radiation, Temodal. 1 ¾ novels, first major holiday, many friends, swam a lot, barely read. A year in hell, but also a fabulous year. On average, barely happier or unhappier than prior to the diagnosis—only the amplitude is bigger in both directions.' After recapitulating the medical events of the year, he moves on to the domains of work and leisure, and then transitions to a cursory account of his overall emotional wellbeing. Herrndorf's summary is brimming with details. Individual words and phrases stand in for the manifold minute stories, little narratives, and various snippets of life that constitute the individual posts of his blog. Only in turning to the affective dimension of the year does Herrndorf employ the more abstract categories of "happy" and "unhappy"; otherwise it is heterogeneity that protrudes. The post functions as a synecdoche of *Arbeit und Struktur* in that it is characterized by the absence of a narrative arc that would organize all these details into a coherent story with a proper beginning, middle, and end.

What allows in most illness narratives for such a relatively coherent structure to emerge is their narrative endpoint, namely survival. Kathlyn Conway calls these illness stories triumph narratives—a designation that is suggestive of the strong teleological tilt that characterizes them. Conway outlines the typical

plotline of triumph narratives as follows: after an initial shock that sets in with the diagnosis, the author finds a way to cope with the disease, and is "eventually restored to health or achieves some kind of moral resolution" (1). Rather than just the denouement, triumph becomes the structuring principle that turns illness into a narratable story but as such it also dominates these narratives, overshadowing moments of pain and suffering. What makes *Arbeit und Struktur* intriguing from a formal-aesthetic point of view is precisely the impossibility of ultimate recovery. The incurability of glioblastoma denied Herrndorf the possibility of triumph over cancer and raises the question of what other tale can be told of sickness if the most prevalent illness story is rendered obsolete.

Stories do ideological work. Employing narrative means, stories fill a contingent world with meaning, transforming it thereby into a place that appears more familiar. A perfunctory remark by Conway helps us understand what specific form this ideological work takes in the context of disease. "There are a plethora of books about illness and disability," she notes, "in which authors attempt to describe and make sense of a range of devastating bodily experiences" (1). To describe pain and the breakdown of the body, however, is not at all the same as making sense of the experience of illness. Strictly speaking, description entails the straightforward rendition of symptoms only, while the intellectual operation of making sense must exceed the immediate body. Since there is no meaning inherent to physical pain, making sense of sickness requires resorting to interpretative frameworks that transgress the realm of the corporal. Various religions, for instance, offer narratives that account for the condition of illness, that is to say they attribute meaning to the condition of sickness. Similarly to religion, the triumph narrative as the most powerful contemporary myth imbues the intrinsic senselessness of suffering with significance.

In their various iterations, triumph stories construct illness "as an opportunity of personal growth," as Conway puts it (2). The triumph that lends this type of story its name thus represents far more than sheer physical survival. The body and actual pain often get short shrift, or figure only insofar as they allow for illness to emerge as a tale of self-realization or personal transcendence (xi). The individual's triumph over the disease, or nature if we will, becomes a moral victory as these narratives reframe medical conditions and bodily suffering in explicitly self-developmental terms. "If one battles hard enough and maintains a positive attitude," Conway sums up their underlying ethos, "everything will work out fine" (2). As tempting as it may seem to attribute a good part of recovery to mere will, stamina, and perseverance—tempting because they bespeak the individual's power over physical conditions—the flipside of this interpretative coin reveals how problematic such a rendering of illness is: if we follow the logic inherent to triumph narratives, death becomes not only defeat, but a matter of personal failure. In constructing death as the deficiency of the

individual to exercise efficiently the various regimes of self-care, triumph narratives convey and disseminate in predominantly celebratory form neoliberalism's rhetoric of total self-responsibility.

Arbeit und Struktur not only breaks with such self-heroic gestures of agency, but showcases a fundamentally different approach to illness. Arthur W. Frank's typology of illness narratives gives us a more fine-grained picture than Conway's singular concept of triumph and helps us understand what Herrndorf writes against and how he does so. Illness stories often rest on the question "Why me?"—an initial inquiry that gives rise to narratives that reconstruct the individual's life story from the vantage point of sickness. In his seminal study of illness narratives, Frank calls these stories quest narratives. Taking a normative approach, Frank's preference lies with quest narratives because they afford the "wounded storyteller"—also the title of his book—the chance to "meet suffering head on" and to find their voice as a consequence of this search for meaning (115). First-person narrators who engage in discovering what illness means in the larger scheme of their life thus perform a twofold task: first, they reclaim their voice from medical narratives that reduce them to voiceless sufferers, usually casting various health care providers as protagonists—a type that Frank calls the restitution plot. Secondly, they also contain through the structuring power of stories the chaos that illness bestows on their life—something at which the chaos plot, the third type in Frank's taxonomy, precisely fails. In his view, quest narratives are empowering because the sick person emerges as victor, not only literally, as the survivor of illness, but also figuratively by having completed a journey that is in some way meaningful.

Herrndorf exposes the belief on which the quest narrative rests by simply negating the question, "Why me?." "Warum denn nicht ich?" (181) 'Well, why not me?,' he shrewdly asks. While the why-me inadvertently casts illness as a meaningful event by virtue of its assigned place within the individual's larger life story, its very opposite, the why-not-me expresses the utter randomness of sickness as an occurrence in anyone's life. Adding the "not" shifts the emphasis away from the me—away from the individual and their life story—to foreground the not, the negation of any meaning that would pertain to illness. The not brings to expression, in the most condensed and apodictic way, "der sinnlose Kampf gegen die Sinnlosigkeit eines idiotischen, bewusstlosen Kosmos" (214) 'the meaningless battle against the meaninglessness of an idiotic and senseless cosmos,' as Herrndorf phrased it. The negation thus works to deemphasize the self and its quest for meaning by broadening the horizon to the world at large, bringing into focus the prevalence of contingency.

Arbeit und Struktur thus rests on a delicate balance. As I argued in the first part of this essay, blogging became a pivotal means for Herrndorf not only to chronicle his illness but also to produce and maintain a sense of self against the

damaging effects of cancer. Consequently, the blog cannot but circle ceaselessly around a "me." At the same time, Herrndorf decidedly refuses to construct this self as the center of a meaningful life story instigated by the disease. What accommodates these divergent tendencies is the digital: its instantaneity allows for the continual production of the self, yet this self is not produced with any sort of coherence or unity in mind. The immediacy of the digital privileges the momentary, the fleeting, and the continually evolving. The blog form's open-endedness allowed Herrndorf to foreground the processual rather than the finished and the complete. Since there is no narrative endpoint from the position of which the posts are conceived, individual moments are set free from the teleological pull that illness often exercises. Composed of stand-alone entries, the blog form thwarts a tighter order and effectuates the dissolving of meaning that may inadvertently arise through narrative. Moments that are captured in the posts do not draw their significance from their position within a broader story, but are meaningful in their own right, Herrndorf suggests.

The absence of a narrative arc has consequences for the way in which Herrndorf conceives of the relation between past and present. In *Arbeit und Struktur*, the past exists independently of illness—unlike in quest narratives where bygone moments shine only in light of their relevance for the present condition. Herrndorf withstands such a colonization of the past. He recounts memories from his childhood and adolescence, like playing ice hockey on the lake in his hometown every winter, his elementary school teacher's handwriting, his daily walk to school, or the MIELE AUTOMATIC W 429 S washer, built in 1968, that he inherited from his grandmother. These glimpses of the past mingle with moments of despair when Herrndorf reports the results of Google searches on glioblastoma and life expectancy, but also triumphant moments like the one after a doctor's visits when he "auf die Donuts geheult" (199) 'wept on the doughnuts' at a bakery because, against all odds, the tumor had ceased to grow. Past and present are represented with a richness of detail, often immersing the reader in briskly swinging moods, changing feelings, and shifting thoughts that may be inconsistent but are nonetheless real. *Arbeit und Struktur* allows for ambivalent affective states and contradictory musings because past and present exist as loosely connected realms only, not tied to one another through the logic of self-development, but held together merely by the passage of time. Perhaps it is the tragic fact that there was no future for him—or only so slim a chance of it that it was tantamount to a miracle—that liberated the past from the burden of meaning that it has to carry for the present in light of a possible future.

In Frank's typology, such a disjuncture between past and present and even moreso the lack of narrative order imposed on the immediate reality of cancer would make *Arbeit und Struktur* a chaos narrative; or rather a non-narrative, to use Frank's term. The very concept of chaos indicates the absence of order, in this

case narrative order, with which illness is kept at bay. Extending Frank's argument, chaos amounts to the individual's failure to exercise control over her condition by means of storytelling. As I argue in the first part of this essay, writing as a coping mechanism was central to *Arbeit und Struktur*. Yet it is not the power of narrative that Herrndorf employed but something more elemental. Refusing narrativizing approaches to illness that carry even the slightest hint of self-realization, he relied on language itself. Since the tumor directly affected his cognitive abilities, the chaos that Frank invokes was in Herrndorf's case not only metaphorical but also literal, caused by the physiological changes in his brain. He heard "immerzu Stimmen" (385) 'incessantly voices' but was unable to tell if they were real or in his head; or dropped items because of his deteriorating sense of space and altered vision. Language was a way for Herrndorf to regain a sense of control over these situations. While the continual effort to write may have been attached to the hope that the production of written discourse as a complex cognitive process may rewire his brain and prolong—if not enhance—its neurological activity and proper functioning, Herrndorf was only too aware that the power of language to mitigate chaos is necessarily always circumscribed. Only in retrospect, once the seizure was over, or when a new drug or a higher dosage of an old one temporarily ameliorated the neurological symptoms, could language come into effect to reassert the power of the self to some extent. Describing the painful details involved in both speaking and writing, he gives anything but a celebratory account of what Frank calls the process of "finding one's voice." Herrndorf's blog, with its matter-of-factness, its relentless return to the physical reality of living with a brain tumor and the ways in which cancer affects everyday life, cautions against too sanguine tales of sickness.

  Arbeit und Struktur is thus deeply indebted to the power of language and displays, at the same time, fundamental skepticism vis-à-vis narrative. I have distinguished between the two, because each indicates a different way to conceive of the self and the self's power over its physical conditions. Herrndorf curtails narrative to the moment. His posts rarely exceed the immediately given situation and do not enter into tight narrative relations with other entries. Thematic continuities exist, of course, but the recurrent musings on natural beauty, moments from childhood and adolescence, or ingenious nuggets of cultural criticism, for instance, do not yield a story of the self, let alone a consistent or a developmental one. Rather, they form a key part in Herrndorf's strategy of denarrativization, which works precisely to debunk the idea of a more evolved self that emerges as a result of sickness.

Final Remarks

       In his essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin laments that in the last couple of centuries "the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness" (93). He argues that nineteenth-century bourgeois society established its institutions to "make it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying" (93). Although Philippe Ariès locates the same fundamental shift somewhat earlier, he contends, similarly to Benjamin, that while death used to be part of everyday life, it undergoes a gradual banishment from this sphere. "Death was increasingly thought of as a transgression," Ariès notes, "which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work" (57). Concentrating on the emotional economy that pertains to dying, Ariès does not elaborate on the connection between death and work; for our purposes, however, we will employ his insight to draw a connection not only with *Arbeit und Struktur*, but also with Crary's critique of the contemporary.

       To qualify as a complete idiot today, Herrndorf remarks, one has to state that death "ist ein Tabuthema in unserer Gesellschaft" (438) 'represents a taboo topic in our society.' His snarky potshot at the triteness of this stance is well-taken, and yet his criticism does not go far enough. Based on Crary's argument that the neoliberal regime of time not only demands that its consumers be relentlessly available and active, but also produces a whole new kind of digital citizen for whom little else exists than constant self-maintenance through work, it is not far-fetched to go beyond a mere thematic avoidance of death in the digital age. The logic of 24/7 rather insinuates the structural impossibility thereof. Death, in other words, is not even a taboo topic any longer because the temporal structures put in place by the neoliberal regime of time simply imply its very non-existence. To be perpetually "on" rests, after all, on the illusion that this state of activity can be endlessly extended. If the previous centuries have removed death from the visible realm of everyday life, as Benjamin and Ariès suggest, the age of 24/7 has advanced that elimination by not even allowing for its very possibility.

       But how can we explain, then, the existence of *Arbeit und Struktur*, a text that represents and negotiates death in the very medium of 24/7? Benjamin's intimation that the novel absorbs the interest in death when it disappears from the public, contributing to the genre's rise in the nineteenth century, will help us make sense of this contradiction. What propels the reader toward the novel is, according to Benjamin, "the hope of warming his shivering life with the death he reads about" (101). Death reveals the "meaning of life" (101) and as the ultimate guarantor of meaning, exudes a peculiar attraction. Moreover, to experience a character's passing in the novel is pleasurable not only because it discloses the meaningfulness of life, but also because it confirms to the reader that she is still alive.

From the perspective of *Arbeit und Struktur*, Benjamin's musings on death as the source of (retrospective) meaning appear in a quasi-religious light. Neither is death in itself meaningful for Herrndorf, nor does it endow life with meaning *ex post*. *Arbeit und Struktur* presents a radically secular view of dying, radical insofar as Herrndorf not only rejects explicitly religious ideas but also withstands providing any sort of metaphysical solace. What informs the undoing of overarching narrative structures is his view of life as inevitably contingent. Herrndorf's blog demonstrates precisely how to live with terminal illness without resorting to a story that explains away contingency by turning illness into a meaningful journey of sorts.

Death appears here as an event that has to be dealt with, almost in a practical way. Deconstructing the notion of meaningful life, *Arbeit und Struktur* represents the antidote to the nineteenth-century novel, yet the blog's existence confirms Benjamin's insight that the interest in death remains in spite of its implied impossibility in the age of ceaseless work and activity. *Arbeit und Struktur* acquired a cult status among the German reading public, beyond the well-trodden paths of literary consumption, precisely because Herrndorf gave his readers extended insight into the everyday struggle of sickness unto death in the age of 24/7. Its existential concern ensured that the blog would sustain attention from its readers and it is through this enduring focus—the prolonged temporality of reading—that *Arbeit und Struktur* made palpable something that is all too easily forgotten: that even in case of terminal illness, there is time to live through and time to fill, with death overshadowing life. The blog was so strangely fascinating and utterly bewildering at the same time because it demonstrated how to endure the process of dying itself. It did so not only in the quintessential medium of 24/7, but employing its one and only *modus vivendi*—work.

Notes

1. Translation mine. The tweet also became the last entry to Herrndorf's blog *Arbeit und Struktur*: http://www.wolfgang-herrndorf.de/page/2/

2. There is no English translation available of *Arbeit und Struktur*. All translations are mine. Since the blog and the print edition of *Arbeit und Struktur* are nearly identical, page numbers in parentheses refer to the German print edition for the sake of user-friendliness.

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