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**An ideological landscape.**

The *Ramsau am Dachstein* complex: film and radio plays

1.

On May 21, 1976, on its first channel (then FS1) the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) showed Elfriede Jelinek’s film essay *Ramsau am Dachstein*, a portrait of the Styrian community of the same name. Jelinek herself had Styrian roots, loosely speaking: she was born in Mürzzuschlag and during her childhood and youth, her vacations were spent at her grandmother’s house in Krampen in the Styrian Mürztal.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus she fulfilled the criteria that secured her an invitation from the ORF to join this project. As part of the series *Vielgeliebtes Österreich* (“Much-Beloved Austria”), in which *Ramsau am Dachstein* was produced, the ORF asked authors and filmmakers to create a one-hour contribution on a region to which they had a special, ideally personal, relationship. In close cooperation with the respective state studios, 14 films were made,[[2]](#footnote-2) which were broadcast between 1975 and 1977. The aim of the series, whose title was taken from the Austrian national anthem, was “to show the diversity of the Austrian regions” and to carry out a kind of “critical land survey”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This is a concept that made sense in the context of the broadcasting reform of 1974: The ORF – now officially a public-law institution – had the explicit programming mandate to ensure that Austrian identity was promoted in all of its programs (and other activities).[[4]](#footnote-4) Beyond that, there were no specifications. The editor in charge, Helmut Fürthauer, saw the series as characterized by the “subjective view” that the creative teams were supposed to bring to the table, along with a “formal openness”.[[5]](#footnote-5) Although all of the contributions led to the provinces or to the periphery of Austria,[[6]](#footnote-6) they turned out to be completely different, shaped by the individual approaches of the respective authors and filmmakers. The series began with two “conventional-instructional culture feuilletons”[[7]](#footnote-7) by Jörg Mauthe, a writer, journalist and politician involved in culture, close to the conservative camp but non-party affiliated; he had been associated with the ORF since 1967 as an editor and program planner and had come up with the idea for the series. But the ORF also managed to get completely different personalities involved, such as (later) proponents of the Austrian film scene, like Franz Novotny and Christian Berger, as well as Karin Brandauer and Fritz Lehner, the latter two of whom were fresh out of the film academy at the time and were to go on to shape Austrian television film. On the authors’ side, well-known or promising names were also brought in, including Michael Guttenbrunner and Peter Rosei in addition to Jelinek.

The work on the film was extraordinarily fraught with conflict, and heated disagreements are said to have broken out at the editing table.[[8]](#footnote-8) The ORF had provided Jelinek with Claus Homschak, an experienced theater and television director. Homschak saw it as his task to film the most beautiful images possible in order to emphasize the “contrast to the content”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Otherwise, his approach and that of the entire ORF team was rather routine and conventional. The result was a defusing of Jelinek’s screenplay, which was based on methods inspired by experimental film, although its realization still “basically corresponded to the author’s intentions in terms of content”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Even the opening sequence – a sensational 360-degree flight over the Dachstein – turned out completely different from the collage of landscape shots, “broken up into individual images, like postcards”, that Jelinek had planned.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Years later, Elfriede Jelinek recalled in an interview: “I really thought I should make a critical film about a landscape. Naturally, the screenplay turned out accordingly. So I really only used the ‘happy skiers’ that you already see as a counterpoint; what I showed were the people who just didn’t benefit from the boom, from the construction of the hotel and pension and the slope and drag lift up in the area.”[[12]](#footnote-12) However, Jelinek not only quarreled about the work process and the product, but also with the reception of the film. The by no means surprising[[13]](#footnote-13) protests by the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the tourist association led to a public discussion meeting on location, which Jelinek attended to explain her concerns;[[14]](#footnote-14) however, she was not met with any degree of understanding. On the contrary, the confrontation with “500 dehumanized farmers who wanted to stone me”[[15]](#footnote-15) was a threatening, even traumatizing experience. *Ramsau am Dachstein* was to remain Jelinek’s only work for television.

2.

*Ramsau am Dachstein* addresses the importance of tourism for the region and the structural change it triggered in the 20th century. Jelinek describes and analyzes the development of tourism in Ramsau in its historical and, above all, economic context. The traditional prohibition on division of hereditary estates enabled an unprecedented accumulation of property. This wealth reached a population with a particular self-confidence that was rooted in the fact that Ramsau was one of the few Protestant-tolerant communities. Women, who more or less indirectly helped finance the prosperity of the propertied classes with their underpaid or completely unpaid labor, largely fell by the wayside. But additionally, mountain farmers – whose farms were often not accessible – and other non-property owning men, i.e. farmhands, were also unable to participate in this prosperity.

In the screenplay manuscript, Jelinek divides the visual and textual levels into two separate, parallel columns – a working method that “conveys the contrastive process that Jelinek was aiming for, in which the images shown are countered by verbal commentary.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The shots of idyllic winter landscapes and cheerful, skiing tourists, sometimes accompanied by traditional folk music – zither and yodelling – evoke the unholy alliance of two clichés: that of happiness through consumption on the one hand, and of what was original and genuine on the other. Both are consistently deconstructed by the text. Jelinek bombards us with pairs of opposites and oppositions. She contrasts the genuine with the inauthentic, the haves with the have-nots, the industrious with those who were not, etc. We are dealing with a “hybrid, complex documentary essay”[[17]](#footnote-17) that presents its audience with a polyphonic composition: “Image, sound, and text spark complex contexts of meaning in montages of contrasts, and well-established filmic patterns are reformulated in an insightful manner.” Inn and hotel owners are also included in the picture and have their say, as do their cooks, the country doctor, the mountain farmer, the owner of the Lodenwalkerei (the only factory in Ramsau) and the carpenter who also serves as the church organist.

The polyphony, however, manifests itself most concretely in the voices of three women, who fulfill different functions in the overall composition of *Ramsau am Dachstein*: first there are the elderly maid Josefa’s memories of bitter poverty, hunger, abuse and misery; they are at the diegetic center of the film. The actress Elisabeth Orth reads a comment from off-screen which, in addition to the facts, also provides the theory to a certain extent. After the 360-degree flight over the Dachstein at the beginning of the film, her enumeration of the most important information about Ramsau culminates in an announcement that stands as programmatic for the film: “Ramsau has the second highest tax revenue in Styria, even ahead of the industrial cities. Ramsau has around two thousand inhabitants. Nowadays there are hopes that Ramsau will reach the one million mark in overnight stays. At the same time, something must begin that could perhaps be described as the demythologization of the so-called simple, original and genuinely rural. This means that we need to see the background behind this idyll, to restore their history to things.” What is interesting about this introduction is not only what is said, but also how it is said.

The first two sentences begin with “in the Ramsau” – a striking repetition that is considered stylistically less than ideal. The adverb “dabei” (“in doing so”) is also placed here abruptly: it does not directly follow what was said before, but rather seems to function as a marker signifying a break. All in all, this creates the impression that the text consists of a montage of existing texts that Jelinek throws together to create new meaning. “EJ treats the world as a mass of text [...]”, argues Peter Weibel. “She does not observe the world, but rather the texts that the world produces. She is a second-order observer. She uses the linguistic material provided by the mass media. […] She thus refers to the mass media and not to the world, or to the image of the world that the mass media create. By plowing through this mass media with her harsh judgement, that is, with her literary techniques, she creates a new image of the world.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Jelinek also uses this montage technique on her own texts. She herself embodies the third female voice in *Ramsau am Dachstein*, speaking both onscreen and off. Her spoken commentary nearly always begins with the sentence: “This is a beautiful landscape”, which forms the leitmotif of the film, so to speak. It is the core, and in each case is followed by variations of statements about the landscape and the people, all of which focus on specific themes. Here, the author draws on her highly acclaimed third novel, *Women as Lovers*,[[19]](#footnote-19) which appeared in 1975 and which, in a similar way, starts with an invocation of the landscape and nature to then reveal social patterns, exploring their implications for the lives of women: “do you know this BEAUTIFUL land with its valleys and hills? / in the distance it is bounded by beautiful mountains. it has a horizon, which is something that many lands do not have. […] / right in the middle of this beautiful land good people have built a factory. […] / the women who work here do not belong to the factory owner. / the women who work here belong entirely to their families. / only the building belongs to the company. so everyone is satisifed.”[[20]](#footnote-20) In Jelinek’s literary work, critique of ideology is synonymous with linguistic criticism. The montage of language material enables her to describe the ideology or a particular myth in an imitative way, thereby accentuating breaks and gaps. In *Women as Lovers*, apparent opposites – the landscape, the people, the factory, the women – are placed within the same (semantic) space and thus dissolved (“so everyone is satisfied.”).

In *Ramsau am Dachstein* too, everything revolves around space, but Jelinek’s critique of ideology takes place in the confrontation of language and linguistic criticism with cinematic elements. Simultaneities and non-simultaneities, presences and absences are set out deliberately. Thus the protagonist, the maid Josefa, is isolated throughout the film in her own space from which she speaks – whether it be in the parlor, the kitchen, or the cowshed. Even when she appears in the picture with others, she seems alien – for example, as the only one walking through the wintery, albeit sunny village without a jacket. She is more foreign than the foreigners, the tourists. Her reports are full of taboos. She tells of things that are not supposed to come to the surface. Only once does she (intentionally) share the space with a second person: Jelinek herself appears in the picture with Josefa and introduces: “This is a beautiful landscape. One finds more happiness in more beautiful landscapes than in less beautiful ones.” What follows are Josefa’s memories of her accident with a bull that nearly cost her her life.

Lying on the floor, she thinks of her children; she fights back tears. A few days after the accident, despite several fractures, she returned to work. Josefa never utters the word happiness. The concept of happiness is completely meaningless to her, who has never had any. In this sequence, myth is confronted with reality – and at the same time, divorced from it. Myth and reality are incompatible. Towards the end of the film, Elisabeth Orth’s off-camera commentary consistently dismisses the possibility of “reconciling reality with the person who produces it” and “reconciling the description of things with their explanation”, as “utopia”. Cross-country skiers ski down the snow-covered, sun-drenched slope; the camera pans to the left. As soon as the cross-country skiers have left the frame, Josefa appears and trudges through the snow, up the slope and towards us. Josefa and the tourists do not fit into the same picture. They exist in the same space, but not at the same time. Then the credits roll.

3.

The radio play *Portrait of a Filmed Landscape[[21]](#footnote-21)* is a direct replica of the film and the debates surrounding it. It begins with an ironic dialogue between the editor and the author, reflecting on the conflict between Jelinek and the ORF team: “When I told you that I wanted this film to be a true-to-life description of a landscape, I didn’t mean a tendentious report. […]”[[22]](#footnote-22) The leitmotif that we already know from the television adaptation is employed again. And it is again the figure of the author who repeats, expands and varies “This is a beautiful landscape” several times. Five farmers tell of progress and continuity with the Third Reich – which is an important difference to the TV film, where the topic is largely left out. In this universe, progress primarily means money and the market economy.

More explicitly than in the film, this aspect is the focus of the radio play: the farmers – sometimes in chorus – attest to the absence of poverty: “Of course, if you are absolutely looking for something, then sooner or later you will find it. But you won’t find any more poverty here with us!”.[[23]](#footnote-23) Another aspect of capitalist ideology is debt: “Better debt than high taxes.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Jelinek’s critique of ideology again takes place in the field of linguistic criticism: “We no longer say foreign tourism because the foreigners are not foreign to us, but our dear guests.”[[25]](#footnote-25) From the peasant choir, zither music, advertisements, and the remarks of a local historian about the area’s original state, there emerges a kaleidoscopic view of the winners in the municipality of Ramshofen am Wetterstein, which easily decodes to Ramsau am Dachstein. The group of winners also has the authority to define those who are outside: “We don’t have anyone fouling the nest here. […] If someone were to do so, we would have no more room for them.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

The narrative of the maid Josefa is conveyed to us in an interview. The interviewer, a television journalist, asks her about her life and experiences. In doing so, he does not allow himself to get involved with her reports, but constantly appeases, relativizes, and manipulates her statements. Nevertheless, he does not succeed in squeezing the harmless cliché of “There’s No Sin on the Alpine Pastures” out of her. Josefa’s modest, even shy report refuses any form of ingratiation: by answering authentically, she tells the opposite of what the interviewer is trying to elicit from her. Now and again, we hear that she is close to tears. The dynamic of the interview assigns the 86-year-old maid Josefa the role of someone who stands outside the logic of the peasant chorus; she is the one who still talks about the “foreigners”, who has no money and for that reason cannot incur any debts, and who thus is almost automatically accorded the role of the one fouling the nest.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The short radio play *Die Jubilarin* (“the Birthday Girl”)[[28]](#footnote-28) focuses entirely on a journalist’s interview with Josefa. The occasion is her 85th birthday. Textually, *Die Jubilarin* adheres almost completely to the script of *Portrait of a Filmed Landscape*, but the voice of the speaker is more convincing[[29]](#footnote-29) and, in terms of intonation, is more closely oriented towards the real Josefa whom we know from *Ramsau am Dachstein*: embarrassed and modest, she giggles a lot – and so she reflects the impossibility of a conversation and understanding between a journalist and a maid: “In this way, the dialogues, which are nothing more than talking past each other, expose the homeland ideology as the perfect satire of a radio interview.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Both *Portrait of a Filmed Landscape* and *Die Jubilarin* were based on tape recordings that Jelinek made in the course of researching the television film. They are therefore exceptions in the context of her rich oeuvre of radio plays: they were also distinguished from the author’s original radio plays as “audio productions”.[[31]](#footnote-31) These are “multifunctional texts”, whereby there were specific work and motif contexts that “enabled or suggested a transfer to the radiophone.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The best known and often studied example of this is probably *Die Ausgesperrten* (English title: *Wonderful, Wonderful Times*): Jelinek wrote the script, the radio play, and the novel almost simultaneously. Jelinek, whose first radio play *Wien West* (Vienna West) dates back to 1972, was an experienced and recognized author of radio plays. The author was regarded as the main figure behind the so-called new radio play, whose formal range was by definition close to her writing practice.[[33]](#footnote-33) She made use of all available possibilities for technical experimentation: from the deliberate use of the timbre and dialect of the speakers’ voices and stereophony to the collages of language and sounds.

*Portrait of a Filmed Landscape* and *Die Jubilarin* are evidence of the fact that the topic was not exhausted after *Ramsau am Dachstein* was broadcast. Both works replay partial aspects of *Ramsau am Dachstein*, placing different emphases that function as a supplement and a correction to the television version. In the radio plays and “audio productions”, Jelinek purposefully and successfully assembles language in order to analyze ideology and make it visible or audible. She controls how meaning is generated: she is in her element.

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1. See Verena Mayer, Ronald Koberg, *Elfriede Jelinek. Ein Porträt* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2006), p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Originally, four films per province were planned, and thus a total of 36 contributions. A list of the films as well as background information and the history of the series *Vielgeliebtes Österreich* and the present film were extensively researched in: Constantin Wulff, “Terra incognita. Ein Beitrag zu einer Geschichte des Dokumentarfilms in Österreich am Beispiel der Fernsehfilme *Ramsau am Dachstein* (1976) und *Franz Grimus* (1977),” in *Spiele und Wirklichkeiten. Rund um 50 Jahre Fernsehspiel und Fernsehfilm in Österreich*, ed. Sylvia Szely (Vienna 2005), pp. 131–140. Constantin Wullf also presented a text on another film in the series, Fritz Lehner’s *Freistadt*, which also contains valuable information on the subject: “Heimat, fremde Heimat. Freistadt (1976), ein Winterfilm aus dem Mühlviertel,” In Fritz Lehner, *Filme*, ed. Sylvia Szely (Vienna 2002), pp. 24–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Wulff, “Terra incognita”, 2005, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10000785> (§4); see also <https://zukunft.orf.at/modules/orfpublicvalue/upload/09r0029.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quoted at Wulff, “Terra incognita”, 2005, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quite typical for ORF productions in the 1970s – see Sylvia Szely, “Seismographen der Gegenwart? Die Transformationen des ORF-Fernsehspiels in den siebziger Jahren” in *tele visionen. Historiografien des Fernsehens*. ÖZG vol. 12, No. 4/2001. pp. 60–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wulff, “Terra incognita”, 2005, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mayer, Koberg, *Elfriede Jelinek*, 2006, p. 85. See also Heinz Trenczak, Renate Kehldorfer, “Achtzig Prozent der Filmarbeit sind Geldbeschaffung. Ein Gespräch mit Elfriede Jelinek” in *Blimp* 2, 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Wulff, “Terra incognita”, 2005, p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Beate Hochholdinger-Reiterer, “Ramsau am Dachstein” in *Jelinek Handbuch*, ed. Pia Janke (Stuttgart, 2013), p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hochholdinger-Reiterer, “Ramsau am Dachstein”, 2013, p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Trenczak, Kehldorfer, “Achtzig Prozent der Filmarbeit sind Geldbeschaffung”, 1985, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Other, less controversial contributions to the series also provoked strong reactions. See, e.g. Wulff, “Heimat, fremde Heimat”, 2002, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mayer, Koberg, *Elfriede Jelinek*, 2006, p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Trenczak, Kehldorfer, “Achtzig Prozent der Filmarbeit sind Geldbeschaffung”, 1985, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hochholdinger-Reiterer, “Ramsau am Dachstein”, 2013, p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Constantin Wulff, quoted at: <https://www.film.at/vielgeliebtes_oesterreich_ramsau_am_dachstein> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Peter Weibel, “Mediale Montage. Literatur im elektronischen Zeitalter zwischen Massenmedien und Subjektaussagen” in *Elfriede Jelinek: ICH WILL KEIN THEATER*, ed. Pia Janke. Mediale Überschreitungen. (Vienna 2007) p. 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Elfriede Jelinek, *Die Liebhaberinnen* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jelinek, *Die Liebhaberinnen*, 1996, p. 5. English translation by Martin Chalmers, *Women as Lovers* (Serpent’s Tail: London, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. SDR 1977, length: 40 Minutes, first broadcast: 1.12.1977, dir. Hartmut Kirste. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Elfriede Jelinek, *Porträt einer verfilmten Landschaft*. Radio play. Manuscript, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In fact, the real Josefa had been the victim of mobbing for being a “shit-stirrer” [Nestbeschmutzer] as a result of her appearance in *Ramsau am Dachstein*, according to Elfriede Jelinek in an email of 13.6.2021 to Dietmar Schwärzler of sixpackfilm. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. BR 1977, Länge: 16 Minuten, Erstsendung: 11.9.1978, Regie: Alexander Malachovski. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The role of Josefa was voiced by the Austrian actress Maria Engelstorfer, known to contemporaries from her appearances in such legendary television series as *Ein echter Wiener geht nicht unter* and *Kottan ermittelt*. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Hilde Haider-Pregler, “Informationsformate als Hörinszenierungen” in *Jelinek Handbuch*, ed. Pia Janke (Stuttgart 2013), p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Christoph Kepplinger, “Partituren für den Rundfunk. Elfriede Jelineks akustische Literatur” in *Elfriede Jelinek: ICH WILL KEIN THEATER*, ed. Pia Janke. Mediale Überschreitungen (Vienna 2007), p. 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For more information on the “new radio play”, see Hans-Jürgen Krug, *Kleine Geschichte des Hörspiels* (Cologne 2020), pp. 94–124. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)