

## Josef Haslinger (Austria)

### Imagination/Fantasy/Reality: Are the Boundaries Changing?

The title is obviously a leading question. If we answer "no," we end up exactly where an American philosopher dumped us off several years ago, at the end of history. At that time I'd already begun to prepare for life from the X-Box, with fantasy served up at the touch of a button. But then our concerned leaders took precautions to ensure that the history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century doesn't differ too much from that of the 20<sup>th</sup>. One might say that reality went to great lengths to contradict the notion of a Zeitgeist philosopher. We have enemies once again, keeping each other on their toes, and so Johann Georg, Friedrich Hegel's old wheel, after getting stuck for a spell, keeps on turning. We've developed a keen sense of hearing, in the meantime. And at least we have learned this much: whenever people have claimed to understand the logic behind history, there have been others made to suffer for it.

I remember well my first video game. It formed the evening's entertainment in an East Austrian mountain lodge at 3,000 meters. The men and women split into separate groups. We had to aim a rifle at a screen and shoot ducks, and I was damned good at it. I was champion of the men's group. All of the hunting enthusiasts and marksmen around me were green with envy. (Perhaps that was why I became a conscientious objector—because I would've been simply too dangerous as a soldier.) I got to dance a waltz with the winner from the women's group.

After the Gulf War of 1991, the *Chicago Tribune* ran interviews with pilots and WSOs (Weapons System Officers) from fighter bombers. As they flew over Iraq in their F-15s, out of range of the anti-aircraft defenses, the WSOs chose on a monitor the targets they'd destroy. They were preparing an attack, but they spoke as if they were supplying the region with food. Bombs were called "pickles," and cluster bombs, which split into smaller individual bombs before impact, they referred to as "mixed pickles." Captain Keith Johnson, a 32-year-old WSO from Nebraska, said, "It's nothing but a video game." His boss, Colonel Hal Hornburg of Dallas, described the bombardment of Baghdad even more colorfully: "The man in front rows the boat, and the man in back shoots the ducks." I declare that man champion of the men's group. He has earned his waltz with Lyndie England, who later won the women's competition.

When video games were making their way into real life, I was writing a novel. I tried to imagine things from inside a terrorist's head. I didn't want to be one of those traditional terrorists, however, printing flyers with drawings of Kalashnikovs in seedy back rooms, propagandizing revolution in the name of some oppressed class. Instead I would be the leader of a cult, devoid of moral scruples and planning some big coup to bring about my means of salvation. I, the terrorist, would not work for publicity, but media publicity would work for me.

And so I set out to turn Vienna's Opera Ball into a European High Society Event, a cultural Superbowl, and through the lens of live TV cameras, destroy it with poison gas. What I didn't know at the time was that other people elsewhere on the planet were working on the same strategic concept, not for a novel, but to make it reality. My novel was published in

February 1995. One month later, on March 20, 1995, members of the Aum cult attacked various subway lines in Tokyo with poison Sarin gas, leaving twelve dead and 5,500 wounded. My novel was first translated into Japanese. When that book came out mere months later, it bore a red ribbon with the words "The novel that anticipated the Ashara attack." Is that something to be proud of? Or did I do something wrong?

If we describe history as the realization of ideas, then it appears to be in utterly good shape. But a strange phenomenon might be observed. Whenever history flexes some muscle, somebody somewhere jumps up and shouts in horror, "The end of literature is upon us!" It has always been like that, so it's nothing to worry about anymore. So far, the funeral dirges for the death of literature have always turned out to have been misunderstood background music for new literary developments. Of course we're losing something this time, too. Throughout the entire course of historic development, something has always been lost.

Some say the situation is graver this time, that reality has become an unstoppable frenzy of images that has arrested the cardiac muscle of literature—of the culture of language. To prevent literary writing from thoroughly becoming an appendix of the movie industry, Ben Marcus recommends, in *Harper's Magazine*, language muscle training by means of experimental literature.

It has become normal for written characters to be in the process of both coming and going. A bookshelf appears as a relic from times past. There is also an ethical dimension to this. The values of a society are traditionally tied to the canonization of written culture. When the canon of a written culture dissolves, the free market of taste takes over, leading in turn to multiple canonizations—though the weight is by no means evenly distributed. The canon focused on literary tradition quickly slips into defensive mode. Like public television outrun by commercial stations, it must find a convincing argument for itself. The dissolution of traditional written culture is directly related to an increase in youth violence, according to Barry Sanders in his book *A is for Ox: The Collapse of Literacy and the Rise of Violence in an Electronic Age*. That's an old intellectual trick played over and over again since the Enlightenment, one with which we German-speakers have been quite familiar since Friedrich Schiller's day. Literature declaring itself the last refuge of Humanity.

I don't know how much excessive violence dear Lady Literature has prevented, but I do know that it hasn't been all that bad at supporting excessive violence, either. Every country has its own dark chapter of literary history.

When we stop feeling at home in contemporary literature, we can always read Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett and Virginia Woolf and reassure ourselves that even the classic authors of the modern age never really felt at home anywhere.

The boundaries, it seems to me, have always been changing.