

Ambiguity and Morality in Jelinek's *Bambiland*

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**Volume 12 Issue 4 (December 2010) Article 12****Andrea Bandhauer,****"Ambiguity and Morality in Jelinek's *Bambiland*"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/12>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.4 (2010)****Thematic Issue, *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*****Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Ambiguity and Morality in Jelinek's *Bambiland*" Andrea Bandhauer begins by noting that the language of Elfriede Jelinek's play *Bambiland* (2004) is characterized by experimentation and a propensity for complex and ambiguous word plays. In this play, her critique of the media is directed against the international, or rather, Western press and its role in the Iraq war. The text of *Bambiland*, conceptualized as a "work-in-progress," in which Jelinek posed as an "embedded writer," started to appear on her website at the beginning of the war and Jelinek continued writing it through 2003. In the text of the play, Jelinek continues her "project of revealing" by means of manufacturing contexts for everyday myths in order to demythologize them. Following Barthes, Jelinek dissects myths which circulate in contemporary society and construct our everyday world. Here, war has become a media event and a spectacle enacted by a dominant power which legitimizes war by naturalizing and universalizing its reasons for violent intervention. Thus, the *Bambiland*-text is a closed universe in which the media generate circular arguments that feign diversity. The play however, while being a polylogue, is presented as a monologue which in the end only serves one purpose: to legitimize power.

**Andrea BANDHAUER****Ambiguity and Morality in Jelinek's *Bambiland***

When, in 2004, Elfriede Jelinek was announced as the winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, the reactions of both the German-speaking and the international press, as well as those of the literary establishment, were extremely divided. They ranged from utter surprise and incomprehension, through outrage to cautious approval, and – in some cases – enthusiasm (see, e.g., Bandhauer). The international reactions reflected the fact that Jelinek's work was – at least at the time of her award – still largely unknown to the wider public in most parts of the world. This was so, even though a number of her novels and plays (especially the novels *The Piano Teacher* [*Die Klavierspielerin*], 1983 and *Lust*, 1989) had been translated into numerous languages, among them English, French, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese (see Jelinek <<http://www.elfriedejelinek.com>>). Her best-known book, *The Piano Teacher*, was made into a film, directed by Michael Haneke and with Isabelle Huppert in the title role. The film was awarded three prizes at the Cannes festival in 2001.

Jelinek's texts are not easily accessible and they have become even less so in her recent work: her intense preoccupation with the physicalities of language poses difficulties for translators, as well as for readers who are not acquainted with or in any way part of the linguistic, cultural, historical, and geographical background to her work. The language of her texts is characterized by experimentation with different linguistic codes such as High German and Austrian colloquialisms and a propensity for complex and ambiguous word plays. While the Nobel Prize Committee emphasized the fact that Jelinek was chosen for her artistic experimentation with language, "for her musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays" ([nobelprize.org](http://www.nobelprize.org) <<http://www.nobelprize.org>>), Jelinek's British publisher, Peter Ayrton of Serpent's Tail Press comments: "She's the voice of the avantgarde ... In a way it's a problem with the Nobel Prize. It provides a mass readership for writers who don't write for one" (Ayrton qtd. in Abbot 16). Jelinek's preoccupation with the politics and culture of her home country, Austria, and the difficulty of translating her linguistically complex texts might make some of the – often outraged – astonishment about the decision of the Nobel Prize Committee understandable to some extent. However, the reactions of much of the German-speaking press were less readily comprehensible, as Jelinek has received consistently the highest accolades for her novels, as well as for her plays, especially in Germany. Since being awarded the Austrian State Scholarship for Literature (Österreichisches Staatsstipendium für Literatur) in 1972, she has won numerous prizes in Austria and Germany, among them the prestigious Heinrich-Böll-Preis in 1986, the Büchnerpreis in 1998 and the Heinrich-Heine-Preis in 2002, as well as the Berliner and Mühlheimer theater prizes in 2002. Her novels *The Piano Teacher* (1983), *Lust* (1989), and the play *Bambiland* (2004) were successful, the latter two becoming bestsellers. Her plays are performed in the most prestigious theaters and staged by prominent German directors such as Frank Castorf, Claus Peymann, Georg Tabori, Einar Schlee, and Christoph Schlingensiefel. In Austria, it is Jelinek herself who is at the center of the harsh criticism that often accompanies her career as a writer there (see also Lamb-Faffelberger 184). As a commentator on public life, she embodies the role of a constant critic who causes intentionally outrage by violating everything that is seen as sacrosanct within conservative, nationalistic, and rightwing circles. It is indeed her negativist ethical radicalism directed against Catholic as well fascist Austrian traditionalism, which attracts hostility.

Jelinek herself plays with the ambiguity of her persona as a public voice commenting on the mundane, and as an elusive artist who tries to shield herself from the limelight (e.g., Jelinek was unwilling to go to Stockholm to collect her Nobel Prize). She has frequently made herself vulnerable by giving the appearance of allowing the public some access to her biography and talking freely about her fear of being exposed as a public persona, seemingly following the feminist credo according to which the private is always also political (e.g., Jelinek's interview with Müller 80-82.). But, as Juliane Vogel argues, the mythical totality attached to the author's self-portrait is in fact nothing but a configuration of stereotyped utterances assembled by Jelinek herself (148), which she feeds regularly to the press. Moreover, as these utterances repeat satirically and reinforce the populist media's prejudicial views of her, she at the same time deconstructs its mechanisms of defamation through mimicry (see, e.g., El Refaie 327). Jelinek's self-stylization in fact complements her work, where stereotypes are reiterated and thus unveiled in a way that corresponds with Roland Barthes's critique of mythologies (see Winter 9-10). Roland Barthes's claim that the very principle of myth is that it transforms history into nature (129), and thus essentializes ideology, has clearly had repercussions on Jelinek's own work (see, e.g., Berka 139; Janz 61). Her preoccupation with the fabric and techniques of the mass media and its

ideological construction of "human nature" and "common sense" can, as Alison Fiddler writes, "be read as an attempt to penetrate the workings of an ideological tool and to expose the ways in which the language of the popular media works towards manipulating and controlling the consciousness of the receiver" (36).

The methods Jelinek employs in order to dismantle the workings of capitalism, populism, and gender hierarchies go back to her origins as an artist, to the tradition of the "Wiener Gruppe" and the writings of its members such as Oswald Wiener, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, Friedrich Achleitner, and H.C. Artmann. One of their characteristic techniques was to produce montages and collages of pre-given linguistic material, composed of both literary and trivial texts of the past and the present. Similarly, Jelinek mixes ideological myths created by the mass media with textual material drawn from the literary and philosophical canon of high culture. Clichés, as preconceived perceptions that can become a comfortable habit, are unsettled and "unpacked." Imitating literary tradition, as well as stereotypical ascriptions and at the same time re-writing these is, as Linda Hutcheon argues, what constitutes postmodern parody (89). However, methods of "re-writing" in order to "distort" and "reveal" were always part of the modernist tradition. This process had already been described by the Russian Formalists who claimed that literary art should be ambiguous and aim to "de-automatize" the perception of the reader (Bode 25-26). As Christoph Bode shows, ambiguity is seen as a necessary phenomenon of poetic language by semioticians like Lotman and structuralist linguists like Jakobson, as well as by Barthes. Ambiguity in this sense causes the disruption of the primary order, which directs the reader's attention towards a secondary structure behind the text (Bode 71-73). Jelinek's ambiguous use of pre-given linguistic material and her dissection of language aims at exactly such a disruption. And this is very much the case in one of her plays, *Bambiland*, that, rather unusually for Jelinek, is not set against the background of Austria and its society. In *Bambiland*, her critique of the media is directed against the international, or rather, Western press and its role in the war in Iraq. The text of *Bambiland* was conceptualized as a "work-in-progress," in which Jelinek posed as an "embedded writer." It started to appear on her website at the beginning of the war and Jelinek continued writing it throughout 2003. The play was first performed at the Burgtheater in Vienna, in December 2003. Jelinek herself had chosen the director, Christoph Schlingensiefel. In December 2004, shortly after the author had been awarded the Nobel Prize, the play was published by Rowohlt, Jelinek's usual publishing house. It appeared together with two additional monologues titled *Babel*, in a volume entitled *Bambiland*.

On Jelinek's website, as well as on the cover of the book, we see the image of a curious installation. A little plastic deer, which looks like Disney's Bambi, stands on a sandy, yellowish surface. In the background, there are two small fir-trees. The iconic image of Bambi, together with the title of the text, *Bambiland*, and the toy landscape could, at first glance, evoke connotations of Disneyland. In her own description of the installation, Jelinek explains the origin of the arranged objects in a seemingly unambiguous way: "The little deer was a present from my aunt for my sixth birthday, the dunes are made of the Maggi soup-flavoring with added parsley, the broken legs are the result of decades of cleaning activity by a conscientious cleaning woman ... The fir-trees are from the toy shop, they're used to decorate toy railways" (Jelinek qtd. in Hirschmann-Altzinger 16; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). While the idyllic image of Bambi and the toy trees present an innocent fantasy landscape of childhood, Bambi stands on wobbly legs. But the damage to Bambi was not – as Jelinek assures us – caused by some sort of violence, rather, it is accidental "collateral damage" that results from cleaning the toy's surface. The Maggi soup-flavoring powder, an ingredient to be found in so many kitchens, seems an obvious choice for fake sand. But why sand? After all, Bambi's origins lie in the Black Forest, where dunes are not part of the landscape. Bambi, as well as the fir-trees, are set literally on foreign ground. These imperfections within the idyllic arrangement seem to refer to something beneath the homely surface. Mainly, the habitual reference to a "Bambiland" idyll is disturbed by the ambiguity of the unfitting spatial arrangements. Indeed, the word "Bambiland" itself contains enough menace. It was, as Jelinek has pointed out, the name of an amusement park built by the son of Serbian dictator Marko Milošević (Hirschmann-Altzinger 16). Here, the contrasting connotations of entertainment on the one hand, and war on the other, intermingle. *Bambiland*, situated in the sandy deserts of ancient Mesopotamia, is in fact a text about the Iraq war as entertainment, as media spectacle, as "wartainment." The superficially benign installation, as well as the name of the play, are thus contextualized in a way that sets our perception adrift and dismantles the concepts of fun, play, and fantasy. The myth of childhood and homeliness is dissected through the ambiguity of *Bambiland* and transformed into metaphors of horror.

In the text of the play that follows, Jelinek continues her project of revealing by means of manufacturing contexts for everyday myths in order to demythologize them. Following Barthes, Jelinek dissects the "myths," which circulate in contemporary society and construct our everyday world. War has become a media event and a spectacle enacted by a dominant power which legitimizes war by naturalizing and universalizing its reasons for violent intervention. Words like "freedom" and "democracy" are misused as patriotic slogans. As Jean Baudrillard points out in his *Simulacra and Simulation*, Disneyland exists in order to hide the "real" land, the "real U.S. "Bambiland," like Baudrillard's Disneyland, belongs to the realm of the hyperreal and simulation: hyperreality is not the consequence of distorting the "real" and glossing over it; rather, the hyperreal creates the "real" as it is perceived by its consumers. Thus, "Bambiland" is a closed universe in which the media generate circular arguments that feign diversity, but in the end only serve one purpose: to legitimize power. Within this self-referential media machine the individual has no agency. The following words open the play: "Many thanks to Aeschylus and the 'Persians' ... As far as I am concerned, you can add a pinch of Nietzsche. The rest is not by me either. It is lousy. It is by the media" (*Bambiland* <<http://www.elfriedejelinek.com>>; comment on the English translation is necessary here. Jelinek's website contains five pages of another translation by Lilian Friedberg, which is currently being worked on. Her translation of the sentence: "Er ist von schlechten Eltern," which Angelika Peaston-Starting and Jennie Wright translated into "It is lousy," in my view conveys the original German more accurately. In her translation, it says: "[It is] ... 'a product of bad parenting' as the German idiom goes." Here, the role of the mass media, which manipulate the consciousness of the receiver and in that sense "educate" the masses, comes out more pointedly). While the *Bambiland* website contains images of photographs, some depicting reliefs of the palace of Ashrunasirpal II, King of Assyria (884-859 BC), some the weapons employed in the war against Iraq, and some the torture scenes in the Abu-Ghraib prison, the play is devoid of any instructions concerning its visual realization on stage. There are no descriptions of the stage settings, no directions, and no characters. The text can best be described as one long monologue. However, the monologue is not delivered by one distinct narrator representing a single opinion, but by a multitude of voices delivering vastly different points of view. There is the choir of ancient elders inserted as an allusion to Aeschylus's *The Persians*, in which the choir acts as a messenger reporting on the Persian war against the Greeks and comments on the enormity and senselessness of the human losses incurred by the losers, the Persians. There are also the voices of the contemporary embedded journalist following the war in Iraq, of US-American soldiers marching across "Bambiland"-Iraq, of "the Americans," and the West – that is, "us" – and of the leaders Bush senior and junior, Rumsfeld, and Cheney. Bundled up, contrasting, and contradictory voices create an oscillating narrator, a "reversible figure," who, as Bärbel Lücke points out, cannot be trusted (239). There exists, however, a clear hierarchy among the voices. It is the Bush (junior/senior), Rumsfeld, and Cheney-"trinity" that provides the reasons for the invasion of "Bambiland"-Iraq. In their "speeches" throughout the text, religious discourse abounds and supplies the "true" justification for the US-American and British soldiers to march into Baghdad. The religious symbolism of the "right" faith, Christianity, is mediated and celebrated on the "altar" of the contemporary world, the TV, where the "real" and "unreal" are one. Religion serves as the prime reason for the power struggle and Bush self-righteously knows that the "Father" is behind him: "Sometimes I have my doubts but my father has just passed me a note which reads that I am also God. Not only him. In any case I'm trying straight away, that is as soon as I've learned that I am God, naturally, to make myself useful in the spirit of Darwinist biology and thus to prove myself fit in my struggle with others. Who could be fitter than one who is both human and God at the same time? (*Bambiland* <<http://www.elfriedejelinek.com>>).

God-father, or – rather – Father Bush is handing down his scepter to his son, who immediately takes on the task of enforcing his order, where – in an absurd twist from the Christian faith towards Darwinism – the strongest survive. Here, religion justifies violence. "Freedom," in this sense, is a privilege of the powerful who reserve for themselves the right to determine which ideology is the "true" basis for its realization, what it means and who must be freed. Christianity figures as a kind of humanism, which is reducible to only one ideology, the American way of life. In the following passage, the narrator's voice represents the 'we' who speaks to the 'other': "Look, in principle it is this, and we do have principles: we are the only country where the individual is still important, because everyone is still the only one... Every human counts. Everyone counts their money. One more so, one less. Cheney more, we less... So you don't need to count, we aren't counting you either! You don't count, so why should you count others?" (Jelinek *Bambiland* <<http://www.elfriedejelinek.com>>). The idea of individualism is perverted through the ambiguity of the verb "to count," which is used in the sense of "being

important" as well as in the sense of "to calculate." Thus, the individualism described here is just another term for looking after one's own interests and becomes an ideology of the rich and powerful.

On CNN, which Jelinek used as a main source of information (Hirschmann-Altzinger 16), the war in Iraq was – at least to begin with – aestheticized as a global live-event, a big adventure taking place in a digitalized world (on this, see, e.g., Rötzer 50.) In *Bambiland*, the dehumanizing effect of a war presented as entertainment is taken to its most extreme point. Here, the blurring of humanity and technology is complete. The protagonists of the action thriller are the weapons, which are repeatedly described in minute and loving detail. Aeschylus's lament about the human loss caused by war turns into mourning over destroyed missiles, cunningly shot by a disguised agent of the Republican guard: "Full of corpses of the diseased who have died a terrible death are the cities, alas aimlessly wandering bodies some of them fleeing, some of them shot and dead. And there he [the *Untermensch* and poorly disguised agent of the Republican Guard, who is dressed-up as a farmer] goes and shoots down a missile! As if there weren't enough dead, really! Bad enough that they go astray, these poor missiles, but now they are even dead ... Such an *Unmensch* [*sic*], shooting these lovely Apaches, and there it is on in the sand poor Apache, and doesn't move anymore" (*Bambiland* <<http://www.elfriedejelinek.com>>). Here, Jelinek plays with the ambiguity of the word "Apache," which signifies a native American tribe mythologized – especially within the German tradition of the idealization of the "Wild West" (particularly by Karl May [1842-1912] in his popular travel and adventure stories) – as extremely courageous and good. In fact, however, within the context of modern weaponry, this refers to the Apache helicopters, the U.S. army's primary attack helicopters, whose Hellfire missiles can be fired from far with a very high accuracy.

In contrast to *The Persians*, in which Aeschylus gives the enemy a "human" voice, in *Bambiland* Western discourse about freedom, democracy, and progress and technology is fundamentally based on a glorification of the achievements of technology. For the spectator watching the war on TV the hyperreal, presented here as a universe of humanized "intelligent" weapons, becomes the only reality of war. War is a digitalized affair, in which the "reality" of the injured and dead is reduced to a mere accidental "side-effect" within a greater picture of the "event," within real-time live entertainment. Jelinek's satirical "translation" of the imagery of war technology into a language of crude inhumanity creates a dramaturgy of mere text, in which there is no place for the seductiveness of the staged dramatic visualization of war. Bertolt Brecht had already shifted "his focus from showing events and their scenic representation on stage towards a meta- and intertextual orientation, where not the events themselves but rather the discourses about those events and history are of importance" (Brecht qtd. in Breuer 104). Jelinek, in her postdramatic theater, goes far beyond that. In Brecht's epic theater, the characters are presented as ideological types spouting agit-prop slogans rather than communicating in a psychologically motivated way. In Jelinek's plays, there are no characters, no plot development, and no clearly detectable, enlightening, or utopian messages at all. Where Brecht's Marxist critique of capitalist society still claimed an educational and didactic effect on the audience, for Jelinek morality is made ridiculous by global power politics and its protagonists ("Wer bekommt schon" 28). Jelinek dissects the seemingly unambiguous ideology of a morality, which is in fact the equivalent of power. Thus, Jelinek deconstructs an interpretation of ethics that pervert the ideal of freedom as conceptualized, for example, by Simone de Beauvoir in her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, who points out the necessity for the freedom of others in order for human freedom to be actualized (30). War propaganda, however, rejects the ambiguous state of human existence, which empowers the individual to transcend the given conditions, while at the same time imposing limitations outside the control of the individual outside of our own control. War propaganda utilizes an arsenal of Western and – above all – Christian values which function to exclude any ambiguities that might cast doubt on the ethical 'reason' for a war.

The play, nevertheless, takes an ethical stance. In *Bambiland*, the "super-reality" Jelinek reveals is the total silencing of the voices of the victims of global politics, economy, and warfare. In the course of the monologue – or, rather, polylogue – in the midst of the pathos of warfare, banal propaganda, and the deliberations of weapon experts, one can detect a voice of an interrupting commentator which is that of the author herself, uncertain, vulnerable, and questioning. However, in *Bambiland*, as in so many of Jelinek's texts, sarcasm and irony provide a way of resisting this powerlessness and of overcoming the paralysis induced by an overwhelming media presence. It is on the side of those who are not heard, that the author situates herself within the grand text of history: "at the intersection, the interface between reality, the mass media's mirroring of reality, but also in poetic works. And then poor little me as well, that is, the unimportant person that is me – the person of all people, who – taken by themselves – are 'unimportant,' fragile, easily destroyable, extinguishable by the millions – it is

at this intersection, where my text originates" (Jelinek, "Es gibt keine Möglichkeit" 16). Further, as Lücke points out, Jelinek's text follows Derrida's critique of Baudrillard, when he contradicts the latter by pointing out that behind all the events created by the media, the simulacra, there are the "real" dead. They belong to the realm of the unspeakable (243). In the war of today, where perfectly employed technology should guarantee total control over action, any violence outside the battlefield becomes a mere "accident" and dead civilians become "collateral damage." However, what the audience cannot see are the incidents where a human encounter takes place, where people assigned to two hostile parties meet face to face, where the question of life and death is linked with emotions such as fear and guilt, and where there are traumatic consequences for the human psyche. In *Bambiland*, one can detect traces of an accusing voice stirring up the smooth surface of the images of this entirely justifiable, indeed "holy" war. But every doubt is immediately waved aside. In the passage below, the narrator acts as a re-affirming "judge," who helps to silence any signs of bad conscience on the part of the soldiers: "You acted correctly when you shot dead the seven wives and children in the van, I wanted to take this opportunity to once more explicitly state that, because they didn't stop despite our several warning shots and that's not on, that can't be allowed, that's not on" (*Bambiland* <<http://www.elfriedejelinek.com>>).

The dead can be "resurrected" in order to serve as a mute interlocutor that can be addressed – albeit retrospectively – for the killing to be justified. As the narrator insists, "but when we say stop, then stop. Then stop!": the "enemy" in the "Bambiland"-war actually acts as the screen, which reflects nothing but the affirmative reasoning of the invading power where the "other" is not allowed to speak (*Bambiland* <<http://www.elfriedejelinek.com>>). However, as always in Jelinek's texts, in order for the "forbidden" to come to the surface, it does not have to be represented. It is language itself and most especially the way it is deployed, which constructs "super-reality" that reveals "reality" beneath. The artificial world of *Bambiland* can thus show the "reality" of a world in which one dominating voice silences all others and where ambiguity is not allowed to exist. This leaves the question of how such a "monolithic" polylogue in which language is the only "actor" can be realized on stage. Jelinek leaves this to the director, whom she views as a co-author. She perceives her play to be an 'open work' in Umberto Eco's sense, which "urges me [the reader] to an interpretive effort" (263). Schlingensiefel notes that "Jelinek's *Bambiland* is a huge code, which one has to decode in order to be able to make use of it" (18). According to Schlingensiefel, the director has to act as an active and critical reader. The text has to be 're'-translated into images for the stage in a way that avoids and even rejects a theater of entertainment and consumption and creates a space where the unambiguity of violence and destruction becomes tangible again.

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