

Article

Intimacy and Resonance: Visions of Love in Hanns-Josef Ortheil's *Liebesnähe* and Ronja von Rönne's *Wir kommen*

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Abstract: Since the millennium, representations of intimate relationships have become one of the major trends in contemporary German fiction. This article examines two novels, Hanns-Josef Ortheil's *Liebesnähe* (*Love's Closeness*, 2011) and Ronja von Rönne's *Wir kommen* (*We Are Coming*, 2016) as examples of two oppositional modes of representation of modern love relationships. Starting from an exposition of the configuration of love in social theory (Niklas Luhmann, Eva Illouz) as a compensatory mechanism for the fragmentation of social roles in modernity, the article reviews two concepts that describe love from a perspective of plenitude, Hartmut Rosa's "resonance" and Francois Jullien's "intimacy". Reading Ortheil's and von Rönne's novels against Rosa's and Jullien's concepts, the article argues that while von Rönne's representation of intimate relations falls squarely within the social theoretical parameters outlined by Luhmann and Illouz, Ortheil's novel presents a fictional alternative to the "unhappy consciousness" of modern love, echoing Rosa's and Jullien's ideas.

Keywords: German literature; love; resonance; intimacy; modernity; social theory

1. Introduction

Until the millennium, love as a theme of serious fiction played a rather minor role in postwar and contemporary German language literature.¹ This apparent scarcity in literary texts is mirrored by a general absence of research. While the theme of love in German literature of the period around 1800 has been widely researched,² there are comparatively few studies of love in postwar and contemporary German literature. Frank Michael Schicketanz's *Liebe nach dem Krieg* (Schicketanz 1995) focuses on a small selection of canonic texts (Koeppen, Mann, Grass, Böll, Handke, and Walser) with just two female authors (Christa Wolf and Karin Struck) and makes scant use of secondary or conceptual literature on the topic. Helmut Schmiedt's historical overview from the eighteenth to the twentieth century *Liebe, Ehe, Ehebruch* (Schmiedt 1993) only mentions Arno Schmidt, Martin Walser, and Elfriede Jelinek as postwar authors. Matthias Luserke-Jacqui's *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der großen Liebe* (Luserke-Jacqui 2011) mentions just two authors from the twentieth century, Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*, 1930) and, curiously (given the subject matter of the study), Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Piano Teacher*, 1983), a novel about (female) sexual perversion, and *Lust* (1989), a novel about the language of pornography. Despite Annemarie Opp's recent *Liebe und Konsum* (Opp 2019), which focuses exclusively on the nexus between capitalism, commerce, and images of romance in selected modern and postmodern novels, Andrea Egger-Riedmüller's *Figurationen einer fortgeschrittenen*

¹ There are notable exceptions, e.g., Heinrich Böll's work, Christa Wolf's first novel *Der geteilte Himmel* (1963), Christoph Hein's *Drachenblut* (*Der fremde Freund*, 1983).

² See for example (Bobsin 1994; Werber 2003; Reinhardt-Becker 2005; Saße 1996; Hinderer 1997).

Liebe (Egger-Riedmüller 2004) remains the most comprehensive study on the relationship between contemporary literature and love.

However, as Egger-Riedmüller noted, love is experiencing a “revival” in German literature (p. 232). Since the turn of the millennium, German language literature has seen a steady rise of texts that take intimate relationships as their central topic.³ This “revival” is unparalleled in the period of German literature since the end of the Second World War and represents the largest engagement with the topic of intimate relationships since the Weimar period.

It is beyond the scope of this article to speculate on the reasons for this re-emergence of literature’s favorite topic, be it a result of market forces and readership response, or a literary response to a transitory period in modernity, similar to the first two periods of transformation of conceptions of love around 1800 and 1900 that coincided with the periods of Romanticism and New Objectivity. However, unlike the first two periods, which developed distinct semantics of love as expressions of a period of social crisis and transformation, the current “wave” of literature on love is rather difficult to systematize into a distinct set of codes or concerns. Niklas Luhmann’s observation in 1982 that it is harder to systematize the semantics of love into “one general formula” than ever before (Luhmann 1986, p. 155) is still a valid assessment.

Rather than attempting to boil down the plethora of fictional explorations of love, intimacy, and romance into a discernable set of characteristics or semantic markers, this article will focus on two texts that are symptomatic of specific literary, social, and conceptual problems when writing about love and intimacy today, specifically that of symbolic communication, addressed by both Luhmann in his study *Love as passion* (1986) and, more recently, by Eva Illouz in *Why Love Hurts* (2012) and *The End of Love* (2019). Hanns-Josef Ortheil’s *Liebesnähe* (Ortheil 2011, *Love’s Closeness*) and Ronja von Rönne’s *Wir kommen* (von Rönne 2016, *We Are Coming*) will both be explored as presenting contrasting responses to specific contemporary constellations with respect to the literary articulation of love and intimacy. The article’s central concepts of resonance and intimacy will be adapted from Hartmut Rosa’s study *Resonance* (Rosa 2019) and Francois Jullien’s *De l’intime* (Jullien 2014, *On Intimacy*).

The article’s central argument will be that while *Liebesnähe* is engaged in a resolution of the problems of modern love described by Luhmann, *Wir kommen* presents a constellation that is reflective of central problems analyzed by both Luhmann and, more recently, by Illouz. Despite the differences in focus, style, and form and the different ages and sexes of their authors, both Ortheil’s and von Rönne’s novels will be read as mirror images of one another as regards their authors’ representations of the possibilities of intimate encounters in the present. What makes the texts comparable is their narrative framing—both are essentially novels about the ability or failure to deal with the death of a loved one—and that they are both set in the world of aesthetic production and are largely concerned with the emotional problems arising from heterosexual relationships.

Before the detailed analysis of the texts, however, it is necessary to cast a brief look at the socio-theoretical situation with respect to love, its status in modernity, and its problems.

2. Theories of Love: The Normativization of Unhappiness

From Plato via Freud and Lacan to Niklas Luhmann and Eva Illouz, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and social theory have constructed love and desire as essentially arising out of lack or deficiency. In Plato’s *Symposium*, love and desire are figured as the result of the sundering of the human being’s

³ See for example Monika Maron, *Animal Triste* (1996), Dieter Wellershoff, *Der Liebeswunsch* (2000), Ulrich Woelk, *Liebespaare* (2001), *Was Liebe ist* (2013), Hanns-Josef Ortheil, *Die große Liebe* (2003), *Das Verlangen nach Liebe* (2007), *Liebesnähe* (2011), Martin Walser, *Der Augenblick der Liebe* (2004), Wilhelm Genazino, *Die Liebesblödigkeit* (2005) Helmut Krausser, *Eros* (2006), Dagmar Leupold, *Grüner Engel, blaues Land* (2007), Feridun Zaimoglu, *Liebesbrand* (2008), Bodo Kirchhoff, *Verlangen und Melancholie* (2004), *Die Liebe in groben Zügen* (2012), *Widerfahrnis* (2016), Hans-Ulrich Treichel, *Mein Sardinien. Eine Liebesgeschichte* (2012), Wolf Haas, *Verteidigung der Missionarstellung* (2012), Navid Kermani, *Große Liebe* (2014), Judith Hermann, *Aller Liebe Anfang* (2014), Günter Ohnemus, *Ava, oder die Liebe ist gar nichts* (2014), Uwe Timm, *Vogelweide* (2015), Sibylle Berg, *Der Tag als meine Frau einen Mann fand* (2015), Marianne Streeruwitz, *Flammenwand* (2018), Brigitte Kronauer, *Der Scheik von Aachen* (2019).

original spherical form. For Freud and Lacan, love and desire are essentially regressive and the futile attempt to compensate for an original lack in the self. For social theory, love above all the attempts to compensate for the loss of social rootedness in the functionalization of modernity. Luhmann's study, *Love as Passion* (1986), remains the most influential theoretical exploration of love as a social phenomenon, and many of his conclusions were repeated by Eva Illouz in her comprehensive study *Why Love Hurts* (Illouz 2012). Luhmann analyzed love as a communication medium that allows for the formulation and expression of emotions for the creation of intimacy. For Luhmann, love is less an emotion than a symbolic code with the purpose of making an otherwise unlikely form of communication—the intimate understanding between two subjects with exclusive communicative expectations towards one another—successful. Distinguishing between two mutually exclusive codes, the French “amour passion” and the English model of love as “companionship” (for which Jane Austen's novels are seen as the prime exponent), it is the first that becomes dominant in modernity because only “amour passion” is capable of integrating the enhanced status of sexuality that romantic love encompasses (Luhmann 1986, p. 10). The code of love operates with an “enhancement of meanings” that can be learned, and that include “tokens [. . .] to be interpreted and small signs to convey deep feelings” (ibid., p. 20). Luhmann noted, however, that the symbolic code of love is increasingly overburdened by the progressive change from a stratified (i.e., estate based) to a functionalized (i.e., role based) society in modernity, and by the strain this functionalization puts onto the modern individual. Due to social functionalization, the modern individual is split into a plethora of social roles that increasingly leave it unrooted and unacknowledged. For Luhmann, love in modernity takes on the compensatory function of providing an intersubjective space, which allows for the communication and acknowledgement of the “whole” subjective persona. This creates the paradox that each subject is pushed by the other into the role of “affirmer of a particular world” (Luhmann 1986, p. 21): “If the other person lays claim to possessing a world-constitutive individuality, then one has always already been allocated a place in that world and therefore is *ineluctably* faced with *the alternative of either affirming or rejecting the other's egocentric projection of the world*” (ibid.). To put it more simply, each subject is required to play in the world of the other the role of object. The codes of love thus create a “two-world-problem”, where each partner is animated by the question: “is your partner acting in a way which is based on your (and not his) world?” The universality that the semantic code of love entails, leads to a progressive overburdening of communication with information, insofar as “the informative content of all communication is constantly being enriched by the ingredient of ‘for you’” (ibid.). The chance of a successful lovers' communication is thus “increasingly improbable” (ibid., pp. 26, 35).

A number of social theorists have followed Luhmann's assessment of the overburdening of romantic discourse as a result of the functional diversification of society and the ensuing pressures on the subject, and have testified to the increasing improbability of a successful romantic relationship in modernity in general and in the contemporary period in particular (Beck and Gernsheim 1995; Evans 2003; Illouz 2012, 2019). In particular Illouz has, in her recent study *The End of Love*, noted the increasing insecurity generated by the devaluation of stable signs and tokens of intimacy in what she refers to as the “hyperconnective modernity” of our social media-dominated lives (Illouz 2019, pp. 37–43).

The consequence of the problem of finding a partner for an intimate relationship is that “the ties and impressions left on a person by a [. . .] relationship lead only to unhappiness. [. . .] Passion comes to an end; the ideal leads to disappointment” (Luhmann 1986, pp. 160, 169).

In summary, when it comes to love and intimacy, for both psychoanalysis and social theory, unsuccessful communication, unhappiness, and disappointment are the norm, arising from a fundamental lack or need for compensation in either the psychic structure of the self or modern society as a whole. Building on this, my analysis of Ortheil and von Rönne is going to draw on two sociological and philosophical approaches that construe love and intimacy out of a notion of plenitude, Hartmut Rosa's *Resonance* and Francois Jullien's *De l'intime*.

3. Theories of Plenitude: Resonance and Intimacy in Rosa and Jullien

Hartmut Rosa's *Resonance* is the attempt to theorize the possibility of a "good life" from within an accelerated modernity that seems to mitigate against it. Rosa's previous work (Rosa 2015, 2012) had developed a "unified" theory of modernity based on technological and social acceleration as the driving force of modern history (Fuchs 2020, forthcoming). For Rosa "[M]odern societies are characterized by systematic changes in temporal structures for which acceleration may serve as a blanket term" (Rosa 2019, p. 1). Noting an "irrevocable *tendency toward escalation*" in modernity (ibid.), Rosa that this acceleration results in the increasing potential for alienation and lack of affirmation for the subject, causing a "pathological relationship to the world". The ensuing decline in the quality of our relation to the world lets the world appear "mute, cold, or indifferent—or even as hostile" (Rosa 2012, p. 8).

"Resonance" is offered by Rosa as a possible "solution" (ibid., p. 1) to the problem of accelerated modernity, describing the potential of developing a successful relationship with the world that is based on functioning and positive connections. Rosa's central thesis is "that life is a matter of the quality of one's *relationship to the world*, i.e., the ways in which one experiences and positions oneself with respect to the world, the quality of one's *appropriation of the world*" (Rosa 2019, p. 5). Functioning relations to the world are dependent on "axes of resonance that allow subjects to feel themselves *sustained* or even *secured* in a responsive, accommodating world" (ibid., p. 30).⁴ Referring to the "*vibrating wire* between us and the world" that comes into being when we have a libidinous relationship to the world, Rosa maintains "that a successful life is characterized by open, vibrating, breathing axes of resonance that fill the world with color and sound and allow the self to be moved, to be sensitive and rich" (ibid., p. 9). Fuchs notes that Rosa's concept "captures the cognitive, bodily, and affective dimensions of subjectivity" (Fuchs 2020, forthcoming).

This is to say, that Rosa's concept of resonance is fundamentally dependent on a relationship to the world that is based on "eros" and the individual's ability to "appropriate the world or to *adapt* it to themselves" (Rosa 2019, p. 11).⁵ It is important to note, however, that Rosa's concept of resonance is a "metaphor for describing the qualities of relationships" (ibid., p. 281), not a state of emotions. It refers to a "specific way of *being-related-to-the-world*" (ibid., p. 289). This "relatedness to the world" is based on four ideal-typical basic modes of balance of the relationship of the self to the world: stable, semi-stable, unstable, and indifferent. The stable relationship is based on an "existential feeling of being borne" (Getragenheit), semi-stability is characterized as the "bourgeois feeling of existence", the unstable relationship experiences the world as hostile and dangerous, and the indifferent relationship sees the world as a cold and indifferent place (Rosa 2012, pp. 386–92). Drawing on Rosa's concept, I will demonstrate that for von Rönne's protagonist, the indifferent mode is the determining relationship to the world, while Ortheil's characters fundamentally experience the world as a responsive place of "Getragenheit".

It should be noted that, for Rosa, resonance does not equate with harmony or consonance. *Resonance* is not an attempt to wrest some form of auratic experience—"the world is beautiful"—from the alienating world of modernity, which for Rosa takes precedence over the subject. Modernity is "the history of a catastrophe of resonance" (Rosa 2019, p. 307). That is to say, experiences of resonance are configured as a momentous moment of the flashing up of a different relationship to the world that have a profoundly utopian value in the face of a principally nonresonant environment:

⁴ The somewhat mundane English translation misses the philosophical and almost religious overtones of the German concepts of "Getragenheit" and "Geborgenheit". "Getragenheit" evokes the opposite of Heidegger's existential term "Geworfenheit" (being thrown into the world), and "Geborgenheit" evokes notions of comfort, love, peace, and trust, which are essential associations with, for example, the family or God (Rosa 2016, p. 59).

⁵ Again, the English translation with its Darwinian echo, essentially misses the almost magical mutually transformative and performative quality of the German verb "sich (etwas) anverwandeln" (lit. to transform something into alignment with oneself, (Rosa 2016, p. 28)).

Resonance is the momentary appearance, the flash of a connection to a source of strong evaluations in a predominantly silent and often repulsive world. [. . .] At the root of resonant experience lies the shout of the unreconciled and the pain of the alienated. At its center is not the denial or repression of that which resists us, but the momentary, only vaguely perceptible certainty of a transcending 'nevertheless' (Rosa 2019, pp. 185, 188)

Despite his characterization of the experience of the utopian moment as “a promise of salvation” (ibid.), for Rosa, alienation remains the fundamental principle of modernity. However, in contrast to a straightforward Marxian reading, Rosa defines alienation with reference to Rahel Jaeggi as a “specific mode of relation to the world”, and as a “*relation of relationlessness*”, in which all relations have become meaningless, indifferent, or even repulsive (ibid., p. 178). This, it should be noted, transfers the motor of alienation from the object (the world) into the subject and its responsibility or ability to engender a responsive relationship with the object world.

Love and functioning intersubjective relations are especially singled out by Rosa as central aspects of the possibility of a vibrating axis of resonance: “Without love, respect, and esteem, our wires to the world—our axes of resonance—remain rigid and mute” (Rosa 2019, p. 9). Within Rosa’s study, love “the *pure, unconditional, romantic* love that exists between man and woman⁶ (or any two intimate partners)” thus acquires a central importance as one of the “paradigmatic resonant relationships” (ibid., pp. 204–5). It is worth noting that Rosa’s conception of love, though referencing social theorists like Luhmann, Giddens, and Illouz who have focused on the unlikelihood of its success, takes its cue from the idealization of intimate relationships in Romanticism (ibid., pp. 203–5). The ideal-typical intimate relationship is conceptualized as “conceived and in a way *sacralized* as transcending all class restrictions and socioeconomic calculations”, offering nothing more and nothing less than a total “promise of resonance” (ibid., p. 205).

Rosa’s conception of resonance has been strongly criticized. Anne Fuchs points out that, while Rosa’s previous two works excluded culture from his theory of modernity, *Resonance* both draws on a wealth of cultural examples and on nonconceptual language, “a rich metaphoric that ranges from physical, mechanical, acoustic, astrological to poetic images”, noting an unresolved tension between the aesthetic and indeterminate aspects of Rosa’s concept and the normative claims Rosa’s study makes as a social theory (Fuchs 2020, forthcoming). Furthermore, Fuchs notes a class-based, one might add, white European, aspect to Rosa’s conception of resonance as an experience of fleeting transcendence (ibid.). Sonja Witte sharply criticizes an implicit affirmative aspect in Rosa’s concept, originating in Rosa’s “optimistic credo” of love of the world (Rosa 2019, p. 444), which she reads as a rhetorical technique to disarm the traditional negativity of critical theory, particularly of the provenance of Adorno’s thought (Witte 2017, p. 301). Andreas Reckwitz, finally, has criticized Rosa’s concept of resonance as “neoromantic” in the way that it describes the “subjective affectedness by the Other [. . .] as a central criteria for the good life” (Reckwitz 2019, p. 227). Of particular importance in this respect is Reckwitz’s critique of Rosa in the context of what he describes as late modernity’s culture of self-realization and positive psychology which result in the search for “peak experiences”, a quest for a continuous valorization of “all kinds of elements of life” for the purpose of feeling authentic (ibid., pp. 212–19).

While these criticisms point to some fundamental “inconsistencies” (Thomä 2016) in Rosa’s conception, this article is less interested in the internal consistency of Rosa’s social theory than the usefulness of its central concept for the reading of literary texts. Fuchs stresses the aspect of performative uncertainty and indeterminacy in resonance (2020, forthcoming), which is something that both turns it into a potential sibling to Adorno’s conception of aesthetic experience and makes it fruitful for literary studies. In particular, Fuchs points out that, in contrast to theories of recognition,

⁶ Translation amended. In contrast to Rosa’s German original “Frau” (woman), the translation here subordinates the female to the male in the form of a “wife” (Rosa 2016, p. 345).

which overemphasize subjective autonomy as a precondition for recognition, Rosa's conception of resonance is "premised on the recognition of a fundamental difference between the self and the other" (Fuchs 2020, forthcoming). It is this principal recognition of the untransgressable difference between self and other that links Rosa's "resonance" to Jullien's concept of intimacy.

Francois Jullien's *De l'intime* (On Intimacy) reads like a philosophical sibling to Rosa's social theory. Starting from the paradox that the intimate is both an aspect of the innermost self and that which connects the self to an other in the deepest fashion, Jullien locates the beginning of an emphatic concept of intimacy in European culture in Augustine's *Confessions* and Augustine's discovery of a God who turns the intimate inside out: "The divine, that is the absolute exterior, the total Other [. . .] is simultaneously that which revealed the innermost part of myself to me" (Jullien 2014, p. 35). As a result, the intimate ("l'intime")⁷ opens up a space *between* subjects: "There is neither 'my' nor 'your' consciousness but 'conscious' ('Bewusstes', HS) radiates *between us*" (ibid., p. 31).

As a historically and culturally determined category, for Jullien, the Latino-Christian concept⁸ of intimacy made it possible for a "language of the heart" to emerge in the European middle ages (ibid., p. 56). Intimacy opens up a space of relationality and breaks with the supremacy of the independent self "because it propagates an I that is open for an event of relationality that is experienced as unique and that simultaneously expropriates the self in its innermost depth. [. . .] Because of this expropriation, intimacy is not lonely (einsam) but deeply dual (zweisam)" (ibid., p. 86). The intimate gesture "tears down the boundary fence between oneself and the other, between the inside and the outside" (ibid., p. 43). Thus, intimacy transcends the interests of the ego and breaks through the self-centeredness of the independent individual: "The intimate transits from the position of the *individual* to that of the *relational*" (ibid., p. 115). Jullien speaks in this context of "co-subjects" (ibid., p. 31).

Jullien seeks to distinguish intimacy from the traditional concept of love. He reads the development of the European concept of love since the middle ages as the equivocal amalgamation of the Platonic tradition of love as desire (lack) and the Christian (Paulinian) tradition of love as "gift". Harboring the promise of reconciliation of the physical and the spiritual, the traditional concept of love is the attempt to reconcile the "two deep trenches" that the search for humanity has created in European culture such as "sex drive and affection [. . .], action and passion [. . .], event and duration [. . .], the shock on the one hand and its levelling in married life on the other" (ibid., p. 161). With an implicit reference to Luhmann, Jullien characterizes the traditional concept of love as "the last point of concentration of all hopes and articulations of will" that is supposed to "confirm our ability to act as individuals" (ibid., p. 159). In contrast to love, intimacy does not attempt to solve the ambiguity of lack and gift. Rather, it circumvents the dichotomy at the heart of love by withdrawing from the juxtaposition of the physical and the spiritual. Hence, intimacy "is no longer tied to the lack, the 'search for' and consequently to the succession of satisfaction-disappointment" (ibid., p. 101).

Intimacy is thus different from both friendship and "love". With friendship one does not have the experience of an "outside", because the other is always an extension of the self. With "love", the object remains outside the self and, once incorporated (in the act of wooing/conquer), its exteriority is reduced, which reduces the desire. That is to say, love for Jullien is characterized by the dialectic of exteriority and incorporation (ibid.).

In contrast, intimacy implies an encounter with an outside, an opening of oneself to its exteriority. However, instead of wanting to absorb this outside into the inside and consequently miss it (missing the lack), intimacy lets the self fall into a shared interiority. This shared interiority is not something granted (as in friendship), but something that is brought about by the act of sharing itself. The shared inside "was *achieved*" (ibid., p. 105). Defining intimacy as "the being with someone", Jullien describes

⁷ Jullien's term "l'intime" will be translated as both "intimacy" and "the intimate".

⁸ Jullien describes intimacy as a Latino-Christian category, the ancient Greeks did not develop a "language of the heart", p. 56.

the preposition “with” (bei = close to someone) as the “leading preposition” of intimacy; “its first predicate is tenderness” (ibid.) and its pronouns are reciprocal (ibid., p. 201).

While love is equivocal because it oscillates between Plato (eros/desire/lack) and Paul (agape, the gift), intimacy is ambiguous and circumvents the separation of the physical and the spiritual: “The ambiguous renounces the decision, because it rejects dualism and sustains itself in the transitory” (ibid., p. 175). Love, for Jullien, is “theatrical, declamatory, and tends towards the superlative, intimacy, in contrast, lives in seclusion and remains silent” (ibid., p. 177). Like Rosa’s resonance, then, Jullien’s concept of intimacy involves the recognition of the difference between self and other, and the non-absorption of the other into the self. It is this recognition that marks the difference of resonance and intimacy to traditional conceptions of love that idealize a “merging” between the solitary self and the other in the desire to overcome the isolation of the subject that is part and parcel of the experience of modernity. In the following, I read Ortheil’s *Liebesnähe* with Rosa’s and Jullien’s concepts as a novel that attempts to sidestep the tortuous and disappointed traditions of love in modernity, while von Rönne’s *Wir kommen* exemplifies the problems of love analyzed by contemporary social theory.

4. The Transformation of Death into Resonance and Intimacy: Hanns-Josef Ortheil’s *Liebesnähe*

After *Die große Liebe* (Ortheil 2003, *True Love*) and *Das Verlangen nach Liebe* (Ortheil 2007, *The Desire for Love*), *Liebesnähe* (*Love’s Closeness*, 2011) is the third “Liebesroman” (romance novel) by Hanns-Josef Ortheil. Designed to self-consciously revert the tradition of unhappy love stories in the literature of modernity and to re-establish the literary representation of happy love stories, the three novels celebrate love as a feast of resonant experience, and metareflexively revise the literary tradition of love. All three texts share common features such as an almost mystical understanding between the two lovers, a highly inter- and metatextual structure, and a celebration of resonant experiences of ecstatic visions of landscape, art, and food, and have been described as developing a “poetics of love” (Catani et al. 2009; Schmitz 2017). While the first two novels are set in real geographical spaces—*Die große Liebe* in the Marches region of Italy and *Das Verlangen nach Liebe* in Zurich, Switzerland—and tell more or less conventional love stories, *Liebesnähe* (L) differs from the first two in that it tells the story of an extended mutual seduction between two artists set in a fictional hotel in an unspecified location in a pre-alpine landscape.

Liebesnähe is a highly stylized text that, over nearly 400 pages, constructs the seduction between writer Johannes and conceptual artist Jule as an elaborate game that is performed as a series of staged encounters between the couple in complete silence. The pair is aided by Katharina, the owner of the hotel’s bookstore who, unbeknownst to both of them, is a friend of both. In the course of the novel it turns out that all three of them have lost a central person in their lives, Johannes has lost his mother, Jule her father, and Katharina her husband, Jule’s father, the owner of a successful Munich art gallery. Katharina functions less as a go-between than as a hinge or link whose friendship to either of them serves as inspiration for their game.

All three characters are suffering from the death of their loved ones to the point that their grief incapacitates their productivity and ability to lead a full life; the hotel serves as a kind of refuge and retreat from life. The seductive game between Jule and Johannes invigorates both of them and reconnects them with their aesthetic productivity. In the course of the novel, all three characters witness the transformation of their lives from stultifying grief to a resonant and intimate relationship with others and with the world through aesthetic productivity.

Liebesnähe reads like a narrative version of, or commentary on, both Rosa’s and Jullien’s conceptions. All three characters demonstrate a resonant and highly libidinous relationship to their surroundings, in accordance with Rosa’s claim that a “person equipped with a libidinal wire to the world (in the form of their beloved) hears *the whole world sing*” (Rosa 2019, p. 81). Both Johannes and Jule are presented as being in tune with the landscape that surrounds them. Johannes, looking down at the landscape where the hotel is situated, wipes his face with water and notes “diese Frische passt genau zu der Frische der Landschaft” (this freshness fits the freshness of the landscape exactly, L, p. 7). Jule, taping the

sounds of her surrounding, turns her environment into a “Klanglandschaft” (landscape of sound) and notes “ein Ausatmen, ein kaum merkliches Strömen, gleichmäßig und konstant” (a breathing out, a hardly noticeable flow, evenly and steady, L, p. 14). Katharina, finally, has turned her environment into a resonant sphere that connects her with every detail: “Ich nehme ununterbrochen Abschied: aufmerksam, getröstet, mit all diesen lebendigen Dingen so eng verbunden [. . .]” (I am incessantly bidding farewell: attentive, solaced, so closely connected to all these living things, L, p. 195).

The entire novel is pervaded by these resonant moments, which are triggered either by perceptions of nature, aesthetic endeavors, or eating and drinking. Nature, aesthetics, music, and food/drink are explicitly mentioned by Rosa as significant “spheres of resonance sui generis” (Rosa 2012, p. 10) that are connected to a transformative experience, “which is often closely linked with intensified perceptions of nature and an aestheticization of everyday life” (Rosa 2019, p. 81). *Liebesnähe* is pervaded by a constant thematization of its characters’ synergetic experience that frequently associates one form of experience with another: “am besten wäre [. . .] eine starke Arie oder ein guter Song, der den Raum noch weiter öffnet” (a strong aria or a good song that opens the space even further, that would be best, L, p. 8). As in *Die große Liebe*, the sensation that “Alles stimmt” (everything resonates, L, p. 17) is the goal and endpoint of Ortheil’s characters’ endeavor (Schmitz 2017, pp. 62–64).

The staged game of seduction between Jule and Johannes takes the course of an increasingly intensifying exploration of moments of intimacy, in which Johannes plays a variety of roles in sets and scenes designed by Jule. These staged scenes are presented by Ortheil as a form of attuning to the wishes of the other, while simultaneously being completely artificial, modelled either on literary texts, music, or performance art. The result is the increasing creation of a mutual fantasy universe of intimate resonance, in which each character listens to the other’s desires. The central encounter between Jule and Johannes is based on Marina Abramovich’s performance *The Artist is Present*, performed at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 2010. *The Artist is Present* is a 736 h and 30 min silent piece, in which Abramovich sat motionless in the museum’s atrium while spectators were invited to take turns sitting opposite her. When Johannes comes across Jule sitting on a wooden bench in the forest, he is immediately reminded of Abramovich: “natürlich wird er Platz nehmen, das hier ist anscheinend eine Performance und die Performance hat den Titel *the artist is present*” (L, p. 109). The encounter is characterized by an open gaze that results in Johannes opening up completely to a silent exchange:

Von Minute zu Minute wird die gegenseitige Anziehung stärker, das fühlt sich an wie ein innerer Austausch, als wanderte alles, was er zuvor nur für sich und bei sich gedacht und empfunden hatte, zu ihr hinüber und zeigte sich nun in aller Offenheit. Sie versteht mich, sie erkennt mich, denkt er plötzlich [. . .].

(Minute by minute the mutual attraction grows stronger, it feels like an inner exchange, as if everything that he previously just thought within himself was wandering over to her and showed itself in all its openness. She understands me, she recognizes me, he thinks suddenly [. . .], L, p. 110).

Like many of the visitors to Abramovich’s performance, Johannes is left in tears “aber es sind keine Tränen der Trauer, [. . .] es sind Tränen der Freude darüber, endlich erkannt und gesehen zu werden” (but they are not tears of grief, [. . .] they are tears of joy about having finally been seen and recognized, L, p. 112). Both Rosa and Jullien stress the resonant capacity of the strong reciprocal gaze. Rosa refers to “the experience that a person’s soul or psyche, and with it their entire being, can be affected by and thus set in motion by a look [. . .] i.e., that a single look is capable of triggering a massive resonant effect” (Rosa 2019, p. 68). For Jullien, the long reciprocal gaze is evidence of intimacy as such: “In intimacy—and this reveals that intimacy is present—one can look at one another, who knows how long? The gaze flows like water, there is no reason for it to falter” (Jullien 2014, p. 199). This flowing is also felt by Johannes who feels “eine fließende Leichtigkeit [. . .] es gibt keine Hindernisse und Umwege mehr” (a floating ease [. . .] there are no more obstacles and detours, L, p. 111–12). That this experience is mutual is revealed by Jule to Katharina, with a reference to “der

berühmten MoMa-performance *the artist is present*” (the famous MoMa performance, L, p. 161). This mutual transformative experience fulfills Rosa’s and Jullien’s conceptions. For both Rosa and Jullien, resonance, and intimacy, respectively, are eventful moments that happen *in between* two people (my emphasis). Jullien remarks that intimacy consists “in the relation itself” (Jullien 2014, p. 171) and Rosa notes that love “as a resonant experience [. . .] refers [. . .] to the moment or moments of mutual, transformative, fluid, affecting encounter” (Rosa 2019, p. 197).

As in *Die große Liebe* and *Das Verlangen nach Liebe*, the growing intimacy results in an almost mystical “große Vertrautheit” (great intimacy, L, p. 110), shared by both characters. Jule feels that Johannes “ist ihr so nahe wie ein älterer Bruder” (is as close to her as an older brother, L, p. 95).⁹ Like in *Die große Liebe*, the ease and naturalness that both partners develop towards one another is an implicit critique of the complications of love thematized by contemporary social theory. The novel repeatedly refers to the “Leichtigkeit und Lockerheit” (ease and looseness, L, p. 132) of the game, the “Klarheit” (clarity, L, p. 60) of the arrangements, the “Geschichte der kleinen Anspielungen, Hinweise und Wegfindungen” (story of little allusions, hints, and pathways, L, p. 127), that require each character to focus away from their selves onto the third thing that is developing between them. The artificiality of their staged game is constantly affirmed as a therapeutic enterprise that transforms their self-centered, mourning selves into opening towards one another. At the end of their game “sie hatten sich beide eine intime Zone der gegenseitigen Vertrautheit geschaffen” (they had both created an intimate zone of mutual familiarity, L, p. 318).

Liebesnähe is, like its predecessors, a heavily intertextual and intermedial novel. While in *Die große Liebe*, the intertextual horizon was constituted by romance literature from the middle ages to Goethe, and in *Das Verlangen nach Liebe* by Gottfried Keller and Thomas Mann, in *Liebesnähe* it is classical and ancient Japanese literature, music (Mozart), and performance art (Abramovich).¹⁰ In particular, the novel’s concern with arrangements, surfaces, clarity, and simplicity, and the apparent eschewing of depth, is modelled on classical Japanese literature. Masuo Bashō’s *The Narrow Road to the Interior* (1702) and Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book*, a collection of observations and short glosses made during her life as a court lady at the Japanese Imperial court in the 10th century, are mentioned in the text as readings that inspire both characters. Above all, Shōnagon’s *The Pillow book* serves as a model for Jule’s and Johannes’ own notes; both begin to perform the roles that Jule reads into the text: “Sie will das Kopfkissenbuch mithilfe ihres eigenen Körpers lesen, [. . .]. Die schöne Schreiberin suchte nämlich nicht nur die Ruhe des Alleinseins, sondern sie sehnte sich auch nach [. . .] einem Geliebten” (She wants to read the Pillow Book with the help of her body, [. . .]. The beautiful writer was not only looking for the quietness of solitude but she longed for [. . .] a beloved, L, pp. 129, 153). At the end of the game, Johannes occupies the role of the beloved in *The Pillow Book*, a role that is imagined earlier by Jule as that of the “einzig, wahrer Geliebter, dessen Einzigkeit und Wahrheit sich im Spiel bewiesen hätte” (only, true beloved, whose uniqueness and truth would have evidenced itself in the game, L, p. 133). The growing intimacy between Jule and Johannes is thus based on an act of intuitive reading, of texts, of one another, of the details of their environment, and the “kleine Signale” (little signals, L, p. 92) of the game.

The intimacy between Jule and Johannes leads to the vision of a life together that echoes Jullien’s idea of “living in two”. Jullien distinguishes between a “life together”, i.e., married life in a house, the “homoeostasis of the couple”, and “living/life in two” (Leben zu zweit) as an activity (Jullien 2014, pp. 184–85). Maintaining that “intimacy is something that opens up a field of shared intentionality”, Jullien argues that life is “strategic” (ibid., p. 185). Ortheil repeats Jullien’s formulation in Jule’s and Johannes’ ecstatic vision at the end of the novel: “Das Leben zu zweit!” (life/living in two!, L, p. 367). This life consists not in living together but in a shared artistic vision of an erotics of aesthetic labor: “sie

⁹ On mysticism in Ortheil’s *Die große Liebe* see Schmitz (2017).

¹⁰ On *Die große Liebe* see Schmitz (2017), on *Das Verlangen nach Liebe* see Klemenz in Catani et al. (2009).

hat den Geliebten gefunden, der von nun an gemeinsam mit ihr in diesen Projekten auftauchen und sie mitverwalten wird. [. . .] die Erotik der Arbeit wird nichts anderes sein als die Kunstform unserer Liebe und unserer Annäherung" (she has found the beloved, who from now on will appear together with her in these projects and will co-administer them. [. . .] the erotic of work will be nothing but the aesthetic form of our love and our mutual becoming closer, L, pp. 347–48).

Like Rosa and Jullien, *Liebesnähe* differentiates between sex and eroticism, and between traditional love and intimacy. Rosa describes sex as "a more or less mechanical physical act, a kind of handicraft [. . .] that nonetheless 'means nothing'". In contrast, erotic attraction is characterized "by the fact that it transforms the subject's relationship to the world as a whole, namely in the sense that body and mind in a way become maximally open to resonance and to the presence of the Other" (Rosa 2019, p. 80). For Jullien, likewise, intimacy and sexuality belong to two different modes of being. Intimacy "is no longer under the spell of sexuality" (Jullien 2014, p. 104). After their first physical union, Jule muses that the "Liebe der Körper hat mit Sex wenig zu tun" (L, p. 390). This observation can be clarified with reference to *Die große Liebe* where sex is associated with sports, something that is characterized by learnable techniques and the staging of bodies, "eine Nummernfolge" (a series of copulations, (Ortheil 2003, p. 185)). Badiou and Truong have argued, with reference to Lacan, that sexual enjoyment is always one's own, "it does not unite, it separates" (Badiou and Truong 2009, p. 23). The idea of sport is articulated in *Liebesnähe* in association with "falling in love", an event of limited temporality. Traditional conceptions of love are associated with conventionality, "Seife, Anstand, Wohlerzogenheit" (soap, respectability, manners), whereas "die große Liebe" is associated with the transcendence of ecstatic art: "die große Liebe war Fest, Tanz und Oper [. . .] die verrückten Rituale" (true love was celebration, dance and opera [. . .] those mad rituals, L, p. 107).

Liebesnähe tells the story of the successful transformation of death and grief into a resonant and productive future-oriented life. The narrative program of the novel is defined by the exploration of what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to as "flow experiences" (p. 4). Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (ibid., p. 6). For Csikszentmihalyi, a cognitive psychologist, the establishment of control is achieved through psychic order. "This happens when psychic energy [. . .] is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action" (ibid., p. 6). Citing art as one of the activities that generate flow experiences, Csikszentmihalyi describes attentiveness as a form of psychic energy and "our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience" (ibid., p. 33). Distinguishing pleasure from enjoyment, he maintains that enjoyment depends on investment and attention, whereas pleasure is essentially passive (ibid., p. 46).

A number of aspects link Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" to Jullien's concept of intimacy and Rosas concept of resonance. Like in intimacy, flow abstracts from the self and orients the subject outwards: flow "does not involve a loss of the self, and certainly not a loss of consciousness, but rather, only a loss of consciousness of the self" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 64). Like Rosa, Csikszentmihalyi describes seeing, listening, and tasting as "flow experiences" that generate a sense of fulfilled presentness (ibid., pp. 69, 107–15), and art as one of the prime "examples of how harmony can be imposed on chaos", especially in the context of death and suffering: "To find purpose in suffering one must interpret it as a possible challenge" (ibid., pp. 233, 235). Finally, both Jullien and Csikszentmihalyi describe intimacy and flow in terms of resources and projects (Jullien 2014, pp. 115, 124; Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 231), while Rosa works with an emphatic concept of "work" as "axis of resonance" (Rosa 2019, pp. 393–402) and speaks of the "responding material" (ibid., pp. 393–402). "Project", however, is the most frequently repeated word in the *Liebesnähe*, occurring roughly twenty-five times throughout the text, both with respect to Johannes' and Jule's aesthetic work and Katharina's scribbled notes on her customers that will be transformed into a book by Johannes. Moreover, love itself is referred to as a "project" (p. 78) and Jule's and Johannes' future work is described as a "project of love": "Ein weiter, unerschöpflicher Kontinent der Arbeit tut sich nun auf, ein unaufhörliches Arbeiten an einem gewaltigen Liebesprojekt aus Zeichnungen, Bildern, Texten und Klängen" (a wide, inexhaustible continent of work is now

opening up, a continuous working at an enormous love project of drawings, images, texts and sounds, L, p. 349).

It is certainly possible to criticize *Liebesnähe* in the same vein as Rosa's *Resonance* for its middle-class (white European) focus on auratic experiences that appears to eschew engagement with the real state of the world for the sake of a vision of personal salvation in an idealized cultural space as well. Like Rosa's concept of resonance, Ortheil's romances are deeply influenced by Romantic traditions, insofar as both are animated by the idea of a "reconciliation of freedom and unity with inner and exterior nature" (Taylor 2017, p. 251; Schmitz 2017, p. 54ff.). In particular Reckwitz's critique of the "culture of positive emotions" in late modernity is pertinent here (Reckwitz 2019, p. 215). Rather than a solution to the problem of recognition in modernity, Reckwitz reads the culture of self-realization as symptomatic of the increasing strain of the sociocultural demands on the subject to be both successful and authentic. This, Reckwitz argues, results in the development of activities and practices that allow the subject to feel authentic ("entfaltet"), something that culminates in a "pattern of performative self-actualization" (ibid., pp. 214, 217). In this, he is in agreement with Illouz, who has also noted the increasing influence of consumer culture on rituals of love, in particular objects of luxury and travel (Illouz 2005, p. 88). While the issue of personal authenticity is, on the face of it, less relevant for Ortheil's novel, Reckwitz's and Illouz' critique of the hypervalidation of particular intensively experienced moments in self-reflexive performance certainly echoes with Ortheil's literary project, even if the novel's conception of intense moments of experience of nature, music, or food does not really fall under the category of luxury consumption in Illouz' terms. Moreover, it would be fair to say that the confluence of aesthetic existence within the sphere of successful artistic production and the development of a successful intimate relationship in *Liebesnähe* is not accidental, insofar as both are made possible within, and in fact depend on, the nonalienated sphere that the form of the "Künstlerroman" (artist novel) provides. Reckwitz explicitly comments on the values of self-realization emerging in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as being traditionally reserved for a small minority of artists and subcultures (Reckwitz 2019, p. 211). As with *Die große Liebe* and *Das Verlangen nach Liebe* before, Ortheil's literary imagination of a successful intimate relationship in *Liebesnähe* is only possible within the confines of a (bourgeois) "Künstlerroman" that sidesteps any serious engagement with contemporary modes of existence.

However, like Rosa's *Resonance*, which configures resonance as a utopian moment in the face of the "catastrophe" of modernity (Rosa 2019, p. 307), *Liebesnähe* is replete with references to the desolate state of the (literary) history of love, subjectivity, and unhappiness. Apart from a biting remark on Goethe's *Werther* as the literary fundament of unhappy love stories ("gar keine Liebesgeschichte [. . .] ein Eifersuchtsdrama", not a love story at all, [. . .] a drama of jealousy, L, p. 357), the theme of death lends the novel a dark "basso continuo" that is the hallmark of Ortheil's work, which is all underscored by the legacy of the wartime tragedy of Ortheil's family (see Schmitz 2012). A comment at the end of the novel, after the protagonists have spent their first night together, exemplifies this: "Sie liegen [. . .] wie zwei Lebewesen da, die einem schlimmen Krieg gerade noch entkommen sind" (They are lying there, like two living beings who have just about escaped from a bad war, L 337). Beyond the reference to the family's war trauma that grounds all of Ortheil's writing, the "just about" in its implicit Nietzschean reference to the "war" and the "deadly hate of the sexes" (Nietzsche 1994, p. 1106) characterizes the entire narrative as a self-aware critique of the unhappy traditions of modern love and its representations. Rather than evading engagement with this tradition, *Liebesnähe* is a conscious and self-conscious attempt to think outside of its negativity. Like Rosa's "resonance" and Jullien's "intimacy", Jule's and Johannes' successful relationship has been "achieved" (Jullien 2014, p. 105).

While *Liebesnähe* narrates the story of three characters regaining control over their lives through aesthetic work, attention, and focus, Ronja von Rönne's *Wir kommen* (*We Are Coming*) is, in almost all aspects, the opposite to *Liebesnähe*. Despite the difference in age and generational focus of the authors and the difference in form and thematic focus of both novels, what makes them comparable is the fact that they are in many respects reverse mirror images of one another. Like *Liebesnähe*, *Wir kommen* is

a novel about the death of a central person in the main character's life and the consequences of this death for the protagonist. However, whereas *Liebesnähe* narrates the successful transformation of grief into life and productive mourning through aesthetic engagement, *Wir kommen* tells the story of the failure of this process, the impossibility of transformation, and the death of a resonant relationship with the world. I will analyze von Rönne's text as a narrative exploration of problems around love and intimacy as described by Luhmann (1986) and Illouz (2012, 2019). This will in turn further illuminate Ortheil's novel as a text that is engaged in a resolution of these problems.

5. No One Receiving: Ronja von Rönne's *Wir kommen*

Ronja von Rönne's *Wir kommen* (Wk) is a first person narrative by the twentysomething actress and occasional blogger Nora, who lives in a stagnant polyamorous relationship with Karl, Leonie, and Jonas. Like *Liebesnähe*, the novel is set in the environment of the creative arts. In contrast to Jule and Johannes, however, who are self-determined artists within the sphere of "high" culture, the protagonists in *Wir kommen* are involved in the creative industries and media. Karl writes popular nonfiction books, Jonas works in advertising, and Nora's TV work consists of hosting the fictional afternoon reality series "The Supershoppers". Like the characters in *Liebesnähe*, Nora is deeply affected by the death of a close companion, her childhood friend Maja. Unlike Jule, Katharina, and Johannes in *Liebesnähe*, however, Nora is in denial about the reported death of Maja, whom she desperately tries to contact throughout her story. The narrative of *Wir kommen* takes the form of a set of notes that Nora makes on the recommendation of her therapist. In the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that the foursome relationship is a desperate attempt on her and Karl's part to find a substitute for the foursome friendship of their early teenage years with Maja as the leader. After Jonas breaks up the quartet, the final pages of the novel disclose that Maja had committed suicide in a bout of late teenage depression in Nora's home village. Narrative inconsistencies notwithstanding—the final pages reveal Nora as a witness to Maja's death which makes her disbelief in Maja's funeral at the beginning of the novel implausible—*Wir kommen* presents an image of von Rönne's media-driven generation as disaffected, sterile, and stale. In almost every aspect, von Rönne's novel is the diametric opposite to Ortheil's.

In contrast to the ecstatic and celebratory tone of *Liebesnähe*, Nora's tone of voice is bored, weary, impudent, and pervaded by a destructive irony towards her entire environment. She notes early in the narrative that "Wenn ich rausgucke ist da Stadt" and "dass es relativ wenig zu erzählen gibt" (When I look out of the window, there's city; that there is relatively little to tell, Wk, p. 12). Nora's life is characterized by a latent depression and a feeling of bored emptiness; she is disconnected from all emotions except negative ones. The narrative is pervaded by temporal markers of boredom that simply mark the passing of empty time: "Später [...]. Dann [...]. Danach" (Later [...]. Then [...]. Afterwards, Wk, p. 45).

The reason for Nora's depression is that, rather than mourning the loss of Maja, Nora's life has regressed into a melancholic shell. Freud classically distinguished melancholia from mourning in that in mourning "it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (Freud 1957, p. 245). In *Wir kommen*, the emptiness of Nora's self results in the perception of the world as empty and stale. In Rosa's words, Nora has lost her "wire to the world": "From the side of the subject, a relationship to the world can fail if the subject 'hardens' or closes itself off, [...] Then it loses its 'wire to the world', as it is incapable of attuning itself to anything" (Rosa 2019, p. 112). For Nora, new events don't lead to resonant experiences because she is detached and indifferent. Events in the outside world are met with no resonance on her part. The end result is an affected boredom that sees no point in reacting to the world: "Ich habe probeweise meinen Stiftebecher umgestoßen um zu sehen, ob ich Lust auf Aufräumen habe. Habe ich nicht" (I threw over my desk tidy to see whether I feel like tidying up. I don't, Wk, p. 13). Nora's tone of laconic indifference is the sign of an affective withdrawal that masks the pain of her loss. As a result, Nora's present life is characterized by a detached emptiness and disengagement that is a reaction to her feeling of lack of control over her environment. The polyamorous relationship is not entered freely but is the result of her boyfriend Karl

bringing Leonie into the relationship against Nora's will. This trio is then completed by the arrival of Jonas, but the ensuing polyamorous quartet only insufficiently and unsuccessfully covers up the gaping emptiness and boredom at the heart of Nora's life. The involuntary aspect of the polyamorous quartet and its status as substitute may explain the novel's curious lack of interest in exploring the dimensions of this unconventional, and potentially nonheterosexual relationship, as Nora's desires and proclivities are heterosexual, first focused on Karl, her boyfriend who brings Leonie into the relationship, and then Jonas.

Nora's life is characterized by what Rosa has described as a "flat" relationship to a world that is experienced as indifferent and cold: "What is characteristic for this basic experience is thus the lack of a relation between self and world and hence the meaninglessness of the latter for the former" (Rosa 2012, p. 392). Nora's relationship to the world fulfils the conditions Rosa describes as "alienation" or "relation of relationlessness" (Rosa 2019, p. 178): "Alienation thus denotes a situation in which the subject experiences his or her own body or feelings, material and natural environment, or social interactions as external, unconnected, non-responsive, in a word: *mute*" (ibid., pp. 178–79).

Rosa speaks in this context of "perceived self-efficacy". It is important for the quality of world-relationships that subjects are able "to be confident in themselves, to master challenges, to influence their environment in a controlled manner" (ibid., p. 159). In contrast to Jule's and Johannes' life, which is full of plans, games, and expectations that lead to experiences of successful engagements with the world and others, Nora's life is characterized by negative expectations of self-efficacy and experiences of powerlessness. Nora is essentially passive, and has given up on attempting to influence the world around her. Her comment, "Ich habe genickt. Das kann ich gut" (I nodded. That I am good at, Wk, p. 12) regarding a joke of her therapist's that she finds distasteful, characterizes her passive attitude to the world.

Similarly to Ortheil's characters, Nora longs for connectedness. Like in *Liebesnähe*, the idea of intimacy is expressed in a desire for the intimate gaze, but Nora lacks a partner to make the world resonant: "Vielleicht bin ich die Einzige, die Blicke austauschen möchte, die nicht mehr Verliebt-, sondern Verbundenheit heißen, [...]" (Perhaps I am the only one who wants to exchange gazes that no longer signify being in love but closeness, [...], Wk, p. 18). Her idea of love is also that of an existential, transformative, and transcendent experience, but her environment provides nothing but resignation and boredom:

Ich will die Art von Liebe, die hält und japst, wenn man ihr einen neuen Brocken hinwirft, eine Schwangerschaft vielleicht, oder eine neue Wohnung, damit der Strudel ins Unvermeidliche immer weiter geht. [...] es kommt eine Resignation, die schlapp fragt, ob es das den nun sei, [...] diese echte, langweilige Liebe. [...] und das war es eben dann mal wieder, [...].

(I want the kind of love that holds and that pants when you throw it a new challenge, a pregnancy perhaps, or a new flat, so the flow into unavailability goes on and on. [...] A resignation comes and asks flatly whether this is it [...] this real, boring love. [...] and once again, this was it, [...]. Wk, pp. 18–19)

Nora's life is characterized by an inability to illuminate her own reality and create her own life. The three week holiday she takes is nothing but an undefined temporal space of emptiness: "So viele Tage liegen vor mir, bis ich wieder arbeiten muss und warten faulig darauf, mit Erlebnissen gefüllt zu werden" (So many stagnating days lie ahead of me until I have to go back to work, and are waiting to be filled with events, Wk, p. 22).

In contrast to Johannes and Jule in *Liebesnähe*, who transform their lives and their environment through acts of aesthetic creativity, the media "creativity" of Nora and her environment only results in endless replications of simulacra. Whereas Jule and Johannes connect themselves to "the real" through their staged activities, Nora's reality disappears behind the simulatedness of the mediated lives of her environment. Nora experiences everything either in terms of mediated pre-existing images, or in terms of symbols and metaphors that ultimately refer to nothing:

Unsere Beziehung ist eine einzige Imitation irgendwelcher Filme und wenn wir uns streiten, dann halt noir mit viel Schweigen und wütendem Rauchen, [...]. Ich vertrieb mir die Zeit damit, Dinge mit Symbolik und Metaphorik zu beladen. [...] Wie viele Metaphern noch für die Liebe? Wie viele Schlösser an Brücken und leise Versprechen [...] braucht es noch, bis es endlich ruhig werden würde?

(Our relationship is nothing but an imitation of some films and when we quarrel then we quarrel 'noir', with a lot of silences and angry smoking. [...] I passed the time with charging everything with symbolism and metaphors. [...] How many metaphors left for love? How many locks on bridge rails and quiet promises [...] do we need until it finally is quiet?, Wk, p. 56)

Nora's manic obsession with symbols, metaphors, and meaning is in stark contrast to the "Japanese" enactments of Jule and Johannes in *Liebesnähe*. Everything in *Liebesnähe* is arranged and simple. Jule likes "die kurzen, nie allzu nachdenklichen, sondern eher wie spontan dahingesagten Aufzeichnungen" (the short, never too reflective but rather spontaneously expressed notes, L, p. 35) of Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*. Johannes films himself reading Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, dressed in a Japanese Kimono, with Jule's equipment in her hotel room. *Liebesnähe's* aesthetics of arrangement and staged simplicity are, in their eschewing of the inside–outside dichotomy of the European subject's relationship to herself, an implicit critique of Luhmann's theory of love as symbolic code that requires permanent (mis)interpretation. Roland Barthes has commented on the way Japanese culture subverts this European "mythology of the 'person'" in *Empire of Signs*: "Topologically, Western man is reputed to be double, composed of a social, factitious, false 'outside' and of a personal, authentic 'inside'" (Barthes 1982, p. 63).¹¹ Japanese writing, in Barthes' reading, eschews metaphors and symbolism, and thus confounds "commentary" (ibid., pp. 69–70). Commentary, however, is the *raison d'être* of the modern subject, necessitated by her isolation and fragmentation into a myriad of social roles. Luhmann has commented on the functionalization of modernity resulting in the hypercharging of the love relationship with the promise of redemption from this hall of mirrors into the space of authentic recognition. This, however, generates the paradox that each of the lovers expects the other to affirm them in their respective world (Luhmann 1986, p. 21.). As a "symbolic medium" (ibid.), love requires endless interpretation and commentary, beset by the uncertainties of misinterpretation. Nora's desperate metaphorizations in *Wir kommen* exemplify the paradox conundrum of modern love, where the subject is always uncertain about the authenticity of the other's emotion and how to read them. In contrast, *Liebesnähe* is characterized by a conscious eschewing of this position: "Raus mit den verquerten Ideen [...]!" exclaims Johannes, calling himself to order (Away with the outlandish ideas!, L, p. 142). Ortheil's implicit critique of the tradition of modern representations of love is contained in an exclamation at the very end of *Liebesnähe*, which sums up the programmatic goal of the novel: "keine Suche nach Abweichungen! Das Ende der ewigen Suche nach einer Benennung der Differenz!" (no search for deviations! The end of the eternal search for a naming of difference!, L, p. 392). Difference is, according to Walter Haug, the essence of both fictional representations of love and the experience of modern interpersonalit. The "discovery" of fictionality in the European literature of the twelfth century coincided with the "discovery" of love itself. With this fictionality, argues Haug, love emerged as unhappy in European culture (Haug 1995, p. 84). It is worth noting, however, that *Liebesnähe* does not deny the painful experience of difference; it merely eschews the modern subjective obsession with its naming. In its programmatic literarization of the overcoming of the subjective focus on the authenticity

¹¹ For the purposes of the argument, it is irrelevant whether Barthes describes Japanese culture "correctly", or whether his reading is a cultural (mis)appropriation. What is important here, are the parallels between Ortheil's novel and Barthes's reading of Japanese culture. Ivanova (2018, p. 14ff) argues, that, in the absence of a unified original of Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*, there is only the diverse history of reception of multiple textual versions. Ortheil's characters' playful appropriation of the *Pillow Book* thus falls within its history of reception and represents another moment of "Anverwandlung" in Rosa's manner (Rosa 2019, p. 28).

of the self, *Liebesnähe* is a metareflexive critique of the tradition of unhappy love in European literature: “dass die Liebe ein Stück Literatur ist [. . .] das reichste und vielfältigste Stück Literatur, das es gibt. Es ist eine Literatur der starken Freude, eine Literatur des Hymnus und des Gesänge, und eine Literatur der Schöpfung, denn sie zeigt wie keine andere, wie Menschen sich gegenseitig erschaffen, indem sie sich begegnen” (that love is a piece of literature [. . .] the richest and diverse piece of literature there is. It is a literature of hymn and of song, and a literature of creation because it shown like no other how people create each other through their encounters, L, p. 279).

In contrast, Nora’s desperate search for symbols and meaning is a sign of her spiritual disaffection and her crisis as a modern subject that remains trapped in a Luhmannian universe of love as a symbolic medium in need of affirmation through “tokens [. . .] to be interpreted and small signs to convey deep feelings” (Luhmann 1986, p. 20). Eva Illouz has, in her recent study *The End of Love*, extended her analysis of the contemporary crisis of intimate relationships with respect to what she refers to the “hyperconnective modernity” of contemporary lives, defined by “the one-night stand, the zipless fuck, the hookup, the fling, the fuck-buddy, the friends with benefits, casual sex, casual dating, cybersex” (Illouz 2019, p. 21). Illouz notes an increasing casualization of erotic relationships in the period of global neoliberal culture that is based on a growing separation between emotional and sexual selves. The result, Illouz argues, is an undermining of the “emotional certainty” that characterized premodern relationships that were based on the stability of signs, tokens, and promises that created “the capacity to translate emotions into sequences, narratives, goals, and objectified signs, which express and performatively induce emotions” (ibid., pp. 42–43). Illouz’ analysis of emotional uncertainty within the casualized universe of hyperconnective modernity testifies to an intensification of the problems of symbolic interpretation of signs of love noted by Luhmann. Illouz refers to these casual relationships as “situationships”. The term situationship describes relationships with unclear status, “new forms of relationships that express the refusal or difficulty to properly contractualize emotions”: “Situationships are extensions of sexual ‘casualness’ to which they give an elongated form. They are non-relationships because at least one of the two sides either lacks an emotional goal or refuses to imagine the future or both. [. . .] Situationships [. . .] have little or no narrativity” (ibid., pp. 153–54).

Nora’s polyamorous quartet represents such a situationship, resulting in interpretative insecurity and the loss of a narrative goal for Nora. As the relationship is not entered into for its own sake, but is a result of a manipulative activity on the part of Karl, Nora’s insecurity as regards symbolic meanings can be read as a reflection of the problems illustrated by Illouz. Ironically, Illouz notes, the separation of emotion and sexuality that is a result of both the sexual liberation since the 1960s and the subsequent increasing sexualization of female bodies in global capitalism, benefit men more than women because of their ability to disconnect sex from personhood (ibid., p. 80). The double bind that this generates for women, of entering a relationship that prioritizes casual physicality over emotional certainty, is reflected in Nora’s inability to extricate herself from the polyamorous quartet.

While von Rönne’s novel could be said to reflect a specific generational issue as regards the formation of intimate relationships, the age range of Illouz’ interviewees from early 20s to mid-60s in both of her studies exemplifies that this is less of a generational problem than a sign of our times. However, in *Wir kommen*, the issue of Nora’s uncertainty as regards the symbolic medium of love is compounded by the alienated boredom and affective muteness that is connected to her melancholic state.

A central aspect of Nora’s spiritual disaffectedness is that she remains arrested on an ironic metalevel that is incapable of authentic moments of experience within a self-reflexive media environment. This results in a narcissistic, but ultimately tedious, self-obsession: “unsere neurotische Hyperreflexion, das ständige Hinterfragen der eigenen Rolle, die manische Beschäftigung mit uns selbst, die Zeit, die sich öde und unendlich vor uns ausbreitet und die vage Langeweile unserer sandigen Leben” (our neurotic hyper-reflexivity, the constant questioning of our roles, the manic focus onto ourselves, the time that spreads before us, tedious and infinite, and the vague boredom of our sandy lives, Wk, p. 62).

Nora's disaffection with hyper-reflexivity, her weary recognition of her narcissistic obsession with herself, is a reflection of what Jean Baudrillard has described as the simulacrum of hypermediated postindustrial consumer society. Baudrillard the real as "that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction" (Baudrillard 1993, p. 73). This is to say, the real in industrial society is distinguishable from its mediated copy. In postindustrial, media-dominated consumer society, "the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced" (ibid.). Hence, reality "is immediately contaminated by its simulacrum" (ibid., p. 74). Reality becomes inseparable from its representation. The "total euphoria of simulation [. . .] aims to abolish cause and effect, origin and end, and replace them with reduplication" (ibid., p. 73). The dissolution of reality into the simulacrum creates its own hyper-reflexivity. The characters in *Wir kommen* all inhabit this nonspace of hyper-reflexivity and "plunge into a sort of secondary existence" (ibid., p. 11).

A number of issues noted by Baudrillard as early as 1976 prefigure Illouz' analysis of the effect of "hyperconnective modernity" on intersubjective intimate relations in *The End of Love*. Like Illouz, Baudrillard noted a collapsing of all aspects of life into consumption (Baudrillard 1993, p. 13). Both note the increased eroticization of the body as a central feature of this change (Baudrillard 1993, esp. pp. 101–4; Illouz 2019, p. 48), the separation of sexual from emotional needs, and the permanent staging of erotic visibility, something both describe as "scopic" capitalism (Baudrillard 1993, p. 72; Illouz 2019, p. 54). Finally, both Baudrillard and Illouz relate the hyperinflation of simulacra (Baudrillard) and the increasing liquidation of the security of individual recognition (Illouz) to the development of neoliberal financial and consumer capitalism with its "flotation of money and signs, the flotation of 'needs' and ends of production, the flotation of labour itself—the commutability of every term is accompanied by speculation and a limitless inflation" (Baudrillard 1993, p. 7). Correspondingly, Illouz argues that "sexual freedom [has] become the neoliberal philosophy of the private sphere" (Illouz 2019, pp. 13–14) and that "the advent of neoliberal policies foregrounded a very specific type of entrepreneurial will which must provide and secure alone the grounds of its own worth, in the workplace and interactions, a process that turns out to undermine the possibilities of forming and maintaining contracts." (ibid., p. 147). Nora's predicament in *Wir kommen*, her disaffectedness with the hyper-reflexivity, her inability to derive recognition within the casual set-up of her lovers' quartet, and the permanent disregard of her emotional, in favor of the quartet's sexual, needs all mirror the central predicament Baudrillard and Illouz have noted.

In stark contrast to Ortheil's characters, who are highly invested in their creative work and receive a high degree of affirmation and satisfaction from it, Nora's relationship with her work is, in Rosa's words, "mute", devoid of resonance and meaning. Unlike most other characters in *Wir kommen*, Nora is unable to assign any value to her own participation in the simulacrum. This inability to derive meaning from her activity extends to Nora's perception and experience of her social environment, populated with media types, critics, actors, multipliers, and minor celebrities. Nora's own lack of productivity and her inability to attach significance to her life is extended to her view of her entire environment.

Nora's weary and bored perspective presents the media environment around her in her own image. In Nora's narration, nobody appears to be productive, all "work" seems to consist of junk production for the internet and for television where the work consists of the task of being "hip" (Wk, p. 86). The result is a complete absence of meaningful presence in Nora's life. Meaning and presence only exist in her memories of Maja, who retrospectively acquires the lost promise of redemption from a life of middle-class tedium. "Mit Maja war das Leben eingezogen" (With Maja, life had moved in, Wk, p. 63). However, here, too, Nora remains essentially passive, a shadowy second to Maja's energy.

What is important for *Wir kommen* is, thus, less the disappearance of productivity into the simulacrum of the medium, noted by Baudrillard, than the effect the hyper-reflexivity has on Nora's ability to make cathected choices. While von Rönne's representation of her character's hyper-reflexivity can be read as a social analysis or critique insofar as it notes the disappearance of the real into myriads of self-reflexive operations, what is crucial, however, is that *Wir kommen* subordinates this analysis to the protagonist's melancholic state. Ultimately, Nora's inability to externalize herself in her own

imaginative production, her lack of resonant capacity are less an effect of the postmodern simulacrum of her media environment than of her alienated arrestedness in melancholia. This is to say that, as a first person narrative, *Wir kommen* prioritizes the melancholic state of its protagonist over its social-analytical aspect. The narrative's judgement of the media world as empty and stale, emanating from Nora's perception is, rather than a socio-critical analysis, a result of her personal disaffection.

Nora's consciousness, trapped between desire for the real and the inability to progress beyond the ironic metareflexive dissection of the inauthentic, exemplifies what Illouz in *Why Love Hurts* has called the "de-structuring of romantic desire". Affirming Luhmann's assertion that the increasing complexity of intimate communication results in a cooling of passion and, ultimately, in disappointment, Illouz asserts that the rationalization of social discourses in the 20th century have emptied out the semantic codes of romance, resulting in a loss of the "cultural pathos" of love (Illouz 2012, p. 197). The consequence of the progressive rationalization of emotions, together with the destabilization of clear gender roles in the latter half of the 20th century, is an increasing uncertainty and irony towards love relationships. According to Illouz, irony as a consequence of growing insecurity is the dominant rhetorical form in the contemporary discourse about love: "The process of rationalization of love is at the heart of the new ironic structure of romantic feeling which marks the move from an 'enchanted' to a disenchanted cultural definition of love" (ibid., p. 195). The result is, according to Illouz, a growing insecurity with respect to one's own emotional situation due to a fracturing of agreed and shared social codes of conduct. Illouz distinguishes between ambiguity, as a semantic order that is conducive to erotic encounters, and uncertainty: "Ambiguity is playful and pleasurable because it is a virtuoso way to play with social rules. Uncertainty [...] inhibits sexual desire and entails anxiety because it makes people focus on and interrogate themselves on the rules of interaction [...]" (ibid., p. 193). This insecurity is one of the aspects that trap Nora, both in her relationship with Jonas and in the unsatisfactory present. Due to the fact that their relationship cannot transition from the illusion of having found the perfect partner to a lived reality, Nora attempts "diese Illusion aufrecht zu erhalten, weil sonst nur Realität überbleibt, und die kann man nun wirklich auch alleine haben" (to keep this illusion up, because otherwise there is nothing left but reality and that I really can have on my own, Wk, p. 19).

According to Illouz, the awareness of the literary and cultural provenance of romantic ideals results in the experience of one's own emotions as part of a literary and cultural tradition, and thus as essentially fictional: "We have all become Emma Bovary in the sense that our emotions are deeply embedded in fictional narratives. [...] Emotions are inextricably intertwined with fiction [...] that is, they are lived as narrative life projects" (Illouz 2012, pp. 211–12). Illouz' reference to Emma Bovary as a model for the complicated relation between emotions and social fictions of love points to the essential conflict between the ideal of love in these fictions and its ultimate disappointment through contact with the banality of lived experience. In both *Liebesnähe* and *Wir kommen*, the ironic metafictionality of literary or cultural models of love plays a central role. However, in *Liebesnähe*, the modern conflict between utopian ideal and its disappointment in banal reality is sidestepped. What allows for this sidestepping is both the playful embedding of the metafictionality of emotional experience in a functioning communicative game between the protagonists that allows for a successful narrativization of their selves into a "life project", and the hypercharging of reality through resonant experience, essentially achieved through the outward orientation of all characters. In contrast, von Rönne's protagonist experiences her metafictional self-reflexiveness in the face of her desires, essentially, as a devaluation of these desires due to the absence of a functioning communicative partner. As a result, even emotional pain is not experienced as authentic and real: "Das war es, was wirklich wehtat, nicht die Trennung an sich, sondern das Bewusstsein davon, wie normal, wie redundant, wie klein das alles war und wie vorhersehbar" (What really hurt was not the separation itself, but the consciousness of how normal, how redundant, how small everything was, and how predictable, Wk, p. 198). In contrast to Johannes and Jule, who experience their relationship as a transition from metafictional engagement to the real, Nora remains trapped "in diesem seltsamen Stück, das jeden, einschließlich der Darsteller,

langweilte und trotzdem nicht enden wollte“ (in this strange play that bored everyone including the actors, and that nevertheless didn't want to end, Wk, p. 139). While Ortheil's protagonists transform their reality into a resonant environment, von Rönne's protagonist remains essentially trapped in Emma Bovary's position of suffering from the absolute difference between romantic ideals and lived everyday experience.

The fundamental difference between Ortheil's and von Rönne's protagonists is nowhere more visible than in the characters' relation to art and aesthetics and, as a consequence, productivity. Whereas Ortheil's novel contains a sustained critique of the socially mediated reception of art and literature and a plea for individual appropriation of aesthetic materials, Nora experiences everything secondhand: "ohne Kritiker wüsste ich gar nicht, was ich denken sollte, Zeitungen und Blogs gaben mir Meinungen vor, die ich vorbehaltlos annahm und als meine adoptierte" (without critics I wouldn't know what to think, newspapers and blogs gave me opinions which I accepted without reservations and adopted as my own, Wk, p. 189). Von Rönne's characters' dilemma of disenchanting desire is expressed succinctly in Jonas' comment on why religious faith is boring. The church is "wie eine schlechte Castingshow, an der niemand mehr teilnehmen wolle, der halbwegs etwas auf sich halte, aber das heißt ja nicht, dass nicht eine generelle Sehnsucht da sei" (like a bad casting show that nobody with any style wanted to participate in, but this didn't mean that there was not a general sense of longing, Wk, pp. 75–76). This statement essentially describes Nora's vision of romantic desire in *Wir kommen*. In contrast to Ortheil's characters, whose productivity consists of them externalizing themselves in their aesthetic appropriations of the world, von Rönne's protagonist is incapable of assigning meaning to her work or perceiving it as productive. Nora likes her work for the TV shopping show because the people at the broadcasters are "nice" and "keiner erwartet von mir, dass ich mich selbst verwirkliche" (nobody expects me to actualize myself, Wk, p. 85).

6. Conclusions

Ortheil's *Liebesnähe* and von Rönne's *Wir kommen* mark the two ends of the spectrum of representations of love and intimacy in contemporary German literature. Whereas *Wir kommen* exemplifies the "disenchanted cultural definition of love", and the "unhappy consciousness" of modern subjectivity (Illouz 2012, p. 195), *Liebesnähe* presents a decisively re-enchanting view of intimacy that is implicitly critical of the tradition of fictional representations and modern theories of love. This difference is framed in both texts through the respective protagonists' reaction to the death of a loved one that situates them at opposite ends of the Freudian spectrum of mourning and melancholia. While *Liebesnähe* presents a process of successful mourning, von Rönne's protagonist in *Wir kommen* is trapped in a state of arrested melancholia. The difference in representations of love and intimacy has been analyzed through Rosa's and Jullien's conceptions of resonance and intimacy, which, in contrast to object-based theories of love (e.g., Luhmann, Illouz), stress the mutual and mutually transformative aspects of intimate encounters. Rosa and Jullien's works entail critiques and modifications of modern conceptions of subjectivity, which also characterizes Ortheil's approach to the subject of love in *Liebesnähe*. In its self-conscious circumvention of the tortuous and self-tormenting traditions of love, *Liebesnähe* thus presents an alternative to, or a resolution of, these traditions, albeit one that is metareflexively located in the safe sphere of pure fictionality. In contrast, *Wir kommen* presents a protagonist whose plight exemplifies central issues highlighted by both Luhmann and Illouz with respect to intimacy in neoliberal media-driven consumer culture. Ortheil's representation of the successful resolution of the problems of modern love, however, is dependent on the novel's situation in a self-enclosed sphere of aesthetic production that largely eschews the engagement with the problems of contemporary existence. While von Rönne's novel can be said to be the more realistic one as regards the consideration of contemporary social complexities, the metareflexive and ironic abstraction of Ortheil's *Liebesnähe*, and its disappearance into the realm of pure literature, as before with *Die große Liebe* and *Das Verlangen nach Liebe*, is precisely the novel's point (see Schmitz 2017; Klemenz 2009).

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