

we never sleep

wir schlafen nicht

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In “wir schlafen nicht” (“we never sleep”), published in 2004, Kathrin Röggla provides a kind of audio portrait of a consulting firm with an unclear goal that is perfectly aligned with the neoliberal goal of profit maximisation. Without any real plot, the story progresses only through the editing of words distributed among seven employees about whom we know nothing besides their answers to questions that remain off-screen, outside any description or action. In this way, the author creates a new form that gives substance and expression to alienation in the workplace. The boundaries between documentary and fiction, raw material and literary elaboration are blurred; form and content become one in an inseparable literary and political indictment.

Working environments and, more generally, the omnipresence of the economy in our modern lives are among the favourite themes of Kathrin Röggla, an author born in Salzburg (Austria) in 1971. She is considered one of the most original contemporary German-language authors and writes hybrid texts that question genre boundaries and deliberately blur the lines between documentary and fiction. “Wir schlafen nicht” is no exception. Seven characters, who are presented at the threshold of the text as in a theatre play, take turns to speak and answer questions that never appear in the text itself. They appear only through their position within the highly hierarchical company. Their statements are organised into thematic chapters dealing with their private lives (or lack thereof), their “lifestyles”, their everyday lives and their terror of the void. Together they bear witness to the exhausting lives of the employees of a consultancy firm that purports to help companies optimise their processes, but is apparently content to draw up redundancy plans: meaningless work, cut off from any form of real production.

The whole sketches work as an obsession, without us really knowing what drives the employees and makes them sacrifice their entire individual lives to a job whose absurdity is obvious, even though it only appears through their words. Work therefore seems to be a serious addiction that gives rise to many others (alcoholism in particular, but also drug and adrenaline addiction). The compulsions are so internalised that they disrupt the body – starting with sleep deprivation, which seems to be a matter of course for everyone and a source of pride. Everyone is interchangeable, without this creating any form of solidarity. The characters talk to each other, but (almost) never with each other. No friendship grows out of their shared exploitation.

While the origin of the words is always indicated, so that we always know who is speaking, their uniformity is striking: all the characters speak the same language, interspersed with anglicisms and orders. Since there is no plot in the classical sense, this uniform language even becomes “the protagonist of the novel”, as Lilla Balint writes (2022, 129). The characters only exist through the compulsion to speak (Redezwang) that Röggla talks about: “The compulsion to speak of my characters, the compulsion for permanent self-expression, for self-fashioning, is socially controlled

and socially produced. It is absolutely non-individual" (2014, 15). The language reflects what is being said: it is frenetic and hasty; the words are spoken in rapid succession to emphasise the call to never stand still in the race for productivity (even if nothing is produced). Nevertheless, there is no sign of progress: the same topics are discussed over and over again, so that the linguistic frenzy goes round in circles, emphasising the absurdity of this new economy.

The political dimension of this novel is thus inextricably linked to the language used and the reported speech, as it succeeds in creating a critical space in relation to its own subject matter. Two processes are particularly striking. Firstly, the words are transcribed in a particular mode, the Konjunktiv I in German, which is the tense of reported speech. As a result, the characters almost never say I; their words are rendered in the third person, which makes reading more difficult but marks a significant distance. It is almost impossible to identify with these speakers (who, incidentally, are not very likeable). Their experience is distanced the moment it is expressed. Then the author deletes the capital letters that normally mark the beginnings of sentences, as well as the nouns in German. These two processes are very visible and immediately signalise the literary work on the reported speech. Praised for its documentary value, Röggl's text not only transcribes and condenses collected testimonies. It deploys highly visible aesthetic strategies that make the process of literary elaboration of the documentary material clear. This is already evident at the beginning of the text, where the author thanks all those she spoke to for her book. These acknowledgements emphasise that the author has indeed conducted interviews; but the typography, reminiscent of blank verse, and the lower case immediately signal the literary dimension of the text. Yet it is precisely these literary strategies that open up the possibility of criticism, even if there is no narrative authority to speak up and denounce what has been reported. Through redundancy and condensation, the empty and literally alienating character of this reported corporate language inevitably becomes visible. Its poeticisation makes it a target for criticism. The critical dimension of the book thus emerges through the formal work, in a novel that manages to be structurally political.

References

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