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Abstract

In his 1999 Nobel lecture, Günter Grass declares narration to be "a form of survival as well as a form of art." He sets out to demonstrate this declaration in his latest novella *Crabwalk* (2002), in which he echoes Walter Benjamin's concerns regarding war and information. The twist for Grass, the author who writes exclusively on his Olivetti typewriter, is that he analyzes the Internet as a narrative medium in his most recent work. This paper analyzes *Crabwalk* as a look at various forms of media—oral memories, historical monographs, film, and a website—through which humans narrate the past, in this case the 1945 sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a German KdF (Strength Through Joy) ship, by a Russian U-boat. The last medium, the Internet, is the focus of this paper as it serves as the central means of narrative development, as well as the single medium that inextricably intertwines Grass's "historical reality," the sinking of the *Gustloff*, with his "fictional reality," the murder of a "virtual" Jew by an apparently "virtual" Neo-Nazi.

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Crabwalk

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> What should historians do with old men's and women's tales? Should they take them as authentic testimony for a past that must not return, put them into museums as mementos of a shipwreck, or ignore them in favor of more scholarly reconstructions?
>
> —Geyer and Jarausch

In his essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" (1936), Walter Benjamin hypothesizes that modern experience has become so fractured and discontinuous that to render meaning has become nearly impossible. Despite the concerns Benjamin voices, the derivation of meaning from a very real, modern experience, the 1945 sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* by the Soviet U-boat *S-13*, is exactly what Günter Grass sets out to do with his latest novella, *Crabwalk* (2002). In this the most accessible of all Grass's works, he offers his version of the *Gustloff* tale by analyzing many of the various media employed by human beings in their attempt to relate perceived experience. Using a mix of history and fiction, Grass portrays a narrator, Paul Pokriefke, as he relates the story of a fictional survivor, Tulla, Paul's mother and violently enigmatic character from Grass's earlier *Danziger Trilogy*. Paul weaves Tulla's tale together with an historical monograph by a team of British authors, a similar monograph penned by a Nazi party functionary, a work of historical fiction from a Jewish author, another survivor's

account, an American film, and a French film. Most importantly to this work, Paul also incorporates the website belonging to his son Konny, a "wannabe" Neo-Nazi, into his narrative. It is this website and Grass's explicit criticism of how the digital network can negatively impact the effort to forge a narrative closing in on the "truth" of German historical reality that is the focus of this paper.

According to a review of *Crabwalk* in *The Spectator* by Andrew Grimson, Grass has simply followed his familiar pattern of taking "some recent episode in German history and render[ing] it less vivid. . . ." The only appropriate response to Grimson is, "Precisely." Clarity may be a luxury never afforded a nation trying to forge a historical narrative from, as Geyer and Jarausch characterize it in their book *Shattered Past*, "such disparate parts . . . from the utter destruction of the *shoah* to the surplus of well-being of the *Wirtschaftswunder*" (16). Grimson does, however, have one thing right—consistency. Grass has always been steady in his approach to rendering a German historical episode. In "To be Continued . . .," his 1999 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Grass suggests that people like Grimson, "defenders of one or another truth," sense mortal danger in face of "the idea that truth exists only in the plural—that there is no such thing as a single truth but only a multitude of truths." The multiplicity of truth is Grass's focus in *Crabwalk*, and it is, as Grimson quite rightly points out, nothing new. Stuart Taberner supports this notion when he points out that *Crabwalk*, indeed, "presents a continuity with [Grass's] previous work rather than a departure" (173). There are, however, at least two aspects of this work that are new for Grass. First, he affords a younger generation in Germany and elsewhere an opportunity to discover that Germans during World War II were not only perpetrators, they could also be victims—an idea that is highly controversial and not entirely new to German literature.[1] It is, however, an opportunity not readily available in many of Grass's other works, and, most importantly, it is Grass, Nobel Prize winner and most influential German author of the latter half of the twentieth century, finally making this point. As Adolf Höfer points out in his article on *Crabwalk*, Grass's work ennobles the theme of German victim-hood and leads it into the realm of "high literature" (183). The second new development Grimson overlooks is that the present, the past, and the "truth" are all becoming tied up in the

Internet, a technology Grass recognizes and derisively refers to in both his Nobel speech and in *Crabwalk* as a playground for young writers in their hasty retreat from public life. Given its ascendancy in the world of media, Grass appropriately depicts the Internet as the dominant historical clarifier/explainer. If the digital network is a "playground," it is a dangerous one.

A closer look at Benjamin's "Storyteller" will provide a framework with which to better understand this constellation of technology, information, and "truth." In formulating his hypothesis, Benjamin, like Grass, has two things in mind—war and information. With regard to the former, Benjamin is struck by how "at the end of [World War I] . . . men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience" (84). Benjamin perceives the experience of this war, the war in which modern weaponry collided with nineteenth-century tactics to produce never-before-seen casualty statistics, as so apocalyptic that its events cannot be justly related and thus no "truth" can be derived. Grass's war, World War II, with its extraordinarily high civilian and combatant casualty rate coupled with Germany's attempted eradication of the Jewish people, was even more apocalyptic. Grass does not examine war on a broad scale, however; he looks at a single event, one of the worst maritime disasters in history. Rather than trying to depict the very essence or "truth" of the event, Grass shows the various ways in which Germans have tried to explain the sinking of the *Gustloff* and its aftermath, which leads to his Benjaminian concern with the nature of information.

As much as Benjamin is troubled by the communicability of events like modern warfare, he is equally distressed by information as the modern form of communication. Information in the modern world, according to Benjamin, has two characteristics. First, it "lays claim to prompt verifiability," and second it must be "understandable in itself" (89). Grass explores both of these concerns in his modern fiction. Konny's website is a form of media, a conduit for information nowhere on the horizon in Benjamin's day, giving an entirely new meaning to the word "prompt" in its delivery of information. It also goes beyond mere verifier; the imprimatur provided by the Internet is nothing short of a "realizer." In an essay entitled "Real Virtuality" (1998), Bazon Brock famously declares

that the Internet does not undercut reality; it does not virtualize reality. The Internet, on the contrary, "is about the realization of virtuality" Brock finds this a natural course of development. Words, images, and actions have always been the realization of the virtuality of the human mind. The process of digitalization merely speeds and broadens the impact of realization. Grass's work gives credence to this idea, but for Grass it is hardly innocuous. The question he poses is: What if the virtuality realized is inhumane? In *Crabwalk*, Konny, a virtual Neo-Nazi for all intents and purposes, shoots and kills a young man portraying himself in cyberspace as a Jew, that is, he murders a virtual Jew. This is the danger Grass recognizes in the blurring of the line between virtuality and reality caused by the most powerful medium yet known to humankind.

The root of the danger, as depicted in Grass's work, lies in Benjamin's concern regarding the "understandable-in-itself" nature of the information underlying both reality and virtuality. The essence of information is such that it can exist without a proper context and has no need to "survive the moment in which it was new" (90). Grass's work depicts this pattern. First, Konny's website does not survive the moment. In the end, it is put out of service. The problem, however, is that it is followed up by a website posted by Konny's followers in honor of his murder of the Jew who was not really a Jew. An entirely new realm of information is spawned using Konny's virtual world as its very context, that is, the new website's context is purely virtual. Konny's troublesome context also leads him to the "revenge" murder of an innocent young man who portrayed himself on the Internet as David Frankfurter, the murderer of the historical Wilhelm Gustloff, the German leader of the Nazi party in Switzerland. In reality, therefore, there is no revenge; there is no Jew; there is hardly even a Neo-Nazi, as I will argue later. In *Crabwalk*, there is nothing more or less than a murder, cold-blooded, verifiable, and understandable in itself.

How the reader gets to the point of the real murder of the virtual David Frankfurter is the stuff of Grass's novella. Grass introduces the reader to Paul Pokriefke, narrator and great disappointment to his mother Tulla. Tulla, who gave birth to Paul the very night of the sinking of the *Gustloff*, had great hopes that he would one day tell the world her tale of survival. "That's all I live for—so's my son

can bear witness one of these days" (15). As a boy, she smuggles Paul into West Germany to live with her old friend Jenny. Paul does well enough in school, passes his university entrance exams, and becomes a journalist—well on his way to fulfilling his mother's dream. At some point in his life, however, he becomes disillusioned by his mother's dream, as well as her story. In the meantime, he marries, has a son named Konny, and divorces. With the interest he shows in the *Gustloff*, Konny quickly becomes a favorite of his grandmother Tulla, who fosters his interest by purchasing a computer with Internet access for him. In short order, Konny develops a website filled with antisemitic venom dedicated to the murder of Wilhelm Gustloff by David Frankfurter and the sinking of Gustloff's namesake ship. In the chatroom associated with his website, www.blutzeuge. de, Konny encounters a chatter pretending to be David Frankfurter. After many months of chatting, the two make plans to meet at Gustloff's birthplace in the former East Germany. At an abandoned memorial dedicated to Gustloff, Konny shoots his Internet acquaintance once in the stomach and three times in the head—just as the real David Frankfurter shot Wilhelm Gustloff. Konny declares in his trial that he "fired because [he is] a German" (188).

Before getting to the details of the murder, the reader meets Paul as he is justifying to Grass—playing the role of Paul's disembodied adviser—exactly why he finally decides to research and tell his mother's story: "Well because Mother's incessant nagging . . . Because I wanted to cry the way I did at the time, when the cry spread across the water, but couldn't anymore . . . Because for the true story . . . hardly more than three lines . . . Because only now . . ." (1). Paul's justification is symptomatic of Benjamin's concerns regarding the communicability of modern experience. He cannot state his justification with any more success than he will ultimately experience in trying to capture a single coherent "truth" of the intertwined story of his family, Wilhelm Gustloff, and the tale of the sinking of the *Gustloff*. It is simply not possible given the complexity of the event.

One difficulty Paul faces in telling this story is his background in journalism. In Benjamin's construct, journalists are the agents of information who attempt to make that information "appear 'understandable in itself.'" All reported events, according to Benjamin, come to the reader "already . . . shot through" (89). Paul echoes the

violence inherent in Benjamin's metaphor when he describes his youthful journalistic pursuits as mercenary; he maintains that he was a shredder and chopper of subjects that needed to fit neatly into news (1). Benjamin concludes that if storytelling, along with its corresponding mission of "having counsel," of providing something useful like practical advice or a moral, is dying out, then "the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs" (89). Paul through his journalistic exploits and Konny through his website are purveyors of information lacking Benjaminian counsel for their readers. In order, therefore, for Paul to relate the story of his family with "counsel," he chooses to abandon his linear, journalistic ways that can only relate a violently damaged story. This compromise seems appropriate in trying to capture a small piece of the history of a country for which, as Geyer and Jarausch suggest, "linear continuity, typical of other national histories, falters in the face of the ruptures of [its] twentieth-century experience" (17). Grass, through Paul, tries to capture this non-linearity by adopting a crabwalk technique—"sneak[ing] up on time . . . seeming to go backward but actually scuttling sideways, and thereby working [his] way forward fairly rapidly" (3). He suggests that it is possible, using this technique, to catch glimpses of the many "truths" he writes of in his Nobel speech, which are inherent in historical experience.

To begin his crabwalking pursuit of history, Paul turns to the Internet, as there is no better place for a journalist "to snare information wherever it may be wandering around the world" (2). In an astute linking of the crabwalking narrative technique and the Internet, Jill Twark suggests that the "overall narrative structure may be viewed as a metaphor for hyperlinking which, as a non-linear means of zigzagging from virtual space to virtual space, can lead to what we now perceive as an ordinary, everyday 'crabwalk' through cyberspace" (160). While on one of these non-linear hunts for information, Paul happens on blutzeuge.de—the website dedicated to Wilhelm Gustloff and, unbeknownst to Paul at this point, mastered by his son Konny. Grass devotes the remainder of the first chapter to the assassination of Wilhelm Gustloff by David Frankfurter. It is clear from the start that although there are several narratives related through several forms of media, it is the Internet, specifically Konny's website, that subsumes all.

One of the several traditional, "linear" media Paul turns to for analysis is the "paper and ink" book. For information on Gustloff and his assassination, he primarily references the works of Emil Ludwig, a Jewish author, and Wilhelm Diewerge, a Nazi Party functionary. Regarding the best-selling author Ludwig, the reader learns that in 1936 he wrote a fictionalized version of the assassination entitled *Murder in Davos*. In this work, Ludwig quotes Gustloff as saying, "In all the world, I love my wife and my mother most. If my Führer ordered me to kill them, I would obey him" (5). He thus paints Gustloff as a man with horribly skewed priorities, even out of touch with a government claiming to hold motherhood in the highest regard. Ludwig also psychoanalyzes Frankfurter when he speculates that Frankfurter's witnessing of the humiliation suffered by his rabbi uncle during a riot in Berlin provided the impetus for him to act. Finally, Ludwig's account characterizes the assassination of Gustloff as "David's struggle with Goliath" (25). By way of contrast, Paul offers up Wilhelm Diewerge, Nazi Party member, propaganda expert, and writer of an "historical" account of the murder of Gustloff. Diewerge challenges Ludwig on all three counts. First, he dismisses Gustloff's quote regarding his wife and mother as merely apocryphal. Secondly, he disputes Ludwig's psychoanalysis of David. He quotes an interview of David's uncle who "purportedly told the Berlin police when they interrogated him: 'It is not true that an adolescent boy pulled me by my beard. . .'" (12). And finally, Diewerge does not see Frankfurter versus Gustloff as a David versus Goliath story, but rather the story of a "cowardly murder" (25).

One problem with both of these assessments is that the reader has them third hand through blutzeuge.de and its associated chat room. Konny and the Comrades of Schwerin generally dismiss Ludwig's stories as lies. Konny sets them up as straw men easily knocked down in the digital world by his devoted right-wing chatters thanks to his employment of Diewerge as the authoritative source. In fact, Konny's detailed account of Frankfurter's actions on the day of the murder is gleaned primarily from Diewerge's "historical" work. Paul is left wondering about "these diametrically opposed assessments [that] have survived into the digitally networked present" (25). Regarding Paul's musings, I would change "have survived" to "have been revitalized" by the new medium. Through the Internet, Konny

assumes the power to pick, choose, and privilege pieces of informa-
tion, reframing the narrative so that it depicts the "truth" he wish-
es to convey. He has subsumed the written works by Ludwig and
Diewerge in the new medium and made them more compelling by
including, for example, an interactive chat room as well as a regu-
larly updated photo gallery. It is features like these that make his
medium feel more real, more like the "truth," to the Internet surfer.
Through his website, Konny has developed the ability to transform
this minor Party functionary, Wilhelm Gustloff, into a martyr for
the Nazi and Neo-Nazi movements.

 "Before long," Paul suggests that through repetition on the In-
ternet, "everything . . . outgrew the perpetrator and his victim and
assumed mythic significance" (25–26). Frankfurter and Gustloff
were, according to Paul, merely supposed "to find their places in
the book of history, figures larger than life" (26). The conflation of
myth and history here seems odd, as the former suggests the "un-
real" and the latter suggests the "real." Both forms of media, how-
ever, the book of history and the Internet, have the capacity to make
myth. He implies that even the book has the power to make a person
"larger than life." The difference lies in the fact that books have no-
where near the power of the Internet to do the same. In keeping with
Brock's formulation, the Internet by no means virtualizes reality—
in this case, it creates myth, cavorting as reality, more powerfully
than any book can or ever could. In the first chapter, Grass suggests
that the reality of Gustloff's assassination has not been virtualized
on the web, because the reality has not been captured by Konny on
his website, a mish-mash of opinion, innuendo, and speculation. In
other words, Konny has virtualized nothing more than previous vir-
tualization as created by Nazi propagandists. It is only Paul with his
crabwalk technique who manages to poke around the edges of real-
ity, to brush against the "truth." The danger of the virtuality Konny
purveys lies in the realization of his newly digitalized myth, in other
words, the realization of that which was never real at all.

 Before coming to the virtual mirror repetition of the past, Paul
lays out the history of Gustloff's funeral and Frankfurter's trial in the
second chapter. Because he is crabwalking, however, he first reverts
to a discussion of his initial discovery of blutzeuge.de. We find that
he came across the website in January of 1996, and it provided the

impetus for him to tell his mother's story, something she had been urging him to do for many years. Her story, however, only includes *Gustloff* the ship, not the man of whom she knew nothing, and hers is a story no one, including her son, wants to hear. The sinking of the *Gustloff* was taboo in both the East and the West. As Sebald suggests, "the sense of . . . unparalleled humiliation felt by millions in the last years of the war had never really found verbal expression" (viii). The lack of expression was largely due to the seeming lack of a willing audience. These "old men's and women's tales," however, are too powerful to be kept bottled up (Geyer 29). As Engler points out in his analysis of *Crabwalk*, "One can probably repress individual historical experience, but never erase it" (143). Through the Internet, these repressed tales find an outlet and an audience. Paul discovers this when he happens on blutzeuge.de and recognizes Tulla's story unfolding, only it is apparently already too late for his version of the event to compete.

As is the rule in political propaganda, he who gets the story out first, loudest, and most intriguingly has gained the initiative to shape it in support of his ends. This is the effect of Konny's website—he gets the story out first, and no book or article Paul writes can possibly match the power and figurative decibel level of blutzeuge.de. Paul knows this. He is amazed by the website and its skillful mixture of photos and "little come-ons: Would you like to learn more about our martyr? Should we offer his story piece by piece?" (30). Konny's second question is particularly important regarding the level of intrigue on his propagandistic website. In Grass's Nobel acceptance speech, he opens with a discussion of nineteenth-century serialized fiction and its reliance on continuation as a technique "of suspense, of building to a climax at the end of a column." Konny expertly employs this technique both over a period of time, like serialized nineteenth-century stories, and through a series of photograph laden, hypertexted pages, thereby luring his modern day reader. The photographic aspect of Konny's website, as alluded to earlier, provides him with yet another hook. To tell the story of Gustloff's funeral, Konny includes quotations from Adolf Hitler's speech about the fallen party member and also photos of the famous Nazi salute "from that newest dimension known as cyberspace" (33). The funeral, in Paul's words, "was brought to life by pictures" (34) on

the Internet. Konny's skillfully designed website is indicative of the special relationship between the Internet and history. It seems to have the ability to reanimate the past, taking advantage of those who have no understanding of history, like no other medium. In the case of David Frankfurter, he is retried by Konny and his comrades, "this time on a virtual world stage before an overflow crowd of onlookers" (45). Konny gets most of his information on the trial from the *Völkischer Beobachter* (46). Visitors to Konny's website learn there that Frankfurter's father disavowed him, and they learn that upon hearing his verdict, Frankfurter wept pathetically, "facts" derived from a Nazi newspaper. Konny once again creates a context for his readers out of the highly questionable context created over a half century ago by the *Völkischer Beobachter*. In Paul's historical version, Frankfurter's father did not disavow him, and, because he confessed to all charges, Frankfurter accepted his verdict without emotion. To the visitor of blutzeuge.de, this version is irrelevant; all that matters is that Konny was there with his website first, loudest, and most intriguingly.

In this same chapter, the reader also gets the first hint of the presence of David Stremplin, the virtual David Frankfurter, in the chatroom. We learn that he was a formidable foe to Konny and the right-wingers, that "he had a comeback for everything" (34). We also learn that despite the debate, the website continued on, untroubled by any contradictory arguments presented in the chat room. Finally, Paul characterizes the debate as follows: "It was as if this exchange of blows were taking place in the hereafter. Yet the attention to detail was very much of this world" (47). The Internet allows for the apparent reanimation of the dead, but does so with a strange amalgamation of past and present, of "the hereafter" and the "this world," unique to the Internet. It seems as though the past is alive and dominant because it is improved and armed with hindsight. The historian Konrad Jarausch urges "a conscious dialogue between the past and the present" in order to better understand German history, and at first glance it appears that the Internet allows for this (15). Upon closer inspection, however, one will not note a true dialogue, but rather a dominant past scolding a wavering, weak-kneed present. Konny and David are Gustloff and Frankfurter with a broader view, but the virtual Gustloff holds the upper

hand because he controls the only media that matters, just like the Nazis of the pre-digital era.

By chapters three and four, Grass has put the pre-history aside and begun to deal with the actual sinking of the *Gustloff*. Here, he introduces the reader to other forms of media, all attempting to relate the same events. Although Tulla's story has previously been alluded to, it is at this point in the crabwalk that we begin to get pieces of her story through the medium of orality. We are also introduced to a "thorough account" by Heinz Schön, a survivor who served as the assistant to the purser on the *Gustloff* (62). In the post-war period, however, he suffers the same fate as Tulla, that is, no one is interested in his book. In East Germany, there is little interest because their Soviet counterparts who control the reception of the history of World War II initially viewed the sinking of the *Gustloff* with indifference. And in West Germany, citizens were not permitted to lose sight of the atrocities perpetrated by Germans by taking part in mourning an atrocity committed against them.[2] The last medium Grass tells of is film. Paul incorporates two films in his crabwalk. The first, for which Heinz Schön served as an adviser, was called *Night Fell over Gotenhafen* and was produced in the late 1950's; it deals with the sinking of the *Gustloff*. The second, produced ten years later, is about David Frankfurter's assassination of Gustloff.

This latter film, directed by Rolf Lyssy, "presents the facts quite accurately" (70), according to Paul. Although the film breaks no new ground, a particular strong suit is the incorporation of actual newsreel footage from Gustloff's funeral. This footage directly contradicts Konny's Internet claims of mass salutes and fine weather along the funeral route, as it shows few civilians saluting and heavy snow accompanying the procession. The newsreels also lend an air of "truth" to Lyssy's film, in much the same way the photo galleries on Konny's website support his version of reality. "Version," however, is the operative word here. In keeping with theorists like Jarausch who declare "there is no single master narrative to be told" when it comes to German history, Grass has Paul refer to his "version" (70) as opposed to Lyssy's version, for example. For Paul there are merely versions of history; some, like Lyssy's film, come closer to the essence of the event than others, but none capture entire "truth" as Konny claims to.

Heinz Schön's book account is one of those versions that may come closer to what actually happened regarding the sinking of the *Gustloff*. His work is thoroughly researched using eyewitness interviews and contemporary newspaper accounts, yet it never received the attention it deserved. One problem, according to Geyer and Jarausch, is that while "the assemblage of facts" can create "a reliable chronicle," it does not necessarily capture history. It does not necessarily capture the "truth" of the "old men's and women's tales" (ix). Echoing this problem, Tulla, to whom Paul finally manages to smuggle a copy of Schön's work before the unification of East and West Germany, is uninterested. Regarding Schön's book and another historical analysis of the sinking written by three Englishmen, Tulla proclaims, "It's all too impersonal; nothing comes from the heart!" (98). The books are simply too factual to appeal. Even the attendees of the fiftieth survivor's reunion organized by Schön are not appreciative of his efforts:

> At the beginning of the reunion he spoke on the topic "The Sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* on 30 January 1945 from the Russians' Perspective." In the course of his speech, it became evident that he had visited the Soviet Union often to do his research, had made the acquaintance of a petty officer from the U-boat *S-13*, and, what is more, had remained in friendly contact with this Vladimir Kourotchkin, who, on his commander's orders, had sent the three torpedoes speeding on their way, and had even been photographed shaking hands with the old man. With these revelations, he had, as Schön later reticently put it, "lost some friends." (101)

The reception of Schön's work by Tulla and the other survivors begs the question: What kind of stories do people want to hear? Do they want to hear the facts, or are the facts too bloodless to appeal? Regarding these questions, Geyer and Jarausch note that the power of personal narrative stands in great contrast to historical analysis and frequently offers more appeal. In the case of Germany's World War II survivors, they suggest, "the penchant for storytelling is a response to the psychological problem of dealing with an incomprehensible catastrophe, of exploring the human aspects of inexplicable suffering" (30). Thus, regardless of how irrational it may sound, the sur-

vivors want to hear that their enemy is a sub-human monster. And Tulla wants to hear her story about how her hair turned silver the moment Paul was born and his scream smothered the screams of the hundreds of drowning and freezing children. Schön's work with its intellectually honest context stands in marked contrast to Konny's website with its appeal to personal narrative and raw emotions, but obvious lack of objectivity and less-than-veracious context. Even the film based on Heinz Schön's work, *Night Fell over Gotenhafen*, done in a medium that comes closest to the power and immediacy of the Internet, fails to reach many viewers.

Only Konny's website finds a significant audience and, in the third chapter, Paul comes to understand that Konny has begun to subsume Tulla's oral narrative in his Internet tale. Paul's first clue that it is his son running blutzeuge.de comes when he reads a statement on the web that is strikingly similar to something he recently heard from Konny in casual conversation regarding Paul's latest assignment covering elections in Schleswig-Holstein. To a provocation from David in a chatroom, Konny replies, "Those democratic elections you glorify are driven by the interests of the plutocrats, of world Jewry! The whole thing is a swindle!" (66). He says much the same thing in an earlier conversation with Paul. This quote heightens Paul's suspicion, but when he reads one of Tulla's "fairy tales" on the web, the tale of her brother's drowning and her reaction to it, Paul is certain. Konny then openly dedicates his Internet work to his grandmother "to whom [he] has sworn, by the white hair on her head and in the name of the Comrades of Schwerin, that [he] will testify to the truth, and nothing but the truth: It is the world Jewish conspiracy that aims to pillory us Germans for all eternity . . ." (76). For those not taken aback by the explicit antisemitism, they see the moving story of a devoted grandson battling to have his grandmother's story told. Konny's is the type of rhetoric, standing in such marked contrast to Schön's, that is so appealing to many. And Paul believes that it was Tulla's plan all along to have Konny tell her story: "At almost fifteen . . . [Konny] showed not a trace of childishness, instead appeared ripe for Mother's plan of initiating him into the complete story of the disaster and, as would become apparent, having him promulgate the legend" (99). Thanks at least in part to the fact that she is the one who purchased Konny "the

Mac with all the bells and whistles" (69), Tulla is finally going to get to have her bombastic, exaggerated version of the tale, or "legend" as Paul calls it, told with nothing less than the imprimatur of the Internet. This much is clear by the end of chapter four.

Chapter five begins with an aside containing an interesting autobiographical admission regarding the story of the end of World War II. Grass makes another appearance as Paul's disembodied adviser and admits that his generation missed the opportunity to tell the story of the war; they gave up the initiative to subsequent generations who have seized that very initiative with a new means of communication—the Internet. Grass muses that his generation:

> should have found words for the hardships endured by the Germans fleeing East Prussia. . . . Never . . . should his generation have kept silent about such misery, merely because its own sense of guilt was so overwhelming, merely because for years the need to accept responsibility and show remorse took precedence, with the result that they abandoned the topic to the right wing. This failure . . . was staggering. (103)

This from the man whom many consider Germany's left-wing conscience, berating those who would forget its horrific past. He believes his generation should have made a more concerted attempt to tell the entire story. The vacuum created by their failure was ripe for filling with tales like the one Konny spins in the digital world of blutzeuge.de.

Given this opportunity, Konny, working feverishly on his Mac, continues to forge a virtual history on his website. He recounts all of the atrocities committed by the Russian army against the fleeing Germans and punctuates them with sentences like: "These horrors were visited by subhuman Russians on defenseless Germans women. . . ." and "This terror still menaces all of Europe if no dam is erected against the Asiatic tide. . ." (106). Again, his rhetoric takes on a stronger feeling of immediacy than if it were published, for example, in monograph form. Paul's understanding is telling: "Spread by way of the Internet and downloaded by who knows how many users, these sentences and the captions to the accompanying illustrations could be read as if they applied to current events. . ." (106).

Again, the Internet conflates present and past and realizes virtuality. In his work *Hypertext* (2001), Stephan Porombka airs the concern that the Internet has the power to completely change reality. He notes that there are many who fear that reality is so completely interwoven into the Internet that outside of the Internet there is no reality anymore—the world and the computer become one (273). Along the same lines, Dietmar Kamper suggests that modernity and its reliance on media has caused "a widespread fictionalizing of the world that will, bit by bit, erase all historical understanding" (85). Günter Grass gives artistic expression to Porombka's and Kamper's concerns.

To this end, Grass has Konny continue his bid to "erase all historical understanding." He makes the claim that the *Gustloff* was a refugee ship. He neglects any reference to the "370 members of the naval women's auxiliary . . . the crews of the hastily dismantled flak batteries" (107–08). He also leaves out "the Croatian volunteer soldiers pressed into duty" (108). In addition to neglecting the presence of troops on the *Gustloff*, Konny is so interested in absolving the Reich of any responsibility for the disaster that he says nothing of the faulty radio system, nothing about the missing life boats, and nothing about the lack of adequate emergency drilling. Paul concludes that Konny, much like the survivors who rejected Heinz Schön because of his relationship with the Russian sailor who fired the torpedoes, desires "an unambiguous enemy" (109). Konny gets away with these omissions because the only requirement for information in the digital age is that it be "understandable-in-itself." Given his medium, he has no need for a broader, more intellectually honest context such as that forged by Heinz Schön.

In chapter six, Grass finally comes to the actual sinking of the *Gustloff*, and in order to tell this story, he resorts to all the media previously mentioned. The resulting non-linear approach effectively demonstrates the difficulty of outlining a coherent historical narrative. He first refers to photos, both on Konny's website and those that Heinz Schön had collected as part of his research. The story the photos tell of the young sailors and women of the naval auxiliary is one of wasted youth. Paul remarks that some look to be approximately Konny's age. Significant also are the groups for whom there are no photos. There are only a few photos of the children. There are

no photos of the thousands of peasants and elderly persons, there are no pictures of the many wounded soldiers from the Kurland, and, most significantly and frustratingly to Paul, there are no photos of Tulla or Paul from that era. There is no way, for example, for Paul to verify the legend of Tulla's silver hair. This leaves Paul to rely on Tulla's oral narrative for much of his history.

And Tulla's is a nebulous narrative at best. She tells of her impressions as each of the torpedoes explodes into the side of the *Gustloff*, and Paul fills in the blanks with his research. Before he gets to Tulla's story, Paul incorporates the Soviet legend of the torpedo naming into his narrative. Each missile was purportedly adorned with its own written dedication. When the torpedo marked FOR THE MOTHERLAND struck, Tulla explains in her narrative that she was already awake. Paul tells us that it hit the bow of the ship below the waterline. Even if a crewman in that area of the ship had survived the explosion, he did not ultimately survive the sinking because the watertight doors were ordered sealed off. The second torpedo, the one marked FOR THE SOVIET PEOPLE, knocked the pregnant Tulla out of her bed. It also hit beneath the swimming pool, which was serving as a makeshift barracks for the naval auxiliary. The explosion shattered the tiles that made up the pool. This in turn shred into pieces the majority of the women bunking in that area of the ship. The third explosion, from Tulla's perspective, necessitated a visit from the ship's doctor. She also believed the third hit, the one that struck the engine room, destroyed all power to the ship, and caused the *Gustoff* to heel to the port side, also caused her labor to begin. As the medical corpsmen were evacuating Tulla, she witnessed the dead in the water who had skidded off the ship. Many of them included children upside down in the water because they had fallen in headfirst. This, according to Tulla, was the cause of her silver hair. It was also, according to the gunner's testimony as related to Heinz Schön, cause for great rejoicing on *S-13*, the Soviet U-boat.

The chaos onboard ship, alluded to by Tulla, could not be captured by Heinz Schön's written text. Konny's otherwise very effective website could not depict the horror of the situation and is found wanting by Paul. Even Tulla found it indescribable, claiming: "There's no notes in the scale for it . . ." (144). For the most accurate

depiction of the sinking, Paul gives credit to another medium. The film *Night Fell over Gotenhafen* does the best job of "capturing . . . something of the panic that erupted on all decks when the three hits caused the ship to heel to port, with the bow already under water from the first hit" (143).

Returning to the Internet, Konny characterizes the U-boat as "the murder vessel" (142). He also provides a schematic drawing of the ship with holes depicting where the torpedoes hit. The effect of this, according to Paul, was that "from then on the ship's name came to carry global significance as the epitome of disaster" (143). Konny fuels the expression of long-seething emotions. Paul explains, "With the exclamation, seemingly emanating from the present, 'The *Gustloff* is sinking!,' my son's home page opened a window to the entire world" (159). Konny makes his version of past present and co-opts this piece of war history for the modern day right wing:

> The chat room promptly filled with hate. "Jewish scum" and "Auschwitz liar" were the mildest insults. As the sinking of the ship was dredged up for a new generation, the long-submerged hate slogan "Death to all Jews" bubbled to the digital surface of contemporary reality: foaming hate, a maelstrom of hate. Good God! How much of this has been dammed up all this time, is growing day by day, building pressure for action. (160)

Grass understands, no matter how derisively he dismisses the Internet as a playground, that the "digital surface" is "contemporary reality," that virtuality is ultimately realized.[3] On his website, Konny claims "to know for a fact" (158) exactly what happened. Grass, however, shows the reader that no medium can capture the reality of the situation. Konny's depiction is thus virtual. The insults hurled are hurled at a boy who is not a Jew at all, and thus virtual as well. The realization, the antisemitism fomented, however, is very real, and Grass understands that this realization presents a clear danger.

After bringing the sinking of the *Gustloff* to the World Wide Web, Konny turns his attention back to "the martyr," back to Wilhelm Gustloff the man. Tragically, Konny also turns his attention to his chatroom partner, David Stremplin, the virtual David Frankfurter. Paul does not know "what . . . got into Konny to make him

seek an actual encounter that would convert into reality a bosom-enemy relationship that had developed over the Internet and was essentially a fiction?" (184). The conversion of fiction into actuality, or of virtuality into reality lies at the heart of this incident. As a first step in this process, Konny suggests that the two meet "where the martyr had been born" (185). They tour the region and, on a beautiful spring day, Konny Pokriefke shoots David Stremplin dead. The fiction Konny spins on the Internet becomes real.

He is, however, not the only spinner of virtuality. Both Konny and David proffer two fictions each on blutzeuge.de. David portrays himself as David Frankfurter and as a Jew. Konny portrays himself as Wilhelm Gustloff and as a Neo-Nazi. David is clearly not Frankfurter, and Konny is not Gustloff. David is also not a Jew, a matter cleared up during Konny's trial. The matter of Konny the Neo-Nazi, however, is less clear. Konny certainly does not hesitate to spout antisemitic bile on his website, but interestingly he is shunned by the local skinhead population. His overtures with this group are consistently rejected. His speeches are too long and cerebral for the uneducated, beer-swilling skinhead groups. Additionally, he has the temerity to praise the military skill of the commander of the Russian U-boat *S-13* in a speech to a group of skinheads. After that, Konny is attacked by a group of skinheads and lives under constant threat of further attack by other thugs. The reality is, Konny was an antisemitic purveyor of hate, but the only place Konny was a Neo-Nazi was on the Internet. Returning to Brock, the Internet is not virtualizing reality, it realizes Konny's virtual existence. In *Connected: Or What It Means to Live in the Network Society*, Steven Shaviro would put an even finer point on this matter than Brock. He would argue that the distinction between a virtual Neo-Nazi and real Neo-Nazi is of little consequence. In the tradition of George Berkeley, Shaviro argues that to be is to be perceived. Further, "to be online is already to be perceived . . . the *cogito* of virtual reality . . . reads: I am connected, therefore I exist" (85). For Shaviro, our existences have already become largely virtual, all that matters is "being," and the only way to "be" is to be online. Konny's virtual existence is therefore the only one that matters. The same held true for Adolf Hitler—the only persona of his that mattered was the one created in the various propagandistic media. The difference, however, between the

media at the disposal of the Third Reich and the Internet is that the latter, given its association with the computer and the veneration the computer enjoys in modern Western culture, carries with it an imprimatur of "reality" not ascribed to any other medium, including film. Konny becomes so deluded and confused, even maniacal, regarding the line between real and virtual that when asked during his trial about the fact that the boy he killed was not even Jewish, he unrepentantly responds, "That doesn't change the situation in the least. It was up to me to decide whether the person known to me as David was speaking as a Jew and behaving as such" (196). Konny decides what is real and what is virtual, and, as Veel correctly points out, this is precisely the tragedy of the novella (210). For Konny, the world and the Internet, in keeping with Porombka, seem to have become one. He therefore kills David Stremplin.

Konny murders David with a pistol purchased for him by Tulla so that he could feel safer living under threat of attack from the skinheads. So what then is the reader to make of the fact that it is Tulla who buys the computer and the pistol? Tulla figuratively and literally arms her young grandson so that he may tell her tale. She buys him the computer with network connection, symbol of virtuality, and the pistol, symbol of reality. When the line between the two is blurred, killing can ensue. This is nothing new. The Nazi regime ran one of the most effective media propaganda machines in modern history. They, too, provided virtuality through media and reality through guns. Their virtuality was expressed with pamphlets, books, newsreels, and blockbuster films, and they were able to realize their make-believe world with weapons. The difference now is that the Internet can subsume all other forms of media, and as Harro Segeberg suggests, "[it] threatens to replace those other forms of media as the universal medium" (321). A website can utilize text, photos, sound tracks, and film to create its own seemingly reasoned reality faster and more convincingly than any other single form of media. This is the trap Grass perceives.

At the end of *Crabwalk* the reader learns that Konny has turned himself around in prison. To indicate to Paul that he has changed, Konny destroys a detailed model of the *Gustloff* he built in his cell. Additionally, the website blutzeuge.de is shut down. The problem is that this does not mark the end. In *Crabwalk*, the "common novel"

referred to by Grass in his Nobel acceptance speech does in fact con-
tinue. In the end, Paul is surfing the Internet and his worst fears
are confirmed. Even though Konny has given up his virtual world,
there is a new site called www.kameradschaft-konrad-pokriefke.de
highlighting that troubling Benjaminian combination of war and
information. A new Internet story is beginning using information
claiming prompt verifiability and ultimately understandable only in
itself. Just as Konny's website campaigned for Wilhelm Gustloff as
a martyr, the new site urges support for Konny as "someone whose
conduct and thinking it held up as exemplary, someone whom the
hated system had for that very reason locked up" (234). As con-
strued and flimsy as the context for Konny's website was, the new
site is worse because it uses Konny's site and its virtuality as a con-
text. Given that Nazi propaganda in the mid-twentieth century was
a distortion of reality and that Konny largely based his site on that
distortion, the new site is at least three layers removed from reality,
or, viewed from the opposite angle, buried in three layers of virtual-
ity. The story continues, and when Paul proclaims, "It doesn't end.
Never will it end" (234), he is correct. This is Grass's counsel.

Notes

1 This point seems to be the source of some controversy. Lothar Baier, Hei-
nz Ludwig Arnold, Jarausch, and Geyer emphasize that the idea of German
as victim is nothing new. In a review for the *Zürcher Wochenzeitung*, Baier
says that Grass must be relying on a type of mass amnesia on the part of
the German public for them to believe that no one has mourned German
war victims. Arnold cites several well-known authors of fiction to support
his case (Arno Schmidt, Siegfried Lenz, Alexander Kluge, etc.) Geyer and
Jarausch point to existence of this idea in the popular consciousness. By
contrast, Sebald claims that German literature has completely ignored the
German victim of air warfare, and Adolf Höfer systematically outlines the
lack of interest in the German victim in German literature.

2 In a way, this *Verbot* is still in effect today. In his highly critical review
of *Im Krebsgang*, Arnold hopes Grass has not forgotten that the day after
the sinking of the *Gustloff*, the SS executed 5000 survivors of the Stutthof
concentration camp. Arnold's "hope" for Grass is precisely Grass's point

and serves to contradict those who claim that the story of German as war victim has been told enough. Baier does the same in a review published in *Wespennest*. He opens his review by detailing the horrific fate of the more than 80,000 Jews living in the town of Libau, thereby implying that Grass has lost sight of what should be the primary post-WWII focus—the Holocaust ("Tal").

3 In her article on virtuality and memory in *Crabwalk*, Kristin Veel overstates when she writes that "the virtual and the real become indistinguishable when there is no differentiation between past and present" (210). The conflation of virtuality and reality occurs for many reasons, but primarily when the technology is sufficiently advanced to allow for this possibility.

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