

Surviving to Tell the Tale: Josef Haslinger's *Phi Phi Island* (2007)

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In a recent essay about natural catastrophes in literature, Swiss writer Christine Rinderknecht observes that “natural catastrophes are by nature not suitable for literary purposes” (16).¹ Using her own case as an example, Rinderknecht, who experienced the 2004 tsunami in Thailand, asserts that disasters lend themselves as material for literary composition only after a considerable amount of time has passed. While distance—historical, geographical or psychological—may in general benefit the artistic process, writing about a profoundly unsettling personal experience like the survival of a major catastrophe in a literary fashion is perhaps particularly difficult because of the author’s dual relationship to the narrative as witness and as artist. Most survivors are not writers, and their accounts are valued for the spontaneous and decidedly non-literary quality that signals authenticity to those who hear or read their stories in various news media. A text like Josef Haslinger’s *Phi Phi Island*, the Austrian writer’s reflections on his survival of the 2004 tsunami, is thus a rare example of a literary disaster account.

Phi Phi Island is a personal yet also highly self-aware text that employs as well as contemplates writing as a means to overcome trauma. Cognizant of what literary critic Shoshana Felman has described as our “post-traumatic century” (1), the narrative seeks to come to terms with a profoundly traumatic event to which prevailing models, most notably notions of historical and cultural trauma in the wake of the Holocaust, do not seem to apply, or, perhaps more accurately, should not be applied out of respect for those who perished in man-made catastrophes. Caused by a natural disaster, Haslinger’s experience is also outside the Western European horizon of expectation: “The real horror,” as Slavoj Žižek put it, “happens *there*, not *here*” (13). Turning the story of his survival into a literary text, Haslinger must stake out his own course through various literary traditions and cultural means of coping with disaster. His book, this essay argues, is not so much a document of individual survival but a text that overcomes trauma through the creation of art.

Literary texts about historical disasters, of which there are many, are typically

¹ “Naturkatastrophen eignen sich naturgemäss nicht als literarische Objekte.” To my knowledge, Rinderknecht’s is the only other literary text about the 2004 tsunami in addition to Josef Haslinger’s. In her lecture, the Swiss writer relates how she saw the water approach and was able to save herself with relative ease by running up a hill. Upon her return to Zurich, Rinderknecht read numerous reports and eyewitness accounts about the disaster and decided to use her experiences as inspiration for a novel. Sections of this novel, which Rinderknecht later decided to abandon, are included in the lecture. Rinderknecht’s published works include *Ein Löffel in der Luft* (Zürich: Pendo, 2002), a fictionalized account of her young brother’s death in a car accident.

written by people who did not in fact experience the catastrophic event, often from positions of significant historical or spatial distance. The purpose of such narratives may be to bear witness for those who can no longer do so but also, and even more importantly, to offer interpretations of the catastrophe beyond the actual experience, drawing comparisons across historical and geographical divides and suggesting moral, political, or scientific implications. The most famous example to this day is perhaps Voltaire's *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, the French philosopher's provocative challenge to the then prevailing Christian religious conviction that by definition „everything is good“ because the world was created by a benevolent God.² Voltaire was less interested in the earthquake itself, instead using the occasion of the 1755 disaster to contest an existing world view. The most famous 19th-century retelling of a historical disaster is probably Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 *The Last Days of Pompeii*, a voluminous historical novel in which the AD 79 Vesuvius eruption figures as punishment for political and moral corruption. With growing technological possibilities, mankind's presumed overestimation of its capabilities and a lack of humility in its relationship with the natural environment gains prominence as a theme of cultural critique. „Die Brück' am Tay,“ Theodor Fontane's 1880 ballad about the 1879 bridge collapse near Dundee in Scotland that killed all seventy people on the train crossing it, exposes as hubris the human belief in its ability to control the natural environment. Written shortly after the accident, Fontane's poem seeks to comprehend a new kind of disaster caused by the combination of technical failure and overwhelming forces of nature. Arno Schmidt's 1958 radio essay „Krakatau,“ produced on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the devastating 1883 volcano eruption in Indonesia, offers a new interpretation of the clash between nature and technology, emphasizing that the eruption, which killed an estimated 36,000 people and whose ashes caused unusual atmospheric phenomena around the entire globe for several years after, was the first globally observed phenomenon and marks the beginning of international disaster studies. Elfriede Jelinek's theatre play *In den Alpen*, to mention one final example, about the accident in November 2000 that killed 155 people in a burning train stuck in a tunnel near the Kaprun ski resort in the Austrian Alps, is a scathing critique not only of capitalist greed but of anti-Semitism and the ideological conflation of alpine pristineness with racial purity.³ As different as these texts are in genre, style, and intention, they all place the disaster in a larger context, creating comparisons across historical and geographical divides and seeking to generate moral, political, or scientific meaning well beyond the immediate event and the individual victim.

Josef Haslinger's *Phi Phi Island*, which chronicles how the author and his wife

² On the intellectual consequences of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake see Harald Weinrich's still valid essay „Literaturgeschichte eines Weltereignisses: Das Erdbeben von Lissabon.“ Weinrich argues that Voltaire's poem was not inspired by his sympathies for the victims but by his desire to intervene in the ongoing „Diskussion der Philosophen und aller aufgeklärten Geister Europas über die Metaphysik des Guten und des Bösen“ (68). Just how far-reaching the impact of Voltaire's essay was has come under scrutiny lately (Jacobs).

³ For a historical analysis of the connection between the Alps and notions of German racial purity, see Dickinson.

together with their teenage son and daughter survived the tsunami of 26 December 2004 that struck their holiday destination off the West coast of Thailand, also seeks to draw conclusions but, unlike the examples listed above, from an event that the author experienced firsthand and was fortunate to survive. Haslinger sustained injuries in the flood and he himself as well as his family were in danger of drowning. The title identifies the catastrophe by its geographical location, a practice common to most disaster narratives, yet at the same time localizes and individualizes the event by focusing on a specific place with limited name recognition within the much larger geo-political region hit by the tsunami. The subtitle "a report" (ein bericht) suggests personal involvement and factual description rather than a work of reflection or fiction. In reality, however, Haslinger's narrative goes well beyond the chronological rendering of a particular event, intertwining several narrative strands and drawing on literary disaster narratives as well as essayistic conventions. The descriptive yet rather specific title together with a genre designation that in the end turns out to be not quite accurate captures the aesthetic challenges and opportunities in Haslinger's book, suggesting that there is no one genre readily available for the type of survivor narrative he felt compelled to create.

Josef Haslinger has made a name for himself with his novels *Opernball* (1995) and *Das Vaterspiel* (2000), both of which involve legacies of the Nazi era. He is also known for his essays pertaining to the political role of literature (1996), an essay collection on the United States (1992) and, more recently, on the challenges of negotiating the dual role of the author as artist and as entrepreneur in the literary marketplace (2005). With *Jáchymov* (2011), a novel about the persecution of the Czechoslovakian ice hockey team by the communist state in the immediate post-war period, Haslinger returned to writing fiction with a political purpose. *Phi Phi Island*, though substantially different from his other works due to its autobiographical content, also probes the connections between the literary work and its relationship to a range of realities, including literature's ability to address trauma and the writer's responsibility to engage with political developments. As in his essayistic pieces, the position of the author as someone who transforms observations and political positions into a literary text is of central concern to Haslinger's project. The immediacy of the experiences, however, poses challenges that are both personal and artistic in nature.

Haslinger begins *Phi Phi Island* with his dilemma of being caught between the psychological need to write about the tsunami and a strong inclination not to turn this deeply personal experience into a narrative to be shared with the public: "you aren't working on a tsunami book, are you?—no, don't worry."⁴ Memory of the tsunami is first of all an impediment—a "barricade" (*Phi Phi* 6)—to Haslinger's work as a fiction writer. After his return to Vienna, he finds himself incapable of composing the novel he had planned to write. Every literary figure he tries to develop, so it seems to him, serves the purpose of coming to terms with the tsunami: "to deal with something that in reality I

⁴ All translations from the German are mine, unless noted otherwise. "du arbeitest doch nicht etwa an einem tsunami-buch?—nein, keine angst" (*Phi Phi* 5).

had to take care off myself.”⁵ Point of departure and motivation for this text is the self-diagnosis of a trauma that needs to be overcome before a return to normalcy is possible, which in Haslinger’s case means the ability to create fictional characters beyond the author’s personal experiences and concerns. Haslinger, who in an interview has described his approach as „popular Freudianism“ (Weinzierl) draws on Freud’s argument that traumatic events will resurface in “reminiscences,” dreams, or, in this case, as literary figures that escape the control of their author and force him to address his trauma (Freud 10). Unlike Freud’s patients, who must rely on the doctor’s help to tell their stories, the professional writer Josef Haslinger is capable of combining the positions of patient and doctor, and the resulting narrative is both a private document of healing and a book for public consumption. Haslinger’s reconstruction of his experiences also echoes current methods of trauma treatment, which encourage the victim to express memories of facts as well as of the accompanying emotions in writing.⁶ Working through his trauma in form of a written text, Haslinger is thus closer to contemporary trauma theory than to Freud’s talking cure. In claiming a Freudian approach, however, Haslinger aligns himself with a theorist famous for his highly literary writing style rather than a remedy in which writing serves therapeutic purposes.

At the core of Haslinger’s mental ordeal is the fact that he cannot feel joy even though all four members of his family have survived. “Why not simply be grateful and silent?”⁷ Instead, tears “press” into his eyes (*Phi Phi* 7) every time he remembers the tsunami. Unlike Heinrich von Kleist’s fictional character Jeronimo Rugera in his *The Earthquake in Chili*, who, upon having survived the (non-fictitious) earthquake that gives the story its title, thanks God and weeps “for happiness because he still enjoyed the charms of life with all its manifold phenomena.”⁸ In Kleist’s novella the individual possesses the certainty that his survival is owed to God and thus has meaning.⁹ For Haslinger, his and his family’s survival is a “puzzle of good fortune” (“glückspuzzle”, *Phi Phi* 28) whose individual elements—location of the holiday bungalows, whereabouts of the family members at the beginning of the flood—can be reconstructed and put into words but do not amount to meaning. “The memory of having survived an immense catastrophe merely by coincidence follows its own logic,”¹⁰ he states, establishing a causal relationship between the coincidence of survival and his inability to feel joy. Coincidence

⁵ „das zu erledigen, was in wirklichkeit ich selbst zu erledigen hatte“ (*Phi Phi* 6).

⁶ The psychologist James W. Pennebaker notes in an essay about the relationship between traumatic experiences and writing that “health gains appear to require translating experiences into language” (7).

⁷ “warum nicht einfach froh sein und schweigen?” (*Phi Phi* 5).

⁸ „vor Lust, daß er sich des lieblichen Lebens, voll bunter Erscheinungen, noch erfreue“ (Kleist 14). English translation: Appelbaum 9.

⁹ This conviction that stands in stark contrast to the fact that Jeronimo loses his life at the end of the story to a mob that blames him and his lover for the earthquake. Divine justice is undone by the human need for a scapegoat.

¹⁰ “die erinnerung daran, eine immense katastrophe nur zufällig überlebt zu haben, folgt einer eigenen logik“ (*Phi Phi* 7).

is also the reason why he hesitates to talk about his experiences: “as if it were somehow offensive to talk about those coincidences seemingly aimed at taking one’s life and of the other ones that spared it after all.”¹¹ In passages like these Haslinger comes close to relating his own experiences to narratives of Holocaust victims, whose inability to rejoice over their survival is well documented.¹²

Having established his psychological need to write about his experiences, Haslinger proceeds to offer reflections on how one can tell such a story. Aesthetics, therefore, not only plays an important role in the author’s individual healing process but, in the final analysis, is the realm in which meaning can be found. Haslinger invokes and immediately rejects the travel and adventure novel as not suitable to his project. His example, Karl May’s loquacious traveler Kara ben Nemsî, is a fantastic invention that wants to be recognized as such (*Phi Phi* 7). The first-person perspective in adventure novels is a guarantor of the narrator’s survival. For Haslinger, survival was not guaranteed and his story must therefore be narrated in a genre reflective of uncertainty in the face of disaster and the trauma this inflicts on the surviving subject.¹³ Importantly, Haslinger is not after suspense. His report is about an outcome—survival—in search of a narrative that explains and affirms this result. Having rejected the idea of writing a work of fiction, which to him seems an evasion of the issue at hand and thus too “transparent” (“durchsichtig,” *Phi Phi* 6),¹⁴ Haslinger decides instead to travel to Thailand again a year after the tsunami in order to educate himself about developments on the island since the flood and to reconstruct what happened to him and his family the year before. This, too, recalls Freud’s assumption that the origin of trauma must be revisited and reconstructed to achieve recovery.

No simple “report,” *Phi Phi Island* comprises two artfully interwoven narrative strands that concern the loss and the recuperation of normalcy. The first begins after the family’s survival and return to Vienna and includes the second trip to Thailand. The

¹¹ “als hätte es etwas anstößiges, von jenen zufällen zu berichten, die einem das leben zu nehmen schienen, und den anderen, die es einem dann doch noch ließen” (*Phi Phi* 6). Christine Rinderknecht makes a remarkably similar statement: “Ich hatte das Gefühl, nicht berechtigt zu sein, darüber zu sprechen. (...) wir hatten ja Glück gehabt, im Gegensatz zu anderen, die dieses Glück nicht gehabt hatten” (17). For her, the severity of the suffering determines the victim’s right to tell the story.

¹² One of many examples is Lawrence Langer’s *Holocaust Testimonies* and his concept of “unheroic memory” as a “penalty for survival” (189).

¹³ The Dutch writer Margriet de Moor offers insightful reflections on the question of narrative perspective in her novel *The Storm* (2005) about the 1953 flood that devastated the Southern Netherlands and killed more than 1800 people. “There is quite a difference between recounting an adventure to an interested audience after it’s over, embellished here and there with a couple of invented details and facts that came to light only afterward, and living one’s own mortal danger, which must remain unvarnished, unimproved, and, *basta!*” (185). The conceptual irony, of course, is the fact that only a work of fiction can assume the perspective of the victim who perishes in the disaster, something de Moor’s novel succeeds in doing.

¹⁴ Christine Rinderknecht, in her essay on natural catastrophes, gives a different reason why disasters do not provide good material for fiction, arguing that they are “zu gross, zu mächtig, zu wirklich, sie ersticken jeden fiktionalen Versuch” (16). Rinderknecht, who, like Haslinger, at first hesitated to write at all about her experiences in Thailand, came to this conclusion after having invested considerable time and money into a work of fiction about the 2004 tsunami which she ultimately decided to abandon.

second thread narrates the story of the initial trip to Thailand, making mention of the fact that Thailand was not the family's initially intended vacation location and thus emphasizing the importance of coincidence from the very beginning. The story of the first journey to Thailand and the days before the tsunami, which includes a guidebook-type introduction to the geography and the history of *Phi Phi Island* (*Phi Phi* 11), conveys information concerning his son's poor performance in math (*Phi Phi* 19), the hotel staff's colorful uniforms (*Phi Phi* 26), and the family's first bath in the ocean (*Phi Phi* 30), none of which would be of interest to a broad readership if it were not for the tsunami about to shatter the normalcy conjured up in these passages. The catastrophe, these introductory sections emphasize, disrupts everyday life and the trivial normality that is one of its salient features.

Haslinger's rejection of fiction as an appropriate narrative form notwithstanding, the text does include elements of fiction. A sentence like "people were perplexed by this strange scene"¹⁵ assumes the perspective of the spectators who observe but fail to comprehend the retreat of the ocean as a precursor to the approaching wave. The narrative then provides information about speed, height, and direction of the waves that made up the tsunami, none of which were available to the observers at the time and whose lack contributed to their inability to realize and escape the danger. The inclusion of factual information that emerges only well after the event, combined here with a fictional perspective, presumes a narrative position of temporal and emotional distance. Writing the story of his survival restored Haslinger's ability to compose fiction. More importantly, "fiction" itself becomes a coping mechanism.

The second journey, a year after the tsunami, is narrated in the grammatical present tense, while the first journey and the intrusion of the catastrophe into the holiday atmosphere are told in the past tense. Time frame and narrative perspective often shift from one paragraph to the next, creating a "before"—"after" effect but also approximating the disorientation of the flood victims and the conceptual limits the reconstruction of such an event must encounter. The video Haslinger happens to shoot of a sleeping man who was to die soon after in the tsunami thus turns into a memento mori (*Phi Phi* 24, 35, 109). His comment "I don't know what moved me to film this quietly sleeping face so extensively"¹⁶ is expression of premonition and dread. In contrast to a disaster movie, the foreboding is not rendered "pleasant" by the perspective of the spectator and the genre conventions that assure the main protagonists' survival. Instead, the video clip, which exists only because Haslinger kept his camera in the hotel safe, underscores the elusive nature of meaning even as the text pursues it. Unlike Schopenhauer's transcendental observer about whom the philosopher Hans Blumenberg noted in his seminal *Shipwreck with Spectator* that he overcomes his own physical and psychological limitations as he watches others drown from the stable position of the shore (61), Josef Haslinger's response to the images is a reiteration of his initial question

¹⁵ „die menschen wunderten sich über dieses seltsame schauspiel“ (*Phi Phi* 43).

¹⁶ „ich weiß nicht, was mich bewog, dieses bewegungslos schlafende gesicht so ausführlich zu filmen“ (*Phi Phi* 24).

“why am I still alive?”¹⁷ The postmodern subject can no longer answer this question with certainty.

Much of recent scholarship on natural catastrophes and disasters is aimed at transcultural and historical comparison. Haslinger's return to Thailand is motivated by a similar interest: “I want to find out how the locals come to terms with it.”¹⁸ One result of comparative scholarship is the observation how often religious interpretations and imagery are invoked even in the contemporary discourse on catastrophe. “Faced with a destructive and traumatizing natural catastrophe even those defined by Western modernity become aware of their need for religion or faith as an existential need,”¹⁹ anthropologist Urte Frömking observes in her comparative study about collective ways of dealing with volcano eruptions in Indonesia and in Iceland. Arguing along similar lines, Swiss historian François Walter in his cultural history of catastrophe demonstrates the “vague continuance of the sacred” (“das diffuse Fortbestehen des Heiligen, “204) in contemporary Western disaster discourse as well. Walter, who as a historian seeks to trace the development of coping patterns over extended periods of time, takes a position against the often expressed assumption of a complete secularization of the Western world and instead argues in favor of analyses that take into consideration the blending of religious and secular coping strategies.

Haslinger's *Phi Phi Island* confirms this oscillation between religion and its rejection when it comes to coping with disaster. In an interview with the national daily *Die Welt* about his tsunami book Haslinger noted that he was raised in a “miracle faith” (“Wunderglauben”) to which he did not wish to return (Weinzierl). Yet religion, in its everyday use rather than in a theologically profound form, plays a fairly significant if ambiguous role in his report. For instance, the family “plays” Christmas in Thailand by singing songs in front of an artificial tree brought from home for that purpose (31). The self-irony that accompanies the Christmas ritual creates distance from its religious implications but confirms its secular purpose of reinforcing family ties. Toward the end of the narrative Haslinger recalls a medallion showing the Virgin Mary that had been given to him years ago by his mother as a protective charm. Tucked away in the wallet Haslinger had kept in the hotel safe in Thailand, the pendant—rusty, but immediately recognizable to him—was among the items returned to the family (*Phi Phi* 200). The medal, which Haslinger mentions while at the same denying its protective powers, is an example of the “vague continuance of the sacred” observed by François Walter. When his wife Edith unpacks a gold chain with a guardian angel given to her by a friend to take with her on the second trip to Thailand, Haslinger suffers a panic attack (*Phi Phi* 38). The amulet's protective powers do not resonate with him but the fear of another disaster is very real. When he notices that he had packed only black clothes for the return journey to

¹⁷ „warum bin ich noch am leben?“ (*Phi Phi* 36).

¹⁸ „ich will wissen, wie die einheimischen damit umgehen“ (*Phi Phi* 36).

¹⁹ „Im Zeichen der zerstörerischen und traumatisierenden Naturkatastrophe wird sich auch der Mensch der westlichen Moderne dem Bedürfnis nach Religion oder Glaube als einem existentiellen Bedürfnis bewusst“ (Frömking 180).

Thailand, he exchanges some of them for colored garments to avoid any association with funerals (*Phi Phi* 136). Superstitious beliefs and “miracle faith” do nothing to alleviate his fears but they haunt him through unconscious acts of his own and the well-intentioned offerings of others.

The narrative repeatedly relies on religious imagery for the description of the disaster and its aftermath. Haslinger talks about the “great judgment” (*Phi Phi* 10) that had no “sense of justice” when he describes how the survivors collect the dead in an effort to separate them from the living. The former hotel’s location, which Haslinger and his wife visit daily during their second trip, turns into a “place of pilgrimage” (*Phi Phi* 130) and thus a site with religious significance. Even though Haslinger uses this and similar terms with a degree of irony, their inclusion in the text confirms what sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger has described as “presence of the sacred” (qtd. in Walter 209). The sacred, according to Hervieu-Léger’s definition, includes everything that has to do with the creation of meaning also in societies in which religious explanations have lost their significance. In its search for meaning contemporary culture, François Walter concludes at the end of his study, affords “spiritual references a wide arena.”²⁰ In Haslinger’s report, religion does not yield meaning or provide solace in the face of disaster. Yet the perceived inadequacy of religion becomes a topic of reflection, its repeated presence in the text perhaps also an expression of regret that, at least for the author, it no longer fulfills its traditional function. The local imam interprets the tsunami as a deserved punishment for the “moral decline” that manifests itself through the arrival of prostitution and pork (*Phi Phi* 69) on *Phi Phi Island*. While we can assume that Haslinger does not share this conviction, he may well envy the ability to believe in such an unambiguous explanation.

The notion of tropical islands as paradisaical places removed from the destructive influences of civilization has been a staple of Western thinking since the 19th century, drawing on Christian imagery for a critique of civilization as alienating and destructive. This view still resonates in the designation of tropical beaches as vacation paradises. It does not seem a coincidence that a photo-documentation, in which Haslinger discovers a picture of himself, should be titled *Phi Phi Island – a paradise lost* (51). Similarly, t-shirts sold in support of the reconstruction effort sport the inscription „return to paradise“ (54). Even if these references take liberties with the biblical original, the invocation of paradise serves to express the enormity of the disaster. In his own description of the flood, Haslinger reverses the image of paradise as an escape from human society into its opposite: “I was swept away by a maelstrom of mud and garbage [...] I was constantly hit by pieces of debris.”²¹ The trash, which Haslinger mentions time and again and which remains strewn about on the island even a year later, also carries symbolic meaning which points to the influence of man and his destruction of paradise. Haslinger’s report thus confirms an observation by the historian Jens Ivo Engels, according to which natural catastrophes contain a “new morality” because now man appears “as his own destroyer

²⁰ „spirituellen Referenzen ein weites Feld“ (294).

²¹ „ich wurde von einem strudel aus schlamm und müll fortgerissen [...] andauernd wurde ich von irgendwelchen trümmern getroffen“ (79).

and enemy" (142). "The hotel, whose ground floor had been completely destroyed, had resumed its paradisiac life,"²² Haslinger observes somewhat sarcastically during his return visit. Here, too, man is to blame for the disaster because of his insistence, driven by greed, to construct buildings in the wrong place, namely paradise.

For Haslinger, the disaster does not lead to a return of religion even though the author did state in an interview that the tsunami made him more aware of his mortality (Weinzierl). Modern man, in contrast to Kleist's Jeronimo Rugera, can no longer rely on God to confirm the meaning of human life. An indifferent nature, Haslinger quotes himself as having noted in a conversation with friends, affords the human being no higher position than an inanimate object, adding that he drank a lot over the course of the evening during which this statement was made (*Phi Phi* 200). Closure, befittingly, comes by coincidence. More than a year after the tsunami Haslinger learns from an unrelated web site that a young woman he and his family had befriended in Thailand is still alive (*Phi Phi* 204). Revealed strategically at the very end of the report, a sign of life from a fellow victim renders Haslinger's own survival just a little less coincidental.

Closure also comes through re-entry into a familiar cultural context. The final sections of *Phi Phi Island* concern the return of the family's valuables from Thailand where they had been stored and preserved in a hotel safe. The only items missing are euro bills, which, it turns out, were stolen in Austria rather than in Thailand. The money is returned, in new banknotes, after a journalist informed the lost-and found-service that she was conducting research into the matter for a newspaper report (*Phi Phi* 201). The incident brings Haslinger back to the familiar territory of those Austrian realities that have been the target of his critique in several of his essays. Haslinger's butcher, greeting the writer with the customary "herr doktor" (*Phi Phi* 203), hangs a chain of sausages over the cast around the arm injured in the flood as if the meat had healing properties. The returned money, a Christmas gift to the children from their grandparents, together with the sausages, is occasion for yet another celebration (*Phi Phi* 203). Normacy is here characterized by Austrian cultural practices, food habits, and, once again, Christmas.

Haslinger's disaster report invites the reader to accompany the author as he transforms his recollections and reflections into a complex and carefully crafted narrative. The use of small letters only on account of the hand injury Haslinger sustained during the flood is a physical but also an aesthetic expression of the experience of survival.²³ While the text includes the stories of several other people, its main focus is on Haslinger himself and his immediate family. Unlike fictionalized disaster narratives aimed at making broader statements about the implications of disaster in the contemporary world, Haslinger's report has a profoundly personal quality. Everyone, this text reminds the reader, can become the victim of a disaster. Jeronimo Rugera's tearful "happiness because

²² „das hotel, dessen erdgeschoss zur gänze verwüstet worden war, hat sein paradisisches leben wieder aufgenommen“ (16).

²³ *Jáchymov*, Haslinger's first novel after *Tsunami: A Report on Phi Phi Island*, adheres to German spelling conventions.

he still enjoyed the charms of life," to invoke Kleist's story once more, is not available to the secular survivor Josef Haslinger. Yet he also does not share the "pleasure of catastrophe" ("Lust an der Katastrophe") that Heiner Müller has described as the "real enjoyment of writing" ("eigentlichen Spaß am Schreiben"), referring to the destruction of World War II and his own project of political critique through the literary text (179). For Haslinger, writing about the tsunami constitutes a break from his political engagement as a writer. To cope with personal trauma, even a century after Freud, he must tell his own tale.

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