



Research Article

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Image and Word in Postmodern Poetry: Friederike Mayröcker's *BROTWOLKE*

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Abstract: This article explores the interplay of visual arts and poetic images in postmodern poetry, focusing on the case of Friederike Mayröcker's poem *BROTWOLKE*, *nach Karla Woisnitza* (1996) [*BREADCLOUD*, *after Karla Woisnitza*]. The article shows that *BROTWOLKE* belongs to a group of texts whose titles indicate an *ekphrasis* or an intermedial quality, but whose specific point of reference is absent. Rather than referencing to a specific painting, the poem thus showcases different aspects of the visual. Offering a close reading of the poem, the article explores Mayröcker's special technique of image-writing and its dynamic effect on the reader. The article argues that the poem both "shows the word" and "writes the image." It is shown that Mayröcker's stream-of-consciousness is a process that refers to the act of writing in the first place and then to an inventory of texts and images that float the text as a stream of sense-data.

Keywords: Austrian literature, intermediality, visual arts, *ekphrasis*

Ich lebe in Bildern. Ich sehe alles in Bildern, meine ganze Vergangenheit, Erinnerungen sind Bilder. Ich mache die Bilder zu Sprache, indem ich ganz hineinsteige in das Bild. Ich steige solange hinein, bis es Sprache wird. (Mayröcker, Heimspiel 5)

[I live in images. I see everything in images, my complete past, memories are images. I transform images into language by climbing into the image. I climb into it until it becomes language.]

From this quotation, the pivotal role of images for Austrian writer Friederike Mayröcker's (1924–2021) life and art becomes clear – images both in the sense of material images (pictures, artworks) and in the sense of para-visual images (poetic images, metaphors and memories).¹ Apart from her own drawing, Mayröcker worked closely with contemporary artists like Maria Lassnig and Günther Uecker, and she has written prose texts and poems on pictures by – most notably – Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Alberto Giacometti. Both her poems and her poems in prose bring forth a closely-knit fabric of intertextual and intermedial references, not least in the form of dedications to or quotations of other artists. Her aesthetics are based on notions of fluidity, movement and associative leaps, and she often made use of techniques such as collage and montage. Nevertheless, as indicated by the quotation above, all materials and images, "Weltsplitter" [fragments of the world] in Mayröcker's words, are transformed into a different system of signs, that is language (*Magische Blätter I–V* 10). Mayröcker's project is about rescuing "particular epiphanies from the

¹ An English translation of selected poems has been provided by Richard Dove (Mayröcker, translated by Dove; see also the review by SIRR).

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totality of time,” as Robert Gilletts points out (230). Quite characteristic for postmodern literature, the term “Weltsplitter” indicates an attitude that gives up on the ideal of wholeness.

This article argues that Mayröcker’s way of “seeing in images” encourages us to read the poem as if it was a picture or – closer to the way Mayröcker herself put it – to climb down into the text until language is retransformed into an image-space, providing a kaleidoscope of images and visual fragments. The conceptual starting points of this investigation will be theories of intermediality.

Art and Literature under the Perspective of Intermediality

The analysis of text–image relations has a longstanding tradition within the study of literature and art. Since the 1990s, these endeavours gained increasing attention under the newly coined term of studies of “intermediality.” According to Irina Rajewsky, “intermediality” in a broad sense is “a generic term for all those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix *inter*) in some way take place *between* media” (46). In contrast to *intramedial* (e.g. intertextual) references, intermedial references bridge the gap between two medial systems: “the given media-product thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific means” (Rajewski 53).

An approach informed by intermediality studies seems to be fruitful in order to explore the interplay of visual arts and poetic images in Mayröcker’s poetry. Offering an exemplary close reading of one of Mayröcker’s many intermedial poems, *BROTWOLKE, nach Karla Woisnitza*,² I will shed light on more general poetic characteristics of Mayröcker’s poetry as well as on the dynamic relation between image and word in postmodern poetry.

BROTWOLKE, nach Karla Woisnitza (1996)

The poem *BROTWOLKE* was written in 1994 and first published 2 years later, in the volume of poems *Notizen auf einem Kamel* [Notes on a camel] in 1996.³ It is one of several poems in this volume which refer explicitly to artists (cf. Gillett 226). The addition in the title *nach Karla Woisnitza* [after K. W.] points to the German artist of this name (*1952), a Berlin-based painter and graphic artist. Until 1989, she lived in East Berlin in the former German Democratic Republic. She worked together with Elke Erb, a German poet, who was deeply influenced by Mayröcker’s poetry and who in 1993 edited a selection of poems by Mayröcker (*Veritas*). In 1994, Woisnitza was awarded the prestigious Käthe Kollwitz Award by the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin. One might speculate that the media coverage connected to this award created some extra attention around Karla Woisnitza’s art in that year. As a matter of fact, Mayröcker wrote her poem *BROTWOLKE, nach Karla Woisnitza* at the end of August/beginning of September 1994. According to Woisnitza, she and Mayröcker had not yet met in person at that time.⁴ In 1995 and 1996, Mayröcker was in correspon-

² *BROTWOLKE* has not received much scholarly attention yet. Reumkens and Raß offer the most comprehensive studies on the relationship between Mayröcker’s texts and art. They mention the poem *BROTWOLKE* only briefly. Schmolzmüller published two pages with “associations” to this poem, a kind of free essay in key words, without aiming at an interpretation or at a scholarly contribution.

³ As the title of the volume suggests, the notion of movement, travel and fugitiveness (“notes”) is present in most of the poems in this book (cf. Gillett 215).

⁴ In a private e-mail-correspondence with me (J.S.), Woisnitza tried to remember and to reconstruct the circumstances of her encounter with Mayröcker and her artistic activities in the year 1994.

dence with Woisnitza, they sent each other texts and pictures, in a notebook that circulated between Vienna and Berlin (Arteel 80f.). The naming of Karla Woisnitza in Mayröcker's *BROTWOLKE* suggests an inter-medial frame of reference for this poem. What is the nature of this reference? How do visual arts and poetic images interplay? These research questions will guide the following investigation.

The poem reads as follows:

BROTWOLKE, nach Karla Woisnitza

blaue Tinte habe blaue Tinte getrunken Wasser Ozeans
 habe getrunken die Luft wolkengetränkt, ausgewrungenes
 Wiesenzeug oder was, Wolkenwäsche zungenfeucht, habe getrunken
 am Fenster lehnend getrunken atmend saugend aufsaugend
 BROTWOLKE Windes Braut Brot oder Wolkenlunge . .
 und wie die weiszliche Waschlauge: Laugenschlange ich meine
 ausgegossen über den Bürgersteig, nach unten züngelnd
 nach unten wie Rinnsal (Zote), unendlicher
 FADENSCHNUR.

1 Vogelbrief was ist das, 1 Japanblume? langstielige
 Wolke vermutlich, blutrote Pelargonienblüte im
 Fenster Korridorfenster, und *repetierende Vision*: am
 Müllkasten klebend, Rand des Müllkastens: bleicher
 Halm ausgebleichtes Niemandskraut Berberitzen Reliquie.
 In der Farbe von Heckenrosenknospen grünrosa/rot/abermals
 KREPP PAPIER HÜGEL, seit Kindertagen nicht mehr angefasst
solches: blutrote Veronika, *Präriepapier*, Topolino –
 Erinnerung eines Tigers Dreiszigerjahre.
 Wenn ich heute sterben müsste, stürbe ich
 als glücklicher Mensch, usw., am Tor, mit aufgedunsenem Leib,
 die todgeweihte Taube. Daneben, zusammengerollt, graues
 Knäuel, verendende Maus.

(Auf die Rückseite der Todesanzeige eines Mitglieds einer Akademie
 gekritzelt: Scharmützel Shelley im Auge . . Rabengefunkel . .
 was ist Reisecafé . . Mütze des Himmels . .)
 (Mayröcker, *Gesammelte Gedichte* 614)

BREADCLOUD, after Karla Woisnitza

blue ink have drunk blue ink water of ocean
 have drunk the air soaked by clouds, wrung out
 meadow-washing stuff or something, cloud-washing tongue-wet, have drunk
 leaning by the window drunk breathing sucking sucking-up
 BREADCLOUD wind's bride bread or cloud's lung . .
 and like the whitish suds: sud-snake I mean
 poured out over the pavement, licking downwards
 downwards like runnel (ribaldry), infinite
 SHINING-THROUGH-THREADS.

1 bird-letter what is this, 1 Japan-flower? long-stemmed
 cloud presumably, blood-red blossom of pelargonium in the
 window corridor-window, and *recurrent vision*: sticking to the
 dustbin, edge of the dustbin: pale
 stalk faded nobody's herbs barberries relic.

In the colour of buds of dog roses green-rose/red/once again
 CREPE PAPER HILL, since childhood days not touched anymore
such a thing: blood-red veronica, *prairie-paper*, Topolino –
 memory of a tiger the thirties.
 If I had to die today, I would die
 as a happy human, and so on, at the gate, with a bloated body,
 the fey dove. Alongside, coiled up, grey
 clew, perishing mouse.

(On the backside of the notice of death of a member of an academy
 scribbled: skirmish Shelley in the eye . . sparkle of ravens . .
 what is travel-café . . cap of the sky . .)

(translation by Jutta Schloon)

This poem shows some of the most prominent features of Mayröcker's poetry: Her style of writing has been described as "poetic stream-of-consciousness-style," which is characterized by a "polyphonic integration of fragments, shivers of thought, foreign voices and quotations" (Herrmann and Horstkotte 185). In Mayröcker's poetry, everyday life and writing seem to be closely entangled, some texts appear to be written in a diary-like technique (Herrmann and Horstkotte 185) – like this scene of a spectator leaning by a window, looking at the clouds in the sky and watching the rain pour down. But as we will see, every piece of everyday life is turned into artistic expression and framed within a genuinely artistic worldview – an all-embracing transposition of life into artistic expression.

Structure-wise, *BROTWOLKE* consists of one single strophe with 22 verses of different length. Below the actual poem, there is a sort of explanatory text in parentheses, like an addendum or paratext. This paratext consists of three additional verses, so that the poem can be regarded as 25 verses long in total (22 + 3). Together with the absence of rhyme, these features give the poem a free form – it does not adhere to any strict, classical lyrical forms, rather appears like a free float of sentences and associations. The speaker is a lyrical subject ("I"). The syntax is characterized by an abundance of nouns and relatively few verbs. The poem starts out in perfect tense ("habe [...] getrunken"), moves on to present tense ("ich meine," "was ist") and ends in subjunctive, with a reflection about the future ("wenn ich heute [...] müsste, dann würde [...]"). As we will see, temporality and transformation are core structuring elements and ideas of this poem.

In the following, I will argue that this poem both "shows the word" and "writes the image." Mayröcker's poem highlights the general interdependency between word and image, which is fundamental for poetry and art.

The generative dynamics between visual arts and poetic images unfolds as a two-way transformative process: Visual arts inform poetic images, and poetic language deploys (para)visual imagery.

Showing the Word

The poem starts with the lyrical subject standing at the window and drinking liquids – ink, water from the sea – and breathing in wet air. The image of the "breadcloud" oscillates between food and drink. Its discrete form reminds of the solid, nourishing bread, while the notion of the cloud connects to lighter substances, a changeable form, some kind of fog that could be breathed in. This process of soaking in, breathing and drinking can be interpreted as a scene of inspiration: the lyrical subject receives life-giving liquids, nourishing substances. This reading is not only underpinned by the parallelization of ink and water, but also by the fact that Mayröcker often uses terms derived from the semantic field of "washing," "laundry" as metaphors for the creative process (Vogel 45–47). In fact, the poem features a whole range of metaphors and established images for the process of inspired writing (cf. Raß 98–113, on Mayröcker's inspired writing

in general). First, there is the idea of air – *pneuma* – streaming in, which in Ancient Greek designates both “breath,” “spirit” and “soul.” The poem thus writes itself into the tradition of pneumatic writing. In a similar fashion, the “dove” mentioned at the end of the poem hints to the religious symbol of the Holy Spirit (*spiritus*). Furthermore, there is the idea of poetry as liquid, referring to the mead of poetry known in Nordic mythology – an inspiring drink that is taken in via the mouth and then ejected out of the mouth in the form of poetry. Finally, images of procreation are evoked by the other, bodily liquids present in this poem: “whitish suds” – through their white colour associated with semen/ejaculation or discharge – and finally blood. All these are liquids connected to life and cycles: The cyclic idea manifests itself in the transformation of life-giving water into suds/sperm which create new life. Together with the other sexual connotated imagery of *cunnilingus* (“licking downwards/downwards like runnel (ribaldry)”), the different liquids evoke the idea of inseminating and fertilizing – due to the spheres of these vapours and liquids associated with the idea of *hieros gamos*, the holy marriage between heaven and earth – and thus the idea of (poetic) procreation.

Another striking metapoetic hint is the notion of “FADENSCHHEIN” [SHINING-THROUGH-THREADS], as it plays on the traditional metaphors of fabric, tissue and texture for literature (text – lat. *textus* = woven fabric). “FADENSCHHEIN” evokes both the structure (the warp threads) and the surface (the decorative threads), in other words: *essentia* and *akzidentia*, thus raising the question of what is the essence and what is the shine. At the same time, this is an image of *vanitas*: a tissue where the finer fabric is worn and has become sheer – threadbare and outworn. This underlines the notion of fugitiveness and transformative change that is at the core of this poem. The writing process itself is connected to this general impression of fugitiveness, changeability and metamorphosis: as the cloud turns into suds, as dove and rat are presented as dying creatures, in a state of transition, Mayröcker produces a text that turns itself into something “fadenscheinig” (threadbare) – a text that allows us to see its own structure and mode of construction (the warp threads).

Thus, the poem is crowded with metaphors derived from the field of traditionally female technologies, i.e. metaphors of washing, weaving and creation – both biological creation and artistic creation. The poet shows her poetic laboratory, her poetic laundry: The lyrical subject stands by the window, gets inspired, begins the work of creation and lets images and visions arise.

The three last verses of the poem may be understood in the sense of a “paratext:” set aside from the main text both through an empty line and brackets. This allows us to read the paratext as a commentary on the poem presented above, more precisely a commentary on its history of origin and evolution. The commentary instructs the reader to think about the situation when this poem was created: is this list of words that is “scribbled on the backside of a death notice” to be understood as a collection of aphorisms and associations that Mayröcker later on turned and transformed into the actual poem above? “Scribbled” implies the idea of something ephemeral, jotted down with a pencil – as opposed to the idea of a text written in “ink” (line 1), with a fountain pen. In a self-referential act, the poem thus contrasts two modes of writing: first, the writing with water, ink and blood – the “wet” mode of writing which corresponds to the “inspired” writing; second, the scribbling – the “dry” mode of writing that needs moistening and fecundation – i.e. inspiration – in order to turn into a proper text. This is closely connected to the idea of mediality – as fluids permeate the body, the poet becomes the medium who filters and takes in the world through her senses. The text thus highlights in a self-reflexive manner the process of writing itself and literally “shows the word” that comes into being.

The poem’s title *BROTWOLKE* [BREADCLOUD] points both to water (in the aggregate state of a cloud) and to bread (also with the religious connotation of *manna*), thus to both drinking and eating. Drinking and eating are also metaphors for taking in the world, in this case taking in “Weltsplitter” [fragments of the world]. Especially for Mayröcker, eating is also a poetological metaphor for incorporating foreign material into her literature. Words of other poets and pictures made by artists are Mayröcker’s “food” for her poetry – she devours them and gets inspired by them:

“Der Tempel Gottes der Leib: da schlummern die vielen Lektüren, die zarten, die stämmigen Dichter, die ich gelesen ich meine: angelesen, halbgelesen, durchblättert und exzerpiert, ja vor allem dies: exzerpiert, mir zu eigen gemacht, in den

eigenen Leib verpflanzt, aufgeessen ('nimm das Buch und verschling es') [...] Also eines Dichterspaars Ingenium [...] als Speisung fürs eigene Werk, so sass ich mehr als 2 Jahre an meinem Honigtisch Seite an Seite mit Gerard Manley Hopkins und Peter Waterhouse und liess mich beatmen von ihrem Geist." (Mayröcker, *Magische Blätter VI* 38).

["God's temple the body: There, the many readings slumber, the tender, the stout poets which I have read, I mean: have started to read, have half read, browsed and excerpted, yes, mainly this: excerpted, appropriated, transplanted into my own body, eaten up ('take this book and devour it')⁵ [...] Thus the ingenuity of a pair of poets [...] as feeding for my own work, like this I sat for more than 2 years at my honeytable side by side with Gerard Manley Hopkins and Peter Waterhouse and let myself be ventilated by their spirit."]

This quotation shows the importance of *referencing* for Mayröcker's work – both intertextual and intermedial references are an essential part of her poetic creations, thus entering into a dialogue with past and present voices and visions. The act of *referencing* is an act of *remembering*: calling upon the inventories and imageries stored in the cultural memory.

There are several layers of references in this poem, both intermedial and intertextual. The explicit reference to Karla Woisnitza in the title might suggest that the poem refers to a piece of artwork created by her. The text presents itself as an *ekphrasis*, but the object of reference is actually absent: as Woisnitza herself confirms, there is no artwork with this title in her oeuvre, neither is there a picture nor a sculpture that could easily be identified as point of reference for Mayröcker's poem.⁶ In fact, the word "Brotwolke" is itself the first step in her *ekphrasis*. Maybe Mayröcker still had a concrete piece of art by Woisnitza in mind when writing the poem, but she does not expect the reader to know exactly what it is. Possible candidates might be found among the illustrations that Woisnitza made for collections of poems in 1991. Elke Erb's volume of poems *Malachit* contains 12 "Aquatintaradierungen" [aquatint etchings] by Woisnitza (Erb, 1991) – evoking the notions "water" and "ink" that are central notions in the first lines of Mayröcker's poem. Among the illustrations that Woisnitza made for Gerhard Wolf's edition of the poems of Róża Domaścyna, *Zaungucker* (1991), there are visual elements that might have inspired Mayröcker's imagery (cf. e.g. Domaścyna 31).⁷ *BROTWOLKE* thus expounds the problems of intermediality and intermedial references in a particularly postmodern way – through a reference that points to the *absence* of an original point of reference. Noël Reumkens, who rightly observes a frequent tension between title and content in Mayröcker's poems on art, interprets her poems therefore as "*envois*" and as "reproductions without original" in the sense of Jacques Derrida's *La Carte Postale*, one of Mayröcker's favourite books (74, 79, 121f.).

The preposition "nach" [after] indicates how Mayröcker's text positions itself in relation to Woisnitza. On the one hand, the reference "nach Karla Woisnitza" suggests that the artist serves as a role model for this poem and her works of art are a source of inspiration (cf. Reumkens 97), both thematically and stylistically. Thematically, Mayröcker's poem features an urban atmosphere, just like some of Woisnitza's works of art that are rooted in Berlin. Stylistically, the use of colour and watercolour connects Woisnitza's and Mayröcker's art. The relationship may thus be defined in the sense of a very free appraisal or as an artistic dedication – as part of a "poetics of the gift" [Poetik der Gabe] (Arteel 99). In a similar fashion, Robert Gillett states that "Mayröcker uses her dedications to make her friends the repositories of the transmuted record of her life. [...] In other words, they become, and we become with them, the guarantors not of hermeticism, but of dialogue (220)." In *BROTWOLKE*, the theme of dialogue and correspondence is evoked by the semantic field opened by the words "Vogelbrief" [bird-letter] and "Taube" [pigeon] alluding to the use of pigeons as messenger birds, also in the Christian iconology as the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, "nach" [after] indicates a temporal distance between Woisnitza's artwork and Mayröcker's text; as Reumkens points out, the preposition marks the text as a "medial post-product" that stands in a temporal and spatial difference to its "pre-product" (80, 97).

5 Cf. The Book of Revelation.

6 In a private email-correspondence with me (J. S.), Karla Woisnitza generously provided valuable insights into the contexts of her friendship to Mayröcker.

7 I would like to thank my peer reviewers for the important hint to *Zaungucker* and a lot of other great suggestions.

In addition to this explicit reference to Woisnitza, *BROTWOLKE* implicitly alludes to at least another work of art: the term “Windes Braut” [wind’s bride] might not just refer to the folklore figure of the wind’s bride, but to a specific work of art – the surrealist painting *Windsbraut* (1927) by Max Ernst, one of Mayröcker’s favourite visual artists that she currently refers to in her writings. The figure of the wind’s bride (*concupina ventis*) goes back to Germanic mythology, where a heavy storm was called *windes prut* (Pfeifer). Max Ernst took up this subject in his painting, depicting two horses whose bodies are intertwined. In line with the etymology of the term wind’s bride, Ernst’s painting has an erotic connotation: inspired by Sigmund Freud’s theory of *libido*, Ernst depicted a twirl of *air* that can be interpreted as a twirl of *lust*.⁸ In fact, there is also another painting named *Die Windsbraut*, made by the Austrian expressionist Oskar Kokoschka in 1913, that features the topic of love and reunion in a dramatic and dynamic brushwork – possibly another intermedial point of reference for Mayröcker’s poem. The allusions to Ernst’s and maybe also Kokoschka’s painting(s) in *BROTWOLKE* are very subtle, but still reinforce the erotic-sexual dimension in Mayröcker’s text – as shown above, this forms part of the metaphors of inspiration and creation. As Michaela Raß shows in her comprehensive study on Mayröcker’s forms of *ekphrasis*, Mayröcker’s texts often describe aesthetic experience as erotic union, so that *ekphrasis* can take the form of a sexual act, and her text thus stages a “rendezvous of the arts” (12, 28, 423–427).

On top of these explicit and implicit intermedial references, Mayröcker’s poem has a literary subtext. The name “Shelley” mentioned in the paratext makes this intertextual reference evident: one of the most famous poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley, poet of British Romanticism, is called *The Cloud*. Mayröcker was surely aware of this poem and the subtext it would give to her own poem. Shelley’s poem is formed like an autobiography of a cloud: a cloud tells its own life story. The poem’s emblematic punchlines are “I change, but never die,” and “I silently laugh at my own cenotaph.” Shelley thus puts the idea of vanity and change at the core of his text, and concludes with the triumph of the immortal cloud: Instead of death, there is transformation. This very idea of transformation is also at the core of *BROTWOLKE*: The cloud turns into water and finally suds. *BROTWOLKE* sketches a lifecycle, too: from birth to death. In the middle of Mayröcker’s poem, upcoming memories of childhood and youth dominate – the verse “Erinnerung eines Tigers Dreiszigerjahre” [memory of a tiger the thirties] may be an autofictional allusion, since Mayröcker was born in 1924 and the 1930s where thus the time of her childhood. These memories of the past are followed by a vision of the future, actually a vision of dying and death. At the end of the poem, images of decay, *vanitas*⁹ and transience prevail: the pigeon destined to die, the dying mouse, the thought of dying, the death notice cut out of the newspaper. The gate (“tor”) and the liminal situation of being at the gates of the underworld (“am Müllkasten klebend”) symbolize transition, here transition from life to death. Shelley’s poem *The Cloud* thus is featured as another nourishing and inspiring substance for Mayröcker’s own poetic creation. Both *The Cloud* and *BROTWOLKE* are about the passing of time, vanity and transformation.

As Juliane Vogel rightly observes, the “watering of the writing” also takes hold of the slips of papers, excerpts and reading notes which Mayröcker collects in her working room and which she uses as “food” for her poetry (54). Intertextuality thus manifests itself in “cloudy, palimpsest-like shapes,” the borders between the different elements of the text become blurred (Vogel 54). The same applies for Mayröcker’s intermedial references which are first evoked and then dissolved. As in some of Mayröcker’s other texts on paintings, also *BROTWOLKE* shows a tendency of dissolution and liquidification: Both reality and artworks dissolve into particular elements, the borders between them become blurred, and elements melt, images flow into one other (cf. Kunz 79). *BROTWOLKE* also shows what Reumkens has called “the sweeping of the gaze” (73): a gaze that does not focus on one single thing, but sweeps from impression to impression.

⁸ <https://www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de/kunstwerke/Max-Ernst/Die-Windsbraut/6444A92A457414BC2BC351935B3F0C18/>

⁹ Bird and mouse are small animals that are usually regarded as nuisance in an urban context; they are low-ranked animals, and nobody cares about their death. This contrasts with the death notice of a “member of an academy,” since the death notice shows that other people care about the death of the person (in contrast to the death of the nuisance animals). That the lyrical I imagines her/his own death in images of dying animals, can thus be seen as a kind of counterstatement. But on the other hand, the member of an academy is not given a name, he or she remains anonymous and will perhaps also soon be forgotten.

Like for other postmodern poets, for Mayröcker, writing is referencing – referencing to material things, to different media, to signs. This interplay of signs opens the text for an abundance of possible associations and stimulates an ever-lasting meaning-making process.

Writing the Image

In Mayröcker's poetry, in her prose and in her radio plays, visual art is both a prominent topic and a source of inspiration and reflection. But if we look closer at the nature of the relationship between text and images, it becomes evident that the poem *BROTWOLKE* displays different kinds of images and explores different "ways of seeing." There are not only allusions to material images but also para-visual images. The text thus has a strong focus on the visual and broaches the issue of a wider concept of image. The poem shows the porous borders between outer and inner images. These are bound to two ways of seeing: On the one hand, an objective way of seeing which is directed towards "fragments of the world," like flowers and plants that the lyrical subject observes in the garden ("pelargonien," "berberitze," "blutrote Veronika"). On the other hand, the poem also highlights a subjective way of seeing that is directed inwards, bound to memories and visions.

Thus, although the actual picture – Woisnitza's artwork – is prominently *absent* in *BROTWOLKE*, the poem is almost overcrowded with images – written images. To a significant extent, the images are bound together by visual qualities (colour) and acoustic qualities, that is assonances between the names of the things mentioned. While the re-iteration of acoustic features such as assonances forms the baseline of the poem, and gives the impression that the series of things and impressions described is chosen due to this acoustic pattern (e.g. "Waschlaube: Laugenschlange," line 6), there are at the same time elements rising visual connections through associative optical features. Thus, the colour-adjectives are prominent and group the items – as for blue is the ink, the water and the ocean; white the suds and the washing; red the pelargonium, the veronica. The title word *BROTWOLKE* plays with the visual form (bread), but at the same time and more importantly, the acoustics drive forward the stream of associations and establish associative connections between the elements, as can be exemplified by the assonances between "Braut" and "Brot" as well as "Brot" and "rot." The connection of red and sky is well established, as for example in a famous romantic poem by Joseph von Eichendorff which also takes up the estrangement, the *vanitas*-motive, loneliness and biographical retrospective ("Aus der Heimat hinter den Blitzen rot/Da kommen die Wolken her [...]"), turned into songs by Johannes Brahms and Robert Schumann.

The notion of vision is of vital importance for this text: "repetierende vision" [recurrent vision] is one of the key terms at the centre of the poem. The poem explores the ambiguous notion of "vision:" vision in the literal sense (the view through the window), inner visions (floating visions of things seen in the childhood), religious visions (evoked by the words "blutrote Veronika," "Reliquie," "Taube") and visions of the future, both personal and eschatological (hypothetically envisioning death). For Mayröcker, transforming reality into spiritual visions was a key concern, as she explained in a short text on her poetics: "man muss mit realen Karten spielen, sage ich, aber man muss transreale Bezüge herzustellen versuchen eigentlich VISIONEN. Je realer die Materialien desto durchsichtiger spiritueller die Ergebnisse, nicht wahr –" (Mayröcker, *Magische Blätter I–V* 368) ["you have to play with real cards, I say, but you have to try to create transreal references, actually VISIONS. The more real the materials, the more transparent, spiritual the results, is it not –"]. This again underlines the importance and superiority of artistic creation for Mayröcker: reality is only the raw material that needs to be transformed into transcendent and translucent substance during the creative process.

The re-iterative aspect of this transformation of reality into transcendent visions during the creative process is bound to the act of writing and remembering. Repetition and variations are stylistic devices to showcase the hermeneutical process of aesthetic experience – a recipient contemplates a piece of artwork and tries to make sense of what he or she sees (cf. Raß 36). Repetition is also a function of memory. Memory has always been a repetitive action; already in memory theories from Antiquity and the Middle Ages,

repetition was a central aspect. Through repeating and remembering, the text reactivates former inventories of texts, images and metaphors. The poem also reactivates imageries that are part of the shared cultural memory. It thereby evokes former modes of thinking, past modes of thinking. The *vanitas*-imagery present in the poem (“Müllkasten,” “todgeweihte Taube,” “aufgedunsene Maus” etc.) may illustrate that argument: the *vanitas*-imagery is at the same time a historical imagery, an expression of past forms of thinking, in this case a type of imagery from the Baroque period and actualized with modern elements (“Müllkasten”). The poem’s movement is thus twofold: On the one hand, there is a movement backwards in history (past imageries), and on the other, there is a movement of actualization, bringing the past imageries back to life in present times. The poem thus actualizes traditional imagery that is part of the cultural memory.

In a similar fashion, a row of autobiographical splitters or glimpses surface within the text as remembered images: “CREPE PAPER HILL, since childhood days not touched anymore/*such a thing*: blood-red veronica, *prairie-paper*, Topolino –/memory of a tiger the thirties.” These images render the poem a bit hermetic. In her often quoted poetological text *MAIL ART*, Mayröcker writes about such remembered images:

“[...] dazu kommt, dass das jeweilige Erinnerungsbild verwandelt wurde, die ursprüngliche Ausstrahlung des Erinnerungsbildes wurde während der Arbeit mit ausserpersönlichen Elementen angereichert, oder überhaupt umgeformt, so dass allein der Autor weiss, welches Erinnerungsbild welcher endgültigen Formulierung zugrunde liegt, und wie es – etwa stufenweise – vom erinnerten Urbild zur poetischen Textur verwandelt wurde.” (Mayröcker, *Magische Blätter I–V* 10)

[“[...] what comes in addition is that the respective remembered image was transformed, the original charisma of the remembered image was enriched by non-personal elements during the work process, or generally reshaped, so that only the author knows which remembered image is at the bottom of the final formulation, and how it was transformed from the remembered archetype into the poetic texture – for example gradually.”]

Exactly like the “fragments of the world” and works of art, remembered images are completely transformed into language and into literary artworks in their own right, adhering to the rules, traditions and not least the own inherent dynamics of literature. Mayröcker thus “writes the image” in a dynamic interaction with the shared cultural inventory of art and images.

Conclusion and Further Perspectives

While a considerable amount of Mayröcker’s texts on artworks explicitly refers to widely known artists and to specific artworks which are identifiable by their titles or prominent features, *BROTWOLKE* belongs to a group of texts whose titles indicate an *ekphrasis* or an intermedial quality, but whose specific point of reference is absent. The reference to Karla Woisnitza thus opens for a more general reflection on the character of art, literature and intermediality. Rather than referencing to a specific painting or work of art, the poem thus showcases different shades and aspects of the visual. The notions of vision and illusion play a pivotal role. There is a strong focus on colours and materiality – connecting the two spheres of the visual and the textual. The poem merges image- and text-worlds from different origin and categories to create an original reflection about transformation and metamorphosis. What could be seen as a rather particular case of poetry in Mayröcker’s overall oeuvre, thus displays some of the most characteristic features of her intermedial literature.

Like a picture or a painting, the scene – i.e. the view – itself is framed: The poem describes a gaze through a window, from inside a room into the world outside the house or flat. The artwork itself provides us a “frame of viewing:” art informs our view of the world. It influences and steers the way in which we see the world. This allows for a closer analysis and better understanding of the poem’s seemingly ekphrastic elements: it entangles the contemplation of the artwork with the contemplation of the real world. The poem oscillates the whole time between these two modes of seeing and contemplating, and thus challenges the

reader: is it the sky and the clouds which are being described or is it a picture created by Woisnitza which is being described? Thus, art and life become inextricably interlaced.

The poem appears almost like a stream-of-consciousness, but not in the conventional form invented by Edouard Dujardin, Arthur Schnitzler and James Joyce who simulate the inner life, thoughts etc. of a figure. Mayröcker's stream-of-consciousness is a process that refers to the act of writing in the first place and then refers to the inventory of texts and images that she collected in her overcrowded working room – a stream-of-consciousness that strictly refers to signs and media. Actually, Mayröcker's stream-of-consciousness could be described as a stream of sense-data: a stream of visual and auditory impressions that float into the text. Mayröcker's texts display a playful artistry that forces the reader to pay particular attention, to slow down and to regard carefully, to pay attention to small details and to the sound and tone of every word. The questions, repetitions and iterative approaches to the objects of contemplation illustrate and exemplify the process of perception, aesthetic experience and hermeneutic attempts of interpreting and making sense of what is being perceived. The complexity of the intermedial play also manifests in the tension between the title and the rest of the poem. The title guides the reader's expectations and his hermeneutic approach (ekphrasis), and it suggests giving the reader a clue (relating to a specific artist or work of art). But instead of satisfying the instigated hermeneutic endeavours by describing a particular picture, Mayröcker's poem engages and vexes the reader's mind as it creates a multi-layered vivid presence of diverse fragments of visual impressions, remembered images, framed views and fragments of cultural memory.

As demonstrated on this specific case, Mayröcker's poems are characterized by step-by-step procedures which accumulate and transform her linguistic material on the basis of both sound shapes and evocated images. Both the images and the sounds are drivers within this process. The images trigger other images via connections through observation, perceived details or associated memories. The sounds of central words seem to generate new word clouds by assonance, alliteration and rhyme by playing with and rearranging the acoustic segments. In short, Mayröcker has a special technique of image-writing: She combines a nervous perception with a forceful climbing into the images and exploration of details and condensed portrait and rearrangement of her *trouvailles*. The wordplay which is perceptible for the listener and visible for the reader directs a high degree of attention towards the building bricks of her texts, that is, the formation, uses and aesthetic qualities of language itself. The acoustic and visual dynamics drag the reader along while at the same time engaging them by the necessity to connect the dots and fill the blank spaces as a result of the characteristic *ars combinatoria* of Mayröcker's poems.

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