

The Planet and Capitalist Realism

On Disappearing in Schalansky

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Since the end of the Cold War, contemporary German-language literatures have included an astonishing number of books that are world-making texts in an almost maximalist sense: Their literary worlds approximate a global scale. Most of these texts are novels, such as the widely translated bestsellers *Die Vermessung der Welt* (2005; *Measuring the World*) by Daniel Kehlmann or *Der Weltensammler* (2006; *Collector of Worlds*) by Ilija Trojanow. The genre of other books, such as Christian Kracht and Eckhart Nickel's *Ferien für immer. Die angenehmsten Orte der Welt* (1998; *Vacations Forever: The Most Pleasant Places in the World*) or Christoph Ransmayr's *Der Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes* (2012; *Atlas of an Anxious Man*), is harder to define. They consist of relatively discrete short prose texts and creatively appropriate formats like the atlas, the reportage book, or the travel guide in order to assemble these short texts into a whole; they often create even more expansive geographies than the novels.

Irrespective of whether we are dealing with novels or collections of short prose texts, the geographical expansion of these literary worlds can be understood as an aesthetic response to two overlapping, and indeed interconnected, historical constellations: first, the height of neoliberal globalization during the 1990s and 2000s, and, second, the public awareness of the climate crisis that has been increasing rapidly in the German-speaking world since at least the 2010s. Such books are symptomatic of a global age, or even a planetary age if they make the ecologies of the Earth and more-than-human relations the center of their literary worlds.

Yet literary world-making does not only necessitate a specific spatiality; it also requires a distinct temporality. And in this respect, I suggest that a rather disillusioning observation can be made when looking at these world-making books. While most of them depict the diversity of natural and cultural temporalities and also create their own aesthetic temporalities, they remain largely within the horizon of "capitalist realism." Coined by the late Mark Fisher, this term designates "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."¹ Under this temporal regime, it is "easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to

imagine the end of capitalism,"² Fisher writes alluding to Fredric Jameson. This overall lack of a sense of future based on collective historical agency and on visions of progressive societal change characterizes the temporal regime of capitalist realism. In contemporary literature, this temporality comes to the fore, for instance, through a prevalent interest in phenomena of disappearing.

I take possibly the most beautiful of these world-making texts as my example: Judith Schalansky's *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln. Fünfzig Inseln, auf denen ich nie war und niemals sein werde* (*Atlas of Remote Islands. Fifty Islands I Have Never Set Foot on and Never Will*), an intermedia work that combines anecdotal stories with maps designed by the author. It was first published in 2009 as a hard cover and then reworked twice by the author for paperback editions that came out in 2011 and 2023. The book makes a world of actually existing islands located in the Arctic, Atlantic, Indian, Pacific, and Antarctic Oceans, islands that are remote from a metropolitan standpoint. This world is only sparsely inhabited by humans. Almost half of these islands are places where projects of human settlement have come to an end, or were never attempted. This emphasis is hardly surprising, given that Schalansky notes in the preliminary remarks to the first paperback edition that her initial premise of a connection between islands and utopia was everything but confirmed during her work on the book: Many islands turned out to be the sites of "terrible events."³ Moreover, *Atlas* confronts readers with a "world without us that does not exist before or after humanity but alongside it, a world that follows its own processuality in temporal rhythms of its own."⁴ An emphasis on non-human phenomena, spaces, and temporalities characterizes this planetary imaginary, as it tends not to construct the Earth in anthropocentric terms.

The island anecdotes record diverse, often violent events and processes of disappearing. The book recounts the story of the children of St. Kilda who died in droves from neonatal tetanus, stating: "In the graveyard lies the future of the island."⁵ The text on Trinidade in the Atlantic ocean focuses on people who "disappear without a trace, swept away by waves meters high, buried by a landslide, or swallowed by a crater."⁶ The extinct Steller's sea cow is mentioned, and the entry on Fangataufa in the Pacific describes a "tidal wave" triggered by a nuclear test: "Afterwards, nothing remains. No houses, no facilities, no trees – absolutely nothing."⁷ Also, entire islands are in danger of vanishing as well – "Takuu will sink, next month, next year." – a process explained with reference to geological and climate change knowledge: "Sea levels are rising. The winds are shifting. The islands are sinking. After every storm, the beach is narrower. Entire stretches of land vanish overnight. Shifting tectonic plates and a changing climate are to blame."⁸ With the intensification of the climate crisis, this topic becomes even more pronounced in the 2023 edition of *Atlas*, which features two additional islands where "the effects of global warming become strikingly apparent".⁹

Finally, Schalansky uses islands to evoke the "end of the earth." Taking the form of a very short history of the Easter Islands, one text relates how the island's gigantic palm trees and its indigenous population were almost completely wiped out by human actions. The text concludes: "Not a single tree grows today on the desolate landscape formed by 70

volcanoes. [...] A textbook case of the definitive end of the earth, a chain of unfortunate circumstances that led to self-destruction".¹⁰ What has occurred on this island foreshadows what is going to happen with the planet as a whole.

It may appear to be only logical then that, in the foreword to the edition of 2023, Schalansky claims that "the entire history of the world [...] could easily be told using the example of remote islands".¹¹ This would be, of course, a history of the human and more-than-human world that revolves largely around experiences, events, and processes of disappearing. Indeed, in *Verzeichnis einiger Verluste* (2018; *An Inventory of Losses*), Schalansky articulates, first, a deep skepticism toward "the faith in progress, the legacy of the Enlightenment," which she criticizes for not sufficiently taking into account that "the principles of evolution have shown that what survives for a certain time is determined, rather, by a disturbingly complex interplay of chance and adaptation."¹² Second, she argues that "[b]eing alive means experiencing loss" and that "[i]t is naturally only a matter of time before everything has disappeared, disintegrated and decayed, before everything is annihilated and destroyed."¹³ Under these apparently transhistorical conditions, she is interested in the "strategies [...] to keep hold of the past and ward off oblivion,"¹⁴ for which she sees the book as the best medium. Thus, many different kinds of disappearance format her planetary imaginary, rather than any visions of societal progress and future-orientated human agency.

Phenomena of disappearing are collected in *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln*, as are survivals, transformations, and re-emergences, although much more rarely. For example, in the 2023 edition, Schalansky writes that the Takuu Atoll, contrary to what had been predicted, has so far not sunk. This development has caused Schalansky to rewrite the anecdote in question, adding a more optimistic tone to it. She transforms the predicted disappearance of Takuu from a *fait accompli* into a possibility: "It has long been predicted that Takuu, too, would have no future [...] Yet so far, Takuu has survived every predicted vanishing."¹⁵ Still, Schalansky's project continues to aim to store, and thus to save, some of the infinite number of things, places, and beings that have disappeared or are about to disappear, by using the medium of the book.

In this respect, Schalansky's world-making aligns, to a certain extent, with a form of planetarity in which, as Mary Louise Pratt critically points out, "[c]onserving pluriversity and relationality boils down to the work of counting, tagging, and tracking endangered species [...] and staging their survival and reproduction."¹⁶ This constitutes a kind of "micromanagement" that "at most offers a lifeboat" during "a crisis of futurity and agency posed in particular by climate change and impending ecological catastrophe".¹⁷ Against this background, it is also telling that one does not find in *Atlas* – and this goes for all three editions – stories of political and social alternatives that respond to climate-crisis-causing capitalism, although Schalansky expresses her "hope for fundamental change" in an essay written during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸

Of course, neither this author's book nor other world-making texts of contemporary literature

need to envision such alternatives in order to constitute insightful and innovative literature that can be read with intellectual benefit and aesthetic pleasure in a planetary age. And yet, it is precisely the fact that *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln* does not include progressive political, social, or, indeed, ecological visions of change, but rather traces a plurality of disappearances that makes its planetary world-making symptomatic of the temporal regime of capitalist realism.

This contribution draws on my book Weltentwürfe in Kurzprosa. Gegenwartsliteratur zwischen Globalisierung und Klimakrise (de Gruyter, 2026).

References

1. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), 2.
2. Ibid.
3. See Judith Schalansky, *Taschenatlas der abgelegenen Inseln: Fünfzig Inseln, auf denen ich nie war und niemals sein werde* (mare/Fischer, 2011), 8. Unless otherwise noted, translations from English are mine.
4. Wolfgang Struck, "A World Without Us: Aesthetic, Literary, and Scientific Imaginations of Nature Beyond Humankind," in *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities, German Studies, and Beyond*, ed. by Sabine Wilke and Japhet Johnstone (Bloomsbury, 2017), 17–37, here 35.
5. Judith Schalansky, *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln. Fünfzig Inseln, auf denen ich nie war und niemals sein werde* (mareverlag, 2009), 34.
6. Ibid., 44.
7. Ibid., 114, 80.
8. Ibid., 122.
9. Judith Schalansky, *Taschenatlas der abgelegenen Inseln: Fünfundfünfzig Inseln, auf denen ich nie war und niemals sein werde* (Suhrkamp, 2023), 19.
10. Schalansky, *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln*, 100.
11. Schalansky, *Taschenatlas der abgelegenen Inseln: Fünfundfünfzig Inseln*, 19.
12. Judith Schalansky, *An Inventory of Losses*, trans. Jackie Smith (Maclehose Press, 2020), 21.
13. Ibid., 14, 22
14. Ibid., 14.
15. Schalansky, *Taschenatlas der abgelegenen Inseln: Fünfundfünfzig Inseln*, 244–245.
16. Mary Louise Pratt, *Planetary Longings* (Duke University Press, 2022), 12.
17. Ibid., 12, 13.
18. Judith Schalansky, "Hirsche im Harold Hill," *Der Spiegel* 20 (2020), 112–114, here 114.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Schaub, Christoph: The Planet and Capitalist Realism. On Disappearing in Schalansky, in: KWI-BLOG, [<https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/the-planet-and-capitalist-realism/>], 19.10.2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20261019-0830>