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**Peter Handke's Reception of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote of La Mancha* (1605) in *Der Bildverlust: oder Durch die Sierra de Gredos* / (*The Loss of Image or Through the Sierra de Gredos*) (2002)**

By Gabriele Ruth Eckart

Peter Handke's novel *Der Bildverlust: oder Durch die Sierra de Gredos* – his “magnus opus, not just in terms of length, but equally in terms of spiritual scope and aesthetic innovation” (Skwara 77) – is up to this date the last of literary texts by Austrian writers that creatively refer to Cervantes's *Don Quixote of La Mancha*<sup>1</sup>. To give an example, the third of the novel's three epigraphs is one of the many quotations from Miguel de Cervantes's work that are sprinkled throughout Handke's novel: “Aber vielleicht haben die Ritterschaft und die Verzauberungen heutzutage andere Wege zu nehmen als bei den alten” / (“But perhaps knighthood and enchantments nowadays must take paths different from those of the ancients”) (All translations of Handke are by Winston, 5). In this study, both intertextual references to Cervantes's text and structural similarities between Handke's and Cervantes's novels will be examined.

The epigraph quoted above indicates that Handke's novel probably will tell a modern version of the adventure-packed old tale of knight-errantry and enchantments. Indeed, the 750-page-long text recounts an adventure story. Spooky places are visited, travelers (some of them manifesting bizarre psychological traumas) narrate their personal stories over a meal, a mythic people is found whose ways are different, and, as it also happens in *Don Quixote of La Mancha*, possessions are lost and things once lost are suddenly found. To make sure we don't misunderstand the literary genre, the female

main protagonist is called “die Aventurera” (750) / (“the *adventurera*”) (766) and we find sentences such as the following: “Das aus so vielen Abenteuer geschichten bekannte Zittern im nachhinein kam über sie. Aber war das nicht andererseits der Beweis für ein richtiges Abenteuer?” (742) / (“The retroactive trembling familiar from so many adventure stories came over her. But wasn’t this, on the other hand, the unmistakable sign of a proper adventure?”) (461) Most importantly, like Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, Handke’s *Der Bildverlust* is an adventure novel about a quest, not the one of knight-errantry that is directed towards courtly love, but, as will be seen, a vision quest. Due to this quest about the right vision and the obsession with which it is pursued, Klaus Kastberger claims about Handke’s novel: “Das Ganze der Neuzeit steckt in diesem Buch.” / (“The whole of modernity is contained in this book.”) (173)

To give a short plot summary, the main protagonist, an unnamed German woman, a banker, very successful in her profession, leaves her unspecified port city in Northwestern Europe to cross a part of Spain by car, bus, and on foot. There, she intends to accomplish a business deal with a writer who lives in the Castilian plains of Cervantes’s La Mancha. For paying him money and taking care of his financial affairs, she wants him to write her biography. On the challenging journey through the mountains, there are “giants” she has to battle with; they are not windmill vanes as in *Don Quixote*, but rather media images which have the power to attack the protagonist from within. The story ends with a dialogue between the woman and the writer about the horrible clash between our subjective vision of the world and its media images.

Besides being an adventure novel about a quest, the text is also a lengthy pamphlet about our contemporary cultural crisis. According to Handke, the flood of

media images that claim to be a vehicle of truth, but are not at all, causes this crisis. On the one hand, the main protagonist is armored with such images and uses them as weapons:

Mit den Bildern hielt sie sich die Angreifer nicht bloß vom Leibe. Sie schlug sie damit zurück. Das jeweilige Bild diente ihr ebenso als Rüstung wie auch [...] als Waffe. Mit den Bildern hatte sie es in der Hand, den anderen buchstäblich niederzumachen und ‘auszuschalten.’ (102) / (With these images she did more than keep her attackers at bay. She struck back at them. The image of the moment served not only as armor but also [...] as a weapon. With the images she had the power literally to do the other person in and “eliminate” him.) (62)

On the other hand, her impression of being haunted by media images (it is especially strong since once she was an actress in a film and knows how images are produced) and her inability to differentiate between what is “real” and what is an image prevent her from enjoying a feeling of authenticity. To give an example, she often imagines being filmed and has doubts if what she experiences is truly her own experience or a part of a film in which she is playing a role. In other instances, so-called objective reports by sensational journalists trigger feelings of anger and alienation. Stephan Sattler is right by arguing: “Peter Handke’s Roman beschwört die Gefahr der Gegenwart: die Zerstörung der Phantasie freier Menschen” / (“Peter Handke’s novel conjures up the danger of today: the destruction of the imagination of free people”) (1). However, as the critic goes on to point out, for Handke our modern world does not have the last word. There is something

we can confront it with: “die persönlich wiedergewonnene Einbildungskraft” / (“the individually regained imagination”) (2). This imagination – a poetic impulse that is in all of us producing “Bilderfunken” (274) / (“image sparks”) (462) – gives the text a utopian dimension. The critic explains:

Der Flut der Bilder in den Medien, die alles verallgemeinern, muss sich der Einzelne widersetzen. Er muss nur seinen eigenen Bildern trauen, ihnen Autorität verleihen gegenüber den Simulationen, die auf ihn einstürzen, Bild und Abgebildetes stets gleichsetzen und sich wie austauschbare Waren benutzen lassen. / (The individual must oppose the flood of media images that are generalizing everything. He must trust only his own images, give them authority in the face of the simulations that overwhelm him, that equate the image and what it represents and let them be used as exchangeable commodities.) (2)

The space in which Handke’s main protagonist attempts to liberate her mind from the terror of media images is the Sierra de Gredos, the mountain range in the center of the Iberian Peninsula – not far from the Sierra Morena where Don Quixote had freed the galley slaves in Cervantes’s text. Although there are abundant references to Cervantes that give the narrative a strong local color, there are not too many structural similarities between Handke’s and Cervantes’s works. Both novels are a satire of the worlds in which the authors live – in Cervantes’s case the world of the late Renaissance, in Handke’s the modern world of electronic media. Also, as Cervantes did before him, Handke radically breaks up the traditional narrative structure by eliminating the

omniscient narrator and introducing a multitude of narrators who constantly contradict and interrupt each other. That makes the text hard to read, or, to put it in Erich Wolfgang Skwara words, Handke's novel *Der Bildverlust* "demands not just slow and careful but repeated reading" (77) to sink in.

The most striking difference between the Spanish and the Austrian novels is that Handke's nameless main protagonist behaves rationally; she is more a modern-day "Jakob Fugger" (743)<sup>2</sup> than a Don Quixote. There is no noticeable disregard of common sense and the demands of the historic reality in the twenty-first century in her behavior. None of the people whom the main protagonist meets crossing the Sierra de Gredos, Spaniards as well as other international travelers or immigrants, has the impression that her brain might be addled. To give an example of her alertness, when a bus driver collapses after a heart attack, she immediately takes care of him, offering first aid, and then continues driving the bus to the satisfaction of the other travelers. Her existential problem that she carries media images inside herself as Don Quixote carried literature inside him "like an incurable wound" (Robert 17) and struggles to affirm her identity does not cause conflict with anybody.

Among the abundant intertextual references to Cervantes's text that serve the purpose of local color and stylistic complexity, there are some that are significant regarding the novel's message. In the context of the twenty-first century, they re-dramatize Cervantes's question about the clash between reality and fiction. An example is the following:

Oder war das inzwischen eine Zeit, verschieden von der damaligen, und die durch die Luft säbelnden ‘Windmühlenflügel’ stellten jetzt in der Tat etwas anderes dar als bloße Windmühlenflügel, nicht gerade ‘böse Riesen’, aber doch etwas anderes? (351) / (Or was this in the meantime a period unlike that one long ago, and did the vanes of the windmills sawing the air now in fact represent something other than mere “windmill vanes,” not exactly “evil giants,” but certainly something else?) (Winston 218)

Although Handke’s narrator does not attempt to find an answer to the question of what those windmill vanes mean today, for the reader it becomes clear on the following four hundred pages that those vanes signify modern media images; they can knock you down as brutally as Quixote’s “evil giants” did. Vanderhaeghe stated correctly: “Handke’s dismissal of modern media is hardly new, but the intensity of his repudiation is” (2).

One important example that supports the interpretation of Quixote’s evil giants as media images is the alien society of the Hondarederos whom the main protagonist encounters in a mountain basin when she is crossing the Sierra de Gredos. They are people from all over the world – an ugly looking bunch of people according to a reporter whom the protagonist meets on her journey. They wear mismatching socks and shoes and communicate in an unattractive sounding idiom. All of them are suffering from “Bildverlust” (see title) and desperately attempt to find an inner balance in this remote part of the world mainly by communicating with plants and animals. Their motto is: “Eine Fassung haben, für nichts Besonderes, für alles und nichts. Gefaßtsein ist alles.” (563) / (“To acquire composure, not for any particular purpose, for everything and

nothing. Composure is all.”) (350-51) The people living around them consider them to be a hostile sect and, according to the reporter, set up “Bildwerfanlagen” (572) / (“image-projecting devices”) (356) to provide them with media images. The purpose is to treat their strange disease and make them appear less dangerous. However, it turns out that the Hondarederos are “bildresistent” (572) / (“image-resistant”) (356):

Es ist [...], als gingen, ja wanderten ihre Augen an den allseits aufgestellten Bilderwänden vorbei, auf den schmalen bildlosen Schneisen horizontwärts, gleichsam wie einst die Israeliten bei ihrem Auszug aus ihrer Knechtschaft in Ägypten durch das links und rechts ihnen eine Furt öffnende Tote, nein, Rote Meer. (572-3) / (It is as if their eyes simply veered past the walls of images erected on all sides, seeking the narrow, imageless strip along the horizon, as once the Israelites during their exodus from bondage in Egypt moved through the passage that opened up for them through the Dead, no, the Red, Sea.) (356)

Ironically called “Möchtegernritter” (564) / (“would-be knights”) (351) by the reporter, the Hondarederos also reject private property and try to make a living by collecting berries and by hunting. In addition, they reject modern Western conventions that measure time as, for instance, clocks and calendars. In their “Versuch eines anderen Umgangs mit der Zeit” (646) / (“attempt to achieve a different relationship to time”) (400) they don’t use it the conventional way by counting hours, days, months, etc. Instead, they refer to its units as “ein Schwung Zeit. Eine Welle Zeit. Eine Igelnasenspitze Zeit. Ein Platanenzackenblatt Zeit. Ein Bombentrichter Zeit” (700) / (“a



swath of time. A wave of time. A hedgehog's snout of time. A plane tree's notched leaf of time. A bomb crater of time") (435). Trying out this different concept of time for herself, it happens to the protagonist that she meets emperor Charles V, who died in 1558, on his journey to Yuste.

To sum up the endless descriptions of what the Hondarederos do and don't do in one sentence, they "hängen dem unproduktiven Traum von einer verkehrten Welt nach" (559) / ("cling to the unproductive dream of an upside-down world") (348). This obsession, however, to follow your impossible dream, is quixotic. And in contrast to dreams of utopia that are directed towards the future, the Hondarederos's dream goes back to the past – as does Don Quixote's. There is a strong resonance of Don Quixote's famous discourse about the Golden Age when "those who lived then knew not those two words *thin* and *mine*" (Cervantes 118) in Handke's descriptions of the Hondarederos who try to live as people did in prehistoric times. Since Quixote's discourse has drawn upon many descriptions of the Golden Age by antecedents such as Ovid, Lorenzo de Medici, and Barahona de Soto (see Stagg 90), all those descriptions also resonate in Handke's portrayal of Hondareda.

In history, the term "utopia" has been used to describe both communities that intended to create an ideal society and fictional societies described in literature – by Sir Thomas More, for instance. Handke, in *Der Bildverlust*, as More does in *Utopia* and Cervantes in Quixote's discourse on the Golden Age, designs a literary fictional society. This is a brave move in an epoch in which utopia seems to be dead. As Russell Jacoby in his study *The End of Utopia* (1999) states, "the most compelling arguments for utopianism do not suffice today. World events and the *Zeitgeist* militate against a

utopian spirit” (179). The most important characteristic of Handke’s utopian society is that the problem of ”Bildverlust” has been resolved by having gained resistance against media images and inaugurated “a new attunement with the world” (Benjamin 2).

This problem of “Bildverlust” is the most important motif of Handke’s novel as the title already indicates. It means that, according to Handke, the flood of media images is increasingly suffocating our inchoate sensations and emotions. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in the chapters about the people of Hondareda the main protagonist and the reporter who was mentioned before – one of the many “eingeflogene[n] Beobachter” (652) / (“observers flown in from elsewhere”) (404) – are competing in portraying them. While the reporter’s portrayal seems to be realistic, Handke’s main protagonist questions its very veracity. For a while, the two are voyaging through the Sierra de Gredos together. In the chapters that describe their dialogue there is a kind of doubling in Handke’s novel as in Cervantes’s famous pair of the knight-errant Quixote and Sancho Panza. The female protagonist who elevates her subjective vision stands for Quixote, the reporter for the more objective Sancho. However, Charles Peterson is not right in claiming that this “setup produces surprising comedy” (1). To the contrary, the dialogue between the main protagonist and the reporter who stands for the media is dead serious; there is no touch of Cervantes’s humor.

Since the figure of the reporter represents the world of modern media – a fact at which the words “flown in” already hint – the main protagonist is very careful not to fall prey to his images that portray the Hondoredos as ugly and dangerous. Finally, after having gained her own experiences at this mythical place, she understands that the reporter’s so-called objective view results in lying. In other words, the main

protagonist's and the reporter's dialogue – as was that between Quixote and Sancho – is about the status of reality, meaning perspective, vision.

About the Hondarederos' problem of "Bildverlust" the reporter states:

"Jeder von ihnen behauptet von sich, keinen Bildverlust habe er erlitten, wahr sei vielmehr: er habe den Bildern abgeschworen. Es gebe und gelte [...] kein Bild mehr, kein einziges. Was für ihn aber [...] in Frage komme, das sei die Anschauung. Verlorengegangen seien ihm, mit seinem Leben dort, von wo er hier eingewandert sei, nicht etwa die wie immer gearteten Bilder [...],

verlorengegangen oder zumindest bedroht worden sei ihm das

Anschauenkönnen." (573) / ("Each of them avers that he has not suffered a loss of images, but rather that he has sworn off images. Each claims that no image, not a single one, exists or is valid [...]. But what matters to him [...] is perception.

Along with his life in the place from which he emigrated, he has lost not the images, [...] what he has lost, or what at least is threatened, is the ability to perceive." [...]) (356)

That the reporter uses the verb "to aver" indicates his skepticism towards the Hondarederos's claim. Also the use of the subjective "I," used in reporting as, for instance, in television newscasts, newspaper articles, and magazines, gives the message an ironic touch as if it were impossible "to swear off" media images. Nevertheless, it becomes clear for the attentive reader that Handke here, in disguise, is delivering us the message the novel is all about: In our contemporary culture our subjective imagination is

losing its potency. Overwhelmed with synthetic, mass-produced, artificial images, we are at the brink of losing our perception, which means that we are losing ourselves as human beings. In the final dialogue between the protagonist and the writer at the end of the novel, one of the two says: “Der Verlust der Bilder ist der schmerzlichste der Verluste.” (746) / (“The loss of images is the most painful of losses.”) (464) The other responds: “Es bedeutet den Weltverlust. Es bedeutet: es gibt keine Anschauung mehr.” (746) / (“It means the loss of the world. It means: there is no more seeing.”) (464) This concern, as is well known, is a basic concern of romanticism. And as it was according to the romantic writers, according to Handke, only strict inwardness by trusting our poetic impulse as well as the contact with nature can soften our suffering from this loss. To give an example for the second remedy, a look into the “Augen der hiesigen Tiere” (578) / (“eyes of the animals here”) (359) – goats, snakes, bulls, vultures, dragonflies, and wagtails – might give the protagonist back, so she hopes, the ability of perception. That she is not a poet, but a banker, might indicate Handke’s romantic conviction that all of us possess a poetic impulse and are capable of such a positive transformation.

Switching from prose to poetry at the end of the novel, which as a whole represents, as Guy Vanderhaeghe observed correctly, “a hymn to longing,” (2) the author is jubilant:

“Bilder, ihr Weltpeile. Bilder, ihr Weltumspanner. Bilder, laßt mich nicht verwaist sein. Bild, du begründete Wahrnehmung. Imagen, mi norte (=Führer) y mi luz. Bilder, laßt uns das Leben erscheinen. Bild, Vokabel der Universalsprache. Bild, so leicht wie eine abgestreifte Schlangenhaut. Bild,

nachhaltigstes aller Nachbilder. Bilder, ihr kapitalen Wirklichkeiten. Bild, gib mir Welt *und* Weltvergessenheit. Bild, Erkenntlichkeit für das Gelebte *und* Schubkraft für das zu Lebende. Im Bild der gastliche und weiterhin gastliche Erdkreis. Bild, das du mir bedeutest, daß ich weiterhin auf dem Weg bin. Bild, du Rebus aus Stille und Erscheinung. Bilder, ihr reines Gegenüber. O Bild, mein Lebensgeist: zeig mir den Zwischenraum, wo du verborgen bist.” (747) / (“Images, you world arrows. Images, you world-encompassers. Images, do not let me be orphaned. Image, you grounded perception. *Imagen, mi norte* (=guide) *y mi luz*. Images, let life appear to us. Image, word in the universal language. Image, as light as a shed snakeskin. Image, most lasting of all afterimages. Images, you capital realities. Image, give me the world, and let me forget the world. Image, acknowledgement of what has been lived, impetus for what is yet to be lived. In the image the hospitable and enduringly hospitable globe. Image, you who indicate to me that I am still on the right path. Images, you pure opposite number. O image, my life spirit: show me the space where you are hiding.”) (464)

This ecstatic paragraph could be interpreted as meaning that only trusting our subjective vision enables us to create this “true” kind of image that gives us the resistance against the powerful image-projecting devices that surround us.

On the page before the last of the novel, the main protagonist, once more, is raving about the utopian society of the people of Hondareda. This time, very interestingly, she adds to the name of Hondareda that of Numantia – the place at which

Cervantes's play *La Numancia* is set that dramatizes the siege of the Celtiberian town by the Romans: "Hondareda! Sie würde die Siedlung umtaufen in *La Nueva Numancia*, nach Numancia, der von den Römern vor weit über zwei Jahrtausenden belagerten und zuletzt dem Erdboden gleichgemachten Ursiedlung in der Meseta" (758) / ("Hondareda! She would rename the settlement 'La Nueva Numancia,' after Numancia, the original settlement in the *meseta* to which the Romans had laid siege far more than two thousand years ago and which they had eventually leveled completely") (471). To point to its utopian potential, the protagonist states:

Noch nie hatte jemand so gelebt, getan, gearbeitet, gelassen wie die Leute von Hondareda oder Nueva Numancia, und nie wieder würde jemand so leben, tun, arbeiten und lassen wie das Volk von Hondareda oder Nueva Numancia – zum Glück? zum Unglück? Nur eine Geschichte? Phantasie: Krone der Vernunft. (758) / (No one had ever lived, done things, worked, left things undone, like the people of Hondareda or Nueva Numancia, and never again would anyone live, do things, work, and leave things undone like the people of Hondareda or Nueva Numancia far off in the Sierra de Gredos – fortunately? unfortunately? Only a story? Imagination: the crown of reason.) (471)

The last clause could have been born in the mind of one of the early German romantic writers, for instance, Friedrich Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, or Novalis. In the next two sentences, Handke's main protagonist elaborates on this romantic definition of imagination as the crown of reason in the following way: "Ein

Suchen gab es, wobei das Gesuchte schon gefunden erschien, weit wirklicher und wirksamer, als wäre es wirklich gefunden worden. Und so ein Suchen war das Suchen für jemand anderen und für andere.” (758) / (“There was a form of searching in which the thing sought seemed to have been found already, far more real and potent than if it had really been found. And such searching was the searching on behalf of someone else and for others.”) (471) This cryptic explanation could be interpreted as an invitation to use our subjective vision and imagination to break open the standardized perception we are trapped in by the media. The “thing thought” has a strong semblance to the romantic Absolute. Searching for it can enable us to recreate utopian places of the past as a tool for creating an imaginary community in the present: “for others.” This community could then be the sprout of a new society. Unfortunately, Handke’s protagonist does not comment any further on why she included Cervantes’s Numantia in her list of lost utopias.

In a narrative digression about the main protagonist’s unnamed brother who recently was incarcerated for unrevealed terrorist activities, there is another intertextual reference to Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*: “Dank fahrenden Rittern, wie er einer war, würde eine neue Zeit anheben, oder eine alte, die vergessene, die bloß noch lachhaft sagenhafte würde wie noch nie die goldene werden” (295) / (“Thanks to knights errant such as him, a new era would dawn, or an old one, the forgotten one, the legendary one that still existed only as an object of ridicule, would be reinstated as never before”) (183). In this commentary, the protagonist’s terrorist brother is called a knight-errant who seeks to restore the Golden Age in the land of his choice to which he decided to emigrate after he had been released from prison. To see Don Quixote as a possible terrorist is a new twist

in the long list of worldwide different interpretations of Cervantes's main protagonist since the seventeenth century. Later, the protagonist thinks that the name of Feirefiz, Parcifal's half brother, would fit her brother because of a similar color of their bodies: "helldunkel gesprenkelt [...]" / ("light-dark spotted") (296). This capricious remark hints at the fact that Handke's main protagonist is also familiar with chivalric novels – Don Quixote's favorite books. Unfortunately, this interesting idea of a quixotic terrorist is also not further developed.

As it was mentioned before, Handke, as Cervantes did three hundred years earlier, radically undermines the traditional narrative structure. Besides the protagonist and the reporter, whose contradictory narratives about the Hondarederos are intertwined through large portions of the text, there is a splitting of the author into three different authors. The first is a "rechtmässiger Autor" (659) / ("rightful author") (409), the second a "falsche[] Autor" (658) / ("false author") (409), and the third a "Dazwischenerzähler[...] von vorhin, von 'weiter oben'" (727) / ("narrator who had intervened before, the narrator 'from above'") (452) without further explanation of what the attribute "from above" signifies. In addition, the main protagonist asks herself how Miguel de Cervantes, her "Traum-Autor" (709) / ("the author she dreamt of") (440), would tell her story – a question that drives the writer whom she commissioned to write her biography to feelings of jealousy: "Und ich, der Gegenwartsautor im Manchadorf? Was war ich im Vergleich zu ihm anderes als eine Art Notbehelf?" (709) / ("And I, the contemporary author in the village in La Mancha? What was I in comparison but a sort of stopgap?") (440) Fueled by this jealousy, the writer calls Cervantes by partially falsifying his biography a "Taugenichts, schlechte[r] Soldat und Galeerensklave [...], einarmiger Quacksalbersohn"



(718) / (“good-for-nothing, [...] inept soldier and galley slave, [...] one-armed son of a quack”) (446). Nevertheless, to the writer’s dismay, the novel’s heroine insists on considering Cervantes as her “idealer Schreibbeauftragter” (710) / (“her ideal writer for this commission”) (441). Her reason for thinking so highly of the Spanish author is for his impact not just on her mind, but also on her body:

“Indem Miguel so schrieb und schreibt und geschrieben haben wird, spürte man am eigenen Leib, an den eigenen Schultern, dem eigenen Profil, den Armen, den Hüften, den Beinen, wie man und seine Geschichte von dem fortschreitenden Schriftzug nachgezogen und unterstrichen, unterstrichen und verstärkt, verstärkt und schöngewandet, schöngewandet und wahrgemacht wurde, hätte werden können, wurde.” (710) / (“As Miguel wrote and writes and will have written in a certain way, one felt in one’s own body, in one’s own shoulders, one’s own profile, one’s arms, one’s hips, one’s legs, how oneself and one’s story was, and could have been, and was being, traced by the moving writing instrument, and underlined, underlined and emphasized, emphasized and clad in beauty, clad in beauty and rendered truthful.”) (441)

Due to this concert of different narrative voices and to meta-narrative reflections as this last one on Cervantes, Handke’s novel has rightfully been called a meditation “on the very nature of storytelling and the salvation it can bring.” (Skwara 77) That Handke in a later reference to Cervantes has the Spanish writer write with a “Stahlfeder” (709) / (“steel pen”) (440) that didn’t exist yet in the seventeenth century probably indicates that,

according to the Austrian author, creating literature is a collective process that does not depend on individual authors who live in different historical periods.

Later, taking up the motif of “Bildverlust” again, the writer states: “Zwar war dies ein Epochenproblem, und der Verlust der Bilder und des Bilds ereignete sich bei einem jeden nur nach und nach, nicht so stracks wie jetzt an ihr [...]” (715) / (“This was, to be sure, a problem of this period in history, and the loss of images, and of the image, took place in each person only gradually, not as suddenly as in her case now [...]”) (444). However, he goes on to say, according to the story, the problem had to be described in conjunction with her, “der einzelnen und Vereinzelten” (715) / (“the solitary and isolated individual”) (444). After this thought the writer again refers to Cervantes, asking if the problem of “Bildverlust” would have been inconceivable or conceivable as a problem for him. If inconceivable, then he, the contemporary writer, should be the “der richtigere” (715) / (“more the right”) (445) author for telling the heroine’s story.

As it was with similar questions before, Handke’s narrator (in this case it’s the writer in La Mancha to whom the main protagonist tells her story) does not attempt to answer it; instead, the action goes on; the protagonist stumbles and falls in a hole. This causes him to ask if her accident might have anything to do with her problem of “Bildverlust.” Indeed, it does: “Ja, zuerst war der Bildverlust, und dann erst verhaspelte sich ihr Gang, kippte sie seitwärts, stürzte, überschlug sich, und das trotz der geringen Fallhöhe.” (716) / (“Yes, first came the loss of images, and only then did she get tangled in her own feet, which caused her to tip sideways, fall, and roll over and over, although she had not fallen from much of a height.”) (445). Later, he explains what exactly happened: “gefällt von dem auf die vorangegangenen, heillos durcheinanderzuckenden

Bilderblitze gefolgt von Löschblitz des Bildverlusts, verhängt über sie und die Welt, ging sie gleichsam [...] durch den Tod” (717) / (“felled by the extinguishing flash marking the loss of images, coming on the heels of the hopelessly jumbled series of image flashes, and now visited on her and the world, she was going through death [...]”) (445). This accident (with the consequence that the screen in her mind turns black) probably indicates that, according to Handke, the problems caused by media images not only affect the well-being of our mind, but also of our body; their terror leads to accidents that can be fatal. To come back to the writer’s question, is this problem conceivable to the author of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*?

Of course, it is! What the extremely popular books of chivalry were in Cervantes’s days, media images are today. As Cervantes’s novel confronted the cultural crisis caused by “the erosion of literature’s authority as a source of value, of language itself as a vehicle of truth” (Alter viii), Handke’s novel *Bildverlust* daringly confronts the postmodern crisis of the modern media as a vehicle of truth. Or, in other words, when Marthe Robert stated about literary quixotism: “the enterprise is intelligible only in relation with the book that constitutes its underlying motive” (6), in Handke’s case the word “book” must be replaced by “modern media.” That means that when Handke’s figure of the jealous writer asks who was “der richtigere” (715) / (“the more right”) (445) author for telling the protagonist’s story of “Bildverlust”, he or Cervantes, the answer could be by all means: Cervantes. It is up to the reader to decide who of the two could tell the protagonist’s story most convincingly. Annegret Pelz, who reads Handke’s main protagonist as a reincarnation of Cervantes’s imaginary figure of Dulcinea, argues: “Bei Handke erscheint das alte, idiotenspezifische Erzählen des Cervantes insofern verkehrt,

als die imaginäre Bildperson nicht länger gesucht werden muß.” / (“In Handke’s case, the old, idiotically specific way of Cervantes’s narrating is wrong for the reason that the imaginary person of the image must not be searched for any longer.”) (167). This is correct since the lady in Handke’s text is not a mere dream image anymore, but a successful banker. This change, allowing the woman to be the heroin who sallies out for adventure, changes the story-line significantly and allows Handke to employ a new narrative technique that can maneuver successfully without too specific description of plot-related details. However, the critic does not raise the question if the humor that Cervantes employs for telling Quixote’s story might not have benefited that of Handke’s protagonist also.

As Pelz pointed out, there is another interesting correspondence between Cervantes’s and Handke’s novels, the frequent intersecting of food and conversation in the form of “Mahlszenen” / (“meal scenes”) (170). As Don Quixote after his arrival in the first inn talks with other guests about his quest during a meal or delivers his speech about the Golden Age to the goatherds after they invited him to share their food, Handke’s main protagonist’s most important conversations happen at every stop on her trip during a meal. To be sure, the meals are more opulent in Handke’s text; however, the different themes of the conversations are as significant as those in Cervantes’s novel. Examples are the similarities between writing and cooking, ontological problems as they present themselves in the twenty first-century, possible forms of work that is not as alienating as the work in most professions nowadays, and, of course, the problem of “Bildverlust.” It is mainly due to the depth of those conversations that Kastberger seems

to be right in claiming that the “Ganze der Neuzeit” / (“the whole of modernity”) (173) is contained in this book.

To summarize, Handke’s novel *Der Bildverlust*, like that of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, tells an adventure story about a medieval quest. Besides updating this quest in the contemporary context of the omnipotent media to a vision quest, there is an abundance of concrete references to *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. In those references, the author plays with intertextuality in order to give local color to the story that is set in Don Quixote’s landscape, to enrich the stylistic complexity of the text and, above all, in order to express his worldview. According to this view, only the evocation of romantic inwardness, the poetic impulse, and the escape into nature can protect us from the destructive power of media images and enable us to live a high quality life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Earlier famous examples are Franz Kafka’s “Die Wahrheit über Sancho Pansa” / (“The Truth about Sancho Panza”) (1917), Joseph Roth’s “Die Büste des Kaisers” / (“The Bust of the Emperor”) (1917), Elias Canetti’s *Die Blendung* / (*Blindness*) (1935), and Wilhelm Muster’s *Der Tod kommt ohne Trommel* / (*Death comes Without a Drum*) (1980).

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Fugger (1459-1525), “sometimes known as Jacob Fugger the Rich, was a German banker and a member of the Fugger family” (“Jacob Fugger” Wikipedia). Since Charles V plays also a role in Handke’s novel, it should be mentioned that in 1519 Fugger led a consortium of German and Italian businessmen who loaned Charles V 850.000 florins to procure his election as Holy Roman Emperor (see Wikipedia).

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