

## Introduction

Across Europe and North America, language and literature departments are contracting at a pace that would have been unthinkable two decades ago. Courses are frozen, programmes merged or dissolved, and the study of specific languages, German not least among them, is too often dismissed as a dispensable ornament of the past. Beneath this development lies a familiar, and deeply flawed, assumption: that in an age of translation driven by large language models and frictionless global communication, the value of linguistic competence is decreasing. If we can converse through our devices, why still learn to speak and think in another tongue?

As we know, language learning is about much more than communication. It is about *metacognition*, about understanding how thought takes shape in and through language. But even more fundamentally, it forces us to ask what communication itself really means. Generative AI /Large language models may allow us to *make ourselves understood* at a basic level, but true communication is not about transmission alone. At its core lies *understanding others* — their assumptions, histories, and emotional registers — and developing the sensibility to perceive meaning within a specific cultural and linguistic horizon. Machines can translate words, but they cannot translate worlds. The work of learning a language remains, at its core, an ethical practice: an act of attentiveness to otherness. In addition, the future of Large Language Models relies on constant new high quality human input and human feedback loops evaluating, for example, the quality of translations. Without this, it has been shown, the quality of their outputs deteriorates quickly.

There is also the matter of resilience. The assumption that so-called Artificial Intelligence will always be available, affordable, and free from ideological inflections (attributes already debatable in many of its current incarnations) is a form of collective wishful thinking. What happens when access to such tools is increasingly monetized or politically restricted? What happens in times of war, electricity outages, censorship, or digital collapse? Linguistic self-sufficiency, our ability to read, think, and communicate across cultures without mediation, may soon be more than a scholarly virtue. It may be a civic necessity.

Here in Ireland, we find ourselves in a relatively privileged position. After a long period of austerity, the tide has begun to turn: posts in the humanities are once again being filled and public investment in language and literature teaching has cautiously resumed.<sup>1</sup> This renewal, however, comes with responsibilities. It obliges us to hold up the torch for colleagues elsewhere whose institutions remain under

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<sup>1</sup> This investment goes beyond third-level education, for example in the ongoing Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) initiative.

siege, to advocate for the continuing value of what we do, and to make visible the intellectual and social importance of the study of languages, literatures and cultures in democratic societies. From this position of relative stability, we have both the means and the moral duty to speak for those working in far more precarious conditions. The three essays in the titular section “The Future of German Studies” bring this global landscape into sharp relief.

Margaret Eleanor Menninger’s *German Studies as a Team Sport* traces how collaboration across disciplines and institutions can counter isolation and sustain the humanities in an age of diminishing investments. From a North American perspective, the author discusses “borders and barriers, but also inclusion, resonance, and cooperation” within multi-disciplinary German Studies. As executive director of the German Studies Association, Menninger traces the efforts within the organization to respond to the climate crisis as well as the barrier of long-distance domestic and international travel (and its wear on caregivers of all sorts) by initiatives such as starting a pilot programme of small regional conferences or an Emerging Scholars Workshop. Significantly, while observing that the teaching of German language, literature and culture is under stress everywhere, Menninger also emphasises that a differentiated engagement with the facts and numbers paints a far less clear-cut picture of the ‘state’ of German studies in the US.

Rachel MagShamhráin’s *Study Abroad and Environmental Collapse: Rethinking Academic Tourism in the Post-COVID Era* is an unflinching call to confront one of the academy’s most cherished ideals: the formative power of studying abroad. Her provocation asks whether international academic mobility (so long framed as inherently beneficial) can be ethically or ecologically justified in a world on the brink of environmental collapse. MagShamhráin situates her argument within the contradictions at the heart of higher education’s public mission. Universities proudly align themselves with both the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and the European Higher Education Area’s insistence that at least 20% of students should study abroad. Yet these ambitions, she argues, are fundamentally incompatible. The promise of “inclusive and equitable education for all” cannot coexist with the carbon-intensive model of mobility that underwrites academic prestige and the myth of transformative travel.

Her essay traces how study abroad, long celebrated as a rite of passage for the globally-minded student, functions as a form of “academic tourism”. The example of Valencia, from where Erasmus students fly en masse to Ibiza under the university-endorsed mission of “cultural integration”, exposes the blurred line between educational mobility and leisure travel. Against the backdrop of Spain’s catastrophic 2024 floods, MagShamhráin draws a sharp contrast between the rhetoric of intercultural exchange and the material costs of climate breakdown.

The pandemic, she reminds us, already forced higher education to experiment with virtual and hybrid forms of learning. Yet rather than using that disruption to rethink mobility itself, universities have largely reinstated business as usual. Even

as digital tools open the door to “internationalization at home”, institutional inertia and the ideological allure of travel continue to define the field. Virtual exchange may offer a partial solution, but it too carries an environmental price: the vast and uneven carbon footprint of global digital infrastructure.

The fetishization of travel, MagShamhráin contends, masks deep inequities in access and privilege, while perpetuating practices that contribute directly to ecological destruction. Her essay forces German and Language Studies in general to confront an uncomfortable truth: the traditional year abroad, once a cornerstone of cultural learning, now stands as a symbol of academic complicity in our climate crisis. What if the most radical act of intercultural engagement, she asks, is to stay still?

Jan Süselbeck’s *No Future? On Teaching German Studies in Times of Crisis* confronts the political and moral stakes of our work, arguing that education about the Holocaust and digital pedagogy together have the potential to renew the field’s democratic purpose. The contribution is a diagnosis of the precarious condition of the humanities under neoliberal and authoritarian pressures. Despite these pressures, Süselbeck insists that German Studies still possesses the intellectual and moral tools to resist collapse, if they can reclaim their critical and democratic purposes. The essay opens by questioning the rhetoric of “crisis” itself. German Studies, Süselbeck posits, is not inherently in decline: it remains vibrant, interdisciplinary, and intellectually alive. The true crisis lies outside the discipline: in the global assault on higher education, the defunding of the humanities, and the resurgence of anti-intellectual and authoritarian politics. Drawing on Anne Fuchs’ notion of the “chronic crisis narrative”, Süselbeck suggests that scholars must abandon fantasies of sweeping reform and instead cultivate “precarious hope”: small, local, relational acts of resilience.

From the vantage point of his own career, spanning posts in Canada, Germany, and now Norway, Süselbeck maps a bleak transnational landscape. Across systems and continents, language departments are being hollowed out by austerity, populism, and managerialism. The commentary moves from the United States, where the re-election of Trump and a climate of censorship threaten academic freedom, to Norway, where budget cuts and political hostility have placed entire language programmes in jeopardy. The “chainsaw politics” of the moment, Süselbeck warns, echo the historical language of fascism: universities are once again branded as “the enemy”.

Yet *No Future?* is also a manifesto for renewal. Süselbeck calls on German Studies to reassert their democratic relevance through two intertwined pedagogical commitments: first, through rigorous teaching and learning about the Holocaust, a practice he sees as a civic imperative amid rising antisemitism and historical amnesia. Second, through innovative, student-centered approaches such as BookTubing and multimodal literacy, which harness the digital habits of “Gen Z” learners to foster critical thinking, linguistic competence, and cultural engagement.

Together, these contributions sketch the portrait of a discipline both embattled and indispensable. They remind us that the future of German Studies, and of the study of languages, literatures and cultures more broadly, will not be secured through nostalgia or technological substitution, but through reflection, solidarity, and the will to adapt. Our task is not simply to preserve a tradition, but to keep alive the human capacity for understanding across borders, histories, and systems of meaning. In a world increasingly mediated by machines, that capacity remains, stubbornly and beautifully, irreplaceable.

This volume's general section features as its first contribution an essay dedicated to Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa, one of the founding editors of this journal. Armin Schäfer's essay *The Virtual Event and Its Literary Actualisation: Thomas Pynchon's Memento Mori* offers a penetrating analysis of the opening section of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), in which the V2 rocket attacks on London become both a historical subject and a narrative experiment. The author shows how the technological and psychological realities of modern warfare disrupt the conventions of fiction through the use of tense, perspective, and character coherence, forcing literature to confront events that exceed perception itself.

Through the figure of Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop and his bizarre correlation with rocket strikes, Pynchon transforms the war into a laboratory of paranoia, exposing how statistical logic and human desire intertwine. Schäfer argues that the V2 rocket, travelling faster than sound, creates a paradoxical temporality: explosions are heard only after they happen, rendering death instantaneous and ungraspable. This breakdown of causal order, he suggests, dissolves fiction's traditional capacity to impose meaning or moral closure.

Drawing on trauma theory and narratology, Schäfer interprets Pynchon's use of the present tense as a way of representing "afterwardness" (*Nachträglichkeit*), where event and memory coincide. The omniscient narrator gives way to shifting focalizations and the impersonal "They," mirroring the collapse of perspective and empathy under total war.

For Schäfer, Pynchon's novel ultimately stages a meditation on *virtuality*: the V2's impact is both real and suspended, an event that annihilates while remaining conceptually unfinished. Fiction, he concludes, becomes the only medium capable of rendering such virtual events thinkable, even as they resist representation.

Taking Andres Veiel's recent documentary *Riefenstahl* (2024) as well as Nina Gladitz's *Zeit des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit* (1982) as starting points, in his essay *Notes on a Massacre: Leni Riefenstahl and the Killing of Jews at Końskie* Bill Niven investigates Leni Riefenstahl's possible complicity in or even indirect responsibility for an antisemitic massacre by Wehrmacht soldiers in the Polish town of Końskie in September 1939. A further focus lies on Riefenstahl's conscription of Romani prisoners from a forced labour camp at Maxglan near Salzburg in 1940 as extras for her film *Tiefland* and her treatment of them.

Working with extensive archival materials, Niven shows that the version of events in Końskie presented in Veiel's *Riefenstahl* is the latest variant of a story that circulated since the late 1940s and traces its iterations over the course of Riefenstahl's post-war campaign to prove her alleged ignorance of Nazi atrocities and the allegedly solely artistic motivation in her film-making. Among other historical sources, the author works with witness statements made during Riefenstahl's denazification proceedings and the later tribunal in Berlin as well as Riefenstahl's own evolving testimony, presenting a detailed overview of these often contradictory voices.

Gavin Brothers' article *The Soundscape of Remembrance: Re-reading the Language of Silence* analyses silence as a representational device in post-war artistic productions centring on Nazi atrocities, with a particular focus on Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (2023), Christian Boltanski's exhibition *Personnes* (2010) and Austrian author Hans Lebert's 1960 novel *Die Wolfshaut*.

Reflecting on the cultural silence about Nazi crimes after the war, Brothers identifies the realm of the audible as a key domain in the interrelated areas of (collective) memory, trauma and the speaker-listener relationship. In his analysis, the three works are read in light of the idea of an aesthetic soundscape as a commemorative medium and as examples of a "poetics of sound and silence" in German-language Nachkriegsliteratur. He thus ascribes a key role to silence in the process of finding a literary language that aptly preserves the memory of an inherently unspeakable event, especially when referring to the manifold and evolving functions of silence in literary and real-life Holocaust remembrance.

Brothers focuses on the relentless background noise of atrocity in *The Zone of Interest* (rather than a visual representation, which the viewer might evade by turning away), as well as the use of layered heartbeats in Boltanski's installation *Personnes*, underlining the simultaneous absence and presence of the persons who were murdered in the Holocaust, in the process of remembering.

The absence of critical interrogation of Austria's role in the Second World War resulted in a post-war "state-endorsed silence", which authors like Lebert are intent on exposing in their writing. In a close reading of the role of the sonic in the novel, Brothers establishes its psychological potency, its potential to challenge hegemonic visual narratives and to reveal underlying repressed realities.

Judith Bierwolf's article *Zur Schaufenster- und Werbekultur in Ost und West: Siegfried Wittenburgs Fotoserien aus DDR und BRD* examines shop-window designs in the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic in the late 1980s, as documented in Siegfried Wittenburg's photo series *Schaufensterbummel in der DDR* and *Reise in den Westen*. The author provides an analysis of these pieces with a focus on consumer culture, observing the general tendency that shop windows in the Federal Republic were designed to attract potential buyers' attention and to seduce them with a large variety of products lavishly displayed, while the plain shop windows in the Democratic Republic aimed

to cover up a lack of stock and the resulting emptiness. If there were decorative elements to be found in these windows, this was their main purpose. Bierwolf notes the diverging communicative intentions behind the shop window designs: mainly informative in the GDR; with a strong appeal to buy in the FRG, often underlined by advertising slogans in the windows. Such advertisements are absent from GDR shop windows. Based on the observation that in place of the (omnipresent) product advertisements in the FRG, in shop windows and elsewhere, posters and placards in the GDR would advertise the political system of socialism, Bierwolf offers the interpretation that in each German state its political system, capitalism and socialism respectively, is being advertised in indirect and direct ways, emphasising an ultimate similarity of the functions of advertisements in both states.

This issue of *Germanistik in Ireland* has deliberately left room for debate. At a moment when our discipline faces contraction, uncertainty, and ideological pressure, we believe that scholarship must retain the freedom to voice opinions and to test the boundaries of consensus. Some of the essays gathered here do exactly that: Margaret Eleanor Menninger's *German Studies as a Team Sport* challenges entrenched hierarchies within academia by suggesting that the renewal of our field may depend less on elite research than on inclusive, access-oriented third-level education. Rachel MagShamhráin's *Study Abroad and Environmental Collapse* questions one of the discipline's most cherished practices, the year abroad, by asking whether mobility itself has become environmentally and ethically untenable. And Jan Süselbeck's *No Future? On Teaching German Studies in Times of Crisis* pushes the discussion further still, confronting the moral and political dimensions of teaching in a polarized world.

While we value Süselbeck's essay for its passionate stand for the humanities and its timely reflections on education in times of political crisis, we wish to clarify that some of the views expressed do not reflect the position of the editorial team. In our view, it must be possible, and indeed necessary, to address the resurgence of antisemitic sentiment and activity in Germany and globally, while at the same time clearly condemning human rights violations committed by Benjamin Netanyahu's government, in line with Israeli peace movements such as *B'Tselem*, *Shalom Achshav*, and *Physicians for Human Rights–Israel*. The recent ceasefire and fragile hope for peace only underline how essential it is to maintain clarity on both fronts: to reject antisemitism in all its forms, and to also defend the principles of international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilian life.

Finally, a special gem in this volume is the very first translation of Heinrich von Kleist's *Bettelweib von Locarno* into Irish. We profoundly thank Damhlaic and Rachel MagShamhráin for offering their translation to us.