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## Talking about Silence and Talking Instead of Silence in Elfriede Jelinek's

### *Das schweigende Mädchen*

In her play *Das schweigende Mädchen* ('The Silent Girl', premiered in 2014, published in 2015), Elfriede Jelinek refers to Beate Zschäpe's defense strategy of silence in the court trial against the German right wing terrorist group that called itself 'National Socialist Underground' ('NSU'). After a brief presentation of cultural-theoretical and philosophical concepts of silence (e.g., Heidegger's position) and the contrasting understanding of silence in German law, the different and sometimes apparently disparate facets of silence that are unfolded in Jelinek's play are analyzed in this paper. It is pointed out that in the play's text silence becomes topical in the contexts of visibility and invisibility, knowledge and its opposite that I will call 'non-knowledge', as well as power and powerlessness; furthermore, it is shown how these positions link the play's text to the trial and the perception of the fatal events the trial recalls. As a conclusion, it is discussed how Jelinek transcends the Heideggerian position concerning silence in *Das schweigende Mädchen*.

Elfriede Jelinek is an author who is known not to remain silent about current social, political, and often violent events but to take a firm stand and react in the form of theatre plays that are written and staged shortly after the events they refer to ('Anlassstücke') (Schöbler 2015: 195). With her works, she opposes social tendencies to hush something up by making the silence a literary topic and by evoking uncomfortable links to past and present. At the same time, Jelinek uses silence in a productive way, for example, by twice withdrawing the stage rights of her plays for Austria, in 1996 and 2000, as a reaction to political shifts to the right, thus exploiting the sovereignty of her own texts (ibid.: 189). Franziska Schöbler concludes: "For the situation of the female intellectual, silence – an effective weapon both of the intellectual and of the (hushing-up) society – seems to play an important role."<sup>1</sup>

Also in her play *Das schweigende Mädchen* ('The Silent Girl') (Jelinek 2015), which was premiered at the Münchner Kammerspiele on September 27th, 2014, and published one year later, Jelinek refers to a current event – the trial against the right wing terrorist group that called itself "Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund" (i.e., 'National Socialist Underground', abbreviated as 'NSU') – and unfolds different and sometimes apparently disparate facets of silence that are linked to the trial and the perception of the events the trial recalls. In the following, I will point out

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1 All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. The German original reads as follows: "Für die Situation der weiblichen Intellektuellen scheint [...] das Schweigen – eine wirksame Waffe sowohl der Intellektuellen als auch der (totschweigenden) Gesellschaft – eine wichtige Rolle zu spielen" (ibid.: 187).

that in the play silence becomes topical in the contexts of visibility and invisibility, knowledge and its opposite, the latter of which I will call 'non-knowledge', and power and powerlessness.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. The 'NSU Case'

The case Jelinek refers to in *Das schweigende Mädchen* is considered one of the most important criminal cases in contemporary German history: The main accused, Beate Zschäpe, is incriminated with having been a member of the right wing terrorist group NSU and being involved in a range of crimes committed between the years 2000 and 2011: the murders of nine men with a migration background and of a police woman, several racially motivated bomb attacks, and a series of bank hold-ups. Uwe Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt, the other members of the NSU, died in 2011 when the existence of the group was detected. The 'NSU case' reveals not only the reality of right wing terrorism in Germany – a fact that has been denied for a long time – but also the latent racism of the media and investigative authorities which had suspected the victims' families themselves of being involved in the murders. Furthermore, the court proceedings and investigations raised questions about the role of the 'Verfassungsschutz' (i.e., the 'German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution'), which was suspected of concealing or withholding important information that could have helped to clear up the case at an earlier stage. Exemplarily pointing at these sore spots, the court case is often considered an important symbol for reflecting the values the German society is based upon – not only in the context of increasingly loud xenophobic voices in German society.

Also in a more quantitative perspective the court case is unique in contemporary history: The proceedings have been taking place in Munich since May 6th, 2013, and have not yet come to an end; the trial is based on a 480-page bill of indictment; among the parties to the proceedings are 62 lawyers who plead for the causes of 86 joint plaintiffs (mostly relatives of the murdered).

These characteristics seem to render the cause particularly interesting for Elfriede Jelinek, or as Silvia Stammen puts it, make it a "Jelinek-subject par excellence".<sup>3</sup>

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2 Due to the limited space, in this paper I cannot dwell on the religious and mythological aspects of silence that are also addressed in the play. See Gerhard Scheit for some implications of Jelinek's reference to Giorgio Agamben's *Das unsagbare Mädchen*, an amended version of the Kore-myth (cf. Scheit 2014–2015).

3 The German original reads as follows: "Jelinek-Stoff par excellence" (Stammen 2014: 11).

The murderers' cynicism, the shady role of the confidential informants, the narrow-mindedness of the investigations that have veered for years towards an ominous Turkish mafia, for whose existence there were no valid clues, in addition to the prejudiced media coverage under the obscene headline 'Kebab Murders' – all of that agglomerates to a new German trauma whose excrescences and secret proliferations are not at all to be overlooked and which can be splendidly paraphrased in Jelinek's characteristic style with its usual pointed emphasis.<sup>4</sup>

But it is another characteristic of the trial that seems to have caught the writer's interest in a particular way: The persistent silence of the accused<sup>5</sup> links the court case to one of Jelinek's preferred topics and political-literary strategies. It seems obvious that the title of the play and the character 'Das (schweigende) Mädchen' are to be read in reference to Zschäpe although her name is not mentioned in the play.

Before analyzing the different and also disparate functions and meanings of silence Jelinek uses in the play, I will outline conceptualizations of silence from different disciplines that are linked to the play.

## 2. Silence – Philosophically and Cultural-theoretically

In her contribution to the anthology *Schweigen*, Aleida Assmann, one of the editors of the volume, presents her observation that the expressions for the phenomenon in different languages vary in the range of their denotation (Aleida Assmann 2013: 65): Whereas the English word 'silence' and its equivalents in romance languages derive from the Latin word 'silentium' and refer to a general absence of sound, the German language offers a linguistic option in addition to that. 'Schweigen' derives from Middle High German 'swigen' (cf. Lexer 1872–1878) and refers to the specific silence that occurs when somebody is not speaking. Instead of generally referring to an absence of sound ('Stille'), in German one can thus refer to an absence of speech ('Schweigen'). When speaking of silence in this paper, I refer to this more specific meaning of silence as absence of speech, not of sound.

In his theory of language, Martin Heidegger, whom Jelinek often mentions as source and inspiration – also in the list of references at the end of *Das schweigende*

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4 The German original reads as follows: "Der Zynismus der Mörder, die zwielichtige Rolle der V-Männer, die Borniertheit der Ermittlungen, die jahrelang in Richtung einer ominösen Türken-Mafia gingen, für deren Existenz es keinerlei stichfeste Anhaltspunkte gab, dazu die ressentimentbehaftete Medienberichterstattung unter dem obszönen Schlagwort 'Dönermorde', all das ballt sich zu einem neuen deutschen Trauma zusammen, dessen Auswüchse und geheime Wucherungen noch gar nicht zu überschauen sind und die sich in Jelineks Duktus mit gewohnter Zuspitzung prächtig paraphrasieren lassen" (ibid).

5 In the meantime, after the play and the book *Das schweigende Mädchen* were released, Zschäpe has changed her strategy: After 149 days in court, Zschäpe had one of her lawyers read a statement in December 2015, and after 313 days, in September 2016, she finally spoke herself.

*Mädchen*<sup>6</sup> – deviates from the common notion of a simple contrast of silence and speech that Assmann presents. In his major work *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger conceptualizes silence (as well as talking and listening) as a part of speech ('Rede'<sup>7</sup>): "*Hearing and keeping silent are possibilities belonging to discoursing speech.*" (Heidegger 1996: 151)<sup>8</sup> Silence is thus not to be equalized with being mute (cf. *ibid.*: 154)<sup>9</sup> but is, as an option of speech, able to express something and can even enable true understanding.<sup>10</sup> For Heidegger, silence itself is meaningful.

According to Heidegger's theory, in the everyday world speech ('Rede') degenerates into idle talk ('Gerede') where "many words may be uttered, [but] rather conceal than reveal what is talked about" (Hirsch 1978: 169).<sup>11</sup> As a part of speech, silence in Heidegger's understanding is thus opposed not to speech but to idle talk – in other words: to meaningless speech. Moreover, silence has the power to strike down the idle talk: "In order to be silent, Da-sein must have something to say, that is, must be in command of an authentic and rich disclosedness of itself. Then reticence [i.e., 'Verschwiegenheit', A.B.] makes manifest and puts down 'idle talk'." (Heidegger 1996: 154)<sup>12</sup>

When Aleida Assmann, in the anthology mentioned earlier, states that some forms of silence can be understood as messages without words (cf. Jan Assmann 2013: 17),<sup>13</sup> this links her categorization to Heidegger's understanding of silence being meaningful itself. Assmann gives the example of heartfelt silence as a sign of strong familiarity between two persons who know each other so well that they don't need to talk to each other (cf. Aleida Assmann 2013: 52). But the wordless message sent by silence can also be ambiguous and its interpretation can hence be dependent

6 "Heidegger, as almost always" / "Heidegger, wie fast immer" (Jelinek 2015: 463).

7 Joan Stambaugh, whose translation of *Sein und Zeit* (cf. Heidegger 1996) I use for this article, translates Heidegger's 'Rede' mostly as 'discourse', which has been criticized as being "too linguistic for what Heidegger includes under this term" (cf. Dreyfus 1997: ix). I will therefore use 'speech' instead, following the example of Elisabeth Feist Hirsch (cf. Hirsch 1978).

8 "Zum redenden Sprechen gehören als Möglichkeiten Hören und Schweigen" (Heidegger 1986<sup>16</sup>: 161).

9 Stambaugh uses the word 'dumb'.

10 "As a mode of discourse [i.e., 'Rede', A.B.], reticence [i.e., 'Verschwiegenheit', A.B.] articulates the intelligibility of Da-sein so primordially that it gives rise to a genuine potentiality for hearing and to be a being-with-one-another that is transparent" (Heidegger 1996: 154). "Verschwiegenheit artikuliert als Modus des Redens die Verständlichkeit des Daseins so ursprünglich, daß ihr das echte Hörenkönnen und durchsichtige Miteinandersein entstammt" (Heidegger 1986<sup>16</sup>: 165). See also Goldblum / Krause 2013: 197.

11 See also Thomä (2013: 297). Nonetheless, 'Gerede' is not to be understood as merely negative.

12 "Um schweigen zu können, muß das Dasein etwas zu sagen haben, das heißt über eine eigentliche und reiche Entschlossenheit seiner selbst verfügen. Dann macht Verschwiegenheit offenbar und schlägt das 'Gerede' nieder" (Heidegger 1986: 165).

13 About Aleida Assmann's contribution to the anthology.

on the context: By being silent one can show either one's consent (cf. *ibid.*: 51)<sup>14</sup> or its opposite, opposing oneself with one's defiant silence (cf. *ibid.*: 56). The emerging danger of misinterpretations can be overcome by metacommunication that – according to Alois Hahn – is evoked by silence in a particular way (cf. Hahn 2013: 32). Assmann refers to these forms as varieties of 'meaningful silence' and distinguishes them from 'strategic silence', whose goal is not to communicate but to achieve something (cf. Aleida Assmann 2013: 51):

For the other person there is nothing to be understood here [in the case of strategic silence, A.B.]; on the contrary: the silent achieves his aim all the better the less his intentions are seen through by the other person.<sup>15</sup>

Following Aleida Assmann, silence as a strategy can have an individual scope – when caused by strong emotions such as shame or sorrow – but also a social scope, for example certain taboos no member of a society talks about (cf. Aleida Assmann 2013: 57–59). In both cases, silence is utilized as some sort of protection. On the other hand, silence can also have the function of a weapon in relationships when it is combined with ignoring someone (cf. *ibid.*: 60–63).

Jan Assmann adds the aspect of voluntariness when he characterizes strategic silence as the result of the decision not to bring something up because talking about it could do harm either to the speaker, the listener, or the object of speech itself (cf. Jan Assmann 2013: 12). Involuntary silence on the other hand is not only the result of being forcefully silenced, but can also be caused by the nature of the objects of speech: Some experiences cannot be communicated to others, or cannot even be articulated, because their nature transcends the horizon of language. Structural silence results when there are no suitable words to describe transcendental experiences, no discursive traditions of articulating extremely traumatic experiences, or respectively, no potential listeners (cf. *ibid.*).

### 3. Silence – Juridically

In the context of German law the understanding of silence differs in some aspects from the denotations and connotations presented earlier. In legal contexts silence

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<sup>14</sup> As expressed in the Latin code of practice 'Qui tacet, consentire videtur'.

<sup>15</sup> The German original reads as follows: "Hier gibt es für den Anderen nichts zu verstehen; im Gegenteil: der Schweigende erreicht sein Ziel umso besser, je weniger seine Absichten vom anderen durchschaut werden." (Jan Assmann 2013: 17) About Aleida Assmann's contribution to the anthology.

generally does not have a meaning at all, it is 'legally void' (i.e., 'rechtliches Nul- lum') (cf. Gottwald 2008: 25; s.a. 2016c). In court trials, this maxim is supported by the Orality Principle: For the verdict, only those aspects that have been said and heard during the trial can be taken into consideration (cf. s.a. 2016a). Consequently, in contrast to day-to-day communication where silence is interpreted as a message without words, silence in legal contexts, and especially in court, does not normally stand for the expression of a will or for a statement. But there are two main excep- tions to this principle: First of all, silence can mean 'yes' if previously agreed upon ('beredtes Schweigen' [cf. s.a. 2016c]) or, in some cases designated by law, it can stand for approval<sup>16</sup> or disapproval<sup>17</sup> ('normiertes Schweigen'). This exception oc- curs for example when a document is read out: Unless somebody opposes it, the content is accepted.<sup>18</sup>

The other exception applies to criminal cases and is a form of strategic silence. As nobody is obliged to bring forward evidence against him- or herself by giving incriminatory information, the accused can remain silent about the criminal charge ('Aussageverweigerungsrecht'). Also, witnesses may remain silent in favor of self- protection ('Zeugnisverweigerungsrecht'). Contrary to strategic silence in day-to- day contexts where the strategy is not always identifiable (cf. Jan Assmann 2013: 17; Aleida Assmann 2013: 51), in legal contexts it represents the (often explicitly stated) claiming of a right (cf. Hahn 2013: 43). Alois Hahn retraces the history of the legal principle 'nemo tenetur se ipsum accusare' and shows that it originates in the 16th century Anglo-Saxon legal system. In Germany the principle was codified in the 'Reichstrafprozessordnung' (i.e., 'Code of Criminal Procedure') of 1877. Until then, an accused was required to submit all information and could be punished for lying (cf. *ibid.*). Today, the principle is highly appreciated as a fundamental indica- tion of whether a lawsuit is in accordance with the rule of law. Therefore, suspects have to be "informed before any interrogation about their right to remain silent" (s.a. 2016b) according to § 136 of the 'Strafprozessordnung' (i.e., 'German Criminal Procedure Code', abbreviated: 'StPO'). In contrast to other communicative contexts, strategic silence in court must not be interpreted as concealment. Moreover, it is

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16 For example art. 416 sec. 1 no. 2 of the 'Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch' (i.e., 'German Civil Code', abbreviated: 'BGB') (cf. s.a. 2016c).

17 For example art. 108 sec. 2 no. 2 of the 'Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch' (i.e. 'German Civil Code', ab- breviated: 'BGB') (cf. s.a. 2016c).

18 For day-to-day implications of the Latin code of practice 'Qui tacet, consentire videtur' (cf. Aleida Assmann 2013: 51).

"not allowed to draw any inference from the complete silence of the accused in any stage of the criminal proceedings" (ibid.). In this aspect, the German law distinguishes complete from partial silence and allows it "to draw conclusions if the accused remains silent only to certain questions about the crime" (ibid.).<sup>19</sup>

Finally, it is worth noticing that in the context of criminal cases the silence of an accused does not necessarily imply that he or she literally is silent; for example, the general denial of the accusation, the issuing of global statements, etc., are possible (cf. ibid.).

#### 4. Silence in *Das schweigende Mädchen*

Unlike in other recent plays by Elfriede Jelinek, in *Das schweigende Mädchen* there is no continuous text-plane ('Text- or Sprachfläche') but there are different characters who talk to each other or themselves. These characters belong to two different spheres: the juridical sphere (e.g., a judge) and the religious sphere (e.g., angels and prophets). Another character called 'Ich' ('I') can probably be read in reference to the author.<sup>20</sup> As is characteristic for Jelinek's works, there is no action in the play; rather, it follows the dramaturgy of a court trial, where the judge tries to make other participants of the trial speak, which they refuse to do. Therefore, angels and prophets appear and speak instead of witnesses or instead of 'Das Mädchen', the accused. Unlike this description seems to imply, though, these characters are not psychologically motivated individuals:

The individuality of the speaker is not only set aside in the content but also in the cast. Sometimes the author does not care at all who speaks, whether it is one person who speaks or several persons. At one point, she decides that 'Nobody' speaks. It is the society who speaks.<sup>21</sup>

In the play, Jelinek uses different verbal expressions for the thematic complex of silence (Fig. 1).<sup>22</sup>

19 If an accused makes statements about only one of several criminal charges, this is not to be considered as partial silence. Hence, no conclusions are allowed to be made (cf. ibid.).

20 Gerhard Scheit dwells further on this aspect (cf. Scheit 2014–2015).

21 The German original reads as follows: "Die Individualität der Sprechenden hebt sich nicht nur im Inhalt, sondern auch in der Besetzung auf. Manchmal ist es der Autorin ganz egal, wer spricht, ob es einer ist, der spricht, oder mehrere. Einmal entscheidet sie, dass 'Niemand' spreche. Es spricht die Gesellschaft" (Siri 2014–2015: 86).

22 The size of each word refers to the number of appearances in the play (total words: 93.654); the list may not be exhaustive: keine Worte (no words): 2, der Mundlose (the mouthless): 12, nichts sagen (not to say anything): 14, S/schweigen (silence/to be silent): 50, Schweiger (the silent): 1, schweigsam (silent): 5, Stille/still (silence/silent): 10, stumm (mute): 8, das Unsagbare/unsagbar (the unspeakable/unspeakable): 5, wortkarg (sparing of words): 1. The second word on the list



Fig. 1: Verbal expressions for the thematic complex of silence in  
*Das schweigende Mädchen*

All in all, these mere numbers do not seem to be overwhelming when compared to the abundance of text (313 pages in the Rowohlt-edition), but in fact, silence is the main subject of the play. It becomes topical in three contexts I will specify in the following. As is characteristic of Jelinek's writing, she takes up disparate positions.

### 5. Silence and (In)Visibility

Alois Hahn states that silence and related phenomena of secret-keeping are often expressed using optical metaphors (e.g., 'to veil', 'to disguise', or 'to draw the curtain over something'). Consequently, talking about silence addresses not only the acoustic sense, but also the optic sense (cf. Hahn 2013: 48). In *Das schweigende Mädchen*, the relation of silence and (in)visibility is unfolded in different respects.

In the case of the character 'Das Mädchen', silence leads – against expectation<sup>23</sup> – to her (imagined) visibility: The character is continuously talked about by other characters but never speaks herself. Not although but *because* the character is silent, it becomes necessary to make her the center of attention, i.e., to make her visible by speech. The other characters even utilize the topic of 'talking vs. silence' for a characterization of 'Das Mädchen' by confronting her earlier talkativeness and her current silence. But the insight of such a characterization turns out to be limited because the silence makes it impossible to 'read' the character:

the little Diddl [i.e., Zschäpe's nickname] who used to be so chatty before, oh dear, she doesn't say anything anymore [...]. She doesn't look as if she were happy, she is silent about it. But maybe she is happy. No idea.<sup>24</sup>

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is a play of words: 'der Mundlose' refers to one of the NSU-members, Uwe Mundlos, whose family name ('mouthless') alludes to his being mute in the context of the case.

23 Aleida Assmann cites the basic rule of classical rhetoric 'Speak, so I can see you' (cf. Aleida Assmann 2013: 54).

24 The German original reads as follows: "die kleine, vormals so gesprächige Diddl sagt, oje, sie sagt in jüngster Zeit nichts mehr [...]. Sie schaut zwar nicht aus, als würde sie sich freuen, sie schweigt darüber. Aber vielleicht freut sie sich. Keine Ahnung" (Jelinek 2015: 376–389).



The author pursues a similar strategy of playing with apparent contradictions of silence and (in)visibility when she does not mention the name of Beate Zschäpe in the play but constantly evokes her image by attributing 'Das Mädchen' with details that refer to Zschäpe.<sup>25</sup> Zschäpe is thus made visible before the inner eye of a reader or spectator who can decipher these allusions.

Furthermore, the connection of silence and invisibility is directly expressed in one of the stage directions in the form of a meta-reflection regarding the writing process of the play: "The girl comes forward and says nothing, [...] I should write the date here, but then I'd have to write the current date every day, and I won't. Zero-diet. Zero diet. Why is it there at all, with nothing inside?"<sup>26</sup> This stage direction and the emphasis on the changing date show the problem of representing silence in the written text of the manuscript: Silence, and especially the dimension of a long silence, cannot be expressed in words.

This textual dimension of silence also has an influence on potential stagings of the play. In the staging by Johan Simons, director of the world premiere at the Münchner Kammerspiele on September 27th, 2014, 'Das Mädchen' is not represented. Simons explains this decision with the burden it would mean for any actor or actress to embody a character that refers to the real person Beate Zschäpe (cf. dpa: 2014). Nonetheless, one can also conclude that the non-representation on stage is designated by the text: The silence of the character inevitably leads to her invisibility on stage. The image of 'Das Mädchen' is only evoked by the other characters speaking about her – her visibility remains an imagined one.

## 6. Silence and (Non-)Knowledge

The silence of 'Das Mädchen' is not only the reason for other characters to speak – in their reflections they also examine characteristics and consequences of the silence.

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25 For example, the sympathy for cats, (cf. Jelinek 2015: 332; cf. Fuchs / Goetz 2012: 165, 210); and the habit of drinking coffee or alcohol with women of the neighbourhood, listening to their problems and talking about make-up (cf. Jelinek 2015: 184, 187, 211; cf. Fuchs / Goetz 2012: 164–165, 212, 215).

26 The German original reads as follows: "Das Mädchen tritt vor uns hin und sagt nichts, [...] ich sollte hier das Datum hinschreiben, aber da müßte ich jeden Tag das aktuelle schreiben, das mach ich nicht. Nulldiät. Null Diät. Weshalb ist es dann überhaupt da, mit nichts drin?" (Jelinek 2015: 171). One can also assume that the mention of 'Nulldiät' is not coincidental in the context of 'Das Mädchen'. Anorexic persons, mostly girls, carry the intention of decreasing their weight to extremes and often seek to become (almost) invisible.

First of all, silence is described as concealment of knowledge, whose severity can be estimated by the amount of withheld information: "The virgin<sup>27</sup> and her mother both say nothing. With the virgin, it's worse, because she simply knows more. She knows what has happened."<sup>28</sup> Although the play refers to a court trial and represents characteristic features of this – e.g., a judge asking questions about violent events – silence is not presented as a legitimate juridical strategy. Instead of highlighting the right to remain silent as a sign of the quality of the legal proceedings, which include the protection of the accused's individual rights, here, instead, the social consequences of silence are emphasized: In the logic of the play, the events the trial refers to cannot be cleared up unless the accused breaks her silence.

Although 'Das Mädchen' is referred to as being flanked by two other silent or mute people ('Der Mundlose', i.e., 'the mouthless', referring to Uwe Mundlos, and 'Der Schweiger', i.e., 'the silent', referring to Uwe Böhnhardt, the two other members of the NSU) (Jelinek 2015: 418), as the only survivor it is up to her alone to reveal her knowledge. Being silent thus seems to be a character trait of the alleged perpetrators in the context of the NSU – but also of perpetrators in general.<sup>29</sup> When the victims' silence finally is compared to the (alleged) perpetrators' silence ("the dead, they are silent. Their murderers are silent, too."<sup>30</sup>), that evokes not only an uncomfortable equalization of murdered and murderers<sup>31</sup> but also the notion of death as the reason for definite and final silence.

All in all, the silence of 'Das Mädchen' is presented in the play as the cause for an extensive epistemic void about reasons for the murders and the exact courses of action:

How can those two sons of the virgin kill all these people? Please, talk! Tell us! She doesn't say it. The virgin is silent. She doesn't say how the sons bravely took a chance at the enemy, the florist, the owner of an internet-café, the factory worker, the tailor.<sup>32</sup>

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27 The character referred to in the title of the play, 'Das Mädchen', is sometimes also called 'Die Jungfrau' ('The Virgin'). This is probably an allusion to the fact that Zschäpe as a young woman had to undergo surgery and had her ovaries removed (cf. Stammen 2014: 12).

28 The German original reads as follows: "Die Jungfrau und ihre Mutter sagen beide nichts. Bei der Jungfrau ist es schlimmer, weil sie einfach mehr weiß. Sie weiß, was passiert ist" (Jelinek 2015: 390).

29 As for the silence of perpetrators after the holocaust (cf. Aleida Assmann 2013: 57).

30 The German original reads as follows: "die Toten, die schweigen. Ihre Mörder schweigen auch" (Jelinek 2015: 448).

31 It is assumed that the NSU's victims were chosen by their murderers because they were looked upon not as equals but as inferiors.

32 The German original reads as follows: "Wie können die beiden Söhne der Jungfrau all diese Menschen töten? Bitte, sprechen Sie! Sagen Sie es uns! Sie sagt es ja nicht. Die Jungfrau schweigt. Sie sagt nicht, wie die Söhne kühn an den Feind sich gewagt, den Blumenhändler, den Internetcafé-Besitzer, den Fabrikarbeiter, den Änderungsschneider" (Jelinek 2015: 461).

By linking silence to (non-)knowledge, *Das schweigende Mädchen* also raises the fundamental question about the possibility of ascertaining truth in the context of a court trial – generally speaking but also especially in the 'case NSU case'. Jasmin Siri states that truth itself is questioned in the play:

Responsibility, guilt and truth are de-ontologized, but not discarded entirely. Truth is not easy to have, but he who is silent passes up the last opportunity to express a truth-apt sentence. Being precarious and instable, their value might even increase; the process of searching for them becomes the new grail of modern humanity. Searching for the truth is not easy but requires the willingness to bear up against ambiguities and – in the context of dealing with the NSU crimes – the willingness to bear up against consternation.<sup>33</sup>

## 7. Silence and Power(lessness)

Due to the observations about silence as strategic concealment of knowledge one can conclude that, in the play, silence is also connected to power. However, silence and its opposite, speaking, are also linked to powerlessness. As the different perspectives of the characters 'Ich' and 'Das Mädchen' are contrasted, a complex picture is created.

The 'Ich'-character, who can be read in reference to the author, says: "But I cannot be silent, that has probably been clear to you for hours. Unlike the girl. She is silent and her spirit rejoices in God."<sup>34</sup> Speaking – and producing the 313 pages of text the play consists of – is correlated with a lack of control, the silence of 'Das Mädchen', in contrast, with (self-)control. But on the other hand, speaking is also characterized as a necessary and powerful action against the strategic silence of the character 'Das Mädchen': "Well that is terrible, I don't have words, or I have too many, but at least I'm speaking... [...] someone finally has to speak, [...] somebody has to speak who can bear the horror."<sup>35</sup> Speaking instead of remaining silent seems

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33 The German original reads as follows: "Verantwortung, Schuld und Wahrheit werden de-ontologisiert, gleichsam aber nicht völlig verabschiedet. Wahrheit ist nicht einfach zu haben, wer schweigt, der vergibt aber auch die letzte Chance darauf, einen wahrheitsfähigen Satz zu formulieren. Als prekäre, instabile Verhältnisse wird ihr Wert vielleicht noch gesteigert, der Prozess der Suche nach ihnen zum neuen Gral moderner Menschen. Die Suche nach der Wahrheit ist in dieser nicht einfach, sondern benötigt vor allem Ausdauer und den Willen zum Aushalten von Uneindeutigkeit und – im Falle des Umgangs mit den Verbrechen des NSU – den Willen zum Aushalten von Fassungslosigkeit" (Siri 2014–2015: 88).

34 The German original reads as follows: "Schweigen jedoch kann ich auch wieder nicht, das ist Ihnen inzwischen wohl seit Stunden klar geworden. Nicht wie das Mädchen. Das schweigt, und sein Geist freut sich Gottes" (Jelinek 2015: 389).

35 The German original reads as follows: "Das ist ja furchtbar, ich hab keine Worte, na, ich habe zu viele, aber immerhin spreche ich... [...] einer muß ja endlich sprechen [...] es muß einer sprechen, der den Schrecken aushält" (Jelinek 2015: 174).

to be the more effective weapon – a position that refers to Jelinek's own political engagement, but transfers it to the domain of literature and arts.

When the silence of 'Das Mädchen' is reflected by other characters, two main contradictory positions can be found. On the one hand, there seems to be a circular connection of power and silence: "But the girl is silent. She is powerful because she is silent. She is silent because she has the power."<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, silence as strategy appears not to be voluntary but rather to be imposed by others – so it could also be associated with powerlessness instead of power:

No wonder she doesn't speak. In addition to that, one has impressed it on her still more: All of them are keen on you talking, that's why you are not to do that on any account! I strongly advise you against it.<sup>37</sup>

Power and powerlessness in connection with silence not only concern individuals, such as the two characters 'Ich' and 'Das Mädchen', but are also reflected in the context of systems, such as the German society and the institution of the court. The main discrepancy in the context of the court is, on the one hand, the existence of constant and extensive debates about the right to speak<sup>38</sup> that are ultimately without content and, on the other hand, the actual necessity for the accused and for the witnesses to speak in court in order to enable juridical clarification.<sup>39</sup> But none of the characters in the play reacts according to this necessity.

Last but not least, silence and power are also presented in relation to the German society: The exclamation "someone finally has to speak"<sup>40</sup> could also be read in this broader context. Speaking would then imply a powerful position against society's structural silence as an expected reaction to such acts of violence as the NSU's killings, where no appropriate words can be found. Nonetheless, it is emphasized that

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36 The German original reads as follows: "Das Mädchen aber schweigt. Es ist mächtig, weil es schweigt. Es schweigt, weil es die Macht hat." (Jelinek 2015: 463) This quotation is from the final monologue – that is, the negotiation represented in the play ends without having been able to break the circle of silence and power.

37 The German original reads as follows: "Kein Wunder, daß sie nicht spricht. Man hat es ihr zusätzlich auch noch eingeschärft: Die sind alle scharf drauf, daß du sprichst, deshalb darfst du es auf keinen Fall tun! Ich rate dringend ab" (Jelinek 2015: 421).

38 'Der Richter' has the theoretical power to grant the right to speak, but an angel claims it: "I tell you who has the right, and now he who has been granted the right to speak speaks. You have the word and the word is with me." The German original reads as follows: "Ich sage, wer das Recht hat, und jetzt spricht der, dem ich das Recht dazu erteile. Sie sind am Wort, und das Wort ist bei mir" (Jelinek 2015: 175).

39 'Der Richter' tries to convince the other characters to speak by pointing out the necessity for the court proceedings: "But somebody has to give evidence here. Any volunteers? You?" The German original reads as follows: "Aber irgend jemand muß hier Aussagen machen. Meldet sich wer freiwillig? Sie?" (Jelinek 2015: 172).

40 The German original reads as follows: "einer muß ja endlich sprechen" (Jelinek 2015: 174).

there is a difference between speaking and meaningless speech, or, in Heidegger's terms, idle talk: "Germany is silent by talking continuously, and when it isn't talking, it's writing something or talking about what it has written, on TV, mostly in small groups."<sup>41</sup> Meaningless speech, where the outcome is nothing, is linguistically equated here with silence.

## 8. Conclusion

The analysis of the play's text has shown that in *Das schweigende Mädchen* angels and prophets do not differentiate silence as a legitimate juridical strategy from silence as a message without words. Instead, they interpret the silence of 'Das Mädchen' as concealment of knowledge, deduce character traits from past and present behavior concerning talking and remaining silent, and question silence as a (voluntary) strategy. Different facets of silence as they have been outlined at the beginning of this paper fall together in the play.

Moreover, the 'Ich'-character raises questions of representation in general as this character is not Elfriede Jelinek but nonetheless – in a form of *mise-en-scène* – refers to her, as the author of the play. It is shown that silence on the one hand is difficult to represent on a material level, but also that – despite these and other difficulties – it is necessary to deal with the topic. Accordingly, verbal expressions for speaking and its synonyms are more present in the play (Fig. 2)<sup>42</sup> than expressions for the thematic complex of silence (Fig. 1).

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41 The German original reads as follows: "Deutschland schweigt, indem es unaufhörlich redet, und wenn es nicht redet, dann schreibt es was oder spricht über das, was es geschrieben hat, im Fernsehen, meist in Kleingruppen" (Jelinek 2015: 267).

42 The size of each word refers to the number of appearances in the play (total words: 93.654); the list may not be exhaustive.

Verbal expressions for speaking/talking: Antwort/antworten (answer, to answer): 30, Gerede (idle talk/meaningless speech): 1, geschwätzig (chatty): 1, Gespräch/gesprächig (talk/talkative): 8, Rede/reden (speech/to talk): 91, sagen (to say): 588, sprechen (to speak): 204.

Verbal expressions for silence: keine Worte (no words): 2, der Mundlose (the mouthless): 12, nichts sagen (not to say anything): 14, S/schweigen (silence/to be silent): 50, Schweiger (the silent): 1, schweigsam (silent): 5, Stille/still (silence/silent): 10, stumm (mute): 8, das Un-sagbare/unsagbar (the unspeakable/unspeakable): 5, wortkarg (sparing of words): 1.



Fig. 2: Verbal expressions for talking and silence in *Das schweigende Mädchen*

The non-personal way of speaking in the sentence "*someone* finally has to speak"<sup>43</sup> (my accentuation) transfers the necessity to speak from writers to everybody, including the recipients of the play.

In this context, speaking is correlated with deficient self-control of the 'Ich'-character. This can be read as one of the gestures for making one-self small that Artur Peřka identifies as typical of Jelinek (cf. Peřka 2014: 335). When 'Ich' characterizes the play as 'Gerede', one could read that as a similar gesture: "I know, you are fed up with me and my idle talk."<sup>44</sup> But at the same time, the term directly refers to Heidegger's philosophy of language. With the reference at the end of the play,<sup>45</sup> Jelinek states that, as in her earlier works, also in *Das schweigende Mädchen* is Heidegger's philosophy one of her points of reference. It has been pointed out that Jelinek does not necessarily cite single words or phrases from Heidegger's works but copies parts of the philosophical logic into her own texts (cf. Vogel 2013: 51). Evelyn Annuß states that Jelinek's way of referring to Heidegger is often contradictory: "With and against Heidegger."<sup>46</sup> It seems that in *Das schweigende Mädchen* a similar synchrony of 'with and against' exists: On the one hand, in the play meaningless and uncontrolled talking is equated with silence: "Germany is silent by talking continuously."<sup>47</sup> The sentence implies that meaningless speech (or in Heidegger's terms 'idle talk') is a way of concealing and has the same outcome as silence: nothing. This means that Jelinek modifies Heidegger's concept, in which silence as a part of speech is always meaningful, whereas "the character of idle talk

43 The German original reads as follows: "*einer* muß ja endlich sprechen" (Jelinek 2015: 174, my accentuation).

44 The German original reads as follows: "Ich weiß, ihr habt schon längst genug von mir und meinem Gerede" (Jelinek 2015: 361).

45 "Heidegger, as almost always" / "Heidegger, wie fast immer" in the list of directly or indirectly cited texts (Jelinek 2015: 463).

46 The German original reads as follows: "Mit und gegen Heidegger" (Annuß 2005: 7).

47 The German original reads as follows: "Deutschland schweigt, indem es unaufhörlich redet" (Jelinek 2015: 267).

[but not of silence] is concealment" (Hirsch 1978: 170). For Jelinek, in contrast to Heidegger, silence can first of all mean concealment – meaningful silence, as Heidegger conceptualizes it, does not exist in the play.

On the other hand, the so-called 'Gerede' of the play *Das schweigende Mädchen* is not concealing but instead able to reveal different strategies of silence, pointing at the existing structural silence of the society and questioning the possibility of ascertaining truth in the context of a lawsuit by highlighting the complex and seemingly contradictory connections of silence, (in)visibility, (non-)knowledge, and power(lessness).

With this focus, *Das schweigende Mädchen* takes up the tradition of Jelinek's other works: "Jelinek's writing is permanently about recognizing what is unsaid in what has been said or what is unspoken in speech, about making visible the silence that has turned into concealment."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The German original reads as follows: "Bei Jelineks Schreiben handelt es sich permanent um das Erkennen des im Sagen Ungesagten bzw. des im Sprechen Unausgesprochenen, um das Sichtbarmachen des zum Verschweigen umgeschlagenen Schweigens" (Peřka 2014: 331).

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