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# Failure as Liberation: A critical analysis of Rilo Chmielorz' artistic feature "Scheitern ist. Eine Bestandsaufnahme" (Failure is. An inventory)

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# Failure as Liberation: A critical analysis of Rilo Chmielorz' artistic feature "Scheitern ist. Eine Bestandsaufnahme" (Failure is. An inventory)

## **Abstract**

This essay is a critical analysis, interpretation and assessment of the feature "Scheitern ist. Eine Bestandsaufnahme" (2016), by the German artist Rilo Chmielorz, which explores failure as a taboo subject in neoliberal societies that worship the ideology of success and progress.

This study deconstructs this unique feature to its various parts and looks at the feature as a whole in terms of the concept of "polyphonic narration" that the Russian literature and art scholar and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) derived from the poetics of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). It shows how the level of content (life stories of failure, experts for failure), the level of narration (recurring themes, etymology, radiophonic sign systems), the level of intimacy (technological and performative) and the theoretical dimension of polyphonic narration are organically interwoven with each other. The author suggests that Chmielorz has found the ideal form for artistically scrutinising the taboo subject of failure and thus revealing its existential dimension, its relativity and last but not least, its liberating potential.

The polyphonic character of this feature, with its predominant use of original sound recordings and its skilful artistic handling, justifies calling this feature a collage rather than a montage. The author locates Chmielorz's radiophonic art work in the German tradition of the *artistic feature* established by predecessors such as Peter Leonhard Braun, Alfred Andersch, Ernst Schnabel, Arno Schirokauer and Friedrich Bischoff.

## **Keywords**

Audio feature, artistic feature, experimental, collage, original sound recording, Germany, polyphony, polyphonic narration, polyphonic artistic thinking, failure, failing

# Failure as Liberation: A critical analysis of Rilo Chmielorz' artistic feature "Scheitern ist. Eine Bestandsaufnahme" ("Failure is. An inventory").

By Ania Mauruschat

## **Credits**

*"SCHEITERN IST. Eine Bestandsaufnahme"* by Rilo Chmielorz

Producer: Rilo Chmielorz

Editor: Walter Filz

Sound Engineers: Johanna Fegert & Angela Raymond

Broadcast 01 May, 2016

Duration: 53'22 mins. German Radio SWR2 2016

Listen to audio: <https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/scheitern-ist-eine-bestandsaufnahme-failure-is-an-inventory>

English transcript available on the *RadioDoc Review* issue page as supplementary article.

**“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”**

Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (1983)

## 1 Introduction

You will fail right away. You are intended to fail, in various ways, when you listen for the first time to the artistic feature “Scheitern ist. Eine Bestandsaufnahme“, which translates as “Failure is. An inventory”. Even if you are a native speaker of German, you cannot avoid failing to grasp the whole complexity of this intriguing audio piece, which – once you have heard it – won’t let you go again quickly. Your world view might even be affected by this example of artistic thinking.

It is the unique combination of the existential topic of “failure” and its experimental dramaturgy which makes this feature so disturbing: while listening, you are forced over and over again into the experience of failing, and at the same time you are meant to question what failure actually means – both to you in particular and on a societal level in general. In this respect, it is a typical work by Rilo Chmielorz, an award-winning sound and radio artist from Germany. For the over 30 years of her career, she has consistently challenged the conventions and expectations of the radio format of the “feature”.<sup>1</sup>

The set-up of “Scheitern ist“ is rather simple: the spoken words that make up approximately 95% of the feature come from the answers of Chmielorz's eleven interlocutors. Five of them told her their life stories in terms of failure, four of them discussed the topic of failure on a more theoretical level, and two did both. In an interview about the production of “Scheitern ist“ Chmielorz herself recalls how difficult it was at first to find people who were willing to speak openly about their own failure, with several of them even cancelling the interview at the last minute.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in

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<sup>1</sup> Although it can be regarded as *the* genuine documentary radio format for longer non-fiction stories and although it is one of the oldest and most mature formats of radio in general, in the German-speaking world research on the “feature” is even more precarious than the little existing research about radio drama (“Hörspiel” in German): When, in 1945, under the guidance of Hugh Greene, the British military authorities in their zone of occupation of Germany established the broadcasting organisation Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk (NWDR) (Northwest German Broadcasting), they also founded the department of “Talks and Features”. Thus, they introduced the journalistic BBC format of the “feature”, which had no tradition in Germany at the time due to both the strict historical separation of high art and journalism and of course the use of the media for propaganda after 1933 in Nazi Germany. In the GDR, a socialist propaganda version of the radio feature was introduced in 1963, while in Austria and Switzerland the feature became a common radio format only in the 1970s (Zindel /Rein (eds.) 2007). Unfortunately, due to the closed archives of the German, Swiss and Austrian public broadcasters as well as the very hands-on mentality of their authors, editors and producers, the format lacks almost any theoretical reflection, and only very few researchers have accompanied the development and studied the history of the radio feature in the German-speaking world. In 1980 Tamara Auer-Krafka published her pioneering study (1980), which was followed in 1981 by a special issue of the broadcasting magazine *medium* on the feature and its history. Christa Hülsebus-Wagner's dissertation on the feature and the radio essay in the context of the literary circle *Gruppe 47* was published in 1983, and Felix Kribus's study of the history, content and language of the German radio feature came out in 1995. After all these academic studies, the book *Das Radio-Feature*, by Udo Zindel and Wolfgang Rein, was published in 1997, which was based on their work as editors at the Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk (SWR) (Southwest Broadcasting) and therefore serves as a practical handbook with 65 pages of introduction and historical background. Eventually, in 2010, the renowned feature author Michael Lissek organised the first “Rendsburger Featuresymposium” that brought together several renowned acclaimed authors, editors, directors and the few existing researchers. The aim of this conference and its presentations was to establish a critical, aesthetical discourse about this format. (Lissek (ed.), 2012.)

<sup>2</sup> Discussion with Rilo Chmielorz about her feature “Scheitern ist.” at the dokKa 4 festival on May 28, 2017 <http://www.dokublog.de/mp3/dokka-4-scheitern-ist> (last visit Dec 12, 2018)

the end she had more than enough material to approach this taboo subject from several quite different angles and literally chop it into countless little sound bites. The result is something which might be described as a “kaleidoscopic oral history of failure”. Or, even more precisely in theoretical terms, Rilo Chmielorz’ “montage” or “collage” of original sound recordings, “O-Ton-Montage”<sup>3</sup> or “O-Ton-Collage”<sup>4</sup> as it is called in German, is a perfect example of a “polyphonic narration”, a term the Russian literature and art scholar and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) derived from the poetics of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) that Tanja Runow (2007) applied to the radiophonic genre of the feature. At the same time, Chmielorz’s piece can also be regarded as a very up-to-date example of the tradition of the *artistic feature* (“*künstlerisches Feature*”)<sup>5</sup> as a specifically German version of the genre, which developed out of the famous literary circle *Gruppe 47* (a group of German writers, including Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll and Hans Werner Richter that developed literary criticism between 1947 and 1967) in contrast to the British tradition of the *journalistic, documentary feature*, described by Virginia Madsen (2007) and others.

## Level of Content, Part 1: Life Stories of Failure

However, for a better understanding of Chmielorz’s achievement in artistic and formal terms, let’s turn towards the level of content first, towards the stories this feature tells, which it is apparently about. A major protagonist of this feature about failure is Timo. He introduces himself at 7’03” and then stays more or less continuously present on the same side of this stereo production. After saying his first name, mentioning that he is 31 years old and telling us that he came to Berlin eight years earlier, he goes on to report his life story to the interviewer in quite a surprisingly frank manner: Timo grew up in a “shit town”, as he calls it, in the backwater of Germany’s south. His father being a lawyer,

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<sup>3</sup> The German term “O-Ton” is the common abbreviation of “Originalton”, which means “original sound” and refers to a recording of a unique, non-reproducible acoustic event, especially a verbal expression like an interview or a speech. Thus, “O-Ton” is also used as a synonym for “quotation”. The term “Montage” derives from the French verb “monter” which means “to ascend”. The noun “montage” was first used in the early years of cinema and refers to the technique of assembling single parts to a new unit. In 1953, the German writer Alfred Andersch, a founding member of *Gruppe 47* and an editor at NWDR, called the radio feature a “Montage-Kunst par excellence” (“art of montage par excellence”; Andersch 1953), a description which is still often quoted in Germany to describe the unique features of this genre. In 1967, Peter Leonhard Braun revolutionised the German radio feature by turning towards original sound recordings and stereophonics to make his stories more direct and vivid (Jarisch 2012). In Braun’s feature *8.15h Uhr III OP Hüftplastik* (1970), the author even took this to an extreme by using only original sound recordings, no narrator and no written text, and assembling the single parts into a new unit, an “O-Ton-Montage” (Runow 2007, pp. 69-84). Due to his innovations and masterful features Braun is perhaps the most important and at least the most famous feature maker in the German history of the genre.

<sup>4</sup> The only study on the history of montage and collage in German radio is Antje Vowinckel’s “Die Collage im Hörspiel” (1995). Vowinckel primarily bases her distinction between montage and collage on Peter Bürger’s distinction in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984 [1974]). According to Bürger the montage of images in the film has to be regarded as a “technical procedure” (p. 73), whereas the collage, derived from the Cubist’s *papiers collés*, is understood as an “artistic principle” (p. 73). Vowinckel transfers this distinction from the realm of images (film and painting) to the sphere of radio (feature and radio drama) and associates the montage as a “technical procedure” with the more journalistic genre of the feature and the collage as an “artistic principle” to the radio drama (Vowinckel 1995, pp. 15-23). However, as Chmielorz’s “artistic feature” (cf. footnote 6) walks the fine line between documentary and art with such mastery and skill, I prefer to call it a collage instead of a montage. “technical procedure” with the more journalistic genre of the feature and the collage as an “artistic principle” to the radio drama (Vowinckel 1995, pp. 15-23). However, as Chmielorz’s “artistic feature” (cf. footnote 5) walks the fine line between documentary and art with such mastery and skill, I prefer to call it a collage instead of a montage.

<sup>5</sup> Hülsebus-Wagner, 1983.

his family is rather well-off, and he is meant to keep up the family tradition, study law and become a lawyer himself, too. But instead of following this predetermined path of life, he leaves his girl-friend behind, who despises the big city, and escapes to Berlin to officially study German literature. All alone in Berlin, Timo moves into a shared apartment with other university students and soon starts partying all week long. Soon he knows which day of the week to go to which club to meet his friends, when to get the best drugs and where to consume them without any trouble. He dives deeper and deeper into Berlin's vibrant clubbing scene and experiences things he never would have imagined – for example, the doorwoman of the infamous KitKatClub asks him to take off his shirt before she lets him enter. Once undressed and inside he understands why: almost everyone is more or less naked, with the dance floor resembling an orgy rather than a Techno club. On this night Timo has intercourse with a man for the first time. All these experiences add up to a certain attitude towards life: the small-town boy falls in love with Berlin and gets addicted to the city's energy, its excess, the intoxication of this lifestyle. As a result, he rarely studies and can hardly bear to spend holidays at home in the provincial south, where he finds himself sitting around the Christmas tree with his parents and his girlfriend, pretending nothing has happened and everything is fine.

However, he never considers breaking up with his girlfriend, which would be the greatest possible failure in his eyes. Eventually, she moves to Berlin, and soon after she gets pregnant with twins, Timo's father buys a freehold flat for the couple and their two boys in the hip neighbourhood of Friedrichshain. Then Timo even finishes his studies by the skin of his teeth and starts working for a suburban advertising agency. In short, suddenly Timo wakes up, bleary-eyed thanks to nocturnal diaper changing, in as average, dull and bourgeois an everyday life in Berlin as he would have had in the provincial "shit town" he escaped from. In his account, he also talks about the severe physical and mental pain it caused him when he realised on the one hand that the apparently endless party was over and on the other hand how much he likes his sons and his partner and would never leave them. He even starts seeing therapists to deal with his situation of being torn apart between his two extremes, family and excess. Timo reflects on the subject of failure with regard to his own life:

Actually, I fail on each side all the time, while trying to get over to the other side again. It's like a ping pong ball, which always jumps from one side to the other. When I am partying, I am failing with regard to the family, when I'm with the family, I'm failing with regard to hedonism.<sup>6</sup>

Why Timo and his rather banal story of failure receive so much attention might be due to the fact that he is the one character that the average German listener of a public radio programme can probably relate to the easiest: Timo could be the son or brother of someone they know, he could be a former classmate, a friend or even the listener himself. For this kind of failure, gender doesn't matter: the experience of being torn apart between having a good time on the one hand and the serious side of life on the other is something most people probably know, certainly in western consumer societies of postmodern neoliberalism, even if their experiences of excess might be more moderate than Timo's. Thus, one could consider Timo's story as a kind of common ground for all the listeners. His life story serves as the background of an average experience of failure in front of which the other, more extreme or philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> „(...) eigentlich scheitere ich ja auf jeder Seite immer wieder – um dann auf die andere zu kommen. Es ist wie ein Pingpong-Ball, der immer von der einen Seite auf die andere springt. Wenn ich feiern bin, scheiter' ich in der Familie, wenn ich in der Familie bin, scheiter' ich am Hedonismus.“

fragments of these various failure stories are arranged: homelessness, irrelevance, unemployment, failed dreams, the crash of economic systems and financial crises, and sensing oneself as a loser in comparison to the rest of society.

Another protagonist of this documentary who tells his life story is Lutz. Before he became homeless, Lutz worked the nightshift for 15 years at Berlin's central market for flowers. When he quits to start a new life, he goes through a detoxification programme for his alcoholism, moves to a new apartment of his own and takes up a temporary job at the Botanical Garden. When the job is over, he moves in with a woman and gives up his own apartment, "dümmlischerweise" ("stupidly"). Half a year later the relationship ends and Lutz finds himself living on the street, at the bottom of society, so to speak. But Lutz also talks about the freedom of living on the street, how he developed a survival strategy, which gets him through one day after another, how this routine has taught him how to be thrifty. Eventually, when his story comes to an end and the author asks him if he would consider his life as failed, he answers self-confidently:

Nope, my life being failed – I wouldn't look at it like that. Well, I just failed a few times on the run.<sup>7</sup>

The third semi-anonymous protagonist, known here only by his first name, is Weston, a talented coder from Mexico. He tells his story mostly in Spanish, which is sometimes translated into German before and sometimes after his own report. Weston doesn't talk about failure on a personal level. He reports on the failure of an idealistic vision from the roaring times of the dot.com age. Weston spent five years of his life developing the social platform CouchSurfing, believing in its unique potential to advance intercultural understanding and dreaming with his colleagues of eventually maybe even being honoured with the Noble Prize for Peace. Unfortunately, this dream doesn't come true. Instead the platform has some severe crashes, and after it gets sold as a result, just like any average start-up sooner or later, Weston – along with many other visionaries from the idealistic team – loses his job.

The fourth and last semi-anonymous protagonist is Roland, an avant-garde violinist who moved to Berlin from New York City. Roland talks about his experience of the classical artist's struggle with life, art, success and failure:

So, every morning when I wake up and look in the mirror I see a failure. I think about all the ways my life could have been considered – a failure – the fact that I have so little money, the fact that very few people know my name as an artist – outside my bubble, my small circle. I couldn't compare myself to David Bowie, of course.

Of course, this statement also refers to the city of Berlin, as Bowie spent some years in West Berlin back in the 1970s. But only moving to Berlin is not enough to become another Bowie, as Roland has to realise. What is often not perceived from the distance when dreaming about living in this adventurous, wicked, historically charged city is that Berlin is more than a metropolis of excess, the perfect background for an artistic success story. Of all the countless artists living in Berlin, maybe one out of a thousand will make it and become a famous artist. As a result, Berlin is first and foremost a harbour for failed, stranded, or perhaps still aspiring artists and bohemians. In this respect, it makes perfect sense that several of these life stories about failure are somehow connected to

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<sup>7</sup> „Nee, also mein Leben gescheitert – würde ich nicht so ansehen. Ich bin halt öfters mal zwischendurch gescheitert.“

this particular city. Maybe one should even consider Berlin as a protagonist of Chmielorz's feature in its own right, too.

## Level of Content, Part II: Experts on Failure

To develop this argument about Berlin's intimate relationship with failure and losers and its subtle significance for Chmielorz's collage, one can turn to the two interlocutors Piotr Mordel and Adam Gusowski. Both these artists came from Poland to Berlin in the 1980s, where they co-founded the "Club der polnischen Versager" in 2001 ("Polish Losers' Club"). Due to its strange name, the club soon became well-known all over Germany as a relaxed place to hang out at subcultural literature readings, concerts and many other kinds of off-scene art events. The name "Club of Polish Losers" is probably best understood as an ironic play with on a common stereotype of the citizens of the neighbouring country, according to which Poles are considered by some Germans as "lazy, useless, criminal". However, in the interview with Chmielorz the two founders of the club very skilfully walk the line between irony and philosophy. As self-confessed Poles and losers Mordel and Gusowski address the social pressure to succeed and the feeling of being ashamed in comparison to all the successful others around oneself. They say they want to encourage people to stop striving for success all the time and to become brave enough to face failure. Asked about it, they agree that the rise to some kind of modest fame of the "Club der polnischen Versager" could be regarded as a success story. But they also point out that all the directors of the club have to have another job on the side because they cannot make a living at the club. And last but not least they admit that it is of course no big deal to be a "Polish loser" in the city of Berlin:

In Berlin, such a confession is very easy. [Here] you can do everything, which means: We are not heroes. In Braunschweig [a comparatively small city in Germany, A.M.], we probably wouldn't succeed.<sup>8</sup>

Although in this respect he is very modest, Mordel also speculates in his broken German about "Polish losers" becoming role models in the near future:

"During the worst economic crisis, the Poles have learned to get along with very little. The Poles lived for years like in a jungle camp. They could survive with almost nothing. (...) Who knows – maybe the Poles will be the future survival strategists for all of Europe if it goes on like this. Then we, the Poles, will be the experts."<sup>9</sup>

The economy and money play a central role if one wants to assess one's own success or failure in comparison to others like friends or colleagues. Thus, the economy also plays an important role in this feature about failure. Mordel, for example, also discusses the failure of Polish socialism and the whole project of communism and what it felt like for him to have to realise that all the values he grew up with had to be regarded as failed. Especially in comparison to West Germany the failure of his home country Poland

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<sup>8</sup> „In Berlin natürlich ist so eine Offenbarung sehr leicht. [Hier] Man kann alles machen. Das heißt; wir sind keine Helden. Wir würden das wahrscheinlich in Braunschweig nicht schaffen.“

<sup>9</sup> „Die Polen in der schlimmsten wirtschaftlichen Krise haben gelernt mit sehr wenig auszukommen. Die Polen lebten jahrelang wie in einem Dschungel-Camp. Sie konnten wirklich mit fast nichts überleben. (...) Wer weiß – vielleicht werden die Polen die zukünftigen Überlebensstrategen für ganz Europa, wenn es so weitergeht. Dann sind die Polen die Experten.“

seemed blatant. However, although this experience of failure is part of his identity, it is a kind of failure which of course cannot be regarded as his own fault. No one can determine which society he or she is born into, and yet this fact becomes your fate and heavily influences your chances to succeed in life – or to fail, according to whatever standards might apply.

Just like Mordel and Gusowski, these two experts on failure, there are five more experts in this collage who are introduced with their full names. These are Sandra Schürmann, once a school underachiever and today a social entrepreneur, the founder of an incredibly successful theatre project for young permanently unemployed people to improve their self-esteem and eventually find a way back to work again; Wiebke Frehrichs and Sara Kuhnt, co-founders and archivists of the IANS, “Institut zur Aneignung und Nachhaltigkeit des Scheiterns” (Institute for the Appropriation and Sustainability of Failure), an art project which anonymously records all kinds of stories of failure; Marc Friedrich, the bestselling author of several books about the capitalist economy and its recurring crises of the last decades, who claims that only “the total crash will be the solution”; and last but not least Peter Bexte, a professor of aesthetics whose philosophical reflections give the whole feature a particular twist. The role of these experts, of course, is to put their own stories as well as the life stories of Timo, Lutz, Weston and Roland into the greater social context.

## **Level of Narration, Part I: Recurring Themes & Etymologies**

A recurring theme of this feature about failure are quotes from Samuel Beckett’s penultimate novella “Worstward Ho” (1983), including what is probably its most famous statement:

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Chmielorz’s feature is framed and structured not only by Beckett’s quotes about failure, but also by some noisy prepared piano and the sound of rewinding tape in a cassette recorder, which always marks the anonymous recorded stories about failure of the IANS, the institute for failure studies. Beyond that, the feature is also kept together by the sound of chopping wood. “Scheitern ist.” even starts with the sound of chopping wood and soon becomes an acoustic collage, at first consisting only of single words related to the topic of failure uttered by the eleven interlocutors, without any information about who is speaking. One only hears anonymous voices saying existential things. Over the course of five minutes these utterances become longer and develop from single words into whole sentences, eventually ending in whole fragments of the eleven different life stories, reflections and elaborations. Thus, the various characters and the roles of their stories and statements slowly become clearer.

The whole documentary consists of countless fragments of varying duration, mostly lasting only between 30 seconds and one minute. As this is a collage these fragments are neatly interwoven with each other. Often their last words also serve as cues or allusions for the take-off of the next fragment. For example, when the author Marc Friedrich speaks about the economic ideology of “too big to fail” and how big banks and insurance companies may do whatever they want because they will ultimately be saved by the government anyhow, the documentary cuts harshly to Lutz, the homeless man, who reports on his daily struggle to get enough money to get through another day. Without

explicitly commenting with her own words and the voice of the narrator, this cut in itself is a strong comment by the author.

The decision to stage the documentary with fragments and the sounds of chopping wood is based on etymology. The noun “failure” is translated into German as “Scheitern”. As the philosopher Peter Bexte explains in one of his statements, the meaning of “Scheitern” derives from the countless pieces of wood (in German “Scheite”) of which a ship is built and into which it falls apart again when it wrecks. Thus, the German noun “Scheitern” is very closely linked to the idea of a shipwreck, and the German verb “scheitern” translates not only as “to fail” but also as “to shipwreck”. Inspired by the German meaning of “Scheite” as “pieces of wood”, Chmielorz took an axe and recorded the sound of herself chopping wood. She applied the same principle to the material of her interviews, chopping the different life stories and reflections up into fragments and then artfully re-arranging them as a collage, with the sound of herself chopping wood sometimes mixed underneath it.

The only life story that is less chopped up and runs through the whole feature is Timo’s. His story and voice are present like a permanent undercurrent, with only the volume of his voice varying: sometimes his voice is the only one we hear, sometimes it is louder than the voices of the others telling their stories, sometimes it is quieter than them, sometimes it vanishes totally underneath them, only to eventually return to the forefront again, loud and present. As Timo’s voice and narration fades in and out and mixes with the other voices and narrations, the listeners have the experience – at least for a few seconds – of not knowing which voice to concentrate on or even of not understanding anything anymore.

## **Level of Narration, Part II: Radiophonic Sign Systems as Storytelling Devices**

To cope with the investigation and representation of the existential topic of failure, Chmielorz uses several well-chosen radiophonic sign systems. As Elke Huwiler says (2016, p.103), these radiophonic sign systems are “flexible storytelling devices that derive their meaning [...] during the unfolding of the story and from the coherence of the narrative which gradually emerges while it is represented.” Thus, the author’s choices of particular sign systems of course only make sense after one has heard the whole piece. However, the radiophonic sign systems mostly used here are primarily voices and languages. For example, the voices and the vocal sounds of Timo’s casual way of smoking while talking or Lutz’s very simple language, the dialect and sociolect of the Berlin working class, tell us a lot about the protagonists and serve as an acoustic expression and affirmation of the social contexts of their stories about failure.

The main language of this feature is German of course, but other languages like Spanish and English are also used. They are not necessarily meant to be understood right away. In addition to introducing a layer of abstraction, just like in abstract painting, these foreign languages confront the listeners with another experience of failing to understand what is being said, just like the fading and mixing of layers of spoken words confronts them with the frustrating experience of not understanding anymore. At the same time, Spanish and English open up the feature and make its topic more universal.

Again, the radiophonic sign systems of cutting, fading and mixing play a crucial role in this radiophonic work of documentary art. As it is a collage of countless statements and

pieces of sound, cutting, fading and mixing allow the various life stories and reflections about failure to comment on and illuminate each other, and eventually they make sense altogether on a higher level. However, the fading and mixing of layers of voices not only serve to clarify matters: again, they also lead to a very special kind of noise. The noise that comes into play here is more than just the average noise which often denotes a particular setting or illustrates a statement in a realistic or symbolic way, like the sound of chopping wood. The noise or even “chaos” that arises from the overlapping of several narrations is an inversion of the phrase “*ordo ab chao*”, meaning “order from noise” (Mersch 2013). These cases are “*ordo ad chao*”, a development from order to noise – and eventually back to order again, to fully understandable narrations. Thus, Chmielorz also refers to the eternal cycle of death and rebirth in her investigations of failure and success.

The frustrating experiences of not understanding while listening contrast with the excessive use of actual interviews and creates tension. In the context of a mass-media production, the original sound recording (in German “O-Ton”)<sup>10</sup>, promises the highest possible form of authenticity. As mass media are often considered by the audience to be “fake news” or “manipulated”, Nikolaus Wegmann (2007, p.22) argues that “the original sound bite [...] serves as a counter-invention to the in principle untrustworthiness of communication.”<sup>11</sup> In Wegmann’s opinion, the “O-Ton” can be regarded as the opposite of mass media in general, or as the rare trustworthy exception within the norm of this allegedly depraved form of mass information and communication. Of course, Chmielorz uses the storytelling device of the “O-Ton” to mark the authenticity of the stories told by her protagonists. However, true authenticity in any mass-media production is not possible. Every single “O-Ton” has been cut and “cleaned”, and sentences may have even been rearranged for the flow of the narration. Thus, Jürg Häusermann (2007, p. 31) reminds us rightly about the limits of such recordings:

Original sound bites are not documents in the sense that a journalist scents them out somewhere and then reproduces them unaltered. They have to be produced in the first place. But original sound bites are also not recordings they produce totally on their own. Without the event, without the stakeholder about whom she reports, there would be no original sound bite. In some respect, it is created by the collaboration of the communication facilitator and the stakeholder.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Footnote 3 for explanation of the German term “O-Ton”.

<sup>11</sup> „Der originale Ton [...] ist als Medienerzählung eine dieser Gegenerfindungen zur prinzipiellen Unzuverlässigkeit der Kommunikation.“ (Wegmann 2007, p.22)

<sup>12</sup> „O-Töne sind nicht Dokumente in dem Sinne, dass die Journalistin sie irgendwo aufspürt und dann unverfälscht wiedergibt. Sie müssen zuerst hergestellt werden. O-Töne sind aber auch nicht Aufnahmen, die sie in völlig eigener Regie produziert. Ohne ein Ereignis, ohne den Akteur, über den berichtet wird, käme kein O-Ton zustande. Er entsteht also in gewissem Sinn in Zusammenarbeit zwischen Kommunikator und Akteur.“

## Level of Intimacy: Effects of Public Confessions

The collaboration between the interviewer and the interlocutor draws our attention to another level of Chmielorz's radio art: the extraordinary intimacy it creates for its listeners. The simplest definition of "intimacy" is probably "the sense of personal closeness or familiarity that can exist between radio (or its presenters) and listeners." (Chignell 2009, p. 85) Of course, it is a commonplace that radio is an "intimate medium". (Crisell 1994, p.11). In the early 1930s, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) already described the radio voice, which "provides a common denominator from which all radiophonic intimacies stem",<sup>13</sup> as a "guest" whom we welcome into our home.<sup>14</sup> And the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) praised the "blindness" of the medium, which means the lack of a face that goes with an acousmatic voice<sup>15</sup>, as the necessary premise to experience intimacy while listening to the radio.<sup>16</sup> However, Evangelia Karathanasopoulou (2015, p.133) has convincingly demonstrated that radiophonic intimacy is not just "intimacy" as it "only conforms in part to the qualities and conditions conventionally associated with the term." Instead, radiophonic intimacy is a rather unorthodox and complex form of intimacy, which consists of two distinct forms of intimacy interacting with each other, "technological intimacy" and "performative intimacy". As Karathanasopoulou writes (2015, p.133), the unorthodoxy of radiophonic intimacy "is born out of distance and blindness, on the one hand, (i.e., technological) and performed by broadcasters/presenters/actors, on the other (i.e., performative)." Elaborating on this distinction and its connection, she concludes (2015, p.134) that intimacy can be discovered

in all forms of radio programmes due to technological aspects, constituting a base level intimacy across the medium, but (...) performative aspects cannot rob radio of this essential intimacy. Indeed, it would appear that intimacy can only be enhanced (rather than diminished) by performative factors, so that

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<sup>13</sup> Karathanasopoulou, 2015, p.135

<sup>14</sup> "[...] die Rundfunkhörer, im Gegensatz zu jedem anderen Publikum, [empfangen] das Dargebotene bei sich zu Hause, die Stimme gewissermaßen als Gast [...]" - Walter Benjamin: Reflexionen zum Rundfunk (1930/31), Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. II/3. Unter Mitw. von Theodor W. Adorno und Gershom Scholem hrsg. von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1991 [1977], pp. 1506 - 1507, here p. 1507. - Translation by AM: "[...] the radio listeners, unlike every other kind of audience, welcome the human voice into their house like a guest [...]"

<sup>15</sup> The French term "acousmatique" was coined by the French writer Jérôme Peignot to describe the particular feature of Pierre Schaeffer's *Musique concrète*. Schaeffer's innovative composition technique, which he developed in the late 1940s, was to record any kind of noise, modify it with the help of technology at his studio and finally present his compositions via loudspeaker. For the first time in 1955 Peignot compared this new kind of music and new way of making and presenting music to the teaching method of the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras, who allegedly taught students from behind a veil or curtain to make them better concentrate on his lectures. Thus, Pythagoras' initiates were called "acousmatics", derived from *akousmatikoi* (ἀκουσματικοί), meaning literally "things heard" or "eager hearers". In 1960 Peignot developed his idea in an article. (Peignot, 1960) In 1982 Michel Chion, a former student and collaborator of Pierre Schaeffer, introduced the idea of an "acousmètre", an "acousmatic entity", in the theory of sound film (talkie) for a figure which stays invisible in a film all the time and can only be perceived by the spectator as a voice without a body. (Michel Chion: *La voix aux cinéma*. Paris, Ed. de l'étoile 1993.) Thus, the term "acousmatic voice" eventually also became common for describing the voice in radio. (See also Christoph von Blumröder: *Akousmatik*, in: Daniel Moart and Hansjörg Ziemer (eds.): *Handbuch Sound. Begriffe – Geschichte – Ansätze*. Stuttgart, J.B. Metzler 2018. Pp. 48-51.)

<sup>16</sup> "Talk calmly, over the radio, at a time when the individual cannot be seen and can himself see no one. For this lack of a face to go with the voice is no impediment; rather it is an asset, because it is precisely this which opens up the axis of intimacy, the inward perspective." - Gaston Bachelard: *Reverie and Radio*. In Neil Strauss & Dave Mandl (eds.): *Radiotext(e)*. New York, Semiontext(e) 1993, pp. 218-222, here p. 220.

at some level (i.e., technological) intimacy remains a constituent feature of all radio.

Chmielorz's feature "Scheitern ist." offers the technological intimacy of listening over long distances to acousmatic voices "without a face" that thus "open the inward perspective" of intimacy for each listener, as Bachelard puts it. But interestingly, the experience of intimacy while listening in this case is not enhanced by the interlocutor's performance, by the way they speak (e.g. by whispering or using an erotic intonation). Instead, the enhancement of the intimacy is due to what they tell us, the listeners, and their intention and attitude. All of them seem – or at least convincingly pretend – to tell the truth, to honestly report their experiences with and thoughts about the taboo topic of failure to the microphone. Although it is neither the setting of the confessional box of the Catholic Church nor the couch in a psychoanalyst's practice, although they deliberately and voluntarily speak into a microphone which records them and will publicly broadcast their words to a mass audience, all the stories and reflections resemble confessions or avowals. Thus, while listening to this polyphonic choir of failure, one can feel deeply touched.

As for the sign system of music, Chmielorz only uses very little in this production. Every now and then a bit of prepared piano is added as a moment to pause and breathe, but of course this doesn't sound like "music" in the common sense. In fact, it sounds more like a "failed" than a virtuosic performance on this classical instrument. However, Chmielorz combines and stages all these different voices of her interlocutors to create a whole that is more a musical composition than a journalistic documentary.

### **Theoretical Contextualisation: Polyphonic Narration in Literature & Radio Features**

Given such considerations, it is fruitful to analyse this feature in terms of the theoretical concept of "polyphonic narration" that the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) derived from the poetics of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) and that Tanja Runow transferred to the radiophonic genre of the feature.

Inspired by the musical concept of polyphony,<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin used the term in literary studies to describe particular features of the narratological structure of Dostoevsky's novels, which he also generally considered to be the appropriate literary representation for modernity. (Runow, 2007, p.17)

For Bakhtin, polyphonic narration was the contemporary mode for literary expressions for two reasons: one epistemological and one ethical. Epistemologically, polyphonic narration is understood as a heightening of dialogic narration and knowledge. As Bakhtin (1984, p.110) points out, the idea of dialogical knowledge reaches back to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates:

At the base of the genre lies the Socratic notion of the dialogic nature of truth, and the dialogic nature of human thinking about truth. [...] Truth is not born nor is it to be found in the head of an individual person, it is *born between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.

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<sup>17</sup> "Many sounds. Mus. in which several simultaneous v. or instr. parts are combined contrapuntally, as opposed to monophonic mus. (single melody) or homophonic mus. (one melodic line, the other parts acting as acc.)." - Michael Kennedy, Joyce Bourne (eds.): 2004 [1996]. p. 570.

Especially in historical situations of radical change such as like the transition from antiquity and its unshakeable world view to modern times and its concepts of enlightenment, scientific understanding and progress, a dialogic approach to perceiving and understanding the world becomes crucial. Thus, for Bakhtin, polyphonic narration as the heightening of dialogic narration is the natural result of capitalism and modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where suddenly a multitude of social, cultural and ideological spheres which never had been in contact before were confronted with one another. This is also where the ethical aspect comes into play. As Bakhtin argues (1984, p.59), if authors accept the polyphonic nature of reality and the Socratic notion of truth, they have to treat the various protagonists of a novel equally and let them speak for themselves:

The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a *dialogic* penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself. The truth about a man in the mouths of others, not directed to him dialogically and therefore a *secondhand* truth, becomes a *lie* degrading and deadening him, if it touches upon his 'holy of holies,' that is, 'the man in man.'

As Runow (2007, p.6) points out, for Bakhtin "dialogic narration" doesn't mean that the protagonists have to talk to each other or to the author explicitly. Much more important for a truly polyphonic narration is that their statements correspond and resonate with the statements of other protagonists.

Runow not only shows that in the early years of the German feature, theorists like Eugen Kurt Fischer and Alfred Andersch already explicitly hinted at the polyphonic character of this genre. She also argues that for two reasons it makes sense to transfer Bakhtin's literary concept of polyphonic narration not only to another genre but even to another medium: first and foremost, Runow claims, any feature is genuinely polyphonic, even more so than it would be possible for any novel to be polyphonic. The author of a radio feature even uses the real voices of the protagonists and lets them tell their own stories themselves instead of inventing them. In addition, she argues, Bakhtin himself supported any attempt to transfer his ideas about polyphonic narration from literature to any other kind of narration:

We consider Dostoevsky one of the greatest innovators in the realm of the artistic form. He created, in our opinion, a completely new type of artistic thinking, which we have provisionally called *polyphonic*. This type of artistic thinking found its expression in Dostoevsky's novels, but its significance extends far beyond the limits of the novel alone and touches upon several basic principles in European aesthetics.<sup>18</sup>

We consider the creation of the polyphonic novel a huge step forward not only in the development of novelistic prose, that is, of all genres developing within the orbit of the novel, but also in the development on the *artistic thinking* of humankind. It seems to us that one could speak directly of a special *polyphonic artistic thinking* extending beyond the bounds of the novel as a genre.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, p. 270

According to Bakhtin (1984, p.16), the aim of such a “polyphonic artistic thinking” is, in the case of Dostoevsky, a “higher unity, a unity, so to speak, of second order, the unity of the polyphonic novel.” Runow declares this also to be the aim of an artistic feature which consciously takes up the polyphonic potential of its genre.

With all this in mind, one can certainly call Rilo Chmielorz or her “O-Ton-Collage” “Scheitern ist.” a prototypical example of what true “polyphonic artistic thinking” sounds like in the case of the radio feature: eleven interlocutors tell their own stories in their own words, and all of these protagonists and their stories are treated with equal respect and put in dialogue with each other, as if we were listening to a Socratic debate about failure and success in times of postmodern neoliberalism. And finally, the whole feature even is staged as a *polyphonic* musical composition.

## Conclusion

Given the organic interweaving of the level of content (life stories of failure, experts at failure), the level of narration (recurring themes, etymology, radiophonic sign systems), the level of intimacy (technological and performative; the intimacy of confessions) and the theoretical dimension of *polyphonic artistic thinking*, Rilo Chmielorz’s “O-Ton-Collage” “Scheitern ist. Eine Bestandsaufnahme” must be seen as an exemplary case of a contemporary *artistic feature*. In this, her paramount achievement, she has found the ideal form for artistically exploring the taboo subject of failure. With her skilful collage of well-chosen statements, Chmielorz reveals the experience of failure as the normal state of being. This is even reflected in the full stop at the end of the title “Scheitern ist.” (“Failure is.”): Failure is a constitutional part of every human existence. No noun or adjective has to be added to this sentence. But she also reveals the relativity of failure when, for example, the philosopher Peter Bexte points out that you never know if what might appear to be a failure today will still have to be regarded as a failure tomorrow or at the end of your life. Last but not least, regarding the “higher unity” of this polyphonic narration, maybe one could see this as the insight that failure first and foremost means freedom. In this respect Roland, the “failed” artist, puts it very nicely:

So, every morning when I wake up and look in the mirror I see a failure. [...] But then I wink at myself. And I know it is not just that what I see. [...] in the end, it’s like an oscillation inside of me that exists at the same moment: this feeling of failure and this feeling of amazing happiness and success. I think ‘ah, that’s beautiful, because that means that I can succeed now’. If I had already succeeded, I would be in a prison of my success. And I could only then fail – before then succeeding again somehow. So, I think failure is freedom in the society. Definitely.

And yet Rilo Chmielorz’s feature has to be regarded a complete success.

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