

REFUSING THE END OF HISTORY:
THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF CASTORF'S VOLKSBÜHNE

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Abstract

From 1992 to 2017, the cultural landscape of Berlin was contested and shaped by the Volksbühne under its intendant, Frank Castorf. Throughout his tenure, Castorf refused the liberal democratic consensus euphorically proclaimed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He made his theatre a space for working through the collapse of socialism and Fukuyama's end of history. Castorf's responses to postsocialism—his contouring of the historic theatre institution and his stagecraft—constituted a refusal of the dominant narrative of history and are the focus of this dissertation. I show how Castorf and his team transformed the dogmatic state-funded theatre into a venue for radical politics and avant-garde aesthetics. During the fractious post-*Wende* period and beyond, Castorf played a public role as polemicist, cultural diagnostician, and prognosticator. At the nexus between the extreme Right and Left, Castorf mined for critiques of liberal democracy and linear narratives of progress. With Jünger and Schmitt on the Right, and Benjamin, Müller and Žižek on the Left, Castorf's intellectual genealogy is woven from a promiscuous engagement of Marx and Nietzsche. Castorf used the theatre and these traditions of intellectual thought to channel the wide-spread *ressentiment*, disorientation and hopelessness wrought by the demise of the Eastern Bloc and rapid Westernization. For Castorf, the only way to deal with these discontents was to shed light upon the temptations of illiberal reaction on behalf of those individuals disenchanted with post-*Wende* society. Here, Castorf drew a strong parallel to Berlin in the 1920s, focusing specifically on Conservative Revolutionary thought and events in and around the historic Volksbühne. The same dark forces lurking on the horizon of Weimar Germany inform Castorf's reception of the present in his dramaturgy. The dissertation develops chronologically and establishes three stages of Castorf's theory-praxis relationship: the mania of the 1990s; the melancholy of his "Russian Turn" in the early 2000s, and the foregrounding of epic and "political theatre" strategies coinciding with the 2008 financial crisis. His productions were anarchic "events" that turned the dramatic canon into occasions for satire, slapstick, digression and ultimately ambivalence. Creating openings, Castorf revived forgotten local and site-specific histories that he hoped would revitalize a proletarian consciousness. Refusing closure, this dissertation makes the case for Castorf's Volksbühne as an archive for an alternative socialist imaginary, conveying the utopian spirit of what the GDR might have been.

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Refusing the End of History:

The Politics and Aesthetics of Castorf's Volksbühne

If you happen to find yourself in the vicinity of Alexanderplatz train station in Berlin — drifting north-west towards Hackescher Markt or strolling along the Alte Schönhauser Boulevard—it is likely that at a certain point you will realize that you have been walking in the long-cast shadow of a massive neo-classical building. The building will warrant a second glance and then a third, beckoning your attention. You walk closer, down a street, to stand at an angle where you can fully behold this austere and imperial structure. It stands dolefully, as if holding court over its immediate vicinity, the Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. This *Platz* or square was once in close proximity to the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) political centre—a historic district for the German Left dating back to the 1920s when the German Communist Party (KPD) headquarters were located just across the street in the Karl-Liebknecht-Haus, which today is the headquarters of *Die Linke*, the German Left Party. While in the late 1920s and early 1930s, working-class youths divided between Communist and Nazi allegiances fought in the streets here almost daily, today the designer shops and cultural life that abound in the Berlin-Mitte district seem a world away from the revolutionary struggles that ended when the National Socialists seized power in 1933.

The building's façade, with its six ionic columns, appears to be entombed in grey concrete and one gets the distinct sense that this building is as storied as it looks. Guessing the architecture's provenance proves challenging. Stalinist? National Socialist? Older even? On the rooftop sits what is clearly a contemporary addition: an OST sign (East) written in electric blue neon. And placed on the large triangular lawn in front of the building is a large black metal sculpture that looks like it has been salvaged from a scrap metal heap: a crude-looking wheel on

top of two stick-legs pointing forward. On any given day, a large banner is mounted over the building's entrance. On it are bold words or slogans, frequently written out in what looks like 1930s fascist typeface. No, these are not the slogans from a reactionary political party, as one momentarily fears, but rather provocations such as "Living without Belief," "Sold" or "Fuck Off."¹ The thought briefly crosses your mind that the building is the site of an anarchist occupation, as a few derelict buildings in the former East are still being squatted in by anarchist punks. Aha! You think to yourself with sudden clarity. A radical art space! That's what Berlin really has going for it, isn't it? Its radical cachet!

Some further reconnaissance and you learn that this building is the Berliner Volksbühne, the People's Stage, built on the eve of the Great War. The Volksbühne was the first theatre institution to emerge from a late 19th century ticket subscriber's organization called the Freie Volksbühne or the Free People's Stage, which aimed to make "high quality" theatre accessible to Berlin's desiring industrial workers. It did so by selling subscriptions for tickets to classical and Naturalist theatre productions that contained a socially progressive message. These productions would be staged at theatres the organization rented out for regular monthly performances. Until the Freie Volksbühne came into existence, such theatre had been both banned politically and prohibitively expensive for industrial workers, whose venues of choice were more likely to be the variety and revue theatres that were springing up in the metropolis. Over the next two decades, the Freie Volksbühne organization spread to cities across Germany and boasted tens of thousands of members. Despite fractiously dispersing its agenda across democratic idealist and revolutionary orientations during that period, the movement united to establish its own theatre

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

building in 1913. These differences in political orientation and aims would result in future controversies, like the Revolutionary Left's scathing attack on the organization's "bourgeois executive" for using "*Arbeiter Groschen*" (workers' pennies) for the erection of this neo-classical building. Even the idea of using money from the workers' monthly subscriptions to build a theatre, rather than to fuel proletarian revolution, would be the source of future animosity. Nevertheless, upon its opening on December 30, 1914, the Theater am Bülowplatz, as it was then called, was inscribed with the organization's motto, its *genius loci* or founding spirit: *Die Kunst dem Volke* (*Art to the People*). The idealistic organization now had an institution and a founding promise that would hold it accountable over the century to come. Despite the controversies that plagued its beginnings, the Berliner Volksbühne was the first theatre of the Freie Volksbühne organization, which is to say the first theatre willed into being and owned by the German working class.

In the 1920s, the Volksbühne was the most vibrant theatre for the German Left. Under the communist Erwin Piscator's artistic directorship from 1924-1927 it was the most vanguard stage in the republic. Piscator wanted art to dissolve into politics, declaring "*Kunst ist Scheisse*" ("art is shit"). This was perceived as the coopting of the officially neutral, educational agenda of the Social Democratic faction. Piscator's tenure would lead to division, to scandal and ultimately to his departure. The Volksbühne was also the only stage that a spectrum of critics on the Left could use to duke out their positions on aesthetics and politics, hence influencing the major debates of the period. Damaged in an air raid in 1943, the edifice was rebuilt by the architect Hans Richter under the Stalinist occupation of East Berlin in 1954 using marble slabs from Hitler's Reich Chancellery for the interior. As such, the architecture itself uniquely mirrors the tragic course of 20th century German history.

Returning to your *flâneurie*, you decide to go in and watch a performance, which with your international student ID card costs you less than the price of a movie ticket. You end up seeing a production directed by someone named Frank Castorf, which is unlike any theatre you've seen before. The production is called *Kokain*, an adaptation of a 1921 novel about decadence, dandyism and drug excesses by the Italian Jewish writer (and later fascist) Pitigrilli (pseudonym of Dino Segre). The cool, edgy vibe in the foyer before the performance begins (the first time you've seen young, alternative types at the theatre); the virtuosity and comic genius of the actors; the femme fatales dominating the stage in glittering dresses and stiletto heels; the eroticism and fairy tale-like whimsy of the performance; the surreal and abstract stage design—all render an evening at the theatre that is impossible to summarize; disorientating, chaotic, exhausting and, at particular moments, sublime. The fact that you understand German helps, but it is clearly not necessary. The evening's impact has more to do with experiencing the melancholia, hysteria and euphoria that emanate at different points from the stage. The production's manic energy, and the strange pastiche of revolutionary and reactionary texts inserted into the evening's program book, provoke and unnerve. You conclude then and there that the avant-garde is not dead after all. The Volksbühne is where its combative spirit lives on.

After a little more scratching at the surface you discover that the Berliner Volksbühne was the most important cultural institution in Berlin in the 1990s—one that offered a *postsocialist* perception of German history. Socialist history was a central topic at Castorf's Volksbühne. Both the lived realities of the former GDR, as well as the failed utopian promise of real existing socialism, continued to necessitate a collective processing of the German pasts. In the subsequent years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Berlin itself—a synecdoche for two nations now artificially bolted together—was fragmented and in acute disarray. Castorf used the

Volkstheater to contest the dominant narrative around unification, as well as the transition to liberal democracy as a positive outcome for former GDR citizens. Starting in 1992 with his appointment as *intendant* (artistic director),² Castorf transformed the Volkstheater into the *only* theatre in the newly unified Germany which defiantly persisted in an OST identity and wherein socialist history resisted closure.

As this dissertation will demonstrate, through his politics and aesthetics, Castorf sought to work through the tensions that haunt Germany in the postsocialist period. Before elaborating the more strictly political and aesthetic dimensions of our problem, we must look to the place of the Volkstheater's past in its present.

Stages of History

The contestation over the role of the stage in German politics and history is a recurring theme of this dissertation. In the late 18th century, German drama and the German national theatre were the primary agents in fueling the momentum towards unifying and democratizing Germany. The historical dramas of Lessing and Schiller were central to developing a democratic consciousness in their audiences. This consciousness was necessary for unifying the feudal German duchies and for indicting corrupt power and authority. Given Schiller's claim of theatre as a "moral institution" (1784), drama could be used to instill bourgeois political values.³ As the "democratic" (violent and bloody) revolution that took place in France from 1789-1799 *failed* to

² The *intendant* of a German *Staats-* or *Stadttheater*—a state- or city-funded theatre—is a position that includes the tasks of the artistic and managing director, and often directing a significant portion of the productions at the theatre as well (Czekay 39). In German state theatres, the *intendant* devises the theatre's politics and its artistic concept, represents the theatre in public and is also responsible for the repertory (39). They are also responsible for selecting a team of dramaturges, directors, actors and set designers (39).

³ The full title of the young Schiller's essay is *Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet (The Stage Considered as a Moral Institution)*. Therein, Schiller writes that "[t]he jurisdiction of the stage begins where the realm of the secular law ends." The theatre as a moral institution criticizes the conditions of society by indicting the aristocracy with bourgeois virtues. According to Berghahn, "[t]he development of the domestic tragedy from Lessing to Schiller... clearly demonstrates how the theatre became a tool of social and political criticism" (543).

take place in Germany, the German stage itself became the site for the sublimation of revolutionary longing. Rather than bloody revolution, *Bildung* (education) and *Kultur* (culture) became the spheres attendant with the bourgeoisie's rise to power in Germany. These spheres were charged with espousing political unity, a national culture and democratic values. In a sense, German intellectuals and dramatists consciously chose the path of avoiding a bloody revolution and Reign of Terror, replacing those social energies with an *Ersatz*: the revolutionary stage. Goethe stated explicitly that "[w]e do not wish for Germany those political upheavals which might prepare the way for classical works" (qtd. in Berghahn 524). According to Klaus Berghahn, the "Germans' lack of political action was compensated for by a spiritual revolution that became known in literature as Weimar Classicism and in philosophy as German Idealism" (524). Goethe claimed that if given the choice between having a French Revolution or no revolution at all, he would choose the latter. As such, the German national theatre became a surrogate for the much longed-for German democratic revolution—a physical space in which to espouse nationalist and democratic values "as if" a revolution had taken place and to shape a bourgeois public accordingly. Schiller and Goethe's theory of symbolic representation assumed "the artist must objectify and idealize both this subjective experiences and contemporary reality in order to create works of universal validity. Art becomes autonomous, and yet its function is 'to unify the divided powers of the soul...and as it were to restore the whole human being within us'" (Nisbet and Rawson 544). This separation of art from everyday life ushers forth the autonomous sphere, which Schiller made the foundation of his *Aesthetic Letters* (1795). "Art, as 'the pure product of separation,' is freed from the restraints and expectations of bourgeois society, and only because it is autonomous can it use its critical potential to project the hope for a more humane society into the future" (544). The aesthetic education of humanity is Schiller's

response to the political crisis of his time. In the second letter he states, “[i]f man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice, he will have to approach it through aesthetics, because it is only through beauty that he makes his way to freedom” (Schiller 9).

Frustration with the feudal conditions that persisted in Germany led to democratic revolutions in 1848, which were ultimately unsuccessful. Wagner created his Bayreuth opera house in order to establish a theatre that united democratic form and nationalist content after giving up on political revolutions.⁴ The Bayreuth Festspielhaus was arguably the first modern iteration of a “People’s Theatre.” It was envisioned as an anti-bourgeois, but democratic institution that included artisans and labourers in its ideal and ridiculed the “lounging spa tourists” (Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre* 47) as Wagner called the bourgeois cultural elite. Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art,” was an attempt to transcend the boundary between stage and audience in an immersive experience and a synthesis of all the elements of the theatrical production. Wagner’s aesthetics and politics anticipated a future community, a democratic *Volk* guided by a return to artisanship (over “art”) and by the idea of using German mythology to fuel nationalism. In a sense, Wagner represents one of the first major iterations of an anti-art ideal and an institutional critique in the performing arts.

Meanwhile, one lineage of German dramatists, starting in the first half of the 19th century, became increasingly frustrated by persistent inequalities, particularly for a new class of

⁴ In the essay “Art and Revolution,” Wagner writes that what will save the revolutionary spirit of 1848 is art and the artist: “when now both Statesman and Philosopher have breathed their last, let the Artist’s voice again be heard” (24). In the “Artwork of the Future” essay, also written in 1849, Wagner centres on art’s relationship to the *Volk*, which he defines as a community of “men who feel a common and collective Want” and who create art to fulfill that want (75). Wagner believes that genuine art must emerge from the *Volk* who will be co-creators of the artwork of the future. Those who crave art as an “intellectual luxury for consumption” (77) have been deadened by machines are alien to the *Volk*. Wagner wished to unite dance, music and poetry (as in ancient Greek drama, which he extolls in both essays). The artwork of the future will unite all the arts and architecture in an “organic unity” (369), which is the idea behind the Festspielhaus (372).

labourers that was emerging in industrializing but still-feudal German society. It was this progressive direction in modern German drama starting with dramatists such as Georg Büchner (*Woyzeck*, 1837), but gaining momentum in the late 19th century with Realism and Naturalism, which first centred on the lives of working people. This impulse to authentically depict the lives of the working classes on stage—rather than the bourgeois heroes that characterized the dramas of Lessing and Schiller—inspired the momentum that would lead to the founding of the Freie Volksbühne in 1890.⁵

On the political front, when Germany finally unified in 1871, it was under the conservative, authoritarian Prussian “Iron Chancellor” Otto von Bismarck. Despite the democratic idealism expressed in bourgeois revolutionary drama, it was the latter’s heroic pathos that seemed to culminate in the founding of a Prussian-led military-imperialist state. Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II perceived the socialist movement, which they sought to suppress, as a threat to their imperial and martial powers. Under the *Sozialistengesetz* (anti-socialist laws), which lasted from 1878-1890, the rising Social Democratic Party (SPD) was outlawed and socialist literature and gatherings were banned in Germany. However, these conditions of suppression and the necessity of socialists gathering in secret only served to strengthen the SPD in Germany.

It was such covert modes of organization that eventually led to the founding of the Freie Volksbühne movement. The *Friedrichshagener Dichterkreis*, an elite left-leaning literati, met at

⁵ According to Klaus Berghahn, the *Sturm und Drang* movement, often described as pre-Romanticism, appeared “to be directed against certain tendencies within the Enlightenment. Its literary rebellion, rejecting all formalized criticism, was mainly directed toward French neo-classicism and dogmatic Aristotelianism” (543).

the Müggelsee writers' retreat of Naturalist playwright Gerhard Hauptmann.⁶ The group consisted of progressive bourgeois writers and critics who wanted to see social reform and were inspired by new Naturalist theatre works such as Émil Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), which had recently been staged privately in Berlin. Zola's bleak, deterministic drama focused on the lives of urban workers, whose plight the members of the *Dichterkreis* sought to reflect.

In 1889, Otto Brahm, a member of the *Dichterkreis* and future director of the Deutsches Theater, founded the Freie Bühne as a private ticket subscriber's organization that would stage Naturalist plays to a closed audience, thus avoiding the censorship of the Prussian police. Brahm's organization broke barriers of content, but did not break barriers of class or cost of entry. As soon as the socialist ban was lifted in 1890, two disparate classes united to make these socially critical dramas accessible to workers. The Freie Volksbühne organization was founded through the collaboration of workers movements and left-leaning intellectuals. The central figure in the organization's establishment was the writer, critic and *Dichterkreis* member Dr. Bruno Wille, who had been inspired by Brahm's Freie Bühne.

The organization saw the proliferation of the movement across Germany, with thousands of newly subscribing members. As such, a new audience of workers—or *proletarians*—came into being. What was truly remarkable was that in Berlin, due to the high-powered social network of *Dichterkreis* members such as Wille, the organization would enable workers to see the most vanguard theatre in the metropolis. The hope was that by granting workers access to new trends such as Naturalism through affordable theatre subscription packages, the Freie Volksbühne would foster a culture of "truth" on the German stage (Davies 27). Moreover, by

⁶ The first German play in the Naturalist style, Hauptmann's *Die Weber* (1892), depicted the revolt of Silesian weavers in 1844. *Die Weber* was considered a prototype for a new type of proletarian drama because it was written in a Silesian dialect and because the protagonist was a *collective* of weavers.

democratizing the audience and by displaying exploitation and inequality on the stage, such a theatre organization would pave the way to broader social reform. The Freie Volksbühne was democratically organized with a high degree of worker participation and established on a not-for-profit-basis (24). A membership granted workers access to twelve socially relevant productions a year, including Dostoevsky, Zola and Ibsen, as well as classics by Goethe and Schiller for “educational” and “morally uplifting” purposes (23).

The first twenty-four years of the movement were plagued by internal strife over the mandate of a worker’s theatre, including its division into two separate organizations in 1892 (43).⁷ Was the organization primarily artistic or political? Should it place emphasis on education vis-à-vis the classical canon; or on “truth” by way of Naturalism? Or should the organization lead the way to a new proletarian theatre? These positions reflected an organization torn between a progressive bourgeois membership, who wanted to see more of an educational or art appreciation programming line-up, and the more politicized workers, who wanted to foster a proletarian culture, promote revolution, and who hoped that more plays would develop in the vein of Hauptmann’s Naturalism (51).

However, many of the workers, who tended to be conservative in aesthetics whilst revolutionary in politics, rejected Naturalism entirely. According to the left wing writer and critic Franz Mehring, Naturalist dramas were merely titillating for the bourgeoisie in their display of

⁷ By October 1892, just two years after its founding, tensions within the organization already reached a breaking point. The workers’ faction forced Wille and his “bourgeois” executive out of the Freie Volksbühne, compelling them to establish their own Neue Freie Volksbühne. The workers’ faction, the radical Left of the movement, then reclaimed the Freie Volksbühne appointing the editor of the Social Democratic weekly *Neue Zeit*, Franz Mehring, as chairman. Under Mehring (most known for his 1918 biography of Karl Marx), the Freie Volksbühne attempted a more revolutionary line of programming by including works of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, which Mehring saw as the precursor to a yet-to-be-developed socialist dramatic canon. The Sturm und Drang movement consisted of dramas of the *rising bourgeoisie*, who had established a national German theatre, which many Socialists embraced as the precursor to their own future socialist theatre. The two Volksbühne factions would reunite in 1920.

the poverty, violence, “amorality,” and the venereal diseases of the lower classes (53).⁸

According to Mehring, the worker faction instead wanted a new, yet-to-be developed proletarian drama that anticipated the society to come, much in the spirit of Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto*, which saw the proletariat as the inheritor of the world historical stage.

By 1914, in the early stages of WWI, the Social Democratic Party was the strongest party in Berlin and, as such, the tectonic rumblings of class-conscious workers had made themselves felt. This was the year the twenty-four-year-old Volksbühne organization became an *institution* by way of building its own theatre. This meant that the dynamic struggles and utopian idealism of the organization’s nascent stage would be cemented into a structure now charged with keeping its original mandate alive, or rather as being the fulfilment of that mandate. Now, the organization would have its own permanent home and performing ensemble. For the first time in German history, an audience had created its own theatre institution, rather than a theatre having to create its audience (87). What remained unclear was who precisely constituted *das Volk* of its founding inscription: *all people* united in a democratic German culture? Or was it the proletariat, upon whose labour the bourgeoisie had achieved their great feats and who had now earned the right not just to the classical inheritance, but to foster their own culture?

In 1914, when the neo-classical building designed by theatre architect Oskar Kaufmann opened on what was then called Bülowplatz, Germany was at war and the theatre’s planned activities had to be paused. The director and theatre impresario Max Reinhardt offered to run the Volksbühne for a period of two years, no doubt as an opportunity to experiment on its new, state-

⁸ Mehring was undoubtedly the most important interlocutor in the early aesthetics and politics on the Left. He vehemently opposed Naturalism and advocated instead for the classics. According Mehring, “Naturalism showed the world that was disappearing, asking whether it had the courage to show the world coming into being.” The workers saw Naturalism’s squalor as an indignity: “Modern drama was deeply pessimistic, proletarian art was deeply optimistic” (Davies 53).

of-the-art stage. Reinhardt was known for his monumental stagings of tragedies and classics in what amounted to quasi-religious mystical spectacles for the masses (Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre* 204). However, the question of whether Reinhardt's spectacles bore an aesthetic "appropriate" for a class-conscious workers theatre immediately surfaced.⁹

The war ended in 1918 with the overthrowing of the Kaiser, the declaration of the Weimar Republic and then of a rival Bavarian Soviet Republic, and finally with the Weimar Constitution—the most democratic constitution in German history to date. Almost concurrent with the founding of the Weimar Republic the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschland* (KPD) emerged from Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg's Spartacist League, splitting the German Left between the SPD and the KPD. Since the Volksbühne's friends and allies were associated primarily with the SPD, now the governing party, the theatre was no longer subversive, but suddenly aligned with power. The SPD and the KPD became bitter adversaries. The Social Democratic Minister of Defence Gustav Noske used army and paramilitary forces to bloodily suppress the communist uprisings of 1919. Aligned with the KPD, the Berlin Dadaists vigorously contested "capitalist-imperialist war." They used precisely the category of art and the art institution to "attack" nationalist-militarists as well as the "bourgeois" Social Democratic *Sozialfaschisten*. For the Dadaists, art ought to be sublimated into revolutionary politics.¹⁰

⁹ Max Reinhardt's productions did not correlate with the Marxist view of a class society, but rather were built upon the notion of a utopian classless community. His work was seen by the Left-wing faction as a betrayal of the movement's aims, not only because Reinhardt's productions were perceived as apolitical and escapist fare, but also due to Reinhardt's status as "star" director and theatre impresario. Reinhardt's renown undermined the democratic aims of the organization because it harkened back to the Romantics' *Genie-Kult* (Davies 108). Because of Reinhardt, however, workers had access to the most innovative theatre of the day and were able to see legendary actors such as future Oscar winning actor Emil Jannings, film director Ernst Lubitsch, and the communist actor Heinrich George on the stage.

¹⁰ When the Far-Right Kapp Putsch resulted in attacks within the famous Dresden Zwinger gallery in 1920, George Grosz and John Heartfield celebrated that the bullets had moved away from working class districts and into a bourgeois "temple" of high culture (Heynen 234-235). The anti-art position taken by the Grosz and Heartfield in the famous "*Kunstlump Debatte*" (the "Art Scab" debate) was played out in the KPD party organ *Die Rote Fahne*. The

The German Left would remain bitterly divided by this history, as well as by the principles of democratic reforms versus those of proletarian revolution. This schism was reflected directly within the Freie Volksbühne organization. For example, in *Deutschland Deutschland Über Alles* (1929) by the satirist Kurt Tucholsky and the Dadaist John Heartfield, the Volksbühne was scathingly critiqued for abandoning its founding proletarian agenda (132-133). Piscator had famously referred to the theatre building as “pompous” and Brecht had despised it too. It was therefore a battleground for disparate visions of what “people’s theatre” and an emancipatory society should look like. In the 1920s, however, even as two proletarian theatres existed in Berlin, the Berliner Volksbühne was the *only* theatre institution of significance in Germany for the working class.¹¹ The Volksbühne became *the* theatre in which a divided and hostile German Left could debate the relationship between aesthetics and politics and experiment in front of an audience of genuine workers.

No individual is more tied to the vanguard, proletarian tradition at the Volksbühne in the 1920s than the communist director Erwin Piscator. Although Piscator was hesitant to direct at a theatre that was dominated by SPD members and hence had “abandoned the revolutionary cause,” he still saw the Volksbühne as the roots of what he called political theatre (Piscator 40). According to Cecil Davies, Piscator saw himself as the potential “savior” of the Volksbühne, returning it to the radical spirit of its inception (108).¹² However, Piscator’s aesthetics and

latter’s critic Gertrud Alexander denounced Dada’s “individualist ultra-Leftism” linking it to Lenin’s left wing Communism, which he had called “[a]n Infantile Disorder” (Heynen 236).

¹¹ The first proletarian stage was *Die Tribühne*, founded by Karl-Heinz Martin. The second, the Proletarian Theatre, was founded by Piscator, which banned the word ‘art’. According to Piscator, the plays were “proclamations with which we wanted to seize on contemporary events and act politically” (qtd. in Davies 106).

¹² Piscator rejected the elevation of art above class struggle. Doing so had made the Volksbühne inert prior to his arrival: “Where was the drama? Where were the authors? All forces, all the forces of the drama, production, direction, political leadership, administration and, finally, of the public, united to guarantee the Volksbühne a long and undisturbed sleep” (qtd. in Davies 60).

politics divided the movement including communists and, in this way, reflected the broader factionalism and splintering of the German Left during Weimar Republic (Schwerd 122-3).

What we see in the debates at the Berliner Volksbühne towards the end of the 1920s, and in the socio-political crisis on the horizon, is a *return* to the theatre's foundations in 1890—to the revolutionary promise of the theatre's beginnings. This return could only occur because the new playhouse made the organization accountable to its original promise (“*Die Kunst dem Volke*”) in a heightened way. Although the KPD leadership saw Piscator's experimentation as “decadent” and “bourgeois,” those young communists involved with the Volksbühne rallied in support of his work (122). They saw his partisan stagecraft as emblematic of the theatre's radical essence. Piscator's productions brought the combative, revolutionary spirit of Berlin Dada, with which he had been directly involved, onto the Volksbühne stage (Innes 16-17). Piscator developed a vanguard style by using new media such as film to broaden the purview of the theatre and fuel agitation and propaganda.¹³ He called his approach to the stage “the political theatre” and saw its roots in the historic Volksbühne (Piscator 30).¹⁴ Epic theatre was also a part of his political theatre concept. Piscator defined epic theatre as an approach which “not only portrays dramatic action, but also describes what social and political conditions determine modern fate” (Innes 102-3). Brecht is indebted to Piscator for his theory of epic theatre. Although he worked with Piscator at the Volksbühne, Brecht had little association with the organization because he, like

¹³ Piscator's *Revue Roter Rummel* (*The Red Revue*) in 1924 was an election propaganda production. The script was devised to accommodate the insertion of the latest news—to be updated at a moment's notice. According to Christopher Innes, this was the first time Piscator's concept of ‘actuality’ enters his vocabulary (43). This is important for understanding the principles of contemporaneity, relevance and spontaneity that underwrite Castorf's work.

¹⁴ Piscator explained it thus: “The political theatre, as it has worked out in many undertakings, is neither a personal ‘invention’ nor a result of the social regrouping of forces broke into the intellectual situation of bourgeois society which, consciously or through their mere existence, altered that situation decisively and to some extent raised it up. These forces came from two directions: from literature and from the proletariat. And at the point where they met a new concept arose, Naturalism, and a new form of theatre; the Volksbühne, a stage for the people” (Piscator 30).

many on the Left, found its executive “too bourgeois”¹⁵ and felt that the theatre should have an explicitly proletarian allegiance. He did, however, stage *Mann ist Mann* at the Berliner Volksbühne in 1928.

Piscator’s unabashed communist sloganeering and highly politicized adaptations of “bourgeois” classics such as Shakespeare and Schiller rendered the originals virtually unrecognizable. The extreme liberties he took with dramatic texts and his unabashed endorsement of Bolshevik, Soviet-style revolution in Germany would cause internal divisions in the organization so extreme that they effectively split the already schismatic Freie Volksbühne organization in Berlin.¹⁶ This internal strife and the sensational debates around them—which reached fever pitch and came to be known as the “Volksbühne Affair” in 1927, resulting in Piscator’s departure—reverberated nationally in the German press.¹⁷ Such crisis, however, rendered the Berliner Volksbühne the most vibrant, radical and contested stage of Weimar Berlin.¹⁸ Its revolutionary ethos influenced the foremost artists and intellectuals in Germany at the time. The aesthetics and politics debates that emerged from within the theatre reverberated in *Die Rote Fahne* (the KPD organ), *Vorwärts* (the SPD organ), intellectual left wing literary

¹⁵ Brecht opposed the Volksbühne executive with the following invective: “How can you save the Volksbühne? Prepare emotional excitement for the board members, as far as possible. Then hope they may go off to an earlier death than is now is to be feared. I really think that these people who are in possession of this beautiful theatre ... need to just physically disappear” (qtd. in Schwerd 124).

¹⁶ The catalyst was the production Ehm Welk’s *Gewitter über Gottland*, a play set in 1400, which Piscator turned into an unabashed celebration of Lenin. He even had the play’s protagonist made up to look like Lenin.

¹⁷ The *Börsen-Kurier* critic Herbert Ihering published a 16-page pro-Piscator polemic titled, “The Betrayal of the Volksbühne” (“*Der Volksbühnenverrat*”) in 1928. Therein, he indicted the Volksbühne for violating its specific purpose of being a theatre of the proletariat (see Piscator 64-65).

¹⁸ The Youth Section passed a resolution that stated that the “proletarian youth in the Volksbühne refuses to accept the bourgeois interpretation of the neutrality of art. As the theatre is an important instrument in the working-class struggle for freedom, the stage must reflect the purpose and life of the proletariat fighting for a new order in the world” (qtd. in Davies 116). Georg Springer, part of the theatre’s executive, responded in the *Weltbühne*: “The Volksbühne has not the tradition, intension or possibility of equating the word Volk in its name with ‘radical-socialist working-class’. Of course it grew out of the aim of opening up the arts, in the first instance the theatre, to the workers, and today it still regards it as its principle task to free the way for the proletariat to the good things of art” (116).

journal *Die Weltbühne*, the organization's own journal, *Blätter der Volksbühne*, as well as the Berlin dailies. The debates surrounding the Volksbühne and its attempt to offer socially relevant, high-caliber theatre for workers impacted legendary critics such as Béla Balázs and members of the Frankfurt School such as Leo Lowenthal, who served as the organization's artistic advisor (Jay 21). Starting in 1929, Lowenthal wrote several critical articles on aesthetic and cultural matters for the Volksbühne's journal (212). Suffice it to say, the great tragedy both in and outside the Volksbühne was that the German Left failed to cohere at a moment it needed to most: in the aftermath of global financial crisis of 1929 and subsequently with the rise of National Socialism in Berlin.

After their ascension to power in 1933, the National Socialists first purged the Volksbühne of its Jewish and Communist membership and then tried to revamp the organization for their nationalist cause (using a policy of *Gleichschaltung* or uniformity in the arts). They renamed the Bülowplatz "Horst-Wessel-Platz" after a murdered Nazi petty-criminal, whom they re-packaged as a "martyr." They then tried to build on the theatre's esteemed reputation to further their own cause. Among those Volksbühne associates who made a Faustian Deal with the fascist regime and continued to work at the theatre under National Socialism were the playwright Gerhart Hauptmann; the communist stage actor Heinrich George (who had worked closely with Piscator and Brecht); as well as the Expressionist dramatist Arnolt Bronnen who, according to Nazi racial laws, was half Jewish (Davies 184). In 1938, the Nazis shut down the Germany-wide Freie Volksbühne movement entirely, burning its records. The Nazis then used the theatre for conservative staging's of "German" classics, eventually using it to entertain SS troops.¹⁹

¹⁹ Volksbühne historian Heinrich Braulich writes that under National Socialism, "the bourgeois, lower-middle-class and working-class audience found in this theatre... 'experiences' which helped them to forget that they were playing no part in the political affairs of the state" (Davies 184). According to Christopher Innes, Goebbels was "reported to

After the Stalinist occupation of East Berlin (1945–1949) and the founding of the GDR in 1949, attempts were made to resurrect both the Freie Volksbühne organization and the Berliner Volksbühne (now located on the renamed Karl-Liebknecht-Platz) under the Freie Volksbühne’s auspices (Davies 199). Ultimately, the entire Germany-wide Volksbühne movement, which was inherently too independent and radical for the authoritarian socialist state, was subsumed to state control (199). However, theatre was German socialism’s most hallowed art form and was—just as it had been in the late 18th century—to be used for nation-building purposes, if now in a communist vein. The GDR’s official interpretation of history was that with its founding in 1949, a socialist, democratic, anti-fascist worker-led state had been achieved. This meant that proletarian art, devised to facilitate class-consciousness and fuel revolution, was no longer necessary. What was needed instead was affirmative aesthetics that projected idealized images of the achievements of the GDR’s *Arbeiter und Bauern* (workers and farmers).

Now under state control, the Volksbühne—one of three major theatres located in East Berlin along with the Berliner Ensemble (BE) and the Deutsches Theater (DT)—started, in the 1960s, to attract East German dramatists who had worked with Brecht at the BE.²⁰ These directors understood the legacy of the Volksbühne and hence the potential for the institution’s radically democratic and subversive roots to reassert themselves in the GDR. These directors included the Swiss Brecht-disciple Benno Besson, the directing duo Manfred Karge and Matthias Langhoff, as well as the playwright-director Heiner Müller. This lineage ultimately transported the proletarian, vanguard spirit of Brecht—who believed twenty years of ideology-destruction

be bored by the plays produced under his aegis. In such circumstances art, progressive or relevant, could not flourish” (Innes 156).

²⁰ The Berliner Ensemble was established by Brecht and his partner Helene Weigel after they returned from exile to the GDR in 1949.

was still necessary in GDR (Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht* 123)—from the BE over to the Volksbühne where it had originated in the first place. Besson's tenure as intendant from 1969-1978 revived the historic Volksbühne tradition and the idea of a *Volkstheater* (people's theatre) by incorporating street theatre, farce and carnival. Besson's artistic directorship represents an attempt to return the Volksbühne to its radical roots under a regime that stifled proletarian politics and suppressed artistic freedoms. Attracting artists from all over the world, Besson's Volksbühne also represented a rare international and cosmopolitan spirit in the GDR.

Heiner Müller (1929-1995) would become a key figure at the Volksbühne in the GDR. Müller is the inheritor of Brecht's alienation strategies and deconstructed approach to the stage but abandons Brecht's strictly Marxist framework and therefore inaugurates a *post-Brechtian* tradition. According to David Barnett (2011), post-Brechtian theatre "is about confronting a world in which the Marxist meta-narrative is no longer sovereign but in which dialectics are still considered a practicable tool for social analysis" (353). Müller's dramas were concerned with the tragic continuities in German history, the failures of left wing revolution, and the compromises involved in building socialism. Arguably, the theatre Müller was predominantly associated with during the GDR was the Volksbühne. This is significant because Müller was highly controversial and many of his works had been banned. Such commitment to staging his work was a provocative stance on the part of the Volksbühne leadership towards the regime.

Although Müller had a fraught relationship with the GDR—falling in and out of party favour—it was *because* of the esteemed role of the artist in the socialist state that Müller could act as a guiding voice during the *Wendezeit*. He played a leading role in the Alexanderplatz demonstration on November 4, 1989 that helped propel the events of November 9 of that same year (Cornish 87). After the *Wende*, Müller's association with the Volksbühne and its radical and

avant-garde connotations under Besson made that theatre particularly ripe for reinvigoration, although throughout the 1980s its vitality lagged (Carlson 99). Nonetheless, the Volksbühne encased a history of subversive theatre not just in the Weimar Republic, but in the GDR as well. It boasted a lineage of vanguard directors that the Cultural Senate of the newly unified Berlin was keen to foreground. Although a surplus of theatres in post-unification Berlin placed the Volksbühne's future in doubt, the theatre would ultimately survive the restructuring of the cultural landscape after the *Wende*. It was retained in the hopes that it could reignite its radical tradition and be used to showcase the aesthetic and political vanguardism of the new metropolis.

These *stages of history* are essential for understanding the Castorf era Volksbühne. They draw a clear line from the revolutionary romanticism of the late 18th century German stage—the use of the stage for promoting freedom and equality through a unified democratic German nation—through to a left wing proletarian or “political,” “epic” theatre tradition in the 1920s. National Socialism and Stalinism constitute a break in its trajectory up until 1933. Starting in the 1960s, the Volksbühne becomes one of the most vibrant theatres in the GDR, reviving the vanguard spirit of the 1920s. At the Volksbühne, these earlier stages of history return. Not unlike the missed opportunity for the German Left at the end of the 1920s, Castorf interpreted the end of the GDR and the unification of Germany under Western liberal terms as another missed opportunity to establish a genuine democratic, anti-capitalist state.

Not only do these *stages of history* underwrite Castorf's postsocialist Volksbühne, but they seem to haunt it, insisting themselves in the present in their quest for justice. They return in the most fraught and the most shining moments of this institution. The breaks, continuities, and returns of its history are made perceivable and brought into dialogue with the present by Castorf in a feat of *Jetztzeit* or Now-Time. This concept, found in Walter Benjamin's “Theses on the

Philosophy of History” (1940), refers to the moment when the past—vis-à-vis an antiquated artifact, a historical dramaturgy, a personage, or a text—is brought up into the present to explode the revolutionary possibilities lodged within them. This act of curating history constitutes a “*weak* Messianic power,” which is to say the potentially transformative import lodged within the past for the present (254). By curating from an archive of both revolutionary and reactionary German politics contained within the Volksbühne’s site-specific history, tensions and repetitions can be thrown, temporarily, into high relief. *Jetztzeit* is an approach to mining history that arises from an impasse or aporia—one Benjamin allegorizes through Paul Klee’s painting of the “Angel of History” (257). As Benjamin describes it, the Angel stares backwards into the disasters of the past, whilst being sucked into a forward hurtling vacuum, mouth agape, and seeing wreckage upon wreckage piling up. If the Angel of History sits on one of Castorf’s shoulders, the other is occupied by a contrary figure—perhaps the Trickster. It is in the blending of these tropes that Castorf’s prognostications and provocations come most to light.

Castorf and the Anti-Institutional Spirit

The early 1990s were a time when German unification was portrayed as the final overcoming of Germany’s dark totalitarian past and the achievement of a centuries-long aspiration towards democratic nationhood. It was also narrated as the joyous union of two halves benefiting citizens of the less developed GDR especially.²¹ As this dissertation will demonstrate, Castorf instead used the Volksbühne to convey an authentic reflection of life in a fractured city—a space for citizens who did not buy into the liberal rhetoric of Western “salvation” and capitalist “freedom.” In the early years of Castorf’s tenure, from 1992 to 1997, the Volksbühne

²¹ One of the most common images in the West German press was that of a marriage with the old BRD as the powerful male and the GDR as the defenceless female (Bargna 92).

became *the* theatre in which to mock, deconstruct, and interrogate conservative myths and liberal democratic narratives of unification under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, whose regime constituted, to Castorf's mind, a dangerous mainstreaming of German nationalism. In response, Castorf would cultivate an anti-liberal-capitalist politics in the city's core, which was geared towards disillusioned East and West Germans alike and *against* the West German status quo.

Castorf used an approach he developed as a director in Anklam in the GDR (which will be discussed in Chapter Two), namely repurposing what was directly at hand, using his actors' private, interior, "psychological" domains, as well as his immediate surroundings as artistic "material." Castorf was guided by an understanding of the theatrical performance as an "attack" on historical and ideological closure, which he had undertaken in the GDR albeit in less explicit, more roundabout ways. After the *Wende*, Castorf wished to open the "bourgeois" stage to the lived experiences of unification and to use state funded theatre as a kind of "spiritual hygiene station," repurposing of the mission of national theatre to confront unspeakable taboos (Schütt 16). Castorf challenged his own condition of possibility and revived the anti-institutional spirit of the historical avant-gardes. The latter are defined by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) as movements that made the institutional framework around the artwork visible (iii). Bürger argued that the objective of the historical avant-garde "isms"—Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism, which existed between 1907 and 1935—was primarily to make the bourgeois conceits of the art institution perceivable (49). Whereas Modernism dealt with formal evolution of style (in visual arts as well as in literature), the avant-garde project involved a radical change, unifying art and the praxis of life (7).²²

²² Bürger concludes that "[t]he historical avant-garde movements were unable to destroy art as an institution; but they did destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity" (87). He adds that "[t]he meaning of the break in the history of art that the historical avant-garde movements provoked does

In order to understand the particular left wing avant-garde tradition in which Castorf's work should be situated, we must look at Benjamin's endorsement of Dada in the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Here we find striking resonances between Benjamin's case for Dada and Castorf's approach to the stage. Benjamin sees the Dadaists as exemplary of challenging the bourgeois function of art—"the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*," that is the "idea of a 'pure' art" without any social function (*Illuminations* 224). According to Benjamin, the Dadaists turned the hallowed language of bourgeois poetry into citation and nonsense—"word salad" containing obscenities and every imaginable waste product of language" (237). They frequently made *life itself* the artwork, mounting "buttons and tickets" onto their paintings (237). Reproduction became the means of production while distraction replaced contemplation. According to Benjamin, contemplation had become nothing more than "a school for asocial behavior" (238). As Benjamin writes, "[w]hat the [Dadaists] intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations.... Dadaistic activities actually assured a rather vehement distraction by making works of art the center of scandal. One requirement was foremost: to outrage the public" (238). Bürger claims that for Benjamin "[t]he contemplative reception of the bourgeois individual is to be supplanted by what is the simultaneously distracted and rationally testing reception of the masses" (28). Benjamin perceives this new mode of perception characterized by the interruption and shock of the cinema positively: "Instead of being based on ritual, art will now be based on politics" (28).

For the avant-gardes, the art of the day consisted in "disinterested" and lifeless works with the goal of producing a reified bourgeois consciousness. The goal of the avant-gardes was

not consist in the destruction of art as an institution, but in the destruction of the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones" (Bürger 87).

to dismantle the category of art as such and the hence the boundary between art and life, privileging the latter over the former (51). According to Bürger,

[t]he European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content. The avant-gardistes view its dissociation from the praxis of life as the dominant characteristic of art in bourgeois society. (49)

The avant-gardes' savage critique of the bourgeois art institution underwrote Castorf's self-reflexive critique of the Volksbühne and of his own condition of possibility. He thought that German theatre was a "stinking swamp with no more connection to the outside world" (qtd. in Schütt 16). Castorf also believed that the financial support state-funded theatres received created a hermetic seal around the stage, placing theatre in complicity with the ruling power and ideology, and disconnecting it from politics and the streets. Castorf's critique of state theatre channelled both the Futurists' and Dadaists' attack on the lifelessness and stagnation of the art institution. His productions revive the spirit of both movements, but especially the Dadaists' ironic negation of dominant discourses through montage, collage and word play. In this respect, a direct line can be drawn from Dada through Piscator to Castorf. Piscator used filmic insertions, projection screens, montage and collage to bring the proletarian politics of the Berlin streets to life on the stage, furthering the Berlin Dadaists' strategies and political discourse within the theatre. Piscator's stage juxtaposed the features and discontents of urban capitalism with images of communist revolution and slogans. Castorf's own juxtaposition of what he called "text and context" in the 1990s especially—namely, a fragmenting of the dramatic text through the addition of a film and/or a second dramatic text, rock n' roll songs, micro-histories and

biographical details—served as a repurposing of the stage for the authentic portrayal of the competing orientations of life in post-*Wende* Berlin.

Castorf's anti-institutional spirit resonated with young Berliners after the fall of the Wall. In fact, for two decades, most alternatively-inclined students, artists, and intellectuals had the Volksbühne *Räuberrad* (Robber Wheel) logo—a crudely drawn wheel on two legs—visible somewhere in their apartment. Moreover, there was hardly a dive bar or alternative club in Berlin without Volksbühne posters, matchboxes, condoms, or a leporello (a folded flyer containing the theatre's monthly schedule) lying around. The *Räuberrad* permeated the Berlin underground like a *leitmotif*, a refrain of resistance. As such, Castorf and his team established a Volksbühne concept, a “brand” that stood for rebellion.

Spectres of Fascism

Both the Volksbühne as an institution and Castorf's own theatrical productions retained irreducible tensions and ambivalence towards the competing impulses of the times. These were informed by a cynical reading of history—one characteristic of a now defunct Left after the demise of the Eastern Bloc and the seeming death of Marxism as an engine propelling world history. While thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama (1992) heralded the “end of history” and the global victory of liberal-capitalism, Castorf was exploring Conservative Revolutionary thinkers such as Ernst Jünger—right wing Nietzscheans, who overlapped with the Revolutionary Left in their virulent anti-Western, anti-capitalist worldview. Castorf wished to explore the seductive pull of the Far Right on disenchanted artists and intellectuals throughout the late 19th and 20th century. His oeuvre demonstrated a preoccupation with the real-life trajectories of idealistic, romantic, “petit bourgeois” youths, who deliberately sought out military danger, were seduced by authoritarian ideology, or who swung from one end of the political spectrum to the other

(Balitzki; Schütt, Detje). Castorf was interested in exploring what these individuals identified as missing in liberal democratic society. As they surface in Castorf's pantheon, these individuals almost uniformly represent a life at first guided by bohemian excesses lived out on the more "authentic" peripheries of bourgeois society. Castorf marks the maelstrom that each of these individuals deliberately sought out, as well as the extremist political ideologies with which each became aligned in their search for transcendence or higher collective meaning.

With his exploration of the radical Right, there were tensions in Castorf's oeuvre devised to inspire discomfort. For this reason, the most interesting and complex aspect of Castorf's work at the Volksbühne was his ability to tap into collective *ressentiment* and other discontents that were being co-opted by the Right during the postsocialist period. Castorf wanted to make visible the irrationality of an age that purported to be the apex of reason, rationality and individual freedom espoused by the likes of Fukuyama, but that instead manifested the gross realities of economic disparity, alienation and disenfranchisement. As Castorf saw it, the longings that stemmed from these discontents were being more successfully addressed by the Right than by the Marxist Left, which had lost almost all credibility after the demise of the Eastern Bloc. He saw the skinhead gangs in the former East as embodiments of the failures of both unification and the Left. This exploration of the radical Right ties together with the end of history and Castorf's institutional critique. Castorf saw it as his duty, as the head of the "overfunded" "moral institution" that was the German theatre, to hack into the obscured dimensions of the collective German psyche as he saw them—to coax out resentment, fascism, and ego-maniacal desires which he himself came to embody in his subversive use of the stage and in his persona.

Castorf: Trickster or Reactionary?

Castorf's public persona, which is under examination in this dissertation, is one that evades classification and disorients audiences. For example, Castorf would use naïve, childlike play and slapstick comedy in his productions, but at the same time conduct interviews with journalists in his office whilst sitting under a portrait of Joseph Stalin with the slogan "Stalin: He is Freedom"; he invited the Lacanian-Marxist Slavoj Žižek and the Maoist Alain Badiou to lecture at the theatre, but frequently cited thinkers considered proto-fascist such as Ernst Jünger or Carl Schmitt; he was an anti-imperialist but allowed a large banner with the word "NEGER" to hang outside the theatre during a production of Bernard-Marie Koltès "*Der Kampf des Negers und der Hunde*" ("The Struggle of the Blacks and the Dogs"), inciting the outrage of the Afro-German community. His primary theatre influences were on the Left, but his productions included textual insertions from the real-life biographies of ultra-nationalist *Freikorps* paramilitaries. Castorf's productions were dominated by a roster of powerful female actors (the notorious Volksbühne "furies"), but their stage personas were highly gendered and sexualized. Rather than feminist, the Volksbühne seemed to be the last bastion for masculinist "bad boy" action artists, neo-Bolsheviks, and disgruntled dissident Marxist intellectuals from the former Eastern Bloc.

Despite his public status, Castorf's intellectual influences and his politics have not been sufficiently analyzed. Towards the end of the GDR, Castorf began quoting Jünger and claiming he longed for a *Stahlgewitter*, a "storm of steel." This was a euphemism for modern warfare that Castorf explained might have riled a "decadent" GDR out of its inertia (Balitzki 150). While he criticized the GDR for being stagnant, Castorf was ultimately a staunch defender of "what the GDR *might have been*" (qtd. in Raddatz 20). Volksbühne dramaturg Carl Hegemann labelled this

phenomenon “*Leben in Selbstwiderspruch*” (“Living in Self-Contradiction), or likewise the ability to work in “*entgegengesetzte Richtungen*” (oppositional directions”) (qtd. in Krump 124). Hegemann claims that the Volksbühne offered “concentration in chaos, instability as norm, always doing the opposite of everyone else” (124). In other words, the Volksbühne manifested the most extreme contradictions of postsocialist society and its implications for the individual. The Castorf era Volksbühne seemed to give expression to the experience of working under permanent conditions of crisis, instability and disorientation associated with late capitalism and the “end of history.”

This “living in self-contradiction” reinforces the political ambiguity of Castorf’s directorial *persona*, a locus in which the Conservative Revolutionaries and contemporary Marxist and critical thinkers coincide. Castorf’s persona as intendant was used to shock and provoke the public and critics alike with the ultimate taboo in Germany: flirtation with fascism. It must be understood as part of the political disorientation Castorf sought to mark. As such, Castorf cultivated a persona that he claimed was a self-reflexive exploration of the reactionary and irrational longings *within himself*, as well as a deliberate attack on German liberal complacency, political correctness, and the general population’s ignorance of the Far Right “pogrom planning” he believed was underway in Germany after the *Wende*.

Both in his re-conceptualization of the theatre institution and in his stage productions, Castorf’s aesthetics and politics seemed to be touting a mixture of combative resistance and resignation to a history of failed German revolutions. Castorf’s Volksbühne was about dialectical oppositions that refused closure. Therein, East vs. West, Right vs. Left, and Revolution vs. Reaction all existed as irreducible tensions. These tensions defined postsocialist Berlin in Castorf’s view.

Literature Review

What distinguishes my study from previous studies on Castorf and the Volksbühne is that I address Castorf as an intellectual in his own right and explore the radical traditions on the Left and the Right that he utilizes to illustrate his often-contradictory politics. Replicating Castorf's own approach, I defer to local history with a view to mark both the continuities and the breaks in the development of the Volksbühne up to the present.

As to the existing literature, one of the first detailed engagements with Castorf's theatrical work was Siegfried Wilzopolski's *Theater des Augenblicks* (1992) documenting his beginnings in 1979, his work in Anklam, and ending in 1992 with his work at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. My own approach, however, has benefited greatly from two waves of German-language studies on Castorf's tenure at the Volksbühne. The first wave came in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, during the high point of Castorf's career. The other, more recent wave emerged around his departure as intendant in 2017. These texts include a great deal of source material such as interviews with Castorf and his team, reviews of productions, and newspaper articles. The first group includes Jürgen Balitzki's *Castorf, der Eisenhändler: Theater zwischen Kartoffelsalat und Stahlgewitter* (1995), Hans-Dieter Schütt's *Die Erotik des Verrats: Gespräche mit Frank Castorf* (1996), and Robin Detje's artistic biography *Castorf: Provokation aus Prinzip* (2002). Accounts of the political contradictions of Castorf's work are found in Balitzki and Schütt. Because they provided so much original interview material, both books helped me to establish an intellectual genealogy and his aesthetic compass in the early years. These two texts also account for Castorf's preoccupation with thinkers associated with the Right. Balitzki's book is primarily comprised of transcriptions of Castorf's monthly radio programme, *Castorf, der Eisenhändler*. It also contains reprints of Castorf's Stasi files, correspondence amongst GDR

theatre directors, as well as interviews with members of Castorf's team. *Die Erotik des Verrats* was written by the journalist Hans-Dieter Schütt and enables Castorf to express himself in detail about his artistic work. It also brings Castorf's public persona to the fore as an interviewee. Detje by contrast, places the director in the context of GDR theater history and tries to capture the essence of Castorf's work through his biography. While the writings of Balitzki, Schütt and Detje serve as invaluable resources, they are not critical, academic engagements with Castorf's work.

On the eve of his departure from the Volksbühne and thereafter, multiple German publications capitalized on the renewed interest in Castorf's twenty-five-year tenure. Annika Krump's *Tagebuch einer Hospitantin, Berlin Volksbühne 1992/93* (2015) is a diaristic, firsthand account of working at the Volksbühne written during the first year of Castorf's intendantship. It provided me with invaluable insight into the behind-the-scenes culture of the space.

Republik Castorf: Die Berliner Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz seit 1992 edited by Frank Raddatz (2016) contains insightful and informative interviews with the Volksbühne team, who are often overshadowed by the focus on Castorf. A second book, *Am liebsten hätten sie veganer Theater: Interviews 1996-2017 Frank Castorf and Peter Laudenbach* (2018), is a collection of interviews with Castorf spanning 1996-2017 by theatre critic and journalist Peter Laudenbach. Therein, Castorf's articulates his views on politics and aesthetics at different periods of his tenure, which helped me to refine my chronological approach.

The monthly theatre journal, *Theater der Zeit*, published *Castorf Arbeitsbuch* (2016) edited by Dorte Lena Eilers, Thomas Irmer and Harald Müller. This edition is an assemblage of essays and interviews that includes international scholars and collaborators from Serbia, the U.S.A., Russia, Brazil and France demonstrating the reach of Castorf's influence. The essays

cover a range of topics including Castorf's time in Anklam, his multimedia aesthetics, and his guest appearances at international festivals. *Theater der Zeit* also produced a special issue in August 2018, titled “*Vorsicht Volksbühne! Das Theater. Die Stadt. Das Publikum*” edited by Klaus Lederer, Harald Müller and Erik Zielke. The publication evolved out of a conference on the past, present and future Volksbühne that took place at the Akademie der Künste on June 15-16, 2018. The panels featured German theatre artists and pundits and were organized around three broad themes: *Mythos Volksbühne* (The mythic Volksbühne); *Stadttheater, Kunsthaus oder beides?* (City Theatre, Art Institution, or Both?); and *Volksbühne—ein Theater in Berlin?* (Volksbühne—a City in Berlin?).

There have been significant academic works produced on the Castorf era Volksbühne. The most recent is Henriette Christiane Kassay-Schuster's (2017) dissertation, “Unaccountable Theatre: intermedial play in the theatres of Frank Castorf and René Pollesch at the Volksbühne Berlin,” which focuses on the aesthetic and political commitment to intermediality in the theatres of Castorf and Pollesch. Katya Bargna's (2000) dissertation, “Der Weg ist nicht zu Ende, wenn das Ziel explodiert,” considers Castorf as a postmodern director rooted in the political theatre tradition and covers his work at the Volksbühne up to the end of the 1990s. Antje Dietz's *Ambivalenzen des Übergangs: Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin in den neunziger Jahren* (2014) accounts for the continuities and breaks of the Volksbühne institution from the GDR through to the 1990s. And Tanja Bogusz's *Institution und Utopie: Ost-West-Transformationen an der Berliner Volksbühne* (2015) takes a sociological approach to the theatre using Durkheim and Bourdieu to analyze the development of the institution within the field of cultural production.

There has been a glaring absence of research on Castorf and the Volksbühne in English, mainly because of the theatre's German-language productions and institutional culture. The Volksbühne's GDR, Marxist and historical orientations have also potentially alienated scholars not entrenched in these histories and approaches. To date, no English-language monograph has been published on the Castorf era Volksbühne. However, two English language books have been vitally important for this research, although neither focuses exclusively on the Volksbühne. The first is Marvin Carlson's *Theatre is More Beautiful Than War* (2009), which contains a helpful chapter with accounts of Castorf's productions at the Volksbühne; the second is Matthew Cornish's *Performing Unification: History and Nation in German Theater After 1989* (2017). Cornish's book produces an overview of the treatment and contestation of German unification in Berlin stage productions through their subversive dramaturgies and dramatizations of history. Two chapters in his book centre on East German *Regietheater* directors Müller, Schlee and Castorf, who each reject the classical Aristotelean plot devices used to support the Hegelian telos associated with nationalist mythmaking. Although I too am concerned with Castorf refusing a liberal, "progressive" telos of history, my emphasis lies rather on *what* Castorf curates from the archive of history, which I then tie to his politics and aesthetics.

As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, I have identified two issues that have not been adequately addressed in the literature: 1) Castorf's engagement with critiques of liberal democracy, in particular those of the Conservative Revolution as these overlap with his anti-Western orientation, and 2) the site-specific history and the discourse of the historical avant-gardes that Castorf revives. I take these gaps in the literature as the starting point for my analysis.

Framing the Problem

The challenge of this dissertation is to distill the politics and aesthetics of Castorf's conception of developments in German history after the demise of the Eastern Bloc over his two and half decades at the Volksbühne. The project is foremost a reckoning with the ambivalence of the Castorf's Volksbühne—a theatre that has seduced audiences with the wild, chaotic, melancholic, Romantic, and revolutionary dimensions of its concepts and staging. The research explores Castorf's intellectual genealogy as he mobilizes diverse traditions of both left and right wing critiques of liberalism and capitalism to contour the theatre in *opposition* to the “end of history,” the politics of German unification, and to liberal bourgeois finalities.

I make three over-riding and interconnected claims:

- 1) Castorf's Volksbühne refuses the “end of history”—as either a linear or dialectical outcome—and sustains the postsocialist condition as a terrain in which historical outcomes remain open.
- 2) Castorf's Volksbühne revives the aesthetic strategies of the historical avant-garde ‘isms’ as well as those traditions of Far-Left avant-garde theatre directors associated with the Volksbühne to channel his anti-institutional spirit.
- 3) Castorf's Volksbühne draws upon critiques of liberalism from both the Far Left and the Far Right. In doing so, Castorf sensitizes us to the points at which those extremes overlap and marks the impasses and aporias of postsocialism.

Before illustrating how each section of the dissertation works through these overlapping claims, I will briefly explicate my methodological approach.

Methodology

To conduct this research, I use a mixed-methods approach drawing tools from cultural and historical analysis. I adopt a cultural materialist perspective, applying genealogy in the epistemological sense of Nietzsche and Kretsedemas, combining it with paratext and the use of case studies, incorporating concepts from performance theory in my analyses.

I take my cues and political orientation from Cultural Materialism, a strain of Cultural Studies developed by British Marxist and cultural theorist Raymond Williams.²³ Williams viewed culture as a “productive process” and as part of the means of production. Broadly speaking, Cultural Materialists analyze cultural artefacts with a view to capture the *Zeitgeist* of a moment in history. They identify “oppositional” cultural elements and promote a class-based analysis of traditional Marxism by focusing on the inclusion of those marginalized by the struggles that play out in the cultural sphere. Cultural Materialism also analyzes the processes by which hegemonic forces in society appropriate canonical texts or, in the case of public institutions, utilizes them in order to validate or inscribe certain values on the cultural imaginary.

Williams claimed that, “you cannot understand an intellectual and artistic project without also understanding its formation” (*Politics of Modernism* 151). This necessitates looking at the foundations (which I call the *Entstehung* or beginnings) and emancipatory goals of a project such as the historic Volksbühne in order to understand its development and situation today. My methodology is congruent with the parameters of Cultural Studies set by Williams in *The Politics of Modernism*. Williams emphasizes *both* the historical and the present-day iteration of a project:

²³ Williams expanded the elitist conception of culture to instead recognize culture as “a whole way of life,” that encompasses sensibilities, values, and practices (1958 and 1961). He argued for the need to think “culture and society” together and promoted overcoming the division between high and low culture. Williams also polemicized against the concept of the “masses” which he perceived as condescending, elitist, as well as homogenizing.

Cultural Studies is not concerned with a formation of which some project is an illustrative example, nor with a project which could be related to a formation understood as its context or its background. Project and formation in this sense are different ways of materializing – different ways, then, of describing – what is in fact a common disposition of energy and direction. This was, I think, the crucial theoretical invention that was made: the refusal to give priority to either the project or the formation – or, in older terms, the art or the society (151-152).

Foregrounding the “energy and direction” of a project from its inception to the present is a key component of this method.

Cultural Materialism, then, is a lens that can illuminate the *Entstehungsgeschichte* (the history of the beginning) of the late 19th and early 20th century Volksbühne. This approach underwrites my attentiveness to the historical mission of the theatre: its fidelity to the working class, its internal crises, and its struggles around who constitutes “*das Volk*.” It establishes the Volksbühne as a site of contestation between different political and social agendas in a leftist tradition with a mission to work in service of the marginalized and those disenfranchised by capitalism. It also foregrounds a lineage of vanguard left wing *Intendanten* that attempted to keep the proletarian tradition at the Volksbühne alive. A hallmark of Castorf’s work is that he enables an unending number of possible interpretations of his productions, which refuse dominant readings and interpretations that could serve existing power structures. I will show how his refusal to insist on any authorial narrative in his performances is, in fact, rooted in his unorthodox Leftist reception of the Volksbühne. When it comes to analyzing his productions’ dramaturgy,²⁴ however, I am more concerned with Castorf’s interventions into the dramatic text than with audience reception.

²⁴ For a concept of dramaturgy, I follow Castorf in taking my cues from Brecht. For Brecht, dramaturgy meant the “entire conceptual preparation from its inception to its realization” (Romanska 2). For Brecht, the role of the dramaturg included researching and developing a clear concept of the “political and historical as well as the

In this dissertation, I also situate Castorf as a materialist in the Benjaminian tradition. Like Benjamin, Castorf's approach to specific moments in the past, which he brings into consciousness in his dramaturgy, not only troubles linear narratives of history but attempts to "blast" the lifeforce out of historical periods and events. As such, Castorf unleashes their hidden insights for the present on the stage. To an extent, I myself am using Benjamin's approach of *Jetztzeit* (Now-Time), actively mining the Volksbühne history for pasts lodged within it that will shed light on this phenomenon and its implications for the Castorf era and the present. I show how Castorf's non-linear conception of history is achieved through creating intricate constellations of local histories, personages and text fragments that are what Benjamin sees as in the spirit of the historical materialist, namely, "grasp[ing] the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (263).

Jetztzeit is never just the object, it is perceiving a whole lifeworld lodged in the past—the material conditions, the labour unaccounted for, the failed struggles for emancipation. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin claims that the key to correcting historical wrongs lies in mining the past for its potentially redemptive use for the present, creating a temporal constellation. For Benjamin, a transformative force lodged within the past endows us, or the future more generally, with a "weak Messianic power" (254). The approach was born of Benjamin's response to the Hitler-Stalin pact and other left wing tragedies that compelled Benjamin to abandon hope in a progressive, linear narrative of history promoted by both the SPD and the KPD. As an approach, *Jetztzeit*'s objective is to explode, meaning to *activate* historical

aesthetic and formal aspects of a play" (2). The dramaturg should also serve as a "liaison between the team and the audience, writing program notes and theoretical articles on the production" (3).

consciousness, which is “characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action” (261). It also potentially facilitates a total break with history allowing for both illumination and a cancelling out. It is an operation of *aufheben*, a Hegelian dialectic: history is preserved, elevated and cancelled (263).

In this Benjaminian vein, I view Castorf’s approach to the stage and to the theatre institution as creating an archive of forgotten but vital moments. He does this by returning obsessively to the site-specific history of the Volksbühne, the Weimar Republic, 19th century Russia, and the biographies of nihilistic and reactionary writers and intellectuals. Castorf’s deployment of cultural and historical materialism challenges the *end of history* thesis that Fukuyama asserted (which will be discussed in detail in Chapter One). This situates Castorf in a lineage of other “curators” of vital history such as Benjamin, who wished to counter the certainty of progress and victory asserted by the Social Democrats and looked to Rosa Luxemburg’s Spartacists for inspiration (260).

I draw upon parallels between Benjamin’s materialism and Nietzschean genealogy. By reading interviews and existing studies on Castorf, I identify a lineage that takes us ultimately back to Marx and Nietzsche as his intellectual forebears. Castorf’s intellectual genealogy consists primarily of thinkers concerned with unsettling the finalities of liberal democracy and linear, progressive narratives of history. I show the diverging branches of illiberal, emancipatory and catastrophic thought on the Left *and* the Right that populate Castorf’s intellectual pantheon. I mark where these thinkers cross-pollinate with aesthetic currents such as the avant-gardes, their affective responses to historical developments such as nihilism and catastrophism, and the points at which thinkers on the Left and Right enter an unruly promiscuity with each other.

As a method, genealogy establishes the unlikely and inconvenient overlaps that unite the extremes of the political spectrum. Genealogies “expose these embarrassing connections between things that would rather be kept separate—underscoring the point that, even if they share similar qualities, ancestors don’t determine the actions of their descendants” (Kretsedemas 2). As such, the genealogical method “can be used to dissolve standards of truth that have been posited as timeless and universal” (2). In a Nietzschean mode, the genealogical method makes visible not only the biased and contingent nature of truth, but also how “truth” and “morals” can serve the interests of those in power. Like Nietzsche, his avowed role model, Castorf’s role as public intellectual is an expression of genealogical conceits, of exposing the origin of a discourse that serves the status quo and the identification of thinkers considered inconvenient according to the official narrative of history.

Foucault establishes a distinction between the evolutionary theories of *Ursprung* (origin) and *Entstehung*, the latter being the type of evolutionary theory that is most consistent with his genealogical method (Kretsedemas 3-4). Instead of predicting the qualities of descendants considering *Ursprung*, a theory of *Entstehung* explores the “‘innumerable beginnings’ of a thing—which underscores that the abilities of descendants cannot be predicted from the qualities of a single, original ancestor” (4). In other words, the genealogical method resists the closure or determinism we would see in, say, Darwin’s genealogy. My iteration of the genealogical method is rooted in Nietzsche, “the first scholar to seriously mine the philosophical implications of the genealogical method” (1). Following the example Nietzsche lays out in *The Genealogy of Morals*, I am interested in the development of a discourse, as well as in the unruly directions it can take us. Genealogies are not just maps of the past, but “templates for future action” (1). Guiding my genealogical approach, therefore, is attention to how the genealogy is being used in

the discourse at the Volksbühne. As with the concept *Jetztzeit*, then, I am both, in a sense, performing the genealogical method *and* charting Castorf's genealogy.

I use literary theorist Gérard Genette's concept of paratext ("Introduction" 1991) to consider the additional materials surrounding Castorf's stage productions as essential to the production of meaning. The paratexts that "frame" the theatrical productions are interviews, program books, banners, poster campaigns, and giveaways. Genette claims that the paratext is "always subordinate to 'its' text—in this case the performance or event (269). For Genette, "the paratext is a threshold" (Genette, *Paratexts* 1-2). It is "a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that ... is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (1-2). The paratextual artefacts and messages are devised to disorientate, shock, provoke, discourage, seduce, or be utilized by the beholder. I show how Castorf and his designer Bert Neumann have elevated the paratext to a dramaturgy of political provocation inspired by Dada.

Genette's method shows how an implicit context (in this case a state-funded theatre institution) "defines or modifies" the meaning of the paratext "in one way or another" (265). This is a vital aspect of an interpretation of Castorf's strategies as they exist in the context of an official state-funded theatre institution. This is to say that the meaning of the paratext would be interpreted entirely differently if it were not produced under the auspices of an official theatre institution with a strong left wing tradition. The context gives it a poetic license. This is to say that what we know about Castorf and the Volksbühne changes our perception and ensures that we "do not read the text the same way" (266).

Paratext also encourages us to consider *who* is being addressed. Certain elements of the paratext are addressed to the public in general. In the case of the Volksbühne this would be the banners, posters, flyers and giveaways positioned outside of the theatre in public space. Others are addressed “more specifically, and more restrictively, to the readers of the text alone” (267). These include the paratext disseminated *inside* the institution: program books, and books edited by or about the Volksbühne for sale during intermission. There are also those books published under the Volksbühne’s auspices sold in bookstores or matchbooks lying around in bars and existing at what Genette calls a “respective distance” from the primary text.

While pursuing grounded, archival and case-study research in Berlin for two extended periods, I attended Castorf and other directors’ productions, as well as political lectures, introductory lectures prior to performances, panel discussions, and conferences at the Volksbühne. My primary sources include videos of productions, as well as documentation (*Inszenierungsdokumente*)—large folders that contain rehearsal documentation, directors’ books, program booklets, media interviews and press clippings, which are all housed in the Volksbühne archive at the *Akademie der Künste* located at the Robert-Koch-Platz in Berlin.

I present case studies of three productions within three distinct periods at the Castorf era Volksbühne. In each, the case study dramatizes the tensions and diagnoses of the chapter that precedes it. Castorf’s adaptation of *Clockwork Orange* is the only production I viewed solely as a video recording dated October 11, 1995. I viewed the other two productions live at the Volksbühne: *Fuck Off, Amerika* (2008) and *Der Kaufmann von Berlin* (2010). I also received video recordings of these two productions from Castorf’s dramaturg Sebastian Kaiser for the repeat viewing required to undertake scholarly analysis. My analyses are attentive to Castorf’s reception of the historical context, the dramatic texts, and the institutional framework of state

funded theatre as sites of negotiation and contestation. In each case, I account for Castorf's attempt to revitalize the dramatic text with a view to exploding its hidden power in the present. The dissertation is therefore interested in Castorf's engagement with two primary artefacts: the theatre institution *and* the stage productions. I show how Castorf's reception of the historic institution informs his stagecraft.

In pursuing these case studies, I incorporate perspectives from theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte. Her book, *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), is undoubtedly influenced by her own experiences as a spectator at the Castorf era Volksbühne (5). As head of the *Institut für Theaterwissenschaft* at the Free University of Berlin, Fischer-Lichte would surely have seen many of the productions discussed in this dissertation. The Volksbühne had some of the most inspired and innovative theatre on offer in Berlin in the decade leading up to the publication of Fischer-Lichte's book. Fischer-Lichte grounds her approach to the concept of performance in J.L. Austin and Judith Butler. She explains this development as what she calls the "performative turn" of the 1960s in Western art and society (18). Here, the aesthetic encounter is understood as an "event," whose meanings, effects, and outcomes are radically unstable, because of each component's potential to influence how the others unfold.

Fischer-Lichte's concept of performance is constituted by the "bodily co-presence of actors and spectators" (32). The rules that govern the performance correspond to the rules of a game, negotiated by all participants—actors and spectators alike; they are followed and broken by all in equal measure" (32). This event is contingent upon the *autopoiesis* and the feedback loop between audience and spectator as co-creating and co-determining the performance (47).²⁵

²⁵ Describing the way performers and spectators react to one another, Fischer-Lichte argues, "performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop. Hence, performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree" (38). Elsewhere, Fischer-Lichte explains the "central concern of

As Marvin Carlson points out, Fischer-Lichte’s writing on performance overlaps the “utopian performance” of Jill Dolan, who likewise traces *autopoiesis* in performance. Dolan’s idea applies to those “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (qtd. in Fischer-Lichte 9). This, as Carlson puts it, is akin to what Fischer-Lichte calls “moments of enchantment, resulting in a sudden deeper insight into the shared process of being in the world” (9).

All the methods I use are devised to illuminate Castorf’s refusal of the end of history and his attempt to open the institution and canon to those normally excluded by high culture. My methods are aligned to Castorf’s own approach and are oriented toward creating openings, resisting closure, and historicizing along Leftist lines.

Chapter Breakdown

The following chapters divide up Castorf’s quarter-century at the Volksbühne into three periods. Castorf’s politics and aesthetics in these periods are both rooted in the specificities of the historical moment and build on longstanding commitments to a form of praxis and an institutional legacy. The first chapter – the only one not paired with a case study – sets the intellectual coordinates of Castorf and the Volksbühne at the putative end of history. Here we see the stakes of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc play out through the work of Fukuyama, Derrida, and Baudrillard in the 1990s. The ascendancy of neoliberal hegemony provides the grounds for Castorf’s agonistic position, culling from the rebellious, anti-liberal thinkers of both the Far Right

the performance was not to understand but to experience it and to cope with these experiences, which could not be supplanted there and then by reflection” (17).

and the Far Left. We see, ultimately, a Nietzschean nexus where Jünger and Schmitt on the one hand, and Müller and Žižek on the other hand, overlap. This point of intersection becomes foundational to Castorf's praxis.

The second chapter takes us through Castorf's first few seasons at the Volksbühne. Castorf's challenge in the early post-*Wende* period was to find a method of reflecting the tensions on the streets of Berlin and refusing the blooming landscapes promised by Chancellor Helmut Kohl. We see how the refusal of the end of history manifests in Castorf's praxis and his stagecraft. The latter exemplifies how Castorf absorbed this context of disorientation and fracturing into his aesthetics. Building on discarded socialist and local histories, Castorf's aesthetic compass pointed defiantly East, establishing the overarching orientation and strategies that would carry him through his tenure. During this early period, Castorf's Volksbühne was the only theatre in a fractured Berlin that dealt with the realities of unification and coaxed the dark unspoken energies of many dissatisfied citizens into relief on stage. In Chapter Three, these unspoken energies take form in Castorf's *Clockwork Orange*. In this first case study chapter I explore how Castorf interrogated the presumed consensus that characterized this period in Germany. In *Clockwork*, Castorf thematized the resurgence of nationalism and Far-Right violence in East Germany on his stage. *Clockwork* exemplifies the aesthetic disposition of this early period, reviving many of the strategies of the historical avant-gardes.

Chapter Four, The Russian Turn, takes us through the melancholia and depression that led the Volksbühne into the new millennium. In the absence of a Helmut Kohl as a dramatic oppositional figure, Castorf reorients his coordinates. With the arrival of the true finale of the Cold War in Germany, Russia and Dostoevsky's novels become sources of a new kind of opposition to neoliberal hegemony. If the fourth wall had been broken down aesthetically in the

earlier period, Castorf now built fortifications—a conceptual barrier to Americanization. Russia then appears as both a discursive field to mine, and the source of new aesthetic inspiration. We see this exemplified in the Chapter Five case study of Limonov’s *Fuck Off, Amerika*. Limonov’s novel gives expression to these themes and provides the template for the excessive aesthetic strategies Castorf was now known for: hyperbole, overidentification, slapstick, taboo transgression, and the main character’s will to power. We see here Castorf’s keen interest in using the biographical novel of a marginal, humiliated figure and mining this for its disaffection as an allegory for the experience of a new stage of postsocialism.

With Limonov’s novel staged on the cusp of a new financial crisis, we find ourselves entering a new period in Castorf’s tenure with Chapter Six. If there was any doubt about the veracity of the end of history thesis in the *Wende* period, the failure of its premise becomes clearest now with the 2008 global economic collapse. For Castorf, this crisis called back to the market crash in 1929, on the eve of the rise of the National Socialists and Piscator’s attempt to create an anti-fascist theatre that might unite the Left. The same risks of anti-Semitism boiling over provides an opportunity for Castorf to again mine the darkest recesses of German historical memory. Here the spectre of left wing anti-Semitism in Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” is discussed in relation to Castorf’s treatment of “the Jew” and the spectre of the Holocaust that haunts his stage. We see a revival of Piscator’s proletarian call to arms as well in this period through the Idea of Communism Conference in 2010, even as Castorf always maintains a tension between seriousness and cynicism or ambivalence in his stagings. This tension becomes clearest in the final case study chapter, Mehring’s *Der Kaufmann von Berlin*. The production is not only a return to Piscator’s Dadaist production from 1929, but like in other periods, a demonstration of Castorf’s digressive, associative stagecraft. Historical figures from the Far Right, like Ernst von

Salomon, are introjected into the text, along with hyperbolic, transgressive depictions of racial, ethnic, and gender difference. *Kaufmann* demonstrates again Castorf's willingness to enter taboo territories that it seemed no other theatre in Germany was prepared to touch.

The dissertation ends with an attempt to look back at the legacy left by Castorf's tenure, and why the inheritor of his role, Chris Dercon, launched one of the greatest *kulturpolitische* scandals in recent Berlin memory. Where is the Volksbühne now in relation to its founding imperatives? What can be said of Castorf and his controversies, now that the dust has settled?

Chapter 1: Castorf's Intellectual Genealogy

*Everything that came before us was practice for the present that we now have.
That is insane continuity, not crisis.*

— Castorf, “Krise? Wahnwitzige Kontinuität”

*The strongest is the strongest alone – that is my idea. I conditioned myself with
Nietzsche and otherwise guarded my aloneness.*

— Castorf qtd. in Schütt 103

Before proceeding to analyze his artistic work, it is necessary to illuminate the intellectual genealogy that informs Castorf's interpretation of the postsocialist period, his directorial work, and the way he understood the Volksbühne as a larger conceptual project. Under Castorf's aegis, the Volksbühne became a theatre that invested heavily in anti-capitalist and anti-liberal theories. While the theatre came to reflect the artistic director's own unorthodox left wing inclinations and reception of history, it also became a space to explore conservative thought and reinvigorate 20th century Germany's dark historical legacies. These preoccupations with left wing and conservative traditions co-existed in a disorientating way in both Castorf's discourse and his productions. As this chapter shows, some of the most influential thinkers for Castorf and the Volksbühne come counter-intuitively from the Conservative Revolutionary camp of the interwar years and its late 19th century forbear, Friedrich Nietzsche. This camp includes the Futurist *Krieger* Ernst Jünger, whom Castorf frequently cites, as well as the conservative legal theorist Carl Schmitt. In my excavation of the figures constituting Castorf's pantheon, I consider why a director who works in the left wing tradition of anti-fascist political theatre explores conservative and reactionary thinkers and continually returns to the polarized intellectual culture of the Weimar Republic. As I demonstrate, the political and discursive conceits of the postsocialist Volksbühne convey Castorf's preoccupation with historical thinkers

associated with *both* radicalized ends of the political spectrum—the Far-Left and the Conservative Revolutionary right.

Castorf evidently perceived the postsocialist period as analogous to the fractious liberal democratic Weimar Republic (1918-1933). Throughout the Republic’s existence, the Social Democratic hold on power was continually threatened by illiberal reaction and violence by the two ideological extremes until the National Socialists seized power. For Castorf, there were important elements uniting opposing left and right critiques of liberal democracy that were particularly vibrant in the 1920s. These lent themselves to his own ambivalent response to the new liberal Germany. They include (1) critiques of conformism, liberal consensus and decadence (2) an aesthetic-political predilection for spontaneous or direct action, vitality, risk and voluntarism, and (3) apocalyptic narratives of catastrophe and the decline of the West.

As the artistic director of a state-funded theatre, Castorf emerged during the post-*Wende* period as a public intellectual in a way unique to theatre artists from the former GDR.²⁶ Castorf, already a renowned cult director, was primed to take on a position of public attention and influence after German unification. Because of their privileged status, artists from Eastern Bloc countries were poised to be leaders in the changes underway during the *Wende*.²⁷ The East

²⁶ For the concept or role of a public intellectual I defer to Jürgen Habermas’s “The Public Sphere” (1989). Therein, Habermas discusses the public sphere as a space wherein individuals can freely discuss social problems and potentially influence political action. Habermas argues that the public sphere requires “specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it” (136). For Habermas (2006), one type of actor who makes their appearances on the stage of an established public sphere is *the intellectual* who has gained a wide reputation in a specific field such as a writer, academic or artist. Unlike experts and lobbyists, the intellectual can spontaneously participate in public discourse with the intention of promoting general interests (416). Here, we can also consider Nancy Fraser’s concept of a counter-public which is, in a sense, one way the Volksbühne can be perceived. In “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Fraser identifies the fact that marginalized groups (i.e. women, the subaltern) are excluded from a universal public sphere. These marginalized groups, Fraser claims, form their *own* public spheres, a *counter-public*.

²⁷ The obvious example is the Czech dissident writer and playwright turned “Velvet Revolution” leader Václav Havel (1936-2011). Havel served as the last president of Czechoslovakia from 1989-1992 and then as the first President of the Czech Republic from 1993-2003.

German dramatist Heiner Müller, for example, had been a leader in the Alexanderplatz demonstration on November 4, 1989—a protest of 5000 people that helped propel the events of November 9 when the Berlin Wall fell. The younger Castorf had not yet reached Müller’s level of influence or renown, but like him, was a highly theoretical thinker ready to express his thoughts on unification in the public sphere. Both saw unification as the West’s thwarting of the attempt to reform the GDR from within. Castorf’s ability to articulate not only the disappointment felt by the dissident artists and intellectuals of the GDR, but also to channel the responses of many East Germans, enabled him to become an important participant in the debates around unification and the resurgence of nationalism in Germany. Castorf’s Volksbühne would respond to a political climate of *Orientierungslosigkeit* (orientationlessness) as a “moral tribunal.” This tribunal was initially devised to interrogate the liberal democratic rhetoric and nationalist myths emerging from the German unification. Castorf and his *Mitstreiter* (co-combatants) Bert Neumann (scenographer), Matthias Lilienthal and Carl Hegemann (dramaturges) geared the Volksbühne’s paratext and programming towards young, disillusioned Germans skeptical of *both* real existing socialism and liberal capitalism.

Two theoretical texts that speak to Castorf’s interpretation of the post-*Wende* period are Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and Jean Baudrillard’s *America* (1988). These two texts reflect the absence of political alternatives and the new experience of postmodern hyperreality wrought by Western mass media infiltrating the former Eastern Bloc, respectively. One strongly endorsing liberal democracy, the other cool, nihilistic, and post-Marxist, both were written by Western scholars and capture the challenges and experiences of the postsocialist period as Castorf perceived them. In the 1990s especially, Castorf vehemently refuted the triumphalist claim of the “end of history” espoused by

Fukuyama, which was ubiquitous at the time. In *The End of History*, the so-called liberal victory over communism had discredited all alternatives to free market capitalism and liberal democracy. Castorf would articulate this struggle as a battle between East and West, firmly positioning the Volksbühne in the “OST” camp. On the other hand, in *America*, Baudrillard describes a political vacuum where simulacra of both history and subjectivity exist only as vacuous images of reality. As Baudrillard describes it, “America” is a depthless image-world into which the real has vanished and in which the shopping malls, highways, cities and deserts are characterized by an ecstatic vacuity and hyperreality.²⁸

Castorf not only refused the closure of the “end of history,” but presented a view of German history, including the architectural history of the Volksbühne, that was haunted by the past. In this sense, Castorf’s conceptual approach corresponded to Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993), which was a direct response to Fukuyama. Derrida argued that the status of Western history was impelled by the demand for justice, *qua* Marx, and therefore resisted post-political closure. Indeed, those individuals disenfranchised or marginalized under liberal capitalism’s terms, as well as the rise of ethno-nationalism and ethnic warfare within Europe, served Derrida and Castorf as “evidence” to refute Fukuyama’s claims of happy outcomes and liberal capitalism’s ultimate victory. Central to Castorf’s interpretation of the historical moment and his critique from the Left were Heiner Müller and Slavoj Žižek as public intellectuals in the post-*Wende* context. The bleak prognostications each thinker espoused fueled their desperate searches for an exit strategy from the grim finalities of liberal capitalism. Müller and Žižek share

²⁸ Here I wish to note Castorf’s hyperbolic diagnostic style, which is aligned with Baudrillard’s. In an interview titled “America as Fiction” Baudrillard explains, “I’ve no wish to conceal the element of defiance and artificiality within my sort of fictionalizing. [...] Let me repeat that I’m not interested in realism. I am not speaking of the real extermination of things, of the physical, biological disappearance of living beings. My books are scenarios. I *play out* the end of things, I offer a complete parody of it” (133).

a catastrophic-apocalyptic perception of history, a worldview made especially evident in some of Žižek's later works such as *First as Tragedy then as Farce* (2009) and *Living in the End Times* (2010).

To understand the ambivalence under which Castorf's Volksbühne operated, one must also examine the influence of Nietzsche's thought on Castorf, as well as on the thinkers with whom Castorf engaged, both on the Left and on the Right. I consider Nietzsche's provocative anti-liberal, anti-bourgeois thought—his attacks on liberal egalitarianism, his attempt to overcome nihilism, as well as the stagnation he associates with the “last man” as Castorf integrates these into the dramaturgy of the Volksbühne. Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* is a central text for Castorf's work; Castorf includes direct citations of it in productions to critique liberal society's preoccupation with comfort and security. Moreover, Nietzsche's *The Use and Abuse of History* shows how his discourse of vitality and the will to power spans the Right and the Left. Nietzsche's principles of anarchic vitality and of history's potentially explosive use for the present, significantly influenced both political and aesthetic critiques of the Conservative Revolutionary Right and Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. For Nietzsche—and this becomes a trope on Castorf's stage—intoxication and frenzy (*Rausch*) are among the most rare and powerful experiences to be had by human beings. Stimulated by aesthetic phenomena, the state of intoxication lifts the individual into a higher mode of being characterized by strength, power, and the excitement of sensuality.

Benjamin's claim, that the rise of fascism was the result of a failed revolution, propelled hyperbolic pronouncements in Müller and Žižek—pronouncements that infused the politics and aesthetics of Castorf's stage. Yet unlike Benjamin, who denounced as fascists Jünger and Ernst

von Salomon in his “Theories of German Fascism” essay (1930), Castorf *engaged them*.²⁹ Castorf believed of the postsocialist period that discontent and *ressentiment* lay unspoken beneath the euphoria of the dominant unification narrative.³⁰ He turned to the Conservative Revolutionaries of the Weimar Republic to explore the rhetoric from a period in German history he perceived as analogous to 1989. This was the lamentation over the victory of the liberal West as “foreign” occupation and the devaluation of Prussian “heroic” virtues in favour of effete and decadent ones. For Castorf, Conservative Revolutionaries such as Jünger were invaluable for tapping into reactionary sentiments and longings for “higher meaning” and “sacrifice” that had uncannily resurfaced in post-*Wende* German society. Crucially, Jünger’s late Weimar writings—“*Die totale Mobilmachung*” (“Total Mobilization”), *Der Arbeiter* (*The Worker*), and *Über den Schmerz* (*On Pain*)—transcend the distinction between Left and Right “isms” to diagnose the rising tide of active nihilism and authoritarianism underway. By incorporating thinkers such as Jünger into his intellectual pantheon, Castorf wished to grasp the Nietzschean conservatives’ critiques of liberalism as well as to explore why the Far Right seemed to again be gaining momentum in the East after the collapse of the Wall. Essentially, Castorf wished to identify what was missing in liberal democratic society that Jünger’s work exposed.

In this chapter, I map out the intellectual undercurrents of Castorf’s Volksbühne along two broad trajectories: (I) the contemporary diagnosticians of its cultural milieu, and (II) the responses to the liberal consensus in both Weimar Germany and in the post-*Wende* period. I

²⁹ In his 1992 autobiography *Krieg ohne Schlacht*, Müller wrote that “texts by Nietzsche and Jünger were the first thing I read after the war” (275). In 1988, Müller visited Jünger in Willflingen (275-282).

³⁰ According to Nietzsche, *ressentiment* is an emotion like jealousy felt by small-minded and weak individuals (“weak priests”) who then turned their inferiority into a moral schema that equates goodness with weakness. It is the externalization of the *Mensch des Ressentiment*’s inferiority onto a moral schema that gives birth to Judeo-Christian values in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

begin with two key contributions to understanding the post-*Wende* period: Fukuyama's declaration of the End of History, and Derrida's hauntological response to the idea of historical closure. I follow this with Baudrillard's accounts of spatial and temporal collapse under postmodernity. From here I demarcate the range of ideological positions at play in Castorf's intellectual genealogy, from the Left (Benjamin, Müller, Žižek), from *between* Left and Right (Nietzsche), and from the Far Right (Jünger, Schmitt). Juxtaposed, these thinkers point to the ultimate ambivalence of Castorf's treatment of politics.

Castorf's Contemporaries in the Post-*Wende*

1989 and Fukuyama's End of History

Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History or the Last Man* (1992) was the definitive liberal response to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Eastern Bloc. In it, Fukuyama, an American political scientist, heralded the end of ideologies and the final victory of capitalist liberal democracy as the best possible political-economic system. Fukuyama's triumphant pronouncements were ubiquitous after the fall of the Berlin Wall and in the decade immediately after German unification and hence are essential for understanding the political climate in which Castorf found himself when he took over the Volksbühne. For Fukuyama, liberal democracy had proven itself superior to all other tried and tested ideologies (xi). It represented a political ideal that could not be improved upon in terms of the principles of equality and freedom it espoused, while all other rival ideologies, especially communism, contained inherent deficiencies and contradictions (xi). For Fukuyama, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc symbolized an irreversible universal, liberalizing tide that meant economic betterment for citizens from former socialist nations, as well as increased individual rights and freedoms, all of which he proclaimed as gospel-like "good news" (xiii).

According to Fukuyama, a “remarkable consensus” had been achieved by the end of the 1980s: liberal democracy had proved itself superior to all other rival ideologies (xi). The end of history meant that the principles and institutions achieved by liberal democracy had settled all the big questions once and for all (xii). Any failures or shortcomings of liberal democracy were a result of the incomplete implementation of the principles of liberty and equality, rather than on those principles themselves (xi). Fukuyama also argued that liberal principles such as the free market in economies produced “unprecedented levels of material prosperity,” which occurred in tandem with the move toward political freedom on a global scale (xiii-xiv). Central to Fukuyama’s argument was that liberal economic thinking either precedes or follows the move toward political freedom around the world (xiii).

From Castorf’s point of view, the collapse of the communist East and the fall of the Berlin Wall looked different. With the demise of the GDR and the FRG, two distinct nations that had existed in ideological opposition to one another disappeared overnight. Out of the fragments of the Cold War, a unified German superpower was emerging that many East Germans perceived as the hegemonic domination of the Western liberal democratic model over the socialist one. The old geopolitical tensions of the Cold War were rapidly degenerating into a new era of instability and crisis in the former Eastern Bloc. The former Yugoslavia was descending into ethnic warfare and Far Right and neo-Nazi movements were on the rise in the former GDR. The material wealth promised by the free market failed to arrive in the East and instead economic instability and joblessness prevailed. According to those dissident intellectuals from the former East Germany, namely Müller and Castorf, this was the result of the collapse of a collective and utopian vision of society, which was being rapidly replaced by consumer culture and the American-dominated mass media.

There was, however, overwhelming evidence to support Fukuyama's claims. Most East Germans at first celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall and believed in the idea that liberal democracy and the free market would bring a vastly improved quality of life to the former GDR. This initial euphoria was captured in the globally disseminated images of joyous East German revelers standing triumphantly atop the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. The spirit of this triumph was palpable in *The End of History* wherein Fukuyama suggests that Western liberal democracy represents the "endpoint of humanity's sociocultural evolution"—a "final form of human government" and a clear victory over experiments in socialism (xi).

To be clear, Fukuyama's "end of history" did not mean that history was "over" in the sense that there would no longer be any great historical events, wars or catastrophes. Rather, what Fukuyama meant was that "History" — "understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process" in the Hegelian tradition—had concluded (xii). The search for the most emancipatory form of human government had ended—not so much with liberal practice, but in the liberal idea. There was no ideology with pretensions to universality that was able to challenge liberal democracy and no universal principle of legitimacy other than the sovereignty of the people (45). Fukuyama endorsed the idea that all human societies manifest a common evolutionary pattern in the direction of liberal democracy, constituting a Universal History of humankind (48). In his reception of Hegel's dialectical view of history, Fukuyama argues that earlier forms of political and social organization contained internal contradictions that became evident, led to their downfall, and were replaced by something improved and better (65). This battle of ideologies that had driven historical development had now ended; what remained was the struggle to implement stable liberal democracies as "the institutionalization of human freedom" (xii).

Fukuyama predicts that over time liberal democracy will become increasingly prevalent, and with it, the values of equality and liberty will spread on a global scale.³¹

Fukuyama builds on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), which accounts for a directional, linear progress of Universal History culminating in the liberal democratic state. Hegel's account of history is non-materialist and charts the momentum of World Spirit or *Geist* in its stages of trying to manifest the possibilities for human freedom and especially the *recognition* of every individual's worth and dignity (xvi). The desire for recognition as a human being drives individuals to become combatants and risk their lives: one submits, the other is victorious, and hence the master and slave are born (xvi).³² Their struggle is about "pure prestige" and not about biology, and this is where Hegel sees "the first glimmer of human freedom" (xvi). For Hegel, what makes a human being is the ability to overcome self-preservation and animal instincts for the sake of "higher, abstract principles and goals" (xvi).³³

Fukuyama saw two inherent weaknesses of liberal democracy that are articulated in the critiques of the extreme Left and Right ends of the political spectrum. The first critique Fukuyama attended to was on behalf of the Left: namely, the economic inequalities that liberal democracies were doomed to reproduce, and the division of labour that perpetuated unequal

³¹ In his 2018 book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (2018), Fukuyama lays out the new coordinates of Western liberalism wherein the demand for recognition serves as a master concept. Narrower forms of recognition (i.e. identity politics) have, however, polarized liberal institutions and contributed to populism and the rise of white nationalism. Continuing many of his arguments in *The End of History*, Fukuyama claims that populist nationalism springs from the demand for recognition.

³² "The outcome of the battle to the death was a division of human society into a class of masters, who were willing to risk their lives, and a class of slaves, who gave in to their natural fear of death" (xvii).

³³ The Hegelian understanding of contemporary liberal democracy is one wherein "every citizen recognizes the dignity and humanity of every other citizen and where that dignity is recognized in turn by the state through the granting of rights" (xviii). Hegel asserted that history at this point comes to an end because the human longing that had driven the historical process has now been satisfied in a society characterized by universal and reciprocal recognition (xviii). No other arrangement of collective life is better able to satisfy this longing and hence no further progressive historical change is possible.

recognition (xxii). The second critique, arguably the “more powerful criticism,” was that individuals in liberal democracies risked becoming passive and inert with nothing but material comfort and security on their minds (xxii). For this critique, Fukuyama drew on Nietzsche, who saw material comfort and democratic egalitarianism neutering the striving and aspirational aspect of human beings (xxii). Fukuyama warned against the risk of this situation as the “fear of becoming contemptible ‘last men’” could lead individuals “to assert themselves in new and unforeseen ways, even to the point of becoming once again bestial ‘first men’” (xxiii). The risk would be caused by an individual’s *megalothymia*, “the desire to be recognized as superior to other people” (182) and the Nietzschean position par excellence. With the “decline of community life,” Fukuyama explained—and with *megalothymia* as a form of illiberal reaction—individuals in liberal democracies risk a “return to being first men engaged in bloody and pointless prestige battles, only this time with modern weapons” (295).

It is this central, dialectical tension between the “last man” and *megalothymia* that Castorf attends to. This is to say that in order to grasp the inherent political risk of the Nietzschean Right’s critique of liberalism encapsulated by Fukuyama, Castorf’s dramaturgy has channeled the critique of bourgeois liberal capitalism. For Castorf, the discourse of the Nietzschean Right explained the irrational striving and revolutionary voluntarism³⁴ of 20th century reactionary writers such as Ernst Jünger, Ernst von Salomon, and Eduard Limonov, amongst others.

The *End of History* reinforces Hegel’s idea that the desire for recognition is the most important propeller of history, greater than the economy. For Fukuyama, individual recognition

³⁴ According to Žižek, voluntarism can be understood as “an active attitude of taking risks” even if the result is Stalinism or another form of totalitarianism (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real* 81).

is the central problem of politics and to a certain extent, it is for Castorf as well. Castorf perceived that in the years after unification East Germans constituted a new underclass and were not fully recognized by their Western counterparts, breeding *ressentiment*. Moreover, “higher, abstract principles and goals” were conspicuously absent in the new neoliberal state. These were reasons why the Far Right was on the rise in the former GDR, as it corralled and unified the disenfranchised members of society based on a form of recognition provided within a national community. Nationalism, according to Fukuyama, is a “modern yet *not fully rational* form of recognition” as well as the source of the “century’s most intense conflicts” (xx). Fukuyama argues that the liberal state will ultimately overcome nationalism because it offers universal recognition to all individuals, whereas nationalism demands recognition only for a linguistic, cultural, or ethnic group (xix).

Fukuyama’s position is emblematic of the liberal reading of Hegel, perceiving the latter’s finalities as enshrined in Western democratic institutions and universal declarations of human rights. This position differs fundamentally from the reception of Hegel by Karl Marx. While Marx takes from Hegel the idea of History as a “grand narrative,” the two differ markedly on what type of society will emerge at the end of history. Marx believed that one fundamental contradiction remained unsolved in Hegel, namely that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Marx argued that the “liberal state did not represent the universalization of freedom, but only the victory of freedom for a certain class, the bourgeoisie” (65). In his critique of Hegel, Marx observed that in liberal democratic societies human beings remained alienated from themselves because capital, a human creation, has been turned into their lord and master and controls them (65). Contrary to Hegel, Marx perceived history in the 19th century as unfinished and the dialectical movement of history as supporting a vision of history according to class

struggle. Where Hegel called the bureaucracy of the liberal state the “universal class” because it represents the interests of the people, Marx claimed that it “represented only particular interests within civil society, those of the capitalists who dominated it” (65). For Marx, the end of history would arrive with the victory of the proletariat, the true “universal class” (65). All contradictions would be resolved after a proletarian dictatorship within a global communist utopia that would end class struggle (65).

This contention between Hegel and Marx directly pertains to the Volksbühne, both historically and as Castorf understood it. Castorf’s reception of the theatre revived the question that has plagued the institution since its inception, namely “who is *das Volk*?”—all members of a democratic nation state or the disenfranchised workers, the proletariat? What political system most adequately responds to the individual’s longing for freedom and recognition? Castorf continually defers not only to the early 20th century totalitarian regimes that laid claim to representing *das Volk*, but also to *das Volk*’s own “Faustian” deals with these regimes in kind. For Castorf, former GDR citizens’ unflinching embrace of the capitalist free market and rising nationalist sentiment after the fall of the Wall represented yet another such Faustian instance.

The End of History is the definitive text for understanding the triumphalist liberal consensus Castorf responded to, not only in the 1990s but throughout his tenure. The general acceptance of Fukuyama’s ideas in political circles seemed to sound the death knell for a “third way” of reformed socialism—the idea of establishing genuine, anti-authoritarian socialism in the GDR that would continue to resist market capitalism. This type of democratic socialism was what many East German “dissident Marxists” were after. This position was exemplified by intellectuals such as the dramatist Heiner Müller and the lawyer-turned-politician Gregor Gysi. Gysi was known for defending dissidents in the GDR, among them Castorf.

As deplorable as Fukuyama's thesis was, the "end of history" at least provided a pronouncement bombastic enough for Castorf to position himself against. Castorf responded to the so-called "end of history" by adopting various strategies including orienting the Volksbühne "backward" against the westward liberal *telos* and towards the East (OST), as well as by displaying evidence of the social and economic challenges of unification. In this way, Castorf went about disproving Fukuyama's claim that there was a consensus and the idea that the recognition provided by the liberal state adequately satisfied human desires. At the Volksbühne, Fukuyama's liberal Hegelianism was countered, in part, by a left wing Hegelianism—by conveying the ongoing struggles for recognition taking place in the margins of society and attuning itself to the new iterations of class struggle emerging in the postsocialist context.

Derrida and the Hauntological Stage

Despite his cynicism and ambivalence, Castorf refused to be done with *both* the possibility once contained within the GDR, as well as the ideas of Karl Marx. In the 1990s especially, Castorf vied for justice and emancipation for those disenfranchised by capitalism, at the same time as he strongly renounced the linear development of history-as-progress that is the case in the thought of both Hegel, Marx and Fukuyama. Castorf instead engaged a non-linear, fragmentary approach to history and the Marxian lineage that bears the distinct mark of Walter Benjamin.³⁵ As early as his directorial work in the 1980s, Castorf's digressional, associative and deconstructive approach to dramatic texts evinced the influence of the French poststructuralist Jacques Derrida.³⁶ In Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993)—which contains the most significant

³⁵ Benjamin's *Arcades Project* was an attempt to offer a grand narrative in fragmented form. It was a grand narrative built on fragmentary foundations, which is evidence of his desire to connect transcendence with immanence. (Stephen Bonner *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists* 33)

³⁶ Derrida's 1967 book *Of Grammatology* introduced the majority of ideas influential within deconstruction, which became an intellectual movement in France in the 1960s and 1970s at a time when Western philosophy—

response to Fukuyama in the 1990s—we see unmistakable resonances with Castorf’s approach to the postsocialist period and the Volksbühne.

According to Derrida, Fukuyama’s *End of History* was a symptom of Western anxiety around Marxism: essentially the West’s need to ensure the “death of Marx” (70-78). Derrida argues that as social inequalities intensify, both historical consciousness and the emancipatory narrative of communism are needed more than ever. Fukuyama was none other than a Western-liberal evangelist, proselytizing the “New Gospel” of globalized neoliberalism as an eschatological finality (70). For Derrida, the realities of life in liberal democratic, free market nations— “the plight of the homeless, the lack of adequate health care, environmental degradation, and enormous national debt burdens” —needed to be soberly confronted (viii). Derrida challenges Fukuyama’s claims with evidence of the “destructive, even violent nationalisms which have followed in the wake of the collapse of communism, not to mention virulent forms of ethnocentrism and xenophobia perhaps not seen since Hitler’s Germany” (ix). The empirical realities of life after the disappearance of communism themselves precluded the closure that the “end of history” hailed.

Derrida built his case around the ongoing relevance of Marx and Engels’s opening lines of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), namely that a “specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism.” Marx himself proposed that “time is out of joint”—a notion of time that is impelled by demands from the past, and which continue to haunt the West. Derrida offered the term *hauntology*—a homophone for the French *ontologie*—defined as an opening or fissure in

“understood broadly as the purification and systematic articulation of the principles of Western rationality”—began to be problematized because of its instrumental connections to social repression and structural domination.

history from whence an ongoing appeal to justice speaks.³⁷ Following Marx, Derrida also theatricalized the term *hauntology*, presenting it as akin to the “out-of-jointness” described by the titular character of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, who saw rot in the state of Denmark. Therein, a bloody play for power in the Danish royal court leads to murder and injustice. These crimes compel Hamlet’s father, the murdered King, to return—to haunt the stage from the grave demanding retribution. For Derrida, *hauntology* was the way in which history insinuates itself in the present. What Marx’s spectres demand, according to Derrida, is “[. . .] justice where it is not yet, not yet there, where it is no longer, let us understand where it is no longer present, and where it will never be, no more than the law, reducible to laws or rights” (xviii). For Derrida, this demand for justice will continue to impel historical consciousness.

Derrida’s prior work on concepts of trace and *différance* serve as the foundation of his formulation of *hauntology*. Here, there is no temporal point of pure origin, no pure present. Rather, the present is always already contaminated by the past. This is also to say that for Derrida, the spirit of Marx is even more relevant *after* the fall of the Berlin Wall. He predicts that the West’s ignorance of the suffering still present in the world will haunt it and eventually provide the impetus for a renewed interest in communism (107-108).

Following Derrida’s concept of *hauntology*, it is important to understand Castorf’s Volksbühne stage as hauntological—as a stage that resisted closure because of Castorf’s ongoing deferral to site-specific histories. If the GDR represented a now-absent “other” to liberal capitalism, then the Volksbühne would at least open the stage for an “other” from whence an appeal to justice could continue to speak. This is to say that the Volksbühne refused the closure

³⁷ *Hauntology* is a concept that refers to the situation of temporal, historical, and ontological disjunction in which the apparent presence of being is replaced by a deferred non-origin, represented by “the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (Davis 373).

signaled by the supposed end of history because of Castorf's ongoing *différance* to its site-specific promises.³⁸ The spectral politics of Castorf's aesthetics are key in that throughout his tenure Castorf placed the Volksbühne in dialogue with the theatre's institutional history, architecture, and *genius loci*: "Art for the People" (*Die Kunst dem Volke*). Castorf's approach was impelled by the Volksbühne's foundational promise to work towards emancipation for the disenfranchised, as well as by his acknowledgement of the dark National Socialist and Stalinist legacies directly inscribed into the building's architecture.

Castorf follows in this tradition along with Marx, Benjamin, Derrida and Müller, wherein the past is granted an indelible status in the present. What Castorf continued from Müller's reception of German history was the idea that the past rises within the context of the living present, challenging people to complete the revolutionary task.³⁹ In the case of the Volksbühne, it is as if its very first patrons—the ghosts of workers past—continue to underwrite Castorf's struggle for improved conditions for those disenfranchised by capitalism.

Baudrillard's *America*: An "Imitation of Life"

While Fukuyama represented the consensus around the victory of liberal capitalism and Derrida strongly refused the claim of historical closure with *hauntology*, a new ontological experience of postmodern "hyperreality" was infiltrating the former East. Castorf observed that after American Western consumer culture "colonized" the former socialist East in the form of McDonalds, MTV, and Hollywood blockbusters, life took on a strangely surreal and inauthentic

³⁸ *Différance* undermines the unity and coherence of a text when a deconstructive reading is performed. Consequently, meaning is disseminated across the text and can be found only in traces, in the unending chain of signification. In the free play of meanings, one signifier leads to a signified, which itself becomes a signifier for another signified and so on, such that the ultimate signified (the "Transcendental Signified"), which transcends all signifiers, is never attained.

³⁹ In *Germania*, Müller explains: "[i]n order to get rid of the nightmare of history, you first have to acknowledge its existence. You have to know about history. It would come back in the old-fashioned way, as a nightmare, Hamlet's ghost. [...] Very important aspects of our history have been repressed for too long" (24).

hue. This experience was the result of a near seamless totality of media images that were swiftly encroaching former socialist terrain from the West. These hollow signs were dominating daily life in the East, reflecting not only the promise of material affluence and the myth of the American Dream, but detracting focus from the high unemployment rate and genuine discontent on the streets.

No single thinker has more evocatively delineated the vanishing of the real, the political void, and the cool nihilism of the postmodern age than French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, an oft-cited source for Castorf. Castorf's perception of postmodernism should be understood through Baudrillardian concepts such as simulacra, simulation, and especially hyperreality.⁴⁰ In fact, Castorf appropriated Baudrillard's concepts to describe the new cultural conditions of postsocialism as a direct corollary of American consumerism's "colonization" of the former East. Baudrillard's hyperreality is a concept that Castorf incorporated directly into his dramaturgy and is defined as the inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced postmodern societies (*Simulacra* 1). It is a condition in which reality and fiction are seamlessly blended so that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins. Baudrillard describes a society of referentless images that have usurped reality and, as such, where the reality principle itself has collapsed. If the mind buckles in its attempt to assess the reality of the external world, then the distinction between reality and fiction disappears.

⁴⁰ Baudrillard describes the simulacra as the copy without an original. When Baudrillard refers to the "precession of simulacra," he is referring to the way simulacra—signs without an origin, with no relation to reality—have come to precede reality (*Simulacra* 166). Baudrillard's famous aphorism for this occurrence—culled from a short story by Luis Borges—describes the drawing of a map to the scale of the earth, covering it, in a manner that the "map precedes the territory" (166). The simulacrum, Baudrillard explains, is "never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none" (166).

Baudrillard's thought underwrites Castorf's interpretation of the Western postmodern capitalist world. In *America* (1988), the text most frequently cited by Castorf, Baudrillard devotes an entire cross-country travelogue to proving an earlier point laid out in *Simulacra and Simulation*, namely that America itself is a fiction that requires an explicitly phantasmatic space like Disneyland to make it seem real. This Disneyfication of daily life was precisely what Castorf saw colonizing the former East. "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real...whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real but belong to the hyperreal order and the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (12-13). The new status of the sign threatened to absorb the very real discontents of post-unification society in a Western media-disseminated fiction, thus spreading the experience of hyperreality.

Crucial to Castorf's reading of Baudrillard's *America*, however, is the fact that the depiction of American postmodernism is not without its own sublime aesthetic qualities. The account of Baudrillard's road trip through America describes a closed circuit of TV and film screens enforcing an entirely fictionalized image of American life. Neon signs, flickering televisions in empty rooms, endless commercials, advertisements, billboards, and an expanse of highways, hotels, and motels characterize the unending transience and circulation of signs that obscure an underlying void or desert underneath. These features convey the seductive *poetics* of simulacra that served as the inspiration behind the scenographer Bert Neumann's ambivalent representations of life under American postmodernism's dominion. This was especially the case in the early 2000s when Castorf perceived the colonization of the East as complete. At this point, Neumann translated the chimerical, celluloid images of Baudrillard's *America* into designs for

Castorf's productions, wherein postmodern America was transformed into fully inhabitable imitations of life on the Volksbühne stage.

One twist for Castorf is the idea that hyperreality also held sway under real existing socialism.⁴¹ This theme is part of Castorf's critique of the GDR as a repressive, autocratic state running on hollow rhetoric and administered by lazy "petit bourgeois" bureaucrats (Schütt 92). While most scholarship tends to associate postmodernism with late capitalism in the West, it was, according to scholars such as Aleš Erjavec and Michael Epstein, an even earlier phenomenon in the East.⁴² These scholars tend to mark the overlaps with late capitalism due to their respective political vacuity and reign of simulacra. This is an interpretation of history crucial to understanding Castorf's cynicism towards *both* real existing socialism and capitalism. The only difference between Western and Eastern postmodern-hyperreality was that in the latter, state media were constructing and promoting the idea that a utopia had been achieved along socialist lines, rather than along capitalist-consumerist ones. Governments across the Eastern Bloc used images to enforce a constructed reality, an idea of the socialist "good life." The beginning of this phenomenon can be marked in the 1960s by the moment when the Eastern Bloc projected statistics about wheat that had not yet been harvested.⁴³ As Epstein notes,

[l]ong before Western video technology began to produce an overabundance of authentic images about an absent reality, this problem was already being solved by our ideology,

⁴¹ After WWII the terms "real socialism" or "really existing socialism" gradually became the predominating euphemisms used as self-description of the Eastern Bloc states' political and economic systems and their societal models. The term "real(ly) existing socialism" was introduced to explain the obvious gap between the propagated ideological framework and the political and economic reality faced by these states' societies.

⁴² Postsocialism, according to Aleš Erjavec (2003), represents a broad range of socio-political phenomena that took place during and immediately after the collapse of the Socialist Bloc. The postsocialist period and its correlative aesthetic logic can be characterized by both crisis and optimism—the latter based on the hope that an improved socialism or another political alternative might surface before liberalism and capitalism firmly take root.

⁴³ Really existing socialism was an ideological catchphrase popularized during the Brezhnev era in the Eastern Bloc countries and the Soviet Union. The term marked the discrepancy between the claims and the realities of socialist regimes and the planned economy.

press and statistics, which would calculate crops that would never be harvested to the hundredths of a percentage point. (Epstein 95)

This socialist iteration of hyperreality resulted in a sense of inertia in the GDR—what Castorf denounced as its “decadence.” Decadence was a term used by apparatchiks to denounce anything they officially deemed *Volksfremd* or “alien to the people” (i.e. formalism, the avant-gardes, absurdism, etc.), but which was ultimately just threatening to the regime. Castorf re-appropriated the term to accuse the erstwhile GDR administration of “decadence”—of disconnectedness from ordinary citizens leading to the GDR’s inertia. Castorf’s critique of the GDR followed Baudrillard’s assessment of the Eastern Bloc’s demise—that it drifted into a somnambulant state. Castorf claimed the “GDR wasn’t abolished, it fell asleep” (Schütt 135). Here he was paraphrasing the following statement by Baudrillard:

the communist systems did not succumb to an external enemy, or even an internal one (had that been the case, they would have resisted), but to their own inertia, taking advantage, as it were, to disappear (perhaps they were weary of existing). (*Illusion of the End* 37)

Rather than blaming Western powers for sabotaging socialism, Castorf claimed that the GDR itself was at fault for its own demise. At some point, the East German state had drifted into postmodern stasis and lost its connection to reality. The GDR was still spewing the rhetoric of worker-led state productivity when in fact it had transformed into postmodern hyperreality.

This “falling asleep” describes the status of political life and signs in the Eastern Bloc. The dramaturgy of social and political life, just as in postmodern America, is articulated by Baudrillard’s concept of “hysteresis.” Hysteresis is “the process whereby something continues to develop by inertia” (*America* 115). We can imagine it as sleepwalking, as a body that is merely going through the motions in a convincing imitation of life. It is a performance “as if” work was productive, politics were participatory, or voting mattered. As Baudrillard describes it, hysteresis

is akin to continuing to vote when there are no candidates or going to work when there is no work to do (*Fragments Cool Memories III* 129). Hysteresis is a situation “where the effect persists even when its cause has disappeared” (*America* 115). Baudrillard nihilistically asserts a “hysteresis of history, a hysteresis of socialism and so on. The whole thing continues to function like a body in motion by virtue of the speed it has already gathered or by inertia-steering, or like an unconscious man still remaining on his feet” (115). In a more comic vein, Baudrillard compares hysteresis to the cyclist in Alfred Jarry’s *Supermale* (1902). The cyclist dies of exhaustion on the trip across Siberia, but keeps on pedalling and propelling the “Great Machine, his rigor mortis transformed into motive power. A superb fiction, for the dead are perhaps even capable of going quicker, of keeping the machine going better than the living since they no longer have any problems. Might America not be like Jarry’s five man bicycle?” (*America* 115). Even better, mightn’t the Eastern Bloc?

In interviews, Castorf would repeatedly disparage this grip of necrosis: we “live in a time of inexhaustibility, even sleep is scorned upon, and laziness of course” (Schütt 135). Castorf also claimed that, “we are sitting on a carousel that is turning itself to death” (135). This description of the race of dead cyclists propelled by their rigor mortis is emblematic of the avant-gardes’ critique, which was intended to make the torpor and absurdity of a thoroughly mechanized capitalist society apparent. As Castorf’s productions will demonstrate, American slapstick comedy (in the vein of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and the Marx Brothers) is now deployed to convey the excesses of late capitalist hyperreality—the mania and excessive speed—and simultaneously radically subvert it with outbursts of vitality, authenticity and deceleration.

Wherein the Eastern Bloc power is “in the grip of necrosis,” Baudrillard suggests that America and all Western democracies have transitioned into the “hysterical euphoria of

menopause” (*America* 117). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the superimposition of this American hologram onto a decelerated, somnambulistic former socialist space, now created a total power vacuum. Baudrillard foresees this situation continuing ad infinitum. In his view, there is no longer an end of history, nor even a post-mortem for modernity. Instead, history is an endless nightmare due to this “process whereby something continues to develop by inertia” (Smith 97).

Here one can reflect once more on the stakes of 1989 for Castorf through our three key thinkers: Where Fukuyama celebrates the supposed end of history, history refuses closure in Derrida, and in Baudrillard the ‘end’ emerges as a sweeping, America-driven hyperreality. At the putative end of history, we can chart three positions: Fukuyama’s optimism, Derrida’s refusal, and Baudrillard’s cool nihilism.

Revolution from the Far Left

While Castorf responded to the postsocialist *Zeitgeist* exemplified by the above described three perspectives on the end of history, he was more personally invested in a *Weltanschauung* that stemmed from an Eastern Bloc dissident Marxist Left. This line is represented by Heiner Müller and Slavoj Žižek’s receptions of November 9, 1989. Each invoked a Benjaminian view of history as caught in a catastrophic momentum as well as the taboo longing for a strong authoritarian leader that could *will* into existence another anti-capitalist, socialist state. Žižek and Müller each felt compelled to think beyond the democratic consensus and thus to perceive dictatorship as an alternative to the impasse created by the disappearance of the socialist world. They exemplify a postsocialist diagnosis of a continuation of crisis, catastrophe, and 1989 as a missed opportunity to reform the Eastern Bloc along genuinely socialist lines.

Dictatorship as an Alternative

The crisis of postsocialism was channeled by the dissident Marxists who gravitated around the Volksbühne. Žižek's discussion of Müller's reaction to the 1990 vote in favour of unification in the GDR is emblematic. In a 2003 article entitled "Heiner Müller Out of Joint," Žižek outlines how Müller surrendered to "post-Wall catastrophism" and perceived "the situation in 1989 as one of utter despair" (np.). Müller's statements after the results of the 1990 democratic election included his grave warning that "free elections also brought Hitler to power" and the claim that he "just want[ed] to drown himself in alcohol and drugs" (np.). Žižek questions whether Müller's response was simply the "arrogance" of an elite artist-intellectual "insulted when the masses rejected democratic socialism during the free elections," or if Müller's call for a dictatorship as an alternative to liberal democracy should be seriously considered (np.).

Žižek extrapolated four motifs that crystallized Müller's political position after 1989: "(1) the rejection of the unconditional drive to productivity, (2) the distrust of democracy, (3) the theatricalization of politics, and (4) and the inevitability of violence" ("Out of Joint" np.). These contradict the three dogmas of liberal, post-politics, which are (1) the focus on economic growth, (2) non-theatrical pragmatism, and (3) non-violent tolerance (np.). Based on what he perceived as the "inherent contradiction of liberal capitalism" came Müller's call for a socialist dictatorship (np.).⁴⁴ Žižek, aligning with Müller's position, argued that if most people "blindly unthinkingly

⁴⁴ For Müller (and he argues this was the case for Brecht too) a dictatorship was a better condition for making theatre than democracy: "A Shakespeare is not even thinkable under a democracy" (*Krieg* 87). Müller acknowledges the importance of dictatorship as a theme in his own life. *Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (*Life under two Dictatorships*) is the subtitle of his autobiography *Krieg ohne Schlacht*, which refers to his youth in the Nazi period and his life in the GDR. Müller cites his scenographer Jannis Kounellis, who said "[t]he more state, the more drama. The less state, the more comedy" (87).

act out their opinions,” others should “gather the courage to radically question today’s predominant attitude of anti-authoritarian tolerance” (np.). Both Müller and Žižek justified the need to explore the possibility of dictatorship on the basis that liberalism’s “non-hierarchical” relations are, in fact, more oppressive than a dictatorship that would act on behalf of the people. Aligning with Baudrillard’s view of a postmodern “power vacuum,” Žižek argued that in late capitalist postmodern society, power is experienced “as such”—as “faceless power relations” that are impossible to contest (np.).

It was a reaction to the crisis of liberal post-politics that Žižek contextualized the longing for a strong decisive leader. He claimed that the inherent “crisis of democracy” accounted for the resurgence of “elitist notions of democracy” (i.e. authoritarianism). The liberal reign of tolerance pragmatism and economic interests, as well as the absence of political accountability, breed the yearning for hardline politics embodied in a strong leader able to make decisions and act.⁴⁵ In a 2013 article in *New Statesman*, Žižek claimed that what the Left really needed was its own Margaret Thatcher—“a leader who would repeat Thatcher’s gesture in the opposite direction, transforming the entire field of presuppositions shared by today’s political elite” (“The Simple Courage of Decision” np). Žižek expressed that Thatcher’s policies compelled Tony Blair’s establishment of New Labour in 1996. Žižek sees Thatcher as responsible for “the third way” that the Labour party took on in the mid-1990s and that was characterized by their shift to the centre and their endorsement of market economics. In other words, Thatcher forced her opponents on the Left to transform their ideologies and to make radical concessions to the free market after trail-blazing the neo-liberalization of the United Kingdom. Rather than denouncing

⁴⁵ By political realism, I mean a tradition that can be traced through Machiavelli’s brutal means-ends rational through to Carl Schmitt. According to Schmitt, “the political realist was governed by the ever-present possibility of conflict” (*Political Theology* xxxviii).

Thatcher for her brutal “no alternative” privatizing rationale, Žižek applauds her decision-making and instead criticizes the participatory, grass roots, anti-capitalist movements that emerged in her wake. For Žižek, “direct democracy” is discredited as myth and ignores real crisis, namely the ongoing crisis of representation. The times required a strong ruler who could disregard consensus and popular opinion to execute her plans and objectives. The function of the “master” role is to enact an authentic formal division “between those who want to drag on within the old parameters and those who are aware of the necessary change” (np). Thatcher fulfilled that role in a time of crisis—taking on an authorial, “iron fist” style of leadership and enforcing a deeply unpopular means-ends rationale that asserted her vision (np).

For both Müller and Žižek, forms of popular resistance amounted to fetishizing democracy. The grass roots or people’s protest movements—with which Müller had been involved towards the end of the GDR—had ultimately failed. Democratic reform movements such as “*Wir sind das Volk*” (“*We are the People*”) had quickly turned into “*Wir sind ein Volk*” (“*We are one People*”) ultimately resulting in the complete disappearance of the socialist alternative after “*das Volk*” had been plied with West Deutsch marks and exotic fruits such as bananas. What the Left needed now was to break with the taboo around anti-dictatorial thinking. This theme is evident in books such as *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) wherein Žižek writes that the Left should abandon “democracy as the Master-Signifier”: [liberal] democracy has become the “main political fetish, the disavowal of basic social antagonisms” (78-79). Instead, the Left should develop an alternative politics that includes voluntarism as “an active attitude of taking risks” even if the result is Stalinism or another form of totalitarianism (81). Žižek also argues that “popular protests around Europe converge in a series of demands which, in their very obviousness, form a kind of ‘epistemological obstacle’ to the proper confrontation

with the ongoing crisis of our political system” (“The Simple Courage of Decision” np). They are under the spell of a “democratic slumber” due to “their blind reliance on institutionalized forms of representative democracy.”

Rather than transcending the discredited system of political representation by moving towards “an emphasis on participation,” Žižek argues for abolishing participation altogether and imposing a form of leadership by an “elite class,” which will “act as a machinery of knowledge that circumvents the primary defect of democracy: the impossible ideal of the ‘omni-competent citizen’.” Žižek believes that people “need a good elite” because they “don’t know what they want.” Indeed, “it is through [the Master] that they discover what they ‘really want’” (ibid.). A Master is needed to pull individuals out of their inertia and somnambulism and motivate them towards a self-transcending emancipatory struggle for freedom. Only the sovereign decision-making of a strong leader can re-set society on the revolutionary path.

Žižek’s frequent presence within the intellectual fold of the Volksbühne at lectures, events and panel discussions effectively “staged” and “theatricalized” these unspeakable longings for a Master in a time of crisis—for a bold return to decisionism, voluntarism and risk. His public speaking style was devised to challenge political correctness and what he perceived as the naïve optimism of left liberals. Part of Žižek’s strategy was to assert a provocative and highly theatrical authoritarian political line. Žižek came to personify not just the yearning for dictatorship at the Volksbühne, but also a defiant geo-political “OST” orientation. Like Castorf, Žižek provoked Western journalists with images of Stalin on display in his apartment. Throughout his tenure at the Volksbühne, Castorf issued the same mandate in the face of crisis: the re-invigoration of the political in opposition to liberal consensus and post-politics. Themes of

authoritarian dictatorship and voluntarism were responses that emerged in both the Volksbühne's paratext and productions to the perceived crises of liberal democracy.

Müller's Catastrophic Imaginary

In the immediate years after the *Wende*, and while Müller drifted into melancholic resignation, Castorf rose combatively to the occasion and tried to corral all resisters of liberal capitalist finalities, especially youths, into contestation. Castorf wished to use state-funded theatre as the last refuge for an authentic reflection of an increasingly inauthentic life. He also wanted to use the state-funded theatre institution to give expression to the hardships those from the GDR faced after unification. One of Castorf's strategies was to cite earlier moments in 20th century German history into his discourse and productions by exposing the crises of German unification and liberal capitalism as a repetition of the dynamics at play during the Weimar Republic. The Weimar era, with its perpetual crises and schismatic parliamentary democracy, was still deeply etched in the collective memory of German Marxists as the fertile soil for both the thwarted left wing revolution of 1919, the treason committed against them by the Social Democrats, and the rise of National Socialism. Castorf "inherited" these preoccupations from Müller, who had been a devoted student of German left wing history.

Müller's writings are preoccupied with the tragedy of proletarian history and the discrepancy between theory and praxis in the Eastern Bloc. Müller was a close reader of both Marx and Benjamin, which was itself an act of provocation in the GDR, where all political theory was supposed to be filtered through the Party's lens (*Krieg ohne Schlacht* 96).⁴⁶ Müller was prone to visualizing history at least as bleakly as Benjamin, namely as "one single

⁴⁶ Müller connects this development in the GDR to developments in the Soviet Union. The Left of the Party was attacked, along with the avant-gardes: "Stanislavsky versus Meyerhold and Mayakovski" (*Krieg* 96). Müller and Castorf were always allegiant to this Left-of-Party-Centre and avant-garde lineage.

catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” (qtd. in Eiland 392).⁴⁷ Müller possessed what has been called a “catastrophic imaginary”⁴⁸ born of his experience under National Socialism. Like Benjamin, he was desperate for any sort of emergency break for human history, which he perceived as hurtling towards catastrophe, especially after 1989. As a way of describing the tragedy of German socialist history, Müller’s dramas frequently refer to Benjamin’s response to the Hitler-Stalin Pact of non-aggression in the latter’s 1940 essay “Theses on the Concept of History.” Müller was particularly fixated on Benjamin’s image of the backward-facing Angel—the angel being an allegorical figure of the historical materialist dislodged in the maelstrom of modern progress.⁴⁹ The Angel’s gaze at the past reveals a history of human catastrophe in which debris is incessantly heaped upon the debris of earlier catastrophe. Benjamin’s view of history undermined the grand narrative and rhetoric of progress that Müller himself experienced in the GDR.

The brutal reaction to the uprising of GDR workers on the 17th of June 1953 brought about the permanent state of emergency that is reflected in Müller’s writing. According to Philip Riedl, Müller’s central concern is the bloody birth of dualism between theory and practice under

⁴⁷ According to Matthew Cornish, Müller’s understanding of the historian’s task drew heavily on Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (107). Cornish explains, “[a]gainst Brecht’s aesthetics of Enlightenment, Müller and Castorf used historicization as part of their aesthetics of entanglement” (107). Exemplary of this entangled historicization Müller’s *Hamletmachine* text in *Hamlet/Machine*” (107). The opening lines echo Benjamin’s angel, “with his face to the ever-growing wreckage of the past, blown into the future by the storm of progress” (107). The crucial point here is that Müller, like Benjamin, saw history as an accumulation of disasters rather than as progress. This concept builds on Helen Fehervary’s 1976 article “Enlightenment or Entanglement: History and Aesthetics in Bertolt Brecht and Heiner Müller” in *New German Critique*.

⁴⁸ Julia Hell explains that she uses the term “imaginary” because it “calls attention to the ways in which the past is conceptualized as a philosophical or political story. Sometimes this conceptualization of history is highly analytical, at other times purely ideological” (77). The second reason Hell provides for her use of the term is that historical imaginary “thematizes affect; it mixes text and image; it creates seemingly illogical temporalities and topographies; it blurs boundaries between present and past, between the living and the dead. Historical imaginaries obey a logic that is both conscious and unconscious” (77).

⁴⁹ This allegorical figure appears in various works by Müller: “The Hapless Angel” (1958), “Hapless Angel 2” (1991), “Explosion of Memory” (1984), and “Mommsen’s Bloc” (1993).

socialism (360). His play *Ödipus, Tyrann* (1966/67), for example, is about a “sovereign who assumes a position of absolute power by his rational powers and individual achievements. Ödipus, however, “overestimates both the possibilities and accomplishments of rational thought, and as a result, the utopian ideal of a new world created by this autonomous ‘new man’ is transformed into the terror of political praxis” (360). Looking back at GDR history in 1989, Müller claimed the detachment of knowledge from power was itself the tragedy of socialism. The GDR had “been unable to put Marxist theory into practice” (361). Müller saw this as the “eternal recurrence” (355) and was searching for a way to disrupt the pattern he perceived in German socialist history. The naïve belief in historical progress and in the utopian ideal of a new world order was no longer plausible. Instead, the optimistic finalities of Marxism had given way to the bleak view that humankind was embedded in a “relentless cycle of violence” (361).

Müller’s treatment of history, like Benjamin’s, involves a critical re-appraisal of the grand narrative found in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), which emerges as naïve in the face of historical reality. It is the same reason that even Marx came to distance himself from the view that historical processes are de facto progressive in character. In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Marx abandons his position that revolution is the driver of social and political change. In Marx’s eyes, the military dictatorship established by Bonaparte in 1851 represented the collapse of the revolution and the victory of the counterrevolution in France. Here, Marx describes historical events in France in metaphorical terms as a stage play by adapting Hegel’s theory of tragedy. The relationship between history and the theatrical genres of tragedy, comedy, and farce that Marx posits emerge as a key theme in Müller’s works (355). The *Brumaire* opens with Marx’s reference to Hegel’s claim that all great world-historical facts and personages occur twice. Marx says Hegel forgot to add: first as tragedy, second as farce. For Müller, “Marx’s

desire for an end of history in a comedy of equality that would supersede the era of tragedy and farce has been buried by both Stalinism and capitalism” (371). *Wolokalmster Chaussee* (1985), for example, was a third attempt at writing a proletarian tragedy⁵⁰ “in the period of counterrevolution that will ‘end in the synthesis of man and machine, the next step of the evolution’” (377). Müller’s proletarian tragedies “deal with the self-destructive mechanisms of socialism [and] clearly refer to Marx’s understanding of the dialectical relationship between tragedy and farce” (372). Here, we see Müller invoke the dialectic between failed revolution and conservative reaction that Marx lays out in the *Brumaire*. Müller’s corpus is preoccupied with the loss of these proletarian energies to the Right. He also attends to the fantasies of a man-machine synthesis we will see in Jünger. The latter is another theme Müller culls from Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay, namely the cyborgian and death drive fantasies of those reactionaries who can “experience . . . destruction as an aesthetic pleasure” (*Illuminations* 242).

Castorf was interested in how Müller located the conditions of possibility for fascism within the failures of the German Left. In an interview, Müller references Karl Korsch’s explanation that the Blitzkrieg was “*gebündelte linke Energie*” (bundled-up-energy from the Left) (qtd. in Laudenbach 110). Müller was fascinated by Korsch’s notion of the Nazis’ appropriation of the anticapitalistic energies of the working class (143). Building on Korsch, Müller claims that National Socialism was, in fact, the “greatest historical achievement of the German working class” (147). Here, Müller means that the energy the fascists were able to co-opt and channel into warfare was, in fact, the revolutionary energies contained within the working class. According to Castorf, Müller sees an analogy here in Jünger’s figure of the

⁵⁰ The term proletarian tragedy is from Curzio Malaparte’s WWII front reportage, *Die Wolga entspringt in Europa*, which Müller had written an introduction to in 1989 (Riedl 377).

Arbeiter, namely machine warfare as an extension of industrial labour (110)—at the nexus where Far Left and Far Right meet.

Between Left and Right: Nietzsche's Vitalist Call to Arms

Although we must situate Castorf in an unorthodox Leftist tradition that goes back (through Müller and Derrida) to Benjamin, Fukuyama and Castorf share one vitally important overlap: both account for the critiques of liberalism on behalf of the Far Left *and* the radical Right. As such, both extremes point to the inherent weaknesses of liberal democracy. Fukuyama rightly acknowledges that for the Left, liberal democracy as “universal recognition...is necessarily incomplete because capitalism creates economic inequality and requires a division of labor that...implies unequal recognition” (xxii). However, Fukuyama also claims that the more powerful critique of liberalism comes from the Far Right, which was “profoundly concerned with the leveling effects of the French Revolution’s commitment to human equality” (xxii). Fukuyama identified Nietzsche as the definitive thinker for the Right’s critique of universal recognition. However, this does not make Nietzsche a quintessentially Far-Right thinker. Rather, it shows how Nietzsche’s critique of liberal values in works such as *The Genealogy of Morals* can be used to gird a conservative critique of liberal democracy.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883), Nietzsche argues that the typical citizen of a liberal democracy is a lamentable “last man” concerned only with self-preservation and comfort, rather than pride or belief in superiority (11). Zarathustra explains that bourgeois societies produce hollow men without chests, individuals who hold no higher aspiration to excellence or achievement and then congratulate themselves on their open mindedness and lack of

fanaticism.⁵¹ Their aspiration stops at equal recognition, comfort, security, and the avoidance of pain. For Nietzsche—and this is Fukuyama’s interpretation—the last man was less than fully human because for him, there is a side of the human personality that “deliberately seeks out struggle, danger, risk, and daring” and this side will remain unsatisfied by the “‘peace and prosperity’ of contemporary liberal democracy” (*End of History* xxiii).

In order to grasp Castorf’s critique of liberal values and institutions, we must first recognize his self-understanding as a Nietzschean. Castorf directly integrates Nietzsche’s critique of the “last man” and the decline of liberal democratic societies into the Volksbühne discourse—especially Nietzsche’s disparaging opinion of the European bourgeoisie whom the philosopher saw as motivated by nothing more than a desire to achieve security, comfort and to suppress pain. Nietzsche’s writings contain a profound cynicism and pessimism, combined with a discourse of revitalization and transcendence devised to overcome the nihilism he diagnoses. Nietzsche defines nihilism as the situation wherein, “[t]he highest values devalue themselves” (*The Will to Power* 9). Nietzsche describes nihilism as a “pathological transitional stage”—in which “there is no truth,” and “no absolute nature of things nor a thing-in-itself” (14). Nihilism places the value of things in the lack of a reality that corresponds to these values and in their being merely a symptom of the strength of the valuers (14).

As an antidote, Nietzsche mandates a revitalizing approach to history and to the cultural inheritance that will inspire *both* the historical avant-gardes, as well as thinkers such as Benjamin who approach history as a repository of revolutionary politics awaiting re-activation. As such,

⁵¹ “This, indeed, this, is bitterness for my bowels, that I can endure you neither naked nor clothed, you men of today. All that is uncanny in the future and all that has ever made fugitive birds shudder is surely more comfortable and cozy than your ‘reality.’ For thus you speak: ‘Real are we entirely, and without belief or superstition.’ Thus, you stick out your chests—but alas, they are hollow!” (*The Portable Nietzsche* 232).

Nietzsche deserves special attention in Castorf's intellectual genealogy as the nodal point in a critique of bourgeois liberal modernity that influences the Right and Left and that underwrote the cultural revolutionary zeal in historical avant-garde movements (Lethen & Geyer-Ryan 308).⁵² Castorf acknowledges profound indebtedness to Nietzsche's philosophical mold, which can be characterized by a heroic or aristocratic detachment, a fierce independence of mind, and unrelenting self-scrutinizing.

In *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche deconstructs liberal discourses in order to demonstrate how morals are neither divinely bestowed nor arbitrary, but rather strategies used to ensure that the historical moment privileges certain groups. Under liberal democracies, a new moral framework emerged where "good" was associated with the weak and those individuals that asserted their will to power were "bad." The will to power had to be suppressed, giving birth to the bad conscious. This resulted in the "caged European" who gnaws at himself for lack of an external enemy, and a society that becomes "better", kinder, etc., but that ultimately degenerates for lack of higher, more life-affirming aspirations (85).

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, the stagnation of liberal egalitarianism is personified by the anemic "last man" —the comfort-seeking bureaucrat or the bloated bourgeois. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche also inaugurates the idea of the *Übermensch*, the exuberant superman whom he sees as an antidote to the "last man" (129). If Nietzsche diagnosed the Christian value system as life-negating and as leading to degeneration, the new values of the *Übermensch* would be life-affirming. Those individuals who are no longer subjugated by the Christian *Sklavenmoral* can transcend the "sick herd" of ineffectual men that he characterizes in the *Genealogy*. In

⁵² As Lethen and Geyer-Ryan point out, a "movement which was so determined to abandon the 'institution of art' in order to become involved in day-to-day political decision-making, had to insist on forgetting, as forgetting is, according to Nietzsche, the prerequisite for vital action" (308).

Zarathustra's schema, a world descended into nihilism necessarily yearns for movement, dynamism and heroic individuals—for the *Übermensch* (124).

Nietzsche's earlier text, *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874), was received as a call to arms for the European intelligentsia, an appeal for a *Kulturrevolution*. It called for a "new man" to emerge who would be unshackled from the weight of history: the man of action who is "without conscience" and who "only recognizes one law, the law of that which is to be" (9). According to Nietzsche, the stifling role of historical texts in bourgeois high culture had resulted in distance from real life leading to decline (*Verkümmern*) and degeneration (*Entartung*) (3). These latter terms would become key concepts for degeneration and decline-oriented discourse of thinkers such as Max Nordau and Oswald Spengler (which would be taken up by the National Socialists).⁵³ Nietzsche believed that the European bourgeoisie had let an excessive *weight* of history preclude authentic life, vitality and spontaneity. Nothing was more emblematic of this decline than the bourgeoisie's cultural institutions and liberal education within which history was "preserved," which is to say *atrophied*.

What Nietzsche is renouncing is the *weight* of history that has been a "dark but invisible burden" on its young inheritors (5). This is Nietzsche's call to a revolution of thought, dethroning the dominant mode of preservation of the texts of classical antiquity that lined the bookshelves of the *paterfamilias*—the preservers of a lifeless historical culture that the young generation of German artists and intellectuals should reject. The bourgeoisie atrophied and

⁵³ Narratives of decline permeated the pre-fascist Weimar republic. Max Nordau's *Entartung (Degeneration)* (1892) is a pre-Weimar attack on what he believes to be "degenerate art" and a commentary on the social phenomena of the period, such as rapid urbanization and its perceived effects on the human body. In the *Decline of the West (Der Untergang des Abendlandes)* by Oswald Spengler, German post-war suffering was placed into a context of the decline of the entire Western civilization.

fetishized history, especially that of classical antiquity.⁵⁴ As a result, their culture was plagued by hypocrisy and ennui (8). In *Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche was proposing a way out of such intellectual paralysis into a self-mobilized assertion of one's circumstances by a politics of action and forgetting (9). This reinforces his idea that nothing is fixed, neither identity nor discourse. For Nietzsche, the universal law is that a person can only be "healthy, strong, and productive within a certain horizon" (7)—a horizon of monumentalism characterized by action and struggle (12). What Nietzsche calls for is a youth revolt against the bourgeoisie and rebellion against the weight of this inheritance: "I see the mission of the youth that forms the first generation of fighters and dragon slayers; it will bring a more beautiful and blessed humanity and culture" (70). The bourgeoisie's inartistic or half artistic natures "will use the weapons against... the great artistic spirits, who alone can learn from that history the one real lesson how to live (6).

The influence of Nietzsche's *Use and Abuse of History* is evident on Benjamin's "Theses On the Concept of History." At this point, Benjamin renounced historical materialism and the grand narratives that underwrite the Marxist view of history. He provided an analogy for this historical impasse through Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. By infusing history with messianism, Benjamin asserts the need for an approach to history that was redemptive and revitalizing. In "Theses," Benjamin quotes Nietzsche's *Use and Abuse of History* directly, namely that "[w]e need history, but our need for it differs from that of the jaded idlers in the garden of knowledge" (394). For Benjamin, history is relevant only if it furthers a revitalization or re-authentication of

⁵⁴ "If one wishes to promote a people's culture, let him try to promote this higher unity first, and work for the destruction of the modern educative system for the sake of a true education. Let him dare to consider how the health of a people that has been destroyed by history may be restored, and how it may recover its instincts with honour" (25). Nietzsche also bemoans "the banishment of instinct by history" (29).

the present. In Benjamin's schema, as in Nietzsche's, historical events, personages or objects contain a potential that, when brought up into the present, can re-direct the catastrophic path on which humanity finds itself. This occurs as *aufheben* (sublation)—a lifting up, canceling out, and hence a redirection of history. Benjamin's approach follows Nietzsche's shift from the preservation—and hence, the repressive *weight* of history—to unleashing history's explosive potential in life. As such, revitalization is also what is at stake in Benjamin when he writes “[i]n every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (255). Benjamin's objective here must be understood as furtherance of both Marx and Nietzsche. In as much as we find this Nietzschean influence on the unorthodox left, we see it in equal measure on the Far Right.

Reaction from the Far Right

In a 2015 interview with the German weekly *Die Zeit*, Castorf was asked to explain his long-time fascination with Jünger, Schmitt and other authors associated with the Right:

DIE ZEIT: The *Waldgänger* (*The Forest Passage*) is a figure described by Ernst Jünger, who has been keeping you busy for a long time, as well as the partisan, a figure described by the Nazi lawyer and intellectual, Carl Schmitt. Both the foresters and the partisans are unpredictable, destructive loners who challenge the ruling system. What attracts you to these figures - and to right wing authors like Jünger, Céline, Malaparte, Carl Schmitt?
Frank Castorf: I appeal to all those who have stepped out of the consensus of the Democrats. What did they explode, why did they do it? That's a lot of fun for me right now. Ultimately, it is an idea that comes from Clausewitz: the idea of being the partisan, the only one who comes to punitive action from the forests, changes something, and then withdraws again.

Castorf's intellectual explorations *beyond* the liberal democratic consensus and his institutional critique draw explicitly on these controversial conservative philosophers. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Jünger presaged the rise of totalitarian *Arbeiter* societies and himself promoted a worker-centric nationalist vision of German society inspired by Nietzsche and Leninism.

Jünger's work bears important overlaps with the revolutionary Left and even promotes a Soviet orientation for post-WWI Germany. His Weimar era writings were preoccupied with overcoming the nihilism wrought by the new industrial technologies and effete bourgeois liberal values. Surrendering to a new martial momentum and authoritarian order were Jünger's strategies for overcoming the impasses he perceived.

Schmitt responds to the crisis of parliamentary democracy with concepts such as the *Ausnahmezustand*, sovereignty, the "friend-enemy distinction," and the partisan. Schmitt admired both Lenin and Mussolini for their direct-action politics, use of myth and decisionism. Jünger and Schmitt's responses to the Weimar Republic that emerged after the German Revolution of 1918-1919 share striking overlaps to the kinds of dictatorial fantasies and hardline approaches that we saw from Müller and Žižek in the post-*Wende* period.

Castorf mines the intellectual culture of the Weimar era as a period that brought about both revolutionary and catastrophic thought. For Castorf, the Weimar era becomes a template for the destructive dynamics of liberalism, capitalism, and schismatic parliamentary democracy that helped to pave the way for the rise of National Socialism. Both on stage and in the paratextual additions he uses, Castorf invigorates the Weimar period as *Jetztzeit*. This is to say that Castorf inserts cultural artefacts, political biographies and intellectual traditions from the Weimar Republic into his productions and the paratext to illuminate similarities with his own period wherein fascism loomed large.

The years between 1918 and 1933 were Germany's most politically fractious and artistically vibrant period. Although the Weimar constitution was one of the most democratic in modern history, Germany's parliamentary democracy was plagued by instability and attacks by the Far Right and the Far Left. Germany's relationship with the Western allied powers after the

implementation of the Versailles Treaty—along with inflation and financial crises in 1923 and 1929—came to define the period. Reactionary fantasies of German re-armament, domination and “total mobilization” characterize the foreboding conservative imaginary of the period. Given the frequency with which they are cited, there is strong evidence to suggest that the Conservative Revolutionary ideas of individuals such as Jünger, and to a lesser extent Schmitt, have consistently preoccupied Castorf. This is on the basis that these thinkers, like Benjamin on the Left, theorized alternatives to liberal and parliamentary democracy and refused its narratives of history as progress. Castorf engaged with these thinkers because Marxism, as an engine driving world history, had been discredited after 1989. He also gravitated towards thinkers with proto-fascist reputations as a provocation strategy—a flagrant disregard for “politically correct thinking” and what he calls Germans’ “addiction to approval” (qtd. in Schütt 54). The shock factor resulting from Castorf engaging Jünger’s taboo discourse was partially devised to rile an inert public into alert attention. It created confusion and uncertainty around what Castorf, who was considered a Leftist, intended. In Castorf’s view, the taboo around exploring Conservative Revolutionary thinkers impeded the arrival at valuable insight into the current bind—a situation that Castorf claims the Far Right was then able to exploit. To his mind, the taboo around conservative thinkers hindered the confrontation with what drove individuals to the Far Right in the first place. Fascism did not develop overnight, but rather from an intellectual and culturally fertile environment. For Castorf, this intellectual environment ought to be studied and the striking parallels between the Weimar Republic and the period after the *Wende*, illuminated.

Ernst Jünger belongs in the category of the Conservative Revolution, which includes Ernst Niekisch, Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Oswald Spengler, among others. The Conservative Revolution was an intellectual movement of the radical Right during the Weimar

Republic. It saw Germany—or more accurately, Prussia’s—occupation by Western forces after the loss of WWI as destined to lead to social decline. Both the Versailles Treaty and the new Social Democratic led republic symbolized not only humiliation for Germany, but the victory of “foreign” liberal and Western values. The Conservative Revolutionaries saw Germany’s new “bourgeois” democracy and concessions to the victorious Western powers as an affront to “heroic” Prussian *Krieger* (warrior) virtues. Influenced by Nietzsche and German Romanticism, these Conservatives deplored liberal egalitarianism, bourgeois individualism, republicanism, and cosmopolitanism. In short: they contested the legacies of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. However, these conservatives were not nostalgic thinkers who wished to restore the old Wilhelmine order, but rather individuals who were shaped by their experience of WWI (Herf 2). Their objective was to invigorate the cult of courage, sacrifice, and voluntarism in an age they stoically perceived as one of degeneration and machine take-over. Although these conservatives were closer to the Communists than to the Social Democrats, some (although not Jünger) preferred the organic theories and *Lebensphilosophie* (Klages and Nietzsche) over materialism and concepts such *Volksgemeinschaft* (folk community) over class-conflict. Their paradigm involved a social order oriented to the nation’s higher welfare, rather than to an individual’s self-interest. Their primary agenda was Germany’s rearmament in order to secure victory in the next great war, which necessitated embracing new industrial technologies (Wolin 120). For this reason, Jeffrey Herf called them reactionary modernists (2)—reactionary in politics, albeit vanguard in their view of a thoroughly technologized and militarized Germany. These conservatives advocated the destruction of the “Western” liberal order and the downfall of its bourgeois capitalist rulers to make way for the establishment of a new order founded on heroic Prussian conservative principles.

Important for Castorf throughout his tenure was a genre of writing that many Conservative Revolutionaries, as well as the highly reactionary *Freikorps* generated, namely nationalistic war literature.⁵⁵ This literary genre was popular during the Weimar Republic and consisted of accounts of the *Fronterlebnis* (front experience) and Jünger's "*Materialschlachten*" ("battles of material"), works of combat fiction, manifestos, and philosophical treatises outlining the radical Right's ideas for the transformation of German cultural and political life. This terrain of writing also represents a continuation of the Prussian Romantic war drama and myth tradition of Heinrich von Kleist and Friedrich Hebbel, as well as a radicalization of the writings of 19th-century Prussian military strategists such as Carl von Clausewitz and Gerhard von Scharnhorst.⁵⁶ WWI had given this generation of young men a sense of solidarity and community missing in a republican Germany they did not identify as their own. Hence, the postwar iteration of Prussian *Krieger* literature actively communicated a sense of "home" and "belonging" on the battlefield. As Herf points out, when these Conservative Revolutionaries looked back nostalgically, it was not to a pre-industrial *Gemeinschaft*, it was to the *Kriegserlebnis*—to their collective experience of war (24). Castorf saw a parallel between their responses to the new Weimar Republic after the November Revolution and the experiences of his generation in a new unified Germany after the *Wende*.

⁵⁵ In this context, the *Freikorps* (translated as "Free-Corps") were the roaming paramilitary units who continued to fight after WWI. Sanctioned by the Social Democratic Minister of Defence Gustav Noske, the *Freikorps* played an important role during the German revolution, suppressing Communist uprisings within Germany and "defending" German territories in the East. Many *Freikorps* were fueled by the *Dolchstoßlegende* ("Stab in the Back" theory) believing Germany had lost the war because they had been "betrayed" by Communists and Jews. Moreover, many core members of the Nazi Party such as Ernst Röhm had been in the *Freikorps*.

⁵⁶ It should be noted that right before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Müller claimed that a renewed interest in Prussia was underway in both Germanys (*Germania* 23). Müller explained that he wrote "polemical plays" dealing with Prussian history (referring to *Germania Tod in Berlin*). He also speaks of the West's attempt to "take [Prussian history] away from the East. This is the first motive behind the Prussian revival and the countermotive here is to hold on to it, keep it alive for our own purpose. It's the old German brother conflict all over again" (23)

Antagonistic Affinities: Jünger’s “Total Mobilization” & Benjamin’s “Theories of German Fascism”

Jünger’s *In Stahlgewittern* (*In a Storm of Steel*), published in 1920, was an unflinching account of trench warfare that earned him the reputation as an “aesthetician of carnage” (Wolin 119). Jünger’s work represented a new ultra-modernist *Härte* (hardness)—a “Prussian” vanguardism to counter the “decadence” of the new republic. *In Stahlgewittern* juxtaposed photographic realism with a rapturous account of modern warfare. Castorf cited it in interviews to channel the feeling of young men who believed that with the founding of the new republic, they had lost everything but their experiences of the trenches. A decade later, Jünger’s essay “Total Mobilization” (1930) developed metaphysical ideas on the meaning of WWI. It describes a new type of individual—the worker-soldier (*Arbeiter*)—and projects the thorough militarization of all spheres of industrial society, thus delineating the trend towards authoritarianism and totalitarianism already underway in the Soviet Union. Here, the worker-soldier constitutes a new social “type” (“*Gestalt*”) who is infatuated with risk, danger, and heroism. As was consistent across his work during this period, war was an end unto itself; there is no “reason” for destruction. For this, “economic explanations, no matter how illuminating, are not sufficient” (Wolin 121). Jünger was a Nietzschean who was preoccupied with the nihilism he associated with the bourgeois age of relativism, moral decay, and the death of God. Like Nietzsche, Jünger did not see progress in history, but rather decline. What Jünger furthered from Nietzsche was the will to power in an industrial age of militarized workers. Surrender to the new age of machines would place Germany at the forefront of a movement directed toward the “self-overcoming” of bourgeois nihilism (Wolin 121). Jünger’s “Total Mobilization” and *Der Arbeiter* would be revealed for their uncannily prescient cultural diagnosis by Müller, who encountered

these texts after WWII when he was given the task of de-Nazifying libraries.⁵⁷ And it was from Jünger that Martin Heidegger learned “the universal rule of the will to power within planetary history” (Quinn 69).⁵⁸ Jünger had alerted Heidegger to “what was coming” (70).

In “Total Mobilization” (1930) Jünger anticipates the abolishment of the 19th century age of European bourgeois individualism and revises its definition of progress. Progress is a word with a “gaudy timbre” (131) that emerged from a bourgeois intellectual sphere whose values were on their way to extinction. He described his generation’s disdain for “the dullness and uniformity of the [bourgeois] life forms at issue” (123). He also pointed to the “agitation around us” —the youth’s “dissatisfaction with the world’s ideas and images of the past” (139). His point is that “progress” should not be measured according to liberal definitions (123). “Spirit” (*Geist*), Jünger proclaimed “has often justifiably reveled in contempt for the wooden marionettes of progress, but the fine threads that produce the movements are invisible” (124). Jünger’s concept of progress is the degree to which Spirit and progressive forces move in tandem with a heroic, cultic reinvigoration of life through war. Such was the case in WWI when the “genius of war was penetrated by the spirit of progress” (123). Secreted in the progressive spirit of modern times—of which the mobilization of all productive forces was evidence for a new age of masses, urban life, technology—was a concurrent dynamic: the readiness for war at all times and the driving momentum of the war economy. “Whenever we confront efforts of such proportions, possessing the special quality of “uselessness” (“*Zwecklosigkeit*”)—say the erection of mighty constructions

⁵⁷ Müller explains that his first library consisted of books banned by the Nazis: “Together with a former teacher from the high school...I was responsible for the purge, the denazification of the libraries of the district. ... We cleaned the libraries of Nazi literature, even those of the landlords. These activities were the foundation of my own library” (*Krieg* 35). Later, as a writer and Marxist in GDR, Müller continued to intensively read thinkers such as Jünger and Schmitt (Riedl 353).

⁵⁸ In the post WWII period, Jünger had an intense correspondence with Martin Heidegger that lasted between 1949 and 1975.

like pyramids and cathedrals, or wards that call into play the ultimate mainsprings of life—economic explanations, no matter how illuminating, are insufficient. This is the reason that the school of historical materialism can only touch the surface of the process. To explain efforts of this sort, we ought rather to focus our first suspicions on phenomena of a cultic variety” (129).

What becomes apparent to Jünger is that hiding within the Hegelian drive to Reason and progress is an irrational drive towards intoxication, ecstasy and the spectacle of war. Jünger explains Spirit’s higher destination vis-à-vis this more mystical, destructive momentum. For him, this is the dialectical aspect of progress, which destroys, through war, other less progressive, less mobilized nations. Total mobilization and World Spirit are attendant forces: “every improvement of firearms—especially the increase in range—is an indirect assault on the conditions of absolute monarchy” (125). In this schema, “world war and world revolution” (123) are attendant phenomena. Even “German Social Democracy,” Jünger writes, “one of the bulwarks of German progress grasped the dialectical aspect of its mission when it equated the war’s meaning with the destruction of the czar’s anti-progressive regime” (132).

Jünger describes a “crusade of reason to which the world’s nations are called under the spell of such an obvious, transparent dogma, raise the battle cry: glowing, enraptured, and hungering after death in a way virtually unique in our history” (133). The brutal reality of life was to be embraced and transcended in a way that accepted death as part of this flow. The fact that young Germans, “with an unconscious longing for a new life,” were signing up to volunteer at the beginning of WWI anticipates this total mobilization. “Who could have imagined,” Jünger asks, “that the sons of a materialistic generation could have greeted death with such ardor?” (138). Jünger points out that these young people were *not* motivated by liberal notions of

humanitarian progress or the struggle against barbarism. Rather, they enlisted out of patriotism “for Germany” (133).

Relevant here is that for Jünger, embracing death is consubstantial with life and vitality. This draws out interesting parallels to the historical avant-gardes, which is indeed where some scholars situate him.⁵⁹ Notably, statements such as “[v]italism understands death, whereas ‘progress’ fears it” could be taken right out of the 1909 Italian Futurist Manifesto. It is the symbiotic flow of energies between the individual and technologies of industry and war—a rapturous reconciliation of military disciplinary and sublime oneness with the new mechanized militarized world order—that Jünger perceives as a “heroic response” to the inevitable rise of authoritarian domination. In this way, war becomes “pure form,” a vision of society like that of Futurists, wherein all elements are thoroughly mobilized. The Italian Futurists proclaim their art as an “attack” on behalf of the youth against a dull, atrophied bourgeois liberal age. In the manifesto, Marinetti asserts that, “[c]ourage, audacity, and revolt will be essential elements of our poetry” and “[w]e want to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice” (np). It is evident how Nietzsche’s revitalizing agenda, as well as the Dionysian impulses of destruction, appealed to the youth-centric Italian Futurists and other avant-garde movements, and was used to fuel their attack on bourgeois institutions with the goal of dismantling the boundary between art and life.

In the “The Futurist Manifesto,” (1909) Marinetti proclaims “[w]e.... who for over two years, scorned by the Lame and Paralyzed, have glorified the love of danger and violence,

⁵⁹ According to Geyer-Ryan and Lethen, Jünger’s *Der Arbeiter* should have been read as an avant-garde manifesto. “But in the field of politics where it ended up, readers extracted only what was in accordance with the political tendencies of the time. It was then no longer perceived as the avant-garde manifesto which it undoubtedly was” (317).

praised patriotism and war, the hygiene of the world, are happy to finally experience this great Futurist hour of Italy, while the foul tribe of pacifists huddles dying in the deep cellars of the ridiculous palace at The Hague” (np). Here we see liberal values and European institutions ridiculed and scorned. It is patently clear how the masculinist *braggadocio* of Marinetti and the Futurists’ techno-military aesthetics—embracing death to re-vitalize life—played directly into the fascist discourse of militarism, voluntarism and death.

It was the stagnating effects of the bourgeois age’s individual rights-based discourses that compelled the Italian Futurists’ brazen attack on “moralism and feminism.” What outraged the Italian Futurists about these discourses was, in Nietzschean terms, that they represented the *Sklavenmoral*. These liberal movements suppressed the will to power that the *Tatmensch*, the man of action, required to genuinely shake up an anemic, conformist society. Like Nietzsche, the historical avant-gardes were particularly attuned to what they perceived as the suppression of vital and authentic expression by liberal egalitarianism.⁶⁰ As we will see, Castorf is preoccupied with the trope of the disenchanting artist turned aspiring *Übermensch* who attempts to transcend his nihilism and despair.

For Jünger, the energies that had been released by WWI were a “heroic countermovement to European world-weariness: a proving ground for an entire series of masculinist warrior-virtues that seemed in danger of being eclipsed at the hands of an effete, decadent, and materialistic bourgeois *Zivilisation*” (Wolin 119). Wolin claims that for Jünger, war “did not so much present

⁶⁰ Regarding the discrepancy between the heroic individualism mandated by Nietzsche and the group formation of the avant-gardes, Adorno (1984) claims that “if artists want to survive in a corporate-capitalist society, they must organize themselves externally as well” (37). “Isms,” Adorno explains, are potential schools which replace traditional and institutional authority by functional authority (38). Adorno explains that these individual artists had to shelter themselves from the corrupting force of the market system, hence the necessity of the group. In a sense, these groups are the art-world equivalent of youth gangs where power games could play out and the groups are held together under the dictatorial authority of leaders (i.e. Marinetti, Breton, Debord).

opportunities for acts of individual prowess as it offered the possibility of a metaphysical confrontation with certain primordial, chthonic elements: forces of annihilation, death, and horror” (119). “Total Mobilization” reflects a mystical cosmic unity as the unbounded energy released in the state of armed conflict. Here, Jünger ties the erotics of transgression to revolutionary energy—a hybrid of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, now channeled into a nationalist-futurist momentum. The power of sexuality is implicitly sublimated in this thoroughly militarized vision of society, wherein the individual always hovers on the edge of death, while their creative energies are mobilized by fluid symbiosis with industrial technology for a more significant nationalist cause.

What surely also interested Castorf was that Jünger had his political compass pointed firmly *Ost*. This was not an uncommon position on behalf of some Conservative Revolutionaries who wanted to forge alliances between Germany and the Soviet Union and thus create a bulwark against Western allied powers after WWI. In the early 1920s, Jünger was part of Ernst Niekisch’s National Bolshevik circle. The German National Bolsheviks—not to be confused with the Russian National Bolsheviks who will appear in Chapter 5—were comprised of ultra-nationalists who adhered to certain Marxist doctrine and were inspired by Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution. Jünger believed that Western Europe had lost conviction and hence advocated a turn away from the West and a “deeper disclosure of [Germany’s] own values” (137). He explored the idea that Germany might have chosen “different allies” and emulated the “progressivist optimism” of Russia (137). In “Total Mobilization,” Jünger writes admiringly of the Soviet Union’s five-year plan, which “presented the world with an attempt to channel the collective energies of a great empire into a single current. (...) The ‘planned economy’ was one of the results of when democracy grows beyond itself into a general unfolding of power” (128).

Jünger perceived projects such as Fascism, Bolshevism, Americanism, and Zionism were emblematic of the unifying momentum that set the masses and industrial production in motion. Patriotism, he claimed, was being replaced by Nationalism. What really mattered now was the total mobilization of society, the surrender of individual freedom to “merciless discipline” and pain (128). Workers were subject to a more powerful momentum, he proclaimed, wherein Right and Left were losing their distinction.

Castorf shares in Jünger’s idea that “the possibilities of intellectual exploration come to life where they penetrate the extremes” (Bullock 567). Jünger believed that in a liberal parliamentary democracy, “Left and Right each lose their individual direction and integrity as they fall back into the orbit of institutional power” (567). During the Weimar Republic, Jünger transcended what he perceived as reductive ties to political parties and oversimplification.⁶¹ He calls all those who participate in the “blasting operation” (*Sprengarbeit*) of modern times, including Benjamin, “kindred spirits” (565). Jünger also claims that warfare itself has a fundamental interchangeability of destructive enterprises, surpassing the distinction between Left and Right. The real distinction, Jünger claims, “lies in how we fight, not what we fight for” (*Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* 74). According to Bullock, Jünger and Benjamin become almost interchangeable at the point of their shared antagonisms and disdain for the liberal bourgeois centre (Bullock 567). Their overlapping sphere of contestation was the “good life” proclaimed by their fathers and the liberal education system that would feed them into “respectable” careers, “which Jünger tried successfully to escape and Benjamin wrote of disparagingly” (569). Both Jünger and Benjamin believed that violence, whether cosmic or revolutionary, was necessary to

⁶¹ Jünger was active in the diverse intellectual and artistic circles in Weimar Berlin, including those of the Left-wing anarchists Ernst Toller and Erich Mühsam. According to Jean-Michel Palmier, Jünger “attended the ‘study group on planned economy’ at which Niekisch debated with Györgi Lukács” (52).

destroy the current order (563). For them, the law, the state, liberal values—all needed to be razed to the ground to open the space for mythical cosmic unity (Jünger) or messianic intervention (Benjamin) (573).

Unlike Jünger, however, Benjamin categorically rejects any concession to a shared vision between himself and Jünger, whom he lodges firmly within the fascist camp. In 1930, Benjamin wrote a trenchant critique of *Krieg und Krieger*, a collection of essays edited by Jünger that including his essay “Total Mobilization.” In the review, titled “Theories of German Fascism,” Benjamin does not see war as the “testing of heroic virtues” that Jünger perceives, but instead equates Jünger’s position on war with “rabidly decadent” principles of bourgeois *l’art pour l’art* (122). As the title of his essay suggests, Benjamin is clear about categorizing thinkers such as Jünger and Ernst von Salomon—another Conservative Revolutionary and *Freikorps* affiliate whose writing Castorf studies—as fascists. Benjamin satirizes the *Freikorps* as war-mongering goons who “carry Klages volumes around in their packs” (128). He also describes the ruling Social Democrats as cunning exploiters of these free-roaming radicals as mercenaries for their anti-Communist ends (127). While Castorf likewise caricatures these ultra-nationalists in his productions, he simultaneously takes their critiques of liberal society seriously. He makes it clear that these men had contradictory biographies and resist easy categorization as fascists, as well as affinities with the Far Left.

In Benjamin’s view, these ultra-nationalists were fetishists of war. They channeled the energy and the tremendous emancipatory potential of new industrial technologies for workers into warfare. Benjamin claims that the writers in *Krieg und Krieger*, “continued to celebrate the cult of war when there was no longer any real enemy” (123). They longed for and actively spread decline and, as such, missed the opportunity in the postwar context to vie for a better direction

for humanity. Instead, they complained that war had become “too administered, too rational” (124). Benjamin also observes that for these *Krieger*, “the ‘landscape of the front’”—also the title of Ernst von Salomon’s contribution—is his “true home” (126). Benjamin notes that the writers included in Jünger’s collection were a generation that never knew peace. They grew up as part of an elite Prussian military caste and came of age during WWI. Benjamin describes their typical postwar trajectory as “roaming mercenaries” (i.e. *Freikorps*) to “the dependable fascist class warrior” (127).

Many intellectuals on both ends of the political spectrum revered Jünger, although he was outlawed by the German liberal establishment after WWII and banned in the GDR. The communist Müller travelled from the GDR to visit Jünger at his home in Wilflingen, West Germany in 1988. Müller recalled that he and Jünger had a “genuine encounter as *Katastrophenliebhaber*” (lovers of catastrophe) (*Krieg* 281). Jünger lived to be 102 and was revered as a *Zeitzeuge* (eyewitness) and chronicler of the extremes of the 20th century. During the Third Reich, Jünger went into so-called *innere Emigration* (inner emigration), writing a thinly veiled critique of the Nazis in 1939 titled *Auf den Marmorklippen* (*On the Marble Cliffs*).⁶² Although the Nazis courted him unsuccessfully, there is no doubt he played into their hands.⁶³

⁶² Jean-Michel Palmier argues that “[if] a certain number of these intellectuals refused to rally to Nazism and formed a kind of aristocratic opposition or internal emigration, they still bear a historical responsibility that it would be vain to deny, Ernst Jünger especially” (55).

⁶³ Jean-Michel Palmier does not see these conservatives as innocent, “even if the aristocratic and intellectual right seems far removed from the beginnings of the NSDAP. They struggled against the Republic, undermined faith in democracy, and provided ideas that could make Nazism acceptable and legitimize it. Moreover, not all champions of the conservative revolution were hostile to Hitler and his party. If they held him in low esteem, they recognized in him a kind of devilish ability, and view him as the only man able to ‘get Germany out of the swamp’, as Oswald Spengler put it” (54-55).

What interests Castorf about Jünger's writings from the Weimar period is that they recognized the totalitarianisms on the horizon.⁶⁴ This was in stark contrast to both those Social Democrats and dogmatic Marxists attached to narratives of progress, which Benjamin likened to the dwarf beneath the automaton chess player ("Theses" 253), and Castorf likened to the naïve Fukuyamian liberals of his own period. Wolf Kittler writes of Jünger's "aura of invincibility resulting from such an exceptional fate" (79). The historian Fritz Stern perceives Jünger's importance as the chronicler of a Faustian age and for having "lived through, described, reinterpreted and perhaps unwittingly prepared people for all the temptations of German life in the century all while keeping his distance" (qtd. in Neaman 67). The journalist Rudolf Augstein describes Jünger as "John Wayne, Clausewitz, and Rimbaud" all wrapped into one (qtd. in Neaman 63). It is these latter perspectives on Jünger as an adventurer and dandy, and simultaneously as a vanguard futurist writer who channeled the spirit of his age while rejecting the National Socialists courting him, that makes him a vital figure in Castorf's intellectual pantheon.

Schmitt's Ausnahmezustand

Carl Schmitt is perhaps the most confounding thinker in Castorf's intellectual pantheon. Considered part of the Conservative Revolution, Schmitt was a legal theorist and political philosopher who wrote critically about liberal democracy and the parliamentary system. Although he plays a lesser role compared to Jünger, it is important to consider *why* Castorf

⁶⁴ Jünger may have recognized the totalitarianisms on the horizon, but why did he not articulate the risk that "total mobilization" could result in the death camps? While Castorf may view him as a kind of seer the fact is that Jünger failed to acknowledge the dark potentialities of Weimar era anti-Semitism and the Nazi's stance on the Jewish Question. The historian Hans Mommsen to some extent captures the paradox of Jünger. He argues that while Jünger helped pave the way for the NSDAP to become a mass movement in the 1920s, his writings also "reflected the existential menace of fascist dictatorships and were thus an 'irreplaceable source of contemporary self-understanding'" (Neaman 67).

would incorporate Schmitt into his repertoire of citable thinkers. Schmitt's work has had a renaissance over the past two decades, especially among thinkers on the Left. His writing re-emerges in the post-Cold War context at the putative end of history to oppose self-assured claims of liberalism's superior outcomes, particularly amongst those scholars who found inspiration in his critiques of the depoliticizing tendencies of universalism. Schmitt's concept of politics is rooted in friend-enemy distinctions, and his emphasis is on the state of exception—emergency measures which becomes particularly relevant after 9/11. His writing remains highly controversial in Germany given his opportunistic association with the National Socialists.⁶⁵

In 1999, the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe edited a collection of essays on Schmitt titled *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, which included a contribution by Žižek. Mouffe identifies Schmitt as the most relevant thinker for the current impasses of democracy and pluralism, warning us “against the dangers of complacency that a triumphant liberalism entails” (2). For Mouffe, Schmitt's conception of the political exemplifies the weaknesses of the dominant liberal approach. Schmitt “shatter[s] the illusions of all those who believe that the blurring of frontiers between Left and Right, and the steady moralization of political discourse, constitute progress in the Enlightened march of humanity towards a new world order and a cosmopolitan democracy” (2).⁶⁶ Schmitt's critiques of liberalism and especially his concepts of

⁶⁵ After the collapse of Weimar in 1933, Schmitt worked in the employ of the Third Reich until 1936 when he fell out of the party's favour due to “internecine quarrels” (Kahn 67). Schmitt was rehabilitated by the Nazis in 1939 and is credited with bringing forth such geopolitical concepts as the *Grossraum*—a theory of German empire that claimed territories in the centre of Europe for Germany. Schmitt later attempted to defend his association with the National Socialists along lines that reflect Jünger's intellectual habitus, namely that he was an “intellectual adventurer” (81). According to Victoria Kahn, Schmitt also remained an “unrepentant anti-Semite” right up until his passing in 1985 (67).

⁶⁶ Mouffe puts forth a theory of agonistic politics—a space for political pluralism and democratic engagement for enemies and devoid of consensus. As such, Mouffe's work is an attempt to politicize liberal ideals and infuse them with “confrontations among adversaries (agonism), thus avoiding a frontal struggle between enemies (antagonism)” (*The Challenges of Carl Schmitt* 4). Mouffe wishes to transform Schmitt's antagonism to liberal plural agonism (5),

sovereignty and the state of exception have had their most significant revival in the work of Giorgio Agamben (i.e. *Homo Sacer*, 1995; *State of Exception*, 2005). It is important to note that Castorf does *not* cite Mouffe or Agamben. Instead, he invokes Schmitt directly—evidently fascinated by Schmitt’s forceful political realism and his neo-Aristocratic, Shakespearean approach to politics. These ideas serve Castorf as provocations and as conceptual arsenal in an age of depoliticization.

In *Political Theology* (1922), Schmitt is concerned with sovereignty— “with the locus and nature of the agency that constitutes a political system” (xi). For Schmitt, it is the essence of sovereignty both to decide what an exception is and to make the decisions appropriate to that exception. This is what he calls the *Ausnahmezustand*, the state of exception (6). For Schmitt, “all law is situational law” (13). What is certain for any institution, including the legal order, is that at some unpredictable moment, “the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition” (15). Schmitt’s emphasis is on the extraordinary and the unpredictable quality of life itself, which supersedes the institution and the law. According to Schmitt, life cannot be reduced to or adequately governed by a set of rules, no matter how complex. The exception is, in a sense, the *fulfillment* of the law—it is activated when the law, the norm, is threatened by “extreme peril” (6). It is therefore the occasion for and the revelation of the true nature of sovereignty. Schmitt’s sovereign is a charismatic, decisionist figure who hails the crisis. Here, overlaps can be seen with Castorf’s public persona.

Ausnahmezustand gets to the essence of the dramaturgy of Castorf’s role as artistic director. In an interview with Peter Laudenbach around his production of Friedrich von

which is completely antithetical to Schmitt’s idea that only a state of equals, a homogenous state unified in the State’s ideals in opposition to other entities, is truly democratic.

Galgern's *Ozean* in 2019, Castorf claims it is a condition that "reigns in the theatre" (qtd. in Laudenbach 55). Like Schmitt (and, in a sense, like the avant-gardes), Castorf wants to intervene in the "mechanism" of the institution "that has become torpid by repetition" and respond intuitively to the crisis at hand—a crisis he deems to be at risk for co-optation by the Far Right. Castorf perceives a duty to respond to the situation and to enable reality to penetrate the theatre institution and to reveal its authentic and charismatic dimensions. Žižek argues that Schmitt's notion of the exception "stands simultaneously for the intrusion of the Real" and "imposes a symbolic normative order...the Master-Signifier" (Žižek in Mouffe 19). The latter is achieved by way of a decision, an act of Will (18). This is to say that Castorf himself uses the diagnosis of an *Ausnahmestand* to hail a state of crisis and contour the theatre accordingly, a situation that repeats many times throughout his tenure. For Castorf, the radical potential of the theatre institution is not only in manifesting the situation of danger and suspending the rules that govern the everyday, but also in letting all manner of political and social "energies" temporarily emerge under its auspices to make this crisis patently visible to spectators.

Refracted differently, we also see a proletarian reading of Schmitt's exceptional state—one entrenched in the Volksühne and its historic allegiances. This proletarianized Schmitt comes from Benjamin, who claims that the "tradition of the oppressed is not the exception but the rule" ("Theses" 257). In order to stave off any number of catastrophes the task is, according to Benjamin, to bring about "a real state of emergency... in the struggle against Fascism" (257). This call represents a return to the struggles that played out in the Volksbühne of the 1920s—the theatre's corrective of history under threat of its most horrific form of return. If the state of emergency is permanent as Benjamin insists it is for the oppressed, then Schmitt's exceptional state has no ability to function as it is supposed to (and hence no chance to be implemented by

the National Socialists, as it was in 1933). The real state of emergency is perpetual and ongoing for oppressed peoples. However, Castorf's Schmittianism is ambivalent. The Volksbühne holds space for both a decisionist leader and a proletarian politics in its engagement with both ends of the political spectrum as a dialectic that emerges from the crisis of liberalism.

In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1926) Schmitt articulates what he perceives as the fundamental tension between democracy and liberalism. What Schmitt means by democratic citizenship and equality is a homogeneous rather than pluralistic *demos*—that a democracy can only exist for *a people* (9). For Schmitt, the nature of this homogeneity is not important. In order to be treated as equals, citizens must partake of a common substance. The consequence of granting universal equality to all individuals in the political realm, without concern for national or any other form of homogeneity, would be the total devaluation of political equality and of the political (12). This form of citizenship would not eradicate inequality, but rather exacerbate liberal democratic terms that then play out in the economic sphere. Schmitt argues that “[u]nder the conditions of superficial political inequality, another sphere in which substantial inequalities prevail (today for example the economic sphere) will dominate politics” (12).

For Schmitt, liberalism's problem was that it had no borders, no frontiers, no geopolitics—essential elements in his concept of the state. After all, a state and a people had to define itself in opposition to something else. After the collapse of socialism, the post-political climate to which Müller and Žižek were responding saw not only the end of the political, but the diminishing of Right and Left into a consensus. As Castorf would see it, this tension between democracy and liberalism was nowhere more clearly played out than in the events leading up to the *Wende*. As noted earlier, the rapid transformation from the *Wir sind das Volk* protest

movement in the GDR into *Wir sind ein Volk*, which helped to propel the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, is exemplary. The latter would play out the collapse of the GDR and the establishment of a unified Germany as a liberal democracy with an increasingly nationalist inflection in the 1990s. In the former, *das Volk* took to the streets in a form of direct-action expression of their *will* to radically transform the GDR and retain an ‘other’ to capitalism. They were the people, enacting their democratic will. Here it becomes clear that the unifying momentum of *the* people united in struggle for justice and democratic participation is antithetical to an economically motivated one. We can see clearly the import of Schmitt’s Us vs. Them division for the Left as a radical form of proletarian democracy unites all people in a struggle for true equality and justice. The *telos* of the Left, however, is not at all Schmittian in the end, as it seeks in the Marxian tradition to eventually eliminate all divisions.

In *Theory of the Partisan* (1962) Schmitt defines the partisan as a guerilla fighter who responds to the strategic operations of regular armies with irregular actions rooted in an opposition of friend and enemy. Relevant for Castorf is that Schmitt’s idea of the partisan emerges from a concrete situation of a foreign occupation (17). Schmitt locates the origins of partisanship in the Spanish guerrilla war (1808-1813). The Spanish partisan was the first to wage an irregular war against a modern, regular army (4). It is was in Prussia, however, that a *theory* of partisanship was developed with the *Landsturm Edict* in 1813. Schmitt calls this document, in which a legitimate King sanctions irregular fighting, the “Magna Carta for partisan warfare” (42). The *Edict* (never actually implemented during the French occupation) was then absorbed into the theories of war that characterized Prussian martial culture and became a topic in

Clausewitz's *On War* (42).⁶⁷ It also led to the development of a "political *theory* of the partisan" (47). Schmitt has a section in his book titled "The Partisan as a Prussian Ideal" (40) wherein he delineates the conditions under which the partisan was discovered, "not only in his military-technical capacity but also philosophically and valued accordingly" (32). Schmitt traces the development from Clausewitz to Lenin (49)—intellectual continuities from Prussia to the Soviet Union that would be of interest for Castorf. In these continuities we see the *Krieger* discourse develop further during the Weimar Republic and influence the intellectual tradition of the Conservative Revolution of which Schmitt was a part. Here, we can also establish overlaps with Lenin, who was admired by Jünger and Schmitt. Lenin himself was an expert on and great admirer of Clausewitz (51) thus illuminating a further connection between the Prussian project and the Leninist one. According to Schmitt, Lenin's notes for Clausewitz's *On War* created one of the most remarkable documents of world history and intellectual history (51). Schmitt argues that Lenin was the "first to fully conceive of the partisan as a significant figure of national and international civil war" (49). Lenin's writings were directed against "widespread social-democratic opinion at the time that the goal of a proletarian revolution should arise independently as a mass movement in parliamentary countries" (50), hence his turn to the concept of partisanship.

For Schmitt, what constituted the partisan was intense political commitment, irregularity, mobility, and connection to the soil. The partisan fights based on an intense political commitment, which means being able to distinguish friend from enemy and, ultimately, a

⁶⁷ Schmitt cites Fichte, Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, Clausewitz and Kleist as recognizing the "enormous spiritual potential of the effective Prussian intelligentsia at that critical moment. The nationalism of this Berlin intellectual stratum was not just a matter of some simple or even illiterate people but rather of the educated elite. In such an atmosphere, which united an aroused national feeling with philosophical education, the partisan was discovered philosophically, and his theory became historically possible" (44).

willingness to fight an enemy to the death. The most pronounced expressions of absolute enmity are found in the works of Lenin, for whom “the concrete absolute enemy was the class enemy, the bourgeois, the Western capitalist and his social order in every country in which they ruled” (52). Importantly, the partisan’s ability to act as a disruptive force is tied to his “irregular” nature—to his mobility and “to his capacity to organize surprise attacks and to retreat fast” (Wouter np). Castorf’s imaginary is inhabited by an idea of this “disruptive force.” As cited earlier, he regards all those “who have stepped out of the consensus of the Democrats” as his intellectual allies. Castorf explains in the interview with *Die Zeit*, what fascinates him about the partisan is the idea of one who comes to punitive action from the forests, changes something, and then withdraws again. This aligns with his conception of the Volksbühne OST under siege by the West, hence the emergence of the partisan—of the intendant as struggling behind enemy lines.

For Schmitt, “the partisan carried the hope of redemption of the political in a world dominated by antagonistic universalistic ideologies” (Wouter np). Schmitt feared that the “partisan’s independence,” which is to say their disruptive power, “would be swallowed up by the same universalizing tendencies” (np.). Here there is a notable difference from Brecht who, like Schmitt, held existential and Leninist ideas about the concept of the political. Schmitt’s partisan is a perception of the *individual* as a potentially redemptive anomaly, whereas in Brecht a self-sacrificing politics (of which his *Lehrstücke* are exemplary), necessitates the *eradication of the individual* for the Marxist-Leninist cause. In a sense, Castorf saw the Volksbühne as ground zero for working through these Prussian, Leninist and Brechtian ideas: the individual as outlier and figure of hope vs. their disintegration into the collective. This tension underwrites many of the aesthetic phenomena Castorf’s theatre has come to represent.

Chapter Summary

Castorf sustained this complex terrain of intellectual interests, political ideas and existential concerns throughout his twenty-five-year tenure at the Volksbühne. What emerges here is a very tight “force field” culled from late 19th and early 20th century German intellectual traditions concerned with illiberalism, voluntarism, dictatorship and direct action. Crucial here is that these conceits span Left and Right divisions and *transcend ideological distinction*. Castorf’s intellectual genealogy can be broadened into two traditions or lineages: one concerned with thwarted revolutionary left wing histories in Germany (from Marx through Benjamin on to Müller) and the other, with the radical Right. These traditions, taken together, reflect a profound ambivalence and ambiguity at the Volksbühne regarding history and the pronouncement of its end. For all the above thinkers, liberalism and capitalism were disasters destined to disaffect and disenfranchise youth, or to lead to economic crisis and a permanent state of emergency. It is ultimately the nexus at which Far Right and Far Left overlap that is the most interesting to Castorf.

Jünger and Schmitt on the Right, and Benjamin on the Left—each sought emergency solutions to hinder the inevitable disaster toward which the crisis-addled Weimar Republic seemed to be heading. Schmitt perceived the threat to parliamentary democracy necessitating a defensive sovereign decision on the “state of emergency.” Jünger, too, clearly saw that it was one authoritarian regime or another—communism or fascism—about to lay siege to an unstable liberal democracy. He perceived a fundamental interchangeability of Left and Right in their response to the same issues: “For a period of more than a hundred years, the masses, blinded by the optical illusion of the franchise, were tossed around like a ball by the ‘right’ and ‘left.’ It always seemed that one side offered refuge from the other’s claims” (“Total Mobilization” 138).

Jünger and Benjamin represent two receptions of Nietzsche in their critiques of liberal democracy, their antagonism toward the bourgeois inheritance and notions of progress, and their channeling of a destructive zeal and appeal to violence to raze the bourgeois liberal order (i.e., Jünger's vital and heroically nihilistic; Benjamin's messianic and emancipatory).

In terms of left wing history, Castorf saw a repetition of failures to achieve genuine socialism as first violent suppression, then stagnation and bureaucratization overtook attempts achieving at a genuinely revolutionary state. We see this position likewise reflected in the dissident Marxists of the former Eastern Bloc such as Müller and Žižek. Their responses drew heavily on Leftist approaches to history that resisted closure (i.e., Benjamin and Derrida) as a method of refuting Fukuyama's end of history. Castorf built on the intellectual approaches of an unorthodox left wing political tradition tied directly to the Volksbühne through Müller. He also contributed uniquely to this tradition as a public intellectual and polemicist for the post-*Wende* generation, and as a contradictory *persona* who reflected and channeled the dark, unspeakable thoughts and longings of *das Volk*. Castorf was, at once, seer and prognosticator—an individual not afraid to explore, intellectually, beyond the parameters of liberal acceptability. For Castorf, the only justification for a state-funded theatre was its ability to reflect and process the dangerous energies burgeoning underneath political correctness and taboo suppression. In the following chapter, we see how these various intellectual and political orientations translate to Castorf's stagecraft, especially in the earliest years of his tenure at the Volksbühne.

Chapter 2: Castorf's Aesthetic Compass: The Founding Years

In his conceptualization of the Volksbühne, Castorf's first three seasons made unresolved dialectical tensions visible, deconstructed dominant historical and unification narratives, and demonstrated the resurfacing of the 20th century German pasts in the present. Castorf explored the National Socialist and the Stalinist histories that he deemed mandated by the Volksbühne architecture itself. These dark legacies, he claimed, were continuing to impact the postsocialist present. A central objective of the early period of his tenure was to place the happy finalities of unification into disrepute by channeling the reactionary sentiments he saw brewing under the façade of the new liberal order. He did so by way of a repertoire that drew a strong comparison between the 1990s and Weimar Berlin, wherein similar anti-liberal extremes, *ressentiment* and secret "pogrom planning" hung in the air. Castorf also used strategies such as over-identification and aesthetic repetition inspired by Boris Groys (1988) that he claimed were necessary to "work off the totalitarian spirit" of Stalin that loomed large over the postsocialist East. With his aesthetic exploration of authoritarian figures on the Right and on the Left, Castorf also marked the longing for a *Leitbild*, a "guiding image," that emerged from the disorienting landscape of postsocialism. This longing for norms and directives correlated with both a disturbing resurgence of nationalist sentiments amongst the presumably left-liberal intelligentsia, as well as the momentum of the Far Right among disenfranchised youths in the former GDR. Castorf explored both phenomena as symptoms of liberal post-politics.

In his now legendary stage productions during this early period—*Räuber von Schiller*, *Lear*, *Clockwork Orange*, *Pension Schölller/Die Schlacht*—Castorf aspired to create adaptations characterized by a radical degree of social relevance and authenticity. He simultaneously launched a form of institutional critique by interrogating the very mission of German state-

funded theatre as it served power and nationalism historically. What emerged in his stage productions were strategies of irritation that alienated spectators from any certain ideological position from which his productions could be interpreted. Aesthetically, Castorf's challenge was, as per Brecht, to find the "correct form of entertainment" for an age he perceived to be irrational and Kafkaesque (Schütt 22). Castorf wanted to find an aesthetic form to reflect reality on stage and make it relevant for those to whom the historic Volksbühne had pledged allegiance, namely the disenfranchised and marginalized. Castorf, much in the spirit of directors such as Piscator and Brecht, wanted to connect the theatre to life outside the institution and reflect the realities on the Berlin streets. In this spirit, Castorf launched his attack on the traditional enemies of the avant-gardes—the petite bourgeoisie, the *Bildungsbürgertum*, bureaucrats and other comfort-seeking, pain-avoiding "last men." He also added his own uniquely postsocialist contribution to those traditional animosities: the West Berlin dentists ("*Westberliner Zahnärzte*") and all other 'colonizers' of East Berlin.

This chapter examines Castorf's first three seasons at the Volksbühne—from 1992-1996—to develop an understanding of how Castorf's aesthetic strategies re-invigorated this historic institution. During this period, the Volksbühne became the most significant cultural institution in post-*Wende* Germany. Not only did it become a hub for dissident Marxist intellectuals from the former Eastern Bloc, but it became a singular space for processing the discontents of unification for East and West Germans alike. Castorf also re-ignited the spirit of Dadaism, Futurism, and those political theatre traditions embedded within the theatre itself. The chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section, Castorf's Aesthetic-Political Foundations in the GDR, addresses Castorf's early formation in the state-subversive aesthetic tradition before the *Wende*. This includes an account of Castorf's time as *Oberspielleiter* in the

provincial town of Anklam, which served as an incubator for the development of his aesthetic. The second section, *Staging Dialectics*, presents the larger social and political context Castorf inherited and the challenges he faced as an artistic director in the post-*Wende* period. This section marks the tensions Castorf reflected dialectically in the institution and in his stage productions: Helmut Kohl's promise of *blühende Landschaften* ("blooming landscapes") in the East on July 1, 1990 and the realities of joblessness and social breakdown (Raddatz 24); the "irrational" experience that characterized the simultaneity of a decelerated East combined with the swift infiltration of a "foreign" mass media (Schütt 22); and an opulent West German lifestyle alongside rising neo-Nazi movements in the East (35). The third and final section, *Castorf's Praxis*, focuses on Castorf's application of aesthetic and philosophical principles: his media interventions, his channeling of Ernst Jünger's *Krieger* persona, his overidentification with both the Far-Right and Far-Left, and the aesthetic repetition of the image of Stalin with which he sought to bring latent longings to the fore. This same section will explore Castorf's method of production with his ensemble as a utopian labour practice that invited freedom and self-actualization for both actors and spectators.

Castorf's Aesthetic-Political Foundations in the GDR

Castorf was born in 1951 in the East Berlin district of Prenzlauerberg (just up the road from the Volksbühne) into a "petit bourgeois" family that owned a private window-blinds store—a rarity in the GDR. The shop, located on the Pappelallee, was founded by Castorf's grandfather in 1889. As the son of a capitalist, Castorf would have been passed over at school in favour of workers' children. Castorf explained how this shaped his relationship to politics: "I've learned one thing from my parents' petit bourgeois training in survival: that one can survive as a person in very different political systems, without being destroyed or adapting oneself. My father

was never a member of the SED; my grandfather was never a member of the Nazi Party” (qtd. in Baltizki 22). This distance from official party politics would continue through Castorf’s life. Against the odds, but because of his formidable intellect, Castorf would eventually win a place at the prestigious Humboldt University in Berlin (HU).

Castorf received his training in dramaturgy at the HU’s Aesthetics and Art History Institute from 1972 to 1976 (Detje, *Castorf* 58-59). Through the research interests of professors such as Joachim Fiebach and Rudolf Münz, the department developed into a hub for approaches to theatre historiography and scholarship that were considered subversive by the aesthetic dogmatists of the SED. This included the study of the early 20th century theatre vanguards such as Meyerhold, Piscator and Artaud, the Theatre of the Absurd (i.e., Beckett, Ionesco),⁶⁸ as well as contemporary neo-avant-garde theatre practitioners like Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Richard Schechner (54). These influences would inspire Castorf’s generation of theatre practitioners in the GDR, many of whom believed that the thwarted revolutionary energies of the Prague Spring and the student movements in the West could be channeled onto the stage. For Castorf, this revolutionary energy was cultural, erotic and youth-centric; it was fueled by the sexual revolution and rock n’ roll bands in the West. The Rolling Stones, The Doors and The Kinks made their way into the Eastern Bloc and were important influences (45-46). Performance ensembles such as Schechner’s *The Performance Group* in New York City and Grotowski’s *The Poor Theatre* in Poland, which constituted the vanguard of theatre aesthetics and praxis during this period, were also studied in the department (54). Their performances drew upon counter-cultural coordinates: anti-authoritarianism, ritual, self-emancipation, eroticism, and

⁶⁸ Castorf completed his *Magister* (master’s thesis) at the HU in 1976 on the theatre of Eugène Ionesco, titled “The Foundations of the ‘Evolving’ of the Philosophical-Ideological and the Aesthetic-Artistic Positions of Ionesco Concerning Reality.”

transgression. These influences, which offered alternative, collective visions of society, later became evident in Castorf's own theatrical praxis.

During his studies, Castorf had access to the library of the Aesthetics and Art History Institute at the HU, which included many texts not accessible to the wider GDR public. Among these texts were works by Jünger, Nietzsche and Spengler. According to Robin Detje, however, the texts even more captivating for Castorf were those from the 1920s *proletkult* and “left-radicals” from the Soviet Union, which had been suppressed by Stalin: “Bogdanow, Arbatow or Trotzki” (Detje, *Castorf* 55-56). As such, the department library constituted an “ideological playground” where one could “rummage around in banned materials” (56), laying the groundwork for Castorf's intellectual promiscuity. It was also during this period that Castorf discovered the cinema of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, which became a decisive influence on his own work (56).

The tenure of Benno Besson as artistic director of the Volksbühne (1969-1978) coincided with Castorf's studies at the HU and greatly influenced Castorf's own reception of the theatre. Besson was a Swiss Communist who had emigrated to the GDR in 1949 after meeting Brecht during the latter's exile in Switzerland. Besson's own productions—first at the Berliner Ensemble, then at the Deutsches Theater, and later at the Volksbühne—were in the Brechtian tradition of epic theatre, but drew more heavily than Brecht on the folk, festival and carnival traditions of people's theatre. Under Besson the “fourth wall” between actors and audience was declared “the enemy” and frequently done away with (Detje, *Castorf* 52). As Petra Struber writes “[Besson's] new Volksbühne concept was a dream of a theatre that wasn't really a theatre anymore – at least not in the tradition of classical German *Sprechtheater*. It was against the [capitalist] leisure-time character [of state theatre] and the *Bildungs*-tradition . . . and, in the

years that followed, [Besson] asserted what he called “plebeian, folksy strategies of the now-vanished old *Volkstheater*” (qtd. in Detje, *Castorf* 52). The anti-authoritarian roots of these non-illusionistic *Volkstheater* traditions made Besson’s type of theatre highly subversive in the GDR. Besson rejected the “affirmative” aesthetics privileged in the GDR, as well as the official styles of socialist or classical realism. Moreover, Besson could argue that these *Volkstheater* traditions were the true roots of socialist theatre.

Under Besson, the Volksbühne hosted twenty-four-hour-around-the-clock marathon theatrical events in 1973 and 1974, which he called *Spektakles*. They offered multiple productions simultaneously, creating the atmosphere of a festival or carnival. Undoubtedly, the *Spektakles* were intended to achieve the function of the festival historically: to suspend ordinary power relations, satirize those individuals in power albeit in covert and allegorical ways, and to bring a democratic, anti-authoritarian community temporarily into being. As Castorf summarized it, Besson’s artistic directorship at the Volksbühne was characterized by a “struggle against the museum-like establishment,” an attempt to facilitate “institutional change” and an “aesthetic provocation to make social contradictions visible” (qtd. in Özdamar 241). Castorf’s re-conception of the Volksbühne almost twenty years later was consciously indebted to Besson’s tenure. The period starting in the late 1960s included not only Besson, but other former Brecht assistants such as the duo Manfred Karge and Matthias Langhoff (who followed Besson to the Volksbühne from the BE), as well as Fritz Marquardt and Heiner Müller. Besson cultivated an openness and international spirit at the Volksbühne that did not exist in other theatres in the GDR, attracting performers and dramatists from around the world (Balitzki 193).

Castorf would apply many of the aesthetic principles from his HU studies and from Besson to his early productions. His first directorial experiments were loose adaptations of

Brecht undertaken whilst he was working as a dramaturg at the Theater der Bergarbeiter in Senftenberg in 1978. He then staged Karl Grünberg's *Golden fließt der Stahl* for the 30th anniversary of the founding of the GDR while working as a dramaturge at the Brandenburger Theater. The production was a scathing satire of a play written to honour the building of socialism and resulted in his being blacklisted due to "unsocialist tendencies" identified in his work (Balitzki 35). Castorf retaliated by launching a successful lawsuit against the SED government with the help of his defense lawyer, Gregor Gysi. Castorf was subsequently "given" creative directorship of a small provincial theatre on the Polish border, the "Vorpommerische Landesbühne Anklam." Anklam was where the "Stasi" (the *Staatssicherheitsdienst* or State Security Service) unofficially sent "difficult" people and where they believed they had Castorf under control (Matussek 192). Contrary to the Stasi's intention, however, banishing him to the periphery only enabled Castorf to establish a laboratory within which to develop his style and to gather an ensemble of social outliers around him.

What happened in Anklam between 1981 and 1985 has become the stuff of theatre legend. Castorf established a troupe—a gang of like-minded anti-authoritarians and outliers—and developed his vanguard approach to the dramatic canon. His adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1982), Müller's *The Mission (Der Auftrag)* (1983), and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House (Nora)* (1985) were startlingly original and subversive interpretations of iconic texts. In Castorf's early work, the characters' pathologies were often articulated through slapstick and the repetition of lines, as well as the actors' spontaneous outbursts of private emotional expression. For Castorf, "political truth onstage comes from liberating the private truthfulness of the actor" (Detje, 2005 7). This was in stark contrast to GDR theatre, which was supposed to be realistic

and affirmative. Productions had to resolve in the obligatory optimistic, socialist conclusion. Castorf's productions eschewed all of this in favour of digression, incoherence and chaos.

Castorf's approach to acting, as it emerged in Anklam, was dialectical: the anti-“psychological” (Stanislavsky) and formalistic style of Brecht combined with the spontaneous unleashing of authentic emotion and explorations of the unconscious through Freud and Otto Rank (Detje, *Castorf* 110). Castorf insisted upon the autonomy and unpredictability of the actors as expressions of individuality that challenged authority, both the author's and the state's. The experience of witnessing “the emancipated actor on stage should emancipate the spectator from their own hierarchical relations” (151). In the GDR especially, this included encouraging his actors' narcissism and egomania as “necessary” bulwarks against state control (Schütt 110-1). The importance of the actor's biography and life experience as the source of authenticity was essential to his approach (Balitzki 130).

The basic co-ordinates of Castorf's directing style emerged in Anklam. Characteristic of his productions was a complete disregard for the dramatic text (often retaining less than 20% of the original); a highly cynical reception of the official GDR discourse; and finally, a fixation on the individual, on interiority and authenticity. Preoccupations with psychoanalysis, insertions of Western rock n' roll music, the incorporation of material elements in the performance (e.g. buckets of water, food fights), as well as slapstick and the absurd repetition of lines, were all early trademarks of Castorf's aesthetic. By refusing the closure of dialectical tensions, and with provocative digressions into absurd and non-sensical antics, Castorf also rejected the affirmative character of art in the GDR. The scandals caused by these strategies (with productions frequently banned after the dress rehearsal or the premiere) rendered Castorf an *enfant terrible*—a figure much beloved in the Western modernist tradition. Castorf's Anklam period lasted for four years,

after which he became a sought-after guest director in the GDR and, starting in 1988, in West Germany as well.

The Nagel Papers

In 1991, the tumult resulting from the unification of Germany was at its height in an officially unified, but still divided Berlin. Both civically and culturally, Berlin was in a state of acute chaos and uncertainty. The surfeit of performing arts institutions and new budgetary restrictions necessitated executive decisions regarding the number of publicly funded arts venues (Nagel 127). When the Wall fell, Berlin had no less than sixteen public theatres—eleven in the East, and five in the West (Stebbins 378). While many theatres were forced to close in the process of amalgamating the two Berlins (most controversially, the Schiller Theater in West Berlin) the Volksbühne-am-Luxemburg-Platz, as it was then called, had powerful advocates who understood its historical importance and recognized its potential to participate in the revitalization of the fractured metropolis. The Volksbühne's location almost directly at the dividing line between former East and West, next to the Karl Liebknecht Haus (formerly the head office of the KPD in the 1920s), *demanding* engagement with the disorienting conditions of post-*Wende* Berlin (Nagel 134). The Berlin Senate for Cultural Affairs appointed a committee, led by theatre director and critic turned cultural advisor Ivan Nagel, to spearhead the process of selecting a new intendant for the 824 seat Volksbühne, at the time Berlin's second largest state-owned theatre (after the Schiller Theater). Nagel and the committee's report was a response to wide-spread speculation about whether there was a single artistic director capable of taking on

this storied institution in a way that addressed the precariousness of the times without being dismantled by them.⁶⁹ If not, the Volksbühne would be closed down and repurposed.

The Senate's aim was to use the centrally located Volksbühne for its civic agenda, namely to suture the division between East and West Berlin. Rather than re-purposing the building entirely, Nagel argued that they should build on the "artistically important" work being done there already (134). On April 6, 1991, the committee published the so-called "Nagel Papers"⁷⁰ regarding the situation of Berlin theatre, in which Nagel specified Castorf by name as someone whom he deemed qualified for the challenge (134). Nagel believed that if Castorf could create such a stir from the rural backwoods of eastern Germany, he would be precisely the man to take the reins at the Volksbühne, now standing under-utilized at the heart of a unified Berlin. Impressed especially with Castorf's adaptation of Schiller's *Die Räuber*—retitled as *Räuber von Schiller*—on the Volksbühne's main stage in September 1990, Nagel urged the Senate to take a risk and instate Castorf as artistic director. Nagel saw Castorf's *Räuber* as the type of socially relevant, albeit wildly entertaining theatre that could engage a younger audience. Castorf had already established a reputation for innovative, anarchic, youth-centric adaptations of classics that were received by audiences in the GDR as encoded allegories for the political situation. *Räuber*, which opened just months before unification, was a commentary on the cyclical nature of failed left wing revolutions in Germany and the ineffectual leadership of the

⁶⁹ Many strong candidates for the position of artistic director were employed elsewhere. For example, former Volksbühne artistic director Benno Besson was in France, and Matthias Langhoff and Heiner Müller were assigned to the Berliner Ensemble (BE).

⁷⁰ Officially titled *Überlegungen zur Situation der Berliner Theater* ("Regarding the Situation of Berlin Theatre") the "Nagel Papers" argue that the future of Berlin's theatres was of national if not international importance and that funding was required for the future German capital to regain its status as the "Hauptstadt des Europäischen Theaters" (217).

GDR.⁷¹ It was also an irreverent “attack” on the bourgeois canon and the tragic “hero” Karl von Moor—who was here portrayed as naïve fool and idiot stock character. In Castorf’s *Räuber*, Karl and his gang of robbers are middle age has-beens and *former* 1968er rebels. With their depiction, Castorf satirized protest movements (including the “*Wir sind ein Volk*” movement that helped to dismantle the GDR) as destined to lead to middle class complacency.

As Nagel pointed out in his report, the civic context in which Castorf would have to intervene was one of “social, cultural shock and confusion” (Nagel 135). This disorientating context should compel an aesthetic response, thus providing a “new perspective on [unification] by absorbing politics and using techniques of alienation to facilitate illumination” (135). The aesthetic strategies Nagel was referring to date back to the historic Volksbühne of the Weimar Republic—specifically to the political and epic theatre traditions of Piscator and Brecht. These strategies, according to Nagel, could be converted to a “new, illuminating and disturbing vision of theatre” (135). They would represent a furtherance of the Volksbühne’s historic contribution to the development of estrangement strategies (*Verfremdungseffekte*)—to the ideology-critique and critical commentary associated with left wing theatre during the Weimar republic. The irony here is that these strategies were devised to make visible the contradictions of capitalism and endorse Marxist finalities. By endorsing Castorf’s stagecraft, the *Kulturpolitik* of the Senate of Berlin could showcase the liberal democratic state’s ability to fully accommodate criticality and vanguardism without being threatened by them. This would signal the West’s cultural and

⁷¹ Underwriting this position is a Left-wing philosophy of history referred to as the “*deutsche Misere*” (German misery), the inability of Germany to actualize a socialist or communist revolution starting from the Peasants Wars (1524-1525) through the wars of 1848 (see Cornish 41). Here, I would add the November Revolution of 1918 to the list and include it in Castorf and Müller’s iteration of the *deutsche Misere*. The *deutsche Misere* is associated with Friedrich Engels and with Bertolt Brecht but was, of course, antithetical to official GDR historiography (41).

ideological superiority over the East wherein these formalist strategies were considered a threat and denounced as “*Volksfremd*” (alien to the people) and “*dekadent*.”

Nagel also spoke of the need for a theatre ensemble or troupe with an “ex GDR core” (135). In this way, Castorf would use the stage to help bridge the mental divide between two disparate nations. The division between East and West that remained long after unification is essential to an examination of Castorf’s instatement. Berlin in the 1990s was a site of ideological collision and diverse agendas. It was a city caught between “Marx and Coca Cola” in which Castorf claimed one “can feel most acutely the artificially bolted-togetherness of these two German halves that don’t belong together” (qtd. in Schütt 80). The overall mood by the early 1990s was quickly becoming a dark one. While citizens in the former GDR had been largely dissatisfied with the SED dictatorship, Western capitalism was failing to prove a satisfactory alternative. The initial euphoria of unification was dwindling and the post-*Wende* period brought with it social disadvantages including the loss of job security, as well as a breakdown of the collective way of life that existed in the GDR. Many citizens began expressing a desire to bring back the GDR. A theatre mandated to intervene politically would have to find the right response to this situation or risk losing all credibility as a relevant force. According to Nagel’s now legendary pronouncement, Castorf’s Volksbühne would be “dead or famous at the beginning of their third year” (Nagel 134).

Staging Dialectics: The First Three Seasons

Bringing History to the Stage in the Inaugural Season

In October 1992, with the aid of Bert Neumann (1960-2015), his chief set designer, as well as his dramaturges Matthias Lilienthal and Carl Hegemann, Castorf officially took over as

intendant of the Volksbühne. At this point, the theatre had long been standing underutilized.⁷² It had been declining physically and artistically since the 1980s—its heights under Besson and as the unofficial home of playwright Heiner Müller, long passed. Castorf's first few years as intendant were early after the *Wende* when unification was still underway, with a great deal of disappointed expectations and resentment on behalf of citizens from *both* the former East and West. East Germans did not find the Promised Land in Western capitalism, nor did West Germans happily accept the new taxes imposed on them to support the rebuilding of the East. West Germans found the citizens from the former GDR lazy, entitled and provincial; and East Germans felt that an image of Germanness was promoted that did not correspond to their reality and that they were treated as second class citizens. As we will see, Castorf and his team rose to the occasion of Nagel's dead or famous challenge, far exceeding expectations in the first few seasons.

Castorf's first season (1992-1993) at the Volksbühne embraced the "dead or famous" mandate with abandon. He launched it with five premieres in the unheard-of span of four weeks. Shakespeare's *König Lear*, Arnolt Bronnen's *Rheinische Rebellen (Rheinland Rebels)*⁷³ and Jochen Berg's *Fremde in der Nacht (Strangers in the Night)* were all directed by Castorf. Andreas Kriegenburg—a young director from the GDR and protégé of Castorf—staged Lev Lunt's *Stadt der Gerechtigkeit (The City of Truth)* from 1924, based on the failed October

⁷² Besson left the GDR for Switzerland searching for artistic freedom after his proposed programming line-up for the 1977-1978 season was denied approval. After Besson's departure, the subsequent artistic directorships of the Volksbühne were disappointments: Franz Rödel (1978-1990); Winifred Wagner, Annegret Hahn, and Marion van Kamp (1990-1991); Hahn then led the theatre as sole intendant (1991-1992).

⁷³ Bronnen's *Rheinische Rebellen* (1925) is set in 1923, the crisis year of the Weimar Republic, when French and Belgian troops were occupying the Ruhr and riots and inflation were shaping the political landscape. Bronnen's piece focuses on Occc, a charismatic leader of a separatist movement, whose goal is the founding of a Rhenish Republic. Not only are the themes highly relevant to Castorf's interpretation of the historical moment, but he also turned this production into a scathing satire of German nationalism.

Revolution.⁷⁴ The young Greek-German director Kostas Papakostopoulos directed Frank Xaver Kroetz's *Stallerhof*. Castorf labelled these five plays "A Cycle of German history – 7. October - 9. November" and launched the premieres to coincide with the forty-first anniversary of the founding of the GDR, as well as the third anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and to commemorate the fifty-fourth anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (Krump 58). Castorf wished to mark the significance of recurrence of certain dates in German history such as November 9. Moreover, by staging *Rheinische Rebellen* and *Stadt der Gerechtigkeit*, Castorf wished to foreground the uncanny parallels he perceived between the post-*Wende* period and the fractious right wing putschist and left wing revolutionary energies of Weimar Berlin (Detje, *Castorf* 198).

Castorf's production of the GDR dramatist Jochen Berg's *Fremde in der Nacht* (*Strangers in the Night*) premiered not at the Volksbühne, but rather at the Kino Babylon, a historic cinema located directly across from the Volksbühne.⁷⁵ The Kino Babylon was a venue selected in order to expand the Volksbühne beyond its physical parameters and to reach a broader audience less inclined to attend theatre. *Fremde* was also the first production to demonstrate Castorf's indebtedness to Piscator. Including film footage into a production to establish a dialectical relationship between stage and screen was a technique first developed at the Volksbühne by Piscator. In his adaptation, Castorf almost completely disregarded Berg's original text and incorporated film footage from *Westfront 1918* (1930), an anti-war film by G.W. Pabst (which was denounced by Joseph Goebbels for "cowardly defeatism"), as well as an

⁷⁴ Lunts was a disciple of the Russian formalist critic Victor Shkolovsky, known for his concept of *ostranenie* or defamiliarization. *The City of Truth* (1924) is a philosophical allegory about an imaginary city of absolute justice, reminiscent of both Shaw and Brecht in its dialectics and mime sequences. The play is also a parable of the revolution in which homesick soldiers stumble into a utopia and get bored with the peace.

⁷⁵ *Fremde in der Nacht*, written in 1990, was the only contemporary play in Castorf's programming line-up that season; the only play by a GDR author and with a unification theme.

old GDR propaganda film. Along with the filmic insertions, Castorf used live music and exploited the comedic and slapstick talents of his main actor Gerhard Klisch (Krump 58). Klisch played the title figure of Siegfried, who doubled here as the head of the Stasi, Erich Mielke. Like Piscator's productions in the 1920s, which saw actors interacting with giant film screens in a human vs. technology kind of slapstick, Mielke is shown haplessly trying to shake Lenin's hand on screen.

With this production, Castorf also placed Berg's play in dialogue with the history of the Kino Babylon. Built in 1928, the Kino Babylon was the backdrop for the infamous 1931 shooting of two local police officers by the young communist Mielke before he was head of the Stasi. Castorf re-invigorated this site-specific history around the cinema to draw parallels to the burgeoning civil unrest he perceived in Germany after unification (Detje, *Castorf* 198). He thus brought the Weimar past into *Jetztzeit*—into a constellation with the present in order to make visible the similarities between the early 1930s and the early 1990s. Detje corroborates this account: “[t]he foreboding mist is in the air recalls the Weimar Republic. Castorf is, with his programming and conceptual choices, already precisely there where the times are heading” (198).

In the latter half of the first season, the Volksbühne premiered productions by two directors who would be inextricably associated with the theatre in the years to come. The first was by Swiss director Christoph Marthaler, who staged the now legendary production *Murx den Europäer! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn ab! Ein patriotischer Abend* (*Screw the European! Screw Him! Screw Him! Go Screw Him! A Patriotic Evening*) in January 1993. The second was Christoph Schlingensiefel's *100 Jahre CDU-Spiel ohne Grenzen* (*100 Years of the CDU-Game without Borders*), which premiered on April 1993. Marthaler's *Murx* was a slow,

poignant meditation on a stagnant GDR staged as metaphorical waiting room, replete with a giant clock and the half-missing quotation “*damit die Zeit nicht stehen bleibt*” (“so that time does not stand still”). The production consisted entirely of choral song. The latter, Schlingensief’s *100 Jahre CDU*, used the talk show format and action art to satirize the racism and militarism underwriting the Western mainstream media, UN foreign policy, the CDU and the hypocrisy of Kohl’s solidarity rhetoric. This was the first-ever theatrical staging by the filmmaker Schlingensief, who up to then was known for outrageous underground films such as *A Hundred Years of Adolf Hitler* (1989) and *The German Chainsaw Massacre* (1990). Schlingensief, the *enfant terrible* of West German art house cinema, aligned with the Volksbühne ethos both in his persona and politics. The plot of *The German Chainsaw Massacre*, for example, saw East Germans captured, slaughtered and turned into sausages by West Germans. Schlingensief’s films parodied New German Cinema auteurs (i.e. Fassbinder, Herzog, and Wenders), attacked both left and right wing politics, and depicted the fascist dimensions he saw in the new Federal Republic. His work manifested the same disdain for the dominant unification narrative as Castorf’s. Schlingensief’s work also relied on an overkill of images that refused any political vantage point from which to comprehend the work (see Scheer and Forrest 2010). Inviting Schlingensief to try his hand at live theatre (the idea of Matthias Lilienthal) was a risk so extreme that it would either result in brilliance or scandal. It achieved both.

The staging of two such disparate directors as Marthaler and Schlingensief effectively conveyed two experiences of political time in the now conjoined GDR and BRD. Marthaler’s decelerated performance represented the quaint provincialism, but ultimately the time warp of the former GDR. That production contrasted sharply with Schlingensief’s manic, actionist parody of the Western media and his production’s digression into mayhem and chaos.

Direct Political Action and the Politics of the Event

In his very first season, Castorf appointed the graphic design duo Last Second Design (LSD)—led by stage designer Bert Neumann and his partner Lenore Blievernicht—to develop the Volksbühne visuals and “brand.” The Volksbühne’s advertising was an aggressive, offensive campaign fueled by agitation, provocation and the need to assert the theatre’s countercultural allegiances. These campaigns should be understood as ironic *détournement* of the seamless Western media spectacle rapidly infiltrating the East. The posters, flyers, and program booklets of the Volksbühne were all created in opposition to late capitalist marketing schemes and as a “polemic against the shiny conservative advertising of other theatres” (Weber 26). LSD decided on an eccentric collage of styles drawn from different decades. For example, a 1930s typeface from an old printing-press in Berlin-Adlersdorf was combined with the medieval graffiti to craft the theatre’s official logo (Krump 12). Dead stock GDR paper and typeface were re-purposed (Weber 26). Neumann explained that his aesthetic was about “insisting on the validity of a certain OST experience and at the same time having an ironic distance from it” (qtd. in Krump 12-14). Choosing materials that foregrounded the labour involved, which was part of the crudeness of GDR aesthetics, “creates a sense of continuity to bygone times” (Weber 26). In the 1990s, the Volksbühne’s *Räuberrad* logo was disseminated throughout the city on matches, condoms, t-shirts, stickers and leporellos, targeting the hip bars and cafés. The *Räuberrad* was apparently a medieval thieves’ graffiti associated with the “down and outs of the 15th century” (Krump 12). Castorf first used it for his production of Schiller’s *Räuber* in order to draw parallels between Karl Moor’s gang and contemporary subcultures (Weber 25). The principles underlying the Volksbühne’s advertising campaigns were also about asserting utilitarian principles and DIY. Neumann acknowledged that the Volksbühne’s aesthetics would inevitably

be absorbed by the very capitalist system they were trying to critique. Nevertheless, the utilitarian aspect of LSD's marketing campaigns and their repurposing of GDR paper and typeface did indeed make a strong statement of resistance to commodification and gentrification. It established a counter-cultural *leitmotif* around the city and demarcated the Volksbühne's turf as the city's alternative grounds.

The first season Castorf won both the prestigious Friedrich-Luft and the Fritz-Kortner prizes and *König Lear* was selected for the prestigious Theatertreffen festival in Berlin.⁷⁶ The Volksbühne was also named Theatre of the Year by the West German monthly theatre magazine, *Theater heute* (Carlson 103). However, Castorf had his detractors. Some West German critics thought his theatre was too preoccupied with the GDR and afflicted by nostalgia for the East (*Ostalgie*), or that it was overly invested in provocation strategies that, while new for the former East, were long outdated in the West. The West German left wing newspaper *taz* was generally hostile to Castorf's politically incorrect brand of provocation (Detje 203) and the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and *Münchener Merkur* consistently gave him bad reviews (Schütt 56).

In the second season, dance-theatre choreographer Johann Kresnik and playwright George Tabori staged *Rosa Luxemburg: Rote Rosen für Dich*; Andreas Kriegenburg directed *Othello*; Schlingensiefel created his own performance happening about the openly homosexual West German neo-Nazi leader Michael Kühnen (who succumbed to AIDS) in *Kühnen '94 - Bring me the head of Adolf Hitler*; Marthaler did *Storm before Shakespeare - le petit Rien*; and Castorf staged two Beckett productions *Katastrophe* in the canteen and *Bruchstück* in the heating room, as well as Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*. Castorf's major

⁷⁶ The Theatertreffen is an annual festival in Berlin showcasing the ten best German-language theatre productions.

production that season was *Pension Schöller/Die Schlacht*, which premiered on April 21, 1994. *Pension Schöller* was a Wilhelmine era “*Kleinbürger*” (petit bourgeois) comedy by Carl Laufs and Wilhelm Jacoby that Castorf interwove with Müller’s *Die Schlacht*, a fragmented and surreal tragedy about Germany in the Third Reich written between 1951 and 1974. Staged against the backdrop of Hitler’s fiftieth birthday on April 20, 1939, *Pension Schöller/Die Schlacht* was a raucous indictment of the petite bourgeoisie played out against the backdrop of the *Führerkult* and Nazi racial laws. Castorf explained he was motivated by discovering what “lies behind the canned laughter and happiness” (qtd. in Schütt 113). He also drew a parallel to the present and suggested that this was perhaps the first time in history that a non-hysterical relationship to the possible apocalypse was developing: “You don’t have to paint the devil on the wall to read his graffiti. From here, a culture of absolute irony grows. The serious is no longer different from slapstick. The reality principle as serious principle collapsed on itself” (qtd. in Schütt 17). This is to say that the mind’s ability to assess the reality of the external world, and to act upon it accordingly, had disappeared.

The genuine, political radicalism of Castorf’s Volksbühne came starkly to the fore at the beginning of his third season in December 1994. That month, a political hunger strike was conducted there by PDS party-members Gregor Gysi and Lothar Bisky after the police had forcibly removed them from the *Reichstag*. The PDS,⁷⁷ the successor to the SED, continued an anti-capitalist, socialist agenda in the new Germany.⁷⁸ By allowing the hunger strike in its foyer,

⁷⁷ The Party of Democratic Socialism (*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*) was active between 1989 and 2007. It was the legal successor to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), which ruled the GDR as a one-party state from 1946 until 1989. From 1990 through to 2005, the PDS had been the left wing “party of the East.”

⁷⁸ The hunger strike, which lasted for one week in over three locations, was a response to the exorbitant and politically motivated taxation on PDS assets on properties owed by the former SED. These were perceived as an attempt to strangle and crush a left wing party.

Castorf demonstrated the Volksbühne's willingness to house real political resistance, as well as a politics of "spontaneous action" (qtd. in Schütt 98). It indicated Castorf's sympathy to the PDS's position shared by many East German intellectuals who, while critical of the SED, never had Western capitalism in mind as an alternative. During this period, Castorf described his politics as a unity of anti-Western authority and anti-authority: "Mielke and Punk – this mixture is basically my hope for the PDS as a breakout party that looks like New York City" (qtd. in Schütt 86).

Another important political event, "Alles Stasi—ausser Mutti" ("Everyone Stasi—except Mommy") in January 1995, saw former Stasi-informants, as well as victims of the Stasi, engaging in an on-stage discussion at the Volksbühne in front of fifteen hundred people. This event was Castorf's approach to dealing with the Stasi files that had recently been opened, but it was also about expressing contradictory feelings toward the GDR. He united the two sides in a "love for the GDR, no matter how it really was" and against "a [capitalist] world we didn't identify as our own" (qtd. in Balitzki 101). Through events such as "Alles Stasi—ausser Mutti," Castorf endorsed the idea that the two sides—Stasi operatives and dissidents (i.e. Sascha Anderson⁷⁹ and Bert Papenfuß)—had something in common and that it was "acceptable to mourn the loss of the GDR, imperfect as it had been" (qtd. in Detje, *Castorf* 227). The event also came together as a rejection of the West-dominated narratives around the GDR—especially the narrative of the West "liberating" GDR citizens from a uniformly oppressive past. Instead, the Volksbühne created a space for ambivalent feelings.

⁷⁹ In 1991, the balladeer Wolf Bierman exposed Sascha Anderson as a Stasi operative (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* or *IM*). The discovery launched a scandal in the German press because Anderson had been associated with the dissident literature scene in Prenzlauer Berg. As it turned out, Anderson had spied on fellow artists including the writer Bert Papenfuß. In 1992, the Stasi files were made legally accessible for citizens in Germany. In 1993, Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller came under suspicion as Stasi collaborators. Suffice it to say, this was a period of heightened emotions, rumours, accusations and paranoia that the Volksbühne managed to capitalize on and turn into a productive public event with Anderson and Papenfuß both in attendance.

Such an event was also emblematic of the quasi-GDR culture fostered at the Volksbühne—one based not on the reality of the GDR, but rather on what the GDR might have been “if a group of low-brow petit bourgeois had not apathetically administrated it” (qtd. in Raddatz 20). From the Volksbühne’s perspective, the GDR had constituted an “other” to capitalism, an anti-capitalist space, and was therefore worthy of defending. The GDR was also formative for millions of its former citizens who called it home. From the Volksbühne’s perspective, this ideological “formation” in socialism constituted a *Störfaktor* or disruptive factor against the post-unification liberal consensus. Castorf put it thusly:

The GDR lives on, if only because there are 17 million citizens from the former GDR. The terrible thing in Germany is that it’s not accepted when something else lives on. A foreign psychological conditioning is disruptive. For this reason, the GDR should be consciously drawn out. It must remain a disruptive factor. (qtd. in Schütt 116)

Castorf wanted to not only use the GDR’s “psychological conditioning” as a *Störfaktor* but wished to intensify its presence at the Volksbühne. The irony was not lost that many at the theatre had been contesters within the socialist regime. As Carl Hegemann observed, “[at] the Volksbühne former dissidents turned into the last defenders of the GDR” (qtd. in Krump 124).

Militarization and Fortification

Castorf revitalized the Volksbühne in the manner of a “military campaign” (Carlson 100). Along with using the language and imagery of warfare and apocalypse to diagnose the situation as one of catastrophe, Castorf spoke of “radicalizing the ‘endangered’ people” and claimed that, the “historical situation of the Volksbühne made it ideal for such a crusade” (qtd. in Carlson 100). Castorf declared the Volksbühne as a “conflict zone” from whence one could “snipe at today’s reality with a cockiness and radicalism unlike theatres in the West” (100).

Amidst the gentrification underway in former East Berlin, wherein all between-spaces were swiftly being eradicated, Castorf transformed the Volksbühne into a last bastion of contestation and resistance. The theatre was dubbed the “*Kiezbürg*” (“neighbourhood fortress”) by the West German press, as well as a “*Wärmestube für verhärmte PDSler*” (a “soup kitchen for haggard members of the PDS party”) (Schütt 16). In his first press release, even before formally taking his new position as artistic director, Castorf officially renamed the theatre from the Volksbühne am Luxemburg-Platz to the “Volksbühne am *Rosa*-Luxemburg-Platz,” adding Luxemburg’s first name in unabashed commemoration of the murdered Spartacist and dedicating his first season at the Volksbühne to her memory (Cornish 115). Rather than return the theatre to its historic name prior to the National Socialist and GDR dictatorships (i.e. the Theater am Bülowplatz), as was the tendency amongst other institutions in the East after 1989, Castorf insisted on refusing the erasure of socialist history (115). Using the full name Rosa Luxemburg was a combative gesture, a “stab at the establishment,” which Castorf only half-jokingly claimed would discourage West Berliners from attending the theatre (qtd. in Schütt 16). He cynically suggested that their response might be different had the theatre been renamed the Theater am Horst-Wessel-Platz—the theatre and the square’s name from 1933-1945 in honour of the Nazi “martyr” Horst Wessel.

At a time when debates were raging about the integrity of artists such as Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller who were complicit with the state (Bargna 100-1), Castorf could defend the GDR with credibility because he had the advantage of being a “*sauberer Ostler*” (a “stain-free Easterner”) (Detje, *Castorf* 112). This is to say that Castorf was untarnished by his connection to the SED or the *Stasi*. Having never been a Stasi informant, Castorf’s reputation (unlike many of his contemporaries from the GDR) remained free from association with the mass state

surveillance machinery that many artists participated in to further their own careers. Rather, his own struggles with the East German state and his lengthy Stasi file (excerpts from which were published in Balitzki's book) aligned Castorf with those who had suffered at the hands of the regime. This was key to both the West and East German public's reception of Castorf after unification as no one could accuse him of political opportunism. He vehemently contested the label "dissident" and argued that he had profited greatly from the GDR.

Castorf was, in essence, *an oppositionist*, disposed to refuse consensus and closure on principle. He established an ideological battleground in a neighbourhood wherein the last vestiges of resistance were rapidly disappearing. He proclaimed that "theatre is the last partisan" and established a united front within the Volksbühne by gathering all those on the ideological spectrum opposed to the outcomes of German unification: idealistic socialists, political radicals of all stripes, and anyone else he identified as "marginalized" (Schütt 30). He declared the Volksbühne's "enemies" as the security-seeking, pain-avoiding petite bourgeoisie, who were often in the audience, as well as the West German conservative establishment personified by Helmut Kohl. Kohl's public image of "sheer inexhaustibility" and "emotional impenetrability" became what Castorf caricatured as a performance of late capitalist excess (11). By contrast, Castorf saw the official opposition, the Social Democrats (SPD), as ineffectual "sleepy heads" not worth agitating about (33). Castorf preferred to attack Kohl because the SPD did "not go far enough in their policies to warrant a response" (qtd. in Schütt 34-35). Castorf explained his position thusly: "My leftist heart beats 'solidarity,' but I am foremost an outsider-agitator of the Helmut Kohl image, who wishes to stir up an emotional response to a political situation" (15). While in one sense Castorf sought to fortify the Volksbühne against its perceived enemies, he

simultaneously sought to intervene in public and political life and hence saw the necessity of dismantling of the boundary between theatre and the streets.

A Volksbühne für “das Volk”

One of Castorf’s central aims in the 1990s was to reach out to disenfranchised populations, bringing their realities into the theatre and using the stage to make social contradictions visible. Castorf claimed he wished to “knock his head through the wall and onto the street and bring the street back into the theatre” (qtd. Balitzki 81). To achieve this objective, the Volksbühne implemented ticket prices that made theatre accessible to the local population, especially youth (Carlson 100). The theatre also ran trailers in local cinemas to attract a younger audience and to familiarize locals with its new approach (100). Tickets were based on a sliding scale to accommodate students, seniors and the unemployed. They cost less than a movie ticket and were sometimes distributed to low-income groups for free (100). These initiatives were intended to return the Volksbühne to its founding promise of being a “People’s Stage”—to eliminate the divide between bourgeois “high culture” and popular, accessible forms of entertainment. In this way, the Volksbühne was committed to reflecting its surrounding neighbourhood of Berlin-Mitte.

In his aim to reflect external reality inside the Volksbühne, Castorf accommodated the establishment of a new troupe in the theatre’s third floor studio space comprised of homeless people called *Ratten 07* (or *Rats 07*).⁸⁰ According to Castorf, the members of *Ratten* provided “direct input” from those most affected by the transition from socialism to capitalism (Schütt 71). The *Ratten*’s presence at the Volksbühne—as performers, audience members, and patrons of

⁸⁰*Ratten 07* originated as part of a production of Albert Camus’ *The Plague* directed by Jeremy Weller in 1992 and became a permanent ensemble at the Volksbühne, performing there for a decade. In 2011, the filmmaker Simone Catharina Gaul made a documentary about the *Ratten 07* titled *Rattengeschichte*.

the theatre's bar and canteen—forced spectators (especially ones from the West) to confront the “true faces” of indigence, which Castorf claimed one “could not easily forget” (qtd. in Schütt 72). The struggles of “homelessness” that the *Ratten* personified was proposed as analogous to the “nationlessness” of citizens from the former GDR who had also lost their home. The *Ratten*'s difficulties were something that Castorf claimed “East Germans understood better than holidays in Mallorca” (qtd. in Schütt 71). The *Ratten* embodied hardship, dispossession, street life and struggle. They also had “a striking presence,” “a total lack of inhibition,” and “a smell” (Krump 54). The material realities they represented challenged conservative theatregoers and subverted the conventions of a traditional evening of hermetically sealed “high culture.” They also created tensions in the auditorium due to the “unpredictability of [their] responses” (qtd. in Schütt 71). The *Ratten*'s ability to judge whether what was being presented on stage was true-to-life added an internal radar that could detect inauthenticity. Castorf explained the *Ratten* represented one of the original ideas of the (historic) Volksbühne, namely that people who were excluded from “*bildungsbürgerlichen Möglichkeiten*” (bourgeois-educational possibilities) for economic reasons, would now have access to the theatre (qtd. in Schütt 69).

Despite its apparent openness and accessibility, Castorf retained a clear concept of who the Volksbühne's friends and enemies were, and he used these divisions to create tensions within the theatre space. At the end of his first season, Castorf expressed that he was happy that East Germans constituted 70% of his audience (Raddatz 20). In fact, Castorf perceived every audience member as a potential enemy because they were inculcated into bourgeois expectations of art and theatre. Castorf explained that their “need for leisure time meant separating daily work-life from an evening of individuality [in the theatre]” (qtd. in Schütt 23). It was this mode of spectatorship that Castorf challenged by not just breaking the fourth wall, but by breaking

down the walls of the institution and transforming the theatre into a communal event and authentic reflection of reality. In doing so, Castorf also revived questions that plagued the historic Volksbühne: Who is das Volk? The Social Democratic ideal of *all people* united in a national culture, or the proletariat, which is to say those marginalized under liberal-capitalist terms? Without using this explicit terminology, Castorf decided upon the latter.

In the 1990s, Castorf achieved what the media dubbed a “party atmosphere for underdogs,” and he recognized that the planned move of the German parliamentary headquarters from Bonn to Berlin would attract an insurgence of West German bureaucrats that they could “systematically piss off” (qtd. in Schütt 11). The Volksbühne became a theatre where people went who were not normally interested in theatre (Hegemann qtd. in Krump 128)—theatre as anti-theatre. Castorf prided himself on the fact that the Volksbühne’s regular audiences were “oddballs” who came to “drink beer, hear rock music and meet the ‘friendly’ people at the box office” (qtd. in Schütt 16). The informality and raucousness of the Volksbühne foyer—the socializing area wherein its infamous “party atmosphere” was most palpable—existed in opposition to the rigid formality of the traditional “bourgeois” theatre. Castorf explained that he wished to be “spared from the *Steglitzer* laughter” (of the West Berlin bourgeoisie), which he said now found “itself at home at the *Berliner Ensemble*” (qtd. in Raddatz 19).

Castorf aimed to create the “unpretentious atmosphere of a communal party” at the Volksbühne (qtd. in Schütt 11). Already with the premiere of *Räuber von Schiller*, Castorf inaugurated a tradition that would characterize his tenure as artistic director, namely the theatre as a multi-purpose event space with different events happening simultaneously. This included the theatre lab on the third floor (*Studiobühne*); the Grüner and Roter Salon, where dance parties, literary readings and panel discussions could take place (Weber 26). Starting in 1995, this would

include a third stage within the Prater Theater, located just up the road in Prenzlauer Berg on the Kastanienallee. The Prater served as an alternative theatre space for more experimental productions. Kresnik, Marthaler, Schlingensief and Castorf would all stage productions there (Carlson 104).

Castorf's Praxis: "Das Konzept bin Ich"

With the pronouncement "*Das Konzept bin Ich*" ("I am the Concept") Castorf emerged as the master-signifier of the Volksbühne (Detje 193). Although it is common in German state-theatres that the intendant reign supreme, Castorf took this role in two highly conceptual directions: on the one hand, he acted as a kind of public intellectual for the postsocialist generation. On the other hand, he used his public *persona* to agitate, trouble and perplex the public sphere. As such, Castorf was a kind of trickster. His provocations, media interventions and overidentification strategies precluded any secure position from which to assess the theatre.

Castorf's Dual Role as Torturer and Emancipator

Castorf cautioned that while a new national image was being constructed—characterized by the luxury lifestyles and liberal values of West Germans—disenfranchised youth (i.e. "Hooligans and Skins") were rebelling (Raddatz 23). He identified genuinely social-revolutionary energies within these groups over which "right wing organizations were throwing political nets" (Raddatz 24). Castorf saw these youths exposing the discontents burgeoning underneath the myth of German unification constructed by Kohl and promoted by the Western media. Kohl's promise of "blooming landscapes" in the East did not correspond to the reality, especially for many young people living in social housing projects in cities such as Halle/Neustadt and Rostock (24). Precariousness and marginalization after the *Wende* placed

these youth at risk for Far-Right radicalization. These were dangers that Castorf believed urgently needed to be addressed:

There is indeed a blooming landscape here, but it is the fascist landscapes of the soul that always fall short in the end. And some people pretend that Germans who jet over to Rome and drink French wine, are the emblems of Germany. But that's Europe: daytime you see wine drinkers, nighttime the pogroms are being planned. It's a nice time for making art. (qtd. in Schütt 35)

By conjuring images of clandestine “pogrom planning” obscured behind the image of a newly affluent German society, Castorf conveyed the urgent stakes of the situation as he saw them. The rational-bureaucratic order of liberal democracy was eliminating a terrain wherein irrational thoughts and desires could be identified, confronted and worked through. Instead, those individuals who dare to “exit this machine”—who rejected the terms of “the system”—were perceived as “unstable forces and pushed out and that increases their potential for aggression” (qtd. in Schütt 77). Castorf wanted to coax out this aggression and give it expression in its darkest, most sinister form on stage. Robin Detje corroborates this view on Castorf:

In an anxiety-laden age of progress and modernization, the task of creating an archaic sense of community spirit was often given to a mad genius. The mad German genius was allowed—even expected—to tap into the darkest irrational sources of the German Volks-soul. (Detje, 2005 6)

Castorf used the media to cultivate a contradictory, albeit charismatic persona that relied on an assemblage of authoritarian, trickster, reactionary and revolutionary tropes. He deliberately projected an alter ego into the public sphere—an egomaniacal “double” of the system; a “torturer” of the petite bourgeoisie.⁸¹ Castorf came to embody a politically incorrect inversion of the status quo. Castorf stated that he wanted to agitate the official image of German nationhood that was personified by Kohl. His intended mission was to give expression to the dominant

⁸¹ It was theatre critic Benjamin Henrichs who first observed that Castorf played a double role as both *Folterknecht* (torturer) or *Freiheitskämpfer* (freedom fighter) (qtd. in Schütt 9).

feeling of ‘hatred’ on behalf of marginalized individuals on his stage (78-79). “If theatre isn’t a little bit nasty,” he explained, “if it doesn’t crudely undermine the self-affirmation of politicians and make fun of society, then it loses its point” (qtd. in Schütt 71).

Since German theatre was such a heavily subsidized institution, Castorf believed that it was his *obligation* to offer a space of genuine reflection, rather than one that merely perpetuated official ideology: “I won’t accept that people have a right to their hypocrisies in such a highly-subsidized space as theatre! I accept that at the fancy department stores, but not in theatre” (qtd. in Balitzki 68). Castorf accused German state-funded theatre of being an “inward looking, stinking swamp, which has no more input from the outside world” (qtd. in Schütt 17). He called it a bigoted, old-fashioned, feudalistic enterprise “which does not deal with reality anymore but is exhaustedly and stiffly maintained” (qtd. in Schütt 16-17).

Although Castorf’s repertoire consisted almost exclusively of works from the “bourgeois” dramatic canon, his objective was to create theatre that had social relevance, which he claimed was almost precluded in state-funded theatre by “overfunding” and “overvaluation” (17). He believed that the more funding there was to theatres, the more theatres’ interest in politics and the streets depreciated (17). For him, the luxuries of the “familiar” canon—of “our Schiller, Goethe, Ibsen, and Shakespeare”—were “ruinous things” that (German) people cling to. Castorf claimed that the uncertainty and precarity resulting from German unification produced a desperate need for escape—for indulgence and relaxation, for “sun and warmth” (35).

One strategy Castorf used in order to subvert the traditional role of theatre was to deploy the dramatic canon as a “Trojan horse.” In this way, he could entice the complacent theatregoer to attend the Volksbühne, thinking they were getting their required dose of culture and individuality (25). This strategy was contingent on the role that theatre has played in Germany

since the late 18th century in fashioning the moral and enlightened individual. Such individuals attending a performance at the Volksbühne were not met with their sought-after evening of escape. Rather, they were confronted with an interrogation of accepted norms and a reflection of the tensions that existed on the streets of Berlin (24). At the Volksbühne, the spectator “leaves the disorientating theatre of the street but finds it again in our theatre” (qtd. in Schütt 24). Castorf knew that this would “piss off the spectator” but that was precisely his aim (24). He wanted a “roughening up of the theatre” that would lead to “honest reactions from both sides of the stage—actor and audience” (24).

The potentially subversive aspect of bourgeois drama was that it placed the behaviour of those in power under scrutiny—a function of the stage dating back to Schiller’s 1784 paper “The Stage as a Moral Tribunal.” Castorf claimed that the possibilities of Schiller’s “moral tribunal” had atrophied and were corrupted by the theatre’s complicity with political power historically (17). Castorf also refused the “forced respect” for state-funded theatre imposed on him for working in such privileged, highly subsidized conditions. If state-funded theatre is the “spiritual hygiene station” of the German nation, as Castorf described it, then even more reason to revitalize this “luxury space” with “vigour and force” (Schütt 16). In Castorf’s terms, as a publicly funded “moral tribunal,” theatre was the only designated space for examining what he cryptically referred to as “social abnormalities” (17). “Our job” Castorf explained, “is to look as closely and maliciously as possible into the sick-herd of the national German body to make theatre a site of resistance and to release collective feelings of insecurity” (17).

Castorf and Jünger: The Futurist-*Krieger* Persona

Castorf’s public persona, especially during the 1990s when he was a visible figure in the mainstream German media, was a provocative mixture of ambivalence, melancholia, nihilism

and aggression. He filtered these qualities through an ambiguous politics that invoked the extremes of the political spectrum, as discussed in the previous chapter. As such, Castorf inhabited a paradoxical persona as a cynical punk with a provocative reverence for dictatorial and iron-fisted totalitarian rulers. For instance, a large portrait of Joseph Stalin with three young children and the slogan “*Stalin. He is Peace*” hung in his office, where he met with journalists. The journalists could never be sure whether this was genuine or ironic admiration for Stalin’s authoritarian leadership. Castorf also quoted philosophers that many thinkers on the Left, including Benjamin, denounced as fascists, most significantly Ernst Jünger. Castorf cited various early works by Jünger, *In a Storm of Steel* (1920) and *On Pain* (1934) because they captured contemporary youths’ “longing for vitality, courage and strength” (qtd. in Balitzki 151). For Castorf, Jünger’s writings provided an explanation as to why the militarized ethos of the Far Right was an attractive replacement to the crumbling social and paternalistic structures of the GDR, which many German youths in the 1990s were enduring (Raddatz 23).

In the early 1990s, Castorf channeled aspects of Jünger’s apocalyptic persona. He frequently produced a “heroic nihilist” style of intellectual engagement for his cultural diagnosis of post-*Wende* society. What interested Castorf about Jünger and other Prussian *Krieger* during the Weimar republic was the longing for pain and sacrifice. This surfaced in their biographies, “people who risked something for their opinions, whose lives were a nightmare, who didn’t feel at home anywhere and for that reason called the trenches holy” (qtd. in Balitzki 151). Referring to Jünger’s *On Pain*, Castorf asserted that “[w]e live in a society where we take pain killers, where it’s important to have secured your retirement fund at eighteen” (qtd. in Balitzki 153). In other words, people choose to numb their natural responses to given circumstances and chase a false sense of security at the expense of authentic sensation. The energy possessed by the avant-

garde movements reflected qualities that now “only exist in right wing extremist movements” and not in what Castorf dubbed the “enlightened-liberal ‘Toscana’ faction” (151).⁸² Castorf associated Jünger not with proto-fascism, but rather with the historical avant-garde movements, with Expressionism and Futurism, which he explained stood for the “courage and energy” that were missing in post-*Wende* society (qtd. in Balitzki 153). This becomes evident when Castorf recalls the political battles that took place at the Volksbühne in the 1920s. Castorf disparaged the “petit bourgeois” executive of the historic theatre—the “God, King, Fatherland” contingent—placing their small-minded nationalism in opposition to Jünger’s existential position toward war and nationalism as an outcome of the momentum of industrial labour. Castorf stated that he “felt closer to Jünger than to the Social Democrats of the historic Volksbühne movement and [their leader] Julius Bab” (150). Castorf bemoaned how Bab had officially unveiled the new Volksbühne building in December 1914 by singing “*Deutschland Deutschland über alles*” (150). As such, Castorf pitted the petit bourgeois nationalists (the “betrayers” of the Volksbühne ideal) against the epic, apocalyptic quality of Jünger. Jünger emerges in Castorf’s pantheon as a visionary who, like Piscator and Benjamin, recognized the stakes around technology and war.

Castorf’s admiration for Jünger was a deliberate transgression of the ultimate taboo in the GDR: flirtation with fascism (150). In a now infamous interview with *junge Welt* in December 1994, Castorf described how towards the end of the GDR, whilst sitting in the canteen in Karl Marx Stadt, he thought “this stagnation, this decadence, we need a new *Stahlgewitter*...” (“Storm of Steel”) (150). In West Germany, Jünger was likewise associated with ultra-nationalism and

⁸² The latter was meant as a thinly-veiled attack on the West German director Peter Zadek, who was then co-artistic director of Brecht’s BE. Zadek, however, denounced Castorf, as well as Heiner Müller and Einar Schleaf, as “standard bearers of the new Right” (Bargna 120). In a 1995 article published in *Der Spiegel*, “*Den Killern ein Alibi*,” Zadek cautioned against what he saw as an acceptability of fascist and right wing discourse amongst left wing theatre directors.

encouraging a bellicose spirit in German youth after WWI that played directly into the hands of the National Socialists. Castorf's reverence for Jünger and his assertion that we need "*faschtoide, vitale Gedankengänge*" ("fascist, vital paths of thought") (151)—had precisely their desired effect: they sent shock waves through the German media. Peter Laudenbach, writing for the *Berliner Zeitung*, claimed, "without wanting to Castorf is playing a sick game. His taboo transgressions could normalize fascist paths of thought and that could be perilous" (qtd. in Balitzki 155). Laudenbach wrote that it was imperative to maintain a basic democratic consensus in Germany and the "defense of a basic anti-fascist, anti-authoritarian basic standard" (qtd. in Balitzki 155). The *Frankfurter Rundschau* critic Peter Iden—the most virulent of Castorf's detractors—called him "insane," "a pathmaker for aesthetic fascism" (Schütt 56). Martin Doerry's article in *Der Spiegel* pointed out the obvious contradiction: "the theatre-maker Frank Castorf, a PDS-sympathizer, reveals his sympathy for radical Right ideals" (qtd. in Bargna 112).

According to the journalist Henryk Goldberg, however, Castorf was not "a man of the Right, he [wasn't] a neo-fascist or anti-Semite, he's just a follower of Dadaism and its tradition of societal provocation" (qtd. in *junge Welt* 42). Peter Glotz, journalist for *Die Woche*, also thought Castorf's admiration for Jünger was a conscious strategy devised to facilitate the exploration of the seductive pull he associated with the Far Right:

If Castorf – in a flashback to GDR times – says we need a new *Stahlgewitter* – then helpless West German critics categorize him right away in the same *volkisch*, right wing tailspin as Botho Strauß, namely on the Right. ... [I]n fact he is a bored apocalyptic thinker, a cynical moralist from the left wing, Brechtian tradition. The Stalin picture in his office makes him no less Stalinist than the avowal of Heidegger and Ernst Jünger places him on the Right. Frank Castorf is a civilization-exhausted, provocative, consciously plebeian to a certain degree anarchist and permanently outraged half-genius who knows the psychology of his fellow Easterners. (qtd. in Balitzki 150)

Castorf explained his fascination with these Weimar era figures associated with the Right thusly: “[Oswald] Spengler, [Arnolt] Bronnen, Jünger—their texts have a great anti-capitalist pull or appeal, which Lenin doesn’t have anymore” (qtd. in Schütt 66). Castorf’s identification with Jünger’s *Krieger* persona, was about “accessing the pull of these emotions ... in yourself” (qtd. in Schütt 55). This approach, Castorf believed, was the most effective way to confront and disempower the pull of the radical Right.

Deconstruction and Reconstruction

Castorf’s goal was to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of state-funded theatre and expose its complicity with state power and the status quo—something he was unable to openly pursue in the GDR. This approach was partially undertaken in the spirit of Brecht, facilitating alienation and criticality so that ideology would become visible. Castorf’s iteration, however, included irritation strategies to subvert any secure position from which to behold the text. There was also a deconstructionist tendency in Castorf’s approach to the dramatic text. As conceived by Derrida, deconstruction is a method of reading philosophical and other types of texts to show how and what they exclude. Characteristic of Derrida is a focus on “undecidable” words, or terms that are bound together in different, often contradictory meanings. Another is to focus on the binary oppositions that structure a text, showing how the text’s system privileges one side of the opposition and excludes the other. A central strategy of Castorf’s was to flesh out the text as a kind of endless deferral to contingencies and thereby comically expose what the text *excluded* with the addition of historical facts, characters, and events that scathingly indict the dominant narrative of German history. He also approached words using *différance* and digression to satirize the pretense of fixed meaning and the rational presumptions that underwrite the bourgeois canon.

In his first few seasons at the Volksbühne, Castorf's productions were arresting constellations of "text and context" of which *Pension Schöller/Die Schlacht* is a stellar example. Castorf would set a dramatic text against a seemingly incongruous, often contemporary backdrop or combine it with a secondary, well-known cultural text such as a Müller drama, a Hollywood film or television series. This combination undermined the intended reading of the dramatic work—exposing, mocking and satirizing its hegemonic mechanisms. Castorf curated these insertions directly from the surrounding media landscape. He wanted to break open the hermetically sealed stage and explained that he had the duty to "estrangle, irritate and to formulate aesthetically what one finds on the streets of Berlin through the selection of material, authors and directors" (qtd. in Raddatz 20).

Often accused of "postmodern randomness" (Raddatz 20), Castorf defended the method behind his deconstructive madness. He explained why, by his own admission, he "took the screwdriver and the hammer" (qtd. in Schütt 14); he deconstructed the dramatic text, but also reconstructed it. He maintained that "we do not remain at [the level of] demolishing. Something is put together again, built up within the context and as a [new] construction. From there, a totally different negative irritating situation emerges. I'm interested in the surprising directions that can emerge [in an artwork] and to move away from expectations" (qtd. in Schütt 14).

Castorf ultimately wanted to reflect social and cultural phenomena that were unrelated but now existed simultaneously: postsocialism, postmodernism, MTV, Hollywood, ethnic war in Yugoslavia. He also described "an inactive life with chips and Coca Cola in front of the TV" that "[y]ou must contrast ...with something irritating, something surreal" (qtd. in Schütt 115). Castorf's strategies expanded and updated what he had already cultivated in the GDR: intertextuality, absurdist and surrealist plot digressions, rock n' roll music insertions, and

slapstick comedy. In this way, Castorf found an aesthetic formulation that correlated with the experience of post-*Wende* Berlin. As he explained, “I do not believe in the subversive power of language or poetry. I destroy a text, but then I put it back together again” (qtd. in Raddatz 20). In 1995, for example, Castorf combined Hebbel’s tragedy dealing with German mythology with the Hollywood blockbuster *Natural Born Killers*, resulting in the production *Die Niebelungen—Born Bad*. Other productions in this vein included *Hochzeitsreise / Die Weber* (1995) and *Golden Fliesst der Stahl / Wolokolamsker Chaussee I & III* (1996).

Castorf’s search for an aesthetic form during the post-*Wende* period was an extension of Brecht’s mandate to find the most suitable form of entertainment for one’s age (“A Short Organum for the Theatre” 108). In this regard, Castorf explained that his art was not eclectic, but rather a reflection of the times in which he was living:

The war in Bosnia, Boris Becker . . . these things belong together, the traces between them get mixed up within us—they get blurred. This blurring is what interests me. Too many things are happening irrationally alongside one another and for that, I want to find an aesthetic form. There is a diary entry from Kafka: morning outbreak of WWI, afternoon swimming lessons. (qtd. in Schütt 22)

Even the event programming at the theatre adhered to the principles of eclecticism by creating ideological-aesthetic collisions. For example, the opening concert of the 1994-1995 season took place on the lawn in front of the theatre and included the Bolshevik Chamber Choir alongside the Irish punk band The Pogues (Balitzki 88). The juxtaposition of socialist kitsch and anarchist punk captures Castorf’s penchant for ironic constellations. Castorf reflected on the high degree of risk involved in the third season’s repertoire, namely that “this season was like a Molotov cocktail for me—throw it and see how it burns” (qtd. in Balitzki 88).

Castorf excelled at irreverent, madcap deconstructions of those canonical dramas that served the bourgeois project of Germany as a *Kultur*nation. These adaptations solidified his

reputation as a destroyer of dramatic texts, or “*Stückezertrümmerer*” (Bargna 213). Castorf explained that he distrusted the “closed dramatic text” as it supported a false ideal of German nationhood (qtd. in Raddatz 19). “The idea to establish a national theatre, even though there was never a German nation and Germany’s primary impulse is more separatist than centralist, is an unbelievably ideological projection” (19). Under Castorf’s leadership, the Volksbühne instead offered “a replacement drug for an image that serves a nation that never existed” (153). In so doing, he interrogated the very role of theatre in German society. This function of state theatre, as Castorf perceived it, was to enforce the ruling ideology and maintain spectator passivity:

The development of theatre is corrupted by its close relationship to power. German power—regardless of how it is presented (capitalist, fascist, Wilhelmine, Stalinist)—always had an interest in shaping the public consciousness, to tie it to themselves. That is why theatre is so highly subsidized, and people get the privilege to see theatre . . . so that they stay weak in their ability to exert social pressure and stay silent. That’s why [theatre] is always just the good spirit that is neither feared nor revered. (qtd. in Schütt 87)

Castorf wanted to make theatre that was both feared and revered. He wanted to expose the mechanisms that underwrote the development and objectives of the German drama historically.

“*Gebt uns ein Leitbild*”: Strategic Overidentification

Castorf’s media strategies, dark prognosticating, as well as his explorations of Jünger, all contributed to a troubling ambiguity in his aesthetic strategies and public persona. One of these ambiguous personas is the Trickster—an archetype characterized by playful and sometimes malicious provocation that fosters illumination beyond reductive binaries. Carl Jung sees the Trickster as “a collective shadow figure, a summation of all the inferior traits of characters in individuals” (Jung 150). Tricksters expose illusions, challenge worldly convention and rules, and celebrate irreverence and divine madness. They can be benevolent or manipulative, but their function is to compel humans to face the dark side of their nature. Castorf channeled the trickster

to personify the dark transgressive thoughts born of *ressentiment*, as well as the totalitarian—both Stalinist and fascist—dimensions he deemed unresolved or threatening to resurface in postsocialist German society. As trickster, Castorf frequently deployed the strategy of overidentification, an “approach of adopting a set of ideas, images, or politics and attacking them, not by a direct, open or straightforward critique, but rather through a rabid and obscenely exaggerated adoption of them” (Shukaitis 1).

Overidentification is a strategy frequently associated with the industrial band Laibach, who emerged from the Slovenian conceptual art movement *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK) in the early 1980s. Laibach was in heavy rotation at the Volksbühne in the 1990s. The band’s logo incorporated the iconic cross of Kasimir Malevich and John Heartfield’s blood axe-swastika (to mock the “blood and iron” idea of National Socialism). The significance of Laibach’s music lay in the way they recombined totalitarian images, generating complex new meanings and revealing continuities with the present. Shukaitis calls it “totalitarian kitsch” and claims that Laibach treats totalitarian symbols as Duchampian ready-mades, “whose combination creates ambiguous and disconcerting effects” (600). According to Shukaitis, the band’s approach is to take the “stated norms of a given system or arrangement of power more seriously than the system that proclaims them itself”—to amplify it and reveal the “obscene subtext that underpins the operation of the law and supporting social norms” (600). In his article titled “Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists,” Žižek argues that Laibach mark the insecurity that propels the desire for a master once the big Other has disappeared. Rather than providing us with a “master,” Laibach explores how ideology functions, namely, by exposing the unknown knowns of a system— “what everybody knew yet did not want to speak aloud” (np). According to Žižek, Laibach refuses the role of the

subject-supposed-to-know by pointing the question of the meaning of the subject's desire back at them: what does Laibach mean *for the audience*?

Castorf's overidentification strategies were significantly indebted to Boris Groys's *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1992)—an analysis of post-Stalinist art in Russia wherein the aesthetic repetition of Stalin is necessary in order to dismantle the seductive power he still holds over individuals in the Eastern Bloc. Castorf explains that Groys offers “a basic understanding” (*Grundverständnis*) for how one is constituted through one's political system (qtd. in Schütt 153). Castorf also warns that the myth of Stalin “cannot be easily replaced by a box of Pepsi Cola” (70). According to Castorf, Groys endorses a practice of aesthetic repetition that frees Stalin from resentment, but still confronts the “feeling of superiority” that Soviet mythology cultivated (qtd. in Schütt 153). In *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Groys argues that totalitarianism was the completion or realization of the Russian avant-gardes' own will to power and dictatorial ambitions (7). The Russian avant-gardes' projects were ego-maniacal attempts to design and aestheticize a whole new world order (36). Groys argues, however, “that the total avant-garde project left one important lacuna that the avant-garde could not fill on its own, namely the image of the author of the project” (56). According to Groys, this role was then usurped by Stalin (57), who absorbed the avant-garde's demiurgic energies under his “charismatic” aegis. As such, the avant-garde's project of sublating art into everyday life—preserving it while negating it as a separate and autonomous sphere—was transformed by Stalin, who again resituated art in the autonomous sphere in the 1930s (56). Under Stalin, the avant-garde's desire to reshape the totality of everyday life became the New Man projected in Socialist Realist art. According to Groys, the only way to break free from the powerful and seductive mythology of Stalin that still had a hold on citizens from the Eastern Bloc was to reiterate him aesthetically (119). Repeating

him and engaging with his mythology will result in liberation from Stalin (119). Citing Groys directly, Castorf explained his idea was “to relate to Stalin not with resentment but with a feeling of superiority: every family has its black sheep” (qtd. in Schütt 153).

During the second half of his first season, Castorf and his dramaturgical team directly incorporated two references to the *Leitbild* concept—first, through Laibach’s lyric “*Gebt uns ein Leitbild,*” and then again through Adorno’s essay, “*Ohne Leitbild*” (1967). In an interview in *Theater der Zeit*, Castorf quoted the lyrics of Laibach’s song “*Geburt eine Nation*”: “*Eine Geburt, eine Nation, ein Volk, ein Führer, eine Rasse, ein Blut*” (“One Birth, One Nation, One People, One Leader, One Race, One Blood”). In this way, Castorf marked the emotional charge these lyrics had for individuals across the political spectrum in a time of acute disorientation. According to Castorf,

[w]hen you hear this dry music, this crazy sloganeering full of ideology, an emotional canon is overcharged that you can’t pull yourself away from. Even members of the autonomous Left scene understand Laibach. In their music, the longing for a *Leitbild* emerges. A longing for a *Leitbild* rises within me too. Even though I know that this longing wouldn’t last with me. (qtd. in Raddatz 24)

By channeling the longing for a *Leitbild*, Castorf also drew attention to what he perceived as the trans-ideological appeal of the cult of death amongst disenfranchised youth. Again, he cited Laibach: “we are all standing in this together – there is ‘one life before death’” (qtd. in Raddatz 24). Castorf explained that when political ideologies tap into the death drive of martial heroism, they “give the individual the feeling of being part of a collective power stemming from antiquity, something partially god-like” (qtd. in Schütt 67). His point was that the appeal of the narrative of self-sacrifice for a higher cause had not lost its power. In fact, it was gaining momentum in the post-*Wende* period, something liberals refused to acknowledge.

Castorf used the idea of a *Leitbild* as a strategy of overidentification foremost to engage with a new nationalism underway in Germany in the early 1990s. In August/September 1993, the playwright Botho Strauß published the controversial essay “*Anschwellender Bockgesang*” (“Goatsong Rising”) in *Der Spiegel*, which came to define the longing for a new German “nationalism of normality” (Bargna 111). Strauß’s essay launched the first major *Kulturkampf* in the unified Germany.⁸³ The essay was subsequently published in the collection *Die selbstbewußte Nation* (1994) and was considered the manifesto of the new conservative intelligentsia (111). In “*Anschwellender Bockgesang*” Strauß argued that, “a people want to assert its moral law against others and are prepared to bring blood sacrifices, and that this is something that we no longer understand and in our liberal-libertarian self-centeredness, consider wrong and reprehensible” (Strauß 21). He also claimed that German intellectuals’ so-called kindness to strangers was not actually kindness, but rather self-loathing (23). Strauß aligning himself with Germany’s leading conservative intellectuals was even more shocking because he had been the dramaturg for the communist director Peter Stein at the Schaubühne and was a critic for *Theater heute* (Bargna 111). Strauß explained his position as a reaction to self-satisfied left-liberal post-historicism that he claimed pervaded cultural and academic institutions (Strauß 25).

In the manifesto written by Hegemann titled “*Gebt mir ein Leitbild*” (published in the second half of the first season), the Volksbühne invoked Adorno’s case against a guiding image

⁸³ In the essay, Strauß made several controversial claims including that neo-Nazis and skinheads have nothing to do with the Right (25). To be Right, he claimed, is to revolt against the “absolute rule of the present that robs people of history and mythical time” (25). In contrast to the Left, “the Right is not interested in world-rule and needs no utopia, but rather is searching for a connection to the past. It is always and existentially based on a fantasy of loss (25). The Right is the fantasy of poets from Homer to Hölderlin (25). He also explains that the person on the Right is a perennial “outsider” and that what separates him from the rest of the world is the latter’s lack of passion (25).

in art (reprinted in Krump 125). Adorno argued that the need for a *Leitbild* in art—for art to ascribe to externally imposed values or provide a “spiritual order”—was tantamount to wanting a totalitarian authority (Adorno 8). For Adorno, modern art’s freedom to reflect its social conditions often manifested itself in an unintelligible form. As Adorno explained, this position inspired the claim that the unintelligibility of the artwork was the result of “alien and rootless attitude of the producers”—language that evoked the spectre of fascism (8). Adorno claimed that any artwork that promoted an idea of right and wrong was characteristic of a “conservative-restorative *Kulturkritik* that emerged in post-authoritarian contexts” (7).⁸⁴ The desire for norms and guiding images in art emerged precisely in such ambivalent contexts of which the post-*Wende* was representative, “where permission and prohibitions no longer go unquestioned, but where one can’t survive without a frame of reference” (8).

Even as Castorf subversively played with the longing for a *Leitbild*, the Volksbühne’s manifesto aligned with Adorno in refusing the idea that art should provide one. The Volksbühne manifesto also argued that theatre must have the freedom to make mistakes “if it wants to be more than a functionless accessory of current ideology” (qtd. in Krump 125). Critics of Castorf, however, accused the Volksbühne of a “not having a clear message” and a “too cozy relationship with Stalinism” (125). Hegemann explained that it is as if theatre is a “propaganda business with the objective to show what is right in the right way” (125). For the Volksbühne, state-funded theatre was the only place where it was “right to do wrong, where things regularly happen that

⁸⁴ For Adorno, art had the freedom to manifest, in its very form, its conditions and restrictions. The more one asks for a *Leitbild*, the more one plays into something determined heteronomously (rather than autonomously), which conforms with a “totalitarian disposition” (*totalitären Sinnesart*) (14). For Adorno, the value of art is in the individual-subjective reflection of the conditions of production, which contains an *objective truth* because it is an authentic response to social conditions (16).

would usually result in you ending up in prison, in the lunatic asylum or dead” (Hegemann, *Pläydoyer* 57).

Castorf’s Ensemble: The Labour of Utopia

Castorf’s public role as intendant was contingent on his authority to act as a kind of seer who could throw dark and contradictory forces into relief. At the same time, he created something entirely different in his praxis and stagecraft. For the latter, Castorf relied heavily on Schiller’s concept of “play” in the *Aesthetic Letters* whereby “play” is a decision to suspend rationality in an exercise for, or rehearsal of, human freedom in the political realm.⁸⁵ Creating theatre through a method that enabled childlike experimentation and negated the usual “cog in a machine” form of labour, meant that everyone in the creative space mattered. In the ensemble he established at the Volksbühne, a radical degree of contingency on participants’ individual qualities and contributions shaped the working environment, and by extension, the performance as event:

[F]or me theatre is about creating specific conditions of happy production, as a model case for free work that isn’t determined by someone else but comes from you. This is a Marxist, quite possibly anarchist notion. The impression, which emerges from this kind of work, is something anarchist . . . Happy laboring as a political principle. (qtd. in Schütt 110)

This is to say that if everyone can freely play and explore the realms of emotion and existence, the creative process enables a kind of utopian space or Marxian principle of non-alienated “happy” labour.

⁸⁵ In his *Aesthetic Letters*, Schiller’s *Spieltrieb* (play impulse) transcends the dualism between *Formtrieb* and *Sinnestrieb* (sensuous and moral impulses). According to Schiller, the *Spieltrieb*, the “play drive,” is the earliest disinterested activity of humankind—free from necessity. Like Hegel’s struggle between Master and Slave, the disinterested “play drive” is a step towards freedom and the cultural evolution of humankind. “For Schiller, coming to aesthetic understanding through authentic play did not mean the strict, rule-governed play of sport, but an open and fluid imagining in which delight is a possible outcome, but can never be a goal” (Siegesmund 303). Schiller’s play is “purposeless” and the “terms of engagement can freely morph, alter and reconstruct to the ephemerally emergent ends of delight” (303).

Castorf's agenda was to establish a *Gemeinschaft* (community) with his ensemble of actors. This ensemble functioned in *opposition* to a *Gesellschaft* (society), which he believed had lost all political-utopian potential (Schütt 59).⁸⁶ This is to say that Castorf's method of production is where his utopian politics came starkly to the fore, trumping his overarching cynicism. What Castorf established with his actors was an approach to theatre creation that was contingent on a high degree of collective co-creation and the actors' self-determination. Dating back to his time in Anklam, Castorf was compelled by the idea of the theatre ensemble as a "model of emancipated labour" (qtd. in Schütt 229). Although theatre in the GDR was heavily censored and often already banned after the first public dress rehearsals, the rehearsal process itself constituted a rare "free space" for working and creating under GDR socialism. As such, the rehearsal became the most sacred part of theatre-making for Castorf—an opportunity to subvert censorship and ideological suppression; to explore pathologies and erotic desires.

The development of Castorf's creative method in Anklam had been inspired by changes underway in the Eastern Bloc in the early 1980s. *Solidariność* in Poland, for example, was a social movement that advanced the causes of workers' rights and was a model for self-governing trade unionism independent of the Communist party. *Solidariność* was trying to separate the concept of "labour" from Marxist dogma by returning to the idea of work and to pre-Marxist forms of trade unionism. Using *Solidariność* as his model, Castorf established a space in Anklam wherein the process of production could be self-determined, collective and emancipatory.

⁸⁶ The section of Marx's *Grundrisse* that is important for Castorf is "Forms which Precede Capitalist Production," which frames the entire history of humanity prior to capitalism in terms of evolving forms of *Gemeinschaft* (community). Marx writes that in pre-capitalist society, "individuals relate not as workers but as proprietors – and members of a community who at the same time work. The time of this work is not the creation of value – although they may do surplus labour in order to obtain alien, i.e. surplus products in exchange – rather, its aim is sustenance of the individual proprietor and of his family, as well as of the total community. The positing of the individual as worker, in this nakedness, is itself a product of history" (Marx, *Grundrisse* 472).

Castorf explained it thusly: “Intellectual labour and artistic labour are perfect examples of free production.⁸⁷ You aren’t constrained by working times, and you’re happy in your work...The Polish model of *Solidariność* was certainly a good model, we were able to practice it in Anklam for two, two-and-a-half years” (qtd. in Fesel and Keller 193).

With this approach, Castorf returned specifically to the etymology of the German word *Werk* (work) and *uuerc*, meaning “act” or “creation” (Nagel qtd. in Schütt 148). His idea was to return theatre to work—to its roots in action and creativity, and to resist theatre becoming a “porcelain vase” or a “final product” for capitalist consumption (148). As Nagel pointed out, Castorf’s production refused the “ding” (thing) character of artwork (148).

Castorf also took inspiration from Marx’s *Grundrisse*, namely that the method of production would inform the spectator’s consumption—or, in this case, the way the performance was *received* by the audience (qtd. in Özdamar 241). In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes of this relation between production and consumption thusly: “Production also gives consumption its specificity, its character, its finish. Just as consumption gave the product its finish as product, so does production give finish to consumption” (*Grundrisse* 33). Marx’s principles around production resulted in Castorf’s unique approach to creating theatre. Castorf believed that if his method of production was co-creative, non-alienated, organic and about “happy laboring,” a radical freedom would be unleashed in the audience in kind. This experience of freedom was the endpoint of the performance.

⁸⁷ Castorf applied this idea of “free production” to the situation he inherited at the Volksbühne in the early 1990s. Castorf continued to use actors from his days in Anklam, as well as others he collected whilst guest directing in cities in both East and West Germany in the mid-1980s to early 1990s. He also “inherited” older actors from the Volksbühne who were on interminable GDR contracts that were still honoured after unification (Schütt 148). The troupe he established at the Volksbühne was comprised of young and old, East and West Germans, as well as a few international performers—looking much like the international Volksbühne Besson established in the GDR 1970s with actors in his troupe from Turkey and India, amongst others.

Acting as *Kindertheater*

Castorf's approach to acting lay primarily in three influences in non-illusionistic formalist theatre: Brechtian political theatre (wherein actors' *Gestus* represented social attitudes), the stock characters of the *Commedia dell'arte*, and the slapstick of Chaplin and the Marx brothers. Castorf's theatre was undoubtedly rooted in Brecht in that it relied on alienation effects and the exaggerated qualities of the characters.⁸⁸ However, his theatre went beyond Brechtian *zeigen* (detached *showing*, to the point of ironic distance) as part of the incredulity associated with post-Brechtian theatre.

From the GDR and carrying forth into his work at the Volksbühne, Castorf saw the actor's spontaneous unleashing of authentic emotion as the sought-after moment of the production (Detje, *Castorf* 62). Castorf saw the moment of authentic breakout of the actor from the role as an opportunity for emancipation from self-censorship and authority, an approach that he began developing in *Anklam* (62). He believed the experience of witnessing the emancipated actor would free the spectator as well (151). For artists working under state socialism prior to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the private, psychological and subjective domains had been a refuge from the state, ideology and self-censorship. The aggressive eruption of individuality in the performance was antithetical to the calculated objective, materialist portrayal of socialist reality in GDR productions. Castorf explained that this approach was *both* anti-capitalist and anti-communist: "We practice a freedom that was devised against hegemony and ideology. The

⁸⁸ What Benjamin says about Brechtian acting in "What is Epic Theatre" is helpful in this context, namely "to think of [acting] in terms of 'putting on a show'. Brecht wrote: 'The actor must show his subject, and he must show himself. Of course, he shows his subject by showing himself, and he shows himself by showing his subject. Although the two coincide, they must not coincide in such a way that the difference between the two tasks disappears'" (*Illusions* 153).

exaggerated ‘I’ was a conscious mobilization of narcissism that was very important in the GDR period” (qtd. in Schütt 110). In the break with character or the direct addressing of the audience, the actor could enact an anti-authoritarian moment—an expression of their unspoken desire for chaos, anarchy and freedom that state authorities could not anticipate or control (Detje, *Castorf* 62). In *Räuber*, for example, the actor Henry Hübchen stepped out of his role and berated the audience for being lazy opportunists in the GDR who now wanted everything for free (Cornish 104). As Cornish explains, “the direct address had more urgency and authority than the fictional world of Schiller’s play” (104).

Creating theatre through a method that enables childlike experimentation and rejects the mindless “cog in a machine” form of labour, results in a creative process where every person matters and where process matters more than product. For Castorf, this all amounted to a form of theatre creation that has the quality of a children’s game:

When I am working with people that I like and who like me something happens like a children’s game, the results of which can sometimes be confused with art. Through the work emerges an unusual wish to preserve the last old-fashioned children’s games. I don’t know the old children’s games, but I imagine that they are full of happiness from the therapeutic, naughty, artificial, above all the un-German, particularly where they become affective or visceral. (qtd. in Schütt 132)

His ensemble was characterized by childlike and naïve antics, manic energy and circus-like athleticism. The whole effect should be described as *Kindertheater* (Krump 27). Castorf explained he “always had the feeling that this kind of theatre no longer existed in the West. The [actors] go work in television and the rest drink themselves to death” (qtd. in Schütt 149).

Castorf claimed that his creative method gave the older actors a chance to re-discover spontaneity and play. As Volksbühne stalwart Sophie Rois describes it “the atmosphere at the Volksbühne is unusually relaxed... and these figures that he recruits for his unusual ensemble:

these amazing old actors, who do crazy things on the stage, and who suddenly can be totally childish, or people who have never acted before, or Herbert Fritsch with his genius autism and the divinely gifted petit bourgeois Henry . . . Hübchen . . . It's so much fun—it's cathartic—it's play. [It is the] reason I never have the feeling to have to work" (qtd. in Balitzki 218).

Paramount for Castorf was the free experimentation through which each scene was developed. Castorf explained that the scene must "develop out of free play, out of free improvisation! . . . The more you think, the more boring it gets. Just try something out! . . . You can't calculate it; it must emerge from coincidence. Power from chaos! (qtd. in Krump 20-22). As Lukas Langhoff describes it: "standing still and asking questions is not allowed, that would be like an interrupted orgasm" (qtd. in Balitzki 220-1). Castorf advises actors to "come alive on stage" and likes "energy and simplicity in his actors' performances. . . . And fun as a motivation, as a childlike principle" (Lilienthal qtd. in Krump 27). For Castorf, espousing principles of chance, risk and spontaneity would keep the much-despised repetition at bay. Repetition was akin to sclerosis. Castorf did not like to rehearse scenes once he set them, nor watch the performance himself (27). Opening night performances frequently contained unrehearsed material. As Peter Boenisch would later put it, "improvisation remains Castorf's fetish. It is needed to reach the 'authentic', 'the real'" (199).

To subvert predictable outcomes on stage and the (re)production of theatre as a commodity, Castorf operated with a high degree of risk, often working at the performers' physical limit (150). He followed Brecht in wanting more "sport in the theatre. [Brecht] wanted more life, more coincidence, more chaos in the hermetic seal of the communication process" (qtd. in Schütt 150). Channeling Brecht, Castorf claimed that theatre should be like a boxing ring or running a marathon (115). He wanted the unpredictability of the performance event to

intervene in ideological repetition—for the performance to disrupt the commodified, bourgeois drama by interjecting it with risk, spontaneous action and physical extremes. As such, Castorf was highly controversial in his methods of pushing his actors to their limits with extreme physical demands.

Undoubtedly, Castorf cultivated a dual role as director and charismatic leader of a free collective by facilitating therapeutic processes for both his actors and himself. In a tradition he began in Anklam, Castorf's own petit bourgeois family background, as well as his personal anxieties about women and emasculation, became sites for the explorations of trauma and neurosis (Detje, 2005 10). These anxieties were frequently portrayed on stage by his slapstick alter ego Henry Hübchen and he encouraged his actors to tap into their own neuroses in kind (Detje, *Castorf* 246). Throughout the 1990s, Castorf's "private," cryptic language of the actors' mania and neurosis on stage retained a therapeutic dimension for his ensemble that was antithetical to highly regimented state-funded theatre because it emerged out of an unusually holistic and cathartic rehearsal process. This was Castorf's way of working against the state-funded theatre institution and in fidelity to the spirit of both Schiller and Marx. It was also a way of establishing a grassroots solidarity of self-determined labour.

This self-liberating approach was what made Castorf's productions so authentic and visceral for the spectators. However, Castorf's approach also demonstrated troublingly hierarchical power relations (Krump 64; Balitzki 221). He deliberately kept his actors in a permanently insecure position, an arguably disadvantageous state for one's psychological well-being. For example, Annika Krump, an assistant at the Volksbühne during Castorf's first season, describes a tense and even cruel atmosphere during rehearsals for *Rheinische Rebellen*, including the psychological manipulation of his actors. Krump claims that Castorf "knows exactly what to

say to who when. And it's fun for him to irritate his actors" (Krump 62-64). This approach—like his role as “torturer” of petit bourgeois theatregoers—was to ensure that the actor never become too comfortable or self-satisfied on stage (40). Castorf claimed that “psychological irritation was necessary, so that the actors remain focused, so that they remember the pain and don't become complacent in later performances” (qtd. in Krump 40). He preferred his actors to be in states of heightened awareness, vulnerability, insecurity, and readiness for spontaneous action.

The troupe, or better *Räuberbande* (robber band), he established at the Volksbühne was comprised of young and old, East and West Germans, as well as a few international performers. In fact, it looked much like the international theatre Besson created in there in the 1970s. There was a commonality among Castorf's actors in that they were individuals for whom his method served a personal need. Many of these performers flourished under his charismatic rule, not only because they had the physical agility and comedic talents required to execute Castorf's absurd and slapstick style, but also based on their non-conformist views, outlier status or eccentricities. Castorf stated explicitly that he did not want a regular theatre troupe, but rather a “mix of reactionary and revolutionary individuals who were united by the agenda to betray the rational order that defined their situations” (qtd. in Schütt 148). These individuals required artistic processes that embraced them fully and that could, like Castorf, exploit their innate qualities for effect.

Castorf's method of production is exemplary of the contradictions inherent in artistic collectives run under hierarchical and charismatic forms of leadership, which proclaim freedom under their auspices. Such collectives tend to suspend the ethical norms of mainstream society in order to live and work in opposition to conformism and alienation. Artists serving such configurations of power push themselves *beyond* their physical and psychological limit in the

name of a freedom and authenticity they purportedly enable. Undoubtedly, Castorf's method was both emancipatory and simultaneously harbored authoritarian dimensions. His ensemble members—a “gang” of defiant outsiders operating under the Volksbühne's aegis—were unique and strong personalities who flourished, artistically, within this form of creative praxis and became *bona fide* stars in Berlin. In fact, there is a strong basis to argue that the appeal of the Castorf era Volksbühne was in great part due to the performers themselves, who transcended the often chaotic, under-rehearsed, sometimes boring and overlong Castorf productions with virtuosic performances and sublime feats of endurance (always with a self-ironic wink and nod at the audience).

Chapter Summary

After his first three seasons at the helm, Castorf, like all great *Intendanten*, emerged as the master-signifier of the Volksbühne. He used his public persona to channel the discontents and ambivalence of the times. Castorf's own transformation from unruly and subversive artist relegated to the far-flung provinces of the GDR, to reluctant unofficial leader of a crop of anti-Western, anti-capitalist dissidents in the post-*Wende* period, is emblematic of a unique moment in Berlin's cultural landscape. This was a period of disorientation, but also one wherein the resistance to closure of the “end of history” had promise, which is to say this resistance still had a public and a basis. Castorf's early tenure and aesthetic compass devised strategies for perpetuating this opening and for prolonging the “working through” of the socialist past so that it might disrupt the liberal democratic consensus.

It is significant to note that the theatre critic Thomas Irmer claims that Castorf's Volksbühne was the *only* theatre in the former GDR that one could truly call “postsocialist” (154). This is because of all the theatres located in the former East, only Castorf's Volksbühne

was able to establish a radically new concept after the *Wende*. Castorf's Volksbühne was able to develop its own aesthetic compass, whilst working within a landscape wherein socialist history refused closure. According to Irmer, other theatres in the East offered a programming line-up that merely perpetuated a "bourgeois concept of culture, driven by middle-class taste" which had dominated in the GDR (154). Hence, a conservative concept of theatre was carried over into most East German theatres after the *Wende* with Castorf's Volksbühne as a notable exception.

However, Castorf did indeed represent a *continuity* from the GDR: he situated himself in the lineage of left wing political theatre directors Müller and Besson. Ironically, this was precisely the lineage of persecuted vanguardism that the new liberal *Kulturpolitik* was eager to associate itself with after the *Wende* (courting Besson for the Volksbühne intendant-ship in 1991 and instating Müller as one of the co-directors of the Berliner Ensemble in 1992). From his instatement as intendant, Castorf pursued a self-reflexive interrogation and critique of his own condition of possibility: the state-funded theatre institution. While Castorf's formation in a state-subversive tradition in the GDR and anti-institutional spirit made him attractive for a Western *Kulturpolitik*, he also fueled an OST orientation and an exploration of illiberal politics in conflict with the Western liberal order.

Castorf's objective was to foster an alternative GDR imaginary as a disruptive factor that would refute Kohl's unification discourse. Castorf's own theatrical productions refused any secure position of perception, and rather explored the simultaneity of the competing social and political influences of the times. His productions also presented opportunities for his actors to explore their neurosis and execute their authentic breakouts from roles. Castorf believed his method of production could only be actualized in the performance event with a live audience. This event orientation undermined the "commodity character" of bourgeois theatre and its

reception. Instead, the performance transformed the audience in kind. Moreover, the types of individuals Castorf welcomed (versus those he “tortured”) turned the Volksbühne into a subversive iteration of institutional theatre that placed primacy upon authenticity and social relevance. In this way, the theatre was accessible and relevant for those individuals traditionally excluded from “high culture.” Castorf did so during a period of acute social crisis in two former Berlins now “artificially bolted together.” As we see more fully in the following case study chapter, Castorf enticed those disenfranchised individuals from the margins of society into the Volksbühne, turning the institution into a site of genuine struggle.

Chapter 3: A Case Study of Castorf's *Clockwork Orange*

As Frank Castorf settled into his new role as intendant of the Volksbühne in the early 1990s, he identified a rupture in German society stemming from the transition from socialism to capitalism. In place of an erstwhile collective and utopian vision for society was a vacuum. Castorf also observed that the new liberal-capitalist system created a constituency of losers and outsiders within German society and fueled a desire within those individuals to assert themselves with fantasies of revenge and domination. Concurrently, those in power enforced a strict regime of social taboos and political correctness around engaging with the Far Right. The new liberal society mandated a “zero tolerance” stance towards skinhead youth that disregarded their experiences of German unification and refused to address what attracted them to the Far-Right “gang mentality” in the first place. According to Castorf, this strategy merely created a false sense of immunity to the burgeoning radicalization of these marginalized individuals. Castorf also believed that since state-funded theatre constituted a “last elite island of resistance” (qtd. in Raddatz 22)—where, in principle, one should have the freedom to say what one wanted—he had an *obligation* as director to tap into this social phenomenon and explore it.

Castorf oversaw the staging of *Clockwork Orange*, which premiered on February 25, 1993, during his first season as intendant. His production was an adaptation of Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel, *A Clockwork Orange* interspersed with references to Stanley Kubrick's 1972 film adaptation. Burgess's novel—a dystopian satire and critique of behaviourism set in Britain in the near future—is narrated by Alex DeLarge, the brilliant and sadistic teenage leader of a youth gang who pursues senseless and random acts of “ultra-violence.” Alex is eventually caught and “rehabilitated” by means of a forced aversion therapy that induces illness at the sight of violence. Burgess's novel ultimately advocates free will and argues strongly against social

conditioning. The ideological conformism and social alienation that underwrite socialist and liberal societies alike are at stake in both Burgess's novel and Castorf's stage adaptation.

Castorf's *Clockwork*, however, is staged with attention to the contemporary post-*Wende* crisis affecting a generation of marginalized youth from the GDR. It centres on the forced imposition of liberal ideology and responds to a postsocialist context in which a viable Leftist politics and collective ideals have disappeared. This political and social situation, along with the taboo around engaging with skinheads, struck Castorf as dangerous. It was reminiscent of an illiberal reaction on behalf of German youth in the 1920s when the National Socialists were gaining momentum.

Castorf approached this crisis not only sociologically, but existentially as well. He was interested not only in the "orientationlessness" of these young disenfranchised men, but also in their longing for collective higher meaning, heroic action, transcendence and intoxication. These themes are reflected in Nietzsche's critique of bourgeois liberal society in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which Castorf inserts directly into the production, along with the avant-gardes' critique of cultural institutions. By examining the discourse and strategies of the Italian Futurists in particular—aspects of which Castorf's adaptation distinctly recalls—we perceive a political ambivalence that makes their critiques compatible with illiberal discourses on both the Right and the Left. Castorf's use of these strategies demonstrates the anti-institutional, anti-liberal politics of his aesthetics. His desire to break down the fourth wall, as well as to eradicate the boundary between theatre and the streets, reflected his critique of conformism and cultural institutions.

Castorf's decision to adapt Burgess's novel was also a direct response to a surge in neo-Nazi violence immediately following German unification. In the early 1990s, skinhead gangs were visible in the outlying districts of former East Berlin and posed a potential danger for

refugees and Germans of ethnically diverse backgrounds. This situation compelled Castorf to identify strong parallels between the early 1990s and the late 1920s. Around the time of *Clockwork*, Castorf perceived both an acute crisis of Far-Right youth, as well as a *continuity* of violence and terror that haunted 20th century German history. In Castorf's adaptation, the National Socialist and Stalinist pasts resurfaced in a highly fragmentary allegory of Germany in 1993 wherein history emerged with striking parallels to the present. With the disappearance of a collectively oriented form of life, Castorf's *Clockwork* attempted to find an aesthetic expression for this situation by conveying the anger and hopelessness of post-*Wende* youth. Castorf wanted a staging of *Clockwork* that channeled the energy of youth subculture—from the Berlin techno scene to the violence and hate experienced by young people living in *Plattenbau* (social housing blocks) on the peripheries of cities in the former GDR. Castorf also wanted to give expression to the hypocrisy of liberalism's claims of universal equality, and of the discrepancy in Kohl's myth of "blooming landscapes" in the East.

Through not only his theatrical staging, but also the surrounding paratext—Castorf established a critique that incorporated perspectives from "Right and Left, Nietzsche and Baudrillard" (Schütt 11). Castorf would theorize the crisis he perceived through Baudrillard's essay "Hate" (1995): of a hypermodern media society characterized by unidirectional, immaterial and visual violence. Baudrillard builds on Nietzsche's critique in the *Genealogy*, namely that when conflict and antagonism are suppressed, they manifest in a directionless antagonism and a "hate" that attempts to preserve conflict. Castorf's direct incorporation of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* in this adaptation is meant to convey the feelings and longings of a generation of lost youth like Alex, who aspire to more transcendent stakes, rather than mere comfort and security. With

Nietzsche's concept of *Rausch* (intoxication), Castorf explores what both music and subcultures offer these youth that liberal institutions do not.

Žižek, a regular interlocutor at Castorf's Volksbühne, offers an analysis of the Far Right from a universal, proletarianizing and class-conscious perspective. Žižek's "Against the Populist Temptation" (2006) represents an exploration of not just the politics, but also the aesthetic tropes (i.e. Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*) at stake in both Kubrick's and Castorf's *Clockwork Orange*. His discussion of Far-Right populism tries to recover illiberal reaction for the Left. With the addition of Žižek's perspective, we are compelled to ask whether Castorf can be situated in a lineage that ultimately tries to politicize Far-Right reaction *for the Left*. Or is Castorf's analysis too ambivalent—too skeptical of political dogma and ideology? Is Castorf's existential critique of liberalism and revitalization of the aesthetics of the historical avant-gardes untenable in the strictly Marxist framework Žižek asserts?

In what follows, I analyze Castorf's staging of *Clockwork Orange* from a video recording of the public dress rehearsal dated February 23rd, 1993. I incorporate perspectives on the production by other scholars, including Cornish, Detje, King and Stebbins. Their observations demonstrate the high degree of variability from performance to performance (or from recording to recording). This variability is emblematic of Castorf's event-centric productions during the early-to-mid-1990s when improvisation, spontaneity and audience engagement were characteristic of his stagecraft.⁸⁹ The remainder of the chapter demonstrates the importance of *Clockwork* as a case study by locating within it the parameters of Castorf's aesthetic compass in the post-*Wende* period: 1) the revitalization of avant-garde aesthetics, 2) the paratextual

⁸⁹ The recording of the dress rehearsal does not document the unplanned interventions into the performance that are explored in this analysis—in particular, when a group of skinheads attended the second performance of *Clockwork*. Thus, the close reading of *Clockwork* attends to variations in performances through other scholars' accounts.

theorizations, and 3) a description of the Volksbühne's encounter with *real* skinheads and the successful breaking down of the barrier between theatre and the street; art and life.

Castorf's Staging of *Clockwork Orange*, 1993

Before discussing the production, it is important to take note of the program booklet titled "*Gebt mir ein Leitbild*" discussed in the previous chapter. It was created with this production in mind. The booklet incorporated the alarmist slogan "Stop the Pogroms!" on every second page in order to shock spectators and alert them to Far Right activity underway in the new liberal republic. The booklet comprised a collage of highly incongruous text fragments curated around the theme of "Germany, Fascism and Violence" (Krump 44). It included excerpts from Nietzsche, Goebbels, Horkheimer and Adorno, Riefensthal, as well as an excerpt from Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1987), a psychoanalytic book exploring the violent and misogynistic inner-lives of the proto-fascist *Freikorps*. This jarring assemblage of texts represented the competing impulses of the early post-*Wende* period as Castorf perceived them. The booklet was responding to the recent cases of right wing attacks on asylum seekers in Hoyerswerda and Rostock-Lichterhagen, drawing an analogy to the rising anti-Semitism during the Weimar Republic (Schütt 198). This context of gang violence and hatred sets the tone for Castorf's two-hour-and-fifteen-minute adaptation of Burgess's novel.

By taking liberally from both the novel and Kubrick's film, Castorf situated himself at the vanguard of using unconventional source material for the stage. In Castorf's *Clockwork*, Burgess's thinly veiled critique of the Soviet Union, as well as of the behaviourism and utopian social housing projects of the UK, became a critique of "tolerant" and "benevolent" but equally repressive and conformist liberal German society. In other words, spanning Burgess's novel and Castorf's stage adaptation was a critique of state-enforced morality, institutional repression, and

the conditioning of human behaviour to achieve desired social outcomes. Castorf's *Clockwork* could therefore be described as an allegory of the contemporary violence of liberal institutions and "forced consensus." His production was about revitalizing *Clockwork* for the post-*Wende* context by addressing alienation and gang violence affecting youth in the *Plattenbau* of former East German cities. Castorf believed that the radicalization of these young men resulted from the transition from socialism to liberal capitalism and from the disappearance of collective ideals and social structures. Castorf's focus on delinquent youth correlated with the longing he identified for a guiding principle or *Leitbild* (discussed in the previous chapter). During the run of *Clockwork*, "*Geht mir ein Leitbild*" hung outside the Volksbühne on two massive banners dominating the theatre's façade, resulting in a politically disorientating message that recalled the overidentification strategies of Laibach. Castorf's *Clockwork* included insertions of seemingly incongruous historical figures and events, documentary film footage, and additional dramatic and philosophical texts. These paratextual additions established striking continuities between the Weimar Republic, National Socialism, Stalinism and post-unification Germany. The production, as will become apparent, was at times confusing and difficult to follow. The analysis below gives a sequential overview of *Clockwork* and attends to its most striking moments.

Castorf's staging allowed for a high degree of improvisation that showcased the bizarre and often sadistic humour of the teenage gang-leader "Alex." Here, Alex is portrayed with manic energy and absurd facial and body-contortionist gestures by the thirty-something actor Herbert Fritsch. Fritsch begins the performance with crazed stuttering that disrupts the line delivery, turning words into "sounds" thus recalling both the Dadaists' "word salads," and the *zanni* or "fool" character of the *Commedia dell'arte*. Through Fritsch's line delivery, Burgess's Russian-infused youth-slang "Nadsat" is taken in an absurdist direction. Fritsch's performance was

devised to “irritate” spectators and to estrange them from their expectations of the iconic, white-clad, futuristic Alex played by Malcolm MacDowell in Kubrick’s film. Fritsch was dressed in white cut-off jeans and a loose, billowy green shirt, while sporting a trashy techno-hairstyle consisting of gelled spikes. The two other droogs, by contrast, were dressed in the iconic Kubrick style wearing white long johns and suspenders. However, Fritsch’s Alex was simultaneously a familiar type: a typical *Ossi* (East German) or *prol* (proletarian), derogatory terms used to refer to less materially privileged or less “cultured” citizens in the new republic. Alex could also read as a Berlin techno kid—as part of a subculture booming in clubs in the former East Berlin in the early 1990s. Alex’s bizarre and hyper-active performance potentially signals the recreational drugs youth involved in the techno scene were using. Castorf’s staging incorporated live rock music by local street musician Steve Binetti, whom Castorf discovered busking in the Berlin metro. Binetti—picture *Guns n’ Roses* Slash but more goth, styled in all-black with vampire fangs in his mouth—stood downstage left throughout the entire performance, providing 1970s-inspired electric guitar riffs and a Wagnerian rock n’ roll *leitmotif* that was devised to capture the raw, dark energy of the Berlin streets. Binetti’s presence gave the performance a feeling or energy of being at a live rock concert. Here we also see the influence of Brecht: making the musical accompaniment visible on stage and interrupting the dialogue with musical interludes, which Binetti did throughout the performance.

The opening scene takes place downstage in front of the audience, much like the acts in the vaudeville or variety theatre. Alex and his two droogs (rather than the three in Burgess’s novel) face the audience leaning against a wall. Fritsch’s Alex suddenly erupts into frenetic action, establishing a highly charged mood by recounting tales of the droogs’ violent, nighttime activities, replete with bizarre bodily twitches and spasms. Marna King, an American scholar

who attended a live performance, observes the spectator's focus "is riveted on Alex whose volatile mixture of intelligence, hate and despair is palpably felt by all in the audience" (65).

After the monologue, a librarian—dressed as a Chaplinesque tramp (dusty old tuxedo, bowler hat) and carrying a comically tall stack of books—bumps directly into Alex. "He" is played by a female actor as one of Castorf's consistent trademarks is a Brecht-inspired reverse-gender casting or miscasting of roles generally. Alex confronts the librarian with a few mocking remarks taken directly from Burgess's text, then begins to hit him over the head with the books one by one in a slapstick style, each time releasing a cloud of "dust" (flour). After this, Alex throws the books violently across the stage—making his disdain for the literary heritage patently clear. Alex then undertakes a crazed action-art performance, nailing a phone book to the floor and making a mixture of milk and real nails (the hallucinogenic "milk plus" in the novel).⁹⁰

Alex then forces the librarian to drink the concoction, nails and all. The librarian—now doubling as the old drunk whom the droogs violently assault and leave for dead in the novel—then begins to sing the lyrics, "I will go back to my darling, when you my darling are gone" with long sharp nails coming out of his mouth and spitting milk. As he stumbles around the stage writhing in pain, Binetti plays heavy riffs on the guitar. The stage is now awash with milk, flour and nails. Against this backdrop, Alex and one of the droogs recount breaking into the house of the writer F. Alexander and raping his wife. This recounting is done in a Brechtian style, directly to the audience, interrupting and contradicting each other. This scene is followed by all three droogs' synchronized dance-like choreography moving across the stage to Binetti's electric guitar riffs. The brutality of the droogs is now completely undermined by absurdist parody.

⁹⁰ Alex's performance here is unmistakably a citation of the Vienna Actionists, using the milk, nails and blood that featured prominently in their work. Moreover, the use of the phone book as an object to be pounded upon violently, is a citation of the American action artist Paul McCarthy's 1971 performance "Ma Belle."

The librarian, now more composed, interrupts the droogs' song-and-dance by singing a pathos-filled, acapella rendition of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, a piece about universal brotherhood. This is a citation of a scene in Kubrick's film, done in a typically Castorfian style: as naïve and childlike. The librarian's singing stirs Alex emotionally, as he begins singing along quietly. One of the droogs suddenly interrupts them with a comically long and vulgar armpit-fart rendition of the *Ode*. Alex responds by spitting directly into his face, physically assaulting him, and then barking the tune back at him. Just as Laibach exposed the obscene underside of totalitarian ideologies through overidentification, we find a similar exposure to universalist, humanist principles in Alex's bellicose response. Žižek notes how the *Ode*, with its flexible and ultimately empty paean to brotherhood, has been repurposed as the anthem of regimes ranging from Far Left to Far Right. It is even the *de facto* anthem of the European Union (*In Defense of Lost Causes* 270-1). Alex is no adherent to the Enlightenment project that the tune promotes in contemporary Europe, yet he is obsessed with "Ludwig Van," and will not permit his fellow droogs (his "brothers") to parody Beethoven's iconic refrains. In his cacophonous response to the droog, Alex seeks to at once redeem the *Ode* from its flatulent rendition and to restore his authority as undoubted leader, but he also exposes his own obscene attachment to this tune. In this final rendering, the *Ode* is exposed as that empty signifier flexible enough, as Žižek notes, to be the source of praise for China's Cultural Revolution as much as Hitler's birthday (270).

The scene digresses into a struggle for power and recognition between Alex and the other two droogs, with Alex asserting the need for a "*Führer*" quoting Burgess directly: "There has to be a leader. Discipline there has to be" (Burgess 22). In later performances, this sequence was followed by a long pause in the action that lasted up to four minutes due to a "staring contest" between Alex and the other droog. The contest was devised not only to assert Alex's dominance,

but to test audience patience and provoke their verbal outbursts (Detje 65; Stebbins 386). As Detje describes it, “in every performance of which a recording exists the audience holds out for about one minute, then it tries to laugh it away. After two minutes and ten seconds a coughing and whistling concert began. After three and a half minutes the audience tries to incite action with applause and then a half a minute later, again, this time louder. After four minutes and ten seconds comes Fritsch’s cathartic line: “I found that really shitty just now” (Detje 224).

After more singing and digressional riffing off a throw-away line from Burgess’s novel, “same time same place tomorrow” (23), signalling the aimlessness of the droogs’ lives, Alex crawls into a 16ft-long piece of bright yellow Telecom tubing. The tubing replaces the bedroom where in both the novel and the film Alex seeks refuge and listens to the intoxicating symphonies of his beloved “Ludwig Van.” Annika Krump, who was working at the Volksbühne at the time, observes that there was a lot of birth and archetypal mother imagery in Castorf’s *Clockwork* (Krump 78). She interprets the tubing as a symbol of the birth canal and Alex’s longing to return to the womb (78). These themes likely stem from the autobiographical and psychoanalytic approach Castorf facilitates with his actors during the rehearsal process. It also signals the influence of Antonin Artaud, who wrestled with similar primal themes. Alex masterfully contorts the tubing from the inside with his body, maneuvering it in comical ways. The droogs, still wanting to assert their dominance over Alex, pour a massive jug of water into the tubing, which comes gushing out when Alex stands upright making it seem as though Alex has just urinated himself. Eventually, the two droogs give up and exit the stage, signalling the end of the first segment of the production.

Alex has now moved from downstage—slinky-like, inside the tubing—up onto another performance platform that is now illuminated to reveal a massive plastic Beethoven bust, a ramp,

and the outline of walls or a fortress as the backdrop. A surreal and near-inscrutable scene takes place with a woman walking two live terriers.⁹¹ She represents the wealthy cat-lady from the novel whom Alex robs and then accidentally kills. Climbing out of the tubing, just as the woman climbs in to chase after him, Alex beats at the tube with the massive Beethoven bust “killing” her. This is followed by the entry of another figure, a bearded middle-aged man, the prison pastor from the novel, now walking the two dogs. He lectures the two small terriers about their delinquency and “exchanging free will for security,” whilst walking around the scenography and raving madly with visions of hell and damnation. Increasingly nervous and agitated, the pastor suddenly screams, “Oh my God, the apocalypse! We are surrounded by walls! The apocalypse is here!” At this moment, Alex is lifted fifteen feet above the stage holding on to the edge of the ramp with his hands, whilst a deluge of stage blood is thrown over him from stage right creating a striking tableau, the allusion to Artaud and his “Theatre of Cruelty” being abundantly clear.⁹² Alex then lifts his body onto the ramp and remains lying there precariously suspended while the next segment—a loosely-structured, surreal and dystopian sequence—begins. A Russian poet arrives on stage with his young bride, who is wearing a white wedding dress. It becomes clear that the poet is *both* Konstantin Treplew, the symbolist playwright from Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull* and F. Alexander, the liberal-progressive writer from Burgess’s *Clockwork*. The actor simultaneously refracts both characters. Actors playing dual or multiple roles is characteristic of

⁹¹ The use of live animals on stage is a typical Castorfian trope. Castorf obviously enjoys animals’ inherently unpredictable and hence comical quality. In *Pension Schöller/Die Schlacht*, for example, the actor Herbert Fritsch had two giant live pythons draped over his shoulders that slid around his neck and torso, one crawling directly into the fly of his long johns (Detje, 2005 5).

⁹² According to Artaud, “[t]he Theatre of Cruelty was created in order to restore an impassionate, convulsive conception of life to the theatre, and we ought to accept the cruelty on which this is based in the sense of drastic strictness, the extreme concentration of strange elements. This cruelty will be bloody if need be, but not systematically so, and will therefore merge with the idea of a kind of severe mental purity, not afraid to pay the cost one must pay in life” (88).

Castorf's Brechtian approach. The couple then begins to beg for something to eat. Instead they are showered with tiny American flags descending from the sky and given bubble gum by the guitarist, which obviously does not satisfy their hunger. As King observes, their endless chewing and failed attempt to blow bubbles become a slapstick sequence (66). The poet recites text from *The Seagull*, reads aloud from Burgess's *Clockwork*, and quotes Nietzsche, creating a collage of Russian, anti-American and philosophical themes. This collage represents the competing orientations at play in Berlin after the *Wende*.

Suddenly noticing Alex dangling on the ramp, the Russian poet recites Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* in the direction of Alex, on the subject of *Rausch* (frenzy), whilst holding one of the small American flags in each hand:

Toward a psychology of the artist. If there is to be art, if there is to be any aesthetic doing and seeing, one physiological condition is indispensable: frenzy. Frenzy must first have enhanced the excitability of the whole machine; else there is no art. All kinds of frenzy, however diversely conditioned, have the strength to accomplish this: above all, the frenzy of sexual excitement, this most ancient and original form of frenzy. Also the frenzy that follows all great cravings, all strong affects; the frenzy of feasts, contests, feats of daring, victory, all extreme movement; the frenzy of cruelty; the frenzy in destruction, the frenzy under certain meteorological influences, as for example the frenzy of spring; or under the influence of narcotics; and finally the frenzy of will, the frenzy of an overcharged and swollen will. What is essential in such frenzy is the feeling of increased strength and fullness. (518)

The quotation represents Nietzsche's reflection on the relationship between art and *Rausch* (intoxication) that is unique to youth—to the “animal vigour” associated with this early stage of life. For Nietzsche, *Rausch* is one of the most intense experiences to be had by human beings. *Rausch* is stimulated by aesthetic phenomena and induces a state of intoxication that lifts the individual into a higher mode of being akin to the rapture of sensuality. Here, striking resonances are to be found, for example, within Jünger's “Total Mobilization” and Marinetti's “Manifesto of

Futurism”⁹³ (1909), in their shared obsession with transcending the sclerotic bourgeois rational order through an intoxicating symbiosis with industrial machinery and technologies of war. And in both Burgess and Kubrick’s dystopias, Alex experiences erotic intoxication in his teenage bedroom whilst listening to Beethoven on his stereo. These experiences and drives convey the longings that exceed the rational liberal discourse. Castorf is preoccupied with the way such irrational drives propel contemporary youth to seek out experiences of transcendence and danger.

This poetic meditation on *Rausch* then suddenly morphs into Alex’s “trial” as he is accused of his crimes by the Russian poet. The hysterical bride (played by Silvia Rieger) speaks in Russian pointing up to Alex on the ramp, calling him “*Fashist!*” and “*Fashistki Agent!*” She then begins singing an acapella, pathos-filled rendition of the “*Lied der Jaramafront*” by the German communist Ernst Busch. The lyrics centre on solidarity and struggle during the Spanish Civil War and serve here as a communist *inversion* of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*. However, these lyrics of socialist solidarity will be undermined in the subsequent scene. Alex has now bizarrely found himself as the defendant in a Stalinist show trial and the Russian poet as his accuser. Alex is Otto Katz, a notorious Soviet spy accused of being a double agent and a “cosmopolitan.” Alex/Katz meekly explains to the poet-interrogator, he indeed had “close ties to Erwin Piscator, a theatre director in Berlin... who introduced [him] to the Trotskyist Willi Münzenberg.” Castorf’s insertion of these biographical details connects the show trial that took place in Czechoslovakia in 1952 to the Volksbühne by way of Piscator.⁹⁴ These kinds of associative digressions are

⁹³ The key quote in the Manifesto of Futurism being “war, the world’s only hygiene.”

⁹⁴ In *The Political Theatre*, Piscator blames the failures of the Piscator-Bühne in 1928 (his first theatre after his departure from the Volksbühne) on Otto Katz’s disastrous financial control (301). Despite this, Piscator personally arranged for Katz to receive a job at Willi Münzenberg’s left wing publishing house. In 1930, authorities pressed for Katz to pay unpaid taxes on the Piscator-Bühne, at which point Münzenberg arranged for Katz to leave for Moscow where he worked in cinema. After what is described as a “nomadic life in the communist cause,” Katz was executed in a show-trial (301).

emblematic of Castorf's site-specific dramaturgy and preoccupation with Stalinism. The real-life Katz was accused of crimes against the socialist state and hanged after the first anti-Semitic Stalinist show trials in the Eastern Bloc. Named after the first victim, Rudolf Slánský, the Slánský-trials saw Jews purged from the Communist party leadership for "Zionist," "Titoite," and "Trotskyite" tendencies. With the insertion of Katz's trial, Castorf shows the virulent anti-Semitism of the Stalinist regime, as well as the coercive force of dogma that made Katz *believe* he was guilty. Fully admitting his "guilt"—asking for the "harshest punishment," but unable to cope with the circumstances—Alex/Katz then attempts suicide on the ramp by pouring gasoline over himself and lighting a match. The match, however, extinguishes itself.

After enough flour is strewn about by the poet-interrogator, who has climbed onto the ramp, the scenography changes. Alex is taken down from the ramp and stripped naked. The auditorium goes dark and the audience is shown a four-minute clip from a Nazi propaganda film. At this point, Alex's "re-education" into liberal ideology begins. Unlike the explicit images of violence and rape Alex is forced to watch in Kubrick's adaptation, the film Castorf shows is the opposite: the 1944 Nazi propaganda film *Theresienstadt*. The latter stages the life of Jews in the concentration camp as "enjoyable," including musical concerts and sporting competitions. Castorf's dramaturgical choice signals liberal society's forced *repression* of violence and death, rather than generating an aversion thereto. Castorf's critique is of the German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or processing of the past, a past that is hermetically sealed, palatable, and which German society has supposedly progressed beyond. As such, it is devoid of a perception of the past's continuities in the present. For Castorf, it is precisely the suppression of this horrific truth under the façade of rational order that is mandated in Alex's ideological conditioning.

The next segment of the performance digresses into surreal incoherence and spontaneous action. The Russian newlyweds begin setting up their new domestic space, dragging household appliances such as a stove and fridge through the audience's entrance in the auditorium up onto the stage, which now looks like a black box. The newlyweds recite the dialogue from an iconic scene in Chekhov's *The Seagull* as Nina and Kostya. As Nina begins to sing a doleful song, Kostya types slowly to her rhythm on a typewriter. Alex arrives on the scene now dressed in a suit and reencounters the poet who is suddenly now F. Alexander. The two droogs reappear, marveling at the couple's newly acquired Western household commodities. The bride begins to fry eggs on the new stove. By this point, dramatic structure and narrative have disappeared entirely and the emphasis is now on the materiality and liveness of the performance. In theatre and performance studies parlance, this is an example of what Hans-Thies Lehmann describes as *postdramatic theatre*, namely the complete breaking open of the "fictive cosmos of the dramatic universe" and an emphasis on the contingencies of live performance (space, time, material, audience) (31). Lehmann situates the postdramatic theatre in a continuum of modern drama that is marked by the progressive separation of theatre from drama. Lehmann explains this phenomenon in Hegelian terms: once theatre is no longer the privileged form of the "absolute"—of spirit, beauty and ethics—its development turns increasingly to its own medium-specific concerns, which intensify until theatre finally separates from drama (46). In Lehmann's schema, Brecht's theatre is still "dramatic," as "the fable (story) remained *sine qua non* for him (33). In the postdramatic theatre—of which Castorf's work is paradigmatic—text and narrative have retreated, and the contingencies of the live performance claim dominance. The postdramatic elements of Castorf's dramaturgy have been interpreted by scholars such as Matt Cornish as the theatre's *refusal* to convey history as Hegelian dramaturgy—a rejection of drama's historical

complicity in constructing a Hegelian *telos*, of using Aristotelean devices to narrate history to support nationalism and/or conclude in liberal democratic finalities. Cornish argues that postdramatic theatre is “an attempt to combat Hegel, and to challenge the legitimacy of nationalism—any nationalism—through [dramatic] structure” (8). This is to say that by refusing the Aristotelean devices that Hegel used to narrate history—by curating history in a disorienting, non-linear way as is the case here in *Clockwork*—the spectator is alienated from a progressive *telos* of history, and from the unification myth constructed by Kohl asserting a happy resolution in the uniting of East and West.

At one point, the Russian bride returns to the stage wearing a sandwich board. On the front of the board, the name “Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz” is written out in bold letters; on the back, “Horst-Wessel-Platz.” The two droogs return to the stage dressed as authoritarian policemen, but behave like dimwitted goons who trash appliances, cannot control their bowels, and soil themselves (Cornish 131). They shout *Scheiße* and pull feces out of their pants. This type of slapstick and grotesquerie represents the indictment of authority figures and draws on tropes used in the medieval carnival. In this *carnavalesque* scene there is also a decapitated Helmut Kohl figure that carries around his own bloodied head. The actor playing the librarian strips naked, washes *her* clothes, eats an “exotic” orange (tropical fruit was a symbol of the capitalist market to which East Germans now had access), recites lines from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, and carries around a stuffed bear carcass (the bear being the symbol of Berlin). The entire cast engages in collective dancing to Binetti’s guitar riffs. A figure wearing a George H.W. Bush mask stares down at the revelers from above. The Russian poet also recites from the *Genealogy* whilst dancing in a frenzy. In this moment of symbolic collapse, police and people are united. This moment represents what Castorf describes as utopia—the moment towards the end of the

GDR when there was a closeness between the “punks and the Volkspolizei, who earlier would have punched them [the punks] in the face” (qtd. in Schütt 26). This is the chaotic, revolutionary *opening* Castorf continually seeks out—the moment the stage now represents.

At the indeterminate endpoint of this final segment arise the improvised antics of Fritsch, who attempts to engage the audience directly. Alex has now transitioned into a weak and pathetic *Spießler* (conservative)—a Nietzschean “last man” who wears a business suit and tie. He addresses the audience with an improvised speech in a quiet voice about his desire to settle down and “find a devotchka”—a mother for his unborn son—and about the next generation of youth being destined to make the same mistakes he did. As he is talking, fruit and other objects are thrown at him from the audience, likely by Castorf himself, who wanted to ensure that Fritsch did not get too “complacent,” even in this neutered iteration of Alex. Fritsch then starts to perform an absurd, improvised ditty about youth being like a “sickness like mumps and measles” and the need to build one’s own house, thus recalling Castorf’s critique of post-*Wende* society where you “need to have your retirement fund secured at 18” (qtd. in Balitzki 151). Slowly, Alex transforms back into the stuttering, menacing persona he was at the beginning of the performance, re-enacting the opening sequence with the librarian. This repetition signals the doomed cycle of thwarted revolutionary energies. Framing this production, is the manifesto in the program book that notes that the disappearance of socialism has turned the Volksbühne’s “guardian angel” Rosa Luxemburg’s slogan “socialism or barbarism” into a tautological “barbarism or barbarism” (reprinted in Krump 125). It is with this bleak depiction of a cycle of youth delinquency, violence and forced consensus that the performance concludes.

As Stebbins’ account demonstrates, Fritsch’s monologue was devised to potentially continue *ad infinitum* so as to provoke audience members, since they would feel obliged to stay,

when in fact, unbeknownst to them, their leaving would signal the end of the evening's performance (Stebbins 367).⁹⁵ Fritsch would negotiate the duration of the monologue by testing audience patience and determine the ending by inciting spectators to react. The idea was to allow for a verbal back and forth, or for audience members to get up and leave when they had enough. In one account, when they did leave the auditorium, Fritsch yelled after them to stay, saying "Hey, I'm performing my ass off here" (387). This is to say that Fritsch's antics were devised to incite the audience to resist passive spectatorship. The latter was perceived by Castorf as tacitly participating in ideological repetition and hegemonic power relations enforced within the "bourgeois" theatre, which Castorf wanted to both make visible and disrupt. As such, each evening's performance was an at least partially spontaneous event that broke the fourth wall, and deliberately challenged the conventions of institutional theatre, as well as audience complacency.

"Bawdy" Madness—Castorf's Disruptive Strategies in *Clockwork Orange*

In the post-*Wende* context, Castorf finally had the freedom to not just deploy, but to radicalize, formalist and non-illusionistic theatrical strategies. Castorf, for example, gave full licence to Fritsch to characterize Alex as a kind of outrageous "fool" or Harlequin stock character. Castorf perceived theatre "as a marketplace or court where a few idiots are given permission to rule" (qtd. in Raddatz 23). He also wanted the performance to explore themes of power, domination, cruelty and the erotics of transgression. On one evening, recounted by both Detje and Stebbins, Fritsch spontaneously challenged an unruly audience member to come on

⁹⁵ According to Stebbins, "the standard deviation of this monologue's length was exceptionally high. Sometimes Fritsch simply refused to end the play until most of the audience had left the theatre. In these cases, the audience—unaware that their leaving would cue the end—frequently behaved so respectfully that the show dragged on for (what is at least remembered now as) an extra hour" (367).

stage, urinate in a cup and then drink it.⁹⁶ Fritsch also incited or invited other spectators to intervene (none did). He used the opportunity to spread a feeling of discomfort in the auditorium since, by breaking the fourth wall, any spectator could potentially become a subject in the performance. This event, as well as the scatological elements in the latter half of Castorf's production, recall not only the Actionists, but also the proto-avant-gardes such as Alfred Jarry, who used the stage to critique the complacent bourgeois audience starting with *Ubu Roi* (1896). *Ubu Roi*'s scandal-inciting opening line *Merde! (Shit!)* was devised to *épater (shock) la bourgeoisie*. References to urine, feces and other bodily functions abound in Jarry's work, connecting his critique of the bourgeoisie with the medieval carnival traditions of parody, satire and especially the grotesque.

Fritsch's antics also distinctly evoked the precepts of the "The Variety Theatre" laid out by the Italian Futurist F.T. Marinetti in 1913, with its mandate to outrage and thus activate the passive spectator with gags, provocations and nonsense. The Futurists' attitude towards the bourgeois theatre—particularly its tendency towards "historical reconstruction" or the "photographic reproduction of daily life" (126)—recalls Castorf's critique of other Berlin theatres such as the Schaubühne in the West, which were content with showing a mere semblance (*Schein*) of authentic life.⁹⁷ Castorf's adaptation channels the "The Variety Theatre" manifesto dated September 29, 1913. Marinetti writes:

[w]e are deeply disgusted with the contemporary theatre (verse, prose, and musical) because it vacillates stupidly between historical reconstruction (pastiche or plagiarism)

⁹⁶ There is some uncertainty about who the audience member was. In Detje's account, he was a member of the *Ratten* ensemble, the homeless theatre collective who had taken up residence in the theatre. In any case, the action was not planned.

⁹⁷ The *Schaubühne* was known for its lavish house on the Kurfürstendamm in former West Berlin. According to New York Times columnist Richard Riddel, "the Schaubühne had always maintained a deep interest in investigating the history of the bourgeoisie, whether it be through the work of Chekhov, Labiche or the contemporary chronicler of the German middle class, Botho Strauß" (np). The theatre of Peter Stein from 1970-1985, it has been under the artistic directorship of Thomas Ostermeier since 1999.

and photographic reproduction of our daily life; a finicking, slow, analytic, and diluted theatre worthy, all in all, of the age of the oil lamp. (179)

In the early 1990s especially, Castorf was vehement about creating theatre that was more vital, authentic and spontaneous than the hermetically sealed “realism” other state theatres in Berlin such as the “Schaubühne am Ku’damm” were content with showing (qtd. in Schütt 71). The theatre had to be open to *life* and resonate with youth. According to the Futurists, “Variety Theatre” and “conventional bourgeois theatre” differed as follows:

The conventional theatre exalts the inner life, professorial meditation, libraries, museums, monotonous crises of conscience, stupid analyses of feelings, in other words (dirty thing and dirty word), psychology, whereas on the other hand, the Variety Theatre exalts action, heroism, life in the open air, dexterity, the authority of instinct and intuition. To psychology it opposes what I call ‘body-madness’. (183)

The Futurist “Variety Theatre” manifesto’s critique of liberal institutions is also reflected in Burgess’s characterization of Alex, who hates libraries and school. However, it emerges most pronouncedly in the physicality of Fritsch’s performance through his “*bawdy*” *madness*. Fritsch’s performance channels the unpredictability and eventalism of the action artist or the punk rock performer (Johnny Rotten comes to mind). Being open to “life” also meant being open to the body and indeed, the actors’ spontaneity and improvisation are central to the performance.

The Futurist manifesto also dictated “putting life into the masterworks” by fueling “frightening dynamism,” “exciting grotesquerie,” and integrating “crude jokes” and “enormous brutalities” (Marinetti 185). Castorf’s staging was not only an irreverent satire of Burgess’s mid-century “masterpiece” but, through Fritsch’s bizarre performance, adhered to the Futurist imperative to “make the absurd and the unlikelike complete masters of the stage” (130). Most important for Castorf was the contemporary relevance he wanted to infuse into Burgess’s *Clockwork*—something at the forefront of the Futurists’ agenda as well. The vitality he wanted

to inject into the performance was meant to free the spectator from the weight of the novel's canonical status and inspire audience members to react. Castorf even spoke of a "crisis of the audience" as the most urgent crisis of the theatre and the mandate to re-educate them in this anti-authoritarian spirit (qtd. in Raddatz 23). Here, the actor Fritsch's bawdy madness—his excesses and exuberance—should function as a kind of contagion, an autopoietic feedback loop enacting a freedom that might inspire the audience in kind.

Castorf not only wished to re-ignite the radical social critique of Burgess's *Clockwork*, which was now firmly entrenched in the literary canon, but to satirize and deconstruct a cultural text that was also part of what skinheads considered *their* canon (Krump 80). Castorf would have been aware that skinhead youth would be provoked by his adaptation of *Clockwork*. Using the canon as a "Trojan Horse" to seduce his avowed enemies—the bourgeoisie—into the Volksbühne, Castorf ultimately did the same thing here with *Clockwork* and the skinheads. Staging *Clockwork* "irreverently," as Castorf did, was also a furtherance of the spirit of both the Futurists and the Dadaists, who shared in the conceit of deconstructing and satirizing the cultural inheritance. The political divide between the two—the Futurists' association with Mussolini's fascism and the Berlin Dadaists' association with Far-Left communism—is notable. To be clear, neither the Futurists' manifestos nor their performances were explicitly fascist, nor were they even political, but as a group they were nationalistic, bellicose and opposed to parliamentary democracy (Marinetti np.). Leading members such as Marinetti became enthusiastic supporters of the fascist project in the hope that it would unify and modernize Italy (Kirby 5). Their favoured target was the "*passatista*"—an old-fashioned, conservative or passé person (14). The *passatista* are akin to those spectators whom Castorf claimed were "outraged" by irreverent adaptations of the classics.

As mentioned in the description of the performance above, Castorf inserted an excerpt from a Nazi “documentary” *Theresienstadt* as part of Alex’s re-education. The inclusion of the *Theresienstadt* footage was one of Castorf’s most shocking dramaturgical decisions: to juxtapose the bizarre on-stage antics of Fritsch with an excerpt from a Nazi propaganda film about the “model” concentration camp would have been highly unsettling for spectators. The footage showed prisoners playing orchestral concerts and enjoying their free time, obscuring the fact that the camp was part of the Nazi’s machinery of death. With this juxtaposition of texts, Castorf conveys the extent to which extreme violence is hidden underneath the smooth façade of rational, liberal order, an analogy that correlated with the “Stop the Pogroms!” slogan used in the program book. The presence of this theme throughout the second half of Castorf’s first season at the Volksbühne was strongly influenced by the arguments laid out in the 1944 *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, an excerpt of which Castorf included in the program book (Krump 44). In this pessimistic text, Adorno and Horkheimer state that just beneath the surface of our “Enlightened” techno-rational, liberal-democratic society looms the potential of repeating the darkest events of the 20th century. Thus, the propaganda film serves as an example of how violence underwrites a thin veneer of order and pleasantness. The inclusion of a propaganda film meant to falsify a happy picture of interned Jews, was also used by Castorf to reflect the “false immunity” German society was creating against the “pogrom planning” he claimed was underway. Not only were privileged West Germans oblivious to *ressentiment* burgeoning within socially marginalized populations in the East, but they also believed that by enforcing the taboo around discussing the National Socialist past they would reduce the momentum of the Far Right. According to Castorf, however, the strategy of taboo suppression merely creates an *aura* around the past. One should be careful not to immediately categorize the

phenomenon “legally and morally” (qtd. in Raddatz 24). Instead, as Castorf provocatively put it, one should try to understand what is so seductive about the gang-formation of skinheads— “in which one can assert one’s self-worth” (23).

A Theory/Theatre of Hate

Castorf believed that community and solidarity were the only recourse against a post-*Wende* society devoid of collective fantasies and utopia. He argued that while “[s]olidarity in society is actually a crazy, unrealizable dream, solidarity in community is still possible” (qtd. in Schütt 59). He claimed that community was the last refuge against a society that was implementing a “liberal-moral dictatorship: a ghettoization through the management of taboos, [a society] which contradicts itself all of the time, but in a subtle way” (59). The claims of liberal society and the free market are unfair, Castorf proclaimed: “they don’t apply for those who can’t manage it” (59). Against the “hypocrisy of liberalism,” Castorf argued, only an “ideology or philosophy of hatred can help. The hatred that one encounters every day can only be prevented if one manages to be hated. That gives one a feeling of self-worth” (Schütt 62). As such, Castorf invoked the idea of mutual recognition and that the obverse, to be hated, is better than not to be recognized at all.

Castorf also believed—in the Nietzschean spirit of self-reflexive theorizing—that one must first identify this violence and hatred *in oneself*. Recall from the previous chapter that Castorf saw *himself* as the “master concept” of the Volksbühne: “*Das Konzept bin Ich.*” Like when he proclaimed in an interview that he longed for a *Stahlgewitter* (*Storm of Steel*)—citing the image of trench warfare that served as the title of Jünger’s WWI *Fronterlebnis*—this was Castorf’s admission that he could relate to the feeling of hate and the impulse toward violence as a reaction to the conformism and hypocrisy of liberal democratic society. Precisely because he

could identify these reactionary longings within himself, Castorf urgently asserted the necessity of *Abarbeitung* or collectively processing them. Playing on Groys's idea of the necessity of the aesthetic repetition of Stalin, Castorf claimed that we "should first take the swastika in our mouth and carry it around with clenched teeth, so that we can actually be cleansed of these emotions" (qtd. in Raddatz 24). The journalist Hans-Dieter Schütt directly challenged Castorf on his own personification of this hatred: "Herr Castorf, you emanate the hatred that one finds in criminality, racism, but also in banal indifference" (qtd. in Schütt 63), to which Castorf replied, "[i]t is dangerous to push away hatred – hatred is the anti-body through which a political order trains its strength to fight against this hatred. But this society is creating a fake immunity to the forces of hatred" (63).

Baudrillard's theory of "the violence of soft eradication, a therapeutic violence of consensus and forced living together" in his 1995 short essay "Hate," proved very useful to Castorf for reflecting upon his production of *Clockwork Orange* (Schütt 79). Baudrillard's essay was written around the release of Mathieu Kassovitz's film *La Haine* (1995), which dealt with youth violence in the *banlieues* of Paris. Baudrillard's concept of "hate" became an important basis for Castorf's exploration of the soft violence of liberal consensus. Baudrillard claims that with the end of the age of historical, class or anti-oppression violence, a new era of "hate" has been inaugurated that is emblematic of hypermodernity. This "hate" was a reaction towards the forced imperative to conform, where negative emotions, conflict, even death, are suppressed. According to Baudrillard, hate is born of the *absence* of violence—of a violence that emanates purely from television screens (92). It is endemic to a system that "roots out any form of negativity [...] including the ultimate form of singularity—death itself" (92-93). This is a society "in which negativity is virtually prohibited, conflict is prohibited, death is prohibited" (93). It

produces “[a] violence which, in a way, puts an end to violence itself. A violence which can be met by no equal and opposite violence. Only hate” (93). Where traditional violence—for example, the violence of class struggle—reflected the “level of oppression and conflict, hate reflects the level of consensus and conviviality... the coexistence of all differences within a great cultural melting pot” (93).

Baudrillard argues that with a lack of an other, existence itself has been pacified. Hate is a reaction to this pacification—a “desperate protest against the indifference of our world and [...] a much more intense mode of relation than consensus” (93). It is precisely “this multiculturalism, this tolerance, this symmetry, which stir up the temptation of a general abreaction [in society]” (93). Baudrillard believes that the violence in urban housing projects is not racism and hatred of the other, but resentment of “*the loss of the other*” (94). It is less a rejection of difference than it is a “fanatical desire *for otherness*” (94) that no longer exists in liberal multicultural society. Therefore, preaching tolerance and respect are futile. In a world that has been “lobotomized”, “where conflicts must immediately be contained, [hate] seeks to resuscitate otherness” (94). Hate, Baudrillard claims, is a disease of this order, “it has something of self-aggression and autoimmune pathology about it” (93). What develops in this context, Baudrillard explains, is *self-hatred*—redundant antibodies attacking the self, akin to Nietzsche’s “bad conscience” in the *Genealogy*. It is a symptom of the “sudden loss of the social, of otherness, of conflict [...] A symptom of the end or the failure of modernity or the end of history, although “paradoxically there has never been an end of history, since there has never been a resolution of all the problems it has posed” (95). This generates what Baudrillard describes as the “cool fanaticism [of] a millenarian form of provocation” (95)—a reaction similar to what Castorf describes as the

“terrorist longing” stemming from a desire “to bring a dictatorship into being, so something better can come into being. Against the big holy liberalism” (qtd. in Schütt 61).

Castorf was interested in how the Ludovico Technique in Burgess’s novel—the therapy that rids Alex of free will and forces his aversion to violence—is akin to the “therapeutic violence” theorized by Baudrillard and enacted upon in Western societies via insidious coercion, namely that of liberal “consensus.” Castorf thought that socially marginalized individuals and young disenfranchised men from the former GDR, would respond by uniting, radicalizing and countering the “soft violence” of forced consensus with a collective expression of hate. At the so-called end of history, class struggle had no meaning and what remained amongst the “asocial” marginalized factions of society was directionless aggression. Castorf summarized the danger of this situation thusly:

Family is falling apart. Which social institution is taking care of these free-form energies being released into society? When, following the breaking apart of the GDR, young people fall into a fully disturbed landscape, without any collective support of communication, when everything is discriminated against that was and is collective, then the affected will organize themselves. The rupture all over the world of utopias, of collective forms of expression, drives people without life-experience as a basis to serious dangers. The diffusion of violence that happens is a darkening-mood of cultures, which is crumbling away in socially “logical” goals because there is no community project anymore. This society is poor in collective fantasies and into this vacuum is where the right wing agitates. (qtd. in Schütt 59-60)

Castorf saw this phenomenon recurring cyclically in society: “[w]hen right wing organizations throw political nets over certain energies we get right wing forms of organization out of social-revolutionary energies, which is how the SA [or *Sturmabteilung*, the paramilitary wing of the National Socialist party], recruited in the 20s” (58). Castorf also observed, on the Left side of things, that protestors at May Day parades “no longer know what they are fighting for, or who

they are fighting against” (78). These young people needed to simulate an enemy to give their daily struggles meaning (59).⁹⁸

The forced consensus and conformism endemic to liberal societies is where the critique of Baudrillard and those of the historical avant-garde “isms” intersect. The latter’s critiques of Western liberal institutions can ultimately be traced back to Nietzsche’s *Use and Abuse of History* and the *Genealogy*, with these texts’ disparaging appraisals of the moral and cultural inheritance and Western “progress.” Castorf inserts Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* directly into the digressional mayhem that ensues towards the end of *Clockwork*. Recited by the librarian, who strips *her* clothes off and is now washing them in the new “Western” washing machine of the newlyweds, the passage from the *Genealogy* is emblematic of Castorf’s own cultural pessimism:

We no longer see anything these days that aspires to grow greater; instead, we have a suspicion that things will continue to go downhill, becoming ever thinner, more placid, smarter, cozier, more ordinary, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian—there is no doubt that man is getting ‘better’ all the time. (*Genealogy* 177)

This quote is emblematic of Nietzsche’s critique of the degeneration (*Verkümmerung*) of Western European society. Castorf uses Nietzsche’s critique to represent the feeling of despondency among youth after the *Wende*—their longing for *Rausch* and more vital stakes to give their daily struggles higher meaning. Instead, Castorf claims, the new liberal value system offers only palliatives, “only Christianity, moralism, hypocrisy—the whole arsenal of a pain avoidance functions very well in this society” (qtd. in Raddatz 24).

⁹⁸ Castorf stages “hate” as a form of illiberal reaction. In Hegelian terms, if there is no “other,” then the struggle for recognition in the Master-Slave dialectic cannot occur—the master *needs* the slave to recognize him, which is to say that the individual *needs an “other”* in order to be recognized. Fukuyama’s *End of History* proclaims the end of the struggle for recognition and the universal recognition of all citizens in the West. Castorf, however, contests Fukuyama’s claim that Hegel’s liberal finalities have been achieved by accounting for the losers and outsiders of the liberal-capitalist system who are not only unable to adapt, but also unable to productively channel their desire for recognition in a new context devoid of community and higher purpose.

Castorf's critique of the pain suppression in liberal society aligns with Nietzsche's concept of the bourgeois "last man" from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, whose life is comfortable, easy and secure, but devoid of higher goals and aspirations. This theme is picked up in Jünger's *On Pain* (1934), a kind of manifesto for embracing self-sacrifice and "heroic" nihilism in an age of death-driven technologies of war. Following this line of critique, the objective of liberal society—and again, this is where Nietzsche and Baudrillard overlap—is to minimize social conflict and pain, and for individuals to live in superficial harmony. Nietzsche's critique of the pacification and anemic conformism of bourgeois liberal society and Baudrillard's critique of forced consensus form the basis for the affinity Castorf captures between the youth-centric *spirit* of the avant-gardes (wherein he situates Jünger) and skinhead youth from the former GDR.

Castorf's *Clockwork Orange* functions as a kind of "Theatre of Hate." Much like Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty," Castorf saw the stage as the only space in which to make visible the dark and irrational energies he saw extending forth from the *ressentiment* of West Germans and East Germans alike, and especially from the frustrations of disenfranchised youth from the former GDR. Castorf wanted to make this hate visible in its most embodied physical and visceral form. "Hate" and the responses to a historic moment Castorf perceived as irrational, could not be given "rational" form. Rather, they had to be expressed as visceral—as a Dionysian, Futurist, Artaudian *assault* on the senses.

An attempt to politicize these illiberal discontents—to reclaim them for a Leftist project—is undertaken by Slavoj Žižek. Žižek himself strongly features as paratext in Castorf's Volksbühne. He began regularly lecturing there in 1993, right around the time of *Clockwork's* premiere. Žižek is emblematic of the type of theorist and theoretical line that Castorf and his dramaturges regularly program, re-enforcing the Volksbühne's Far-Left allegiances in spite of

the ambivalence of Castorf's position.⁹⁹ Žižek's essay "Against the Populist Temptation" (2006) demonstrates the way Marxists such as Žižek explore Far-Right populist reaction as indicators of potentially revolutionary anti-capitalist resistance. Žižek explores the rise of right wing populism through an analysis of the "no" vote issued by the French and Dutch on the project of a European constitution that same year. Žižek makes clear that the only parties that voted no in France were those at the opposite extremes of the political spectrum: the Communists and Trotskyites on the Far-Left and Marine Le Pen's Front National on the Far-Right (568). According to Žižek, right wing populism is itself the result of "the rise of [liberal] post-politics"—the reduction of politics proper to the "rational administration of conflicting interests" (567). Žižek claims that in the West, right wing populism is emerging as the "inherent shadowy double of institutionalized post-politics" (567). It is a "displaced version of workers' protests" (552) and "displaced class content" that emerges in excess of a system that cannot accommodate it (567). Žižek describes populism in terms of what Derrida calls a "supplement"—the area in which political demands that do not fit into the institutionalized space can be articulated (567). It should be noted that these supplements can come from the Right and from the Left. According to Žižek, "[t]here is no way for this discontent to find a politically effective expression; such frustration can only foment dangerous extra-parliamentary explosions" (568).

Žižek perceives an anti-capitalist resistance in right wing populism that is recoverable for the Left if properly *proletarianized*. He argues that the "rightest racist populism is today the best argument that the 'class struggle', far from being 'obsolete', goes on" (552). Žižek also claims that the Left can align with many of the critiques of the Far-Right around globalization

⁹⁹ Notably, Castorf and his dramaturgical team never once invited a thinker associated with the Right to lecture at the Volksbühne, nor to participate in any panel discussions.

such as open markets and the import of cheap labour under the guise of multicultural tolerance (552). For Žižek, the idea is to not give up on the critique of political economy in order to avoid playing into Far-Right discourses. Rather, he demands demystification of why racist othering occurs and mandates the politicization of their overlapping critiques in Marxist terms. According to Žižek, what the two extreme ends of the political spectrum share is the “awareness that politics proper is still alive” (569). When people voted no to the EU declaration, it was because the elite [technocratic liberals] were unable to articulate, to translate into a political vision, the people’s longings and dissatisfactions (568). These neoliberal technocrats framed the vote as a choice between liberalism and barbarism. For Žižek, however, the no-vote was not a choice between an enlightened vision of a “modern Europe, ready to fit the global order, and old confused political passions” (569). Rather, it was “a message and expression of hope—hope that politics is still alive and possible and that the debate about what the new Europe shall and should be is still open” (569). In other words, the no-vote presents a possibility to be translated into a coherent alternate political vision (551). Žižek asserts that we should see in the populist trend people awakening from their apolitical slumber (552). He claims that the main task of an emancipatory politics today is to find a form of political mobilization that is “critical of institutionalized liberal politics,” but that “avoids the populist temptation” (567).

Moreover, Žižek argues that the “automatic dismissal of entertaining any thoughts outside the established post-political coordinates as ‘populist demagoguery’ is hitherto the purest proof that we effectively live under a new *Denkverbot*” (Žižek 553). This *Denkverbot* is precisely what Castorf is attuned to and he uses the Volksbühne to push back against it and explore all manner of political and social taboos.

Uniting the Theatre and the Street

Being well-versed in the aesthetics and politics debates that directly evolved from within the Volksbühne in the 1920s, Castorf was keenly aware of what Franz Mehring—founding member of the Spartacus League and erstwhile director of the *Freie Volksbühne*—claimed, namely that the working class tends to be “conservative in art even when revolutionary in philosophy” (Davies 53). This claim underwrote the official line of Marxist-Leninist Party dogmatists who advocated realism and denounced the avant-gardes by claiming their formalist aesthetics were “*Volksfremd*.” In the mid-1920s, Piscator’s vanguard adaptations of both classics and new dramas—rendering the original virtually unrecognizable—erupted the so-called *Werktreue* or “fidelity to the original” debate within the Volksbühne organization. Piscator had little reverence for the “original” dramatic text and used film and stage technologies to bring world historical events and street politics into the theatre. Piscator took extreme liberties in his adaptations—cutting, reassembling and politicizing scenes, as well as including statistics and filmic insertions to make visible the mechanisms of global capitalism or the historical coordinates revolution. Piscator’s objective was to make theatre relevant for the lives of the proletariat. His approach to text and to the use of technology anticipates Benjamin’s idea in “The Work of Art” essay about the reproducible artwork destroying the aura and enabling a direct encounter with the beholder (*Illuminations* 237-238). Castorf was likewise intent on destroying any reverence for the original text. He surely anticipated that skinheads would come to the Volksbühne to worship at the altar of their most revered cultural text: *Clockwork Orange*. Castorf used Burgess’s novel as “material” to cut and reassemble as a fragmented allegory of life after the *Wende* for disenfranchised youth. Through irritation strategies, Castorf’s *Clockwork*

reflected the “fatal simultaneity of disparate and contradictory experience of processes underway in everyday life” (qtd. in Schütt 72).

At the second performance of *Clockwork* on February 26, 1993, about twenty skinheads turned up at the Volksbühne replete with shaved heads, army boots and dressed as droogs. When it became apparent that Castorf’s staging was *not* what they had expected, their unruly behaviour boiled over into protest. This included hanging their legs over the balcony railing, heckling and shouting insults, and throwing cigarette butts down onto the stage (Stebbins 378). The skinheads’ flagrant disregard for audience convention was devised to strongly demonstrate their disapproval of Castorf’s adaptation of a cult classic they revered and expected to see faithfully reproduced on the stage that night. Castorf had taken such extreme liberties that *Clockwork* was no longer recognizable to them and they were outraged as a result.

For the Volksbühne team that evening, this rare opportunity to directly engage with the skinheads should have been seized in accordance with the themes explored in the dramaturgy and evident in the paratextual supplements. However, both the audience and performers of the left wing Volksbühne were incensed by the presence of rowdy skinheads, who were disrupting the performance. After about an hour, the actor Silvia Rieger, who played the Russian bride, stopped the performance and left the stage to confront the skinheads directly and force them to leave the theatre. A brawl ensued in the foyer involving the skinheads and a few audience members that resulted in damage to two glass doors in the historic building. According to Annika Krump, the skinheads immediately justified their behaviour by claiming that *Clockwork* was *their* film, *their Lebensgefühl* (attitude towards life) and they refused to let that be destroyed (80). The production “should have been staged more realistically. That’s what they were expecting” (80). Krump claims that the skinheads’ presence suddenly brought “reality” into the

Volkstheater “against which all that intellectual drivel [of the dramaturgy and paratext] did not hold up” (80).

Despite accounts of Castorf’s apparent “helplessness” at the violence that ensued that evening (79), the skinheads’ presence at the Volkstheater was precisely what Castorf was after: the eruption of dissent inside the theatre. As he noted:

Here (at the Volkstheater) one can still have political conversations, here one can still have arguments, here there is still a starting point to have really nasty arguments and also get really nasty answers....that is for me a starting point, to begin to think anew in the political sense, because my work is political work. And I find that theatre, as kitschy as this sounds, is still a moral tribunal. That is why I am here. The unification starts for me here at the Volkstheater. (qtd. in Baltizki 90)

The skinheads, however, were enacting a critique of, and intervention into, the theatre institution itself—a furtherance of Castorf’s professed goal to shake up the “stinking swamp” that was state-funded theatre and “which has no more input from the outside world” (qtd. in Schütt 17).

Because the skinheads personified the hate that “soft violence” and “forced consensus” generated, their presence at that evening’s performance suddenly broke down the barrier between theatre and reality in the way that Castorf aspired to.

The historic avant-gardes—by opposing the bourgeois art institution—highlighted the conceits, boundaries, rhetoric and exclusionary constitution of the art institution *as such*, pitting it against “life.” It was, for example, the realization of the Italian Futurists’ dream of a spirited brawl taking place inside the theatre. The Futurists’ slogan was, in fact, there “was no beauty except in strife” (13). Marinetti admired the variety theatre “because its spectators actively responded during the performance with indications of approval or disdain, rather than waiting passively until the curtain went down to applaud” (23). The Futurists aspired to an “energetic exchange between performers and spectators and Marinetti made suggestions for forcing the

spectators to become a part of the performance whether they wanted to or not” (Kirby 23). Both the Futurists and the Dadaists, anticipating Piscator and Brecht, aspired to the irreverent conventions of the variety theatre. Therein, raucous behavior and heckling on behalf of the audience would directly challenge the performers and the “smoke of cigars and cigarettes [would] join the atmosphere of the theatre to that of the stage” (“The Variety Theatre” 181). As such, the now infamous skinhead incident during the run of *Clockwork* is an extreme instance of what theatre scholar Marvin Carlson observes about Castorf’s Volksbühne, namely that “its audiences were much like those that Brecht desired but never really attained: active, engaged, often shouting out their approval and disapproval” (101).

Castorf undoubtedly welcomed this moment of confrontation and scandal. He saw this face-to-face encounter with the untouchables of liberal society as an opportunity to expose the limits of its own rhetorical claims of tolerance and universal equality. The skinheads’ disruption also exposed the limits of the Volksbühne’s own rhetorical standard of being a “People’s Theatre,” as well as Castorf’s purported focus on socially marginal groups (Schütt 15). The truth was that the first response of the Volksbühne staff and the audience was to *disengage*—to denounce and expunge the skinheads from the theatre. This was a situation Castorf would later rectify by inviting the skinheads to directly engage with him in a public forum.

After the brawl, Castorf invited two of the skinheads to appear alongside himself and the actor Fritsch on his live public radio show, *Castorf, der Eisenhändler*.¹⁰⁰ As such, Castorf

¹⁰⁰ Castorf’s public radio program *Castorf, der Eisenhändler* (“Castorf, the Ironmonger”) was broadcasted on *Radio Brandenburg* from 1993 to 1995 and was a way for the director to directly engage with the public and to challenge the political correctness that he believed was stifling the public sphere. Castorf used his show to incite the public to speak honestly about their experiences of unification. Like his stage productions, the radio show was about “breaking taboos through which one can work against the German addiction to affirmation,” which resulted in individuals censoring their “authentic responses to an irrational historical moment” (qtd. in Schütt 54). The moniker “ironmonger” referred to Castorf’s family’s window blinds store just up the road from the Volksbühne.

provided the skinheads with a public platform to have their voices heard, even as they again expressed their disapproval of his staging of *Clockwork*, having expected a faithful adaptation. The skinheads also pointed out that they experienced a discrepancy between the Volksbühne's institutional status as the so-called "People's Theatre" and their treatment therein (Stebbins 389). They pointed to the "hypocrisy of the theatre and its audience for claiming to care about marginalized populations yet demanding the eviction of the "Faschos" from the public space of a municipal theatre, from the Volksbühne, the peoples' stage" (389).

Through his interview with the skinheads, Castorf ultimately extended the Volksbühne *beyond* the physical parameters of the theatre and into the public sphere. As such, he ultimately made good on the Volksbühne's commitment to "*soziale Randgruppen*" (socially marginal groups) (Schütt 15), enabling them to express their perspectives and air their dissatisfactions. The journalist Hans-Dieter Schütt asked Castorf whether he was happy that skinheads came to the Volksbühne. Castorf answered 'yes,'

even when they fought with us or broke windows during *Clockwork Orange* to reclaim the work for the Right. Burgess and Kubrick are cult artists for them. It's not like I want them at every performance. And it wasn't like there was just fighting, there was discussion after. But that's a fringe group that feels themselves abandoned by official culture. (qtd. in Schütt 69)

In the spirit of the historic Volksbühne that he consciously revived, Castorf wanted to reach those abandoned by official bourgeois culture—those excluded from the so-called "brotherhood" of enlightened liberal democracy. He wanted to create a stage experience more vital, visceral, agitational, and more existentially profound. In this way, theatre would offer the rebellious, intoxicating experience youth were finding in other counter-cultural channels.

Chapter Summary

Castorf's *Clockwork Orange* played sold out shows to a visibly young audience and remained in the Volksbühne repertoire for three more seasons until 1996 (King 63). In May 1999, the production was also broadcast on German television (Stebbins 393). Castorf's staging of *Clockwork* is, without a doubt, one of the most iconic productions of the post-*Wende* period in Germany—notable for its engagement with the topic of rising Far Right violence, as well as the outrageous and shocking incidents that occurred during actual performances. In *Clockwork*, we see Castorf's "aesthetic compass" applied to the stage: we see how his dramaturgy gave expression to the tensions existing on the Berlin streets, how it captured the feeling of hate felt by disenfranchised youth after the *Wende*, and how it conveyed the "soft violence" of forced consensus. Castorf also inserted *Theresienstadt* and the anti-Semitic show trials in the Soviet Union in order to stage a continuity of ideological coercion and anti-Semitic violence. With the latter, Castorf drew a connection to the "pogrom planning" that he perceived as persisting covertly in present-day Germany. Using aesthetic strategies such as shock, irritation, assemblage and provocation, Castorf managed to de-familiarize an iconic cultural text and revitalize *Clockwork* for the acute crisis of the present.

While the National Socialist and Stalinist pasts haunt the stage and weigh upon the present, this does not weigh down the performances. Actors such as Fritsch assert a radical vitality and an improvisational performance-style—rendering each performance a singular and entirely unpredictable event. What we see in Fritsch is a reassertion of the aesthetic roots of the Volksbühne that Castorf identifies in the beleaguered avant-gardes, as well as in the *Commedia* and the variety theatre. His critique of the state-funded theatre institution and appeal to those marginalized by society were realized in the confrontation with real skinheads, who felt excluded

by “high culture.” Hence the skinhead incident constituted the realization of not only the historic mission of the Volksbühne to make art accessible to the disenfranchised, but also both the Italian Futurists’ and Brechtian dream of strife and scandal in the theatre. The latter is what was at play in *Clockwork*: this vitality, this eventalism, which trumps all the cynicism and historic trauma. These qualities of the performance exemplify the medium specific possibilities of live theatre to intervene in ideological repetition and closure.

Throughout the production, walls represent a unifying conceptual device: the disappearance of the Berlin Wall, the fourth wall between stage and audience, and the wall between theatre and the street. Precisely these walls—those of the proscenium, as well as the intensification of geo-political fortifications (East vs. West)—will again be at stake in the following chapter that focuses on the next stage of Castorf’s tenure in the late 1990s and 2000s. As we will see, the tumult of the post-*Wende* period will sediment into firmly entrenched neoliberalism resulting in the almost complete disappearance of resistance in unified Berlin. For Castorf, this situation necessitated a new strategy: the rebuilding of the fourth wall and a provocative turn to the Russian and Soviet cultural roots of East Berlin. The radical degree of openness that characterized a Berlin that had not yet been thoroughly “colonized” by the West would come to an end. Castorf’s Volksbühne flourished under conditions of crisis—this has already been established. What would happen once these organic energies on the streets of Berlin, the refusal and contestation that Castorf channeled, were no longer available? What would become of the Volksbühne once the acute East-West conflict largely dissipated, as eventually happened at the end of 1990s?

Chapter 4: Castorf's Russian Turn

After a wildly successful initial period at the helm of the Volksbühne, Castorf had to wrestle with his own depression (Detje 222). With himself as the “master concept” of the Volksbühne—“*Das Konzept bin Ich*”—it is to be expected that if Castorf was suffering from a particularly acute depression, that it would permeate every aspect of the institution: his reception of history, his productions, and the Volksbühne discourse. The impasses Castorf faced towards the end of the 1990s evolved from the challenges he perceived both politically and existentially in the former Eastern Bloc. His condition was brought about by what he saw as the *true finale* of the Cold War.¹⁰¹

Castorf's melancholia, however, simultaneously launched a radical turn that would lead to one of the most innovative and vibrant periods of his tenure at the Volksbühne. Around the time he sunk into depression in response to a seemingly irreversible westernizing, neoliberalizing tide, Castorf drastically and more forcefully re-oriented the Volksbühne towards the former Eastern Bloc. This was signaled by his focus on a Russia that he combatively asserted was “feudal,”¹⁰² anti-Western and anti-Enlightenment. Starting at the end of the 1998/1999 season, Castorf began to devote himself to adapting lengthy Russian novels for the stage (Carlson 106),

¹⁰¹ This included the break-up and subsequent wars in Yugoslavia, the techno-utopianism that was replacing 20th century social movements, and the seeming impossibility of resistance to global capitalism (Carlson 105).

¹⁰² When Castorf uses the term “feudal” to describe post-Soviet society, he is articulating a dissident position emphasizing that the Soviet Union did not take the path of development leading to communism outlined by Karl Marx. Marx believed that communist society could only develop in the evolution from capitalism to socialism and from socialism to communism. The Soviet model had been a diversion from Marx's teleology. The Leninist position and the Bolshevik revolution (admired by Badiou and by artist-dissidents such as Müller and Castorf for its risk, decisionism, and avant-garde politics) was the source of this revisionist model that saw Russia attempt the leap from feudalism to socialism. When Castorf uses the term “feudal” he is also referring to the post-Soviet nations having never experienced the West's stages of history and now suddenly being confronted with accelerated late capitalism and hyperreality.

in particular those by the 19th century novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky.¹⁰³ Dostoevsky's Russia served several purposes for Castorf's discourse and dramaturgy: a Slavophile polemic against the West,¹⁰⁴ an existential reckoning with the disappearance of higher collective ideals and ethics, and finally, an examination of the intellectual conditions—liberal thought and nihilism—that Dostoevsky prophesied as the breeding ground for the revolutionary terror that would characterize twentieth century totalitarianism.

At this time, Castorf drew parallels between the end of the Cold War and the crisis faced by the French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in the post-WWII period (Carlson 105). Both periods were marked by a crisis of faith in a humanity that had descended into barbarism. The relationship between unlimited individual power and depression permeated Castorf's interpretation of not only Camus and Dostoevsky, but also his consideration of his own position at the helm of the Volksbühne. Beginning in the 2000/2001 season, Castorf and dramaturg Carl Hegemann explored this theme at the Volksbühne by creating panel discussions and a three-volume booklet series titled *Kapitalismus und Depression*.¹⁰⁵ The series explored the experience of late capitalism without its 'other' (socialism) and established the new antinomy

¹⁰³ Prior to staging Dostoevsky, Castorf had staged only one other Russian text at the Volksbühne, namely Vladimir Sorokin's contemporary drama *Hochzeitsreise* in 1995.

¹⁰⁴ A Slavophile was a member of a 19th-century intellectual movement that wanted Russia's development to be based on spirituality, values and institutions derived from the country's early history. Developing in the 1830s from intellectual circles in Moscow, the Slavophiles were influenced by German Idealist philosophy and by Friedrich Schelling in particular. The Slavophiles argued that Russia should not use Western Europe as a model for its modernization but should follow a course determined by its own character, history and "soul." The role of the Orthodox Church was more important than that of the state in this context. Slavophiles perceived socialism as an "alien" ideology and preferred Russian mysticism over "Western rationalism." Dostoevsky is exemplary of the Slavophile worldview, as are the 20th century writer Aleksandr Slozhenitsyn and the Far-Right political philosopher Alexandr Dugin.

¹⁰⁵ In an interview with Boris Groys, Hegemann points to the new collaborative models between art and industry gaining traction towards the end of the 1990s as a major theme in the *Kapitalismus und Depression* series. Of this, Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) is perhaps most exemplary. Hegemann explains, "[f]or some time there was a certainly illusory feeling that the economy would learn from artists and the market could function as correction of exploitative, manipulative forms of authority. We dealt with this under the heading of capitalism and depression" (np).

Castorf perceived between globalizing, America-driven neoliberalism and post-Soviet “feudal” Russia. What I call the “Russian Turn” is Castorf’s exploration of the conflict between America-driven late capitalism and its encounter with both post-Soviet Russia and the Slavophile worldview of the Russian novelists he adapted for the stage.¹⁰⁶

While the discourse of this Russian Turn focused on Dostoevsky’s anti-Western, anti-imperialist polemics, Castorf simultaneously emphasized the anti-authoritarian, pluralistic and anarchic spirit of Dostoevsky’s novels. Castorf channeled this anarchic spirit in his dramaturgy. The *carnavalesque* and *polyphony* were concepts used by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin for a subversive interpretation of Dostoevsky’s poetics under conditions of Stalinist repression. In Castorf’s adaptations, these literary devices reflect the diversity of voices, ideas and worldviews the director places in opposition to liberal “consensus.” Under the auspices of the Russian Turn, Castorf created some of the most legendary productions at the Volksbühne,¹⁰⁷ including Dostoevsky’s *Dämonen* (*The Devils*), which premiered on May 19, 1999; *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte* (*The Insulted and the Injured*) in October 2000; *Der Idiot* (*The Idiot*) in October 2002; Bulgakov’s *Der Meister und Margarita* (*The Master and Margarita*) in June 2002; *Schuld und Sühne* (*Crime and Punishment*) in October 2005; and Eduard Limonov’s *Fuck off, Amerika*, which premiered in October 2008 and will be discussed in the subsequent case-study chapter.

As a counterpart to his Russian adaptations, Castorf also included and directed plays that represented “America” in the Volksbühne’s repertoire: Tennessee Williams’ *Streetcar Named*

¹⁰⁶ Detje (2005) refers to this phase as Castorf’s “Russian period” (15). However, I use the concept of the Russian turn to refer specifically to the Volksbühne’s geopolitics: its more forceful orientation away from Western-liberal politics and toward a decidedly postsocialist or Eastern European world view.

¹⁰⁷ Here it is important to mention that four productions that I locate within the “Russian Turn” were all selected for the prestigious Theatertreffen festival. These productions were *Dämonen* (2000), *Endstation Amerika* (2001), *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte* (2002), and *Der Meister und Margarita* (2003). Castorf would not have another one of his Volksbühne productions selected for the Theatertreffen until *Faust* in 2018.

Desire (Endstation Amerika) (2000) and *Sweet Bird of Youth (Forever Young)* (2003), as well as Frank Norris' novel *Gier nach Gold (Greed)* (2004). In his adaptations, Castorf explored the mythic American Dream as it collided with a decelerated and feudal former Soviet Bloc. This surreal collision played out in the hyperreal stage-worlds and tragic-comic lives of his protagonists. By alternating between Russian and American-oriented productions, Castorf staged the co-ordinates of the new postsocialist condition as he perceived them, with America now asserting itself nearly unencumbered on the global stage. These new coordinates were visually represented on stage by what can be described as an "Imitation of Life." Castorf's chief designer Bert Neumann created cinema- and television-inspired scenographies built directly into the interior of shipping containers. These containers signaled a new global reality: an American-dominated, prefabricated lifestyle in an age of mobile media and reality television.

Drawing insights from the Russian art historian Boris Groys, these representations of a mythic America evoke the competing and entirely constructed utopian myths that underwrote the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union for the best life for workers. This struggle haunts the "victory" of American capitalism and refuses closure on the Volksbühne stage. Depression, melancholia, and ambivalence mark the spectrum of postsocialist affects in Castorf's dramaturgy during this period. Rather than asserting the breaking down of barriers that characterized the Volksbühne in the early-to-mid 1990s, this phase of Castorf's tenure saw the director retreat into an institution he now further fortified against Westernizing processes and against the intensifying momentum of neoliberalism. It also saw the Volksbühne pushing the possibilities of theatre into new vanguard directions that once again positioned it at the forefront of multimedia experimentation, as it had been under Piscator.

In what follows, I first explore the convergence of capitalism and depression in the productions at the turn of the millennium. From here, I consider the oscillation between Russian vs. American-oriented productions that characterize this period. Next, I offer a closer look at the discourse of Castorf's staging of Dostoevsky's *Dämonen*. Finally, I end with two sections dedicated to aesthetic influences on Castorf: his designer Neumann's Baudrillardian "Imitation of Life," and Groys on the postsocialist condition. Overall, in what could also be called Castorf's "Existential Turn," this chapter asks: What does it mean to be an individual living in a context devoid of moral authority and wherein the [communist] future has become the past? How does Castorf conceptualize a new stage of resistance against the backdrop of an unfettered globalizing, neoliberalizing tide?

Capitalism and Depression

Before the revitalizing upsurge that characterized Castorf's adaptations of Dostoevsky's novels, the Volksbühne by all accounts spiralled downwards at the end of the 1990s with a series of "flops" (i.e. *Hauptmanns Weber*, 1997; *Terrordrom*, 1998¹⁰⁸; *Das Obszöne Werk: Caligula / Camus und Bataille*, 2000). In the early to mid-1990s, Castorf and his co-combatants at the Volksbühne could directly incorporate the discontents of German unification to contour the theatre conceptually, as well as to ignite the stage in contestation. By the late 1990s, however, German unification had dissipated as acute crisis and the Far-Right extremism became covert. Berlin-Mitte, which had once been a derelict but artistically fertile district inhabited by squatters, students and bohemian types, was now a chic, highly coveted neighbourhood. Gentrification had pushed the economically disadvantaged out and a new "creative class" had swiftly taken over the

¹⁰⁸ Notably, Tim Staffell's *Terrordrom* projects an apocalyptic Berlin, much like the UK depicted in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*.

Volkstbühne's vicinity. For most of the 1990s, Castorf mandated that his immediate surroundings be reflected on stage and he achieved this by frequently breaking the fourth wall. Actors regularly addressed or provoked audiences (i.e. *Räuber von Schiller*, 1990, *Clockwork Orange*, 1993, and *Weber*, 1997).¹⁰⁹ By the 1997-1998 season, however—and without the artistically fertile ground of acute *dissensus*—Castorf was forced to re-conceptualize the Volkstbühne's strategies in a now West-oriented, cosmopolitan Berlin. The audience demographic had also shifted. The Volkstbühne's international reputation and location meant that the theatre lost some of its radical cachet. The theatre still had a young and bohemian audience-base, but increasingly audience members looked like those in any other "bourgeois" theatre in Berlin and the unique solidarity between the renegade actors on stage and the audience had dwindled. During that period, the Volkstbühne itself manifested a scepticism towards "theatre," attracting individuals who would never otherwise attend it (Hegemann, *Pläydoyer* 131). The situation had now changed and the Volkstbühne was now firmly a part of the theatre establishment.

There were significant changes in the late 1990s in both the Volkstbühne's key staff, as well as in the political landscape in unified Germany. In 1998, Castorf's chief dramaturg Matthias Lilienthal—his "co-artistic director" according to Robin Detje (218)—left the Volkstbühne to be replaced by Carl Hegemann. Hegemann had worked at the Volkstbühne as dramaturg from 1992-1995 and now returned as head dramaturg in 1998-1999. Upon their first encounter in 1992, Castorf proclaimed that Hegemann would be his "Bukharin" (*Republik Castorf* 215). Hegemann's appointment represented a re-orienting of the theatre's dramaturgy

¹⁰⁹ The actor Henry Hübchen developed such a strong rapport with Berlin audience members that they would frequently insert themselves into his improvisations, interrogating not just the character but even the actor himself. Stebbins recounts that in Schiller's *Räuber*, Hübchen crawled out into the audience to shake hands with an agitated spectator and in Hauptmann's *Weber*, Hübchen accosted audience members during the intermission about their mode of transportation to the Volkstbühne—public or BMW (Stebbins 391).

from Lilienthal's more street-centric and DIY ethos to an emphasis on more "heady" continental philosophy and sociology.¹¹⁰ Hegemann curated panel discussions, lecture series, and undertook the editing of a book series published under the Volksbühne's auspices. Equally significant for Castorf was the changing of the political guard (Stebbins 393). In 1998 the sixteen-year reign of Helmut Kohl and the CDU came to an end. The CDU was replaced by the SPD, with Gerhard Schröder as the new Chancellor of Germany (393). Like New Labour in the UK, the SPD had shifted markedly towards the centre (393). The party's drastic cuts to the Welfare State (i.e. Hartz IV) did little to distinguish the traditionally left-liberal party—the political roots of the 19th century Freie Volksbühne movement—from the conservative CDU (393). Now, even the left-liberals appeared to be ideologically bankrupt and abandoning their core tenets. The icing on the cake, however, and the ultimate symbol of the West's victory of the Cold War, came in 1999 when Berlin replaced Bonn as the capital of Germany. What the Volksbühne desperately needed was a new *Feindbild*: an image of who or what should be fought against on the eve of the millennium. In this regard, Schröder was no match for the telegenic Kohl, whom Castorf had used as a caricature of West German, petit bourgeois conservatism. Kohl may have been deplorable, but he was useful as an over-the-top emblem of the West Germany Castorf wished to take down.

These accumulating factors seemed to nullify the combative energies of the intendant. Castorf reached his "lowest point" at the Volksbühne with his, by all accounts, disastrous staging of a production titled *Das Obszöne Werk: Caligula / Camus und Bataille* (*The Obscene Work:*

¹¹⁰ Hegemann's doctoral thesis was titled, *Identität und Selbst-Zerstörung: Grundlagen einer historischen Kritik moderner Lebensbedingungen bei Fichte und Marx*. Published by Campus-Verlag in 1982. It was republished under the Volksbühne's auspices in 2012. Moreover, Irmer, Carlson and Stebbins have all marked this continental re-orientation at the Volksbühne as starting with Castorf's production of *Schmutzige Hände* in 1998.

Caligula / Camus and Bataille), which premiered in January 2000 (Detje, *Castorf* 220). Theatre scholar Marvin Carlson observed a “nihilistic theatricalism” in Castorf’s *Obszöne Werk* that reflected, “[the intendant’s] desperate search for meaning through transgression in the new postsocialist, late capitalist world order” (Carlson 105). *Obszöne Werk* signalled a shift from an earlier stage of what could be described as more “manic” productions (i.e. *Clockwork Orange*; *Pension Schöller/Die Schlacht*) to more “depressive” ones (Detje, *Castorf* 222). Although, to be fair, Castorf’s productions always contained *both* manic and depressive inflections representing the dialectic of affects that emerge under late capitalist, neoliberal conditions. Detje claimed that the production of *Obszöne Werk* reflected the director’s own conflicting feelings about his ascent and loneliness at the helm of the Volksbühne (222). According to him, *Castorf was Caligula* (222). Detje describes how Castorf imbued his personal struggles into what amounted to a bleak, “orientationless” production:

The heavy burden of his job has been turned into an artwork and dumped onto the spectator. The ensemble seems to be lost [...] They gather around in their banality and emptiness underneath a huge eyeball for sad-sounding guitar playing in front of a toilet seat. (222)

Detje claims this production was Castorf’s meditation upon the depression born of a new “total freedom” (222). In *Obszöne Werk*, Castorf effectively stared into the seemingly limitless expanse of global capitalism inaugurated by the disappearance of Cold War frontiers and perceived an ethical and spiritual bankruptcy. The individual freedom longed for under socialism and now granted under Western capitalism’s aegis was *not* a victory, but an unbearable existential burden. Castorf’s depression in perceiving this situation was, according to Detje, palpable to spectators (222).

For Castorf, it was the end of the 1990s, not 1989 or the early 1990s, which represented the true finale of the Cold War (Detje 219). The NATO airstrikes and the new borders that took shape after the breakup of the socialist state compelled Castorf to cynically claim that “the war in Yugoslavia was really just about where Russia’s border to the West is going to be” (qtd. in Laudenbach 38). In “The Post-Communist Condition” (2004), Groys corroborates that the “expansion of NATO and the EU into Eastern Europe has often been interpreted as signalling the definitive end of the Cold War” (164). Casting his gaze beyond Germany and assessing the situation of postsocialist Europe—the Srebrenica massacre and the bombing of Sarajevo—the end of the millennium manifested the same absurdity and irrationality for Castorf as the end of WWII had for the French existentialists (Carlson 105; Detje 219; Hegemann 182).

In March 1998, Castorf had staged *Schmutzige Hände* (*Dirty Hands*), using Sartre’s 1948 drama about a fictional country named “Ilyria” as an allegory for the contemporary crisis in the Balkans (Stebbins 393). The production inaugurated Castorf’s more existential approach to European history. It takes place at a “moment in history when belief in the quasi-scientific rationale of socialism had been lost and where the individual had to cope and take responsibility without having a clue about the genuine circumstances within which they were maneuvering” (Hegemann qtd. in *Plädoyer* 185). The production was a bleak interpretation of contemporary Europe that had descended not only into war, but also genocide. Like the comparisons he once drew between Berlin in the early 1990s and the Weimar Berlin of the 1920s, Castorf now drew an analogy between the end of the 1990s and the post-WWII period in France, making these parallels visible on stage. As such, Castorf brought Sartre and Camus’ work into a constellation with the present. In the French existentialists’ writings, he perceived a similar crisis of faith in humanity and in the direction of history his own period was experiencing (Detje, *Castorf* 219).

Under the slogan “Ohne Glauben leben” (“Living without Belief”), which governed the 1999/2000 theatrical season in which *Das Obszöne Werk* premiered, Castorf asked: “[i]s happiness something you have to create for yourself? Should one be responsible for one’s own happiness? Is that not too much responsibility?” (222). These questions emerged from what Castorf perceived as the death of higher collective ideals in Europe resulting from the collapse of socialism, and their replacement by individualism, materialism, pragmatism, and relativism. Castorf’s conclusion to the questions about happiness was a resounding “no”—one needed something outside of and higher than one’s self, and that “[h]uman beings cannot live without belief” (220); or at least we cannot live without something to oppose. Embracing unlimited freedom and power, as Camus’ titular character Caligula does, would lead to emptiness, delusion and ultimately to self-destruction. The “breakouts” of anarchic individual freedom and chaos that Castorf’s actors enacted on stage in Anklam in the GDR and that constituted the production’s “subversive moment” (62), were now potentially just assertions of a terrifying vacuity. However, given his reading of Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* and “The Notion of Expenditure,” Castorf saw a subversive potential in Caligula’s nihilism in his rejection of all rational calculation: Caligula’s violent expenditure had no utilitarian or market logic. In Bataille, Castorf saw “where individuality and excess collapsed into each other. It is obscene and simultaneously the most radical refusal of capitalism’s utility logic. For Bataille [...] and for Camus, the anti-economic aspect of terror was [...] a fascinating thought” (Hegemann, *Plädoyer* 153).¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Bataille shows us how useless expenditure, without any utilitarian end, is critical for a symbolic economy. Bataille argues that “men assure their own subsistence or avoid suffering [only] in order to accede to the insubordinate function of free expenditure” (“The Notion of Expenditure” 180-181). The bourgeoisie would later turn expenditure into a shameful thing.

Another significant challenge for Castorf was the new digital and interactive media culture that emerged towards the end of the 1990s. Since the advent of film and then television, theatre had long been usurped as the dominant media for dramatic storytelling. Hegemann asked the question: how can the theatre, as the oldest medium of performance, call on something that goes beyond traditional theatre? For Hegemann, theatre could rely on its most essential element: storytelling. The answer lay in Brecht's "*Straßenszene*," (street scene), where anyone could act out a scene, without hiding that they were acting or who they were (130). Brecht's model of theatre could be translated into new vanguard forms of performance. Hegemann explained "the medium is not so important" and declared the Volksbühne ready to experiment with all forms of media—the internet, film, television—in order to continue to address its central political, aesthetic and poetic questions (*Glück ohne Ende. Kapitalismus und Depression II* 153-4). What was important for the Volksbühne was that theatre remain at the vanguard of risk and experimentation, paradoxically mirroring capitalism itself, which continually generates its own subversion (Hegemann, *Pläydoyer* 176).

Discursively, however, the Volksbühne foregrounded the discontents of a new digital age. While the mainstreaming of the internet and the rise of a new digital culture enabled interactive engagement and new forms of virtual community, they simultaneously exacerbated unfettered individualism by providing users with total freedom to pursue instantaneous gratification. The World Wide Web, for example, offered not only an instantly available repository to satisfy all manner of desire, but it also trafficked in cultural nostalgia. Castorf had hitherto curated history in explosive and allegorical ways, bringing key historical moments into present consciousness in his productions. He used the Volksbühne as a communal space wherein melancholic attachments to the socialist past could be collectively worked through, albeit always

in ways that utilized strategies of irritation, estrangement, and irony. Now, however, the new media landscape enabled an archive of memories and fantasies alike to be navigated individually online and provided users with complete curatorial power over space and time. This development paralleled a shift in the direction of politicized performance practices in the West towards participation, propounding the rhetoric of horizontal engagement (see Bishop 2012). Audiences became increasingly conditioned to see interactivity or physical participation in a theatrical performance as superior to “its mythic counterpart, passive spectatorial consumption” (Bishop 275).¹¹² The degree of participation supposedly signaled the degree to which the artwork was democratic and emancipatory (a similar line as Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer”).¹¹³ Castorf, by contrast, asserted that “[t]heatre is always a dictatorship” (Detje, *Castorf* 188). For him, “dictatorial thinking” could provide a productive impulse against liberal consensus. An “authoritarian” intendant such as Castorf was no longer as *au courant* as the hip performance collectives emerging, for example, from the University of Giessen’s Institute for Applied Theatre Studies. Trending in Berlin at alternative venues such as HAU, the Sophiensaele and Podewil were collectives such as She She Pop and Rimini Protokoll. The latter relied on the participation

¹¹² Bishop outlines a series of tensions between equality and quality, participation and spectatorship, that are constitutive of this debate, showing how social and artistic judgements of an artwork are ultimately irreconcilable (275). For one sector of artists and critics, good art is good ethics and creates positive change in society. For another, however, “ethics are nugatory, because art is understood continually to throw established systems of value into question, including questions of morality; devising new languages with which to represent and question social contradiction. The social discourse accuses the artistic discourse of amorality and inefficacy because it is insufficient merely to reveal reduplicate or reflect upon the world; what matters is social change” (276). She claims that “[a]rt’s relationship to the social is either underpinned by morality or it is underpinned by freedom? (276).

¹¹³ To be clear, Castorf sees the spectators as participants in a collective event. The theatre production is only “completed” through the spectator’s reception of it. Philosophers such as Jacques Rancière essentially closed the debate around spectator participation once and for all with *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008). In this work, he views spectatorship itself as participation. However, as Claire Bishop describes it, the “social turn” in art towards the end of the 1990s engendered a new criterion that evaluated art based on the degree to which the artwork involved the physical participation of targeted groups, often at the expense of aesthetics and criticality. The debate harkens back to Benjamin demanding the artist’s social engagement as a sign of political commitment.

of untrained performers as “experts of the everyday,” as well as interactivity, delocalization, and relational aesthetics.¹¹⁴

Castorf’s dramaturg Hegemann noted a new techno-optimism in the late 1990s resulting from feats such as the mapping of the human genome, cloning, and the development of virtual reality. This optimism was also evident in the posthuman discourses and cyborg manifestos trending in the mid-to-late 1990s. Such a techno-euphoria, however, had no resonance at the Volksbühne, which observed the “combination of depression and megalomania that surfaces in the new optimism of technological progress” (Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 10). At the Volksbühne, genetic research was perceived as displacing the emancipatory project that had driven 20th century social movements. This theme was explored in Castorf’s adaptation of Michel Houellebecq’s dystopian novel *Elementarteilchen* (*The Elementary Particles*) in 2000.

The “depression” that infused adaptations of *Obszöne Werk* and *Elementarteilchen* had implications for Castorf’s strategies of contestation and resistance. Castorf had always trafficked in taboo transgression as a unique enactment of freedom permitted in the theatre space. In *Obszöne Werk*, however, acts of transgression symbolized by a massive eyeball hanging down from the ceiling onto the stage—a reference to Bataille’s erotic novella *The Story of the Eye* (1928)—now seemed significantly less life-affirming and provocative. On the new borderless stage of neoliberalism, America-driven media and popular culture not only encouraged all forms

¹¹⁴ In the late 1990s and early 2000s, numerous companies and artists began using audio and video guides for creating participatory theatre projects. The Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller were among them. Some of these activities have their roots in the relational aesthetics discourse trending in the 1990s and are based on principles of delocalization. Nicolas Bourriaud describes relational aesthetics as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (113). This branch of performance was interested in the expanded field of performance and possibilities.

of transgression, but also seemed to have absorbed the margins and counter-cultural terrain entirely.¹¹⁵

Castorf's depression did at least inspire a new zeal in *Kritik* at the Volksbühne. Castorf, but especially Hegemann, rigorously theorized the new context of seemingly alternativeless global capitalism and the reign of the market economy that had replaced all other values. Hegemann programmed a public lecture series starting in 1999/2000 and edited three short books around the theme of "capitalism and depression."¹¹⁶ *Erniedrigung geniessen* (*Enjoying humiliation*): *Kapitalismus und Depression III*, for example, featured contributions by Castorf, Hegemann, as well as by left wing intellectuals, writers, and anti-capitalist activists such as the filmmaker Alexander Kluge, the Turkish Nobel-prize winning novelist Orhan Palmuk, and local political activist Guillaume Paoli of the activist group the "happy unemployed" ("*glücklichen Arbeitslosen*"). In the introduction to *Erniedrigung geniessen*, Hegemann explained that the Volksbühne has "probably always been concerned with [capitalism and depression], but at the very least since the *Wende*, and since Frank Castorf took over its leadership" (8). Regarding the

¹¹⁵ Castorf's position recalls what Jünger describes as nihilism in the arts in "*Über die Linie*" (1950). Here, Jünger argues that nihilism reduced the beautiful to the measurable and that *eros* to rational calculation. This quantification of desire signifies "a dismantling of taboos, which at first frightens," but after "what has then been enucleated becomes a matter of course" (qtd. in Quinn 74). By "its shrinking of human values, its transformation of the citizen into the worker, Nihilism for Jünger has become the norm" (74). Jünger perceives the modern state as the apex of nihilism, as organization without principle and motion without goal. For Jünger, however, there are indeed two "oases in our deserts:" poetry and *eros*. *Eros*, and this should remind us of Castorf, is the irruption of the unpredictable and the personal; it is for that reason that tyrants suppress it: "One single individual is a sufficient witness that freedom has not yet disappeared. ... Then the powers of resistance awake in us. Tyrants know this and seek to dissolve the human into the universal and the public – keeping at a distance everything unpredictable and extraordinary. ... Freedom and the life of the Muses are inseparably bound together" (74). Individuality, spontaneity and the extraordinary—not to mention *eros* and poetry—were expressions of freedom in Castorf's work up to this point. However, Castorf has now reached his own apex of nihilism in the face of a new totalizing American hegemony.

¹¹⁶ The series *Kapitalismus und Depression I, II, and III* was published for Castorf's adaptations of Tennessee Williams' *Endstation Amerika*, Michele Houellebecq's novel *Elementarteilchen* (*The Elementary Particles*), and Dostoevsky's *Erneidrigte und Beleidigte*. In this chapter, I rely primarily on *Erniedrigung geniessen: Kapitalismus und Depression III*.

title, Hegemann explained “the person who has nothing else can at least enjoy their humiliation” (12). He lists the co-ordinates that describe life under late capitalism’s aegis as a paradoxical mix of “squalor, lust for life, paranoia and depression” (8). As editor of the series, Hegemann claimed that the books made patently clear that with the so-called “progressive emancipation” of all spheres of life under global capitalism, as well as the enforcement of the idea of “using one’s own mind without the guidance of others’ (Kant), the degree of difficulty of the art of living has actually increased rather than decreased” (8). Hegemann claimed that, “whoever protests against the [...] rules of the capitalist market for the sake of “good old-fashioned virtues” is deemed “a right wing radical, a masochist or a schizophrenic” (9). From the Volksbühne perspective, however, it was precisely these outcasts of a “rational” liberal-capitalist society who were the last-remaining vestige of dissent and a refusal of the market economy logic that had replaced ethics (9). “Good old-fashioned virtues” inevitably evoked the *Leitbild* idea which Castorf and his team had vehemently contested in 1993. Almost a decade on, however, it seemed as if a *Leitbild* was not an entirely unappealing idea in the face of the disappearance of ethics and the total domination of the capitalist free market. Under the framework provided by the series *Kapitalismus und Depression*, Castorf not only infused the Volksbühne dramaturgy with his melancholia and depression, but he also explored existential questions in a way that manifested a conservative reaction to the “Western European anything goes” attitude of a new neoliberal age (qtd. in Laudenbach 42).

Russian-American Dialectics

Starting in the 1999/2000 season, the Volksbühne transitioned from focusing on national forms of dissensus to casting its gaze *beyond* Germany’s borders, specifically to the antinomy “Russia” vs. “America.” Through his adaptations of Dostoevsky, as well as the Russian author

Mikhail Bulgakov, Castorf explored an alternative, Slavophile worldview at the Volksbühne, which he juxtaposed with American postmodern capitalism. As such, “America” became the dialectical counterpart to Russia in the Volksbühne repertoire.¹¹⁷

Through his adaptations of Russian novels, “Russia” became a projection screen for Castorf to not only explore existential questions, but to illuminate a terrain not fully absorbable into the globalizing neoliberal momentum. As such, Russia now served Castorf as a space of resistance and a barrier to Westernization processes. In a way that evoked the thinking of Ernst Bloch, Castorf described Russia’s post-Soviet “feudalism” as retaining a “non-contemporaneous” relationship with the accelerated postmodern West.¹¹⁸ In an interview with theatre critic Peter Laudenbach, Castorf explained that he was interested in giving expression to the different experiences of time and different kinds of historical consciousness that distinguished the former Eastern Bloc from the West (43). He argued that “today’s Russia actually emerges from the 19th into the 21st century, the 20th century is not available in between” (qtd. in Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 30). In other words, post-Soviet Russia was going from hyperreality into a strange mélange of feudalism and hyper-capitalism. Russia “was not going through an organic process from which Western European parliamentary democracy would

¹¹⁷ One of the American works was Frank Norris’s *Gier nach Gold (Greed)*. Norris’s writings have been heavily criticized for racism, antisemitism, and anti-immigrant sentiment, as well as disdain for the poor. Norris perceived those disenfranchised and on the margins of society as “losers” in the Social-Darwinist struggle for existence. Castorf, by contrast, proclaimed solidarity with these “losers” and was interested in capitalism as a zero-sum game, as well as Darwinism as a legacy of the Enlightenment. Norris’s “exaggeratedly muscular novels” represent the kind of masculinity Castorf scathingly caricatures.

¹¹⁸ In *Heritage of Our Times* Bloch describes *Ungleichzeitigkeit* or non-contemporaneity. He explores the diverse stages of social and economic development that exist simultaneously in 1930s Germany. Because of uneven modernization, Germany was “this classical land of non-contemporaneity” (106). Traces of pre-capitalist relations of production remained. As Bloch described it, “[n]ot all people exist in the same Now” (97). Instead, “they carry earlier things with them... Times older than the present continue to effect older strata; here it is easy to return or dream one’s way back to older times” (97). Bloch’s analysis “took issue with the rationalist bias of Marxist orthodoxy” (Herf 23). In a highly controversial move, Bloch suggested that “the appeal of Nazism lay less in traditional antimodernism than in the promise of cultural and emotional redemption through embracing aspects of the modern world in accordance with German national traditions” (23).

organically develop, but rather a hysterical process was playing itself out there” (30). Post-Soviet Russia was manifesting an illiberal development and not the “progressive,” linear trajectory that would lead to the stable liberal democracies Fukuyama predicted at the ‘end of history’.

Precisely because of this, Russia could now serve the Volksbühne’s political imaginary as an even more intense *Störfaktor*—replacing the former GDR as a stronger “other” to the West.

Castorf summarized it thus: “Dostoevsky is interesting for me as an easterner for whom *Ostalgie* [nostalgia for the East] is no longer enough. With the GDR you can’t satisfy yourself anymore, the drug needs to be stronger, and you find that in Eastern Europe” (qtd. in Laudenbach 38).

Castorf’s exploration of the French existentialists Sartre and Camus was the starting point for a new obsession with Dostoevsky’s novels. Castorf was led to the material through Camus’ dramatic adaptation of Dostoevsky’s *Dämonen*, entitled *Les Possédé* (1959). Notably, Camus saw Dostoevsky, not Marx, as the true prophet of the 19th century (Davison 119). Camus also perceived *Dämonen* as depicting a period in Russia analogous to his own in post-war France. This inspired Castorf to likewise explore Dostoevsky’s novel as a reflection of his own period in Germany at the true end of the Cold War. However, Castorf went about his adaptation as a “corrective” to Camus’, who had gone about his “very anti-communistically...and by eliminating the raging comedy of the figures that recall the [arbitrary] thrownness [*Geworfenheit*—Castorf uses Heidegger’s term here] of Beckett’s figures” (Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 23). Instead of Camus’ anti-communism, Castorf undertook his staging with characteristic ambivalence toward the disappearance of socialism. He imbued his production with a sense of forlornness that there was no longer a moral authority or value system to guide the individual.

Castorf’s use of Russian novels as stage material also represented a refusal to discard the cultural inheritance of the socialist (and czarist) world as distinct from that of the West. This is to

say that he asserted Russia as part of his own and the Volksbühne's roots. By orienting the theatre's repertoire toward Russian material, Castorf also wanted to repurpose the cultural debris left over from the Soviet occupation of former East Berlin. This strategy was akin to Benjamin's 19th century ragpicker, "whose job it is to pick up the day's rubbish in the capital. He collects and catalogues everything that the great city has cast off, everything it has lost, and discarded, and broken" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 349). The ragpicker's method is described by Benjamin as one of "literary montage" and by making use of "the rags, the refuse" (460). The ragpicker actively pursues what has been discarded and deemed passé. His montage-like method produces what Benjamin describes as striking dialectical images that acquire unforeseen meanings in their new context. Benjamin describes the ragpicker "rummag[ing] here and there for a particular piece, hold[ing] it next to some other piece, and test[ing] to see if they fit together.... The result can never be known beforehand, for there is no natural mediation between the two" (368). As performance scholar Frederick Le Roy observes, Benjamin's methodology is "premised on making historical leftovers perform" (127). This method is analogous to Castorf's, as he literally makes cultural debris come alive on stage. Castorf combines fragments of East and West cultural ephemera in surreal and disorienting ways to estrange beholders from linear narratives and to illuminate a uniquely postsocialist experience of history.

Castorf's collages were devised to disrupt the teleological narrative of the end of history in favour of forgotten historical residues. At a time when West-centric, anti-GDR narratives were being consolidated in the new official storehouses of history in Berlin—when a memory boom was underway in the new German capital in the form of Cold War museums, archives and commemorative sites—Castorf's turn towards 19th century Russia was a strong assertion *against* the new master narrative of German history. This too, was akin to the ragpicker's method. As Le

Roy notes, “the ragpicker’s diligent archiving of waste is not only a symbol for challenging existing master narratives in cultural memory, but also for undoing the conditions of possibility that enabled these master narratives” (130). Like the ragpicker, Castorf created a counter-archive of all that has been de-valued or forgotten by the dominant culture. This method of collage served Castorf’s agenda since it fractured a coherent linear narrative of history and undermined the hegemonic Western power structures that underwrote it.

For Castorf, scavenging and repurposing socialism’s cultural waste was not only a way of preserving socialist history and resisting gentrifying processes, but also of using *fantasy* to transcend what was merely at hand (Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 28). Fragmentation and fantasy were in great part responsible for the magical, mysterious, fairy tale-like quality of Castorf’s Dostoevsky adaptations. This strategy of repurposing can be traced back to the conditions under which Castorf first developed his approach to making theatre in the GDR, namely under the conditions of censorship and limited resources. This approach was furthered when he took over the Volksbühne and inherited the actors on interminable contracts there. Castorf explained his method thusly:

What I find is what I use. This is the good and the bad, the old and the young, the beautiful and the ugly. You can turn anything into poetry if you surrender yourself to the individuals and are prepared to write stories for them. I cannot do [Shakespeare’s] *Richard III* with everyone, but I can make adaptations of it if I use fantasy. Fantasy is a drive that has fallen into disrepute in the theatre because so few people have the desire to humbly surrender to what one discovers right before oneself. (qtd. in *Erniedrigung* 28)

Castorf’s Russian adaptations were built on the principles of deconstruction and fantasy alike. However, the requisite co-ordinates of Castorf’s dramaturgy remained intact: the exploration of human behaviour, drives and guilt, as well as a high degree of improvisation “needed to reach

the ‘authentic,’ ‘the real’ (Detje, 2005 15). Using fantasy, Castorf reconstructed the fragments as impressionistic and surreal allegories for the present experience of postsocialism.

Castorf’s turn toward adapting Russian novels resulted in some of the most legendary productions of his tenure at the Volksbühne. These included *Dämonen*, which premiered in Berlin on May 19, 1999; *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte* in October 2000; *Der Idiot* in October 2002; and Bulgakov’s *Der Meister und Margarita* (*The Master and Margarita*) in June 2002. Castorf’s productions of Tennessee Williams’ *Streetcar Named Desire*, which had to be renamed *Endstation Amerika* on account of copyright issues with Williams’ estate (October 2000), as well as *Sweet Bird of Youth*, renamed *Forever Young* (October 2003), offered the American, dialectical counterpart to the Russian adaptations and interpretation of history. Castorf called *Dämonen* and *Endstation Amerika* “the first and third elements in a trilogy on the End of History (Carlson 106). As Hegemann notes, the title *Endstation Amerika* could not have been more fitting for the new America-dominated political context (Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 8).¹¹⁹ Castorf understood Williams’ plays as critical commentaries on the American Dream, replete with protagonists who were marginalized, longed for the past, and inhabited their own fantasy worlds—propelled by a self-ironic *Größenwahn* (megalomania), a typical Castorfian trope. A quotation from Brian Massumi served as the tagline for the production: “The individual life is a serial capitalist mini-crisis, a disaster with your name written on it” (*Endstation. Sehnsucht*).

¹¹⁹ In Castorf’s *Endstation Amerika*, Stanley Kowalski (played by Henry Hübchen) is a Polish immigrant living in Berlin-Marzahn. He is portrayed as a washed-up middle-age rocker and forgotten hero of the Solidarność movement for whom emigration to the “promised land” (the West) is *erniedrigend* (humiliating). In one scene, Stanley stars in a Polish commercial for Wrigley’s chewing gum, singing the jingle in Polish, whilst wearing a gorilla costume. His “trailer trash” peroxide blond wife Stella (played by Katrin Angerer) plans to sell a video of the birth of their baby on the internet. As such, the production showed the encroachment of the market economy and surveillance into the domestic sphere. Neumann’s container scenography reflected the layout of a typical East German *Plattenbau* apartment, albeit with an American-style interior. The bathroom, where much of the action took place, was linked by video and the action inside was projected onto a screen. The soundtrack of “depressive music” was curated by cultural theorist Diedrich Dietrichsen and included Lou Reed, Nirvana, Britney Spears and Don McLean.

Kapitalismus und Depression I 6). By containing *both* Dostoevsky and Williams in the repertoire in the first half of the 2000s, Castorf gave expression to a Russian-American dialectic—an ideological battle that refused closure at the Volksbühne. This dialectic was an organic extension of the Volksbühne’s own site-specific history: previously under Soviet occupation and now under an American one.

Castorf’s *Dämonen*

With *Dämonen*, a novel published in 1871, Castorf inaugurated his newfound interest in adapting 19th and 20th century Russian novels for the Volksbühne stage. Castorf explained the significance of using the novel as stage material as follows:

I am getting more and more estranged by the calculated modelling and closure of drama, and by its suggestion that reality can be conquered – where I can say: Ah, that’s the story, ah, it’s as easy as that in the world. This doesn’t correspond to my experience of reality. I am fascinated by antagonisms and by what I cannot explain, by vague intuitions. [...] Novels offer more of the complicity I find in reality. (Castorf, 2001 22)

Castorf perceived the novel, Dostoevsky’s especially, as an inherently more open, complex and anti-authoritarian literary form—one *not* invested in espousing a coherent worldview and endorsing ideology the way the bourgeois German drama was. In this way, Castorf’s perception of the novel was aligned with Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s. In *Discourse in the Novel* (1934), Bakhtin argues that the novel’s power lies in the coexistence and conflict between different types of speech. He defines this as heteroglossia: “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intensions but in a refracted way” (324). The point is that for Bakhtin, language is not a closed system. The latter would render it a vehicle for a centralized authority just as standardized language is the language of the elite. Bakhtin accounts for both the standardizing and the oppositional forces in a language. He describes the former as centripetal processes that centralize language, and the latter as centrifugal processes which diversify a

language. As Bakhtin sees it, the history of language is a constant struggle between the two: “the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward” (272). We can consider these centrifugal forces refracting from Castorf’s adaptations of novels. The spectator is expecting a linear narrative that offers coherence and closure in order to transmit meanings. Castorf, however, *centrifugalises* his stage, allowing unending “fugitive” meanings and possibilities to emanate therefrom. What emerges from Castorf’s Russian adaptations are impressionistic scenes fractured in myriad possibilities that refuse authorial intention. Castorf’s *Dämonen* was six hours long, as was *Der Idiot*, while *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte* lasted five hours. As Detje explained: “As a mad genius, Castorf is authoritarian enough to make his audiences suffer and force them to sit through very long nights of rebellious anti-authoritarianism” (Detje, 2005 6).¹²⁰

Castorf’s approach to Dostoevsky was therefore aligned with Bakhtin’s own politics and aesthetics: with subverting hegemonic power and resisting closure. According to Bakhtin, “Dostoevsky carries dialogue into eternity, conceiving of it as perpetual co-rejoicing, co-admiration, con-cord. At the level of the novel, it is presented as the unfinalizability of dialogue” (*Problems with Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 252). Bakhtin claims that Dostoevsky’s characters are motivated by the utopian dream of creating some sort of human community that lies beyond existing social forms” (280)—a dream that in many ways characterizes the Volksbühne. Castorf

¹²⁰ Castorf’s marathon performances tested the endurance of the audience—their ability to withstand physical discomfort, occasional boredom and restlessness. Their physical responses brought “reality” into the theatre, forcing an awareness of space, time and the body. Lengthy productions were a hallmark of Western theatre auteurs such as Peter Stein, Robert Wilson and Vinge/Müller among others, Castorf grounded his marathon productions in the desire to “disrupt” the traditional three-hour bourgeois theatre evening and intervene in an increasingly homogeneous rhythm of life.

perceived Dostoevsky's character-studies as embodiments of disparate political-philosophical ideas playing out during the period. The characters refuse subordination and consensus and constitute a litany of responses to the crises unfolding in Russia during this period.

Castorf perceived *Dämonen* as a "philosophical novel," a novel about ideas.¹²¹ What is "fascinating about this novel," Castorf explained, "is that it explodes into the infinite" (qtd. in Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 16). As is exemplary of heteroglossia, "[a]ll possible moral, socialist-utopian, religious-fanatical theses and positions that currently surround us are in there" (16). In his discourse Castorf emphasized the affinity he felt with Dostoevsky's own political and existential views during a period in Russia he perceived as analogous to his own in Germany in the late 1990s.

For his production, Castorf also drew inspiration from Beckett's "Theatre of the Absurd," finding comic nihilism to be the best form of expression for a situation he describes as apocalyptic and as devoid of ideals or higher meaning (23). Castorf describes the stakes of his *Dämonen* in existential terms in the *Regiebuch*:

Life, death, God, redemption, revolution? He, who lives in the abyss, already has the most difficult part behind him and he has the compulsion to talk about it. The absurdity of life is a given. At the end of the world as we know it, the oldest inhabitants are the most confused regarding their belonging to a project that the younger folks have long denounced as despotic and that an even younger generation has already turned into a real despotism. (AdK Inszenierungs-DK 975)

According to Castorf, Dostoevsky's *Dämonen* is "situated in the transition from religious belief to material ideology, and already perceives on the horizon not only the death of God, but also the failure of socialism" (AdK Inszenierungs-DK 975). Castorf saw the novel as presaging the

¹²¹ Castorf has been consistently preoccupied with the "philosophical fiction"—the "novel of ideas" genre. Many of the writers he adapts or reads fall into this category: Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*; Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*; as well as the philosophical novels written by Sartre and Camus.

events that took place in Russia in the early 20th century. As such, Dostoevsky both captured the *Zeitgeist* and manifested a “Cassandra-like ability to see” the rising momentum of revolutionary terror in Russia (qtd. in Laudenbach 42).

Dämonen reflected Castorf’s preference for incorporating “real life” into his novels (Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 18). This preoccupation reflects Castorf’s own anti-bourgeois aesthetic principles, namely the eruption of *reality* in the artwork and the rejection of theatrical realism. Castorf understood *Dämonen* as “an Eastern European novel, which . . . wants to stage something other than the world of the ‘schöner Schein’; not ‘Art,’ but a political polemic against the . . . system” (18). According to Castorf, Dostoevsky imported the political crises he witnessed unfolding in Russia into his novel (18). Castorf was specifically interested in how Dostoevsky incorporated those real-life figures involved in the 1860s revolutionary movement, the *People’s Reprisal* (*Narodnaya Rasprava*), into his novel. In *Dämonen*, Dostoevsky portrays the ideas of Sergey Nechayev, the movement’s mastermind, and Mikhail Bakunin, who staged the first political terrorism campaign in modern Russian history (18). Nechayev was also responsible for a manifesto entitled *Catechism of a Revolutionary* (1869) which, in its depiction of a revolutionary-nihilist type, bears striking resonances with Benjamin’s composite of “The Destructive Character”.¹²² Benjamin’s destructive character is a young, cold, rational, nihilistic “Apollonian” type who engages un-sentimentally in the destructive enterprise of razing the bourgeois world order. In the novel, Dostoevsky portrays Nechayev through the figure of Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky, namely as the driving force of mayhem and chaos that enters the town. Through his depiction of Pyotr’s liberal idealist father, Stepan Trofimovich, Dostoevsky

¹²² As Nechayev writes in *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, “[t]he revolutionary is a doomed man. He has no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property, and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and the single passion for revolution” (1).

establishes a causal connection between the generation of Western-influenced liberal idealists of the 1840s and their nihilistic revolutionary sons in the 1860s (Wasiolek 112).

According to Castorf, the key figure in *Dämonen* is the charismatic nihilist Nikolai Stavrogin, who is like a “black hole with an unbelievable power to attract individuals who are searching” (AdK Inszenierungs-DK 975). Stavrogin personifies Dostoevsky’s idea that the Enlightenment ends in nihilism.¹²³ His destructive excesses in the face of existential meaninglessness parallel those of Caligula. Castorf also explains that the figure of Ivan Shatov represents the Slavophile worldview and therefore aspects of Dostoevsky himself (Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 18). In *Dämonen*, Dostoevsky contrasts Shatov’s Slavophilia with the revolutionary doctrine devised by Shigalyev, the group’s intellectual mastermind. Shigalev explains that the development of his theories evolved from “absolute freedom to unlimited despotism” (Dostoevsky 404). Castorf also perceives the group’s ideas for the organization of humankind as foreshadowing what would play out in the 20th century (Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 19). In Shigalyev’s vision, ninety percent of society is to be enslaved to the remaining ten percent. Equality of the herd is to be enforced by police state tactics, state terrorism, and the destruction of intellectual, artistic, and cultural life (405). Castorf claims that *Dämonen* presented political ideas “no different from those Blanqui formulated in France and that Lenin would later turn into practice” (18). Castorf quotes Shigalev’s plans: “It is estimated that about a hundred million people will need to be killed on the way to the goal” (19). As such, Castorf explained, the

¹²³ Stavrogin was played by the actor Martin Wuttke, whose addition to the Volksbühne ensemble for *Dämonen* helped to usher in a new intensity in Castorf’s stagecraft. Wuttke went on to play leading roles in *Der Idiot*, *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte*, and *Der Meister und Margarita*. Arguably, the success of Castorf’s Russian Turn can be partially attributed to Wuttke’s acting style—an intense, hyper-realistic style more suited to Castorf’s existential themes and video footage during this period. Wuttke’s virtuosic characterizations constituted a marked shift from Henry Hübchen’s self-deprecating slapstick and comic physicality.

20th century became the “simulation environment (*Simulationsfläche*) for the ideas and personalities germinating in the 19th century (19).

Castorf used Dostoevsky’s observation of the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871) unfolding in the author’s midst to fuel his own polemic against Western imperialism. Castorf highlights Dostoevsky’s response to the “hollowness” he perceived in the France of Napoleon, which was occupying Prussia at the time, as well as the need for Russia to emancipate itself from “foreign” Western influences (22). Castorf explains Dostoevsky’s views thusly:

[s]ometimes you need war for the sake of ideals, the freedom to overcome the hollowness of a society. This Napoleonic France was so hollowed out it needed to disappear. At the same time, Dostoevsky blamed Germany for the (Franco-Prussian) war... And besides, Russian foreign policy, which for one hundred years was European-German dominated needed to find itself anew. (22)

Castorf perceives in Dostoevsky the idea that the antidote to cultural decline—signaled by Western “decadence” and the passive acceptance of foreign domination—is the revitalizing force of war and strong nationalist ideals. Castorf quotes Shatov’s lines about “a people that no longer exclusively plays the leading part in life as a world people. . . . and no longer wants to have the sole truth in order to save other people, at once becomes ethnographic material” (19). According to this line of thought, a people needs to assert their dominance, their possession of a superior truth, otherwise they become conquerable. Here, the resonances between Castorf’s reception of Shatov/Dostoevsky’s Slavophile position and Botho Strauß’s “Anschwellender Bockgesang” essay (discussed in Chapter Two) are striking.

In a letter to his niece that Castorf paraphrases, Dostoevsky writes “[w]ithout war a person grows numb in comfort and wealth [. . .] I am speaking of nations as a whole. Without suffering, you will not understand happiness. An ideal passes through suffering the way gold does through the fire” (22). Castorf explains that here Dostoevsky is not far removed from both

Nietzsche and Jünger (22).¹²⁴ Castorf is interested in the way Dostoevsky's thinking aligns with Jünger's, who espouses the "heroic" acceptance of pain, as well as the value of self-sacrifice and war as methods of revitalizing a nation. "Western democracies," Castorf reminds us, "are societies where we take many security precautions and, through the daily intake of pain killers, live relatively well" (qtd. in Laudenbach 38)—that is, *merely* well by way of conformism and suppression.

Castorf claims that Dostoevsky wrote *Dämonen* as "a polemic against everyone, but foremost against himself" (qtd. in Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 21). Castorf here again proclaims a personal obligation to "grind away daily at the Stalinist structures that conditioned [him]" (20-21). Referring to the Stalin portrait hanging in his office, Castorf again invokes Groys to explain how the repetition of Stalin's image facilitates the disempowerment of his aura and enable's Castorf's own cathartic process. Castorf compares the aesthetic repetition of Stalin to what Dostoevsky is doing with *Dämonen*:

You can say the Stalin picture is tasteless. Nevertheless – Boris Groys describes it very nicely – as someone from the East one has the obligation to work off the totalitarian structures that conditioned you, the Stalinism in yourself, every single day. As airy-fairy as this might sound today, setting the moral imperative in motion, that is a deciding factor why Dostoevsky wrote this polemic. Against everyone, but above all against himself—against the Netschayev, the Bakunin, that he was. (20-21)

Castorf situates Dostoevsky not only in the tradition of aesthetic repetition discussed by Groys in *The Total Art of Stalin*, but also within the Nietzschean tradition of relentless, self-reflexive

¹²⁴ Jünger observes that nihilism is a stage of moral purification and strengthening through which one eventually passes. The theme of purification through suffering is a focus of Jünger's *In a Storm of Steel* and *On Pain*. Nihilism, Jünger explains, advances in three phases: "from doubt to pessimism, from there to actions in valueless and godless space, and then to new fulfillment" (qtd. in Quinn 71). Jünger's 1950 essay *Über die Linie* is concerned with the "abolition of nihilism" (70). Jünger cites Nietzsche and Dostoevsky specifically as thinkers who perceived nihilism as an intermediary condition that paradoxically creates the conditions of possibility for heroic individuals. Jünger claims that nihilism provokes a desire for exceptionalism—an allusion to Nietzsche's "horizon of monumentality and its longings" (70) as outlined in *The Use and Abuse of History*.

theorizing. Castorf perceives *Dämonen* as a form of *Abarbeitung* for the Russian author and for himself—for processing authoritarian paths of thought. For Castorf, Dostoevsky’s polemic is both anti-imperialist and a method of working through his own bellicose, illiberal reaction to Western occupation.

Underlying the discourse of Castorf’s *Dämonen* was an exploration of the nihilism that Dostoevsky perceived as a breeding ground for terror and despotism. “Terrorism,” Castorf explained, “has always fascinated me—the terror with which the virtuous wants to be enforced” (AdK Inszenierungs-DK 975). As such, Castorf wished to make visible the relationship between virtue and terror that underlies the trajectory of modern revolutions. For Castorf, this tension originates in the French Revolution and in Robespierre’s speech for the National Convention on May 7th, 1794, “On Political Morality,” which explained the relationship between virtue and terror as concomitant: “virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing other than justice: prompt, severe, and inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue.” Looking back at the events of the 20th century, Castorf sees no emancipatory development from the attempt to enable virtue to flow from terror. Considering the actions of the Red Army Faction (RAF) in West Germany—a case he references in relation to *Dämonen*—Castorf concludes that “at the end of this century . . . it is said that these simple terrorist changes are not shared by the majority” (qtd. in AdK Inszenierungs-DK 975).

The program book distributed to audiences during the run of *Dämonen* was an assemblage of texts on the theme of revolution and terror that spanned the historical and the contemporary. It included a letter from Bakunin addressed to Netschayev; the official statement from the RAF announcing their dismantling after twenty-eight years, dated April 20th, 1998; a text by Paul Virilio, “*Die Welt als bewohnbares Koma und bewohnbares Kino*” (“The World as

Inhabitable Coma and as Inhabitable Cinema”); a speech by the Naturalist dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann, titled “*Sonne, Luft und Haus für alle!*” (Sun, Air and Houses for All!), as well as an open letter addressed to the German Parliament by fellow Volksbühne director Christoph Schlingensiefel regarding the Bosnian refugee crisis in Macedonia dated and signed in Skopje, May 7th, 1999.¹²⁵ The program book also provided audiences with a list of cultural and temporal coordinates to help them orient themselves around the production’s key aesthetic influences. Castorf situated *Dämonen* in “one of the last houses just beyond the western border of Russia, somewhere between ‘Paris, Texas,’ Cindy Sherman, Dogme 95, and Duma 2000” (Carlson 106). As such, the aesthetic inspiration for *Dämonen* was drawn, on the one hand, from the extreme performativity of photographer and performance artist Cindy Sherman, as well as from the postmodern, cinematic artifice of director Wim Wenders’ depiction of America in his film *Paris, Texas* (1984). These influences were sharply contrasted with the authenticity mandated by the Dogme 95 filmmaking manifesto, which Castorf printed in its entirety in the program book. According to Castorf, Dogme 95’s rules for artistic production functioned as a kind of “religious

¹²⁵ During the run of *Berliner Republik* in 1999, Schlingensiefel and two actors fled to a refugee camp in Macedonia from which they reported live to the Volksbühne on the humanitarian crisis. Schlingensiefel then unsuccessfully attempted to bring 50 Kosovo refugees to Germany to be housed in the theatre. The former East Germans working at the Volksbühne thought Schlingensiefel’s approach was narcissistic and “typical West German.” They wanted him to stop playing humanitarian martyr and instead centre his action on a critique of NATO (Hegemann, *Plädoyer* 126). Castorf did not want to involve himself as Schlingensiefel’s action occurred during the run of *Dämonen* (126). These events engendered an internal conflict and a public scandal, but it also inspired a roundtable discussion at the Volksbühne (134-135). Ultimately, *this* was what Castorf was after: the Volksbühne achieving “relevance that extends beyond the feuilleton” (128). The roundtable discussion re-ignited the Volksbühne in a way that “recalled the beginning of Castorf’s artistic directorship” (128). Castorf explained, “I am happy about what Schlingensiefel is doing, because then I don’t have to do it” (128). According to Hegemann, however, the directors’ political interventions should ultimately remain *within* the theatre, otherwise theatre loses its unique critical function. As Hegemann noted, “political theatre is still ultimately theatre. Experiments to dismantle the theatre always have the effect that they strengthen those very structures that are put into question. Every attempt to take down the boundaries of theatre ultimately saves it, because it shows the unavoidable divide between audience and actor, the necessity of scripts, and the framework of partitioned play” (127).

fast” that cleansed individuals of American “fast food film,” which was entirely “foreign” to the postsocialist Eastern Bloc (qtd. in Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 26).

In 2000, Castorf turned *Dämonen* into a three hour-long, Dogme 95-inspired film. The film was shot in the former East German province of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, which Castorf claimed was located on the border to Russia (8).¹²⁶ As such, Castorf was provocatively asserting the orientation of the German province *towards* Russia. He claimed that Mecklenburg (which borders on the EU-member state Poland) had an *Eastern* and not a *Western* orientation. Castorf described the film location in the following way: “[O]ne has the impression that East Germany is in the vicinity of Eastern Europe, that it actually has something Slavophile or a Russian element” (14-15). With this description, Castorf was sharpening the dichotomies between East and West, Russia and America. In one scene in the film, the characters throw rocks and yell “*verpiss dich*” (“piss off”) at a vintage American station wagon driving up a dusty road toward them. According to Castorf, this attitude was also “very Berlin” (15). Castorf perceived this scene as the “20th century breaking through into the landscape and cutting it up” (15). He claimed that Russia did not go through a “20th century” (30), hence the lifestyle portrayed on American TV was entirely foreign to the Russian experience of history. What ultimately emerged in both Castorf’s stage production and film adaptation of *Dämonen* was a surreal, disorientating collision of the postsocialist Eastern Bloc encountering late capitalist postmodern America.

Bert Neumann’s “Imitation of Life”

Through Bert Neumann’s scenographies, Castorf gave his Russian and American adaptations vibrant expression. Neumann was undoubtedly Castorf’s single most important

¹²⁶ Castorf’s *Der Idiot* was likewise turned into a film in 2004 and would be Castorf’s second and final experiment in filmmaking under the Volksbühne’s auspices.

collaborator and ultimately the co-mastermind of the Volksbühne. He was the creator of the Volksbühne aesthetic and a key progenitor of the Volksbühne concept during the Castorf era. Neumann was also central in deciding which artists and directors to invite into the Volksbühne fold. Starting with *Dämonen*, Neumann inaugurated a new visual paradigm at the Volksbühne that would characterize the scenography of Castorf's Russian Turn. Most significant about this new aesthetic was that the action moved from being primarily downstage in the 1990s—very close to, and sometimes even amidst, the audience—to frequently being “behind the scenes” in the 2000s. The live action was often hidden from the spectators entirely and then projected, by way of live video cameras, onto large film screens placed within the scenography (Carlson 106). In the early-to-mid 1990s, Castorf's actors frequently broke the fourth wall and attempted to activate and provoke audience members. Under the new aesthetic aegis devised by Neumann, this imperative to unsettle theatrical convention persisted, albeit in a different way. Neumann's containers undermined conventional modes of visual and aural perception in theatre by obstructing what was normally perceivable to spectators. The action now frequently took place entirely inside shipping containers placed on a stage platform that rotated.

The containers were the signature feature of Neumann's scenographies and evoked prefabricated American-style housing (Hurztig 199). As such, they signalled a new global mobility and the dissemination of pre-packaged American lifestyles saturating the international market. On stage, the containers were fully furnished to convey the interior of American suburban households or Russian dachas, sometimes refracting both simultaneously like a hologram. As Castorf described the container for *Dämonen*, “the house on stage looks so American, but it is simultaneously so obviously [in] the Russian tundra” (qtd. in Laudenbach 43).

Starting with *Dämonen*, Neumann’s designs made the experience of globalizing processes visible. His sets from this period were, in typical postmodern fashion, a pastiche of pop culture and retro-Americana influences, with vintage furniture and costumes sourced from second-hand shops around Berlin. They represent Neumann’s DIY ethos and approach to repurposing capitalist waste, mirroring Castorf’s ragpicker-like approach to repurposing socialist waste. The décor inside the containers frequently spanned the Cold War decades from the 1960s to the 1990s, depicting suburban-style interiors including wall-to-wall carpeting, kitschy 1970s lamps, sleek leather couches, as well as fully functioning kitchens and bathrooms. Alternately, some of Neumann’s set designs during this period looked like a Las Vegas hotel complex (*Der Idiot*)—an unabashed celebration of trash-culture and capitalism’s seedy underworld. These scenographies were, in fact, fully inhabitable reproductions of contemporary living spaces that catered to increasingly common forms of transient existence.¹²⁷ Neumann simply heightened the artifice to make the logic of globalizing capitalism perceivable to spectators. In both *Dämonen*, as well as *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte (Insulted and Injured)*, the plastic patio furniture and outdoor swimming pool full of dirty or frozen water stood next to the container. In one memorable sequence in *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte*, the frozen swimming pool—a metaphor for an ice-cold capitalist society—served as an ice rink upon which the actors skated (Carlson 107). According to Castorf, the defunct swimming pool “suggested that one wanted to have another standard of living, one would like to participate in another culture, but remains in an old Russian

¹²⁷ Volksbühne director René Pollesch would create a production called, “*Insourcing des Zuhause. Menschen in Scheiß-Hotels*” (*Insourcing the Home. People in Shit-Hotels*) likewise using Neumann’s containers. The play is based on three people who rent an office and a home in a hotel, which is in line with the logic of city “development” and “flexible” new jobs. Pollesch’s piece is about the fluid transitions between work and living, between public and private and the related marketing of emotions as technology. It was part of Pollesch’s “Prater Trilogy,” along with *Stadt als Beute (City as Prey)* and Mae West’s *Sex*.

mud hole” (qtd. in Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 16). While Neumann’s interiors took cues from American soap operas or reality television sets, they simultaneously made visible the longings and aspirational element of the characters’ social class apparent.

Neumann arguably achieved the pinnacle of his “Russian” scenographies with the staging of *Der Idiot* in 2002. For that production, the audience sat amid the hotel “Romantic World.” On what was normally the stage, there were now three levels of scaffolding on which the audience was now seated, while in the auditorium the ‘*Neustadt*’ (new city) was built up around them. Neumann’s Neustadt-concept was a kind of East-German *Plattenbau*-meets-Las Vegas hotel. The name “Neustadt” evokes the now crumbling socialist housing projects and model communities still dominating the peripheries of East German cities. Halle-Neustadt was the most notorious of these and was referenced by Castorf in the early 1990s around *Clockwork Orange* and in relation to youth gang violence. Neumann’s Neustadt included fully furnished hotel rooms and apartments of up to four levels, a supermarket, a bordello, a hair salon and a pub. The set was also equipped with fourteen video monitors (placed directly into the scaffolding for the audience), eight surveillance cameras, and three large projection screens. By placing the audience amid this model city, the traditional division between proscenium and stage was dismantled, thus invoking Piscator and Walter Gropius’ immersive “Total Theatre” concept.¹²⁸ At the same time, the scenography established new barriers and walls by way of actors performing in partially obstructed spaces.

¹²⁸ Piscator commissioned Walter Gropius, former director of the Bauhaus school, to design a “Total Theatre” in 1927. According to Christopher Innes, “[t]here were to be multiple stages, one of which could be revolved into the centre of the auditorium – during the course of a performance, if the director so wishes, thus instantaneously alternating the relationship of the audience to the action. The design also made it possible for film to be projected onto all the walls and the whole expanse of the ceiling. Enclosed by the unbroken ovoid shape of the building, the spectator would have been completely encircled by the action, while the events represented on stage could be placed in the middle of the public” (139).

In the early to mid-1990s, Castorf and Neumann saw the Volksbühne as a platform for the struggle against a West-dominated German reunification narrative. Now that that battle appeared to be lost, Castorf's stage evidently turned inward, not only resurrecting a fourth wall it had tried to break down but retreating even further behind it into the containers and thus into a hermetically sealed "Imitation of Life." The latter was the name of the iconic Douglas Sirk film from 1959 (itself an "imitation" of John Stahl's 1934 version). "Imitation of Life" was also the title of a seminar Neumann gave on theatre design in 1999, and of a monograph on Neumann's work published in 2001. As such, "Imitation of Life" came to unofficially serve as a slogan for Neumann's design principles during this period. It is an apt title for characterizing the hyperreal aesthetic of his container worlds, with their obvious indebtedness to the poignant artifice of Sirk's melodramas.

From Castorf's perspective, the new hermetic seal around the stage evolved from the political situation. He explained that "the surroundings in. . . . Germany have become so impossible for me . . . that I am retreating into this collective adventure of the Volksbühne, which is a rather apolitical move" (qtd. in Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 25). This retreat *seemed* to be opposed to the theatrical principles that had guided Castorf hitherto, namely breaking down the barrier between stage and audience, between the institution and the surrounding streets.

Neumann's sets were evidently influenced by Castorf's reading of Baudrillard's *America* (1988)—a depiction of postmodern hyperreality not without its own sublime aesthetic qualities. As discussed in Chapter One, on his road trip through America, Baudrillard perceives a closed circuit of television and film screens that enforce an entirely fictionalized image of American life. Neon signs, flickering televisions, endless commercials, advertisements, billboards, and an expanse of highways, hotels, and motels characterize the transience and circulation of signs that

obscure an underlying void or desert beneath. The America Baudrillard encounters on his trip conveys the seductive poetics of simulacra that serve as inspiration for Neumann's ambivalent representations of life under American postmodernism's aegis. Neumann's scenographies, which heavily cited television and cinema tropes, made an *absence of truth*—the absence of an original that precedes the reproduction—perceivable to spectators. This approach correlated with Baudrillard's dictum that “[t]o see the simulacrum is to see the truth which conceals that there is none” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 166). Neumann's scenographies manifested Baudrillard's description of a hyperreal, dream-like America as an empty signifier driven by utopian myth and now disseminated and emulated the world-over: “America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia, which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too” (*America* 28).

In Neumann's sets, the citational and simulated quality of every aspect of life under late capitalist postmodernism became apparent. Slogans such as “Dreams for Sale,” “I Want to Believe,” “Romantic World,” and “Imitation of Life” became governing concepts inserted directly into the sets as neon advertising signs. In *Der Idiot*, for example, the hotel name “Romantic World” functioned as a massive billboard sign placed on top of a container. With these signs Neumann established a Brechtian meta-commentary upon both the illusoriness and constructed nature of the American Dream. At the same time, these signs endorsed Baudrillard's injunction to “enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction. It is, indeed, on this fictive basis that it dominates the world” (*America* 29). Neumann's scenographies manifested *both* Baudrillard's “America” as an empty signifier—a fiction now disseminated the world-over—as well as foregrounding the constructedness of that fiction as the theatre's domain.

On stage, Neumann frequently showed the “naked construction” of the containers by, for example, exposing scaffolding or leaving parts of the re-construction of the containers incomplete. He thereby made the construction perceivable, a facet he claimed had its own “logic and beauty” (qtd. in Hurtzig 198). In this way, Neumann was indebted to proletarian art principles that spanned the Russian Constructivists, Piscator and Brecht, namely to “lay bare the device” (*Understanding Brecht* xv). For Brecht, “[t]o be anti-bourgeois or proletarian was to show how things worked, while they were being shown; to ‘lay bare the device’ (in the words of the Russian Formalists). Art should be considered a form of production, not a mystery; the stage should appear like a factory with the machinery fully exposed” (Mitchell qtd. in *Understanding Brecht* 48). Neumann refurbished the containers by adding sliding glass doors and floor-to-ceiling windows, but deliberately left part of the construction visible and incomplete. This incompleteness, Neumann explained, reflected the experience of living in a Berlin in which construction was permanently underway (Hurtzig 201). Neumann’s scenographies were also a furtherance of Brecht’s objective to disrupt, through estrangement, the narcotic effect of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (*Brecht on Theatre* 37-38). Neumann’s “*Gesamtkunstwerk* America” made visible a seamless postmodern hyperreality driven by a globalized culture industry that permeated every aspect of the individual’s private life—already anticipated by Adorno and Horkheimer.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ In this sense, Neumann’s scenographies were a manifestation of what Adorno and Horkheimer describe as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in “The Culture Industry”—a seamless totality emerging through the alliance of media, communication and capitalist industry. In that essay, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, “[t]elevision aims at a synthesis of radio and film, and is held up only because the interested parties have not yet reached agreement, but its consequences will be quite enormous and promise to intensify the impoverishment of aesthetic matter so drastically, that by tomorrow the thinly veiled identity of all industrial culture products can come triumphantly out into the open, derisively fulfilling the Wagnerian dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the fusion of all the arts in one work” (Adorno & Horkheimer 3).

In the monograph *Imitation of Life* (2001), Neumann recalls seeing a photograph of Marlene Dietrich on the set of *Morocco* sitting under a palm tree at an oasis. Positioned around her are film workers, cameras and microphones, thus acknowledging the labour of creating this Hollywood image. Another monograph documenting Neumann's set designs, *Dreams for Sale* (Blievernicht 2005), centres on the construction of his sets in a manner that recalls the photograph of Dietrich. The book features Castorf's actors in Hollywood-style production stills for *Der Idiot*, *Gier nach Gold*, and *Forever Young*. These stills capture the Volksbühne's stage technicians, make-up artists, and wardrobe assistants at work in Hollywood constructing America's "dreams." Neumann claims that through this "simultaneity of illusion and work, the imitation of nature becomes believable, because the decision [to believe] lies with the beholder" (qtd. in Hurtzig 199).¹³⁰ Neumann was making the construction of a mythic America visible and simultaneously asserting the audience's decision to buy into the illusion and artifice as the medium-specific domain of theatre. As such, Neumann's scenography constituted an assertion of theatricality over theatrical "realism."¹³¹

Ultimately, the sheer beauty of Neumann's depiction of American postmodernism on stage—replete with representations of mass-manufactured glamour and commodity culture accessible to the working classes—seemed to indicate that there were indeed utopian kernels lodged within this aesthetic logic. This idea follows Benjamin's dialectical way of seeing the Paris Arcades, which illuminates the emancipatory promise of a 19th century materialist project,

¹³⁰ "The most intense form of belief is the belief in a fiction that one knows is a fiction." This is the endpoint of the Enlightenment: "Who wants success today has to be like Don Quixote. Without Irony." (Leporello der Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, January 2000).

¹³¹ "The real world has been eroded, as has the *scheinbare Welt*, the world of appearances. All that is left is theatre. This is why theatre is so important in spite of its marginalization. Under the key term *theatricality* theatre scholars attempt to make this process a topic: all spheres of life are becoming theatricalized. If theatre once mirrored the world, now the world mirrors theatre" (Hegemann qtd. in *Plädoyer* 138).

a bourgeois capitalist “dream world” (Benjamin, *Arcades* 13). This is to say that Neumann’s sets were not simply cynical meta-critiques of a totalizing simulacrum and fiction of America. Rather, they staged the enchantment and eroticism of American commodity-capitalism in a way that evoked the historic promise of mass industrialization for workers. Here, Neumann’s approach to trash culture mirrors the ragpicker’s: “like a miser hoarding treasure, he collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial magic” (349).

Perhaps the most significant quality of Neumann’s scenographies was the sense of mystery that came from the action being frequently obscured inside the containers. Castorf explained that because the action was not always visible, spectators were forced to engage other modes of perception including listening and imagining, thus taking partial information to their own conclusion (Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 17). Castorf claimed that this experience was akin to reading a novel or a fairy tale, in which the beholder must fill in the gaps with their senses. This approach, Castorf claimed, “broke with the long-standing convention that everything on stage should be seen” (17). Castorf also extended the action into hidden parts of the set and expanded the performance area by including the backstage by way of live video camera work. The use of live camera and the act of filming on stage through the presence of videographers was yet another assertion of Constructivist and Brechtian principles to make labour visible.

With the action now significantly less or sometimes not at all visible to the spectator—but with interior spaces and close-ups of actors projected onto screens—voyeurism and surveillance became dominant themes. Surveillance cameras were frequently built directly into the interior of the containers and infrared cameras were used to film in the dark. Intrusive shots, campy emotional confessions, and parodied pornographic sequences were ironic commentaries on a culture obsessed

with “behind the scenes,” particularly with the rise of the Big Brother reality television series, which Neumann’s first container for *Dämonen* presaged by a few months.¹³² In this way, the video work in the “Imitation of Life” manifested what Baudrillard perceived in *America*:

·What develops around the video or stereo culture is not a narcissistic imaginary, but an effect of frantic self-referentiality, a short-circuit which immediately hooks up like with like, and, in doing so, emphasizes their surface intensity and deeper meaninglessness. (*America* 35-36)

Without this perpetual streaming of video, Baudrillard explains, nothing has any meaning today. The “mirror phase has given way to the video phase” (35).

The footage projected from inside the hermetically sealed “Imitation of Life” indicated a world governed by surveillance or manipulated by editing choices. It also signaled the “loss of private life” (48) and the banality of life under the scrutiny of omnipresent surveillance. This hybrid of reality television and live theatre made visible the evolution of the voyeuristic preoccupation with working class milieus from Naturalism and Realism, up to Reality television. The close-up shots not only re-cited and parodied Expressionist cinema tropes, but they also frequently contradicted the truth of what was happening on stage vis-à-vis the additional layer of commentary through facial expression. As such, close-ups or pre-recorded sequences were used to create doubt around what was being narrated, reflecting “an underlying truth and hidden reality” (51).

¹³² Hegemann pointed out the parallels between bb (big brother) and BB (Bertolt Brecht). He explained that all of us are participants in an “epic model” performance of life, only now there is no longer space for critical reflection. Hegemann writes that the difference is that *we* are now the surveillers and that a small group performs their life before us in a model of epic theatre (*Plädoyer* 157). Hegemann also points out that the “lost status of the individual and the simultaneous impossibility to rely on others in the struggle for existence, are latent themes in big brother and Bertolt Brecht alike” (158).

This new stagecraft was about highlighting the gap between the live and the mediated.¹³³

All the things that exceeded the camera's frame now became visible on stage. Castorf's videographer Jan Speckenbach explained the unique "reality effect" emerging from the production's integration of live images within theatre performance:

This idea [of reality] is correlated with the nature of the performer, not with the character they portray. Thus, along with TV-technology, reality enters the theatre – yet not the exterior, the outside (which is present in some documentary images, which remain, however, mere citations of reality), but the inner reality of the stage itself. The heavy make-up and the colourful light contribute their part to stimulate a mood that is different from "realism." (Speckenbach 2002, 82)

As such, these stage productions undermined theatrical "realism" by foregrounding the inner reality of the stage itself.

It should be noted that while film, video, and mediated settings became an increasingly important in Western avant-garde theatre in the 1980s and 1990s (i.e. Robert Wilson, Robert LePage, The Wooster Group, Peter Sellers, Katie Mitchell), Neumann's containers and Castorf's use of video constituted a vanguard, no doubt made possible by the exorbitant funding available to German state theatres. Hegemann explained that Castorf created a "hybrid style of performance that cannot be achieved by either film or theatre alone. The unique combination of live and mediated action has fundamentally changed many of the conditions that were basically the same for over 2000 years" (qtd. in Earnest 51). By combining the live and the mediated,

¹³³ In Performance Studies, there is an oft-cited debate between Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander around "liveness." Phelan, in *Unmarked* (1993), argues that theatre's unique value is in its live, ephemeral irreproducibility and that its "only life is in the present" (44). Performance, she claims, "cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations. Once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" (44). For her, this ontology represents performance's unique ability to intervene in ideological repetition and create temporary utopian community. In his book *Liveness* (1999), Auslander counters Phelan by claiming that the notion that the live necessarily precedes the recorded is a construct and part of our cultural anxiety around authenticity. In an age of mass media, the boundaries between the live and the mediatized have become blurred. Auslander calls into question the "ontologically pristine" nature of performance (p. 45) and builds a case for the reflexive relationship between mediatization and the theatre.

Castorf showed the screen's ability to create another reality, to manipulate, but also to generate an emotional charge between spectator and actor. Fischer-Lichte claims "every minute of the video increased the desire for the actors' "real" bodies; a desire that was repeatedly frustrated (qtd. in Boenisch 171). At the same time, the re-appearance of the live actor on stage after a lengthy video sequence—especially the Volksbühne actors' uniquely vital presence—reinforced the electrifying energy between audience and live performer (i.e. the autopoietic feedback loop described by Fischer-Lichte).¹³⁴

Despite this retreat behind the fourth wall and focus on the obscured realities of the stage, the Volksbühne continued its project to transcend the division between the theatre and life. While the Volksbühne now found itself uncomfortably situated in the midst of the gentrified "theme park" of Berlin-Mitte, the peripheries of Berlin were turning into theme parks of a different kind—places where American-style shopping malls were springing up and replacing pre-existing forms of social life. Neumann wished to bring his containers out of the Volksbühne and into marginal communities where the processes he was aestheticizing were underway. In 2000 and 2001, Neumann took his containers into social housing communities in a travelling road show he called *Der Rollende-Road-Schau* (*The Rolling-Road-Show* or *RRS*).¹³⁵ Neumann set up the containers in districts normally excluded from "high culture" such as Marzahn, Märkisches Viertel, Lichtenberg, and Neukölln. The road show represented the Volksbühne's aim to transcend the boundaries of the institution in order to encounter its desired audience of

¹³⁴ Erika Fischer-Lichte's contention in *The Transformative Power of Performance* is that the "corporeal co-presence" between actors and spectators is the defining characteristic of the category of performance, distinguishing it from other art forms like film. Indeed, this "corporeal co-presence" is the key concept underlying Fischer-Lichte's notion of the "aesthetics of performativity."

¹³⁵ The first iteration of the *Rollende-Road-Schau* was titled, "Nachtgrauen und Aufklärung" and the second, "Raus aus dem Themenpark Mitte: Marzahn, Märkisches Viertel, Lichtenberg, Neukölln" 2001.

low-income and disenfranchised individuals. The *RRS* was about creating a community event, replete with live performances from the Volksbühne's repertoire such as René Pollesch's *Sex*, as well as offering fast food and souvenir stands (Carlson 111).¹³⁶ With the presence of the containers, vendors, and entertainment, the *RRS* drew on the tradition of carnival and travelling fairs, thus evoking earlier iterations of "people's theatre."

Mythic Utopias

What was at stake for Castorf and Neumann during this period was making visible the myths that drive the hegemony of American capitalism. Under the auspices of the "Russian Turn" Castorf explored the psychological and existential implications that unfettered neoliberalism had on individuals. What becomes clear in these productions is how a new world order driven by capitalist media and pop culture shapes both the fantasy lives of individuals and the dramaturgy of everyday life. This form of American cultural imperialism dates to the Cold War and the ideological battle with the Eastern Bloc. According to Groys in "The Post-Communist Condition," what took place during the Cold War was a war at the level of images, a marketing of political-utopian models professing the good life for workers. While only one Cold War model, American capitalism, was victorious, it was impelled by the ideological struggle that inaugurated it and hence by the aspirations of the working classes for a better life. While the mythic Soviet Union had collapsed, fully exposing a feudal, decelerated terrain beneath it, Neumann's scenographies gave sublime expression to the entirely constructed fiction of America borne in competition with the Soviet Union, now spreading nearly unencumbered on the global stage.

¹³⁶ René Pollesch's production of *Sex* premiered on January 30, 2002. *Sex* was inspired by Mae West's brothel: "living better beyond the law," "living better in illegality" and "existence beyond heterosexual constraints" <http://www.goethe.de/kue/the/nds/nds/aut/pol/stu/en5053993.htm>

Groys argues that prior to the advent of the Cold War no one perceived capitalism as a system with utopian potential (166).¹³⁷ On the contrary, “[i]n the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, capitalism was generally regarded as being an economically efficient but a morally unjust and flawed order” (166). In fact, it was not until Stalin made the bold claim to have achieved utopia in the U.S.S.R. that an ideological race began that would play itself out for the duration of the Cold War (167). Groys suggests that “[d]uring the [Cold War] period, Western capitalism came under considerable pressure to prove its legitimacy, leading the West . . . to advertise itself to a global spectator as superior to the communist ideal” (166). During this same period, an unresolved apologia for the ‘actually existing’ Western capitalism emerged, since it was credited not only for being the home of economic affluence but also the true incarnation of human rights, social solidarity, individual creative freedom and the highest standard of morality (166). Groys claims that, “the communist event introduced an era of the worldwide international political market for competing models of society” (167). Each ideological system “sold” their model of the “good life” or “good society” to workers on the global political marketplace. Each of these models “hails itself as utopia - and is then denounced by its rivals as dystopia” (167). Groys also points out that “Orwell’s vision of an anti-utopian world of total surveillance in a permanent state of emergency was penned as a satire of Soviet society, but in the meantime, its rhetorical application has primarily come to address the current political conditions in the West” (166). As such, the correlation between Groys’s Orwellian analogy and Castorf’s aesthetics of surveillance and voyeurism on stage could not be more apparent.

¹³⁷ In the monograph *Dreams for Sale* (2005), which documents the productions *Der Idiot*, *Gier nach Gold*, *Forever Young* and *Meister and Margarita*, the idea is of life in the capitalist city as a “superpoppeepshow”: casinos, peep shows, brothels. In these productions, urban capitalism is equated with gambling, underworld, sex and corruption.

For Groys, “[t]he historical accomplishment of communism lies precisely in how it transformed actual society into a political model. In other words, the Soviet model initiated a tide that “refused to recognize society in its entirety as a historically evolved ‘natural’ entity, and thus as utterly singular, perceiving it instead as an artificial construct that can equally be exported or imported from country to country” (167). As such, Groys claims that communism haunts any attempt to construct and sell a utopian model society. Groys also claims that there can be no real processing of the communist past that is analogous to processing the fascist past (163). This is because communism lacks a subject that could assume responsibility for the communist past. This subject could only be the “specter of a utopian communist humanity” (168). Here we see resonances with *Specters of Marx*, in which Derrida coined the term *hauntology* to describe the way Marxism insinuates itself in the present, its spectres demanding “justice where it is not yet, not yet there, where it is no longer” (xviii). This spectre of communism underwrites the new post-Cold War co-ordinates of Castorf’s stage, as it does the former Eastern Bloc, and refuses closure upon it. In a sense, we may say that as much as ‘Russia’ is situated in a dialectic with a mythic America, the former is in equal parts brought into tension with its own past.

Chapter Summary

Castorf’s “Russian turn” was Janus-faced: on the one hand, the director stared into a globalizing American hegemony as a futureless void and, on the other, he was oriented “backwards” towards what he described as a “feudal” postsocialist East. Castorf’s position was a rejection of Hegel’s westward, forward-moving *Geist* and of Fukuyama’s euphoric reception of the victory of liberal democracy and the capitalist free market. Castorf’s productions during this period confronted not only the social and economic implications of unfettered neoliberalism, but

perhaps more importantly, their darkest psychological-spiritual implications (i.e. nihilism and existential despair) as a destructive force on the individual.

The evolution from Castorf's early years at the Volksbühne to the period of the Russian Turn also marks a shift in overarching tone from the manic to the depressive. Yet, Castorf's bleak reception of the true finale of the Cold War after the Yugoslav wars and his ensuing existential crisis was ultimately highly generative for the Volksbühne—sharpening geo-political antinomies on stage and evolving radically new directing and design principles, as well as multimedia strategies. Under the aegis of this Russian Turn, Castorf made decisions that strengthened the Volksbühne's "OST" orientation in the theatre's dramaturgy and political imaginary. In the new, post-Cold War context in which Western capitalism emerged victorious, "Russia" constituted a "stronger drug"—a more intense *Störfaktor* than the concept of the GDR could now be. "Russia," as Castorf asserted it, was more disruptive to the processes that were eroding history. While the late 1990s and 2000s represented Castorf's new focus on Russian novels, the director remained critical of liberal democracy, albeit in melancholically inflected, existentially oriented productions, and with an ambivalent attitude toward "America." Castorf's political and existential concerns were given expression in Bert Neumann's representations of the poetics of simulacra and hyperreality in his sublime container worlds.

During this period, Castorf's stage refracted the collisions of temporalities, utopian myths and historical consciousness that constituted the new co-ordinates of the postsocialist condition. Castorf's ragpicker-like approach saw him salvage the cultural debris of a Russia-oriented former East Germany in response to the West-oriented "master narrative" and memory culture being institutionalized in the new capital Berlin. Castorf was also interested in Dostoevsky's reaction to the encroaching of Western liberal ideas in Russia, with which he saw parallels to

Nietzsche and Jünger. These conservative dimensions of his work mark the distinction between Castorf's discourse—part of his dialectical thought process and self-reflexive overidentification strategies—and the absurdism, anarchy and irony that dominated his stage productions.

However, Castorf's productions during the period of the Russian Turn kept the key themes of Volksbühne vibrant: the end of history, Left vs. Right, the vying for reality over realism, as well as the anti-institutional spirit are all accounted for under these new coordinates.

Once the novelty of these productions dwindled, as they inevitably would, Castorf was compelled to import a real-existing nihilist-revolutionary (in the mold of *Dämonen*'s Shigalyev) onto the Volksbühne stage. This was the Russian literary *enfant terrible* and political extremist, Eduard Limonov (b. 1943). In the following case study, we will see the postsocialist experience personified in the individual as artist-provocateur turned “heroic” militant partisan. Here, the ironic theatricality of totalitarian overidentification combined with what Alain Badiou calls “the avant-garde's passion for the real” represent two aspects of Limonov's *persona*. The following case study shows how Castorf's *Fuck Off, Amerika* manifested both the most virulent and simultaneously the most comical, self-ironic dimensions of Castorf's Russian Turn.

Chapter 5: A Case Study of Castorf's *Fuck Off, Amerika*

As outlined in the previous chapter, the late 1990s and first half of the 2000s saw the establishment of Castorf's Russian Turn; a re-orientation of the Volksbühne toward the former Soviet empire, as well the establishment of a Russian-American dialectic through Castorf and Neumann's legendary adaptations. This dialectic conveyed the new coordinates of a postsocialist experience that Castorf perceived as the true end of the Cold War at the end of the 1990s. During this period, the Volksbühne engaged in a critique of American imperialism permeating every aspect of social life through media, popular culture and the experience of hyperreality. Castorf persisted in an OST-oriented postsocialist interpretation of history even after the novelty of his Russian Turn had worn off. Well into the latter half of the first decade of the 2000s, Castorf's productions continued to channel East Germans' *ressentiment* towards Westernization. Here, a set of tensions persist in Castorf's dramaturgy between revolution and terror, utopian community and dictatorship, art and life.

In February of 2008, Castorf premiered *Fuck Off, Amerika: Nach Motiven von Eduard Limonov*, an adaptation of Russian author Eduard Limonov's eponymously titled fictional memoir (1984).¹³⁸ Although this theatrical staging was conceived nearly twenty-five years after the memoir's publication in German, its content was strikingly aligned with Castorf's critique of both the Soviet Union and America. Limonov's novel is reflective of the political ethos of Castorf's Volksbühne in its disdain for two hitherto unsatisfactory political systems—the real existing socialism of the former Soviet Bloc and American capitalist liberal democracy. In both

¹³⁸ Eduard Limonov's *Fuck Off, Amerika* (the German title) was originally published in Russian in 1979 *БаужцаМвйзкзд, (ЁТО ЈА—ЕДИЌКА)* and in English as *It's Me, Eddie* in 1983. When directly quoting Limonov's novel, I use the English translation. All the other references to these characters are in the German form as utilized in Castorf's production.

Limonov's novel and Castorf's adaptation, the two systems emerge as interchangeable in their tendency to suppress individuality and breed inert "last men," even as redemption is ultimately found in the East for both figures. In this adaptation, the political co-ordinates of Castorf's Russian Turn are expressed through a biographical depiction of Limonov's real-life metamorphosis from dissident Soviet writer and "loser" in America to authoritarian politician in post-Soviet Russia. As such, Castorf's adaptation makes visible both the resistant and reactionary fantasies of those individuals from the former Eastern Bloc disillusioned and disenchanted by the West.

Castorf's *Fuck Off, Amerika* consists of an assemblage of melancholy, dictatorial and slapstick motifs that combine scenes from the novel with excerpts from Limonov's political tracts written in the 1990s, as well as references to his career as an ultra-nationalist politician in Russia in the early 2000s. The staging centres on Limonov's radicalization: from humiliation and insult in capitalist "Amerika" (resonating with the Dostoevskian themes of *Erniedrigung* and *Beleidigung*) to the artist's rebirth as political leader of the extremist National Bolshevik Party (NBP)¹³⁹ in Russia in the 1990s and his creation of an aesthetic-political *Gesamtkunstwerk* or "total work of art" under his party's auspices.¹⁴⁰ In this way, Castorf establishes an associative dramaturgy that stages the transformation of Editchka from outsider in America, to military

¹³⁹ In 1993, Limonov formed the National Bolshevik Party (NBP) in opposition to the disastrous rule of Boris Yeltsin. The NBP were primarily a grassroots political organization that endorsed direct-action politics. As Fabrizio Fenghi points out, the NBP "adopted a violent and aggressive rhetoric, based on a cult of war, revolution and masculinity, and oriented toward political action" (184). After Russian courts banned the organization in 2007, Limonov became a leader of The Other Russia, a political bloc opposing Vladimir Putin. However, following pro-Russian unrest in Ukraine, and Russian military intervention therein, Limonov has emerged as a strong supporter of Putin.

¹⁴⁰ In *Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (2011), David Roberts defines the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as seeking to convey a world vision, anticipate a future utopian or redeemed state of society, and act as the medium for such a transformation. Roberts argues that "[t]he total work...cuts across the neat equation of avant-gardism with progress and deconstructs the familiar left-right divide between revolution and reaction, or between the modern and the anti-modern" (1-2).

combatant and nationalist-authoritarian leader in post-Soviet Russia. For Castorf, Limonov's trajectory reflects the disappointment and subsequent outrage felt by many citizens from the former East at the myth of capitalist "freedom." As such, Castorf's adaptation gives expression to the dangerous, titillating, yet resistant fantasies of the disenchanting.

By zeroing in on Limonov's political radicalization, Castorf exposes an important trend within postsocialist zones where liberal democracy has not yet firmly taken root, such as Russia or other non-EU countries in the Eastern Bloc. Notably, Fukuyama tapped into precisely this pattern too. He recognized that non-Western, illiberal nations often serve as terrain for ego-maniacal "*megalothymic*" types to live out their perceived "higher stakes" through revolutionary voluntarism and direct action. Fukuyama even claims that this is a good thing for liberal democracies if their "ambitions and energies" could be channelled *outside* of the West (318). Fukuyama argues that the "fact that a large historical world co-exists with the post-historical one means that the former will hold attractions for certain individuals precisely because it continues to be a realm of struggle, war, injustice and poverty (318). In the postsocialist context, these terrains constitute an "other" to the West and provide a space of more authentic and vital forms of existence. The artist-provocateur Limonov himself had to migrate from one subversive terrain to another in his quest to locate authentic revolutionary dynamism and political resistance. This quest drives him from the Soviet Union to New York City in the mid 1970s, and then back again to the more dramatic zones of real war and conflict within former Socialist Bloc nations in the 1990s and 2000s. Both the totalitarian contours of Limonov's political interventions, and the disorienting politics of Castorf's dramaturgy, could each be interpreted as a provocative play with explosive signifiers. However, they also mark a "passion for the real" that Badiou claims characterizes the action-oriented and life-affirming stakes of the historical avant-gardes.

Castorf sees Limonov as *both* artworld *enfant terrible* and as real-life revolutionary-turned-authoritarian. As such, Limonov personifies an affinity between avant-gardes and dictators outlined by Groys. Through Limonov, Castorf processes the reactionary longings that he believes emerge from the experience of American imperialism. Moreover, Castorf situates Limonov in the tradition of French *poète maudit* Arthur Rimbaud, as well as the reactionary modernists Ernst Jünger and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. As Castorf describes it, these writers all rejected their petit bourgeois milieus for the bohemian peripheries of bourgeois society, only to be seduced by a life of even more intense and vital extremes.

I begin this chapter with an analysis of Castorf's *Fuck Off, Amerika*—first by providing context for the adaptation and then describing Limonov's novel and political career in more detail. I emphasize what made Limonov's biography optimal material for Castorf and the Volksbühne in accordance with the politics of the Russian Turn. Moving on to Castorf's staging of *Fuck Off, Amerika*, I start with a brief discussion of the designer Jonathan Meese's scenography and then embark on a close reading of the performance based on video footage from March 30, 2008. After describing the production, I turn to the paratext. Here I look at Castorf's inclusion of the NBP's political tracts and other extremist texts included in the program booklet. All additional materials I consulted including the *Inzenierungsdokumentation* (production documentation) were located in the archives of the *Akademie der Künste* in Berlin. The next section marks a shift in my analysis from Castorf's theatrical staging to his reception of Limonov as a political figure. I discuss Limonov's transgressive authoritarianism and his subversive play with totalitarian aesthetics. I situate Limonov and the aesthetics of the NBP in the tradition of postsocialist performance and citation practices, including overidentification and aesthetic repetition. Finally, I show how Limonov's biographical trajectory is emblematic of the

core avant-garde trait that Alain Badiou defines as “the passion of ‘the Real’”—to move away from the bourgeois “semblance” of art into a terrain of authentic, life-changing *action*.

Eduard and Editchka

Limonov’s *Fuck Off, Amerika* depicts a life of desperation and erotic transgression in mid-1970s New York City. The fictional memoir is written in the first person by a dissident Soviet poet named Eduard, referred to by his diminutive “Editchka.” Editchka is Limonov’s alter-ego, who has recently immigrated to America with his wife Helena seeking fame or at least the ability to write freely after too many run-ins with the KGB. Editchka’s rambling Bukowski-esque inner monologue reveals a narcissistic artist who is frequently self-parodying. The novel also describes a cast of Russian émigrés living alongside Editchka in the run-down Winslow Hotel in New York City, sharing in his disillusionment with the American Dream and disdain for so-called Western “freedom.” In Editchka’s view, America corrupts people from birth and fails to recognize his greatness. At the time of its publication, the novel unleashed a scandal in the literary world for its almost-pornographic depictions of sex and frank treatment of homosexuality. It also exposed the miserable conditions of Russian émigrés living in America and debunked the myth of free speech, as it revealed the American media’s refusal to publish Russian writers who criticized the American way of life.

In Limonov’s *Fuck Off, Amerika*, we get an anti-hero full of *ressentiment* and hatred for the petit bourgeois. Editchka’s welfare-collecting lifestyle in America is similar to life in the U.S.S.R. during Brezhnev’s “era of stagnation” (1964-1982), where a common unofficial slogan was, “[w]e pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us.” It is the fiction of these superpowers’ rhetorical claims, as well as the banality of life under them that compels Editchka to actively search for vestiges of artistic or political vitality. In America, Editchka locates these within the

fissures of the capitalist system, amongst Black, queer, marginalized or eccentric individuals. Only those individuals inhabiting society's peripheries can represent a potential source of revolutionary uprising against the American capitalist system.

In true, punk form, Editchka collects welfare checks from the American government and feels superior to the middle class, whom he despises — “Because you lead dull lives, sell yourselves into the slavery of work, because of your vulgar plaid pants, because you make money and have never seen the world. You're shit!” (Limonov 5).¹⁴¹ Throughout the novel, he oscillates between poetic sensitivity and narcissistic rage. After his wife Helena leaves him for wealthy older men with drugs, money and cars, Editchka continually bemoans the “coldness” of capitalism. He wanders around New York in search of kindred spirits, forging alliances with fellow outcasts and “losers” and engages in numerous flings with women and men alike. Unlike Helena, Editchka's preference in men is not for wealthy WASP Upper East Side Manhattanites, but rather for “strong” and “dangerous” African Americans from the derelict downtown Lower East Side with whom he feels an implicit kinship.

While he forges solidarities with the outcasts of American society, Editchka simultaneously feels alienated from the Russian émigré intelligentsia. The latter are pro-Western democracy with disdainfully conservative taste in art and literature. Although he too despises the Soviet Union, he finds their anti-Stalinist views and their reverence for dissident writers such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *boring*. As an affront to their sensibilities, Editchka calls himself

¹⁴¹ Here, Editchka's inner monologue mirrors Nietzsche's discourse in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. For Nietzsche, liberal democratic society did not constitute a synthesis of the morality of the master and the morality of the slave, as Hegel had claimed, but rather the victory of the slave and the slave morality. The individual in liberal democratic society had abandoned their natural pride or belief in their superiority in favour of comfort and self-preservation. This individual was oriented solely towards desire and reason, but lacking in *megalothymia* (ego, pride, drive). Like Nietzsche, Editchka finds the self-contented, self-satisfied individuals of mainstream American society contemptuous “slaves” (Limonov 5).

“scum,” writes scathingly anti-American and pornographic texts, and decorates his hotel room with images of Mao Tse-tung, Patricia Hearst and André Breton, as well as posters for gay liberation and the American Workers Party.

After 264 pages, Limonov’s novel does not resolve but ends abruptly after what appears to be Editchka’s first year in America. In his tearful and rage-filled final lines, Editchka threatens to join an anti-imperialist insurgency or terrorist group—to die for a higher cause:

I may happen upon a group of armed extremists, renegades like myself, and perish in an airplane hijacking or a bank robbery. I may not, and I’ll go away somewhere, to the Palestinians, if they survive, or to Colonel Gaddafi in Libya, or someplace else—to lay down Eddie-baby’s life for a people, for a nation. (264).

As America failed to live up to its promises—which is to say, as the real-life Limonov failed to attain individual recognition (*Fuck Off, Amerika* was rejected by publishers thirty-five times)—and as Manhattan’s grittier downtown spaces failed to turn into zones of real combat and instead became chic art galleries, Limonov was compelled to migrate from the literary subculture of New York City into the political arena of post-Soviet Russia. His self-styled rebirth as politician occurred after years spent in Paris starting in 1980, where he finally achieved relative literary success for *Fuck Off, Amerika* and contributed to *L’idiot international*—a controversial publication that proposed a revitalization of the French Left through the convergence of ultra-nationalist and communist ideas. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Limonov returned to Russia and in 1993 formed the NBP uniting the extremes of Far-Right and Far-Left in opposition to the “democratic” rule of Boris Yeltsin.

Under the auspices of his leadership, Limonov penned books that delineated his vision for a new Russian-Eurasian territory. For example, all women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five would be forced to give birth to four children. The males would be given to the

state for training in the military arts and poetry.¹⁴² Limonov's visions of warrior men and fertile young women convey a political line that seemed to unite ideas from Plato's *Republic* and Nietzsche's *Will to Power*—a masculinist-heroic warrior ideal that Limonov himself sought to personify in the 1990s as a real-life volunteer combatant in Bosnia, Crimea and Moldova. Limonov promised his young followers—the *nazbols*—a “life of danger every day” (Bennett np.). “Rebellion must never end,” he proclaimed in a quote that was placed on the Volksbühne website, for “[a] healthy wild beast will fight when you put it in a cage.” This line paraphrases the “bad conscience” from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, wherein he describes an “animal which scraped itself raw against the bars of its cage, which people want to ‘tame,’ this impoverished creature, consumed with longing for the wild, which had to create out of its own self an adventure” (85). In Limonov's iteration, this caged animal fights back, frees itself from internalized guilt, and lives out his wild, Romantic, actionist adventure in a neo-feudal Russia.

The Stage Adaption of *Fuck Off, Amerika*

In his adaptation, Castorf makes explicit the link between the artist's alienation, humiliation and failure and his transformation into a political leader with authoritarian visions for a National Bolshevik-led Russia. Castorf's staging of Limonov's disillusionment with America and subsequent migration into extremist politics, gives this trajectory direct expression. Limonov personifies an illiberal reaction to what he perceives as a leveling of European humanity. What Castorf makes visible is the line of thinking—politically and existentially—that compelled Limonov to abandon his literary career and directly insert himself on the Serbian side of the Balkan war seeking action. For Castorf, Limonov's biography exemplifies an anti-

¹⁴² See Limonov's interview with *The Guardian* from 12 Dec 2010 <guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/12/Eduard-limonov-interview-putin-nightmare>.

imperialist struggle against the West and a nostalgia for the Soviet past—not for Gorbachev or Yeltsin’s democratizing efforts, but rather for a Soviet Union charged with the revolutionary energies of the avant-gardes and of great authoritarian leaders.

The Scenography

Jonathan Meese—an *enfant terrible* action-painter and performance artist—was invited into the Volksbühne fold by Neumann based on a shared aesthetic-political sensibility. Because Neumann himself was unavailable at the time of this production, Meese took on the role as scenographer. Meese’s artistic *persona* is not unlike those modernist “bad boys” whose biographies feature prominently in Castorf’s corpus. For this production, Meese’s scenography was, much like Castorf’s directing, guided by an associative logic. The set for *Fuck Off, Amerika* represented a massive sinking ship dominated by a grand, lop-sided staircase invoking the Titanic. The ship motif was a furtherance of the Rimbaudian theme of *Le Bateau Ivre*, adapted by Paul Zech in ballad-form in 1920, which Piscator adapted at the Volksbühne in 1926 and Castorf staged at the third floor Studiobühne of the Volksbühne in 1988. The massive staircase was inclined slightly forward to reveal a deck area shaped in the outline of an iron cross, a Prussian military decoration under Otto von Bismarck and later appropriated by the Nazis. As a symbol borne of Prussian nationalism, the iron cross established a connection to the Soviet-oriented, albeit right wing German National Bolshevist movement of the 1920s.¹⁴³ The all-white set and white cross outline also clearly drew inspiration from the Russian Supremacists and,

¹⁴³ The German National Bolsheviks (led by Ernst Niekisch) wanted a German-Russian alliance rooted in a shared anti-liberalism and their resentment of Western democracies (see Herf 37). National Bolshevism was, at first, a current in the KPD and then the KAPD, which wanted to unite dissident nationalists with communists who rejected the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

more specifically, from the white-on-white geometric shapes of Kazimir Malevich.¹⁴⁴ Malevich's "supremacy of pure artistic feeling" and the Suprematists' aspiration to artistic dictatorship were later usurped by Stalin according to Boris Groys's study of the avant-garde's will to power (*The Total Art of Stalinism* 7). These concerns reflected Meese's own artistic *oeuvre*, which he calls the "Dictatorship of Art." The totalitarian symbols he incorporates (including the Hitler salute during his performances) become subordinated art material in the artwork's own will to power (*BAVO* 197).¹⁴⁵

Castorf's Stagecraft

Castorf's two-and-a-half-hour adaptation (without an intermission) debuted on February 29, 2008. The performance begins when the actors walk out onto the stage: five men and three women, who are all dressed in campy late 1970s and early 1980s disco-inspired outfits connoting the high period of Limonov's debauchery and excess in New York City. A cast of seven Russian émigrés, one of whom is played by the legendary Fassbinder actor Volker Spengler (a member of the Volksbühne ensemble), seat themselves around a large white table downstage left. As their banter indicates, they are nostalgic for Russia and disappointed in America, finding émigré life in the capitalist metropolis to be cold, depressing, and void of culture. For the first forty minutes of

¹⁴⁴ Suprematism (Russian: Супрематизм) was an art movement, focused on basic geometric forms, such as circles, squares, lines, and rectangles, painted in a limited range of colours. It was founded by Kazimir Malevich in Russia, around 1913. The term *suprematism* refers to an abstract art based upon "the supremacy of pure artistic feeling" rather than on visual depiction of objects. In sharp contrast to Constructivism, Suprematism embodies a profoundly anti-materialist, anti-utilitarian philosophy.

¹⁴⁵ Meese wrote a manifesto called "Dictatorship of Art" in 2008. In the 2011 monograph *Diktatur der Kunst*, Meese's work is described as follows: "With the nihilism of the disenfranchised, and a hint of play, Meese relentlessly rages against all historical and contemporary social orders, declaring them failed and henceforth completely redundant." Moreover, Meese also performed the Hitler Salute twice during a panel discussion about the art world's megalomania [*Größenwahn in der Kunst*] at the University of Kassel just before the launch of the *documenta* 2012. This led to a debate about whether declaring something as art guaranteed it a free ride outside the law (cf. *ibid.*). Meese was legally indicted, but later acquitted, because he was able to demonstrate that the action was part of a performance and not at all the expression of a political attitude (cf. *ibid.* and Ackermann 2014).

the performance the group drink beer, complain, cry on one another's shoulders, and exchange sordid tales directly extracted from Limonov's novel. They frequently declare in comic choral unison, "*scheiss Immigration!*" ("Fucking immigration!")—immigration serving as an allegory for the East's experience of Westernization after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In trademark Castorf style, the ensemble alternates between manically energized slapstick and melancholic *tristesse*. At the centre of the group is "Editchka"—a self-pitying, but endearing Soviet dandy played by Max Hopp, who is wearing white trousers, white shoes, and a loosely-tied pastel coloured bathrobe. Castorf's Editchka moans, whines and weeps, behaves restlessly or wallows comically around the stage. In a monologue recited directly to the audience, Editchka explains that his great tragedy is that his wife, Helena, has left him for sexual adventures with capitalist hedonists. Editchka recounts this with an ironic declamatory emotionalism taken from the stock character repertoire of the *Commedia dell'arte*. He speaks with a cracking falsetto voice, replete with flowery, minstrel-like hand gestures and small balletic jumps. As such, he recalls the lovelorn and athletic figure of the Harlequin. His performance takes on an absurd quality when, for example, he gives the audience a pathos-filled monologue, taken directly from the novel, about Helena's unused tampon. Throughout the first half of the production, Editchka manifests a kind of "pathetic aesthetic," namely the protagonist as anti-hero or "loser" and as sentimental Russian poet. His performance verges on idiocy—on the Russian Holy Fool archetype or *The Idiot's* Prince Myshkin, which Castorf describes as "typically Dostoevskyan" and "a form of resistance against the self-satisfied new-born liberalism" (qtd. in Hegemann, *Erniedrigung* 27).

The three campily dressed women, who have hitherto been observing Editchka from different positions around the stage and occasionally contributing their own tales from the

trenches of “*scheiss Immigration*,” suddenly gather around a piano tucked away downstage left. The musical director of the production, Timo Kreuser, begins to play Robert Schumann’s *Lied* from *Szenen Aus Goethes Faust*, “Du kanntest mich, o kleiner Engel.” The director’s book (*Regiebuch*) notes that Castorf’s idea behind this scene is, “finally some high culture in the ‘scheiss Immigration.’” The women take turns singing Gretchen’s aria. However, each is silenced by Editchka, who finds their singing of the *Lied* unbearably evocative and painful.

After this scene, the entire ensemble congregates centre stage and comically contorts their bodies to make the shapes of the letters “W-I-N-S-L-O-W”— “The Winslow” being the name of the seedy hotel where Editchka and the Russian émigrés are housed. After the pose has been struck and held with comical awkwardness, the ensemble collapses onto the floor while the accompanist plays a doleful Shostakovich piece on the piano. Game-playing, along with collective singing and chanting, feature strongly in this production. These are part of Castorf’s mandate to encourage the naïve, child-like play he associates with Schiller and the Marxist principle of freedom through “happy labouring.” Here, however, we see child-like play juxtaposed with the pathos of the beleaguered Soviet composer’s music. This represents the dialectic between utopian free and “happy labouring” and the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century under which this aspiration ultimately eventuated in the gulag.

This scene blends seamlessly into a Brechtian-type parable. One actor stands up, exits the stage, and then returns with his face and hands painted yellow. He imitates a Chinese accent and portrays Editchka’s busboy colleague, Wong. Here, Castorf parodies the Brechtian form—more specifically, Brecht’s racializing trope of the “mysterious” Chinese from “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” (1936). Wong gives a didactic monologue to the rest of the cast, who sit gathered around him on the floor in a semi-circle. The monologue is directly extracted from a

scene in the novel in which Editchka and Wong flip through a pornographic magazine and discuss the degree of sexual corruptibility of different ethnicities of women. Wong's didactic lesson to the rest of the cast—the Brechtian "*Lehre*"—is that Chinese women are incapable of corruption, whereas Japanese women are inherently willing to degrade themselves. Castorf retains the Brechtian tradition of acting "as if" but asserts the performance of ethnic identity as not just citation, but as a parody of Brecht's racializing categories. This is *not* to imply flawless race politics at Castorf's Volksbühne. The use of "yellow face" is emblematic of Castorf's flagrant disregard for the taboo around re-citing racializing tropes and the colonial histories they invoke. However, to be clear, Castorf is satirizing Brecht's own racial stereotypes, which were still caught up in what scholar Katrin Sieg (2002) describes as mimesis and exoticization (61). In this scene, *both* Editchka and Wong come off as vulgar misogynists. Castorf parodies Wong's ethno-centric misogyny and re-frames the whole Brechtian *Lehrstück* as outdated retro kitsch.

While the group is still seated on the floor, another actor dressed as a young, tough-looking punk in a black leather jacket takes Wong's place in front of the semi-circle and continues with the Brechtian *Lehre*. He explains to the group matter-of-factly that he has had a lifelong obsession with weapons, calling them "holy and sacred objects that can take life." He briefly walks off stage and then returns not with a weapon, but rather with a tiny ukulele, playing the instrument whilst delicately tiptoeing amidst the group and reciting Editchka's lines from the novel. He explains to the group, "[w]hat I hate first and foremost about this system . . . is that it corrupts people from birth. I made no distinction between the USSR and America." Here, Castorf highlights the comical discrepancy between Editchka's political virulence and his delicate, poetic constitution. What is clear, from all the talk of weapons and hate, is that the performance has just taken a darker turn with the introduction of scenes that exemplify

Editchka's more bellicose persona, which emerged with his real-life entrance into politics in the 1990s.

As the production progresses, various actors play Editchka (or could they also be *nazbols*, followers of Limonov and the National Bolshevik movement?). This is a testament to Castorf's Brechtian roots and his penchant for acting as citation and ensuring that distance is retained between character and actor. The pianist then begins to play the cynical Pet Shop Boys' pop song "I Love You, You're Paying my Rent." The actors stand up and contort their bodies into the numbers 1-2-1-9 (December 19)—the date Helena left Editchka. Castorf focuses, in large part, on the theme of the "betrayal" by Helena—a woman who, in Editchka's view, has been corrupted by America and seduced by capitalism's peddling of commodities and luxury. Helena personifies Castorf's "Faustian" theme on stage, having sold her "Russian soul" to the devil of American capitalism. She simultaneously serves as Editchka's once innocent, but now fallen, Gretchen (Faust's beloved), whose debasement at the hands of capitalist materialism he bemoans.

The director's book reveals that *Fuck Off, Amerika* was originally intended to be a "musical evening" centring on Robert Schumann's *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* (1853), which Castorf planned to title *FaustFaustFaust* and intersperse with vignettes taken from Limonov's novel. The Faustian deal is a recurring trope on Castorf's stage. In this production it serves as an allegory for the GDR's acceptance of Western imperialism in exchange for access to the American lifestyle and commodities. The Faustian theme is furthered in scenes parodying capitalist excess. In the next scene, the scenographer Meese—with his trademark long, gothic black hair and black Adidas jacket—enters the stage with a shopping cart heaped full of real fresh fruits, including an entire case of bananas. He proceeds to lay out all possible fruits that

were rare and “exotic” in the GDR. Meese’s banter directly addressing the audience about each type of fruit and stating that his only goal “is to eat cookies all day and chew gum at the same time”—is a parody of infomercials and the “decadence” of the American lifestyle. The inclusion of bananas is particularly symbolic, since bananas and West German Deutsch Marks were handed out to East Germans when they crossed the border into the West as the Berlin Wall was being dismantled on November 9 and 10, 1989.¹⁴⁶ During the *Wende*, bananas came to represent “freedom,” understood as access to a global, capitalist market of cheap consumer goods. Castorf summarized that situation as “[t]he East German soul gave up every form of solidarity but was prepared to work hard for every banana” (qtd. in Laudenbach 46).

Next there is a failed attempt at a sexual encounter between Editchka and Helena (played by Irina Kastrinidis) that takes place while she poses, provocatively with her legs splayed, in the shopping cart. Editchka then climbs into the cart with her and says, “Helena, you are not a whore. What I hate more than anything is this system that perverts people from birth. I have no shame in saying this hatred so obviously came from the personal reason that my wife betrayed me.” The Dostoevskyan theme of *Erniedrigung und Beleidigung*¹⁴⁷ is sublimated to the political level so that Castorf makes clear the link between humiliation—a trope used in the discourse of the Russian Turn as characteristic of life under capitalism—and his subsequent illiberal reaction

¹⁴⁶ Matt Cornish calls this the “lazzo of the East German and the banana” (131)—the lazzi being stock comedic routines that are traditionally associated with the *Commedia dell’arte*. Cornish emphasizes how political Castorf’s lazzi are—how they serve the Aristophanic tradition of satirizing the ruling elite. Cornish observes that the lazzo of the banana first emerges in Castorf’s *Rheinische Rebellen* in 1992, where a man wearing a bowler hat devours a banana, licks it, drops the peel, and then slips on it repeatedly whilst attempting to run across the stage. In Castorf’s production of *Golden/Wolokolamsker* (1996), the Schreivögel likewise repeatedly slips on a banana peel (131). Robin Detje, however, argues the lazzi are not political, “they are ornamental” (2005 16).

¹⁴⁷ *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte* (*The Humiliated and Insulted*) is the title of Dostoevsky’s 1861 novel, which Castorf adapted at the Volksbühne in 2001. Castorf explains, “The novel presents the social hierarchy and the division of human beings into winners and losers as natural Those who don’t possess anything, can still enjoy their humiliation.”

in the form of authoritarian politics. Faithful to the casual misogyny of Limonov's novel, Helena is also shown to be infinitely more poised for success in America than Editchka—more capable of embracing capitalism's soulless materialism, which is something the Russian male poet, de facto, cannot. "Editchka" is ultimately a hopeless romantic, now disillusioned by a world he perceives as both corrupted and corrupting.

As a source of humour at Editchka's expense, strong sexually emancipated women and capitalism pose the greatest threat to his masculinity and dignity. This theme plays out in a highly typical Castorfian trope in which women dominate and humiliate men in fumbling, awkward sexual encounters. Given the putative influence of psychoanalysis on Castorf's work, this type of scene also manifests male castration anxieties, perhaps stemming from the empowered GDR model of womanhood under which Castorf came of age.¹⁴⁸ Across Castorf's productions, powerful and virtuosic female actors dominate men sexually and otherwise, whilst performing athletic feats in stiletto heels on stage.¹⁴⁹ These notorious Volksbühne "furies"¹⁵⁰ are highly performative and citational in their gender roles, taking the performance of femininity to the point of camp (or better, "vamp camp") and ruling the stage with commanding presences while the men fumble and embarrass themselves.

Castorf turns the most infamous scene in Limonov's novel—the sex scene between Editchka and a Black man named Chris, whom he encounters one night in a vacant parking lot—

¹⁴⁸ The male anxiety and fear of "being weakened by the woman, infected with her femininity and showing himself incapable [of an erection]" (Freud, 1918, 249-250). The threat of castration was also used as a trope to express the pressure put on the West German standard of living by the East German masses. See for example Lewis: "Unity Begins Together: Analyzing the Trauma of German Unification" in *New German Critique* 64 (1995), 149.

¹⁴⁹ Detje claims sarcastically that in Castorf's work "men desperately try to wrestle themselves out of the grip of women's long legs. Men must carry these women on their backs, which looks like hard work. As soon as the men make their entrance, women running wild jump into their arms and it looks like a horrible fate to bear. Often the men collapse under the onslaught. Again, and again, we catch them literally with their pants down. They are always ridiculous and never have any fun" (2005 16).

¹⁵⁰ Behrendt, Eva. "Frauen in Scheiss-Kostümen." *Theater Heute*, Volume 43, 2002, 4.

into outrageous parody and textual collage.¹⁵¹ Their tryst was recounted in detail in the novel in order to scandalize the literary establishment. With its romantic inflection, however, the scene underscores Editchka's ultimate search for love and human warmth in a soulless America. In the novel, Editchka also claims that the erotic encounter is motivated by "some unconscious instinct...a craving for death" (77). The fact that Chris is "likely a criminal" (77) makes their encounter even more thrilling. In his production, Castorf combines Editchka's sexual encounter with Limonov's political tracts written in the 1990s and published in the NBP organ, *Limonka*. Here, the legendary Volksbühne actor Sophie Rois now plays Editchka and Rosalind Baffoe, the only Black member of the cast, plays Chris. The scene begins with the two women, both dressed in glamorous late 1970s eveningwear and stiletto heels, wrestling on the floor downstage, with Chris/Baffoe trying to strangle Editchka/Rois. Editchka suddenly stops, sits up, and explains to the audience that s/he has long been "aesthetically curious" about Black men's penises.¹⁵² S/he then professes her love and proposes eternal partnership to Chris, clearly seeing their homosexual union as an alternative to the women s/he now perceives as uniformly debased.

The two begin to enact over-the-top orgasmic gestures, while Chris recites lines from Limonov's NBP manifesto, "I have a dream." The tract refers to Martin Luther King's iconic

¹⁵¹ Notably, the French title of the novel was *Le poète russe préfère les grands nègres* (*The Russian Poet prefers Big Blacks*, 1980), referring to Limonov's graphically described homosexual encounter in a parking lot with Chris. That encounter conveys the thrilling possibility of transgressing bourgeois norms and exemplifies the homoeroticism that permeates the novel.

¹⁵² This "aesthetic curiosity" is obviously underwritten by the West's curiosity around and appropriation of Black bodies. Black men have been exoticized, sexualized and dehumanized by the West through Eurocentric discourses that legitimized colonization and slavery by othering—precisely the kind undertaken so flagrantly by Editchka here. However, as an anti-Western anti-imperialist, Limonov perceives himself to be in solidarity with the racialized other, including them in his quasi-fascist vision of Russian society (which celebrated the exceptionalism of outcasts and wished to unite all marginalized peoples). Editchka's erotic encounter with Chris is not only a rejection of heteronormativity, but a solidarity formed against the structures of power reproduced by mainstream, petit bourgeois society.

speech in title only, and instead outlines a Revolutionary Romantic, “Eurasian” vision for Russian peoples on behalf of the NBP:

We have to abandon Russia, build a new homeland on the fresh soils of Central Europe, and conquer it and found a new civilization of free fighters there, assembled together in an armed community, which roam the steppes and mountains and fight in southern lands. . . . Many types of people will have to disappear. . . . The cops. Bureaucrats and other flawed material will lose their roots in society and die out. This armed community can be called Eurasia. People will die young and happy. Our gods will be ones who grant us death. Martin Luther King’s I have a dream. But his dream was impoverished and sickly. (AdK, Berlin, Inszenierungs-DK 1083)

Here, Limonov’s “dream” emerges as an inversion of King’s peaceful and egalitarian “dream.”

Limonov would see the latter as anemic and sclerotic—emblematic of effete liberal egalitarianism that lacks the will to power. In Limonov’s “dream,” which Chris shouts out ecstatically, “a new folk will be selected. Not based on hair or eye colour, but on courage and loyalty to our community” (AdK, Berlin, Inszenierungs-DK 1083). What the NBP hoped to establish was a “Eurasian” territory wherein an elite martial community of fearless, death-embracing youth would reign.

This scene then seamlessly morphs into a five-minute long sex orgy when Editchka and Chris move from downstage close to the audience into a bunker-type space hidden underneath the massive staircase that dominates the stage. The entire auditorium darkens. Video close-ups of faces and body parts of the hidden bunker are projected onto the white backdrop of the staircase. Meanwhile, the entire set begins to slowly rotate so that we can now see inside the room while above it, a large video screen amplifies the action. At this point, “Sonya,” one of Editchka’s lovers in the novel, has joined in. The actors, who are now engaged in a pseudo-pornographic orgy, take turns reciting from Limonov’s “Die Aprilthesen” (“April Theses”), published in

Limonka in 1994 (AdK, Berlin, Inszenierungs-DK 1083).¹⁵³ The theses list “significant dates” in the month of April for revolutionaries, dictators and terrorists, who comprise Limonov’s pantheon of heroes. Included are the dates of a Baader-Meinhof terrorist action; the birthday of the writer Comte de Lautrémont (an avowed idol of André Breton and the Surrealists); Alexander Newski’s Patriot Act from the year 1242; Lenin’s birthday; and finally, the birthday of Hitler, who is “the most wanted dinner guest of 57% of Americans. Hitler was, in the first place, a creative person, a bohemian” (“*Die Aprilthesen*”). While the dates listed in the “April Theses” are being shouted by the three ecstatic orgy-participants, another young cast member (Christoph Letkowski), dressed as a classic rock n’ roll rebel in jeans and a black leather jacket, stands on the white staircase and begins playing The Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil” live on guitar—a song inspired by Castorf’s favourite Russian *Faust*-themed novel, *The Master and Margarita* (1967). The montage makes explicit the connection between rock n’ roll rebellion and Limonov’s political fantasies: both are ultimately driven by Batailleian forms of erotic transgression that lead to the temporary dissolution of the individual.

Castorf is interested in the tension between the individual and the collective for the artist specifically and in their quest for immortality. These concepts are outlined in psychoanalyst Otto Rank’s *Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development* (1932), excerpts of which Castorf has included in the program book. Rank, a disciple of Freud, posited the “urge to immortality” as the artist’s deepest drive. Rank lays his position out as a dialectic between the

¹⁵³ The publication *Limonka* was the official organ of the NBP. The name, *Limonka*, is a play of words on the party’s founder adopted surname “Limonov” and idiomatic Russian for hand-grenade. *Limonka* reproduced the aggressive and direct style of the Soviet propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s and the aesthetics of the revolutionary political poster. Party slogans – provocative, politically incorrect, sometimes ironic, were printed vertically in big letters on the first page of each issue. Each issue contained one of Limonov’s political tracts. Verbal “hand grenades” were aimed at political opponents, intellectuals, governmental leaders, even the Russian intelligentsia in its entirety (Fenghi 189).

artist *as individual* and the collective ideology. Rank claims that the artist channels the collective through their artwork but refuses to dissolve into it. It is through the artwork that the artist achieves the immortality they are ultimately seeking:

The artwork presents not only a unity of form and content, but also a unity of personal and collective ideology. An artist is an individual who cannot or will not serve the prevailing immortality ideology, be it religious or social or otherwise, not because it is different from his own, but because it is collective, while what he strives for is an individual immortality in a collective way. (qtd. in AdK, Berlin, Inszenierungs-DK 1083)

In a way that aligns with Rank's delineation of the artist's urge to immortality, both Castorf and Limonov refuse socialism's programmatic dissolution of the individual into the Party. Castorf uses Rank to foreground the existential dimension of the artist's quest that is achieved by the artist's *apartness* from society and their "anti-sociality." Rank identifies the paradox that "[a]t the height of the individuating impulse, the 'will to separate,' artists feel most strongly the longing for attachment, the 'will to unite'" (1929–31, 155). By exploring this theme, Castorf contests the artist's position under socialism that subordinates the creative impulse to the collective. This theme avows Castorf's concurrent rehearsing of Brecht and Müller's *Die Massnahme/Mauser*, which premiered at the Volksbühne on March 19, 2008. It should be understood as Castorf's stance against Brecht's *Lehre* or lesson: the sacrifice of the individual to the will of the Marxist-Leninist Party.

The comically drawn-out orgy now underway in the ship's bunker also serves as satire of the absurdity of sexual relations in America. In Editchka's view, sex under capitalism undermines the rhetoric of sexual emancipation in the West, since apparently the only "free" aspect to life under American capitalism is entry into the marketplace upon which Helena has sold herself. As Castorf stages it, sex under the aegis of capitalism is a mechanical performance

of “sheer inexhaustibility.” It is akin to how he described Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s public appearances in the 1990s (Schütt 11).

After this outrageous scene, the performance takes a much darker turn, focusing on motifs culled from Limonov’s real-life political career. Two young punks enter the stage (played by Sebastian König und Christoph Letkowski) rhapsodizing about weaponry and lust for war and battle. They are described in the director’s book as “young athletic men” and represent *nazbols*, the followers of the NBP. The two begin the scene by each holding the end of a large red National Bolshevist Flag and spinning around as in a children’s game. They then exchange lines such as, “[a]re you an extremist?”, to which the other answers, “[y]es, I am an extremist for our beloved time.” Or, “where is the machine gun?” to which the other answers, “it is stored in the Cathedral of Hate.” The two men then load a real anti-aircraft cannon, place it on a podium, and begin firing into the audience. This is a citation of a scene from the documentary film *Serbian Epics* (1992) by Pawel Pawlikowski. In the film, the real-life Limonov is seen cavorting with Serbian war criminal Radovan Karadžić (known as the “butcher of Bosnia”) and shooting down into the besieged city of Sarajevo. Limonov later claimed that the footage was tampered with and that he was, in fact, at a shooting range. Notably, Karadžić is a self-described poet and therefore personifies the *dichter*-dictator etymological connection that characterizes Limonov as well.

The sounds of the firing of a machine gun from the stage blends into the darkening of the auditorium. Black and white silent documentary film footage is projected onto the ship’s white staircase. The footage shows Limonov meeting with shadowy-looking men dressed in military regalia. It evokes Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) by virtue of being set against the backdrop of a ship and by showcasing a massive staircase—two iconic locations in the film. One of the actors, Rois, stands beside the piano and somberly sings Shostakovich’s “Russland du

mein Volk” to live piano accompaniment. The dark, heavy-sounding piano piece shares in socialist and nationalist connotations.

Immediately after the documentary footage, two young *nazbols* enter the stage and recite lines that Castorf has taken directly from Limonov’s 2003 book, *The Other Russia*. The lines are spoken directly to the audience without any hint of irony, but venomously and with force:

PUNK 1. That the West is a monster, which mercilessly eats alive any alternatives—both individuals, as well as nations with an alternative worldview—is something I have known for a long time from my own experience. That coward Gorbachev paved the way for his enemy [America] into his only ally Iraq. This brought about the fall of all alternative-minded leaders.

PUNK 2. Serbia should bring the war into all Western European and American lands. They should conduct terrorist attacks on the London metro and the New York subway. This will force the Western enemy to keep its paws out of Serbia.

PUNK 1: If NATO and the WEST want to wage war they should stop attacking from the air like cowards. They should put troupes on the ground and fight for real.

This type of polemical exchange continues for a few minutes. Limonov’s text evidently reflects Castorf’s own position, thus furthering the possibility that Limonov serves as Castorf’s alter ego. In a 1999 interview with Peter Laudenbach, Castorf claimed that the NATO air strikes were hypocritical—undertaken in the name of “human rights” that had no real existence in Western liberal societies: “Violations of human rights occur every day at the Hamburg train station when 12-year-olds have to sell their asses for money, and we don’t do anything” (Castorf qtd. in Laudenbach 41). Castorf went on to state that “[t]he human right to live, to have a roof over one’s head, to work, those are all disavowed in the free world in which we are living. That makes the [NATO] bombings in the name of human rights so deplorable” (39).

The performance of *Fuck Off, Amerika* does not definitively end so much as unravel into scenes that have by now lost any coherent relation to the novel or to narrative more generally. In the penultimate scene, Editchka, again played by Rois, leads the ensemble in the acapella singing

of an upbeat Italian pop song, “Piove” by Jovetti, at the end of which she mumbles audibly to herself, “[m]aybe I’ll end up an extremist or a bank robber. I’m ready for anything, people. I’ll show you! I’ll do it, you cocksuckers, you piece of shit. Fuck Off!” Rois paraphrases the final lines of Limonov’s novel where he vows to abandon his “decadent” bohemian punk lifestyle for a radical political cause in Palestine or Libya.

In the production’s final scene, Editchka, once again played by Max Hopp, is wheeled out from the bunker in his own personal rocket ship and time-traveling machine. With a dead pan voice and blank expression, he sings the refrain from an iconic GDR children’s TV show, *Unsere Sandmännchen (Our Sandman)*, invoking the Sandman character who uses futuristic cars and flying devices to display awe-inspiring technological feats. After singing this sweet socialist lullaby, Editchka suddenly begins screaming “fuck off!” from inside the tiny enclosed rocket and banging on the glass roof enclosure. At the play’s perplexing conclusion, Castorf stages Limonov’s megalomania as a kind of “pathetic aesthetic,” at the same time as he parodies the trope of the heroic Soviet cosmonaut colonizing outer space. The strange and melancholic ending is typical of Castorf. As Hegemann points out, Castorf is “mostly sad and hopeless in his productions, but never lets them end in a moralising or didactic way” (181).

In fact, Castorf is deliberate about not leaving spectators with any idea of how they are supposed to interpret Limonov or the production. This refusal to control meanings and provide closure evokes Bakhtin’s concept of the novel’s “centrifugal” forces discussed in the previous chapter. All possible interpretations are accommodated as the inherent appeal of novel’s more open form.

“On Revolutionary Personalities”

Fuck Off, Amerika represents a consistent theme in Castorf’s work: the narcissistic fantasies of an artistically inclined, but disenchanting petit bourgeois young man, who rejects the confines of a conformist society for more exuberant experiences on the peripheries of a rationally ordered society. This trajectory is a well-trodden one by bohemians and avant-gardists alike: First, *he* (this is a highly gendered phenomenon in Castorf) embraces the margins of society as a poet or writer. Eventually, he wishes to infuse his life with adventure and higher meaning and therefore embarks on foreign escapades or embraces revolutionary or reactionary politics. Castorf refers to the prototype as the mid-19th century French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891). Rimbaud “was a model for the young expressionists, participated in the Paris Commune, had a homoerotic relationship with Verlaine, destroyed Verlaine’s family...then became an arms dealer in Africa” (qtd. in Schütt 117). According to Castorf, he was a “betrayal of the expectations of bourgeois existence” (117). Rimbaud chose to “take off into anarchism” (117). He, along with those reactionary modernist writers whom Castorf frequently cites, namely Jünger and Céline, came to represent the destructive side of anti-bourgeois rebellion in the literary imagination. In the cases of both Rimbaud and Jünger, the writer willingly embraces the risk of death in order to revitalize an otherwise sclerotic existence. What characterizes the revolutionary personality is his antagonism towards the bourgeois establishment. While Rimbaud first oriented himself towards the proletarian Left, Jünger was part of ultra-nationalist circles during the Weimar Republic, eventually making his contribution to a worker-oriented Futurist politics in *Der Arbeiter* (1932). What Rimbaud and Jünger share is an existential concern with living a vitality-fueled life.

Homosexuality or homoeroticism is a strong aspect of this type. In the case of Editchka, his encounter with Chris represents not only a cathartic release from obsession with Helena, but also his commitment to the margins. His recounting of sex with Chris was a deliberate provocation towards a racist and homophobic literary establishment, and simultaneously an ode to the poetics of erotic transgression. Not only is Editchka aroused by the primal physical power of male sexuality, he is especially excited by the risk of death. Moreover, Castorf's satirical interpretation of the novel's notorious sex scene makes visible the paradox that ultra-nationalist movements in Germany had queer dimensions. In Limonov's oeuvre, as well as in Castorf's, the union of masculinist ultra-nationalism and homosexuality is a provocative recitation of a fascist trope—the strange convergence of homophobia and homoeroticism that exposes the inherent contradictions of fascism. The fact that Castorf has two women playing Chris and Editchka further deconstructs the highly gendered contours of this masculinist type, turning the scene into parody and gender performativity.

In “On Revolutionary Personalities,” a political tract written in *Limonka*, Limonov asserts that it is not the stable proletarians who will launch a revolution, but rather the “wild ones”—the bohemians, eccentrics and outsiders that are the true agents of revolution. Limonov explains it thus:

The most revolutionary personality is the outsider: a unique, maladjusted person on the peripheries of society, a talented sadist, fanatic, psychopath and loser. One should not think that there can be too many of them in a revolutionary party. There are enough outsiders, there are hundreds of thousands. That is an entire social class! The NBP does not work with the masses. It makes no attempt to turn workers into zombies. You can facilitate 100 years of propaganda with workers and they will never make a revolution happen. A revolution needs the wild ones! (“AdK *Inszenierungs*-DK 151, 1)

Here, Limonov establishes an aristocracy of eccentrics, punks and outcasts as the core membership of the NBP. The Slavophile philosopher Aleksandr Dugin believes that among these

marginal groups one would find the future members of a new intellectual counter-elite, which would be able to lead Russia out of its current ideological and spiritual crisis (Fenghi 190). This is something Castorf refers to when discussing *Dämonen*. He sees Stavrogin as precisely this type of decadent dandy and social outsider who would be the natural leader of a revolutionary terrorist cell. In the novel, Shigalyev attempts to recruit Stavrogin because of the destructive force of his charismatic nihilism.

Further on, Limonov's tract claims that, "Gorbachev and Yeltsin ruined a powerful state founded by the genius of crazies, sadists and poets." This line could have come directly from Castorf, who asserted a similar position about the GDR being co-opted by "a group of lowbrow petit bourgeois" (qtd. in Raddatz 20). As such, both Castorf and Limonov assert the bohemian roots and avant-garde energies (or will to power) of the socialist utopian state, which was thwarted and banalized by small-minded bureaucrats.

What interests Castorf about Limonov is his commitment to direct action, voluntarism and to dismantling the barrier between art and life. Limonov is directly opposed to the stagnation and conformism represented by both the Soviet Union and America. Nietzsche of course believed that no true human greatness or excellence was possible in societies that held egalitarianism as an ideal. Individual greatness could only emerge from *megalothymia*, which, as discussed in Chapter One, Fukuyama defines as "the desire to be recognized as better than others" (304).¹⁵⁴ This is opposed to the *isothymia* or radical equality that underwrites the agenda of communism (314) and *thymos* or individual dignity and self-esteem that underwrites liberal

¹⁵⁴ This desire, Fukuyama explains, is "not merely the basis of conquest and imperialism, it is also the precondition for the creation of anything else worth having in life, whether great symphonies, paintings, novels, ethical codes or political systems" (304).

democracy (xvi-xvii).¹⁵⁵ Fukuyama emerges as a cautious supporter of Nietzsche in his assertion that some degree of *megalothymia* is a necessary precondition not only for innovation, excellence and creativity, but for life itself (315). This desire is not “merely the basis of conquest and imperialism, it is also the precondition for the creation of anything else worth having in life” (304). According to Fukuyama “[i]ndividuals like Lenin and Trotsky, striving for something that is ‘purer and higher’, are therefore more likely to arise in societies dedicated to the proposition that all men are *not* created equal. Democratic societies [are] dedicated to the opposite proposition” (305). Their egalitarian vision for society (*isothymia*) could not have been imposed if not for the force of their *megalothymia*, their striving and will to power. Fukuyama claims that to make a revolution and create an entirely new society requires an individual who is hard, ruthless and brilliant, qualities that the early Bolsheviks possessed in abundance (305). The paradox is that the type of society the Bolsheviks were striving for “sought to abolish the ambitions and characteristics that they themselves possessed” (305). According to Fukuyama, leftist movements—and here we can add the sectarian avant-gardes—all eventually encounter crises over the “cult of personality” of their leaders (305).

It is Fukuyama, associated with the defense of liberal democracies, who emphatically suggests that if liberal societies are successful at purging *megalothymia* from life and substituting it with rational consumption, all individuals risk becoming Nietzschean “last men” (314). Here, Fukuyama and Castorf paradoxically align. Fukuyama argues that human beings “will rebel at the idea of being undifferentiated members of a universal and homogenous state” (314). They

¹⁵⁵ Here, Fukuyama draws on Plato’s *Republic*, where he noted that the soul had three parts: the desiring, the rational and a part he called *thymos* (“spiritedness”). Of the latter, Fukuyama writes “human beings seek recognition of their own worth, or of the people, things, or principles that they invest with worth. The propensity to invest the self with a certain value, and to demand recognition for that value, is what in today’s popular language we would call ‘self-esteem’” (xvi-xvii).

will want to be “citizens rather than bourgeois, finding a life of masterless slavery in the end boring” (314). They will also “want to have ideals by which to live and die. . . and they will want to risk their lives even if the international state system has succeeded in abolishing the possibility of war” (314). According to Fukuyama, *thymos* is the side of the individual that seeks out struggle and sacrifice to prove that the self is something higher than a fearful, pathetic, dependent creature (304). The danger is if we are dissatisfied with ourselves, we risk dragging the world back into history and its wars, injustice and revolution (312). Fukuyama is attuned to the way nations outside of the West become terrains wherein these individuals’ quests can be played out. For Castorf and Limonov, post-Soviet Russia serves as a conceptual expanse wherein this type of individual can still live with abandon and higher existential stakes. However, Castorf is highly attuned to this pattern as a form of dangerous illiberal reaction that Fukuyama perceives. By staging the trajectory of Limonov’s life from humiliated “scum” to authoritarian politician, Castorf elucidates the darker aspects of this “revolutionary” artistic personality.

Limonov’s Passion for the Real

As discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation, the historic avant-garde drive the aesthetics of Castorf’s Volksbühne, and this is perhaps most apparent in *Fuck Off, Amerika*. For Badiou, what characterizes the avant-garde of the early 20th century is that it “does not hesitate to sacrifice the image so that the real may finally arise in the artistic gesture” (*The Century* 132). The avant-garde wished to go further than previous artists had in the eradication of semblance (the “*schöner Schein*”), mimesis, representation, narrative etc.—to “live out their passion for the real” (132). What was at stake for the avant-garde was, according to Badiou, *life itself* (134). In other words, the stakes for the depressed and melancholic avant-gardiste “type” was the question of whether life was worth living at all (141). Badiou pits the decision to *act*, to rebel, or to risk

against those who say that rebellion is pointless, especially after repeated evidence in the 20th century that rebellion only leads to violence and terror.

According to Badiou—here citing the Surrealist André Breton—for the avant-garde, “[r]ebellion is its own justification, completely independent of the chance it has to modify the state of affairs that gives rise to it” (144). Individuals who say that this risk is not worth the wager, that rebellion or revolt are pointless, are what Breton calls “miserable priests,” personae of resignation (144). For Badiou, the miserable priest is “anyone for whom rebellion is no longer an unconditional value,” one who “measure[s] everything in terms of ‘objective’ results” (145). Badiou argues that the avant-gardes, for all their programmatic pronouncements in the form of manifestos, were oriented entirely around action in the present. They believed in the transformative power of the radical gesture. They wanted there to be a “pure present” for art—one that refused to consider future meanings or outcomes so much as to channel direct force into a struggle against “sclerosis and death” (134). Repetition is the dreaded enemy—everything grows dull and torpid by repetition. According to Badiou, this renders the avant-gardes categorically Romantics, rather than Hegelians, because of their belief that “art is the highest destination of the subject” (135). Hegel thought art had already achieved its golden age in Greek classicism, by which he meant that “[a]rt [was] no longer the privileged historical form for the presentation of the absolute Idea” (135). The avant-gardes, by contrast, believed that the golden age of art is always right now (134). Their manifestos created the envelope for an absolute present—for *action*—to house a vital spark, a pure present (144).¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Other directors and artists at the Volksbühne fold have manifested similar themes (e.g. Meese, Schligensief, Vinge), identifying themselves with the losers and outsiders of society. They often thematize the existential conceits that underwrite the avant-gardes’ fantasies of direct action and affecting real symbolic terror (i.e. the Surrealists claimed that the ultimate artwork was to take a gun to the street; composer Karlheinz Stockhausen called 9/11 the “greatest artwork of all time”). This was why 9/11 was self-reflexively thematized at the Volksbühne with the

Castorf's production gives direct expression to Limonov's time in New York City as a *failed* poet and "loser," and his transformation into direct action, authoritarian politician in post-Soviet Russia. For Badiou, injury and abjection are preconditions to inciting life-changing action—the change from *ressentiment* to the full expression of vitality and exuberance (142). Like Badiou, Castorf demonstrates that an "ordinary life" will never breed "bewitching excess or a creative rebellion" (142-143). One can only pass from a negative excess of "what has been suffered and inflicted, a terrible negative sign – to a positive one, the hard-won possibility of celebrating what 'makes life worth living'" (143). This alchemical inversion of the sign of excess from a negative to a positive is what Breton, an avowed idol of Limonov, calls "rebellion" (143). Indeed, if for Badiou, "[a]rt can no longer be conceived without an element of violent aesthetic militancy" (135), then we see this most clearly in Limonov's transgressive authoritarianism.

Transgressive Authoritarianism

The real-life Limonov was ultimately unable to live out his artistic and political ideals in America. However, he found within the post-Soviet Eastern Bloc a liminal terrain wherein ongoing crisis and conflict offered him the vitality he sought. His political line was furthered through provocative statements maligning Western Europe in the press, a performative strategy that echoes Castorf's. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2010, for example, Limonov juxtaposed Europe's "repressive" politically correct culture with Russia's freedom and vitality. Limonov asserted that, "Europeans are so timid they remind me of sick and elderly people. There is so much political correctness and conformity [in Europe] that you can't open your mouth. It's

"Attainismus Seminar" from December 2-20, 2002 and featuring the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. Therein, the connection between the avant-gardes and terrorism was explored. The conference anticipated Schlingenseif's production *ATTA ATTA—Art has broking out!* which premiered on January 23, 2003. Both in the persona of the director and in the politics of his aesthetics, the avant-gardiste's "passion for the real" refuses closure at Castorf's Volksbühne.

worse than prison. In Russia, fortunately, the people still have some barbarian spirit.” This “barbarian spirit”—a Romantic fantasy of a wild and unfettered “East” where action, adventure and violence abound—becomes, for Limonov, a space for heroic action and anti-Western resistance. His “barbarian imaginary” is an extension of the Slavophile worldview of Russian writers in the anti-Western, pan-Slavic tradition such as Dostoevsky, so admired by Castorf.

With the founding of the NBP in Russia in 1993, Limonov came to embody the features of an authoritarian leader. Limonov outlines the NBP’s totalitarian program in “I have a dream”:

After the seizure of power, the NBP will carry out far-reaching revolutionary changes in Russia. It will build a totalitarian state. The law of nations must precede human rights. In the countryside, an iron Russian order is being established, creating a climate of discipline, mercilessness, and a love of labour. (“I have a dream.” In: AdK Inszenierungs-DK 143, 3 Bl.)

This citation not only outlines the NBP’s authoritarian vision for Russia, but it also evokes Shigalyev’s vision for a post-revolutionary society in *Dämonen*. Jünger’s concept of “total mobilization,” which describes a new order as the surrender of individual freedom, merciless discipline, and pain resonates here as well. Limonov appears to transform from anarcho-punk into the personification of precisely the authoritarianism that he *should*, logically speaking, deplore.

Despite the self-conscious irony of the stage production, Castorf’s staging insists that we not dismiss Limonov as a puerile provocateur. Limonov’s NBP was not only the most significant “revolutionary movement” in Russia in the post-Soviet period (Fenghi 186), but a real and viable option for the Russian Kremlin for a period in the early 2000s. Together with Alexandr Dugin, Limonov established the NBP’s anti-Atlanticist, Russia- and Eurasia-centric geopolitical platform. Dugin authored *Foundations of Geopolitics* in 1997—a book heavily influenced by

Carl Schmitt's *Grossraum* theory.¹⁵⁷ Therein, Dugin claims that "the Eurasian Empire will be constructed "on the fundamental principle of the common enemy: the rejection of Atlanticism, strategic control of the USA, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate us" (5). In Limonov's iteration of this vision, such a Eurasian territory would retain a vital expanse between the West and "the Orient." Limonov's reactionary fantasies, as they emerge in *Fuck Off, Amerika*, have turned into an actual political program with profoundly sinister implications.

Limonov's vitality- and action-oriented politics were, however, housed within a highly ambiguous signifying regime. The visuals and graphics of his NBP party organ *Limonka*, for example, must be understood in the tradition of the DIY punk "zine" culture and as a furtherance of the *samizdat*, or Soviet underground self-publishing circles, with which Limonov was involved prior to immigrating to America. In its visuals, *Limonka* re-cited the graphics of avant-garde manifestos, the sloganeering of revolutionary propaganda, totalitarian imagery, as well as sado-masochistic tropes. These symbols were used to produce a Futurist-like "slap in the face of the public taste" and to "call into question mainstream cultural and political values" (Fenghi 197).¹⁵⁸

According to Fabrizio Fenghi, *Limonka's* aesthetics were a response to the political context of post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s. The dismantling of the Soviet Union, the arrival of "democracy," and the introduction of the free market had only intensified inequality, created a

¹⁵⁷ Anti-Atlanticism is a political position outlined by Alexandr Dugin in *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia* (1997). His book declares that "the battle for the world rule of [ethnic] Russians has not ended" and Russia remains "the staging area of a new anti-bourgeois, anti-American revolution" (5).

¹⁵⁸ The Volksbühne's program book for *Fuck Off, Amerika* was made to replicate the zine-like style of "Limonka." The front page—an image of Limonov and a woman engaged in S&M—was a combination of totalitarian and sadomasochistic imagery. It included texts such as "Mussolini and other Fascists" by Limonov; "Schlagt die Avantgarde, wo ihr sie trefft!" by art historian Jean Clair; lyrics by the Sex Pistols ("No One is Innocent"); Otto Rank on the artistic personality; Céline's poem "New York, a Horizontal City"; Paul Zech's Expressionist poem "Ballad of free as a Birds – Francois Villon"; and Ezra Pound's defence of fascism. It also included illustrations by the comic artist Steven Appleby.

new ruling class of oligarchs, and failed to result in actual democratic participation. In this context, Fenghi argues, the NBP's interventions created a counterpublic formed according to an anti-establishment discourse and "contributed to the shaping of a new language of political protest in Russia" (182). The ironic, citational aspect of the movement characterizes what Fenghi describes as the emergence of a Soviet militant mode of collective participation or a "post-Soviet militant *stiob*" (184). *Stiob* is a specifically Russian iteration of overidentification. It functions as "a form of parody that involves overidentification with its own object and neo-romantic impulse" (183). Again, we see in NBP a transgressive authoritarianism: the establishment of a subversive community that is contingent on a performative repurposing of the original utopian spirit of the Russian Revolution and, simultaneously, the negating of any fixed ideological position with which to interpret their politics. According to one of the NBP's manifestos printed in *Limonka* contradiction and disorientation are programmatic:

The National-Bolshevik is that person who will bring death to radical-right, and radical left wing ideologies. The National-Bolshevik is their dialectic sublation, and negation... The National-Bolshevik is a person who hates the system, and its lies, alienation, conformism, and stupidity, but he is able to immerse himself in it, to assimilate it, to then destroy it from the inside. This is a person who loves the paradox and "sublation" (*preodolenie*); discipline and freedom, spontaneity and calculation, erudition and inspiration. He is against the dogma, but for authority; he is against external limitations, but he is capable of a strict self-control... (qtd. in Fenghi 196)

This quotation here sounds strikingly akin to Castorf's own disorientation strategies. Here, the NBP channels a trickster and Dadaist spirit, as well as a Futurist *braggadocio*—a feeling of provocative superiority that recalls Marinetti's manifestos. According to Fenghi, *Limonka* represents the "avant-garde posture, the taste for the aggressive and shocking gesture, which often took the form of harsh attacks and derision of any cultural and political institution or hegemonic group" (196).

One cannot be certain about the intention with which Limonov lived out his commitment as leader of the NBP—a party that seems to be a postmodern play on irreconcilable right and left wing signifiers. By uniting communist and ultra-nationalist symbols in his political iconography, Limonov overidentifies with the agendas of these movements, as much as he attempts to live-out authentic direct-action political practices.

What figures such as Limonov represent for Castorf is the fantasy of an exit strategy—of disrupting the symbolic order and the “passion for the real.” Castorf looked to the writings of Jünger and Schmitt for a similar purpose. Recall the 2015 interview in *Die Zeit* (discussed in Chapter One), wherein Castorf cites Jünger’s *Forest Passenger* as “an unpredictable figure”—an explosive source of revolutionary revolt, hiding in the forest, who refuses to be inculcated into “the system.” Likewise, Schmitt’s *Theory of the Partisan* is, for Castorf, about “uprooted radicalization”—a partisan or guerrilla who “fights irregularly,” which is to say in occupied territory, “from behind”; one who “comes out of the woods like a guerrilla, does something, and then goes back.” Limonov personifies the “passion for the real” as a potential source of revolutionary disruption. Politics, rather than art, ultimately offers him a more direct, un-sublimated expression for contesting the end of history. As such, Limonov undermines a new, more intense stage of neoliberalism and post-politics by returning us to the stage of history: to “feudal” Russia. He also conveys the impasses of Castorf himself caught between melancholic paralysis and masculinist fantasies that he can, at least, self-reflexively parody and deconstruct.

Chapter Summary

Possibly more than any of Castorf’s other adaptations of Russian novels, *Fuck Off, Amerika* exemplifies the discourse and politics of Castorf’s “Russian Turn” in the late 90s and 2000s. It conveys Castorf’s political line, namely that the Soviet Union and America were

interchangeable regimes in their rhetorical claims of having achieved utopia. Despite this double admonishment, Castorf and Limonov alike still privilege the Soviet Union because America turns out to be as cold as capitalism itself. As such, the “feudal” Russia that emerged after the demise of the Soviet Union serves Castorf as a projection screen or fantasy space; a chaotic and wild terrain that can stave off the standardizing effects and hypocracies of liberal democracy and yet is powerful and authoritarian enough to challenge America.

Both Castorf and Limonov are in pursuit of “authentic” struggle, enacting a prospector’s search through “feudal” terrain on the margins of society, or in territories wherein postsocialist struggle is ongoing. Where they posit such territories as open or resisting closure, what Limonov really seems to long for is the pursuit of life-affirming action and, ultimately, *immortality*. In pursuit of these, Limonov unleashes a Pandora’s Box of masculinist, ultra-nationalist, Stalinist and totalitarian fantasies and, in doing so, deliberately flouts liberalism’s ethical boundaries. Both Castorf and Limonov seek out vestiges of postsocialist tumult wherein utopian fantasies and dystopian realities coincide in unresolved ways.

The very real discontents that Castorf identifies under the aegis of his Russian Turn necessitate exploring the extreme ends of the political spectrum and mobilizing what he perceives to be all available resources against the seemingly unrelenting encroachment of globalization and neoliberalism. For Castorf, Limonov’s eastward, anti-Fukuyamian *telos*, serves to establish the conditions for overcoming nihilism: through direct-actionist politics and vital rebellion. Limonov’s NBP attempts to create the conditions of possibility for a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, which Castorf treats ambivalently, both parodying and taking seriously. With this production, Castorf ultimately takes a strong position on the need to make theatre a space for unfettered freedom precisely in order to contain radicals like Limonov. This returns us to the

need to politicize aesthetics and not vice versa, to aestheticize politics. Perhaps the greatest importance of Limonov for Castorf is to infuse the Volksbühne stage with the force to tell America to fuck off and to make visible, ideational and conceptual bulwarks to totalizing late capitalist neoliberalism.

Chapter 6: The Return of History

While its vitality flagged again in the mid 2000s, the 2008 global financial meltdown would prove that the Volksbühne flourishes under conditions of acute social and political crisis. The global financial meltdown was, in fact, the catastrophe the Volksbühne had been anticipating since its re-birth under Castorf in 1992. In its aftermath, Castorf's stagecraft shifted from the melancholic "Russian" inflection of his wrestling with Dostoevsky described in Chapter Four, to the more manic energy and anti-fascist approach to theatre Castorf mobilized under conditions of acute social crisis. Whenever crisis surfaces as an acute theme at the Volksbühne, as it did after the *Wende*, it is certain that Castorf will invoke the fractious and politically polarized Weimar Republic: its economic instability, collapse and Far Right reaction. Undoubtedly, the year 2008 was an *annus horribilis* on a nearly unprecedented, global scale. The collapse of financial and housing markets in America reverberated globally in a way not seen since the Wall Street crash of October 29, 1929. In its wake came the predictable finger-pointing at corrupt financial speculators, corporate greed, and market capitalism itself. The instabilities of unfettered global capitalism that Castorf and the Volksbühne heralded displayed their true catastrophic implications twice in the first century of the new millennium: first with the attacks on the Twin Towers in NYC and then again with the global financial meltdown. For the Volksbühne, the latter was a clear confirmation that the capitalist system was flawed from within.

The financial collapse also invoked the stereotype of the Jewish capitalist speculator—emblematic of the National Socialist's mystification of capitalist forces—and, by extension, the most horrific and traumatic event in German history, the Holocaust. Castorf's treatment of 'the Jew' will be explored in more detail in the subsequent case study chapter. Here it is necessary to

situate Castorf in Marx's account of 'the Jewish question,' which simultaneously invokes the spectre of left wing anti-Semitism and a preoccupation with the Holocaust that hovers around almost every Castorf production. A survey of Castorf's treatment of the subject shows that he has always been preoccupied with the Holocaust, perceiving it as an event that can find no language and remains unintegrated as the catastrophe which refuses closure and risks return. Castorf's invocation of the threat of "putsch and pogrom"—propelled by the undeniable return of history—shows the remarkable foresight of the director as cultural diagnostician and prognosticator. Indeed, at the end of the first decade of the new millennium, we witness the real-life return of history in Germany with a resurgence of the Far Right.

This was all fodder not only for the Volksbühne, but for its unofficial in-house theorists, Marxist stalwarts Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. The financial collapse drove Žižek's appeal to left liberals at the "Idea of Communism" conference held at the Volksbühne from June 25 to 27, 2010 (which I attended), to abandon 'progressive' politics and "return to the idea of Communism." Žižek's *First as Tragedy then as Farce* (2009) and *Living in the End Times* (2010), written in the aftermath of the financial meltdown, paralleled the Volksbühne's commitment to the *idea* of communism and to universal proletarianization. In *First as Tragedy then as Farce*, Žižek appeals to his readers to abandon Social Democracy, considering its destiny to continue to generate gross inequalities and the condition of possibility for the rise of the populist Far Right.

The "Idea of Communism" conference is a concrete example of the way the Volksbühne mobilized the tumult of the financial crisis. During the conference, Castorf premiered *Lehrstück*, an adaption of Brecht's *Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis* (*The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*) written in 1929. Castorf's staging was a grotesque slapstick and postmodern satire of

one of Brecht's most radical teaching plays, which premiered just two months before the stock market crash on October 29, 1929. It also demonstrated Castorf's ambivalence toward the finalities of the radical Left at this juncture. Simultaneously, the period demonstrates Castorf's indebtedness to Piscator and to the tradition of anti-fascist theatre, whose "spectres" have returned in the form of a divided Left.

The period towards the end of the 2000s is one wherein Castorf perceives an opportunity to raise a historical materialist and proletarian consciousness by invoking both the history of the Volksbühne in the 1920s and Piscator's political theatre. By virtue of the Idea of Communism conference, the Volksbühne was consciously enabling a Brechtian "*umfunktionierung*" or "refunctioning" of the space from theatre venue to organ of political struggle. According to Volksbühne dramaturg Thomas Martin, this meant returning to the ideas of the 1920s as a time "where intellectuals and proletarians could come together" (vimeo). Martin also claimed that the Volksbühne excels in these moments of crisis; that it is "always better when it has to act rather than react."

This chapter seeks to give an account of the stakes of historical repetition for the aesthetic and intellectual approaches of the Volksbühne after the 2008 global financial crisis. We see this through several returns—the return to Weimar, the return of anti-Semitism, but also, in response, a return to Marx's proletarian call to arms. With a view to the final case study, *Der Kaufmann von Berlin*, we see how the crises of the 1920s provide a vantage point for reckoning with the possibilities that open with these repetitions. I begin by considering the recurring, interwoven themes of anti-fascism and anti-Semitism in the tradition of Dada, Piscator and Castorf. From here I consider some of the dimensions of Castorf's dramaturgy in the post-2008 period—his attention to Benjamin's historical materialism and to universal proletarianization. I end with an

account of the events surrounding the 2010 Idea of Communism conference, including Castorf's production of *Lehrstück* staged for the occasion, and the intellectual interventions made by Žižek and Badiou on living in apocalyptic times.

Piscator's Political Theatre as Anti-Fascist

Castorf chose to direct *Der Kaufmann von Berlin* not only because of the timely relevance of Walter Mehring's 1928 drama, but because Piscator staged it in 1929 under very ominous circumstances. This history around the premiere—with a long backstory that leads to strife at the Volksbühne in 1927, which compelled Piscator to leave and establish his own theatre—is of primary interest to Castorf. He perceived it as the thwarted trajectory of the left wing avant-gardes directly connected to the Volksbühne. Piscator's *Kaufmann* caused an unprecedented scandal that reflected the heightened political tensions of Berlin in autumn 1929. Anti-Semitism was rampant throughout the duration of the Weimar Republic, but especially that year, with the global economic crisis looming large and the National Socialist Party ascending. Interpreting Mehring's drama as anti-Nationalist (which it was) and philo-Semitic (which it was not), Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels himself published a pamphlet sending Mehring "To the Gallows" and Nazi Storm Troopers protested the production nightly directly in front of the Piscator-Bühne at Nollendorfplatz (Wuliger np.). The liberal and left-liberal press, by contrast, interpreted the play's connection between financial corruption and the powerful Jewish banker Kaftan as anti-Semitic. In his defense against accusations of anti-Semitism, Piscator pointed out that the play's most corrupt character was not the Jewish banker Simon Kaftan, but rather the German "Christian" lawyer Heinz Müller (Piscator 333). Piscator saw Kaftan foremost as a capitalist and his Jewishness as incidental. "Kaftan," Piscator claims in an excerpt from his political-artistic autobiography *The Political Theatre* (1929), was a racketeer whose "cupidity is

only thinly veiled by his ethical motive, his love for his sick daughter” (333). His “racial or religious affiliations were a matter of indifference to us. However, as the public saw it in 1929, Kaftan the Jew was more prominent than Kaftan the capitalist. Anything we aimed at capitalism was bound to hit the Jews” (333). Piscator added that he “never wanted to lend a hand to an anti-Semitic witch hunt; for it was not a racial problem, not the relationship between immigrant Jews and indigenous Germans, but the social or class problem which was the point at issue in this play” (333). Carl von Ossietzky, editor of *Die Weltbühne*, rose to *Kaufmann*’s defense, arguing that the production was a critique of capitalism, showing the “effect of inflation” that “draws all classes into a hellish dance macabre, like the pushers themselves, whether Jew or Christian. For this, Simon Kaftan is no less of a victim of the times than the impoverished Putsch-General and his officers” (Ossietzky 300).

The right wing and Nationalist press launched attacks against Piscator’s *Kaufmann* proclaiming “degeneration” in German art, and that the production was an attack on “healthy,” “German” culture and on “tender” nationalist sentiments (Piscator 338). Piscator became a primary target of the Far Right, which associated his work with “Jewishness” and “disintegration” (338-339). Piscator claimed that his nationalist and right wing detractors were using the production to launch another attack on “our weak State with renewed ferocity, and to start a fresh offensive against the masses whose will to freedom, whose progress, has always been a thorn in their flesh. They are fanning the flames of pogrom, which will affect not only me, but everything which is progressive, everything which has overcome their dark malignant spirit, everything which points to the future” (338).

The panic and instability that ensued in the wake of the October 1929 stock market crash helped pave the way for the rapid ascent of the National Socialist Party starting in 1930.

Mehring's *Kaufmann* is a play that identified the dynamics of economic crisis, rising fascism, and anti-Semitism in their nascent stage in 1923 and again in 1928. Piscator blamed the disastrous reception of *Kaufmann* in 1929 on an audience more inclined towards the "irrational mysticism" of the Third Reich, than sober political analysis:

That we could not stop fascism with our theatre alone was abundantly clear to us from the outset. What our theatre was supposed to do was communicate critical responses which, translated into practical politics, might possibly have stopped this fascism. That Germany later preferred the irrational mysticism of the Third Reich to our clear and precise critique was not our fault, even if it was the cause of our personal tragedy. (334)

What Piscator was attempting to do was to use theatre to create an anti-fascist front of "all the workers" —an attempt to unite Communists and Social Democrats. This anticipated the KPD leader Ernst Thälmann's analogous plea on August 24, 1930 in his "Program for the Social and National Liberation of the German People."¹⁵⁹ Piscator concluded *The Political Theatre* in 1929 with an impassioned appeal to his fellow communists and Left-leaning democrats alike to "not let the Right triumph" —and for the Left not to "look on in silence as a venture which was animated by no other desire than to fight the cause of the oppressed, the cause of tomorrow, is driven into bankruptcy" (339).

Piscator's *Kaufmann* was staged only thirty-two times between September and October 1929, an extremely short run compared to his legendary productions *Schweik* or *Rasputin*. However, there was another evaluative criterion that rendered *Kaufmann* a colossal success, namely the scandal it caused. The ire *Kaufmann* unleashed was evidence that Piscator had pushed all the right buttons (335). *Kaufmann* exposed precisely those hidden machinations that proved most threatening to reactionary forces in the republic. As will be discussed in the

¹⁵⁹ Published in the *Rote Fahne*, August 24, 1930. In the Reichstag on February 11, 1930 Thälmann warned that "fascism rules in Germany."

subsequent case-study chapter, Castorf's staging of *Kaufmann* was driven by the same anti-fascist agenda as Piscator's—the same premonition around the apocalyptic stakes of the times. In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, the Volksbühne was emboldened to reassert the theatre's role as a social agitator and thus revive the spirit of Piscator's partisan struggle against fascism.

Castorf's Approach to the Jewish Question

Castorf consistently approached the Weimar Republic as leading to the conditions of possibility for the rise of fascism. He obsessively recited the discontents from this period that resulted from the failed November Revolution, the terms of the Versailles Treaty, the occupation of the Ruhr, and two major economic crises (1923 and 1929) that the Nazis were eventually able to exploit for their own purposes (*Konzeptprobe*). In both Mehring's drama and in Castorf's staging of *Kaufmann*, the *Scheunenviertel* (barn quarter)—an *ostjüdische* (Eastern European Jewish) ghetto where the Volksbühne now stands—is the primary site of investigation. Mehring's tragicomedy explores the question of Jewish assimilation during a period of hyperinflation and an *ostjüdische* refugee crisis in Berlin. As the Volksbühne dramaturg Thomas Martin explained, this was also a period when the National Socialists constructed the Jew as “other” and conflated the assimilated German-Jews of Berlin with the Yiddish-speaking *Ostjuden* fleeing pogroms in Galicia and Russia and living ghettoized in Berlin-Mitte.

What is of interest here for an analysis of Castorf's *Kaufmann* is identifying the continuities in the Marxist Left's depiction of Jewishness and examining what is often perceived as a strain of left wing anti-Semitism that begins with Marx's “On the Jewish Question” (1844). Although Castorf primarily attended to fascist anti-Semitism, various productions also marked left wing anti-Semitism (i.e. the Stalinist show trials in *Clockwork Orange*). Moreover, the roots

of the leftist avant-garde's portrayal of Jewishness—and here a line can be drawn from the Dadaists, through Mehring (himself German-Jewish), to Piscator up to Castorf—must be situated in the way Marx himself theatricalizes and caricatures the Jewish capitalist as social type. Marx's "On the Jewish Question" should not be read as a biological, racializing critique of the Jew. Rather, the essay's approach is more in the spirit of grotesque caricature which, if it were not a political essay, could fit into the left wing Dadaist tradition that deconstructs social and racial identity and exaggerates capitalism's effects on social groups.¹⁶⁰ Mehring, Piscator, as well as the scenographer for Piscator's staging of *Kaufmann*, George Grosz, all emerged from the Berlin Dada circle and offered scathing depictions of the effects of war, the inflation, and the rule of the *Sozialfaschisten* (Social Democratic "fascists") in their respective artforms.¹⁶¹ Piscator referred to Grosz's caricatures in his productions as "epic satire" (Piscator 254).

While Marx's essay is vile in its reproduction of anti-Semitic stereotypes, it is important to note that he attempted to use stereotypes to make visible capitalism's effects on individuals. Marx saw capitalist alienation producing the Jewish capitalist as social type and he saw liberal solutions as insufficient for overcoming the stigma of Jewishness. His essay explores the question whether abandoning religion in Germany would enable Jews to assimilate. Marx was responding to Bruno Bauer's essay "The Jewish Question" (1843), which makes this claim. For

¹⁶⁰ The Dadaist Hannah Höch, for example, deconstructed the visual politics of race and Blackness in her photomontages, making strong statements on racial discrimination in Germany. Exemplary is Höch's *Half Breed*, which "uses photomontage to evoke, criticize and transform ethnic stereotypes" (Biro 228). As Matthew Biro notes, *Half Breed* evokes "the 'scientific' notions of race that subtended colonialism since the nineteenth century as well as [suggests] issues of human breeding through its title..." hence, "the photomontage raises questions of race and eugenics" (230).

¹⁶¹ Notably, at the "International Dada Fair," in Berlin on June 5, 1920, the central figure hanging from the ceiling was an effigy of a German officer with a pig's head. Artists involved in the exhibition included Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, Johannes Baader, Wieland Herzfelde, George Grosz and John Heartfield. The exhibition was emulated by the Nazis who reproduced its content and layout for their "*Entartete Kunst*" (degenerate art) exhibition in Munich in 1937.

Bauer the paradox is as follows: Jews control the fate of entire empires through bank-houses and financial enterprises, whilst continuing to be disenfranchised by the stigma of anti-Semitism. According to Bauer, it is hypocritical when in theory political rights are denied “the Jew,” while in practice he possesses a “monstrous power and exercises on a large scale a political influence that is limited on a small scale. . . . The contradiction between the practical power of the Jew and his political rights is the general contradiction between politics and the power of money. Whereas the first ideally is superior to the second, in fact it is its bondsman” (Marx, “On the Jewish Question” 67). With alienation being constitutive of social life under capitalism, Jewishness becomes the pervasive form of subjectivity. Marx does not believe that the secular liberal state would resolve the Jew’s problem of acceptance into German society. He sets out to show the limits of a secular liberal-capitalist society, which divides the individual into a public and private entity, a citizen and a bourgeois. Marx’s answer to the question around the assimilation of German Jews asserts that the liberal state’s public secularism and private religiosity would *not* enable German Jews to achieve full emancipation under liberal-capitalist conditions.¹⁶² Marx argues that while the liberal state achieved formal equality for all citizens, it also abdicates responsibility for material inequalities that play out in the private sphere. This “decomposes” (fragments) individuals: the citizen, who is publicly oriented, versus the bourgeois, who is privately oriented. For Marx, Bauer’s idea of political emancipation only leads to mere formal emancipation under the law, while conditions of alienation persist.

In the highly problematic second part of “On the Jewish Question,” which is often perceived as ground zero for left wing anti-Semitism, Marx changes the question: it is no longer

¹⁶² “Successful assimilation”—the turning away from Jewish tradition and religious customs—was usually signaled by conversion to Christianity; many Jews accepted assimilation as the price of admission to the universal humanity envisioned by Enlightenment philosophers.

the issue of the Jews' or the liberal state's capacities for emancipation, but rather "what particular social element needs to be overcome in order to abolish Judaism?" (65). The "Jewish problem," according to Marx, lies in the very nature of capitalism and its social ills. What the Jew needs to be emancipated from is also what the contemporary "enslaved world" needs to be emancipated from: capitalism (66). The emancipation of the Jew is equivalent to the world's emancipation from capitalist enslavement (65).

Of interest here for Castorf's staging of *Kaufmann*—both in looking for the origins of the Left's critique of liberal identity politics, as well as for an uncomfortable strain of left wing anti-Semitism—is a consideration of how Marx himself caricatures the Jew as social type. What Marx does in Part II of his essay is offer a figuration of the Jew as paradigmatic of *both* the exploited and the exploiter. Marx deploys theatricality—exaggerated masquerade that shows up the historical contingency of Jewish identity. Here we must also note resonances with Brecht's use of masquerade to show up subjectivity as historically contingent. Marx uses this strategy in order to deconstruct "the Jew" as stigmatized social type and personification of capitalist alienation. So, while "On the Jewish Question" mobilizes anti-Semitic stereotypes in a deplorable way, Marx ultimately does so in the name of demonstrating that there is nothing "Jewish"—nothing biological or innate—about the Jewishness he describes. The "Jew" as social type merely exploits the possibilities created by his own alienated subjectivity due to the stigma placed upon him in Christian society and perpetuated by the capitalist system. Marx's essay is thus definitive for understanding the Far Left's critique of both splintering liberal identity politics, as well as the agenda of "assimilation" under liberal, secular terms.

Yet, despite an attempt to ground this tradition in an emancipatory politics and as a product of its time, Marx's "On the Jewish Question" justifiably horrifies and outrages readers. It

is also an essay that explains what provocateurs and satirists on the Left (including Castorf) often *think* they are doing as “equal opportunity” offenders, but that merely reproduce deplorable stereotypes and alienate the spectator. This “genealogy” of left wing caricature and satire—from Dada, Mehring, Piscator, up to Castorf—should serve as an explanation for why, in this tradition, artists will risk offense to communities to reproduce mask and caricature. Their aim is to not only show up capitalism’s effects, but to demystify what the fascists attempted to racialize.

As we will see in the final case study chapter, Castorf’s roots in this aesthetic and political tradition render him averse to “biologically correct” casting. The latter is one of the most controversial issues in the Berlin theatre landscape today. Castorf’s Volksbühne has been accused of racism or failing to diversify and reflect the realities of multiethnic Germany (see Zöllner 2003; Dietrichsen 2015; Laudenbach 2017). Suffice it to say here, Castorf uses masquerade and satire to show up *all* racializing identity as a construct. This leads us to the next obvious question: How, then, does Castorf treat the Holocaust? After all, adhering to the correct register in which to “process” the Holocaust is arguably what contemporary liberal German identity is most contingent upon. What that correct register should look like, however, is vigorously debated by all political camps. Certainly, the conservative narrative of Germans’ progressing past this event is something Castorf vehemently contests.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ This conservative position is exemplified by the conservative historian Ernst Nolte. Nolte is best known for his role in launching the *Historikerstreit* (“Historians’ Dispute”) of 1986 and 1987. On June 6, 1986 Nolte published a feuilleton essay titled “The Past That Will Not Go Away: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered” in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In contrast to the *Sonderweg* concept—Karl Dietrich Bracher and others’ theory that Germany from 1871 to 1945 took a “special path” from nationhood to Nazism—Nolte argued that the Holocaust was *not* unique and claimed the Nazi deathcamps were equivalent to the gulags in the Soviet Union. Nolte also thought Germans were lacking in national pride. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas criticized Nolte for “apologetic” history in regard to the Nazi era, and for seeking to “close Germany’s opening to the West” that in Habermas’s view had existed since 1945. Habermas also took Nolte to task for suggesting a moral equivalence between the Holocaust and the genocide of the Khmer Rouge. According to Habermas, since Cambodia was a “backward,” “Third World agrarian state” and Germany a modern, First World industrial state, there was no comparison between the two genocides. For the latter comments, Habermas too was taken to task.

Castorf's Treatment of the Holocaust

The critic Maxim Biller once stated that “Castorf directs plays as if the Holocaust never happened” and claimed that he is “uncomfortable with Castorf’s stage language” (qtd. in Hegemann, *Plädoyer* 181). Little did Biller realize that his feeling of unease is exactly what Castorf was after—that any “safe” or “correct” approach to the Holocaust was precisely what Castorf was interested in disrupting. Biller is referring to Castorf’s refusal to integrate the Holocaust into the realm of the representable on stage. Indeed, the Holocaust is something that Castorf has treated in a roundabout way or, alternately, in a way so utterly shocking that the audience is forced to sit with extreme discomfort (181). In both cases, the Holocaust looms large on the edges of most Castorf’s productions, refusing closure and threatening to return. If the Holocaust *is* addressed, it is done abruptly—as a citation that disrupts the flow of a performance and that is never further commented upon. Recall *Clockwork Orange*, discussed in Chapter Three, where the Holocaust surfaced through the “pleasant” treatment of Jews in the Nazis’ Theresienstadt “documentary.” There, Castorf implied a continuation of secret “pogrom planning” in a smug, newly unified Germany. In *Pension Schölller/Die Schlacht*, Castorf used a madhouse as an allegory for Nazi Berlin and combined it with Müller’s nightmarish scenarios from WWII, which also “never directly refer to the industrial machinery of death” (181). In *Golden Fliesst der Stahl/Wolokolamsker Chausee* (1996), the early days of building socialism in the GDR are suddenly disrupted by gas coming out from the showers (181). In 1996, Castorf also staged Helmut Kohl’s favourite play, *Des Teufels General*, in a manner that scathingly satirized Carl Zuckmayer’s drama about a “good German army officer” who tried to stop Hitler. But as Hegemann notes, the Holocaust was never explicitly treated in any of the aforementioned

productions (181).¹⁶⁴ Rather, it haunts the madcap absurdity and tragicomedy of individual lives that play out against the backdrop of unspeakable crimes. As such, the Holocaust was a strong presence in its glaring absence—the event towards which modern spectators know everything leads.

Castorf explains, “Adorno said that after Auschwitz there could be no more poetry. This is obviously not true” (qtd. in Laudenbach 110): there is clearly still art. Castorf’s approach to the Holocaust is best exemplified in a 2002 production he directed at the Schauspiel Hamburg that premiered, as Hegemann notes, on Hitler’s birthday, April 20. The play, *Vaterland* (*Fatherland*) by Robert Harris, depicts a dystopian 1964 as if Germany had emerged victorious from WWII. As Hegemann describes it, Castorf’s adaptation began by replicating the stylistic conventions of Harris’s novel, namely those of a crime thriller. As soon as spectators became comfortable with the approach, there was a sudden break from the genre and flow. Castorf interrupted the fictional world of the adaptation just when the audience started thinking that the Holocaust would be integrated into the production in a meaningful, entertaining and “tolerable” way (Hegemann, *Plädoyer* 182). The actors instead began a very dry, matter-of-fact reading of the protocol of a meeting of the Nazi Ministry of the Interior, just three days after *Kristallnacht*, the first planned pogrom in Germany on November 9, 1938 (182). The protocol deals with insurance questions and how the damages will be dealt with in legal terms. This “banal” documentary evidence of the “pre-Wannsee Conference”¹⁶⁵ was drawn out to an absurd length on Castorf’s stage. However, the protocol itself remained uncommented upon. Castorf refused to allow the material to be integrated into the performance. According to Hegemann, it served as

¹⁶⁴ *Des Teufels General* was critically acclaimed and selected for the prestigious Theatertreffen festival in 1997.

¹⁶⁵ The January 20th, 1942 conference at a villa on Lake Wannsee where the “Final Solution” to the Jewish Question was decided upon.

evidence of “barbarism” and the “*Zivilisationsbruch*” (the break with civilization”) constituted by that event (182).¹⁶⁶ The protocol represents the “missing link” between “barbarism and the respectable normality that reigns as much today as it did under fascism” (182). The “document of the pre-Wannsee conference shows with shocking clarity, but without stating it explicitly, the possibility of mass murder at the highest point of civilization” (182). It also conveys the result of the failure of personal responsibility and the outsourcing of responsibility to administrative decisions. The risk of historical repetition, he adds, is in no way ruled out (183). Notably, Castorf’s documentary approach is clearly influenced by the work of Piscator in the 1960s at the Freie Volksbühne in West Berlin. There, Piscator developed a postwar documentary theatre as a “moral tribunal” for interrogating the Nazi past.¹⁶⁷

For Hegemann, Biller’s claim that “Castorf directs plays as if the Holocaust never happened” is patently unfounded (183). The Holocaust haunts Castorf’s productions yet refuses smooth integration on the stage since that would mean capitulating to “the harmonizing ideology of a collective morality” (183). Invoking Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Castorf instead chastises a society of “cold, specialized interests with no consideration for the whole” (183). Instead, Castorf advocates an existential position of absolute moral freedom—even the freedom to commit horrific crimes (186). Responsibility that rests solely on the individual is, of course, opposed to the longing for a *Leitbild* that Castorf explored after the *Wende*, or the need for God or higher meaning in the face of widespread nihilism he

¹⁶⁶ As Hegemann notes, the production led to storms of protest in Hamburg (182).

¹⁶⁷ Piscator returned to the Federal Republic in 1951 after a long period of exile in the Soviet Union and America including at the New School for Social Research where he set up the Dramatic Workshop and deployed the likes of Hanns Eisler until the McCarthy era. Upon his return, he was appointed intendant of the newly built Theatre der Freien Volksbühne in West Berlin. The documentary plays which had been lacking during the Weimar Republic now began to appear, and he directed Rolf Hochhuth’s *The Deputy*, Heiner Kipphardt’s *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* and Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation* (Piscator 344).

explored in the context of 19th century Russia. Castorf's proposal for a radical individual freedom argues for the existential responsibility of every individual to develop a moral and ethical code *without* an authority.¹⁶⁸ It is with this proposal, Hegemann argues, that Castorf attempts to “outbid those moral categories that compelled the sense of duty felt by the obedient mass murderer in the Third Reich” (186). Castorf's simultaneously “totalitarian and morality-free productions are, paradoxically, a case for freedom from rational calculation and utilitarianism, to be free to behave as a human being” (186). Castorf reminds us that despite our collective horror at the atrocities committed during the Holocaust, Germans are *not* better people today (187); we have not progressed.

These points situate Castorf in the lineage of Müller, who saw in West Germany morally complacent ex-Nazis and perceived the unified Germany as destined to lead to a resurgence of nationalism.¹⁶⁹ Müller's plays do not deal directly with the Holocaust or the roots of German anti-Semitism. To some extent, this can be explained as a product of the GDR's official position that it was a state founded *against* fascism (Müller, *Reader* 143). In his dramas *The Battle* (1951, 1974), *Germania Death in Berlin* (1956, 1971) and *Volokolamsk Highway* (1984, 1987), “Müller approaches the period of German fascism from the perspective of antifascism” (142). According to Carl Weber, these dramas discuss “historical violence in the context of Stalinism and

¹⁶⁸ Hegemann describes *Schmutzige Hände*, *Dämonen* and *Caligula/The Obscene Work* as Castorf's “trilogy of existential productions” (183). *Schmutzige Hände* was widely lauded as a public and critical success and was selected for the Theatertreffen festival in 1999.

¹⁶⁹ In an interview with *The New York Times* in 1990, Müller is quoted as calling West Germans smug and saying “they're all ex-Nazis, but they feel completely innocent. They accept no responsibility for what Germany did. They believe they never did anything to anybody. I hate their moral complacency. . . . And what surprises me most about recent events is not the tumbling of the wall but the resurgence of nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism. I thought these weeds had been pulled out, but the roots were left in the ground to sprout again. A reunited Germany will make life unpleasant for its neighbors” (Holmberg np.)

communist revolution and elide the question of the relation of German fascism to anti-Semitism” (143). And yet the perceptive reader sees the Holocaust everywhere in Müller’s plays.

In a discussion titled *Auschwitz ad Infinitum (Auschwitz kein Ende)*,¹⁷⁰ Müller claims that Auschwitz ultimately has no answer: “It’s Dostoevsky’s problem, the Raskolnikov question. Dostoevsky, too, can only find one answer in the end and that is Grace. Assuming that Auschwitz is the model for selection, then there is no political answer. There is probably only a religious answer” (151). Müller adds that Benjamin comes to the same conclusion with his concept of Messianism: “Socialism, communism, or whatever other utopia stands no chance, if it doesn’t also offer a theological dimension” (151). Müller ultimately takes a position for absolute moral freedom and individual responsibility: the only answer to the question of what to do if one had been in the same position is that “each of us is alone with ourselves and our decision” (153). It is likewise through Messianic time or *Jetztzeit* that we can grasp the spirit of Castorf’s dramaturgical approach guided by the risk of return that the 2008 economic crisis could bring.

The Theatre Director as Historical Materialist

In 2010, Castorf plucked Mehring’s largely forgotten drama out of obscurity. With *Kaufmann*, Castorf—to use an image from Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940)—wrested or “explode[d] from the continuum of history” not only Mehring’s drama, but also the political context of Weimar Berlin and Piscator’s political theatre, including right wing

¹⁷⁰ *Auschwitz ad Infinitum (Auschwitz kein Ende)* was a discussion between Heiner Müller and two young French directors. Müller included it in his production booklet for his staging of the anti-fascist play, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (which Brecht wrote in 1941 while exiled in Finland) at the Berliner Ensemble in 1995, along with an excerpt from *Germania 3* (Scene 4). The material demonstrates Müller’s desire to address questions of German fascism with his Brecht production marking the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII. The title refers to Goethe’s *Shakespeare ad Infinitum (Shakespeare und kein Ende)* and is an indirect reference to his proposal as artistic director of the Berliner Ensemble to make his own plays and those of Brecht and Shakespeare the focal point of the BE’s work.

terror, putsch and anti-Semitic pogroms. This “wresting out” or “exploding” of history is an operation of what Benjamin calls *Jetztzeit* or bringing history into the *here-and-now*. Benjamin revises a concept of homogenous empty time (the linear time of progress) to a concept of time wherein the past can be brought into illuminating dialogue with the present, a dialectical standstill potentially cancelling out the past and setting history on another path (263). This mode of historical materialist thinking, according to Benjamin, assigns major significance to a specific context such as a historical period, place or culture (263). As such, the past becomes a repository of information or dramaturgy useful for the present, even containing clues for the future’s redemption as Benjamin combines Marxist and Jewish-messianic thought. In other words, we encounter the past in such a way that it is already charged with the future.

As noted in the Introduction, Benjamin describes the excavation or archeological work of the historical materialist as a “tiger leap” into the past, analogous to the way the French revolutionaries mined ancient Rome for dramaturgical cues and inspiration for their revolution:

History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now [*Jetztzeit*]. For Robespierre, Roman antiquity was a past charged with the here-and-now, which he exploded out of the continuum of history. The French revolution thought of itself as a latter-day Rome. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a past costume. Fashion has an eye for what is up-to-date, wherever it moves in the jungle [*Dickicht*: maze, thicket] of what was. It is the tiger’s leap into that which has gone before. Only it takes place in an arena in which the ruling classes are in control. The same leap into the open sky of history is the dialectical one, as Marx conceptualized the revolution. (*Theses On the Philosophy of History* XIV)

The dramaturgy of the French Revolution, charged with the aesthetics and politics of ancient Rome was, for Benjamin, a playbook that might instigate a revolutionary event in the present. Castorf’s obsessive reciting and mining of Weimar Germany functions in a similar way. The director’s cynical, comic-nihilist vision of history is in this sense tempered with a Benjaminian

“weak Messianic power.” Castorf evidently believed that by at least awaking from our inertia and recognizing the looming catastrophe we may be able to effect some change.

The historical materialist draws from the past creating a constellation in which one’s own epoch encounters that of an earlier one. With *Kaufmann*, the year 1923 becomes *Jetztzeit* for Piscator’s theatrical staging in 1929, just as the lessons of both 1923 and 1929 become relevant for Castorf after the 2008 global financial crisis. For Benjamin, awareness that one is about to “explode” this continuum is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. Benjamin’s quest is to cull from the archive of history those artifacts that could be transformative for the present impasses. This can be understood as a historical consciousness along revolutionary lines.

The real-life historical events that Mehring’s *Kaufmann* depicts, the proletarian and Eastern European Orthodox Jewish (*Ostjuden*) milieus it illustrates, and the urban social types it conveys all align with Castorf’s commitment to both institutional historiography and local ethnography. Castorf is committed to excavating local histories, particularly those of the long-forgotten inhabitants of the theatre’s surrounding neighborhood during the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras. Castorf is what *Berliner Zeitung* critic Ulrich Seidler calls a “hysterische Heimatkundler” (“hysterical local ethnographer”). Seidler notes the layers of site-specific histories that Castorf unfolds in this production:

This is thanks to his place of work, Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, which was at one time called Horst-Wessel-Platz and before that Bülowplatz. This is where the Volksbühne organization planted its 2000-seat-armoured tank in 1913, the Eastern-European Jews were living next door in the most deplorable conditions. Here the Communists and Swastikas bashed each other’s brains out, here [the Nazi “martyr”] Horst Wessel was shot. This sizzling Berlin is Castorf’s site for projection, which takes a cultural pessimist tone in the program book: Berlin has lost everything that she once had. It used to be a cold and hot city, now it’s become cool.

Castorf frequently takes his dramaturgical cues by directly unfolding historical layers from the location of the Volksbühne and in no production more vigorously than in *Kaufmann*. Seidler, however, emphasizes Castorf's "cultural pessimist" gaze on the Berlin of today—a marked difference from the revolutionary hope Piscator had for his *Kaufmann* in 1929, although these hopes would be dashed by the production's disastrous reception and the rapid ascent of the National Socialist Party shortly thereafter. Focusing on the Volksbühne's locality, Castorf revives the historical struggles and tensions that played out in Berlin "OST." A decade into the new millennium, the once raw and vibrant districts of Berlin-Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg have become a gentrified playground for an international creative class and young bourgeois families from south-Western Germany; enclaves of organic grocery stores, luxury lifestyle shops, and yoga studios. Castorf channels the *ressentiment* of many Berliners towards globalization and gentrification and offers a foreboding apocalypticism as he pursues his *flânerie* through the eastern part of the city:

It's nice that there has been peace here for a long time, but at the cost of other continents. This is a dance on a volcano that is exploding in front of us. You can see this enlarged when Europe is afraid about bankruptcy or people are shooting each other at *Alexanderplatz*. You can also see this small scale at the private level. I walk like a *flâneur* through Prenzlauer Berg, this eco-terrorist terrain, which is difficult if you don't have a baby carriage in front of you. . . . How long will this good fortune hold out? At some point the crisis will come and one will look for alternatives. (qtd. in Laudenbach 87)

Castorf, however, ultimately frames this *ressentiment* in anti-imperialism and class critique. He is critical of neoliberalizing processes for nations outside of the EU. Castorf is Cassandra-like in his warning of how the privileged lifestyle of "eco terrorist" urban elites, which is contingent on the exploitation of other continents and peoples, will inevitably lead to crisis and collapse.

Castorf observes a dangerous imperviousness to what exists beyond the privileged bubble of Prenzlauer Berg and to what happened there historically.

The Metropolis and Proletarian Vanguardism as Site-Specific Themes

With *Kaufmann*, Mehring achieved what arguably remains the strongest presentation of Berlin in the German drama. What undoubtedly inspired Castorf was how heavily Mehring drew from the political “hotbed” upon which the Volksbühne was located: the Bülowplatz—now Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz—as well as the *Scheunenviertel*, the Jewish ghetto and proletarian district. Amidst this fractious working-class neighborhood in the 1910s and 20s, the neo-classical façade of the Volksbühne stood out incongruously. In *Kaufmann*, Mehring describes the Volksbühne disparagingly as a “monstrous square block,” which is emblematic of the disdain the revolutionary Left, including Piscator and Brecht, felt about the theatre. This was also a jab at the Social Democrat’s usurpation of the Volksbühne, turning a proletarian movement into a “temple for high culture” (Davies 108).

In 2010, the dramaturgy department at the Volksbühne described Mehring’s play as follows on the theatre’s website:

Reading Mehring’s text is like reading the newspaper (not just one, but all of them!), watching a film (not merely one - but all the films in the world!), is like getting overwhelmed by a city map, is like listening to all the voices of Berlin at that time, hearing them sing and shout, holler and scream. Mehring’s writing is reminiscent of a camera’s panning action shot of Berlin’s streetscapes during the interwar years. It mirrors the high and the low, contains fine and foul language, Yiddish, thieves’ slang, and all the empty phrases of the high society. [Kurt] Tucholsky wrote: “Mehring was the first man to literally fly over the city of Berlin!”¹⁷¹

Castorf sees the urban panorama of Mehring’s historical drama—the depiction of disparate milieus rubbing up against each other, “the high and the low,” the bourgeois and the proletarian—as a Dadaist montage brought to life. This reflects the new urban mode of perception, an experience of simultaneity that was also reflected in the emerging medium of

¹⁷¹ Volksbühne website: volksbuehne.adk.de/praxis/der_kaufmann_von_berlin/index.html

cinema and its obsession with the city (i.e. *Metropolis* or *Symphony of a City*). As such, “the cold and the hot” —cold industrial technologies and hot fractious politics—of the 1920s Berlin metropolis are placed in stark contrast with the “cool” obliviousness and seeming eternal present of contemporary, postmodern Berlin.

The metropolis is another consistent category of investigation for the director. Castorf has adapted several of what he calls “big city novels” at the Volksbühne. Two of these productions focus on Weimar era Berlin including his and Lothar Trolle’s adaptation of Alfred Döblin’s novel *Berlin, Alexanderplatz* (1929) in 2005—which was staged in the now-demolished former GDR parliament, the *Palast der Republik* in 2006¹⁷² —and Erich Kästner’s 1929 children’s detective novella, *Emil und die Detektive* (1929) in 2007.¹⁷³ What interests Castorf about the 1920s Berlin metropolis is the way the dynamics of urbanization and immigration create collisions of the old world and the new, as well as the way the city inspires the dream lives of the characters. Castorf likewise explores the metropolis as a stage for the symptoms of capitalist discontents, which informs his digressional, often madcap and unwieldy exploration of the characters’ pathologies. Like Marx and Freud, Castorf saw that the truth of a society or of the psyche led through what surfaced as pathological distortions of the system: economic crisis, nightmares, dreams, slips of tongue, etc. And like Freud, Castorf understood that there is no repression without a return of the repressed.

¹⁷² A co-production with the Schauspielhaus Zürich, where it premiered in 2001. The Palast der Republik was the parliament of the GDR from 1976-1990. In 1990, it became vacant due to unification and was closed due to the discovery of asbestos. In 2003, the Bundestag voted for the demolition of the Palast and the reconstruction of the Berlin Palace.

¹⁷³ Further to this metropolis theme, Castorf also staged Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, set in Moscow (re-titled as *Nach Moskau, Nach Moskau*) in 2010, as well as Dostoevsky’s *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte*, set in St. Petersburg, in 2000.

The Idea of Communism Conference

Castorf's dramaturgical team used the situation of crisis to curate events such as the second "The Idea of Communism: Philosophy and Art" conference in July 2010, no doubt to seize upon an intellectual momentum that the crash of the financial market, including the Eurozone crisis in 2009, elicited amongst Leftists worldwide.¹⁷⁴ Invited speakers such as Žižek, Badiou and Antonio Negri amongst others discussed the possibility for revolutionary action in Europe and elsewhere. It is no coincidence that a high-profile Leftist conference would take place at the Volksbühne of all possible venues in Europe. The theatre was an established hub not only for the Eastern European Marxists and other intellectuals on the Left, but it influenced them in kind (Hegemann qtd. in Krump 130). Moreover, the political imaginary that emerges from the Volksbühne under Castorf has, during various periods, fueled the revolutionary contagion of catastrophe and apocalypticism. Co-opting this moment of crisis to launch a genuine proletarian revolution has undoubtedly been the long-held fantasy of the left wing intelligentsia who gravitate to the theatre.¹⁷⁵ Twenty-one months after the near collapse of the capitalist status quo, the weakening of the Euro and of European democracy, a new Leftist momentum had emerged. According to Badiou, the conference was about a new "communist hypothesis" and about "universalism, the subject in history, events of truth, Hegel and psychoanalysis after Lacan" (Oehmke np). Badiou asserted that it was not about looking back "into the gloomy 20th century, with the catastrophes that occurred in the name of communism. . . . Stalin and Pol Pot" (np.).

For the occasion, Neumann printed the word "communism" in black capital letters on a large banner that hung over the façade of the Volksbühne. The theatre also distributed

¹⁷⁴ The first "Idea of Communism" conference took place at Birkbeck College in London in 2009.

¹⁷⁵ Badiou opened his keynote by quoting Mao: "Be resolute, fear no sacrifice and surmount every difficulty to win victory." Žižek responded less optimistically by quoting Beckett: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (Oehmke np).

headphones during the talks for live, simultaneous translations of lectures in French and Italian into German or English. Phillip Oehmke, writing for *Der Spiegel*, described the attendees as “mostly under 30. Some are dressed like Brecht, others like Sartre (np.).” Not surprising was how white, male and heteronormative the event was, with only a single female panelist (Cécile Winter), few people of colour, and no representation of trans voices. Moreover, the talks were challenging for those not trained at a high level in Marxist theory. What *was* successfully communicated, however, was the urgent stakes of the times. There was a palpable feeling of contagion transmitted from the lectures and panel discussion that emanated throughout the entire building. To complement the speaker line-up, films and political performances were on offer, enlivening the Volksbühne in a way that distinctly recalled Besson’s *Spektakles* in the 1970s.

The conference represented what Benjamin describes Brecht as doing, namely an “*Umfunktionierung*” of the theatre institution, turning it from a venue for entertainment into a venue for political struggle (“The Author as Producer” 93). The struggle over the correct political and aesthetic line at the Volksbühne in the 1920s—in which all positions on the Left had stakes—surely influenced Benjamin’s essay. In 1927 the KPD launched an official mandate to “Bolshevize” Social Democratic institutions, including the Volksbühne, by planting “red cells” in them and attempting to turn them into communist organizations (Schwerd 77). The young communist faction of the Volksbühne (*Sonderabteilung der Berliner Volksbühne*)—supporters of Piscator and patrons of his Piscator-Bühne—agitated to proletarianize the theatre, reaching a climax around the time of the financial crisis (82-83). Here we can draw a striking parallel to the Volksbühne’s 2010 “Idea of Communism” conference. Like the official Bolshevizing agenda of the KPD in 1927, the conference was devised to inspire liberal progressives to take up the revolutionary cause.

Lehrstück

As his contribution to the conference, Castorf staged an adaptation of Brecht's *Das Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis* (1929), which he retitled simply as *Lehrstück* but not to be confused with Brecht's broader category of *Lehrstücke* or teaching plays. Starting in 2007, Castorf adapted Brechtian *Lehrstücke* with indebtedness to both Brecht and Müller's iterations of the form. Castorf's *Lehrstücke* were emblematic of his preference for the Leninist Brecht—the Brecht who asks “the boat is full. Who has to be pushed out?” (qtd. in Schütt 93). Characteristic of Brecht's *Lehrstücke* is that the political becomes an existential totality for which one must be willing to give one's life. As discussed in the previous chapter, the “*Lehre*” was always subservience to the Party and the willingness to embrace death for the communist cause. According to Castorf's dramaturg Thomas Martin, Brecht started writing *Lehrstücke* in 1929, after witnessing the police shooting at striking workers at a May Day parade directly in front of the Volksbühne (vimeo). Martin claims that the experience was the turning point for Brecht. After it, Brecht decided that theatre had to be much more radical. He developed the *Lehrstück* as a form of didactic theatre without an audience and for participants only. In “The Modern Theatre is The Epic Theatre,” written in 1930, Brecht also advocated converting “certain institutions from places of entertainment into organs of mass communication” (Willett 42). Brecht's *Lehrstücke* were preoccupied with critiquing capitalism and Social Democracy. They were also committed to endorsing the hardline road to building a communist society: to discipline and self-sacrifice. Although they raised critical questions devised to be worked out in a participatory method, their Marxist-Leninist conclusions were foregone.

Müller, by contrast, was of the generation that had to deal with the crimes perpetrated in socialism's name—Stalinist atrocities and betrayals of the people. Starting in the mid 1960s, Müller's post-Brechtian *Lehrstücke*—*Philoktetes* (1964), *The Horatian* (1976) and *Mauser* (1976)—were correctives to, and reckonings with, socialist history. According to Uwe Schütte, Müller's three *Lehrstücke* comprise “a series of reflections upon the legacy of Stalinism and a set of proposals for a politics that would combat it, a politics calling for . . . an open debate about the crimes of the past, and for the retrieval of a genuinely revolutionary ethics from its association with the atrocities of the past (qtd. in Schütte 10-11). Müller's *Lehrstücke* inject Brecht's unflappable Marxist conclusions with surreal and tragic dimensions relayed through historical allegory. As such, they unravel Brecht's ideological finalities by marking the betrayals and bloodshed that occurred in the name of building socialism. This aligns with a definition of a post-Brechtian theatre which, according to David Barnett, retains Brecht's dialectical structure, but marks an epistemological crisis: the un-tenability of Brecht's Marxist conclusions within the realities of the GDR (Barnett 337).

Müller wrote his *Lehrstücke* at a time when his own dramas were under siege in the GDR. His post-Brechtian theatre believed that the past held the key to discoveries that might transform the future (Schütte 1). For Müller, theatrical tradition was “a living thing, to be developed and critiqued,” rather than a “dead canon,” to be quoted and pastiched (1). This approach is later outlined in Müller's manifesto on Brecht, entitled “To Use Brecht without Criticizing Him is to betray him” (1986). Müller marked time as “out of joint” by conjuring socialism's victims, who were thus enabled to “speak back” to the present. Müller's wished to dismantle the “dictatorship of the dead” in whose name socialism was built (qtd. in *Reader* 137)

and rather allow for a politics of the living to govern the reception of history. In an interview in 1992 Müller explained his position:

There is a theory that Lenin was a Dadaist and the October Revolution was a Dadaist performance. Even though that's sheer nonsense, it's correct in principle. It's an attempt to force history out of the museum. Once it's outside the museum, it can speak and the dead can speak with us. Expelling art and history from the museum means tearing them away from death and establishing the discourse of the living. Only the production of ever newer perspectives on the old makes it at all possible to live. Everything else turns one into a zombie. (qtd. in *Reader* 136)

Müller, it could also be argued, saved Brecht from a fate of petrification and museumization in the GDR, bringing him back to the land of the living. Müller launched a critical re-appraisal of Brecht's *Lehrstücke* and simultaneously re-purposed them as a corrective to the communist past. While Brecht's *Lehrstücke* were in one sense an *open*, participatory form of praxis, they were ultimately *closed* in the sense that they guided participants to Marxist-Leninist conclusions. Müller's *Lehrstücke* were the inverse: *closed*, completed dramatic works that were *open* to a dialogue with the past.

In Castorf's adaptations of Brecht's and Müller's *Lehrstücke*, by contrast, there was no one to speak back to and there were no openings. For example, what we see in Castorf's staging of Brecht's *Badener Lehrstück* at the Idea of Communism conference is a recursive, hermetically sealed world replete with revolutionary tropes staged as grotesque farce. In Castorf's production, an eerie postmodern present is blended with the macabre antics of party apparatchiks who use contemporary methods of surveillance and coercion. In what appears to be commentary on the present as much as on the communist past, Castorf's staging of the *Badener Lehrstück* was a bleak meditation on the continuities of forced consensus, the eradication of the individual, and the absurdity of life under a totalizing regime of hyperreality. During the conference, Castorf's

Lehrstück was performed in the *Studiobühne*, a small performance space located on the third floor of the Volksbühne. However, his production was *not* the participatory, didactic form of amateur theatre that Brecht had intended, but rather a highly *auteurist* and *carnavalesque* production. Neumann's postmodern scenography—neon lights, white plastic patio chairs, video screens—contrasted sharply with the manic intensity of the performers, who were dressed uniformly in blue workers' overalls.

Brecht and Paul Hindemith's *Badener Lehrstück von Einverständnis* is a musical drama written to instruct participants on the cycle of violence and dependency inherent to Social Democracy, and ultimately about leading participants away from progressive liberalism towards communism. In this sense, the production fit perfectly with the theme of the conference. Moreover, Brecht's *Lehrstück* is about a pilot and four mechanics that fly over the ocean and crash their plane, having used technology to satisfy their egoistic desire to achieve fame and thus immortality. Landing in a non-descript place, the group are confronted with a "learned choir" (a politicized Marxist collective) whom they ask for food, water, and shelter. Before helping them, the choir wants them to answer: in whose name was their "technological advancement" undertaken? And "does humanity ever really 'help' humanity?" Brecht offers three vignettes to demonstrate that if the cycle of capitalist-imperialist war and social assistance continues—as two components of Social Democracy—humankind is doomed. Brecht's third vignette is a grotesque scene in which two clowns dismember a third clown—the gullible giant "Mr. Smith," who represents the proletariat. For the flyers to be rehabilitated, they must renounce their egotism and urge to immortality. Brecht's lesson here is that the individual must be renounced in order to create a genuinely emancipated, classless society. When asked, "who are you," the pilots' at first answer, "we are the ones who flew over the ocean"—an answer that is dissatisfying for the

Marxist choir. The pilots must continue to answer the question until the two finally learn to answer “nobody.” “Nobody” has had to learn to die—to dissolve into the collective; their immortality is achieved by their contribution to humanity.

As is his habit, Castorf liberally re-arranged and cut scenes and turned Brecht’s finalities into raging slapstick. Here, the male pilot is turned into a female pilot-soprano, played by Ruth Rosenfeld. Castorf characterized the two leaders of the Marxist chorus as zealous, orthodox party functionaries—a sadist played by Katrin Angerer and a masochist played by Maria Kwiatkowsky. Recitations from *The Collected Works of Lenin* (1965) are turned into outrageous parodies of self-criticism sessions. Castorf situates Brecht’s “non-place” where the pilots had crashed, in a surreal totalitarian context—a Stalinist Soviet Union or Mao’s China during the Cultural Revolution. In the infamous Clown Scene, the giant clown Mr. Smith appears on stage as a life size Castorf doll—more specifically, as the iconic Castorf of the mid-1990s, when he was the ubiquitous poster-boy for post-*Wende* dissidents. Castorf himself performs the voice-over of “Mr. Smith,” responding laconically to his ailments as he is slowly dismembered by the sadistic party ideologues. As such, Castorf conveys his own sense of political resignation—at the same time as he parodies his melancholic paralysis.

Castorf also uses live and intrusive video-camera work on stage to produce close-ups—especially of the pilot-soprano, which are then projected onto a screen on the back wall. The camera work and video projections engage us with questions about the status of live performance in an age of totalizing media saturation. Castorf shows the pilot-soprano’s inner refusal to “consent” to death by way of the camera’s “epic commentary,” which revealed the fear in her eyes in a close-up shot of her face. According to Steve

Earnest, this “ironic juxtaposition between the stated text and the intention of the characters represents another level of the epic quality of Castorf’s directorial vision” (50).

It must be added that one of the party functionaries achieves what appears to be sublime ecstasy as she gets swept up in revolutionary pathos whilst reciting from the collected works of Lenin and even when performing self-criticisms. Although parodied, her rote learning exercises, poetic recitations and self-punishment are attempts to grasp at the sublime and the ineffable—at *the absolute*. The latter is the dialectical resolution that ideological re-education sought to achieve by way of aesthetic programs, which would culminate in a utopian classless society. In a subsequent scene, however, Castorf projects images of Pol Pot’s victims on the back wall. In doing so, he not only undermines the revolutionary pathos of the party apparatchik but replaces the images of capitalist-imperialist war mandated by Brecht’s original with victims of communist regimes. Yet, the ecstatic and pathos-filled recitations of the party functionary—even as parody—indicate that something indeed remains in the *idea* of communism.

In Castorf’s adaptation, the highly eroticized pilot-soprano inserts her authentic biography into the production. As pilot and as a Jewish-Israeli woman—she is unwilling to give up her individuality, or her will to live, for the sake of the Party. She performs all sorts of absurd, slapstick representations of “individuality” (including a Pina Bausch-inspired interpretive dance piece) that resist her being inculcated into the Marxist choir. Finally, she dons a white gown and jewelry and claims that she is “sick of this Bolshevism shit.” As emblematic of highly individualistic personality—and as an Israeli—one wonders whether the spectre of left wing anti-Semitism is rearing itself,

even if only as a provocation? Or is this the authentic view of the performer Rosenfeld herself? In the case of the latter, it would align with Castorf's method wherein his actor's erotic emancipation is part of the aim of his creative process.

Castorf ends his production with an ironic celebration of love and freedom in which the audience is invited to join in a finale of handclapping to The Beatles' "Yellow Submarine." The latter constitutes Castorf's only concession to the *Lehrstück's* participatory form. Castorf used this same Beatles song in a production of Ibsen's *Volksfeind (An Enemy of the People)* in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz) in the GDR in 1988. At that point, the song conveyed the characters' resignation to repression by remaining in the GDR at the end of the play, and hence functioned as an allegory for their permanent entrapment within ideological confines (Detje, *Castorf* 131). Here again, the music serves as an allegory for an alternativeless, ideologically coercive society in which people take painkillers to suppress authentic emotion.

Not only does Castorf turn Brecht's *Lehrstück* into a raucous, cynical, slapstick event, he also marks the historical rupture that makes a serious performance of the *Lehrstück* impossible as precisely the disappearance of the socialist world. As long as the Eastern Bloc existed, the socialist past still had a future—the one Müller was able to conjure and speak back to. With the disappearance of socialism as a real existing geopolitical space, this opportunity has disappeared. Moreover, Castorf's *Lehrstück* ultimately conveyed an ambivalence toward the very *idea* of Communism. The latter, as we will see, did not undermine the profound resonances between Castorf and the left wing intellectuals headlining the "Idea of Communism" event.

Žižek and Badiou

At the “Idea of Communism” conference, Žižek and Badiou made their respective cases to use the global financial crisis to abandon liberal democracy and embrace revolutionary action. The conference came off the heels of Žižek’s *First as Tragedy then as Farce* (2009)—a book that is strikingly aligned with Castorf’s reception of Berlin after the economic collapse. The title of Žižek’s book comes from Marx’s *18th Brumaire* and the latter’s oft-cited quote that history will repeat: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce . . .” (1). Žižek’s book culminates in an impassioned plea to left-liberals: “[d]o not be afraid, come back. You’ve had your anti-communist fun, come back and join us. You’re pardoned” (157). His plea was a response to the financial meltdown that advocated the event-oriented politics of action espoused by Badiou. Therein, Žižek encourages readers to co-opt the financial crisis and risk fidelity to the moment, calling for revolutionary action. For Žižek, the financial crisis was a sublime opening, a rupture, a window of opportunity. This was a moment to embrace Benjaminian *aufheben*—to “preserve, to elevate, to cancel” (263) what came before, setting history again on an emancipatory course. Crisis, Žižek claims, is the moment when the inherent flaws of capitalism are spectacularly exposed.

For Žižek, the stakes are especially urgent because he warns that every crisis which opens a space for the radical Left also gives rise to anti-Semitism (75). Žižek claims that populist fascistic fetishism results from the false identification of both the nature of the antagonism, as well as the enemy: “class struggle is displaced onto struggle against the Jews, so that popular rage at being exploited is redirected away from

capitalist relations onto the ‘Jewish plot’” (66). So, when the subject says, “Jews are the cause of our misery” what they really mean is that big capital is the cause of our misery. The explicit bad content of anti-Semitism covers over the implicit good content of class struggle and hatred of exploitation (67).

Žižek argues that the scapegoating of ethnic or racialized minorities can be prevented by demystifying the real causes of capitalist financial crisis. And in this way, his argument follows in line with Marx’s “On the Jewish Question.” Žižek claims that, “the only way to fight anti-Semitism is not to preach liberal tolerance and the like, but to articulate its underlying anti-capitalist motivation in a direct and non-displaced way” (70). Žižek’s agenda is to work against the connection between anti-capitalism and anti-Semitism. He calls those guilty of the “misdiagnosis of the Jew for big capitalism” as “one of our own,” by which he means “the underprivileged themselves” (68). Implicitly, he means the not-yet-politicized working class, who are “seduced into directing their rage at the wrong target” (68).

What Žižek advocates is a proletarian apocalypticism (94), thus returning us to the stakes of Piscator’s political theatre and his staging of *Der Kaufmann von Berlin* in 1929. Žižek is intent on conveying the apocalypticism of the times, which “render us all proletarians” (92). For Žižek, apocalyptic time is different from cosmic time and linear progressive time (93). It is “the time of the end of time,” the time of emergency, of the “state of exception” when the end is nigh, and we can only prepare for it (94). Žižek advocates for us to radicalize the concept of the proletarian to an “existential level, beyond Marx’s imagination” (92). Given today’s crises it is no longer about the classical concept of the proletariat, who have “nothing to lose but their chains,” but rather that we are all now in danger of “losing *everything*” (93).

Žižek demands risking fidelity to a revolutionary event regardless of the outcome, “even if the Event ends up in an ‘obscure disaster,’” citing Badiou’s motto “*better disaster than desolation*” (75). “A true Left takes a crisis seriously,” he claims. Following Badiou, Žižek explains that “[t]he best indicator of the Left’s lack of trust is its fear of crisis . . . [it] fears for its own comfortable position as a critical voice fully integrated into the system, ready to risk nothing” (75). Žižek claims that now, “more than ever, Mao Zedong’s old motto is pertinent: ‘Everything under heaven is in utter chaos; the situation is excellent’” (75).

Žižek returns to Fukuyama’s *End of History* by arguing, “[t]he future will be Hegelian—and much more radically than Fukuyama thinks. The only true alternative that awaits us . . . is between socialism and communism . . . the alternative between the two Hegels” (148). Put otherwise—and thus returning to the issue that divided the historic Volksbühne in the mid-1920s—for the radical Left, the only true alternative is the one between itself and the liberal progressives. The populist or fascist Right being nothing but the symptom of ideological mystification.

Žižek recommends coopting what he calls “rage capital”—namely, using widespread *ressentiment* and discontent on the streets to propel revolution (89). This, he explains, was the strategy used by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, as well as by all “successful socialist revolutions, from Cuba to Yugoslavia” (89). They all followed the same model, seizing a local opportunity in an extreme and critical situation, co-opting the desire for national liberation or other forms of “rage capital” (89). Revolutionaries, he explains, must wait patiently for the very brief moment when the system openly malfunctions or collapses. They must exploit the window of opportunity to seize power, which lies in the streets, and then fortify their hold on it (90). What the Left needs is the “Jacobist-Leninist paradigm” (125). Now, more than ever, one should insist on what

Badiou calls the “eternal Idea of Communism, or the communist “invariants”—the “four fundamental concepts” at work from Plato through the medieval millenarian revolts and on to Jacobinism, Leninism and Maoism: strict *egalitarian justice*, disciplinary *terror*, political *voluntarism*, and *trust in the people*” (125). These imperatives that the revolutionary moment reopens at the Volksbühne are received with a dialectical ambivalence by Castorf himself. Castorf at once opens the theatre to the occasion and, on the other, marks the impasses of fully embracing the moment with the knowledge of the practical applications of Žižek and Badiou’s imperatives.

Chapter Summary

Evidently, the Volksbühne—historically and up to the present—flourishes in times of crisis. Given Castorf’s attention to historical repetition, the 2008 financial meltdown can be viewed as opening the space for a potentially unspeakable threat. Although it took a couple of years for the impact of the global financial crisis to fully manifest within the theatre, by 2010 the Volksbühne was riding the crest of an intellectual wave on behalf of the European Left. The latter perceived the period after 2008 as the definitive one for agitating and risking the revolutionary event. This momentum culminated in the “Idea of Communism” conference that affirmed the Volksbühne as a nodal point for the left-wing intelligentsia. A set of coordinates embedded in the history of the theatre come into view here: Marx’s *Brumaire*, Benjamin’s “Theses,” and the anti-fascist political theatre of Piscator. In tension with these, Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” emerges at the tipping point of anti-Semitic violence, as we see more fully in the following chapter. In the present moment, Žižek and Castorf alike have pointed to the ways that ideological mystifications around economic collapse risk a Far-Right revival and scapegoating. They alert to the risk of repeating xenophobic violence and hence ultimately to the

Holocaust that hovers around Castorf's stage as an impelling reminder that refuses integration. Likewise underlying this discourse is the tension between Social Democracy and Communism—between left-liberalism and the radical Left. The real challenge of the moment, just as it was at the Volksbühne towards the end of the 1920s, is for the Left to cohere in the struggle against fascism. The “missed opportunity” for the Volksbühne itself to produce this cohesion under Piscator is another return Castorf was conscious of and impelled by.

If Castorf was driven by the same universal proletarianization of his intellectual forebears, it was with some degree of caution. His staging of Brecht's *Lehrstück* revealed, following Müller, the impasses of a director in the Leftist theatre tradition after the realities of real-existing socialism. At the same time, Castorf's stagecraft in this post-2008 period was more manic and satirical than in previous years. As such, it recalled the stakes of the stage during the Weimar era—the approaches of Dada, Piscator and Brecht, and the thwarted revolutionary potential of the theatre's most vibrant period in the 1920s. While his programming choices aligned with the above described discourse of Žižek and Badiou, his productions manifested a profound ambivalence and revealed a repetitious pattern of tragedy and farce. We see this structure of historical repetition most clearly in the final case study, *Der Kaufmann von Berlin*.

Chapter 7: A Case Study of Castorf's *Der Kaufmann von Berlin*

Since taking over the Volksbühne in 1992, Castorf has been heavily influenced by Piscator's concept of political theatre, as well as by the combative and iconoclastic Dada movement that underwrote it. During the Weimar Republic, members of the Berlin Dada circle and later the "political" and "epic" theatre directors Piscator and Brecht, participated in struggles against capitalism, imperialist war, and their *Sozialfaschistischen* (Social Democratic) enablers. Walter Mehring's drama *Der Kaufmann von Berlin: Ein Historisches Schauspiel aus der Deutschen Inflation* (*The Merchant of Berlin: A Historical Play Set During the German Inflation*) was a Dada-inflected, tragic-comic adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* written in an epic style with Piscator's vanguard stagecraft in mind. Both Mehring and Piscator had been part of the short-lived Berlin Dada movement after WWI. Mehring's play represents a key Dadaist principle that Piscator and Brecht also upheld: to repurpose the classics for contemporary social and political ends, using "theatre as a weapon for the liberation of humanity" (Piscator 72). A direct line can be drawn from the Dadaist's iconoclasm through the political and epic theatre traditions to Castorf's reputation as a "*Klassikerzertrümmer*" (a smasher or destroyer of classical plays), for there is nothing more Dada than the irreverent treatment of iconic works of art or "national culture." As discussed in Chapter Two, it is important to note that while Castorf "destroyed" the original dramatic text, he also stitched the material back together in ways that revealed its contemporary relevance. Hence, these Dadaist and political theatre lineages take on renewed vibrancy in Castorf's staging of *Kaufmann*. Castorf's stagecraft manifests the same trenchant critique of the machinations behind capitalist speculation as Piscator's did in 1929. In both Piscator and Castorf's productions of *Kaufmann*,

historical precedent, which is to say the year of the inflation crisis, 1923, is allegorical for current instabilities and underwrite apocalyptic interpretations of the crisis at hand.

With his staging of *Kaufmann* (a production staged only once since its original mounting in 1929), Castorf was agitating against the well-intentioned naiveté of liberal-progressives and their imperviousness to historical precedent. By re-staging *Kaufmann's* account of the 1923 crisis of the republic—the inflation, right wing terrorism, anti-government putsches and anti-Semitic pogroms—Castorf was also warning contemporary audiences about a looming potential for a resurgence of Far-Right, anti-immigrant violence, as well as the limits of “tolerant” liberal multiculturalism.

Castorf's production of *Kaufmann* is devised to challenge the contemporary “bourgeois” spectator lacking in historical consciousness now comfortably seated in the Volksbühne auditorium. The citational, historical, and ethnographic exploration of long-forgotten *ostjüdische* and proletarian milieus that Castorf undertakes in *Kaufmann* is foremost a *provocation* directed towards the “cool” creative class who have taken over the Volksbühne's immediate vicinity. In the program booklet for *Kaufmann*, Castorf describes them as “sleek people, who live here in Mitte and have no idea about local history.”¹⁷⁶ For Castorf, the new Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg inhabitants are a liberal cosmopolitan elite with no awareness of the political or proletarian stakes that played out in their corner of the city in the 1920s. The historical detail, the digressions and citations from historical texts inserted in the program booklet, and the production's four-hour length, are all *provocations*, as well as attempts to make a constellation of forces—wide-spread *ressentiment*, economic collapse and anti-Semitism—emerge in relief on the Volksbühne stage.

¹⁷⁶ Castorf's full quote in the program book: “Die Nachgewachsenen und zugezogenen glatten Leute, die hier in Mitte wohnen und die keine Ahnung von Lokalgeschichte haben.”

Kaufmann's dramaturgy is underwritten by a rigorous investigation of different social milieus colliding in the Berlin metropolis. For one, Castorf *Brechtianizes* Mehring's play. He simplifies and deconstructs scenes and adds the role of an "epic narrator." He also places emphasis on *Gestus* and performativity, exposing the constructed-ness of identity, race/ethnicity and gender.¹⁷⁷ Castorf captures the competing impulses of the period by adding autobiographical accounts of real-life historical personas such as the ultra-nationalist Ernst von Salomon. As such, Castorf adds a level of complexity and nuance to the parody of goonish anti-Semitic paramilitaries depicted in Mehring's drama. He creates new scenes inspired by the comic book series *Berlin: City of Stone* (I) and *Berlin: City of Stone Smoke* (II) by the contemporary American artist Jason Lutes. He also includes the Wilhelmine era caricaturist Heinrich Zille's accounts of prostitutes from his book *Hurengespräche* (*Whore's Conversations*) to flesh out a depiction of the districts surrounding the Volksbühne, or what Zille referred to as Berlin "O" (*Ost*).

Castorf has significantly reworked the original play. While he maintains Mehring's tragic-comic figure of the "Jewish banker," he intensifies the alienation effects by casting a woman (Sophie Rois) in the role of Kaftan. This reflects the Brechtian roots and poststructuralist influences that underwrite Castorf's approach to gender and race. Like Piscator's *Kaufmann*, Castorf's staging is unequivocally a critique of speculative capitalism and anti-Semitism as interconnected dynamics, but likewise seems to edge on reproducing the problematic link between capitalism and Jewishness found in Marx's "On the Jewish Question" (1844). Precisely his figuration of the Jew on stage reflects Castorf's refusal to abide by what he describes as a

¹⁷⁷ Brecht describes the *Gestus* as follows: "The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another is what we call the realm of gest. Physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression are all determined by a social gest" (*Brecht On Theatre* 128).

“self-censorship becoming more widespread in the German theatre” (*Konzeptionsprobe*). These transgressive elements reflect Castorf’s belief in the obligation of theatre to raise uncomfortable and complex questions.

This case-study chapter presents a close reading of Castorf’s adaptation of Mehring’s *Der Kaufmann von Berlin*, which premiered at the Volksbühne on November 20th, 2010. The analysis is based primarily on a video recording of the performance on November 23rd, 2010,¹⁷⁸ as well as Castorf’s *Konzeptionsprobe* (concept rehearsal) dated September 28, 2010 (posted on the Volksbühne website), interviews with Volksbühne dramaturg Thomas Martin (posted on vimeo), and the program book distributed during the production run. I begin with an excavation of the program book as paratext, then move through the iterations of *Kaufmann*, from Mehring to Piscator to Castorf. I end by considering the conceits of ethnic drag as they shift from Brecht to Castorf.

The Program Book for *Kaufmann*, 2010

An elaborate eighty-one-page program book was distributed during the run of Castorf’s *Kaufmann*. The dramaturgy team, led by Sebastian Kaiser, created a richly detailed collage of primarily historical and political texts. It included writings from the radical Right and Left of the period, contemporary Berlin historians’ reflections on the Weimar Republic, excerpts from the comic book series set in Weimar Berlin, *Berlin: City of Stones* and *City of Smoke* (2004/2008) by the American artist Jason Lutes, and a Yiddish-German glossary of terms. In the booklet, Castorf outlined the questions that guided his research into the *ostjüdische* and proletarian milieus of Berlin in 1923, juxtaposing these with the gentrified Berlin of today:

¹⁷⁸ I myself attended a live performance on November 25, 2010.

What was Berlin? Who came here and why did they come? Berlin was cooking. A location of extremes, when there was still a brashness that one doesn't find here anymore, where politics and the avant-garde melded together. We don't have that anymore in 'organic food-land' Prenzlauer Berg, where the Volksbühne still stands. (75)

Castorf's research questions were devised to push back against the ahistoricism of contemporary Berliners and to defer to the frenetic, polarized and ultimately far more heterogeneous and vibrant Berlin of the 1920s. The program book included a transcript of a radio discussion between Piscator and Goebbels titled, "Nationale oder Internationale Kunst" ("National or International Art");¹⁷⁹ the communist Karl Radek's attempt to reclaim the *Freikorps* hero Leo Schlageter for a left wing revolutionary cause; an excerpt from Ernst von Salomon's *The Outlaws* (1930); various newspaper clippings that document Far Right activities and putsches; as well as articles from the Nazi party organ, *Der Angriff* (edited by Goebbels) denouncing Piscator and the reign of "Jewish cultural Bolshevism";¹⁸⁰ and a copy of an original letter from Leon Trotsky detailing his plans for a Soviet occupation of Germany in 1923.

One of the newspaper clippings from *Der Angriff* and dated January 1933 is an announcement of a planned march starting in front of the Volksbühne, which "Hitler himself will take part in" (48). The march was to commemorate the Nazi "martyr" Horst Wessel. The article claims that the "Moscowers" (a derogatory term for communists) "behave as if they own the Bülowplatz just because the Karl-Liebknecht Haus [headquarters of the KPD], the seat of Jewish-Communist bigwigs, is located there" (49). In a 2009 lecture titled *Berlin im*

¹⁷⁹ In November 1930, over a year after Goebbels denounced Mehring and Piscator's *Kaufmann*, the two participated in a public radio debate at the Berliner Rundfunk on national vs. international art. Piscator claims the Nazi approach to art is a combination of misunderstood Marxism and a bourgeois art criticism (40). Piscator also argued that Nationalism is an outdated relic, pointing to an international momentum (in a way that overlaps with Jünger's "Total Mobilization"). Goebbels retorts that the NDSAP is a *socialist* and not a Marxist party that *transcends* right and left because it stands with *das Volk* (40-41).

¹⁸⁰ *Der Angriff* was first founded to rally NSDAP members during the nearly two-year ban on the party in Berlin. It was conceived as a mass circulation paper that fought the hated liberal democratic "system" with rude and aggressive language. Its main themes were anti-parliamentarism and anti-Semitism.

Nationalsozialismus (“Berlin under National Socialism”)—an excerpt from which is also included—the historian Michael Wildt explores how Goebbels and the Nazis bizarrely managed to get a foothold in “red” Berlin in the first place. Up until 1927, Berlin was a city firmly divided between Communists and Social Democrats, much like the Volksbühne itself until 1933.

The program book is entrenched in the Dada tradition contingent upon montage, juxtaposition and quotation. It also evokes Benjamin, who famously claimed that as a writer his greatest pride was that his “writing consisted largely of quotations—the craziest mosaic technique imaginable” (*Briefe I* 366). The booklet pulls together fragments of texts from the Right and the Left in order to establish a kind of totality or composite of competing political forces from the times. The effect is the booklet is impressionistic and kaleidoscopic, since it is also shot through with contemporary artists and historians’ reflections on the past.

Walter Mehring’s *Der Kaufmann von Berlin*

Walter Mehring’s 1928 drama unfolds thusly: At the beginning of 1923, Simon Chaim Kaftan—an *Ostjude* fleeing pogroms in Galicia and seeking his fortune—arrives at Berlin-Alexanderplatz train station with a hundred US dollars in the lining of his cap. Kaftan’s first experience of the metropolis, as Mehring depicts it, conveys a panorama of swindlers, charlatans, rampant anti-Semitism, political slogans, newspaper headlines, trains, cars, and movie theatres. The fortune Kaftan hopes to amass is for a “noble cause,” namely to pay for his gravely ill daughter Jessi’s stay at a tuberculosis sanatorium. Shortly after arriving in Berlin, Kaftan stops at a tavern where news of his hundred US dollars—worth a fortune during the 1923 inflation crisis—travels fast. He meets the corrupt lawyer Heinz Müller, who convinces him to speculate his dollars on the inflation. After first investing in soap and then ham, Kaftan eventually acquires what he believes is a waste-disposal site near Jüterbog. It turns out to be a storage space for

illegal weapons for Müller's ultra-nationalist cronies, who are planning a putsch to overthrow the liberal government. The group, the anti-Semitic *Bund der Acht* (*Band of Eight*), are a parody of the real-life paramilitary "Organisation Consul" or O.C.¹⁸¹ In the meantime, Kaftan buys the legendary Jewish banker Eisenberg's "Eisenbank" and renames it the "Kaftanbank." Eisenberg's own rise to banking power is, as Mehring's plot conveys, "inexplicable and mysterious."

Mehring's drama exposes the ultra-nationalist and industrialist machinations behind the "Jewish banker" as social type. With the Mephistophelean (and anti-Semitic) lawyer Müller guiding his moves like a puppeteer, Kaftan becomes a billionaire through financial speculation, as well as a front for Müller's illegal dealings. As the most prominent banker of Berlin, Kaftan symbolically trades in his caftan for a business suit and joins the *Verband für Deutsche Juden*, the "Association of German National Jews," symbolizing his assimilation into "German" (bourgeois-nationalist) society.¹⁸² At the play's dramatic climax, Kaftan holds a reception for high society during which the inflation bubble bursts, the *Bund der Acht* attempt a putsch to overthrow the government, the Deutsch Mark is stabilized by government intervention (*Währungsreform*), and Kaftan's capital is embezzled and forfeited. The putsch fails, Jessi succumbs to her illness, and there is a pogrom in the Jewish ghetto directly adjacent to the Volksbühne. The ruined "Kaftanbank" is then passed into the hands of Cohn & Co., another Jewish banking front for Müller and his Far-Right backers. Having lost everything, Kaftan returns to the train station where he encounters the next "Kaftan" wandering into the city. The

¹⁸¹ Castorf's full quote in the program book: "Die Nachgewachsenen und zugezogenen glatten Leute, die hier in Mitte wohnen und die keine Ahnung von Lokalgeschichte haben."

¹⁸² The Association of German National Jews (*Verband nationaldeutscher Juden*) was a German-Jewish organization during the Weimar Republic and the early years of Nazi Germany (1921-1935). These were nationalist and conservative German-Jews whose goal was the eradication of Jewish identity, assimilation into the German *Volksgemeinschaft*, and the expulsion *Ostjuden* (Eastern European Jews) from Germany.

play's action takes place over a few weeks, enough time for Kaftan to rise—to replace the reigning German-Jewish banker “Eisenberg” as the new finance-magnate of Berlin—and to fall. During this brief period, Kaftan has turned into a “harter yid” (a “tough Jew”)—an exploiter of the inflation and a profiteer of a deeply corrupt economic system.

Piscator's 1929 Staging of *Kaufmann*

On September 6th, 1929 the Piscator-Bühne am Nollendorfplatz elicited what would be called “one of the greatest theatre scandals of the Weimar Republic” with his staging of Mehring's *Kaufmann* (Mehring 124). Even if causing a scandal was not especially difficult in the fall of 1929, when the Berlin stages were as politically charged as the streets and where the constant barrage of newspaper headlines fueled an escalating atmosphere of crisis, Piscator's *Kaufmann* caused the scandal of the decade. After the premiere, the *Sturmabteilung* or SA (the paramilitary branch of the Nazi Party) protested in front of the theatre and Goebbels himself published a pamphlet sending Mehring “to the gallows!” Moreover, neither the nationalist nor the liberal press seemed able to comprehend the play's stance on the “Jewish Question” (Piscator 333). Piscator, however, saw Kaftan foremost as a capitalist exploiter and his Jewishness as incidental. “Kaftan,” Piscator explains in *The Political Theatre*, was a racketeer whose “cupidity is only thinly veiled by his ethical motive, his love for his sick daughter” (333). His “racial or religious affiliations were a matter of indifference to us. However, as the public saw it in 1929, Kaftan the Jew was more prominent than Kaftan the capitalist” (333). Carl von Ossietzky, editor of the famed left wing intellectual journal *Die Weltbühne*, rose to *Kaufmann*'s defense, arguing that the production was a critique of capitalism, showing the “effect of inflation” that “draws all classes into a hellish dance macabre, like the pushers themselves, whether Jew or Christian”

(Ossietsky 300). For this, Simon Kaftan is no less of a victim of the times than the impoverished Putsch-General and his officers” (300).

Piscator ultimately wanted more economic analysis and class politics over and above what existed in Mehring’s drama. However, Piscator acknowledges the difficulty of writing a drama about inflation and that it “is one of the most difficult subjects that exist” (331). “Its basic causes” he wrote, “and the mechanism by which it operates are hotly disputed even today, and political economists and politicians within the Marxist camp itself propose conflicting solutions of the problem” (331).¹⁸³ A brief survey of reviews from Piscator’s 1929 production, however, reveals that *Kaufmann*’s most egregious offence was not its ambivalent treatment of the play’s Jewish protagonist, but rather its irreverent treatment of fallen soldiers. A scene in which a dead veteran is disrespectfully disposed of by a street cleaner cheerfully singing, “Garbage! Sweep it Away,” was the catalyst for massive public outrage from which Piscator’s theatre never recovered.¹⁸⁴ His production of *Kaufmann* effectively terminated Piscator’s political theatre experiments in the Weimar Republic and the director fled to the Soviet Union shortly thereafter.

It should be noted that Piscator’s *Kaufmann* was another step in developing the technological stage. With *Kaufmann*, Piscator aimed to surpass the heights he had reached with *The Good Soldier Schweijk* and *Rasputin* at the first Piscator-Bühne in 1928. For *Kaufmann*,

¹⁸³ Piscator comments on his extensive research into the mechanics of capitalism: “For months the problem of inflation was the subject of thorough economic analyses during the preparatory work on the play, and at this stage we consulted economic theorists from both the Marxist and the bourgeois camps, people like Alfons Goldschmidt, Fritz Sternberg and Moris Lewinsohn. The more the work progressed, the more clearly we saw that a subject like this could not be dealt with in one evening and really required a whole cycle of plays” (331).

¹⁸⁴ The scene led most of the audience to protest with a raucous “whistling concert.” According to Christopher Innes, the scene was “the equivalent—in nationalistic terms and in terms of insult—of painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa.” Piscator was forced to defend himself, stating that the politically charged actor in the role went “too far.” The scene, however, was emblematic of the Dadaists’ and political theatre’s critique of imperialist war and of the Social Democratic government’s treatment of veterans. The theme persists in other Left-wing dramas during the Weimar republic including Brecht’s *Drums in the Night* 1922 and his *Badener Lehrstück* from 1929.

Bauhaus designer Lazslo Moholy-Nagy designed a three-tiered mechanical set based on principles of spatial dynamism and light. Two conveyor belts were set on rails enabling the actors to move laterally across the revolving stage. Kaftan “had his first taste of Berlin with colored projections by George Grosz” (316). Piscator and Maholy-Nagy created film footage to insert into the production, expanding the purview of the stage to include other locations and historical events. Filmed backgrounds of Berlin streets were projected, as well as exchange rates, dollar signs and wage rates where relevant. *Kaufmann* was Piscator’s most elaborate attempt to create a vanguard machine theatre. However, as Piscator explains, the machinery, which “should have been swift, smooth and synchronized, proved to be slow and ponderous . . .” (316). Paul Fechter, a journalist from the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, accused Piscator of the “dictatorship of a dead apparatus” to which Piscator replied that his stage reflected the “condition of life in the factories, in the mines, in prisons, in the barracks and in war” (qtd. in Innes 160).

Piscator wanted the melding together of public and stage, akin to the anti-art objectives of the historical avant-gardes. He was among the first artists in Germany to recognize that media and technology would determine the course of culture under capitalism and were important weapons in the ideological struggle against fascism. Given the stakes of the times, Piscator understood that using technology and contemporary media was a “necessity for the political artist” (Fehervary 1973, 169). Notably, Piscator developed these vanguard approaches to *before* Benjamin began to theorize about them in the 1930s (169). What is also crucial to recognize is that Mehring and Piscator’s *Kaufmann* distilled the interconnected forces of government, finance and the Far-Right paramilitary one year *prior* to Benjamin’s “Theories of German Fascism” essay in 1930. This fact, combined with Piscator’s technologized theatre as a recognition of the stakes around technology in the struggle against fascism, is another example of the foresight of

the political theatre tradition he perceives to be rooted in the historic Volksbühne (Piscator 30). Piscator's highly technologized approach to the stage was an attempt to politicize mass technologies, to put them in the service of the proletariat, rather than leaving technology in the hands of capitalist industry.

Castorf's 2010 Staging of *Der Kaufmann von Berlin*

Castorf's production at the Volksbühne begins when a group of actors dressed as Orthodox Jewish men wearing kippahs, ringlets, fake beards and caftans walk onto the stage and take their seats in the train carriage. Once all the actors are comically jammed in, one last passenger—a man in a business suit, carrying a newspaper—squeezes into the overcrowded train carriage. After a few moments of silence, the group begins yelling hysterically over one another in an exaggerated Yiddish-German, comparing rumours they have heard about the assimilated Jews in Berlin.¹⁸⁵

It would be clear to Piscator's audience in 1929 that these were *Ostjuden* fleeing pogroms in Galicia on a Berlin-bound train as thousands did in the period of rising anti-Semitism starting in the 1880s. *Ostjuden* comprised the largest wave of emigration to Western Europe around the turn of the century with Berlin as a popular destination. The group on the train is debating the degree to which Germans are anti-Semitic and the degree of Jewishness of the assimilated German-Jews in Berlin. The debate reaches fever pitch as one of the Jews—a shamanic, Cassandra-type—foresees pogroms and apocalyptic “Messianic Times!” ahead. This unleashes an outburst of mania and frenzy in the train cart. Another tries to quell the hysteria with a

¹⁸⁵ What immediately strikes the spectator is the Yiddish-German being used, and the *Berlinerisch* dialect, as well as standard German, which reflect the diversity of the metropolis from that period (and should be understood as a rejection of the language of bourgeois, classical High German). These are features of Mehring's original drama that Castorf admired.

reminder that they “have a Jewish foreign minister of Germany,” referring to Walter Rathenau. This is a moment of tragic irony in Mehring’s drama, since Rathenau was murdered by the paramilitary group the Organisational Consul or OC in 1922.

There is an unsettling feeling emanating from the stage that is a consequence of this caricature of Jewishness.¹⁸⁶ What we see on stage is inevitably haunted by what we know about the succession of events in Germany. Castorf’s opening scene also has an Old Testament, parable-like quality and simultaneously something “*Märchenhaft*” or fairy-tale like about it that is evoked by the Shtetl-world of the émigrés. Brechtian estrangement strategies are heavily at play here. Two things stand out immediately in the first few moments of the production: first, the frenetic and hysterical energy of the actors—index fingers pointed when speaking, bodies tense, gestures exaggerated. This manic energy gives the spectator the feeling of something ominous on

¹⁸⁶ In an article in the left wing newspaper *taz* published on May 30, 2015, journalist Dmitrij Belkin writes that the attempt to have a political discourse opened about German-Jewish relations— “after the Holocaust and where it hurts”—is strikingly absent in German society. Belkin claims that today, all that exists in the cultural landscape in Germany is state-funded “philo-Semitism.” This is in stark contrast to the critique of “*Subventionierter Anti-Semitismus*” against the German film and theatre director Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Belkin claims that on German stages today Jews are one-dimensional characters—innocent victims in representations within a national discourse too afraid to do otherwise. Belkin claims that in Germany, only Jewish directors are asked to direct plays that deal with the “Jewish Question.” He also claims that the Volksbühne is the *only* theatre in Germany within which one can imagine going beyond one-dimensionality to address the complexity of the issue and confront anti-Semitism. He claims that the Volksbühne is the only theatre in Berlin that could stage Fassbinder’s play *Die Müll, die Stadt und der Tod* (1981) with its controversial character of the “rich Jew” (which elicited massive protests in Frankfurt when it was staged). Fassbinder was deeply preoccupied with both the “Jewish Question,” as well as with how social games involving power, sex and greed transcend race, ethnicity and class. Fassbinder was interested in questions of assimilation, belonging, as well as oppression and exploitation. For Fassbinder, the Jew is the “every person,” equally exploiter and exploited. He contends that today, “[t]he sometimes fascistic, fecal, pornographic and simultaneously unendingly lyrical language of [Fassbinder’s] play would have to be partially ommitted,” but that the Volksbühne could “dance it out.”

the horizon. The second striking element is the drag,¹⁸⁷ with two of the women playing orthodox Jewish men.¹⁸⁸

Castorf has entirely inserted this next part into the production. Reproducing the social *Gestus* of the cold and fastidious “German,” the last man to enter the train cart (played by Dieter Mann) personifies the *ressentiment* and rabid anti-Semitism of the times. He informs the Jews in the train carriage that he has “reserved the entire car for himself from Breslau on.” “Surely,” he inquires, “they are on their way to Berlin?” “Jojojojojojojojo” they comically chime in unison. “Yes,” he continues, “we Berliners are a *hospitable* people,” with the emphasis on hospitable implying that the Jews are guests and will leave again. “There are a lot of *you* in the *Reichshauptstadt*,” he tells them, making his anti-Semitic leanings apparent. He then excuses himself; he must change train carriages. He “reserved a seat in the first class as a cautionary measure.” “You know” he tells them, “the smell in here is a bit strong.”

As the man steps out of the train carriage, the stage turns black. A single spotlight is now cast on the anti-Semitic passenger as he takes on the role of an epic narrator, breaking the fourth wall and speaking directly to the audience. Castorf’s insertion of a narrator role represents a *Brechtianization* of Mehring’s drama, which was already written in an epic style with Piscator’s political theatre in mind. Castorf has taken from *Kaufmann*’s elaborate historical commentary, as well as from the train passengers’ banter, and inserted them into the mouth of the narrator. He then provides spectators with the historical context around the 1923 hyper-inflation crisis and

¹⁸⁷ Katrin Sieg renames impersonation “drag,” taking her cues from feminist theatre scholar Sue-Ellen Case. Case renamed the custom of female impersonation on the ancient Greek stage and in the Renaissance theater “classic drag”. Her critique recovered “the social resonances and consequences of female impersonation and reassessed its political meanings in the context of patriarchal, homosocial gender systems” (Sieg 27).

¹⁸⁸ In the Elizabethan period, and of course, on the Shakespearean stage, the female parts were played by men. Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, upon which *Kaufmann* is partially based, contains gender drag with Portia disguised as a doctor of the law.

personifies the rabid anti-Semitism prevalent in Berlin at the time. For each of the misfortunes plaguing Germany in 1923 that the narrator lists—the overthrow of the Kaiser and establishment of the Republic, the inflation, the “unfair” terms of the Versailles Treaty, the French occupation of the Ruhr—the narrator asks the audience, “and who is at fault?” Each time, the spotlight turns back to the Jews sitting in the train carriage and wailing “Achjott! Achjott! Achjott!” (*Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!*).

The narrator then recounts the rise and fall of the banker Eisenberg, who goes from small hosiery shop owner to director of a banking empire in Berlin over night. In doing so, he casts both suspicion and blame on German-Jews such as Eisenberg, who have “mysteriously” risen to power and who “now has a seven-room apartment and two cars.” The narrator then ominously claims that what is missing is a “man of action, a man who gets things done with an iron fist.” This scene conveys the *ressentiment* on behalf of Berliners towards those who have profited from the inflation. In Mehring’s original and now in Castorf’s adaptation, the desire for an authoritarian “iron fisted” ruler to restore Germany’s “honour” is invoked in this context.

After the narrator’s anti-Semitic rant, the spotlight turns back to the train carriage. Suddenly, Kaftan—the play’s tragic-comic anti-hero—jumps up. Kaftan is played by Sophie Rois, one of the star actors of the Volksbühne ensemble, who is immediately recognizable for her husky voice. Kaftan then counts “his” dollars: “10 – 20 – 20 – 50: 100 *Dollarrrrr!*” Rois performs the *Gestus* of the *Ostjude émigré* and patriarch in ethnic drag.¹⁸⁹ She speaks with a

¹⁸⁹ Katrin Sieg uses the term ethnic drag to describe cross-racial casting on stage and the performance of “race” as a masquerade (2). Sieg’s study *Ethnic Drag* (2002) explores the political and aesthetic presuppositions that underwrite the history of ethnic drag on German stages, as well as how “people lived, disavowed, and contested “Germanness” in its complex racial, national, and sexual dimension” (2). Ethnic drag “reveals the continuities, permutations, and contradictions of racial feelings in West German culture” (2). Sieg explains that as a “technique of estrangement, drag denounces that which dominant ideology presents as natural, normal, and inescapable, without always offering another truth” (2).

heavy Yiddish-inflected German, with fists held tightly together and arms waving wildly about. There is something cartoonish and Chaplinesque about Rois's Kaftan. Her characterization recalls the hapless tramp wandering, forlorn in the metropolis—a kind of comic physicality that was, in fact, influential for the development of Brecht's aesthetic. *Kaufmann's* plot also builds on the "American Dream," the rags-to-riches tale of the poor foreigner arriving in the capitalist metropolis and eventually ruling over it.

Kaftan asks his fellow *Ostjuden* in the crammed train carriage for food, explaining he has dollars, but cannot use them. Instead, he must exchange them to generate more capital for the sake of his sick daughter Jessi's stay in a tuberculosis sanatorium in Switzerland. In Castorf's adaptation the mere mention of dollars elicits comical hysteria in the small train carriage: "Dollarrrrr! Dollarrrrr! Dollarrrrr! Dollarrrrrrr!" the group in the carriage shout in unison before the stage blacks out.

The spotlight cuts back to the narrator, who introduces audiences to the *Scheunenviertel*, the densely populated *Ostjuden* quarter which was partially demolished to make room for the building of the Volksbühne in 1913. The narrator's mention of the Volksbühne elicits another interruption of the monologue by the wailing of the Jews. With this response, Castorf effects an ironic self-referentiality and invokes the Volksbühne's fraught history. The narrator then continues: "an architectural monstrosity emerging from the rubble of the demolished *Scheunenviertel*, the former refuge of the *Lumpenproletariat*." Mehring's commentary on the Volksbühne, which is of utmost interest to Castorf, is representative of the revolutionary Left's accusation of the Volksbühne's "betrayal" of the proletariat. This betrayal—outlined in a pamphlet by the critic Herbert Ihering in 1927 after the "Piscator Crisis"—was also the position held by Brecht, Piscator and Kurt Tucholsky toward the theatre. The conclusion of the narrator's

monologue provides a vivid collage of images that illustrate the competing impulses at play in the *Scheunenviertel*: the vestiges of the failed Spartacus revolution, the death skulls of the *Schwarze Reichswehr* (Black Reichswehr), European skyscrapers, and the Shtetl of the *Ostjuden*.

This description produces a collage of modernist and rural-pastoral temporalities that were colliding in the Volksbühne's vicinity in the early 1920s.¹⁹⁰ It provides the spectator with historical context that conveys the political polarization and competing energies at play in Weimar Berlin. Castorf ends the opening scene with the narrator returning to the train car to sit directly across from Kaftan. Kaftan then begins to sing Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line" as the train carriage and the massive red and white circus tent, which dominates the stage and encloses the carriage, begin to slowly rotate. Castorf has always had a penchant for inserting iconic rock n' roll songs in his productions. Like Kaftan, Cash is also a religious "man in black" and evokes the American Outlaw persona, of which the capitalist speculator is a distantly related social type. Cash's lyrics about love and self-sacrifice are obviously meant to represent Kaftan's sacrifice for his daughter.

Kaftan then steps out of the carriage and does a little Yiddish folk dance around the rotating circus tent, humming to himself. At the same time, the massive tent puts on its own comical-mechanical performance. The circus tent is opened for the first time to reveal its interior. Silver metallic strips of curtain hang down like tinsel from a rod, which then begins to twirl around in the interior of the tent in one direction, while the circus tent rotates in the opposite

¹⁹⁰ In *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (*Heritage of Our Times*) Bloch describes this as *Ungleichzeitigkeit*—a mixture of modern, capitalist and industrial experience alongside traditional, pre-capitalist, and preindustrial life. Bloch writes of the German *Mittelstand* or middle-class consciousness that still had memories of small-town life and less rationalized forms of production. Bloch's analysis took issue with the rationalist bias of Marxist orthodoxy. Bloch suggested that the appeal of National Socialism lay less in traditional anti-modernism than in the promise of cultural and emotional redemption through embracing aspects of the modern world in accordance with German traditions. The Right were the true revolutionaries since they promised "a renewal of the soul in a modern setting." (Herf 23)

direction. In a nod to slapstick and vaudeville theatre, the small, tramp-like figure of Rois's Kaftan comically tries to stop the rotation of the gigantic tent by commanding it with an imaginary remote control as if it were a TV. This type of humour—tiny human body vs. mass industrial technology—features prominently in the silent era cinema of Charlie Chaplin. It was also the unfortunate reality in Piscator's staging, which tried to create a fully technologized stage that disastrously "turned into the opposite of what was intended" (Piscator 334). By contrast, Neumann's glittering, smooth-functioning, albeit significantly pared-down, set represents the realization of the possibilities of vanguard technology at the Volksbühne in a way not yet feasible in Piscator's time, but significantly indebted to him.

The next scene takes place downstage in front of closed curtains. A young soldier (played by Marc Hosemann), enters the stage and is accosted by two Prussian police officers who look like a Grosz illustration come to life. The officers force him to strip off his trousers and underwear and do balletic jumps in his socks, whilst he tries to cover his genitals and buttocks. This is the kind of comedy Castorf is known for: a Chaplin or Keaton-inspired brand of slapstick based on self-humiliation and emasculation. Kaftan approaches the jumping soldier looking to exchange his dollars. The discovery that Kaftan has "dollars" turns the encounter into another occasion for mad-cap digression, absurdity and hysteria: "Dollarrrrr! Dollarr! Dollarrrr!" they both declare in unison, emphasizing the rolling of the "r" as the two begin to bounce around the stage. Still trying to cover his genitals, the soldier suddenly stops and transforms into a one-man bank director, thus amalgamating Castorf's comical digression and actual dialogue from Mehring's play. In Mehring's drama, the point of this scene is to depict the average Berliner in 1923 trying to exploit the inflation crisis in order to survive. In an aggressive tone and comically thick Berlin dialect the bank director says to Kaftan, "we are a respectable bank house and not

some stock market pimps that make themselves rich on the cost of the fatherland.” However, when Kaftan refuses his offer, the man makes outrageously anti-Semitic statements with his Berliner *Schnauze*:¹⁹¹ “I’m no anti-Semite, but something like you should be clubbed to death and fed by the pound to idiotic orphan children.” He then goes behind the curtain and returns to the stage carrying a small terrier, using the live animal for comic effect to cover his genitals. He then puts the dog down, which has a few moments of being forlorn on the stage, before it is retrieved by the larger of the two burly Prussian soldiers.

Castorf has inserted the next scene from Ernst von Salomon’s post WWI memoir, *The Outlaws (Die Geächteten)* written in 1930, which is an account of the events leading up to the murder of Walter Rathenau.¹⁹² Castorf’s inclusion of the figure of Salomon is part of his agenda to hack into the thinking of the *Freikorps* and Conservative Revolutionaries as *both* a proto-fascist form of right wing terror in Germany *and* as an existential position towards capitalism and the West with some significant overlaps with the revolutionary Left. The insertion of Salomon as a character in Castorf’s *Kaufmann* is also reflective of the director’s insistence upon incorporating real historical personages and their *Weltanschauungen* into his stage productions in order to flesh out the competing dynamics of Weimar Germany. Castorf evidently believes that

¹⁹¹ The *Berliner Schnauze* describes the verbal humour or attitude of Berliners, characterized as being outspoken, lacking politeness and using coarse humour. Mehring is showing up the widespread anti-Semitism of many Berliners during this time.

¹⁹² *The Outlaws* is set in Germany in the immediately after of WWI where Salomon was still only an officer cadet too young to have fought in the trenches. Salomon took part in crushing Communist revolts that had broken out all over Germany in the period from 1918–20. Afterwards, he joined the *Freikorps* and headed to the Baltic States where he fought against the Bolsheviks. Salomon and his comrades saw the Weimar Republic as a betrayal of Germany and was involved in numerous attempts to overthrow it, including the Kapp Putsch in 1920. Later he helped his comrades organize a secret society—the Organisational Consul—whose task was to assassinate politicians deemed to be a threat to their goals. This culminated in the assassination of Walter Rathenau, a liberal German politician who served as the Foreign Minister. Salomon was found guilty of having aided his co-conspirators by providing the escape car and was imprisoned as a result. The O.C. was dissolved in 1923 after the failed Küstrin Putsch.

the financial crises and rising anti-Semitism that plagued the Weimar Republic provides relevant insight into the 2008 financial crisis and its potential implications. By inserting quotations from Salomon's political biography, Castorf has "blasted"—in the Benjaminian sense—a relevant artefact lodged in the archive of history, hoping to use it for "explosive" effect on the here and now.¹⁹³

At this point, the train carriage is again at the front of the circus tent. This next scene, which Castorf has entirely constructed, is taken directly from *The Outlaws* and depicts Salomon and his real-life comrade Erwin Kern on their way to the Baltics to "defend" German territories against the Soviet Army—an undertaking of paramilitary brigades between 1919-1923. Dieter Mann, who was just playing the narrator, now plays Kern, one of the men responsible for Rathenau's murder. Another soldier, Salomon, then enters the carriage, played by Hosemann who just played the soldier-banker. Lastly, Kaftan steps into the train car and asks, in a heavy Yiddish-accented German, "So? Where are you off to?" "To the Baltics," the two soldiers reply in unison.¹⁹⁴ Breathless and riled-up, Castorf has Salomon recite an excerpt from *The Outlaws*:

I have never had the feeling so strongly as in the last few days that all events are concentrating on one point. Perhaps I am under the influence of a universal mood, born from the innumerable hopes and wishes which are agonizing for the great change. But if the decision really comes now—what is our position? [...] What gives us the right to our arrogant claim? Are we the chosen—we, who have no power of ourselves; who have no talents save for shooting; no understanding save of plotting; no experience save of our

¹⁹³ In a vimeo interview with the Helsinki student theatre, Volksbühne dramaturg Thomas Martin discusses Castorf's incorporation of texts from Salomon. *The Outlaws* recounts the events leading up to the murder of Rathenau. Martin is careful to distinguish Conservative Revolutionaries such as Salomon and Jünger from the National Socialists, with whom neither wanted any association. Martin does, however, emphasize that Salomon and the O.C. "played right into [the Nazis'] hands." He explains that by incorporating the perspective of Salomon in *Kaufmann*, Castorf is "allowing the competing impulses from those times, different political orientations, to collide [on stage, and] then it becomes very political."

¹⁹⁴ Both Kern and Salomon were part of the Brigade Ehrhardt which the Social Democrats, under the direction of General Noske, had used to crush the Soviet *Räterepublik* in Munich in 1919 and communist uprisings in the Ruhr. The Brigade was then put on "border patrol" in German territories in the East. The Brigade Ehrhardt were also involved in the counter-revolutionary Kapp-Putsch in 1920 that attempted to overthrow the Weimar Republic. Shortly thereafter, the Social Democratic government officially dismantled the *Freikorps*.

failures; we, who are pursued and pursuers; who are even filled with disgust at our own deeds? [...] I want power. I want some aim which will engross my life. I want to savor life whole. I want to know that all this has been worthwhile. (*The Outlaws*, 262-4)

Salomon's vision here is of an impasse requiring a great revolutionary event that would reset the course of German history on a heroic path. Undoubtedly, Salomon's preoccupation with "the decision" and the existential conceits of the radical Right might be lost on Volksbühne audiences in 2010. However, they represent Castorf's intense study of a genre of memoirs from the Weimar period that dealt with the *Fronterlebnis* or the activities of radical post war paramilitary formations. Although too young to have seen actual combat in WWI, Salomon was a member of the Prussian military caste and strongly identified with the comradeship, nationalism, and revolutionary fervour that characterized the culture of the extreme Right after 1919. *The Outlaws* is a memoir that is emblematic of the Conservative Revolutionary worldview and hence manifests intellectual preoccupations with not only decisionism and authority, but also concepts such as organicism (i.e. national destiny), voluntarism and direct action. For young men such as Salomon, such conceits imbued life with "higher meaning" in opposition to a liberal republic they conceived of as bourgeois and sclerotic.

It should be noted that Hosemann is a young actor with extraordinary physicality and comic timing. Here he embodies Castorf's enduring fascination with the "manic" energy of young men involved in the *Freikorps*. Hosemann's performance as Salomon combines the youthful zeal of political radicalization with the physicality of a circus actor. As critic Christian Rakow observes, Hosemann's Salomon is more Groucho Marx than menacing proto fascist (np.). Castorf's inclusion of *The Outlaws* also provides context for the *Ost*-oriented worldview and geopolitics that some on the radical Right adhered to, especially those involved with Ernst Niekisch's National Bolshevik circle. Here, Castorf's excerpt from *The Outlaws* demonstrates

the overlaps between the “Prussian” iteration of socialism and Russian Bolshevism based on their shared animosity for “the tyranny of capitalism and the West”:

EvS: Bolshevism as a claim to nationalism? I shall become a Bolshevik tomorrow.

Kern: If you do, I shall look on you as a Russian [...] But what can we say when the Slav, in order to defend himself against Western influences, accepts the support of an ally which, though born of the West, is inimical to the West. This is the same as if one called on the Beelzebub of Marxism to throw out the Devil of Capitalism.

[...]

EvS: But it’s a matter of war against the West, against Capitalism. Let’s become Communists. I’m ready to make a pact with anyone who will fight my battles. I have no interest in protecting the propertied classes, since I am not one of them.

Kern: It isn’t a matter of interest. The Communists are concerned with interests. If we quarrel with them about it, it’s not because it’s theirs, but because we can recognize no other interest than that of nation. Instead of “society” or “class,” we speak of the “nation” and you will understand what I mean.

EvS: But that represents Socialism in its purest form.

Kern: It does, as a matter of fact, represent Socialism and only in its present form, in the Prussian form. If it is indeed a power that we are undermining, then it is our task to destroy with every weapon that comes to our hands, that power is those in the nation who have allowed their Teutonism to be submerged in a flood of Western culture. They utter the word “Germany” and mean “Europe” —their true motherland.

In the excerpt Castorf has inserted, Kern reinforces the ideals of *Prussian* iteration of national socialism (as distinct from Nazism, but equally rabid) and emphasizes their goal as “the victory of Germany over the earth.” These ultra-nationalists’ primary struggle was against “the tyranny of the economy” and “the German class that is pro-capitalist and pro-Europe” (*Outlaws* 268). As such, their central ideals overlap with *some* of the Marxist-Leninists. Castorf ends the scene with Salomon asking Kern how he could stand watching the events of November 9, 1918. To which Kern responds: “I didn’t. I put a bullet in my head.” The stage blacks out.

The scene is complemented by artificial train car sounds, as well as by a figure sitting in the train who suddenly stands up in blackface, an afro wig, and performs Josephine Baker’s iconic banana dance. This is a citation of a citation, namely of Baker’s own subversive re-citation of the white colonial fantasy of the “African” as an “exotic,” “primitive,” sexualized

“other.” Baker performed in Berlin in 1925 and riveted the likes of former Volksbühne director Max Reinhardt. As one journalist from that time wrote of Black cabaret performers in Berlin, “[t]hey are a cross between primeval forests and skyscrapers; likewise, their music, Jazz, in its colour and rhythms. Ultramodern and ultra-primitive.”¹⁹⁵ Castorf flouts political correctness and forces his audience to confront this racialization and exoticization as part of his montage of the Berlin metropolis in the Weimar era wherein the Black female body was a fetishized emblem of both modernity and primitivity.

Not only is Castorf’s use of blackface a provocation, but it is also highly unsettling. Why does Castorf think it is permissible for him, as a white, German, male director, to recite the blackface tradition and the partially nude “exotic” banana dance? Blackface on the European stage invokes the racist tradition of the minstrel shows and the history of Black bodies being paraded out at German ethnographic fairs—the *Völkerschau* or “human shows”—starting in the late 19th century. Moreover, one cannot stage blackface in Germany without also invoking Germany’s history of the racializing impersonation of Jews, and hence without conjuring the spectre of scientific racism and National Socialism.

Castorf is, of course, interested precisely in the taboo around exploring race and racializing performance on contemporary German stages. He intentionally provokes spectators by implying that there are continuities to be identified that link the German National Socialist and colonial pasts with the liberal, “tolerant,” “multicultural” present that has purportedly “progressed.” Castorf’s citation of Josephine Baker in blackface invokes Germany’s own under- or unaddressed racializing history—not just under National Socialism, but also the genocide

¹⁹⁵ That journalist was Count Harry Kessler who attended a 1925 performance of Josephine Baker in Berlin (Biro 244).

perpetrated by Germans in Namibia between 1904 and 1907, which was just becoming more present in public consciousness. The German parliament would only officially recognize the genocide perpetrated by Germans in Namibia five years after this production, in 2015.¹⁹⁶

After the “Josephine Baker” figure has finished her banana dance, another soldier enters the train car—a buffoonish, swastika-wearing Nazi played by Mex Schlüpfer. He is addressed as Leo Schlageter, a real-life Far Right revolutionary Castorf has inserted into the production and program book. In a 1923 *Rote Fahne* article, also in the program book, the revolutionary Communist Karl Radek tries to reclaim Schlageter’s death for the radical Left by pointing out the similarities between his struggle and the Marxist one.¹⁹⁷ Castorf has Schlageter comically spew lines that Mehring had originally written as dialogue, thus effecting the sloganeering quality of newspaper headlines: “Bochum is occupied! That means the collapse of Germany! Naujock’s knock out! Lockout bei Thyssen! The victims of the occupation! . . . Swastika on the steel helmet! Black-White-Red Band! The Brigade Ehrhardt!” Before “Schlageter” can continue, he gets comically knocked over the head by Salomon. In a slapstick manner, he keeps his rant going, this time with an anti-Semitic element: “Down with the Jewrepublik! Down! Down! Pfui Pfui! Hoch Hoch! Pfui Jewrepublik! Pfui Schieberrepublik. They should head over to Grenadier Street and clean up!” This last phrase was meant to foreshadow Berlin’s first anti-Semitic pogrom, which took place directly next to the Volksbühne in 1923. The scene ends with a striking collage: Schlageter’s request to “clean up” the Jewish ghetto, “Josephine Baker” doing

¹⁹⁶ On February 15, 2015, the Volksbühne hosted the “Africa Conference: 130 Years of Berlinisation of a Continent and Practice into Transgression” featuring the Ghanaian artist Bernard Akoi-Jackson amongst others. The conference commemorated the 130th anniversary of the Berlin Conference wherein representatives of 14 nations met on the invitation of Otto von Bismark in order to sign the so-called “Congo Act,” which provided the framework for the colonial division of Africa. The Volksbühne acknowledged this anniversary by critically examining the history of German colonialism and facilitating a discussion and programming line-up that dealt with the ongoing effects of colonialism.

¹⁹⁷ Radek, Karl. “Leo Schlageter, der Wanderer ins Nichts.” *Die Rote Fahne*. June 1923. In the program book, 28-36.

the banana dance, and Salomon and Kern on their way to the Baltics.

The next scene is filmed backstage and projected onto a massive film screen that is now embedded at the front of the closed circus tent. This scene constitutes the first encounter between Kaftan and the lawyer Müller (also played by Dieter Mann). The scene takes place in a tavern that doubles as Müller's unofficial office for his illegal dealings. The screen invokes the 1920s silent film era by showing the negative print edges of the black and white film footage that is being shot live during the performance. The footage has both an Expressionist and a film-noir feel—the latter, much like the American gangster films Brecht was obsessed with. The black and white footage provides an air of mystery and decaying glamour, which is furthered by the actors performing in a campy, neo-Expressionist style. The performers interact ironically with the camera, directly gazing into it and establishing a quasi-intimacy with the spectators.

Castorf's use of film expands the performance space. In the *Konzeptionsprobe* for *Kaufmann*, Castorf discusses the site-specific history of his multimedia experiments and of “political modernism from Meyerhold to Piscator” at the Volksbühne in the mid-1920s and “Besson's rediscovery of this tradition through film and montage in the 1970s.” Castorf explains that the Volksbühne sees itself “subjectively in this tradition,” as well as “in the attempt to marry politics and the avant-garde.” The live footage in this scene undertakes a surreal voyage into the dark criminal underworld of the metropolis. A bartender working in the tavern played by Hosemann recites a shocking, proletarian children's bedtime prayer Castorf has taken from Heinrich Zille's *Hurengespräche* (*Whore's Conversations*) (1921). As he recites the prayer, he gazes comically into the camera like a deranged Dr. Caligari:

ich bin klein / I am small
mein Ding wird rein/ My thing will be pure
ich will ich auch immer artig sein. / Let me always be good

drum liebes Gottchen / Please dear God
bewar mein Grottchen, / Protect my little Grotto
vorm ollen großen Hosenwurm. Und seinem Samen. Amen. / From old big pants-worm
and his semen, Amen.

The insertion of Zille's perverse and shocking "prayer" about childhood sexual abuse is emblematic of Castorf's insistence on asserting the brutality of local history—specifically that of a working-class, spatially-partitioned "Berlin O," (*Ost*) as Zille called it, that has now disappeared. In this production, Castorf asserts local vernaculars that describe the daily struggles faced by marginalized peoples. These histories are devised to challenge what Castorf describes as the "*zugezogenen glatten Leute*"—the "one-dimensional people who have recently moved here" and who are impervious to the difficulties that continue to play out along class and spatial boundaries in Berlin.

The entire set then rotates around to reveal a small Jewish tailor shop, "Leschnitzer's", where Kaftan is getting fitted for a business suit. The scene is representative of Jewish assimilation into German bourgeois society, of Kaftan having to abandon his caftan to fit in with "Germans." Accompanying him is Müller, who says to Kaftan coldly, "I have understanding for old traditions, but one must be mindful of one's surroundings. One has to acclimatize." After Kaftan dons his business suit, Müller says approvingly, "What did I tell you? You are a completely different person. *A real human being!*" Here, the "humanity" of the Jew is shown to be directly contingent on their being able to "pass" as a bourgeois German. The scene makes visible the social constructedness and performativity of not just German identity, but of identity as such. Kaftan's transformation from caftan-wearing, Yiddish-speaking *Ostjude* to suit-wearing "German" is a deconstruction of racial identity before the spectator's eyes. This approach renders "Germanness" a performance and citation, rather than an immutable essence.

Mehring's *Kaufmann* was ultimately a scathing attack on the Nazi propaganda machine already rolling in the late 1920s. The tailor-shop scene in his original dramatic text is a *reversal* of the anti-Semitic scenario that portrays Jews as dupes trying to pass or masquerade as "real Germans." In other words, Mehring's scene subverts the dramaturgy of "the pass." The "success" of the pass, according to scholar Amy Robinson, reveals a "calculated performance that throws the cultural codes of race into relief" (726). In both Mehring's scene in *Kaufmann* and Robinson's pass scenario, ethnic drag is located not in the performance itself, but in the spectator's witnessing of it (727). Mehring, Piscator and Castorf are all part of a tradition that deploys ethnic drag, exposing what Sieg describes as a "simulacrum of 'race'" and challenging "the perceptions and privileges of those who would mistake appearances for essence" (Sieg 3).¹⁹⁸

The next scene is, in a Brechtian fashion, constructed directly before the audience as stagehands carry out a vintage photograph printed on canvas depicting a "Prussian General's Villa." The scene takes place in the planning room of the putschist military general "Stechow" in Potsdam. It features a table with a map of a pre-war Germany that includes Prussian territories ceded after WWI, a black flag with a skull (the symbol of the *Schwarze Reichswehr*), and a picture of "Iron" German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck hanging on the wall. It begins with Salomon shouting, "The damn list!" and then jumping onto a table. Salomon is referring to the Organisational Consul's hit-list, which led to the murders of 354 "enemies" of the group's ultra-nationalist cause. Salomon then launches into a lengthy monologue that Castorf has taken from the former's post-WWII memoir, *The Questionnaire* (1951). The book was a response to the American military's survey conducted in US-occupied zones devised to facilitate the process of

¹⁹⁸ As Katrin Sieg points out, masquerade, mimicry, drag, and simulacrum are key terms in postmodern critiques of identity (4). These are tropes in feminist, postcolonial, ethnic and queer studies, frequently girded by Judith Butler's notion of performativity and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity.

de-Nazification, assessing the political activities of individual Germans during the National Socialist-period. Instead of filling out the questionnaire, Salomon wrote an 807-page account of his actions during the Weimar Republic through WWII. Castorf draws directly on this account and has Solomon explain to the audience that the Organisational Consul “did not kill Rathenau *because* he was Jewish, but *despite* his being a Jew.” He also claims that Rathenau’s own *Mut und Furcht* theory of the “new man” not only fascinated him but was *itself* fascist. Salomon explains that he was greatly influenced by Rathenau’s response to the Jewish Question, namely, that Jews were a German tribe like other German tribes. He says that he waited for a response to the publication of *The Questionnaire* from the much-revered Ernst Jünger.¹⁹⁹ Jünger would eventually break his silence and explained that he believed that the murder of Rathenau *was* an anti-Semitic crime, challenging Salomon to admit it. Salomon recounts all of this and then explains to the audience that the murder was, in fact, an act of teenage folly, “a pretty pubertal fantasy” (130) and that he went into it “like Schiller’s Karl Moor.”

Salomon’s monologue shows that the murder of Rathenau was about vitality, “higher meaning,” sacrifice and ultimately German nationalism. He describes the intoxication (*Rausch*) and frenzy he felt about the idea of achieving martyrdom for Germany. Again, Castorf is tapping into the existential dimensions that underwrite political radicalization, as he has explored these elsewhere via Nietzsche, Jünger and Bataille. Salomon’s quotation from *Der Fragenbogen (The Questionnaire)* describes “a radical unleashing of all the potential energy in the world—to blow the world up to the moon” (“*die Erde an den Mond zu sprengen*”). Overcoming the *ressentiment* that was so widespread in Germany during this period and asserting a *will to life* precisely by

¹⁹⁹ Salomon played a significant role in Conservative Revolutionary intellectual circles and contributed an essay to the Jünger-edited *Krieg and Krieger* called “Landscapes of the Front,” which was savagely taken down by Benjamin in “Theories of German Fascism.”

risking and embracing death are concepts that reappear in almost all the biographies of the late 19th and 20th century figures in which Castorf is interested. Bataille is important in this context as a thinker who assigns only *relative* value to utility and economic rationality. In “The Notion of Expenditure” Bataille privileges useless expenditure over utilitarian ends in his understanding of the symbolic economy. For Bataille, free expenditure is characterized by the destructive or non-utilitarian impulse. According to Bataille, it is found in spectacular feats of pointless and unproductive daring or excesses such as war, spectacle, gambling, and perversity (Bataille, *Reader* 169). These wagers with wealth are characteristic of a bygone age capable of grandiose gestures driven by honour and glory. Such gestures are diametrically opposed to those of a bourgeois age, which has turned excess into a shameful thing and utilitarian accumulation into its central objective (176). The willingness of the radical Right, like Salomon and his compatriots, to risk death for Germany, gives expression to this very excess.

Act II of Castorf’s *Kaufmann* begins with a scathing parody of the “*Der Bund der Acht*” (*Band of Eight*) based on the Organisational Consul. The scenography here is Brechtian and crude. There is a simple wooden free-floating door frame, eight chairs placed in a semi-circle, as well as a massive black *Schwarze Reichswehr* flag with a skull hanging down as the backdrop. Castorf has reduced the eight of the *Bund* to just two actors, who are parodied as goons. They are wearing black KKK cone hats and capes, with Nazi brown shirts underneath and swastikas around their arms. One of the two addresses the other: “Dear Friends!” and begins to recite from the New Testament, Matthew 5. Ch. 30,

If your right hand bothers you, cut it off and throw it away. It’s better for you to lose your limbs than your whole body. Dear Friends, who can this analogy be intended for but the Volk? Germany is the flesh and the hand that tempt us... can there be any doubt who is implied?
No doubt! The socialists!

No way! The Jews!

A third person enters, a mysterious late arrival, who is obviously a woman in male drag (played by Margarita Breikreiz). She is wearing the requisite KKK hat and cape, but a bodysuit and high heels. After she recites the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Breikreiz's own authentic Russian accent, the scene digresses into an absurd and childish game of tag.²⁰⁰ During the game, the *Bund* members discover that the mysterious late arrival is a woman after they lift up her cape and feel her buttocks. This brand of slapstick humour is comically drawn out after a second round of tag. At one point during the game, the woman opens the free-standing door to find the two *Bund* members having sex, thus parodying the masculinist Far Right's homosexual subculture.

The game of tag falls apart after the mysterious woman takes off her KKK hat and admits to being Jessi, Kaftan's daughter, who has just arrived in Berlin from a tuberculosis sanitarium. In Castorf's wildly associative dramaturgy, Jessi is reunited with her former lover, "Ernst von Salomon," as the real-life biography of Salomon collapses together with elements drawn from Mehring's dramatic text. Salomon's lover was in fact a German-Jew named Ilse Gotthelft, whom he managed to save from the Nazis by passing her as his wife during the final years of WWII. Salomon confesses to Jessi that he killed Rathenau. He then proceeds to address the audience directly with a passage taken from *Der Fragenbogen* that provides an historical account of the end of a period of stability in the Weimar republic after German foreign minister Gustav Stresemann's untimely death in 1929. Castorf then has the actors perform incongruous scenes of

²⁰⁰ *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a forged anti-Semitic text that purports to describe a Jewish plot for world domination. The hoax was first published in Russia in 1903, translated into multiple languages, and disseminated internationally in the early part of the 20th century. According to some of its publishers, the *Protocols* are the minutes of a late 19th-century meeting where Jewish leaders discussed their goal of global Jewish hegemony by subverting the morals of Gentiles, and by controlling the press and the world's economies.

manic drug-taking and party excesses caricaturing the “Golden 20s” stereotype and which he has taken from Jason Lutes’ comic book, *Berlin: City of Smoke (II)*—creating a complex collage of influences that reflect Berlin anno 1923. Cohn then begins to recite lyrics from Mischa Spoliansky and Marcellus Schiffer’s 1928 cabaret song, “Its in the Air” (*Es liegt in der Luft*)—which refers at once to the rising mass media trends of the late 1920s Berlin metropolis, but also implies something dark and ominous on the horizon.

Again, in a Brechtian fashion, the Volksbühne stage technicians bring out a large vintage photograph of a train station, which they set up as the backdrop for the next scene. The stagehands then place a small table and two chairs downstage, establishing this next scene in a train-station café. Two actors enter: Hilde, Müller’s lover, and Jessi Kaftan. Castorf has constructed a scene in which the two women are sitting together complaining to each other about their problems with men. These two actors exemplify the eccentricity characteristic of Castorf’s ensemble: the baby-voiced, off-kilter fragility of the 60-something, heavy-set actor Bärbel Bolle as Hilde, and the young, live-wire actor Maria Kwiatkowsky, who has taken over the role of Jessi from Breitzkreis. Castorf blends this imagined train-station setting with the dramatic climax of Mehring’s drama, namely the opulent reception Kaftan hosts to celebrate his acceptance into “German” high society. In Mehring’s original, the reception disintegrates into mass hysteria at news of an attempted putsch against the government. Here, Castorf has turned the dramatic climax into a one-woman tragicomedy routine for Kwiatkowsky, who dazzlingly recites the lines of all the guests at the reception using different voices, and also performs the role of both Kaftan and herself. She then briefly exits the stage, while Hilde confronts the audience with the following lines: “You all look so kind... Jidn geschlogn! Jidn geschossen! Meschiachs Zeitn!” (Attacked Jews, killed Jews, Messianic times!). Jessi returns to the stage with a large life-size

cannon—the same one used to fire into the audience in *Fuck Off, Amerika*. She then climbs onto the cannon, points it out into the audience, and fires repeatedly, eliciting loud bangs and smoke. The dramatic height of Mehring’s play—the mass hysteria and guests’ uncertainty around whether a putsch is being launched by the Far Right *or* the Far Left—is now Hilde’s deadpan recitation of the lines, “The Spartacists! The Swastikas! Putsch from the Right! No, putsch from the Left! Spartacists! Swastikas! Spartacists! Swastikas! Spartacists! Swastikas! Spartacists! Swastikas!” Hilde’s dry delivery is meant to underscore the difference between the heightened stakes of the 1923 and today where, as Castorf sees it, individuals in gentrified Berlin are impervious not only to the historical stakes that played out around the Volksbühne, but also to the “pogrom planning” that continues behind the façade of multicultural tolerance.

Jessi then dismounts from the cannon, runs into the backstage “tavern” and talks directly into a hand-held video camera following her. The footage is now projected onto a screen: “Pogrom and Putsch. My Father and I. You are at fault! What? We should go back to Galicia? You think we should go away? Really? You want us to leave?” Castorf uses the close-up footage of Jessi’s face to confront the audience in a direct manner. However, the screen and Kwiatkowsky’s exaggerated performance, simultaneously estrange the spectator. Jessi’s pointed questions directed at the audience are devised to challenge the complacent spectator to consider continuities between the pogroms of the 1920s and anti-immigrant violence in contemporary Germany.

The final scene of *Kaufmann* represents the unravelling of any coherent plot, structure, or framework (which is the case across Castorf’s productions almost uniformly). The stage has now been emptied out. A large, black and white vintage photograph of a tranquil forest now serves as the backdrop. After a few moments, a Volksbühne stagehand walks onto the stage and rips off a

portion of the canvas to reveal a sign that says, “*Juden sind in unseren deutschen Wäldern nicht erwünscht*” (“Jews are not welcome in our German forests”). Castorf then sets the infamous “Garbage! Sweep it Away” scene in Mehring’s drama (that scene that supposedly degraded war veterans and incited Goebbels’ sending Mehring “To the Gallows”) against the backdrop of Nazi racial laws. Castorf has reimagined the scene as Kaftan “sweeping up” money backstage in a hidden filmic space visible on a large screen, with the two actors playing Jessi (Breitkreitz and Kwiatkowsky) downstage together—one singing *La Vie en Rose* and the other suggesting they go to *Wannsee*, about which their father claims to have an “uncomfortable feeling in his stomach.” By referencing Wannsee, Castorf invokes the “Final solution to the Jewish Question” (*Endlösung der Judenfrage*). By citing this specific moment in the history of German anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust, Castorf is drawing uncomfortable parallels to the present. The spectre of the Holocaust that looms over Castorf’s citational, hauntological stage coexists with the hope that we might recognize the conditions of possibility for the *risk of the repetition of history*. Anti-fascism and the recognition of historical repetition is what unites Castorf’s iteration of *Kaufmann* with Mehring and Piscator’s.

Racialized Bodies on Castorf’s Stage

As his choice of dramatic material indicates, Castorf’s theatre is one of provocation and taboo transgression. One cannot stage the “Jewish banker” in Germany after the financial crisis without invoking the racializing stereotypes of National Socialist ideology, especially those anti-Semitic myths surrounding “Jewish control” over the banking industry. However, by staging the transformation of Kaftan from Yiddish-speaking *Ostjude* to assimilated German-Jewish financier, Mehring’s drama deconstructs the process of assimilation before the spectator’s eyes and makes the *performativity* of German-bourgeois identity perceivable. This is somewhat akin

to Marx's "On the Jewish Question," which deconstructs the creation of Jewish identity from the conditions of only partial emancipation offered in liberal bourgeois society. Mehring's text was not only contemporizing and *dada-izing* Shakespeare's Shylock, it was also satirizing a long history of anti-Semitic Jewish impersonation on German stages.²⁰¹ This was the tradition of the 18th and 19th century "Jew farces," later continued in the National Socialists' racialized theatre. Mehring's drama deconstructs and satirizes this anti-Semitic form and makes explicit the specific conditions that compelled Kaftan to become a capitalist speculator, the nationalist forces that aided him in doing so, and depicts a Berlin metropolis full of desperate individuals in which anti-Semitism and corruption were widespread.

According to the precepts of Brecht's epic theatre—an influence that is especially pronounced in Castorf's *Kaufmann*—subjectivity is always contingent and mutable. As Katrin Sieg points out, Brecht's theatre was insistent upon interrupting mimetic systems of representation and establishing a "defamiliarizing space for reflection and historicization" (15). Brecht highlighted the disjuncture between body and role, which was devised to estrange class ideologies that mimetic forms of representation naturalize. Sieg also observes the overlaps between Brecht's construction of the critical spectator and anti-Semitic drag's urging audiences to "see through" the masquerade. She explains that "the reference to a dramaturgy that Brecht elaborated in exile in opposition to Nazi Germany obscures the fact that Nazi culture had inherited a long stage tradition of racial masquerade and deployed it as part of its propaganda efforts" (11). "Masquerade," Sieg argues, "has [also] been an important theatrical trope through which Germans have imagined and expressed their difference from other, supposedly inferior,

²⁰¹ I am referring to Shylock from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. According to Katrin Sieg, Jewish impersonation emerges in Germany around 1800. Sieg shows how the pervasiveness of racial impersonation on the German stage functioned "in the service of ethnic segregation, social exclusion, and cultural hierarchy" (11).

whites, and denounced them as usurpers threatening national cohesion and racial purity” (11). By contrast, the Brechtian spectator notes the disjunction of actor and role “without attributing it to a racially motivated intention to deceive” (70). Instead they interpret it within a non-Aristotelian poetics not organized around catharsis (and hence ideological affirmation), but oriented towards the collective transformation of an unjust social order (70).

The strong Brechtian inflection of Castorf’s *Kaufmann*, which underwrites the artifice and masquerade of his portrayal of *ostjüdische* identity, however, does not ensure solid race politics at the Volksbühne, nor on behalf of Brecht himself. Sieg argues that “Brechtian drag cannot be unproblematically marshaled for a historicizing deconstruction of racial identity. Racial presumptions haunted Brecht’s writing” (16). In other words, Brecht’s alienation effect does not automatically result in a critique of racialization, as we noted in the previous case study. Like Marx’s vile figuration of the Jew, Brecht’s masquerade has highly Eurocentric and racist shortcomings. Sieg asserts that for Brecht, race “marked the limits of the social realm as that which can be changed, and was instead relegated to the natural realm, which could only be mastered” (64). For Sieg, this “attests to the complex genealogy of Brecht’s scientism—its affiliation with enlightenment anthropology, with Marx’s anti-Semitism couched in class terms, and finally with his own contemporaries’ casting of historical processes in crassly racial and eugenicist terms, across the ethnic, class and political spectrum” (64). Following Sieg, Brecht’s essentialist conceptualization of race was historically contingent and rooted in a Western “enlightened,” scientific worldview. Brecht wrote “Alienation effects in Chinese Acting” (1936) after he had watched the Chinese female impersonator Mei Lan-fang in Moscow in 1935 (59). Therein emerges a dichotomy: enlightened Westerner vs. the inscrutable and mysterious Chinese actor (61). Here Sieg argues that the “Brechtian spectator is thus firmly ensconced in the

orientalist dichotomy of domination that empowers the Western subject with its colonial and racial underpinnings” (61). In Brecht, Sieg claims, “race is located outside the purview of historicization, and therefore of critical interrogation, figuring instead primitive nature and magic or ideological complicity” (63). Despite this, Sieg reclaims Brecht for an intersectional critique. She argues that “the critical, socially transformative potential of Brechtian drag underwrites feminist and postcolonial notions of mimicry, queer concepts of drag and performativity, and the recuperation of the simulacrum for a critique of race” (15).

Evidently, Castorf’s theatre endorses masquerade over mimesis. As Sieg notes, for many German theatre artists “biologically correct” casting choices perpetuate “colonial-postcolonial continuities” (5). Implicit here is the idea that the Brechtian tradition of anti-naturalist masquerade constitutes a break with the racial ideologies of the past (6). According to this logic, in biologically-faithful casting—predominant in the former West Germany and currently experiencing a resurgence in post-migrant theatre—a mimetic style of representation reproduces the operations of racial ideology. Cross-racial masquerade, by contrast, contests social relations organized around race. For directors in the Brechtian lineage, “biologically correct” casting, in “purporting to represent an accurate, mimetic relationship between body and role, in fact conscripted these bodies into the identarian logic of racial science that bolstered colonial domination” (6). The exaggerated (Brechtian) disjunction of white actor and Black Arab role supposedly relieved “coloured bodies from authenticating a white authored fiction and confirming white audiences’ folkloristic perceptions, thus suggesting a radical break with racial scientism of the past in a self-consciously anti-racist gesture (6). According to Sieg, these “poststructuralist strategies all hinge on the severing of signifier and signified, actor and essence, performer and mask” (15). She argues that this is a way of contesting the “truth claims” that

underwrite “the restructuring of social orders around innate, supposedly natural differences” (15).

Castorf believes that it is not only acceptable, but urgently necessary to critically engage with the racialization of the Jewish body, as well as the exoticization, sexualization and racialization of the Black body on the Volksbühne stage. Castorf does so in a way that revitalizes the Dadaist, political, epic and anti-fascist theatre traditions—the theatre of social types, masquerade and other non-naturalistic styles of representation. His theatre is contingent on a critique of racializing ideologies through caricature and parody. Castorf’s own deconstruction of Brecht’s racializing stereotypes ultimately pushes the left wing political theatre tradition *past* Brecht’s limitations and exposes the performativity of all subjectivity. However, Castorf also pushes the boundaries of acceptability—both for spectators who have experienced racialization and othering in Germany, and also surely in the eyes of critical race and whiteness theory scholars who would contest the director’s right to invoke the painful history of Jew farces and blackface *as parody*, particularly within a predominantly white cast. Moreover, if Castorf is going to defamiliarize race, why not show up all race as a construct and have actors wearing whiteface? Without excusing the director, Castorf’s intention—his *priority*—is to transgress a taboo and expose the bourgeois stage’s complicity in an imperialist ideology that continues to be exclusionary and violent to racialized bodies, building on a history of anti-Semitism, scientific racism and colonialism in Germany.²⁰²

²⁰² We can also locate the roots of Castorf’s approach to Jewishness in Piscator’s *Kaufmann*. In *The Political Theatre* Piscator explains that he understands the temptation to perceive “the very appearance of a Jew on stage as an attack...and that anyone who singles them out, brings them into the limelight or even mentions the problem, must have hostile intensions” (Piscator 333). However, Piscator goes on to say that he “cannot concede that in a theatre based on the principle that every truth must be uttered, certain things should remain unsaid because of potential sensitivity” (333).

Notably, Castorf and the Volksbühne have been in trouble with the Afro-German community before, for example, when the Volksbühne hung the word NEGER on a banner outside the theatre for the run of Bernard-Marie Koltès' *Battle of Blacks and Dogs* directed by Dimitrij Gotscheff (2003). The Volksbühne's defense of the banner was that they made race visible as a construct—disempowering the word *Neger* by using it as the shorthand for the production (which is how the banners were usually created, e.g., *Murx* or *Idiot*), but clearly devised to shock, provoke and thus confront racism head-on.²⁰³ After outrage and protest, Castorf had the full title placed on the banner. This was something many in the Afro-German community refused to accept. At a public discussion that took place at the Volksbühne in November 2003, many members of the Die Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD) steadfastly protested the use of the word *Neger* and asked, in essence, “who was the Volksbühne to decide that such a pernicious and historically-loaded term could be placed on top of Berlin's largest state-funded theatre?” They demanded the word be changed to *Schwarzer* (Black) and the Volksbühne refused. Castorf has consistently responded to such critique by claiming that the freedom and critical function of art is hindered by such “political correctness” debates, and that no one living in social housing projects or on the margins of society relates to them (Laudenbach 94). Castorf maintains that this political correctness is the result of a conservatism “that one sees on television shows such as *Tatort* where there must be a moral to the story” (94). He claims that “[w]e are removing ourselves ever further from the irritation and paradoxes of art, like for

²⁰³ Abini Zöllner, *Berliner Zeitung* journalist, asks “who is supposed to be provoked? Theatre lives from provocation, but this time it was personal—and turned against its own audience.” Zöllner's critique of the Volksbühne was that from its position of privilege it was explaining how something was really meant or what its function was. Basically, Zöllner describes what amounts to the Volksbühne's whitesplaining the Black community.

example [that found in a writer such as Louis-Ferdinand] Céline. If we don't tap into the *ressentiment* that is going on in Europe, then that is dangerous" (94).

Broadly speaking, and without excusing him, Castorf's treatment of race should be understood as an estrangement strategy that attempts to trouble both the official national image and liberal identity politics-oriented discourse around race in Germany. His agenda is to subvert the socially affirmative function of theatre historically and its cathartic Aristotelian characteristics, leaving the spectator instead unsettled and provoked around these issues. As with the offensive banner for the Gotscheff play, Castorf's idea is that the provocations speak to a public *beyond* the institution's boundaries. The citation of one word, *Neger*, unleashed a public outcry and a massive debate was launched in the press. A public discussion took place at the Volksbühne, spearheaded by the ISD, thus creating a space for dialogue within the theatre without insisting on consensus.

It is in this spirit of transgressing the taboo around racializing masquerade that Castorf's *Kaufmann* deconstructs race and ethnicity. His portrayal of the "Jew" in the tradition of Brechtian ethnic drag, albeit exposing the constructedness of race, was essential to the project of demystification he saw as anti-fascist. With this approach, Castorf also positioned himself in a Brechtian lineage of estrangement and criticality.

Castorf's approach to race and ethnicity can be juxtaposed with other state theatres in Berlin, especially the new "postmigrant theatre"²⁰⁴ that emerged from Bauhaus Naunynstrasse in 2008 and is now associated with the Maxim Gorki Theater. Postmigrant theatre foregrounds the

²⁰⁴ The artistic director of the Maxim Gorki Theater (as of the 2013/2014 season), Şermin Langhoff, was instrumental in defining "*postmigrantisches Theater*," which is concerned with creating theatre "by and for Germans with immigrant backgrounds—at the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse and Maxim Gorki Theater" (Cornish 9). Broadly speaking, *postmigrantisches Theater* fosters the development of theatre in Germany that asks important questions about integration, assimilation, roots, equality, discrimination, religion, tradition and identity.

stories and experiences of Germans with migrant and ethnically diverse backgrounds. Its goal is to expand upon the historical “moral” function of the German stage and write migrant stories *into* the canon, thus enabling diverse voices to emerge that reflect contemporary German society. Seen from the perspective of postmigrant theatre, the urgent question facing Germany today is not the Jewish Question *per se*, but rather the legacy of the *Gastarbeiter*, the acute refugee crisis, and recognizing Islam as an important faith tradition in a new multi-ethnic German cultural mosaic. By addressing these issues, the postmigrant theatre enables new German voices to expand what issues are scrutinized on the “moral tribunal” of the German stage. Castorf’s approach to identity and representation might, by contrast, appear to be that of a stodgy *Ostler* invested in a set of outdated coordinates. What Castorf’s coordinates *do* enable, however, are a form of pattern recognition that allows the director to expose the recurring dynamics of liberal-capitalism and hence prognosticate history’s uncanny returns. In Castorf’s *Kaufmann*, Kaftan’s fate is emblematic of a renewed risk of racializing and othering [of all vulnerable populations] against the backdrop of rising nationalism and economic crisis.

Chapter Summary

Kaufmann demonstrates the ongoing relevance of the “political theatre” tradition of Mehring, Piscator and Brecht as a framework for an anti-fascist cultural reflection and as a warning-siren that is most sonorous around moments of acute crisis. With Piscator, the stakes of the stage were to aid in facilitating genuine revolution, an event now only accessible by reciting the past. The point is to turn the crisis into a genuine event, an opportunity for facing apocalypticism with comic nihilism, slapstick and farce. It is this thinking that guides Castorf’s staging—citational, ironic and detached. It is strikingly devoid of the heightened emotions that

characterized the climate around Piscator's staging in 1929. Yet its cynical, citational dramaturgy attempts to expose comparisons to the political landscape today.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of Castorf's *Kaufmann* is its ability to insert itself into, and mark, a persistent set of dynamics. This remarkable foresight and grave warnings make the production eerily timely. From Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, through Mehring's drama, Piscator's and Castorf's stagings of *Kaufmann*, we also see the repetition of the historical dynamics of anti-Semitism. Castorf uses many of the same strategies as Piscator to make these patterns visible but abandons the optimistic finalities of the left wing framework. The enduring power of Castorf's stage is its ability to channel what he perceives on the streets and from there to make visible the conditions of possibility for the repetition of history.

Kaufmann's premiere almost directly coincided with Angela Merkel's proclamation four weeks earlier on October 16, 2010 that "attempts to build a multicultural society in Germany have utterly failed" —a statement that sent shockwaves around the world. Merkel's comments inevitably invoked the spectre of Germany's National Socialist past. The German Chancellor seemed to be using the perceived failures or shortcomings of German multiculturalism to justify advocating a more assimilationist policy and as such, undermining the recent progress Germany had made towards establishing itself as a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society. That same year, Social Democratic politician Thilo Sarrazin published a book entitled, *Germany Abolishes Itself* (*Deutschland schafft sich ab*) wherein he proclaimed that "Muslims" —here, meant as a derogatory term referring to *Deuschtürken* (Turkish-Germans), as well as Muslim migrants—"were sapping Germany's intellectual and economic strength." The following year, a neo-Nazi terrorist organization, the National Socialist Underground (the NSU), was uncovered. This was exactly one year after the premiere of Castorf's *Kaufmann*, which now proved to be as prescient

as Piscator's staging had been in 1929. The NSU was responsible for a series of murderous attacks against the *Deutschtürken* community. In striking ways, the NSU resembled the *Bund der Acht* in Mehring's drama, as well as the real-life Organisation Consul on which it was based. The discovery that Far-Right paramilitary, xenophobic violence was alive and well in liberal, "tolerant," multicultural Germany was, of course, no surprise to Castorf, who had been vocal as far back as the early 1990s regarding what he perceived as clandestine "pogrom-planning" underway.

Kaufmann should be understood as Castorf's revisiting of the historic stage of Piscator toward the end of the Weimar Republic when the Left had the potential to conquer fascism and forestall the pogroms. Piscator's stage was devised to make these dynamics visible and, ultimately, to unite the Left at a crucial juncture (a project that had failed within the historic Volksbühne itself). Had the Left managed to cohere around Piscator's emancipatory, universalist proletarian stage, might history have turned out in a radically different way? These stakes were not lost on Castorf, who saw in his own citational stage a partial opening in the historical consciousness.

Conclusion: The Last Partisan

“I never found my home in this Germany, it remained foreign to me. Berlin now belongs to the tourists, and this also drifts into the Volksbühne.”

Frank Castorf, 2015

“The Volksbühne was once a well functioning theater; now it’s dead.”

Frank Castorf, 2015

It is the end of a long, tiring, and at the same time exhilarating period of research on Frank Castorf and the Berliner Volksbühne. You’ve left the archives of the Akademie der Künste for the last time this afternoon and now you find yourself as the research began for you—wandering through the streets of former East Berlin. Drifting aimlessly through Berlin-Mitte, up the *Kastaniallee* into Prenzlauer Berg, you notice an aggressive, almost omnipresent poster campaign plastered on the walls of buildings. The posters do not appear individually, but rather in clusters of five or six, each featuring words such as “KRISE,” “LÜGE,” “RAUSCH,” “GLAMOUR” and “GLANZ UND ELEND” (“CRISIS,” “LIES,” “INTOXICATION” “GLAMOUR” and “SPLENDOR AND MISERY”) written out in an eerie fascist-looking typescript. You briefly ponder, “What crisis? Whose lies?” And then you suddenly recall the scene in Castorf’s *Kaufmann* with the lines, “Putsch from the Right! No, Putsch from the Left!” In Berlin in the summer of 2015, such a poster campaign can *only* be the work of the Volksbühne. The theatre aggressively extends itself into the streets of Berlin and actively fuels a feeling of crisis and disorientation. The poster campaign is, of course, an ironic proclamation of decadence and decline. Not only does it invoke the vocabulary of political extremes towards the excesses of the Weimar Republic, but also articulates a real existing *ressentiment* on the streets of Berlin today. Words implying decadence such as “*Rausch*” and “*Glamour*” are, to an extent,

as apt to describe today's Berlin as they were in the "Golden 20s"—after the 1923 inflation crisis and before the 1929 collapse.

Staring at the posters you think about how, in the course of your dissertation research, the Castorf era Volksbühne has overwhelmed you with impressions, excitement, conflicting emotions and unease. For a long time, it was challenging to find an angle through which to behold phenomena that were intentionally contradictory and disorientating. It was precisely this disorientation that needed time to be worked through and that was necessary for Castorf's refusal to make the theatre experience easily palatable for spectators. Irritation, fragmentation, an associative and often-times inscrutable logic, the manic-depressive affect, the prismatic view of German history—these are all strategies that Castorf used to alienate spectators from "bourgeois" theatre conventions. Pushing yourself through the disorientation, you have come to understand that the historical digressions and associations that characterize his stagecraft *are* Castorf's method. Along with parody and slapstick, these strategies situate Castorf firmly in an unorthodox, left wing Volksbühne lineage that includes Piscator, Müller and Besson.

You think back to your first experience watching a Castorf production at the Volksbühne in 2004, which was, much in the spirit of "decadence and decline," an adaptation of Pitigrilli's 1921 novel *Kokain*. At that time, Castorf's stagecraft was a sensational overload of chaos, mania, screams, and video footage, all with an uncanny ability to seduce you. *Kokain* worked impressionistically and viscerally on your body. Like a contemporary fairy tale, the production was darkly enchanting, glamorous, cynical, and at the same time comical, excessive, exhausting, and just too much. *Kokain* generated so many questions at that time in a way that now seems fortuitous. Responding to these questions has required, metaphorically-speaking, stepping into Castorf's library. The books and especially the biographies we encounter there preserve what

amounts to a counter-cultural history of Germany and Eastern Europe—one that provides a snapshot of a fiercely independent intellectual mind, as well as the remainders of a dissident Marxist and bohemian milieu born of the GDR. This image of Castorf’s library recalls Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library” (1931) wherein book collections tell the story of both the object and of the collector. It also recalls the Dadaist Walter Mehring’s *The Lost Library: The Autobiography of a Culture* (1951)—an account of his father Sigmar’s German-Jewish intellectual milieu (which had been destroyed by the Nazis) told through the story of his books. Castorf’s “library” offers a similar historical reservoir and was taken with him into exile in “the West.” Included therein are not only the requisite Nietzsche, Marx and Benjamin one would expect to find there, but also Jünger, Schmitt, Salomon, Niekisch, Céline, Malaparte and Pitigrilli, amongst others. Through Castorf’s collection, these figures form a pastiche of responses to the historical impasses each perceived: cultural pessimists hailing civilizational collapse; revolutionary romantics embracing voluntarism to escape their petit bourgeois existences; nihilist writers and intellectuals seduced by the Far Right; dissident Marxists from the former Eastern Bloc unable or unwilling to come to terms with the end of history. Castorf’s library indicates that he was especially interested in the way the biographies of political outliers disrupt the official narratives and closure of history. In provocative ways, biographical accounts—as Castorf reinvigorates them—fill up the “presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]” and “make the continuum of history explode” (“Theses” 261).

Looking back at the posters, you remind yourself not to take this Volksbühne “bad boy” all *too* seriously. That would be missing the point. You chuckle to yourself and light up a cigarette. You’re in on the joke now. You understand that a great deal of Castorf’s provocation serves precisely to keep people like *you*, North American academic types, on your toes. Castorf

wishes to provoke thought beyond acceptability and consensus, albeit with a wink and a nod to those individuals who aren't too po-faced to perceive that the Volksbühne's allegiances remain firmly with the "losers of capitalism": the marginalized and the disadvantaged. You take a pensive drag on your cigarette and exhale as a panoply of transcendent moments from *Die Brüder Karamasow*—Castorf's final Dostoevsky adaptation at the Volksbühne in 2015—comes rushing back into your head.

Although this dissertation has focused almost solely on Castorf's intendantship, it has by no means intended to posit him as the singular "genius" behind the Volksbühne project. The late Bert Neumann, Castorf's chief designer and scenographer, was an equally important figure for shaping the Volksbühne conceptually and aesthetically, not to mention the dramaturges Matthias Lilienthal and Carl Hegemann. Castorf's quarter-century at the Volksbühne was also indelibly shaped by legendary performers such as Kathrin Angerer, Herbert Fritsch, Marc Hosemann, Henry Hübchen, Silvia Rieger, Sophie Rois, Mex Schlüpfer, Jeanette Spassova, Volker Spengler, Martin Wuttke amongst many others. Stage managers and lighting personnel, videographers, cleaners, wardrobe, administration, and front of house were all key members of the Volksbühne team. Finally, there were those directors inextricably tied to the theatre under Castorf and whose productions helped to shape the culture of the institution: dance-theatre choreographer Johann Kresnik, Swiss music-theater director Christoph Marthaler, *enfant terrible* Christoph Schlingensief, playwright/director René Pollesch, and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* duo Vinge/Müller to list just a few. These directors contributed to the Castorf era Volksbühne in a way that furthered its critique of liberal capitalism and its aesthetic vanguardism. Each created legendary theatre

events that undoubtedly enchanted, provoked and transformed their audiences and pushed theatre as an artform into genuinely vanguard territory.

This dissertation *has*, however, argued that Castorf's intellectual preoccupations have shaped the culture of the institution to a significant degree. Castorf said himself "*Das Konzept bin Ich*" and, in the encounter I had with Bert Neumann in June 2015, he confirmed that the interest in Prussian *Krieger* literature and the Conservative Revolution was singularly Castorf's and not, say, the dramaturges'. Tragically, Neumann passed away unexpectedly on July 30, 2015 at the age of 54. Many perceived Neumann's death as the symbolic end of the Volksbühne era under Castorf. The last *Bauchbinde* or slogan Neumann placed on the façade of the theatre was "*verkauft*," meaning sold and, by implication, "sold out." This slogan cynically referred to the drastic changing of the guard that was about to take place at the Volksbühne.

Just a few months prior, in April 2015, rumours that Castorf's tenure would not be renewed were confirmed. That announcement was no shock. Twenty-five years is one of the longest tenures for a theatre intendant in Germany. What *was* surprising, however, was that Castorf's tenure would end so spectacularly and hence so fittingly with one of the most incendiary *kulturpolitische* debates in German theatre history now known as the *Berliner Theaterstreit* (Berlin Theatre Controversy). Let us be clear: this kind of crescendo ending was precisely what Castorf and his co-combatants were after. As this dissertation has shown, crisis and scandal are moments when the Volksbühne comes most alive. The crisis in the Berliner *Kulturpolitik* surrounding *who* was taking Castorf's place as the new artistic director of the Volksbühne ensured that the Castorf era would not simply fizzle out. The appointment of Chris Dercon, the Belgian former Tate Modern director and "cultural manager" (here a derogatory term) as the new intendant inspired the ire of not only Castorf's team, but those who understood

the Volksbühne's historic significance and symbolic importance for Berliners after the *Wende*. Dercon's appointment, however, also pitted those wishing to preserve the Volksbühne's *Sprechtheater* tradition—namely, a repertoire consisting of German-language drama, led by a theatre director or dramaturg, with a permanent ensemble—and those that dismissed that tradition, in its association with patriarchy and Eurocentricity. Further grievances leveraged against Dercon included that he had no prior theatre experience and that he stood for gentrification (since he planned to extend the Volksbühne into the new Tempelhof airport in the West, thus furthering the city's plan for the “re-development” of that area and enlisting private sponsors to do so). Dercon's idea was to establish a principle of “*Kollaboration als Modell*” (“*Collaboration as a Model*”) and to use “*Kunst als soziale Arbeit und City-Making*” (“*Art as Social Work and City-Making*”) (SZ)—a vision that seemed to be taking its cues from Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). His approach reflected what art historian Claire Bishop (2012) disparages as art's “social turn.” Bishop perceives concepts such as Dercon's (e.g. “collaboration” and “social work”) as part of a neoliberalizing agenda that uses artists to replace state-funded community infrastructure (277). In short, Castorf's preference for an aesthetics of estrangement and criticality were to be replaced by Dercon's more socially engaged ethos. The two approaches are mutually exclusive.

Public outrage ensued in Berlin after Dercon's name was announced as Castorf's successor. The decision was widely perceived as top-down and made by city strategists rather than with the support of Berliners themselves. Open letters were published, and protests occurred, including the scatological gesture of delivering feces in front of Dercon's new office door and a six-day occupation of the Volksbühne by anti-gentrification activists. 40 000 signatures were gathered for an online petition to reopen the Volksbühne-intendant debate. These

protests succeeded in drawing new “frontlines” around the Volksbühne and sharpening the wars of position. The Volksbühne crisis exacerbated tensions brewing in Berlin that Castorf was attuned to. Longtime Volksbühne associate Guillaume Paoli (2016) describes Berlin during this period as a “divided city”—not between rich or poor, Right or Left, but divided *culturally*. The Berlin secretary of cultural affairs Tim Renner, one of the individuals responsible for Dercon’s appointment, identified a different divide. Renner claimed the division was between the “old Berliners”—whom he perceived as patriotic, populist, angst-ridden and negative—versus the “new Berliners” who were cool, cosmopolitan, progressive and business-minded (np.). For Renner, the latter were aligned with Dercon’s “neue volksbühne” concept. For Paoli, however, Renner’s description of “conservative” fans of Castorf and “progressive” supporters of Dercon was a false dichotomy. Dercon was coming to Berlin from a cultural institution that had played a key role in the “urban regeneration” of London. The latter was a euphemism for driving up the cost of housing and pricing locals out of the city, dividing London between tourists and global elites. Paoli suggested Berlin was headed in the same direction and that the new *Kulturpolitik* of Mayor Michael Müller’s office was “becoming a city marketing strategy” (np). This, he claimed, was evident in Dercon’s plan for the Volksbühne, which was to replace the *Sprechtheater* tradition with a curated international line-up of performance and dance-theatre pieces that would be accessible to an English-speaking audience and easy to import and export.²⁰⁵ Like the new *Kulturpolitik* of the Berlin mayoral office, Dercon’s “neue volksbühne” was oriented toward the speculative optimism of the start-up types. Paoli also argued that although “das Volk” never really went to the Volksbühne, the theatre “was always at least a colourful mix of people” (np).

²⁰⁵ Berlin already had two venues that specialized in programming international performance and dance-theatre (i.e. Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) & Haus der Berliner Festspiele).

Dercon's audience would, by contrast, be a "bubble of globally connected citizens," implying homogeneity in their politics and socioeconomic status.

Dercon's appointment and plans undoubtedly unleashed the *ressentiment* that had been simmering in Berlin for years. It was directed towards an international creative class and property speculators, and frequently toward a young international set of revelers heading to Berlin on weekends to immerse themselves in the club scene. Berlin was no longer "poor but sexy," as former mayor Klaus Wowereit once called it. It was now a prospector's paradise and a party capital accessible by easyJet and Ryanair, with long-term rental apartments replaced by Airbnb (Chazan np.).

In June 2016, approximately 200 people affiliated with Castorf's Volksbühne signed an open letter warning of "the destruction of originality and obstinacy, which has gained the Volksbühne an international reputation and worldwide recognition." The signatures included directors René Pollesch and Christoph Marthaler, actors Sophie Rois and Martin Wuttke, members of the Volksbühne cleaning staff, stage technicians, and administration.²⁰⁶ The day after the open letter was published, Claus Peymann, then artistic director of the Berliner Ensemble and an old nemesis of Castorf's, published an open letter suggesting that Mayor Müller should cancel Dercon's planned take-over and pay him out, lest he should go down in history as "*der Killer der Volksbühne*."²⁰⁷ Pollesch, whom Dercon courted to lead the "Performance Division" of the "neue volksbühne," also officially refused the offer. Pollesch—a

²⁰⁶ "This change of director is not a friendly takeover. [Dercon] represents an irreversible turning point and a break from our most recent history in which the Volksbühne could be saved from being reclassified as a dance and festival venue. This change stands for a historical leveling and destruction of our identity. The artistic processing of historical conflicts is pushed aside in favor of 'global consensus culture' with unified patterns of presentation and sale." [open letter dated June 20, 2016.]

²⁰⁷ Peymann also stepped down as the *Intendant* of the BE after 17 years at the helm and was replaced by Oliver Reese. 2013/2014 Şermine Langhoff, a *deutschtürkish* woman, became *Intendant* at the Maxim Gorki Theater, transforming that institution in a way that reflected the new reality of multicultural, multiethnic Germany.

playwright-director known for short, manic productions infused with critical and queer theory and pop culture tropes—was presumed to be Dercon’s most likely ally at Castorf’s Volksbühne. Pollesch, however, like all Castorf era Volksbühne directors, was highly critical of late capitalism and neoliberalism. His work was heavily rooted in critical discourses around globalization, outsourcing, precarity, and hence was completely antithetical to Dercon’s vision.²⁰⁸ One month later, in July 2016, international artists supporting Dercon responded with their own open letter, warning the city’s mayor against a “narrow-minded and self-interested *coup d’etat*” (Shea Para. 5). One commenter on the Volksbühne’s Facebook page compared Dercon’s opponents to the “angry citizens who take part in anti-immigrant rallies in Dresden” (Rogers Para.13).

The question at the centre of this culture war, “[w]ho is the Volk of the Volksbühne?”, has preoccupied the historic institution since its inception. Certainly, Castorf held strong ideas around who “das Volk” was, namely socially and economically vulnerable people and all those unwilling or unable to concede to liberal capitalist finalities. Strikingly absent at Castorf’s Volksbühne, however, were feminist discourses,²⁰⁹ and trans and queer-of-colour communities who did *not* find their bodies or discourses reflected in the theatre. Issues of diversification and representation are some of the most pressing and vitally important issues facing the

²⁰⁸ Pollesch productions with the aforementioned themes include *world wide web-slums* (2001), *Cappucetto Rosso* (2006), and the Prater Trilogie: *Stadt als Beute* (*The City as Booty*) (2001); “*Insourcing des Zuhause. Menschen in Scheiß-Hotels*” (2001); and “*Sex*” (2002).

²⁰⁹ In an article published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on June 28, 2018, Castorf attempted to justify why there had been so few women directors during his long *Volksbühnenintendanz*: “We have a Women’s [soccer] World Cup and a Men’s [soccer] World Cup, and the quality of the game is very different.” He went on, “[i]f a woman is better, I do not mind, only I have not seen so many” (Dössel np.). Castorf does cite Pina Bausch as a notable exception. Castorf’s sexist comments and imperviousness to patriarchal institutional structures inspired public outrage. An open letter of protest was published on July 4, 2018 with 700 signatures.

contemporary Berlin theatre landscape. Not surprisingly, Castorf scored poorly in terms of diversity quotas, as these were not being implemented at his theatre.

According to cultural theorist Dietrich Dietrichson, this “culture war” accurately reflected divisions within the “post-*Wende* Left” (2017). Dietrichson argued that the Volksbühne crisis could be boiled down to two positions: the local and working class-oriented Marxist, anti-imperialist, anti-American orientation of the Castorf era Volksbühne versus the anti-racist, feminist, queer, postcolonial allegiances of Dercon’s supporters.²¹⁰ A third position should be added to the list here, namely the grass-roots community activists. The latter were represented by the group *Staub zu Glitzer* (*Dust to Glitter*) who occupied the theatre for six days, wanting to reinvigorate what they believed was the promise of the historic Volksbühne. The *Staub zu Glitzer* occupiers wanted the Volksbühne to be run by a local collective, with a two-year interim council put in place to work out what that would look like.

Dietrichsen observed that because the Volksbühne endorsed German-language theatre and because its directors were primarily white men, the theatre was accused of being “nationalist” or “colonial.” Dietrichsen himself came to the conclusion that “[a]lthough I - and this has irritated me most in this cultural struggle - politically and theoretically would rather be on the side of Critical Whiteness and Queer Studies, I stand aesthetically and cultural policy-wise on the side of [Castorf’s] Volksbühne” (np). The Volksbühne’s Leftism, he explained, was ultimately class-oriented, and had not yet incorporated the categories of race and gender. “Intersectionality,” he bemoans, “is a discourse that often remains in the domain of an educated

²¹⁰ Dietrichsen argues that this Berlin debate seemed to reflect what *Return to Reims* (Didier Eribon) and *The End of Identity Liberalism* (Mark Lilla) have been about: “the self-incrimination of the left, that led to Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen because there was too much talk about transgender toilets (and not taking the concerns of the stupid worried people seriously enough)” (np.).

middle class” (np). Dietrichsen ultimately endorsed the politics of Castorf’s aesthetics, calling his own position one of “cognitive dissonance.” This is to say that even though Dietrichsen took issue with the *limits* of the discourse and the politics of representation at the Volksbühne, he still found it to be a singularly vital space—a last bastion for refusing neoliberalizing processes according to its site-specific Leftist tradition.

After the second-last performance of *Die Brüder Karamasow*, Castorf’s penultimate production at the Volksbühne, the OST sign was ceremoniously removed by helicopter in a poignant scene of protest. The *Räuberrad*, which had symbolized the theatre’s allegiance to those on the margins of society either unable or unwilling to assimilate into the new capitalist system after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was also eventually removed from the front lawn. Castorf’s tenure at the Volksbühne officially ended with his final, seven-hour adaptation of Goethe’s *Faust*. The Faustian theme of selling one’s soul (to capitalism or America), which had consistently been a *leitmotif* in Castorf’s work at the Volksbühne, took on renewed meaning during the Dercon crisis. This adaptation of *Faust* was set in the North African wars of liberation and heavily influenced by Castorf’s reading of Frantz Fanon. Castorf’s discourse and dramaturgy was heavily invested in anti-imperialist and postcolonial struggle, even if he refused to concede to what he would deem to be “liberal identity politics” on stage.

Dercon’s catastrophic tenure lasted a mere 255 days, from October 2017 to April 2018. It was clear Berliners could not tolerate Dercon’s ultimately neoliberal vision for the old *Panzerkreuzer*. For many Berliners who lived through the *Wende*, the theatre encapsulated their experiences of unification and the disorientating period thereafter. Refusing the closure of the end of history, the Volksbühne continued to keep an open idea of OST alive—a space for alternative possibilities, or what the GDR “*might have been*”—whilst exploring the dark

intellectual temptations born of *ressentiment* and catastrophic thinking. Dietrichsen pronounced the Volksbühne a “dynamic and evolving archive of the *experiences* of Berlin since the 1990s” (np). More than an archive of a city in flux, however, Castorf’s Volksbühne was *the last partisan*—the last space for resistance in gentrified Berlin-Mitte and struggle “behind enemy lines.” In its most shining moments, the institution manifested an anarchic heterogeneity and “unity of extremes” that Castorf claimed had been the case in the GDR just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. This brief period represents the opening of a yet-to-be-determined future that the OST sign represented throughout Castorf’s tenure. The indeterminacy of that moment is reflected by Žižek regarding what happened in Romania right after the fall of Communism, namely as “that intermediate phase when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost its hegemonic power, has not yet been replaced by a new one. . . . The masses who poured into the streets of Bucharest ‘experienced’ the situation as ‘open’” (*Tarrying with the Negative* 1). This utopian spirit of opening was reflected in Castorf’s creative process resulting in the most sublime moments of his stagecraft. Castorf refused the idea of theatre as a “finished product” and rather saw the performance *itself* as the endpoint. When audiences witnessed Volksbühne actors convey virtuosic expressions of authenticity and freedom they could experience their own emancipation in kind.

The Castorf era Volksbühne was also an archive of the intellectual impasses faced by the Left after the demise of the Eastern Bloc, as well as a container for a lineage of left wing avant-garde directors that can be traced back to Piscator. It was the latter’s scandalous tenure at the Volksbühne in the mid-1920s that had attempted to unite a divided left in the struggle against rising fascism. In his final parting words on the steps of the theatre Castorf returned to this site-

specific history and cautioned that the Volksbühne must never return to the name “Theater am Horst-Wessel-Platz,” it must remain the “Volksbühne *am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz*.”

The year 2019 has seen a resolution to the four-year Volksbühne crisis, as well as the interim directorship of Klaus Dörr. On June 12 plans for a new vision for the Volksbühne—spearheaded by René Pollesch, who will be the new intendant starting in fall 2021—were unveiled at an official press conference. The writer-director Pollesch, along with the theatre duo Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller, and the dance-theatre performer Florentine Holzinger, will constitute the cornerstones of the programming lineup. At the press conference, Pollesch explained that his concept is “to use the actors as our starting point.” Under Pollesch, actors (especially women) will play a central role in co-creating the dramatic material—already a hallmark of his current work. In this way, Pollesch is poised to take the institution in the direction of collective performance practices and feminist discourses and away from the more masculinist intellectual conceits that characterized the Castorf era. Although Pollesch directed productions under the aegis of Castorf, he is also less interested in sustaining a socialist or “OST” imaginary. Pollesch will, however, continue in the tradition of critically exploring subjectivity under neoliberalism, while the duo Vinge/Müller, whom Castorf identified as his preferred inheritors of the Volksbühne intendantship (Dössel np.), will provide radical interpretations of the dramatic canon. As “Volksbühne-Children,” the duo’s surreal and monumental deconstructions of iconic texts render them heirs to the Castorf and Neumann tradition. Vinge/Müller’s work also represents a radicalization of Brechtian estrangement—taking mask, prerecorded dialogue and physical *Gestus* to their most extreme endpoint.

At the beginning of this dissertation I made three over-arching claims: 1) that the Castorf era Volksbühne refused the liberal finalities of the end of history; 2) that Castorf revived the left-

wing avant-garde theatre tradition with his reception of the Volksbühne and his site-specific approach to German history; and 3) that Castorf pointed to critiques of liberal democracy that exposed the overlaps of extreme Right and Left, channeling the *ressentiment* and discontent Castorf claimed the Right was better equipped to address than the Left. Castorf's Volksbühne tenure made visible *both* the resistant and reactionary fantasies of those individuals disillusioned and disenchanting by Western liberal capitalism. In his oeuvre, we see the historical avant-gardes and revolutionaries on both ends of the political spectrum overlap in their critiques of linear "progressive" history and in their preference for a vital present, or what Badiou describes as their "passion for the real." Castorf's intellectual genealogy establishes a set of coordinates that convey the uncomfortable resonances between an unorthodox Left and a Conservative Revolutionary Right during the Weimar Republic when the Left *should* have won and conquered fascism. In so doing, Castorf opens a space to reclaim illiberal reaction for an emancipatory Leftist project by identifying continuities in the present.

Castorf's approach to theatre, however, is increasingly at odds with a theatre landscape mandating the diversification of representation on German stages. In 2019, the *Theatertreffen*—the annual festival of the ten best German language theatre productions—took the step of addressing sexism and the overwhelming predominance of male directors by imposing a quota of 50% women-directed productions amongst its selection. We can assume Castorf contests these quotas based on his belief that they would constitute to a state imposed *Leitbild*. Although Castorf should be taken to task for many of the shortcomings of his work, his refusal to submit to externally imposed quotas must be understood as his belief that theatre should be granted a radical degree of freedom if it wants to serve as more than a "functionless accessory" of liberal ideology. Castorf attempted to engage critically with the conditions of possibility of state-funded

theatre in Germany. His concession to the theatre's complicity with the state and hence to its constraints and limitations was constituted by a radical *umfunktionierung* of the theatre institution into a space that refused consensus and reflected the irrational and unspeakable dimensions of German society. In this anti-institutional spirit, Castorf was able to revive the Volksbühne's vanguard left wing tradition that is most vibrant when working in fidelity to its historic mission. A feminist critique might legitimately take Castorf to task for refusing to interrogate the male gaze prevalent in his theatre. Nonetheless, Castorf has challenged gender norms by prominently conveying an antifascist approach where masculinity deconstructs and parodies itself. It is the risk of a resurgence of the Right that has guided Castorf's promiscuous intellectual pursuits and the politics of his aesthetics.

Arguably, Castorf's Volksbühne was more relevant on the eve of his departure than at any other point in his tenure. Castorf's theatre seemed to warn that reaction to a global, neoliberalizing tide would ultimately lead to an end of Fukuyama's democratizing *telos* on behalf of the Right. Castorf's power was in making this historical pattern emerge in high relief. In his cultural diagnosis and prognosticating Castorf continued to look to the Weimar Republic for a template of illiberal dynamics. We are currently seeing a weakening of liberal democratic principles, a strengthening of borders, a return to nationalism and populism, and a rise in megalothymic authoritarian leaders. The Right has returned openly in Germany with AfD and Pegida. We even see the aspiring strongman-authoritarian Donald Trump channeling discontents in America and mobilizing *ressentiment* for his populist right wing approach to politics. A polarizing narrative of "Us vs. Them" and alternative facts, as well as an outrageous dramaturgy of spontaneous decision and *will*, are the coordinates of Trump's leadership. Under the conceits of his political theatrics, the only person speaking "truth" to liberal "elites" and their powerful

allies in the media is Trump himself. By extension, the only person on the side of the working-class, the “losers” of globalization—or so he claims—is Trump. In the right light, Trump even doubles as a clown or trickster figure, reflecting the dark latencies of White Americans. But alas, no such performative critique is at play in this pantomime. The current revival of the Right in America, and around the world, is a stark reminder that history is far from over. It is a reminder that history returns, sometimes as a ludicrous farce. But it is only when that farce is represented, on stage for example, that we can arrive at a fuller consciousness of it. This insight is perhaps Castorf’s strongest legacy.

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