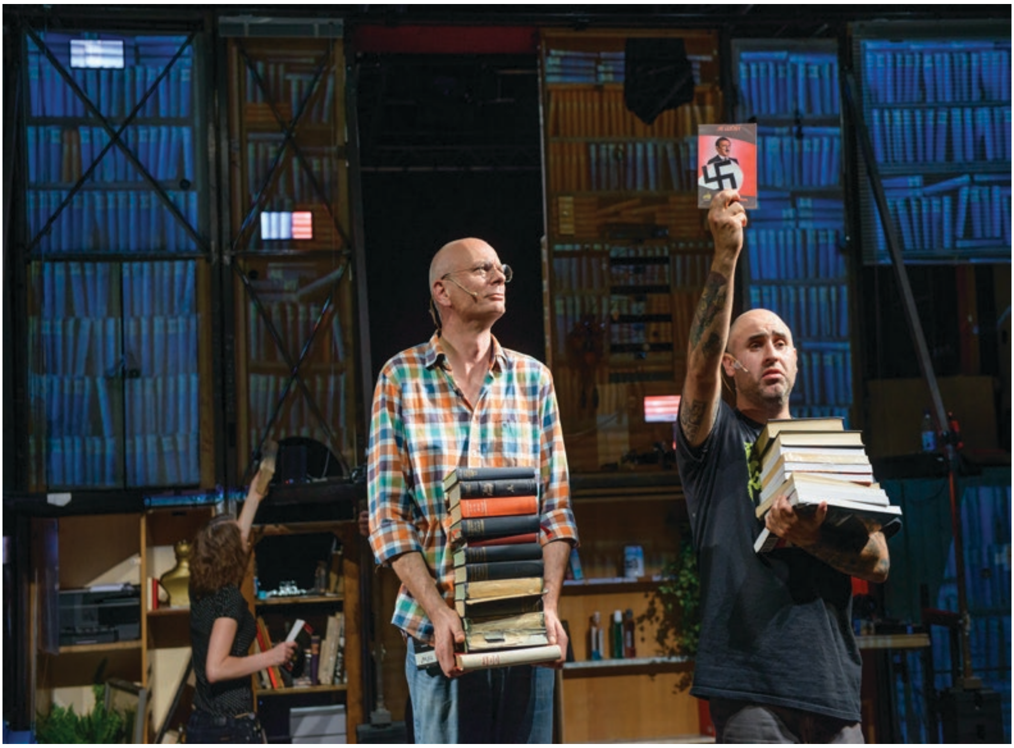
Postfictional Theatre, Institutional Aesthetics, and the German Theatrical Public Sphere

Christopher Balme



> *[T]he real figures this new theatre conjures [...] are just as far from any imagined end to fiction as they are from any anticipated respite from theatre's long struggle with violence and the ambiguities of representation.*
>
> — *Tim Etchells (2019:9)*

Tim Etchells's characterization of the theatre of Argentinian director Lola Arias references the so-called real figures that feature so prominently in her work while disavowing that such figures signal the "end of fiction" in theatre.[1] Rather than neutralizing the eternal ambiguities

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of representation, such figures probably complicate them even further. The perceptible shift in German theatre towards various types of stage productions and formats that programmatically eschew the label "fictional" prompts the questions of why and in what form a turn towards "postfictional" theatre can be explored — and with what consequences.

The division of tasks between realms of fiction (art, literature) and fact (history, science, information media) in highly differentiated societies (Luhmann 1982) has now been upset. Politicians of the alternative right have clearly colonized the artistic realm of subjective truth by following the artistic principle of: *la vérité, c'est moi*. They have also coopted many other tools and devices of the progressive, artistic left such as subversion, transgression, and self-stylized oppositionality to the "ruling elites" (Davis 2019).[2] So how can a politically inflected art and theatre respond to this new state of affairs? Where is their proper sphere now? Theatre has already begun to leave the subjunctive realm of illusion, mimesis, and as-if and is beginning to occupy a new domain I want to term the "postfictional." This does not signal the "end of fiction," as Etchells stresses, but rather the transcendence and augmentation of the theatrical medium and its conflation with the mode of fiction. That this process is already well under way can be gleaned from a brief glance at any experimental theatre festival in Europe, and it has already received a significant amount of scholarly attention. Carol Martin has proposed a comprehensive conceptualization of this development in two books and a series of articles (2010, 2013) under the term "theatre of the real." Although most examples she and other scholars deal with are contemporary, Martin emphasizes that it is by no means a new phenomenon:

> Theatre of the real, also known as documentary theatre as well as docudrama, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, and theatre of fact, has long been important for the subjects it presents. (2010:1)

The taxonomy, which is not exhaustive, makes clear that the theatre of the real has already developed into subgenres with established, albeit by no means entirely stable, conventions.[3] The theatre of the real does not necessarily mark a clear ontological distinction between the "real" and the

Figure 1. (previous page) Volkan Türeli (alias Volkan T error) holds up a Spanish translation of Mein Kampf. *Matthias Hageböck to his right holds a selection of translations. It is illegal to display the swastika in public in Germany. Rimini Protokoll,* Adolf Hitler: Mein Kampf, Vol. 1 & 2. *(Photo by Candy Welz; courtesy of Christopher Balme)*

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[2] Lennard Davis writes: "Yet in an age in which bad leaders exemplify disruption, transgression, subversion and flamboyance, how can such behaviours lead us to greater social justice? You can't get more flamboyant than quasi-despots such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Rodrigo Duterte, Boris Johnson, and Matteo Salvini. In fact, their appeal is based on their larger-than-life personality performances with outrageous hair and bare chests. Likewise, they subvert norms and revel in transgressing laws and ethics. Why did we think that these strategies were inherently progressive and liberatory?" (2019).

[3] To this list Martin adds in her later study "nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle reenactments, and autobiographical theatre" (2013:5).

"theatrical" but frequently thematizes the unstable divisions between the two, the "blurred boundary between the stage and the real" (Martin 2013:4). The theatre of the real represents an ongoing attempt on the part of theatre-makers to access an experiential dimension that they deem resistant to the stage's ineluctable power to make signs of signs. Erika Fischer-Lichte argues in her study of performative aesthetics ([2004] 2008a) that theatre has always been caught up in a tension between the real and the fictional, especially in respect to the actor's body, and on occasions to theatrical space when the two realms become blurred. Performances that emphasize the materiality of the body or spatial "iconic identity" characteristic of site-specific performance (Stephenson 2019:7) destabilize or at least reflexively draw attention to the theatrical frame.

The potential for the real—defined here as a quality resistant to semiotic transformation—to break the boundaries of theatrical framing is described by most commentators in terms of aesthetic transgression, even "betrayal of trust" on the part of spectators (5).

The term "postfictional" deals with some of the same developments studied by Martin, Fischer-Lichte, Stephenson, and others.[4] However, it extends the frame of reference beyond particular performances and genres to address the way some leading German public theatres are reorganizing the repertoire to include not just an increasing number of postfictional performances but also informational *formats* such as lectures, conferences, and workshops—to such an extent that an estimated 20% of content (Schmidt 2014) is no longer "fictional" in the strict sense of the term.[5]

The assumption that the theatre, like novels or feature films, operates primarily in the fictional is, in part, an institutional question. The proliferation of performances that purport to make use of material or create situations not easily framed by fictional conventions has implications for institutions. As more and more postfictional productions and informational formats enter the mainstream German subsidized theatre they raise not just aesthetic but also institutional questions. The aesthetic innovations are much easier to assimilate than the institutional changes they provoke.

German public theatres, with their large ensembles and repertoires, represent a very specific institutional setting that is rare outside the German-speaking world. While examples of postfictional theatre are becoming increasingly ubiquitous, the phenomenon manifests itself perhaps most consistently and with the most far-reaching institutional consequences in German public theatres (*Staatstheater* [state theatres] and *Stadttheater* [city theatres]).

While the trend towards postfictional performance is by no means limited to the German-speaking world (Martin 2010), it is especially prevalent there, and, importantly, has left the experimental realm of festivals and galleries and has entered the mainstream (Fischer-Lichte 2008b:93). Take for example, three productions presented between 2016 and 2018 at the Munich Kammerspiele, one of the most prestigious municipal theatres in the German-speaking world. The fact that the productions took place there, although they were not always conceived for that theatre, is important in respect to the question of institutional aesthetics. Theatre is being "reformatted" and "remediated" (Bolter and Grusin 1999) in institutional as much as aesthetic terms; the institutional remediation may be even more unsettling than the aesthetic. This institutional remediation has in turn implications for theatre's place and role in the public sphere.

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[4] Numerous scholars have engaged with the questions and artists aligned to the various genres of postfictional theatre. See for example Favorini (1995) and Reinelt (2009) on documentary theatre both past and contemporary. For a study of the German, or particularly, Berlin context, see Garde and Mumford (2016).

[5] The term "format" is intentionally borrowed from communication and media studies where it is well established (Jancovic et al. 2020) but also finds mention in Dirk Baecker's critique of the German *Stadttheater* (2011).

What Is "Postfictional"?

There exists a long-standing relationship between theatre and the fictional, although the latter term is seldom used in reference to theatre. Theatre theorist Theresia Birkenhauer notes: "In theatre theory the concept [fiction] is rather marginal" (2014:111). Fiction normally implies imaginative prose writing or feature films, where any relationship to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. Even if the subject is historical or "based on true events," the fictional mode of perception still pertains. The term "fiction" refers to the epistemological status of the world and characters represented, whether in a novel, play, or film. Almost all drama, opera, and ballet belongs to the realm of the fictional. Nevertheless, in theatre and performance studies we seldom use this term, preferring cognates such as illusion, mimesis, as-if, or play. These all refer to the cognitive process by which spectators agree to enter the fictional world and willingly suspend their disbelief.[6] Fiction and illusion are the twins of aesthetics, with the former applied to writing and the latter to performance. In both, however, imagined diegetic worlds are created that the reader/spectator agrees to inhabit.

The articulation of the fundamental distinction between the fictional stories represented in plays and the factual ones in histories goes back to Aristotle, who introduced the famous distinction between things that have happened (history) and those that could happen (poetry), between the particular of history and the universals of poetry:

> For the difference between the historian and the poet is not in the presenting of accounts that are versified or not versified [...] The difference is this: the one tells what has happened, the other the kind of things that can happen. And in fact that is why the writing of poetry is a more philosophical activity, and one to be taken more seriously, than the writing of history; for poetry tells us rather the universals, history the particulars. (in Else 1957:301)

Less often cited, but perhaps even more pertinent for the role of fiction in theatre is the next passage:

> But nevertheless the fact remains that even among our tragedies some have one or two familiar names and the rest are fictitious, and some have none, for example Agathon's *Antheus*; for in that play the names are as fictitious as the happenings, and it is none the less enjoyed. (315)

In his commentary, Gerald Else remarks that this passage indicates "Aristotle's awareness of a fundamental fact: *that in Greek tragedy the action was likely to be partly or wholly fictitious even if the names were known*" and suggests that in fact in most tragedies "the plot is almost entirely *πεποιημένον*" (319). The Greek word cited here, *pepoihmenon*, means made (up) or invented, the root word being *ποιέω* (*poiéo*), from which is derived *poiesis*. The "poetic" in Aristotelian terms is thus broadly synonymous with the fictional (at least in translation).

The distinction between history and fiction has remained largely unquestioned in theatre aesthetics, even in a genre such as the Elizabethan "history play," which conflates the two terms.[7] But the term "fiction" has another meaning beyond the imaginative worlds created through storytelling. In this context, fiction is opposed to the factual and the truthful. Indeed, it is difficult to think about the category of the fictional without its "other," the factual and the truthful, in order to define and demarcate it. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines fiction as "invention as opposed to fact" and cites the 18th-century English philosopher Lord Shaftesbury: "Truth is the most powerful thing in the World, since even Fiction itself must be govern'd by it."[8]

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[6] The marginalization of the term "fiction" may be a specific characteristic of German theatre studies, as evidenced in Fischer-Lichte's major study of theatre and performance ([2004] 2008a), where the term is scarcely used. (The 2008 English version of the 2006 original *Ästhetik des Performativen* is not a complete translation.) See, however, her essay "Reality and Fiction in Contemporary Theatre" (2008b)—which recycles material from the 2006 German original, where the terms "reality" and "fiction" are central to the argument.

[7] On the history play and the relation between fiction and historical events, see Hattaway (2002).

But why should fiction be governed by truth, i.e., be subordinated to it? Shaftesbury adumbrates a powerful aesthetic discourse that would attain dominance in the 19th and 20th centuries. To art is attributed the privilege of creating and defining truth after its own fashion. Once art (which includes theatre) freed itself from the obligation to represent nature mimetically, it redefined its frames of reference and value: art is beholden to truth, not to nature, and in the world of art truth is fundamentally subjective, defined by the artists themselves and their artistic vision. This becomes an essential component of the modernist credo. In Adorno's reading, the "truth content in artworks is the materialization of the most advanced consciousness" ([1970] 1997:176).

The preeminence of art as truth defined the place of art in a highly specialized modern world: it created an autonomous sphere where its own truths reigned supreme. In other domains or systems — politics, science, education — the concept of truth became marginalized or, more precisely, conflated with the factual: agreement on basic facts was essential in these fields and this process of agreeing on facts was enacted in both scientific communities and in the wider public sphere of the media. This division of responsibility led ineluctably to a marginalization of art within the wider public sphere. This is a key argument in my book *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Balme 2014). As theatre in Western societies gained increasing autonomy and freedom from censorship (because its fictional worlds were answerable only to subjective truth, not objective facts) so too did it lose its function as an interlocutor in the public sphere where facts matter.

Postfictional theatre can be seen as an outgrowth and radicalization of what Hans-Thies Lehmann described as "postdramatic theatre" at the end of the last century ([1999] 2006). Postdramatic theatre includes, however, the fictional, albeit under different conditions of representation. The real, or nonfictional, in Lehmann's understanding, is something that "erupts" into the performance, destabilizes our perception, rather than framing it entirely: "an overcoming of the principles of mimesis and fiction" ([1999] 2006:99).[9] Lehmann also argues that, being live, theatrical presentation per se tends to counteract and destabilize the construction of dramatic fictions; postdramatic theatre in this sense is a radicalization of something inherent in the medium that under normal circumstances only manifests itself in isolated moments and "mishaps" (101).

Because postdramatic theatre usually eschews clear coordinates organizing narrative and character, it often requires considerable effort on the part of spectators to decode meanings and even make sense of what they see. In other words, postdramatic theatre seeks to shift the production of meaning from the performance to the spectator; it is, in Elinor Fuchs's words, the "spectator's response theatre: we write our own script out of the 'pieces of culture' offered" (1996:111). The main protagonists of postdramatic theatre are familiar names: Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor, and Heiner Müller represent a first wave; groups and artists such as The Wooster Group, Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, and Forced Entertainment became a dominant presence in the late 1980s and 1990s. Their work has pushed and blurred the boundaries of theatre and performance art so that today a sharp distinction between the two genres is largely obsolete. Many of these artists, however, worked or still work within a fictional frame.

Postfictional theatre on the other hand dispenses entirely with the cognitive apparatus required to process theatre in a fictional mode. The real does not "erupt" into it but forms the cognitive frame to begin with. It emphasizes knowledge acquisition, not aesthetic experience, or it redefines aesthetic experience to include or even privilege knowledge acquisition. Alternatively, it might define an ethical predicament and play this through in a counter-factual manner. Above all, it requires very low thresholds of comprehension to access it; ease of cognitive access is a major condition of postfictional performance and something that distinguishes it from first-wave postdramatic theatre, which still tended to rely heavily on modernist devices, especially "enigmaticalness" (Adorno [1970] 1997:175), opaqueness, and hard associative labor on the part of the spectator.

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[8] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "fiction, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/69828. Accessed 2 January 2023. The quote is from Shaftesbury's *A letter concerning enthusiasm* (1708:7).

[9] The trope of reality erupting into or interrupting the fiction of theatrical performance is frequently evoked: see Martin (2013:9), who refers to "a rude eruption of real life into a play about a real event" (2010:3) or "intrusions of the real into the theatrical" (2013:9); Fischer-Lichte speaks of the "invasion of the real into fiction" ([2004] 2008a:60) as does Stephenson: "Real things […] invade the performance frame" (2019:5).

Most of Rimini Protokoll's work falls into the category of the postfictional, as does the work of Milo Rau, Hans-Werner Kroesinger, Christine Umpfenbach, and all the interrelated genres of lecture performances, discourse theatre, docudrama, and even verbatim theatre. The terms proliferate and much of this work is discussed under the rubric of "the real" (Martin 2013) or "authenticity" (Schulze 2017), despite the notorious definitional problems associated with both terms. As Lehmann would argue: all theatre is real, always; it is just that we have evolved a use of it that privileges dramatic fictions. It is the systematic deconstruction of the fictional frame that describes much recent work and which is therefore the more productive phrase to apply in respect to institutional settings.

Staged Exhibitions

Rimini Protokoll's *Adolf Hitler: Mein Kampf, Vol. 1 & 2*

Rimini Protokoll needs little introduction. Their productions and concepts have been extensively described (Brady 2007; Jackson 2011; Mumford 2013; Cornish 2019) but they are various, multifaceted, and cannot be reduced to one form or format. Nevertheless, what links their projects is a concern with eliminating illusion or what is termed here "fiction." They employ various techniques to achieve defictionalization. Perhaps the most famous is the convention of inviting "experts" to be the main performers, the so-called *Experten des Alltags* (experts of everyday life). They are nonprofessional performers who have some kind of expertise in the topic in hand. The designation "experts" is designed to counter possible (and real) objections to their supposed amateurish self-presentation onstage.

For *Adolf Hitler: Mein Kampf, Vol. 1 & 2*,[10] the directorial team (in this case Helgard Haug and Daniel Wetzel) assembled a group of experts to explain their relationship to Adolf Hitler's notorious bestseller. The guiding idea was to initiate a discussion of the book on the eve of its release into the public domain in January 2016, following the expiration of copyright held by the State of Bavaria. Upon Hitler's death in 1945 without heirs, the State of Bavaria "inherited" the copyright to the book and prevented it from being reprinted and sold in Germany. The experts onstage were Sibylla Flügge, a professor of law and women's rights; Anna Gilsbach, a lawyer specializing in copyright law; Matthias Hageböck, a book restorer; and Alon Kraus, a lawyer from Tel Aviv. They were assisted by Christian Spremberg, who is vision-impaired and was familiar to audiences from an earlier Rimini Protokoll production, *Karl Marx: Das Kapital*. Spremberg gave a reading from the braille version, imitating Hitler's voice, while Volkan Türeli (alias Volkan T error), a Turkish-born hip hop artist, provided not just musical accompaniment but also a perspective from Muslim countries, where *Mein Kampf* enjoys special prominence and reverence. The performance consisted of these experts elucidating different aspects of the reception of *Mein Kampf* or explaining their relationship to it.

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[10] *Adolf Hitler: Mein Kampf, Vol. 1 & 2* was not designed specifically for the Kammerspiele but the latter was one of several coproducers and the production was in repertoire at the theatre in the 2015/2016 season. A recording of a performance given there is available on Vimeo with English subtitles at https://vimeo.com/178309114.

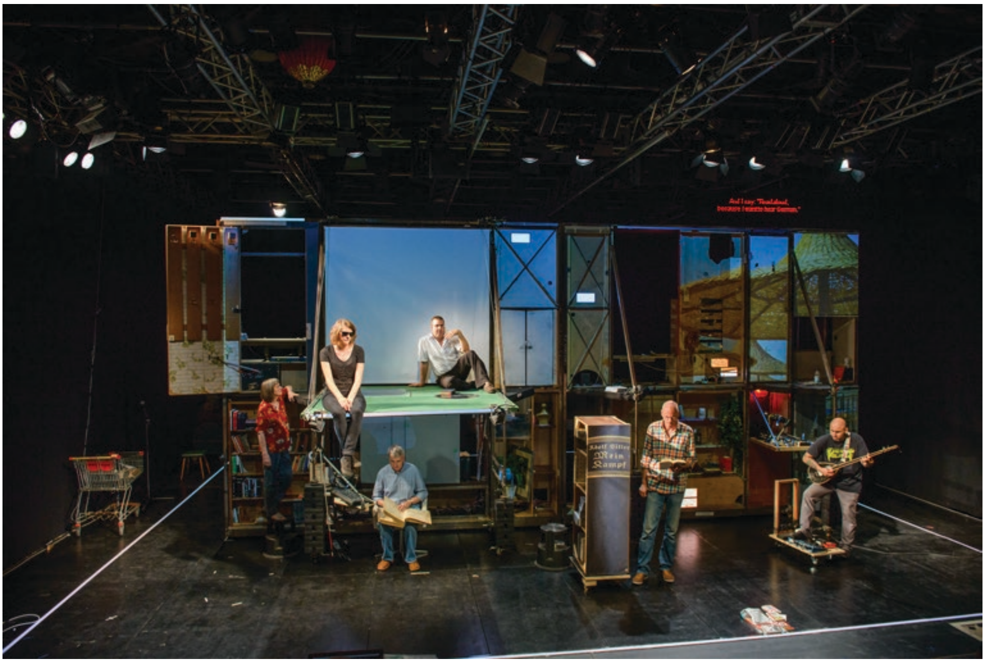

Figure 2. Set of Adolf Hitler: Mein Kampf, Vol. 1 & 2, *showing the spine of the German edition built into a bookshelf center stage. Design by Marc Jungreithmeier. Performers from left: Sibylla Flügge, Anna Gilsbach, Matthias Hageböck, Alon Kraus, Christian Spremberg, Volkan T error. (Photo by Candy Welz; courtesy of Christopher Balme)*

The set (fig. 2) consists of two moveable modules that can be subdivided into smaller spaces. Initially they stand at right angles to one another; later they are moved together to form one extended backdrop. The smaller spaces become by turns a library, second-hand bookshop, flea market, storage space, disco, student flat, and projection screen. The multiple smaller spaces can be repurposed as focalized viewing areas for specific scenes and themes. Aficionados of Rimini Protokoll will recognize resemblances to *Das Kapital* (2009), which also took place in a library. The interocular references are not just oblique but are made explicit when one module is turned around to reveal the reverse side of a theatre set. Volkan T error remarks: "Hey Christian, we're on the backside of the former set of DAS KAPITAL, sort of on the 'arse-side.'"[11] *Mein Kampf* can be seen as the ideological flipside of Karl Marx's magnum opus. As the performance progresses, more and more images and objects are accumulated to form an exhibition-like visualization of the performers' individual associations with the book. It is a dynamic stage set with ever-changing projections of images and texts. The most spectacular transformation takes place while Volkan T error raps a banned song he composed with the rapper Deso Dogg, who joined ISIS and was killed in combat. While the text extols the Germanness of immigrants ("Wir sind Deutschland…I'll die on German soil") the set folds together to reveal the spine of *Mein Kampf* as the backdrop.

Volkan T error is the only genuine professional performer in the cast. As one reviewer put it: "this is not great acting, but the theme of this evening is also the illustrated narrative of the research that the ensemble has undertaken together" (Breckner 2015), thereby framing the performance as a collaborative research project. Indeed, the audience obtained significant amounts of information during the evening, for example, that an astonishing number of copies of *Mein Kampf* were still in circulation. Hitler was a bestselling author who became a millionaire from the royalties. More than

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[11] All quotes from *Mein Kampf* are from a video recording available on the group's website: www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project/adolf-hitler-mein-kampf-band-1-.

12 million copies were printed by the end of the Second World War, later illegal editions continued to circulate in Germany, and there were translations into many other languages, including Hebrew. We learn of the book's and its author's continued popularity, especially in Muslim countries.

In a series of short scenes, the evening explores people's fascination with this book, which after the war Germans always claimed to have owned but never read, avoiding judgmental analysis. Rimini Protokoll does not lecture in a didactic-moralistic sense but rather takes the audience on a guided tour together with the performers through a series of historical and cultural contexts in which the book has resonance. The aim seems to be to promote, shortly before the expiry of the copyright protection period, a sense of composure rather than anxiety: reading *Mein Kampf* can help one understand history; it will not recruit neo-Nazis (Breckner 2015).

While the production may not contain "great acting" and indeed critical response reveals a certain terminological insecurity, even helplessness, in finding ways to describe and evaluate *Mein Kampf*, its informational value remains undisputed. Normally the subject of television documentaries—which in Germany are usually moralizing—Hitler's book onstage is subjected to a variety of discursive riffs and quite literally voices and bodies that illuminate its cultural significance without adducing to it "value" in a valorizing sense. The corporeality manifests itself in different registers: the Israeli accent of the lawyer, Alon Kraus; the sight impairment of the braille reader, Christian Spremberg; Volkan T error's German-Turkish idiom; as well as the *biodeutsch*[12] bodies of Flügge, Gilsbach, and Hageböck, who represent three generations of recent German history. The range of responses may vary but they hardly permit anything resembling strong affect (except an occasional chuckle) or identification. There is no fictional world created here, but something resembling different rooms of an exhibition through which the audience collectively reacquaints itself with the infamous book and thus Germany's Nazi past.[13]

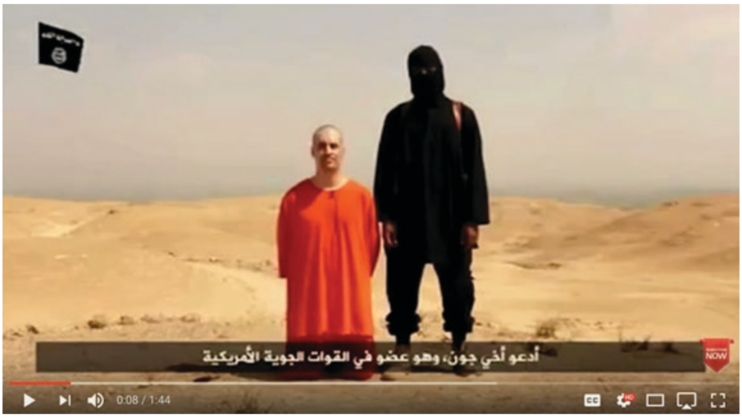

Figure 3. Screenshot from the ISIS video depicting James Foley's decapitation and used in the production, Situation with Spectators. *The desert background was extracted for a triptych backdrop onstage behind the performers. (Screenshot by Christopher Balme)*

Extreme Postfiction

Hauptaktion's *Situation with Spectators*

Situation with Spectators was created by the independent, Munich-based group Hauptaktion and premiered at the Kammerspiele on 20 January 2017.[14] Subtitled an "essay-performance," the piece confronts the audience with the ethical dilemma of whether or not to watch the notorious ISIS video in which US journalist James Foley is beheaded on camera.

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[12] *Biodeutsch* (bio-German) is a very common ironical phrase coined by German-Turkish satirists in the context of the German migration debate.

[13] There is a clear relationship here both to the older German tradition of documentary theatre and its interrogation of the Nazi past as well as to the newer interest in representing "perpetrators" (Knittel 2019).

[14] Created and performed by Banafshe Hourmazdi, Jasmina Rezig, and Oliver Zahn, the production was coproduced with the Munich Kammerspiele and HAU Hebbel am Ufer, in cooperation with Theater Rampe Stuttgart. It was sponsored by the City of Munich, the Richard-Stury Foundation, and the Fonds Darstellende Künste. Hauptaktion terms itself an "association for artistic research" and was founded by Oliver Zahn, Hannah Saar, and Julian Warner in 2015. While Zahn trained as a theatre director at the Bavarian Theatre Academy, Julian Warner is a cultural anthropologist and Hannah Saar is a producer.

Three performers sit at desks in front of a triptych showing a desert landscape that has been extracted from the video itself. Speaking alternately, they first outline the question. One speaker discusses whether one should watch this video or not. Another provides examples from theatre history in which humans have been executed or tortured for the delectation of spectators—for example a performance of *Oedipus* in the Roman theatre, or the faked but effective blood-thirsty excesses of the Grand Guignol theatre in Paris that caused collective fainting. The third speaker describes the eight-minute video frame by frame so that by the time the video is about to be played the audience knows what it will see. At this point the doors open and the audience is given the decision to remain or leave.

Afterwards, a postperformance discussion takes place in another room. Whether one stays or leaves, the performance raises a range of questions: violence, voyeurism, the gaze, and whether the theatre is perhaps the only culturally legitimate space where one can/should watch such a video. The ISIS-authored video, versions of which can still be accessed on platforms such as bestgore.com, is carefully crafted, professionally produced and edited propaganda, apparently not intended as gratuitous violence. It advances an argument, namely that Foley's impending death is the direct result of President Obama's authorization of airstrikes against ISIS and that here retribution is being exacted: an eye for an eye. It claims justification as a politically and not religiously motivated execution. It is a horrific, if not effective engagement with the mediasphere in as much as its main argument achieved the maximum exposure owing to the depicted decapitation.

Situation with Spectators combines archival research with a fundamental question about theatrical spectatorship and ethics. If *Adolf Hitler: Mein Kampf, Vol. 1 & 2* provided a kind of staged exhibition to inform and alleviate anxieties about the most notorious book in the German language, then *Situation with Spectators* stages an ethical dilemma in which a spectatorial action—to leave or remain—has consequences, primarily for the individual rather than the collective. The "remainers" do, however, form a collective. The question is of what? A collective of the brave? of the medially inured? This dilemma, which takes on corporeal form through the remaining spectators, mirrors the ethical dilemma that confronted public broadcasting when the original video was released. The two main public television channels in Germany, ARD and ZDF, made different decisions. The ARD showed a pixelated photo of Foley on his knees just before decapitation in accordance with standard journalistic practice, which seeks to protect an individual's dignity while at the same time providing legitimate reporting of a global event. The ZDF took a different path. According to anchorman Claus Kleber: "This one time we decided differently, because the calm attitude of James Foley in the face of his death exudes a dignity that must have remained incomprehensible to the fanatical killers next to him" (Ehrenberg 2014). The kneeling James Foley could be seen, looking into the distance, slightly larger in the picture, unpixellated, without a black bar obscuring his face.

While *Situation with Spectators* is not a simple replay of discussions in TV editorial departments, it is implicitly connected to them. Not only is theatre synching with the internet by showing a video designed for maximum viral impact in that medium, it amplifies and complicates the dilemmas faced by broadcasters when confronted by such material. In comparison with *Adolf Hitler: Mein Kampf, Vol. 1 & 2*, *Situation with Spectators* is highly affective but in an interrogative sense. Spectators are urged to question their own ethical and affective proclivities. Does leaving the auditorium make me in some way a better person by refusing to engage with ISIS propaganda, or does the act of remaining document my habituation and perhaps even desensitization to such material (the hardened theatregoer)? Whatever the decision, the material presented is not fictional by any definition. James Foley was decapitated by ISIS on 19 August 2014.[15]

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[15] The documentary film produced about Foley's life, *Jim: The James Foley Story* (2016, dir. Brian Oakes), does not contain footage from the video.

Performing *Lebenszeit*

What They Want to Hear

What They Want to Hear had its premiere in the summer of 2018 at the Munich Kammerspiele. It depicts the plight of a Syrian asylum seeker, Raaed Al Kour, who fled his homeland and the war to avoid conscription into the Syrian army. In 2014 he came to Germany via Turkey and Bulgaria and became enmeshed in an endless closed circuit between asylum applications, deportation orders, and appeals.

Al Kour comes from Daraa in Syria. He studied archaeology in Damascus and Alexandria and en route to Germany he was detained in Bulgaria and fingerprinted. In Germany he applied for asylum; at the time of the premiere his case had been unresolved for nearly five years and he had received two deportation orders. The piece makes tangible how, for the protagonist, flight becomes paralysis, movement becomes stasis, and the temporal experience of one's own life being wasted becomes an all-consuming experience.

What They Want to Hear was conceived and directed by Lola Arias, the internationally renowned Argentinian film and theatre director who has built a reputation for exploring the unstable borders between fiction and reality, and especially autobiography. She has worked with Rimini Protokoll and directed an earlier piece at the Kammerspiele, *Familienbande* (Family Ties, 2009). In the English-speaking world she is perhaps best known for *Minefield* (2016), where former Argentinian and British soldiers perform together and share their recollections of the Falklands War (Graham-Jones 2019).

Arias was invited by the Kammerspiele to work with its Open Border Ensemble (OBE), a project initiated as a theatrical response to the migration crisis that erupted in Germany in 2015, when over a million refugees entered the country between September and December. In the 2017/18 season, the theatre invited actors from Damascus and other artists from the Middle East to join the team to form an Open Border Ensemble. Under the directorship of dramaturg Krystel Khoury from Beirut, the OBE was conceived as kind of laboratory in search of new stories, formats, and theatrical languages. The self-proclaimed goal was to work towards a transnational theatre that created a space where different narratives could emerge from cultural and sociopolitical contexts. Its productions programmatically mixed languages to reflect multivocality, characteristic of but not restricted to the experience of migration.

In *What They Want to Hear*, Al Kour plays himself. In keeping with Arias's method, the production was collectively devised by a group of actors closely following Al Kour's actual journey through the aporia of German refugee camps and asylum bureaucracy. He introduces the audience to the stations of a never-ending holding pattern—the asylum seekers' hostel, the offices of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), and lawyers specializing in asylum procedures. The play asks, explicitly:

> Will they believe me or not? And is there a statute of limitations for credibility? At the heart of this evening, in which the German asylum process is connected with the basic assumptions of theatre, stands the relationship between credibility, time, and theatre. (in Khoury 2018:2)

The title *What They Want to Hear* refers to a particular experience of the asylum process whereby applicants undergo extended interviews with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, which attempts to ascertain the veracity of their "stories." These interviews are so crucial to the final decision that asylum seekers are coached and rehearsed by refugee organizations in order to give them better chances of "passing." The theatrical parallels between the real life-determining dialogue of asylum seeker and "decider" (the official term for these officials) and the rehearsal process are made clear in the production. The officials are all too aware that many of the responses and life stories are "scripted" to improve the interviewee's chances of gaining coveted asylum status.

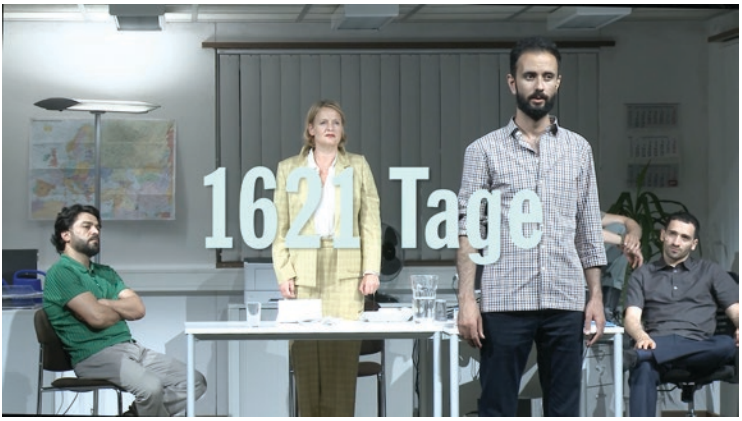

Figure 4. Raaed Al Kour addresses the audience in What They Want to Hear. *Directed by Lola Arias, Munich Kammerspiele, 2018. (Screenshot courtesy of Viola Hasselberg)*

The metatheatrical and hence sometimes comic characteristics of refugee life are a defining feature of the production. Even more defining, however, and in no way humorous, is the experience of time itself, especially for the protagonist. While he waits, he performs in the production. In the last scene Raaed Al Kour says:

> So this story has no end.
> Up until today I have no
> status here in Germany.
> I spent four years, 1,808
> days waiting for decisions.
> I am here performing for
> you, while I am waiting.
> (Kammerspiele 2019)

With each performance, the number of days changes. Real-time, Al Kour's lived time (*Lebenszeit*), passes. "Lebenszeit" cannot be translated exactly as "lifetime," because the English word refers to a completed, or nearly completed life, whereas Lebenszeit is associated with the productive (or nonproductive) use of one's life as it happens.

The phenomenology of fictional theatre tends to eschew actual time onstage. As Walter Benjamin argued in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "astronomical time [clashes] with theatrical time [...;] a clock that is working will always be a disturbance onstage" ([1936] 1977:247). This idea is elaborated by theatre phenomenologist Bert O. States: "There is something about a working clock onstage that is minimally disturbing to an audience" (1985:30). While there are no working clocks in *What They Want to Hear*, there is a running count of the actual days Al Kour has spent waiting. Theatrical time and "astronomical" time become one and the audience is palpably aware of lost and wasted Lebenszeit. By the time of the last performance in summer 2019—more than one-and-a-half years after the play opened—Al Kour's residence status had not been clarified. He continued to wait, performing his Lebenszeit as wasted time.

Institutional Aesthetics

Reformatting and Remediating Theatre

You wouldn't go to Macbeth *to learn about the history of Scotland—you go to it to learn what a man feels like after he's gained a kingdom and lost his soul.*

—*Northrop Frye (in Geertz [1972] 2005:84)*

In his essay on Balinese cockfighting, Clifford Geertz cites Northrop Frye's analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics* in order to highlight how the paradigmatic universalism of literature, as opposed to the particularity of history, can also be played out within the experience of the cockfight. Yet today this still largely unquestioned assumption—that literature's function is to fashion morally instructive, paradigmatic tales for all time—can no longer be taken for granted. Today we might indeed go to the theatre to *learn* about the history of Germany in the Third Reich and the legacy of its most infamous book, the political context of a recent infamous video, or the Kafkaesque aporia of Germany's refugee bureaucracy. Theatre seems to be changing its function from a place of empathetic identification to knowledge acquisition.

Like most postfictional theatre, the performances discussed above proceed from the basic assumption that the theatre is a medium, like television, radio, or the internet. Just as mass media utilizes a wide variety of formats of which fictional drama is just one, so too does postfictional theatre assume that the theatrical apparatus can be employed for a much greater variety of activities than just representing fictional stories. In Germany, theatres are increasingly being used to hold lectures, organize discussions, and host conferences, activities more familiar in the academy or on (public) television. These activities are now termed the "fifth division" (*die fünfte Sparte*)—after drama, opera, dance, and children's and youth theatre—and their importance is growing by the year (Schmidt 2014). This area of theatrical activity is now second only to drama in the German subsidized theatre system (see fig. 5).

The remarkable increase in nonfictional formats is a clear indication that theatre is being redefined as a medium that can host various forms of communication and engagement. But also the use of the term "format" is itself a symptom of a significant institutional shift towards the postfictional. Sociologist and system theorist Dirk Baecker proposes seeing theatre as a "trope" (Baecker 2011), a configuration of three elements—organization, stage, and audience—that can be expanded and varied by the addition of new "formats":

> Even a cursory glance at the current theatre landscape reveals that in the broad field of city theatres, state theatres, the independent scene, the performative arts, installations, Happenings, interim uses, community developments, [...] and tours in city and nature, factory and museum, we find experiments with *a variety of formats* that all derive their wit, energy, and aesthetics from varying the organization, the stage, and the audience of what constitutes theatre. (Baecker 2013:124; emphasis added)

Within these various formats, postfictional performances of the kind described above occupy a liminal position between drama (*Schauspiel*) and the fifth division. Although it may use discussions and lectures among its devices, it is not simply another symposium with better lighting. Of crucial importance is the "theatre" in postfictional theatre (see Fischer-Lichte 2008b). The term "theatre" is key and preferable to the tautological and mostly pejorative epithet "performative theatre" that has become popular in Germany.[16] "Theatre" emphasizes the institutional setting of the postfictional and the irritation that it often causes.

Postfictional theatre does not just employ the stage as a space. At its best it makes use of the framing power of the theatre: the patterns of behavior that theatre has evolved and that spectators expect to deploy when they go there. We can see postfictional theatre as a kind of "laboratory," using the term as German philosopher Ernst Bloch does in his essay on Brecht's theatre theory. Here Bloch defines progressive theatre as a kind of laboratory for exploring what it means to be human, in which different models of behavior can be tested: an experimental "preview-stage" (*Vorschau-Bühne*) of possibilities (1986:418).

Laboratories are insular spaces where hypotheses can be tested, adjusted, and retested in controlled conditions. Given this controlled context, this kind of laboratory is not part of the public sphere. Postfictional theatre, therefore, is a kind of *public* laboratory that is part of the theatrical public sphere, albeit on a small scale. Here questions of truth and the interrogation of facts can be tested as in a laboratory, but in public view.

The shift to postfictional formats can be regarded as a case of institutional remediation. The term "remediation" was coined by media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) to characterize the processes by which new media accommodate many of the conventions of old ones.

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[16] In German, the term "performative theatre" has become fashionable, especially among theatre reviewers, as a means to describe acting where the usual conventions of a staged play do not apply. It is sometimes used interchangeably with "postdramatic theatre." One of its most vociferous critics and hence popularizers of the term is the dramaturg Bernd Stegemann (2017).

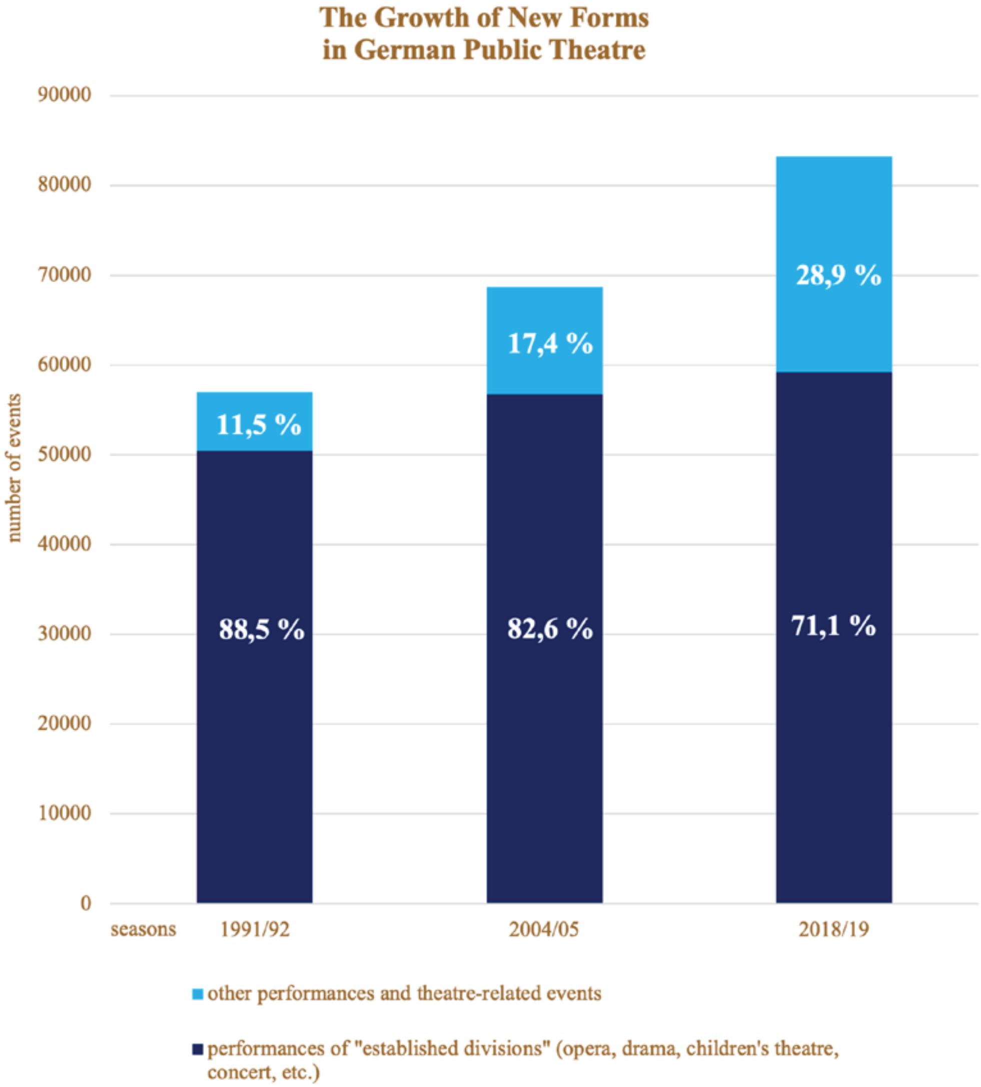

Figure 5. Growth of nontraditional formats in German public theatres since 1991. The "fifth division" is subsumed here under the term "theatre-related events." Compiled from statistics of the Deutscher Bühnenverein by Lukas Stempel.

Bolter and Grusin proceed from the assumption that modern culture is defined by "our apparently insatiable desire for immediacy" (1999:5), which manifests itself in increasing numbers of live broadcasts, reality TV shows, and digital media. I propose that we extend the notion of remediation and its "multiplying" logic (5) to ask why the medium of theatre, despite the many traditions of avantgarde performance, remains largely focused on the narrow function of representing fictional stories through performers who are more often than not enacting a role. Theatre historians know that this limitation of the function of theatre is belied by even a cursory acquaintance with the multiple functions to which stages have been purposed and repurposed, particularly since the early modern period. Although these uses have ranged from scientific experiments (Schramm et al. 2005) to visual spectacle (Leonhardt 2007) and living newspapers (Cosgrove 1982), theatre history research has only recently begun to consider these "outlier" phenomena within the purview of their work.[17] Whereas broadcast media have traditionally maintained a clear institutional division (and many subdivisions) between information and entertainment, with the former subject to the editorial rules of journalism and the latter to the more creative demands of drama and music, theatre does not have an "information division" (with the exception of Living Newspapers and other forms of agitprop). However, the increasing importance of the "fifth division" outlined above suggests that the distinction is being questioned. The growing number of lectures, discussions, and symposia taking place in theatres and as theatre suggest that the theatre is assuming an almost journalistic function complete with editorial bias. It often shares with investigative journalism and academia a commitment to research within the temporal and institutional frameworks in which it operates. Yet it is not journalism in the conventional sense of news reporting or op-ed writing. Postfictional theatre shares with journalism a commitment to truth based on verifiable, not "alternative," facts, but foregrounds our subjective, often affective responses to them.

This redefinition of theatre's function does not come, however, without a cost. Although the trend is perceptible in many places, a radical *institutional* enactment took place between 2015 and 2020 at the Munich Kammerspiele, the city's prestigious municipal theatre. The artistic director, Matthias Lilienthal, embarked on a transformation of the theatre with a heavy emphasis on postfictional formats. He implemented a kind of production office for independent productions, concerts, and lectures. After Lilienthal had been artistic director for 12 months, a major controversy erupted (Michaels 2020:206).

The unrest centered around the following points: The once famous ensemble of the Munich Kammerspiele, arguably the finest collection of actors at any German theatre, had been relegated to a marginal role; instead of high-profile productions directed by charismatic directors, a plethora of smaller performance events, mostly from the independent scene, were dominating the program; prominent actors were frustrated; "performative theatre" (the alternative, and largely pejorative, German term for postdramatic theatre) was taking precedence over "traditional" staged drama. The theatre's subscriber audience cancelled their subscriptions in large numbers.

In early autumn 2016, the head theatre critic of Munich's leading daily, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Christine Dössel, published a scathing assessment of Lilienthal's first year in office, generating even more protest (Dössel 2016). The situation became so polarized that the theatre organized a public discussion where the main critics and representatives of the theatre shared a stage to articulate their views. This free event was fully booked, with standing room only and a live feed into the adjoining bar for those who could not get seats. The main point of contention was the sidelining of the acting ensemble and director's theatre.

The controversy simmered beyond this self-organized town hall meeting and became overtly political when a local conservative politician, Richard Quaas, cultural policy spokesman of the Christian Social Union (CSU) faction of the Munich City Council, launched a series of attacks: "The time for financial and artistic experiments is over," he declared on his Facebook page (in Schleicher 2018). The tendentious attacks were couched as parliamentary "questions" to the department of cultural affairs and involved extensive information-gathering exercises, which in the end demonstrated that the objections were without foundation. Their main function was to undermine Lilienthal's legitimacy. In March 2018, Lilienthal announced that he would not be renewing his contract.

The controversy surrounding Lilienthal's directorship was more than just a replay of the old question of a "crisis of representation," which usually means preparation for a new aesthetic paradigm or style. Similar debates erupted in the early days of German directors' theatre in the late 1960s and early 1970s until it had established itself as the new aesthetic norm (see Carlson 2009). While aesthetic questions did play a role—dramatic versus "performative" theatre for example — the institutional dimension predominated, in as much as the institutional and the aesthetic became so intertwined as to be almost inextricable.

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[17] I am restricting my comments here to actual theatre buildings and stages, not to performative phenomena, which have of course been the subject of research for decades, particularly in the pages of this journal.

In place of a work- or artist-centered approach, the concept of institutional aesthetics proposed here, and which the trend towards postfictional theatre forces us to consider, seeks to investigate the crucial effect of institutions on the production, distribution, and reception of artistic products on a collective level. Although interest in institutional concerns and influence is not in itself new, the implications across the different artistic disciplines differ considerably. Whereas art history has integrated questions of patronage into research paradigms, and latterly, formed alliances with museum studies, the impact of institutional influence has been less pronounced in the performing arts, although the institutional focus would seem to be particularly relevant for the latter because of performing arts' traditional reliance on labor-intensive organizations and usually expensive, purpose-built buildings.

There is little doubt that institutions and the impact of their decisions are coming into focus and that scholars across disciplines are examining these complex relationships. Shannon Jackson, in *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (2011), investigates the need for support in the production of performance and explores, among other things, how institutional critique manifests itself as a way of reflecting institutional structures within the work itself. My own work on the theatrical public sphere (2014) is also institutional in focus in as much as the theatre itself — more than individual works or artists — is the object of the many debates with which the book deals.

A special issue of *Performance Research* (Argyropoulou and Vourloumis 2015) entitled "On Institutions" offers an intriguing exploration of the ways performance scholars could engage with institutions beyond the usual pejorative understanding of constraints, restrictions, and limitations. Perhaps the key insight is that institutions are themselves performative, even reflexively so: they quite literally institute themselves. The editors of the issue, Gigi Argyropoulou and Hypatia Vourloumis, proceed from the premise that institutional structures are formed through repeated practices, patterns, and relations. They call for "a performance studies lens that approaches the figure of the institution as a verb," asking "how institutions are performance and in turn how performance practices may enforce, destabilize and initiate new modes of organisation" (Argyropoulou and Vourloumis 2015).

The apparent crisis has been engendered by a new understanding of theatre, not as the place where a permanent ensemble performs a repertoire of fictional plays old and new (in Germany mainly old), but as a forum for a changing program of debates; independent, often postfictional performances; and even events outside the black boxes of the theatre building itself. A theatre organization and the institutional framework legitimating it consist of not only the theatre's management, technical staff, and performers, but also, as neoinstitutional theory argues, its wider environment (Powell and Colyvas 2008), which also includes the "supporting public" (to use Jackson's phrase) and the political consensus across parties that this system is necessary. When, however, one key part of this institutional environment, the management, radically questions another part, the repertoire; and then another part, the supporting public, the loyal subscription audience, feels deprived of its entitlement: the whole configuration is destabilized.

In the end, Lilienthal's decision not to renew his contract was a response to political pressure and his perception that the Munich City Council was not supporting his new course. An aesthetic program lost the support of key components of the institutional framework behind a publicly funded theatre, namely the political body ultimately responsible for the funding and the "public." The City Council members in turn were responding to what they perceived to be loss of public support, which they conflated with the subscriber audience. The final irony of the saga was the selection of the Munich Kammerspiele as "Theatre of the Year 2019" by the prestigious theatre magazine *Theater heute*. This led in turn to a surge of support and by March 2020, right before all theatres were shut down as a response to the Corona virus crisis, the Kammerspiele was playing at 95% capacity.

The Theatrical Public Sphere Redux

Theatre is usually a fairly controlled affair. Its real fictions — the dramas and operas it stages — are normally clear in their framing and their position vis-à-vis the demarcation lines between fact and fiction, even though conventional theatre always has the potential to break the frame by choice or by chance. As politics continues to move toward occupying the fictional realm, as it turns George Orwell's fictions into official "facts," theatre can and perhaps must redefine its own position in the mediascape. By employing postfictional strategies, the theatrical public sphere is reestablished as a realm where the complexities of mediated reality can be interrogated and debated. Yet this reorientation will not happen without a struggle; institutional resistance will be fierce both inside the organizations themselves and on the part of political decision-makers and audiences.

As theatre-makers attempt to reclaim theatre's place as an interlocutor in questions of public interest, it runs the risk of making itself redundant in its current institutional form: the ensemble-based repertoire theatre — at least this is so in Germany. For all its aesthetic appeal and ability to engage with burning questions of the public sphere — the renaissance of rightwing extremism, the appeal of Islamist propaganda, or the human, individualized side of migration politics — postfictional theatre is challenging the very institutional framework that currently nurtures it. The once unquestioned conflation of theatre with enacted fictional stories by role-playing performers has long been superseded. Once synonymous with fakery and dissembling, theatre is reinventing itself as medium of truth with the potential to reemerge as the place where the public sphere can be enacted once again.

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