

Memory and Repetition: Reenactment as an Affirmative Critical Practice

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Two days before the premiere of Milo Rau's *Breivik's Statement*, set for October 19, 2012, the Deutsches Nationaltheater in Weimar canceled the performance. As a result, Rau moved the performance to a nearby cinema. The piece was a reenactment of the speech Anders B. Breivik had delivered six months earlier to the Oslo court in April 2012, when he stood trial for the murder of seventy-seven people. The hourlong speech in which Breivik explains the motivation for his deeds was not broadcast on television or reproduced in the news media. Yet bits and pieces of the speech were spread almost immediately via Twitter and other social media. Rau's reenactment constituted the first public performance of the speech in its entirety. The theater was concerned that this reenactment would be misconstrued as an endorsement or vindication of Breivik's views: Thomas Schmidt, then the director of the theater, stated that he did not want to "provide a platform" for Breivik's arguments.¹ In response,

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1. Höbel, "Zoff um Breivik."

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the critic Dirk Pilz lambasted the theater for eliding the difference between the text and the performance and, more scandalously, for its lack of confidence in the power of art to stimulate critical thinking: “Here ignorance meets fear of the power that Breivik’s text might gain on stage and the debate that theater can provoke. They are not distancing themselves from Breivik but from art.”² Indeed, as Pilz emphasizes, the performance is anything but an authentic or realistic representation of the trial. Rau has taken several precautions to “de-dramatize” and “de-theatricalize” the speech:³ Breivik’s text is read out by the Turkish German actress Sascha Ö. Soydan, who stands at a lectern wearing a T-shirt and a track-suit jacket, chewing gum. Soydan does not address the audience directly but speaks into a camera, which relays a close-up of her upper body to a large screen at center stage (fig. 1). Soydan’s delivery is largely purged of affect, and she reads in a sober, matter-of-fact style, pausing every so often to sip from a bottle of water. She does not comment on the text at any point, and there are no prompts to tell the audience how to respond to this performance. Therein lies the troubling ambiguity of the piece. This lack of an interpretative “safety net” was presumably what gave the Weimar theater cold feet; indeed, subsequent performances in Munich, Basel, and elsewhere were also canceled, forcing Rau to find alternative venues.⁴

Rau does not explain Breivik but focuses entirely on his words. These words, however, are not the insane ramblings of a madman; rather, they form a coherent narrative that sounds uncannily familiar. What is disturbing about the speech is that it is not disturbing at all: the thoughts and sentiments expressed in it have become all too familiar in public discourse in Europe today. In fact, as Rau himself emphasized in the Q&A after a performance in Rotterdam, spokespeople for several of Europe’s right-wing populist parties, including Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom and Christoph Blocher’s Swiss People’s Party, responded to Breivik’s self-justification by saying that they condemned his actions but shared his concerns. This is a distinction that Rau will not accept: for him, the violence is already inherent in the words. And his rationale for allowing Breivik’s words to speak for themselves, stripped of their immediate context and sensationalist framing, is precisely to confront people with the troubling fact that such views are part of everyday political rhetoric in Europe. From this perspective, perhaps the theater directors were right to fear the power of the words. If the violence is already inherent in the language, then

2. Pilz, “Skandal um Theaterlesung.”

3. Rau, “Regisseur bringt Breivik ins Theater.”

4. SRF, “Wirbel um ‘Breiviks Erklärung’ in Basel.”



Figure 1. The actress Sascha Ö. Soydan reading the statement Anders B. Breivik gave during his trial in Oslo. Photograph by Thomas Müller © 2012 IIPM.

how can we be sure that in repeating it we are not also repeating that violence? Clearly, Rau has taken significant measures to avoid celebrating or simply restating that violence, but at the same time, his staging seeks to avoid placing the speech in an overdetermined critical framework that would neutralize it by modeling the appropriate response for the spectator. This precarious undertaking is what makes Rau's approach particularly powerful and volatile. It hinges on the ability of repetition to create a difference, but this is a difference that must be produced anew in each performance.

The tension between difference and repetition is a hallmark of what Carol Martin terms the "theatre of the real," which is increasingly prevalent in the twenty-first century and which encompasses a wide variety of forms, media, and practices, from historical reenactment to performance art to living history museums, from documentary theater to theater of witness to autobiographical theater.⁵ These all share a concern with questions of representation, representability, mediality, and reality or authenticity. Scholarship on reenactment has focused on the affective significance of reenactments for the reenactors themselves, on pedagogical uses of reenactments, or on their relevance for historical

5. Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, 5.

knowledge production.⁶ The reenactments I discuss here, however, belong to another category entirely, and central to all of them are questions of critique and of political and civic engagement.⁷ They are hybrid forms that incorporate elements of historical reenactment, performance art, and documentary theater. Staged in the theater, in the studio, or at the actual sites of historical events, reenactments of this kind bring documents to life (literally performing the archive), a process in which the spectators participate as witnesses. These reenactments are not nostalgic; the past is not viewed as singular and separate from the present, and the events are reenacted precisely because of their importance as a potential critique of the present. Furthermore, they are all concerned with the rhetorical power of perpetrator speech and with probing the psychology of mass murderers through a restaging or reenactment of documents written or spoken by perpetrators of mass violence.

The Franco-German filmmaker Romuald Karmakar, for example, has undertaken two projects similar to *Breivik's Statement*: the three-hour film *Das Himmler-Projekt* (2000), in which the actor Manfred Zapatka reads the entire manuscript of Heinrich Himmler's infamous Posen speech, and *Die Hamburger Lektionen* (2006), in which Zapatka reads two sermons by Mohammed Fazazi, the former imam of a Hamburg mosque frequented by three of the terrorists involved in the 9/11 attacks. While these reenactments focus on aural repetition, hearing the words again in a different context, other reenactments emphasize the visual dimension not only by repeating the words but by recreating a scene in minute detail, with costumes, sets, makeup, and gestures. An example of this is Rau's *Die letzten Tage der Ceaușescus* (2009–10), which restages the trial in which the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena, were sentenced to death in 1989. Still others, such as the performances by the Historikerlabor, are based on the repetition of a key perpetrator document but are supplemented by additional documentary materials.⁸ I discuss

6. Recent studies of these various forms of reenactment include Lüttiken, *Life, Once More*; Magelsen, *Living History Museums*; McCalman and Pickering, *Historical Reenactment*; and Agnew and Lamb, *Settler and Creole Reenactment*. Rebecca Schneider's excellent book *Performing Remains* brings together a whole range of reenactments in art, theater, photography, and living history.

7. In this they are more similar to, yet different from, the pieces discussed by Carol Martin in *Theatre of the Real* or in *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*.

8. For example, the Historikerlabor's reenactments of the Wannsee Conference in 2012 or of the Hunger Plan Conference in 2014. Based in Berlin, the historians' lab is a group of professional historians who reconstruct and stage key events of the planning of Nazi extermination policies. Situated between reenactment and reconstruction, their work is an excellent example of practice-based research or, in Martin's words, of embodied kinesthetic historiography (*Theatre of the Real*, 11). Another example is *Die Frau an seiner Seite* (2001), by the actresses Inga Dietrich, Joanne Gläsel, and Sabine

some of these examples in greater detail, but first I want to consider why this particular form of reenactment should recently have emerged in Germany. These reenactments can be seen as a further development in the German tradition of documentary theater, which has always been concerned with the figure of the perpetrator. At the same time, however, the emergence of reenactment in contemporary German theater and film coincides with a more widespread shift in the conception of the role of critique in literary and cultural theory. It is this latter aspect that I explore in this article. There is by now a widespread sense that critique has “run out of steam” or that we have entered a “postcritical” phase in cultural inquiry.⁹ Numerous terms have been proposed to describe these new postcritical reading practices, for example, “reparative reading,” “thin description,” or reading “with the grain,” all of which come under the heading of what Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best call “surface reading,” which seeks not to recover a hidden or symptomatic meaning behind or beyond the text in the mode of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” but to attend carefully to the literal and manifest facticity of a given text.¹⁰ The term *postcritical* is thus a misnomer, since what is at stake is in fact a turn away from hermeneutics. In his foreword to Friedrich Kittler’s *Discourse Networks*, David Wellbery outlines the three core components of what he terms “post-hermeneutic criticism.” The first of these is the “presupposition of exteriority,” whereby the task of criticism “is not to reabsorb the scattered utterances and inscriptions of the past into an inwardness that would endow them with meaning;” not to study “what is said or written but the fact—the brute and often brutal fact—that it is said, that this and not rather something else is inscribed.”¹¹ The reenactments I examine here follow this presupposition of exteriority in that they do not try to interpret or make sense of the utterances being represented but, first and foremost, insist that *this* is what was said or written. This insistence is what I call affirmation. The other two components of posthermeneutic criticism, namely, mediality and corporeality, are likewise central to reenactment. This is particularly evident in *Brevik’s Statement*, where the staging foregrounds the physical presence of the actress reading the text and at the same time the process of mediation and re-mediation. Much of the reenactment’s effect is generated by the interplay between the three compo-

Werner, a collage of documentary texts that explores the implication of SS wives in the crimes of their husbands, which I discuss at greater length elsewhere (Knittel, “Stand by Your Man”).

9. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”; Felski, *Limits of Critique*.

10. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading”; Love, “Close Reading and Thin Description”; Bewes, “Reading with the Grain”; Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading”; Felski, *Limits of Critique*.

11. Wellbery, Foreword, xii.

nents, exteriority, mediality, and corporeality. Together, they form what I am calling an affirmative critical practice.

What Is Affirmative Critique?

In 2009 Rau published “Was ist Unst?,” a manifesto in which he outlines his aesthetic and critical program. *Unst* is conceived by Rau as a poetics of repetition, of literalism and rigorously objective realism—an aesthetics of the “just so” (*genau so*).¹² Like an echo, *Unst* presents a verbatim repetition that is also a subtle transformation: “If someone says *Kunst*, we answer him verbatim: *Unst*. If someone writes *Kunst*, we take out the eraser and arrive at *Unst*.”¹³ This erasure of the first letter lays bare certain resonances: *Unst* can be parsed as beginning with *un-*, that is, with a negative prefix, suggesting that this repetition is also a negation. At the same time, the loss of the *K* exposes the *uns* that was at the heart of *Kunst*. On this reading, *Unst* would denote something communal or shared, something that happens *to us* or that is created *by us*. This reading is supported by the use of the first-person plural throughout Rau’s manifesto: “*Unst* is pure repetition. For we have understood that art must get rid of itself in order to become one again.”¹⁴ Finally, the *st* at the end can be read as a superlative,¹⁵ which, in combination with the other two potential meanings, would indicate that *Unst* is either the most communal form of art or the most antithetical to traditional conceptions of *Kunst*.

A response to the question of the place of art in society, *Unst* is defined as a practice, an activity of “collecting, copying, and exhibiting” the detritus of a society’s collective memory, a “completely verbatim repetition of the present via the past for the future.”¹⁶ This repetition, Rau insists somewhat enigmatically, is undertaken for its own sake. In other words, the repetition does not serve some purpose that would be beyond the given moment; it does not illustrate something else but invites the viewer to look again and more closely at the specific event or thing being repeated. In this sense, the *Ünstler* ([Artist) places his or her trust in the given moment. This is important because it is from this moment that the *Ünstler* derives the tool to dissect or deconstruct it. In this respect, the critical practice of the *Ünstler* resembles that of the bricoleur, as

12. Rau, “Was ist Unst?,” 116. See also my discussion of *Unst* in relation to Rau’s *Europe Trilogy* (Knittel, “Ruins of Europe,” 48–51).

13. Rau, “Was ist Unst?,” 117.

14. Rau, “Was ist Unst?,” 117.

15. Thanks to Gerd Bayer for suggesting this possibility.

16. Rau, “Was ist Unst?,” 117, 116.

famously theorized by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida.¹⁷ In both cases, the principle is that the critical tools with which to analyze a given object must be found in the object itself, and only through literal repetition does the given moment open itself to critique. Thus, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, *Unst* can be seen as a “telescoping of the past through the present,” which “mobilizes the past in order to place the present in a critical state.”¹⁸

The links between *Unst* and the “postcritical” turn in the humanities and social sciences become clearer if we consider it in relation to Bruno Latour’s now-classic essay “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” (2004). In it Latour complains that the tools of critical analysis inherited from Marxism and psychoanalysis have outlived their usefulness, and calls instead for the development of new tools. Latour’s biggest source of dissatisfaction is the way in which established critical practices have tended to lead away from the objects of critique, finding the truth behind appearances or in some much larger framework that is always determined in advance. Instead, he insists, critique should bring us closer to things. In this way, “the critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather.” Latour also calls for the return to a “realist attitude,” which dovetails neatly with Rau’s literalist aesthetics of the just so.¹⁹

Both Rau and Latour are advocating what I would call affirmative critique. If negative critique is on the side of evaluation and places the critic securely above the object, with the ultimate aim of limiting or negating it, affirmative critique is on the side of creation and negotiation or entanglement: it makes space for the object, allows it to take place (again), entangles the viewer, the reenactor, and what is being reenacted. It interpolates the past and the present, and, by repeating a past event in the present, it produces a difference. But this is a difference that has to take place in the given moment and cannot be fully determined or controlled ahead of time. This approach entails a twofold risk. On the one hand, there is the risk that the difference will not emerge and that, to return to *Brevik’s Statement*, the director and the actress simply reproduce a hateful speech without the necessary framework for critical reflection. We, the audience, on the other hand, have to risk stepping out of our comfort zone to affirm this speech, taking it to a certain extent on its own terms and engaging with it as it is. We are denied the safety of the moral high ground that a more

17. See Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play.”

18. Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, 588. My translation.

19. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” 246, 232.

didactic and distanced representation would enable; instead, we are invited to actively listen to the perpetrator's words and to reevaluate our own position in relation to them without any guidance.

I should emphasize here that by *affirmation* I in no way mean to suggest that we endorse, rehabilitate, or assent to Breivik and his views and actions. This is also why I prefer the term *affirmative* to *positive*, which would be the more obvious antonym for *negative* critique: it is precisely not a question of "liking" the object of critique or of emphasizing only the positive or constructive aspects. This bears repeating, because in other contexts the vocabulary of affirmation is so closely aligned with approval, positive affect, and an uncritical acceptance and hence is antithetical to what is commonly considered the essence of critique and of critical thinking. But, as numerous critics have observed, the traditional critical stance, allied with the "hermeneutics of suspicion," has tended to exempt the critic's own position from critical scrutiny while becoming a master narrative of its own, seemingly unable or unwilling to think critically about its own premises.²⁰ As Elizabeth Grosz writes: "Critique tends to generate defensive self-representations or gestures of counter-critique, which give the complacent reader a vague sense that one need not bother further with a position once it has been adequately criticized. It tends to function as a form of dismissal of texts, rather than as an analysis of the embeddedness of critique in that which it criticizes." Affirmative critique, by contrast, is "a mode of assenting to rather than dissenting from" texts or other objects of critique.²¹ This affirmation or assent is critical precisely because it calls into question (i.e., "places in a critical state")²² the critic's own subject position, forcing him or her to reconsider the parameters of that position.

The danger involved in "not bothering further with a position" is especially apparent in the case of perpetrators of political, genocidal, or mass violence, since dismissing them as monsters or psychopaths disavows or masks the way that the ideas, convictions, and assumptions underlying the perpetrators' discourse permeate other and more "mainstream" forms of speech. Moreover, to speak with Latour, it renders perpetrators and their actions into inert matters of fact, whereas the goal of affirmative critique conceived as a realist attitude toward the given moment would be to see them for what they are, namely, matters of concern. Matters of concern are "highly complex, historically situated,

20. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 237–39; Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 68; cf. Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism*, 127.

21. Grosz, *Time Travels*, 3.

22. Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, 588.

richly diverse . . . things that gather,” that require a new critical attitude, “a multifarious inquiry . . . to detect *how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence.”²³ Considering something a matter of fact assumes that reality is a given and subject to unchanging universal laws or truths and that there is nothing to be done about it, whereas viewing a phenomenon as a matter of concern implies that it is a construct, the contingent effect of multiple causes and actors, and it is subject to change. In this regard, it corresponds to what Michel Foucault refers to as the genealogical component of critique in that it “restores the conditions for the appearance of a singularity born out of multiple determining elements of which it is not the product but rather the effect.”²⁴ Thus what Latour is in fact calling for is a return to a properly Foucauldian conception of critique, which is predicated on this initial genealogical reconstruction of its object, whose goal is not to determine the legitimacy of a particular statement or position within a discourse but to understand how it came to be *acceptable as* legitimate. In other words, for critique to be properly critical, it cannot content itself with refuting or debunking views with which it disagrees but must first understand how it was that these views came to be widely held in the first place. Or, to quote Grosz again, “we need to find out more than what is wrong with the position: we need to understand primarily what is right with the position.”²⁵ This is important because a critical practice that neglects or even refuses to engage affirmatively with the object of critique runs the risk of giving the position with which it disagrees a kind of fetishistic power. Grosz is speaking of the relationship between feminist criticism and patriarchy, especially the impulse simply to dismiss patriarchal texts: “There is no text that is so dangerous to feminist thought that we shouldn’t read it. I don’t think that we are in danger of being contaminated by patriarchal thought, since we are already contaminated by patriarchy.”²⁶ We can extend this to any other field or discipline, and it is evident in the Weimar theater’s refusal to provide a space for *Brevik’s Statement*, thus implicitly granting a contagious power to the speech and by extension revealing a lack of confidence in the audience’s ability to withstand it. Rau’s literal reenactment of the speech is thus an act of demystification that has confidence in the audience’s ability to affirm these words critically, and precisely to “bother with” these ideas and actions and thus to see them as a matter of concern.

23. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” 237, 246.

24. Foucault, “What Is Critique?” 64.

25. Kontturi and Tiainen, “Feminism, Art, Deleuze, and Darwin,” 255.

26. Kontturi and Tiainen, “Feminism, Art, Deleuze, and Darwin,” 255.

The Himmler-Projekt

At the beginning of the *Himmler-Projekt*, the viewer sees Zapatka standing at a lectern in front of a dark grayish-brown background, with a glass of water next to him, ready to give a speech. He is wearing a black shirt and suit coat, no tie. In front of him is a stack of paper. The speech he reads lasts for more than three hours, and it is one of the most cited and most disturbing documents of National Socialism: the first of Heinrich Himmler's notorious Posen speeches, delivered on October 4, 1943, to ninety-two members of the SS elite. While the speech was secret and addressed only to a small elect circle, Himmler had it recorded via phonograph on wax master plates, and a transcript was made.²⁷ The voice recording and the typewritten transcript have survived, and the speech has become known as a key document of Nazi self-revelation: in it Himmler speaks openly about the extermination of the Jews. The passages that call the murder of the Jews a "glorious chapter that has not and will not be spoken of" and that praise the SS, who have remained "decent" in spite of it, all have become notorious: there is hardly a publication or documentary about the Holocaust that does not quote them. Yet few are familiar with the speech as a whole.²⁸ This becomes clear when listening to Zapatka at his lectern, reading the speech in its entirety. The often-cited passages about the mass murder of the Jews occupy only two minutes of the three-hour speech, which mostly focuses on the situation on the eastern front, the failure of Germany's allies (especially Italy), and the resistance in the Balkans and which includes lengthy digressions on the correct treatment of inferior peoples under German rule and grandiose visions for a "new racial order" in the future German empire, with the SS as the ruling class.

Like Soydan in her performance of Breivik, Zapatka does not imitate Himmler in his delivery. Reading the text in a neutral manner, he always remains an actor exhibiting Himmler's words. He delivers the speech in such a way that a contemporary audience can follow easily, can focus on the words, the sentences, and patterns of speech. We see Zapatka from four static angles, mostly in close-up and medium close-up, sometimes from the side.²⁹ Karmakar did not edit out Zapatka's slips of the tongue and the resulting repetitions,

27. See Kékesi, *Agents of Liberation*, 93–94.

28. Frölich, "Perpetrator Research," 78.

29. Olaf Möller notes how Karmakar's camera work "subtly gives shape to the performance, re-sensitizing the viewer again and again to Zapatka's presence and his reading; and also accentuating the units of meaning [*Sinneinheiten*]. In this way, Manfred Zapatka becomes an embodiment of the text" ("Easy Way," 95).

and so the actor's struggle with the text becomes palpable.³⁰ Himmler gave his speech extemporaneously and later corrected and edited it for the official transcript. The text Zapatka reads, however, is based on the audio recording and hence retains all grammatical and syntactic errors, incoherent run-on sentences, exclamations, and asides. The film thus presents a sort of palimpsest of errors, some Zapatka's and some Himmler's. By disregarding his edits and reinstating his mistakes, Karmakar denies Himmler authority over the text. Moreover, although the performance reenacts Himmler's vocal utterance, Zapatka makes no attempt to reproduce or copy Himmler's voice and manner of speaking. This is done precisely to minimize any auratic quality: the text is decoupled from the overdetermined figure of Himmler as an incarnation of absolute evil. Karmakar employs several other distancing devices, especially in a moment early in the speech when the setting is shown: Zapatka steps out from behind the podium and approaches one of the cameras, which brings the other cameras and the studio into view (fig. 2). This happens precisely when Himmler interrupted his speech because he was concerned that the kitchen personnel might be listening through an air vent. Only when the vent was covered with a mattress did he proceed.

But the text is also presented without any interpretation or commentary. Here its extraordinary length plays an important role: it is unabridged and unedited, transposed into the present, without elaborate markers of historical distance. Both the actor and the audience have to open up to, or *affirm*, the text as it is: by consenting to spend over three hours with it, by receiving it without condemning it from a safe distance, and, in a way, by becoming the addressee of this speech. This merging of historical and contemporary audiences becomes especially pointed in the moments when the reactions of the historical audience, such as laughter or applause, appear as subtitles on the screen. In these moments Zapatka looks directly at the camera, and the contemporary spectators are addressed as the perpetrators from 1943. As Veronika Rall observes, this places the audience in a "precarious, unstable position: as addressees, as listeners, as confidants . . . they come to occupy the position of the SS leaders, but equally of witnesses to a historical event. . . . It is this complicity with the representation that lies at the core of Romuald Karmakar's work as a filmmaker."³¹ And it is this complicity that also caused Karmakar trouble, especially for the film's distribution. As Axel Bangert observes, while the crit-

30. Tacke also examines Zapatka's verbal slips and struggles in view of the camera's presence in the *mise-en-scène* ("Desk Murderer and the Corporate Executive," 88–89). See also Möller and Omasta, *Romuald Karmakar*, 230–31.

31. Rall, "Armut in der deutschen Filmlandschaft," quoted in Bangert, *Nazi Past*, 75. Translation modified. Cf. Ebbrecht, *Bilder hinter den Worten*, 60–61; and Richardson, "Reenacting Evil," 187–89.



Figure 2. The actor Manfred Zapatka reading Heinrich Himmler's Posen speech in 1999. Still from *Das Himmler-Projekt*, directed by Romuald Karmakar. Photograph © 2000 Pantera Film GmbH.

ical reception of the *Himmler-Projekt* was largely positive when it premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in 2000, the distribution and subsequent transmission on television revealed reservations and uncertainty over the inflammatory content of the piece. To reduce the risk of appealing to neo-Nazis and inviting misunderstanding, additional contextualization and framing were added, either in the form of postscreening audience discussions or, in the case of the television broadcast, by superimposing the title at regular intervals.³² Hence the *Himmler-Projekt* apparently disturbed “some of the norms of German film funding and memory culture, in particular the demand to contain ideologically charged material and to channel audience reactions.”³³

As Karmakar explains in an interview with the German weekly *Die Zeit*, there are two aspects in particular that he explores in his reenactment of this speech.³⁴ First, the elaborate efforts to keep the proceedings hidden from public scrutiny seem at odds with the desire to preserve the speech for posterity and to monumentalize it. Second, we encounter the striking unfamiliarity of this ostensibly familiar document: the speech is famous and often quoted but

32. See Bangert, *Nazi Past*, 72.

33. Bangert, *Nazi Past*, 76. See also Ebbrecht, *Bilder hinter den Worten*, 63.

34. Worthmann, “Dem Täter eine Chance.”

has been reduced to a few decontextualized passages. Karmakar reintegrates these passages in their original context, which in turn prompts a reevaluation of the historical narrative that has been created around them. Like *Breivik's Statement*, Karmakar's reenactment dwells on the peculiar oscillation between secrecy and nonsecrecy, familiarity and unfamiliarity, to reclaim the strangeness of this speech by giving us access to its disconcerting unspectacularity. In this way both reenactments become vehicles of what I describe elsewhere as the "historical uncanny," which is characterized by "the vertiginous intrusion of the past into the present, the sudden awareness that what was familiar has become strange."³⁵ History becomes uncanny when it extends into the present, forcing us to reevaluate our own subject position in relation to a collective past. This effect can be observed palpably at the end of the *Himmler-Projekt* with the on-screen listing of the names and postwar careers of the attending SS officers, a third of whom went on to occupy prominent positions in the public and private sectors in the Federal Republic. The viewer, who until this point has been sutured to the perspective of these original witnesses, must now be reoriented and take up a new position vis-à-vis this reenactment. The film does not tell us how to respond to what we have just seen. Perhaps our most immediate reaction on seeing these names is to recognize the continuities between the Third Reich and the Federal Republic and the limitations of denazification. The men who listened to this speech in 1943 went on to lead successful lives in the new Germany. The affirmative potential of the reenactment, however, also entails a recognition of the difference between the original and the copy, a recognition that hinges on the addressee. While Himmler's speech was addressed to these men who have just been listed, the reenactment is addressed to us, and it is our responsibility to respond. Opening ourselves to the speech, we can recognize discourse that is uncannily familiar to us. "Himmler's discourse is *unheimlich*," writes the literary scholar Peter Haidu, "because it reproduces, with all nuances and paradoxes in place, the discourses we know as the discourses of poetry and policy, of idealism and religion, of administration and bureaucracy. . . . What is horrifying, what is monstrous, in this discourse, is not strangeness or alterity: its unspeakability derives from the recognition of our own modes of discourse and of the subjectivities which, if they are not actually our own, are entirely within the grasp of our imaginations." Listening to Himmler's words, we realize that "we are the product of the same genealogy."³⁶ Haidu's essay is an early example of a more affirmative approach to the figure of the perpetrator, a shift that took place in the 1990s. If in 1989 Saul Friedländer could still claim that

35. Knittel, *Historical Uncanny*, 9.

36. Haidu, "Dialectics of Unspeakability," 292, 294.

“no one of sound mind would wish to interpret the events from Hitler’s viewpoint,” in the 1990s studies such as Haidu’s, Christopher Browning’s, and Inga Clendinnen’s paved the way toward a more nuanced engagement with and an analytic understanding of the perpetrators and their actions.³⁷

The *Himmler-Projekt* and subsequent reenactments, such as *Breivik’s Statement*, also need to be discussed in the context of the tradition of documentary theater, which has concerned itself with the figure of the perpetrator and the crimes of the past. One could even argue that these kinds of reenactments form a crucial part of a new wave of documentary theater in Germany, beginning in the early 2000s. Brian Barton distinguishes two major phases of German documentary theater, the first in the 1920s and the second in the 1960s. Both times the turn to documentary theater arose out of a frustration with traditional theater’s inability adequately to address the pressing current political and social issues as well as the recent past.³⁸ Especially in the 1960s, documentary theater by authors such as Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Weiss, and Heinar Kipphardt aimed to engage with the problems of the present in light of the recent past, focusing on issues of culpability and complicity. The Eichmann trial and the Auschwitz trials of the early 1960s provided the material for some of these new plays. Because of the sheer amount of material, plays such as Weiss’s *Die Ermittlung* (*The Investigation*, 1965) and Kipphardt’s *Bruder Eichmann* (1983) presented a distillation or concentration, a rearrangement of carefully selected fragments into a montage.³⁹ The critical dimension of this kind of documentary theater is a result of the selection and arrangement of the material in such a way that it also speaks to and comments on contemporary issues, with the aim of creating a debate. Hence the key to the political and critical effect of such theater is the aesthetic framework, its form. Only when they are brought into some sort of aesthetic form can the materials point beyond themselves.⁴⁰ Second-wave documentary theater authors employed various techniques to alter or manipulate the materials, including distillation or abbreviation, narrativization (the addition of a dramatic arc), contextualization, and thematic extension, that is, adding materials that connect to the issues of the present or that engage with broader ethical questions.⁴¹ Weiss’s *Ermittlung*, for example, is a “concentrate” of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963–65): 182 trial days

37. Friedländer, “‘Final Solution,’” 69. See also Browning, *Ordinary Men*; and Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust*.

38. Barton, *Das Dokumentartheater*, 2.

39. See Barton, *Das Dokumentartheater*, 48–50.

40. Barton, *Das Dokumentartheater*, 5.

41. Barton, *Das Dokumentartheater*, 80–81.

become 3 hours, 350 witnesses are represented by 9 anonymous figures, and so on. The material is arranged in the form of an “oratorio in eleven cantos,” as the subtitle has it, and formally it echoes the triadic structure of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. This high degree of artifice perhaps best illustrates the difference between the 1960s model of documentary theater and the more recent pieces I am discussing here. While they all share the dedication to problematic pasts and controversial documents and the conception of the theater as a site for practice-based research, in the recent pieces the author’s status and hence also the material is radically different: the author no longer inhabits a privileged position as the hermeneutic authority who interprets the historical events and presents them to an audience for their edification. Indeed, Karmakar and Rau, for instance, are not the “authors” of these speeches but the producers or curators who exhibit, in an unabridged and largely unannotated form, and in a given framework and at a given moment, the “work” of others. The proponents of this new documentary theater act as facilitators of an encounter between the public and the archive. The critical work is not completed by the author in advance but merely initiated by staging the reenactment, in order that it might be carried out by the audience each time. This calls for great trust in the audience’s ability and willingness to act as agents in this affirmative critical process.

The Last Days of the Ceaușescus

This facilitation of an encounter with a historical document or event is especially important in an age of mass media, where certain images, sound bites, or quotations are repeated obsessively almost immediately after their first use. This instant mediatised repetition frequently hinders an actual engagement with or a working through of the events in question. The affirmative reenactments staged by Karmakar, Rau, and others actively work against what Jean Baudrillard famously called the “precession of simulacra,” namely, the obliteration of reality by media representations. Baudrillard’s insistence that “the simulacrum is true” was already a rebuke to the hermeneutics of suspicion and its misguided efforts to discover the reality behind appearances: the appearances are the reality.⁴² Nevertheless, Baudrillard’s theory led to an impasse and to allegations of political impotence or even irresponsibility. It is no accident that Latour singles him out for scorn in his aforementioned essay.⁴³ It is because of people like Baudrillard, Latour implies, that critique has run out of steam. The reenactments under discussion here attempt to move beyond this impasse

42. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

43. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” 228.

while retaining the resolute focus on the surface. One way that Rau, for example, seeks to move forward is by returning to a pre-poststructuralist conception of the simulacrum, proposed by Roland Barthes in “The Structuralist Activity.” The production of simulacra in this definition is the fundamental principle of theoretical practice. The theorist “takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it,” and “between the two objects, or the two tenses, of structuralist activity, there occurs something new,” which consists of a tiny surplus of meaning.⁴⁴ The “imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible or, if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object.”⁴⁵ Effectively, what Rau does is reinstate the referent. Whereas for Baudrillard there was no underlying reality, only free-floating systems of representations without any referent in the “real world”—which is what allowed him to claim, notoriously, that the Gulf War did not take place—for Rau it is important that these simulacra refer to actual events. Those events, however, were not necessarily transparently self-evident when they occurred.

One of the central motors of the production of “hyperreality” is the endless repetition of de- and recontextualized images on television and the internet that immediately superimpose themselves on people’s memories of the events themselves, ultimately becoming indistinguishable from those memories. In this sense Baudrillard would say that even eyewitnesses never really experience the events themselves but always already a mediated and mediatized simulacrum of them. Since the advent of digital technology there has been no meaningful difference between the copy and the original, and each reiteration is identical to the others. Hence a critical affirmation of hypermediatized images can hope to produce a difference only if the parameters for the repetition of those images are changed. And here reenactment offers an alternative means to generate difference by repetition.

This is particularly evident in Rau’s *Die letzten Tage der Ceaușescus*, his reenactment of the Ceaușescu trial. On December 25, 1989, as a culmination of the revolution, the Romanian dictator and his wife were captured on the run by the army and brought before a hastily convened military tribunal. The main charge was genocide: the Ceaușescus were accused of ordering the massacre of tens of thousands of protesters during the revolution and of having brought suffering, starvation, and deprivation to the Romanian people over the preceding decade through food shortages, unreasonable rationing of electricity and heat,

44. Barthes, “Structuralist Activity,” 215.

45. Barthes, “Structuralist Activity,” 215.

and forced labor.⁴⁶ The trial lasted less than an hour, whereupon they were sentenced to death and immediately executed. This was reported in the national media the same day, with selected stills from a video recorded during the trial that was censored to protect the identity of the tribunal members. The haste with which the trial and execution had been carried out, coupled with the paucity of documentary evidence, quickly gave rise to myriad conspiracy theories. To lay such wild speculation to rest, it was eventually decided that the video of the entire trial would be broadcast on national television the Sunday after Easter 1990. It is unclear whether this broadcast achieved the desired effect, as it did not resolve the mystery or provide answers to outstanding questions. Moreover, the shaky and poor-quality video of these two elderly people who do not appear to understand the gravity of the situation was liable to provoke sympathy for them.⁴⁷ At any rate, as Rau notes in an interview, these television images supplanted the actual event, as if the trial and execution had taken place on television only: “While people have in their minds an image of the ‘end of the regime,’ ultimately it was just a staged purification rite” without any real catharsis.⁴⁸ To revisit the events of December 1989, Rau argues, there is no choice but to work first *with* and *through* these images, bringing them back to life but also defamiliarizing and recontextualizing them. The goal is for the audience to “step into the historical situation” in order to inspect it again with the knowledge of today, and perhaps come to new or different insights as a result.⁴⁹

Rau’s reenactment was staged twenty years after the events, in December 2009, at the Odeon Theater in Bucharest, with a group of professional actors who are well known in Romania. In preparation, Rau interviewed dozens of people, some prominently involved in the overthrow and execution of the Ceaușescus, among them General Victor Stănculescu, a confidant of the Ceaușescus, who turned against them; Colonel Andrei Kemenici, the commander of the garrison at Târgoviște, where the Ceaușescus were imprisoned and executed; and Dorin Carlan, a soldier on the firing squad. Rau also spoke with dissidents, such as the poet Ana Blandiana and the actor Ion Caramitru, and with people who had been children at the time, such as the journalist Dinu Lupescu. Rau condensed the collected interviews into six monologues, each of which offered a different perspective on the revolution. These monologues were then recorded by the actors and projected onto six screens at the front of the stage as a prologue to the reenacted trial. Accompanied by documentary

46. Kideckel, “Undead,” 123.

47. Kideckel, “Undead,” 135.

48. Rau and Bossart, “Jener 25. Dezember 1989,” 35.

49. Rau and Bossart, “Jener 25. Dezember 1989,” 37.

footage and photographs from the time, the monologues frame the reenactment, provide background information, and also give a vivid and very personal impression of the fears, hopes, and insecurities of the Romanian people during the revolution. Following this introduction, the screens are removed to reveal an exact replica of the courtroom in the military barracks of Târgoviște, where the trial was held.

Based on the original transcript and video footage from the trial, as well as on eyewitness testimony, the trial is reenacted in full without interruption or commentary. Unlike the casts of *Breivik's Statement* and the *Himmler-Projekt*, the actors wear the same clothes and reproduce as exactly as possible the gestures and speech patterns of the original video, taking care not to parody or stylize the Ceaușescus (fig. 3). The reenactment is uncanny on several levels: the courtroom, which for the audience has existed only as a two-dimensional image, now takes on a three-dimensional physical reality before their eyes, including the Ceaușescus themselves, who come back to life in the mimetic representation, which is nevertheless subtly undermined by the fact that the actors portraying the Ceaușescus are well known. The oscillation between similarity and difference allows for a momentary suspension of critical distance, which then makes it all the more jarring when it suddenly reestablishes itself.⁵⁰ The most startling moment in the proceedings is at the end of the trial, when the Ceaușescus are taken away to be executed. Even though the audience knows the outcome, the Ceaușescus' sudden panic and screaming when they realize that they will be killed is profoundly disturbing. Through the mimetic reproduction of the trial in its entirety and the affective charge that builds up during the performance, the suddenness of the ending becomes real for the viewer in a way that the mere knowledge of the outcome cannot transmit. The shocking intrusion of the real into the frame of representation is underscored when the stage goes black and the machine-gun fire from the original recording is heard: the moment of the Ceaușescus' death cannot be reenacted. It was also not filmed at the time, the reason for which is still obscure. Supposedly, the members of the execution squad were so nervous about a possible intervention by the security forces that they did not give the cameraman time to aim his camera. Hence, while the audio recording continued, the video footage only resumed a few seconds after the Ceaușescus had been shot.⁵¹ Regardless of the contingent reason for this absence of video footage, symbolically it marks the lacuna in the memory of this event and powerfully insists on the unrepresentability of the

50. See Gronemeyer, "Banalität und Schrecken," 74.

51. See the website accompanying John Borneman's book *Death of the Father*, "Media Sources," which contains additional media materials and commentary on the trial and execution of the Ceaușescus.



Figure 3. *The Last Days of the Ceaușescus* (IIPM 2009). Photograph © 2009 Karl-Bernd Karwasz.

moment of death. This unrepresentability is repeated in the reenactment. The curtain falls on the deserted stage.

After the end of the premiere in Bucharest, nobody applauded. Rau comments: “The audience need to find their ‘role’ again after the end of the piece; they have to remember what is expected of them—namely, applause. And there is something substantially culpable about this applause, for how can you applaud a murder even when it is so well deserved?” Rau admits that he and his team were asking the Romanian audience to respond to and to take a stance vis-à-vis something “so paradoxical” (*widersprüchlich*) that it is impossible to know how to position oneself in relation to it.⁵² The members of the audience are called on to implicate themselves as witnesses to this execution; that is, they are asked to affirm this event through its reenactment, and this affirmation carries with it a destabilization of the observer’s own subject position as evinced by the audience’s uncertainty over whether to applaud. This aspect met with harsh criticism in the Romanian press, and it also proved problematic when the piece was taken to Germany and Switzerland. Rau notes that he resorted to playing music after a period of silence at the end of the reenactment to call the audience

52. Rau and Sasse, “Das Reale des Simulacrums,” 58.

back to reality and signal that the performance was over.⁵³ In a sense, this might be seen as a betrayal of the affirmative power of the piece, but at the same time it is important to stress that for affirmative critique of this sort to be effective, it must not only unsettle the viewer and destabilize his or her subject position but also facilitate a critical engagement with both the representation and the event in question. Thus, after the initial shock, the premiere was followed by an audience discussion with Victoria Cociaş, the actress portraying Elena Ceaușescu; the journalist Rodica Culcer; the historian Bogdan Murgescu; and General Stănculescu, who was instrumental in organizing and carrying out the execution. Stănculescu, one of several individuals in attendance who had been involved in the events, was there under police guard because he was serving a prison sentence for his role in suppressing the uprisings in 1989 before he joined the revolution. Evidently, Rau's performance was deemed important enough to allow him to leave prison; indeed, this indicates just how singular an event this reenactment was. His presence and that of some of the other original actors at the premiere heightened the uncanny nature of this performance and the coincidence of past and present, original and copy. In keeping with this uncanny effect, the performance has begun to infiltrate the digital memory of the event; as Rau is fond of pointing out, an online image search for the Ceaușescu trial turns up images from the reenactment before stills from the original film.

The performance made a significant impression in and around Bucharest. Hundreds of blog entries, online discussion threads, and newspaper articles appeared, and historical journals published transcripts of some of the eyewitness interviews Rau had conducted.⁵⁴ The most astonishing reaction, however, was on the part of Valentin Ceaușescu, the late dictator's oldest son, who sued for an injunction against Odeon Theater for its unlicensed use of his family name, which he had registered as a trademark.⁵⁵ This is an altogether different approach to turning the legacy of the Ceaușescus into a simulacrum of itself. If anything, this corresponds more closely to Baudrillard's conception of hyperreality and certainly does not appear to have triggered any kind of critical self-reflection.

Conclusion

"The art of the reenactment," says Rau in an interview, "depends on placing the audience in a situation that has the uncanny aura of a repetition, but that is nev-

53. Rau and Sasse, "Das Reale des Simulacrum," 59.

54. Rau, "Genau so."

55. Adevărul, "Valentin ține cu dinții de Ceaușescu."

ertheless wholly present, wholly real, wholly open.”⁵⁶ It is this openness that constitutes the affirmative character of reenactment. Repetition has an uncanny aura because it typically connotes forgetting, trauma, and an inability to overcome. Thus, proverbially, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. In Freudian psychoanalysis, repetition compulsion is necessarily unconscious; the patient does not realize that he or she is repeating the past, and it is the goal of Freud’s hermeneutics of suspicion to uncover the real truth beneath the surface and bring it to light. By contrast, affirmation in the sense that I am using it here rejects the strict dichotomy between conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational, and involves a more complex dynamic of conscious and unconscious processes of entanglement and observation—indeed, second- or even third-order observation. We not only watch Zapatka reenacting Himmler’s speech and Soydan reenacting Breivik’s, but we also, in effect, watch ourselves watching. Karmakar, Zapatka, Rau, and Soydan, for their part, carry out equivalent second-order observations of their own practice. At the same time, the radical openness of the reenactment, which is grounded in the artist’s and the audience’s trust or belief in the given moment, does not prescribe an outcome or a predetermined interpretation or telos. This is not to say that it cannot be, in a certain sense, therapeutic, only that it does not hold out the promise of redemption or cure in the future but focuses resolutely on the here and now. In this sense, reenactment as affirmative critique occupies a position between trauma and mastery. The reenactment does entail a working through of the past, but, as noted above, the critical tools of analysis must emerge through intensive engagement with the event in question and thus not by application of a prefabricated critical apparatus that produces the same (usually monocausal) interpretation every time. Seen in this light, nonaffirmative critique—that is, the hermeneutics of suspicion—is itself a form of repetition compulsion, namely, a repetition that does not produce a difference. For the reenactment to become an event, the difference it produces cannot be legislated in advance, and, as shown above, this entails a risk for everyone involved, a leap of faith even, not in a religious sense but more akin to what Gilles Deleuze describes as “belief in this world, as it is.”⁵⁷ This formulation comes close to what Rau means by the aesthetics of the just so, namely, a repetition of a given moment undertaken for its own sake. Deleuze is writing about cinema, and he insists that “the cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world.”⁵⁸ We

56. Rau and Bossart, “Jener 25. Dezember 1989,” 36.

57. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 172.

58. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 172.

could easily reformulate this with regard to the theater in order to capture the essence of Rau's aesthetics of reenactment. The implication is that the world is not simply something given, or something that we must reject in favor of an ideal world to come, but something that we must believe in, in an affirmative sense—which again, crucially, does not mean approving or quietist but, precisely, critical, as something that *concerns* us, because “there is no outside,” no other position to which we might withdraw and from which we might mount our critique.⁵⁹ The function of art is to give us “*reasons to believe in this world*” and thus to make it a matter of concern rather than simply a matter of fact.⁶⁰ Reenactment has a critical role to play here. The Deleuzian insight that the essence of being is difference means that any original event is always already a repetition and hence that a reenactment, whether it tries to approximate the original mimetically or not, on a more fundamental level also reenacts the differential structure of history. Thus, by repeating the past, consciously and affirmatively (just so), reenactment may enable us to think about the present and its relation to history in such a way that it becomes possible to imagine a different future that would not be a repetition.

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59. See Thiele, “Affirmation,” 28.

60. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 172.

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