

the political force of performance pieces taking full account of the sense in which this representative relation is not simply to be evaded, but is crucial to the richness of their critical insight.

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Towards a Paradoxically Parallaxical Postdramatic Politics?

Brandon Woolf

Firstly: The political can appear only indirectly in the theatre, at an oblique angle, modo obliquo. And second: The political has an effect in the theatre if and only if it is in no way translatable or re-translatable into the logic, syntax, and terminology of the political discourse of social reality. What then follows, thirdly, is the seemingly paradoxical formula that the political of the theatre must be conceived not as a reproduction of the political, but as its interruption.¹

Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'Wie politisch ist postdramatisches Theater?'

The summer and winter months of 2008 paid witness to an intensive transatlantic scuffle in the pages of *TDR: The Drama Review*. The subject-matter: the 2006 translation and increasing popularity of Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*. The contenders: Lehmann himself; Elinor Fuchs, author of a biting review of Lehmann's text; and Karen Jürs-Munby, translator of Lehmann's volume into English. Fuchs's review – which at times seems more like a personal assault – expends a good deal of its energy attacking Lehmann's legitimacy as progenitor of the term 'postdramatic'. She then goes on to question the quality of Jürs-Munby's translation due to its abridged length,² its prose style, even the typographical errors overlooked by the copy editors at Routledge. Surprisingly, Fuchs seems more interested in

criticising an alleged 'scandal of ethics and oversight in academic publishing'³ than she does in devoting critical energy to Lehmann's complex argument. One is left to wonder about her pre-existing aesthetic biases (toward the dramatic perhaps?) and about her personal and *political* motivations.

While much of the critical attention that Fuchs pays to the thrust of Lehmann's actual argument is laudatory, she does point to a seeming ambiguity in his text, which is the focus of this chapter. In many ways, Lehmann's volume is an ambitious attempt to come to terms with the *aesthetic* developments in American and European theatre and performance over the last three decades. How then, does Lehmann account for questions of the so-called *political*, which have been so integrally tied to both theories and practices of performance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Fuchs writes:

If in fact the 'dramatic' is destined [. . .] to be erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea, then all the social and political theorizing of the past quarter century so notoriously absent in his essay could be seen as mere flotsam on the ineluctable tide of an aesthetic life expectancy.⁴

Fuchs is frustrated by Lehmann's refusal to explicitly engage with questions of the 'political' in the body of his text. And while he does append an 'Epilogue' that addresses 'a few general reflections on the way in which one could theorise the relationship of postdramatic theatre to the political',⁵ the writing is fragmentary, even aphoristic at times, and does not amount to a systematic appraisal. Perhaps that is just the point – but I move too quickly

In his invited response to Fuchs's review-cum-attack in the winter 2008 issue of *TDR*, Lehmann 'take[s] issue with' her substantive query. He writes:

What kind of logic would deduce that a book offering an aesthetic approach to theatre necessarily denies the importance of the

political?! [. . .] Yes, I admit, I am tired of much social and critical theorizing that amounts to little more than circulating some supposedly critical notions. But, please, note in passing: questions of aesthetic form *are* political questions.⁶

I submit that Lehmann's 'note in passing' is anything but a transient side comment. In fact, I submit further that Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* is deeply engaged with the 'political' – both in and beyond its 'Epilogue.'

I am most aware that it is by no means uncontroversial to engage in general terms with a concept like the 'political' in performance. However, because Lehmann invokes the term over and over again – and because it is invoked in the title of this book – my effort here is to greet (and close-read) Lehmann on his own terms. I attempt to tease out just what he means by such a term and, further, what is at stake – both to be gained *and* occluded – when such a term is deployed in (relation to) and by the postdramatic.

Ironically, Fuchs's own maritime metaphors provide us with orientation. First, Fuchs encourages us to examine Lehmann's dialectical method – although she does not seem to grasp his method as dialectical. How does he understand historical and aesthetic progress? What is the means by which drama has become post-drama? Has the 'dramatic' been merely erased or overcome by the tide, leaving no trace of its previous inscription? Or does Lehmann work to unearth a more complex process in which the dramatic and postdramatic remain in constant, mediated relation? Next: Might it be useful to think of the 'social and political theorizing of the past quarter century' as flotsam, as wreckage, as (Benjaminian) debris that are *essential* for Lehmann? If we understand his narrative as other than strict 'erasure' – which it surely is – how does Lehmann incorporate (or account for) theories of aesthetics and politics in the last twenty-five years? And to move beyond Fuchs's quarter-century asymptote: how does Lehmann incorporate or account for the relations – if not

dialectics – of aesthetics and politics that have long been so prominent in theatre studies and larger critical theory circles?

Before we can address the ‘political’ directly, we must understand the methodology by which Lehmann advances his conception of the ‘post’ in postdramatic. My intention is not – nor could it be – to fully explicate Lehmann’s densely theoretical foray into the logic of dialectical relations (and a non-traditional dialectics at that) in order to postulate the transition between a dramatic paradigm and a postdramatic one. In fact, as Lehmann cautions, the movement from drama to post-drama is by no means neat and clean, and to speak in terms of a paradigm shift at all – as is so common in the sciences, for instance – presents a risk: ‘Paradigm is [instead] an auxiliary term used here to indicate the shared negative boundary demarcating the internally highly diverse variants of the postdramatic theatre from the dramatic.’⁷ It seems, then, that Lehmann conceives of a more ‘negative’ dialectic; he challenges the idealism of a simple transition between or overcoming of contradictions, and he denies the possibility of any grand sublation between poles in constant tension. The shift to the postdramatic is by no means a purely abstract negation, a ‘mere looking away from the tradition of drama.’⁸ Instead, Lehmann envisions a process of determinate negation, in which ‘newly developed aesthetic forms allow both the older forms of theatre and the theoretical concepts used to analyse them to appear in a changed light.’⁹ The process is one that resists conceptual predetermination and normalisation, and one that troubles a purely linear temporality. Lehmann invokes the language of constellations (hence my invocation of Walter Benjamin above) to help explicate the logic of this dialectical movement: ‘[I]t is only the constellation of elements that decides whether a stylistic moment is to be read in the context of a dramatic or a postdramatic aesthetics.’¹⁰ Of course, the irony here – or perhaps it is the very point – is that Lehmann looks ‘back’ to Benjamin to justify his move ‘forward’. In turn, we see how the dramatic is always

already inherent in the postdramatic; the postdramatic is also – albeit somewhat paradoxically – inherent in the dramatic.

In light of Lehmann’s constellatory language, we begin to understand the complexity of the ‘post-ness’ he is working to explain. We move, then, to the second aspect of Fuchs’s metaphor: How does Lehmann make room – or does he? – within the postdramatic for that carefully crafted ‘social and political theorizing’, which, according to Fuchs, pertains to the dramatic? Although Lehmann engages with numerous prominent theoreticians of ‘drama’ throughout his text, I focus on Bertolt Brecht. The reason? One might argue – and this was explored at length during the conference for which this contribution was initially prepared – that Brecht’s theory and practice of ‘political theatre’ was (and perhaps still is) the dominant reference point for so much thinking on the conjunction of aesthetics and politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Any theory working to track the political in performance must – at the very least – consult Brecht before moving on. Lehmann does just this – all the while remaining sensitive to the complexity of his own understanding of what it means to ‘move on’. Lehmann posits that, despite popular conception and despite Brecht’s own distinctions between ‘dramatic’ and ‘epic’ theatre, Brecht’s epic theatre must be counted as a part of the dramatic tradition. Lehmann explains: ‘Brecht’s theory contained a highly traditionalist thesis: the *fable (story)* remained the *sine qua non* for him.’¹¹ Thus, in spite of his effort to move beyond traditions of naturalism and in spite of the great innovations of *Verfremdung*, Brecht remained, Lehmann explains, committed to a ‘theatre of stories’, which structured time and an audience’s experience of the ‘fictive cosmos’¹² in a (more or less) teleological manner. In turn, Lehmann continues, Brecht can no longer be ‘understood one-sidedly as a revolutionary counter-design to tradition.’¹³ Instead, we must understand the epic theatre as a ‘renewal and completion of classical dramaturgy’.¹⁴

If Brecht remains rooted in the traditions of the dramatic, then perhaps the postdramatic theatre can be thought of as a post-Brechtian theatre.¹⁵ As Lehmann explains, in a revealing passage:

[The postdramatic] situates itself in a space opened up by the Brechtian inquiries into the presence and consciousness of the process of representation within the represented and the inquiry into a new 'art of spectating.' At the same time, it leaves behind the political style, the tendency towards dogmatization, and the emphasis on the rational we find in Brechtian theatre.¹⁶

Lehmann thus presents a number of rhetorical questions which emerge at the fore of this analysis: '[I]s there a political theatre after narration? Without a fable in Brecht's sense? What might political theatre after and without Brecht be?'¹⁷ In other words, how might we (re)conceive of the 'political' in performance beyond commitment, beyond the primacy of *content*? We must return, then, to Lehmann's 'note in passing' to Elinor Fuchs. For it is in the primacy of *form* that Lehmann locates a postdramatic politics. And it is this emphasis on the *form* of postdramatic performance that will occupy my attention for the remainder of this chapter.¹⁸

If we are to take Lehmann's dialectic seriously, however, we must also remember that a post-Brechtian theatre can never *fully* abandon Brecht – just as the postdramatic can never fully abandon the dramatic. Thus, we are poised to ask: What *formal* Brechtian elements remain most prominent in the realm of the postdramatic? Lehmann provides an interesting answer. He writes: 'Brecht's demand that authors should not "supply" the theatre with their texts but instead change it has been realised far beyond his imagination.'¹⁹ Lehmann's reference here – although he does not provide a citation – also evokes Walter Benjamin's famous lecture on the 'Author as Producer', which he delivered to the Institute for the Study of Fascism in 1934. At the height of his most 'Brechtian' period, Benjamin explains that the

'bourgeois apparatus' is quite capable of assimilating revolutionary content. Artists must, in turn, be careful not to *supply* the apparatus; they must, instead, work to *change* it. Benjamin continues: 'Before I ask: what is a work's position *vis-à-vis* the production relations of this time, I should like to ask: what is its position *within* them? This question concerns the function of a work within the literary production relations of its time. In other words, it is directly concerned with literary *technique*.'²⁰ Thus, a full year before his most famous pronouncements about the possibilities of 'politicizing art',²¹ Benjamin provides a cipher: the 'work of art' is no longer intended to 'represent individual experiences' as it is 'aimed at using ([and] transforming) certain existing institutes and institutions.'²² The 'work of art' must achieve 'organizational usefulness.'²³ The 'work of art' – and here Benjamin most explicitly borrows from Brecht – must work toward 'functional transformation' (*Umfunktionierung*); it must work to transform the '*forms* and instruments of production.'²⁴

It is thus Brecht-via-Benjamin's notion of *Umfunktionierung* that is front-and-centre in the movement from the dramatic to the postdramatic. And while Lehmann is not primarily concerned with bourgeois apparatuses per se, he is interested in the changing relations of *theatrical* production, interested in the 'new' theatre's almost exclusive focus on formal innovation, on functional transformation, on *technique*. Lehmann is interested in the new (aesthetic) forms that 'separat[e] the new theatre from those political forms that had dominated the experimental scene from the historical avant-gardes until the 1960s.'²⁵ Finally, Lehmann is interested in the ways these new (aesthetic) forms change our 'understanding of what politics in theatre can be.'²⁶

Just what kind of *Umfunktionierung* of those older forms does Lehmann have in mind? He admits that his 'inventory' is in no way comprehensive; the amount of variety in such a vast – and diverse – collection of performances makes it hard to keep track

of a systematic 'aesthetic logic'.²⁷ In a moment of condensational clarity, however, Lehmann recapitulates: '[I]t becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information.'²⁸ While I would argue that Lehmann's theoretical innovations help to secure *Postdramatic Theatre* as the primary text working to think through the aesthetics of contemporary performance, Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Transformative Power of Performance* is also somewhat helpful in categorising the formal transformations of the postdramatic. While Fischer-Lichte's admission criteria in *Transformative Power* are slightly different than Lehmann's – most notably in her penchant for performance art – the two texts share extensive overlap in the aesthetic criteria they consider. Like Lehmann, Fischer-Lichte is interested in performances that demonstrate 'contingency', 'participation', 'bodily co-presence', 'meaning that eludes linguistic interpretation'²⁹ and much more. Fischer-Lichte avoids adoption of the terminology of the postdramatic, however. Instead, she works to trace the primary '[functional] transformation'³⁰ of the so-called work of art into an *event*. According to Fischer-Lichte, the event-character of performance allows it to exist 'independent of its creator and recipient; instead, we are dealing with an *event* that involves everybody – albeit to different degrees and in different capacities.'³¹ It is in these 'moments of enchantment', that the boundaries between artist and spectator blur, and all involved achieve a 'sudden deeper insight into the shared process of being in the world'.³²

And what hints of the political reside in *Transformative Power*? In his 'Introduction' to the 2008 English translation of Fischer-Lichte's text, Marvin Carlson notes the seeming prevalence of the 'aesthetic' *over* the 'political'. As he explains: '[Her] approach, based as it is on what might be called the aesthetic side of theatre and performance, seeks the "meaning" or "purpose" of performance

in what she calls its "specific aestheticity," a concern one would be most unlikely to encounter in an American performance theorist.'³³ Writing from an American perspective, Carlson is quick to explain that this 'aestheticity' could seem foreign to those enmeshed in the interdiscipline of Performance Studies, 'with its close historical ties to the social sciences' and long traditions searching for the 'utility of performance in its ability to alter or at least alter the spectator's thinking about general and specific social situations.'³⁴ Here, Carlson's contextualisation also helps to explain Fuchs's objection. For Fischer-Lichte, however, the very form of performance *as* event constitutes politics in itself: the political is everywhere in her conception of performance. Fischer-Lichte's approach is most certainly Romantic – if not idealist. It is the blurring of 'roles', the 'bodily co-presence' of artist and spectator, of subject and object that works to overcome or 'collapse the ostensible dichotomy of the aesthetic and the political.'³⁵ Art, social life and politics: Fischer-Lichte believes that they 'cannot be clinically separated in performance.'³⁶ In and through its forging of concrete social situations, performance works to dissolve these strict binaries, so that all aesthetic work is inherently social, all social work is inherently aesthetic. It is in the *formal* construction, execution and experience of the *event* that one finds politics at the theatre. Fischer-Lichte explains further: 'Setting up art and reality as binary oppositions generated a whole range of other dichotomies, such as aesthetic vs. social, aesthetic vs. political, and aesthetic vs. ethical. As we have seen, such dichotomies have been collapsed demonstratively in performances since the 1960s.'³⁷

Lehmann and Fischer-Lichte differ, however, in their readings of the political potential of the postdramatic. Lehmann is not interested in such an *easy* politics. His 'dialectical imagination'³⁸ commits him to a series of more complex and tenuous mediations between seeming binaries.³⁹ Performance does not merely *blur* lines. Performances do not merely *dissolve* dichotomies. While Fischer-Lichte's

'border-crossing'⁴⁰ is important for Lehmann, it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. In a lecture at the University of California, Berkeley in March 2010, Lehmann explained – in an implicit critique of Fischer-Lichte – that conceptions of the postdramatic must extend beyond the mere *event*.⁴¹ Instead, Lehmann contends that the postdramatic both embraces *and* challenges the fundamental differences (even contradictions) between art and reality. How does Lehmann envision the complexity of relations between Fischer-Lichte's 'dichotomies,' between 'real' and 'representation,' between the 'political' and the 'aesthetic'?

His answer is a complex one. On the one hand, Lehmann asks us to consider the dwindling role of 'representation' in the realm of the postdramatic. As he explains, 'real' conflicts of our own time no longer find 'truth' in the representational conflicts of the dramatic. 'The representational form "drama" is,' Lehmann writes, 'available but grasps at nothing when it is meant to articulate experienced reality.'⁴² For drama no longer rings *true* in its representation of 'action,' of 'personal conflict,' of 'reconciliation.'⁴³ Drama is no longer capable of representing the great 'contradictions' of our 'mediatised and globalised'⁴⁴ society – one replete with 'social and political conflicts, civil wars, oppression, growing poverty and social injustice.'⁴⁵ For Lehmann, then, the postdramatic reflects the *real* 'retreat' or 'unravelling' of the dramatic imagination: 'The theatre of sense and synthesis has largely disappeared – and with it the possibility of synthesizing interpretation.'⁴⁶ And in the place of 'realist' representation, Lehmann locates the postdramatic, a theatre of 'partial perspectives and stuttering answers that remain "works in progress".'⁴⁷ Lehmann insists that he is not interested – like Fischer-Lichte – in a simple, unmediated one-to-one mapping of the 'real' and the 'aesthetic'. And yet, it is the postdramatic that brings us closer to the 'real,' and to the 'political' – no longer by means of 'dramatic' representation, but by mediated 'reflection'. In other words, the

'real' has become a 'co-player'⁴⁸ on the postdramatic stage; a stage which – as David Barnett explicates Lehmann – has moved '*beyond*' representation, in which the limitations of representation are held in check by dramaturgies and performance practices that seek to present material rather than to posit a direct, representational relationship between the stage and the outside world'.⁴⁹

On the other hand – and as we have come to expect from Lehmann by this point – to move 'beyond' is precisely to undertake a simultaneous process of engagement with and differentiation from the very thing that is superseded. In other words, any move beyond the representational entails a deep engagement with representation itself. As Lehmann explains, 'Theatre is a practice [. . .], which like no other forces us to realise "that there is no firm boundary between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic realm."⁵⁰ It is a practice that is 'at once signifying and entirely real.'⁵¹ And while the postdramatic critically questions the representational status of the dramatic, and foregrounds 'real' elements, it also clings tightly to its aesthetic (or representational) status, foregrounding its 'signifying' elements, its 'fictive cosmos' – albeit a cosmos quite different from a dramatic cosmos.

Contrary to Fischer-Lichte, in whose work the 'real' emerges as the central and structuring tenet, the postdramatic develops an '*aesthetics* of the irruption of the real.'⁵² It foregrounds 'the significance of the extra-aesthetic *in* the aesthetic.'⁵³ The signifying, the representational, the aesthetic remains an essential and constitutive element.⁵⁴ The postdramatic theatre remains theatre and continues to remind us – and itself – of this very fact. To make this point, Lehmann harkens back to those almost messianic leanings of another of his Frankfurt forefathers: namely Theodor W. Adorno on the mimetic quality of the artwork. Mimesis, for Adorno, does not consist of a dutiful copying of reality, a subsumption of the aesthetic by the real. Instead, the art object presents a 'becoming-like-something,' always foregrounding its

aesthetic-cum-mimetic character, its position as art *object*, and thus serving as a stopgap against an instrumentalising totality. Lehmann quotes Adorno: 'Art is no more a replica of an object than it is an object of cognition. Otherwise it would debase itself by becoming a mere duplicate of something. [...] Actually, what happens is that art makes a gesture-like grab for reality, only to draw back violently as it touches that reality.'⁵⁵ In so doing, in drawing back, art establishes its resistant, and thus its political character. By refusing to imitate the administered world, it indicates the possibility, albeit negatively, of another world that is not yet here; it 'postulate[s] the existence of what does not exist'.⁵⁶

In an unexpected passage – one which was omitted from the English translation – Lehmann also begins to conceptualise the relations between the resistant relevance of the 'representational' in the postdramatic and the ways in which its re-functioned modes and apparatuses of production produce (or enable) such a potential politics. He writes:

Nowadays, theatre does not – or only rarely – become political by directly thematising the political, but by the implicit content of its modes of representation (*Darstellungsweise[n]*). (These modes involve, by the way, not only certain [aesthetic] forms, but also particular modes of labour (*Arbeitsweise[n]*). This study has hardly mentioned such labour forms, but they merit their own investigation: how theatre is made, and how the political content of theatre can be grounded in the way it is made.) Theatre represents – not in theory, but in praxis – an example of a conjunction of the heterogeneous, which symbolises the utopias of 'another life'. In the theatre, mental, artistic, and physical labour, individual and collective praxis, are mediated. It can claim to be a resistant form of praxis already by dissolving the reification of actions and works into products, objects, and information. By pushing its event-character, theatre manifests the soul of the dead product, the living

artistic labour, for which everything remains unpredictable and [remains] to be invented tomorrow. Therefore, theatre is by means of the constitution of its praxis virtually political.⁵⁷

Hopeful Adornian language abounds again in this enunciation, in which the postdramatic resists the active forgetting of reification (*Verdinglichung*), and thus resists the 'real' itself by foregoing outright political commitment (on the level of content) and forging new modes – arts – of labour, of collaboration, of imagination, of spectating (on the level of formal production). And while Lehmann admits that he has not allotted ample time to the analysis of these new 'forms and instruments of production', it is, it seems, in this praxis *and/of* representation of formal 'heterogeneity' that Lehmann understands the postdramatic as a '*promesse de bonheur*', looking forward to the 'utopia' of 'another life' that is – and will remain – *not-yet*.

One could argue that Lehmann works to maintain two seemingly incompatible positions here: a retreat from representation on the one hand, and an insistence on the theatre's 'aesthetic', 'mimetic', or 'representational' character on the other. However, the citation with which I began – from a 2001 essay – insists on this 'double-diagnosis'⁵⁸ (*doppelte Feststellung*):

Firstly: The political can appear only indirectly in the theatre, at an oblique angle, *modo obliquo*. And second: The political has an effect in the theatre if and only if it is in no way translatable or re-translatable into the logic, syntax, and terminology of the political discourse of social reality. What then follows, thirdly, is the seemingly paradoxical formula that the political of the theatre must be conceived not as a reproduction of the political, but as its interruption.⁵⁹

Postdramatic theatre thus 'obliquely' engages the political *realities* of our 'mediatised and globalised' world by refusing to 'represent' a *reality*

which is no longer *really* representable as drama. Simultaneously, the postdramatic is a theatre that ensures it 'is in no way translatable or re-translatable into the logic, syntax, and terminology' of the 'real' world by embracing, foregrounding, insisting on its 'aesthetic' or 'representational' status, its status as not-conceptually-predetermined. How then does Lehmann propose we mediate this tenuous circumstance, this first *and* second? Lehmann hopes – albeit 'paradoxically' – that his constellatory dialectic makes this 'double-diagnosis' feasible.

And in this 'paradoxical' position, Lehmann is in good company. Over the last few years, a good deal of European performance scholarship – while not concerned only with the postdramatic – has turned sharply away from 'simple,' 'unmediated' conjunctions of theatre and politics, of real and representation, and turned toward more nuanced, more dialectical readings of these relations. A number of critics have grown impatient with a theatre that wants to think of itself as purposefully and explicitly intervening in the realm of the political. In place of the content-based 'political theatre,' critics have begun to explore theatre's (negative) political potential as much more indirect, much more unpredictable. Like Lehmann, Joe Kelleher, Alan Read, even Jacques Rancière have been re-reading Adorno (albeit implicitly) – and perhaps each other – and they come together in their understanding of a different kind of political potential for the theatre, an 'unintended politics of performance.'⁶⁰

In *Theatre & Politics* Kelleher argues that 'theatre's value for political thinking [derives from] its seeming fragility and tendency to untruth rather than from the strength of its representations and the justice of its political messages.'⁶¹ There is no guarantee that the 'committed' message of the theatre or its desired effect will be achieved, or understood in the ways they are intended. Rather, theatre 'remains unpredictable in its effects, given that its effects reside largely not in the theatrical spectacle itself but in the spectators and what they are

capable of making of it.'⁶² The potential inherent in the theatre is the 'unpredictable relationship'⁶³ between the event's very liveness, its there-ness, its ephemerality, and a public's (and performer's) aesthetic experience of performance.

Alan Read also issues a sustained polemic against any neat and clean, any *sublated* rendering of theatre '&' politics. In fact, it is only by *separating* theatre from the political, Read argues, that we can come to understand the ways in which theatre might function politically. 'The error,' Read explains, 'has precisely been to leave these two terms bonded in a fantasy of expectation and hope while patronizing them both with the commiseration of a failure.'⁶⁴ If we examine the ampersand (&) used to bind supposedly related terms – like theatre & politics – we notice that the 'ampersand turns its back on theatre with its two ends binding politics to itself.'⁶⁵ This turn, notes Read, signals an ambiguity that must not be ignored or taken for granted. Only by troubling – by 'interrupting' in Lehmann's terms – the presumption that the two terms belong together can the 'consequences' of the conjunction be truly evaluated. Read does 'not seek an apparent symmetry between the theatre machine, its politics and more general political processes.'⁶⁶ Instead, he takes what he calls a 'parallax view'⁶⁷: a view that asserts incompatibility and asymmetry where there was once a presumption of relation and congruence. The goal of this 'parallax' terminology is to posit a complex (negative) dialectic of sorts, one that thrives in its dissonance and not in its reconciliation, yet one that is unwilling to forego the possibility of some (eventual) (gradual) (accidental) identity, or relation, between its terms. Only by challenging a symmetry between theatre and politics can we understand how full of politics theatre actually is.

Similarly, Jacques Rancière in his *Emancipated Spectator* is interested in gradual experiences, accidental experiences, aesthetic experiences that are not conceptually predetermined. For with conceptual determination, he argues, comes a representational 'logic,

syntax, and terminology' that has already been co-opted. Instead, aesthetic experience (of the theatre event) is oblivious to desired effects. And it is in this very denial of the 'real', of the here and now, of a world which is entirely bound by concepts that Rancière locates the political. Like Adorno, Rancière advocates a 'sensory rupture within the continuity of the representative cause-effect schema'.⁶⁸ He has no patience for 'critical art' which conceives of a straightforward, undialectical confluence of political aims and aesthetic means. Like Adorno, Rancière is resistant to any attempt to anticipate our common future. Instead, he is interested in new configurations unbound by concepts, by anything that could be anticipated. Like Adorno he puts faith in the theatre (and the aesthetic more generally) as a means of reconfiguring the 'landscape of the possible'⁶⁹ or, at the very least, providing a fleeting glance toward a different future.

We return finally to the explicitly 'political' 'Epilogue' to *Postdramatic Theatre*. Here Lehmann presents us with paradoxical, or parallaxical sentences like: "Theatre can only ever be ambiguously "real."⁷⁰ Or: "[T]heatre can never know whether it really "does" something, whether it effects something and on top of it means something."⁷¹ Or, finally: 'In the postdramatic theatre of the real the main point is not the assertion of the real as such [. . .] but the unsettling that occurs through the *indecidability* whether one is dealing with reality or fiction. The theatrical effect and the effect on consciousness both emanate from ambiguity.⁷² Somehow the postdramatic gets us closer to the 'real' than the dramatic could ever dream. Somehow the postdramatic must also resist the 'real' and refuse the status quo in order to preserve its critical, and thus political, edge. For Lehmann, it is this 'double-diagnosis' that permits a 'genuine relationship with the "political"'.⁷³ For Lehmann, it is by means of this very uncertainty, this very tenuous and contradictory situation, this formal interruption of the predetermined logics of the political, that the postdramatic becomes an 'aesthetics of resistance', an '*Ästhetik des Widerstands*'.

Performing Dialectics in an Age of Uncertainty, or: Why Post-Brechtian ≠ Postdramatic

David Barnett

Early on in Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, one finds an explicit connection between Brechtian impulse and postdramatic response:

Postdramatic theatre is a *post-Brechtian theatre*. It situates itself in a space opened up by the Brechtian inquiries into the presence and consciousness of the process of representation within the represented and the inquiry into a new 'art of spectatorship'.¹

The links Lehmann makes with Brecht are clear and certainly hold true, and by calling the postdramatic 'a post-Brechtian theatre', he notes that the post-Brechtian may indeed have several manifestations on a contemporary stage. Lehmann's approach, as articulated in another essay, envisages many post-Brechtian theatres, defined in terms of what can be salvaged from various aspects of Brecht's formal arsenal.² That is, Lehmann understands the term as suggesting a process of decomposition, in which elements of Brecht's theatre persist in the present, having been taken up and/or recycled. He thus seeks to integrate elements of such a theatre into the umbrella term 'postdramatic theatre'. However, I will argue for a more holistic definition of post-Brechtian theatre, based on understanding its root,

- 52 Tracy C. Davis, and Bruce McConachie, 'Introduction', in *Theatre Survey*, special issue on audience research 39.2 (November 1998), p. 3.
- 53 Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 11.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 14 (original emphasis).
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 57 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 5.
- 58 Peter Boenisch, 'Acts of Spectating: The Dramaturgy of the Audience's Experience in Contemporary Theatre', in *Critical Stages*, 7 (November 2012). Available at: www.criticalstages.org/criticalstages7/entry/Acts-of-Spectating-The-Dramaturgy-of-the-Audience's-Experience-in-Contemporary-Theatre?category=2#sthash.v8w2Pkl3.gZLc0n1r.dpuf (accessed 9 January 2013).
- 59 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, pp. 185–6.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 61 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edn, London: Verso, 2001, p. 99.
- 62 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 185.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 64 Deck, 'Politisch Theater machen', p. 13.
- 65 Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben*, pp. 14–15.
- 66 Boenisch, 'Acts of Spectating'.
- 67 Fuchs, 'Postdramatic Theatre and the Persistence of the "Fictive Cosmos"', pp. 66–8.
- 68 See Spencer, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 8.

Chapter 1

- 1 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben*, Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2002, pp. 16–17. All translations from German are my own unless otherwise noted.
- 2 As Jürs-Munby points out in her own written response to Fuchs, the book manuscript was abridged by Lehmann himself for this and other

- international translations. See Hans-Thies Lehmann, Karen Jürs-Munby and Elinor Fuchs, 'Lost in Translation?', in *TDR: The Drama Review* 52.4 (2008), pp. 13–20, here p. 18.
- 3 Elinor Fuchs, 'Postdramatic Theatre (Review)', in *TDR: The Drama Review* 52.2 (2008), pp. 178–83, here p. 182.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 5 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 175.
- 6 Lehmann, Jürs-Munby, and Fuchs, 'Lost in Translation?', p. 16.
- 7 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 24.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 27.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 23–4.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 33 (original emphasis). A counter-voice here is that of Birgit Haas, who has no interest in a mode of performance that 'place[s] the process of "making sense" of the theatrical event on the shoulders of the spectator'. See Birgit Haas, 'The Return of Dramatic Drama in Germany after 1989', in Denise Varney (ed.), *Theatre in the Berlin Republic: German Drama since Reunification*, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 81–114, here p. 93. Haas traces – and valorises – a resurgence in Germany of a tradition of still 'dramatic drama', to which Brecht's oeuvre belongs, in which the 'postmodern dissolution of text, author and message is replaced by a structured, hierarchical and mimetic dramatic text' (p. 84). Although Haas does not engage theoretically with the issues in the same depth as Lehmann, she seems committed to an understanding of the political that is entirely based on content (i.e. political commitment), precisely one of the conceptions of the political that Lehmann works to challenge.
- 15 The complexities of this claim are explored in David Barnett's contribution to this book.
- 16 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 33. At times I find Lehmann's expositions in *Postdramatic Theatre* overly totalising of Brecht's quite

- complicated and often contradictory – if not dialectical – positions.
For a more nuanced approach to Brecht by Lehmann, see ‘Der Andere Brecht’, in *Das Politische Schreiben*.
- 17 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 180.
- 18 Although, for the sake of this argument, my emphasis will be on the so-called *formal* aspects of the postdramatic, I find it important to note that, if we are to take Lehmann’s dialectical approach seriously, formal questions could never be abstractly divorced from questions of *content*.
- 19 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 50.
- 20 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, in *Understanding Brecht*, London: NLB, 1973, p. 88. The original German text can be found in: ‘Der Autor als Produzent’, in *Versuche über Brecht*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966.
- 21 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008.
- 22 Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, p. 93.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 93 (my emphasis).
- 25 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 105.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 29 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain, Abingdon: Routledge, 2008, pp. 39, 40, 44, 147.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 9. In many ways, Fischer-Lichte’s *event*-character shares much in common with the equally Romantic concept of ‘relationality’ developed by Nicolas Bourriaud in the field of contemporary visual art. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Collection Documents Sur L’art. Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002.

- 33 Marvin Carlson, ‘Introduction’, in Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, pp. 1–10, here p. 6.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 38 This is the title of Martin Jay’s landmark study on the Frankfurt School. See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.
- 39 Shannon Jackson’s recent work also complicates – albeit in different terms – the binarising logics and ‘easy’ politics of Fischer-Lichte’s conception of the relations between the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘social’. See Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, New York: Routledge, 2011.
- 40 Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, p. 203.
- 41 Hans-Thies Lehmann, ‘Anagnorisis/Understanding/Performance’, paper presented at the symposium ‘Conjunctures of Performance and Philosophy: Conversations with Hans-Thies Lehmann and Freddie Rokem’, UC Berkeley, 9 March 2010.
- 42 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 182.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- 44 Karen Jürs-Munby frames the issue as follows: ‘[H]ow can theatre represent or refer to “the world” when the world – multiply mediated and globalised as it is – has become less “surveyable” than ever? Or: what kind of forms of theatre do practitioners find to address the lack of agency in a world without “real” protagonists?’ David Barnett, Hans-Thies Lehmann and Karen Jürs-Munby, ‘Taking Stock and Looking Forward: Postdramatic Theatre’, *Contemporary Theatre Review: An International Journal* 16.4 (2006), pp. 483–9, here p. 488.
- 45 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 175.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

- 49 David Barnett, 'When Is a Play Not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts', *New Theatre Quarterly* 24.93 (2008), pp. 14–23, here p. 15 (my emphasis).
- 50 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 101.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- 52 *Ibid.* (my emphasis).
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 103 (italics in original).
- 54 André Eiermann's recent work on the 'reality of illusion' in contemporary theatre extends this discussion in a number of interesting directions. See André Eiermann, 'Introductory Lecture: Realitäten der Illusion im zeitgenössischen Theater', paper presented at the symposium 'TO DO AS IF – Realitäten der Illusion im zeitgenössischen Theater', Justus-Liebig-Universität, Gießen, 6 July 2012.
- 55 Theodor W. Adorno, quoted in Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 38.
- 56 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 59.
- 57 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999, pp. 456–7.
- 58 Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben*, p. 16.
- 59 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.
- 60 Joe Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 34.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 64 Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement: The Last Human Venue*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 7.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 67 *Ibid.*
- 68 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London: Verso, 2009, p. 74.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 70 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, pp. 179–80.

- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 73 Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben*, p. 14.

Chapter 2

- 1 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006, p. 33.
- 2 See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben: Essays zu Theater texts*, Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2002, pp. 219–37.
- 3 Berliner Ensemble/Helene Weigel (eds), *Theaterarbeit: 6 Aufführungen des Berliner Ensembles*, Dresden: VVV Dresdner Verlag, 1952, p. 434. All translations are my own.
- 4 See Brecht's poem, '1954, erste Hälfte', in Bertolt Brecht, *Werke: Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Volume 15, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993, p. 281. Brecht's *Werke* are hereafter referred to in the notes as BFA followed by the volume and page numbers.
- 5 Meg Mumford, 'Brecht on Acting for the 21st Century: Interrogating and Re-Inscribing the Fixed', *Communications from the International Brecht Society* 29.1 and 2 (2000), pp. 44–9, here p. 47.
- 6 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann [= *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6], Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, p. 168.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 8 Heiner Müller, quoted in Müller and Alexander Weigel, 'Etwas für das Programmheft', in Linzer, Martin and Peter Ullrich (eds), *Regie Heiner Müller*, Berlin: Zentrum für Theatrodokumentation und -information, 1994, pp. 26–30, here p. 29.
- 9 In the following analysis, I refer to the video recording of the premiere, held in the Akademie der Künste Archive, AVM 33.3595.
- 10 See aro, 'Nach einer riesigen nationalen Tragödie', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 February 1996.