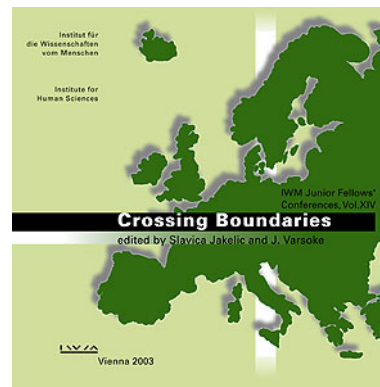


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# Tracing Tranquility: A Proposal in Progress<sup>1</sup>

Katharina Pewny

## *Research Questions*

In a very broad sense, my paper discusses the connections between *Ruhe* (calmness, stillness, peace, tranquility)/*Unruhe* (restlessness), theater and politics. My initial question concerns the human im/possibility of finding *Ruhe*, and will require further research into the level of social and cultural productions of *Ruhe*. The decision to focus on theater (and not on film, video, virtual worlds or literature) is based on the assumption that, in a specific way, theater can provide an escape from the contemporary consumer world, which might evoke the (viewers') production of *Ruhe*. Prominent theories of theater (Plato, Aristotle, Schiller, Brecht) suggest that theater is a place of political disturbance (*Belun/ruhigung*). Discussions of theater at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are a rarity in the fields in which I am working – cultural studies, gender studies, and deconstructive thinking. Barbara Freedman highlights some of the reasons:

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Anita Fricsek and Stephen Zepke for the translation.

Those in search of the poor monster, dramatic theater, will discover it miming the role of the scapegoat for Western humanism in a new-fangled postmodern morality play. Accused and found guilty as a machine of the state and an enemy of the people, drama is charged with the job of carrying away the fourfold sins of phallogocentrism, humanism, individualism, and representation along with its demise. In this contest of the avant-garde with itself on the field of representation, theater has indeed been hoist on its own petard. Long derided as one of the last bastions of humanism in literary studies, one of the few free zones where character, plot, and even presence itself could travel undisturbed, unsuspected, and unsuspecting, theater is only now saving itself by denying itself. Traveling incognito as performance, denying any relation to dramatic theater upon which it preys, theater, now...has become avant-garde.<sup>2</sup>

When theater is “traveling incognito” as performance, etc., and “denying any relation to dramatic theater,” the challenge is to find theater’s interface with other cultural forms of representation, or rather to question different forms of theater about their role in producing *Ruhe /Unruhe (Restlessness)*. I choose four different theatrical events for a closer analysis.

1. *A production of Samuel Beckett’s play “Glückliche Tage” (Berlin Ensemble 2001/2002, Director: Edith Clever, performed at the Akademietheatre in Vienna).*

I have chosen Beckett because of my interest in the production/representation of *Ruhe*. The play centers on a female protagonist whose body is almost entirely stuck in the sand. The very sparse dramaturgy is interesting in regard to the production of *Ruhe* because of the two following reasons:

a. The reduced means of perception offered to the viewers elevate their imagination and support the very creativity (of the spectators), which helps to facilitate inner *Ruhe*. Spoken theater (*Sprechtheater*) is by disposition a place of *Ruhe*.

b. By concentrating on the female protagonist, connections between *Ruhe* and gender identity (women as the “calmed gender”) become obvious.

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<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Freedman, “Frame-Up: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Theatre,” in Sue-Ellen Case, *Performing Feminisms*, 58.p.

## 2. *Publix Theater Caravan (Volxtheater Karawane)*.

This Viennese theater group has staged various plays in recent years and understands itself as part of the anti-globalization-movement. During their European tour “No border, no nation, no deportation” (2001), on their way to Genova from Frankfurt, 25 of their activists were arrested and imprisoned in Italy for several weeks. I chose the *Publix Theater* for three reasons: first, this is a theater form beyond the box theater (*Guckkastentheater*); second, it has a significant political dimension in stirring political disturbance (*Unruhe*); and third, it is related to post-colonial studies by supporting migration movements. With the analysis of the *Publix Theater* it is possible to link drama studies to contemporary theory within the field of cultural studies.

## 3. *Theatrical events in shopping malls*

The search for current discourses of *Ruhe* lead to questions about the creation of time, namely work time and leisure time (see below). Inspired by sociological analyses, I arrived at shopping malls as privileged urban places of leisure time, and consequently at questions of presence, dramaturgy and function, in relation to theatrical events in shopping malls. Discourses of modernity are useful here, discourses that connect art with the free market (see Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno), and whose recent developments can be linked to drama studies. The specific question will be the function of theatrical events in shopping malls in connection to leisure time and *Ruhe*. Are those theatrical events simply a special kind of advertisement? Which social problems and norms do they communicate? This part of my work connects sociological questions (including the new urban research) with drama studies in order to open a new field of investigation.

## 4. *Performance*

At this point it is still undecided what fourth theatrical event I will be investigating. Perhaps it will be a work (titled *Haut*) by the performance artist Barbara Kraus. After her performances Barbara Kraus often invites the audience to discussions, and the theater evening is thus talked about as a possible exercise in civic responsibility (by individual interference into the incidents of the public space). What emerges here is an aesthetics of the effect of interactive performances related to political disturbance (*Belunruhigung*). The performance investigated shall in any case fulfill the following function: an explicitly performative work with the body, in an interactive approach. The body is the focus, which makes sense in the investigation of *Ruhe*, because psychological, psychoanalytical and therapeutic discourses of restlessness

(*Un/ruhe*) are related to the body as the place of restlessness (*Un/ruhe*). Of further interest is the collapse of differentiation of the representing subject (actress) and the presented subject (dramatic figure), which the performance pushes to the extreme.

### *Methodologies – Framing Tranquility*

Before the analysis of the theatrical events can start, there will be two major steps in tracing tranquility: first, different cultural discourses and, second, the theories of theater. These two steps will provide the conceptual framework and raise questions necessary for the work on theatrical events.

Theater as a representational system is not a monadic entity in the world, but reflects and constitutes society in a specific way. If we take up Theodor Adorno's approach to art, in which art has a mimetic relationship to society, we have to take up different approaches to questions about the *Ruhe* of theatrical events. Four framing discourses are chosen: philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis/psychology, and drama theory. Cognitive theory necessarily implies this constellation, which includes the history of thought, social structures, psychic dispositions and cultural representations in order to describe the phenomena investigated. This should clarify the claim that, due to practical reasons, this discourse cannot move through centuries in a linear fashion, let alone establish an absolute truth. On the contrary, I am proposing contextual readings of theatrical phenomena that have validity from my point of view, and which are embedded in historical and political contexts.

Interdisciplinary work makes the focusing and narrowing down of a notion *Ruhe* enormously difficult, even more so if the research is limited to just a few years. Decisions about certain reference points were made only recently, and the following presentation will necessarily be rudimentary. My work, arguments and speculations up to this point will form the basis for further decisions.

Etymology provides a useful basis for defining the notion of *Ruhe*. Medieval texts define the notion of *Ruhe* as follows: "First of all *Ruhe* is release, the pause of exertion and hardship, as well as the rest following work. *Ruhe* is the necessity to rest the arms, to rest the warrior ... in this way it is consumed by the tired walker, ... in Bavarian the word appears clearly as the interruption of work."<sup>3</sup> On a linguistic level, thus, *Ruhe* has always meant an ending of hardship. In medieval scripts of

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<sup>3</sup> Both see: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Vol. 14, München 1984, 1418.

Meister Eckhart, *Ruhe* is named as a divine promise: coming to stillness is compared to becoming God. Religion as a site of tranquility raises further questions about the meanings and sites of tranquility in the secularized world in which we live.

### 1. *Philosophy – Aesthetics*

*Ruhe* appears in the paradoxes of Zeno (the arrow in flight stands still), Aristotle (the Gods are fixed and set things in motion), Seneca (peace of mind), and Heidegger (composure). To focus on *Ruhe* in relation to other notions, and to find out how *Ruhe* is thought about, I will investigate the postulates of the “nature” of *Ruhe* and its related phenomena (composure/stand still/leisure) in the work of those thinkers.<sup>4</sup> I want to find out whether the concept of *Ruhe* always demands an oppositional contrast or contradistinction. However, at this point it remains to be seen if philosophy can be instrumental in my research project.

### 2. *Sociology: working society, time and consumerism*

Western societies have become “work-leisure societies,”<sup>5</sup> which means that leisure time is not unplanned but thoroughly organized time. Self-time, i.e. the time not dedicated to social obligations and duties, or duties of reproduction (which women often have to accomplish in their so called spare time), is vanishing. Therefore leisure time cannot be assumed as a fixed category providing self-time and stillness. On certain discursive levels, the question of *Ruhe* has shifted to the organization of work relations (in the so called postmodern context of a fragmentation of living situations). As a part of an increasing production of self-help literature against stress, the *Book of Ruhe*<sup>6</sup> offers tips and techniques for the production of *Ruhe*. This sort of literature suggests *Ruhe* is something that can be self-produced, by (perhaps shamanic) techniques that not only include new organizations of the work place, of time, and of priorities, but also concern physical and psychic states.

The combination of *Ruhe* and the “work place,” a contradiction at first sight, not only points to the merging of the formerly separated spheres of work and leisure, but also provokes a rethinking of how to gain *Ruhe*. Is *Ruhe* dialectically produced through activity? Perhaps *Ruhe*, like leisure, could be thought of beyond the di-

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<sup>4</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Die Gelassenheit*, Stuttgart 1992 and Wilhelm Capelle, *Die Vorsokratiker*, Stuttgart 1938.

<sup>5</sup> See Ulrich Beck, *Die Erfindung des Politischen*, Frankfurt 1993.

<sup>6</sup> See Paul Wilson, *Das Buch der Ruhe*, München 1999.

chotomies of work and leisure, and inhabit the boundary space between them, a space which questions their old modes of existence:

Leisure is different than spare time because it does not describe a time span, but signifies a way of life that radically refutes today's economic logic. Leisure prefers life to the fetish of goods...This means that leisure, if thought of as self-liberation, has to start by rejecting (alienating) work from the center of our lives. It is necessary to overcome bourgeois socialization and the cultural hegemony...of the work-leisure-society. Not-doing and contemplation must find their entitled place again.<sup>7</sup>

All that raises various questions for the theater:

- a. The question of the presence of theatrical events in places of consumption (since consumption is often described as the main activity of Western urban environments, see above);
- b. The question of content and the spatial representation of *Ruhe* in the theater;
- c. The questions of the quality of the activity of the theater audience: Is the “art of the spectators” a state of *Ruhe* exactly because it is a state of creation? Is it this state of creativity that produces meaning, which is opposed to consumption, and therefore “calming”?<sup>8</sup>

### 3. *Nervous Spaces: Psyche, Bodies*

In modernity *Ruhe* is thought of negatively in discussions of restlessness and nervousness. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a large number of texts were published about nervousness. The word *Ruhe* already implied something physical in these theories of nervousness. Within these theories broad subdivisions can be made – ‘driven nervousness’ (Sigmund Freud) and nervousness caused by the environment (‘American Nervousness,’ industrialization and over-stimulation as a trigger for nervousness). Currently there are two specific discourses about *Ruhe*. One, as shown above, is concerned with stress phenomena caused by work, and includes techniques to induce *Ruhe*. The other, following psychoanalysis, deals with restlessness (*Unruhe*) caused by trauma, and recognizes not only the psyche as a residuum of traumatic experience but also the so-called body. Bodies are understood as the

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<sup>7</sup> Erich Ribolits, *Die Arbeit hoch*, München 1998, 266f.

<sup>8</sup> Bertold Brecht, *Über die Schauspielkunst*, Berlin 1973.

residue of traumatic experiences, and parallels to war, torture and sexual violence are drawn. Therefore the question arises as to which understanding of bodies can be found in contemporary discourses of restlessness. Trauma theories will serve as a source here.<sup>9</sup>

The institutionalization of cultural studies made theater vanish from it almost completely. If theater is mentioned at all, it is discussed in terms of one of its last two constituting values: the presence of so called “real” bodies. As the place of the semiotic, as the realm of the senses before they are grasped by the theoretical, as a space often associated with the feminine, theater offers connections to current discussions of corporeality and restlessness (*Unruhe*). It is necessary to investigate in what ways concepts of the body in psychoanalytic discourses (especially in trauma theories) and theories of the theater are related, or rather, whether concepts of the body in trauma theory can be useful for the unsettling (*belunruhigende*) function of theater.

#### 4. *Theatrical Disturbances ('Belun/ruhigungen')*

##### A. *The concepts of theater in antiquity*

In Plato's *Politeia*, one can find a number of hints pointing to a connection between theater and politics (state). Those hints are mimetic phenomena and aim to concretize male self-identity.<sup>10</sup> This process of fixation occurs via a temporal dissolution or vibration, it is the dynamic of catharsis, which for Plato, in contrast to Aristotle, is negative (see below). For Plato, the tragic mimesis brings out the menacing aspect of the self. In Plato's discussions, the threat represented by the theater of tragedy is excluded from the *polis*, while the political effect of tragedy can already be seen.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not formulate the political effect of tragedy on the level of state theory, but argues the aesthetic effect, which is partially based on identification. The characters of the tragedy are humans, who are better, worse or similar to the spectators. Their fate calls for terror and pity (“lamentation and shudder”/“fear and pity”).<sup>11</sup> By catharsis the tragedy cleanses the spectators, its purpose

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<sup>9</sup> See Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, London 1992.

<sup>10</sup> See Platon, *Politeia*, Frankfurt / Leipzig 1991, 606d and 395c.

<sup>11</sup> Aristoteles, *Poetik*, Stuttgart 1982.

is purgation, bringing about a smoothing affect. It remains to be seen how this cleansing process is related to calming and stillness (*Beruhigung/Ruhe*).

The menacing political potential of antique concepts of theater as found in Plato is interesting for our discussion, as are the effects of identification assumed by Plato and Aristotle. In twenty-first-century Europe the theater certainly has a different status than it did in the *polis* of antiquity, where it functioned as a cultic event and was a representational tool for the powers of Athens. What we currently understand as the theater of tragedy in antiquity remains relevant both for European drama studies (then and now there is much “operation” with antiquity) as well as for bourgeois box theater, which in its self-definition greatly draws from “antiquity.” From the cultic and ritualistic function of antique tragedy several questions can be extracted: if and how, and in what form, theater (viewing box theater, street theater) can function as a cathartic space, as a place that allows transgression of norms, in a “no-time” that the everyday forbids? This will have to be investigated in relation to theater as a place of creation and *Ruhe*. If theater is a place of *Ruhe* in terms of productivity, opposed to neo-liberalism, then what function does theater have within the whole society?

### *B. Friedrich Schiller: ‘Dynamic stillness’*

Aesthetic texts of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century have proven useful in the further definition of *Ruhe*, going beyond simple oppositions of *Ruhe* and restlessness (*Unruhe*). With Friedrich Schiller, *Ruhe* can be subdivided into “dynamic stillness” and “deficient stillness.”<sup>12</sup> My research project does not and cannot deny the largely political reality and history of “deficient stillness,” but is instead interested in an investigation and development of “dynamic stillness.” Both Schiller’s dramatic writings and theories deal with *Ruhe* and interestingly enough, with different concepts of *Ruhe*. The first concept is social peace achieved by oppression and/or apathy. For Schiller, *Ruhe* is invalid if attained through oppression, and is explicitly compared to the tranquility of a graveyard.<sup>13</sup> This second concept of *Ruhe* appears within the social sphere of ideals and politics, and is constructed dialectically. In terms of my research questions formulated at the beginning, the following points will have to be clarified:

- a. the exact notion of dynamic stillness;

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<sup>12</sup> See Mark Roche, *Dynamic Stillness*, Tübingen 1987.

<sup>13</sup> See Mark Roche, *Dynamic Stillness*, Tübingen 1987, 50f.



- b. if and how theater can in Schiller's understanding contribute to political disturbance (*Belun/ruhigung*);
- c. the connections of *Ruhe* and worldliness, which also appear in Hannah Arendt's concept of involvement with the world;
- d. if Schiller's conception is apt to further differentiate *Ruhe* today, when repression does not work in linear ways as it did in monarchies, but in manifold winding paths, dynamics and internalizations.

### C. Bertold Brecht: Anti-realistic theater

Brecht's theory of theater is interesting in terms of the potential of political disturbance, because he sees theater as a possibility to make social connections visible, so they can be reflected on and criticized. The technique applied is the alienation effect. In Brecht's 'theater-of-gesture' the actors become visible by "pointing out."<sup>14</sup> A gap between the subject/situation of representation and the representing subject is meant to make anti-illusionary theater possible, and therefore present social processes as constructed and changeable.

For this investigation the following questions are raised in relation to Brecht's theory of theater: If theater is capable of reflecting social processes, via estrangement and the art of viewing, which assumes a knowledge of social codes, can theater be seen as having the basic potential to induce political alertness? Does the art of viewing offer an escape from the ever-present worlds of consumerism by sharpening a precise aesthetic perception and by calling for the "production" of one's own political position and values? Can this escape be found with Brecht's tools in one of the theatrical events to be investigated?

### D. Feminist and/or Post-dramatic Theater Theories

With Brechtian hindsight we know that realism, more than any other form of theater representation, mystifies the process of theatrical signification. Because it naturalizes the relation between character and actor, setting and world, realism operates in concert with ideology. And because it depends on, insists on a stability of reference, an objective world that is the source and guarantor of knowledge, realism surreptitiously reinforces the arrangement of that world.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Bertold Brecht, *Über die Schauspielkunst*, Berlin 1973.

<sup>15</sup> See Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, London 1997, 4f.

Feminist thinkers of theater discuss anti-realistic theater as a possibility to show and destabilize social power structures and gender stereotypes. Open dramaturgy and non-linear successions of scenes are understood as being able to show specifically female experiences. Which forms of theater can support female subjectivity and which ones cannot? The question is impossible to clarify outside the context. The formulation of oppositions of politically effective, (fragmentary theater), and politically ineffective (realistic theater), holds the danger of prolonging the dichotomies of being and seeming, of homogeneity and heterogeneity, of natural and artificial. Feminist thinkers have deconstructed these oppositions when they are connected to male and female as the central mechanism of hierarchic constructions of gender difference. Therefore, it seems more meaningful to investigate concrete works of theater as to their production of gendered subjects, and their potential to destabilize power relations.

### *Back to the start*

I will have to further clarify the different notions of *Ruhe/Unruhe*. Thus far, they are used to point to psychic and to political processes. One of the challenging aims of my project is to discover more about the relation between psyche and politics.

In the future my thought process will also *move* between theatrical and theoretical discourses. This method is useful for not having to use theater texts as proof of theory, and theory texts as an explanation of theater. It gives credit to an understanding of representation that is based on the construction of what is given, and does not assume representational relations (between Art and the “World”). However, the chosen metaphor of this thought process may inform us about *Ruhe* in so far as it sets *Ruhe* in relation to movement.

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