From Heiner Müller’s *Death in Berlin* to Christoph Schlingensief’s ‘Death’ in Venice: Metaphors and Spectacles of Illness on the Occasion of a Nobel Prize

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Abstract

Under the polished surface of national and cultural symbiosis, Europe has perennially emerged as a locus of political, social, and ideological implosion. Heiner Müller’s words could not have described it more accurately: “When we speak of peace in Europe we speak of peace in war” (Germania 1990). Prompted by the disconcerting to many-2012 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the European Union for “[helping] to transform most of Europe from a continent of war to a continent of peace,” this paper traces in the spiral workings of history an ailment that devours the body—in all its political allegory and thickness of flesh—from within. It is the cancer-stricken organism whose destabilized mechanisms have mindlessly ordered a cannibalistic schizophrenia—once experienced as self-destructive fascism, as a crippling schism between West and East, and lately, as a self-consuming recession in the South threatening the North with aggressive metastases. Heiner Müller’s and Christoph Schlingensief’s theatrical visions provide rich ground for such a debate: both of them were German, artistically and ideologically transgressive, and afflicted by cancer. Exploring the symbolic, the personal, and the political in their art, but in unbending denial of any set of edifying or therapeutic conceptions of closure whatsoever, this paper registers the artists’ avowal of “digging up the dead and showing them in the open” (Müller), as well as “[generating] visibility” (Schlingensief).

Keywords: theatre, body—illness, cancer

“When we speak of peace in Europe we speak of peace in war”

Heiner Müller

The European Union has been awarded the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize for six decades of “[contribution] to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe” (“Nobel Peace Prize Awarded to European Union”). The Norwegian Nobel Committee justified their choice stating that “the stabilizing part played by the EU has helped to transform most of Europe from a continent of war to a continent of peace” (“European Union (EU) - Facts”). The “dreadful suffering” in World War II demonstrated “the need for a New Europe,” beginning with the reconciliation of Germany and France after 1945 and later established after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the settling of ethnically-based national conflicts on what has been widely perceived as the European continent.

Exposing the precarious transition from the utopia of European unity to the dystopia of European Union, Eurosceptic politicians questioned the timing of this award, occurring in the middle of the “biggest [economic and social] crisis” in the history of the EU, which “has made the Eurozone look more divided and fragile than it has for decades” (“European Union
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(EU)-Facts”). This controversial award prompts a debate on whether the EU truly envisions “a unity in diversity,” as Anthony Smith states, or is a postmodern mutation of premodern nationalism under the rubric of a globalization-induced uniformity (70).

Such an inner split has often been associated with an ailment that devours the body/nation—in all its political allegory and thickness of flesh—from within. It is a cancer that has mindlessly ordered a cannibalistic schizophrenia, once experienced as self-destructive fascism, and lately, as a self-consuming recession in the South threatening the North with aggressive metastases.

Heiner Müller’s and Christoph Schlingensief’s political alertness, radical theatrical visions, and personal experiences with terminal cancer provide rich ground for such a debate. In Müller’s case, the diseased body of German history consumes itself until it completely runs out of either flesh or ideology in *Germania Death in Berlin* (1953-1971). In Schlingensief’s case, the diseased/dead body of the performer, in all its subjective, phenomenal terror, is politicized through its (dis)appearance in his posthumous award-winning exhibition at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011).

What essentially connects Müller and Schlingensief is that they both speak of guilt not just before a German, but also a universal audience. Müller confessed in 1990: “I feel guilty for Germany. And what surprises me most about recent events is not the tumbling of the wall but the resurgence of nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism […] A reunited Germany will make life unpleasant for its neighbors” (qtd. in Holmberg n.p.). Schlingensief similarly approached illness as “a symptom of what society has suppressed, of something [i.e. the National Socialist past] that breaks out because it can no longer be restrained” (Malzacher 188). Helen Fehervary sees this guilt as “the pervasive cancer of German history” that destroys the body (politic) from within (86). Susan Sontag accordingly states that, when attached to social and political criticism, the illness metaphor “[is] used to judge society not as out of balance but as repressive” (74). Departing from these postulations, I examine the extent to which the erratic nature of cancer and its cultural significations form an effective metaphor for dystopian ideologies, intranational fragmentation, and crisis in political as much as private identities. I further discuss the aesthetic grounds of the representation and reception of the tension between real and represented illness.

**Müller’s *Death in Berlin*: cancer as metaphor**

Heiner Müller’s *Germania Death in Berlin* was written between 1956 and 1971, under the impact of ideological, historical, and political transformations. There is always a major conflict at the center, one that he describes as the “rebellion of the body against ideas, or more precisely, the impact of ideas, and of the idea of history, on human bodies,” especially the wounds they inflict on them (*Germania* 50). It is no wonder then that the spectacle of post-human, quasi-mechanical figures that return from the dead of Germany’s nationalist past to haunt a faltering socialist present, and eliminate true revolution until they dissolve, like a cancer-stricken body, into nothingness, was pressing on a raw nerve to the ideologically bankrupt post-war East German regime. The play was thus banned from stage and print in the GDR until 1988, two years before the reunification of Germany.

Müller constructs his post-ideological universe by drawing on fragmentation as inborn to German identity in its own right—“the German schizophrenia” (*Hamletmachine and Other...*)
Texts 28), but also as a distinctive feature of its dramatic literature, revealing its Brechtian legacy (Kalb 154). The idea of rupture and the concomitant disintegration of the personal and national identities that runs throughout German history are conveyed through dense intertextuality and mocked historicity, as these mesh together in a collage of surrealism, farce, mime, and social realism, Müller’s synthetic fragments. Paired scenes, with each first scene referring to Germany’s historical or mythical past, and its double to East German reality further accentuate the concept of coexisting extremes.

This motif of rupture is obvious in the questioning of German identity and ensuing ideological conflict and internal violence as the play’s thematic core; in the structural rifts conveyed through temporal discontinuities; in the way plot is fragmented in several short and mainly unrelated scenes; in dense intertextuality conveyed through a large cast of characters borrowed from German history, mythology, literature, and folklore; in spectacular violence conveyed through the violent spectacles of dismembered bodies, obscene creatures, terrorist acts, disease and death; and ultimately, in spectatorial alienation induced by these semantically dense and schematically unrepresentable scenes.

What the fragmentary nature of the play and the intense physicality of its landscapes display is a body “unfinished,” mechanical, androgenous, prosthetic, limping, and cancerous. As Schivelbusch and Fehervary observe, this “unfinished” quality in Müller’s work “reflects the historical development of the GDR in a transitional phase” (104). Classical aesthetics of gender and genre are thus abandoned. As characters, they are absurd and estranging; as physical entities, they are almost unstageable; as ideologies, they are profoundly dystopian. This political debate is primarily grounded in the body-in-pain in all its pervasiveness and urgency, at once suffering and pain-inflicting, violated and violating, cannibalized and cannibalistic; “the body in its deepest extremity” (Garner 147). This body is choreographed into a spectacle of terrorism, “the terror of Germany” in Müller’s words, on both hermeneutic and aesthetic levels. Sue Ellen Case sustains that, if “true terrorism celebrates failure, unclear distinctions, error and confusion,” then the cancer death of a communist worker in the GDR in the final scene of the play attests to “the barbarian within” the ultimate form of internal disorder (72). The repeated failure and the systematic suppression of reaction are a central theme in the play. Robert von Dassanowsky-Harris associates it with the concept of “German misery:” the inability of the German people to sustain a successful revolution and a futile wait for a progress that is never realized (26). Cancer then becomes an apt metaphor for the “aspects of [German] history [that] have been repressed for too long” (Germania 24).

In Germania, Müller attempts a reviewing of German history from medieval times to the early 1950s and the crisis in the German working class movement in a GDR setting, so as to unearth the true causes of its current social and political disintegration.¹ To this end, he interlaces historical particularities like the failure of the peasants’ war against Prussian monarch Frederick II in the sixteenth century as the precursor of the defeat of the Spartacus proletarian uprising in 1918 (as seen in the first scene, “The Street 1”), and ultimately “the lack of successful revolution throughout the course of German history” (Ganter 137). In the same vein, the battle of Stalingrad (in the “Homage to Stalin 1” scene) appears as “a metaphor for all futile historical battles,” and as the most prominent ideological conflict in

¹ For a breakdown of each of the thirteen scenes of the play, see Ganter (97-221).
modern European history: Hitler’s fascism versus Stalin’s communism (Ganter 126). And third, the Workers’ Strike in the streets of East Berlin in 1953 and its brutal suppression by the Soviet army (in “The Workers’ Monument” scene) is yet another signifier of profound ideological disintegration within the communist movement, also indicative of the inner split in German identity. Dictatorial figures such as Caesar and Napoleon as man-eating zombies are paired with the Nibelung warriors, creatures found in Germanic myths, who engage in onstage obscenities, thus ascribing mythological depth to endless intra-European hostility.

Müller further deconstructs authority, religion and family—what Case identifies as “systems of lasting value” (73). For instance, in the place of Joseph-Mary-Jesus triad, “The Holy Family” scene presents a homosexual/oedipal Hitler-Germania-Goebbels triangle. Hitler is a whimsical soldier-eating egomaniac, and Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, is his transsexual pregnant wife. This alludes to the idea of sexual perversion and veiled homosexuality commonly associated with fascism (Dassanowsky-Harris 19). Germania, “the oldest revered name of German nationalism” (Case 74), is depicted as Hitler’s mother and mistress, the evil fruit of this union being a Thalidomide Wolf. The Three Magi offering presents to the monstrous infant represent the Western Allies: England, France, and the United States. In Müller’s imagination, the newly born Germany historically transpires as a continuation of Hitler’s fascist regime, is territorially located in the Federal Republic of Germany—and its capitalist allegiances—and is politically nurtured by Western interests in the Cold War period.2

Instances of inter-familial violence, and rivalry between brothers in particular, either real or symbolic, emphasize “the warrior ideology of German socio-politics” (Dassanowsky-Harris 16). Under this light, cannibalism, so far staged as mythological, in the case of man-eating emperors and monsters, or satirical, in the case of Hitler eating his soldiers, becomes symbolic once attached to the play’s contemporary socio-political backdrop. In “Homage to Stalin 1,” German soldiers with incomplete bodies, as stage directions indicate, trapped in a purgatory-like Stalingrad setting, appear to consume human limbs to avoid starvation. Nibelungs, then, devour the soldiers; once they run out of human flesh they devour one another. At the end of the scene, the leftovers of human limbs pile up in a monstrous mass of rotten flesh and metal; which part is more human remains pending, but also anticipates both the dismembered puppet-figure and the worker’s half-cancerous body in “Nightplay” and “Death in Berlin 2” scenes respectively.

As it seems, Müller’s is a bitter comment on the immanence of self-destructive violence among people of common national ancestry, “the war between brothers, between relatives [being] an old German situation” (Germania 23). This is obvious in the paired scenes “The Brothers 1” and “The Brothers 2” dramatizing two cases of fratricide. The first case is actually a passage by Roman historian Tacitus, about rivalry between two Germanic brothers. In the second one, the Communist, imprisoned by the very GDR communist regime he supports, is maltreated by his Nazi brother, with whom he shares the same cell and who

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2 Müller commented on West Germany’s allegiance to the USA: “If the United States is… the heart of the beast, then West Germany is the stomach,” pointing at its lust for power as well as fascination with Western capitalism. Appalled by the East Germans’ Western fantasies disseminated through the media, he was convinced that reunification would take place on the condition that “West Germany would buy out East Germany” (Germania 111, 92).
murders him moments later. The conflict that is cogently illustrated here is not one of protagonist against antagonist, but one of “the self at war with the self,” which is the ruling principle in cancer metaphors (Sontag 16). On a symbolic level, the self, traditionally made up of familial entities or ideas, becomes at once the subject and the object of the conflict with self-annihilation being the inevitable outcome.

The oppositions that have been accumulated like the piles of limbs on stage and are indicative of profound self-destruction culminate in the eleventh scene, a pantomime with the title “Nightplay.” As stage directions indicate: “A person stands on stage. He is larger than life-size, perhaps a puppet. He is wearing posters. His face is without a mouth” (Germania Death in Berlin 34). The puppet/person is mocked by an offstage agent while trying to reach a bicycle—a symbol of historical progress throughout German history (Ganter 213). After tearing his own legs and arms off, the puppet contemplates his despairing condition, his scattered limbs and the useless bicycle, lamenting his last lost chance to a successful revolution. Then, “two Beckett-spikes at eye-level close in from left and right,” and, with two movements of his head, the person/puppet blinds himself. With lice crawling out of the empty sockets, the person screams “and the mouth originates with the scream” (Germania Death in Berlin 34).

This scene poses several challenges, as it is almost impossible to be staged, except if recited or cinematically projected as a surreal animation. Bearing many similarities to Samuel Beckett’s Act Without Words I and II, “Nightplay” dramatizes the existential struggle of the self against a hostile universe (Kalb 166). Another obvious association can be made to Edvard Munch’s painting “The Scream,” where the “sonorous vibration” of pain becomes visible through concentric circles on the surface of water (Jameson 63). Whereas Munch’s scream expresses a sense of anxiety and alienation, Müller’s staged screams spread out into the world of the postmodern, where “the alienation of the subject is displaced by [its] fragmentation” (Jameson 63). With fragmentation transpiring on hermeneutic and aesthetic levels—as the physical dismemberment of the puppet coincides with the crippled ideology it represents, Müller’s absurd stage breaks from Beckett’s “history-less world” (Kalb 165). Presenting German self-destruction on a symbolic level, it is the play’s most critical point (Dassanowsky-Harris 16); and, though it seems to stand in the play unpaired, it is in fact the abstract double of the cancer-stricken worker’s death throes in the final scene.

Exploring the association between body and voice in torture, Elaine Scarry states that “the goal of the torturer is to make one, the body, emphatically and crushing present by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, absent by destroying it” (49). Here, however, with the body gradually disappearing and the voice violently emerging, the analogies of defeat are reversed. Müller’s point thus becomes highly polemical, a vehement incitement to action. The appearance of voice construed as a rebirth of identity has to come violently. But with no functional limbs, this rebirth into subjectivity is instantly deferred. Typically Beckettian, as Case notes, this solipsistic character “emerges when no revolutionary action is possible” (35). Unable to be sufficiently substantiated into a revolutionary scheme, this suggestive cry is congealed into a “material signifier in isolation,” just like Munch’s scream, produced by a subject without ears, is lost in the concentric circles of the water and into nature (Jameson 75).
“Nightplay” therefore condenses “birth and death,” Müller’s own “formula of theatre” as he describes it (*Germania* 56). In his all-but-Cartesian universe, however, death is not an irreversible state governed by deterministic temporal frames, but rather an erratically expanding state of protracted liminality to the point of becoming a permanent condition. Drawing on the concept of liminality in rites of passage as developed by anthropologist Victor Turner, Arpad Szakolczai postulates that

if all wars are liminal situations in which the cycle of mimetic violence escalates beyond measure, then the closing stages of a world war, especially the process of reconstruction that starts after such massive warfare, can be conceived as a rite of reaggregation. This is the moment to assess guilt and mete out punishment, but also to heal wounds, look towards the future (215).

In retrospective evaluation, “communism was a regime in which the Second World War never ended”, and which kept “[playing] continuously on the sentiments of suffering, revenge and hatred” (Szakolczai 215). The pain as performed by the non-yet-human puppet articulates the horror of incomplete transition, the lack of effective restoration of order and peace, and, hence, Müller’s own disillusionment with the failed ideological apparatus of the GDR. The times *Germania* dramatizes and the times Müller suspected were to come, which most probably are still underway, echo Zygmunt Bauman’s “times of interregnum:”

extraordinary situations in which the extant legal frame of social order loses its grip and can hold no longer, whereas a new frame, made to the measure of newly emerged conditions responsible for making the old frame useless, is still at the designing stage, has not yet been fully assembled, or is not strong enough to be put in its place (49).

Caught in transition, the Müllerian puppet, the future of German communism, and the ever-expanding contours of Europeanization that were to emerge from the ruins of the Berlin Wall, represent what Johannes Birringer perceives as the redefinition of Europe: “a highly complex work in progress” (28).

Abandoning surrealism and grotesqueness, the final scene, “Death in Berlin 2,” acquires real-life proportions. Hilse, a communist worker previously confined in a GDR prison, and whose opposition to strike is indicative of an ideological split within communist socio-politics, is dying of cancer. In the meantime, a young yet still childless couple visits him. For Hilse, who is trapped in the past, cancer represents the impasse occasioned by his inability to reconcile his political beliefs with the new circumstances: “I’m only half of myself, cancer ate the other half. And if you’re asking my cancer, things are just fine” (Müller, *Germania Death in Berlin* 36). No more safely framed by a body, the subject fails to maintain his ideological integrity. His incomplete body, like all the fragmented bodies that have peopled the stage so far, not only signifies Germany as a physically and politically split nation, as the Berlin wall would later prove, but also suggests an ideological division within the East, as the misappropriation of communist ideals, turning this aspiring experiment into a dystopia, even among its devotees, like Müller. The parade of cannibalistic and cannibalized bodies is suggestive of the battle within Hilse’s body, a *mise-en-abyme* of the self at war with the self, an eternal internal civil war. Politicizing this schizophrenic representation, it rests upon the
audience to configure which half is the cancerous one. “We are a party my cancer and I,” Hilse says, and the rotten part could be either side of the coin, but always integral to the self.

Fehervary provides a very interesting interpretation of the play’s closing scene as history that stands still, with “no flesh for the cancer of myth to feed on” (92). This stasis is conveyed ideologically, through the utter absence of hope for the future; dramatically, as the death of character coincides with the end of representation; and symbolically, through the metaphor of cancer as self-annihilation. The young couple and the vague prospect of a new life are not an adequate promise of change. In Antonio Gramsci’s words, “[the] crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (qtd. in Bauman 49). If such an incomplete closure might be didactic, it seems to be outside the finite universe of the play and beyond its author’s scope. After all, its author was never really “interested in answers and solutions,” but only in “problems and conflicts” (Germania, 34).

*Germania Death in Berlin* chronicles a profound disillusionment as it anticipates a dark prospect of the destruction of all utopias, Müller’s own included. Questioning his very own ideological consistency, Müller further challenges reception by deconstructing his role as author and the authority of meaning. Examining *Germania*’s thick “tissue of quotations”—as Roland Barthes would say (146)—in his absence, and looking beyond the text’s dense intertextuality, *Germania Death in Berlin* eventually emerges as a vibrant thesis on pain and fear. It appeals to what Nicolas Evreinov identified as a “theatrical instinct,” and as such, it is universal and thus pre-aesthetic (58).

On this stage that brims with putrefied flesh and petrified ideals, conflict is intrinsic and visceral; it has always been there, Müller implies, not only as the ongoing political civil war, but also, autobiographically, as “the two souls dwelling in [his] breast” (*Hamletmachine and Other Texts* 15)—the two Germanies. He died of cancer in 1995—an East German playwright with immense success in the West. In an interview, he expressed his hope “for a world in which a drama like *Germania Death in Berlin* can no longer be written, because the reality does not provide material for it anymore” (qtd. in Brenner 42). His intention to “[go] back to the bones of German history to make sure that crime is not lying dormant in guilt and repression” (*Germania* 59) is his defensive strategy against national guilt. He thus invested his hopes on the GDR, for “all the dividing lines of our world go through this country. That’s the true state of the world and it has become quite ‘concrete’ in the Berlin Wall” (*Hamletmachine and Other Texts* 15). Embracing both sides, Müller admitted “standing with one leg on each side of the wall” as only way for him to go by (*Germania* 32-33). Sontag’s analogy of cancer as constant transit between two worlds, as “a dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick,” rhymes thus with Müller’s personal and political schizophrenia. Embodying this essentially German split and releasing it back on stage is what made him a German as much as a universal playwright.

**Schlingensief’s “Death” in Venice: cancer as spectacle**

If Müller’s *Germania Death in Berlin* chronicles the quest for a national identity before the fall of the wall, Christoph Schlingensief’s art showcases the same conundrum after
reunification. While the wall represented the apex of modernist oppositions alongside a profound identity crisis emanating from such schizophrenic binaries, its fall did not provide any answers at a time of precarious unity, globalized economy and its double standards, and a loosely defined peace among nations. And while warfare in its WWII conception has been (almost) eliminated, “[the] widening gap in living standards between the prosperous North and the impoverished, chaotic, and self-destructive regions of the South” have posited new political challenges (Habermas 59).

Schlingensief was a West German filmmaker, performer, and director, who also died of cancer in 2010, while working on an installation that would represent Germany in the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. He was commissioned as such, as he was representative of post-unification Germany in the nineties, “a period during which peace-loving Europe failed to understand its own worst nightmares” (Birringer 31). Anticipating the precarious unity of European nations under a loosely defined state of peace and equality, Schlingensief belonged to a generation of politically alert artists who used the post-wall East German bankrupt socialism to “make—as malignantly as possible—the disease in the national body of Germany the subject matter of theatre and to create feelings of uncertainty” (Umathum 59).

On a European/global scale, Schlingensief was interested in the West’s apathy to violence as this is occasioned by postmodern media culture. At the same time, he questioned conventional aesthetics and experimented with the effect of alternative spaces on spectatorship. In particular, he was very fond of confusing his—often unwitting—audience by blurring the boundaries between art and life and thus putting the limits of representation and theatricality into test. In 1999, for instance, he boarded on a ferry in New York in order to “sink the garbage of German history,” which he carried in an urn, into the waters of the Hudson River. For what audience was he performing this ritual?—tourists that happened to be around, the media that adored his idiosyncratic style, or himself? What is undeniable, though, is that such an act anatomized the process of theatricality, which, according to Josette Féral, “has to do with a ‘gaze’ that postulates and creates a distinct, virtual space belonging to the other, from which fiction can emerge” (97).

Shifting from political parody to personal reality, his theatrical pieces on illness and death reveal his existential fear along with deep-seated catholic/capitalist guilt, “a mixture of disgust and fascination” (Diez and Reinhardt). Once illness stroke, Schlingensief was forced back into the painfully unbearable reality of his own body. In 2008, he was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer and had one of his lungs removed. But instead of allowing it to destroy the conditions of theatricality, Schlingensief incorporated this new experience in his art. He developed a new contract with his audience, shifting the perceptual dynamics of his presence from subject to object of the artistic process. The incorporation of death into life and life into art is at the core of his cancer trilogy, briefly discussed below, around which his posthumous exhibition at the Venice Biennale was constructed.

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3 The study of Schlingensief’s works poses a challenge to a non-German-speaking non-German-based researcher, as they have neither been systematically translated in English, nor fully archived. The Website www.schlingensief.org is a noteworthy attempt to introduce his multifarious art to a non-German audience. It contains digital platforms for almost all of his works for the theatre and opera, installation projects, action performances, etc. with adequate description and criticism in English along with photos, footage, and links. For the purposes of this paper, performance descriptions are predominantly based on these online sources, Forrest and Scheer, and the “German Pavilion” collection of essays edited by Gaensheimer.
The first part is *The Current State of Things*, based on tape recordings Schlingensief started to put together shortly after his diagnosis in January 2008. Resisting the cultural taboos that have traditionally enveloped cancer in silence, this was his first attempt to be outspoken about sickness and dying. Resisting the disintegrating effect of pain on language, his later art was dedicated precisely to defending the ill and disabled that have been banned by society as offensive, obscene, and troubling sight: “I am moulding a social sculpture of my illness,” he said; “[it] is simply about [generating] visibility” (qtd. in Umathum 191).

The second part is *Church of Fear for the Stranger in Me* (September 2008). This piece draws on the metaphorical association of cancer with Julia Kristeva’s concept of the Abject as the other that, even though part of the self, threatens the self with death. Staged as a Catholic Mass, it also brought into play the idea of guilt imposed on Christians by the Catholic Church—an allusion to Schlingensief’s own troubled relationship with religion and God. The collage of quotations by Heiner Müller, Joseph Beuys and others, and music by Wagner and Bach, are interlaced with Schlingensief’s recordings of medical reports and filmed sequences portraying him at a young age playing on the beach. The play ends with him appearing on stage as Jesus.

The last part, *Mea Culpa: A ReadyMade Opera* (2009), is a montage of quotations. It contains scenes and recordings from his other cancer pieces, along with passages from Goethe, Nitzsche, Beuys, Nancy, to name a few. It features a revolving scene that spins naturalistic African landscapes together with abstract sceneries, with “the principles of sampling, quoting, and steeling [being] carried to an extreme” (Malzacher 196).

The place that Schlingensief would exhibit his work in Venice was The German pavilion, a stone neoclassical “tomb of history” built in 1909 and redesigned by the Nazis. This “suspicious representational building,” as he saw it, is in fact the articulation of Hitler’s megalomaniac architectural plans, which involved the reconstruction of Berlin as a grand Fascist city called “Germania.” It was also another exemplification of the catastrophic expansion of Germany beyond its borders. Schlingensief’s intention was to transform the German pavilion into an “African Wellness Center” based on what was his life’s last and most significant commitment: the creation of an opera village in the African state Burkina Faso, consisting of teaching facilities, recreation sites, and accommodation. The pavilion would therefore introduce this project in its celebration of the Third World well into the shrine of Eurocentrism, as both this monument and the prestigious event that hosted this exhibition represented, to a universal audience (Gaensheimer 23). As those plans were disrupted by Schlingensief’s death, Susanne Gaensheimer, museum curator and commissioner of the German Pavilion, decided to devote the exhibition to his career as symptomatic of a double-edged suffering, Germany (the political) and cancer (the personal) (Diez and Reinhardt). She thought it was precisely this existential as much as socio-political split this retrospective installation should present. The exhibition therefore combined the three milestones of Schlingensief’s art: film, theatre, and Africa.

On the right wing there were projections of his early splatter films about Germany, which dig into the debris and the horror of his country’s Nazi past and the chain of events that led to the division and reunification of Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall—in particular, *100 Years of Hitler*, a documentary-like parody of Hitler’s last hours in his bunker; *The German Chainsaw Massacre*, a horror film about the cannibalization of East Germans by West...
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Germans shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall; and Terror 2000, which tackles xenophobia and right-wing violence. Other films included were: Menu Total (1985), and Egomania (1986) (Vander Lugt, 39).

The left wing was dedicated to his Opera Village project, featuring the projection of a filmed expedition to the construction site. Images of peaceful African landscapes were juxtaposed with scenes from his play Via Intoleranza II, in which Schlingensief himself, and, after his death, his filmed double, expressed his concerns about Africa, as it has been “infected” by the West, often under the pretext of goodwill initiatives (Cornish 191). That was a collage of fragments of his previous works that blended stories of his illness and incidents in the African village in a multi-textured performance by European and African actors, dancers and musicians.

Finally, the main hall was occupied by the sets of his 2008 Fluxus Oratorio A Church of Fear for The Stranger in Me. The church-like setting, complete with altar and pews, openly dealt with his illness and the concomitant shift in his art from audaciously political to painfully personal. During the time Schlingensief was alive, he would step on a stage impersonating Jesus before a mixed crowd of actors and audience members, and distribute the Eucharist; unlike Christ, however, he would say to the spectators/communicants: “This is not my body. This is your body” (Diez and Reinhardt). In all its eccentricity and blasphemy, this scene most significantly crossed the borders of performance, as it reminded the part-takers of the dying performer and of the uncontestable reality their own deaths.

On the day the pavilion’s doors opened, however, the altar-like stage was empty of live actors. Only the props were there to commemorate the once crowded stage. Among them, Schlingensief’s x-rays, a hospital bed, and an image of a beast with red lungs complemented the funereal atmosphere, while projections of the artist as a boy were counterpoised by his much older—ravaged by illness—self. The room was filled with pews; big screens were spread around the walls. The stage was an exact recreation of the nave of the Catholic church Schlingensief used to go to as an altar boy and where his funereal ceremony was held. The church-space stood between the Germany-themed right wing and the Africa-themed left wing, a clear metaphor of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory.

The main screen above the altar projected scenes from The Current State of Things, where he was heard dictating reports of medical exams:

Have this death cut out of you … as soon as possible. … And what comes then … is a new life. … It’ll be quite different from your previous one, with no big plans for the next year or so. … The prognosis for this kind of thing is not good. … Only a few people make it (qtd. in Malzacher 192).

When this piece was performed, a screen was placed very close to the first rows of seats, making the spectacle extremely intimate. Commenting on this arrangement, Florian Malzacher asks: “Do we want to see this? Do we want to get so close to him? Is it honest sharing, exhibitionism, or emotional blackmail?” These tapes are thus indicative of his overall schizophrenic attitude toward illness, as a blessing befallen on the artist, and as a visceral fear of one’s encounter with death (191).
Analogous to Müller’s staged scream of pain articulated by the puppet/person, Schlingensief’s mediatized scream was at once estranging and real: “Please don’t touch me now. I don’t want anyone to touch me anymore” (qtd. in Malzacher 191). When these recordings were reproduced at the Biennale installation, the artist’s mediated presence remained the same as penetrating, as it was intensified by the reality of his death. Although it might not articulate a symbolic despair, like Müller’s disillusionment about a revolution never to arrive, it politicized the primal fear of death that is immanent in all human beings. Appropriately moderated through a computer, it also played out society’s fascination with fetishized suffering, the way we are all familiar with, absorbing it in controlled numbing doses through a screen. Either way, it demanded that we listen.

Being thus a haunted space, the German Pavilion becomes at once an historical metaphor, a performative site, and a commodity, which transpires and expires before an audience. The filmic reproduction of the artist’s life, art, and suffering for the duration of the exhibition, creates the same enclosed universe we saw earlier in Germania Death in Berlin. Although at a first glance the pavilion’s stage is empty of actors, the stage is the pavilion itself, as an international crowd of visitors populates it. Space is literally and figuratively given to them to mourn the national and private tragedies exhibited: Germany’s as much as Schlingensief’s predicament. Yet, as the author/artist is literally and figuratively dead, spectators find themselves in front of an unprecedented freedom. The spectacle is released from all meaning, allowing for a limitless perception and reception: each member of the audience performs the mourning of their personal and national failures, maladies, or losses, as they gravitate toward the semio-ontological cleft caused by the absent artist.

Schlingensief’s performative absence subsequently poses a challenge on both aesthetic and hermeneutic grounds: what remains of performance once its generic constituents cease to apply? Does the death of the performer (actual and represented) equal the death of the spectacle? Since the ontological precondition of performance is the co-presence of actor and spectator, as Erika Fischer Lichte postulates, Being-ness is substantiated through the exposure to others (32). The absence of spectacle in live performance relocates the founding principles of society into society itself, which is to say, “society is the spectacle of itself” (Nancy 67). By forming this temporary community, spectators became part-takers; as such, they also turned themselves into spectacles. Framed by a space of dense historical and political signification, spectators were left to complete the unfinished artwork themselves. In Hans Thies-Lehmann’s words “[they] are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning” (6).

Even though this spectacle reveals its postdramatic profile (multimedia, self-reflexivity, pastiche) it also bares itself down to its primitive roots, returning the theatrical spectacle to its most basic principle: sharing space with others. As a liminal space, like all performative spaces, the German pavilion represents a threshold, which according to Richard Schechner is a “space that both separates and joins spaces,” a celebration of “the inbetween-ness” (295). Spectators are clearly apart from the performer, as they are alive while he is not, but also in communion with him, as they are part-takers to the spectacle he consciously created for them before he died. Negotiating the borders between the symbolic and the lived, Schlingensief haunted the already haunted site not as a man-devouring apparition, like Müller’s ghost of
history, but as the very body of history in transition, reflecting the very idea of Europe as the spectacle of its peoples, as an event that traverses borders, rather than an allocated space with rigid protocols of production and reception.

While Müller staged his “death as author” by abandoning his audience amid an interstitial universe of ideological stagnation, substantiating Derrida’s postulation that “the intention of the author must be absent in order for the linguistic sign to function” (326), Schlingensief’s physical death came uninvited, giving a literal dimension to his aesthetics of the unfinished. His mutating, disappearing body, traversing the borders between health and illness, life and death, presence and absence, the symbolic and the lived, is resurrected not as a man-devouring apparition, like Müller’s ghostly zombies of Germany past, but as the very body of history constantly in a state of becoming, a yet unfinished work in progress.

The full semiotic potential of the artefact is then released, for, according to Barthes, “to give a text an Author is to impose limits on that text … to close the writing” (147). In their empowerment of the audience, these fragmentary pieces, suggestive of a postmodern, post-ideological, postnational culture that is engulfed by the chaotic multiplicity of perspectives it promotes, pertain to what Barthes describes as the gravitation of the text’s unity towards its destination, the reader, rather than its origin, the author – and “the birth of the reader” must occur “at the cost of the death of the Author.” This new orientation can no longer be personal; the reader, according to Barthes, is one “without history, biography, psychology” (148). Müller’s Germania Death in Berlin and Schlingensief’s posthumous, award-winning meta-art exhibited in Venice, therefore, are to be received as open-ended, and event-like, rather than as semantically and structurally finite objects, inviting new readings; therein lies their affective potential.

**Politicizing the personal: Müller’s and Schlingensief’s open endings**

The fact that both Müller and Schlingensief died of an ailment they had previously aestheticized intensifies the experience of reception. Interestingly, it was through a series of poems that Müller chose to speak about his own illness. In one of them, he wondered: “Was I proud of my unvanquished/Tumor/One moment long flesh/of my flesh” echoing the ambivalent embrace of death anticipated by his ending to Quartet: “we’re alone now cancer my lover.” (“I Chew the Sick Man’s Diet Death” 109; Hamletmachine and Other Texts 118). Schlingensief’s reaction to cancer similarly exudes the pride of a megalomaniac, when he once said: “I am convinced I’ll get cancer… like Heiner Müller” and later: “I sometimes think that perhaps I instigated it somehow” (qtd. in Malzacher 198, 213). Could cancer be the new romantic disease, Malzacher asks. Or is it purely the outcome of a long repression of national and personal guilt, as Sontag would have been quick to notice?

These speculations on the represented and the real as concurrent states fanning out into an array of aesthetic and political negotiations disclose the ongoing appeal of Müller’s and Schlingensief’s works. And yet, they shared much more than their ideological opposition, obscene aesthetics, and private suffering. They both sought to escape from their country’s (and Europe’s) poisonous polarities—and, symbolically, from their dying bodies. “I’m waiting for the Third World… this big waiting room, waiting for history” Müller once said (Germania 15, 33). Schlingensief likewise wanted the Opera Village to be a prosthetic lung, a place where he could breathe: “The opera house must be built out of those materials that can
be found in Africa. That is the last breath I want to take.”

**Works Cited**


From Heiner Müller’s Death in Berlin to Christoph Schlingensief’s ‘Death’ in Venice