



ADDRESSING
'THE CULTURAL
LEVEL OF
AN AVERAGE
EUROPEAN'
(KAFKA)

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ABSTRACT

Several times during Oliver Frlić's 2019 production of Kafka's *Report to an Academy*, at Berlin's Gorki Theater, the question 'are you afraid of Jews?' is posed. This essay will explore what Kafka's parables make it possible to 'remember' theatrically, through the haunting of the past by the future. Here, perhaps, the question as to what we might be afraid of concerns the idea of European citizenship, as it is repeatedly impugned by the social stigmatisation — and worse — of different communities. In a context where authoritarian populism is a major political force, and with the European memory of laws that fail to provide for a universal condition of citizenship, the question of anti-Semitism, as of Islamophobia, might be rephrased in terms of the politics of 'majorities' and 'minorities' — and theatrically posed as: 'Are you afraid of democracy?'

RÉSUMÉ

A plusieurs reprises lors de la mise en scène faite par Oliver Frlić en 2019 au Théâtre Gorki de Berlin du *Rapport à une Académie* de Kafka, la question suivante est posée : « Avez-vous peur des Juifs ? ». Cet article se proposera d'examiner ce dont les paraboles de Kafka permettent de « se souvenir » théâtralement, à travers la hantise par le futur, du passé. Étant donné le contexte actuel où le populisme autoritaire est une force politique majeure, et que la mémoire juridique européenne n'a pas accordé la condition universelle de citoyenneté, la question de l'antisémitisme, comme celle de l'islamophobie, pourrait être reformulée en des termes suivantes : « Avez-vous peur de la démocratie ? »

KEYWORDS

Kafka, Frlić, Gorki Theater, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia

MOTS CLÉS

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With an effort which up till now has never been repeated I managed to reach the cultural level of an average European. In itself that might be nothing to speak of, but it is something insofar as it has helped me out of my cage and opened a special way out for me, the way of humanity.

Kafka, 'Report to an Academy',
trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir,
in *The Complete Short Stories*, 1992: 258

All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Kafka, 'On Parables', trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir,
in *The Complete Short Stories*, 1992: 457

I am going to Dresden as though it had to be, and will have to look at the Zoological Garden, in which I belong.

Kafka to Brod, 22 July 1912,
in *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*,
trans. by Richard and Clara Winston, 1977: 83

In addressing what Franz Kafka, in his satire of a literate ape addressing an academy, called ‘the cultural level of an average European’ — together with the parabolic mystery of what may, or may not, be ‘incomprehensible’ (whether in life or in literature) — the three epigraphs juxtaposed here introduce a disconcerting question concerning who might ‘belong’ in a cage. Here it is important to remember that in Kafka’s lifetime there were not only animal zoos in Europe, but human zoos also (Blanchard et al. 2011). The supposed distance between human and animal, marked by the cage as an index of ‘cultural level’, was related then to a social evolutionary paradigm (itself invested in racist and, indeed, eugenic principles), which such zoos tantalisingly suggested was permeable, as also the supposed division between education and entertainment, between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ social values. This epitomised a pernicious reduction in the understanding of human consciousness, one that the primatologist Frans de Waal has called ‘anthropodenial’ (2019: 50) in its very assertion of colonial anthropocentrism. De Waal writes, for instance,

The anthropomorphism argument is rooted in human exceptionalism. It reflects the desire to set humans apart and deny our animality. To do so remains customary in the humanities and much of the social sciences, which thrive on the notion that the human mind is somehow its own invention. I myself, however, consider the rejection of similarity between humans and other animals to be a greater problem than the assumption of it. I have dubbed this rejection *anthropodenial*. It stands in the way of a frank assessment of who we are as a species. (2019: 50)

The ‘civilising’ claim of ‘human exceptionalism’ — emblematised by reference to ‘an Academy’ in counterpoint to a zoo or a circus in Kafka’s ‘Report’ — glosses the supposed distance between animal and human, satirising the latter’s desire to define itself in opposition

to the former. In its sensitivity to this estranging scenario concerning ‘humanity’, Kafka’s narrative attests to fantasies underlying different ‘levels’ of European culture, exposing its reading to the very conditions of violence that it narrates.¹

This is, indeed, the fundamentally parabolic aspect of Kafka’s writing, which seems to be conceived of, and presented by, the victim of the violence of which it tells; as if the mouse were itself the architect of an experiment in which it is the tortured subject. It is as if the creature had designed a cage with no way out — save, perhaps, for the inevitable one, in which the interests of ‘humanity’ are no different to those of any other animal. (This sensitivity could, of course, be related to Kafka’s day job as a professional legal writer of reports for the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute.) The oscillation between the literal and the metaphorical — in which the parable of the (in)comprehensible is exemplified by the Kafkaesque trap of an incriminating innocence — is made explicit, for example, in the name of the subject of ‘A Report to an Academy’. The adjective ‘red’ in the name of the ape — Red Peter — who tells his life story to the Academy refers not to any Communist affiliations, but to the scar that marks the gun shot that introduced him to human society and its variety of cages. The role of the name — a metonym of and for acquiring language — in the relation between what is unforgettable and yet not remembered (being learnt about only subsequently, when it becomes possible for the ape to talk with the perpetrators of this violence) is a key to the paradoxical temporality of the ‘Report’.

1. I have also discussed this interweaving of theories of evolution with European politics in Kafka’s ‘Report’ in another essay, reflecting on a film made by Peter Friedl for Documenta 14 (Twitchin 2022a).

The Gorki Theatre in Berlin, 21 September 2019.
Photograph by Mischa Twitchin.



Alternative Cages

The question of literacy and empathy here translates that between humanity and animality, unsettling the relation between entertainment and education projected by institutions — figured in the exchange between the zoo and the academy — that even now can only ambiguously be called ‘post-colonial’. By contrast to Kafka’s 1912 letter to Max Brod (Kafka 1977: 83), the ascription of belonging in a zoo is rarely one’s own, offering an ironic alternative to the other cages (or institutions) that define one’s social existence. Kafka’s reflections on his writing are mirrored in the example of Red Peter, who managed to escape from being gawped at — whether in a zoo or in a vaudeville theatre — and ended up being listened to in an academy.

Amongst many theatrical adaptations of the ‘Report’ (often made as monologues for particular actors) is one presented by Oliver Frlić at Berlin’s Maxim Gorki Theater (2019), where the theatre itself serves as a double of the eponymous academy. Frlić has made several productions at the Gorki, beginning with *Gorki — an Alternative for Germany?* (with the all-important question mark) in March 2018. Indeed, under the artistic direction of Shermine Langhoff, this theatre has been committed to exploring plural ‘alternatives’ for Germany, distinct from the one offered (without a question mark) by the right-wing political party — Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) — that despite (or, perhaps, because of) its explicitly racist politics has gained seats in the German parliament over recent years. Langhoff addresses the Gorki’s work through the term ‘post-migrant theatre’, with her commitment to the ‘radical diversity’ of social narrative engaging the politics of the state-funded repertory system that prevails in German theatre.² This is the artistic and political context in which the Frlić *Report* appears,

offering its own question of what might be ‘European’ in contemporary theatre. In this context, such reflexive questions as those posed by Aleida Assmann gain renewed resonance: ‘Can we conceive of something like a European identity? Is such a thing even desirable? How could Europe become an imagined community? And what would contribute to these collective ideas?’ (Assmann 2016: 217–18)

In the year of its production (during which I was able to see performances on three different occasions), watching Frlić’s *Report* was not really dissociable from the political context in which the so-called ‘German Alternative’ political party increased its representation in the state parliaments of Brandenburg and Saxony, capitalising on a sense, in the former East, that the ‘reunification’ of Germany remains unfinished business. In the September 2019 elections, for instance, the party’s slogan, ‘Complete the transition’ (*Vollende die Wende*), re-inscribed the idea of the 1990 *Wende* in a process of delegitimising the state apparatus, pursuing a programme of disruption in contesting matters of cultural memory — matters that might have been thought, until recently, settled or mainstream (not just in Germany but across Europe).³ Here we see the outline of a reversal of the recognition made in 1985, by the then West German president, Richard von Weizsäcker, that the end of the war represented not simply defeat for Germany but ‘liberation’ (Weizsäcker 1985: 2). The resonance of this understanding, especially for democratic politics in Germany, continues to gain significance up to today. As Susan Neiman has observed: ‘When the AfD attacks decades of efforts to work off the Nazi past as shameful, it is imperative that the rest of us insist that shame can be the first step toward responsibility’ (2020: 20).

← 2. In the second issue of the *European Journal of Theatre and Performance* (May 2020), the Artist in Focus section is devoted to the Gorki Theater under Langhoff’s direction. See: <https://journal.eastap.com/eastap-issue-2/> [accessed 19 July 2022].

Amplifying the scapegoating of migrants and refugees, the AfD's election narrative in the 2019 elections was put forward at the very time that the German President, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, was in Warsaw participating in a commemoration of the outbreak of World War II. Asking 'for forgiveness for Germany's historical guilt' and recognising Germany's 'enduring responsibility' (Steinmeier 2019: 4) for the war's seismic destructiveness across Europe — above all, through the Nazi programme of genocide — the President's speech appealed to a common understanding (or remembrance) of the past. The contrast, however, between his invocation of a responsibility to prevent any 'resurgence of nationalism' (Steinmeier 2019: 3) and growing nationalist politics — not only in Germany, of course, but also in Poland, Italy, Sweden, and elsewhere — demonstrates that appeal to a 'shared' European cultural memory (as proposed, for instance, in the optimistic title of the second EASTAP Conference in Lisbon, in 2019, 'Shared

← 3. Of course, as with any far-right party, there is an element of truth in the AfD's reference to certain effects of political-economic violence, if not to their causes; not least, as this is manifested in their electoral success. In an interview with the *Observer's* Berlin correspondent, Kate Connolly, the AfD's leading candidate in the Brandenburg region, Andreas Kalbitz (who makes no secret of his neo-Nazi past) says that: 'It has been forgotten in the west, but people in the east have not forgotten how people came with their fast cars and closed down the businesses, so as to clear the field of competition for western businesses' (Connolly 2019: 34–5). As Connolly summarises Kalbitz's position: '[he] insists it is largely western Germans' lack of empathy towards easterners, and the widespread perception that they plundered the east of its wealth in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of communism, that has fuelled much of the resentment among Brandenburgers.' Here the party's xenophobic politics are recast as an intra-German colonial history, interweaving *what* may be understood to be 'German' with *who*. An East German police officer, Bernd Wagner, wrote a report on neo-Nazis in the GDR in 1987 (a report that was buried at the time) and he comments today that: 'Westerners have no feel for how fragile things are. The elites don't see the post-democratic decline. Easterners have seen a system collapse before' (quoted in Bennhold 2020: 4). Between empathy and resentment, then, comes the work of history and memory that we call politics — as, indeed, in its theatre.



The foyer of the Gorki Theatre in Berlin, 21 September 2019. Photograph by Mischa Twitchin.

Memories') occludes as much as it promises.⁴ The ambiguities of both parliamentary and theatrical politics in addressing the 'cultural level of an average European' today unsettles any progressive assumptions about Europe as a 'community of memory' (Assmann 2016: 220). With respect to the Gorki's *Report to an Academy* production, exposing the tensions between theatrical and political representation is, indeed, what one would expect from Frlijić — even if, perhaps, Kafka does not quite conform to the terms in which he is staged there.⁵

4. See the conference announcement at <https://eastap.com/blog/2019/08/20/program-eastap-ii-conference-in-lisbon/> [accessed 19 July 2022].

5. For the trailer of Gorki Theater's *Report to an Academy*, see: <https://www.gorki.de/en/ein-bericht-fur-eine-akademie> [accessed 19 July 2022].

On Entering the Theatre

As the audience enter the theatre, Red Peter is sitting in one of two large, upholstered chairs on an otherwise bare stage, with the iron safety curtain down behind him. He smokes a pipe while silently observing the conversations of those filling the auditorium. The safety curtain will later be raised to reveal a library, a setting which will itself be later revealed as masking a huge cage when the books fall off the shelves, as if pushed by ‘invisible forces’, theatrically exposing what was hidden by their image of humanistic values. The Gorki Theater, after all, is more or less opposite Babelplatz, on the other side of Unter den Linden, which was the site of Goebbels’s book burning spectacle in May 1933 — a tragic sign of what was to come in the Nazis’ destruction of any ‘alternatives’ to their own claim to a monopoly of power. The image of the cage — for which the theatre-as-academy offers a mask — is carried through into a satire of the Reichstag at the production’s end.

This explicit image of captivity, as it is evoked by Red Peter’s account of his abduction and transportation by agents of ‘the firm of Hagenbeck’ (Kafka 1992: 251), is a telling contradiction of the development of ‘modern’ zoos by the Hamburg entrepreneur Carl Hagenbeck, who took ‘wild’ animals out of fairground cages and created environments or enclosures in which they could roam ‘freely’ in their European imprisonment. This may be seen as an underlying parable for the shift to what Gilles Deleuze called ‘control societies’ (1992), in which social order is maintained without the overt appearance of a police state. As many critics have discussed, the carceral is now participative for the majority rather than directly repressive, although state violence remains the guardian of an ‘educated’ self-exploitation (as a mode of self-policing).



The metro in Hamburg, 3 August 2019. Photograph by Mischa Twitchin.

Without dimming the house lights, the performance formally begins with the entrance, through the auditorium, of someone who introduces herself as ‘Elizabeth Costello’ and who addresses the audience with reflections that relate the Holocaust, animal rights, and the ethics of the bystander. After about ten minutes of this not-so-implicit indictment of the audience, she then introduces the figure who has been seated on stage all the while: Kafka’s simian academician, Red Peter.

For those in the audience who do not recognise the source of this opening speech (drawn from a lecture given in the eponymous novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, by J.M. Coetzee) and, therefore, its intertextual

device of performance by literary quotation, the accusatory didacticism of its reminder of all that is condensed in the name of Treblinka makes for a discomfiting start. Heard without quotation marks, it feels like the audience is, indeed, being lectured rather than drawn into ‘the world of the play’. And yet this is, precisely, the introduction’s fiction, reproducing that of Coetzee’s text, which is itself a lecture that references Red Peter (Coetzee 2004: 62–80) given by Coetzee to an academic audience gathered to celebrate his literary achievements (Twitchin 2019).⁶

With this intertextual framing, making the performance an acutely meta-theatrical project, Frljić’s production offers an unfolding palimpsest — with characters drawn from across Kafka’s work, not just the ‘Report’, including the figure of the author (Kafka) himself. Through a series of scenes that are characterised by their serial interruption, in a montage rather than a developmental drama, the production’s own theatricality is foregrounded — not least, when the playing of a wedding scene extends out into the auditorium, with a naked actor clambering through the first few rows of the audience or when a real baboon sits on stage, as the addressee of Red Peter’s ruminations on man and god.

On Entering the World of Carl Hagenbeck

Amongst various historical figures related to the twentieth-century context of the ‘Report’, the already mentioned Carl Hagenbeck also appears. An importer of wild animals for European zoos, Hagenbeck also brought ‘exotic’ human beings to Europe for public exhibition. This aspect of the Hagenbeck story is only passingly mentioned — and then without any further comment — in an issue of the magazine published (again in 2019) by the Hamburg zoo that bears its founder’s name, celebrating the 175th anniversary of his birth.⁷ In various ways the Hagenbeck colonial era is still present in Hamburg — literally so in the naming of metro stations, for example, orienting us in the urban landscape as well as the imagination — when addressing ‘the cultural level of the average European’ today. Besides the human characters, Red Peter too has historical models — such as the celebrated primate performer, Consul Peter (Radick 2019; Rothfels 2002: 190) — and, in the full version of Costello’s lecture, we are reminded of Wolfgang Köhler’s experiments with apes (conducted at the same time as Kafka was writing), especially with one named Sultan (Coetzee 2004 71–5).⁸

⁶. An even more intense citation of this same text in and as performance is made at the beginning of the second part of Krzysztof Warlikowski’s production, *(A)pollonia*, which has been in the repertoire of Warsaw’s Nowy Teatr for over a decade (Twitchin 2022b and 2023).

⁷. In the magazine’s 175th birthday wishes, the only reference to Hagenbeck’s role in human zoos (*Völkerschauen*) is presented as if it were self-explanatory: ‘Here he established contacts for his animal trading and informed himself about the great exhibitions and innovations in the developing leisure and entertainment business — which he himself kept supplied with exotic ethnographic shows and sensational dressage troupes.’ (*Hier knüpfte er Kontakte für seinen Tierhandel und informierte sich über die grossen Ausstellungen and Neuheiten in der entstehenden Freizeit — und Unterhaltungsbranche — die er selbst ständig mit exotischen Völkerschauen und sensationellen Dressurgruppen versorgte.*) (Gille 2019: 47)

⁸. A sympathetic, historical-critical review of Hagenbeck and his legacy is given by Nigel Rothfels (2002), who also cites Kafka’s ‘Report’ in his discussion.

Beyond these relations between the fictional and the historical, however, there is the allegorical (or parabolic) relation between the wound that gives Kafka's literate ape his name and the hidden tail that is a reminder of his animality for others. This is also a signifier of the very question of the fiction itself, since an ape — unlike most other monkeys — does not in fact have a tail. The scar — as a signifier of and for questions of (in)comprehension — is a reminder of the Hagenbeck-funded colonial hunters in Africa who murdered Red Peter's mother before abducting him for a caged life in Europe. According to Hagenbeck's daughter in Frljić's play — named Josephine, after another of Kafka's allegorical animals (Kafka 1992: 360–76), in whose guise she, indeed, first appears here — killing the mothers makes the orphaned animals easier to train for their future in European captivity.⁹ As if to compensate for the cruelty of her father's business, this Josephine marries Red Peter, their wedding offering some very acute exoticisation of European pretensions — particularly concerning the uses of the mouth for both eating and speaking (as well as for kissing) in 'civilised society'. That this scene is played with great comic effect indicates that it does, indeed, touch on something repressed within the 'acceptable behaviour' of those attending the theatre.

Kafka's satire, of course, suggests that the tension between the scar and the tail is a parable of the naked apes in the audience to whom the 'Report' is addressed. As already noted, the production also stages a reflection (through a confession by Red Peter) on the relation between the theoretical father, God, and a real monkey — a baboon called Jea-ny. The compelling stage presence of the latter poses its own questions concerning whose image the performance is made in. The 'Report' was written, after all, when notions of the 'missing link' were much in vogue,

⁹ Rothfels quotes from contemporaries of Hagenbeck, such as Alexander Sokolowsky, who reflected poignantly on the often fast demise of captured apes (2002: 1–6), exposing the reverse implications of anthropodenial in the cultural politics of empathy.

popularising a misunderstanding of Darwin, as if the relation between ape and human represented a break rather than a continuity in evolution.

In *The Descent of Man*, for instance, Darwin proposed that, 'My object [...] is to shew that there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties' (Darwin 2004: 86). Darwin conceived of animals as possessing mental processes analogous to those we call consciousness, manifested in practical — even in reflexive — terms, despite not being articulated as such in language. The 'link' that is, as it were, 'missing' concerns, then, the historical self-understanding by humans of empathy (and, indeed, of the mimetic), as this has been explored in research as diverse as that by Aby Warburg (in art history), Vittorio Gallese (in neuroscience), Michael Taussig (in cultural anthropology), and Frans de Waal (in primatology). The question of empathy is also explored in literature, of course, and is profoundly addressed by Coetzee in his Costello lecture. (A contrast between Köhler and Darwin can also be gauged from chapter 4 of *The Descent of Man*, for example, which addresses the 'moral sense'.)

'Are You Afraid of Jews?'

This manifold palimpsest of cultural memory and meaning in Frljić's production is made explicit with a question that is repeatedly posed by the character of Josephine (Kafka's Mouse Singer and also, here, the daughter of Hagenbeck): 'Are you afraid of Jews?' Although addressed to Red Peter, the question to and for 'you' implicates the audience, of course. The fictional and the historical are intertwined as past and present speak of and to each other through this theatricalised device

of implication (distinct from the opening gesture of direct address in Costello's references to Treblinka and social-political indifference). The complex sense of implication has been thematised by Michael Rothberg, who writes of what he calls 'the implicated subject' that this is 'not an identity, but rather a figure to think with and through' (2019: 199). Crucially, he continues, 'Socially constituted ignorance and denial are essential components of implication; as such, they are also potential starting points for those who want to transform implication and refigure it as the basis of a differentiated, long-distance solidarity.' (ibid.: 200) One could say that it is, precisely, this sense of 'transformation' and 'solidarity' that Frljić aims to rehearse in his theatre work.

Josephine's question is discomfiting — not simply when heard in the heart of Berlin, but as it is translatable in any European capital city. On the one hand, the question is posed in the historical context of the staging — the world in which Kafka and Hagenbeck are contemporaries; that is, as a question of anti-Semitism as if bearing upon the participation of Jews in European politics and culture. On the other hand, this question has profoundly changed since the Shoah, as the question now also implies 'are you afraid of Nazis?' Or, indeed, 'are you politically afraid of 'other' Germans (who are not Jewish)?' The question pertains not simply to those to whom violence was done, but also to those by whom it was done (not least, 'passively'). As this concerns politics and its theatre, it is worth noting that the commemoration of victims in the past often veils the question of perpetrators in the present.

Voicing the question of a fear of designated 'others' in a theatrical scene between fictional characters offers an historical short-circuit with the facts of Kafka's own family, as an instance of what is profoundly problematic considering a 'shared' memory of European anti-Semitism. For, of course, the question of xenophobia concerning fellow citizens is not simply historical when it evokes the politics of implication.

Here another palimpsest is in play, one with European-wide resonance, even as it is staged as a cultural alternative 'for Germany'. For behind this question of Jews is, of course, that of Muslims. Furthermore, if one is Black, the question of racism would concern not simply one's confessional heritage and a potential assimilation into the dominant culture.¹⁰ Particularly given the resonances of a discourse about animality that haunts the populist question, 'Are you afraid of immigrants?', all this touches upon the ostensible indices of Kafka's satire addressing the 'cultural level of an average European' as it informs the recognition of citizenship, with its attendant rights and responsibilities; not least, through the image of the cage (Kafka 1992: 252).

Interestingly, no one in a post-show discussion that I attended at the Gorki (in April 2019) raised the question, 'are you afraid of Muslims?' Or even, indeed, 'are you afraid of anti-Semitism?' The 'of' here entails the sense of both its manifest and latent violence — felt by both Jews and Gentiles, for whom its tropes are embedded in European languages and which flourish when not explicitly addressed. This is equally the case with Islamophobia (not least, at election time), as this resonates, for example, in Salman Sayyid's observation: 'What is it about the question of Europeanness now that makes insisting on the Muslim question one of its most vocal expressions?' (2018: 434). Perhaps the self-selecting group of the Gorki's audience attending a discussion with the production's dramaturg were being 'discrete' about such questions, politely preserving the specificity of the theatrical in the context of the political. It is, of course, a common trope of European cultural memory to refuse the sense of implication in the basic political question: 'Are you afraid of racists?' Or rather (to transform this 'historical' question

¹⁰. Rothberg engages, for example, with the important testimony offered by W. E. B. Du Bois on precisely this point (Rothberg 2009: 111–34; 2019, 125–8), and this is also the concern of Susan Neiman's comparative discussion of American and German histories of racism in terms of an 'accountable perpetrator' (Neiman 2020: 390).



in and for the present): ‘Are you afraid of racism?’ In both formulations the ‘you’ is, of course, oneself: ‘Am I afraid that the racist in question is me?’ Paradoxically, then, it seems as if the contemporary might be culturally forgotten when remembering the past (as ‘history’), despite Frljić’s aim to theatricalise the mutual implication of past and present as a question of and for ‘shared’ cultural memory.

Are You Afraid of Democracy?

Indeed, the question of implication touches upon what may be learnt from — and not simply about — the past, understood as a future that has potentially already occurred. For behind these questions, after all, is yet another one, which the production itself comes to in the final part (albeit without stating it explicitly): ‘Are you afraid of democracy?’ Ultimately, as we already know, this question of political ‘alternatives’ (in the relation between state and society) is grounded in the possibility not only of war but of genocide. Beyond systemic discrimination and marginalisation, genocide begins with the legal exclusion of ethnic, religious, or other minorities from a majoritarian (rather than universal) status of ‘national’ citizenship. In its concern for justice, the past is not yet completed (except as it is forgotten), but remains culturally mutable — not least, in the demand of its victims to be remembered. This is evoked, for instance, by what Max Horkheimer suggested was the theology in Walter Benjamin’s materialism, with the latter’s idiosyncratic understanding of how ‘[t]he materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state’ (Benjamin 1999: 471).



The Hagenbeck Animal Park in Hamburg, 3 August 2019. Photograph by Mischa Twitchin.

Benjamin's reply to Horkheimer's assumption that the past is simply what has already occurred offers a key to the work of interpretation in and for cultural politics: 'The corrective to this line of thinking maybe found in the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. What science has "determined", remembrance can modify' (Benjamin 1999: 471).

But how might such remembrance avoid simply instrumentalising (or rationalising) the theatrical as political here? In evoking what is implied by the Gorki-Frljić production of *Report*, how does one avoid simply contextualising the one (whether politics or theatre) by reference to the other and thereby occluding what is specific to each? How might the example of Kafka's parabolic writing invite us to work through an unsettling of relations between the 'incomprehensible' and the 'everyday struggle' — as it invites a recognition of ambiguity rather than a trap sprung by dialectics in the 'critical state' of the present?

While the separation of past and present (as between cultural memory and forgetting) is manifestly not the intention of Frljić's production (however it might seem so in effect), one could wonder what it is that Kafka's parables make it possible to remember in terms of 'creation, research, and politics on the European contemporary stage' (as the subtitle of the 2019 EASTAP Conference proposed). These parables are not simply 'historical', after all, even as they illumine their historical context today, despite questions of implication remaining too often descriptive rather than anticipating any sense of the transformative. As Theodor Adorno famously discussed (1998: 89–104), 'working through the past' does not necessarily make it any less traumatic — as has been symptomatically registered in a post-war politics that has become content simply to commemorate the past, rather than to transform it in and for the present. Indeed, as Irit Dekel and Esra Özyürek write, 'The Nazi past is increasingly presented in a ritualised and spectacularised

fashion, often as unrelated to racism in Germany today' (2021: 394). Nonetheless, theatre (distinct from mass, or even social, media) may perhaps allow us to rehearse such a political-cultural transformation.

The *Report* production broaches this entanglement in its penultimate scene by reciting a political speech about Germany as a model of and for European democracy, given the example of how it has addressed its totalitarian past. This speech is addressed to the real baboon, Jeany, seated inside a cage model of the Reichstag, embodying a metaphor of the animal within the political question of 'others'; as well as, perhaps, a satire of the idea of 'learning democracy' as a prophylactic against 'radicalisation' (once extolled as a virtue by fascism).¹¹ Initially presented as if spoken directly by Red Peter, now a member not just of an Academy but of Parliament, it turns out that the speech is a recording; as if its themes were something that could be spoken automatically or unthinkingly within contemporary German politics. This gesture ambivalently exposes the sense of the pedagogic values 'that have allowed [Germany] to enter once again into the community of civilised nations, and [that] are the standard by which it will be measured in the future' (Assmann 2016: 241–2).¹² Today, after all, we read such an affirmation as that offered by Assmann (originally written in 2006) from the point of view of that very future — in a relation to historical time that both the literary and the theatrical (and their translations) seem, parabolically, to escape.

11. The complex interweaving of this with Islamophobia in Germany has been illuminatingly discussed by, for example, Esra Özyürek (2018 and 2022). To quote again from her article co-written with Irit Dekel: 'What is actually at stake is something more comprehensive and thoroughgoing: the possibility of a shared and equal life in a plural, democratic society' (2021, 393).

12. This has been critically discussed by Mischa Gabowitsch in his assessment of an emergent culture (or 'imperative') of 'atonement', in which post-war Germany is taken as a model in contexts that are in fact profoundly different (2017, 1–24 and 274–302).

While some politicians engage meaningfully with critical ideas about responsibility concerning the past, others only mouth clichés, while still others try actively to undermine any supposed moral consensus, identifying social fractures that they then exploit. Crucially, the changing ‘politics of memory’ (Hilberg 1996) concerning the relation to cultural-political minorities — particularly in the emerging institutionalisation of the professed ‘uniqueness’ of the Holocaust — occludes the manifold (and equally changing) sense of Muslims as the ‘new’ national minority serving as an index of and for the constitution of national cultural memory, through contested claims about ‘belonging’. How do such critics of Islamic participation in German politics and culture — from Thilo Sarrazin to Ahmad Mansour (feted as if endorsing a model of German civic values) — fit into such general claims as those offered by Assmann?

Does Frljić’s performance, for example, literalise Kafka’s parable (in its own sense of understanding the ‘everyday’ and the ‘incomprehensible’), as if to point only to the ape’s scar and not the tail? Might a reading of the source texts of Frljić’s production already say more about its political possibilities than the production itself does — or even, perhaps, can? Might one suggest here that Kafka is a political writer, in the sense that Benjamin is a materialist philosopher? Might the memory of Kafka — at least, when read with Benjamin — expose ‘political theatre’ to the politics of theatre in a way that exceeds the framing of Frljić’s work, for all that the latter explores (indeed, stages) cultural and political violence so acutely?

The final gesture of the production sees Red Peter and his wife Josephine take their seats for a performance in the same theatre that we are sitting in. The scene returns to its pre-show tableau — although both



Stencil-graffito in Tartu, 13 September 2019. Photograph by Mischa Twitchin.



of the on-stage chairs are now empty. Elizabeth Costello once again enters the auditorium and the last line is a repetition of the first: ‘Ladies and Gentlemen’ — at which point (this time) the house lights, which have been on throughout, go off. In the sense of a parable, then, the audience is returned to where it already is; albeit now with the inevitable question of Treblinka understood as, historically, already implied. Between the zoo and the parliament, imagination and history, citation and interruption, repetition and difference, the theatre offers a rehearsal (or a hope) for each of these conjunctions to register a resistance to their familiar political disjunction. What is evoked here is a cultural memory that is not necessarily ‘shared’. Rather, as in Adolph Muschg’s formulation, the production shows that ‘what binds Europe together and what divides it is essentially the same thing: the common memory’ (cited in Assmann 2016: 224).

On Leaving the Theatre

The fundamental ‘lesson’ of Kafka’s ‘Report’ concerns the relation between literacy and empathy, without which the creative potential of cultural memory is silenced — distinct from being loudly commemorated by the theatre of state. In terms that bear precisely on the question of democracy, Aleida Assmann writes that ‘unless history is taught to future generations of Europeans within a common European framework of memory, the idea of Europe will remain an empty fantasy’ (2016: 234). As noted before, these evocative words were written in 2006 and the Gorki Theater, with its commitment to migrant and minority voices within German culture, offers a current example of giving practical content to such a ‘teaching’, whereby ‘the idea of Europe’ might become

historical rather than fantastical or empty. Similarly, Susan Neiman — who herself refers to the Gorki Theater as an example of such a hope (2020: 15) — voices the ethical implications of the factual dimension of history when she writes of her own work: ‘The goal is to wrestle with questions about how working-off-the-past [*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*] can prepare the ground for freer futures, and how it can become a process that blocks access to them instead [...] [This is a moral training] that cannot be confined to historians but must become a matter of shared public memory — history no thinking man or woman can honourably ignore.’ (2020: 19)

Like anti-Semitism (today as much as yesterday), Islamophobia is part of a European revanchism that ‘see[s] in the advances of antiracist struggles a loss of white privilege [and, one might say, of ‘ethno-nationalist’ privilege] rather than the achievements of social justice’ (Sayyid 2018: 428). The question as to whether or not such commitments as evidenced by the Gorki Theater and Frljić’s *Report* can transform the ‘average’ into the ‘honourable’ — in addressing the present ‘level’ of cultural memory beyond an ‘empty fantasy’ of European citizenship — points to a parable of implication, engaging historically with what may be ‘shared’ (or shareable) in the complex relation between theatre and politics. •

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