

# **Transgression of Taboos in Postdramatic Theater. Productive Aesthetics of Risk**

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**Abstract:** This contribution analyzes Aristotle's influence on the modern understanding of theater (based on the concept of the drama script) as a restriction and reduction of the potentiality of theater. Therefore, it presents a comparative analysis of the objectives of the antique theatrical practices around the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. (before Aristotle) and Schlingensiefel's "Action 18, Kill Politic" (2002). It provides also a transcultural examination that helps explain the meaning of the postdramatic transgression of taboos, its productive aesthetics of risk, and its social and political potentiality. Thus, the performance "Action 18, Kill Politic" is analyzed as a process-oriented and experience-based aesthetic of risk as well as a 'social drama' in everyday life.

**Keywords:** postdramatic theater, aesthetic of risk, social drama, performativity, potentiality

In the history of the German speaking theater, the postdramatic aesthetic of risk can be understood in some way as a redefinition of the artistic form as well, as the social and political dimension of theater performance, that transcends the boundaries of the Aristotelian and modern criteria of dramaturgy. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Aristotelian and modern dramaturgy and theatrical practice have been based on a staged drama script or narration which constructs boundaries between reality and fiction, and establishes distance between audience and actors. Since that time, the drama script, as the key element of the aesthetic ideal of

German and Western theater, has helped moreover to clarify when 'dramatic time' has replaced routinized social living (Turner 1928: 7). That is why in 21<sup>st</sup> century German contemporary theater practice one of the transgressions of taboos in postdramatic aesthetic starts with its objective to conceptualize art, in the sense that it offers not a representation but an intentionally unmediated real experience relating to body, space and time (Lehmann 2006: 134). Consequently, its political dimension tends to intervene directly in political issues of everyday life beyond the understanding of modern theater as a representation or narration based on a drama script. This raises several questions: is it possible to think of and experience political theater practices without narration? Without a fable in Brecht's sense? What might political theater after and without Brecht be? Does theater, as many people believe, rely on the fable as a vehicle for the representation of the world? (Lehmann 2006: 134).

Postdramatic strategies related to these questions enhance the potentiality of theater in transgressing taboos: a productive aesthetics of risk targets a taboo, which is defined as a socially anchored form of affective reaction that rejects certain realities, forms of behaviour or images as 'untouchable', disgusting or unacceptable (Lehmann 2006: 186). This includes institutional criteria of artistic and aesthetic works. In this sense, Christoph Schlingensiefel's theater concept is a good example of postdramatic aesthetics dealing with transgressions of taboos.

Evidently, the potentiality of political theater after Brecht and without fable or narration does exist and is to be found, among others, in Christoph Schlingensiefel's action-oriented theater performances. Christoph Schlingensiefel (1960-2010) was a German theater director, performance artist and filmmaker; he was well known in Germany and other German-speaking countries (Austria and Switzerland) as an *Enfant Terrible*. In fact,

his art work generally does not leave one indifferent. Due to its aesthetic potentiality of transcending institutional boundaries of art into real social and political spheres, Schlingensief's work activated the audience, who were sometimes directly and actively involved in the performance. For example, his performance *Bitte liebt Österreich! – Erste Österreichische Koalitionswoche* (2000, "Please Love Austria! – First Austrian Coalition Week"), alternatively called *Ausländer raus* ("Foreigners Out"), was produced in 2000 in Austria, when the FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) became part of the government coalition. While performing this work, Schlingensief placed a container next to the Vienna Opera House with twelve 'asylum seekers' assembled inside. The Austrian public was then asked to vote on which refugees should leave the country. This controversial piece of action art caused outrage in Austria as the performance was a subversive critique against the crescendo of xenophobic politics exemplified by the FPÖ's admission to government (Pyzik 2015). In a similar vein, and with more or less the same political reactions, in June 2002 Schlingensief staged "Action 18, Kill Politic" against Jürgen Möllemann, the deputy leader of the German liberal political party FDP during the 2002 German federal elections. The irritation and scandal that these theatrical interventions caused can be accounted for by the fact that the pieces do not represent a fictional reality but rather catalyze real political actions and issues. Both examples show that some postdramatic modes of theatrical expression blur or overstep the boundaries between theatre and forms of artistic practice such as Performance Art, which strives for an experience of the real (Lehmann 2006: 134).

First, this article analyzes Aristotle's influence on the modern understanding of theater (based on the concept of the drama script) as a restriction and reduction of the potentiality of

theater. Second, this contribution presents a comparative analysis of the objectives of the antique theatrical practices around the 6 and 5 B.C. (before Aristotle) and Schlingensief's "Action 18, Kill Politic" (2002). It provides a transcultural examination that helps explain the meaning of the postdramatic transgression of taboos, its productive aesthetics of risk, and its social and political potentiality. Third, the performance "Action 18, Kill Politic" will be analyzed as a process-oriented and experience-based aesthetic of risk as well as a 'social drama' in everyday life.

### **From Aristotelian Aesthetic Ideal of Drama to Postdramatic Theater**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the interest of European societies in written texts and literature strongly increased. Therefore, emphasis on the drama script became the key element of European/Western theater during that period (Schechner 2003: 72). This explains why for about 300 centuries, the usual modes of reception in theater, as Anton Bierl stresses (2012: 286), have been "characterized by naturalistic and veristic performance traditions that focus on the plot/action, drama, psychologically credible characters and suspense". This claim goes back to Aristotle who in his *Poetics* examined the Greek theater performance from the same perspective. Based on the conviction that Aristotle, "who stands so close to the tragedies of classical Athens, could fully comprehend these texts, this view, also transmitted by the discipline of Classics, became the leading and commonly shared position" (Bierl 2012: 286).

Another explanation of why the Aristotelian perspective became the exclusive reference for Western theater, until the advent of Bertolt Brecht's theater, dates back to the period of the media revolution that occurred around the late 5 B.C. in Ancient Greece. This revolution progressively transformed the

predominantly body-centred and oral modes of expression into a written culture of books (Bierl 2012: 286).

The rolls of papyrus on which the first scripts were written were manufactured from reeds that grew in the Nile, and it was in Alexandria on the mouth of the Nile that the world's greatest library was established in the early 300s BC. [...] Whilst Greek actors in the Roman period concentrated on performing extracts, particularly musical numbers from Euripides, scholars in Egypt set up literacy scholarship as an independent exercise. Over the centuries a certain social cachet became attached to the Greek once spoken in classical Athens, and the study of classic texts entered the educational system. Seven plays by Aeschylus, seven by Sophocles and ten by Euripides were bound up in book form and widely circulated, and our knowledge of Greek drama is thus largely based on the literary tastes of the second century AD. The eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes also reflect the choice of this period. Happily, we have a better perspective on Euripides because of the chance survival of a volume of his complete works (titles E-K), together with many fragments of papyrus that reveal his popularity in the later Greek world (Wiles 2000: 170).

The period of systematic media transformation of Ancient Greek culture from oral to written word, which occurred between 5 and 3 B.C., corresponds exactly to the time when Aristotle set down his aesthetic ideal based on the drama script and received tragedy almost exclusively as a text and action and suppressed its theatrical dimension. Aristotle based his abstraction of dramatic form on the works of the Greek playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles

and Euripides who lived before him.

The decisive and exclusive importance of the written text and its corresponding period has, from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, been at the core of modern theater productions. During the same period, marked among other things by colonization, the influence of drama script-based theater productions expanded around the world; their tools and criteria of analysis (focusing on realistic/naturalistic, on plot/action, on psychologically credible characters and on suspense) have for considerable time been applied to determine whether or not non-Western theatrical performances can be considered theater as such.

However, even if the drama script at that time was dominating Western performance, non-Western theatrical practices have significantly influenced Western theater. This influence first manifested itself in avant-garde productions at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and became mainstream in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Schechner 2003: 72). Hence, a transcultural view point, as Bettine and Christoph Menke (2007: 6) observe, shows that the Aristotelian drama script-based theater represents a historically specific and structurally limited form of theater. For his part, Rüdiger Schaper (2014: 33) radically asserts that Aristotle was even late to set down the theory of drama in his *Poetics*. Moreover, Schaper (2014: 33) critically remarks that already a hundred fifty years before Aristotle and without any knowledge of his theory, great theater works had been produced in the world that remain significant until today.

It is thus clear that Aristotle himself expressed his own aesthetic ideal of what drama and theater ought to be. Wiles (2000: 170) observes for example that Aristotle's dislike of performance and isolation of the written text from its performance context is bound up with his deep dislike of the Athenian democratic system. The theater of words was for the elite, the

theater of sound and spectacle for the masses. This leads him to conclude that “Aristotle’s elitist thinking” motivated him “to identify a certain type of script as the aesthetic ideal” (Wiles 2000: 170) and to analyze drama only as texts to read. At the same time, he deliberately ignored multiple aesthetic as well as performative key elements of Ancient Greek theater practice connected to ritual and political contextualization: it was embedded in real time and space with real bodies in action related to the spectacle with strong, heterogeneous visual, acoustic and kinetic dramaturgical components of the scene in process (Bierl 2012: 287). Unlike modern mainstream understandings of the modes of expression of theater as isolated from political, religious and quotidian life, the ancient Greek theater performance was rather a double “act of worship of a god” and “a kind of surrogate political assembly”, aiming “to explore this middle ground between politics and ritual” (Wiles 2000: 77). It was indeed not isolated from political and ritual activities and the Greek dramatists were supposed, “to engage publicly in shaping the past, present and future of the community” (Wiles 2000: 172).

Greek culture was predominantly oral in the classical period. The dramatists taught the roles to their actors face to face, with the correct intonations, movement and music, and there is no evidence that actors ever received a script. [...] This was a culture that accorded low status to the written word (Wiles 2000: 167).

Based on these insights and the performative turn in the 1960s, the postdramatic and transcultural framing of theater and performance studies could re-read the antique theater performance and other cultures around the world from another point of view, freed from the dominating and restrictive Aristotelian perspective.

Thus, antique theatrical practice before Aristotle, known as “predramatic, in the words of Hans-Thies Lehmann, find its elucidation in the postdramatic theater” (Bierl 2012: 286).

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many research approaches have emerged based on the ethnologist Milton Singer’s work ‘cultural performances’, the anthropologist Victor Turner’s ‘liminality’ discovered in some African ritual performances and Richard Schechner’s works on ‘Performance Theory’. These approaches have transcended established institutional boundaries of art and recognized that performances are not only fundamental to the habits, practices and rituals of cultures, but a part of everyday life and thus constitute artistic modes of expression (Klein 2011: 6-11).

Moreover, the postdramatic theater approach oversteps the model of the Aristotelian and dramatic theory and structure basically associated with the drama script; it goes beyond the old expectations of theater and opens, for example, unexpected theatrical contexts and aesthetic dimensions: it “presents itself as a meeting point of the arts and thus develops – and demands – an ability to perceive which breaks away from the dramatic paradigm [...]” (Lehmann 2006: 31). The perspective also reveals that theatrical modes of expression have neither geographically nor historically consistently relied only on drama script (i.e. a fictional, staged story) but also on a shared and experienced reality in social life. However, it is important to underline that the prefix *post* in postdramatic theatre “is to be understood neither as an epochal category, nor simply as a chronological ‘after’ drama, a ‘forgetting’ of the dramatic ‘past’, but rather as a rupture and a beyond that continue to entertain relationships with drama and are in many ways an analysis and ‘anamnesis’ of drama” (Lehmann 2006: 2). In this sense, Lehmann’s term postdramatic theater is to be understood as a generic paradigm that stands for more than just

the theorization and the description of a wide range of theatrical practices that have emerged since the 1970s in Europe. It is essentially about the diversity of an international and historical theatrical framework in several cultures around the world, which can neither be examined nor understood from the restrictive dramatic viewpoint. Furthermore, owing to the insight that the generic paradigm of postdramatic theater embraces a wide range of international, historical and heterogeneous theatrical modes of expression relating to rituals and politics as well as a continuously rediscovering and regain of theater practices of past periods (Antique, Middle Age etc.) and other cultures (in Asia, Africa etc.), this contribution asserts that Schlingensief's performance "Action 18, Kill Politic" is a good example of postdramatic aesthetics of risk in so far as it creates unforeseeable circumstances and offers an intentionally unmediated experience of real time, space and body in everyday and political life.

Hence, the following connections between postdramatic aesthetics and the objectives of Christoph Schlingensief's theater as well as some characteristics of antique theatrical practices can be observed: the theater situation is a kind of a real-life experience that shapes political and ritual aspects of everyday life, related to the past, present and future of the community. The next part of this paper will present and discuss "Action 18, Kill Politic" as a postdramatic adoption of antique theatrical aesthetics.

### **Postdramatic Adoption of Antique Theatrical Aesthetics**

Christoph Schlingensief's transgression of taboos and aesthetic of risk attempt to tackle the problematic issues of modern societies and democracy. The connection between Schlingensief's postdramatic performance "Action 18, kill Politic" and the pre-Aristotelian Ancient Greek theater is the aesthetic of 'social drama' embedded in real time and space which

seeks to explore the middle ground between politics and ritual. Schlingensief staged a theatrical situation that shaped everyday German reality regarding both cultural and political events: he used the cultural occasion of the festival ‘Theater der Welt’ (Theater of the World) and the political event of the German federal election in 2002 to directly address the community of citizens through theatrical action, exactly like the poet in Ancient Greek tragedy would have done:

In tragedy, the poet spoke to the whole community, as well as outsiders who had come to view the community, so it was imperative that the plays should not be seen as partisan. The poet [in tragedy] was a kind of appointed guru, and the space of the festival allowed him a special freedom of speech. This was a freedom to look into the void: to confront death, on occasion to confront also the possibility that an entire community might be extinguished; and to confront the moral void, where right meets right and there are no answers (Wiles 2000: 35).

In fact, Schlingensief directed his performance in June 2002 against the German politician Jürgen Möllemann, the second leader of the German liberal political party FDP at that time. In response to debates on anti-Semitism sparked by the FDP’s political discourse, Schlingensief as an engaged artist and citizen decided to ‘intervene quickly’. He did not want to invent anything, but wanted to artistically represent the politician Möllemann. His contribution was titled “Aktion 18: Christoph Schlingensief, der deutsche Kennedy” (“Action 18: Christoph Schlingensief, the German Kennedy”). The documentation of the retrospective exhibition *Christoph Schlingensief 2013/2014* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin precisely

summarizes this performance action as follows:

To mark the German federal elections in 2002, ACTION 18 plagiarized the election campaign of the pro-business FDP, in which party grandees [...] propagated PROJECT 18 with the goal of achieving 18 percent of the vote [...]. Jürgen Möllemann tried to appeal to anti-Semitic sentiments by resorting to anti-Israeli statements and tirades against prominent German Jews. Schlingensief decided to address this thoroughly populist balancing act. He launched ACTION 18 on June 23, 2002 in the Theater Duisburg with a special edition of QUIZ 3000 [...]. The quizmaster Schlingensief asked candidates FDP-specific questions excoriating the party's policies. The high point of the event was when he challenged the audience to complete his exclamation "Kill ..." with the name "Jürgen Möllemann" . The following day, flanked by a huge police presence and media pack, Schlingensief conducted another action on the grounds of Möllemann's dubious export consultancy firm Web/Tec, complete with piano à la Joseph Beuys. His action diary reads: "Washing powder into the piano to check the purity of its notes. This place requires a cleansing ritual. The old detritus of the Möllemann era must be disposed: the besmirched flag of Israel and a straw doll. It stands for the Axis of Evil. Then we distributed 20 kilograms of feathers and 7,000 ammunition shells in the gardens of Möllemann's weapon-dealing firm. Then some smelly meat. An old witch's ritual. Besmirching is followed by defense." Meanwhile, Möllemann held a press conference in the regional parliament in Düsseldorf, and, on account of the events in the Theater Duisburg, accused him of "sedition" and "incitement to commit a crime" [...] A

“book burning event” organized by Schlingensief on the banks of the Rhine in Düsseldorf was subsequently observed by a police helicopter. Schlingensief set up a book of condolences on the death of the FDP in the pedestrian zone in Bonn and prematurely brought ACTION 18 to an end [...] (KW Institute for Contemporary Art 2013).

As one can see, the “Action 18, Kill Politic” is based on real social life experience and expressed by an unmediated self-presentation and presence: it is based on the real performative interaction between Schlingensief, the politician Möllemann and the police, as well as civilians. All of them become decisive and active participants in unpredictable series of actions (e.g. the exclamation “Kill [...] Jürgen Möllemann”) in the processual running performance. The immediacy of active interaction between Schlingensief’s bodily presence, as well as his self-presentation and the reaction of Möllemann and the police, develops not only a common borderland between performance and theater (Lehmann 2006: 134); this borderland also turns into an eventful and theatrical process and a risky situation where performativity, potentiality and relationality of the running performance are being tested and experienced. Katharina Pewny, Johan Callens, and Jeroen Coppens (2014:8) argue that performativity and potentiality consist of a more specific process of exploring the question of relationality in terms of aesthetic configurations of relationships. Related to “Action 18, Kill Politic”, the performativity shows a kind of kaleidoscope of individual, real actions “that are realised only by virtue of being executed” (Pewny, Callens, Joeroen 2014: 8). For example, artistic, ritual and political issues intermesh in real time through the interaction between the artist Schlingensief, the politician Möllemann and the police. These series of performative actions

carry a power of efficacy expressed through potentiality in the sense that it foregrounds the risky capacity of Schlingensiefel's process-oriented dramaturgy to constitute and become reality as performativity (Pewny, Callens, Joeroen 2014: 8). "Action 18, Kill Politic" is thus characterized by the practical, simultaneous manifestation of relationality, performativity and potentiality in so far as it enhances "the processual nature of dramaturgy (in contrast to dramaturgy as a product)" (Pewny, Callens, Joeroen 2014: 8). Therefore, this performance can be viewed as "a classic example of political performance and, as in a religious ritual, the focus is more on the performer's real actions" (Behrendt 2011: 12). The focus lies also on the real reactions of Möllmann, the police and the media: for example, Schlingensiefel performed his voodoo ritual in front of the consultancy firm Web/Tec under police surveillance while Möllmann was in the regional parliament in Düsseldorf, holding a press-conference in the presence of the media. On account of the events in the Theater Duisburg the day before, he accused Schlingensiefel of 'sedition' and 'incitement to commit a crime' during the press conference.

This kaleidoscopic range of real reactions perform the problematic, as well as dialectic, of relationality as aesthetic configurations of relationships as already mentioned: in this case, the performance as a non-mimetic and non-fictional narration is characterized by a risky series of real actions parcelled and fragmented at different times and in different spaces and also involving different protagonists. Additionally, it underlines performatively practical and process-oriented changes through the reactions of opposing protagonists. These process-oriented and situational real actions of self-presentation of all protagonists in this postdramatic performance remake the history of Ancient Greek theatre. Art in general cannot develop without reference to earlier forms (Lehmann 2006: 27); in the case

of theater, it returns to its most profound roots in what Victor Turner (1982: 11) has called ‘social drama’ in the everyday life of a specific community. Indeed, in terms of Turner (1982:11), the roots of theater are in ‘social drama’, which accords well with Aristotle’s abstraction of dramatic form from the works of Greek playwrights. Schlingensief’s “Action 18, Kill Politic” therefore qualifies as ‘social drama’.

### **Conclusion: “Action 18, Kill Politic” as a ‘social drama’**

As previously discussed, relationality, performativity and potentiality (in the sense of a practical forming of reality) focus on process-oriented as well as experience-based individual actions. Based on the notion of ‘social drama’ from an anthropological perspective, Turner (1982:11) defines the term as a paradigm of description and analysis of a form of ‘drama’ that is embedded in real social life. He first observed this form of cultural performances when doing fieldwork in some African villages. ‘social drama’ can be conceived of as ‘drama’ that is constantly emerging from the otherwise fairly even surfaces of social life. Being an artist with theatre experience, Turner argues that such a manifestation of drama reveals individual character, personal style, rhetorical skill, moral and aesthetic differences, as well as potential and actual choices. Furthermore, Turner remarks that in large-scale modern societies, ‘social drama’ may escalate from the local level to national revolutions, or from the very beginning may take the form of war between nations. For Turner, in all cases, from the familial and village level to international conflict, ‘social drama’ reveal ‘subcutaneous’ levels of the social structure of all social systems. In small-scale societies, there are oppositions among clans, subclans, lineages, families, age-sets, and religious and political associations. On this basis, Turner concludes that social life, then, even its apparently quietest moments, is

characteristically ‘pregnant’ with social drama. This is the point of departure and the first stage of ‘social drama’. The second stage besets people all the time, in all places, and at all levels of sociocultural organization. For Turner, the third stage of social drama, the mode of redress, which has always contained at least the germs of self-reflexivity, has moved out of the domains of law and religion into those of the various arts. For example, theater performance like “Action 18, Kill Politic” “probe a community’s weaknesses, call its leaders to account, desacralize its most cherished values and beliefs, portray characteristic conflicts and suggest remedies for them, and generally take stock of its current situation in the known ‘world’” (Turner 1982: 11). This is how artistic means are used in the third phase of ‘social drama’ with the aim of alluding to political issues. In this sense, “Action 18, Kill Politic” is a sort of staged and aesthetic exaggeration, of juridical and ritual processes; it is not a simple replication of the ‘natural’ total processual pattern of the ‘social drama’. It is an investigative, judgemental, and even “punitive character of law-in-action” (Turner 1982: 12) that remembers tragic history and predicts possible future consequences. Schlingensief aimed to criticize Möllemann’s anti-Israeli statements and his tirades against prominent German Jews as well as the appeal to anti-Semitic sentiments, thus reminding us of the causes and consequences of the Second World War. Schlingensief’s ‘book burning event’ is also an exaggeration in the sense of artistic anticipation attempting to draw people’s attention to the same tragic history.

Like Ancient Greek dramatists, protagonists in Schlingensief’s “Action 18, kill Politic” are public figures, engaged from a postdramatic perspective; they are not acting roles but they are offering their presence for contemplation (Lehmann 2006: 135) through each performed presence. Lehmann underlines

that performance in the wider sense has aptly been described as an “integrative aesthetic of the live” that focuses on the risky “production of presence”, and the intensity of “face to face” communication, which cannot be replaced by even the most advanced interface mediated communication process” (Lehmann 2006: 135).

To conclude, the productive aesthetic of risk in the “Action 18, Kill Politic” shows processual patterns and represents an exaggeration of ‘social drama’. Its transgression of artistic and political taboos is inextricably linked to the aesthetic unbordering of the theatrical setting. Its potentiality and aesthetic impact consist in the performativity of a real-life experience or sequence of experiences expressed through theatrical doubling that create possibilities for other insights. This is why a transcultural examination of “Action 18, Kill Politic”, considering diachronic and synchronic elements, allows for the observation of a figuration and contemporary reality-virtuality continuum of pre-Aristotelian or predramatic aesthetics, its ritual and political modes of expression, and its potentiality and efficacy. Therefore, the elucidation of the pre-Aristotelian/predramatic aesthetics in postdramatic theater is also about the resumption or continued reworking of older aesthetics, beyond the dramatic idea or the authority of dramatic paradigm in theatre (Lehmann 2006: 27).

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