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## The Tragedy of Earth

### Some Remarks on Climate Change In German-Speaking Contemporary Theatre

#### Abstract

This study explores the intersection of climate change and contemporary German-speaking theatre. The paper delves into the challenges posed by climate change and species extinction, emphasizing the need for presenting facts and fostering commitment. Drawing parallels to ancient Greek tragedies, the author examines the dramaturgical potential of political theatre to address the "tragedy of the earth" and instigate essential changes. The study covers various aspects, including the presentation of scientific facts and scenarios, the role of reason and ethics in theatre, the portrayal of Gaia (Earth) on stage, and the call for action in the tradition of Brecht and contemporary theatre. The exploration extends to the use of masks, the evolving nature of postdramatic and post-human theatre, and the challenge of representing nature and Gaia within traditional dramatic forms. The author concludes by discussing the ongoing search for an adequate theatrical form to address the tragedy of climate change and species extinction, emphasizing the role of drama and theatre in helping humanity navigate these challenges.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Tragedy, Political Theatre, Gaia, Postdramatic Theatre, Brecht, Masks, Post-Human Theatre, Anthropocene, Hubris, Ethics, Anthropomorphism, Children's Theatre, Species Extinction, Contemporary Theatre

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## Hubris in theatre and society

Climate change and species extinction are an immense challenge for German-language theatre. Above all, facts would have to be presented and commitment encouraged. In this paper, paradigmatic stagings and plays of the last few years will be sketched and the dramaturgical potential of a political theatre or are theatre, which is political, to adequately deal with the tragedy of the earth and to initiate necessary changes will be shortly discussed. As you may know, in the first recorded tragedy by Aeschylus, *The Persians*, the Athenian citizens were warned in the theater after their victory over a formidable enemy about the consequences of not guarding against hubris. From the perspective of the Persian ruling house, the Athenian citizens were shown in the Theatron of Dionysus Theater how quickly arrogance, ignorance, and escapism can lead to overlooking or misinterpreting warning signs, resulting in the downfall of a community, society, and individual. The admonitions of seers like Tiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus* or in Euripides' *The Bacchae* were tragically ignored as well. Tragedy, from the beginning of European culture to the present day, is intertwined with the recognition of uncomfortable truths. Hubris, peripeteia, and anagnorisis, and in modern times, I would add, commitment, continue to challenge theater, particularly when it comes to the tragedy of climate change and species extinction.

## Facts and scenarios

Ideally, science provides facts. Facts should not be alternative facts, even though facts need to be selected, evaluated, and presented. However, decisions based on the assessment of scientific facts solely lie in the hands of politics. Politicians must decide whether jobs in the coal industry or the survival of the Maldives are more important to them. Nevertheless, science is not free from theatricality in its presentation of facts. Climate research presents its results and projections in what are known as scenarios. Scenarios are not predictions, like those of mythical seers in ancient tragedy. They are projections of facts and various assumed conditions into the future. In modern age, we have the freedom to make rational choices for what is right. In making scenarios, scientists remain skeptical: Scientific facts and scenarios cannot be verified in themselves, but they should be falsifiable according to Karl Popper

(Popper 2007). Scenarios should be plausible or causally possible. They therefore exhibit interesting parallels to theater and drama. Aristotle also believed in his *Poetics*, that tragedy should be probable (Aristoteles 1981). This belief is echoed in the Renaissance drama, Lessing's bourgeois tragedy, the well-made play, and quality series. Both on the epistemological and moral levels – think of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative – , reason is called for, with some even demanding a new Enlightenment (Weizsäcker and Wijkman 2017, 179; Gabriel 2022) and hoping for a rediscovery of reason and utopia after the unleashed postmodern and often post-factual era. For this purpose, on the one hand, dramatic theater can assist in pursuing a rational path in the fight against climate change and the foolishness of individuals who still have not recognized the seriousness of the situation. Friedrich Schiller's use of reason in his concept of tragedy, which builds on Kant, and his aesthetics of play provide an appropriate counterbalance on the intellectual level for the instinctual aspects of human nature. On the other hand, we have known since Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* about the Dionysian foundation of theater, which, as (neo)avant-garde theater today, no longer adheres to traditional dramatic forms, but a more or less contemporary post-dramatic expression searches. Against this backdrop, ethical and epistemological perspectives in theater take on different meanings. In a nutshell: Dramatic theater focuses on the rational, ethically definable positioning within the action or constellation of characters, which legitimizes the division between right and wrong and ultimately good and evil. Post-dramatic theater, as theater of ritual (Richard Schechner), suggests that overly clear representations and stereotypically portrayed dramatic identities, which obscure prior power dynamics and violence, would be a urgent issue in theatre and society.

## Gaia on stage? (from Galileo to Lovelock)

With reason, ethics, and a good outcome, children's and youth plays easily succeed. In spite of exciting new approaches to promote performative forms in children's and youth theater, I would still assume that especially younger children tend to prefer closed dramatic forms and easily interpretable stories that help them understand the complex world. For example, Franz Hohler's *Gengalo the Glacier Flea* allows glacier fleas to experience climate change up close – It drips in the glacier cave, and Fitshi fleas fleeing from the sinking Fiji Islands

arrive in Switzerland – while the glacier flea children force the adults to follow ecological reason.<sup>1</sup> *Gengalo* is immensely effective: Since my son saw ‘Gengalo’ with me, we are no longer allowed to use airplanes.

As is well known, children have a lot of imagination; their world of objects is animated, and if you kick a stone with your foot, it hurts the stone. Good artists have a lot of imagination. Reason, facts, and imagination also form the basis of Margulis and Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock 1988; Lovelock 2009; Margulis 1999).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, anthropomorphism in adult theater is somewhat peculiar, isn’t it? But probably we need much more anthropomorphism in theatre, when we have to deal with climate change and species extinction. Adult theater reluctantly follows the children’s theater, as can be seen, for example, in Martin Heckmanns play, who has just been invited to the play festival in Mülheim. He has seriously adapted *The Bremen Town Musicians* as *We Find Something Better Than Death Everywhere*, where Donkey Gray, Dog Clever, Cat Black, and Chicken Commun try to escape their environmentally destructive power relations (Heckmanns 2021). Unfortunately, the brave animals die! But they die only for the stage moment, so that ultimately, every production of nature, of animals, and the environment is exposed as a human-made staging and arrangement. However, it is about something very serious, namely that everyone, animals and humans, on stage and in front of the stage, must respect all forms of life as part of Gaia. You wonder in Heckmann’s play: ‘That I happen to be here and part of a whole and can still play / On the stage on Earth / Under a strangely cosmic perspective suddenly / Just beyond the dead among roots and mushrooms and animals and viruses / in the critical zone between lava and thin air / in a strange, rare time that we still share’ (Heckmanns 2021, 47). As we know, Gaia means that we have to learn to change the main perspective from a Galilean look in space to a perspective in the sense of Lovelock on the wonder of life on Earth itself – Galileo understood the similarities between the planets, Lovelock understood the exceptional nature of Earth (Lovelock 1988; Latour 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Hohler, Franz. *Gengalo der Gletscherfloh*, Bühnen Bern 2019, director: Meret Matter.

<sup>2</sup> And Frank Raddatz calls for a new shamanism (Raddatz 2021, 59).

## Action, please (from Marx and Brecht to contemporary theatre)!

Brecht already believed that in theater, 'the important thing is not only to interpret the world but to change it' (Brecht 1994, 399—490). He quotes the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach by Karl Marx: 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it' (Marx and Engels 1998). Al Gore demands, 'Learn as much as you can about the climate crisis. Then put your knowledge into action.'<sup>3</sup> SAVE THE WORLD puts it succinctly, 'From Empathy to Action'.<sup>4</sup> „Action' was what Brecht wanted, 'Action' is what Milo Rau or the Center for Political Beauty want.

Everyone actually wants 'Action', the debate revolves around how to achieve 'Action'. Piscator and Brecht believed that political theater must be made political, Jean-Luc Godard called for making films political rather than making political films, Hans-Thies Lehmann enriched Brecht's reception with a considerable or improper dose of Nietzsche and also demanded not political theater but making theater political (Lehmann 2013). René Pollesch, who locates his work in the tradition of Brecht's *Lehrstücke* (against Reese or Ostermeier's Brechtian *Schaustücke*) (Wirth and Ulvaeus 1999), who studied with Lehmann, lets his theatrical alter ego Fabian Hinrichs speak in *GEHT ES DIR GUT?*: 'What? What did you say? What? What do I think? I think, first make the world a cesspool, and then fly somewhere, and everything will get better there? When the masks fall. Will everything get better?'<sup>5</sup>

## Masks. Between tragical conflict and deconstruction

Masks are the focus; in ancient tragedy, linen masks were worn; Michel Foucault was known as the philosopher with the mask, for Hans-Thies Lehmann, the mask consisted of the distorting socio-symbolic law, the norm, the normality (Lehmann 2002, 366—380). Richard Schechner, the actual inventor of

3 Gore Al. 2006. "End Credits". In Guggenheim Davis: *An Inconvenient Truth* (documentary film).

4 SAVE THE WORLD. <https://www.savetheworld.de/burning-issues-2023/> Viewed on 08 July 2023.

5 Pollesch Rene. 2022. *Geht es dir gut?* (Berlin: Volksbühne).

Post-Dramatic Theatre, called for everyone, including the actors, in today's time, 'where public life increasingly becomes theater', to take off 'the masks', to no longer be someone 'who "plays", acts like a fool, or lies, but someone' who "'tells the truth" in an absolutely understood sense, or at least, if the claim is not fulfilled, to explain how the masks were put on and can be taken off' (Schechner 1974, 455–481; Schechner 1966, 20–53). So, in a theater of the anthropocene, do we want to portray conflicts in the mask or deconstruct the masks as tragic representation figures (the Nietzschean apollonian, so to speak)? Nicolas Stemmann remains here congenially undecided in his adaptation of the Christmas play *Snow White Beauty Queen*, where you can find actors on stage, who conventional play roles: the wolf and the hunter become vegans, and Snow White refuses to do housework for the six dwarfs and teaches them how to interact with nature correctly.<sup>6</sup> Also Thomas Köck with his death games in Gaia and on stage. Since he comes from Vienna, Köck celebrates his downfalls. In a creative process of sym-poiesis, as he describes it, Köck succeeds in combining Gaia resonances, scientific facts, historical developments and human-evil theater in such a way that factual causalities become partially or schematically visible in the production. His dystopias, such as his climate trilogy inspired by Greek tragedy and mostly Nietzsches Interpretation of Greek tragedy, 'paradies fluten (verirrte sinfonie)', 'paradies hungern', and 'paradies spielen (abendland. ein abgesang)' (Köck 2017) overwhelm as artworks. The theatertext and production offer in performance the experience of Gaia, the actors and figures are only ridicoulus puppets of history, evolution and society.

## Postdramatic and post-human theatre

Far more than Stemmann or Köck, Rimini Protokoll's 'World Climate Conference' produced a postdramatic theatre, realized a Lehrstück of societal masks, where each spectator assumed a randomly assigned role, becoming a climate activist or a lobbyist for the coal industry.<sup>7</sup> In this theatre without actors, acting or dramatic roles, each person had to decide for themselves. Definitely beyond good and evil worked the botanical long-term theater *The World Without Us*

<sup>6</sup> Stemmann Nicolas (nach den Brüder Grimm). 2023. *Schneewittchen Beauty Queen* (Zürich: Schauspielhaus)

<sup>7</sup> Rimini Protokoll. *Welt-Klimakonferenz* (Hamburg: Schauspielhaus, 2015).

by Tobias Rausch and the lunatiks production collective.<sup>8</sup> The quasi-actors here were plants, and for the theater, they became what Rosi Braidotti understands as post-human subjects (Braidotti 2013), who also enter into dramatic relationships with non-human actors such as objects, plants, or animals. Bruno Latour would discover quasi-objects here instead of Aristotelian characters in action (Latour 1993). In an effort to transcend human solipsism, Tobias Rausch even staged a 'real' tornado in the theater. However, he ultimately acknowledges that he failed to bring Gaia onto the stage, as animals, plants, trees, tornadoes, or atmospheres have completely different living conditions. Or vice versa: Human conditions, which form the basis of human tragedy and comedy, human drama, and human theater, are the underpinning of humanity's exceptionalism. Nature and animals (to borrow from Shakespeare: 'All the world's a stage') in theatre and society are ultimately reflections of human cognition.

According to Markus Gabriel, a proponent of new realism, humans are the only animals (Gabriel 2022). Why is this the case? Because the anthropocentric definition relegated animals to the status of objects, devoid of the knowledge, consciousness, and capacity for action that humans possess. Drawing from Schiller's distinction between the liberating drive for form (Formtrieb) and the drive for substance (Stofftrieb), as well as Friedrich Nietzsche's recognition of the Apollonian alongside the deliberating Dionysian, drama and theater delineate the distinct and unique tragic or comedic human conditions. However, human drama and theatre overlooked the otherness of animals, plants, humans and Gaia as the wonders of life.

## Who cares who acts?

One of the fundamental challenges we, as theater makers, need to address is that nature, that Gaia is not easy to represent in our traditional theatrical or dramatic forms. Does this mean abandoning all attempts at constructing theses within the realm of drama? At the very least, we must succeed in making the immeasurable relevance of Gaia, even as a reawakened narrative, perceptible in the theater. Heckmanns quotes at the beginning of his play from Bruno Latour's *Terrestrial Manifesto*: 'Today, everything is on stage: set, scenery, backstage, the entire building has stepped onto the stage and is competing with the actors for

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<sup>8</sup> Rausch Tobias/Lunatiks. 2010. *Die Welt ohne uns* (Hannover).

the main role. This is reflected in the scripts, suggesting different outcomes of the intrigue. Humans are no longer the only actors, but at the same time, they find themselves entrusted with a role that is too big for them' (Heckmanns 2021, 5). Well roared, philosophical lion, one would exclaim as a theater person, but who then acts in the tragedy? Drawing something incredibly complex as a character or a figure is challenging. Since Aristotle, we have known that drama stems from 'dran', which means 'to act'. Dramatic theater presents actors in roles that involve action. And those who act bear responsibility and, if they have acted wrongly, carry the burden of guilt. Franz Hohler rightly insists on a human perspective in the Aristotelian drama: *Children want answers!* (RaBe 2019)<sup>9</sup> *Fridays for Future*, *Extinction Rebellion*, and *The Last Generation* demand answers – the youth know very well who the good guys and the bad guys are in the game. But present-day theater is often more undecided. Kathrin Röggl outlines the current state in her play *Das Wasser*: 'When you can't tell something in a play, the search movement comes to the foreground' (Röggl 2022, 7). The movements become more frantic, but we theater makers are still searching. Selma Matter stages the dramatic awakening of the permafrost, of the seemingly eternal geological stratification, of the orderly diversity of species, ultimately Gaia's awakening, in *Grelle Tage* (Matter 2022). Another young author, Raphaela Bardutzky, dramatizes the dramatic inner life of activist groups like *The Last Generation* in *Das Licht der Welt*, where tragic human elements persist as always, including a love story is.<sup>10</sup>

Alexander Eisenach brings the earth system researcher Antje Boetius as a living Cassandra onto the stage in *Anthropos, Tyrann (Ödipus)* at the Berlin Volksbühne.<sup>11</sup> In *Der Mensch* erscheint im Holozän, Alexander Giesche evokes in Zürich the atmosphere of Gaia through wind machines, rain systems, light effects, fog fields, and empty spaces, based on Max Frisch's work.<sup>12</sup> These productions all appear to be exciting explorations of theater, which has not yet quite found its adequate form for acting characters, for tragedy of climate change and species extinction. Bruno Latour admitted that he was at a loss himself: for the theater

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9 Hohler, Franz. 2019. "Kinder wollen antworten". <https://rabe.ch/2019/11/18/kinder-wollen-antworten/> Viewed on 08 July 2023.

10 Bardutzky Raphaela. 2022. *Das Licht der Welt* (Köln: Kiepenheuer).

11 Eisenach Alexander. 2021. *Anthropos, Tyrann (Ödipus)* (Berlin: Volksbühne).

12 Giesche Alexander. 2020. *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (Zürich: Schauspielhaus).



he hoped for a new Brecht; only a new genius could tell the story of Lovelock, Margulis, the discovery of Gaia and the new connections between cosmological order and society.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps, I might add, there will never be a new Brecht. Perhaps when creating theater and society we have the epistemological and ontological problem that people continue to be relevant actors who, as people, recognize and play humanly. But drama and theater will, as always, help humanity survive. Max Frisch's statement from Gieseche's *Man Appears in the Holocene* still applies today: 'Man only knows catastrophes if he survives them; Nature knows no catastrophes' (Frisch 1982).

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<sup>13</sup> Down to Earth. <https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/immersion/programm/2020/down-toearth/> Viewed on 08 July 2023.

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