

Kathrin Röggla

---

# Acting in the Age of Multiple Crises? Acting in the Age of Ecocide? Acting on Stage?

If one turns as a writer to the central question of multiple ecological crises, the question of action becomes a key question. Why don't we act? Who is acting? What is the action? There is a noticeable amount of symbolic politics, but progress is being made in the legal field and the legal system is changing. One of my papers below deals with rivers becoming legal entities, and this is a fundamental challenge to logic. The idea of writing my play *The Water* (original German title *Das Wasser*) was created at the request of scientists, and included many conversations with experts in action. What are we doing? Why does this huge braking effect occur, and what does it have to do with generational onflict? There are many questions that need to be answered. The second part of my two articles published below (Dear River, original German title *Liebes Wasser*) emphasizes that law itself is part of economic logic, even if it is supposed to be above it. At least as applied law.

## Writing *The Water*

For some time now, water has been a constant topic in the media. Too little, too much, enormous damage. The flood of the century alternates with the drought of the century, words like drought stress find their way into our everyday vocabulary. The question of how long it will take to fill the former lignite areas in Upper Lusatia that are to be renaturalised (the Spree has to flow into it for 60 years) stands next to reports of fish dying in the Oder, next to images of caked soil and burning forests, flooded areas in Pakistan and Italy, sometimes obviously catastrophic scenarios, sometimes only indirectly, the reference to crop failures etc.

These are only rare moments when one receives an idealistic commission for a play (beyond contractual arrangements). However, the fact that it was necessary to prompt me on this set of issues a few years ago (circa 2019) also speaks volumes about me. To me, the context seemed too abstract, too vast, too large to be grasped in literary terms, in addition laden with myths, the material unmanageable. It was the "Theatre of the Anthropocene", namely Antje Boetius, earth system researcher and director of the Alfred Wegener Institute in Bremerhaven, known for the polar star expeditions, and the director and author Frank Raddatz, who really sought me out and asked me to comment theatrically on this world tragedy. Mentioning the facts and forecasts had too little effect; what was needed was an emotional connection, a different echo in the public. An idealistic mission, but one that impressed me very much. The Leibnitz Prize winner Antje Boetius has been engaged for many years on various levels to create a public sphere, a conversation between the arts and science to create pressure, a consciousness that is able to close the gap between knowledge and action, Frank Raddatz has moved in the direction of Greek tragedy through the theoretical references of Michel Serres and Bruno Latour in numerous projects and conversations. And now me. One always writes at one's time, that is, at the moment of the present, even if something emerges from it that passes through the ages. My moment was when in Germany the damage caused by the massive ecological crises could no longer be denied. Grey forests, the flood in the Rhineland, which I witnessed at first hand (I live in Cologne), failing harvests, burning forests. And then we, as a society, with our supposed inaction or negligence.

This posed itself as the main question in 2021: Why are we not acting? (And who is we?) What is holding us back? Is it the lobbyists of the automobile com-

panies, the energy companies, is it the politicians: in, who sail through their terms in office on a realocourse, always in fear of the next election, is it the bureaucracies that put obstacles in our way via the environmental agencies land use plans and water directives, or municipalities that prevent microplastic filters in sewage treatment plants for budgetary reasons, or is it ourselves, how we do not get into action, have developed too little flight shame and plastic shame, want to be too mobile for the limits of our planet that resilience researcher Johan Rockström has described so clearly.

In Germany, 2021 is all about water. To give it away straight away: Water is not a resource, water is a force, it is a primal element, a component of our life, to call it a resource is pretty crazy, it is in a constant cycle. If water disappears from a region, life disappears, we know that at least from Nasa, which is looking around on Mars for a planet b that doesn't exist. In my first conversations with actors from Saxony, I learned that the whole of eastern Germany is under drought stress. There is a shortage of 800 litres per square metre per year. But sometimes in heavy rain regions the 800l fall in one day. Which doesn't really help the soil either, because it only runs off and doesn't penetrate deep into the caked soil. Drought stress leads to soil erosion, the extinction of an ecological system, failed harvests and soil salinisation. Nitrate pollution is a major problem anyway.

One of the supporting conflicts of the play is also the generation conflict, i.e. a conflict based on the question of who lives when. Time may not be a resource either, but never before has it made such a difference in such a short period of time who was born when. I can be accused of being quite anthropocentric in that respect. I think my literature out of social conflicts, out of an in-betweenness, even if I find these are increasingly mediated through other non-human actors. My central question, however, is about human agency. In my research (because as an author I want to learn to understand something) I set out to encounter models of action: What do people do who want to do better? Who want to change something, who have concepts and plans and social structures in which they make a difference. So away from the bourgeois shock theatre, towards a theatre that wants to introduce something. I spoke with numerous groups: the founder and staff of the Dresden Environmental Centre, various representatives of the Environmental Office, various representatives of TUUWI, civic organisations, and the local government: I spoke with numerous groups: the founder and staff of the environmental centre in Dresden, various speakers from the envi-

ronmental office, various representatives of TUUWI, cradle to cradle, Fridays for future and Ende Gelände, an actor of the Week of Good Living in Dresden, a representative of the church model community, a hydrogen producer, Germanwatch, Greenpeace, the participants of a sustainability group in the Saxon state theatre, an irrigation representative of a large German city, a Demeter farmer in the Rhineland, a representative of the Green League and operator of a meadow orchard near Dresden, an antigentrification activist, and others.

Strangely enough, although they all told me about action, they told me at least as much, and perhaps mostly, about non-action. Again and again they complained about the lack of self-efficacy, and it may be that I have fallen into the maelstrom of a popular pessimistic narrative, but I have to say that I would not have expected it from the actors. The only ones who were quite optimistic and unapologetically energetic about the future were the lawyers and PR representatives of Greenpeace and Germanwatch. They had just, at the end of April 2021, won the "climate lawsuit" at the Federal Constitutional Court – the ruling was about the freedom of future generations threatened by the German federal government's inaction, with the stipulation that they should finally do things in line with the European climate goals. What has happened since then? Since then, we have seen the continued pandemic and the Ukraine war, which suddenly seems to set completely different standards and even brings coal-fired power generation (and the continued operation of nuclear power plants) back into play. A mockery for activists. After all, in both crisis situations, large sums of money and restrictive measures were put in place, while they were absent in the climate sector. The anger, not only of the younger generation, is understandable in this respect. So what is holding us back? Why are we not ready to take responsibility? The useless we again?

The story of Jonah and the whale is one of the best known from the Bible; it is often told in primary school religion classes because of its imagery, drasticness and eeriness, and in the play it serves as a foil and reference narrative that takes us out of our fixation on the present. Basically, the whole climate crisis story is contained in it. We learn about storms, floods and droughts in turn. It is about Jonah's willingness to carry God's message to Nineveh, i.e. the question: Do I take responsibility for a city society that is not even my own (!) And about recommendations for action. To outline it briefly in his own words: Jonah first refuses, runs away on a ship, angers God who sends the storm, then knowingly sacrifices himself for it and goes overboard so that the ship's crew can be saved.

God sends the whale to save Jonah and swallows him. An animal saves man, man sits in the animal (what a wondrous image!), there is suddenly animal-inside and animal-outside, that is Jonah's whole world. He comes ashore, goes to Nineveh and warns. The people do as God says (go in sackcloth and ashes, not to pasture etc) and are spared. Jonah sits outside his house and ends up angry that nothing he prophesied comes to pass. He has prevented something, and you can't see that now because it hasn't come to pass. God lets a tree wither in his garden, Jonah weeps for the tree, and God says: "You weep for your tree, but you deny me the right to preserve my creation. Something like that. The whale has become for me the image of a temporary salvation, but one that already creates an inside and an outside. So: who is temporarily saved and who is not, who has the option at all and who remains outside? The flesh becomes a wall of time. (A time that not only goes forwards and backwards, as we are used to, but contains tipping points, irreversibilities, something I absurdly cannot even think of). As I said, the generational conflict is the conflict that is emerging more and more. It is very tempting in this to exploit it and put all the work of resistance on the next generation. They reach out to us emotionally, because it is "our children", they say, i.e. bourgeois children who are standing up. (In the meantime, it is no longer necessarily the bourgeois children, but completely different actors, but that is the public image). Symbolically, we delegate climate protest to the youth, which also disempowers it for the time being.

A few years ago, I visited a high school in L.A., about 10 km from the sea, which is the "star" in this city, the tourist magnet next to Hollywood. And there I met children who had never seen the sea because their parents had no car or no time to take them there or simply wanted to protect them because it is more dangerous for African-American children to move around the city than for those who are not so racialised. That shocked me. The idea of a child who has not seen the sea, and now the sea is coming to him because of rising sea levels, engaged me. And of course, it doesn't come to him in its tourist-enjoyable form, but as a monster. On a global scale, (and actually this is the necessary perspective) the people who are excluded from mobility and consumption are the first to feel the effects of the climate crises. Life under the conditions of massive ecological crises is one in which survival and death are decided. From us.

Cologne, at the Stillnottheendof time 2023

*Dear River,*

*it's been quite a while since we've heard from each other, and I also understand that you want to remain anonymous, and yet the whole affair is somewhat convoluted. With the post boxes, the proxies, the lawyers and your advocates. I look out of the window every day and think, is that you? Because there is definitely something flowing outside my office window, it's not like I would keep quiet about it. But in fact I would like to meet you one day. Really, for real. At the moment I meet you more in the courtroom, in the court hearings that we have to hold because of you. I wouldn't have thought that you would become a legal person just like that, you could have told me that before. Suddenly I'm threatening you, they say. Me and my management. Along with other management and CEOs. We are destroying your ecosystem, you or your legal representatives claim. I think that's a little unfair. Have you ever thought about what you are destroying? Have you ever thought in terms of jobs? What are the people in this region supposed to live on? They have an ecosystem too, not just you.*

*You know, I don't really have time to write to you because you make so much work for me. Because you are so much in our way. So now, suddenly, there's no getting around you. We thought you were working with us, that is, you were pulling together with us, but now you have betrayed us like this. I thought you would generate electricity together with us, get renaturation projects going that we had planned, create flourishing landscapes, and now this. And I can tell you one thing: flourishing landscapes need money, you must have heard that already. You know that, don't you? Or do you really believe that you are above all economic issues? No, not at all. In the end, that's all that's at stake in the court either.*

*Of course I know your name, but I'm certainly not going to blurt it out like that, certainly not in public, and to that extent I'm already practising in this letter. So that you get even more popularity and attract even more public opinion to your side. Look, this is our river, you want people to say that it has its own ecosystem and a right to an ecosystem. Look, this is our environment! So my environment is relative. Even if I were to divert you, I would have an*

*environment, even if we were to concrete you over, I would have an environment. In Prishtina they did it with all the rivers. And not only there, but also here, yes, all over the world there are these vanished rivers, built over, covered over, straightened. The Emscher, yes, we can also talk about the Emscher, its so-called tributary, but I doubt that you really want to.*

*Of course, no one here is talking about filling it with concrete, that wouldn't serve anyone here, but it would have been good if we could have built this or that dam. Alternative energies. Everyone talks about it, but when it comes to implementation, the river is the first to speak against it. Just not on my doorstep, or was it the backyard? What would be the backyard of a river? That's something to think about, don't you think? They are the biggest enemy of the environmentally conscious right now. Have you ever thought about that? We think of nothing else but the preservation of this wonderful earth and you, what do you actually think? You think only of your immediate ecosystem.*

*And then the thing with the chemical factory – seriously! What chemical factory? Those are rumours. A combined heat and power plant, that's more like it. But you, you know exactly what you're doing when you come around the corner with a chemical plant. You know exactly what your strategies are. Whether we plan a chemical plant is not a foregone conclusion. And besides, how are you going to pay for your nature reserve?*

*You river you! I have to tell you, you have no idea what you are doing now. Even with the means you're fighting with. Just stepping over the banks. Just going into the city. Or to raise a roll of water under which you bury everything. Eight metres, that's what one of their little tributaries did. You should get those under control too, by the way. Your tributaries, you water catchment area, you! But no, what do you do? Produce backwater when it doesn't suit you. Yes, you can say, are you still a river at all, or are you already a single backwater? You see, the sea doesn't want to take your water any more either. They have no more customers, and what do you do as a producer? Downsizing! But you, you are not draining properly at all, you are deliberately holding back the water. I guess now you want to show us who you are. A show of force. Now there is water everywhere. So all I see is water, as if they wanted to say: We can't get around you any more. Well, I am. My technical intuition has gotten me out of every impossible situation. You know, I'm not Noah, I'm more.*

*You can fill our cellars as much as you want, use our roads as much as you want, take our vehicles with you. No matter how much you flood the fields and think that impresses me. Next time I will be faster. You will see.*

*But now, now I suppose you're desperate to show that everything counts as a river basin. That's your business idea. Don't make me laugh, you are now actually taking all tributaries and tributaries into your liability just to cripple the whole region. That's the way it's always been. Forming alliances. Don't get me wrong, but I don't think this is an effective strategy. For one thing, where do we stop? For another, you no longer control your alliances, you take them over! Not the other way around!*

*What did you say the other day? You don't care? You're assuming an average evaporation rate of my thoughts? You think I have a flow rate too? No, nothing flows out of me, I can tell you, absolutely nothing, and certainly nothing. I am the absolute lack of flow. You have brought me this far, with me everything stands still, I can assure you of that.*

*With superfluous regards*

*Your*

*Noah 2 Zero*