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CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF'S REALIST THEATER

Ilinca Todorut

Christoph Schlingensief's Realist Theater

This book is the first study of the prolific German filmmaker, performance artist, and TV host Christoph Schlingensief (1960–2010) that identifies him as a practitioner of realism in the theater and lays out how theatrical realism can offer an aesthetic frame sturdy enough to hold together his experiments across media and genres.

This volume traces Schlingensief's developing realism through his theater work in conventional theater venues, in less conventional venues, his opera work focusing on the production of Wagner's Parsifal at Bayreuth, and his art installations on revolving platforms called Animatographs.

This book will be of great interest to scholars of theater, film, and performance art and practitioners.

Ilinca Todorut is IB Theatre Arts Teacher at the United World College in Changshu, China.

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1 Introduction

Schlingensief and realism

Under the skin

Christoph Schlingensief's prodigious artistic output stretching from the 1980s to 2010, the year of his premature death from lung cancer, stands in defiance against attempts to draw quick overviews. And yet, I will begin by saying something simple: Schlingensief's trendy, trashy, intermedial, outrageous performance projects can be subsumed under a decrepit-sounding aesthetic agenda: realism. The tension between visible surface and occluded depth gives momentum to both theatrical realism and Schlingensief's work.

Schlingensief first emerged as a filmmaker at the cusp of German reunification, making a local splash with DIY-aesthetic movies that irreverently teased out the crassness of German twentieth-century politics in genres such as the soft-core bunker craze film-noir of *100 Years of Adolf Hitler* (1989), or mock dystopian horror that viewed the economic cannibalization of East Germany by West Germany through the lens of Tobe Hooper's cult classic *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*: in Schlingensief's *The German Chainsaw Massacre* (1990), Wessies hunt Ossies to make sausage out of them. Schlingensief's next movie, *Terror 2000* (1992), which together with the previous two forms the *German Trilogy*, blends splatter-film aesthetic with action-movie film tropes to create a cocktail of scenes replete with gangsters and businessmen, priests and miracle healers, Polish refugees, Treblinka camp inmates, nazis, and chancellor Helmut Kohl. *Terror 2000* caught the attention of the leadership team at the Volksbühne theater in Berlin, which was planning a reform in the artistic programming and institutional outreach of the East German theater under threat of closing down due to major cuts in state funding after reunification.[1] Frank Castorf, the Volksbühne Intendant, invited Schlingensief to stage his first theater project, *100 Years CDU: Games Without Frontiers*, which premiered in 1993 and continued the themes of the *German Trilogy*. From here, Schlingensief exponentially branched out into theater, television, opera, radio, print, visual and performance art, voraciously devouring artistic media and genres, producing over the span of two decades a variegated and prolific body of work. Diedrich Diederichsen good-naturedly makes fun of Schlingensief's diva-like thirst for public attention noting that Schlingensief "fundamentally belonged to the

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theater" because he craved the "energy rush that only a large audience can provide."[2] Odd as it may be to connect the word "theater" with "large audience," it was through the orchestrated media scandals surrounding Schlingensief's performative works that he slithered into notoriety. Schlingensief belongs to the theater the way Wagner belongs to the theater: not because the word "theater" subsumes the work but because everything he did rolled over in theatricality like a pig rolling in mud. He was spectacular in his knack for showmanship.

Schlingensief's theater initially catches the eye because of its vivid brashness manifested through unexpected imagery and loud, scandalous social interventions over which he presided in person, taunting the audience and stringing jokes. The way in which he served hefty, problematic slices of daring with thickly spread charm recalls Nietzsche warning against the "seducer on a large scale" Wagner hexing his audiences.[3] Like other realists before him admiringly accused of wizardry,[4] Schlingensief was a master manipulator who toyed with smoke screens of the visible to destabilize treasured communal myths, from the warm brotherhood of *Deutschland über alles* brandished in 1989 to other nationalist tales of victimhood, peace-making, and xenomania. Although realism in the theater tends to be conflated with its anal-retentive detailed mimesis of physical surface, its neurosis is rather obsessed with what lies *beneath* the surface. Not coincidentally, Freud wrote case studies about Ibsensian figures like *Rosmersholm*'s Rebecca West, the first character on the European stages who dared to bring to the surface of verbal utterances the torrential power of her chthonic sex drive. Konstantin Stanislavski stubbornly maintained that the infamous clutter of visual and auditory detail in the Chekhov era of the Moscow Art Theatre was constructed not for the audience's visual pleasure but for the actors' benefit, to help them access the subterranean well of emotional memory through sensory stimuli. The modern realist theater-maker Bertolt Brecht came to the realization that with the real's slippage into the abstract domain of functionality in developed capitalism, a faithful reproduction or visual copy of material reality doesn't say much about reality anymore: "from the carefully taken photograph of a Ford factory no opinion about this factory can be deduced."[5] A contemporary realist theater-maker like Schlingensief still cared very much about his "looks" and flooded the audience with visual information, but the core impulse reacted *against* images, setting out to destroy naturalized meanings and pull down screens. The situationists articulated with political know-how the anti-visuality drive militating against the spectacle of consumerist mass culture. In his own lingo, Schlingensief talked about the "dark phase," the imageless tiny space in between film frames necessary for the film stills to get strung together and set in motion: "I also relate the dark phase to society. For me this dark phase concerns those who stand in darkness. This is the actual power. Not the flash."[6] Schlingensief offered his allegiance to the socially invisible: the misfits and outsiders like the unemployed, foreigners, and people with disabilities who invalidate by their marginal existence the fronts of equanimity, democracy, and community. Schlingensief's dark powers operated on the spaces *between* images or the immediately visible as he spelled out the goal to "make the invisible visible."[7]

Schlingensief's operations of exposure to reveal the hidden behind deceiving surfaces may be compared to Walter Benjamin's efforts to see properly in crepuscular times. Deciphering the truth of our age etched into menial material objects, Benjamin divined that "fashion, like architecture, inheres in the darkness of the lived moment, belongs to the dream consciousness of the collective. The latter awakes, for example, in advertising."[8] Schlingensief's lush imitation of commercial culture imagery disseminated through channels such as advertisements, news pieces, and slogans tampered with the darkness that masks the collective fear, and scratched at wounds inflicted by the injustices and cruelty of our social reality. Schlingensief eagerly adopted Joseph Beuys' motto "show your wounds!" Schlingensief's work dove after the residual hope huddled in the dark corner that our constructed world is not eternal and hardly the only possible one. Historical specters, echoes of other timelines, and obsessions with precedents squirmed their way through his projects. Using spirits to exorcise spirits, these apparitions rendered our collective reality as a field of dreams and mass repressions, a realm of treasured appearances designed to mask social nightmares, and a surface of fictive constructions devoid of reasons to be maintained in perpetuity. In what Benjamin called a "turn of remembrance," ragpicking through the historical past unearths beneath the mounds of war and destruction the golden nuggets of missed opportunities, of other ways of being that have been pushed aside, of relentless dreaming for another world.[9] The remembrance of buried moments of alterity can initiate a collective awakening. Susan Buck-Morss explains that Benjamin borrowed the phrase "darkness of the lived moment" from Ernst Bloch, who meant by it "the momentary, fleeting experience of fulfillment simply anticipatory of a reality that is 'not-yet'."[10] In his autobiographical account *Ich weiß, ich war's*, Schlingensief wrote:

> You see an image and think this is the world, but you forget that there are many images of the world. That even within yourself there are many images, ideas, desires that you could not fulfill, but you're still hanging on to them. . . . And I believe that everyone has such a dark phase in themselves. Everyone sits every now and then in such an empty, dark space in which the images and the desires live on. And maybe they can still happen if you don't ignore this darkness.[11]

The dark phase stood then also for an anti-"manifest imagery" laboratory where dismissed alternatives and barely remembered possibilities may be re-amplified and tried out collectively. The idea of theater practice as a research facility goes back to Brecht, who saw realist theater instructing participants by modeling a practice of alternatives.

Yet from the physical surface of his own persona, the notoriously loud and brash "boy-next-door from small-town Oberhausen"—to use one of the catchy, semi-discrediting labels assigned to Schlingensief in the press, along with such facile tags as "provocateur" and "*enfant terrible*"—seems to have little in common with the imposing and more hirsute classical realists in the theater

world, like Ibsen or Stanislavski. Even the mid-century revolutionary realist Brecht appears to mock with his cool smirk Schlingensief's earnest, wide smile. As with their artistic products, however, there's more than meets the eye to a realist's personal style: a carefully cultivated appearance gleams on the surface of their deep-rooted recalibration of the artist's role in society. Ibsen's serious demeanor rejected all French frou-frou and embodied the image of an artist who does not want to deliver light, Scribean, fashionable dramatic entertainments but urgent theatrical fares that challenge the worldview of their spectators. Brecht's working-class, frumpy artist belittled Wagnerian velvet, Schillerian tossed curls and entranced wide eyes: Brecht's theater aimed for a down-to-earth social usefulness distinct from idealistic conceptions of art's intrinsic nobility. Brecht's fixation on the social aim of art, however, fastened him to predecessors like Schiller and Wagner, who plotted art's political purport in the romantic lingo of societal regeneration through organic, aesthetic states and face lifts. A look into nineteenth-century artistic production discloses just how tenuously the dividing lines get drawn between romanticism and realism, two eclectic movements sharing one beating heart of Utopia. Like Brecht, and to a significant extent *through* Brecht via film-makers like Fassbinder and Kluge, as well as through his fascination with socially active artists such as Joseph Beuys and Richard Wagner, Schlingensief's obsession with the relationship between art and society encircled him within the branches and various artistic movements of a German *engagé* family tree. Schlingensief talked about his beloved "kitschy" tendencies when he felt the pull of the grandiosity and sublimity of German idealism, as well as of the loftiness and revolutionary scale of German materialism, both thriving in popular culture. His art stuck out from amidst the high art sophistication and experimentations of the postmodern art scenes through its social grit, almost messianic humanism, and a relentless enthusiasm for change that was bound to be read as artlessness.[12] Despite his own self-doubts and self-exposures of futility and inner nazis, Schlingensief chose imperfect (and often questionable) interventions over melancholic aestheticism and ironic detachment. "I'm also extremely pathetic," he wrote, "I'm very romantic. . . . I'm everything that has to do with embarrassment. But I'm not a cynic in the modern sense."[13] With the allusion to modern cynicism, Schlingensief hinted perhaps at his occasional collaborator Peter Sloterdijk's idea that we are today fully aware of the brutality of our constructed reality, but we accept it anyways in the absence of (or belief in) alternatives. Jean Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal, for example, cancels hope in substantial change. But Schlingensief's image of a person sitting in a dark space to block the shine of the spectacle (an inverted Platonic cave analogy) illustrates Raoul Vaneigem's dictum that "nobody lies groaning under the yoke of inauthenticity twenty-four hours a day."[14] Schlingensief kept the concrete materiality of living people in focus. Instead of seeing no way around an entrenched, abstracted reality, Schlingensief insisted that for an artist, there is no way around challenging that perspective. With all the grossness of politics, Schlingensief maintained that becoming a politically active artist almost happened to him against his will.

As his frequent dramaturg and collaborator Carl Hegemann recounts, Schlingensief spelled out this point in an action ironically declaring himself a free nation of one where "the new state would restore the autonomy of the artist, whom the democratic state had compelled to go into politics and bureaucracy."[15]

Schlingensief's casual sartorial style may have been the result of a careful planning designed to make a statement about the artist's purpose in society. He may have worked up his bushy hair into disorder with generous amounts of mousse and with the same vanity reflected in the anecdotal jab that Brecht used a golden file to push dirt *underneath* his finger nails. Schlingensief's supermarket-bought jeans, dress shirts, and training jackets reversed the personas of the avant-garde *enfant terrible* or the experimental auteur-director, leaving behind broodiness in leather jackets, black T-shirts, and dangling cigarettes for populist, anti-high art stances. The light-key earnestness and enthusiasm of his persona were notoriously infectious and gained him strange epithets for a middle-aged man such as "child-like" (which betrays the continued grip of the norms-transcendent artistic genius myth). His good looks and good humor may have often given him a free pass, and his finger-poking into everything and everyone under the pretense of "art" frequently veered into the crass, questionable, and irresponsible. On the dark side of his art, Schlingensief was burdened by the omnipresence of violence even in the seemingly innocuous. He preoccupied himself with historical incantations, invisible gaps and spaces that separate, with foreignness and in-betweens, and eventually, consumingly so, with sickness, decay, and death. He gleefully touted his thoroughly respectable German bourgeois pedigree—his happy, uneventful childhood as "the pharmacist's son" and Catholic choir-boy—to expose the trash and corruption at the heart of mainstream, respectable culture. On the luminous side, he fashioned a practice seemingly naïve in the largesse with which it embraced the socially and artistically unglamorous. When alluding to political change as social, economic, affective alchemical processes, Schlingensief flirted with a quasi-mystical language of revelation (like Benjamin) and redemption (like Wagner). Schlingensief often made it hard for people to discern whether he was a fool or a genius, and he played the role of *idiot savant* with gusto. He was often earnest but also a master at acting out earnestness, staging authenticity, mimicking confessions, and performing exposure; he enjoyed tricking people into situations where it was impossible to distinguish between theater and reality just as much as he enjoyed defusing already-existing tricks and deceptions. Beholden to the realist quest for truth, Schlingensief reveled in toying with the fake as a compulsion to unravel what rests beneath the lies, stubbornly tugging at the seams between authenticity and performativity.

Superabundance

Schlingensief's work sometimes gets divided chronologically into medium-dominant periods. Theron Schmidt distinguishes between the "early work for film and television in the 1980s and 1990s, public actions and interventions

in the 1990s and 2000s, and finally pieces that engaged with more traditional theatrical and operatic forms."[16] A last stage of fine art installations may be added, a stage which arguably brought him more worldwide recognition than any other through the posthumous winning of the Venice Biennale (2011), and the string of retrospectives at high-profile venues such as Tate Modern (2012), Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art (2013), MoMa (2014), and Sydney Biennale (2016). Chronological and institutional delineations are useful to highlight the type of projects that gained public prominence at different times, but they also iron out the ease with which Schlingensief moved between media, and the craftiness of his artistic opportunism. Schlingensief never truly left film, while his involvement with traditional theater dates earlier than his dissections of Wagner. He designed scenic structures and directed scenarios and actions live and on camera, inside and outside theaters, in museum spaces, in the street, and in the desert, in Europe, Africa, and America, using the combination of media and venue that would give a maximum return of visibility and outreach. Schlingensief tended to mix and match, recycle, and reuse pieces of his various creations (and other artists' works) across projects with an enviable transmedial flair. He projected films into theater works, filmed live actions, turned sets into installations, created performance events around art installations, and interrupted operas with speeches and dance numbers. On top of it all, Schlingensief hosted and produced talk shows and TV shows, founded a political party, and worked to build an Opera Village in Burkina Faso equipped not only with stages and working spaces but also with living quarters, a school, and a hospital.[17] The 2014 MoMa catalog editors state that Schlingensief's "superabundant" body of work is "for all its hybridity . . . hard to do justice to." "Its nature is such," conclude Horn, Biesenbach, Gebbers, and Pfeffer, "that [critical] inquiries can never be comprehensive enough. . . . Schlingensief's productivity was far too vibrant and multilayered for one to be able to come to any final conclusions."[18]

Moreover, Schlingensief's daunting diversity of media and themes seems approachable in comparison to the ambiguous aspirations of some of his works. Without dreaming in vain to arrive at *final* suppositions, I take my cue from Schlingensief's claim that his body of work is held together by the unifying element of its social outreach. Reflecting on his art in his cancer journal, Schlingensief drew summative statements about his artistic output: "I want to be sure that my work had a social concept."[19] In the same journal, Schlingensief melancholically observed that the engaged attitude of his art didn't receive enough critical attention: "the social aspect of my work has been mostly written away."[20] In truth, however, critics have often and deftly nudged into the limelight the social aspect of Schlingensief's work. Tara Forrest applies the concept of "realism" to Schlingensief's work and discusses it side by side with writer and filmmaker Alexander Kluge's.[21] Schlingensief frequently reiterated his admiration of older, New German Cinema filmmakers like Kluge and Fassbinder. In their turn, Kluge and Fassbinder were forged in the meteoric impact Brecht had on realist and political art-making.[22] Anna Teresa Scheer also highlights

the social aspect that runs through Schlingensief's projects and identifies as a main technique the practice of a "phantasmagoric theatre" that uses, abuses, and over-layers imagery in order to set up a political "intervention into the discourse of fear as generated via the imagery and rhetoric of the mainstream news media and by key political leaders of the period."[23] Scheer responds to the over-saturation with media images and slogans of Schlingensief's projects and observes how turning up their volume had the effect of making manifest their fear-mongering goal.

Like most phantasmagoric creations occluding realities of people, things, and the relationships among them with ideological transpositions, Schlingensief's work enjoyed choreographing games of hide-and-seek. Schlingensief's barrage of visual and verbal information provides a relatively well-lit, if often baffling, surface to his work. The realist lens affords moving beyond the optical focus to probe the realist's obsession with the "dark phase" and with what lies beneath the visible surface. Schlingensief emulated and pitted against each other not just media imagery but also popular and populist narratives and plots, widespread misconceptions and rhetorical strategies, social scenarios held as valid, recognizable cultural industry products from films and TV shows to performance art projects and theater plays. If mediatized imagery, of highbrow or mass spectacle origins, provided the setting and scenography, the lines of dialogue riffed on popular rhetoric and familiar-sounding textual remains, and the plot stole from scenarios haunting the popular imaginary, whether they had been inculcated as historical or political apperceptions or consumed via the entertainment industry.

Adorno saw the magician Wagner initiating a high-tech, visually rich "phantasmagorical style" that deviously masked the production mechanisms of its supernatural tricks and hid the human labor needed to manufacture the illusion, a style living in "the moment between the death of Romanticism and the birth of realism."[24] Through his phantasmagoric style, like Schlingensief, Wagner aimed to expose a truth about present reality. Both artists shared the resoluteness of accessing the political through the aesthetic, and a conviction that myth and fabulation, spectacle, affect, and emotion light the path toward deciphering the present. Marx applied the term "phantasmagoria" to a desubstantiated socio-economic reality where things are treated as oddly enlivened commodities and people are treated as things, where commodity fetishism produces dazzling images obfuscating real use value. But, as Margaret Cohen reminds us, Marx did not invent the word "phantasmagoria," merely extended its meaning, since the phantasmagoria was originally a hyper-theatrical magic lantern show in post-revolutionary Paris parading the ghosts of revolutionary heroes and villains (as well as of loved ones and, to spice things up I guess, of nubile bare-breasted women).[25] Sharing an interest in image-making technologies (including magic lanterns, which came to dominate projects such as the Animatographs), Schlingensief exhumed the original phantasmagoric shows exploring mass delusions. These shows exerted a libidinal fascination upon their audience, while desiring to teach a critical awakening in the midst of a den

of artful illusions that feel true but are mere magic tricks. Schlingensief's realism may appear as atypical as Adorno and Benjamin's undogmatic materialism colored in aesthetic or theological nuance, but their embrace of the subjective dimension was geared toward the concrete and the empirical. Schlingensief's practice begs for a widening of our conceptualization of theatrical realism.

Understandably so, within theater studies, Schlingensief is more often discussed in relation to the postdramatic. If from the angle of undoing and toying with the dramatic form, Schlingensief does indeed have a connection with the postdramatic, from the angle of his social investments, the connection loosens. Realist theater never could fit into the straightjacket of the dramatic, and tellingly Ibsen initiates accounts of the dissolution of the dramatic form in modernity penned by Georg Lukács and Peter Szondi.[26] Realism's investment in the multi-causal complexities of social realities defies representation in the shape of the dramatic teleological plot, so Lukács argued that realism can be best served by the novel.[27] Brecht retorted by triumphantly declaring his realist theater "anti-dramatic" and "anti-Aristotelian," crowning it as "epic" instead, in a move to assert theater's continued relevance as a politicized tool. In contrast, postdramatic theory articulates its social impact in the way that it *avoids* political discourse and touches on the political dimension only *modo obliquo*, to use Hans-Thies Lehmann's much-quoted expression. Lehmann writes that theater can be political to the extent that it "artistically deconstruct[s] the space of political discourse as such," resisting political discourses and expelling ideologies from its artistic field of operations.[28] Jacques Rancière similarly believes that the domain of art carries a valid political function when it rejects and indirectly criticizes the narrative domain of the political, with all that it entails: imposed agendas, domineering positions, and the assertive violence of communicative language.[29] The postdramatic's take on politics shares terrain with Lyotard or Foucault's denunciation of grand European progress and emancipation narratives, a "disappointment in the politics of liberation" which Edward Said historically located in the Cold War era.[30] Lehmann's position on theater's political reach has an enduring beauty that first shimmered in the aesthetics of thinkers like Roland Barthes and Theodore Adorno.[31] The position defends art's right to be art—irresponsible and effervescent, anti-discursive, outwitting the explicit, battling fixity—against the excesses of partisanship and gauche engaged art: Schlingensief fought under this banner too. Since art barely gained its independence from court and church dictates, Adorno argued that it shouldn't be so quick to relinquish again its hard-earned autonomy. Yet Adorno's sophisticated pedaling away from politics can be criticized for its strain of indecisiveness, for its elitist pretense that privileged artists can be above it all, for its western-centric position that can afford to decree liberation as illusory, and for its denial that any art is not always and already deeply enmeshed in the political. Said perceived the strenuous efforts to separate the realm of culture from those of worldly politics and economics as "an act of complicity" with an imperialist world market.[32]

Barthes too saw art as a panacea for the arrogance of discursive language weaponized by political discourses into judgments and proclamations. Against

the incessant requests to affirm, to eliminate alternatives and in-betweens, art can keep things open. But Barthes did not slip into the equally easy essentialist-humanist, universalism-enamored art-for-art's-sake polar end to rigid partisanship, floating instead in the pendulum of an "almost tireless compromise" where he saw Brecht maneuvering to-and-fro.[33] As Barthes explained, Brecht's theater found meaning in political action, but it didn't prescribe a distinct course of action.[34] For Barthes, Brecht avoided indoctrination without falling prey to an apolitical suspension of all meaning. Schlingensief deserves his place on the tightrope between art and politics, a merger of conflicting demands. Schlingensief practiced a form of theatrical epic shaped by its interest in social realities, historical and psychotic forces, and political situations calling for collective protagonists. The magnitude and superabundance of Schlingensief's opus turn it into Aristotle's "extraordinarily large," "thousand miles long" animal that metaphorically refers to a theater over-extending itself in time and space, rendering it ungraspable and incoherent.[35] The epic scale of Schlingensief's projects often grew to such longitudinal spread as to want to eat up whole countries (as in *Please Love Austria*), or to such deep presumptions of national, even international, historical import as to bloat into cosmic proportions, as Wagner's mythologized histories tended to do. Schlingensief's accelerating obsession with Wagner was directly proportional to the plotted scale of his projects, culminating in the doomed-to-incompletion Opera Village. The postdramatic resonates with the semiotic openness of Schlingensief's productions, but the postdramatic is, by definition, largely divorced from the narrative domains of history and politics. Lehmann and Rancière's elegant take on the relationship between aesthetics and politics cannot go too far in engaging with a theater that, like Schlingensief's, is discerningly and critically anthropocentric, humanistic, partisan, and *modo recto*, overtly political.

Rightfully challenged concepts like "humanism," "the real," "authenticity," or "partisanship," which have been historically weaponized to suppress individuals and populations that did not comply with the norms imposed by such concepts, are hard to avoid when discussing European realism. A decoloniality framework demonstrates the Eurocentric epistemological invention even of concepts such as "human" (not to mention the blatantly hegemonic constructs such as "the West," "the primitive," or "the Third World").[36] Yet in the context of European theater, the role of the human figure in the artistic concept points to starkly different ideas of dramatic form and social purpose, and so for lack of better concepts, I stick to the old ones to express intelligible, if imperfect, ideas about a realist aesthetic in the theater. As Edward Said has repeatedly pointed out (and Fanon before him), the continued use of human-focused terms does not deny the catastrophic results of liberal humanism and of a self-centered Anthropocene. It rejects the phallocentric hubris proclaiming man as the center of all things and the master and exploiter of the environment, but maintains faith in the possibility of a non-hierarchical humanism deloused of essentialisms and imperialist demagoguery, stressing ideas of co-agency and community-in-difference.[37]

Although, to paraphrase a Brecht weary of our fabricated categories and classifications, just as ultimately there is no essential difference between true reason and true feeling, there may not be one between the postdramatic and the realist modes with a keen sense of both art and the political.[38] Even more importantly, terms such as "realist" and "postdramatic" make sense only in the context of western thought on art; in the case of theater, of the notion of the "dramatic" as first elaborated by Aristotle. In a decolonial discourse on theater, these terms would be not only pointless but also deleterious to continue to impose. Even though coming from a Hegelian standpoint and seemingly unaware of the impact of a postcolonial, multi-polar world on art production, Arthur Danto made the case that postmodern art is characterized by its absence of unified styles defining of epochal movements, by its diverse faces uncompliant to master narratives, and by its—to use Danto's Eurocentric term—"post-historical" nature.[39] To the extent that Schlingensief called upon his western predecessors (mostly German or German-speaking white males: Fassbinder, Beuys, Wagner, Brecht, Hermann Nitsch, etc.), mired in western histories and ideas of art, he can best be called a realist artist. A simultaneous streak in Schlingensief, however, which wondered what is art in a wider geographical and cultural expanse bristles against the attribution of any historically narrow category. But, just as Schlingensief, and as complacently, I too begin with realism.

Anti-resolution

The internal contradictions of Schlingensief's work threaten to topple any single interpretation. But the to-and-fro between life-affirmation and death-obsession, sincerity and performativity, and quasi-religion and militant politics cannot also deny the realist attribution. Cultural and literary theorists have defined realism again and again as a contradictory, paradoxical, antinomical aesthetic due to its extra-aesthetic interests and epistemological claims upon the real world.[40] In their utopian aspirations, realists can flirt shamelessly with idealisms. Their aesthetic may morph into such psychologically dense, cultic, or premonitory practices as revolutionary romanticism, Wagnerianism, surrealism, or sci-fi. Or, realism can transform into its very opposite, as Soviet Realism can testify with crystal clear images of pure fabulation. Realism is split between a cultural practice that reproduces normative representations with their embedded values and worldviews, thus consolidating authority and mollifying dissent (as, for example, Edward Said bared the link between the nineteenth-century British novel and imperialism), and a realist critical wing, a non-aestheticist avant-garde that questions those dominant representations. There's nothing inherently conservative nor radical in mimetic acts. A contestatory realist representation, however, will challenge the internal coherence of narratives and norms. One way of doing this is by avoiding the completion of narrative resolutions or satisfying and pacifying clear endings. Aristotle contended that the theater cleanses human negative emotions like fear, giving the citizen a contained venue for releasing then, and helping the citizen

keep these dangerous emotions away from the political forum. The purgation of emotions, the catharsis, is the process that the spectator undergoes at the moment of dramatic resolution, where catastrophes have happened already and the environment reverts back to a neutral state: order is restored. Aristotle's drama is conservative. By contrast, realist theater does not want to appease but to activate the audience. It doesn't want the audience to leave something in the theater that they don't need as citizens but to take something from the theater that they can use in the political arena. Realist plays avoid a dramatic denouement, since the resolution the plays aim at is on the level of reality, as political change.[41]

In the 1996 stage production *Rocky Dutschke '68*, Schlingensief wrestled with the iconic figure of the German Left, Rudi Dutschke, the history of the '68 student movement, as well as the very idea of political art and of using theater to impart politicized knowledge. Here, some postdramatic aesthetic categories may find themselves as odd-fitting as an auteur-director black turtleneck on Schlingensief's body. The production employed a loose narrative structure of delivering lessons about the title figure and his era. It asked the audience to join a class in the Volksbühne space reimagined for audience participation without the typical row of seats. Alongside many other actors and scenes teeming in the space, Schlingensief—donning an askew, ridiculous Dutschke wig—gave impassioned, meandering, and incomprehensible lessons to the audience using a blackboard. The production acted out the theater's role in the Aesthetic Education of Man but mocked narrow didacticism and teased the hip audience's dearly held icons and beliefs. *Rocky Dutschke '68* directly addressed political theory and practice, but it "produced disorientation," as Sandra Umathum writes about her experience as an audience member.[42] The disorientation dug out rooted-in positions about political figures and courses of action training the audience in "exercises in de-paralyzation."[43] The un-learning pedagogical impetus, the refusal to serve up answers, and the desire to turn spectators into co-producers are all pillars of Brechtian dramaturgy. *Rocky Dutschke '68* played out the incompatibility between artistic and political values: as art, the only political truth realist theater can serve is anti-dogma, and yet it seeks to take on an active political role (that it has trouble to identify). Locked into its labor of negativity, realist theater can make occluded affirmations only on the sly. Schlingensief's work exacerbated both realism's intrusion into life and the borders between art and reality. This conflict played itself out through the twirling dances between myth and reality, surface and depth, seen and unseen, and occlusion and exposure that characterized theatrical realism from its nineteenth-century Wagnerian, Ibsenian, or Chekhovian infancy. Schlingensief's work braved the quicksand of such contradictions, for example, in the realist manner in which language was used both a means of communication and discombobulation.

The verbal logorrhea and excessive visual data in Schlingensief's performance projects hark back to the classical realist compulsions for endless talk and visual detail yet amplified to a level paralleling the growth of mass media