

## ***Negationsgattung* or the Genre of Negation: *Publikumsbeschimpfung* = **theatre** = (theatre + theatre)<sup>2</sup>**

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Negation Theory, by now a well-established field in postmodern critical theory, concerns itself mostly with the limits of discursive expression. Negation theorists typically critique the disruptive apposition of “both the ‘noise’ of affirmative discourse and of the unrepresentable ‘silence’ of the negative discourse that underlies postmodern notions of textuality.”<sup>1</sup> It is no coincidence that most writing on negation is concerned with fiction and prose, and to a lesser extent with film, but with hardly any attention for theatre.<sup>2</sup> This is not surprising, given the fact that a genre like theatre is crucially dependant on presence, the opposite of which—call it present absence or negative presence—seems to undermine the theatre’s phenomenological quality. And yet, no other genre of representation has so much doubleness in its constitutive essence of *re-presenting* as theatre. Doubleness, Wolfgang Iser, one of the pioneering contributors to Negation Theory, reminds us is a crucial characteristic of Negativity, the awareness that any formulated text has an “unformulated double.”<sup>3</sup> This doubleness can manifest itself on many levels, but most crucially and strategically, occurs on the level of the generic codes and conventions of any given discursive practice. This essay then, looks at a peculiar trend in postmodern artistic practice to disrupt, subvert and negate conventions of genre, thus exploding the “unformulated double.” The question is: what happens when theatre resists being theatre?

### **Negation as Heterological Practice**

Examples of negation of genre in prose and film are manifold. Samuel Beckett and Thomas Bernhard’s prose are often critiqued in this way; Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, can be read as both an end (of being) as well as a beginning (of writing). Other examples can be found in Raymond Federman’s prose and poetry; the film aesthetic of Jean-Luc Godard, too, can be interpreted as a negation of film genre.<sup>4</sup> In theatre, I can think of Quebec playwright René Daniel Dubois’ *Ne Blâmez pas les bedouins* (1984) as a more recent example; one may argue that Heiner Müller’s work can also be read as a negation of genre. Thomas Bernhard’s plays too, like

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*Vor dem Ruhestand* (1979), pose serious questions as to the genre of theatre and the role of the audience.

For the purpose of investigating this phenomenon on the stage, however, I will go back to Peter Handke's legendary first playscript, *Publikumsbeschimpfung* or *Offending the Audience* (1966),<sup>5</sup> and I will critique the generic phenomenology of the play, as it emerges in the playwright's strategies and the audience reception of its production. Theatre critics who witnessed the first production of the play had high hopes for a piece that seemed to promise a generic suicide. In many ways, Handke's script can be seen as a blueprint for an impossible project, and, no doubt, to this day, the play is still the best example of generic negation on the stage. In the following essay, I will use the play's original audience reception history to establish a critique of the script as a parodic play with the genre of theatre. The essay investigates how exactly the play uses its audience parasitically as its main constitutive element. I will use Wolfgang Iser's theory of reading as play to comment on the heterological practice of this kind of theatre and introduce the notion of *Negationsgattung* as a critical term that can help us in the resolution of the paradox of the play's assertive negation of its own genre.

Although the notion of anti-theatre became popular a few decades ago, the term itself remains critically ambiguous and unsatisfactory. Allegedly introduced as a joke by Eugène Ionesco, it usually implies a non-illusionistic and/or non-narrative based dramaturgy. Absurdist theatre has often been labelled as anti-theatre, and so have interventionist and participatory theatre experiments.<sup>6</sup> The term has been applied to the expressionist theatre of Michel de Ghelderode, but also to the plays of Genet, Adamov, Ionesco and R. W. Fassbinder, as well as to the early plays of Peter Handke.<sup>7</sup> While the expression 'anti-theatre' suggests a hostile disposition toward the stage—one must be careful to point out that the term has nothing to do with anthitheatricalist dispositions *à la* John Northbrooke or J. J. Rousseau (though one can well imagine what these would have to say about a play like *Publikumsbeschimpfung*)—most anti-theatre productions are, paradoxically, exploitative of the genre of theatre. Handke's play is a perfect example of this paradox, and thus ideally suited to test critical discourse on the phenomenon of genre subversion in the theatre.

### Tracking down Reception

While *Publikumsbeschimpfung* has been critiqued extensively, audience reception studies have been astonishingly lacking in this criticism, particularly so in view of the play's raucous reception history. This essay, then, will also contribute to a better mapping out of the complexity of the play's project, impact and audience reception. For practical reasons, I will limit my audience reception research mostly to the first production of the play by Frankfurt's Theater am Turm (1966).<sup>8</sup> Claus Peymann, then a budding theatre talent, directed the piece on a shoestring budget

not realising that he was working on what was to become one of the most controversial theatre performances in the history of the German stage. I have been very fortunate in being given access to a historical film recording of this first production by the Frankfurt television station, Hessischer Rundfunk. While the transfer to a two-dimensional format with its necessarily selective focus is problematic in a study of the genre of theatre, this source remains of tremendous value in gauging the effect and impact of the play.<sup>9</sup>

When the play premiered in Frankfurt, as part of the inaugural “Experimenta” arts festival, the appreciation and reception of it were extremely diverse, although homogeneously emotional. Reviews of the opening night report on repetitive and tumultuous interruptions; the second night acquired the atmosphere of a happening. During this first production, however, the actors were invariably able to produce the rehearsed performance, forcing the focus of the audience back to the original script.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it seemed as if the tension between stage and audience was real, though usually not hostile, and became a part of the dialectical dynamics that were at work. In his review of the play, Rudolf Krämer-Badoni reports on this field of tension between actors and audience:

The odd spectator leaves the theatre either swearing or joking, not noticed by the overflowing auditorium; one spectator suddenly gets up, waving the programme notes and tries to provoke laughter . . . but, it’s ineffective; nobody joins him and he sits down in astonishment; the actors interrupt their acting, stare at him in a friendly way, and one of them says calmly: “Let’s repeat the last part, since the gentleman has sat down again.”<sup>11</sup>

Wolfgang Vogel reports on a similar effect when he writes: “The attacked audience acted along; the abuse from the stage was effective in the elicitation of response.”<sup>12</sup> Most of the reviewers of that first night suggest the play is a revolutionary masterpiece, setting altogether new paths for theatre.<sup>13</sup>

A different tone, however, emerges in critiques that comment on subsequent performances and productions. Wolfgang Ignée reports on the second night of the play during which, in the middle of frantic shouting and whistling, the stage and the performers were actually assaulted by audience members: “A handful of spectators finally climbed onto the stage and carried table and chairs from behind the stage, and wanted to sit down among the four actors, who were sweating and rolling their eyes.”<sup>14</sup> In his review for *Theater Heute*, Henning Rischbieter also reports on the pandemonium of the second night, though he stresses the amusing and happening-like character of the whole event: “Peter Handke offered his audience the most entertaining evening since a long time—in spite of the invective.”<sup>15</sup> The

general lack of a confrontational atmosphere and, instead, a rather merry mood, is also evident from the TV recording of that second night, including the bit of stage assault, referred to above. In numerous close-ups of spectators, including Handke himself, we can see mostly amused faces, broadly smiling. These smiles may have partly to do with a recognition of Handke's project to play with structures of theatre, and may well reflect a complicitous audience response to the playwright's ambition to lay bare these structures and set up a game with them.

*Publikumsbesschimpfung* is a play whose scope is firmly situated within the parameters of the theatre. The few explicit references in the script that go beyond the theatre walls as such also fulfil a function within the theatre event itself. At one point, the audience is confronted in almost minute detail with the various possibilities and options it went through in preparation for the very theatre event it is attending:

Before you came here, you made certain preparations. You came here with certain preconceptions. You went to the theater. You prepared yourself to go to the theater. . . . You were prepared to sit and have something shown to you. . . . You approached this location from different directions. You used the public transportation system. You came on foot. You came by cab. You used your own means of transportation. Before you got underway, you looked at your watch. . . . Everything was as it always is. Your expectations were not disappointed. You were ready. You leaned back in your seat. The play could begin.<sup>16</sup>

These lines, by drawing the outside world of the audience into the play itself, intensify the meta-theatrical nature of the event. The focus on the audience's conventional tradition of preparing for the play fits into Handke's agenda "to show the producedness [*das Gemachte*] of theatre."<sup>17</sup> Handke's ambition, in other words, is, to a certain extent, to liberate the theatre of its own generic structures, which brings the project close to a happening, a genre that was quite popular in the 1960s.

### **The Phenomenology of Negation**

In his *Varia Semiotica*, Walter Koch assigns a process of "structure liberation" to theatre happenings. These, he points out, encourage spectators to transcend limitations of existing theatre structures.<sup>18</sup> To a certain extent, this process also played a role in the original reception of *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, albeit it in a highly controlled form, unlike in a happening. Its desire to shed the shackles of traditional representation or, in other words, to liberate the stage of existing structures, operates within a paradox of an emphatic reiteration (and exploitation) of these very theatre structures. In this case, and to rephrase McLuhan, the medium is not the message, since the medium remains a controlled playscript in spite of

what the message says. The effect on the audience is what Koch calls *Textgrenzenunsicherheit* or uncertainty about the borderlines of the text, in which spectators, individually or as a group, are uncertain whether certain fragments belong to the script or are custom-made improvisations, which turn out to be (pseudo-)provocations. In spite of the uncertainty, however, the play—on stage as well as in the auditorium—never really ceases its operation within the generic conventions of the theatre. Rischbieter's wish that "lots of critics and reviewers, who have so much to do with theatre professionally, would have loved to experience the disintegration of theatre in the theatre,"<sup>19</sup> unfortunately does not come about. Theatre does not do away with itself in Handke's *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, quite on the contrary.

In order to understand the meaning of negation in *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, we must situate it within the socio-political context of 1960s culture of contestation which permeated Handke's first play, but also within the context of the playwright's oeuvre. Negation as a strategy and disposition was crucial in the so-called liberation ideology of the 60s and in much of Beat and pop culture, especially in the radical refusal and denial that is implied by contemporaneous drug culture.<sup>20</sup> It is, therefore, no surprise to see it prominently present in Handke's early oeuvre.<sup>21</sup> In his third *Sprechstück*, *Selbstbeziehung* or *Self-Accusation* (1966), the "I" in its linguistic search for self-definition hovers continuously between two poles of confirmation and negation: "Ich bin . . . [I] Ich bin nicht . . ." <sup>22</sup> In *Hilferufe* (1967), to every single statement that is uttered, the speakers reply with a determined "NEIN" until eventually the word "Hilfe" literally brings help and, thus, affirmation in the form of a "JA!" <sup>23</sup> In *Kaspar* (1968), too, this motif of negation plays a crucial role in the self-negation/self-affirmation of Kaspar's *Leitsatz*, "I want to be a person like somebody else was once."<sup>24</sup> In Handke's most recent play, *La Cuisine* (2002, co-written with Mladen Materic), his extremely scarce use of language serves at once as a negation as well as a confirmation of the expressive power of words. In all of the above cases, the negation acquires an emphatic intensity within the performance text of these plays. As such, they are wonderful examples of Fischlin's suggestion that negation and unsaying, "as performative structures intrinsic to discourse, create opportunities for self-extension and for the illusion of a self-presence that is inviolable because it is unsaid."<sup>25</sup>

In *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, however, the negation is said loud and clearly. About a third of the way through the play, the audience is summarily reminded of the basic guideline of the event: "You recognized that we negate something. . . . You recognized that this piece is conducting an argument [*Auseinandersetzung*] with the theater."<sup>26</sup> As is implied in the term *Auseinandersetzung*, there are really two opposing movements at work in the play: one of separation and obliteration and one of explanation and accentuation. This particular effect of negation is a recurrent object of study in logic and linguistics. It was E. Husserl who compared

the act of negating with the erasure or crossing out of given expectations. In the case of *Publikumsbeschimpfung*'s vocal denial of its own genre, the audience is confronted with its own expectations in terms of theatre. What is being offered is not the expected representation but, instead, a discourse on theatre in which traditional representation is simply rejected. This is done in a language which, paradoxically, focuses on this rejection with such persuasiveness and determination that what is being negated is, in fact, verbally very much present. In other words, as with any crossing out in any semiotic system, the erasure itself gives presence to the erased. This is to say that Handke's negation of theatre (~~theatre~~) does not bring about an elimination of it and a fresh start on totally different tracks, but, in a paradoxical way, it draws focus to the continuity that exists on the stage as well as in the auditorium, where the audience ultimately performs itself, or adds a performance of itself playing along with the conventions exploited by Handke's play (= [theatre + theatre]<sup>2</sup>).

This effect seems to be the result of the nature of negation itself. One of the basic structural characteristics of negation is, after all, its intimate dependency on what is negated. As Walter Weiss points out, a fundamental structural characteristic of negation is that it implies what it negates: "The negation does not just refer to an opposite . . . but its formulation most explicitly implies the negated."<sup>27</sup> *Verneinungen* or negations, Weiss continues, draw attention to what they negate.<sup>28</sup> This attention-grabbing effect of negation is of particular importance when it not only happens in language, but also on the stage in the form of a refusal of representation and illusion. We can also see this in explicitly performative (or, performatised) utterances like advertisements. Benetton's United Colors ad of an African man with an amputated hand with, in its place, an improvised prosthesis made of a tin spoon, bluntly draws focus on what is *not* there.<sup>29</sup> It is the *absence* of 'hand' rather than the *presence* of 'tin-spoon-hand' which grabs our initial attention.

In his study of negation in *Hamlet*, James Calderwood points out that "Negation . . . introduces a paradox into language: the verbal presence of conceptual absence."<sup>30</sup> In Handke's play, this is pushed further: the negation brings about the verbal *and* physical presence of conceptual absence, even to the point that the negation itself becomes a convoluted affirmation. Theatre, in other words, utilises theatre to disrupt itself and, consequently and inevitably, reaffirms its theatricality. The whimsical stagecraft of the four actors in Peymann's *mise en scène* underscored this process. At various moments in the performance, and much to the delight of the audience, they managed to suddenly disappear from the stage, only to re-emerge, seconds later, at a completely different level or plane on the stage, or somewhere in the auditorium. The script too indulges in its self-consciousness of this theatrical erasure with rhetorical equivocation even to the point that the equivocation itself is self-reflectively denied and, therefore, unavoidably, rhetorically strengthened:

Due to the fact that we only speak and due to the fact that we don't speak of anything invented [*nichts Erfundenem*], we cannot be equivocal or ambiguous. Due to the fact that we play nothing, there cannot exist two or more levels here or a play within a play.<sup>31</sup>

It is ironical that *das Erfundene*, the inventive character of the event, is denied, while perhaps the most outstanding (and memorable) characteristic of Handke's play is the fact that it is based on what has adequately been called an original idea or "ein Einfall."<sup>32</sup> What Handke ultimately does is a juggling game with theatre as a genre, with the principle of negation as the motif of the game.

### Negation as Genre: *Negationsgattung*

In the determination of meaning, genre is an important constructive element. "Meaning," in John Searle's words, "is more than a matter of intention[;] it is also at least sometimes a matter of convention."<sup>33</sup> Genre, in many ways, is also a sort of convention through which meaning is constructed. In his study of literary genre, Fowler uses the concept of a "generic horizon," in which a literary work finds a place through "processes of generic recognition."<sup>34</sup> What sets this recognition in motion is a certain "'familiarity' acquired through encounters, direct and indirect, with the generic family."<sup>35</sup> Although the definition of genre may not altogether be an external categorisation, but rather "a collective or group creative process," showing "some of the elusiveness of a single work," the presence of an audience, embodied in the critic, the reader or the theatre audience, is essential for the genre to be able to function as a signifier.<sup>36</sup> Fowler's notion of generic horizon is particularly useful in combination with Jauss's horizon(s) of expectations. The audience's reception will be greatly influenced by their familiarity with and expectations of a certain genre. The effect of Handke's *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, then, and its impact on the audience must be understood in terms of its ambiguous relationship with conventions of genre, form and style, all of which are dealt with in inimical language.

Jameson reminds us that a specific genre may well have an ideological cloak or weight to it.<sup>37</sup> For a German audience of the mid-sixties, the genre of theatre was still very much associated with a mostly bourgeois art form. Handke's innovative play, while it was part of an experimental festival, was, in fact, a maverick achievement, marking the very early beginnings of a whole series of theatrical experimentation and innovation on the German stage. The German convention of dressing up for the theatre, for instance, which he exploits in his playscript, was well ensconced in the minds of his spectators (and is clearly visible in the Hessischer Rundfunk filming of the event). Until the early 1980s, German theatre posters reminded the public to come to the theatre, dressed properly in "*angemessene*

*Kleidung*.” The genre of theatre enjoyed a certain authority, and with that authority came its own generic expectation. Handke delightfully exploits this authority and with it, its expectations.

Moreover, in its negative dramaturgy, the play constantly insists on reminding its spectators of their own generic horizon, in the denial and prevention of any possible generic recognition: “You are not attending a piece for the theater. You are not attending.”<sup>38</sup> This obsessive denial of something that, in the denial, is reaffirmed, is a strategy which has been used extensively by numerous post-modern writers and artists in the seventies and eighties, where essential elements of a certain genre were turned upside down, only to be re-instated.

Genre or *Gattung*, generally speaking, is a sort of *fix* or template, which helps to establish a frame of interpretation.<sup>39</sup> *Publikumsbeschimpfung*’s *fix* then can be called a genre of negation or *Negationsgattung*, a *fix* which proclaims to *unfix* itself. The more peculiar effect of this characteristic is the fact that, for the audience, it is precisely the experience of the *fix* or genre—that of the theatre—which is central in the spectator’s experience of the play, and in the experience of its negation. *Negationsgattung*, in other words, brings about, paradoxically, a high degree of *Gattungserlebnis*. The genre of negation is characterised by a more intense experience of precisely the genre that is negated, or, once more, the erasure intensifies the erased. While this is the case for just about any genre, it is particularly valid for theatre, because of the experiential quality of the event. The play’s meta-negation, and not its much anticipated invective, is, in fact, its plot, or, in Kenneth Burke’s words, its “symbolic action,” and requires its live audience to play along with its apparent heterological practice. While Handke’s theatre debut is a pioneering work in its subversion of the grammar of its own genre, especially in the light of the postmodern usages of this technique, it is important to remember that he did not invent the strategy. When Denis Diderot titles one of his chronicles as “Ceci n’est pas un conte” (1772), his negation of the narrative genre clearly aims at playing with the notion of a present listener to whom the telling of the story is directed, and who, in turn, becomes part of the narrative and its production and reception.<sup>40</sup>

It is obvious that these cavorts with generic expectations only succeed through the presence of an audience to whom they are directed. This makes *Publikumsbeschimpfung* a playscript that is extremely dependent on performance, one of the more crucial generic characteristics of theatre. On the other hand, the audience’s awareness of the textuality and text-dependency of the performance poses a serious threat to the generic efficiency of the text as performance. It is these contradictory forces which bring the play closer to cabaret than to theatre *per se*. In a review of a 1970 Flemish production, for instance, the piece was labelled “kabaret.”<sup>41</sup> The play’s provocativeness—to theatre as a genre and to its audience



—thus acquires a campiness, and, similar to camp, becomes a sort of posturing or sham.

One of the etymological origins of the word ‘camp’ is in the French verb *se camper*, which means “to posture boldly.”<sup>42</sup> Handke’s play is a ninety minute long posturing in front of a captive audience, which, most crucially, must be found willing to make mental space for the affectation. *Publikumsbeschimpfung* is a play with attitude, and, similar to camp, there is a vast amount of allusive winking in the piece, which culminates in the delivery of invective at the end of the play.<sup>43</sup> However, while camp often brings about a sabotage of a certain model, which it exploits, Handke’s play equally exploits the generic conventions of theatre, even negates them, only to re-assert them boldly. Like camp, *Publikumsbeschimpfung* works by contradictions, but unlike camp, the play does not work by crossing different fields and/or registers of cultural expression—in this case, conventions of illusionary theatre—but rather by *pretending* to cross them out. It is a structure that can easily wear thin. In the original production, Peymann’s intensification of the actors’ stage presence in the physicality of their acting, almost to the point of acrobatics, was clearly an attempt to compensate for the danger of excessive textuality (and was a strategy which Handke did not particularly like, cf. *infra*). This weakness becomes prominent at the very end of the play, after the much anticipated outburst of offence has taken place, and the audience is tersely thanked for their presence and wished a good night. The stage directions tell the actors to remain on the stage and stare aimlessly into the public. Even then, the audience is not allowed its role of acknowledging the theatrical event by means of their applause. Instead, the roles are reversed yet again, and it is the audience that, in full spotlight, is roared at and applauded:

*Roaring applause and wild whistling is piped in through the loudspeakers; to this, one might add taped audience reactions to pop-music concerts. The deafening howling and yelling lasts until the public begins to leave. Only then does the curtain come together once and for all.*<sup>44</sup>

During the deafening rumpus in the Peymann production, as can be witnessed in the film recording of the second night, it were the actors who threw flowers at the spectators. Not only were the roles, once more, turned around, it was also a final reaffirmation of the “producedness” of the whole event, on both sides of the fence. Clearly, actors as well as spectators were playing roles. However, while most spectators did applaud the event at least for a moment, the curtain call—the staged one as well as the spontaneous one—petered out under wild whistling and applause blaring from the loudspeakers into a largely empty auditorium. The play’s strategy,

clearly, sets up a pseudo-heterological structure which cannot compete with the realities of an audience that has checked out and decided to go home.<sup>45</sup>

The impression is that Handke wants to have it both ways here, by pulling the carpet from underneath the audience as an audience and turning them into the event itself, in spite of themselves. Indeed, after all, spectators are not given any other alternative function than that of an extremely passive group of onlookers, which seems to be precisely the kind of audience for the kind of theatre that is being criticised. Joachim Kaiser raises an interesting question in this regard, in his review of the München re-take of Peymann's production: what would have happened if the audience were not allowed its conventional seating, but, instead, would have had to stand throughout the production?<sup>46</sup> Handke opts for the well-tryed (and hazardless?) conventional set-up. The erased, once more, is amplified through the erasure.

The significance of this effect is important and it reveals one of the keys for explaining the play's immediate success and ongoing fame.<sup>47</sup> Through a technique of distancing and emphasising, of negating and confirming, the focus is uncompromisingly on the medium itself, and the authority of theatre as a genre emerges from it re-confirmed and re-enforced.

Negation Theory usually illuminates the possibility of negation—the drawing of absence into presence—by placing it within the performative play of language. Authors, in the words of Wolfgang Iser, “play games with readers, and the text is the playground.”<sup>48</sup> In theatre performance, this phenomenon is intensified because of the performative realisation of the authorial text in what Patrice Pavis calls the Performance Text. Iser's Reception Theory of reading posits reading as an act of transformative ideation;<sup>49</sup> he explicates, most revealingly, the reading of a text as a staging of it, or, more precisely, as a staging of its play.<sup>50</sup> In the theatre, then, reading—or, to use an unhappy word, spectating—has more to do with a transformative realisation in which blanks and differences manifest themselves on different levels. Difference is a condition of play, and the intensification of the experience of difference in the theatre—in production as well as in reception—turns the theatre into an all the more ludic affair or *playground*.

When looking at the production history of Handke's first playscript, the ludic approach was re-occurring on the side of producers as well as audiences. Strategies of play and game have been crucial for numerous directors who have mounted the script, not in the least for Claus Peymann's world creation, which was, quite literally, to use Iser's observation about reading, a staging of the play of the text. Peymann's *mise en scène* was trendsetting in its radical choice for an expressively physical rendering of the text. His four actors went at it with the creativity and energy of circus clowns. Handke himself would have preferred a more sober, declamatory interpretation, providing, what he calls, a “gradual encirclement”<sup>51</sup> of the audience in language.<sup>52</sup> While Handke saw his first play as something that is exclusively

located in the linguistic realm, which, paradoxically, had to be materialised on a stage, most successful productions—in terms of audience response—have opted to stress the histrionic—as opposed to the linguistic—potential of the script.

In one of the most recent professional productions of Handke's play, Director Philip Tiedemann went even further in his physicalised interpretation, turning the play into a playful romp. For his 1998 Vienna Burgtheater production, Tiedemann pulled out the whole gamut of stage witchcraft. From the very beginning of the play, during the prologue, wind turbines cover the stage in paper, actors fly over the auditorium, sound effects blare from the loudspeakers, and the spectators are treated to an entertaining light show.<sup>53</sup> Tiedemann's production, not one bit offensive, presents a sort of Rapp interpretation of the play,<sup>54</sup> a frolicking, multi-lingual spectacle in which the stage becomes a "trampoline for equilibration of play and pleasure."<sup>55</sup> The negation of theatre, so central in the script, no longer conceals that what is not, but is turned into a celebration of that what is: stage play. While Iser suggests that the deliberate omission of a generic technique leads to a "minus function,"<sup>56</sup> and therefore to disorientation on the part of the reader, this is only temporarily so in Handke's playscript because of its ludic interaction with its own generic structure. In a later article, Iser points out that "oscillation, or to-and-fro movement, is basic to play,"<sup>57</sup> and it is this oscillatory movement of *Publikumsbeschimpfung* which permits the co-existence of the mutually exclusive of theatre and non-theatre. However, the rules of the game—and any game, including Handke's play, has rules for it to be played—are ultimately regulative, as opposed to aleatory or liberating.<sup>58</sup> *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, in all its playing with itself, with its audience and with its own genre, emerges as *only* theatre, and, therefore, *very much* theatre.

Herbert Blau calls Handke's first play an "ingenious but desperate project,"<sup>59</sup> clearly the generic structure of the play works against itself. However, one of the greatest merits of *Publikumsbeschimpfung* was, and I would argue still is, its ability to haul in its own audience as a constitutive and constructive element of theatre. That capacity is generated because of its playful disposition, and those directors who decided to exploit this dimension had their instincts well tuned. Play, it is well known, allows us to gain experience; this is called the ontogenetic function of play. The various productions of *Publikumsbeschimpfung* have had an ontogenetic function, in so far that they were part of the development of an audience. The negativity of its *Negationsgattung* has therefore a positive impact, and it confirms Wolfgang Iser's assertion that negativity is an enabling structure. This quality too, may well go back to the uniqueness of play in its response to the blanks of negativity, or, in Iser's words: "it produces, and at the same time allows the process of production to be observed."<sup>60</sup> This makes it possible for Handke to have his actors boldly assert that his play "is no play," but minutes later taunt their audience with a matter-of-facted "You are being played with here."<sup>61</sup> While the play is a campy,

and posturing *Verneinung*/negation of theatre, it not only enables theatre, but, ultimately, also takes it extremely seriously. Christopher Isherwood's reminder that "you can't camp about something you don't take seriously"<sup>62</sup> is helpful to explain not only Handke's theatre debut, but also his ensuing authority as a leading and serious playwright in the German canon, and his continuing fascination with innovative audience strategies. By placing the genre of theatre *sous rature*, the focus on its various generic conventions and constituencies is, in fact, intensified. At the end of the day, what we look at in *Publikumsbeschimpfung* is how we look at theatre, and how theatre looks at us.<sup>63</sup>

## Notes

1. Fischlin, "Introduction: Negation, Critical Theory, and Postmodern Textuality," *Negation* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994) 2.

2. Mark Fortier's "'In no Recognizable Way' *The Tempest*" (Fischlin 59-87) is a literary analysis of negation in Shakespeare's play, which is bracketed with a reference to performance. Beth Cleary's "The Bread and Puppet Theatre and Performance Practice," (*New England Theatre Journal* 9 (1998): 23-48), on the other hand, critiques the theatrical practice of negation strategies in performance as an ideological tool to impact on audience's involvement and alignment. For negation theory in literary criticism, see Daniel Fischlin, ed., *Negation, Critical Theory, and Postmodern Textuality*, and Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable. The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

3. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London: Routledge, 1978) 182 and 225-29.

4. See Piet Defraeye and Margaret Owens, "Digging for Lear: In Search of the Vanishing Point in Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear*," *Alfa* (Symposium on French Language and Linguistics) 10/11 (1997-98): 243-52.

5. The play has also been performed in English under the title *The Audience Abused*. All quotations are from Michael Roloff's translation of Peter Handke, *Kaspar and Other Plays* (New York: Farrar, 1969) 1-32.

6. For absurdist theatre, see Ronald Hayman, *Theatre and Anti-theatre: New Movements since Beckett* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), for interventionist theatre, see, among others, Cleary.

7. See Hayman, 95-123, and Nicholas Hern, *Peter Handke. Theater and Anti-Theater* (London: Wolff, 1971).

8. For a more extensive critique of almost forty years of production and reception history of Handke's play in Europe, see my article in an upcoming issue of *Seminar, A Journal of Germanic Studies*, "You hypocrite spectateur."

9. Claus Peymann, dir., *Publikumsbeschimpfung* by Peter Handke, Frankfurt, Theater am Turm, TV recording, Hessischer Rundfunk, 1966.

There are no references as to exactly which night of the play's run at TAT was filmed. By comparing the film and different reviews, however, there is little doubt that the filmed performance was that of the second night. This video recording is extremely useful for audience research, because of its extensive

coverage of audience behaviour and reactions. One camera, out of a total of at least three, was fixed upstage, with its focus frontally into the audience, while a second, more mobile camera regularly captured sequences of audience response.

10. This was not always the case in subsequent productions of the play. Most famously, a Spanish production was interrupted by a group of spectators which assaulted the stage. Police had to intervene to protect the actors during the Barcelona premiere in Teatro Roma, directed by Rizard Salvat (October 1970). See "Publikumsbeschimpfung in Barcelona," *Ludwigsburger Kreiszeitung* 28 Nov. 1970: 2, and "Handke Beschimpft," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 30 Oct. 1970: 32.

11. Rudolf Krämer-Badoni, "Die Sprache beim Wort genommen," rev. of *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, *Die Welt* 11 June 1966, my translation.

12. Wolfgang Vogel, "Die Publikumsbeschimpfung," rev. *Frankfurter Rundschau* 11 June 1966, my translation.

13. See Rudolf Krämer-Badoni, Wolfgang Vogel, and also Günther Rühle, "Allerlei Absprünge," rev. of *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, *Über Peter Handke*, ed. Michael Scharang (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972) 110-13.

14. Wolfgang Ignée, "Publikum Raus!" rev. of *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, *Über Peter Handke*, 118, my translation.

15. Henning Rischbieter, "Das Verhältnis zwischen Bühne und Publikum neu definiert: Die erste Experimenta in Frankfurt," misc. rev. *Deutsches Theater Heute: Stücke, Regisseure, Schauspieler, Theaterbau 1960-67*. (N.p.: Friedrich Verlag, 1967) 166, my translation.

16. Handke, *Offending* 22-23.

17. Peter Handke, "Nauseated by Language," interview, trans. E.B. Ashton, *The Drama Review* 15.1 (1970): 57.

18. Walter A. Koch, *Varia Semiotica* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1971) 133.

19. Rischbieter 166, my translation.

20. See Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, [1968]) and also Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75* (London: Methuen, 1986) 81-124.

21. See also Werner Thuswaldner, *Sprach- und Gattungsexperiment bei Peter Handke: Praxis und Theorie* (Salzburg: Winter, 1976) 9-14.

22. Peter Handke, Self-Accusation. *Kaspar and Other Plays* 33-51.

23. Peter Handke, *Hilferufe. Stücke I* (Frankfurt a/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) 89-97.

24. Peter Handke, *Kaspar. Kaspar and Other Plays* 53-140.

25. Fischlin 21.

26. Handke, *Offending* 14.

27. Walter Weiss, "Zur Stilistik der Negation," *Festschrift für Hugo Moser*, ed. Ulrich Engel, et. al. (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1966) 271, my translation.

28. Weiss 277.

29. Food for Life by United Colors of Benetton, advertisement, *De Standaard* [Brussels] 15-16 Feb. 2003: 8-9.

30. James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) 55.
31. Handke, *Offending* 27.
32. Rühle 112.
33. John. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969) 45.
34. Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 259.
35. Fowler 260.
36. 277.
37. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982)
38. Handke, *Offending* 12.
39. Rosalie Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara Lewalski (Berkeley: U California P, 1973).
40. Other famous early precursory instances of *Negationsgattung* that come to mind include Paul Gauguin's repeated use of the emphatic "This is not a book" in his *Intimate Journals* (1903). René Magritte's legendary caption for the eponymous painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1929) also plays with the definition (and reception) of the genre of painting.
41. "'Dag Jan!' in Waltra-teater," rev. of *Dag Jan (Publikumsbeschimpfung)*, *De Standaard* [Brussels] 11 Mar. 1970.
42. Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the performing Subject* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan Press, 1999) 29.
43. Peymann staged the entire concluding section, with the inventory of invective, as a rock concert, turning the abuse into rhythmical word patterns.
44. Handke, *Offending* 32.
45. The audience's response of Theater der Westentasche's production in Blaubeuren (1968) is memorable in this respect. About eighty spectators refused to leave the theatre after the eighth performance of the play's run and organised an impromptu sit-in in a cold and dark auditorium, while the theatre administrators could not close their building. "We were forced to sit through this play and waste our time; now we're going to waste their time for a while," one of them is quoted as saying ("Das Haben sie nun davon," *Ludwigsburger Kreiszeitung* 1 Feb. 1968: 2, my translation).
46. Joachim Kaiser, "Handke-Granaten," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 16-17 July 1966: 12.
47. A year after its world premiere, during the 1967 season, *Publikumsbeschimpfung* ranked among the five most frequently produced contemporary plays in German (Michael Patterson, *German Theatre Today: Post-War Theatre in West and East Germany, Austria and Northern Switzerland* [London: Pitman, 1976] 115), and it was already on play-bills in seven countries. In spite of the 40 years since Handke's play premiered in 1966, the play continues to be seen as a highly modern, even contemporary playscript. Students of theatre are invariably fascinated by the boldness of Handke's project, and while the play is a tough read for most of them, it often brings about enthusiastic responses, frequently coupled with plans to mount a production of the play.
48. Wolfgang Iser, "The Play of the Text," *Languages* 327.

49. Iser, *The Act* 147-50.

50. Iser, "Play" 336.

51. "Nauseated" 59.

52. Handke was not particularly pleased with the physicalisation of his text which, in his opinion, also stimulated the uproariousness of some audiences. The playwright ultimately decided, in 1969, to withdraw production rights for the play, a ban which lasted officially till 1983.

53. Philip Tiedemann, dir., *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, by Peter Handke, Wiener Burgtheater, Vienna, 1998 (reproduced by Berliner Ensemble, Berlin, 2000).

54. See Matthias Ehlert, rev. of *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 29 June 2000, B4.

55. Günther Grack, "Wir stellen was dar," rev. of *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, *Der Tagespiegel* [Berlin], 23 Jan. 2000.

56. Iser, *Act* 209.

57. Iser, "Play" 332.

58. On regulative and aleatory rules of reading, see Iser, "Play" 334-35.

59. Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1990) 128.

60. Iser, "Play" 336.

61. Handke, *Offending* 9.

62. Isherwood, Christopher, *The World in the Evening* (1954). Qtd. in Cleto 51.

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