Social Performance

Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual

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the usual and attendant visuals – water cannon, police in moonscape uniforms, etc. By and large those orchestrating extra-institutional protest are extremely performance-minded and adept at mocking those in power, making power itself look ridiculous.[19] With revolutionary insurrection political theatre is both internal as well as external, with acts within a movement as much theatre as those against the state. Similarly, terrorism is virtually pure theatre, deeds as events enacted by small bands seeking to render the state helpless, confused, and immobilized. Shocking events aim at converting citizens into, if not supporters, then at least bystanders, while the state is portrayed as helpless, clumsy, awkward, suffocating in and by its own paraphernalia, swaddled by its bureaucracy. Terrains so identified become virtually holy lands while serving as staging areas for organization, mobilization, education, and violent activities. Here the object is not to get the state to listen to demands but to overthrow the state as it is, the acts pursuant to that end, themselves constituting the acts of the play (Apter and Saich 1994).

So, for example, the virtually pure theatre of Sendero Luminoso in Peru, or the Red Brigades in Italy (not least of all in putting Aldo Moro on "trial" and then, after his execution, dumping his body exactly half way between Communist and Christian Democratic Party headquarters – the ultimate gesture of contempt).[20]

Masters of political theatre have always been abundant. From the storming of the Bastille to the tumbrels of the Jacobin period, the French Revolution was perhaps a model for the radical uses of political theatre (Schama 1989; Nora 1992) not lost on the purveyors of dramatic monumentality in Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and the Soviet Union. But the variety of examples of political theatre, especially of a kind that rendered retrievals of the past as ways to authenticate a presumed future, is virtually infinite.

We have suggested that today's political theatre includes ecclesiastical expressions of violence, not least of all that kind of fundamentalism that at one time would have taken more secular modes, socialist and Marxist. It bears repeating these latter, having more or less disappeared, have left a space on stage for racial, ethnic, religious, and ideological dramas. These sacralize terrain, making of residence or location not something on a map but a mosaic of moral jurisdictions endowed with drenched signifiers, a condition making crossings and passages dangerous. Such jurisdictions are occasions for ritual celebration, raised panoplies, accoutrements, and all manner of symbolic paraphernalia, not least insignia of war and violence.

But political theatre is of course far more from "above" than below, and part of normal politics. And as already suggested, every democratic society affords plenty of such occasions. Every election is in large measure a theatrical performance; so too with parliamentary debates. Nostalgia and the politics of retrieval, mythologized pasts as critique of present lapses, are punctuated by

those that make of solemn occasions instances of spectacle employed as theatrical events. Indeed, democracy, for all its claims to the contrary, is a far cry from the reasoned expression of competing claims within a framework of Enlightenment ideals. It is rather a series of theatrical occasions that make appeals to the voter by dramatizing and exaggerating fears and prejudices dressed up as policy preferences. By so doing, more serious claims are emptied of reasoned content while serving to convince skeptical pluralities.

Thus even in well-entrenched democracies like the United States, political theatre as mobilization can be used to override constitutional niceties and undermine legal protections. This is so especially when the play is about transcending political evil and realizing the political good by exorcizing demons in some palpable way, even though a mythical harmonious state, an original harmony of the spheres, a universal rationality, is as illusory as the perfectly equilibrated.[21]

Politics from below deals with contingencies that have in a sense gotten out of hand. Not any contingencies, of course, but those that on closer inspection turn out to derive from systemic conditions not fully recognized politically. Discourse from above will always try to regularize and eliminate such contingencies. Politics from above abhors randomness and favors order. But some contingencies have a way of refusing to be so managed, most particularly when they are seen to represent structural contradictions, social cleavages that, if they harden into boundaries, turn jurisdiction itself into a matter of contention, a condition in which opportunities for contentious politics through resorting to theatrical means are enlarged. Virtually all of the subversive theatrical performances today are dramatistic interventions arising out of perceived economic and social gaps within countries as well as between them. Modern global tendencies offer propensities for dramatic violence, the reordering of events, made possible by the increasingly fractured and divided character of advanced modernity, the social fissures, cleavages, and faultlines of wealth and poverty. These, and the polarizing tendencies they represent, create both opportunities for semiotic and moral space within which can be enacted those rituals of combat which the play itself reworks in traditional themes, primordial chaos, casual injustice, and rectifying principles. When contingencies are such that events become randomized, those without authority begin to take matters into their own hands, using violence to express inversionary objects. It is then, too, that political theatre is likely to depend on spectacular acts. Which is why we said at the onset that politics as theatre is most significant in moments of confrontational disjunction, especially when the play is about self and/or collective overcoming, the transcending project. One might say that whatever the concrete form the space formed by the state and the opposition to it may take, together they constitute a theatre in the round.

This is not to suggest that the propensity towards inversionary political theatre correlates with some threshold of inequality. But it can provide the contingent events out of which such theatre is composed. To turn contingent events into theatrical performance requires involvement by those who themselves are far from the margins of social, economic, and political opportunity. The agents who engage in theatrical discourse, including those favoring extra-institutional modes of politics, are usually themselves among the more privileged. It is they who reach out for wider clienteles and followers, create theatrical episodes, seek confrontation by committing violent acts, spectacular events of which are designed to dramatize polarization as between inversionary and redemptive alternatives that reveal the hegemonic character of the state. To the degree that such proposals are intrinsically subversive of prevailing laws and orders, so the stage is set for the dramas to unfold.

Nor does the emphasis on politics from below suggest that this is some-how different in kind from ordinary politics. Every political campaign, every competition between candidates, each time politicians line up on one side or another in favor or against legislation, and especially when principles, real or illusory, appear to be involved, politics is as much drama as it is about some more ostensible object. But it is at the exceptional moment that the theatrical side of politics is critical insofar as it engages individuals in the larger pro-cess of interpreting their predicaments in terms of collective action. That is, inversionary discourses, radical in nature, seek to reveal in dramatic events, not least of all confrontations, terror, and protest, the justiciable insensibility of the state when seen from the standpoint of those most penalized – those who need the most and get the least from political institutions unable or unwilling to adequately respond appropriately. In which case theatrical spectacles can include deliberate atrocities designed to undermine the conventional practices and discourses of politics, the acts of the drama, the more transfiguring the better, serving as rhetorical and symbolic tropes. So events are reinvented as drama, an imaginary real more "real" than the events themselves especially when the ethical fine tuning of political equity refines prevailing notions of justice. Seeking the theatrical in the event, inversionary political theatre is a way of translating alternative interpretive meanings into transcending truths.[22]

By the same token, subversive political theatre serves up as signifiers events that are metonymies for alternative political ideologies, larger principles gener-ated out of violated rights and mobilized grievances. When political movements challenge the limits laid down by the state by acts and events of confrontation, subversive political theatre needs to demonstrate within the play itself how rea-son derives from ruptures, the more disjunctive the better. Political theatre in this sense contributes to building dissident and subversive discourse communities that thrive on conflict with the state. It is as discourse communities that these

can establish their own boundaries, define their own territories, and use political theatre to reinforce their claims. The more transformational, foundational, or redemptive the objects, the more theatre devolves around confrontational and violent events.

From above, political theatre incorporates past foundings, transformations, redemptions, all of which serve as mythic foundations for continuous revalidation of the state and mobilize them for a purposeful intent, not least of all war. By this means the state celebrates its own legitimacy based on "deep myths of culture" (Turner 1974).

Between the "above" and "below," the range of theatrical alternatives and strategies varies. But no matter how performance, substance, plot, and focus alternate in style and mode of expression, the common denominator that makes political theatre a phenomenon in and of itself is the dynamics between audience and actor, drawing the two together, and where it succeeds, that is becomes intrinsically power, it constitutes a kind of transcendent reality. By framing the analysis as theatrical confrontations between hegemonic and inversionary discourses, it should be remembered that unlike theatre qua theatre, the events of each drama are grounded, concrete, empirical. They "represent" socially significant recognizable predicaments the particular circumstances, situations, and ingredients of which are restructured for, by, and as interpretive action. To the extent that this is so, the theatrical component is crucial in the exercise of political power. Where political theatre differs from just plain theatre, however, is in terms of a prior knowledge of power. Theatre is, after all, entertainment. Political theatre may indeed be entertaining. But it is in the end dangerous.

Dramatistic morphologies

All political theatre can be said to derive from a common ancestor, the dramatistic transcendence of chaos, the primordial condition of politics is one in which gods and other lords spiritual sported with the lords secular, to master the randomness of situation by the portrayal of fate. Nor has this primordial object disappeared today. Politics as theatre from above tends to center around ritualized spectacles whose deep structures are myths of the state. From below it involves "inversionary" events resulting from movements with revolutionary, terrorist, nationalist, or similar aims, where the emphasis is on those aggrieved for whom the benefits from society and state leave off. In this sense what becomes dramatized is the state of "social toxicity" as a consequence of state policy and institutional power. Insofar as the discourse then is directed not only to why and what institutions need to be changed but how, theatre becomes "real" insofar as it generates its own events.[23] Political theatre in this polarized sense is endgame politics. Violence, always a possibility, becomes endemic – a

structural problem. Both sides create the drama. Each mobilizes principles by defining their violation by the other. Signifying events constitute moral codes that become visible on the ground, the fresh outrage of newly dead bodies, the savagery of the other, and each side tries to define the other as a primitive alter. In this sense violence as theatre creates its own objects, its own plots, it miniaturizes as sacred those theatrical venues which are scenes of violation – such places defining terrain, boundaries, jurisdictions, and establishing the rules and rituals of crossings and passings.

However, if the "play" should end, with one or the other side triumphant, then the problem is to keep the drama going without it becoming thin, repetitive, mimetic. Should an inversionary movement succeed and in fact come to power it will need to keep itself alive as acting out a moral drama the more it attempts to dominate or replace prevailing institutions. And the more ritualized and emptied of meaning the play becomes.

With political theatre from below scripts follow a generative morphology that specifies an original condition of grace, a fall (depatrimonialization, dispossession, dispersal, etc.), leading to a recitation of perceived grievances and suffering, from which the logic of a transcending accomplishment can be derived – rectifying claims, rights, and demands (particularly as these relate to the defined responsibilities of the state and how far such responsibilities should extend and apply) with narrative sequences condensed into acts.

Such depth is all the more necessary given drastic changes in the political landscape. Conventional boundaries, jurisdictions, and affiliations are undergoing alterations on the ground and as categories. So too with regional groupings and associations, not to speak of state and society. The European nation-state is eroding both as a functional unit and legal entity. Migrations, immigration, the ebb and flow of cultures and populations, require a more deliberate understanding of society which has become more intermediated in complex ethnic, religious, linguistic, as well as class, status, and other ways. Not only have jurisdictions and affiliations altered but also beliefs about them – and as subject to controversy, fratricidal, factional, sectarian, and ethnic. In turn these occur within national boundaries rather than between them.

Similarly, hitherto conventional lines of distinctions, such as between combatants and non-combatants, are becoming eroded, and the meanings of war and peace have blurred. Confrontations are increasingly "popular," drawing in and engaging most if not entire populations, the rationality of such action depending on which substrate of logic is preferred, such preference deriving less from "interests" than from selected memories and experiences – real and imagined. As for incorporated and recounted narratives, it is the mythic that provides the basis of a logic with facts a sort of "imaginary real" (Smith 1991). By this means state power becomes more forceful than its rationality claims,

the common rules of the political game no longer applying. Instead of "ordering," territorial, political, or social boundaries serve as potential theatres of war, constituting, when conflict occurs, their own kinds of theatres. Today's politics displays an ever-widening range of mobilizing social and political movements. Many of these are not content to pursue conventional interests, ends, and goals. Rather their purpose is to take aim at the principles on which these rest. In which case political life itself conjures new social texts that occur when people try to make sense out of what is happening to them. In seeking solutions they inquire into their own conditions of possibility. To the degree that that is so, what is needed in political analysis is more emphasis on the differences such differences make. That is, more emphasis on words, things, and agents, rather than coalitions, interests, institutions. Not to dispense with these latter – of course not. Rather these need to be encompassed with a framework that would indicate how each by taking on symbolic endowments reinforces or redefines meaning and instigates action accordingly.

Just as moral principles can be deliberately eroded and replaced with exceptionalism, so boundaries in the mind can be altered by changing the balance between what is seen and what is imagined (see, for instance, Barthes 1972, in which an analogy is made with wrestling and indeed the wrestling match). That is what constitutes the narrative possibility. Such possibilities take the form of certain recognized themes, patrimonies lost or found, territoriality violated or preserved, and affiliation, loyalty, or treason as well defined. It takes potentially severe and stringent means to encode new boundaries or for that matter restore older ones. The narrative opportunity builds on the magnification of grievance, the transformation of loss into political yearning, and conversion of loss into political passion.

Which brings us back to events. We have said, repeatedly, that the place to start is with events. A quick glance at cultural problematics would lead us to select historically relevant benchmark events that also serve as analytical (and moral) punctuation marks. The range of possibilities is virtually infinite, from constitutional conventions to revolutions (or the other way around), each with a context based on its own specific cultural and historical profiles. Qualifying events, in appropriately signifying sites, magnify the effect of speeches, massed marches, torchlight parades, military displays. All manner of venues can do, theatrical spaces like squares, parks, palaces, amphitheatres, this redoubt, that pub, a mountain top, an altar, a podium. Whichever they are they need to be capable of confrontational costuming and pageantry, so that flags, fires, music, and the gestures and words to those on stage, broadcast to both a narrow circle of initiates, and a wider group of potential recruits susceptible to mythic renderings of duty.

The danger lies in becoming ridiculous. From today's standpoint it seems ludicrous that Hitler, in his uniform, mustache, his arm wearing the swastika stuck out in front of him, could convert the enormous and grandiose,

pseudo-classical amphitheatre at Nuremberg into a virtual church, thousands sharing the performance, waving a sea of Nazi banners, on signal massing the straight-arm salute, the uniforms, the black and the red exhorting the body to the state. Similarly with Red Square and Stalin and his henchmen standing in their points of vantage in Lenin's tomb before endless displays of armed might, tanks, guns, gymnasts, or other massed testimonials to the new soviet man. Or, again, Mao in Yan'an creating a mythical kingdom that realized itself in a Communist middle kingdom in 1949 in Tiananmen Square and to be undone exactly forty years later in the very same place.

The frequency of more and less memorable expressions of political theatre would suggest that as a phenomenon it is ubiquitous enough to be taken for granted as intrinsic to the public face of politics whatever form it may take. What matters is the script, what it contains, how it is coded and the quality of performance, and choreography and to the extent that what is being acted out in the general implication of more specific circumstances, a decline and fall from grace defining an overcoming project, a narrative trajectory beginning with a period of suffering and longing and ending with a description of accomplishment – that is the how as well as the what to be accomplished, the self realized for bigger purposes, movement, state, cause, as the case might be. What goes with these is demonization, victimization, redemption, and other important devices. One has only to think of De Gaulle in exile in London during World War Two and his triumphal return at the Place de la Concorde, echoed in its own way on the left when Mitterrand arrived at the Pantheon for his inaugural for his first term as President, thereby transforming a "red" but dead space into a living theatre. Consider the utterly theatrical events of the "war" against terrorism, or the tit-for-tat negative choreography of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. Today, of course, it is the drama of political violence that is on the whole the most disturbing, and the way in which staged and organized protest can endow particular places with sacramental or sacral qualities (think Jerusalem), inversionary pathos, yearning, and the hope that through violent actions what will result is that transubstantiation of the negativized "other," that the damned will be saved – the ultimately redemptive political trope. In this context individual acts transmute, provoking evocative scenes, signifiers for pathos, transgression, suffering, transcendence, and accomplishment. Politics as theatre is most successful when its effects are to renegotiate tensed fragments of experience, reordering in terms of sin, defilement, guilt, and purification the rules laid down by political figures as "script-writers," "agents" who are political leaders.

The interplay of ingredients – a preliminary assessment

In these terms political theatre is a way of constituting a referential wholeness. In this sense politics as performance, play or drama is both free-standing, with

a beginning and an end, but incomplete insofar as its end feeds into the next round. It is thus closed and complete and open-ended. In this way it contributes to and is intrinsic to chains of meaning forming an ongoing narrative. Thus each political sequence is a play that is itself an element in a sequence of others, the whole being greater than the parts. So the dramatistic side of politics contributes to belief, ideology, not to speak of religious or political preferences which, by means of the alchemy of political theatre, harden into doctrines – this in turn to the degree that the ordinary is endowed with the exceptional.

Political theatre is one particular dimension of a more general process but tailored in the form of recognizable parallels to theatre *tout court*. Theatrical episodes are among the ways that interpretation uses references to experiences, its "real" theatre a reality of lived experiences. Its themes are basic: death and dying, loss of patrimony, exclusion, to name a few of those most likely to be preferred by militant movements. The more a politics of theatre is transgressive, the more it inverts the order of things, opting for transubstantiating truths. This is the accomplishment of every successful revolution. Mobilized movements, by engaging events of their own making, choreograph acts to order and in so doing define or redefine prevailing terms of power. In contrast, from above, political theatre represents the triumph of order over chaos, a normative order embodying a preferred notion of justice, providing institutional gravitas, a constitution of self-embodying virtue.

This suggests a somewhat somber dynamics. It would include a wide range of possible circumstances, the terrifying drama of the holocaust, itself a stage for any number of totalizing theatrical encounters involving trauma, genocide in Rwanda, the dramatic standoff between Arafat holed up in Ramallah and a beleaguering Israeli army. In these terms, behind the deed lies the trauma, with death the configuring element. Suffering, exclusionary neutering, the transmogrification of souls, real or imagined, to merchandise – all are consequences of politics as theatre (Alexander 2002).

It should be admitted that discourse theory and theatrical politics suffer from certain operational deficiencies, an apparent lack of appropriate scientific methodologies, an absence of quantitative techniques. Yet paradoxically enough, both are extremely empirical, requiring fieldwork in depth, sophisticated engagement with the subject, and genuine contextual knowledge of a kind, indeed, eschewed by others than area specialists.

In this sense the present concern is with occasions when the "theatrical" component of events looms large, disrupting not only the order of things, but the orders of mind – indeed, an exceptional sequence of exceptional events is interpreted by suitable agents, so serving as a means to alter conventional political meanings of political life. When such events are reinterpreted not simply as events but links in "causal" chains connecting such events to explosive

potential consequences, especially those designed to bring down governments, tear apart social institutions, and alter prevailing conditions of possibilities, then the analysis of discourse theory generally, and political theatre more specifically, becomes a critical addition to the body of prevailing political theory used for the normal study of politics. So too with that most breathtaking *coup de théâtre*, the events of September 11, 2001, still embedded in our retinas, such theory will pose questions about equity, power, and domination. Moreover, it starts from the events themselves as a point of departure, and the rationale for acts against taste, convention, and political stability undertaken by those most offended by the way things are, and the most willing to sacrifice for the ways things, at least in their view, ought to be. If it is the power of discourse theory to show how interpretation of events, cast in a dramatic mode, restructures rationality, then the emphasis is on experienced events as they form first into a social text, as Geertz would have it, and then into a theatrical one.

If it is correct that politics as theatre has become a crucial element in politics today, should this be a cause for concern? Was Plato essentially correct in taking such a dim view of theatre? He was right to be suspicious. For (whether writ small or large) to the degree it takes on its own reality it becomes a form of magic realism, to use Jameson's (1986) term. The more successfully actor-politicians play to the crowds the less significant are more ordinary ways of doing the business of politics. The trouble with symbolic capital is that it subordinates the reality of common sense to the acting out of belief. If it can override obstacles, it can also lead to disastrous solutions. One has only to look at the consequences of religious revivalism in conjunction with the moral space left by failed radical and Marxist alternatives. In this sense, to the extent that theatrical space defines a moral space, it can be filled by any ideology, any fundamentalism, any true and truly overcoming belief. Any nonsense suddenly becomes plausible and logical, including sacral residues reworked into dominant themes.

Political theatre is intrinsic to politics. It is also dangerous. It involves the instrumental manipulation of symbolic expression. The danger is greatest when it becomes a method of conveying some form of mystical tuition based on reve-latory insights. It offers opportunities to beguile, entice, or entrap an audience, a public, or a citizen. It is also a way of encouraging a preference for passion over reason (Brown and Merrill 1993). In short, it is, among other things, a method of instrumental gulling. In this sense, it is suspect – not so different from Plato's warnings against music and poetry. It can be simply fun, entertaining, but not when that prevents citizens from taking a more proper measure of truth.

Yet to argue that political theatre and truth are inversely proportional would be utterly misleading. For in a world in which reality is, if not "unreal," at least increasingly bizarre, it is political theatre that can reveal a great deal about poli-tics. It can be used to puncture the pretensions of those in power with the cruelty

of parody or the devastating effects of comedy. It can be used as well to glorify those in power, reinforce or denounce extant political figures, firm up orthodoxies or tear down beliefs, or even more subversively, expose political subterfuges, and reveal what otherwise might have remained hidden from public view.[24]

Some tentative conclusions

We have emphasized those occasions in which political theatre is politics and politics is political theatre. Where it works it builds up power by intermediating between citizens and state in the several ways suggested. It codes meanings and adds dimensionality. Its scripts are weighty with referrals to past grievances and events. Its narratives celebrate the sorrowful. Its texts claim not only truth in the act but require acts that demonstrate higher truths, locating the worthy by virtue of their loyalties, and sanctifying jurisdictions dramatically defined. By weaving a fabric of belief out of a tissue of interpretations political theatre, unlike theatre more generally, works best when it exerts a kind of conversionary pull on its audience such that favored political ideas become superior insights. Those sharing such insights become a kind of chosen people; chosen not least of all in the sense such insights take on the power of logical truths. So too throughout history, especially in those combinations of theocratic and ideological doctrines, political theatre has been used to define or drive home the distinction between what is orthodoxy and what is blasphemy, what is dissent and what is subversion.

One does not want to overstate the case. As suggested, a great deal of political theatre is just, well, theatre. That is, it neither tries nor could it rise to such heights. But that does not mean it is irrelevant. Even where it lacks defining power, it serves other purposes, mostly celebratory, and it performs ritual functions. For in sharing in such dramatic occasions and fêtes of power political theatre enables people to feel that they have a stake in society for or against, and in favor or opposed to government and the state. It reminds them of their share in power, even if politically they have little voice. So too with the subversive nature of carnivals, fairs, and other circumstances where personalization allows greater toleration of inversionary roles, and by means of parody and *lèse-majesté*, sets aside at least for a moment the conventions of respect and authority, age, status, rank, and property in bursts of familiarity if not intimate exchange.

Moreover, if through expert manipulation of the magic of time and place, staging and players, actors and performance, script and spectacle, timing and choreography, as well as necessary resonance, an actor-agent as addresser to addressees is able thereby to collectivize an audience so that as a collective body it takes on jurisdictional and affiliation characteristics, so we can regard this as foundational politics whether of the state or oppositional politics. We have seen how this works when political leaders as actor-agents establish out of

singular events certain designated situations that become moral moments and by doing so exempt themselves from commonplace judgments and the ordinary constraints of common sense. In this sense the performance of the right kind of play in the right kind of setting serves an enabling function for political leaders seeking exemption from the ordinary rules of the game.

Seen from that perspective, political theatre provides a rationale for political exceptionalism, imposing a claim on citizen loyalties even against their better judgment. In this sense, political theatre, by means of symbolic condensation, enables what Roberto Unger has called transformative practice and intersubjectivity. It affords political actors who can get away with it opportunities to redefine appropriate objects through the artful use of rhetoric, the right occasion of ceremony, and a script in which citizens come to recognize themselves as players of many parts.

And then there are exceptional dramatic moments that all history seemed designed to produce, "narrativity codes" leading to moral teleologies, previous sacrifices recounted (and so kept alive) with martyrdoms a saving grace imposing its validity of claims and demands on others. One thinks here of radical millennial solutions embodied in confrontational theatrical events, or those involving revelation, even religious ecstasy. This kind of theatre can make catastrophes sublime by the projection of the transcendental accomplishment. Daily life is lifted out of its commonplaceness. People become aware or are made to feel privileged by playing their own roles in the public drama. Then, in their own eyes, and those of others within a public space, a community becomes an elect, to enjoy the exceptionalism of its own commonality.

Whether beguiled, gulled, or through more reasoned appreciation of spectacle, narrative, text, story, logic, retrievals, and projections, political theatre, insofar as it reconstitutes the public interpretation of private interpretations, and as it touches on themes that affect daily life, endows the ordinary with the exceptional. The more political theatre allows for such forms of political transubstantiation – that is the translation of private discretion to a public entity, whether a government leader or the head of a guerrilla movement – what is so enabled is what has been called a discourse community, an elect, a chosen people. It is in these situations that political theatre, by creating symbolic capital, creates not only power but authority. In the special occasion this is a result of a conveyance of private and individual wills to a collective one – producing what can be called collective individualism.

In this sense political theatre provides opportunities for political leaders to not only engage the ordinary loyalties of citizens, subjects, or members of particular political groups, but to induce them as individuals to convey their personal discretion to a collectivity. Insofar as this generates symbolic capital, the result will be a fund on which individuals can draw, the value of whose capital to the individual is that he or she feels empowered, with personal qualities

enhanced. By drawing more from the collectivity than individuals conveyed in the first place one transcends one's own limitations, and the collectivity transcends the limitations that circumstances have imposed on it. (This notion of conveyance adds an interesting dimension to rational choice theory and its individual rationality assumptions.)

As has already been suggested, political theatre becomes most significant in politically rupturing moral moments. That is, when political theatre aims at far more than ritual exercise, when it seeks to capture and encapsulate in perfor- mance such solemn occasions as the founding of new societies and states, or moments of revolutionary transformation, or redemptive moments, it becomes most important, especially in establishing when it is that old orders transgress and purifying alternatives come into being.

To summarize: in the last analysis, whether as state pageantry or a politics of resistance, political theatre is significant in the degree that it reinforces or undermines the state. For if our analysis is correct, it can contribute to powers that be or powers that are becoming, by means that have, on the whole, been obscured by more general views. It contrasts with that preponderance of politi- cal business that takes place, as it were, behind the scenes where the day-to-day work of governing goes on, committees, back rooms, over drinks and dinners, and other private or semi-public occasions. While these may have their own the- atrical aspects, generally speaking they follow their own rationality and their own purposes behind closed doors, and with only more occasional or periodic nods and calculations with respect to public preferences, especially where vot- ing and candidate choice are involved. Relevant information is largely based on the testimony of those most directly concerned with particular issues especially when vested interests sense decisional closure – government by secrecy, as it were, although subject to disclosure. Despite, or perhaps because of many and diverse power venues, what happens at political party meetings, caucuses, or in planning and legislative strategy sessions, or the specific tabling, shelving, or pursuing motions, follows its own coalitional rules (Hardin 1995).[25]

Political theatre requires visibility. It follows rules of performance in "scene(s)," scenarios, employing suitable "scenery." It contrasts to politics *behind the scenes* where the rationality rules of the game are relatively fixed and well understood by the participants. With political theatre the rules as well as the ends of politics are themselves the subject. In the case of power from "above" the rules of political order and procedure are reinforced by means of ritual occasions, spectacles, fêtes, and the invocation in regularized pageantry and in a variety of magisterial and ceremonial occasions (tradition playing an important role) in occasions of pomp, ceremony, and pageantry reinforcing public loyalties and symbolic solidarities.

From "below," especially when antagonistic groups engage in efforts to refor- mat the rules of order and procedure by means of staged confrontational events,

most particularly events of violence, the role of political theatre is to redefine situations so that those who would regard the state with disfavor would be inspired to change it. In both cases, as we have tried to show, the theatrical deployment of symbolically loaded events serves as the raw material for commitment. Politics as theatre then works best in defining moral moments. It can determine obligation, and establish discipline and affiliational loyalty. This argues for the assumption that there are fundamental attributes of political power independent of institutions.

We conclude this much too long and rambling discussion with a plea for a more nuanced approach to political analysis. Political discourse and political theatre should not be taken lightly or regarded as frivolous concerns. Political drama is not only relevant to real politics. It is a method of understanding politics in its full range, and on a par with historical, institutional, structural, behavioral, or rational choice modes of analysis. It emphasizes what even the most shrewdly designed theories based on principles of rewards and punishments, pleasures and pains, costs and benefits, inputs and outputs, or structural principles and institutional mechanisms overlook.

Nor, despite the emphasis on the exceptional, are democratic systems aloof. Every election is in large measure a theatrical performance; so too with parliamentary debates. Indeed, democracy, for all its claims to the contrary, is a far cry from the reasoned expression of competing claims within a framework of Enlightenment ideals. It appeals to voters by dramatizing and exaggerating fears and prejudices dressed up as policy preferences. Even serious claims are emptied of reasoned content in order to convince skeptical pluralities.

The more passionate the play and the more moral its objects the more the subtext is about purity and danger, as Mary Douglas (1973) called it. The more it invokes the sacred and the profane, the more dangerous its activities. The manipulation of theatrical power in this sense is more similar to church rituals, religious rites, exorcism, mysticism, all of which create a space for specialists, professionals, experts in projecting images of violation, sacrifice, betrayal, redemption, and other such themes on to a public stage and in ways that make for audience participation. Indeed, the craft of political theatre as distinct from theatre more generally, is to provide a sense of vulnerability overcome. It is the overcoming project defined, that brings political theatre home (Ricoeur 1967). In this sense and in relation to political power, political theatre exorcizes political danger through the collectivization of individual wills, this last distinguishing political theatre from more ordinary entertainments. It works best when it becomes hyper real even in its most sublime moments of unreality.

We have examined theatrical politics as a thing in itself. We have also considered it within the broader framework of political discourse theory and pragmatic phenomenology. Political theatre is part about the way people interpret their circumstances, personal and social, individual and collective, and how they

come to change them. Both occupy the strategic space at the intersection of the personal and the public, the latter as audience and actor. Political theatre can in this sense be considered a field of action, one that works a kind of performative alchemy that transforms experienced events into hortatory admonishments. Political theatre is in this sense the abiding abode of the political imagination.

Notes

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1. See also Flyvberg (2001), who in turn attacks science in terms of the "epistemic" versus "phronesis."
2. One thinks here of superstructure among Marxists, early debates between Parsons and Blumer, or the critical sociology of such putative phenomenologists as Goffman, ethnomethodologists like Garfinkel, "death of the author" structuralists like Barthes and Foucault, not to speak of the "structural phenomenology" of Bourdieu.
3. See, for instance, Negara (Geertz 1980). This is one of the most explicit studies connecting architecture, geography, spatialization and symbolization to political theory.
4. One can cite, for examples, Roman Jackobsen, Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paul Ricoeur, Guy Debord, Hayden White, Terry Eagleton, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and, albeit in very different terms, Adorno, Durkheim, Dilthey, Mead, Mannheim, Parsons, Benjamin, etc.
5. See Burke (1952a), especially where he discusses what he calls a "mystic moment," a "stage of revelation after which all is felt to be different" (1952a: 305). See also, Geertz (1973), Barthes (1966), and Bourdieu (1977).
6. See Skinner (1985). Interestingly enough a good deal of grand theory went out of fashion just as it was becoming more and more politically relevant. Hence, kicked out the front door it is returning through the back especially in fields like economics and political science, where generally speaking market theory and rational choice leave little space for such concerns.
7. The contrast is with more formalistic theories, inputs and outputs, integration, balance, or equilibrium in part to incorporate as theory what these others exclude as contingencies. In these terms the original connection between the two emphases was Pareto's distinctions between rational action and "non-rationalistic" aspects of politics, residues, and derivations. Where distributional rationalities left off these provided the equilibrating elements of which "optimalities" and "ophilimities" could be composed. They filled the space otherwise left to contingencies, serving as the conditions of possibility for equilibrium outcomes.

8. Included in the notion of performance is the tension that arises out of denoted events, the dramatic impact of a specific story line. One also needs to know how politics as theatre works at the level of structure, and in two ways, form independent of content and then in terms of content itself – the first representing what Hayden White has called "the content of the form."

9. "Jules Michelet's triumphal narrative made the Revolution a kind of spectacular performance, at once scripture, drama, and invocation" (Schama 1989: 5). See also Nora (1992).

10. A good mixture of such high and low comedy with tragic overtones was the impeachment proceedings against President Clinton.

11. Geertz's (1973) twin notions of "thick description" and "social text" are relevant. The characterization of culture as template, and social text as a system of signifiers, points in an ethnographic direction.

12. One can favor the structural side of Geertz and use certain phenomenological modes to decipher social texts, the accomplishments of Bourdieu (1977) with his emphasis on the relationships between events structured according to the time, space, and exchange meanings endowed by those engaged in them.

13. Nkrumah's Agora was Black Star Square (thereby retrieving within his own the historical script of Negro suffering and slavery by using Garvey's "black star" as the constituting reference point). Mao, whose first arena was in the hills and mountains of Yan'an, used the caves his followers lived in as the ground for an Agora, his dramatic recounting of events taking place against a backdrop of weapons, horses, the sounds of gunfire, while virtually every defeat, like the stations of the cross, served as a narrative of victory. Such theatre eventually wound up in the Tiananmen Square, which became his personal forum as well as mausoleum. Today that space carries with it a different drama, with its own spectacle, the memory of the events of June 4, 1989.

14. Dispersed through the different narratives were multiple themes of oppression, not only between black and white but within the latter, British colonialism, Boer victimization.

15. For Mao the emphasis was on ideological struggle, critique plus uplift (Zedong 1976).

16. Nothing could have outdone the political theatre created by Mao during the Cultural Revolution when, it has been estimated, some 12 million people were packed into Tiananmen Square for the grand mobilization against those who came to power and sidelined Mao himself. Also the mock "trials" of officials when children, students, and others organized as Red Guards charged people for crimes they did not commit, humiliating, beating, and destroying their property were replicated in virtually every organized setting, schools, factories, rural settings and urban. Mao was very conscious of politics as theatre. For earlier theatrical "occasions" during the revolution and Mao's comments on political theatre itself, see Apter and Saich (1994).

17. All this has been known in one form or another since ancients like Plato saw the "city" as a discourse community. Composed of one part rational and logical principles and the other mythic belief, the "dialogue" was both a performative and symbolic script.

Plato's dialogues are "plays" in which the performance is contained in the action and the action is contained in the script.

18. Mao Zedong for example, issued quite precise instructions to the many theatre groups which were part of the Chinese Red Army during the Chinese revolution, arguing in good socialist realism terms that a peasant audience was far more preoccupied with authenticity, particularly in details of dress, utensils, household accountrements, etc. than in some particular plot. He believed that without such attention to detail the power of the narrative and the ideological meaning of the play would be lost (Apter and Saich 1994).

19. For an analysis of extra-institutional protest as political theatre see Apter and Sawa (1984).

20. Wagner-Pacifici puts it as follows. "For just as generic choices in theater effect the internal complexity of the characters, their range of relationships with other characters, and their possible relationships with the audience, so do generic choices in the theater of politics condition the amount and quality of public participation and character richness and psychological complexity. Here, the two ends of the generic continuum will be represented by Tragedy and Melodrama – Tragedy allowing for an encouraging audience identification with the tragic victim and his or her decisions, dilemmas, weaknesses and fate; Melodrama excluding the audience both from such identification and from any engaged participation beyond that of the prescripted booking of the villain and cheering of the hero" (1986: 20–2). See also Moss (1997).

21. As already suggested, theatrical occasions can occur in virtually every kind of expropriated venue – a court room will do, or a legislative body. A stunning theatrical terrorist act, one with a global impact in terms of shock, anger, and uncertainty – witness the impact of September 11, 2001 – can create an instant venue, as occurred with the Twin Towers which themselves are in process of becoming memorialized in an appropriate architecture. Democratic societies are particularly vulnerable to such self-constituted theatres of terror; this is all the more significant because, for the most part, democracies use political theatre to celebrate one or other aspect of enlightenment, including the struggle to accomplish its higher purposes. So too, fundamental retrievals and projections, its deep myths, historical struggles, etc., give way to popular re-enactments of constitutional revalidation and confirmation, the constitution itself constituting the logical divine behind secular politics.

22. Of course there are many kinds of political theatre, not least of all the theatre of the absurd. It becomes anything but absurd when and where cleavage politics becomes central and where events lead to both tragic consequences as well as themes for discourse. In this latter context, if and when political figures appeal to transcending ethical principles as a form of ideological persuasion, then passion and principle become likely handmaidens. With what consequence will depend a good deal on the power of performative persuasion. Among the characteristic qualities of such persuasion is what is best described as general aura of ethical romanticism.

23. Indeed, what distinguishes the destruction of the World Trade Center as a theatrical event was the way it set off a chain of further events from which not only discourses

but scripts, scenes, and stock parts unfold, increasing uncertainty, public fear, a ballet of responses that called for a display of force. The play substantiates an enticing agenda for jihadists on the one hand and world police on the other.

24. "Aristotle had said that, particularly in the arousing of pity, the rhetorician is most effective if he can bring before the audience the actual evidence of hardship and injustice suffered" (Burke 1952b: 81).

25. Despite publicity, few politicians seriously engage the public. The politics of choice is for the most part a politics of manipulation according to well-understood rules of the game. Indeed, the prevalence of common rationality rules and a shared understanding is perhaps a corollary of democratic politics in particular. Disagreement over possible outcomes within the framework of behind-the-scenes politics, is what gives rational choice relevance as a mode of analysis.

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8

Symbols in action: Willy Brandt's kneefall at the Warsaw Memorial

Valentin Rauer

"Through all former and later pictures, [. . . I] see a kneeling man in Warsaw. [. . .] there are people who can say more with their back than others with thousand words. It was obvious that every part of this body felt something that wanted to be expressed – about guilt, penance and an infinite pain."

Cees Nooteboom[1]

Introduction

On December 7, 1970, Willy Brandt, the Chancellor of the German Federal Republic, was to sign the Warsaw Treaty, one of the treaties between Germany and Warsaw Pact nations currently seen as the first diplomatic step to the break-through of the Iron Curtain. The official signing took place in Warsaw and, as expected in the international political arena, it was paralleled by several commemorative ceremonies. The agenda included a visit to the Warsaw Memorial, erected in honor of the Jewish heroes of the 1943 Ghetto Uprising. Surrounded by the official political entourage and several representatives of the international press, Mr. Brandt stepped out of his vehicle, slowly approached the Memorial, straightened out the ribbon of a previously laid flower wreath and took a step back. Then something unexpected happened: he suddenly sank on to his knees in front of the Memorial and remained still for a minute. The next day, the response to his gesture was enormous. The picture of Brandt kneeling made its mark in the international press. All major newspapers in Europe and the United States enthusiastically featured this "emotional moment" in international relations.

Based on a media analysis of the German Chancellor Willy Brandt's kneefall in Warsaw, I will demonstrate that this was not just another media-hyped *occurrence* in politics but in fact an extraordinary *event* that marked the beginning of a new stage of development in the trajectory of German identity and memory. This performative event has changed the way in which Germans attempt to come

to terms with their Nazi past (Barkan 2000; Moeller 1996: 1035). In the twenty-year period following World War Two, Germans have perceived themselves as victims of Hitler and Stalin rather than as victimizers. Reminders that Germany represents a "country of perpetrators" were usually dismissed by the majority of Germans either out of ignorance or resentment. The kneefall was the first symbolic public representation of German guilt that did not face general immediate defensive opposition in Germany. Quite the opposite, this event opened up the way for new forms of collective remembrance of and responsibility for the German past.

This breakthrough raises an essential theoretical question: how can a spontaneous gesture that lasted only one minute have such a powerful latent impact on West German self-representation? Why and how is the kneefall currently perceived in the German public sphere as the decisive turning point in the history of German collective memory? To expand on these issues, I will first refer to the epistemological impact of a performed social reality (Austin 1957; Derrida 1982 [1971]; Eco 1977). Second, I will refer to two paradigms of social performance that may at first glance seem incompatible: the cultural-pragmatic approach of performance (Alexander, in this volume; Turner 1986) and the concept of "event-ness" (Giesen, this volume; Mersch 2002). The cultural-pragmatic approach provides analytical concepts for common performative productions and receptions in their entireties, and highlights that any actual performative action is always embedded in a certain cultural context, in narratives and scripts, and in power relations. The concept of event-ness, in contrast, focuses on the construction of *occurrences* as extraordinary *events* (Mast, this volume). This transformative construction of occurrences into events is crucial in the case of the kneefall because it enables us to explain how rigid identities and collective memories can rupture and how they are rearranged. After an occurrence has been perceived as an "extraordinary event" we no longer see the world as before. The reconciliation of these two approaches will elucidate the question of why Brandt's kneefall as a performative act has had such a profound path-breaking effect on German collective memory; furthermore, it provides a theoretical contribution to performance theory, of how the relation between cultural stability and cultural change could be conceived of.

Performances between reproduction and event-ness

After Willy Brandt, the highest representative of the Federal Republic, had through his symbolic gesture acknowledged Germany's past as a perpetrator, former narratives of disclaimer and self-victimizing were not as acceptable as before. Brandt's acknowledgment was not a *formal* speech, but a symbol in action or a gestural performance. Such acts have much more power to construct

a new social reality than formal contracts or agreements (Tambiah 1979; Turner 1986). The kneefall was a gestural "speech act" that expressed feelings of remorse and repentance. Performatives achieve their meaning by *doing* instead of *describing*; they do not *claim truth* in the Habermasian sense, but *create social reality* by doing something. Performatives are never true or false but "felicitous or infelicitous" (Austin 1957: 9f.). The "action part" of a speech act (e.g. "I am sorry," "I promise") creates a way of social "being" which did not exist before the utterance. The only epistemological doubt that can be raised concerns the pragmatic question of whether the act is infelicitous, inadequate, or fabricated; e.g. did the proper person make the apology, or was the apology performed authentically enough to enhance the moral status of the person or collective? Similarly, the weekly journal *Der Spiegel* featured the kneefall by asking the question: "Should Brandt have knelt?"[2] It may seem trivial at first glance, but Austin's epistemological distinction is crucial here: Brandt invented a new performative symbol to represent the German past, thus creating a new collective reality. The discussion that followed was able to react to this new reality only by questioning the *adequacy* of the symbol, not its *truth*. The reference of truth to identity was thus shifted from the "inner" world of consciousness into the "external" world of action, expression, and perception. The philosophical being was replaced by a social being. The Cartesian *cogito*, "I think, therefore I am," was transformed into "I perform, therefore I am." The internal world was superseded by its surface; the "true" inner self became irrelevant to the social meaning of the interaction communicated.[3]

However, all performative utterances depend on the *iteration* of certain textual models or scripts in order to be to be understood, which means that there is nothing like a *new* performance (Derrida 1982 [1971]: 307–30). In the media, Brandt's kneefall was equated to a mythical historical predecessor: medieval King Heinrich IV's kneefall in Canossa. Thirty years later, the kneefall became an object of iteration and mythification in its own right. It had been applied to various contexts (Yugoslavia, China/Japan, Italy, Chile etc.) as a symbol which one should take as a model to be followed while performing public acts of reconciliation. Derrida's concept of iteration explains that the effectiveness of performative acts lies in the fact that their activity is meant to be understood and shared.[4] However, what is missing from his perspective is an approach with which to study the social conditions within which such symbols in action occur. Textual iteration includes neither a notion of social power, nor of actors, nor of an audience passing judgments on or interpreting such acts. If there are only textual iterations of signs and scripts, performance theory is reduced to what Umberto Eco once called "pan-semiotical metaphysics." There is no latent context beyond the "world as text – the text as world" (Eco 1987: 15–17, my translation).

Therefore, from a sociological perspective, the more challenging question is how and why performances have the power to *transform* and *reproduce* social identities, hierarchies, or power-structures (Turner 1986). A person who has successfully apologized for his or her deeds no longer possesses the same "degraded" identity as before (Garfinkel 1956). In order to understand that "performative magic" (Bourdieu 1991) in a sociological sense, the audience perspective must be included. The Weberian charismatic leader does not *possess* a real extraordinary disposition, but performs before his or her audience in such a manner that everybody *believes* in his or her extraordinary-ness (". . . der Glaube an die Außeralltäglichkeit"). In the same sense, an extraordinary event is not extraordinary in itself, but rather is believed to be by the audience. In this respect extraordinary-ness and event-ness do not represent an ontological reality, but rather a social reality. For the study of the persuasive force of performative events on collective identity, this argument demonstrates that we must take the perspective of the audience into empirical consideration.

But what is *the audience*? In modern or postmodern societies, Goffman's dichotomy of stage and back stage on the one hand, and audience on the other, is too simple. Audiences are not as monolithic as they seem at first glance. The functional differentiation of the means of media productions and techniques causes a multiplication of audience on at least three different levels, which can be called first-, second-, and third-order audiences. The *first-order audience* experiences the actual performance (the crowd actually observing the kneefall, see figure 8.1); for them, in terms of speech-act theory, the fusion of time and space and of actors and audience "creates a new reality." The *second-order audience* are the media which encode the event (Hall 1980) by providing latent structures of time and space by means of textual or visual representation. The media make the "absence" of the situation possible (Derrida 1982 [1971]) and encode the event as successful or failed. The reader or viewer of the media products are the *third-order audience*, who more or less depend on these medial judgments while decoding its meaning (Hall 1980). However, it is even more complex than that: the audiences can become *actors* themselves. The first-order audience is already often included and shown on TV or in newspaper pictures. Their spontaneous utterances, their laughter, or in this case, their silence, are also taken into account by the media. Their reactions are cited by the second-order audience in order to transform a profane *occurrence* into an extraordinary *event*.[5] In modern "media democracies" not only the audiences, but also the *actors* are multifaceted (Meyer 2002). In classical theatre the actor on stage represents not himself as a person, but a *social type* of persons. The actor does not express his "real me" but a general, typological or "social me" (Eco 1977). In theatre, abstract social categories are performed as if they were really happening. Thus the performance of social classifications is the central structural characteristic of

Figure 8.1   Willy Brandt kneeling in front of the Ghetto Memorial

classical theatre (Eco 1977). In contrast, television genres such as news reports or "reality TV" represent a wider scope of social reality. Here, the mediated person simultaneously refers to him- or herself both as a "real person" and to his or her social role. On television news reports he or she walks and talks not *like* a politician, but *as* a politician (Eco 1977). If, for instance, the kneeling German Chancellor is broadcasted on TV, it shows not only an actor who plays or imitates political ceremony, but someone who creates as the "real" Chancellor a new reality of commemoration by a performative act. Television's means of symbolic productions produce a multifaceted spectrum of social realities; the newer medium innovates and iterates theatre at the same time. Seen from the perspective of speech-act theory, this means that television enables real politicians to perform an act in order to transform the status or identity of the collective that they represent. In (post)modern societies *teatro mundi* is challenged by *media mundi*.

However, in order to understand the social impact of performance comprehensively, more than just the audience and actor perspectives are required (see Alexander, this volume). Some performances are censured and changed from "above" or due to the concrete societal context cannot even take form. Therefore, power and hierarchical aspects must always be taken into account. It is a different thing if it is the leader of the opposition or the Chancellor of the country who falls to his or her knees. In the same way, it makes a difference if a

private person has sexual affairs or if it is the President of the United States (see Mast, this volume). For a person holding extraordinary power, it is much more likely that his or her performance is not perceived as profane occurrence, but as extraordinary event. This is quite similar to the phenomenon of "charisma of office" (Max Weber).

Moreover, performances are embedded in "background systems of collective representations." These are general belief systems, the values on which the actual performance relies. The nation as an "imagined community" of freedom and solidarity is one of the strongest belief systems in the modern era (Anderson 1983). Narratives according to which the national identity is rooted in a heroic uprising strengthen these beliefs and transform it into a stable and latent taken-for-granted-ness (Giesen 1998).

The interrelatedness and mutuality of the different pragmatic cultural patterns such as actors, audience, representational systems, scripts, and power-structures, etc., explain the reproduction and stability of collective identity and cultural specificities. However, a salient question remains: how can these collective identities change, or how can we think of cultural change in terms of performance theory? For instance, the "guilt of nations" (Barkan 2000) was a totally new phenomenon for imagined communities.[6] There existed neither a traditional knowledge of how to remember adequately such a "counter-past," nor were there collective scripts and commemorative rituals on which one could simply rely. All these cultural techniques and representations had to be invented almost out of nothing. The kneefall was one of these inventions.

To develop patterns for the theoretical interpretation of inventions, ruptures, breaks, and rearrangements, it is necessary to take into account the phenomenon of performative "event-ness." Recent philosophical approaches to performance theory differentiate between "action" and "performance" (Mersch 2002). Whereas *actions* are intentionally driven, *performances* are events that are by definition "unintentional." Events are experienced as if they "manifest themselves," as if they "simply happen," driven by a radical "alterity" which is beyond the sphere of profane or ordinary meaning (Mersch 2002: 9, my translation). Taking up Durkheim's differentiation between the sacred and the profane, one can argue that, for modern societies, it is the uncontrived event-ness that takes on the former function of the sacred (see Giesen, this volume). Whereas sacred rites such as the communication with the divine are crucial for constructing collective identity in traditional or stable times, it is the experience of event-ness, or, to introduce another term, *meaningful contingency*, that alters rigid belief systems. Those meaningful contingencies provide a resource for the invention of new traditions, belief systems, and rituals.[7]

As the following empirical analysis will show, the presence of *meaningful contingency* is precisely why enhanced moral value is still attributed to the kneefall thirty years after it took place. For the international audience, the

kneefall was unprecedented. Brandt's "invention" expressed a change in the community of perpetrators. If, in contrast, the gesture had been commented on as intended and contrived, there would be no such attributions and transformational effects.

Cultural pragmatic as public commemoration: the West German case

Before going into the detail of the kneefall's specific significance, the performative environment or the historical context of the kneefall must be roughly sketched (figure 8.2). The context can be patterned through a set of different periods in which the kneefall played an important role as turning point. Periodizations always risk over-simplification and West German history of memory in particular is characterized by fundamental ambiguities. Whenever it seems that the country's historical conscience has settled down, a new, formerly taboo issue suddenly appears as the main concern for public memory. However, by using the analytical tools of cultural pragmatics and event-ness to undertake a periodization, the principal openness, fluidity, and the subjectivity of such a categorical attempt remain transparent. It is important to note that these different periods are not mutually exclusive in a strict sense. All four acts of the German memory drama more or less overlap and are to some degree still present. Some modes of remembering continually return, some come more slowly than others to a halt (Assmann and Frevert 1999) (see table 8.1).

Throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s, most West Germans perceived themselves not as perpetrators but as victims.[8] According to them, the villain was Stalin who kept millions of German POWs in his camps and occupied German territory. The suffering of Germans has frequently been paralleled to that of the Jewish victims of the concentration camps (Moeller 1996: 1026–7).[9] Public stories portrayed German women as innocent victims of war and patriarchy (Heinemann 1996; Grossmann 1998; Schneider 1998). Yet there were some incidents which could and did indeed raise the question of guilt: war crimes trials and reparation payments to Israel. But all these public debates did not really affect the common disclaimers. Instead, these issues remained objects of contestation and resentment. The German victim-discourse was valid for both those who currently still adhered to Nazi ideology as well as for those who had regrets in retrospect. The former group usually did not feel guilt at all, whereas the latter group lived in a system of collective representations of "transcendent guilt." Guilt was transformed into an existential condition of mankind and was thus represented within the sphere of metaphysics: "Mankind is evil, thus the war and the Nazis are only one example of this evilness and we, like all others, are victims of that human nature." Within the primary script dominant at the time, Hitler was imagined as "the demon" who alone was responsible
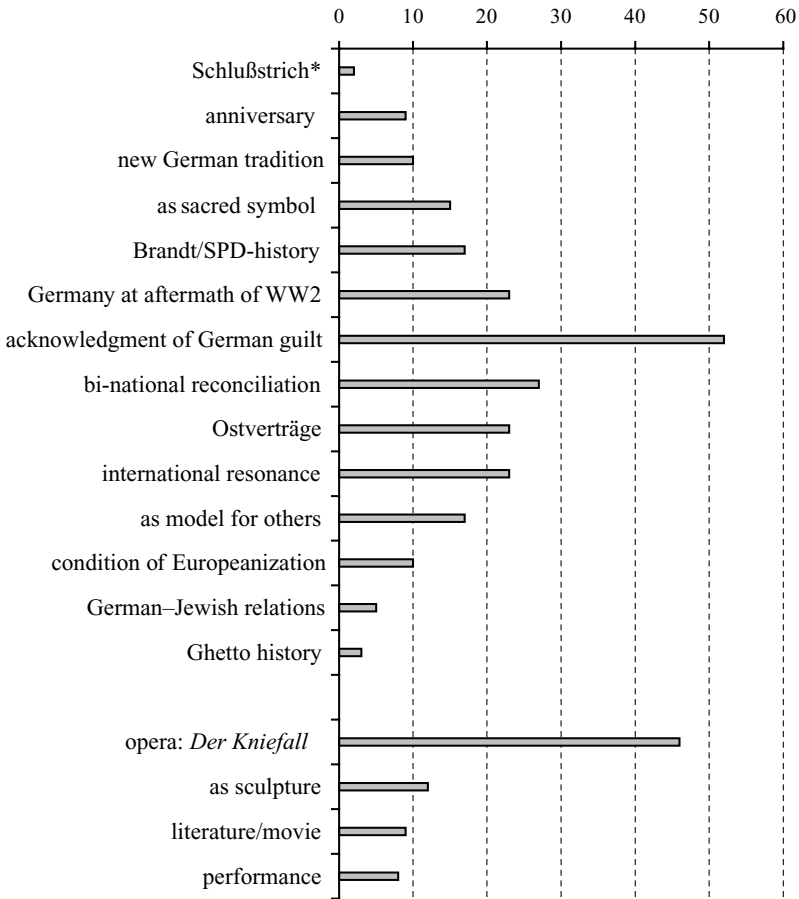
Figure 8.2 – Attributed meaning and frames concerning the kneefall (n = 203)

Figure 8.2   Attributed meaning and frames concerning the kneefall (n = 203)
*"Schlußstrich" means considering the kneefall as a closed object of memory.

for Auschwitz.[10] The actors in power at that time were to a great extent former National Socialists who had either changed their identity or merely kept silent about their past.[11] It is commonly acknowledged that the continuity of the elite within institutions such as medicine and law was almost unbroken, but marginal fields such as, for instance, sociology, were also no exception to this rule (Rehberg 1998). In terms of social power, it is a remarkable fact that no surviving victim was ever given the chance to speak publicly at commemoration days (Lüdtke 1993: 554).[12] The means to symbolic production about the extermination camps were labeled improper, although they were available. Popular films, novels, and scholarly research depicted the general aspects as

Table 8.1 *The history of the performance of a past-as-perpetrator in the West German public sphere*

Time periods	1949–50s	Early/ mid-1960s	Late 1960s–70s	1980s–90s
Background representation	Demonization of guilt	Individualization of guilt	Gener(aliz) ation of guilt	Nationalization of guilt
Foreground scripts	Victimized Germans	Decent Germans	Resisting Germans	Victimized Jews
Actors/social power	1st generation	1st generation	1st–2nd generation	2nd–3rd generation
Public audience	Disclaim	Expulsion	Contestation	Acceptance
Means of symbolic production	Ignored, silenced	(Trans) national media coverage	Public riots, terrorism	Theatricalization of memories
Mise-en-scène	Absence	The court	The street	TV narratives

*For the theoretical model and indicators (left row) see Alexander, this volume. For historical background see Giesen 2004.

well as the specifics of Germany's "fate" (Moeller 1996). One striking example of this is that, during these years, only 4 percent of nearly 800 television documentaries on National Socialism mentioned the persecution of Jews (Classen 1999: 111). Metaphorically speaking, the only social drama performed on stage in respect to Germany's guilt and its victims, was a *mise-en-scène* of absence.

In the mid-1960s, public attention was captured by the so-called "Auschwitz trials" held in the 1960s in Frankfurt am Main. Whereas the Nuremberg trials conducted by the victorious Allies could easily be dismissed as *Siegerjustiz* ("victors' justice"), the Frankfurt trials were held before a German court.[13] In 1961, the Eichmann trial was held in Israel. The picture of the accused bureaucrat sitting in a glass chamber went around the world and was the crucial *mise-en-scène* at the time. In both cases, the accused appeared as ordinary Germans. The "banality of evil" (Arendt 1963) no longer allowed for a metaphysical demonization of guilt. Hence, the system of collective representation shifted to the crimes of individuals. Former perpetrators and bystanders were still in power and from their point of view, the criminals had to be exculpated. Thus, the individualization of guilt did not challenge the primary script of the "decent Germans." Furthermore, the trials triggered such an enormous international resonance that a new sensibility emerged in Germany as to how it should more adequately represent its past (Dubiel 1999: 105). The means of symbolic production ceased to be exclusively in the hands of the German public sphere; instead, it became clear that the perspective of the international public sphere had to be included. This new transnational tendency seems to indicate the presence of a recently identified phenomenon termed "international moral" (Barkan 2003), "moral universals" (Alexander 2002), the new international "politics of regret" (Olick and Coughlin 2003), or the transformation from "triumph to trauma" (Giesen 2004).

The trials were also observed by a new, younger generation. For this particular section of the audience, the collective representation of individual guilt versus "decent" German soldiers was unacceptable. They began to question their parents' generation (Bude 1997). In West Germany, the student movement of 1968 was directed not only against capitalism, consumerism, and societal hierarchy, but also against their parents' generation's denial of memory. The *mise-en-scène* was constituted by their "families" or demonstrations, happenings, or riots in the street. By attributing general guilt to the older generation ("gener(aliz)ation of guilt"), they, the "children," positioned themselves on the "safe" side of the generation gap. National guilt or a sense of responsibility did not exist for the students of 1968; since at the time capitalism was perceived as the ultimate cause of fascism, resistance against capitalism meant resistance against fascism. Some important participants in the student revolt were at that time already inclined towards national patriotic movements; later, they became

right-wing German nationalists (Kraushaar 2000). Latent anti-Semitic preju-
dices could still be identified within the cultural dramatizations (Stern 1992).[14]

It will be demonstrated in the following empirical sections that the first per-
formative event to acknowledge national guilt was Brandt's kneefall. Another
occurrence discussed nationwide was the television series *Holocaust* of 1978.
The series raised once more the question of guilt; its performative effect lay in
the fact that this was not represented in the form of an abstract debate, but as a
narrative (Lüdtke 1993: 554f.). In general, the public's attention was above all
caught by an increase in the "theatricalization" of memory (Bodemann 2002)
and the *mise-en-scène* represented by biographical or fictitious narratives on
television. However, this period – which continues to the present day – can be
divided into several different subperiods (e.g. before and after reunification)
and is characterized by a high grade of complexity and ambiguity.[15]

The media reception of the kneefall in 1970

The kneefall occurred while Willy Brandt visited Warsaw to sign the so-called
Warsaw Treaty, one of Germany's *Ostverträge*.[16] The planned visit had been
frequently reported on by the national and international press. In the period
between November 1970 and January 1971, in France and Italy alone each
major newspaper had published around thirty articles on that topic. Within
the international public sphere, the treaties were generally viewed positively,
whereas in West Germany, the media, especially voices close to the conserva-
tive Christian Democrats and the associations of the ethnic German refugees
from Eastern Europe (*Vertriebenenverbände*) opposed the treaties furiously.
One famous slogan against Brandt's politics of reconciliation was: "Brandt up
against the wall" (*Brandt an die Wand*), which was nothing less than an appeal to
homicide. This strong opposition to the treaties had been reported on in France
and Italy, as well (e.g. *Il Messaggero*, December 7, 1970).

For the media, the kneefall was the most noteworthy event of the moment, giv-
ing it enormous international resonance. Important newspapers in Italy, France,
Switzerland, and the US (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Corriere
Della Serra*, *Il Messaggero*, and the *New York Times*) carried a front-page photo
and feature article on this event.[17] One month later, *Time Magazine* elected
Brandt "man of the year" (*Time*, January 4, 1971). In general, the newspa-
pers praised the gesture as an authentic symbolic admittance of responsibility
for Germany's past. For example, *Le Figaro* (December 8, 1970) subtitled the
photo an "emotional moment." Frequently, especially in Italy, the press por-
trayed the kneefall in a highly enthusiastic and emphatic style: "We saw Willy
Brandt kneeling and engrossed in deep reflection, lost in grief and isolated from
the world around him" (*Il Messaggero*, December 8, 1970). In almost every

newspaper, internationally as well as in the West German press, the kneefall was narrated in every detail of its performance:

The Chancellor slowly approached the monument, he paused for a moment, adjusted the ribbons of a wreath made of white carnations, then he spontaneously sank onto his knees, as if shot dead, remaining still and stony-faced in this position. (*Corriere della Sera*, December 8, 1970).

He stepped from his car and walked slowly toward the memorial between two flame-lit stone-menorahs. Mr. Brandt, who had spent the Nazi period in Scandinavia, dropped to his knees and remained that way for a full minute. He bowed his head slightly and then rose heavily. When he turned, the edge of his mouth was trembling. He joined his official party and walked slowly back, past the widely separated thin line of spectators. (*New York Times*, December 8, 1970)

Sometimes, especially in the Italian press, the kneefall was even deemed a historical moment which "drew a line under the past" (*Schlussstrich*) as either "a sign which deletes the past" (*Il Messaggero*, December 8, 1970) or as a "victory over the past" (*Corriere della Sera*, December 9, 1970). In contrast, comments in the German newspapers immediately following the event were reserved and rather reluctant. The gesture was, however, reported by the major newspapers, and mostly without any criticism.[18] The only statement questioning the kneefall was to be found in an article in the conservative newspaper *Die Welt* (December 8, 1970). It printed two pictures side by side, the kneeling Brandt and the medieval emperor Heinrich IV in Canossa. The pictures were subtitled: "self humiliation does not always eliminate the ban."

The media reception of the kneefall during the 1990s

Empirical data[19]

All articles from a period of four years (1995–9) in which the kneefall was mentioned were assembled. Out of a total retrieval of about 200 articles, 80 percent covered the kneefall as their main topic. In the remaining 20 percent, the act was mentioned in different contexts as a symbolic device, for instance in sport coverage.[20] On the most general level, the findings can first be distinguished as *memory frames* (figure 8.2: columns above) and *theatricalizations* of the kneefall (figure 8.2: columns below). The memory frames can be further subdivided into *national* frames and *international* frames.

Interpretation

In the media of the 1990s, the kneefall strongly symbolized the transformation from disclaiming the past towards an acceptance and acknowledgment

of "national guilt." This significance was not attributed immediately after the event, but at a historical distance of 25–30 years. Furthermore, the kneefall was used outside of its historical and geographical contexts as a model of appropriate recollection with respect to political gestures associated with the acknowledgment of national guilt. Framing of this kind tends to stress explicitly the characteristic meaning of such symbolic gestures. In this way, the kneefall serves as a normative point of reference in order to judge a symbolic act by the state as either "successful" or as "failed." The kneefall is iterated and re-iterated in the sense of Derrida. To give an example of a reference to the kneefall which compares it to a positively viewed, "successful" symbolic act, consider the following comment on German Federal President Herzog's speech in Guernica, Spain:

Since Willy Brandt's kneefall in front of the Warsaw Ghetto, there has not been a more touching gesture of guilt faced. The world had to wait for a long time for this. Until yesterday, neither Germany nor Spain had confessed publicly who was responsible for the destruction of the city. Finally a German broke the leaden silence about Guernica [. . .], naming the crime. (*Berliner Kurier*, April 28, 1997)

In this example the kneefall functions as an iterated, abstract model; Herzog did not perform any similar gesture, but simply gave a speech. In contrast, the kneefall has been used elsewhere in the same function, but to argue the opposite. For instance, it was applied to criticize the absence of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl on the occasion of the inauguration of the Holocaust Museum in Washington:

Willy Brandt bent his knee in the Warsaw ghetto in front of them. Though, a visible sign of German repentance would also have done well in Washington, the Germans remain guilty of the mass extermination of Jews, monstrous in its scale and execution. (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 24, 1993)

It is intriguing to see how directly the kneefall is applied within different contexts. The author did not intend to accuse Chancellor Kohl of denying German guilt, instead the contrasting comparison between Kohl's absence in Washington and the kneefall was drawn in order to emphasize – without much explanation – how an appropriate enactment of collective memory should have been performed.

National frames

Furthermore, the kneefall is referred to as a "remarkable event" in the history of the Federal Republic. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Willy Brandt's biography, where the kneefall is presented on the occasion of its

25th anniversary, both attach particular importance to the kneefall in historical retrospective.

Another frame can be designated "the kneefall as *sacred symbol*." Readers of the leftist newspaper '*taz*' wrote critical letters to the editor about a satirical caricature in which the kneefall was re-enacted by Mr. Scharping, a candidate for Chancellor at that time. The caption read: "I can do that as well." The two following quotations are examples of the readers' protest:

To "estrange" Willy Brandt's kneefall in the Warsaw ghetto [. . .] is a painful blunder! On behalf of critical officers and non-commissioned officers of the German Federal Armed Forces I dissociate myself from this awful act and expect words of regret, insight and declaration of shame from the people responsible. (H. P., Retired Officer of the Federal Armed Forces (*taz*, August 22, 1994))

It's really the worst and most reactionary thing the *taz* has ever come up with, to mess with Willy Brandt's kneefall in these times of Neo-Nazism. (Member of the German Green Party (*taz*, August 15, 1994))

In response to the protests, *taz* saw itself forced to withdraw its commercial campaign. This example demonstrates that toying with the kneefall is taboo and will not be allowed, which is an indicator of the power of identification implied by the kneefall within the particular collective system of memorial representations.

Finally, two letters to the editor were coded under *Schlußstrich*, i.e. the kneefall was "considered to be a closed matter of memory." In the letter, the reader argued that in the context of the "forced labour compensation debate," Brandt's gesture had done enough penance (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 29, 1999). Another letter took the opposite position (*taz*, April 10, 1993). However, due to its singularity, such argumentation does not appear to represent the main concerns of public discourse.

Transnational frames

The kneefall is mentioned again and again as a paradigm for a successful "conciliation gesture" in transnational relations, especially between Germany and Poland. For example, *Die Welt* uses the kneefall as a model of successful conciliation to comment on the state visit of President Herzog to Poland:

Herzog faced his first practical test during the months of commemoration. In Warsaw he apologized in an honest and unrestricted way for the injustice done to the Polish people by the Germans. Thereby, he may have achieved an effect as important for the relations between both nations as Willy Brandt with his historical kneefall. (*Die Welt*, July 31, 1995)

In addition, there were statements in which the kneefall serves as a model for unsuccessful symbolic memory politics. The author of the following quotation combines the significance of Brandt's kneefall as a performative model with the reconciliation between Poland and Germany by proposing that it was this gesture which "suddenly gave the relationship a new basis." Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, the original context of his symbolic act, which inaugurated reconciliation on the basis of political negotiations, is simply forgotten. The power of performative acts appears much more relevant for a nation's collective memory in contrast to that of political treaties.

Nowadays, in this country the sense for symbolic action [. . .] is not very developed among politicians. The conciliatory gestures offered by Helmut Kohl to different presidents at several war cemeteries did not find uncritical approval in the public eye. With a sigh [observers] remembered Willy Brandt's kneefall in Warsaw which suddenly gave a new basis to the relationship between Poland and Germany. (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 15, 1996)

Another frame is crucial for the question of the mutual interdependency of transnationalized public spheres. Here in particular, the viewpoint of others, i.e. the international resonance to the conciliatory power of the kneefall as a performative gesture, is quoted and emphasized. In this way, the *Berliner Kurier* summarized international impressions of President Herzog's visit to Warsaw:

[. . .] abroad Herzog makes a good impression. With his "plea for forgiveness" at the memorial of the Warsaw uprising, he gathered international sympathy for Germany. This awakens the memory of Willy Brandt's legendary Warsaw kneefall in 1970. (*Berliner Kurier*, July 12, 1998)

Another frame identifies the kneefall as a *model for the others*, i.e. an internationally applicable symbol "Made in Germany" and "Ready for export." This interpretation of the kneefall is suggested within the context of the Yugoslavian conflict. Additional attributions could be found within the context of post-war relations between China and Japan or Italy and Slovenia, as well as in the case of France and Algeria, Chile and Pinochet, Germany and the Czech Republic and East Germany:

A leading Croatian scientist agreed in a public discussion that, without a symbolic gesture from the Serbian side similar to Willy Brandt's kneefall in Warsaw, true normalization between aggressors and victims of aggression may not be achieved. (*Die Welt*, January 27, 1997)

China praised the Germans for coming to terms with their past and recommended it as a model for Japan. [. . .] The news agency also referred to [. . .] the kneefall of the German

Ex-Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1970 and compared it to the disputed gestures of the Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto. (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 16, 1996)

Finally, Fini demanded a formal apology from the Slovenian government for the blood-bath which Yugoslavian partisans committed [. . .] in 1945 among Italian citizens. No doubt, such an act of apology would only be possible for Slovenia if Italy were also to apologize for its fascist misdeeds, [thus] Fini's reference to Willy Brandt's kneefall in Warsaw [. . .] is misleading. (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, October 20, 1994)

In a few further articles, the kneefall was framed as a "necessary condition for Europeanization." The Italian journalist Franca Magnani compared the manifesto of the Italian *resistenza* with Brandt's kneefall, designating both acts as fundamental to the establishment of the European idea. In *Die Zeit* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Brandt is praised as the politician to whose visions Europe should refer after the end of Cold War:

[The r*esistenza*] is of a symbolic significance comparable to Willy Brandt's kneefall in the Warsaw ghetto. Therefore, one can not overlook the essential factor which applies to all countries that are characterized by resistance against National Socialism and fascism: the ethical values the struggle for freedom has created as a common point of reference for every country which is prepared for the construction of Europe. (*Die Zeit*, March 3, 1995)

The international recognition of the kneefall has been enormous; *Time* chose Willy Brandt as "Man of the Year." Since the fall of the iron curtain, he may be the only politician with a conclusive vision, the most interesting and hopeful vision of a new Europe. (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 23, 1999)

   The least frequent frames concern the "German–Jewish relationships" (n = 5) and the "history of the Warsaw ghetto" (n = 3). It is remarkable that the actual historical cause at which the kneefall was visually directed is so rarely featured. This infrequency highlights the relevance of "the kneefall" as an abstract iconological symbol for the history of German memory. The main focus is not the revolt in the Ghetto to which Willy Brandt's gesture literally referred. Instead, its significance is used to construct a redeemed, new German collective identity. The symbol has been removed from the historical context in which it initially appeared, in the 1990s coming to symbolize a "successful" performative act which challenged the denial of guilt within the culture of German historical memory.

Theatricalizations of the kneefall

To the group "theatricalization" or "dramatization" were attributed all those sentences which reported on the performative mimesis of Brandt's kneefall

by artists, musicians, etc. Most articles were concerned with the opera *Der Kniefall von Warschau*, which had its premiere in 1997. In coverage preceding the premiere, the press responded positively to the kneefall as a theme for an opera:

The kneefall of Warsaw on 7th December, 1970 was one of the most important political symbolic acts of the century. It was readily apparent that an opera seeking to devote itself to the noble, the altruistic and the good would choose as its take-off point this great gesture before the Warsaw memorial at the very moment in which it transformed a figure of contemporary history into a hero of the theatre. (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 24, 1997)

Subsequent reviewers praised the composer's decision to have the instruments be silent during the moment at which the kneefall occurred on stage. The newspapers retold the dramatic "climax" of the opera in detail, as did for example, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*:

The tension increases, the historical moment expands into immensity. WB [. . .] has just arranged the wreath's bows on the memorial in the former Warsaw ghetto. Now he is standing and becomes engrossed, hears from afar synagogue songs: internal music accompanying the memory of the dreadful things that came to pass here. He stands, does not kneel yet. Not until a group of young people wearing the yellow Star of David, seized by panic, comes storming up to the ramp, and they all collapse, hit by imaginary shots. Just then, as the music stops, WB kneels – "the human being becomes a myth." (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 24, 1997)

However, in total, critics were quite disappointed by the opera. The *Berliner Zeitung* topped off its critical review with a headline pun: "Prostration was a frustration" (*Kniefall war ein Reinfall*) (*Berliner Zeitung*, November 24, 1997). In general, the critics complain about the "hero-worship" of the work, i.e. its evocation of a "traditional heroic image" (*Berliner Zeitung*, December 3, 1997) of Willy Brandt. These reviews speak of the relative abstraction of the symbolic gesture "kneefall" in contrast to the image of Willy Brandt evoked in the opera. Whereas the act itself seems apparently suitable for the mystification, a mystification of the person Willy Brandt is viewed with skepticism and commented on with irony. Perhaps this differentiation is due to the way in which the act itself was depicted, which did not fall under the typical classical narrative presentation of a heroic protagonist. Or the criticism could also be interpreted as referring in particular to the background of traumatic memory visualized by means of a culprit/victim iconology which emphatically rejected a triumphalist hero narrative.

Another frame entails statements referring to the kneefall as a suitable subject for a stone memorial sculpture. For example, it was proposed that a sculpture

of the kneefall might be appropriate for the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Elsewhere, a Social Democrat politician, Klaus von Dohnanyi, opposed a monumental Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, suggesting instead that "an artist could depict Willy Brandt's kneefall on the square before the Warsaw ghetto as a work of art" (*Berliner Zeitung*, November 11, 1997).

Occasionally, the kneefall became framed in literary contexts as an important event. In particular, it was mentioned in connection to the screen adaptation of a book by Primo Levi and readings by Günter Grass or the writer Cees Noteboom from the Netherlands (previously quoted in the introduction). In addition, references were made to the work of performance artists who presented mimetic reproductions of the kneefall. The artist Matthias Wähner placed himself beside the kneeling Brandt in a photomontage (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 13, 1994). The provocative trash artist Christoph Schlingensief dressed as an orthodox Jew and re-enacted the kneefall in front of the Statue of Liberty in New York after he had sunk a suitcase symbolizing "Germany" in the Hudson River (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 11, 1999).

Empirical and theoretical conclusions

The analysis of the media reception of the kneefall demonstrates that this short gesture has developed into a symbolic representation of a "transformed German identity." In the German media of the late 1990s, the kneefall was a continuously renarrated and emphatically recollected symbol of atonement and the acknowledgment of guilt. Symbolic representations of the acceptance of guilt are a necessary condition for reconciliation with others (Rigby 2001). In addition, the gesture became the subject of an opera and was re-enacted in various other performative art projects.

The script of the kneefall was a spontaneous invention, or had at least been convincingly represented as such.[21] The media coverage attributed to the act both authenticity and the ability to "fuse" different levels of meaning (see Alexander, this volume). The detailed retelling of the *mise-en-scène*, how "Brandt dropped to his knees," how "he rose again," how his "mouth was trembling"; all this information is provided only to prove that Brandt's authenticity fused the reality of history by "means of sudden intuitive realization." Such a "sudden intuitive realization" is the experience of extraordinary "event-ness" (see Giesen, this volume). The attribution of fusion to a performative act depends therefore on the unexpected "event-ness" of its script. However, it is neither this suddenness nor intuition alone which determined the media's interpretation of the act.

The spatial context in which the performance was enacted was the *mise-en-scène* of the Warsaw Memorial. Brandt's gesture occurred on the very square

where the hundreds of thousands of Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto were gathered to be deported to German death camps. A memorial is not the legal venue of a court room, nor is it a site of political riots like the streets of the generation of 1968. The *mise-en-scène* of a court room is juridical and the street is political, whereas the Memorial presents a moral context, and, most important of all, transcends time and space (Giesen et al. 2001). It *re*-presents to the present the victims of the past, and, in the case of the Warsaw Memorial, the heroes of the Ghetto Uprising, as well. The *mise-en-scène* represents not only an instance of guilt or heroic resistance, it also questions the nature of human existence in general in the sense of a "moral universal" (Alexander 2002).

As the Chancellor of West Germany, Willy Brandt was equipped with the maximum amount of *social power* available to a citizen of that nation. In contrast to the student revolts, the kneefall was an "act from above," performed by the highest member of the West German federal government. If a private person or a student were to have fallen to his or her knees in the same way, it would have had no societal effect. More intriguing is the significance of the kneefall for Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, as a part of which Germany renounced the entire territory east of the Oder/Neisse River. Brandt profited from the public attention given to his symbolic act. His policies were, at the time, met with strong opposition from conservatives and the right wing who still adhered to the narrative of victimization preferred by ethnic German refugees from Eastern Europe. Taking advantage of his position as Chancellor, Brandt was able to challenge symbolically this narrative of victimization without explicitly denying it. He strengthened his position by contrasting the "victimization" they claimed for themselves with that of German guilt. His performance was an indirect but nevertheless powerful way of silencing or diminishing the influence of these oppositional voices.

The collective meaning attributed to this specific location must be linked to the performing *actor* in the person of Willy Brandt. As an individual he was innocent. He had emigrated to Norway during the war and participated in the resistance movement against Nazi Germany. The actor "Willy Brandt" as individual person could in no way be suspected of hypocrisy. The paradox seems to be that only a person who individually bears no guilt that could be admitted is in the position to perform an authentic role. If a German perpetrator had acted as Brandt did, it would have reeked of strategy and calculated action. This observation brings us into the fourth and fifth part of the argumentation: the script and the systematic that lies behind collective representations.

According to the rules for the fulfillment of official scripts and systems of collective representations, the gesture represented an innovation. It was spontaneous (or at least it seemed to be spontaneous to various audiences, which is the decisive factor). Its authenticity was a factor of this spontaneity. Acting

unexpectedly and in an uncontrived manner, the Chancellor's kneefall symbolized the "re-fusion" of different identities. Within this moment, the "role" of the representative of the Federal Republic and the individual "real" person Willy Brandt, overwhelmed by the "sacredness of the moment," fused into one. He did what he felt, and he felt what he did, both regardless of and in regard to his official role. These "two bodies of the Chancellor," to modify Ernst Kantorowicz's (1990 [1957]) terms, are crucial to understanding the suggestive power of the script. The *individual* innocent body of the Chancellor bowed down as the representative of the *collective* body of Germany.

The innocent takes up the burden of the collectivity's "original sin," thus re-founding and redeeming the nation. It is with this understanding that a former member of the Polish Resistance declared: "Within me there is no longer any hatred! He knelt down and – elevated his people [. . .] He highly elevated it in our eyes, in our hearts. I confess this as a Pole and a Christian."[22] Brandt's kneefall had a transforming or even "cathartic" effect on the audience. In terms of performance theory, it appears that Germany "has undergone a transformation of state and status, been saved, elevated or released" (Turner 1986: 81).

This example demonstrates that the performative success of Brandt's kneefall is highly dependent upon the presence of a Christian background culture in the form of "Christomimesis" (Giesen 2004). The representative of a community which is founded on the concepts of an "original sin," is him- or herself simultaneously included within and excluded from that community. The performative magic lies within this fused or trickster-like script. A person who simultaneously does and does not belong to the community of guilt is able to transform scripts in which the community's past is disclaimed. Christian myth provides both collective guilt and collective forgiveness. This might also lie behind the ease with which the German audience was able to accept Brandt's proclamation of national repentance and guilt. Since the script was decodable in accordance with Christian patterns of meaning, it claimed both collective guilt *and* forgiveness for an unforgivable past.[23]

However, the most salient impact of the kneefall is its power to challenge rigid structures in which culture was represented and with which it was identified. Rejection of the past and self-perception as victims were transformed into scripts that more and more acknowledged the past of victimizers. Why is this so? The spontaneity of the event is the key to understanding the elements of potential transformation to be found even within rigid and stable cultural representations. The combination of contingency with a deeply rooted Christian culture was the condition under which a rewriting of the possible forms in which a national self could be imagined could be accomplished. If a spontaneous contingent act resonates with existing patterns of cultural representation, or seems to fit into a system of collective representations, then this act will not be

interpreted by its audience as "accidental," but instead as a manifestation of a "truer meaning." An *occurrence* is transformed in a meaningful *event*. It is the cultural meaning attributed to contingency which disentangles meaning from its either accidental or intentional, and therefore profane, significance. The power to challenge an existing script is based on this combination; on the one hand on the background presence of patterns of cultural meaning which resonate well with the challenge, and on the other hand on the meaningful contingency of a performative moment. The mutual reference between the systematic of the cultural background and occurrences transforms some of these occurrences into extraordinary events. After such a transformation "the world is seen differently." Hence, the performative event-ness enables cultural systems to alter or challenge their rigid collective self-images and paradigms.

Notes

1. *Cited in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 24, 1997 (my translation). Cees Noteboom is an internationally known Dutch writer.
2. "Durfte Brandt knien?": *Der Spiegel*, December 14, 1970.
3. These assertions are not ultimately new in sociology (see also Junge, this volume). Classical frame-analysis (Goffman 1974) and the famous Thomas theorem ("if men define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences") imply very similar assumptions.
4. To put it bluntly, the aim of Derrida's argument is to prove that even action depends finally on discourse or text. Such an argument is in general at odds with social theory; however, the notion of iteration does contribute to concepts of social performance if it is interpreted as a condition for constructing "common sense."
5. For instance, Egon Bahr, Willy Brandt's counselor, stood in Warsaw behind the wall of the crowd, unable to see what was happening. Later on, he was quoted saying that suddenly the audience became absolutely silent while the journalists whispered to one another, "he's kneeling." Bahr went on to say that the rarity of moments when journalists turn silent proves the extraordinarily intense atmosphere. This is exactly the successful "re-fusion" (Alexander, this volume) of the kneefall. Thus, if we seek to understand the collective meaning of a public ritual in modern societies, we cannot avoid analyzing the media response to it (Buser and Rauer 2004).
6. Karl Jaspers (2000 [1946]) was the first German intellectual to understand this new phenomenon and wrote a highly influential essay on different types of German guilt: "criminal guilt," "political guilt," "moral guilt," and "metaphysical guilt."
7. The dialectical relation between change and stability is already at the core of the classical definition of performance as a means for the construction of collective identity: "Self is presented through the performance of roles, through performance that break roles, and through declaring to a given public that one has undergone a transformation of state and status, been saved or damned, elevated or released" (Turner 1986: 81).

8. At the opening session of the new German Bundestag 1949, the speaker did not mention the victims of the Germans, but instead the German Members of Parliament who had been victimized during the National Socialist period (Dubiel 1999: 37–42).

9. War criminals were euphemistically framed as "war prisoners" (*Kriegsinhafierte*) and always seen as victims (Schildt 1998: 34f., 43). In general, "newspapers describing 'Graves and Barbed Wire: The Fate of Millions' evoked images of millions of German POWs, not millions of victims of concentration camps" (Moeller 1996: 1021, quoted in *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, October 25, 1950).

10. See the popular book *Unbewältigte Vergangenheit* by Jacob Seiler (1960) quoted in Schildt (1998: 47).

11. See, among others, the contributions in the volume edited by Loth and Rusinek (1998).

12. It is also remarkable that in the Adenauer Administration there was no "Ministry for Survivors of Nazi Persecution and Nazi Concentration Camps," but there was a "Ministry for Expellees, Refugees and War-Damaged" (Moeller 1996: 1032, 1020).

13. Some of the accused were alleged members of the SS and were accused of committing mass murder and torture in concentration camps.

14. Nevertheless, the public narrative of this movement that forced the nation to come to terms with its past is still unbroken. Marcel Reich-Ranicki (1999), a prominent German literary critic who survived the Warsaw Ghetto, writes in his memoirs that during the early 1960s, nobody ever dared to discuss his past with him. The first time a German publicly asked him to share his experience was after the Frankfurt trials at which he was called to testify. The name of the young journalist was Ulrike Meinhof, who later on became one of the most prominent figures of the 'RAF', a leftist terrorist group. The group perceived themselves as a latter-day resistance movement against fascism and capitalism.

15. See, among others, Frei (1999). Some of the many important issues were the "historians' debate" of the 1980s concerning the singularity of the Holocaust, the speech by President Weizäcker on May 8, 1985 (Dubiel 1999), and the debate concerning the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin during the 1990s (Kirsch 2001). Recent debates have focused on reparation payments to former forced labourers (*Zwangsarbeiter*), on German victimization by Allied bomb raids (triggered by the bestseller *Der Brand* by Jörg Friedrich (2002)), and on the commemoration in the form of a monument in Berlin of those who were expelled from the former Eastern territories. Whether these latter two debates could lead to a new German self-victimization (or sustain it) and if they will have strong effects on the system of collective representations cannot yet be determined.

16. Also: "East Treaties" or "treaties of reconciliation." Among others, the treaties were to confirm a West German renunciation of former territory which had become part of Poland since the end of World War Two.

17. Kneefall pictures or articles on the front pages can be found within all newspapers we selected for research: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*: (December 8, 1970), *Le Figaro* (December 8, 1970), *Le Monde* (December 8, 1970, article, no picture), *Corriere*

Della Serra (December 8, 1970), *Il Messaggero* (December 8, 1970, article, no picture), *New York Times* (December 8, 1970).

18. In the case of the German public sphere in 1970, we analyzed the newspapers *Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the weekly journals *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*. Each newspaper featured about four articles on the event at the Warsaw Memorial following its occurrence. In general, the photo was presented and at the textual level the kneefall was mentioned in a few paragraphs within coverage on the *Ostverträge*. One week later, *Der Spiegel* (December 14, 1970) covered the kneefall as a main feature. It published an opinion poll in which the majority of Germans deemed Brandt's act an exaggeration.

19. In order to analyze how the kneefall has been represented in the media thirty years later, two different methods can be used. First, one could choose the media coverage at an anniversary of the event such as December 7, 2000, when Chancellor Gerhard Schröder attended a ceremony in Warsaw in order to dedicate a new monument commemorating Brandt's symbolic kneefall. Or, this being the method I have chosen, articles are selected during a non-memorial period, i.e. a time when nothing specific happened within that memorial context. Among the newspapers sampled are agenda-setting nationally published newspapers, as well as regionally distributed newspapers: *Berliner Kurier*, *Berliner Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (*FAZ*), *Neue Zürcher* (*NZZ*), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (*SZ*), *die tageszeitung* (*taz*), *Die Welt*, and *Die Zeit*. In cases where newspapers provide an online archive reaching as far back as 1990, these articles have been included as well. The newspapers' political orientation ranges from conservative to liberal-leftist. Since all newspapers are available either as Internet archives or on CD-Rom, data retrieval was achieved by an online search strategy. In terms of methodology, a computer-assisted, quantifying frame analysis has been applied. A media discourse analysis was conducted in which Goffman's (1974) proposed method was further developed. The software "Winmax," which enables the coder to construct an inductive frame typology and to quantify the results afterwards, was used for coding.

20. "Netzer's (football) passes will stick in our memories like Brandt's kneefall in Warsaw," *taz* (May 8, 1998), quoted in *SZ* (May 11, 1998).

21. The question whether this impression of the act's spontaneity is true or not is irrelevant to its social effects due to the fact that this spontaneity was attributed by the media audience.

22. Quote in *Die Zeit* (February 4, 1977): Lew Kopelew, "Bekenntnisse eines Sowjetbürgers." The Christian symbolism of the kneefall was discussed once in an article in *Der Spiegel* (December 14, 1970). Journalists debated whether the gesture was more Protestant or Catholic. Since Brandt was an atheist, the question was irrelevant in terms of his ideological intentions. However, what was not discussed in the article was the importance of Christian symbolism from the audience's perspective.

23. The absurdity of Christian "forgiveness" in the context of the Holocaust and the problematic connotation of any Christian iconology cannot be further outlined here (cf. Bodemann 2002). See e.g. Koselleck's analysis of the cynical anti-Judaist connotation of the *Pietà*. The *Pietà* is a monument placed in Berlin's "Neue Wache"

in the year 1992 to commemorate the victims of World War Two (the statue was originally created by Käthe Kollwitz in 1937/8, referring to the victims of World War One). The monument shows a mother holding in her arms her dead son which again symbolizes Mother Mary mourning for the crucified Jesus Christ, who was, according to the anti-Judaic Christian tradition (and later for the Nazis), "murdered by the Jews" (Koselleck 2002: 78).

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