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## Making Petrified Relations Dance: Aesthetics, Terror, and the Emergence of a Critical Collective Subject<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In the introduction to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Karl Marx writes, "One must force these petrified relations to dance by singing to them their own melody!" The next sentence reads: "One must teach the people to become frightened of themselves in order to give them courage." History has shown that the real terror, the horror, and the violence human beings are capable of inflicting on others have often made those relations dance—and passed off self-defense as courage—yet never truly generated the courage needed to break through the petrified relations of history's repetition as comedy and farce. But what if this terror must be experienced not in reality but at a distance, as an aesthetically mediated terror—to trigger a dialectical form of catharsis? That is precisely the question this article asks: In what ways could the experience of rupture, as an aesthetic experience of disruption, bring the petrified relations—through a form of self-subjection—to dance? The French sociologist Pierre Charbonnier describes, in his ecological history of political ideas Abundance and Freedom, a "nearly total collapse of the bridges that typically connect us both with the past [...] but also with the future as we have imagined it until now." He argues that the only response to this loss and demoralization is the emergence of a "novel, critical collective subject." In turn the East German dramaturg Heiner Müller sketches, in his apocalyptic theater texts, a landscape from which this new critical collective subject emerges through a form of self-subjection.

In the introduction to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Karl Marx writes, "these petrified relations must be forced to dance by singing their own tune to them!"<sup>2</sup> The next sentence reads: "The people must be taught to be *terrified* at itself in order to give it *courage*."<sup>3</sup> History has shown that the real terror, the horror, and the violence human beings are capable of inflicting on others have often made those relations dance—and passed off self-defense as courage—yet never truly generated the courage needed to break through the petrified relations of history's repetition as comedy and farce. But what if this terror must be experienced not in reality but at a distance, as an aesthetically mediated terror—to trigger a dialectical form of catharsis? That is precisely the question this article asks: In what ways could the experience of rupture, as an aesthetic experience of disruption, bring the petrified relations—through a form of self-subjection—to dance?

In *Affluence and Freedom, an environmental history of political ideas* by the French philosopher Pierre Charbonnier, he writes:

<sup>1</sup> The article is based on a lecture I gave at the Institute for Social Research Frankfurt in the workshop "Subjekte der ökologischen Verwüstung – Soziologische, psychoanalytische und sozialphilosophische Beiträge zur Aktualisierung der Kritischen Theorie" from May 16-17, 2024, which is scheduled to be published in German in 2027 in an anthology accompanying the workshop. This article is a modified version of that lecture.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>. The standard English translation reads as follows: "Every sphere of German society must be shown as the *partie honteuse* of German society: *these petrified relations must be forced to dance by singing their own tune to them!*"

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The ecological and climatic crisis is burning almost all the bridges that usually connect us to the past – since the Earth we inhabit is no longer the same as before – but also to the future as we had imagined it up until now.<sup>4</sup>

For Charbonnier, the ecological crisis makes a collective experience visible, one that cannot rely on previously acquired insights from the past, whose consequences and scope appear incalculable, and which highlights a globally interconnected crisis potential that before this collective experience was still imagined as supposedly local, singular, and repairable, hence politically solvable. One could add, following Reinhart Koselleck, the familiar formula that the connection between the horizon of experience and the horizon of expectation has collapsed — that we can no longer refer to past experiences and derive expectations for the future from them. But unlike the common descriptions of this human-made present, Charbonnier refrains from using the collective singular of a guilty humanity and links the prevailing historical-sociological reading of modernity with the history of political ideas in order to trace the material history of freedom. He shows how the idea of freedom is directly connected to the problem of abundance, and thus to the ecological crises of the present. According to Charbonnier, the only way to respond to the experience of loss and dismay in the ecological crises of the present in a future-oriented, solution-focused manner is “to reinvent freedom”<sup>5</sup> and thereby to allow “a new form of [an] critical collective subject”<sup>6</sup> to emerge, as well as “to tell the story of our recent history and to organize the map of our attachments so that politics and the use of the Earth are no longer heterogeneous.”<sup>7</sup> It is this problem-centered shift of perspective on the politically contested notion of freedom, the reinvention of the subject that results from it, and the future imagination of the non-heterogeneous between environment and capitalism that makes Charbonnier’s approach so central for the subjects of aesthetic experience.

The following will therefore address how this de- and self-subjectivation can be conceived at all by bridging Charbonnier’s demand for a novel critical collective subject and a theater text by the East-German dramatist Heiner Müller in which such a subject appears. Both theoretical thinking and Müller’s theater practice draw on their own reading, updating, and expansion of Critical Theory. Charbonnier’s book *Affluence and Freedom* ends with this call for a different form of subject without specifying it further. Charbonnier refers the task of defining and naming the subject to the field of philosophy. I argue that the actual place where this subject is determined and created is the field of aesthetics — as a philosophical space of reflection, and not least, of art. Heiner Müller, in his theater text *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*, posits in the (theatre)space the thesis that Jason’s mythological Argonaut voyage marks the beginning of conquest and colonization, which consequently leads to that dystopian apocalyptical landscape of ecological devastation. Müller locates in the figure of Medea — both subject and object of the exploitative system of colonization — the possibility of a novel critical collective subject, in other words, the agent of a possible other past future.

And this is where my article’s argument begins: I want to explore how art, here in the form of textual material in literature and theater, in the sense of aesthetic theory, is capable of imagining, preparing, and indeed creating this novel critical collective subject. Following the praxeological grundassumption of Hegel and Adorno, art as a reflection of truth contributes to society’s process of self-understanding. Using Heiner Müller’s piece, it becomes possible to trace how an aesthetic experience could enable the recipients to both assess the magnitude of ecological catastrophe and comprehend the act of self- and de-subjectivation — a condition of possibility for the political agency of a potential new critical collective subject.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), p. 261.

<sup>5</sup> Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom*, p. 25

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

I follow here the theory of a materialist aesthetics that has continued, in the GDR, from theater theory since Brecht and Benjamin as an aesthetics which examines the catastrophic consequences of capitalist progress from the point of view of ecology<sup>8</sup>, and which draws its self-understanding from Marx's injunction to demonstrate to people that social relations are made in particular ways by particular subjects and therefore can also be changed by particular subjects themselves. Brecht describes this with reference to Marx: he wanted to apply the sentence to the theater that it is not enough to interpret the world, but to change it<sup>9</sup>. I will therefore describe in the following, using a drama play by the East German dramatist Heiner Müller, how this materialist aesthetics measures out and imagines a future landscape with Argonauts as a "memory of the future", as Müller put it: "Literature is not only the remembrance of a past and the acknowledging of a present but also a memory of a future."<sup>10</sup>

In German Müller's drama play is called *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*. The most adequate translation seems to be *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*.<sup>11</sup> We are dealing with a short text of 12 pages that addresses the disastrous antagonism between civilization and nature, between perpetrator and victim, as well as the submission and the banishment of the woman [Medea] from the process of history. The play is the sedimentation of a 30 years-developing-process that finally was put on stage in the West German town Bochum in the year 1983. In his text Müller draws from and adapts the mythological idea of the sea traveling Argonauts as well as the homicidal crime of Medea. The myth tells that Medea betrays home and family by killing and mincing her brother because of her love for the Argonaut Jason. She follows the conqueror and lover into the unknown but gets abandoned *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts* for another woman and takes vengeance in killing not only her rival but also her children. In Müller's *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts* the story is more told than played in the middle part of the play: *Medea Material*. The other two parts, *Waterfront Wasteland* and *Landscape with Argonauts*, flanking the central section like nightmare visions of a catastrophic social reality. But as Müller says himself, "it is the converting of the reality" he is interested in, "not reality itself"<sup>12</sup>.

The three pictures together compose a texture of fragmented shreds of memory and thoughts. The language Müller uses is striking: On the surface it appears vulgar, coarse and brutal; and yet it contains a convoluted subtext, where sexuality, violence and an apocalyptic mood become the guiding themes. Depicted in the three images (*Waterfront Wasteland // Medea Material // Landscape with Argonauts*) the central part (*Medea Material*) presents the theatric part of the play. Only here speakers are clearly identified and have an assigned text. Through its tripartition the play seems to be arranged like a triptych: The central part represents the story; a classical dramatic form is present through narration, classification, identification and imagination; there are dialogues and one long monologue.

The two framing wings, the drama parts *Waterfront Wasteland* and *Landscape with Argonauts*, function as transcendent references to the past, present and future. Through these "wings" relations and contexts are produced and become visible. The formal framework of a drama is exceeded not only because speakers aren't clearly assigned but also because the stage directions cannot easily be transposed into stage reality. In the last sentence of his directions, Müller re-

<sup>8</sup> The German quote reads: "unter dem ‚Gesichtspunkt der Ökologie‘ die ‚katastrophalen Folgen‘ des kapitalistischen Fortschritts in den Blick nimmt" (Mayer 1992: 18, cited in Loheit 2024: 170).

<sup>9</sup> Brecht 1985, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup> Heiner Müller, "Fünf Minuten Schwarzfilm," in *Gesammelte Irrtümer 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1990 [1988]), p. 148 (translated by the author A.G.).

<sup>11</sup> Heiner Müller, *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, in Marc von Henning (ed.), *Theatremachine* (London: Faber, 1995), pp. 45–58 (translated by Marc von Henning).

<sup>12</sup> Heiner Müller, "Kunst ist die Krankheit mit der wir leben," in *Gesammelte Irrtümer* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1986), p. 64 (translated by the author A.G.).

marks that the simultaneousness of the three parts of the text can be represented as is seen fitting. Hence, the temporality of the play gets declared as synchronous: The idea of the play arises from a myth. The topic continues and staggers and simultaneously brings back the original event throughout the scenes. Thus, the original gets reshaped, refigured and reinterpreted. This changes the format: The classical drama composition of a linear narrated event is no longer accentuated. Rather we could talk of a pictorial grasp of a present. A present whose history is founded in its materiality but also in its narration, and - therefore in its myths.

Therefore the stage directions actually belong to the whole play as much as the three pictures I described before. They can be understood as a substantive forth part which functions as a sub-text for the other three parts of the text. In a way, the stage directions at the end of the text form the pedestal, the predella, of the tryptichon – the grounded element of the grand narration. For example, the description of the scenery of the first part WATERFRONT WASTELAND resembles a movie more than a drama play:

WATERFRONT WASTELAND can be played in a working peep show, MEDEAMATERIAL by a lake near Straußberg that is equally a muddy swimming pool in Beverley Hills or the bath of a nerve clinic.<sup>13</sup>

The stage directions form another example for directions which are not convertible to a theater play on stage. Instead, they could be imagined as a movie setting. Through the shift of the perspective from the text to the image – thus for example from theater scenery to a movie scene – a shift of perception is possible: In this way the detail is as graspable as the total scene at once and simultaneity becomes visible. Müller wants to mediate what is happening behind and beyond the words of the text, at the outer limit of presence – a graspable image; which we are able to see simultaneously all in one.

The opening lines in Müller's triptych *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts* read:

Lake near Strausberg Waterfront wasteland Remnants / of Argonauts with flattened foreheads / Bristles of reed Dead brancherot / THIS TREE WON'T OUTGROW ME Fish cadaver / Gleaming in the mudd Biscuit tins piles of shit FREUD'S DUREX MARLBORO (BUDWEISER) /The torn-up tampons The Blood / Of the woman of Colchis<sup>14</sup>.

I will repeatedly take up lines from the text without performing a full analysis in order to illustrate the moment of the aesthetic experience as mediated through the text.

Müller designs in his texts a landscape from which this new "critical collective" subject becomes, in a first step, descriptively conscious of itself, and then transfers this descriptive self-exploration via the moment of terror into a de-subjection. At the same time — and this is of course the core of the aesthetic experience I want to trace here — the viewers are implicated in that terror in a kind of dialectical shame. Here, both the absence of distance and the establishment of distance in and through terror are made possible, so that a possible new critical subject can be created out of the aesthetic experience of Medea's self-subjection. Thus, this aesthetically appearing new critical-collective subject points toward another future. A future that is different from the portrayed and aesthetically mediated already-past future of the lake near Straußberg. A subject whose collective identity, as will be shown, understands itself not as unity but as multiplicity, whose identity is formed between man and woman, between human and non-human, between past, future, and present in direct connection to nature — as Müller himself describes in the stage direction to this text in the depiction of Medea's self-subjection. He writes: "As in every landscape the I in this part of the text is collective."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Müller, *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

And this landscape, he comments in his autobiography, “lasts longer than the individual. In the meantime it waits for the disappearance of the human who despoils it without regard for his future as a species.”<sup>16</sup> Müller paints, in a kind of trauma(r)tistic imagery, a warning of the end times as, in his words, a “memory of the future.” In many of Müller’s texts, references to past and future often appear only as fragments of a dead world. Fragments of art, philosophy, history, and literature frequently seem to run through the text like complexly branched hyperlinks in a hypertext, as Müller, guided by the theoretical school of Critical Theory, works through and questions various myths, temporal layers, and geopolitical as well as ecological developments. Exemplarily with Müller one can thus experience a critique of the subject of our present. Here the poietic capacity of materialist aesthetics to translate between time and space is evident:

Translation into another unit of time, into another space. History [in the theater] can only be represented as the simultaneity of past, present, and future, which makes it comprehensible. [...] In this way, the time continuum of everyday experience is broken open, a fantasy space for reality is liberated, and the past and possible future are torn into the moment.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, in his triptych Müller sketches a catastrophic dystopian end-time civilization in fragmentary images that, beyond the elaboration of the Medea myth, begin at the first colonizing land-grab by the “Argonauts with flattened foreheads” of the past and strand at a decayed shore of the past future of our present. At the same time, as will be shown throughout the lecture, Müller’s aesthetic work consists, in opposition to the instrumental reason of the Enlightenment, of carving out a collective hopeful subject from this seeming defeatism of a waste land.

The place “a Lake near Straußberg” is chosen exemplarily as a site from which historically real devastation originated, where the last tank battle of the Second World War took place, but also where the headquarters of the National People’s Army of the GDR (NVA) was stationed. Müller changes the orthography of the town name *Strausberg* to *Straußberg*, from ‘s’ to the sharp ‘ß’, without directly transforming it into >SS<<sup>18</sup>. Müller introduces a historical-political reference, showing the cynical traces of progress. The mythological allusions, in turn, admonish the mystical beginning and the end of destruction imagined by Müller, which continues through world war, military presence, and their consequences: Thus the text reads: “till the Argo smashes his skull the wasted / Vessel / Balanced on branches Dry dock and shit-house for vultures”<sup>19</sup>. Now nature, which had been turned into a ship, strikes back and ends the destructive megalomania of the eternal belief in progress “of modern man and his way of life based on economic growth”<sup>20</sup>. What interests Müller in the Medea myth is that “the story of Jason represents the earliest myth of colonization. European history begins with colonization. The fact that the vehicle of colonization slays the colonizer foreshadows its end. This is the threat of the end we face: the ‘end of growth.’”<sup>21</sup>, as Müller himself formulates it in an interview. And thus, “Jason’s death appears as the first expression of the dialectic of enlightenment.”<sup>22</sup> It is this aesthetically mediated experience of terror, which however does not stand for defeatism but must be understood as a

<sup>16</sup> Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht: Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2003), p. 320 (translated by A.G.).

<sup>17</sup> “Ein Gespräch zwischen Wolfgang Heise und Heiner Müller,” in Wolfgang Heise (ed.), *Brecht 88: Anregungen zum Dialog über die Vernunft am Jahrtausendende* (Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1987), pp. 189–208, here p. 202 (translated by the author A.G.).

<sup>18</sup> Genia Schulz, “Waste Land / Verkommenes Ufer,” in Wolfgang Storch (ed.), *Explosion of a Memory: Heiner Müller DDR. Ein Arbeitsbuch* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1988), p. 104.

<sup>19</sup> Müller, *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Eva Huller, *Griechisches Theater in Deutschland: Mythos und Tragödie bei Heiner Müller und Botho Strauß* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2007), p. 218.

<sup>21</sup> Heiner Müller, “Was ein Kunstwerk kann, ist Sehnsucht wecken nach einem anderen Zustand der Welt,” in *Gesammelte Irrtümer* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1996 [1983]), pp. 130–131 (translated by the author A.G.).

<sup>22</sup> Huller, *Griechisches Theater in Deutschland*, p. 218.

practice of aesthetic education toward the critical collective subject: the shock moment of awakening in the autopoietic experience of disruption.<sup>23</sup> It is the suffering that can be experienced aesthetically and endured aesthetically. With Charbonnier one can add that the collective subject, through Müller's text, awakens in the trial by threat, in the moment of loss of its own historicity.<sup>24</sup> This is taken up again at the end of the third part of Müller's text when an airplane, as a modern means of transport and instrument of colonization, shoots the narrator, who identifies himself in text fragments among others as Prometheus, who as bearer of fire first enabled the development of progress and is now shot by this very thing.

That the downfall of civilization functions as the legacy of high culture reveals the dialectic of Müller's philosophy of history as aesthetically mediated, operating as a reference to the wiles of reason and as the irony of history. The beginning of the European civilizational project is always linked here with its end — an end that without the figure of Medea on the ground would be understood as an inevitable and undialectical endgame. But Müller says: "On the bed though Medea her carved-up / Brother in her arms Expert / In poison Medea". In the image of the ambivalent Marian representation (as a remembrance Medea kills her children at the end of the myth), with the brother in her arm (although dismembered, now again reunited in the arm), the 'though' announces something more than obvious, another possibility, and thus also functions as a difference to the preceding endgame scenario. It is this 'though' that contradicts.<sup>25</sup> As foreigner, as oppressed, as dominated, who becomes aware of her otherness, as "Expert in poison", who builds up this knowledge into liberation from oppression, she is the one who resists the constant repetition of injustice in history ("on the bed")<sup>26</sup>. With Müller, Medea embodies the self-consciousness that has come to itself, recognizes, acknowledges, negates, and is thus involved in the becoming of the self-other, as I will explain using another text excerpt. In this 'thus' lies the sand in the gears that can be overlooked if the apocalypse of nature is captured with a few all-encompassing terms and collective singulars and seems to concern only the preservation of the mechanism. Sand that, however, inevitably emerges as an actor-led resistance when the perspective is shifted to both the subjects who produce the devastation and the subjects produced by the devastation, as well as those who can still be recreated from the critique of ecological devastation.

Müller opposes the idea of a linear conception of history that assumes a chronologically traceable and teleological grand narrative narrated by progress. Similar to Walter Benjamin, who depicts history as a "single catastrophe" and denies any moment of development<sup>27</sup>, Müller portrays history as a process of recurring conflicts and constellations as existential foundational experiences of human coexistence and, like Marx and Benjamin, understands history as a product of production. When we read about Medea at the seabed, we imagine a shadow, a ghost in history that haunts and admonish, even when we try to undo what was happened.

The aesthetically produced subject of this materialist philosophy of history of repetition is slightly different from that of a theory of progress and growth: because the idea of history repeating itself contradicts both the orientation towards a higher goal (of the individual as well as the masses), for the achievement of which necessary compromises in the present would have to be

<sup>23</sup> See "Ein Gespräch zwischen Wolfgang Heise und Heiner Müller," in *Brecht 88: Anregungen zum Dialog über die Vernunft am Jahrtausende*, ed. by the Brecht-Zentrum der DDR (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1987), pp. 189–208.

<sup>24</sup> Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: Towards a New Critical Subject*, pp. 252–257.

<sup>25</sup> In the original German, the word "aber" has been translated variously as "though", "but", and "however". In German, "aber" expresses a more explicit contradiction. Since Müller was a German-speaking author, the interpretation here follows the original sense of contradiction.

<sup>26</sup> In the original German, the phrase "auf dem Grunde" means "on the seabed" and has also been translated as "ground". The latter carries implications of the "ground of history", as interpreted here.

<sup>27</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," section IX.

made, as well as the comforting idea of providence and transience. This means that, in the moment of a radical recognition of repetition, the subject becoming self-conscious in this way must part from the illusion of a god that provides metaphysical meaning and from the concept of timeless progress and resulting eternal growth.

As a result, the human is then free to become a mature, independent thinking and acting individual. An individual who endures and affirms the suffering that arises from the collision of past, present, and future, and in this affirmation, freed from old assumptions and needs, recognizes a meaning in radical change. Müller's theatrical work of materialist aesthetics in the sense of a Critical Theory following Benjamin and Marx thus expands Epic Theatre (after Brecht) by Nietzsche's Eternal Return. For, as Nietzsche writes, the "question in each and every thing, 'Do you want this again and innumerable times again?' would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *long for nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?"<sup>28</sup>

The task of the new critical-collective subject, therefore, is to transform the eternal recurrence into the "highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable"<sup>29</sup>, as amor fati, the love of fate. In itself the character of the eternal recurrence appears fundamentally nihilistic, for that nothing possesses an intrinsic meaning and is free of purpose is the 'heaviest weight'. But it is not about surrendering to fate; rather, it is about a conscious and active affirmation of life. In this affirmation the new subject becomes a fellow human being, for again quoting Nietzsche, "My humanity does not consist in sympathizing with people as they are, but instead putting up with the fact that I sympathize with them... My humanity is constantly overcoming"<sup>30</sup>. And this is precisely what manifests in the constitution of the subject both of Müller's theater and of the subject that reflects and constitutes itself through this theater. The active "I" of this philosophy of history is constantly in conflict, confrontation, and contradiction.

Medea too needed the insight rooted in the moment of the experience of existential betrayal, in the instant of terror, which is traceable while reading the following confession to Jason by Medea in Müller's play: "Deaf and blind to screams and pictures / I was until you tore apart the web [...] Betrayal which was your pleasure Thanks for your / Betrayal which has given me eyes."<sup>31</sup> In *Medeamaterial*, the middle part of the triptych, the contradiction hinted at by the 'though' in the last image is worked out: In the dialogue between Nurse, Medea and Jason, Medea grows stronger, also as Jason falls silent and Medea moves into a monologue that becomes a process of self-discovery — up to the neutralization of Jason through forgetting, disregard and non-recognition, when she finally asks: "Maid Do you know this man"<sup>32</sup>.

But before this monologue, she is herself a chosen victim, accomplice, and reproducer of the system of violence, voluntarily subordinating herself — to the man, to culture, to the colonizers. Yet in the mirror, in failing to recognize herself — that is, through the negation, "Bring a mirror That's not Medea" — a self-recognition takes place, and thus the first word she directs to Jason in the dialogue after this negating self-recognition in the mirror is "I". From there she recapitulates her situation: at the moment of recognition she perceives her entire fate, her betrayal in co-perpetration, the logic of an illogical system — because it does not add up, because it cannot be grasped — a system that seems trapped in the binary logic between end and beginning. "When is this going to stop" Jason asks about the end, but Medea asks back "When did it start" and thus explains that what is supposed to end here already had its beginning as the beginning of the end. Just as the beginning of the play is the decayed shore of the end times, that beginning was from

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. J. Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 341.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: Zarathustra 1*, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Müller, *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

the outset destined to end. Following this insight, she becomes aware of her identity outside the cultural, patriarchal and political order that oppresses her, and answers Jason's question, "What were you before me woman [Weib]", confidently with her name: "Medea".

In the first part of the monologue that follows the recollection of her dead brother, Medea recapitulates the events of the Argonaut myth, the colonization that was carried out at the expense on the "bodies bones graves of my people". She becomes conscious of her own complicity as "bitch", "whore", "tool" — and thus of her own betrayal. But only through the doubling of betrayal, through Jason's betrayal of her and through her own betrayal, does she understand the cycle of history as repetition and break the cycle of life as actor: in which, in the binary order surrounding her, she is stylized as perpetrator — in the murder of the children and Glauke as destruction of Jason's genealogical line.

Medea breaks the frame of this historical logic by choosing the moment of the in-between as an anthropological place: "I want to break humanity in two / And live in the empty middle I / No woman no man What are you screaming about Worse than / death". Thus Müller does not make the killing of the children the center of the dramatic event, but rather Medea's process of self-discovery: neither man nor woman, neither animal nor human, neither perpetrator nor victim. There, in the gap of the in-between, "between I and NolongerI", she finds her true identity, which does not lie in returning to one of the two poles of the binary antagonism but in its liminal middle. For reaching this middle, it requires the negation of the self, just as happens here with Medea. Now, at the end of the middle part, "everything is still / The screams of Colchis also silent", the betrayal has been atoned for, not undone, but the consequences of the cycle have been changed. And thus Medea, who at the beginning of this part still defined herself through her husband, no longer recognizes him when she asks "Maid Do you know this man". She has freed herself from Jason by negating him as part of her self. Not in the sense of an anthropological mutation of a post-Oedipal subject that consumes the other, but by highlighting the impossibility in the self-other. Medea thus embodies the possibility of change in the (ongoing) process of self-becoming.

When Heiner Müller creates parallel constructions in his historical and mythical montages, he reveals "the identical in the historically similar" and "understands history as a circular movement in which the end intertwines with the beginning, the new already carries the germ of decline within itself"<sup>33</sup>. In continuation of Hegel, for whom progress still expresses the law of historical development, Müller wants to "strengthen the awareness of conflicts [...], of confrontations and contradictions"<sup>34</sup> in the presentation of history and based on the subject of his non-linear philosophy of history. This becoming subject of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence — the *Übermensch* — is, in Walter Benjamin's terms, "the man who has arrived where he is without changing his ways; he is historical man who has grown up right through the sky"<sup>35</sup>. Walter Benjamin, who for Heiner Müller provided key words for his own philosophy of history in his theatre texts, transforms Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return into a kind of pessimistic template in which the individual is petrified in history but must break out of it. Benjamin sees in the represented horror the organization of pessimism. Benjamin, "who was a critic of myth, [understood] the myth of eternal return as the complement of an empty progress"<sup>36</sup>. Müller concentrates this Benjamin concept of organizing pessimism into parallel constructions that emphasize simultaneity and let them appear as textually produced images.

<sup>33</sup> Norbert Otto Eke, *Heiner Müller* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), p. 275 (translated by the author A.G.).

<sup>34</sup> Heiner Müller, "Ich glaube an Konflikt, sonst glaube ich an nichts," in *Gesammelte Irrtümer* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1982), p. 86 (translated by the author A.G.).

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," in M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings (1913–1926)*, Vol. 1, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 289.

<sup>36</sup> Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, "Erwachen aus dem Traumschlaf," p. 179 (translated by the author A.G.).

Thus the image is an elemental category for Walter Benjamin, because “History decays into images, not into stories”<sup>37</sup>, and through the image it becomes possible to think asynchrony. Heiner Müller elaborates Benjamin’s ‘dialectical image’ of history and utopia for his theater work by, as in the stage directions to *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, assuming the simultaneity of the scene and referring to an additional time dimension as a memory of the future. In the ‘dialectical image’ “lies time. Already with Hegel, time enters into dialectic. But the Hegelian dialectic knows time solely as the properly historical, if not psychological, time of thinking. The time differential [*Zeitdifferential*] in which alone the dialectical image is real is still unknown to him”.<sup>38</sup> Müller recognizes that “the problem is that utopia and history are becoming increasingly distant from each other. It has become impossible to imagine utopia within the historical process. Utopia today stands beyond or alongside history, beyond or alongside politics.”<sup>39</sup> This “problem” of the separation of history and utopia, of horizon of experience and horizon of expectation, of the collapse of the bridges between past and present, Müller seeks to make evident in his aesthetic work and to contribute to the construction of a collectively critical subject. The materialist aesthetics at work here produces in the shock-moment of the exhibited and represented terror its own dialectical image: a moment of the in-between as an aesthetic-political field of possibility in which the thinking of the impossible-possible is effected by the ahistorical depiction of (or the reference to) another state of the world as a memory of the future. With Benjamin, “the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process.”<sup>40</sup> This “violent expulsion from the continuum of the historical process” qua ‘dialectical image’, ‘awakening’, terror and ‘shock’ in the respective ‘now of recognizability’ in Benjamin, is related to the explosion that Heiner Müller wants to make possible with his aesthetic work as a ‘memory of the future’. And so Heiner Müller speaks out against political art and for art as a haven of the transformation of political relations:

I don’t think you can simply parallel politics and art. If you translate an idea into an image, either the image becomes distorted or the idea explodes. I’m more in favor of the explosion. I think Genet put it very precisely and correctly: The only thing a work of art can do is to awaken a longing for a different state of the world. And this longing is revolutionary.<sup>41</sup>

Here it becomes clear that the experiences of the subject of disruption through (self-) reflection contain and interweave the experiences of encountering the Other, both as constructed memory and as a projection of the future. Levinas describes this as the infinite experience of transcendence within an encounter with alterity. Only through aesthetic learning via the aesthetic experience of shudder (as Goethe calls it in *Faust*), shock (as found in Brecht and Benjamin), or terror (as in the Marx quotation with which this article opened), when the “image of the enemy appears in the mirror as knowledge” (as Heiner Müller puts it in an interview with Wolfgang Heise), would the activist catharsis of autopoiesis become possible – as an aesthetics of existence<sup>42</sup>. In the narratives of the disruptive self, the thread is spun that is woven into the web of

<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 476.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 867.

<sup>39</sup> Heiner Müller, *Rotwelsch* (West Berlin: Merve-Verlag, 1982), p. 62 (translated by the author A.G.).

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 474.

<sup>41</sup> Heiner Müller, interview with Urs Jenny and Helmuth Karasek, “Was ein Kunstwerk kann, ist Sehnsucht wecken nach einem anderen Zustand der Welt,” for the premiere of *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten* (Bochum, 1983), in *Gesammelte Irrtümer: Interviews und Gespräche* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1986), p. 133 (translated by the author A.G.).

<sup>42</sup> I am linking ethics with aesthetics here while having Foucault in mind who intertwines the concept of aesthetic already with social and ethical practices: ‘Greek ethics is centered on a problem of personal choice, of aesthetics of existence.’ In: Michel Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,’ in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 348.

references and relationships into the space between the individual and the community. From here the individual recognizes itself as part of the fragmented whole and so another whole becomes possible.

In the aesthetic practice of weaving experiences, various temporalities are intertwined. Reflecting on these experiences through aesthetic practice a second-order self-observation (Luhmann) is initiated so that a specific self-generated self arises. This self mirrors both the connection to the surrounding world and the distinctive character of this connection as a constructive condition. The narrations of this disruptive self create a poetic fabric in which ethics as reflected freedom<sup>43</sup> appears, allowing autopoiesis as a form of self-experience, self-knowledge and self-transformation. Autopoiesis here thus encompasses the historicity of the self, self-referentiality and the generation of the self in the contingent process of openness and incomprehensibility. The autopoietic practice takes place here as a (self-)epistemology in art, film and literature through the reflected experience of disruption. This is not an unadulterated attempt at empathy as mere re-identification of the self, but rather a kind of continual de-subjection. And that is precisely what makes catharsis as a specific activist catharsis possible and opens the way to responsible coexistence. With the aesthetic experience one can embed the individually made singular experience in a communal frame. I have attempted to show how, through art and literature, it is possible to produce an aesthetic experience that could enable recipients both to grasp the extent of their own made and to-be-made disruptive experiences and to comprehend the act of self- and de-subjection — and thus to bring the petrified relations to dance.

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<sup>43</sup> As Michel Foucault describes it: "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom." Care of the self was the way individual liberty was seen as ethical. The aesthetics of existence was 'the purposeful art of a freedom perceived as a power game'. In this 'game', freedom 'was a power that one brought to bear on oneself'. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1988 [1984]), trans. from *Le souci de soi*.

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