

Slaughtering, skinning, stripping: cannibal humour in Heiner Müller’s work

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Abstract

GDR playwright Heiner Müller (1929-1995) is famous for the dark, carnivalesque humour of his plays, mostly dealing with German historical traumas. To approach the complexity of Müllerian theatrical texts, this article focuses on a salient form of their grotesque horror: cannibalism. In Germania Death in Berlin (1971) and its structurally and thematically similar sequel Germania 3 Ghosts at the Dead Man (1995), references to cannibalism are omnipresent. They occur in three variations: slaughtering, skinning, and stripping. The first echoes the centrality of the military battle in Müller’s work. Relying on the polysemy of the German word stem schlacht (meaning both “battle” and “slaughtering of animals”), it unveils the reoccurrence of blood and violence in German history and culture, behind the mask of political antagonism. Skinning, the second form of cannibalism, also builds on wordplay: Müller depicts the Stalingrad Kesselschlacht (“battle of encirclement”, literally “battle in a cauldron”) as a long process of soldiers dismembering and devouring each other. While slaughtering and skinning both gradually transform specific individuals into the collective, organic form of meat, the third cannibalistic variation, stripping, refers to another kind of opposition between bodies, represented satirically as well: sexuality. The progressive undressing also reveals the flesh and sheds light onto the carnal drive in human behaviour. As stripping is linked with depraved sexual acts, i.e. rape and necrophilia, this underlines its proximity with slaughtering and skinning. In sum, the Germania diptych deconstructs ideologies through reducing them to their corporeal essence, in a mix of horror and laughter.

Keywords: German theatre, postdramatic theatre, grotesque.

1. Black Carnival: introduction

HITLER *while he gooses the giggling Goebbels: Breakfast! Exit guard. Soldier. Hitler eats him, the head last of all. Sneezes, spits and claws hairs from his mouth. I gave orders, that my men be completely shaven before I eat them. Disgusting! Sneezes and drinks gasoline.*
GOEBBELS *May I call to your attention, my Führer, to the necessity of keeping the secret to the smallest possible group. The German people reveres you as a vegetarian. (Death in Berlin, p.20)*

Libidinous, scatological, anthropophagous. East German playwright Heiner Müller, who died in 1995, has often been considered the irreverent heir to Bertolt Brecht (Silbermann, 2003). Both have indeed been considered geniuses by some critics over the course of history, but beyond this recognition, they share a common taste for formula, an inclination for self-presentation, and a tendency towards black humour. Whereas in Brecht's work, the presence or absence of humour depends on the individual texts, black humour runs as a thread through the vast majority of Müller's production. This aspect of the work was largely nurtured by Müller himself. At the end of his life, he made one television appearance after another, and multiplied bon mots and sibylline assertions for the media of a reunified Germany, or one well on the way to being so, vis-à-vis which he imposed himself as an ideal client. The playwright asserted himself as a witness and bearer of the decaying socialist utopia, as well as a critic (from within) of the excesses of the East German regime's political apparatus (Dupont, 2012).

In terms of writing, too, Müller distinguished himself from the Brechtian model by embodying early on postmodernism in theatre, or rather the "postdramatic" vision (Lehmann, 1999) on theatrical writing. Postdramatic approaches involve a radical questioning of the notions of text, character and thematic unity, as well as an appreciation of writing as a process, in particular via a collaboration with actors on the theatrical text. Over time, this orientation has led to an increasingly strong tendency towards collage. From the outset, Müller's work has been highly hypertextual, playing with layers of quotations and the interweaving of their interpretations. In Müller's later work, however, any hierarchical structure is abandoned in favour of a thoroughly postmodern mode of functioning, based essentially on associations, fragments and rewritings (Keller, 1994). The incorporation of canonical exogenous texts into Müller's contemporary text generates what the author calls "islands of disorder" that break with traditional dramatic conception and put the materials back to work, as they illuminate each other (Combes, 2009, p. 261).

Such writing – which Combes describes as "textual dismemberment" rather than deconstruction (p. 258, our translation) – is regularly claimed by Müller as a necessity of his thematic material, even if he often uses different justifications depending on the period of his life. Indeed, most of his work takes the form of a reflection on German history and its roots, which find extensions and reflections in other geographical and (a)temporal spaces, such as the French Revolution and the independence struggles of the colonies, Soviet socialism, or Greco-Roman antiquity. Ultimately, Müller sees his country's history as a never-ending repetition of the same patterns of absurd violence, cruelty and destruction, poorly masked by ideologies such as Communism and Nazism – that at the surface seem to be diametrically opposed, but meet in their deep structure.

Müller's texts are masquerades in the truest sense of the word: the meaning of history is nothing more than an absurd, circular movement, in which each historical reality represents no more than a face, one among many possible masks for a great game of destruction. This historiographical view is expressed by carnivalesque paraphernalia and arrangements. Plays oscillate at a very steady pace between the body and the disguise, between high and low, between the world of the most immaterial ideas and the most scabrous physicality. Meuser aptly

refers to Müller's omnipresent grotesque with horrific overtones as a “Black Carnival”. She remarks that he uses to make visible his favourite themes, such as “the revolt of the body against its rationalist domestication or the unveiling of collectively buried memory” (2019: p. 37, our translation). Black grotesque even becomes a structuring element of the plays, from *Germania. Death in Berlin* on, which will be our first focus. On numerous occasions, the author stresses that he would like his works to be perceived and staged as comedies (Greiner, 1986), and to elicit laughter more frankly. This laughter does not take place in spite of the horror, but in intimate interweaving with it.

Grotesque accents, sometimes with elements of gore, are also typical of cultural productions dealing with the end of the GDR and the reunification of Germany, such as Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Das Deutsche Kettensägenmassaker* (1990, translated into *The German Chainsaw Massacre*) (see Hodgin, 2014), a parody of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (dir. Hooper, 1979). While Müller's interest for Black grotesque thus predates that cultural moment, his work short for and after the *Wende* also borrows and more from televised events and popular cinema short and after the *Wende*, integrating for example a highly mediatized serial killer, or the imagery of American zombie films into *Germania 3 Gespenster am toten Mann*, which will be our second focus.

Müllerian humour is characterized by a carnivalesque, earthy, organic and political dimension. All differences in corpuses put aside, it links with Bakhtin conception of the Carnival, that opposes the laughter of the powerless people with the seriousness of the powerful. In Müller's texts, as we shall see, the question of materiality, which is central to Bakhtin's development, is played out on two levels: it is a matter of content (with the lower parts, and in particular ingestion, digestion and excretion as motifs), as much as of form (the materiality of the text itself being thematized as well). Through his texts, the German playwright sketches out the contours of an upside-down world (Bakhtin, 1970) – in its post-modern acceptance – where laughter is as much the result as the lever of a possible overthrow.

The *God of Happiness* fragment (*Glücksgott* in the original)¹ sums this up in a typically Müllerian concretism of death, laughter, and seriousness (Greiner, 1986): it ends with the laconic scene *The Cheerful Corpse* (*Der fröhliche Tote*) in which The God of Happiness (GOH) encounters a dead person:

GOH Why so cheerful, corpse?
Toter Should I be dead
And not be cheerful?
The GOH weeps.

(Müller, 2001, p. 79)

2. Cannibalism at work: the two *Germanias*

The two works we discuss in this article share the same title, *Germania*. The first, subtitled *Tod in Berlin* (*Death in Berlin*), is marked by a complex publication history, typical of Müller's turbulent relationship with the state art apparatus (and hence censorship) in the GDR: some first excerpts were published in 1956, the final version of the text in 1971. The second text dates from after the end of East German socialism, being published and staged posthumously in 1995. However, the 1995 text was not written in a single block either: as we saw earlier, it is made up of short texts written over time and then edited together into a theatrical text (Kalb, 2006). It is

¹ *The God of Happiness*, published in 1975, is a series of fragments dating from Müller's attempts to write a libretto for an opera by his friend Paul Dessau. Though short, and unfinished, and considered a failure by Müller himself, this text occupies a pivotal place in his writing, as Morel (2013) remarks.

entitled *Germania 3. Gespenster am toten Mann*, or *Germania 3. Ghosts at the Dead Man* in English translation². In the first place, the *Dead Man* refers to a hill near Verdun (*Le Mort-Homme*) which witnessed several battles between the German and the French army in WW1. However, the title can also be read intertextually as a reference to a corpse, that could be the German state, dead since the 1971 version.

Overall, the relationship between the two *Germanias* is that of a reprisal on two levels. First, in terms of structure: both consist of the succession of tableaux of often anecdotal, yet allegorical scenes from twentieth-century German history. Second, numerous motifs are common to both texts: actions such as dismemberment, rape, or childbirth; characters such as the skeleton, the soldier, the bourgeois, the party official and the prostitute; but also mythical figures such as Germania, the Nibelungen warriors or historical figures like Hitler, Stalin or Goebbels. In places, however, we can speak of a genuine rewriting, as in the tableau depicting the Nibelungen. To complicate the relationship even further, the opening scene is in a sense part of both works, having already been presented in *Germania. Tod in Berlin* during a 1988 performance (Kalb, 2006). Generally speaking, *Germania 3* integrates the first opus into its intertextual network, offering a metareflection on the 1971 text.

The scenes in *Death in Berlin*, for example, depict the Berlin street at the start of the attempted November Revolution in 1918, then the birth of the GDR in 1949, and finally the announcement of Stalin's death in 1953. They also include two clowns who in turns pretend to be King Frederick II of Prussia, the battle of Stalingrad, and Hitler in his bunker in 1945. These tableaux are interspersed with a silent passage, a long extract from Tacitus on Germania, and verses by Georg Heym about Berlin. In *Germania 3*, we see East German Communist Party presidents Thälmann and Ulbricht standing guard along the Berlin Wall; Stalin reminiscing about his past enemies and fraternally addressing Hitler; the battle of Stalingrad once again and then Hitler's bunker. The play closes with a monologue by the Pink Giant (*Der rosa Riese*), a serial killer from the immediate post-reunification era.

Among the motifs that run through *Germania* as a whole, there is one, we argue, that is of central interest: cannibalism. From a thematic point of view, to begin with, scenes in which the human body is eaten are exceptionally numerous. Thus, in a scene from "Homage to Stalin", soldiers eat each other; in "Homage to Stalin 2", it is a petty bourgeois who confesses to being puzzled by the provenance of the meat he has eaten; in "The Holy Family", Hitler, under his vegetarian cover, secretly devours his soldiers; in "Siegfried a Jewess from Poland" (Müller, 2001, p. 188), the warrior Kriemhild says "you ate my flesh and drank my blood" (*Ghosts at the Dead Man* [hereinafter *GatDM*], p. 194). Poetically, too, some of these moments can be read as reflections on the text itself and the way it is constituted. In *Germania 1*, "pieces of corpses crawl together and form themselves [...] into a monster of scrap-metal and body-parts" (*Death in Berlin*, hereinafter *DiB*, p. 13), while the German hardcover edition of *Germania 3* is accompanied by a poem that compares the writer's "I" to a vampire (*Gespenster am toten Mann*, cover). Ideologically, finally, the devouring of humans by humans is presented as an explanatory model for history, an image that recurs frequently in Müller's interviews (cf. "Demokratie als Allesfresser" with Alexander Kluge, 1995).

Here again, the horrific aspect is not a hurdle to, but rather a motor of laughter. In his typology of humour around death, Thorson recognizes in jokes about cannibalism a "distancing strategy that is often used here in an attempt to show that persons who would do such a thing are not like us", and an "undercurrent of racism" (Thorson, 1985, p. 2010) through which the joker ascribes cannibalism to the foreign and not to their own culture. However, Müller does quite the opposite: in *Germania*, cannibalism occurs in various forms in all ethnic and political

² Multiple explanations have been developed about why there isn't any text entitled *Germania 2* between the 1 and the 3. Kalb (2006) puts forward the idea that Müller would have done so only to confuse analysts.

groups represented on the stage, Germans included, as a fundamental feature of civilization. It seems that his account of cannibalism has more to do with political uses of cannibalistic tropes, that other scholars link with the denunciation of ideologies that are considered inhumane or absurd. The concept of a humans devouring humans is often put in relation with the situation in autocratic regimes, in which “people ha[ve] to beware of their neighbours, acquaintances, even friends and family” (Laineste & Krikmann, 2015, p. 92). In reusing the trope while the ex-GDR part of his audience is familiar with Soviet and East-European humour, Müller connects with a reservoir of humoristic allusions to authoritarian, especially socialist regimes, with their economy of shortage (*Mangelwirtschaft*), their bureaucracy, and their generalized surveillance.

Yet if, in Müller’s work, everything is political, considering his taste for cannibalism as purely politically motivated would certainly be erroneous. In his work, History and politics always trigger aesthetical considerations, and he likes to leave open the doubt as to whether he would, after all, cynically use political situations and convictions as a mere pretext for aesthetics reflections and experiments.³ Without going so far, we must acknowledge the aesthetic appeal of cannibalism for an author who regularly emphasises the centrality of negative impulses such as disasters, fear, and destruction for his creative process (see Löschner, 2002).

Abjection is thus probably equally appealing for Müller’s poetology. In her famous work dedicated to abjection, Julia Kristeva (1982) notably emphasised the ambivalence provoked by the corpse, and the fact that -laughter can also arise from such an ambivalence. As she points out, the corpse reminds us of what we get rid of to allow us to live. “The utmost of abjection” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4), it is the ultimate waste, the threat of the living gnawed by death, what we refuse but which always catches up with us. Morbid corpses are thus examples of the abject, in the sense that they could be “a vortex of summons and repulsions” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2), producing the effect of an “inescapable boomerang” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1), and being perceived simultaneously as repulsive and intriguing. In this sense, the abject can produce a feeling of discomfort – especially when it comes to ingesting a corpse, abject food among all – and this is where laughter and humour can come into play. As Kristeva also states, “laughter is a way of placing or displacing abjection” (1982, p. 8). If it does not permanently deliver us from the abject – and therefore from the corpse –, laughter temporarily protects us from it, through displacement. Kristeva’s thought quite rightly illuminates Müller’s work, where humour represents nothing other than a reprieve in the face of the absurdity of death and violence in their perpetual recommencement. This comedy – which we have described as black or carnivalesque – is the origin of laughter mixing enjoyment and horror: “Abjection, as a state of being or as a rubric for critical reading, may lend itself to horror as well as to comedy, but its ultimate stakes are bigger than either. The abject objection derives from and contributes to an extremity of affect, a dislocation of the self, in which screams and laughter become indistinguishable” (Hennefeld & Sammond, 202, p. 5). In Müller’s work, this ambiguous laughter becomes very clearly a critical tool.

As a textual trigger for (extratextual) laughter, cannibalism (as a formal and thematic issue) is in our view an effective way of approaching Müller’s sprawling oeuvre, which is subject to an even wider range of interpretations, fuelled by the sometimes contradictory self-analyses provided by the author himself. It is not the only one available, but at the very least, it is a path that enables us to quickly get to the *heart* of this mass of texts.

³ In several interviews, Müller describes art as “parasitic”. In his autobiography, he often assumes the pose of someone who considered the socialist ideology and system from the viewpoint of the conditions for his writing only, and not from the perspective of political adhesion or rejection (see Müller, 1990, p. 37, and Müller, 2005).

3. Slaughtering

The most direct example of cannibalism is the recurring scene in which a character is shot or stabbed, and then eaten by other protagonists. The German verb for “slaughtering an animal” is “schlachten”, which is homonymic with “battles” (*die Schlachten*), one of Müller's favourite themes. *Death in Berlin* is emblematically punctuated by battlefield scenes: Stalingrad, a place reminiscent of Verdun, and a scene of intergenerational stoning. As a Müllerian obsession, it is Stalingrad that is the most detailed and the stage for most events. In this setting German soldiers appear first, then the ghosts of Napoleon and Caesar, and finally the Nibelungs. By using spectres and then German mythological figures, Müller shows that the war does not end with the dead of all combatants, as it should. Rather, the same pattern of war will be repeated systematically throughout history with recurring archetypes:

More and more soldiers stagger and crawl onto the stage, fall, remain lying down. Then the Nibelungs Gunther, Hagen, Volker and Gernot, larger than life-size, enter clad in rusted armor.

[...]

VOLKER They think that when they're rotting, they've done everything that can be demanded of them.

HAGEN *sneering*: The[y] think they have it behind them.

[...]

The Nibelungs arm themselves with corpses and pieces of corpses and throw them screaming at imaginary Huns, so that an uneven wall of corpses piles up.

(*DiB*, p. 11-12)

The soldiers are thus replaced by their timeless version, the Nibelungs warriors, an allegory of German culture as a culture of blood and murder. The Nibelungs are a parody of brutal heroes who tell salacious jokes, and fight an enemy they have invented for themselves, since they want to avenge Siegfried, who was in fact killed by Hagen – here in reference to the “enemy within” fantasized by the Nazis and then the East German state apparatus. But this tenuous purpose doesn't for long hide the fact that battle and death (constantly *re-lived*) are appreciated for their own sake: “Are you some sort of Hun, that you need a reason to fight.” (p. 12), Volker asks Gernot. The latter, however, seems weary of battles:

GERNOT I don't want to die every night. I find that boring. It's no fun for me. I'd like to do something else for a change. Like the thing with the women for example. I've forgotten what it's called.

HAGEN *sneering*: He's forgotten what it's called.

VOLKER That's the youth of today. They have no ideals anymore.

GUNTHER Why do you think your mother gave birth to you. We'll practice it until you can do it in your sleep.

The three Nibelungs cut the fourth into pieces in a lengthier battle. Then they masturbate together.

VOLKER *masturbating*: “I'd like for once to do something else. Like the thing with the women for example. I've forgotten, what it's called.”

The Nibelungs laugh.

(*DiB*, p. 12)

Here, the sexual act degenerates into macabre, ritual masturbation on a pile of corpses, intimately linking violence and perverted sexuality. Motherhood, too, is distorted, turned upside down: the Nibelungs are indeed the offspring of a mother, but in the course of their eternity, childbirth has become a phenomenon of assembling pieces of corpses and scattered weapons, the “monster made of scrap-metal and body-parts” (p. 13) that rises from the rubble at the end of the scene. Grotesque, monstrous childbirth, as well as the reversal of maternity and paternity

are echoed in the ferocious scene “The Holy Family”, in which Germania, the mother-figure of Germany, is transformed into a midwife who delivers Goebbels's monstrous child (a “Contergan-wolf”, p. 23)⁴, which he has conceived with Hitler.

It is interesting to note that, unlike *Death in Berlin*, the battle scenes, the “Schlachten” as such, are not visible in *Ghosts at the Dead Man*. Nevertheless, they are constantly referred to: by characters who have recently experienced them, such as the cannibal soldiers who return in this third opus, by Stalin who evokes the imminent arrival of the Germans at Stalingrad, or the Nibelungs who reflect on their eternal battle before shedding their disguise to reveal a German uniform for Hagen, and a Soviet one for Kriemhild.

Battles are present as the constant reminiscence of an object which remains ungraspable as such. This is in keeping with Müller's post-Wall phase, when he published an autobiography entitled *Krieg ohne Schlacht: Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (that would translate as *War without Battle: Life in Two Dictatorships*). In a final postmodern movement, the Grand Narrative of war has disappeared and remains an empty central point around which discourses gravitate. Similarly, the slaughter is no longer represented on stage and loses its grotesque character, as when it is narrated mechanically and dispassionately by a Croatian immigrant worker returning to his native country after two years in Germany:

While I make love to my wife, I'm thinking of the brothels in Germany [...]. After breakfast I go to the tool shed, take the axe that's still hanging from the same hook, and slay my wife with it. With my hands that have worked for two years at the conveyor belt in Germany I kill my children. I leave the house.

(*GatDM*, p. 201).

The shock is no longer produced by the gore, extrovert approach to taboo violence, but rather by its neutral enunciation, which contrasts with the horror of the content. In so doing, Müller continues to unveil the butchery behind each historical event, but under different conditions. In the post-GDR era, the aim is no longer to show the drive for death and destruction perpetuated in German civilization, as opposed to the “tabula rasa” approach to the Nazi past adopted in East Germany. Instead, it is needed to show that the pacification of reunification did not change anything, and that the end of history heralded by capitalism is nothing more than the repetition, now within one and the same political system, of the same deadly cycles that previously heralded regime change.

4. Skinning

From a civilizational point of view, the Müllerian slaughtering shows war as endless butchery. A second figure of cannibalism helps to show the effects of these bloody cycles on individuals: we want to call it *skinning*. Müller's commentators point out that, for him, Stalingrad represents the paragon of encirclement warfare. This kind of war locks up the space of the battle, but its time as well. In the same vein, Combes speaks of “arrested dialectics” (2009, p. 259, translations are ours), of a German history that is fundamentally “anachronistic” (p. 61), the Soviet part of which is even “frozen” (p. 265). Stalingrad serves as the premise for a whole dialectic of speed and slowness, promiscuity and vast spaces, interwoven with reflections on the cultural differences between West and East (cf. Löschner, 2002). In *Death in Berlin*, Müller again plays with words, particularly through mixing their literal and figurative levels. The German word for

⁴ Contergan is the German brand name for Thalidomid, a drug available in the fifties and early sixties, which turned out to be highly teratogenic and resulted in a high rate of congenital malformations in the so-called *Contergan-Kinder*.

“encirclement war” is “Kesselschlacht”, meaning “war in a cauldron”, and the characters in the scene “Homage to Stalin 1” experience their situation on both levels: they refer both to being caught in a vice and to the cooking cauldron. It is from this telescoping that the humour emerges:

SOLDIER 1 Here comes the chuckwagon.

SOLDIER 2 He still has everything.

SOLDIER 3 Who’s turn.

SOLDIER 1 Me.

SOLDIER 2 Where you from, buddy?

YOUNG SOLDIER From the battle.

SOLDIER 3 And where you going?

YOUNG SOLDIER Where there’s no battle.

SOLDIER 1 Your hand, buddy.

Tears off his arm. The young soldier screams. The dead men laugh and begin to gnaw at the arm.

SOLDIER 3 *offering the arm:* Aren’t you hungry?

The young soldier hides his face with remaining hand.

SOLDIER 1 Next time’s your turn. The cauldron has flesh for all.⁵

(DiB, p. 11)

The scene of the young soldier's dismemberment plays on words: not only on the aforementioned cauldron, but also on the act of *giving one's hand* to another. Thus, the signs of war are on the body of the young soldier and the other combatants, who are also crippled. These characters at different stages of dismemberment equate war with a slow, cruel death on a population scale. The fratricidal nature of war for the Germans, “cannibals of themselves” (Combes, 2009, p. 264), becomes clear when the young soldier is presented with his *own* arm as food. The philosophical absurdity of the annihilation of human by human is reduced to a very earthly absurdity: while the soldiers are indeed starving, they can find meat in abundance, the only condition being that they consider their fellow human beings as potential food. Later in the play, the dismemberment takes on farcical proportions, as Hitler exclaims, furious at being surrounded by traitors:

HITLER *shrieks:* Conspiracies! Treachery! Betrayal! I’m surrounded by traitors. They want to kill me. They put bombs in my bed. They pour knives into my food. They put poison in my gasoline. I’ll chop their heads off. I’ll hang them from piano wires. I’ll draw and quarter them. *Howls, gnaws at the carpet, still howling. Crawls to Goebbels, lays head on his breasts, grimaces.*

GOEBBELS *strokes and comforts him:* You are the greatest. You are the strongest of all. They can’t do anything to you. You’ll punish them.

HITLER still in same pose: Yes. Chop off their fingers. Hands. Arms. Legs. Lop off the ears. Cut off the nose. Giggling and fidgeting. Tear off the peepee.

GOEBBELS *warns with finger:* One doesn’t say peepee.

(DiB, p. 20)

This parody of the torture of traitors is likely to lead to the same result as the absurd wars of the Nibelungs: a heap of indistinct limbs, a mass of flesh in which the meat of a traitor will be indistinguishable from that of a loyal Nazi. The final emasculation continues the carnivalesque inversion of the sexes that takes place throughout the bunker scene, but also returns to the idea of a paradoxical, monstrous childbirth.

What all the skinning scenes have in common is that they start from the individual body and move towards meat, the collective matter of human organicity. Under this meat, bones and skeletons, which also appear in Müller's Black Carnival, function as *memento mori*.

⁵ In the German original: “Der Kessel hat für alle Fleisch”.

SKULL-SELLER A lovely pair. Permit me to offer you a small souvenir. *Draws a human skull from the sack. Whore I screams.* A memento mori for the new home. IN THE MIDST OF LIFE WE ARE / SURROUNDED BY DEATH. I dug him up myself. And boiled three times. A clean specimen. 18th century according to the gravestone. And it's a good skull, feel the temples. The earth brought it to light. Here is where one thinks, my good sir, the theodicy of the great Leibniz had its place in this hollow realm. Materialism is a mistake, I assure you.

(DiB, p. 18)

As the almost eternal remnant of a highly perishable body, the bone is a reminder of the permanence of death: beneath the appearance of vitality that characterizes ideological commitment and the combat it nurtures, it is to death that this movement always leads back.

5. Stripping

“War is a job for men” (DiB, p. 13), exclaim the Nibelungs at the end of their masturbation session. However, their vague recollections of “the thing with the women” (p. 12) betray the fact that there must be another form of opposition between the bodies, linked to sexuality. And indeed: in the scenes of *Death in Berlin* that take place outside the battles, several female characters are present. They are just as schematic and stereotypical as the male protagonists, since they are either Germania herself, in the outrageous matronly version we mentioned earlier, or Berlin street prostitutes. Similar to war invalids, the latter also bear the marks of historical trauma on their bodies, for example on the day of Stalin's death:

PATRON 1 Why aren't you dressed in black, ladies, on a day like this.

WHORE 2 For us it runs deeper. *Shows black underwear.*

(DiB, p. 14)

Partially *stripping*, with sexual intent or subtext, means shedding one of the many masks that conceal the repetition of the same patterns under the guise of unique and distinct events. It also means scraping away the veneer of ideologies to reveal what is hidden: the corporeal, carnal nature of human actions, and the part played by sexual impulses in aggressive actions. The misuse of sexuality in the Nibelungen scene finds another expression outside of the battlefield, often in scenes evoking rape:

Here we tore the rags from Berlin's bloated belly, that whore of the Kaiser
and the Prussian gilt from the empty teat.

For one night, the Kaiser-whore
was a proletarian bride, naked in November snow
Overwhelmed by hunger, panicked by the general strike,
washed with proletarian blood.

(DiB, p. 2)

Given the cruelty of the process, the proximity to skinning and dismemberment becomes even clearer. In tearing off Berlin's clothes, the earthly equivalent of the mythical Germania, the revolutionaries also bring it back to its essence. In her case, it is not the permanence of death, but that of perpetual, absurd childbirth, a “bloat[ing]” echoed – to return to the realm of the comic – by the nauseating flatulence emitted by Goebbels during his carnivalesque delivery.

The end of *Ghost at the Dead Man* features the Pink Giant. Much like the other historical figures in the play, this parody of a real-life serial killer appears as a clownish figure, here mocked by his wife for dressing in pink underwear. He explicitly links devouring and undressing

in a quotation from the tales by the Brothers Grimm: “I’M SMELLING HUMAN FLESH SAID THE GIANT” (*GatDM*, p. 215)⁶. His appearance recombines all the other themes from the two *Germanias*: necrophilia, macabre masturbation, gender confusion, corrupted motherhood and fatherhood, Nazism and socialism. His monologue ends with a warning that can only be read with irony: “Nobody laughs about the Pink Giant” (*GatDM*, p. 216).

6. The playwright’s stomach: opening

As mentioned several times in the course of this article, Müller’s work, and especially the two *Germanias*, calls for intertextual analysis. We could isolate and analyse some of these intertextual relationships, yet untangling the full web of references is far beyond our ambitions and capability. Moreover, the syncretic end of *Ghosts at the Dead Man*, in which all history, literature, and topics seem to coalesce – “Hail Stalin”, says the Pink Giant (*ibid.*) – challenge the hermeneutical work even more than Müller’s work so far. The last sentence of this play is a citation attributed to Gagarin (see Varney, 2003), “DARK COMRADES IS OUTER SPACE VERY DARK” (*GatDM*, p. 216). Its autopoetical reading can refer to the difficulty of interpreting the text and connecting it with any fixed view on society: it will remain an unstable assemblage of debris, free-floating in an unfathomable and expanding space.

Therefore, perhaps an opening towards the intertextual dissemination of Müllerian thoughts suits better than a conclusion, a movement towards closure. In the first volume of *Chronik der Gefühle* (that would translate as *Chronicle of Feelings*), German filmmaker and writer Alexander Kluge, a long-time friend and interviewer of Müller, publishes a text entitled “Heiner Müllers letzte Worte über die Funktion des Theaters” (“Heiner Müller’s last words on the function of theater”, our translation). In his usual blend of factual and fictional material, that allows for drawing near to the “character” Müller (Morel, 2022), Kluge depicts an imaginary interview between a young trainee journalist and a Müller who is close to death, starving from the throat cancer that was eating him away. This fragment from Kluge’s volume, whose form borrows from theatrical text at various places, incorporates a number of stage directions into the exchange between the two characters, giving it a special perspective – Morel (2022) describes these indications about the character’s inner state as “internal focalization”:

Meatballs are brought; they are unsuitable for the playwright’s damaged gullet. Müller sat in front of the plates with a mixed feeling that he thought was hunger. The feeling urged him to change something about his current state; no state could be worse. He would not be able to sleep in this state. Sluggishly, he threw himself back into the conversation. Any other measure to change his condition would have been more agonizing.

(Kluge, *Chronik der Gefühle*, p. 75, our translation)⁷

Schulte (2004, p. 172) reads the trainee’s insistence as a will to *prey* (“Beute machen”) upon some last statements by Müller. This choice of words not only prolongs the cannibalistic

⁶ This quote is both an example for the intertextual links between the two *Germania* plays and Müller’s intricate way of handling citations. Indeed, the line originates from several tales by the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perreault, but its ending (*SAID THE GIANT* or *SAGTE DER RIESE* in the original) makes clear that Müller consciously cites from second hand, namely from a first citation appearing in *Death in Berlin* (cf. *DiB*, p. 16).

⁷ The original: “Es werden Buletten gebracht; sie sind ungeeignet für die beschädigte Speiseröhre des Dramatikers. Mit einem gemischten Gefühl, das er für Hunger hielt, saß Müller vor den Tellern. Das Gefühl drängte danach, etwas am augenblicklichen Zustand zu verändern; kein Zustand konnte schlechter sein. Schlafen würde er in diesem Zustand nicht können. Träge warf er sich erneut in das Gespräch. Jede andere Maßnahme zur Änderung seines Befindens wäre quälender gewesen.”

path that we have initiated, but situates Müller's work itself as a resource for poaching practices, and Müller as person (or body) as cannibalizable entity. More generally, the detour via Kluge's text not only enables us to reinscribe Müller's work in a broad network of thinkers and intellectuals of his time, it also allows us to synthesize a series of fundamental elements that have been regularly discussed to date. Just as we have chosen to do, Kluge here proceeds to analyse Müllerian thought by montage and association. In essence, this analytical gesture redoubles Müller's writing process. It allows us to recapitulate and to put back into circulation themes and figures that have proved central: meat, hunger, the misuse of the body or its functions, and the appeal of its lower parts. Related to these misuses of the body, both texts also focus on suffering, and make it a condition for laughter, but also for change. However, everything repeats itself in Müller's work, and as death, life, victory, and defeat are always blurred, we are left with our uncertainty regarding the extent of these changes: are they only minimal, or will they lead to Revolution?

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