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The Roots of German Theater’s “Spatial Turn”: Gerhart Hauptmann’s Social-Spatial Dramas

This essay considers how the works of dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann anticipate a “spatial turn” by exploring how space functions as an organizing principle within the dramaturgical designs of five of Hauptmann’s iconic “social dramas”. Influenced by theorists Henri Lefebvre, W.J.T. Mitchell, and Michel de Certeau I examine Hauptmann’s plays for their innovative spatial compositions and geographical orientations, ranging from the rural farmlands of Silesia to the urban capital of Berlin. I suggest that the dramas Vor Sonnenaufgang [Before Daybreak, 1889], Die Weber [The Weavers, 1892], Der Biberpelz [The Beaver Coat, 1893], Rose Bernd [Rose Bernd, 1903] and Die Ratten [The Rats, 1911] should be considered as “social-spatial dramas”. Viewed from a social-spatial analytical lens, I propose three categories: Landschaftsspiele [landscape plays], Grenzspiele [border plays], and Stadtspiele [city plays]. To further illustrate the social-spatial emphasis of Hauptmann’s poetics, my analysis also attends to the material productions of these plays on the contemporary German stage. Ultimately, the essay suggests that a social-spatial interpretation of Hauptmann’s dramas affords a more nuanced appreciation for his relationship to naturalism over time.

In his groundbreaking study of culture in the age of late capitalism, Fredric Jameson views one of the distinguishing features of postmodernism as “a certain spatial turn”, characterized by an experience of spatial discontinuity, disorientation, and displacement unknown to the subjects of modernism.1 One need only glance over the past decade of theatre in Berlin to provide evidence for Jameson’s case: for example, in renegade director Frank Castorf’s production of Dostoyevsky’s The Insulted and Injured (2001) at the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, the set consisted of a displaced trailer-container of the exact kind being used at makeshift construction sites around the city, reflecting the status of East Berlin as a once economically isolated space opening its doors to global capitalism.2 With their nods to Berlin’s matrix of spatial disorientations, coupled with their experimental multimedia aesthetics, many

of Castorf’s productions suggest an artistic consciousness that reflects what Jameson describes as:

[our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself.\(^3\)]

Like Castorf, many other innovative theater directors in Germany, such as Thomas Ostermeier, Ronny Jakubaschk, and Michael Thalheimer, reconceptualize how space is related to cultural, racial, ethnic, regional, national, and global identities. They bring a critical engagement on the contemporary stage towards the alleged “spatial turn” of millennium culture.\(^4\)

While it is productive to view German theater’s articulations of space as a predominantly postwar cultural phenomenon, stemming from the apocalyptic fragmented spatial compositions of the late Heiner Müller or the experimental designs of his predecessor, Bertolt Brecht, it is also possible to consider how the roots of such a “spatial turn” may be traced further back in time to selected works of German modernism, among them, I propose, the dramas of Gerhart Hauptmann.\(^5\) Best known for his “social dramas”, Hauptmann has long been heralded for his sympathetic portrayals of the lives of everyday people in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Germany and Silesia. Alongside Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen and German director Otto Brahm, Hauptmann is widely credited with introducing German society to the artistic movement of naturalism, which aimed to employ the scientific strategies of

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\(^3\) Jameson: *Postmodernism*, P. 413.

\(^4\) Several American artists working in Berlin might also be considered, for example, David Levine, whose production *Hausvogteiplatz* explored the clothing factories of the rag-trade district by figuratively appropriating the architecture and environment of one of Berlin’s famous squares. And in his latest piece, *Bauerntheater*, Levine took Heiner Müller’s *Die Umsiedlerin* (though it is worth noting that he considered Hauptmann’s *Rose Bernd* instead) as a jumping off point for a piece that attempted to train an American actor how to play a German farmer of the DDR, setting him up in a field on the outskirts of Berlin where he planted and cultivated potatoes using a *Reihenzieher* for over a month.