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## KUNSTSPIEL: Artistic Paradigms at Play in Botho Strauß's Drama *Der Park*

Jenifer S. Cushman

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**I**f one strolls through Central Park in New York City or the Tiergarten in Berlin, one may be struck by the strangeness of encountering remnants of the primeval forest within the steel and concrete labyrinth of late twentieth-century urban life. As the western world moved from rural to urban centers and those who inhabited it began to grapple with industrialization and advancing capitalism, city planners were careful to include a bit of the old within the new, nature in the midst of concrete. In psychoanalytic terms, the city park is a signifier for the primeval depths within our rational, twentieth-century psyches. As nature, but nature controlled by the hand of human beings, a tamed forest, so to speak, the park has been used to symbolize the realm of artistic production. Stefan George, for example, invited the skeptic to "Komm in den totgesagten Park und schau," in a comment on the state of art at the turn of the century.

In his drama *Der Park*, Botho Strauß also calls the attention of his contemporaries to the state of art today. Drawing from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Strauß uses the park image to create a world of illusion and confused perspective. In an absurd juxtaposition of the mythical with the everyday, lofty artistic ideals come "down to earth" as the Shakespearean characters Titania and Oberon "reveal" themselves quite literally to the unsuspecting mortals; they "flash" the mundane citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany, in Strauß's words, through "ne frierende Erscheinung" (16).

Strauß's humorous presentation is evidence of a playful attitude toward his drama. He is, in effect, "playing" with the word "Spiel" itself. Katrin Kazubko notes of Strauß: "Das Theater des Botho Strauß verleugnet sich nicht als Spiel, sondern weist sich gezielt als Spiel aus" (4). Strauß's play, his "Lustspiel," is a tribute to Shakespeare's skill of



presenting the human condition in a humorous light. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written at the time that the English Enlightenment spread its glow of reason across noble Britannia; Shakespeare himself was a bit more skeptical of human rationality than his contemporaries. He set his play in ancient Athens, the cradle of western philosophy, but his characters do not bathe in the glorious light of human reason, rather they are lost in the wood at night, their minds muddled by the heat of midsummer and the moon, caught in a supernatural web of erotic confusion and misunderstanding.

Strauß is but one in a long tradition of German authors to honor Shakespeare, beginning with Gryphius, whose *Herr Peter Squenz* also draws from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and continuing with Lessing and other Enlightenment figures, and ultimately Goethe, who considered Shakespeare a genius, a great artist destined to create high art. Goethe's attitude toward art and artists found a strong foothold in the Romantic movement, and its underlying assumptions about "high art" and artistic genius survived the modernist movements at the turn of the century and remain with us even today. In contrast, Strauß responds to Shakespeare not as a "great bard," but as the marginal figure he was, an actor and a playwright, a member of the theater crowd living a subversive life-style and satirizing prevailing ideology. Like Shakespeare, Strauß questions dominant paradigms through his art. Using the park trope, he traces contemporary artistic viewpoints back to Romanticism and the Enlightenment and identifies inconsistencies and problems of exclusivity inherent in Enlightenment, Romantic, and contemporary thought.

*Der Park* focuses on the return of the Queen and King of the Fairies, Titania and Oberon, to the modern day Federal Republic of Germany. Their attempts to reinstitute a sense of ritual and meaning in life fail, as the married couple Wolf and Helma interact with Georg and Helen in an erotic entanglement replete with Shakespearean twists and miscommunication. The search for a valid art form is central to each character's exploration of creativity and purpose, but each artist ultimately faces the figure of death in the person of "the Man in Black."

Strauß does not merely discount art in our time, rather he explores the possibility of new direction and justification for art in our century and the one to come. This visionary aspect of Strauß's artistic production has not generally been recognized by literary critics. Most have been quick to label Strauß's work as typically "postmod-

ern." Hans-Thies Lehmann sees Strauß's "Lust am Spiel" as postmodern and, in connection with Titania and Oberon's aesthetic "revelation" notes: "ästhetische Erscheinungen [existieren] jenseits (oder vielleicht nur diesseits) von Moderne" (249). Strauß's writing undoubtedly exhibits postmodern characteristics, but his work is too complex to be assigned neatly to any particular category. The designation "postmodern" implies that Strauß negates existing artistic paradigms, especially those stemming from the modernist movements, without providing any hopeful alternatives. Yet, Strauß subverts modernist paradigms without succumbing to a postmodernist refusal of meaning or purpose.

In "Myth and Modernity in *Der Park*," Russell Berman eloquently analyzes important modernist strains in Strauß's play, but he, too, sees them as ultimately failing. "Describing the failure of the three aesthetic options of modernity, [the play] relegates them to a past, and this historicizing gesture locates the text itself in a postmodern position . . ." (148). With his model, Berman does not adequately address all aesthetic options in the text, and the three he does explore do not necessarily and unequivocally "fail" as such, nor can their respective fates even be equated.

Titania and Oberon represent two of the three "aesthetic options" identified by Berman. He sees Oberon as the modernist proponent of "high art," embodying the Romantic notion of artistic genius that was perpetuated in the "l'art pour l'art" attitude of Stefan George and other *fin de siècle* poets. Titania's relationship to Oberon is one of tension in Berman's model, as she represents the avant-garde artist. "The conflict between the two," says Berman, "corresponds to that between the autonomous and avant-garde models of the work of art, the former insisting on the separation of the work from material practice, the latter motivated by an unremitting passion for transformation, taking part in the quotidian activities of human experience" (146). While Oberon seeks to maintain his divine separation from the lowly mortals, Titania continually seeks to join with others in passionate union, to mix herself up in current affairs. "Du sollst erscheinen können," Oberon admonishes her, "nicht dich untermischen" (20). When he asks her "Was fragst *du* nach der Zeit?!" she responds simply, "Ich möcht sie wissen" (22), an expression of her desire to locate and realize her specific role in history.

Berman's model draws heavily from Critical Theory; his reliance



on Adorno's model of the culture industry is evident in the third figure, Cyprian, the commercial artist particular to the twentieth century. Initially a servant to Oberon, Cyprian draws power from Oberon but uses his artistic skill ultimately to serve the marketplace. Oberon, his lofty spirit appalled, reprimands Cyprian, saying of his artistic power: "du hast es unerlaubt benutzt und münzt Naturgeist um in Massenware" (81). Cyprian responds: "Ich dien dir gern, mein Herr, doch nicht nur dir. Jetzt bin ich auch ein Untertan der Menge" (83).

This is the failure of Oberon: the inability for the Romantic notion of high art to survive in our century. Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," notes: "die technische Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks emanzipiert dieses zum ersten Mal in der Weltgeschichte von seinem parasitären Dasein am Ritual" (144). John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* sees the mystical aura of high art as being replaced by value of a different nature: "The bogus religiosity which now surrounds original works of art, and which is ultimately dependent upon their market value, has become the substitute for what paintings lost when the camera made them reproducible" (23). High art as exemplified by Oberon is indeed dead in the commercialized world, and in the end of the play, Oberon relinquishes his divine powers and moves off-stage through the circus curtain, a symbol which reappears throughout the play, the significance of which I shall discuss later.

In contrast to Oberon's subtle and symbolic death, the violent death of Cyprian is played out onstage before the eyes of the audience. When Cyprian attempts to force the "schwarzer Junge," a park maintenance worker, to his knees in a sexual power play, the "schwarzer Junge" beats him to death with a stone. Having already established—with the relationship between Cyprian and Oberon—the link between commercialism and the Romantic notion of high art, Strauß now extends his historical perspective and connects commercialism to Enlightenment and colonialism.

Much of the inherent problematic of Enlightenment thought was expressed in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in which the claim was made: "Aufklärung ist totalitär" (12). While the Enlightenment ostensibly promised equality for humanity, the humanity implied in this promise consisted exclusively of white European men. A time of expansion and colonialism coupled with the

rising capitalist drive for money and power, the Enlightenment found its impetus in the ultimate goal of Europeans to swarm across the globe, to subjugate other races and cultures in the name of progress. Berman notes that the Indian boy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a reference to English colonialism; as the areas colonized by Germany were primarily in Africa, the Indian boy of Shakespeare's play becomes the "schwarzer Junge" of Strauß's. The death of the commercial artist, then, can be seen as a direct result of its roots in the Enlightenment and the desire to subjugate, exploit, and capitalize.

The insidious roots of Enlightenment thought are also portrayed in the marriage of Georg and Helen. Helen's artistic endeavors are not explored by Berman, although her husband is linked to Enlightenment thought. Their relationship begins as the play opens with a dramatic image of Helen, an acrobat, having fallen from a trapeze. A paradoxical union of "high art"—the trapeze is as high above the masses as the "Seil" of the "Seiltänzer" in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*—and popular art—the circus is a popular arena accessible to all—Helen can be seen as an artistic paradigm that exhibits the state of art in the twentieth century: fallen.

Georg, as unaware of the disastrous state of things as he is of the paradoxes inherent in his Enlightenment outlook, begins a (non)conversation with Helen, asking innocently: "Was macht die Kunst? Zufrieden?" Helen responds to his casual question as if it were literally meant, and claims the superior artistic attitude of a "called" artistic genius: "Kunst, ja? . . . Kunst machen die, ja? Kunst ist was anderes. Das ist keine Kunst, was die da machen. Alles blutige Laien" (9). Georg encourages her to reclaim her old glory, but she insists, "Nein. Bin runtergefallen" (10). Ever the enlightened scientific prober, Georg asks for more information: "Wie?" and, more specifically, "Vom Seil?" assuming, perhaps, the Nietzschean image of the artist suspended high above the marketplace. "Vom Trapez," insists Helen, revealing that art has, in fact, always been "in der Schwebe," never fastened securely at both ends.

As an artist figure, Helen is caught in European constructs, especially those of racism and sexism. "Ich kann Nigger nicht ausstehen" (50), she remarks, and Georg is shocked to discover the insidious relationship between Enlightenment thought and racism: "Du heiratest eine schöne Frau und es stellt sich heraus, es ist 'ne Frau vom Kuklux-clan" (66), he says. The fact that she is a "schöne Frau," and is named



Helen, alluding to the Greek ideal of beauty and aesthetics, is also related to her aesthetic elitism and her art. In contrast to Cyprian, who can be a productive artist in a patriarchal society, Helen is confined to the female artist's role; her artistic talent lies in acrobatics, the art of being seen. John Berger expresses it: "*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (47). In refusing to perform, Helen consciously rejects these gendered concepts; at the same time, she is "suspended" in the paradigm of female beauty and can no longer produce as an artist.

Helen's relationship to death is quite different than that of Cyprian's. Rejected by Georg for her racist views, she retires to a quiet house in the suburbs, her only companion "der Mann in Schwarz" (111), the figure of death. As a woman, she can accept "death," that is, the death of the dominant discourse of Enlightenment, and live together with "der Mann in Schwarz." Still caught within the Enlightenment constructs of racism and womanly beauty, however, and the Romantic belief in high art, she is destined to live only on the outskirts of the changing world, in a "Vorort." The "Vorort," incidentally, is an interesting counterpart to the park, as both imply a pseudo-suspension of urban life and, symbolically, of history.

Yet, Helen does not represent merely another failed artistic paradigm. The promise inherent in her rejection of traditional female roles is carried further in the "Mädchen" character. Nameless, the "Mädchen" in Strauß's play can be seen as the undefined new generation of women at the cusp of the twentieth century. Unlike Cyprian's statue "Das Mädchen mit den zerknicksten Knien" (32), the living girl on stage is not a Pygmalion object of male creation who destroys herself by continually bowing to patriarchy. When the "Junge" complains "kannst du dich nicht an meinen Schritt gewöhnen?" she responds, "Gewöhn du dich doch an meinen" (13-14). She recognizes that the mystification of art, beauty, and woman belongs to an earlier age, as she gazes at Titania transformed into a statue, and remarks, "Sie ist nicht von heute . . . Sie kann nichts festhalten" (40). Nor does the girl accept male projection onto herself; when the "Junge," feeling guilty for his own sexual actions, accuses her of being "verhurt" (116) she refuses to accept the designation, saying "Verhurt. Das brauch ich mir von dir nicht sagen zu lassen" (117).

While she rejects the mystification of art and sex, the girl never-

theless perceives a need for higher aspirations, a need that has apparently been stifled in today's world. Counter to Enlightenment reason, she asserts that "Die Schulterblätter am Menschen sind eigentlich verkümmerte Flügel" (56). Through his "Mädchen" character, Strauß identifies the need for art and ritual. The play "pleads for the urgency of art in a prosaic age" as Berman puts it (142). Yet, Berman claims, the three forms of modernist art fail miserably as they are carried to their postmodern conclusions: "the aesthetics of classical autonomy are demonstrably ineffectual, the interventionism of the avant-garde has failed, and the mass marketing of the culture industry succeeds only in trivializing aesthetic substance" (147). Nevertheless, Strauß is not necessarily negating the validity of art; instead, he is searching for a viable mode of artistic expression in the late twentieth century, in a world, as Adorno put it, "after Auschwitz."

Helen's inability to produce art, the failure of Oberon, and the death of Cyprian can all be seen as a comment on the Eurocentric model of art, stemming from the Enlightenment and Romanticism. In our world of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and post-Enlightenment, the only hope for art must lie in an essential change in western thought; this attitude is in accord with the avant-garde movement. While Berman sees Titania failing as miserably as Cyprian and Oberon, "her effort to surpass aesthetic autonomy" resulting in "a regression to barbaric myth" (146), Titania is the only artistic paradigm to survive at the end of Strauß's drama, melancholy as her life may be. She is also the only artistic figure to produce something lasting; her "Fabelsohn" is a result of her so-called "regression to barbaric myth," that is, her sexual union with a bull, and this "Fabelsohn" literally takes center stage at the end of the play.

Unfortunately, this artistic production is problematic in that it is the result of a barbaric encounter, is imbued with incestuous allusions and remains, ultimately, only a fable. Art as is cannot survive; art as it can be cannot yet be conceived. Yet, there is a gesture toward hope present in Strauß's play; a utopian artistic vision is represented by that which lies behind the circus curtain. One by one, Strauß's characters turn toward the curtain and enter the hidden realm. The fact that it is a circus curtain raises some interesting speculation on the direction Strauß may be positing for the future of art. However much Helen claims to be a high artist, the Romantic concept of high art itself is an illusion, and she is, in the end, a circus performer whose



art is accessible to all. Historically, circuses began in Roman times, but the modern version of circuses and zoos began to appear with Enlightenment expansion, when exotic animals—and people—were subjugated, caged, and brought back to be put on display before gaping crowds. The move toward this curtain suggests that the justification for art in the next century lies in a rejection of a Eurocentric model and in a move to join with the cultures that European thought has labeled as oddities of otherness, to adopt a more global perspective and accept other, new artistic paradigms, as yet unrecognized and unexplored.

*The Ohio State University*

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## Zur Essayistik von Friedrich Nietzsche und Robert Musil

Cary Henderson

**I**n der Geschichte der deutschen Essayistik spielen Friedrich Nietzsche und Robert Musil eine entscheidende Rolle. Paul Michael Lützeler, Franz Mautner und Klaus Weissenberger sind nur einige von den vielen Literaturwissenschaftlern, die Nietzsche und Musil in ihre Untersuchungen zum deutschen Essay an wichtiger Stelle einbeziehen. Diesen Untersuchungen ist die Andeutung gemeinsam, daß die essayistischen Arbeiten der beiden Autoren zwischen der zweiten deutschen Staatsgründung und dem zweiten Weltkrieg das 'Goldene Zeitalter' des deutschen Essays gleichsam einrahmen.

Obwohl Nietzsche und Musil nicht nur Essays, sondern auch andere Prosastücke veröffentlicht haben, sind gerade in den letzteren besonders dort, wo Aspekte der zeitgenössischen Gesellschaft untersucht werden, deutliche Spuren ihrer Essayistik zu finden. Den Übergang in der Essayistik beider Autoren von einer kurzen, selbständigen Prosaform zu umfangreicheren, anspruchsvolleren Texten nachzukonstruieren und zu kommentieren bildet das Thema der vorliegenden Arbeit.

Im ersten Teil werden als Grundlage für die Analyse ausgewählte theoretische Ansätze zur literarischen Gattung Essay zitiert und untersucht. Im zweiten und dritten Teil beschäftige ich mich speziell mit der Rolle des Essays in Nietzsches und Musils Werk. Die Zusammenfassung stellt den Versuch dar, die Essayistik beider Autoren als typischen Ausdruck ihrer Epoche zu verstehen.

#### I

"Nicht durch Definitionen, sondern"—so Gerhard Haas—"durch sorgfältige Beschreibung des Phänomens" scheint man am besten ans Wesen des Essays heranzukommen (39). Dieses Wesen vermittelt nach