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The Theatre of the Anthropocene

Concept, questions, performances

Abstract

This article explores the emergence and development of *The Theatre of the Anthropocene*, a unique artistic platform founded by Dr. Frank M. Raddatz and Prof. Dr. Antje Boetius in 2019. This ecological theatre operates at the intersection of art and science, aiming to depict and engage with the complex realities of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene, a geological epoch marked by human influence on Earth, necessitates a scientifically informed theatre to convey the intricate interplay between human activities and the planetary ecosystem. The article delves into the theoretical foundations of this theatre, drawing on Bruno Latour's critique of ecological disasters rooted in deficient epistemic concepts. It contrasts this with Bertolt Brecht's scientific theatre and emphasizes the need for a transformation in the science stage to address contemporary environmental challenges. The role of feedback loops and the recognition of non-human entities as independent subjects in an Anthropocene aesthetic are central themes. The article also explores the potential of a spectral aesthetic, emphasizing the hybrid nature of the phenomena addressed, and presents the example of the production *Lawyers of Nature*. Furthermore, it discusses the urgent task of developing an ecological sensibility through art to instigate changes in societal attitudes toward planetary conditions.

Keywords: Theatre of the Anthropocene, Anthropocene aesthetic, science theatre, Bertolt Brecht, Bruno Latour, ecological sensibility, feedback loops, non-human entities, spectral aesthetic, *Lawyers of Nature*, nature's own rights, legal subjectivity, ecological revolution, planetary forces, climate catastrophe, artistic-scientific collaboration

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1.

The *Theatre of the Anthropocene* was founded by the dramatist and publicist Dr Frank Raddatz and the marine and polar researcher and science communicator Prof. Dr Antje Boetius in November 2019. The patron was Prof. Dr. Sabine Kunst, President of Humboldt University.¹ The purpose of this stage is to develop artistic -theatrical projects in the context of the Anthropocene. Since then, events linking climate activists, scientists, philosophers and artists have taken place in cooperation with foundations and scientific institutions at very different locations, mainly in Germany.

It is an ecological theatre at the art/science interface. Why is the art/science interface central to this theatre or anthropocene aesthetic? The answer to this shows us that science acts in a double role in this context. The entire toxic vocabulary of ecology such as global warming, melting of the poles, acidification of the oceans, serious losses of biodiversity, etc. is based on earth system science surveys, atmospheric measurements, computer simulation, satellite records and elaborate drilling at the ice poles. Using drill cores that sometimes reach back hundreds of millions of years into Earth history, the extent and potential of the current crisis is both assessed and extrapolated. For example, that the Holocene would have lasted up to 50,000 years without the emissions of industrial societies. The Anthropocene is a well-founded scientific construction, as its name was not accidentally created by a Nobel Prize winner, namely, Paul Crutzen, Nobel Prize for Chemistry 1995.

But why the dual role? Well, according to the historian of science Bruno Latour, the ecological disaster would not have been possible at all without the sciences and the technology associated with them. The ecological crisis is the result of a deficient epistemic concept. In short: the classification of the planet as a dead physical object. Latour conceives of the Earth planet as something alive, which he calls GAIA in ancient Greek. Gaia is not covered by a series of dead things but by highly living effective powers that are interconnected and influence each other. At the same time, this network of life or the interconnectedness of the Critical Zones can neither be recognised nor understood without science.

¹ Theater des Anthropozän. <https://xn--theater-des-anthropozn-15b.de/> Viewed on 08 June 2023.

If a stage wants to depict this reality, play with it, come into contact with it, it needs a scientifically based theatre. But what can such a theatre look like? First of all, there is already a scientific theatre that operates successfully all over the world. Brecht's epic theatre is explicitly designed as a stage for the *children of the scientific age*. His main theoretical writing *Kleines Organon für das Theater* (*Small Organon for Theatre*) invokes Albert Einstein, Robert Oppenheimer and several times Galileo Galilei. This link to science in no way means that a play such as *Mother Courage and Her Children* conveys essential knowledge about the 30-year war. Rather, while the sutler loses her children one by one in the religious war, the thinking spectator is supposed to come to the compelling conclusion that no business can be done with war. The theatre, which stems from cult and ritual, becomes a thinking space and with this operation is entrusted to the guardrail of causality. Seen in this way, the Anthropocene stage, together with the art/science interface, could easily saddle up to Brecht's scientific theatre. But at the same time there are serious differences. For global warming and the frightening loss of biodiversity are by no means intended side effects of the processes of nature control. Instead of propagating a mechanical and linear causality like the Brechtian stage, I have to ask the Anthropocene theatre what logic rules in the planetary habitat that responds to human intervention with global warming and other threatening effects.

While Brecht's idea of progress is based on the secret premise that the exploitation of nature is free of feedback and founds the basis of the well-being of all, the Anthropocene stage is confronted with the undesirable global side effects of the industrial form of nature's domination. Moreover, Brechtian theatre is based on the epistemes Latour criticises as deficient.

From the point of view of an anthropocene aesthetic, Brecht's theatre is still anchored in bourgeois drama despite all the innovations. Traditionally, for example, a cherry orchard, the name of a well-known play by Anton Chechov, is valued as an object and represented on the scene by an element of scenery. In contrast, an Anthropocene art has to show the actants of nature as quasi-subjects, as something alive, interacting with the world. By behaving and reacting to human activities, the entities of nature demonstrate at the same time that they can by no means be grasped and described as objects solely with a mechanical logic. Rather, they are Critical Zones actants that interact with each other with the beginning of life on earth and respond to the actions of each actor in the web of life. Like a monad, no tree exists only in relation to

itself. It is in intensive exchange with other trees, but also with all life forms and spheres with which its species is in contact. The face of the earth, for example, would be unrecognisable without the terraforming of trees and forests that has continued over many hundreds of millions of years.

In view of this theorising, humans must quickly realise that they too are only one factor in the critical zones, exerting great influence but shaping the habitat just like other actors. However, because he is blind to the now global effects of his activities, he is in the process of putting a noose around his own head due to his long-lasting ignorance of the effects of his actions. In the meantime, essentials of our mode of existence on this planet have been recognised, but still too little is known about their consequences and implied interrelationships. Latour therefore identifies the epistemic figure of feedback as crucial to ecological disaster. In an Anthropocene art, according to Latour, 'each feedback loop should be simultaneously collectively narrated, reenacted, acted out and ritualised. Each of these loops records unexpected responses from an external agent that complicates human action.' Instead of treating the agents of nature as objects or elements of scenery in a science theatre, it is necessary to 'ceaselessly and repeatedly (re)draw these loops with all available means, as if the old differences between scientific instrumentation, emergence of a public sphere and political arts, as well as the definition of common space, were disappearing. These differences are much less important than the emphatic call: do everything to make a loop comprehensible and publicly visible, otherwise we will become blind and helpless and have no ground left to settle on.' The actors of the non-human world are to be regarded as independent subjects or powers that are difficult to calculate, as in the mythically based theatre of antiquity. The question of this stage is therefore how it can – as Michel Serres put it – organise the actors 'in a circular causality, in feedback loops'.

Against the horizon of these epistemic arguments concerning the difference between object and actant, the different approaches to physical reality in 20th and 21st century science theatre stand out clearly. If an anthropocene stage assumes with Latour that knowledge of feedback loops is essential for survival, the similarities with Brecht's science theatre fade, so that the need for a fundamental transformation of the science stage becomes apparent. The shift from mechanical causality with its reproducible effects to the process logic of feedback loops with barely calculable results outlines the playing field on which art and science communicate despite their opposition.

2.

In view of the climate catastrophe and the growing horizons of threat associated with it, it can only be the goal of an ecological aesthetic to create a sense of connection with the planetary habitat. Traditionally, the shaping of sensibility is one of the primary tasks of culture, art and theatre. Thus Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) already saw an essential effect of the bourgeois tragedy, which he naturalised in Germany, in the establishment of affects that were alien to feudal culture. The parallels are obvious. The 'ecological class' (Latour) also has to articulate its own canon of values and develop a corresponding sensibility that corresponds to the realities after the overlap of earth and human history (Chakrabarty 2018). Without the formation of a sensitivity to the demands of the 21st century, an indispensable modification of social modes of existence will hardly succeed. To initiate a general change of attitude towards planetary conditions, the non-human inhabitants of the earth and the fragility of our ecosphere as a whole is urgently required from a scientific point of view, but apparently the research generated by means of computer simulation, drilling cores, satellite programmes, measuring stations is not sufficient to trigger changes in consciousness. Information about the increasing instability of our spheres of life obviously does not necessarily generate adequate social behaviour. This points to the task of art in this field: 'knowledge alone is beautiful but/ you also have to believe in this knowledge', the Austrian playwright Thomas Köck aptly writes in his play *Aerocirkus* (2023). It is not scientific knowledge that reaches its limits but its power of persuasion, if it does not lead to immediately useful technical innovations. Only art, so the desperate thesis, can release those fantasies that set in motion the modifications of behaviour deemed necessary and drive systemic reconstruction. This outlines the task of theatre at the interface with science. Theatre should not add further knowledge about creative procedures etc. to knowledge, but emotionalise and culturalise the process of communication. This means condensing knowledge into forms of aesthetic experience.

3.

There is still no convincing stage grammar that ties the planetary parameters that are in motion, such as global warming, the continuing loss of biodiversity, the melting polar ice caps, back into theatrical contexts. While the stage has

for many centuries been considered a site of the social, staging confrontations between people, it has nevertheless historically been quite capable of organising contacts and exchanges with the sphere of non-human forces.

Anyone who goes in search of the planetary dimension of theatre art will come across the Dionysian. In order to flank Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* in terms of the philosophy of art, the young Nietzsche sketched out a basic outline of the tragic motor by recourse to the dichotomy Apollonian-Dionysian introduced into aesthetic discourse by Friedrich Wilhelm Josef Schelling (Nietzsche 2003). By no means was the Dionysian – as often claimed in the commentary literature – conceived as a quality of the human being. Rather, it is an impersonal planetary force that grips members of all species by virtue of their corporeality and membership in the forces of evolution. This libidinous sensory intoxication is intensified by the intended ecstatic effect of music and rhythm on the level of culture. They form the foundation of tragedy-art rooted in the cultic. This foundation implies a metric of the texts, which are sung, but also danced, in a communal, ultimately choral form. The individual protagonists and their individual fates historically grow out of this choral subject.

In the perspective of the Anthropocene, the Dionysian shows itself as an expression of the planetary force that drives the cycle of evolution and life. Its power is organised in planetary rhythms, the seasons. By means of the art form of Attic tragedy, this pulse of the planet is ceremonially condensed and celebrated at the beginning of spring in the form of the *Dionysia*. At the same time, Dionysus, who is responsible for the annual sprouting of greenery as well as for the theatre, is the only god who can die.

A theatre that wants to play on a living planet dominated by effective powers can therefore refer to roots that are deeply connected genealogically with the earth. At the same time, a relationship between shamanic or indigenous forms of knowledge and mythical narratives, which form the cultic basis of theatre art, is evident. With the Dionysian as a planetary effect, an essential component is determined that connects the Anthropocene stage with the basal layers of theatre. But how can this potential be reactivated under current conditions?

While ancient theatre in its early phases had the possibility of attributing earthquakes or plague outbreaks to divine influence and thus personifying them, elementary forces of nature such as the climatic earthquake or the climatic plague are currently refusing to be translated into figurations with an affinity for theatre. From traditional drama, i.e. Shakespeare's royal dramas, the

tragedies of the 18th century, bourgeois and socialist drama, it is hardly possible to make a viable connection to the darkening time horizon of the present. What is striking, however, are the affinities to the ancient world that span millennia. In the epoch of the Anthropocene, powers announce their reign that seemed defeated and subjugated in times of triumphant progress. Instead, they seem to have merely changed shape and return with a character that must be described as capricious, unpredictable and unpredictable. Where just a moment ago a barely known heat wave was bearing down on the land, suddenly water masses hitherto thought unimaginable are raining down. Gradually but inexorably, we see ourselves transported back to the world of early civilisations and antiquity, when the powers of nature appeared like despotic and indomitable eminences. At ever shorter intervals, digital modernity, based in the global village, has to admit that its immanence is being perforated by conditions in the history of the earth, which in recent centuries have only been suitable as a backdrop on the stage.

When James Watt solved the riddle of the optimisation of the steam engine in 1783, as Oedipus had solved the riddle of the Sphinx thousands of years before, he pushed open the door to the industrial age with its insatiable hunger for coal and fossil fuels without evil intentions and in a state of innocence. As a result, today, just a few generations later, the entire human species is plunging irreversibly into the planetary age. How can the concepts of a pre-scientific world, which were in close exchange with the non-human powers, be transferred to a science-based civilisation based on a technosphere? How can a stage deal with these challenges?

4.

Against the outlined coordinates, the Theatre of the Anthropocene has in the last four years brought out performances on water, the forest, soil and animals in soil, as in December 2022 on nature's own rights. All these productions are based on the premise that the current problems did not fall from the sky. For there is no immediate nature. Rather, the phenomena addressed have a long history in that they are always part of the symbolic household and are rooted in cultural and spiritual designs. *Nature is concept*, sums up Bruno Latour. Nature is never outside the symbolic field as an independent or even given quantity, but is always dependent on the culture of an epoch and thus subject to per-

manent change. Since the cultural designs emerge in a dependency of time horizons, the scenic arcs are not anchored in nature per se but in what has become historical. The performative exhibits emphasise the hybrid character of the motifs and materials. Linked by the theme, scenes, videos and music present different aspects of the respective phenomenon. This kind of perspectivation does not paint a homogeneous, closed picture of an entity but unfolds the heterogeneous aspects of the actors. Aesthetically classified, they do not appear as a homogeneous unit or entity but as an assemblage. At the same time, this requires the activity of the viewer, who has to weigh the individual points of view in order to generate an overall picture or to put together what is disjointed.

Them artistic procedures constitute a spectral aesthetic. The personnel of the individual performances is just as diverse as the content that is addressed. The artistic ensemble consists of musicians, actors, inclusive actors, puppeteers, filmmakers and dancers. Earth system scientists, foresters, curators, experts and activists also perform. At the interface of art and science, this ensemble of actors with different affiliations generates a knowledge that is both scientific and non-scientific in nature and, as an aesthetic experience, offers a multitude of open connections – sensual, mobile and surprising. In the following, I would like to present this artistic process by way of example in the production *Lawyers of Nature*.

5.

In 1972, the American lawyer Christopher Stone argued for a fundamental revision of our anthropocentric legal system with his polemic *Should Trees Have Standing?* for a fundamental revision of our anthropocentric legal system (Stone 2010).

In 1990, Michel Serres, the 'philosophical mastermind of the Anthropocene' (Hans-Jörg Rheinberger) provoked with his essay *The Natural Contract*, arguing for the recognition of nature as a legal subject in order to stabilise the out-of-balance order of ecological parameters: 'When objects themselves become legal subjects, all the scales tilt towards the equilibrium position' (Serres 1995).

Fifty years after the paradigm shift initiated by Stone, the discussion about concrete steps towards a kind of nature contract or constitution of the Anthropocene has gained momentum. Legal ethicist Jens Kersten of Ludwig-Maxi-

milians-Universität in Munich, who advocates an 'ecological revolution of law', draws fundamental legal conclusions: 'The constitution of the Anthropocene should conceive of nature as a legal subject that can independently claim, sue for and enforce its rights.' He bases his argument on the fact that the rights of animals are recognised in court in Argentina, Colombia and the USA, and the rights of rivers in Ecuador, India, Colombia, Canada and New Zealand. A view that goes beyond the protection of species and landscapes by allowing nature to 'assert its ecological interests as a legal entity itself'.

Thus, in the publication *Haben Tiere Rechte? Aspects and Dimensions of the Human-Animal Relationship of 2019*, over 40 lawyers and experts from agribusiness, anthropology, nutritional science, marine biology, medicine, philosophy, political science and theology argue for comprehensive reforms of the legal aspects of the relationship with nature. The summary of the status quo by Anne Peters, Director of the *Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law* in Heidelberg, makes the prerequisites clear: 'The conventional status of animals fits into a strict dichotomy between persons (*personae*) and things (*res*), which many legal systems, including the German one, have adopted from Roman law. Parallel to this is the division between legal subjects and legal objects. Persons (legal subjects) can have rights – against other persons, in things or against the state. A person can be owned by no one. [...]. Things are therefore objects of law over which persons can dispose.'

The Western legal system distinguishes between two categories of persons. In addition to natural persons, i.e. human beings, there are legal persons, such as business enterprises in the form of joint-stock companies. An epistemological transformation of things into actors and quasi-subjects would correspond to their categorisation as persons at the legal level. The 'further development of law', according to Peters, of a national as well as global animal law would be entirely possible through an expansion of legal subjects: 'Since the philosophical and legal concept of 'person' based on it is a human invention, an 'animal person' could also be conceived without further ado and placed as a third type of person alongside the two existing ones.' Jens Kersten also emphasises: 'A legal system is fundamentally free to decide whom or what it recognises as a legal subject.' In view of the ecological threat horizons, it is urgently necessary to put the traditional human-animal/landscape relationship to the test at the legal level and to reform it where necessary.

6.

A revision of the traditional legal definition of non-human actors in nature, granting them a status as 'quasi-subjects' (Bruno Latour) with a legal status, is undoubtedly a profound cultural-historical caesura. Since the days of ancient tragedy, theatre has been used to narratively illustrate upheavals in the legal system. Moreover, art has the capacity to explore and situate spaces of possibility. Therefore, the stage is particularly suited to playfully illuminate the theme of nature's own rights in a loose sequence of scenes from various aspects.

The Western legal order, and thus that of the global world, is historically based on Roman law, which was in sharp contrast to the legal order of less anthropocentrically oriented cultural areas. For example, both Cicero and Friedrich Georg Wilhelm Hegel disapproved of the ancient Egyptian animal protection laws, which were feared for their harshness towards delinquents. In the performance, a dancer demonstrates how permeable the boundaries between humans and animals are, while anthropological and ethnological texts, passages with reference to prehistoric human-animal relationships or mythical antiquity prove how the intimate connection between humans, animals and landscapes determined the attitude to life of previous cultures.

Another scenic block is set in the Middle Ages. A vintner accuses beetles of ruining her vineyard and demands systematic insect extermination. An authentic 16th century case from France has been handed down, in which the court ordered the beetles to leave the vineyard. At the same time, the community had to provide the insects with an alternative site, since the small animals were also creatures of God.

In another scene, the forgotten and almost unknown animal rights philosopher of the early 19th century Karl Christian Friedrich Krause rises from his grave and pleads for his reflections on the earth as an organism to become the basis of law. It shows how forward-thinking thinkers who were close to the earth were systematically removed from the symbolic universe in the course of an exaltation of reason inspired by Descartes and Hegel. Subsequently enters a guest from a parallel world enters the scene, who has a demon at his side. He talks about the meaning of birds in surrealism, which are anything but dead things, and asks whether art is not far ahead of traditional subject-object thinking.

In the end, the real-life lawyer Charlotte Maier appears to mediate in a conflict between people and a river. The real problems that the city of Berlin will be facing in a few years in terms of water supply form the basis of the dispute. In addition to the exchange of arguments between the various interest groups, the river Spree itself appears to articulate its position. In a specially produced video clip, the judge Agustin Grijalva explains his judgement, which he passed a few years ago in the context of the lawsuit of the cloud forest Los Cedros in Ecuador against a mining company. The non-anthropocentric perspective of the indigenous population, in combination with enforceable rights, prevents a relapse into practices of re-mythification. The rights of nature thus offer a viable path that leads to a future beyond dystopias at the height of the 21st century. The ecological misery thus generates with feedback effects that even affect the legal constitution.

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