

Slaughtering, Stripping, Skinning: Cannibal variations in Heiner Müller's work

Abstract

GDR playwright Heiner Müller (1929-1995) is famous for the dark, carnivalesque humor 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 Kesselschlacht ("battle of encirclement", literally "battle in a cauldron") Stalingrad 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 behavior. 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)*