

## Karl Kraus at war

LEO A. LENSING

'I did not want this': The uses and abuses of *The Last Days of Mankind*

Published: 7 January 2015



"Die letzten Tage der Menschheit" by Deborah Sengl, 2013 Photograph: © Deborah Sengl/Photo by Mischa Nawrata

the Bible was "unbearable in its stunning power". In his "own text", where, he reported, "greatest danger" vied with "greatest impact", he dismantled the already ubiquitous slogan "Die große Zeit". Parsing the grandeur out of the adjective "great", he warned the audience not to expect his "own words" while in "the realms of the impoverished imagination pens are dipped in blood and swords in ink". The massive propaganda cooked up by the government, the press and the poets was to be countered with an ethical imperative of a different order: "Let anyone who has something to say step forward and be silent!"

This is an admonition that today's Austria would have been well advised to take to heart as it prepared for the baleful anniversaries of 2014. Yet the state-subsidized culture machine, already cranking into high gear at the end of 2013, announced not one, but two Viennese productions of *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (*The Last Days of Mankind*), the great anti-war drama that Kraus began to write in 1915 and of which he had completed a first draft two years later. He first published the play in four special issues of his satirical journal *Die Fackel* (*The Torch*) in 1918–19, with the expressionistic "epilogue" *The Last Night* coming first. The red wrappers and the documentary photograph of Wilhelm II used as the frontispiece of the epilogue initially lent it the explosive impact of a revolutionary pamphlet. Kraus continued to revise and add new scenes based on information suppressed under war-time censorship, until the first book edition appeared in 1922.

*The Last Days of Mankind*, documentary and visionary in equal measure, not only directly influenced Brecht's theory and practice of Epic Theatre, but also set a powerful example of modernist textual collage that helped shape

***We hope you enjoy this free piece from the TLS, which is available every Thursday in print and via the [TLS app](#). This week's issue also features the curse of Sinophobia, the prescience of William Gibson, the trials of Pakistan, the archaeology of photography, Huck Finn and others heroes – and much more.***

On November 19, 1914, Karl Kraus read "In dieser großen Zeit" (In These Great Times), his strategically postponed reaction to Austria's declaration of war on Serbia, before a full house in Vienna's Mittlerer Konzerthausaal. Unlike many writers and other intellectuals, including Rilke, who wrote patently bellicose "War Cantos" in the early days of August 1914 and published them in a *Kriegsalmanach* the following year, Kraus refused to join the war of words unleashed by the rush to battle. He published nothing and gave no readings. When he finally broke his silence he confronted his listeners in wartime Vienna, still giddy at the prospect of grand military victories, with apocalyptic passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah and the book of Revelation. As he confided in a letter to Sidonie von Nádherný,

the famous political photomontages of John Heartfield as well as Alfred Döblin's great city novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Kraus appropriated posters, advertisements, photos from illustrated magazines, films and, above all, countless newspaper clippings, which were pasted onto the manuscript page and satirically transformed into self-revealing dialogue. The play is consciously constructed in excess of the traditional five-act tragedy, the genre cited in its subtitle, not only by the addition of a prologue and an epilogue, but also by the irregular accumulation of scenes that range from thirty in the first act to fifty-five in the fifth. Two hundred and twenty scenes altogether make for a drama scarcely still of this world, one better suited to "a theatre on Mars", as Kraus suggested in his preface with a nod perhaps to Wellsian science fiction as well as the god of war.

As daunting as the monstrous drama might seem on the 800 pages of the original edition, its dramaturgical potential has proved irresistible; and Kraus had to stave off repeated enquiries from the best stage directors of his own time, including Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator. Since the 1970s it has been periodically revived in inspired theatrical experiments of great intensity. In 1983, Robert David MacDonald staged his own translation of the play with the Citizens' Theatre of Glasgow. Provocatively set in an elegant Viennese coffee house that gradually metamorphosed into a smoke-filled, barbed-wire-littered no-man's-land, the production became the sensation of the Edinburgh Festival that year. In 1991, Luca Ronconi, ratcheting up Kraus's critique of the "technoromantic adventure" of modern life accelerated by the war, created a furore by staging the play along the assembly lines of the former Fiat factory in Turin. Johann Kresnik's version of 2003 dared to use an even more spectacular and daunting setting, a Second World War-era submarine bunker in Bremen; this production had to be repeatedly extended and eventually reached a hundred performances.

Given these intimidating precedents, one has to wonder that Thomas Schulte-Michels, who directed an early-summer short run of performances in the Volkstheater, or Matthias Hartmann, who was scheduled to oversee a more ambitious joint undertaking by the Burgtheater and the Salzburg Festival, had the courage to consider the project at all. Schulte-Michels, known for elegantly designed dramatic confections, at least operated with a concept. He completely eliminated the twenty-two dialogues between the Grumbler, Kraus's alter ego, and the Optimist, which periodically interrupt the dramatic action to comment on the conduct and the ideology of the war, and otherwise drastically reduced the epic length of the play to 100 minutes. A full production would require at least fifteen hours on the boards. Apparently on the theory that a psychiatric ward is a kind of charnel house anyway, the play is introduced by a psychiatrist in a lab coat as the work of "Herrn Fackel-Chefredakteur Kraus", a formulation that further obscures the dramatic function of the Grumbler and belittles Kraus's satirical work, in which "Redakteur" (news editor) in all its forms is a term of opprobrium. The psychiatrist-conférencier announces that the play will be performed by a troupe of mental patients. Both this dramaturgical idea and costumes dominated by a wrinkled white-underwear look seem to be lifted directly from one of the great theatrical successes of the 1960s, Peter Brook's famous production with the Royal Shakespeare Company of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (*The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*). Schulte-Michels's production soft-pedalled the violence of the play – in one battle scene a cannon shot out confetti – luxuriated in its musical elements, and entirely eliminated the ghoulish cinematic apparitions of the last scene and the expressionistic epilogue. As a Viennese critic put it, playing on the double meaning of "irre" or "irren" (which can refer both to being mentally disturbed and making a mistake), "anyone who thinks after watching this performance that they have experienced Kraus's great drama is mistaken".

Matthias Hartmann, until recently the general manager and artistic director of the venerable Burgtheater, was expected to produce a much more ambitious staging of Kraus's drama, to premiere at the Salzburg Festival and then return to Vienna in the autumn. Hartmann, a proponent of the German "Regietheater" (dramaturgical concept trumps text) and an occasional playwright, had planned the run up to the event with a production of a new work of his own, followed by the usual round of interviews before his staging of *The Last Days of Mankind*. Its premiere at the Salzburg Festival was scheduled for July 29, to coincide with the hundredth anniversary of the day after Austria's declaration of war. Instead, the deputy director of the Burgtheater was fired in December 2013 for financial mismanagement, for which Hartmann, known during his previous post in Zurich as much for his devotion to high living as to high art, was at least equally responsible. By March 2014, Hartmann had also been dismissed –

the first time in the almost 250-year history of the Burgtheater that the position was vacated forcibly.

There is legitimate doubt as to whether Hartmann would have been up to the task of credibly bringing Kraus's great drama to the stage. It appears that he left no evidence of having begun preparations for Salzburg in earnest. Ulrich Weinzierl, the Viennese-born, well-informed former Austria correspondent for *Die Welt*, told me recently that I could rest assured that Hartmann had no knowledge of Kraus whatsoever ("keine Ahnung").

Enter Georg Schmiedleitner, who unlike "the giant of Osnabrück" as the lanky Hartmann was unfondly called in Zurich, is Austrian. Schmiedleitner revealed in conversation that he had actually read *The Last Days of Mankind* in a university course with the late, legendary Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, the author of books on Nestroy, Thomas Bernhard and Ernst Jandl and one of the most distinguished Austrian literary scholars of the post-1945 generation. Schmiedleitner's interviews leading up to the premiere contain thoughtful, sometimes refreshingly unconventional remarks such as the claim that Kraus, still often understood primarily as a satirical critic of the press, was a "grandioser Theatermacher" and an originator of new forms of theatre.

In welcome contrast to the Volkstheater production, the Grumbler and the Optimist did take the stage in Salzburg. Seven of their dialogues were included in the fifty-five scenes selected and edited for the dramatic script. These exchanges, however, rarely conveyed the rhetorical tension and incisive analysis of the original. The actors often lapsed into a kind of verbal slapstick, sounding more like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert having a bad night with their fake-news shtick than Kraus's fierce intellectuals. It may be no coincidence that a Viennese scholar is planning an American lecture tour featuring an ill-conceived comparison of Stewart and Kraus, although Colbert's right-wing persona with its creative mangling of political slogans and sinister cheerfulness fits nicely with the Optimist.

Part of the problem in Salzburg lay with the cut-and-paste method applied to the Grumbler's speeches. The play opens with the character speaking what at first hearing seemed to be the preface, a text situated outside the dramatic fiction by its placement after the title page but before the dramatis personae and prologue. But instead of having the Grumbler recite this brief, powerful exhortation, which is at once jeremiad and dramatic analysis, in its entirety, the dramaturg incorporated a drastically cut version into lengthy passages from the Grumbler's final appearance in Act V, scene 54. This monologue, delivered at his desk, constitutes the culmination of Kraus's dynamic self-portrait in the drama. In contrast to the dialogues with the Optimist, in which he always bests his interlocutor with wit and wordplay, this final statement contains moments of self-recrimination and is shot through with anguished addresses to the soldiers fallen in battle. There is also something Prospero-like in the Grumbler's surrendering the authority of his documentary satire at dawn – the dreaded hour of the cries of "Extrausgabe!" ("Extra, extra, read all about it!") that frame this speech – to the expressionistic apparitions that rise up in the next scene, the final one of the five acts. That this great authorial statement takes place under the sign of Shakespeare is confirmed by the Grumbler's repetition of Horatio's famous lines from *Hamlet*, first cited in the preface: "And let me speak to the yet unknowing world / How these things came about: so shall you hear / Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts . . ."

As Edward Timms argued in *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic satirist (1986)*, this is a powerful moment at which a performance might end. But if not here, then where? With the apparitions that conclude the five acts, the final one being the Unborn Son's declaration in verse of his desire to be aborted rather than come into the world as the syphilitic offspring of a "hero father"? Or with the final words of the epilogue: the Voice of God quoting Kaiser Wilhelm's disingenuous remark "I did not want this"? In Salzburg, it ends with the Optimist getting the last word. He bounds onto the stage with a severed head in a plastic bag and assumes the role of an Austrian infantry officer. This Captain Prash shamelessly recites a litany of unspeakable atrocities he has committed and concludes with a macabre pun, "Kopf hoch!" – "Hold your head high!" – as he raises up his bag.

The plastic bag is symptomatic of this production's half-measures. Kraus's stage directions call for the head to be uncovered and held up on a stick, but they also indicate that the brutal officer does not appear corporeally. He is first one of fifty "Erscheinungen" or apparitions projected onto a so-called Kolossalgemälde (a monumental painting) of "These Great Times", a real patriotic canvas that metamorphoses here into a movie screen displaying

the atrocities and horrors of the war, everything from “Drinking bout of officers. A lieutenant shoots a waitress” to “Dead calm after the sinking of the Lusitania. Two children’s bodies on a piece of flotsam” to “Thousands of crosses in a field of snow”. Of course, these scenes need not be shown as photographs or with real or staged footage, although even that would have been possible. Rich new pictorial material would have been there in abundance, as is shown in the publication, in 2013, of a volume by the Austrian historian Anton Holzer, which matches mostly unpublished and unknown photographs with passages from the drama.

Even though the Salzburg production compromised the beginning and end of the play, there were cleverly conceived scenes and well-judged performances in between. The young actor Christoph Krutzler, corpulent but nimble and with a command of broad Viennese dialect, evoked in two quite different roles – the brutal butcher Chramosta and the practically senile Austrian general who expatiates on the difference between Prussian “Organization” and Austrian “Gemütlichkeit” and “Schenesequa” (*je ne sais quoi!*) – memories of the great actor-author and recitationist Helmut Qualtinger. Qualtinger, whose legendary readings of the drama in the 1960s and 70s required only a desk and a glass of water, must have been on the minds of many in the audience. At the premiere, one disgruntled member even conjured his presence: “Heiliger Qualtinger, schau oba!” (Saint Qualtinger, look down upon us!). With her red hair and slender frame in every respect the physical opposite of Qualtinger, Stefanie Dvorak nevertheless displayed his huge talent by speaking all eighteen roles in one of the street scenes that begin each act and drive home the fact that the more the war changes reality, the more the empty talk about it stays the same.

All theatrical productions have in common that they inevitably contract and distort the dramatic text. Jung und Jung, a small Salzburg press, deserves thanks, therefore, for publishing the drama in a reliable, unabridged edition. Since the once estimable Suhrkamp Verlag, which has been plagued for years by management disputes, allowed the book to go out of print, only print-on-demand versions have been available. Gratitude diminishes considerably after perusal of the editorial apparatus, which consists of a ten-line note referring the reader to the glossary and appendices in Christian Wagenknecht’s excellent Suhrkamp edition, the out-of-print one. The editor’s afterword, which had already been published in a Viennese newspaper and would be reprinted in the programme for the Burgtheater-Salzburg production, might have profitably surrendered its twenty pages to an index of names at least. The layout of the book has been marred by situating the frontispiece (a gruesome photograph of a smiling executioner holding his hands over the head of the hanged Italian patriot Cesare Battisti) opposite the series title rather than in its rightful place as a visionary document resonating with the apocalyptic title. The same mishap occurs at the end of the text where the photograph of a shelled crucifix with an intact Christ figure is reproduced next to a blank page rather than opposite the last words of the drama spoken by the Voice of God: “I did not want this”.

“Rats make good metaphors”, begins one of Karl Kraus’s famous “glosses” in *Die Fackel*. Although the Viennese artist Deborah Sengl does not cite this passage in the beautifully produced catalogue of her installation held at the Sammlung Essl in Klosterneuburg (a well-known venue for contemporary art), this stunning display of 176 taxidermied rats as actors presenting forty-four scenes from *The Last Days of Mankind* delivered a bracing test of its potential.

The preparation, costuming and posing of the rats as well as the meticulous attention to miniature props – facsimiles of period newspapers, a factory owner’s top hat and bow tie, the sample cases of travelling salesmen, infantry rifles – reflect a deep knowledge of Kraus’s text and disciplined commitment to an unconventional representation of its meaning. The rats themselves are white, and all the costumes and props are white as well. As Sengl remarks in an interview in the catalogue (published in German and English), the only colours mark the sparing use of “blood, urine and alcohol”. And the rats, which represent the Grumbler in three scenes, have been dyed black. The powerful effect of this large assemblage of monochromatic tableaux is heightened by juxtaposition with the preparatory drawings, which were exhibited next to them and are beautifully reproduced in the catalogue. These delicate line drawings all use colour, sparingly but pointedly, so that the viewer is inevitably drawn to a comparison with the corresponding tableaux. Seen up close, as they are in the catalogue photographs, which include some unsettling enlargements, every white rat’s cocked head, gaping mouth, or crooked claw points back to

the linguistic physiognomy of the speakers of a war-contaminated language who people Kraus's drama.

It would be tempting to say that Sengl has reimagined the scenes in hating detail, were it not for a handful of tableaux that convey genuine pathos. The best example is based on the brief vignette in the fifth act, of a pregnant woman writing a letter to her husband at the front in which she tries to explain why she has slept with another man. The drawing shows the rat sitting at an ornate table writing the last line of the letter; the tableau features a simpler table and adds a pile of small crumpled sheets of paper, testimony to the emotional difficulty of composing the letter. Sengl also models the great scene of the Grumbler at his desk, the black rat bent over and grasping his face with his paws. His blackness connotes not only his outsider status, but also printer's ink, the "black magic" of the press that he condemns but cannot escape.

Three of the tableaux are based not on drawings, but on large acrylic paintings with black backgrounds. Sengl calls them "Monumentalszenen" and gives them the title "Apokalypse" 1, 2 and 3. They represent the last scene of the five acts, the drunken banquet of Austrian and German officers that gives way to the projection of apparitions onto the giant painting "These Great Times", a pandemonium that defied the theatre productions of 2014. The first "Apocalypse" shows the raucous banquet where wine flows as though it were blood. The second one depicts the most heinous of the projected atrocities including the brutal Captain Prasch, who here holds up the white rat soldier's head on a stick as red drips from the neck. The third apocalypse presents the more expressionistic apparitions with the rats holding up masks in front of their faces and includes "The Austrian Countenance", the disembodied face of the executioner whose work appears in the photograph opposite the title of the drama. With this *finale furioso* Sengl comes very close to embodying with her rats the "perpetrators and speakers, who are not flesh but blood, not blood but printer's ink, shadows and puppets stripped down to their frantic emptiness" that Kraus conjured up in his preface, from which she quotes the central, dramaturgical passage at the beginning of the catalogue.

Although the phrase "rats desert a sinking ship" appears in *Die Fackel* a number of times, Kraus's wittiest variation on this metaphor has been preserved only in an anecdote. When Brecht, fleeing the Nazis, arrived in Vienna in 1933, Kraus, characteristically prescient, greeted him with "The rats board the sinking ship". This is an apt reminder that 2018, perhaps a better year for reviving *The Last Days of Mankind*, will mark not only the hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War and of the publication of the drama's epilogue, but also the eightieth year after the so-called Anschluss of Austria by Nazi Germany. As the example of Deborah Sengl – who worked with her rats on *The Last Days of Mankind* for more than a year – demonstrates, it's not too early to begin preparations now for a major production with human actors.

**Leo A. Lensing** is Professor of German Studies and Film Studies at Wesleyan University, Connecticut. He is the co-editor, with Peter Michael Braunwarth, of *Sogni 1875–1931*, the Italian translation of Arthur Schnitzler's dream journal, which was published in 2013. He is working on an edition of Karl Kraus's early journalism.

By continuing to use the site, you agree to the use of cookies. You can change this and find out more by following [this link](#).