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Duell an der Havel: Fritz von Unruh's depiction of eighteenth-century Prussian-American relations

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Tim Zumhof
Nicholas K. Johnson
(eds.)

Show, Don't Tell

Education and Historical Representations
on Stage and Screen in Germany and the USA

Zumhof / Johnson
Show, Don't Tell

**Studien zur Deutsch-Amerikanischen
Bildungsgeschichte**

**Studies in German-American
Educational History**

General Editor Jürgen Overhoff

Tim Zumhof
Nicholas K. Johnson
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Show, Don't Tell

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Duell an der Havel: Fritz von Unruh's Depiction of Eighteenth-Century Prussian-American Relations



Fig. 2: Chancellor Merkel and President Trump at 2018 G7 Summit (© Jesco Denzel).

The photograph was an instant internet sensation (Fig. 2). Taken by Jesco Denzel, an official government photographer, during the G7 Summit of June 2018, and posted to Instagram by the German Chancellor's office, it perfectly captures the standoff between President Trump and the other leaders of the G7, foremost among them Chancellor Merkel.¹ Leaning in, with no more than a meter separating her from the American president, Merkel's scolding gaze calls him out for his puerile flaunting of diplomatic norms. By now it does not matter whether the topic at hand is the Paris Climate Agreement, trade treaties and tariffs, refugees, NATO contributions – all of them suddenly major points of contention that threaten to undermine transatlantic relationships. What is fascinating about

1 Chloe Watson. "Trump G7 Photo Becomes Internet Classic, Going from Baroque to Ridiculous," *The Guardian*, 11 June 2018, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/11/g7-photo-of-trump-merkel-becomes-classic-art> (accessed March 4, 2019).

images such as these is the way they present political and philosophical conflicts between nations through the bodies of their leaders as impasses that may *or may not* be resolved. The future hangs in the balance.

That future is, of course, closely linked to a chain of antecedent diplomatic encounters. The central conflict is between Angela Merkel and Donald Trump, between the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States, for which there a long and intimate history. We also recognize the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and we see French President Emmanuel Macron's nose and Theresa May's earlobe. That this is a meeting of the G7 and not the G8 alerts us to the absence of Vladimir Putin – as did Trump's suggestion that Russia and Putin be invited back – an absence so vivid as to make him present. We realize that the picture resonates with the afterimages of other fraught occasions: Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta, for example, or MacArthur and Hirohito in Tokyo. Part of the power of the G7 picture, I would argue, is its implicit reconfiguration of the post-1945 world order. There is more at stake here than the items on the agenda.

Obviously, these photographic representations of political negotiation are charged with a unique drama, often enhanced by the backstories. From the perspective of theater and film studies, the question to ask is whether the inherent drama of historical conflict and negotiation is available for representation on the stage? In centuries past, drama was a favored and powerful genre for exploring the intersection of public lives and political ideas. Think of Shakespeare's Roman and British history plays or Schiller's political tragedies. While the historical novel and historical drama continued to flourish in the nineteenth and peaked in the first half of the twentieth century, I would argue that for much of the postwar period, Western audiences' interest in the historical-political dimension of human life declined. We can offer several explanations for this turn away from history. Perhaps it was a cultural defense mechanism against the trauma of the Second World War. Perhaps it was a condition for our market- and consumption-driven cultures to succeed. Perhaps the historical paradigms for literary and dramatic production available after the war were found to be inadequate or suspect. Perhaps history was a burden and our feeling of freedom depended on casting it from our shoulders and tackling – or avoiding – the challenges of the present. People shook off the weight of historical precedent in their conviction that what they were creating was new and in order to proceed unhindered by a historical critique that might show that it was not.

It is against this background that I want to re-introduce a forgotten German playwright, Fritz von Unruh, and his 1954 play, *Duell an der Havel*, in which, more than 50 years before the publication of Jürgen Overhoff's dual biography, *Fried-*

rich der Grosse und George Washington: Zwei Wege der Aufklärung,² Unruh not only asks the question: “Wer ist größer: Washington – oder unser Fridericus Borussorum Rex?”, but, more audaciously, orchestrates their fictional meeting on the stage of the *Staatstheater* in Wiesbaden, where the play premiered.³ It is not our task to compare Washington or Frederick’s relative grandeur, but we will focus on the postwar historical moment of the play’s production in order to determine to what end Unruh dusted off Washington and Frederick and what can be learned from it. Fritz von Unruh was born into a family of Prussian nobility and was the son of a decorated Prussian general. As a boy, he was sent to the military academy at Plön in Holstein. At the academy, he was selected to be one of a handful of companions to the Kaiser’s two youngest sons. In this rarified academic context, he absorbed exorbitant portions of Prussian culture, history, and myth. In four autobiographical novels written after the war, Unruh tried, through the exorcism of writing, to overcome the insidiousness of his *Bildung*, but wound up constructing the nightmare vision of a bizarre universe that we might best compare to a Prussian Hogwarts. Pedagogical cruelty, homo-erotically charged sadism, distorted protestant Christianity, escapist fantasies, suicide, strict submission to hierarchy – these were the elements of his milieu. Drawn to music, the arts, and theater – not unlike the young Frederick the Great – Unruh’s inclinations met with stern rebuke. He entered World War I as an officer and was traumatized, particularly by his experience at Verdun. He embraced pacifism – notably not one of the Prussian virtues – and authored numerous anti-war plays that issued from the scene of his trauma, many of which were censored by the Prussian state. During the Weimar Republic, the raw emotion and grotesque allegorical character of these plays drew the attention of the great German-Jewish director Max Reinhardt and, for a time, at least until 1933, Unruh became the most widely celebrated Expressionist playwright. Some of his plays grappled with Prussian history, essentially putting an intimately observed Prussian pathology on display. He stood by his convictions and challenged the Nazis in the years leading up to 1933 at public rallies, where he exhorted thousands of youthful auditors to stand with him. His books were burned and he went into exile, eventually winding up in and around New York.

Exile was not easy for him. In contrast to Lion Feuchtwanger and Franz Werfel, to mention two more successful exile authors, Unruh’s literary habitus did not translate well into an American idiom or into the prevailing literary discourse. Things did not get easier once the war was over. In the spirit of making reparations to a native son, the city of Frankfurt am Main repeatedly invited him to return

2 Jürgen Overhoff. *Friedrich der Große und George Washington: Zwei Wege der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2011).

3 Fritz von Unruh. “Duell an der Havel,” in *Sämtliche Werke* (20 vols.), ed. by Hanns Martin Elster and Bodo Rollke, Vol. 5 (Berlin: Haude und Spenersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1991). 376. – Subsequent references to the play will be indicated by page number in parentheses.

and three times he tried. A series of rousing speeches to the youth of the nation in 1948 seemed to bode well for a comeback, but his ability to reach an audience was limited and his pathos failed to animate the language of his plays. Three historical plays from the early 1950s, including *Duell an der Havel*, enjoyed every advantage in terms of director, cast, and venue, but failed to resonate with audiences. It wasn't just the language. Unruh's critical animus was re-directed toward what he perceived to be a continuity between Prussian history, the Nazi regime, and the new Republic. When Adenauer started moving towards a remilitarization of Germany, Unruh was incensed. His message was not welcome. West Germany had no patience for a Prussian pacifist.

In order to appreciate Unruh's political interventions through theater, it is important to call to mind what a looming presence Prussia was not only for him, but for all of Germany and the Allies. From our perspective, we are likely to confine our notion of Prussia to the remnants and reanimations of Prussian history in Berlin and Potsdam – whether the dutifully curated palaces, museums and gardens of the *Stiftung Preussischer Schlösser und Gärten* or the ludicrous reconstruction of the Berliner Schloss. It is often forgotten that at the time of Frederick the Great, much of Western Germany was in Prussian hands, and that by 1866 the Kingdom of Prussia stretched from the Dutch border to Königsberg. Throughout the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, Prussia became known for a set of strict values or virtues that included loyalty, order, diligence, duty, discipline, and the like. For many, the *Urszene* of Prussian culture, however, was the unspeakably cruel and traumatic punishment the Soldier King imposed on his wayward son, Frederick the Great: forcing him to watch the execution of his dearest friend Katte from a prison window in Küstrin. For the Allied forces administering the occupied sectors, especially for the Americans and British, the Prussian mentality lay at the root of Nazi evil and needed to be eradicated. The allies dismantled the *Siegesallee* in Berlin, a sculptural glorification of Prussian history that extended from the Brandenburg Gate to the *Siegessäule* and removed the equestrian statue of Frederick the Great from Unter den Linden. But that was not enough. On 25 February 1947, the Allies summarily abolished Prussia with Control Council Law 46. “The Prussian State which from early days has been a bearer of militarism and reaction in Germany has de facto ceased to exist. Guided by the interests of preservation of peace and security of peoples and with the desire to assure further reconstruction of the political life of Germany on a democratic basis,” all political, territorial, and administrative traces of Prussia will be eliminated.⁴ We have to keep this in mind as we approach Fritz von Unruh's play, the premiere and only staging of which took place in Wiesbaden, in the American occupied sector, in March and April

4 “Abolition of the State of Prussia, Control Council Law No. 46,” URL: <https://www.questia.com/read/16323703/germany-1947-1949-the-story-in-documents> (accessed March 4, 2019).

of 1954. Part of Unruh's intervention, in other words, was to stage an encounter between Frederick the Great, the most familiar icon of Prussia and paradigmatic figure of enlightened despotism, and George Washington, the democratic titan of the United States, at a time when the stock of the former was at an all-time low. Appropriately, the historical premise of the play, as well as the framework for the plot, is a trade treaty – *ein Handelsabkommen* – between Prussia and the fledgling nation. As Jürgen Overhoff explains, there really was a “Treaty of Amity and Commerce” that was hammered out in The Hague in 1785 between Frederick's representative Friedrich Wilhelm von Thulemeyer and a trio of well-known American representatives to Europe, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin.⁵ Preliminary negotiations were conducted in Berlin by American representatives travelling incognito as merchants. For Unruh, an adept in Prussian arcana, and himself a conflicted mediator between the United States and the young Federal Republic, the Treaty and the idea of representatives in disguise were tantalizing enough to suggest a story that turns on George Washington traveling in obvious incognito to Berlin, quite possibly to work out the terms of a new cultural “treaty” on the Wiesbadener stage between citizens of the Federal Republic and the occupying force.

Instead of scenes, the play is comprised of six tableaux, what Unruh calls *Bilder* – essentially scenes of action that lead to tableaux similar to the photograph of Merkel and Trump. In the first tableau, which takes place in the Potsdam Palace, Frederick's aide de campe, Major Ingo von Schmettau, is preparing a report on Washington for his sovereign, due by 4AM that morning. His conversation with other officers is interrupted by the news that two Americans have been arrested for unauthorized coffee-roasting, followed by their appearance on stage: a Mr. James Colder, head of the delegation, who bears an uncanny and much remarked upon resemblance to George Washington, and Ms. Evelyne Smith, his economic advisor, who seems on an earlier occasion to have aroused Schmettau's interest. Coffee, Europe's new and fashionable commodity, is heavily taxed in Brandenburg-Prussia in order to finance Frederick's military, which, as we know from Immanuel Kant, is viewed as a necessary guarantee for the freedom of enlightened discourse – “Argue as much as you like and about what you like, but obey!”⁶ For Americans, the idea of taxing coffee is as repugnant as taxing tea and as likely to produce a response akin to the Boston Tea Party. The situation, which should have found an easy diplomatic solution, escalates when, in the heat of ideological sparring between Evelyne and Schmettau, the latter insults the former – “We could care

5 Jürgen Overhoff. *Friedrich der Große und George Washington. Zwei Wege der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2011), 310-312.

6 “*Räsoniert, soviel ihr wollt und worüber ihr wollt, aber gehorcht!*” Immanuel Kant. “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?”, in *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (1784), 481-494, URL: http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/view/kant_aufklaerung_1784?p=17 (accessed March 4, 2019).

less about your fraudulent claims of freedom over there!”⁷ (401). Evelyne heatedly responds by challenging him to a duel with pistols, which he accepts.

In the second tableau, an insomniac Frederick summons Schmettau to his private palace, Schloss Sanssouci, even earlier than the 4AM deadline for his report. We learn that Frederick admires Washington and sees the Revolution as “the beginning of a new, more realistic world order”⁸ (408). Schmettau offers a scathing critique of the United States (“The pursuit of material goods is the only and loftiest principle of Americans,”⁹ 413) and of Washington, who as “Freedom’s hero” owns 300 African slaves, and, according to Schmettau, believes only in America, not in freedom – an early version of “America first.” Frederick suspects that Schmettau, who reminds him uncannily of his youthful friend Katte, may have ulterior motives for painting such a dismal picture of the young republic. Schmettau confesses his part in the impending duel and Frederick presses him to reveal if he has by chance fallen in love with Evelyne. Schmettau swears on his Prussian oath that he has not. We, as audience, of course, know better.

The short third tableau takes place in a hotel room, where Colder and Evelyne engage in an intense dialogue that exposes the implications of the duel for the trade treaty. Colder/Washington admires Frederick, values the trade treaty for the good of the republic, and wants Evelyne therefore to back out of the duel, which involves a personal slight, as would only be reasonable. Evelyne is passionate about proceeding with the duel and regards Frederick as an arbitrary dictator with whom negotiation is morally offensive. In her view, her freedom and with it the freedom of the United States are at stake. Colder must not really be the disguised Washington if he insists, just as she would cease to be Evelyne and an American if she were to renege on the challenge. Obviously, Unruh is working out the terms of a philosophical dilemma regarding the paradoxes of freedom. But, as Washington points out, the motivating factor in Evelyne’s argument is not reason, but passion of a distinctly unreasonable variety. Just as Schmettau’s companions and Frederick suspect that he has fallen for Evelyne, so Washington detects the same for her. She responds that she doesn’t merely want to wound Schmettau, she wants to kill him: “I want to shoot him!”¹⁰ To which Washington responds: “What? Hahaha! (*all of a sudden*) kill the one you love?”¹¹ (426). This puzzling observation actually helps us understand what Unruh is doing. By deploying the topos of the radical proximity of love and hate, Unruh associates Evelyne, whom he also mysteriously calls an “Indian,” with the character of Penthesilea in Prussian author Heinrich von Kleist’s tragedy by the same name. Penthesilea is queen of the Amazons and she

7 “Wir pfeifen – und zwar auf Euren ganzen Freiheitsschwindel da drüben!”

8 “Der Anfangspunkt einer neuen, realeren Weltordnung”

9 “Das materielle Streben ist der einzige und höchste Grundsatz aller dort lebenden Menschen.”

10 “Erschießen will ich ihn!”

11 “What? Hahaha! (*auf einmal*) den töten, den man liebt?”

has fixed her amorous and destructive attention on Achilles whom she confronts in a succession of armed encounters, essentially duels, placing the future of the Amazon nation at risk for the sake of her passion. In their final confrontation, she and her dogs overwhelm Achilles, and she sinks her teeth into his breast: “Kisses, bites, they rhyme.”¹² Eighteenth-century decorum wouldn’t allow for this kind of excess, but the destructive and contradictory character of Evelyne’s passion is implied. Frederick will later call her an “Amazönchen” (466). Washington, who had earlier tossed her pistol into the commode, urges her to be reasonable – “I cannot order you to do so. And I don’t want to order you to do anything. Think of our goal. Don’t do it”¹³ (433-434) – and leaves. She retrieves the pistol.

The fourth tableau takes place on the Pfaueninsel, an island in the Havel River, and stages the duel in a manner that transposes the overwrought tragic quality of the corresponding scene in Kleist’s *Penthesilea* into a comic mode. Schmettau’s friends have loaded the dueling pistols with *Knallerbsen* (caps). Like Achilles in his final encounter with Penthesilea, Schmettau arrives determined not to duel, but Evelyne mocks his cowardice and submission to Frederick’s command. Unruh opts for what he probably held to be a Kleistian version of gender comedy that we are now more likely to find inappropriate and offensive: “Schmettau leaps towards her, pulls her from the table, lays her over his knee and smacks her bottom with the flat of his hand. Suddenly he grabs her and wants to pull her towards him. Evelyne wrestles free. Runs back the length of the table and ... shoots”¹⁴ (443). Schmettau is wounded and bleeds. Both enter states of attenuated consciousness – similar to the state of Penthesilea and Achilles – until Evelyne blurts out, “I love you!”¹⁵ (444). End of tableau.

For the fifth tableau, we return to the Potsdamer Stadtschloss. Can the trade treaty be saved? Can the relationships between Evelyne and Schmettau, Washington and Frederick, the United States and Prussia be mediated? As far as Unruh is concerned, only after all of the contradictions and tensions have been exposed. In effect, the duel on the Pfaueninsel is followed by a duel of words in the form of a trial that takes place between Frederick and Washington with Evelyne as his second. Framed as a court proceeding with judges at hand, Frederick presses his case against the American delegation for illegal coffee roasting. The prosecution and defense touch on principles of Prussian vs. American law, a discussion that

12 “Küsse, Bisse, das reimt sich,” Heinrich von Kleist. “Penthesilea,” in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* (2 vols.), ed. by Helmut Sembdner, Vol. 1 (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 425.

13 “Ich kann es Ihnen nicht befehlen. Und ich will Ihnen auch nichts befehlen. Denken Sie an das Ziel. Tun Sie es nicht.”

14 “Da stürzt Schmettau zu ihr hin, reißt sie vom Tisch, legt sie sich übers Knie und klatscht mit der flachen Hand auf ihr Gesäß. Plötzlich packt er sie und will sie an sich reißen. Da zerrt sich Evelyne frei. Rennt dann die Länge des Tisches zurück und . . . schießt.”

15 “Ich liebe dich!”

resolves into a debate over natural right and loyalty to the crown. They locate a common basis in Germanic law – *das alte germanische Sachsenrecht* (459) – but Frederick is outraged by the idea that rights reserved to him should be universalized to the citizenry. He accuses Washington of breaking his oath to the crown of England, arguing that oath-breaking was the founding act of the new state. In a sort of eighteenth-century version of WikiLeaks, Washington responds by airing secret intelligence about Frederick's largesse to Prussian nobility at the cost of the over-taxed poor. They arrive at an impasse and Washington is ready – in anticipation of Trump's *Art of the Deal*¹⁶ – to walk away.

Unruh saves the situation by preempting Washington's departure by announcing that Schmettau, who has been under arrest in Spandau, has been brought to the Potsdam Palace. The dilemma is thus shifted to the Schmettau-Evelyne plot, which would seem even less tractable. Schmettau and Evelynne confront each other in the presence of Washington and Frederick. Will he remain loyal to Frederick and renounce his affection for Evelynne or will he break the oath, which he had reconfirmed in the second tableau, and renounce his loyalty to Prussia and his king? Frederick is confident: "He will not break his oath to me – not like your Washington broke his oath to the British king"¹⁷ (465). Evelynne attempts to seduce him with anachronistic visions of the "undiscovered" American West (the redwoods, the sparkling waters of Washington state) – she is herself an anachronism, a female economist among the founding fathers of America, and, as such, a figure of fantasy as much as the appealing image of the America that she evokes. Schmettau counters with visions of his beloved Prussia. And yet Evelynne succeeds. Schmettau espouses Evelynne's motto for the new world: "The highest good is life"¹⁸ (474) and thus commits that most un-Prussian of deeds, he breaks his oath.

For the sixth and final tableau, Unruh once again calls on Kleist, but this time it is *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, arguably the most brilliant literary representation of the Prussian ethos. Kleist's play is centered on Brandenburg's victory over Swedish forces at Fehrbellin and an uncompromising vision of loyalty that requires the battle's hero to acknowledge that the victory he secured depended on his failure to follow orders and that regardless of the victory and his heroism it is proper that he assent to his execution. Unruh's Frederick recalls his youth and the hatred he and his siblings shared for their ruthless father. "I, my sister, the family, relatives, people at large – we all hated him."¹⁹ Referring to his father's cruel punishment, Frederick continues: "He crushed me because he wanted to replace my 'I want freedom' by awakening in me the 'Thou shalt' of duty. That 'Thou shalt' of duty

16 Donald Trump and Tony Schwartz. *The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2015).

17 "Das wird er *mir* nicht brechen – so wie euer Washington seinen Eid dem Britenkönig."

18 "Das Höchste ist das Leben."

19 "Ich, meine Schwester, die Familie, Verwandte, die Menschen – wir alle haßten ihn."

should overshadow one's own self"²⁰ (482). For Unruh's Frederick, such self-denying behavior amounts to "Prussia's Declaration of Independence"²¹ (482). "It was the Declaration of Independence from the desires of our own egos"²² (480). Whether this *Urszene* of Prussian identity formation ultimately refers to Kleist's play or rather the cruel execution of his friend Katte by his father remains unclear. Frederick is in a state of historical hallucination. He willfully mistakes his chamberlain Grumbkow for the long dead Johann Sebastian Bach, composer of the Brandenburg Concertos, which he dedicated to the youngest son of the Grand Elector of Brandenburg. In the facial features of Schmettau, he now sees the executed Katte. He engages Schmettau in a humane dialogue of principles, suspending the Prussian hierarchical order. Frederick's fundamental commitment to a politics premised on war and a powerful military comes to light and becomes the foil for Schmettau's newly found pacifism. Unruh explicitly names the opposition: *Aberglaube Liebe* (love as superstition) confronts *Aberglaube Krieg* (war as superstition). Frederick ritually strips Schmettau of his Prussian military insignia and prepares to sign the trade treaty, which has, it seems, been saved. In a final exchange with Colder, Frederick subtly acknowledges his penetration of the incognito, at the same time that he wonders whether Washington, as Schmettau had earlier suggested, believes in freedom or only in America. Nationalism, in his view, is an even worse superstition than war. We can call this *Aberglaube Nationalismus* (nationalism as superstition). Washington responds that the worst superstition is that freedom can be restrained – we can call Washington's belief *Aberglaube Freiheit* (freedom as superstition). "The king stares at him. Suddenly he embraces him"²³ (494). Frederick leaves the stage in animated conversation with the imaginary Bach. The curtain falls.

Perhaps, like Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug*, the premiere of which under Goethe's direction failed miserably in Weimar, it is a question of timing and finding just the right way to approach Unruh's *Duell an der Havel*. Unruh's 1954 audience and critics were unforgiving. In a review in *Der Fortschritt* under the title "Prussia in a Perverse Light,"²⁴ the reviewer claimed that "Washington's" extensive lectures on freedom reminded him of the American re-educators, the "Umerzieher," of 1945.²⁵ The reviewer's suspicion that Unruh spent too much time in America and

20 "Er zertrat mich, weil er statt meines 'Ich will die Freiheit' in mir das 'Du sollst' der Pflicht erwecken wollte. Das 'Du sollst' der Pflicht weit hinaus über das eigene Ich!"

21 "Preußens Unabhängigkeitserklärung."

22 "Es war die Unabhängigkeitserklärung von den Begierden unseres eigenen Ich."

23 "König sieht ihn groß an. Plötzlich umarmt er ihn."

24 "Preußentum in schräger Sicht."

25 F.-H., "Preußentum in schräger Sicht. Abgerutschte Aufführung von Fritz von Unruhs 'Duell an der Havel' in Wiesbaden," *Der Fortschritt*, April 8, 1954. – "Mister Colder" alias Washington holds forth on the stage about freedom to the Prussian officers and the old rickety Fritz to such

with Americans highlights the dilemma Unruh and others returning from exile faced. Unruh was not looking to re-educate his fellow Germans, but to win them for a reawakened Transatlantic partnership on equal terms. In the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Martin Ruppert wondered about the rationale for returning to the eighteenth century. “If, with regards to Prussia, the beauty of the language of an author such as Heinrich von Kleist can’t lure us into the past and its historical grandeur, then we should remain in the present.”²⁶ E. R. Dallontano acknowledges the potential for drama, “but unfortunately, the drama never got off the ground since the poet Fritz von Unruh required Washington as well as Old Fritz with his podagra to mouth so much banal nonsense that they became caricatures of themselves.”²⁷

Could we imagine a performance of *Duell an der Havel* in the era of Trump? Such a performance would require recognition of Unruh’s masterful integration of the conceptual framework – the political-philosophical differences and similarities between the idea of Prussia and the idea of the United States – with the plot of the play. The best way to show this is to use the “semiotic square,” an analytic tool developed by A. J. Greimas.²⁸ The square begins with an opposition, in this case Colder/Washington vs. Frederick the Great as the representatives of two opposite versions of Enlightenment governance. Each of these implies a distinctive subject, Evelyne as the passionate instantiation of freedom and Schmettau as the passionate instantiation of duty. Washington and Evelyne are thus joint representatives of American freedom, while Frederick and Schmettau stand for Prussian duty. At

an extent that the ‘re-educators’ of 1945 would have been in ecstasy. Fritz von Unruh probably spent so much time in America that he had no idea that a German-American love relationship on the stage was not the proper vehicle for giving a democracy for beginners course. Since he did it anyway, he spent scene after scene teetering along the narrow ridge between the sublime and the ridiculous.” [‘Mister Colder’ alias Washington hält auf der Bühne preußischen Offizieren und dem alten, klapprigen Fritz ein solches Kolleg über die Freiheit, daß jeder ‘Umerzieher’ von 1945 seine Freude daran haben könnte. [...] Fritz von Unruh war wahrscheinlich zu lange in Amerika, so daß er nicht ahnen konnte, daß eine deutsch-amerikanische Liebe auf der Bühne nicht gerade geeignet ist, einen Kursus für Anfänger in Demokratie zu halten. Da er es aber trotzdem tat, schlich er szenenlang auf dem schmalen Grat zwischen dem Erhabenen und Lächerlich dahin.]

26 Martin Ruppert. “Der alte Fritz und die Indianer. Unruhs ‘Duell an der Havel’ im Wiesbadener Staatstheater,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 29, 1954.

27 “Leider kam das Drama gar nicht erst zustande, denn Washington sowohl als auch der Alte Fritz mit seiner Podagra mußten ihrem Dichter Fritz von Unruh so viel banales Papier nachschwätzen, daß sie zu Karikaturen ihrer Selbst wurden und das Drama verpaßten. Wenn wir nicht gerade – was Preußen anbetrifft – durch die Schönheit der Sprache eines Heinrich von Kleist in die Vergangenheit und ihre geschichtliche Größe abgelenkt werden, dann sollten wir in der Gegenwart bleiben.” E. R. Dallontano, “Washington bekehrt den Alten Fritz,” *Rheinischer Merkur*, April 2, 1954.

28 For a contemporary introduction to the semiotic square, see John J. Corso. “What Does Greimas’s Semiotic Square Really Do?” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 47 (2014): 69-89.

the same time, we recognize that even though Evelyn and Schmettau are also opposites, they are similar in their passion, just as Washington and Frederick are similar in their rationality. A third form of relation that comes into view through the semiotic square is that of contradiction, in this case between Frederick and Evelyn (rational concept of duty vs. passionate concept of freedom), a theme widely explored by Unruh and complicated by gender, on the one hand, and Washington and Schmettau (rational concept of freedom vs. passionate concept of duty), on the other. The semiotic square also lets us see how the duel/love relationship and the trade treaty are homologous and alternative versions of precarious negotiation with potentially volatile outcomes (see Fig. 3). The shift from politics to passion as a way to finesse or circumvent the impasse is familiar from melodrama as well as comedy. Billy Wilder's brilliant postwar Berlin comedy *A Foreign Affair* (1948) comes to mind.

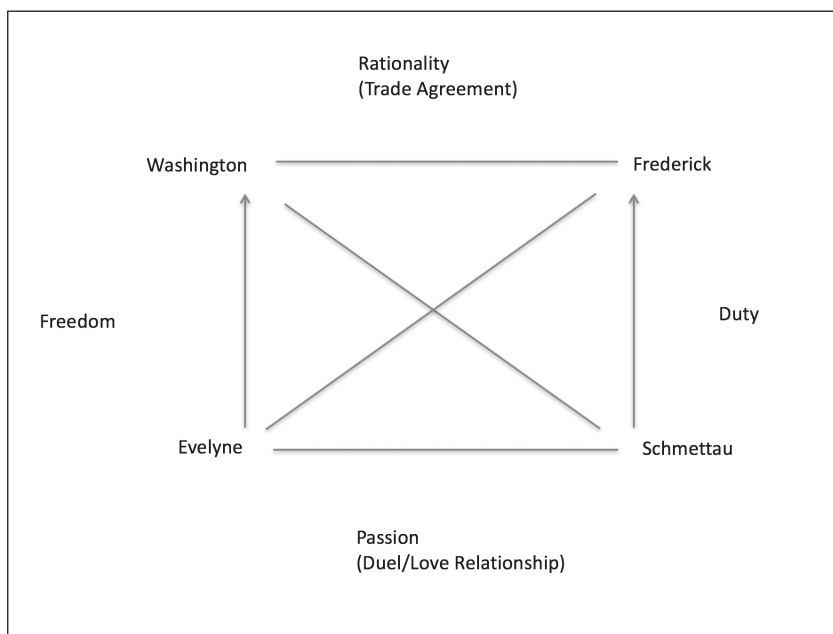


Fig. 3: Semiotic square, “Rationality, Passion, Duty, Freedom.”

But we are still left wondering: what actually happened in the sixth tableau? What logic prevailed? How was the mediation, if it was a mediation, achieved? If we map the varieties of superstition Unruh introduced – *Aberglaube Krieg*, *Aberglaube Liebe*, *Aberglaube Nationalismus* or rather *Aberglaube Freiheit* – onto the semiotic square (see Fig. 4), perhaps we can find the answer. Because of Schmettau's be-

trayal and abandonment of Prussia and his realignment with love, freedom, and pacifism in contradiction to war, the fourth corner is now unoccupied. Perhaps that is where Johann Sebastian Bach comes into the picture.

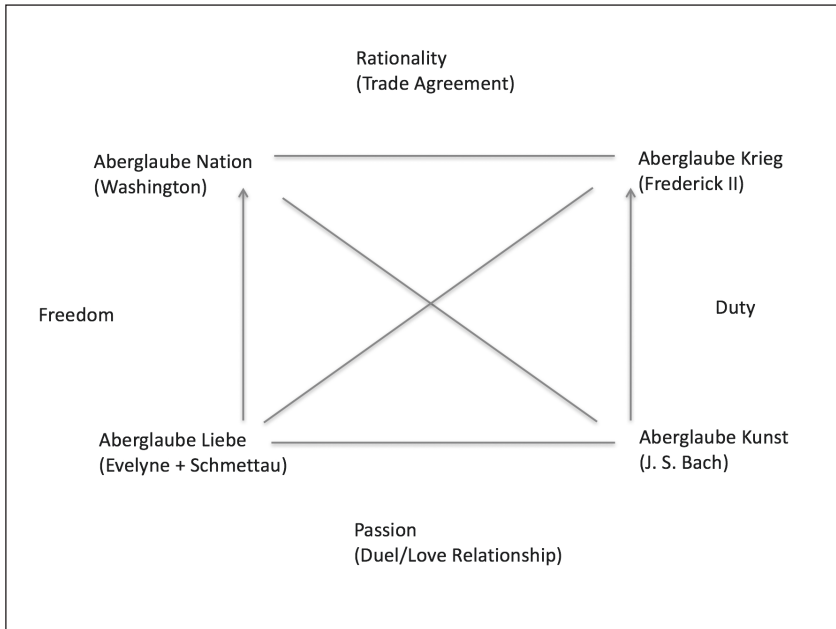


Fig. 4: Semiotic square, “Aberglaube.”

Losing Schmettau, who reminded him of his young friend Katte, as well as the seven years he spent cultivating the arts as Crown Prince in Schloss Rheinsberg, Frederick replaces Schmettau with Bach, “der [...] trotz seiner musikalischen Allmacht doch die Monarchie als die von Gott gewollte Ordnung [erkannte]” (479). An aesthetics of order, of sublimated passion and submission, – let us call it *Aberglaube Kunst* – would be the Prussian counterpart to the immigrant love story embodied by Evelyne and Schmettau, even if the historical availability of the former is called into question by its hallucinatory character, as is the latter by the anachronistic fantasy of Evelyne’s existence. In a register that Unruh might not have understood, we could even imagine this position occupied by musical theorist Theodor Adorno who reasserted the critical potential of classical aesthetics in the face of American consumerism (see Fig. 5).

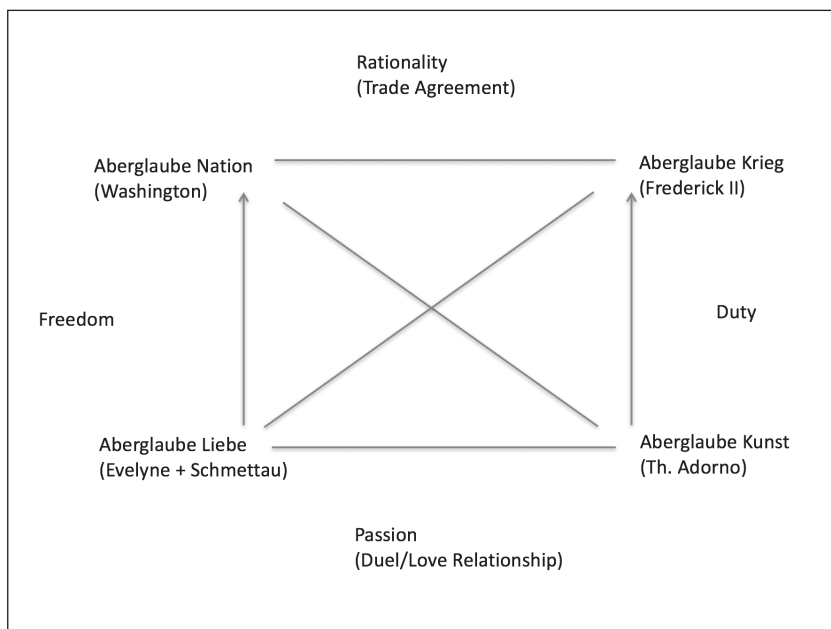


Fig. 5: Semiotic square, “Adorno.”

Presumably Unruh is not recommending a mass emigration of West German citizens – democracy refugees, if you will – to the United States – though he himself shuttled back and forth between Germany and the US in evident indecision. It is more likely that Unruh was advocating for a “migration of mentality,” a passionate resolve to break with Prussia and Frederick and to embrace the democratic order of Washington in the Federal Republic.

What Unruh’s play leaves unexpressed, but the semiotic square brings into view, is that the dilemma was resolved on the level of emotion (and fantasy) exclusively and not on the level of reason. The contradictions within and between the two models of Enlightenment governance have not been overcome, even if, for a time, we embraced the American illusion as Frederick embraced Washington. Schmettau’s tendentious critique of America early in the play – that it places material and nationalist interests ahead of idealism and freedom – seems to be born out in the present historical moment, halfway through President Trump’s term. At the same time, Schmettau’s trenchant pacifist accusations against the toll of Frederick’s militarism go unanswered in the play and find a ready counterpart in the millions of war and climate refugees failing to find humane accommodation in Europe and the US. And that is why now, in the year 2019, for the first time since 1954, we can imagine a staging of *Duell an der Havel* that includes the image of

Trump and Merkel at the G7, with roles reversed, at an impasse again that invites us to renewed analysis and critique of the political structures and principles laid down in the “Treaty of Amity and Commerce” more than 230 years ago.

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