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La réunification – c'est moi - Performing Identity in Politics

Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the German Reunification in the German Election-Campaigns of the 1990ies

Christoph Scheurle (University of Applied Science and Arts of Dortmund/Germany)

Abstract

Despite the fact, that the German reunification was a positive event, it can doubtlessly be seen as a crisis of identity for the German national state, or better: the German national states. In this sense the successful election campaigns in the 1990ies of the German conservative party – CDU – and its candidate, chancellor Helmut Kohl, can be understood as a result of a convincing identity offer. This offer, however, was not only given by using the national symbols (flag of the German Union, the Brandenburger Tor etc.) but as well by Helmut Kohl himself. He was called „Kanzler der Einheit“ and became a personalized image of the reunification.

In my paper I would like to use an election spot of 1994 as an example how the CDU-party and Helmut Kohl transferred the events of the reunification into a personal success of Helmut Kohl and thus into a coherent narration of the German history.

Introduction

I would like to frame my analysis of the performance not only with concepts of Identity – which I am going to introduce later – but also with some ideas from the field of the theaterscience.

Therefore I want to cast a brief look on two different terms which I see as crucial to the topic:

Theatricality and Performativity

Theatricality

Since the late 1990 Theater as a model of cultural science has proven his potential to analyse not only theaterperformances but also many different sorts of cultural, political or other social events. The development of an integrating and widespread understanding of theater tended to put theater-situations and non-theater-situations alike. In this perspective the staging of political events and theater events is minimized, since in both scenarios there are people who perform in front of other people, which matches to the theater formula:

Person A performs part B in front of the audience C in either cases.

In this perspective theater itself is, as Ulf Otto stated, only „the „Sonderfall“ who claims to be the measure of what theatre is and what not“ (Otto 2012, S. 43)ⁱ. (And in this sense, one can also observe, that the borders of theater are more and more pushed)

With Matthias Warstatt, another German theater researcher, one could argue: „Theatricality in actual discourse is not understood as a primal aesthetic category, but as a general dimension of human acting...“ (Warstatt 2005, 3)ⁱⁱ This actually refers as well to ideas of the German sociologist Helmut Plessner who stated, that play, (self-)presentation and the staging of the self are key elements of the human self who serves the need to be someone. (Plessner quoted in: Warstatt 2005, 3) In this sense Plessner understands acting itself as *conditio humana*.

Performativity

There is a widespread discourse about the term performativity. According to Sybille Krämer (quoted in Fischer-Lichte 2005, 234)ⁱⁱⁱ there are three different concepts of performativity: the weak concept, which incorporates acting as such: Language, gestures etc.: Somebody moves through a room and manipulates objects that already are performative acting. The strong concept of performativity relates to expressions who execute at the same time what they express. So in performative expressions the usual distinction between word and deed is not at work any more (I hereby declare you man and wife). Which means, as Erika-Fischer-Lichte stated that the „conditions of the world are not only represented by words but actually constituted by them. This, however, is not only the case with words but can be claimed for all sorts of symbolic acting“ (Fischer-Lichte 2005, 234)

The radical concept of performativity hints at the capability of performance to serve strategic functions, which shows and undermines the borders of dichotomic classifications, typologies and theories. (ibid.)

To sum up the basic ideas, performative acts can be understood as corporal actions who are, according to Judith Butler are „non-referential“ but – and here I quote the German theater researcher Fischer-Lichte again – „are self-referential and thus create in whatever way reality.“ (ibid.)

This means, that performativity is highly dynamic. A already existing and stable identity that could be expressed by performative action, does, as Fischer-Lichte stated, merely exist. Identity, however, is formed and expressed firstly and only by the action itself.“ (Fischer-Lichte 2005, S. 237)

According to Kobena Mercer identity becomes a problem only when there is a crisis: “When something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty”. (Mercer quoted in: Bechhofer and McCrown 2009, 7)^{iv} Accordingly, a crisis of identity of a nation would occur in those typical situations when the pillars of a so-called national culture begin to waver and the continuity of (national) history becomes uncertain. In this case, the crisis is endangering the nation, because the repeatedly “quoted pillars of national identity” (Eickelpasch and Rademacher 2004, 69)^v like tradition, history and origin begin to waver.

Identity expresses itself – according to Eickelpasch and Rademacher – in at least two forms:

- as the *personal* identity, when the individual proves to be identical with himself – in whatever shape –
- as the *collective* identity, which welds together individuals of heterogeneous groups into a unity, even for at least a short time. (Eickelpasch and Rademacher 2004, 69)

In the first case, the purpose is to show and point out the differences between oneself and the other, while in the second case an abolition of cultural and individual differences is intended – at least partially. Collective identity seems to be characterized by the fact that the successful construction of a “we-feeling” marginalizes cultural and/or individual differences by welding together different groups sharing common values and common experiences, at least for a short time.

To achieve this collective identity is in the interest of a democracy with permanent election campaigns for the favor of voters, it is in the interest of the different parties and their representatives as well as in the interest of the state, which has to mediate between the different interests of individual groups.

Identity – collective or individual – will always develop, as formulated by Peter von Zima “im Diskurs (und) als narratives Programm” – “in a discourse (and) as a narrative program“. (von Zima 2010, 15)^{vi}

To this end, a person is needed who will and should represent the totality and thus the narration is proved to be logical and true by his action. That means that the problem how to establish an national identity – apart from the more abstract state symbols like the national flag, the coats of arms, the national hymn etc. – is always a question of a single political person who in his actions performs and embodies the idea and the identity of nation and state.

Thus, in a crisis of state the communicative equalization and identification of person and state is the aim of all political communication. For this is the only way how to convince the voter that the identification offered does make sense for him.

The German reunification – being, of course, a positive event – has doubtlessly been a crisis of identity for the German national state, or better: the German national states. If it is true that the „most important discursive strategy for the the *narration of the nation*” as an invention of identity“... is the construction of a past “ (Eickelpasch and Rademacher 2004, 69), then the harsh election campaign of the CDU and the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) in the 1990ies can also be understood as a competition for the best identity concept of a “new” Germany. The election campaigns of the different parties can thus be seen as communicative proposals how to cope with the crisis of identity. The events in the national history – actually being contingent – will be presented as a coherent and logical continuum of history in a narration, described above.

The CDU party and its candidate for chancellor, Helmut Kohl, have been very successful in 1990 and 1994. The reason could be that a very convincing identity offer was given by using the national symbols (flag of the German Union, the Brandenburger Tor etc.) as well as giving Helmut Kohl a personal image as the “chancellor of the German reunification”. In its election campaigns the CDU interpreted the reunification of Germany as a natural consequence of history, and Helmut Kohl as the political finisher of the up-to-then painful history of the German division.

In this paper I would like to use an election spot of 1994 as an example how the CDU-party and Helmut Kohl transferred the events of the reunification into a coherent narration of the German history. I mainly will use the ideas of Eickelpasch and Rademacher stating that the “construction of a common past will give the single individual the feeling of being embedded in the course of events, of having a place in the collective history”. (Eickelpasch and Rademacher 2004, 69)

In the spot, the party, the nation and the person of chancellor Helmut Kohl are shown as being identical. The spot promises that the history of Germany will be continued and the national identity will be stabilized again, if people will vote for Helmut Kohl. In this sense, the spot can be understood as a “conditional program” (Wachtel 1988, 21)^{vii} of the nationstate. The protagonist presents in his performance not only the personal identity or the group-specific program of his party, but offers at the same time also a model for identification, which is intended to be supra-individual and group-overlapping. In this perspective the nation is understood as a “parent collective” (*Dachkollektiv*; Hansen 2009, 12)^{viii} and the CDU-election-spot as a communicative attempt to join together the term “nation” and “party” with the concrete person of the chancellor Helmut Kohl as a chancellor for all Germans.

Analysis of the election spot

The election spot of 1994 is a picture-collage of various film snips, all dealing with the event of the German reunification.

Regarding the quality of the pictures they can be distinguished by four different groups:

historical pictures,

showing events of the German separation and reunification in “iconographic pictures” so-called *Schlagbildern* – (Diers 1998) with the voiceover comment of an anonymous speaker who is creating the historical context.



pictures of historical persons (US presidents)^{ix}

showing the US presidents at official occasions like state visits, confirming their solidarity with the German Federal Republic and its chancellor. As so-called “key pictures of Power” (*Schlüsselbilder der Macht*; Ludes 1998) they document the political everyday life as well as “mass-medially constructed pictures of persons, institutions and also facts” (Schiller 2002, 273)^x which are accepted as official pictures of power. If this sort of pictures are shown in an advertising spot, they always benefit from the official aura in context with the news where these pictures came from. (Scheurle 2009, 142)^{xi} Formally, they can be characterized by the fact that an anonymous speaker fits them into the historical context, and in respect to the contents the heads of a state (Kennedy, Reagan, Clinton, Mitterand) speak themselves, while their statements usually are condensed to more or less well-known slogans (Clinton: “Berlin ist frei” (“Berlin is free”); Kennedy: “Ich bin ein Berliner” (I am a Berliner”); Reagan: “Mr. Gorbatschov, open this gate”).



additional key pictures

showing Helmut Kohl as a statesman and politician together with other statesmen at official occasions with the interpretation by an anonymous speaker (“Jetzt schuf Helmut Kohl bei Gorbatschow die Voraussetzungen für ein geeintes Deutschland”) (“now, Helmut Kohl saw Gorbatschow and created the conditions for the reunification of Germany”).



informal pictures

showing the chancellor in private: He is sitting in front of a bookshelf under a standard lamp. Here, Kohl is speaking about his personal experiences in German history and stresses his own share in it. .



The four different sorts of pictures have in common their documentary character. None of the pictures have been expressively made to the purpose of party advertisement, (and even the private pictures of Helmut Kohl were made for a TV-documentation). Superficially, the first part of the spot (30 seconds) seems to tell objectively the story of the German division, which is presented in a sequence of rapid key and iconographic pictures, commented by an anonymous speaker. "Germany was divided into two parts and was meant to remain separated".

Then the speaker leads up to Helmut Kohl's first appearance. He is remembering those days when the vision of a reunified Germany seemed to have disappeared in a far away future – as a result of the Gromykov dictum, who claimed that Germany will be separated for good. The chancellor's personal involvement is stressed by the combination of pictures with the text of the anonymous speaker and by showing Helmut Kohl as a private person. The result is the feeling that Germany's history of division and the biography of the chancellor appear to become fatefully entangled. The narration suggests that already at the beginning of Germany's division Kohl would not accept it, although it seemed to have been cemented by Gromykov's words.

The following sequences (TC: 0:00:37,21 – 0:01:01,12) show the US presidents and the GDR people stringently acting against Gromykov's verdict. The US presidents' appeals and the GDR revolt are put up as agreements aiming at actions against the injustice of dictatorship. Thus, the stage has been prepared for Helmut Kohl's great appearance: first he is shown in a crowd of people who are shouting with joy, and then visiting Gorbachov, where he is "creating the conditions for the German unity" (TC: 0:01:01,02) according to the voice of the commentator. This is proved by pictures showing Helmut Kohl and the former General Secretary of the UDSSR landing together in a plane. In this sequence of pictures Kohl is installed as the important promoter in the history of the German reunification by bringing the past and the future into accord.

Thereafter, the private Helmut Kohl appears telling how he had proved to Gorbachov that the German unification was an inevitable step (TC: 0:01:06,12). Kohl compares the unification with a natural phenomenon and he argues as follows: As certain as all the water of the earth will run eventually into the sea, earlier or later, as certain is the German reunification. The speaker then agrees with Kohl's prophecy and argues with the following historical fact: "Germany reunited!". Further, the recipient is told the circumstances which have led to this event: Germany became accepted in Europe and all European states confided in Germany and especially in its leader Helmut Kohl. This is supported by the "testimonial" of Francois Mitterand, who calls Kohl a great European and compares his achievements with Adenauer's, ennobling him by this comparison (TC: 0:01:29,12). Here again, historical events have been argumentatively entangled to create the impression of a historical continuum. The beginning and the end of the German history after the Third Reich is thus most closely connected with the actions of the CDU-chancellors, and Kohl's activities are given an additional historical legitimation. Although the spot mentions the party only at the very end, it has a central position. In the sentence: "Our chancellor, towards a secure future: CDU" the party is positioned as a link between the people and the chancellor. Voting the party means reaching the desired aim: the chancellor.

Conclusions

In the spot the anonymous speaker combines the political life of Helmut Kohl and the history of Germany by linking and enlarging facts of the German division with personal memories of the “private person Helmut Kohl”. On the one hand, history is thus translated into a personal and anecdotic dimension, while, on the other hand, Kohl is installed as a prominent contemporary witness of history. By doing so, the objective report of the anonymous speaker is enriched by an emotional component. That means that the “off-commentary reported connection of actions” (Wachtel 1988, 76) is supplemented, personalized and specified by Kohl’s authority as narrator, which is installed as with equal rights.

Consequently, Kohl has a double part in the spot. He is actor in history – which can be seen in the historical key pictures – as well as narrator. He has the authority to explain the pictures in the film, thus proving not only his historic achievement but also his real existence in politics. His actual body and his narration of anecdotes stress the authenticity of the anonymous report. When seen the other way round, Kohl’s statements are characterized as being authentic by the directly following words of the speaker. Now, when the text of the speaker is underlaid by further key pictures – like Kohl and Jelzin signing a treaty – then the statements of the anonymous speaker are, for his part, verified. Like in an argumentative vicious circle Kohl is defined as a political insider and visionary as well as a successful guider of the state.

In my opinion, the informal pictures and narrations of the chancellor have a double function: By the re-putting on stage of the already accomplished history of the German reunification in 1994 as a personal experience, Kohl seems to be the initiator of the fortunate course of history and it seems to be his own merit. As protagonist of the narration and as narrator Kohl becomes the inner and outer point of reference of the events. (Scheurle 2009, 183) Therefore, the history of the German reunification presents itself to the recipient as a coherent story without any contradictions, and the logic of history interprets Germany’s reunification also as the fulfillment of a supra-personal will, perfected by Helmut Kohl.

In this sense, the election spot seems to be a narrative attempt to render the person, the party and the state identical. The means of the narration procedure are less rational-argumentative but rather esthetical-persuasive. (Brombeck 1976) The spot could be an example for the attempt in principle to construct the national culture by the identities which are shown and treated in the film. Thus, it definitely influences the arising imaginations of the historical event.

Because of his engagement for the reunification of the nation Helmut Kohl is not only celebrated as a soloist, but is, moreover, presented as being the coherent and logical continuation of the work of his political predecessors. In this sense, Kohl’s success in the reunification is also the fulfillment of his predecessors’ legacy. As Kohl is the personification of the nation the collectives of nation and party seem to be merged performatively in his person as “Der Kanzler der Einheit” (“the chancellor of the reunification”), and chancellor, party and nation appear to be identical in these presentations.

The spot suggests that every recipient and voter can participate in the aura and glory of chancellor and nation, if he is voting for Helmut Kohl and the CDU. The success of the German unification appears to be not only the logical consequence of all the endeavors, but the spot also promises that Kohl will guarantee the continuity of history in the future – if he is elected. Although the spot thus formulates an open offer for identity to the voter and recipient, it also takes up the absolutistic idea of sovereign and state by this authoritarian gesture: *La réunification – c’est moi!* There, however, is the other side: The unity of the nation – and this is the unavoidable threat of the spot – can only be secured by the re-election of the CDU chancellor.

Finally, it has to be asked, if and how such a procedure – seen from a today’s perspective – is only an anachronism, because the idea of an “‘autonomous’, self-determined, unified, coherent subject” (Eickelpasch and Rademacher 2004, 10) seems to be not only obsolete, but the national offers for identification also become more and more problematic: the concept of a nation as “a communities of the same blood and origin” (Eickelpasch and Rademacher 2004, 72) has been revealed to be a fiction. In other words: Can the idea of a nation still be a narrative in the 21. century, can it still be able to combine heterogeneous groups and individuals together into a collective?

If one looks at the just finished election campaign for the president in the USA, the question has to be answered with “yes”. (I am, of course, aware of the impossibility to equate the European concepts for identity with those of the Americans.) The analysis of Obama’s speech at his victory and the “concession speech” of his challenger Mitt Romney shows that in both speeches the national identity is used to bridge the intra-cultural differences, which have been revealed during the election campaign. Mitt Romney as the loser congratulates Barack Obama for his victory and prays to God for a successful leadership in guiding the nation^{xii}, and in his victory speech the victor Obama conjures up the unity of the nation:

»We are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions and we remain more than a collection of red states and blue states. We are, and forever will be, the United States of America.«^{xiii}



Again, we find here the effort „to standardize nations by discourse” (Eikelpasch and Rademacher 2004, 74). The unity is conjured up and the cultural differences between Republicans and Democrats which have been uncovered intentionally during the election campaign will now be evaluated as marginal – one could say: “they are deconstructed again”. Once again, the nation is assembled under the “commander in chief”, being a community with the same destiny. The identity of the nation is reformulated by a ritual gesture – Obama`s victory speech – or renewed by the “concession speech” (Romney).

The way how the national values und symbols are used and presented resembles strongly the way shown in the spot. To me it seems that the construction of national identity uses the same performative strategies and methods – here and there.

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Spot:

- *Sicher in die Zukunft – CDU* (TV-Commercial 1994, Colour: 2 minutes, 30 seconds; source: Archiv der Adenauer Stiftung)

ⁱ All quotations of this book have been translated by the author from german into english

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^{iv} Mercer quoted in: Bechhofer, Frank & McCrown, David: *National Identity, Nationalism and Constitutional Change*, Palgrave/McMillan 2009: 7

^v All quotations of this book have been translated by the author from german into english.

^{vi} All quotations of this book have been translated by the author from german into english.

^{vii} All quotations of this book have been translated by the author from german into english.

^{viii} All quotations of this book have been translated by the author from german into english.

^{ix} All photos are screenshots from the commercial *Sicher in die Zukunft - CDU*

^x All quotations of this book have been translated by the author from german into english.

^{xi} See Scheurle 2009: 142, Footnote 169

^{xii} Vgl. etwa: <http://www.zeit.de/video/2012-11/1952561626001/us-praesidentschaftswahl-romney-gesteht-niederlage-ein>; zugriff: 25.11.2012

^{xiii} Transcript of President Obama’s Election Night Speech; In: The New York Times, November 7th 2012; URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/07/us/politics/transcript-of-president-obamas-election-night-speech.html?pagewanted=3>