

# THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA – ONE OF EUROPE’S GREATEST HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHES THROUGH A TRANSMEDIAL LENS

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In 1989 Julian Barnes dedicates one chapter of his novel *A History of the World in 10 and 1/2 Chapters* to a “Shipwreck”.<sup>1</sup> In 2011 German video-artist Marcel Odenbach created a video he entitled *Im Schiffbruch nicht schwimmen können* (“Unable to Swim in Shipwreck”). In 2017 the Austrian writer Franzobel (Franz Stefan Griebel), Ingeborg Bachmann Prize winner of 1995, published his highly acclaimed novel *Das Floß der Medusa* (“The Raft of the Medusa”).<sup>2</sup> In 2020 Alexander Polzin, sculptor, stage director, designer and visual artist, together with musical director Laurence Dreyfus and his Phantasm Ensemble, and choreographer Sommer Ulrickson created a dance-music-theatre performance for the Berlin Pierre Boulez Hall from 20 to 22 March 2020.<sup>3</sup> In 2022 the Salzburg Schauspielhaus produced an adaptation of Franzobel’s novel for the stage, which was written and directed by Susi Weber. These works of literature and art are only a few examples of how the shipwreck of the French frigate Medusa in 1816 was turned into art.<sup>4</sup> Dealing with the same incident in history, they may be explored from a transmedial vantage point, both in terms of their mutual interdependencies and their shared debt to one of the most famous paintings held by the Louvre: Théodore Géricault’s *Le radeau de la Méduse* (1819, oil on canvas). The foundation for Géricault (and subsequent artists) was laid by Jean Baptiste Henri Savigny’s record of the shipwreck, which appeared in September 1816 in the *Journal des débats*, a few days later in *The Times* in English, and was then published together with Alexandre Corréard in 1817 as *Naufrage de la frégate la Méduse, faisant*

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<sup>1</sup> All references to this chapter are taken from: London: Jonathan Cape, 1989. Page numbers will be given in brackets.

<sup>2</sup> Franzobel, *Das Floß der Medusa* (Wien: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> “The Art of Being Human – Interview with Sommer Ulrickson, Laurence Dreyfus and Alexander Polzin,” Pierre Boulez Saal, February 4, 2020, video, 4:40, [https://youtu.be/Lm\\_onsJ0vf8](https://youtu.be/Lm_onsJ0vf8).

<sup>4</sup> Among further (musical) dramatisations, novels and films we may list: Georg Kaiser’s play *Das Floß der Medusa* (1940–43); Hans Werner Henze’s oratorium *Das Floß der Medusa*, 1968; Peter Weiss’ *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* [The Aesthetics of Opposition], 1975; Iradj Azimi’s film *Le radeau de la Méduse*, 1998; Günter Seuren’s novel *Das Floß der Medusa*, 2004.

*partie de l'expédition du Sénégal, en 1816*, which ran through 5 editions.<sup>5</sup> Here is a brief summary of the events.

In late June 1816, after the final defeat of Napoleon and the *Treaty of Paris*, France sent a convoy of four ships to West Africa with soldiers, merchants and officials on board. Its mission was to reclaim from the English the isle Saint-Louis and a few trading posts in Senegal. Among this small force (corvette, flute, brig) was the impressive frigate *Medusa*, which was commanded by the inexperienced Captain Hugues Duroy de Chaumareys, a veteran who had served under Louis XVI and who was now serving Louis XVIII. When the *Medusa* grounded on the Arguin sandbank off the coast of Mauretania, the lifeboats were not capacious enough for all 400 passengers, and a makeshift raft was constructed from the frigate's masts and timbers. The rescue boats were to tow this 'machine' with 147 passengers, but soon the ropes were cut and the occupants, huddled together and standing up to the middle in water, were abandoned to the sea, storms, and the burning sun, with hardly any provisions on board and without any technical means of controlling the raft. Within a couple of days chaos broke out, resulting in mutinies, homicide, murder, massacres and cannibalism. After 13 days adrift, the funeral raft was found by the brig *Argus* with only 15 survivors on board – emaciated bodies, wounded and delirious from the hardships they had endured. Among the survivors were the engineer-geographer Alexandre Corréard and Jean Baptiste Henri Syvigny, the ship's surgeon, who recorded the happenings on his voyage back to France. His initial account caused a scandal and was suppressed, but pirate copies were circulated. Savigny and Corréard's joint publication in 1817 aroused enormous interest, both as historical evidence and as a lasting stimulus for the arts.

The shipwreck of the *Medusa* poses particular challenges for the creative reception. Most of its first-hand witnesses died (those abandoned on the raft) or tried to cover up happenings (the Admiralty and those in the lifeboats cutting, or witnessing the cutting of, the ropes). The world's knowledge of the trials of the raft hinges on the record of two involved eyewitnesses: Savigny and Corréard. From their own account to contemporary recreations, the crux has been how to communicate one of the greatest catastrophes in the history of Western civilisation. Hence all artworks and performances discussed in my paper – painting, music- and dance-theatre, film, novel – in one form or another tackle the question of how to express, or re-create, the unspeakable and unfathomable. Variegated as the formats are, they share a pivotal aesthetic strategy – that of harnessing or

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<sup>5</sup> On the circumstances and reception of the publication and its editions see Albert Alhadeff, *The Raft of the Medusa: Géricault, Art, and Race* (Munich / London: Prestel, 1988), 14–5, and Albert Alhadeff, "Julian Barnes and *The Raft of the Medusa*," *The French Review* 82, no. 2 (Dec. 2008): 276–91.

creating a recipient situation, be it that of spectator, auditor, viewer, listener or reader. This paradigm of reception and production is central to the transmedial process of re-telling, dramatising, performing or choreographing the story of Medusa's shipwreck, commemorating the historical tragedy whilst reviving what has become a central myth of crisis, commonly known as "the raft of the Medusa", in ever new time-space realities.

The *transmedial hermeneutics* which informs my comparative study of six interconnected works of art, is taken from my chapter "Transmedialisation between Transitivity and Creativity."<sup>6</sup> To clarify my approach, I should like to recall key premises:

In its broadest sense, *transmedial* reflects a research perspective that understands medial phenomena and formats in terms of their relations to other medial phenomena and formats. These are not only the legacy of modernist art theory and practice, but have intriguing aesthetic and ethic implications in the digital era [...] (38)

Transmedialisation suggests "a tension between media-specificity and media-transitivity, which is not least owed to the compound *trans-medial*<sup>7</sup> and which constitutes the framework [...] for conceptualising the fundamental 'relation between the sign and the signified<sup>8</sup> in the context of media-technological communication". (39-40)

*The concept 'transmedialisation' pinpoints the relation between medial configurations and what is meant by them.* (40)

The paradigm of continuation and transformation has proved rewarding for the study of quite distinct spheres of culture, as is suggested by a range of cultural theories over the last couple of decades as diverse as Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973),<sup>9</sup> theories of interfigurality and intertextuality,<sup>10</sup> approaches to mythology<sup>11</sup> and narrato-

<sup>6</sup> Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, "Transmedialisation between Transitivity and Creativity," in Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Christopher Herzog, Hg., *Transmedialisierung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2019), 37–59. All subsequent quotations are from this chapter, page numbers will be indicated in brackets.

<sup>7</sup> See Jäger's survey of different definitions of 'transmediality' and the innate etymological ambiguity of the term in Ludwig Jäger, "Jenseits von Medien: Transkriptionstheoretische Bemerkungen zum Begriff der Transmedialität," in Coelsch-Foisner and Herzog, *Transmedialisierung*, 193–217.

<sup>8</sup> In this context see Borck, "Vermittlung als Verwandlung: Transmedialisierung und Transsubstantiation in der Hirnforschung", in Coelsch-Foisner and Herzog, *Transmedialisierung*, 143–60.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> Heinrich F. Pletti, ed., *Intertextuality* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1991); Wolfgang G. Müller and Ines Detmers, eds., *Don Quijotes Intermediales Nachleben: Don Quixote's Intermedial Afterlives* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2010); Wolfgang G. Müller, "Intermedialität: Text und Musik," *ZAA49* (2001): 180–3; Wolfgang G. Müller, "Namen als intertextuelle Elemente," *Poetica* 23 (1991), 139–65.

<sup>11</sup> See Herwig Gottwald's survey of theories of myth: *Spuren des Mythos in moderner deutschsprachiger Literatur: Theoretische Modelle und Fallstudien* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007).

logy, reception theory, reader-response criticism and genetic criticism,<sup>12</sup> including concepts of (mediated) witnessing.<sup>13</sup> Further to modernist and postmodernist notions of change, transmedial processes of interpretation and communication may be regarded as vital for cultural production and a guarantee of its heritage, both material and immaterial. (47-48)

The concept of transmedialisation does not simply address the chronology of creative productions and receptions, but calls into question both the binary logic and the hierarchy of production and reception, of representation and what is represented and, still more importantly, of the perceiver and the perceived. Consequently, it foregrounds the productive, receptive, and interactive mechanisms of (re-)constructing meaning as the subject matter of research. (48)

In the light of such inherent transmedialisations, cultural production studies must account *both* for the productive processes of *mise-en-scene* and transmission and for the receptive processes of interpretation and (re-)constructing meaning. Such interdependence constitutes a transmedial principle, whether seen as transformation, integration or re-creation. *Transmedialisation may be understood as a hermeneutics that is both science and art.* (59)

To illustrate the process of transmedialisation in the examples selected, I shall address the relation between reception and production in terms of 1) the biographical dimension, 2) visualising the sublime and 3) the tension between media-specificity and media-transitivity.

### THE BIOGRAPHICAL DIMENSION

Experiences and incidents in history bear no name or title. These are given in retrospect by chroniclers and historiographers, journalists, scholars, and the common people. The titles "The Raft of the Medusa", "Das Floß der Medusa" are translations of Géricault's heroic painting, which upon its initial exhibition was listed in the Salon catalogue as *Scène de*

<sup>12</sup> Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden, eds., *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); William Kinderman and Joseph E. Jones, eds., *Genetic Criticism and the Creative Process: Essays from Music, Literature, and Theater* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009); William Kinderman, *The Creative Process in Music from Mozart to Kurtág* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Gabriele Dolff-Bonekämper, "Late Experience of Loss – Mediated Witnessing – Future Memory," in Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, ed., *Memorialisation* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 65–76.

*nauffrage* (Scene of Shipwreck).<sup>14</sup> Géricault worked on the painting from 1818–1819. He worked under great physical and emotional strain and locked himself into a vast studio, which became a proto-romantic site of creation recalling the laboratory in which Frankenstein creates his monster in Mary Shelley's eponymous novel *Frankenstein* (1818). In his monograph *The Raft of the Medusa: Géricault, Art, and Race* (1988), Albert Alhadeff opens on the "amazing tale" of the painting's composition:

Géricault had assembled in the faubourg du Roule where he had stretched his immense canvas – it towers nearly five meters in height and runs more than seven meters in length – truncated thighs, dismembered arms and legs, severed heads, horrific body parts that transformed his work-space into a morgue, a gruesome mall for decomposing limbs. Dare we imagine the vile smell, pools of coagulated blood spattered on floor boards, and the sight of rats darting amidst rotten flesh.<sup>15</sup>

Alhadeff goes on to quote from Théophile Thoré's witness account dated 1843<sup>16</sup> and, while conceding the typically romantic features of gothic creation stories, he goes on to emphasize the documented physical and mental strain of Gaultier's artistic engagement with the event<sup>17</sup> and how "Théodore Géricault's grim struggle with the *Raft* preoccupied him entirely [...]."<sup>18</sup>

Géricault's sizeable oil tells a harrowing tale, a story of expendable lives, of convulsive trials, and passions that not only confronts the castaway's plight head-on but also alludes to the ordeal of the man who conceived the *Raft*, his travails, malaise, and consuming needs.<sup>19</sup>

In the act of creation, the painter's obsession with the sufferings of the men on the raft merges with his own ordeal as an artist who tackles his subject. Such total immersion is not just a *romantic* topos of creation, but equally characteristic of the creative labour

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<sup>14</sup> According to Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 101/2 Chapters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), 129. By contrast, Alhadeff notes *Scène d'un naufrage* [Scene of a Shipwreck]: Alhadeff, "Julian Barnes," 285.

<sup>15</sup> Alhadeff, *Raft of the Medusa*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> In his biographical sketch of Géricault, Eitner calls this phase "the most strenuous effort in his career". Lorenz Eitner, "Géricault, [Géricault] (Jean-Louis-André)Théodore," *Grove Art Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T031509>.

<sup>18</sup> Alhadeff, *Raft of the Medusa*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

undergone by the other artists examined in this paper. It is symptomatic of a process that has been called *invention ru réel*<sup>20</sup> by Géricault's biographers and may be understood as *mediated witnessing*. The term was created by Gabriele Dolff-Bonekämper in connection with the Exhibition *Zerstörte Vielfalt* in Berlin 2013,<sup>21</sup> which commemorated the victims of the Nazi regime. Mediated witnessing means compassion, empathy, vicarious suffering through acts of reception, sharing and re-creation. Hence a crucial role of art is to bear witness to what eludes direct experience and to turn audiences and creators into witnesses. Ezra Pound particularly valued transmedial re-creation and even saw the *construing* of a work of art as being enhanced by inter-artistic exchange. For him "an exquisite painting contains the seed for a hundred poems", and "a work of art is all the more rewarding for occasioning a hundred works in a different form of art for its exegesis."<sup>22</sup>

Engagement with an artwork that deeply affects the recipient constitutes an act of mediated witnessing, as is suggested by Marcel Odenbach, who translated Géricault's painting into a contemporary context. He interviewed African migrants who in their flight to Europe had survived the perilous voyage over the Mediterranean Sea. Odenbach, who has staged moving pictures and their acoustic accompaniment at many festivals and major art institutions, has variously dealt with history and trauma. In his video *Im Schiffbruch nicht schwimmen können* ("Unable to Swim in Shipwreck"), three Africans of different ages visit the Louvre in Paris and study a painting that is clearly recognizable as Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, even though it is not shown in full. Just as the ocean scenes in the video mean something different for Odenbach, who partly lives in Ghana, Géricault's painting serves a critical examination of trauma as it is contemplated by these migrants. It does not only remind *them* of their own perils and sufferings, it becomes a universal icon capable of encapsulating innumerable individual destinies. Odenbach's video connects the private and the public:

For this work, I held extensive interviews with the three Africans about their journey, or rather their flight, about their motivation and their lives. They spoke to me about their homesickness, their worries, their fears, and being foreign in their own country. They kept things from me, and were ready to be critical. I took just a few statements from these long discourses and decided not to use them orally, but in writing. They are silent

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<sup>20</sup> Régis Michel, *Géricault: L'invention ru réel* (Paris: Gallimard/Réunion des musées nationaux, 1992). See also Charles Clément, *Géricault: Étude biographique et critique avec le catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre du maître* (Paris: 1867 (3rd ed., enl. 1879), reprint with preface and catalogue supplement by Lorenz Eitner, New York 1974), 131–32; quoted in Alhadef, *Raft of the Medusa*, 9–10.

<sup>21</sup> Dolff-Bonekämper, "Late Experience of Loss."

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Gisbert Kranz, *Gedichte auf Bilder: Anthologie und Galerie* (München: dtv, 1975), back cover.

before the monumental image. Sitting at the seashore, dreaming of things far away. But what happens when the far away becomes home? The sea in my work is the sea in front of my home in Ghana that I see everyday. The sea that seems endless, peaceful, then again full of danger. Hope and the homeland, that for me as a German always also means rescue and flight. – *Marcel Odenbach*.<sup>23</sup>

By focusing the recipient stance, Odenbach also re-historicises and re-politicises Géricault's painting, which Alhadeff, in line with nineteenth-century critics like Charles Blanc<sup>24</sup> and Alfred Deberle,<sup>25</sup> considered a vital statement of Géricault's own abolitionist sympathies: "a black, a former slave [...] now stands at the very apex of Géricault's grand composition."<sup>26</sup> This is read as a reversal of roles: "Ironically, those deprived of freedom are to save their captors[...]"<sup>27</sup>. Though not preoccupied with the "exalted black at the helm"<sup>28</sup>, Odenbach's video contributes to a critical focus on the "interactions blacks and whites play on the *Raft*", notably on the "sacrificial victims [*arrachés à leurs familles, à leur patrie*] for France's thriving trade between herself and her colonies" in Géricault's time,<sup>29</sup> and on those Africans deprived of their homes and families in our time.

Alexander Polzin's bronze sculpture "The Raft of the Medusa" is modelled on Géricault's painting. As it expands in three-dimensional space, it becomes dramatic and, in a larger version, the central stage prop in the music-and-dance-theatre piece *The Art of Being Human*. As such it is dynamised and interacts with the dancers and musicians. It serves as a platform to sit or lie on, or to hold on to; it is taken apart, put together and removed from centre-stage to hold or leave individuals behind (to drown in the sea). This production was a collaboration between Alexander Polzin (visual artist), Alexander Dreyfus (treble viol and musical direction) and Sommer Ulrickson (choreography), which was

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<sup>23</sup> Marcel Odenbach, *Im Schiffbruch nicht Schwimmen können*, HD video, 8:15, 2011, Videoart at Midnight Editions – An Anthology of Artists' Films and Installations, accessed July 17, 2022, <https://www.videoart-at-midnight-editions.de/n-14-marcel-odenbach/>.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Blanc, *Histoire des peintres français au dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Cauville Frères, 1845), quoted in Alhadeff, "Julian Barnes," 285–87.

<sup>25</sup> Alfred Deberle, "Les Historiens de l'art," in François Thomas Pillon, ed., *L'année philosophique: Études critiques sur le mouvement des idées générales dans les divers ordres de connaissances*, 2 vols., (Paris: Gerner Baillié, 1868–69), quoted in Alhadeff, "Julian Barnes," 285–87.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 287. The French expressions are inserted from Corréard and Savigny's ardent call for the abolition of the slave trade in their report.

scheduled for performance at the Berlin Pierre Boulez Hall from 20–22 March 2020, but fell prey to the first lockdown upon the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. A distinct feature of its multi-sensory aesthetic was the creative team's joint effort to test and cope with challenging situations, to explore moments of exposure among them, to try unfamiliar postures and overcome fear together. At a deeper level, the performance was essentially symbolic rather than a mimetic re-creation of the historical event or of Géricault's composition, as Ulrickson argues: "We tend to think of 'human' as positive, even 'humane', while we are in a constant struggle with our own negative aspects that come with being human."<sup>30</sup> Their aim was to dive 'into the cracks', but to highlight the positive qualities of 'being human'. Coming from visual art, movement and music, all three artists stress the role of stage-art as a "laboratory for society" (Polzin), notably to explore "sociability and communication" artistically (Dreyfus): "If we as artists coming from really very different angles manage to get along with each other, then that sets a good example how we can deal with each other in society" (Polzin).

Artistic practice serves as vicarious experience, both for the artists involved and for the audience. Vicarious experience is an empathetic way of seeing, hearing, or moving with other creators, travellers and reporters. As Nicholas Humphrey argues in *The Inner Eye*, the majority of contemporary human experience is mediated rather than immediate:

[...] unlike the Yanamamo shaman, you have, let's say, travelled with Defoe, loved with Shakespeare, sung along with Verdi, laughed with Bunyan, and seen the world through the eyes of Rembrandt or van Gogh. From earliest youth you have been party to a culture which in effect, and maybe by design, drums into every one of us the accumulated experience of a multitude of other people's lives.<sup>31</sup>

Transmedial creation is a special form of such empathetic reception and re-creation, a way of placing a work, and harnessing its meaning, in relation to preceding works in a different artform.

In his acknowledgments, Franzobel describes how he had spent "thousands of days"<sup>32</sup> aboard the *Medusa*, the raft, and in the desert. Stage-director Susi Weber explains how her engagement with the catastrophe via Franzobel's novel evoked a more recent shipwreck- that of the *Costa Concordia* from 2012. She embarks on a voyage to the human body by projecting the heartbeat onto the drama on stage. In her adaptation, a percus-

<sup>30</sup> See the recorded interview on the performance "The Art of Being Human."

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Humphrey, *The Inner Eye* (1986; repr., New York: OUP Inc., 2002), 132.

<sup>32</sup> Franzobel, *Das Floß der Medusa*, 590.



sionist was placed in central backstage position, from where he could overlook all action. He accompanies the entire play, accelerating or slowing down the rhythm, stopping and commencing anew. This carefully timed solo composition was more than acoustic accompaniment. To witness the percussionist viscerally *produce* and vary the heartbeat<sup>33</sup> to emulate excitement, fear, life powerfully connected the actors and the spectators, in fact everyone present in the room.

Apart from such genre-specific instances of mediated witnessing and vicarious experience, we must bear in mind that all transmedial re-creations of the shipwreck ultimately originate in Savigny's witness account. It prompted Géricault to execute portraits of the survivors, anatomical studies of the human bodies, limbs, and corpses, their twisted postures, sketches of the cannibalism, the mutiny, and the rescue. This genetic process is the topic of the chapter "Shipwreck" in Barnes's history of the world.

"Shipwreck" concentrates on the transformation of history into art and, to this end, is divided into two parts, one narrative, the other exegetic. It is told by an omniscient voice, whose presence is felt in ironic comments, e.g. when the sailors and passengers on "the little flotilla"<sup>34</sup> are abandoned by the lifeboats:

But it was at this instant of greatest hope and expectation for those upon the raft that the breath of egotism was added to the normal winds of the seas. One by one, whether for reason of self-interest, incompetence, misfortune or seeming necessity, the tow-ropes were cast aside.<sup>35</sup>

The narrator's speculations are plausible from an ethical perspective, whilst acknowledging the limits of the imagination to be truthful to the passengers' distress: "It was impossible to form an idea of that first night which was not below the truth."<sup>36</sup> This perceived limitation points to the sublime, the second parameter in my transmedial study of "the raft of the Medusa".

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<sup>33</sup> This was explained by Susi Weber in our conversation on February 14, 2022. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, "Atelier Gespräch: Das Floß der Medusa – eine der großen Katastrophen der Menschheit, mit Angelika Walser und Susi Weber," UniTV, February 14, 2022, video, 59:55, <http://www.unityv.org/beitrag.asp?ID=1046>.

<sup>34</sup> Barnes, *History of the World*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 118.

## VISUALISING THE SUBLIME

The dilemma of *how* to express the unspeakable is addressed both in Franzobel's novel and in Weber's stage play: the men on the raft know that nobody would believe them if they were to survive. What they experience is too horrible, too extreme for humans to fathom. Both Barnes and Franzobel refer to a familiar trope in the pre- and high-Romantic gothic, where the scale of suffering and the immensity of phenomena prompt an operatic excess of action and gigantic or monstrous features: e.g. the huge helmet and plumes in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the boundless ugliness and, eventually, evil nature of Frankenstein's monster (1818), the ordeal, incarceration and perpetual swoons suffered by the noble Verezzi at the hands of the heinous Zastrozzi, the title hero in Percy Bysshe Shelley's juvenile gothic parody from 1810.<sup>37</sup>

The raft of the Medusa has fuelled the Romantic imaginary of the sublime and symptomatically prompted works of vast proportions. The measurements of Géricault's historical painting (oil on canvas) are 4.91 x 7.16 metres, Franzobel's novel is 600 pages, and in 1839 Auguste Pilati Friedrich von Flotow produced an excessive spectacle in the manner of grand opera in Paris.<sup>38</sup> Yet, even by expanding the physical dimensions of works of art and literature, they must fall short of what Franzobel describes as a '*no man's land* without decency and morals',<sup>39</sup> because the sublime by definition eludes reasoning and clarity. According to Edmund Burke's seminal aesthetic treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757),<sup>40</sup> "astonishment" constitutes the most powerful passion caused by the sublime.

[It] is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. [...] No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as *fear*. [...] Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.<sup>41</sup>

"Fear", "pain or death", "a prospect of the ocean", all aspects Burke addresses readily comply with the raft of the Medusa. For a study of transmedial relations, Burke's ideas on

<sup>37</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Zastrozzi* (1810; repr., London: Hesperus, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> See Sarah Hibberd, "Le Naufrage de la Méduse and Operatic Spectacle in 1830's Paris," *19th-Century Music* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 248–63.

<sup>39</sup> Susi Weber, "Das Floß der Medusa," play-text, unpublished manuscript, Dec. 2021, adapted from Franzobel's novel *Das Floß der Medusa* for the production 2022 at Schauspielhaus Salzburg, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Portable Edmund Burke*, ed. with an introd. Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin, 1999), 64.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

“uncertainty” and “obscurity” are illuminating. “To make anything very terrible, obscurity in general seems to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes.”<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, words are the province of uncertainty, because they can only raise “a very obscure and imperfect idea of such objects”<sup>43</sup>, whereas a painting “can at most affect only as the palace, temple or landscape would have affected in the reality. [...] In reality, a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever[...].”<sup>44</sup> Hence every effort to bring the infinite within the compass of the finite is an enemy to the terror a scene might otherwise affect. This has profound implications for the study of aesthetic strategies specific to visual, performative or narrative recreations of the pain and panic on the raft.

A central effort in all examples under scrutiny is the attempt to visualise incidents allegedly too gruesome and appalling to imagine. The last third of Franzobel’s novel deals with the horrors of cannibalism. More than two hundred pages are filled with revulsive accounts of truncated, bleeding bodies, amputated limbs, survivors greedily eating pewter, drinking urine, slicing and drying the flesh of corpses, and complaining about the stench of rotting flesh. Depicted with expressive accuracy, these scenes force readers to form stomach-turning mental images. Here lies the crux: the way these scenes affect readers is owed to their uncertainty and imprecision, however precisely they are told. Hence, the question seems to be less what readers *can* imagine than what they *are ready* to imagine.

Readers are made to see with their inner eye what is commonly withheld from their eyes: the inside of the body – organs, intestines, blood, bones, the brain, as well as violent scenes: a body disappearing between the teathed jaws of a shark (an undoubtedly sublime horror image), a knife cutting human flesh or an axe splitting a body. Such scenes are offered in abundance and told with detached humour. For Franzobel’s novel is all but a medico-scientific account of cannibalism. His omniscient narrator holds our interest, because he is a quick-witted mediator between Chaumarey’s France and today’s society. He is no doubt indebted to Barnes’s authorial comments as he ambivalently bridges over two centuries whilst producing an aesthetic distance from the dying men’s pain and their disfigured physique. Metaphor is the name of the game. Franzobel’s novel abounds in macabre-grotesque images, such as the raft which looks like a mixture of a child’s

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

drawing and an artificial set of teeth with holes. Innumerable references to contemporary life, pop-culture, and racy slogans function as a buffer-zone for readers to stretch their willingness to picture Franzobel's laboratory of cruelty.

The power of the novel rests with the narrator's sardonic comments and reasoning. "Who would have thought", he ponders, "that fifty hours would suffice to turn men into cannibals? Colonists, who were supposed to teach the savages European values, had transformed into cannibals."<sup>45</sup> For large parts of the novel, Savigny, the ship's second surgeon, serves as a focaliser, whose thoughts are rendered in italics. Thus, when he pulls out a knife stuck in a man's chest, he perceives the latter's body rising up and his arms stretching out towards him, before it falls back again. The potential horror of the spectacle is left to the reader's imagination, whereas Savigny offers his laconic diagnosis: *Lazarus syndrome*<sup>46</sup>. When men begin to eat the flesh of the corpses, he "felt like a fasting man in a restaurant, a vegan at a barbecue party."<sup>47</sup> When that miserable man has his lower half bitten off by a shark, the narrator observes the intestines hanging down from the trunk and concludes that no toothpick will be needed anymore, since the man had a wooden leg.<sup>48</sup> When the poor victim realises the scope of the injury, his reaction is supreme *terror* and *fear* – his eyes almost spring out of their holes – while the narrator drily notes: "Here, no prostheses are of any help anymore!" While playing on the readers' expectation of superlative feelings and excessive gestures common in gothic texts, we are denied the errands and hesitations of an unreliable narrator – a prime instance of the sublime. The madness and delirium suffered by the men on the raft are recorded with insatiable curiosity and grim humour, simultaneously evoking and controlling the sublime. No dramatic exclamations or shrieks of horror are uttered by the narrator, who prefers the role of picaresque<sup>49</sup> to that of an awestruck or hallucinating emotional victim. Savigny never ceases being a scientist. For him the voyage on the raft is an experiment in a vast anthropological laboratory.<sup>50</sup> Significantly, Savigny only feels close to tears, when his scientific notes are thrown overboard, and is relieved to see Victor, the young sailor who be-

<sup>45</sup> Franzobel, *Das Floß der Medusa*, 471, my translation.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 448.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 468, my translation.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 542.

<sup>49</sup> This role is also noted by Bernhard Sandbichler in his review of Franzobel's novel *Die Eroberung Amerikas* [The Conquest of America], 2021. Bernhard Sandbichler, "Die Eroberung des historischen Romans: Franzobel verpasst dem Roman neue Dimensionen," *Literatur und Kritik* 553/554, no. 2 (2021): 86–9.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Alexander Košenina, "Roman und Gemälde als 'allégorie réelle': Menschenexperiment in Franzobels und Géricaults *Floß der Medusa*," *Zeitschrift für interkulturelle Germanistik* 9, no. 1 (2018): 105–17.

comes his assistant, clasp his glass with a pickled brain, as they clamber onto the raft (347). What Savigny hoped would be an “adventure” and a “unique experiment, a fantastic chance for science”,<sup>51</sup> turns into a ghastly nightmare. Yet, unlike the young and adventurous Victor, Savigny is no romantic and we must not expect pity from him, but empirical evidence, as when he notes that men standing 48 hours in water do not suffer from thirst, because of their limbs’ constant absorption of water. “Amazing, that’s something to note down later on.”<sup>52</sup>

Franzobel knows how to engage, shock and entertain his readers. Košenina relates his technique to that of a seasoned crime writer – first comes the shocking incident, then the analysis.<sup>53</sup> Still, the sublime lurks underneath the surface, as when a severed foot is described as formless, blurred, bloated, and greyish yellow<sup>54</sup>, leaving enough room for the reader’s imagination.

Franzobel’s *Das Floß der Medusa* (“The Raft of the Medusa”) is a frame narrative and opens on an idyllic vista of the sea on the Argus on a sunny day in summer, with azure blue sky, crystal clear air, dolphins following the ship, and all movements aboard the ship being in concerted harmony. The pleasant scene ends abruptly when the sailors behold a raft carrying fifteen wrecked bodies: “Then a grain of sand got into the gears.”<sup>55</sup> The second frame tells the arrival of the men in Saint Louis and Savigny’s futile effort to tell his story. Chapter 3 is entitled “No Rats”<sup>56</sup> and opens the story of the raft and its passengers, beginning with the disembarkation of the Medusa from the port of Rochefort and depicting the carnage on the raft from the first morning when Savigny wakes up in the midst of disembowelled corpses to the disposal of the unfit and unworthy by the fitter men to enhance their chance of survival. A white butterfly alights on the raft and is interpreted as a sign of divine mercy<sup>57</sup> by the dying men, who feed on the rotting flesh of the last cadaver.

The outer frame of the survivors’ rescue by the Argus closes with the narrator’s abrupt shift from an intra- to an extradiegetic perspective.<sup>58</sup> In an instant, the survivors are depicted from outside as naked, sunburnt, skinny, emaciated bodies covered all over with cracks and lacerations. They are taken to Saint Louis, where five more of them die. Savigny

<sup>51</sup> Franzobel, *Das Floß der Medusa*, 347.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 448.

<sup>53</sup> Košenina, “Roman und Gemälde als ‘allégorie réelle’”, 110.

<sup>54</sup> Franzobel, *Das Floß der Medusa*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 556.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 566.

is offered by Chaumareys to stay in Senegal as a doctor, but he declines and on his voyage back to France writes down his report of the shipwreck. The last twenty pages of the novel deal with the report's publication in the *Journal des débats*, the scandal it caused, the minister's efforts to suppress it and the proceedings against Chaumareys. At this point, the narrator self-consciously says: "All that remains is to tell the story of Victor"<sup>59</sup>, who was miraculously saved, returns to France and is welcomed by his parents, but will remain a solitary wanderer, a tongue-tied exile, engulfed by the monstrosity of his memories, unfit for human company and unable to tell his story: "*How should he [his father] believe something that was unbelievable?*[...] his father would not understand. Nobody would understand."<sup>60</sup> The verdict seals the story of the raft of the Medusa.

By contrasting Savigny and Victor, Franzobel contrasts two responses to the same experience – report and silence –, which are emblematic of the *art* of the novel. For the story initially printed as a "factual account"<sup>61</sup> is transformed by the novelist from historiography to fiction, albeit a "novel after a true incident" ("Roman nach einer wahren Begebenheit"). The closing acknowledgement addresses both the exigencies of historical truth and the writer's poetic licence. While expressing his thanks for travelling to the Senegal and the Mauretania border, the help offered him with nautical knowledge and terminology, Franzobel also thanks his family for "thousands of hours I spent aboard the Medusa, on the raft, or in the desert, and not with them"<sup>62</sup> and in so doing characterises the blend of his art between the rational (recording, commenting, visualising) and the sublime (warnings, prophesies, omens).

The Burkean binary of obscurity and clarity resonates in the impossibility of visual and performative art forms to *represent* extreme violence or ethically outrageous situations mimetically, without making them appear trivial or comically distorting them. Géricault himself believed that neither painting nor poetry could convey the extreme fear experienced by the passengers on the raft<sup>63</sup> and refrained from representing sensational scenes. Significantly, he only made one sketch of cannibalism, as Barnes notes: "The spotlight moment of anthropophagy shows a well-muscled survivor gnawing the elbow of a well-muscled cadaver. It is almost comic."<sup>64</sup> His judgment draws on Burke's *Inquiry*:

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 584.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 586–87.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 579.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 590.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. The reference is to Gregor Wedekind and Gregor Hollein, ed., *Géricault: Bilder auf Leben und Tod* (München: Hirmer, 2013), 83, quoted in Košenina, 108.

<sup>64</sup> Barnes, *History of the World*, 128.

clearness opposes the sublime, and since the scene captures an ethically taboo topic, clearness of depiction strikes us as comic.

Stage director Susi Weber combines acoustics, light and video projections showing a rough sea to suggest the terror on the raft. Blood is scarce on stage, and the only mutilation mimed is the amputation of Victor's leg. There is no mimetic suggestion of cannibalism on stage, given the limits to which audiences will stretch their "willing suspension of disbelief." In a conversation I had with Weber prior to the premiere,<sup>65</sup> she explained her approach to the cannibal scenes: the men on board the raft grab apples which they heartily crunch. Weber explained how that noise gave her the creeps each time the scene was rehearsed. The vigour and 'healthy appetite' it might suggest in contrast to the delirious, starving men provides a haunting discrepancy, which recalls the puns, conceits and discordant images in Franzobel's novel, such as bloodscaabs looking like Florentine biscuits<sup>66</sup>, or: when one man shouts, "Hey, doctor, what are you concocting?" the answer is "What is there to boil?"<sup>67</sup>. In their desperate craving for something to eat, the men imagine everything they see as having food value, grotesquely stretching their palates just as the narrator's farfetched conceits counterbalance our terror.

Barnes's narrator is more moderate in his intrusions than Franzobel's is when reporting the lurid scenes on the raft. But Barnes is more concerned with the dilemma the sublime poses for the visual and performative artists rather than with the writer's handling of terror. His comment on the iconographical deficiency of cannibalism in Géricault's painting pinpoints questions of transitivity and media specificity<sup>68</sup>.

## TRANSITIVITY AND MEDIA SPECIFICITY

Barnes divides his 'chapter' into two parts. The first is a vivid account of the ordeals of the passengers on the "fatal raft"<sup>69</sup>, notably hunger and thirst, delirium, nightmares, mutinies, massacres, and cannibalism. The second part answers the question, "How do you turn catastrophe into art?"<sup>70</sup>, meaning pictorial art, since Barnes is concerned with the act of painting, its conception and genesis, rather than the literary re-creation of history. Barnes

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<sup>65</sup> Sabine Coelsch-Foisner in conversation with stage director Susi Weber and theologian Angelika Walser on the occasion of the Salzburg Schauspielhaus (theatre) production *The Raft of the Medusa* (Das Floß der Medusa) Coelsch-Foisner, "Atelier Gespräch."

<sup>66</sup> Franzobel, *Das Floß der Medusa*, 448.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 449.

<sup>68</sup> Barnes, *History of the World*, 128.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 125.

diverts the reader's attention from the narrative of the first part, which evidently aestheticises the survivors' experience by using epithets like *fatal/raft*<sup>71</sup> and *crue/sacrifice*<sup>72</sup> as well as irony, such as: "The raft, which now carried less than half of its original complement, had risen up in the water, an *unforeseen benefit of the night's mutinies*."<sup>73</sup> (my italics). The monstrosity of the historical event resides in the narrative and what the words evoke in the recipients' imagination of happenings that are more nauseating than anything readers or spectators can have experienced in their lives. "We have to understand it, of course, this catastrophe; to understand it, we have to imagine it, so we need the imaginative arts. But we also need to justify it and forgive it, this catastrophe, however minimally."<sup>74</sup> Barnes makes the reader *understand* the catastrophe by beginning in the manner of an art historian with "truth to life", i.e. with biographical details about Géricault and the act of painting. Barnes again employs authorial intrusion when he wonders: "How did they [the survivors] feel about posing for this reprise of their sufferings?"<sup>75</sup> Barnes's exegesis begins in an unusual way: "Let us start with what he did not paint"<sup>76</sup> he suggests and arrives at the conclusion: "In other words his first concern was not to be 1) political; 2) symbolic; 3) theatrical; 4) shocking; 5) thrilling; 6) sentimental; 7) documentational; or 8) unambiguous."<sup>77</sup> The answer is straight-forward: "Well, at least it [the catastrophe] produced art. Perhaps, in the end, that's what catastrophe is *for*."<sup>78</sup>

The subsequent notes offer information on the painting in addition to arguments and speculations why certain scenes and moments of the historical event (such as cannibalism, throwing men overboard, the incident of the white butterfly, etc.) were not chosen by the painter. For Barnes the quintessence of what Géricault captured in his work is the suspension "between hope and fear", which the survivors experienced for half an hour, i.e. when they beheld a vessel on the horizon, which, however, "disappeared from the sea."<sup>79</sup> From this Barnes follows that Géricault did not paint "the hailing that led to the final rescue; that happened differently, with the brig suddenly close upon the raft and

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 123.



everyone rejoicing."<sup>80</sup> Barnes is concerned with "the mood of the picture"<sup>81</sup> and examines the discrepancies between the report and the scene represented in the painting, such as the number of survivors painted (20 men) as distinct from the 15 reported in Savigny's and Corr ard's report, or the fact that the raft is visible in the painting, whereas according to the report the passengers were standing in water up to their hips. By charting such inconsistencies, Barnes addresses the tension between transitivity and media-specificity: the rationale of painting, the pact between the creator and the recipient, the prevalence of (heroic) painting at that time, the requirements of decorum,<sup>82</sup> iconic conventions of subject matter, pose and manner, etc.

To read Barnes's chapter as primarily concerned with genre specifics would not explain his broader interest in the genetic transformation of the real into the imaginary (from "truth to life" to "truth to art"<sup>83</sup>), or rather from one medium into another, since the *reality* available to G ricault was Savigny, the geographer-engineer Corr ard, and a handful of survivors, whom he sketched. The rest was mediated reality, such as Corr ard's technical sketch and scale model of the raft as well as Savigny's account. Referring to Michelangelo's depiction of the Flood and Noah's Ark, Barnes also speaks of a 'reorientation' and 'revitalization'<sup>84</sup>, by which he means that during those eight months of seclusion in his studio, G ricault evolved the "emotional structure" of the painting, i.e. "the oscillation between hope and despair"<sup>85</sup>. Linking the *conditio humana* with art, Barnes argues that "[T]he painting has slipped history's anchor"<sup>86</sup>, the particular in history becomes the universal. At this point Alhadeff disagrees with Barnes on the grounds that the latter ignores the presence of blacks aboard the raft and, in particular, overlooks the pivotal role of the black who leads the pyramid and desperately waves a piece of cloth to be seen by the ship on the horizon. Where political readings of G ricault as a transgressive *all gorie r elle* (Ko enina) with abortionist overtones in the guise of Burke's aesthetic (Alhadeff), differ from Barnes' exegesis, the Burkean sublime holds true for all of them and, from a transmedial perspective, is apt to explain the muscular, well-built bodies in G ricault's *Raft*: Had G ricault presented "[s]hrivelled flesh, suppurating wounds [...] the painting

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 131. In this point, interpretations of the painting differ.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Ko enina, "Roman und Gem lde als 'all gorie r elle,'" 109.

<sup>83</sup> Barnes, *History of the World*, 135.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 137.

would be acting on us too directly."<sup>87</sup> Barnes' argument stresses the necessary *obscurity* in Burke's philosophy of the sublime and draws our attention to the stage, where healthy actors' or dancers' bodies impersonate the miserable passengers and their tribulations. Theatre is bound to rely on different means.

Susi Weber shifts the focus from the gruesome cannibals and cadavers to the voyeurism which the frame-plot suggests. The conversation between captain Chaumareys and Savigny is the opening party of an exhibition of sea paintings, with exquisite finger-food and bottles of champagne displayed on two long party tables stage-left and stage-right. In the midst of this decadent setting the 'story' of the raft unfolds. The raft is a wooden platform with a mast. A red rope is loosely tied around it, as if to demarcate the exhibition from the visitor space. Intradiegetically, it divides the passengers on the raft from the rescued captain and his officers, Schmaltz, the governor of the colony and his family, who are simultaneously the guests of the exhibition. Savigny, Victor and those abandoned enact their ordeal on the raft. When the ropes are cut, the two groups are separated, but they still interact. To amputate Victor's leg, Schmaltz's wife Reine hands a knife over to the raft; condescending jokes are made by Chaumareys and his crew; champagne is poured over the miserable passengers on the raft, and while the party guests nibble party food throughout the play while they hypocritically justify their repudiable conduct, Savigny and his men are tormented with hunger.

In Weber's adaptation the raft is both a visual artwork, exposed to the survivors in the gallery, and a stage, on which the (reported) drama is performed. Reported and reporting time coalesce, and the scenes on the raft are visualised for both the party-guests and the audience. As the audience witness (and sympathise with) the victims, they are also made accomplices of the sadistic regime of the incompetent Chaumareys, who demonstrates his absolute power over the ship: when on the Medusa a sailor is brutally lashed for a petty offence, which is not even attributable to him, and eventually dies after 40 lashes, the entire cast is lined up on the front stage and faces the audience. The light turns blood red, they count the number of whiplashes, which are acoustically amplified by the drums. What makes this scene so brutal, since the flogged man is nowhere *shown*?

To answer this question, we must look into theatre's special relation to Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry*. Poetry, he argues "with all its obscurity, has a more general, as well as a more powerful, dominion over the passions, than the other art [painting]."<sup>88</sup> Burke could not foresee how painters like Géricault or William Turner would render the "obscure

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>88</sup> Burke, *The Portable Edmund Burke*, 67.

idea<sup>89</sup> in their works and fill them with passion and pathos. Géricault, who was aware of the impossibilities of rendering the intense fears of the passengers on the raft,<sup>90</sup> is commonly praised for the affective quality and the emotional immediacy of his work, for making the sensations of the bodies represented palpable. Košenina credits him with inaugurating a “revolution in painting” by moving from “demonstratio” to “significatio.”<sup>91</sup> With the human-size figures forming a pyramid in the middle, the double-size corpses in the foreground and the front corner of the raft pointing towards the spectators, the latter are enthralled by the forced participation and proximity to the scene. Theatre *embodies* figures and events. Its media-specificity, however, is not the visual, the auditive, or the kinetic per se, but the furtive *rendering* visible, audible, or perceptible of characters, actions, plots and settings. Absence is as meaningful in performance as is presence. To make silences, breaks, invisible characters and settings resonate in audiences is the creative challenge of theatre’s multiple authors – director, designers, actors and actresses, musician(s), technicians – who jointly ‘strive for form’, to use Barnes’ image. Moment for moment, the performance resolves the tension between absence and presence, negotiating media-transitivity and media-specificity. Absence is conducive to the Burkean obscure and the arousal of violent passions, be it in Franzobel’s verbal evocation of horror, in Géricault’s painting, as Barnes suggests, or in the specific dynamic of stage play.

The transmedialisation of Savigny’s report in different arts *pinpoints the relation between medial configurations and what is meant by them.*<sup>92</sup> A crucial momentum in this sense-making or semiophoric<sup>93</sup> process are the lacks and binaries inscribed in the event – the living and the dead, hope and despair, the dominant and the serving classes, blacks and

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> The reference is to Wedekind and Hollein, *Géricault*, 83, quoted in Košenina, “Roman und Gemälde als ‘allégorie réelle’”, 108.

<sup>91</sup> Košenina, “Roman und Gemälde als ‘allégorie réelle’”, 107.

<sup>92</sup> Coelsch-Foisner, “Transmedialisation between Transitivity and Creativity,” 40.

<sup>93</sup> I owe the term “semiophoric” to Krzysztof Pomian’s theory of collections, according to which the objects in a collection (whether publicly exhibited or privately amassed) connect the visible with the invisible, the presence of the material with the absent, whether remote and distant in time or in space, or different, as the divine or Other (see Krzysztof Pomian, “Relics, Collections, and Memory,” in Coelsch-Foisner, *Memorialisation*, 27–42). For the purpose of the study of cultural productions, I’ve applied this concept to the analysis of theatre productions. See Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, “Das Paratheatrale, das Genetische und das Semiophorische – ein Forschungsprogramm zur wissenschaftlich-künstlerischen Erschließung theatraler Produktion,” in Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Timo Heimerdinger, eds., *Theatralisierung* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2016), 1–26.

whites, colonisers and colonised, ocean and land, good and evil, civilised and savage, peril and safety, home and abroad, etc. All works are characterised by strategies to make these divisions heard and resonate in the recipient. The master narrative of all subsequent transmedialisations provides the key for this: When Savigny's report was heard in Saint Louis, it aroused little interest; when his written manuscript was printed and read by the French, it provoked a scandal – because the behaviour of Frenchmen sailing under the flag of the grand nation to what was in their opinion savage Africa, was a blow to the achievements of civilisation. That was but one construction of the shipwreck and its consequences.

Géricault focuses on the moment of greatest suspense between hope and despair, for which he vastly puts aside the physical horrors he had studied with such assiduity. Géricault, of course, could rely on contemporary viewers to be familiar with the historical event. The process traceable from his travels and meetings, anatomical studies, sketches, portraits from the life, and a model of the raft to the monumental painting is “from reportorial realism to a broadly humanitarian statement, putting the emphasis not on the scandalous circumstances of the disaster but on the suffering and struggle of men abandoned to the forces of nature”, as Lorenz Eitner argues:

The problem he had set himself was the extremely difficult one of treating a contemporary occurrence in the exalted language of monumental art: the newspaper story of the wreck of a government frigate and the shameful abandonment of its crew was to be raised to the tragic power of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* or Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>94</sup>

Géricault's *Raft* is a painterly solution to Burke's inquiry into the binaries of the sublime and the beautiful, preferring Michelangelesque bodies to drastic realism in the service of the sublime, which obviates unequivocal clarity and precision. The composition is almost divided into two halves, the front area shows the dead and dying, whereas the survivors move or point upward, with their backs to the viewers as they wave for help, “almost triumphant, celebratory in being alive.”<sup>95</sup> Recent transmedialised renderings of Savigny's account shift the barbarism on board the raft to the social, political, racial and ethical inequalities, which culminate in the moment when the ruling classes visibly dissociate themselves from the lower ranks by cutting the ropes. The shocking element is not so much the cannibalism on the raft, but the division between the privileged and the

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<sup>94</sup> Eitner, “Géricault.”

<sup>95</sup> Marilyn Brouwer, “Favorite paintings in Paris: *Le Radeau de la Méduse* by Théodore Géricault,” April 2, 2019, <https://bonjourparis.com/art/favorite-paintings-in-paris-le-radeau-de-la-meduse/>.

underprivileged, the hypocrisy, selfishness and lack of compassion on the part of those in power, as Susi Weber explains in my conversation with her.<sup>96</sup>

Franzobel's novel has been described as a mirror, a parable, a microcosm or *allégorie réelle*<sup>97</sup> of post-Napoleonic French society and its colonial politics. Yet it is, as much as Géricault's painting,<sup>98</sup> a transgressive *allégorie réelle*, with the roles of colonisers and colonised subverted, both on the raft and in the desert of Africa, where the rescued survivors are all but welcome by the natives. Thus, while a third of Franzobel's novel throws the cannibalist barbarism in his readers' face, the outrage is equally attributed to the colonial arrogance and hypocrisies with which the ruling classes acquit themselves of their responsibilities. From a structural and narratological perspective, his account is balanced between gothic and enlightenment, between Savigny's sober view and Victor's romantic ideals.

Polzin's music-dance theatre spectacle meta-theatrically re-creates the catastrophe by dramatising scenes on and around his sculpture. The focus is less on truth to life than on what the incident signifies in a contemporary stage context: facing insuperable difficulties, fear, exposure, trust, compassion in order to address the negative and positive sides of human nature. Weber confronts the shipwreck of the Medusa and its consequences head-on as the bankruptcy of humanity, which is the failure of humans, not monsters. The thwarted ideals of the French Revolution – equality, liberty, and fraternity – are expressed in the costume design, which is divided between lavish period design, exaggerated makeup and wigs for the captain and his royalist friends and contemporary outfits for the suppressed and abandoned ones. The historical dimension of the disaster is transmedially translated into a humanitarian catastrophe, and the plea for democracy is insistently brought home by its negative: luxury foodstuffs versus starvation, upright versus crouched or lying postures, contrasting styles, gestures and speech habits, which audiences readily understand.

Odenbach transfers the historical moment of the shipwreck to a provocative spectator scene in the Louvre, with three Africans contemplating Géricault's *Le radeau de la Méduse*. The camera darts from details on the canvas to details of their posture, faces, dress, and hairstyle. The video is interspersed with transliterated passages from Odenbach's interviews with African migrants. What is perturbing is the fact that their statements are transliterated and not spoken by them. Why are they not given a voice? Odenbach's video is reminiscent of W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938) on

<sup>96</sup> Coelsch-Foisner, "Atelier Gespräch," Section 4, "Humour and Cynicism."

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Košenina, "Roman und Gemälde als 'allégorie réelle,'" 105, 116.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Ken Lum's chapter on the painting, "On Board The Raft of the Medusa," in *Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life. 1991–2018* (Montreal: Concordia UP, 2020), 36–41.

Pieter Breughel the Elder's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The focus of the poem is less on the Greek myth as on the disinterested standers-by who take no notice of Icarus falling into the sea. The sailing boat, the ploughman and everybody in the picture scandalously ignore the tragedy. Auden's quietly accusing voice is echoed in the mute(d) Africans of Odenbach's video, in the colonisers' irreverent comments about subordinates and slaves and their incessant consumption of food in Weber's stage play. Each of the examples under scrutiny resolves the multiple divisions enshrined in the event and its first account by re-negotiating the tension between transitivity, i.e. reception, and media-specificity, i.e. production in biographical, aesthetic, political and ethical terms. In so doing they attest to the fluidity of this tension in the transmedial history of "the raft of the Medusa".