
**REMEMBERING THE VÖLKERSCHLACHT (BATTLE OF THE NATIONS)
1813 AND ITS MONUMENT FROM 1913 IN THE 21TH CENTURY. THE
LEIPZIG COMMEMORATION ACTIVITIES IN 2013¹.**

**RECORDANDO LA VÖLKERSCHLACHT (BATALLA DE LAS NACIONES)
DE 1813 Y SU MONUMENTO DE 1913 EN EL SIGLO XXI. LAS
ACTIVIDADES DE LA CONMEMORACIÓN DE 2013 EN LEIPZIG.**

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Abstract: In this article I want to analyze and discuss the approaches in the 2013-commemoration of the Battle of the Nations in Leipzig taken by official political sides and civil society. With the perspective of a theater scientist I analyze which esthetic and discursive strategies are used to shape the discourse over this historical event in October 1813 and the 1913 erected monument, the biggest landmark in the Leipzig region. The main focus is the official act of remembrance, the re-enactments of soldiers and civilians and the theater projects by independent groups which probably offer alternative views to the official remembrance discourse.

Keywords: Battle of Nations, *Völkerschlachtdenkmal*, remembrance culture, re-enactment, theater.

Resumen: Mi objetivo en este artículo es analizar y discutir los enfoques de la conmemoración de la Batalla de las Naciones llevados a cabo por las autoridades y la sociedad civil de Leipzig a lo largo del año 2013. Con la perspectiva de un científico del teatro analizo el tipo de estrategias discursivas y estéticas utilizadas para conformar el discurso sobre este acontecimiento histórico acontecido en 1813 y su monumento de 1913, el punto de referencia más importante de la región de Leipzig. El principal foco

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de interés se centra en el acto conmemorativo oficial, las reconstrucciones llevadas a cabo por soldados y civiles y los proyectos teatrales escenificados por grupos independientes que, probablemente, ofrecen visiones alternativas frente al discurso conmemorativo oficial.

Palabras clave: Batalla de las Naciones, *Völkerschlacht*denkmal, cultura conmemorativa, reconstrucción, teatro.

1. Panorama 1813-1913-2013.

Between the 16th and 19th October 1813 the biggest battle in European history – up to this point – took place in and around Leipzig. Over half a million of soldiers from several nations – Russians, French, Austrians, Prussians etc. – fought for several days and ended Napoleon's military plans of ruling Europe. Over 100.000 soldiers died during those days and with them the same number of civilians due to the following famine, plagues etc. Even today rests of ammunition and other relicts can be found on the former battlefields which nowadays have the status of a landscape monument and are mainly used as crop fields. The battle meant a big defeat of Napoleon's forces which had to retreat behind the Rhine river.

The victory over Napoleon did not only lead to the Congress of Vienna in 1815 which redefined the political landscape all over Europe but also started a strong nationalist movement, especially in the German states. Divided into several states the ideas of a unified nationality became more and more popular among German intellectuals and bourgeois forces and in the revolution of 1848 with its center in Frankfurt the national assembly even tried to convince the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV to take the title as German Kaiser, which he neglected. With the Prussian-Austrian war in 1866 and the German-French war in 1870/71 the unification of the German Reich was achieved with military strength and not being given from the hands of civilians. But the national spirit remained strong and the citizens of Leipzig decided to build a national monument in remembrance of the 1813-battle. The plans delivered Freemason Bruno Schmitz, and the nationalist civil association *Deutscher Patriotenbund* (German Patriots' Alliance) organized building and funding. It was not a state owned monument. The dimensions are huge. The height is 91 meters, and its basis is 80 x 70 meters. The material is mostly concrete. The erection took 15 years and it was opened in 1913 by the German Kaiser and Prussian King Wilhelm II.. He did not like monumental

style and even left the celebrations of the monument to attend the parallel commemoration activities of the Russian and Austrian monarchs.

From its beginning the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* was part of nationalist and *völkisch*² discourses. Also it was at first a civil opposition to the monarchy, which included mainly bourgeois and nationalist forces. The workers' movements had no connection with the monument, and denying any respect the social-democrats just called it a "pile of stones".³

During World War I the monument was a prominent spot for patriotic acts but finally became the main commemorative point for the fallen German soldiers in the war. This function was kept throughout the republic of Weimar and preserved the installation as national monument and kept it connected to military forces. So it was no wonder the national-socialist movement was attracted by this symbol. In the 1932 commemoration activities, one year before Hitler came to power, SA forces rallied even together with choirs and nationalistic student organizations at the monument.⁴

With the turn to the nation-socialist regime the meaning of the monument changed again slightly. The nationalism was now stronger militarized and the tune in speeches at events got more and more aggressive in the pre-war time. The Nazis used the impressive ambient frequently for mass events and interpreted the monument as symbol of the invincibility of the Germans. Hitler's first speech there took place in May 1933 where he drew a line between the victorious forces of 1813 and the new nationalistic movement.⁵ During the war the current interpretations emphasized on German strength and loyalty but after the air raid on Leipzig in December 1943 it was also used as place to commemorate the civil victims.

During the following socialist regime the monument's meaning changed fundamental. It served as a symbol for the German-Russian alliance and brotherhood in arms with the other socialistic states and and, especially in the early years, to define the new regime as the heir of the

2 *Völkisch* is difficult to translate. As grammar would put it, it is an adjective to *Volk* (people). It uses an ethnical definition of people and derives in this case from German romanticism and was strongly used by the National-Socialists which connected it with the idea of a superiority of the Aryan or German race, so the adjective *völkisch* has a racial component as well.

3 Quoted after: HUTTER, Peter (1990): *"Die feinste Barbarei". Das Völkerschlachtdenkmal bei Leipzig*. Mainz am Rhein, Philipp von Zabern, p. 185

4 POSER, Steffen: "Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte des Völkerschlachtdenkmal zwischen 1914 und 1989", in: KELLER, Katrin and SCHMID, Hans-Dieter (eds.): *Vom Kult zur Kulisse. Das Völkerschlachtdenkmal als Gegenstand der Geschichtskultur*. Leipzig, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1995, pp. 78–104, p. 85

5 *Ibid.*, p. 87

progressive line of German history. In 1950, one year after the GDR was officially founded, the inner space of the monument was used to celebrate the first anniversary of the first socialist state in Germany. It was also used as a spectacular scenery for mass events especially for its youth organizations. The socialists applied the same esthetic use of the monument when they summoned for examples thousands of people with torches, as did their predecessors.

As seen, during all its existence the monument served as a legitimating political monuments with changing messages. The political discourse just integrated the monument in the current models. It always worked as a symbol for dominating and hegemonic political ideas. It was never a neutral political space at least not until 1989.

With the disappearance of the GDR the new democratic city government had no idea what to do with the monument. Due to the air pollution during the socialist period it was in a bad shape, the brown sandstone-fassade had turned black and also the surrounding areas had substantially suffered. But parts of civil society demanded the reconstruction. In 2002 the monument was given to a public foundation, the *Stiftung Völkerschlachtdenkmal Leipzig*⁶, and the reconstruction was given in the hands of a civil association *Förderverein Völkerschlachtdenkmal*⁷. The association did fund-raising and planned the reconstruction and cleansing-process which successfully ended in 2012.

Also first voices arose about the question what to do with the monument in the future. In 1993, with the 180th anniversary of the battle, which was widely celebrated, the novelist Wolfgang Loest proposed to name the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* as a monument for European peace and unification.⁸ He is also the author of the 1984 published novel “Völkerschlachtdenkmal”⁹ in which he tells the story of the monument and a blaster who wants to disrupt it. A new intent of a political intended re-interpretation of the monument was started with his intervention.

Nowadays the monument and its surrounding are a merely a touristic point and since 1993 once a year a sociocultural center has used it for a sportive fun event, called *Badewannenrennen*¹⁰ (bath-tube-race), where the participants enter the water basin in front of the monument with self build

6 http://www.leipzig.de/de/buerger/satzungen/4_11.PDF. Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

7 <http://www.voelkerschlachtdenkmal.de>. Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

8 LOEST, Erich: “Vom Totenmal zum europäischen Friedensmal“, in: KELLER, Katrin/ SCHMID, Hans-Dieter (eds.): *Vom Kult zur Kulisse. Das Völkerschlachtdenkmal als Gegenstand der Geschichtskultur*. Leipzig, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1995, p. 212.

9 LOEST, Erich (1984): *Völkerschlachtdenkmal*, Hamburg, Hoffmann und Campe.

10 <http://natobadewanne.wordpress.com/>. Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

boats and do some fun oriented challenges. This event is offensively disrespecting all historical bounds and attracts year by year over 10.000 spectators. The surroundings are also used for open air concerts, wine or beer markets and other events in a more entertaining context in which the *Völkerschlacht*denkmal is reduced to pure scenery with no connection whatsoever to any historical events. The monument has been transferred from the political and societal sphere to consumerism's one. It is now a place for commercial events using the scenery as a marketing scheme which still works with the possibilities of the monument and its surroundings as a gathering place for the masses (of consumers). However, this does not support a political ideology to create some sort of community but shall attract the individual to spend his money there to fulfill the commercial circle. If there is an ideology working this is a neo-liberal one with its own marketing scheme and characterized by the idea of total commodification. The subjects use the aura inherent to the monument to do their business which is clearly based in the contemporary need for events. The huge block of concrete and the will to entertain and create events within a neo-liberal capitalistic framework fit well in its different aspects. But it does not apply a new interpretation to the monument but really uses it as an empty space, a signifier without any significant. The plays and production of signification take place around or in front of the monument. The monument itself delivers no own meaning to the deals nor they do deliver one to it. The net of commodification lies around the *Völkerschlacht*denkmal without really tangling it.

In the 1990s and the 2000s only Neo-Nazi movements have tried repeatedly to hold manifestations in front of the national monument, seeking for impressive pictures and of course reformulate their nationalistic and racist discourses with the power of the traditions the monument is providing to their cause. Their attempt to be present at this spot reaffirmed what a neuralgic point the *Völkerschlacht*denkmal could be and that a pure ignorance by official agents of the city would not work. The city government and civil society are always trying to defend the place and to keep the right wing manifestations away from such points. Only the extreme right wing movement and their party, the national democrats (*NPD*) are using the monument for political rallying. There is a big consensus in the city, including nearly all relevant groups, that the monument may not be used for such propagandist uses and the *Förderverein* also produced a big banner, saying: "Nazis raus", which is only shown, when the Nazis have declared their presence¹¹.

¹¹http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:V%C3%B6lkerschlachtdenkmal_Leipzig,_Anti-Nazi-Plakat_2.JPG.
Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

The right-wing-interventions produce a certain discursive pressure on official speakers to give an interpretation to the monument. It cannot be ignored. In the look back every time has produced its echo over the Battle of Nations and with its 200th anniversary the time has come to give a new echo, a new interpretation. The pile of stones is accompanied by a pile of interpretations, as we have seen, and this chain of interpretations cannot be smashed, it's like a river going on and on, a maelstrom which goes over the past destroying and reconstructing it at the same time. The subjects are not free to enter the discourse or not, but they are bound to it, even in a position where they can define the hegemonic patterns.

2. The discursive field.

Before I turn to the events and re-framings in 2013 I will have a closer look on how the discursive pattern around the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* can be described and how the historical interpretations are reflected in the contemporary ones. It is important to keep in mind that the discursive field or the discursive formation are never stable things because different subjects try to establish their interpretations and in all discourses there are a continuous struggle for hegemony between dominant and subaltern forces. It will be shown how these forces in the given case rely on the same set of concepts but use them in a specific way, emphasize one or another and disregard one or the other in order to gain dominance or at least a visibility which delivers a crack in the hegemonic structure while the hegemonic one is in the same operation to maintain and strengthen its discursive fortress.

The events of the battle in 1813, the erected monument, and its history of reception and political interpretation let appear a framework, or discursive formation in which the utterances about battle and function of the monument can be organized. I follow thereby the discourse theory of Michel Foucault and the implications to it formulated by Philipp Sarasin's term of the 'history of the say-able'.¹² It is based on the assumption that utterances in the discourse are always framed by historical context which means that not all utterances in a given discourse can appear at any time. This limitation derives from the changing rules of the say-able. As Sarasin puts it: "An utterance is 'rare', it is historical unique, it appears and disappears again. The interest for an analyst of discourse is to explain why utterance X appears at time-point Y."¹³

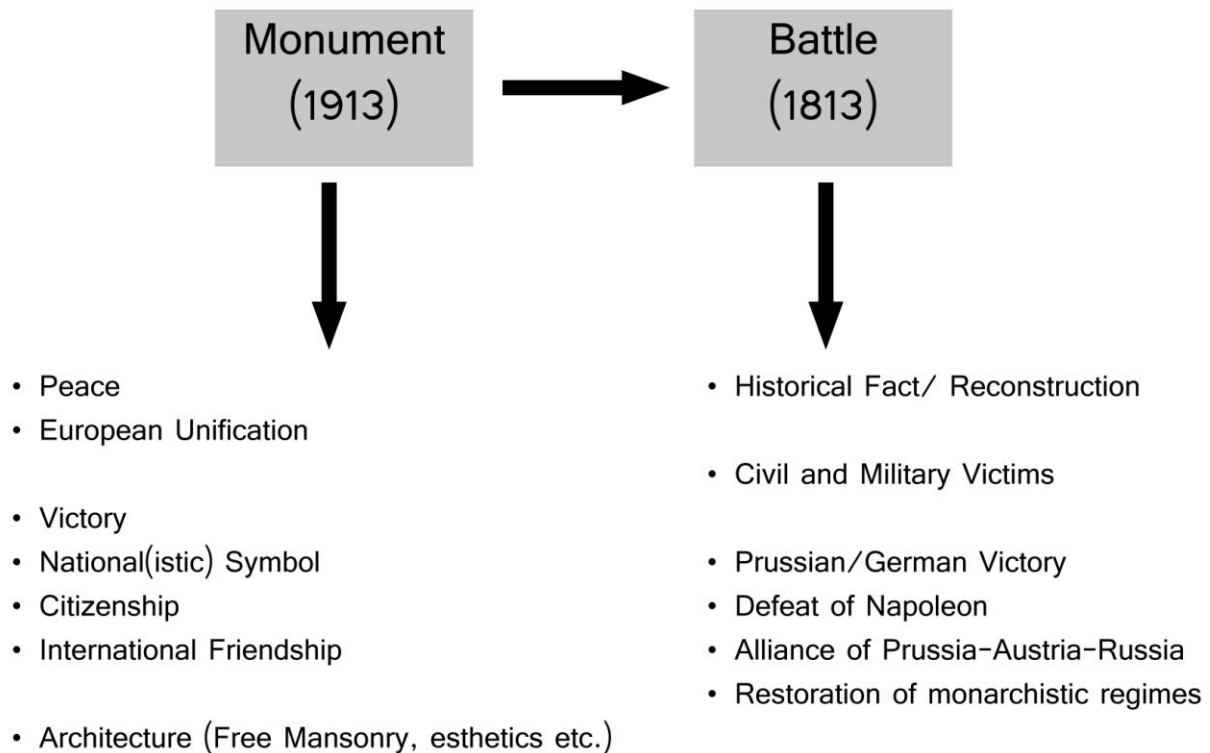
12 SARASIN, Philipp (2003): *Geschichtswissenschaft und Diskursanalyse*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.

13 SARASIN, Philipp (2008): *Wie weiter mit Michel Foucault*, in: HAMBURGER INSTITUT FÜR SOZIALFORSCHUNG (ed.): *Wie weiter mit...? Wie weiter mit Hannah Arendt? /Wie weiter mit Niklas Luhmann? /Wie weiter mit Michael Foucault?*

As one hypothesis I would formulate that the emergence of an utterance relies on the discursive fights about legitimation and truth. Every utterance, as states Michel Foucault, has primary followed the discourse rules which produce a regime of truth.¹⁴ Only within this regime an utterance is valid and true. And the truth is bigger than the hegemonic discourse position, but it derives from the underlying patterns. To make a true utterance in a discourse (assuming that the subject has the power to speak and being heard) the subject has to make a formulation on the basis of those underlying structures. Of course he can recombine in his utterance those underlying notions in new (or old) ways to make his statement but its validity relies on being made within the limits of the defined truth, the current discursive rules, and the underlying patterns. For example nowadays an utterance which relies on a blood-and-soil ideology would be rejected because it is outside the regime of truth but a reference to a German nation can still be made. I want to examine the historical interpretations and attributions attached to battle and monument to see what are those underlying concepts on which subjects still rely on. I would not define them as universal but they prove a certain stability in their base throughout the years. However, of course, the details of their interpretation change constantly. The nationalistic notion has always been there but is nowadays obviously framed differently than in the Third Reich. The field of possible utterances can be visualized for the Battle of Nations and the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* as one of its biggest echoes as follow:

/Wie weiter mit Karl Marx? /Wie weiter mit Max Weber? /Wie weiter mit Sigmund Freud? Wie weiter mit Émile Durkheim? /Wie weiter mit Theodor W. Adorno?, Vol.4, Hamburg: Verlag Hamburger Edition, p. 18.

14 FOUCAULT, Michel (1991): *Die Ordnung des Diskurses*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, p. 25.



All of those fields, especially the questions of esthetics, could be laid out more detailed but as an approach this scheme seems sufficient. In a semiotic perspective the monument of 1913 is the signifier for the battle of 1813, but this representation is already an interpretation of the battle and its aftermath. There is no pure or innocent representation of the past. Its interpretation, seen as the nationalist ideal of a unified Germany forged by wars, is already inscribed in the stone monument. On an esthetic level it abandons the then dominant neo-classicism (the art of monarchy) and uses a style which is thought to be more archaic and closer to the German roots and mass symbols, which Elias Canetti defines as forest (*Wald*) and army (*Heer*).¹⁵ The construction itself could therefore stand as an example for the modern renaissance of the nation, which can be seen as ideology. The monument is constructed with concrete, but the facade is 100 per cent sandstone. The modernity is covered by an archaic element which rebounds to the past. The imagined past is a mask to hide (before) the impositions of the modern world, leaving that behind shining concrete becomes the favorite material in later postmodern architecture.

¹⁵ CANETTI, Elias (1980): *Masse und Macht*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, p. 190

Also historical facts are not just there but organized as story line which in the given case lead to German unity. The storytelling follows the rules of 19th century historians. In this case the narrative model of the romantic comedy applies perfectly, and tells the story of a hero (the German people) who fights and finally gets his right (the German nation-state).¹⁶ The Battle of the Nations is here not the final point but the starting one.

All those narrative and ideological patterns shown in the graphic are inscribed in the monument and cannot be erased but taken into account in new interpretations. With our little walk through the history of reception we have seen how different aspects have shown up in the utterances. The founder highlighted the marks of citizenship, nationalism and the military victims. With the Weimar Republic, especially the military victim narrative was emphasized but took a turn from the 1813 memory to World War I. Also the nationalistic and militaristic approaches were strong, the part of citizenship faded away. The upcoming national-socialist focused on nationalistic ideas which were interpreted as *völkisch*, and especially during World War II the militaristic message grew stronger and stronger but later it was accompanied by the commemoration of war victims, especially contemporary ones. In the GDR the nationalism was re-interpreted and the Russian-German comradeship reinitialized, while a certain amount of militarism always stuck to the monument, here in a more para-military way.

Even in 2013 it can be shown how these fields of meaning are still part of the actualized narratives. The emerged patterns are still in use and only a new interpretation in discourse is applied by the speakers. On that patterns I will examine which speaker or acting group uses each one, because it is not necessary that every speaker takes every aspect in account. It is more that each one of these aspects shown above is organized in favor of one or another meaning. The discursive fights are not only about the remembrance discourse as a whole but also about the sub-topics which are used as anchors of legitimation for the speakers position. We will see who throws his anchors at which part of the remembrance-reef.

3. Mapping the discourses – the remembrance activities in 2013.

With the 200th anniversary of the battle of nations and thus the 100th anniversary of the respective monument the city of Leipzig is shattered with a huge amount of different events,

16 See: WHITE, Hayden (1973): *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-century Europe*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, p. 22.

starting in May with a lecture series and exhibitions in several museums in and around Leipzig and ending in November with a concert of the requiem “Den Manen der Sieger bey leipzig und la bella Alliance geweiht” by Jacob Gottfried Weber at 24th of November, also the Sunday in commemoration of the dead in the Evangelic church's calender. The official program lists 69 organizations – from nearby towns to small and local cultural associations – participating in the commemoration events during the year.¹⁷

I want to focus on some of the main events in the commemoration week taking place from October 16th to October 20th, which includes intellectual debates, church actions, an official political act, theater plays and a re-enactment of the battle itself as well as historic re-enactments of daily life in 1813 in nearby villages and bivouacs. Since I come from from the field of theater science, I will include four theater projects in the context: “The Millenium Front Theater”¹⁸ by *Schaubühne Lindenfels* and *fringe ensemble*, “Ein einzig langes Donnergebrüll”¹⁹ by Maya Chrenko, “Krieg und Frieden”²⁰, based on the Tolstoi-novel by *Konsortium Luft und Tiefe*, and “Imagine Europe/TraumWelten“ by *Theater Titanick*. Based on the outlined discursive basis the main question is how these groups interact in the discursive schemes and what topics they apply to strengthen their interpretations and discursive position. But since these positions are relative it is first needed to define the hegemonic position given by the city government and establish the contemporary official political interpretation of the 1813 events and the 1913 monument.

4. Official discursive framing

The approach of Loest's “moument for peace“ in 1993 has nowadays become the official political standpoint not only but city officials but also on a European scale. Mayor Burkhard Jung for example writes on behalf of the two anniversaries: “Begehen wir das Doppeljubiläum [...] zukunftgewandt als ein europaweites Signal für Frieden, Völkerverständigung, Demokratie und Selbstbestimmung, das von Leipzig, der Stadt der Friedlichen Revolution ausgeht.”²¹ In this

17 <http://www.voelkerschlacht-jubilaem.de/>. Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

18 <http://www.voelkerschlachten.net/konzept/das-millennium-front-theater-jahrtausendfeld/>. Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

19 <http://www.maja-chrenko.de/voelkerschlacht-2013.html> Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

20 http://www.nato-leipzig.de/live_aktuell.php?itemid=51598&bravo=bra51c9b2c053dc3. Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

21 LEIPZIG TOURISMUS UND MARKETING (LTM) (eds.): *Leipzig 1813-1913-2013. Eine europäische Geschichte*, p. 9, (http://www.voelkerschlachtjubilaem.de/tl_files/voelkerschlacht/download/Voelki_Programmheft2013_Web.pdf) Translation: Let's make this double anniversary [...] headed to the future, as signal for peace, international understanding, democracy and auto-determination, that is send out by Leipzig, the city of the Peaceful Revolution, to all Europe. Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

rhetoric figure the monument is cut off from the instances in the past. It is on the first sight depleted of any earlier meaning and put in a context of European peace. Kant's never ending peace between republics which he formulated in 1795 comes to mind. This European peace idea is then connected to the peaceful revolutions against the socialist regimes in 1989 in which the population Leipzig took a big part with weekly mass demonstrations. Those are annually celebrated in Leipzig with an event called festival of lights at 7th of October, one week before the commemoration events of the Battle of the People. 1989 is especially important for the city's identity and the connection between the peaceful revolution and the Battle of the Nations is not coincidental. It tries to establish Leipzig, a city in the center of Europe, as a center also for European history with the two historical main events of 1813 and 1989. Again an official narrative which does not neglect certain teleological views is established. This has to be seen also as a marketing scheme since the city of Leipzig is also in a rival position about investments and tourists with Dresden, capital of Saxony, and Berlin. The other great historical merit of Leipzig is the label city of Music with the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and the internationally celebrated Gewandhaus Orchestra. The monument is also a marketing scheme for the city.

But this discourse about European freedom and peace is not only the city's discourse but generally assumed by actors of the political sphere. For example, the prime minister of Saxony, Stanislaw Tillich, pledges to give to the *Völkerschlacht*denkmal “which was founded as a national monument a truly European dimension.”²² Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament points out that “the battle of nations is for long not only a German point of memory but a European one.”²³ In effect people from all over Europe come together to talk about “our common future”. He also points out the events of 1989 and declares the necessity to put “this disturbing monument in a new context.”²⁴ That proves that “we” learned from the errors of the past (earlier he mentions not only the Napoleonic wars but also world war I and II) to overcome “wars, racism and antisemitism”.²⁵

All three reformulate a new political idea for interpretation and using the monument anew. The history delivers on a first sight the legitimation to do so but on a second look the artifact is cut off its historical bounds in favor of a Kantian idea of a never ending peaceful future in the frame of

22 *Ibidem*, p. 8.

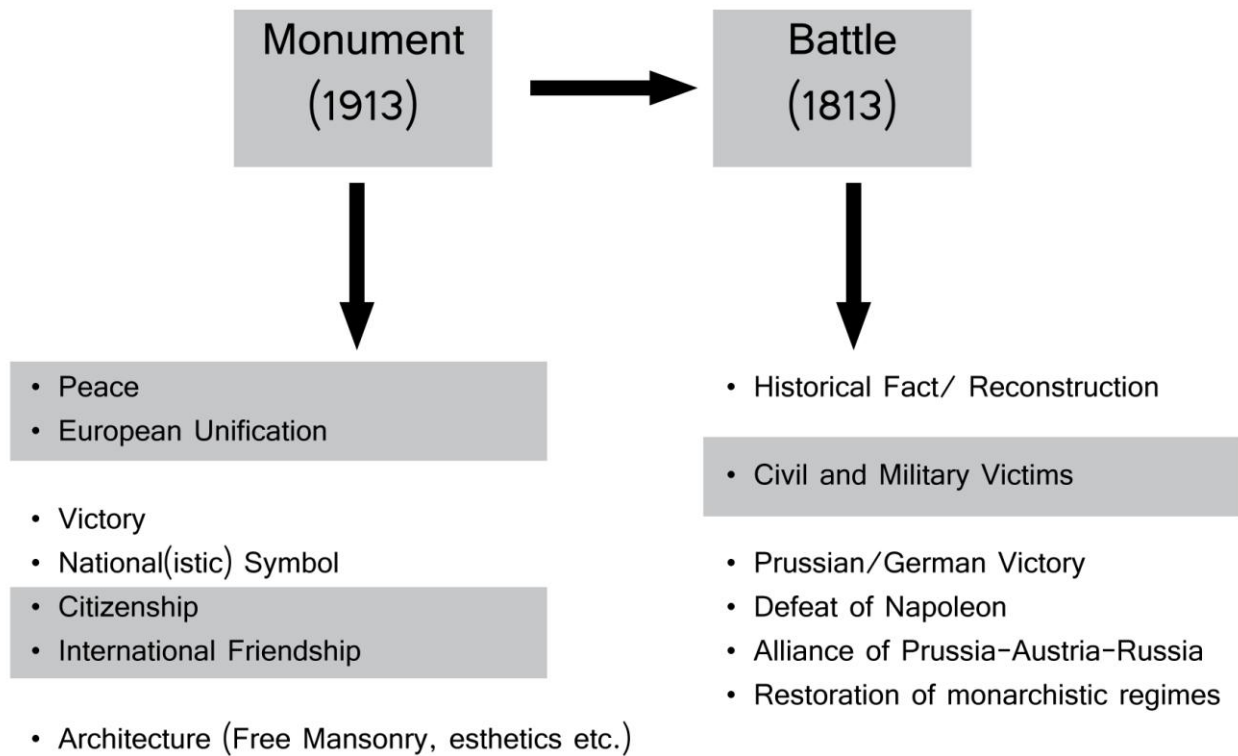
23 *Ibidem*, p. 7.

24 *Ibidem*.

25 *Ibidem*.

a common Europe. Any militaristic approach towards the monument is wiped off (a parade of the re-enactment groups was even forbidden by the mayor). Nevertheless the bounds to its historical meanings have not be cut but shifted as the nationalist symbol now appears as European symbol. Once again the battle of 1813 has become the origin of a political community's unification, but this time it is not about the German nation but the nation of Europe. The European Union, one could imply, is the new nation in the 21st century. The bloodshed of the 20th century is filled with a teleological meaning of what Europe has overcome and left behind: racism, facism, etc. This vision ignores obviously current discussions all over the continent from the fortress Europe at the southern borders to the problems of European minorities such as the Roma, the ongoing nationalist tendencies in regions like Catalonia or Scotland and a strong right-wing-populism from politicians like Geert Wilders and parties like the the French Front National, the British UKP or the German NPD. But discursively these topics disappear in a shiny cloud of goodness inside the commemoration. It is noteworthy that only one month after the celebrations the publication of plans for a new mosque gives room for a strong anti-muslim movement which is based on racist arguments. Peace is not only the absence of war.

The *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* has once again become a symbol for a current policy or ideology in a sense that ideology is nothing else than a dominating discourse, which legitimates political actions. The monument has to serve again, but its history is reduced to a minimal impact, and a far shadow. The national (war) monument becomes an European (peace) monument. In the proposed scheme the hegemonic discursive position uses the following aspects:



The victims are the legitimation of the new processes. It is a common figure to build a community upon those who died for it and by this operation, giving to their deaths a deeper sense. In the rhetoric patterns, as seen, this status of victim is also widened and not only includes the victims of 1813 but all victims of what some historians nowadays call the European civil wars. But the legitimation of the present on the bones of the dead is still in force and also the nationalist forces in the 19th century used this scheme. The monument stands for cruelties which shall never happen again as if there would be a lesson learned in all this bloody history.

Such re-interpretations do not stay without critics. Leipzig's city magazine *Kreuzer* stated on his title in October 2013 "there is nothing to celebrate", illustrating the topic with bloody bowels in the shape of the monument.²⁶ And the newspaper *taz* wrote about the activities:

²⁶ RAABE, Andreas and IBS, Torben: "Der Schmerzkoloss", *Kreuzer*, 10 (2013), pp. 20-21.

«Ein Leipziger Allerlei aus historischer Peepshow, Kriegsspiel, Heimatpflege, Sachsentümelei, Personenkult, Nostalgie-Nippes, Abenteuerwanderungen, echten Informationsangeboten, Ausstellungen, künstlerisch-kritischen Adaptionen und einigen wenigen pazifistischen Nachdenklichkeiten. Das Bedürfnis der Bevölkerung nach Vergangenheitskult will ebenso befriedigt werden wie das kommerzielle Interesse an touristischen Ködern»²⁷

In opposition to this official discourse patterns appear which can be aligned to different groups of civil society who try to foster their discourses, counter-discourses, and different approaches of remembering.

5. Re-enactment: trying to connect with the past

“We want to bring to life in an authentic way what happened 200 years ago,” explains Michél Kothe.²⁸ He is the president of the *Verband Jahrfeier Völkerschlacht bei Leipzig 1813* and since the late 1980s they are organizing re-enactments of the battle. For the 200-year-commemoration 6000 participants from all over the world come to Leipzig to live for three days in historical bivouacs, which are also open to public. It is not only the re-enactment of the battle of 1813 but also of the daily life a routine at this time. More than 30.000 spectators visit the spectacle. It is staged on original grounds. Besides the battle reconstruction the association organizes educational events in schools with history lessons in reconstructed uniforms with the aim that the pupils can literally get in touch with history. Authenticity is a key concept in all those activities. Another key concept is the will of going back to the origin (“*Ursprung*”) of the battle. As Foucault points out such an origin is impossible to find because it's only the construction of history, and its writing that produces history. History cannot be thought as an origin but is only thinkable as a look back and with all inscriptions in work, life and language.²⁹ The re-enactment therefore must be seen as an actualization of our picture of what happened in 1813. It does not really intent to reconstruct the battle in all its details, but is, as Wolfgang Hochbruck and Judith Schlehe write, “an enactment, implying a *mise-en-scène* quality few of the original event that have become subject to reenactment

²⁷ Michael BARTSCH, *Leipziger Schlachtfestspiele*, taz-die tageszeitung, 17-10-2013.

Translation: A Leipzig potpourri with historical peep-shows, war games, cultivation of the homeland, being Saxon, cult of personage, nostalgic kitsch, adventurism, real information offer, exhibitions, artistic-critical adaptations and some pacifist thoughts. The need of the population for a cult for the past wants to be pleased as well as the commercial interest of touristic lures.

²⁸ Michél Kothe, 30th may 2013, interview by the author, Leipzig.

²⁹ FOUCAULT, Michel (1974): *Die Ordnung der Dinge*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, p. 397.

ever had.³⁰ The organizer tries to give an insight in how a part of the battle could have taken place. The used acting techniques are based on a strategy of embodiment and overcoming the distance between now and then allowing a total identification:

«This is an attempt to feel sympathy for the subjects of bygone events by imagining oneself in their position. By eliminating the safe distance between abstract knowledge and personal experience, between then and now, between the others and oneself, re-enactments make personal experience of abstract history possible»³¹

That has consequences for the event:

«It is not history, however, which is passing before their eyes but a (re-)constructed past for which a stage has been prepared on which the same willing suspension of disbelief is operative which already informed Samuel Taylor Coleridge's theory of the theatre, an which is largely based on the credibility of the presented past's pastness»³²

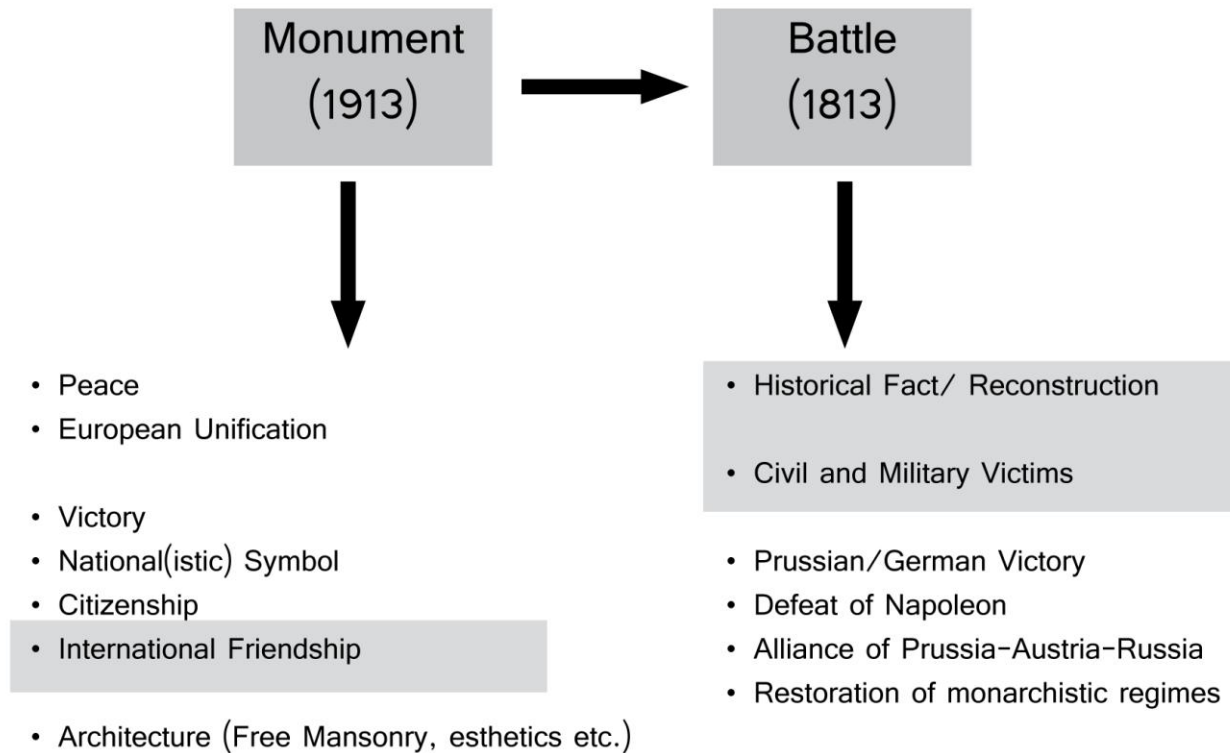
It's the credibility or authenticity which is so appealing and its conversion into a stage which takes away obstacles for the spectator. The presented events must not be true in a strong sense but the show must be credible. There is a great emphasis towards the historical events behind the political or societal interpretations. The re-enactment is not about the monument or its ideals but refers to the battle itself, with authenticity as the key argument. In his discursive interventions Kothe is not happy with the reformulation of the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* as a monument for Europe and peace. In his opinion such a new interpretation cannot be done without damaging the “spirit of the monument “which should only “stand for the time it represents.“ It's a call for purity but also the intent to depoliticize the monument making it a pure artifact with no discursive content since the old idea of a national monument cannot be transferred in the 21st century easily. At the same time Kothe assigns himself to some part of the official paradigm, since he argues that this event is an international one and brings together the foes of the past in the name of peace and international

30 SCHLEHE, Judith/ HOCHBRUCK, Wolfgang: “Introduction: “Staging the Past””, in: SCHLEHE, J, UIKE-BORMANN, M, OESTERLE, C, HOCHBRUCK, W (eds.): *Staging the Past. Themed Environments in Transcultural Perspectives*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2010, pp. 7- 22, 14.

31 ARNS, Inke: “Strategies of Re-enactment”, in: ARNS, I, HORN, G, KW INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART (eds.): *History will repeat itself. Strategies of re-enactment in contemporary (media) art and performance*, Frankfurt am Main, Revolver – Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, pp. 38-63, p. 61.

32 SCHLEHE, H (2010), p. 15.

dialogue. Again Kothe discards the discursive role of the monument to strengthen the focus on the battle itself. His discursive position can be visualized as this:



His group is in general a friend of the idea to use the commemoration events as an international peace festival with cultural exchange and global contacts. A special focus lies on the historical events and a gaining for accuracy at least with the costumes and props, not so much in the ongoing re-enactment of the battle itself which is merely symbolic. They demand that the monument shall be politically neutral and oppose themselves to new interpretations, but they also tend to ignore such built manifestations or they try to use them for their action (as scene for a parade for example). Nevertheless they don't deliver a view which goes further than the acknowledgment of the battle they stage, a position which is coherent with their stand opposed to re-interpretation and an interesting attempt to ignore contemporary struggles as well as the given history of reception and all their traps. The claim for neutrality also hides their own political position in contemporary discourses, so their whole endeavor seems more likely as part of the event-culture and co-modification, stabilizing and not intervening in the struggles of meaning but

certainly demanding for a voice. The intention to keep the monument out of political and discursive struggles appears naive since discussions about the question what the monument is all about have always been part of the monument and its reception from the very beginnings. There is no neutral ground.

6. Historical events as entertainment.

The two theater projects “Ein einzig langes Donnergebrüll” (One long thunder roar) by Maya Chrenko and “Krieg und Frieden” (War and peace) by *Konsortium Luft und Tiefe* work with a strong will to create a connection with past, and try to explain, in a way, what happened by mixing authentic elements with artificial ones. This is really clear with the work of Maya Chrenko. It's a small play with three actors and the several scenes are taken from historical sources as well as literature pieces. It's a collage about the events and the time representing the perspective to the common men as well as classic authors such as Georg Büchner. It delivers no own position to the nowadays event around the commemoration. The same can be said about the production of “Krieg und Frieden,” based on Leo Tolstoy's novel “War and Peace“. For the third time the theater company *Konsortium Luft und Tiefe* uses the platform in front of the monument to perform an open air theater in summertime. The first year they played a version of Tankred Dorst's “Die Ritter der Taffelrunde” (The knights of the round table) and last year they presented “Sechs Könige” (Six kings) based on Shakespeare's historical dramas.

With the Tolstoy-production this year they not only adopt the events of the Napoleon wars but also engage in the cultural discourses within the city of Leipzig as director Sebastian Hartmann took the same book to stage at the city owned *Centraltheater*. His production was invited to *Theatertreffen Berlin*, one of the important festivals in German theater, in 2013. Based on the last years experiences director Stefan Ebeling, in charge at *Konsortium Luft und Tiefe*, produces a nicely entertaining piece of work, which fits in the scenery and has a certain will to bring the text alive. A classical work for summer season where many groups play rather comedies like Shakespeares'. In this context a topic like Tolstoy is quite an effort and an economic risk for the company and Ebeling also stands for a certain artistic will and quality but it does not claim to be a political intervention at all. Both plays can therefore be seen as entertaining and *l'art pour l'art* which are stabilizing the official discourses but give a special emphasis on the victims' side.

7. Searching for the ignored.

As part of the official ceremony the city of Leipzig hired the theater group *Titanick*, based in Leipzig and Münster but working international. For the commemoration the group creates an open air theater space in front of (but not within the area) the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal*. The title of the performance is “Imagine Europe/TraumWelten”. It is a theater installation with several stages and different performances including lots of bizarre objects, big puppetry, visual effects and fireworks. It takes place on 19th of October, one day after the official speeches and one day before the battle re-enactment. Robert Schiller, technical director, explains that in the beginning there were two basic ideas.³³ The first idea was the erection of a counter-monument for the deserter and disobeying, the people who did not take part in the battle. The second idea was an artistic comment on the ongoing crisis as a symptom that the Battle of the Nations is not over. Finally the group decides to place a installation with performances. The theater work therefore does not consist of one homogenous narrative but is divided into different sections, Schiller calls it a *parcours*.

The esthetics used by the group derive from modern avant-garde and street theater with big machines, industrial alike costumes and a grotesque body work with a similarity to puppets similar to the early works of *La Fura dels Baus*. It takes place in a park in front of the monument but not part of the monument. In the presentation *Titanick* starts with a march of soldiers in the central paved part of the park, but then let the audience stroll through the park where several installations and little scenes are going to happen. There is no narrative but a strong artistic will. Fantasy and nightmares stand against the disciplinary machine represented by the military forces.

³³ Robert Schiller, 14th may 2013, interview by the author, Leipzig



By focusing on the inactivity in wartime and disobedience *Titanick* tries to break up the classical inscriptions and narrations of history, installing a space in between, trying to bring the war movements to an end. This operation is not only a comment against the dominant storytelling but searches for cracks in the closed circuit which seems to be the future. By focusing on the Not-Doer, remembering the famous cite of Melville's *Bartleby* "I would prefer not to..." *Titanick* also connects in a political sense to heterogeneity, denying one central political thesis but referring to the "utopia of the other life"³⁴ The new political sense in this kind of productions, as Lehmann puts it, is not the representation of the oppressed but a practice of this heterogeneity in life and work.³⁵ It's a suspension of the current political discourses and this interruption can be seen as a contemporary political approach to theater.³⁶ It is a theater which not only looks for a dialectic confrontation with hegemonic political discourses but undermines its patterns and contents by escaping them. It opens a third space, in which military expressions are defiled and devalued, which is accompanied by a high emphasis to a whatsoever other. Creativity washes the soldiers away. It is a call for heterogeneity.

34 LEHMANN, Hans-Thies (1999): *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt, Verlag der Autoren, p. 457.

35 *Ibidem*, pp 455-457.

36 *Ibidem*, p. 459.

In this context I want to look at “Millenium Front Theater” (MFT) which takes place from May 28th to June 15th 2013 in Leipzig. The project is part of a two year cooperation between the theater group *fringe ensemble*, situated in Bonn, and the theater *Schaubühne Lindenfels* in Leipzig. For three weeks they install a workshop on an open field which had the camouflage of a military camp. Several authors and actors live and work there together and in the nights the just produced texts are presented in stand up performances. This procedure can be seen as a comment on the re-enactment process which uses similar strategies but in the spirit of reconstruction and not, as it is the case of MFT, to produce new texts, theater performances, and insights. At the same time it is comment, persiflage, and something quite different. MFT is looking for the creative potential in this camp situation, doing a research as a classical form of independent theater groups in Germany. What seems a connecting point between re-enactment and art appears as a breaking point in a closer look .

The leading question is: “Where is the front line?” The MFT thus uses the events of 1813 and 1914 to decipher in an artistic project the layers of battlefields which have been inscribed in places and thinking throughout the time. The camp site is situated on the place of an old fabric, which produced war machinery during both world wars and even the sleeping place of Napoleon during the 1813 events is near that location. Everything is connected and disconnected at the same time. The texts, produced instantly, mostly ignore these main events or took them only as a starting point to perform a re-sampling with today events. For example Russian author Alexander Malchonov connects in his play “The Stone” Russian war remembrance culture with the currents events about *Pussy Riot* by telling a fictitious interrogation of a protester who vandalized against a monument of the Russian-French war. Other works focus on military patterns in contemporary society or seem on the first view quite apart from the topic. In the panorama of texts a great variety and a connection to heterogeneous aspects is visible which also had the potential to undermine political discourses, giving voice to new historical connections and alternation of historical as well as current events. In this way the project gives voice to subaltern discursive speeches – not only in order to oppose hegemonic assaults but to undermine them as well and show how fragile the construction of a hegemonic discourses always is.

As a third collection of little interventions and performances the project “fireworks & smokebombs“ has to be mentioned.³⁷ Ten artists present different approaches to perform an

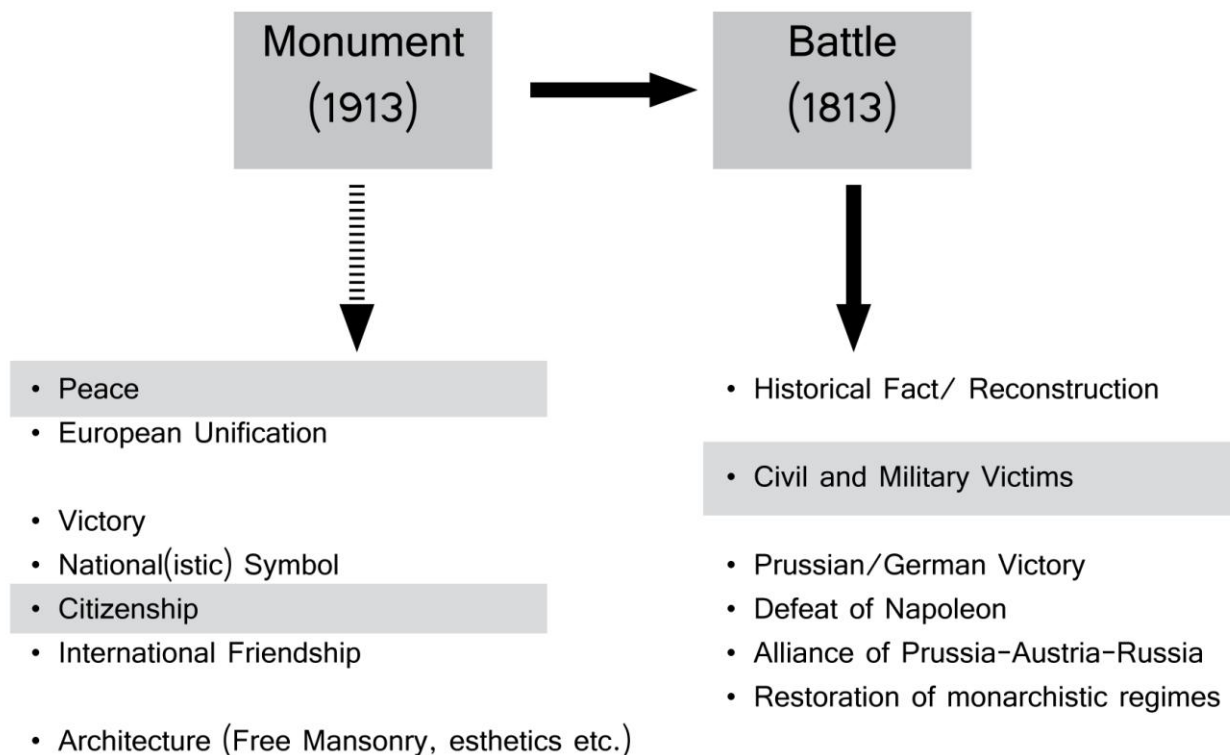
³⁷ <http://fireworksandsmokebombs.de/>. Consulted last time 26-06-2013.

alternative interpretation of history and oppose especially to the re-enactment. The projects are various. Verena Landau produces a fake publicity act, where she transforms the monument into a commercial center. Monica Sheets installs audio devices which let the stone figures inside the monument speak. And Bertram Haude creates the “International Shattered Liberation Force – ISLF“, staging an army corps of deserters strolling through the landscape, looking for food and shelter. On the one hand it is a clear parody of the re-enactment of the battle, turning all the great uniforms to trash and the heroic marches into steps into darkness and wilderness. It's the other side of the war, not represented in the re-enactment theater. On the other hand it connects the re-enactment and the *Titanick* idea of a monument of the deserters by staging those who deny to fight, those who flee, those who do not follow. There is no positive narrative that includes this failure as a starting point. But it works in the tradition of Christoph Schlingensiefel, a German performer, who established the slogan “Failure as Chance” in the 1990s: his ideas of performances which perforated the border between life and art in order to enter societal processes with art, bringing theater back from the hall to the street. In 1998, for example, he founded a political party with the name *Chance 2000* which took part in the federal elections.³⁸ One of his actions was to invite all 6 million German unemployed to enter the lake Wolfgang, which was known as the vacation residence of the then German chancellor Helmut Kohl. The idea was, when all of them got into the lake at the same time, Kohl's residence would be flooded. Of course only some hundreds of partisans appeared but the media was widely reporting. This piercing of art into reality creates a certain instability in the recipient and allows to question it all since the line between art and life is not given.

All of those projects (*Titanick*, *MFT*, *F&B*) try to establish a counter-discourse by either oppose the official discourse paradigms or by the tactics of evasion to promote a different approach to the topic *Völkerschlacht* and its remembrance. But in contrast to re-enactment they do not propose a clear alternative of how the monument could be used in a way of an alternative policy of memory. They evade the monument and in a way the ongoing activities but nevertheless perform a subaltern discourse which answers and echoes the official one. Both approaches emphasize with the victims, especially the civil ones, to tell a counter-history which would basically be a history from the bottom. This process is an attempt to de-legitimize the official positions and to diffuse the concentration. The main character of the historical events is its heterogeneity which shall overcome the official ideological line. This is the discursive struggle that these artistic projects try to establish

38 SCHLINGENSIEFEL, Christoph and HEGEMANN, Carl (1998): *Chance 2000. Wähle Dich selbst*, Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch.

in order to crack the hegemony in favor of a much wider focus, which makes a historical narrative with teleological aspects impossible. In such a discourse the victims would not be ignored but waived with grief without any sense-making. The question which arises here is not only about war and peace but about the meaning of killing. The humanist approach here is strongly pacifist, stating that there is no sense in such killings and victims. This is the great difference between the official discourse and the artistic one, as it can be called. But even this discourse approach is based on the same discursive pattern mapped below and their actions are not independent from the official celebrations but need them as antithetic counterparts:



Conclusions.

It has become clear that a monument such as the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* (but it's true for all other monuments as well) does not have a clear defined meaning throughout all times as structures like this are always part of current political interpretations which are framed and formulated in an official discourse. This discourse is searching through past legitimacy for actions in present and future, however these legitimation discourses are not random but built on a certain set of rules and objects which are open for continuing re-interpretation. Besides this changing political meanings sites like the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* are under a steady consumerist pressure which intends to use the monument as depoliticized facade for certain events.

Today the official discourse proclaims the remembrance stone of the Battle of Nations as a European monument for peace and unity, fostering a new quasi-teleological view of history and once again defining the victims as a worthy sacrifice, even though this impetus is connected with a never again. The nationalist idea originally represented in the monuments has been transferred to the idea of Europe as an ersatz nation.

Civil society does not provide an alternative reading of the monument but nevertheless oppose itself against the official discursive framing. The theater artist articulate an alternative view on history by ignoring the monument and its battle to search for the ignored facts of history which does not automatically fit in the big narrative and focus on a history from above. They devalue the monument and its inherent pathos. On the contrary, the re-enactment group is against any new argumentative framing and seeks for the neutrality of the facts which, as seen, can only be called a naïve myth. Telling history is always interpretation.

All different discursive and artistic approaches can be seen in its relation to a set official, hegemonic discourse. Also many other events hold by other actors such as the churches or groups of civil society could be included in this pattern to create a discursive map of civil society and its interventions in the anniversaries. The infinity of utterances regarding the commemoration of the battle and its monument also show that history is never over. A final statement what the *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* meant or means, cannot be made, and every criticism to a given interpretation just leads to another signification. There is no basic ground or origin which could be reached by that strategies. But there is an ongoing struggle for hegemonic ideas.

In a pluralistic society the discursive battle about such symbols like the massive monument of the Battle of the Nations is an never ending imperative to subaltern and hegemonic groups. As definitions of the meaning of this stone block are never final, they are always part of the discursive play and every utterance should be welcomed. But these utterances organize in a specific social field which I tried to measure. Subjects organize themselves within those fields and its layers and historians are just one more part in this field delivering more utterances plays and language games.

This analysis shows how discursive actors are trying to shape or to frame the interpretation not only of the monument and its history in a whole but referring to certain key-variables and deliver an interpretation of their specific value in the framework – in accordance with the today needs and not the intentions in the past. These emphasized or ignored aspects shape the nowadays signification of the monument as a monument for peace or of the victims. The interpretations are not exclusive but emerge from the same discursive pattern and can therefore be seen merely as fluent variations than radical counterparts.

The ironic outcome is that the stone made form of remembrance produces a true flexibility in the remembrance throughout the years. And that is valid for all monuments. It's is not the history that lays frozen in a monument but the monuments enables the present forces to perform their