Tableaux Vivants

The family is the fundamental group unit of society, even in extra-ordinary times such as ours. This is why Andreas Mühe's work on our family combines references derived from biography and history, individuality and society, and politics and aesthetics with compelling consistency. This allows the conclusion that these family portraits had no choice but to become what they now are. From the picture of my family I will looking at the Mühe family and their central character, Ulrich Mühe. In doing so, I will not make use of my right to refuse to give evidence and I will also be looking through him a little bit. As early as 2011 Andreas' brother Konrad presented at the Berlinale his Fragen an meinen Vater (Questions to My Father), a film outlining his attempt to cope with Ulrich Mühe's untimely death. Given that every family can reflect history in its own stories, such extreme subjectivity can be the only way to strive for independence from one's own family.

Almost a Motto

Several months ago I saw in Andreas's studio what were preparatory studies for the family portrait. Instead of the family members, cut-out silhouettes, which appeared to sag a little and to be under the weather, had been assigned their places in an almost finished interior. These blank spaces, which were a bit tired and seemed to be taking it easy for a while, reminded me of a poem by Richard Leising.

Bild am Morgen

Aber als du fortgingst ward es helle
Und des Tages nahe Gegenwart
Hatte eine unerfüllte Stelle
So als sei dein Umriss ausgespart

Dass ich dich nicht sehe, nicht erkenne
Blieb als hellstes Bild von dir bestehn
Und es ist die Leere, die ich nenne
Wenn ich frage, wie ich dich gesehn.

Sommer 1956[1]

Life after Death

The title Henrik Ibsen had originally planned to give to his last play was Resurrection Day. In a first step this was replaced by When the Dead Awaken before the great dramatist settled for the final title, When We Dead Awaken. 'We' are now part of the experimental setup. In the play, Ibsen confronts his old ego with its own past and consigns

himself to death. The play takes the form of an ascent to a mountain summit, with the summit being identical with death.

Appearing in one and the same picture in the company of the dead allows two conclusions. For the dead who have been resurrected in the picture it is us in our present state who are dead, because they have no experience of us. For us, the living in the picture, the dead are alive because our memories of them give life to them. The dead in the family portraits are as young as my own vivid memories of them or they thrive, as do all the others, on the remembered memories of those persons who are the same age as - or even younger than - the photographer, even though they are his grandfathers and grandmothers.

Both of Andreas' grandfathers in these groups were passionate storytellers. Like their stories, which were adaptable and changed to suit the occasion of their excavation, they stand before us in the pictures as emblems of virility, full of sap, while we, the generation of the living these men procreated, look old: we're still clinging on to life.

When my father entertained company with his stories in my childhood, there were two occasions when I used to hold my breath. The first one was before he started. I breathed a sigh of relief when it was a story I knew already. This meant that things were going to my father's and the present company's liking and that he was in a good mood. The second thing that took my breath away was my astonishment when I realised that the story was never the same as the one I thought I had heard before. The stories always veered off course in the process of telling, to the point where they were sometimes even given a new punchline. Itching to intervene and put him back on course I was saved by my mother's stern look as she bundled us children off to bed. Other stories and the later part of the evening belonged to the grown-ups and I was spared agonal breathing. This style of storytelling and putting on plays are really birds of a feather. One must take theatre seriously, by all means, but it should never be taken at its word. I understood then and there that life can be a feast and that this feast can be endlessly enhanced by how it is performed.

Having donned festive clothes like for a family celebration, the family members get together, falling into informal groups. This moment is captured in each of the two great family portraits. In it, some of the dead come face-to-face with each other and the dead and the living look each other in the eye.

My father would have loved playing his part in one of these portraits when he was still alive, with the proviso that he be given the spacious and honorific place in the middle. A brilliant raconteur, he was also a sufficiently adept actor of his own life. And my former father-in-law liked to say how he had planned to be an actor and how the nose job, necessary in his view for him to realise this ambition, had put paid to his plans. He enacted his stories in a way that differed slightly from my father's. While in command of an equally well stocked war chest of anecdotes, he relied for his brilliant performance on the services of his second wife, Vera, who - more of a fellow

actress than a prompter - supplied him with names, places, dates, events and contexts in a manner that seemed to suggest these very details chanced to course through her head at the very moment when her husband had broached the subject.

Both grandfathers claimed the gift of storytelling exclusively for themselves. Telling stories with company being present was for me a domain reserved for men who did not need to be pernickety with the truth. This realisation included the further realisation that there were stories galore which were never told; about which one kept quiet a lot and for ever, creating a situation that required the payment of the price of having to tell stories that were already old hat all the more often. Having internalised this experience, you tend to keep an eye on the stories of the sons and to be wary of the style in which they tell them.

Papa, You're Again Acting like a Madman!

In Ghosts, arguably the best known of Ibsen's family dramas, the mother of the invalid artist Oswald, Mrs Alving, conjures up the past: 'I am half inclined to think we are all ghosts (...). It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that exists again in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs and things of that kind. They are not actually alive in us; but there they are dormant, all the same, and we can never be rid of them. Whenever I take up a newspaper and read it, I fancy I see ghosts creeping between the lines. There must be ghosts all over the world. They must be as countless as the grains of the sands, it seems to me. And we are so miserably afraid of the light, all of us.'

Under the wary eyes of Inge Keller as Mrs Alving and of demanding partners such as Otto Mellies and Kurt B we, well meaning but reserving their judgment on whether he will able to pull through and double down when the professionals get serious at the end of the rehearsal period, Ulrich Mühe plays the role of the doomed son Oswald at the Deutsches Theater in 1983 and he succeeds in breaking through to the first league of actors in the country. Did he say good-bye or hello to his own ghosts?

The Comédie à tiroir: Plots within Plots

'A life without love, without the presence of the beloved, is nothing but a "com die tiroir". We pull out drawer after drawer, swiftly tiring of each, and pushing it back to make haste to the next. Even what we know to be good and important hangs but wearily together; every step is an end, and a fresh beginning.' (From Ottilie's diary at the end of Chapter 9 of Goethe's Die Wahlverwandtschaften (Elective Affinities)).

The chest of drawers in the picture was passed from great-grandfather Richard Mühe to Ulrich Mühe. Such pieces of furniture are not to everyone's taste. A chest such as this with its many

drawers may come to resemble the soul of its owner. Its great number of evenly arranged drawers, secret compartments and inserts provide space for belongings of all shapes and sizes, for finds, mementoes, secrets, letters, papers, writing utensils, devotional objects. A piece of furniture which is loved and cherished by its owner can morph into a replica of his soul, a place where the different strands of his life come together. As one can see, the chest of drawers still exists. Uli has sat down in front of its writing top, has sharpened his pencils and made a first tour d'horizon of the secondary literature: today he starts working on his next part. The chest of drawers has changed ownership from father to son early on and survived in children's and young adult's rooms and in the first flats of its present owner, Andreas Mühe. Like the fir tree in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy story of the same name, which has been put away and sheds its needles, it is waiting for the next Christmas. Well, let's wait and see.

Not Even the Gods Can Change the Past

What should follow at this juncture, after an extremely sumptuous description of interlocking still lifes, is the hypothesis that the joint presence of the living and the dead in our family portraits, where the rejuvenated dead take up their place in the family dance, allows us to come to terms with the finitude of life and to form a modern memento mori. Draped around the dead, as it were, are people of different age, who at one stage were linked by children, then children's children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces, cousins of both genders, siblings, half-siblings, daughers-in-law, fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law - even though now, in many cases, they only have the prefix ex- in common. A jinxed reality is presented in these pictures because the dead have not aged - and why should they? They appear to us much younger in these pictures than we remember them. The dead have come back at a half-way stage in their lives.

Half of Life - Like in the Pictures

In 1985 Hermann Zschoche's film H lfte des Lebens (Half of Life), featuring Jenny Gr llmann and Ulrich Mühe as Susette Gontard and Friedrich H lderlin, is released in der GDR. This marks the beginning of the legend surrounding the couple Gr llmann/Mühe, for they embody and symbolize the great unfulfilled love between the charming banker's wife and the divinely gifted poet. In the film, a union which was never to be. In life, however, a happy couple. Zschoche refers in his film to a myth of human nature as told by Plato: At one stage very early on we were beings with four legs, four arms and two heads facing in diametrically opposed directions. These spherical beings were either male-male, female-female or male-female. They were self-sufficient to such a degree that the Gods deemed it necessary to carve them up into symmetrical halves. Ever since, human beings have been scouring the earth in an effort to find their proper second half. Rather than

referencing H lderlin's poem titled H lfte des Lebens (Half of Life), Zschoche focuses in terms of content on the desperate plight of the person who, against considerable odds, has found his longed-for second half, but proves unable to hold on to it. Zschoche achieves this by moving the love story to the fore. What is in the film a star-crossed love affair and a longing that cannot be fulfilled did find fulfilment and a happy end of sorts in real life. Sometimes, after all, viewers would like to see their expectations come true.

'Woe is me! Where / When it is winter, will I find flowers, and where / The sunshine / And the shade of the earth?' This quick prayer, uttered whenever the GDR was felt once again to be too strait-laced, too sad and too drab, moved many of its inhabitants. For many people who were caught up in the maelstrom of 1989 and had reached the half-way point in their lives rather like the film's protagonists, the last verses of the H lderlin poem held a particularly poignant meaning: 'The walls stand / Speechless and cold, in the wind / The weather vanes rattle.'

Was the rebellion against the GDR's stagnation an expression of one's own life crisis? Or were the disintegration of the East Bloc and the end of the Cold War already part of history, the mere product of logical consistency? In the portraits, all the family's dead are alive in the first half of their own lives, which amounted for each and every one to a deep incision in their respective lives, linked to decisions in favour of sweeping changes.

Alas, Poor Yorick!
A Court Jester Minus a Court

In 1989-90, rehearsals for Hamlet/Hamletmaschine at the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin took place in an underground setting that had already ceased to provide a firm foothold. Up above, in the streets, in factories, in the editorial offices of newspapers and even in the antechamber of the Politburo discussions were taking place what course events were supposed to take, with or without the GDR. Just as Hamlet picks up Yorick's skull in the scene with the gravediggers, it seemed possible to pick up the GDR like a football. However, people started asking aloud for the first time what stuff might be attached to that ball. The great reckoning kicks off and demands for a historical reappraisal are being voiced. Mühe stands on the stage as Hamlet, with the skull of his father's fool in his hand. He is a fool himself but there is no longer such a thing as a state. Who is he supposed to amuse. Who is he to direct his fool's railings against. Who does he hold the mirror up to. The intention had been to step down from the stage and abandon one's theatrical role in order to speak one's mind. Now there is no getting back on to the stage any more. 'Oh, that I were a fool! I am ambitious for a motley coat.' The paradise of the stage seems lost, its doors locked against anyone trying to return. He tries to achieve a comeback elsewhere, but paradise remains lost. For our children, even though they really were children in 1989, these were

formative years, just as my parents' youth in the Third Reich and their wartime experiences were formative for me.

This, then, is the reason for the decision not to let the family's dead be buried by the dead but to have them put on the masks of their youth, an age when people still look, move or march forward. The different life phases and what they ascribe respectively to women and men make a certain amount of friction visible and muddy the waters for the observer.

Zehn Jahr ein Kind,
Zwanzig Jahr ein Jüngling,
Drei ig Jahr ein Mann,
Vierzig Jahr wohlgetan,
Fünfzig Jahr stille stahn,
Sechzig Jahr geht's Alter an,
Siebzig Jahr ein Greis
Achtzig Jahr nimmer weis,
Neunzig Jahr der Kinder Spott,
Hundert Jahre gnade Gott.[2]

The lives of men are measured in decimal steps. Fifty years marks the half-way stage, where 'things coming to a halt' describes a point that is both a climax - you've reached everything that was actually in your reach - and the sobering conclusion that in the remaining time not much is going to change any more. The puppets morph into tilting figures whom one feels like asking in a whisper, 'Why do you stare at with your eyes that cannot see', to drive home the point to them that there is a price to pay for not having to age like the rest of us. We would like to humiliate them and to grab them by their handicap, as Macbeth does with his apparitions. Whoever goes on living, remains behind only to add to the guilt they have incurred already, unlike the dead who have turned their back on all this. Instead of returning to where it all began, we, the really old ones in the family portrait, find ourselves stranded in the last phase of our lives.

In 1544, a year before his death, Hans Baldung Grien painted Die sieben Lebensalter des Weibes (The Seven Ages of Woman). In his painting, too, the aged woman stands still, keeping her feet together, as against all her younger iterations, who are captured in mid-movement. His 50-year-old stands still, with broad feet and massive knees; she has to lift her arm a bit to be able to rest it on the shoulder of her significantly younger self. 'To think that you, who have rotted away with the long passage of time, should ask what unstrings my virility, when your teeth are black, and extreme decrepitude ploughs furrows on your forehead, and your disgusting anus gapes between your shrivelled buttocks like that of a cow with diarrhea! I suppose I am excited by your bosom with its withered breasts like the udders of a mare, your flabby belly, and your scrawny thighs perched on top of your swollen ankles!'[3] The central group in the Mühe family obviously steer clear of love's lost labour. Like

in the myth of Marlene Dietrich or Maria Callas, they have managed, against our better knowledge, to convince us that they will succeed in defying age for good. A privilege reserved to performers.

'Tournez s'il vous plaît!'

The figure seen from behind was one of Andreas' favourite motifs for self-portraits and group portraits and for toying with truth and fiction. For his family portraits he eschews this stylistic device almost completely. With great effort he prepares a living picture featuring the members of his family who either deliberately look straight into the camera or sideways. The model for this only exists in his head, as opposed to the popular eighteenth-century pastime of recreating a well-known painting or engraving as a tableau vivant (at comparable expense). In the family portraits, the poses assigned to the puppets are decisive for the quality of their presence. It is instructive to remember the plastinates in Gunther von Hagens's Körperwelten, which only exist as bodies through the poses they are made to assume and become human beings because of the roles and functions they are assigned. I remember a medium-sized, cuddly naked puppet, which at the beginning of a multi-part performance under the direction of Bruno Cathomas on the theme of the Bible staged at the Maxim Gorki Theater in 2004 presented the creation of humankind as the product of its own initiative. With great effort, the puppet took a bone into its as yet barely prehensile hand and raised it to the heavens, to its own huge delight. This was not the creation in seven days but the history of millennia condensed into two minutes - thanks to the right pose.

In "Die Wahlverwandtschaften" (Elective Affinities), Goethe, too, places the creation of a tableau vivant based on Gerard ter Borch's Die v terliche Ermahnung (Gallant Conversation, known as The Paternal Admonition) far above the original. There is the young woman, who is seen from behind; her father is positioned in front of her, her mother, with her eyes in the glass she raises to her mouth, is seated at his side. In Elective Affinities, the audience cannot get enough of the scene so that in the end 'one impatient and comical fellow shouted out the words sometimes written at the foot of a page, "tournez s'il vous plaît," and his cry was taken up.' Was Goethe aware of the radical interpretation of the painting, which makes the so-called father a whoremaster, the mother a procuress and the daughter a prostitute? The original exercises much more restraint, even though the bed in the background and the entire arrangement would seem to preclude a domestic scence. 'Tournez s'il vous plaît' is not that far from 'Take your clothes off!'. The family portrait, too, remains ambiguous and polyphonous in its arrangement. According to Goethe, the actors in the tableau vivant he conjures up are well aware of the effect they are having and ignore the suggestion. In the family portraits the genuine actors likewise keep a low profile and stick to their part, which is to play themselves and to simply be there. They remain motionless. Maintaining their pose they become puppets. It is

now for the real puppets to play games and to keep moving. They are living it up.

'Wo denn sterb ich, und wie?
und wie lange'[4] (Richard Leising)

Georg Pencz, painter, draughtsman and engraver. His woodcut Das Glücksrad (The Wheel of Fortune, 1534) shows men astride a wooden wheel of fortune. On the left of the wheel is a group of men who are talking among themselves and watching the ascent of the men on the wheel. Those who have already made some progress to the top hold pots of coins or goblets in their hands. At the top, at twelve o'clock, as it were, the king is holding tight. With the sceptre and the orb in his hands he is leaning backwards, playing for extra time on top of the world. The wheel turns clockwise. The man at one o'clock is beginning to sense the precariousness of his position, but looking back he tries to soldier on. The fellow at three o'clock is about to leap off. With intercessory prayers on their lips, men positioned outside the enclosure try to catch the 'fall guys' in their outstretched arms. The crank of the wheel is turned by Fortuna, the female personification of Fate. She has a loop round her neck, the far end of which is in God's hand. God's long arm empowers a woman to decide when and how fast the wheel of fortune is put in motion. Could this be a reminder that women hold men's fate in their hands or that men are made by women? For Ulrich Mühe the women with whom he started families had great symbolic significance. He was on a quest for an idol he could admire and for an ideal of his own devising. Susanne Lothar, whom he met after the fall of the wall, quite clearly came to represent his Statue of Liberty. He devised for himself worlds and ways of living but with the very next step he transgressed the boundary lines he himself had drawn. In the family portrait he is put back into his family but he does not fit in, because his family constructs were purely notional and the result of pretence. He was incapable of building something with an equal partner. All he ever achieved was his self-design. Constructing a photo round him corresponds to the reality of his life.

His Mission - Memory of a Revolution

Under the direction of Axel Richter Ulrich Mühe played the part of Sasportas in Heiner Müller's Der Auftrag (The Mission) at the Städtische Bühnen in Karl-Marx-Stadt in 1981. In the course of the French Revolution three men are assigned the mission of inciting a revolution among the slaves in Jamaica to export the revolution to the Caribbean. Napoleon rises to power, the former masterminds are gone and the three want to resign from their mission. Mühe played the recalcitrant son of a coloured slave as a rebellious ape and his intelligent, body-oriented interpretation of the part was a triumph. It procured him the ticket to Berlin and to the Volksbühne. His first part in Heiner Müller's Macbeth at the Volksbühne was a minor role as a bomb planter. He was

supposed to play the part naked. Mühe opted for a bowler hat, a tie and a diaper: the apprentice anarchist was likely to soil himself and had to take suitable precautions. In 1987 he teamed up again with the dramatist and director Heiner Müller for Lohndrücker (The Scab). Mühe's character oscillated briefly between the Hitler salute and the Red Front fist. It was most impressive how he mastered that conflict of impulses - hand to head, which gives it a quick thought, head to hand, which adjusts its position. His own mission was the precision he achieved in his acting, his awareness of a clear sequence of actions, without flourishes of any kind and reduced to bare essentials. Two years later the director and his star actor badly misjudged the timing of their Hamlet. Who were they supposed to turn to for their debriefing? The state they had set out to unmask simply did not exist any longer. 'The revolution is the mask of death. Death is the mask of the revolution.' Heiner Müller's barrage from the prayer wheel retains the upper hand. In his heart of hearts, Mühe takes leave of the theatre. He remains open for other missions. It is his last film role that brings fulfilment.

Not long before his death he is given the role of a Stasi officer in Das Leben der Anderen (The Lives of Others). The officer first observes the people he is assigned to, then he sympathizes with them and finally colludes with them; he is then unspectacularly retired from the Stasi surveillance system by the powers that be and ends up handing out advertising brochures to passers-by in the street. This role allows Ulrich Mühe at least in formal terms to overcome stasis, the dilemma that plagues his native country, by impersonating it to perfection.

Playing for high stakes, he resigns himself to moving things only in his head. When the world was finally his oyster, he had to bow out. And what about us? We lead the lives of others.

The Photo as a Document

For my father a photo was equivalent to a document. Visits by relatives or friends and important meetings were documented photographically, as was the regular Sunday outing, which was something special in my childhood, the shopping trip to Berlin, the reunion with relatives and the excursion of the agricultural cooperative, whose chairman he was in the first years after collectivization in 1960. The photos in this family log, whose sole mood barometer is my father, carry only positive connotations. There is a photo of every special event, a wedding, the announcement of the birth of offspring and of the different stages of their upbringing. Photos were a must during our visits to Berlin, which were fairly regular from what I remember. There was the obligatory photo taken in the company of the Berlin bear, which you were supposed to lovingly grab by one its teeth and whose fur costume gave me the creeps, rather like when we had to pose with Father Christmas at Berlin's Christmas Market. To cut a long story short: My father did not take photos himself, he had them taken.

This compulsion of being photographed has never left me entirely. I have never pressed a release button in my life.

This is not to say that photos as documents and as part of a life's logbook do not speak to me. My sister has many photo albums. Legends serve as aides-memoire and sometimes the photos are commented on in a sentence or two to capture the situation.

When my children were small they knew no greater pleasure on rainy Sundays than to leaf through these photo albums together with my sister. The older they were, the more they had to say about the pictures by way of comment. The pleasure they took in the history of the family, whose reenactment contributed to the family's stability, slowly morphed into the pleasure of taking apart the construction of any given pictorial reality, until the interest in the family as such went absent without leave.

For my father-in-law photography was all about the depiction of beauty, of the moment, of human beings, of nature. He liked to surround himself with beautiful things and appreciated very much being together with beautiful women. He cultivated his friendship with the Leipzig photographer Günter Rössler; I have fond memories of both the man and his nudes. My father-in-law had a knack of giving women presents that gave them real pleasure. He had a good eye for how women should dress, what clothes suited them and what objects they should surround themselves with.

What's the Matter?

Oskar Panizza's narrative Das Wachsfigurenkabinett (The Waxworks) comprises the description of a visit to a show booth at the Nuremberg Fair, where the 'Leiden und Sterben unseres Heilands Jesus Christi', the passion and the death of our saviour Jesus Christ, is performed in three acts. The narrator, who happens to be an excellent eye witness, describes in great detail the expected and unexpected effects the scenography, the puppets with their mechanical movements and the details of the plot produce in the audience. We are immediately drawn into the performance because of the narrator's skill with which he establishes a relationship between the minimal, monotonous movements of the puppets. He manages to convincingly suggest mimetic qualities on their part, even though as mechanical puppets they barely resemble human beings. Fear and pity arise in the specators. They side with the Man of Sorrows and after his crucifixion a tumult breaks out in the auditorium. Stage and auditorium momentarily change places.

Visitors to the exhibition will stand between the two family portraits, unable to figure out what really goes on between those two pictures. All they can do is side with one of them.

The Passion as Farce

The venue for Mischpoche is a museum. Andreas Mühe puts his family on display, almost in the style of ethnographic exhibitions that were frequently put on in Europe's great zoological gardens up until a hundred years ago. The museum, a place in the meantime sensitized for the demarcation lines of provenance, is the venue where he presents this family. The family as a performance.

What is the difference between these pictures and a glance into the family album?

When my father used to watch documentary films showing the Wehrmacht in action in the Second World War, it was always the Wehrmacht advancing, never the Wehrmacht retreating.

In the same way it is the construction of a house or the round birthday accompanied by a family reunion that gets photographed. We prefer the documentation of a birth or a christening to photos of a burial. I remember putting it down to a lack of respect when the undertaker sent us photos of my father lying in state in our church. I then realised that this was due to the fact that, for the first time in living memory, the much bigger church was used for the leave-taking ceremony instead of the funeral parlour. As funerals are occasions for indulging memories of the person who has passed away, photographs call up memories in us that had disappeared or been buried. Retreat.

So stand still for a moment for the camera. What an effort for children not to give way to their desire to fidget, cough, roll their eyes, stick out their tongue or raise two fingers behind the head of the person in front of them to suggest they have 'ass's ears'. A family is a group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit.

Annegret Hahn

1
An Image Seen Early in the Morning But when you left, dawn was breaking / And the day's imminent vicinity / Had a place that remained unfilled / As if your contours had been left deliberately blank
That I don't see you, don't recognize you / Has remained the brightest image you left behind / And it is the emptiness that I call by its name / When I ask how I have seen you.
Summer 1956

2
Ten years - a child / Twenty years - a youth / Thirty years - a man / Forty years - well done / Fifty years - things come to a halt / Sixty years - the onset of old age / Seventy years - an old man / Eighty years - a stranger to wisdom / Ninety years - mocked by children / A hundred years - the Lord may have mercy.

3
Horace, Epode 8, in: Horace, Odes and Epodes, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 2004, p. 291.

4
'So where will I die then? And how? And for how long'