Chapter 2

Language as Impasse

Mit dem Zweifel, der der beste Lehrmeister ist, wäre schon viel gewonnen: manches bliebe ungesprochen. (p.8)

[With doubt, which is the best teacher, much would be gained: some things would remain unsaid.]

In the Introduction I suggested a reading of Kraus that focuses on impasses, namely on the resistance to representation and interpretation that characterizes his work. Instead of classifying Kraus in one category or another, which seems to be impossible, I suggested making this resistance to categorization (which often takes the form of an explicit refusal) into an object of study and reflection. Accordingly, in the next two chapters I will examine Kraus’s views on language, his *Sprachkritik*, not as an attempt to provide a proper or corrected form of language, but as a radical problematization of various linguistic practices, and an attempt to provide an alternative to them. This problematization will be demonstrated with respect to Kraus’s idea and practice of citationality in chapter three, and the relation between language, violence and war in chapter four, which introduces the notion of the “zero degree of language” (focusing on *Die Letzten Tage der Menschheit* as an example). The present chapter will focus on Kraus’s concept of the poetic creativity of language, and provide the foundations for these later discussions. I shall argue this is neither a concept of pure or accurate language, nor a method for stabilizing meaning or improving communication, nor simply an idea of artistic style in language, but the marker of a critical project and a moral campaign, which makes essential use of such elements as ambiguity, uncertainty, suspension of meaning, and self-contradiction.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It might be argued that the attempt to present Kraus’s entire body of work under the idea of a comprehensive and radical critique of language—an idea that will be developed here through the notion of impasse—is misguided. Throughout his work, Kraus is regularly preoccupied with such aspects of language as grammar and linguistic structure, devoting significant attention to wrong word selections and their absurd or manipulative usage, to condemning enigmatic speech forms, and ridiculing what he regarded as superficial stylistics. Yet such a repertoire of techniques and discursive strategies, it might be argued, does not amount to a wholesale critique of language as such. Following this line, Krausian satire and critique of the press, as radical as they may be, are usually viewed under one of two overarching approaches: either as an attempt to restore conservative tendencies, or as a naïve and idealistic effort. If there’s an impasse here, it has to do with Kraus’s own utopia, rather than with language itself. Against such readings, this chapter will demonstrate that Kraus’s critique is to be understood as stemming neither from the concerns and objections of a conservative nor those of an idealist thinker. Kraus’s view of language not only rejects its false or “corrupting” uses, but also challenges its basic communicative and interpellative functions. Moreover, Kraus’s critique of language is tightly related to social and ideological critique, both of which have to do with a crisis of signification.[[2]](#footnote-2) Such critique, I shall argue, is not aimed at recreating a “lost” unity or restoring a state of harmony, but at the realization of a genuine crisis and the exposure of a fundamental abyss, manifested in the motto of Kraus’s essay on language, *Die Sprache*: “Abgründe dort sehen zu lehren, wo Gemeinplätze sind—das wäre die pädagogische Aufgabe...” [To learn to see abysses in commonplaces—that would be the pedagogic mission]. The task of the critic, as I shall argue in what follows, is to expose the abyss that lurks within social institutions, relations and practices by bringing their language to an impasse.

This chapter begins by reviewing the way Kraus’s view of language was interpreted and understood within what I call the “paradigm of representation,” demonstrating the limitations, shortcomings and blind spots of this paradigm. The reason I find this discussion to be important is that, although some scholars have indeed criticized and dismissed this paradigm, they have not provided an alternative to it. In order to suggest such an alternative, I subsequently turn to secondary literature that deals with various forms of performativity, analyzing these ideas in relation to Kraus’s concept of language as “creation and shaping”. In the last section I offer a discussion of Kraus’s *Wortgestalt*, arguing that what he is striving for (or ultimately ends up with) is not a self-defeating or esoteric language but a mode of moral critique and resistance.

# I. Against the Representational Paradigm

Many early Kraus scholars understood his view of language as deriving from a romantic or rather platonic conception. Their assumption was that Kraus believed in an omnipotent conception of language that determines social and political reality—a view shared by other language critics and intellectuals of his time.[[3]](#footnote-3) Kraus’s view of language was thus regarded as mystical, fanatic, apocalyptic, and even as a form of idolatry.[[4]](#footnote-4) These interpretations highlight Kraus’s emphasis on the relations between *Wort* and *Wesen*, understood as a signification process, and his insistence on correct grammar and the accurate use of words, expressions, phrases and sentences—an insistence interpreted as aiming for linguistic purity, which relies on the idea that, if something is grammatically wrong, it must also be morally defective. This means that language by itself is perceived as a reliable mediator, which has the ability to produce a valid account of experience as well as to assure moral conduct—as long as it is correctly used. From this point of view, Kraus’s life-project is regarded as a critical rewriting, through linguistic correction, of social life at his time.

Other scholars have noticed the problematic aspects of such an approach. Reading Kraus’s reflections on language, they noted his emphasis on active interpretation and the role of the imagination in the production of meaning. However, they still attached Kraus’s concept of language to the idea of adequate representation. For example:

To say that imagination, or the sensibility, of a man is coextensive with his morality is very much like saying that his language is coextensive with his experience. These two assertions encompass Kraus’s entire work, and both are open to the same logical and existential objections.[[5]](#footnote-5)

A shift in the interpretation of Kraus’s work occurred in the mid-1980s when, in light of the rise of post-structuralism, a number of researchers reexamined his concept of language and paid more attention to its complexity. Both Kraus’s theoretical concept of language, as well as his unique linguistic praxis corresponded with his concept of *Sprachliche Zweifel*.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this new light, Kraus was described as a “conceptualist”, “naturalist”, “rationalist” and sometimes affiliated, albeit with some reservation, with Wittgenstein or Benjamin. An example for such linkage is provided by Jay F. Bodine, who writes that “Kraus’s critique of language and literature is ultimately a type of verification procedure; it checks for the truth content of an expression in social context.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Another example is Michael Rogers’s reading, which argues that Kraus developed a symbolic language that had to do with events and emotions and does not simply represent reality. Reality is thus discovered through a process of ”value-judgment”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Although no longer a naïve concept of representation based on the relation between word and object, this line of interpretation insists that language maintains its ability to represent, and thereby also maintains and guarantees a certain social state of affairs or *status quo*. Immoral conduct is then regarded as the consequence of a gap opened up when language as a social mechanism hinders and replaces, rather than promotes and supports, forms of individuality.

Despite this paradigm shift, the basic interpretative assumptions remain identical. Namely, first, that Kraus regards language as a medium that is based on representation (whether this representation relies on a model of signification or a more elaborate semantic process). Second, Krausian critique is directed at *false or distorted contents* that are expressed through language, or at the questionable personality of the speaker/author (Heine, Harden, Werfel, Kerr and so on). More precisely, Kraus is seen as criticizing various forms of the corruption of language, which takes place when the latter is harnessed to the distortion of content rather than its truthful delivery, or to the promotion of narrow personal ambitions. Third, Kraus’s critique occurs at the hermeneutic and stylistic levels of both the works he is criticizing as well as his own works. Other aspects, including performative aspects, acoustic aspects, his critique of images, and the use of typefaces, page layouts and other similar elements are excluded from this context. And fourth, Kraus did not present an explicit theory of language: his works present a series of critical acts, rather than some comprehensive critical theory of language in general.

The presentation of Kraus as a “language purist”[[9]](#footnote-9) and as the “high priest of the German language” is strongly echoed in some of his own expressions, as well as in the impression made by his texts, along with his readings and theatrical performances. This was, in a way, the role Kraus wished for himself. However, when this view itself becomes an interpretation of Kraus’s work, compelling as it may be, it leads to an irresolvable inconsistency between his admiration for language on the one hand and the skepticism that characterizes his satire on the other. The emphasis on adequate representation seems to bring Kraus’s concept of language to an intellectual impasse. Seen through such a prism, he indeed appears as a reactionary publicist who, instead of taking part in the radical rethinking of the complex relations between language and society offered by such contemporary modernists as Freud, Kafka or Benjamin, campaigned instead for a conservative concept of language while condemning those who betrayed it. Although, as mentioned, several researchers have doubted or rejected such a view,[[10]](#footnote-10) they failed to provide an alternative and comprehensive interpretation of Kraus’s relation to language. The focus in Kraus studies merely shifted from problems of language, representation and media to historical and contextual questions, including such themes such as Kraus’s satiric style in relation to other words of his age, his theatrical works, his relation to psychoanalysis, his problematic “Jewish identity” and his position in the diverse intellectual and artistic debates of his time. For example, discussing Kraus’s attitude towards journalism, Robert Lilienfeld writes that “it was not the institution itself he [Kraus] attacked, but rather the attitudes it tended to generate: the use of thought, language and imaginary for some other purpose than the expression of truth.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Kraus’s critique of journalism is already framed here as directed against its “tendency” for false representation. Language remains the only and absolute source of correct representation, of truth, a mechanism for perfect expression (when used correctly), which, through this capacity, can function as the guarantor of moral conduct, a culture of justice, a decent society and politics, etc.

But one cannot but wonder: if Kraus was concerned with representation, why did he choose to direct his attack of the media at the format of the feuilleton rather than the news, and to do so while himself creating his own kind-of feuilleton (*Die Fackel)*? Why did he see a need to resort to so many wordplays and complicated, twisted forms of writing in order to deliver this message, instead of opting for a more “direct” form of representation that would allegedly “cut through” those linguistic forms that distort rather than preserve truth? Why did he pay so much attention to style rather than content, and did so even when the style in question was grammatically flawless? How can we account for such seemingly enigmatic statements by him like “the press is the event”?[[12]](#footnote-12) More specifically, if, according to Kraus, our very notion of reality is always already shaped by the press, and events cannot simply be detached from the way they are represented and covered by the media, what meaning can there be to the idea of exposing reality as such? These questions, I argue, cannot be answered within the representation paradigm of Kraus-scholars.

This paradigm is also apparent in those studies of Kraus that pay more attention to the theatricality and performativity of his language, such as that of Kari Grimstad.[[13]](#footnote-13) Although Grimstad carefully examines Kraus’s theatricality, its main features are left unexplained. Why is theater, as a medium, so important to Kraus? Why does he reject theatrical realism? What is the function of the frequent use of quotations in his plays? Why does he reject many modern forms of performance, focusing almost solely on the actor’s voice? How to explain the fact that he regarded his public readings of the works of Shakespeare and Nestroy (his *Theater der Dichtung*) as a form of critical resistance to the First World War and to the tragic postwar situation? How is such a reading supposed to provide an alternative to the corruption of language caused by the press, according to Kraus? Since these questions were left unanswered, the option that Kraus’s concept of theater might be related to his critique of the press is completely left out. In order to address these questions, one has to look at language not as a field of harmony but of tension; not as paradise but as an abyss. In both these examples—journalism and the theater—what most studies leave out is the function of the medium itself (the newspaper or theater show). It is not what these media succeed or fail to represent, but rather their function *as* media that is so central to Kraus.

In his 1931 essay “Karl Kraus,” Walter Benjamin writes: “The newspaper is an instrument of power. It can derive its value only form the character of the power it serves; not only in what it represents, but also in what it does, it is the expression of this power.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The power of the newspaper is that of “high capitalism,” and Benjamin is here sensitive to the connection between new economic structures and means of representation. In other words, if the media “represents” anything, it is capitalism—namely the form or system of power it is itself part of—rather than “the truth”.[[15]](#footnote-15) It functions and shapes society through this power-structure and is therefore inherently politicized. “Public opinion” is thus something that is generated by the press—which also becomes the only place, Kraus notes, where opinion is made public—and this constitutes a shift from the private to the public, from the unique to the general, from word to event, from origin to replica. Language in the capitalist world becomes the reified/reifying language of the press. Along with these changes, the critical focus on language is also shifted: from the critique of representation to that of the mechanism of production, from content to relations between content and form, from the medium as messenger to the medium as agent of social and political power. It will thus be useful to return to Benjamin’s text when trying to reconstruct Kraus’s concept of language beyond the idea of adequate representation.[[16]](#footnote-16) Kraus’s words quoted above, “to learn to recognize the abyss in the commonplaces,” can thus be understood, first, as learning to recognize the public sphere as an already-politicized zone; and second, as learning to recognize language not as the answer to the atrocities of modernism but as an abyss that should trigger critical doubt about modernism. In the following sections, I will follow Benjamin in reading Kraus as addressing the crisis modernism, and the way they understand it to be inherently a crisis of language.

# II. Social Crisis as Linguistic Crisis: Kraus’s Media Critique

In his book *Karl Kraus und die Presse* (1974) Helmut Arntzen suggests that future Kraus scholars read *Die Fackel* as a historical document that dissolves obvious connections and illuminates unsuspected ones. Building up on this thought, I would suggest reading Kraus’s paper as a chronology of social crisis, enhanced by the rise of new forms of technology and media, and in which Habsburg Vienna serves as a case study, the forerunner of a global process. Using his claim that “the newspaper is the event” as a starting point, Kraus’s work can be read as *media-history*. By that I do not mean that Kraus was a historian *of* the media, but that he both realized and practiced the fact that history itself is produced and shaped by the new forms of media. Kraus was challenging the “obvious” history by exposing the ways it is connected to processes of social change and to the rise of new forms of economic and political power. Kraus is not a historian or theorist, but an author who expresses his critique and observation not only through his articles and witty aphorisms, but also in linguistic formations, poems and plays. His satire as well as linguistic style and choice of genre are reactions and responses, modes of resistance aimed at unmaking the effects that the crisis he diagnosed – which was first and foremost a media crisis – had on subjectivity and to form (or per-form) a critical stand point via this process. The literary context of his era allows us to place Kraus’s work in relation to the anti-mimetic poetic style of his time,[[17]](#footnote-17) and to point to the relation between poetic style and social and political critique. By understating the nature of the social crisis and its relation to language diagnosed by Kraus, we can point to the specific aspects or media critique his anti-mimetic style wished to address. In other words, when Kraus says “the newspaper is the event,” this has a double meaning. First, “event” in the sense of a media production: in order to sell newspapers, the press must create events. And second, the linguistic style of newspapers that is deployed in order to turn occurrences into “events”.

Here is a famous example of Kraus’s critique of the language of the press in relation to the First World War:

In dieser großen Zeit, die ich noch gekannt habe, wie sie so klein war; die wieder klein werden wird, wenn ihr dazu noch Zeit bleibt; und die wir, weil im Bereich organischen Wachstums derlei Verwandlung nicht möglich ist, lieber als eine dicke Zeit und wahrlich auch schwere Zeit ansprechen wollen; in dieser Zeit, in der eben das geschieht, was man sich nicht vorstellen konnte, und in der geschehen muß, was man sich nicht mehr vorstellen kann, und könnte man es, es geschähe nicht –; in dieser ernsten Zeit, die sich zu Tode gelacht hat vor der Möglichkeit, daß sie ernst werden könnte; von ihrer Tragik überrascht, nach Zerstreuung langt, und sich selbst auf frischer Tat ertappend, nach Worten sucht; in dieser lauten Zeit, die da dröhnt von der schauerlichen Symphonie der Taten, die Berichte hervorbringen, und der Berichte, welche Taten verschulden: in dieser da mögen Sie von mir kein eigenes Wort erwarten. Keines außer diesem, das eben noch Schweigen vor Mißdeutung bewahrt.(F. 404,1)

In these great times, which I knew when they were small, which will again be small if they still have time, and which because, in the field of organic growth, such transformations are not possible, we prefer to address as fat times and truly as also hard times; in these times when precisely what is happening could not be imagined, and when what must happen could no longer be imagined, and if it could it would not happen; in these grave times that have laughed themselves to death at the possibility of growing serious, and overtaken by their own tragedy, long for destruction, and then, catching themselves in the act, seek words; in these loud times booming with the fearful symphony of deeds, that engender reports, and of reports that bear the blame for deeds; in these speakable times, you can expect no word from me. None except this, which just preserves silence from misinterpretation.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The paragraph is taken from Kraus’s first public lecture after the break of war in November 1914. Kraus is playing on the press cliché, “In These Great Times,” which relates to the greatness and glory of war, celebrating and idealizing it as a desirable event. This phrase does not provide any information about the times or insights about the war, but is rather a discursive act that defines the war as an outstanding historical event by portraying it as “great.” In his satirical piece, Kraus is not bluntly contradicting or dismissing the phrase, but rather pushes the metaphor forward until its logic becomes absurd: applying physical dimensions to time, starting with great or big (*großen*), which then becomes small (*klein*), then fat (*dicke*),and finally heavy (*schwere*). The point is not that the phrase is simply a false or literary-deformed description of reality, but that it is part of an epistemological–linguistic crisis. It is part of a whole language or genre of phrases (in the media, in politics, and in other discourses), in which reality cannot be grasped and perceived, and that prevents its judgment or evaluation. Such catchphrases do not simply distort representation, but also their addressee’s mind. They form a language that has a completely new (non)logic, with statements like “war is great” or “war for peace” (examples referred to in *The Last Days of Mankind*), which generate an emotional effect marked by a false sense of familiarity and identification: a language that functions as an ideological apparatus and an interpellative mechanism. The result is a gap between this language of phrases and metaphors (“booming reports” and “symphony of deeds”) and the experience such a language distorts. Kraus is turning the phrase’s metaphor about times into an account of the relations between language, imagination, experience, and actions. In his satire the metaphor returns, only this time in order to point to the function of the speech-act in which it appears, to its inability to say anything. This re-use of the metaphor thus becomes a call for silence, one that Benjamin, in his Kraus essay, referred to as a “reversed silence”: a silence that is itself a speech-act in the face of a language crisis.

Again, it should be noted that the point is not to represent the world. Kraus is not correcting grammar or checking correlation between signifiers and signified. His exposure of the false representation of the press is not meant to provide a better and more valid one, but to demonstrate the existence of a more comprehensive crisis of language, of which the press is a symptom, and to call for a different relation to it through a form of critical awareness. Kraus’s satire exposes language not as false representation, but as a semantic field with different aims.[[19]](#footnote-19) His effort is not to generate new representations, but to play in the same field, in order to create alternative options and different effects. His understanding of language as an open space for word-games allows him to identify the semantic weaknesses of his opponent, exposing them through his counter word-games. His emphasis on linguistic forms, expressions, and grammatical perfectness is designed to create a different linguistic effect on the reader. Such techniques allow us to question one form of language use, and to form sense and meaning through a *different* kind of relation to the text that is being (critically, satirically) read. Kraus is not decorating language but exposes its mechanism, and in so doing introduces doubt: generating an alienation that stresses the gap between language and the experience of the reader, thereby placing the latter in an *active* position of judgment.

The following passage presents a more general reflection by Kraus on the nature of the press:

Was ist sie [die Presse]? Ein Bote nur? Einer, der uns auch mit seiner Meinung belästigt? Durch seine Eindrücke peinigt? Uns mit der Tatsache gleich die Vorstellung mitbringt? Durch seine Details über Einzelheiten von Meldungen über Stimmungen oder durch seine Wahrnehmungen über Beobachtungen von Einzelheiten über Details und durch seine fortwährenden Wiederholungen von all dem uns bis aufs Blut quält? (F. 404, 8)

What is it [the press]? Only a messenger? One that bothers us with its opinion? That torments us through its impressions? That brings us the facts together with their presentation? Through its details about pieces of information about the public mood, or through its perceptions of observations of details of particularities, and through constant repetitions of all that tortures us?

Kraus emphasizes that the press is not a messenger and its action is not a representation of events. In fact, it disrupts and prevents people from perceiving their reality and evaluating it. It overwhelms readers with details that are processed and manipulated until there remains no valid distinction between facts and opinions, between the events the press is presenting and its forms of presentation. By this continued flood of fragmented speech and repetition, the reader is confronted with messages he cannot process: a stream of disinformation that builds up to a “torture.” The problem with the press is not that it fails to represent events or that it manipulates them, but by the way it operates as a mechanism that “subordinates language to misfortune”[[20]](#footnote-20): it covers its senseless fragments of information with images and symbols, juxtaposing different items so that a completely different view of things is created in the reader’s mind. Gaps and question marks are covered over by an excess of speech, and lack of substance—by repetitions and clichés. The interpellative logic of the press is not a matter of what it reports, but of a mechanism that generates subjectivity based on compliance, on becoming the addressee of an ideological call: one that results (somewhat differently than in Althusser’s account) from a *tension* between the form of this ideological call and its content or message that *cannot* be understood. Kraus’s satirical operation exposes the emptiness of the journalistic language by imitating its repetitious and circular style. Instead of talking about events, Kraus criticizes the ways they *become* events, concentrating on social and political mechanisms that together with the media create a crisis and linguistic impasse. As I show in chapter 4, Kraus’s World War play *The Last Days of Mankind* is a collection of examples that are meant to simulate this interpellative process, and perhaps provide an alternative to it. This, however, gives rise to the following question: under these circumstances, when language itself is at an impasse, is literature still possible? How could satire and poetry function as social critique under such an impasse?

# III. Media Critique as Critique of Mimesis

To address this challenge, one has to examine Kraus’s distinction between a mimetic and anti-mimetic use of language. In order to do that, I need to turn to a brief excurse to the question of the relation between literature and identity in modernism, against the background of the modern crisis of identity, in the face of the pressures of mass culture, the commercialization of society, industrialization of labor, and so on. David Trotter examines how early twentieth century poetic styles were a response to these “pressures of professionalization,” constituting different forms of rejection of mimesis. Trotter claims that these anti-mimetic poetic style were an “anxious means of responding to the new commercial paradigm governing the cultural production of value.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Following Peter Nicholls’s *Men of 1914*[[22]](#footnote-22), Trotter emphasizes the political aspects of mimesis, and its effects on autonomy and subjectivity in the sense that “the experience of life is only possible by others.” He demonstrates the problem of mimesis via its implications on identity and gender, i.e. the creation of identity by the “repression of differences.” The anti-mimetic poetic style was a response to these threats, by the simulation of integration through the creation of an *intra-*personal literary perspective. According to Nicholls, the modernist self is a self saved from the passive mimesis of modernity by an active mimesis of the cultural past. Trotter expands this definition and applies it to literary style and the changes of genres. The production of this modern self can be traced in a dialectic struggle between inner and outer experience, the imagined and the real, the present and the past (or its eternal return), between a sense of unity and disintegration. The texts of the period manifest this poetic style by replacing narrative and plot with self-consciousness and symbolism, and with a tormented, fragmented and disturbed tone. Timothy Melley further connects this threat on identity to a collective cultural pathology.[[23]](#footnote-23) Beyond the literary individual expressions of writers, Melley suggests that the anti-mimetic poetic style manifested itself as a response to “culturally produced and authorized narrative technology.” Patrick O’Donnell defines such literature as a “narrative work or operation that articulates the ‘individual's’ relation to the symbolic order.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Aaron Rosenfeld continues the same line in his beautiful analysis of the “poetics of paranoia” in Orwell‘s *1984*, writing that: “Modernism shifts the balance of inflection between the word and the world in favor of the word, substituting the dream of a formally coherent text for the expectation of coherent character, and thus opens the door to the enforced unities of paranoid reading.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Erich Auerbach diagnoses this new anti-mimetic style in the following way: “Common to almost all of these novels is haziness, vague indefinability of meaning: precisely of the uninterpretable symbolism which is also to be encountered in other forms of art of the same period.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Auerbach’s important emphasis is that modern literature does not seek to resolve this crisis of meaning by restoring the possibility of an identity based on the model of correspondence adequacy between reader and text (e.g. between the modern bourgeois subject and the modern novel), but rather to produce a different identity (subject position, reader position):

These are the forms of order and interpretation which the modern writers here under discussion attempt to grasp in the random moment—not one order and one interpretation, but many, which may either be those of different persons or of same person at different times; so that overlapping, complementing and contradiction yield something we might call synthesized cosmic view point or at least challenge the reader’s will to interpretative synthesis.[[27]](#footnote-27)

On the one hand, a traumatic experience of displacement that conflicts with the reader’s expectations for synthesis. On the other hand, a new kind of unity is created through this process: that of a hopeless interpreter, exposed to the destabilizing effects of the text. Thus, in response to socially-constrained, overdetermined identity, these modernity writers, through the above literary strategies, strove to generate an alternative that relied on literary subjectivity: one that could no longer rely on the problematic idea of a mimetic language with its coherent concept of representation, nor on the ideological promise to provide social order through a stable order of identities.

Along similar lines, Michael Rogers suggested that Kraus created a symbolic language as a supplement to the modern loss of sense and integration. Kraus, he writes, “takes every instance as symbolic, as an expression of some terrifying rule about the world in which we live.”[[28]](#footnote-28) As Rogers beautifully shows, language for Kraus functions as a structure that provides unity by congruence between expression and what is expressed—which is not the same as the relation between a reference and referent. But while he emphasizes that, in Kraus’s view, “reality in effect is what the media tells you it is,” and that for Kraus “communication is reality,” Rogers then goes on to argue that Kraus’s concept of language is “tantamount to the *study of reality*” (my emphasis). In other words, the problem is that Rogers’s notion of symbolic expression, while indeed accounting for Kraus’s alternative to the model of representation, nonetheless still relies on a notion of mimesis. Contrary to Rogers, Kraus is not making an effort to present an undistorted representation of reality through symbols (instead of representations), but rather seeks to construct an anti-mimetic perspective. In *The Last Days of Mankind*, for example, Kraus is not striving to express the experience of the First World War, but to present the mediatic framework (the press) through which the events are experienced, and the effects of such mimetic language on the subjectivation of the masses.

Friedrich Kittler’s theory of media suggests a helpful analysis of the relation between media and experience that explicitly rejects the mimetic framework. He opens his book *Gramophone, Radio, typewriter*[[29]](#footnote-29) with the statement “The media determines our situation”: a sentence that seems very close to Kraus’s view. In his study, Kittler suggests an analysis of the ways media determine and shape social and scientific discourse. Media do not simply transmit information but determine what is information, and how it is structured and operates as discourse. In a previous study, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, Kittler discusses the rise of the modern media forms (photographs, films, radio) as a shift from strategies of inscription to information storage and manipulation.[[30]](#footnote-30) He examines how these media forms shape social relations and norms, as well as literary genres, philosophical concepts, and ways of thinking. This perspective allows us to understand Kraus not as a “moralist” or a “prophet” who set out on a crusade against the press,[[31]](#footnote-31) but as a media critique sensitive to the constitutive role of the media in the formation of reality and identity.

An example to the way Kraus was sensitive to the way new media technologies rendered the notion of mimesis impossible can be seen in the following example, which is very much in line with Kittler’s analysis. Here is the character of the *Grumbler* in *The Last Days of Mankind* on the phonograph:

Hätte man die Stimme dieses Zeitalters in einem Phonographen aufbewahrt, so hätte die äußere Wahrheit die innere Lügen gestraft und das Ohr diese und jene nicht wiedererkannt. So macht die Zeit das Wesen unkenntlich, und würde dem größten Verbrechen, das je unter der Sonne, unter den Sternen begangen war, Amnestie gewähren. Ich habe das Wesen gerettet und mein Ohr hat den Schall der Taten, mein Auge die Gebärde der Reden entdeckt und meine Stimme hat, wo sie nur wiederholte, so zitiert, daß der Grundton festgehalten blieb für alle Zeiten.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Had one preserved the voice of this era on a phonograph, the outer truth would have been in conflict with the inner truth, and the ear would not have recognized either of them. Thus, time makes the essential truth unrecognizable, and would grant amnesty to the greatest crime ever perpetrated under the sun, under the stars. I have preserved this truth, and my ear has detected the sound of their deeds, my eyes the gestures of their speaking, and my voice, when it only cited, did so in such a way that the fundamental tone remained for all time.

This paragraph shows the problematic nature of the new media technologies, despite their seemingly transparent mimetic nature. A recording, for example, is not a “neutral” documentation, but a mediatic intervention that affects the way it is perceived. Listening to a phonographic recording of events is not a mere sonoric chronology but, in Kittler’s terms, an active form of inscription and manipulation that shapes and transforms its content. Kraus’s own theatrical documentation of the War, which is admittedly also a mediatic form (although not precisely traditional theater, as I explain in chapter 4), is at the same time an *anti-mimetic* form: a critique on the *pretence* of these new media forms to a “documentation” of reality; their pretence to transparency, to being, so to speak, “non-media.” I will explain the mechanisms behind this critique in Chapter 3, where I refer to Kraus’s technique of citationality.

These examples show the importance of such an analysis in order to address the problems and unanswered questions I mentioned in regard to the representational paradigm. Kraus can be read as documenting and struggling against the new media. His project is not about “proper” representation and the restoration of mimesis: a return to a paradise of perfect correspondence between word and meaning. This is no longer possible, as his tragic tone and melancholic poems demonstrate. Instead, under the conditions Kraus diagnoses, the only way to express the crisis and produce meaning is by confronting these new media technologies (first and foremost the printed press), by displacing them and exposing them *as* media. Kraus clearly corresponds to other projects of critique of modernity and modern media. However, in order to understand his uniqueness, one ought to focus on his two major life-projects, *Die Fackel* and the *Theater der Dichtung*, and to understand them as *anti-media*.[[33]](#footnote-33) I suggest a reading of Kraus’s media critique in light of his anti-mimetic literary strategy. It is in the medium itself that Kraus wishes to create an alternative to the repressing and suppressive forces of the times. Against the “will for knowledge” encouraged by the press, Kraus creates and uses his anti-media for the suspension of knowledge, creating a dialectical concept of language that emphasizes gaps and impasses, and provides an alternative form of the use of language, which he calls “language as shaping” (*Gestaltung*).

# IV. *Sprachgestaltung*: Kraus’s Alternative View of Language

One of the key concepts in understanding Kraus’s alternative idea of language is that of *Sprachgestaltung*. In order to get an idea of what the term means, here is the motto to his essay collection on language, *Die Sprache*:

Sprachanweisungen müßten unleserlich geschrieben sein, um dem Sprecher annährend den Respekt einzuflöβen wie das Rezept dem Patienten. Wenn man nur entnehemen wollte, daβ vor dem Sprachgebrauch der Kopf zu schütteln sei. Mit dem Zweifel, der der beste Lehrmeister ist, wäre schon viel gewonnen: manches bliebe ungesprochen. (p.8)

[Language-instructions must be unreadably written, in order to instill the speaker with respect somewhat like the prescription does the patient. If one would only conclude that in the face of the usage of language the head should be shaken. With doubt, which is the best teacher, much can be gained: certain things would remain unsaid.]

From the outset, Kraus’s interest lies not in the ways language produces meaning or communication but in that *function* of language that goes beyond sense. This function lies not outside or beyond language but is rather its most essential aspect. The critical function of Krausian doubt (*Zweifel*) is not to destabilize the sense of an utterance or to question its truth, but rather to move beyond sense: to create a rejection, a deferral that is used as a mean to trespass onto what remains unsaid in every utterance. The point is to realize that meaning is not the product of the sense of the words in a sentence, but of the relations between words and syntax on the one hand and the way they operate on their addressee on the other:

Das Unverständliche in der Wortkunst […] darf nicht den äusseren Sinn berühren. […] Das Geheimnisvolle sei hinter der Klarheit. Kunst ist etwas, was so klar ist, daß es niemand versteht. (A, 434)

The unintelligible in the art of writing [*Wortkunst*]… should not touch external sense… the mysterious should be laced behind clarity. Art is something so clear that no one understands it.

What Kraus calls “the art of writing” (*Wortkunst*) is his idea of a use of language that resists and criticizes the mimetic-representational-interpellative usage of language. The object is to go beyond the verbal understanding of meanings and denotations, and into a different and so-called “mysterious” sphere that, instead of subduing to what is spoken, provides space for imagination and poetic expression, based not on what is said but on the unsaid, the absence or void. What is referred to by Kraus as “mysterious” should not be understood as a romantic yearning for a non-rational, transcendental, or similar sort of language, but rather as the effect language often has on its addressees, expressed, for example, by Kraus’s notion of the “black magic” (*Schwartze Magie*) quality of the press vis-à-vis its audience. On the other hand, as the above aphorism suggests, there is also a positive sense of *Geheimnisvoll*e, found predominantly in art, which can be used as an antidote that encourages an imaginative complexity. In other words, there is a confrontation here between two distinct forms of the *Geheimnisvoll*e of language: a negative, interpellative, enchanting power of communicative language and sense, versus a positive, polysemous, poetic speech that is based on deferral and absence. What Kraus is advocating is not exactly a disenchantment of the world (or of language) à la Weber, but a use of the positive *Geheimnisvolle* potential of language totransform ideological enchantment (negative *Geheimnisvolle* or *Schwartze Magie*) into poetical indecision, which is itself, I shall argue, a form of critique.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In the beginning of *Die Sprache* Kraus distinguishes between language as communication (*Mitteilung*) and language as shaping and creating (*Gestaltung*), which characterizes “the art of writing.” In the former case, we are dealing with a semantic field, system or code that needs to be transferred and deciphered between addressor and addressee. Here language operates under the principle of the familiarity (*Heimliche*) and recognition of pre-given meanings. Language as shaping (*Gestaltung*), on the other hand, operates a complex mechanism of suspension that allows endless possibilities and combinations to be created through the encounter with the “ever changing” (*immer wechselnde*) nature of the word.[[35]](#footnote-35) Here, language does not carry meaning: it transmits nothing else but its own creating power (*Geschaffenheit*), its ability to produce or give birth (*Empfangen*) to thoughts and ideas (*Gedanken*). Poetic language should not be treated as a possession: it is not about reaching a clear point or position (of understanding, agreement, etc). It is endowed with special transformative and creative powers that turn it into the “einzige Chimäre, deren Trugkraft ohne Ende ist” [The only Chimera, whose creating power is endless]. This unique, endless power of creation in language has to do with its “creaturely nature,” as well as with its hybrid and mytho-poetic origin.[[36]](#footnote-36)

*Wortkunst* likewise requires a different approach from the addressee (reader, listener), a point Kraus makes through an aphorism:

Der intellektuelle Ehrgeiz, das “verstehen” zu wollen, was nur empfunden werden darf, um aufgenommen zu werden, was nur gesehen und gehört werden muß, wie es empfunden wurde, spielt, vom Dummkopf aufwärts beim Lesen die verhängnisvollste Rolle. (F. 572-576, 66)

[The intellectual ambition, the will to ‘understand’, which may only be sensed in order to be recorded, that which may only be seen or heard like it was sensed, plays a disastrous role in reading not only with idiots.]

In reading one needs to give up the ambition to understand, and instead gain the ability of feeling or experiencing language—what Kraus refers to as *Sprachgefühl* or *Spracherlebnis*. Language should not provide the reader with a clear message which he could understand, but provoke something in him so that would cause him to create meaning by using his imagination. It should be sensed or imagined through hearing and seeing, which corresponds to the act of creation of the utterance. Another point that should be noted here is that it is not only the ambition to understand that Kraus criticizes but also the “recording”, which is in contrast to “seeing” and “hearing”. There is a critical distinction between the “idiot’s” relation to language, which is based on reducing language to a definite and determined meaning (*Verständnis*) on the one hand, and its mechanical recording and data processing on the other. Poetic language requires distance and openness: it is not recorded but performed. I will further develop these aspects in relation to Kraus’s practices of language and media critique in chapter 3.

All this does not mean that Kraus is advocating a form of understanding (reading, listening) that relies entirely on emotionality instead of hermeneutic rationality. He rather calls for an awareness and sensibility to undertones, nuances, and acoustic effects[[37]](#footnote-37), all taken to be inherent aspects of language, on which the *Geheimnisvolle Macht* is based:

Dass Sprache nicht bloß das, was sprechbar ist, in sich begreift, sondern daß in ihr auch alles was nicht gesprochen wird erlebbar ist; daß es in ihr so sehr auf das Wort ankommt, daß noch wichtiger als das Wort das ist, was zwischen den Worten ist. (p.278)

Language includes not merely what is speakable, but… in it all that is not spoken can be experienced… in language things depend so strongly on the word that, even more important than the word that is there, is what is between the words.

The first point I would like to emphasize here is the importance of syntax: that which is between the words, and is more important than the words themselves. The fact that a sentence conveys meaning beyond its content as communication and denotation relies on these structural and grammatical formations—what Fredrick Jameson calls “expressive syntax.”[[38]](#footnote-38) An acknowledgement of these syntactical operations, and with them an acknowledgement of the void or gap between words and experiences, encourages the reader to wonder about the function of the words. The “clothing” or “wrapping” of language one has to be attentive to is found not in what the words of a sentence speak but in their syntactical links and interactions within the context of an utterance (as well as its relation to other contexts, as discussed in chapter 3). It is in the places where language does not speak, through this interruption or deferral, that it becomes true to its essence.

The question, however, remains: if the reader has to give up the ambition of understanding, what kind of reading is expected of him? How can the unsaid of language provide an alternative to communicative language? Veronica Forrest-Thompson’s discussion of the particularities of poetic speech may prove useful here: “Only when this [suspension of meaning] is done, can the critic hope to reach a thematic synthesis which will make contact with the poem itself on its many levels and not with some abstract, or indeed, concrete, entity created out of his own imagination.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Kraus emphasizes the same point when he notes that his readers’ knowledge and familiarity with the subjects they read about hinders them from using their own creative imagination when seeking for the meaning in the text:

Das Verständnis meiner Arbeit ist erschwert durch die Kenntnis meines Stoffes. Dass das, was schon da ist, noch erfunden werden muß und dass es sich lohnt, es zu erfinden, sehen sie nicht ein. (A, 322)

[The understanding of my work is hindered by the knowledge of my subjectmatter. What they do not realize is that what is there must first be invented and that it is worthwhile to invent it.]

Creation, invention and imagination can be regarded as a toolset to which Kraus offers the name *Phantasie*, and which serves the project of *Wortkunst* by generating a relation between reader and text that reveals its different layers of expression. Forrest-Thompson demonstrates the ways in which meaning is created through suspension rather than thematic interpretation in her reading of Shakespeare’s 94th Sonnet (an example that most likely would have been supported by the Shakespeare-loving Kraus). The ambiguity and complexity of the sonnet creates in the reader different feelings and emotions that stand in tension to its thematic (or referential) level:

These feelings are conveyed by the non-semantic levels of metre, rhythm, convention, sound pattern, not by reference outside the poem. The non-semantic levels need only be related to each other and to the level of meaning as they filter it to produce a thematic synthesis.[[40]](#footnote-40)

These intimate relations between content and form, the non-semantic and thematic levels that define what Forrest-Thompson calls “poetic artifice” are based on a reading that suspends meaning through the different linguistic and poetic means that structure Shakespeare’s sonnet.

Both Kraus and Forrest-Thompson find in Shakespeare’s sonnets an element of ambiguity that forces the reader to experience the sonnet rather than understand its content. However, two important distinctions should be made here. First, while Forrest-Thompson is interested specifically in the poetic use of language, Kraus is using it as a foundation for his general critique of language which covers non-poetic fields, such as the press. His *Sprachkritik* is applied to the unsaid level of various social discourses, evident in his critique of journalism and war propaganda. Second, Forrest-Thompson attempts to formulate the ways in which poetry differs from everyday speech and other linguistic usage, but she is also interested in a formalistic analysis that separates and distinguishes poetry from these other forms of writing. For Kraus, however, the suspension of meaning and the taking into account of the non-semantic aspects of language require coming to terms with the social context. The poetic artifice is used by Kraus to create uncertainty and ambiguity within, among other things, press editorials and the words of politicians, and furthermore, to problematize forms of social identification and interpellation. Put differently, Kraus’s *Sprachgestaltung* turns poetic artifice from a theory of literature into a radical form of social critique.

# V. Passive Creativity

The notion of *Sprachgestaltung* thus finds its expression not only in the demand directed at writers for an “art of writing,” but also requires what we might call an “art of reading” (what Isava calls “passive creativity”). In his essay *Die Wortgestalt* (“Word-shape”), Kraus suggests a kind of reading that focuses precisely on the creative and “creaturely” mechanism through which language operates:

Die Körperfähigkeit des Wortes, an dem man gemeinhin nur die eine Dimension der Aussage erkennt, ist immer in einer Unscheinbarkeit gegeben, die erst dem Blick, der über den Sinn hinauslangt, die tiefere Beschaffenheit darbietet, die Geschaffenheit, die Wortgestalt.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The corporability of the word, in which we usually recognize only the dimension of what it said (*Aussage*), is always given in an inconspicuous manner, which presents its deeper constitution (*Beschaffenheit*) its ‘createdness’ (*Geschaffenheit*), its word-shape only to a glance which reaches beyond sense.

Before we analyze this quote, it is important to notice the close affinity of the two terms, *Beschaffenheit* and *Geschaffenheit*, the ‘constitution’ of the word and its ‘createdness’, is apparent in the affinity between the two words, which are identical save for a single letter. This is an example of how Kraus’s use of language expresses his views about language. This is the focal point of Kraus’s concept of *Wortgestalt*: The utterance of a word both carries with it already-constituted aspects, while at the same time being a creative operation: always corresponding with already-existing contexts by putting the word to use in some new context. The problem, however, is that the createdness-axis tends to escape readers, who are quick to overlook the critical changes that the constitution-axis undergoes when a word is being put to use. This is what Kraus means when he talks about the “corporeality” of words, and in order to realize it, the reader has to relate to the text not at the level of its sense (*die Aussage*).

These creative aspects of Kraus’s view of language have been generally ignored in research. The two main scholars who dealt with these aspects of his work are Josef Quack, who analyzed Kraus’s concept of language at length but has not theorized it in a systematic way, and Luis Miguel Isava, who suggests the following condense formulation:

Kraus’s view of ‘language as shaping’ implies the acknowledgement of the alternative forms of significance at work outside and beyond the common process of understanding “a meaning” in a sentence or in a text. These forms, however, are not to be understood as pertaining to a different (conception of) language, but on the contrary arise from the furthering of language’s common rules and establish a dialectical relation with them. For this reason, the concepts of understanding and agreement, as they are used in the context of communicative language, must be superseded in order to account to more adequate concepts such as thought process and organization (combination).[[42]](#footnote-42)

The main emphasis in Isava’s analysis is on the creativity of language and the ways it systematically shakes and unstable language from within. This is apparent in Kraus’s formulations of the relations between *Wort* and *Gedanken*. Here is one example among many:

Der Gedanklose denkt, man habe nur dann einen Gedanken, wenn man ihn hat und in Worte kleidet. Er versteht nicht, daß in Wahrheit nur der ihn hat, der das Wort hat, in das der Gedanke hineinwächst. (A, 235)

[The one who is thoughtless thinks that one has a thought only when one has it and puts it into words. He does not understand that in reality only the one who has the word into which the thought grows, has the thought.]

As Isava notes, Kraus wishes to reverse the idiom “*Gedanken in Worte kleiden*” (“to dress thought in words”), through the paradoxical statement “*Der Gedanklose denkt*” (“the thoughtless thinks”). According to Kraus, one first “has” words, on which thoughts can then grow. The word does not function here as mere signifier but more like a template, a space, which is activated by thought. In another aphorism Kraus writes: “Weil ich den Gedanken beim Wort nehme, kommt er” (A, 236) [Only because I take the thought literary does it come]. However, Kraus is not arguing for a precedence of words over thoughts but for an interdependence between them. This is expressed by yet another one of his sayings, “*Beim Wort nehmen*” (“to take thoughts at their words”), which refers to the linguistic process through which thought grows and develops in contact with words. Part of the implication here is that words tell more than what their authors intend them to say. Any utterance, precisely when taken literary, “by the word,” says both too much and too little. As Isava puts it:

On the one hand… a “verbal” reading of any sentence, of any utterance for that matter, is likely to expose its “real” significance, its ideological tenets, the author’s apparent intentions notwithstanding… On the other hand… the aphorism [“*Beim Wort nehmen*”] puts forth… the possibility of producing thought by handling words.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Words do not simply express their author’s intentions, but are dynamic forms that change with every utterance. The other side of this assertion is that the creation of thought is made possible only thanks to this principle. In both cases, “to take someone by their words” means a critical assessment of this dialectical process.

*Wortkunst* is constituted through this complex relationship. Thus, the creation of thoughts (*Gestaltung*), not opinions (*Meinungen*) or communication-forms (*Mitteilung*) is related to the concept of *Wortgestalt*—a linguistic space that allows thoughts to be developed and formed. In another aphorism Kraus notes: “Das geschriebene Wort sei die naturnotwendige Verkörperung eines Gedankens und nicht die gesellschaftsfähige Hülle einer Meinung” [The written word is the essential embodiment of a thought and not the socially acceptable wrapping of an opinion]. Quack explains: “The most important criterion for poetic-language (*Sprachkunst*) is that thought and form are unified within the word… so that language, the linguistic form will be regarded as the source of the thought.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The contrast between wrapping and creating also distinguishes between the two forms of the *geheimnisvolle* power of language: the wrapping has to do with what is “socially acceptable” – opinion or norm, while the “essential embodiment” has to do with the shaping-creating process. This contradiction however is not between the external-social and the inner-individual language. Kraus claims that the words are not private, and that even the inner thoughts have to do with social experiences. [[45]](#footnote-45)

As a result, the shaping and creating of language has to do with a transformation of the speaker/author, who himself becomes subjugated to what we formerly referred to as the constituted dimension of language—unlike the case of a painter, for example: “Die Sprache ist das Material des literarischen Künstlers; aber sie gehört ihm nicht allein, während die Farbe doch ausschließlich dem Maler gehört” (A. 113) [Language is the material of the writer; but it does not belong to him alone, whereas color does belong specifically to the painter]. What is true for words is thus also true for thoughts: “Ich habe manchen Gedanken, den ich nicht habe und nicht in Worte fassen könnte, aus der Sprache geschöpft” (A. 292) [From language I have taken thoughts that I did not have and couldn’t put into words]. Kraus goes on to argue:

Ich beherrsche die Sprache nicht, aber die Sprache beherrscht mich vollkommen. Sie ist mir nicht die Dienerin meiner Gedanken. Ich lebe in einer Verbindung mit ihr, aus der ich Gedanken empfange, und sie kann mit mir machen, was sie will. (A, 134-5)

[I do not control language; but language controls me completely. She is for me not the servant of my thoughts. I live in a bonding with her, from which I receive thoughts, and she can do with me as she pleases].[[46]](#footnote-46)

These quotations demonstrate what Isava calls “passive creativity”. Kraus is not suggesting a notion of the death of the author (Foucault), although he does challenge the concept of his subjectivity. The author cannot master language: in fact the possibility to become an author is depended on the ability to give up the tendency to try and master language, instead allowing the “embodiment necessary by nature” (*naturnotwendige Verkörperung[[47]](#footnote-47)*) to take place; a “preformedness of thought” (*Präformiertheit der Gedanken[[48]](#footnote-48)*) as Kraus puts it elsewhere. Here is another version of the description of this process:

Ich pariere ihr [der Sprache] aufs Wort. Denn aus dem Wort springt mir der junge Gedanke entgegen und formt rückwirkend die Sprache, die ihn schuf. Solche Gnade der Gedankenträchtichkeit zwingt auf die Knie und allen Aufwand zitternder Sorgfalt zur Pflicht. Die Sprache ist eine Herrin der Gedanken, und wer das Verhältnis umzukehren vermag, dem macht sie sich im Hause nützlich, aber sie sperrt ihm den Schoß. (A. 134)

I obey language by the word. Then from the word the ‘young thought’ jumps towards me and retroactively forms the language that created it. Such grace of the pregnancy of thought forces one to his knees and all the efforts of outmost accuracy become an obligation. Language is a master of thoughts, and whoever is able to reverse the relation, to him she makes herself useful at home, but she will block her womb.

Kraus here is not explaining but rather demonstrating or performing his point. The quote begins with a speech act, a pledge of allegiance to language, which is also a word-play, based on the double meaning of “*aufs Wort*” (“by the word”). The speech act constitutes a relationship of obedience to words and by them. This double meaning opens a dialectic process whereby a new thought is conceived, which demonstrates (and thereby reaffirms) the creativity of language. This process brings the speaker “to his knees”, forces him to an “accuracy” of speech and obedience. Passive creativity is here marked by gender oppositions and by the physiological and bodily metaphor of giving birth. He who attempts to restructure and reverse these relations (which also implies a reversal of gender categories), finds himself barren, bound to a merely technical, non-creative use of words.

Kraus’s view on the relation between thought and language, as well as his critique of the concept of representation are not far from those of Herder and Hamman, especially as they have been developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his concept of *Weltansicht—*a world view that is created through language:

The mutual interdependence of thought and word clearly illuminates the truth that languages are not really means for representing already known truths rather instruments for discovering previously unrecognized ones.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Kraus was familiar with Humboldt’s ideas on language, and quoted him in one of the mottos to his collection *Zur Sprachlehre* (F. 572-576). The point there, as well as in the quote above, is that meaning in language is created by the *activation* of words. Language is not a system (*ergon*) but an activity (*energia*). For Humboldt, this process is related to the distinction between two linguistic forms, the “sound form” and the “inner-mental” one, which should be united in speech, through a specific mental capacity (*Geistigkraft*). Like Kraus, Humboldt too argues that language is a formative organ of thought. They both share the view that these aspects are inherent to language but also dependant on a pedagogical project that Humboldt defined as *Bildung* and Kraus referred to as *Sprachlehre*. The main difference between them, however, is that while for Humboldt this was a scientific quest for the foundation of a national education system and the advancement of the project of the enlightenment, for Kraus this was the foundation of a *critical* project meant to counter many of the ailments of the enlightenment.

In the analysis of the relations between word and thought, I have tried to illustrate how Kraus’s formulations fortify his critical position. Kraus’s *Sprachkritik*, I have argued, is based on a rejection of the representative and communicative usage of language, and an attempt to reconstruct social life through the concepts of *Wortkunst* and *Sprachgestaltung*. Before moving on, let me now stress a few points.

First, like Foucault in more recent decades, Kraus claims that a writer is always-already inside a discourse, and never an isolated subject. Thus, his creation is always part of existing discursive power-relations, and subject to their limits and possibilities. This, however, does not mean (as some interpreters suggested) that the author is completely bound by these limits. That is what creation in language is all about. Furthermore, not only is language itself not an absolute boundary, it is also the case that words always present some degree of resistance to contextualization (a point expended in the next chapter). The artistic activation of words through their “natural embodiment” is an act of transgression against the discursive mischief of “common opinions” (*Gesellschaftsfähige Meinungen*).

Second, while discussing Goethe’s verses, Kraus writes “Man weiß, was “gemeint” ist, aber das ist eine Befriedigung außerhalb der sprachschöpferischen Sphäre” (p.68) [One knows what is ‘meant,’ but this is contentment beyond the sphere of linguistic creativity]. On the one hand, words are not empty signifiers: they have historical and traditional attributes, although ambiguous and uncertain. On the other hand, this is exactly what cannot be turned into “content” or message. These are aspects of language that cannot be verbally transmitted or translated: syntax and grammatical requirements, the choice of a word, the way it is combined in a sentence, the different associations involved or provoked by it, its undertones—are all elements of understanding that go beyond common concepts of communication and signification*.*

Third, “writing” here seems to constitute not an order or a system, but a refusal to any order: a perpetual interference and displacement, where both language and the speaking subject are transformed and deconstructed. Kraus, however, was very strict in his use of linguistic rules and grammar. Hence it appears that his is not a refusal of order as such, but an attempt to substitute a particular kind of order –social discourse – by another – which we might term “poetic contextuality”: the result of adopting a relation of passive creativity towards language. This concept contradicts the ideological logic, where ideas are wrapped in words and then distributed and transmitted. This can be seen in the following statement of intent from *Die Sprache*: “Besitzfall zum Zeugfall zu erhöhen, das Haben zum Sein” [To raise possession to tool, having to being] (p.272). The negative notion of “possession” (*Besitzfall*) in this quote, as well as the transition it necessitates from “having” to “being,” demonstrates Benjamin’s claim quoted in the first part of the chapter, regarding Kraus’s critique of the language of capitalism and the reification it brings with it. Kraus’s point is not about the class struggle involving private property, but an epistemic change that alters language’s social function. The concept of language as shaping and creating opposes mastery and possession. Elsewhere Kraus identifies what he considered the confusion of his contemporary society, which favors *Lebensmittel* (goods and utilities) over *Lebenszweck* (culture and values). The point of the required linguistic transformation is thus to allow what Isava rightly calls an “altogether different economy of exchange.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

# VI. The Word’s Two Bodies: From *Wortgestalt* to Citationality

Kraus’s critique of language, as I have argued, focuses on the processes and conditions of its production. This shaping and creating process has a material aspect. The “corporeality” or “embodiment” of the word according to Kraus, which we have already encountered, is constituted through the activation of its own creative power. It is not the dress (*Kleid*) of a thought but its flesh (*Fleisch*). Thus, the word as shape (*Wortgestalt*) has to do with its physical coming to being. Thought is not only shaped, it is embodied, contextualized and expressed through speech or writing. This process, however, is very different than that of the reifying language of the press. The latter is not an expression of an experience but rather a fabricated, superficial speech. Hence, while the phrases of journalists can simply be printed and distributed, a *Wortgestalt*, if it is to remain true to its anti-media essence, demands constant reenactment of its own creation in a recurrent act of speech or writing.

In the essay *Wortgestalt*, Kraus explains this concept through what he considers to be the best example, the word *Turm* (tower) from the last scene of Shakespeare’s Henry 6th Part III.[[51]](#footnote-51) From a conservative point of view, this seems like a strange choice for a number of reasons. First, it is a translated piece and not an original German play. Second, “tower” is not the most important word nor motive in the play. Third, it refers to a place, the tower of London, and not to an idea or concept. But the most puzzling aspect is that the word *Turm* in the passage Kraus cites functions as a replacement of speech, as what is used to hide more than to reveal. It marks the border of what cannot be said at that present moment in the play and will only be revealed later.

Here are the lines Kraus quotes followed by Shakespeare’s English:

Gloster: Clarence, entschuld’ge mich bei meinem Bruder.
In London gibts ein dringendes Geschäft:
Eh ihr dahin kommt, sollt ihr neues hören.

Clarence: Was? Was?

Gloster: Der Turm! der Turm! (ab)

*GLOUCESTER: Clarence, excuse me to the king my brother;**I'll*[*hence*](http://shakespeare.mit.edu/Shakespeare/Gloss/gloss.H.html#HENCE)*to London on a serious matter:**Ere ye come there, be sure to hear some news.*

*CLARENCE**: What? what?*

*GLOUCESTER**: The Tower, the Tower.* (Exit)

These lines are a dialogue between Richard of Gloucester and his brother the Duke of Clarence. Richard says that he needs to hurry for an urgent business (*Geschäft*)in London about which his brother will soon “hear the news”. The eager Clarence asks: “What? What?”, and Richard vaguely replies “The tower, the tower!” As the audience learns in the following scene of the play, Richard hurries to murder the king which is held prisoner in the tower of London. Instead of telling his brother about his scheme, Richard only says “tower.” This might be regarded as a metonymic reference to the king inside the tower. The doubling of the word, however, as well as the fact that both the kind and, more importantly, the nature of Richard’s “business” (murder) go unsaid, reveal that what is at stake is not a gap between what Richard says and *how* he says it (“tower”/“king”) but a tension between what Richard says and *does not* say (“tower”/”murder”). Kraus remarks:

Wie dieser ungeheuren Fügung ein Monstrum in Menschengestalt entspricht, wird erst – im Unterschied zweier dramatischen Abgänge – die ganze Macht wie Ohnmacht des Wortes sinnfällig…(p.285)

Like this tremendous destiny, corresponding to a monster in human-figure, demonstrates, it is only then – through the difference in the two dramatic exits – that the whole power and powerlessness of the words manifests itself...

In other words, the drama has to do with the manifestation of words that do not represent or signify, yet still operate in a “monstrous” way. It is a constitutive scene that charges the word *Turm* with different levels of meaning. It is now associated with the deceit, plots and lies, with the murder of the king, the venue where this horror took place, and with the figure of Richard of Gloucester who, through this murderous acts, would eventually become Richard the Third (the hunchback king, who would later serve as one of Kraus’s theatrical figurations of the First World War, and was also the demonic alter-persona of Kraus himself). *Turm* holds in it a world of stored associations and possibilities that unwrap themselves out through its utterance. It is not an empty signifier on the one hand, nor linguistic content in the usual sense on the other, but a collection of possibilities that trigger associations of thought and action.

Thus, Kraus finds in Shakespeare’s theater a space of creativity through the void that the speech opens, a speech which is a deferral or refrains from representation.[[52]](#footnote-52) It hides what it is supposed to deliver and at the same time seems to expresses too much (*ungeheure*). This is exactly the kind of speech act that John Austin considered as parasitic, hollow and ill.[[53]](#footnote-53) It is the illness or feeling of decay that Lord Chandos in Hofmannsthal’s story sensed but could not cope with.[[54]](#footnote-54) For Kraus, this illness or void is highly crucial. It has to do with the power of sovereignty and political violence, and is at the same time what defines art and literature.

This example—which, as mentioned, refers to a “foreign” text (Shakespeare) as paradigm—reveals thatevery *Wortgestalt* relies on a logic of citation. Alexander Gelley wrote about the concept of citation in Kraus and Walter Benjamin that:

Citation underscores an activating moment, the emergence of a new affectivity of what is being cited, whether it be a word or a historical moment… citing involves not only retrieval of a text or concept, but intervention into the temporal process, the activation of a past in the present: citing as *inciting.*[[55]](#footnote-55)

This explanation can also be applied to Kraus’s *Wortgestalt*, and the way he suggests to think about *Turm* not only as an example for creating and shaping but as a way of introducing the seventeenth century drama of sovereignty into twentieth century Vienna. The many Shakespeare quotations found throughout Kraus’s writings reveal that time is, indeed, “out of joint.” Whereas for Hofmannsthal’s *Lord Chandos* quotation represented repetition and return of the same, provoking an over-determinate speech, Kraus turns the quotation itself from content to form, from reference to a static, past context to a dynamic movement between past and present, an utterance that estranges itself. The staging of the utterance, its medium of theatricality, provides the hollow space, the void, the suspension, that, although it appears just for a moment, transforms the logic of time and creates interruption and rupture in it. These aspects, and Kraus’s logic of citationality and inter-contextuality, as I call it, will be examined in the next chapter.

1. Kraus’s work consists not only of his texts; it also includes such mediatic elements as typography, acoustics, musicality and visual effects. I use the overarching term “project” in order to be able to refer to all of those simultaneously. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In his study on Hofmannsthal, Hermann Broch defined the relations between the political, social and literary spheres of 1900 Vienna through the term *vacuum*. In relation to language he writes: “Hence language – discursive language – alone becomes inadequate and interpretable.” This is demonstrated by the famous example of Lord Chandos’ Letter. See: Hermann Broch, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and His Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.109. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One prominent example is Stefan George and his circle. See: Werner Kraft, *Stefan George* (München: edition text + kritik, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To name just a few: Leopold Liegler, Caroline Kohn, Burkhard Müller, Hans Weigel, Wilma Abeles Iggers, Jens Malte Fischer, Franz Mauthner or Thomas Szasz. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. J. P. Stern, *Kraus’s Vision of Language* (Modern Language Review, 1966), p.83. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As Werner Kraft argues, linguistic doubt plays an important role in Kraus’s thoughts on language. For him it is not just philosophical skepticism, but an attribute of language itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jay F Bodine, *Karl Kraus, Ludwig Wittgenstein and ‘Post-structural’ Paradigms of Textual* Understanding, in: *Modern Austrian Literature*, Vol. 22 (Bowling Green / Houston: 1989), p.152. Bodine notices the importance of the social context, but since he is committed to the concept of language as representation, he again ends up with a dichotomy of true / false. The point to be discussed in the third section of this chapter – dealing with social context – is crucial to explain the performative function of language. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Rogers, *Karl Kraus and the Creation of a Symbolic Language*, in: *Karl Kraus in Neuer Sicht* (München: Text+Kritik, 1986), p.32 ff. I agree with Rogers’s preliminary insight about a different logic that underlines Kraus’s view on Language. However, while Rogers argues for a symbolic system that could provide and stabilize meaning, Kraus, as I try to show, was interested in criticizing and destabilizing such uses in the context of a symbolic crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Against the idea of purity of language Timms writes: “Here again, the focus on words implies a critique of ideologies. Kraus was aware that the proposals for ‘pure’ German had xenophobic overtones.” Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus AS Vol. 2* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2005), p.149. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I have already mentioned Werner Kraft in this context. A rejection of an idea of language as representation can be found in Helmut Artnzen, Edward Timms, and more recent studies like those by Paul Reitter and Irina Djassemy. In the following I will analyze two other scholars who developed a reading of Kraus’s creative language: Josef Quack and Louis Miguel Isava. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Robert Lilienfeld, *Reflections on Karl Kraus*, in: *Nation, 296* (New York: 17/18. April 1973), p.572. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In Kraus’ words: ”Ist die Presse ein Bote? Nein: das Ereignis” [Is the press the messenger? No: the event.] (F 404-408), 1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See: Kari Grimstad, *MP* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol.2* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.440. In this context it should be noted that Kraus is hardly present in contemporary discussions of Critical Theory. However, because of the growing interest in Walter Benjamin, there exist some relevant studies, although their viewpoint is usually that of Benjamin’s thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It is surprising that, although Kraus is considered a media critic, he was hardly studied from this angle. In fact, Kraus is mostly ignored by media scholars. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The term “Anti-mimetic” is taken from David Trotter (see note 20). In some of the discussions on Kraus the authors used the term mimesis as dialectic between reality and literary representation and style. My choice here is meant to emphasize the rejection of the realism and the otherness Kraus interested in creating [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Translated: Benjamin, *Karl Kraus*, in: *SW Vol.2* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,1996), p.435. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This is the differentiation between language as communication and language as shaping and creating reality, as I will show in the following section of this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In original: “Subordination der Sprache vor dem Unglück.“ See: Kraus, *In dieser großen Zeit*, in: *Ausgewählte Werke 2* (Berlin: Volk & Welt, 1971), p.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See: David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism – Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Trotter focuses on English Literature, but the examples of the Austrian and German literature of this period (Hofmannsthal, Rilke and many others) shows almost a parallel phenomena. It is important to note that another study by Trotter focuses on the concept of *mess* in modernist literature. *Mess* is a favorite expression for Kraus; in *Die Fackel* he uses it more than 400 times! [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Peter Nicholls, *The Men of 1914*. In: *Modernisms: A Literary Guide, 2nd expanded ed.* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-War America* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Patrick O’Donnell,*Latent Destinies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Aaron S. Rosenfeld, *The “Scanty Plot”: Orwell, Pynchon, and the Poetics of Paranoia*in: *Twentieth Century Literature 50,* p. 337-367 (New York: Winter 2004), p.343. Orwell can be read as echoing several aspects of Kraus’s diagnosis of a crisis of language, both in his dystopic account of language in *1984* (“War is peace” etc.), as well as in his sharp critique of the press. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton / New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p.551. It’s especially Auerbachs awareness to the problematic, political aspects of Mimesis, in light of world wars, that makes his work fascinating and valuable for this discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton / New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p.549. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Michael Rogers, *Karl Kraus and the Creation of a Symbolic Language*, in: *Karl Kraus in Neuer Sicht* (München: Text+Kritik, 1986), p.39. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Friedrich A. Kittler*, Phonograph, Film, Typewriter* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Friedrich A. Kittler**,** *Aufschreibesysteme: 1800-1900* (München: Fink Verlag, 2003). Interestingly enough, although he examines many intellectuals from the German sphere of the beginning of the 20th century, Kittler doesn’t refer to Kraus. When I asked him about this issue, Kittler answered me that Kraus may need his own categorization within this framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. I don't mention here the extensive literature that mostly from psychoanalytical perspective tried to answer this question. I will however discuss this in relation to Kraus’ Jewish not-identity, which means the relation between the critique of the media and the question of assimilation. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. LTdM p.680. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Sigurd Paul Scheichl / Leo A. Lensing / Heinz Lunzer, *Die Fackel, ein Anti-Medium*, in: *Was Wir Umbringen*, (Wien: Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 1999), p.94-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Leslie Hill suggests a definition that may also fit here: “Radical Indecision,” which is “both the condition and the limit of any critical decision… what it reveals… is that all writing… precedes the articulation, imposition and enforcement of any law.” See: Hill, *Radical Indecision* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p.334-335. Thus, *Geheimnisvoll* as enchantment is deconstructed and yet maintains its “mystical” power of creation. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Here is how Kraus defines this transformative aspect: “Ein Absolutum der Wortgestalt gibt es nicht, da das Wort noch jenseits seiner eigenen Problematik vielfältige, immer wechselnde Beziehungen mit dem Wort eingeht. Das eben wirkt den Gefährlichen Zauber der Sprache, daβ noch die primitivste Aussage zu voller Eindeutigkeit auf ihre Sphäre angewiesen bleibt.“ See: Kraus, *S* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), p.434. [There is no absolute in the word-shape (Wortgestalt), because even beyond its own difficulties, the word enters constantly changing relations with the word. It is this, which effects the dangerous magic of language. Even the most primitive statement aspiring for uniqueness remains dependent on its own sphere.] Wittgenstein seems to suggest a similar argument: “we grasp the meaning at a stroke, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the ‘use’ which is extended in time!” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p.59. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Kraus writes: “(…) wo Form nicht das Kleid des Gedanken ist, sondern sein Fleisch.” See: *Aphorismen. Sprüche und Widersprüche* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p.133 [Form is not the dress of thought but its flesh]. “Creaturely” here relates to the distinction between rationality (*Verstehen*) and physical aspects such as speaking, hearing and seeing. This also has to do with the corporeality of language that resists and problematizes signification through this physical excess. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. This is another point where Kraus and late Wittgenstein seem to accord each other: “The words of a poet can pierce us completely. And that is of course casually connected to the use
(*Gebrauch*) they have in our life. And it is also connected with the fact that, in accordance with this use, we allow our thoughts to roam to and fro into the well-known surrounding”. Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p.26. Isava is using this quote in order to show that for Wittgenstein poetry is an exception. See: Isava, *Wittgenstein, Kraus, and Valéry: A Paradigm for Poetic Rhyme and Reason* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), p.27. What I suggest with Kraus is to consider it as the rule. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Fredrick Jameson, *Late Marxism – Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), p.63-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Forrest Thompson, *Poetic Artifice – a theory of twentieth-century poetry* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), p.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Forrest Thompson, *Poetic Artifice* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), p.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Kraus, *S* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), p.289. Translation in: Isava, *WKV* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), p.85. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Isava, *WKV* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), p.84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Isava, Ibid., p.68. Isava suggests that Kraus’s critique on ideology has to do with the concept of taking his adversaries “by the word“. I basically agree, yet I find it to be just a partial explanation. As I showed, the verbal meaning is never just on its own, but contextualized. It relates to the unsaid and other non-semantic aspects, finally – it is the way the ideological speech with interpellative power, which requires different critical strategies and techniques, as *The Last Days of Mankind* clearly demonstrates. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Joseph Quack, *Bemerkungen zum Sprachverständnis von Karl Kraus*, (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1976), p.70 (my translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. The idea that one cannot control ones own language is close to Wittgenstein’s claim against private language in his *Philosophical Investigations*: “But is it also conceivable that there be a language in which a person could write down or give voice to his inner experiences and his feelings, moods, and so on – for his own use? …The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know – to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p.95. This illustrates the gap between an inner experience and the need to express it in external linguistic means, an issue that connects the language skepticism of both Wittgenstein and Kraus, and the attempt to “reform” language. This also relates to Daniel Dor’s theory of Language and Experience, see next chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The correct grammatical form to refer to “language” in English would, of course, be “it.” However, I did not want to lose the feminine gender aspect existing in German, which plays an important role in Kraus. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. F 261-262: 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. F 329-330: 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften* *Vol. III* (Berlin: Behr, 1903), p.169. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See: Isava, *WKV* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Kraus, *S* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), p.284-289. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Werner Kraft noted: “Why is the end of ‘Iphigenia’ so great? Because the deep emotional struggle of King Thomas is not represented here, but rather to extent sealed in a word of farewell.” Werner Kraft, *Das Ja des Neinsagers* (München: edition text u. kritik, 1974), p.82 (my translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. In Austin’s words: “(…) as *utterances* our performances are also heir to certain other kinds of ill, which infect *all* utterances (…) language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in many ways parasitic upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances.” See: *Deconstruction: critical concepts in literary and cultural studies*, Volume 1, edited by Jonathan D. Culler (London: Routledge, 2003), p.238-239.

34 It is important to note that Hofmannsthal’s Chandos letter is dated to 1603, the year of the death of Queen Elisabeth and the times when Shakespeare wrote Hamlet. Both he and Kraus turn to this period when they confront the crisis of language. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. 35 Alexander Gelley, *Epigones in the House of Language*, in: [*Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/partial_answers) ([Vl. 5, Nr. 1, January 2007](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/partial_answers/toc/pan5.1.html)), p.25. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)