

Syllabus/Programme

Performance Ethnography: Living the Historical Rupture

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When & Where:	Fridays at 17:00 CET	Off University Moodle, online
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Hosted by:	Bonn University with 6 ECTS Certification*	
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Department	Department of Eastern European History	
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How to count your Off university course towards credit?

Successful completion of a course at Off University is certified by the host university. This means that you are able to use these credits at any university in the EHEA in a programme you are enrolled in, or you may count this as previous knowledge in a future study programme. In order to be sure that you can transfer the credits, we suggest you get written confirmation by your home university's students' office. And if you are not enrolled in any university programme: You are very welcome to join! All our courses are free of charge and open to anyone: students, scholars, activists.

Description:

We live in a time when wars, revolutions, political repression, and social or ecological crises can rupture the present without warning. Such ruptures disrupt familiar orientations: communities transform or disperse, identities lose their recognition, and the narratives through which we understood our past and future no longer correspond to the realities we inhabit.

This course explores the question: What does it mean to live through historical rupture?

Approaching this question through performance ethnography, the course uses biographical theatre as both a research method and artistic practice. Playback Theatre creates a temporary research community grounded in trust and ethical witnessing, where personal stories are transformed into improvisational performance. Documentary Theatre works with archives, testimonies, artifacts, and embodied memory to compose performances that connect individual experience with historical contexts.

The course culminates in the development and presentation of collaborative documentary performances and a reflection on performance ethnography as a method of knowledge production.

Digital Self Defense

This course addresses personal narratives, collective memory, and experiences that may be politically, socially, or emotionally sensitive. For this reason, digital self-defense and mutual care are integral to our learning environment.

Our platform is dedicated to spreading knowledge that may be threatened by authoritarian and right-wing populist regimes and to enabling participants to practice digital self-defense. We encourage all users to register anonymously on the platform and to respect others' preferences regarding anonymity. You may use a nickname and a non-identifying email format. **Please do not pressure anyone to disclose personal information, and do not record sessions, take screenshots, or share any course materials outside the platform without explicit consent.**

All sessions take place on Off University's Moodle platform, which includes an encrypted video-call option, cloud storage, and internal messaging. Communication with other participants outside the platform (e.g., via personal email, social media, messaging apps, or external video-conferencing tools) may put individuals at risk and should be avoided unless explicitly agreed upon by all parties involved.

Because this course works with testimony and lived experience, we apply additional principles of digital and ethical care:

- Participants decide what they share and at what level of detail.
- Personal stories shared in class remain within the class unless explicit permission is given.
- Anonymization of materials is encouraged when working on documentary components.
- Public presentation of work (if applicable) will only include materials that participants have explicitly agreed to make public.
- Digital security is not only a technical issue but an ethical commitment to protecting each other's dignity, safety, and autonomy.
- The course is practice-based; prior theatre experience is not required.

Timeline of the Course Schedule

Week 1 17-04-2026	Foundations: Method, Community, Ethical Container	Introduction. Theatre as Life Practice
Week 2 24-04-2026		Performance Ethnography, Community, and Trust
Week 3 01-05-2026		Ethics of Performance Ethnography and Biographical Theatre
Week 4 08-05-2026	Playback Theatre as Embodied Inquiry	Embodiment, Emotion, and the Structure of Performance
Week 5 15-05-2026		Playback as Live Artistic Event: Conducting and Performance Flow
Week 6 22-05-2026		Individual and Collective Feelings
Week 7 29-05-2026		Art-Translation: Decoding and Encoding Lived Experience
Week 8 05-06-2026		Playback Forms in Practice
Week 9 12-06-2026		Narrative Structures and Boundary-Crossing
Week 10 19-06-2026		Documentary Theatre: From Memory to Composition
Week 11 26-06-2026	Biography and Historical Time: Rupture, Identity, and Voice	
Week 12 03-07-2026	Documentary Composition: From Material to Draft Performance	
Week 13 10-07-2026	Rehearsal, Public Presentation, and Methodological Reflection	Rehearsal and Development: From Draft to Coherent Piece
Week 14 17-07-2026		Documentary Performance and Public Dialogue
Week 15 24-07-2026		

Aimed Outcomes

A general understanding of:

- The purpose and structure of the course as a practice-based research laboratory
- Performance ethnography and biographical theatre as methodologies of inquiry
- The relationship between individual biography, collective memory, and historical rupture
- Theatre as a medium of knowledge production and social dialogue
- The principles of Playback Theatre and Documentary Theatre
- The role of embodiment, emotion, and narrative in shaping lived experience
- Ethical frameworks for working with testimony, trauma, and sensitive material
- The significance of community, trust, and ritual in collaborative artistic processes

The skills to be gained upon active participation:

- Applying Playback Theatre techniques to explore and translate lived experience
- Conducting attentive and ethically grounded storytelling interviews
- Transforming personal narratives into embodied performative forms
- Analyzing stories using narrative and structural frameworks
- Developing documentary theatre material from archives, memory fragments, and testimonies
- Structuring and composing a short performance piece individually or collaboratively
- Reflecting critically on the relationship between theory and artistic practice
- Engaging responsibly in collective creative processes
- Articulating insights from practice-based research in written analytical form

Course components

The methodology includes:

- Interactive lectures introducing theoretical frameworks
- Assigned academic readings (approx. 15–25 pages per week)
- Guided seminar discussions
- Practice-based Playback Theatre workshops
- Documentary theatre composition labs
- Small-group work and peer feedback
- Reflective writing
- Supervised rehearsal and performance development
- Online public performance and moderated dialogue

Assessment & Grading Breakdown (6 ECTS)

The final grade for the course will be based on the following:

1. Active Participation – 30%

- Engagement in discussions
- Active involvement in workshops and rehearsals

2. Reflection Posts – 20%

- 2 reflections across the semester, 500–800 words each
- Critical engagement with readings and practical experience
- Total written volume: approx. 1,000–1,600 words

3. Final Artistic Project – 25%

- Group performance piece
- Demonstration of integration of theory and practice

4. Final Analytical Reflection – 25%

- Submitted after final session
- Critical reflection connecting performance to theoretical frameworks
- Discussion of methodology (performance ethnography)
- Self-reflection on learning process
- Length: 1,500–2,000 words

Organization of the course

Focus/Topic of the week & Reading List

Week 1: Introduction. Theatre as Life Practice

The first session establishes the conceptual, methodological, and relational foundations of the course. It introduces theatre not as an aesthetic product, but as a life practice and research method for investigating lived experience, memory, identity, and historical rupture.

Central question introduced: What does it mean to live through historical rupture?

Activities:

- Instructor introductions: sharing personal trajectories and how theatre became a method of survival, reflection, and research
- Participant introductions: guided reflection and sharing on relationship to theatre, storytelling, and performance experiences
- Discussion: stories as structures of meaning-making; how narratives shape perception of reality and support identity continuity
- Embodied exercise "If I Directed My Life": reflecting on an important life moment as a theatrical scene; sharing in pairs
- Introducing the central research question: What does it mean to live through historical rupture?

Week 2: Performance Ethnography, Community, and Trust

This session introduces performance ethnography as a research methodology and establishes the theatre group as a temporary research community. It explores trust as the foundation of ensemble work and community as a space of dialogue and belonging.

The session deepens the central question by asking: How can we investigate historical rupture through performance?

Activities:

- Interactive lecture and discussion: Performance ethnography as embodied research method; research by us, not on us
- Discussion: Theory of community, belonging, and polarization; community as support structure during crisis
- Trust-building exercises
- Movement-based exploration: Rhizomatic identity - "Who am I in each new place/context?"
- Demonstration and mini-practice: Introduction to Playback and Documentary theatre forms.

Week 3: Ethics of Performance Ethnography and Biographical Theatre

This session explores ethical foundations of performance ethnography and biographical theatre.

Participants work independently with core ethical questions that emerge when lived experience becomes research material and performance: What responsibilities do we carry when we investigate experience through embodied practice? How do we work

ethically when the researcher is also the subject? What are the boundaries between witnessing, representation, and exploitation?

This session prepares participants for creating a research community where personal stories can be shared and explored with care and ethical awareness.

The focus shifts to ethical preparation: What are the ethical responsibilities in research that is embodied, participatory, and autobiographical?

Activities:

- Reading assignment and reflective writing based on the focus and central question of the session
- Writing Ethical Agreements Proposal for our course

Reading materials:

Conquergood (1985) - "Performing as a Moral Act" [File](#)

Week 4: Embodiment, Emotion, and the Structure of Performance

This session shifts from relational foundations toward embodied and artistic practice. It explores the body as a site of lived history and introduces the structural components of Playback performance. The session also establishes Playback ensemble agreements and rituals.

The key transition: How does lived experience become embodied expression?

Activities:

- Establishing collective ethical agreements and Playback ensemble rituals based on Session 3 proposals
- Body mapping exercises exploring how historical experience lives in the body
- Emotional embodiment practice: expressing emotions through movement, voice, and spatial relation
- Introduction to Playback performance structure: roles (conductor, performers, musician), atmosphere, and "red thread"
- Practical mini-lab: translating emotional moments into embodied forms

Week 5: Playback as Live Artistic Event: Conducting and Performance Flow

This session develops professional understanding of Playback as a live artistic event. The emphasis moves from structural knowledge to real-time facilitation, interviewing, ensemble coordination, and dramaturgical decision-making.

The central inquiry: How does a Playback performance function as a dynamic, responsive process?

Activities:

- Ensemble responsiveness exercises: non-verbal coordination in space, shifting from rehearsal to performance mode
- The conductor as dramaturgical navigator: demonstration of interviewing and shaping performance flow; discussion on deep listening vs. casual listening
- Interviewing practice in pairs and small groups: clarifying emotional core, identifying key images, listening for action rather than explanation
- Translation lab: practicing identifying playable elements, making fast artistic choices, moving from narrative description to embodied scene
- Managing unpredictability and flow

Week 6: Individual and Collective Feelings

This session deepens the exploration of emotions as social and historical forces, focusing on how feelings operate collectively and how Playback Theatre works with emotional atmospheres rather than psychological analysis.

The central inquiry: How do individual feelings transform into collective emotional experience in performance?

Activities

- Emotional check-in using movement instead of words: exploring what emotional atmosphere participants bring into the room
- Discussion: emotions as social and historical forces; how collective feelings shape public action and shared narratives; emotional climates in times of crisis
- Specificity of Playback work with emotions: working with feeling without psychological interpretation; staying with ambiguity and contradiction
- Individual vs. collective feeling exploration: one participant names a feeling, ensemble builds collective form around it; reflecting on how feeling transforms when shared
- Emotional forms practice: fluid sculptures, chorus, pairs focused on emotional clarity, ensemble listening, and avoiding narrative over-explanation

Week 7: Art-Translation: Decoding and Encoding Lived Experience

This session develops understanding of Playback Theatre as a system of symbolic translation, focusing on mechanisms through which lived experience becomes embodied sign, metaphor, and composition.

The guiding inquiry: How does lived experience become performative language?

Activities

- Discussion: Playback as semiotic practice; performance as system of signs; difference between illustration and translation; symbolic condensation in theatrical form
- Story decoding practice in small groups: listening for central impulse, structural shifts, contradictions and tensions, recurring images and motifs, underlying relational dynamics
- Exploring vocabulary of Playback as sign system: body as sign (direction, weight, speed); voice as sign (tone, rhythm, silence); space as sign (distance, levels, boundaries); interaction as sign (mirroring, opposition, fragmentation)
- Micro-exercises: transforming a single impulse into different body configurations, spatial compositions, and vocal variations
- Encoding practice lab: taking one shared story and creating two different performative translations (one minimalistic, one metaphorical); group reflection on how metaphor shifts meaning

Week 8: Playback Forms in Practice

This session brings together all previous Playback explorations into concrete work with theatrical forms. Participants practice choosing and executing different Playback forms based on narrative focus, exploring how form shapes meaning, particularly when working with stories situated in historical rupture or crisis contexts.

The central inquiry: How does form shape meaning in performance?

Activities

- Brief analytical introduction: Playback forms as performative structures; form as frame, lens, and structuring device; what each form allows and limits
- Exploring core Playback forms: fluid sculptures, pairs, chorus, story form
- Micro-exercise: performing same short story in different forms; reflecting on how meaning shifts

- Choosing form according to story focus: identifying narrative focus (inner experience, relational dynamics, ambivalence, transition); practicing intentional form selection
- Discussion: Playback and historical rupture; positioning oneself as witness when biography intersects with historical time; how form changes when story carries rupture
- Practice lab: longer stories from participants performed in different forms; comparative reflection on structural, emotional, and ethical shifts; actors' reflection on experience of shifting form

Week 9: Narrative Structures and Boundary-Crossing

This session introduces analytical tools from narrative theory (Propp, Lotman, Campbell) to understand how stories are structured and how rupture operates within narrative. Participants practice Story in Roles and learn to map rupture within narrative arc.

The guiding inquiry: How do narrative structures reveal biographical ruptures and transformations?

Activities

- Discussion: narrative structure as analytical tool; difference between event and transformation; structure as pattern beneath personal story
- Introduction to Propp's morphology: functions within narrative, recurring structural movements, turning points and shifts; practical mini-task identifying structural functions in a short personal story
- Introduction to Lotman's plot as boundary-crossing: crossing limits and thresholds, rupture as structural transformation; small group exercise identifying where the boundary is and what changes after crossing
- Introduction to Campbell's Hero's Journey: departure, initiation, return, transformation of identity; discussion on when this model illuminates experience and when it oversimplifies
- Story in Roles as extended Playback form: narrative progression within improvisation, holding structural arc, tracking transformation in performative space
- Narrative analysis in practice: working with one selected personal story to identify event, turning point, boundary crossing, transformation, resolution or lack of resolution; mapping rupture within narrative arc

Week 10: Individual and Collective Memory as Documentary Material

This session marks the transition from Playback's improvisation to Documentary's composition. It explores memory as material for documentary work, distinguishing between memory as reconstruction (not reproduction) and examining how individual memory intersects with collective narratives.

The central shift: From improvisation to composition; how does memory become material?

Activities:

- Discussion: memory as active reconstruction, not reproduction (Proust, Deleuze); difference between remembering, reinterpreting, and reframing
- Individual and collective memory exploration: individual memory as embodied experience; collective memory as shared narrative field; memory as layered archive
- Memory mapping exercise: tracing connections between individual memories; identifying constellations where personal stories intersect and histories overlap
- Working with archives and artifacts: bringing one artifact (photograph, object, letter, document) into the space; exploring how it reframes memory
- Discussion: memory and borders (geographical, cultural, biographical); how borders reshape memory and narrative voice
- Selecting memory fragments for documentary development: identifying core image, tension, and historical layer; beginning to articulate potential documentary focus
- Short writing task: choosing one memory fragment and one memory object for potential documentary work; brief written reflection on what makes this memory significant

Week 11: Biography and Historical Time: Rupture, Identity, and Voice

This session explores the intersection of biographical and historical time, focusing on moments when people realize "I am living history." It addresses collective trauma as social condition and body memory of historical events. The session also addresses questions of voice and authenticity: Who has the right to speak? How does historical rupture affect narrative voice? Participants identify their documentary focus from selected memory material.

Central question: How does historical rupture reshape identity, memory, and the right to speak?

Activities:

- Discussion: historical time as lived experience; moments of rupture when familiar narratives collapse; collective trauma as social and structural condition
- Body memory work: guided embodied exploration of where historical memory lives physically
- Discussion: voice and authenticity in times of rupture; who has the right to speak from different positions (stayed/left/fight/exile); self-censorship and authorized narratives; autoethnographic voice as methodological solution
- Documentary focus development: identifying where rupture is located in your memory material, what transformation occurred, what remains unresolved; formulating one sentence capturing the historical tension

Week 12: Documentary Composition: From Material to Draft Performance

This session transforms memory fragments into documentary performance drafts.

The central transition: How does documentary material become performance?

Activities:

- Discussion: documentary theatre as composition; from archive to scene (selection, cutting, juxtaposition)
- Voice and authorship: rewriting same fragment from different narrative positions ("I", "we", observer); who speaks, from where, to whom
- Writing lab: turning memory fragments into playable text; building dramaturgical spine (theme, tension, sequence, transitions)
- Peer feedback protocol: presenting project outline (title, theme, materials, structure); structured feedback on clarity, coherence, ethical safety

Week 13. Rehearsal and Development: From Draft to Coherent Piece

This session transforms embodied knowledge into methodological reflection. Participants work on structure, transitions, polyphony and online Performance design. We establish witnessing practices, and implement structured feedback.

The central principle: Investigation through staging.

Activities:

- Rehearsal as research: staging fragments and testing structure through performance
- Focused rehearsal blocks: tightening structure, clarifying transitions

- Polyphony and montage: balancing individual presence and collective flow
- Online performance design: camera framing, sound, timing, transitions in digital space
- Technical run-through
- Structured feedback rounds

Week 14. Documentary Performance and Public Dialogue

This session presents the culmination of the course: online documentary performance as collective testimony, followed by public dialogue. Performance becomes response to the central question of the course and a shared research outcome.

Activities:

- Online documentary performance (60-90 min);
- Moderated public dialogue: audience reflections, questions, dialogue with authors;
- Performers' reflection: What changed through performance?;
- Collective acknowledgment

Week 15. Performance Ethnography and Collective Reflection

This final session positions performance as research outcome, traces transformation across the course, and articulates methodological discoveries. It closes the research cycle by returning to the central question with embodied understanding.

The focus: What knowledge has been produced through this embodied research process?

Activities

- Collective knowledge mapping and articulating discoveries (methodological, artistic, personal);
- Small group reflection, returning to central question: "What does it mean to live through historical rupture?"
- Common reflection and closing ritual.
- Purge