

Becoming Someone Else: Experiences of Seeing and Being Seen in Contemporary Theatre and Performance

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In his much praised study entitled *Speaking into the Air*, the media theorist John Durham Peters analysed the history of human communication, its economies and effects and set up a sobering thesis: “The problem of communication becomes [...] one of making contact with the person sitting next to you” (Durham Peters 1999, 178). This proposition seems logical, insofar as messages organised by dissemination, i.e. addressing a broad audience, or even conveyed through media technologies, always establish a clear structure of roles and participation in the information transfer. In contrast to the relative stability of situations composed of a speaker (or multiple speakers) and (many) listeners, in dialogical situations we have to take into account the potential for the destabilisation and unpredictability of an established reference. Due to the reciprocity and closeness of the particular positions involved, uncertainties, ambiguities and disagreements may emerge jeopardising the intactness of the information transfer. As Durham Peters demonstrates, in view of the historical and current media situation, the supposed privilege of the dialogical is to be revoked inasmuch as it is, above all, mass communication that has always played the most dominant role. If one considers how, for instance, our visual culture is orchestrated and in what ways it is

configured in the form of images stored and distributed through media technologies – such as placards, fashion photography, video clips, movies and television films – it seems plausible that the normative power of the communicational circumstances of the spectacle derives from the fact that their formats are always already firmly established before any reception could take place. The contingency and risks of their information transfers conveyed intentionally are minimised to the greatest possible extent.

In the theatre and performance art of the 20th century, however, we can find traces of a production trend which distinguishes itself by a mutual visualisation of the performance participants, so that the relations between the Self and the Other take shape in the reciprocity of seeing and being seen. Thus, in progressive forms of the performing arts visual perception advances to the position of inter-subjective participation and, consequently, the corresponding irritations and bewilderment of habitualised behavioural reflexes emerge on the horizon of experience. The act of looking at someone is accompanied by the possibility of being looked at, which complicates the representation of oneself and the Other, so that the effects, functions and consequences of seeing subvert the traditional experience and description patterns developed by theories of perception, such as phenomenology or semiotics.

The mutual participation engendered by the gaze in the theatre can be grasped as a form of aesthetic experience which, as a consequence, also entails social effects, as it were. In the exchange of gazes the dependence of the Self on the Other becomes virulent, while this dependency correlates with a form of inter-subjectivity that fundamentally differs from the reception models of viewing and spectatorship. If one not only sees but is also seen, then it is fair to say that certain types of gazes, which are involved in the processes of subject formation, hitherto remained neglected in the theories of the gaze developed in Media, Image and Film Studies. Even though these disciplines are interested in the social effects of

seeing, they all seem to concentrate on, and thereby prioritise, the “seeing subject” as opposed to the “seeing individual that is also being seen”, and analyse gaze dialogues predominantly from the perspective of the aesthetics of reception, i.e. as adoption, identification, empathy, or projection. However, the critical analysis of certain performances from recent years shows that the spectator has assumed a “new” role, and his or her activity is no longer restricted to making “a selection from the visual environment” (Wulf 1997, 446), as Christoph Wulf insisted in his definition of seeing. In the act of seeing, the attendee of a performance becomes a participant perceived visually and affected corporeally, and is confronted, in the gaze of the Other, with the fact that his or her behaviour is conditioned by the perception of the Other, and “that one is beside oneself, not at one with oneself” (Butler 2004, 103). Settings characterised by the simultaneity of “seeing and being seen” open up a field of action in which subjectification, identity acquisition, and all forms of meaning production are dependent on the perspectives of others, and are negotiated and practiced accordingly.

If the spectator is embedded in a structure of power and dependences that stem from the fact of mutual perception, than he or she is characterised by a form of individuation which can neither be grasped from the perspective of traditional intermodal perception models, nor by using interpretative concepts based in sign theory. In contemporary theatre, spectators have to give up their voyeuristic position since they are driven out of their hiding spot in the auditorium and put in the spotlight or confronted with the gaze of the Other. Consequently, they have to be prepared for unpredictable appeals and reactions which propel them to fight for recognition and continually redraw themselves in the eye of the Other. Their role unsettles the dichotomy of actor and spectator, of one’s own and the foreign, and, accordingly, the classical subject-object duality is transformed into a contingent subject-subject relation. Beyond all verbal speech acts and vocal appeals, the exchange of gazes seems to induce a subjectification process in which the Self

begins to form only after self-loss and self-endangerment take place. After an intermission of considering a few points about the specific mediality of gaze dialogues, in what follows we will try to find answers to the question of what the relation is between the Self and the Other in contemporary theatre performances.

The Mediality of the Exchange of Gazes

Arguably one of the most beaming gazes ever captured in an image looked down from the self-portrait of Rogier van der Weyden. The painting was held in the Town Hall of Brussels but it is not in existence anymore. The philosopher and theologian, Nicholas of Cusa described the look on this picture as active and omnipotent. “[L]ook upon it”, he prompts his addressees who at the time were the monks of the Tegernsee:

[L]ook upon it [a]nd each of you shall find that, from whatsoever quarter he regardeth it, it looketh upon him as if it looked on none other. And it shall seem to a brother standing to eastward as if that face looketh toward the east, while one to southward shall think it looketh toward the south, and one to westward, toward the west. First, then, ye will marvel how it can be that the face should look on all and each at the same time. For the imagination of him standing to eastward cannot conceive the gaze of the icon to be turned unto any other quarter, such as west or south. Then let the brother who stood to eastward place himself to westward and he will find its gaze fastened on him in the west just as it was afore in the east. And as he knoweth the icon to be fixed and unmoved, he will marvel at the motion of its immoveable gaze. If now, while fixing his eye on the icon, he walk from west to east, he will find that its gaze continuously goeth along with him, and if he return from east to west, in like marvel how, being motionless, it moveth, nor will his imagination be able to conceive that it should also move in like manner with one going in contrary direction to himself (Cusa 2007, 4–5).

In his choreo-graphic report, Nicholas of Cusa addresses a performative pictorial experience which emerges in the encounter with a portrait. Weyden’s self-portrait has a pleading quality inviting the recipient to relate to the visual representation, to respond to its appeal, and to take up a position in terms of his or her actions and behaviour towards the image. The impression of vitality made by the figure depicted in the painting stems from the fact that the materiality of the painting,

that is its two-dimensional, continual object-like quality, and thus its actual material constitution, escapes the attention of the spectator in the perception process. While encountering the lifeless materiality of the picture, this disappearance enables the spectator to exchange the object relations for an event which, in accordance with its performative foundation, can evoke an inter-subjective relation between the spectator and the picture.

My proposition is that the pictorial effects of a self-portrait, as well as several other illusion techniques and visual traps of contemporary art production, are incomparable with the impact of the exchange of gazes which takes place in an interpersonal framework. No matter how active and activating images are, one cannot interact with them. It is only the spectator that animates them and brings them to life. Due to their mediality, however, they resist the recipient's every attempt at influencing them. The human gaze, on the other hand, becomes a transformative impulse – provided that it is directed at a person that is bodily present and not an image. For the gaze inevitably leaves traces in the social environment; it takes part in reality; it intervenes in it, and is steered by it. While the perception of the “artificial presence” (Wiesing 2005, 70) of an image is based on “simple” contingency, social interactions are characterised by a double contingency, as Niklas Luhmann put it (Luhmann, 1997, 333; Baraldi 1998, 38). The exchange of gazes constitutes a kind of relationality between people, who perceive themselves in the action of perception. It is not only by grasping the world visually that the gaze creates images, but also by showing a capacity to constitute and animate the Other as a subject, as well as to prompt him or her to stage, adjust or adapt him- or herself.

In contrast to the procedure of “seeing”, the concept of the gaze (German *Blick*, French *regard*) connotes a relation between the one that sees and the one being seen by decentralising the position of the former and connecting him or her to his or her environment. Consequently, the gaze establishes a transitory nexus which

impacts the Self and the world, or the Self and the Other. As many theoreticians of the gaze have pointed out, while the gaze is capable of extending the physical reach of the body, it always creates a paradoxical “contact at a distance” (Wulf 1984, 21), for the sense of proximity between the gazes is unfailingly reduced by the experience of remoteness. If the relation created by the gazes harbours a tension between directness and distance, then the exchanges of gazes correlate with ambiguous or even conflicting relations between the Self and the Other. This idea is illustrated by the tradition of Western myths and legends in which gazes rule over life and death, and whose settings of the gaze have been reproduced in numerous Western artistic representations. The stories of Narcissus, Oedipus, Orpheus, and Pygmalion speak about gazes characterised by emotional or existential concern, about episodes in which the physical and mental dispositions of the protagonists can be recognised, in a concentrated form, from their visual relations.

A whole range of scholars and philosophers in the 20th century provided systematic descriptions of reciprocal relations of the gaze. The ideas put forward by Georg Simmel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan may provide productive starting points for the analysis of gaze dialogues in theatre and performance, even if they cannot be applied directly to artistically designed gaze relations. Simmel conceives of the seeing process as an “inter-individual” (Simmel 1921, 359) procedure, at the same time, however, he idealises the exchange of gazes as a reciprocal information exchange that suspends all asymmetries. He writes:

By the glance which reveals the other, one discloses himself. By the same act in which the observer seeks to know the observed, he surrenders himself to be understood by the observer. The eye cannot take unless at the same time it gives. (ibid., 358)

Thus, Simmel does not consider the inter-subjective implications of power and the “negative” correlative effects implied in the exchange of gazes – above all in

situations of intimidation or turning away. The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty reaches a conclusion which is similar to Simmel's sociological concept of the gaze. In his late work, Merleau-Ponty develops the idea of the world as flesh (*chair*) and also fosters the elimination of asymmetries. Since it conceptualises the gaze positions in a complementary way¹ and ignores historical, cultural and gender-specific dimensions,² Merleau-Ponty's concept cannot offer insight into those moments in the perception process in which our inter-subjective "dependence" is actually determined by an experience of difference. Jacques Lacan also described significant parameters of what it means to be looked at and dismissed the idealistic concept of seeing from a central perspective. However, his theory of the gaze resists the application to the relations of individuals mutually looking at one another. Although there have been attempts at transferring his model of the gaze to inter-subjective relations (Meyer-Kalkus 2007, 226; Widmer 2005, 144), Lacan himself advised against reformulating his theory of the drive about the pre-existing gaze as an inter-subjective model (Lacan 1973, 83, 93).

After a critical assessment of pertinent theories of the gaze, we can set up four fundamental theses which prove to be productive for the analysis of exchanges of gazes in a theatrical context. *Firstly*, living bodies cannot be reduced to visually fixed shapes, that is to say, interactions of the gaze presuppose a double contingency if they are to be regarded as reciprocal social processes. *Secondly*, the gaze is not be conceived of as a process of making oneself understood, but as a

¹ Martin Jay characterises Merleau-Ponty's model of the gaze as a "cooperative, complementary world of intersubjectivity", for the phenomenologist consistently distances himself from thematising and conceptualizing non-reciprocal gaze interactions. Cf. Jay 1993, 312.

² Rabinow and Dreyfus, among others, accuse Merleau-Ponty of ignoring the historical-cultural encoding of corporeality. Cf. Dreyfus 1982, 166. According to Andrea Roedig, the phenomenological method misses "Linguistic, Psychoanalysis and History" and follows these up in her monograph (Roedig 1997, 60). In her brilliantly written and elegantly laid out deconstructivist reading of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, Luce Irigaray accuses Merleau-Ponty of a solipsistic positioning, and critically assesses his concept of the reversibility between the one that sees and the one being seen, a concept which does not take into account the experience of the difference of the Other: "If I cannot see the other in his alterity, and if he cannot see me, my body no longer sees anything in difference" (Irigaray 1993, 168).

mechanism of animating and affecting one another. The gaze does not carry out a symbolic exchange but, instead, *initiates and activates* processes of action and exchange by generating and maintaining interpersonal contacts. *Thirdly*, a gaze relation is always motivated and accompanied by asymmetries, distances, differences, and potentials for conflict. *Fourthly*, the encounter with the Other in the gaze can by no means be reduced to a cognitive achievement. Rather, it is to be understood as a sensual experience of intersubjectivity, individuation, and experience of the world.

The Subjugating Gaze (Franko B: *Don't Leave Me This Way*)

By condensing the intersubjective act of the encounter into a reciprocal event of the gaze, the performance *Don't Leave Me This Way* by Franko B displays the brief moment of mutual looks by the Self and the Other. In his 2007 work entitled *Don't Leave Me This Way*, the Italian performance artist who, since the late 1970s, experiments with his own body and blood and turns the body into the subject matter of his art, presented his naked body on a round platform in front of visitors of the gallery. The completely empty exhibition space featured only a round stage platform and a chair, as well as the corporeal presence of the actor which became visible and noticeable only when a flash-like beam hit the stage.

Since the premiere, Franko B performs his show in two different theatrical settings. Generally, his self-harming performances were carried out either in the centre of a collective of spectators or in a face-to-face encounter with a single visitor. Similarly, after the first lengthier stage version, which had dramatic lighting and musical accompaniment, he also realised *Don't Leave Me This Way* in an alternative format which set up the encounter of the artist with a single spectator. The visitor of the performance was led into a fully darkened space and left alone with his expectations in a sphere with very few stimuli. Suddenly, a glaring beam of light filled the space (lighting designed by Kamal Ackarie), made

Franko B's body visible, facilitated an exchange of gazes, and turned the already existing bodily co-presence into an actual scene of intersubjective encounter. As soon as the photographic effect of the flash-like light was over and the eyes involved had to plunge into darkness again, the visitor was collected by someone offstage and led into the entrance hall. And so the performance, marked by the fleeting exchange of gazes and the caesurae of darkness, came to an end.

By displaying his robust body tattooed from head to toe and making the phenomenal qualities of his very own body available for the visitors' gaze, he presented himself as a visually designed sculpture. Just like in his earlier works, B suspended all linguistic and vocal articulations this time as well, and exhibited his naked body, which he consistently calls the canvas of his art.³ However, this time his performance did not only seem to stage an act of the perception of art in which the body is exhibited as an object but, rather, it raised questions concerning the participation of gazes – Who is looking at whom? Who is actually posing?

In *Don't Leave Me This Way*, the individual behaviour of the spectator was affected by the feeling of being looked at. The situation let the spectators realise that their position and behaviour as someone who is looking at something are not only constituted by their own perspectives and the visual field they perceive but also, or above all, by the fact that they are suddenly being looked at. The gaze of the Other reaches and frames our body. That is to say, it lets us appear in a particular framework to which we, first of all, have to adapt physically. What one sees is of secondary significance in Franko B's theatrical setting. What is crucial is how one behaves, that is where one looks – how, where exactly, and how long one looks at the Other. By making the gaze manoeuvres visible to the Other, the binary logic of the perceiving one and the perceived one becomes unsettled and

³ “The body is site for presentation, a canvas. In my performances I am not interested in story telling. I show things that are not possible to articulate with speaking. The image moves on all the time and the baggage that we all carry changes the images that we see.” Quoted from Meyer 2008, 230.

socially effective reactions emerge, such as intimidation or tension, turning away or straying.

In Franko B's performance, one not only sees, but is also seen. And what is more: in the act of seeing, one becomes an image. The notion of becoming an image in the gaze of the Other has been described by Jean-Paul Sartre as objectification. For him, getting into the focus of the Other means losing the privileged perceiving position of the voyeur and becoming the object of inspection, as well as the target of value judgements of others (Sartre 1992, 302). Sartre's reasoning leads to the conclusion that the purpose of the gaze is objectification. However, the example mentioned above points to the fact that the one being looked at is also an individual with situational and social ties.⁴ Franko B's performance demonstrates that under the "flashlight" of the gaze of the Other, processes of subjectification take place, which are experienced as primal corporeal acts. In addition to the participants themselves, their viewing directions and, consequently, their visual attention become visible as well and, therefore, in this inter-bodily proximity the question of the fairness of the gazes presents an ethical problem. Spectators may feel insecure as to whether they are allowed to peer at the Other, they are to favour the face of the Other, or if they should look at the body in order not to stare at them so much.

Franko B's gaze at the visitor from the platform implies a perspective which is inaccessible to the one being looked at, and which prompts him or her to adapt to this perceptual perspective. This mechanism of the corporeal redrafting of the Self, which takes place in the objectifying gaze, has connections to the theory of the appeal. In Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation", the moments of objectification and subjectification coincide in a way that reminds us of one of the

⁴ It is certainly not enough to look at the world if one is to experience the dimension of the reflexive consciousness. Sartre puts it pithily: "For the appearance of a man as an object in the field of my experience is not what informs me that *there are men*" (Sartre 1992, 373, italicised by Sartre).

experiences in Franko B's performances. As Kaja Silverman⁵ critically observes, Sartre interprets the theory of the phenomenon of suddenly being looked at primarily as objectification and not as subjectification. Silverman rewrites Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation and makes it productive for the description of the individuation taking place in the interaction of gazes.

Althusser's guiding principle, according to which "[a]ll ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" (Althusser 1971, 175), is most commonly illustrated by an example in which the subject is constructed through the vocal appeal of another person. When a policeman addresses a passerby by shouting "Hey, you there!" thereby separating him or her from the crowd and taking away his or her anonymity – this event is a manifestation of the "ideology" generally accepted by all individuals. In the figurative sense, Althusser's theorem about the interpellation is to be understood as an act of "temporary arrest", and refers to the thesis that the social conditions of the Self always presuppose a central "subject", i.e. discursive norms, on behalf of which empirical subjects can connect with each other and are acknowledged as subjects. Accordingly, every gaze negotiated between individuals calls into existence a third perspective, the dimension of symbolic behavioural conventions, and turns the visual objectification into social subjectification. The gaze that hits us exposes social expectations. It urges us to conform to the perspective of the Other and appear as worthy of being recognised. In brief: the gaze simultaneously *forces* and *enables* the constitution of the subject looked at, and makes it dependent on the "symbolic order" without which no intersubjective communication can be established.

⁵ "Finally, Sartre misses the crucial opportunity implicit in the concept of the looked-at look – the opportunity to theorize it in relation not to objectivity, but to subjectivity. He fails to understand that latent in the voyeur's apprehension of the exteriority of *le regard* is the possibility of both coming to an awareness of the lack upon which the look pivots, and – in accepting this lack, which not only limits, but opens the door to the infinitude of desire – emerging as a subject in the strongest sense of that word" (Silverman 1996, 166-167).

Analogously to the voice, the gaze of the Other is the witness of an exterior which introduces the individual into an existence related to the Other and situates him or her in a social context. However, critics of Althusser's interpellation theory point out⁶ that in the constellation of the three perspectives active in the exchange of gazes, i.e. the one who looks at someone, the one being looked at, and the gaze of the "symbolic order", there is always an irresolvable asymmetry at work. This prevents the one being looked at from assuming a closed identity, the gaze of the Other from appearing as something fully sovereign, and the conventions of the discursive framework from becoming completely predictable and calculable. In light of the fact that in Franko B's performance the physical proximity of the artist and the effect of appeal contained in his gaze constitutes the spectator as a Self marked by and dependent on social and situational conditions, the moment of suddenly being looked at is not only to be conceived of as objectification and mortification but also as subjectification and individuation. Furthermore, the example provided by *Don't Leave Me This Way* also demonstrates that in situations of gaze exchanges in which the participants are bodily co-present, there is no clear differentiation of roles between the one looking at someone and the one being looked at, the one acknowledging and the one being acknowledged, and the visually subjugating and the visually subjugated, since these positions, although continually occupied, can never be frozen in an intersubjective complementarity. Since the 2010s, the disappearance of the fixed positions of visual subjects and

⁶ The Slovenian psychoanalytic theorist Mladen Dolar disputes that ideology is characterised by a claim of totality and interprets subjectification as a fragile process continually producing remainders, which creates the subject only by never letting it be identical with itself and forcing it at all times to leave something behind that cannot be incorporated into the status of the subject (cf. Dolar 1993, 75–96). In the argumentation of Althusser, Judith Butler even detects the individual's "passionate complicity" with the law which is not only coupled with the acceptance of guilt but also prevents the critique and subversion of ideology (cf. Butler 1997b, 29–30). Slavoj Žižek affirms Dolar's thesis about the individual not reaching total subjectification and points out that subjectification is an impossible and processual act, for neither the symbolic order nor the subject can be grasped as being complete and also cannot be totalised. Consequently, both are reliant on a permanent relation of interdependence (cf. Žižek 2014, 134).

objects, which Shannon Jackson recently linked to a new emphasis on the social aspects of art,⁷ has become a central aesthetic principle in performance art. In this regard, it was certainly Marina Abramović's durational performance *The Artist Is Present* that received the greatest response. In the framework of her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, every day from March 14 to May 31 she sat at a small wooden desk and initiated eye contact with the museum visitors. For a total of 700 hours visitors had the opportunity to sit down opposite her, one by one, and exchange wordless glances with her while having an influence on how long these exchanges lasted. In *The Artist Is Present*, as well as in her performative installation *512 Hours*, which remained undocumented for good reason, she exposed intersubjectivity along with seeing and being seen as a dimension of action in the primary sense, that is a sphere of agency "where sovereignty wanes" (Butler, 1997a, 16), where the tactics of illusion generation, domination and affirmation are to be questioned or rendered ineffective. The fact that a conceptual dichotomy of the one who sees and the one being seen gets unsettled, if not subverted, becomes apparent, above all, in the contingent allotment of shame which, in performances, makes the dichotomy of roles implied in the "feeling of embarrassment in front of the other", which Sartre elaborated, problematic.

The Sense of Shame in the Gaze of the Other (She She Pop: *Bad*)

Jean-Paul Sartre is the only theoretician of the gaze that revealed and developed the affective level of seeing and being seen. To put it differently, his concept of intersubjectivity relying on arguments rooted in the psychology of affects is based, in a revolutionary way, on epistemological considerations, which can be

⁷ Already at the beginning of her monograph, Jackson notes that "[i]n recent decades, artists and art critics [...] see performative work as a variant of 'post-studio' and 'post-optical' art-making, joining terms such as social practice and relational aesthetics to others such as live art, time-based art, or group art" (Jackson 2011, 1). See also: Bishop 2012, Balme 2014.

seen from the fact that Sartre conceptualises the moment of being looked at as an experience of shame (Honneth 2003, 76). His formula of “shame is shame of oneself *before the Other*” (Sartre 1992, 222, italicised by Sartre) point to the fact that the situations in which the experience of suddenly being looked at and the vocation of shame implied in it become virulent are, above all, situations of bodily co-presence. In contrast to a number of other affects, such as fright or joy which can be provoked by objects standing on their own, the sense of shame is a genuinely intersubjective emotion closely connected to the socio-cultural creation of our Selves. Sartre takes a bipolar logic of embarrassment as his starting point, according to which the one being looked at is affected by shame when he or she realises the situation in which he or she is. However, if one considers certain contemporary performances, it becomes apparent that the simultaneous presence of the participants correlates with a factor of contingency which reallocates the roles of the one looking at someone and the one being looked at, the exhibitionist and the embarrassed one – over and over again.

What seems to be recourse to Sartre’s observations on shame, at the beginning of their work *Bad*⁸ (2002) three actresses from the theatrical performance group She She Pop displayed a tableau of bodily exposed and exhibited people presenting themselves naked to the eyes of the spectators. In the centre of the performing space, the performance artists Ilia Papatheodorou, Lisa Lucassen and Katharina Oberlik waited with microphones in their hands, while the audience slowly, one by one, entered the hall through the narrow corridor and sat down on their chairs arranged in a “democratic” circle. Compared to the nude actresses who suggested exposure and the quality of being unmasked, the audience seemed to be protected by clothes as well as a socio-cultural orchestration. However, the constellation of people undressed on the one hand, and dressed on the other,

⁸ The work *Bad* by the performance collective She She Pop was performed in Kampnagel in Hamburg on 31 January 2002. Later, it was shown in Podewil in Berlin, too, among other places.

implied a definite assignment of roles only at first sight. The contingently programmed performance caused the relation of subjects and objects to sway. In the process of exchanging gazes, the positions of the ones that are looking at someone and the ones being looked at suddenly changed. The performers compensated for their nakedness by giving out acoustic and verbal signals, thereby articulating their reactions to the ways the audience members appeared and behaved as they entered the theatre hall. They seized power by making comments, often even offensive remarks, and, consequently, drawing the audience members' attention to the one they were directing their gazes at. Despite their "masochistic" exposure, the actresses, who verbally humiliated people that were unknown to them, revealed themselves as the true voyeurs of the situation. By objectifying the spectators, who were dressed up, they maintained their position of power unflinchingly. By directing the attention of the audience members already present to imperfections of visitors just entering the hall, and critically assessing their bodily proportions, facial features, as well as clothing, they bartered their sense of shame for the dominance of the interpellators. The visitors, who entered the space unsuspectingly, and whose appearance served as the target of nasty comments, found themselves in a state of helplessness, for they were not capable of changing their looks or their conspicuousness. In the social vortex of the gazes, the members of the audience experienced what it is like to suddenly and fully unexpectedly become an image and to become a subject by subjugation. This subverted the more or less passive ideas about conventional role allocation of an average visitor. In the starting situation of *Bad*, the artists did not only assume their ultimate roles as the ones that look at someone, they also robbed the visitors of their own gazes, who bowed their heads in shame and avoided eye contact. Thus, the neat dichotomy of the roles of actors and the audience collapsed right at the beginning of the performance, and every visitor experienced what it is like to

unintentionally assume the position of the actor and, correspondingly, subordination.

It was a kind of negative interpellation that befell the spectators who became the object of comments, which blocked them physically and mentally. Their powerlessness correlated with a discomfort in the face of the negative assessment of their entering the hall and triggered feelings of shame. This intense affective feeling which, according to Sartre, is to be conceived of as signs of a “freedom” (Sartre 1992, 259) suddenly lost, involved repressive reactions on the part of the visitors. They bowed their heads after entering the hall, they blushed, their motor movements seemed involuntary and uncertain, they experienced the inability to act and felt the urge to disappear. In an effort to protect themselves from the comments, they rushed to their seats as fast as they could.

In the register of affects, shame is characterised by particularly intense amplitude, a relatively short duration, and passive agitation on the part of the one ashamed. Many theories of the shame take it as their starting point that this feeling is provoked by violations of norms that “are not entirely intentional” (Landweer 1999, 38). The cause of the experience of shame is “an idiosyncrasy of the Self which cannot be voluntarily influenced by the individual” (Bastian 1998, 50). The feeling of shame differs from the affect of guilt precisely in this regard, the latter emerging “after committing something evil” (Bastian 1998, 49) and can be seen as the consequence of a failure or a deviant act; at any rate, it goes hand in hand with conscious activity (Wurmser 1993, 314).⁹ According to Anja Lietzmann, the affect of shame is an inevitable social “event” which consists in the loss of “certainty about what one is” (Lietzmann 2007, 17). However, shame is not a “purely” repressive experience; it also has a protective function which, in spite of all the conflicting differences between the ideal and the self-image, retains the

⁹ According to Wurmser’s arguments, in the example of *Bad* we could locate the feeling of guilt on the side of the performers, and the feeling of shame on the side of the spectators.

self-integrity of the one looked at. Furthermore, in the feeling of shame the bewilderment cooperates with the enhancement of self-reflexivity, as well as with the realisation of the values and ideals of one's own identity. To put it differently, the motor, cognitive and psychological block caused by shame can lead to action. In the performance entitled *Bad*, in which individual feelings of shame almost turned into a collective awkwardness, the visitors reacted to the gaze directed at them by quickening their steps and trying to disappear. In his interpretation of Sartre, Hans-Dieter Gondek explains the arresting gaze and shame as "elements of the primal scene of an implantation, as it were, of sociality and morality" (Gondek 1997, 185).

It is precisely this social experience of everyday processes of encounter, in which shame becomes the price we have to pay for intersubjectivity, that the performance group *She She Pop* radicalised. In terms of processes of participation, we can even speak of a "habitualised shamefacedness", for the Self experiences and fears "the collective of others as an eagle-eyed controller who is always alert" (Lehmann 2002, 41, 43). Sartre argues that the sense of shame has a triple valence which presupposes an encounter between the Self and the Other: "shame is shame of oneself *before the Other*" (Sartre 1992, 222, italicized by Sartre). The experience of becoming an image and the corresponding vocation of shame are at their most virulent in situations of bodily co-presence, provided that the sense of shame is a genuine intersubjective emotion.¹⁰ As demonstrated by *Bad*, the interactions of the gaze do not permit a complementary role allocation of seeing and being seen. Rather, all who are present experience their participation in the performing situation as a continual and unpredictable alternation of active and passive positions, of exhibitionistic joy and humiliating instances of shame.

¹⁰ Cf. Jens León Tiedemanns Dissertation *Die intersubjektive Natur der Scham*, in which he contemplates and further investigates the phenomenon of shame from the perspective of current theories of recognition rooted in intersubjectivity (Tiedemann 2007).

This unpredictability of moments in which one becomes the object of inspection is a constant feature in our attendances of performances. And what is more, in contemporary theatre performances the indissoluble risk of suddenly being looked at often creates a latent fear of embarrassment, even a permanent and crisis-like bewilderment in the visitor, which Matthias Warstat described as a state of nervousness. According to him, nervousness results from the worry that one is not able to autonomously influence the interaction one is part of. It is a feeling which accompanies the perception of contemporary theatre-goers and which relates the attendance of performances to the experience of an exam situation. Besides She She Pop's *Bad*, this feeling may also be familiar from numerous other works which were designed as community plays, such as Gob Squad's *Western Society* (2013) or Signa's *Club Inferno* (2013). As Warstat puts it, "a thousand pair of eyes examine how miserably or capably one deals with the challenge of the situation. The result is a sort of exam stress" (Warstat 2006, 90). To make one nervous or to create fear and anxiety, it is enough to produce a certain spatial and physical proximity between the actors and the audience:

[...] here, nervousness results from the experience of being seen, or from a kind of seeing that always has to take into account its own risk of being seen. The visitor, elevated to the position of a visible actor, is forced to react to an unfamiliar situation in front of the crowd (Warstat 2006, 90).

Thus, nervousness arises from the fear that one might unexpectedly be given the task of staging him- or herself and, by doing so, will run the risk of having to be ashamed of him- or herself in front of others.

Self-staging in the Gaze of the Other (Dries Verhoeven: *thy kingdom come*)

By interweaving the moments of reciprocal self-reference with moments of reference to the Other in a relation of gazes between a male and a female spectator, the Dutch director Dries Verhoeven made the specific mediality of the interpersonal exchange of gazes the subject matter of his interaction play *thy*

kingdom come (2003). The performance began with the two of them being collected from different cafeterias of the Viennese Museumsquartier and then led to a metal container. After entering the windowless container bare-footed, they realised that the interior space has been divided into two sections by a glass panel. The visitors were not allowed to speak verbally or touch each other; here, their communication was limited to the exchange of gazes. The voices offstage tried to create feelings of sympathy between the spectators, and told fragments of a fictional love story from male and female perspectives. Remarks such as “I was sure that it was going to be you, I saw you outside” or “What I am telling you now, should remain our secret” created mutual trust and led to statements that created (eroticising) desire: “I want to touch you” or “I want you to hold me”. In this setting, it was not the most important what one saw, what really mattered was *where* and *how long* one looked. The perception of the spectators oscillated emphatically between different realities: between the story recounted acoustically and the things seen directly, between the imagined and the phenomenal. The reason for this was that the gaze actually emancipated itself from the acoustically presented narration and created subjectivity beyond the possibilities of staging. The individual movements of the gaze and their mutual visibility subverted the coherence of the love story told by the voice and often led to reactions like intimidation or turning away.

The gaze of the Other mobilised discursive behavioural norms of a social formation, which can also be achieved by cameras. But it also forced the one looked at to adapt to the perceived subjective demands for recognition of the one looking at him or her. In this case, subject formation involved processes of self-staging as well, for the exchange of gazes not only integrated the participants into a single context, but also into a processual situation. Since the perspective of the Other, due to its contingency, could not be fathomed only imagined, it contributed to the creation of the Self *in the long run* and *in reciprocity*. In light of the

configuration of this setting, we can set up the thesis that in the gaze of an Other physically present we are forced to continually redraft our own Self and let our behaviour hinge on the actions of the one looking at us – if we are to gain long-term recognition, that is recognition for the duration of the gaze dialogue.

In *thy kingdom come*, the specific subjectification effect of the human gaze came to light by coupling appeals of the voice and the gaze. The acoustic level aimed at addressing the spectators as gender-based subjects that fall into line with hegemonic identity norms, i.e. with representational ideals that Jacques Rancière and Kaja Silverman called *dominant fictions*.¹¹ The voices offstage assigned an appropriately naive but mysterious and “unfathomable” female image to the female spectator. The male spectator, on the other hand, was supposed to appear as a slightly frightened but sensible man that still managed to take the initiative, and articulate unobtrusive but clear signs of establishing a relation. Thus, in his textual dramaturgy Verhoeven utilised the strategy of typifying female and male identities and, apparently, codified their social relationality. At the same time, however, the confrontation between the individual gaze intentions worked vehemently against stereotypes, which are employed as a normalising representational power in many commercial images. The gazes, moving in their own ways and not adapting to the narrative structure, opened up a dimension for the critique of the hegemonic identity, without necessarily creating other consistent identities as an alternative. Their potential for critique lies in their incalculable and autonomous movement, as well as in the fact that they were continually visible for the Other and bewildered him or her.

Accordingly, the peculiar appeal of the exchange of gazes in *thy kingdom come* consisted in the fact that the acoustic invocation by the narrative voices was disrupted and subverted by attacks of the gaze, while the interaction was filled up

¹¹ “[The dominant fiction is] the privileged mode of representation by which the image of the social consensus is offered to the members of a social formation and within which they are asked to identify themselves” (Rancière 1977, 28; cf. also Silverman 1992, 23–28).

with tension, gaps, contingencies, misunderstandings, and conflicts. Beyond verbal speech acts, a processual dynamic of reciprocal subjectification had been developed here, which destabilised the consolidated rhetoric and imaginaria of the idea of “love at first sight”. It became apparent that individual actions of the gaze are capable of intervening in the regime of calculability and staging, and, furthermore, these actions demonstrated that there is no act of recognition and, consequently, intersubjective communication without the risk of disturbances, disruptions, and irritations in the visual relation.

In *thy kingdom come*, the doubly contingent actions foregrounded the individuality of the viewers, for the spontaneous, partly unconscious reactions, which sometimes seemed involuntary, drew the intersubjective attention to themselves. The male and female spectator could not immediately evaluate and calculate how the situation was going to play out and how their interests and reactions would develop, and so they were not sure which rules and norms they should follow with their actions. No matter how the spectators behaved, they became the protagonists of their own “performance”. The expressivity of their behaviour consisted precisely in the singularity of their actions, whose unpredictability transcended traditional fictional patterns of representation. Verhoeven’s performance exposed the processuality and unpredictability of self-staging which counteracted all kinds of causality in the dramatic composition. The spectators were spotted in the middle of the act of finding themselves, they were grasped as subjects constantly in search of adequate images of themselves. They demonstrated that self-staging in the reciprocal and doubly contingent exchange of gazes is accompanied by a processual and interminable formation of the Self. In contrast to exhibits of portrait photography or theatrical representations of characters, there were no images of the Self here given prior to the event, neither staged, nor materially fixed, which could have appeared as coherent and illusory. *thy kingdom come* made the dimensions of failure and anti-conformism visible in

a thoroughly thought-through form. The performance elevated unpredictability to the position of the primary dramatic and aesthetic principle. Dries Verhoeven showed that in theatre identity is caught up in a contingent *scene* and does not get frozen into an *image*. In accordance with Judith Butler's thesis, recognition was negotiated as a communicative practice, "as a processual result of communication" (Schaffer 2008, 151)¹² in his performance.

The theatrical setting of gazes directed at each other makes an aspect of subject formation apparent which, according to the political scholar Isabell Lorey, remained unattended to in the juridical model of identity production. Lorey's objection, especially to Butler's earlier theories of subjectification, is that the socialization of an individual can by no means be reduced to his or her relation to the law.¹³ In her monograph *Immer Ärger mit dem Subjekt* [There is Only Trouble with the Subject], Lorey re-evaluates the agency of individuals, and emphasises the interactive dimension of subject formation, which plays an essential role in human socialisation. Thus, in performance situations which enable the reciprocal communication of the participants, normally there are three perspectives connected, all of which may impact the subject formation of those involved. The one who looks at something, the one being looked at, and the gaze of the 'symbolic order' – this triad conditions all intersubjective relations (of the gaze). Accordingly, the corporeal exchange of gazes amounts to the initiation of relations between people who can only become individuals and subjects of a situation as a result of these processes of establishing a reference. The exchange of gazes teaches us that self-reflexion in situations of bodily co-presence depends

¹² Johanna Schaffer sums up Judith Butler's arguments about the intersubjective practice of recognition with this phrase (cf. Butler 2004, 132).

¹³ "Since Butler is not interested in the problem of the formation of the Self, juridical structures of dominance are foregrounded in her analysis, which operate under constraint. Due to the central position of the relation between the subject and the law, interactive processes are left out of consideration. By doing so, Butler reinforces the idea of a self-identical and autonomous subject. This reproducing effect cannot prevent her from giving an account of the fiction of self-identity. Thus, Butler's critique of the subject ends up in a circular argument" (Lorey 1996, 142).

on the implicit and constitutive risk that the recognition might potentially fail. If others affect us through the sense of shame, if they look away, if they observe us, fix their eyes on us, or control us through their gazes, they call for the redrafting of our Selves in an idiosyncratic way, and make us fight for the recognition of our social visibility incessantly.

The above-mentioned scene of encounter in Dries Verhoeven's *thy kingdom come* consists in the interminable negotiation of a regime of gazes between two individual perspectives. By revealing visual experience as an interpersonal participation process, this configuration challenges traditional definitions of seeing and its reduction to a procedure of reception. It draws attention to the fact that the gaze is not only constitutive of individual visual perception, but also has social effects, as it were, and establishes intersubjective relations. It is an immaterial means of communication which is semiotically relevant and which resists the consensual symbolic encoding and, at the same time, produces corporeal and tangible effects. It makes one become someone else through someone else.

Conclusion

Even though every performance analysis begins with the description of the setting and of what one sees, until now theatre studies have not shown much interest in the process of seeing and its effect on the continuous subject formation of the spectator as a culturally conditioned Self. In contemporary theatre, however, we can witness a proliferation of diverse visual effects from the visualisation of bodies actually present to forms of technological or digital transmission of images, resulting in the fact that the inter-medial interplay of phenomenal and virtual representations can be considered an inherent feature of theatre performances defined by aesthetic and social factors. And what is more, the reason for the insistence on and importance of an analysis of gaze interactions

rooted in theatre studies is the fact that in this discipline the exchange of gazes can be examined in the reciprocity of seeing and being seen. That is to say, an approach based in performance analysis helps us to grasp the experience of the exchange of gazes in the bodily co-presence of the participants, an experience which can be *evoked* by visually transmitted figures and their gazes, be they recorded cinematically or photographically, but which can by no means be medially configured.

However, individual actions of the gaze that carry the potential of being seen do not only constitute the nucleus of aesthetic experience in contemporary theatre productions and performances. In addition, they also take on increasing significance in the visual arts, so that the performance analytical investigation of the visual processes of appropriation proves to be productive and necessary within a wider cultural context. In the situations that Tino Sehgal designs for the museum or in contemporary dance performances in the context of exhibitions, above all those of Boris Charmatz, Xavier Le Roy or Ivo Dimchev, often even the audiovisual documentation of the event is forbidden which restricts the experience of the gaze to the duration of the performance. It is interesting, however, that despite the recording ban the experiences of the gaze gained in these exhibition situations provide for lively discussions and resonate for a long time. These unique experiences produce imaginary inscriptions, as well as their vivid verbal extension. The short-lived encounters of the gaze in performances and exhibitions provide evidence for the fact that a participation of gazes does not end in the singular act of being directed at someone but, beyond the situations themselves, it can also find expression in discourses and imaginaria, and shape future expectations and actions of the gaze.

An analysis of the gaze based in theatre studies draws attention to the fact that the effects of the gaze cannot be conceived of in the duality of the one who sees and the one being seen. The effects of the gaze invariably presuppose a

relationship triangle between *the one who sees, the one being seen* and the *context of the gaze*. This configuration is of utmost importance for theatre and culture studies, for it sheds light on the fundamental medial conditions of an intersubjectivity based in reciprocity. The irreducible trinity of perspectives is only inherent to performance situations; the effects of the gaze in the case of camera objectives, photographic or cinematic images suspend the double contingency and merely simulate effects which cannot be transferred into interactions. The corporeal exchange of gazes involves the creation of connections between peoples that can only be produced as subjects of a situation in and through this process of establishing reference. This demonstrates that it is not only images that affect the body and the behaviour in a normative way. In fact, the gaze of the Other implies a transformative power which is capable of altering identities and “the landscape of the possible” (Engel 2002, 93). Every exchange of gazes jeopardises social norms by mobilising, (inter-)subjectively negotiating, and potentially shifting them in particular acts of identification and self-staging. A performance analytical standpoint helps us discuss positions of embodied perception which never manifest themselves in abstract and regular forms, but always in specific discursive configurations or between concrete and particular perspectives.¹⁴ In the play of gazes, every position is personified along spatial-temporal and socio-cultural coordinates. Without overestimating the relevance of this particularity in creating and critiquing culture, it can be stated that in contemporary performance art it seems to be crucial to consider political questions of representation through singular gaze acts and focus on our socio-

¹⁴ In her overview of the subject of participation, Juliane Rebentisch stresses that the challenge that art theory faces today is that of taking into account the “culturally and socially conditioned nature of subjectivities” in the analysis of aesthetic experience: “The question of the relation of aesthetic experience to the dimension of the intersubjective [...] must be reformulated. For otherwise this dimension can only be conceived of as something clear and abstract. Instead, it must be related to the individual, that is concrete, culturally and socially conditioned form of subjectivities” (Rebentisch 2013, 59-60).

cultural power to act in situationally conditioned visual relations. Since each and every one of us “sees and hears from a different position” (Arendt 1958, 57), the spatial-temporal difference between the spectator subjects is an elementary signature of our social conduct. Even habitualised practices of intersubjectivity which are firmly established in the discourse rely on actualisation and its perception which unsettle and, to an extent, reshape and shift the validity of supposed majority positions. It is precisely the connection of dominant and particular, collective and individual actions of the gaze that assume great importance in contemporary theatre performances. Their exposure draws the contours of the new guidelines of a performance analytical approach and requires a corresponding broadening of the analytical horizon.

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