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Staging Difference: Theater–Representation–Politics[†]

by Katharina Pewny

The feminist spectator might find that her gender—and/or her race, class, or sexual preference—as well as her ideology and politics make the representation alien and even offensive. It seems that as spectator she is far from ideal. Determined to draw larger conclusions from this experience, she leaves the theatre while the audience applauds at the curtain call and goes off to develop a theory of feminist performance criticism.¹

Politically and scientifically situated in feminist theory, I link, in my dissertation, feminist theory and drama, and address the following main concerns:²

[†] This article is the revised version of a paper I held at the Junior Fellow's Seminar at the Institute for Human Sciences. For their critical comments I want to thank Dagmar Fink, Cornelia Klinger, Gerlinde Maurer, Selma Sevenhuijsen, and Miriam Wischer.

¹ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 2.

² Politics and science are related to each other. I distinguish them at this point to indicate two different practices: thinking gender difference and activism in feminist politics. Drama is the technical term for scientific research on theater, in German "*Theaterwissenschaft*."

1) How do plays by contemporary female dramatists stage gender difference?³ What representations of femininity are they offering?

2) Theater is a special apparatus with its own mechanisms. How does the production of meaning work in theater?

3) Hierarchical power relations between women and men are not only inscribed in our societies by law and order, but culturally prescribed. In order to change them, can theater be a useful site for non-traditional representations of femininity?⁴

4) Mimesis, masquerade, representation, and performance have been common terms for re-thinking gender difference in recent years. What theatrical processes do they imply? What can a feminist political movement gain from them?

In this article reflections on representation and mimesis will be presented through a close look on Elfriede Jelinek's recent play "Ein Sportstück."⁵ These reflections will first will be contextualized in their disciplinary origins and theoretical background.

Disciplinary Origins

Drama as a university discipline works with a combination of methods such as literary theory, art history, philosophy, anthropology, and history. At most institutes specializing in theater/drama in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria there is no practical work in theater, but instead there are historical studies, film theory, and the aesthetic theory of theater. The Viennese Institute has focused on historical studies and recently on media-theory. As in literature, there is a prominent canon of writers, directors, and actors—which feminist critics name a "male-stream" canon. In the European context, it is impossible to graduate in Drama without knowing Aristotle, William Shakespeare, Bertold Brecht... by heart. At the same time it is not only possible, but even most likely, that a student will graduate without ever hearing of Hrotsvith von Gandersheim or Caroline Neuber.⁶ In many dis-

³ I have limited the field of research to German-speaking dramatists and their plays from 1986 to 1996.

⁴ When I talk about theater, I am talking about stage theater for adults. I exclude children's theater, musicals, operas, and performance.

⁵ "Ein Sportstück" came forth at the Viennese Burg Theater in January 1998. The staging was directed by Einar Schleaf. Elfriede Jelinek, "Ein Sportstück" (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag GmHB, 1998).

⁶ Hrotsvith von Gandersheim lived in tenth century in Germany and wrote religious dramas. Caroline Neuber, living in the eighteenth century, was manager of a theater group and a

ciplines Women's Studies developed in the late 1970s, which paved the way for reflections on Gender Difference and Gender Studies, up to Gay/Lesbian/Queer Theory in the 1990s. Drama continues to neglect these crucial developments—crucial because of their meaning for the production, mediation, and distribution of knowledge itself.

Within German-speaking Drama there are some works committed to Women's Studies, such as publications on women's history as actresses, directors, or writers in various historical periods. There is also a rather young generation of scholars analyzing videos or films. The academic response to German-speaking female dramatists is generally low, but still a bit higher in the English speaking community than in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland.

Within the German-speaking discourse no school can be found that offers a theory of gender difference and theater.⁷ Some recent publications on feminist theory and theater have come out in the United States and Britain.⁸ The titles of these books indicate their ground-breaking quality: It is 'still' necessary to discuss the 'basics' such as *Feminism, Theater, and Theory*.⁹

Reflections on Representation

Precisely because of the operation of representation, actual women are rendered an absence within the dominant culture, and in order to speak, must take on a mask (masculinity, falsity, simulation, seduction), or take on the unmasking of the very opposition in which they are opposed, the Other.¹⁰

dramatist. See Helga Kraft, *Ein Haus aus Sprache, Dramatikerinnen und das andere Theater* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1996).

⁷ One important exception is Anke Roeder's publication on current women dramatists. Anke Roeder, *Autorinnen, Herausforderungen an das Theater* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989).

⁸ See Sue-Ellen Case, ed., *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theater* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Elaine Aston, *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Helene Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), and Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis, Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁹ In other disciplines Feminist Theory is disappearing again and giving way to Gender Studies and Queer Theory. So it is everywhere necessary to discuss the "basics."

¹⁰ Jeanie Forte, "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism," in Case, *Performing Feminisms*, 251–270, 252.

The term “representation” indicates the “made” status of our culture, and thus of gender. We can look at representations and analyze their explicit as well as implicit meanings: “the unmasking of the very opposition in which actual women are opposed.”

So, how is gender difference culturally represented? The two genders function as relational terms and ways of being. They are represented through the constitution of a hierarchical binary order. The male functions as neutral-universal subject (i.e. the general) and the female as particularity. That is why (not only) feminist theorists speak of a phallogocentric order.¹¹ It means two things. First, female identity is not represented as the powerful subject but as lacking the one and only sign of subjecthood. And second, at the same time female identity is included in a universal subject which neglects their gender. If anything, this gap, this difference, can be rendered paradigmatic for female identity: not of character or nature, but rather on the level of structures. Gender difference is thus buried, and, if it is represented, it is represented only in a binary order.¹²

This leads us to the relation between the following different levels: In which way are discourses and so-called reality linked?

Jacques Lacan named our symbolic order as phallogocentric. This symbolic system is clearly not the same level as “real life.” But symbolic systems work effectively only if they refer to other levels. I follow the thoughts of French and Italian philosophers who stress the importance of identification. To identify oneself with symbolic positions—god, powerful politicians, cultural heroes, for example—is a question of gender; identification requires a certain amount of sameness to run smoothly. Women have, by virtue of their gender, a broken identification with positions marked as culturally powerful.¹³ “The subject’s identity is no more or less, than the accumulated history of her identifications.”¹⁴

Now the question is: What strategies are useful to change this order? How can we avoid reproducing the old enduring images of femininity as body-centered, emotional, and immanent on the one hand and avoid simply reproducing a male

¹¹ See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹² Nowadays, also in Austria, powerful women are more present in the mass-media than ever before: “new powerwomen, supermoms” and co. This representation increases as women’s unemployment becomes more urgent. This representation veils increasing poverty.

¹³ See Diotima, *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1987).

¹⁴ Diamond, 111.

state of being on the other? And how can we avoid continuing everything that is traditionally considered feminine in a perverted way by simply rejecting it?

Coming to Grips with Mimesis

Mimesis is the term Luce Irigaray proposes as a political as well as a discursive strategy:

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it.... To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to submit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the ‘perceptible,’ of ‘matter’—to ‘ideas,’ in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible.¹⁵

Mimesis means in this respect to take up given attributes, to repeat them, but in a slightly altered way. It does not mean miming in the sense of playing a given role without adding something new (this is a traditional female position). From a psychoanalytic point of view it is never clear that a girl/woman becomes a subject, like a boy/man does.¹⁶ Thus female subjectivity can be viewed only as mimesis of male subjectivity. So mimesis is *the* fundamental condition of female identity and not only a question of theater (as a site for miming) versus reality.

Onstage, everyone seems to know that the actresses are performing a role. Even in illusionary theater, even if the potential for identification is very high, there is a remnant of consciousness remaining: it is a play. That is why the cathartic effects of theater can take place: theater is, *per se*, a transcending of ordinary life.

Using mimesis as a representational strategy seems to indicate theatrical processes: an actress and a role, her identity as a “real person” distinct from a role that can be taken on and off like a dress. But it is not that simple. When we follow Luce Irigaray’s thoughts, we must conclude that mimesis is the everlasting status of fe-

¹⁵ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 76. On the different traditions and meanings of mimesis see: Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray,” in *The Essential Difference*, Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weeds, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 40–63.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Wright, ed., *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1992), 414.

male identity. Or, as quoted above, if women must take on a mask to sustain it, this masquerade is a mimetic gesture. Thus we have to differentiate between two kinds of mimesis: the “old,” traditional female position, and another, which can bring forth different articulations. This second option is a mimetic gesture *per se*: it is mimesis of the given attribute of women as mimetic beings.¹⁷

Staging Differences

Historically women have been denied power in the theatre apparatus, yet signs of female sexuality have been crucial to that apparatus’ functioning—a contradiction that can be read into the signifying processes of almost any play.¹⁸

Women still seldom hold powerful positions such as authors, directors, and managers in the theater apparatus. This exclusion is parallel to an inclusion: we all know plays with prominent female characters. Signs of female sexuality are to be found not only at the level of content but at a structural level as well. If “theatre itself may be understood as the drama’s unruly body,” as Elin Diamond states, it is linked to the feminine as “other.” Exactly this “otherness” transgresses linear narration and monolithic identification:

The historical subject playing an actor, playing a character, splits the gaze of the spectator, who as a reader of a complex sign system, cannot consume or reduce the object of her vision to a monolithic projection of the self... In reading a complex ever-changing text, spectators are pulled out of their fixity; they become part of—indeed they produce—the dialectical comparisons that the text enacts.¹⁹

Theater as an apparatus offers exactly this potential, and in a different way than film: Theater has a transitory character; every event is a bit different from the other. Therefore, theater *per se* is a site for subverting universalistic narrations. It is, though, not fruitful to define its subversive potential only at an abstract level. Every

¹⁷ The equation of femininity and mimesis is most obvious in descriptions of actresses and the equation of actresses with their roles. See Renate Möhrmann, *Die Schauspielerin, Zur Kulturgeschichte der weiblichen Bühnenkunst* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1989).

¹⁸ Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, iii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53, 55.

theater event takes place in a specific historical and political context. Let us dwell now on Elfriede Jelinek's recent piece, "Ein Sportstück," and its staging.

"Ein Sportstück" came forth at the time of the Olympic games in winter 1998 when Austria was over-excited by the new national hero, the skier Hermann Maier. This, along with growing right-wing radicalism in Austria and Germany, are hints at this specific historical situation. Concerning femininity and women's positions there is also a specific historical situation: Increasing poverty and unemployment among women pushes them back to the status as mother and housewife on one hand and increases the pressure to be better and better in the few remaining jobs on the other hand.

This is the sociopolitical level. The easy link between *femininity, reproduction, and motherhood* can be found at the symbolic/imaginary levels (in philosophy and in the arts) as well: Female productivity is traditionally reduced to nature, to giving birth to children. This fact is stressed by Jelinek in the play: "The mother does not produce what is begotten. The mother gives refuge to the guest, given as a gift by the father."²⁰ Female identity is, in the play, represented as a mother, an author, a young woman, and the sportswomen, who are hardly differentiated from the sportsmen. The two characters representing the author are crucial because, due to the profession, they transcend the equation of women and nature, of universal subjecthood, of women as supplement to men. Her identity is not closed but shifting: we have an unnamed author as a character and Elfi Elektra, who both represent Elfriede Jelinek as author. These positions thus structurally subvert the notion of closed, self-identical subjectivity.

O god, how shallow my jokes are today! They don't even wet my fingers when I'm turning my bad pages around for you. That doesn't matter. Read me anyway!²¹

These are some of Elfi Elektra's words at the beginning of "Ein Sportstück." This character is one of the author's representations. In these lines her whole being is identified with her text. In the staging we hear a female voice reciting the words rapidly and we see the Burg Theater on a huge film screen; we see the traffic around the theater. Together with the camera, the audience's gaze gets closer and closer to the theater. The female body, as referred to by the text of the play, is then onstage

²⁰ Jelinek, "Ein Sportstück," 24. These lines are an almost literal quote from Aeschylus. See *Die Eumeniden: Orestie III* (The Eumenidies: Orestes, pt. 3) (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jr., 1959), 658–661 [p. 28]

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13. Pages in German (Seiten) means both pages of a book and side of a character.

replaced by the monumental building: the Burg Theater. The theater and the author are linked and thus symbolically equated. Insofar as the Burg Theater stands for theater itself (especially in Austria), the author's body—not her text—stands for (theatrical) representation. This is one of the many examples to be found in the staging of the play which shows how signs of femininity are used on an imaginary and symbolic level.

The author appears once again in the text: at the very end. Onstage she is sometimes played by the male director. In one such instance her text is written in big letters on a carpet, and the director walks over the carpet frontstage while reciting it. After the curtain falls the ensemble does the same.²² In this way the female bodily presence is essentially crossed out twice; a split is made between the text—which is her productive force—and the representation of that force: Insofar as the text symbolizes the author herself, her body, she is the underlying ground of the staging.

In this society of the spectacle, it's women's bodies that are the spectacle upon which representation occurs; it's women's bodies that are represented as the negative term of sexual differentiation, spectacle-fetish or specular image... woman is constituted *as the ground of representation*, the looking-glass held up to man.²³

One way to interpret the staging of "Ein Sportstück" is to stress its affirmative logic. Jelinek's text is a mimetic practice: she repeats traditional practices, such as motherhood, but avoids the error of advancing new normative definitions of femininity. The author's monologue mimes certain positions, such as the equation of her bodily presence with her text, but she is a split subject. This split occurs on a structural level: it is not her individuality as a writer that is at stake, but female productivity. Jelinek's theater is not a realistic-illusionary one, but one in which there are always gaps between the characters onstage, their words, their appearance. It is a staging of language, a game with differences. Ulrike Ottinger, for example, staged Jelinek's play "Begierde & Fahrerlaubnis (eine Pornographie)" in the following way:²⁴ The text appeared onscreen, while a deaf-mute actress illustrated it with

²² Since it was conceptualized as a work in progress, the staging was not always the same on different evenings. The Burg Theater gave a long version of seven hours and a short version of five hours. In this analysis I refer to the long version on 15 March 1998.

²³ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 15.

²⁴ "Desire and A Driver's License (A Pornography)." See: Dagmar von Hoff, "Stücke für das Theater, Überlegungen zu Elfriede Jelineks Methode der Dekonstruktion," in Christa Gürtler,

sign-language. The non-realistic theater (of Jelinek) subverts linear narrations. The strategy of “Ein Sportstück” is to affirm through repetition and to cover up the production of gender difference. Thus, the play succeeds as a mimetic gesture that unmasks of the opposition in which women appear only as other.

In contrast to the text itself, the play’s staging produces a double-meaning. First, it undermines, and at the same time continues, the traditional idea of female productivity by pointing to the split/schism between female bodily presence and intellectual/artistic productivity. Second, it represents femininity through a male subject (the director) and by an institution (the Burg Theater). Both of these representations cross out the idea of female public agency, which is also a form of productivity.

The staging of the play and the media’s response to it are both representational sites. The difference between the text, the staging and the media-critics demonstrate how representation works, how gender is constituted.

Representational Sites

Public representations, such as the media, are, in effect, one constitutive field of meaning. Here symbolic values are linked with individuals, who may themselves represent many different ideals, but who are always gendered.

In theatrical events, the affirmation and/or redefinition of cultural values and hierarchies are at stake. But where does the theatrical event end, and where does the ‘reality’ start? Theater does not end when the curtain falls. Even if traditional theater is constituted by an aesthetic distance between actors and audience, analysis of theatrical events must take into consideration surrounding contexts, such as the media’s response.

In the print-media Elfriede Jelinek, who is the best known female dramatist in the German-speaking world, was very often represented as a vampire, vamp, or depressive lonely woman.²⁵ Concerning “Ein Sportstück,” the media-response toward her was not as openly hostile as usual. This time some print media identified her to the director in a heterosexist way: He was said to have courted her, to have come

ed., *Gegen den schönen Schein, Texte zu Elfriede Jelinek* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag neue Kritik, 1990), 112–120, 116.

²⁵ See Gürtler, *Gegen den schönen Schein*.

close to her text's body, or to have been the hot German guy with a cool Austrian woman.²⁶

Representations of this sort construct a male-female couple. Together they bring forth a "child," the production. A typical nuclear family is recalled to mind and thus re-institutionalized. This over-eagerness to interpret the creation of the play/staging in this way points exactly to that which Elfriede Jelinek mocks in the play. In this representational economy, female productivity cannot stand for her own, cannot be conceptualized without the addition of a male origin.

The border between art and so-called reality is a shifting one. Clearly a theatrical event is not the same as a "real" one. But what makes the difference? And what does this difference—if there is any—mean for methodological approaches? This question touches upon not only traditional disciplinary borders, but conceptions of the world as well. Let us embed it in its context and push the similarity between theatrical representations of femininity onstage and "reality" a little further. In this way, we are discussing the production of gender difference via representation on a structural level, and not on the level of art versus reality.

Elfriede Jelinek is said to present herself as "a work of art of herself."²⁷ The border between a work of art and, in this case, her female identity cannot be drawn clearly. Searching for the "real" Elfriede Jelinek is a useless venture, but one that is very often attempted. For example, once a photographer tied her up with chains and leather ropes, in a desperate attempt to fix the mystery that she stands for, to fix the essence of her being between vampire and depressive mother's daughter.²⁸ It is exactly these shifting borders between the "real" Elfriede Jelinek and the author's representation onstage that bring the traditional conception of femininity as mimetic being, and also the mediatory capacity of femininity, into visibility once again. Thus we can leave behind the question of female identity as essence and continue to de-construct and de-naturalize different representational sites.

Critical interventions in different representational sites need to be done, and on different levels: on the level of content and on the level of structures, for they are intertwined. Interventions in cultural institutions, in the public sphere, and—last

²⁶ Such references were made in the Austrian newspaper "Standard" and in the German weekly magazine "Spiegel."

²⁷ Juliane Vogel, "Oh Bildnis, oh Schutz vor ihm," in Gürtler, *Gegen den schönen Schein*, 142–157, 144.

²⁸ Ibid., 144.

but not least—in academic discourses. So we look back to the beginning and imagine the following scene at an ordinary university, academy, or conference.

The female theorist might find that her gender and/or her race, class, or sexual preference make the representations alien and even offensive. It seems that as listener/speaker she is far from ideal. Determined to draw larger conclusions from this experience, the next day she starts to develop a theory of feminist cultural criticism.