

Situating the director (in a theater based on the art of the actor)

Abstract:

The following text attempts to situate directorial practices in our present day. Focussing mostly on the actor-director relation during rehearsals, it traces the impact of the so called *social turn in the arts* (as conceptualized by Claire Bishop and others) on the internal processes of theater making. In order to do so it offers a cultural historical analysis of the author's own professional background: transitioning from a theater of monopolized authorship on the director's end to a theater of democratization and actorly participation. The basic ambition of the text is to offer a perspective on how the present day actor-director relation is modelled after the ethical premises of relational aesthetics (respect for the other, recognition of difference etc.) and how these come into play with the legacy of the 20th century's avantgardes' aesthetical values (shock, excessive immersion etc.). To achieve its aim it stages a dialectical conflict between the 20th and the 21st century's conception of transgression as liberatory respectively intrusive. Transposing bell hook's notion of a "teaching community" from the classroom to the rehearsal space, the text finds a surprising synthesis/exit road through the 90's; allowing for a further discussion of anachronistic models of collaboration applicable today.

Acknowledgment:

The discourse brought forward in this essay springs from a continuous and wonderfully open dialogue with my peers at the Research Center of Stockholm University of the Arts – an environment we fostered together since 2019, in which I could listen and be listened to. The most specific impulses for conceptualizing "the director" stem from the research of/and conversations with PhD-candidate Linn Hilda Lamberg, who is also my colleague at the Department of Performing Arts (StDH).

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prelude

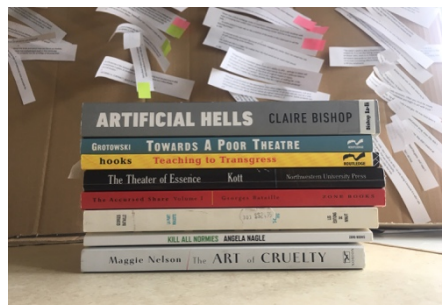
In spring 2020 I took a “reading course” as part of my PhD-studies. The formal title of the so-called “other assessed component (7,5 study points)” sounded like this: *Ethics and Aesthetics of Excess, Waste and Abundance in the Performing Arts*.

The timing for it turned out to be quite perfect in so far as when Sweden’s higher education turned to “distance learning” given an all-encompassing pandemic, I found myself in quarantine with a pile of books, that I was commissioned to read.

In the text below I work (I play around) with quotes extracted from that pile; partly to create generative montages, partly to back up a theoretical argument. Back in spring, I transcribed most of the quotes manually and we thus entertain a dear relation. Before writing, I arranged them in a certain order, that forms the backbone of the text unfolded here.

The mentioned pile consists of the following works, stacked in the order of the importance they gained for what you’re about to read:

Claire Bishop
Jerzy Grotowski
bell hooks
Jan Kott
Georges Bataille
Angela Nagle
Maggie Nelson



Artificial Hells
Towards a Poor Theatre
Teaching to Transgress
The Theater of Essence
The Accursed Share
Kill All Normies
The Art of Cruelty

For clarification it is thus important to know, that, in trying to situate contemporary directorial practices, I am drawing from an input that originally was to inform the research question of the reading course: how do the avantgarde values of excess, waste and abundance resonate in a 21st century paradigm of eco-sufficiency?

Nevertheless I also hope to speak more broadly to the question of what a contemporary director’s position could be after the social turn in the arts (a paradigm shift, I’ll come to talk about in more detail); in order to do so, I’m offering a sort of storytelling around the question of how relational aesthetics have affected the encounter between actor and director within forms of theater that were formerly driven by the concept of the *auteur*.

To make my point, I’m walking through the past decades, that is to say: through the ones I myself can perceive with a minimum level of awareness regarding their cultural climate. It is thus a linear mode of storytelling I’m indulging in – with the hope of eventually rendering my own directorial practice intelligible as a symptom of the present moment¹.

¹ Before we start, I would like to express my gratitude to both my supervisors - Juliette Mapp and Jon Refsdal Moe - for their guidance and support in this; more specifically, Jon for designing the content of the reading course with me and engaging in its reflection. Juliette for offering the opportunity to re-encounter Jerzy Grotowski from a western perspective as well as the weekly meetings in instable times.

A THEATER BASED ON THE ART OF THE ACTOR

Let me begin, by trying to approximate the theater I've been putting most of my directorial energies into so far and that I'm hoping to enrich through my research.

I found this definition of a "theatre based on the art of the actor" in an interview Grotowski gave in the early 60's². And I liked it a lot for its various implications and possible anachronism: theater as something involving actors, acting as an art in itself / a distinct practice / distinguishable from the individual actor's identity, the actor's presence as the possible site of the *mise-en-scène* etc.

Interestingly enough, throughout most of my professional life, I had been successfully avoiding direct contact with the „guru from Poland“ – as Jan Kott poignantly describes his compatriot (Kott 1984: 144). My keeping-Grotowski-at-a-distance sprung from meeting students of my own (back then: *young*) age, who had attended schools founded by his disciples. My friends' accounts of the totality by which they were *en-rolled* in the various programs, of the full grip the teachers exercised over their physical and psychic existence were an early encounter with the two-folded face of director-actor/teacher-student transgression, of its liberatory and manipulative effects, that we will come to discuss here.³ However, going back to the source of Grotowski's own writing this spring, I found a somewhat friendly rigour, that I had little problem identifying with. Let's hear out the full quote regarding a "theatre based on the art of the actor", where he – in slightly Stalinist fashion – asks and answers his own questions in order to conclude with a definition:

Can the theatre exist without costumes and sets? Yes, it can.

Can it exist without music to accompany the plot? Yes.

Can it exist without lighting effects? Of course.

And without a text? Yes; the history of theatre confirms this. [...]

But can the theatre exist without actors? I know of no example of this. One could mention the puppet-show. Even here, however, an actor is to be found behind the scenes, although of another kind.

Can the theatre exist without an audience? At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance.

So we are left with the actor and the spectator. We can thus define the theatre as "what takes place between spectator and actor". All the other things are supplementary.⁴ (Grotowski 2002: 32)

Coming from here, I can move on to adjusting the focus of my research leading up to this seminar. In the following, I will - as good as I can - avoid speaking of the *mise-en-scène* and its

² *The Theatre's New Testament*; interview with Eugenio Barba, 1964 (Grotowski 2002: 27-53)

³ To quote Kott again on this: "Grotowski brought a Method and metaphysics with him to the West. His Method is precise and verifiable in practice; his metaphysics is obscure and ambiguous." (ibid: 142)

⁴ Note that this definition would also allow for the inclusion of forms of Live-online-theater, as they are being increasingly tried out in the current crisis. To clarify that this is not the intention, the quote needs in fact to be backed up by another one: "There is only one element of which the film and television cannot rob the theatre: the closeness of the living organism. [...] This implies the necessity for a chamber theatre." (Grotowski 2002: 42) – chamber theater, or what within the theater institutions is often called "the small stage" or "studio" is also the place where my own practice has been most fruitful. That is to say an architecture that, because of its small format, can balance out the „visual“ aspects of theater with the „sensory“ the „visceral“, the „blind“ ones.

politics. That is to create the least possible distraction from the very arena in which the ethical dilemmas of actor-director-encounters have surfaced throughout the last years: the rehearsal space and its extensions. In alignment with that focus, I'm proposing to look at "what takes place between director and actor", in the process of making theater on the basis-of or post drama.

To be clear about why I bracket the aspects of the final staging, which could easily be looked at as the essence of the director's work: One can for sure also get to speak about directorial signatures by interrelating "what takes place between actor and spectator" to "what *took* place between actor and director" – and how rehearsals and show do or do not mirror each other in each specific case. For now, I would like to save this to a later seminar, fully dedicated to exploring the dialectics of that correlation.

Let me just anticipate this much, as we will come back to it when looking at the influence of relational aesthetics on contemporary directing practices: The moment I first felt the urgency for this research was when becoming aware of how process and product had started to technically collapse into each other; in the sense that ethical standards applied to the actor-director-relation were symmetrically reproduced in how the *mise-en-scène* operated in the actor-spectator-relation⁵.

NOT ... BUT

Whilst avoiding to analyze the director's work through a reading of others', or possibly my own directorial signature/artistic expression, I still feel the necessity to briefly sketch the tradition or theatrical self-understanding that I was educated into. For you to understand the dilemmas I'm grappling with, it feels important to at least lay out what could be called my AESTHETICAL BIAS - as far as I could possibly bring it to my own awareness.

(In that context I liked this quote from Bataille: "thus the object of my research cannot be distinguished FROM THE SUBJECT AT ITS BOILING POINT" (Bataille 1991: 10; my emphasis))

Trying to bring my background to the mind's foreground, I can identify 3 premises that are specific to the theater I was naturalized into and situate the director within. ("Regie-Theater" is the term used in the german-speaking countries for this form of stage art where authorship is more or less fully monopolized by the director's position; and he or she thus figures as

⁵ This symmetry only came to my awareness through accompanying processes of rehearsals that one could conceptualize as "contractual", in the sense that a lot of effort is put into avoiding surprises or non-agreed situations among director-actor as well as among the actor colleagues. (The contract is understood here as a (western) way to get a hold of a possible future, to assign resources in a rational way and prevent chaos, shortly put, to become fully sustainable.) These "safe" work environments often led to artistic results that were equally "contractual" on the level of the spectator-audience-encounter; holding close to no possibility of an "event", i.e. the emergence of a situation based on the singularity of the specific performance. However, ethics (of rehearsals) translating into aesthetics (of the performance) has always been a factor in our field and can be traced in "transgressive" forms as well. The *terreur* experienced as an audience in many shows of the "director's theater", possibly received as aesthetic pleasure, mostly mirrors the level of uncertainty and unaccountable leadership embodied by the director during rehearsals. - In either case, a dialectical relation between product and production is painfully missed.

auteur. Sometimes I hear the term being used in Scandinavian languages as a sort of technical term, but I'm always in doubt how much explaining has to be done, given our different cultural backgrounds. Despite the fact, that the Anglosaxon countries don't have a vital tradition in it, I will for the sake of clarity from now on only refer to it as "director's theater".)

I would describe the 3 premises of it as:

- x. Dramatic Text as Pre-text / Orientation by what's "truly alive"⁶
- y. Compulsion to repeat trauma (psychoanalytic teleology)
- z. Cultural self-embedding within an Economy of Expenditure (Bataille's exudation)⁷

Instead of unpacking each of these premises in detail, let me try to give a more ambiguous voice to the aesthetic legacy of the "director's theater", in form of an explicit manifesto. Of course, one such text does not exist and can only be retroactively constructed (as some sort of decalogue) through a montage of several quotesⁱ; I've tried for one here, based on my material, that – with a light touch of re-writing – might pinpoint the phenomenon for us. It will sound obscure to you in the first place (at least I hope it will), given our global awareness of scarcity and our current position in the middle of what could be called the "sustainability turn in the arts".

(I liked this quote in this context: "I'm bad milk. Drink it." - Tyler G. Okonma, 2009)

1

The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy - wealth - without any return.

2

On the surface of the globe, for LIVING MATTER IN GENERAL, energy is *thus* always in excess; the question is always posed in **extravagance effervescence ebullition exudation super-abundance squander & prodigality**

3

Theater is the place to deal with problems that follow from the existence of these surpluses.

4

It is part of a "general economy" in which the "expenditure" (the "consumption") of wealth, rather than production is the primary object."

⁶ Here is a symptomatic account by Grotowski: „I remember the situation when the Teatr Laboratorium began to work on *Samuel Zborowski* of Slowacki, and, without realizing it, we changed direction during rehearsals. After a few months, in fact, some elements appeared - they were ALIVE AND INTERESTING, but they didn't have anything to do with the text of *Samuel Zborowski*. AS DIRECTOR, I WAS ON THE SIDE OF THAT WHICH WAS TRULY ALIVE. I didn't look for a way to insert it into the structure of the projected performance; instead I observed what would happen if we developed it.“ (Grotowski 1993: 119; my emphasis)

⁷ There are certainly more: the choice of these three premises can be argued as the attempt to highlight the ones that feel most outdated today. Such a choice, I hope, will be most productive when trying to situate the director in a theater of the future, understanding our own position in this time as a moment of historical watershed.

5

We can express the hope of avoiding a war that already threatens. ~~But in order to do so we must~~ by diverting the surplus production; either into the rational extension of a difficult industrial growth, or into unproductive works ~~that will dissipate an energy that cannot be accumulated in any case.~~

6

Within this economy, destruction is the best means of negating a utilitarian relation between man and the animal or plant.

7

Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. The victim of the sacrifice – *the actor in the theater* - cannot be consumed in the same way as a motor uses fuel.

8

The aim *is* to produce a space of participation as one of total destruction, in which expressions of hostility *are* available to all classes as a brutal form of entertainment. *Theater* allows people to participate in, and enjoy, the spectacle of their own destruction.

9

The impossible theater begins when the aesthetics of a rehearsal become the principle and essence of the theater. During rehearsals, the director is second after God. And if God does not exist, he *or she* is God himself. The director's domination of the author and his text originates in the very aesthetics of a rehearsal.

10

Our enjoyment stems from art's ability to offer - ~~perhaps~~ to viewer and creator alike - retroactive mastery of traumatic experiences that one's defenses failed to deflect adequately ~~from the organism~~ at the time of original impact or injury.

The "compulsion to repeat the trauma" - be it in art, nightmare, or waking life – is our ~~the organism's~~ attempt to master the surplus anxiety that the original incursion produced.

BIGGER PICTURE – (melancholic interlude)

My 38th birthday last year marked the day from when on I will always have spent more lifetime in the 21st century than I have in the 20th.

Biographically speaking, I'm at that strange midpoint in my life, where I have come to the full, and partly painful realization, that there is an entirely different generation emerging after me. They say historical trauma prevails for three generations. From the perspective of my ancestry, I would thus be the last offspring of the second world war – an identity that worked

as a strong justification for all sorts of transgressive aesthetics, for me as well as the generations before⁸.

I thus feel strongly indebted to the traditions mentioned above, but I can also see – or rather sense – where they have come to a dead end. Namely Bataille's "general economy" reads like one long half-conscious aesthetical program to me, more worthwhile a re-visit than ever, but it is interesting – as I was in the middle of reading "The Accursed Share", going through the fascinating accounts of human sacrifices in ancient Aztec rituals (the worship of the victims leading up to their slaughter), the corona pandemic we're currently struggling with started showing its daily and direct effects. And with the general sense of insecurity and a close family member in intensive care, the words in the book all of a sudden turned shallow, driven by some unaffordable notion of super-humanity. (Back then I took a break reading and I haven't made it since to pick up the thread again.⁹)

From the younger generations – and as a global collective – we have learned a great deal in recent years about our own as well as the vulnerability of others. We are not so sure anymore, if re-traumatization in the realm of the aesthetical is the way to deal with / or heal historical or personal trauma. Or at least, we acknowledge that different sets of privileges make for different levels of playfulness/(dis-)engagement when doing so.

Furthermore, transgressions in our own work environments, thoroughly exposed by the #metoo-movement, have made us doubt the value of transgressions in the arts. And if we are to believe Angela Nagle¹⁰, it is nothing but a historical coincidence anyhow that cutting-edge aesthetics – Grotowski's "techniques of shock" (Kott 1984: 144) – have become associated with the socialist left. As Maggie Nelson put it in regard to a former avantgarde sensibility gone mainstream: "Cruelty bears an intimate relationship to stupidity as well as to intelligence, and I am not interested in stupid cruelty, of which the world is overfull." (Nelson 2011: 10)

Nevertheless, I personally can't help a sense of loss; a feeling of the 20th century ending before it was actually achieved. The German theorist Diedrich Diedrichsen addresses this „disappointment“ of a "generation, that has been working since the 1960's [...] with shocks and transgressions, with experiments of seduction and overwhelming immersion [...]" (Diedrichsen 2016: 138; my translation). In his analysis, the consequences of the respective

⁸ Here, the Vienna Actionists, are a great example taken up by Maggie Nelson: "Despite the culture's professed fatigue with transgressive body art, these Actionist films have not lost much of their visceral punch - I've yet to meet anyone who doesn't find them, at least upon first viewing, provoking, exciting, repulsive, or some combination thereof." (Nelson 2011: 21)

⁹ Here's what Bataille would have to say about this: „Anguish arises when the anxious individual is not himself stretched tight by the feeling of superabundance. This is precisely what evinces the isolated, individual character of anguish. There can be anguish only from a personal, PARTICULAR point of view that is radically opposed to the GENERAL point of view based on the exuberance of matter as a whole. Anguish is meaningless for someone who overflows with life, and for life as a whole, which is an overflowing by its very nature." (Bataille 1991: 38)

¹⁰ „The ease with which this broader alt-right and alt-light milieu can use transgressive styles today shows how superficial and historically accidental it was that it ended up being in any way associated with the socialist left.“ (Nagle 2017: 29)

art forms have not hit where they intended; if they had political effects, it wasn't the ones wished for.

The way we see the director's role has always been based on our conception of the subject. On the battleground of posthumanist theories, the director nowadays stands as an antique (baroque?) allegory of intentionality. The world has slipped out of her right hand whilst she is upholding a sword of agency in the left.

Diedrich Diedrichsen again:

But in order for the disappointment to turn into a complete experience, it would have had to be worked through. Art [...] does not succeed, where the subject aims and intends. That doesn't mean that it never succeeds or could do without the subject. (Diedrichsen 2017: 138; my translation)

INTELLIGENT CRUELTY

As a way to work through this disappointment – and alongside Maggie Nelson's reckoning – we might want to ask: What then, would be "intelligent cruelty" or in Artaud's sense "pure cruelty", "cruelty without laceration" – if I understand the concept right: "cruelty without sadism"?

Let's narrow our perspective down again and have a closer look at the actor-director-set-up in a (director's) theater based on the art of the actor¹¹. I'll start with another quote by Grotowski:

"The actor's work is also a thankless one because of the INCESSANT SUPERVISION it is subject to. It is not like being creative in an office, seated at a table, but under the eye of the *director* who, even in A THEATRE BASED ON THE ART OF THE ACTOR, must make persistent demands on him to a much greater extent than in the normal theatre, urging him on to ever increasing efforts that are painful to him." (Grotowski 1992: 44; my emphasis)

In the beginning, I mentioned the experiences of my friends and colleagues who went through this premise of "learning through transgression" in the various franchises of the polish Teatr Laboratorium. The "incessant supervision" of the director or teacher can give us a first idea of the role the actor is to assume in this 20th century tradition: In a sort of negative agency, s/he figures as a subject constantly pushed out of her zones of comfort. A professional in transgressed boundaries.

Transgressions (in the actor-director relation) seem to be made from this ambiguous double bind of liberation and intrusion, expansion and oppression. In recent years the negative connotations of the term clearly prevail: in the art field, as already mentioned, we've gained critical awareness of the kind of transgressions that are undoubtedly beyond the realm of the aesthetical. The many accounts of abuse of power under the pretext of some higher artistic

¹¹ And again, let's save the analysis of possible transgressions between actor and spectator, triggered by the director's way of dealing with limits during rehearsals, for a later moment of this research project.

goal have left us in a state of alarm; we started doubting the idea of such a goal as such as well as most notions of *total* involvement, as they are for instance invoked in Grotowski's actor training.

Still, when we try to reduce those "non-aesthetical" transgressions to mere issues of work environment, we can't seem to find ways of effectively mirroring the logics of our field. We're left with the question if the heterotopic space of a rehearsal studio really can be fully commensurated to the social mechanisms of, let's say, a public institution? Maybe that is, because our practices are already transgressive in themselves: With our bodies and psyches forming the material of our collaboration, it can be hard to draw the exact line between our various entanglements; where we overstep and where we're just doing our work. Or again, given our art form's emergence from 20th century psychoanalytic logics: Where we're doing our directorial work *by overstepping*¹².

In contrast to our contemporary *wokeness* regarding these questions, I was happy to find a text providing a full-on positive notion of transgression as liberation. It dates back to the 1990's and is thus still very much part of the 20th-century-paradigm described earlier, whilst already stretching out into the discursive future that we are inhabiting today.

bell hooks' suggestions for approaching student-teacher-relations are avant-garde through and through: the interaction is conceived as total/holistic in the sense that it demands a spiritual and bodily self-actualization on both ends. It is transgressive in the sense, that to learn is to be „pushed over a cliff“, to seek out teachers „who would challenge me beyond what I might select for myself“ (hooks 1994: 207). Pain in the classroom is acknowledged as productive and carefully distinguished from harm. The effects of learning are viewed on a long-term basis, often hitting the student only with retardation, rendering instant course evaluation meaningless¹³.

It is without big effort that we can transpose these values found in „Teaching to Transgress“ from the classroom to the rehearsal space of a theater based on the art of the actor; and it

¹² I believe one of the tasks of the artistic researcher in the realm of the performing arts is to provide some language for these distinctions. How to de-sexualize the discourse around actor-director relations again, whilst still allowing for the presence of the erotic to be part of the analysis? I find myself on this slippery slope all the time: from my speaker's location, can I even formulate my research question "What is consent in an actor-director-relation?" without engaging in a discussion about what I believe "sexual consent" to be? Could I deflect all further questions to the realm of jurisdiction by saying: „I believe the question about how *sexual consent* works is handled adequately by the Swedish law, but that is in no way how consent works between an actress and a director.“?

In this regard, it is fruitful to also consider the phenomenon of a possible *juridification* of the rehearsal space, as described by sociologist Wolfgang Engler. (Engler 2016: 63)

¹³ See the following quote in relation to safe spaces practices that allow for anyone present to stop the interaction at any time a subjectively experienced limit is crossed: "In the classes I teach, students are often presented with new paradigms and are being asked to shift their ways of thinking to consider new perspectives. In the past I have often felt that this type of learning process is very hard; it's painful and troubling. It may be six months or a year, even two years later, that they realize the importance of what they have learned." (ibid: 153)

might even be extra fruitful in a context like ours, where we're discussing our autonomous artistic practices as well as their implementation in teaching.¹⁴

If we accept that transposition of classroom and rehearsal space for now, the anachronism in bell hooks' conception of the actor-director relation gets to unfold in an exciting way. Because, whilst resonating strongly with present notions of ours (respect for the other, recognition of difference), in many ways her and Grotowski's project is still the same: the emancipation/empowerment of the director's counterpart through pedagogical transgression¹⁵. And to the same degree as their strategies can be distinguished from one another, both their means differ from what we might consider ethically sustainable today.

Let me offer another montage of quotes to you as to make this claim fleshier (this time without any rewriting, yet in form of another decalogue):

Standards must always be high. Excellence must be valued, but standards cannot be absolute and fixed.

It's necessary to remind students and colleagues that pain and painful situations don't necessarily translate into harm. We make that fundamental mistake all the time. Not all pain is harm, and not all pleasure is good.

The fact that the work is tiring is absolutely necessary. Often you must be totally exhausted in order to break down the mind's resistance and begin to act with truth.

Students do not always enjoy studying with me. Often they find my courses challenge them in ways that are deeply unsettling. This was particularly disturbing to me at the beginning of my teaching career, because I wanted to be liked and admired.

When we find the courage to do things that are impossible, we make the discovery, that our body does not block us. We do the impossible and the division within us between conception and the body's ability disappears.

As a teacher working to develop liberatory pedagogy I am discouraged when I encounter students who believe if there's a different practice they can be less committed, less disciplined.

¹⁴ On a side note, I would also add, that in a lot of ways directing practices as such can be read as efforts to emancipate the rehearsal studio from the dispositive of the classroom. That is especially true for contexts, where theater is a middle-class affair and both directors and actors often stem from teacher's families (me included), thus prone to reproduce bourgeois patterns of pedagogy, when left to each other in artistic collaborations. In this sense bell hooks project of "building teaching communities" can also be understood as creating alternative directorial practices.

¹⁵ "Since our theatre consists only of actors and audience, we make special demands to both parties. Even though we cannot educate the audience - not systematically at least - we *can* educate the actor." (Grotowski 1992: 33) A quote to back up the implication that Grotowski is always thinking the director as a director-teacher, which allows for the parallelization with hooks' pedagogical reflections that I'm making here.

[...]determination, is a training for how to go beyond our limits. These are not the limits of our nature, but those of our discomfort. These are the limits we impose upon ourselves that block the creative process, because creativity is never comfortable.

We have to learn how to appreciate difficulty, too, as a stage of intellectual development. Or accept that that cozy, good feeling may at times block the possibility of giving students space to feel that there is integrity to be found in grappling with difficult material.

Given that critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully, to some extent it must rely on the presence of the erotic in the classroom to aid the learning process.

None of the exercises in the various fields of the actor's training must be exercises in skill. They should develop a system of allusions which lead to the elusive and indescribable process of self-donation.

As you could see, this time I haven't marked when it is bell hooks and when it is Jerzy Grotowski speakingⁱⁱ. I am aware that is a bit of a diabolic thing to do and I hope you were able to let go into my short manipulation (as the *auteur* of this text).

My subconscious enjoyment, of course, lies in relieving the white, Polish male from his speaker's location for a second.^{16 17} But the point I wanted to make is beyond identity political demarcations. Or rather, it's a point from a time when these demarcations were still in discussion, moving and dynamic.

Here are two more quotes, this time marked:

Understanding and appreciating our different locations has been a necessary framework for the building of professional and political solidarity between us, as well as for creating a space of emotional trust where intimacy and regard for one another can be nourished.
(hooks 1994: 132)

¹⁶ For a semantic tryout, transpose the following quote from class room to rehearsal space and into a director-actor-relation and let it be said by Lars von Trier or any other *transgressive director* of our day: „Engaged pedagogy not only compels me to be constantly creative in the classroom, it also sanctions involvement with students beyond that setting." (hooks 1994: 205)

¹⁷ bell hooks about that: "In recent years, many white male scholars have become critically engaged with my writing. It troubles me that this engagement has been viewed suspiciously or seen merely as an act of appropriation meant to enhance opportunistic agendas. If we really want to create a cultural climate where biases can be challenged and changed, all border crossings must be seen as valid and legitimate. This does not mean that they are not subjected to critique or critical interrogation, or that there will not be many occasions when the crossing of the powerful into the terrains of the powerless will not perpetuate existing structures." (ibid: 131)

This element of warm openness [of the director towards the actor] is technically tangible. It alone, if reciprocal, can enable the actor to undertake the most extreme efforts without any fear of being laughed at or humiliated. (Grotowski: 1992: 47)

Emotional trust, intimacy, regard for one another, warm openness – these are the values that serve as a backdrop to the transgressions intrinsic to the director's theater based on the art of the actor. In 1994, they are not yet ends in themselves – as the coming shift of paradigm will suggest – but stand in a dialectical tension to authoritarian models of teaching and directing. A tension allowing for something that could be conceptualized within the actor-director relation as *cruelty without sadism*.

("I'm not trying to say that we are all equal here. I'm trying to say that we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context." (hooks 1994: 153))

WAS JERZY A NICE GUY ? – intermezzo

Every research, I guess, has a pop-cultural undercurrent. A parallel track that runs alongside and inspires. During the reading course I accomplished in spring, for me this was a Netflix-Documentary-series about Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls, entitled "The last dance"¹⁸. It covers the years leading up to the final championship, and is thus a sentimental journey into the youth of a globalized generation¹⁹ at the very volatile midpoint I tried to describe above.

The main material of the documentary is a never-released footage from the 97-98 season, when a camera team was granted access to the "backstage" of the Bulls (i.e. the locker rooms, the team jet and the actual training). A selection of those all in all 500 hours of *process* (!) is constellated with interviews of the former NBA-protagonists in their present lives; thereby providing a constant dialogue between the era in which bell hooks asserts her conceptions of the ethics of the class room (the 90's) and our cultural climate today²⁰.

In the last 5 minutes of Episode 7 – the ones that confirmed my intuition to include the series as relevant material²¹ – this conversation across time comes to a "dramatic" escalation, with

¹⁸ I might not have been the only one to indulge in this consumerist pleasure. The series ranking as No.1 on the various Netflix Top Ten-lists only proves the nerve it hit in our *Zeitgeist*.

¹⁹ For many of us – east- and west-europeans – getting up for the playoffs in the middle of the night was a first bodily realization of such a thing as the U.S.A.; a monastic discipline of lifting the iron curtain, that had just fallen.

²⁰ The series itself refines a genre of storytelling that could be explored further as the "melodrama of masculinity", in which the morally superior protagonist (Michael Jordan) is put into a constant play of proximity and distance with both his nemesis (Isiah Thomas, Charles Barkley, Karl Malone etc.) and his loyal or treacherous companions (foremost Scottie Pippen in the role of the second best/Salieri-character, but also Steve Kerr, Horace Grant, Dennis Rodman etc.). The basic drama thus unfolds in form of the conflict between the art genius and a mediocre society and is resolved through the uplifting/cultivation of the latter into a community of winners. Michael Jordan: "I wanted to win. But I wanted them to win and be a part of that as well." This narrative lays the basis for a lot of male fantasies and enactments of the director-ensemble relation.

²¹ All following quotes are taken from those 5 minutes.

a close-to-tears Michael Jordan defending his back-then method for collaboration against how it might be viewed today.

When people see this, they gonna say, "He wasn't really a nice guy. He may have been a tyrant."

Obviously, in the eye of the present viewer, the dilemma of a clear standard in terms of an outcome to reach (winning the championship) and the means of getting there (the process / the training) comes to a painful actualization. (*Well that's you*, Jordan says, *because you never won anything*.) And we're again confronted with transgressions within the collaborative process and the various justifications of a leader:

Winning has a price. And Leadership has a price. So, I pulled people along, when they didn't want to be pulled. I challenged people when they didn't want to be challenged.

And I earned that right, because my teammates that came after me, they didn't endure all the things that I endured.

*Once you join the team, you live at a certain standard that I played the game - and I wasn't going to take any less.
Now, if that means I had to go in and get in your ass a little bit? Then I did that.*

You ask all my teammates. "The one thing about Michael Jordan was, he never asked me to do something that he didn't fucking do."

In the dramaturgical sequence of the series, this dramatic melt down of the hero – MJ calls for a break of the interview, as he rips off the sound equipment wired to his body²² - is triggered by the ultimately banal question: "Was he a nice guy?" and the answers offered by former teammates.

A question that is by now being raised in regards to almost every former (male) "hero" of the director's theater and displays how strong of an impact the ethical standards of a process come to have on our evaluation of the aesthetical outcome. (To stay within the sports-metaphors of winning: *Akropolis* was "won" based on an until then unseen excellency of acting, but what about "the long-echoing arm of Grotowski's sexism"²³)?

As Michael Jordan had the exclusive rights to the all-access footage, the documentary could only be made with his agreement. And with his production company financially involved (even though not in the credits) it's very likely he had a final say in how the story was going to be

²² "Look, I don't have to do this. I'm only doing it because it is who I am. That's how I played the game. That was my mentality. If you don't want to play that way. Don't play that way."

²³ See Rebecca Schneider discussion of Elizabeth LeCompte's theatrical appropriation of Grotowski's patriarchal lineage (Schneider 2011: 112),.

spun in terms of the present day interviews as well²⁴. After years of refusal, we might get to wonder: why did Jordan finally agree for the “process-documentation” to be used? (And how come the “authentic moment” of a vulnerable sportsman made it in to the final product?)

The PR narrative that has been suggested to answer this question is that MJ would have been triggered by the statement of a contemporary NBA-player claiming to have turned into the best player of all times by now. That aligns well with the way the Jordan-character is constructed within the series as singularly competitive and could very well have caused the change of mind. But beyond the melodrama of male competition persisting across time, I believe the actual reason for eventually releasing the material to lie much deeper: Michael Jordan, the 20th century legend, is grappling with the social turn in the arts and its reverberations.

RELATING RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

In the following, final part of this text I’ll try to get a hold of the effects the social turn in the arts, as it manifested in relational aesthetics, has had on the situatedness of the director today. In doing so, I rely strongly on Claire Bishop’s analysis of this most recent paradigm shift and her generous counter-discourse. All the following quotes are from her “Artificial Hells”.

It may strike you as surprising to use resources from a study dedicated to participatory art forms, when speaking of a theater based on the art of the actor. The director’s theater - as we’ve seen it emerge and fade - has used audiences mostly as an indirect space of resonance²⁵ and at times even preferred to totally withdraw into the classical showcase-set up. Nevertheless, I have witnessed it in my own directorial practice, as well as of other theater makers of my generation, how influential the early 21st century participatory strategies have been to our field; crossing over both from the fine as well as the independent performing arts.

If we bracket the *mise-en-scène* one last time, this time we can do so, not only as to direct our full attention to the process of rehearsals, but also because this very move supports a logic intrinsic to relational aesthetics and most types of post studio practices nowadays:

Today’s participatory art is often at pains to emphasize process over a definitive image, concept or object. As a result, it is an art dependent on first-hand experience, and preferably over long duration (days, month and even years). (Bishop 2012: 6)

This emphasis on process over product – or, perhaps more accurately, on process as product – is justified on the straightforward basis of inverting capitalism’s predilection for the contrary. (ibid: 19)

²⁴ Despite the praise received, the filmmaker Jason Hehir has been strongly criticized for agreeing to such a biased form of journalism. See Boren, Cindy “Ken Burns says Michael Jordan’s ‘The Last Dance’ isn’t good journalism or good history” The Washington Post <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/04/30/ken-burns-says-michael-jordans-last-dance-isnt-good-journalism-or-good-history/> (accessed 21.8.2020)

²⁵ The original staging of “Offending the Audience” (author: Peter Handke; director: Claus Peymann, 1966) is a great example of the director’s theater’s use of the audience as a sort of bouncing ball, that drives the performance, but ultimately can’t affect it.

Instead of supplying the market with commodities, participatory art is perceived to channel art's symbolic capital towards constructive social change. (ibid: 12)

[T]he artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of SITUATIONS. (ibid:2, my emphasis)

The argument for the mentioned strategy is striking: if capitalism needs products to exist, we will find ways to not give any to it²⁶. The art piece after the social turn is thus never finished, never crystalized to a sellable form; in the performing arts – instead of postponing premieres, as was the routine at the Artist's Theater in Moscow, when the makers felt the piece was not yet achieved – we tend to invite our audiences into works that we consider in-progress²⁷ or - if they are in fact finished - propose a temporal/spatial dimension, that can't possibly be perceived as a whole by an individual viewer²⁸.

So far for the, by now, well known analysis. My project here is to understand what this formula – “process as product” – entails for the actor-director relation in theater forms that are *not* per se participatory. How does this “processification” shift our professional identity from producers of aesthetics to producers of ethics? Let me first seek refuge in an anecdote to illustrate my best guess.

In 2005 I attended a Q&A with Alain Platel, the Belgian choreographer and director. I had come to see his show WOLF for the 3rd or maybe 4th time, intrigued by the freedom the performers (dogs and dancers) displayed on stage. Back then I was a young student at the directing department of a somewhat still Soviet-oriented theater academy, and I assembled all my courage as I asked the question that I had burning for so long. My question was: “How do you do that?” “How do you direct? What do you do during rehearsals to create these amazing evenings?” Platel's answer, I believe, changed the course of my directing methods radically henceforth and – looking back – is both genuine and symptomatic for the social turn *within* the actor-director relation. Alain Platel's answer at the wake of the millennium was: “Oh, I don't do much. In rehearsals I mostly make coffee and make sure everybody is doing fine.”

²⁶ In german „capitalism“ is gendered male, so I'm tempted to write: „to him“.

²⁷ Jan Kott: "The directors of the impossible theater move the spectacle from the stage into the rehearsal hall. The sum and substance of a rehearsal is trying out: it is a work unfinished, like successive drafts of a painting. Identifying the theater with a rehearsal leads to a public presentation of a rehearsal as a spectacle." (Kott 1984: 155)

²⁸ Speaking of capitalism, there is a complicated double bind to be found in this strategy: on the one hand the art piece evades the status of a concise product and thereby the market logics; on the other it individualizes the audience experience to a point where it's hard to even have a conversation about it, let alone attempt for a value judgments. The liberal self-assurance „You saw your piece and I saw mine, and that's a good thing“ is a trope that by now has exhausted itself, revealing just one of the many levels of isolation in the neoliberal condition. *Makes me long for Sergej Eisenstein's directorial ambition of producing the one tear at the exact same time in an audience of many.* Memes aside, I believe, the very processes of filmmaking got more interesting again in times of this regime of individualized truth / post truth. Under the premise of realism, the conversation of MANY about the simple question „what is likely?“ turns into a rather complex political operation.

Conceptualizing such a thing as a “social turn in the arts” we get to trace the hardly noticeable, but steady replacement of aesthetical categories (as a criteria of quality judgement in the arts) by ethical ones. Understanding the reverberations of this within the actor-director-relation gets clearer when we look at – for instance – the presentist reading of the famous Godard-quote: *The problem is not to make political films, but to make films politically*. Whilst at the time it was proclaimed as a motto, this was both a Marxist call to reflect the dialectics of production *as well as an aesthetical* challenge to reactionary forms of cinema – my present ear can hardly hear anything but the necessity of proper crew politics and a non-exploitative work environment. In Bishop’s words we’re being compared/judged/evaluated on the basis of “ethical one-upmanship”: “the degree to which artists supply a good or bad model of collaboration.” (ibid: 19)

emphasis is continually shifted away from the disruptive specificity of a given practice and onto a generalized set of ethical precepts. Accordingly, a common trope in this discourse is to evaluate each project as a ‘model’, echoing Benjamin’s claim in ‘The Author as Producer’ that a work of art is better the more participants it brings into contact with the processes of production. Through this language of the ideal system, the model apparatus and the ‘tool’ [...], art enters a realm of useful, ameliorative and ultimately modest gestures, rather than the creation of singular acts that leave behind them a troubling wake.²⁹ (ibid: 23)

Here’s a new dichotomy echoing the form-content problem. Our model of collaboration *is* our content. It’s what we’re giving out to the world as artists these days. As actors and directors, we’re aware of these logics, to the extent that we want our collaborations to mirror the values we put forth in our works. Nevertheless, we haven’t reached a reflective language yet for how this collapse (of content and collaboration) impacts or structures our relation, let alone the shows we make together³⁰.

As a working thesis, I am thus suggesting that the audience-artist relation manifesting in participatory art can serve as a more or less exact mirror of the director-actor relation at stake in our present processes. In the case of Platel we can already see the director at work as “collaborator and producer of situations”; on a tangent to “reducing authorship to the role of facilitation”³¹.

²⁹ Note how the discourse of relational arts is hegemonial within our branche of artistic research as well; an epistemology emerging on the very verge of the social turn. My own project description makes an implicit promise to provide „tools“ and „models“ exemplifying/ameliorating the communication between actor and director.

³⁰ As the author of this research, I can have hopes to tear these elements apart again, when focussing on models of collaboration and their dialectic relation to the *mise-en-scène*. At least on a discursive level. Practically I hope to inform these questions: how can sustainable processes possibly lead to excessive artistic results? How to create spaces of uncertainty for our audiences, whilst providing safe spaces during our rehearsals? – What models of collaboration between actor and director are fit for what aesthetical ambition?

³¹ Facilitation as authorship is introducing the figure of a sort of director-curator. Platel could be understood as *curating* the personalities and independant skills of the dancers in his company. As a trained teacher of children with special needs, he would be as far as can be from a director such as Grotowski, who, as a trained actor, is constantly mixing with his collaborators’ craft when directing.

In practice, directors have different ways of reacting to this ethically charged climate. Here's how I personally experience my encounter with an ensemble nowadays: in order to work, I assert „an ethics of authorial renunciation“ (ibid: 22): based on “the false polarity of ‘bad’ singular authorship and ‘good’ collective authorship“ (ibid: 8) I try to exemplify a superior model of collaborative practice, one in which individual authorship is suppressed in favour of facilitating the creativity of others.³² “[I]diosyncratic or controversial ideas are subdued and normalized in favour of a consensual behaviour upon whose irreproachable sensitivity we can all rationally agree.”(ibid: 26)³³

Not to sound too lachrymose, i.e. to be fair: Claire Bishop's argument should not be misrepresented as one long polemic rant against relational aesthetics. On the contrary, her observations spring from a point of appreciation, wanting to contribute a richer, critical vocabulary reflecting the various genres of participatory art in their specificity.³⁴ Also my own analysis stems from a sort of Brechtian consent (Einverständnis) with the impact of relational aesthetics on my processes, affirming that we can only criticize what we deeply agree with to be an existing phenomenon.

In particular there is one artist in the field of participatory art, Bishop really likes. Allow me to replace his British name by “the future director”³⁵ and, spinning off on Diedrich Diedrichsen's “subject”, end on a constructive note for our coming craft:

“In contrast to the dominant discourse of socially engaged art, [the future director] does not adopt the role of self-suppressing artist-facilitator, [...] His [or her] authorial role is a trigger for (rather than the final word on) an event that would otherwise have no existence [...]. “

[The future director springs] from a second, a later subject, that is one of giving-in and of letting-possibilities-emerge, (rather than of purposeful action.) It's a subject that can make itself an object or at least can give in to that; it is a soft, a weak subject, always in need of a complementary, and, given its reliance [on the actor] as a medium, doesn't want to penetrate or dominate it, but rather have itself carried and softly caressed by its cold objectivity. (Diedrichsen 2016: 138)

³² Here's Bishop trying to name the unoutspoken value assessment within contemporary art criticism after the shift from aesthetical to ethical criteria: „the work of Oda Projesi is better than that of Thomas Hirschhorn because it exemplifies a superior model of collaborative practice, one in which individual authorship is suppressed in favour of facilitating the creativity of others.“ (ibid: 22)

³³ The quote continues: “By contrast, I would argue that unease, discomfort or frustration – along with fear, contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity – can be crucial to any work's artistic impact. This is not to say that ethics are unimportant in a work of art, nor irrelevant to politics, only that they do not always have to be announced and performed in such a direct and saintly fashion.” (ibid: 26)

³⁴ All this whilst being outspoken about her own underlying values: singularity and idiosyncrasy.

³⁵ The original quote: “In contrast to the dominant discourse of socially engaged art, Deller does not adopt the role of self-suppressing artist-facilitator, [...] His authorial role is a trigger for (rather than the final word on) an event that would otherwise have no existence, since its conceptualisation is too idiosyncratic and controversial ever to be initiated by socially responsible institutions. In short, The Battle of Orgreave's potency derives from its singularity, rather than from its exemplarity as a replicable model.” (ibid: 36)

Whilst sticking to his or her genius, the director of the future embraces directing as the art of not getting what you want.

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ⁱ The quotes in these „10 commandments of Regie-Theater“ stem from the sources listed below. Words in italic mark that they have been added or that words in the original have been replaced.

1 Bataille 1991: 28

2 ibid: 23 (my emphasis)

3 ibid: 39

4 ibid: 9

5 ibid:25

6 ibid: 56

7 ibid: 55-56

8 Bishop 2012: 46

9 Kott 1984:154

10 Nelson 2011: 11

ⁱⁱ The quotes come from the following sources:

Standards must ... (hooks 1994: 157)

It's necessary to ... (ibid: 154)

The fact that ... (Grotowski 2002: 238)

Students do not always ... (hooks 1994: 204)

When we find the courage ... (Grotowski 2002: 248)

As a teacher working ... (hooks 1994: 145)

[...]determination, is a ... (Grotowski 2002: 249)

We have to learn ... (hooks 1994: 154)

Given that critical ... (ibid: 194)

None of the exercises ... (Grotowski 2002: 38)