

Theatre of/or Truth

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The famous scene near the end of *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), when Truman's boat hits the wall of the television studio that has been his life's scenery, is a moment of truth. Fans throughout the world hold their breath, glued to their television sets. Will Truman finally discover that his life has been no more than theatre? Will he break free from his world of shadows to enter the real world, outside the studio? 'Come on Truman, you can do it!' When he finally takes a bow and steps outside, his fans cheer with delight, 'he made it!' Which is, actually, a rather surprising response, given the fact that his discovery means the end of the TV show that has been important to this same audience for many years. A show, furthermore, that thrived upon Truman's carefully kept ignorance, a condition enforced upon him, for their pleasure. Nevertheless, the audience celebrates Truman's discovery as a triumph. *The Truman Show*, argues Slavoj Žižek (2002), is the ultimate paranoid fantasy of an individual who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he is living in is a fake, a spectacle in which everyone around him are in fact the actors and extras in a gigantic broadcast. The ending reads as the promise that there is a real world 'out there' after all, and that this real world is theirs.

In *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), when George W. Bush is making faces to the camera, rehearsing his serious face while being made up just minutes before he will announce the invasion of Iraq, the message is less comforting. Bush knows when it is for real. Real is when he is on air. Real is when he is performing what he has been rehearsing (and mocking) minutes before: the serious president, concerned, capable and with a clear goal in mind. Once upon a time, as Brian Massumi eloquently puts it, Ronald Reagan had to explain 'how half a lifetime as a bad actor actually qualified him for the high office, contrary to the then public perception that the roles of entertainer and governor were fundamentally incompatible.' (Massumi, 2002: 46) Times have changed. In a time in which 'seeming being' (Massumi) has become the norm, George W. Bush qualifies even without acting experience.

Indeed, on Massumi's account, Reagan's performance as president lacked a convincing representation of a character with psychological depth, one coherent over time, true to himself, a person who stood for something. (This can also be said of George W. Bush.) Reagan's acting lacked the illusion of being rather than acting; it lacked the illusion of self-identity. In this sense he was a bad actor. However, Massumi argues that this 'bad acting' is the key to understanding Reagan's success. When trying to grasp the impact that Reagan's acting had on its contemporary audiences, and on the course American politics has taken since, the relevant distinction is no longer between reality and appearance, true and false, or acting and non-acting. Instead, the pertinent criterion is intensity. In order to understand how this intensity works and has its effect, what is required is a relational approach that stems from the impact Reagan was able to make as a catalyst for processes

at work in his society. Massumi explains Reagan's success as the ability to include, or absorb into his appearance, a great variety of relative perspectives. Thus, his presence could hold the promise of many different possibilities at the same time. Reagan set the standard for the kind of politics exemplified by president-to-be Cozzano in *Interface* (Bury, 1994). After a stroke, he is revived through implanting a chip, connecting him to an electronic polling system to which his brain automatically aligns itself. Cozzano is created by multinational companies who basically own the country (what's new?) and use this 'president' so that the country can pass for a democracy (again, what's new?). Cozzano automatically adapts his sayings and activities to include the points of view of as many voters as possible, producing an intense response.

Massumi's analysis of Reagan's political acting will be my starting point for some reflections on the relationship between theatricality, politics, and the event of visibility. I will examine Massumi's reading of Reagan's political behaviour in terms of Samuel Weber's account of the relationship between theatre and politics (found in the first chapter of his *Theatricality as Medium*, 2004) and Tracy Davis's reading of President Clinton's behaviour during the Starr inquiry (in her 'Theatricality and Civil Society,' 2003) as well as three performances presented in several European countries over the past few years. Although these performances differ from each other in many respects, one thing they have in common is that they are explicit about their status as theatre, and they use this condition as a means of engaging with questions of truth, with what is real. More than that, they explore how things are real and true, and for whom. Theatre, in these performances, is not something that can be undone, deconstructed or left behind, unlike the false world of the media in *The Truman Show*; neither can the real be uncovered by taking the theatre away, as is the promise of much Brechtian theatre. What these performances posit is that the inherent theatricality of reality does not mean an end to differences, nor does it mean that anything goes. Rather, they suggest that rejecting political performances like that of George W. Bush in *Fahrenheit 9/11* for being 'mere theatre,' and therefore not to be taken seriously, might in fact be a protective mechanism safeguarding the illusion (or at least the possibility) of the real existing elsewhere. A mechanism that directs attention away from how truth, or what is real, is produced *within* the theatre that is our reality, and how we as viewers are involved in producing it. At this point, I will argue, it is helpful to distinguish between 'theatrical' as a quality, aspect or characteristic of what is seen (in the theatre or in daily life) and 'theatricality' as emerging from a process of spectatorship. Theatricality as a communicative affect emerging from the interaction between spectators and what they see denotes the uncanny moment when the distinction between reality and fiction suddenly ceases to be self-evident. Not because what is real is unmasked as false, nor because anything goes and the distinction has become meaningless, but rather because we are confronted with the assumptions at work in how we make our distinction between the two. Theatricality points to the interaction between (political) performances and their audiences, and to looking as a kind of active investment easily overlooked in analyses of these performances in terms of logics of representation. This investment involves more than what is there to be seen.

It involves what matters to people as they live their lives: their desires and their fears, their beliefs, concerns and prejudices.

The Rise of Theatrocracy

Massumi begins his analysis of Reagan's acting by quoting Reagan describing his disappointment with himself as an actor: 'It has taken me many years to get used to seeing myself as others see me, and also seeing myself instead of my mental picture of the character I am playing' (Massumi, 2002: 46). What Reagan describes is not so much a problem with seeing as it is with visuality, an event occurring within a culturally and historically specific situation, involving the someone seeing and that which is seen. It appears that how he is seen is not something Reagan can control simply through his intentions. The point of view from which he is seen by others, or by himself as an other, must be taken into account.

Reagan's description seems to allow, or even beg for, a second discourse, one that is remarkably absent from Massumi's elaboration on Reagan's observation on acting. This is the discourse of the theatre. What Reagan describes touches upon the roots of theatre in the Greek notion of *theatron*, meaning the place from where something is seen. Theatre is all about staging events in relation to the place from where they will be seen, and the notions of *theatrical* and *theatricality* have a long history of being used to describe behaviour that (all too explicitly) takes into account the awareness of being seen. This is but one of the many complexities of these notions. *Theatrical* and *theatricality* are used both to refer to a particular quality of something – its being 'of the theatre' and therefore staged for a viewer – and to failure, the failure to convince onlookers of authenticity or truth. This complexity goes into the heart of Reagan's struggle with acting as well as the subsequent reception of his acting. Moreover, it goes into the heart of the complex relationship between theatre and politics.

This relation has, as Weber (2004) puts it, 'a long and vexed history,' and early articulations of it can be found in Plato. Interesting in this respect is not only Plato's well-known anti-theatrical prejudice in the *Republic* - in which theatre gets rejected for being mimesis, a mere repetition falling short of the original - but also in his *Laws*, in which a speaker called 'The Athenian' discusses the reason for the decline of his city. In the old days (which were, needless to say, much better days) his country had been strong and brave, able to resist the onslaught of the Persians. This strength was due to two factors, both involving fear: fear of the enemy, and fear instilled by subjection to pre-existing law. Since then, however, a history of increased liberty has brought about the collapse of the state of law.

Surprisingly, the Athenian refers to the history of music as an exemplary illustration. More precisely, the grounds on which he rejects particular developments in music are presented as similar to the reasons for rejecting comparable developments in society. Once upon a time, the Athenian explains, music had been subject to clear laws and patterns. Departures from these rules and conventions were not accepted. In the course of time, an unmusical license set in with the appearance of poets who were men of native

genius but ignorant of what is right and legitimate in the realm of the Muses. Instead of respecting rules and conventions, not to mention the leaders protecting those conventions, the once silent audiences found a voice, persuaded that they themselves could determine good and bad in art. As a result, the old sovereignty of the best (which is aristocracy), gave way to a sovereignty of the audience, becoming a 'theatrocracy' in which everybody knows everything, and is ready to say anything: the age of reverence is gone, and the age of irreverence and licentiousness has begun.

Weber points to the similarities between the Athenian's condemnation of 'theatrocracy' and well known contemporary condemnations of the media as producers of noise and rubble that merely play into the hedonistic pleasures of the masses. But, Weber argues, a closer look at Plato's text suggests a different reason for Plato's condemnation of the theatre. Namely, its potential for disturbing and transforming the established order, traditional authority, and the hierarchies these entail. Interesting in this respect is the tension, pointed out by Weber, between the theatron as the seeing place that is the theatre and teatrocracy as the moment that theatricality begins to separate itself from the theatre:

[T]heatrocracy (...) is associated with the dissolution of universally valid laws and consequently with the destabilisation of the social space that those laws both presuppose and help maintain. The rise of teatrocracy subverts and perverts the unity of the theatron as a social and political site by introducing an irreducible and unpredictable heterogeneity, a multiplicity of perspectives and a cacophony of voices. This disruption of the theatron goes together, it seems, with a concomitant disruption of theory, which is to say, of the ability of knowledge and competence to localise things, to keep them in their proper place and thus to contribute to social stability (Weber 2004: 36).

Seen this way, *theatrocracy* describes the moment that a society characterised by a unitary perspective on what is good, beautiful, and true, gives way to a situation in which the dominant perspective begins to fall apart, giving way to a multitude of points of view. At this moment, what is true, good, and beautiful becomes a contested area instead of something automatically recognised on the basis of shared values and assumptions. At this moment, theatricality begins to wander and invades all areas of society.

Seen this way, Reagan's ability to incorporate a multitude of points of view might actually be read as a successful response to the teatrocracy of American society. Which is not to say that this makes his politics any better or more true. But it is to point to the risk involved in condemning this, or other, political behaviour on the basis of its being 'mere theatre'; and how such condemnation runs the risk of playing into (probably without intending to do so) reactionary conservative politics by trying to protect or restore a singular point of view on what is true, good and beautiful - a point of view which is, needless to say, the conservatives' own. At this point, fear proves to be a powerful instrument indeed. Could it be that the problem with Reagan's political act (at least, according to those who do not agree with him) is not that

it is theatre, but that it is not theatrical enough? Could it be that his ability to absorb a multitude of perspectives actually obscures the theatrical character of his political act?

What We Are Looking For

What do we mean when we say that someone or something is theatrical? What we mean is that such a person is aware that she is seen, reflects that awareness, and so deflects our look. We refer to a fractured reciprocity whereby beholder and beheld reverse positions in a way that renders a steady position of spectatorship impossible. Theatricality evokes an uncanny sense that the given to be seen has the power both to position us and displace us (Freedman, 1991: 1).

Like Massumi, Barbara Freedman argues for a relational approach to the intensities produced by acting, in her case in the theatre rather than the political arena. Things or people appear as theatrical when our position as observer of a stable and independently existing world is undermined, making us aware of how we are implicated in what we see. This dynamic is the subject of the performance and video-installation *Lecture on Lecture With Actress* by Barbara Visser. Visser's work reads as a critical engagement with what might be called 'metaphysics in the field of vision,' the web of binary oppositions producing the real in terms of an objective, material and ocular truth. Visser's vehicle for this critical engagement is a re-enactment of the scenario of Plato's cave.

The work began at a symposium titled *Reality as Fiction in Art and Media* held in Amsterdam in 1997. Visser was invited to give a presentation of her work and decided, without the participants of the symposium knowing, to have herself represented by an actress claiming that she was Barbara Visser. During the performance, the real Visser was sitting behind a black curtain, invisible to the audience and talking in a microphone. The actress, wearing a little hearing device in her ear, repeated Visser's words. A heated discussion took place about reality and fiction in art, with no one in the audience seeming to realise that what they were looking for - 'reality as fiction' - was actually taking place right in front of them.

In 2004, Visser used the video material of this symposium for a second performance, this time in Berlin. Visser was again represented by an actress claiming to be Barbara Visser. This second 'Barbara Visser' explained to the audience in Berlin what had happened in Amsterdam and showed short pieces of the 1997 video. The actress representing Visser expressed her amazement about how the Amsterdam audience automatically accepted the fake Visser as the real one. Nobody even seemed to notice the unnatural behaviour of the fake Visser. As the actress put it:

No one seems to notice the fact that the blond woman is an empty shell, repeating the words she receives through a small device in her left ear. I speak, she listens, she repeats, I think, I speak, she waits, I listen, we're both silent, we speak. The long silences between her

words seem to be accepted by the audience. Her behaviour is peculiar; retarded is the word for it.

The real Visser, behind the curtain, decided to bring the situation to a head by means of a direct confrontation between reality and fiction. The actress in Berlin explains:

I urge Jolien (this is the name of the first actress, MB) to introduce a clip from my guest appearance in a Lithuanian soap series. There everyone will see the real me featuring in the trailer, and may notice the difference. This will be the test.

The Berlin actress shows the trailer of a real Lithuanian soap series in which the real Visser plays the girlfriend of one of the main characters: her role is that of a Dutch visual artist known by the name of Barbara Visser (so much for reality as fiction). The audience in Berlin can see for itself:

There is scarcely any resemblance between the tall blonde woman on the stage and me, appearing in the video, but the audience sees what they expect to see. They say to each other 'My, hasn't she changed in two years!' What we see always depends on what we are looking for.

The audience in Berlin now knows what it is looking for and therefore this audience does acknowledge the difference, not only between the woman in the Lithuanian soap and the first actress representing Visser, but also between the woman in the soap and the second actress, even though this woman looks much more like the woman in the soap. Like the first actress, this second actress claims to be Visser and she too speaks in a highly unnatural manner. Once we know, it is not difficult to see this behaviour as the effect of her having to repeat texts spoken by somebody else. And as if to confirm this interpretation, the second actress ends her lecture-performance by taking the hearing device from her ear and putting it in a hand extended to her from behind a curtain.

This seems to finish the story. Visser presents a re-enactment of her earlier re-enactment of herself and this way unmasking the earlier re-enactment as theatre. Yet, at the same time, the all too explicit staging and the double unmasking of the fake turns this re-enactment of Plato's scenario into an uncomfortable experience. Plato teaches that the first step towards learning to see the truth is to recognise the falseness of what until then is taken to be true, realising that real truth is hidden, elsewhere. Visser's Berlin unmasking of the Amsterdam performance's fakery is instrumental in teaching us what truth to look for. The scenario, however, must not become too transparent, for it then loses its effectiveness as truth and becomes 'mere theatre,' a staging that undermines the insights it is supposed to evoke. Can we actually see or know that this actress is repeating Visser's words? Or, do we see what we think we know? How does the Berlin audience know that the reactions of the audience in Amsterdam (shown on video) are not staged? Why do we believe it really is Barbara Visser behind that curtain, her hand the one stretching out at the end of the performance to receive the microphone?

Politics of Incipience

Visser's *Lecture on Lecture with Actress* points to a dynamic that Michael Fried (following Diderot) has described in terms of the conceptual pairing of theatricality and absorption. Fried (1980) describes how, in French paintings of the middle and late eighteenth century, a certain tension makes itself felt between the painting as an object – produced to represent something for a viewer – and a certain uneasiness with this condition of representation. Fried refers to the moment that this paradox manifests as 'a momentous event, one of the first in the series of losses that together constitute the basis of modern art' (Fried, 1980: 61). This loss inaugurated a continuous search for representational strategies that would evoke the effect of *absorbing* the viewer into the scene represented. Fried refers to accounts by eighteenth century art critics (Diderot, among others) to point out how and why these paintings, at the moment of their production, were conceived of as absorptive, and also how strategies aiming at absorption eventually lost their power – at which moment the paintings were denounced as theatrical.

Theatricality and absorption thus appear as opposing results, arising from the interaction between, on the one hand, the effect of a representation produced at a particular time and place and, on the other, a culturally and historically specific viewer. This opposition of theatricality and absorption is not symmetrical. Theatricality is what happens when a representation fails to convince its viewers. Furthermore, Fried's analysis illuminates how the binary pair (theatricality and absorption) functions within a specific cultural and historical perspective. The emergence of the desire for absorption is closely connected to the emergence of the modern scopic regime, with its desire for visions from nowhere and belief in reality as independent from any particular point of view. Absorption, as a strategy of persuasion, plays into precisely this promise of metaphysical plenitude. It is also from this perspective that theatricality, when understood as something that arises out of the failure to absorb, can appear as an indicator of falseness, inauthenticity, and make-believe.

The implication of Fried's observations is that theatricality is not the result of whether something is or is not 'theatre,' but that theatricality denotes the inability to be convincingly 'truthful.' In order for an event to appear truthful, the point of view implied within that event must remain invisible, or at least not be too obvious. Address your audience in a manner that acknowledges the subjective point of view from whence this audience sees you (including the presuppositions, assumptions, expectations and desires characteristic of this point of view). The better you are able to absorb this perspective, i.e. the more you respond to the desires, assumptions etc., the more convincing your audience will find your performance. [1] This is precisely what Reagan's struggle was about. His problem, according to his own description of his experiences, was not that his behaviour was theatre (i.e. that he was acting rather than being). His struggle with acting hinged on his uneasiness with theatricality. He found it difficult to incorporate an awareness of what he looked like from the outside. He had trouble accepting the difference between how he was seen by others, and how he imagined himself to look, while

acting. He described filming, watching the day's rushes, and being disappointed that he did not look at all as he imagined himself while playing the character. He looks like his plain old self, 'It's one hell of a letdown' (Reagan, quoted in Massumi 2002: 47).

This desire to be seen in various ways, and to be perceived as a different person by the various people he encounters is what, according to Massumi, drives Reagan to politics. Aided by the media, his lack of a stable, autonomous and self-identical character now turns into his advantage. As Massumi puts it:

Reagan operationalised the virtual in postmodern politics. (...) He was an incipience. He was unqualified and without content. But his incipience was prolonged by technologies of image transmission and then relayed by apparatuses such as the family or the church or the school or the chamber of commerce, which in conjunction with the media acted as part of the nervous system of a new and frighteningly reactive body politic. It was on the receiving end that the Reagan incipience was qualified, given content. Receiving apparatuses fulfilled the inhibitory, limitative function. They selected one line of movement, one progression of meaning, to actualise and implant locally. That is why Reagan could be so many things to so many people: that is why the majority of the electorate could disagree with him on major issues but still vote for him. Because he was actualised, in their neighbourhood, as a movement and a meaning of their selection – or at least selected for them with their acquiescence. He was a man for all inhibitions. (Massumi, 2002: 41).

Massumi observes that 'Reagan' is cut up into separate moments that can have specific meanings for specific groups of people. This allowed him to be actualised in many different ways, thus meeting the needs and desires of different people, for each of whom he could somehow be 'theirs,' someone they might disagree with, but still their own, and thus sympathetic.

Reception and its role in postmodern politics was the subject of *Everybody for Berlusconi* (2004, announced as 'The democratic answer to Berlusconi's weapons of mass seduction') by the Slovenian theatre company Betontanc, in collaboration with the Dutch company Jong Hollandia. The setting resembles a political conference, with the audience seated behind tables that surround a rectangular open space. Information packages are handed out by conference attendants. These attendants also explain to the audience how to use the voting apparatus placed on each table. For this is what the audience will be asked to do: to vote on the life and death of former Italian prime minister Berlusconi (who, at the time of the performance, was still in office). Concerned with Berlusconi's undemocratic, unlawful, reactionary, and at points even openly fascist discourse and doings, and shocked by the fact that, notwithstanding a whole series of trials and severe national and international critique, Berlusconi was able to keep on saying and doing what he had been saying and doing all the time, the makers of this performance have decided it is time for serious measures. They have learned how to shoot (as we see on

a short video) and are prepared to do the dirty job, but first they want to make sure that there is public support for what they are about to do. Their 'answer' to Berlusconi has to be democratic. Since the evidence against Berlusconi is overwhelming, they are quite sure of their case.

The audience is presented with facts, evidence and various opinions about Berlusconi. From his problematic claims ('Mussolini never killed anyone. Mussolini sent people on an eternal holiday'), to the unlawful combination of his being both president and director of important businesses, to his ownership of Italy's most important media, the facts are as plain as day. Yet, as the conference/show proceeds, Berlusconi's supporters take over. Not because they can refute the facts. They don't even try. They know the facts, they agree that these things are bad, and yet nobody can touch 'their' Berlusconi. These supporters promote Berlusconi with spectacular demonstrations of their devotion and admiration (which are appropriately set in a big inflatable castle). Instead of being victimised by deceiving spectacles organised for them (in which case they could be 'saved' the Brechtian way, by pointing out how they are being misled by 'mere' theatre), Berlusconi's followers are themselves the organisers. Their spectacular expressions of support present us with a great number of different perspectives on Berlusconi, all of which he as a theatocratic imaginary appears to be able to absorb. Like Reagan, Berlusconi appears to be a man of infinite characters. For some he is a saint to whom miracles are being assigned, for others the potent playboy they want to identify with. He is the good businessman, or he is the strong leader giving hope for the future, and thanks to whom Italy no longer lets itself be bullied. For yet another group of admirers he is the family man, and so on.

The audience is invited to vote in three rounds. Needless to say, Berlusconi wins. Whether this result reflects the actual voting behaviour of the audience or is pre-determined is unclear – and this murkiness is strategic. We will never know whether we were able to resist these 'weapons of mass seduction.' It remains unclear if our vote made any difference. What the show does instead is to redirect attention to our own position in relation to the political spectacle. Do we want to see this face of democracy, or do we close our eyes and find reassurance in the fact that it is 'mere' theatre?

Theatricality or Sympathy?

Berlusconi, one might argue, is a typical example of postmodern politics of spectacle, as well as symbolic of the complications one encounters when trying to criticise this kind of politics. It is not very difficult to point out the 'mere theatre' of his political behaviour, yet somehow such unmasking of the fraud does not really seem to help. *Everybody for Berlusconi* suggests that Berlusconi's ability to absorb a multitude of perspectives is to a large extent the effect of how his followers create him as the answer to what they lack, long for, or believe in. His followers are most actively involved in 'operating the virtual' (Massumi, 41). They are not interested in unmasking him, in most cases they already know the counter narratives. The problem (from a more critical point of view) is that they are not willing to draw conclusions from what they know. Instead, they choose to sympathise with him.

This choice to sympathise (involving emotional participation with what is seen) or theatricalise (defined as resulting from either the failure to sympathise or the denial of sympathy, in both cases allowing for critical distance) is central to Tracy Davis's (2003) elaborations on the critical potential of theatricality in the public sphere. Similarly to Fried, Davis argues that 'theatricality is not likely to be present when a performance is so absorbing that the audience forgets that it is spectating' (Davis, 2003: 128). She then continues by defining theatricality as the communicative affect that emerges from a situation in which a spectator takes a certain distance and begins to distinguish between actor, role, and situation; self and other; and between self and self-as-actor. [2] Although what Davis argues for is in some way similar to what theatre makers like Brecht and Boal were aiming at, 'relying on alienation from character and circumstances to bring about political critique as an affect of viewing,' there is also an important difference. In public life, it is up to the spectator to make 'the conditioned choice to sympathise or theatricalise' (153). She concludes:

In the theatre, as Althusser describes, an actor 'comes down to the footlights, takes off his mask and, the play over, draws the lessons' (Althusser, 1997: 209). In public life, however, the onus for instigating this theatrical moment is the spectator, who by failing to sympathise and instead commencing to think, becomes the actor. Through being spectators to the *theatrum mundi* of civil society, engaged but not absorbed watchers, we bring our whole experience to bear on what is seen without insisting on sameness as the criterion of worth. Do we not appreciate art for its ability to show us new ways of seeing? Is it not maudlin when it shows us what we already know and feel? And yet, it is the act of withholding sympathy that makes us become spectators to ourselves and others (Davis, 2003: 154).

The distinction between 'theatrical' as a quality, aspect or characteristic of what is seen (in the theatre or in daily life) and 'theatricality' as emerging from a process of spectatorship is helpful in distinguishing, for example, between Reagan's behaviour (its being theatre, its being acting) and the effect or intensity produced within the relationship between this behaviour and a viewer. Reagan's behaviour may have been theatre, but this does not mean that it aimed at instigating theatricality as a communicative affect. On the contrary. Reagan's ability to absorb a multitude of points of view in his appearance prevented him from being looked at as theatre and instead won the sympathy of his audience. Taking a certain distance and looking at his behaviour as if it were theatre may indeed help create awareness of this mechanism. At this point, Davis's elaborations on theatricality read as the consequence of a possibility given in Fried but not made explicit by him. More complicated however, is the opposition of theatricality and sympathy. First, there is the question of choice. Theatricality within the theatre, Davis argues, may be the effect of the address presented by a performance. Outside the theatre, however, it is the viewer who instigates this theatrical moment. But what if, outside the theatre, we are unable to sympathise with what we see and instead perceive what we see as theatrical *without* this being the result of

our choice to look at it this way? [3] Furthermore, although both the choice to withhold sympathy and the failure to sympathise may invite critical thinking, they do not necessarily do so. [4]

These complications become especially urgent when it comes to the contemporary situation, in which the failure to sympathise has for many become the norm, with many people alienated from the spectacle that is our political reality. Interesting in this respect is Davis's only contemporary example, which again involves an American president: Bill Clinton during the Starr inquiry and the public responses to his testimony. Davis writes:

As the Starr Inquiry gathered testimony prior to the impeachment hearings, we were fascinated by how Clinton made bad arguments about reality, we eschewed the 'rhetorical imposture' of bad mimesis, and we were riveted by his very inauthenticity. Of course, he practiced for hours in front of his lawyers before turning on the video-camera, but who cares about that? We wanted to know how convincingly he testified, and whether he could do so maintaining the dignity and decorum of his office. Yes, this is entertainment rather than art, but why concede to Stanislavski's opposition of the two? The art of artifice is all, and this technique is a masculinised trait. Clinton's avowal of error and repentance mattered, rather than his belief in them or our persuasion that he would not repeat such indiscretions. Seeing the great man brought low, the public denied sympathy (switching this instead to Hillary Clinton, who was redeemed through this feminisation) and thus the public realm did its work to exonerate him, to let him continue in office chastened but intact. By denying sympathy, Americans denied their own culpability (Davis, 2003: 147-148).

The activity around the Starr inquiry, Davis argues, 'produced theatricality ...in precisely this denial of sympathy' (Davis, 2003: 148). From her description of the process, however, we may conclude that it was hard to look at Clinton's behaviour as being anything other than 'mere theatre.' This would suggest that theatricality here is not the result of the choice of the audience to deny sympathy where they might have granted it, but of the failure to sympathise in the first place. The question then is: what does taking the critical stance associated with theatricality involve here? And how did this involve the audience as 'spectators to the theatrum mundi of civil society, engaged but not absorbed watchers' who 'bring our whole experience to bear on what is seen without insisting on sameness as the criterion of worth' (Davis, quoted above)? Actually, Davis's description suggests the opposite.

'We' knew his behaviour was theatre. The convincing nature of his testimony therefore was not a matter of the truth of what was being said, nor either of 'us' or he himself really believing in what he said. What convinced 'us,' according to her description, is that 'we watched Bill Clinton try on and discard identities until there was a plethora of self-made versions of himself, none of them any more reconcilable than our own *dédoublement*' (148, italics in text). What convinced 'us' was that 'we' could recognize his theatrical behaviour as a sign of something else, something in which 'we' could recognize ourselves.

This would suggest that it was *sameness* that convinced us that he knew his place. It was the recognition of something that was similar to our own *dédoublement* that confirmed 'us' that 'we' were right in our judgement, and that Clinton recognized our judgement as being the truth about himself.

'We' denied him sympathy, but did this make 'us' critical spectators? One might argue that denying him sympathy was to be expected, and a not very reflective response to behaviour that within 'our' culture generally is rejected. Seen this way, denying him sympathy was not so much a critical response, but an example of spectators reacting according to historically and culturally specific conventions that (often unconsciously) inform who or what we sympathise (or fail to sympathise) with. Seen this way, Clinton's case is not an example of the connection between the absence of sympathy and critical spectatorship. Rather, his situation questions whether the absence of sympathy necessarily results in critical thinking. The example of Clinton could equally well be read as an example of how 'we,' in a world that already appears as theatre, desperately look for something 'we' might recognise as more true; we are looking for something that reconfirms the opposition of all that is mere theatre with something more 'true,' and how the recognition of such truth is a reconfirmation of sameness rather than the acceptance of difference.

What might have made the public response to Clinton's behaviour during the Starr inquiry more critical would have been consideration of the fact that it was because of this recognition of 'ourselves' in him that his behaviour could appear as authentic. This might have informed the question of why we need such a sign, and also whether or not he may have been performing this *dédoublement* precisely because it corresponded to the presuppositions of 'us', his audience, which in turn might have made 'us' wonder whether or not it would have been a problem if he were performing rather than being; and even, whether perhaps the real problem is not if (and when) he was performing or not, but how unmasking his behaviour as mere theatre and opposing it to something more real served as an excuse; one that prevented him from being held accountable for what he actually said and did. For this is what happened. 'We' all knew that what Clinton did was wrong and that what he said was not true, and yet he remained in office. This brings the case of Clinton and the Starr inquiry alarmingly close to the analysis of Berlusconi in *Everybody for Berlusconi*.

Stuck in the Cave

'[I]s theatricality more concerned with the act of showing than with the inherent quality of what in fact is shown? Or is theatricality precisely the challenge to try to separate the two?' wonders Freedman (1991: 51). Her observation could well have been the motto of another politically motivated theatre performance, *Guantanamo Bay, the Musical* (2004), created by Flemish theatre and film maker Peter Misotten. Like *Lecture on Lecture with Actress, Guantanamo Bay, The Musical* undermines the promise of a clear distinction between 'mere staging' and the real thing as given in Plato's story of the cave (this promise so cunningly evoked by the final scene of *The Truman Show* when Truman's crash into the wall of the media-cave is

instrumental in his finding the way out). In *Guantanamo Bay, the Musical*, the characters are also stuck in a cave covered in media projections. What is lacking, however, is the promise of an outside. The real world *is* the media projections and this real world is shown to be theatre. Not 'mere theatre' that can easily be rejected as false in favour of something more true, authentic, and real, but structurally the same. The performance consists of a series of acts about subjects, events, and motives all somehow related to the second Gulf war. The structure is a variety show, with independent routines loosely composed into an evening's program. The format reads as a commentary on the political reality it represents, which likewise consists of a series of loosely connected independent actions lacking coherent narrative. This is our political reality; politicians simply shift to the next act as soon as audience attention begins to falter.

Each scene recalls typical formats of two different and mostly incompatible realities. Many of these realities are themselves already explicitly staged (TV shows, official speeches, musical concerts, theatre plays, musicals). Often, one of the two given formats is explicitly fictional whereas the other is taken from what usually passes for reality. A series of scenes showing interrogations at Guantanamo Bay are modelled after German playwright Peter Handke's text *Self-accusation (Selbtsbeschimpfung)*. In Handke's text, an 'I' utters a long series of one-sentence-long confessions about things he has done or may have done. In *Guantanamo Bay, the Musical*, people in orange overalls are led around in circles by 'guards' while they utter Handke-like confessions ('I have been bitten by a duck', 'I don't like pork', 'I killed a mouse'), as if desperately trying to give their interrogators what they want to hear. In another act, a performer looking like an American country singer sings *What is America to me?* while a second voice repeats each sentence parlando in German (*Was ist Amerika für Mich?*), in a voice that is processed to sound like German Radio speeches from the Second World War. The German translation suggests a reading of the song that is rather different from the seemingly self-evident associations evoked by the original, and highlights disturbing similarities between this song and aspects of Third Reich ideology. In yet another scene, a woman reads what first seems to be a letter home from a holiday, or perhaps a school camp, but, as it appears later, is in fact a description of her arriving at Guantanamo Bay. It remains unclear whether the woman is unable to perceive what is actually at stake, whether this description is intended to be misread by relatives she does not want to confront with the reality of Guantanamo Bay, or whether perhaps her description is the product of censorship demanding a different 'reality.'

'This is fiction. This is real. This is a musical,' read the program notes. This motto was made explicit in a scene in which one man reads quotes from the Bible while another one responds with 'this is real', and 'I know this is real for my God is the only God'. The scene adopts the format of catechism, or other forms of religious indoctrination. The way it is performed, however, also suggests that it might be a TV game show in which candidates have to decide what is real and what is not, or even an interrogation scene. A little later the scene is repeated, this time with quotes from the Koran. The texts are remarkably similar. Large projections on the walls show Holofernes

decapitated by Judith as depicted by Renaissance painters; images imbued with a passion for violence that, from a contemporary Christian point of view, is usually attributed to Christianity's religious other. In another scene, two identical looking girls in semi-military outfit interpret George W. Bush's speech directed towards the family of Nick Berg. Their performance recalls Massumi's observation on Reagan, literally cutting Bush's appearance into separate moments and showing his performance as a continuous shifting from one pose to the next. Their re-enactment of Bush exaggerates the difference in expression and timing between these poses, turning each of them into a little theatre piece, each addressing its audience in a different way. The result is a strange kind of dance performed simultaneously by the two girls, evoking associations with a chorus line or music video. A few acts later they repeat this dance, this time with different words, showing choreography that can be used at different occasions no matter what the speech is about. The very same series of serious expressions and poses now accompanies a story about how Bush went for a ride on his bike but got lost in his own backyard. Is this fiction? Is this real? Yes, this is a musical!

Watching these acts was an uncomfortable experience, not only because of the atrocities this performance is addressing, which were well known by the audience. The makers were actually quite modest in their choice of media footage (that is, compared to what this audience had already been confronted with on television and was available to them on the Internet). What made watching *Guantanamo Bay, the Musical* such an uncomfortable experience was how the performance played with this well-known material in a way that made it difficult to decide how to look. Events and situations we knew to be true suddenly did not seem that likely anymore, whereas at other moments outrageous fantasies seemed quite plausible.

In today's theatocracy, where theatricality has invaded all areas of society, and in which the failure to sympathise has for many become the norm, the question is not (or not only) how to actively dissociate oneself but how to relate to this spectacle that is our reality. At this point, the choice to theatricalise may contribute to reflection on one's own position in relation to the spectacles we encounter both within the theatre and outside it, provided that this becoming spectator involves the willingness to face one's own assumptions, interests, desires and presuppositions as they are inevitably involved in how we see what we see. However, needed as well is reflection on the opposition of theatricality and sympathy itself. What is at stake in this understanding of theatricality in terms of the failure or unwillingness to sympathise? Or, the other way round, what does it mean to denote as theatrical that which we often find ourselves unable or unwilling to sympathise with?

According to Freedman, theatricality indicates a destabilisation of the relationship between someone seeing and what is seen, because its emergence highlights the relationship between them. As a result, what is seen may appear to be false, inauthentic. However, this falseness is not the opposite of truth or authenticity. Rather, this falsity is the result of the failure to convince as true or authentic, because our conceptions of truth and

authenticity and of what is real do not allow reality, truth and authenticity to depend upon a subjective point of view. This is what makes the attempt to define theatricality in opposition to another term such a complicated undertaking. When trying to grasp the implications and complications of theatricality, the issue is not what could or would be its other, but how theatricality emerges from the destabilisation of the binary oppositions that structure and shape the 'dominant fiction' (Silverman) that is our reality. This can inspire critical thinking but may also evoke reactionary responses. [5]

Seen this way, the difficulty to sympathise is indicative of the difficulty of accepting the fundamentally theatrical character of reality, as well as of politics and of democracy. Accepting this theatrical character involves accepting that reality is 'a photograph in multiple exposure, it makes sense only by blocking out part of the visible field' (Buck-Morss, 5). It also involves accepting that politics is about getting votes. People vote for politicians in order that these politicians may act for them and represent their interests and convictions. Politicians need to relate to the points of view of their potential voters or otherwise these potential voters will not vote for them. At this point, the theatre and theatricality actually present a useful model to understand the implications of representational democracy; and how it works through responding to voters' points of view. A model as well of how politics depend upon the voter's investment. Turning away from it because it is 'mere theatre' does not solve the problem, for the problem is not that politics is theatre. The problem is that politics *is* theatre but we don't want to know.

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Notes

[1] The concept of 'point of view' is central to Diderot's epistemology. As he writes, '[t]he universe, whether considered as real or as intelligible, has an infinity of points of view from which it can be represented, and the number of possible systems of human knowledge is as great as that of points of view' (*Oeuvres Complètes*, VIII, 211, quoted in Fried 1980: 216). The claim to understand a given phenomenon, or recognize its truth, involves accepting the responsibility not only for the explanation, but also for the point of view implicit in the explanation. In this respect, Diderot's observation links up remarkably well with postmodern, feminist and postcolonial critique of the supposedly universal point of view implied by the grand narratives. But Diderot also makes another important observation with regard to intelligibility, vision and point of view, namely that in order to appear as truthful, these points of view implied within visions of 'how it is' must not be too obvious. As soon as they become too prominent the effect will not be truthfulness but artificiality, theatre.

For a more elaborate discussion of Fried's reading of Diderot and its use for the theatre see my 'Absorption and Focalisation: Performance and its Double' in *Performance Research* 10.1(2005): 48-60.

[2] She supports this reading with a close reading of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and its definitions of the terms, in which both words pertain to the stage, to scenic representations, or a performer; extravagance or showiness; or simulation. However, Davis argues, 'if theatrical and theatricality do designate the same cluster of concepts, why did a word with a new suffix emerge in 1873, nearly three hundred years after 'theatrical' appears?' (Davis, 2003: 127). The OED's equation of theatricality with mimetic inauthenticity, Davis argues, is an error based on a misreading of Thomas Carlyle, the inventor of the neologism. Tracing the intellectual context of the emergence of the notion of theatricality brings her to conclude that theatricality according to Carlyle is coexistent with a failure to sympathise, but not with dissimulation.

[3] Davis does acknowledge that theatricality may result from both the act of withholding sympathy and the failure to sympathise, but does not reflect on the difference between these two. The act of withholding sympathy presupposes a situation in which something initially appeared as not theatrical to a spectator, and where theatricality emerges as a result of the choice of this spectator to dissociate him or herself. Being critical here involves a shift from the emotional involvement Davis associates with sympathy towards a situation in which we choose to withhold our sympathy. The failure to sympathise, however, presupposes that there was no sympathy or emotional involvement in the first place. This subjective point of view is *not* a matter of choice. The whole point with the subjectivity of vision is exactly that we cannot simply choose how to see what we see but that instead how we see what we see is to a certain extent the effect of cultural and historical visual practices to which the individual seeing is subjected. Yet this difference is crucial when it comes to understanding the relationship between theatricality as a result of viewing and a culturally and historically specific spectator. The point is that the 'conditioned choice to sympathise or theatricalise' is made from a subjective position, from which some things already appear as theatrical and others not. This asymmetry is reflected in, but also obscured by, the shift from 'the conditioned choice to sympathise or theatricalise' towards an account of theatricality in terms of either the failure to sympathise or the act of withholding sympathy.

[4] The failure to sympathise can also easily lead to rejection of what is seen as 'mere theatre' i.e. make-believe, fake, etc. The spectator wards off his or her unsympathetic or uncomfortable feelings towards what is seen by relocating that which causes these feelings in that which is seen (this presumably being theatre, staged, inauthentic). Stating that theatricality is the failure to sympathise, but not dissimulation (as Davis does), does not solve the problem. The question then remains: what does it take to turn this failure to sympathise into critical thinking? Similarly, the act of withholding sympathy does not necessarily lead to critical thinking, but can also be motivated by the desire to unmask something or someone as 'mere theatre', and therefore not to be taken seriously. Here again the question is, what turns the act of withholding sympathy into a critical act, rather than dissimulation?

[5] Actually, the attempt to oppose theatricality to what it is not, may itself be understood as an attempt to neutralise the threat posed by theatricality, by incorporating theatricality within this very system of binary oppositions that is questioned by its appearance.

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