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STAGING SPECTATORS IN IMMERSIVE PERFORMANCES

COMMIT YOURSELF!

Edited by
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culturally constructed relation to historically contingent norms (Demmerling & Landweer 2007, p. 237).

It's important to differentiate between guilt as a relatively abstract moral term and the feeling of guilt as a social emotion. Following Sara Ahmed, I do not use the term 'emotion' to refer to the distinct, inner feelings of a subject, but rather to social, relational, and embodied practices. Emotions shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies, and they are produced as effects of circulation (Ahmed 2004, pp. 5-9). Therefore, guilt can be understood as one specific cultural effect of the circulation of affects, signs, and meanings between bodies.

The primary questions for the analysis of Verhoeven's and Hetzl's works are therefore: (1) What aesthetic strategies are used to produce feelings of guilt? (2) What kinds of guilty feeling are 'fabricated'? (3) What do the constellations of felt guilt tell us about the relationship between subject and society?

Guilty landscapes

The second episode of Dries Verhoeven's video installation series Guilty Landscapes was presented in Berlin during the final season of the Foreign Affairs Festival (Haus der Berliner Festspiele 2016). It took place within the framework of the new format Nachausstellung: Exhibition by Night, entitled Uncertain Places. Instead of an entrance fee, a personal registration at 9:30 pm was required. The list offered time slots for only 18 audience members per night.

At 11:30 pm, an employee of the front house picks me up in the foyer and guides me to a stairway usually not accessible for the audience. Having reached the third floor, he asks me to take a seat in front of a closed door. I find myself waiting in the glaring, bleak staircase for about five minutes, becoming more and more tense. Another employee then opens the door to a vestibule where I am asked to leave my coat and personal belongings. Before he opens the door to the installation, he instructs me that I should independently leave the performance space after a period of ten minutes.

I enter a room of approximately 60 square metres, one side of which is completely filled with a screen 2.5 metres tall. Projected on the screen is the image of a sparse landscape. Three barracks of wood and canvas built in an obviously provisional manner fill the right centre of the image. A puddle takes up the foreground. Pieces of plastic waste and other debris are littered about the area. The sun manages to break out of the small piece of sky visible. The represented space gives an apocalyptic impression. Do the hills at the horizon consist of waste? What has happened here? War or a natural disaster? These are my thoughts while a rough gust of wind plays out of the loudspeakers. I notice an illuminated display on my left side - the kind typical of exhibitions - with the title 'Port-au-Prince' and a list of materials used in the installation.

Only now do I become aware of the man who is also a part of the projected landscape. In the composition of the whole image, he did not attract my attention at first. Apparently, he stood up while I was examining the display. He's wearing dark blue trousers and a reversed cap. With his legs in the puddle, he stands there, focusing on me. How can it be possible that he seems to look directly into my eyes? He starts to approach me. I feel myself watched by him. He stands in the same posture that I do. I change it and he does the same. Is he mimicking me? I'm surprised and confused (Figure 15.1).

Feeling that I've now 'arrived' in the installation, I sit down on the grey box positioned across from the screen. Again, he mirrors my movements and sits down on a slab swimming on the surface of the puddle. Can we talk to each other? For a brief moment, I consider saying something, but remain silent. At many points, I find myself avoiding direct eye contact. He then stands up and invites me to do the same. We're now standing upright in front of each other. He bends down and switches an audio player on. Instead of the wind, the room is now filled with loud drumming and chants that sound African to me. Slowly, he starts to move; he raises his arms with both fists in front of his chest, synchronising the contractions of his arms with the swinging movement of his turning hips. Although I'm alone, I act coyly. And although I'm not really in the mood for dancing, I start to move my hips too. But why are we dancing anyway? In contrast to the landscape, of which he is a part, it feels absurd.

He is there, I am here. I'm in my safe place of the exhibition space, he's in the representation of a poor and destroyed landscape. I sense the

Figure 15.1 Guilty Landscapes, episode II by Dries Verhoeven.
Source: © Christopher Hewitt
impossibility of a real encounter. I interrupt the dancing and sit down again. He keeps on moving for a while. Then he stops too, coming closer to me. With a smile on his enlarged face on the screen, he suddenly leaves the projection to my right side.

I linger in the space with a diffuse feeling of trepidation. The experience of this strange encounter leaves me with a sense of powerlessness. The format opens up a space for experiencing and reflecting on inequality, impotence, and constellations of guilt and responsibility.

Staging separation and uncertainty

The performance, which basically consists of an encounter between me as a beholder and the young man in the represented Guilty Landscape mediated by a video projection, lends itself to analysis in the framework of Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics. As a curator and art critic, Bourriaud developed a theory of contemporary art forms that focus on human interactions, where the substrate is formed by intersubjectivity, and which [take] being-together as a central theme, the “encounter” between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning (Bourriaud 2002, p. 15). Against the background of a social ontology and philosophical materialism, intersubjectivity forms the foundation for both production and reception, in the sense that “the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 22).

Relationality – as an analytical tool – therefore focuses on specific affective dynamics and social bonds that are produced, reproduced, and codetermined by the artwork.

The arrangement of Verhoeven’s Guilty Landscapes, episode II produces at least two significant qualities of audience involvement: separation and uncertainty towards my own position as a spectator due to several factors within the form of the encounter. An organisational inequality starts with the registration process. The fact that only a small number of spectators are invited to participate not only demands a certain engagement on the part of the audience (the first-come, first-served principle), but also separates a small circle of ‘chosen ones’ from the outset.

Verhoeven’s work is presented in the framework of an exhibition, and this frame is also reiterated twice in the set design of the space: the lighted display stand provides contextual information about the video installation, and the grey box in the centre of the room suggests the ideal perspective towards the screen. Conventions of reception could lead the visitor to start by contemplating the projection in the tradition of landscape painting or landscape photography – a tradition that already implies considerations of the relation between human and nature. At the same time, the isolation in the exhibition space directs attention towards the spectator’s own perception and emotional re-actions. The kind of disturbing clue in the four-part series Guilty Landscapes (episode I: Hangzhou, episode II: Port-au-Prince, episode
The evolving dance scene remains deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, the situation becomes more intimate through the prolonged eye contact, his shirtless body, the rhythm of the drums, and the dancing; it's even possible that a small flirtation unfolds. On the other hand, the 'foreignness' becomes conspicuous. The song that he switches on is called 'Bode Bode Alou Mandia', an example of Haitian voodoo music. The cult of voodoo is deeply rooted in the cultural identity of Haitian society as part of the African diaspora, but my only references at the time stemmed from popular culture portrayals of a transgressive African ritual practice. In this shared act, there is an encounter of two separate bodies with separate cultural and corporeal knowledge and memories. The way he appears to be affected by the music differs from the way it affects me.

**Framing guilt**

Considering the aesthetics of effect from a reception theoretical perspective, the staged encounter in *Guilty Landscapes* entangles the visitor in a complex relational and affective experiment with framing strategies and their effects. While for Erving Goffman, *frames* are an important tool for individuals to identify and make sense of specific social situations or interactions (Goffman 1977, pp. 18), Judith Butler’s concept of frames goes beyond this individualistic and subject-oriented perspective. She fundamentally questions the normative idea of personhood as individualism and its role in delimiting (or framing) the scope and meaning of recognisability, and thus of human life itself (Butler 2009, pp. 5–6). For Butler, frames are an operation of power through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (love-able or injurable) [...]. They do not unilaterally decide the conditions of appearance but their aim is nevertheless to delimit the sphere of appearance itself.

(Butler 2009, p. 1)

The social ontological premise is that '[the “being” of the body [...] is one that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically in order to maximise precariousness for some and minimise precariousness for others' (ibid.). Therefore, epistemological framing (in Butler’s sense) also functions as a cultural mode of regulating affective and ethical dispositions. She also reminds us of a poignant link between framing and guilt:

As we know, ‘to be framed’ is a complex phrase in English: a picture is framed, but so too is a criminal (by the police), or an innocent person (by someone nefarious, often the police), so that to be framed is to be set up, or to have evidence planted against one that ultimately ‘proves’ one’s guilt. When a picture is framed, any number of ways of commenting on or extending the picture may be at stake. But the frame tends to function, even in a minimalist form, as an editorial embellishment of the image, if not a self-commentary on the history of the frame itself. This sense that the frame implicitly guides the interpretation has some resonance with the idea of the frame as a false accusation. If one is ‘framed’, then a ‘frame’ is a construct around one’s deed such that one’s guilty status becomes the viewer’s inevitable conclusion.

(Butler 2009, p. 8, my emphasis)

Following Butler, I argue that the form of the mediatised encounter in *Guilty Landscapes* as a reciprocal bodily exhibition fosters specific framing processes. Depending on my own affective disposition, and due to the modalities of separation and uncertainty produced through feelings of inequality, responsibility, and the re-enactment of guilty feelings, I position myself and my counterpart within culturally and epistemologically hegemonic frameworks.

Bearing this in mind, I’d like to ask: how does *Guilty Landscapes* frame (individual) feelings of guilt? As I’ve described earlier, Verhoeven’s installation establishes two different uncertain places.

Knowing the title of the episode, the projected images could be ‘read’ as an inaccessible area of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, which had been damaged by Hurricane Matthew in October 2016.

Hundreds of people died and more than 10,000 houses were destroyed, which has resulted in a massive ongoing and urgent humanitarian crisis. The contextualising reference to Port-au-Prince provided by the exhibition’s frame (re-)evokes pictures from the broader cultural imaginary that has been shaped, at least in part, by the imagery selected and circulated by news media in the wake of Hurricane Matthew. Within this coverage, climate change, processes of global warming, and questions of responsibility become thematic. Is he really living in Port-au-Prince?

With my presumptions as to the hardships faced by this man – that is, presumptions based on the material squalor of the destroyed place that he inhabits ‘in the picture – our relation is transformed into an exemplary constellation in which I represent the ‘global north’ while he becomes the representative of the ‘global south’. This establishes a dimension of relationality that goes far beyond the situational encounter between him and me in the framed here and now of the performance installation. We are both framed culturally as well: he as a ‘victim’, and I as a ‘perpetrator’. The young man is victimised, positioned within a scene of a natural disaster’s aftermath, standing in this ruined landscape caused by a hurricane, which could be understood as a direct consequence of global warming patterns for which our western industrialised countries are primarily responsible. I, as the counterpart of this encounter, develop feelings of shame and guilt because of my personal failure to render assistance, while at the same time I blame
(and frame) myself for living my western life of wealth, which rests upon the exploitation of the global south.

The relation becomes even more emotionally charged and loaded with historical impact if considered through the lens of postcolonialism. Although a comprehensive sketch of the long and rich history of Haiti exceeds the bounds of this chapter, I would like to draw attention to a particular historical moment and its consequences, which carry significance for the topic of Schuld as both guilt and debt. Aside from the association with natural catastrophes, Haiti is also known for the 1791 Haitian Revolution, in which slaves revolted against their French colonisers, leading to their formal independence in 1804. Since 1825, Haiti has had to pay millions of French francs as reparations to France due to their loss of plantations and slaves. Throughout the centuries, this has made economic stability practically impossible. Today, Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, burdened with new debts (Schulden) coming from US-American and European developmental aid.

The encounter thus raises – besides the moral postcolonial guilt of the ‘first-world’ witness – the neo-colonial fabrication of financial guilt/debt for Haitians as a practice of dominating countries.

These references I have to our shared reality intensify the inequality I feel, which is further heightened through the installation’s dramaturgy of affect – through spatial separation that leaves me feeling isolated, an unexpected interruption in the circulation of gazes (given his ‘looking back’ at me), uncertainty regarding how to communicate, and the timidity and shame that result from that uncertainty. All this shapes an encounter that, structurally and thematically, cannot take place eye to eye. His appearance is framed and mediated by the camera lens and projection, which determine what I am allowed to see or, more specifically, what I should see. And the display with the title standing in the exhibition space operates as a caption; it frames my perception and my interpretation. In addition to the reference to instant messaging services, the live stream video is reminiscent of global news coverage with its penchant for circulating spectacular images of natural catastrophes and war for the consumption of viewers a world away.

In her essay Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag discusses the relation between (war) photography and compassion, as well as the question of how pictures can mobilise their ‘spectators’ to do something, to transform a moment of being affected into action. Sontag maintains that photographs need contextualisation like a title or a comment in order to render the captured scene interpretable.

Butler, however, counters [...] that, in framing reality, the photograph has already determined what will count within the frame – and this act of delimitation is surely interpretive, as are, potentially, the various effects of angle, focus, light, etc. In my view, interpretation is not to be conceived restrictively in terms of a subjective act. Rather, interpretation takes place by virtue of the structuring constraints of genre and form on the communicability of affect [...] (Butler 2009, p. 67).

In Guilty Landscape, episode II, I find myself being set into a relationship with an unfamiliar counterpart. Although in his performance there are no indications of pain or suffering, I frame this situation as an experience of poverty and existential precariousness, and I do so on the basis of a broader cultural imaginary concerning Haiti. Since new technologies allow us to regard the pain of others all over the world at any time, normative moral obligations to feel compassion and empathy (for the lives of those who are framed as ‘grievable’ in Butler’s sense) too often come to naught for viewers inured to the visual onslaught. During the performance, I did not feel compassion or empathy, but rather guilt. Moments of a consciously shared con-temporality and the experience of an interdependent bodily encounter led me to become aware of a fundamental ‘being-with’ in Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense. The inequality staged by the performance and felt by me fostered normative moral feelings of guilt. I felt ashamed because of my failure to render assistance (for instance, with a donation) to those who suffer from war or natural disasters – a feeling I re-enacted phenomenologically in the act of lowering my gaze and avoiding his glance. I adopted the culturally constructed guilty conscience. By re-enacting guilt, I felt in and through my own body how interpretative frameworks are structured and how they shape my affective and ethical attitudes, values, and norms.

**Guilt factory**

I enter a pop-up store named ‘SELF’ on Volksgartenstraße in the Austrian city of Graz. Two young shop assistants are standing behind a black counter with a white sink, smiling at me. The interior is mostly sober with a minimalist black-and-white design. Soap boxes, empty and numbered, are arranged at the back right side of the shop. Two large staged photographs hang on the wall, each with a black man lathered in white soap sud on a grey-blue ground (Figure 15.2).

The two women are dressed in black and white too. One of them offers to clean and massage my hands. I agree to this and promptly find myself in a sales conversation. ‘This soap is a really special product. It’s a human soap—a soap made from humans for humans’ (‘von Menschen, für Menschen’). From humans? ‘You mean it is made of human fat?’ ‘Yes! If you’d like to hear more about it, you’re cordially invited to visit our soap factory in the back of the shop’. Said and done. I’m fascinated and find myself waiting for access, feeling convinced that I’m about to visit a fake institution.