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UNCANNY LESSONS

AESTHETIC CONDITIONS IN THE WORK
OF MARKUS SCHINWALD

I

A spectacle focuses all of the available attention on itself.¹ It directs the gaze towards the stage, the Greco-Latin *scaena*, at the same time as turning it away from reality. Whatever lies beyond the stage, show, or spectacle is 'obscene' in the true sense of the word, the Latin *ob scaenam*, the everyday, unspectacular, non-staged, the ordinary and familiar.² Markus Schinwald's sitcoms integrate this element of the everyday and ordinary, the overlooked or scorned. The unspectacular outside becomes the inside of the spectacle.³

Media dislocation, mirroring and reflection takes place on very different levels within Schinwald's work. For the viewer or spectator, they create an irritating, unsettling, sometimes even eerie impression. This feeling of irritation or wonder is the starting point for every aesthetic experience: "When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new, or very different from what we knew in the past or what we supposed it was going to be, this makes us wonder and be astonished at it. And since this can happen before we know in the least whether this object is suitable to us or not, it seems to me that wonder is the first of all the passions."⁴

Astonishment, wonder, and irritation are not only the root of all the passions, but also the beginning of all philosophical thought and aesthetic experience. The question thus arises as to who is refracted, where and how, in the shifts and reflections of the media apparatus that Schinwald constructs for the viewer.⁵ The answer depends to a large degree on the position of the viewer in any given case. It is therefore always necessary to ask who is observing, who is observed, and from what position.

It is also necessary to distinguish between the different situations in which a particular viewer might encounter Schinwald's works: as a member of a live audience during the production of the sitcom, watching from a kind of meta-level while the artist, camera crews, and actors repeat the various scenes until the director considers them finished; or, at the same time, watching the images delivered by the cameras, the live-edited video version on the three flat screens. The live audience, then, can distinguish between the actors actually performing on the stage set and the reproduction of the media gaze on the screens. The viewer can apprehend this difference as an aesthetic insight concerning the reality of television/video recording, processing this knowledge in emotional, cognitive, and social terms. As an eye witness present at the production of a sitcom, then, the viewer is a component of a presented and staged situation in which all objects, persons, and events are actually completely present, performing on the stage set created by Schinwald. The viewer is an eye witness to a staged spectacle that is performed in his/her presence. At the same time, audience members can watch the video recordings on the flat screens mounted on

the ceiling at the front edge of the stage, comparing these images with their own experience of the performance situation. They can compare their subjective view with the media view of the cameras and the edited version, integrating this view into their own experience or consciously distinguishing between the two.

Visitors to the exhibition, on the other hand, are neither eye witnesses nor participants in the performance. They see the real stage with the real set and props, and they can walk on this stage. But the stage is empty, with no actors performing, no cameras moving back and forth, no director shouting “action” or “cut”. Instead, the visitor sees the edited recording of the performance on the flat screens. He sees an audiovisual moving image that is to a certain extent at odds with the present reality.⁶ As such, the exhibition visitor’s aesthetic insights cannot draw on the decisive distinction made by the live audience between its own perspective and that of the video recording. While the live audience member is a second-order observer who can watch others watching, the exhibition visitor remains an observer of the first order: he sees what he sees.

One thing the exhibition visitor can do, however, is apply his powers of imagination. The empty stage with its props remains an empty space for the imagination.⁷ At the same time, the images on the screens show that the actors on the stage must have performed in a particular way. This allows visitors to the exhibition to project an imagined aesthetic experience back onto the real stage, mentally reinserting the missing actors and audience into the spatial and temporal setting.

II

The spectator sees everything. At least he thinks he does. In fact, however, he only sees what he is shown by the invisible powers that produce the spectacle. As the audience, we are always already complicit with the spectacle: fascinated, shocked, excited, frustrated.

The actors are real people who perform in front of real spectators in the three-dimensional space of the production. But—and this is where the first shift, the first break with reality begins—they do not perform as themselves, instead representing someone else, a fictional character embodied in their part. They are themselves in physical terms, at the same time as playing a different, imaginary per-

1) “As a part of society, [the spectacle] is the focal point of all vision and all consciousness.” Guy Debord, *The Society of The Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, London, 2006, p. 7.

2) Johannes David Schreber, *De libris obscoenis*, Lipsiae: Fleischer 1688, § 2.

3) “When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real things – dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle’s job is to use various specialized mediations in order to *show* us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special pre-eminence once occupied by touch ...” Debord, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 11.

4) René Descartes, *The Passions of The Soul* (1649), trans. S. H. Voss, Indianapolis, 1989, Article 53, p. 52.

5) Gilles Deleuze, “What is a dispositif?,” in Armstrong, *Michel Foucault, Philosopher*, trans. and ed. Timothy J. Armstrong, New York, 1992, pp. 159–168.

6) “The image object, however, is given in a perceptual apprehension modified by the characteristic of imagination. But that still does not suffice. The appearance belonging to the image object is distinguished in one point from the normal perceptual appearance. This is an essential point that makes it impossible for us to view the appearance belonging to the image object as a normal perception: It bears within itself the characteristic of *unreality, of conflict with the actual present.*” Edmund Husserl, *Fantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*, (= *Husserliana*, Vol. XXIII), Den Haag, Boston, London, 2006, § 22, p. 51.

7) For more detail on this, Cf. Hans Dieter Huber, *Bild, Beobachter, Milieu. Entwürfe einer allgemeinen Bildwissenschaft*, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2004, pp. 81–88.

8) “The human individual *has* a body that he can manipulate and exploit like other objects. At the same time, he is this body, he is a body-subject. By stepping outside of himself to portray a character ‘in the material of his own existence,’ he points emphatically to duplication and the implied distance.” Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt am Main, 2005, p. 129. (all excerpts herein trans. NG)

son. They are an embodied fiction.⁸ The spectator is caught in this duality of simply-being and pretending-to-be. Sometimes he sees the fictitious character as portrayed and embodied by the actor, other times he sees the actor himself, the real person. And at such moments, he sees the actor as himself, as the person he really is and as none other. When the director stops the scene and the actors return to their starting positions, maybe making jokes among themselves which are not recorded, then at such moments, the actor is not an actor. Rather than embodying a part, he is the person who he is. The actor, then, is a dual being, himself and not himself. He is an uncanny revenant of the self.⁹

The exhibition visitor, on the other hand, who can only see the video recordings, no longer has this possibility of experiencing a dual physicality. He cannot tell that what he sees is just an act and that the actors also have a reality, a life, and a body of their own. Whereas the live spectator can switch constantly back and forth within his aesthetic experience between the level of performance/embodiment and that of actor/body. This enables him to observe the constitutive conditions of the film construction and make them part of his aesthetic experience.

Let us now go back one step further. The scene itself, the built architecture, is also not really itself. It is a stage set, a backdrop. It, too, represents something different, something absent, embodying it via its physical materiality. The stage set, too, is a doppelgänger. On the one hand, it is itself, real, made of wood and paint. On the other hand, it is not itself, referring instead to a different space which is absent and which it only represents. The stage set points to something that is not present, to a fictional space. This referential character of the scene, and thus its ambivalence, can also be identified by the exhibition visitor, as he can walk round the set and see its "ob-scene" reverse, its outside.

III

Sitcom (short for situation comedy) is a distinct television genre with its roots in the American radio comedy shows of the 1930s and '40s. The genre is clearly linked to the medium of television.¹⁰ The television series "I Love Lucy" with the actors Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz is considered the first major sitcom hit of the early 1950s. The series was pre-produced for television in front of a studio audience and broadcast at a later date. It was shot using three 35mm movie cameras and without using canned laughter. The laughing of the live audience supported the liveliness of the performance and gave the end result an authentic, acoustic accompaniment.¹¹ The use of three cameras offered the opportunity to film not just the person speaking but also the reactions of the other actors, thus capturing unexpectedly funny moments.¹² The three-camera technique was retained as standard for the production of sitcoms. At this point, however, the footage was still being shot on film stock that had to be developed before editing could take place. This gave series like "I Love Lucy" a special cinematographic quality. Then, in the second half of the 1950s, with the invention of magnetic tape recording by Ampex, combined with electronic stu-

9) From the 1960s, theater productions and performance art tested and developed ways of using the body by "consistently departing from the assumption of the duality of body-being and body-having, of the phenomenal body and the semiotic body. Uses of the body are founded in and justified by the bodily being-in-the-world of the actor/performer." Fischer-Lichte, op. cit. (note 8), p. 139.

10) Daniela Holzer, *Die deutsche Sitcom. Format, Konzeption, Drehbuch, Umsetzung*, Bergisch Gladbach 1999, p. 39. Cf. also Jürgen Wolff, *Sitcom. Ein Handbuch für Autoren. Tricks, Tipps und Techniken des Comedy-Genres*, Cologne, 1997.

11) Holzer, op. cit. (note 10), p. 15.

12) Holzer, op. cit. (note 10), p. 45.

dio cameras, so-called “live recording” became possible.¹³ This meant that images from the individual cameras could be edited while the actors were performing live in front of the studio audience based on the monitor images from the three cameras. This is the technique used by Markus Schinwald in *Vanishing Lessons*.

Characteristic of sitcoms is their swift succession of gags, punch lines, and comical situations. Unlike comedy shows, however, where sketches are simply performed one after the other, these elements are embedded in a *plot*, a narrative. Classic sitcoms are typically filmed in a studio on a simple stage set which, as in the case of Schinwald’s *Exceptions Prove the Rule* (2007), may also contain outdoor spaces like the front door with the garbage can. Sitcom episodes usually take the form of a half-hour television format.¹⁴

It should be stated clearly and unequivocally, however, that *Vanishing Lessons* is not a classic television sitcom but a performative installation. The videos are not broadcast on television, but shown in an art exhibition. It is a matter of the specific difference, then, the conflict with the actual present of television, as Husserl would put it. Schinwald does of course borrow many elements of sitcoms, like the set-like stage, working with a director, television cameras, actors, and live audience. But he also makes key changes to the format. The stage is no longer purely a set, tending instead to varying degrees in the direction of a sculpture or an installation. Several unexpected changes or surprises are built into parts of the set and the furnishings, for example, like an over-long drawer that can be pulled almost three meters out of the chest of drawers, or a narrow secret passage between the walls of two rooms which allows the actors to enter and leave the stage via a double cupboard.

IV

Every staged event also stands in relation to an outside, however, something it is not. This outside is the only thing about such an event that is *not* staged. One might refer to it as the ob-scene, that which is located outside the scene or stage. But is it the outside of the spectacle that elicits the astonishment, shock, or wonder of the viewer? In any case, it is a place where the media shifts and refractions of reality become visible and thus apprehensible as such. In this light, one can use the word obscene to describe spectacular events that possess an outside that is made accessible to the viewer. The effect is one of dis-illusionment, an annulling of the illusion of the spectacle.¹⁵

When this occurs, what is portrayed is experienced as a portrayal, what is staged as a scene, what is acted as an act. The apparatus of the stage becomes transparent, something one can look behind, and thus relative. For the spectator, this is a moment of dis-illusionment, the abolition of illusion. Dis-illusionment is an important subjective experience, something that can only be experienced in and with relation to oneself. For this

reason, the realization that the spectacle is just staged, the play just a play, the act just an act has healing and cathartic properties. It promotes a sense of being anchored in a reality which the spectacle originally shifted into illusion and reflected via the media. Now, this spectacular shift, the media break with the real, is reversed in the disappointment and

13) Albert Abramson, *The History of Television, 1942–2000*, Jefferson, 2002, p. 60 ff.

14) Holzer, op. cit. (note 10), p. 13.

15) “Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is an *affirmation* of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances. But a critique that grasps the spectacle’s essential character reveals it to be a visible negation of life—a negation that has taken on *visible form*.” Debord, op. cit. (note 1), p. 9.

in the surprise at oneself. A memento mori says: Watch out! It's not the way you think or believe. In reality, it's quite different.

As a third level of the media reflection of apparent reality, the film cameras, cameramen, director, cable carriers, technicians, assistants, and so forth come into play. This level can be described as the media apparatus of film recording.¹⁶ This media apparatus surrounds the stage, the actors, and the spectators in equal measure. As a significant frame round the spectacle, it represents the condition for the possibility of representation. It is the invisible outside of the recording.

The director, hidden from the audience, operates as an all-seeing, panoptic god. Like the spectator, he believes he can see everything. In reality, however, he possesses just three monocular technical eyes which he can control and direct via radio instructions: the live images from the three cameras. The cameras are technical prostheses of seeing which seem to extend the borders of his perceptive capacity, but which actually limit, discipline, and restrict this capacity in a way that has far-reaching consequences. The director is himself part of the media apparatus, by which—in freely submitting to its conditions—he is cast, generated, and brought forth as a “seeing subject.” The director as a panoptic god is in reality a subject shaped, subjugated, and disciplined by the media apparatus.¹⁷ He sees only the flat, two-dimensional images recorded in real time by the cameras. He decides which camera shot is used at any given time and when to switch to the picture from a different camera. He is connected to the camera crew by a headset and can invisibly control them at any time. At the same time, he can send instructions to the actors, especially when a scene is to be shot again or when a mistake has been made. His voice is like the voice of an all-seeing, omniscient god. The director's instructions have something decidedly uncanny about them. It seems as if he has control over everything. In reality, his view is the most strongly limited and the most artificial of all those involved, as his perceptions depend on just three two-dimensional moving images plus sound.

V

Members of the audience at the live recording, by contrast, occupy an entirely different perceptive position. They sit on a stepped podium, offering the best possible view. They see all levels of the production at the same time and can switch their attention back and forth between them at will. In addition to the real performance of the actors on stage, they—and only they—can also follow a two-dimensional representation of the action on several flat screens in real time.

The spectator, then, is able to differentiate between at least three different levels. First, the set-like stage construction and the actions of the actors in it. Second, the media apparatus of film recording, which lies like a seemingly invisible, panoptic surveillance organ over

16) “What I am trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.” Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, New York, 1980, p. 194.

Cf. also: “These apparatuses, then, are composed of the following elements: lines of visibility and enunciation, lines of force, lines of subjectification, lines of splitting, breakage, fracture, all of which criss-cross and mingle together, some lines reproducing and giving rise to others, by means of variations or even changes in the way they are grouped.” Deleuze, op. cit. (note 1).

17) Michel Foucault, *The Order of Discourse*, trans. Ian McLeod, in Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the Text*, Boston, 1981, pp. 48–78.

the entire production situation. The two cameras installed in front of each stage set in the exhibition give a potential indication of this level which is concealed but which can be observed, identified, and revealed as such by the spectator. The media apparatus of the recording decides what will be shown to the exhibition visitors and what is kept from them, what is made to disappear as the latent, obscured outside of the film recording. And third, the recording itself as a two-dimensional moving image. It is shown on three flat screens, attaining a visual autonomy of its own with respect to the other levels of representation and media. Finally, it is the image level that survives for the future as a visual representation of an absent and past event in the form of a work.

In view of the multiple media dislocations within the stage situation, this production begins to resemble post-dramatic theater.¹⁸ In recent years, such media dislocations and reflections have often taken place in this field, for example in the plays of René Pollesch or in Nicolas Stemmann's 2006 production of Elfriede Jelinek's "Ulrike Maria Stuart" at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg.

The audience itself remains the blind spot of the whole observation set-up. The spectator constitutes his own latency. In order to observe, to distinguish and name, he must remain obscured as the instance that makes decisions. This blind spot, the structure of auto-latency and self-invisibility, is reflected on the third floor of the exhibition at Kunsthaus Bregenz. Attached to a grey, abstract architectural framework, various mirrors give a view of the whole media apparatus. In the form of a *re-entry*¹⁹ of the excluded into the exclusion zone, the outside of observation, audience and cameras is introduced into the inside of representation. Now the cameras suddenly become visible. The spectators, invisible until this point as the blind spot of observation, can now experience themselves as a social group of eye witnesses.²⁰ They see themselves reflected in the mirrors, represented in the video, and experience themselves as eye witnesses while they watch the performance.

"In the scopis field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. ... What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects."²¹

Via the mirrors, the excluded outsides of the production are brought back into the production. That which is off stage (the obscenity of the real) now becomes a part of the staged spectacle. This creates a fourth level of media reflection and dislocation of reality.

Where has the outside disappeared to? It enters the work itself as form, becoming visible as reflection. For before one sees

from a specific point oneself, one is long since being viewed from all round, according to a well-known formulation by Jacques Lacan.²² Like in a conjuror's trick, the outside of the spectacle seems to have dissolved and become a spectacle itself. Everything is now spectacle, everything is staged. There seems to be no more outside world, no blind spot, no unobserved latency, no invisible fields. Everything is panoptic presence. A truly uncanny situation has been created. Here, faced with his reflection in the mirror, when the spectator himself enters into the

18) "The adjective 'post-dramatic' refers to a kind of theater that feels obliged to operate beyond drama, in a time 'after' the validity of the paradigm of drama in the theater." Jens-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt am Main, 1999, p. 30 (trans NG).

19) On the concept of *re-entry*, cf. George Spencer-Brown, *Laus of Form*, New York, 1979, pp. 69–76.

20) Cf. Hans Dieter Huber, "Split Attention. Performance und Publikum bei Dan Graham," in: Huber, *Dan Graham. Interviews*, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1997, pp. 47–63.

21) Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Seminar XI*, New York, 1981, p. 106.

22) "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides." Lacan, *op. cit.* (note 21), p. 72.

form of the spectacle as a blind spot, a switching of attention takes place. Attention becomes self-attention, aesthetic experience becomes self-experience, reference becomes self-reference.

This peripatetic transfer of experience onto itself, the transformation of experience into self-experience, is the key to understanding Markus Schinwald's work. Everything points back to us. At this moment of transfer triggered by the reflection in the mirror, it becomes clear that every experience is ultimately self-experience. Attention is always directed either towards ourselves or towards the other, but never towards both at the same time. Every reference presupposes self-reference. As a result of this self-recognition in the mirror image, it becomes clear that self-experience, self-attention, and self-reference represent the fundamental conditions for the possibility of experience, attention, and reference. Without the ability to distinguish between oneself and the other, and to draw a line between the two, no observation or experience are possible.

Every possible relationship to the world that a human individual can adopt is thus characterized by two fundamental and inseparable aspects that form two sides of one and the same distinction. In any given case, one must be rendered invisible, blocked out, and kept in a latent state in favor of the other in order to set in motion the operation of observation. Either experience and attention are directed outwards at the world and the other, i.e., that which is observed, or they are directed towards the self, inwards, towards the person doing the observing. But observation can never be directed towards both at the same time. Aesthetic experience as a special form of observation oscillates back and forth between aspects of the self and aspects of the world, the spectacle, the media apparatus, and the mechanisms of discipline.

The return of the repressed, described by Sigmund Freud as one of the causes of the feeling of the uncanny,²³ can now be described as the re-entry of the blind spot, of excluded latency, and of the invisibility of one's own self into conscious observation, experience, or attention. It leads the self-recognizing spectator or exhibition visitor to realize within aesthetic experience that he must ultimately take responsibility for his own distinctions by recognizing and above all by acknowledging that it really is he himself who is making them. And this means taking responsibility for his own feelings, projections, associations, aesthetic likes and dislikes.

This places Markus Schinwald as an artist in the tradition of the educators and social reformers of the eighteenth century. His work is a great and uncanny lesson about the role of the viewer and his social responsibility for the construction of assigned roles. The viewer's subjugation by the media apparatuses of discipline and self-correction and his resurrection, his re-entry into the spectacle of society as a social, purified, disciplined, educated, and subjugated subject via aesthetic experience, can be perceived in Schinwald's works as an experience of freedom.

23) Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919) in Freud, *The Uncanny*, New York, 2003, p. 121 ff.