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## About

*Gender forum* is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

## Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to [gender-forum@uni-koeln.de](mailto:gender-forum@uni-koeln.de).

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

## Article Publishing

The journal aims to provide rapid publication of research through a continuous publication model. All submissions are subject to peer review. Articles should not be under review by any other journal when submitted to *Gender forum*.

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There are no submission or page charges, and no colour charges.

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## Editorial

1 Addressing the diverse field of gender and language, the current issue of gender forum brings together articles from a wide range of disciplines. Thus this issue presents contributions investigating the role of language in relation to gender in literature by East German women writers, the language philosophy of Stanley Cavell, linguistic codes employed in gay personal ads in Taiwan, as well as the nexus of language, gender, and history in selected works by Gertrude Stein.

2 Drawing on Peirce's concept of iconicity, Anne Lequy's contribution, "Iconicity as a Doorway to a New Space: Lesser Known East German Writers in the Seventies and Eighties," looks beyond the work of well-known authors such as Christa Wolf to shed light on the use of language in works by eight less known GDR women writers. In her discussion, Lequy shows how imagic, diagrammatic, and metaphoric iconicity subvert patriarchal as well as totalitarian structures in these texts. However, Lequy also cautions us to not simply equate iconicity with subversion in that such an equation would necessarily blind us, among others, to how literary iconicity enables these authors to free themselves at least momentarily from their "squinting gaze" (*schielender Blick*), thus enabling them to work creatively from within the space carved out by male aesthetic norms.

3 In discussing the importance of gender in Stanley Cavell's writing on language and on film, Ludger Viefhues-Bailey's "Bearing the Beyond: Women and the Limits of Language in Stanley Cavell" addresses a silence in the critical study of Cavell's work, whose concern with gender issues has rarely become the subject of critical and systematic analysis. Positioning Cavell in relation (as well as contrast) to Wittgenstein's language of philosophy, Viefhues-Bailey goes on to shed light on the intricate relation established between gender and ways of speaking and knowing, between language and (male) desire in Cavell's work, illustrating how skepticism and other ways of knowing come to be perceived as a specifically "male affair." By reading Cavell's work on language together with his work on film (Hollywood melodrama in particular), Viefhues-Bailey critically examines Cavell's claim that these films subvert male ways of knowing, allowing female stars to evade a model of desire based on objectification and replacing it with one based on participation.

4 Hong-Chi Shiao's contribution, "Performativity, Intertextuality and Social Change: An Ethnographic Analysis of Taiwanese Gay Personal Ads" investigates linguistic codes used by Taiwanese gay men in personal ads before and after the rise of the Internet. Analysing and comparing the linguistic codes employed in these ads, Shiao reads them as interactive

performances enabling the construction of homosexual identities and opening up a site where social and cultural norms can be contested and subverted.

5 Bringing together the issues of gender, language, and history, in her reading of Gertrude Stein's *Messages from History* and "We Came. A History," in her contribution, "Are Remarks History? Gertrude Stein as Conceptual Artist," Linda S. Watts discusses Stein as a forerunner and founding figure of language-based conceptual art. Describing Stein's use of and play with language as an "aesthetics of interruption," Watts illustrates the extent to which Stein used this technique to question and destabilize male-centered versions of art and history, and traces the repercussion of this technique in the work of contemporary conceptual/word artists such as Barbara Kruger and the Guerilla Girls.

6 This issue is completed by Jozefína Komporaly's interview with British playwright Lisa Evans, in which the author of *Once We Were Mothers* discusses her work and the importance of gender in her writing, as well as by reviews of Christina Wald's *Hysteria, Trauma and Melancholia: Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* and Patricia Hill Collins' *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*.

# Iconicity as a Doorway to a New Space: Lesser Known East German Women Writers in the Seventies and Eighties

By Anne Lequy, Hochschule Magdeburg-Stendal (FH), Germany

## Abstract:

Christa Wolf, Anna Seghers, Irmtraud Morgner, Brigitte Reimann and Maxie Wander are not the only women who wrote in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Although these five are the most well-known of that country's female authors, their fame should not cause us to ignore the very varied corpus of unrecognised literature produced by East German women. I uncovered more than 350 names of women who lived, wrote and were (or at least tried to be) published in Eastern Germany between 1971 and 1989, i.e. the second half of GDR history or the "Honecker era" (Lequy 487). Among this multitude, I choose to concentrate here on the eight I find most interesting from the point of view of literary iconicity. Applying Peirce's semiotics, I distinguish successively between imagic, diagrammatic and metaphoric iconicity. All eight authors I selected for this paper explore and exploit the materiality of words. Thanks to the corporeality of language, they open a door to new literary and political dimensions. This paper aims at both showing which innovative aspects literary iconicity brings to the works of lesser known GDR female writers, and analysing which innovative aspects their works bring to the theme of iconicity.

1 About a century ago, two theories of the sign were conceived on opposite sides of the Atlantic. The European semiology of Saussure emerging on one side was "verbocentric," as Saussure saw the arbitrary nature of *la langue* as the paradigm form of representation. On the other side, Peirce, a systematic philosopher, suggested a much broader epistemological conception of representation: for him, the sign-relation is able to explain comprehensive theorems of knowledge and perception. Iconicity is nested within a complex structure of philosophical, as opposed to linguistic, concepts. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we must acknowledge that Peirce has won the match: our language is not exclusively arbitrary as Saussure postulated, and iconicity is ubiquitous in language and literature, cognition and scientific activities.

2 Broadly speaking, iconicity refers to a specific relation between the form of a linguistic sign and the concept to which that sign refers in a person's understanding of his or her real world. Pierce considers the relations between three basic elements — the representation (*sign*), the object of the representation (referent or *object*) and the way the object is represented

(*interpretant*). In his correspondence with Lady Welby dating from 1908, Peirce explains which "path" can be followed between object and interpretant.

I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former. (Peirce, *Semiotic* 80-81)

The logical order of determination is indicated by the direction of the arrows in Fig. 1:

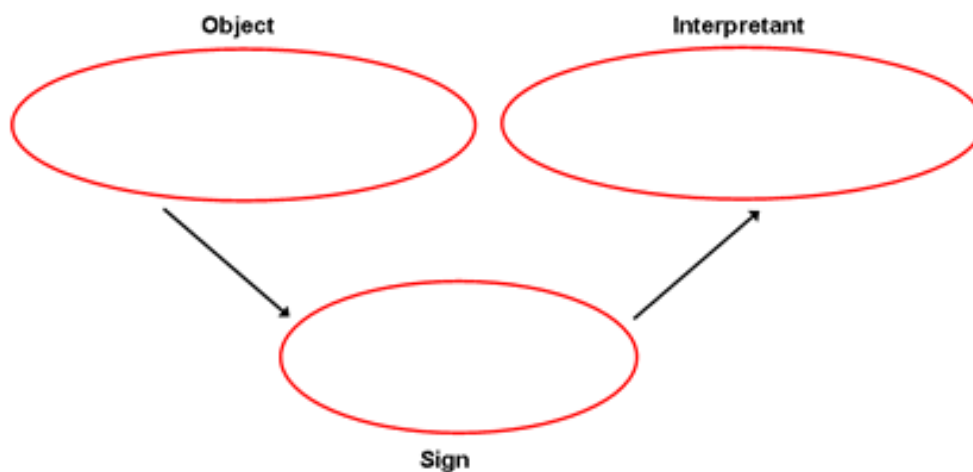


Fig. 1.

3 The correspondence between sign and object can be quite direct, when both share common, intrinsic features. This basic version of iconicity, whose existence Saussure did not reject, is commonly referred to as *imagic*. A prominent example of this type is the notion of onomatopoeia, which is not limited to words such as the German *bang* or *plumps*, but also includes puns like *Mauser* (in place of *Mauer*, German for *wall*). Katja Lange-Müller, an East German writer, chose this name for the main character of the book she published in 1988, four years after leaving the GDR and one year before the East-West German wall came down. In other cases, however, the correspondence between sign and referent is far less direct: in Peirce's taxonomy of signs, this type of iconicity is termed *diagrammatic*. In this case, there is no overt

similarity between the signifier and the signified. Caesar's *veni, vidi, vici* is a very often used illustration for the iconic diagram. The sequence of individually symbolic words mirrors the sequence of actions it enumerates. There is a third and a last category of iconicity, rarely addressed by Peirce's critics: *metaphoric* iconicity. Jappy gives an obvious example to illustrate how metaphors operate: "This surgeon is a butcher" (Jappy, Chapter 3). The metaphor, which will be analysed more precisely later on, conveys the idea that this surgeon treats patients as if they were lumps of meat and bone in the butcher's hand. Even if this example might be a metaphoric sign (or hypo-icon), Peirce insists on the point that metaphor is form, and not a piece of figurative discourse such as a sentence.

4 The corpus of works on which this study draws consists of texts written by eight lesser known GDR female authors between 1978 and 1989. Astonishingly enough, the Peircean concepts of iconicity have never been applied to the writing of East German women. This is indeed quite surprising, since the former GDR appears to be a good "substrate" for iconicity, as far as the working and living conditions of female authors were concerned. I would even like to suggest that the three types of iconicity described above (imagic, diagrammatic and metaphoric) are inherent in the writing of women in the GDR, due to the specific features of that country. Geographically, politically, economically and sociologically, East Germany differed a lot from Western Europe: It was virtually impossible to cross the border to the Federal Republic of Germany. The state's doctrine was marked by militarism and nationalism; the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) dominated political life. The SED was based on centralism and on the principle of social unity, which reinforced the standardisation of society, whereas divergent elements were excluded or instrumentalised. The socialist regime ruled over the mechanisms of literary creation and reception: writers, reviewers, publishing houses as well as the channels of distribution were under government control. This state domination had paradoxical consequences on the literary climate, which also benefited from this public support: reading and writing played a bigger role than in other countries. Another specific feature of GDR society is the so-called "proclaimed equality of rights" between men and women. Indeed legislation in the GDR was very progressive (e.g. female access to so-called masculine jobs, equality of wages, divorce, birth control and abortion). Nevertheless the ways of thinking had not evolved as quickly as the politics, and most of the time women were still in charge of the household and the children's education, in addition to their paid jobs.



5 The standardisation of society was an expression of political will. However, this does not necessary mean that all GDR female authors to be dealt with in this paper had the same experiences in their lives as women and as writers. Of course they shared a common denominator, a lack of recognition, but their personal situations might have varied a lot. The following diagram shows how close or distant some lesser known female writers were from the central power. The state machinery treated some in a more or less friendly way than others (Fig. 2).

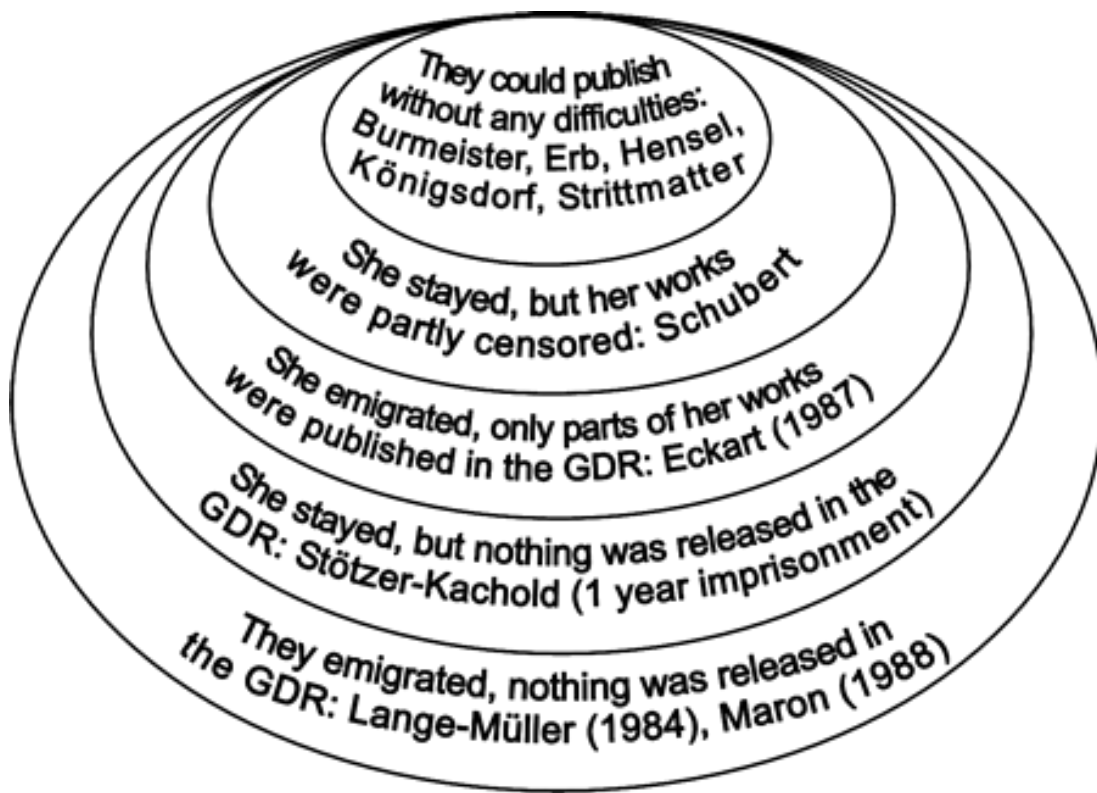


Fig. 2.

The literary climate in the GDR (i.e. the conditions in which literature emerged) could be tough for one author and yet encouraging for another one, depending on her political acceptance. There may be a strong link between the political acceptance of an author and the use she made of iconic means in her literary works. Can we say, for instance, that the more literary iconicity she used (i.e. the more daring and provocative her writing was), the more difficult it was for her to stay in the GDR and have her works released there? In order to test this intuitive hypothesis, we need to have a closer look at the texts — and at the East German context.

6 Why might it be that unrecognised works by East German female authors hold so many surprises as far as literary iconicity is concerned? Their innovative potential is due to their very specific place of emergence. Since East Germany remained a patriarchal country in spite of its progressive socialist laws, in this particular context language appears to be dual, existing simultaneously as a factor of oppression and a key to emancipation. Iconicity enables the writers to cope with language duality:

The iconic force in language produces an ENACTMENT of the fictional reality through the form of the text. This brings realistic illusion to life in a new dimension: as readers, we do not merely receive a report of the fictional world; we enter into it iconically, as a dramatic performance, through the experience of reading. (Leech and Short 236; emphasis in the original)

Leech and Short allude to the emotive value of iconicity for the interpretation of literary texts. They refer here to an "enactment," which leads to a reader-based "dramatic performance." This performance is by definition a subjective process, which is an individual result of the act of reading. It means that the representation of the text (the sense) does not exist before the act of reading, which makes it difficult for censorship (as well as self-censorship) to work efficiently. This is why we can assume that literary iconicity is particularly vivid in works written by East German female authors, due to their very specific way of life.

7 More than in Western Europe, the life of lesser known women writers in the former GDR was affected by the double standards described above. First, they experienced this contradictory situation as women — living in a state where the question of women's liberation was considered solved but the mentalities remained patriarchal. Secondly, they felt the rift between principles and reality, between theory and practice in their life as writers. On the one hand, the GDR society was extremely literature-friendly: many people read a great deal of books; the authors were in close contact with their editors and readership. Moreover, even books considered hard to sell were published; editorial decisions were not governed by the commercial rules applied in capitalist countries. On the other hand, literary creation was subject to censorship, which automatically induces self-censorship. Thirdly, lesser known East German women writers experienced marginalization in the literary landscape because their works were considered second-rate or not considered at all. During the GDR era their texts were not duly reviewed or

analysed by literary critics. Recognition finally came late and with hesitation (i.e. after the *Wende* in 1989-1990).<sup>1</sup>

8 Beyond these GDR-specific difficulties, East German women writers — like other female authors all over the world — also coped with the problem of what Sigrid Weigel called "double place" (Weigel, *Topographien* 262; my translation). They experienced this phenomenon both in their life and in their writing: they lived in an inherently patriarchal society, which at the same time pretended that the equality of rights between the sexes had been achieved. They faced a male language that tended to exclude them, but also served as their first means of effective expression. Thus, they had to look through what Weigel calls "the man's glasses," in her much-cited essay on the topic of Feminine aesthetics, entitled "Der schielende Blick" (Weigel, *Blick* 85).<sup>2</sup> "The title [. . .] is full of ambiguities. 'Der schielende Blick' can mean 'the cross-eyed gaze', 'the surreptitious gaze out of the corner of the eye' or 'the gaze directed in two divergent directions'" (Translator Harriet Anderson, in Weigel, *Focus* 303).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, for East German female authors, there were no other ways to see: the patriarchal glasses are the language in which they articulate themselves, the reason they need to draw conclusions. But the paradoxical status of women in a patriarchal society as both subject and object allows them to squint: with one eye they see through the glasses but with the other they dare to peek at another reality (Weigel, *Blick* 104). Iconicity may serve as a literary technique enabling these female authors to rule the norms instead of being ruled by them.

9 The first type of iconicity used as a literary technique is the imagic one. East German female writers often use imaginisation in search of a suitable literary setting. They make literary use of a resemblance between an item and its referent by some — visual, pictorial, acoustic — characteristic. Katja Lange-Müller's work is one of the most striking examples. She plays with the phonetic shape of words and the evocative value of sounds in order to locate her writing between both German states (Lange-Müller, *Kasper*). Her story entitled *Kasper Mauser — Die*

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<sup>1</sup>The following examples illustrate this late and only partial recognition by the scholarly community: The volume *Vogel oder Käfig sein* (an overview of art and literature in independent GDR magazines from 1979 to 1989) presents only 23 contributions by women from a total of 158 texts (Michael and Wohlfahrt). In her "obituary" dedicated to GDR female writing, Christa Wolf mentions only her — already famous — colleagues Irmtraud Morgner, Inge Müller, Brigitte Reimann, and Maxie Wander (Wolf 19). Instead of searching in anthologies or high-circulation magazines, one should track down lesser known GDR female writers in isolated articles or in case studies written from a feminist point of view: Ph.D. theses (Schulze, Dahlke) or scholarly articles (Abret and Nagelschmidt).

*Feigheit vorm Freund* tells us less about life in East Germany than about the author's break with her former existence and her transition to a new society.

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# **Performativity, Intertextuality, and Social Change: An Ethnographic Analysis of Taiwanese Gay Personal Ads**

By Hong-Chi Shiau, Shih-Hsin University, Taiwan

## **Abstract**

Based on in-depth conversations with those who have actively been involved in the process of producing and responding to gay personal ads, this paper attempts to challenge the earlier content-centered and socio-psychological analyses concerning gay personals. In addition to analyzing elicited historical testimonials (the personal ads published in print), I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-two Taiwanese gay men who actively posted and/or responded to gay personal ads. In my interviews it soon became evident that the notion of intertextuality and multiple levels of linguistic functions worked together to facilitate the linguistic performance in gay communication, but that the respective importance of these was changed by the transition from print to digital media.

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

1 Prior to the rise of the Internet as the chief vehicle for personal ad placements, a group of linguistic codes identifiable as referring to Taiwanese gay (or sexually non-conforming) men were used to correspond in mainstream Taiwanese magazines. These "situated" linguistic systems, which can also be described as a cultural *taste*, "an acquired disposition" to "make difference by a process of distinction" (Bourdieu 466), have enabled Taiwanese gay men both to pass in relation to mainstream readers and helped construct homosexual identities. Based on in-depth conversations with those who have actively been involved in the process of producing and responding to gay personals, this paper attempts to challenge the earlier content-centered and socio-psychological analyses concerning gay personals. In addition to analyzing elicited historical testimonials (the personal ads published in print), I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-two Taiwanese gay men who actively posted and/or responded to gay personal ads. In my interviews it soon became evident that the notion of intertextuality and multiple levels of linguistic functions worked together to facilitate the linguistic performance in gay communication, but that the respective importance of these was changed by the transition from print to digital media.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Toronto, Canada, August 2004.

## **Historical Review of Content-based Approaches**

2 In the context of western academic research, personal ads have long been examined in the area of social psychology, and are recognized as a valuable source of information about self-presentation, social roles, gender stereotypes, and judgments of attractiveness (see Jones). Many studies have employed quantitative methodology to compare heterosexual and homosexual samples, concluding that gay men emphasize physical characteristics and mention sexuality more often than do women and heterosexual men (see Deaux & Hanna; Koestner & Wheeler; Gonzales & Meyers; Child, et al.). Furthermore, heterosexual men sought long-term relationships and mentioned sincerity more often than did gay men (see Gonzales & Meyers). Much of this content-based research compared social and psychological demands overtly stated in personal ads; in an attempt to unravel the gender differences, personal ads placed by both hetero- and homosexual males were repeatedly construed as a testimonial arena and (ab)used for comparisons concerning deviances, differences and sexualities.

3 This socio-psychological approach to gay personals has its limits. In order to devise a quantitative comparison, the coding schemes in most of the aforementioned research relied on straightforward declarations of what one has and what one wants (e.g. Deaux & Hanna 363), "ignoring the importance of textual constraints, discursive practice and socio-cultural relations of power restructured in the text" (Jones 37). Accordingly, this paper argues that the difference between male heterosexuals and homosexuals is more reflective of the socially constructed marginality in which male homosexuals have little opportunity for legitimate and public same-sex relationships, rather than proof of their supposedly genetically-determined promiscuous nature. It is sometimes more plausibly assumed that personal ads in Asia, e.g. in India and Taiwan, are more linguistically indirect and grammatically complicated; as suggested by intercultural studies, in high-context cultures communication relies more heavily on the context rather than the words articulated (see Hall).

## **Taiwanese Gay Personals: A Socio-linguistic Inquiry**

4 The capability of detecting their alliances and partners efficiently and accurately is imperative for sexual minorities. These "performances" are emblematic of a situated cultural production and legitimation of social distinction, enabling gay men to "pick each other out in a crowd" (Shelp 2). Without any gay-themed magazines before 1993, the gay personals lurking beneath the mainstream Taiwanese magazines were nearly unknown to outsiders. While GWM has long been known to mean "Gay White Male" in an Anglo-American



context, most gay linguistic registers in Chinese only emerged in the early 1990s. Although the informal and private discussions of gay sensibility or *taste* took place in a limited circle far earlier, it was not until 1993, when the first Taiwanese lesbian magazine, *Ai-Bao*<sup>2</sup>, had its debut, that some gay identifications became more readily recognizable in the public sphere due to repeated use. In the meantime, a myriad of articles have invented new lexicons in an attempt to replace the conventionally stigmatizing usages in *Ai-Bao* and *G & L* (another leading gay-themed magazine). However, due to a lack of grass-roots activism, these articles provided antidotal, western-imported usages to redefine and reframe male homosexual relationships in Taiwanese society. For instance, "top" and "bottom" were quickly imported and are widely used. "No C, no fat" has become one of the most commonly used sentences. Currently known as the abbreviation for sissy, "C" has nearly replaced any traditional Chinese expression of being feminine. Some localized usages evolved rapidly after the Internet became the chief vehicle of relationship matching. In the Taiwanese context, familial obligations are referred to the constellation of homosexual relationships to some degree: masculine and senior characters then identifying themselves as "Ge-Ge" (literally "senior brother"); feminine, senior and caretaking roles are "Je-Je" (literally "elder sister"). Along the same line, younger and sexually undifferentiated versatile gay men are "younger brothers," whereas the younger and feminine gay men are known as "Mei-Mei." The elderly and gay are often mocked as "auntie" or "grandma."

5 In 2006, I joined a workshop related to Taiwanese gay men health concerns and empowerment. After the workshop, a participant brought up the "funny personal ads" in the early 90s. I was surprised about the drastic social changes that the new technologies have brought about over the last decades. I have been connected with a number of informants, which later inspired me to conduct a study. Accordingly, I started searching the magazines systematically, reading between the lines and looking into issues carefully in an attempt to understand how several magazines were chosen as a site of desire where Taiwanese gay men appropriated texts and intertexts to assert their homosexual subjectivities. As mentioned earlier, this research was in reaction to several active informants, thus ethnographic interviews were conducted to retrieve their situated experience of producing and consuming these texts.

6 It is in this context that my research was conducted, and a snowballing sample scheme was employed to expand my sample from the close friends and acquaintances of researchers to the people in the circle. Since all my informants were mostly well educated, working

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<sup>2</sup> *Ai-Bao* means "Love Newspaper," while *G & L* is an abbreviation of gay and lesbian.

professionals (volunteers for AIDS pandemic prevention and education), I do not pretend that they represent the average Taiwanese gay male. Instead, this study intends to analyze situated and strongly context-bound social linguistic practices to shed light on the notions of intertextuality and performativity discussed in cultural studies. Communication among the members of this small community was covert, not known to the public, and thus these gay personals manifest the notion of intertextuality by importing, recreating or referencing internal or foreign texts to create a pool of meanings that can be decoded by certain readers only. At a time when the common linguistic registers and presentations had not yet come into existence, this site became a place where a wide range of "performance exercises" were executed. Some succeeded; others failed. Thus, the examination of the dynamic process of creation illuminates how social reality is continually created through social signs (cf. Butler's concept of performativity). In the same vein, this study sets out to displace content as the natural site, inverting the claims of traditional hermeneutics for meanings as substantive, expressive, and essential.

### **Gay Personals Lurking Beneath the Surface**

Kaoshiung, 174, 24, easygoing, into photography, mountain climbing and outdoor activities; I would like to make friends with you (guys) who are optimistic and forward looking. (Chih-Shiung<sup>3</sup>, 24)

Taichung, 169, 22, music lover wants to make friends with guys, will reply to any responses enclosed with photos and phone number. (Yu-Lin Chang, 22)

7 Starting in the 1980s, five to ten personal advertisements like the ones above began to appear quietly in each issue of *Green and Red Light of Love*, a magazine akin to *Cosmopolitan* in the US, which had long been advising working-class, high-school educated young Taiwanese twenty-somethings on dating and relationships. At first glance, these ads often passed as regular personals as a result of not being read as addressing a person of the same sex<sup>4</sup>. In the 1980s, these personal ads resembled other (non-gay) personals; the only identifiable information disclosed, although ambiguously, was that the search was geared towards same-sex (male) friends. Due to length restrictions, the authors of personal ads often

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, all Chinese names of my informants are pseudonyms. The paper keeps English names as given by informants. The use of English names in the Taiwanese context has a high degree of anonymity since these names are not official. Most personal advertisement posters use English names so as not to reveal their real identity. It is common for Taiwanese to have ten English names for different occasions.

<sup>4</sup> The English pronoun *you* does not differentiate male or female. However, such a distinction is made in Chinese. In other words, the personal ad loses its specifically male addressee when translated into English.

refrained from intimating their intentions. Given this, every poster followed a standardized linguistic genre. Often gay posters indicated that they were looking for a "soul mate" to spend their leisure time with. Their "linguistic struggle" consists in finding a "proper" performance, i.e. one revealing a non-conforming male self but not being too obviously "different." At times, the only identifiable register that differentiates gay personals from non-gay ads was a target specified as "male." The prospective respondents were required to read closely to differentiate a "male denoting you" from a "female denoting you" (see note 3). Most ads are kept low profile, following a generic pattern; almost everyone has similar talents and hobbies. While the boundary is neither absolute nor certain, gay male affiliated hobbies likely include: movies, hiking, traveling and photography. As stated by a number of informants consistently: "Straight guys do not usually make so much effort to meet guys on personals." Second, "guys do not have to care how well their respondents look." An informant expresses the possibility for queer decoding as follows:

...you know, what type of guy would post an ad to look for another guy to go hiking and traveling together? Yes, straight men may love to do that with their buddies, but they won't post their search in a women's magazine. (Jake , 37, who posted his ads and allegedly received 88 responses)

Kai-Wei, 42, who responded to three ads in the 1980s, commented on the creation of these personal advertisements: whatever they write, only one word counts, which is the male-denoting "you." This key word is to be found in such a sentence as "I would like to make friends with 'you.'"

8 Despite the linguistic distinction, readers are likely to misunderstand the poster's intention. For one thing, the male-denoting "you" is somewhat inclusive and used to refer to male or female. In terms of linguistic evolution, the female-denoting "you" came into existence under the influence of Roman languages which differentiate the feminine and masculine more strictly. The correspondent female-denoting pronoun in Chinese was thus created to more accurately translate western imported ideas. Because of this grammatical ambiguity the possibility remains that the ad creator literally wants to find buddies to play basketball together.

### **Gay Personals among Cinephiles**

9 Gay men have long used cinema as an important arena for the enacting of homosexual meanings (see Farmer). Movie theaters have long functioned as an "in venue" for gay men's cruising, and this has also been the case in Taiwan. However, not until 1993, when the *Golden*

*Horse* film festival featured a gay-themed section<sup>5</sup>, have large-scale gay-themed films been accessible and well-received in a legitimate context. Given that gay-themed movies were usually rated as "restricted" and had to be scheduled late in the evening, going to the movies, combined with the likelihood of dating and cruising, mobilized a large number of dispersed gay cinephiles to attend the screenings. Taking advantage of the popularity of film festivals and the visible association between gay males and cinema, a handful of Taiwanese movie-related magazines lent themselves as outlet for gay readerships. Featuring special issues focusing on identity politics, desires and fantasy, these magazines transformed into a key vehicle for gay male personals. As the number of gay personals grew exponentially, the genres and linguistic registers they employed were becoming diversified. While many remained conventional - customarily sincere and polite - akin to their straight counterparts, different articulations emerged among gay-identifying posters with certain positions and references that disclosed and, sometimes, even covertly affirmed their sense of gay subjectivity. Here are some examples of film-derived ads:

I wish to see the first *green ray* of light in the early summer morning. (Yang, 26, friendship)

Stifled ..... a yearning for the room with a view. (Yan, 33)

Walking amid a sun-drenched desert, disoriented, this is my so-called "*private Idaho*." I can't take it any longer. (Moosh, 38)

*Green Ray*, the film referenced in the first post, was a well-received among gay circles. The heroine's long pursuit of "true love" was resonated with the community's collective memories of growing up gay in Taiwan. Trying to relate their experiences with others, Taiwanese gay men reference cinematic texts, especially those of Rohmer's films.<sup>6</sup>

10 In January 1997, Corey posted the following personal advertisement in *World Movie Monthly*, a leading Taiwanese film magazine:

I would like to grow up bravely just as a shrub aspires to survive the most difficult winter and thrive. (Corey<sup>7</sup>, 34, male, friendship)

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<sup>5</sup> Gay-themed movies showing at the in 1991 Taipei Golden Horse film festival included: *Garden* (GB 1990); *Torch Song Trilogy* (US 1988); *Total Eclipse* (US 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Eric Rohmer is an acclaimed French filmmaker and a frontier in the French New Wave. His film was screened in the *Golden Horse* film festival. Several informants of the study felt that the female narrators in his movie in fact are gay men in drag.

<sup>7</sup> As a longstanding friend of the author, Corey (pseudonym) volunteered to offer many personals he posted and share with me what he thought of the responses he received.

There were a hundred and fifty personals published in the issue: approximately 35% of them were similar to Corey's. Within two months Corey received twenty responses: eight were from women; twelve were from men. Corey maintained correspondences with three men regularly. After six months, Corey started dating one of the three, and they have been together for nine years. Corey's story exemplifies a situated linguistic practice in which he re/produces gay male subjectivity. In his words, these linguistic registers "often entail contradictions and contrasts, strangely uncanny." For instance, similar textual practices such as "melancholy struggle," "icy warmhearted," "loneliness amid a crowd" and "subversively submissive" occurred in the same issue. These linguistic terms became emblematic of gayness, actively targeting Taiwanese homosexual men before the rise of the Internet.

### **Cross Media Intertextuality and Performativity**

11 In a 1997 issue of *World Movie Monthly*, Tim posted the following personal:

After a while, like a deer, we learnt to lick our wounds to ease the pain. After a while, we came to the realization that our darkest fears were remarkably average. After a while we bumped into each other in the shade of a tree. You smiled and sighed: Oh, you are here, too. (Tim, 29, friendship)

In answer to the above paragraph, Tim received more than 80 responses; approximately 70 respondents were male. By 1995, this staged performance, a tacit consensus among posters and respondents on the matter, unknown to non-community members, had become recognizable to the majority of gay men in Taiwan. In Tim's opinion, his personal ad disturbed earlier linguistic genres by deliberately omitting his offerings; it was thus too "obscure" for straight men. Fraught with ambiguity and dissonance, the stream of consciousness, tension, juxtaposition and struggling presented in personal ads, according to my informants, signified a gay sensibility.

12 In the interview, Tim continued to explain what constitutes "gay registers," or a gay archetype in Taiwan. The most popular icons surfacing in the gay scene he can think of are the "young-sad-boys" in *Crystal Boys*, a novel by Kenneth Pai published in Taiwan in 1983. Literally, "crystal boys" means "sons of sin," but it may also be an allusion to a state in which "friendless officials and concubine's sons"<sup>8</sup>, the ostracized individuals in Chinese imperial society, had to learn to negotiate their identity. Ostracized by their schools and families, the

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<sup>8</sup> Qu Yuan relates the notion of friendless officials and concubine's sons in one of the earliest pieces of Chinese classic literature, *Li Sao (Sorrow of Parting)*, to the ostracism experienced by male homosexuals in modern society.

protagonists of *Crystal Boys* are sentimental and depressed. The characters of *Crystal Boys* became convenient intertextual references. The shady trees, pagoda, red pavilion, lotus pool, skyline and moon reflected upon the small pond of the Taipei New Park<sup>9</sup> became signifiers often appropriated in stream-of-consciousness passages. Notably, the semantic construction depends heavily on hidden dialogicity, i.e. the omission of the statement of one speaker in a dialogue between two persons. The meanings of words stretched beyond common dictionary definitions to point to individual and contextual differences.<sup>10</sup> Thus, although gay personals were not primarily a political medium, they nevertheless became subversive texts challenging conventional linguistic and semantic usage and heteronormativity and turned into a crucial vehicle for the construction of Taiwanese gay subjectivity. In addition to *Crystal Boys*, most gay-related linguistic registers were derived from art or works of literature, e.g. *Notes from a Desolate Man*, the winner of the *China Times* Novel Prize in 1994. In the text of *Notes*, the narrator, dying of AIDS in the end, discloses his desire and longstanding indulgence in anonymous sex across the world. While the writing in *Notes* illustrates the volatile relation between signifiers and signifieds, the intertextual appropriation of texts in personal advertisements enabled the respondents, most likely also the readers of *Notes*, to interact, to respond and to exchange their shared texts. The slices of life narrated in *Notes* were cited and reproduced among gay men in Taiwan, in particular, the protagonist's confrontation with his ex-lover's risky lifestyle, radical political activism, and eventual death. In the mindset of one poster, the perpetual recombination of fragments from *Notes* was emblematic of "the fragility of romantic love; the awesome power of eroticism; the solace of writing and the cold ennui of a younger generation enthralled only by video games" (personal ad posted in 1995).

### **From Mainstream Magazine to Cyberspace: From Asexual to Hypersexual**

13 "Taiwan's gay movement is also a movement of media" (Chou 159). Scholars analyzing Taiwan's gay movements claim that the rapid emergence and growth of Taiwanese gay/lesbian/queer community in the 1990s can be attributed to computer-mediated

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<sup>9</sup> Beginning in the early 1980s, the Taiwanese gay community became increasingly visible in urban settings, most notably the Taipei New Park depicted in *Crystal Boys* and other gay-themed works of fiction. Located in proximity to the presidential palace and parliament, the Taipei New Park was established as a public space, but the Chinese-styled architecture and the abundance of shade combined with the frequent intrusion from patrols and the enforcement of martial law made it a significant location laden with cultural connotations for sexual minorities in the 1980s.

<sup>10</sup> Thus, the line "Oh, you are here too," derived from the theme song of the film version of *Crystal Boys*, Taiwan's first gay-themed movie, and alludes to a reunion after a lengthy journey in which disbelief and mischief almost ruin homosexual relationships.

communication (see Berry & Martin; Yang; Chou). The rise of the Internet during the 1990s has helped form a virtual community where gay/lesbian/queer people increase their visibility in an anonymous fashion (see Chang). The earliest form of interactive Internet communication in Taiwan was the Chinese-text-based Internet Relay Chat (IRC). The most popular IRC site for gays in Taiwan was MOTSS (Members Of The Same Sex). As a "virtual community" MOTSS provides a "public sphere," common ground for the sharing and discussion of issues important to its participants. In light of the accessibility and interactivity of the Internet, most personal posters migrated to such communities where members can garner resources and support to aid them in the pursuit of their lives. MOTSS functions as an alternative medium, and represents both a community to its subscribers and a resource to the gay and lesbian community in Taiwan.

14 Local web pages were scarce until 1997 and were not as popular as MOTSS due to their relatively non-interactive nature. However, the text-based format applied by MOTSS and similar sites gradually lost its attraction when regular websites were able to create new platforms that offered higher degrees of interactivity. The number of sites targeting gay people increased drastically after 1997. The advanced infrastructure of information technology in Taiwan helped facilitate a rapid transition from the text-based IRC to gay virtual communities in which users could post audio/visual/textual messages and communicate simultaneously.

15 In the digital age, gay linguistic registers emerged rapidly by either borrowing from anglophone gay cultures, reinventing the existing language or by concocting it from scratch. For instance, in order to be fully literate in the gay community, non-English speaking gay Taiwanese became at least acquainted with the following words: *gay*, *lesbian*, *top*, *bottom*, *LTR*, *bears* or even *sugar daddy*. Additionally, vocabularies were introduced to facilitate the process of interpersonal communication among posters and respondents. For instance, "flaming," in contrast to "discreet," refers to a target who unabashedly demonstrates his male homosexual identity.

16 As the interfaces of cyberspace have become increasingly interactive, mostly taking place in the audio-visual form, the present gay personal advertisements have become polarized. Some sites exist mainly for people aiming to solicit sex, while others are more geared towards clients seeking relationships. According to Josh, who was a longstanding poster and has experienced the transition from print to digital media, "it is almost impossible to attract any respondent nowadays if you post an ad without featuring your photo." In contrast to the former gay "frontier" the gay personal ads in the mainstream media, such as

Top-Fong, have become quite sexually explicit. Since many gay-related sites have become oriented towards a clientele seeking to solicit brief sexual encounters, gay men looking for long-term relationships have distanced themselves from these sites by creating a different space and re/negotiating their position. Some gay Taiwanese men have returned to the mainstream friend-seeking arena, reframing their interests and deemphasizing their sexual orientation to find a sincere soul-mate relationship. They gained inspiration from the days when personal ads were created for mainstream magazines, sending ambiguously poetic statements seeking feedback from both male and female respondents. Through these strategies, they managed to successfully distinguish their endeavor from that of sex personals.

17 With the rise of the Internet, sources for personal advertisements became increasingly diverse and fragmented. No longer did any one magazine or newspaper monopolize the market of gay personals, and neither did the former spatial constraint apply. Despite being the most frequently-researched source for analysis, the personal advertisements featured in *Advocate*, the American GLBT bi-weekly magazine, are far from representative of gay-personal advertisements since the emergence of their online counterparts.

18 A growing fashion which has been covered by many columnists in gay-themed online sources is that gay men seeking mates insist explicitly that their potential partners should be genuine and true to themselves (see Elmer). Observing this phenomenon in hundreds of gay personals, Elmer concluded that an identifiable expression of the ad writers' virtuousness, discernment, and value" (no pag.) in the competitive dating pool has also become a strong selling point in the gay community of the digital age, such as:

I want someone who is comfortable with who they are and who is stable sexually, mentally and emotionally. (Yahoo friend making site, 26 April 2005)

At the same time the use of abbreviation and jargons in personal advertisements is in sharp decline.

## **Conclusion**

19 As seen from the transition of presentations of gay personals, my study maintains that gay personals display a wealth of cultural connotations and can serve as a particularly fertile terrain for the study of cultural construction and performance of sexuality. Studies of social change and homosexuality have given attention to how changes in institutions accommodate or disadvantage homosexual people (see Blasisus; Cohn & Gallagher; Jenness; MacNair et al.). The media are considered to be "the important forum for understanding cultural impact since they provide the major site in which contests over meaning must succeed politically"



(Gamson 59). For Gamson, media are the critical gallery for discourses carried on in other forums. In the given context, I argue that gay personal advertisements lurking beneath the mainstream media can be regarded as evidence for how the collective correspondences to the dominant ideology have manifested themselves by negotiating a sphere where the fear of outing and the yearning for visibility collide. The production of a personal ad is not casual; rather, it actively responds to culture, sponsors connotative meanings and is a site where cultural values and norms are contested.

20 This study aimed to offer a different perspective on the examination of personal ads, arguing that the earlier content-based approach, dependent upon straightforward declarations, was de-contextualized and ignored the power of institutional discourses and structures. This study illustrated how gay personal ads emerged as ongoing multiple processes of interactive performances: internally, with individual rehearsed life scripts loosely related to his/her biological body; externally, their performativity is policed by social norms, and, in the event of personal positing, linguistic capacity and anticipated institutional requirement. As Felluga suggests in reference to Judith Butler, "our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies" (no pag.), and the transitions of performance and intertextuality of gay personal ads illustrating these multiply interactive processes. In addition, this paper is written from a conviction that emphasis should be put on the psycholinguistic dimension of gay subjectivity, with a focus on performativity and intertextuality. Stressing the impossibility of "proving" sex, sexuality, and gender by recourse to a prior, foundational biological body, this paper illustrates the process of how the gay male homosexuality in Taiwan has been rehearsed, much like a script, and how we, as the actors make this script a reality over and over again by performing these actions (see Butler 1993, 1997, 1999).

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# Bearing the Beyond: Women and the Limits of Language in Stanley Cavell

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## Abstract:

The American philosopher Stanley Cavell is one of the very few thinkers in the Anglo-Saxon dispensation of philosophy who addresses the role of gender and desire in our possessing language. While Cavell's oeuvre is receiving more and more attention in Europe, the issues of gender discussed in and raised by his writing are not systematically explored. Against this silence in Cavell scholarship, this paper aims to show exegetically how philosophizing about language and about sexuality are connected in Cavell's work. Systematically, I will argue secondly that for Cavell not metaphysics but concrete gender and sexual arrangements motivate the yearning for the impossible, which characterizes so much of modern western philosophy. To this end I will trace a connection between Cavell's technical discussions of Wittgensteinian understanding of language and his own reflections on gender and marriage in opera and film.

1 The American philosopher Stanley Cavell is one of the very few thinkers in the Anglo-Saxon dispensation of philosophy who address the role of gender and desire in our possessing language. While Cavell's oeuvre is receiving more and more attention in Europe, the issues of gender discussed in and raised by his writing are not systematically explored.<sup>1</sup> That the topic of gender is shrouded in silence is even more surprising, since in his later writings on theatre, film, and opera Cavell ponders explicitly what women can say in the face of the violence of masculine ways of knowing and speaking.

2 Against this silence in Cavell scholarship, this paper aims to show exegetically how philosophizing about language and about sexuality are connected in Cavell's work. Systematically, I will argue that for Cavell not metaphysics but concrete gender and sexual arrangements motivate the yearning for the impossible, which characterizes so much of modern western philosophy.<sup>2</sup> To this end I will discuss in some detail Cavell's analysis of what kind of understanding of speech and knowledge fuels skepticism as the opening gambit of modern philosophy. This discussion will make clear that for him the skeptical worry is motivated not by the structures of language as such, but by a specific form of structuring

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<sup>1</sup> For example, gender appears only as an afterthought in Stephen Mulhall's Stanley Cavell: *Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Likewise Richard Eldridge's superb 2003 collection of essays on Cavell does not systematically explore the issue of gender (*Stanley Cavell*. Ed. Richard Eldridge. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003). My *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear: A Cavellian Reading of Gender, Origin and Religion in Modern Skepticism* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2007) aims to rectify this situation.

<sup>2</sup> For the importance of this yearning for the impossible for the continental tradition in general and for Derrida in particular see: Dooley, Mark, and Liam Kavanagh. *The Philosophy of Derrida, Continental European Philosophy*. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007; as well as Vries, Hent de. *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.

knowledge and desire. Turning to Cavell's work on film and opera will allow us secondly to identify these forms of knowledge and desire as specifically gendered. The analysis of Hollywood comedies and melodrama will finally make it possible to examine the violent consequences of this kind of knowledge and desire for women and to characterize their powers for overcoming it.

## **Skepticism and Language: From Rules to Masculine Desire**

### **Doubting without Context**

3 In Cavell's analysis, modern philosophy is haunted by a form of skepticism that is characterized by a deep dissatisfaction with our ordinary claims to knowledge, and he raises the question of whence this particular dissatisfaction? Why should we need to defend our ability to answer in specific contexts the doubting question "how do you know" or why should consider ordinary and contextual knowledge to be unsatisfactory?

4 According to Cavell, the skeptical quest for knowledge results from a removal from the concrete circumstances of our practices of knowing or doubting whether something is the case. The skeptic desires epistemic *certainty in-and-of-itself*. Not the status of my claim that "I know that 'this here is a gold finch'" (to which I could answer, don't you see the color of the feathers and the beak) is in question. Rather, the skeptic transfers a question ("how do you know") out of contexts in which it can make sense into one where nothing is claimed and thus nothing can be doubted. Instead of asking "how do you know *this* or *that*," the question becomes, "how do you know in principle." Cavell considers this move to be illegitimate. The skeptic may defend it along the following lines: we can surely project the word "know" into new contexts; for example, we can move from "how do I know whether this is a gold-finch" to "how do I know whether this is a Louis XVI chair." Why not extend and generalize the projection to "how do you know whether x" and thus ask whether I can know anything? For Cavell this move however is the point where the skeptics speak as if they were outside the world of concrete contexts, phenomena, and acts of claiming. A consequence of this quest for *noumenal* knowledge (knowledge *an sich*) is that the skeptic loses his or her moorings in the phenomenal world. And in so doing the skeptic's doubt loses intelligibility itself. Without the concrete contexts within which we ordinarily ask for clarification of claims to knowledge we cannot know what doubting consists in. Yet a consequence of this radical doubt is that the phenomenal world of concrete interactions itself, the life-world of the skeptic, becomes condensed into an abstract x, and is imagined to be situated in opposition to the skeptic. Thus, Cavell writes that the skeptic deals with the world as if it were like a giant "tomato" or the

dark side of the moon (Cavell, *Claim* 237, 202). The world in its totality becomes objectified.

5 In this imagination the skeptic expresses simultaneously a vision of penetrating potency and of isolated impotence: The skeptic seems to imagine the world as a suitable object of intellectual desire, something readily available for his epistemic grasp, all the while he envisions the knowing subject as one who is (ideally) *mastering* its object. In this *master-vision* of the subject, the epistemic ideal has to be total epistemic access and access to totality. I have to know all of the object under all circumstances. Yet, at the same time, the epistemic subject is construed as being impotent *vis-à-vis* the world, because the knowing subject's position is eternally fixed as one of separation. I am isolated from the world. The same distance that makes possible the vision of mastering the totality of the world, engenders the fearful suspicion that the object of intellectual desire is perpetually removed from my grasp. The skeptic gazes longingly at the world with a desire for total epistemic control, and he experiences himself as being "sealed off from the world" (*Claim* 144).

6 The anthropologist Stanley Tambiah makes a similar point. He distinguishes two possible orientations toward the world, which we can find, to varying degrees, in all cultures. Tambiah calls them "causality" and "participation." With causality he describes an attitude toward the world characterized by a logic of opposition. "Causality," Tambiah writes, "is quintessentially represented by the categories, rules and methodology of positive sciences and discursive mathematico-logical reason. The scientific focus involves a particular kind of distancing, affective neutrality and abstraction to events in the world" (105). Individuals in all cultures are capable of relating to the world in this manner, yet modern western science has made this the dominant orientation in western contexts. Tambiah contrasts this way of relating oneself to the world and others with one that he labels "participation." Here we find language of "solidarity, unity, holism, and continuity in space and time" (109). The Ego is not positioned in opposition to the world but seen deeply intertwined with it.

7 I mention these anthropological observations to strengthen the claim that the specific epistemic position that the skeptic imagines is not simply the result of linguistic or metaphysical structures. Rather, the skeptical desire for context-independent certainty reflects a *specific attitude* toward the world and society — one of distantiation writ large, in which the world in its totality is ideally completely exposed to the skeptic's desire to know. In the skeptical imagination the causal attitude toward the world becomes free floating, disconnected from the concrete practices of scientific cultures of knowledge production. The skeptic's pose moreover is reminiscent of "a modern scene of existence as controlled by a spectator at once impossible and divine who organizes everything without ever acting or

participating," to use the words of Stefanos Geroulanos's reading of Foucault (649). Conversely, we can understand Cavell as arguing that the skeptic is motivated by a fearful rejection of what Tambiah called the participatory orientation toward world and society. The skeptic fears an epistemic position where not abstract rules but relationships determine the meaning of our words. And this is indeed the point that Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein wants to highlight: Our words have meaning only within the context of a shared life. Fully acknowledging this point however leads to an anxiety over what we can say about ourselves and over who counts as "we."

### Sharing Words is Risky

8 Wittgenstein argues, according to Cavell, that the skeptical move from a concrete act of doubting to doubting in-and-of-itself is made possible because the skeptic is, as it were, bewitched, by language.<sup>3</sup> Our language is pliable and depends for its creativity on our ability to project a word into a new context.<sup>4</sup> The skeptic thinks however that this ability for projection must be governed by a system of rules. After all, we regularly produce projections of words into new contexts that others recognize and can understand. It is an "astonishing fact," writes Cavell, "that language is shared, that the forms I rely upon in making sense are human forms, that they impose human limits upon me, that when I say what we 'can' and 'cannot' say I am indeed voicing necessities which others recognize, i.e., obey (consciously or not); and that our uses of language are pervasively, almost unimaginably, systematic" (*Claim* 29). If not linguistic rules, what else could account for this "systematicity" of language?

9 Wittgenstein cautions against thinking that syntactic rules can account for the regularity with which we understand each other's words, even in new contexts. For example, with regards to the truths of logic, Wittgenstein writes, "it has often been put in the form of an assertion that the truths of logic are determined by a consensus of opinions. Is this what I am saying? No. There is no opinion at all; it is not a question of opinion. They are determined by a consensus of action: a consensus of doing the same thing, reacting in the same way" (*Mathematics* 183-84). The meaning of words is not controlled by a system of rules outside of our acts of speaking and living together.

10 In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein makes this point by reminding us of the analogy between speaking a language and playing a game. We can easily imagine, he writes,

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<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, and G. E. M. Anscombe. *Philosophical Investigations*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997. §115. In the following *PI*.

<sup>4</sup> For a more technical discussion of this point see the second chapter of my *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear* as well as Pears' formulation that, according to Wittgenstein, meaning resides in linguistic techniques" (26).

people "playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball [. . .] and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw" (*PI* §83). Importantly, Wittgenstein adds: "And is there not also the case where we play and — make up the rules as we go along. And there is even one where we alter them — as we go along" (*PI* §83).

11 The key implication of this (often quoted) example is that accords and discourse in language are based on the players' willingness to engage each other. Thus, what makes the systematicity of language possible according to Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein is our capacity and willingness to follow each other's words. We can do this to the degree that — to use Cavell's expression — we are "attuned" to each other's sense of what can be said in a given context, of how *this* word in this situation can be considered as a natural extension of what *we* say in that context or of how this is an appropriate or inappropriate understanding of what *you* say. Linguistic attunement is therefore an instance of being attuned in a shared form of life, according to Wittgenstein. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? — It is what human beings *say* that is true or false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinion but in form of life" (*PI* §241; emphases in the original). The fact that we are attuned in our understanding what can "naturally" or "humanly" be said or doubted reflects, as Wittgenstein writes in §325, "how we think and live."

12 "How we think and live" is however not simply given either — nor is there a stable set of behaviors and thought patterns that identify "how we think and live." Rather, like playing ball together, thinking and living together is an ongoing process; and (unlike playing ball) it is a risky activity. What is remarkable about our use of language is how easily we can and do follow naturally the invitations expressed in new stories, in new jokes, etc. This speaks to the fact of how much we are in tune with each other. What is worrisome, and should be according to Cavell at least, is that any such invitation to follow can be refused. Sometimes projections that seem natural to us are utterly outrageous to others and we realize that we are not in tune with each other. "We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations — a thin net over an abyss" (Cavell, *Claim* 178).

13 What does this mean for the Wittgensteinian idea of a language game, which has such a hold on the imagination of many of his readers? Do language games provide a clear set of rules that perfectly govern the use of words? Given that Wittgenstein resists the idea of



seeing rules as perspicuous representation of how we use words we need to tread carefully here. The function of language-games should not be pictured as being like the function of a computer-chip somewhere implanted in our brains, filled with algorithms for potential moves for the game it governs. Rather, language games are methods of description that Wittgenstein uses in dialogue with the philosopher. *They are methodological inventions aimed at solving not abstract issues of grammar but particular concrete problems about which we find ourselves to be confused.* Remember the ball-game. The revelers play some existing game without finishing, and then play parts of another. In describing a strip of behavior we may invoke "football" or "soccer" and we may say that this move is "like playing soccer," etc. We imagine connections, similarities and dissimilarities in order to clarify what is going on. Yet, there is a difference between saying that "this is what is going on" and claiming that "this is all that is going on" or that "this is the only way of describing what is going on." Whether you do agree with me that this way of describing things is appropriate cannot be settled by rules. I can only try to tell you how it strikes me thus. I can tell a story or relate to you my impressions. The invention of language-games is part of the methodological procedures by which I show you how this or that use of my words seems natural to me. I am leading you from one example to another. By showing you how this is natural to me I am appealing to you that you understand or consider these connections to be natural, as well. As Cavell writes in *The Claim of Reason*:

The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I made sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me from others, from all others, from myself [. . .]. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason. (20)

14 This picture provokes the question of who are "we" here? It may be tempting to invoke the concept of "form of life." The players in questions are those who belong to the "same form of life" and who are socialized, perhaps, in the same ways of using language, in the same standards of appropriateness or of esthetic tastes etc. Yet, a closer look reveals that Wittgenstein invokes "form(s) of life" or "what we do" in his *Philosophical Investigations* mostly in contexts of contestations. Martians may see the man as back-sliding, but "we" cannot help but see him as climbing the steep hill. References to what "we" do are not so much explanations for our actions but rather exhortations or appeals to being in community. If you cannot help but see the world in terms of mereological sums; or human beings as sacks

of flesh governed by a universal consciousness; if you cannot see how "this" is being in pain, my words come to an end. I cannot explain but only claim that "this" *is* pain, or that bodies do matter. The form of life, which we share or contest, serves as a reference point that comes to existence only in the process of our appealing to it. As such, forms of life do not refer to existing demarcated spheres of behavior or experience. Appealing to a "form of life" is a claim to being intelligible and thus to being in community. Such appeals do not necessarily settle the question of any specific disagreement, but they transform a linguistic question into a negotiation of community.

15 Appeals to what "we" say are not so much reference to any *existing* communality but they constitute negotiations and performative creations of community. Again, it is helpful to stay close to the picture of the ball-game. It is through playing that we keep the ball going around. In other words, it is the interaction in words and life that establishes the reach of language, i.e., the circle of those to whom we talk and whose words we hear. Failed or contested interactions bring to the fore the questions of "what are we playing here" or "weren't we playing this game and not that one." Yet, it would be a mistake to see contestation and negotiation only at play when we have no resort but to assert the legitimacy of our practice in statements like "well, *this* is how we do things." Rather, we negotiate the reach of our community through the very acts of speaking, avoiding speech, silencing, and listening.

16 This reading of "forms of life" presents a picture of community in the *optative*. References to "what we do" in language are attempts to *create* community. Speaking and living together are open and fluid negotiations of belonging, secured neither by stable boundaries of existing communities nor by transcendental structures of language or of speech. Who we are as a community and who we are within this community is not given prior to our acts of speaking. Answers to these questions are only found as the result of constant struggles and attunements. In contrast to most readers of Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell is acutely aware of the dangers and potentials this plasticity in language implies.

## **Movies as Sites of Analysis and of Overcoming Skepticism**

### **Masculine Knowing: the Skeptic's Plight of Mind**

17 While this basic analysis of the skeptical desire for epistemic certainty is based in a reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in his work on film and opera Cavell goes beyond the Wittgensteinian answer that language is the main culprit. Not language (as a disembodied actor) exerts an irresistible and bewitching influence on the skeptic who is lured into desiring

the impossible and into denying the web of relationships on which rests intelligibility in language. Rather, the skeptical problem is driven by a specific plight of mind, by a specific way of being in the world, which makes it seem natural to move from claims to phenomenal knowledge to those to noumenal knowledge. Not structures of language but the epistemic desires of specific language users lie at the heart of the skeptical problem.

18 In Cavell's analysis of the skeptical desire, the idealized position of absolute sovereignty over and impotent isolation from the world reflects a particular masculine vision of knowledge. For example, in his interpretation of Othello, Cavell writes:

The violence in masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property. Othello's problem, following my suggestion that his problem is over success, not failure, is that Desdemona's acceptance, or satisfaction, or reward, of his ambition strikes him as being possessed, as if he were the woman. (*Knowledge* 10)

Othello as an emblem of skeptical knowledge aims not only to achieve total access to Desdemona as the object of his desire; moreover he fears to be known in turn, since being known seems to require being objectified in the calculus of the skeptic's understanding of knowledge.

19 Particularly Cavell's work on Hollywood movies from the mid-1930s to the 1940s can be read as a further examination of the contours and consequences of this idealized masculine knowing. By turning to artistic analysis, Cavell treats the skeptical desire as expressive of gender configurations permeating north-Atlantic culture. More specifically, Cavell considers through his work on these films the question of whether modern skepticism, and with it modern philosophy, could be seen as a profoundly "male affair" (*Pitch* 169).

20 One site of analysis are the movies that Cavell subsumes under the genre "melodrama of the unknown woman," a designation taken from Max Ophüls' movie of the same name.<sup>5</sup> In the films of this genre we encounter women who are forced to expose themselves to a male world, one that is characterized by a skeptical desire for epistemic control. Like Othello, the men of the melodramas are not ready to be objects of knowledge themselves. Knowledge is understood by the man as total access to and possession of the woman's privacy. In *Now Voyager*, the man wishes to know the woman's secret, in *Stella Dallas*, he tries to escape it, and in *Gaslight* to destroy it "where each objective is generically reflected in the others" (*Contesting* 14). And by holding on to the idea of knowledge as objectification, the man makes it impossible for the woman to expose herself to his knowledge. The kind of

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<sup>5</sup> Other titles are: George Cukor's *Gaslight*, Irving Rapper's *Now Voyager*, and King Vidor's *Stella Dallas*.

knowledge to which she can expose herself is violent; the terms set by masculine knowledge in the movies disallow the woman to be known outside of the logic of objectification and thus prevents her from being acknowledged on her own terms.

21 Cavell's reading of *The Letter of an Unknown Woman*, describes how this ideal of knowledge affects the unknown woman. Lisa Berndle, the character played by Joan Fontaine who gave the film its name, is left to create herself. But she has to do so without reciprocity and conversation with Stefan Brand, the addressee of the letter. Rather Lisa creates herself in isolation from Stefan, played by Louis Jourdan, and for him. She does this moreover privately — as her voice-over tells him (and us) posthumously: Quite consciously I began to prepare myself for you. I kept my clothes neater so that you wouldn't be ashamed of me. I took dancing lessons; I wanted to become more graceful, and learn good manners — for you. So that I would know more about you and your world, I went to the library and studied the lives of great musicians. (*Contesting* 107)

22 She wants to know more about him and his world but she is disbarred from doing so in relationship with him. Consequently, Lisa herself remains unknown because knowing her would move Stefan into a relationship of reciprocal knowledge and thus transformation. The problem in the films of the genre lies in the masculine desire to remain unchanged, unexposed, and private. In Stefan's denial of reciprocal knowing Lisa's "existence has been unacknowledged, a fact that quite literally, kills her. This is the reason she comes back to haunt the screen; her plea for acknowledgement posthumously directed both to Stefan and to us," as Carla Marcantonio comments (no pag.).

23 In short: the skeptic imagines knowledge to be constituted according to a logic of objectification where the knowing subject positions himself ideally in contrast to the world, desiring a form of knowledge that is possible only if he remains disconnected from his epistemic object. Similarly, the men in the melodrama understand desire according to a logic of objectification. In order to be desirable the woman has to be known without reciprocity. To be known or desired like a woman means to be objectified. To know and to desire like a man means to stand outside the processes of objectification.

### **The Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage as Sites of Transformation**

24 What would it mean to overcome this imagination of absolute disconnect and objectification? How do women and men acknowledge and cultivate their attunement on which all their claims to knowledge rest? These are the systematic questions that Cavell explores in his reflections on the films he calls "comedies of remarriage" (e.g., Frank Capra's

*It Happened One Night* or Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday*) in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. These movies provide a happy vision of marriage as the bond of speaking and being together.<sup>6</sup> Here Cavell describes a world in which women and men solve the issue of being fated to each other in language and in community.

25 This positive vision however reflects more than a simple consummation of a desire for intimacy. Cavell's reading engages the fact that in the American political imagination, the ideal marriage is an emblem of the bonds that bind society together (see Cott). According to Cavell, this ideal marriage is best understood as *remarriage*, i.e., as the constantly threatened and regained bond of reciprocity in speaking and listening. "What does a happy marriage *sound* like," asks Cavell; and he points to the "sound of argument, of wrangling, of verbal battle" (*Pursuits* 86). Given that using a language is an appeal to community in the optative, as we have already seen, we can understand these marital conversations as an appeal to a new community, one which does not yet exist but that is there to be created by the couple. In this community the woman and the man can find their individual and separate voices. At the same time, husband and wife have to find words in which to express themselves and to speak for each other in mutuality. With the help of the comedies, Cavell develops therefore the Wittgensteinian idea that language is not a contractual relationship but one based on our willingness to speak together and thus to remain exposed and attuned to each others words. And, as any musician knows, the job of tuning in is not simply finished in the moments before the performance starts. Tuning, remaining in tune, is a constant ongoing and mutual process. The comedies provide Cavell with the imagery and the sound of the struggles by which we are, become, and remain attuned to each other's words.

26 However, these films also allow Cavell to work out another idea that is central to his philosophizing. This is the Emersonian theme that language presupposes and enables the creation of a new vision of humanity. Our words (the inflections of tone, the connections we draw, and the allusions we imply) are performances of what it means to be human. The never-ending exchanges of words in remarriage enable a never-ending back-and-forth between new visions of humanity. This intercourse in words begets new understandings of what it means to be a human being. The continuous transformation of self, language, and community is at stake. In the ideal world of the comedies this constant need for transformation is acknowledged. More importantly the remarriage of the leading couple in the comedies presents us with an image of a community of *mutual* transformation.

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<sup>6</sup> The other movies Cavell discusses are: Leo Mc Carey's *The Awful Truth*, George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* and *Adam's Rib*, Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby*, and Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve*.

27 The task of transformation is however curiously gendered in Cavell's work. He writes at one point, "that the subject of the genre of remarriage is well described as the creation of the woman, or of the new woman, or the new creation of the human" (*Pursuits* 140). The woman becomes the stand-in for a new humanity. Moreover, her new creation is the result of work done by the leading men in the comedies, as Cavell seems to be saying for example in discussing Peter and Ellie's relationship in *It Happened One Night*. According to Cavell, Ellie is transformed through Peter's insistence that she humble herself and that she accept the food he cooked for her (*Pursuits* 57). Yet, Cavell also states that Ellie creates *herself* as a new woman. The question of who transforms whom in these movies or who has agency in the shaping of the new human community leads to ambiguous results.

28 This ambiguous relationship between the leading woman's activity and passivity reveals itself most clearly in Cavell's description of Walter and Hildy in *His Girl Friday*:

I mention several features of their intimacy which this film picks up quite unmodified from the laws of the genre of remarriage. There is the early, summary declaration that this woman has recently been created, and created by this man. What he created her from is a "doll-faced hick," which thus satisfies the law that they knew one another in childhood, anyway in a life before their shared adulthood. And what he created out of her was a newspaperman [sic!]. This creation accordingly hinges with the further feature in which accepted differences between the genders are made into problems, several related ones. The conventional distribution of physical vanity, first of all, is reversed. Our opening glimpse of Walter is of him primping, and soon he will be giving himself a flower to wear, as though dressing for battle. It takes a while for Hildy's comparative casualness about her looks to reveal itself [. . .]. The question which of them is the active and which the passive partner is treated at the close of their initial interview as a gag, as in *Bringing Up Baby*, about who is following whom, or about who should be. In *His Girl Friday* it takes the form of issues about who is to go first down the aisle through the city room and about who is to hold the door and a gate open for whom. (*Pursuits* 168)

29 Cavell's thoughts about the role of the camera and of the audience in these films can help to analyze further the question of activity and passivity in the creation of the woman. In his essay "Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly," Cavell describes as an essential aim of the comedies that they exploit "film's power of metamorphosis or transfiguration." Cavell continues with the claim that in these films this power is "expressed as the woman's suffering creation, which cinematically means the transformation of flesh-and-blood women into projections of themselves on a screen. Hence the obligation in those films to find some narrative occasion for revealing [. . .] the woman's body, the body of *that* actress" (*Contesting* 122).

30 In this passage, Cavell follows an insight from his earlier work *The World Viewed*. Here he had argued that whereas the actor on a stage disappears behind the character he or

she plays, the camera makes the actor on screen into a star (*World* 33, 175). The camera emphasizes the physical presence as photographic presence of the actor, an emphasis which demands the display or suggestion of the naked body "of the woman" (*Pursuits* 140).

Thus does film, in the genre under consideration, declare its participation in the creation of the woman, a declaration that its appetite for presenting a certain kind of woman a certain way on the screen — its power, or its fate, to determine what becomes of these women on film — is what permits the realization of these narratives structures as among the highest achievements in the art of film. (*Pursuits* 140)

31 In the next paragraph Cavell writes how in *The Philadelphia Story* the thematic question of whether this woman is made of flesh and blood or whether she is a (distant) goddess is formally inflected by the camera's studying of Katharine Hepburn's body — preferably in the presence of water, for example, when she produces a trained dive into the swimming pool. I refer to these passages because they seem to present us with the idea that the creation of the woman through the camera is a technical version of the creation of the woman through a male gaze.

32 Yet things are more complex. First, according to Cavell, the camera exposes allegedly "naturally" the "feminine aspect of the masculine physiognomy (and though I am for some reason more hesitant about his, the masculine aspect of the feminine)" (*Pursuits* 224). He links the intuition that the camera reveals the opposite sexual nature of its human subjects with the following two ideas. On the one hand, the camera reveals "an otherwise invisible self" (*Pursuits* 224). The camera and its focus on human bodily expression can present us with images of the potentials of the human self that are not usually seen, or not open to the "normal view." For example, the distinctions of societal order (in clothes, reputations, etc.) are not relevant for the eye of the camera. "It is this property of film that allows, say, Fellini to discover in the face of a contemporary Roman butcher the visage of an ancient Emperor" (*Pursuits* 158). On the other hand, the luminosity of the objects presented to the camera, points to an "inherent self-reflexiveness or self-referentiality of objects filmed" (*Pursuits* 224). The objects participate in their representation: the camera is not completely in control of the creative act. Moreover, the presence of those objects on the screen refers for Cavell to their absence. They point to the possibility that in the presentation of human beings on screen we are also confronted with what is absent or invisible in their gendered desire — something like the "other side" of each gender.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "The reflexiveness of objects harks back, in my mind, to the earlier claim in *The World Viewed* that objects on a screen appear as held in the frame of nature, implying the world as a whole. The sexual reflexiveness of

33 Secondly, the gaze of the camera should not be seen as fixed and fixing. Cavell produces a list of powerful gazes of woman on screen, transforming men on screen with their look. He ends this list with "Mae West delivering her line running, 'Come up and see me' — precisely unimaginable, I take it, as an offer to be gazed at dominantly" (*Contesting* 124). Cavell invites us to imagine that these women are empowered to "instruct the camera in its ways of looking — to, say, the extent that men can be instructed" (*Contesting* 125). Thus the gaze of the camera is not conceived as the "appropriative, unreciprocated gaze of men," but rather in line with the creative and reciprocating gazes of the men in the comedies of remarriage themselves (*Contesting* 123). Moreover, some of the films present one partner in the leading pair as surrogate director. For example, "in *Lady Eve* it is the woman who directs the action (as it is in *Bringing Up Baby*); the man is her audience, gulled and entranced as a film audience is apt to be. In *It Happened One Night* it is the man who directs, and the woman is not so much his audience as his star" (*Pursuits* 107). Thus, it is not clear whether the gaze of the camera presents a point of view of a male or female director.

34 In sum, the content of the comedies as well as the camera work present us with a complex of agency: the female stars expose themselves to the objectifying gaze of the male viewers while returning this gaze and claiming reciprocity. In so doing they subvert the logic of objectification and introduce the viewing man and the audience into a web of reciprocity. This subtle play of gazing in the comedies supports the mesh of verbal exchanges, which creates and acknowledges a vision of community in mutual participation. The comedies therefore in form, verbal exchanges, and content create an alternative vision to the skeptical objectification of desire and knowledge.

## **Bearing the Beyond**

### **Visualizing the Sublime**

35 It is clear however from this presentation that in Cavell's reading the female stars bear a special burden and possess their own power for moving the skeptical viewers out of a desire structured on the model of objectification into one structured on the ideal of participation. They have to bear the risk of exposing themselves to a partner who may or may not see them outside the confines of skeptical desire and knowledge. They need a man who is capable of revealing his own limitations, like Walter who declares in the movie *His Girl Friday* "that his own power is only mortal, without certainty, without insurance" (Cavell, *Pursuits* 180). The

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human beings would accordingly suggest the individual as expressing humanity as such, what in *The Claim of Reason* I call the internal relation of each human being with all others" (*Pursuits* 225).</p>
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37



leading men in the comedies are thus not only enabling transformation in their partners. They acknowledge for themselves the need for change and the acceptance of finitude.

36 This idea prompts for Cavell the question of what happens to the women who cannot find such a man. Do they possess their own powers to overcome the skeptical violence? Here we return again to the melodrama of the unknown woman. While the villains in these films are male, the women are cast in the double role of being both victims and saviors. The female stars represent therefore the Emersonian ideal of being open to change by embodying exposure to the future and to each other without metaphysical or grammatical guarantees. Where men deny the possibility of mutual conversation and where they refuse to join a community of transformation, "the woman must achieve her transformation otherwise" (Cavell, *Contesting*, 117). She must be considered to possess her own power to create herself in the face of the violence of masculine knowing. This power for self-creation is expressed in these movies through the trope of gaining a new identity, one which is visualized through changes of her body — or in and around her body, new ways of carrying herself, new dresses and appearances.

37 An example of this new creation of self, dressed in the visualization of bodily changes, is Stella Dallas's scandalous choice of donning excessive jewelry and furs when she, the working class woman and heroine of the movie *Stella Dallas*, appears at the resort hotel frequented by the upper class friends of her husband's Stephen. Cavell interprets this "Christmas tree spectacle" as Stella's way of appealing to the "distaste of those for whom she knows she is distasteful" (*Contesting* 202). Stella performs her exclusion from Stephen's world by presenting her audience with their own reading of her. According to Cavell, we have no reason to assume that her over-decorated appearance reflects Stella's own taste (*Contesting* 202). The care with which her preparation for this appearance is shown, suggests rather that she plans to be a spectacle. In so doing she reveals what it means to be a woman in an unwelcoming world of men:

The woman's problem is not one of not belonging but one of belonging, only on the wrong terms; unlike the exile, the woman is not between two different cultures but is at odds with the one in which she was born and is roughly in the process of transfiguration into one that does not exist, one as it were still in confinement. (*Contesting* 213)

38 Her spectacle theatricalizes the fact that Stella is at odds with Stephen's culture. And it declares Stella's right not to accept the terms of his culture, not to accept Stephen's terms of association and conversation. The spectacle prepares her for the freedom to leave "not just the man of the marriage but the consequence of a marriage she allowed herself to believe would

transform her" (*Contesting* 217). In this freedom Stella can express and realize her own taste, and this is no longer a taste for the world of men. Has it ever been the world of men? By characterizing her family of origin as primitive, Cavell suggests that Stella early on had a sense of being out of place in this world she was supposed to call home. Cavell recalls for us the wooden, shadowy father delivering ugly orders; the monosyllabic, helpless mother; the noisy, nervous brother, the filthiness of whose hands is ambiguous as being caused by his work in the mill, or by his maleness or by his incestuousness; and Stella's primping before the cheap mirror, as if always knowing that, wherever else she finds to be, she does not belong, she from the beginning does not belong here, at what the world calls home. (*Contesting* 218)

39 At the end of the movie, and of her attempts to find a home in the world of men, Stella walks away, ratifying her own taste, "that is the taking on the thinking of her own existence" (*Contesting* 219). She proves her own existence without fully knowing who she is. Here she is stripped of ornaments and Barbara Stanwyck's Stella is without spectacular beauty or "obvious glamour" (*Contesting* 219). Despite this lack, we know, says Cavell, that she has a future, "because she is presented here as a star (the camera showing her that particular insatiable interest in her every action and reaction), which entails the promise of return, of unpredictable reincarnation" (*Contesting* 219).

40 Whereas the stars in the comedies stand for humanity achievable in mutuality, the female stars in the melodrama stand for humanity achievable only through an aversion of the terms of a society that has no knowledge of them. In this aversion the women of the melodrama are not only asserting their right to speak their own mind. They are also empowered to judge this male world, which has nothing but silence to offer to them; a silence which is either the result of the negation of her voice in an abusive marriage or the silence of inexpressiveness in her isolated state of being unknown (cf. *Contesting* 127). The women of the melodrama demand the transformation of a man's world, and they transcend the position ascribed to them in this world.

41 Reading the fate of women in the Hollywood movies analyzed by Cavell therefore gives us insights in the violent consequences of the skeptical epistemic and erotic ideals of total access and total disjunction. Importantly these consequences are not metaphysical but instantly recognizable as part of the violence perpetrated against women's bodies in a world shaped by these ideals. Yet, Cavell's close attention to the luminosity of the body of the female stars on film also presents these women as a visualization of the sublime, understood as that which resists the confinements of the given order of things and yet is encoded in this

very order. These women's powerful bodies bear the beyond, which is able to change or judge the world created in a state male skeptical imagination.<sup>8</sup>

### Judging the World

42 In his reflections on opera Cavell expands on the idea that women have the power to judge a male-centered world from a space beyond it. He does this by linking their power to judge with the act of singing. He writes that a central feature of "singing [is] expressing the inexpressible — *in loss* or *in discovery*" (*Pitch* 154; emphasis added). The women in opera express in their song the

sense of being pressed or stretched between two worlds — one in which to be seen, the roughly familiar world of the philosophers, and one from which to be heard, one to which one releases or abandons one's spirit [. . .] and which recedes when the breath of the song ends. This expression of the inexpressible (for there is no standing language of that other world; it requires understanding without meaning) I described as a mad state, as if opera is naturally pitched at this brink. (*Pitch* 144)

43 Like the women stars in the melodrama, the singing women in opera expose themselves to the male world, because they carry within them the power to embody an Emersonian aversion from a place beyond the male space of seeing. In what he calls the *experience of loss* Cavell expresses the connection of singing to orality. Orality implies a pre-verbal place of feeling or pain. It is from this space that the woman expresses herself without a concept and consequently without assurance that she is understood or can make sense. The point is "to propose that we think of the voice in opera as a judgment of the world on the basis of, called forth by, pain beyond a concept." The therapeutic seduction of opera involves that we are called to listen to this pain and "to understand beyond explanation" (*Pitch* 149). This pain expresses the forced separation of the women's self from herself in a world where there are no words for her, "a separation that may be figured as being forced into a false marriage" (*Pitch* 151). In its inexpressiveness, this experience of loss — like music — points to a place of "understanding *before* what we might call meaning, as if it exists in permanent anticipation of — hence in perpetual dissatisfaction with, even disdain for — what can be said" (*Pitch* 160).

44 In what he names the *experience of discovery*, Cavell links singing to orgasm. In singing, the woman is beside herself. She experiences herself in connection to a "nextness to a grander world," i.e., a transcendent or sublime realm intervening into our world in the form

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<sup>8</sup> For this notion of the sublime see also: Mehigan, Timothy J. *The Critical Response to Musil's The Man without Qualities*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003. 103.

of an "irrupting of a new perspective of the self to itself" (*Pitch* 145). Cavell conceives of this irruption of self-knowledge as empowering jouissance available only to the woman herself. The diva abandons herself to this knowledge and in her abandonment she is willing to "depart from all settled habitation, all conformity of meaning" (*Pitch* 144). In her — according to Cavell — word-shattering singing she becomes the emblem of the "human as immigrant" (*Pitch* 144).

## Conclusion

45 It is impossible not to hear heteronormative Freudian undertones in Cavell's equation of "woman" and her "inexpressible jouissance" with "absence" and "transcendence."<sup>9</sup> In his work on the movies or on opera, the "feminine side" of our character symbolizes "the other" side, i.e., the sublime other side of the male and his fearful and violent desire to control. However likewise important is that Cavell's reading of these movies allows us to consider how these structures of desires (named as feminine or masculine) are malleable and part of the world that we speak into being. Masculinity and femininity are not the result of innate rules of desire given in biology or in the structure of any symbolic system; rather as forms of desire masculinity or femininity are formed in us through the social intercourses that carries our world. Consequently, they are local and performative. In Cavell's analysis modern philosophy's desire for the impossible, as the opening gambit of modern skepticism, is intertwined with these local performances of desire, epistemic and erotic. Not metaphysics but new attention to politics of desire will help us overcome them.

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<sup>9</sup> The similarities between Cavell and, for example, Julia Kristeva are suggestive and deserve fuller exploration. I explore these in more detail in my *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear*, where I give a fuller and more critical account of Cavell's symbolism of gender.

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## **Are Remarks History? Gertrude Stein as Conceptual Artist**

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### **Abstract:**

Although critics typically characterize Gertrude Stein as a modernist, it is at least as useful to approach her as an antecedent for language-based conceptual art emerging during the late twentieth century. Conceptual artists pose questions rather than make assertions. With her penchant for estranging familiar words from their association with common ideas, Stein challenges readers to think in more abstract terms, to challenge conventions of statement, to contest the constraints of artistic and literary formulas, and to question traditional assumptions about what is good, usual, natural, beautiful, true, or memorable. Stein's work, with its distinctive properties—brazen self-referentiality, preoccupation with mass culture and ready-mades, deformation of narrative strategy and voice, and bold explorations of the edges and interstices of both the body's senses and the mind's symbolic systems (such as images and words), anticipates many of the themes that would later fascinate conceptual artists, including claims to monumental or immutable truths.

Most of you know that in a funny kind of way you are nearer your grandparents than your parents [. . .]. I created a movement of which you are the grandchildren.

--Gertrude Stein

1 Although critics typically characterize Gertrude Stein as a modernist, it is at least as useful to approach her as an antecedent for language-based conceptual and activist artists emerging during the second half of the twentieth century, such as Barbara Kruger and the Guerrilla Girls. As critic Tony Godfrey explains, "Conceptual art is not about forms or materials, but about ideas and meanings. It cannot be defined in terms of any medium or style, but rather by the way it questions what art is" (4). Conceptual artists pose questions rather than make assertions. In particular, they challenge viewers to revisit their notions of what traditional measures of merit (whether artistic, literary, or historical) imply. With her penchant for estranging familiar words from their association with common ideas, Stein challenges readers — both in her day and in ours — to think in more abstract terms, to challenge conventions of statement, to contest the constraints of artistic hierarchies, literary formulas, and historical methods; to question traditional assumptions about what is good, usual, natural, beautiful, true, or memorable. Stein's work, with its distinctive properties — brazen self-referentiality, preoccupation with mass culture and ready-mades, deformation of narrative strategy and voice, and bold explorations of the edges and interstices of both the body's senses and the mind's symbolic systems (such as images and words)—anticipates many of the themes that would later fascinate conceptual artists, including exclusionary

language practices and claims to monumental or immutable truths. Therefore, while Stein's career and life concluded before much of the work that would eventually be characterized as language-based conceptual and activist art took shape, she, along with other avant-garde figures of her era such as Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso engaged in climate- and precedent-setting work for conceptual art emerging decades later. In this way, Gertrude Stein helped set in motion a "movement" sustained and extended by language artists and activist artists now working, both in the United States and elsewhere.

2 Two conceptual art pieces form the bookends around this investigation. The first is a 1974 work by sculptor Claes Oldenburg, entitled "Picasso Cufflinks." This sketch for an installation (or "colossal monument," as he calls them) adapts Picasso's Chicago sculpture (elsewhere immortalized by Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, "Chicago Picasso"), as a distinctive pair of cufflinks. The second is a 1994 work by contemporary artist Janine Antoni, entitled "Tender Buttons," not coincidentally the title of one of Gertrude Stein's most critically acclaimed books of poetry. In a black crushed-velvet jeweler's box rest two round brooches, each about 1 1/4 inches in diameter. The accompanying label tells us that the pins are 18-carat gold castings from the artist's nipples.

3 These pieces — part homage, part parody — threaten to commodify works of the modernists referenced. One is a send-up of a public monument, the other the record of a private moment. Both pieces recall the past as a means to inhabit and interpret the present. The manner of doing so suggests a gendered and bifurcated practice of historical memory, in which men have monuments (history as overstatement) and women have moments (history as understatement). Depending upon one's perspective, they either render Stein and Picasso's legacies as ritual objects, or reduce their visions to trinkets (accolades or accessories). Either way, the pieces dramatize the extent to which the earlier artists such as Gertrude Stein continue to shape the interventions of contemporary conceptual and activist artists.

4 As such tributes attest, there can be little doubt that the influence of Stein's notions of interdigitation among systems of language, gender, and history continues to be felt as much as, if not more than, during her lifetime. Her ways of interrogating language and culture, which frequently found expression by means of a writing practice that embodied (rather than explicated) her theories, still have deep resonances for subsequent forms of conceptual art, especially those of feminist, language, and activist artists. In turn, contemporary conceptual artists extend Stein's project with their irreverent commentaries on androcentric thoughts, refigurings of exclusionary historical narratives, and reframings of gendered speech.

5 While Stein's name may be highly recognizable today, she remains the modernist writer more often quoted than read, her words bandied about chiefly for their sharp wit and sententious quality. Who hasn't heard Stein's words invoked as soundbytes? Writer and critic Cynthia Ozick makes this point about Stein in her essay "Gertrude Stein: The Salonkeeper":

As a writer she is defined for us by only four quotations — egoless catch phrases, her logo and trademark: "Pigeons on the grass alas." "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." (Four roses; heavier brew than the three commonly cited.) To Ernest Hemingway, after World War I: "You're all a lost generation." On her deathbed: "What is the question?" (95)

Although literary luminaries Oscar Wilde and Dorothy Parker may be better celebrated for their spoken repartee, Gertrude Stein's body of work represents an inordinately rich contribution to the aphoristic legacy. Given, as she was, to peppering her prose with one-liners and waggish remarks, Stein's barbs constitute more than a playful sense of humor; taken together, they frame a trenchant criticism of the assumptions underlying many of American society's truisms and pieties. Even those who cite her scornfully prove themselves susceptible to Stein's power as an epigrammatist. Her sharp turns of language help readers recast customs of remark, judgment, and narrative.

6 Full of fragments and jagged edges, Stein's works find their shape less from punctuation than from the pauses her ideas induce in the reader's headlong habits of perception and engagement. Where one may be tempted to read her briskly, Stein changes the reader's tempo in an otherwise hasty process with *bon mots* that halt the eye's movement, if only long enough to reckon the fierceness with which she savages conventional wisdom. Stein's aesthetic of interruption, which postmodernists would later claim for themselves in the name of 'intervention,' not only contests the tenets of literary realism, but also pierces the smooth surfaces of literature and, in so doing, ruptures consensus narratives of art, gender, and history.

7 Stein's educational background provides clues into the sources of her concerns with the interplay among language, human perception, gender, and history. Ever since her student days, Stein had cultivated some fairly eclectic interests in philosophy, metaphysics, and psychology. She was nurtured in these studies by some of the most prominent scholars of the era. As a college student at Radcliffe's annex, Stein had studied with many of Harvard's greats, from Josiah Royce to William James. She conducted her own psychology experiments, including some related to the theory of automatic writing. Stein was intrigued by philosopher Otto Weininger's theories of psychological differences between male and female characteristics, as articulated in his controversial 1906 book on the subject, *Sex and*



*Character* (1906). She inquired into the nature of history and the importance of its rendition. She had learned her metaphysics from no less than George Santayana, himself often quoted on the perils of insufficiently critical studies of history. To Santayana others frequently attribute such quips as, 'History is always written wrong, so always needs to be rewritten,' 'History is a pack of lies about events that never happened told by people who weren't there,' and, perhaps most famously, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' Like Santayana before her, Stein knew the power of a winning line or a withering retort. From this sensibility, she mounted an attack on the insistent voices of the status quo — literary, artistic, philosophical, and historical.

8 In so many of her works, Stein proceeds by first gratifying, and then confounding, the reader's expectation of a single, continuous narrative from a unified perspective. It is as if the music of her language somehow replaces harmony with dissonance. Stein's pithy remarks and incisive wit enable her to assemble multivocal texts in which voices and perspectives featured clash rather than join in chorus. In this way, dominant cultural scripts get disturbed, then halted, then overtaken and rewritten by dissenting voices and views.

9 By crafting memorable lines, and then embedding them within narratives where those ideas would seem to be at odds, Stein interferes with and troubles the process of thought/statement the text begins, much as feminist writer Susan Griffin does in her own experimental works of history/documentary, including *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* and *A Chorus of Stone The Private Life of War*. More than a stylistic device, this technique enables Stein to layer her texts in such a way as to render conspicuous the underlying assumptions of familiar cultural practices and/or writing conventions. This self-interrupting narrative approach has the effect of simultaneously disrupting the concepts upon which conventional conclusions depend. This same tactic lives on in works by subsequent artist/author/activists whose efforts to challenge dominant cultural scripts rely upon elements of surprise, contradiction, unresolved tension, and fracture already at work in Stein's writing. Contemporary figures such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Laurie Anderson, Susan Griffin, Ann Hamilton, and the Guerrilla Girls use words to interrogate social orthodoxies: standards of etiquette and protocol, notions of objectivity and quality, paradigms of power and expertise, images of celebrity and infamy, icons of heroism and villainy, perceptions of legitimacy and taste, and so on. That — and how — they do so owes much to Gertrude Stein.

10 The primary focus within this discussion will be on unorthodox representations of history within two 1930 works by Gertrude Stein, "We Came. A History" and *History or Messages from History*, and their implications within subsequent word-based works by

conceptual artists such as Barbara Kruger and activist collectives such as the Guerrilla Girls. This pair of Stein texts operates as a prelude to her later meditations on the subject of history, such as *Four in America* (1933) and *The Geographical History of America* (1935). While Stein's later writings engage in a fuller-scale subversion of historical master narratives, through such devices as impossible meetings among historical personages of different eras, the 1930 texts strike at the nature of history itself and, with it, the problematics of historical writing. Much as Stein tackled the paternalism of institutionalized religion's benevolence in "Lend a Hand or Four Religions" (1922) and the androphilic impulses enshrined by canonical literature in "Patriarchal Poetry" (1927), with these two 1930 texts, Stein seeks to recuperate the power and memory of history from its masculinist practices and accounts.

11 In his brief treatment of "History or Messages from History" in *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*, critic and Stein scholar Richard Bridgman notes that, "the burden of her critique dealt with what history excluded" (204). Bridgman reads the piece as a response to the selectivity with which traditional historical accounts "filtered out the lyricism of life" (204). While history's exclusions indeed seem the focus within this text, Stein seems at least as concerned with the extent to which the principle of selection favors an androcentric history, presented in such a way as to venerate first, most, or exclusively male-coded expressions and endeavors. The elements Stein suggests have been denied historical status are not merely the lyrical, but more particularly the domestic, the everyday, and the gender-coded terms traditionally associated with female experience: flowers, herbs, baskets, dogs, and the like. Within Stein's formulation, the category status of history has instead usually been reserved for acts of aggression, contest and victory. In short, "[t]here is no history," Stein's text appears to lament, "in gentleness" (*History* 25). The simultaneous suggestion is that there is no history that records the lived-world experiences of most women, and no documents of their worlds of contribution and influence. What emerges from this discovery is a cautionary tale — a lesson about history's omissions, most especially as pertains to the wishes and will of women as historical agents. Stein writes, "The lesson of history so she says is that he will do it again but will he we hope not" (*History* 32). While men may be favored in historical accounts, women often enough make history. A male-centered version of history, however, would suggest otherwise. Such a warning still echoes in the gendered valences of image-word texts by Barbara Kruger, in which a female speaker (I/We) addresses a male authority (You): "You make history when you do business" (*Love* 68). Both for Kruger and for Stein, history is a contested field of meaning and narrative, in which women are readily forgotten or relegated to the realms of "endangered species" or "missing persons" (*Love* 51). The heroic model of

history places men at the center of accounts, with women at the periphery ("We decorate your life," [Love 91]. History's skew too readily becomes memory's shape ("Memory is your image of perfection" [Love 38]), until women are rendered absent from or silent within its record ["Your comfort is my silence" (Love 45)].

12 If Stein's *History or Messages from History* stands underexamined within Stein scholarship, still less has been written about its companion writing, Stein's seldom anthologized composition, "We Came. A History." While it does appear in Richard Kostelanetz's *Gertrude Stein Reader* (2002), there is little context for the piece even in that volume, except the editor's note about the uniqueness of Stein's use of the equal sign within this writing. Where elsewhere Stein makes use of white space to break segments within her text, as would customarily be accomplished with punctuation marks, in the six-page long "We Came. A History," she combines spaces and sentence-end punctuation with some 350 appearances of the equal sign [=], as seen within mathematics. Stein's use of this particular symbol seems both to employ and to ironize its meanings. Stein invokes the equal sign toward varied, and sometimes contradictory, ends: linking otherwise separate lines of the text, visually suggesting or rendering suspect equivalences among the assertions, and, often enough, creating a false line break within a seemingly continuous utterance:

Historically there=Is no disaster because=Those who make history=Cannot be overtaken=As they will make=History which they do=Because it is necessary=That every one will=Begin to know that=They must know that=History is what it is= ("We Came" 121-122)

To the extent that a pattern emerges within the text's commentary on history, it would suggest that Stein wished to lampoon history's inequalities, as evidenced by the elitism and male privilege implied within the recitation of history. To this end, the piece begins by defining history in some rather stark terms:

1. *as the product of deliberate action:*

"History cannot be an accident." ("We Came" 121);

2. *as uncommon acts:*

"history is not=Just what every one=Does" ("We Came" 122);

3. *as uncommon acts by uncommon people:*

"History is made by a very=Few who are important=And history is what that=One says." ("We Came" 122)

4. *as an account of triumphs rather than misdeeds:*

"History must be distinguished=From mistakes." ("We Came" 121)

5. *as something that transpired and concluded in the past:*

"History must not be what is=Happening." ("We Came" 121)

6. *as a record of events that are well-known and widely-regarded:*

"history must be=Something unusual and=Nevertheless famous and=Successful."

("We Came" 121)

7. *as evidence from the past about how current events have meaning:*

"History must=Be the occasion of having=In every way established a=Precedent"

("We Came" 121)

8. *as a rationalization of power asymmetry:*

"Those who make history=Cannot be overtaken." ("We Came" 121-122)

Within this calculus, history would seem merely to reinforce and reinscribe itself as a retelling of what matters most from the past, retold by those who most matter. Having defined history in this way early in the piece, Stein's "We Came. A History," proceeds to challenge such a definition or equation, both textually and contextually, such that history becomes recast as moments rather than as monuments. In this way, women's markers once excluded — here described with words from 'necklaces' and 'tube-roses', to 'peppers' and 'blushing pails' — find their way into the historical record, until, as Stein puts it, "All this has=Been a history of pleasantness" ("We Came" 123). Moving beyond *History or Messages From History* and its declarations that gentleness has no place in history, Stein uses "We Came. A History," to frame a tale in which a history defined by hostility, conquest, and exclusion gets displaced by one depicted in terms of hope, reciprocity, and inclusion.

13 Although it might not seem surprising to trace Stein's influences on later experimental writers such as Griffin, or even on word artists such as Kruger, the Stein impact becomes most noticeable precisely where readers who regard Stein solely as aesthete might least expect it — in the work of a cadre of artist/activists known as the Guerrilla Girls, who use language and word play to protest racism, sexism, and historical disenfranchisement, chiefly in the art world. The group announces itself on the Guerrilla Girls Home Page as:

A group of women artists and art professionals who make posters about discrimination. Dubbing ourselves the conscience of the art world, we declare ourselves feminist counterparts to the mostly male tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hoods, Batman, and the Lone Ranger. We wear gorilla masks to focus on the issues rather than our personalities. We use humor to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny.

In the (mock) tradition of fictive male egalitarians, they commence their work. The group had its inception after a 1985 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art bearing the ambitious title "An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture," in which appeared a curator's statement from Kynaston McShine that any artist not included in the show should rethink "his" career. The exhibit featured 169 artists. All were white. All were from the United States or Europe. Only 13 were women. In response to this affront, "the conscience of the art world" was born. Rather than merely picket or boycott (girlcott?), the Guerrilla Girls, attired in gorilla suits, engage in theatrical interventions and use mass-media forms such as posters, buttons, and stickers to showcase their dissenting views.

14 For the purposes of interviews and other situations where it becomes useful to distinguish among guerrilla girls, they adopt the names of dead women artists and writers. One such guerrilla girl, under the name of Gertrude Stein, took the occasion of a group interview, reprinted in *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls*, to quip that, "There's a popular misconception that the world of High Art is ahead of mass culture but everything in our research shows that, instead of being avant garde, it's derriere" (26). With their activist zaps, reminiscent in some ways of countercultural happenings, the Guerrilla Girls reclaim Stein, effectively renaming her as a figure whose agency, like that of the Guerrilla Girls, proceeds from a critical rather than judgmental engagement with cultural forms, both pop and serious, that tempers transgression with humor. Their taglines bear serious messages, though, much like the Stein-like mottoes of HIV/AIDS activist collectives Gran Fury ("This is to enrage you") and ACT-UP ("Silence=Death"). For example, in a poster displayed on their website, the Guerrilla Girls make a powerful challenge to the calendar of historical recognition implied within both the art world and the host society when their pop quiz asks, "Q. If February is Black History Month and March is Women's History Month, what happens the rest of the year? A. Discrimination." Just as Stein resisted a history that silenced or marginalized the contributions of women, so now do the Guerrilla Girls expose the tokenism, separatism, racism, and sexism that persist in museums, the keepers of art's history, and, by implication, the public history of creative achievements.

15 When members of the Guerrilla Girls, engaged in direct action for artistic inclusiveness, don fake fur and assume the names of specific women artists, including Gertrude Stein, there can be little doubt that the reference to Stein is strategic and intentional. Does this mean figures such as Kruger are alluding to Stein through their pieces? Chances are, the debt is a somewhat less direct one. Does this mean that Stein, as the writer so frequently accused of repeating herself, in fact persists (finds herself repeated) wherever we find her concepts and

contexts recurring in others' work some seventy-five years later? Likely it does. Are artists the only ones profiting from attention to the legacies of effrontery left behind by such precursors as Picasso and Stein? Surely not, when America's rapacious consumer culture co-opts yesterday's outrage to make today's bric-a-brac. An observant tourist in Chicago would now see that souvenir bracelet charms of the Chicago Picasso make Oldenburg's sketched cufflinks a near-reality and a vintage button boutique there named for Stein's "Tender Buttons" presumably stands poised to make of Antoni's brooches something like a logo. That which mass culture cannot make to conform, it seeks to absorb. This same history lesson first reached me as a youngster, when I realized that a television commercial for skin cream had appropriated the rhetoric of civil rights as it proudly proclaimed, "Finally — equal treatment for hands and nails."

16 Ultimately, it is in this very tension between confrontational art and its commercial assimilation, critical accolades and public notoriety, that Stein found herself wrapped as an innovator. Robert Bartlett Haas quotes her as saying:

You see it is the people who generally smell of the museums who are accepted, and it is the new who are not accepted [. . .]. [I]t is much easier to have one hand in the past. That is why James Joyce was accepted and I was not. He leaned toward the past, in my work the newness and difference is fundamental. (46)

Denied the stale yet honorific home of the canon, literature's version of the museum, Stein developed an ability her male counterparts never needed to cultivate: what some have termed the art of speaking truth to power. That message still sounds — because it still needs to — in the epigrammatic works of today's conceptual artists and activist artists. Stein's interrogations of language, gender, and history inform these contemporary efforts. When Barbara Kruger writes that "We will not play nature to your culture" (qtd. in Wells 282), and when the Guerrilla Girls ask and answer a corresponding question ["Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female."], it seems clear enough that not all that much has changed.

17 In the face of that knowledge, is it any wonder that Gertrude Stein was a life-long champion of a verb tense located outside temporality and history, something she called the 'continuous present'? As Stein expressed the predicament in "History or Messages from History," "A famous wife is married to a famous poet both beloved. This is what history teaches" (*History* 33) . Within this formulation, remembrance, whether in art or history, remains reserved for men. Women achieve such recognition only as helpmates to famous men. When viewed within this context, Stein and Kruger's twin humanifestoes — 'When this

you see remember me' and 'Remember me' — demand attention for women within the historical record. With their insight, wit, and Stein-like sloganeering, women continue to call for a more accurately told and equitably unfolded history. Remarks may not, as Stein warned, be history, yet backtalk of the kind these women summon — crafted with equal parts impertinence and concision — carries with it the power to redirect history.

18 If these recent campaigns to reinflect history's words and change its ways seems to have taken on a militant — even military — overtone, that may not be coincidence. In one of her last works, "Reflections on the Atomic Bomb" (1946), reprinted in Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman's anthology, Stein anticipated the information revolution and the ways our very immersion in messages might compromise our clarity with its undertones and insinuations. In this short text on a timely subject, Stein juxtaposes the very public accounts of scientific advancement with the notion of a secret weapon. While she professes a lack of interest in "death rays and atomic bombs," her piece nonetheless betrays a fascination with the language surrounding atomic research, and how publics respond to such official accounts of stealthy weapons of mass destruction ("Reflections" 823). She writes: "Everybody gets so much information all day that they lose their common sense" ("Reflections" 823). She foresaw people bombarded more by words than atoms, and at a peril through language that, once discerned, can be more readily resisted than can the deployed force of an A-bomb. Stein enters the fray, armed with powerful phrases and penetrating insight. She marshals an arsenal of words and ideas that contest the usual narratives of human history as a march of progress, with its claims to opportunity, justice, and manifest destiny. Therefore, when Jenny Holzer's online fans beg her for a 'text bomb' or Gran Fury's members describe themselves as involved in 'poster sniping,' it may well be that they have detected what Stein long ago understood: that cultural wars are often waged, and so may best be won, at the level of subtext. May moments shape our memories as forcefully as monuments ever have.

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**"I never dared to write a comedy before. If nobody laughs you're stuffed,  
aren't you?": Lisa Evans in Conversation**

By Jozefína Komporaly, De Montfort University Leicester

Lisa Evans has written extensively for the theatre, radio and television. Her stage work includes both new plays and adaptations, and has been performed apart from the UK in Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Israel and the USA. She regularly collaborates with director Gwenda Hughes and has been writer in residence at the Theatre Centre, London and Temba Theatre. She has won, among others, British Theatre Association awards and her work is published by Oberon. In this interview, she speaks about her work in general, and her play *Once We Were Mothers* in particular.

**Interview taken at London, 8 November 2007**

**Jozefína Komporaly:** Your play *Once We Were Mothers* has premiered in October 2007 at the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, but it was first produced in 2004 at the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Why this revival now, and what inspired the play at the time of its original production?<sup>1</sup>

**Lisa Evans:** I actually wrote the play well before it got staged, but it wasn't produced until September 2004, when it was a good point in the theatre's calendar to put it on. As you probably know, there are times of the year which are graveyards for new plays. I was commissioned by The New Vic, Stoke-on-Trent, by director Gwenda Hughes, as they'd got the funding and she and I had often worked together before. She was/is my sort of 'theatrical marriage.' The theatre wanted to commission a play that had a part for someone with a learning disability. They wanted this aspect to be part of a regular play, not a special play on disability as such. That's specifically what they got the money for, and it was at this point that they commissioned me. I then conducted research by speaking to three mothers who had teenage daughters with Down's Syndrome. The thing that most came up for them, owing to the ages of their children at the time, was how you let go. It's hard enough to let go of any teenager but with somebody with whom you have had such an intense, protective relationship, it is even harder. We also needed somebody who was the opposite of this, which became the character of Kitty, set in the fifties. There is no way she would let go, ever. And also I heard a piece on Radio 4 about the Bosnian rape camps, so I started to research that, and it seemed a good point in the triangle to actually have somebody who is a good mother, but then does the unthinkable by murdering their own child. All three stories were about

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, Lisa. *Once We Were Mothers*. London: Oberon Books, 2004.

different views of motherhood, but also ones that many people would not have necessarily experienced; they were kind of extremes if you like: "this is how it might feel if this were to happen, imagine what it feels like."

**JK:** How did the current revival come about?

**LE:** I'd been talking to Sam Walters, the artistic director of the Orange Tree Theatre, for a while about putting something of mine on there [it's my local theatre] but he doesn't do new plays very often. I also spoke to director Auriol Smith about this, and I sent both her and Sam the play. I knew however, that you shouldn't press Sam too hard because if you do he resists. So I was treading a very cautious line. But one night I went to the theatre to see a show a friend of mine was in and half the audience were people I had worked with. I felt terribly old because everyone knew me. Then Auriol said "we are doing a women's season, why don't you speak to Sam about your play?". I did and he rang me up saying he wanted to read some adaptations of mine, as he was thinking about them for that season. I thought he probably wasn't interested in this play then, but he suddenly rang out of the blue and said "*Once We Were Mothers* is what I want to do." There was some stunned silence from me at that point as I really didn't expect him to go for it.

**JK:** Were you writing this play with a particular audience in mind?

**LE:** The audience it was commissioned for, a Stoke audience. I don't really think about a particular audience though, but I write plays with women casts and about women quite often, because there are very few plays with enough good parts for women. Also women buy the tickets. So it seems to me sensible to write about things that might interest them.

**JK:** Do you see *Once We Were Mothers* as a women's play or a feminist play in any sense?

**LE:** I hope that everything I write is informed by my politics, which is feminism, but I don't think it's a women's play. I think it's a play about motherhood, and men tend not to get found under cabbages — they also have mothers!

**JK:** But there is a relative lack of balance between your male and female protagonists. Isn't this a hallmark of women's theatre?

**LE:** I try to write more women than men in my plays just to redress the balance. If I had been born at another time, another age, maybe it wouldn't be necessary to do that. I think it is necessary at the moment, still. Also, the men are part of the story, they just don't appear on

stage. There are only a certain number of cast members that you can afford, and since the play was about mothers I thought it was more important to have them on stage. The men are crucial to their relationships, but with the exception of Tajib, they were served quite well through being reported as opposed to being actually seen on stage. They are nevertheless a presence, and a positive presence. I needed Tajib, the Bosnian husband on stage, because I needed the very happy first act to contrast with what happens afterwards. I thought it was important to show how happy Milena's sexual relationship with her husband was before the war, and, similarly, to have the same actor play her husband and the teacher she has known most of her life. How these two characters double — Tajib and the teacher (one of the men who eventually rape her) — is actually very positive.

**JK:** I was wondering whether the doubling was something you wrote into the script? In both productions the same actor plays the role of Tajib and the teacher, as well as the doctor, constantly switching between them throughout the play.

**LE:** Most of the doctors at the time these children were young were male. In fact, the actor playing Tajib, the doctor, and the teacher wasn't meant to appear in Act Two, but the director, Ellie Jones made the decision to bring him back. I am very happy with Finn Hanlon's performance, but I think having him appear in even more roles in Act 2 just looks like we haven't got enough money to pay more male actors. So I think this is kind of a political mistake. People will always ask why are there so many women in the play and so few men. It is something particularly key to all male reviewers.

**JK:** The programme indicates that one of the plot strands — centring on Ali and Flora's story — is set in Richmond. In the printed text there is no reference to this, the only information provided is that it is located in a contemporary setting. Was this an attempt to bring the play closer to the local community here?<sup>2</sup>

**LE:** There was not really any reference in the play to anywhere. This time it was a matter of marketing; however, some of the actresses live in the Richmond area, so the programme was accurate in this sense!

**JK:** What was the reception of the piece?

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<sup>2</sup> Evans, Lisa. *Once We Were Mothers: Programme, Orange Tree Theatre*. Richmond, 2007.

**LE:** Amazingly good. It is quite an emotional experience and it is quite different I think from things that normally happen at the Orange Tree. Not that they don't have emotional plays, but the content and the way it's done is quite novel here for this audience. They are dealing with the play all right!

**JK:** As it happens, both the New Vic and the Orange Tree are theatres in the round. Did you intend the play for such a space? If so why?

**LE:** Well it was initially written for a theatre in the round, but I wonder if it would work as well using a pros arch space. You could do it in the traverse, or use a thrust or something, but the distance of a pros arch would be slightly problematic. The closer you are to the audience, the better for direct address.

**JK:** Could you talk about the artistic and dramatic choices you are opting to make in your work?

**LE:** This is a generalisation, but I tend to write about whatever someone is paying me to do at the time. This is what happened when Gwenda Hughes initially asked me to write *Once We Were Mothers*. It was also a reflection on her experience, because she was trying very hard to become a mother herself at the time. But then, if you read the preface you'll know she eventually adopted a little boy just before we did the play. Bizarrely every actor in the play with the exception of one — the grandmother in this and the last production — is childless and not necessarily by choice. It is part of being an actress though; it is hard to have family and be on the road. Motherhood is a common theme in my plays, so are daughters. There is the common theme of women. I guess my politics informs what and who I write about. Adaptations have been of stories that interested me and of ideas that people have thought to commission. I did a version of *East Lynne*, which is a horrible punitive story by the 19th century author Mrs Henry Wood about what would happen to women if they dared to have an affair: "You'll be punished horribly, shame on you!" It was written for Birmingham Rep, directed by Gwenda. We decided to have the heroine fight back and the play was written from the heroine's point of view — commenting on "why was I punished so badly for what I did." So there was a feminist slant on this topic. Similarly, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was a play about the abuse of a woman kept prisoner by a drunken husband who refused her freedom, and about how she finally breaks free and comes to a new place in her life.

**JK:** Can you talk about your affinities with other writers. Who if anyone is likely to provide inspiration for you?

**LE:** I realize more and more that I love the monologue. A writer I admire hugely, a friend of mine and somebody much funnier than I am, who also loves the monologue is Bryony Lavery. She has this theory that she can spot my plays anywhere because there is always the theme of a dead child in there. Her theme, she says, is interment, so we agreed that we could work together! I have just written a play that is being done as a rehearsed reading at the Orange Tree which is a comedy. I never dared to write a comedy before. As it is supposed to be funny, it is such a responsibility; if nobody laughs you're stuffed, aren't you? And back again to motherhood, it is set in a crumbling hospital ante-natal class. Principally, many years ago when I was having a child, the comedic value of the whole thing struck me quite forcibly.

**JK:** What kind of research did you conduct in preparation for writing *Once We Were Mothers*? You cover such a broad ground in the play...

**LE:** Firstly, the research on Ali and Flora's story was done with three women who had daughters with Down's Syndrome. This was the starting point as we wanted to have somebody who had a disability. Because of the nature of Down's Syndrome you can have people with huge ranges of ability, and also — despite this being a huge generalisation — people with Down's Syndrome often tend to be quite gregarious and enjoy performing. So when we were thinking what kind of person to come up with, someone with Down's Syndrome came to mind for those reasons. So I researched with them, and most of the stuff they told me was moulded into one family and the material was reordered. It was all their contribution, including the jokes. I wish it was mine, but it was mostly theirs; they were incredibly generous. Secondly, I did my research at the BBC and read books about the war in Bosnia. I didn't want to talk to refugees about their experience during the war. I thought they'd had enough happening to them already. What I talked about with them was their childhood, what were the customs in their country when you get married, what you eat, the festivals, all the happy times, what were schools like, things like that. I research a lot to get the confidence to write something I have not witnessed, in fact I over-research if anything. Finally, the third strand is totally fictitious. There is so much in the news today about Madeleine McCann. Around that time there was an article written by the sister of someone who went missing about what that does to the family. I think Bryony [Lavery, whom Evans greatly admires] has read it too, but luckily I hadn't read *Frozen* before writing my play or I'd accuse myself of plagiarism. The article was a very moving account of how a family gets

destroyed by absence, how it becomes obsessive. It is very hard to be a survivor in such a family. This aspect really interested me, the nature of the relationship the remaining child can have with the mother. For my play I thought that the surviving daughter was the crucial one, the one who stays behind but who is receiving some appalling mothering really.

**JK:** This is my favourite plot strand, I have to say. Maybe because this was the one I could least relate to personally, I was less exposed to narratives on this topic. I was also mesmerised by the performance of Esther Ruth Elliott as Kitty.

**LE:** The actress who played the part first time around, Hazel Maycock, came to see the Orange Tree production. It was interesting talking to her because she and Esther gave such extraordinarily different performances! They are different because the performers are different people obviously, but in the initial one the pain was completely contained, the actress was completely bound up physically. In the Richmond production, they went for the opposite; a complete expanse physically, vocally and emotionally. Both work, interestingly.

**JK:** The only actress who appeared in both productions is Sarah Gordy, playing Flora. And you have worked with her previously as well.

**LE:** I had written an episode for *Peak Practice* (long running television series, not on any more), a love story for two young people with Down's Syndrome in a sheltered house. Sarah played a part in that. Then she was in the first production at the New Vic and I kept in touch with her and her mother afterwards, so she was the obvious choice to take on the part again. She is amazing. It was very interesting for her to do the part the second time; she is older, thirty-one now, and is playing young very well (the character of Flora is a teenager!). But she had to go through a different production process this time and sort of unlearn what she had done the first time around, which for someone with Down's Syndrome can be tricky. She was of course up for the challenge, but it was hard on her. One of the things that happened in rehearsal is that when the director, Ellie Jones wanted to try things out with Sarah for Flora and then she didn't choose them for the finished production, Sarah thought she had done something wrong. She kept feeling that she failed. To try and then not have what you've done accepted is a challenging part of the process for her.

**JK:** How do you see this role being played by others? Do you think anyone could potentially play it?

**LE:** I hope so. I recently got a card from Jane, Sarah's mother saying that a friend of hers has also got a baby with Down's Syndrome. She is having speech therapy and her mother's ambition is for her to become an actress and play the roles Sarah by then would be too old for — passing on the baton, as it were. In fact, they were introduced because Paula Stockbridge, who played Milena in the first production, had a friend who knew she was about to have a baby with Down's Syndrome and who had some trepidation about it. Paula suggested she meet Jane and Sarah, to witness how they work together and how happy and joyful they are about each other. Now they are sort of role models.

**JK:** Can you talk about the thematic connections in your plays? And perhaps about how you explore them in the writing process?

**LE:** Mothers and daughters are always there. Not specifically, it's a story that somebody tells me that sets me off rather than me thinking about an issue. I did an issue thing, writing about violence against women and interviewed some people. I found it very hard, however, to then turn such material into something dramatic. The topic in this case was something which we recognise as terrible but I didn't quite know how to spin it to make that work on stage. It's too abstract. Also people's personal stories are always better than the ones you think up as a writer.

**JK:** Is that the way you normally write, being touched by something?

**LE:** Yes, then I start to read around it and quite often if it is going to work as an idea the images join up and you find it easy to do research about it. When things fall into place it's a good thing. When they don't, it's not the right project, so leave it for a while and do something else.

**JK:** Do you find that this helps, leaving things and then return to them at a later stage?

**LE:** If I can, but I mostly work to commission. My theatre work is subsidised by television anyway; living on stage work is kind of a joke. But this is what I love doing and if I could live on it, I'd do nothing else. At the moment I don't think I have anything that I am burning to write to just sit and do it though. I don't want to write just for me, I want to write something to be done on stage. Being a playwright, as far as I am concerned, means that my work does not really exist unless someone is performing it. When I got published I thought it would feel different but it isn't. Oberon now publishes pretty much what I get put on in theatres — it is nice to have the published plays out there and see that the work is not

ephemeral, it is something you can go back to, and of course that libraries and companies have easy access to — but actually it is only when work is on that really counts. It is that immediacy, that's what theatre is about.

**JK:** I am exploring the idea of performers as mothers/mothers as performers in relation to some other plays I am looking at, and of course we have Ali who is a dancer. I am thinking here of a multiplicity of potentially interconnected issues, such as pregnancy as spectacle (owing to the development of imaging technologies and the possibility of visualising the process of gestation), of the practice of motherhood as a demanding task constantly assessed and critiqued by outsiders — almost on the terms of a public performance, but also of some mothers simply being performers by career (actors, dancers etc).

**LE:** I am trying to remember why I made that choice. I think I wanted her to be something creative, and involved with something where you have a clear idea of when you fail and when you are good. It wasn't that much a connection with the idea of the artist as such. Also the phrases being "a dancer" and "my daughter dances" were in my head quite early on, together with things like being a "proper" child and a "proper" girl. I was thinking of the opposition between the "right" way to do things and the "energetic, creative" way to do things. That's what interested me. I don't like plays specifically about writers or about actors. It feels too incestuous. I would have loved to be a dancer, maybe that's what it is. One day my partner and I were driving in the car and our son suddenly asked what we both would have liked to be, something other than what we actually did. (I started out as an actor and turned into a writer, my partner is an actor.) Without stopping to think he said "archaeologist" and I went "dancer." When I was at drama school I loved dancing, I loved to be able to express myself physically.

**JK:** In the play you have Ali who has a career as a dancer, while the other women are mainly if not solely defined by their motherhood.

**LE:** Milena works in a factory, Kitty is a housewife and mother, as were most of her generation if they could afford it. You went out and worked if you had to rather than if you wanted to.

**JK:** Could you talk about the challenges of working in different media. You mentioned your film work already.



**LE:** I am doing a script for a film, that's new for me, and I am working on two adaptations one of which is with the physical theatre company Frantic Assembly. They are really nice people to work with. Their way of working is fascinating as well. I just did a visit to Broadmoor Prison for research. My framing story, apart from Frankenstein in the middle, is that I wanted to have a modern monster, a woman who kills her child. I also got commissioned for an adaptation of a Melvyn Bragg novel to be done in Keswick for their centenary. I do keep on the move as you can see, I am a moving target!

**JK:** Have you done any adaptations from other languages?

**LE:** No, I haven't. It would be fascinating, I'd love to do that, but someone would have to give me a literal translation as I don't speak other languages (just a bit of French but that isn't enough for doing a translation). That would be really interesting and challenging because of the speech patterns and rhythms. That's why I have written several plays set in America because I love the speech patterns you can get using American. That way you have so much more poetry in the language than using modern English. That, and a film, and comedy — new things. I like throwing myself off cliffs, if I haven't done it before it is a jolly good reason to have a go.

**JK:** What about your work for television?

**LE:** I have written quite a lot for television, sort of stuff everybody knows about: *Casualty*, *Holby City*, *East Enders*, *The Bill*. This work is a kind of jigsaw puzzle, doing a guest episode while having to link the plot to existing and forthcoming storylines.

**JK:** One final question: if you didn't have to depend on commissions what would you like to write?

**LE:** No idea. I don't know because I need the work to be wanted. One of the reasons of writing for commission is obviously financial, but also I am not sure that I have the confidence, without anybody else saying that this would be a good idea, to necessarily think it is worth doing. That's why I work with other people all the time. I hate being in the attic on my own. I talk to directors about what to write next. Quite often with Gwenda, for instance, we talk and she suggests "how about writing something about this." That's how it starts. I would be in trouble if I didn't have interest from somebody else. Except I have just rewritten a comedy which is uncommissioned, just so I could get it right. So I don't think I know what this new piece would be...perhaps something with dance in it! For me writing is a very

collaborative process, I get my mates involved, I ask my son to listen as I try ideas out with him. I know there are other writers who just shut themselves away for a while, but I don't work like that. I change quite a bit in the process of writing and during rehearsals, sometimes structurally, sometimes by editing, and very often it is the end that changes for some reason. In the case of *Once We Were Mothers* we talked about how to end it for quite a while. I don't remember the details we went through now, but we wanted to have a positive ending, bringing together the three strands on stage. Initially I wanted a child's voice, laughter and swinging on a trapeze, to give a sense of physical freedom. But at the Orange Tree they have no flying (being a small theatre in the round), so that had to be left out! At Stoke a montage of children's voices was used instead — to suggest an off stage effect, with Flora dancing and smiling centre stage.

**Christina Wald. *Hysteria, Trauma and Melancholia: Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.**

By Jozefína Komporaly, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

1 Christina Wald's book is an ambitious, well-researched and meticulous study focusing, according to the jacket blurb, on "the interaction of theatrical performance, psychiatric and psychoanalytic theory, and the theory of gender performativity." Wald's interdisciplinary approach covers substantial ground indeed, as she conducts a detailed analysis of ten recent Anglophone plays underpinned by an expert application of an impressive array of secondary sources, ranging from Karl Abraham to Slavoj Žižek. Structured into three substantial chapters preceded by a theoretical introduction that clarifies methodological issues, technical terms and introduces the key framework of performativity theory, the book places the three maladies under a historical and conceptual focus and establishes firm connections between these and theatrical case studies.

2 In fact, addressing the status of hysteria, trauma and melancholia as powerful tropes in contemporary culture, the author highlights their extensive presence in the world of theatre and calls attention to correspondences between playwrights' aesthetical concerns and established theoretical frameworks. Thus, Wald not only posits "The Drama of Hysteria," "Trauma Drama" and "The Drama of Melancholia" as recurrent conceptual and analytical categories in contemporary Anglophone theatre but also launches them as distinct dramatic genres; and ultimately conceptualises hysteria, trauma and melancholia as "performative maladies."

3 It is the latter agenda that constitutes the book's most immediately relevant concern for readers located in the field of theatre and performance studies. Initially, they are likely to be puzzled by the juxtaposition of playwrights as diverse as Anna Furse, Kim Morrissey, Terry Johnson, Victoria Hardie, Sarah Daniels, Phyllis Nagy, Claire Dowie, David Auburn, Marina Carr and Sarah Kane, especially since Wald chooses not to elaborate in detail on the criteria she utilised towards the inclusion of these particular authors and the exclusion of others. It is apparent, however, that Wald is firmly pursuing thematic connections, and that her selection process is filtered through her definition of what constitutes "performative maladies". Crucially, in all three sections, Wald makes clear that her case studies are representative samples from a broader range of other potential examples. Ultimately, despite the author's decision not to

elucidate matters of provenance and cultural context (e.g. North American as opposed to British), plays such as Furse's *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* end up sitting comfortably and convincingly alongside the Irish Carr's *Portia Coughlan* or the American David Auburn's *Proof*.

4 Wald's bibliography is remarkable in its sheer breadth alone. As the author herself reveals in the acknowledgements, the book is a revised version of her recent doctoral thesis completed at the University of Cologne - a fact apparent in the comprehensive approach to documentation that characterises the book. In other words, Wald engages with a broad range of theoretical perspectives, all carefully chosen with relevance to her chosen thematic enquiries (e.g. French feminist theory on hysteria, Seltzer and Bronfen on trauma, Schiesari on melancholia). To counterbalance this somewhat ambitious strand, she dedicates ample space and energy to an in-depth focus on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity that constitutes the backbone of the book and its key intellectual merit.

5 Wald is careful to equally situate her intervention within the context of debates in theatre studies. She engages with the work of leading scholars such as Elaine Aston, and stresses that although most of the plays she has chosen for scrutiny in her book have already been analysed elsewhere, hers is a fresh perspective. In fact, she regularly contrasts her own readings with interpretations by other critics, and occasionally, with the views of playwrights discussed (cf. Wald's notion of hysteria as a performative malady versus Anna Furse's view of hysteria as a genuinely female mode of expression, p. 7)

6 Overall, this a welcome contribution to the Theatre and Performance list at Palgrave, and a noteworthy work as far as the meticulous integration of psychoanalytic and gender theory and performance analysis is concerned. The study is an invaluable survey of how "disorders" such as hysteria, melancholia and trauma have been represented in Anglophone theatre from the mid-nineties onwards. I warmly recommend the book to readers interested in exploring the interdisciplinary connotations of hysteria, trauma and melancholia, and to scholars and students in theatre studies, gender studies, cultural studies as well as the social history of medicine.

**Patricia Hill Collins. "From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism." Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.**

By Paul Khalil Saucier, Rhode Island College, USA

1 In her new book *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, a collection of previously published essays, Patricia Hill Collins probes the contested spaces of racism, nationalism, popular culture, and feminism in an attempt to expand the struggle for a truly democratic society for all. The first section, "Race, Family, and the US Nation-State" (chapters 1-2), features two essays that take an in-depth look at the intimate connections between motherhood and national identity. Section two, "Ethnicity, Culture, and Black Nationalist Politics" (chapters 3-4), offers two essays on the usefulness and efficacy of Afrocentrism, while section three, "Feminism, Nationalism, and African American Women" (chapters 5-6), offers strategies for empowerment.

2 In the past, one was unlikely to confront the work of Hill Collins outside the disciplinary confines of sociology and gender studies. However, *From Black Power to Hip Hop* should not suffer such a fate, as it fits well within the academic boundaries of cultural studies. Hill Collins regards culture as political — as a terrain of conflict, incorporation, and contestation. Culture is seen as a key site for the production and reproduction of the social, albeit unequal, relations of everyday life. Never for a moment does Hill Collins omit the idea that culture informs the structure and shape of history. She explores various epistemologies of emancipatory knowledge and by extension investigates with great depth ideologies of nationalism and feminism as well as influential knowledges of popular culture and everyday life. *From Black Power to Hip Hop* concludes that what is at stake are the connections between culture, power, and politics, the need for change, and the representations of and for marginalized groups.

3 Throughout the text it is clear that Hill Collins is indebted to many Cultural Studies scholars, most importantly Paul Gilroy. Similar to Gilroy's *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1991), Hill Collins attempts to highlight the tension between ethnic and civic nationalism and also attempts to deal with the dilemma of racial solidarity, more specifically black solidarity. Hill Collins uses black nationalism as a background to the discussion of politics in the post-Civil Rights era and attempts to answer how black unity is to be conceived in the new millennium. Insightfully speaking, she is careful not to paint all ideological struggles concerning black solidarity as taking place within the black/white binary. Instead she begins and ends her analysis from within the

black community, in turn illustrating that black solidarity can and does have variable meanings and that black solidarity has always been contextually and historically specific, located within diverse and sometimes overlapping discourses.

4 One point of departure from Gilroy and similar scholarship is Hill Collins' understanding of motherhood in relation to nationalism. According to Hill Collins, motherhood frames national identity: "the construction of infertility as a national tragedy and the huge amounts of media attention paid to this condition reflect [. . .] [a] preoccupation with increasing reproduction among women of the dominant group" (63). Many public services support white mothering, yet public policies drawing upon a logic of eugenics have been used to deal with women of color. She suggests that any new politics must take into account the racially coded language within colorblind discourses that speak of and about women of color (e.g. "unwed mothers" and "family values").

5 Furthermore, while Hill Collins concludes that feminist cultural texts and practices are multiaccultural she also regrets the fact that many black feminist activists have uncritically accepted the tenets of mainstream feminism, neglecting to pay attention to the structural causes of social inequality. Rather than resisting the matrix of power, many feminists are slowly and unknowingly becoming grunt workers for white patriarchal capitalism. Hill Collins criticizes the emphasis on personal politics: "The personal as a metaphor for more transgressive ideas about women's empowerment have [sic] given way to a version of personal politics that is increasingly narcissistic and amenable to the annexation by conservative political forces in the United States" (183). To the dismay of Hill Collins, feminism has become increasingly obsessed with the "self" at the expense of the "social."

6 Some could accuse *From Black Power to Hip Hop* of fetishizing the paradigm of intersectionality and therefore precluding a systemic critique of capitalism. While this may be true of others who use intersectionality theory, what Hill Collins does particularly well is to foreground class and push the politics of difference to the back. Rather than construct a sense of political agency around issues of difference, looming in the text is the suggestion that agency should be constructed around a ruthless critique of capitalism. For example, Afrocentrism has long been vehemently denounced in the academy, yet Kwanzaa has become part of American popular culture because "it articulates with capitalist marketplace relations" (91), not because America is becoming more inclusive. With her use of popular culture, historical analyses and a robust social theory Hill Collins never undermines the analytical power of class and in no way

conceals the predatory and aggressive powers of global capitalism. To this end, developments in this book can serve as a departure point from which to reform the paradigm of intersectionality and revisit some of its core beliefs.

7 What transpires from her analysis is that the shortcomings of intersectionality, mainly the idea that race/class/gender are coprimary, do not warrant a sweeping dismissal. However, this does not imply that we should ignore the realities of intersectionality; rather it suggests that we shift our attention to the plurality of oppression within a broader framework of capitalist class relations. Throughout the text, Hill Collins explains and acknowledges the need to revise intersectionality theory, with the caveat that as a general framework it should not be dismissed. *From Black Power to Hip Hop* does not ask abstract theoretical questions about social change, for it is theoretical without being overly abstract, leaving room to realistically and pragmatically envision a progressive multicultural vision of radical democracy. Moreover, it portends that if any serious challenge to eliminate the multiple forms of oppression is to be successful, the aggressive power of capitalism must be confronted.

8 In the end, what is important is that *From Black Power to Hip Hop* brings together essays that might have otherwise been ignored making it an exceptional text for an introductory course in gender studies or cultural studies. Hill Collins offers guidance by showing how to be critical, what went wrong, and what is right; she takes the best of feminism infused with many insights from cultural studies and reimagines a better, more equitable society.

## List of Contributors

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