

Dark Immersion. Some thoughts on SIGNA's "Wir Hunde"

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Thank you for inviting me and for all these inspiring talks. Let me start this comment by saying that I have been working on the topic of immersion from a perspective not directly related to theatre but to philosophy. I have been doing critical theory of what I call 'immersive power', a form of power that is dominant in post-industrialist corporate environments, for instance, where immersion is used as a strategy to govern employees. One of my case studies was the work culture of IT start-ups. These companies frequently present themselves as playful work environments where you will find all sorts of lifestyle elements integrated into the workplaces (such as toys, kicker tables, sports facilities, outdoor sites, free food, etc.). The rationale of these arrangements is to blend work seamlessly with leisure, to 'stimulate potentials' so they can 'unfold freely' to foster innovation. I have been arguing that the design of these work environments is implemented as a specific technique of governance and subjectivation. While the Fordist paradigm of workplace organization follows a logic of enclosure, the post-Fordist era builds on 'intensity spaces' where you are not enclosed, but rather *immersed* in inherent (and often amplifying) dynamics based on your psychological and emotional dispositions instead of external constraints such as fixed work hours and the notorious 'cubicle' around your desk.¹

Now you might wonder what this has to do with immersive theatre. I will suggest in the following pages that there is a connection which arises when we take into account that these workplace governance techniques were intellectually preceded by the fields of group dynamics research and group psychology that emerged in the 1940s following, among others, the work by Kurt Lewin at MIT. This work found its way into Human Resource Management in the 1980s, when the 'teamwork' paradigm was widely adopted around the

1 See on this: Deleuze 1992, Boltanski & Chiapello 2006, Terranova 2010, Mühlhoff 2018, Mühlhoff & Slaby 2018.

world. Teamwork is a management technique that sources its energy by harnessing employees' inherent motivational and social forces. In teamwork you are meant to engage with your colleagues as a *full person* with affects and emotions. Teamwork promises to make everyone relate on eye-level, as putative friends or at least as people with needs and feelings – which makes you committed to one another. Affect scholar Melissa Gregg (2011) points out that people working in teams are often heavily immersed on the basis of feelings like guilt, shared responsibility for the whole project, and a general exploitation of social skills. Training measures such as team building and corporate retreats indicate that there is an *apparatus* of stimulating and producing suitable psychological dispositions for teamwork in employees. Finally, in those constellations, power structures and hierarchies are in fact not undone but often only *masked* behind group dynamics and mechanisms of group pressure (cf. Terranova 2010).

In light of this background of mine I would like to share my observations on the SIGNA² performance in Vienna called “Us Dogs” (“Wir Hunde”). I saw the closing night of this production (18 June 2016) and I will just recount my personal experience here (it was my first SIGNA performance, I should add).³ Upon entering the setting, I was addressed from the outset in this commanding tone, with this authoritarian attitude by one of the performers who asked me for my name. He introduced himself as Iwan; I guessed that Iwan might not be his real name but the name of his character in the fiction. I was asked to give my real name, which appeared to me as asymmetric and as a strategy of discomforting personal engagement, and which I intuitively refused because he was addressing me in this authoritarian tone. So I gave a fake name. And already in these first 45 seconds I made a decision: my plan for the night was to refuse to be addressed in this voice. I did not want the performers to address me in this barking, authoritarian, harsh voice anymore.

This implied a second decision that crucially framed my experience of the show. I tried to intervene in scenes of violence, for instance when people were slapped or beaten, when these Doggies (“Hundsche”), or the performers playing them, were physically abused in diverse ways. Such measures were integrated into the fiction in an immensely sophisticated way, and, what's more, the audience was also implicated in those scenes and measures – mostly as passively enabling agents. For instance in the dungeon (“Zwinger”), scenes of flogging Doggies that were ‘new’ to the community were staged as a kind of spectacle for the audience, surrounded by a narrative that one has to be extremely careful in this special area of the performance, as some of these not yet domesticated Doggies are ‘uncontrollably violent’. Another and even more intricate type of violent scene was the typical family living room setting (e.g. in Wieland Kalthoff's and in Iwan Hinghaus's apartments), where ‘masters’ who seemed eager to perform well as hosts on this open house day would thrash (or threaten to thrash) their Doggies as scapegoats for wrongs they

2 SIGNA is a Copenhagen based artistic collective founded by Signa & Arthur Köstler, see <http://signa.dk>.

3 See Benjamin Wihstutz (this volume) for more details on the fictional setting of SIGNA's “Us Dogs”. See also Schütz 2016.

did not actually commit and as an obvious relief to their own tensions in the rare situation of having public visitors. Often this was accompanied, all within the fiction, by an apologetic discourse on why this violence is justified for the Doggies' own sake, implying everyone's understanding. In this way, the two figures Wieland and Iwan performed what one could call the lower-middle class family tyrant: intimidating, friendly on the surface, but deeply insecure and brutal behind the facade, controlling the whole scene affectively and discursively to the extent that no one would dare to contradict or even question their behavior, audience members (as guests) included.

When on those occasions a Doggy was about to be thrashed, I tried to intervene, and this created literally explosive scenes. The performers were excellently trained, or maybe 'trained' is not the right word; the performers were excellently performing an explosion towards me. For instance, when I threw a soft ball at Wieland's back as he was just about to beat one of his Doggies under the eyes of about ten visitors sitting on his sofa, he went into a full-blown tantrum. Though he was not attempting to beat me, he was performing the same aggression on the verbal level and finally he threw me out of the building (and that also meant out of the show). I refused to go, and this created a very delicate situation because it meant that the whole scene kept being interrupted for the other spectators in the same room, who, as it seemed to me in my agitated state, just wanted to witness a nice immersive theatre scene that happened to be a scene of domestic violence. Upon my intervention, Wieland's reaction remained completely *within the fiction*, yet it made me feel guilty towards the others, since it seemed that to them I was disturbing *the performance*. These two layers, fiction versus performance, were always intricately entangled with each other.

Now, what did I take away from this evening? When it comes to the concept of immersion as a certain mode of being affectively involved, absorbed and modulated in an intensive relational dynamic, in this situation it meant to me a modulating engagement on *three* different dimensions. One was that I had to *act as a private person*, for instance when I was facing an authoritarian tone which I didn't want to face, or when other performers (the Doggies) were seeking intimate physical/body contact with me (such as rubbing their genitals on my leg) – they were kind of checking what the limits are – what are my limits of intimate contact? In this way I was forced to (re-)act 'personally' more than I would have in a normal theatre show, where I would just sit in an armchair – I would call this 'immersive' on a very basic level. This first dimension concerns the relation to myself and my feelings within the performance.

The second dimension of immersion was that I had *to act as a guest*, as a guest (of an open house day in an asylum) within the fiction, but also as a guest of a performance show. The tricky thing is that this was not seamless; there were discrepancies or tensions between these two guest roles, for instance, should I intervene or not, should I disturb the fiction, or are they even counting on audience members to interfere? Within the fiction, an interven-

tion might disturb the fiction, for of course I would not be a nice guest of an open house if I were to intervene; but on the level of the *performance*, I knew that this was an immersive performance in which I could probably do anything without them dropping character, and it might even create more interesting situations for everyone if something unexpected were to happen. So there was a constant negotiating between what seemed like two contradictory but concurrent forms of immersion as a guest. Hence this second dimension concerns a twofold relation of me as spectator to the *whole setting*.

A third dimension that characterized immersion in this show to me was that I felt triggered *to act as a political subject*. There were a lot of references and meanings in this well-crafted fiction connected to the political world outside. There were the topics of ‘refugee crisis’, the FPÖ in Austria, institutional racism, paternalism in psychiatry, and the authoritarian psychology in education which reminded me of the Nazi era. Moreover (and more immanently) I gradually discovered during the five hours that there were a lot of smaller ‘hints’ around the scenes that this whole asylum might be a systematic apparatus of sexual abuse and domestic violence. For instance, there were suspicious web cameras on tripods next to beds that looked like those from pornographic sites; there were a lot of verbalized references by the Doggies to sexual relationships with their ‘masters’; there was a submissive sexualized behavior performed by some Doggies towards me and other audience members that was embedded in narratives like ‘this is what my master does with me at night’. As a guess, I would say that this performance was using a fictional setting that turns out to be a well concealed *structural* apparatus of abuse and violence, masochism and sadism, if one looks at it carefully, if one reads the codes.

So, the pressing question for me became: how do I behave towards this *politically*? This meant taking what I saw not (only) as individual scenes of violence or abuse, but as evidence of a structural configuration that must be questioned and politicized on a general level. I was a ‘spect-actor’ after all, not just an invisible, passively observing ghost floating through the inner space of this asylum. This question of politicization was the third and strongest dimension of my way of being immersed in this performance. Interestingly, however, this dimension was pretty much a relationship *not* between me and the performance, but between me and the rest of the audience in light of larger and more general political structures. This is a point I would like to stress. It was because so many other people in the audience did not do anything and did not seem to notice the structural level of violence that was staged here in the fiction that I felt like: ‘What!? I should just watch this passively with all the others just watching it passively? No, this is not an entertainment show!’ And that framed me into the role of the “recalcitrant” guy (as Iwan called me), intervening because the others did *not*. So the political dimension of my engagement actually concerns a relationship between me and the other members of the audience within the immersive framework of that performance. It seemed to me in my rather agitated state that the majority of the audience did not see that this was a structural apparatus of violence that they

were passively enabling by behaving like “polite” guests; and if they saw it, I was sure that either they didn’t care or didn’t *want* to see it.⁴ This is what framed me affectively into a recalcitrant role, understood as a form of *protest within the performance*. The consequence of this experience to me is that immersion cannot be understood as only a relation between me as a single individual and a fictional setting. The dimension of audience-audience relationship was absolutely critical for my own experience of, and my behavior in, this show.

Yet, what was I protesting against? The fiction or the performance? I think it is precisely characteristic of this as an *immersive* show that this border is blurred. It was the structural apparatus of authoritarian pleasures and violence I was protesting against – and this was *more than merely fictional*. This brings me to my last concern. This show made me think not only of the audience-performance and audience-audience relationships, but also of the relation between the performers. It seemed obvious to me that an immersive production like this must be first of all immersive for the cast. They were performing this consecutively for one month, almost every night, five hours long, with amateur actors constituting 50 percent of the cast.⁵ After the shows most performers went to sleep all together in one large dorm (so it was rumoured). I was already wondering in the performance whether, on the level of group dynamics, the power relationships of the fiction might extend to power relationships outside performance hours – whether the affectivities and psychologies that are performed might extend to ‘real’ affective and psychological dispositions of the actors. This suspicion made me suddenly furious, as it potentially turns the production itself into an apparatus of structural violence. In a setting in which violence and physical abuse, tantrums and authoritarian commands, sexualized power relationships, inferiority complexes, shyness, borderline behavior and anxieties (on the part of the Doggies) are performed to such a degree of realness, intensity and temporal duration, will some of this not be built on ‘real’ pleasures and ‘real’ psychological structures on the part of the performers? To what extent must we concede that such a production might be an apparatus of producing, stabilizing or amplifying psychological dispositions through which the fiction gradually, over the course of time, *becomes real*?

I raised this question in the audience Q&A on 19 June 2016, and I got very interesting answers. One performer of a Doggy came to me afterwards saying that my suspicion – that power structures of the fiction extend to the relations within the cast – is justified, but that it couldn’t be said officially. The performer of Wieland Kalthoff explained to me in a long conversation that Wieland would not have been able to perform the tantrum upon my throwing a soft ball at his back if this intervention had happened in one of the first and not one of the last nights. By the end of the period, his affective embodiment of the figure was so advanced that he could perform this furious explosion “completely automatically and

4 The idea that others didn’t intervene because it was a performance occurred to me, but it made me even more upset as I considered this argument to be void, see below.

5 In other SIGNA productions, such as the recent “Das halbe Leid” (Hamburg, 2017), which was running daily from 7pm to 7am, this is even more extreme.

without deliberate thinking”. Such an intervention does not happen in the performance every day; his reaction is therefore not a scripted piece of acting that works better with each show. Rather, *within* the figure/fiction/role, this was a reaction towards something *unexpected*, hence one could say that there is something like an emerging affective autonomy of the character Wieland beyond the scripted repertoire of the role. Such an autonomy of an affective character emerges in a certain *relational affective arrangement*, in which this very affective disposition gets produced and stabilized over time in an affective niche into which Wieland is growing (here it is the niche of the choleric family tyrant within the fiction).⁶

The carrier of the character is thus not the single performer, and the affective brilliance of his/her performance is not primarily the result of a good knowledge of his/her individual psychology plus acting skills. Rather, it is a relational and situated phenomenon. Hence saying that certain (authoritarian, submissive, sadist, masochist, etc.) psychological dispositions of the individual actors can freely unfold in this performative setting might be true, but is generally a too simple version of the critique I am raising. The affects we see in the play are not merely produced by a mobilization of individual psychological memories of real affective and emotional constellations (this is what sociologist of emotion Arlie Hochschild calls ‘deep acting’). Rather, we seem to have a converse phenomenon of ‘deep realization’ in the case of immersive theatre: a certain *relational arrangement* (which is, at first, fictional) *creates affectivities and psychologies* of real persons that transgress the realm of fictionality towards psychologically real pleasures, real sadistic and masochistic relations. Although the setting was created as fictional, the affects might become real; they *gain reality*, as dispositions of real persons, over time.

This is how my visit left me with political skepticism. The show reminded me of the Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971, where alarming observations were made of similar processes of the situated emergence of psychological traits in the context of perceived power. It should be discussed – and not kept as corporate secrets – in what way such productions are immersive for the cast, blurring the boundaries between individual psychological engagement and engagement on the fictional level. Frankly, this performance looked like a sado-masochistic machine to me, with audience members as passive enablers, so long as this is not verbalized. As much as one should therefore intervene in the play, why should one not intervene on the level of theatre curating, production and scholarly reflection of this phenomenon?

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6 For the concept of an ‘affective arrangement’ see Slaby et al. 2017, for the approach of a relational genesis of affective and psychological dispositions see Mühlhoff 2018.

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