Stage Fright

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Thus we find ourselves in what Erving Goffman calls "the outside": "When outsiders unexpectedly enter the front or the back region of a particular performance-in-progress, the consequence of their inopportune presence can often best be studied not in terms of its effects upon the performance-in-progress but rather in terms of its effects upon a different performance, namely, the one which the performers or the audience would ordinarily present before the outsiders at a time and place when the outsiders would be the anticipated audience."

(Goffman, 1959: 135)

A close-up of a man sceptically watching an event taking place outside of the image. Then two pairs of hands skittishly gesturing over a couple of pages of text. Emphatic instructions to one side, nervous fumbling with paper to the other. A frilly golden blouse in dialogue with an ill-fitting tie. Additional participants await their entrance at the edge of an open-air stage, some spectators follow the proceedings from a distance. What all eyes are directed to lies out of view. This silent opening sequence from Katarina Zdjelar's video *Untitled (The Motto of Today. Rise Again)* (2011) suggests that the actual performance takes place at the edge of this onstage event. The focus is on the preparations of the participants.

"He had to change, he had no shirt," we hear a female voice say in Slovenian. We can only assume she is referring to one of the performers whose appearance needed to be brought in line with protocol. This odd, indiscreet comment, addressed to us not personally but as presumed members of the same "community of values", places us in an indeterminate realm between the audience and backstage areas of an important social event[1] — the festivities marking the celebration of World Refugee Day being held in a Slovenian asylum centre for refugees. In collaboration with the residents and accompanied by music and dance performances by native children, an event for a select public will be held here, aimed at honouring the efficiency of European integration policy in addition to the refugees' "courage and desire for freedom".

Zdjelar's recordings make use of the reportage style, but without commentary or any spatiotemporal reference, and lacking identifiable protagonists, her shaky close-ups admit only fragmentary glimpses. The camera is at best at eye level with the bystanders and stops at the

edge of the stage. Image and sound only rarely run synchronously, meaning an increasing disorientation for us viewers. Thus we listen in on what does not concern us, while other (unsubtitled) messages are deliberately withheld from us. We observe the gestures and facial expressions of the protagonists and spectators at close range while our gaze is again and again carefully diverted from the overall happenings on the stage. We are at once included and excluded, accomplices and strangers, positioned in the space but lacking a general view. As Mladen Dolar comments:

> "A celebration is always a staging for an ideal gaze, but this is here completely lacking. The ideal gaze of the other is the viewpoint from which history is looking at us, the frame in which we want to be placed and from where we want to be seen"
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> (Dolar, 2012: 11)

Zdjelar's camera subverts and de-centres the "ideal gaze" of history, thus allowing us a closer look at how and for whom identities are performed here.

The joint celebration gives the refugees a stage without giving them a voice. Before an audience of fellow residents, asylum centre staff, the local community and international representatives, they put on a show whose script has been developed by the organisers and put in their mouths. On the day that bears their name, some of them get the chance to represent the group in proving their worth—that is, their desire for integration—by assuming a role onstage in a public performance. What counts is not so much how convincingly they embody their stage personae but their willingness to play along. That the performances

of the three refugees as a TV presenter, pop star and Bruce Lee are the only sequences in the video in which the image and sound are synchronised seems to reflect the actors' efforts to reconcile their dual role requirements in formal congruence.

In the Afghan Farhad Nazari, the show within a show has a true protagonist. In his role as a TV presenter he is an 'anchor' in the direct sense of the word: he is not only to embody the ideal type of the 'good refugee' before the Slovenian public but also to provide the blueprint for his immigrant audience to follow. It is not without a certain irony that he is seen here announcing the 'good news' as the mouthpiece of a news programme and thus representing a societal consensus that is diametrically opposed to his real existence. In a magical transformation he goes from a humanitarian emergency exploited by the media to a maker of the mainstream. The fact that we see our projection of an assimilable foreigner incarnated in commentator Farhad and his show guests is thanks to the (simulated) television transmission, which brings it close in an understandable way and at the same time holds it at a distance as a media image. Paradoxically, it is precisely Farhad's failure as a performer that would appear to validate his integrity as an asylum seeker in the eyes of his audience.

Beyond the stage, close-ups of a fleetingly exchanged handshake, a furtively smoked cigarette and the final support given before the big show suggest the intimate familiarity between the refugees. The time spent together in refugee asylums or in hiding, the repeated separations and reunions, have created a sense of mobile and geo-dispersed community between them. The recordings, which they themselves make of what is happening onstage with cameras and mobile phones,

document their recognition of the others as representatives of their own situation. Both the gesture of capturing images and the now and again reciprocal gaze of the camera reveal a complicity with the artist; here at the event at the invitation of the men, she herself moves between the boundaries of cultural and political affiliations. Meanwhile, the busy fussing-along of the hosts, the impatient coming-and-going of ladies' legs on the stage and the anxiously observed protocol of the official address suggest that there is also something at stake for them: they act not only as hosts of a local event but as host nation. Their performance reflects not only the expectations of the refugees but those of their European neighbours. On World Refugee Day no one is 'at home'; it makes everyone out of place. While the willing suspension of disbelief unites actors and audience in the illusion of a multicultural 'We' for the duration of the event, the camera documents the effort required to maintain this understanding, every breach and every lapse. The 'We' invoked here is based on the misrecognition of a 'They' that cannot be integrated but one which is nevertheless indispensable as a mirror of their own ambitions.

Two additional film sequences from other sources are mingled nearly unnoticeably with the recordings from World Refugee Day. They insidiously subvert the already fragmented course of events by showing some of the actors in other roles and realities. Shaky mobile phone shots show three of the Afghan refugees in a wooded area in Croatia, only scantily protected from the cold and wet with plastic bags as sleeping bags. Like a sudden, involuntary flashback to a not-so-distant past, this brief scene is slipped into the 'broadcast' from the 'television studio', accompanied by the singing of the Cameroonian

Don’t Do It Wrong, 2007,10’13”

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As a refugee practising martial arts he seems to embody the "post-partisan" condition. One is in fact reminded here of Slavoj Žižek's remarks on kung fu as a "genuine working class ideology of youngsters whose only means of success was the disciplinary training of their only possession, their bodies"

(Žižek, 2004: 78)

'pop star'. These recordings blur the boundaries between an unsettling document showing the lives of the actors prior to their stage-ready formatting as refugees and the all-too-familiar documentary treatment of precarious lives in the media. They have their mirror-image counterpart in a second, semi-fictional sequence that was directed by some of the refugees in a wooded area not far from the asylum centre. It revolves around Bruce Lee, a young Afghan who, because of his resemblance to the Hollywood star and his passion for kung fu, also has this nickname in real life.

The spectacular aesthetics of the martial arts genre in *Untitled (The Motto of Today. Rise Again)* is combined with the military drill, male rites of passage and notions of a utopian community in an ambivalent orchestration. The young hero and leader serves to project the men's desire for a self-determined, heroic departure from their histories. The fact that the plot unfolds around the Bruce Lee character, who among other things performs his training routines on a memorial stone honouring Slovenian partisan forces,[2] also prompts associations with a noteworthy episode in post-Yugoslav commemorative culture.

In 2005 a Bruce Lee statue was erected in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina at the behest of the people to stand as a symbol against ethnically motivated violence and for understanding between peoples. After tough negotiations, the figure of the Chinese-American kung fu star had turned out to be the only proposal acceptable to all sides as a public monument integrating all segments of the population. In the video he embodies the past of a society that had for decades been dragged down by an inward confrontation with what was supposedly foreign and at the same time its present, in which it increasingly finds itself confronted with an external foreignness in the

course of global migration movements. In the guise of a happy compromise, the Afghan Bruce Lee reintroduces the foreigner who cannot be assimilated into the Slovenian reality, covering up the impossibility of unity.

While *Untitled (The Motto of Today. Rise Again)* brings together asylum seekers and hosts for a joint performancei n which they conjure up the ambivalent illusion of a multicultural 'We', the video diptych *Act I, Act II* (2010) shows how the refugee is produced from the material of his life story. In the first part, Zdjelar's tableau presents three men, a Bosnian refugee, a Dutch civil servant and a simultaneous interpreter, conducting an interview in a clinical white studio set representing a Dutch immigration office. The refugee responds to the soberly delivered standardised questions of the interviewer, who barely looks up as he steadily types into his computer. The stylisation and insularity of the setting condenses the scene into a nearly archetypical constellation, which the camera scans in slow motion and with static close-ups. Here too the image and sound are only partially synchronised, as if the characters were not speaking for and of themselves.

The system is here practising the assessment and processing of exemplary lives: the refugee speaks as a witness to his own life story, and his testimony must convey and substantiate the suffering he has endured. Such evidence can only be provided, however, when the story of his own unique experience is comparable to those of other refugees. He necessarily speaks for himself as subject and as an exemplary case. In turn, the standardisation of the questions is intended to produce a record of his life so that it can be compared with that of other and erase "garnered towards capturing his life in comparability mode." As a medium between refugee and

state apparatus, the interpreter can pave the "Highway to Freedom" (as the slogan on his sweatshirt reads). Thanks to his intermediation, the individual's experience can be integrated into an existing corpus of records. Whoever wishes to be recognised as a refugee must respond *like* one. An interview is an interrogation, a guilty verdict: the interviewee's lowered head is not only an expression of shame but also a gesture of submission. It communicates in no uncertain terms that the respondent has accepted the ground rules of the questioner. It is he who begins the conversation and declares it over.

Nevertheless, and paradoxically, it is precisely the matter of "recognition as" that sets the interpretive play of identities in motion. When Hannah Arendt warns of the "great temptation of recognition, which, in no matter what form, can only recognize us *as* such and such, that is, as something which we fundamentally are *not*" (in Bedorf, 2010: 193), she is pointing to the danger in codifying identity, whether it be the expression of the emancipatory aspirations of marginalised groups or an instrument of state sanctioning and segregation. At the same time, the process of misrecognition holds out the prospect of not only permanently holding subjectivity in abeyance but making new subject positions possible through the play of identities. The interview, which is to determine the identity of the speaker, then becomes the stage on which he interprets his role.

In *Act II* this relationship between life and role is further complicated. Here we meet the actor who played the Bosnian refugee as an extra in second-rate feature films, in which he is cast exclusively as a shady Eastern European. His narration from off screen appears in English translation as text panels in the centre of the image. Only once do we see his whole figure in the video;

usually only fragments of movements show up on the screen, gestures that seem to hint at the marginal roles he is describing. In his films he is the fictional reincarnation of the abstract fears European immigration policy projects onto foreigners in general, and at the same time he is identified with them by virtue of his life history.

The video suggests that what is foreign can only be integrated in the hackneyed garb of sublimated fears. The mostly white image of *Act II* imposes itself as a screen, as a projection surface for our own candid images of 'Eastern Europeans'. And against the background of this second act must we not proceed from the assumption that the first was also merely another role, an act acted out by the same actor? In fact, the three actors perform a role play in *Act I*. More precisely, they play themselves in the role play: all three regularly perform in similar interviews for employees of the Dutch immigration authorities for training purposes. Nevertheless, the figure of the refugee remains ambivalent. His unexpected emotional collapse at the end of the interview is no less disturbing even, or especially, when one is aware of the fictional nature of the arrangement. In the end it remains unclear whether an actual trauma is revived and uncontrollably unleashed for the speaker at this point, whether the scene here reaches its intended dramatic climax or the actor's identification with his role in it gives way to an outburst of the emotions that *typically* occur in such a situation.

In these complex areas of overlap between role play and real life, it is less a question of differentiating reality and fiction as areas *between* which the subject plays a part and more a matter of the necessity of their interplay in making the social constitution of the self visible. With each role something is at stake. For the refugee participating against his better judgment in the

Untitled (The Motto of Today. Rise Again), 2011, 31’32”

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fiction of a harmonious multicultural coexistence at World Refugee Day, his performance is existential: it may affect the decision on his residence status in the host country. And the Turkish primary school students who line up for the daily morning flag ceremony in Zdjelar's video *Don't Do It Wrong* (2007) are likewise learning not only discipline but the role of a good citizen. A chaotic throng of children is for a short moment still and arranged in rows three deep, their babble of voices singing the national anthem in unison and chanting militant slogans together. Even as the performative power of the ritual evokes the quasi-organic cohesion of a unified body politic in the image of the children in (uni)form, the compulsory nature of this order is still obvious. It gives rise to panic attacks, nervous outbursts and loud rebukes, and immediately after the shared routine is complete, a blind momentum takes over.

Here Zdjelar focuses on a moment of precarious order that undermines the assertion of collective identity from the inside: a moment in which the oath to the nation is still not fully automated in daily ritual and solidified into the ideal of community, but in which the children are struck with all the might of its martial declarations. The oath develops its binding long-term effect not despite but because of this first shock, which is revived in a sublimated form with every repetition of the ritual. In this spirit, the admonition of one of the teachers, 'Don't do it wrong', transcends the actual performance of the students. It brings the state into the arena as the absent addressee of the ritual, with the camera here functioning as its representative: a gaze to which all those wishing to belong expose themselves, but whose disciplinary power they secretly fear.

The body's role in the production of subjectivity through language is instrumental in two senses of the word. It produces the voice as a unique expression of the individuals which, with entrance into the symbolic order, accomplishes the transition into a political community. In *The Perfect Sound* (2009) Zdjelar has shed light on this connection in the work of a British speech therapist with his student, a young immigrant. In a country where class distinctions are still today particularly marked in language, the elimination of a foreign accent, that is, the neutralisation of pronunciation, also promises an improvement in social performance. Every sound uttered by the teacher is mimicked by the student like an imperfect echo as he endeavours to bring his vocalisation in line with what is heard. Yet each repetition only gives rise to another deviation. As in the chorus of the school children, here too the striving for synchronicity and harmony always produces more than one voice.

The motor effort that the formation of sounds requires is written on the face of both speakers. The voice's incongruity with what one aims to emulate requires not only phonetic correction but the re-formation of the body producing it. Only by relinquishing 'normal' physiognomy and allowing speech to 'relapse' into the monotonous singsong of the purely vocal can new linguistic form be moulded. The teacher's eccentric gestures not only demonstrate the production of the sounds in the body, their direction and extension in space but in a sense give birth to them. Disciplining the voice helps bring such a new speaker into existence, however his optimised performance remains marked by its passage through the shapelessness of pure voice. It reminds us that

> "the voice is not simply an element external to speech, but persists at its core, making it possible

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and constantly haunting it by the impossibility of symbolizing it"

(Dolar, 2006: 106)

The perfect sound is the result of a misrepresentation. To generalise, one could say that even the most successful performance carries within it the more or less painful or shameful failure that had to be overcome along the way. That those who witness the performance are not normally aware of this is due solely to the fact that the rehearsal process is withheld from them. Only a slip summons it back to mind. The particular tension, but also the creeping malaise, that one feels when watching Zdjelar's videos arises from her finding and presenting situations that usually take place out of public view. She infiltrates the places and processes where social subjects are produced in direct feedback with the system: Turkish nationals, EU citizens with an immigrant background, eloquent social climbers. Zdjelar's videos are obscene in the sense that they present processes of this kind whose mechanism of action lies precisely in their not being made explicit. They show us at an intimate distance that it is impossible for a role played to ever be more than an approximation, for a role to ever achieve anything more than a temporary compromise between the desire for recognition and the risk of giving oneself away.