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**Who's watching? Me! – Theatricality, Spectatorship and the Žižekian Subject**

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**Abstract**

This chapter outlines a Žižekian analysis of theatre performance that goes beyond disclosing the ideological workings of the symbolic and imaginary orders at the level of plots, characters, and representation. Linking Žižek's revision of Hegelian (negative) subjectivity with approaches from German 'theatricality studies', I instead focus on the (formal) level of theatrical presentation. Discussing Flemish director Guy Casiers's intermedial production of Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities* (2009-12), I argue that the dynamic force of 'thea' creates a reflexive experiential loop of 'watching ourselves watching'. This induces a parallax split, which dramatizes the negative dialectic force of Hegelian-Žižekian subjectivity.

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# Who's watching? Me! – Theatricality, Spectatorship and the Žižekian

## Subject

Peter M Boenisch

In the opening sentence of a 2012-essay for the British news magazine *New Statesman*, where he commented on the Occupy movement through the lens of the then latest output of the Batman movie trilogy, Slavoj Žižek expressly states his basic principle for analysing popular culture: ‘*The Dark Knight Rises* shows that Hollywood blockbusters are precise indicators of the ideological predicaments of our societies.’<sup>1</sup> For Žižek, cinema, music and (more rarely) the performing arts can reveal the ‘true’ message of the official symbolic and imaginary order, and are thus akin to the psychoanalytic ‘return of the repressed’. In this contribution, however, I will attempt to outline a ‘Žižekian analysis’ of theatre that goes beyond the Lacanian disclosure of ideological misapprehension and the subject’s subjection under the symbolic order. This analytic perspective will focus less on the level of representation (the content, plot, characters, and narrative), but instead concentrate on the level and the mode of presentation – in line with the Hegelian reminder, regularly quoted by Žižek, that the truth is always on the side of form, and not on the side of content. I shall here draw on Žižek’s seminal re-reading of Hegel in order to develop an outline of the fundamental formal structure of theatre, characterised by reflexive repetition, and the relational parallax. These principles link theatre directly with Žižek’s ‘negative’ ontology of the subject, his peculiar Lacanian-Hegelian reassertion of subjectivity, the very notion discarded, above all, by postmodern philosophy. Additionally, I will introduce the German scholarly field of ‘theatricality studies’ (*Theatralitätsforschung*), and refer to recent theatre work by Flemish director Guy Cassiers as my example. Such a Žižekian approach to analysing

theatre has a lot to offer for current methodological debates in theatre and performance studies, which more and more challenge the prevailing critical focus on the work, the artist and the (semiotic and/or phenomenal) performance event. It also highlights that, as a (live) cultural practice, theatre is able to do more than disclose specular mirror images of subjective identification and ideological misrecognition.

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The theatrical signature of Guy Cassiers is an immediately recognisable intermedial set-up of live-feed projections and images (especially well-known paintings) on an almost empty stage. Initially trained as a graphic designer, the Flemish theatre director gained international prominence for a number of large-scale projects, most notably for his four-part adaptation of Marcel Proust's *Recherche du temps perdu* (2002-2005), created at Rotterdam's Ro-Theater (where Cassiers was Artistic Director between 1998 and 2006) and shown internationally at such major theatre festivals as Avignon, Vienna, Berlin and Dublin. Taking over as Artistic Director of Het Toneelhuis in his hometown of Antwerp in 2006, Cassiers followed this success with the *Triptych of Power*, a trilogy of plays on Hitler, Stalin, and George W. Bush. At the same time, he also turned to opera, including his controversial *Ring*, which was co-produced by Teatro alla Scala in Milan and by Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin. He directed the great Wagner cycle between 2010 and 2012, simultaneously to working on *De Man Zonder Eigenschappen*; another trilogy, which was based on Austrian author Robert Musil's unfinished novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (The Man Without Qualities, 1930-1942). In the following, I shall mainly turn to the latter production for my discussion, not least because it adds to an oeuvre which heavily explores issues of identity and subjectivity,

most tangibly in the stagings of the Proust- and Musil-novels. These productions were also underscored by reflections on the big political topics of the twentieth century, especially on totalitarianism and war – topics which lie very close to the heart of Žižek’s work, too. The first part of Cassiers’s Musil-project, *De Parallelactie*, especially foregrounds the novel’s political dimension, something which similarly had been a far more pronounced aspect of his Proust-plays than of any previous adaptations of the *Temps Perdu*. This first part, set in 1913, focuses mostly on Musil’s protagonist Ulrich’s reluctant involvement with the planning committee tasked to prepare the eponymous ‘Parallel Action’ of the title, the celebrations of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Emperor Franz Josef’s reign in 1918 (‘parallel’ since it would coincide with the 30-year jubilee of German *Kaiser* Wilhelm).<sup>2</sup> Of course, our knowledge as spectators about what would happen between 1914 and 1918 serves as a constant dramaturgic foil, while the atmosphere of the tired empire of Musil’s ‘Kakanien’ also directly resonates with our own feeling of ‘living in the end times’, as one of Žižek’s more recent book titles so aptly phrases it.<sup>3</sup>

Despite (or rather, in addition to) these overt political overtones of Cassiers’s productions, their principal political stakes are raised not on the grounds of these thematic layers of adaptation and interpretation, but precisely on the level of formal theatrical presentation. Here, his work is often misjudged, as some critics consider it as rather conservative, since he still relies, even in these postdramatic times, on a play script with characters and a narrative.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is not least the director’s elaborate use of digital technology that sets in motion a machinery of mediation, which should be read in direct parallel to the Hegelian *Vermittlung* of the dialectical process. In sharp contrast to the technological wizardry of theatre directors such as Robert Lepage, Simon

McBurney, or the media-visual poetry of Katie Mitchell (whose work could be seen to serve the ideal of neo-naturalist representation), Cassiers repossesses not only the use of new media: moreover, he turns his attention to the entire representational machinery of the illusionist proscenium theatre, above all by creating a genuinely ‘theatral’ experience. By this, I mean Cassiers’s carefully calibrated dramaturgic balance of dramatic narration and of postdramatic means of presentation.<sup>5</sup> This is particularly intriguing, and specifically relevant to the present argument, since it avoids our immediate immersion into a fictional world; it prevents our identification with characters, and forestalls our empathy. At the same time, we are still inextricably immersed into the theatral presentation, and more specifically, into the process of mediation. It is impossible to adopt a spectatorial stance of ironic critical distance here, something which is quite characteristic for a number of prototypically postdramatic approaches to theatrical representation. Cassiers’s crucial innovation, precisely, lies in a formal effect: his productions reflexively relate us to our own ‘acts of watching’. They create experiential (reflexive) loops of ‘watching myself watching’, which foreground the perception of perception itself. They thereby turn the act of spectating into a *Wahrnehmung* (realisation) of the all but banal question: Who is watching? This, then, is precisely the point where the essential ‘theatral’ dynamics (a term I shall explore further below) of his productions, far more than the represented content or the fictional characters portrayed, stage and dramatize the very moments and dynamics of all individuation and subjectivisation processes.

Cassiers’s directorial work deserves to be read alongside Žižek’s radical re-assessment of the Hegelian dialectical movement; in his writing, this is a central aspect of asserting the notion of subjectivity against its postmodern deconstruction as an ideological

fabrication, or, more recently, as pure neuronal biological effect. The intellectual capitulation declared by this position, as Žižek never tires to point out, is that once the subject has been fully exorcised, there will be no subject left to act, to criticise, and to stand up against the very manifest processes of (de-)subjectivisation brought about by the global capitalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a position that, of course, perfectly plays into the hands of the very system it sets out to criticise. Against this dilemma, Žižek returns to the ‘spectre of the Cartesian subject’, but not in its incarnation as a totally transparent self, driven by Kantian will. Instead, Žižek points towards the Hegelian notion of ‘absolute negativity’.<sup>6</sup> Instead of attempting to *fill* the gaping hole at the centre of contemporary subjectivity, Žižek makes this very emptiness his ‘point zero’ for all forms of agency, critique and of subversion:

Subjectivity is not dismissed as a form of misrecognition; on the contrary, it is asserted as the moment in which the ontological gap/void becomes palpable, as a gesture that undermines the positive order of Being, of the differential structure of Society, of politics as police.<sup>7</sup>

Žižek here beats subjectivisation via subjectivisation itself. He exposes how every founding gesture of subjectivity necessarily undermines any notion of pure positivity of the Self because it simultaneously produces an obscene supplement: where there is subjectivisation, there is necessarily also more than the mere subject itself. The subject must disavow this excessive surplus in order to affirm its own existence; yet without it, the subject would not exist at all. For Žižek, the subject is therefore the positivation of this abject negativity: Instead of expressing a positive content or identity, subjectivity only emerges through the loop of recursive self-reflexivity that circles around an empty

core. Žižek here performs his interpretation of the Hegelian ‘negation of the negation’, the ultimate reversal at the culmination of the dialectical process. What Hegel terms ‘reconciliation’, however, in Žižek’s reading assumes anything but a positive gesture of overcoming conflict: moreover, it assumes ‘the most extreme expression of the modern delirium of the total subjective-notional appropriation of all reality’:<sup>8</sup>

Reconciliation does not mean that the subject finally succeeds in appropriating the otherness which threatens its self-identity, mediating or internalizing (i.e., ‘sublating’ it). Quite the contrary, Hegelian reconciliation contains a resigned note: one has to reconcile oneself with the excess of negativity as a positive ground or condition of our freedom, to recognize our own substance in what appears to be an obstacle.<sup>9</sup>

This is what is meant by the popular Žižekian-Hegelian catchphrase, ‘tarrying with the negative’. What changes in this in order to pass from alienation to reconciliation is not the subject’s reality, but the way it perceives and relates to it. The speculative Hegelian dialectical mediation induces nothing other than a change in our own perspective, a formal turnaround which Žižek describes as a parallax shift of perspective: it is the very moment of reconciliation where ‘the subject endorses the loss, re-inscribes it as its triumph.’<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary theatre works such as those by Guy Cassiers open up a dimension of spectatorial experience which performs and makes available precisely this parallaxic experience of subjectivity: they challenge our own perception of and our own relation to ourselves – *as spectating subjects*.<sup>11</sup> This happens at a purely formal level, beyond

(or, rather: beneath) the levels of content and (symbolic) representation, and certainly before the standard primary concern with the ‘interpretation’ of plays and performances comes to bear. What I develop here as a Žižekian analysis of theatricality provides us with the tools to disclose how contemporary theatre opens up a vital alternative dimension: the relational and reflexive plane of theatrical *presentation*. It is here where theatre gains its central political force as a public art and as a socio-cultural medium within the digital and global economy of the twenty-first century.

I have now used the term ‘theatricality’ several times, which still requires further introduction. This notion emerged within the German school of ‘theatricality studies’ (*Theatralitätsforschung*). With their distinct coinage of ‘theatricality’ (instead of ‘theatricality’), scholars such as Rudolf Münz, Joachim Fiebach, Helmar Schramm, and Andreas Kotte signalled their critique of the normative (academic) matrix of established theatre (and other cultural-ideological) institutions and their canon of the ‘classics’. At the same time, however, they also countered the outright dismissal implied by the term ‘theatricality’ and its associations of something that is fake or a fabrication and therefore not ‘real’. Theatricality as theatre minus theatricality thus aligns itself structurally with the Žižekian subjectivisation minus the subject and Cassiers’s staging of texts minus drama. Rudolf Münz’s pioneering historiographic research brought, above all, into focus the very principle of *thea* itself, which, of course, also aligns theatre and theory, performance and philosophy. The intriguing ambiguity of the Greek verb *theorein* implies both the ‘gaze’, the ‘viewing’ and ‘looking’, and it also refers to the ostentatious presentation, the actual performance.<sup>12</sup>

To Münz, performing and spectating are two inseparable sides of the same coin of theatricality, activating both the positional ambivalence and the fundamental relationality at the heart of *thea*. Accordingly – and in explicit contrast to the approach of Schechnerian Performance Studies – Münz conceives of theatricality as ‘a relation, not a behaviour’.<sup>13</sup> Helmar Schramm further expanded on Münz’s relational notion of a continually adapting, always historically specified socio-cultural ‘fabric of theatricality’ (*Theatralitätsgefüge*). He proposes an understanding of theatricality as a *Denkstil*, as a ‘style of thinking’, which is coordinated by the relational dynamics between what he describes as the ‘three decisive agents of cultural energy’: *aisthesis* (perception), *kinesis* (motion) and *semiosis* (meaning). Schramm evocatively terms these relational micro-dynamics the ‘magic triangle’ of theatricality.<sup>14</sup> His major study, *Karneval des Denkens* (Carnival of Thinking), accordingly scrutinises theatricality at work in the philosophical writings of Montaigne, Bacon, Descartes, Pascal, Hobbes, and others.<sup>15</sup> He argues that while new ‘styles of thinking’ emerged at the historic juncture of the seventeenth century (through the printed dissemination of writing, the geometric systematisation of space, the ‘scientific’ rationalisation of knowledge, and the emerging capitalist imperative of industrial economy), an irrational, non-calculable, anti-geometric, non-linear and simply non-productive underside surfaced at the same time. Such processes can be observed in such instances as alchemy, but also in popular performance, and elsewhere in dreams, fears, and in fantasy: in precisely the whole ‘carnival of thinking’ his book title refers to. Schramm’s triangular ‘forcefield’ of theatricality, as it were, thus outbalances the privilege of purely rational *semiosis* by carefully realigning signs, text, and language to processes of *kinesis* and *aisthesis*. With Žižek, we should add Hegel’s dialectic sublation here. Žižek contrasts Hegel’s thought with the modern mathematisation of science of the later nineteenth century; in Hegel he sees ‘the last

great attempt to “sublate” empirical-formal science into speculative Reason<sup>16</sup> – another, dialectical ‘carnival of thinking’.

Today, an entire new tradition of (essentially Continental European) approaches to theatre directing allow for a similar ‘carnival of speculative reasoning’. Exemplarily, the theatre of Guy Cassiers not only presents us with a *Vorstellung* (representation), it also offers us a form of *thea*, i.e. a space for *Anschauung*. It is a theatre that is united with both theatricality studies and Žižekian philosophy in its transgression, even its straightforward rejection of the hegemony of a purely representational logic. Instead, it reintroduces the often unrefined, irrational, inefficient and vulgar dimensions of what Schiller once famously termed the ‘human play’. In Žižek’s work, the vulgarity and playfulness of jokes is the most notable device that allows him to confront, expose, and critique hegemonic ideological patterns, and to even access and analyse totalitarian structures. Furthermore, he rarely ‘argues’ rationally, let alone coherently. Using collage, juxtaposition, montage in the service of defamiliarisation, amassing material until any clear ‘logical’ perspective gets lost and the ‘truth’ emerges from the interval, Žižek employs a thoroughly ‘theatrical’ dramaturgic strategy in much of his writing. Here, both Žižek and Cassiers have learnt their lessons from the epic as well as from the postdramatic textbooks. Theirs is a dramaturgy that no longer follows the law of causal linearity of a plot, nor the logic of a ‘philosophical argument’. There are redundancies, permanent reflections and repetitions, which are undercut by ever so tiny shifts that soon result in apparent self-contradictions. Moreover, however, their ‘stylised thinking’ of theatricality, where perception, movement, and meaning interact, adds the vital performative (kinetic and aesthetic) dimensions of playing, relating, and reflexive spectating – of *thea*.

As a result, the experience of watching Cassiers's work is no less vertiginous than reading Žižek. His directorial work never streamlines, it never doubles, or simply illustrates the object-content of the novels he stages. In fact, it would be impossible to adequately 'represent' the content of Proust's and Musil's monumental novels – or equally, in Cassiers's other trilogy, to represent Hitler or Stalin on the theatre stage. Hence, the director invents numerous theatrical equivalents for the complex narratives and the multiple perspectives of the novels he stages, which in turn trigger the 'magic' playfulness of meaning, motion, and perception. The principal impression as spectator of his *Man Zonder Eigenschappen*, for instance, is one of watching flamboyantly colourful figurines arrested in an image against the dark, black, and largely empty stage. We appear to perceive a relief that is cut out from the very texture of reality. This typical almost laminar two-dimensionality of Cassiers's *mise en scène* directly evokes Catherine Malabou's notion of 'plasticity'. In its double sense of expressing a capability of receiving form, but also of giving, producing and even annihilating it (as in the detonation of plastic explosives), plasticity (a term taken from Hegel's writings) is Malabou's key to grasping Hegelian 'speculative thinking': as a 'plastic' logic that sublates finite truths and predicative logic.<sup>17</sup> 'Plasticity' is hence a useful term to describe the theatricality at work in Cassiers's productions, as it 'sublates' the representation of characters, and equally characterises the position of the dramatic text within his work. Cassiers collaborates for his adaptations of novels (which almost all of his theatre productions are) with prominent Dutch and Flemish authors, such as Tom Lanoye, Josse De Pauw, and Eric De Kuypere: the dramatic text in his plays is crucial to 'receive form', yet it no longer fulfils the role of the solely dominant sign system. We see this in the Musil trilogy (as elsewhere in the director's work), where characters exchange conventional dramatic dialogue throughout. Yet the strictly semiotic meaning

of language they employ is constantly sublated through the playful plasticity of kinetic and aesthetic elements, which are – above all – introduced through visual and other mediatised means.

This very plasticity short-circuits (or even implodes) the fictional representation with the very act of (theatral) presentation. Notably, the actors all speak through microphones, something which prevents any theatrically expressive declamation. It enables a reduced delivery of the text which presents the dramatic dialogue precisely as text: as an utterance that is declared, as an ‘act of speaking’. Relieved from the expressivity of representation (in the mode of psychological acting, in particular), the play-text regains its ‘pure (‘plastic’) form’, replenished with its full kinetic, aesthetic, and semiotic potential – prior to the ‘suture’ of representation, the domestication of the ‘magic’ theatral dynamics through the coherent, causal and linear symbolic order of the ‘Big Other’. At the same time, we see projections of live images on screens, mostly showing close-ups of the actors’ faces. As a result, some of the work conventionally expected from an actor in a dramatic production – characterisation, the showing of a character’s psychology – is taken over elsewhere: by the projected image, by digital manipulation of the voice, and not least by the striking costumes (by design collective Belgat). They pronouncedly refute any historic realism, while telling us a great deal about their characters as well as the historic context. These costumes further externalise the characters as a visual psychogram: the performers in a very literal sense ‘wear’ their characters.

The resulting excess of the ‘theatral’ play must irritate. In Cassiers’s productions, the text, in fact, almost becomes ‘too much’. No longer contained by a representational

framing of fictional illusion, it slowly turns into an all-encompassing abyss. The play's text never 'comes off the page' this way, as the English theatre phrase goes: not because of a *lack* of the *mise en scène*, but because there are simply *too many* parts that no longer add up 'in one'. The production no longer weighs and privileges speech, nor does it place its emphasis on visual information alone. Cassiers rather exposes his spectators to a dis-integrating multiplicity, to a perpetual surplus of contrasting, confronting, and complementing streams of mediatised information which can never add up. Dramaturge Marianne van Kerkhoven suggested the evocative term 'multisensual' to describe this approach.<sup>18</sup> Cassiers's multidimensional, 'multisensorial' effect indeed resembles the theatrical equivalent of a Picasso painting, which simply cannot be 'grasped' and dominated from a singular 'objective' standpoint opposite and outside – or, for that matter, the philosophical writing of Žižek, as hinted at above. Instead of a closed and coherent totality of a fictional character, the separated mediatised streams of voice, image, and the actual body of the actors performing (who we simultaneously see on stage) make the fictional illusion of the production porous: the acting and the presentation of the *mise en scène* cut through representation to foreground theatrical presentation. These two layers never gel as 'one' but engender instead a surplus, an excess which results, precisely, in the 'plastic' interplay of the three theatrical 'energies' of *semiosis*, *aisthesis*, and *kinesis*.

The result is notably different from Brechtian 'showing' or the ironic demonstration of a character which is so typical for postdramatic theatre. In either of these cases, the performer and/or director (and hence, the spectator) adopt a rather distanced, and thereby privileged, a superior, 'more authentic' position. But crucially, there is no such hierarchic superiority in Cassiers's work. The actors lend their voices, faces, and bodies

to the exposed processes of theatrical mediation. It seems to be an entirely logical consequence that the programme notes for the Musil-productions list the names of the actors in alphabetical order under the rubric of ‘play’ (*spiel*), just as we will find the names of those responsible listed under ‘light’, ‘stage design’, or in a section named ‘*Regie*’. This further de-emphasises, even prevents the identification of any ‘player’ with a specific character. At the same time, throughout the production, the protagonist Ulrich’s own presentational role as the novel’s narrator gets emphasised. We find repeated references to his extra-diegetic (double) role. For instance, he remains present on stage, invisible for the other fictional characters, as it were. Elsewhere, he stops a scene with a snap of his fingers, just to continue with a narrator’s monologue from the novel. Or, following a meeting of the ‘Parallelaction’-committee, Ulrich begins disconnecting and storing away the cameras – his character’s occupation is to be secretary to the committee, so he would do such tidying up, yet (not to mention the anachronistic element of cameras and microphones) here again the explicit double-bind of fictional representation and of theatrical presentation is prominently highlighted.

The direct complement of this exposed narrator is, of course, the exposed (double) role of the *spectator* – who here finds her own spectating, as it were, ‘included’ in the (staged) picture.<sup>19</sup> Some of the contemporary ‘immersive’ and ‘participatory’ performances take the well-known Lacanian suggestion that ‘[t]he picture is in my eye, but I am in the picture’ all too literal, and they turn spectators into ‘co-actors’.<sup>20</sup> While the audience there gets ‘immersed’ within an encompassing theatrical environment and is no longer seated in a dark auditorium opposite the stage, they still have to follow an exactly scripted role – as ‘acting spectators’. This is precisely Rancière’s criticism of the blind, ‘stultifying’ spot of so many attempts to ‘emancipate’ the spectator.<sup>21</sup>

Cassiers's work adopts, in this respect, a rather progressive position, which appears only at first sight as conservative. He insists on a conventional proscenium arch set-up that maintains a distance – but thereby his productions precisely avoid the trap of 'interactivity', this hegemonic logic of the global digital capitalism which Žižek frequently criticises. Instead, his work is more in line with Žižek's preferred position of 'interpassivity', which tends to take a reflexive step back. The change here is not one of the location of the spectator in reality, but consists entirely of the dialectical sublation of their viewing position: of a 'parallax shift' – the very fact that *despite* sitting in the traditional auditorium, we are no longer able to 'neutrally' observe the performance as a coherent, objective totality, unifying and synthesising all 'signs' into a coherent picture of representation (the implicit 'ideal ego' of the subject of theatre semiotics).

As a result of this experiential parallax shift, the normally transparent medium of theatre is brought into an equally reflexive focus. It is impossible to synchronise the two spectating perspectives of presentation and representation. I can either follow Musil's narrative, with the prominent excess of theatricality remaining an irritating, blurred spot in my perception; or I can reflect on my own awareness of 'watching myself watching', where the persistence of the dramatic representation (the characters and their story) prevents the seamless coherence (and hence supremacy) of my spectatorial position. Following the logic of the Žižekian parallax, it is impossible to establish an experiential equilibrium that would bring both these positions into a single focus. What makes Cassiers's form of contemporary theatre even more magical than Schramm imagined is therefore its ability to activate the triangle of meaning, motion and perception in an attempt to stage an impossible, incongruent viewpoint. He activates the *thea* of a

dialectical ‘parallax’ perspective in order to expose the fantasy of a stable, objective viewpoint from the outside which could discern (and represent) the one ‘true meaning’.

Thinking with Žižek enables us to analyse this strategy of theatre directing further.

*Regie* here brings the play to life – in the fullest sense of the libidinal wealth of drives and desires. We should therefore consider the practice of directing through the central Lacanian notion of the ‘non-All’: a play’s symbolic and imaginary content alone must structurally remain ‘non-All’; the *mise en scène* gives us the (non-All) play *plus* its ‘magic’ theatrical excess of movement, meaning and perception in all its (in Kantian terms) ‘pathological’ dimensions. Rather than thinking of directing as an interpretive process of adaptation that *reduces* the potentialities of the dramatic text to the actuality of its singular *mise en scène*, we should - along these lines - (re)think *Regie* as a Hegelian dialectic process of sublation: going through the negation of the particular *mise en scène* allows for the full play of potentiality, ‘putting in play’ the very plasticity of the play’s text. It would therefore be entirely inadequate to judge Cassiers’s *Regie* on the basis of its ‘truthful’, ‘correct’ or ‘complete’ representation of Musil’s novel.

Beyond the standard category of hermeneutic textual interpretation, which mainly corresponds to the Platonic concept of the text as a pure ‘Idea’ (the infamous ‘intention’ of the author) to be (necessarily inadequately) realised in its *mise en scène*, the Žižekian analysis of theatre directing reconceives it as a speculative operation that eventually enables the famous Hegelian ‘sensory appearing of the Idea’.<sup>22</sup> Opening up what at first appears like a closed system of mere ‘text’, *Regie* – far from being a secondary instrument of medial representation – becomes a plastic activity of theatrical thinking; it restores the ambiguous, contradictory, unseemly ‘styles of thinking’. In Schramm’s terminology (we may equally evoke Rancière’s ‘partition of the sensible’ to the same

effect), it is precisely the ‘carnival’ whose spectres and shadows are perpetually locked within the text and thus split it from within. Almost paradoxically, the virtually bare stage of Cassiers’s productions brings this to the foreground even more prominently. His production of Musil’s novel hence succeeds – not as measured by the efficient productivity of fictional illusion (at the level of spectacular representation), but by presenting us as theatre spectators with a multi-faceted, multi-sensuous, entirely absorbing and literally ‘mind-blowing’ (or, ‘ego-blowing’) effect of *reading*: It stages the empty, negative and reflexive relation of the reader’s subjective position. Conversely, this strictly immanent split allows the classical text, the drama itself to become a subject too: it induces a reflexive split of distance and thereby (re)asserts its own totality precisely as a Lacanian ‘non-All’, or in more Hegelian terms: as an absolute negativity.

Following this Žižekian line of argument allows us to directly connect the experience of theatricality to the core problem of the formation of subjectivity. Theatre, as a place to see and to be seen, is not least the place where and when we perceive, experience and realise ourselves/ our selves as the spectators. *Thea*, in its peculiar theatrical density, can offer us, to paraphrase Eugenio Barba’s famous term, an ‘extra-daily’ encounter with *our own* being, by means of the theatrical excess of the ‘magical’ interplay between the theatrical vectors of *aisthesis*, *kinesis* and *semiosis*. It therefore induces a reflexive relational gest that collapses the clear-cut gap of spectacular consumption between those who appear in the spotlight and those who are gazing from the dark. Instead, in theatre forms such as Guy Cassiers’s theatre work, our own act of spectating, as a relation, is constantly absorbed into the dense textual totality of the performance, which thereby becomes all the more (reflexively) palpable. The formal operation of *thea* – of

showing and gazing – induces a minimal difference here, whereby our subjective (formal) relation to the represented content and/ or its interpretation becomes at least as important as the content/ interpretation itself. We are no longer voyeurs or mere witnesses observing from a distance, but we begin experiencing ourselves as the spectator – not because we enter the fictional world (as in that current vogue for immersive theatre), but because *the fiction itself enters the theatre*: it becomes explicitly theatrical. Theatre hence offers us a unique occasion to relate to our own self: The essentially relational, reflexive and entirely incompatible parallax perspective of ‘watching us watching’ stages the very drama of our own subjective engagement. This position of an encounter with ourselves as gazing subjects is structurally parallel to the (Lacanian) split of the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enounced: the disjunction between the (grammatical, imaginary, symbolic) subject; the ‘me’ in the sentence, and the ‘real’ I who does the speaking. As ‘split spectators’, absorbed in the theatrical density of the ‘magic triangle’, as the ‘barred’ subject of spectating and as the subject of ‘the spectated’, our process of watching is directly confronted with the reflection of our gaze that *gazes back at us* in its desubstantialised, dematerialised form: ‘I am only the void that remains, the empty distance toward every content.’<sup>23</sup>

Far more than (potentially) challenging our ‘natural(ised) habits’ of viewing and spectacular consumption, theatre may, much more fundamentally, confront our innermost ‘natural habits of being’. What makes the theatrical encounter with ourselves uncanny is that we here face our own ‘other’, who is no longer just an ‘imaginary mis-identification’. Whereas the symbolic operation posits my subjective unity *outside* myself (in the signifier that represents me), the uncanny power of *thea* confronts me with the ‘absolute negativity’ of the void. I am no longer able to distance myself and to

pretend adopting a ‘truer’, ‘de-ideologised’ viewing perspective. Instead, as a theatrical spectator, I realise that while the subjective position is required, it does not have a ‘proper’ positive place: it exists only as pure reflexive relationality – as an absolute negativity. Being spectating subjects, the force of theatricality makes us experience this lack of ground, out of which can then emerge the Žižekian subject – as a failure of the closure of representation. The central link here is the crucial shift from representation to presentation.<sup>24</sup> In more than one sense, we can therefore subscribe to Alain Badiou’s assertion that the spectator is the very ‘point of the real by which a spectacle comes into being’.<sup>25</sup> It is by this ‘tarrying with the negative’ of subjectivity, enabled in its spectatorial form by the parallax experience of *thea*, that we realise that, as an empty, formal spectating relation, my ‘I’ is the very spot in the picture that avoids my representational closure: the spot that is too much for everything to add up neatly in a coherent order of cause, effect and symmetry. And yet, it is only this confrontation with the nothingness of our selves that enables our subjective engagement with the world. The theatrical experience of subjectivity and of subjective agency – as essentially mediated – hence needs to be posited right at the heart of any contemporary socio-political critical stance. This way, it can seek to defend, through artistic practice as well as through philosophical reflection, a politics of engagement within our media-based global economy. The ‘split’ subject of theatricality constitutes another site of the purely contingent foundation for political agency and resistance which Žižek throws in the face of a politically correct ‘usual gang of democracy-to-come-deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness suspects’.<sup>26</sup>

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1 Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Politics of Batman: From the repression of unruly citizens to the celebration of the “good capitalist”, *The Dark Knight Rises* reflects our age of anxiety’, *New Statesman*, 23 August 2012, accessed 11 August 2013. <http://www.newstatesman.com/2012/08/people's-republic-gotham>.

2 Impressions from Part I of the Musil trilogy are streamed on the Toneelhuis’s *You Tube* channel, alongside other clips from the trilogy and its creative process, accessed 29 October 2013, <http://youtu.be/Oaf8e8R-9mE>.

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- 3 Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London and New York: Verso, 2010) – ‘K und k’ was the official abbreviation for the Habsburgian *königliche und kaiserliche* ‘double monarchy’ of Austria and Hungaria before the First World War. Musil’s ironic term ‘Kakanien’ is a clever pun, which in a way that Žižek would like connects ‘k und k’ (phonetically) with a German colloquial word for ‘shit’, thereby also evoking the brown colour of emerging fascism. It has become proverbial term in German.
- 4 Exemplarily, the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* disqualified Cassiers as ‘unfamiliar with German viewing habits’ (Fredrick Hanssen, “Mein Gott, Vater!” – Das Orchester erzählt Bedeutsameres als die Protagonisten: Daniel Barenboim dirigiert eine packende *Walküre*’, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 19 April 2011). Where German critics dismiss the director for treating the texts he stages rather seriously, the prejudice is as uninformed as the fatiguing bashing of “European directors’ theatre” by Anglo-American critics.
- 5 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 6 This section is necessarily inadequate in summarising Žižek’s position on subjectivity, developed in his central theoretical works, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 1999) and recently culminating in his opus magnum, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).
- 7 Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 232.
- 8 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 508.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 502.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 204.
- 11 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).
- 12 The Greek word corresponds in its ambivalence with the German *Schau*, which can also both be used ostentatiously (as in *zur Schau stellen*) or referring to reception (as in the activity of *schauen*).
- 13 Rudolf Münz, *Theatralität und Theater: Zur Historiographie von Theatralitätsgefügen*, ed. Gisbert Amm (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 1998), 70.
- 14 Helmar Schramm, ‘The Surveying of Hell. On Theatricality and Styles of Thinking’, *Theatre Research International* 20:2 (1995): 115f.
- 15 Helmar Schramm, *Karneval des Denkens: Theatralität im Spiegel philosophischer Texte des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), 44.
- 16 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 458.
- 17 Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), 13.
- 18 Her original Dutch term is *multizintuiglijk*. Quoted in Sara Colson, ‘De perceptie van Guy Cassiers’ multimedial Proustcyclus’, in *Proust 4: De Kant Van Marcel – Script & Werkboek*, ed. Ro Theater (Amsterdam: UIT&FB, 2005), 134. See also Peter M. Boenisch, ‘Multisensuality and Postdramatic Mise-en-Scène: The ro:theater’s Proust-Project’, in *Fictional Realities/Real Fictions: Contemporary Theatre in Search of a New Mimetic Paradigm*, ed. Malgorzata Sugiera and Mateusz Borowski (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 121-34.
- 19 My argument follows, above all, Žižek’s most developed outline of a ‘Lacanian-Hegelian theory of representation’: Žižek, ‘Objects, Objects Everywhere’, *Less Than Nothing*, 649-713, in particular p. 702ff.
- 20 See Peter M Boenisch, ‘Acts of Spectating: The Dramaturgy of the Audience’s Experience in Contemporary Theatre’, in Katalin Trencsenyi and Bernadette Cochrane, eds, *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 2014), 225-41.
- 21 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009).
- 22 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Ästhetik*, ed. Friedrich Bassenge (Berlin: Aufbau, 1955), 146.
- 23 Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 40.
- 24 Following closely Dieter Henrich, Žižek detects in Fichte a similar insight into the subject as result of the failure of representation. With Henrich, he notes the crucial shift in Fichte’s thinking from representation (*Vorstellung*) to presentation (*Darstellung*):

‘But what now does representation present? As soon as I have arrived at presentation from representation, the question “What is represented” has an entirely different meaning. In representation, of course, it would be the object that is represented. But what is presented in the representation in the sense of *darstellen*? The answer is obvious: the self!’ [Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, ed. David S. Pacini (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 200. See Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 174.]

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- 25 Alain Badiou, 'Rhapsody for the Theatre: A Short Philosophical Treatise', trans. Bruno Bosteels.  
*Theatre Survey* 49:2 (2008): 189.
- 26 Žižek, *Parallax View*, 11.