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Aesthetic Experiments

On the Event-Like Character and the Function of Disruptions in the Arts

“Disruption” can be seen as a new meta-category in cultural studies dealing with the socio-political, epistemic, and medial conditions of the constitution of images of reality and society. The study of disruption combines individual perspectives from literary and media studies, sociology, the history of knowledge and is intended as a contribution to the deconstruction of certain still-powerful categories, such as the distinction between high culture and popular culture. Our goal is to demonstrate that disruption – as an object of scenarios that shift between factuality and fictionality, as well as an instrument of an aesthetics of uncertainty – plays an important role in quite different cultural fields; as an organizing principle of reflexive experimental spaces, disruption makes a significant contribution to the generation of socially relevant knowledge.

1 Cultural work on societal self-descriptions

The cultural processing of disruptions constitutes a major challenge for all self-descriptions of society. These would include the capacity for preventive anticipation or the classificatory evaluation and retroactive re-normalization of de-normalizing events. As agencies of complexity reduction, which create “imaginary constructions of the unity of the system,” and thus make it possible “not to communicate in society with the society, but about society” (Luhmann 2013: 167), competing self-images have the function of making a particular version of reality appear self-evident; over time they also suggest that the notorious problem of the identity of complex societies is a problem that can actually be solved, after all (Luhmann 2013: 314–323). In their quest for hegemony, the conflicting descriptions of the “reality” of society – in the fraught domain of freedom and security, for example – are at pains to conceal their own contingency (i.e., their constructed character) by endeavouring to suppress the discursive and symbolic conditions of their own “world-making” (Goodman 1978), so as to keep them below the perceptual and discursive threshold of social communication. In addition

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to the competition for argumentative plausibility there is thus also constant competition in the management of perceptions, a kind of “poetics” of society which takes the form of affective and aesthetic activation or distraction and thus regulates the fields of what can be said and seen, thereby ensuring that “we don’t see that we don’t see what we don’t see” (Luhmann 2013: 323).

The mass media are the central forum in which the acceptance of societal self-descriptions is negotiated. It is here that the coherence-creating narratives of normality are produced, in an exchange of symbolic, discursive, and affective elements that are in constant, and at the same time situation-specific, circulation between various specialized discourses (politics, economics, law, etc.) and different social constituencies. In medial scenarios of danger and threat, these narratives undergo a repercussive proliferation and then in turn feed back into negotiations between specialized discourses. Understood as an event- or process-based perturbation of orders of meaning and visibility that “disrupts the ordinary course of history” (Derrida 2007: 446), disruption is significant in two respects with regard to the dynamics of production of cultural schemata: first, it confirms the formulated order of things as the object of a first-order observation, the stability of the latter being based precisely on the exclusion of its respective other. This is exactly the way a multitude of strongly repercussive narratives of danger and disaster function: they portray an isolated intrusion of the other, but in fact narratively perpetuate the status quo of the supposed normalcy by deploying figures of exclusion such as the assassin, the rampage killer and the hacker. This discursivization transforms the complexity of the world into its own form of complexity, thus ensuring an opening to the future.

On the other hand, as the object and mode of a second-order observation, disruption develops its own reflexive potential that can be fruitful in a cultural-analytical sense. If one considers that disruption does not exist as an autonomous entity, but only in a perspectival relation, so that the determination of the disruption “depends on where we sit” (Bateson 2000: 413), then it can be used as an epistemological event. In this sense, the moment of disruption becomes a knowledge operator, which makes it possible to observe precisely those socio-political and technical-medial framings within which an event is registered as a disruption. This occurs either in the mass media format itself, which thus situates itself in relation to other instances of the medial processing of disruption,¹ or it occurs in the cultural-analytical observation of narratives of disruption and the various practices intended to counteract disruption that are de-

1 A good example here is Michael Haneke’s film *Time of the Wolves*, which is seen as a troublesome case within the genre of disaster film. See Koch (2010).

ployed in these narratives. A connection can be made here with media-theoretical conceptualisations of disruption – for instance the communication models of Claude Shannon and Niklas Luhmann – which assume that disruption displays a high degree of systematicity; that, as noise or “unmarked space” (Spencer-Brown 1979), disruption constitutes a communicative a-priori, that it is always already a component and a medium of all communicative forms. Drawing on the thesis from media and cultural studies (Vogl 2001: 122) that, when a disruption occurs, the focus of attention is placed on the conditions, otherwise hidden, that are a prerequisite for communication, Ludwig Jäger suggests that disruption makes the mediality of the medium observable:

Disruption can be defined as that moment in the course of a communication which causes a medium to lose its (operational) transparency and to be perceived in its materiality, where transparency is defined as that state in which the communication remains free of disruption, thus the focus of attention is not on the medium as a medium, in the sense in which Luhmann assumes that, in the interdependent relationship between medium and form, the form is visible and the medium remains invisible. (Jäger 2012: 30)

Especially when, with regard to a cultural way of worldmaking (Nünning et al. 2010), the question is raised concerning the strategies of evidence that apply societal self-descriptions in order to achieve a high degree of general validity and bindingness, focusing attention on disruptions is of great benefit, since the latter make “the medial relativity of the real visible, and the system of symbolic representation itself as a mode of world-making” (Jäger 2012: 31). It is precisely here that aesthetic functionalizations of disruption arise, by implementing moments of interference and interruption in their experimental settings, either on the level of content or form, thereby reflexively exposing attitudinal expectations, conventions of attentiveness, and behavioural routines. Aesthetic-experimental spaces of disruption construct “hypothetically, a possible form of knowledge [...] which can then be evaluated in terms of its aptitude for reality” (Gamper 2010: 13).

2 Aesthetic-experimental spaces of disruption

The central feature of contemporary art is to multiply conceptions of reality. Aesthetic action increases our sensitivity to perceptual processes, reminds us of the wealth of discursive and medial conditions of every cultural reference to the world, and makes breaking points and blind spots of normal everyday life visible. Understood this way, art constitutively binds together aesthetics and epistemology. The aesthetic opens up a space of possibility in which, unlike the largely

planned (working) day, the unexpected can or may occur, or is even meant to occur:

What art aspires to could be described as [...] a reactivation of deactivated possibilities. Its function is to allow the world to appear in the world, to depict the unity of the whole, whether in an improved form or (as currently preferable) a worsened form. (Luhmann 2010: 210)

Like the epistemological situation that prevails in the laboratory (Borck 2011), in art it becomes possible to test self-descriptions of society taken to be self-evident in the form of (fictional) scenarios and (participatory) experimental arrangements for latent alternatives, response reactions and/or underlying processual interrelationships. Pointedly formulated, one could thus describe aesthetic processes of disruption as a kind of experimental drilling in the discursive substrata of reality.

As Hans-Jörg Rheinberger writes, an experiment is a “system for the generation of differences” (Rheinberger 2006: 280). The emphasis on the productive nature of experiments allows us to understand differently the intrinsic logic of experimental knowledge generation, compared to the established theory of knowledge and classical scientific experimental practice. Whereas in 1917 Ernst Mach, following the teachings of nineteenth-century experimental science, was still able to define “the planned methodically-conducted quantitative experiment” (Mach 1976: 292) as an “operation designed to evaluate and confirm” (Mach 1976: 195) what had previously been “hypothetical conjecture, supposition or postulation” (Mach 1976: 214), in current scientific and laboratory research the prevailing view is rather that truly interesting results often arise in the mode of deviation from the planned/anticipated course of events. Surprising innovation occurs especially when, in the course of an experiment with its own internal dynamic, a disruption of the anticipated experimental operating procedure occurs that makes a difference, thus provoking a subsequent re-conceptualization:

In science, novelty emerges only with difficulty, manifested by resistance, against a background provided by expectation [...] The awareness of anomaly opens up a period in which conceptual categories are adjusted, until the initially anomalous has become the anticipated. (Kuhn 2012: 64)

In this quote Thomas S. Kuhn highlights in an instructive way the function of disruption, which, in the context of science as well as in connection with politics or aesthetics, sets in motion a permanent process of de- and renormalization. In this process is expressed a complex interplay of different temporal planes of reference of retrospection, anticipation, and presentness, in which the status of dis-

ruption is re-negotiated in each instance until the initial confusion stabilizes in the contours of a new “epistemic thing” (Rheinberger 2006: 27). The difference between aesthetic experiments and those in the natural sciences consists principally in the fact that, in the former, the future is always conceived as an open horizon in which singular events can occur, while in the latter case the unplanability of the future tends to come to light only when an experiment fails, meaning that the hypothesis-based production of measurement data is unrepeatable.

The theory of the laboratory has changed significantly thanks to the ethnomethodological work of Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Bruno Latour, and Karin Knorr-Cetina. Here, too, the creative production of knowledge, as compared to the mere causal and logical reproduction of results, is coming increasingly to the fore. Thus, Michael Gamper’s definition of the experiment as a process that “produces knowledge through a fusion of performative and representative methods, knowledge that owes its existence to a particular provoked experience” (Gamper 2010: 11), has met with broad acceptance. The reference to the generation of a provocation is important to the extent that it allows the character of disruption in the experimental spaces of art to be determined with greater precision. Aesthetics of disruption are aimed at creating situations in which normal processes undergo a crisis-like intensification, accompanied by moments of de-differentiation, disadaptation, and the release of critical potentials.

Disruption as an experimental experience of crisis can take quite different forms. For example, the narrative evocation and communication of fictional events of disruption, a common literary process since the genre of the novella and novel established themselves widely in the nineteenth century, is still aesthetically effective today in countless variations in narrative media formats such as the feature film or the TV series. Fiction thereby becomes a semiotic space in which social, technical, or psychological instances of disruption can be presented in specific constellations and played out in various forms of reaction and process. In this sense, writes Evan Horn, fictions process:

something narratively, in the mode of a hypothetical situation [...], something that structures our reality intensively. Provided fictions are not limited to the field of literary invention, and scientific thought experiments or philosophical hypotheses are also viewed as fictions, the latter are modes of exploring the domain of the possible in the midst of our social reality. (Horn 2010: 105)

Another form of aesthetic disruption is to be found in the post-dramatic theatre and in performance art. Their radical break with the classical idealist aesthetics

of the nineteenth century² seems particularly interesting for an inquiry into the “principle of disruption” because here, far more so than in fiction films, the disturbance shifts from the level of the represented to the level of representation. Experimenting with spectator participation – a central *modus operandi* of the avant-garde since Brecht’s epic theatre – aims at an aesthetic experience in which, through the uncertainty surrounding the roles of actor and addressee, the “experience itself becomes a theme” (Gehlen 1986: 219), where the “open work of art,” in the experimental production of an indistinguishability between noise and signal,³ attains an “experience of experience” (Menke 2013: 85).

At the same time, for the underlying question here concerning the cultural-analytical potential of disruption as a category, it is important that, wherever disruptions appear, opportunities for observation exist that are linked with resources for the description and critique of references to reality and societal self-descriptions. Moreover, an obvious hypothesis is that moments of disruption – that is, moments of active, planned incitement of disturbance and interpretative uncertainty – are precisely designed to generate social knowledge, in a way that combines Jean-François Lyotard’s pointed formulation “hiding (and) showing, that is theatricality” (Lyotard 1979: 282) with Ludwig Fleck’s insight that “every empirical discovery [...] can be construed as a supplement, a development or transformation of a mode of thinking” (Fleck 2016: 125).

3 Disruptive fictions

Just as in the history of science in recent years it has been shown that human and non-human actors working inside a network are jointly involved in the production of scientific knowledge, so has it been demonstrated that, at the interface of literary and historical sciences, poetic texts or fictions produce knowledge to the same degree as supposedly objective scientific publications. Thus, not only are a variety of agents involved in the production of knowledge, but, in addition, knowledge takes on different aesthetic forms. Hayden White has

² Which does not mean that, in the nineteenth century, aesthetic disruptions were not already being theorized; the work of Friedrich Theodor Vischer is one example. In his aesthetics, Vischer points out that “disruptive accidents” clash with the paradigm of the beautiful (Vischer 1846: 149).

³ See the corresponding deliberations in Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work* (Eco 1989: 44–83). The fate that befell Joseph Beuys’s social sculptures, “Badewanne” (Bathtub) and “Fettecke” (Fat Corner) shows that an aesthetic intentionality of static and (signal) noise (“des Rauschens”) can be readily overlooked.

pointed out that historiographical narratives are “verbal fictions” (White 1978: 82), the readers of which become familiar with past events through the careful composition of sequences of events and plot structures. In fictions as “a way of telling stories” (Rancière 2004), empirical data and reports are assigned significance, and events that are passed over in silence, along with unexceptional events, are also assigned a meaning. Using the example of William Shakespeare’s work, Stephen Greenblatt has shown that the comedies and tragedies of the English poet – often in conjunction with another genre, namely historical documents – generate a literary world that is firmly integrated in the discursive network of its time and is thus extremely well suited to producing knowledge of the period (Greenblatt 1988). Here we are dealing with positions in poetics and the history of knowledge that, while not denying it, prefer to bypass the distinction between fact and fiction and focus instead on the different aesthetic organization and representation of historical events (Vogl 1999: 14). “Science and poetry are in equal measure forms of knowledge” (Deleuze 2006: 20), Gilles Deleuze once remarked, referring to the discourse analysis of Michel Foucault, that it is less important to determine whether a particular statement is *true* than to ask under what conditions of possibility a statement has come about and is held to be true. Poetry can point to the fundamental order of knowledge and a system of thought, when, for instance, poetic texts comment on the rules of discourse and thus limit what may or may not be said – or when, as an alternative literary form, such texts express the most secret and the unsayable, thereby disrupting the accepted conventions of the sayable and the visible (Vogl 1999: 15). Literally, and in the original Greek sense of the word (*poiēsis*), poetry creates a world that is a central part of our everyday reality.

As crazy as it may seem, a fiction always stems from a discursive network that has made it possible and on which it also in turn has a reciprocal effect. That may be the reason why, within a particular system of thought, many fictions are held to be credible, why they seem plausible and are not immediately rejected. Thus, for example, an apocalyptic vision that pictures the end of the world brought on by nuclear war falls on especially fertile soil where heavily-armed nuclear powers are engaged in a face-off, where civil defense films on TV constantly present warnings of a first strike, and scientists compute chain reactions and are continually constructing ever more effective nuclear weapons. The knots that bind fiction and fact, literature and science are difficult to unravel. The development of the atomic bomb is an example that demonstrates the constant exchange between literature and scientific thinking, and in which the researchers were even spurred on by fiction. For instance, in his 1914 novel, *The World Set Free*, H.G. Wells already imagined a weapon like the atomic bomb, thus a good number of years before scientists and readers of Wells such as Leó Szilárd

developed the atomic bomb in Los Alamos in the U.S. during the Second World War, and the U.S. military eventually deployed it in Japan. In this case, the connection between “science” and “fiction” is such that the atomic bomb was first invented by literature; the bomb thus existed in discourses before the scientific discovery of nuclear fission, before science exercised its apocalyptic power in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Dotzler 2004; Brandstetter 2010), which later gave rise to new literary and filmic fictions.

The fictional scenario of “nuclear war” may have been one of the most relevant stories of the second half of the twentieth century. As a “non-event”, as a “fable, pure invention” (Derrida 1984: 23), this fiction shaped the reality of life during the Cold War in a fundamental way – even though the nuclear war did not take place – in that politics, culture and institutions were guided by the vector of the nuclear arms race, the potential destructive power and deterrence. “For the ‘reality’ of the nuclear age and the fable of nuclear war are perhaps distinct, but they are not two separate things,” as Jacques Derrida described the node of fiction and reality (Derrida 1984: 23). The fictions of literature and film, but also the simulations of nuclear war and the thought experiments concerning life after a nuclear strike shaped the reality of life in the two power blocs during the Cold War.

Subverting the boundary between poetry and science, and between fiction and facts, leads to three considerations that we can relate to the function of disruption in artistic fictions and to the question of societal self-descriptions. First, historiography in general proves to be susceptible to disruption, and disintegrates into many possible stories. Fictions that perturb academic historiography by seeking out the sites of historical events, interviewing long-deceased witnesses or ordering the events differently, explore and construct through these methods a historical space of possibility that suggests other compossible stories (Vogl 2007: 126–127). However likely or unlikely they may be, such alternatives break open “the fiction of the more probable story” (Vogl 2011: 124) and thus enter into productive competition with monolithic histories and the vehemence of their narrative world production. They explore a “sense of possibility” that undermines the self-evidence of a hegemonic historiography, form hypotheses, and test them in the context of a literary “experiment” or “experimental design”.⁴ They make a case for a disruptive, discontinuous historiography that dissolves political, social, and cultural truths.

Secondly, in disruptive fictions precisely, psychological deliberations come into view that couple mental disorders with fantasies and fiction. Thus, as he

⁴ Albrecht Schöne referring to Robert Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (Schöne 2010: 200).

was beginning to formulate his psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud states in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess that there are no “indications of reality” in the unconscious, “so that one cannot distinguish between truth and fiction that has been cathected with affect” (Masson 1985: 264). The place where the drives and the repressed contents are “stored” and to which the therapist seeks to gain access as part of a psychoanalysis makes no distinction between imaginary and real experiences and, as Freud later writes, unconscious processes pay “little heed to reality,” since the unconscious is subjected solely to the pleasure principle (Freud 2001: 188). In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud states that a “psychic reality” is not to be confused with “material reality” and wonders whether “unconscious impulses [...] don’t have the importance of real forces in mental life?” (Freud 1978: 781). In the talking cure, the psychoanalyst, like the information technologist, has to distinguish between the message and noise: do the patient’s words and phrases emit a generalized noise – such as the noise of the unconscious – or do they constitute a message that offers the key to neurotic disorder? (Foucault 2001: 557) Mental disorders, according to what we know from psychoanalysis, can also arise from the imaginary or at least stem from that part of the psychic apparatus that does not draw a boundary between fiction and reality.

But the imaginary also plays a further role. Whereas the psychoanalyst devotes himself to the “instinctual-unconscious,” the movie camera processes the “optical unconscious” (Benjamin 2008: 37–38). For film can provide new forms of perception and experience using techniques of montage, close-ups and slow motion, which, in combination with psycho-technical processes, such as aptitude tests, allow people to be trained and groomed. In his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin perceives the cinema as the place where the spectator can come to terms with the shocking experiences from the battlefields of the First World War, and at the same time be prepared for life in technologised modernity (Kaes 2011). For, while an auratic painting, exhibited in a museum, invites the viewer to contemplation and to form associations, film, due to its rapid sequence of images, is incapable of this. Film works against the disruptions of the technologized world, accustoms its audience to the perceptual demands of modernity, and distracts its spectators, but leaves them no time for the necessary contemplation and reflection on what they see. To a certain extent, going to the cinema provides a set of tools, serves as a “training device”⁵ for dealing with the changing human environment, and in this way seeks to countervail human mental disorders.

5 Benjamin uses the term “Übungsinstrument” (translator’s note).

Through such a pure aestheticization of political life – here Benjamin is thinking of fascism – film can be deployed as a kind of instruction manual for neutralizing the masses and the necessary social as well as individual self-reflection, (Benjamin 2008: 41–42) with the consequence that the disruptive counter-version of history ends up being eradicated.

Thirdly, the question arises concerning the function that can be assigned to fictional disruptions. On the one hand, disruptive fictions contribute to the sphere of entertainment, by interrupting the normal course of life and by catering to a specific pleasurable fear (“Angstlust”); for instance, by providing stories about the dangers of a (bio-)technological absolute-worst-case scenario, or about a cyborg uprising (Sontag 1965). On the other hand, their function is to confront society with what is possible and to present it with the virtual forms that the future may take. Understood in this way, disruptive fictions constitute a major component of a “heuristics of fear” (Jonas 1984: 26), which plays out the implicit threat potential of current social and technological situations, thereby (at least in the context of a modernity that is open to the future) providing resources for reflection on, and the management of, situations that may arise. In the research on disasters and worst-case scenarios, however, it has been noted that the absolute worst cases that may arise largely depend on the standpoint of the observer. Disasters, says Lee Clarke, are part of normal life. The evaluation of a disaster depends on those that have already occurred and on the calamities considered possible in the future, within a framework of the conceivable. While the tsunami that struck Thailand just after Christmas in 2004 was perceived as a worst case, from a certain perspective the tsunami in Japan in 2011, in combination with the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima, may be considered an even worse disaster (leaving aside the fate of specific individuals, of course). What would be the new worst case? How can catastrophic scenarios of a “radically unknown future” (Opitz and Tellmann 2010: 29) be planned, in a way that does not exhaust itself in the extrapolation of past events? “To construct prospective worst cases [...] ,” says Clarke, “we must somehow imagine the unimaginable” (Clarke 2006: 22). Imagination thus becomes the benchmark for the assessment of disasters and shapes the awareness and the (self-)perception of society with its individuals, institutions and policies. Worst case scenarios as they are played out and simulated in the sphere of politics or in the military turn out to be the doubles of what is imagined in literature and film. They refer to each other, exchange ideas, and draw inspiration from each other. So it is no coincidence that in Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler’s Cold War novel *Fail-Safe*, published in 1964, the head of a think-tank prepares a report for the military and political leaders in the Pentagon on the benefits of a first strike against the Soviet

Union and develops scenarios for the war as well as life afterwards, complete with precise calculations.

Such fictions prove to be an experimental space in which possible futures or alternative pasts are tried out. Thus, literary research on the Apocalypse has established that fictions thematizing the end of the world not only play out different disaster scenarios, but also deliberate on the behaviors of individuals and entire societies that are coupled with the visions of doom. Bio-political questions about the selection of “human capital” in the face of an impending disaster – who is allowed to survive? who has to die? – can be worked through in fictions in an exemplary way and presented for discussion in the framework of an ethics of allocation. Putting such tragic decisions to the test gives “an eminently political thrust” (Horn 2010: 118) to the corresponding thought experiments. In this perspective, the cultural analysis of real or imagined threats or instances of disruption provide information on “how societies define themselves and provide security for themselves against the horizon of ongoing terror threats” (Engell et al. 2009: 5). Future actions and decisions are placed against the horizon of possible and imaginary calamities and provide a template for forms of social and individual behavior.

These three aspects – disruptive historiography and a sense of possibility, mental disorder and fiction, and disruption in the experimental space of fiction – may exemplify the possible themes of a specific sub-field of cultural studies that deals with the category of narrative disruption. Fictions of disruption are a specific and fundamental form of world-making, which opens up a vantage point for the problematization of forms of social self-evidence and helps to expose the “discursive relation to the world” (Legendre 2001: 15) on which forms of the social and the political are based. All knowledge is constantly exposed to the danger of disruption, thus to the danger of “counter-knowledge”, which creates a multiplicity of stories and brings about change. This provides us with a description of the faltering of a foundation believed to be solid, a faltering that can also be found at work in the subject, whose unconscious tells a “counter-story” to that of the superego, and whose atavistic insistence can be discerned in mental disorders. Ultimately, disruptive fictions prove to be spaces of experimentation where stories of the possible are written, serving as a grid for future decisions and actions. These fictions in turn have an effect on the psyche of the people who read and view them; they can impose a direction on societies or make a decision to go in a certain direction appear necessary, make it seem as if a discursive problematization has been resolved. For what unites these three sets of reflections on the proliferation of stories, the psyche, and the possible courses that the future might take, is not just that they all media-based, but that they also involve a political dimension: who exactly is this great “Other” who writes

and who directs a society, and which versions of the past and the future do we have at our disposal?

4 The performance of disruption

As outlined above, disruption constitutes an essential principle of contemporary theatre and performance art. The space of the theatre serves as a “laboratory of social fantasies” (Müller 1975: 126), a “laboratory with spectators” (Primavesi 2012: 132) who are placed in a “crisis mode” and are confronted with the “intensification of extreme situations, with borderline and threshold experiences” (Primavesi 2012: 147). As a cultural practice that amalgamates religious, political and social elements, the theatre has always been a medium for the observation of, and reflection on, social relations of and to the self. In Brecht’s epic theatre, “interrupting processes” (Benjamin 1998: 18) are deliberately used to create disruptions, an alienation effect that is intended to highlight and challenge social conditions. It was with this in mind that Benjamin pointed out that “interruption is one of the fundamental methods of all form-giving (‘Formgebung’), [which] reaches far beyond the domain of art” (Benjamin 1998: 19), extending into politics and society. What has continued to change in the transformation from the dramatic to the post-dramatic theatre is a novel form of addressing the audience: while the classical drama was largely built on the organizational and structuring principles of the proscenium stage, on the observation of “the way people behave in closed situations, under readily comprehensible conditions, where the dramatic storyline manipulates these conditions in an easily intelligible way” (Primavesi 2012: 135), the post-dramatic theatre takes the radical step of doing away with the fourth wall that separated the space of the drama from the space of the spectators. This constituted the interim high-point of an aesthetic tendency towards an experimental opening-up, a tendency instigated by the various avant-gardes (Mersch 2002: 245), subsequently reinforced in the 1960s by the Fluxus movement (Stegemann 2012), and by the theatrical practice of the Situationists (Perniola 2011: 107–110), who extended the theatre into public spaces. For German post-dramatic artists such as René Pollesch or Christoph Schlingensief, this tendency became a kind of source-code for artistic endeavors. This is especially true of Schlingensief, who always viewed the theatre as meta-drama, where the aim is to produce a calculated uncertainty in the audience regarding the status and boundaries of fiction and reality, breaking open the *cordon sanitaire* of the dramatic frame.

While the director’s theatre of the 1970s still sought to accumulate the resources of attention-getting and disturbance mainly by staging traditional mate-

rials in unorthodox ways, by recontextualizing them and bringing them up to date, in the post-dramatic theatre these purely content-related aspects recede into the background in favour of an emphasis on form and experimentation with perception. Heiner Müller's trenchant phrase "theatres that are no longer able to provoke the question 'WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?' rightly end up being closed down!" (Müller 1996) expresses what can be seen as an intrinsic focal point of contemporary theatre: provoking audience reactions through aesthetic experiences, which – by blurring the distinctness of categories such as "authorship," "director," "staging," and "audience" – shake up political, social, and cultural certitudes and self-evidence, and thus generate disruptions that give rise to a quasi-ecological reflection on the otherwise unreflected, implicit political and economic conditions of the relations to one's social environment. It is precisely this cultural function of aesthetic disruption that Carl Hegemann (the longtime dramaturgical colleague of Christoph Schlingensiefel) has in mind when he reflects on Joseph Beuys's concept of social sculpture:

Unlike in works of fine art or technical machines [...], in social sculpture perfection is not the goal. Achieving perfection would be identical with the end of social life, since social organisms function only as dysfunctional entities and they necessarily need a quantum of dilettantism; if all goes well, the fear of death spreads. (Hegemann 1998: 160)

The insistent attempts at activation are motivated by the thesis that the audience in the mass media apparatus of a "society of the spectacle" (Debord 1994) is placed in an attitude of uninvolved ignorance, and drilled in accepting the status quo of the distribution of power in society as an ineluctable fact. A critique of this passive aesthetic pleasure has much in common with the work of Stanley Cavell, who reflects on the ways the theatricality of classical drama results in forms of objectification that reify the characters on the stage in the detachment of being observed (Cavell 1969). Samuel Weber addresses the indifference of this form of spectatorship, and the cynicism associated with it, which he sees as a political effect of the dominance of television, the principal medium of contemporary culture:

If we remain spectators/viewers, if we stay where we are – in front of the television – the catastrophes will always stay outside, will always be 'objects' for a 'subject' – this is the implicit promise of the medium. But this comforting promise coincides with an equally clear, if unspoken threat: Stay where you are! If you move, there may be an intervention, whether humanitarian or not. (qtd. in Lehmann 2006: 184)

Drawing on Aristotelian aesthetics, Cavell calls for an immersion of the spectator in the performance, with the hope of getting as close as possible to the represent-

ed world and thus experiencing an existential separation from the fates of the characters, which, in a reflexive turnaround, is then supposed to lead to a feeling of compassion (Rebentisch 2012: 25–38). By contrast, the post-dramatic theatre begins precisely with the form of the representation. Here, the goal is to prevent immersion, create incoherence, and provoke uncertainty in the spectators concerning the possible ways of understanding what they are presented with:

When the staging practice forces the spectators to wonder whether they should react to the events on stage as fiction (i. e., aesthetically) or as reality (for example, morally), theatre's treading of the borderline of the real unsettles this crucial predisposition of the spectators, namely the unreflective certainty and security in which being a spectator is experienced as unproblematic social behaviour. (Lehmann 2006: 104)

The attempt to overturn the emotional security of spectators by drawing them into affectively charged situations of self-questioning does not necessarily have to lead to a crude, forced activism, of the kind exercised by Tino Sehgal when, at the Venice Biennale in 2005, with the help of paid cultural animators, he got visitors in empty exhibition rooms involved in a discussion about capitalism; nor does the releasing of the “safety catch” have to be as gratingly carried out as Santiago Sierra did in Cologne in 2006, when he transformed a synagogue into a gas chamber and required visitors to wear a respirator mask and to be escorted around by a fireman. Other artists, such as Cuqui Jerez, the group “Forced Entertainment” or the activists of “Gob Squad” begin at an even more fundamental level: their performances are such that the experience of being a spectator requires taking an active stance, since seeing itself is an act (Rancière 2009b). Here we are dealing with a principled endeavor to reverse the modern subject-object framework of aesthetics and to make the audience feel what it is like to be exposed to the gaze of others.

Advanced methods of viewpoint reversal are motivated by the realization that conventional theatre aesthetics, even when seeking to convey politically subversive content, collaborate with the dominant conditions, because, as Pollesch observes, in conventional performance practice the relationship between sender and receiver, between actor and observer, is simply reproduced:

This is my problem. Outside democracy exists as some kind of template, but the actual processes that one encounters out there are not democratic. They are sexist, they are racist, they are characterized by hierarchies. This is exactly what the rehearsal processes are based on. For that reason I consider representation to be unsuited for dealing with our problems. (Hegemann and Pollesch 2005: 50–51)

It is precisely here that the identity politics-oriented counter-program of the Turkish-German activist group “Kanak Attak”⁶ sets to work: in their performances, members of the so-called “culture of dominance” are filmed and induced in a provocatively ironic way to articulate subcutaneous prejudices and racisms.⁷ In the group’s manifesto, this programmatic strategy of disrupting images is described as follows:

Kanak TV intervenes where racial hierarchies are held to be the norm. We emphatically reject any attempt to gawk at migrants, to measure them and to squeeze them into categories. Instead, we turn our gaze on the Alemanns, who think it is perfectly natural to examine and to question others, to belittle them. As a watchful companion of everyday life, Kanak TV disrupts customary viewpoints and cherished patterns of reception. Kanak TV spreads uneasiness among the self-righteous. Kanak TV offers neither liberating laughter nor feelings of compassionate solidarity. Despite everything, Kanak TV does make people laugh, however. And the more German and the more smug the audience, the deeper the laughter sticks in their throats. Kanak TV reverses the racist gaze. But we don’t just want to expose racist views and fixed notions. Our focus is also on how images and notions are created, manipulated and used. Kanak TV exposes the media gaze as power, by in turn using the same power gaze. The power relationship is thus called into question, rejected and counteracted. (Kanak TV: 2016a)

There is, of course, an ever-present danger that the disruption-oriented and open-ended series of experiments, as carried out by “Kanak Attak”, Schlingensiefel and others, can simply be consumed as scandalous happenings. The post-dramatic theatre endeavours to counter this danger by creating situations in which the stream of experience is interrupted; habits of perception are disrupted so that sensory experience is divided up in a new way, which, as Jacques Rancière sees it, is paired with special political potentials. The “emancipation” of the spectator is not brought about by means of didactic education or by confronting him with “revolting things” (Rancière 2010: 135), but rather by creating “dissensus” (Rancière 1999). This keyword of Rancière’s political-aesthetic theory is used to designate the creation of ruptures and differences, the effects of which have not been prechanneled through the authority or messages of the artist (Rancière 2009a). Accordingly, political art today can be realized only as a politics of form, which, in

⁶ The name of the group “Kanak Attak” is derived from the German pejorative expression “Kanak” which refers to people from the Mediterranean. When Germany started recruiting guest workers in the 1960s, “Kanak” was coined as an offensive collective term for people from Italy, Spain, and Greece. In German contemporary culture the expression is used mostly for people with Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Kurdish roots or, more generally, for immigrants from the South and South East of Europe.

⁷ See for instance the video clip “Weißes Ghetto” (Kanak Attak: 2016b).

the performative mode of “liveness” and feedback loops (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 67), facilitates an active participation of the audience in the temporal metamorphosis of social structures, and creates politically effective constellations of “dissonant resonance” requiring subsequent reflection on the audience’s part. The “non-coherence” that this produces, writes Dirk Rustemeyer,

is not meaningless or flawed, it is neither a gap nor a desideratum, but rather a generator of meaning. Because it blocks routinized conclusions derived from formal differences, but also furthers the creation of new differences and at the same time serves as the basis for a pre-reflective correspondence between different semiotic forms, it remains a crucial factor in the dynamics of cultures. (Rustemeyer 2009: 13)

In concrete terms, aesthetically disruptive strategies, in addition to the already-mentioned suspension of the fourth wall, work with reception-overload that results from the seriality and simultaneity of moments of action, with forms of interruption of the temporal continuum of representation or with discontinuous arrangements of representation, which result in a disruption of the distance between the internal perspective of the characters and the spectators. As Hans-Thies Lehmann notes in his work on post-dramatic theatre, the latter is strongly influenced by elements of an “afformativity”. Thus, a post-dramatic aesthetics of disruption permeates “all representation with the uncertainty as to whether something is represented; every act with the uncertainty of whether it was one; every thesis, every position, every work, every meaning with a wavering and potential cancellation” (Lehmann 2006: 180). As a result, these perturbations produce moments of unconsumable opacity; using Heidegger’s terminology, one could speak in terms of the loss of the taken-for-grantedness of reference, which renders perceptible the “conspicuousness, obtrusiveness and obstinacy” (Heidegger 2008: 69) of signifying materials. In such opacity, the register of perception changes from a mode of a “looking through” into a mode of “looking at”. As a consequence, the discursive-medial, perception-configuring, enabling context of any worldview can be seen as a constitutive factor. By evoking disruption, performance art accordingly thematizes the conditions of possibility for something to be perceived as something: “Whereas we can normally only communicate about perception, art communicates through perception” (Rebentisch 2012: 90). The general provision that the medium of art “is present in every work of art, yet it is invisible, since it operates only on the other side – the one not indicated – as a kind of attractor for further observations” (Luhmann 2000, 118–119) has to be modified for the program of aesthetic disruptions. When Luhmann writes that art provokes “a staying-focused-on-the-work in a sequence of observations that attempt to decipher it” (Luhmann 2000: 126), then the disruption-induced uncertainty concerning the status of the representation

forces an enactment of understanding, “that at every moment of its own formations of form, that is, its own production of context on or in the artwork, always refers back to the medium, the unmarked space of the infinite possibilities of creating such a connection or forming such a form” (Rebentisch 2012: 93).

If from this vantage point one returns to the question of the reflexive capabilities of societal self-descriptions, it becomes clear that contemporary art has a major political role to play in the performance of disruption. As Lehmann points out, following on from Adorno’s concept of form as an essential component of art (Adorno 2004: 180–214), theatre is no longer political by virtue of its political content, “but rather by virtue of the implicit substance of its mode of representation” (Lehmann 2006: 178). Theatre is a “practice in and with signifying material which does not create orders of power, but rather introduces chaos and novelty into orderly, ordering perception” (Lehmann 2006: 179), producing a social disposition in which the political as a “critique of world making” (Goodman 1978: 94) can take place first and foremost, precisely because the continual process of a power-induced identification of identities, roles, and system boundaries is situationally interrupted. The indecision that is opened up by disruption brings about a “politics of the theatre” as an experimental “politics of perception” (Lehmann 2006: 185):

Politics consists in an activity that redraws the sensory framework within which common objects are determined. It breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the “natural” order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of ruling or being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific “bodies,” that is, to specific ways of being, seeing and speaking. (Rancière 2010: 139)

5 Disruption as narrative and event

In a series of essays and plays, the Austrian writer Kathrin Röggla has presented a literary reflection on the exchange between fiction and reality, the momentum of which is maintained by the irruption of disruption. In her work, Röggla focuses on society’s fear-laden approach to dealing with crises and disasters, describing the consequences of drastic disruptions of normal social processes, which as a result of constant, insistent breaking news has engendered a general state of social alarm (Koch 2013: 247–248). In her texts, Röggla diagnoses a “commanding presence of the disaster narrative” (Röggla 2013: 23), which has overrun the mass media, and, in its plot structures, organizes the knowledge of the world that is constantly updated in the news. Disaster films “dig deeper into real processes” and, by offering collective-individualistic opportunities for iden-

tification, they “determine our everyday life, our politics, our media” (Röggla 2013: 23). Röggla understands the mainstream cinema of spectacle on a first-order level of reception as a site of “distraction”, which, by generating a desire for ever-new disaster stories, hinders reflection on the political dimensions of what is being seen. The catastrophic imaginary thus creates a situation that is “fantastically real, in complete contrast to the distressing unreality of our daily lives” (Röggla 2013: 27). By being constantly brought up to date in the media, “collective fears and paranoia plots” (Röggla 2013: 31) are inscribed in individuals, resulting in a de-politicization that hardly perturbs anyone because, paradoxically, it generates effects of unburdening, of relief, in the viewers. Thus, for many viewers, it is “better” to be connected to the (fictionally-induced) “hysteria out there, than to be exposed to the hysteria in here, to the feelings of panic that beset you, the origin of which can no longer be located.” (Röggla 2013: 27)

A way out of the feedback loop of anxiety, prevention, further anxiety and the conservative model of being rescued can, however, be provided by those films, novels, and theatrical productions (or hybrid forms) that break through the disaster stories and their “hermetically-sealed images of rescue” (Röggla 2013: 37). They have to be disruptive, by producing dissonances, by being disintegrative, thus putting paid to the “classic narrative matrix” (Röggla 2013: 36) of the disaster spectacle.

What such a disruption of the medial infusion of fear might look like can be gleaned from the doomsday films of Michael Haneke (*Time of the Wolf*, 2003) and Abel Ferrara (*4:44 – Last Day on Earth*, 2011). In his play, *Rosebud*, dating from 2001, which thematizes the reactions to the attacks of September 11, Schlingensiefel also presents a disruption of the semantics of disaster: by confronting the spectator with myriad cognitive dissonances that render impossible any form of empathy or absorption in the actions on stage, the play enacts a “rhythm [of] derailment” (Kohse 2001), which, along with a flood of signs, references and plot elements, seeks to create a constant overload effect.⁸ The “delay in meaning [that is thus generated] opens the text to a different approach to reception” (Nissen-Rizvani 2011: 178), which is meant to provoke spectators into reflecting on their own reactions to 9/11 and the ensuing politics of emotion. For her part, Kathrin Röggla goes a different way, in a formal sense, but which is still comparable in its critical thrust. Her collection of stories, *die alarmbereiten* (2010), which is based on her theatrical texts, is written almost entirely in the conjunctive

⁸ On Schlingensiefel’s *Bilderstörungsmaschine* (image-disruption machine), see the article of Lars Koch in this volume.

mood, using the distancing mechanism of a reported interior monologue; the assembled texts thus stress the reality and perception-shaping function of language, they illuminate different scenarios of fear and threat and illustrate how much the media, first and foremost Hollywood, influence the kinds of fear that are promulgated and the grounds for fear in the West. Fear, according to Ernst Bloch's central thesis (Bloch 1995: 300–301), is an effect of expectation; it is directed at what is coming and can therefore be exploited politically and economically to justify measures designed to prevent a threatening future from becoming a future threat. The scenarios within which potential dangers are imagined come from the stories told by cinema and literature, which serve as scripts for emotional and cultural fears. Whoever wants to find out and understand – this is the quintessence of Röggl's analysis – how present-day alarmism works, with its mixture of fear and desire, must take heed of the rhetoric of suddenness in the media and the worst-case scenarios of Hollywood films.

This would provide a description of certain features that seem central to the principle of disruption with respect to the social formation and societal self-description: disruptions facilitate a societal self-examination by bringing to light knowledge of the respective discourses, systems of thought, and their constitutive conditions. Whether literary, filmic or performance-based, fictions are experimental spaces in which to explore a society's possibilities and options, and social conditions are codified through ever-the-same plots and matrices. Disruption is the factor within the cultural work on societal self-descriptions that opens up this experimental space, that breaks up plots, thus potentially inducing a change. Disruption can produce "counter-stories" that unsettle uniform narratives, shake up and wake up somnambulistic audiences through new forms of staging, and show that individual anomalies can be traced back to social processes. In the most radical manifestations of disruption, it is a question of creating an open future, rather than a "defuturization" (Luhmann 1982: 278–279) of the future, or a closing off of future options through narrations or stochastic processes that anticipate possible events and bind them to the present.

However, it seems impossible for the media to grasp a disruptive event that cannot be assimilated into a pre-existing series by means of projections of the past or the present. For Jacques Derrida, "the event as event, as absolute surprise, has to fall on me" (2007: 451). Otherwise, the event would be predictable, divested of its radicalism. Each and every processing of disasters by the mass media, every fictional prognosis of a potential accident thematizes disruptive events that fit into the framework of a familiar system of thought and are thus perfectly foreseeable. Yet the absolute event, according to Derrida, cannot be calculated, predicted or theorized, since there is no horizon for such an irruptive disruption. Such an absolute disruption and disaster, such a major, irruptive

event defies discourse, just as in Röggl's play, *die unvermeidlichen* (2010), the interpreters at a large political conference reflect on their actions as representatives of the media and on the political rituals they are witnessing, yet they are unable to penetrate to the core of the political event (if one is actually taking place, that is). Such a fundamental disruption defies appropriation by the media, and thereby also defies politics and societal self-description. If such a disruption were ever to irrupt, society would have to be re-thought.

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