The Auto-Poietic Feedback Loop Of Actors And Spectators

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Max Herrmann, the founder of the German Theaterwissenschaft emphasized that a performance comes into being out of the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. Performance, then, requires two groups of people, one acting and the other observing, to gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime. Their encounter – interactive and confrontational – produces the event of the performance. To use traditional terminology: performance must satisfy specific conditions of "production" and "reception." The actors act, that is, they move through space, gesture, change their expression, manipulate objects, speak, or sing. The spectators perceive their actions and respond to them. Although some of these reactions might be limited to internal processes, their perceptible responses are equally significant: the spectators laugh, cheer, sigh, groan, sob, cry, scuff their feet, or hold their breath; they yawn, fall asleep, and begin to snore; they cough and sneeze, eat and drink, crumple wrapping paper, whisper, or shout comments, call "bravo" and "encore," applaud, jeer and boo, get up, leave the theatre, and bang the door on their way out.

Both the other spectators as well as the actors perceive and, in turn, respond to these reactions. The action on stage thus gains or loses intensity; the actors' voices get louder and unpleasant or, alternatively, more seductive; they feel animated to invent gags, to improvise, or get distracted and miss a cue; they step closer to the lights to address the audience directly or ask them to calm down, or even to leave the theatre. The other spectators might react to their fellow spectators' responses by increasing or decreasing the extent of their participation, interest, or suspense. Their laughter grows louder, even convulsive, or is suppressed suddenly. They begin to address, argue, or insult each other.

In short, whatever the actors do elicits a response from the spectators, which impacts on the entire performance. In this sense, performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop. Hence, performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree.

By the end of the eighteenth century, this uncertainty was seen as theatre's inherent flaw, a nuisance which had to be eliminated at all cost. To this end, a variety of strategies were developed and tested. Apart from favoring textuality, the theatre of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries strove to discipline its audiences. Theatre laws were passed, prohibiting disruptive and unfortunately often infectious "misbehavior." The authorities tried to discourage eating, drinking, latecomers, and talking during the performance by imposing penalties. The invention of gas lighting eliminated the biggest source of trouble: the visibility of the spectators to the actors and, particularly, to each other. From the 1840s onwards, Charles Kean experimented with the increased darkening of the auditorium. Then, Richard Wagner immersed the audience in complete darkness during the 1876 Festival at Bayreuth. These measures aimed at interrupting the feedback loop. Visible and audible – i.e. potentially distracting – audience reactions were to be channeled into "interior" responses that would be sensed intuitively by others but remained without outward expression. The audience was expected to show "empathy." The philosopher Friedrich Theodor Vischer was among those who actively propagated empathy, defining it as "lending one's soul" (Vischer 1874: 435).[1] And yet, theatre scandals such as the opening night of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Before Sunrise* (October 20, 1889) at the Freie Buehne Berlin, suggest that these strategies were only partially crowned with success.

A fundamental change in strategy occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century when the theatre director moved into the limelight. The central paradigm no longer prescribed the elimination of all perceptible reactions by the spectators but carefully employed staging strategies to stir the audience into controlled and guided responses. The director's sphere of influence grew so far as to include the audience; the feedback loop was to be organized and controlled. Sergei M. Eisenstein succinctly articulated this ambition on the occasion of his production of Ostrovsky's *Even a Wise Man Stumbles* (1922/23). In his essay entitled "Montage of Attractions" (1923), he noted that the "basic materials of the theatre" are the spectators; he also defined the role of the performance as "guiding… the spectator in a desired direction (or a desired mood)" (Eisenstein 1977: 181). Similar staging strategies recurred in the 1920s, particularly in Soviet and German theatre, and the 1930s, for example in the National Socialist *Thingspiele*. Much before that, at the turn of the last century, Max Reinhardt had already employed such strategies, followed by the Italian Futurists (Marinetti 1913). Reinhardt's use of the *hanamichi* and an arena as well as his emphasis on the individual corporeality of his actors suggest an attempt to introduce spectators to new modes of perception, thus stimulating perceptible responses from the audience. However, as one review of Erwin Piscator's *Hoppla, We're Alive!* (1927) suggests, not all productions succeeded in this respect: "Time alone will tell whether or not such performances impose too big a physical strain on the spectator" (Jacobs 1927 cited in Ruehle 1988: 794).

Contingency became a central aspect of performance with the performative turn of the 1960s. The pivotal role of the audience was not only acknowledged as a pre-condition for performance but explicitly invoked as such. The feedback loop as a self-referential, autopoietic system[2] enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process

emerged as the defining principle of theatrical work. A shift in focus occurred from potentially controlling the system to inducing the specific modes of autopoiesis. Given this shift, it needs to be investigated how actors and spectators influence each other in performance; what the underlying conditions of this interaction might be; what factors determine the feedback loop's course and outcome; and whether this process is primarily social rather than aesthetic in nature.

Performances since the 1960s have not only addressed these issues; they have increasingly been constructed as experiments that seek to offer answers. Today, performance is no longer seen as the mysterious locus for an inexplicable encounter between actors and spectators. Rather, performance provides the opportunity to explore the specific function, condition, and course of this interaction. The job of the director lies in developing relevant staging strategies which can establish appropriate conditions for this experiment. These preconditions aim at making the functioning of the feedback loop visible by foregrounding certain factors and variables, whilst minimizing, if not fully eliminating, others.

Yet, evaluating the outcome of these theatrical experiments proves difficult. The processes of negotiation vary, at times significantly, in each individual performance of a given production, making it impossible to draw even approximating conclusions from them. It cannot be clearly established whether a performance actually constitutes an experiment testing the autopoietic system or a play with its diverse variables and parameters. In either case, the playful nature of the experiment and the experimental nature of play reinforce each other.

The staging strategies or game instructions devised for such experiments consistently play with three closely related processes: firstly, the *role reversal* of actors

and spectators; secondly, the *creation of a community* between them; and thirdly, the creation of various modes of mutual, physical *contact* that help explore the interplay between proximity and distance, public and private, or visual and tactile contact. Despite the large diversity of these strategies (within a production, in the productions of one director, in the productions of various directors), they all have one feature in common: they do not – if at all – simply depict role reversal, the creation and collapse of communities, proximity and distance. Instead, they actually create instances of these processes. The spectators do not merely witness these situations; as participants in the performance they are made to physically experience them.

The reversal of roles

Christoph Schlingensief had a variety of framing devices collide within a single performance over the course of his productions during the 1990s. In *Chance 2000 – Campaign Circus '98* (*Chance 2000 – Wahlkampfzirkus '98*) at the Volksbuehne Berlin, it was impossible for the spectators to determine with certainty what kind of event they were attending: a theatre performance (by virtue of it being a Volksbuehne production with tickets being sold at its box office); a circus (indicated by the venue – a circus arena – as well as the acts presented by the circus family Sperlich in the course of the performance); a "freak-show" (perhaps suggested by the inclusion of mentally and physically disabled performers who were partly treated roughly); a talk-show (several interviews were conducted in the course of the performance); or a political event, perhaps even the formation of a political party. The latter was suggested by Schlingensief summoning the spectators to step into the arena and add their names as "Chance 2000"

party members to prepared lists. Frequently, two or three event types concurred – complementing and contrasting, even undermining, each other.

When numerous audience members entered the arena to assert their political agency and join the party on Schlingensief's summon, the actor Martin Wuttke delivered a fifteen-minute tirade against them from above the entrance to the arena. He accused them of meekly following the crowd, willingly obeying their master's orders without reflection. Using a megaphone, he repeated one nonsensical sentence in particular: "I am the virus of the people and you are an autogenous stress sculpture!" The constant collision of frames and the resulting collapse of newly established frames evidently unsettled and irritated many spectators. Their often vocal reactions had them repeatedly enter into the performance as actors. The collision and disruption of frames was the most effective staging strategy for bringing about role reversal and for drastically increasing the unpredictability of the autopoietic feedback loop.

The performance consisted of a range of randomly ordered acts, always open to cuts or additions. The rules included the performers' right to refuse to perform a certain act or to invent new ones on the spot. In both cases, the conceptual frames of the performance as "theatre" or "circus" were destabilized. The spectators enjoyed the same right and exercised it with growing fervor. Whenever the refusal of a performer created a gap – sometimes even in the middle of an act – spectators entered the arena to take their place. Usually, Schlingensief and the other performers then retreated to the seats inside the arena to watch. In such cases, the spectators seized the opportunity to join into the performance as equal partners, while Schlingensief observed them – at times encouraging them, at others brusquely cutting them short. Some minor exceptions aside, Schlingensief was present at and supposedly guided every performance; yet his dominance contradicted

the performance's rules of democratic participation. In principle, every actor and spectator enjoyed the right to interfere in the course of the performance. This gave further proof to the randomness of the feedback loop. Whenever a spectator intervened or an actor refused to act, the performance took another unforeseen turn. Everyone, Schlingensief as much as each of the participants, had to react to each development, continuously prompting new turns, until the performance was randomly declared concluded. It could almost be said that every performance of *Chance 2000* served the sole purpose of presenting and experiencing the random process that constitutes the feedback loop.

The constant collision and disruption of frames repeatedly put the audience in situations where they could not react "automatically," that is to say according to a set of given rules. Instead, the spectator had to make choices and evaluations about each frame. When Schlingensief treated the disabled performers rudely, the audience had to decide whether to treat the situation as a theatrical or social interaction. Those favoring the theatre frame remained calmly in their seats, taking Schlingensief's harshness as pretense and part of the play; those in favor of the social frame protested against his discriminatory behaviour.

The collision and disruption of frames plunged the audience into a crisis. For one, they were permanently deciding through which frame to view the action. Moreover, any given boundaries between these different frames became increasingly blurred and eventually invalidated. Political gathering, theatre or circus performance, and the founding of a party increasingly merged into a single event. All were performances negotiating and determining the relationship between participants and presenting

different types of "artistic feats." Each of them concerned the relationship between agency and spectatorship.

Role reversal not only increased the performance's indeterminacy; the unpredictability of the feedback loop made its workings visible. Moreover, role reversal made the feedback loop's implicit political potential explicit. Schlingensief conceived a form of role reversal in *Chance 2000* that exceeded the spectators' ability to co-determine the course of the performance through their actions. In more than one way, the spectators paid a heavy price for their experience of role reversal. Engaged spectators had to watch how their interventions were easily undone by subsequent actions of other spectators or actors. Yet, spectators experienced how their behavior changed the course of the performance – regardless of whether they actively intervened or remained seated, tortured by self-doubt or amusedly detached. In other words, the audience experienced the simultaneous power and impotence of their responses. The spectators could not counteract the chance principle that governed the performance; they could only use it to a limited degree for their own purposes.

Community

The creation of a community out of actors and spectators based on their bodily co-presence plays a key role in generating the feedback loop. Here, too, the aesthetic and the socio-political coincide. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, theatre's potential community-building power has been the object of extensive discussion. In its initial phases, the discussion between theatre theoreticians and practitioners interlinked closely with the debate in ritual studies and sociology on how communities might have emerged from a group of individuals, or whether communities actually preceded individuals.

Referring to William Robertson Smith's (sacrificial) ritual theory, Emile Durkheim wrote: "Collective life is not born from individual life, but it is, on the contrary, the second which is born from the first. It is on this condition alone that… personal individuality… has been able to be formed and enlarged without disintegrating society" (Durkheim 1964: 279). A profound interest in the processes of community-building manifested itself at the turn of the last century. It was a time in which individualism had progressed to a point at which, as Durkheim aptly put it, "the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion" (1964: 172), while increasing industrialization and urbanization led to the concurrent growth of anonymous masses. To many, the theatre presented a site from which to observe and experiment with these processes. Georg Fuchs, for example, was convinced that "according to their nature and their origin, player and spectator, stage and auditorium are not in opposition. They are a unit" (1959: 46). Like many theatre reformers and avant-gardists he felt that this unity could be reestablished by abolishing the division between stage and auditorium which Meyerhold lamented as "dividing the theatre into two mutually foreign worlds: those who act and those who watch" (1979: 131). Reinhardt's experiments with the *hanamichi* and the arena at the Circus Schumann aimed at creating such a unity between actors and spectators. Carl Vollmoeller, who had adapted the *Oresteia* for Reinhardt, even praised the arena theatre on the occasion of the opening of the Grosses Schauspielhaus (converted from the Circus Schumann in 1919) as "an assembly for the peoples of today…. What the de-politicization of our people during fifty years of imperial reign prevented is possible today: a gathering of thousands in a theatre space to build a community of active, enthusiastic, and empathetic citizens" (1920: 21). A performance in such a theatre was thought to have the power to transform individual actors and spectators into members of a community.

In Einar Schleef's Choric Theatre in the 1980s and early 1990s, at the centre were strategies of how to build or resist to communities onstage and between actors and spectators. In his production of *Mothers* in 1986 in Frankfurt, there was a runway in the auditorium that cut right through the audience. While the runway's position enabled the actors to move among the spectators, it also permanently threatened to tear apart the audience's collective body by demonstratively bisecting it. Moreover, the spatial arrangement made the audience easy targets for the chorus' violent attacks in the form of thunderous trampling and shouting. This offended some spectators. They responded either by physically withdrawing from the performance or by actively defending themselves: they stamped their feet, clapped rhythmically, and shouted comments. It was another power struggle, fought out between actors and spectators. The ecstatic chorus sought to overpower the audience in order to infuse them with their ecstasy and thus force the audience to join their community. Some spectators loudly resisted or left the theatre. Some were frightened into submission, others enjoyed the union with the chorus. Yet, harmony only ever existed in moments of transition before the power struggle erupted anew and threatened to transform the theatre into a pandemonium.

During these fluctuating struggles the two groups neither performed communal actions nor did they directly assault each other. Nonetheless, struggles were fought between them; nonetheless, harmonious unions did come about, if rarely. Moreover, actors and spectators retained their roles throughout the entire performance. How was this possible? It seemed as if the feedback loop in this case released special, unifying energies in all participants. *Rhythm* – strongly emphasized by Schleef – played a key role in this matter. Georg Fuchs already assumed that "the rhythmic movements of the human body in space" were capable of "infecting other people with the same or similar rhythmic

vibrations, putting them in a state of ecstasy" (1906: 13). In addition to abolishing the division between stage and auditorium, Fuchs proposed a new acting style based on rhythm to pave the way for a community of actors and spectators. Evidently, he aimed at setting free energies through rhythmic movements, but his interest was limited to rhythm's potential for forging communities joined in ecstasy. In *Mothers*, Schleef did not aim at inducing states of ecstasy. At the center of his production lay the processes of energy circulation generated through rhythmic movements and speech. The circulating energy was invisible and inaudible, of course, and yet, it could be sensed. Rhythm lies at the base of our fundamental physical and biological mechanisms. It regulates our breath and heart beat – the human body is rhythmically attuned. The body perceives rhythm as an external as well as internal principle. We see certain movements, hear certain words, sounds, and melodies and perceive them rhythmically. However, rhythm only develops into an energetic principle when we sense it physically – as with our own bodily rhythms.

Mothers demonstrated how to perceive rhythm synaesthetically, that is, not just through sight and sound but through our bodily senses as a whole. The energies released from the rhythmic movements and speech circulated between actors and spectators created a reciprocal release and intensification of energy. These energies then collided and resulted in the "struggle" between chorus and audience. The flow of energy could also harmonize and generate short moments of communal unity, albeit individuals could choose to distance themselves. The flow of energy was unpredictable. It depended as much on the actors' ability to mobilize energy at any given point during the performance as on every single audience member's level of responsiveness and their ability to physically experience the energy. Among other factors, the proportion of responsive and resistant spectators played an important role in this context. The audience fuelled the

feedback loop and thus the course of the performance through their particular attitude and experience. The audience physically experienced and absorbed the energy[3] emitted by the actors and transferred it back to them.

The theatrical communities of Schleef's choric theatre revealed that the autopoietic feedback loop is generated and kept in motion not just through visible and audible actions and attitudes of actors and spectators but also through the energy circulating between them. This energy is no phantasm but is indeed physically perceptible.

Touch

The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators as the basis for a community between them also implies the possibility of physical contact. The notion of a community is singularly based on and seemingly legitimized by the concurrent presence of both groups in the same place. Frequently, specific spatial set-ups such as the Greek orchestra, the medieval market place, the Elizabethan stage, or Japanese *Kabuki* theatre's *hanamichi* are seen to represent the unity of both groups. Yet the idea of physical contact between actors and spectators seems absurd at first. As the term "theatre" suggests (Greek *theatron* from *theasthai =* to see, to behold; *thea =* a view), it is first and foremost a medium based on sight, emblematized by the enormous Greek theatres with capacities of over 10,000 spectators. This is not to say that European theatre history lacks examples of physical contact between actors and spectators. Despite possible instances of physical contact, for a long time the fundamental opposition between seeing and touching in theatre remains intact.

One of the reasons for this opposition springs from the fact that theatre represents a public medium while physical contact belongs to the sphere of intimacy. Nevertheless, well into the eighteenth century opponents of the theatre charged it with offering, even encouraging the possibility of mutual and obscene touching. Such physical contact was exclusive among spectators themselves and did not extend to any contact between actors and spectators (Barisch 1981). The development of illusionistic theatre in the eighteenth century presented another reason for the exclusion of physical contact between actors and spectators as a direct result of the opposition between seeing and touching. In *Mimik* (1784/85), Johann Jakob Engel explains that the audience's illusion is destroyed whenever the actor's body ceases to represent the dramatic character but is perceived as the real body of the particular actor. Physical contact seemed to enhance this danger by performing the invasion of the real into fiction. By observing the happenings on stage from a distance, the audience emotionally engaged with the dramatic characters rather than the actors. In his *Elements of Criticism* (1762), Henry Home noted that "the external appearances of joy, grief, anger, fear, shame, and of the other passions," the visible signs constituting the dramatic character, express feelings and passions that "open a direct avenue to the heart" (Home 1785: 435), thus stimulating the spectators' emotions by gazing at the dramatic character.

Such a fundamental opposition between seeing and touching in performance is connected to a number of other interrelated oppositional pairs: public vs. private, distance vs. proximity, fiction vs. reality. They are all based on the seemingly insurmountable, fixed opposition between seeing and touching. In his unfinished work "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," Maurice Merleau-Ponty undercuts this opposition when he writes:

The look… envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things…. We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence. Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.

(1968: 133)

A glance exchanged between two people can constitute closeness and intimacy similar to physical contact. Seeing stimulates the desire to touch. If, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, the opposition between seeing and touching cannot be maintained, what effect does this have on the other related oppositions in the theatre?

Let me discuss this question with reference to particular performances. In *Imponderabilia* (at the Galleria Communale d'Arte Moderna in Bologna, part of the event *La performance oggi: setimana internazionale della performance*, 1977), Abramović and her partner Ulay provoked physical contact to highlight the established dichotomies of public vs. private and seeing vs. touching. The spectators entered a liminal state as they encountered Abramović and Ulay, who stood naked, facing each other, on either side of the museum's front door. The space remaining between them was so narrow that to pass through the door, the audience had to touch either his or her naked body. Generally, the women preferred to come in contact with Abramović, while the men tended to pass on Ulay's side. The spectators avoided all eye contact with the performers. Spectators passing through were observed by other spectators on either side of the door. The nakedness shaped the physical contact as a public yet intensely intimate act. Stepping

across the threshold of the door exemplified another situation of betwixt and between as this act undermined prevalent dichotomies.

While physical contact between actors and spectators in performance and action art of the late 1960s and 70s contributed to the destabilization of the opposition of public and private that had been established along with the rising bourgeois society during the eighteenth century, the late 1990s mostly invalidated this dichotomy as a whole.

This situation creates new conditions for performance as well. To destabilize an already obsolete opposition between public and private today hardly creates possibilities for new experiences. Nowadays, when actors and spectators touch each other in performances, they are aware that the binary between public and private belongs to the past. What, then, does such physical contact achieve today?

In his piece *Secret Service*[4] (2002), the Berlin choreographer Felix Ruckert experimented with the possibilities and potential of mutual contact between actors and spectators in an unprecedented and bold manner. Ruckert has worked as dancer for numerous choreographers including Jean-François Duroure, Mathilde Mounier, Wanda Golanka, and was a member of Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal from 1992–4. To my knowledge, his piece constitutes the first example in Western theatre that abolished the spectators' visual sense. They were denied their sight and remained blindfolded for the duration of the performance. Only the actors were able to see.

The piece consisted of two parts. Prior to each part, the visitors were introduced to its rules by a female dancer: they could signal to the dancers that they did not wish to continue at any time during the performance. The visitors then removed their shoes and socks; the dancer blindfolded them, took them by the hand, and led them into the performance area.

The theatre scholar Peter Boenisch talks about his experience:

> After a while, a hand touches my torso, nudges me and shoves my body into the space, lifts my arm and releases it…. Led by my hand, I am travelling through the space, running around in a circle, as suddenly my body is shouldered and I am now whirling through the space. Then I find myself lying on the floor where feet press against my body – and in the next moment, someone else is lying on top of me, slowly rolling over my body, then clutching my toes and tickling me…. [T]he audience here becomes part of a strictly choreographed dance piece, with no-one apart from the dancers themselves being allowed to watch…. Who, after all, would be the subject, who the object anyway? The dancers, who do not wear blindfolds, must watch *me* as I am myself groping for another body, shoving him to the beat of the techno-music. Is this other body one of the dancers at all? Or is he yet another of the spectators? Is he a *he*? It is hard to answer more than this latter question.
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> (Boenisch 2003: 39)

The opposition between public and private spheres utterly dissolved. The intimate became public.

As in the other examples, the audience underwent a reversal of roles. The conditions, however, were completely different because they had surrendered their sight. They were not only forced to depend on their other senses – hearing, smelling and, particularly, touching – but had to trust the actors, who were able to see and control their actions. The "spectators" were faced with a tremendous challenge and an extreme situation of liminality. For one, they had to entrust themselves to total strangers, the actors, and literally surrender their bodies without knowing the consequences. They were forced into a passivity that by far exceeded the passivity of the proscenium audience, so

deplored by members of the historical avant-garde. At the same time, Ruckert's audience was encouraged, even invited, to actively influence the performance through their tactile sense. With each touching, shoving, kicking, stroking, snuggling, the performance took a new turn in its development. Although the actors had their sight and the power to oversee the performance, the reactions of the audience at least could not be predicted or controlled by the actors. The performance drastically demonstrated to the spectators that they could physically influence but not control the event. By becoming aware of the autopoietic feedback loop the audience was transferred into a radically liminal state of betwixt and between, which many audience members relished in, as they admitted after the performance.[5]

The physical contact between actors and spectators in *Secret Service* revealed the hidden connection between the working of the autopoietic feedback loop and the experience of liminality that generates transformation. This liminal state results from the ostensible contradiction between actively participating in a performance – from sensing the circulating energy physically to joining the action on stage – while experiencing the elusiveness of the entire event. The spectators remain on the threshold for the duration of the performance. Their position is never fixed; they do not control the performance, but their influence can be felt nonetheless. The audience constantly oscillates between these various states, ultimately enabled, defined, and triggered by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators.

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[1] See also Vischer 1922 and 1927.

[2] Here it becomes necessary to apply the term "autopoietic feedback loop" to this process in order to adequately describe it. I would like to emphasize that I am using the term "autopoiesis" as defined in cognitive biology by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1992) and not Niklas Luhmann's

definition. The introduction of this term to our discourse forms a part of the larger effort of this book to develop a vocabulary for an aesthetics of the performative, which extends beyond traditional theories.

[3] My use of the term "energy" here is not based on a clearly defined concept – unlike in physics, for example. A certain vagueness about its concept is acknowledged which results from the immediacy of the perceptual experience.

[4] The ambiguous title at once alludes to the secret services offered by prostitutes and to the various political Secret Services, which employ spying on even the most intimate actions and resort to torture practices.

[5] See letters from spectators at http://www.dock11-berlin.de/presssecret02.html (accessed 4 March 2007). The above examples reveal an interesting cultural-historical development of the body from the late 1960s until today. In the 1960s, all forms of exhibiting the body in public, including "going naked" (Schechner), were seen as a "liberation of the body" (Herbert Blau) and a culturally revolutionary act in Herbert Marcuse's sense. Today however, the wide-spread narcissistic concentration on the body and the efforts to mould it through fitness, wellness, and beautification feed into the desire to publicly display an ideal body. *Secret Service* plays with this idea precisely by *not* allowing the spectators to see the reactions to their bodily display.

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