Poetic Seeing in Wittgenstein and the Contemporary Avant-Garde Theatre

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1. Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein, "the philosopher of poets and com-posers, playwrights and novelists" (Perloff 1996: 94), in-sightfully pointed out that "philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetic composition" (Wittgenstein 1980: 24e). Bertolt Brecht, the theatre philosopher and practitioner, insightfully declared that "the theatre's future is philosophical" (Brecht 1989-2000: 53). This paper puts forth the hypothesis that both these claims are potentially actualized with the turn to philosophy through poetry in the contemporary avant-garde theatre. Taking Wittgenstein's philosophical undertaking as an enactment of the vision for the philosophy of the future just mentioned, it posits that the (re)turn to poetry in philosophy presupposes a poetic mode of seeing. After mapping out the notion of poetic seeing from the perspective of several Wittgensteinian remarks, the paper uses Botho Strauss's *Die Zeit und das Zimmer* as a case-study for exploring the poetic seeing in operation in the avant-garde theatre performance today. At stake in this exploration is a renegotiation of mimesis grounded in a reconfigured memory-image associated with poetic seeing. The paper performs a "meandering journey" (to extrapolate Wittgenstein's expression, 2009: 3e) in-between the past, the present, and the future casting light on potential effects as well as on the utility of Wittgen-stein's philosophical thought in realms traditionally seen as exterior to philosophy.

2. Poetic Seeing in Wittgenstein

Notwithstanding Wittgenstein's reference to himself as "someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do" in philosophy (Wittgenstein 1980: 24e), I argue that Wittgenstein's (especially later) philosophical writing has a distinct poetic dimension. This dimension is defined by extreme compression, ambiguity, and repetition with difference. In this sense, for instance, Wittgenstein notes that in *Philosophical Investigations* "the same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions" (Wittgenstein 2009: 3e). This approach is grounded in the performance of an act of seeing to which Wittgenstein refers repeatedly throughout his own "long and meandering journeys" (Wittgenstein 2009: 3e). In what follows, I shall term this act poetic seeing.

Importantly, poetic seeing is not thinking. As Judith Genova justly notes, in Wittgenstein, "*thinking* tends to *see* identities and essences, where *seeing*, in contrast, *thinks* differences" (Genova 1995: 57). Remark 66 from *Philosophical Investigations* makes this distinction clear:

> Consider, for example, the activities that we call "games". I mean, board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: "They *must* have something in common, or they would not be called 'games'" – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For

if you look at them, you won't see something that is common to *all,* but similarities, affinities, and a whole se-ries of them all. To repeat, don't think, but look! (Witt-genstein 2009: 36e)

More than simply emphasizing the difference be-tween thinking and seeing, the cited remark also offers suggestions as regards the nature of poetic seeing. Thus, poetic seeing entails seeing multiplicity rather than unity ("something that is common to *all*"). At the same time, poetic seeing in effect emerges as a mode of formal see-ing. It is a seeing of relationality in the form of "a compli-cated network of similarities (and, by implication, of differ-ences) overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein 2009: 36e; brackets added) rather than of given, stable entities.

The same point concerning poetic seeing as a func-tion of relation is iterated in an earlier remark: "What is the relation between name and thing named? – Well, what *is* it? Look at language-game (2) or at some other one: that's where one can see what this relation may consist in" (Witt-genstein 2009: 22e). Interestingly, seeing the relation is not necessarily limited to sensorial vision, for the relation to be seen may very well be established between "the hear-ing of a name" and the mental "picture of what is named" triggered by the hearing (Wittgenstein 2009: 22e). Yet, if in Wittgenstein's language-game seeing is emptied out of sense experience, what could the nature of poetic seeing then be?

Importantly, poetic seeing is intimately associated with linguistic performance. The remark cited above, for instance, supports this claim: poetic seeing begins with the act of calling something "games". In turn, poetic seeing itself triggers an act of speaking: "Don't apologize for any-thing, don't leave anything out; *look and say* what it's really like – but you must see something that throws new light on facts" (Wittgenstein 1980: 39e; emphasis added). Where poetic seeing is, it seems, there is also a corresponding act of saying.

Noteworthy in this Wittgensteinian formulation is also the condition of seeing "something that throws new light on facts". This requirement potentially implies that poetic seeing makes possible a defamiliarizing experience by means of which "facts" are revealed in a "new light". But what does this defamiliarization presuppose? Conciseness makes Wittgenstein's insight ambiguous in this sense. To gain a better grasp of this aspect, I now turn to another Wittgensteinian remark: "In order to see more clearly, here as in countless similar cases, we must look at what really happens *in detail*, as it were from close up" (Wittgenstein 2009: 30e). If seeing facts in a new light and seeing clearly are both modes of poetic seeing, then the defamiliarizing experience is achieved by looking "from close up". This is an active looking, a seeing as doing from the inside of a specific language-game. Seeing inside and from the inside of a language-game in a sense entails entering the realm of forms and relations, operating within a structure.

3. Poetic Seeing in the Contemporary Avant-Garde Theatre: A Case-Study

As practitioner of and writer about poetic seeing, Wittgenstein is a forerunner of emblematic figures of the contemporary avant-garde theatre such as the German playwright and inheritor of Brecht's legacy, Botho Strauss. To support this claim, I now turn to Strauss' *Die Zeit und das Zimmer* and read it as an enactment of poetic seeing within the language-game of memory and as an actualization of the turn to philosophy through poetry in the avant-garde theatre today. Even though Strauss does not fully adopt the poetic form in this play, *Die Zeit und das Zimmer* is nevertheless defined by a poetic dimension realized mainly through compression, linguistic performances, and self-reflexivity.

Die Zeit und das Zimmer is an elaborately encoded language-game of memory, whose rules are laid down in the first act and played out in the second. According to Wittgenstein, memory is a complex "language-game" (Wittgenstein in Hacker 2000: 417) that "lacks experiential content" (Wittgenstein 1968: 231). This lack of "experiential content" is coextensive with the *Ausleerung* that grounds Strauss' play. Here, Strauss plays on a reduction to form bordering on the extreme, identifiable in recurring mirroring patterns as well as at the level of the characters. More rigorously discussed in terms of "figures" (Pfister 1991) rather than of stable, autonomous, and developing characters, the players in Strauss's *Zimmer* are enactors and producers of language-based acts of memory. As pure forms, Frank Arnold and Der Völlige Unbekannte of the first act can become Erster Man and, respectively, Zweiter Man, in act two, just as Das Mädchen von der Strasse can spontaneously transform herself into the central figure of the play, Marie Steuber. Just as in Wittgenstein's theory of memory, on the site of the memory Strauss negotiates in his play, the way is open for synchronic proliferation.

The first rule of the language-game of memory is stated by Die Mädchen von der Strasse shortly after Julius performed his ritual of looking out of the window. Importantly, this rule is formulated in terms of seeing:

DAS MÄDCHEN VON DER STRASSE: Besagtes Leben, um noch einmal darauf zurückzukommen, wir haben ja nur unsere Erinnerungen. Alles übrige: am Fenster stehen und hinausschauen, bis man vom Erdboden wieder verschwunden ist. (Strauss 1991: 323)

This citation casts light on the role of the second constitutive term in the title: "das Zimmer*"*. Given that the only modes of being in Strauss's play-world are either "am Fenster stehen und hinausschauen" or "ins Zimmer blicken" and that looking out is "alles übrige" with the exception of "unsere Erinnerungen", "das Zimmer" reveals itself as a *Gedächtniszimmer.*

A few lines later, the act of seeing re-appears in a stage-direction that helps elucidate the first component of the title, "die Zeit". Thus, in response to Der Man ohne Uhr's question ("Wie spät haben Sie übrigens*?*"), all the figures "gehen zum rechten Fenster und blicken hinaus" (Strauss 1991: 324). In light of the decoding of the first term, "die Zeit" emerges as coextensive with "alles übrige" and, thus, antithetical to the *Gedächtniszimmer*. The memory-image activated in the *Gedächtniszimmer* therefore presupposes the elimination of the rigid and tri-partite temporal dimension measurable by the clock ("Uhr"). In its place, an alternative temporality defined by simultaneity comes to dominate Strauss' *Gedächtniszimmer*, best captured by the concept of "Gewärtigen": "Zustand zwischen

Vergangenheit und Zukunft" that "schliesst doch beide ineinander ein" (Thomas 2003: 214).

After the first rule is enunciated, the second one follows shortly:

"Sie reden es herbei. Vorsicht!" (Strauss 1991: 328).

In light of this rule, seeing inside the *Gedächtniszimmer* is intimately associated with the act of saying. Underlying this rule is a series of relations of mirroring: between utterance and utterance, between action and action, or, the most unsettling of all, between language and action. Particularly interesting in this sense is the pattern of coming-into-being grounded in the language-action mirroring type, activated in apparently descriptive – but, given the second rule, effectively prescriptive – acts of speaking that recur consistently during the first act. Of these, I mention, for instance, Julius's description of the girls in the street followed by Das Mädchen von der Strasse's entry into the room. Another example is Marie Steuber's account of the man who carried in his arms a sleeping woman, out of a hotel on fire succeeded by the appearance of Der Man im Wintermantel carrying Schlaffrau in his arms, both of whom have just escaped from a fire. As far as the utterance-utterance mirroring is concerned, the word-for-word reproduction of part of Julius's introductory speech by Olaf towards the end of the play generates a particularly defamiliarizing effect.

As regards this second rule, the explicit discourse of memory in Strauss's play-world is also worth discussing. In *Die Zeit und das Zimmer*, the marker of memory, the utterance "Ich erinnere mich" is repeated several times by different figures. Julius, for example, exclaims "Ich erinnere mich" (Strauss 1991: 327) after carefully examining Schlaffrau's finger. Marie Steuber likewise utters "Ich kann mir voll erinnern" when asked "Was haben wir bloß voneinander gewollt" (Strauss 1991: 331) by Der Man ohne Uhr. Importantly, however, "Ich erinnere mich" remains empty in most cases, for nothing is actually being remembered. From the perspective of Wittgenstein's conception of memory, to utter "Ich erinnere mich" means to play a game through which "I" create the past: "Man learns the concept of the past by remembering" (Wittgenstein 1968: 231). This "learning" entails the conflation of past and present in the temporality of *Gewärtigen*.

Characterized by simultaneity and intense mirroring, the memory-image played out inside the *Gedächtniszimmer* takes the form of what Karl Bohrer termed "poetisches Gedächtnis" (Bohrer 2001). Deeply anti-teleological, purely formal, and paradoxically subjective*, poetisches Gedächtnis* is the alternative to the chronologic memory with objective referents. In the place of "Gedächtnis als Traditionsbewusstsein", *poetisches Gedächtnis* is defined by a "komplizierte Reflexionsstruktur" (Bohrer 2001: 113) realized through a move between parallel, simultaneous forms. These forms come into being through *Ausleerung*. As in that of Bohrer, in Strauss's conception of memory the temporal dimensions are conflated: in the *Gedächtniszimmer* "a reflective relationship with the past" that "articulates an experience of simultaneity between the past and the present" is established (Denman 2004: 275).

If where *poetisches Gedächtnis* is, theatre is, then indeed "what is mirrored in memory is the mirror" (Blau 1986: 19) in the case of Strauss's inherently self-reflexive theatre. This reflection is essentially poetic, for it is "in poetry" that "the sign refers to itself" (Roland Barthes cited in Ekegren, 44). Within *Die Zeit und das Zimmer,* this mirroring of theatre in the play is blatantly revealed in the apparently out-of-place Medea-scene of the second act. Here, a revolted Rudolph shouts out the question "Wo ist die Pa-

rallele zwischen mir und dir einerseits, zwischen Medea und Jason andererseits" (Strauss 1991: 339). To this he soon answers himself in a somewhat desperate tone:

Sie (Medea and Jason) sind mitten in einer Tragödie! (…) Wir befinden uns dagegen keineswegs in einer Tragödie. (Strauss 1991: 340; *brackets added*)

In the end of the scene, Marie Steuber casts doubt upon Rudolph's certainty regarding the distinction between the Medea-Jason world and the Marie-Rudolph one, when she asserts that "Du scheinst nicht zu begreifen, dass Medea da ist. Dass sie ihr Recht fordert" (Strauss 1991: 341). Through Rudolph and Marie Steuber – ultimately mere forms themselves – the theatre-play points to itself as theatre.

4. Mimesis and the Digital

This self-reflexivity and simultaneity that ground it presuppose a renegotiation of mimesis. In a traditional conceptualization, mimesis entails a temporal removal of the imitation from that which is imitated. Such a removal requires a tri-partite temporality as well as unity instead of multiplicity. Thus, according to Plato, "no one man can imitate many things as well as he would imitate a single one" (Plato 2008: 339). In the contemporary avant-garde poetic theatre like that of Strauss, however, imitation is replaced by reflection. The theatrical performance as a complex structure of reflection challenges the audience to practice the intensely defamiliarizing Wittgensteinian poetic seeing: to enter the network of relations and multiplicity, to look from close up inside a specific language-game.

From this perspective, the avant-garde poetic theatre today can be seen as a "'training centre' (for) new standards of processing and structuring" (Peter Boenisch cited in Barton: 577) a new logic of vision. This new structure of vision, I suggest, is that of the digital associated with the "multiple-'window'/multiple-screen format" configured "only in the last two decades" (Friedberg 2006: 3). Characterized by multiplicity and self-reflexivity, the new logic of vision is grounded in ambiguity and presupposes transformations of time. Operating by means of metaphor (Friedberg 2006: 15), it determines a new relationship to language and can be defined as a looking inside specific language-games and seeing networks of relations. On account of these points, the hypothesis that remains to be further explored is whether Wittgenstein's formulation and practice of poetic seeing can indeed be seen as a "training center" for the logic of vision framed by the digital.

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