

Gisèle Vienne: Disturbance in Representation
Bernard Vouilloux

Gisèle Vienne: Disturbance in Representation by Bernard Vouilloux was first published in 2013. This text is an extract from his book *Plateaux fantasmatiques. Gisèle Vienne* that will be published during fall 2018 by Shelter Press. It is translated by John Wojtowicz. Black Box teater has previously presented several of Vienne's works, including *Jerk*.

Bernard Vouilloux is a 20th century French literature professor (literature & visual art) at Sorbonne University. He focused his research on the link between verbal and visual, literature and painting, poetry and aesthetic. At the Study Center of the French Language and Literature (CELLF) at Sorbonne University, he is in charge of the transversal approach "Literature, arts, medium". Besides many articles, he published around twenty publications among: *Figures de la pensée. De l'art à la littérature – et retour* (Figures of Thought. From Art to literature – and back), Hermann, 2015 and *Image et médium. Sur une hypothèse de Pascal Quignard* (Image and medium. About an hypothesis of Pascal Quignard), Les Belles Lettres, 2018.

For over a decade, beginning in 2000 with Jean Genet's *Splendid's*, Gisèle Vienne has been building up a fascinating body of work, piece by piece, as if she were gradually discovering its figures, that is both spellbinding and disturbing. It captivates us for the very reason that it forces us to examine the unclear connection that we maintain with both our fantasies and with the dark part made up of manipulation, domination, and violence that forms interpersonal relationships. To advance along this perilous course, Gisèle Vienne—who sees herself as choreographer, puppeteer, director (or producer) and visual artist all at once—uses these means of representation as her medium. While she has recently appropriated the more or less defined working methods of the art installation (*Last Spring: A Prequel*, at the 2012 Whitney Biennial in New York), exhibition (*Teenage Hallucination*, as part of the Nouveau Festival at the Pompidou Centre in 2012), and even the book (*40 Portraits, 2003–2008*, published in 2012 by Éditions P.O.L), the venue and format to which she has usually devoted herself since her debut are those of the performing arts, or, as is still said, of "live performance", even though the question of the status of these pieces—*theatre*, or *spectacle*—remains open.

Although very little is verbalized, works such as *Kindertotenlieder* (2007) and *This Is How You Will Disappear* (2010) are built on a tight storyline, on the intricate librettos created by Dennis Cooper,

the American writer whom Gisèle Vienne has collaborated with since *Apologize* (2004). The transition to the stage, getting onto the set, the “action”—to recall the formula used for the first tableaux vivants at the end of the 18th century—far from yielding an unequivocal version of these underlying stories, makes available all potentialities. In Gisèle Vienne’s work, the story—the *muthos* of Aristotle—can be re-captured only through all that is manifested on stage, the actors, sets, and props. Aristotle distinguished between, on the one hand, what belongs to the realm of the poetic, namely the means (language, or *lexis*, and song, *melopoeia*), which are verbal, and the objects (the story, *muthos*, the characters, *ethos*, and the thought, *dianoia*), which are capable of being verbalized, and, on the other hand, the sets and the props, which relate to the spectacle (*opsis*), the theoretical thread separating what may be theory from what goes beyond the theory. Gisèle Vienne, like many of those who preceded her in the twentieth century, repudiates the boundary, with the *opsis* interacting with the *muthos*: after all, “theater” and “theory” come from the same root. This was one of Freud’s lessons: nothing shown to us in dreams is irrelevant. A gesture takes place: the grammar of what is spoken on stage is as complex as that of the statement “A child is beaten.” The story, since there is a story, can only become muddled, caught in the folds and layers of a narrative that will never succeed in being sorting out in the various temporalities that pass over us. The subject matter on which each of Gisèle Vienne’s productions

has been constructed is not unlike what anthropology designates as “myth”, that unrecoverable narrative whose inscrutable—and even contradictory—variations sustain rituals. What we are shown seems to conform to rules or laws whose sense eludes us, compelling us to develop our own inferences to support this or that conjectural version. Even when the ritual is revealed as such—as, for example, in *Kindertotenlieder*, the appearance of the *Perchten*, those zoomorphic beings of Bavarian and Austrian folklore—it is then defused in order to merge into another “ritual”, that of black metal concerts: the masks come off, like the one at the very beginning of the piece, that of the character who comes out of his coffin, but they reveal nothing more than appearances...

Apart from *Une belle enfant blonde* (2005) and *Jerk* (2008) in particular, the “theatre” of Gisèle Vienne is a laconic one: the spoken word does not really exist there; to the extent that it does occur, it does so in the minimal form of monologue, often murmured, addressed to oneself or to someone who cannot hear, one who is absent or deceased. These are words of repeated refrain, those that we sing in the dark, words that return, as distorted by a mask and exposed in its own utterance despite all sorts of wanderings (“destinerrante”, having lost its way, to use Derrida’s term). Who is speaking? And to whom? These are questions that arise when the identity of the sender and that of the recipient are uncertain: in ancient rhetoric, this figure took the

name “prosopon”, a Greek word which designates the face, the appearance, the character, and by extension the person. *Jerk*, which decidedly occupies a special place in this oeuvre, suggests what would be spoken in Vienne’s other shows if it were to be uttered; and at the same time, because it is a narrative, performed by a psychopathic narrator, and containing dialogues (entirely carried off by the impressive Jonathan Capdevielle), the spoken word of *Jerk* provides access to the underlying framework of the productions conceived by Gisèle Vienne based on the written texts of Dennis Cooper: invaginated texts, delirious constructions, or to put it more precisely, very learned literary reworkings of a fantastical material pumping its figures into the substrata of Eros and Thanatos. One should imagine all of Dennis Cooper’s sources of inspiration, from another continent and another culture, when he tells stories of beautiful, ambiguous teens brutally tortured, young women manipulated, lovers gone missing. It is as though they have been commissioned by Sade and Sacher-Masoch (invoked in *Showroomdummies*, 2001–2009), revised by Genet and Bataille, and then reworked by Robbe-Grillet (Alain, but Catherine as well) with, on the horizon, “Freudian Psychology Refracted through Post-Modern Example” as specifies the narrator of *Jerk* (not without immediately adding, “Whoaa..., that’s a mouthful!”). Gisèle Vienne says she has only taken the path that brings fantasy to the collective after exploring its most intimate aspect. In any case, the phantasmatic material is

like stories that we can only attempt to reconstruct, conjecturally, from the snippets that deliver the representation: the intimate myth of the *Urszene* (a Freudian term translated as “primitive scene”) is also a construction after the fact, since it is carried out by the child on the basis of visual and aural cues conveyed to him by parental coitus.

As we know, writing that feeds from images of all sorts, those that rise up from within us as well as those that come from outside, is itself a powerful trigger of images, whether it be those that develop on the stage or those that each spectator imagines or recombines from what s/he sees and hears, or even from what s/he reads (e.g. the fanzines distributed to the audience at the beginning of *Jerk*, 2008, or at the end of *The Pyre*, 2013). In the work of Gisèle Vienne, however, the image on stage is unique in that it is mobile, its plastic qualities (the interplay of lights, mist, and stage set) have been highly elaborated, and it is coupled to an almost uninterrupted flow of music (by the duo of KTL, consisting of Peter Rehberg and Stephen O’Malley). Neither opera nor filmed theatre, it is rather dream images, images from silent film, and accompanied by music and spoken word as if from off-stage, from “another scene” (Freud), as it were ... Here the stage setting functions like a photographic frame. The two never overlap. With the traditional stage, two axes cross, arranged perpendicular to each other: the technical axis (in both senses, ancient and modern, the *tekhnè* as

art and as logistics) opposing the set and its wings (stage left and stage right), and the representational axis established by the structural boundary, physically perceptible and separating the stage from the hall. The photographic frame results from an act, an operation, the framing, carried out of the place and from the point of view of the operator, whose intervention results in an off-screen effect. The difference between the two is equivalent to the one René Bazin showed that exists between the pictorial frame, centripetal, and the filmic frame, centrifugal. The limits of the stage as conceived by Gisèle Vienne do not form, as Bazin said of the filmic, “the frame of the image, but a *cache* that can unmask only a part of reality”. The “theatre” of Gisèle Vienne deals primarily with all that is neither looked at nor listened to, the silent images that haunt us, flooding back onto the stage.

Gisèle Vienne as well as subsequent critics commenting on her work have often cited the genre of tableau vivant: onlookers (you, me) assume the poses, the postures, and sometimes the costumes of the painted figures of a familiar scene. Except that there is no original tableau that this can be traced back to, one whose recognition would reassure us. Recognition, one of the cornerstones of Greek tragedy (*anagnorisis*), is captured by the lure of false recognition: this is a picture, but we are at a loss to identify the original painting (the *Ur-Bild*) from which the images unfold before us, some sliding over the others. The shared visual

culture does not fail to deliver some clues, floating and fleeting: perhaps Caspar David Friedrich for the snowy heath of *Kindertotenlieder*; modernist asceticism for the neutral and functional place like an airline terminal in *Showroomdummies*; our worst nightmares, relayed by Hollywood and trivial news items, for the undergrowth conducive to all the criminal burials in *This Is How You Will Disappear*; futuristic scenery (reminiscent of the spacecraft of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Vasarely) for *The Pyre*. The actors themselves play along, their displacements having the effect of saturating (crossing-out?) the performance space, of mobilizing all of its dimensions, from edge to edge, by a rigorously constructed total environment. All of the body's speeds are utilized, in synchrony or dyssynchrony with the music, lights and mists: quick staccato dance (in *The Pyre*), quasi-gymnastics (in *This Is How You Will Disappear*), displacements that are fast, slow, or even highly broken down, as in slow motion.

But “actor” and “performer” are words that in this case are ill-suited—and not only because most of the figures activate the resources of choreography. The schizophrenic narrator-puppeteer of *Jerk* says to one of his characters: “those characters are only what you see onscreen they have no interior life at all, unlike real human beings who are really complex and impossible to understand, no matter how hard you try.” The formula is a perfect example of the eminently perverse skill with which Dennis

Cooper's verbal art flows into the manipulative techniques of his characters: if it apparently conforms to the stereotype that one character deprived of an interior life would be less complex than another, this is self-contradictory, since the one who states it is a fictional character, and as such, is not unlike those "we see on the screen". Finally, it is truly abysmal: David Brooks, the accomplice, along with Wayne Henley, of serial killer Dean Corll, accused of having murdered around twenty teenagers, tells the story of these murders while he is in prison. David, played by Jonathan Capdevielle, lends his voice to the puppets representing Dean and Wayne, as well as those who represent the young victims, and plays his own role: he is himself, he says, his own puppet. The frame closes up on the body of Jonathan Capdevielle, whose torso serves as a backdrop and his thighs as a floor: the body as puppet booth. The mechanism of representation is reduced to its most minimal state: it is enough that the body is doubled, that the mute voice that is designated "subject" is bifurcated and reflected off itself. The theatre is based on a tmesis.

The puppets are the projections of this process of fission. Bodies of rags and wood, bodies hollowed out, in the interior of which slips the hand of the puppeteer—just as the hand of Dean rummages through the bowels of his victims. Gisèle Vienne herself has touched on this in her account of how in sixth grade she began to create marionettes and perform with them, in order to tell herself stories.

The puppets and mannequins point to a more advanced stage of this process: on the set of *Kinder-totenlieder*, the ten motionless silhouettes, with hoods pulled up over their hair, hair falling down over the face, and heads bowed down (a recurring motif, seen again in the series of *40 Portraits*), who seem to be those of the young audience at a black metal concert, or those of *Showroomdummies*, where the characters embodied by the actors spend their time manipulating, shifting, moving around. The final stage is that of living persons who also wear masks (as in *Showroomdummies*). Don't their gestures and movements sometimes seem to be mechanized, "mannequinized" (a word used by Diderot), puppetized, whereas conversely, the animation of the puppets (e.g. the eyelids and beating heart of the boy of *Last Spring: A Prequel*) and even of the mannequins makes them seem alive? The boundaries between the living body of a person (actor, dancer) and the body of a character are blurred when the inanimate becomes animated and the animate mechanized. The beautiful dancers of *This Is How You Will Disappear* and *The Pyre* are a little like the automata which delighted an eighteenth century which, from Condillac to Rousseau, had been haunted by the figure of Pygmalion. The same disturbing thought troubles us when faced with the figures of a *tableau vivant*, or of wax: the most familiar becomes the most strange. One of the living returns otherwise: this is called a "phantom", a word etymologically related to "fantasy", both of which have much to do

with melancholy (and mourning), which all these downturned, saturnine faces carry the burden of.

Indeed, under the direction of Gisèle Vienne, there are neither actors or performers nor even people, but *figures* which are at the same time apparitions, geometrical forms, and rhetorical operations. The generalized uncertainty plays not so much on illusion (we can differentiate between the living persons, the puppets, and the dolls) as on the stage set of simulacra. One of the very few contemporary writers interested in the tableau vivant, Pierre Klossowski, knew this well: when Catherine Robbe-Grillet, who shares his interest, staged *Pierre le maladroit* (Pierre the clumsy), tableaux vivants closely linked to his icy narratives, she abandoned the sequence of the narrative, and presented it in images.

The fantasy material set into motion by Gisèle Vienne as by Dennis Cooper takes this uncertainty to a state of additional complexity: the ambiguity of age, between infancy, childhood, adolescence, and post-adolescence. It is also that of gender—for example the young androgynous boys of *Jerk*, in contrast to the powerfully sexual bodies of the female dancer and the trainer in *This Is How You Will Disappear*. But still more disturbing than anything else is the uncertainty of the subject itself, above all when it speaks as in *Jerk* or *Last Spring: A Prequel*. On this subject, guided by the visible figures of the fictional bodies, by the geometrical

figures of their movements, by the figures that form multiple verbal and visual operations which take them for objects, reduced as we are to conjecture, we can only resort to *projections*.