

Disturbing the Metaphor

Performance and Medial Presence in the Fiction of
Elfriede Jelinek and Günter Grass

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Abstract

In this article, I want to discuss the way metaphors take form as diegetic actions in Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* (1983) and Günter Grass's *Too Far Afield* (1995). In these texts, the reader must literally picture what metaphorical language usually only conceptually refers to. Both authors confront their readers with disturbing actions that are felt to be significant in some way; they resist straightforward interpretation and rather provoke affective reactions. This deliberate disturbance of metaphorical language can be understood as medial presence effects. They foreground the mediality and materiality of language and literature. The way literature performs and functions as a medium is made visible and perceptible.

Keywords Intermediality, performativity, metaphor, presence effects, Elfriede Jelinek, Günter Grass

Introduction

In the fiction of both Elfriede Jelinek and Günter Grass, some objects appear to be let loose, and some actions are perceived as more disturbing than meaningful. Both authors confront the readers with

actions and objects that are felt to be significant in some way, although it is hard to say exactly what they mean apart from 'actually' taking place on stage, or being 'really' present in fiction. Grass's fiction appears as visual, concrete, and occupied with sensual detail (see Standfuss 2008, 35–66). Even abstract processes are felt to be part of the plot, to be "real objects" (Just 1972, 118).¹ What, however, is meant by this idea; that some objects – a tin drum, potatoes, a protagonist's teeth – are more 'real' than other objects in the diegesis? Although their significance may become obvious to the reader, it is more difficult to come to any conclusions regarding exactly *what* and *how* they signify.

In Jelinek's plays and novels, the structural violence in social structures and language use is 'actually' carried out in forms of direct, physical violence (Janz 1995). Even here, researchers explicitly point out an unusual degree of materialisation. Thus, Mireille Tabah not only explores how Jelinek's female protagonists defy traditional female gender roles, she also stresses how female protagonists "*actually* appear as vampires" and that "mothers *actually* are child devouring monsters"; language becomes visible on stage as "signifiers . . . flown on the stage as gruesome objects, things or bodies" (Tabah 2008, 219, my italics).² Processes of materialisation appear to replace or disturb signification.

In this article, I want to explore this peculiar stressing of 'actual' events and 'real' objects. Why are some objects perceived to be more 'real' than others are, although they are still only represented by language? Why are some events or actions on stage perceived as more 'actual', although they still clearly are make-believe?

In the following, I intend to explore how this 'actual'-ness foregrounds the presence of literature as a medium. As both authors are familiar with other media than literature, they thus also are aware of the mediality of language and literature. Jelinek is a trained musician and composer, Grass was educated in visual arts and always continued to switch between writing and drawing. Performing music depends on material bodily presence. In painting material qualities have to be considered. In language, however, material preconditions are easily ignored. In the following examples from Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* (*Die Klavierspielerin*, 1983) and Grass's *Too Far Afield* (*Ein weites Feld*, 1995) the immediate short cut to a level of ideas is disturbed. Metaphors, which usually describe *how* to imag-

ine a diegetic object or event, 'actually' appear within the diegetic world. The reader is thus confronted with diegetic actions that are felt to signify but do not make immediate sense, as they are not perceived as meaningful. I want to explain these actions as primarily performative. The way in which language and literature perform as media is set into action within the plot.

Performativity, mediality, metaphors

Disturbing metaphorical understanding involves that linguistic performativity, theatrical staging and medial performance interact in a way that has to be explained more in detail.

The "wandering concept" (see Bal 2002, 174–212) of performativity is applied to a confusing range of different phenomena. However, even if performativity and performance often appear as only loosely connected, they still share some common characteristics (Bal 2002; Wirth 2002; Krämer 2004). No matter, how we understand performativity, it always involves that the production of meaning cannot be separated from bodily or material presence. A performative perspective always implies that otherwise convenient binaries collapse or start to oscillate (Krämer 2004, 21; Fischer-Lichte 2008, 17); word and action in Austin's performatives; repetition and change in Derrida's concept of iterative performativity; linguistic iteration and the social identity that they help to establish in Judith Butler's performative acts; actor and work in Fischer-Lichte's performative approach to performance. In medial perspective on communication the material presence of the medium and conveyed meaning cannot be separated. A focus on mediality in communication is thus always performative (Krämer 2004, 20), and implies an oscillation between meaning and a certain kind of "presence effects" (Gumbrecht, 2004). Instead of unmediated presence, these effects discussed here rather draw attention to the presence of the medium and could be considered as "medial presence effects".

Intermedial relations highlight the connection between performativity and mediality (Krämer 2004). Nevertheless, even intermedial interpretation easily focuses on how material medial presence contributes to meaning and interpretation. In the texts discussed below however, intermedial relations and the convergence of literary performativity and performance prevents immediate interpretation and creates disturbance.

In literary language, the performative convergence of action and words mostly appears to take place in the act of writing, narrating or reading a story. Literary studies have mostly focused on the performativity of narrative discourse – its self-reflexive ability to both create and comment upon what it described (Wirth 2002, 25). To a performative perspective, narrated acts and words appear to be of lesser interest as they do not affect the real, social world. However, a heightened self-reflexive performativity of narrative discourse also influences the way we understand narrated acts. Svend Erik Larsen points out, how narrated performance that is not clearly framed by a stage or by the narrator, blurs the border between every day and performatively meaningful acts (Larsen 2010, 79). As a result the border between what the texts means, or represents, and what it does, or presents is destabilised (ibid., 68). This can be seen in the performative use of metaphorical language.

Metaphors connect two apparently unrelated objects through imbuing a primary subject with the characteristics of subsidiary subject (Donogue 2014; Cohen 2008). All language-based thought relies on conceptual metaphors that describe the abstract with the more concrete (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kövecses 2010), whereas explicit metaphorical expressions creatively establish new connections of similarity. Max Black describes the metaphor as a “filter” (Black 1954/55, 291) that highlights certain traits of *both* primary and subsidiary subject while downplaying others. In order to understand explicit metaphors we apply a metaphorical shift from literal to transferred meaning – whenever literal meaning appears as absurd, self-contradictory, or false (cf. Cohen 1997, 224). Both metaphorical filter and metaphorical shift are performatively challenged in the examples below.

***The Piano Teacher* : Performing Metaphors**

Elfriede Jelinek’s texts foreground the ambiguity of language with all its polyphonic resonances (Kecht 2007). All semantic meaning is iteratively destabilized in literary discourse; and language self-consciously reflects the way it participates in shaping social reality (Janz 1995, Piccolruaz 2007). In Jelinek’s early novel *The Piano Teacher*, there still is the notion of a coherent plot and psychologically motivated characters. However, already here, a plot that is perceived coherent is challenged by the novel’s self-reflexive narrative dis-

course. The novel's protagonist, Erika Kohut, is a failed pianist and turned severe piano teacher. Her sexual life revolves around voyeurism and self-harm. When Walter Klemmer, one of her students, tries to make her his sexual conquest, she can only conceive of a sexual relationship in terms of Bondage & Dominance.

It has been noted before, that Erika's profession as a pianist contributes to her inhibited sexuality (Powell and Bethman 2008). Her most disturbing behaviour, in terms of both sadistic aggression and self-harm, often remains the subject of psychological interpretation (*ibid.*, 176). However, several of her disturbing actions appear to be in performative relation with violent metaphors that are used to describe music. In the novel, performance of music is presented as gender performance by means of a performative narrative discourse. This merging of different performative levels destabilizes the borders between what is perceived as diegetic actions and metaphorical language.

In *The Piano Teacher*, music is not primarily the source of auditory pleasure. From the perspective of the performer, music appears as the result of hard work and discipline. Violent and mechanical metaphors highlight the amount of physical strain and subjection to discipline (see Schirmmacher 2016). Mechanical metaphors compare Erika to a piece of ticking clockwork (Jelinek 1988, 40, 114), or other mechanical instruments (36); an unmotivated music student is compared to a reluctant car engine (28). The gendered notion of performing (and thus reproducing) music as an approach to music deemed suitable for women (Powell and Bethman 2008) is conveyed in domestic metaphors. Thus, a recital's audience listens to "the intricate crocheted patterns of contrapuntal texture" (Jelinek 1983, 63f.), and Erika, in her role as piano teacher, "corrects the Bach, mends and patches" (105) when a student fails to perform adequately.³ Performing music, when described through the filter of female household chores, is gendered female (Solibakke 2007, 259). Mechanical metaphors compare the performer to a tool, an object. These metaphors foreground, how conceptions of music have been used to define the female gender (Powell and Bethman 2008, 173), and they point out the rigours of discipline in the tradition of Western art music which the performer has to subject her body to (Cook 2001). However, in the diegesis, only the primary subject, performing music, is present, the subsidiary subjects, as

needlework, clocks or engines are only conceptually evoked in narrative discourse to describe the way *how* Erika performs.

Subjecting the body to discipline in performing music also is conveyed by metaphors of direct violence. The “crocheted patterns” above are in fact “*the whiplashes* of the intricate crocheted patterns of contrapuntal tissue” (my italics), while the recital’s audience should, according to Erika, be “gagged and subjected”, as they apparently yearn for “thrashings” (68). The five black lines of the staves of a piece of sheet music are said to be a “grid system, that has hamstrung [Erika] in an untearable net of directions . . . like a rosy ham on a butcher’s hook” (190).⁴ The similarity between the net of the ham and the grid system of the staves literally ‘fleshes out’ how the demands of discipline may mistreat the body. However, unlike the domestic and mechanical metaphors, the subsidiary subjects of the violent metaphors also appear in non-metaphorical contexts: the whips, the gags, the instruments that hurt the body play a vital role in Erika’s sexuality and self-harm. In her BDSM fantasies she becomes as immobilised as the smoked ham in the net, asking her would-be lover Walter to tie “her up with the ropes . . . and also the leather straps and even the chains! Hogtie her; bind her up as thoroughly as he can” (215); “Use a rubber hose . . . to stuff the gag so tightly into my mouth that I can’t stick out my tongue: . . . Please use a blouse to increase my pleasure: tie up my face so skilfully and thoroughly that I can’t get it off.” (218)⁵

Thus, the aggression towards the body that is demanded of the (female) performer is not only brought out in metaphors, but also literally carried out by Erika’s actions. When Erika cuts her hands, “she presses the blade into the back of her hand several times The metal slices her hand like butter” (44). In her need for self-harm she is “spreading her legs she makes a cut” and mutilates her genitals (86).⁶ Actions of violence and self-harm are not only metaphorically evoked, but they also literally take place in the diegesis. The razor is an object in the diegesis, and Erika uses it to slash her vulva or maim her hands, at the same time, the razor, as the whips, the gags are imbued with significance as subsidiary subjects of violent metaphors. As the reader must imagine what language otherwise only refers to, this is experienced as being transgressive, twisted, distorted.

In artistic performance, the very materiality of the acts carried out prevents a merely symbolical interpretation, and so both material and symbolic interpretation begin to oscillate (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 16-18). Reading the passages that relate to Erika's self-harm almost certainly results in feelings of unease and rejection. The bodily violence overrules any merely symbolic interpretation; the actual violence in the diegesis is kept present. The virtual world of the diegesis, which is traditionally believed to lack performative force, is thus able to provoke emotional affect a notion of 'actual'-ness. Art performance usually takes place at a performance site rather than a clearly framed stage; it toys with the uncertain relation, of material and symbolic acts (ibid.). Similarly, certain of Erika's actions turn the diegesis into a performance site.

***Too Far Afield* – Visualising Metaphors**

Just as in the work of Jelinek, disturbing metaphorical language deforms and distorts the narrative in the fiction of Günter Grass. The controversial novel *Too Far Afield* (*Ein weites Feld*, 1995), for example, appears rooted in the visual and material qualities of Grass's graphic work. Published in 1995, approximately all literary critics literally ripped the novel to pieces (Reich-Ranicki 1995; see also Negt 1996). On its front page, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* showed Germany's then most influential literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki to 'actually' tear apart the novel (*Der Spiegel* 34/1995).

Set in 1990 in Berlin, the novel reflects German re-unification, and deals with the problems and hopes of former GDR citizens who are adapting to the new order. Still, the plot appears somewhat contrived. The novel's protagonist, Theo Wuttke, nicknamed Fonty, is mentally stuck in the nineteenth century, re-enacting the life of his idol, the novelist Theodor Fontane. Hoftaller, a former member of the Stasi, constantly follows – or rather shadows – Fonty. Even Hoftaller is a kind of literary double of the protagonist spy in Hans-Joachim Schädlich's novel *Tallhover* (1986). As Fonty always draws on history in order to explain the present, and as Germany's unification in 1871 preceded two world wars, Fonty expects re-unification to lead to renewed German aggression. This critical perspective on re-unification was widely attacked. Additionally, the critics found the novel's plot overly complex, its style intolerably cumbersome and the protagonists as being lifeless. Fonty's actions appear

to be too often dictated by Fontane's biography and predilections, and lacking in individuality and psychological depth. Moreover, as Fonty is very fond of quoting his idol Fontane, and both he and Hoftaller frequently repeat their favourite phrases, they thus appear to be poor imitations of their originals.

Scholarship has considerably revised this picture of a failed novel. Alexandra Pontzen, for example, point out to the relevant parallels between Fonty and Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (Pontzen 2008). However, the protagonist's unsatisfactory lack of depth and complexity can also be explained by how Grass visually explored metaphors. His working process involved drawing motifs that were related to the text. In this process of "checking on verbal metaphors by the means of drawing them", he perceived the drawn metaphor as being more exact, as "not prone to the alluring sound of words. . . . First when translated into graphic representation, the metaphor can prove itself to be consistent." (Grass 2007, 506)⁷ In drawing, Grass explored how primary and subsidiary objects of the metaphor might exert concrete influence on one another. He then re-translated these relations into the text. Verbal metaphors appear as artistic material, formed and deformed through a graphic process. This process can be exemplified with the series of images created during the writing of *Too Far Afield*.

In "Bilderbogen – sitzend, stehend und gehend" ('Epinal print – seated, standing moving'; Figure 1) we find the two protagonists standing side by side or back to back, sitting vis-à-vis, or parting company at a corner. Here, Fonty and Hoftaller appear loosely sketched, two-dimensional, flat, in contrast to Grass's usually more detailed graphic style. These figures, however, look like silhouettes, shadows. Thus, their loose, vaguely sketched nature can be seen as a way to put on test the metaphor 'to shadow' by means of drawing. Fonty and, arguably, Hoftaller are literary doubles – *doppelgänger* – in various ways. They explicitly lead their narrated lives in the shadows, or as the shadows, of their predecessors, being introduced as "silhouettes" (Grass 2000, 6, 13) or "shadowly outlines" (45).⁸ Hoftaller is referred to as Fonty's "day-and-night-shadow" (36 et passim), clinging as he does to the object of observation – Fonty – that he is tasked with 'shadowing'. Nevertheless, as Grass moves from literary to visual means of expression, he refers not to the commonplace associations of shadows in literature – which of-



Figure 1: Günter Grass, "Bilderbogen – sitzend, stehend und gehend," Kugelschreiber 1993. In Günter Grass: *Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 2: Die Lithographien (Göttingen: Steidl 2007), 254. © Steidl Verlag.

ten is the familiar turned *unheimlich* unfamiliar (see Freud, 1919). In drawing, Grass highlights the visual qualities – the flatness of the silhouette, the fleeting nature and dependency inherent in a relationship centred on ever-following – aspects that are deliberately downplayed in the literary metaphor of the shadow as an uncanny, haunting double.

Flatness and two-dimensionality are present in the graphic presentation as well. The series' title refers to *épinal* prints, and the drawings are produced as lithographs – 'flat', planographic printing techniques that duplicate the original on a two-dimensional surface. Furthermore, the *épinal* print was used to disseminate popular songs and stories in the nineteenth century and was, in terms of both visual detail and narrative quality, relatively simplistic and lacking in depth. The visual and material exploration of the metaphorical material appears to be re-integrated into the narrative; Fonty is not only a *doppelgänger* but literally unable to act independently, encumbered as he is by the visual restraints of his assumed role, and thus his behaviour is (irritatingly, perhaps, to contemporary critics) lacking in depth.

The visual metaphor with its more unconventional characteristics of the shadow bereaves the literary *doppelgänger* and the shadowing spy of their threatening potential. The visual treatment of the two protagonists is a deliberate demystification of the threat of history repeating itself. Upon closer inspection, the novel does not share its protagonist's fatalist perspective – of German history repeating itself – but offers emancipation from the past (Platen 1999; Preece 2008, Schirmmacher 2012, 163–208).

However, the disturbance of metaphorical language obstructs immediate understanding: The metaphor of the shadows not only illustrates Fonty's behaviour. Instead, the material characteristics of the shadow develop an agency of their own – they do not explain but govern Fonty's behaviour and distort his diegetic actions. When asked the reader does not automatically recognise the familiar metaphor of the shadow as a double rather, many readers and critics only perceive an odd 'badly written' protagonist and a contrived plot. As aspects of the plot appear oddly distorted, critics are easily tempted to blame the author of failure. The obstruction of conventional understanding however is intended.

Conclusion – Performing Medial Presence

Both Jelinek and Grass deliberately disturb the effectiveness of metaphorical language as they insist on the presence of the metaphorical subjects involved. The subsidiary subjects of metaphors deform events in the diegesis. In Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*, the subsidiary subjects of violent metaphors are present and able to 'actually' hurt and even maim in diegetic actions. Not only in *Too Far Afield*, Günter Grass questions established metaphorical meaning. Subsidiary subjects become 'actually' present both in diegesis of the text and in the material production of his visual art. Conceptual relations, usually only evoked, turn into diegetic actions, which accounts for the notion of things 'really' being present, of events 'actually' taking place.

The insistence on conceptual relations 'actually' taking place prevents a metaphorical shift, which would enable the reader to separate diegetic actions and their meaning. The texts discussed here do not simply give access to an imagined world, as the language participates in forming diegetic actions. The texts thus performatively demonstrate how the diegesis does not exist without narrative discourse; they keep the medium of language present.

The awareness of medial performance, of medial presence effects could be used to reconsider Grass's insistence on the concrete, on *Gegenständlichkeit*, which resists symbolical meaning and instead might be understood as mediating a notion of objects being present. One might also ask, how performance of metaphors is also in effect in Jelinek's later prose, which often is perceived as self-reflexive iterative language game. It might help to better approach the irritation caused by texts that engage with reality but at the same time resist referential reading as has noted concerning Coetzee's *Disgrace* (Horsman 2009, 147). Of course, these texts still convey meaning, but interpretation includes affective reaction to what is presented. The irritation not being able to settle for a meaning beyond what is presented, draws attention to the language at work. In these "medial presence effects" we thus perceive literary language in action, they make language as a medium disturbingly perceptible.

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Notes

- 1 "Darstellung psychischer oder anderer unanschaulicher Vorgänge [die] als reale Gegenstände der epischen Handlung angehören."
- 2 "Frauen treten *tatsächlich* als Vampirinnen, Mütter *tatsächlich* als Kinder ermordende und fressende Monster auf . . . Der Signifikant wird dabei ins Groteske übersteigert und als zugleich komisches und grausiges Objekt – als Ding oder Körper – auf die Bühne 'geworfen.'"
- 3 "in regelmäßigem Zweiglatt/Zweiverkehrt" (Jelinek 1983, 151); "des verschlungenen zu Mustern gehäkelten Kontrapunktgewebes" (63f., my translation as this passage is missing in the English translation). "Erika K. bessert den Bach aus, sie flickt an ihm herum." (105)
- 4 "Peitschenschläge[] des verschlungenen zu Mustern gehäkelten Kontrapunktgewebes" (Jelinek 1983, 63f.); "Man muss sie schon tyrannisieren, man muß sie knebeln und knechten, damit sie überhaupt durch Wirkung berührt werden. . . Sie wollen Prügel und einen Haufen Leidenschaften." (69); "In dieses Notensystem ist Erika seit frühester Kindheit eingespannt. Dieses Rastersystem hat sie . . . in ein unzerreißbares Netz . . . geschnürt wie einen rosigen Rollschinken am Haken eines Fleischhauers." (191)

- 5 "dass er sie mit Genuß so derart fest, stramm, gründlich, ausgiebig, kunstgerecht, grausam, qualvoll, raffiniert mit den Stricken, die ich gesammelt habe, und auch den Lederriemen und sogar Ketten!, die ich ebenfalls habe, fesselt, ver- und zusammenschnürt und zusammenschnallt wie er nur kann." (216)
- 6 "Dann drückt sie die Klinge mehrere Male tief in den Handrücken hinein Das Metall fräst sich hinein wie in Butter." (45); "Sie setzt sich mit gespreizten Beinen vor die Vergrößerungsseite des Rasierspiegels und vollzieht einen Schnitt" (88).
- 7 "die sprachliche Metapher zeichnerisch zu überprüfen"
"Die Grafik . . . ist genauer. Sie lässt sich nicht durch Wortklang verführen Erst ins graphische Bild übersetzt beweist die Wortmetapher ob sie Bestand hat."
- 8 "Schattenrisse" (Grass 1995, 13, 21, 45); "Tagundnachtschatten" (48 et passim).