Undoing gender revisited: Judith Butler's parody and the avant-garde tradition

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Abstract:
The considerations outlined in this text are motivated by two interrelated phenomena: the passionate use that contemporary political movements such as the alter-globalisation movement or the queer movement make of aesthetic tactics such as parody, irony or alienation and the similarities and manifold relations that exist between this political practice and the feminist theory that has developed since the late 1980s.

1 The considerations outlined in this text are motivated by two interrelated phenomena: the passionate use that contemporary political movements such as the alter-globalisation movement or the queer movement make of aesthetic tactics such as parody, irony or alienation and the similarities and manifold relations that exist between this political practice and the feminist theory that has developed since the late 1980s. The writings of Judith Butler, in particular, have been widely received in the areas of critical theory and political practice. In her first internationally recognised book, *Gender Trouble*, she presented a strategy for the "subversion" of gender norms, which also became an important reference point for the formation of *queer theory*. Butler claimed parody and travesty were a "strategy of subversive repetition", via which usual forms of gender appearance can be interrupted and so to speak revealed (Butler, 1990: 107ff.). This thesis was also adopted more recently in particular by parts of the alter-globalisation movement. Influential theoreticians of this movement, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, refer specifically to Butler when outlining a "performative collective project of rebellion" of the multitude that is carnivalesque and "queer" (Hardt/ Negri 2004: 200).

2 The writings of Judith Butler as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define important transformations of contemporary political mobilisation by highlighting two tendencies: On the one hand, political collective bodies today are emerging more and more in a contingent way outside classical "modern" institutions such as parties, associations, trade unions or clubs, they are sometimes short-lived, overlap with one another to some degree and usually unite people in a more temporary way. Thus each individual is able to participate in various collective bodies at the same time and is inclined to change affiliations more quickly and more often. On the other hand, lifestyle, i.e. a refined exhibition of differences in dressing-up, self-performance, inhabiting space and referring to aesthetic traditions has become more important for the fabrication of connectivity. In addition, discursive figures

such as “the people”, “workers”or “women”, which were formerly used so widely and in a universal way to address all of us, are now being called into question.

3 These changes in the contemporary political arena are read by Butler and Hardt/ Negri in an affirmative way, despite all the various alterations they propose. Connected to this, political “subversion” is almost euphorically asserted and celebrated. Political subversion is closely linked to the use of certain aesthetic tactics, which in this way become isolated and univocally judged as a means of undermining hegemonic politics. This way, the participation of these aesthetic tactics in generating “dominant” or “hegemonic” culture is overlooked. In this paper, the pattern of argumentation and acting passed on in these theoretical inputs and their adoption in contemporary political practice is examined in the form of a critical genealogy, with the focus being on feminist theory since the late 1970s and its reception in the contemporary activist scene. The goal is to more accurately understand these transformations in the contemporary political arena by taking into account the various effects of aesthetic tactics rather than just the politically undermining side of them and by examining the political consequences of such a schematic way of judging the aesthetic means.[1]

4 The paper is organised as follows: As a methodological starting point in the opening chapter I outline aesthetic tactics as calculated though constitutively incalculable interventions into an interplay of a variety of lived, demonstrative and ideal bodies. Then I present Butler’s debut thesis on parody, compare it to Irigaray’s concept of mimicry and, in the following section, investigate how this thesis deals with the triad of lived-demonstrative-ideal bodies described at the outset of this text. Finally, I confront this with revisions Butler formulated in respect to parody and subversion in her later work and ask why these revisions did not assert themselves with regard to her debut thesis. In closing, Butler’s thesis of parody as subversive repetition as well as Irigaray’s concept of mimicry are discussed as being anchored in a shared process of the invention of an “avant-garde tradition”, which is interrogated with regard to its politically stimulating characteristics as well as its de-politicising effects.

Methodological starting-point: Interventions and the body as an existence-site

5 I have chosen an approach that makes the body into a starting point for such a genealogy – here I explicitly refrain from referring to the extensive “body debate”, especially in the German-speaking world, triggered by Judith Butler’s early writings (see Distelhorst 2007: 36ff. and 50ff.). When I speak about the body, I am not referring to a definitively fixed

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and thing-like entity, but to the body as an existence-site (Nancy 2000: 16). There are various bodies that are simultaneously present when we speak about "the body" – we can identify a triad of lived, demonstrative and ideal bodies: for instance there is one's own, lived body that asserts itself by way of its often ungraspable extensions and insistent sensations. Then there are the perceived bodies of others, which can become demonstrative bodies of, for example, advertising or educational discourses or in the training situations we encounter in institutions such as the school, the military or the hospital. And there are the ideal bodies populating our imagination (Schober 2003: 70f., see also: Foster 1992: 482). We usually deal with several of these bodies, even when handling our "own body", whereby this "own body" also appears to us as a perpetually different body – sometimes as imperfect, heavy, awkward and in need of perfection, care or "tailoring"; at other times, however, as desirable, beautiful, stately, full of energy, one that draws the gaze of others. The bodies of others, which we encounter in the workplace, on the streets or in the media, however, are for us the actually describable and orientation-delivering bodies – analogous to dancers at a ballet school, they can become "demonstrative bodies". It is by watching them, that we learn how to move, to dress up, to flirt or to judge.

6 The exchange with others, however, also has consequences on how we ourselves are perceived. Because only by entering into an exchange with others, can we, in such a relatedness, be perceived and experienced as "one", whereas when we are alone, we "dissolve" into various bodily sensations and psychic persons (Arendt 1971: 198).[2] Hence only in an exchange with others, are we able to show "who" we are, as distinct from a "what" – i.e. we can leave bureaucratic allocations such as gender, age, nationality behind and bring actions, judgements and viewpoints (Arendt 1971: 198) to the fore. Furthermore, part of this superimposition of sensations, imaginations, projection and images, which situates us in a bodily way, consists of "ideal bodies". Usually – like the bodies ballet dancers in front of the mirror project for themselves into the future or which populate their fantasies – they feature everything lacking in our own hard-to-grasp and often in everyday life insufficient bodies.

7 Political power emerges anew in an exchange or struggle between a plurality of these bodies. Hence political power is not "something" that is given to some of these bodies once and for all – for example the "demonstrative bodies" of educational discourses, as some would assume. It cannot be forced by some bodies onto other bodies, but arises in an always up-to-date form via a process of exchange and struggle in which identification, rejection,

[2] For Arendt, this "dissolution" of the self that occurs when we are alone is also the condition for a "thinking conversation" that constitutes ourselves (Arendt 1971: 198f.).

projection, seduction and fascination or disgust are just as much involved as denominating, "knowing" allocation and training.

8 This, however, does not mean that all bodies participating in the formation of political power enter these struggles with the same amount of self-assertion. Some demonstrative bodies, for example those brought into play by institutions such as the church, the school or the educational system in general, the military or medical care, also incorporate the authority and the cultural capital of these institutions – a weight these bodies bring into these struggles. But the demonstrative bodies brought into play by political grassroots movements or oppositional groups often command a particular seductive force too, which results from the rejection of convention and the norms inherent in these bodies and from their dealing with a "something" that is felt to be lacking in the present environment.

9 No public action by either official institutions or political grassroots movements, therefore, ever intervenes in an initially empty, transparent or manageable space but in one that is always already populated by various perceived, demonstrative and ideal bodies and the identifications, desires and disavowals connected with and circulated between them. Aesthetic tactics of parody or alienation, on which there is so much emphasis in contemporary political practice, can be understood as encroachments in such an interplay of bodies, which also means that they interact with what is already present in an always unforeseeable and often surprising way.

Subversive body acts and mimicry

10 The aforementioned tradition of judging certain aesthetic tactics, such as parody, as being "subversive" has been expressed in particularly cogent terms in one of the theses developed by Judith Butler in her early writings, especially in *Gender Trouble*. Even if Butler herself soon started to put this thesis of parody as subversive repetition into perspective and to replace it at some points with a more cautious formulation (Butler 1997 and Butler 1998), it has been this debut thesis, in contrast to her later writings, that has remained outstandingly influential (see also Distelhorst 2007: 36ff), especially for contemporary political movements such as the queer or the alter-globalisation movements. This particular reception history is the reason for presenting the following critical discussion of this thesis and the particular relations between bodies that are solicited in it.

11 In *Gender Trouble* Butler presented a critical examination of the political practice of the feminist movements of her generation, in particular of their use of "women" as a collective subject of emancipation, and confronted this with seemingly novel political tactics

of "subversive repetition" (Butler 1990: 44). Her reasoning was: If bodily surfaces can in a "natural" way be made to appear as "male" and "female" – something the women's movements are inherently involved in – there is also the possibility of using them for a de-naturalising, dissonant performance. There are forms of staging the body, so Butler, that can show that "gender" is usually produced in a performative way and can lead to a questioning of current forms of appearance. As a central aesthetic means for such a practice she chooses the form of parody: Via a parody of masculinity and femininity, according to Butler, gender binarity can be weakened and a multiplication of the sexes may be achieved (Butler 1990: 171f.).

12 Hence Butler starts with the assumption that the "naturalness" of gender is an effect that results from the steady repetition of ritual practices. From this she deduces that when we re-enact our performances of the self in another, parodic way, we interrupt this repetition and make a statement that she regards as one that destabilises the current order and can, because of this, be called "subversive" (Butler 1990: 107ff.).

13 Parody is an aesthetic tactic that participates in everyday processes and in which one utterance, i.e. a sentence, a performative act or an image insinuates another one with the intention of disfiguring it (see Dentith 2000: 6). By presenting her thesis of parody as subversive repetition, Butler, however, transforms the potential of parody to create attention and challenge the given into the certainty of a politically "subversive" position. She interprets parody not as an intervention that can give rise to various effects but equates it with "subversion" and with a feminist, deconstructive position. In doing so Butler disregards the fact that parody, if it is actually identified as such by the viewers or listeners, can also control and police what is legitimate to express in a certain situation – by mocking statements and innovations made by others – or that parody can induce some of the receivers to hectically reinstate the contested categories. At the same time, she also fails to take into account the fact that parody paradoxically also preserves the image it tries to disfigure and this way keeps the possible points of involvement for actual and potential viewers and listerens wide open. Furthermore, she also neglects dealing with the fact that even if parody leads to an interruption of the usual flow of meaning and of ruling certainties, such an interruption is still translated in a multifaceted way into the conceptual tracks of everyday communication.[3]

14 In formulating this thesis, Butler takes up what was already a pre-existing figure of argumentation even in the feminist field before 1990, failing, however, to negotiate it

[3] For more on the genealogy of parody and irony and in particular on the political use modern emancipation movements since the French Revolution have made of these aesthetic tactics as well as on the various effects of parody and irony and the multiple ways of negotiating it in further detail see Schober 2009/4: 15ff.

explicitly in relation to the aesthetic tactic of parody. One of the theoreticians constituting this field was Luce Irigaray, who at the end of the 1970s presented a concept of "mimicry" (Irigaray 1985: 68f.) that very closely resembled Butler's parody as "subversive repetition". Irigaray, too, introduced mimicry as an emancipatory tactic suited to dealing with the exclusion of the female in the "economy of the same" (Irigaray 1985: 66ff.) as she calls patriarchal power regimes. The reason for this, she says, is that historically two modalities of speech were granted to the female – silence and mimicry; and even if, as she further shows, there is no "outside" from which such attributions could be questioned, there is still the possibility of inhabiting them differently and transforming them in this way. According to Irigaray, one can actively carry out mimicry in order to extract something different from ruling discourses, i.e. one can "play mimicry" in order to "make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language" (Irigaray 1985: 68).

15 The parallels are obvious: Both Butler and Irigaray call for the use of repetition in order to "reveal" or "unveil" something that is otherwise invisible – the constructed nature of gender identity (Butler) or the possible operation of the feminine submerged in the "economy of the one" (Irigaray). Butler distinguishes herself from Irigaray insofar as she categorically refuses to enquire about something like the "truth" or "authenticity" of the female or the masculine, and in contrast uses a genealogical critique in the effort to trace the ways in which "gender tales" are established and circulate (Butler 1990: xxxiv). To her – as she argues in discussing Irigaray's approach in *Gender Trouble* – ideas such as the "possible operation of the female in language" indicate "totalizing gestures", which feminists tend to oppose to what they see as a "masculinist signifying economy" (Butler 1990: 18).

16 In *This sex that is not one* Irigaray operates with two notions of difference.[4] In contrast to Derrida's understanding of difference, which denies any figure of origin, the one coined by Irigaray relies on a primal duality: in the order of the One, i.e. the phallocentric discourse, the female, as excluded, sustains the functioning of discourse – here there is difference, but not genuine difference insofar as it is only "the other of the same". However, in this order there is also a "beyond" that cannot be subsumed and which stands for the contingent par excellence. Irigaray refuses to define this "beyond". At the same time though, she metaphorically states that the basis for this is the "sexual organ that is not one" (Irigaray 1985: 26). In relation to

[4] In Bodies that Matter Butler tends to obliterate this difference in some places – something that Irigaray's writing invites to some extent since it playfully re-inhabits notions, metaphors and images connected with the feminine. For instance, when reading Irigaray, Butler, without hesitation, equates in some places "the female" instead of "the contingent" with that which lies outside phallogocentric order. This leads her then to the critique that in Irigaray's writing the female would monopolise the sphere of the excluded (see Butler 1993: 48).

this she uses the image of two touching lips, and in this way, parallel to Jacques Lacan's concepts but developing them in another direction, she constructs a theory of an alternative "sensible transcendental" in favour of symbolic change rather than explicit emancipatory activism.[5]

17 In both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* Butler deals extensively with Irigaray's writings and criticises her, especially in her first book, sometimes vehemently (Butler 1990: 18). Nevertheless, in her second book she takes a conceptual turn that is basically similar to Irigaray's, even if the contact-points for identification she offers are different. As already mentioned, Irigaray argues that a phallogocentrical order induces an outside that is constitutive and stands for the contingent par excellence, for which she coins the metaphor "the sex that is not one". This appears in *Bodies that Matter* in a mirrored way when Butler points out that the constitution of a subject is always and constitutively accompanied by exclusion. Butler then passes over this exclusion, which is constitutively part of the formation of any identity, referring on the one hand to the notions of "repudiation" and "abjection" borrowed implicitly from Lacan (Butler 1993: 3 and 111) that designate a process in which the subject abandons unliveable potentialities (see also Distelhorst 2007: 118f.). But on the other hand she superposes this exclusion with the notions with which Michel Foucault investigates the ways in which norms define who and what counts as reality and as a viable subject, and who or what is "fundamentally unintelligible" (Butler 2004: 28 and 30). This brings Butler to the conception that the heterosexual hegemony produces homo-, trans- or intersexuals as "unthinkable, abject, unliveable bodies" (Butler, 1993: xi and 3). Butler criticises Irigaray for, as she sees it, equating the outside of phallogentric order with "the female".[6] Nevertheless, her writing also mirrors that of Irigaray in *Bodies that Matter* when Butler relates this outside of phallogentric order to the lesbian and ultimately the homosexual (Butler 1993: 51). In this way, however, as Butler contends, a competition in the sphere of the excluded and abjected emerges between the "feminine" and the "homosexual", one that is tantamount to a competition between (heterosexual) "women" and "gays/lesbians". This becomes evident when Butler states "that the feminine monopolizes the sphere of the

[5] This metaphor of self-speaking lips contributed strongly to turning Irigaray into one of the most controversial figures of feminism at the turn of the millennium – this metaphor was often ridiculed and in this way trivialised and devaluated. In psychoanalytic theory, however, it is common to operate using sexual metaphors. Lacan's phallus metaphor for instance is understood independently of its biological reference, the penis. (Whitford 1991: 142 and 183; Frei Gerlach 2004: 250).

[6] This criticism is insofar not justified as Irigaray deals or rather "plays" with the fact that such an outside can only be grasped by re-inhabiting notions, metaphors and images taking part inside this order.

excluded" (Butler 1993: 48), an assumption she sets out to criticise.[7] Such a bringing-into-competition also becomes evident when Butler critically discusses whether "gender" can be seen as a "code for homosexuality" (Butler 2004: 181) but then herself poses the question of whether "difference" could not be read as a "code for heterosexual normativity" (Butler 2004: 202).

18 Butler is very well aware that the "excluded" is a category that is constitutively produced by any order and that speaking about it or identifying it with certain groups of people is actually not possible and is not conceptually coherent. This, for example, becomes recognizable when she argues against a "theoretical gesture in which exclusions are simply affirmed as sad necessities of signification" (Butler 1993: 53). Or when she writes about the difficulties connected with "making the articulation of a subject-position into the political task", since an increasing visibility of different identities would be accompanied by a multiplication of strategies of abjection and repudiation (Butler 1993: 112). Nevertheless, Butler in *Bodies that Matter* and in several subsequent texts does indeed take such a step, which can be interpreted only as a politically motivated step that is not, however, set out explicitly in the realm of the political but rather is smuggled in an untagged way into the analytical categories of how to explain the constitution of identity. Butler thus repeats – and shifts – what she initially accused Irigaray of, but also highlights other identification places and models. In this way Irigaray's "phallogocentric order" becomes Butler's "compulsory heterosexuality", and the outside of phallogocentric order becomes first the unsymbolisable, the unspeakable, the illegible (Butler 1993: 190)[8], and later the "derealised" (Butler 2004: 27) bodies of the heterosexual matrix.

The political and the trouble with representability

19 Butler's conceptualisation of political power in relation to "gender" at the same time tries to evade any temptation to call for a "radical and inclusive representability" (Butler 1993: 53) at a political level since this would entail precisely the creation of a collective subject and the definition of a "positive" identity in search of emancipation of which she is so critical and which she sees first and foremost as being connected with the dangers of essentialism. As mentioned above, she then, as a kind of compromise, undertakes such a step

[7] This way the debate still resides inside a paradigm that acts on the assumption that emancipation processes bring groups together united by certain characteristics, which makes those active in those groups "equals", but also contends that this is incompatible with the actions of others who also aspire to emancipation but who to achieve that goal unite on a different basis (held together by different characteristics). This paradigm has been called "identity politics" (see Laclau 1996: 47ff.).

[8] "The production of the unsymbolizable, the unspeakable, the illegible is also always a strategy of social abjection." (Butler 1993: 190).

at another place – at the level of the analytical categories of how to explain subject constitution.

20 In order to understand this conceptual move that Butler undertakes, one needs to consider and discuss the fact that – based on Michel Foucault's main works, one of the leading frameworks for her writings – it is very difficult to achieve a "positive" notion of the political or of resistance capable of guiding political action. Foucault investigates modern relations of power in a way that all notions remain at an analytical level and allow no normative conclusions. He is interested mainly in the processes of the production of "docile" bodies – for instance through modern, individualising, pastoral power. Thus he does not answer the question of what there is on the "subject side" besides self-insertion into the "individualising matrix" (Foucault 1983: 215) of confessional or pastoral power or where and in what way the smooth incorporation of individuals into subject positions, created discursively, might be interrupted. There is a perspective of disciplinary power as a monolithic machine and of the impossibility of resistance, which arises in view of Foucault's main works (Hall 1996: 10ff.; Muhle 2008: 276ff.). And this perspective can then shift the search for the possibility of resistance onto an individual level. Butler exposes parody and drag as potential modes and sites of resistance and in doing so she refrains from further investigating how these aesthetic tactics participate in processes of a normalisation of "self-invention" which characterizes ruling hegemonic power relations too. Other readers of Foucault also take similar paths, for instance Michel de Certeau, who in *The Practice of Everyday Life* contrasts the strategies of institutions with "resistant tactics" of everyday life such as walking, dancing or dressing up (de Certeau 2002: 29ff.) and thus also overlooks mutual contaminations and articulations between these strategies and tactics.[9]

21Ernesto Laclau formulated an answer to this desideratum of a "positive" notion of the political in Foucault's reception by going back to Antonio Gramsci and by devolping his notion of "hegemony". In doing so he uses the term "political" for every public activity that calls into question restrictions on entering the stage of politics or other orders of things, proposes a different way of ordering the world and/or is able to expose something that actually appears as so far unachieved, desired and full of utopia. Laclau sees the sphere of politics in a narrow sense, composed of, for instance, parliament and parties, as being distinct from this larger public political sphere. At the same time, however, politics depends on voters and actions present in this sphere and is directed towards dealing with this challenging, loosely assembled terrain of the political (Laclau 19990: 68f.). In order to bypass the above-

[9] In previous works I have shown that these "strategies" and "tactics" cannot be contrasted in as dichotomous a way as de Certeaus presents them, but are, instead, mutually contaminated (see Schober 2003: 70).

mentioned desideratum in the main works of Foucault, Butler in her approach accommodates at a certain point such a "positive" definition of the political via a reception of this theory of hegemony by Ernesto Laclau (and Chantal Mouffe) – however without revising her conception of "exclusion", "repudiation" and "abjection" in connection with it and without pointing out how this can be combined with her scepticism in relation to political representability. And though just as abrubtly as she started to include this strand of theory in her writings she also stoped pusuing it in her more recent works, the term "hegemony" continues to appear in her writings – albeit in a now not further defined way.

22 While Butler sees the sexes as both constructed in a way that reinforces heteronormativity without specifying the relation between them in more detail, Irigaray dwells on a fundamental asymmetry between them – "the woman" appears as the objectified "other" of the phallogocentric order – as well as the potential for a thus far unrealised "otherness". (Soiland 2003: 161ff.) But beyond this, the differences asserted by Butler conceal the similarity in political tactics that both Butler and Irigaray postulate: both present certain kinds of repetition as an emancipatory political tactic that is able to "reveal" (Irigaray 1979: 78; Butler 1990: 200) and in the long run also overcome current ruling regimes in relation to sex and gender. At the same time both link this potentiality in choosing a "subversive" repetition instead of a usual one with a certain sovereignty on the part of the actors, which, however, they both appraised differently – something that in the reception of Butler's texts made the question of "agency" so contentious.

23 In the early 1990s Butler's *Gender Trouble* was received with a vehemence that led Sabine Hark to speak of a "discursive event" through which a new constellation of forces was established (Hark 2005: 271). By contrast, in such post-Butler readings Irigaray was often one-dimensionally charged with being an "essentialist" (for instance by Frey Steffen 2006: 63).

24 Butler's performance thesis around 1990, however, was in itself caught in a net of equivalent argumentations: In the 1980s and 1990s a whole range 23 of investigations coming from the newly established disciplines, such as cultural studies, cultural science, aesthetics or film theory, were similarly biased to *Gender Troubles* in describing aesthetic tactics such as irony, parody, montage or alienation as emancipatory ways of reading and as means by which various discriminated or marginalised groups could resist the dominating discourses (Schober 2009/4: 17ff.) In feminist theory, too, apart from Irigaray others also argued in a similar way. Donna Haraway for instance described irony as a "serious play", as "a rhetorical strategy and a political method" capable of decentring and deconstructing patriarchal discourses (Haraway

1985: 65). In relation to such persistent staging of the political effectiveness of certain aesthetic tactics, Linda Hutcheon speaks of a "mainstream concept" of groups regarding themselves as oppositional (Hutcheon 1994, 30ff.).

A celebration of transgression and a new inequality of bodies

25 What forms of appearance of bodies and what relations between them are conceived in Butler's thesis of parody as subversive repetition? In the formulation of this thesis Butler speaks of a new multiplication of configurations of gender identity through which the ruling gender binarity can be brought into disarray (Butler 1990: 171ff.). For her this connects with "subversive laughter", caused by "the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic and the real are themselves constituted as effects." (Butler 1990: 200)

26 Thus to her, confusion and laughter do not connect with the dominant, everyday situation comprised mainly of bodies that appear "natural" but with an aspect that stands out from everyday life through interruption and destabilisation caused by bodies that have become sites of "a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself." (Butler 1990: 200)

27 Here Butler distinguishes between two kinds of bodies: the "natural" bodies of the majority, who are involved in a mere repetition of the status quo, and the bodies of a minority acting parodically, whose *mise en scéne* "reveals" the illusion of gendered identity or deprives "the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: 'man' and 'woman'." (Butler 1990: 200)

28 In this way, Butler presents a kind of celebration of transgression: On the one hand there is a majority of bodies imprisoned in illusion and repetition who only from the outside can be made to pause and reflect through parody. At the same time there are irony- and parody-practicing bodies that "uncover" illusion and "deprive" "current narrations of their central protagonists. These latter bodies seem to possess a knowledge that the bodies that make up the audience of such performances seem to lack.

29 At the same time Butler explicitly pursues an emancipatory project: she wants to "disrupt the foundations that cover over alternative cultural configurations of gender" (Butler 1990: 201), in this way creating the conditions for groups that have until now been seen as "deviant", such as homo-, trans- or intersexuals, to be recognised in their struggle over the shape of past, present and future (Butler 1990: 105). Hence in Butler's writing there is a discrepancy between the attempt to act as a stimulus for emancipation and the simultaneous operating with a new inequality of those involved.

30 By using notions such as “revealing”, “uncovering” or “subversion”, Butler repeatedly asserts a close, causal relation between a parodist intervention and a specific result on a political-ideological level. Even if she pauses at some point, stating that parody in itself is not subversive (Butler 1990: 189), she consistently stages the incorporated practice of parody in the direction of such a one-dimensional causality.

31 But what kind of bodies – and here I am referring to the triad of “perceived–demonstrative–ideal bodies” described at the beginning of this text – did Butler have in mind while formulating her thesis of parody as subversive repetition? From the viewpoint of the “naturalised” majority in her explanation in *Gender Trouble*, there are in the first place “demonstrative bodies” that use parody effectively to lead spectators to reflect on body *mise en scéne*, gender, sex and societal power. The “perceived bodies” of this majority and the resulting possible self-experience as being imperfect and awkward or desirable and beautiful are missing, as are their dreams and wishes and the “ideal bodies” connected with this. From the viewpoint of a minority employing parody, however, the only mention is of their own energetic, almost omnipotent bodies, which seem to correspond to the ideal bodies of the imagination. Everything imperfect, painful[10] or awkward in this perception of our “own” bodies seems to be overcome in this moment of employing parody. By contrast, the bodies of others are not described from this perspective as “demonstrative bodies”, or rather as demonstrative bodies only in a negative function, since they appear exclusively as bodies nourished by and caught up in illusion that have to be challenged and encouraged to reflect upon the situation they are in. In this way the audience for such parodic performances is portrayed as if it were caught in a kind of “false consciousness” but can be brought – via parody – to a revision of this false consciousness. Other demonstrative bodies, for instance those appearing via the media, other political grassroots movements or social reform programmes, that compete for attention with those using parody, do not appear here either.

32 Furthermore, if one takes the triad of perceived, demonstrative and ideal bodies as a starting point, it becomes apparent that every political-aesthetic intervention will always lead to various – including sexual and erotic – entanglements, attractions and repulsions between the various bodies populating the public sphere. The intention, so vehemently articulated in Butler's thesis, cannot control all the expressions inherent in an intervention as comprehensively as the author suggests (Derrida 1985. 307ff.).

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[10] Butler mentions psychic and bodily pain and vulnerability in her later works, especially in relation to what she calls the “de-realisation” of some bodies (Butler 2004: 27); she will rarely, however, mention it in relation to operative interventions into the gender of a person. If this is apparent as in the case of Brenda/ David, she articulates doubts about “who” is speaking: he or language, David or the “norms” as “the means by which he sees.” (Butler 2004: 70)

33 Moreover, with the formulation of this thesis, Butler, as Linda Zerilli, another critic, also shows, acts on the assumption that aesthetic language is a kind of "gender prison" from which every divergence would free us. (Zerilli 2005: 53f.). Relating to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Zerilli argues that divergence is always already part of our language and appearance, hence our dealing with unusual self-performances is considerably more flexible than Butler would permit. In the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein she contends that the actions we carry out as beings who are also sexually defined are governed by certainty and not by knowledge. Hence certainty is a doing, an acting, and not a knowing (Wittgenstein 1994: 150ff.), and this everyday, usual acting also might simply "swallow up" certain aberrations. According to Zerilli, this means if we encounter an action that is alienated aesthetically via parody or in any other way, we can pass it by without reacting, since our attention remains absorbed by the flow of everyday life, or noticing that we are dealing with "subculture" or "art", we might switch to corresponding patterns of perception and acting. That we, in this way, are encouraged to practise a "critical" reading of the everyday is only one possibility – and, as Zerilli maintains, certainly not the most obvious one. But even if we do take this step, various forms of further negotiations of such an act are still possible. The use of aesthetic tactics such as parody is thus linked to uncertainty and unpredictability arising from the fact that the spectators are those perceiving parody or irony as such and will deal with it in infinitely different and often very creative ways.

Judith Butler and the avant-garde tradition

34 In her later work, Judith Butler implicitly deconstructs her thesis of parody as subversive repetition. Already in *Bodies That Matter* she points out that *drag* and travesty can "de-naturalise" as well as "re-idealise" gender norms (Butler 1993, 125ff.). In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997) she then proposes separating the power of speech from its meaning and presents an alternative view showing that even if language acts, this does not mean that it will directly or causally impact the receiver (Butler 1997: 105f.). Only a successful action, according to Butler now, "is one in which I do not only perform the act, but some set of effects follow from the fact that I perform it. To act linguistically is not necessarily to produce effects, and in this sense, a speech act is not always an efficacious act." (Butler 1997: 17) While Butler in *Gender Trouble* repeatedly suggests a causality between the aesthetic tactic of parody and political subversion – and so gets caught in a means-end logic that obscures the various references of acting – in *Excitable Speech* she turns against such a causality. However – and this possibly is one of the reasons for the continuous influence of

her debut thesis – she does not deal with her previous thesis in relation to *drag* and travesty, but shifts the question into the legal realm. As an impulse for this re-formulation she mentions the repeated quoting of her former far-too-close connection of speech, norms and conduct in order to promote and to legitimise state intervention in practices of signification, for instance in relation to pornography – an intervention that Butler is firmly against, since she sees civil society as the only possible venue for various types of discussion of hate speech and of discriminating representations of the body. The closer the relation between speech and conduct, and the more obscured the difference between felicitous and infelicitous acts becomes, the more strongly state intervention in this respect is supported (Butler 1997: 23).

35 When she speaks in her later works about *drag* or travesty Butler indicates some shortcomings in her earlier approach to this – for instance when she says that she wrote this part of *Gender Trouble* "probably … too quickly" (Butler 2004: 213) or that her writing was strongly influenced by her then identifications (Butler 2004: 213). However, she does not relate the conceptional revisions she arrived at in *Excitable Speech* continuously to her analysis of *drag*, and she tends to return to her first thesis and to re-affirm it, despite all revisions, which might be another reason for the lasting influence of her thesis of parody as subversive repetition.

36 Nevertheless, the main reason why the conceptual revision of Butler in respect to language acts was unable to assert itself against her initial thesis of parody as subversive repetition, which today still exerts widespread fascination in political activism, art and the discourses associated with them, does not lie in the writings themselves. Because at the moment of its appearance this thesis was already supported by a tradition that had been "invented" collectively in various milieus and in political practice as well as in cultural theory throughout the 20th century, and which can be called the "avant-garde tradition" or "tradition of the politically effective form" (Schober 2009/3: 27ff.).

37 In this tradition, several different artistic and political positions meet, such as Dadaism, Surrealism, neo-avant-garde groups in the 1960s and 1990s or the alter-globalisation movement as well as cultural-critical patterns of argumentation from film theory found in the British journal *Screen* up to and including some positions of today's cultural studies or queer theory. Even when individual movements and standpoints react to very specific conditions and differ from each other often quite strongly, they have participated in such an "invention" (Hobsbawm 2005: 2f.) of a shared tradition through explicit reference, quotation, similarities, allusion, imitation or by certain especially pronounced reception histories.

38 In this tradition, too, the public is constantly presented as the ones who do not understand on their own and have to be disturbed, "awakened" or "illuminated" and not as those who do understand, love or become enthusiastic. Hence this tradition shows the same oscillation between an emancipatory orientation and the simultaneous establishment of new inequalities of the bodies involved as they appeared in Butler's debut thesis on parody. At the same time, aesthetic procedures are likewise causally related to a de-legitimating effect at a political level. (Schober 2009/3: 26ff.) In a nutshell, and in quoting one of Judith Butler's (Butler 1997: 51) later arguments with which she negotiates the increase of the effectiveness of speech-acts through repetition, her advocating of parody as subversive repetition echoes the previous assumptions of all these other political and artistic actions and, in turn, these continue, until today, to enrich her then argumentation with authoritative force.

39 Luce Irigaray's already-mentioned mimicry concept is also anchored in this tradition – i.e., despite all the differences highlighted especially by Butler, both hers and Irigaray's approach reside in a shared process of invention. With the revisions in *Excitable Speech*, however, Butler comes in some way closer to Irigaray, who always emphasised the character of mimicry as a potentiality and the ambivalence connected with this – for instance by showing that mimicry is also involved in the "becoming woman" of the phallocentric order, but that the playful "as if" also indicates an elsewhere of matter and of sensations that cannot always be subsumed (Irigaray 1985: 68).[11]

40 There is thus an aspect of the unexpected and undisciplinable in our production of meaning and in particular in our use of parody. Parody has to be identified as such by the viewers or listeners, but even if it is identified, it still can be perceived as already mentioned in various ways. Parody, like irony to which it is related,[12] can have the effect of controlling and even policing what is expressed legitimately, it can lead to a hectic reinstating of the contested categories and, since it also preserves the image it tries to disfigure, it can also serve as a point of contact for other, even contrary, readings. Besides, even if parody leads to a dis-figuring of meaning, such a dis-figuration still needs to be translated back into our dealing with everyday uncertainties, and the ways in which this is carried out are multiple too. This aspect of the unexpected and undisciplined in our production of meaning is also highlighted, for example, in Adriana Cavarero's concept of "stealing" figures from the dominant imagery

[11] The sovereignty of acting is in Irigaray – as in the revised version of Butler and not in her previous one – strongly withdrawn: Acting cannot control the manifoldness of expressions it triggers, but is an initiative that depends on the continuation of others. On this notion of acting see Arendt 1989: 233f.

[12] Linda Hutcheon points out that irony and parody show a structural similarity: "Irony can be seen to operate on a microcosmic (semantic) level in the same way that parody does on a macrocosmic (textual) level, because parody too is a marking of difference, also by means of superimposition (this time, of textual rather than of semantic contexts)." See Hutcheon 2000, 54.

and relocating them (Cavarero 1996: 5ff.). This resonates Irigaray's understanding of mimicry. According to Cavarero any attempt at creating order consists also of leaks, tears and places of the symbolic and the imaginary that produce surprising, unintended meanings. (Cavarero/ Bertolino 2008: 134 and 147) Conversely, however, any attempt to put irony or parody into a concept disarms these aesthetic tactics since irony and parody are exactly what escapes every definition and what gets comprehensive speech into difficulties (de Man 1996: 163ff.)..[13]

The ambivalence of being involved in tradition-building processes

41 This text has not been written in order to propose a clear-cut solution of how to deal with the tradition traced, in which Butler's thesis of parody as subversive repetition and the political activist adoptions it still triggers to this day are anchored too. However, in closing, one might maintain that this tradition has limited as well as stimulated and nourished political imagination. To begin with the latter: Butler's thesis has contributed to highlighting some spaces and forms of appearances where and through which political struggles are fought. For example, it draws attention to arenas of the public sphere, where entertainment and politics mingle and where something like "politainment" reigns, and highlights everyday gestures of our self-representation, such as dressing up, putting on makeup, moving, walking or dancing as sites for making politically challenging statements. Since the emergence of modern protest movements and especially since the students' movement and the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, clothing and the form of the staging of the self have played an important role in achieving public, political presence. Nevertheless, Butler's argumentation highlights the importance of this aesthetic dimension of public action even more, draws attention to the rising arenas of politainment and turns these into key phenomena for understanding contemporary political culture. The adaptations of her thesis of parody as subversive repetition in the visual arts and in popular culture were correspondingly insistent. It is here that very old myths – for instance in relation to hermaphroditism and androgynity as well as very recent practices of consumption and self-stylisation – are processed and often become entangled.

[13] For example, irony is disarmed by reducing it to a practice or an artistic device that accentuates the aesthetic appeal of a thing or practice; or by assimilating it to a dialectics of the self as a reflexive structure; or by inserting ironic moments or ironic structures into a dialectics of history. The title of Kierkegaard's book, *The Concept of Irony*, must therefore be interpreted ironically – it mocks such scientific methods. See Kierkegaard 1992.

42 At the same time these tradition-building processes – and this perhaps is the more surprising feature – limit political imagination, even causing de-politicising effects. Why? On the one hand because they operate with the already-mentioned new hierarchisation of bodies and refer the audience back to a position where they do not understand the situation they are living in on their own and have to be "illuminated"– via aesthetic tactics such as parody.

43 The central de-politicising aspect, however, lies in the fact that the tradition-building process described above gets in the way of the second necessity of practice that consists in the capacity to deal with the unforeseen and the contingent (Hobsbawm 2005: 3; Schober 2009/4: 18.) This means that references, quotations and inherited concepts and judgements that we encounter in the course of this tradition-building process enable people to act and to find models and parameters for their deeds and in this way can fire their political and aesthetic imagination. But at the same time precisely the judgement patterns handed down by this process unconditionally ascribe a "subversive", de-legitimising effect to parody and turn out to be an obstacle in dealing with political processes in a more flexible and farsighted way by taking the manifold contingent effects of one's own actions into account. Thus it is the univocal judgement of parody as "subversive" that tends to de-politicise it. If one agrees with Hannah Arendt and defines "the political" as an action that can initiate something but depends on others who can on the one hand carry on what has been started but who, on the other, can also contest or ignore it (Arendt 1989: 233f.), one can refer to such rigid patterns of judging and of distinguishing between "subversion" and "affirmation" as "de-politicisation" – a "de-politicisation" that paradoxically emerges despite any attempt to politicise everyday deeds. Hence, by anticipating their results with notions of "subversion" or "reveiling", the patterns of judgement handed down in this tradition decapitate precisely the processes of multi-voiced, plural further negation of what has been started. So, for instance, any proclamation of the thesis of parody as subversive repetition loses sight of the ways in which this thesis in itself shows equivalences to individualized and normalised processes of the finishing and re-invention of the self, which are also requested in several other places in society while usually being presented as mere histories of success, purged of all painful and problematic aspects. Besides, unintended relations to conceptions of the body as they can be found, for instance, in discourses dealing with reproduction technologies are also usually not negotiated.

44 Apart from this, through the fixation of Butler's texts and their reception with regard to *drag* and travesty, all the other imaginations, inventions and transformations related to femininity, masculinity, "gender" and "difference" remain unconsidered and the contents as

well as the fascinations and disavowals connected with them remain undiscussed. This includes, for instance, not only the rise in the number of single households and the resulting need for each indivividual to develop and integrate capacities traditionally seen as "masculine" and "feminine" but also the dissolution of what was up to now known as "genealogy" (see Berkel 2006), which goes along with what is discussed as "patchwork-families", new procedures of adoption and with reproduction technologies that include sperm- and egg-donors as well as surrogate mothers. And in the process, the force for involvement and projection that *drag*, tranvesticism and also so-called "shemales" exert as part of contemporary (erotic and sexual) culture in broad circles of society and their impacts on how "gender" is lived out, also remain overlooked.

45 However, by taking into account that there is such a simultaneous enrichment and impediment, one can keep the question open of how this tradition can and should be used and passed on in the future. In particular, the aspect of invention and imagination in political action (and artistic-political creation) steps to the fore in this way: for example, by focusing the discussion on the plurality of already-lived transformations and innovations in relation to "gender" and "difference" or by posing the question of how political imagination in relation to "gender" and "sexual difference" can leave rigid judgments and "frozen" discussion behind and take the line of more original paths.

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