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The Invisible Fool: Botho Strauss's Postmodern Metadrama and the History of Theatrical Reality

In the traditional play within the play established most notably by Shakespeare, the Fool is the one persona allowed or even bound to speak what the drama stages as 'the truth', this 'truth' being the knowledge of just where the boundaries between the metadrama's different levels of playacting are to be found. In postmodernist play-within-the-play structures, for example in Botho Strauss's comedy *Besucher* (1988), the Fool as a stage persona has become invisible. This very invisibility, however, underscored as it is by the recurrence of the word 'Narr' and other allusions to the theatrical tradition of the visible Fool in the play within the play, serves to keep the Fool very much present, in the shape of a blank which must be filled by a knowledge about 'truth' which threatens to be lost together with theatre itself.

In the traditional play within the play established most notably by Shakespeare, the Fool is the one persona allowed, or even bound, to speak what the drama stages as 'the truth'. This 'truth' is the knowledge of exactly where the boundaries between the metadrama's different levels of playacting are to be found – and, more importantly, where they are superseded by those levels' structural affinities to each other. Whenever the Fool tells the truth about the relationship between the play and the play within the play, he also tells the truth about the structural affinity between the drama onstage and reality off-stage. Thus it is the Fool's privilege to reveal that fact and fiction, or, in terms of the drama, playacting and reality, not only both participate in basically the same formal designs of communication, but that the significance of each is dependent on that of the other. The Fool makes it clear that there is no speaking the truth without using theatrical forms to express it, while on the other hand the form's self-conscious theatricality paradoxically serves to underscore that what is spoken is, in fact, the truth.

Especially in his later works, Botho Strauss stages patterns of the play within the play that finally allow no one, least of all the audience, to locate such boundaries. Again and again his protagonists lapse from their parts on one level and relapse into them as soon as another level seems established. The simple concept of the play within the play turns into an undistinguishable multitude of what, in the end, cannot even be called different levels of acting.

Strauss's metadrama thus surpasses the epistemological doubt introduced into the play within the play by German Romanticism, doubting the ontological security of there being, after all, recourse to a single reality. Strauss makes it very clear that while Romantic playwrights at the end of the eighteenth century took up the Shakespearean tradition of the play within the play and showed an artistic value derived from the blurring of any difference between play-acting and reality, in the twentieth century there are no such boundaries to be blurred, only a compound of realities derived from individual ways of performing one's identity.

The perception of reality that is the subject matter of postmodern theatre¹ does not allow for the secure knowledge of a sphere that is perfectly and unshakeably authentic, untouched by any infestation of fictional elements. Reality is constituted by a flow of information that owes as much – and probably a lot more – to the techniques of simulation used by the new media in conveying such information as to the factual events reported. Between the ritualistic aspects of communication and the loss of any co-ordinating influence on the ever-growing multitude of specialized micro-languages, this 'medialisation' of reality confronts the postmodern theatre with a singularly paradoxical situation. The lack of a co-ordinating macro-code of communication throws everybody back on his or her own self-conception for the security of his or her identification, as Lyotard put it, concomitantly instilling knowledge of this security's arbitrariness,² while the growing awareness of the imminent theatricality of the 'real' led to the paradigm of performance taking hold in literally every sphere of social existence. If this is what the postmodern theatre aims at exhibiting, then it is anything but remarkable that it can, even must, dispense with the Fool persona. The differences once managed by the

¹ For a typological description of the postmodernist theatre see Alfonso de Toro, 'Die Wege des zeitgenössischen Theaters – Zu einem postmodernen Multimedia-Theater oder: das Ende des mimetisch-referentiellen Theaters?', *Forum Modernes Theater*, 10 (1995), 135-83. De Toro states that postmodern theatre, developing since ca. 1970, 'ist gekennzeichnet durch seine Ambiguität, seine Diskontinuität, seine Heterogenität, durch Pluralismus, Subversion, Perversion, Deformation, Dekonstruktion und Dekreation, es ist antimimetisch und widersteht sich der Interpretation. Es handelt sich um ein Theater, in dem Kunst als Fiktion und das Theater als Prozeß, Performance, Nicht-Textualität gefeiert werden ('is characterized by ambiguity, discontinuity, heterogeneity, pluralism, subversion, perversion, deformation, deconstruction and de-creation; it is anti-mimetic and resists interpretation. It is a theatre in which art is celebrated as fiction and theatre as process, performance, non-textuality'; 137). See also Dieter Kalfitz, 'Bilder der Troslosigkeit und Zeichen des Mangels.: zum deutschen Drama der Postmoderne', in *Tendenzen des Gegenwartstheaters*, ed. by Wilfried Floeck (Tübingen: Francke, 1988), pp. 157-75.

² See Jean-François Lyotard, *Das postmoderne Wissen: ein Bericht*, trans. by Otto Pfersmann, ed. by Peter Engelmann (Vienna: Passagen, 1986), p. 54.

Fool seem to have comprehensively lost their importance for the state of consciousness with which theatrical discourse used to concern itself.

In Strauss's postmodern metadrama, however, there remain two aspects of the Fool's absence to be accounted for, aspects which lead one to believe that this absence must be treated as conspicuous, indeed even as an invisible presence. On the one hand, by having his personae lapse in and out of roles, Strauss obviously works on the assumption that there is a difference between two or more levels of playacting, so that his aesthetics of metaleptics still realise the Fool's privilege, however rudimentary. On the other hand, the term 'fool' (*Narr*) itself appears recurrently in his plays, sometimes in a title, such as the 2001 *Der Narr und seine Frau heute abend in Pancomedia* ('*The Fool and his Wife Tonight in 'Pancomedia'*'), where there is no Fool among the protagonists, and sometimes, even more significantly, in lines spoken by protagonists who are desperately seeking hold where the sequence of metaleptic changes offer none, as in the earlier comedy *Besucher* (1988). These appearances serve to create an intense awareness of the Fool's presence, even if the concretisation of a *dramatis persona* is denied him.

The lines sketched above suggest that the invisible Fool's significance in Strauss's metadrama may well be due, at least in part, to a radicalization of what has always been part of the visible Fool's history. The earliest Fool on record dates back to ca. 3000 B.C.; the position of the Fool in the sense of the jester was a social institution and as such part of the institution of the royal court. His job description covered the typical function of merry-making at public events as well as, more often than not, that of close companion, even friend, to the king. The institution of the Fool was found by Beatrice Otto to have existed in every historical society that was hierarchical, the king's caste strictly distinguished from that of his subjects.³ It is in fact this distinction which both fuels and marks the Fool's specific social position. Sheltered by an a priori acknowledgement of his words' fictionality, the king's jester is privileged to speak truths which, if spoken by anybody else, would be deemed treacherous; armed with this privilege, the Fool can act as intermediary between the sphere of the king's perception of reality formed by the ritualist behaviour of court life and that of the framing, 'real' reality of his subjects.

Taking on the Fool as its structurally most important *dramatis persona*, Shakespearean metadrama stages his truth as that of a fixed world order kept

³ See *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000). For the history of the Fool, see also Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) and Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984).

in place by God.⁴ This God, master director of all, directs man's playacting just as he directs reality, so that all boundaries between playing and reality are those between different levels of playing installed to advance awareness of God's omnipotence.⁵ As such they are mirrored by the play within the play on the theatre stage, the structure of which in itself simply exhibits the relationship between playing and being as it is placed by the topos of the *theatrum mundi*: 'Ist die ganze Welt Spiel, so ist das Theater schon Spiel im Spiel' ('If the whole world is play, then theatre is always play within play').⁶ Under these circumstances, the persona of the Fool, pointing out, in the words of the melancholy Jaques in *As You Like It*, that '[a]ll the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players',⁷ balances precariously on the narrow brink between the affirmative and the subversive. Even in his ostentatious resignation he seems to imply blasphemously that there is a sphere where men and women might be more than 'merely players'. Precarious it is, but balance he does, a trickster jesting his way across the boundaries between levels of playacting.

If the 'purpose of playing, [...] both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature',⁸ reflecting an historical reality consisting of separate political and social spheres, the Shakespearean Fool embodies the aims of the play within the play, i.e. the privilege of both showing

⁴ The terms 'play within the play' and 'metadrama' have been repeatedly discussed. The former is generally applied to a structure which puts forth a play within the framework of a consistent masterplot, this structure being not necessarily a priori concerned with the subject of the theatre, while the latter explicitly denotes the processes of creating, staging and performing. As I am concerned with the concept of theatrical reality as shown by the play within the play, this distinction is academic in my case and I use both terms synonymously. For the term 'Spiel im Spiel', see Joachim Voigt, 'Das Spiel im Spiel: Versuch einer Formbestimmung an Beispielen aus dem deutschen, englischen und spanischen Drama' (unpublished dissertation, University of Göttingen, 1954); for the term 'metadrama', see Karin Vieweg-Marks, *Metadrama und englisches Gegenwartsdrama*, Literarische Studien, 1 (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1989).

⁵ See Manfred Karnick, *Rollenspiel und Welttheater: Untersuchungen an Dramen Calderons, Schillers, Strindbergs, Becketts und Brechts* (Munich: Fink, 1980), pp. 16-17.

⁶ Bernhard Greiner, *Welttheater als Montage: Wirklichkeitsdarstellung und Leserbezug in romantischer und moderner Literatur*, Medium Literatur, 9 (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1977), p. 19. See also Dietrich Schwanitz, *Die Wirklichkeit der Inszenierung und die Inszenierung der Wirklichkeit: Untersuchungen zur Dramaturgie der Lebenswelt und zur Tiefenstruktur des Dramas*, Hochschulschriften Literaturwissenschaft, 22 (Meisenheim: Hain, 1977).

⁷ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. by H.J. Oliver (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), II.7, p. 87.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), III.2, p. 288.

up and bridging the chasms which divide said spheres by speaking the truth. This truth in the play within the play encompasses not only information carried from one sphere into the other, but also points to their similarity, knowledge of which is deemed necessary for holding both spheres' functioning intact by making it clear that the difference between them must be held up willingly and strategically. Fulfilling this function, the Fool is the axis which guarantees both the play's and the world's integrity by allowing the spheres to meet, even mesh, under the tight control of a trickster who, by always doubting the restrictions put upon man by God, effectively seduces his audience into accepting them. So it is fitting that the first invisible Fool to appear in the history of the play within the play should turn up in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, his invisibility representing the threat to 'all the world' incurred by the tragedy's starting point, the vicious murder of the rightful king by his brother. Shortly before the final showdown rights this wrong, Hamlet's encounter with the Gravedigger opening up old graves for further use gives the crucial clue as to what precisely lies at the bottom of Hamlet's seemingly mad behaviour. 'Alas, poor Yorick', Hamlet mourns, holding in his hand the skull of the late King's dead jester; without the Fool's 'most excellent fancy',⁹ the time is 'out of joint',¹⁰ lacking the trickster to mediate between the spheres and thus endangering the *theatrum mundi* onstage as well as (by implication) offstage.

To put the time back into joint, to pave the way for revenge of his father's murder by providing the framework of communication necessary for perception of the truth about the murder, Hamlet himself has to take the place of the Fool. To do this, he simulates a madness whose very efficiency depends on being taken seriously by everybody concerned, including himself: assuming the Fool's privilege, Hamlet can speak the truth about the theatre mirroring 'nature' and thus uncover the structural affinity between them. As it is the true content of the play within the play that makes the closure of revenge possible in the framing master play, the closure of the master play in turn points to the truth that theatricality is common to all communication. Precariously and self-destructively replaced as the legitimate heir to the throne – who is himself king in all but form, as the acting king having murdered his predecessor has no right to his position – the Fool's importance for the theatrical discourse and, through that, for the discourse on reality's theatricality, is em-

⁹ *Hamlet*, V.1, p. 386.

¹⁰ *Hamlet*, I.5, p. 228.

phasized once more by Hamlet's last words, as with the death of the King turned Fool: 'The rest is silence' indeed.¹¹

In the history of German theatre, Gottsched's banishment of the Fool from the Enlightenment stage in the early eighteenth century was due to the phenomenon that the role of the Fool in early modern theatre had transformed the court jester's truth privilege into the Fool's license to improvise freely – and lewdly – in direct reaction to his audience. This meant that the Fool constitutionally threatened the distance between play and audience necessary to the ideal moral and aesthetic wholeness of didactic Enlightenment theatre. Gottsched's cleansing act, however, might have remained merely an episode, had not the French Revolution of 1789 rendered the classical Fool obsolete by dramatically challenging the pre-modern idea of man ordained by God to fill the social position he was born into. The fact that dramatists from then to the present have chosen to set their plays within the play in the context of this Revolution – e.g. Peter Weiss, Heiner Müller – is testimony to the fundamental change wrought in 1789 when the hierarchical separation of social spheres was, at least in theory, overthrown in favour of the idea that man could and should take responsibility for his own life and its achievements.

This development affected the history of the metadrama in a contradictory way, reflecting already the ontological problem later tackled by postmodern dramatists like Strauss. On the one hand, Romantic authors like Ludwig Tieck and Clemens Brentano created metadramatic plays that mirrored the new reality by subverting the traditional structure into a perfect *mise en abyme* that afforded no security of perception on any levels of play. With the background of the metaleptic breaking up of the *ancien régime*, metalepsis, once carefully controlled by the Fool, now changed into a near-autonomous mode of representation. The Revolution had effectively exposed the historical structure on which the traditional play within the play had been based as what its Fools always had known it to be – an artificial instrument for imposing order on a reality which, in truth and opposed to what clerical and political powers had argued before, was not naturally organized by class separations.¹² Consequently, the Romantic metadrama no longer needs the Fool to point out explicitly that all the world's a stage. Moreover, as the Fool's voice cannot but imply the authority of a sovereign power that keeps the playing spheres apart, the Fool finds himself dethroned along with his king. In his comedy *Der gestiefelte Kater* (*Puss In Boots*) Ludwig Tieck ascribed the same ridi-

¹¹ *Hamlet*, V.2, p. 416.

¹² See Axel Schalk, *Geschichtsmaschinen: über den Umgang mit der Historie in der Dramatik des technischen Zeitalters* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsverlag, 1989), pp. 71-96.

culous superfluity to both King and Fool, pointedly leaving to the Poet the privilege of telling the truth about the time being out of joint without any possibility of restoring its former status quo.

However, the Romantic metadramas' reception in their time proved that the public depended on the tangible separation of spheres now more than ever before: Brentano's metadramatic capriccios were not even staged, and the first performance of *Der gestiefelte Kater* was not successful because the audience, far from being amused, were openly furious at the disorienting proceedings onstage – particularly when actors crossed the border between the stage and the unsuspecting spectators in the front rows. The audience felt cheated of the hoped-for theatrical illusion. While the Shakespearean metadrama had exhibited 'truth' as the knowledge that man's existence on earth was nothing but that of a puppet, the emancipation of man in the name of reason required a strict separation between playing and reality in order to establish a firm ground of authenticity on which man could rely for his sense of self; that included plays being unquestionably and consistently fictitious. Subsequently, at least German metadrama has more or less had to revert to conventional lines to achieve stage success, and the Fool has subsided into an unobtrusive, if persistent, existence at fairgrounds, in carnival festivities and puppet shows.

With the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea – still mainly theoretical, of course – of man shaping his own social position without being hampered by prescribed roles merged with the development of the then new audiovisual media into a conception of reality which focussed on epistemological frameworks of perception. The questions posed to reality were now concerned with ways and means to organize knowledge about it which, as Brian McHale notes, is a typically modern approach, as opposed to the postmodern questioning of ways and means to organize reality or even realities.¹³ Looking at the play within the play within this period of so-called 'classical modernism', the Fool (in contrast to Romantic 'early modernism', when he still played at least a token role) is already invisible in a way similar to the postmodern play within the play; his presence is part of the play without manifesting itself as a *dramatis persona*.

Arthur Schnitzler's one-act play *Der grüne Kakadu* (*The Green Cockatoo*), first staged in 1898, gives a particularly fine example of the early invisible Fool. Set on the day when the Revolution of 1789 began, the play denounces the difference between play and reality as a collective cultural fantasy. In a pub called The Green Cockatoo, the former theatre director

¹³ *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987).

Prospère combines his old profession with that of host: his ensemble assume the roles of prostitutes and murderers, thieves and even revolutionaries to provide the blasé nobility visiting the pub with the frisson of mixing with the most dangerous subjects in all Paris. (Of course, the audience remain secure in the knowledge that the atrocities narrated and partially enacted by Prospère's crew are nothing but make-believe.) When the Revolution breaks out in the streets outside the pub, it only confirms what is happening inside the pub. None of the characters assembled there manage to tell play from reality, so much so, that when the leading actor gives a spectacularly passionate account of having murdered the Duke of Cadignan moments earlier because he had found the Duke in bed with his – the actor's – woman, the host's horrified reaction provides him with the information that the said woman has indeed been betraying him with the Duke for months. Right on cue, the Duke himself appears and is promptly murdered by the infuriated actor, this time 'for real'. With the Revolution already under way, the rules that would have condemned a nobleman's murderer to death mere hours before the crime was committed have changed, and the murderer is forthwith celebrated euphorically for his service to the young republic.

At the beginning of the play the Duke had explicitly ascribed the term 'Fool' to one of its characters, thus the Duke's murder equals the abolition of King and Fool alike along lines similar to the Romantic metadrama. Having been elaborately insulted by Prospère, the Duke muses aloud: 'Wenn ich der König wäre, würde ich ihn zu meinem Hofnarren machen, das heißt, ich würde mir viele Hofnarren halten, aber er wäre einer davon.' ('If I was king I would make him my jester, that is I would have many jesters, but he would be one of them.').¹⁴ Prospère's position can indeed be said to resemble that of the classical Fool, to the extent that at first he is the only one of the characters who can explain to the police officer investigating his pub for revolutionary tendencies precisely where the boundaries between playing and reality are drawn in his pub. During the course of the play, however, the qualities of the knowledgeable functionary of theatricality are successively deconstructed, until Prospère's Foolishness degenerates into mere foolishness when he fails to realise that Henri's story is an act, thus unwillingly instigating the Duke's murder, while the revolution outside the pub sets the stage for a reality no longer in need of anything like a *Hofnarr*. As it is, the Duke's musing itself is conducted in the speculative mode of fiction, the Duke no more a king than Prospère is a traditional Fool (either as the King's jester or even as the Fool

¹⁴ Arthur Schnitzler, *Der grüne Kakadu*, in *Der grüne Kakadu und andere Dramen, Das dramatische Werk*, 8 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1977-9), III, p. 25.

onstage). Prospère had set up his business without the sheltering authorisation of jesting by the sovereign and, moreover, collapses out of his role as a director in unintended and therefore perfectly un-Fool-like clumsiness.

The introduction of the term 'Hofnarr' thus serves to hint that what lies at the core of the play directed by Prospère (collapsing into its framework and vice versa) is not the category of knowledgeable Foolishness impersonated by one *dramatis persona* in disguise; rather, it is the embarrassing triviality of a foolishness common to all protagonists without exception. In its extreme form of not being able to even realise, much less articulate, the difference between playing and not playing, this foolishness is most clearly represented by two characters, one of whom speaks only the unadulterated truth, while the other speaks anything but. Early in the play, a ragged newcomer by the name of Grain enters the Green Cockatoo to ask Prospère for a job in the mistaken belief that the pub-theatre's director would be delighted to have an actor who is entirely truthful about his felonies; Grain hails straight from jail where he has served two years for murdering his aunt. Now Grain wants to become an honest man, but Prospère is appalled at the thought of a real murderer on his premises, and only consents to let Grain stay because of his convincing appearance, the perfect makeup of a murderer. While Grain implicitly insists on 'reality' being the perfect stepping stone for an actor imitating it mirror-fashion, the former actor and present politician Grasset suggests the contrary, that playacting is the key to acting 'real'. Grasset begins boasting of the inflammatory public speeches he makes while drawing on his experience as an actor, and in the end claims authenticity for the voice of the Revolution by loudly approving of the Duke of Cadignan's murder. He is a liar turning his playacting into a representation of a new political truth. Having shifted the attribution of foolishness once from the honest felon to the dishonest politician, the play leaves its cast wide open to further shifts, by implication including the historical citizens of 1789 Paris as well as the actual audience of 1898; small wonder, then, that Schnitzler's play was closed by the Austrian court not long after its very successful first night.

Boasting many of the characteristics of the postmodern play, especially in view of the connection between metalepsis and the Fool's invisibility, Schnitzler's *Der grüne Kakadu* is in substance still distinctly modern. For Schnitzler, disillusionment concerning the indistinction of playing and not playing still remains a truth, however arcane; moreover, the play's author can make this truth systematically available to its recipients. Following the logic implemented by Tieck, Schnitzler even has the poet Rollin, in the manner of the author's mouthpiece, voice the generic impossibility of distinguishing between playing and being: 'Sein...spielen...kennen Sie den Unterschied so

genau [...]? [...] Ich nicht.' ('To be...to play...do you know the difference so very well [...]? [...] I don't.')¹⁵ There is, however, at least one important difference to be discerned between the Fools in modern and postmodern invisibility. While Schnitzler is still concerned with the topical analysis of reality's theatricality as such, presenting at least an atrophied version of the Fool's role onstage to be identified, Botho Strauss in his comedy *Besucher* (1988) uses the term 'Fool' only to signify that no such role can any longer be distinguished among the *dramatis personae*. Here Strauss is concerned with the modes and techniques of simulation through which a given individual might define him- or herself within the flow of images – visual and others – constituting reality at the end of the twentieth century.¹⁶ The play begins and ends in a theatre, but what looks like a simply constructed frame for a play or plays within quickly dispenses with any pretention to coherent levels of playing, shifting abruptly from rehearsal stage to living room to bar to fairground to a TV station and back to a stage.

Crossing all those spaces without ever motivating his transitions, the young actor Max is driven by the desire to fill his existence's empty stage by means of performing a charismatic, even auratic identity.¹⁷ To achieve this, he draws all the play's characters into a playing game seemingly promising himself as prize – seemingly, because the others are playing just the same game with just the same end in view. The famous actor and male protagonist of the rehearsed play, Karl Joseph, imposes the double bind of 'Sei frei' ('Be free') to enforce the actor's conventional adherence to the script which marks his (Karl Joseph's) hitherto successful technique of playacting, while Max, feeling threatened and marginalized by the play's rigid textuality, tends to

¹⁵ *Der grüne Kakadu*, p. 33.

¹⁶ Strauss's earlier works are mainly concerned with the relationship between contemporary consciousness and the perception of the theatre in its conventional sense. It is only with *Besucher* that he programmatically crosses the line towards a theory of the theatre in connection with contemporary media, even if studies written before the publication of *Besucher* already diagnose many of the elements that later became part of his concept of theatrical as 'mediatised' reality. It might, however unlikely, even be supposed that Strauss was aware of these diagnoses when he wrote his comedy. See Monika Sandhack, *Jenseits des Rätsels: Versuch einer Spurensicherung im dramatischen Werk von Botho Strauss*, European University Studies: Series 1, German Language and Literature, 905 (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1986); Ursula Kapitza, *Bewusstseinsspiele: Drama und Dramaturgie bei Botho Strauss*, Literarische Untersuchungen, 9 (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1987) and Verena Plümer, *Zur Entwicklung und Dramaturgie der Dramen von Botho Strauss*, European University Studies: Series 1, German Language and Literature, 942 (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1986).

¹⁷ For the ambiguous significance of the paradigm 'performance' for postmodernist drama, see Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Postmoderne Performance: Rückkehr zum rituellen Theater?', *Arca-dia*, 22 (1987), 55-65.

disrupt rehearsals, feeling that performance should develop from the process of playing itself. The equally famous actress Edna Gruber, cast as the female lead, at the same time seduces Max with devastating efficiency by prophesying that he will only have one other chance of love during his entire life – a prophecy she uses on men she desires at every given opportunity, unashamedly using it to introduce yet another love scene into her life. At the same time, Max is in danger of losing Lena because he won't tell her that he loves her, believing the words *Ich liebe dich* to be an exhausted line and not worthy of his feelings.

The problem exposed by Max's violent detestation of textuality in all its forms, private or public, is that of being conscious that however authentic the individual experience, the words necessary to communicate it have been used before and thus, considered in their textual materiality, can never be anything but lines quoted from somebody else's script.¹⁸ Thwarted in his hopes to convert Karl Joseph to his aesthetics of a living, ever-changing performance on stage – 'Revolution um der Revolution willen, das ist l'art pour l'art' ('Revolution for the sake of revolution, that is l'art pour l'art.')¹⁹ – Max is rebuked by Karl Joseph and his ideas denounced as intrinsically conventional and, by implication, textual. Having delivered a catastrophically incongruous, if spontaneous, statement during a conference on TV, Max turns to the fair-ground for a space in which to stage an unrestrained identity performance. Here, however, where the traditional play within the play – see, for example, Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* – establishes a kind of topos in which the script followed by everyday existence is annulled by the carnivalesque's laws of exception, Max still more emphatically than before finds himself anything but a singular individual. Looking into a broken mirror,²⁰ he gains 'einen äußerst verwechselbaren Eindruck' ('an impression extremely susceptible to being mistaken') of the face reflected there. Worse still, when he identifies the entrepreneur of the throwing range as a fool, obviously hoping for the Fool's authority on the difference between playing and being, the entrepreneur echoes Max's line like that rehearsed from a script:

MAX	Ich sehe, Sie sind ein Narr.
WURFBUDENMANN	Sie sind ein Narr.

¹⁸ See the study of this particular problem in Andreas Englhart, *Im Labyrinth des unendlichen Textes: Botho Strauss' Theaterstücke, 1972-1996* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), pp. 171-88.

¹⁹ Botho Strauss, *Besucher*, in *Drei Stücke* (Munich: Hanser, 1988), p. 22. Further references will be by page number in the text.

²⁰ See Kenneth Little, 'Masochism, Spectacle, and the "Broken Mirror" Clown entree: A Note on the Anthropology of Performance in Postmodern Culture', *Cultural Anthropology*, 8 (1993), pp. 117-29.

MAX	Es ist enttäuschend, am Ende seiner Wege anzukommen und dort als erstes jemanden wie sich selber zu treffen. (66)
(MAX
SHOWGROUNDMAN
MAX	I see you are a fool.
You are a fool.
It is disappointing to reach the end of one's road and the first thing you'll find there is someone like yourself.)

Max's desire for the truth includes a pathological misinterpretation of his perceptions, a quality which might be pronounced narcissistic self-love if anything approaching a positive and distinguishable self were not so utterly and conspicuously absent from the persona itself. The concept of 'someone like yourself', disappointingly encountered at what Max believes the end of his wanderings, is that of a negative self, the image of a vacuum created by the excess of identically preformed images inscribed into the idea of 'self' through the intermedial linkages in the fabric of what Max experiences as reality. Contemporary media of communication – represented by the TV conference, a walkie-talkie, an advertisement whose subject, a girl posing with a diamond, talks back at Max, and, last but not least, an eye-shaped loudspeaker – have left techniques of mimesis behind in favour of a referenceless flow of audiovisual artifacts which lead any quest for identity ultimately to the unsubstantial existence of oneself as a bodiless image generated by those media. 'Gehen Sie ins Kino!' ('Go to the movies!'), Max desperately cries out: 'Sehen Sie dort: die Methode erzeugt Gespenster' ('you'll see: the method creates ghosts'; 22), populating countless worlds with equally countless ghosts or spectres like Max himself. Now that everybody speaks the truth about everybody else, everybody talks in jest, and no position of power maintains the order once imposed on reality by guarding it fiercely against the intrusion of different spheres of playing on each other: 'Jeder des anderen Narr. Und keiner mehr gehört zu einem König.' ('Everyone everyone else's fool. And nobody belongs to a king anymore'; 74)

And at the end of the comedy the rehearsal begins again – similar to what it had been earlier in every detail save one: the director's table is now nowhere to be seen. This missing table opens Strauss's comedy programmatically towards virtual reality. With the electronically-based possibilities of simulation, everybody owns his own director's table; the rules organizing the simulation of artificial worlds are rules implemented technically and their relationship with what Schnitzler still recognized as a 'reality', however ontologically doubtful, has lost any representational quality. Now, not even the tension between textuality and performance remains as a space for the Fool to appear invisibly between the textual term 'Narr' and the process of Max's fruitless revolution against the strategic elements imminent in any, even the

most radically self-centred, performance; a process which still bears a remote resemblance to the classical Fool's ambivalence. Characterised by Karl Joseph as a time when 'das gesprochene Wort noch König war auf der Bühne' ('when the spoken word was still king on the stage'; 81), modern theatre has lost its authority to postmodern performance theatre, while the latter is in danger of losing even its precarious hold on the reality of the act of staging, as the director's table and with it the last bastion of the boundaries between playing and being is removed from sight, leaving behind the omnipresence of an intrinsically theatrical reality where offstage is always onstage: 'Zuletzt', Karl Joseph resignedly states finally, 'verlassen der König und sein Narr die Bühne. Ordnung und Unordnung ziehen gemeinsam ab' (p. 84) ('Finally, the king and his jester leave the stage, order and disorder disappear together'; 84), and as far as the institution of the 'real' theatre is concerned, now more than ever the rest is indeed silence.

In 1992 Strauss elaborated on this melancholy diagnosis by publishing a collection of essays titled *Beginnlosigkeit* (*Beginlessness*). All the essays deal with the relationship between theatricality and reality as determined by the field of tension between, on the one hand, the loss of authenticity characterizing the so-called 'real' at the end of the twentieth century and, on the other, the indubitable reality of cultural theatricality. Within this field of tension, postmodern drama is only one of many different media existing simultaneously, indistinguishably intertwined. Seen with this background, the Fool's invisibility in Strauss's plays gains its significance from the idea of play-acting as such: 'Der Mime', Strauss remarks on the development of the art of drama since early modernity, 'Trickster des modernen Bewusstseins, dem es gelang, sich der Affekte der früheren Epochen zu bedienen, deckt eine Weile noch seinen zerrissenen Zustand mit zerrissenen Gebärden ab. [...] Im Spiel der Spiele indessen gewinnen weder Tod noch Leben, sondern allein der künstliche Gesell.' ('The mime, trickster of modern consciousness, who succeeded in appropriating the affects of earlier epochs, could manage for a while to cover his tattered condition with tattered gestures. [...] However, in the play of all plays neither death nor life can win, only the artificial comrade.')²¹

Careful to use the word 'Mime' instead of 'Schauspieler', the actor, Strauss develops his concept of playacting from the mimetic capacity used by the actor to embody a persona instead of simply speaking its lines. Thus, the 'Mime' represents the tension between the power of the textual material to which Karl Joseph adheres and the art of performance practised by the perso-

²¹ Botho Strauss, *Beginnlosigkeit: Reflexionen über Fleck und Linie* (Munich: Hanser, 1992), p. 25.

na of Max, displaying this tension as the 'zerrissenen Zustand', the tattered condition, of playacting within a present in which the distinction between playing and 'Tod und Leben', death and life, has become obsolete. What remains is the 'künstliche Gesell', the artificial comrade who has not only lost whatever 'life' the actor identifying with his role breathed into it during times when theatre and reality were clearly separated, but who also (due to the same logic which, because of this separation, had invested the artificial life onstage with its specific reality) has become a descriptive category for man both onstage and offstage.

Seen in this light, the postmodern play within the play texts' invisible Fool still acts as an intermediary in the sense of bridging and at the same time stabilizing the chasms between different levels of playing. He is an intermediary who, by being turned into an invisible presence at the time when the aesthetics of metalepsis replaces the traditional structure of the play within the play, becomes a means for underscoring the truth privilege of metalepsis in itself, while his conspicuous absence functions as a blank to be filled – and identified with – by actors and audience alike. Quite literally, however, there is more to the invisible Fool than meets the eye: in postmodern drama he transcends his significance for the once different spheres of playing towards a new significance both linking and keeping apart different media as different modes of cultural theatricality. One notes that the concept of theatricality applied to the texts quoted above is based mainly on literary, i.e. textual, evidence. The reason for this is the condition of the invisible Fool's existence: part of postmodern drama courtesy of its techniques of intertextual bricolage drawing from traditions which, especially in the Fool's case, are markedly literary and thus textual, the invisible Fool, apart from his structural significance as such, represents the residuary of literary aesthetics in the flow of audiovisual artifacts which constitutes present-day perceptions of reality, so that his invisible presence may even be said to retain the memory of the knowledge that the systematic employment of intermediary strategies has its roots in dramatic literature.