

Hen: Queer Puppet Cabaret, Utopian Perspectives for Sexual Bodies

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ABSTRACT

Named after the gender-neutral Swedish pronoun, *Hen* is a queer puppet show, created and performed by the French artist Johanny Bert. In this performance, the body of the puppet, made of wood, foam and, fabric, is used like a “jigsaw” - assembling different pieces together in order to create and reveal a form, an image, a meaning. It becomes the material for a new vision of how we conceive and construct the body, as it deconstructs essentializing, binary, heteronormative identities, envisioning greater possibilities and pluralities of bodies. Through the vision of non-human object in the space of a theatre, Johanny Bert unveils and rethinks the relationship sexuality and society maintain together by showing sexuality as a theatrical utopia where new forms of bodies and desires can be revealed. Guided by an interdisciplinary approach combining both Gender Studies and Visual Studies, this article talks about how the plasticity of the puppeting object can affect the perception of our own bodies. How and where does the show *Hen* manifest utopia for the human body and sexuality? Johanny Bert puts the concept of anthropomorphism as the threshold for questioning human sexuality into the theatre and challenges the ways we define and circumscribe bodies and desires, inviting new perspectives for sexual and corporeal paradigms, too.

KEYWORDS

puppet, sexuality, queer, visibility, theatre, body representations

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Hen is a puppet, named after the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun, created in 2019 and performed by the French artist Johanny Bert during the Avignon Festival. The show then toured within France and stopped for a series in Paris in 2020, at Théâtre Mouffetard (a theatre specializing in puppet shows). This is where I attended the show for the first time. The small room of the theatre was full, and I felt the excitement of people to be reunited altogether in a theatre after the shutdown due to the pandemic. At the centre of the main stage, there was another smaller, uplifted stage with a proscenium arch made of neon lights, closed by a small red curtain. At each side of the forestage, two musicians (a percussionist and a cellist) were playing live music. And behind one of them, at the prompt side, a sign language translator, who translated the whole show. I remember telling myself that it was the first time I had seen that: a real inclusivity for performance.

As Johanny Bert never recorded any performance of the show, how can I talk or write about a performance whose imprints are only in my head? Where I can only count on my memory. This reminds me of what the theatre scholar Peggy Phelan said: "Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations."¹ I will then trust and relate to my memories and sensations, and then use both a phenomenological and semiotic approach² in order to re-activate my own perception. And also, what carries my very own interpretation about what the show left within me. How does it affect spectators (including me)? And what does it mean? I will try to give to the reader a global and short glimpse of the performance. And semantically, I choose to refer to the puppet Hen using the pronoun "it" and not "they", to emphasize its existence as an object, even though Hen is a queer puppet.

As the musicians start to play, a singing voice starts to resonate in the room, while the scene starts to light up and the auditorium goes slowly into darkness. The first song is quite intimate, longing. Suddenly, the head of a puppet pops out from the red curtain. It is quite a big head, full of make-up, with prominent lips. As the song goes on, the whole body comes upon the small stage from behind the curtains. This body, smaller than the head, seems not to be proportionate with it. I perceive the body as female, dressed in a shiny long dress, hiding massive breasts, and wearing heels on its feet. The song ends and the puppet starts to talk to us, spectators. Its name is Hen, it welcomes us into its "cabaret show" and greets every one of us: "heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, but also asexuals, pansexuals, polygenders, transgenders, lithromantics, etc." and so on. With a touch of humour, Hen unfolds a very long list of sexual identities running through queer movements nowadays. Then, Hen starts speaking about itself, a queer puppet with a transformational and hybrid body made of foam and fabric. It adds: "By the way, I am warning you for those who I may irritate, don't worry,

1 Phelan 1993, 146.

2 Fischer-Lichte 2014, 50.

I am just a puppet! You know, if I was a human being... a human being who looks just like me could not even walk for five minutes in the street without being insulted, beaten to death". The atmosphere of the room became serious.

The rest of the performance continues this way: about twelve songs alternate with talking directly to the audience. All of it (songs and talking) is based thematically around the need for sexual liberation of bodies constrained into the binary heteronormative system. The show talks about identity, organic fluids, eroticism in a humorous and benevolent provocative way. Either Hen makes love with a spotlight, flirts with the two musicians, talks and refers to its two puppeteers (Johanny Bert himself and Anthony Diaz) as its bodyguards, and even gives birth to a butterfly. I also remember a song, called "Response to an anonymous woman"³, which is a response to a famous interview of a homophobic woman during a protest against same-sex marriage-laws in France. Another song is called "Anatomic Love"⁴ and sexualises incongruous body parts. I recall some covers of two famous French singers: Brigitte Fontaine and Annie Cordy. But what thrilled me the most, and what I recall the best, is that the puppet also spectacularly changes its appearance all along the show.

Together with plastic artist Eduardo Felix, Johanny Bert created Hen so that it would have fourteen different bodies, which could take on the physical attributes of different types of people. So, like an object which you can manipulate, the puppet adds members and dismembers itself, sometimes in front of the audience's eyes. It composes an incredibly plastic hybrid body, where a body-building torso sits on top of high, curved and smooth legs; where the size of the masculine genitals in erection is inordinately huge; where we can suddenly cut ourselves a breast with a pair of scissors; or wear fifty breasts at a time; where you can undress the skin and the organs; or make the vulva speak; and make the skeleton dance. Each body part can be separated from the rest. Speaking with me on the artistic process of creating *Hen*, Johanny Bert says: "I worked a lot by images, (...) I had an image in mind, and we built the sequence, the image."⁵ The narration comes from fragments, ideas, in an empirical and visual way, and the show becomes like Hen's body, a "jigsaw", an adjustable combination of images, desires, and fantasies.



Figure 1: HEN, picture no 1, photo by Christophe Raynaud-Delage

3 Originally in French "Réponse à une inconnue", but as no translation exists, I translated it myself.

4 Originally in French "L'Amour Anatomique", but as no translation exists, I translated it myself.

5 From the interview I conducted with Johanny Bert, conducted on Zoom, 4.4.2020.

It occurred to me that this theatre performance, with all the different images of Hen and its puppet bodies that Johanny Bert has created, has something to do with the “utopian gesture”⁶ Jill Dolan talks about in “Performance Utopia and the “Utopian Performative””. According to her, “[t]he utopia (...) takes place now, in the interstices of present interactions, in glancing moments of possibly better ways to be together as human beings.”⁷ And so does Hen when it confronts the audience with a “queer-phobic” society outside of the safe space of the theatre room, where a body like it could be insulted and beaten to death. But how does attending a puppet performance like *Hen* create that need of “how a different world could feel?”⁸ What is at stake in watching a queer puppet playing and performing the “grotesque”⁹ out of our human sexualised bodies? How and where does the show *Hen* manifest a queer utopia?

Queer Puppet within the Heteronormative System

To begin with, I want to discuss the context of the performance. Max Von Boehn wrote in *Dolls and Puppets* that “[t]he doll is the three-dimensional representation of a human figure,”¹⁰ from which we see the ability the human being has to represent itself through an object, a material that shapes either form and/or ideology that needs to be represented. The doll, in common modern imaginary, is often feminine and the attribute of little girls playing with it. This object, the doll, is defined as a marker of their gender identity within which they can reproduce social behaviours, such as caring, nursing, dressing. From a phenomenological aspect, the object of the doll carries with it its “background”¹¹: the representation of what society expects from femininity and little girls. Rebecca Schneider, in *The Explicit Body in Performance*, explains that “the battlefield of identity is inextricably wrapped up in the histories of the ways identities have been marked, imaged, reproduced in the realm of cultural imagery.”¹² The doll becomes one of the tools with which feminine identity can be imaged, rehearsed, and reproduced through time and practice. It is through the result of repeated and stylized gestures, behaviours, and speech acts that gender identity is performed, as also demonstrated by Judith Butler¹³.

But dolls can also be a masculine attribute, I would rather say possession, when it comes from creating an erotic and fetishist object from the female body. The case of Oskar Kokoschka is emblematic when, in 1912, he created a perfect replica of his former lover to satisfy his fetishism, by keeping her body within his reach and within his gaze. Later, this inspired the photographer Hans Bellmer who, in 1936, created what he calls “the anagrammatic body”. It is a separable female puppet in order to “play with morphology, sexual powers of the image and intertwined differences between the masculine and the feminine, [and] multiply erotic metamorphosis.”¹⁴ The use of dolls does not escape the *male gaze* and authority of men over a woman’s body. The body of a woman has to be cared, nursed, and dressed to suit men’s desires.

In *Fear of Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner defines heteronormativity as: “the structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged and necessary.”¹⁵ Heteronormativity tries to run through the binary male and female distinction of sexual powers, behaviours, and expectations. It is an unbalanced space between men and women, also expending itself by trying to remain invisible, and “desire must appear as unmarked, as *human nature*, (...) as if by some great accident of God: desire is masculinized, the desired, feminized.”¹⁶

I consider Hen as an “anagrammatic queer doll”. It even has been created especially

6 Dolan 2001, 455.

7 Dolan 2001, 457.

8 Dolan 2001, 478.

9 I borrow the use of the term from Mikhail M. Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*.

10 Von Boehn 1929, 43.

11 Ahmed 2006, 549.

12 Schneider 1997, 10.

13 Particularly in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler 1990.

14 Teixeira 2011, 213.

15 Warner 1993, 11.

16 Schneider 1997, 5.

for that, although with different motivations as, on the contrary, it critically engages the heteronormativity. The difference between a doll and a puppet though is to be made around use, context, and dramatisation in which the puppet relies on. Charles Magnin has “established certain parallels between the history of puppet theatre and the history of the drama.”¹⁷ In our case study, *Hen*, the performance, proposes then the critical dramatisation of the heteronormativity at stake, through Hen, the puppet. First by talking directly to the audience that is making Hen be “a body (...) that looks back”¹⁸, this creates the ground for a political and reflexive discourse. Then, by naming all the sexual identities that might be present in the room, the puppet reintroduces the sexuality in our bodies whereas Hen itself is “just a puppet”. It supposedly does not have sexuality and organic desire. But it has the capacity to represent them in all their forms.

Those first two examples use Althusser’s concept of “interpellation”, often seen and discussed within sociology, feminist, and gender studies. This concept explains the formation of ideology as “an inescapable realm in which subjects are called into being or *hailed*”¹⁹. In other terms, the dominant ideology turns someone into a subject by recognition and thus assimilation within the interpellation “You, there!”. The previous example of the doll can be seen as heteronormativity “hailing” the little girl, using the doll as the tool through which the interpellation functions, and by saying “You, there! You’ll be a heteronormative woman!”. Hen uses and subverts this concept when he calls out all non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities.

The Penis as an Object



Figure 2: HEN, picture no 2, photo by Christophe Raynaud-Delage

I would like now to talk about a very symbolic object seen in the performance. The third or fourth song of the show is called “Response to an anonymous woman”. We first listen to the famous

17 Jurkowski & Jityo, 2009.

18 Bleeker 2008, 106.

19 Muñoz 1999, 11.

street interview with a homophobic woman during a protest against same-sex marriage-laws in France, which I talked about in the introduction. She says that homosexuality is “unnatural” and “if the law is passed, God’s anger will fall down on France.”²⁰ Then, Hen responds to her with an ironic yet quite engaging song. During the song, Hen is sitting on a red velvet throne, wearing a big fur coat. It is the prototypical “diva” singing a lyrical yet bawdy song. It is identified as a woman. All around the throne, sprinkled by the second puppeteer hidden from behind, many different dildos of different sizes, colours, and shapes are dropped manually and slowly onto the stage. The dildo symbolises how sexuality can be removed from the body and the flesh, deployed by and through an object. Its erect penis, the penetrant organ, is fully used as the symbol of it: the masculine and phallographic power. By metonymy, they are so the symbol of oppression.

But Maaïke Bleeker notices in *Visuality in the Theatre, the Locus of looking* that: “[t]he penis as a sign for masculinity appears to function unlike other signs. In order to function as a sign of masculinity, the penis must be attached to the male body; it must be part of it. If it is not, it signifies the absence of masculinity instead.”²¹ In other words, the dildo is able to subvert its own image by itself, through its capacity to disinvest its own political and critical charge. It passes from the symbol of oppression to the lack of it. However, within a queer frame in which the dildo is seen here, it carries both at the same time. The signifier image of the dildo is double: it contains the phallographic and homophobic discourse of this “anonymous woman”, but it also reinvests the power of sexuality by sending the stigmatisation back to the women, in an “antiparastasis²²” way that reminds us of the history of the term “queer”.

Because the dildo is also charged with eroticism, pleasure, and sexual practices of penetration. The fact of moulding the masculine sexual attribute shows here that sexuality can, first, detach itself from the body and eroticize objects (which is what fetishist practices do). And secondly, it makes the body perfectly objectifiable (the sexual object in a proper sense), in the gaze of the subject. In *Sex, Gender and Sexualities*, Elsa Dorlin argues that: “the dildo facilitates the modification of the erogenous geography of the body, by detaching it to its phallographic reference: it can be placed in the hand, on the pubis, but also on the leg, the arm. This possible proliferation of supplementing “penetrants” notifies a *mutation of the biological body* and proposes a new *technological narrative*.”²³ When an object is shaped as a representation of its meaning but is detached from the body, it can be invested with different other meanings and be the operator of something different. It facilitates the consideration of the body as a multitude of “bio-technological” tools.

Later in the show, during one of the talks with the audience, Hen appears with big boobs on its chest and a giant straight erect penis started from the crotch. Wearing those both ultra-feminine and ultra-masculine signifiers, it walks across the stage and comes to sit upon a toilet bowl, lit up from inside like a gloriously divine recipient. The size of the penis makes the proportion of its body naturally impossible. When Hen sits on the toilet bowl, its penis is pointed toward the audience, its legs are crossed upon it and its arms crossed upon its huge breasts. Then, Hen genuinely talks about something else, like if everything was normal. For the Freudian account, the difference between male and female is the lack of the penis for the female, as the symbolic power from which she is deprived of. “The female genitals stand for the absence that inaugurates the awareness of sexual difference, and thus inaugurates a fundamental binary opposition”²⁴ as Maaïke Bleeker notes. But Hen, by being both male and female at the same time (“wearing” penis and breasts), puts at a distance this binary significance. However, it does not mean that this image of Hen has no significance.

I relate the irony of such an image and representation to what Maaïke Bleeker calls a “semiotic disruption”. Indeed, a “semiotic disruption” is when a sign “whose meaning is to

20 My translation.

21 Bleeker 2008, 113-14.

22 Dorlin 2008, 109-10.

23 To my knowledge, the book has not been translated into English yet, I propose here a translation of my own from the French title *Sexe, Genre et Sexualités*. Dorlin 2008, 137-8.

24 Bleeker 2008, 111.

indicate (...) the absence of other signs.”²⁵ Here, the huge penis, and the ironical way Hen acts with it, indicates the absence of signs by the cancellation of the signs that have been carried with it before (as seen above, the oppression and the erotic charge). But, she argues, by quoting Brian Rotman, that: “they [the signs of absence] stand in for the absence of signs, but in doing so they remain signs and, as signs they owe their position to a particular syntax that grants them this status (Rotman, 1987, p.19).”²⁶ Here, I argue that Hen, by being both male and female and seated upon a very inordinately huge penis, proposes to the vision a new and “particular syntax” of sexed bodies into the Freudian binary and heteronormative system. Because “[f]rom the point of view of the female body, this body is not lacking anything. The male body then is a body with something extra, a part that functions as a sign.”²⁷ Hen resists and stands up to the heteronormative system, when it subverts the “interpellation” concept or makes a rain of dildos fall on the stage. It subverts signs and “demonstrates that an alternative perspective is thinkable.”²⁸

So, this subversion that tries to create new meanings from a sign, would it be called a “blank” sign ready to carry something new? Is a “blank” sign really blank? “Within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment²⁹?” In phenomenological terms, such scenes “disturb the order of things” and proposes what Michael Moon describes as “a sexual disorientation, (...) a series of *uncanny effects* (...); then the sexual disorientation slides quickly into social disorientations.”³⁰ I argue that it is through these kinds of “uncanny” images or “blank” signs that the show *Hen* proposes the possibility of queer utopia.

Emergence of Queer Subversions

I mentioned in the introduction a second song I recall: “Anatomic Love”, which Hen performs almost at the end of the show. It looks like the picture shown above, with glittery shoes, quite naked with what looks like a black “fishnet body” worn on a very muscular body with big breasts. This visually evokes both the burlesque cabaret with some sexual practices such as bondage. The two musicians start playing the music. It is a music quite “common”, with a rhythm one can dance to, such as pop music. Here is a short abstract of the lyrics:

“Me, I am this way / Anatomic love / I adore that / It is so much more erotic...
Oh yes, lick my prostate gland / And my oesophagus / Please, pig out on my spleen / And the sinus / Please, do me... / A bladder-lingus (...)”³¹

And the song continues about the different parts of the anatomical body combined with sexual practices. During the song, Hen plays with its body by dismembering itself. The left arm replaces the neck and holds the body up, while the head slowly rolls down the right leg, and where the right arm is now joined to the torso by the crotch. Then, when a moment of suspension occurs in the rhythm of the music, all its body parts come away from each other. They fly a bit in the air, and then join back together in a new form. This “uncanny image” reminds us that Hen is a puppet, an object who reveals its own separable and detachable materiality (foam, fabrics, etc). And a paradox occurs within the fact that a human body is not able to carry on in this way, because it also reveals the materiality of our own organic and fleshy bodies. I am now bringing this moment of the show into discussion for two reasons. The first one is because organic and sexualized bodies are a politically strategic point of queer studies, and the second one because Hen’s body, at this very particular moment, becomes the starting point from which a queer utopia could be felt.

By sexualizing Hen’s body parts that are not traditionally seen as sexual, Johanny Bert

25 Bleeker 2008, 100.

26 Bleeker 2008, 100.

27 Bleeker 2008, 114.

28 Bleeker 2008, 114.

29 Butler, 1990, 113.

30 Ahmed 2006, 565.

31 My translation.

makes visible the whole body as a “bio-technological” tool, and the boundary between body/object at the core of his artistic proposition. By questioning and putting into perspective eroticism of the body, especially with a not-made-of-flesh body such as the puppet’s, he moves sexuality onto the field of object. The body becomes the accessory of sexuality and vice versa. It proposes what Kaja Silverman calls, in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, a “productive looking”, which produces a change in the sense that it denaturalizes the dominant perspective. Like seen above, “the point (...) is not to pledge allegiance to the familiar but to make the *familiar* strange.”³² Because subversions of common sexual practices, as sung by Hen, and body transformations, as an object you can manipulate and reorganize, is what is at stake within the queer movement.

As Rebecca Schneider points out about feminine artists’ performances who put their proper organic body at the service of their politically engaged art pieces, it “interrogates socio cultural understandings of the “appropriate” and/or the appropriately transgressive.”³³ Scholars have critically engaged bodies within discussions and theoretical analysis, regarding patterns of heteronormative oppressions upon/within them. In order to destabilize the academic and hegemonic masculine point of view that runs through social sciences, they try to “mark” and make visible another point of view. This is what Nicholas Mirzoeff in *The Right to Look* calls “the authority of visibility”: “[v]isuality was held to be masculine, in tension with the right to look that has been depicted as feminine, lesbian, queer, or trans.”³⁴ The body of sexual minorities, as a subjective self (on the contrary of masculine “science objectivity”) then became the “standpoint”³⁵, from which new epistemologies of sexuality can emerge. Sara Ahmed precises in *Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology*: “from which the world unfolds: the here of the body and the where of its dwelling.”³⁶

The queer movement is also a sub-culture that performs what Paul B. Preciado calls “a praxis queer.”³⁷ It is a way of inhabiting the body that transgresses heteronormative laws within which bodies have been entangled in. This is what Hen literally represents on stage, when the head is not at the centre anymore, but rolling up and down the body. The head is not the focus point of the visual image and representation anymore. What we see when looking at and hearing what Hen is doing/singing is a subversion of sexuality and of mechanical functions of the body (the fact that the puppet dismembers itself and “rearranges” its body through a new “unnatural” form). This “uncanny image” allows us to grasp edges and artifices of the sexed bodies, and to see them as distinct identity accessories which can be invested differently. It is either subverted by the person itself, the “owner of the body”, or by other people when seeing it. Hen removes heterosexual gaze, denaturalizes heteronormative practices to reveal “the unmarked nature of heterosexual identity.”³⁸ Subversions make sexuality suddenly become theatrical and diffused from the naturalistic charge that is entailed within.

Theatricalization, Fictions, and Utopia

The theatricalization of bodies appears then as a fundamental process in queer strategies of survival and visibilization. Maaïke Bleeker says that: “theatricalization can be used to show bodies that, within the current symbolic order, appear as non-ideal. (...) It helps us to understand the appearance of bodies as the effect of signs, signs we read and interpret and that get their meaning within a frame of reference, rather than something essentially given within them.”³⁹ Hen’s fragmented puppet body shows to us signs of hybridity within its theatricality because the frame of reference (supposedly the heteronormativity) is subverted within the song. The ironical distance in the song, between sexual desires and their object of desire, functions in the same way as when a non-heterosexual person declares: “I don’t like this object of desire I am supposed to like, but I like something else!” Furthermore, what Hen is doing with the hybrid transformation

32 Ahmed 2006, 569.

33 Schneider 1997, 3.

34 Mirzoeff 2011, 475.

35 Dorlin 2008.

36 Ahmed 2006, 545.

37 Bourcier 2001, 196.

38 Phelan 1993, 96.

39 Bleeker 2008, 115.

of its body is that it reinvests the body as a non-holistic entity, rather a fragmented one, made of organs and limbs, from which the assemblage reveals “the theatricality of everyday life.”⁴⁰ And it is through those theatrical “blank” signs of hybridity that queer utopia emerges through our subverted bodies.

In *Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz evokes the concept of “fiction of identity” in which he develops the idea that, for a queer person, a moment of disidentification from the heteronormative frame of reference is crucial. And from “the reality” of the self, something new has to be invented, to be fictionalized. He says: “I refer to disidentification as a hermeneutic, a process of production and a made of performance. (...) Hybridity catches the fragmentations subject formation of people whose identities traverses different race, sexuality and gender identifications.”⁴¹ In other terms, and regarding Hen, we can assume now that through the theatrical performative of its “hybrid transformations” that fragments its body, the queer puppet fictionalizes its identity. The process of disidentification functions as the “semiotic disruption” moment I talked of earlier, but in fictionalizing those fragments of bodies. Those fictional fragments are those “extra” signs, those “blank” signs I talked about. But does it mean that those theatrical and fictional fragments are really utopian?

José Esteban Muñoz continues by saying: “disidentificatory performances (...) require an active kernel of utopian possibility.”⁴² He quotes Theodor W. Adorno who says: “utopia is essentially in the determined negation of that which merely is and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points, at the same time, to what it should be.”⁴³ That means that utopia might be something new, but not something “blank”. If utopia points out “something false” and “what it should be”, it means that we are supposed to have an idea of “what it should be”. When Hen sexualizes incongruous body parts, it does not mean that sexuality “should be” this way, or that body “should” look different (as the leg for the head, and a giant erected penis with breasts for example). The role of the “fiction of the self” is then crucial. José Esteban Muñoz determines it this way: “the “real self” who comes into being through fiction is not the self who produces fiction but instead produced by fiction. Binaries finally begin to falter and fiction becomes the real.”⁴⁴



Figure 3: HEN, picture no 3, photo by Christophe Raynaud-Delage

40 Phelan 1993, 99.

41 Muñoz 1999, 25.

42 Muñoz 1999, 25.

43 Muñoz 1999, 25.

44 Muñoz 1999, 20.

What Hen is doing, and by extension the whole queer sub-culture, is to propose to subvert our already binary male and female fictionalized selves, by theatricalizing a system of signs and identities already entangled within the system. And this is what José Esteban Muñoz refers to when he talks about “utopian possibility”. Queer utopia is subversion, theatricality, and fiction, and appears within the space left by fragmented bodies. But what is the vector of appearance of utopia? As addressed a bit earlier, “the feminine, queer or trans right to look” Nicholas Mirzoeff is talking about is opposed to the masculine “authority of visibility”. It means that looking for women, queer and trans is constantly struggling against the masculine authority. However, the “right to look” can also be seen as “countervisuality”. He says: “the right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity.”⁴⁵ Does queer utopia appear within visibility by claiming its own authority?

Empowerment Visuality

During a moment when Hen talks to the audience, Hen goes off stage and comes back “invisible”. That is to say: there is no Hen materialized by the foam and fabrics that constitutes it visually, but only its voice pretending to be there in front of our eyes. And what we see is just the two puppeteers’ arms moving and actioning like if Hen was here. The only element left visible is Hen’s little ponytail put on the puppeteer’s hand, the hand that is supposedly actioning Hen’s head. And the three other hands move into the air and on the ground, pretending they are making the puppet walk from right to left. This scene lasts a couple of minutes, during which we hear Hen’s voice (Johanny Bert’s) making jokes about being invisible. This moment, where we see a puppet playing with our eyes, made me realize the role that visibility/invisibility of a puppeting object, and thus visibility, has to do with queer utopia.

The artifice of puppeteering is thus revealed when they make Hen walk on stage, but the only thing the audience sees is the action of four arms moving in the air. This artifice “critically engage[s] ways of seeing, specifically perspectivalism.”⁴⁶ From a phenomenological aspect: “Perception oscillates between phenomenological bodies and objects (the physical bodies and objects that are present in front of spectator) and semiotic bodies and objects (the dramatic figures and objects that they represent.)”⁴⁷ So what is at stake when seeing Hen, an object that can even be invisible, but still “there”? In visual studies, the notion of “perspective” finds its roots in the Renaissance, when the subjective point of the eye arose. In *The Anthropology of Performance*, Victor Turner summarizes what Gesber and Palmer has defined: “perspective spatializes the world, it orients the eye in relation to space in a new way.”⁴⁸ This is what is called perspective: the distance between the eyes and the object seen, as both a geographical frame and a reflexive detachment. The invisibility of Hen, or its absence, makes even more palpable its materiality, and the distance that separates us from it.

Nicholas Mirzoeff also tackles the process of seeing as “classifying, separating, and aestheticizing” in what he calls the “complex of visibility”⁴⁹. According to him: “the concept is not composed simply of visual perceptions in the physical sense but formed by a set of relations combining information, imagination, and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space.”⁵⁰ In other terms, perspective can be also understood as a temporal space, given by the connection created between the action of the object seen and its effect on the one who looks at the object. By playing with its visibility/invisibility, Hen thus also materializes the perspective, and makes us “feel” it by its effect of disappearance. Seeing an object, it is also seeing its invisibility/absence, and for Jill Dolan, is “feeling the potential of elsewhere”⁵¹. This feeling offers to the spectators the possibility to ask themselves the following questions: “where is the border between what you think you see and what is actually there to be seen? (...) Where do

45 Mirzoeff 2011, 473.

46 Schneider 1997, 3.

47 Fischer-Lichte 2014, 54-5.

48 Turner 1987, 73.

49 Mirzoeff 2011, 476.

50 Mirzoeff 2011, 476.

51 Dolan 2005, 1.

your own projections, desires, and denials begin?”⁵²

As a spectator attending *Hen*, a performance in which we look at a queer puppet, one achieves the experience of “feeling” the utopia. But not as discovering something new that would be external to our very own selves, rather discovering the potential of utopia that our perspectival way of looking carries. I argue that this *is* the “locus” of where queer utopia, relying on subversion acts and theatrical fiction signs, can appear: within the “perspective”. Indeed, the perspective in the field of vision, is made by the organisation of the space in which the one who is looking focuses into something specific (in here *Hen* on stage). But the theatre offers more than just an organization of space, as Sara Ahmed wrote: “Bodies as well as objects take shape through being oriented toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as a cohabitation or sharing of space.”⁵³ From *Hen*, singing bawdy or political songs or spectacularly changing its body appearance, the spectator recognises it as such, and immediately relates to the object seen, cohabits with it.

But Maaike Bleeker tackles the notion of perspective as a paradoxical and imbalanced space. She says that: “the perspective presents a model of how representation is firmly on the side of the one who looks, and not on the side of who is seen. This model, furthermore, illuminates how it is invisibility that equals power in the field of vision.”⁵⁴ To see and/or to look at implies then the deletion of the proper perception of the body of the watcher, to the profit, purportedly, of the object/subject who is seen. This is what she calls “just looking”. But in fact, the one who is looking, the spectator, is not inactive in front of the actors but has the power of what Jacques Rancière calls “the Emancipated Spectator”. Indeed, as Peggy Phelan has pointed out, the action of seeing functions when the spectator: “forget[s] the object itself and enter the subject’s own set of personal meanings and associations.”⁵⁵ And Erika Fischer-Lichte specifies that: “a spectator does not enter a performance as a blank page. Spectators bring previous experiences, knowledge, and so-called “universe of discourse” with them into a performance. The experiences they live through during a performance relate to other, earlier experiences.”⁵⁶ In this vein, Johanny Bert emancipates spectators by placing them in a position of power through looking at a body/object on which operates their sexual fantasies as “personal meanings and associations” upon a fictional fragmented body.

The show *Hen* plays with this particular paradox, as by making visible and empathic an object, it reveals the theatricality of the look by “retheatricalizing sexuality in the field of vision.”⁵⁷ The queer puppet absorbs our heteronormative projections and return them back through new signs of subversion and fiction, giving us the power through our perspectival vision to create the queer utopia. *Hen* demonstrates that queer utopia is located within our theatrically visual abilities to connect with an object. This also shows how queer utopia is fundamentally related to subversion and the fiction of self-identities. The show *Hen* is then the visual experience of a politically and utopian empowerment space, to subvert the established heteronormative rules within which all our bodies have been entangled in. It creates new fantasies in the fragmented “present interstices” of a fictionalized non-made of flesh body. It creates the space of a “queer authority” as “not simply a matter of assembled visual images but the grounds on which such assemblages can register as meaningful renditions of a given event.”⁵⁸ This is what I felt when the show was over, and when *Hen* was bowing to us alongside Johnny Bert and all the team: queer utopia already exists within the space of my look, my visibility. I now have “to see it”. And this puts back into our look our very own bodies, made of flesh and sexual desires, the infinite and very personal utopian possibilities of our sexed bodies. Because, as Sara Ahmed concluded: “the body is not merely an object in the world”, rather “it is our point of view in the world.”⁵⁹

52 Bleeker 2008, 115.

53 Ahmed 2006, 552.

54 Bleeker 2008, 99.

55 Phelan 1993, 146.

56 Fischer-Lichte 2014, 56.

57 Bleeker 2008, 98.

58 Mirzoeff 2011, 477.

59 Ahmed 2006, 551.

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