

Stephen Greer. *Contemporary British Queer Performance*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, 245 pp., £ 47.38.

The diversity of contemporary queer British performance is difficult to grasp since it highly differs in themes and formats. However, in his study *Contemporary British Queer Performance* Stephen Greer draws a detailed picture of this heterogeneity, primarily using a decidedly materialist perspective to focus on production processes and “interrogate [...] the circumstances and relationships through which work has been commissioned, developed and presented” (ix). Thereby Greer illustrates salient features of queer performance art and shows that collectively organised production processes are gaining significance. Such production processes are not only a strategy of queer performance but mark a popular tendency in contemporary Western European and Northern American performance and theatre art in general. Again and again, this trend is dealt with explicitly in many stagings,¹ and it broadly influences contemporary performance’s aesthetics.

Alongside his materialist approach, Greer reflects on the term ‘queer’ to examine how “recent performance work may be read through and against queer theory’s pluralising account of subjectivity and challenge to pre-given categories of identity and desire” (xi). As the chapters in Greer’s study show, British performance work uses ‘queer’ in highly divergent, sometimes even contradicting manners. Whereas chapters 2–7 (of which I will only discuss a selection due to spatial limitations) are arranged chronologically and thematically, retracing the main developments of British queer performance since the 1970s, chapter 1 lucidly explains the theoretical concepts that Greer uses in his concrete analyses. Controversially discussed in cultural studies at present, Greer’s definition of the concept ‘visibility’ particularly proves to serve his following arguments. While in earlier phases of queer emancipatory movements the visibility of tabooed gendered and sexualised identities was held to be a necessary political strategy and queer performance became a privileged practice of putting those once invisible phenomena on public display, Greer points to the downside of the visibility cult in reference to Peggy Phelan’s influential book *Unmarked* (1993). Visibility, Greer claims, does not necessarily “guarantee [...] cultural intelligibility” (14) and cannot always be equated with agency since the “ways in which claims to subjectivity [are] made *through* visibility may be dependent on existing terms of reference” (15). Therefore, Greer argues, we should keep in mind the “deeply contextual and conditional quality of visibility as a political or performance

1 Such as the works by the German dramatist René Pollesch.

strategy” (15), as both empowerment and oppression might result from representation. Visibility as a contested category is not only relevant when it comes to questions of ‘coming out’ as a queer subject, of ‘finding yourself’ and putting an end to ‘living a lie’, but it also gains immense significance in the field of racism. Applying an intersectional method which understands queer theory and practice not only as an instrument to critically examine sexual or gender identities but also to focus on normative conceptions of race or class, Greer states that mainly “marked subjects – those already denoted as marginal – are required to engage with the issue of visibility” (24). Critical whiteness studies for example have shown the privileged status of a white performer’s body on stage. Whereas the (male) white performer’s body remains unmarked or may represent (hu-)mankind ‘universally,’ the non-white subject on stage is eye-catching, it “‘gets in the way’” (23), always referring to the ‘Other’. Thus visibility can by no means always be described as a sign of agency but in several contexts hints at powerful symbolic economies of hegemonic unmarkedness versus subaltern markedness.

Pioneer work on early emancipatory notions of queer visibility was done in the late 1960s and the 1970s by the British performance collaborative *Gay Sweatshop*, a group whose aesthetics and methods are introduced in chapter 2. According to Greer *Gay Sweatshop* played an important role in queer performance history due to their “critical engagement with the very issue of performative representation: questioning both the particular images of gay and lesbian life that might be presented, and the conditions and conventions of their production” (63). One issue the group particularly was confronted with was their constant debate whether the group’s members have to be self-identified lesbians or gays in order to authentically deal with homosexual concerns on stage. After a while *Gay Sweatshop* had to accept that same-sex desire was not a guarantor of homogeneous experience or ideological points of view – a fact that finally led to the splitting up of the collaborative into an exclusively female and an exclusively male company. The female members of the group felt that “many features of their oppression were shared more with other women than with gay men” (61). For Greer, who strongly takes into consideration the conditions of performance processes, these challenges the group had to face are evidence of the “presence of larger political and social narratives within which performance practice operates” (62).

When it comes to the janus-facedness of visibility, chapter 5 on “Pride and Shame: Developments in the Performance of Queer Protest” is particularly illuminating. Taking into consideration that contemporary forms of queer visibility in public often go hand in hand with a neoliberal commercialization of certain queer lifestyles (Western white middle class gay lifestyles in particular), Greer is interested in asking how various queer artists and activists make use of

performance strategies in order to oppose or subvert the commodification of homosexual communities. Greer understands this recent “performance of politics” (133) as radical action against the “professionalization of Pride by its organisers as ‘a parade, not a march’ and the emergence of carnival and festival events which have increasingly invoked commercial standards of profitability and business acumen as a primary measure of success” (134). While such commercial events like the London Pride can be described as “sites of ‘authorized transgression’” (135) due to their profitability and their seemingly affirmation of bourgeois ideologies, the queer collective *Duckie* for example developed an annual performance series from 2004 onwards under the title *Gay Shame* in which the collective mocked the “banalities of the mainstream gay Pride festival” (157). Each performance, among them the piece *Girly Shame* (2009), was staged in a marketplace format inviting the audience to actively participate in the event. The spectator would receive a certain amount of ‘Duckie money’ or ‘pink Euros’ with which to take part in a trade at several performance stalls. Thus *Duckie* framed their performance series as a parody of “neo-liberalism’s procorporate ‘free market economy’ sensibilities” (156) to creatively rebel against affirmative images of queer culture as a consumer culture. The performance piece *Girly Shame* offered a “‘pro-femme funfair for post-gay chicks and chaps... an arty farty party for the clitterati’” (157), as *Duckie*’s website announced. During this event *Duckie* requested the audience to enact typical neoliberal appeals to women which basically meant “‘Do some low paid factory work’ and ‘most of all ... Go shopping’” (158). Greer depicts *Duckie*’s politics not as mere opposition against (queer) consumerism but as a subversive representation of its strategies. According to Greer, *Duckie*’s subversive methods demonstrate that queer consumerism “indeed [can] be a powerful assertion of gay economic power” (158–59). However, their methods also expose the audiences to neoliberalism’s exclusionary principles:

[Y]ou can only shop at as many stalls as you have Duckie money to pay for. That reality might in turn carry its own counter to the logic of [a] queer subject as [a] responsible consumer, refuting the terms of access to legitimate identity in which [...] the commodities on sale become the entire machinery of citizenship [...] – not least because what is on sale is the illegitimate, parodic version of what the market claims is authentic and desirable. (159–60)

Whereas in chapter 6 Greer focuses on several contemporary queer art festivals in Great Britain, their financial burdens and their divergent notions of what is queer about queer performance, the final part of the book, chapter 7, critically examines possible future scenarios of queer performance. Greer observes that queer performance projects have discovered the internet as a productive virtual

space to deal with queer issues. After a series of queer teenage suicides in the USA the American author and sex-advice columnist Dan Savage for example initiated the video platform *It Gets Better* as an “anti-homophobic bullying campaign” (203) in order to demonstrate to queer youths with bullying experience “why it’s great to be gay today” (203). The open collaborative structure of *It Gets Better* encouraged queers and queer-friendly people from all over the world – among them popular Northern American or British figures like Ellen DeGeneres, Sue Perkins or Barack Obama – to release their video passing on “messages of persistence, survival and hope” (203). For Greer it is precisely the virtuality of the *It Gets Better* project that provides new forms of queer performance intervention: “the *It Gets Better* project was conceived because Savage felt that he could not speak to young people in their families and schools; he would not be permitted entry to those places” (207). Even though this internet project is a means “to address a physical separation” the video formats still evoke some kind of “face-to-face encounter of care and protection” (207).

To briefly conclude, Stephen Greer’s *Contemporary British Queer Performance* provides a very insightful survey of important tendencies of queer performance strategies in Great Britain and other English-speaking countries today. On the one hand, his reflection of materialist aspects of performance practice is an innovative perspective which has not yet been explored in sufficient detail in other studies on queer performance. On the other hand, Greer illuminatingly manages to integrate widely discussed concepts like ‘visibility’ in his argument. The way in which Greer connects salient concepts from cultural studies with the analysis of concrete examples of queer performance enables him to elaborate on significant features of contemporary queer performance strategies. Moreover, the resulting dialogical structure between cultural studies and performance analysis shows how complex models from cultural studies are and that their political productiveness necessitates critical attention and careful evaluation. Queer performance – as reconstructed by Greer – is a place where this evaluation creatively can be put into practice.

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