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A Frame to the Void: Some Remarks on the Staatstheater Augsburg Adaptation of Wittgenstein's *Mistress* and a Conversation with Nicole Schneiderbauer

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Abstract: Nicole Schneiderbauer's adaptation of David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* - a first-person account of usually single-sentence paragraphs by a middle-aged woman who believes herself to be the sole inhabitant of the entire world - premiered at Staatstheater Augsburg on 18 November 2022, and quickly garnered much praise for its inventive handling of complex literary material. I saw the performance on December 9, three weeks after the premiere. In this article, I offer an analysis of some of the most important creative choices made by Schneiderbauer in terms of translating Markson's novel into the language of the stage. As proved by my conversation with the director, her bold decisions - which may at first seem at odds with the spirit of Markson's novel - are precisely what has ensured the remarkable success of the whole enterprise. Avoiding the novel's more immediately theatrical aspects, reducing it to a 'condensate,' pluralizing the protagonist and dialing down on the absurdist humor, Schneiderbauer has succeeded at what may be the most valuable aspect of adaptation: that it is, in Linda Hutcheon's memorable words, "repetition with variation."

Key words: David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Nicole Schneiderbauer, Staatstheater Augsburg, adaptation, theater, intermediality, postmodernism, experimental novel, metafiction, American literature

Wittgensteins Mätresse - Nicole Schneiderbauer's adaptation of David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, in Sissi Tax's translation - premiered at Staatstheater Augsburg on 18 November 2022, and quickly garnered much praise for its inventive handling of complex literary material. Rather than employing the theater's main venues, Schneiderbauer chose the confined, dimly lit industrial space of a defunct gas house, Am Alten Gaswerk, which has been used for cultural events since 2019 ("Eröffnung..."). I saw the performance on December 9, three weeks after the premiere. From the hallway of the newly renovated multipurpose building - after a 15-minute introduction, which highlighted the figure of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the relevance of his philosophy of language to the novel - we were led to

the performance space proper. The viewers were given Virtual Reality helmets and instructed to put them on when the actors did so; this would happen several times during the performance, and the 'screenings' of VR material would last no more than a few minutes.

The novel itself is a first-person account of overwhelming solitude, given in short, usually single-sentence paragraphs by a middle-aged woman who either is the sole inhabitant of the entire world or believes herself to be in this very situation. Extremely unreliable as narrator, the woman whom we know as Kate – although even that is far from certain – is apparently typing her sentences on a typewriter found in a beach house which she currently occupies, somewhere on the American East Coast. She is a painter who has not touched the tools of her trade for years, but her thinking is deeply influenced by the arts. In a non-chronological and often baffling manner, she narrates various events from the last ten years of her life, apparently spent travelling by boats and cars around the curiously emptied world. In telling this, she circles around, and avoids revealing, a personal tragedy: the death of her young son and the guilt connected with it. Perhaps this is the catastrophe which, in her shattered mental state, she casts in global or cosmic terms. What is even more striking about this non-linear, self-conscious narrative is that Kate thinks about the world through a muddle of cultural, literary and historical artifacts, and her 'tale' is an orgy of misquotation, misattribution and misremembering. If, as the narrator of Flann O'Brien's 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* half-jokingly prophesied, "[t]he entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw" and "[t]he modern novel should be largely a work of reference" (p. 25), *Wittgenstein's Mistress* more than delivers on this idea. Either a work of belated high modernism, following in the wake of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Malcolm Lowry, or a postmodernist text in the spirit of the literatures of exhaustion and replenishment as theorized by John Barth (1997, pp. 62–67; 193–206), *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a labyrinth of metafictional allusion and association, filled with supposedly offhand speculation in the vein of the eponymous philosopher. Nevertheless – and

this, perhaps, is the greatest achievement – out of these various pieces and ‘broken images’ Markson manages to conjure a heartbreakingly real narrative self.

It should come as no surprise that this perplexing, purposely incomplete and circuitous text poses a great challenge to a prospective adapter. As director, Nicole Schneiderbauer – so far as I can tell, the first person ever to stage this work – made crucial creative choices in terms of translating Markson’s novel into the language of the stage and adjusting the performance space. Her bold decisions, which may at first seem at odds with the spirit of Markson’s novel, are precisely what has ensured its safe transition to the world of theatre and the remarkable success of the whole enterprise.

First of all, the performance features more than one Kate. In Markson’s novel, the protagonist’s singleness is the governing principle; here, there are five Kates, played by two actresses (Ute Fiedler, Jenny Langner) and three actors (Florian Gerteis, Andrej Kaminsky, Thomas Prazak) in identical black dresses with silver, irregularly shaped reflecting surfaces sewn on top, worn over black trousers. The fluidity of masculine and feminine incarnations corresponds interestingly with an important aspect of the text and its adaptation. After all, a male author, David Markson, has fashioned a female voice through which to speak, frequently, in the voices of (absent) men – Rembrandt, Spinoza, Heidegger or, indeed, Wittgenstein – and it is this already complex, effectively non-binary voice, in turn, that a woman, Nicole Schneiderbauer, brings to the stage. The actors employ a variety of tones, move in different ways, enforce diverse tempos, but what comes through is the coherence of a tight ensemble. They pass one another by, cross paths, observe one another through the empty frames which comprise the minimalistic stage design. The members of the audience – who have no assigned seats and who wander the underlit room – can follow one of the Kates or else assume a further vantage point from which more than one ‘incarnation’ can be seen; it is impossible, however, to keep track of all five, and this impossibility is calculated.



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Usually only one Kate is speaking, although at times her communication is amplified or interrupted by another voice; the actors may deliver two differing lines concurrently, as if in counterpoint. Crucially, however, this multiplication does not preclude the solipsism that is the basis of the novel: on the contrary, the solipsistic elements are thrown into sharper relief. Kate – splintered, fragmented, yearning to meet anyone or anything alive – keeps encountering herself. She also encounters us, viewers, and regards us closely, disbelievingly. Her long, suspicious gaze is difficult to endure. The presence of several actors onstage makes it possible to embody, even if only for a moment, the memories of lost loved ones, mainly Kate's mother and son. Her shattered selves, then, also function onstage as phantoms of memory. We, the viewers, become phantoms ourselves, we lurk in the shadows, keeping to the fringes of the performance space: mute, immobile, we watch the solitary, possibly insane protagonist. The spectators become specters.

Secondly, Schneiderbauer abandons the idea of using the entire text of Markson's novel. Although the strategy of compression belongs in the standard adaptational toolbox, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is notoriously

difficult to excerpt or abridge. It has no paragraphs or chapters, no readily extractable sections or even a discrete textual unit other than the sentence. Occurring one after another in a seemingly infinite series, these sentences are variously entangled, and their (comic, tragic) effect often stems from ingeniously deployed repetition and syntactical / lexical referentiality. Yet it is difficult to imagine actors speaking two hundred and fifty pages' worth of text, unless in a performance stretched to several hours. Schneiderbauer's adaptation is a breezy 75 minutes, including moments of near-silence and unsettling ambient noise, so perforce we hear only some of the sentences typed by the novel's protagonist. Their order is (as far as I was able to determine) chronological, which means that particular sentences often represent an elaborate sequence of several pages in length – for instance where Kate describes cartoons with books found in the basement, or where she speculates about the figure which is perhaps visible in the window of the house represented in a painting on the wall. The result is eerie, because the logic of the narrative – often already threadbare in Markson's novel, or else requiring cognitive leaps to rival those of Kate's – becomes even more strained. In effect, the text heard during the performance is more radically fragmented, and (as is frequently the case with adapted fiction) less intelligible. This prompts the question: who is the recipient of an adapted novel – not just this one, but more generally? And what effect does such an adaptation have on someone with no prior knowledge of the original? Despite the brief introduction to Wittgenstein's philosophy and the plot of Markson's novel, all of which precedes the performance, I see Schneiderbauer's efforts as a variation on the theme that is *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. And since variation is a mode which the novel frequently engages – the repetitions of sentence structures with new elements, but also endless recycling of objects, place names, and much, much more – this adaptational strategy seems perfectly suitable.

Thirdly, the performance is (unless my feel for German delivery fails me) almost entirely devoid of humor. Watching the trailers a few months before the premiere, I worried that the adaptation might prove too brooding and

oppressive, whereas humor – naturally of a certain dark, existentially-tinged variety, typical of American postmodernism – seemed to me the novel's *sine qua non*. During the performance which I attended, the audience did not laugh, and, in truth, there was little occasion for this. I did not laugh, either, and not just out of fear of disturbing the peculiar atmosphere which Schneiderbauer and the actors carefully constructed. Perhaps it was because Kate's bizarre statements – about the cat which may be living in the Colosseum, about the seagull which in all likelihood is merely a scrap of burnt paper, about pretending that the signs written in the sand are Greek letters – sound all the more desperate when spoken by a live voice, accompanied by particular facial expressions. Not impossibly, many of these declarations would slide into farcicality unless given a somber reading.

Markson was famously proud of the fact that his novel was irreducible either to its postapocalyptic interpretation (the protagonist is indeed alone in the world) or to a 'medical' one (the protagonist is mad and only imagines herself to be solitary) (Tabbi, 1990, pp. 111–112). In Schneiderbauer's rendition, the scales are tipped towards the latter meaning, and there is understandably less space for humor. But this has to do, I think, with an important shift. We are no longer readers, but viewers, with all that such a transposition entails: rather than ensconced in Kate's mind, we observe her from the outside, which complicates our reaction to the character, generating a different kind of sympathy. I see this, again, as variation, justified within the very broad spectrum of meanings engendered by the novel. A variation, more importantly, which I find poignant. I need only to think back to the moment from the Augsburg production when Kate remembers a snatch of melody from *Les Troyens*. Many a director would have supplied a relevant musical fragment by Berlioz to point up the extent to which the boundaries between the real and the imagined have been blurred in Kate's world. But Schneiderbauer's Kate – each of the five Kates, in fact – is frozen to the spot, and for a minute we listen to silence, as John Cage would have it: the creaking of the few chairs, someone's careful footsteps, the subtle white-noise pulsation of near-vacant spaces.



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In the novel, Kate has the whole world at her disposal; however, in David Foster Wallace's memorable phrasing, it is an "empty plenum," an empire built of signs meant to detour the protagonist through a collective cultural past, and away from her own unbearable personal story. In the performance, she traverses the shadowy room, constantly bumping into, or attempting to scale, its boundaries – a clear allusion to Wittgenstein's most famous quotation about the limits of language. Yet the primary visual motif is the empty frame: the protagonist poses in them, walks through them, shatters them, constantly problematizing the boundary between (artistic / linguistic) representation and what we may call 'reality' or 'world.' This simple prop proves semantically

capacious: as needed, it becomes a window, a mirror, a painting, all three of which are closely aligned in Markson's novel. In this context, the five Kates' costume, designed by Miriam Busch, also becomes legible: they are wearing shards of a broken mirror.

The VR environment, created specifically for the purpose by video artist Stefanie Sixt and made available through Heimspiel technology, renders the boundary between reality and representation even more fluid. The novel's iconic spaces – the seashore, the empty street, the stairs, the dilapidated house – are here combined into impossible, mostly monochromatic mindscapes, reminiscent of video game settings. If colors come into play, their cold shades only intensify the effect of the pale, seemingly subaquatic light of the performance area; these are disorienting spaces, with no stable ground, producing in the viewer a sense of being suspended in the air over a void. In these oneiric spaces we, ghosts ourselves, encounter phantoms of Kate. One of the early virtual scenes has Jenny Langner approach us warily, uncertain if we are there at all. Trying to walk through us to make sure, at the last moment she bounces off our virtual body, and her face registers a mixture of disbelief and alarm.

The use of VR harmonizes with Markson's problematization of the line separating that which exists from that which can be thought. Hence the importance of the maneuver, near the end of the performance, where what is transmitted directly to the VR helmets is the signal from the camera set up in the middle of the room. Reviewing *Wittgensteins Mätresse* for *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Yvonne Poppek complained that the visual loop is a gimmick in an otherwise strong performance (Poppek, 2022): this is not my sense, at all. When, as viewers, we see ourselves in odd, clumsy poses, next to the actors – all with the inevitable defamiliarizing delay – the circle is complete: it is no longer clear who has been watching whom, who has imagined whom, whose existence is solid and whose is spectral. This naturally corresponds to the loop in the text, and to the repetition of the sentence from the novel's beginning: "Jemand lebt an diesem Strand". "Somebody is living on this beach."

I left the Staatstheater Augsburg adaptation of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* greatly impressed by how much thought Nicole Schneiderbauer gave to the question of the novel's theatricality, avoiding its more immediate aspect:

indeed, many would be tempted to see the sentence-by-sentence first-person narrative as monodrama waiting to happen. Pluralizing the protagonist, she has succeeded in that which, following Linda Hutcheon's sentiments, I consider to be the most valuable aspect of adaptation: "repetition without replication," or "repetition with variation" (Hutcheon, 2006, pp. 7–8). In her *Wittgensteins Mätresse*, Schneiderbauer offers an (ironically!) unverbose variation on Markson's novel, a variation that is significantly darker, and spellbinding from the first minute to the seventy-fifth.

Below is a conversation which I conducted with Nicole Schneiderbauer by e-mail four months after the premiere, following the completed first run of *Wittgensteins Mätresse*, when the show was scheduled to return in the fall season of 2023.

Krzysztof Majer: Nicole, you're no stranger to adapting American literature, including experimental postmodernist works. You've directed *Tiny Kushner*, a series of shorter plays by the author of *Angels in America*; and you've taken on daunting adaptation challenges, like William T. Vollmann's 800-page novel, *Europe Central*. Would you say that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was a natural next step for you?

Nicole Schneiderbauer: After adapting and dealing with *Europe Central*, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was indeed a logical next step for me, artistically. Both works are unique literary reflections on history (or the history of mind), human suffering and existence. They're works of art that seem to go beyond the boundaries of their form because of their intermedial perspective. This is what captivated me about both texts in their own unique way. In the development of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, however, the approach was very different from that which I employed with *Europe Central*. I discovered *Wittgenstein's Mistress* during my research, but then had it sitting in my bookcase for about a year before I read it. As soon as I picked it up, I was fascinated by Markson's post-apocalyptic setting and his attempt to grasp the world, memory, language, art, being – and all of this in an almost playful way. The novel is like a huge surface of projection: what is true? What false? What has happened to the protagonist? Who or what is she anyway? A game of realities, or a never-ending emotional state?

KM: You've emphasized the intermediality of the two novels, which, I think, poses an interesting challenge in itself. After all, theatre is, in its essence, 'always already' intermedial, involving – even in its classical forms – the verbal medium, the visual, the musical. On top of these, contemporary practitioners add more recent media, such as the filmic or the digital, as in the case of your *Wittgensteins Mätresse*. But intermediality in a literary text is a different matter, wouldn't you agree? Neither Markson's novel, nor Vollmann's, involves other media in the strict sense, but rather representations of them – what we get is ekphrasis, then, or melophrasis. Much of the tension in Markson's novel is built on that – on the absence of the work, whether visual or musical, which Kate is forced to reimagine and translate into language. In that sense, I think, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is unique, because it asks both its narrator and its reader to do away with other senses – to render everything linguistic. Markson wrote it before the Internet changed all of our lives, and I often wonder about the extent to which it complicated his idea for the novel. Nowadays we can all google Pinturicchio's rendition of Penelope at the loom, or even use DALL-E to generate the nonexistent Van Gogh painting that Kate mentions! How did you approach this idea of intermediality? Does adapting a work like *Wittgenstein's Mistress* mean that you have to restrain the urge to, for lack of a better word, intermedialize, or does it give that urge free rein? Was it similar with *Europe Central*?

NS: In Kate's world, language is the only thing that 'exists,' in a way. As an artist she no longer has any painting utensils, as she says herself. So she tries to use language to make her world and her own history transportable, to archive them, to create a huge medium of memory – to build a system of coordinates to which she can relate and through which she can exist. Practically speaking, language is the only medium with which Kate can 'translate' pictures or music. And yet, by using images, stories, music – some of which are deeply inscribed in Western cultural history, with ideas or associations in our own cultural memory – Markson taps into our space of imagination. One can hear Maria Callas, or at least snatches of her singing, one can see the coins painted on the floor of Rembrandt's studio or (figuratively)

chase after the cat, there are the references to Greek antiquity, to Helen, Odysseus, Achilles... The exciting aspect of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is that Kate puts her situation and especially her emotions into already existing cultural images and stories, trying to recognize herself in them.

We tried to research as many of the mentioned artworks and references in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* during the production, to track down all the traces. Without the Internet, that would not have been possible in the same form. I have the feeling that the Internet is even expanding the associative space of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* – which is great.

And to return briefly to the topic of intermediality. Theatre tells stories intermedially, if you will, but a novel like *Wittgenstein's Mistress* definitely needs other attempts and forms beyond classical approaches in its transmission. This is also true for *Europe Central*. You have to ask yourself other questions in the making.

KM: And how important has this particular site, the defunct gasworks, been to the Augsburg production? Is your *Wittgensteins Mätresse* typical fare for this space, or are you breaking new ground here?

NS: The Staatstheater Augsburg has two main venues – one is the brechtbühne (on the gasworks area) and the other is the martini-Park. For special formats / productions we always look for other venues in the city. The theater already used the Kühlergebäude on the gasworks area in 2018 for two productions, but at that time there was a 'classic' seating situation, which means that we had a tribune and fixed seating installed. After that, the Kühlergebäude was being renovated and was closed to audiences.

With *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, it took us a long time to find a suitable location, and when the Kühlergebäude finished renovating, it was immediately clear to me that this location is perfect for Miriam Busch's stage design – the sculpture built from different picture frames. It was also very important for me that the audience can move freely in the Kühlergebäude, that they can be part of the installation, and that everyone has to search for their own narrative thread, feeling their way around Kate's mindscape. In this process, everything is fragmented, only perceptible in excerpts, and ultimately you yourself become part of this memory palace as a shadow or a mirror image.



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KM: This is also a very interesting decision – one that I applaud! – but that needs to be investigated, because, after all, the nonlinearity of Markson’s novel is a strictly constructed one. For an experimental and fragmented novel, which it undoubtedly is, it’s also rigorous in building towards certain revelations, jokes, reinterpretations of existing texts, and so on. Unlike Cortazar’s *Hopscotch*, or what’s been described as “shuffle literature” (Husárová & Montfort, 2012) – say, B. S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* or Herta Müller’s *The Fox Was Ever the Hunter* – Markson’s novel does not invite us, let alone force us, to read out of order, or skip. I think this is one of the reasons for which some critics insist that *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* is the sort of high

modernist artifice – like *Ulysses*, *Under the Volcano*, or *The Sound and the Fury* – where the chaos of experience is aesthetically ordered, organized into a literary representation of chaos, but is not chaotic in itself: far from it, in fact. So would you say you're taking Markson across that threshold into postmodernity (towards which he gestures here, but perhaps does not take the leap) – pluralizing Kate, disjoining the threads, fragmenting the reception?

NS: I try to approach the question from my own artistic perspective. Everything we have done in the making and in the examination of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* has resulted from the fact that the novel is the way it is – from its inner order, its logic, and its chaos. Kate is both a character and a broken mirror, a fragment, she is both intangible and multifaceted. What I can perceive as a reader of the novel is limited at first, I don't have the chance to understand it to its core. I can develop a desire, however, to bring light into this darkness. For that I would have to read and re-read, interrupt the reading and search 'outside' the novel, and then read it again. But ultimately I will always fail because I don't have the chance to even begin to 'understand' anything, just as Kate doesn't have the chance to understand herself or her story. It all slips like sand through her fingers. Maybe Markson doesn't invite us to read his novel differently, but he doesn't forbid it, either. In other words, he tries to seduce us via variation, repetition, and deception so that we constantly have to reevaluate our own impressions.

KM: Let's talk a little more about some of the searching that has to happen outside of the novel. How important, would you say, is the German and Austrian resonance of the subject announced in the title? After all, despite his Cambridge fame, Wittgenstein is the quintessential Viennese philosopher, and Heidegger – perhaps the second thinker most frequently mentioned in the novel – is firmly associated with the Baden-Württemberg countryside. These two throughlines never cross, but they are perhaps also a way of demarcating the painful landscape of twentieth century history.



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NS: *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a playground of references, a huge archive or memory palace full of traces. One has the sense of never coming to an end of searching and discovering information and links – this is all very tempting, but it also drives one crazy. Wittgenstein and Heidegger, who interestingly never met even though they were both born in the same year (1889) and were already very well known throughout their lives, are Kate's logical points of reference for me. Both dealt with the foundations of cognition, proclaiming a different way of philosophizing, speaking, thinking, and trying to make the world habitable. Moreover, both have been described as 'the last philosophers.' So is Kate. I've heard the novel called 'philosophical science fiction.'

KM: Yes, it was David Foster Wallace who used that phrase, though I think it's more than a little misleading, especially when one couples it with the postapocalyptic setting: I think it tends to generate expectations that will have to be frustrated! I love the figure of the memory palace, though: memory in Markson's novel is spatialized, potentially infinite, confusing in its jumbled excess. A colleague of mine has described the world of the novel as a library without a catalogue – how Borgesian! An archive, too, or a “bloody museum,” as Kate calls it, since she has been “appointed curator of all the world” (Markson, 2010, p. 227).

I'm interested in the 'lastness' that you mention: Kate is the 'last woman,' to paraphrase the title of Mary Shelley's apocalyptic novel – the last painter, the last art historian (*sui generis*, of course), the last thinker. This sense of lastness, with names of infamously difficult philosophers thrown in, can be foreboding to viewers. Markson has often been praised for the lightness with which he approaches philosophical questions; did you strive for a similar kind of lightness, or did you decide to take in stride the weight of the material to which Markson alludes?

NS: Both – we consciously looked for this lightness in the acting and in the performance, but even so, there is this emotional weight and the quasi-plot, transferred from the novel to the stage, with Kate's family history and the supposed death of her son. Deep emotional confrontation in theatre is always important to me, personally, and I deliberately seek that out. Reading the novel, one gets the impression that Kate is trying different ways to avoid having to deal with her memories, specifically the loss of her son and what really happened in Mexico ten years earlier or so. But as it is in life, one cannot escape one's own pain points even with a lot of wit and humor. And the memories take on a life of their own, so Kate is not always the 'master' of her own world.

KM: With that last phrase you bring out another aspect of the title. After all, the word 'mistress' is the feminine version of 'master.' Actually, English dictionaries (*Oxford, Cambridge, Merriam-Webster*) give this sense – a woman in a position of authority, control or responsibility – as the first, with the 'illicit female lover' or 'kept woman' only a secondary or even tertiary one.

Of course, it's the philosopher's name in front which brings that erotic / sexual meaning to the fore, and famous artists' mistresses – Jeanne Hébuterne or Suzanne Valadon – are mentioned, but maybe this needn't be the dominant idea. Translating the novel into Polish, I couldn't find a word that would fit both of these meanings, so I've had to go with *kochanka* (lover, though not necessarily an illicit one). I wonder to what degree the aspect of mastery is present in the German title. The word *Mätresse* seems like a close analogue to the English, but how far would German readers and viewers expect the theme of mastery or mastering (of the world, of language, of one's own solitude) to appear in the text? Is there a sense here of someone overpowering or overcoming Wittgenstein, would you say?

NS: The German word 'Mätresse' comes very close to the English meaning of the word and captures all aspects. I don't know what the audience expects, though. But I'm very interested in the question, and I've asked it myself many times. Does Kate overcome or overpower Wittgenstein? Sometimes I think yes and sometimes no. It's definitely possible. What would you say?

KM: Well, since the theme of masters and pupils is such an important one in the novel, and since Kate is set on reasserting female presence in such lineages – a feminist critique of art history – it would be tempting to think of a female master in the sphere of philosophy, or writing. I've looked at it through the biographical lens, which we haven't mentioned yet. Markson dedicated the novel to the painter Joan Semmel, his *de facto* mistress. It seems that Semmel taught him a thing or two about appreciating women's contribution to world and art history. Reading Markson's novels in order, one is simply thrown by how different and original *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is, and a big part of that must be Semmel's influence. So if he, Markson, identified in any way with Wittgenstein, through his own writing and concerns, then she, Semmel, was both his lover and his teacher, I'd say. She did leave him in the end, too, which could account for some of the melancholy tone... In the novel itself, though, I guess we also have Wittgenstein overpowering or overcoming himself, because, as a number of people have demonstrated (e.g. Ambrozy, 2015, pp. 72–73), the novel illustrates the shift from early Wittgenstein, of the *Tractatus*, to the late Wittgenstein, of *Philosophical Investigations*. And for

him to move from that first stage to the second he needed to make a spectacular about-turn, reopen the questions that he thought he'd dealt with once and for all in the *Tractatus*. And Markson's own dynamic is similar, in the sense that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is such an unexpected about-turn in his writing, too; all his later novels live in its shadow, and there's no getting back from this radical shift. So yes, I'd say there is some overpowering of Wittgenstein going on here.

NS: I absolutely agree. But it's like almost everything in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* – it's never one thing, but always many things, and always depends on the way or the angle from which you look at it.

KM: Indeed! And since we've touched on the subject of translation – interestingly also one of the many subjects that spark Kate's curiosity at a few points – I wonder about the role, if any, of the German translator, Sissi Tax. In Poznań's Teatr Polski, where Maja Kleczewska, one of our most exciting and notorious directors, recently staged Joyce's *Ulysses*, the author of the new translation and of a hefty book on the subject, Maciej Świerkocki, attended several rehearsals, instructing the actors on interpretation and delivery. Sissi Tax is a writer herself, and from what I understand, her stature as an author has had a big impact on how her translation of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was viewed in German-speaking countries, or how much attention it received; Elfriede Jelinek's afterword must have played a part, too. Has Tax been involved in your production, especially as far as abridging the text went, or have you consulted her in other ways? Has she seen the production yet?

NS: Sissi Tax was not involved in our production, and, to my knowledge, has not yet seen it. As for adapting the novel, we used a very unusual process. When I read the novel, I immediately had the feeling that it couldn't be adapted into a theatrical version like other texts, and that we had to choose a different approach in order to do justice to Markson's novel with all its variations, repetitions, images, and time jumps... So together with the dramaturge, Sabeth Braun, I created a 'condensate' of the novel, so to speak: a textual basis with which we started the rehearsals. From this textual basis, with the help of our research and through body improvisations, each actor developed their own narrative thread – their own Kate. In the next step we layered these threads together and interwove them, and that's how the version of the play finally came into being.

KM: That's a fascinating way to go about the process, and, I believe, empowering to the actors. But I'm curious also about what got left out of the 'condensate,' and why – what stayed on the cutting room floor, as it were. I had the feeling that some narrative or thematic threads were represented by shorter versions of themselves, but others seemed to have disappeared altogether. Can you tell me more about how you made the necessary decisions to snip this or bolster that, and about the rationale behind this? Were there any aspects of the novel that you thought were outdated, or simply less relevant – or others that you thought the adaptation could not do without? Did the actors themselves also make such decisions, or at least partly?

NS: Because we developed the piece in this way, we made most of the decisions together. Some of them were made consciously, others less so, through and in the many improvisations. These gave rise to images, sequences, situations, among other things, which we tried to organize from the inside (from the character's perspective) and from the outside (from the director's perspective). The coordinate system was always the novel and our condensed version of it. At the beginning of the rehearsals (we rehearsed in two phases: in April 2021 and in October/November 2022) we were limited in terms of the duration of the evening due to the Corona pandemic. Originally, I thought about setting the evening at five to six hours, and really treating it as a world in which one can immerse oneself, but also lose oneself – in which sequences, scenes, and reflections are repeated in slight variations. But since we were limited to 90 minutes, the theme of perpetual repetition and variation can only be glimpsed in rudiments in our *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Also, many humorous language games would not have transferred well to the stage. One aspect I'm personally sorry about cutting – one which we tried to translate, but ended up discarding – was Markson's handling of the theme of time.

KM: I'm intrigued by this. Can you say more about the parts that you mean and what about them, in particular, seemed more difficult to transfer to the stage?

NS: Theatre thrives on emotions, situations and actions, on immersion in atmospheres and relationships. We have tried to make Kate's world tangible, and have dealt intensively with her attempts to construct it. However, in

the novel there is a lot of focus on Kate's family history, on her identity as an artist, and on the emotional phases that she goes through, because inscribed in the novel is a strong emotional charge that is dramatic and exciting. We shifted the focus from the text to different theatrical means as a way of translating Kate's situation and the motifs of the novel into images, moods, associations. What Markson does in his novel would not have worked in this form on the stage, because it must be spoken language rather than read, and because reading is perceived differently than seeing or experiencing physically. Markson develops trains of thought over several pages, in parts and in layers. There is also a great desire for (factual) knowledge – I think that would have been very boring to transfer on a one-to-one scale.



KM: The performance works marvelously, but I wonder if you've had to overcome any resistance at Staatstheater Augsburg when you first presented your idea there. Or did the project instantly meet with enthusiasm?

NS: The plan to realize *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as a theatre performance coincided with the beginning of the Corona pandemic and thus took on its own explosive level of meaning – Kate's loneliness, the post-apocalyptic mood, her lack of relationships – suddenly this was also a major social issue. So yes, there was a great interest of the Staatstheater Augsburg in realizing it.

KM: The context of the pandemic is particularly interesting to me, because it was a similar case with my translation into Polish. I started working on the first 25 pages for an online magazine in January 2020, so by the time I had the fragment ready for publication, sometime in the spring, we were all looking at the most famous places in the world emptied out, with rumors of wild animals reappearing in the canals of Venice, and so on. The novel took on a resonance which I didn't notice when I first read it ten years earlier, or even when I re-read it just a few months earlier – it activated not only new ideas of what solitude can mean, but also ecocritical / post-anthropocenic readings, which are key in our day and age. Can you tell me more about how you and the ensemble worked these meanings into your adaptation? Did the actors' own experiences of seclusion and separation during the Corona crisis translate into how they approached their versions of Kate?

NS: We talked a lot about loneliness, and in that context, of course, about the setting of the novel and Kate's being alone after a nameless disaster: whether she is really alone or simply no longer able to notice anyone else. And, of course, about our own experiences, how the separation and lack of contact felt, what happened to our bodies, how one longed for touch, for another person. But also about the grief and loss. That was a very present theme and it imprinted itself deeply on the actors' engagement with their Kate.

There's this beautiful line in the novel that says, essentially, that what people admired about Rubens, even if they weren't always aware of it, is the way everyone was touching. That was one of the central phrases for us. True, it is not said on stage. But it is present, because there is no physical touch between the performers, only the longing for it.

KM: Yes, the exact sentence is: “One of the things people generally admired about Rubens, even if they were not always aware of it, was the way everybody in his paintings is always touching everybody else” (Markson, 2010, p. 102). The idea returns later, but only once, when Kate is talking about Anthony Van Dyck as Rubens’ student. With so many other concepts that recur in the novel, this is one of the less prominent ones, and yet – I agree completely – crucial in identifying the human touch as what Kate is missing so badly. And that you’ve kept the sentence itself out of the text spoken onstage is very much in the vein of the novel: an absence, a void, in the middle of things.

But since we’re talking about sensualities and bodies: how important is the theme of femininity here, as a lived, corporeal experience? David Foster Wallace insisted that this was one of the very few aspects – or maybe the only aspect – in which the novel fails. He quoted some female readers who found the frequent references to menstruation, for example, as “ringing false” – that is, as Markson trying too hard to authenticate the female experience (p. 233). But Sherrill Grace, for example, thought that Kate “speaks from her mind and body about all aspects of the world” (1990, p. 212). Some of my female colleagues, friends, and students tell me that the voice sounds very convincing to them – as if a woman had written it, one of them even said. What is your sense of this? The theme does come up in your adaptation – if I remember correctly – through the verbal descriptions of the aging body and the menopausal mood swings. Visually, it is conveyed, for example, in the VR sequence where the actor’s hand is held waist-high like a brush with dark paint, which is then dripped onto the legs and the floor. But it is one of the male authors who is pictured in this way, so there’s more complexity here, it seems – more ‘gender trouble.’

NS: For me, Kate reveals another aspect of the female body, that connected with birth and offspring – Kate will not be able to have any more children in the foreseeable future. Not only is she alone in the world, but even in the most unlikely event that she would find someone, there will be no more children. She really is the last person. Beyond that, menstruation also provides her with a foothold in terms of regularity, structure. But that also no longer works – because of the actual irregularity of her periods. We talked a lot about this aspect in the production and I would say our take was a mix of

David Foster Wallace and Sherill Grace. Personally, I think it's important that Markson addresses the issue as it's an essential aspect of the female body, and part of Kate's everyday life and body experience, much like masturbation. These topics are talked about far too little in our society and when they are, there is usually a strange form of shame involved. What mattered to us in the VR sequence was opening up this field of tension between male and female aspects, but also to pose the question of authorship – who is talking about whom? At the same time, the male actor is still Kate, and an author of his own 'thread' in the process of creating the character. The setting opens up a multitude of possible interpretations, thereby allowing gender to become fluid, and one can try to overcome it through this.

KM: That's so true: no futurity here, just an eternal present, which keeps repeating – irregularly at that, as you say – since the body clock is going the way of all the other clocks in the novel, which stopped working long ago. And the theme of masturbation, apart from emphasizing the bodily, ties in with the themes of solitude, the closed circuit of the self. I continue to be amazed by how Markson makes each aspect of the novel meaningful on a number of levels, and how these meanings can be extended – as you've done, for instance, with Kate's gender fluidity.

I know that the response to your production has been very positive. Can you say a few words about that?

NS: Both the critics and the audience were very taken by *Wittgensteins Mätresse*, and enthusiastic about it. It was described as a multimedia theatre adventure, because on the one hand you encounter the big questions of the history of philosophy, understand their emotional weight, too, and at the same time keep asking: is it all just a fantasy? The audience is immersed in this “bloody museum,” in Kate's head, and, like Kate, they become curators of their own history and experience. It's interesting that many people don't want to leave the room after the piece ends, or say that they could have watched it for hours.

KM: I can understand this reaction and relate to it, because the space you've created is eerily hospitable. I wonder also how important sound design has been to constructing that space. The Augsburg Staatstheater page doesn't

list a separate person responsible for sound, so I understand that these were collective decisions, too – about the relative absence of sound or the use of what I would call ambient ‘white noise.’ Was it clear to you from the start that silence would feature so prominently?

NS: It was immediately clear to me that silence would play such a big role, yes. I tried to imagine very early what sounds are still there in Kate’s world, and what her actual soundscape might be. On the one hand, there are the elements (fire, water, earth, air), and on the other hand the noisy space of her memory, and her own attempts to make sounds, like setting several alarm clocks to ring or rolling tennis balls down the Spanish Steps. We then developed together all the sounds that the audience ‘hears.’

KM: I was also curious about the VR process. How much influence did you have on Stefanie Sixt’s astounding virtual mindscapes? Did the artist read the novel and develop her own ideas on the basis of this, or did you commission specific types of images and / or offer suggestions? Was this a collaborative process, and if so, to what extent?

NS: Stefanie and I have been working together for six years now. Our collaboration is close and trusting, and we usually develop the initial ideas together. Since VR plays a very important part in the production, we worked intensively on *Wittgensteins Mätresse*. After reading the novel, we worked out what the VR should be in terms of content and dramaturgy, and gave a lot of thought to the merging of VR and performance. The VR worlds are a mix of 2D and 3D shots and 360-degree images. The idea was to build associative image spaces consisting of landscapes, stills, portraits, and abandoned apocalyptic places. They are spaces in between, where time functions in a distorted way and which are upside down. Another important aspect was Kate’s searching and her traveling. We wanted the audience to have the same experience as Kate – being alone, thrown back on themselves, trapped in their own head, in their own memory.

I’m very happy with the aesthetics of Stefanie’s VR worlds. They are powerful, sensual and poetic, and it is hard to ‘get rid’ of the images. And I am happy that we managed to use the live VR camera profitably despite the great technical challenges. We weren’t sure until the end if it would work.



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KM: It does work, indeed, and it manages to point up the theme of circularity and self-consciousness in marvelous ways. And to circle back, Markson-style, to where we began: is such minimalistic stage design, near-absence of sound, the presence of multimedia / VR typical for your theatre work? Did you readily inhabit the physical world of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, or did you need to leave your comfort zone in order to make it work?

NS: *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a typical evening in terms of my formal language. I like to work in installations, associatively, physically, and with proximity to the audience. What was different compared to other works is the approach to the material and the development. I always leave my comfort zone when directing. I can't imagine it any other way.

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