

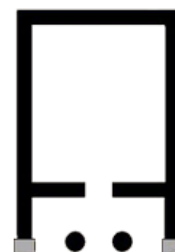
Playground of Gender: Cross-Dressing and Self-Mutilation as Negation of Gender Identity in Tanja Dückers's *Spielzone* (1999)

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Playground of Gender: Cross-Dressing and Self-Mutilation as Negation of Gender Identity in Tanja Dückers's *Spielzone* (1999)

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'I wish I could be somebody completely different, put on a skin-tight costume'.¹ Through this statement, made by one of the numerous protagonists of Tanja Dückers's novel *Spielzone*, several central aspects of the plot are already expressed. Therefore, I want to take this sentence as a motto for my study of Dückers's debut, published in 1999. The novel offers a fruitful basis for the analysis of the literary depiction of negotiation of gender identities on the basis of aesthetic differentiation through clothing and the body. It depicts the life of two streets in different districts of Berlin from the perspective of their inhabitants, and thus provides a literary portrayal of their milieu, which demonstrates the experimentation with new lifestyles in the urban space. For this purpose, Dückers uses an interesting aesthetic method, which distinguishes itself through a remarkable immediacy and an over-stylisation. As a literary critic sums it up, Dückers 'does not analyse. She provides basic work. She shows an urban catwalk and spreads the work of the cityscape on several backs'.²

To 'put on a skin-tight costume' points to an identity crisis : the costume should fit so close that it is felt as one's own skin and therefore merges into 'flesh and blood'. These two aspects – firstly, the depiction of the negotiation of one's own identity through a masquerade, and, secondly, the expression of identity through the body—shall be explored in the following analysis. The focus will lie on the negotiation of gender identities, whose crisis noticeably emerges from Dückers's aesthetic technique.

In her debut, the author opposes two Berlin districts: the Thomas Street in the district Neukölln, and the Sonnenburger Street in the district Prenzlauer Berg which, before the Wende, was part of the GDR. Hence Tanja Dückers consciously decides on depicting two Berlin districts which differ not only geographically, but also socially. While Neukölln, in the nineties, was suffering from a negative image and was considered a social hot spot, after German unification Prenzlauer Berg found itself in constant change and - especially since the beginning of the nineties- has drastically changed through the growing influx of middle-class intellectuals. As Tanja Dückers herself writes in an article on the district of

¹ Tanja Dückers, *Spielzone* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2007), p. 91. Throughout this paper, quotes from this text will be indicated in brackets in the text under the abbreviation SZ by making reference to the page number. All the quotes from primary and secondary texts in German were translated into English by the author of this article.

² Verena Auffermann, 'Der schrille Blick', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 24 March 1999, p. V2/6.

Prenzlauer Berg after the Wende, the new part of Berlin was a new and experimental area, especially for youngsters:

The opening of the East – physically and culturally – for that time, for the West-teens and tweens, was an enormous expansion of their leisure facilities. East Berlin became a kind of big adventure playground. Every week a new illegal bar opened which could only be accessed over a roof or through the basement, a new house was found, occupied, celebrated.³

Through her fictional characters, Tanja Dückers reflects on these social and formative differences of these two areas of the city, and also on the state of construction of Prenzlauer Berg, which was rediscovered by the West Berliners after the Wende.

The protagonist, Mr Lämmle, lives in Neukölln—whose typical Svabian name already anticipates a certain conservatism – and projects his utopian desire for another identity on a couple, whom he secretly observes every day with binoculars from the wall of a cemetery. The unusual couple is living a seemingly carefree life devoid of commitments, and unashamedly exhibits this at night by not protecting the brightly illuminated rooms from public view through blinds. Jason's and Elida's lifestyle represents what Mr Lämmle has always been longing for: being able to escape from his life in the rather conservative district of Berlin, to diversify his everyday life routine, and to transform himself into a more attractive man. As opposed to his routine lifestyle, Jason and Elida instead change their names weekly and experiment with different existences by continuously draping themselves in shimmering costumes and flashy clothing. With this, they steadily accomplish changes of roles without tying themselves down to one identity. In the novel, they obviously have the function of depicting the counter-draft to Lämmle's stuffy and regulated life as married director of a sewage treatment plant, and they impersonate his imagined, free existence. But he eventually has to realise that he is neither capable of changing his lifestyle nor 'capable of transforming himself' physically – in the district of Neukölln no change seems to be possible (SZ, 93). The aesthetically particular couple shines out of Neukölln's cityscape through its noticeable appearance, and thus represents a rupture with the majority of the inhabitants of this district. With that, Dückers already anticipates the second part of her novel, which is situated in the experimental district of Prenzlauer Berg and embodies a kind of playground of existences for its inhabitants.

This changing former district of East Berlin is described by a protagonist as 'a wonderful twilight zone, not East anymore, but not yet West, ideal for testing oneself' (SZ, 108). It is thus depicted as a liminal area, i.e. as a place where new meanings can arise, free from

³ Tanja Dückers, 'Spaßhaus Mitte', *Der Spiegel*, 36 (1999), 102-105 (p. 102).

conventional categories.⁴ Especially noticeable is the experimentation of the mainly young protagonists with regards to gender identities, on which I will elaborate further on.

The ethnomethodological study 'Doing Gender', published in 1987 by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, shall be used as a basis for the following analysis of Dücker's depiction of the negotiation of gender identities. 'Doing Gender' contradicts the hitherto assumed distinction between sex and gender as biological and social respectively, and considers both as socioculturally constructed. For West and Zimmerman, this construction presupposes discursively-produced heteronormativity (after Michel Foucault), as well as a fundamental two-sex structure. According to them, three levels can be identified in the analysis of this production of gender: sex, sex category and gender. The first level, sex, is the social classification of female or male, which is decided on the basis of biological criteria and is already determined at birth on the basis of the genitalia.⁵ The sex category, then, is defined as the application of this classification, and therefore is used in everyday life in order to fulfil the expectations corresponding to the biological sex determined socially at birth. Thus, most of the time, the sex category seems like the supposedly natural biological sex. According to West and Zimmerman, this categorization 'pretends to show the sex of a person',⁶ and is based on an "if-can"-test in everyday interaction. This test stipulates that if people can be seen as members of relevant categories, then categorize them that way'.⁷ The third level, gender, is the active and appropriate behaviour according to the sex category, and therefore a comportment adjusted to different situations in order to be acknowledged as belonging to one of the social genders:

[T]o be successful, marking or displaying gender must be finely fitted to situations and modified or transformed as the occasion demands. Doing gender consists of managing such occasions so that, whatever the particulars, the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender-appropriate or, as the case may be, gender-inappropriate, that is, *accountable*.⁸

The construction of gender is always embedded in interactions: it reciprocally depends on the coherent active behaviour and application of gender roles and, at the same time, on the successful categorisation by the recipient. Through these processes, gender is reproduced and manifested. 'Members of a society [could] never not produce gender, since society in all areas is shaped by the essential differences between man and woman and the placement in one gender category'.⁹ Gender, therefore, cannot be avoided.

⁴ See Gertrud Lehnert, *Wenn Frauen Männerkleidung tragen* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), p. 18.

⁵ See Nina Schuster, *Andere Räume* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), pp. 56-57.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 57.

⁷ West Candace and Don H. Zimmerman, 'Doing Gender', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1987), 125-151 (p. 133).

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 135. [Original italics].

⁹ Schuster, pp. 58-59.

Stefan Hirschauer describes how, through covering the sex organ - and therefore by simply covering nakedness - the importance of the genitalia is underlined and their constructed nature clearly emerges. In his opinion, this is the most subtle way of ‘mystification and symbolic charging of body parts’.¹⁰ Since the secondary sexual characteristics actually considered as fundamental are covered, other features have to be charged gender-specifically in order to render the biological sex - and therefore the sociocultural gender - visible for society.

According to the sociologist Erving Goffman, gender is represented and reproduced through culturally coined symbols, such as ‘names, gestures, postures, styles of speaking, voices, hairstyle and body representations through clothing’.¹¹ In this process, the vision and the observers’ view plays a decisive role, since their competence of recognition of gender specific features and behaviours is socially trained and considered natural.¹² For the attribution to a cultural gender, the experience and the foreknowledge of the observer play an important role since he (or she) is, in a complex process, able to identify the representation of gender as either authentic or inconsistent. Transsexuals challenge this competence by transcending this sign system through perceived incoherence and discrepancies, and therefore irritate dualistic patterns of thinking. Most notably, through the obviously imitative representation of gender characteristics and behaviours, their constructive nature is rendered visible.

The negotiation of gender identity by an individual is a lifelong process. The basis is created in early childhood, though, and subsequently, through the constant confrontation with the other sex and dominant gender discourses, it never reaches a stable state, but is subject to a continuous questioning in the course of a lifetime.¹³ Therefore, as Judith Butler has famously described it, there is an ‘illusion of an inner essence of gender’, an absence of a firm essence of identity, which is only constructed afterwards through performativity.¹⁴ The game with gender specific clothing can be considered in the context of the negotiation of gender identities, and, according to Gertrud Lehnert, indicates a liminal period in which the respective individuals stand.¹⁵ Cross-dressing represents a period of transition from one state to another and therefore depicts a state of identity disturbance with regard to dominant gender discourse. Dückers shows these phenomena through her protagonists. The characters of the Sonnenburger Street in the district of Prenzlauer Berg are between sixteen and twenty-five years old, and consider their life as a

¹⁰ Stefan Hirschauer, *Die soziale Konstruktion der Transsexualität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 26.

¹¹ Schuster, p. 60.

¹² See Hirschauer, p. 28.

¹³ See Lehnert, p. 25.

¹⁴ Hannelore Bublitz, *Judith Butler zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2010), p. 73.

¹⁵ Cf. Lehnert, *Wenn Frauen Männerkleidung tragen*, p. 15. Lehnert refers to Victor Turner’s definition of the liminal phase in *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982).

play-zone for experimenting with different existences. In this period of transition from adolescence to adulthood, they play with various gender identities, as reflected in the depiction of the spatial changes of the urban district.

In Dückers's novel, the depiction of gender identity through clothing is most prominent, and gender identities are challenged by excessive masquerade and cross-dressing. As mentioned before, the author thus shows the expression of a crisis of gender identity, which is negotiated through the change of exterior and gender-specific features, and especially through clothing. As Marjorie Garber stresses, 'the fascination of cross-dressing is clearly related to its status as signum for the constructive nature of the genders in terms of categories of the socially assigned and adopted'.¹⁶ What Garber criticises, however, with regard to existing analyses of transvestism is that transvestites, despite the emphasis on constructions, are always assigned to one of the supposedly natural genders and that no further category is established. Therefore, the two-gender structure persists and reproduces prevailing sociocultural norms.¹⁷ Garber especially criticises literary studies for this procedure which reproduces binary gender roles; and she emphasizes that transvestism especially questions binary gender constructions and thus highlights the demand for a third category.

Garber elucidates this so-called Third by referring to Lacan's symbolic. Lacan established this third category as an additional dimension to the Real and the Imaginary and therefore, as a further discourse of reference apart from the relation to the own mirror image, which the individual has to fit into. With this, Lacan refers to 'the immersion into codes and constraints of culture', which is constantly renegotiated through political change or historical developments, and which may question binary categories: 'This disturbance, this unsettling act of questioning is exactly the position and the role of the transvestite'.¹⁸ Dückers appropriately reflects this questioning in her novel since the Prenzlauer Berg district, due to its state of construction, promises exactly this: the experiment with new existences and the questioning of old patterns. As one of the protagonists stresses, at the Prenzlauer Berg 'every mirror image '[is] new, every day one's own identity has shifted a centimetre further. And in the evening it is not adjusted, but only displaced a bit more' (SZ, 97).

The young protagonists in Prenzlauer Berg question the sociocultural order of genders and demonstrate the constructedness of gender roles in a playful way. In search of new gender

¹⁶ Marjorie Garber, *Verhüllte Interessen. Transvestismus und kulturelle Angst* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993), p. 21.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

-specific forms of being, they experiment with different costuming, as does, for example, the young protagonist Nils, who dresses up like a girl:

Today, he dressed up like a girl, with silver stretch trousers, a belly top, a little pigtail with lady beetle bobby pins and light red painted lips. Under the top, there are two oranges, actually too big for his dainty body.¹⁹

When the neighbour amicably asks him who he is, he answers: ‘I am a human being dressed up as a woman’; this shows that the adolescents in Dücker’s depiction are aware of the construction of gender roles and get back to the seemingly common basic category of human being (SZ, 124). Dücker demonstrates that, for the hip milieu of the youngsters, a denaturalisation of gender roles has taken place. They have been suspended in order to be newly defined. Especially through the exaggerated disguise as woman, which obviously and consciously lacks authenticity, the incongruence and therefore the constructedness of the established category woman is made visible. But the fact that a young man describes himself as a human being and un masks the category ‘woman’ as construct, and not the other way round, points to the conventional privileging of the male, as I will explain further later on.

Dücker’s following representation makes clear that the categories woman and man do not fit the lifestyle of the adolescents anymore:

‘You really look old-fashioned today... like a real man’, Kiki says, pulls Felix’ beard and laughs. ‘Yes, I once again felt like dressing up as a man’, he replies and smiles charmingly. [...] ‘Have you just attended an evening class in classic femininity?’ he asks twinkling.²⁰

In the milieu of the youngsters, the binary gender categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are therefore considered as outdated and as mere carnivalesque costumes, with which they are experimenting in their play zone at Prenzlauer Berg. For their negotiation of gender identity, they go back to existing categories and try to break away from them in order to find the Other, as outlined by Marjorie Garber. For Dücker’s characters, the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are fashion phenomena, which at their time are already outmoded: ‘I don’t think that women with hips and breasts will be fashionable again’ (SZ, 134), one of the (female) protagonists claims. Thereupon, her friend answers: ‘Yes, [...] I think so, too, that women will be completely abolished. The current fashion turns men into boys, though women not into girls, but into boys, too’ (SZ, 34). Now, the new gender category which is introduced by the young people is the ‘young man’, who is supposed to replace both ‘woman’ and ‘man’. In order to fulfil this category, the youngsters do not only accomplish a change of their clothing style, but also try to physically adapt to the new category. The girls accomplish this through so-called ‘binding’ (SZ, 135), which means that they bind off their breasts - which imply conventional femininity. In this context, the category ‘young

¹⁹ Dücker, *Spielzone*, p. 124.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 130.

man' could be interpreted as the Third mentioned before, but it does exactly confirm Garber's criticism, which accuses literary studies as always allocating new categories to one of the existing genders. A young man can be considered as a human being before the complete development of a sociocultural gender identity, but the concept 'young man' as new gender role does neither socioculturally nor linguistically break away from existing categories, and therefore does not establish an independent third category. In this way, Dückers conveys the difficulties of a detachment and a complete denaturalisation of existing gender categories and shows that renegotiations of gender identity to date can only go back to existing categories.

The act of experimenting in Dückers' novel, though, is not exclusively reduced to clothing features, but also expresses itself through a violent change of the body and therefore an intended self-mutilation. For the young woman, Ada, her body is a burden, which society has imposed on her through gender roles being based on physical features. When she is faced with the feelings of a young mother, who describes her new role as 'a new dimension of being a woman', and puts her baby on her big breast in front of Ada's eyes, Ada is overcome by disgust for her own supposedly female breast. The perception that for the young mother her breast is 'not only a curved part of her body, which one does not necessarily have to like, but something magnificent, a privilege', causes Ada to take a knife and cut off her nipple within seconds (SZ, 125). After a subsequent stay in hospital, she organises a big party in celebration of the symbolic loss of her breast. She is happy about her decision since, at the same time, she has also removed a societal constraint and has therefore come closer to her supposed self. Relieved, she says about her missing left nipple, which symbolically stands for the breast: 'From the left like a boy, from the right like a girl, and in the middle it's me' (SZ, 128). This act of brutal self-mutilation is a sign of a desperate attempt of self-discovery free from the prevailing gender discourse and its binary gender roles established by society, because bodies 'without culture do not possess any meaning'.²¹ Thus, Ada perceives her body as a 'masking of her "actual" self', and through self-mutilation experiences a de-masking and revelation of an identity, which is traditionally attributed to the human being as a solid essence.²² Therefore, she also constitutes her body as a liminal zone, like the district in Berlin, as a kind of construction site, which still has to find its own expression and personality.

According to Gertrud Lehnert, the act of transvestism can have several motives which always have to be considered in their cultural and historical context.²³ Hence, for a long time, wearing male connoted pieces of clothing due to gender-specific relations of power meant power and liberty for women and thus, ultimately, once more represented the superiority of men.

²¹ Lehnert, p. 24.

²² *ibid.*, p. 36.

²³ See *ibid.*, p. 15.

The public perception of gender representations is also dependant on localities and spaces where more or less strict gender separations are practiced.²⁴ This theme, too, can be found in Dückers's novel; in the district Neukölln, which is further removed from educated and intellectual classes, the means of cross-dressing is applied by the student Katharina in order to escape from physical and verbal attacks by men in a space characterised by anxiety—Thomas Street. She dresses as a man and therefore feels safer on the streets in the evening:

That's why I sometimes wear the pinstripe suit from the flea market, put the pinned-up hat under a cap and stick on the small brown moustache which matches my skin colour. Like this they leave me in peace.²⁵

With this depiction of cross-dressing, Dückers's novel can be related to many other literary texts in which women dress as men in order to gain more mobility in public.²⁶ But with these depictions of women gaining power through male clothing, the two-gender system is considered as natural and both the biological and social gender are accepted without being questioned:

That means that they [the men dressed up as women] assume the duality of gender and a clear separable identity, they exactly differ between appearance and reality and know or believe to know that they have to be classed among the side of appearance.²⁷

In the socially problematic district Neukölln, dualistic patterns of thinking are therefore reproduced and inscribed and thus contrast the attempt of a dissolution of gender roles through the game of the youngsters at Prenzlauer Berg. In order to escape the sexist attacks, and driven by a desire for a new beginning, Katharina moves away from Neukölln, shortly after the scene previously described, to the promising district of Prenzlauer Berg, since in Neukölln 'for being a woman she constantly has to endure offenses' (SZ, 100). In contrast to the traditional patterns of thinking in Neukölln, the adolescents in the milieu of Prenzlauer Berg, as I have said, reveal the status of constructedness of biological and social genders and try to break open binary concepts. But eventually the student, Katharina, after having settled at Prenzlauer Berg, is shown to realise that even there it does not completely work out to break with the old paradigms:

Actually [...] I do not live here in a much different way than in Thomas Street either [...]. Both districts are somehow a kind of play area for overwrought and weird existences and in this bear a resemblance to each other.²⁸

Through costumes, it is possible to make the state of construction of the categories sex and gender visible and, in addition, masquerade can reveal prevailing relations of power.²⁹

²⁴ See Hirschauer, pp. 34-35.

²⁵ Dückers, *Spielzone*, p. 100.

²⁶ See Lehnert, pp. 39-110.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁸ Dückers, *Spielzone*, p. 156.

Clothing produces certain social orders, which can also be subverted exactly through this. The protagonists at Prenzlauer Berg, with their play with masquerades, transcend conventional constructions of two-gender systems and thereby irritate dualistic patterns of thinking. The prevailing discourse of power is seemingly eliminated through the deconstruction of gender roles and is suspended by the detachment from the prevailing and conventional dress code. But this game does not completely work out since, with the recourse to the young man as the new fashionable gender, the sociocultural gender of 'man' is reproduced and further on inscribed as the supposedly only normative gender. The female is dissolved at the expense of brutal self-mutilation and depicted as old-fashioned, and therefore manifests all the more the subject position and superiority of men. Even if the adolescents question conventional gender roles, in the first instance, the prevailing discourse of power seems to persist even in the experimental grey-zone Prenzlauer Berg. Tanja Dückers, with her depiction of the young protagonists, demonstrates the difficulty of a change of paradigms in the area of gender constructions. However, the attempt at a subversion of existing gender roles expressed as aesthetic differentiation through clothing shows that Dückers opens a problem area at Prenzlauer Berg which moves towards a breaking up of traditional gender roles.

Coming back to Butler's analysis of the illusion of an essential identity, the experiment in the period of spatial and identity transition is one without an end, since masquerade is to 'be located in a spiral without beginning and end [...]: not as a static condition'.³⁰ This experiment shown in Dückers's debut is therefore the perpetual centre of a process, which henceforth develops further. While in the Neukölln district asymmetrical relations of gender are expected and considered as natural, at Prenzlauer Berg one can observe a game with categories, a consciousness about their constructedness and a first attempt at establishing new gender paradigms.

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²⁹ See Lehnert, p. 13.

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