THE LURE OF THE ABYSS

ON MARIA MORITZ' PAINTINGS AND THE STAGING OF THE CREATURELY

„König Nußknacker, so heiß' ich, harte Nüsse, die zerbeiß' ich. Süße Kerne schluck' ich fleißig, doch die Schalen, ei, die schmeiß' ich lieber andern hin, weil ich König bin."

- E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Nussknacker und Mausekönig* (1816)

IN THE SCHLUND OF PLEASURE

In a still from Ulrike Ottinger's 2007 documentary *Prater*, a woman with shoulder-length, light brown hair stands in front of a painted jungle scene. She wears a light blue, slightly draped top and black pants. Beside her, a large monkey painted on the wall, with brown fur, wide-open maw, and eyes, looks towards the camera. With its gaping mouth, it bares its fierce teeth, and its eyes seem on the verge of popping out of their sockets. The image plays with an optical illusion: at first glance, it seems as if the woman is placing her hand on the monkey's chest. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the hand is painted as part of the background. The woman's real hand is in her pocket, creating an illusion that blurs the boundary between reality and painting, a gesture that plays a significant role in Maria Moritz's works as well. The woman stands relaxed next to the painted monkey, slightly leaning on her hip. Her posture appears calm, almost casual, while the illusion of the painted hand suggests a direct touch with the monkey. She remains distant yet ironically plays with the painted scene. Her facial expression is serene, almost neutral, without visible surprise or fear in the face of the dramatically wide-open mouth of the monkey. In doing so, she consciously subverts both the theatrical impact and immersive quality of the depiction.

The bodies of visitors who position themselves for a photo with the monkey do not experience a real crossing of boundaries; instead, they exchange this experience for a tourist pleasure - the feeling of real engagement is replaced by a placebo. Like a Gorgon, the painted monkey guards the palm-lined background but is only used as a monster to challenge people to stand next to it, thereby distorting themselves as part of an alienated whole. However, the woman in the film still is not an unknown figure but rather the writer Elfriede Jelinek, who wrote about her childhood memories of the world's oldest amusement park, the Prater in Vienna, for Ottinger's film. The Prater, as a document of history since 1825 (also known at times as the *Wurstelprater*), with its rigid, mechanical automatons, is brought to life and questioned by Ottinger's cinematography. Jelinek confirms my assumption regarding the function of the monkey in her contribution to the film: "Da waren also die Buntheit und Vielfachheit all der Pratergeräte, nur dazu da, benutzt zu werden, als Geräte, dazu vorhanden, um den Benutzern etwas zu eröffnen, das die Benutzer, Menschen, Kinder, Erwachsene, immer wieder wie neu erscheinen lassen konnte, auch wenn sie immer wieder die Alten waren, wenn sie davon herunterstiegen oder daraus hervor kamen, diese Vervielfältigungsmöglichkeiten […]".

Power and domination are the themes Ottinger addresses in her documentary film on both familial and societal levels. The latter, particularly in regard to the connection between the entertainment industry and colonialism - entire populations were torn from their homelands, shipped, and exhibited to serve Western society as entertainment. In Prater, we encounter Schlünde of various attractions that open and close in an unchanging rhythm, decorating the rides or consuming visitors only to later spit them out. Ottinger's camera eye stages the mechanics of the Schlünde through angles and perspectives from which a new orchestra of fear emerges. It brings the mechanical Schlünde close, whose breath may be a little dusty, yet precisely for that reason, they fascinate the viewers. For, as Jelinek also writes elsewhere, the amusement park was ultimately a place for demonstrating modern technology. Ottinger consciously

image, we may find a counteracting, if not perverted, motion to the King Kong composition, for, as dangerous as the Schlund may be, it holds a fantastic allure through the potentiality of a new, other, and surprising space it can open up - and in the case of Pinocchio, it ends in safety.

ALMOST AMORPHOUS YET RIGID

Queer sexual fantasy and transgression are two of the major themes in the paintings of Toyen (1902-1980). Toyen's late surrealist work, although less explicit than her early erotic pieces, develops a subtle yet intensely sensual visual language characterized by motifs such as labia, tongues, and vaginal openings. In Toyen's *Minuit, l'heure blasonée / Midnight, the Armed Hour* (1961), there is a theatrical atmosphere between eroticism, dream logic, and threat. Here too, we encounter the play between the animalistic and the abstract, the fluid. An indeterminate, hybrid creature with dark eyes lies on a red surface, beside it rests a lion with its head lowered. On the left, a ghostly, almost formless figure appears, resembling a wave or veil, stretching into the image with its large opening. In the background, a glowing, organic shape in neon pink opens up, resembling another gate, a tear in space, or an erotic cipher. The soft, rounded forms evoke a vulva-like structure. At the same time, this throat-like form also carries an uncanny quality. It is not a clearly defined place, but a vibrating, almost immaterial presence, and thus, it could just as easily devour as invite. The image operates in a similar color spectrum as Moritz's works, with ambiguities between presence and absence, desire and mystery. Toyen's work is often infused with queer corporeality, and here, a symbol of fluid, uncanny desire seems to unfold. The contrast with the other figures is intriguing: the resting lion seems sleepy or resigned, and the ghostly figure on the left appears to dissolve. In this scene, the glowing Schlund becomes a paradoxical center - it radiates energy while everything else sinks into darkness or a dreamlike state. The stage and curtains also point to the aspect of staging, a play between visibility and the hidden, which also plays an important role in Moritz's works. But who is the actor, and who is the spectator? The lion and the demon in the foreground are present but passive. The pink opening dominates the image, but is it the subject or the projection? Like in Moritz's Schlund paintings, we also find in Toyen's work the exciting simultaneity of an attractive, lustful, and dangerous pull. Toyen integrates another component in the image that may be unlocked in Moritz's works through the positioning of the canvases and the positioning of visitors in between, ,,between the teeth'': Toyen's symbolic figures of the human psyche show frozen, surrendered beings, like the lion, which is usually read as powerful. While the glowing Schlund suggests a kind of vibrating movement, the other figures seem to remain in a state of waiting, sleeping, or even dissolving, creating a simultaneity of dissolution and rigidity in the image - a reality that perhaps, in the present, is more familiar to us than we would like to admit.

IN THE INTERSTITIAL OSCILLATION

In *Schlund I*, the saber-tooth tiger's tusks curve toward a cave-like entrance. In their unnatural bend, they form a gate. We do not see other teeth (which only appear in *Schlund II*), nor the corresponding head. The saber-tooth tiger has long been extinct, thus opening up a fictional space. Like the flicker in Stevie Wayne's description of the fog from *The Fog*, Maria Moritz has applied a glow to the two tusks of the tiger, one glowing bluish and the other fluorescent pink. They have a similar magical allure to the illuminated blue and red tones of a full moon in the sky, which might bring both sleepless nights, nervousness, and unrest as well as longing romance. Both could also be present during an imaginative

chose to intertwine the past and present cinematographically into a kaleidoscope, and where better for this connection to occur than in this transitional space of pleasure, between desires and consumption? Jelinek ironically poses confidently next to the monkey while, in the painting she partially obscures, an erotic scene of absurd love between a woman and a wild animal plays out. This ultimately feels far less dangerous than the racist content of the various King Kong film adaptations, the first of which was shown in cinemas in 1933. The Schlünde in Ottinger‘s staging of the Prater, which here serves as a model version of an entire society, manifest such tipping moments and ambivalences of the entertainment industry. Pleasure at the expense of others is frozen in time in the Prater, as a topos of a bygone era, in the entertainment machines, and through the film, it is catapulted into the present, into a late capitalist society whose existence is based on exploitation. Like a reflux, Ottinger’s film treatment flushes the undigested history into the present and raises the question of who or what actually represents the uncanny - the automatons or the people?

Another camera shot from *Prater* shows the face and busy claws of a vile monster with vampire teeth, while the motorized clicking and clattering of the machine‘s gears already lull me into a trance. Indeed, this perspective from the visitor’s viewpoint may seem realistic, but Ottinger achieves abstraction by employing a seemingly monochromatic background and the absence of the rest of the amusement park. With the idea of the undigested, the illusory, and such an abstraction of or with the figurative, we come closer to the work of Maria Moritz, whose playful character also contains its deceptive moments.

THE FEAR OF FORMLESSNESS

In John Carpenter’s atmospheric horror film *The Fog* (1980), it is the repressed history of an entire island community that strikes back in the form of dense fog and swallows the village within two days. On one of the movie posters, a woman with wide-open eyes and hair standing on end extends her Schlund towards us. Her eyebrows are perfectly shaped, her black eyeliner accentuates her huge eyes, whose pupils draw towards her nose. She wears red lipstick. Her teeth are perfectly aligned, and between them, her tongue is exposed, its two bumps taking on a nearly tangible texture through the bright red coloring. Her sharply defined cheekbones frame her open, red lips, and her somewhat stylized, excessively symmetrical expression of horror doesn’t make me shudder, but rather leaves me stunned. ‘‘Fog of Horror’’ is the subtitle, with ‘‘Fog’’ written in bloodstained letters, as the chin of the woman’s intact head disappears in a white glowing light from a lighthouse. This glimmer is described in the film by radio announcer Stevie Wayne from the lighthouse: ‘‘This is going to sound a little bit strange, but I saw the fog last night out in the ocean in the distance. It was - glowing.’’ In this statement lies the entire paradox of the cinematic atmosphere, which Carpenter masterfully constructs in The Fog: The fascination with the threatening, the allure of the Other and the inevitable doom, the almost sweet scent of revenge.

OCEANS

From your question one might pick out two phrases: first, „Who comes after the subject?“ the „who“ perhaps already pointing toward a grammar that would no longer be subjected to the subject; and, second, „a prevalent discourse of recent date concludes with its [the subject‘s] simple liquidation.”

- Jacques Derrida

Open maws, the fear of being swallowed or consumed, also remind us of narratives and images surrounding Moby Dick and Pinocchio. Moby Dick swallowed the leg of a sailor, while the sea monster in Pinocchio consumed an entire boat, along with Pinocchio‘s creator, Master Geppetto. A Pinocchio caught in the throat dwells in Efteling, an amusement park that, much like Vienna’s Prater, shelters animatronic relics lost in time. Pinocchio then ventures into the monster‘s Schlund to find his creator. One such Schlund, as depicted in Pinocchio, resembles the dark abyss of the whale, which is far less constricting than the snake’s interior or the toxic stomach acids. In contrast, the whale or, in Pinocchio’s case, the sea monster Monstro, offers a vast, airy space, where Geppetto even sets up a table, as Monstro not only swallows people but an entire boat in one motion. The journey through the whale‘s Schlund differs fundamentally from that through a birth canal. It does not unsettle by oppressive tightness or the enormous exertion required to escape; rather, it is the immense size of the opening, the all-encompassing totality of the giant mouth that only needs to open effortlessly to take in whatever comes its way. In this

excursion into the throat. The transcendental coloring in *Schlund I* has a similarly potent effect on the viewer as moonlight on moths. On the pink-tinged tooth side, which highlights the tooth's interior from a grayish outer layer to a yellowish highlight, the transition to the palate positioned centrally at the top, from reddish purple to rust brown into the bluish Schlund, seems effortless. One would only need to fall into the abyss of the Schlund, the entrance of which is formed by the palate. The tongue, also in a red tone, supports this movement: it rests between the teeth like a pillow, so that the view into the ''rabbit hole'' behind may feel like a gently cloudy trip as long as one stays on the tongue. The tongue is in the same aubergine color as the monochrome area that surrounds the teeth.

Moritz's color palette is consistently unnatural - even the darkness shifts in various shades - and thus, the violet spilling over the canvas integrates into this almost spiritual color space. One could read the mouth opening as a horizon, where the tongue resembles an ocean, over which, instead of a setting sun, a mysterious abyss awaits, which, however, is not the end of a flat disc, but the entrance to something new, unknown, and also a bit dangerous. Moritz places the viewer between *Schlund I* and *Schlund II*, and thus between the teeth, in the jaws of the predator, in a ''danger zone.'' The experience of boundary dissolution in *Schlund I* is disturbed by a blood-red spot resting on the left tooth tip and also by a blood-red drop falling into the vast purple area in the center of the image. The glowing world that Moritz opens for us, in my opinion, is more akin to the old animatronics in the Prater in Vienna and Efteling than to the far more color-similar worlds from films like Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012), or even more so to the fantastic scene from *Love Lies Bleeding* (2024), where Jackie turns into a giant and walks through a starry sky - a projection of her all-encompassing physical strength that she has developed. Moritz is less concerned with such massive actions as crushing, but rather with the play between (in)visibility of undigested and possibly spit-out subjects. An unfinished incorporation, which perhaps also reveals a comment on the painting process itself, where it becomes an experience of the throat by the painter herself - a losing oneself in matter, layers, compressions, and its unveiling through the invitation to position oneself in the exhibition space between the tiger's teeth. Painting then becomes the embodiment of a state rather than a representative function, inviting viewers to experience their own moment within or between this painted space. By staging the Schlund as a spatial experience in the gallery space, it unfolds through the positioning of bodies in the room, and these bodies become part of the picture space. The figurative aspect of the image thus dissolves towards the edge of the image into an abstract formlessness. The moment of the threshold is not only an image content but is activated by movement in the space - the body enters an in-between space that incorporates it. In this space, an oscillating stillness is experienced, a lingering in the uncertainty of how this situation will resolve.

The monkey in the *Prater* cannot be so easily removed from its cultural context, from its cinematic past, and its silent, but threatening presence is intersected by Ottinger's camera in a mechanical way with the modern subject. In a similarly mechanical movement, Moritz succeeds in translating the boundary experience and possibly the associated greed and pleasure in relation to the Schlund into an abstract space that opens up the possibility for a reworked version of incorporation in pure presence form, allowing for new, undigested projections, desires, and fears. And I am left with the question, what is this intermediate state in the throat, when we are now so omnipresently served the abysses and ecstasies of a society on a plate, if not an uncontrollable emptiness, a large field of color that meets me on an affective level? That happens to me?