# Traversing the phantasm

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Lecture, 13.2.2016, Akademie der Künste, Berlin (Forum Expanded: Traversing the Phantasm)

According to the curators the title "Traversing the phantasm" refers to the specific capabilities in experimental film, video or film installations to traverse or to transit real and imaginary spaces, or more precisely to interfere into the intrinsic connectivity in between real and imaginary spaces as they appear within nationalist, patriarchal, or capitalist rhetorics all around the world. The real in this sense is always already coded with meaning or overdetermined by fantasy. Borders e.g. do not simply limit real territories, they also frame a state of mind, thus creating identities, feelings of belonging and not-belonging, which in turn justify concrete politics of inclusion and exclusion. Imagined communities and imagined threats are going hand in hand with seductive images and political rhetorics. We can see that in the media every day. To deconstruct those images, phantasies and rhetorics therefore seems indeed to be of utmost importance, as well as the insistence on moments of resistance and reflection on the limitations of nationalist and patriarchal class cultures. (The creation of nationalist narratives is an ongoing topic in many films)

However, in experiencing the Forum Expanded we are probably not only <u>engaged</u> in watching <u>engaged</u> works of art opening our eyes about the illusions of the others, motivating or mobilizing our inertial selves in order to rationally decode the "fundamental phantasm", and thus offering secure ground to our own understanding of reality, of the political value system we want to promote and finally, of film as an exemplary medium of worldliness, as a sort of world language which translates every local idiom into common understanding. It might be way more uncanny.

The title "Traversing the phantasm" is probably not just a recipe for a rationalist understanding of aesthetics and politics; it is first of all a quote from the famous French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, - and that already should make us cautious - who coined that phrase in the late 1950s within the context of his structuralist re-definition of psychoanalysis. Within that endeavor the term phantasm plays a crucial role, translating Freud's term phantasy with the Platonic "phantasm", an illusionary image of the idea, and thus creating a French neologism. (translations ..) If phantasy

in Freud was still conceived strictly as individual, unconscious wish fulfillment attributed mainly to children, neurotics, and poets – and that means there is still a place for a rational, grown up male who might be able to hold control over phantasy -, the phantasm now became a complex psycho-social arrangement in which precisely that place is contested as the biggest phantasy of all. Whereas in Freud there is still a possibility for an agent performing some sort of rational aesthetics or politics in the tradition of the Enlightenment, in Lacan precisely that position becomes impossible. Lacan envisions the material, psycho-social arrangement of phantasm as a sort of cinematic "scene in which an unconscious desire is shown." The agent here is not the ego but the "subject of the unconscious", the unconscious desire working itself like an uncanny director, arranging the phantasies/images of what we desire as reality in a specific way. This specific way is mapped out by the symbolic order. That means, according to that symbolic order the phantasmatic images of reality are arranged around what Lacan calls the "Real". The Real, being the lack, castration, or the big Other, defines what cannot be symbolized. (Sorry for bothering you with all that Lacanian terminology, you might either find highly mysterious or all too familiar already. It is just important here to give you an idea of this specifically cinematic view of the psyche, which holds a prominent place within the connections between film and psychoanalysis like dream work and editing or mirror stage and cinematic apparatus) The phantasm therefor protects the Real, or protects us from the Real, and lulls us categorially within the imaginary world of unconscious desires working strongly within the ideals of political, particularly humanitarian activism e.g. in trying to save the world. That is why Lacan could only ridicule the students from 1968.

This strictly defensive definition of the phantasm in Lacan allows for no abrogation or sublation. The phantasm cannot be sussed out or unmasked like ideology. It can only be "traversed," which is nothing more than staggering from one phantasm to another. Until nowadays under Lacanians it is highly disputed what Lacan really meant by that phrase. Clinical Lacanians mainly argue for a "demolition of the ideals" represented within phantasms; Slavoj Zizek however, seeks to break-through the phantasies in order to penetrate into the "core of enjoyment". In the 1980s Thanos Lipowatz had already suggested that there might be a way of "coming to terms" with phantasms, especially in confronting their denial of the Political. Recently, Samo Tomsic, following the late Lacan, also offered a similar reading focused on a Political

Unconscious, founded not in the structural and material givens of language but in the Marxian Value form.

However, I cannot decide here for you, which might be the correct interpretation. I'm not even a Lacanian myself, and all those attempts imply some sort of insight into the Real or some sort of rational subject position in order to strive for all those goals. (I have to want to break through and to achieve pure enjoyment, but that means I do not have it in the moment) Contradictions seem unavoidable, at least as long as we stick to the strictly defensive definition of Phantasm. Because how can I even perceive something as phantasmatic, how can "I" traverse phantasms with the means of psychoanalysis, art, film, or politics, if the phantasms are always already traversing me, when my ego always already has a heavy phantasmatic charge? What does my ego tell me then? There seems to be no easy way out, and the phrase "traversing the phantasm" appears more as a trap than a strategical device.

There is however a less defensive and way more ambivalent take on phantasies within psychoanalysis. Melanie Klein e.g. had focused her interest mainly on the process of differentiating between phantasy and reality. Only by continuously comparing them can phantasy and reality be distinguished from one another. Thus, the rational insight into reality is not a given capability – like in the tradition of a philosophy of consciousness -, but something which is continuously on the move. Something has to be rejected as phantasy in order to claim it as reality. Thus reality remains dependent on phantasy. And this process of comparing and adjusting necessarily involves disappointment and frustration; it is the "depressive position" within which reality gains its right. So we have to endure depression in order to accept and conceive something as a reality. But obviously we cannot endure depression too long, and that is why we need phantasy again. Here we can clearly see the productive function of phantasy. It implies a lifelong process which is not limited to children, neurotics and poets. It is also valid for grownups, it even concerns the very process of maturation. (And it also concerns guilt, because phantasies are far from being harmless games; they are essentially highly aggressive and destructive impulses directed against those objects who imaginatively have rejected the wish-fulfillment.)

The psychoanalytic Ego which shows up here is therefore neither a Kantian transcendental subject nor a Lacanian Subject of the Unconscious. It remains radically empirical, because only within that process of differentiation between phantasy and reality, between enjoyment and frustration it constitutes itself. Within this perspective authorial positions in art, filmmaking, politics and theory are possible to envision, but these positions cannot be trusted once and forever in terms of canonical authority. They are rather fragile, constantly in flux, and will never achieve salvation neither in phantasy nor in reality. The running room or margin of these positions can only be the ambivalence in between a defensive and a productive understanding of phantasms, but also in between the way they hide or protect something (the Real) and the way they reveal something. Because as in the symptom in phantasy what is supposed to be hidden appears in a distorted way. (Freud) In this sense the phantasm always already seems to imply the critique of itself, which sets boundaries for it in the name of a sphere called reality. Which does not protect neither the critique nor the reality from itself becoming a phantasy. Following that kind of ambivalence Zizek has shown in his early work ("The Plague of Phantasms"), phantasms are already waiting for the decrypting, critical gaze. Critique, thus is virtually present in phantasm, and that to me seems to be the crucial point in Zizeks amazing readings of Popular Culture.

These readings of Klein and Zizek not only name the defensive as well as the productive sides of the phantasm, of phantasy and reality, but also the reciprocally constitutive function of masquerade and critique. In this sense there is always already something critical rooted within phantasms, and something phantasmatic in critique. The processes of mutual delegation, of projection and introjection between ego positions, between ideals and material conditions, and in between different normative horizons, could thus be considered the starting point for a Post-Kleinian position. And what I am suggesting here is indeed a Post-Kleinian position reframing the Lacanian proposition in terms of an inter-subjective, inter-objective and inter-normative direction, and thus giving the phrase "traversing the phantasm" a more concrete meaning. What happens when one phantasm meets another one, or one structural or material condition of articulation (as everyday language, as theoretical language, as artistic or filmic language) is confronted with another one, or one value system hits another one? The inter-subjective, inter-objective and inter-normative

dimensions of the psyche refer to what is discussed in recent years as the "networked soul" in opposition to the strictly one person-centered psychology of classical Psychoanalysis. This networked soul however should not be confused with the networks social media provide; way more likely it refers to what is discussed within postcolonial theory as "entangled histories". So my main argument here will be that Forum Expanded confronts us with "entangled phantasms" on an inter-subjective, inter-objective and inter-normative level.

Now, how can we relate that argument towards the concrete artistic, filmic or cinematic practices and the curatorial decisions which are here at play? What can "traversing the phantasm" mean in terms of authorial positions, artistic practices and political ambitions, especially when traversing is supposed to mean traversing in between multiple and entangled phantasms?

First of all, it has to be stated that such entangled phantasms can neither be intentionally shaped (at least not completely controlled) nor fundamentally overcome; to a certain degree we find ourselves always already at their mercy. They also cannot be located in the Other and dealt with there, because this Other is always already present in one's own self. But neither can the phantasm close itself off like some sort of perfectly manipulated world, precisely because it always already contains a moment of difference and of critique, without which it cannot be phantasmatic. Expectation and disappointment thus characterize the two sides that drive it in their interplay, but between which it is also possible to navigate. It is thus neither a matter of a purely distanced attitude nor of an immersive submergence; exposing oneself to the ambivalence of phantasy and reality, distance and proximity, defense and critique becomes the requirement for being able to rework the structures and dynamics of the phantasmatic.

Whereas in classical avant-garde film the camera could enter or the Real (in Dziga Vertov e.g.), presuming a clear difference between inside and outside, there is no such "penetration" (in Benjamin's words) possible today, but also no pure documentation or narration of the Real. Images, codes, and phantasmatic dimensions are always already there; the starting point is always from within as you can see e.g. in Sandra Schäfers work "Mleeta" which not only "documents" a highly

phantasmatic reality – a war site in the Lebanon becoming a propaganda-museum, she also confronts the extremely manipulating scenario and the non-less manipulating media footage with the manipulating work of her own film editing, thus forcing us as viewers into a constant negotiation of our subjectivities, objectives and norms. But in all works content levels, formal means, formats, genre and media decisions seem to be permanently in flux. Still, there is the documentary, the dramaturgical, the experimental, and even the narrative image in use. Their sense, however, does not lie in the strict definition of a category, which would incorporate the phantasmatic truth, but in their structural relation to one another in the differential of the image forms towards each other. Precisely in the overlapping between narration and documentation, between dramaturgy and experimental coding the arsenal of formal "traversing" can thrive: in the non-identity of image and sound, image and text, illustration and reality, content and media, without these non-identities becoming identical in turn themselves. In a similar way, references are made to genres like horror or the war movie without being absorbed in them.

Crucially important on the content level seems to be focus on what we could call the "media of the phantasmatic". The term media here does not simply mean the media image, but the interfaces at which the images are anchored in the structure of the symbolic order. Many films or projects focus on the archive or the museum, the territory or the border, the weapons of war and those of imagination. They all can be considered as interfaces where the phantasms of history, nation, and art cross. The *tactics of traversing* here come into play. In Angela Melitopoulos work "The Refrain" we not only see a documentary of militant practices of singing; we rather experience a complex cycle of references. Referring to the term "Ritornello", Deleuze and Guattari in Mille Plateaux had taken from classical musical theory in order to describe a historically specific tactical maneuver (1837), this tactical trope is brought back to music, but to music with a very specific political and tactical coding. The repetitive structure of the songs thus generates not only identity but also difference not only towards the military personnel, but also towards us as the viewers having to balance the empathy towards the resistant practices and the factual distance from them.

At the installational or situative level as well, no simple "resolution" of the film image in space takes place. The immersive film space here does not extend into lounge-like

relaxed participation and acclamation – in the tradition of the Expanded Cinema. Instead, within and also between the individual works, intersections arise that do not simply mediate between the curatorial selection, the individual authorial ego and a curious audience. All mediation breaks down in the constitutive overlapping of technical, artistic, and psychic projections and introjections. In Kader Attia's work "Reason's Oxymorons" not only documentary and installative form are fused; The inter-subjective encounter in between the different talking heads as well as between the talking heads/informants and the audience is always already accompanied by an inter-objective layer, referring to different encodings of language and speaking, altogether referring essentially to the inter-normative dimension of extremely different value horizons concerning ideas of madness in European and African Cultures. If you want to focus on one of the interviews, the others are continuing in your back. You can try to turn around to grasp them all, but they seem to jump from one monitor to the next one, or to duplicate. There is no safe place foreseen here for a distant viewing experience in terms of a rational aesthetic experience or politic judgement. Rather, a structural unsettledness seems to thrive, constantly provoking the identitarian drive of one's own phantasms.

As in many other works reference and the situational do not resolve here the tension between expectation and disappointment. For the viewer it is a matter of constantly linking images with the structural forms of their coming-into-being, and this might be quite frustrating. There is no reconciliation between the content and its appearance, between the authorial position and the reflexive experience of the viewer, between desire and its depressive completion. Instead of refining the phantasmatic in favor of one or the other of its sides, it is addressed in its relational form, as a special form of structurally connecting contents and speaking positions, forms and presentations, authorship and reception. If phantasms fundamentally cannot be overcome, they still can be placed in contrast to one another. In doing so the economic, cultural, and political transfer can also be traced, and the transversal dynamics of the agents can be made visible, situating the very viewer directly within the dynamics of social, material and normative difference.

However, there will be no pure fulfillment in tracing or mapping the entanglement either. Today, Unconscious fantasies are not only related to ideals of wholeness,

synthesis, autonomy, identity, and similarity any more. After more than a hundred years of film history, of ever more refined editing techniques and dramaturgical effectiveness, phantasms can also encounter the fragmentary, the estranged, heteronomy, and difference. Difference, thus will not redeem us from identity, or the fragmentary from the totality. Phantasms will categorially escape our attempts to catch them. We can only expose ourselves to them, balancing their critical and masquerading sides. They can't be grasped by willful acts, but they must be willed in order to be failed. And this will to failure we could call Resistance, Autonomy, or Art.