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(Extra)Ordinary Presence

Social Configurations and Cultural Repertoires

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Taking its cue from contemporary western debates on presence in the social sciences and the humanities, this volume focuses on 'presence' both as everyday experience and as an experience of intense moments. It raises questions about diverse social configurations of presence as well as about the specific cultural repertoires which encode, articulate, and shape discourses of presence. The contributions take as a premise that phenomena of presence are connected to particular forms of knowledge. Especially tacit knowledge (pre)determines experiences of individual and collective presence and becomes tangible in moments of presence or presentification.

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Heike Paul

INTRODUCTION

I.

“I heard a Fly buzz – when I died.” Thus opens Emily Dickinson’s poem no. 465, one of many in her oeuvre to center on death as perhaps the ultimate experience of presence turning into absence (and vice versa). The poem superbly captures the tension between ordinary and extraordinary presence in this one single line: it undercuts the pathos and somberness of conventional religious deathbed poetry by interjecting a fly, i.e. an ordinary, contingent presence, into the speaker’s death scene. The solemnity of this extraordinary moment – “The Eyes around – had wrung them dry – / And Breaths were gathering firm / For that last Onset” – is interrupted by this fly in an almost macabre way; as the poem ends “I could not see to see,” we may assume that death has come right after the fly has “interposed” itself at the deathbed and has shielded the dying woman from the “light.” “With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz,” the fly itself may be read as symbolizing the briefness and transitoriness of life (Dickinson c.1862/1985: 851). In many ways, Emily Dickinson is a poet of (extra)ordinary presence who time and again torques a Puritan belief system (and thus the absolute presence of God) around everyday matters and quotidian observations. Dickinson interweaves social configurations and cultural repertoires of presence in an aesthetic practice whose deceptive simplicity taps into romantic symbolic codes and proto-modernist concerns with self-reflexivity at the same time. In doing so, she anticipates several dimensions of more recent debates on presence that are at the center of this volume: the oscillation between extraordinary and ordinary presence in conceptualizations of religious, civil religious, and aesthetic experience; the modes of representation of presence in literature, poetry, and popular culture; the cultural practices that produce both (ordinary) orientation and (extraordinary) spectacle, and the adjustments in

theoretical and philosophical debates in light of this kind of scaling of presence. The latter may take on different forms: the extraordinary can be considered an explication or an amplification of the ordinary, but it can also figure as an (adversarial) opposition to the ordinary.

Taking its cue from contemporary Western debates on presence in the social sciences and the humanities, this volume focuses on ‘presence’ both as everyday experience and as an experience of intense moments. It raises questions about diverse social configurations of presence as well as about the specific cultural repertoires which encode, articulate, and shape discourses of presence – implicitly and explicitly. Recent debates about ‘presence’ are themselves symptomatic of a specific social configuration and cultural repertoire: Firstly, they seem to respond to the highly differentiated and culturally plural contemporary world society of media-driven interconnectivity and space-time-compression. A perceived ‘loss’ of actual presence, secondly, is often seen as propelling discussions of presence as an epistemological category. The contemporary discourse on ‘presence’ acknowledges an epistemic repertoire focusing on materiality, aspects of somatically mediated practices, the immediacy of emotions, pathos, affect, excess, and ecstasy as well as the ritualized and atmospheric character of the private and the public, respectively, in their functions for various social fields such as the arts, religion, and politics.

This collection brings together different disciplinary perspectives on phenomena of presence and their discursive negotiations and manifestations in social and/or cultural practices, artifacts, and narratives, past and present. It accounts for both ordinary and extraordinary experiences of presence in their local, cultural, and social contexts. Therefore, it takes as a premise that phenomena of presence are connected to particular forms of knowledge – especially tacit knowledge, which (pre-)determines experiences of individual and collective presence and becomes tangible in moments of presence or presentification.

II.

Can there be ordinary presence without extraordinary presence (and vice versa)? And how are the two related in the social, cultural, and political spheres? Is ordinary presence the tacit dimension of the extraordinary? Or rather its opposite? Both, we argue. The former is evident, for instance, in the symbolizations, configurations, and practices of (extra)ordinary presence of collective identities on which nation-states and democracies are predicated and which mark “nation-time” as both circular and teleological (Anderson 1991: 24): the imagined community of the nation is a “sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous empty time” (ibid. 26) and is thereby

presentified in a meaningful synchronicity that produces the modern nation as a coherent entity. In celebrations of national holidays, memorial events, and collective civil religious rituals – both ordinary and extraordinary presences – imagined communities evoke a sense of a shared history and a common future/telos. Donald Pease has – with a nod to Jacqueline Rose’s work on “states of fantasy” (cf. Rose 1995) in psychoanalysis – coined the term “state fantasy” to suggest a tacit dimension of collective identity work in the nation that often operates subliminally and “which cannot be named” (Pease 2009: 17), while manifesting itself as an extraordinary presence in particular moments of crisis to respond to uncertainty and change (cf. *ibid.* 4-5) and to enable recalibrations in the “political unconscious” (cf. Jameson 1981) that smooth over contradictions in the social fabric and the cultural imaginary of a community/nation/state. Several contributions in this volume engage with state fantasies of various kinds that imply differing degrees of consensus and contentiousness.

In the realm of the social and the political, modern democracy has been addressed as necessarily resting on both ordinary and extraordinary presence. Hans Vorländer has noted the ordinary *and* implicit dimension of democracy in discourses of legitimacy as a fundamental and counter-intuitive paradox, as it renders the *transparent* premises of a democratic order as somehow *transcendent* and unavailable (‘unverfügbar;’ cf. Vorländer 2013: 13). From another angle, Judith Butler, a theorist of (extra)ordinary presence in many ways, has recently reiterated how the ordinary presence of democracy is posited on and is interdependent with its extraordinary presences, i.e. the gatherings, protests, and demonstrations that draw upon the “right to appear” and to occupy public spaces in protest to political and economic infringement: “‘the people’ are not just produced by their vocalized claims, but also by the conditions of possibility of their appearance, and so within the visual field, and by their actions, and so as part of embodied performance” (Butler 2015: 19). The politics of assembly thus make present abstract claims of political participation and representation. This presentification only works, Vorländer and Butler seem to suggest, because of an implicit understanding of the meaning of democracy and of the inalienable rights to gather and to speak. In fact, from the Occupy Movement in the US to the protests that are now commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, Butler reads public gatherings as concrete embodiments of such abstract claims. More recently, the protests following the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States are another case in point. The ordinary presence of people on the street turns into an extraordinary articulation of resistance that, in turn, rests on implicit dimensions of what it means to be a citizen and to ‘appear.’ In a similar vein, Christoph Schumann and Dimitris Soudias have only begun to unfold a new political theory of space that accounts for the effects and transformations of the public co-presence of people protesting in the streets of Cairo in 2011 (cf. Schumann/Soudias 2013).

With a view to possibly antithetical constellations of ordinary and extraordinary presence, such gatherings can also be read as contending with the ordinary presences and forces of late capitalism, structural racism, and political oppression in people's lives and as explicating their destructive powers. In that sense, the assembly of protesters may (re)present and embody the workings of a political system, yet, on another level, also draw attention to and explicate its shortcomings. With regard to another protest movement, the current Black Lives Matter, it is the ordinary presence of "premature black death" (Gilmore 2007: 28) in the black diaspora and in much of the Western world that is marked as a matter that should not be accepted as ordinary but should rather be of extraordinary concern.¹ The hegemonic discourse of anti-Blackness and white supremacy (i.e. hegemonic whiteness, as addressed in Willie James Jennings's contribution to this volume) has recently been analyzed as being widely considered as normative (or, at least, normal) by Christina Sharpe. Somewhat contrary to Butler's discourse of performative empowerment, Sharpe's Afro-pessimist perspective reads the democratic foundations of the West as too deeply flawed to serve as a ground for (black) empowerment. Rather, she calls upon her readers to be "in the wake," i.e. to be *present* (cf. Sharpe 2016). Sharpe plays upon the ambiguity of the concept of the 'wake' (referencing both the wake of a ship, i.e. the slave ship or the refugee boat, and the wake held for the dead) and manages to intricately weave these different registers and evocations into a kind of cross-mapping of a history of slavery and black death and a contemporary scene still characterized by an apparent acceptance of premature black death in America (and elsewhere).

In sum, the scaling of presence and the discussion of (extra)ordinary presence enables us to re-engage with what counts as ordinary (or normal) and what constitutes an extraordinary manifestation of presence in times of perpetual, ever-extending "states of exception" often orchestrated as the "new normal" (Dick Cheney quoted and critically discussed in Masco 2014).² The dramatization of some presences on the one hand and the normalization of other presences on the other can clearly serve different social, cultural, and political functions, a tension which is also addressed in various contributions to this volume.

1 | "Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (ibid.).

2 | Giorgio Agamben's phrase of the "state of exception" (cf. Agamben 2005) has had a broad reception in cultural studies and the social sciences. It can clearly be seen as related to discussions of extraordinary presence, especially with regard to state control and the legal underpinnings of security issues as well as the politics of representation of these issues in global post-9/11 popular culture.

III.

Grouped into three sections, the essays in this volume provide theoretical reflections as well as case studies on the phenomenon of (extra)ordinary presence within a broad disciplinary scope including American studies, theology, media studies, comparative literature, sociology, and philosophy.

Section I, “Whiteness and the Rules of Redemption: Ordinary and Transcendent Presence,” includes the essays by Willie Jennings, Stephen Hamilton, and Monika Sauter. In his essay on whiteness and aesthetics, titled “Caucasia’s Capital: The Ordinary Presence of Whiteness,” **Willie Jennings** takes issue with normative frameworks of beauty and uncovers their often tacit investment in racial norms. The recent return to beauty in philosophy and theology as well as literary and visual culture studies has, according to him, yet to give an adequate account of the wider horizon of the racial aesthetic energized by the performances of whiteness. Drawing on examples from popular culture and public debates, Jennings points out how discourses of whiteness are, in fact, foundational for Western standards of beauty, whose tacitness and ‘invisibility’ make them appear self-evident (to white people, at least), whereas they present an “aesthetic disciplinary” and a technology of othering for people of color. From the perspective of the latter, he calls for a pedagogy of unthinking this ordinary, yet normative presence of a white aesthetic regime.

Stephen Hamilton’s essay draws on a religious discourse of presence and explores its theological structure in the conversion experience as extraordinary presence. In his broader argument, he connects the concept of a “new birth” in the works of the late 17th-century German theologian Philipp Jacob Spener with contemporary discourses of the religious right in the United States and the spiritual autobiographies some of its ‘converts’ have written, among them Brian “Head” Welch, founding member of the nu-metal band Korn. Hamilton argues that the connecting link between both Spener and Welch, separated as they are by 300 years, is the concept of the “Born-Again Christian” as a particular theology, i.e. formula, of conversion and presence.

Monika Sauter, who is also interested in the pop-cultural aspects of religious presence, analyzes the television show *Preachers’ Daughters* and its focus on a religious public feeling that negotiates the seeming tension between claims of a divine (i.e., absolute) presence in the lives of those very same preachers’ daughters and their contingent social and cultural contexts as perpetually ‘tempted’ adolescent girls in contemporary America. It is their struggle for ‘purity’ (read: chastity) that the series stages in a manner that, on the one hand, evokes therapeutic discourses of self-improvement and, on the other, invites a more voyeuristic access to the girls’ frequent ‘failures’ and their exposed bodies. Thus, the affective economy of the series allows for its audience’s libidinal investment in chastity (pleasing God and sanctioning his

overarching presence) while at the same time making room for the enjoyment of supposedly also pleasurable transgressions.

Section II, titled “Ab-Use, Paranoia, Decay: The (Extra)Ordinary Presence of the Past,” gathers the essays by Florian Tatschner, Carolin Lano, and Susann Köhler. In “Heidegger Ab-Used,” **Florian Tatschner** engages in a creative sabotage of Martin Heidegger’s later writings, and especially his idea of *Besinnung*, to think “(Extra-)Ordinary Presences between Place and Planet.” He performs this ab-use in three steps. Tatschner first reads Heidegger’s notion of a struggle between world and earth with Mignolo’s border gnosis to develop a dynamic concept of *presencing* beyond a static logocentrism. Secondly, Heidegger’s critique of the aesthetic through his sense of “attunement” is supplemented with what Shotwell calls “sensuous knowledge” (2011: 53) to unfold an embodied mode of approaching phenomena. Lastly, by drawing on Lyotard’s distinction of discourse/figure the concepts developed in this way are connected to Heidegger’s (un-)homeliness and poetic dwelling in/through literature and beyond by way of his reading of *Antigone*.

Carolin Lano’s essay looks at the “persisting presence” of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 in American culture and analyzes discourses of the archive (and reliability), witnessing, and conspiracy as elements in the reiteration of the shooting as a mediated event. Rather than a sense of closure, these re-entries time and again produce an ambivalence and a continual deferral of meaning in the very process of guiding their audience through the evidential process that claims to point toward the actual ‘truth.’ Taking as her key source the famous Zapruder film as well as its complex history of reception allows her to demonstrate this media-induced self-reflexive absence of closure and the kind of lingering presence it involves.

Urban ruins in postindustrial photography are at the center of **Susann Köhler’s** essay, a meditation on presence, aesthetic experience, and urban materiality. The photobook *The Ruins of Detroit* by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre ‘presentifies’ and documents a particular urban history of decline while orchestrating and engaging with affective responses to that loss to which the presence of the ruin attests. The urban ruin thus can be seen as an ordinary presence of destruction (in the lived reality of the city population) that is turned into a (possibly controversial) sublime and beautiful presence through the medium of photography. Whereas the images attest to the decay of postindustrial Detroit, the human suffering remains absent or is at best implicit in these renderings. Thus, it remains debatable whether the photographs provide a vehicle of social and cultural critique or whether the overt aestheticization of their visual language actually has the opposite effect.

Section III, “The Cultural Specificity of Presence: Rituals, Symbols, and Imagined Communities,” includes contributions by Alexander Engel, Kristin Surak, and Markus Gottwald. **Alexander Engel** looks at Vladimir Sorokin’s

novel *Kremlin Made of Sugar* (2008) in order to discuss and expose an aesthetics of presence in contemporary Russian political culture – Vladimir Putin’s civil religious self-sacralization – that is feeding on Russian Orthodox traditions. In a science-fiction scenario set in the not-too-distant future of 2028, Sorokin’s novel exposes, satirizes, and critiques a cult of leadership and leader worship that instrumentalizes a religious iconicity while also being steeped in notions of material consumption. It is the sugar-made Kremlin that becomes a central symbol for the materiality of an *Ersatz*-presence and the apparent immateriality of power and total control.

Few practices are simultaneously as exotic and representative, esoteric and quotidian, instrumental and sensual, political and cultural as the Japanese tea ceremony. In her observation and analysis of tea rituals, **Kristin Surak** studies culturally specific practices and rituals that are based on and, in turn, affirm constructions of Japaneseness. As her ethnographic research as an observing participant shows, the tea gathering as a full four-hour social affair is a highly and tightly scripted ritual whose rules extend to actions, gestures, conversations, and all bodily movements. Depending on the actual context, however, the ritual appears to be ordinary or extraordinary – in a traditional context, it may seem a daily routine, in a non-traditional, urban context it conjures up nostalgic notions of traditional Japanese culture. And yet, in both instances, the (extra) ordinary performances of the ritual couple the “tea flow” with the concomitant, intensive experience of cultural specificity, as the tea ceremony serves as a site and instrument for evoking Japaneseness.

Markus Gottwald analyzes the apparent difference between a sociology of the micro level, more recently informed by the practice turn, and a perspective attuned to the macro level. Drawing on Goffman and Joachim Renn’s pragmatist theory of differentiation, he uses the concept of presence in order to mediate between these apparently different epistemological approaches and thus seeks to figure out a “technique of presentification” which may allow for a reconstruction of macro-dynamics as the *absent* present of micro-level practices.

The volume concludes with an afterword by **Bernhard Waldenfels**, who comments on individual contributions to this volume while also identifying larger patterns of the discussion of presence as they relate to experience and to bodily presence and absence, both temporal and spatial. From the perspective of a phenomenologist, Waldenfels opts out of simplistic dichotomous models that pit presence, i.e. the phenomenology of experience, against meaning, i.e. the semiotics of the sign. Instead, he perceives the extraordinary *in* the ordinary and vice versa, thus seeing them as mutually constitutive of each other rather than figuring as binary opposites.

This brings us back full circle to Emily Dickinson’s poetic oeuvre, with a sample from which I began this introduction. In her poems, Dickinson often

treats death not as a terrible calamity or as an extraordinary absence, but as an ordinary, familiar presence, as a close friend, trustworthy confidante, and permanent companion. It is in the spirit of this symbolic repertoire that we dedicate this volume to the memory of our late colleague Christoph Schumann (1969-2013), Professor of Politics and Society in the Middle East at the Friedrich-Alexander-University of Erlangen-Nürnberg since 2009. This project began with his presence in our midst and now concludes with his presence in our minds. We miss him.

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