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Abstract

In her 1977 short story “Probleme Probleme,” Ingeborg Bachmann plays with space and representations of reality in a way that reflects the disillusionment of Austria’s post-war generation. Beatrix’s two desires in the short story – to look at herself in the mirror and to sleep – both suggest a resistance to living in the real world and a dependence on the illusions of her dreams, mirrors, and the beauty salon. Although the older patrons of the salon and Beatrix try to hide from the responsibility for the past and present, the mirrors and the salon prove to be temporary illusions that are unsustainable. Sleep and mirrors become ways to avoid reality rather than coming to terms with it, which, for Bachmann, is ultimately unproductive and naïve.

Keywords

Ingeborg Bachmann, Austrian literature, Post-war, Probleme Probleme, Problems Problems

Disciplines

European Languages and Societies | German Language and Literature | German Literature

Comments

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The Reflected (Un)Real: Space in Ingeborg Bachmann's "Probleme Probleme"

An obsession with a search for the ideal distorts Beatrix's reality in Ingeborg Bachmann's 1972 short story "Probleme Probleme." In the story, Beatrix, a young woman living in Vienna, divides her time between complaining about her life and wishing she was asleep. She laments her departure from her dreams when Erich, a married man she is having an affair with, calls to ask her on a date for that evening. Hours after the call, Beatrix finally climbs out of bed and makes her way to a beauty salon. There, endless mirrors force Beatrix to continually face her own image as she moves back and forth between loving and loathing her reflection. The spaces in which Beatrix moves in the story are all places of comfort for Beatrix because they are spaces in which she can temporarily live in a fantasy. Beatrix's attachment to the idealism of these spaces signifies a disconnect between reality and fantasy. The reminder that there is a real world sends Beatrix into a crisis that reflects the disillusionment of Austria's post-war generation.

There are three main spaces Beatrix moves between in the short story: her bedroom, the salon, and the mirror. In the salon, Beatrix is surrounded by people, and so it is a space in which Beatrix has the opportunity to interact with others. Because of this, the salon becomes a representation of Viennese society; more specifically, the patrons and the workers in the salon are part of the older generation that lived during the war. As a member of Gruppe 47, Bachmann often deals with the repercussions of Nazi Germany and the post-war generation in her work. She raises the issue that "Austria—which as an entire nation assumed the role of the first victim of Nazi aggression—and individual Austrian Nazis succeeded in shirking responsibility for their

involvement in National Socialism.”¹ The patrons and the workers of the beauty salon are representatives of this generation that was directly impacted by the war and that avoided responsibility for Austria’s role in the war. This older generation resides mostly in a salon filled with mirrors, which, throughout the story, is established as an unreal space where Beatrix and the other patrons go to in order to escape their problems and responsibilities of the real world.

Beatrix is part of the younger, post-war generation born just after the war. This generation had no direct responsibility for the war but was still living with the residual trauma of it. Beatrix is alone in the salon only in that she is decades younger than the other patrons: “[A]lle Frauen [waren] hier mindestens Dreißig waren, der Durchschnitt um Vierzig...und jedenfalls war Beatrix hier weitaus die jüngste.”² Beatrix stands apart not only because she is the only patron from her generation in the salon but also because she prefers to spend her time in this space inhabited and created by this older generation instead of with other young women who are doing their own hair and nails: “[J]unge Mädchen wünschen sich in Wien ihre Haare gewiss selber und feilten sich ihre Nägel.”³ This lends itself to Beatrix’s crisis of identity, in which she feels estranged from other women her age. Beatrix surrounding herself and feeling a connection with the older generation, especially one that is connected to discourse on blame and responsibility for the war, signifies that Beatrix, like this older generation, is “haunted in her dreams by her own unmastered past.”⁴ The salon, then, acts as a place existing outside of time and the real world. As long as Beatrix remains inside the salon, she does not have to confront her past, her loneliness, or her future.

¹ Dagmar C.G. Lorenz, “Viennese Memories of History and Horrors,” in *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2007), 248.

² Ingeborg Bachmann, “Probleme Probleme,” in *Simultan* (München: 1972), 63

³ *Ibid.*, 63

⁴ Sara Lennox, “Gender, the Cold War, and Ingeborg Bachmann,” in *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2007), 125.

In contrast to the salon, Beatrix is completely alone in her bedroom. There, Beatrix only thinks about sleeping. She wants to do “[n]ichts als schlafen” because when she is sleeping, she does not have to worry about “Zukunftspläne und Interessen” or pressure to find a job.⁵ Sleeping, and thus the bedroom, represents a space in which Beatrix does not need to participate in reality. Paradoxically, Beatrix says that she feels most alive when she is sleeping and unconscious of her life: “[D]er Schlaf [war] die Erfüllung geworden und wert, dafür zu leben.”⁶ For Beatrix, sleeping is one of the only parts of life that is worth living for. Part of her desire to sleep all day comes from the fact that Beatrix has “eine viel größere Angst vor dem Leben, einfach eine Heidenangst.”⁷ Her fear of life and mortality has paralyzed Beatrix to the extent that she feels she can only fully experience life through her dreams. While the bedroom is a real place in which Beatrix can move, it is also representative of an unreal space that Beatrix wants to escape to, signified by her dependence on sleep and the mirrors that she turns to.

The first introduction to Beatrix’s image in the mirror comes when she is in the house. Looking at herself in the bathroom mirror, she “versuchte eine Verbindung zwischen sich und den Kleidern herzustellen.”⁸ Although Beatrix searches for a connection between her and her clothes in the mirror, this search actually exposes the disconnect that exists between the image in the mirror and Beatrix herself. The mirror exists as another world that Beatrix is desperately trying to be a part of. It is significant that Beatrix is looking at the dresses in the mirror when she says that she wants to find a connection to them rather than when she is looking at the dresses on her bed. She is in search of a reflection that bends reality rather than one that reminds her of the reality she can see without a mirror. In this mirror, she also finds herself looking “[f]ast

⁵ Ingeborg Bachmann, “Probleme Probleme,” in *Simultan* (München: 1972), 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

durchsichtig” and “wächsern im Gesicht.”⁹ Looking at herself in the mirror, Beatrix only sees a doll-like, artificial face staring back at her. The mirror for Beatrix does not reflect reality but rather her ideal version of herself. The person she sees in the mirror is unreal and her ineffectual desire to make that person real results in her dissatisfaction with life. When she goes to the salon, Beatrix seeks to become more like the perfect image in the mirror.

At the salon, the distance between reality and fantasy shrinks until it ultimately collapses. Beatrix’s obsession with her reflected image comes from Beatrix believing that “die Trennung zwischen Ich und dem Anderen, dem Spiegelbild, nicht nur aufgehoben, sondern das Spiegelbild *ist* für Beatrix sie selbst.”¹⁰ The reflected image and Beatrix have switched places for Beatrix in terms of which is the real and which is a reflection. By going to the salon, and surrounding herself by mirrors on all sides, Beatrix has found a place in which she can live in her fantasy outside of her dreams. The mirror, then, becomes the boundary between the real and the unreal. In his essay “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault distinguishes the unreal perfection of a utopia from the real heterotopia in which spaces are “represented, contested, and inverted.”¹¹ In the mirror, Foucault says, exists both a heterotopia and a utopia:

[The mirror] makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.¹²

⁹ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰ Imke Meyer, “Im Spiegel ist Sonntag, im Traum wird geschlafen,” in *The Germanic Review*, vol. 70, no. 3 (1995), 101.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in *Diacritics*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1986), 24.

¹² Ibid., 24.

The mirrors of the beauty salon allow Beatrix to exist in the utopia of the reflected space and escape from life. The mirror does not become a reminder of her surroundings until the end when the fantasy collapses and Beatrix is confronted with the reality of her life again.

When Beatrix looks in the mirror, the woman she sees looking back at her is an idealized version of herself that only exists in the mirrors of the beauty salon. As long as Beatrix looks in those mirrors, a second Beatrix also exists: “[Sie] war froh, sich selber in den Spiegeln kommen zu sehen und aufhören zu dürfen, an ihre Belastungen zu denken. Das also bin ich, sagte die eine Beatrix zu der anderen im Spiegel und starrte sich ergriffen an.”¹³ The explicit split between two versions of Beatrix represents her separating the mirror and her surroundings into two different worlds: one in which she can live and one from which she wants to escape. It is with this perfect Beatrix that Beatrix falls in love later in the story: “Ich bin ja richtiggehend verliebt in mich, ich bin zum Verlieben!”¹⁴ Here, she says that she is “in love with me,” and so she ignores the illusion in favor of believing that she has fully become the idealized version of herself that she has constructed in the mirror. The two forms separate again after Beatrix has been worked on in the salon for a while and she comments on how the woman in the mirror now looks synthetic: “So sollte sie aussehen...Schmal, puppenhaft.”¹⁵ Like with her reflection in the bedroom, Beatrix again sees herself as artificial. She saw a doll-like reflection in the house earlier, but in the salon, she is surrounded on all sides by large mirrors, and so it is a place in which Beatrix’s reality has merged with the “unwahrscheinlich” and “märchenhaft” version of herself.¹⁶ It is only when reality becomes reflective of a fantasy that Beatrix finds love and a moment of happiness in a world that she otherwise sees as only being filled with problems.

¹³ Ingeborg Bachmann, “Probleme Probleme,” in *Simultan* (München: 1972), 61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

The illusion soon crumbles completely, however, whenever Beatrix is reminded of the world around her again. The mirror ceases to be a comforting utopia for Beatrix and instead becomes a heterotopia that serves as a harsh reminder of the real space that surrounds her: “[D]ie kurze Zeit der Perfektion...schleifte schon dahin, und wieder würde sie konsumiert werden, vom Leben.”¹⁷ Beatrix cannot live in her fantasy forever. She comes to the painful realization that as she tries to assure herself of her existence through the superficiality of a mirror, “so wird sie nie mit sich selbst konfrontiert, sondern lediglich mit immer neuen, immer anderen Abbildern ihrer selbst.”¹⁸ She deceives herself with the mirror by creating new versions of herself in order to avoid facing her real self and her reality. With this, Beatrix invents a new identity for herself every time she looks in the mirror and becomes increasingly unable to distinguish between them.

In the final scene, a fourth space emerges: the outside. By the end of the story, the bedroom and the beauty salon have both become depictions of unreal spaces where Beatrix becomes lost in the fantasy of her dreams and her reflections. The outside world, then, represents the real world in which the rain washes away her mask created in the beauty salon. Standing in the rain, Beatrix is forced to confront the actuality of her life again: “Nachdem sie ihm den ganzen Nachmittag ins Gesicht geschleudert hatte, war ihr Kopf klatschnass, die Frisur weg.”¹⁹ Still unable to accept this, Beatrix searches out another mirror, this time in a powder room down the street. She mourns the loss of her perfect reflection and her perceived identity when she looks in the mirror and sees only “eine Katastrophe.”²⁰ When an older woman tries to comfort her, Beatrix notes that the woman does not understand Beatrix’s situation but to allow the woman to

¹⁷ Ibid., 79.

¹⁸ Imke Meyer, “Im Spiegel ist Sonntag, im Traum wird geschlafen,” in *The Germanic Review*, vol. 70, no. 3 (1995), 104.

¹⁹ Ingeborg Bachmann, “Probleme Probleme,” in *Simultan* (München: 1972), 83.

²⁰ Ibid., 83.

still believe in her “Märchen,” Beatrix “schluchzte...noch einmal laut auf” and agrees that her problem is just “die Männer”²¹ By putting on a show and thereby sustaining the older woman’s fairy tales, Beatrix refuses to leave the unreal world behind. The older woman works in the powder room, and so she too is surrounded by the fantasy world of mirrors. Instead of being honest with the old woman, another representative of the older generation, Beatrix allows both of them to continue to live in the easy problems of the artificial world rather than the genuine problems of the real world that exist outside of themselves.

The mirrors throughout the story blend the real world with the one in Beatrix’s dreams. And so, reality becomes distorted, incomprehensible, and unattractive to Beatrix. The disconnect between these two worlds means that the more Beatrix seeks out her dream world, the less she is able to adequately handle the burden of the responsibilities of the present real world. The older generation, represented by the patrons of the salon and the woman in the powder room, are able to live in the fantasy worlds that they have created because their realities are defined by the mirrors, reflecting only what they want to see. Beatrix, though she tries to fit into this older generation in the beauty salon, is unable to hide in the illusion forever. As soon as she returns to real world, the mask she had been given by the beauty salon washes away and the mirrors disappear. Any breaks she finds from reality are temporary and unsustainable. Beatrix, as a representative of the post-war generation, is forced to leave the comfort of the illusion and leave the reflected, ideal world for that of a world rebuilding itself and coming to terms with the horrors of the past and the enduring trauma.

²¹ Ibid., 84.

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