Performing to survive: simulation, camouflage and theatricality in Nazi concentration camps

Laura Miñano Mañero

Department of English and German Philology, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain

Laura Miñano Mañero holds a PhD in Sociolinguistics from the University of Valencia, Spain. She has recently joined the Department of English and German Philology at the University of Zaragoza as an assistant professor. Her research focuses on language contact, translation and interpretation in extreme contexts, postmemory and intergenerational transmission of trauma, specially focusing on second-generation Holocaust survivors, and Holocaust and gender literary studies.

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This article draws upon concentration camp survivors' memoirs so as to examine the ways in which simulation, mimicry and camouflage significantly contributed to deportees' survival and constituted a form of constant offstage performance allowing them to subvert Nazi power. Though much has been discussed about actual theater in the camps, exploring how deportees engage in this kind of theatrical behavior in regular social interaction, both with fellow inmates and with Nazi perpetrators, remains an underexplored subject, whose analysis may allow us to reach a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the conditions of death and survival in the *Lager*. Following survivors' accounts, the camp society seems permeated by ritual-like, dramaturgical and symbolic action, which significantly shapes both human relationality and power relations. In this regard, I examine simulation and camouflage as survival strategies in relation to the actual theater produced in the camps, offering a comprehensive reflection on the meaning of performing in the concentrationary universe. Conceiving the *Lager* as a permanent space of performance, I contend that actors construct and share clandestine codes of communication and signification, taught to each other and constantly improved, which allow them to creatively evade and deceive the perpetrator, resist the dehumanizing ethos, and foster ingroup solidarity.

Keywords: Holocaust; Nazi concentration camps; theater; performance; nonverbal communication; simulation

Introduction

That Nazi concentration camp inmates engaged in usual and diverse theatrical activities is well documented. In the extreme conditions of the *Lager*, the yearn for art and entertainment was not extinguished; instead, the performing arts thrived and proved vital for survival in different ways. Within the concentrationary universe, the flourishing of clandestine, highly satirical performances embodied crucial acts of both spiritual and political resistance which not only made prisoners' existence more bearable, but also significantly renegotiated and shaped the relations of power.[1] The exploration of

survivors' memoirs, however, renders the camp society, and its imbrications with theatricality, in a much more complex light, one in which the dramaturgical dimension reaches far beyond those surreptitious representations and pervades every facet of social interaction through symbolic, rhetorical and ritual-like behavior. Concentrationary literature, in fact, portrays the camp as a permanent space of offstage performance and spectatorship where actors develop, rehearse, share, and perform their own clandestine codes of communication and signification, both verbal and nonverbal, which allow them to creatively deceive and avoid the perpetrator, to defy the Nazi dehumanizing ethos, and to promote ingroup solidarity. Exploring the potential of simulation and camouflage to contribute to inmates' survival and to subvert Nazi power remains an underexplored area meriting further study, as it may allow us to establish new connections between Holocaust and performance studies, sociology and anthropology. Hence, in what follows, I will critically delve into this pervasive, far-reaching and multifaceted dramaturgical dimension that shapes the camp society, as it is mirrored in survivors' testimonial accounts, in relation to the actual theater that was produced in the *Lager*.

I will contend that in examining and contrasting these different theatrical spheres, and in redefining what it meant to perform for survival in Nazi concentration camps, we will arrive at a greater understanding of human relationality and artistic activity in the Holocaust. This is, indeed, a highly transversal and interdisciplinary enterprise, which relies on, encompasses, and reinforces several fields, broadening the scope and outreach of Holocaust scholarship. From Erving Goffman's theatrical allegory to approach social interaction to Victor Turner's groundbreaking examination of ritual as performance; from James Scott's discourse of the hidden and public transcript to Schechner's conception of performance as restored behavior: intertwined disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and political science, and performance

studies may offer new paths to reexamine the concentrationary experience so as to cast light on traditionally overlooked subjects.[2] Because empirical observation of social interaction and theatricality in the *Lager* is not possible, it behooves us to acknowledge the unique significance that resides in the literary and testimonial legacy left by survivors, whose writing shares common roots in an absolute commitment to reveal the truth and a fierce moral imperative to bear witness on behalf of the voiceless, those 'who saw the Gorgon, did not come back to tell, or they came back mute.'[3]

Mindful of the complexity of analyzing such phenomena, we discover, nevertheless, that author-eyewitnesses take great pains to evoke and reenact in their memoirs the dramaturgical dimension that pervades social interaction in the camps, placing special emphasis on its connection with survival—*i.e*., on how a person's ability to *perform*, in the wide range of meanings and implications that I will discuss here, operated as a significant arbiter of life and death in the *Lager*. Indeed, survivors provide many accounts of situations in which inmates rely on disguise, simulation and camouflage as low-profile acts of resistance allowing them to surreptitiously overturn power structures. In this article, conceiving the concentration camp system as a universe that needs to be approached holistically, I examine texts authored by survivors deported to different camps, hoping to unveil the constants and the singularities that shaped the *Lager* in relation to theatricality. In the same way, to reflect the profound social heterogeneity that defined the camp society, I incorporate testimonies from deportees belonging to diverse backgrounds, a suitable decision to explore the ways in which dramaturgical behavior is also connected to concepts and constructs such as ingroup solidarity, belonging, and otherness.

After this brief introduction, I will begin by offering a preliminary insight into the concentrationary universe, understood as an unprecedented, *sui generis* structure of

power embodying a caesura in the history of terror and domination.[4] Because my claim is that the pervading dramaturgical dimension epitomizes the inmates' response to the singular nature of the *Lager*, I will specifically concentrate on its social structure, deliberately erected by the perpetrator so as to destroy the human condition by ravaging the universal structures of human relatedness to the world, to others, and to the self.[5] Next, I will introduce the theatrical fact and I will present previous research on the theater composed, produced and performed by concentration camp inmates, exploring its definitory characteristics and diverse functions in depth. Once I have explored such theatrical activities, I will be ready to formulate my approach to the notion of theatricality, conceived as a wide-raging and encompassing term referring to the dramaturgical dimension that extends beyond those onstage theatrical performances and, rather, impregnates social encounters by means of symbolic, rhetorical, performative behavior. In this regard, offstage performance and spectatorship will be examined as a potential weapon that subverts the Nazi ethos, allowing the victims to reconstruct the universal structures of human relatedness to the others and to themselves. By examining these acts of resistance through the lens of theater and theatricality, I endeavor to rethink the meaning of performance in the *Lager*, hoping to ignite larger discussions on the power of simulation, camouflage and theatricality in totalitarian spaces.

The concentrationary universe: a *sui generis* structure of power

The concentration camp cannot be incorporated into the history of slavery, despotism or modern discipline: though certain structures of the *Lager* draw upon previous models, it embodies an anthropological and historical rupture in the trajectory of domination demanding a radical epistemological shift.[6] The *unicum* lies in the unparalleled, industrially structured and state-initiated genocide, but also in the singular treatment of

its victims before their annihilation.[7] In ways both analytically and symbolically meaningful, Nazism may never be satisfied with killing, the ultimate reference point of all power. Instead, before murdering, it must ravage 'the universal structures of human relatedness to the world: space and time, social relations, the connection with work, the relation to the self,' becoming, in this way, a form of power of a distinctive, unique nature.[8] To eradicate plurality and turn its victims into a superfluous aggregate, it needs to eliminate spontaneity itself as an expression of the human condition. Only in the extreme microcosm of the *Lager* may such endowment be thoroughly annihilated: concentration camps, thus, are the true central institution of totalitarianism.[9] Forcing deportees into an atomized, depersonalized mass, Nazism incites animosity among prisoners and erects a social structure characterized by stark contrasts. In the *Lager*, a specific form of society emerges, albeit one that remains at the edges of sociality, reflecting the essence of absolute power which arbitrarily shifts between sociation and dissociation, between formation and dissolution of society, in order to destroy the human condition.[10]

The society of the *Lager* was a system of extreme inequality, deliberately established by the category system and the resulting dynamics of functional power. Upon arrival, prisoners were classified through a series of external insignia, colors and triangles that predetermined their position in the social hierarchy based on Nazi prejudice. At the zenith stood racial distinction between human beings and *Untermensch*, 'subhumans,'—Jews, Gypsies and Slavic prisoners—then, other criteria such as political hostility and social deviance.[11] This taxonomy was an instrument of power developed to foster discrimination and dissociation among inmates. Unconsciously assimilated by the victims, it channeled social perception, reinforced antagonisms, and drew uncrossable lines of social demarcation. Besides mobilizing

social prejudice, the system of categories significantly distributed influence, work, and possessions, determining functional authority and chances of survival.[12] The dissociative potential of camp power engendered radical deformations of sociality, permeating the relations between the deportees and shattering 'the basic rules of social intercourse, fundamental trust in the continued existence of the social world, the prospect for assistance, the certainties of social action.'[13] It forced collaboration by creating an elite of inmates, accomplices of terror, who turned to brutality as a means of self-preservation, while their victims, the concentrated mass of dehumanized bodies, faced a constant life-and-death struggle for bread, string, space. With its frightful power of corruption, Nazism led to a 'gray zone,' an obscure ethical dimension that blurred the boundaries between perpetrator and victim.[14]

While terror penetrated into every sphere of interpersonality, consolidating a world of surveillance, informers and accomplices, class hierarchy also ordered the social field and radicalized national, political, and racial tensions among the prisoners.[15] Social heterogeneity was deliberately implanted to further encourage hostility so as to prevent unanimous acts of resistance, allowing the Nazis to control an incredibly large number of inmates with few officers.[16] Though only German was officially allowed, speakers of up to forty different languages were crowded together in a single camp, most of whom did not master the language of power.[17] The concentrationary universe was thus organized around an 'adverse multilingualism' which regulated social interaction through repressive linguistic principles and exacerbated semiotic economy, resulting in linguistic exclusion and isolation.[18] The politics of *Sprachterror*, 'linguistic terror,' triggering extremely imbalanced communication conditions and strict regulation of linguistic exchange, paradoxically led deportees to the realization that, in their fight for survival, they also had to fight for communication.[19] In a Babel like the *Lager*, the

most incipient traces of solidarity emerged among prisoners who shared a mother tongue.[20] Thorough exploration of survivors' memoirs, nonetheless, reveals a more complex reality: nonverbal codes of communication, reinforced by theatrical behavior, constantly flourished to overcome linguistic chaos and foster international cohesion. In my approach to the dramaturgical dimension of the *Lager*, I will begin by examining such interaction.

Among the possible strategies that inmates in influential positions could employ to maintain their status, solidarity with fellow prisoners was certainly the most dangerous one. Instead, the power of corruption of the *Lager* usually led these prisoners to orient themselves toward the camp leadership. They sought contact with the SS and adopted—or even exceeded—their modes of behavior, succumbing to a 'mimetic servility' which oscillated from simple imitation of gestures to full identification with the authority.[21] This mode of adaptation to the *Lager* was a 'conversion' by which the inmate appropriated the lexicon, posture, recreation and expression of aggression of the Nazi perpetrator.[22] The conduct of these inmates in the gray zone seems, indeed, permeated by a performative dimension meriting further scrutiny. Yet, despite the hazards it implied, some prisoners could and did remain loyal to the inmate group, either orienting themselves downwards toward the stratum of fellow deportees or, as the underground resistance usually attempted, finding spaces of independence to maneuver between the fronts so as to gain independence and pursue subversive action.[23] Though the system created submissive accomplices, survivors' memoirs reveal a whole multifaceted and complex system of camouflage and mimicry that deportees—in every position in the social hierarchy—would deploy in front of Nazi officers or corrupt prisoners.[24] My objective is to explore how this theatrically imbued reality, at the same

time occluded and exposed, permeated into virtually every realm, took processes of nonverbal communication one step further, and surreptitiously defied power relations.

Theatrical activities in the *Lager*

Preserved through fragments of songs, poems, and remnants of atrezzo, the theater of the Holocaust strengthens the natural crossover between the different arts, reinforcing its intrinsically collaborative nature. In the camps, amateur and professional musicians, poets, performers and visual artists came together in rehearsed and spontaneous variety revenues, programs of readings and songs, and puppet shows.[25] In its transitoriness and its requirement for a live audience, theater establishes a direct relation to community, differing from other art forms. Though the performer creates distance and dwells in a separate emotional sphere, they paradoxically share a temporal and spatial dimension with the audience and remain dependent on them for connection and feedback. While the performer connects to community through the audience, spectators maintain a link to culture through the show, whose content echoes with society, projecting from the shared present into the future or the past.[26] Yet, this communal quality of theater, and the performance paradigm in general, were complicated in the *Lager*, due to its severe and unnatural circumstances. Since performing intertwined with notions of identity and privilege, it could prove both cohesive and divisive among inmates[27]. However, even in the face of adversity, theatrical activities allowed performer and audience to share emotion, time and space, thus leading to the formation of temporary bonds which seemed fundamental for all agents involved in their existential struggle for survival.[28]

Exploring theater as a mode of creative expression, consequently, may enable us to cast light on the underlying social dynamics of the concentrationary universe. Performance is, in fact, theorized as a discursive event engendered by the interweaving of various expressive elements and semiotic codes, which jointly create a textual

structure allowing acts of signification and communication to take place, while also encompassing pragmatic phenomena.[29] In the *Lager*, inmate-performers adapted to extreme conditions and severe constraints so as to transform theater into a weapon of counterpower, engaging in subversive action through symbolic behavior. An act of resistance implies reversing the course of events—*i.e.*, 'when confronted with one force, a second force will be used to counteract the first force to either place it in balance over and against the reaction or to overcome the original force.'[30] Unable to resort to arms or sabotage, the only means to resist in the *Lager* was both rhetorical and discursive. Theater, in particular, epitomizes how words created actions through which resistance could be taken, even in the presence of the perpetrator.[31] In fact, though most of the theatrical activity occurred clandestinely, some performances were sanctioned by the Nazis. This occurred paradigmatically in Theresienstadt, a 'model camp' used as a showcase for world opinion, where the Nazis encouraged and supervised programs of classic opera and theater, safe productions mounted to deceive Red Cross representatives.[32] Significantly, even in such cases, prisoners could use their physical agency to subvert power relations.

In this regard, to examine how authorized performances could defy Nazism, Edelman turns to Bitzer's notion of 'rhetorical situation,' which defines the work of rhetoric as pragmatic, as 'a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.'[33] For instance, in Westerbork, a transit camp in the Netherlands, the commander allowed prisoners to organize cabarets so as to keep them calm and distracted until they were transported to the extermination camps, concealed behind the façade of a relocation to begin a new life. Artists who were aware of the danger because of their privileged status managed to hide and transmit pieces of

information and implied warnings to their audiences within such performances, teaching the victims both essential survival lessons and an understanding of the evil surrounding them. The rhetorical nature of such action resides, precisely, in the fact that performers were able to obliquely convey these messages even under the vigilant eyes of the Nazi officers attending the shows.[34] Creative activities constituted the conditions for a symbolic behavior to develop which could, indeed, mediate between the agents involved and achieve a form of subversion otherwise impossible.[35] Theater allowed performers to form codes of signification and communication in disguise, whose rhetorical nature manifests quintessentially in the ironic line closing one of the monologues performed there: 'Now I realize what it means to say farewell, my Westerbork.'[36]

Unlike this veiled discourse, direct and fierce satire lay at the heart of the underground political cabarets, which proliferated throughout the concentrationary universe due to the ease with which productions could be staged. These illicit cabaret presentations, organized by amateur actors, embodied an attack on the Third Reich and flourished inasmuch as they were perceived as crucial acts of resistance.[37] Carried out at a high personal risk, performances generally took place in the barracks inhabited by political prisoners, with sentries posted in strategic locations to ensure freedom of action. The common arrangement was for the audience to sit in a circle around the artists. The shows were characterized by humorous monologues ridiculing the Nazis, political songs and antifascist poems, and short plays attacking the camp administration, which combined satire and comedy.[38] Besides, clandestine cabaret productions of a nonpolitical nature also thrived, employing professional entertainers, some of whom were very well known in the realm of European theater.[39] Both political and nonpolitical theatrical activities fulfilled the necessity to safeguard the integrity of the

self from the systematic effort to dehumanize deportees. Participating in this artistic endeavor, either as an active performer or as an interested spectator, enabled prisoners to feel human again, 'to reexperience the dimension of who they were, and the freedom that was embodied in this sensation. It increased the sense of competence so crucial to their coping.'[40]

In the same way, becoming involved in theater restored inmates' agency. It provided them with a crucial feeling of control in a totalitarian environment characterized by complete lack thereof. On the stage, those who played an active role assumed absolute control over the set; members of the audience, in turn, were free to decide whether or not to face the hazards of attending the show.[41] Certain scholars are adamant that the performing arts survived in the *Lager* because they allowed for a form of escapism through which both artist and audience could disconnect from the brutal reality, if even only for a fleeting moment, and find a spiritual retreat through aesthetic experience.[42] For Rovit, however, only actors could insulate themselves from the horror around them, a dilemma that, in fact, engenders the paradox of performance and self-preservation. Performance functioned as a commodity that could be traded for essential privileges such as protection, respect, or additional food, establishing an influential status that separated certain artists from ordinary inmates. [43] By interviewing several prisoners who performed theater in the camps, Rovit found many of them acknowledged the ambiguous nature of their actions—*e.g.*, the incongruence of singing popular songs in a killing center. Such survivors claimed that 'performance enabled them to suspend time and momentarily prolong life, preserving a sense of humanity—however compromised—and a tenuous connection to their fellow prisoners.'[44] Rovit's research proves key to unravel the tense nexus of theater, power, and human relationality in the camps.

Other academics, like Stuart-Fischer, argue that it was simply impossible to psychologically or spiritually escape the ruthless existence of the *Lager*. In fact, theater-making was never an attempt to do so, but a volitional act deliberately framed to establish 'a mode of being-with-the-other that resisted the absurd and *ubuesque* environment of the concentrationary world, which, through its use of Kapos and the indiscriminate violence of camp life, sought to set inmates against each other and destroy any sense of solidarity.'[45] This mode of togetherness, rooted in the political, allowed deportees to redefine their relationships with each other and contributed to their survival by creating a sense of solidarity and communitarian experience among the inexorable reality of the *Lager.*[46] Indeed, there is broad consensus that theatrical performance emphasized a shared bond that brought prisoners together, creating a sense of belonging and communitas that was extraordinarily needed.[47] Anthropologist Victor Turner defined the experience of communitas as a feeling of heightened togetherness occurring when humans become 'subverted from their duties and rights into an atmosphere of communitas' where they 'see, understand, and act towards one another […] as essentially an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals.'[48] Communitas denotes the sense of intensified solidarity and common purpose occurring during liminal moments of ritual, where participants, by transgressing social norms and prescriptive roles, are brought to an equal level that strengthens society.[49]

Though performance was inextricably connected to notions of identity, prestige, and privilege, and could thus embody a site of conflict among prisoners, potentially penetrating into the gray zone, it prevailed as a place of reconnection and reconstruction of sociality. I would go so far as to argue that, in fact, theater allowed participants to reclaim those universal structures of human relatedness to the world, to others and to the

self that, according to sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky, the concentrationary system actively sought to annihilate.[50] In this regard, theatrical activity in the *Lager* has been suggested to enable inmates to follow the steps that, as specified by psychiatrist Judith Herman, are needed to confront trauma: establish a safe space, rewrite traumatic events into psychologically manageable narratives, and reconnect with themselves, with each other, and with the reality outside the camp.[51] Through performance and spectatorship, deportees found a temple to share collective experience, while they reached far beyond the barbed wire and forged social networks that exceeded the time and space of the act, rejoining their political, religious and national communities.[52] My conception of theatricality encompasses other manifestations of what I deem is also dramaturgical behavior into this same scope. In the following section, hence, I will critically examine a performative dimension that remains yet to be analyzed, concentrating on its double-edged and ambiguous nature in relation to human relationality and relations of power.

Simulation, camouflage, and theatricality

Ubiquitous processes of nonverbal communication taking place in the *Lager* exemplify the most basic stratum of theatrical behavior in relation to human interaction, and prove thus idoneous to begin illuminating the nature of this complex dimension. Nonverbal signals may be defined as all those potentially informative conducts that exceed purely linguistic content and, intertwining with it, are used either voluntarily or involuntarily to convey meaning.[53] In fact, the inherent tripartite quality of speech combines verbality with paralanguage and kinesics, the former referring to 'the nonverbal voice qualities, voice modifiers and […] intervening momentary silences, which we use consciously or unconsciously supporting or contradicting the verbal […] messages, either simultaneously or alternating with them,'[54] the latter denoting 'the conceptualization and conscious or unconscious behavioral structuration of interpersonal and person-

environment space.'[55] In the Babelic atmosphere of the concentrationary universe, deportees actively resist the deliberate Nazi politics of linguistic terror by means of both spontaneous and prearranged forms of nonverbal communication, which become crucial so as to overcome the official prohibition to speak, to manage multilingual encounters, and to produce private codes whose meaning may only be accessed by the specific addressee. Striving for communication through engagement in paralinguistic and kinesic action allows inmates to challenge the dissociative potential of camp power and constitutes the underlying foundations needed for more complex forms of theatrically imbued subversive behavior to develop.

First, it was strictly prohibited for inmates to speak during the endless hours of slave labor: 'people work next to each other in silence. Talking is forbidden at work and who knows whether your neighbor is a future friend or enemy,' recalls political prisoner Seweryna Szmaglewska concerning Auschwitz-Birkenau.[56] In this coercive environment, prisoners developed predominantly nonverbal codes of communication allowing them to convey significant information so as to evade the perpetrator. Szmaglewska's memoir offers an enlightening episode in this regard. As deportees toil carrying heavy bags, the capricious Kapo unexpectedly appears to terrorize those lagging behind. Yet, 'her presence does not disturb the girls,' since 'she is alone and they are fifty, linked together by a sensitive spring of understanding. A word, a whistle, a grimace has a particular meaning in their defensive language. Protected by this group solidarity, they can achieve much.'[57] Unable to speak freely—both because the oppressor forbids it, and because messages could reach hostile prisoners,—women resort to this intuitive, low-profile communication, combining various semiotic systems to sabotage work and foster ingroup unity. Kinesic activity acquires such significance in this context that deportees who spent time in solitary confinement and Nazi prisons

attest to the creation of *ad hoc* sign language to overcome the prohibition to speak: 'You outline the letters; you pinch the palm of your hand; and, to make a comma, for instance, there's a gesture as of chasing a fly away, […] you try to guess each letter in advance,'[58] writes Dachau political prisoner Nerin Gun.

Second, reaching far beyond the ambit of language prohibition, survivors' memoirs expose the permanent exhibition of nonverbal behavior as a pervasive strategy employed to develop clandestine codes of communication. For instance, political prisoner Kielar Wieslaw alludes to such processes occurring on a regular basis around the barbed wire fence separating women and men in Auschwitz-Birkenau, where 'everybody waved his hands, everybody expressed with his gestures something that only the other could understand.'[59] The need to communicate in an oppressive environment, where any action carried a potential death sentence, led inmates to engage in a form of behavioral duality, manifest in the reality that, frequently, the language transmitted by the bodies did not correspond to the agents' real intentions. As a result, to decipher true meanings and objectives, prisoners had to learn to read in the other's actions the signs of a genuine, inventive and secret code, which drew upon any resource available, but may have been imperceptible at a first glance. In this regard, German-Jewish survivor Siegfried Meir, evoking his experience in Mauthausen, claims to have developed 'an ability to capture moods, to interpret gesture and gaze' which was crucial for self-preservation inasmuch as 'learning to decipher, almost to intuit, the meaning behind a gesture or a glance, much more than behind words, was essential if you wanted to survive'[60] I suggest that nonverbal signals, as fundamental triggers of behavioral duality, sow the seeds of further theatrical and performative activity.

Third, in the Babelic *Lager*, nonverbal communication became essential to resist linguistic chaos and manage multilingual encounters. For instance, Shlomo Venezia,

survivor of the *Sonderkommando*—the work units, composed of male Jewish prisoners, forced to carry out the disposal of gas chamber victims,— significantly reflected on the limited reach of Yiddish as a shared language, and the resulting linguistic exclusion of Jewish deportees who did not master it. According to this author, most members of the *Sonderkommando* came from Poland or 'other countries in Eastern Europe, but all of them could speak Yiddish, except for us, the Greeks, who spoke Ladino among ourselves.'[61] To overcome this barrier, prisoners relied on nonverbal behavior: 'we signed to each other with our hands, our feet… whatever way we could.'[62] In previous research, I have approached multilingual interaction in the *Lager* through the lens of Derek Bickerton's protolanguage, a model of synthetic, structureless and pidgin-like communication system 'differing from fully developed modern language in its vocabulary size, its lack of syntax and its lack of modern phonology,' which, in the earliest stages of language evolution, 'began as a free-for-all, catch-catch-can mode that utilized sounds, signs, pantomime and any other available mechanism that would carry intention and meaning.'[63] The exploration of language contact in the camps, I suggest, can benefit from Bickerton's theory, which underscores the central role of *ad hoc* nonverbal behavior in multilingual encounters.[64]

Through nonverbal communication, deportees create a sense of community which challenges the dissociative potential of the *Lager* and allows them to resist its dehumanizing ethos; the performative dimension of gesture, in addition, lays the foundations for more complex manifestations of theatrically permeated behavior that, as I intend to demonstrate next, are crucial for the preservation of both the self and the community. To begin, Nazi politics of linguistic terror are not only resisted by means of nonverbal expression; instead, they trigger a whole multifaceted system of camouflage which subverts the relations of power and renegotiates the position of inmates in the

social hierarchy. Though the perpetrator turns language into an instrument of oppression, deportees contrive to create spaces of autonomy and resistance, the first of which relates to simulated linguistic (in)competence. Following Primo Levi, because speaking German was necessary to be deemed useful for the system—and, therefore, to survive,—there was a general tendency among deportees, in their interactions with Nazi officers, 'to reply "*Jawohl*," never to ask questions, always to pretend to understand,'[65] and to act accordingly by analyzing pragmatic phenomena and context, and maintaining a low profile. Inversely, in certain situations, it was convenient to fake incompetence, as did Spanish Republican Jorge Semprún when interrogated by the Gestapo: 'I had carefully concealed the fact that I understood German. They talked openly in front of me, which gave me a few seconds—however long it took them to translate—to prepare myself for what was coming next.'[66] Semprún's lines show that officially endorsed linguistic chaos could be transformed into a weapon of counter-power, suggesting prisoners' ability to carve out inconspicuous spaces of subversion within totalitarian practices.

In fact, inmates devised other strategies to surreptitiously manipulate the politics of linguistic terror to their benefit, using language(s) in creative ways to evade the perpetrator. *Sprachterror*, as emphasized by Aschenberg, thrived on the forced coexistence of multiple cultures and languages, and the resulting linguistic isolation and exclusion.[67] Yet inmates could turn this form of oppression to their advantage. For instance, the Spanish word for 'water,' *agua*, which in the jargon of the underworld implies a warning connoting 'danger,' was used by Spaniards in Mauthausen with this same meaning and became adopted by prisoners from all countries as a clandestine code to alert each other to the presence of Nazi officers in a language the enemy could not decipher.[68] In Buchenwald, an analogous warning system was activated through the

code word *achtzehn*, which means 'eighteen' in German.[69] *Achtzehn* needs to be understood in relation to *Achtung*, 'attention,' the term that prisoners were forced to utter to announce the arrival of SS guards. Inmates created *achtzehn*, thus, through paronomasia, exploiting the phonetic similarities between both words so as to devise a subtle code that would not easily draw the attention of undesirables. Following German-Jewish survivor Trudi Birger, a similar procedure was established in the *Lager* infirmary, where convalescents faced the peril of unexpected *selections* for the gas chambers. Prisoners who were strong enough would keep watch and 'when they heard the officers coming, they called out, "*sechs!*" (six!).'[70] This signal immediately triggered a life-and-death performance: as Nazi perpetrators 'passed from wooden shelf to wooden shelf, picking up the blankets with their swagger sticks to look at our bodies,' patients did their best to appear healthy, 'to smile and look cheerful.'[71]

When sick prisoners put on a show to look healthy in front of Nazi doctors, when inmates engage in clandestine (non)verbal communication under the stern eye of the perpetrator as they work, when they pretend they (do not) understand German, they perform for their lives. In the existential struggle for survival, the *Lager* embodies a space of perpetual offstage performance in which theatricality pervades every realm of social interaction, unveiling deportees' genuine response to the singular, unnatural conditions of this universe. Their perceptible gestures of subordination and linguistic deference 'serve as a barrier and a veil that the dominant find difficult or impossible to penetrate, [preserving] a sequestered site where a more autonomous discourse may develop.'[72] James Scott captures the tensions between oppressor and oppressed in the paradigm of the public and hidden transcript. While the former refers to the public performance required of the subordinates to elaborate and uphold systematic forms of social domination, the latter alludes to the discourse taking place beyond observation by

powerholders. The hidden transcript, hence, consists of the gestures, speeches and practices that inflect and contradict the subordinate discourse surfacing in the public transcript.[73] It develops whenever the oppressed assemble outside the gaze of power, but it also emerges in interaction with the oppressor by virtue of the 'politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors,' which leads to the reality that 'a partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript is always present in the public discourse of subordinate groups.'[74] Examining the traces of the hidden transcript, which is designed to be evasive, is a complicated endeavor, yet a necessary one to recover nonhegemonic voices and understand how they resist tyranny.[75]

Scott's approach to extremely asymmetrical social interaction may contribute to illuminating the nature of power relations in the *Lager* in relation to theater and theatricality. Jeff List has relied on the theory of the public and hidden transcript to explain acts of resistance in Nazi-approved cabarets. Whereas each performance granted authority to the perpetrator and reinforced the lower status of the inmates, considering official programs as solely submissive dismisses their subversive character. Since these cabarets alleviated Nazi concerns of underground movements, participating in them contributed to hiding the location and growth of other cultural and political activities. Besides, without overt rhetoric of resistance, performers were able to conceal in these representations clandestine, rebellious narratives.[76] The veiled performance of hidden transcripts in open perpetrator-victim interaction negotiated power and, 'under the guise of complicity, the doubled codes demonstrated forms of resistance.'[77] The rhetorical emphasis of this creative residue exemplifies the performative nature of discourse and language, as clearly 'words could create actions and through words resistance could be taken,'[78] allowing the hidden transcript to be enacted through low-profile stratagems in

performance. But more significantly, when inmates performed for their lives offstage, that is, when they engaged in theatrically imbued forms of behavior to survive, they navigated between public and hidden transcript as they did onstage, in front of a Nazi audience. *Achtung* and *achtzehn* epitomize this tense relationship: while *Achtung* embodied the public transcript, the required open performance of the subordinates when interacting with the oppressor, *achtzehn* represented their subversive hidden transcript. As a code word, it was deliberately created to be evasive: through paronomasia, exploiting its phonetic resemblance to *Achtung*, deportees were able to hide in their public transcript a subtle yet mighty weapon of counter-power, even in the presence of the perpetrator.

The paradigm of the public and hidden transcript demonstrates that both onstage and offstage performance allow prisoners to shape and convey, under the vigilant eye of power, a subversive discourse that is simultaneously made present and occluded, as 'by the subtle use of codes one can insinuate […] meanings that are accessible to one intended audience and opaque to another audience the actors wish to exclude.'[79] Following Schechner, performances are coded, transmittable 'restored behaviors' or 'twice-behaved behaviors,'—performed actions that require training and rehearsing. This doubleness, implicit in art-making, also conditions everyday life, which involves years of practice to adjust and perform one's life roles deriving from personal and social circumstances.[80] Under the premise that 'life itself is a dramatically enacted thing,' Goffman's dramaturgical sociology approaches human interaction as theater, as an exchange of behaviors where players adopt roles to create, maintain, and destroy a specific impression of reality.[81] Consequently, the self is not an independent, organic psychological entity, but rather a dramatic effect, a performed character arising from the scene that is presented, in constant transformation.[82] As performance, thus, Goffman

understands 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.'[83] Theorizing human interaction as dramaturgical enactments of impression management, operationalized deception emerges as an essential component in life, highly adaptative and even crucial for survival.[84] The examination of social encounters in the *Lager*, I contend, unveils an extreme environment where agents constantly engage in restored behaviors and adopt different identities allowing them to deceive and manipulate the powerholder so as to increase their chances of survival.

Prisoners' performing bodies and ever-changing selves mirror restored behaviors, engendered by interactions between play and ritual, which shape performance as 'ritualized behavior conditioned and/or permeated by play.'[85] Rituals, 'collective memories encoded into actions,' help people to cope with ambivalent hierarchies, complex transitions, and desires to violate or exceed social norms.[86] Through symbolic action, they involve 'more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers,' that tend to be repetitive, stereotyped, stylized, and also tend to occur at specific times and places, under specified circumstances.[87] Like ritual, playing resides in the roots of performance. While ritual has seriousness and authority to it, play is permissive, looser—'forgiving in precisely those areas where ritual is enforcing, flexible where ritual is rigid; […] double-edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously.'[88] Though difficult to define, play is a mood, a creative, spontaneous eruption; pervasive and inherent to human behavior, it can overturn the powers that be, as in carnival or parody. Coalescing into performance, ritual and play become transformative for human behavior by creating a second reality, disconnected from ordinary life, where participants temporarily enact different selves.[89] As I will argue next, in the *Lager*, the territory that became most

drastically permeated by such ritual-like behavior, and that proved crucial to develop low-profile forms of resistance, was work. Nazism stripped work of its productivity and functionality, transforming it into an instrument of terror characterized by physical overexertion, undermechanization, extravagant waste of manpower, pointlessness, endlessness.[90] Terror labor was a means not of self-preservation, but one of absolute power intended to shatter its victims, hounding them until they were drained, and providing only 'a short postponement, a temporary reprieve until their total depletion.'[91]

Brutal physical demands and continued harassment sought to annul the constitutive somatic self-relation, subjugating the human to the dominance of an emaciated body, replacing one's intentional connection with the world by a passive condition of suffering.[92] Furthermore, the system dissipated the potential of collective cooperation, as it strived to avoid the formation of ties eluding control and to retain humans in an atomized, serially structured, superfluous mass order. To promote hostility among prisoners, inmates who worked slightly more slowly than the others were mercilessly beaten; those who were a bit faster, instead, encouraged Kapos to put more pressure on the rest.[93] Survivors' memoirs show, however, that terror did not completely fulfill these purposes. Through highly performative behavior, inmates struggled to salvage those structures of human relatedness to the others and to the self denied by the perpetrator. As Kapos zealously watched deportees work, they were not aware that prisoners kept them under constant surveillance as well. To conserve their strength, inmates developed the shared principle of *immer gucken*, 'always looking,'[94] that is, literally learning to work not with the hands, but with the eyes: *mit den Augen zu arbeiten*.[95] Veterans shared this knowledge with newcomers, frequently turning to a humorous lexical creation: 'You've got to have eyes in your ass. *Arschaugen*.'[96] As soon as there was no supervision, the universal, collective policy was to reduce work

and productivity to the absolute minimum, even daring to commit acts of sabotage. When the enemy reappeared, the warning system went into instant effect with the code word *achtzehn*, and deportees pretended to work effusively.

But even in the presence of the perpetrator, to avoid beatings, the members of a *Kommando* succeeded in finding an even tempo that could be followed by everyone, proving a certain sense of solidarity and belonging.[97] This shared pace, furthermore, always had to look faster and more productive than it actually was: 'inmates with longer experience therefore taught the newcomers that in work one should as much as possible keep to the old Latin principle of *festina lente*—hasten slowly,' wrote Polish-Jewish survivor Samuel Drix regarding Janowska.[98] French Resistance fighter Charlotte Delbo provides an enlightening account in this regard: as the detail toils carrying earth frenetically, 'the weight is greater, the arms grow numb. We take the risk of holding the apron's corners tight, letting a bit of soil run out. If a fury were to take notice, she would beat us to death. Still, we do it.'[99] The realm of work seems, indeed, thoroughly permeated by a dramaturgical dimension that intertwines with prisoners' physical and spiritual resilience.

The notions of *Arschaugen* and *festina lente* encode and transmit implied warnings and fundamental survival lessons which give rise to specific manifestations of restored behavior. When prisoners engage in these shared performances, they cunningly enact their subversive hidden transcript in front of the oppressor. On the one hand, *festina lente* and *Arschaugen* somehow become ritualized behaviors—stereotyped, repetitive, symbolic, coded and transmittable, even ceremonial—leading to a feeling of heightened togetherness and common purpose among the participants; to this experience of communitas which, following Turner, can only be achieved during liminal moments of ritual.[100] Transmitted from veteran prisoners in the work detail to

newcomers, *festina lente* and *Arschaugen* function almost as rites of passage that assert the novice's trustworthiness, leading to their initiation into a subversive community. On the other hand, in its playful nature, performance's potential to be ambiguous, double-edged, spontaneous, and flexible allows inmates to subvert the powers that be—to successfully deceive the enemy, to recover their physical strength. Besides, against all odds, this kind of offstage performance intensifies a shared bond that brings prisoners together, providing an emotional outlet to reconnect with each other and with themselves, thus defeating the very purpose and character of terror labor.

In the same line, though speaking during work was strictly forbidden, prisoners succeeded in communicating with each other by putting on deliberately inconspicuous performances. Szmaglewska describes how male deportees who enter Birkenau on duty, dexterously avoiding detection, share news with women: 'he bends over his wheelbarrow, as if repairing it, while she, a few steps away, works the ground with her spade. They do not look at each other, though they do converse under their breath. If an SS man happens to pass, they move even farther apart and become intensely engrossed in their work.'[101] On constant alert, inmates establish communication by turning to behavioral duality, strategically using the submissive language conveyed by their bodies to conceal subversive action: 'making believe she is crumbling the sand on the slope of the ditch, […] without stopping her work or raising her eyes, she *says* smiling, as if she was talking to the mound of sand: "Have you a knife? Let's have something to eat."'[102] Sometimes, in order for the performance to be successful, extreme resourcefulness, coordination and diligence are required. Delbo explains the tactic deployed by French women, as they work carrying earth, to make contact with a fellow countryman: 'Shrewdly we measure out our run to be served by him. We try to exchange a couple of words. He speaks without moving his lips, or raising his eyes. […] Three trips are

required for a full sentence'[103] Indeed, all these theatrically imbued acts of resistance seem to echo with the nature of actual theater in the *Lager*: both onstage and offstage performance prevail as sites of reconstruction of sociality that restore deportees' agency and provide them with a crucial feeling of control in a coercive environment characterized by the lack thereof.

The complex relationship between simulation and resistance in the domain of terror labor is paradigmatically epitomized in the comportment of some influential deportees, such as certain Kapos or Blockältester. Nazism chose its accomplices among the corrupt prisoners, cruelty towards their fellow deportees being the essential requirement to occupy positions of power. Succumbing to 'mimetic servility,' their violence confirmed they were the right candidates for the job: 'they imitated the master because the latter would never punish an imitation of what the master did. They acted like their master in order to remain what they were—privileged prisoners.'[104] Yet survivors' memoirs unveil a different reality. For instance, Spanish Republicans evoke the memory of the prisoner in charge of their barrack in Ravensbrück, a German communist who yelled at them furiously and hysterically whenever SS officers were around, but was fair, supportive and empathetic the rest of the time.[105] Delbo's rendition of the Kapo leading her work detail sheds further light on this kind of behavior:

> She was a German political prisoner who kept on shouting without ever catching her breath. This woman could really shout. She did so without any visible reason for it, shouting while stamping her feet, shaking her head, her stick, and hitting blindly, then suddenly freezing where she stood. She kept on shouting incomprehensible orders we were unable to carry out, […] she had gotten used to shouting so as to pull the wool over their eyes and be promoted to kapo. When she waved her stick, hitting haphazardly, it would come down next to her target; at any rate, she let us dodge the blow. [106]

Both evocations mirror what I theorize as instances of simulated mimesis, alluding to situations in which the subject visibly performs the role of the perpetrator to create and maintain a specific impression of reality that allows them to surreptitiously defy totalitarianism. The inmate in a position of power openly mimics the brutal practices, gestures and speeches of the SS oppressor so as not to attract their attention. By simulating the public transcript required by power, the prisoner carves out a subtle space for the defiant hidden transcript to be enacted. In the *Lager*, indeed, the language expressed by the bodies often does not correspond to the true intentions of the actors—there is a constant pantomime in operation. In order to infer someone else's real motives, the inmate must be able to read in the other's behavior the signs of a singular code, based on both *ad hoc* resources and shared, tacit, restored behaviors, which exceeds visible impressions and appearances. As it becomes manifest in the realm of terror labor, performative behavior may contribute to establishing a sense of togetherness and ingroup solidarity among the members of a work detail. Outside this domain, theatricality is also decisive to enhance internal cohesion of different social groups in the *Lager*.

In particular, underground resistance movements in every camp relied heavily on simulation, camouflage and deception to carry out subversive action. Sharing his experience of the Buchenwald resistance, Eugen Kogon mentions a 'prisoner intelligence service,' which maneuvered to worm its reliable key members into all the important posts, so that they 'were able to observe everything that happened in the ranks of the SS and the prisoners, to obtain information on every personnel shift and policy trend, to overhear every conversation. Everything that seemed of the slightest significance was under constant scrutiny.'[107] Surveillance and infiltration worked so seamlessly and efficiently that 'nothing of any importance happened in a concentration

camp, including even secret information, that did not come to the attention of the prisoners either immediately or else in a very short time.'[108] The extent to which simulation played a central role in this context is embodied in the figure of the *Läufer*, the inmates who were ostensibly appointed to maintain liaison with the multiple, scattered SS offices. Polish-Jewish survivor Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, who was involved in the resistance, details their influence in Auschwitz:

> A *läufer* was not a simple courier. The area of the camp extended for several kilometers, and the camp was divided into many areas separated by gates. All of the administrative reports and orders were carried from the main administrative office to the blocks by the *lauferki*. They were able to move through the camp freely and were treated respectfully. The camp underground tried to enlist these girls in the organization because they were an excellent source of information on what the Germans were planning to do in the camp. The *lauferki* could also serve as a communication link among various groups in the organization without being noticed.[109]

Most of the *Läufer* in the concentrationary universe did, in fact, join the organization to work on behalf of the prisoners and, thanks to their commitment, all reports and intelligence converged on the underground leaders and their inner circles.[110] Inasmuch as the perpetrator considered the *Läufer* to be a mere passive instrument used to transmit messages, the public transcript constructed them as an inoffensive, voiceless mouthpiece. Precisely, this paradoxical identity of the *Läufer*, shaped by power, proved double-edged, as it allowed the *Läufer* to find a safe space to share and voice the unauthorized hidden transcript while they played their part and pretended to fulfill their assigned functions. Kogon's testimony implies that performances of a similar nature, as a matter of fact, were systematically and successfully delivered by every infiltrated member of the resistance in close contact with the Nazis: 'a prisoner orderly might be unobtrusively sweeping out an office or a hall, apparently minding only his own

business, the SS men never dreaming that his attention was focused on anything but the broom in his hand.'[111] Indeed, members of the resistance used their performing bodies to assert their agency and to prevent the vigilant oppressor from penetrating their collective hidden transcript.

Besides, certain performances were carefully rehearsed and put on collectively in strategic moments, demonstrating that the collaborative nature of theater also permeated offstage, theatrically imbued behavior in the *Lager*. Lise London, French political prisoner and key member of the underground organization in Ravensbrück, offers a fundamental account in this regard. The resistance committee used to meet in *the catacombs*—their code word for a cellar where Catholic prisoners congregated to pray on Sundays, and usually Nazis let it pass—to discuss and plan their strategy. During these clandestine gatherings, women 'were ready to celebrate "Mass" in case the SS appeared.'[112] London details how the events unfolded in such cases:

> We were [holding our meeting] when our sentinels warn us. Immediately, Madame Cadences begins a '*Je vous salue marie...*' which is followed by most of those present. […] It is the commander himself, as always accompanied by his dog and his Aufseherinnen, patrolling the cellars. When he sees us praying, he stops to look at us for a moment, and leaves without saying a word.[113]

As it did in the context of the underground resistance, collectively rehearsed and delivered performances also arose to resist the totalitarian ethos of the camp and to foster ingroup cohesion in other communities. In this respect, Shlomo Venezia's *Sonderkommando Auschwitz* offers a profound insight into the communitarian experience of Greek Jews, the only Ladino speakers in the *Lager*, in relation to theatricality. When Venezia worked in the crematorium, a detail operating nearby was integrated by a few Greek Jews as well. Venezia explains how these men deployed a creative stratagem to covertly establish contact with the Greek members of the

Sonderkommando: 'They'd heard that there were Greeks working in the Crematorium and that our group didn't lack anything. The German allowed them to sing as they worked, so they made up a tune and asked us, in Ladino, to send them some food and clothes.'[114]—linguistic chaos proved, once more, potentially advantageous for the inmates. Venezia and his countrymen responded by preparing parcels with food wrapped up in shirts, and throwing them over the barbed wire to them.

When deportees pretended to sing innocent lyrics or to offer Mass, they performed for their lives and also for the preservation of the community. These excerpts prove that highly performative practices that the perpetrator judged inoffensive and tolerated—or, rather, overlooked—in the subordinate's public transcript allowed for a sequestered space in which to enact their collective, subversive hidden transcript. The playful nature of performance—its quality of not being completely real or serious—led the perpetrator to deem these practices to be innocuous, to disregard them. Yet this playfulness is, in Turner's words, like the irreplaceable and untrustworthy 'jocker of the deck, […] a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence,'[115] which paradoxically made it possible for the performers to subvert or inflect what was seemingly being communicated, by imbuing their actions with coded meanings. In harmony with Schechner, I posit theatricality in the *Lager* as an interplay of ritual and play that creates an alternative reality in which participants adopt different selves to challenge totalitarianism.[116] The extent to which this dramaturgical dimension intertwines with both ritual and play, proving decisive for ingroup cohesion, is vividly captured in the memoir of German-Jewish survivor Thomas Geve, a preadolescent who 'enjoyed observing other people's attitudes and customs'[117] in Auschwitz, as he conjures up the game played by Greek teenagers:

> For me, hitting someone meant being angry with him, but with the Greek boys it was a play. They called it 'Klepsi klepsi'—a nickname given to stealing. The harder you slapped your blindfolded playmate's face the more fun there would be in watching him try to recognize you from among the crowd of grinning bystanders, all doing their best to look guilty, and if he did, it was your turn to cover up your eyes and guess who was hitting you.[118]

Callous and brutal, *Klepsi klepsi* embodied a rite of passage for the participants, marking their initiation into the community of young Greek boys of Auschwitz and forging their sense of togetherness. Echoing with the relentless existence of the *Lager*, their ritual-like game had to be equally ruthless to bear symbolic meaning. Embedded in this universe of indiscriminate violence, where youths personified the most helpless and vulnerable victims, the game allowed the participants to experience liminality[119]—to momentarily transgress their submissive, victimized role by claiming and exerting their agency. Because their camp experience had taught that brutality shaped social hierarchy, these adolescents turned to violence as a means to disrupt the social order, even just for a brief moment, resorting to this mild and controlled form of violence—as opposed to the inhuman ruthlessness sieging them—to demonstrate the resilience and survival instinct of each of the participants. The ritual brought them to an equal level and strengthened their feeling of belonging, transforming them permanently into members of a closed community. Besides, *Klepsi klepsi* illuminates the fundamentally performative essence of play and playing. In certain ways, it was very much like theater and ritual. Not only did it involve a stereotyped sequence of actions performed under specific circumstances, it was also narrational, it created roles and characters, winners and losers; it provoked conflict, arousal and display of emotion.[120] Indeed, *Klepsi klepsi* is enlightening to bring this discussion to a conclusion because it encapsulates the intricate connections between theatricality and communitas, because it mirrors the

extent to which ritual and play may be examined as performance, and vice versa. In its performative nature, *Klepsi klepsi* comprehends the impulse

> to be serious and to entertain; to collect meanings and to pass the time; to display symbolic behavior that actualizes 'there and then' and to exist only 'here and now'; to be oneself and to play at being others; to be in a trance and to be conscious.[121]

As an outsider, uninvited, Geve observed the participants in this ritual from a distance, unable to decipher their language or behavior, puzzled. Geve's position exemplifies the unescapable antithesis of togetherness—the creation of otherness. Exploring moral life in the *Lager*, Todorov emphasized that 'solidarity with our own implies the exclusion of all others. Its victims are thus foreigners, strangers, those who are different. […] All groups tend to develop this corporate spirit as a defense against intrusion from without.'[122] Theatrically permeated behavior was indeed double-edged and ambiguous. Offstage performance only prevailed as a site of reconnection with the self and with the others, as that sequestered space of the liminal within which communitas could be experienced, inasmuch as it also demanded the necessary exclusion of all those deemed to be the other. Theatricality allowed members of the ingroup to share coded meanings and enact subversive strategies that were fundamental for survival, keeping them deliberately undecipherable for the rest and, thus, remaining to a certain extent impassible towards the suffering of the outgroup. Though both theatrical activities and theatrically imbued behaviors showed the potential to foster ingroup cohesion and solidarity, echoing Rovit's perspective on onstage theater,[123] offstage performance seemed to be equally connected to notions of privilege and identity, embodying a latent site of conflict which penetrated into the gray zone. The attempt to unravel the ways in which this dramaturgical dimension pervades the structures of sociality and identity in the *Lager* poses complex questions as to the

unstable, blurred roles of performers, audiences and outsiders, whose boundaries seem to be in constant transformation. Delving into these issues, as I have intended here, is essential to disentangle the tense nexus of theatricality, power and human relationality in the camps.

Conclusion: participants, audience, outsiders

While much academic interest has been devoted to the exploration of theater in the *Lager*, scholars have overlooked the significant role that dramaturgy also played offstage, permeating into virtually every realm of social interaction. In their memoirs, author-eyewitnesses construct the *Lager* as a permanent space of performance where players strive to create various realities and to enact different selves, emphasizing the connection of this pervasive dimension with survival—*i.e*., demonstrating the great extent to which a person's ability to *perform* operates as an arbiter of life and death. The fact that deportees turn to simulation and camouflage as low-profile acts of resistance allowing them to overturn power structures calls for a reconceptualization of the meaning and scope of performance in the concentrationary universe. Not only will this rethinking allow us to reach a deeper understanding of human relationality and artistic activity in the Holocaust, but it will also lay the foundations for larger discussions on the power of theatricality in totalitarian contexts. Concentrating on the *Lager*, I posit performance and spectatorship as a weapon that subverts the Nazi ethos by helping the prisoners to reconstruct the universal structures of human relatedness to the others, to the self, and to the world denied by the perpetrator. Prisoners create, rehearse, share, and perform clandestine codes of communication and signification allowing them to deceive the oppressor and to promote ingroup solidarity. Nonverbal communication flourishes to overcome linguistic terror and to resist the dissociative potential of camp power, planting the seeds for complex forms of performative behavior to develop. As a

result, deportees perform for their lives and for the preservation of their communities, partaking in this theatrically imbued reality, simultaneously occluded and exposed, where a subtle space is carved out to navigate between public and hidden transcript, under the vigilant eye of power.

Deportees enact their subversive, collective hidden transcripts by means of behavioral duality, using their performing bodies to mislead and conceal their true intentions from anyone deemed to be an outsider. As a result, to decipher someone else's real motives, the prisoner must learn to read in their behavior a unique code, based on both *ad hoc* resources and shared restored behaviors, which reaches far beyond appearances. To a certain degree, offstage performance resembles some of the functions fulfilled by onstage theatrical activities: it allows participants to gain control and agency temporarily, it helps them communicate secret knowledge and survival lessons. In both realms, the ritual component of performance leads to the experience of liminality and communitas, but also to the construct of otherness and the exclusion of strangers. Furthermore, mirroring the playful nature of performance, it could even be argued that certain instances of theatrically imbued behavior, such as *Klepsi klepsi*, provide entertainment, while others, like the song in Ladino, somehow echo with aesthetic experience. But whereas theater draws a clear-cut distinction between the roles of performers, audience and outsiders, theatrically permeated behavior merges and blurs these identities, shaping a much more complex paradigm. Theater is a collective endeavor that requires performing actors as well as a non-acting third party that evaluates their performance and determines whether the rules have been correctly observed. Its power results, in fact, from being an event *for* an audience: 'it interrupts the continuity of profane reality, it presents something unexpected and extraordinary, it opens up a space for the encounter with […] collective identity or the sacred.'[124] The

kind of performative processes taking place in the *Lager*, in contrast, are delivered to an audience whose members are not aware, and under no circumstances may find out, that they are part of an audience.

Inmates need to put on a convincing representation of the external reality, visibly abiding by the rules established by the Nazi perpetrator, so that the oppressor takes the performance for reality. While the main objective of theatricality is to convince the audience of an illusion concealed as reality, and members of the audience are thus, in a way, the central participants around whom the whole endeavor revolves, on every occasion that the performance is successful they are also paradoxically excluded at the same time: forced out from the codes of communication and signification taking place, from the hidden transcripts being enacted, from the community that is created and strengthened through performance. It is significant to emphasize that these processes not only define interaction between subordinate and powerholder—be it corrupt Kapos or SS officers,—but also among subordinates themselves. In the inexorable existence of the *Lager*, offstage performance fosters a sense of togetherness and belonging inasmuch as it also underscores otherness and implies the exclusion of outsiders. But whatever the case may be, this pervasive dramaturgical dimension seems strongly connected to the reconstruction of sociality and identity, countering Nazi efforts to retain deportees in an atomized, serially structured mass order. Indeed, because theatricality salvages and demonstrates inmates' spontaneity and agency as expressions of the human condition, further exploration of Holocaust literature through the lens of performance studies is fundamental to deepen our understanding of the concentrationary universe.

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Notes

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[1] Edelman, "Singing in the Face," 205-6; Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities," 10.

[2] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 152; Turner, *From Ritual*, 79-82; Scott, *Domination and Arts*, 2-5; and Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 28.

[3] Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 64.

[4] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 16.

[5] Ibid., 280.

[6] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 16.

[7] Ibid., 12.

[8] Ibid., 18.

[9] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 438.

[10] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 9.

[11] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 18-20.

[12] Ibid., 123-5.

[13] Ibid., 280.

[14] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 280; Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 25.

[15] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 18.

[16] Kogon, *Theory and Practice*, 36-7.

[17] Aschenberg, "Linguistic Terror," 64.

[18] Gramling, "An Other Unspeakability," 167-9.

[19] Aschenberg, "Sprachterror," 556.

[20] Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 92-3.

[21] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 137-9.

[22] Goffman*, Asylums,* 63-4.

[23] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 137.

[24] Kogon, *Theory and Practice*, 317.

[25] Rovit, "Cultural Ghettoization," 463.

[26] Ibid., 461.

[27] Ibid., 461

[28] Ibid., 476.

[29] De Marinis, *Semiotics of Performance*, 1-2.

[30] Edelman, "Singing in the Face," 205.

[31] Ibid., 205-206.

[32] Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities," 9.

[33] Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," 3-4.

[34] Edelman, "Singing in the Face," 207-8.

[35] Ibid., 205.

[36] Ibid., 208.

[37] Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities," 8-10.

[38] Daniel, "The Freest Theatre," 803-6.

[39] Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities," 6.

[40] Seligman, "Trauma and Drama," 129.

[41] Ibid., 129.

[42] Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities," 10; Edelman, "Singing in the Face," 211.

[43] Rovit, "Cultural Ghettoization," 475-6.

[44] Ibid., 476.

[45] Stuart-Fischer, "Imagining Theatre," 91.

[46] Ibid., 96.

[47] Seligman, "Trauma and Drama," 129; Stuart-Fisher, "Imagining Theatre," 96-7; and Peschel, "The Cultural Life," 73-5.

[48] Turner, *From Ritual to Theater*, 45.

[49] Ibid., 45-9.

[50] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 280.

[51] Peschel, "The Cultural Life," 59.

[52] Ibid., 73-5.

[53] Hall and Knapp, *Handbook of Communication Science*, 6.

[54] Poyatos, *Paralanguage*, 6.

[55] Poyatos, *Nonverbal Communication*, 329.

[56] Szmaglewska, *Smoke over Birkenau*, 122.

[57] Ibid., 120-121.

[58] Gun, *The Day*, 180.

[59] Wieslaw, *Anus Mundi*, 167.

[60] Meir, *Mi resiliencia*, 55 (translated by the author for lack of a published English translation).

[61] Venezia, *Sonderkommando*, 132.

[62] Ibid., 132.

[63] Bickerton, "Language Evolution," 515-6.

[64] Miñano-Mañero, *Contacto de lenguas*, 80-4.

[65] Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 29.

[66] Semprún, *The Long Voyage*, 159.

[67] Aschenberg, "Sprachterror," 530-33.

[68] Wingeate Pike, *Españoles en el Holocausto*, 527.

[69] Kogon, *Der SS-Staat*, 101.

[70] Birger, *A Daughter's Gift*, 143.

[71] Ibid., 143.

[72] Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 32.

[73] Ibid., 3-5.

[74] Ibid., 19.

[75] Ibid., 17-9.

[76] List, *From Hidden to (Over-)Exposed*, 36.

[77] Ibid., 37.

[78] Edelman, "Singing in the Face," 206.

[79] Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 158.

[80] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 28-9.

[81] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 71-2.

[82] Ibid., 252-3.

[83] Ibid., 15-6.

[84] Zuckerman, DePaulo, and Rosenthal, "Verbal and Nonverbal Communication," 2.

[85] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 52,

[86] Ibid., 52-3.

[87] Rappaport, *Ecology*, 175-6.

[88] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 89.

[89] Ibid., 52.

[90] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 190.

[91] Ibid., 167.

[92] Ibid., 186.

[93] Ibid., 191.

[94] Maršálek, *Geschichte*, 421.

[95] Kogon, *Der SS-Staat*, 101.

[96] Borowski, *This Way*, 35.

[97] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 191.

[98] Drix, *Witness to Annihilation*, 63.

[99] Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 91-2.

[100] Turner, *From Ritual to Theater*, 45-9

[101] Szmaglewska, *Smoke over Birkenau*, 241.

[102] Ibid., 222-3.

[103] Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 92.

[104] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, 138.

[105] Català, *De la resistencia*, 143,

[106] Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 147.

[107] Kogon, *Theory and Practice*, 257.

[108] Ibid., 257.

[109] Nomberg-Przytyk, *True Tales*, 31.

[110] Kogon, *Theory and Practice*, 257

[111] Ibid., 258.

[112] London, *Souvenirs de résistance*, 366 (translated by the author for lack of a published English translation).

[113] Ibid., 366 (translated by the author for lack of a published English translation).

[114] Venezia, *Sonderkommando*, 125.

[115] Turner, "Body, Brain, and Culture," 233-4.

[116] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 89.

[117] Geve, *Guns and Barbed Wire*, 136

[118] Ibid., 136.

[119] Turner, *From Ritual*, 40-1.

[120] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 121.

[121] Schechner, "From Ritual to Theater," 480.

[122] Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 82.

[123] Rovit, "Cultural Ghettoization," 475-6.

[124] Giesen, "Performing the Sacred," 246.