

KATARZYNA (KASIA) ZARZYCKA

**THIS BODY'S
MADE OF FEAR:
EXPOSING THE
PSYCHOPOLITICS
OF FEAR THROUGH
PERFORMANCE**

**HOME OF
PERFORMANCE
PRACTICES**

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THE PSYCHOPOLITICS
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KATARZYNA (KASIA)
ZARZYCKA
MA PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

A Thesis presented by Katarzyna Zarzycka to Master Performance Practices
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HOME OF
PERFORMANCE
PRACTICES

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SYNOPSIS

This thesis explores the potential of performance, understood as sociological phenomena and an artist practice, to expose the ways in which fear is manipulated, internalized and politicized. Operating from the standpoint of affect theory, claiming emotions as crucial elements of understanding the contemporary society, the research focuses on fear as one of the strongest emotions with the capacity of influencing the body and the (conscious and subconscious) mind, making it politically salient. Responding to the personal as well as societal urgency of gaining awareness into how this affect is used through and against certain bodies, the research aims to fill the gap of underrepresentation of artistic, specifically performance practices in the wider discussions on the political use of fear, claiming performance's intrinsic connection to politics and manipulation. Drawing from sociology neuroscience and psychological studies, as well as performance and theater studies, the research takes their insights into the realm of artistic practice, situating fear not as an innate or universal response, but as a socially conditioned and embodied experience shaped by factors such as gender, ethnicity, and social position. Taking the body of the author as the primary source of inquiry, the research employs the methods of autoethnography, photography, acting and re-enactment as tools for gaining an embodied knowledge

on the workings of fear, its sources and the the politics of their representations. In order to expose them, it proceeds with the exploration of language and embodied presence. By positioning performance as both a mode of analysis and a practice of exposition and subversion, the thesis argues for interdisciplinary framework for understanding how fear operates as a psychopolitical tool. It presents performative strategies and dramaturgical operations such as re-enactment, satire and metaphor as contributions to the further practice of politically engaged performance-making.

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DECLARATION

I, Katarzyna Zarzycka, hereby certify that I had personally carried out the work depicted in the thesis entitled, 'This body's made of fear: Exposing the psychopolitics of fear'. No part of the thesis has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma prior to this date.

"...the Latin root of the word emotion is emovere, and it is the capacity of emotion to move bodies that makes the phenomenon so politically potent."
Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*

"No experience is more one's own than harm to one's own skin, but none is more locked within that skin, played out within it in actions other than words, in patterns of consciousness below the everyday and the constructions of language. Trapped there, the violation seems to continue in a reverberating present that belies the supposed linearity of time and the possibility of endings."

Roberta Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self"

"The horror! The horror!"
Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

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INTRODUCTION

BODY OF FEAR, SOCIETY OF FEAR

In the last four months during which I conducted my research, I realized clearly that I live in a society of spectacle and a culture of fear. From the infinite scroll of the no-longer-censored images of corpses from DRC, Ukraine, or Gaza, through fear-induced rhetorics of the newspaper headlines, to daily fears for the future, for my body, and for my safety, I have a sensation of fear engulfing me every day. I am not alone in this feeling: one of the key figures of this research, philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, points to the growing sense of fear and anxiety in seemingly safe Western societies of the 21st century, a result of what he calls the “liquid modernity” a period defined by neoliberalist individualism, uncertainty about the future, and erosion of communities (Bauman, 2000, 102). There are many entities that benefit from this shift, he claims: far-right parties, religious figures, authoritarian leaders, neoliberal companies, and others who know how to manipulate our fears (Bauman, 2006, 169). Writing this introduction on the day the ship “Madleen”, carrying humanitarian aid and volunteers to Gaza, was intercepted by the Israeli authorities, who called it “the hate flotilla”, a couple of days after President’s Trump ban on admitting Harvard international students to the US on accounts of “national security concerns”, and a week after

the de-facto victory of the far-right party in Polish presidential election, Bauman's words resonate with me even more.

The research presented in this thesis stems from an urgency to show that the fears that dominate my personal, and societal landscape do not exist in vacuum, but appear in response to stimuli - stimuli which are consciously, and intentionally, created by political agents. It follows Bauman's assertion that it is not too late to notice these fears, "seek their common sources and the obstacles that pile up on the road to their discovery, and find the ways of putting them out of action" (Bauman, 35, 2006). It is neither within the scope of this research to create a full inventory of the ways in which fear is used for political gain, nor find concrete ways to resist it. This job I leave for sociologists, activists and Phd students. As a theater artist, however, my practice of acting, re-enacting and creating performances has brought me invaluable insights into understanding how fear works on my body and how engaging with it through practice-as-research can bring embodied knowledge for both myself, the performer, and the audiences. Hence, using the framework of performance studies and contemporary theater, this research sets out to demonstrate that performance can be a means of instilling a critical lens through which *psychopolitics* of fear can be noticed, embodied and exposed. Furthermore, it aims to contribute to the wider field of performing arts by presenting specific performative strategies and dramaturgical operations

which can be used in the further practice of politically engaged performance-making.

DEFINING THE TERMS

The research question "How can performance expose the psychopolitics of fear", uses some terms that require clarification: namely performance, psychopolitics and fear.

Firstly, *performance* is understood after Richard Schechner as a range of socially modelled behaviors and activities, ranging from rituals, politics, sports to interpersonal interactions. "There are no clear boundaries", writes Schechner, "separating everyday life from family and social roles or social roles from job roles, church ritual from trance, acting onstage from acting offstage" (Schechner, 2002, 76), marking performance as the conscious and unconscious way of transmitting information to others through the body, language, gesture, facial expression but most importantly - actions. When thinking about performance within the realm of the live art, however, I see the term *performance* an extension of the post-dramatic theater tradition, which moves beyond the classic text-based approach, away from narrative, character, and plot as central organizing principles. It centers the body as the main protagonist and the carrier of knowledge.

The term *psychopolitics*, coined by philosopher Byung-Chul Han, refers to the subtle manipulation of individuals' inner lives and desires by neoliberal power structures. It leads to internalization of control rather than being externally dominated. The idea of *psychopolitics* updates Michel Foucault's disputed concept of *biopolitics* by tying it to neoliberalism as the main form of power in the 21st century, which operates not just through the subjugation of the body but through the willful manipulation of the mind. It does so predominantly through emotion:

"Emotions are steered by the limbic system, which is also where the drives are seated. They form the pre-reflexive, half-conscious, physical-instinctual level of action that escapes full awareness. Neoliberal psychopolitics seizes on emotion in order to influence actions on this pre-reflexive level. By way of emotion, it manages to cut and operate deep inside as such emotion affords a highly efficient medium for psycho-politically steering the integral person the person as a whole" (Han, 2017, 48).

Psychopolitical power operates precisely through the emotions with their "hidden wishes, needs, and desires" (Han, 2017, 20), by making the subject obey not through brute force but his own will, instilled nonetheless by neoliberal paradigms. That is to say that those emotions which seem to be working from within, are in fact working from without.

Finally, *fear* is an emotion that appears in response to an imminent threat, prompting physiological reactions such as accelerated heartbeat, sweating, tensing of the muscles or intensification of the blood flow towards the gut (APA

Dictionary of Psychology, 2024). Despite a popular perception of fear being a "primal" emotion (common across species and partly innate), the recent interest in the consciousness theories among the neuroscientists generated debates about the differences in cognitive experience of fear in humans and animals (LeDoux, Brown, 2017; Mobbs, 2019), prompting them to investigate what social theorists knew all along: fear is also a "constructed emotion" (Berrett, 2017) heavily determined by individual's felt, inferred and predicted knowledge of the world. It is a reaction to a present situation influenced by culture and habitus, "a sediment of past experiences", in the words of Zygmunt Bauman "...that outlives the encounter and becomes an important factor in shaping human conduct even if there is no longer a direct threat to life and integrity" (Bauman, 2006, 52). What Bauman calls "secondary fear" is predominantly the topic of this research, as rather than understanding how fear feels, my research explores where it comes from, in which situations and environments it manifests and how it has been used by and within political performance. By using specific performance practices and theories as tools for understanding, analysis, and dissemination, this research aims to contribute to the broader conversation within the affective turn in political sciences. It seeks to demonstrate that fear—internalized through cultural upbringing and personal experience, and manipulated by political rhetoric, language, and performance—is not innate or natural, but constructed and fundamentally psychopolitical. By doing

is, it also contributes concrete performative strategies and dramaturgical operations that can be used in the practices of politically-engaged theater making.

FINDING THE GAP

One could ask: why approach this topic through the lens of artistic research and apply performance-based methods? Why not rely on more conventional tools such as surveys, cognitive tests, EEG scans, fMRI, or archival analysis, which might appear to yield more objective results? As an artist I neither have the means to conduct scientific research, nor do I believe it is my place to do so. I do, however, have specific knowledge and skills that allow me to approach the topic from a different angle. Applying artistic lens to a topic predominantly studied within sociology and neuroscience complements their findings and opens it to new audiences, allowing for its dissemination and popularization. In the arts, within the last decades, the topic of fear has been almost monopolized by the film industry, which indeed began to reflect critically on its political importance. With the emergence of post-modern horror, which challenges and subverts the classic horror-tropes, horror movies of the last twenty years have successfully been uncovering the use of fear in upholding racist stereotypes, justifying gender-based violence or creating social divisions. Nevertheless,

the same topic, even if periodically taken to the stage, did not receive the same attention within the performing arts, despite, what I argue, performance's incredible potential of exposing and understanding fear's ties to politics (especially the body politics). That Western theater was born in the same place where democracy was born; that power, authority and discipline were for ages exercised through public performances, whether in form of executions, uniforms, or protocols; that a political speech is in fact a monologue performed on a stage, all show an undeniable connection of performance to politics. Writing about theater and politics, critic and performance artist Jon Erickson states that both are "examples of a rhetorical apparatus that has the ability to efface its own performance techniques in order to present the illusion of a truth dramatically to its audience" (Erickson, 2003, 155). That "dramatical" way of presenting the truth is where performance, with its dramaturgical operations, rhetoric, language, voice and visuals, manipulates the emotional response. It is also where I identify the gap within the field of affect theory and political studies, which despite occasional analysis of social behavior (performance) related to fear, fail to properly investigate the artistic performance's potential in understanding this subject. With the emergent embodiment, critical approach and emotional resonance it has on both the performer and the audience, performance, and specifically in the case of this research, a theatrical performance, may use the same techniques of manipulation, but when employed

critically, it can subvert them, disseminating them to the wider audiences. This research is then a call to both artistic and academic circles to further pursue this interdisciplinary inquiry, one that merges arts and sciences, in the context of topics too broad to be researched by one discipline only.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Chapter One introduces the experiments conducted in the first year of the Master and the importance of the key insights from horror theory and affect theory and outlines how post-dramatic theatre practices are used to embody concepts from performance studies, such as social behavior as performance, the performativity of language, and embodiment. It also critically positions the research within political studies, highlighting both their insights and limitations in addressing the psychopolitics of fear.

Chapter Two focuses on methodology, reflecting the various practices employed throughout the research, with the focus on the role of acting and re-enactment. It considers both the potential and limitations of these practices and draws connections to psychological and neuroscientific findings that align with insights gained through embodied artistic exploration.

Chapter Three reflects on the personal understanding developed through the research and returns to the core aim: exposing the manipulation of fear. It outlines a set of dramaturgical strategies that emerged from the practice, as well as tools that may support other theatre-makers.

CHAPTER 1: MAPPING THE FIELD

HORROR AND THE 1ST YEAR EXPERIMENTS

Fear has been the core topic of my practice for a long time. Already in my first year at the MA Performance Practices I explored the horror genre as a potent mode of analysis of the fear of the Other, which I identify as the core element of the psychopolitical narratives that surround me. From shorter performances which used the slasher aesthetics for the purpose of comedic commentary (such *Tick* presented as part of Body in Performance module, where I went from a character of an authoritative professor to a blood-sucking vampire) to the mockumentary performance *East Eats or a Contemporary Culinary Horror* (Fig. 1) in which I used the imagery, language and rhetorics borrowed from the horror genre as a way to demonstrate the exoticization and vilifying of the non-white characters within the genre, I kept asking myself “whose bodies are we afraid of?” and who the “we” is in this discourse.



Figure 1: *East Eats or a Contemporary Culinary Horror*, photo: Steef Kersbergen

I was aided by film and literary theories which see horror as representing “deep-rooted social and psychological anxieties” (Hawkins-Dady, 1996, 232), serving as a peculiar mirror of societal fears present in the forms of folk tales, ghost-stories, novels, films, to creepy-pastas. The theories I engaged with at that time demonstrated the link between the cultural, psychological and sociological aspects in the study of horror, particularly potent for my research, as well as explained the deep drive I always felt for these stories. “The power of horror lies in its confronting viewers with images and ideas that reach into our darkest, deepest fears and

expose them” writes film critic Anna Bogutskaya. “They don’t just reflect our fears back to us; they articulate them, turning our anxieties, fears and hungers into sensory experiences, extracting them and splattering them on a screen for us to witness, surrounded by strangers” (Bogutskaya, 19, 2024). Still, horror - a highly commercialized genre - uses fear as entertainment and in order to appeal (and sell tickets) to broader audiences it often makes use of simplifications and, unfortunately, replicates harmful stereotypes. Even though in the recent years the subversion of racial and gender stereotypes has been a defining feature of the post-modern horror (Pinedo, 1997; Moscozo, 2016; Brzostek, 2021), most horror movies still cast a classically beautiful white woman as the protagonist, portraying her as a subject to a threat from Others. My engagement with the horror genre and theory has been then focused on using its metaphorical potential, identifying the tropes which exemplify the fear of the Other, and using its aesthetics in such a way as to create similar emotional resonance without losing the critical lens.

POST-DRAMATIC THEATER, LIVENESS AND EMBODIED PRESENCE

After working with representations and projections of fear within pop-culture in my first year, I initially wanted my practice-as-research to focus on constructing the immersive

experiences of fear for the audiences in a theater setting in order to provide a safe space for analyzing, challenging and exposing their manipulation. Around that time, I got employed at a horror-themed escape room, where I would observe the live reactions of fear of its participants, and conducted field research into haunted house attractions in the Netherlands, focusing on the dramaturgical operations these places employ to induce fear. The performance I created at that time, however, changed the focus of the research: *In your wor(l)ds* (two versions, both presented in December 2024), inspired by Rimini Prokoll's narrative audio performances (*Mirror Neurons*, 2004; *The Walks*, 2021) and John Duncan's immersive experiences, which used suggestive and triggering soundscapes in dark spaces (*Black Room*, 1980; *Move Forward*, 1984), took a form of a guided meditation, which explored the role of sound and suggestion in inducing physiological reaction of fear and discomfort in the audience. The experiment failed to produce a universal response in the audience without a body of the performer present. Its impact (confirmed by feedback from those who saw both versions) was much greater, however, when I physically appeared on stage. This finding pushed my research farther from the immersive audience-centered experience and closer towards researching how the performance *of* and *with* the embodied presence of the body on stage can be that which "exposes" the workings of fear.

The question which materialized after this experiment, namely "How can performance expose the psychopolitics of fear?", was researched within the framework of performance studies and contemporary theater practices, the disciplines within which I was trained as an actor and director. In realm of contemporary theater, I situate my practice specifically in the post-dramatic theater tradition, which understands "performance" as an extension of the modern theater forms, and most theater directors from whom this research draws, makes this distinction calling their work "performance" rather than "theater". A term popularized in the 1970s by theater scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann, post-dramatic theater refers to a range of theatrical forms and aesthetics which de-center dramatic texts, i.e. they do not base themselves in character-centered and plot-driven narrative plays (Lehmann, 2006, 17). Even though the performances I create have scripts, they do not necessarily begin with text - the starting point for a construction of a performance can be for me a conversation, an image, movement improvisation, or a feeling in the body. My practice relies on the idea shared by many performance studies scholars that exposing the live body on stage (or on the street, a gallery, or any other context that marks itself distant from the ordinary) gives it a unique lens of analysis. In her work *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008) Erika Fischer-Lichte identifies the physical presence of the performer on stage as the crucial element of post-dramatic theatre - not as someone representing a

character, but as a body in action, evoking affect, tension, and meaning through liveness (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, xx). The physical characteristics of the body, of which perception is usually suspended in the dramatic theater (for example, in a school play, a girl with a black mustache painted above her lips will likely be “read” as playing a male character), are that which imbues the post-dramatic performance with new meaning (here, whether a Black or a white man is playing, let us say, Othello will be a significant information on how to understand the commentary a performance is making). In my practice then, when I am on stage, my bodily appearance and embodied affects are representative of my body rather than the body of a character. This allows me to draw from my personal history and create authenticity, but at the same time the setting of my work in a clearly theatrical space leaves room to interweave truth with fiction - a notion that later became essential for my research.

Nevertheless, a body creates meaning not only through its physicality. It also carries invisible embodied knowledge, which is why working with the reality of my own body - a body which is small, female-presenting, white, and abled, but also a body which carries genetic information, cultural codes, memories and experiences - serves as my primary tool of investigation. Guided by the recent trends on the global stages emblematic for the post-dramatic theatre’s turn towards authenticity, my interest in exploring that embodied

knowledge comes from directors such as Lola Arias, Wojtek Ziemilski or Gosia Wdowik, who all merge the elements of fiction, documentary theater and confessional performance. Even though their own body is usually not at the center of their inquiries, all three at some point in their career have been challenged to reflect on their own positionality towards the art they had been creating: Arias, after two pieces staged with children of parents implicated in the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina, created and performed in a deeply affecting piece about her own relationship with her mother (*Melancholy and demonstrations*, 2012); Ziemilski, for years working with other people’s autobiographies, made a confessional piece about his own intergenerational trauma and guilt (*Small Narration*, 2010), and Wdowik, usually a director from behind the scenes, made herself and her body the topic of the last segment of her trilogy of emotions (*Fear*, 2018; *Anger*, 2018; *Shame*, 2021). Their decision to expose themselves not only with the presented story, but with their bodily presence, without hiding behind a character is something that reassured me in my choice to first critically reflect on how fear manipulates my own body before making any commentary about the others.

AFFECT THEORY AND AFFECTIVE TURN IN POLITICAL SCIENCES

The works of the three practitioners mentioned above, are representative of the contemporary theater's turn towards affect, authenticity and embodiment. Many scholars argue that this turn is a response to the perceived superficiality of contemporary culture (Docherty, 2003, p. 27; Schulze, 2017, p. 8), a condition only intensified by the rise of virtual interactions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The trend in the arts has been paralleled by growing interest in emotion within the social sciences, which increasingly claim "affect" as a political force. Affect theory has been the core theoretical framework of my research, as it bridges the notion of performativity, emotion and politics. The notion that "affects" - that what emotions do to the bodies - are inseparable from politics has been a belief that accompanied me since my early encounter with Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005). The author's brilliant literary criticism opened me to the political potential of affects usually disregarded as minor, or not-so-interesting, such as irritation or anxiety, in diagnosing and interrogating one's own position in the neoliberal world. Ngai's pointed reflections on the role of film and literature in portraying and popularizing those emotions was something that further influenced my choice to investigate horror theory as complementing the early research into representations of fear in popular culture.

Some of the other affect theorists important for this project include Teresa Brennan, whose work concerning the transmission of affect between the groups of individuals and communities was influential in my understanding of transmission of affect between the performer and the audience; Rose McDermott, whose emphasis on the importance of including the body and its somatic in IR analyses affirmed my urgency; Patricia T. Clough, who similarly to Byung Chul-Han expands the notion of biopolitics to the realm of the psyche, helping me dive deeper into the notion of "psychopolitics"; and Brian Massumi, whose ideas about the ontology of threat as fear coming from the future were an indirect nod towards my repeated use of speculative fabulation as a dramaturgical operation. What brings my research within the field of these theorists is our shared conviction of the impossibility of de-politicizing emotions, as it is emotions that are at the core of constructions of ideas, norms, communities and identities, thus governing not just our individual perceptions and action, but impacting every social interaction from a conversation with a neighbor to policy-making summit at international organizations. The evidence they bring from sociological and political studies are crucial for my performance practice they empirically confirm the premise of my research that affect (once again, that what is felt and experienced within the body) "cannot be pushed out of the mind and or excluded

from the decision-making processes of the so-called rational actor because the mind *is* body, meaning the rational is always already emotional and vice versa" (Purnell, 44, 2021). What differentiates my approach, however, from the above-mentioned theorists is my use of artistic practices as means of actualizing their theories. After all, as Sara Ahmed states, "theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin" (Ahmed, 2017, 10). As much as my research draws from affect theory, it still preferences the practice as the main method of inquiry.

LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE, RHETORICS: DRAMA AND POLITICS

The key takeaway from the various affect theories this research engages with is focus on performativity of language when it comes to inducing emotional states. In both my acting and writing practices, language, and in that: word choice, rhetorical structure, tone, emphasis, and strategic omission, functions as a core tool through which I shape performance toward specific aims. It is then hardly surprising that the focus on language and discourse as fundamental parts of psychopolitical work of fear materialized in the early stages of the research and continued to evolve into one of the main findings. Among many scholars who elaborate on this topic, I found Frank Furedi's writings on the language of fear particularly illuminating. In the book *How Fear Works*

(2018) he thoroughly examines how fear is used by political elites to manage uncertainty and maintain authority within contemporary Western societies, pointing to the role of the media (although not independently of the prevailing culture) in shaping the perception of ever more threatening reality. The media's role in popularizing the culture of fear occurs in particular, he claims, through fear-infused language, showing how certain fear-related expressions nowadays appear in popular usage more frequently than in the last 20 years (Furedi, 2018, 39). Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotion* pointed me into the direction of looking specifically towards the narration around immigration in the Western societies as a prime example of psychopolitical manipulation of language that induces fear, something that reflected my own observations from the first year of living in the Netherlands. In her linguistic analysis of the news coming from the British press, she identifies "the language of border anxiety" (Ahmed, 2004, 76), pointing specifically to the de-humanizing use of the words such of "swamps", "floods" of "invasions" to describe the immigrants; words, that draw on the associations with something aggressive, dirty, and dangerous.

Reading Ahmed's articles, I could clearly connect that language to the recurring pop-cultural tropes within the film history ever since the 1950's - in the US a period defined by a looming threat of the Cold War and sudden immigration of the non-white asylum-seekers and workers after WW2. On a

similar note, scholars such as Elijah Anderson or Sally Engle Merry point to the commonly used discourse of “stranger-danger” (predominantly in discussion about immigrants of color) as a way of projecting violence onto the bodies of “Others”, refusing to accept the overwhelming evidence of violence happening within interpersonal, familiar structures. As Merry states “The stranger is here figured as the violent monster whose elimination would mean safety for women and children. Such a figuration allows the home to be imagined as a safe haven: an imagining that cannot deal with the violence that is instituted through the social relations within the home” (Merry, 35, 1981). The imagination-stirring words such as “monster”, “alien” and “invasion” stuck with me longer (which in itself proves their emotional salience), and provided material for the future performance experiments, used notably in my Exposition of Artistic Research in May.

WHERE NEUROSCIENCE COMES IN: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

“The public performance of political figures” claims Eddie Paterson in *The Contemporary American Monologue* “relies on recognizably theatrical components such as costume, scripting, staging, persona and dramaturgical framing” (Paterson, 2015, 44). Their performances - including speeches, slogans, gestures - rely on careful curation, or manipulation,

of language. Paterson's analysis of the rhetorical devices used in both politicians and actors' monologues, draws attention to the power of language in inducing emotional states, something indeed confirmed by psychological and neuroscientific research. Various studies, including De Martino et al. (2006) showed that how a choice is framed - using positive or negative wording - affects outcomes and brain activity. fMRI results revealed that “loss” framing activated the amygdala, triggering instinctual, fear-based responses, while the prefrontal cortex helped regulate this effect. This, and many other studies (Xu et al. 2013; Van Peer et al. 2014; Zhang et al., 2020) highlights the strong influence of emotion on decision-making, which is highly relevant to my research. It proves that how the politicians are using language has a real, biological effect. This insight became a departure point for my practice: if the manipulation of language within political performance can produce such effects, then the critical application of those same performative techniques holds the potential to reveal and challenge that very manipulation.

THE PERFORMATIVITY OF LANGUAGE

The finding that language affects our thinking is also a claim with a long history in the humanities and social theory, but it is the notion of the “performative” aspect of the language, as understood in critical theory, that carries the greatest

repercussions for this research. Judith Butler, one of the most prominent scholars of the topic, describes how the language effectively creates the reality we experience: "Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (Butler, 13, 1993). For example, in the Western marriage act it is the performative "yes, I do" that establishes the marriage union, the signature on the document just reaffirming the pronouncement of the act that took place. In other contexts, the speech act itself might be enough even without the written component, as in the Muslim tradition of divorce, where saying the "plain" words of divorce (any word derived from "divorce") effect the act no matter if said with the truthful intention of divorcing or not. The ephemeral turned physical, a reality created through language is then a lived, embodied reality which structures and dictates the life of individuals. As Sara Ahmed affirms, 'The worlds we "are in" might not be of "our making," but they are made, and through being made, they "make us." Indeed, politics could be thought of as a project of "world making" in which "truth" is one aspect of the world that is being made and remade' (Ahmed, 378, 2003). Ahmed's idea led me towards speculative fabulation as a strategy for performance making with the potential on commenting on that "project of world making" - something I was also noticing while analyzing use of language of politicians and news commentators.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS AND FINDINGS

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The core method of my research was autoethnography, described by communication scholar Carolyn Ellis as an "approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis, 2004, 3). In my approach, I used autoethnography as a means of self-reflective mode of analysis, which through the act of writing helped me establish distance to the described events. Throughout the process, the words of Byung Chul-Han Han from *Psychopolitics* were accompanying me: "A sense of self derives from giving an account - it is not counting but recounting that leads to self-discovery or self-knowledge" (Han, 2017, 60). For this project, my autoethnographic writing focused on the instances of everyday life in which I felt afraid. On my personal blog, I created a logbook where I wrote diary entries. To stay consistent, I constructed a list of questions which I consulted when making the entries, based on the similarities between the first ten entries. The three questions that eventually became crucial turned out as follows:

1. How did my body react?
2. What thoughts appeared in that moment?
3. How have the characteristics of my body influenced my actions and thoughts?

Describing my bodily reactions served as a way of determining whether what I feel can be described as fear or not. For example, if I notice a rush of adrenaline and accelerated heartbeat, how does this relate to the situation I am experiencing? Is it due to the coffee I just drank, an upcoming stressful conversation or a dog barking at me from behind the fence? Is the emotion connected to something happening in the moment or something that had happened in the past? Am I in danger? How does my body know I am in danger? What other parts of my body give me this indication? In the instances I believed a potential harm could occur, I would do everything *not to expose* my feelings for the sake of staying safe. For example, when forced to interact with an aggressive man in the middle of the street at night, I would smile, wish him a good night and lie about someone waiting for me at home, trying to perform nonchalance with my body language. The observation, that in many threatening situations I would perform as if I was *not* afraid, struck me as particularly interesting. After all, in the horror films I watched, the portrayal of fear was usually “grand”. The protagonist would look behind her multiple times, her chest moving

up and down, giving the viewer, as well as the potential perpetrator, an indication that she saw something she should not have, thus becoming an easy target. That portrayal of fear in pop-culture seemed distant from my reality, so in order to understand why the movies choose to portray fear like this, I would write my experiences down and re-enact my movement, juxtaposing them with similar scenes I had seen in the movies. By contracting them, I wanted to understand why and for what purpose the female protagonist perform their fear differently that I do in my real life.

The second question dived into the visual and auditory stimuli which triggered the bodily response, to consciously determine the source of the fear. Why is this man making me scared - is it his behavior that indicates a possible danger; is it his appearance that produces increased alertness (and if so, what is it about his appearance? Homelessness? Substance use? Would I react in the same way if he was well-dressed? If I met him in front of a luxury store and not a coffee shop?); does my experience really concern this person or rather memories of similar encounters in the past? This question in particular made me attuned to which fears are coming from the innate sense of danger and harm, and which are only based on assumption of potential danger and harm, not based in objective view of the situation.

Question number three was specifically pertinent, as from the beginning I was aware of the impossibility of generalizing my findings onto bodies other than my own. Being a body that is white, female-presenting, abled, and small were the primary physical characteristics I identified as contributing to my fears. Recounting my experiences in the form of writing and putting a name to the otherwise ephemeral and undefined, was a way of answering to myself and reflecting on my bias, but also a way to acknowledge the lived reality of the body. Reflecting on my ethnicity influencing my anxious reaction to a Black man walking behind me on the street, my gender, while walking home at night, or my immigration status in the US, were all contributing to realization that indeed, my fears are determined by the body inhabited, but they are also amplified by narratives that taught my body to be afraid.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography became a way to introduce the physical (and hence embodied) aspect of noticing and recording my fears in daily life. If autoethnography was a method employed to reflect and analyze *after* the experiences, taking a photo when feeling fear made me more aware of my behavior in the moment. In February, my father sent me my old camera (not an analogue, but the first one I ever got as a child in the early 2000s) and I started to carry it with me every day. I chose

one small enough to put in a pocket, but bigger and hence different in sensorial reception than a phone camera. The weight of the camera in my pocket became a reminder to enter a more conscious state of perceiving my environment and my body, and the audible "click!" as it took a photo paired with the instant memorization of the image. The idea to then come back to the photo, analyze its content, form and aesthetics was supported by sociological research showing the potential of this method of visual research in revealing the otherwise mundane and taken-for-granted aspects of our habitus (Sweetman, 2009, 292). For example, there are a lot of photos in my collection that show the streets in Arnhem where I walk on every day. At a first sight, they might look completely normal, but for me there are clear signs why I took the photos in that moment. Looking at a photo of a window above Sjoesies (Fig. 2) I remember chills down my spine when I noticed the American Confederate flag in the window (something my friends, who are not familiar with American history, did not recognize). In other photo (Fig. 3) in the background, there is a silhouette of a man who I remember was behaving aggressively in the middle of the night. One can see that I took the photo from far away, hiding behind a wall.



Figure 2: Looierstraat, Arnhem.



Figure 3: Spijkerkwartier, Arnhem.

The more I engaged with this method, however, the more its limitations became apparent. On a late night in February, the sound of my camera provoked a man to walk out of the house which I was passing, known in my neighborhood to be

an illegal drug-dealing spot. Looking at the photo I took at that moment, I am reminded of the instant "flight" response and my body reacting faster than the rational mind. There were likely numerous explanations for why this occurred, but a mixture of assumptions ("he is a drug dealer"), societal bias ("drug dealers are dangerous"), the circumstances (late night, nobody in sight), casual fallacy ("flash of the camera - closing of the window"), paired with traumatic memories, and the number of horror movies I watched ("woman alone at night, a man following her = something bad happens") all prompted me to feel afraid and act irrationally. In that moment, I realized the method was neither fit to show the source of fear in the moment, nor was it safe. Nevertheless, that among many others, made me attuned to the wealth of my internalized fears which have roots in bias or political narratives. Analyzing more than 400 photos I took in the span of four months, I arrive at the same conclusion: none of the photos, if looked at without the context, show an objectively dangerous or fearful situation. Most of them contain the aesthetics of the "weird and the eerie" as Mark Fisher would describe them - items or persons that seem not to fit in the picture, the undefined sense of something being off - or objects commonly seen as "creepy" that reference the horror, macabre and grotesque (skulls, weapons, blood, clowns, etc.). Still, others do demonstrate the workings of psychopolitics, as they exposing how the objects I captured were already framed within me as threats through political conditioning (photos of the dark

alleys, men shouting in foreign languages, alcoholics and the homeless persons on the streets).



Figure 4: The photo exhibition as part of the EAR. Photo: Steef Kersbergen.

STUDIO PRACTICE: ACTING AND RE-ENACTMENT

The autoethnographic writing paired with the photographic practice provided me with material to be analyzed in the studio-practice through acting and re-enacting, tying my experiences of “performing” fear in real life to “performing” fear in the theatrical context. The Stanislavsky method, as well as other acting methods, were applied in order to check the

hypothesis that the psyche can generate affect in absence of real threat, strengthening my claim that fear is affective, real, and embodied even when the context is fictional, which has great repercussions for its political use.

Stanislavsky's method, in particular, was chosen because of its similarities to my autoethnographic practice as it encouraged the actors to carefully observe their own emotional reactions in their daily lives. In order to truthfully portray the character, it was imperative, Stanislavsky believed, to first learn one's own emotions. Drawing from those embodied memories, it was possible to then arouse the same emotional states during the play. The aspect of his method which was particularly important for my research was the engagement with emotional memory.

The experiments I conducted I described in my logbook. One of the entries reads:

Saturday, January 25th

I had thought it would be difficult to feel fear on stage. I went to the studio and I placed a white stool in the middle of the stage. To make it taller, I put a black one on top of the white one. I imagined the construction to be a man whom I needed to walk past last night. I recalled how the conversation I was having with another person slowed down, and how I became attuned to his movements, all the while pretending I didn't enter an alerted state - there was no need to draw his attention. When I made the choice in my head to walk past the stool-man I put my head down, tensed my entire body so that it was ready to run, curled my fingers into fists ready to defend myself if need be, like I did last night. I walked by the stool fast, never letting it out of my sight, even though my head was down. I repeated that couple of times, experimenting with the distance. The closer I was passing it, the faster I'd walk.

To my amazement, already after a couple of minutes my shoulders and my chest tensed. My breath became shallower, while my heart-beat accelerated. In a voice note I recorded for myself after the experiment, I hear myself talking slowly, deliberately choosing each word, taking deep breaths in between sentences. There is a genuine surprise in my voice that this experiment worked – just by remembering and imagining I was able to induce the physiological reactions in my body. The method was employed multiple times, and twice with another participant, to determine its usefulness on other bodies and ensure the quality. The similar effects were observed, proving that certain fears are so internalized within the body that the imagining of them can produce real response. This mirrors how psychopolitics operates: fear is *felt* because it is *implanted*, not because it is justified, a critical finding for the psychopolitical aspect of my work. It gave me an indication that employing fear-based narratives, even if not based in fact, could still lead to affective response, something indeed confirmed by studies into rhetoric of the far-right (Rico et al., 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019).

STUDIO PRACTICE: RE-ENACTMENT

As part of my acting practice, I used the method of re-enactment of horror movie scenes to understand on the bodily level how fear is portrayed in pop-culture and juxtapose

it with the re-enactments of the experiences I described as part of the autoethnographic practice. Before I explain how the method was applied, I need to clarify that most scholars use the term “re-enactment” when describing performances related to memory and history. I understand re-enactment after director Milo Rau who talks about his own theater pieces which use re-enactment as de-construction “with a heuristic aspiration (in the sense of a critical actualization of that which is repeated)” (International Institute of Political Murder). In this sense, I use the method of re-enactment to repeat an action/behavior/scene and by performing it, visibly demonstrate, but also *feel* through embodiment, what of this portrayal of fear is true, what is omitted, or deliberately distorted.

The choice to use this method was premised by the notion of exposing the psychopolitics through contrast. As bell hooks and various critical theorists have long stated, representation in the media is closely tied to political control, stating that “the colonizing culture’s manipulation of representation is essential to the maintenance of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (bell hooks, 2009, 105). Who, and how, gets represented is already enmeshed in politics, and since horror, as elaborated on in the Field chapter, is representative of societal fears, its portrayal becomes also political. By contrasting my real-life experiences with cinematic portrayals, I aimed to identify the differences and explore why pop-culture represents certain fears in the ways that it does. Finally, tying this embodied

practice to my interests from the first year, my goal was to understand how those portrayals contribute to instilling fears in the audiences, and how, if so, that makes them political.

Applying the method, I first identified films that featured a female protagonist, then chose a scene in which she was performing fear. Watching closely, I focused on her body language, facial expressions and then the movements. Then, sometimes with the scene playing in the background, sometimes just with the sound, I would repeat her actions and notice how certain movements felt. Did it feel natural to look away in that moment? Did it feel necessary to put my hand in this position? How did I feel walking faster or slower in that moment? What was this movement doing to my body and what emotions, thoughts and sensations was it producing? Next, I would imagine how I would act in this situation and proceed with embodying it. This re-enactment (as in, doing it again, but *my way*) served to juxtapose the presented scene, scene re-presented by me, and then a scene that felt natural to my body, leading to an embodied sense of unnaturalness or forcedness of the previous portrayal.

The practice was re-presented, as means of disseminating it to the audiences, as part of the April Prototypes session. During the performance, I re-enacted a scene from a classic horror movie *Scream* (Craven, 1996) (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Prototype of This body's made of fear. Photo: Thais Dos Santos.

On the stage, I had the props the protagonist was using in the scene, such as a microwave to make popcorn, a knife, and a phone. Behind me there was a cyclorama onto which the scene from the film was projected. In real-time I was re-enacting the movements of the character, Casey, and delivering her lines (which were muted from the scene's audio track). In the scene, Casey receives a phone call from an unknown number. As she picks up the phone, she hears a voice, which initially flirts with her, become more and more creepy, in the end threatening to kill her. The scene culminates in a frantic chase around the house. While re-enacting this scene, I felt that it sexualizes my body, making me open my mouth wide, draw my arms so that the breasts are visible, or crawl on the floor

when I could easily get up and run. After the scene ended, I stood motionless and recalled the time I got a call from an unknown number. My body tensed, as I performed picking up the phone, and remembering the situation - rather than running from door to door - I found myself slowly dropping to the floor, hugging myself and making myself small. The re-enactment and juxtaposition of both scenes gave me the embodied knowledge of the fact that in this scene (and many others practiced in the studio) there was conscious directing to perform fear in a "sexy" way rather than authentic. Of course, it is true that I base this finding in the reality of my own body. Perhaps for Drew Barrymore, who played Casey, this was the most realistic way of performing fear in her own body. Still, the camera angle, the shots, and the language used, all contribute to the portrayal of the female character as sexy, but stupid, contrasting it with the smart and strong masked perpetrator.

PERFORMANCE MAKING: REMIXING, SPECULATIVE FABULATION AND SATIRE

The method of acting and re-enacting was later used as a strategy for creating "performance-remixes" presented to the audiences. Remix, a term which I found only recently in Polish-language theater studies, is described as a blend of re-enactment and re-cycling, focused on entering into a dialogue

with the original text/action/event/performance, challenging and subverting it. As scholar Anna Burzyńska contends, „remix is an extreme form of re-writing, one that emphasizes a redemptive error... The key here is the difference" (Burzyńska, 2014, 228). The highlighting of difference connects remix to my previous strategies of employing dramaturgical operations of contrast and juxtaposition as a way of *exposing* psychopolitics through performance.

During the research process five short performances were created, and based on their use of cultural referencing, re-enactment and critical approach, almost all of them could be described as remixes:

1. *In your wor(l)ds*, 4bid gallery, Amsterdam
2. XYZ, SKY Studio, Amsterdam
3. *Stop the Extraterrestrial Alien Invasion*, Cambridge (MA)
4. *This body's made of fear* (prototype), ArtEZ University of the Arts
5. *This body's made of fear* (EAR), ArtEZ University of the Arts

In your wor(l)ds, a sensorial performance in a form of a guided meditation, was already briefly mentioned. Upon the feedback received after the first tryout, I realized that no fear is universal, and neither is the bodily reaction to it - that, which induces a fear reaction in one body does not produce the same reaction in another body. In a second version, I

introduced my own body on stage half-way through the sound meditation. Responding to the sounds and placing my body in uncomfortable positions, I realized I was able to focus the audience's attention on the experience of the visible body and create a sense of identification rather than distance. Addressing the audience in the second person *while* performing physically on stage, allowed those audience members who felt overwhelmed in the previous performance, as well as those who were not drawn to the sensorial experience, to transpose their feelings onto the body they were witnessing, which was later confirmed in the feedback session. *In your wor(l)ds* was fundamental in the decision to focus the research on the experiences of my own body, as paradoxically it was that operation that could make the personal - universal.

In *XYZ*, together with dancer Natalia Keskeny, I explored language connection to bodily sensations and movement. Inspired by British theater group Forced Entertainment's repetitions of narrative structures, in the studio practice we engaged in re-telling each other ghost stories we heard as children and analyzed images and words related to fear which appeared. We then audio-recorded a game of associations, from which we constructed a list of our common fears. We then created choreography of the intuitive movement for each word. The combination of chosen words and physical movements offered insight into the link between language

and the immediate mental images it evokes. Often, we would "portray" a word in a completely different way, revealing the influence of the media representations we consume. For example, with the word "gunshot", Natalia started to explore the quick and defined movements of her arm and wrist, while I dropped "dead" to the ground and started to "bleed". The final performance, staged at SKY Studio in Amsterdam, was an attempt at disseminating that knowledge to the wider audiences.

Stop the Extraterrestrial Alien Invasion: A rally to build a wall around the Earth! was the performance I consider the most important for the development of my research, as it brought me not only a renewed sense of urgency, but also the embodied understanding of the power of language and public appearance in psychopolitical use of fear. With three other performers we remixed eight famous American speeches focused on the discourse related to immigration, presenting them as part of the site-specific performance in Harvard Science Center Plaza. Dressed in green, alien-like costumes, we delivered them as part of the fictional rally collecting signatures under the petition to build a wall around Earth. Preparing for the performance, I analyzed speeches made by Republican Presidents and senators, picked those in which fear-language was used and re-wrote them, substituting the words "criminal" to "extraterrestrial", "immigrants" to "aliens" which built on the double-meaning

of the word “alien” (in American judicial system used to describe any person residing in the US who is not an American citizen). During the performance my voice was amplified by the wall on the other side of the plaza, and I stood on a stone which elevated me at least a meter. While delivering the speeches, I felt an embodied sense of power, stemming from the raised voice, the height of my “podium” and the fact that I could see and lock eyes with the passersby rather than the invisible audience in the proscenium theater. The words I was saying, the ideas I was instilling felt even stronger when shouted with confidence, with the objective to scare, prompting some people to stop and read the flyers we were distributing. It was not the fictional frame alone, but my physical voice, my proximity to the audience, and the immediacy in real-time that activated the political charge of the language. The performance gained its full force precisely through the embodied act—through the *here and now* of my voice meeting the gaze of others in public space.

The rally was the most overtly political performance I undertook during this research, coinciding with a period of increasingly violent ICE raids in the US targeting undocumented immigrants. Through its use of satire and indirect re-enactment, the piece commented on the psychopolitical manipulation of fear embedded in the rhetoric of the Trump administration and due to the explicit nature of this commentary some performers ultimately chose not to

participate. Although fourteen students and alumni initially responded to my invitation, the escalating political tensions in the weeks leading up to the event led several to reconsider their involvement. Each day, I kept receiving messages of people withdrawing from the project. “All of a sudden, I start having second thoughts” one person with the immigrant background, wrote. “What if we get arrested? What do we do if ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] shows up? I can’t get deported, Kasia.” With the ethical dilemma of believing in the urgency of this performance and not wanting to risk the safety of my collaborators, the masks and costumes were used to maximize the satirical and fictional aspect of the performance. In the activist tradition of the anti-communist Polish group the Orange Alternative, I made sure the rally was so absurd it could not have been taken seriously, and the language we used in informing the audiences about the performance was framed as “drawing attention” rather than “criticizing”. With the link we were distributing to sign the petition, the audience was taken to a website exposing the action as performance and explaining the research behind it (Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Flyer from the performance *Stop the Extraterrestrial Alien Invasion: A rally to build a wall around the Earth!* Design: Victoria Amani Mwaniki Kishoiyan

The performance part of my Exposition of Artistic Research titled *This body's made of fear* (Fig. 7.) was directly influenced by the insights gained in the *Alien* performance, namely: the impact of the embodied presence, the manipulation of language in political speeches, and the use of costume and mask. For the performance, I re-mixed radio broadcasts, pieced together from recorded excerpts of right-wing news stations and podcasts, such as *Fox News* or *Ben Shapiro Podcast*, and infused them with fictional news, in order to highlight something potentially lost in the everyday flood of information. Working with the radio as the mass-media manipulating fear was inspired by Milo Rau's *Hate Radio*. In the piece, the Belgian director reconstructed the infamous

auditions by the Rwandan station RTLM, also known as "Radio Machete" believed as to have a direct impact on enticing the 1994 genocide of the Tutsis. Using archival documents and witness statements the broadcasts were then re-enacted by a group of Rwandan and Belgian actors, in what the director describes as "theater of the real". The other inspiration drew from the 1938 Halloween episode of the Mercury Theater on Air which presented Orson Welles' *The War of the Worlds* in a form of news broadcast. The legend has it the episode generated panic among listeners who believed the audio-drama was real. Bringing the real excerpts from those radio shows and contrasting them with the news about flesh-eating monsters using the strategy of speculative fiction was aimed to highlight how grotesque and absurd some of their word usage and rhetorics were, and give them a critical lens through the theatrical context.



Figure 7: This body's made of fear. Photo: Steef Kersbergen

As the radio was playing – the fear metaphorically penetrating my personal space even if seemingly in the background – I re-enacted my morning routine of actions I do after waking up. However, the re-enactment once again was not exact because of the two ropes tied to my wrists and legs. The ropes made me seem like a marionette – a visual metaphor meant to represent the fear manipulating my body, affecting and ultimately restricting its movement. In the performance, I was then alienating the viewer by putting the quotidian on stage and subverting it to achieve the same change of perception I was seeking on my own body through the methods of

autoethnography and photography. During the performance, three times the radio broadcast would stop, and I would pause my actions to allow my collaborator to enter the stage, and put bloody makeup on my face, making me appear more and more “a monster”. In the end, I delivered a speech to the camera pointed at my mouth, which resembled an address to the nation in the face of a catastrophic event. Using the rhetorics I identified before, specifically those likening the immigrants to “monsters” the performance ended with the call to physically “cut the fear” out of the brain.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND THE FUTURE OF THE RESEARCH

This research, rooted in the body, affect and experience, ultimately led to the exploration of language and embodied presence as the main contributions in exposing the psychopolitics of fear. Through the performance making practice, it employed the dramaturgical operations of re-enactment, satire and metaphor to achieve this goal and disseminate it for the wider audiences. The range of disciplines and interests covered in this research is mirrored by the ultimate turn to the idea of the re-emix as the most appropriate form to convey this finding, but by no means has it been exhaustive. I identify numerous potential directions for future development of this research: from deeper look into the implications of neuroscience for embodied performance, a further inquiry into the connections between linguistics, affect and performative texts, as well as the largely missing analysis of the fear-rhetorics employed by other than right-wing political parties. For myself, I would like to continue the research with a newly emerged idea of "a monster", which only materialized after my performance in Boston, and due to the timing of this encounter could not be explored in depth. Frankenstein appeared in the last performance as the metaphorical encapsulation of my idea of psychopolitics of

fear – a body created with other body parts, manipulated by its creator, a “thing” (not even considered a human being) deemed a “monster” by those who refused to look beyond its surface. Furthermore, the question of who the real monster is – the one deemed a monster or the one who created it – resonated deeply with my autoethnographic writing at the time. Thinking of my own body as constructed with fears of others, a habitus of fears ingrained in my genes, and those learned from the surroundings, it allowed me to experiment with visual transformation into a monster. The inquiry into the field of monstrosity (which has already had a great impact on critical theory, de-colonial, feminist and queer studies) and its potential for embodiment and metaphor is where I see my artistic research unfold in the future.

Throughout the research, I used a lot of psychological insights to dive deeper into the topic and understand the psychopolitics on the level of the mind and the brain. The most important insight to come out of my practice-as-research, however, is the embodied knowledge of fear. For the past months, not only did I try to understand fear, but I tried to notice it, feel it, and challenge its power over me. With every re-enacted scene, with every photo taken, and every speech pronounced out loud, I felt myself inhabiting my body in a way I had not experienced before. “The emotion of fear” writes Bourke, “is fundamentally about the body – its

fleshiness and its precariousness” (Bourke, 31, 2015). How susceptible my body is to instincts as well as suspicions, how easily it can be shaken into fight or flight mode, how a thought or a memory can make me act in a way deemed after the event as “unreasonable” were all evidence of this precariousness which I always knew but wasn’t aware of how to challenge. Nonetheless, gaining information must not be confused with arriving at conclusions – the fact that I am afraid of, for example, a police officer, does not imply the police officer being a threat, but rather that my personal experiences, cultural programming, and representation (as well as many other possible factors), all project onto that figure. Knowing that, noticing and sensing the emotion, I can exercise agency over my behavior that follows. As a performer and theatre-maker, the knowledge I acquire through my own body forms the foundation of what I seek to communicate through performance. The power of performance, and the contribution I intend to make with this practice-as-research, lies in its ability to draw attention to, critically observe and reveal this embodied knowledge by presenting the reality of the body on stage. I consider the physical presence of the body to be the most vital aspect of my performances, something indeed distinct from film, which, despite its dominance in representing narratives of fear, lacks the immediacy of liveness. It is not fiction itself that limits film’s capacity to expose the psychopolitics of fear, demonstrated

in my use of speculative fabulation, but rather the distance from the reality of the body and the possibility of transmission of affect. In performance it is the presence of the live, feeling body with its voice, trembling, breath, paired with the criticality imposed by the visibility of theatrical elements, such as stage, costume or acting, that makes the affect not only visible but experientially shared. This corporeal immediacy is what gives theatre its unique critical force.

I would like to end this chapter with a quote from Chokri Ben Chikha, the creator of Action Zoo Humain, who during the COVID-19 pandemic was invited together with 100 other theater makers to answer a question posed by the NTGent "‘Why theater?’ in the times of emergency and rethinking societal necessities?"

"I have always believed in artistic theatrical truth as a very powerful autonomous form of truth against the other forms of truth: the factual truth, the propagandist truth, bureaucratic truth, religious truth, you name it. The artistic truth offers a perspective on the world that is free, but not free of engagement. It is a truth that can look behind things and tries to unmask and unveil what reminds hidden otherwise. Because it has a poetic potential at its disposal. Without that artistic truth, we wouldn't be able to imagine anything" (Chikha, 2020, 40).

In this thesis, I brought the evidence of empirical findings, compared them with the experiences of my own body in real-life situations, in the studio and on the stage, and engaged in multidisciplinary practice of performing and exposing psychopolitics of fear through performance of re-enactment, juxtaposition, satire and speculative fabulation. I tried to unmask and unveil objective truths, but ultimately what this research contributes is the artistic truth.

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