

Staging Hannah Arendt: TV and the Visual Politics of Interviewing on *Zur Person* (1964)

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1. Staging Interviews

In many ways, the talk show *Zur Person* (*ad personam*), hosted by *homme politique* and journalist Günter Gaus, appears to be the perfect example to illustrate the principles of factuality and matter-of-factness. The black box atmosphere, the minimalist décor, the focus on the invited guest and the intricacy and academic character of the questionnaire all contributed to the impression that this was a show in which set-design and cinematography were of little or no importance. At the same time, a closer look at the filmed encounters in *Zur Person*, especially in its early phase from 1963 until 1968, reveals that the minimization of all things visual or ornamental was neither artless nor accidental. In fact, this is minimization with a method, a programmatic austerity, promoting not just a certain style of *mise en scène*, but also, as I will try to show, a specific use of space and perspective as well as a concept of interviewing that functions as a form of world-building.

The following article will discuss these ideas with a focus on a famous interview between Günter Gaus and Hannah Arendt, which was recorded on September 16th 1964 and broadcasted six weeks later on October 26th. In many ways, this encounter resembles the interviews that preceded and followed it, insofar as *Zur Person* is a talk show, which seems to have offered little else but talk. Highly intelligent talk, to be sure, which, in the case of Arendt, begins with a discussion about the differences between philosophy and political theory, and then follows up with Arendt's biography. In a more or less chronological order, Arendt's childhood years in Königsberg to her studies in Marburg, Freiburg, and Heidelberg are all recalled; her escape from Nazi Germany in 1933, her exile in France and in the United States, her visits to Germany after 1945 up until the controversy surrounding her book on the Eichmann trial¹ (a German translation had been published not long before the author appeared on *Zur Person*, in the summer of 1964²).

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen* [1964] (Munich: Piper, 2006).

² Sonja Vogel, "50 Jahre Eichmann in Jerusalem. Der Verwaltungsmassenmörder," *die tageszeitung*, 21 May 2013, accessed 21 Mar. 2019, www.taz.de/!5067022.

The interview ends with some closing remarks by Arendt on “the venture into the public realm”, a quotation by Karl Jaspers, first used by Arendt herself in a laudatory speech on the philosopher.³ Here, re-quoted by Gaus, it causes Arendt to reflect upon the exposure und fallibility which are part of the experience of speaking in public. The reference to the interview situation on *Zur Person* is not so much implicit as very evident and it invites further investigation on the question of how the act of speaking and responding is staged in this talk, as it is certainly among the most interesting in the history of the filmed interview.

2. *Zur Person* / *ad personam*

The book that investigates the history of *Zur Person*, the patterns and protocols of the encounters, the question of who was and who was not invited, the way Günter Gaus prepared and asked his questions, the numerous changes from one public network to another (ZDF, SWF, WDR, DFF, RBB) ... is a book yet to be written. At the same time, even without an extensive study, it is widely acknowledged that *Zur Person* has been of great importance; not only as a contribution to the effort of self-reflection and self-definition in the Federal Republic of Germany during the 1960s and 1970s, but also because it documents a specific notion of the public persona, with an obvious focus on politics (Konrad Adenauer, Ludwig Erhard, Willy Brandt, Rudi Dutschke were all guests on *Zur Person*, later renamed *Zu Protokoll*), supplemented by some encounters with academia (Edward Teller, Golo Mann) and the arts (Gustaf Gründgens).⁴

The aesthetics of *Zur Person*, especially in its early phase from 1963 until 1968, are characterized by a design that is ostentatiously bare. The opening credits are in a modernist typeface [screenshot 01] (no serifs, no capital letters, the typeface a variation of the Futura font), set against a black background, and to a score taken from a composition by Ludwig van Beethoven (“Musik zu einem Ritterballett,” 1791). There is no décor, no visible backdrop or studio set, a lot of black space surrounding the interviewer and the interviewee, a limited range of camera angles, and almost no interruption to the Q & A.

³ Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* [1931], 5th ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1955), 121.

⁴ A selection of interviews from *Zur Person* can be found on Youtube (the quality is mostly good) and on DVD, in an edition which was published by Hamburg Studio Enterprises in 2005.



With so little to see, the focus will inevitably be directed at the show's guest. This is clearly indicated by the opening credits, starting with the two words "zur person", supplemented with a black-and-white portrait of Arendt. The words "zur person" are then replaced by the name "hannah arendt" [screenshot 02], which, in turn, is replaced by the announcement "im Gespräch mit Günter Gaus" ("in conversation with Günter Gaus", as if the viewers were about to be introduced into a conversation that is already well under way.) This is all the information, which is given, before the camera cuts to Günter Gaus in his armchair, filmed from the left, who announces Hannah Arendt by addressing her as "the first woman to be portrayed on this show". (In German: "die erste Frau, die in dieser Reihe porträtiert werden soll."⁵)



While Gaus continues to address Hannah Arendt, the camera cuts to the invited guest who, from this moment on and until the end of the interview, is given all of the screen time, whereas the interviewer is mostly present as a voice with a complicated questionnaire, sometimes shown from the back, the top of his head just visible above the headrest [screenshot 03]. (Walter Jens is reported to have called Günter Gaus "the most famous back of the head in the history of

⁵ After the Arendt interview, another five years went by before a second woman, Dorothee Sölle, was invited on *Zur Person* (1969), and another five before the invitation of the third, the publisher Aenne Burda (1974). See: "Zur Person: Liste aller Interviews," rbb, accessed 21 Mar. 2019, www.rbb-online.de/zurperson/die_sendung/liste_aller_interviews.html.

German TV”; a quote which has been repeated by at least half of the articles published about the show and its famous host.⁶) The viewers are thus confronted with a *mise en scène* which is strikingly different from that of contemporary talk shows, where interviewer and interviewee are usually placed in a single frame, so that the interview is presented as a form of close interaction and a scenario which involves two protagonists. In contrast, *Zur Person* arranges its scene in such a way that it purports to be about one person only, with the other person present in the role of a questioner and prompter.



3. Listening

Like most formats on TV, both historical and contemporary, *Zur Person* is made for the small screen and therefore designed to privilege listening above viewing, i.e. the auditory above the visual experience.⁷ Moreover, and it may very well be here, where things become interesting, it is obviously designed to show that this show does not encourage visual pleasure and to indicate that those who fol-

⁶ Although there is no reliable source for the famous quote, it has been repeated in many articles about Gaus and his talk show. Kerstin Decker, “Ein Leben voller Fragen,” *Tagesspiegel Berlin*, 9 Apr. 2003, accessed 21 Mar. 2019, www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/m Medien/ein-leben-voller-fragen/405366.html; “Diplomatie: Günter Gaus ist tot,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 May 2004, accessed 21 Mar. 2019, www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/diplomatie-guenter-gaus-tot-1160374.html; “Mittler zwischen Welten: Ex-SPIEGEL-Chefredakteur Gaus gestorben,” *Spiegel*, 15 May 2003, accessed 21 Mar. 2019, www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/mittler-zwischen-welten-ex-spiegel-chefredakteur-gaus-gestorben-a-300042.html; Jonas-Erik Schmidt, “Ach, das war noch Fernsehen!,” *die tageszeitung*, 7 Jan. 2018, accessed 21 Mar. 2019, www.taz.de/!5475079.

⁷ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 157.

low the encounters between Gaus and his respective guests should be prepared to give their full attention to what is being said. To cater even less to any expectations of a spectacle, there is little pretense of any spontaneous interaction between the conversation partners, at least not on the side of Gaus, the interviewer, who even reads his questions from his notes.

It should be noted that these notes are extensive (this is true of many conversations on *Zur Person*, but particularly of the Arendt interview) and that the questions asked by Gaus tend to be long and intricate. Written questions, to be sure, and academic questions; one might say, not necessarily incompatible with TV but nonetheless testimony to a period still marked by the idea that TV could (and should) be used as an educational medium.⁸ Not until Alexander Kluge and his own talk show *10 vor 11*, first broadcast in 1988, have there been questions of comparable length and intricacy on German TV.⁹ However, unlike *10 vor 11*, the potential unanswerability of some of these questions was never part of the concept in *Zur Person*. Instead, what becomes evident in the sheer length of the questions, is Gaus's effort to show himself *au par* with Arendt, who is not only the first woman, but also the first philosopher on the show. (The contrast between the ease of Arendt extemporizing and Gaus's very script-based performance remains a striking feature throughout this Q & A.)

To sum up these introductory observations: a few minutes into the interview, which is about one hour long, *Zur Person* has managed to establish certain rules and premises. This talk show is not about the interviewer, but about the interviewee; not about appearances, but about content; not about entertainment, but about education and, most importantly, not about viewing, but about listening, serious listening, one might say, especially in this case, where academia makes an appearance in a scenario hitherto dominated by politicians and *hommes publiques*. At the same time, notwithstanding the somewhat austere scenario and the impression that this talk show pays little attention to matters of *mise en scène* and décor, there are some very interesting things happening on the visual level.

4. *The Black Box*

The studio, in which the Gaus-Arendt interview is situated, presents itself as a black box, i.e. no part of the studio space is visible in the camera images, nor is

⁸ See: Judith Keilbach, "Die vielen Geschichten des Fernsehens: Über einen heterogenen Gegenstand und seine Historisierung," *montage AV: Zeitschrift für Theorie und Geschichte audiovisueller Kunst* 14.2 (2005), 29-41.

⁹ On Alexander Kluge's interview technique: Georg Seeßlen, "Interview/Technik oder Archäologie des zukünftigen Wissens: Anmerkungen zu den TV-Interviews Alexander Kluges," in *Kluges Fernsehen: Alexander Kluges Kulturmagazine*, edited by Christian Schulte and Winfried Siebers (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), 128-137.

there any master set or stage of the sort, which can be encountered in American shows of the same decade like *The Tonight Show* (since 1952) and *The Mike Douglas Show* (since 1961) or, to mention another famous talk show from the early history of West German TV, *Der Internationale Frühschoppen* (since 1952). As a matter of fact, the set in *Zur Person* seems to have been designed to create the impression of a *non-set*: no walls, no steps, no doors; none of the elements that have come to be so important in stage design for all kinds of TV shows; no visual markers other than the light and the armchairs, no décor or backdrop, and nothing to indicate the presence of a crew except some communication with a person off-screen, who is apparently in charge of refilling the glasses.

Obviously, the message implicit in such a form of *non-design* and *non-set* is that nothing should distract from the observation of the person that responds to the questionnaire. It is also obvious that the absence of décor (no frills, no distraction) indicates that the invited guest (herself or himself) is all that is needed to make the show worthwhile: *Zur Person*, *ad personam*, an experiment in visual minimalism, which relies on nothing but the respective *persona* to attract and to hold the viewer's attention. In the radical subtraction of décor, *Zur Person* brings to mind a number of early writings on cinematography and on camera appearance: from Béla Balázs's remarks about the competitive relation between space and protagonist¹⁰ to Walter Benjamin's observation about the organization of visibility in the film studio: "The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice."¹¹ (German: „Der apparatfreie Aspekt der Realität ist hier zu ihrem künstlichsten geworden.“¹²)

"Equipment-free", or so it seems, and almost free of objects: although it is clear that in the history of the talk show, the darkened studio has never become the dominant model of staging interviews on camera, it is still possible to find similar uses of the studio space, on TV and in documentary film. One work from the history of German documentary film that comes to mind is the *Der lachende Mann / The Laughing Man* by GDR film makers Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann, recorded in 1966 at a TV studio in Munich; two more recent examples are *Notre Nazi / Our Nazi* by Robert Kramer (FRG 1984) and the multi-protagonist *Sieben Brüder / Seven Brothers* (G 2003) by filmmaker Sebastian Winkels.

In all of these films, darkness is used, first, to keep the focus on the respective protagonist and to prevent any competitive relation between space and figure;

¹⁰ Béla Balázs, "Großaufnahme," in *Der Geist des Films* [1930] (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 16-29.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction [1936]," in *The Work of Art [...] and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2008), 19-55: 35.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," in *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften 1* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1955), 136-169: 157.

second, to isolate the figure and to remove it from any environment, surroundings, furnishings and props, which might otherwise serve to influence the viewer; third, to create the fiction of a world-building which, for better or worse, unfolds *ex nihilo*, based entirely on utterance and discourse. (There may be a strong biblical undercurrent in the cinematography of the black box; especially when the box becomes the setting for speech, which, as Arendt states herself during the interview, “is a form of action.”)

Of course, the apparently straightforward and unmediated performance of the interviewees on *Zur Person* is fabricated with the support of a very active media apparatus. “In the film studio“, Benjamin writes, “the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure”¹³ (German: “das Ergebnis einer besonderen Prozedur”¹⁴). This is certainly true of the interview with Hannah Arendt, in which three or more cameras are operative in the darkened studio space, and it is also true of other studio interviews, from the investigative interview film *Der lachende Mann* (1966), to US-filmmaker Errol Morris’s experiments with the close-up and the device of the interrotron in his interview series *First Person* (US 2000) and films like *The Fog of War* (US 2003),¹⁵ all very good examples of the hypermediated quality of immediacy that has been described by Benjamin (and, more recently, by Bolter and Grusin in their book on *Remediation*¹⁶).

5. *Drawing Room & Library*

It has already been pointed out that the darkened, unmarked space, in which Gaus’s early interviews took place, appears programmatically underfurnished. No walls, no doors, no stairs; no desk, no sofa and certainly no podium for the band. At first sight, the space in the studio seems just about habitable, with the two armchairs placed vis-à-vis, two hidden side tables and the water glasses and ashtrays, which are hardly visible but very much in use. On closer inspection, however, this is a set which still retains certain features of genteel hospitality, not just in the form of service (the person who refills the glasses), but also in the arrangements, which recall the bourgeois drawing room and library.

Of the drawing room, the set retains the basics: the erudite conversation and some comfortable seats, where this conversation can take place. Of the library, it retains nothing but the memory. Nevertheless, that memory is very present,

¹³ Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 35.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk*, 157.

¹⁵ Errol Morris, “Interrotron,” *FLM Magazine* (Winter 2004), accessed 22 Mar. 2019, www.errolmorris.com/content/eyecontact/interrotron.html.

¹⁶ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2000), 20-51; 20-34.

because much of the conversation between Gaus and Arendt will be about books and reading: Arendt reading Kant at age fourteen and Jaspers and Kierkegaard only a little later (“all the books were in the library at home”, she tells Gaus); Arendt, the student, reading Greek and Latin, and Arendt, the scholar, who still knows a large number of German poems by heart and who proclaims, later on in the interview, “the German language is the essential thing that remained.”¹⁷

To anybody wondering what it may have meant to have a conversation like this in the year 1964, and to stage it the way it was staged, the Arendt interview must appear as an example in which set design and statements are particularly compatible. On various levels, this show is striving to make a point about what is essential: that, which remains if you take everything else away; that, which can be reclaimed, even when the furniture is gone and most of the library as well; that, which is still there, notwithstanding twelve years of Nazi Germany with their specific chronology of book-burning, censorship and exile.

In its décor, just as much as in the questions that were asked and the answers that were given, *Zur Person* reveals itself as a post-war project, contributing to a more general discourse about how values and traditions of pre-war Germany should figure into the modeling of the Bundesrepublik after 1945.¹⁸ To reclaim (and at the same time: to claim, to define, and to invent) pre-war traditions has been an important part of the cultural wars and politics in both Germanys after 1945; and in the talk show hosted by Günter Gaus, the program of West German self-reinvention was converted both into a politics of invitation and into a form of visual politics that favored scarcity, austerity, intellectuality and a decidedly non-materialist approach to questions of tradition and continuity.

This show never said that they wanted the furniture back. Or the house. Or the property. As a matter of fact, in its very protestant attitude against all things material and cumbersome, it may have been designed to oppose certain aspects of the famous West German ‘Wirtschaftswunder’, already accomplished at the beginning of the 1960s.

6. Camera Work I: Frontality

The camera work in this episode of *Zur Person* is worth a closer look as well, especially because the three or more cameras operating in the darkened studio seem partly guided by a strict set of rules, while other movements and opera-

¹⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes by Hannah Arendt are taken from her interview with Günter Gaus.

¹⁸ Knut Hickethier, *Geschichte des deutschen Fernsehens* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1998), 198-280 (“Zwischen Lebenshilfe und politischer Aufklärung: Fernsehen in der Bundesrepublik von 1963 bis 1973”);/9783956505126-153, am 24.08.2024, 01:12:05

tions appear less coordinated. The focus on the invited guest is an obvious rule: the totality of perspectives and angles are organized in such a way that Günter Gaus is hardly visible (except in the very first shot), while Hannah Arendt gets all of the screen time and visual attention. Also obvious are the dominance of speech and its guiding function: the rhythm of the montage between various angles and shots follows the rhythm of the interview and is therefore subordinated to the flow (or rather: the punctuation) of the questions and answers. In the edited version of the interview, there is no indication that any of the cameras ever reacted to a facial or gestural expression; instead, the montage has been used to further accentuate the presence of the spoken word and the back-and-forth that happens in regards to the conversation.

In the *mise en scène* of this conversation, another striking aspect of the camera work is the avoidance of frontality, a very strict avoidance in the case of the master shot, which is dominated by a diagonal. Neither the camera nor the armchairs are positioned in a way that would allow it to film the two speakers from the front or to present the interview as an event directed at the viewers of this TV show [screenshot 04]. On the contrary, as the two chairs and the two speakers almost face each other and the master camera is placed somewhere behind Günter Gaus, the interview situation marks off its own closed space, relegating the camera not just to the outside, but rendering it a presence which may not be uninvited, but unaccounted for. In short, *Zur Person* casts both the master camera and the viewers not in the role of audience members, but in the role of witnesses. Present but never addressed (not even in the opening), attentive but never acknowledged, the viewers are admitted to the conversation but seem to play no part in its procedure or setup.



The avoidance of frontality can also be observed in the operation of the two other cameras, positioned left and right of the master camera. Of course, it

would be surprising if they were positioned otherwise, not just because of the technicalities, but because ever since the early days of photography, the frontal position has been reserved for the supposedly suspicious or the criminalized subject: subjects, who can be encountered in photographic taxonomies of the 19th and 20th century, and also in documentary films like *Der lachende Mann* or *Notre Nazi*. In contrast, Hannah Arendt is captured in a series of profile shots, the whole range from quarter to three-quarter, all in accordance with the traditions of Western portraiture, in which the profile is reserved for the worthy subject, the one, who deserves respectful contemplation and discretion.

It is worth pointing out that *Zur Person* took some time to adapt (or: re-adapt) to these principles of portraiture, and that, in the earlier episodes, the camera work seems more inconsistent. Ludwig Erhard, former Minister of Economic affairs and the very first guest on the show in 1963, is often filmed from the front, sometimes combined with a lower angle, as if to accentuate his posture and physical appearance [screenshot 05]. Gustaf Gründgens, in turn, whom Gaus visited at his residence in Manila, is filmed from a more ‘conversational’ position, i.e. at eye level, both in profile and from the front; and even Willy Brandt, who was Gaus’s guest on the show in the episode that preceded the interview with Arendt, receives a visual treatment which seems undecided between the frontal shot and the classical positioning of the honorary subject.



Exploring the possibilities of camera work on TV and at the same time reconciling these new possibilities with the traditional codes and conventions of representation is as much a part of the early history of television as it has been part of the early history of the cinema. In a sense, the first interviews on *Zur Person*, a show which changed the design of its opening sequence, title design, backdrops, furnishing and lighting several times during the first season, all retain the quality of an experimental set-up, especially if they are watched as a series.

7. *Camera Work II: Lighting and Close-ups*

Frontality and its avoidance are one issue in the Arendt interview; the contrast between lighting and camera work is another. Unlike other talk shows of the same decade, both in the US and in Germany, which favored the now-standard studio practice of high-key lighting and a very even illumination of the entire set, *Zur Person* favored a specific form of low-key lighting, which, according to a compendium on lighting techniques, is “all about shadow.”¹⁹ And unlike other episodes, the Arendt interview is filmed in such a way that figure and background are never fully separated. Instead, Arendt appears as a figure who is enveloped and partly absorbed by the blackened space: an almost sculptural effect, which, at the same time, binds the speaker to the opacity that surrounds her. Nevertheless, the chiaroscuro portrait in these camera images is not so much mysterious as protective, establishing a visual presence which is never fully available to the gaze of the camera nor to that of the viewers. (From Ludwig Erhard to Edward Teller, the episodes before and after this interview work with a different effect, always foregrounding the figures and cutting them out against the darkened space or background.²⁰)

If all this indicates that the rendering of Arendt on *Zur Person* is more or less in accordance with the traditions of Western portraiture and art (the respectful distance of the master camera, the profile, the chiaroscuro), it is all the more remarkable that, throughout the interview, the cinematography of the two side cameras seems to be guided by a different agenda. As a matter of fact, this camera work is far from being discrete, and after watching the Arendt interview a few times, the viewer will not only be more familiar with her biography and work or her voice and features, but also with her ears, her teeth and the texture of her skin [screenshot 06], not to mention her shins and knees, which figure so prominently in those of the master shots that are filmed from a lower angle.

¹⁹ Caleb Ward, “How Low-Key Lighting Can Instantly Make Your Film Dramatic,” *The Beat*, 7 July 2015, accessed 22 Mar. 2019, www.premiumbeat.com/blog/how-low-key-lighting-can-instantly-make-your-film-dramatic.

²⁰ The same effect can be observed in documentary films like Robert Kamers *Notre Nazi* (FR/BRD 1984) or Sebastian Winkels’s *Sieben Brüder* (GER 2003), where the black box and the low-key lighting are used to make the figure of the speaker all the more visible.



While there is obviously a protocol (and a script) for the verbal address of “the first lady to be portrayed on this show” (Gaus’s introduction of Arendt), the cinematographic protocol is only partly in place and the visual politics are a little inconsistent. It is bewildering to witness the almost investigative approach to the protagonist’s posture, face and features. Distance, a principle so important to genteel interaction, may be maintained on the level of verbal interaction. On the visual level, however, it is repeatedly interrupted by the somewhat unruly taxonomy, which takes over every now and again: a form of portrayal which may not be ‘in your face’ but which is definitely in Arendt’s.

What to make of her?, and *How to deal with Arendt?* If anything, the interview, which was recorded in September 1964 communicates a certain unease, which translates both into a very elaborated questionnaire and programmatic *mise en scène* (minimalism, austerity, a focus on the interviewee) and a somewhat uneven cinematography. As a visual document, the interview is remarkable for that very reason: the unease, the unevenness behind the invitation of a speaker whose appearance on West German TV was by no means self-understood.

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