

'What is this unfortunate thing between us?'. The question, posed in German, is repeated several times. The questioner is a woman whose image appears at intervals on the large video screen that hangs above the stage of HAU 1 at the Hebbel am Ufer theatre in Berlin. Her face is framed in a tight close-up, so that she seems to inhabit the screen, belonging to a realm beyond the auditorium. Her question is ambiguous – perhaps she is referring to the large cameras positioned on the stage or even to the screen itself, which draws attention away from the physical performance to its mediated image. She is not simply speaking to those seated in the theatre, however, because this performance is being televised on the German digital channel ZDFkultur. So the 'unfortunate thing' might be the physical distance that separates the television audience from the theatre, and from each other. In previous incarnations, live television often promised a distinctly public social experience while offering only its simulation; in the 1950s for example, US anthology drama shows such as NBC's *Goodyear Playhouse* offered the illusion of a night on the town without the inconvenience of leaving home.

## PHIL COLLINS

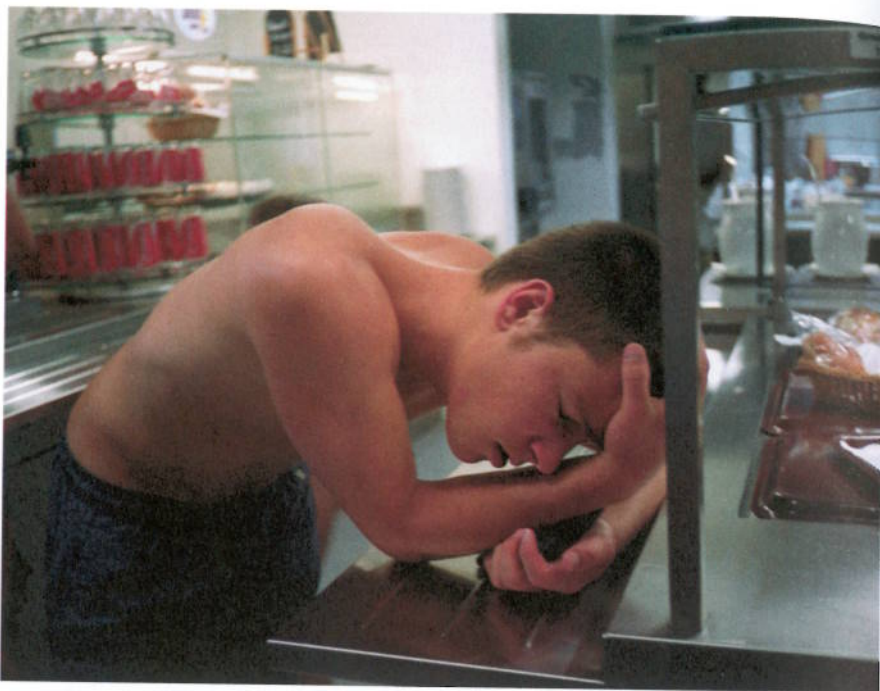
### UNFORTUNATE THINGS

<sup>1</sup> But *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* was not simply a theatre performance. Staged and transmitted over two nights, 'TUTBU TV' was in fact a shopping channel with presenters selling individual experiences, instead of mass-produced consumer goods. There were several experiences on offer for the bargain price of €9.99 each, with a special discount of €7.99 for the unemployed, pensioners and students, apparently tailored

to the desires of the German viewing public. On the first night of the show, the experiences were demonstrated by actors in the hope of tempting prospective customers. So a 'Stasi-style interrogation' is followed by a 'historical porn scene' set in the Victorian era and, finally, a death-bed scene in a modern hospital, in which the dying person is at last free to express all of their 'dissatisfaction and resentment'. On the second night, the experiences were again brought to life, this time with the three purchasers in the leading roles. In the group interview that concluded the show all of the customers appear to express satisfaction but during the actual scenes, they seem somewhat dislocated, perhaps overwhelmed by their chosen experiences. Even the young bearded man who found himself costumed as a maid, being eagerly undressed by willing sexual partners in the historical porn scene, seemed slightly removed from the action. Like his fellow non-actors, or the demonstrators on the first night, he might be imagined as a stand-in for the 'real' subject of the experience (the German public). If *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* involves a potentially dodgy deal, in which viewers pay for the pleasure of performing publicly, the ongoing project *free fotolab* also offers the potential for self-exploitation. Described as 'an itinerant service and photographic archive', which Collins has been running since 2004, *free fotolab* invites the inhabitants of a city in which the project takes place to submit undeveloped rolls of 35mm film. No money changes hands, but those utilising the free service must sign a contract granting Collins universal image rights to their photographs, which he incorporates into his own work, in the form of slide projection or framed compositions. There are some possible precedents for this mode of address in the history of early cinema; the Lumière brothers famously toured from city to city, filming popular thoroughfares and encouraging locals to attend screenings in the hope of seeing themselves on film. But Collins' model is different, both because he specifically addresses prospective participants as *authors and producers* of images, precisely by requiring them to



Phil Collins  
free fotolab 2009



Phil Collins  
free fotolab 2009

relinquish their rights and because, rather than promoting a new technology, *free fotolab* responds to the demise of 35mm film in the digital era. The project reflects the blurring of boundaries between public and private modes of reception (exacerbated by the rise of social media) and demonstrates that disparate economies of image production and circulation can overlap and intersect.

Collins' interest in photography's past is underlined by the work's presentation on a carousel slide projector, first shown in 2009 in a version that brings together images collected in the UK, Switzerland, Serbia, the Netherlands, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although the images are very clearly drawn from disparate contexts, the projection is carefully sequenced so that formal continuities in framing, composition and sometimes subject matter are occasionally apparent. But the experience of viewing is also frequently marked by moments of disjunction, most notably when landscapes or candid shots of mundane activities dissolve to scenes

of overt display, such as the shots of small children, animals or objects, held in front of the camera, the drunken girls posing with flash-lit red eyes, or the face of a deceased woman laid out in a coffin, her body covered with flowers. This sequencing of the familiar and the strange, the proximate and the distant, requires the viewer to perform a continual process of reorientation in time and (virtual) space, underscoring the undiminished affective power of the photographic image. While *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* is less obviously concerned with the lived experience of media as shaped by social, economic and technological change, it is nonetheless informed by developments within the European broadcasting landscape, which have prompted concerns over the future of the televisual public sphere amongst media theorists.<sup>2</sup> As already noted, the project involved the temporary transformation of ZDFkultur into a shopping channel – TUTBU TV. The identity of this station (a digital service offered by a publicly-funded broadcaster) was, however, already in flux. Originally known

as ZDFtheaterkanal, it initially focused on live arts such as dance, opera and cabaret but in May 2011 (just four months before the televising of *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us*) it was rebranded as ZDFkultur, with a much more expansive definition of the arts that included games and pop music. Collins is well known for a long-standing interest in pop music and the mise-en-scene of *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* included a live in-house band featuring Welsh musician Gruff Rhys and North Wales surf group Y Niwl.

*This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* did not, however, seek to mediate between opposing notions of 'arts' and 'culture' in German society. Instead, the production process required Collins to negotiate some of the contradictions that arise when notions of publicness historically associated with theatre are transposed to the realm of broadcasting. These contradictions became apparent in the televising of the historic porn scene, which was edited (by a live TV director on duty in the transmission van) to exclude most of the action from below the waist, substituting it by other elements of the show, such as four actors visible in the wings, who were

'dubbing' performers in this scene. All aspects of the performance were in fact filmed and the work now exists in a new edit determined by Collins, which retains some of the content left out by the TV director. So like *free fotolab*, the experience of viewing *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* in HAU 1 produced an awareness of proximity and distance, and the hierarchy of viewing positions existing within the auditorium itself. Despite the sometimes obstructive presence of the cameras on stage most of the audience in the theatre could view the full bodies of the actors as well as the televised version of the scene. But those seated very close to the stage – or indeed participating in the action – did not have this doubled vantage point.

This hierarchy of viewing positions situates Collins' work in relation to a much earlier tradition of self-referential moving image production, theorised by Thomas Elsaesser through reference to the 'Rube Film'.<sup>3</sup> The character of the Rube, appearing in films such as Robert Paul's *The Countryman's First Sight of the Animated Pictures* (1901), remade by Edwin S. Porter for Edison as *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902),

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Discipline through Diegesis: The Rube Film between "Attractions" and "Narrative Integration"', in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, edited by Wanda Strauven, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006, pp. 205-226.

Phil Collins *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* 2011



Phil Collins  
free fotolab 2009

is generally an inexperienced viewer who mistakes the onscreen action for reality, disrupts the screening and is sometimes punished by the projectionist.

Noting that these films have often been interpreted as didactic parables aimed at rural or immigrant viewers, Elsaesser argues that they instruct audiences not 'by way of [...] negative example, shaming and proscription, but rather, by a more subtle process of internalized self-censorship'.<sup>4</sup> Discipline is imposed specifically by allowing audiences to 'enjoy their own superior form of spectatorship, even if that superiority is achieved at the price of self-censorship and self-restraint'.<sup>5</sup> Elsaesser situates this internalisation of discipline within the context of a much larger 'civilizing' process that cinema 'both supports and exacerbates': a shift from proximity by touch toward a combination of distance and proximity.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to adequately summarise Elsaesser's complex argument here, but he goes on to explore the various ways in which these disciplinary

dynamics are enacted and also allegorised.

He concludes by noting that video and installation works from the 1960s and 1970s, by artists such as Andy Warhol, Dan Graham, Anthony McCall and Malcolm Le Grice, 'manage to trap spectators in time-delay mirror mazes and have them catch themselves in cognitive loops', suggesting that these works may also enable or involve forms of 'learning' in which spectators take on new roles, as 'users, visitors, witnesses, players and [...] especially as Rubes'.<sup>7</sup>

It may seem somewhat perverse to connect *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* with the Rube film, because Collins actually *does* offer the spectator (viewing on the first night of the show) the opportunity to enter the fantastical world depicted on screen. In the process, however, it is precisely by taking up a place on stage that this viewer loses the ability to observe the mediation of their image for a television audience.

Within the hierarchy of proximity and distance established by the staging and transmission of the performance, the person buying a place amongst the cast might initially be viewed as a type of Rube, who has somehow misunderstood the consequences of the bargain (yet another 'unfortunate thing'). Yet as Elsaesser's formulation makes clear, the primary role of the Rube is to encourage self-discipline amongst *other* viewers. *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* seems to embrace and perhaps complicate this disciplinary scenario further, by introducing the possibility that those seated in the auditorium might also be Rubes. It is important to note that the customers were indeed genuine viewers, chosen from a large number who phoned in on the first night of ZDFkultur transmission. But for those seated in the auditorium on the second night – presented with the results of research supposedly revealing the inner

desires of Germans – there was no way to objectively verify that they were really non-actors, or even to confirm the existence of another television audience viewing the proceedings from afar. Consequently, any sense of superiority achieved by the theatre audience on the basis of their detachment or self-restraint is steadily (and comically) eroded, to the point that it is no longer possible to determine exactly who or what might really be unfortunate.

#### MAEVE CONNOLLY

**Maeve Connolly** is a writer, lecturer and researcher whose work centres on concepts of publicness in contemporary art and culture, informed by histories of art, film and television since the late 1960s.



Phil Collins  
free fotolab 2009

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