



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.5699/austrianstudies.27.2019.0013](https://doi.org/10.5699/austrianstudies.27.2019.0013)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Kolkenbrock, M. (2020). Saved Face, Defended Place: Arthur Schnitzler's Posture of Detachment and the Codes of Cool Conduct. *Austrian Studies*, 27(0), 13-28. <https://doi.org/10.5699/austrianstudies.27.2019.0013>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Saved Face, Defended Place

### Arthur Schnitzler's Posture of Detachment and the Codes of Cool Conduct

In his seminal study, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany* (2000, German original 1994), Helmut Lethen describes how the experience of defeat in Germany and Austria after the First World War led to the formulation of behavioural codes of cultivated distance that were supposed to contain antagonistic tensions and promote a peaceful coexistence in a society whose traditional value system had been thoroughly destabilized.<sup>1</sup> The philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner and his 1924 study *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism* form a central theoretical backdrop for Lethen's analysis.<sup>2</sup> He shows that this anthropology of distance also informed the aesthetic production of the Weimar Republic, inspiring the 'New Objectivity' of literary and visual culture in the 1920s.

Lethen remarks that Plessner's study breaks with the conventions of the Expressionist cult of authenticity by retrieving elements of Nietzsche's philosophy and of turn-of-the-century aestheticism: 'we may conclude either that that aestheticism fundamentally penetrates the existential conditions of modernity or that a major work of philosophical

---

<sup>1</sup> Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, trans. by Don Reneau (Berkeley CA/London, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Helmuth Plessner, *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*, trans. by Andrew Wallace (New York, 1999).

anthropology in the 1920s still unconsciously observes fin-de-siècle convention'.<sup>3</sup> Taking its cue from Lethen, this essay aims to examine where the work of Viennese Modernist Arthur Schnitzler can be placed with regard to this connection between turn-of-the-century culture and Plessner's anthropology of the interwar years. It will be argued that Schnitzler can indeed count to some extent as a, perhaps unlikely, forerunner of the cool conduct codes promoted in Plessner's study. I hope to show that what I want to call Schnitzler's authorial posture in the literary field is informed by an anthropology of detachment which shares central aspects with that of Plessner.

The Swiss literary scholar Jérôme Meizoz defines an authorial posture, taking his cue from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the literary field, as a unique manner of occupying a position in a field. It is a personal mode of accepting or holding a role or a status: an author gambles or fights for their position in the literary field through different forms of representation of themselves and of their postures.<sup>4</sup> The main difference between the term posture and what is generally referred to as authorial self-fashioning is that posture includes, but goes beyond the intentional forms of self-styling and conscious strategies of authorial position-taking.<sup>5</sup> As the analysis of an authorial posture asks how the way an

---

<sup>3</sup> Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> See Jérôme Meizoz, 'Die posture und das literarische Feld', *Text und Feld. Bourdieu in literaturwissenschaftlicher Praxis*, ed. by Markus Joch and Norbert Christian Wolf (Tübingen, 2005), pp. 177–188 (p. 177).

<sup>5</sup> See also Clemens Peck and Norbert Wolf, 'Poetologien des Posturalen 1918–1933/38: Einleitung', in *Poetologien des Posturalen: Autorschaftsinszenierungen in der Literatur*

author places themselves through literary texts relates to their other forms of position taking, it allows me to explore how Schnitzler's own public display of detachment in the literary field corresponds to the anthropology of detachment developed in his literary and aphoristic writings. While we will see that this anthropology often resonates rather strongly with Plessner's ideal of cultivated distance in the public sphere, it will become clear that Schnitzler's perspective, particularly in his literary writings, contains elements that are decidedly critical of the potential risks that this ideal, if taken to an extreme, may entail. The more biographically oriented analysis in the first part of the essay will show that Schnitzler's own cultivation of a detached posture, while cognate with Plessner's conceptions of cultivated distance, is to a considerable extent informed by the fact that his positionality as a Jew often placed him in a rather precarious location in the German-language literary field and Austrian society at large.

## I

In *The Limits of Community*, Plessner describes the public sphere as an antagonistic space, in which everyone is striving for recognition, but is terrified of shame. Making oneself seen without exposing oneself is the difficult balance to be maintained. Therefore, the individual has to protect his dignity (for Plessner, the public sphere appears to be an entirely male domain) by armouring himself through the adoption of a public persona:

---

*der Zwischenkriegszeit*, ed. by Clemens Peck and Norbert Wolf (Paderborn, 2017), pp. 9–25.

‘The individual at first must give himself a form that makes him unassailable, an armor that he can wear entering the battlefield of the public sphere’.<sup>6</sup> Plessner modifies the militaristic metaphor of the armour by adding the theatrical metaphors of mask and role-play. For Plessner, any attempt at authentic expression creates a moment of extreme vulnerability. He recognizes an ‘intrinsically inscrutable ridiculousness of all uninhibited expression of emotion, indeed of all pronouncements of psychological being in general’.<sup>7</sup> This public mask thus protects the individual from the embarrassment of such pronouncements and allows for a less immediate and more detached social intercourse in the public sphere.

The need to protect oneself through detachment becomes particularly relevant when one’s dignity in the public sphere is under explicit attack. Plessner’s idea of an antagonistic social space in which the individual has to protect himself through an armour or mask resonates, therefore, with Schnitzler’s own experience as a Jewish author in the German-language literary field at the beginning of the twentieth century where his legitimate place as representative of German and Austrian culture was constantly challenged. Schnitzler highlights the ‘seelisch[e] fast noch mehr als politisch[e] und sozial[e] Bedeutung’ [psychological, almost more than political and social significance] of the public omnipresence of the so-called *Judenfrage* or Jewish question and writes that it was impossible for a Jewish person, ‘insbesondere für einen Juden, der in der Öffentlichkeit stand, davon abzusehen, dass er Jude war, da die anderen es nicht taten, die Christen nicht und die Juden noch weniger’ [in particular for a Jew who was a public

---

<sup>6</sup> Plessner, *Limits of Community*, p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

figure, to ignore the fact that he was a Jew, because the others did not ignore it, not the Christians, and the Jews even less so].<sup>8</sup> Schnitzler reacted to this coerced placement with what I am calling a posture of detachment.

In a letter to the *Neue Rundschau* of 1915, Schnitzler writes pointedly:

Die systematische halb oberflächliche, halb böswillige Verfälschung meiner literarischen Physiognomie [...] schleicht sich natürlich auch schon in die Literaturgeschichten ein, [...] die ja zum grössten Teil von verschämten oder unverschämten Klerikalen und Antisemiten geschrieben werden.

[Of course, the systematic, half superficial, half malicious, distortion of my literary physiognomy has now also crept into our literary histories which are mainly written by shameful or shameless clericals and antisemites.]<sup>9</sup>

It is striking that Schnitzler uses the unusual term ‘literary physiognomy’ instead of, for example, authorial ‘portrait’. Physiognomy seems to refer to less laudatory forms of

---

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Schnitzler, *Jugend in Wien. Eine Autobiographie*, ed. by Therese Nickl and Heinrich Schnitzler (Vienna, Munich and Zurich, 1968), p. 328. Henceforth references are given in parentheses in the body of the text, as JW, followed by the page number(s). Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Schnitzler Papers, Cambridge University Library (henceforth CUL), A20, 3.

representation and particularly to the invocation of antisemitic stereotypes.<sup>10</sup> Drawing upon Erving Goffman's dramaturgical concept of identity, Ritchie Robertson has highlighted how self-representation and performance of the self are constantly made difficult for stigmatized groups such as the Jews in the increasingly antisemitic Austrian society of the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Schnitzler's expression of literary physiognomy seems to exemplify this paradigmatically. Moreover, it brings to mind another Goffmanian notion, that is, the so-called 'facework' of social interaction: according to the sociologist, 'saving face' designates the way we construct and protect our public self-image against threats.<sup>12</sup> The antisemitic distortions of his literary physiognomy have to be

---

<sup>10</sup> I follow the recommendation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance to use the un-hyphenated spelling of 'antisemitism' as opposed to the more frequently used 'anti-Semitism', 'in order to dispel the idea that there is an entity "Semitism" which "anti-Semitism" opposes. Antisemitism should be read as a unified term so that the meaning of the generic term for modern Jew-hatred is clear.' See International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 'Memo on Spelling Antisemitism', April 2015: [https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/memo-on-spelling-of-antisemitism\\_final-1.pdf](https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/memo-on-spelling-of-antisemitism_final-1.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Ritchie Robertson, 'Jewish Self-Hatred? The Cases of Schnitzler and Canetti', in *Austrians and Jews in the Twentieth Century: From Franz Joseph to Waldheim*, ed. by Robert S. Wistrich (Basingstoke, 1992), pp. 82–86.

<sup>12</sup> Erving Goffman, 'On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction', *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City/New York, 1967), pp. 5–45.

precisely understood as such threats against his face in the Goffmanian sense. And this practice of saving one's public face appears to be intimately coherent with the protective mask and armour which Plessner claims to be a necessary element of social interactions in the antagonism of the public sphere.

As a posture is a form of authorial self-representation in order to – intentionally or not – claim and defend a position in the literary field, I understand Schnitzler's posture of detachment as a form of distancing practice, linked to his need to maintain a 'face-saving' mask in the public sphere of the literary field. The constant confrontation with more or less explicit antisemitic attacks throughout his life and writing career made it particularly necessary for him to protect his own face, as expressed in the metaphor of literary physiognomy. The unpublished folder 'In eigener Sache' [In my own case] in which the letter quoted above is contained is a collection of letters and private comments on passages from the press, in which Schnitzler sees himself attacked or misrepresented. It is interesting in this context that these often unpublished commentaries seem to have the function of protecting Schnitzler's public face, not by publically setting things right, but by giving him a channel for his anger, which will remain unseen: 'Der Sinn dieser Worte soll vorläufig kein anderer sein als durch rasche Abreaktion die Seele für reinere und wertvollere Regungen wieder frei zu machen.' [In the first instance, these words are supposed to function as a swift way to let off steam in order to free the soul for purer and more valuable emotions.] (CUL A20, 8)

Rather than engaging in heated confrontational exchanges with the antisemitic press, Schnitzler thus seems to prefer – at least publically – to 'keep his cool'. The emotion of

---

anger is here not seen as a fitting response to injury, but as something ‘impure’, or at least counter-productive, an emotion that needs to be contained. This is reminiscent of the way Plessner understands the display of authentic emotions as always potentially embarrassing and a sign of vulnerability. Schnitzler seems to protect himself from such embarrassment by hiding his anger from the public.

In his letter to the *Neue Rundschau*, Schnitzler also adds that he has heard some of the stigmatizing and stereotyping misrepresentations often enough ‘um endlich stumpf dagegen zu werden’ [to have finally become indifferent to them].<sup>13</sup> He thus claims to have become able to detach himself from these hurtful attacks. How hard it is to maintain this form of detachment in an increasingly antisemitic society, however, Schnitzler describes in the often-cited autobiographical note on the *Judenfrage* mentioned earlier. Here, he highlights that it was impossible for any Jewish person to remain unaffected by the contemporary discussions of the so-called Jewish question:

Und auch wenn man seine innere und äußere Haltung [...] bewahrte, [...], ganz unberührt bleiben war so unmöglich, als etwa ein Mensch aber mit wachen Augen zusehen muß, wie unreine Messer sie ritzen, ja schneiden, bis das Blut kommt.

[And even if one retained one’s inner and outer posture [...], staying completely unaffected was as impossible as it would be for a man to remain indifferent, if – even having had his skin anaesthetized – he had to

---

<sup>13</sup> CUL A20,3.

watch dirty knives scoring, indeed cutting into it, until the blood flows.]  
(JW, 329).

Schnitzler uses the metaphoric image of a body that is cut open and made vulnerable to infection to describe the constant strain of antisemitic attacks. In her study *Strange Encounters* (2000), Sara Ahmed writes about how the idea of bodily integrity is related to the privilege of being racially unmarked: ‘The unmarked body is the body that appears contained, enclosed, and separate’.<sup>14</sup> Schnitzler’s passage seems to describe how antisemitism marks the Jewish body as ‘other’ and therefore does injury to the boundaries that make sure it remains ‘contained, enclosed, and separate’. ‘Haltung bewahren’ [retaining posture/bearing], significantly, means remaining in control of one’s body, confining it to the rigid lines of a socially prescribed posture, keeping it contained. It is also a military term which resonates with Plessner’s idea of donning armour. ‘Innere Haltung’ [internal posture] refers to control over emotions, which in turn can affect also physical composure or the ‘äußere Haltung’ [external posture]. In view of the quotation from the letter to the *Neue Rundschau*, both are also important for Schnitzler’s authorial posture as a means to defend his place in the literary field.

Schnitzler highlights both the struggle to retain one’s posture in the face of antisemitism and the impossibility of remaining completely detached, that is ‘unberührt’ [unaffected], which might be rendered as ‘untouched’, and ‘gleichgültig’ [indifferent]. It appears here that detachment from one’s emotions (staying ‘gleichgültig’) – in combination with

---

<sup>14</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: 2000), p. 43

retaining one's posture – is seen as closely linked to retaining one's dignity, which corresponds to Plessner's emphasis on the prevention of embarrassment through exposure of one's emotions. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed points out that 'emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy: emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is 'lower' or 'higher' into bodily traits', meaning that the uncontrolled display of certain emotions is used as a symptom to designate 'the other'.<sup>15</sup> In her discussion of the correlation between emotions and marginalization, Ahmed quotes Darwin, who remarked that certain bodily signs of emotions are primal remnants of a time when 'man once existed in a much lower and animal-like condition'.<sup>16</sup> Being able to control one's emotions is thus seen as a sign of evolutionary progress. Schnitzler's description of 'purer and more valuable emotions' seems to suggest that his own perspective on anger is coloured by this hierarchical coding of emotions. This means, however, that if people who belong to groups already marked as 'other' do display rage or a loss of posture they will be punished with further 'othering'. While Plessner's study does not take such asymmetrical power structures into account, Schnitzler's case demonstrates that the need to mask one's emotions depends to a large extent on one's placement within social and political hierarchies.

---

<sup>15</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (Edinburgh, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## II

The operation of ‘othering’ often takes the form of insulting, injurious speech acts. Judith Butler writes, ‘[t]o be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are’.<sup>17</sup> Being ‘othered’ in this way is thus intimately linked with a destabilization of one’s sense of place: ‘Exposed at the moment of such shattering is precisely the volatility of one’s “place” within the community of speakers; one can be “put in one’s place” by such speech, but such a place may be no place’.<sup>18</sup> Saving one’s face and retaining one’s posture against attacks of ‘othering’ therefore also means defending one’s place within the community of speakers.

A passage in Schnitzler’s novel *Der Weg ins Freie* [The Path into the Open (1908)] shows this mechanism through the example of the Berthold Stauber, a young Jewish physician with at least originally ambitious political aspirations. However, he decides to terminate his political career after an incident in parliament where his opponents use antisemitic slurs to silence him. In the context of a political parliament discussion, these insults have precisely the effect described by Butler: they take Berthold out of the context of the parliamentary discussion because they are not at all related to the content of his own speech but deny him his right to be heard out and taken seriously as a politician in the arena of political speech. The antisemitic insult sends Bertold off the political stage to

---

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, New York, London 1997, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

an uncertain non-place outside of the community of speakers, assigning him the position of the ‘other’.

Significantly, when he recounts the event to his non-Jewish acquaintances, the novel’s protagonist Georg, his lover Anna and her family, their reaction shows that they are not prepared to accept and support him in his anger. Berthold shows his outrage by imitating his aggressors:

“Ruhig, Jud! Halts Maul! Jud! Jud! Kusch!” fuhr Berthold fort und schien in Erinnerung zu schwelgen.

Anna sah vor sich hin. Georg fand innerlich, es wäre nun genug. Ein kurzes, peinliches Schweigen entstand

[“Quiet, Jew! Shut your gob! Jew! Jew! Down boy!” continued Berthold, who seemed to wallow in the memory. Anna just looked ahead. Georg’s feeling was that this was quite enough. There was a short, embarrassed silence].<sup>19</sup>

Anna’s father then utters the assumption that Berthold is ‘über diese rohen Insulte gewiß erhaben’ [of course, above such crude insults] (E, 1, 657). It is clear that this comment and the embarrassed silence following Berthold’s outburst reflect the expectation that Berthold should retain his posture and not express his righteous anger.

This is further underlined when Berthold recounts a scene at the buffet reception following the insults in the parliamentary session, where one of his most outspoken

---

<sup>19</sup> Arthur Schnitzler, *Die Erzählenden Schriften*, 2 vols (Frankfurt a.M., 1961), I, 657.

Henceforth references to this edition are given in parentheses in the body of the text, as E, followed by volume number and page number(s).

aggressors greets him as if nothing had happened. The possibility that the way he treated Berthold in parliament might actually have consequences, that he might be met with anger and resistance also off the political stage does not even occur to him. For Anna, however, this does not seem to warrant a reaction as strong as Berthold's resignation: she teases him for his decision 'mit leisem Spott' [with gentle mockery] (E, 1, 657).

Confronted with such a lack of empathy, Berthold masks his susceptibility to hurt with a smile, albeit betrayed by a physiognomic tic: 'Berthold lächelte. Zugleich aber zuckte es um seine Brauen wie gewöhnlich, wenn er unangenehm oder schmerzlich berührt war' [Berthold smiled. But at the same time there was a twitching round his eye-brows, as was usual when he felt unpleasantly or painfully affected/touched] (E, 1, 657–58). Having been thus 'touched', he assumes, retrospectively, a posture of detachment, so to speak:

“Sie haben ja wahrscheinlich recht, Fräulein Anna,” sagte er, “wenn Sie darüber lächeln, daß ich wegen dieses läppischen Abenteuers mein Mandat niedergelegt habe. Ein parlamentarisches Leben ohne Komödienspiel ist ja überhaupt nicht möglich.”

[“You are probably right, Fräulein Anna”, he said, “if you smile at me resigning my seat because of that silly adventure. But then, a parliamentary life without comic theatre is quite impossible.”] (E, 1, 659)

In order to describe the inauthenticity of parliamentary politics Berthold uses the notion 'Komödienspiel', which appears with great frequency in Schnitzler's work and often

seems to refer to the inauthenticity and insincerity of politics.<sup>20</sup> This evaluation seems to differ significantly from Plessner's ideal of social role-play that is aimed at avoiding social conflict.

In contrast to Plessner's study, the passage in Schnitzler's novel makes the asymmetrical power structures residing in the public sphere explicit: the specific role assigned to Berthold is considerably more restrictive than others. Berthold recognises that social interactions both in- and outside parliament follow a certain script and that his authentic reaction of being personally offended by the antisemitic insults thrown at him only leads to further derision. By calling the incident 'läppisch' [silly], he at least retrospectively assumes the role that everyone around him seems to expect him to play: someone who is able to rise above the insults and retains his posture. The passage exposes the vicious circle inherent to the practice of 'othering': showing outrage and thus losing one's

---

<sup>20</sup> See also the following aphorism: 'Machen wir uns nicht mitschuldig an der Lügenhaftigkeit der Welt, insbesondere am Komödienspiel der Politik, wenn wir uns immer wieder anstellen, als hätten wir innere Ansichten, Überzeugungen, Ideen zu bekämpfen, da wir doch wissen, daß uns nur Parteiinteresse, Gedankenlosigkeit und Bosheit gegenüber stehen' [Do we not become complicit in the falsehood of the world, particularly in the comic theatre of politics, if we pretend time and again that we have to fight inner opinions, convictions, ideas, even though we know that we are just confronted with party interest, thoughtlessness, and malice]. Arthur Schnitzler, *Aphorismen und Betrachtungen*, ed. by Robert O. Weiss (Frankfurt a.M., 1967), p. 239. Henceforth references are given in parentheses in the body of the text, as AB, followed by the page number(s).

posture in the face of discriminatory speech only perpetuates its very effect by seemingly confirming already existing stereotypes of the 'other'. After all, the body that is perhaps most remarkable in its inability to remain in a socially acceptable posture is that of the hysteric. And the allegation that both women and Jews had a particularly high tendency to develop nervous or hysterical symptoms, thus to not be able to contain one's inner and outer posture, formed a central part of the respective stereotypes.<sup>21</sup> Labelling someone as 'hysterical' or 'over-sensitive' is thus an effective strategy to silence them and to put them back into their 'place' if they dare to protest against the initial 'othering' they have received. In turn, being in control of one's posture and emotions appears as a defence strategy against 'othering'. Berthold's smile thus becomes a mask of detachment protecting his 'face' against further injury.

As we have seen above, this is mirrored in Schnitzler's own attempts at retaining his posture of detachment when confronted with antisemitic aggression. Schnitzler's cultivation of cool conduct codes is in the first instance not the deliberate embodiment of an ideal of cultivated distance, but emerges from his marginalized placement in the literary field. However, as we will see in the following, to some extent, Schnitzler seems to share Plessner's view that *Komödienspiel* forms an elemental part of the human condition and that a certain amount of regulated distance could be indeed desirable for the relaxation of social tensions. At the same time, Schnitzler's work anticipates critically the risks inherent in a society that relies completely on cool conduct codes for its regulation of interpersonal intercourse.

---

<sup>21</sup> See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, 1991), p. 63.

### III

For Plessner, social role-play and masking are not forms of alienation, but part and parcel of the human condition, as he claims that man is artificial by nature.<sup>22</sup> Lethen points out that this understanding of the social role takes its cue from Nietzsche's paradox 'only masked is a man entirely real'.<sup>23</sup> In one of his aphorisms, Schnitzler expresses a similar idea:

Manche Menschen erscheinen uns so widerspruchsvoll, weil wir in ihrer Betrachtung und Beurteilung das Element des Komödienspiels zum Teil oder ganz vernachlässigen, welches doch bei jedem Menschen, nicht nur bei den sogenannten Komödianten, Lügner, Poseuren usw. in irgendeinem, wenn auch bescheidenen Maße vorhanden ist. Es ist sozusagen eine physiologische Beimischung des Elements Lüge auch in dem wahrsten Individuum, und wäre es auch nur als Geltungs- oder Spieltrieb.

[Some persons appear to us to be so full of contradictions because when we observe and judge them we partly or completely neglect the element of comic role-play, which exists, to however modest a degree, in every

---

<sup>22</sup> Helmuth Plessner, 'Macht und menschliche Natur: Ein Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichtlichen Weltansicht' (1931), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10 vols. (Frankfurt a.M., 1982), V, p. 199. See also Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. 53.

<sup>23</sup> Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. 63.

individual and not only in the so-called comedians, liars, poseurs etc. [...].  
Even in the most authentic individual, we detect, so to speak, a  
physiological admixture of the element of lying, and be it only due to the  
drive for social recognition or play.] (AB, 285)

The notion of *Komödienspiel* appears here in a different light than in the passage in Schnitzler's novel discussed in the previous section. If an element of *Komödienspiel* exists in all of us, as Schnitzler writes, then it is to be understood less as a moralistic deficiency and more as an anthropological fact. This is underscored by the almost bio-medical terminology in this passage: if a certain amount of inauthenticity is part of our physiology, if playfulness is in fact a 'drive', then Schnitzler's anthropological conceptualization of role-play corresponds to Plessner's dictum that man is by nature artificial. Moreover, Schnitzler's expression of the so-called *Geltungstrieb*, the drive or instinct for social recognition, resonates with Plessner's idea of the public sphere in which individuals strive for recognition and avoid the embarrassment of revealing themselves completely.

For Schnitzler, in a similar way as for Plessner, this social *Komödienspiel* forms part of how one places oneself more or less effectively in the public sphere while avoiding conflict and confrontation: 'Nicht jedes Lügen ist eben auch ein *Anlügen*. Es kann Affektation, Pose, auch Höflichkeit sein' [Not every act of lying implies lying to someone. It can also be affectation, posing, but also politeness] (AB, 285). In particular the last aspect, politeness, is compatible with Plessner's idea of tactful social role-play that maintains a respectful distance between individuals:

the virtuous mastery of forms of play where persons come close to each other without meeting [...]. The offensive indifference, coldness, and rudeness of living past each other is made ineffective through forms of politeness, respectfulness, and attentiveness. Reserve counteracts a too great intimacy.<sup>24</sup>

Plessner's advocacy of cultivated distance could have resonated with Schnitzler's own evaluation of potential conflict in in the public sphere. In 1927, thus after Plessner published his study, Schnitzler writes:

Es ist immer noch besser, wenn sich zwei Menschen über den Abgrund ewiger Fremdheit hin kühl die Hände reichen, als wenn sie einander über den trügerischen Wirbeln des Verstehens gerührt in die Arme sinken.

[It is always better, when two people, divided by an abyss of eternal estrangement, offer each other a cool handshake, rather than fall into one another's arms in a deceitful whirl of understanding.] (AB, 63)

A tactful distance that is respectful of the difference between two individuals is thus preferable to a false sense of intimacy that ignores the incommensurability of the other's difference.

The image of the cool handshake over the abyss already appears at the end of Schnitzler's play *Professor Bernhardt* (1912), where the doctor and his adversary, the priest, enact

---

<sup>24</sup> Plessner, *Limits of Community*, p. 131.

precisely this scenario.<sup>25</sup> When the priest offers Bernhardi his hand after having triggered an antisemitic smear campaign against the Jewish doctor, the latter smiles: ‘Über – den Abgrund, Hochwürden?’ (Over – the abyss, Reverend?).<sup>26</sup> In view of Schnitzler’s own experience with antisemitic aggression, his sympathy for established boundaries may not be surprising. Schnitzler’s posture of detachment has to be understood as a defence against transgressive antisemitic attacks that precisely do not respect him as occupying a legitimate place in the literary field (or, in Berthold’s case, in parliament). Conduct codes that regulate the maintenance of respectful distance in the public sphere may promise much needed protection from precisely such violation of boundaries, as long as they apply to everyone. If Plessner’s ideal of social role-play in the public sphere is based on tact, which can be defined as ‘respect for the space of the other’,<sup>27</sup> then this responds to a need for everyone to respect the place of one another and to not violate the other through transgression. While, according to Lethen, this need emerged more generally in the German society after WWI as a reaction to the collective humiliation of defeat, it may be

---

<sup>25</sup> See Verena Vortisch, *An der Grenze des Poesielandes: Arthur Schnitzlers Komödie Fink und Fliederbusch* (Würzburg, 2014), p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Schnitzler, *Die Dramatischen Werke*, 2 vols (Frankfurt a.M., 1962), 2, 436. Henceforth references to this edition are given in parentheses in the body of the text, as D, followed by volume number and page number(s).

<sup>27</sup> Katja Haustein, ‘How to Be Alone With Others: Plessner, Adorno, and Barthes on Tact’, *MLR* 114.1 (2019), 1–21 (p. 3).

plausible that it was felt well before then by someone like Schnitzler who had to defend his place and save his public ‘face’ from antisemitic ‘disfigurement’ on a regular basis.

#### IV

Schnitzler’s apparent sympathy for codes of cool conduct in the public sphere *avant la lettre*, however, does not mean that his work idealizes the detachment of social role-play as a general lifestyle. Far from endorsing or participating in the aestheticist tendencies that, according to Lethen, gave inspiration to the development of cool conduct codes in the 1920s, Schnitzler’s work seems to suggest that if the need to keep one’s protective mask in place through social *Komödienspiel* becomes the primary concern above anything else this will have problematic consequences for interpersonal relationships. In one of his better-known aphorisms, Schnitzler introduces the term ‘Kernlosigkeit’ [carelessness], which he describes as a common psychical constitution of the modern person:

Die Seele mancher Menschen scheint aus einzelnen gewissermaßen flottierenden Elementen zu bestehen, die sich niemals um ein Zentrum zu gruppieren, also auch keine Einheit zu bilden imstande sind. So lebt der kernlose Mensch in einer ungeheuren und ihm doch niemals völlig zu Bewußtsein kommenden Einsamkeit dahin. Die große Mehrzahl der Menschen ist überhaupt in diesem Sinne kernlos, doch erst an merkwürdigen oder bedeutenden Menschen fällt uns solche Kernlosigkeit auf, die übrigens vorzugsweise bei reproduzierenden Talenten, vor allem

bei genialen Schauspielern, insbesondere Schauspielerinnen, zu beobachten ist.

[Some people's souls appear to consist of separate and, as it were, floating elements, which never settle around a centre, and as such can never build a unity. The coreless person thus lives in a terrible loneliness, although he is never fully conscious of it. The large majority of people are coreless in this sense, but we notice this corelessness only in noteworthy and prominent people, which, incidentally, you can observe in particular in people who are talented in the performing arts, above all in actors of genius, and actresses in particular.] (AB, 53–54)

Horst Thomé has pointed out that since Schnitzler speaks of 'some people' or a 'large majority', he seems to conceptualize this 'corelessness' not as a fundamental human condition but as an – albeit widespread – pathological syndrome.<sup>28</sup> One may ask about the social conditions that contribute to this common phenomenon if a large majority of people, even though perhaps not all of them, can be considered coreless personalities. Schnitzler does not incidentally associate the lack of a 'core' with the performing arts. Being coreless has something to do with the talent of taking on different roles, of performatively adopting a personality rather than seeking ways of unmediated, authentic

---

<sup>28</sup> See Horst Thomé, 'Kernlosigkeit und Pose Zur Rekonstruktion von Schnitzlers Psychologie', in *Fin de Siècle. Zur Naturwissenschaft und Literatur der Jahrhundertwende im deutsch-skandinavischen Kontext*, ed. by Klaus Bohnen, Uffe Hansen, and Friedrich Schmöe (Kopenhagen and Munich, 1984), pp. 62–87 (p. 63).

expression. Thomé is right when he links this aspect of role-play to the performance of social roles: Schnitzler's coreless personalities, one might say, are overwhelmed by their own protective *Komödienspiel* and unable to maintain their individual personal core apart from their public social role.<sup>29</sup>

In Schnitzler's literary writings, a too radical understanding of the cultivated detachment of social role-play appears to engender coreless personalities who suffer from a decisive lack of empathy and remain entrapped in the loneliness behind their own protective mask. Abigail Gillmann speaks of Schnitzler's 'aesthetics of detachment', albeit only casually, in order to sketch out the un-empathetic personality of the protagonist in *Der Weg ins Freie*,<sup>30</sup> but it is a description that may well be applicable for the larger part of his work. The fear of personal exposure in a public space full of masked personas is pointedly played out in Schnitzler's famous *Traumnovelle* (1925/26), when the protagonist experiences a profound sense of horror at the request to take off his mask at a masked ball: 'Tausendmal schlimmer wäre es ihm erschienen, der einzige mit unverlarvtem

---

<sup>29</sup> The conflict between the individual and normalizing social forces as a central aspect of Schnitzler's work has been widely recognised. See the overview by Wolfgang Lukas, 'Anthropologie und Lebensideologie', in *Arthur Schnitzler Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. by Christoph Jürgensen, Wolfgang Lukas, Matthias Scheffel (Stuttgart, 2014), pp. 40–43 (p. 41).

<sup>30</sup> Abigail Gillman, 'Failed Bildung and the Aesthetics of Detachment: Schnitzler's *Der Weg ins Freie*', in *Confrontations/Accommodations: German-Jewish Literary and Cultural History from Heine to Wassermann*, ed. by Mark Gelber, (Tübingen, 2004), pp. 209–36.

Gesicht unter lauter Masken dazustehen, als plötzlich unter Angekleideten nackt' [It would have seemed a thousand times worse to be the only one with his face not masked among so many masks, than to suddenly stand naked amongst people who were dressed] (E, 2, 468). The passage can be read metaphorically as the need of modern subjects to participate in the social *Komödienspiel* in order to hide their vulnerability at all costs.<sup>31</sup>

The consequences when this fear of embarrassing disclosure is carried from the public into the private sphere are paradigmatically played out in Schnitzler's drama *Der einsame Weg* [The Lonely Road (1904)]. Notwithstanding the misogyny in Schnitzler's aphorism, when he attributes a particular tendency for corelessness to female actors, the coreless personality affects both genders in this play, and men perhaps even more severely than women. In particular, the friendship between the painter Fichtner and the writer Stephan von Sala is decidedly defined rather by detached role-play than interpersonal connectedness. This is explicitly presented as a phenomenon of the twentieth century when Sala tells Fichtner:

‘Wir bringen einander die Stichworte so geschickt – finden Sie nicht? Es gibt pathetische Leute, die solche Beziehungen Freundschaft nennen.

Übrigens ist es nicht unmöglich, daß wir uns im vorigen Jahrhundert »du« gesagt, am Ende gar, daß Sie sich an meinem Busen ausgeweint hätten.’

---

<sup>31</sup> See Julia Freytag, *Verhüllte Schaulust: Die Maske in Schnitzlers Traumnovelle und in Kubricks Eyes Wide Shut* (Bielefeld, 2007), p. 64, and Sibylle Saxer, *Die Sprache der Blicke verstehen: Arthur Schnitzlers Poetik des Augen-Blicks als Poetik der Scham* (Freiburg i.Br./Berlin/Vienna, 2010).

[We give each other our cues rather elegantly – don't you think? There are certain emotional people who would call such relations a friendship.

Incidentally, it is not impossible – had we lived in the previous century – that we would have been on a first-name footing, maybe even that you would have had a good cry on my breast.] (D, 1, 780)

Direct demonstrations of intimate friendship are regarded as a relic of the last century, and intimacy can only be expressed through the ironic detour of referring mockingly to the past. Sala's ironic distancing from more openly affectionate expressions of intimacy thus appears as a symptom of modernity – and it also seems to be inextricably linked to re-formulations of male identity constructions and modernist artistic styles. In the introduction to his study *The Burdens of Intimacy: Psychoanalysis and Victorian Masculinity* (1999), Christopher Lane explains that 'several male modernists recoiled from the "taint" of Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite sensibility'.<sup>32</sup> T.E. Hulme, for example, famously distanced himself from the alleged emotionalism of his literary predecessors such as Keats, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Swinburne. He warned writers of the poisonous, drug-like effects of Romanticism, while praising 'the classical attitude' for its 'holding back'.<sup>33</sup> In opposition to the allegedly overly emotional, effeminate man of the previous century, the man of the twentieth century avows a modern form of reserved, cool, and detached masculinity. With the representation of artistic characters who comply with these conduct codes that regulate the interpersonal interaction and ensure a smooth

---

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Lane, *The Burdens of Intimacy: Psychoanalysis & Victorian Masculinity* (Chicago/London, 1999), p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

performance of the masculine ideal, Schnitzler's text places itself firmly within the modernism of the twentieth century. However, the fact that these characters are essentially drawn as 'coreless' personalities suffering from loneliness as well as a lack of empathy suggests that Schnitzler also critically anticipates the problematic consequences of the anthropology of detachment emerging in the interwar years. Loneliness is directly linked to the inability of the characters to form or maintain interpersonal connections and becomes contextualized as a time-specific diagnosis of an 'Epochenkrankheit' [illness of the era].<sup>34</sup> The play, which Schnitzler called in earlier drafts 'Egoisten' [Egoists] and 'Junggesellen' [Bachelors],<sup>35</sup> has been read as a 'Drama der Beziehungsschwäche' [drama of weakness in relationships] that not only criticizes aestheticism as a decadent art form, but also the decadent bourgeois life-style concepts of the turn of the century that it informs.<sup>36</sup>

The kinship to Plessner's conduct codes of detached social role-play is highlighted by the fact that Sala uses a theatrical metaphor ('Stichworte'/cues) to describe his relationship with Fichtner. Friendship is thereby reduced to a witty performance of social role-play that makes any attempt at intimacy impossible. Two implicit references to both Plessner

---

<sup>34</sup> Alfred Doppler, "'Der Ästhet als Bösewicht – ?'" (Schnitzlers Schauspiel *Der einsame Weg*), *MAL* 12.1 (1979), 1–18 (p. 16).

<sup>35</sup> See Michael Titzmann, 'Der einsame Weg', in *Schnitzler Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. by Christoph Jürgensen, Wolfgang Lukas, Michael Scheffel (Stuttgart, 2014), pp. 75–79 (p. 75).

<sup>36</sup> Jochen Schmidt, 'Der einsame Weg', in *Arthur Schnitzler: Dramen und Erzählungen*, ed. by Hee-Ju Kim and Günter Saße (Stuttgart, 2007), p. 118.

and Lethen in a review of Christian Petzold's 2010 production of Schnitzler's play support this interpretation: bringing to mind Plessner's armoured persona in the public sphere, the journalist Christoph Schmidt writes in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: 'Jeder scheint hier in sich selbst gefangen und wird nur laut wie in einem Lagerkoller, um gegen die eigene Panzerung zu trommeln' [Everybody here seems to be imprisoned within themselves and only shout out as if in cabin fever to drum against their own armour].<sup>37</sup> And he summarizes the experience of watching the play as an evening dominated by the codes of cool conduct. Indeed, Schnitzler's characters in *Der einsame Weg* seem to be so detached from their own emotional and personal 'core', so to speak, that they display an 'internal inability to cohere'.<sup>38</sup>

At the end of the play, Sala has to pay the price for his radical adoption of detached conduct codes: when he is confronted with the diagnosis of terminal illness, it becomes impossible for him to maintain his cultivated mask of indifference. Consequently, he chooses to end his life immediately: 'Sie denken doch nicht, ich werde warten? Das fänd' ich ein wenig peinlich. *Zu Julian, lachend.* Wer wird Ihnen jetzt die Stichworte bringen, lieber Freund?' [You don't think I'll wait? That I would find a bit embarrassing. *Laughing, to Julian.* Who will give you your cues now, dear friend?] (D, 1, 835). In order

---

<sup>37</sup> Christoph Schmidt, 'Distanz der Vampire: Christian Petzold inszeniert Schnitzlers "Einsamen Weg" als Gespensterreigen in Berlin', *Süddeutsche Zeitung: sz.de* (17 May 2010) (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/christian-petzold-als-theaterregisseur-distanz-der-vampire-1.387801>, accessed 28 November 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Lane, *The Burdens of Intimacy*, p. 2.

to avoid embarrassment and vulnerability Sala chooses to keep up his ironic role-play.<sup>39</sup> His fear of embarrassment certainly resonates with Plessner's conception of the 'risk of ridicule'. While Schnitzler entertained ideas sympathetic to Plessner's hope to contain aggressive tendencies by avoiding embarrassing exposure through cultivated detachment, his play shows that the compulsive need to protect one's personal 'core' from exposure by masking it through social role-play may contain the risk of becoming completely 'coreless' and therefore unable to connect with others or feel empathy for them.

In another aphorism, written during WWI, Schnitzler invokes Darwin when he reflects on an extreme form of detachment, that is the indifference to the suffering of others, which he understands as a more problematic aspect of human nature than the tendency to aggression or cruelty: 'Diese Gleichgültigkeit hat sich wahrscheinlich im Kampf ums Dasein entwickelt, da nur durch sie das Leben, das Weiterleben überhaupt möglich wurde' [This indifference was probably developed in the struggle for existence, because only through this was it at all possible to live, to survive] (AB, 212). Schnitzler was forced to adopt his own posture of detachment in order to defend his place in the literary field in particular and in the Austrian society in general. The passage in *Der Weg ins Freie* gives insight into how this posture of detachment, forced upon the marginalized individual as the expression of anger, is met with further marginalization. In the passage about Berthold, this further injustice is created by the inability and unwillingness of the people around him to accept his anger, let alone join him in it – people who are

---

<sup>39</sup> In Thomé's reading of Schnitzler's novella *Das Spiel im Morgengrauen* [Gambling at Dawn], he comes to a similar conclusion about the connection between compulsive social role-play and the protagonist's suicide. See Thomé, 'Kernlosigkeit und Pose'.

supposedly at least sympathetic to his criticism of antisemitic injustice. It is their detached lack of solidarity that enforces Berthold's detachment.<sup>40</sup> It is here that Schnitzler's work addresses an aspect that will be neglected by Plessner: the fact that cultivated indifference, even when softened by tactful politeness, will reinforce forms of social and political oppression.

Plessner's study was written against new forms of radicalism on both the right and the left wing of politics. The tactful cultivation of distance, he hoped, would prevent the formation of totalitarian discourses of community. However, when cool detachment becomes necessary for survival, it creates a 'moment when all is lost except attitude [or: posture – 'Haltung', M.K.]'.<sup>41</sup> At such a moment, individuals will experience not just loneliness but an all-encompassing sense of abandonment that, according to Hannah Arendt, paves the way for totalitarian regimes to take hold.<sup>42</sup> This danger is already expressed in *Der einsame Weg* when Sala's parting words seem to entail a pre-fascist anticipation of precisely such a moment: 'Es scheint mir überhaupt, daß jetzt wieder ein besseres Geschlecht heranwächst, – mehr Haltung und weniger Geist' [It generally seems to me that a better generation is now set to come of age once more – more posture/bearing and less spirit] (D, 1, 835–36). Twenty years before Plessner's study was

---

<sup>40</sup> This remains an important aspect of discussions on the politics of emotions today. See Amia Srinivasan, 'The Aptness of Anger', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26.2 (2018), 123–144 (p. 127).

<sup>41</sup> Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. 216.

<sup>42</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Elemente totaler Herrschaft* (Frankfurt a.M., 1956), p. 277. See also Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. 216.

published, Schnitzler's play therefore seems critically to anticipate the radicalization of its claims.