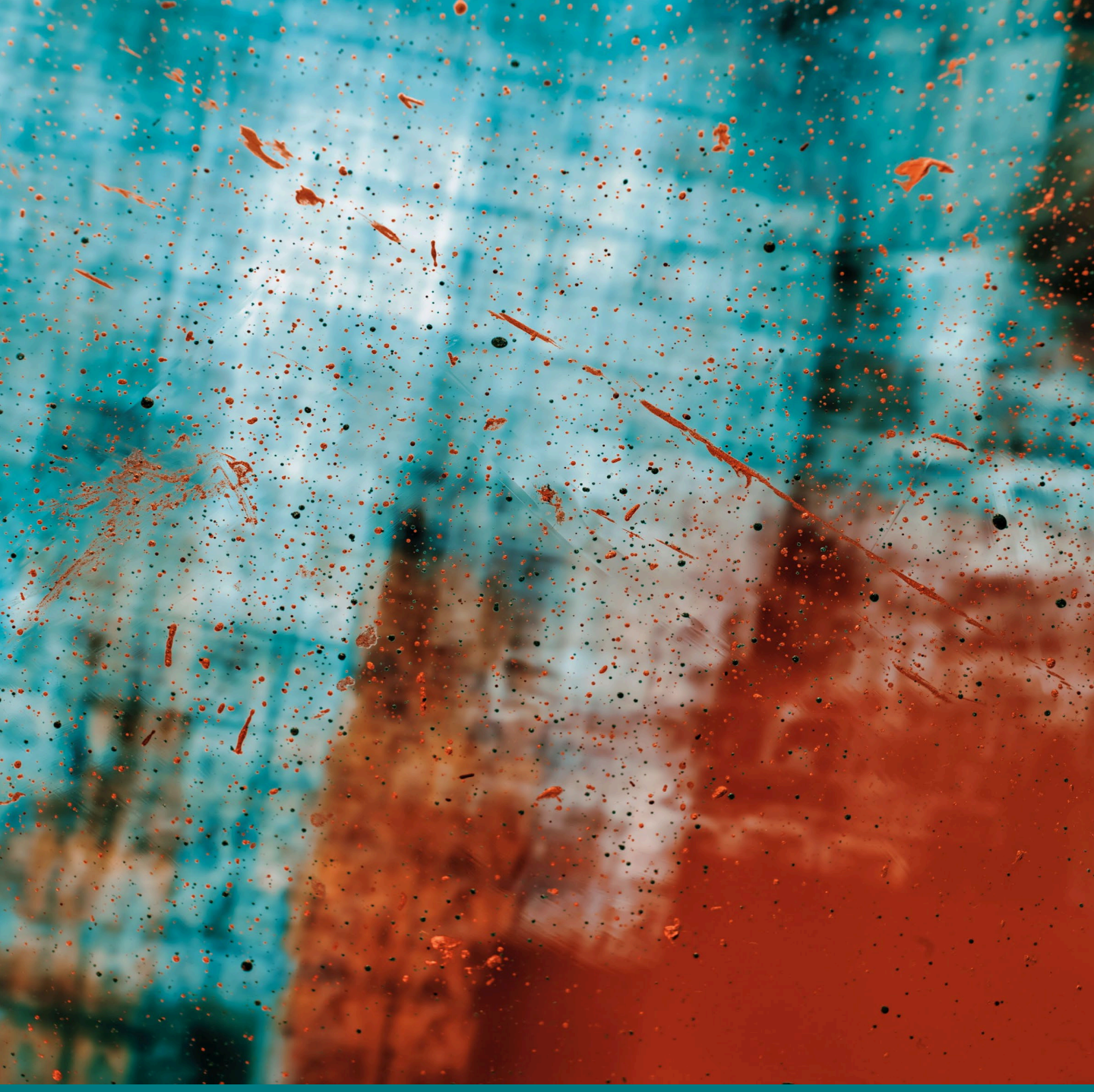

Borderlands

Performative Acts Across Language, Culture and Media

Eva Ulrike Pirker, Kathrin Hettrich & Leslie Fried (eds.)

hhu books

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.dnb.de abrufbar

UNIVERSITÄTS- UND LANDESBIBLIOTHEK DÜSSELDORF

Herausgegeben von hhu books,
Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Düsseldorf 2022.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24336/hhhubooks.41
ISBN: 978-3-942412-07-0

Titelbild: iStock.com/Litay

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Danksagung

Die vorliegende Publikation, die ihr vorausgehenden Diskussionen und Recherchearbeiten wurden durch das Förderformat »Bürgeruniversität in der Lehre« der Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf ermöglicht.

Die Podcasts zur Publikation wurden durch den E-Learning Förderfonds der HHU Düsseldorf ermöglicht. Die Podcasts sind abrufbar über den Anglophone Literary Studies Blog des Instituts für Anglistik und Amerikanistik sowie über Spotify.

Für das Lektorat der Beiträge danken wir Janna Krampe.

Chiara Timbone

The Representation of Queer Black Identity in *Moonlight* (2016) and *Surge* (2019)

I am a student of media and culture analysis at the Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, and I began to compose this podcast as a work for the seminar »Borderlands: Performative Acts Across Language, Culture and Media« at the Department of English and American studies.

The subject I want to focus on is the representation of queer Black identity in two fairly recent works: Barry Jenkins' film *Moonlight*, which came out in the U.S. in 2016, and Jay Bernard's poetry collection *Surge*, published in book form in 2019. In this podcast, I am going to explore in what way these two works capture the complexity of queer Black identities in societal contexts in which representations thereof are rare. Additionally, I will be looking at the question of whether their approaches are not as dissimilar as one would expect, given the difference in the chosen medium—poetry and film.

It is important to mention that both works have crossed medial thresholds before they became widely noted and highly appreciated works. The poems in *Surge* have originally been composed as poems for the stage and the story of *Moonlight* was originally written by playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney to be performed as a stage play. Hence, we have two cases of medial transformations. However, I am interested in the thresholds and boundaries that *Surge* and *Moonlight* engage with in terms of identity constructions. More specifically, I am interested in their representation of queer Black identity and in their engagement with the challenges queer Black people are facing in the UK and the US.

In our culturally developed and technologically advanced world today, with so many possibilities of identification being shared and multiplied on the internet and the resulting multitude of cultural identity offers, individuals are still confronted with the fundamental questions: Where do I belong? What is it that truly defines my identity? And am I allowed to live every aspect of my identity openly, freely, to embrace and be proud of the person I am?

Even though acceptance and tolerance have increased in many social and spatial sectors, we still have not come to the point we should—by now—find ourselves at. The recently re-inflamed Black Lives Matter movement as well as the current debate around equality for members of LGBTQ* communities have highlighted the importance of the societal discourses about inclusion and exclusion based on gender and race. Poet and activist Jay Bernard identifies as both—queer and Black—living in a divided England. In the context of our seminar, we came across their work

Surge—a poetic exploration of Black British history and an investigation of the New Cross Fire in London in 1981 where a birthday party ended in tragedy: thirteen young Black people were killed in what some believe to have been a racist arson attack.

Moonlight, on the other hand, is a US-American movie directed by Barry Jenkins, and it first came to my attention in the context of my Bachelor Studies of Anglistics where I had done research on the representation of LGBTQ* groups in popular culture. In a long history of pop culture where queer identities have been under- or misrepresented, the emergence of the New Queer Cinema in the early 1990s has brought attention to the lack of identity offers that queer people are facing. As JoAnne C. Juett puts it in her book *Coming Out to the Mainstream*: »In particular, NQC was a movement of defiance, seeking to defy a homophobic cultural past; to openly defy cinematic convention; and, in the wake of the dreadful specter of AIDS, to defy death itself.«[1]

Even though, retrospectively, the New Queer Cinema movement has come to a rather quick ending about ten years later, its long-term effects are reflected in more recent films that are trying to renegotiate queer identity and attempt an honest representation. Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* portrays one example of this as the film deals with the journey of the young Black boy Chiron who grows up in a housing project in Miami. He is played by three different actors who represent him during three stages of his life. Significant time spans have passed between these three stages and separate the individual parts as gaps, which makes the storytelling of the film so unique. These disconnections lead to the fact that we as the spectators are asked to fill the gaps imaginatively and help complete the narrative. This leaves room for fluid interpretations. Growing up, Chiron has to deal with bullies, a drug addict mother, and his growing awareness of the fact that he is gay.

Connecting the dots at this point, it may seem hard to draw parallels between such different media as poetry and film. However, at second glance, I discovered common themes in *Surge* and *Moonlight* that deserve attention as they go deeper than the obvious topic of identity formation in a hostile environment marked by anti-queerness and anti-Blackness.

In their respective media, Jay Bernard and Barry Jenkins both address queer Black identity to offer an exploration of the challenges queer and Black individuals are facing to this day, both in Great Britain and the US.

Studying both works, I was especially fascinated by the use of imagery and discovered that *Moonlight* and *Surge* share common features in this regard. Both Bernard's poetry and Jenkins' film make use of the elements water and fire as symbols that allow the audience to delve into the threats to queer Black identity and that offer moments of revelation.

Fire Imagery in *Moonlight* and *Surge*

In *Surge*, the element fire is not only literally in focus due to the catastrophes of the New Cross Fire in 1981 and the Grenfell Tower Fire in 2017—two tragic events in London that frame this collection of poetry. Fire is also used in a metaphorical way as a threat to Black identity—Black identity depends upon the possibility of a narrative of Black history as it is constantly being marginalized and negated.

> Where does the body sit across the categorizations of national, local, and ethnic identities if the traumas of personal and systemic violence make being at home impossible?[2]

Referencing Jay Bernard, the poet and scholar Sandeep Parmar argues: »The fire becomes an existential threat beyond its historical moment, and the ephemera lovingly preserved in the archive become an ark in the flood of time.«[3]

In a reading for the T.S. Eliot Prize, Jay Bernard remembers the space they found themselves in when writing the poem »Hiss« which circles around the firefighters' feelings when going into the house at New Cross after the flames have been extinguished. Jay Bernard explains that they wrote the poem right after spending some time on the beach reflecting upon the firefighters' descriptions of what the place had felt like after the fire.[4] The respective passage in »Hiss« goes as follows:

> *Going in when the firefighters left / was like standing on a black beach / with the sea suspended in the walls.*[5]

This imagery in the poem—comparing the burnt-out space to a black beach—seems somehow paradoxical. However, it displays how thirteen lives have just been washed away as by a crashing wave—a *surge* perhaps? At the same time the word »Hiss« is marked by an onomatopoetic sound that reminds us of flames and fire which, again, takes us back to the tragic location at New Cross and stands in contrast to the water imagery evident in *Surge*.

Water Imagery

The collection's title itself can be seen as part of the imagery of elements as it carries the meaning of a huge wave, eventually coming down as a flood. In *Surge*, water also has another connotation—namely the disappointed hopes of immigrants coming to Great Britain from the Caribbean in the middle of the 20th century—when they had to face racism in many forms in a country they had been taught to call their »mother country.« The Windrush migrants, who are referenced here, and the Windrush scandal in 2018 is another topic Jay Bernard touches upon in *Surge* that stands out, and which is explored in another podcast of our series *Borderlands*.[6] But back to water!

In *Moonlight,* the imagery circles around the element of water and contrasts with the idea of the fire as a threat to minoritarian, marginalized groups and their identity formation. In an article for *The Atlantic*, Sophie Gilbert shows that the first scene in which the relevance of water as a motive emerges is the moment when protagonist Chiron is being taught how to float in the sea as a young boy. In many texts—in Greek mythology as well as Shakespeare or even the bible, transformational powers are ascribed to water—it appears as a symbol of rebirth and release.[7]

Barry Jenkins *Moonlight* (2016) © Moviestore Collection Ltd.

In *Moonlight,* water seems to have this power, too, and it comes up as a recurring theme in Chiron's progress—his difficult journey towards eventual self-acceptance. Another example of this is Chiron's experience of his first sexual encounter on the beach. Throughout the film he seems to explore his vulnerability and softness, features of his true self—when he is close to water. And this is also how the movie ends. It leaves us with a flashback of Chiron as a young boy, staring out at the ocean.

Isn't that how it's supposed to be? Water beats fire. The power of water that can stand for an escape and revelation for queer Black identities, beating the threat that comes with a fire. However, looking at this matter from another angle, water does not only appear as this pure element that represents freedom and possibility. Especially in this context—considering Black history—it also references the transatlantic slave trade and the resulting deaths of millions of people in the Atlantic Ocean. As Paul Gilroy has shown in *The Black Atlantic*, the flipside of Black liberation in the Atlantic world is the history of anti-Black oppression and racism.[8] Jay Bernard's *Surge* can therefore also be interpreted as a reminiscence and eventual recurrence of this history. Jay Bernard alludes to this in their author's note to *Surge*:

> The Windrush scandal was reminiscent of right-wing calls for Black repatriation. The archive became, for me, a mirror of the present, a much-needed instruction manual to navigate what felt like the repetition of history.[9]

In both *Moonlight* and *Surge,* the imagery of water and fire helps to construct the challenges of individual experiences of inhabiting a queer Black identity and speaking from a marginalized, perhaps even vilified, or stigmatized position. Could *any* poet or filmmaker have come up with these works? In what follows I want to explore how the authors' own experiences have shaped the ways in which we, as an audience, witness the challenges surrounding queer Black identification. So, what do the authors say about this conundrum?

For Jay Bernard, sexuality and gender are not—*cannot*—be two distinct topics. They are connected in a way that connects all parts of society. A society in which intersectionality still plays a substantial role with regard to the many levels and dimensions of individual identities. To counteract such disparate treatments, the people concerned as well as their allies seem to feel urged more and more to engage in political acts. Namely, to push for a society in which they feel just as included as everybody else, as Jay Bernard alludes to in an interview with Claire Armitstead for *The Guardian*:

> People are starting to enforce change, to stand up and say I'd like to use this pronoun and call bullshit on a lot of the preconceptions we have around gender, which isn't this discrete thing: it's intimately bound up with class and race and history.[10]

When speaking about the author of *Moonlight* on the other hand, I need to specify who I am actually referring to. The movie is based on a playscript by Tarell Alvin McCraney, an openly gay Black playwright who has grown up in the rough neighborhood of Liberty City—a housing project in Miami. As A. A. Dowd points out, this is also neighborhood in which director Barry Jenkins grew up and the one in which the movie is set,[11] and this is one of the aspects that have brought the two together to write the screenplay for the movie.

McCraney speaks of his original playscript as a semi-autobiographic work. Chiron's experiences in the story are based on McCraney's own, as he explains in an interview on *BBC Newsnight* about the story of the film:

> It was based on a lot of memories. Particularly the memories of myself, my mother and my childhood growing up in Liberty City. There's a lot of me in it, but there's also a lot of Barry Jenkins in it. I think when you come to a piece about self-discovery it is very difficult to leave yourself out. So, one of the things I think Barry was very generous in—very brave in—was putting himself in the film as well.[12]

Director Barry Jenkins, who does not identify as gay, significantly identifies with Chiron in many other respects as he has explained in an interview by Andrew Pulver for *The Guardian*:

> I did have reservations. Can I, as a straight man, really tell this story fully—in the way it needs to be told? But I approached this as an ally. Tarell is very openly gay and I felt like if I preserved his voice it would at least pass the smell test. I saw myself in Chiron in every way—except for that one aspect of his identity. If I turned my back on him for that, it would be cowardly. I couldn't have lived with myself if I'd done that. So, I felt I had to become a better man, a more secure man, to make this film. Once I got past that, I wasn't a straight man or a gay man. I was the man telling the story.[13]

Wrapping up my research it can be said that both Jay Bernard as well as Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney have made important contributions to our understanding of queer Black identity. They have succeeded in representing complex developments and identity processes, integrating queer and Black perspectives as a matter of course, as part of a world of experience and as speaking positions. The symbolism used in *Surge* and *Moonlight* offers a deeper engagement with the experiences of threat and marginalization through an artistic, and yet tangible lens. After all, not for nothing have they received massive appreciation and recognition for their works. Both works have touched and transformed their creators: The archive has impacted Bernard, the telling of *Moonlight* has impacted Jenkins. Likewise, they have the potential to touch and transform their audiences.

NOTES

[1] JoAnne C. Juett & David M. Jones, »Introduction,« in *Coming Out to the Mainstream. New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*. Ed. JoAnne C. Juett & David M. Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), x.
[2] Sandeep Parmar, »Surge by Jay Bernard Review – Tragedy and Solidarity,« *The Guardian*, July 6, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/06/surge-by-jay-bernard-review-the-painful-echoes-of-britains-black-radical-past. Access 15/09/2021.
[3] Parmar, »Review.«
[4] T. S. Eliot Prize, »Jay Bernard reads ›Hiss‹.« YouTube Video, 0:10-0:38, January 2, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o43u8h-RFQs. Access 15/12/2021.
[5] Jay Bernard, *Surge* (Vintage Digital, 2019), 25, Kindle.
[6] Mandy Bartesch & Özlem Dagdelen: »Jay Bernard and the *Angel of History*,« *Borderlands: Performative Acts across Language, Culture and Media*. (Düsseldorf: hhu books, 2021), 19-27.
[7] Sophie Gilbert, »And, Scene: Moonlight,« *The Atlantic*, December 26, 2016, theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/the-power-of-water-in-moonlight/511547/. Access 15/12/2021.
[8] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993).
[9] Jay Bernard, *Surge*, x.
[10] Claire Armitstead, »Speaking Out: Ted Hughes Winner Jay Bernard on Exploring the New Cross fire in a One-off Performance.« *The Guardian*, April 5, 2018, theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/05/speaking-out-jay-bernard-surge-side-a-poet. Access 15/12/2021.
[11] A. A. Dowd, »One of 2016's Best, Moonlight Unfolds a Coming-of-Age Story with Poetic Grace.« The A.V. Club, October 20, 2016, https://www.avclub.com/one-of-2016-s-best-moonlight-unfolds-a-coming-of-age-s-1798189203. Access 25/12/2021.
[12] BBC Newsnight, »Moonlight's Tarell Alvin McCraney: ›I'm still that vulnerable boy‹ - BBC Newsnight.« YouTube Video, 00:10-00:35, February 16, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsmlTyQtu4U. Access 15/12/2021.
[13] Andrew Pulver, »Moonlight Becomes Him: Barry Jenkins's Journey from a Miami Housing Project to the Oscars.« *The Guardian*, February 7, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/07/moonlight-barry-jenkins-director-interview. Access 15/12/2021.

Chiara Timbone is an MA student of Media and Culture Analysis at HHU Düsseldorf. Previously, she has finished her BA in Media and English Studies at Ruhr-University Bochum. Her research focus encompasses issues on racism and identity constructions in social media contexts.

Abbildungen

Titel: Foto: iStock.com/Litay. The Blue Decline Intro. ID:1168924372.

S. 3: Titelseite und Ankündigung der französischen Übersetzung von Poes Gedicht »The Raven« durch Mallarmé. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. *Le corbeau...* New York Public Library Digital Collections. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-4748-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99. Access 20/07/2022.

S. 6: Bildcollage von Seminararbeiten aus dem Kurs »Staging Wor(l)ds, Embodiments: Performance and Translation«, HHU Düsseldorf, Sommersemester 2020.

S. 23: Tim Ring, Black People's Day of Action, 2 March 1981, Alamy Stock Foto. https://bit.ly/3SiNIky. Access 20/01/2022.

S. 24: Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*. 1920. Israel-Museum, Jerusalem. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Klee,_Angelus_novus.png

S. 31: Moviestore Collection Ltd, Bild-ID: HH0B4D, Alamy Stock Foto. https://bit.ly/3Dcz0ak. Access 15/01/2022.

S. 36: Oscilloscope Laboratories, *No Ordinary Man* (Film Still), Documentary by Aisling Chin-Yee & Chase Joynt. https://noordinaryman.oscilloscope.net/. Access 15/01/2022.

S. 38: Victoria Pickering, Transgender Health Care Rally, 22 October 2018, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0, https://www.flickr.com/photos/vpickering/50232639333/in/photostream/. Access 15/10/2022.

S. 44: Sophia MacPherson, *Leben und Zeit des Michael K*, https://www.dhaus.de/programm/a-z/leben-und-zeit-des-michael-k/. Access 15/01/2022.

S. 45: Sandra Then, *Leben und Zeit des Michael K*, https://www.dhaus.de/programm/a-z/leben-und-zeit-des-michael-k/. Access 15/01/2022.

S. 52: Handspring Puppet Company, *Life & Times of Michael K*. Cape Town.

S. 55: Sandra Then, *Leben und Zeit des Michael K*, https://www.dhaus.de/programm/a-z/leben-und-zeit-des-michael-k/. Access 15/01/2022.

S. 61: Anna Kasten, Thiago Rodrigues' *By Heart*. Burgtheater Wien, 2019.

S. 62: Matthias Horn, Wajdi Mouwads *Vögel*. Burkhard C. Kominski. Schauspiel Stuttgart. https://panthea.com/past-projects/. Access 15/01/2022.

S. 64: Sophia MacPherson, *Leben und Zeit des Michael K*, https://www.dhaus.de/programm/a-z/leben-und-zeit-des-michael-k/. Access 15/01/2022.