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Theatre and Continental Philosophy

Editorial

S.E. WILMER & KAREN VEDEL

The interrelationship between philosophy and theatre has a long history. Plato encouraged an anti-theatrical prejudice by emphasizing the danger of imitating bad character, while Aristotle's theory of drama inspired French playwrights from the seventeenth century and continues to inform the conventions of much television drama today. Nietzsche influenced George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill, while Wittgenstein inspired Thomas Bernhard and Tom Stoppard, and Deleuze underlies much of the work of Romeo Castellucci. In turn, certain theatre artists have had a major impact on philosophers, such as Wagner on Nietzsche, Brecht on Benjamin, Beckett and Carmelo Bene on Deleuze. Moreover, philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Alain Badiou have used drama to express philosophical concepts, and dramatists from Aristophanes (*The Clouds*) to Brecht *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, to Tom Stoppard (*Jumpers*) have represented philosophers in their work. Recently, Castellucci dramatised the second part of Spinoza's treatise on ethics as *ETHICA. Natura e origine della mente* (Ethica. Nature and origin of the mind), which is illustrated on the cover of *Nordic Theatre Studies'* current issue. He has described the production as a "philosophical fairytale", and has also been planning to adapt the other four parts of the book, which he considers to be "a tool for life" (Castellucci 2017).

In the last fifty years, theatre scholars have grown more interested in philosophical aspects of theatre, such as semiotics, phenomenology and aesthetics (Bennett 2016). What particularly motivates the current issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* is the way in which continental philosophy has significantly impacted theatre and performance studies in the last two decades. From Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, from

poststructuralism to posthumanism, theatre and performance scholars have used a variety of approaches to explore the relationship between theatre and philosophy. Such overviews as Timothy Murphy's *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, Freddie Rokem's *Philosophers and Thespians*, Martin Puchner's *Drama of Ideas*, the book series on "Performance Philosophy", edited by Laura Cull, Alice Lagaay, Freddie Rokem and Will Daddario, and the newly established professional association of Performance Philosophy, with its own journal and a worldwide network of more than 2,500 scholars fostering many articles and monographs, attest to the wealth of recent research in this arena.

This issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* on "Theatre and Continental Philosophy" brings together articles by Nordic, Baltic, and international researchers who reflect on the importance of specific aspects of continental philosophy for theatre and performance studies. The authors use a variety of approaches such as focussing on a concept developed by a philosopher to explore a specific work, company, artist, or art form, or applying a philosophical concept to develop a new approach to theatre practice. Scholars in this issue engage with such philosophers and cultural theorists as Hegel, Heidegger, Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Bourdieu, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Althusser, Barthes, Braidotti, Habermas, Agamben, Butler, Haraway, Rancière, Honig, Sjöholm, and Žižek.

It is appropriate that Freddie Rokem, one of the most influential figures in this recent scholarly trend, should begin this issue by reflecting on Walter Benjamin's engagement with Bertolt Brecht. Beginning with an epigraph from Hamlet about welcoming the stranger, Rokem digs into Benjamin's analysis of epic theatre by exploring the example of the interrupting stranger as a feature of *Verfremdungseffekt* (the effect of making strange). Rokem shows how Benjamin revised his essay on this topic at least twice with subtle differences, emphasizing the importance of the sudden appearance of the stranger as one of the key notions of Brecht's epic theatre as well as a topic that Benjamin pursued in his critique of other writers. Rokem notes the increasing violence in Benjamin's rendition of the supposedly typical dramatic scene that paralleled the political situation in German society, and ironically comments that such a dramatic scene rarely, if ever, actually occurred on the stage.

The next three articles apply new philosophical concepts to theatre. Like Rokem, Audronė Žukauskaitė could also have quoted from Hamlet's welcoming of the stranger. She explores the experimental world of bioart, a controversial art form that negotiates hybrid interactions between biology and performance to create new forms of biological assemblage. Applying the ideas of a wide variety of philosophers, including Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "unnatural participations", Donna Haraway's use of "sympoiesis", and Giorgio Agamben's theory of *kairos*, or messianic time, Žukauskaitė analyses three examples of bioart that offer new arrangements of time and space as symbiotic forms of cohabitation, proposing that they create unique moments of bio-presence, "when the artist literally becomes the host and the hostage of the other and thus creates a singular act of ethical responsibility." In pointing out the

collaboration between human artists and non-human animals that feature new heterogeneous assemblages, Žukauskaitė stakes out a posthuman position, showing the links between what were formerly considered distinct species, and introducing the novel concept of “bio-performativity”, which calls for a new ethics.

Martynas Petrikas applies Bourdieu’s notion of field to theatre criticism in an innovative approach that depicts theatre criticism as a separate and hierarchical field of social practice. After mapping out Bourdieu’s concepts of *nomos*, *doxa*, *illusion*, and symbolic violence that influence social behaviour and sustain the status quo, Petrikas shows how theatre criticism is defined by the tension between the opposing interests of theatre and the market or political power, and that theatre criticism is subject to similar control mechanisms that impede innovation. Using a case study from the Lithuanian theatre, Petrikas demonstrates how the social field of Lithuanian theatre criticism had been constructed during Soviet times and how the postmodern work of the theatre director Oskaras Koršunovas presented new difficulties of interpretation. As a result, it took time for certain parts of the social field to legitimize the artistic practice of this young director and its “aesthetic relevance to the international milieu.”

Wade Hollingshaus discusses the work of Erkki Kurenniemi, a Finnish hoarder of “physical artefacts of his daily life”, who intended to leave behind a virtual presence of himself with the aid of future advances in computer technology. Kurenniemi was a leading figure in new media and music in the 1960s who believed that, as artificial intelligence progressed, art, computers, and humans would gradually coalesce “into a new amalgamated whole.” He assembled a mass of material, estimating that computers in the future would be able to construct a virtual representation of his consciousness from his archive of assorted video and audio recordings of himself, as well as photos, writings, and random items: “everything from tram tickets and receipts to body hairs.” Hollingshaus views Kurrenniemi’s life after death project as a literary work in which the artefacts that he assembled already express much about him without the aid of computers: “they are already a performance of Kurenniemi’s consciousness.” In analysing the project, Hollingshaus applies Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “aesthetic regime of art, an historical period (our period) in which all objects, significant or not, are potentially perceived as art,” a period that has already existed for a century. According to Rancière, in the regime of art, anything has the capacity for expression, which he calls “silent speech”. Hollingshaus argues that Kurenniemi’s archive is historical and literary, and in that way is similar to other archives that depend on the analysis placed on their artefacts. In Kurenniemi’s project “every remnant, even the most detrital, and perhaps even particularly the most detrital, can be transformed into something of grand, even literary value.”

The next three articles explore how theatre has advanced notions of social and national identity. Eva-Liisa Linder applies Habermas’ theory of the public sphere to recent theatrical performances in Estonian theatre. She considers three periods in recent Estonian history: the Soviet era when theatre served as

a political and ideological tool, which could be subverted through anti-Soviet nuances in performance; the early twentieth century during which such groups as NO99 used the public sphere in highly ironic political performances such as *Unified Estonia*; and the more recent performances about national identity that posit nationalism against globalization (Organic Estonia versus e-Estonia), and Estonian-speaking against Russian-speaking communities. Perhaps the most sensational use of the public sphere occurred when NO99 created a fictive political party called Unified Estonia, attracting the support of 25% of the electorate. The theatre company demonstrated the mechanisms of political manipulation in organising a rally of 7,000 people in the largest indoor arena in Estonia, getting its artistic leader elected as leader of the new party, and then telling the audience that they didn't need a new leader: that they should trust themselves. Linder shows how NO99 has frequently opposed government policies in their shows, confronted government ministers who have attended their performances, and influenced one to resign over a financial scandal. She also discusses more recent productions that use the theatre as a space to confront social issues involving questions of national identity such as the falling birth rate, the rise of emigration (with 20% of the population going abroad since joining the EU), the dwindling Seto culture, and the integration of Russian-speakers into Estonian society.

Zane Radzobe also addresses questions of identity by applying Foucault's notion of counter-memory to recent Latvian performances. According to Foucault, memory is a discourse that can be challenged by counter-memory, acting as a form of social resistance to "regimes of truth". She points out that in the 1990s, Latvian theatre revised the earlier Soviet control of national history by presenting a counter-memory that developed into a new official discourse about a historical understanding of the past that had been suppressed. By contrast, recent Latvian theatre artists, who operate in a "post-dramatic, post-soviet and post-memory" as well as post-colonial era, have reversed this process with new counter-memory discourses in "national, cultural and individual identities." Radzobe examines several performances that illustrate the construction of memory and question grand narratives of history: *The Legionnaires* directed by Valters Sīlis in 2011 that examines the position of Latvian soldiers conscripted by the Nazis to fight against the Soviet forces during the Second World War; *The Last Pioneer* directed by Dmitry Petrenko in 2015 that focuses on the Russian-speaking population in Latvia; *The Father – Hero '69* written by Inga Gaile, and directed by Dāvis Auškāps in 2016, based on the writer's grandfather, a Latvian KGB officer, and demonstrating sympathy for him as a collaborator with the Soviet regime; and Vladislav Nastavshev's autobiographical performance of *The Lake of Hope* in 2015 that shows his coming out as a gay man. As Radzobe argues, all of these plays "demonstrate the uses of counter-memory as a tool of questioning the dominant discourse, rather than promoting marginalized memory discourses in their own right."

Julie Rongved Amundsen employs Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology and his term of "failure" to assess the work of Norwegian folk epics such as *Spelet om Heilag Olav*. According to Amundsen, annual amateur performances of

Norwegian *spels*, which are place specific, aim to reinforce notions of identity through historic folk drama which, in Victor Turner's terminology, is a liminoid practice that resembles ritual but is voluntary and playful rather than obligatory. While purporting to convey national history and a sense of authenticity, such performances, according to Amundsen, reinforce myths about national heroes and feelings of solidarity or *communitas* instead of attempting to verify historical facts. Applying Roland Barthes' notion of mythology as a "second order semiotic system, Amundsen suggests that the mythology and folk history used in *spels* have a "naturalizing function" which is reinforced by conservative staging aesthetics such as normative Medieval costumes, and that the authenticity invoked by the event is an ideological fantasy.

The last two articles use philosophical discourse to develop new approaches for theatrical production. Daniel Johnston applies Heidegger's lecture on "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" to the rehearsal room, suggesting ways in which actors can use Heideggerian theories for a production of Ibsen's *The Master Builder*. Johnston provides a close reading of the play, and indicates how a phenomenological process can lead to uncovering aspects of the text for building the environment and the roles. Johnston points out, as the work by Ibsen is about a builder, it is particularly apt for this type of approach. He explores specific rehearsal techniques and questions that the actors might ask themselves, for example, in relation to Heidegger's notion of the Fourfold, that could be useful in preparing a production.

The final article by Kristina Hagström-Ståhl focuses on Hegel's exegesis of Sophocles' *Antigone* that has incited recent theatre scholars because of his paternalistic interpretation. Hagström-Ståhl suggests that there are moments in the play that Hegel and many others have overlooked regarding the relationship between Antigone and Ismene. In preparing for a future production of the play, Hagström-Ståhl employs the work of Bonnie Honig, Peggy Phelan, and Cecilia Sjöholm to argue that Ismene could be placed more centrally into the drama by recognizing her solidarity with and assistance to her sister. As Honig has suggested, Ismene could have committed the first burial act of their brother in secret to protect her sister from harm, but that unfortunately Antigone was caught in reburial of her brother. This interpretation goes against Hegel's dialectical approach of two equal protagonists (Antigone and Creon) unilaterally confronting each other, and it introduces a more nuanced representation of the two sisters as working together to achieve a desired end. Moreover, Ismene, who remains alive at the end of the play, normally disappears from the action, but Hagström-Ståhl provocatively asks what Ismene's role could be. In thinking about a forthcoming staging of *Antigone*, Hagström-Ståhl not only calls attention to the patriarchal discourse that has played such a dominating role in the philosophical and psychoanalytic interpretations of the play, but also suggests the possibility of a more radical interpretation focusing on the solidarity of the two sisters.

The articles in this issue demonstrate how ideas from continental philosophy help to illuminate certain aspects of theatre theory and practice. The concepts applied here -- *verfremdungseffekt* (Rokem), bio-performativity (Žukauskaitė),

field theory (Petrikas), aesthetic regime (Hollingshaus), public sphere (Linder), counter-memory (Radzobe), *communitas* (Amundsen), phenomenological approach (Johnston), and sororal affinity (Hagström-Ståhl) -- show the wide variety of possible strategies for deepening our understanding of the theatrical arena. At the same time, together, they indirectly inform the ongoing debate about the relationship between theatre and philosophy: whether, for example, theatre *and* philosophy are a natural combination of terms (such as “performance philosophy”) or whether they represent independent fields of enquiry that complement and inform each other but do not belong together in a single discipline. Martin Puchner (2013, p. 543), in reviewing the two, has provocatively argued, “What makes the study of theatre and philosophy interesting, even thrilling is the very fact that they [sic] two are so utterly and irreconcilably different.”

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‘Suddenly a Stranger Appears’ Walter Benjamin’s Readings of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre

FREDDIE ROKEM

ABSTRACT

My contribution to the the NTS issue on Theatre and Continental Philosophy discusses a particular aspect of the complex intellectual and creative dialogue between the work and thinking of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, beginning in 1929, the year they became close friends. Benjamin is no doubt the first critic of Brecht’s epic theatre, even planning to write a book about his artistic contributions. By examining the notion of the “Interruption” (*Die Unterbrechung*) and the sudden appearance of a stranger in three of Benjamin’s texts about Brecht’s epic theatre, I want to draw attention to Benjamin’s philosophical understanding of this ‘critical’ figure’ (the interrupting stranger), as one of the central aspects of the epic theatre. The essay is a prolegomenon for a more comprehensive study of this topic.

KEYWORDS

Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Epic theatre, Performance theory, Critical Theory, Interruption, Estrangement effect.

‘Suddenly a Stranger Appears’ Walter Benjamin’s Readings of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre

*Horatio: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!
Hamlet: And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*¹

This discovery (or estrangement) of situations is fostered through interruption of the actions. The most basic example: a family scene. Suddenly a stranger appears. The mother is just about to seize a bronze bust and hurl it at her daughter; the father is in the act of opening a window to call a policeman. At this moment, the stranger appears in the doorway. “Tableau” is what it would have been called around 1900. In other words, the stranger is confronted with the situation: troubled faces, an open window, the furniture in disarray. But there is a gaze before which even more ordinary scenes of middle-class life look almost equally startling.

Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre? II” (1939)²

The section in the so-called ‘second version’ of Walter Benjamin’s essay “What is Epic Theatre?”, published in 1939, called “The Interruption” (*Die Unterbrechung*), part of which is quoted in the second epigraph above, presents what Benjamin

1 Shakespeare, 1989, I, 5, ll. 164-167.

2 Benjamin, 2003a, 304-305. (Adjusted, F.R.). The German original: “Diese Entdeckung (Verfremdung) von Zuständen vollzieht sich mittels der Unterbrechung von Abläufen. Das primitivste Beispiel: eine Familienszene. Plötzlich tritt ein Fremder ein. Die Frau war gerade im Begriff, eine Bronze zu ergreifen, um sie nach der Tochter zu schleudern; der Vater im Begriff, das Fenster zu öffnen, um nach einem Schutzmann zu rufen. In diesem Augenblick erscheint in der Tür der Fremde. »Tableau« - wie man um 1900 zu sagen pflegte. Das heißt: Der Fremde wird mit dem Zustande konfrontiert; verstörte Mienen, offenes Fenster, verwüstetes Mobiliar. Es gibt aber einen Blick, vor dem auch gewohntere Szenen des bürgerlichen Lebens sich nicht so viel anders ausnehmen.” (Benjamin, 1977, 535)

considers to be a central feature of Bertolt Brecht's dramatic writing. Benjamin – the first critic to scrutinize the innovative character of Brecht's work in depth – analyzed the major components of Brecht's theatrical experiments, emphasizing in particular how the sudden appearance of a stranger creates a vital juncture between Critical Theory and Performance at a time of crisis. For Benjamin, this stranger is a 'critical figure' in two senses, simultaneously appearing as an embodied character on the stage, interrupting the actions of violence in what could, according to Benjamin, be an ordinary scene of middle-class life, while, at the same time, serving as a literary/theatrical 'trope' of *Verfremdung* itself – i.e. estrangement – drawing attention to the philosophical dimensions of Brecht's epic theatre.

The stranger is a 'critical figure' who besides its sudden appearance, interrupting violence, also empowers a critique (*Kritik*). For Benjamin this primarily means creating a direct involvement with a work of art, integrating it in new discursive formations, even transforming it into a program for social change, rather than, as in a traditional Kantian critique, objectifying it from an external position. Such a negotiating position can already be found in the exchange between Horatio and Hamlet – which I have quoted as my first epigraph – when Hamlet after ordering Horatio to swear, with the ghost as their witness, not to say a word about the strange things they have seen and heard, which (as Hamlet famously adds) cannot be "dreamt of in your philosophy." In this situation Hamlet tells Horatio that he should "therefore as a stranger give it welcome." This reinforces the sense of fatality concerning what happens when this 'thing', the ghost, who is the ultimate stranger, appears again tonight, already referred to in the first scene of the play: "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?"³

This, the second version of "What is Epic Theatre?" was one of the last texts Benjamin published during his life time. It appeared in the July-August 1939 issue of the Swiss journal *Mass und Wert*, a year before he committed suicide in the Spanish town of Portbou, on the border with France on the Mediterranean coast, fleeing the Nazis. The reason it is called 'the second version' is that already in 1931, when Benjamin and Brecht had been close friends for over a year and had no doubt discussed their work and ideas with each other on many occasions, Benjamin had written an essay with that name, which was more detailed than the version published in 1939, where the enigmatic stranger also appears. The earlier essay, only published posthumously, had at the time been accepted for publication in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, but was for 'editorial reasons' withdrawn just before its publication.

The figure of the interrupting stranger also appears in a lecture, "The Writer as Producer", which Benjamin wrote in April 1934 for a meeting in Paris of 'The Institute for the Study of Fascism' led by Arthur Koestler. Even if this lecture was apparently never delivered,⁴ it is certain that Benjamin brought it with him, together with his then not yet published essay on Kafka, when – in the summer of 1934 – he made his first of three extended visits (followed by additional visits in the summers of 1936 and 1938) to Svendborg, on the island of Fyn

3 Shakespeare, 1989, I, 1, ll. 21. See also Rokem, 2009.

4 Benjamin 1999a, note 1, 781.

in Denmark, which Brecht had made his exilic home after the Nazi takeover of power in Germany in February 1933. Benjamin mentions the essay in his first diary entry (from July 4, 1934) documenting his conversations with Brecht during his stay in Svendborg.⁵

These three essays – the two versions of “What is Epic Theatre?” and “The Writer as Producer” – which had been written several years apart, all include the same scene of domestic violence which is interrupted by a stranger. In what follows, I want to examine the slightly different contexts in which the stranger appears in these three texts, first by looking more closely at the 1939-version of “What is Epic Theatre?”, which is also the most concise, gradually going backwards to the earlier versions, towards the origins – perhaps even an *Ursprung* (origin) – of the ‘critical figure’ of the suddenly appearing stranger. This does however not mean that the 1939 version is the version which Benjamin himself would have considered as final or more definitive. Rather, it was the version he succeeded in publishing, just before the beginning of the Second World War; and, as I will point out later, the first version of “What is Epic Theatre?” from 1931 draws attention to certain features of Brecht’s writing and thinking, which are probably the most innovative.⁶ After discussing the three appearances of the suddenly appearing stranger, I will in closing briefly draw attention to two instances which are not connected to Brecht’s epic theatre, where Benjamin refers to the appearance of strangers.

In the 1939-version of “What is Epic Theatre?”, Benjamin introduces the passage on “The Interruption” by suggesting that at the same time as the Brechtian interruption produces astonishment (or wonder/amazement) – the *thaumazein* through which Aristotle claimed (in *Metaphysics* 982b12) “that men both now and at first originally began to philosophize,”⁷ – it aims at abolishing “the Aristotelean catharsis of emotions”.⁸ Thus, according to Benjamin, “instead of identifying with the protagonist the audience should learn to feel astonished at the circumstances under which he functions;”⁹ because, as he adds, “according to Brecht,” apparently referring to something Brecht had said, perhaps even directly quoting a conversation with him, this is achieved by the epic theatre being less concerned with “the development of the action than the representation of situations”¹⁰

This presents an additional conflict with Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where the most important aspect of a tragedy is the development of an action, focusing

5 Benjamin, 1999b, 783

6 I will not try to speculate on how Benjamin’s difficulties of getting published during his life time affected his writing. However, Benjamin had a group of readers among his circle of friends, like Brecht, who read and discussed these essays with Benjamin himself. Benjamin wrote more than ten essays on Brecht and according to Wizesla (2009, 98ff) he planned to collect them in a book about Brecht. As many of Benjamin’s plans, it never materialized. It is also impossible to speculate how an earlier publication of Benjamin’s essays on Brecht, or even a book, would have influenced Brecht’s early or subsequent reception.

7 <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.1.i.html> (accessed September 10, 2018)

8 Benjamin, 2003a, 304.

9 Benjamin, 2003a, 304.

10 Benjamin, 2003a, 304. In German: *Das epische Theater, meint Brecht, hat nicht so sehr Handlungen zu entwickeln, als Zustände darzustellen.* (Benjamin, 1977, 535)

on the process, rather than presenting situations or conditions (*Zustände darzustellen*) where the development of the action is arrested. Benjamin's opposition between the verb *entwickeln* (develop), accounting for what is usually translated as the "representation of an action" in Aristotle's *Poetics*, on the one hand, and *Zustände darzustellen* ("representation of situations") on the other, to characterize Brecht's method of 'presenting' (as I would prefer to translate *darzustellen* here) situations or conditions, on the other, points at the core of the theoretical issue at stake here. For Benjamin, who, like Brecht, opposed much in Aristotle, the verb *darzustellen* and the noun *Darstellung* are reserved for situations where presentation and representation (or rather a complex mixture of both) interact with each other.¹¹

Instead, Benjamin argues, the presentation of such *Zustände*, where actions in effect have been interrupted (or rather 'arrested'), is a crucial aspect of the epic theatre. This procedure, enabling us through astonishment "to discover situations [or conditions] for the first time" (*die Zustände erst einmal zu entdecken*) is according to Benjamin "fostered through interruption of the actions" (*Abläufen*, a term which also means 'procedures', as in a scientific experiment). To describe more exactly how the discovery of such situations takes place, Benjamin adds the word "*Verfremdung*" in parenthesis, which, in the published English translation is rendered as "defamiliarization", while the German word actually includes the root for 'stranger' (*Fremde*), thus referring more directly to an 'estrangement', 'making strange' or 'alienating' (and I have adjusted this in the quote in the epigraph), making room for the appearance of the stranger as the 'origin' for this estrangement. This is an important detail because Benjamin's basic 'example' for an interruption is the stranger, who suddenly appears in a room where the wife is about to throw a bronze bust at her daughter while the father is opening a window to call a policeman, describes a situation where there does not seem to be any specific motivation for such a sudden appearance, as opposed to the appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet*. The sudden appearance of the stranger, Benjamin concludes, creates a *tableau*, as it would – he significantly adds – be called "around 1900" (*um 1900*), the date in the title of Benjamin's book about his childhood (*Berliner Kindheit um 1900*).

The stranger first notices the older woman about to throw a bronze statue at a younger woman, presumably her daughter, while the man referred to as the father is about to open a window to call a policeman (*ein Schutzmann*); someone who can supposedly protect them (with *Schutz* meaning 'protection') from this potential violence. Since the stranger obviously does not know these details as he enters, Benjamin sums up the short section on the interruption by presenting the point of view of the stranger who has been "confronted with the situation: troubled faces, an open window, the furniture in disarray," complementing the chaotic impression with information which only Benjamin as a spectator of this interruption can provide. Benjamin supposedly knows who the three figures in the room are; while the stranger probably does not. "But there is" – as Benjamin emphatically adds – "a gaze (*Blick*) before which even more ordinary scenes of

11 For a more detailed discussion of this issue see my article, Rokem, 2018.

middle-class life look almost equally startling.”¹²

However, at the same time as this family scene seems quite transparent, it is also quite enigmatic: Why should we be startled or astonished by scenes looking like ordinary scenes from middle-class life? How is it possible to distinguish between the ordinary and the exceptional; what on the one hand is acceptable or tolerable and what, on the other, characterizes states of exception and violence? By concluding that the “more ordinary scenes of middle-class life look almost equally startling,” Benjamin probably both means that what has the appearance of something exceptional is much more common than we usually think – an attitude he adopts when interpreting historical events – and furthermore that the ordinary also contains an uncontrollable potential for violence. Or as he expresses it in his eighth thesis on history (one of the last texts he wrote) which also incorporates the Aristotelean *thaumazein*: “The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.”¹³ And beyond the issues of where and how to draw the line between the ordinary and the exceptional – the common and the strange – it is much more difficult to explain why, as far as I know, there is no existing play or performance which includes a scene like the one Benjamin describes in what he terms “the most basic example” (*das primitivste Beispiel*) of an interruption. Why does he ‘invent’ such a scene to clarify the theoretical basis of the epic theatre, when such a scene apparently does not exist, at least not in any canonic play? (And I must admit that I have not yet found a satisfactory answer to this question.)

The sudden entrance of the stranger, interrupting a scene of potential violence as it is just about to reach its climax, creates a *tableau*, a visual arrangement which is ‘frozen’ or creates what Benjamin termed a “dialectics at a standstill”, a notion he has referred to in several contexts. One of the most well-known formulations appears in the *Arcades Project*, his *magnum opus*, which Benjamin began working on already in 1927, but which remained unfinished at his death:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [bildlich].¹⁴

This could be read as a more abstract version of the interrupting stranger, who is an image through which “what has been comes together in a flash with the now”, creating a standstill, i.e. a *tableau*. Already, in the first version of the essay “What is Epic Theatre”, written in 1931, i.e. eight years before the second version quoted above, Benjamin had written that “The thing that is revealed as

12 Benjamin, 2003a, 305.

13 Benjamin, 2003b, Thesis VIII, 392.

14 Benjamin, 2002, N3, 1, 463.

though by lightning in the 'condition' represented on the stage – as a copy of human gestures, actions and words - is an immanently dialectical attitude. The conditions which epic theatre reveals is the dialectic at a standstill."¹⁵ Finally, it is through the sudden appearance of the stranger that the image of violence in the room becomes visible; triggering the dialectical process between past and present by the interruption itself.

The essay, "The Writer as Producer" from 1934, which has the tone of a lecture, draws attention to some of the formal aspects of Brecht's work that have probably become the most widely accepted and discussed among Brecht-scholars:

./.../ Epic Theater, [Brecht] declared, had to portray situations, rather than develop plots. It obtains such situations, as we shall see presently, by interrupting the plot. I remind you here of the songs, which have their chief function in interrupting the action. Here – according to the principle of interruption – Epic Theater, as you see, takes up a procedure that has become familiar to you in recent years from film and radio, literature and photography. I am speaking of the procedure of montage: the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted. But here this procedure has a special right, perhaps even a perfect right, as I will briefly show. The interruption of action, on account of which Brecht described his theater as "epic," constantly counteracts illusion on the part of the audience. For such illusion is a hindrance to a theater that proposes to make use of elements of reality in experimental rearrangements. But it is at the end, not the beginning, of the experiment that the situation appears – a situation that, in this or that form, is always ours. It is not brought home to the spectator but distanced from him. He recognizes it as the real situation – not with satisfaction, as in the theater of Naturalism, but with astonishment. Epic Theater, therefore, does not reproduce situations; rather, it discovers them. This discovery is accomplished by means of the interruption of sequences. Yet interruption here has the character not of a stimulant but of an organizing function. It arrests the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude vis-a-vis the process, the actor vis-a-vis his role. I would like to show you, through an example, how Brecht's discovery and use of the gestus is nothing but the restoration of the method of montage decisive in radio and film, from an often merely modish procedure to a human event. Imagine a family scene: the wife is just about to grab a bronze sculpture and throw it at her daughter; the father is opening the window to call for help. At this moment a stranger enters. The process is interrupted. What appears in its place is the situation on which the stranger's eyes now fall: agitated faces, open window, disordered furniture. There are eyes, however, before which the more usual scenes of present-day existence do not look very different: the eyes of the epic dramatist.¹⁶

15 Benjamin, 1998, 12.

16 Benjamin, 1999a, 778–779.

Benjamin's analysis of Brecht's method has to be examined at greater length than I will be able to do here, in particular the discussion of the more general "organizing function" of the interruption as that more formal feature of the text or the performance which "arrests the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude vis-a-vis the process, the actor vis-a-vis his role."

Already in his early writings, Benjamin had discussed Friedrich Hölderlin's often enigmatic remarks about the *caesura*, the break in the poetic line and the rhythm of the language as an interruptive device. It served as the point of departure for a more comprehensive theoretical approach to literature and to drama in particular. In his essay on two poems by Hölderlin written during the First World War (which was not published during his life time), as well as in his doctoral dissertation "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" (*Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, published 1920), and in the essay "On the Task of the Translator" published in 1923, Benjamin shows that the break (or the interruption) created by the *caesura* does not arrest the continuity of a text but rather serves as a device (or a feature) which structures its form, or, as Hölderlin himself suggested in his "Remarks on Oedipus", gives form to "representation itself".¹⁷ In "The Writer as Producer", though without clearly formulating this principle – which will become important for the Brechtian theory of acting – Benjamin argues that there is also a *caesura*, an interruption between the actor and the role.

In the 1931-version of "What is Epic Theatre?" Benjamin draws attention to the identity of the stranger as a thinking man or a philosopher:

*Epic theatre, then, does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them. This uncovering of conditions is brought about through processes being interrupted. A very crude example: a family row. The mother is just about to pick up a pillow to hurl at the daughter, the father is opening a window to call a policeman. At this moment a stranger appears at the door. Tableau', as they used to say around 1900. In other words: the stranger is suddenly confronted with certain conditions: rumpled bedclothes, open window, a devastated interior. But there exists a view in which even the more usual scenes of bourgeois life appear rather like this. The more far-reaching the devastations of our social order (the more these devastations undermine ourselves and our capacity to remain aware of them), the more marked must be the distance between the stranger and the events portrayed. We know such a stranger from Brecht's *Versuche: a Swabian 'Utis', a counterpart of Ulysses, the Greek 'Nobody' who visits one-eyed Polyphemus in his cave. Similarly Keuner – that is the stranger's name – penetrates into the cave of the one-eyed monster whose name is 'class society'. Like Ulysses he is full of guile, accustomed to suffering, much-travelled; both men are wise. A practical resignation which has always shunned utopian idealism makes Ulysses think only of returning home; Keuner never leaves the threshold of his house at all. He likes the trees**

17 Hölderlin, 1999, 102.

which he sees in the yard when he comes out of his fourth-floor tenement flat. 'Why don't you ever go into the woods,' ask his friends, 'if you like trees so much?' 'Did I not tell you,' replies Herr Keuner, 'that I like the trees in my yard?' To move this thinking man, Herr Keuner (who, Brecht once suggested, should be carried on stage lying down, so little is he drawn thither), to move him to existence upon the stage – that is the aim of this new theatre.¹⁸

In this version, written already before the years of forced exile, beginning in February 1933 with the Nazi takeover of political power, Benjamin claims that the identity of the stranger finally depends on the characteristics of the society where the performance will be presented. When the social order is in a state of devastation (*die Verwüstungen unserer Gesellschaftsordnung*) as well as when in particular it is difficult to recognize or to become aware of this situation of danger (which was no doubt how both Benjamin and Brecht experienced the situation from their horizon in Berlin, in 1931), the identity of the stranger, Benjamin argues, should be more distant or even estranged from the events portrayed. The character that, according to Benjamin, fulfills this condition is the a-social, cynical trickster-figure Brecht invented called Herr Keuner, whom he begins to depict in ironical situations, beginning in the middle of the 1920's. Here is just one example of such a Keuner-situation: "What are you working on?' Herr K. was asked. Herr K. replied: 'I'm having a hard time; I'm preparing my next mistake.'¹⁹

His name, Herr Keuner, representing his character-traits, is a combination of two 'etymologies'. First, as Benjamin suggested in a radio-talk about Brecht that was broadcast on the *Frankfurter Rundfunk* in June 1930, the name 'Keuner'

is based on the Greek root κοινός (koinós), the universal, that which concerns all, belongs to all. And in fact, Herr Keuner is the man who concerns all, belongs to all, for he is the leader. But in quite a different sense from the one we usually understand by the word. He is in no way a public speaker, a demagogue; nor is he a show-off or a strongman. His main preoccupations lie light-years away from what people nowadays understand to be those of a "leader." The fact is that Herr Keuner is a thinker.²⁰

But his name is also, as Benjamin notes in the passage from the first (1931) version of "What is Epic Theatre?", "a Swabian 'Utis', a counterpart of Ulysses, the Greek 'Nobody' who visits one-eyed Polyphemus in his cave" and has come to challenge nothing less than class-society. This nobody is also a Schwabian stranger because, in Brecht's home-dialect, the German word for nobody, *keiner*, is pronounced as 'keuner'. Thus, both etymologies make him a thinking

18 Benjamin, 1998, 18-19. (Adjusted, F.R.)

19 <http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/brecht-keuner.htm> (accessed September 10, 2018).

20 Benjamin, 1999c, 367

man, a philosopher as well as an anarchist and a 'nobody'.²¹

It is also no coincidence that Herr Keuner – as in the quote above, about preparing his next mistake – is frequently also referred to as “Herr K.” Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, which was published posthumously in 1925, begins with the appearance of a stranger who announces that “Josef K.” as he is called at first, then also simply named “K.”, who is waiting to have his breakfast brought to him, has been arrested. Brecht had no doubt read Kafka’s novel many times because his personal copy kept in the Brecht Archives in *Die Berliner Akademie der Künste* is literally falling apart, and he has marked his ownership of this copy by signing his own name on the front cover, between the name of the author and the title. *The Trial* was also extremely important for Benjamin, who had brought his then not yet published essay on Kafka on the tenth anniversary of Kafka’s death with him on his first visit to Brecht in Denmark in 1934. There are several diary entries by Benjamin about his and Brecht’s disagreements in interpreting Kafka’s work.²² Without having any clear evidence, it is even possible that Benjamin’s stranger, and the interruption he created by his sudden entrance, can be more directly identified in the writings of Kafka than in those of Brecht; and that Benjamin, for some reason, superimposes the interrupted family scene on Brecht’s *oeuvre*, rather than relating directly to Kafka where similar scenes can be more clearly discerned, even if the specific family scene Benjamin describes should probably be seen as his own invention. There is clearly something enigmatic in these texts.

It seems clear though that by tracing the appearance of the stranger at a scene of violence retrospectively in three of Benjamin’s texts about Brecht’s epic theatre, we can discern a gradual development of Benjamin’s stranger from an Homeric, Swabian ‘Utis’, a subversive thinker and philosopher in the earlier version, to an astonished, universal observer who tries to make sense of the violence in the room. Chronologically, these texts also progress from the more playful violence in the 1931-version, where “The mother is just about to pick up a pillow to hurl at the daughter, [and] the father is opening a window to call a policeman”, to the much more threatening gesture of the mother in the two later versions, from 1934 and 1939 who “is just about to seize a bronze bust and hurl it at her daughter”. This development reflects the political developments

21 In the *Messingkauf* dialogues, which Brecht began writing in 1939, but never completed before his death in 1956, he planned four nocturnal conversations taking place on a theatre stage between a group of people working in the theatre: a dramaturg, an actor, an actress and a lighting technician hosting (in Brecht’s own words, introducing these conversations) a “philosopher who has come to a large theatre after the performance has finished, to talk with the theatre people.” And “He has,” Brecht adds in what could even be seen as an ironic remark, “been invited by an actress” and “wants to use the theatre ruthlessly for his own ends.” (Brecht, 2015, 11) In these texts the philosopher has finally entered the stage, investigating how the thespians he is addressing “apply your art and your whole apparatus to imitating incidents that occur between people, making your spectators feel as though they’re watching real life. Because I’m interested in the way people live together, I’m interested in your imitations too.” (Brecht, 2016, 13) But a more detailed discussion of this remarkable Brecht text lies beyond the scope of this essay.

22 For a detailed analysis of the discussion between Benjamin and Brecht about a short story by Kafka, see Chapter 4 in my book *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance* (Rokem 2010)

during this decade, from the waning Weimar Republic to the Third Reich and its preparations for the Second World War.

I fully agree with Judith Butler who referring to the 1939-version of "What is Epic Theatre?" claims that "It is fair to say that this is an astonishing scene of violence," concluding that it "gives us a domestic example that includes dimensions of gender, class and violence," adding that "The scene emerges quite suddenly for the stranger and for us, and no one has a context for what is happening."²³ In the text itself, this is no doubt the case. However, as I have suggested here, Benjamin's stranger appears and reappears in what seems to be (more or less) the same family scene, which, even if its concrete realizations are very similar, the larger contexts shift and their significance, as Benjamin has constructed them through his rhizomatic, intertextual writing, give rise to change and transformation. This does not necessarily give us a clearer understanding of the role of the suddenly appearing stranger. But it reinforces our sense that this stranger is a central trope (or 'critical figure') for how Benjamin envisions the possibilities for putting a halt to violence.

Having said that, it is no surprise that there are several additional strangers in Benjamin's writings, further re-contextualizing the interrupting stranger. I will only give two brief examples here, without discussing them further, fully aware that they only mark the beginning of a broader discussion of *Verfremdung* as the origin of artistic image-making, not only in Brecht's epic theatre. My first example is from the opening paragraph of the third (and final) part of Benjamin's extensive essay on "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*", (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*), written in 1919-1922 (and published in 1924-1925). Here he introduces the stranger in a simile presenting a methodology for making a critique of works of art, exploring what has become a central feature of Benjamin's own intellectual legacy: the elective affinity between art and philosophy:

Let us suppose that one makes the acquaintance of a person who is handsome and attractive but impenetrable, because he carries a secret with him. It would be reprehensible to want to pry. Still, it would surely be permissible to inquire whether he has any siblings and whether their nature could not perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger. In just this way critique (Kritik) seeks to discover siblings of the work of art. And all genuine works (alle echten Werke) have their siblings in the realm(s) of philosophy (im Bereiche der Philosophie). It is, after all, precisely these figures in which the ideal of philosophy's problem appears.²⁴

And finally (for now), in his notoriously difficult essay "Critique of Violence" (*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*), published in 1921, Benjamin gives the mourning figure of Niobe, who has lost all her children through the vengeance of the gods, and whom Sophocles in *Antigone* calls the 'Phrygian Stranger', with whom Antigone compares herself before entering the cave to perish. For Benjamin Niobe

²³ Butler, 2017, 187.

²⁴ Benjamin, 1996a, 333.

represents mythical violence, being a victim of violence rather than the one who can stop it by suddenly entering a room just before the violence will burst out, as in the examples on Brecht's epic theatre I have discussed here. According to Benjamin she herself has reached a standstill, through petrification, creating an uncanny mirror reflection of the scene with the suddenly appearing stranger:

Violence therefore bursts upon Niobe from the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate. It is not actually destructive. Although it brings a cruel death to Niobe's children, it stops short of claiming the life of their mother, whom it leaves behind, more guilty than before through the death of the children, both as an eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods.²⁵

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²⁵ Benjamin, 1996b, 248.

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Hybrids, Chimeras, Aberrant Nuptials: New Modes of Cohabitation in Bioart

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ABSTRACT

The essay examines different cases of bioart, which, by combining biological materials and technological processes, present new forms of biological assemblages. For example, such collectives as *Tissue Culture and Art Project* and *Art Orienté Objet*, artists Eduardo Kac, ORLAN, Maja Smrekar and Robertina Šebjanič invent new forms of hybridization and symbiotic forms of cohabitation. The essay will question what is so specific in bioart and in what respect does it differ from scientific research conducted in laboratories, or from some biological phenomena found in the natural world. My hypothesis is that bioart introduces a specific mode of bio-performativity and creates a unique moment of bio-presence: it does not represent but presents and produces new material bodies, which are living and decaying in our presence. The essay will seek to discuss the specific time in which these Semi-Living objects perform their existence: this time, which is “the time of the now”, can be called (in Giorgio Agamben’s terms) *kairos* and contrasted with our habitual chronological time. *Kairos* is a messianic time, a contraction of time (similar to time in specific laboratory conditions), which helps to imagine new ways of organizing living materials. In this sense, bio-presence and bio-performativity can be seen as a resistance to the habitual arrangement of space and time and its biopolitical implications

KEYWORDS

Bioart, symbiosis, sympoiesis, hybrid, chimera, bio-performativity.

Hybrids, Chimeras, Aberrant Nuptials: New Modes of Cohabitation in Bioart¹

In this essay, I will focus on three specific cases of bioart: the project “May the Horse Live in Me” by *Art Orienté Objet* (Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin), performed in 2011, the project “K-9_topology” by Maja Smrekar, carried out between 2014 and 2017, and the project “Aurelia 1+Hz / proto viva sonification” by Robertina Šebjanič, carried out between 2014 and 2016. All projects involve a human artist and her collaboration with non-human animals, which is based on scientific research and mediated by technological manipulations. In different ways, each project questions the limits between the human and non-human, blurs the distinction between species and contests the notion of the biological individual. The project “May the Horse Live in Me” by *Art Orienté Objet* (Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin) presents an extreme case of medical self-experiment during which animal blood plasma, containing the entire spectrum of immunoglobulins, was injected into a human body. The intention of this project was that animal immunoglobulins would bypass the defensive mechanisms of the human immune system and would eventually bond with human proteins, thus creating a certain communication between animal and human immune systems.² The project by Maja Smrekar, “K-9_topology”, interrogates the co-evolution between humans and dogs. The project questions human exceptionalism and superiority and creates specific conditions for interspecies contiguity.³ The project by Robertina Šebjanič, “Aurelia 1+Hz / proto viva sonification”, investigates the sound produced by marine animals – moon jellyfish.⁴ The sound was recorded during the “Deep

1 This research was funded by a grant (No. S-MIP-17-32) from the Research Council of Lithuania.

2 Art Orienté Objet (Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin). 2011. “May the Horse Live in Me”. <http://www.biofaction.com/synth-ethic/#art-oriente-objet> Accessed 2 May 2018

3 Maja Smrekar. 2014–2017. “K-9_topology”. The artwork “K-9_topology” which emerged between 2014 and 2017 is comprised of four individual art projects: “ECCE CANIS” (2014, spatial installation); “I Hunt Nature, Culture Hunts Me” (2014, performance); “HYBRID FAMILY” (2015–2016, studio visit); “ARTE_mis” (2016–2017, project in a biotechnological laboratory). http://kersnikova.org/kapelica_gallery_public_release/ Accessed 8 December 2017

4 Robertina Šebjanič. 2014–2016. “Aurelia 1+Hz / proto viva sonification”. <http://robertina.net/aurelia-1hz-proto-viva-sonification/> Accessed 8 December 2017

Blue” project enacted at the Institute of Marine Science and Technologies in Izmir, Turkey in 2014. The pre-recorded sound is navigated by the artist who attempts to harmonize her melody with the sounds of marine animals.

All these artworks create types of “unnatural participations” or “aberrant nuptials”, similar to those described in Deleuze and Guattari’s work *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004). In this work the philosophers seek to subvert the structural divisions between species, to question human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, and deconstruct the notion of human and biological individuality. To achieve this, Deleuze and Guattari contrast what they call the “plane of organization” (the plane of structural or genetic development) with the “plane of consistency” or composition. The plane of organization establishes distinctions and hierarchies, whereas the plane of consistency or composition creates new heterogeneous assemblages. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, “these combinations are neither genetic nor structural; they are interkingdoms, unnatural participations.”⁵ The essay will focus on these “unnatural participations” and will try to examine the difference between symbiotic and symbiogenetic relationships found in the biological world and the sympoietic assemblages created in bioart. I will argue that to achieve this mode of cohabitation, bioart has to create a new mode of experimental presence which may be named bio-presence. This bio-presence, created in laboratory conditions, is “the time of the now”, or biological *kairos*. The essay will question what is this extension of time: is it a space-time where ethical decisions cease to be valid, or is it messianic time calling for a new ethics?

Symbiosis, symbiogenesis, sympoiesis

Besides Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of “aberrant nuptials” or “unnatural participations”, these artistic examples can be conceptualized in Donna Haraway’s term of sympoiesis, which refers to “making-with”, or “becoming-with”, to create symbiotic assemblages with other species for interactive collaboration or cooperation.⁶ Haraway refers to biologist and evolutionary theorist Lynn Margulis and her notion of autopoiesis, which defines the organism as a self-organising, “self-making” system. However, as Haraway points out, organisms are never quite autonomous, and neither biology, nor philosophy supports the hypothesis of an individual organism. Instead, she says, we have intra-active complex systems of relations, where the elements of the system do not pre-exist the relations but are created precisely by them. In other words, the notion of autopoiesis, as Haraway suggests, should be replaced by M. Beth Dempster’s term of sympoiesis, which means “collectively producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries.”⁷ Autopoietic systems are self-producing, autonomous and homeostatic, with defined spatial and temporal boundaries, whereas sympoietic systems overcome these boundaries by creating dynamic complex systems. We can argue that autopoiesis explains the functioning of bounded

5 Deleuze, Guattari 2004, 267.

6 Haraway 2016, 58-61; Haraway 2017, 25-27.

7 Haraway 2016: 61.

units or individuals, whereas sympoiesis is a term to explain the collaborative assemblages between different units which can do without the notion of the individual.

In a famous article, “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals”, Scott Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred Tauber (2012) argue that biological individuals are always inhabited by other forms of life, such as viruses or bacteria. After examining a biological individual according to anatomical, developmental, physiological, genetic, and immunological criteria, the authors come to the conclusion that all organisms are related to each other in an all-pervading symbiosis. Following from this, they argue that there is no such thing as a biological individual. In a more recent article Gilbert argues that this statement concerns not only other biological species but also human bodies: “Only about half the cells in our bodies contain a ‘human genome’. The other cells include about 160 different bacterial genomes. We have about 160 major species of bacteria in our bodies, and they all form complex ecosystems.⁸ After discussing the criteria defining anatomical, developmental, physiological, genetic, and immune individuality, Gilbert argues that none of these criteria defines humans as individuals. Most of our cells are microbial, therefore we are not individuals but holobionts – organisms persistently cooperating with communities of symbionts.

A good example of this conceptual shift in the consideration of identity could be the notion of immunity. In its early development, the notion of immunity was based on the self/not-self distinction: immunity was imagined as a fortress to protect us against other organisms. At the same time, the notion of immunity reflects the old philosophical distinctions between the Same and the Other, self-identical and different, friendly and deadly contagious. However, recent research in immunology destroys these binary models and proves that the immune system allows countless microbes to become parts of our bodies. As Gilbert points out, “even the immune system itself is built by microbes. Without the proper microbial symbionts, important subsets of immune cells fail to form.”⁹ In other words, recent immunology reveals that there is no such thing as the individual “self” because our bodies can survive only by hosting microbial organisms. “The immune system, rather than being imagined as a force of protective soldiers made by the host, can be thought of as a group of passport control agents and bouncers. (...) The immune system is a composite product of the holobiont, and it is not simply fighting anything that is ‘not-self’. Rather, it knows that there are some bacteria that are supposed to be welcomed into our bodies because (...) the bacteria are needed for completing our development and for our physiological functioning.”¹⁰ In other words, if symbiosis is the inevitable mode of life, if “we are all holobionts by birth”, as Gilbert¹¹ points out, our vital interest is to find out who is this other or many others which are the composites of symbiosis. What do these modes of

8 Gilbert 2017, 75.

9 Gilbert 2017, 82.

10 Gilbert 2017, 81-82.

11 Gilbert 2017, 84.

symbiosis and co-habitation mean for us and for other species?

Even if biology and immunology take the notions of symbiosis and symbiogenesis for granted, and completely withdraw from the notion of the biological individual, in the Arts and Humanities these notions are progressing differently. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) pointed out, the Humanities are based on the notions of humanism and anthropocentrism, which are so fundamentally situated that it is difficult to question them. Nevertheless, new trends in contemporary theory, such as new materialism, vibrant materialism, or agential realism, together with new insights in biology, evolutionary theory, and immunology, have resulted in a new field of knowledge, which Braidotti names as posthuman Humanities studies.¹² Haraway is even more radical, rejecting not only the Humanities for humusities, but also giving up Homo for humus.¹³ As Haraway points out, “we are compost, not posthuman, we inhabit the humusities, not humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist. Critters – human and not – become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding”.¹⁴ Thus, sympoiesis is not something found or given, but something that can be artificially created in the Arts and Humanities.

To achieve this possible change would imply two important shifts. First, we have to realize that the relationship between humans and other species is not a relationship between pre-existing, bounded, and finished individuals, but a permanent “becoming-with”, where every member of the relationship is created by and with another member. Both humans and non-humans are holobionts, in other words, organisms collaborating with other symbionts. Every member of this collaboration gets its “individuality” only within this collaboration and is defined by its intra-relationships. Second, to explain these relationships we have to borrow terms from biology, as Deleuze, Guattari, and Haraway did. In other words, to describe these posthuman or non-human modes of biological existence, which prevail not only in biological reality but also in bioart, we need a new conceptual vocabulary and a new perspective. The discursive models of signification and interpretation are not adequate to describe this biological reality: holobionts and symbionts evolve, develop, and collaborate rather than signify. In this respect we have to focus on the corporeal modes of sympoietic collaboration rather than on the effects of discursive interpretation.

Hybrids and Chimeras

These questions are at the heart of bioart, which still has to invent new forms of expression to present these modes of sympoiesis and co-habitation. Bioart has thus to invent and produce those forms of co-habitation which are already taken for granted in biology. Even if biologists and immunologists have enough proof that human beings are never self-identical, and that half of our cells are of

12 Braidotti 2013, 157.

13 Haraway 2016, 32; 55.

14 Haraway 2016, 97.

microbial origin, this knowledge does not change our common sense and our relationships with others. In this respect, bioart, by creating and constructing sympoietic modes of existence, such as hybridization, microchimerism, or co-habitation, opens new fields of knowledge. By examining various artworks, we can distinguish between different forms of sympoietic existence: for example, hybridization, which rests on the binary logic of two individuals, which merge together, or microchimerism, which works on the molecular level and dissolves the remnants of bounded individuality. For example, Vinciane Despret distinguishes between hybrids and chimeras, or between what she calls “combinations” and “compositions”: “Hybridization remains a matter of a ‘combination’, thus of the reproduction of certain characteristics of the two ‘parent’ species. Thinking in terms of hybridization forces the rest to give and to impose a binary system... Metamorphoses, conversely, retranslate ‘combinations’ into a system of ‘compositions’, a system that remains open to surprise and to the event: ‘other things’ can arise that profoundly modify beings and their relations.”¹⁵

In other words, hybrids have two identifiable “parent” species. For example, in Eduardo Kac’s work “GFP Bunny” (2000) we have the DNA of a jellyfish combined with the DNA of a rabbit, and similarly, in Kac’s “Natural History of the Enigma” (2003–2008) we have Kac’s own DNA combined with the DNA of a petunia flower.¹⁶ More challenging and complicated is the attempt to turn “combinations” into “compositions” and to create aberrant chimeras, which do not have official parents and a clearly defined line of descent. Despret describes these new forms of “compositions” as “co-optation, contagion, infections, incorporations, digestions, reciprocal inductions, becoming-with”; following Haraway, she says that “the nature of human being (...) is at its most profound, at its most concrete, at its most biological, an interspecific relation – a process of co-opting strangers”.¹⁷ A process of becoming-other, which is also at the centre of Deleuze and Guattari’s project, escapes the defined lines of evolution, or structures of genetic development, and liberates particles and parts of anonymous matter. Such becoming, functioning at a molecular level, resists any signification and interpretation, and avoids the logic of scientific classification. A good example of such a multiple becoming could be ORLAN’s project “Harlequin Coat” (2008), produced in the Symbiotica lab.¹⁸ The artwork consists of a bioreactor, shaped as a geometrical structure, which is populated with various cells from different species and ethnic origins, including the cells of ORLAN herself and of other mammalian species. Being placed in a bioreactor under specific conditions, these cells grow and intermingle with each other. As such, the artwork denies any biological or genetic development and replaces it with unpredictable, chimeric molecular multiplicity.

15 Despret 2016, 190.

16 Eduardo Kac. 2000. “GFP Bunny”; Eduardo Kac. 2003-2008. “Natural History of the Enigma”. <http://www.ekac.org/transgenicindex.html> Accessed 21 December 2017

17 Despret, 2016, 191.

18 ORLAN. 2008. “Harlequin Coat”. <https://www.fact.co.uk/projects/sk-interfaces/orlan-harlequin-coat.aspx> Accessed 21 December 2017

Having these differences in mind, we can discuss our specific examples. As was mentioned before, the project “May the Horse Live in Me”, by Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin, started as a biomedical self-experiment, which consisted of several procedures. Over the course of several months the artist Marion Laval-Jeantet allowed herself to be injected with horse immunoglobulins and thus progressively developed a tolerance to this foreign animal body.¹⁹ To achieve this, they had to exclude some elements that are fatal to humans, such as red blood cells, white blood cells, macrophages, etc.; what remained after this removal was the blood plasma, containing hormones, lipids, and several kinds of proteins (immunoglobulins, cytokines, etc.), which transfer information within the body.²⁰ After having built up her tolerance, the artist Marion Laval-Jeantet was able to be injected with horse blood plasma during a ritualized performance at Galerija Kapelica in Ljubljana on February 2011. The intention of this performance was that the horse immunoglobulins would by-pass the defensive mechanisms of the human immune system, enter the artist’s blood stream, and interact with it. In this respect, the performed horse blood plasma transfusion became the place of negotiations with otherness: on the one hand, the injected blood plasma was recognized by the artist’s immune system; on the other hand, some new reactions and affections emerged in the artist’s body. As the artist herself points out, the first response to the transfusion was fever, which was going up and down, then sleep disorder, a very strong appetite, and panic attacks.²¹ After the transfusion, the artist performed a communication ritual with a horse, walking beside the horse with leg extending stilts. Afterwards her blood sample was extracted, which became completely clotted in ten minutes, thus showing a symptom of strong inflammation. The blood sample, which was freeze-dried, can be seen as a synecdoche part of the performance, as a document of a new form of “becoming-with”, or the becoming-horse of the performer.

Maja Smrekar’s project, “K-9_topology”, in different forms and in different time periods, examines the potential co-evolution and co-habitation between

19 Art Orienté Objet (Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin). 2011. “May the Horse Live in Me”. <http://www.biofaction.com/synth-ethic/#art-oriente-objet> Accessed 2 May 2018

20 As the artist points out in her conversation with Aleksandra Hirszfeld, “we need to remember that when we talk about horse blood transfusion it was not transfusion of all its components. For example, we excluded some most cytotoxic red blood cells, as well as lymphocytes and macrophages. We have however saved for transfusion all other cells, including immunoglobulin, which transfers information within the body, between the body’s organs. The transferred information is not only immunological but also about the needs of the body. Preparing for the performance I had to test every immunoglobulin on myself in order to avoid anaphylactic shock during the transfusion. By recognising strange cells my body could get rid of unbearable excess. However, the huge amount of injected cells helped over half of them to bypass the defensive mechanism of my body and forced my organs to respond directly.”

Aleksandra Hirszfeld. 2016. “May the Horse Live in Me (interview with *Art Orienté Objet*)”. http://artandsciencemeeting.pl/teksty/may_the_horse_live_in_me_interview_with_art_oriented_objet-13/

Accessed 8 December 2017

21 Ibid.

humans and dogs. The first part of the project, the exhibition “ECCE CANIS” (2014), reproduced the smell of hormone serotonin, which was biotechnologically extracted from the blood of the artist and her dog. This hormone defines reciprocal tolerance between humans and wolves, which were domesticated as dogs. In this respect the smell of serotonin not only created the molecular environment for interspecies cohabitation, but also incited the spectator to become part of this process. Another attempt to create a symbiosis between the two species was the performance “HYBRID FAMILY” (2015– 2016), which took place in Freies Museum in Berlin. During this performance, the artist, using a certain diet and mechanical stimulation of her breasts, produced a certain amount of colostrum, which was used to feed a puppy. In this respect the performance questions the normative status of the heterosexual family and invites us to imagine “unnatural” or “aberrant” familial ties with other species. The project “ARTE_mis” (2016–2017) pushed these interspecies relationships even further by attempting to create a hybrid at a cellular level: after conducting research at the laboratory, the artist and her co-workers managed to perform in vitro “fertilization” of the artist’s egg cell with her dog’s somatic cell, taken from its saliva.²² The merged cell was maintained alive for two days; when the nutrition was stopped, it remained frozen as a molecular sculpture. Although the merged cell had no chance to develop because of large biological disparities between the two species, this frozen molecule can be seen as a virtual form of a wolf-man or wolf-woman, which potentially may become real in the future, when (and if) the artists can legally use dog’s reproductive cells (instead of somatic cells). In this sense, both projects by Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin and by Maja Smrekar create hybrid entities at a sub-cellular level and question the boundaries of individual organism and the divisions between species.

Similarly, Robertina Šebjanič in her work “Aurelia 1+Hz / proto viva sonification” examines the co-evolution and interspecies communication between humans and jellyfishes. The jellyfish *Aurelia Aurita* is one of the ancient species that has been around for more than 500 million years. Even if the environment of the oceans and seas is rapidly changing, it seems that it does not disturb the jellyfish. The *Aurelia Aurita* has some rudimentary sensory nerves which allow it to perceive light, smell, and orientation. Its

22 “A reproductive cell has been in vitro enucleated in a laboratory with micromanipulators. Then it was left under a UVC light for 30 minutes, so as to achieve decomposition of all DNA in the cell. The leftover membrane of enucleated reproductive cell was fused with a dog’s somatic cell, isolated out of her saliva, through the process of electroporation. Since a reproductive cell “programmes” the nucleus to divide, after 7 divisions, the aggregate of 128 cells, on the 6th day, a blastocyst occurs. ARTE_mis has been left to divide just up to the stage before the formation of a blastocyst. It was then frozen to a – 198 degrees Celsius, after a 3rd day of growth. It gets reanimated for the exhibition, with the nutrition and hormone feeding stopped, so that the cell stays frozen in time.” http://majasmrekar.org/ARTE_mis Accessed 2 May 2018

However, in her earlier interview, the artist expressed an intention to use not a dog’s somatic cell but sperm: “in my fourth project within the K-9_topology series, I am suggesting to inoculate in-vitro my eggs with dog sperm in order to eventually make a new species which would have better chances to survive in the very unpredictable nature of the future.” See: Régine Debatty. 2016. “Post-anthropocentric art. An interview with Maja Smrekar”. <http://we-make-money-not-art.com/post-anthropocentric-art-an-interview-with-maja-smrekar/> Accessed 8 December 2017

gravity receptors, containing calcium crystals, are similar to our Vestibular system. Having these similarities in mind, the artist investigated the possible cohabitation and communication between humans and jellyfishes. She recorded the sound of jellyfish in their natural environment and then navigated this sound archive with the help of a special program which translates the movements of jellyfish into specific sound found in the archive.²³ This sonic and visual experience creates the feeling that the observer is immersed in the milieu of a living organism and takes part in its creation and development. Here, the performer, who navigates the sound and the recording of previous experiments, acts as another organism, trying to harmonize her melody with the host organism. In this respect, the performance by Robertina Šebjanič, similar to the performances discussed earlier, changes the anthropocentric perspective and attempts to create an affective relationship with a non-human other. In contrast to scientific research, which examines different forms of symbiosis which are already found in the natural world, bioart invents and produces new forms of hybridization, molecular becoming, and co-habitation.

At this point, we can argue that the symbiosis and symbiogenesis found in the natural world follow a certain pattern of genetic organization or evolutionary development, whereas molecular assemblages, created in bioart, are heterogeneous, erratic, and contingent. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between two principles, or two planes: one is the plane of organization or development, "it is structural or genetic, and both at once, (...) the genetic plan(e) of evolutionary developments with their organizations"²⁴; and there is a different plane, a plane of consistency or composition: "there is no structure, any more than there is genesis... (...) It is thus a plane of proliferation, peopling, contagion; but this proliferation of material has nothing to do with an evolution, the development of a form or the filiation of forms."²⁵ Whereas the plane of organization belongs to the kingdom of nature, the plane of consistency or composition breaks any distinction between the natural and the artificial. The plane of consistency or composition is the plane of art, which, through artificial means, creates new compositions and becoming. Although described as two opposing principles, these two planes always need each other. This is obvious in the case of bioart, which combines natural biological materials and processes with artistic compositions.

Bio-presence and bio-performativity

The question that we have to ask now is what makes these hybrid entities or co-habitations a *sympoiesis*; in other words, what makes it not only a form of biological symbiosis but also *poiesis*, a form of art. As we can see, the works of bioart are very often conducted in laboratories with the help of researchers, and the result of this research usually has nothing artistic in itself. Sometimes the boundary between the mere scientific research and the work of art is

23 For more detailed information see: "Aurelia 1+Hz / proto viva sonification" (2016) by Robertina Šebjanič. <http://robertina.net/aurelia-1hz-proto-viva-sonification/> Accessed 8 December 2017

24 Deleuze, Guattari 2004, 292-3.

25 Deleuze, Guattari 2004, 293-4.

almost inconceivable. As Daniela Silvestrin observes in her conversation with Jens Hauser, Kac's "GFP Bunny" seems to be "art" just because it was created by an artist.²⁶ However, something more is involved: bioart is a specific form of art which has the power to confront the spectator with biological or organic presence. This organic presence residing at the heart of an artwork is something completely different from the conventional forms of representation. As Jens Hauser points out, "this art uses a priori nonimage-producing biotechnological processes, and turns the representation of physicality into its originally constructed and staged presence."²⁷ In other words, bioart is a form of art, which does not represent biological reality but produces and presents it. This staging of a new biological reality, besides its technological mediation, is a performative act, inventing and, at the same time, asserting a new reality. It is important to note that new biological reality asserts its existence not by the hermeneutical circle of signification and interpretation, but by direct bio-mediality, which attracts the spectator with its affective corporeality. For example, the smell of human and non-human molecules of serotonin, the transfusion of horse blood plasma to the artist's body, or the artist feeding a puppy, – all these staged presences create a strong feeling of physical proximity and affective response, and, in terms of Neal White, can be named as invasive aesthetics.²⁸ The molecules of smell and the flow of blood or milk directly connect human and animal bodies, performatively relating them into a new hybrid co-corporeality. The physical presence of live animals, related to human bodies via biological substances (milk, blood), create strong evidence of "becoming-with" and sympoiesis.

However, it seems that artists are not fully satisfied with these practices of bio-presence and bio-performativity. Therefore, besides presenting the real biological processes, they also use more conventional forms of simulation and visual representation. For example, during the performance "May the Horse Live in Me", the artist conducted a symbolic ritual to get into a relationship with the live horse in a gallery space and visually imitated the horse by using leg extending stilts and by her horse-like appearance. Similarly, in the "K-9_topology" project, the artist simulates a visual resemblance to wolves, as if trying to recreate mythopoetic images of a wolf-man or a wolf-woman. In a different part of this project, in the performance "I Hunt Nature and Culture Hunts Me" (2014), the artist developed a situational communication with wolves and, with the help of ethologists, tried to establish her animal position in a wolf pack. In this respect both artists withdrew from the domain of bio-presence to the more conventional domain of signification, visual representation, and simulation. However, this "compromise" makes their performances very close to performance art or live art, and potentially affects the audience with their

26 Daniela Silvestrin. 2012. "Dialogues on "Bioart": A Conversation with Jens Hauser". <http://digicult.it/news/dialogues-on-bioart-1-a-conversation-with-jens-hauser/> Accessed 21 December 2017

27 Hauser 2010, 89.

28 Jussi Parikka. 2016. "The Office Experiment: An Interview with Neal White". <https://jussiparikka.net/?s=invasive+aesthetics> Accessed 21 December 2017

animal theatricality. As Jens Hauser points out, this shifting between different modes of expression is what defines bioart: “Bioart shares with live art the dialectical relationship between real presence and representation. (...) What this gives rise to for the spectator is a realm of emotional tension and interplay between the two possible modes of perceiving the action. Likewise, the viewer who is experiencing bioart may switch back and forth between the symbolic realm of art and the ‘real life’ of the processes that are being put on display and are being suggested by organic presence.”²⁹ In other words, it seems that bioart cannot quite communicate its bio-performativity without the help of conventional theatricality.

Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, artists working at *Tissue Culture and Art Project*, point out that “the tissue itself did not effectively communicate its aliveness”.³⁰ Therefore, the artists, while presenting their works “Disembodied Cuisine” (2003) and “Victimless Leather” (2004)³¹ in the gallery, had to invent some special “feeding rituals” and “killing rituals” to interact with the audience. In this respect we can argue that conventional theatricality helps bio-performativity to gain its affective force and visibility. The same problem occurs in the performances discussed earlier, which result in new forms of life, frozen in a state of molecular sculpture (the blood sample of the Centaur or the egg cell, “fertilized” with a dog’s somatic cell). It seems that these new presences cannot communicate their cutting-edge novelty without the help of real animals, which are brought on stage as performance actors. The presence of an animal affects the audience with the feeling of co-corporeality and helps, at least for a moment, to arrest the all-pervading assumption of anthropocentric superiority. As Marion Laval-Jeantet points out, she always felt frustrated because of her inability to put herself in place of an animal and because this place is systematically set from man’s perspective.³² Maja Smrekar, as was mentioned earlier, also tried to establish her animal position in a wolf pack in her project “I Hunt Nature and Culture Hunts Me” (2014). Her performance clearly refers to earlier performances with real animals, such as Joseph Beuys’ “I Like America, America Like Me” (1974), or Kira O’Reilly’s “Falling Asleep with a Pig” (2009)³³. It seems that the real biological presence of the animal body has the power to affect the spectator’s bodily condition and to enhance his or her animality.

A slightly different strategy is used in Robertina Šebjanič’s work “Aurelia 1+Hz / proto viva sonification”, which also contains an interactive installation “Aurelia 1+Hz / proto viva generator” (2014). The generator consists of real jellyfish contained in an aquarium and a robotic machine, which is animated

29 Hauser 2010, 91.

30 Catts, Zurr 2016, 144.

31 The *Tissue Culture and Art Project* (Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr). 2003. “Disembodied Cuisine”; 2004. “Victimless Leather”. <http://lab.anhb.uwa.edu.au/tca/> Accessed 21 December 2017

32 Aleksandra Hirszfeld. 2016. “May the Horse Live in Me (interview with *Art Orienté Objet*)”. http://artandsciencemeeting.pl/teksty/may_the_horse_live_in_me_interview_with_art_oriented_objet-13/ Accessed 21 December 2017

33 Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, 2010.

not by using artificial intelligence but the live organism of a jellyfish. In this respect, the installation blurs the difference between a natural organism and a machine and asserts the creative nature of any assemblage. Another part of the project, which includes the artist herself, explores the sonic assemblage consisting of natural sound performed by jellyfish and the recorded sound navigated by an artist. The performer, who navigates the sound and the recordings of previous experiments, here, acts as a different organism, which is grafted into the first, and has to harmonize her melody with the host organism. In other words, the rhythmic sonification acts as a medium of becoming, which merges the becoming-animal of the performer and the becoming-music of an animal. Instead of using simulation or imitation, the performance is involved in experimentation and contingent becoming.

To summarize, all of the discussed artworks oscillate between the plane of organization and the plane of consistency and composition. On the one hand, by using living organisms and tissues, they follow the patterns of biological development and organization; on the other hand, by creating new heterogeneous and contingent assemblages, they work on the plane of composition. These artworks simultaneously represent natural order and present new biological hybrid assemblages. On the one hand, these artworks recreate conventional forms of representation, such as rituals and theatricality; on the other hand, they invent new forms of bio-presence and bio-performativity, which affect the spectator directly. They combine conventional forms of signification and interpretation with contingent experimentation and unpredictable becoming. Working simultaneously in two different regimes, these artworks also involve different modalities of time and duration.

Biological *Kairos*

How can we define these strange biological entities, which are created in laboratories using artificial conditions and which express the mode of sympoiesis or becoming-with? Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, working with tissue culture, invent the term Semi-Living being. The term refers to fragments or parts of organisms which are taken from their original context, then grown, mixed, and kept alive with the support of artificial conditions and biotechnologies.³⁴ In this sense, the Semi-Living being lacks a cultural context to be inserted in: as Catts and Zurr point out, “Semi-Livings are lab-grown and lab-modified entities which sit uncomfortably within new biological and cultural taxonomies. They problematize notions of body, agency, species, gender, race, class, or life itself. However, as they literally are potentially dying, they require our attention: physical, technological, and conceptual.”³⁵ Lab-grown Semi-Living beings, potentially living and dying at the same time, can be treated as “bare life” in Agamben’s terms. In this sense, Semi-Living beings are the object of manipulation and control, which can prolong or terminate their aliveness. This potential death, as well as the potential or future life, belongs to a specific modality of time – the messianic *kairos*.

34 Catts, Zurr 2016, 135.

35 Catts, Zurr 2016, 137.

In *The Time That Remains* (2005), Agamben refers to different modalities of time – secular chronological time, eschatological time, and messianic time. Eschatological time reflects the eschaton – the end of time, the instant, when the time ends. By contrast, “the messianic is not the end of time, but the *time of the end* (...). What interests the apostle is not the last day, it is not the instant in which time ends, but the time that contracts itself and begins to end (...), or if you prefer, the time that remains between time and its end.”³⁶ The apostle Paul refers to secular time as *chronos*, or chronological time, which lasts from the creation of the world to the messianic event. Here, time contracts itself and begins to end. This contracted time is *ho nyn kairos*, “the time of the now”. However, this contraction of time does not coincide with eschatological time, which marks the coming of the Messiah and the new world, and which ends the time and enters into atemporal eternity. As Agamben points out, messianic time is neither chronological time, nor eschatological time: “it is a remnant, the time that remains between these two times, when the division of time is itself divided...”³⁷ For Agamben, messianic time has the transformative power to end secular chronological time and to convert it into eschatological time of eternity. In this sense, messianic time “is a caesura which, in its dividing the division between two times, introduces a remainder [resto] into it that exceeds the division.”³⁸ It is time in-between, which undergoes an entirely transformative contraction.

As such, messianic time is not external to chronological time, but is internal to it. It is a contraction of chronological time which comes to an end. “This contraction of time, Agamben suggests, is rather like the muscular contraction of an animal before it leaps – an image that beautifully highlights the fullness and power of messianic time. While not the leap itself, messianic time is akin to that contraction that makes the leap possible; it is the time ‘left to us’ before the end and which brings about the end.”³⁹ Agamben takes the notion of time that contracts itself from the linguist Gustave Guillaume. Guillaume defines “operational time” as a time that the human mind needs to construct an image of time. In this sense, Guillaume defines time as a three-dimensional formation: we can grasp time in its pure potentiality, in its very process of formation, and, finally, in the state of having been constructed.⁴⁰ In other words, we can realize time as having been constructed and represented, but also we can grasp time in the moment of its formation or emergence – this is *kairos* or operational time. The time, which is alive as the muscular contraction of an animal, can be imagined as the time of life itself.

The notion of operational time can be useful to describe the moment of experiment taking place in bioart. What is the time of the Semi-Living lab-grown entity? To which modality of time does it belong? Obviously, it is not a chronological time, representing what is already given. It’s time in-between, a time full of possibilities for entities which are potentially alive (being supported

36 Agamben 2005, 62.

37 Ibid.

38 Agamben 2005, 64.

39 Mills 2011, 132.

40 Agamben 2005, 66.

by biotechnological means), and potentially decaying and dying. Furthermore, it is an operational time, a small moment of time given to understand the image of life, to comprehend life in its full potentiality. How can we classify such entities as a blood sample, containing the molecules of horse and human blood, or a frozen fertilized cell, containing human and dog cells? This is biological *kairos*, the decisive moment when something new that is not yet present may come to life or it may die or disappear. In this sense, the biological *kairos* carries in itself some messianic promise of a different biological future. Donna Haraway also noticed this messianic dimension of experimentation when describing the special case of the oncomouse, a genetically modified mouse, which carries an activated oncogene and which was created to research breast cancer. In Haraway's interpretation, the oncomouse is both a scapegoat and a secular Christian figure which will be sacrificed to find a cure for breast cancer and possibly save many woman – other mammalian beings.⁴¹ In this respect the time of an experiment is the moment of *kairos*, the contracted time, where the moment of the animal's death contains a promise of a different future for humans. Biological *kairos* is this impossible, unthinkable moment, where life and death, animal life, and human life can be replaced interchangeably. Bioart explores precisely this interchangeability by making the artist's body become the time and space of an experiment. In this sense, the artistic experiments invent, in Levinasian terms, an ethics of substitution, when the artist literally becomes the host and the hostage of the other and thus creates a singular act of ethical responsibility.

Biological *kairos* is also a critical, decisive moment, which can involve danger for an artist, the danger of anaphylactic shock, the danger of animal aggression or of deadly contact. It is the artist who has to attune her immune system to accept the horse blood, to reconnect with dogs using the hormone of serotonin, the colostrum, or a reproductive cell, or to synchronize her performance with the melody of jellyfish. In this sense, the discussed examples of bioart, which imply both a promise of a different future but also the reality of contagious connection, stand in contrast to Haraway's quest for sympoiesis which does not demand any real changes for the theorist. Sympoiesis still belongs to chronological time, to the plane of organization, where things connect and reconnect without breaking natural patterns. By contrast, bioart belongs to a different paradigm, to the plane of consistency or composition, where things emerge not by filiation or heredity, but by contagion and artificial interventions, forming new heterogeneous assemblages. These new assemblages, being temporary, erratic and fragile, take place in a leap of time: they may look like a messianic promise of a different biological future, but they may also contain real danger both for human or non-human agents involved in this assemblage. These new forms of assemblage-like cohabitations demand a different kind of ethics, which, in the Levinasian sense, is unpredictable, incalculable, and asymmetrical.

41 Haraway 1997, 79.

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Bourdieuian Concepts and the Field of Theatre Criticism

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ABSTRACT

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field sociology began their life in humanities, particularly in literature and art studies after publication of his seminal *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* in 1992. Regrettably, Bourdieu has not left a study dedicated to theatre, possibly due to the long-standing French tradition of considering theatre as another literary genre. Nevertheless, Bourdieusian sociology is abundant with terms, concepts, and ideas that are extremely handy in analyzing and understanding how theatre was produced in the past and is produced in the present. The appropriation of Bourdieu's ideas for theatre studies is a tempting effort, especially considering how closely theatre is intertwined with the phenomena of *habitus*, distinction, and all the forms of capital described by Bourdieu himself.

The aim of my article is to discuss the applicability of selected Bourdieusian notions and concepts for research of a very specific aspect of theatre studies. I argue that the concepts of field (*champs*), *nomos*, *doxa*, *illusio* as well as of symbolic violence are very useful in understanding the nature, functions, and effects of theatre criticism. Dwelling on my own theoretical research, I propose to understand theatre criticism as another field of social practice that is defined by the conflict between the opposing interests of the field of theatre and other external fields (such as market or political power).

KEYWORDS

Pierre Bourdieu, theatre criticism, field of social practice, habitus, symbolic violence, Bourdieusian Concepts and the Field of Theatre Criticism

Bourdieuian Concepts and the Field of Theatre Criticism

Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) began to develop a conceptual and methodological framework for his “field sociology” in the 1960s. From the outset, his sociology envisaged a wide scope of application, and since the appearance of his seminal book *Les Règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* in 1992, it has become evident that field sociology is also effective in literary and art studies. Specialized books and publications by Bourdieu himself as well by his numerous followers challenged the situation in the humanities and, moreover, in theatre studies, where, as Maria Shevtsova observes, sociology was understood as “fundamentally about facts, graphs, and, worse still, statistics, and was thus alien to the creativity, artistic motivations, genres, forms, styles.”¹ The variety of the topics of research that relied on Bourdieusian ideas, concepts, and methods seemed of unlimited applicability. Such notions as different forms of capital, for example, became a byword in areas by and large exceeding purely sociological interests. Yet, more importantly, Bourdieusian sociology provided complete and explanatory models for understanding and possibly contending societal phenomena – sociology is “a combat sport”², after all, and Bourdieu’s theory always provided a perspective on its practical implication outside academia.

In the last decades, however, Bourdieusian activism as well as constructivist and determinist assumptions became an object of heated discussion even among his previous followers. For instance, Nathalie Heinich, a specialist in contemporary art and a former Bourdieu disciple herself, has warned about the dogmatization of his legacy on the radical Left where epigones of the great master fail to consult his theories as a whole, and abuse his idea of sociological criticism and continuity between personal opinions and academic research.³ Another interesting insight came from Gérald Bronner and Etienne Géhin, who, in their *Le Danger sociologique* (2017), criticize Bourdieu’s “theory of social determinism”, which leaves very little space for the agent’s freedom, and as such is objectionable

1 Shevtsova 2017

2 “La sociologie est un sport de combat” – title of Pierre Carles documentary film (2001) featuring Bourdieu and his colleagues.

3 Bastié 2017

in the light of contemporary scientific findings: “Progress in neurobiology and cognitive sciences does not allow sociologists to ignore the resources of ‘an organ’ [a human brain], which, being a tool for thought, intelligence, invention, and choice, is somewhat an independent arbiter, anymore.”⁴

In this context, an attempt to define theatre criticism as another possible field of social practice and revisit several key Bourdieusian notions calls for certain justifications. A first motive is related to the contemporary state of theatre where the importance of mediation in terms of advertising, public relations, and audience development rapidly increases. One can take these two very different examples. First, when in preparation for the Creative Europe Programme (2014-2020), the European Expert Network on Culture (EENC) was asked to define types of intervention involved in audience building in Europe, communication and the media were mentioned before other factors, such as research and data, capacity building, resources and funding, et al.⁵ Second: in the 2000s several New York theatres initiated “Bloggers’ Nights” giving out free tickets to authors not associated with traditional printed media.⁶ Thus, larger publicity was anticipated and the importance of communication in social media acknowledged. Bourdieu himself often mentioned communicative acts performed by critics among other intermediaries when discussing the ways fields of artistic production function, arguing that the “production of the value of the work” equals the creation of the “belief in the value of the work.”⁷ Thus, the acceleration of communication in theatre calls for thorough mapping and an understanding of the anatomy of contemporary theatre criticism. A second motive is of an epistemological type. Critics’ words and judgements, as Michael Billington observed in 2007, today are exposed to the blogosphere where “opinions can be countered, corrected, reviled or even, on rare occasions, enthusiastically endorsed.”⁸ The rise of informal criticism creates numerous challenges in terms of analysis and understanding of who mediates theatre and its products in the social space as well as how and why. In my opinion, Bourdieu’s notions of field (*champs*), *nomos*, *doxa*, *illusio* as well as of symbolic violence are very useful in understanding the nature, functions, and effects of expanding the field of theatre criticism.

Field sociology and the notion of field

Before Bourdieu formulated his original conception of the “field” in the Eighties, the notion itself was already known and applied to various theories of social and natural sciences. The sociologist himself points to theoreticians as different as formalist Jury Tynyanov, social psychologist Kurt Lewin, Norbert Elias, and structuralists from Edward Sapir and Roman Jakobson to Georges Dumézil and Claude Lévi-Strauss, for all of whom relational “thinking in field terms” was common. Thus, it is the relations that are the basis of “field sociology”, whereas “field” itself, for Bourdieu, is “a network, or a configuration, of objective relations

4 Bronner & Géhin 2017, 16

5 Bamford & Wimmer 2012, 5

6 Hunka 2016, 48

7 Bourdieu 1995, 229

8 Billington 2007

between positions.”⁹ The positions in mind are those, taken by agents – persons or institutions that occupy the field. The status and capacities that the agent receives from a given position are objectively defined by the present or potential situation of the position, the sorts of power, or capital they are capable of providing as well as their relation to the other positions in terms of domination, subordination, homology, etc. Bourdieu observes that a powerful position is a prerequisite for various forms of “profit”, which is a “prize” of the “game” that agents “play” within the field in their quest for domination.¹⁰ It is important to note, however, that the sociologist emphasizes objective relations that govern the individual will or cautiousness, and not the relations between the agents or the liaisons between the persons: “I could twist Hegel’s famous formula and say that *the real is the relational*: what exists in the social world are relations – not interactions between individuals, but objective relations which exist ‘independently of individual cautiousness and will,’ as Marx said.”¹¹ Bourdieu’s mechanistic argumentation emphasizing objective and determining laws that govern the social world (and the fields – the small universes within) over the years has become an object of heated criticism that has not subsided in recent scholarship as was mentioned in the introduction.

It is also important to stress that the notion of the field in Bourdieusian sociology functions in plural form. The number of fields that constitute the social world or social space (for a sociologist it is the equivalent of national territories) changes depending on the differentiation of the society. For instance, in *Les Règles de l’art* Bourdieu surveys the structural changes within the literary field of France in the nineteenth century, how it emerges and develops under circumstances that are entirely different from the previous century in terms of the relations between cultural producers and men of power (in the eighteenth century artists completed the orders directly placed by the aristocracy).¹² A semi-autonomous field of art emerged in the nineteenth century due to innovation – its “authentic structural subordination” to the market of cultural goods and constant relations with members of “higher” social groups, who could divert the means from the private purse to the artists (or at least to a certain part of them). Thus, the “field sociology” as an analytical tool is most effective for analysing differentiated societies that provide a possibility to establish the relative autonomy of different fields of social practice (politics, religion, economy, etc.).

In order to define theatre criticism as a field of social practice, several other fields have to be taken into consideration. Dwelling on the Bourdieusian model, which depicts a social space as made of various interconnected fields, the field of theatre criticism should be placed in relation with at least three other fields. First is the field of theatre which, as a type of field of artistic production according to Bourdieu, is governed by rejection or inversion of the principle of material gain. The other two fields are the fields of power – political and economic, that function in exactly the opposite way (“business is business” is the only legitimate

9 Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 97

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Bourdieu 1995, 49

objective of the market, for example). The field of theatre criticism is thus located between two antagonistic poles and contrasting tensions define its structure as well as the placements of the positions of its agents – the critics.

Specifics of the field of art

In *Les Règles de l'art*, Bourdieu argues that after a long process of autonomisation, the field of art emerges as a world of reversed economics. Its *nomos*, or the supreme law in Bourdieusian terminology, is the lack of economic value of the art, i. e. the value of an art piece is proportional to its disinterestedness. Works of art can claim their pedigree by rejecting every kind of applicability, and their disinterestedness can also be justified by rejecting traditions. However, as every type of artistic production requires at least some financial resources, the artists are inevitably influenced by economic capital. Due to this structural subordination, the field of art is typically constituted out of two conflicting subfields and of a schism between different positions of the agents. According to Bourdieu, a conflict between the subfields is typical for any field of cultural production as one part of the agents' aim is for limitation, the other part for mass demand.¹³ An art piece that due to reasons such as innovative and / or challenging aesthetic vocabulary, or a long period of production is not fit for mass consumption, belongs to the subfield of small-scale production, in contrast to the pieces that following the requirements of market or political power, belong to the subfield of large-scale production.

Evidently, in the first subfield the value of the art piece and the reputation of the artist are measured by the principle of autonomy from the consumers; financial loss is equal to approbation, whereas profitability discredits it. In the second subfield, strong ties with the market and / or political power are favoured as a heteronomous position grants dominance for its agents at least for some time. Meanwhile, the artists who take an autonomous position can seek vital means at the anti-market. According to Bourdieu, the anti-market functions on the basis of high cultural capital that can be represented by such institutions as small publishing houses, galleries, specialized press, selected theatre and cinema audiences as well as private or corporate patronage. In a historical perspective, an access to financial capital controlled by political power or the market crucial for any kind of artistic production was possible only by assuming a heteronomous position in relation to these fields, external to the field of art. An inevitable conflict between the subfields thus ran alongside the meeting of pre-existing demand and pre-established forms on one side and the production that is entirely turned to the future on the other.¹⁴

It is important to note, however, that due to historical developments and changes, a clear-cut division that is characteristic of the Bourdieusian model should currently be regarded with caution. Metaphorically speaking, the state (especially the European states) as *maecenas* is learning to acknowledge the disinterestedness and high-risk investments of public funds in the anti-market. As Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska, authors of the two hundred

13 Bourdieu 1995, 124

14 Bourdieu 1995, 142-143

page study “Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture” funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK conclude: “Conventional discourse, above all when directed to advocacy for purposes of public funding, has often given pride of place to benefits that were thought to resonate with governments, and this may have deflected analytical attention away from dimensions of equal or perhaps even greater overall importance. Thus, when examining the benefits of arts and culture for the economy, we have emphasised the way that innovation is fostered through network, knowledge and talent spillovers from the creative sector to the broader economy.”¹⁵ One might even argue that the field of art is currently at a state of accomplishment: the value of disinterestedness is broadly accepted, or as Ivan Hewett notes rather humorously: “There is now hardly a town in the UK that doesn’t have a swanky museum or arts centre, often built with Lottery funding [i. e. funded from the public purse]. <...> From being a daring idea of a few marginalised ‘community artists’ back in the Seventies, the notion that art has social benefits and should be taken out into the world is a received wisdom – which you question at your peril.”¹⁶

Although the conflict between the agents of the autonomous and heteronomous subfields nowadays runs along less clear-cut lines, the Bourdieusian model of the field of art nevertheless provides a fine analytical tool for inquiring into the anatomy of the production of art, the consumption of its products, and, even more so, of its communication. In terms of justification of choice of one product or one artist over another, private individuals as well as representatives of the state, to a greater or lesser degree, are in need of expert advice and support. Herein, the function of criticism becomes important. Acknowledgement of an art piece as worthy of investment either from private or public funds can be based on opinion, which, in its turn, can be informed by the professional opinion makers, i. e. the critics, who in their turn can choose to voice the artists, the state, and society, or the market.

In this respect, I propose to understand the structure of the field of theatre criticism as homologous to the structure of the social space. The critics first as representatives of different fractions of society, second as representatives of the artists, the state, or the market, interpret and judge any given production alongside the interests of the group that he or she shares and feels affinity to. As Bourdieu notes, “The structural and functional homology between the space of authors and the space of consumers (and of critics) and the correspondence between the social structure of spaces of production and the mental structures which authors, critics and consumers apply to products (themselves organized according to these structures) is at the root of the *coincidence* that is established between the different categories of works offered and the expectations of the different categories of the public.”¹⁷

Dwelling on the theory of field I argue that the field of theatre criticism can be located in between the fields of theatre production and consumption (political power and / or market). As the outreach of, for instance, the daily newspaper is

15 Crossick & Kaszynska 2016, 153

16 Hewett 2016

17 Bourdieu 1995, 162.

much greater than the number of theatregoers that can observe the production live, it is the mediated image of the show that creates bigger reverberations in the social space. Therefore, the field of theatre criticism functions as an intermediary between the makers of the theatrical product and the fields of power that control and attribute various forms of capital. Hence, in the case of commercial theatre, criticism can act as a vehicle for positive or negative public relations that influence the fiscal success of the production. In the case of theatre that relies on public support, criticism can influence the channelling of subsidies as well as make cases for official legitimation in terms of pointing to the artists worthy of awards, medals, titles, etc. In this the power of criticism is especially evident: the critics that support autonomous theatre can facilitate the accepting of new rules of the consumption of the theatrical product, foster new aesthetic sensitivities, and, above all, initiate and sustain the acknowledgement of disinterested artistic creation in the social space. Thus, the field of theatre criticism and its cultural dispositions that are homologous to the social space can be regarded as a system of possibilities that enables theatre artists to realize their chosen creative ethos.

Habitus, “popular” and “pure” aesthetics

In the discussion of the specifics of the field of art, several important notions of “field sociology” were mentioned and they deserve more attention as they help to understand the anatomy of theatre criticism. Bourdieu argues that every agent’s position in any field of social practice is defined by a combination of the rules, specific to the field, of capital in the agent’s possession (Bourdieu famously discriminates between social, economic and cultural capital alongside the derivative and encompassing symbolic capital¹⁸), and of *habitus* characteristic to the agent. Semantically, the notion of habitus (Latin *habitus*, German *Habitualitaet*) indicates a certain system of specific features, yet, according to Bourdieu, it should not be understood simply as a “habit”, as habitus indicates a totality of dispositions (long-lasting cultural competences) that are typical to every agent. The agent acquires his/her habitus via inheritance from the immediate environment. For instance, the capital in his/her family’s possession. However, habitus is not a stable entity: cultural competences can develop and change as the agent socializes, imitates his peers as well as undergoes formal education. Therefore, the agent’s habitus is a sum of dispositions that grounds his/her worldview and directs his/her trajectory within the chosen field of social practice. It is important to note that in the case of art criticism, the critic’s habitus needs to be in accord with that of his readership. Bourdieu argues that “a critic can only “influence” his readers insofar as they grant him this power because they are structurally attuned to him in their view of the social world, their tastes and their whole habitus.”¹⁹

Among the many scholars who investigated the applicability of the notion of habitus for art studies, Žilvinė Gaižutytė-Filipavičienė surveyed the genesis of the concept and reached the important conclusion that Bourdieu articulated the

18 Bourdieu 1986, 241–258

19 Bourdieu 1996, 240

notion of habitus by combining his insights on moral dispositions – systems of values (ethos) with research on linguistic competences and aesthetic dispositions (aisthesis). According to this scholar, Bourdieu thus proved that the comprehension of art is not only a sensual or emotional experience – simple aisthesis, but it is closely linked to such parameters as education, professional affinities and the cultural background of the beholder: all this paved the way for the amalgamation of ethos and aisthesis into the notion of habitus.²⁰ In other words, the theory of habitus helps to overthrow the erroneous truism of *de gustibus...*: to understand the dispositions that guide and form consumers' (and, indeed, critics) personal choices in cultural products is possible only by going back to their habitus – the initial system of dispositions that encompasses various objective parameters of capital(s), education, cultural experience, ethical attitudes, etc. It moreover helps to understand and to define the positions of the critics within the field of criticism as well as to draw its overall structural pattern.

The combination of ethos and aisthesis (as well as their possible conflict) is especially evident in the Bourdieusian interpretation of “popular” and “pure” aesthetics.²¹ To discriminate between the two types, Bourdieu uses criteria taken from ethics. He argues that popular aesthetics operates “in itself”, yet not “for itself”, and postulates that the continuity of life in art, subordinates form to function and, as such, is an absolute antipode to the Kantian idea of beauty. If the specifics of aesthetic judgement for Immanuel Kant meant a special disinterested gratification that cannot be utilitarian in any sense, popular aesthetics at their core have the requirement for art to fulfil a function (at least of sign pointing to reality beyond the art piece). Moreover, popular aesthetics, in their judgement, openly dwell on moral norms or the norms of pleasure. Therefore, the consumer of popular art is guided and his/her choices are governed by ethical (in contrast to aesthetical) principles.²² Curiously enough, in 1979 (the year of the first publication of *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*), Bourdieu noted that this consistency out of all forms of art is especially visible in theatre “where the working-class audience refuses any sort of formal experimentation and all the effects which, by introducing a distance from the accepted conventions (as regards scenery, plot etc.), tend to distance the spectator, preventing him from getting involved and fully identifying with the characters (I am thinking of Brechtian “alienation”).”²³

As to the competences required for the appreciation of “pure” aesthetics, Bourdieu begins with a critique of the model of the sensual perception of art. Dwelling on the classification proposed by Erwin Panofsky, where the sensual level of an artwork is merely a starting point for aesthetic experience and not its end, the sociologist argues that the sensual experience of art corresponds to a specific anti-intellectual stance. In his opinion, the lack of specific knowledge that enables one to perceive the work of art (or refusal to employ an intellectual

20 Gaižutytė-Filipavičienė 2005, 136

21 For a quick reference on the development of pure aesthetics see Bourdieu's article “The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic” published in “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism” in 1987.

22 Bourdieu 1996, 5

23 Bourdieu 1996, 4

approach for that matter), leaves the beholder at the sensual level of perception since, for further travel from the initial layer of meanings, a background of specific knowledge and vocabulary of terms is required, as only in this way is it possible to define the stylistic features of the piece.²⁴ Therefore, the encountering of an art work is not at all “love at first sight”: aesthetic contemplation should not be disengaged from intellectual procedures of enquiry and decoding.²⁵ This all encompasses the practical application of received knowledge and cultural competences and, according to Bourdieu, this type of intellectual theory of perception entirely disqualifies the sensual or physically pleasurable perception of art which is characteristic of the typical “art lover”. Therefore, the “pure” gaze for Bourdieu is (a) an aesthetical disposition that is reproduced by academic institutions and (b) an ability to perceive art “for itself”, in its form, and not in its function.²⁶ The “pure” gaze in its turn is directly connected to the emergence of an autonomous field of artistic production, one that is capable of implicating its own rules for the production and consumption of art.

The distinction that Bourdieu makes between two models of perception corresponds to two different types of consumption of art. “Popular” aesthetics accommodates the rational criterion of functionality where an art piece is understood as a part of everyday life. In contrast to that, consumption which is based on “pure” gaze implies an intellectual distance and arsenal of specialized knowledge. In terms of homology, these two models can be regarded as corresponding to the divisions within the social space, where groups of consumers are differentiated by unequal amounts of cultural capital in their possession and consequent ability to acknowledge the value of disinterested art.

In this perspective, a theatre critic, as someone presumably in possession of the greatest amount of cultural capital and specialized knowledge, should stand as an advocate of “purity” of aesthetics and supremacy of form. In reality however, positions that critics occupy and represent in their field are much more nuanced. The field of theatre criticism of late 1970s France that Bourdieu frequently evokes in *La Distinction* is structured along both sides of the Seine that functions both as a real and symbolic line dividing Right-bank from Left-bank critics, ones that favor either “technical skill, joie de vivre, clarity, ease, lightness, optimism”, and others that prefer “tedium, gloom, obscurity, pretentiousness, heaviness and pessimism.”²⁷ Moreover, these are the times when “each fraction of the dominant class has its own artists and philosophers, newspapers and critics, just as it has its hairdresser, interior decorator or tailor.”²⁸ In the course of the four decades that followed after the publication of *La Distinction*, oppositional divisions evidently became somewhat less clear-cut as was the case with conflict between the agents of the autonomous and heteronomous subfields in the field of art. Or, to be more precise, the hierarchies of values that critics rest their judgements on possibly run along different criteria. Nevertheless, the Bourdieusian interpretation

24 Bourdieu 1996, 2-3

25 Ibid.

26 Bourdieu 1996, 41-44

27 Bourdieu 1996, 235

28 Bourdieu 1996, 231

of “popular” and “pure” aesthetics, if regarded not as polar opposition but rather as a continuum or a sliding scale, can be an illuminating tool for understanding the anatomy of contemporary theatre criticism.

Nomos, doxa and illusio

For Bourdieu, any field of social practice is relatively autonomous – its autonomy resting on a particular *nomos* that is unique to every field and defines it as such. For instance, the field of art is defined by its *nomos* “art is art”.²⁹ Such a “law” separates the field of art from the field of, say, economics, with its mercantile and fiscal objectives and motivations for action enshrined by the *nomos* “business is business”. In *Les règles de l’art*, Bourdieu notes that the definition of the “real” artist (writer, scholar, etc.) as well as “real” art (literature, science, etc.) is established as a result of a long chain of exclusions and excommunications, which aim to disqualify those artists (writers, scholars, etc.), who disobey or violate rules implied by the *nomos* of a particular field. In the case of the field of art, such profanation is traditionally connected with commercial art aimed at profit as well as with politically engaged art aimed at social effect, since, in both cases, creation is motivated by rules external to the field of art proper.³⁰ It is herein that the field of criticism becomes essential as a part of the institutionalized system of “gatekeeping” that is invested with capabilities to accept or exclude artists and artworks from a canon of “real” or worthy art.

The phenomenon of “gatekeeping” is discussed in *Les règles de l’art* in the context of symbolic value that various intermediaries (publishers, gallerists, and indeed critics among others) add (or deny) to the artistic products: “The producer of the *value of the work of art* is not the artists but the field of production as a universe of belief which produces the value of work of art as a *fetish* by producing the belief in the creative power of an artist. Given that the work of art does not exist as a symbolic object endowed with special value unless it is known and recognized – that is to say, socially instituted as a work of art by spectators endowed with the aesthetic disposition and competence necessary to know it and recognize as such. <...> It must therefore take into account not only the direct producers of the work in its materiality (artist, writer, etc.), but also the ensemble of agents and institutions which participate in production of the work via the production of the belief.”³¹ Contributions that critics make towards the production of the value of the work of art are by no means arbitrary as they are deeply informed and influenced by the *nomos* of the field which, in its turn, depends on *doxa* or the phenomenon of unquestionable assumptions, i. e. set of beliefs that are self-evident for a given society.

Bourdieu defined his notion of *doxa* (ancient Greek for “to appear”, “to seem”, “to think” and “to accept”) in his 1972 book *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique*: “Because the subjective necessity and self-evidence of the commonsense world are validated by the objective consensus on the sense of the world, that is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying*: the tradition is silent, not

29 Bourdieu 1995, 223

30 Ibid.

31 Bourdieu 1995, 229

least about itself as a tradition; customary law is content to enumerate specific applications of principles, which remain implicit and unformulated, because unquestioned; <...> and nothing is further from the correlative notion of the *majority* than the *unanimity* of *doxa*, the aggregate of “choices” whose subject is everyone and no one because the questions they answer cannot be explicitly asked.”³² For the aim of this article the notion of *doxa* is important as it serves as one of the parameters that help to understand differences among the art makers, critics, and consumers. In *La Distinction* Bourdieu observes that one’s initial experience of the social world is in fact an experience of the *doxa*, i. e. an agreement to comply with an order which, as a compulsory element for understanding the world, is accepted without asking.³³ The shape of the society is perceived gradually, and the perception is facilitated by various forms of distinction and distinction-making that spring out and indicate different conditions of existence. Social differences are being established by acceptance and rejection, by relational strategies determined by the social structure (marriages, romances, contracts, etc.) as well as a plethora of hierarchies and classifications that are reflected in objects (especially cultural products), institutions (system of education, for instance), or – simply – in the form of one’s language. The perception and sustainability of the social structure is thus assured by most of the judgements and verdicts as well as acts of the redressing of the symbolic order that happen in private (in family) or at institutional levels (e.g., in the system of education). That is how social differentiation becomes a principle for differentiation, which generates further images of the social world: objective lines of division become a sense of division – the practical instinct of objective limits, i. e. sense of one’s place, which encourages the agent to reject everything (goods, persons, places, etc.) that he/she was separated from.³⁴ Hence, it is the *doxa* that is behind the patterns of the agents’ movements in the social space as well as at the bottom of their choices.

The analysis of the Bourdieusian notion of *doxa* leads to another concept – *illusio*. As the *doxa* requires the practical implementation of its rules and principles, Bourdieu introduces the term of *illusio* – a fulfilment of *doxa* via game according to the rules (Latin *in* + *ludo* = to play). The term was developed in his “Méditations pascaliennes” and “La Domination masculine”, where it is defined as “investment in social games”.³⁵ According to the sociologist, every field of social practice creates its’ own specific form of *illusio* – a system that mobilizes and motivates agents of the field and fuels their competitiveness (for instance, *illusio* in the field of economics is utilitarian interest, an aim to maximize financial gain). On the other hand, *illusio* is also an illusory and relative phenomenon: in spite of the *nomos* of the field of art (“art is art”), it would be naïve to exclude the element of financial profit from its *illusio*. Thus, Bourdieu argues, that *illusio* is a game that the agent of the field of social practice is interested in, as *illusio* represents a combination of the agents’ habitus and the specifics of the field itself.³⁶

32 Bourdieu 1995’, 167–168

33 Bourdieu 1996, 471

34 Bourdieu 1996, 470-471

35 Bourdieu 2000, 208 and Bourdieu 2001, 48

36 Bourdieu 1995, 230-231

Theatre criticism and symbolic violence

The last important notion that has to be mentioned is symbolic violence. For Bourdieu symbolic violence is primarily associated with systems of education.³⁷ However, press and art, in terms of institutions that function as facilitators for social agents to internalize (or to reject) the system of domination as their seemingly natural position in the social space, are also extremely influential. In this article I propose to regard theatre criticism as one of the channels for symbolic violence. To do so a little summation could be helpful: the characteristics of the main notions of “field sociology” explain and support the idea of symbolic violence as a tool for sustaining the legitimate *status quo* within the social space.

To begin with, “field sociology” argues that symbolic social space is constructed out of relatively autonomous fields of social practice (politics, economy, art, religion, etc.). The number of fields is proportional to the level of differentiation and complexity of the division of labour in a given society. According to Bourdieu, the autonomy of every field is defined by its characteristic *nomos*, or “the law”, that is necessarily different from the *nomoi* of the other fields. *Nomoi*, however, are closely related to the *doxa* that is typical to a given society at a given time, i. e. the unquestionable image of the world and its order that functions as essentially an artificial factor supporting the structure of society at a pre-reflexive level of the agents. Consequently, *doxa*, as both a symbolic backbone and a set of rules of the society, has to be realized in practice: such an implication Bourdieu terms *illusio* – a game according to the rules, set by *doxa* of every social space. Every field of social practice creates a form of *illusio* of its own, and it functions as a mobilizing and motivating force for its agents.

Another essential feature of social space and fields of social practice is their hierarchical structure, where the dominant position is related to the disposition of capital (economic, social, cultural or symbolic). The field of biggest resources occupies the dominant position in the social space, whereas its characteristic values, the understanding of the world order (*doxa*) and the derivative rules of the game (*illusio*) are legitimated (i. e. applicable to all) in order to sustain the *status quo*. The biggest resources of symbolic capital are likely to be found in the field of political power that preserves its dominant position as long as its agents accept its symbolic power. The preservation of this concord is supported by a system of the reproduction of legitimate *doxa* that functions on an institutional level (family, education) or is realized voluntarily when an agent accepts legitimated *illusio*. Bourdieu calls this system of reproduction a symbolic violence: a particular type of violence that affects an agent in his/her own complicity.³⁸ According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is so effective precisely because it is based on an agent’s pre-reflexive assumptions.³⁹ These founding experiences are further solidified by the system of education directly related to the field of political power, and by *illusio* after the agent joins the field of social practice of his/her choice. Conformity to or rejection of a particular *illusio* is fundamentally influential to the agent’s further

37 For more on this subject, see Bourdieu, Pierre & Passeron, Jean-Claude. 1970. *La Reproduction: éléments d’une théorie du système d’enseignement*. Paris: Les éditions de Minuit.

38 Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 167-168

39 Ibid.

trajectory within the field in terms of upward or downward mobility on the scale of social hierarchy.

As established before, the field of theatre criticism can be located in-between the field of theatre and the fields of power (economic or political) in its capacity to mediate between the theatre and various forms of capital. This mediation, however, is reciprocal: the production “happens” in the public space and become social via critical texts. By the same token however, the texts symbolically represent and express the reaction to the production as it occurs in different sections of social space. Hence, the field of theatre criticism can be regarded as a meeting place for different systems of values represented by various fields of social practice and their different *nomoi*. The subsequent combination of different *nomoi* can also be regarded as its characteristic feature, granting relative autonomy of the field. The field of theatre criticism is thus not identical or overlapping with that of theatre, or with those of economic or political power.

The relativity of autonomy here is an essential parameter as it influences the intensity of a possible conflict or “miscommunication” between the theatre and the market or political power. The conflict that critical texts express explicitly springs out of a collision between the *nomos* of reversed economics and pursuits of utilitarian interests, characteristic to fields that the field of theatre is primarily connected with. These ties act like an external system of limitations and requirements that can be communicated via the critics’ texts. The critics in their turn follow the principle of either external or internal hierarchization: the former, according to Bourdieu, is imposed by a subfield that, in a given time, is dominant in the field of political (or economic) power and designates the criteria for success (such as commercial efficiency, popular or official acknowledgement, etc.)⁴⁰ According to this principle, the most successful artists are those that either are favoured by a mass audience, or contribute to the reproduction of societal *doxa* and hence are worthy to be included into a canon of official culture. In contrast, the internal principle of hierarchization favours those artists who (at least in their early career) are known and appreciated by their fellow artists and selected connoisseurs only, and who sustain the prestige of their work by renouncing the demands of “popular” aesthetics or political conformism.

Accordingly, theatre critics, mediating between two (or more) fields, can channel principles of either internal or external hierarchization. The field of theatre criticism can function as a tool for the implication of an external *nomos* into the field of theatre, or *vice versa*, it can serve as a bridge for a system of values specific to the field of theatre into the social space. Here, one can remind oneself of the different types of positions the critics assume that Albert Thibaudet called “the simple men” (members of the audience, journalists), “the professionals” (academics) and “the artists”.⁴¹ These positions, corresponding to values, interests, and rules of different fields of social practice, create the structure of the field of theatre criticism and reveal the channels of symbolic violence. Dwelling on values common for fields of power, part of the critics in their verdicts indicate the guidelines for artists who, by following them, can

40 Bourdieu 1995, 217

41 Ferenczi 2003, 13-14

expect external acknowledgement (popularity, financial success or symbolic consecration). Another part of the critics siding with and defending the *nomos* of disinterested art, not only propagate the principle of internal hierarchization, but also expose the *doxa* that underpins the structure of social space and its possible inconsistencies.

It is worth stopping for a moment at the political aspect of the dynamics that are created by the agents of the fields of art. In his analysis of logic behind structural changes within the field of artistic production, Bourdieu notes that the consequences of the inner transformations of the fields are also observable in the social space that envelops them.⁴² According to the sociologist, artists who dominated the field *before* the change occurred consistently maintained their position by establishing their names in the market and becoming more and more recognizable and acknowledgeable (as it was noted before, official acknowledgement might indicate that the artists' work was recognized as beneficial for the reproduction of the *doxa*). A new artist appearing and establishing him/herself might, in fact, downgrade the already established art, its makers and consumers as well as the system of tastes in the past. Such a situation is especially evident in times when the field of artistic production increases its autonomy, and its agents begin to supply innovative products that require a new system of taste. Therefore, Bourdieu argues, the dynamics of change within the field of artistic production define more than a change in aesthetic taste (i. e. within the system of preferences that guide consumer choices). If dominant or subordinate positions within the field of artistic production are homologous to the hierarchies of aesthetic preferences in societies, then the general transformation within the field initiates the same within the system of taste, but this time as a hierarchized system of distinction between societal groups.⁴³ That is why it seems natural that when a change within the field of artistic production is significant enough to transcend its boundaries, it provokes a reaction in a society: favourable, in the case of the fraction that aims to dominate, and antagonistic in the case of the already dominant one that instinctively seeks to sustain its *status quo* even in terms of its aesthetic preferences. This model can be traceable when surveying reconfigurations within the field of theatre criticism where major changes in the field of theatre were greeted (or damned) as almost a political *coup d'état*.

Oskaras Koršunovas' rise to consecrated avant-garde

Oskaras Koršunovas, one of the most prominent Lithuanian directors, debuted in 1990 while still a student of the Lithuanian State Conservatoire.⁴⁴ In terms of his initial place in the field of theatre, the dominant positions at the time were held by the directors Rimas Tuminas, Jonas Vaitkus, and Eimuntas Nekrošius. The triad together with their lesser known colleagues represented the typical tendencies of Lithuanian theatre developed in the late Soviet period: *auteur*

42 Bourdieu 1995, 251-252

43 Ibid.

44 Koršunovas belongs to the first generation of Lithuanian theatre directors who have not undergone compulsory studies in Russia, which was a standard practice during the Soviet occupation (1940–1990). The same practice was implemented in the case of theatre scholars.

theatre, metaphorical, and highly visual communication, a strong bedrock in the Stanislavskian method of physical actions,⁴⁵ and a romantic understanding of the mission that the theatre has towards people in general and Lithuanian society in particular. In contrast, one of the most important features of Koršunovas' creative trajectory was (and still is) visibility and aesthetic relevance to the international milieu. The director debuted internationally in the same year as nationally, and his very first production, *Ten būti čia* ("There To Be Here"), was awarded The Scotsman Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the same year, 1990. Thus, atypically for a beginner, Koršunovas began his career with a relatively high degree of consecration specific to the *nomos* of the field of theatre.

The Lithuanian critics in their reviews of Koršunovas' first and subsequent productions on the second stage of a major institution – the Lithuanian Academic Drama Theatre (*Senė* ("The Old Woman", 1992), *Labas Sonia Nauji Metai* ("Hello Sonia New Year", 1994), *Senė 2* ("The Old Woman 2", 1994) helped build his status as a "young and promising" director further. Some went as far as calling the director (still in his twenties) "a virtuoso",⁴⁶ the "first in line of the Lithuanian avant-garde".⁴⁷ But the common denominator in the reviews, especially those written by the critics in their forties and younger, was the insight that Koršunovas' work was somehow very different from the main currents in Lithuanian theatre.⁴⁸

The first major move that could be regarded as Koršunovas' attempt to secure a dominant position in the field of theatre occurred in 1997 with the opening of his *P.S. byla O.K.* ("P.S. Case O.K.") – a devised production in cooperation with the writer and playwright Sigitas Parulskis. Unlike his previous works, *P.S. byla O.K.* was created for the main stage of the Academic Drama Theatre (renamed the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre from 1998) and was challenging on many levels – aesthetic, ideological, organizational, and even physical as it ran for several hours and had no coherent plot, nor conventional characters. The critical reception of *P.S. byla O.K.* reveals a pattern of the symbolic struggle for the re-definition of legitimate art that involved agents of different habitus and positions within the field of criticism, whereby the pages of the cultural weekly *Literatūra ir menas* ("Literature and Art") were turned into a major battlefield.

Considering such parameters as age, schooling as well as cultural and political context of their entry into the field, the critics that were active in the field of Lithuanian theatre criticism in the Nineties represented three groups or generations.⁴⁹ The first debuted in the Fifties and the Sixties (some even in the Thirties and Forties), the second group of the forty and fifty somethings debuted in the Seventies and the Eighties, and the third group began their careers in the late Eighties to early Nineties.⁵⁰ *Literatūra ir menas* in its coverage of *P.S. byla O.K.* initially published an interview with a representative of the first group, who decidedly denounced the production as amoral and unprofessional, mentioning

45 Marcinkevičiūtė 2009, 535-536

46 Vanagaitė 2009, 66

47 Vasiliauskas 2009, 52

48 For a rich collection of largely favourable reviews, see *OKT: būti čia*. 2009. Vilnius: OKT / Vilniaus miesto teatras.

49 Drobyšaitė 2000, 14

50 Ibid.

the need for a body that would control the work of young artists.⁵¹ The second publication was written by a representative of the third group who diagnosed a generational clash between the critics in terms of understanding what theatre is, what it has to look like, and what it has to do.⁵² In the third publication of the series, another representative of the first group declared her refusal to evaluate the production on the grounds that it was not comprehensible.⁵³ In an interesting twist the editors of the weekly then published a short collection of generally favourable reflections by three students, who read theatre criticism at the Lithuanian Academy of Music,⁵⁴ after which the previous critic revisited the production and in a new review declared it worthwhile.⁵⁵ In a sort of *audiatur et altera pars* Koršunovas himself was then given a voice and produced an interview tellingly called “Postmodernism means having no other choice”.⁵⁶ As a curious coda to this symbolic consecration, another collection of favourable reflections was published. This time it was written by Russian and Ukrainian critics representing major Russian publications.⁵⁷ The theses by Vladas Vasiliauskas, the critic of the middle generation, could be used to sum it all up: 1. Koršunovas has no company, premises, nor works under institutional support, yet, he makes internationally acclaimed productions that attract a “different” audience than the regulars at the Academic Drama Theatre; 2. *P.S. byla O.K.* avoids the emotional impact of lecturing on existential issues, as well as national sentimentality – everything that is usually dear to Lithuanian theatre makers; 3. Koršunovas is the only Lithuanian director that tries to employ the logic and idioms of contemporary art; 4. *P.S. byla O.K.* makes him “the fourth” director alongside Tuminas, Vaitkus, and Nekrošius.⁵⁸

A clash of different habitus is evident at the core of this symbolic struggle to define what is legitimate art. The bewilderment as well as enthusiasm of the critics confronted with a postmodern aesthetic vocabulary on the stage of a national institution was itself fuelled by a schism that occurred in Lithuanian societal *doxa* after 1990. The traditional image of national identity with its stable, i.e. ethnic markers after the country regained its sovereignty, gradually bifurcated into parallel yet interconnected conceptions of national and transnational identity, and the decisive role in the process of identification of Lithuanianness was taken by the markers of an emotional and moral dimension.⁵⁹ Therefore, the representatives of the older generation, still preserving symbolic capital and

51 “Ir mane durną...” 1997, 10

52 Jauniškis 1997, 10. Directly below the review the editors placed the information on publication of the first issue of *Teatras* (The Theatre), a first specialized magazine on theatre of the Nineties, mentioning that several articles there are dedicated to “P.S. Case O. K.”

53 Girdzijauskaitė 1997, 10

54 “Atsiliepiant į Sigito Parulskio ir Oskaro Koršunovo spektaklį“ 1997, 12

55 Girdzijauskaitė, 1997’ 10. The critic mentioned that after her first review was published a famous artist wondered if she had joined “the demented”

56 Koršunovas 1997, 10

57 ““P.S. byla O.K.”: nauji paradymai” 1997, 11

58 Vasiliauskas 1997, 8. After the success of *P.S. byla O.K.* and meeting with actor and manager Martynas Budraitis and stage designer Jūratė Paulėkaitė, Koršunovas began to contemplate establishing his own company.

59 Kuznecovienė 2006, 107

authority, discredited *P.S. byla O.K.* in an instinctive defence of traditional cultural dispositions and the *nomos* that in the mid-Nineties was already becoming alien to the field of theatre. The advocates of the new *nomos* in their turn used all the methods and techniques available to legitimise and reproduce their habitus, even convincing some of their adversaries to change their mind by inducing a fear of losing credibility and relevance.

To my mind, Koršunovas' rise to the consecrated avant-garde was symbolically completed in 2010 when Arūnas Gelūnas, the Minister of Culture at the time, stated, "In our opinion, Martynas Budraitis, who won the competition [to become general manager of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre] and is mostly associated with Oskaras Koršunovas <...> can successfully run the Theatre in accordance with the expectations and conception of the national theatre that is prevalent in the cultural *milieu* and the entire society."⁶⁰

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to propose an understanding of theatre criticism as a field of social practice – as a semi-autonomous space defined by a tension between conflicting interests of theatre on the one hand, and of fields external to it (market and / or political power), on the other. The internal structure of the field of theatre criticism is formed out of a changeable balance between critics who occupy a position heteronomous to the fields of political and / or economic power, and critics, who sustain the *nomos* characteristic to the field of theatre. Hence, the dynamics of the field of theatre criticism, the mechanisms that hierarchize and motivate its agents as well as patterns of its internal change are homologous to those occurring in the fields of artistic production and political and / or economic power.

The Bourdieusian idea of symbolic violence, if applied to theatre criticism, underpins the reconstruction of the matrix of hierarchized positions that critics assume in a given time and place. The practice performed by critics – the agents of the field of theatre criticism – can be considered as acts of symbolic violence in a fight over the authority and legitimate right to decide which art is worthy of acknowledgement, thus reinforcing or inhibiting theatre that supports the *doxa* of the social structure. Thus, some of the critics, the ones that are in possession of the greatest symbolic capital, most effectively support or deny the value of theatre that is considered legitimate. In this respect the changes that occur within the field of theatre and of power are directly interconnected with re-hierarchizations within the field of theatre criticism. In terms of the capacity for official consecration, the critics that represent the dominant societal fraction in the fields of theatre and of power sit at the top of the hierarchy. The ones that represent subordinate fractions can function as intermediaries for alternative consecration, spreading the alternative understanding of values in art. It is possible to imagine autonomous critics, dwelling on the ethos and aesthetic criteria of the "pure" gaze, performing specific consecration. Thus, the critical discourse becomes a continuum where opposing conceptions of art sit at opposite ends. In a given field of criticism, the constellation of the positions along the continuum reveal the unique combination

60 "M. Budraitis pradeda vadovauti Nacionaliniam dramos teatrui", 2010

of the possibilities for specific consecration to turn into the official one.

In the same way as Bourdieusian ideas cannot be detached from their political implications, theatre criticism as a form of social practice is also underpinned by the political effects it creates. For instance, the principle of disinterested art as well as the struggle for its acknowledgement can be regarded as a political stance, a way of questioning social *doxa*. However, cultural dispositions demonstrated by the critics of the greatest symbolic capital can be taken as homologous to those of the dominant fractions of society. The temporal dimension and reconfigurations of the positions within the field of theatre criticism cannot be separated from general changes that occur in the overlapping social space, and in fact should be regarded as mutually interrelated.

Finally, it could be argued that from a contemporary perspective Bourdieusian notions and ideas are too rigid, the models that they propose are too normative and determinist, whereas their transplantation into the theory of theatre criticism might resemble a return to the dated schemes of class warfare. After all, art itself has grown suspicious of some of its most revered values (such as beauty and authenticity, for example) and political power is more willing to accept disinterested art than ever. Nevertheless, in times when theatre criticism has become a part of the technologically expanded public sphere, where, as Rónán McDonald notes, discussion on culture is atomized and “everybody’s interests are catered for, nobody’s challenged”⁶¹, Bourdieusian formulas might prove very helpful for ordering, classifying, and ultimately understanding patterns and motives behind theatre making, its consumption, and communication.

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61 McDonald 2007, 16

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A Literary (Techno)science

The Silent Speech of Erkki Kurenniemi's 2048 Performance

WADE HOLLINGSHAUS

ABSTRACT

Beginning in the late 1970s, Finland's Erkki Kurenniemi (1941-2017) actively labored to archive every possible aspect of his life. He took photos, made videos, and collected his tram tickets, receipts, body hairs, etc. Kurenniemi believed that within the next forty years, computer technoscience will have advanced sufficiently that it could be programmed to interpret the data of his archive and—on his 107th birthday, 10 July 2018—resurrect his consciousness. For Kurenniemi, this project was an experiment in the realms of neuroscience and artificial intelligence. However, it can also be seen as an experiment in aesthetics, or in what Jacques Rancière calls the “aesthetic regime” of art—an aesthetic-political historical framework imbued with the dynamics of democracy, where “everything speaks.” This article reframes Kurenniemi's work within the aesthetic regime of art to draw attention to the “silent speech” and “aesthetic unconscious” (Rancière) of the work and what is the literary nature of Kurenniemi's experiments with (techno)science.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, Archive, Finland, Erkki Kurenniemi, Literary, Performance, Philosophy, Jacques Rancière, Technoscience

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A Literary (Techno)science The Silent Speech of Erkki Kurenniemi's 2048 Performance

During his human life—we have yet to see what he will be in his post-human life—Erkki Kurenniemi (1941-2017) was not a principal figure in the debates surrounding the possibility for computers to simulate human consciousness, although he clearly aligned with those that believe such is eventually possible. For decades, Finland's Kurenniemi speculated on this proposition. In an interview conducted by filmmaker Mika Taanila, he explains: “We think of the brain as a neural net computer. We’re rapidly discovering how the brain works. There are still big open questions, but I’m sure they will be solved too. These include the essence of consciousness, character personality or identity and all the features traditionally connected to a biological, living being ... and to man in particular. They are all universal, independent of underlying material. In other words, as soon as it’s technically possible, our consciousness, mind and personality can enter a computer. Man can be simulated with adequate precision, meaning that you and your closest friends think that you are alive, conscious and have retained your personality, although its house of dust no longer exists.”¹ Arguably the most striking evidence of Kurenniemi’s commitment to this proposition was the project that dominated the last five decades of his life—what, for our purposes here, I refer to as the “2048 Performance.” In the late 1970s, Kurenniemi actively began collecting physical artifacts of his daily life: everything from tram tickets and receipts to body hairs. He claimed to take about twenty thousand photos a year, though he believed that he should double that. He was preferential to video recording, but for practical reasons, he typically utilized still photography, all of which he stored in computer files. Also, he generated dozens of journals, in which he wrote anything that came into his mind. Kurenniemi was, to use his word, “manic” about archiving his life, because he believed that technoscience² will have developed sufficiently that

1 Taanila 2002, 299. Taanila conducted this interview in conjunction with his documentary on Kurenniemi, *The Future is Not What It Used to Be*. Larger portions of the text, inclusive of this quote, also appear in the film.

2 I borrow the term “technoscience” from Bruno Latour, who early in *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* uses it as a replacement for the longer “science and technology” (1987, 29). The concept refers to practices that bring technological development

computers can use this archive to reanimate his consciousness on his 107th birthday, 10 July 2048.³

Kurenniemi did not provide any clear detail on the technoscience requisite for the 2048 Performance. What he did provide constitutes either broad generalities about the nature of the technologies required or grand circumscriptions like his notion of “supermegatechnologies”—an extrapolation on information technologies, biotechnologies, and nanotechnologies.⁴ His vision for the final format of the project seems to be based purely in electronic digital technologies and not a hybridization of body, organs, and technology, the likes of which Stelarc describes in his work on the deconstruction of the body—although Kurenniemi and Stelarc seem to be cut from the same futurist cloth.⁵ That said, Kurenniemi’s lack of specificity does not rule out the possibility that biological or other organic materials will be a part of the final/inaugural performance.⁶ Whatever the format, the gap between current technology and the necessary technology is still wide. After all, Kurenniemi’s project depends upon a computer that has yet to be invented. This lack of technological detail notwithstanding, Kurenniemi positions his project as a technoscientific one, an experiment on the relationship of mind, body, and technology.⁷ Be that as it may, there are a number of scholars who have become interested in the project, less for the contributions it might make to the debates between computer scientists and philosophers of mind, and more for the other implications presented by the project.

Not just a site of experimentation for technoscientists, the 2048 Performance also provides a site for discussing issues relevant to historiography and aesthetics. The project invites historiographical questions in the fact that the intention of the project extends beyond generating a new computerized consciousness and proposes to reanimate a consciousness that already has a history and historicity to it. This aspect of the project invites a reevaluation of the nature of memory and the role that archives and archiving play in the production of history. Many of these questions have been ably addressed in the small but growing amount of research that has been conducted on the 2048 Performance,

to bear on scientific investigation and vice versa. In the context of Kurenniemi, this would include the mutual studies occurring between computer science and neurological and cognitive science. It should also be noted, however, that while Latour begins his book with this simple definition, much of the book argues that science and technology never were actually separate and, that being the case, were also always social. I would hope that that resonance of “technoscience” also adds nuance to Kurenniemi’s work and, specifically, his 2048 Performance.

3 In *The Future is Not What It Used to Be*, Kurenniemi states, “I register everything with manic precision. Video recording, take notes with a cell phone every minute on the most trivial things: how much a cup of coffee is, what the people in a particular bar look like and so on” (2002, 2:35). Later in the documentary, he again refers to his registering of the archived files as “manic” (42:16).

4 Kurenniemi 1999-2000.

5 See for example, Stelarc 2013.

6 Whether biological materials are utilized in the final performance or not, it does seem that, drawing on Jens Hauser’s work on biotechnologies, the biological would likely manifest in some way to ground what is performed as authentically “Kurenniemi” (2013).

7 For an extrapolation on and analysis of Kurenniemi’s ideas of reanimation through a technological archive, see Ernst 2015.

localized in two anthologies on Kurenniemi and his work, *Erkki Kurenniemi: A Man from the Future* and *Writing and Unwriting (Media) Art History: Erkki Kurenniemi in 2048*. In these volumes—both of which were published before Kurenniemi’s human death in 2017—scholarship on the aesthetic implications of the 2048 Performance is even less abundant, but not less significant. Not surprisingly, that scholarship echoes in its scope Kurenniemi’s own theorizing on his artistic practice: embracing the productive entanglement of art, man, technology, and archives.

The present essay intends to follow suit, recognize the entanglement of these various components and tease what implications it can out of it. Beginning as we have with the idea that Kurenniemi intended the 2048 Performance to capture and eventually reanimate his consciousness through technological means, what follows will build upon the historiographical and aesthetic analyses that have already been conducted on the project, in order ultimately to argue that despite and in some ways because of Kurenniemi’s attention to the technological, his project is essentially a literary one. Kurenniemi archived in anticipation of a forthcoming performance of his conscious, but there is already in the archive—inclusive of his own writings about the archive—an unconscious that speaks forth literarily. Pursuant to this argument is my contention that Kurenniemi’s thinking regarding the 2048 Performance was delimited by the historical conditions of what Jacques Rancière calls the aesthetic regime of art, an historical period (our period) in which all objects, significant or not, are potentially perceived as art insofar as they can be perceived to possess “silent speech,” a form of expressivity written within them. Even without the materializing technology of a computer-like device, the artifacts of Kurenniemi’s life already speak forth silently and literarily; they are already a performance of Kurenniemi’s consciousness.

Kurenniemi’s 2048 Performance project brings into a single site, issues related to mind, body, technology, memory, archive, and art. This presents a complex nexus of possibilities for research and theorization. Kurenniemi’s project raises questions for many current scholarly discussions. Much if not most of the scholarship that has begun on Kurenniemi’s project has been located in relation to the growing discourse on new media arts. This is perhaps not surprising when one recognizes that Kurenniemi first began exploring the possibilities for computers in music and other art forms in the 1960s, the decade that Sean Cubitt and Paul Thomas identify as home to “the early experiments in digital arts” and what would become new media arts.⁸ Kurenniemi’s career as a new media technoscientist and artist is contemporary with the development of new media and new media arts. In their summary of the current state of new media arts, Cubitt and Thomas offer a description that very nearly describes Kurenniemi and his four-plus decades of work on the 2048 Performance. They write: “As the field matures, the bones of the practice are slowly becoming clear: a passion for archives, documentation, and oral history, for the look and feel of past events and works, some of which are irreparably lost, and a care for the

8 Cubitt and Thomas 2013, 10.

specificity not just of works and practices but also scenes.”⁹ With its reliance upon the new media arts scholarship that grounds most Kurenniemi research thus far, the present essay recognizes the value that Kurenniemi’s project is as a site for new media arts studies. That said, the article locates itself chiefly within the context of the current Kurenniemi scholarship and makes at times references to further work anthologized in Cubitt and Thomas’s volume *Relive: Media Art Histories*, the title of which also strongly resonates with Kurenniemi’s project. Defining what is meant by “relive,” Cubitt and Thomas suggest, “the bringing back to life, to live otherwise [...], and to live again.”¹⁰ Kurenniemi lives to relive, whatever that might be.

Kurenniemi’s Aesthetics

Kurenniemi was a formidable figure of the Finnish avant-garde for over half a century. Through an eclectic array of creative pursuits, he distinguished himself as an innovator in the fields of technoscience, art, and philosophy. In the very early 1960s, Kurenniemi developed an electronic studio for the musicology department at the University of Helsinki. In August 1963, he joined with U.S.-American avant-gardist Terry Riley to create the first Happening in Finland. Soon after, he began his collaborations with noted underground digital musician M. A. Numminen and the band Sperm. Rounding out the decade, Kurenniemi composed music for a number of short non-narrative films. In the 1970s, he headed Digelius Electronics, a company that manufactured electronic products, ranging from dairy automatics to some of the world’s first digital musical instruments. Throughout the seventies, Kurenniemi focused intently on developing these musical instruments, called DIMIs, to produce minimalist soundscapes from a variety of visual or biofeedback inputs: a dancer’s movements, the movement of a group of actors in a production of Samuel Beckett’s *Act Without Words II*, a single actor’s facial movements, and also a transcutaneous electrical circuit created by a group of four individuals who would connect their bodies together in a variety of improvised structures. Beginning in these same years and continuing into the 1990s, Kurenniemi was involved in a number of other artistic outlets, including painting and partnerships with Finnish avant-garde artist groups, Dimensio and Datart.¹¹

Although not all of Kurenniemi’s experiments in technoscience were equally also artistic experiments, and although not all of his artistic experiments were equally also technoscientific experiments, his oeuvre clearly evidences a commitment to exploring the relationship between the two. This is corroborated by Kurenniemi’s philosophical writings, in which he regularly theorizes how each informs and transforms the other. Aspects of this are seen in one of his most well-known essays, “Message is Massage,” and also in the unpublished “Computer-Integrated Art,” but the clearest example resides in “Computer

9 Ibid. 10.

10 Ibid. 22.

11 Taanila provides an effective summary of Kurenniemi’s career as a scientist, artist, philosopher, etc. and also the concept of the 2048 Performance, in his documentary *The Future is Not What It Used to Be* (2002).

Eats Art,” in which he describes the stages by which the divisions between art, computers, and humans disappear. First, the existing art forms begin to utilize computers to expand their capacities. This leads to new art forms, which eventually become “fused together into an all-encompassing and pure computer art.”¹² He further argues that as computers become more human-like, humans also become more computer like, to the point that human and computer will “eventually coalesce.”¹³ The logical consequence of all of this is that art, computers, and humans enter into a new amalgamated whole.

The coming inseparability between art, computers, and humans is a central theme in Kurenniemi’s oeuvre. With this in mind, it might seem odd that his most ambitious experiment, the 2048 Performance, does not seem to be directly connected to questions of artistic practice. The project does not resemble traditional types of artistic works, the types that Kurenniemi engaged throughout his career: music, dance, theatre, and painting. However, as Lars Bang Larsen and also Geoff Cox, Nicolas Malevé, and Michael Murtaugh evidence, the 2048 Performance aligns well with the trajectory of artistic development that Kurenniemi had plotted. In his essay “The Unbearable Non-Artist from ‘L’Homme machine’ to Algorithmic Afterlife: Non-Cartesian Cybernetics and Aesthetic Embodiment in Erkki Kurenniemi,” Larsen recognizes that while Kurenniemi did engage in the creation of art works, the fragmentation and “sense of incompleteness” that “pervades all that Kurenniemi touched in his working life” has rendered a Kurenniemi that is a “fractured whole” and that has made of his life a work of art.¹⁴ The implication of Larsen’s analysis is that the 2048 Performance is the culmination of a lifetime of work leading to the collapse of “life,” “art,” and “work.” Cox, Malevé, and Murtaugh, in “Archiving the Databody: Human and Nonhuman Agency in the Documents of Erkki Kurenniemi,” relate how the Brussels-based artistic collective Constant utilizes mechanized computational media technology to engage Kurenniemi’s archive in the formation of a new online artistic creation, titled “(preliminary work towards) an online archive.”¹⁵ Constant’s work engages Kurenniemi’s “fractured whole”—to borrow Larsen’s phrase—in a textual dialogue that both writes and un-writes Kurenniemi while also writing and un-writing this new work of art.¹⁶

Taken all together, Larsen and Cox, et al. describe a 2048 Performance that is clearly a step toward fulfilling Kurenniemi’s prophecy of the dissolution of the definitions that separate artists from works of art and also that separate one work of art from another and one artist from another. In his futuristic thinking,

12 Kurenniemi 1972-82, 98.

13 Ibid. 103-05.

14 Larsen 2015, 113.

15 In Cox, Murtaugh, and Malevé, the authors render the title of the project “(Preliminary Work) Toward an Online Archive” (125). I have opted to render it as it appears on the project’s website (Constant n.d.).

16 In “Australian Video Art Histories: A Media Arts Archaeology for the Future,” Ross Harley asks, “[C]an we imagine a media arts archaeology for the future that capitalizes on the open access culture of today’s Internet culture and technology?” (2013 221). Constant’s use of (a portion) of Kurenniemi’s digital archive to both write and un-write Kurenniemi provides another way to imagine an answer.

Kurenniemi sees this as a move toward redefining the entire state of art. One way of interpreting Kurenniemi's claim for the dissolution of the contours that give definition to art is to posit that art as a category disappears, but this does not seem to be Kurenniemi's position. Larsen intimates a different interpretation when he identifies Kurenniemi as a "non-artist."¹⁷ What I read Larsen to mean vis-à-vis this epithet is not simply that Kurenniemi was not an artist, but rather Kurenniemi was an artist that was also not an artist—that he creates art works that are not art works. Such is readily conceivable in an age where everything can be a work of art. If this was Kurenniemi's sensibility, then what he described as a future state of art is actually further evidence of a state of art that Rancière argues has already been with us for over a century, what he calls the "aesthetic regime of art"—an historical condition by virtue of which art can be seen in everything, even and perhaps especially in those things/objects that do not have a place in the traditional taxonomy of art objects.

Kurenniemi's theorizing regarding the future state of art was such because his thinking was delimited by the conditions of the aesthetic regime of art. There is a sense, then, that what Kurenniemi imagined was/is in large part already here, even without the patina of science fiction that often attends Kurenniemi's speculations.¹⁸ One clear example of this is "A Video Letter to the Future," which Kurenniemi made in 1990, for the express purpose of being presented as a part of the 2048 Performance. In an excerpt from the video, Kurenniemi stands in a room with a handful of friends and discusses with them the reason for the document: "Should we underline it or is it clear that here and now we're doing a posthumous video, a work of art, or a collective work based on the idea that it will be a part of my vast collection of tapes on similar and many other situations. The premiere will be in 2048. July 10, 2048." One of Kurenniemi's friends then asks where this premiere will take place, to which Kurenniemi responds, "On the net, no particular place. You can watch it anywhere with a headband video. Any channel. No commercial breaks."¹⁹

In addition to the brief insight the excerpt provides into what Kurenniemi imagined of the 2048 Performance, the excerpt reveals how Kurenniemi's thinking reflects the conditioning of the aesthetic regime of art. He refers to the video as a work of art, but the video, such as it is, does not much resemble what might traditionally be called art. "Traditionally" here does not mean to refer to so-called classical art or art works that more culturally conservative patrons would agree to classify as art. The avant-garde digital music that Kurenniemi was making in the 1960s challenged the typical musical forms of the age, but at the same time, that music satisfied the empirical requirements for what qualified as music. It just did not meet the taste requirements of all listeners.

17 Larsen 2015, 113.

18 While Rancière develops and historicizes his theory of the aesthetic regime primarily in the context of French literary and artistic history, an argument can be made that the shift to the aesthetic has also occurred in Finland over the last few centuries. Evidences of this shift, other than in relation to Kurenniemi, can be seen in comparing, for example, the aesthetic philosophies of Fredrik Cygnaeus, Yrjö Hirn, and Karle Sanfrid Laurila. See *The History of Finnish Aesthetics from the Late 18th Century to the Early 20th Century* (Kuisma 2006).

19 *The Future is Not What It Used to Be*. 2002, 44:09.

For example, one can easily imagine many claiming that Kurenniemi's 1968 piece "Antropoidien tanssi" is not really music, but with its rhythm, timbre, etc., Kurenniemi's avant-garde digital music still meets the demands of what might "traditionally" be called music.²⁰ What is curious about the "A Video Letter to the Future," on the other hand, is that it does not satisfy the traditional demands of a definition of art. With its handheld-camera jerkiness, its lack of visual or narrative composition, its absence of edits, and its general haphazardness, the video seems to be more a home movie than a work of art.

Kurenniemi's video is closer in definition to what film scholar David E. James refers to as a "film diary." In his work on Jonas Mekas, James delineates between a "film diary" and a "diary film." Mekas, like Kurenniemi, shot lots of footage of his life. He was making a diary of his life, but rather than writing it in linguistic language, he was recording his diary on film. He was making a film diary. This contrasts with the diary film. James explains that later in his life, Mekas began to take unadulterated footage, cut it, and stitch it back in such a way as to create an object that then becomes a film, an object subject to the economy of the cinema. In sharpening the definition between the film diary and the diary film, James explains that the film diary is a practice that "privileges the author, the process and the moment of composition"; it has a "commitment to presentness, to the process of perception, to the antiartifactual use of the medium, and to all these as the means of the renovation of the individual."²¹ In his analysis, James teases out the complexities of this distinction and their implications relative to Mekas's work, but at the basic level, James indicates that the film diary would not traditionally be considered an art work, but that the diary film would.

Following from this taxonomy, insofar as Kurenniemi's "A Video Letter to the Future" is a piece of film diary, it does not meet the traditional demands of a definition of art—same as the home movie of my own wedding reception would not meet those demands. Yet, Kurenniemi calls it art. More than just a rhetorical romantic flourish, Kurenniemi's conceptualizing of the video as a work of art evidences a historical shift in what constitutes art objects. Rancière marks the shift as the move from the *representative regime* of art to the *aesthetic regime* of art. As noted above, Rancière posits that whereas at one point historically there was a clear division between what did and did not constitute a work of art, that division is no longer as clear. In the former there are distinct kinds of artistic modes and also distinct rules governing the aesthetic nuances and dynamics of those modes. Such rules follow from a matrix of inclusion and exclusion that, according to Rancière, underwrites how we receive both art and politics. He refers to this matrix of inclusion and exclusion (and indeed any matrix of inclusion and exclusion) as a "distribution of the sensible." Thus the move from the *representative regime* to the *aesthetic regime* is a redistribution of the sensible, a move that allows some things to disappear from discursivity and others to appear. It is the unique distribution of the sensible in the aesthetic regime that allows anything the capacity for expressivity, for what Rancière

20 Kurenniemi 1968.

21 James 1992, 147 and 161.

calls “silent speech.” Silent speech is, Rancière explains, “the capability of signification that is inscribed upon [the] very body [of things], summarized by the ‘everything speaks’ of Novalis, the poet-mineralogist. Every sensible form, beginning from the stone or the shell, tells a story.”²² Thus, although “A Video Letter to the Future” does not meet the formal artistic criteria that the representative regime has established for what qualifies as art, the video—even with and in its audible features—“speaks silently” in the same way that “everything speaks.” Even a prosaic home movie, simply capturing a conversation with the most minimal of directorial shaping speaks as art in the aesthetic regime of art; for the aesthetic regime reports that there is always, somehow, something there, “silently speaking” beneath the surface of traditional representation.²³

Understanding the potential for everything to speak in the aesthetic regime then provides historical context for the various implications that Cox and his co-authors and also Larsen tease out from Kurenniemi’s work on the 2048 Performance and indeed everything that is a part of Kurenniemi’s archive. Constant’s archive project that Cox, et al. describe as an entanglement with Kurenniemi’s archive scarcely follows “representative” definitions of artistic works, yet Constant, which presents itself as a “non-profit, artist-run organization,” moves forward with full confidence in its project’s potential to speak silently in some manner or another.²⁴ Larsen keeps his discussion focused on Kurenniemi himself, but recognizes, as noted above, that Kurenniemi was already an amalgamation of partial forays into a wide variety of practices. Larsen refers to these as “crossings” and writes, “In terms of aesthetic experience, these crossings cannot be understood in the specialized sense of making of art works—neither what is typically rubricated as visual art, nor what is called computer art.”²⁵ Instead, Larsen argues, the type of art that Kurenniemi created is a non-art, an art that does not fit into “representative” categories of art but that nonetheless, in its “fractured whole[ness],” manages to speak silently forth. Similar claims can be made of each and every artifact comprising the archive Kurenniemi is amassing as part of the 2048 Performance, and the same can be said of the project itself, including its promised performance in 2048. Each receipt, each hair, each ticket stub, each video, each doodle, each audio recording, each note has the potential to speak silently forth, expressing some emotion, some beauty, some information, some history.

The Aesthetic Archive

The notion that the artifacts of Kurenniemi’s archive are also art objects perceived to speak silently is homologous to the concept of archives more generally. Archives are collections of artifacts believed to convey through some

22 Rancière 2009b, 34.

23 Rancière discusses three distinct historical areas: the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of art, and the aesthetic regime of art. While each does have a moment of historical emergence that is sequential, there is significant overlap between the three, and they inform each other. Rancière develops his theories on these areas and their implications over a number of his writings. See, for example: 2004, 20-23; 2009a, 19-44; 2009b, 34-35.

24 Constant 2016. Cox, et al. also refer to Constant as artists (2015, 125).

25 Larsen 2015, 113.

representational measure information, history, meaning, etc. Archives are already conditioned to some extent on the idea of a silent speech, speech waiting to be brought forth by some mechanism of heurism or interpretation. This mechanism could be visitors to the archive or, in the case of Kurenniemi, a computer or computer-like machine that makes manifest the latent content of the artifact. This is precisely the process that Kurenniemi imagined with his 2048 Performance. The archive he collected of his life comprises objects whose silent speech awaits extraction and manifestation by yet-to-be-realized computer-like machines. The product of this process is Kurenniemi's consciousness.

As those who have analyzed Kurenniemi's approach to and theorizing of his archive in relation to the 2048 Performance have observed, his conceptualization of the function of his archive was rife with questions of an historiographical nature. In her article "Fleshly Intensities," Susanna Paasonen recognizes, building from the work of Friedrich Kittler, that the technological processes of archiving have a formative effect on the representational outcomes of the archive. She writes, "The perceptions and observations that Kurenniemi recorded in order to reproduce his consciousness are media-saturated and inseparable from the technologies used to record them."²⁶ The silent speech of Kurenniemi's archive is inextricably a product of the technologies of archiving, meaning that the material contingencies of the technologies used to capture and store the artifacts, do not neutrally re-present silent speech but rather necessarily delimit it.

Moreover, the concern Paasonen raises about how Kurenniemi's very desire for the archive compromises the transparency he maintains for it. Paasonen correctly reads Kurenniemi's drive for creating the archive as emblematic of what Jacques Derrida refers to as "archive fever."²⁷ "Kurenniemi's 'archive fever' is fueled by an awareness of imminent loss. His process of accumulating and storing records of everyday events have been a means of warding off erasure and the limits of human existence—their temporality is geared simultaneously toward both annihilation and eternal life (in 2048, and after)."²⁸ As noted above, Kurenniemi was "manic" about archiving his life. He has been living his life in manic anticipation of its posthumous performance. As Paasonen suggests, if Kurenniemi's drive to archive was part of the consciousness that he was archiving, it would stand to reason that it would be part of the consciousness to come.²⁹ We should expect that the silent speech that someday emerges as Kurenniemi would be equally as manic, a consciousness rabid with "archive fever."

This is not, however, likely what Kurenniemi imagined as his future. He did not likely see his archive as the feverish attempt to generate an equally feverish future consciousness. Perhaps he did, but then his project becomes less interesting in terms of a transhumanist experiment and more like another

26 Paasonen 2015, 35.

27 Derrida 1995.

28 Paasonen 2015, 36.

29 Ibid.

cautionary tale.³⁰ To be sure, Kurenniemi's vision of the future Kurenniemi does have a science-fiction-like resonance to it, but it also seems to be less dystopian. Kurenniemi's response to the speculation that computers will eventually be able to produce human consciousness was, as noted above, that such is possible but only insofar as actual human consciousness becomes more and more computer-like. He contends that there is a double move that will bring these two together, letting them meet somewhere in the middle. Thus, it could be that what Kurenniemi imagined as the state of his consciousness as performed in 2048 will be the result of this double move, but there also seems to be enough romanticism in his thinking, in his "archive fever," that his future consciousness will have an existence still imbued with the hope of humanism. There is a clear sense from what Kurenniemi describes about the 2048 Performance that the Kurenniemi of the future will have a life that still has meaning. Kurenniemi seems to imagine that while Kurenniemi will (again) be in the world of 2048 and beyond, that world in all of its nuance and potentiality will also be in the Kurenniemi in that world.

A Literary Kurenniemi

Kurenniemi's project is archival, but it conceives of archive in a way that pushes beyond artifacts as conveyances of fact and situates them as opportunities for something more resonant with human experience, with human consciousness and thought. At the same time, however, the archive remains subject to the disimpassioned and contingent representations of pure materiality. The point of tension between these two trajectories is precisely the tension at the center of the aesthetic regime, at the center of what that regime presents as art. In his short volume *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Rancière articulates a difference between writing and what he calls "living speech." The latter he associates with the representative regime; writing he associates with the aesthetic regime. He explains that intrinsic to writing is "silent speech": "the contradictory mode of speech that speaks and keeps silent at the same time, that both knows and does not know what it is saying."³¹ The contradictoriness is the tension noted above, it is the point of division between thought and what Rancière refers to as "non-thought." He writes: "For the silent revolution that we have called aesthetic opens the space in which an idea of thought and a corresponding idea of writing can be elaborated. This idea of thought rests upon a fundamental affirmation: there is thought that does not think, thought at work not only in the foreign element of non-thought but in the very form of non-thought. Conversely, there is non-thought that inhabits thought and gives it a power all its own. This non-thought is not simply a form of absence of thought, it is an efficacious presence of its opposite. From whichever side we approach the equation, the identity of

30 Although there are certainly aspects of Kurenniemi's theorizing on his 2048 Performance that might be considered more posthumanist than transhumanist, I use the term "transhumanist" to foreground that much of Kurenniemi's theorizing about his project is imbued with a sense of overcoming death. In this, I draw upon definitions of "transhumanism" provided by Damien Broderick (2013, 434) and Rosi Braidotti (2013, 91).

31 Rancière 2009b, 33.

thought and non-thought is the source of distinctive power.”³² Non-thought is the thought yet to be thought in the written of the archive, where it bears the marking of having already been thought. Between the thought and the non-thought is the power that Kurenniemi draws upon in imagining the activation of a future consciousness, of a future domain of thinking again.

Kurenniemi has been feverishly building the archive, and as he sees it, the obstacle to overcome will be a technological one, one that technoscientists will solve by developing a machine that can extract and mobilize thoughts from the artifacts. What Rancière describes in terms of the tension between thought and non-thought, however, is what activated Kurenniemi’s belief in the power of archives to mobilize thought in the first place. In the historical conditions of the aesthetic regime, Kurenniemi already saw the thought in the non-thought of the archive, and already began to imagine what it might “mean,” even if he did not yet know what it will technoscientifically “be.” This imagining, according to what Rancière explains of the nature of non-thought, belongs less to the technological world and more to the literary one. The mechanism for making manifest the latent content of the non-thought is literature. Discussing the materiality of trivia, Rancière writes, “In their striations and ridges they all bear the traces of their history and the mark of their destination. Literature takes up the task of deciphering and rewriting these signs of history written on things.”³³ Thus, the act of writing as literature would already be to have moved to the stage of interpretation, of literalizing. By leaving the “signs of history written on things” and amassing them into an archive, Kurenniemi preserved the non-thought of the unconscious as the yet-to-be-thought of a future conscious and, at the same time, signaled that a singularizing of the signs is possible—into a single entity, Kurenniemi. What the archive also does, however, is belie the fact that Kurenniemi’s project is at heart still a literary project.

I say “still a literary project,” because at one point in the genesis of the 2048 Performance, what Kurenniemi had imagined was an explicitly literary project. In his article, “Dead Computers Tell No Tales: Remarks on the Futures Behind Kurenniemi’s 2048 Resurrection,” Jyrki Siukonen explains that Kurenniemi first conceived of the 2048 Performance not as a digital performance of video, audio, and text but rather as a novel. After a few failed attempts in the late eighties and early nineties to generate what Kurenniemi called the “2048 novel,” he switched formats. Discussing this, Siukonen writes: “It seems to me that what lies at the heart of the project 2048 is not so much a vision of the coming technological progress as it is Kurenniemi’s idea that all that has been saved of his life could be turned into literature, i.e. meaningful writing. In his email correspondence with the author Leena Krohn in 2003 he still muses: ‘And yet, my notes on small pieces of paper may contain a wealth of information about my world, down to my handwriting, if all that material is analysed with a programme, say, a million times more efficient compared to what we presently have.’ The main point here is not whether Kurenniemi himself could have concentrated harder and worked enough to produce textual material that deserves future attention,

32 Ibid. 31-32.

33 Ibid. 34.

but that a computer should be able to interpret and reveal his often rather dispirited and fragmentary notes as something more than trifles, in other words, turn second-hand information into first-rate thoughts.”³⁴ As Siukonen adeptly observes, Kurenniemi’s faith in his project’s ability to make “first-rate thoughts” out of “second-hand information” is inherently a literary project. Kurenniemi believed not only that the archive of his life can make direct references to the historical events of that life but that every remnant, even the most detrital, and perhaps even particularly the most detrital, can be transformed into something of grand, even literary value.

Repositioning the 2048 Performance as literary rather than technoscientific does not erase the technoscientific ambition of the project. Instead, it takes the technoscientific into consideration as both part of the many materialities across which Kurenniemi’s silent speech is written and also as content that will likely be brought forth out of the materialities comprising the project. The technoscientific was part of Kurenniemi’s consciousness during his human life, which he continually unfolds in his many writings and interviews, and there is no reason to think it would not be a part of the consciousness to come, as those in the audience to his performance read Kurenniemi’s thought against his non-thought, and vice versa. Such a practice moves outside of the sheer materiality of syntactical rules and into the space of meaning, into the space of the literary. This is the space that Kurenniemi occupied during his human life and will continue to occupy in the future, 2048 and beyond. The consciousness of Kurenniemi will ever be literary.

AUTHOR

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³⁴ Siukonen 2013, 60.

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Three Phases of the Theatrical Public Sphere in Estonian Theatre

EVA-LIISA LINDER

ABSTRACT

The concept of the public sphere by Jürgen Habermas has inspired humanities and theatre studies. Estonia, as a small post-totalitarian nation state, proves the concept especially relevant as its recent history reveals three different phases of the theatrical public sphere. 1) Theatre as a secret forum. In Soviet times, theatre served as a political and ideological tool, providing a place for keeping the national memory and consolidating society. 2) The active and technical use of the public sphere by newly awakened political theatre NO99 since 2005. 3) The agonistic theatrical public sphere. During the past decade, a whole wave of projects have discussed national identity with concurrent antagonisms: globalization vs nationalism, civic vs ethnic nationalism, the Estonian vs Russian-speaking community. Theatre has commented on two concepts of national identity, e-Estonia and Organic Estonia, innovative digitalization and cultural traditions. The discursive public sphere has led to increased civic awareness and structural changes in the developing democracy, supported integration, and anti-xenophobia in Estonia. At the same time, two main characteristics of the theatrical public sphere have been highlighted: spatiality and political relevance.

KEYWORDS

public sphere, political theatre, critical theory, national identity, Estonian theatre

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Three Phases of the Theatrical Public Sphere in Estonian Theatre

Revolutions in Eastern Europe have made the concept of the public sphere topical, declared Jürgen Habermas in his foreword to the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1990. The changing political situation reopened the possibility for his theory to make an input into addressing questions about democracy.¹

The experience of the Baltic states has confirmed this assumption multiple times. The public sphere became a cornerstone for the new democratic societies. However, if we widen the scope to the theatrical public sphere, we can detect even more of its manifestations as it functioned long before the revolutions. All examples of theatrical public sphere, regardless of their social context, have enabled protest and opposition to the ruling mentalities and supported democratic developments.

Estonia is a good example, as coming from a totalitarian regime, it has demonstrated democratic and economic development which has granted the country a reputation as the tiniest, but most successful of the Baltic states. Moreover, Estonia enjoys an exceptionally high number of theatre attendances. For a nation of 1.3 million citizens, there were 1.2 million attendances in 2016. Theatre performances and concerts are the most popular forms of culture, and about 45% of people go to the theatre at least once a year, according to a recent study.² Theatre scholar Janelle Reinelt has found the statistics of Estonia telling as it confirms that theatre as a cultural institution is a potential locus for a meaningful rethinking of national issues and that the public sphere is more potent in small countries.³

However, Estonian sociologist Marju Lauristin has voiced her longing for a more elevated role for culture in solving social problems as the potential of the arts has been underestimated in Estonia. It takes more than rational economic development for a nation-state to function, otherwise the citizens could just as well anonymously belong to any global network.⁴

1 Habermas 1990, 11–12.

2 Kivirähk 2016, 3–4.

3 Reinelt 2005, 371.

4 Lauristin 2011, 197.

The necessity of a mediating zone between the state and individuals has been justified by philosophers many times. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Habermas stated that the spiral of violence begins with a spiral of distorted communication.⁵ Chantal Mouffe agrees: “When institutional channels do not exist for antagonisms to be expressed in an agonistic way, they are likely to explode in violence.”⁶

Theatre scholars Christopher B. Balme⁷ and Janelle Reinelt⁸ state that any considerations of the public sphere should start with the definition by Habermas as a discursive arena where individuals can come together to freely discuss societal problems and through that discussion influence political actions.⁹ However, the remarks by Balme and Reinelt are crucial for elaborating the concept for theatre. While Habermas sees the public sphere as a discursive space, containing rational debate and aiming at consensus, Reinelt makes two additional comments. Firstly, affective and emotive communication should be included. Secondly, the print culture should be complemented by the role of orality, visuality, and other channels of communication.¹⁰ Reinelt admits that embodied practices may involve political positions and contribute to the multiplicity of polyvocal opinions circulating in the public sphere.¹¹

Balme agrees with Reinelt’s suggestions and, taking inspiration from the agonistic concept of Chantal Mouffe, concludes that the theatrical public sphere should include the discursive potential of the Habermasian theory, but should also be augmented by the agonistic and ludic dimensions. Balme outlines the completed vision as a dialectical resolution of two apparently opposing views: the extended concept of agonism with its emphasis on emotion and affect, without forgoing more rational-critical modes of dispute.¹²

Taking these arguments into account, the present paper will focus on three different manifestations of the theatrical public sphere in Estonian theatre during the past decades. Although the bulk of the repertoire still belongs through its aim, topics, and structure to the private sphere, certain discussion zones stand out in historical and contemporary practices, which give insight into different phases of the theatrical public sphere.

1) Theatre as the secret forum behind the Iron Curtain during the Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1990. Although the period saw many subspheres, their overall structure was defined by the totalitarian political regime. As the experience in Estonia reflects the fate of other East European countries under totalitarian rule, the phase will be discussed briefly.

2) Political theatre activating the public sphere: the active and technical demonstration of the public sphere by Theatre NO99 (2005–2018). The projects by NO99 addressed various political issues, aiming at public discussion

5 Habermas 2001.

6 Mouffe 2013, 122.

7 Balme 2012, Balme 2014, 2.

8 Reinelt 2011, 17.

9 Habermas 1990, 292.

10 Reinelt 2011, 18.

11 Reinelt 2011, 16, 18–19.

12 Balme 2014, 11.

by novel means: huge political spectacles, media coverage, PR campaigns, artist talks, publishing metatexts, etc. NO99 was the main company that succeeded in moving the debate from the aesthetic realm of theatre into the wider public sphere of political debate.

3) The agonistic theatrical public sphere. Over the past decade, different companies have discussed national identity with concurrent antagonisms: globalization vs nationalism, civic vs ethnic nationalism, the Estonian vs Russian-speaking communities. A whole wave of projects have reflected mentalities in a changing Europe: from conservative nationalism to anti-xenophobia. Here, the discursive theatrical public sphere proves to be a fruitful umbrella concept, explaining the dynamics of changing attitudes in the longer run. Semiotics and critical theory support the analysis of different productions.

The three phases, that cover more than seventy years of history, witness features of the three types of public sphere described by Habermas and Balme: a) the representative form of the public sphere typical of absolutist political regimes, b) the bourgeois public sphere with its universal access and equality of status, and c) the new trend towards performative intervention, introduced by Balme.¹³

In doing so, two main characteristics of the theatrical public sphere have been highlighted: spatiality and political relevance. While Habermas named theatre as a place for the emerging bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century, theatre houses in contemporary Estonia prove themselves to be the most fertile public spaces for discursive practices before they enter the political scene proper.

1) The secret forum: the theatrical public sphere behind the Iron Curtain

Sharing the fate of all Baltic states, Estonia was occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and spent the next fifty years under totalitarian rule. The occupation resulted in mass deportations, arrests, and repressions. 33,000 Estonians were deported to Siberia,¹⁴ while the country was overwhelmed by an Orwellian dystopia.

It means that during roughly half its history, professional Estonian theatre had to function under the conditions of imperialism, the most terrible form of the *ratio*, as stated by Adorno and Horkheimer.¹⁵ The totalitarian regime meant constant censorship that, in Balme's view, implies a deep conviction about the political potency of the theatrical gathering.¹⁶ Theatre as a public domain remained under tighter official supervision than the other arts. The repertoire was ruled by social realism, the only artistic style accepted. Within the system, plays needed a licence in order to be premiered. State officials sat in the audience and checked that no improvisational words nor intonations slipped from the actors' lips. Even an accidental combination of the blue, black, and white colours of the Estonian national flag in costumes or set design would have caused difficulties.

However, by the 1950s, playwrights and theatres were ready to take risks

13 Balme 2012.

14 Rähesoo 2008, 55.

15 Adorno, Horkheimer 2016, 89.

16 Balme 2014, 16.

and audiences quickly learned the culture of hints and allusions.¹⁷ Although the 1960s gave more breathing space, enabling the rise of theatre renewal with physical and ritual theatre, the control was tightened again in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, the opposition to officialdom gave the arts throughout these decades a clear social function.¹⁸ Estonian theatre scholar Luule Epner has pointed out that theatre operated as a memory machine.¹⁹ National values and myths served to consolidate society, confirming the formula: the lesser the political and economic freedom, the greater the need for unifying cultural events.²⁰ The phenomenon can be seen in the wider scope of international analyses by Stephen Wilmer, indicating that particularly at times of national crisis, the theatre has served as a political and ideological tool to help configure the nation.²¹

2) NO99 demonstrating theatre as the new political force

It took a long time for political theatre to recover in post-totalitarian countries that reestablished their democratic societies. After the Singing Revolution and Estonia's restoration of independence in 1991, theatre as a form of public art had to reconstruct its role.²²

Theatre NO99 started off as the first company actively producing socially relevant performances since 2005. Founded by the artistic tandem of stage director Tiit Ojasoo and interdisciplinary artist Ene-Liis Semper, and only ten actors, the company turned its "thorn of criticism"²³ towards the audience and politicians, giving rise to the audience-critical turn in Estonian theatre. The style of NO99 corresponds to what Hans-Thies Lehmann describes as post-Brechtian²⁴ and post-theatrical theatre,²⁵ emphasizing the enlightening function of theatre in these concepts. NO99 has demonstrated the dimensions and opportunities of the public sphere in their projects on various issues like racism, nationalism, the energy crisis, the falling birth rate, etc., but most eminently in its research into the mechanisms of power.

NO99 tested society's limits of tolerance many times.²⁶ Some examples. In 2009, their piece of devised theatre, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, took inspiration from the scandalous performance by German artist Joseph Beuys and introduced different fields of contemporary art, e.g. performances, modern dance, and installations, asking self-critically how to explain the works to audiences, officials, and sponsors. One of the central problems raised by the project was poor cultural funding. The action features a parody of Laine Jänes ('Jänes' meaning 'hare'), the then Minister of Culture. In various episodes,

17 Rähesoo 2008, 56, 63–64, 69.

18 Rähesoo 2008, 79–80.

19 Carlson 2001, 2.

20 Epner 2005, 379, 381, 384–385.

21 Wilmer 2002, 3.

22 Rähesoo 2008, 81.

23 Adorno 1997, 21.

24 Lehmann 2006, 33.

25 Lehmann 2007.

26 Two more projects by NO99, *Hot Estonian Guys* and *Three Kingdoms*, are covered in the next section.

the Minister is shown engaged in dialogue with theatre practitioners who are repeatedly left disappointed after hearing there is no money for the theatre. In many scenes, the Minister is subjected to accidental attacks. In one, a dog, resembling the Kulik's dog (played by Risto Kübar), suddenly lunges at the Minister. In another, the Minister gets accidentally hit in the middle of a so-called national sports event, which includes a competition in "precision peeing." Afterwards, the Minister herself said that she liked the show and the issues raised by NO99 were vital.²⁷ Thus, the project made headlines in newspapers, at the same time sending out a signal that sharp criticism is allowed in theatre.

It is worthy of note that NO99 with its leading figure Tiit Ojasoo, who could be called the Romeo Castellucci of Estonian theatre, was state-subsidized. The example serves as an exception to Janelle Reinelt's hypothesis that direct political efficacy is practically impossible within state-supported and subsidized theatres.²⁸

In the following year, the fictive political movement *Unified Estonia* (2010), with its title hinting ironically at United Russia, Vladimir Putin's political party, became a prime example of political theatre in Estonia. The mock party announced that Saku Suurhall, the biggest indoor arena in Estonia, would be used as the venue for its "assembly", thereby highlighting the message that everyone was invited. With an attendance of more than 7,000, *Unified Estonia Assembly* became one of the largest theatre events in contemporary Europe.²⁹

The aim of the project was, however, more ambitious: to engage the whole society while revealing the political misdeeds. During the 44 days of the project, NO99's actors played politicians in public, using the technique of subversive over-identification.³⁰ The team made larger-than-life promises in TV and radio, put up political posters and launched adverts on TV, uploaded video lectures entitled *Election School* to YouTube, and used other means to X-ray the techniques of political manipulation: populism, demagoguery, buying off voters, the propagandistic use of youth associations, etc. At the same time, the project aimed at changing "the serf mentality" of Estonian voters, criticized by Ojasoo in his final speech at the *Assembly*.³¹

The project was greeted with wide attention. The company has documented the making of *Unified Estonia* in their first film, a documentary entitled *Ash and Money* (available with English subtitles on YouTube). An exposition of *Unified Estonia* participated in the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space in 2015, winning the Golden Triga for the Best Exposition and for Innovative Approach to Performance Design. In Prague, the company summarised that the *Unified Estonia* project was unique in terms of its approach to actual political issues as it was never treated merely as theatre but as a real political force. Polls indicated that the new party created by NO99 would take 25% of the votes if they

27 Kase 2009.

28 Reinelt 2011, 21.

29 *Unified Estonia Assembly* 2018.

30 Wilmer 2013, Wilmer 2009.

31 *Unified Estonia Assembly* 2013.

were to run in the parliamentary elections.³²

While the huge political spectacle of the *Assembly* has been well covered by reviews,³³ two one-off actions belonging to the same project seem telling from the point of view of the public sphere as well, although they have been practically overlooked. The first of the two, the *Unified Estonia flash mob*, invited people to the main square of the capital Tallinn, introducing the concept of *flash mob* to Estonian audiences. The aim was to sing *Unified Estonia's* anthem, and a few dozen fans made the action a success.

The other action, entitled *When 200 will become 6500*, also tested involving audiences and generating political dialogue. However, the outcome was unexpected. On NO99's small stage, actors enacted provocative episodes, e.g. inviting the audience to dance along or complain about the real estate development on the coastline blocking access to the sea, an irritating situation for the sea-loving Estonians. "What do we say to that?" actors asked the audience, and commented ironically: "We see political power as a parent or a god, who takes decisions for us." An actress asked a volunteer to step on stage, but left her there alone, challenging the audience to come to support her. Soon, there were more people on stage than sitting in the audience. The situation grew tense as one of the persons remaining seated was Rein Lang, the then Minister of Justice. As actors asked him to join the crowd, the Minister answered with a question: "What is it that you have to say?" A provocative back-and-forth followed. The action was drowned in the unprepared discussion at this point. Only a slogan at the back of the stage carried on the line of thought, citing Estonian literary classic Friedebert Tuglas: "Estonia is a country where truth has been replaced by authority, freedom by fear, and yearning by bourgeois ennui."³⁴

The episode with the Minister made headlines in the media. Tiit Ojasoo, NO99's artistic director, claimed that the performance was interrupted by the Minister. The Minister in turn retorted by calling the allegations part of a smear campaign. Silver Meikar, a member of the Prime Minister's Reform Party, who had been in the audience, described the action in his blog as "a frightening and dangerous masterclass in crowd manipulation." He admitted that the borders between the stage and the auditorium, play and political propaganda were blurred. He warned the company not to cross the line – i.e. not to go into politics as there is no need for another failed political party.³⁵

The success of the *Unified Estonia* project was proven during the following years, which saw a Reform Party politician – incidentally, Silver Meikar himself, influenced by the theatrical project – reveal illegal funding practices in the party. It was followed by public demonstrations and the launch of an independent political movement called Enough of Deceitful Politics, demanding honesty and transparency from the political establishment. Finally, the Minister of Justice, a central figure in the funding scandal, resigned in 2012. Therefore, NO99 used different techniques to activate the public sphere, which, in turn, led to an

32 *Unified Estonia* 2015.

33 Virro 2012, Pesti 2012, Linder 2013.

34 *Radar* 2015.

35 *Eesti Ekspress* 26.3.2010.

increased civic awareness and structural changes in the developing democracy of Estonia.

During its fourteen years of activity, NO99 enjoyed the admiration of people interested in the arts, at the same time gathered political enemies. The Conservative People's Party of Estonia proposed depriving NO99 of its state subsidies. It claimed that instead of producing culture, NO99 perpetuated "radical left-wing propaganda, which is difficult to explain to the taxpayer in terms of necessity and aesthetic quality."³⁶ Although the proposal was rejected by the Parliament, the critique continued, even after NO99 was awarded the Europe Theatre Prize for New Theatrical Realities in 2017, one of the most notable international recognitions given to an Estonian company. As the biblical saying goes, "A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country."³⁷

3) Theatre as a collective echo chamber for social concerns on national identity

After NO99 withdrew from its role as a watchdog of democracy in its last years, political theatre remained somewhat under represented in Estonia. However, there has been an issue sparking lively discussions over the past decade, and using theatre as "a collective echo chamber", as described by Balme³⁸. This is national identity.

Although the issue has occasionally appeared in Estonian theatre since the time of national awakening in the nineteenth century, it was not until recently that theatre started to voice original opinions, to present authentic research and insights, and to provide creative solutions to topical problems. Two paradigm shifts can be detected behind this change: socially, the globalization trends and the migration crisis in Europe, and artistically, the rise of postdramatic theatre with a tendency to documentary, devised, and applied theatre.

Reconsidering national values from a contemporary perspective has become a new challenge for many theatre companies, supported by theatre's ludic power,³⁹ which makes it possible to easily deconstruct and reconstruct fictional worlds.⁴⁰ Theatre serves here as a public space bringing together different cultures and communities, challenging the boundaries, estrangement, and xenophobia rooted in society. In audience discussions, social research carried out by theatre companies surpasses that by the media in its scope and depth.

The discussion revolving around national identity has mainly addressed three questions: a) how to react to a changing Europe: nationalism or globalization, civic or ethnic nationalism?, b) how to integrate the Russian-speaking community

36 Reisenbuk 2017.

37 On 31 October 2018, NO99 issued a press release declaring their joint decision to end the company's activities (Theatre NO99 2018). Although the end was written into the theatre's initial concept of countdown from 99, they stopped at production NO30. They explained it as being due to their inability to follow their creative ideals. Critics have also seen here their tendency to follow Samurai ethics (Pilv 2019). The Conservative People's Party, on the other hand, declared the end of the theatre as a political achievement for their party (Põld 2018).

38 Balme 2014, ix.

39 Balme 2014, 12.

40 Epner 2005, 379, 385, 400.

in Estonia?, c) which identity model suits the country best, e-Estonia or Organic Estonia?

The following overview offers an insight into the debate that has increased recently, forming a whole wave of productions on national issues that revolve around three antagonisms.

1) Nationalism vs globalization

The topic of demographic crisis and conservative nationalism was first addressed in *Hot Estonian Guys* by NO99 (2007). The introductory text of the theatrical research project declared: “It is not a question of *if*, but *when* the extinction of Estonians will take place.” The promotional campaign covered the capital with posters: “Men, start making babies.”

According to the storyline, an extraordinary situation called for extraordinary measures: a group of Estonian men founded a club with the sole aim of making as many babies as possible. Their action is morally unacceptable, ethically unsound, but still the only one to produce results.⁴¹ Although the design of the production was replete with national symbols – national costumes, songs, and dances, to an extent reminiscent of the famous Estonian Song Festivals –, the content dealt with rather more realistic issues: the financial difficulties of the hot Estonian guys, their communication problems with Russian PR-workers, their undertaking from the viewpoint of women, etc. The project encouraged a wide debate in the media. Urve Eslas, a journalist at the daily *Postimees*, asked whether the aims of a state can be turned into personal imperatives: are women obliged to simultaneously serve as loyal workers, consumers, and birth-givers?⁴²

Surprisingly, a small non-professional troupe of young Seto women took the lead in tackling national issues next. Their piece of applied theatre, *How to Sell a Seto?* (Youth Studio of Taarka Heritage Theatre, 2012) with the self-ironic title, was played on the sand floor of a barn in Setomaa. It is a region in the south-east corner of Estonia, where Eastern and Western civilizations meet, inhabited by indigenous ethnic and linguistic minority Setos for more than 8000 years. The Setos still keep alive their customs and a unique multiple-voice singing tradition called *leelo*, added to the list of UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage.

However, the present-day situation of young Setos is complicated. On the one hand, the new generation is expected to keep up traditions. On the other, they are confronted with the increasing pressures of consumerism and commercialization, which places the continuation of their cultural heritage in jeopardy.

The series of self-ironic studies presented the tragic choices of young Seto women as they find themselves at the crossroads of traditional and commercial cultures. The girls are faced with questions: how to react to the building of a new supermarket over an old cemetery or the use of Seto symbols to market goods and services that have little to do with traditional culture? To wear national costumes or not? As a refrain, the girls sing a mixture of traditional *leelo* songs and contemporary popmusic: “Super-Seto, Super-Seto, leelo, leelo”, pointing sarcastically to the commercial requirement for all contemporary musical life to

41 *Hot Estonian Guys* 2018.

42 Eslas 2007.

be dominated by its commodification, as Theodor Adorno puts it.⁴³

How to Sell a Seto? left the impression of a Mayday call from a sinking ship. The production declared that commercialization and mass culture along with their tendency to fetishism, banal repetitions, and the “liquidation of the individual”⁴⁴ threaten to destroy the heritage and cultural continuity of old Estonia, which will be turned into a huge open air museum, a “non-place”.⁴⁵ Encouraged by successful performances, the troupe initiated two more productions, forming the Seto series. Using the theatrical public sphere to speak out their worries seemed to be a release for the young Setos.

By contrast, several years later, a bunch of productions started to speak in favour of globalization and anti-xenophobia. A documentary production, *Smaller Inside than Outside* (Endla Theatre, 2017), was undertaken by Mari-Liis Lill, an actress and stage director of socially relevant projects. The play was based on interviews with ordinary people, demonstrating the shortsightedness of radical national conservatism spreading in Estonian society. It revealed that people hostile to other cultures tend to be careless towards other minorities as well, even if they are their relatives or neighbors.

The topic of migration from the Third World was touched upon for the first time in another project of the same year, *The Return of Furby* at the Open Space (2017). This time, the approach was humorous. The troupe provided many creative solutions to the social problems in an age of migration, like decorating jars with Estonian national patterns and using them as protective covers in case of mosquitoes and cold weather, a necessary device during Nordic summers.

From another perspective, *Apart: Estonians at Home and Abroad* by Rakvere Theatre (2018) raised the issue of Estonians who had emigrated after World War II and had become the Others in the eyes of those who had remained. It insisted on the need to continue the communication, as “we are all Estonians”.

2) Estonian vs Russian communities

The conflict of Estonian and Russian communities has a much longer history in Estonia, at the borderline of East and West. The present-day situation in Estonia is influenced by the last Russification of the Soviet period. In 1945, Estonians formed 94% of the population, by 1989 their share of the population had fallen to 61,5%.⁴⁶ Today, approximately a quarter of the Estonian population is Russian-speaking. Although the government has taken the approach of significant integration, the process has turned out more complicated than was expected. As a positive tendency, researchers have noted a process in the formation of a new ethno-cultural community, Estonian Russians.⁴⁷ However, it is a well-known problem for sociologists and politicians that the two communities still tend to live in parallel worlds with different languages, customs, and political worldviews influenced by two oppositional media coverages. Against this background, young

43 Adorno 2006, 37.

44 Adorno 2006, 35.

45 Augé 1995.

46 O'Connor 2003, 128.

47 Kirch, Tuisk 2008.

theatre makers have provided many anti-xenophobic productions that function as an integration project bringing two communities into one space – the theatre space.

The first show, *At Second Sight* (2016), was a rare cooperation project between Tallinn City Theatre and the Russian Theatre. It started with actors learning each other's language for two years. They made a production that started with an excursion around the capital, introducing landmarks which carry different connotations for Estonians and Russians. The show culminated on stage where two worldviews were opposed. Was Estonia occupied or freed by the Soviet Union in WWII? Is NATO a protective alliance or a threat? Should Russians learn Estonian – the official language that is hard to study and is spoken only by one million people? The show resulted with a scene describing the two communities engaging well on a practical level: two women discuss food recipes, sharing delicacies from Estonian and Russian cuisines.

While *At Second Sight* attempted to bring two audiences into one space, the next project, *I'd Rather Dance with You* (2016), went a step further, promoting dialogue between real people. The Vienna-based Russian choreographer and director Oleg Soulimenko came to Estonia with the experience of communication projects between Russian and Austrian artists. He started to examine the relationship of two nationalities in Estonia. In a talk show format, ordinary people were put on stage and members of the audience were invited to join their discussion. The whole night was covered with questions on political and social, cultural and personal issues: "Where do you get your news?", "Who are your friends?", "Tell me your biggest dreams", etc. The aim was not only to enhance dialogue between the conflicting worldviews, but to introduce fellow countrymen as people. Finally, a Russian and Estonian were asked to hug each other. It mostly succeeded.

The latest project by young documentary theatre authors Mari-Liis Lill and Paavo Piik aimed to be a mythbuster. For the project, *Midsummer Day* (Estonian Drama Theatre, 2018), they travelled to Siberia, 5000 km from Estonia. They researched the life of an old Estonian village that has been populated by expatriate Estonians and their descendants for more than a hundred years. Today, people there speak mostly Russian, watch Russian TV, praise Putin, but still consider themselves proudly as real Estonians with their distinctive culture. Thus, the notion of "real Estonian" was challenged and stereotypes of Estonians and Russians shifted, making Russian-speakers part of "us".

It is worthy of note that many integration productions have taken place at Open Space (Vaba Lava), the theatre center in Tallinn, that aims at changing mentalities in a wider scope. At the end of 2018, the center opened its branch in Narva, the eastern-most and third largest city in Estonia at the border with Russia. The region is known for industrialization, but also poverty, unemployment, abandoned properties, and a large Russian population (88%). Thus the building of a new cultural venue in an old military factory aimed at integrating minorities through culture, creating a new community by regenerating places, and strengthening the identity of the local community as Russian-speaking Europeans, as stated

by Kristiina Reidolv, the Managing Director of Open Space.⁴⁸ The undertaking inspired the President of Estonia to relocate her entire Office to Narva for a period of one month in the autumn of 2018 to give more attention to the region, to break stereotypes, and to help establish civil society there.⁴⁹

3) e-Estonia vs Organic Estonia

The discussion of two prevailing concepts of national identity forms one more facet of the scenic debate.

Firstly, there is a conception of e-Estonia as an advanced digital society that provides innovative services. It is a movement by the government of Estonia, presented as the success story of a tiny but innovative Nordic country, self-styled as the most advanced digital society in the world, providing numerous e-services: i-Voting, e-Banking, e-Ticket, etc. Altogether 99% of public services are available online, saving the country 800 years of working time annually.⁵⁰ In 2000, the Estonian government declared internet access as a human right. In 2014, Estonia became the first country to offer e-residency to non-Estonians, a step towards a digital nation of global citizens, “a country without borders”, reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined communities.⁵¹

Secondly, the concept of Organic Estonia promotes traditional culture and untouched nature. It regards ancient forests and bogs as national symbols. The concept was the winner of an ideas competition held by the Estonian Development Fund in 2015 and aims at transforming Estonia into the first organic country in the world. Academics have emphasized that the idea does not cover only the economic dimension, but a free mental and spiritual environment, as well as a nation state and a traditional culture.⁵² The concept hints at geographic, historical, and ethnic nationalism as described by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith.⁵³

Both models enjoy their own home pages (e-estonia.com, organicestonia.ee) and recognition at state level, although the visions seem diametrically opposed if analyzed semiotically and with the help of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

The visual symbols of e-Estonia comprise mainly of digital and innovative elements: LEDs, skyscrapers, and mobile phones, all in futuristic tones of blue. A hand holding a phone seems to belong to a character from a computer game rather than a person of flesh and blood. Organic Estonia, in its turn, promotes itself with verdant forests, organic food, and children as the symbols of the bearers of cultural traditions – all in a very down-to-earth fashion. A conclusion by Adorno and Horkheimer seems especially telling in regard to these opposite concepts: “Men have always had to choose between their subjection to nature or the subjection of nature to the Self.”⁵⁴

48 Reidolv 2018.

49 ERR News 2017.

50 *E-Estonia* 2018.

51 Anderson 2006.

52 Einasto 2017.

53 Hutchinson, Smith 2012, Smith 1991.

54 Adorno, Horkheimer 2016, 32.

The characteristics of the two models can be presented in a comparison table of concepts:

e-Estonia	Organic Estonia
Forward-looking	Looking into the past
Innovative technology	Ancient history and untouched nature
Automated and digitalised	Hand-made
Based on rationality and logic	Based on spirituality and traditional knowledge
Global village	Local village
Non-places (Augé)	Places (Augé)

However, for purposes of promotion, the two concepts are sometimes combined, e.g. “the smart and organic state”, and called even a match made in heaven.⁵⁵ Although the issue is rather new to humanitarian studies, a recent presentation offered a fused notion of an Estonian eco-digital narrative.⁵⁶

Theatre projects have commented on the concepts from different points of view. For example, *Three Kingdoms* (2011) gave a valuable international commentary on Estonian identity. It was an innovative collaboration project between NO99, the Munich Kammerspiele, and the Lyric Hammersmith in London, premiering in all three countries. The play was spearheaded by UK dramatist Simon Stephens, German director Sebastian Nübling, and Estonian designer Ene-Liis Semper.

The cultural differences were depicted through a crime story that begins in the United Kingdom with the discovery of a woman’s head. The English detectives follow the trail to Germany, where they come upon an East European sex trade ring leading to Tallinn.⁵⁷ The show starts with a stable and peaceful situation in England: two detectives drink coffee and discuss musical preferences as one likes the Beatles, the other Chris Isaac. (Here, the audience can sense the cultural prejudices: “Englishmen are polite and haughty,” stated Simon Stephens later.⁵⁸) The further the detectives travel to the East, the more unpredictable the situations become, the more formless and hair-raising the environment turns, recalling the opposition of a “mature” Western and an “immature” Eastern Europe described by Polish philosopher Witold Gombrowicz.⁵⁹

The project portrayed Estonia as an example of criminal Eastern Europe. At the same time, it was a wild, mystical, and mythical place, confronted by the anonymous non-places of Western and Central Europe. A character called Trickster suddenly intruded upon the scene and other characters wore deer or

55 *Invest in Estonia* 2018.

56 *Annus* 2018.

57 Balme 2014, 69.

58 Stephens 2011.

59 Gombrowicz 1998, 126–127.

wolf headdresses, hinting at the concept of Organic Estonia.

The next two pieces signalled the utmost pessimism in future scenarios for Estonia. *The Emigration Airfield* (Tartu New Theatre, 2013) asked: will the last person to leave please turn out the lights? Spiced with black humor, the show presented the last remaining Estonians talking about their fellow countrymen as e-Ulysseses sailing on e-oceans. They complained about globalization, emigration, and the digital world distancing people. For example, in one episode, the detective Hercule Poirot is given such a difficult case to solve that he has to call other detectives for help: Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Jules Maigret, and others. To them he explains:

“You ask – what is it all about? A whole nation is lost! [...] L’Estonie! A small lovely nation by the Baltic sea. [...] Now there is only an empty field. Like an airfield!”⁶⁰

According to stage director Ivar Põllu, the show did not address only people who have physically left Estonia, as there are also many who have turned into “internal exiles” due to feeling redundant. They are equally lost to the state, to society and to the nation.⁶¹

The topical issue of emigration was also reflected in a documentary about Estonianness, *45,339 km² of Bog* in Endla Theatre (2015). The title referred to the total area of the country and one of the symbols of Organic Estonia, the wetland. The motto of the play was: “Should I stay or should I go?” The young team organized a survey among a thousand Estonians living abroad, asking about their reasons for departure, lifestyle and future plans. Out of the answers, a series of episodes were born. The stage director Laura Mets confessed she was dealing with the topic because the government does not.⁶² Out of one million ethnic Estonians, 200,000 have left the country in recent years.

It was a realistic look at the functioning of transnational Estonia, a concept introduced by the Human Development Report two years later.⁶³ For example, the actors portrayed expatriate Estonians spending national holidays with the rest of the family by the help of Skype. The play showed the models of e-Estonia and Organic Estonia working together, although not as a match made in heaven, but in a more tragicomic manner arising from prosaic situations.

Finally, *The Distinguishing Marks*, a devised project by two video artists Chris Kondek and Christine Kühl from Berlin, performing at the Open Space (2017), tested the possibilities of e-residency. They voiced, for the first time on Estonian stages, criticism of the success story of e-Estonia. Christine Kühl cooled down the digital fanaticism of Estonians, describing how the automated, anonymous e-corridors and e-crossroads left her lonely and desperate. Her comments on an excessively rationalized and mechanized worldview resembled those of Adorno

60 Aas 2013, 28–29.

61 Eilat 2013.

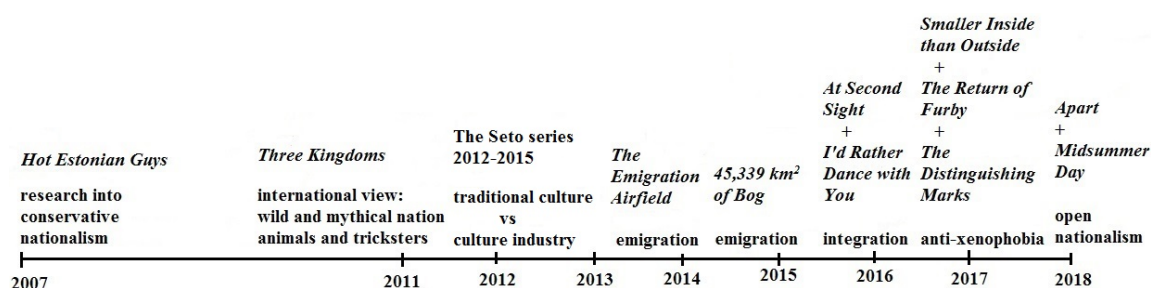
62 Mets 2016.

63 Estonian Human Development Report 2016/2017.

and Horkheimer.⁶⁴

In conclusion, the theatre projects that discussed the two concepts of national identity unanimously supported Organic Estonia or its cooperation with e-Estonia. At the same time, they provided constructive criticism to the state-propagated e-Estonia model, that is hard to find in the mainstream media.

The discussion in the theatrical public sphere ranged from conservative nationalism to open nationalism and anti-xenophobia in a single decade (as presented on a timeline below), anticipating and complementing sociological studies in many ways. The projects became more frequent and provided indispensable insight, research, and analysis into the functioning of a modern nation state.



Timeline of the changing national mentality in the theatrical public sphere in Estonia, 2007-2018.

However different the social context and the character of the theatrical public sphere over several decades – the secret forum, the technical, or the agonistic public sphere –, it always created a mediating zone between the state and individuals. It enabled a discussion space with the possibility to affirm, protest, or voice opposition to dominant mentalities, thus supporting democratic developments. As seen in the examples above, on many occasions emotional and physical episodes, e.g. by NO99, expressed critical attitudes equal to rational-critical articulations. In doing so, the critical discussion was never simply a comment, a response, but an ongoing process. It opened up the possibility of practising new values and identifying new directions. Thus, the concept of public sphere has proved itself relevant to contemporary Estonian theatre as well as for theatre studies more generally.

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⁶⁴ Adorno, Horkheimer 2016.

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Performance as Counter-memory: Latvian Theatre Makers' Reflections on National History

ZANE RADZOBE

ABSTRACT

The article introduces the topic of Latvian documentary theatre of the second decade of the twenty-first century using Michael Foucault's concept of counter-memory. The article analyses a series of performances by artists of the Latvian post-Soviet and post-memory generation dealing with history and memory discourses and highlights the main strategies of use of counter-memory discourses in the creation of national, cultural, and individual identities; emphasizing memory as a construct and highlighting strategies of its creation and maintenance; emphasizing the oppressive nature of dominant-discourses; a disassociation with the past and memory, both cultural and individual.

KEYWORDS

counter-memory, post-memory, discourse, counter-discourse, post-Soviet, performance, documentary theatre, identity

Performance as Counter-memory: Latvian Theatre Makers' Reflections on National History

Memory has been one of the most important subject matters in Latvian theatre since the regaining of national independence in 1991. Previously, history, especially that of the Second World War, its causes, and consequences, was often discussed in theatre, but in correspondence with Soviet ideology, and, consequently, often in contradiction to the memories of Latvians who, as a nation after the war, found themselves under Soviet occupation. The first decade of independence, therefore, was characterized by detailed attention towards discourses of memory previously marginalized, the so-called blank spots of history (events that had been concealed or misrepresented during the Soviet era), particularly Soviet repressions, mass deportations, as well as experiences of the exile communities formed abroad by the refugees of the war. The main source of historical knowledge became testimonials of oral history, not in the least because, for a time, there was a significant lack of historical research uncompromised by the specific frames of Soviet propaganda.

This process encompassed a range of channels (e.g., official memory policies, educational curricula, representations in arts and mass media), was geared towards the creation of a new national identity and discourse of history, and was successful – the previously marginalized memories now form the basis of the dominant discourse on national history. With the conclusion of this process, theatre of the early twenty-first century in Latvia lost interest in history and memory as subject matter. Recently however, there has been a renewal of interest in the memory and history of the second half of the twentieth century by the younger generation of Latvian theatre makers, although the discourses they offer are often incompatible with the dominant discourse established by previous generations. In this article, I will attempt to demonstrate what, how, and for what reasons the younger generation remember, how the discourse generated by contemporary performances relates to the socio-political context of the twenty-first century, as well as explain the performances in the context of counter-memory.

Memory and post-Soviet generation. Contexts

The term 'counter-memory' is applied by Michel Foucault in numerous of his works and defines the process of remembering in a socio-political context. Foucault interprets memory as a discourse, stressing that it is constructed rather than naturally occurring, and thus draws attention to contexts of remembering. Counter-memory, for him, is a form of *resistance against the official discourses of historical continuity, so-called 'regimes of truth', and it is exercised by those who are marginalized by power.* In "History of Sexuality", Foucault writes: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." (Foucault 1990, 95.)

It is important to stress that Foucault's understanding of counter-memory is closely linked with his understanding of counter-culture. For Foucault, counter-culture and mainstream are not mutually exclusive, but rather a dichotomy of categories. While mainstream culture can sustain itself, counter-culture is only viable if the mainstream exists since it is formed by negation. The same traits can be attributed to counter-memory – it does not form without the dominant discourses of memory and is consequently dependent on the established regime of truth that it opposes by promoting marginalized, diverse memories that cannot be easily integrated in the dominant discourse.

Of importance too is the dynamic of the power relations of the memory process. As with any discursive practice, the dominant discourse of memory for Foucault typically forms a 'top-down' perspective. The dominant discourse is suppressive and tends to subject all. Counter-memory, however, highlights the reversed perspective of 'bottom-up', representing the process during which different groups and individuals try to influence the existing knowledge and struggle for a recognition of marginalized discourses of the past. Thus, counter-memory serves as an act of democratization and pluralization and remembering for Foucault is a political act since it aims at influencing the existing power relations.

In this context, I would also like to refer to Foucault's essay on authorship "What is an Author?" The premise of this article dictates that I speak of a certain group of theatre makers as of a generation, and Foucault's understanding of the relationship between an author and a text allows me to categorize a diverse group of individuals, setting aside their individual traits, while concentrating on the common strategies of creating discourses as well as the common contexts that inform them. For Foucault, authorship "points to existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture". (Foucault 1977, 123.) The author, for Foucault, is situated in the breach between the social and the fictional, and Foucault explains in detail how this position dictates the plurality of the author's ego – there exists at the same time a unique individual who has succeeded in creating a certain piece; an author that has fulfilled a set of objectives and used a set of techniques that could be duplicated to arrive at the same conclusion by anyone; an author who has certain goals. Therefore, Foucault concludes, the author does not refer simply to an actual individual, but highlights the mechanisms of discursive

practice, and proposes a list of questions to be considered when discussing authorship, including, where do the discourses come from, how are they circulated and controlled.

The generation discussed in this article operates in the context of post-dramatic, post-Soviet, and post-memory situations. Born in the 1980's, this group of theatre makers is *de facto* the first post-Soviet generation in Latvia: although born in the Soviet Union, they are educated in independent Latvia, do not possess personal memories of the traumatic events of the second half of the twentieth century (e.g., war, deportations, struggle under an occupying power etc.), including knowledge of Soviet discourses of history, but are recipients of discourses of cultural and social memory of independent Latvia. The dominant discourse of history for them, therefore, is that of the institutionalized memory at the turn of the century.

They are also a post-memory generation, a description that in this article is understood in accordance with Marianne Hirsch's work. In her seminal work "The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust", Hirsch writes that "postmemorial work strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. In these ways, less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone." (Hirsch 2012, 633.) I have also stayed in line with Hirsch's elaboration on post-memory's connection with cultural memory (institutionalized memory by means of ritual, commemoration, or performance, as defined by Jan Assmann) and Aleida Assmann's characterization of political memory as an integral part of cultural memory.

In this context, a post-colonial perspective is also important, since the dominant discourse on the history of the national state of Latvia was formed in specific historical circumstances. The nation regained its independence in 1991 and had survived a period of occupation not only by a foreign power, but by a regime whose goal was to eradicate previous political, social, and aesthetical practices of the society and replace them completely. This process was traumatic for Latvian society. Benedikts Kalnačs, who discusses the dominant discourse of Baltic drama at the end of the twentieth-century in this context, therefore uses a post-colonial critique and summarizes the discourse as a) stressing a causal link between individual suffering and power; b) foregrounding national culture and identity; c) articulating a strong dichotomy of 'home' / 'alienation'. (Kalnačs 2011, 122)

The discourse characterized above is a discourse of national history created during the third national awakening.¹ It was originally a counter-memory

1 According to tradition, periodization of Latvian national history includes three "national awakenings". The first corresponds to the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century – the formation of the Latvian nation as an ethnic, cultural, and social entity. The second awakening metaphorically alludes to 1918 and the creation of the independent national state. "The third awakening" is used as a term to describe popular cultural, social, and political movements whose

discourse in the context of the Soviet Union, and was turned into the dominant discourse with the regaining of independence, and taught in schools, promoted in the press, the arts, etc. However, parallel to this discourse, influential alternative accounts of history also exist (particularly, Soviet discourses promoted by neighbouring Russia; to a lesser extent, Western European interpretations of Soviet history, discourses on the Holocaust, etc.), and it is important to take their irreconcilable differences into account as a context that greatly influences the current generation.

The creation of the dominant discourse of history in Latvia was geared towards reestablishing the severed ties with pre-war Latvia, and thus inevitably failing to encompass a large group of Russian-speaking people that had come to Latvia during Soviet times.²

One of the most important differences between both discourses is the interpretation of the Second World War. For the Russian-speaking minority, the Soviet discourse is viable – the war is seen as a breach of a socio-political norm of pre-war society that is corrected by the victory over Nazi Germany. Consequently, in this reading, the Soviet troops are heroes; the Nazis are the villains; but most importantly, so are all resisting Soviet rule (national partisans, political activists, exile communities, etc.) since they are disturbing the re-established normality. The dominant Latvian discourse, however, interprets the

activities in the late eighties of the twentieth century contributed to regaining national independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

2 It should be stressed that the Soviet context is of great importance here. The statistics allow me to demonstrate how the ethnic composition has affected the political and cultural composition of Latvian society. Pre-war Latvia was also a multi-ethnic state and had a considerable, but well integrated Russian minority – the official census of the 1920s and 1930s registers about 10% of the inhabitants of Latvia as ethnic Russians. Ethnic Latvians at the time make up about 80% of the population. During the Second World War and the first decade of Sovietisation, the Latvian majority was reduced considerably due to casualties at war, mass emigration of refugees to the West, and mass deportations carried out by the Soviets. The Soviet government also imposed mass migrations of industrial workers to Latvia from other regions of the Soviet Union. Consequently, the ethnic composition of Latvia was changed significantly. In 2018, 62% of the population of Latvia are listed as Latvians, while Russians are currently 25% of the population. The differences in numbers between both ethnicities are less considerable in cities, since towns and countryside are predominantly Latvian – most regions have 70 to 90% of Latvian inhabitants. This means that, for example, in the capital city of Riga Latvians are currently a minority – in 2018 only 47% of the inhabitants are Latvian. (See: Centrālā Statistikas pārvalde 2018.)

In practical terms, the minority is even larger. This article uses the term “Russian-speaking” instead of “Russian”, because a considerable portion of people of other ethnicities that relocated to Latvia during the Soviet period currently identify culturally and politically with the Russian minority, not with the Latvian majority. Self-identifying as economic migrants, they are perceived by most Latvians as the colonizing force of the Soviet regime and labelled politically untrustworthy. This has affected the citizenship laws, forcing Soviet migrants and their descendants to formally apply for Latvian citizenship and pass a citizenship test, while ethnic Latvians received their citizenships automatically. This has led to the situation where currently in Latvia 11% of the population do not hold any citizenship at all and are formally referred to as non-citizens of Latvia. This group consists exclusively of minority people and has a significant influence on the cultural and political standing of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia as a whole. (See: Centrālās Statistikas pārvalde 2018, 25-26.)

loss of independence as the breach of the norm. Therefore, the Soviet victory is seen as the prolonged continuation of the breach, begun at the beginning of the Second World War with the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940 and overcome only in 1991 with the regaining of independence. Consequently, the Soviets and the Nazis are villains alike, but the people opposing the Soviets are perceived as national heroes. As demonstrated by recent surveys (e.g., see: Kaprāns 2017) the differences between how the Latvian- and Russian-speaking communities remember the war and its consequences are vast. For example, 83% of Latvians believe that the mass deportations were unjustified (by comparison with 49% of Russian-speakers). Almost 80% of Latvian respondents identify the Latvian soldiers fighting for Nazi Germany as predominantly victims (by comparison with less than 50% of Russian-speakers). There are also significant differences between how different age groups perceive historic events. For example, when asked how they evaluated the Soviet era in the history of Latvia, almost 50% of the respondents aged 18-24 characterized it as bad, while in the age group 55-74 more than 60% had a positive response towards the Soviet era.

This is the context of which theatre makers dealing with the subject matter of national history are acutely aware and take into consideration when constructing their pieces. Starting from 2011 there have been more than a dozen performances by the post-memory generation dealing with the subject matter of memory and history, a significant amount considering that the theatrical environment of Latvia is a small one. Of significance is also the fact that almost all of the directors of this generation actively working have staged at least one performance dedicated to the matter. Although aesthetically and technically very different, the performances are characterized by similar traits. The most important (and in the context of Latvian culture - novel) is the refusal to remain within the limits of one's own ethnic memory discourse, highlighting rival ones. Another trait significant in the context of the representation of memory is refusal to interpret individual memories in the context of grand narratives of history. The last trait to mention is the potential of interaction built into the performances by design. The performances play with the expectations of their audiences as to how history should be represented, and between them clearly demonstrate that memory is understood as a tool of expressing one's political standing in contemporary Latvia, and as a practice of counter-memory. In the following section, I will examine three tactics of using counter-memory discourses in the performances by young Latvian theatre makers.

Remembering *against the grain*: construction of memory

The first tactic I would like to mention – highlighting the constructed nature of memory, as well as drawing an audience's attention to emotional and sometimes irrational strategies used to maintain cultural memory - is characterized by the performance of *The Legionnaires* by director Valters Sīlis staged in Ģertrūdes ielas teātris in 2011. The performance deals with a nationally well-known historical event. At the end of the Second World War, a few hundred Latvian soldiers drafted into the Nazi army fled to Sweden

where they asked for political asylum. The Soviet Union pressured Sweden to extradite the men, which the Swedes did in 1946 despite the understanding that the troops in question were not war criminals and that they would face unlawful prosecutions in the USSR. In Latvia, the historical event is perceived in accordance with the national discourse explained above – the soldiers are seen either as heroes defending their country against the Soviets or as victims since they were illegally drafted and couldn't avoid fighting for the Nazis. The extradition is perceived as an act of betrayal and is also, at times, tied in with the discourses of contemporary international politics in the region as an example of the inefficiency of international pacts and laws. Sīlis constructs the piece opposing three strategies existent in the dominant discourse: he adopts an international perspective, refuses to interpret the legionnaires within the frame of grand history, and chooses differing source material.

The piece does not use any oral history testimonies as was customary at the time in Latvian theatre, but documents from the archives of the Museum of Occupation of Latvia, as well as a novel by the Swedish author Per Olav Enquist, and it consists of a reading of the documents and a fictionalized, very subjective interpretation of the subject in equal parts. The expressed goal of Sīlis' work is to make history come alive, emotionally accessible to contemporary people, although the legionnaires themselves in the performance are robbed of their voice and are only seen and interpreted by outsiders – politicians, contemporaries, artists telling their story.

It is interesting to note that the performance was inspired by the most important rendering of national history in Latvian theatre by a director of a previous generation – Alvis Hermanis' *The Grandfather* staged in 2009. *The Grandfather*, consisting of three stories of veterans of the Second World War (a Soviet, a Nazi soldier, and one that was drafted into both armies) was based on interviews of oral history and clearly demonstrated a tactic of using oral history sources for the construction of the hegemonic discourse on national history. On closer inspection, the seemingly mutually exclusive narratives (for how could a Nazi and a Soviet both be right?) turn out to be structurally identical. The men have almost identical experiences and motivations, regardless of their ideological convictions, and they are all portrayed as not so innocent, yet, never the less, victims in the grand clash of superpowers where individuals are reduced to the role of a puppet, and therefore are not accountable for their actions. The fact that Hermanis had found an ingenious way of consolidating a disrupted national identity did not escape his audience, and without a doubt *The Grandfather* has been very influential in establishing a new, coherent, and all inclusive discourse on national history.

It is therefore of importance that Sīlis positions himself in opposition to *The Grandfather*. According to Sīlis, he first devised *The Legionnaires* because he thought that Hermanis got his history wrong – in Hermanis' piece, the legionnaire interviewed turns out to be a life-long Nazi sympathizer and Sīlis could not subscribe to this representation of a national hero, since his personal convictions were in line with the previously dominant discourse of national history. (Sīlis 2014.) However, in his work, we can also identify a certain aspect

of distrust towards the discursive practices of memory all together. He often questions the discourses of memory, especially in the cases where it paints too nice a picture, allowing the one who is remembering to put oneself in a heightened position – that of an innocent victim or dissident, for example, – and thus history and memory for Sīlis acquire a less hegemonic nature. Sīlis does not aim for “the historic truth” as a definite entity. He is not interested in the reconciliation of mutually exclusive experiences, but rather questions the relationship between memory and the present.

The Legionnaires is performed by a Latvian actor, Kārlis Krūmiņš, and a Swedish-born Finnish actor and director, Carl Alm, who periodically switch from roles to semi-autobiographical stage personas to comment on the material. For example, Alm, to Krūmiņš’ dismay, insists more than once that legionnaires were war criminals and Latvians are self-righteous to defend them. Krūmiņš generally defends legionnaires as national heroes, until at one point he puts on a mask resembling one of the most important figures of the first national awakening, Krišjānis Barons. Barons is the founder of Latvian folklore studies that in his time became a cornerstone for an early national self awareness and national identity, and so when he mockingly starts to sing a made-up folksong about killing the Jews, the act has a shock value, as well as questions whether the show’s insistence that the legionnaires were only fighting for national ideals or survival, is as innocent as the audience would like it to be. Both actors at some point embody Swedish and Soviet officials trying to outsmart each other in a political game or imagine how the soldiers, awaiting the decision of the Swedish government, felt and behaved.

It is important to stress that the legionnaires in the show are purposefully de-heroized. Although in the national discourse they are usually represented as seasoned men with strong patriotic inclinations, Sīlis stresses the reality of teenagers brought up in war time and drafted by force. The legionnaires in the performance are in their early twenties, and behave accordingly – they swear, they drink, and masturbate on stage. They are more interested in the practicalities of their everyday life than on reflecting on the historical or ideological meaning of their surroundings. It is less important for them to understand the intricacies of post-war international diplomacy than to find out who has fathered their pregnant girlfriend’s child. In depicting the legionnaires, the performance is careful to present only actions without ever ascribing them any value or meaning. However, that does not mean that the audience members do not attribute certain meanings to the events shown.

One of the themes of the performance is the inability to understand each other. During the show the actors speak in five languages – Latvian, German, Russian, Swedish, English – therefore, at any show, audience members, regardless of their background, do not understand at least part of the text. The legionnaires themselves are displaced. Furthermore, the inability to understand each other in a contemporary European context is also present in the different personas of the actors. Representing different perspectives on history, they can never agree with each other. The performance is subtitled ‘a discussion with a fight’, and when discussion fails, both actors stage a fight

trying to convince each other by physical force. That fails as well, and the show ends with them both covered in blood sitting on the edge of the stage without the issue of their disagreement having been resolved.

However, the performance itself is not about the legionnaires – who they were, how to interpret their historical role –, since Sīlis is aware that the Latvian audience already arrives at the show with set beliefs and depends on that. Remembering *against the grain* – the story expected by the audience – is used to draw the audience's attention to their behavior in constructing memory.

The audience is actively involved in creating the story of *The Legionnaires*. The actors constantly ask them whether they can imagine something. "Can you imagine that you are a soldier seeking asylum in a country that was formerly your ally? Can you imagine that you are a representative in the Swedish parliament voting for or against extradition?" etc. The questions are constructed in a way that highlight mutually exclusive perspectives on the matter. However, the audience members are also pressured to arrive at a definite interpretation, for example, when they are asked to cast a vote for or against extradition. This means that at least part of the information given by the show must be discarded, and audience members are made aware of the process of choices. In this way the mechanisms of creating a discourse are highlighted (e.g., whether historic accuracy or patriotic value is of more importance, what kind of argumentation works best – rational or emotional, what sources do the audience trust and what are they likely to discard, etc.), and the context of the present, as opposed to the context of the past, is also stressed.

According to Sīlis, in Latvia, audiences always vote against extradition, and it is an emotional highlight of cathartic magnitude: it feels almost like the wrongs of history being corrected. At that point, Alm faces the public and ironically asks them: "So, you want to change history?" The question stresses the emotional background of helplessness: the legionnaires, although it is their story, historically could not influence anything. However, even more importantly, neither can the audience members in the theatre, nor the theatre makers themselves, should they choose to – the past is uncorrectable. The emotional letdown at the end of the show is complex. The audience is disappointed with the history, but even more so – with the present, because throughout the show, the contemporality of the events depicted has been stressed, e.g., by showing the legionnaires in situations that may well be of the twenty-first century, by alluding to the similarities of the political contexts of post-war and contemporary societies etc. The dominant discourse, therefore, is presented in a hyperemotional way, but also demonstrates its superficiality, constructive nature, and its failure to dominate in a context larger than a singular ethnic memory group.

The good Russian: identity in the context of oppressive memory

The awareness of the dominant discourse as merely one of many is characteristic to all the works by the generation, even though they often use the contrasting discourses for different reasons. Sīlis uses the counter-

discourse to test the dominant discourse and for him, the inability of the latter to dominate the reading of history has negative connotations and is seen as the somewhat tragic vulnerability of the national identity; for others it serves to highlight the oppressive nature of the dominant discourse and the socio-political consequences of that.

The range of use of counter-memory discourses in this way is significant. For example, counter-memory is used to highlight the ethnic tensions of contemporary Latvia by problematizing the position of Latvians, now a majority that is still traumatized by having been a minority, in relation to contemporary ethnic minorities.

In 2015 director Dmitry Petrenko premiered *The Last Pioneer* in Dirty Deal Teatro, a show that was devised using oral history interviews of Russian teenagers coming of age during the collapse of the Soviet Union, the last ones to join the nearly mandatory ideological Soviet teenager's movement - the pioneers. In stark contrast with the dominant discourse on the third national awakening that depicts the end of the eighties of the twentieth century as a golden age of unity in Latvia, the counter-memory discourse of the Soviet teens shows characters that feel helpless, believe that their future has been stolen (e.g., with the closing of the national borders they are no longer eligible to study in Russian universities and therefore are forced to alter their career preferences), and feel lost.

To represent the characters' inability to understand what is happening in newly independent Latvia, the show uses language. People interviewed for the show recall that in the early 1990s they were brought up in Latvia, but in the Soviet Russian context, did not speak Latvian at all, and suddenly they were confronted with a new social, political, and cultural situation. The absurdity of the changes as seen by Russian teenagers is highlighted on the stage by a poster that spells out "Pūt, vējiņi!" (loosely translated as "Blow, little wind!" in English) in Cyrillic. The cultural significance for the Latvian audience is obvious – it's the title of a popular Latvian folk song that gained heightened cultural status during the Soviet occupation; while many Latvian songs, including, but not limited to the national anthem, were banned and their performance criminalized as an act of treason, *Pūt, vējiņi!* was among the repertoire that could be performed despite not being ideological or popular in nature. The teacher of the Latvian language uses this song and only this song in a class that does not speak the language, does not understand the text, or the cultural significance of it, and yet she blames the students for their inability to communicate in Latvian. The students in their turn conclude that Latvianness is something foreign and forced upon them. To highlight their discomfort, the actors switch to speaking Russian for a few scenes, even though the piece is performed in an independent theatre catering to predominantly young Latvians that, due to a longstanding Latvian educational policy actively discouraging Latvian schoolchildren from learning Russian as a foreign language, are in most cases unable to communicate in Russian. The actors, Latvians in their twenties, also do not know Russian – they have mechanically learned to pronounce the text that they do not understand. Here, language acts as a

multi-layered metaphor, and the distinction between pretending to speak and speaking signifies also processes of identification and integration.

It is an effective strategy to make the audience feel the discomfort the characters of the piece are experiencing. The language ties the discourse presented to a specific contemporary context since the question of whether the Russian language should be banned in Russian minority schools has been on the political agenda for more than a decade. The controversy is obviously tied to the question of identity – the Russian minority feels that by banning the Russian language from schools, the state of Latvia is aggressively suppressing their cultural identity; Latvians fear that strengthening the identity of a large minority will lead to a second official language of the state and endanger Latvian identity. Both positions have far reaching political consequences and contribute to the maintenance of society as a construct consisting of two isolated communities.

The specific use of the Russian language in the show also highlights the question of the relationship between the minority and an oppressive dominant culture. The show alludes to the Latvian national history – periods during the nineteenth century tsarist Russia, the Nazi and the Soviet occupations in the twentieth century when Latvian was banned from use in bureaucratic, legal, and educational contexts. Thus, the show indirectly poses an inconvenient question of the similarities between the situation of the past and of the present that are reflected in the dominant discourse in a contrary manner. What changes when a minority becomes a majority? Do all minorities have inherit rights to fight for their identity? How does the Latvian and Russian marginalization differ?

The show also poses a question of what the ideal behaviour of a member of the Russian minority in the eyes of the Latvian majority would look like. The director – a Latvian Russian who actively works in the field of Latvian culture – presents an image that he himself has ironically dubbed “the good Russian” (Rozentāls 2013): that is somebody who not only is a loyal citizen, speaks Latvian, contributes to society, but also someone who has effectively ceased to be Russian. The irony here is inescapable, and Petrenko’s work exudes a considerable amount of Soviet nostalgia. In this case the longing is not for a place to return to, for a political regime, but rather for a time when one’s identity was unchallenged, whole. It is clear that the memory presented in the show is nurtured and maintained as a direct reaction to the dominant discourses of memory that fail to reflect sufficiently on the experiences of a minority.

As this is the strategy that is used the most by this generation of artists, I will mention a few more examples to highlight the range of memories marginalized or, as felt by the artists, misrepresented by the dominant discourse. In all the cases, as in *The Last Pioneer*, at the centre is the question of identity, and the productions often return to the memory discourses most unacceptable to the dominant discourse – those closely resembling the Soviet discourse on history.

For example, *The Father – Hero '69* written by Inga Gaile, directed by Dāvis Auškāps (Dirty Deal Teatro, 2016), tells a story of a Latvian born KGB officer during the sixties. The show is promoted as a study of a family history, the

main character of the play being based on the playwright's grandfather and marketed as a controversial take on national history by admitting Latvian collaboration with the occupying regime. The profession of the main hero is repeatedly referenced throughout the show; however, the audience never witness him in any professional capacity, nor learn anything about his deeds that would, according to the dominant discourse, label him as a borderline criminal. Instead, the play focuses on the troubled relationship between a married couple locked in a spiral of alleged mutual infidelities. The character may not be a pleasant one, but his unpleasantness is due to exaggerated jealousy and an infantile nature that threatens his personal life but does not affect, nor relates to, his public life. If Sīlis in *The Legionnaires* de-heroizes the national heroes, Gaile and Auškāps, on their part, humanize the national villain.

Director Mārtiņš Eihe develops this trend even further in his *Birthday of Tanya* (*Ģertrūdes ielas teātris*, 2016). The text of the performance consists of memories collected in the project *Your memories for the future of Latvia* funded by the Goethe Institute in Riga, inviting people of different ethnic backgrounds to share their family stories of the twentieth century.

The show mimics a family party - approximately a hundred audience members are invited to sit by a communal table set with a selection of appetizers, sweets, wine as traditional in large Latvian family gatherings. The audience is then encouraged to eat and drink, to involve themselves in the small talk with the people next to them, and they are only interrupted by the actors from time to time for a toast, a speech, or a party game. The texts the actors perform vary from anecdotes to nostalgia, to testimonials of deportations, exile, collaboration, etc. The guests are also actively invited to share their stories or to discuss the stories heard. The metaphorical frame of the performance enables the inclusion of any experiences since the nation here is interpreted as a family consisting of vastly diverse, yet equal individuals.

Nevertheless, it is important in the context of the use of counter-culture to stress the dramaturgical structure of the piece. Despite being relatively open to any interactions by the audience members, the piece itself has an arc of conflict written into it. At one point two actors disagree on the reading of history – one expresses a nostalgic longing for the Soviet era, insisting that life was less complicated then; the other promotes the dominant discourse of history, stressing particularly the deportations as a definite argument in proving the evil nature of the Soviet state. Their verbal exchange escalates into a physical fight that ends without any definite conclusion on the issue of how to interpret the Soviet occupation. But the most interesting aspect is the fact that the emotional culmination of the show is the reading of letters of a Soviet soldier who, during the war, corresponds with his pregnant wife back in the Urals. The letters are beautiful and paint a portrait of a gentle, loving man, an image in stark contrast with how the dominant discourse would portray a soldier of the occupying army – as a faceless monstrosity whose only goal is the destruction of Latvian lives.

The authors of *The Last Pioneer*, *The Father – Hero '69* and *The Birthday*

of *Tanya* are informed by very different contexts. Petrenko is a Russian, and although he works predominantly in the context of the Latvian community, his reflection on the subject is naturally influenced by the context of the Russian minority in Latvia. It could be argued that Gaile's take on history is dependent on her personal relationship with the subject, since the history of her family might compromise her status in contemporary Latvia. However, the counter-memory discourse is also used by Eihe who comes from the context of the Latvian majority, is very patriotic, and in the theatre often chooses to stage performances that are closely connected with the national history as seen by the dominant discourse.

What these and other performances by this generation of theatre makers demonstrate is the unease of the artists with the dominant discourse as a failed attempt to encompass a sufficient amount of differing memory discourses existent in contemporary Latvia and the consequential crisis of national identity. Although all are influenced to some extent by the contemporary political theatre scene, especially verbatim and documentary theatre, and one of the main themes of their performances is the problem of representation, none of the artists have defined their theatre as political in nature. However, their work with counter-memory discourses obviously highlights the striving to open dominant memory discourses for re-evaluation. The current dominant discourse, therefore, is often seen in an ironic light, and the very idea of the possibility of succeeding in creating a dominant memory discourse acceptable both to majority and minorities at the same time is never really questioned.

What am I to do with it? An attempt to disassociate from one's memory

In conclusion, I would like to briefly touch upon the third strategy of the use of counter-memory in Latvian contemporary theatre: the dissociation from the past and abandonment of the attempt to reconcile dominant and counter discourses.

In 2015, Russian born Latvian director Vladislav Nastavshev staged his autobiographical performance *The Lake of Hope* in the New Riga theatre, followed by *The Lake of Hope is Frozen* in 2018. The performances deal with the question of the author's identity, especially the first one that introduces the image of remodeling – of Vlad's Soviet-style apartment, of his relationship with his elderly mother, as well as his identity, and it is obvious that the choices Nastavshev as an artist makes are closely influenced by his personal discomfort with discourses of the 'norm' in Latvian society.

Nastavshev is a Russian and a gay man, and both of those identities can be a challenge in Latvia. One of the main objects on the stage in *The Lake of Hope* is a closet, and the performance is literally Nastavshev's coming out, revealing his sexual identity to the public for the first time. However, the closet is filled with all sorts of things Nastavshev feels he could do without but cannot get rid of, starting with his useless repairmen, a neighbour and a potential love interest of Nadezhda (Vlad's mother), but, predominantly, objects that remind Vlad of his Soviet childhood.

The character longs for a cosmopolitan identity and feels humiliated by his

Soviet past. However, the metaphorical space of the stage representing Vlad's inner reality stubbornly fails to allow him to let go of the memories. Even though, in the end, Vlad seemingly succeeds in renovating his apartment (a metaphor for his identity), the "Soviet nature" of it has only been highlighted. Vlad's resistance to live like everybody else (meaning, in the context of the show, to renovate one's apartment in the style of European minimalism) leads him to scrubbing down all the layers of his walls to reveal their true composition. It turns out to be Soviet cement, an imperfect building material that is now exposed much to Vlad's satisfaction. Neither the character, nor the director seem to be aware of the irony of the image.

The title of the play features a wordplay. *Hope* is the translation of Vlad's mother's name, and encompasses Nastavshev's complicated relationship with the past he has inherited and refuses to identify with. *The Lake of Hope is Frozen*, for example, deals with Nastavshev's relationship with his maternal grandmother – the widow of a Soviet officer who is openly against the independence of Latvia; but shortly after introducing the character to the stage, Vlad loses any interest in her – he has nothing to remember about her. However, it turns out that simply by refusing to acknowledge something or someone, they do not disappear. Vlad's grandmother joins different inanimate objects in the background of the stage, but never leaves. Thus Vlad's 'hope' for the future, for a changed living space, is never fulfilled, since there is no space to build something new. Although the character is conscious about his rejection of the dominant discourse of memory, his attempts to adopt some form of counter-memory also fail, and Vlad is left on stage filled with the debris of his memory, feeling isolated and unable to find any meaningful relationships in any group of society. The lake has frozen, and Vlad is also freezing in metaphorical isolation, ironically dressed in the velvet costume of a figure skater that he has outgrown.

It is important to stress that this sort of use of counter-memory is by no means limited to Nastavshev. While the performances described above are a serious attempt to analyze the identity of a complex personality belonging to several minorities in the Latvian context, the same technique is used also by ethnic Latvian artists, predominantly in comedies. Perhaps the most characteristic example here is *The Flea Market of Souls* by playwright Justīne Kļāva and director Inga Tropa (Dirty Deal Teatro, 2017), a comedy about the identities of a group of European exchange students in their twenties. Each of the characters in their turn remember how they have been confronted with their grandparent's tales of glory during the Second World War. The absurdity of the discourses on national histories becomes evident when compared on an international level. A Russian grandson's refusal to buy beetroot, for example, is met by his grandfather's reminder that he liberated Europe from the Nazis. A Polish girl cannot find a sufficient answer when her relatives claim that they fought Russian tanks on horseback. An Austrian guy is forced to be silent altogether as soon as he starts to speak. All the others silence him by either stressing that he has never really suffered because of historical memory or, rather ironically in the context of the previous claim, call him a Nazi, etc. The

only answer any of the characters are able to offer to their predecessors is repeated like a chorus all through the performance: “But what am I to do with it?” They all feel disconnected from the discourses they inherited. However, in interpersonal (and intercultural) relationships they also learn quickly that a memory of someone instantly triggers a counter-memory by someone else, even if privately they are all sceptical of the discourses they have inherited. Thus, the dominant and the counter-discourses feed each other in a constant loop, ensuring the survival of the other in the ever-changing power struggle.

In conclusion, the differing practices concerning representations of counter-memory discourses are rarely positioned as political. However, they are all inherently connected with the question of individual or cultural identity, and are critical of the contemporary socio-political establishment. All of the performances analysed in this article demonstrate the uses of counter-memory as a tool for questioning the dominant discourse rather than promoting marginalized memory discourses in their own right.

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Playing History

Play and ideology in *Spelet om Heilag Olav*

JULIE RONGVED AMUNDSEN

ABSTRACT

Spelet om Heilag Olav, also called *Stiklestadspelet*, is Norway's longest running historical spel. Spels are Norwegian annual outdoor performances about a historical event from the local place where the spel is performed. *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is about the martyr death of King Olav Haraldsson at Stiklestad in 1030, which is said to have brought Christianity to Norway. The spel is subject to conservative aesthetics where both the history of medieval Norway and the spel's own inherent history guarantees that there will not be big changes in the performance from year to year. This conservative aesthetics makes room for a certain form of nostalgia that can be linked to *play*. The spel makes use of more serious sides of play. In the theories of Victor Turner, play is connected to the liminoid that differs from the liminal because the liminoid is connected to choice while the liminal is duty. The spel is liminoid but it can be argued that the liminoid has a mimetic relationship to the liminal and through play the spel can make use of several liminal qualities without becoming an actually transforming event. One of the main aesthetic ideas of the spel is authenticity. That this today feels old fashioned is legitimized through the necessity of authenticity and authenticity's connection to play. Through the use of Žižek's theories of ideology and his term of *failure*, the article argues that the failure of creating totalities is inherent to theatre, and that this failure is play. Because the totalities are not clear, the event plays with desire showing its audience, through a form of rituality, how what is happening is an important event for the nation as a whole. *Spelet om Heilag Olav* becomes an effective presenter of Norwegian ideology because it manages Norwegian history in a way that focuses more on the collective experience of the event than on its content.

KEYWORDS

Spel, ideology, play, ritual, outdoor performance, Stiklestad, Olav Haraldsson, nostalgia, authenticity

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Playing History

Play and ideology in *Spelet om Heilag Olav*

Introduction

The annual performance of *Spelet om Heilag Olav*, also called *Stiklestadspelet*, is Norway's longest running historical *spel*. In this article, I will explain Norwegian *spel* culture by addressing one specific case study, and I will discuss how this particular *spel* makes use of Norwegian history and mythology. I will start out by discussing the *spel* before looking more closely at its use of history and then continue by discussing aesthetical issues. Further, I will see how the *spel* exercises its sense of place, narrative structures, historical costuming, and acting before I place the *spel* in a theoretical context. I will argue that the *spel* makes use of a certain form of *play* that can be considered a form of *ritualistic theatricality* and that this can be effective in its presentation of Norwegian ideology. By saying this, I do not mean that there exists only one Norwegian ideology, but that the ideology contributed through the presentation in the *spel* is one of the ideologies constituting the plurality of ideologies that in different ways for different people tells a story about what it is to be Norwegian. Neither do I mean that Norwegian consciousness is made up by a fixed number of ideologies, but that different narratives and actions together create a plethora of ideas that can be used for ideological purposes if its symbolic existence and adherence is strong enough among its constituents.

In the article, I will argue that the *spel* makes use of more serious sides of play. I will discuss the theories of Victor Turner where play is connected to the liminoid. To Turner, the liminoid is connected to choice, while the liminal is connected to duty. The *spel* is liminoid but it can be argued that the liminoid has a mimetic relationship to the liminal. I will also argue that one of the main aesthetic ideas of the *spel* is authenticity and that through using authenticity ideology becomes present through play. This form of authenticity is deeply conservative, and the conservatism in which the aesthetics are made are also subject to play and ideology. In regards to this, I will discuss Slavoj Žižek's theories of ideology and his term of *failure*. I will argue that the failure of creating totalities is inherent to theatre. The wish of creating theatrical totalities is tangible in the *spel*'s use of authenticity, and that the necessary failure of this is play.

Spel, history and mythology

I have seen the spel at Stiklestad twice, once in 2015 and once in 2016. The first time I saw it, the spel was directed by Marit Moum Aune, the second time by Hanne Tømta. *Spelet om Heilag Olav* tells the story of the medieval Norwegian king Olav Haraldsson and the hours leading up his death. He was later declared a saint and is said to have introduced Christianity to Norway.

The performance *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is centered around the historical king Olav Haraldsson and his martyr death at the battle of Stiklestad in 1030. The performance was premiered in 1954 and has since been performed annually for the holiday of Olsok that marks his death. It is performed outdoors in an amphitheatre built especially for the *spel* that lies in close proximity to the place where Olav is said to have been killed. In Norwegian, the term *spel* means *play*, but the term in this form has come to mean exactly this type of outdoor performance with a historical theme. As a genre, *spel* marks a performance that takes place outdoors, involves a great number of amateurs and local resources, and finds its narrative from historical events connected to the concrete place where the performance is staged. Another important aspect concerning the spel genre is that it very often makes a form of national struggle its theme. This means that although the topic of the performance is to be found in historical events of the local place where the spel is performed, its importance comes from the local place's position in the larger national narrative.

Spelet om Heilag Olav is widely regarded to be the first Norwegian spel. It is even called "the mother of all spels." Today, spels are performed all over the country all year round, although mostly during the summer. According to the organization *Norske Historiske Spel*, there are 150 spels in Norway today. They are not all performed annually, but biannually or even less often, but they are considered to be recurring events.¹

Although it feels as though spel culture is omnipresent, at least in summer time, the concept is rather modern, and does not have a connection with drama from the periods it presents. *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is regarded as the first Norwegian spel and premiered in 1954, after most probably being inspired by its Swedish counterpart *Arnljotspelen* which tells the story of Arnljot Gelline, a Swedish character found in Snorre's saga about Olav Haraldsson. Arnljot was a Swedish man of the forest who was baptized by Olav and joined him for his final battle at Stiklestad. *Arnljotspelen* was premiered as early as 1935, and it is probable that Olav Gullvåg and his collaborators were inspired by this when they started working on *Spelet om Heilag Olav*. It was, however, in the 1980s that spel culture first really took off in Norway with new spels occurring all over the country. It is important to note here that *Mostraspelet*, which premiered in 1984, also finds its theme in the life of Olav Haraldsson. It is considered the second longest running spel in Norway, although it is not performed every year and has been subject to large changes during recent years.

There has not been any extensive research on Norwegian spel culture, and the sources on the field are few. In 2005 Sigurd Ohrem published a book called

¹ Oddvar Isene from Norske Historiske Spel in an e-mail to me 22 August 2016.

*Spillet om stedet: Historiske spel i Norge.*² The book provides information about a large number of spels but lacks discussions about genre, aesthetics, and the use of history. The book is largely based on a thesis from 1997 written by Kari Vågen, at the time a student of theatre studies at the University of Oslo.³ 1997 was a good year for spel research with another student thesis by Maria Danielsen about the dramaturgy of historical spels.⁴ The same year, theatre scholar Anne-Britt Gran wrote an article about the "explosion" of historical spels in Norway.⁵ Gran claims that historical spels should be placed between ritual and aesthetical theatre. This is an important view that has not gained much following in Norwegian discussions about this popular cultural phenomenon. She also discusses how the use of the local place in all spels relates to the national project. Regarding *Spelet om Heilag Olav* or *Stiklestadspelet*, journalist Yngve Kvistad's book *Stiklestadspelet – slaget som formet Norge* has been an important source, but although it shows good journalistic effort it lacks theorization and ambition to set the spel in a larger cultural context.⁶

All spels are about historical events. Not all these events are true. Some are clearly and solely mythological. Examples of spels that perform narratives found in local mythology and storytelling are *Marispelet ved Rjukanfossen* that tells a fairytale like story about local class struggles and forced marriages, and *Steigen Sagaspill* which also tells a story about two lovers whose matrimony is delayed because of external societal forces. Where *Marispelet* finds its inspiration in a story collected and written down in the early 19th century, *Steigen Sagaspill* finds its narrative in a myth said to have existed in the area since Viking times. This also shows how many historical periods are represented in the creation of spels and that the most important genre traits are how they relate to the place where they are performed and that they refer to historical periods of the actual place. Another important aspect is the use of amateurs in the performances and voluntary work on the productions.

Spelet om Heilag Olav is one of the spels that, contrary to the two spels mentioned above, finds its narrative in actual historical events. Historical research has shown that we can be certain about many details regarding Olav's life and times. We know beyond all uncertainty that Olav Haraldsson was king. Olav's birth year is contested but according to tradition it is said that he was born in 995, the year his forerunner Olav Tryggvason became king.⁷ Before Olav Haraldsson became king, he spent years abroad as a Viking, gaining wealth and making alliances. In 1015, he returned to Norway where he became king of large parts of the country.⁸ At this time we know that he was Christian, and after he

2 Sirgurd Ohrem: *Spillet om stedet: Historiske spel i Norge*,

3 Kari Vågen: *Framveksten av historiske spel i Norge*, hovedfagsoppgave i teatervitenskap, UiO, 1997

4 Maria Danielsen: *Historiske spill i Norge: struktur og dramaturgi i spillenes tekstgrunnlag*, hovedfagsoppgave i teatervitenskap, UiO, 1997

5 Anne-Britt Gran: "Kjeppar i hjula eller føde for nasjonen? Om eksplosjonen av historiske spel", *Syn og Segn*, hefte 2 (1997)

6 Kvistad

7 Langslet 1998, 15

8 Ibid.,. 31

came to the throne, he introduced new Christian laws. It also seems quite certain that Olav Haraldsson's death date was in fact the 29th of July 1030.⁹ In earlier times, the writings of Snorre Sturlasson were used by historians as a factual historical source. That Snorre conducted his writings several centuries after the fact and that he also relied heavily on oral tradition was downplayed.

Today, historians rely much less on Snorre, and are quite aware of the methodological problems in doing so. This does not, however, mean that folk tradition and historical belief has changed. The version of history that is presented in the *spel* is largely based on stories from Snorre's extensive saga on the holy king. When discussing and researching Olav Haraldsson, it soon becomes clear that the distinction between mythology and truth is many faceted and that the certainties are few. On the one hand, there is historical, researched knowledge about Olav. On the other hand, there is the vast reception history connected to Olav and the perceived stories about him.

The most important stories of Olav started when he died and quite quickly became a symbol of Norwegian Christianity and the nation's connection to it. Olav was canonized early on, and even though Norway gave up the catholic faith in 1537, the sainthood of Olav has had a surprisingly strong standing. In addition to the official Christian mythology surrounding sainthood and Christianization, there has been a large array of folk myths in different versions around the country.¹⁰ In this mythological landscape the *spel* places itself as a presenter of historical fact but also makes use of parts of the vast mythology of Olav's miraculous deeds that no one actually believes to be historical truth.

In my use of the term *mythology* I rely on the French theorist Roland Barthes and his book *Mythologies* and the essay *Myth today* published in 1957.¹¹ In it, Barthes defines myths as narratives that function as legitimizing factors within society. To Barthes, myths are a type of speech. As speech, mythology is to be regarded as a semiotic system, but Barthes does not think mythology is like all other forms of language and coins it a "second order semiotic system". As signs they do not refer back to a significant but remain empty signifiers. As empty signifiers mythology's most important factor is that it naturalizes its content. Maybe we can say that since the myths are empty signifiers, they create their own significant and the significant is internal to the signifier itself. In this way it does not make a big difference whether the story told by the myth is factually true, made up for the fun of it, or based on religion or folklore, the naturalizing process that makes it myth is the way it incorporates its own significant. In the myths about Olav, some things are almost impossible to know whether they are true or not, while other things are definitely pure folklore, and some things are based on historical knowledge. Together these elements create a system of myths relating to its own mythology and folkloric history with a naturalizing function.

9 Ibid., 87

10 Ibid., chapter 9.

11 Barthes 2009

Spelet om Heilag Olav: Narrative and Sense of Place

The dramatic work on which *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is based was written by Olav Gullvåg for the premiere in 1954. It is based on Snorre's saga, but large parts were also added by Gullvåg. In journalist Yngve Kvistad's book about the spel, it becomes quite clear that Gullvåg was never thoroughly pleased with the work.¹² He rewrote it several times. I have based my research on the text of a version from the performance in 1960 that has been given to me by Stiklestad Nasjonale Kultursenter (SNK), which is responsible for the staging of the spel every year.

Olav Gullvåg's text tells the story of a family at the farm Sul in Trøndelag in 1030. The family is split over questions regarding faith. The grandfather on the farm, Gamal-Jostein, still believes in the old, Norse gods, and keeps telling his young granddaughter, Gudrun, stories about them, particularly about Balder and his death. The wife on the farm keeps a terrible secret. Years ago, she put her newborn child out into the woods to die, something that became a punishable offence with Olav's new Christian laws. The day before the fatal battle, Olav and his men arrive at the farm and ask to stay the night. This creates tension in the family. Gudrun has become crazy and keeps seeing her dead sibling walking around the farm. When she has experienced these sightings the only way to calm her down is through dancing a heathen dance ritual in worship of the sun. This does, of course, not please Olav when he arrives at the farm, and he confronts the family.

The battle is not extensively described in the original text. In later mise-en-scenes the directors have chosen to give more room to battle scenes, and the audience get to see Olav die. In director Hanne Tømte's version from 2016, the soldiers fought slowly and silently before a large blood red cross made up of a silk-like fabric was laid out on the stage floor, that is slightly hilly, to underline the importance of his death and its connotations.

The amphitheatre at Stiklestad is built for the spel as a traditional theatre space where the stage is at a higher level, with an orchestra pit underneath. During the performance a full orchestra plays original music composed by Paul Okkenhaug to accompany Gullvåg's text. The stage area is surrounded by trees, and on the grass covered stage three small permanent houses are built to resemble the way farms looked in Norway in early medieval times. The permanent scenography is interesting in the sense that it limits changes to the visual experience from year to year or from director to director. The stage area is in itself a guarantor for the spel not changing very much.

Although the spel is performed outdoors very close to the place where Olav is said to have been killed, to a surprisingly large degree it feels like walking into a stage area that can be almost anywhere. The weather and natural surroundings remind us of where we are, but the arena feels closed off from the rest of the world. The Canadian theatre scholar Josette Féral speaks of how theatricality can come into being when you walk into a theatre space long before a performance is about to start. Féral describes several experiences that can be said to be theatrical based on one's own perception of space. The term she uses for this is *clivage*. You can perceive the theatrical essence of the room

12 Kvistad 2003

although there is no performative communication.¹³ This, I believe, comes from expectancy and semiotic readings of a room. When you walk into a traditional theatre space, you know that you are leaving the quotidian space outside. At Stiklestad the entering of the staging area has much of the same quality, but it also has the opposite effect. When the space outside the arena is left outside, we do not get the same emotional connection to the space as the location could suggest. At Stiklestad, the trees have grown so that you cannot see anything of the landscape surrounding it, something that increases the feeling of a traditional theatre space. When this is combined with a permanent scenography with no room for change, the space is given a semiotic meaning that is somewhat hard to determine because the symbolic reverence of the place is undermined.

One way of explaining the aesthetics of the spel is through a form of *conservatism*. This is not just given by the staging area and the scenography alone but can also be seen in the costumes and acting styles. While the term *conservatism* is most often connected to a political view as presented by certain political parties, it of course also has the meaning of resisting change, and in this theatre space change is impossible. It is not just impossible, the arena is built in a way that in itself controls that there will be no change. In many other spels the outside forces play a significant role. When I saw the spel *Korsvikaspillet* in Trondheim in 2016 the audience beforehand were told that the people making the spel had asked for there not to be any boat traffic on the fjord that was used as a backdrop during the spel, and they apologized in advance for cruise ships that might pass by unannounced. This made me look for cruise ships throughout and I became very aware of the natural surroundings and references to the modern day Trondheimsfjord. They might have tried to control it, but because they were not able to, they made the surroundings, maybe unintentionally, an even greater part of the performance. In *Spelet om Heilag Olav* nothing happens unintentionally, increasing the idea of controlled conservatism.

History Repeating in Costumes and Acting

The costumes are made to resemble medieval Norway, but more importantly in understanding the conservative aesthetics is that the view of what medieval Norway looks like never seems to change. Comparing images from different periods of the spel's history, we can see that the same costumes are used in several performances and that when the costumes change, they are kept in the same style and colour. While all the soldiers and farm people wear light, earthy colours, the king wears a royal blue colour. In 2011, one million Norwegian kroner was invested in new costumes.¹⁴ In the images dating from after this year we can see how the king is dressed in more armor before the battle. However, the colour tones are the same, addressing the same idea of Norwegian medieval dress.

The acting style is also worth discussing in relation to conservative aesthetics in the spel. As a rule, it is a Stanislavskian style made to fit the outdoors and mixed

13 Féral 2002, 97

14 <https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/i/77Xe3/Spelet-tilbake-til-start>

with a declamatory and ceremonious style, giving room for an understanding of the spel as a little bit slow and old fashioned. What conservative aesthetics means is not only that the performance resists change in the sense that it is played in the same way every year, but also that this resistance is made the main aesthetic principle, and that it is explicitly conveyed and performed.

The resistance to change is given value in and for itself. The Norwegian history of Christianization, mythology, and stories about power are important, but as important is the history of the spel itself. Olav Gullvåg, who wrote the dramatic text, was a Norwegian resistance fighter against the German invaders during the Second World War. One of the main motivations for the farm people fighting on Olav's side in the spel is that Olav is Norwegian and that he will free the people of Trøndelag, the region where Stiklestad is situated, from Danish rule. Seen through the lens of postwar Norway, one can easily see a connection to a form of Norwegian nationalism that gained followers during the fight against Nazi rule and perhaps most particularly in the years that followed the German defeat where Norwegian self-rule and independence was important.

When analyzed today, the spel needs to be seen through the lens of early postwar Norway. The ideas about nationhood and independence that became important after the German defeat came to define Norway as a nation at least throughout the 20th century. Although notions of identity have changed today, the aura of conservatism provided by the spel becomes a reminder of how things have been, not necessarily 1000 years ago but in some undefined past and in 1954 as well as in 1030.

This conservatism, therefore, invokes nostalgia. And this nostalgia, I think, can be related to *play*. Aesthetical conservatism enables a certain freedom, something different, graspable but limited, enjoyable, understandable, important, emotional, desirable and fun. Anne-Britt Gran argues in her article from 1997 that the amateurs represent the local and regional while the professional actors represent art and nation. She also thinks that the amateurs provide a form of authenticity by being closer to the local place.¹⁵ I believe that the conservatism in the spels has some of the same function, and that the choice of what feels like an old-fashioned quality represents an opposition to the city's cultural elite, (post)modern aesthetics, and artistic estrangement. The conservative aesthetics attempts to invoke a feeling of being more *real*.

Richard Schechner argues, in the article "Restoration of behavior", that all performance is "twice behaved behavior."¹⁶ To him, it is important that rituals always repeat other rituals or are said to be reperforming some original mythical event. Traditional theatre too relates back to rehearsals, to other performances of the text, or some other textual idea. This is, of course, important in *Spelet om Heilag Olav* which exists within different time frames simultaneously. It restores historical mythical actions at the same time as it restores its own tradition, and by making these restorations explicit the concept of nostalgia is given importance as a quality in itself. Although I agree with Schechner in the belief that performance is restored behavior, it is important to note that all performances also only exist in

15 Gran 1997

16 Schechner 1985

the present, exactly when it is performed and in the here-and-now communication with its audience. It is in the recurrence of history in the here-and-now and in the communal experience that *play* becomes a pillar of spel aesthetics.

Play

Ever since Olav was killed, his death day has been marked. For a long time, it was an official holiday, but in Lutheran Norway it has had lesser importance. At Stiklestad, however, the holiday *Olsoke* is now marked by a weeklong festival with many events in addition to the spel performance. If we are to understand how this particular spel makes use of play and ideology, we have to see it in relation to the total event. This is what the Swedish theatre scholar Willmar Sauter, in his article "Festivals as theatrical events: building theories" in the book *Festivalising*, calls *contextual theatricality*.¹⁷ The interesting thing about using this term to explain the events at Stiklestad is that Sauter not only includes the logistical and infrastructural surroundings of a festival event to the contextual theatricality, but also includes expectations and habits of the audience which I think are important when regarding the spel as an ideological event and discussing how it meets its audience. Regarding *play*, I think it is important to have in mind the factor of amateurism. Although there are also professional participants, many participate solely in order to have a good time and do something for the local environment.

The Dutch play scholar Johan Huizinga defines *play* as "a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'."¹⁸ This definition is easily transferred to theatrical events. "We found that one of the most important characteristics of play was its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from everyday surroundings."¹⁹ Because of the insistence on a marked area, theatrical play fits right into Huizinga's definitions.

As aesthetic principle, *play* becomes visible in the spel first through the prologue. In it, the audience is asked to "put away a thousand years for a while with the help of magic". In both the *mise-en-scenes* I have seen, the grandfather figure, Gamal-Jostein, reads the prologue, but there is nothing in the text indicating that it has to be him. Nevertheless, the prologue tells the audience that what is happening is *play* and uses the idea of history, or rather almost an idea of a time machine, to invoke it. Simultaneously, the audience is told to connect to the space they are in and follow the rules that are connected to the aura of medieval times. While the spel performance keeps its distance from the audience both physically and communicationally, there are elements of play in the performance that tells the audience that we are still part of something playful. The performance is rife in seriousness and a declamatory style, but the references to Norse religion and rituals, everything that underlines the idea of Viking culture, is connected more explicitly to play than are the references to

17 Sauter 2007, 21

18 Huizinga 1949, 28

19 Ibid., 19

Olav and Christianity. Especially Gudrun's use of a sun worship dance to calm down incites *play*.

The American anthropologist Victor Turner discusses *play* in his book *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. Both Huizinga and Turner agree that play is not the opposite of seriousness, quite the contrary, play can involve very serious actions. Turner connects *play* to the term *leisure* and shows how play is something that stands in opposition to work. Through repetition and declamatory style, *Spelet om Heilag Olav* underlines the serious sides of play. The event is experienced as solemn and deeply emotional, tapping into the great questions of life while never letting anything unexpected or actually bad happen. The death of Olav is an expected symbolic death, which in its resemblance to ritual attempts to give more weight to the idea of new life that rises from death than death as darkness.

Turner uses the concept of leisure to explain the idea of the *liminoid*. The *liminoid* denotes actions resembling what Turner calls *liminal* but which are not fully liminal actions. Turner connects liminality to the time of mainly agrarian rituals where the ritual subjects pass through a time when the rules of society change for a limited time before the usual rules are reinforced. The term *liminal* is adapted from the work of the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and his research on initiation rites. In these rites, the initiands are temporarily removed from their society for a period, a period recognized by the ritual subjects being in between different societal statuses not adhering to normal social norms. In relation to the liminoid, Turner says that: "Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon and obligation the liminal."²⁰ This means that whereas the ritual subjects cannot choose to be a part of the liminal actions but are obligated to take part, one can choose, in a liminoid set of actions, whether or not one wants to participate. The liminoid is therefore to a greater degree connected to leisure, to play, and to the freedom that also Huizinga sets as criteria for play.

On my own account, I think the idea of the *liminoid* compared to the *liminal* shows us that the liminal can have a mimetic relationship to the liminoid. This means that the liminoid can take on several features of the liminal without becoming liminal or undergoing the societal and personal implications that the transformations of liminality are connected to. The liminoid might therefore be a theatrical form of invoking some of the qualities of the liminal without needing to hail to the strictness of liminality and ritual. The intentional use of liminoid qualities is part of what I call a *ritualistic theatricality*. It is a way of peering into the anti-structure of ritual without having to give up the safety of structure. This can be done through play.

Olympic scholar John J. Macaloon draws on Turner and his idea of the optation of the *liminoid* when he says that ritual is a duty and spectacle a choice.²¹

In this argumentation, there is no doubt that an event like *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is not a ritual; it is clearly voluntary to participate, and the voluntariness of it contributes to the idea of freedom and therefore also play. However, the use of ritualistic elements gives the choice of participation an extra dimension whereby

20 Turner 1982, 43

21 MacAloon 1985

the participation is experienced as more important than regular entertainment. The German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte relies heavily on Turner in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance*, but completely omits the concept of the liminoid, reducing the liminal to something inherent to all performance, not only of ritual. Although this, in my view, makes seeing the differences between ritual and theatre or other performative events more difficult, in this way she manages to argue that performance is efficacious with the inherent power of creating change without needing to have actual ritual qualities. Through this I believe that we can say that by providing spectacles of choice with elements resembling ritual, the effect can similarly resemble the ritual effect although it is a leisurely event.

Spelet om Heilag Olav is a structured event. Nevertheless, it is indebted to play. It is what Turner would call, a “modern leisure genre.”²² It is play separated from work. The idea of leisure is especially interesting here because *Spelet om Heilag Olav* is one of the large spels in Norway where a great amount of the spectators are not local residents but tourists coming from afar to see the spel. The mix of audience shows us that it has meaning as leisure genre and as entertainment. Where some locals might participate more by obligation, there is no doubt that tourists are there by choice. That the audience is mixed, however, also underlines the effect the performance can have on a large number of Norwegians, whether they are locals or traveling from some other part of the country.

One of the most important traits of liminality, according to Turner, is how liminality invokes *communitas*. *Communitas* is a feeling of togetherness where all the ritual subjects have a time limited experience of belonging. Different forms of *communitas* can come into being at different times, and if I understand Turner correctly, *communitas* can exist independently of ritual structure, and is in itself astructural. The interesting thing with *communitas* as it can be found at Stiklestad is that it exists only in structure. Just as the use of play elements resembles ideas of the liminal, and has a liminoid form, the use of the audience in the performance gives an aura of *communitas* that is not there outside the performative structure. At Stiklestad, a structured *communitas* is created through the ideological communication that shapes its audience and makes it a group recipient of the same ideological message.

Ideology at Stiklestad

The most famous definition of *ideology* is that it is “false consciousness.” This idea is connected to a Marxist worldview but is not found in Marx’ own writings. Rather, it can be found in a letter written by his colleague Friedrich Engels to Franz Mehring in 1893 where Engels claims that ideology is a set of thoughts set forth by the thinking subject consciously but based on false premises, on a *false consciousness*. The subject is not aware of his real motives of his actions because he is not aware of the real conditions of life.²³ In his discussion of ideology from 1989, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek cites

22 Turner 1982. 43

23 Engels 1893

a phrase from Karl Marx' *Capital* where Marx writes that "they do not know it, but they are doing it." Žižek connects this to an idea of ideology based on a basic form of naiveté, "the misrecognition of its own presuppositions."²⁴

Žižek does not agree with the basis of naiveté of ideological understandings and proposes a different reading. "What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are but still they are doing it as if they did not know."²⁵ We know how things really are, we know that we are guided by ideology, but we act as if we do not. The reason for this, according to Žižek is *enjoyment*. It is easier, more comfortable and enjoyable to act according to ideology than having to face the uncomfortable realities of the world and our own existences. What I find especially interesting in Žižek's theory here is that he moves ideology and our adherence to it from consciousness, from the individual mind, to action, both individual and collective action. Ideology is not (just) a theoretical dictum but the way we act accordingly. This makes performance especially interesting to research as ideological expressions and collective actions. Žižek connects the wanting of an ideological frame for action to *ideological fantasy*. Using the term fantasy here shows us that ideology and ideological structures for action are something desirable and wanted by the ideological subjects, even though one does not believe one can act *as if* one does.

Still, in order to act as if something is true although one knows that it is not, one needs something to act in accordance with, something that might be true if we want it to be. In my use of the term *ideology*, I see ideology as what structures and explains our society to us. Ideology provides the structure of society with meaning and makes it important and natural. In many cases ideological expressions have narrative structures. There are stories about who we are and how society has become what it is and why this has happened. It is a worldview concerning society and society's structures, including power structures. The ideological narratives are often presented with naturalness and authenticity, which makes them easy to desire as the complexities of common life and belief are replaced with simplistic oppositions.

In *Spelet om Heilag Olav*, we can recognize mechanisms of authenticity that are baked into the spel as a part of the artistic expression and therefore thought of from the presenters' side. However, authenticity is also wanted from the audience who seeks the experience of authenticity. Authenticity becomes part of the ideological fantasy. The authenticity of the spel is connected to the narrative structure but is also acted out through play. One thing is the story that is told in the performance, but the whole place is drenched in stories of the historical Olav. Together, the different stories with variable truthfulness build the character of Olav and his importance for the Norwegian process of Christianization. The stories that are told and their desirable authenticity are mixed with explicit fantasy and thereby create a connection between the Norwegian monarchy and the Norwegian church resulting in an idea of nationhood. Making these stories a fantasy version of the truth makes them easy to play with, existing both as

24 Žižek 2008, 24

25 Ibid., 30

explicit myth and as truthful play simultaneously.

I argued above that during *Stiklestadspellet* a form of structured *communitas* appears, making the audience, who come from all over the country in addition to many locals, one group. The French theorist Louis Althusser speaks of how ideology interpellates its subjects. Althusser claims that ideology speaks to us directly, that all people are ideological subjects, and that this is a result of interpellation.²⁶ The insistence on the importance of both the historical events and the performative events for the becoming and being of the nation interpellates every single spectator at the same time as the concept of nationhood as a common experience interpellates the audience as a whole. Through this social interpellation the structured *communitas* appears, and the interpellated individuals become one group without making individual consciousness and experience less important.

The spel's overall search for authenticity is one of its most important aesthetical ideas. First of all, the place provides a *real* connection to the actual historical event, the scenography and costumes are made to resemble medieval dress, and the story that is told, although it explicitly makes use of folklore, carries with it some historical facts and the wish to underline the narrative's truthfulness. That this today therefore feels old fashioned and not at all as contemporary theatre is legitimized through the necessity of authenticity and authenticity's connection to play.

As the most important aesthetical idea, authenticity becomes the spel's main expression and message. Through the use of authenticity as aesthetical practice, the spel expresses a wish for a total view of history. By this I mean that the complexities both of historical actions and of our understanding of what happened almost 1000 years ago and how it has influenced history is downplayed in order to give a more simplistic view of both history and our contemporary understanding of it. By total view I mean a view that does not ask questions or let there be known that there are complexities outside this particular view.

The discussion of totalities has seen many sides in the 20th century. To George Lukács, for instance, gaining a consciousness of totality was what would enable the working class to rise against the power controlling classes and capitalism.²⁷ He was of the opinion that the fragmented world of capitalism held the working class from gaining knowledge of the total picture of the world order. Only when a consciousness of the totality was acquired could the workers rise. To Žižek the belief in totalities of consciousness is a form of false consciousness. He believes totalities are desirable but impossible. To Žižek the impossibility of an ideological totality is what he considers sublime. This impossibility of totality is scary, but also has a desirable edge to it. I do not know if Žižek meant it to be a central term in his work but his idea of *failure* to grasp and present totalities makes way for an interesting use in terms of theatre studies.²⁸

Spelet om Heilag Olav is a closed event, and I would argue that it attempts a theatrical totality. The connection to place is symbolical, the place is not taken

26 Althusser 1971

27 Lukács 1990

28 Žižek 2008, 229

into the aesthetical expression as anything other than fixed reality. The narrative is simple, and the characters all have one narrative task in leading towards its conclusion. Nevertheless, the theatrical event does not pretend to be without failure in its totality as it will always and necessarily provide *clivage*. Theatre gives us the permission to play because it is obvious to everyone that there are actors performing and that they do not belong to a different time than the audience, failure of totality is inherent to theatre.

By infusing the event in itself with *play*, the ideology itself becomes playful. This also means enjoyable, which, if we continue to use Žižek's terminology, is connected to desire. The playfulness then becomes both a result and reason for the desire of ideological totalities within the performance. The use of a leisurely liminoid setting, which I above connected to a ritualistic theatricality, underlines the seriousness and sincerity of the event, making the message conveyed appear important, necessary, and true, although it explicitly gives room for the failure of totality. Because the totalities are not clear, the event plays with desire, showing its audience through a form of rituality how what is happening is an important event for the nation as a whole. A nation to which everyone in the audience belongs and in which they can find common ground with each other in the structure we can call *communitas*. Through a ritualistic theatricality that is expressed by structured *communitas*, seriousness, solemnity, authenticity, emotions, and nationhood the *spel* gives its audience space to desire the importance of the event while at the same time focusing on enjoyment and entertainment, making the ideological message natural and interesting rather than a truthful totality.

Spelet om Heilag Olav becomes an effective presenter of Norwegian ideology because it manages Norwegian history in a way that focuses more on the collective experience of it than on its content. In this article, I have shown that the use of *play* in the frame of conservative aesthetics contributes to creating a limited and structured *communitas* that interpellates its audience. Because ideology is subsumed by a necessary failure to provide understandable totalities, the *spel* uses its own aesthetical and ideological challenges to create an event that, through a self-referencing style, becomes an authority on the field and may be experienced as authentic, enjoyable, and sincere.

AUTHOR

Julie Rongved Amundsen (born 1981) has a Ph.D in theatre studies from the University of Oslo where she defended her doctoral thesis, *Performing Ideology. Theatricality and Ideology in Mass Performance* in 2013. The thesis discusses the use of theatricality with ideological purposes in two mass theatre events, the reenactment of the battle of Gettysburg in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and the Arirang mass gymnastic festival in Pyongyang, North Korea. She is now an independent critic and scholar based in Oslo and is currently working on a book about the Norwegian tradition of historical dramas known as *spel*. In the summer of 2017, her critique of the national pastime of *spels* contributed greatly to a national media debate. She is also the editor of the Norwegian online journal for theatre, dance and music, Scenekunst.no.

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“Theatre Phenomenology” and Ibsen’s *The Master Builder*

DANIEL JOHNSTON

ABSTRACT

How might an actor find inspiration from philosophy to build a world on stage? This article examines how phenomenology can offer a framework for creating performance and a vocabulary for action in rehearsal. Taking Henrik Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* as a case-study, a number of exercises and approaches are suggested for exploring the text while drawing on Martin Heidegger’s lecture, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” which ponders the nature of “building”. Far from merely “constructing” an environment, essentially, building is “dwelling”. As the characters in Ibsen’s drama go about their dwelling, actors must build a world by bridging the gap between the stage, the ensemble, and the audience.

KEYWORDS

Phenomenology, Ibsen, *The Master Builder*, Heidegger, Building, Dwelling, Thinking, The Fourfold, Being, Rehearsal

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Introduction

What does it mean to build a world? Humans do it in their everyday activities and interactions with others. Actors build a world in a different way. This article examines how one of continental philosophy’s most significant movements—phenomenology—can examine the meaning of “world” and provide a fertile source of inspiration for creative practice. Theatres are uniquely located at the intersection of multiple worlds—both real and imagined—of actors, characters, and audiences.¹ This connection permits the theatrical event to explore what it means to make a world in a fictional context while also paying attention to the social context of the performance. It is not surprising, then, that theatre can be “about” world-building both in form and content.² This article explores an actor’s work on a text as world-building through the lens of what might be called “theatre phenomenology”.

Henrik Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* (*Bygmester Solness*) is a particularly apt case study for phenomenological inquiry in rehearsal and for opening a dialogue with “The Question of Being” as famously articulated by the philosopher Martin Heidegger.³ Ibsen’s text explores the meaning of “building” and, as is considered below, how the essence of building is dwelling.⁴ Each character in the work struggles with building: Halvard Solness’ has grand designs for architectural pursuits and an ambition for personal transcendence; Aline, his wife, is “a builder of souls”, though she experiences loss; Ragnar Brovik and Kaia Fossli, the young couple, hope to build a future together; and Knut Brovik hopes to build a legacy for his family. But the mysterious visitor, Hilde Wangel, dreams of living in a castle built for her in the clouds. And by rejecting her responsibility to “the call of Being”, she is in danger of “falling”—as Solness literally does at the end of the play.⁵ In real life, humans create an environment in order to sustain their

1 McAuley 1999.

2 States 1985, 19-47; 119-56; Wilshire 1982, x-iv; 38-91.

3 Heidegger 1962; Ibsen 1981.

4 Heidegger 1978, 350.

5 “Falling” is a technical term that Heidegger uses to describe the tendency to interpret our own being in terms of mere objects in the world rather than as unique beings with the ability to inquire

own “being” as an end in itself. In order to “build” a character in performance, actors can inhabit a role with a kind of “dwelling” that points back to their very own being too.

The approach offered here is not simply a form of literary analysis or thought-experiment, however. It considers the actor’s quest for truth in performance (or “poetry” in Heidegger’s later philosophical writings).⁶ Such a philosophical frame can offer a practical guide for building a character.⁷ For example, Solness, Hilde, Aline, and others in *The Master Builder* fall short of taking authentic action in the world in which they find themselves. On the rehearsal room floor, it would be productive to examine these themes through a series of exercises based around questions such as: What is a world? How do objects and equipment reveal different worlds? How do humans encounter others with the same kind of being as themselves? How do they experience mortality in relation to the infinite? What is the human relationship with death in everyday activity? What does it mean to grasp meaning from a meaningless world? Through these questions, rather than simply gesture towards “Being as such”, the actor can relate an existential context to concrete action and involvement.

The outline for practice in the second half of this article extends upon a recent practical workshop in “theatre phenomenology” at Sheffield Hallam University in 2017.⁸ Working on Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, a company of professional actors and undergraduate students carried out a series of exercises designed to examine different aspects of our Being-in-the-world. The first phase included work and reflection on the actor’s own self—observation of the way consciousness takes in the world when moving through the city, its relationship to everyday objects and actions, its connection with others in the world, and its fleeing tendency to be in some other place or time. Having explored these modes of being in the actor’s own experience, the same was explored in the fictional world of a character. Exercises were created to investigate the character’s relationship with their environment, with objects and actions, with others there or not there with them, and their desire to be elsewhere. Finally, the actors reflected on their own experience of artistic creativity and considered the way that the world presented itself to their own conscious experience during rehearsal and performance. The hope was that the creative process itself might open up a different way of approaching specific phenomena in relation to the play’s text. The actor-participants reported that the language provided by this phenomenological workshop was helpful in describing their experiences and considerably sped up their progress in approaching the world of the play and the character they were seeking to inhabit. Each practical exploration was highly specific to the actor, character, and text, and as such, emphasised considerably different phenomenological accounts of experience. With this in mind, the ideas presented below extend such exercises in relation to *The Master Builder*.

It is worth noting that this is not a “theory of acting”, however, but rather a

into their own existence; Heidegger 1962, 219-24.

6 Heidegger 1971.

7 Note Elizabeth Hapgood’s translation of “Building a Character”; Stanislavski 1949.

8 Johnston 2018.

way of understanding what actors already do—or might do—in a different light. Stanislavski, for example, asked many similar questions about the relationship between action, self, and the broader meaning of existence in his approach to theatre-making.⁹ A philosophical frame may therefore develop an understanding of existing approaches and inflect practice. The result may provide a fresh vocabulary—an alternative way of seeing the creative work of the actor.¹⁰ Nor does this approach constitute a purely abstract intellectual contribution to the history of ontology. Heidegger’s “hermeneutics of the facticity of Being” (the interpretation of the way that Being has been understood—both now and in the past) can be applied to creative practice in so far as it issues a call for thinking in a new way of thinking about temporality. The contention is that performance itself can be an impetus for such a rethinking.

Theatre Phenomenology

Phenomenology—arguably the most influential movement in twentieth-century continental philosophy—is the study of the way the world shows itself to lived experience. It advocates a return to “the things themselves”: phenomena as they are encountered rather than presupposed through abstract thought. For this reason, the object of phenomenology should be extremely helpful in the art of acting.¹¹ The approach questions pre-given assumptions about knowledge, consciousness, the structures of perception, the nature of embodied experience, and the conditions that mark the horizon of existence. There is no unified method of phenomenology—its history is a series of revisions, interruptions, and new beginnings.¹² Edmund Husserl, the founder of the movement, proposed a method of bracketing off the question of whether external reality exists outside of one’s mind. By applying what he called the *epoché*, he focused on the way experience presents itself to consciousness in its mode “givenness”. As such, one must step back from the “natural attitude” (an everyday mode of engaging in tasks) and focus in on the phenomenon at hand. In fact, the phenomenologist carries out a series of “reductions” in order to describe the essence of a particular phenomenon (the elements without which it would not be what it is). Later phenomenologists would argue that we should not focus on the *detached* (i.e. transcendental) human subject and indeed denied that this was even possible.

In his early writings, Husserl’s student Heidegger aimed to investigate the structures of Being-in-the-world constituted by the unique being that we have as humans conveyed by the term *Dasein* (being-there). He argued that being human is constrained by various horizons: we exist within time, in a world with equipment, tasks, others around us who share our unique kind of being, we are

9 Stanislavski 2008. Also see Johnston 2011a. I should also note that by drawing attention to specific roles, or “characters” here, I am not intending to reify them as stable ontological figures. As seen below, the basis of character is always in action in the given circumstances.

10 Thomas 2013, for example, provides a full range of social, cultural, and political aspects through which to approach script analysis for actors, directors, and designers. My project here provides a philosophical set of questions with practical exercises for their investigation on the rehearsal room floor.

11 Johnston 2017a.

12 Glendinning 2007, 1.

thrown into a set of circumstances that precede us, and even the very fact that life will end gives meaning to every moment of existence.¹³ Later, Heidegger would turn from examining the being of the specific beings to explore a poetic expression of Being as such. Rather than be limited by philosophical language and technical terms, the poet is free to consider the nature of Being and “found” a world through their work.¹⁴ Yet Heidegger says very little about “performance” in his discussion of the work of art—a gap that this research explores.¹⁵

“Theatre phenomenology”, as employed here, is the inquiry into the way the world presents itself to conscious experience through theatre and considers performance-making as a mode of phenomenology in itself. The phrase points towards the relationship between theatre and phenomenology, modelled on the term “performance philosophy”.¹⁶ By withholding a conjunction/preposition in the phrase (e.g. ‘and’, ‘as’, ‘through’, etc.), theatre phenomenology leaves the connection between the two fields open. On the one hand, one might interpret performance processes in philosophical terms thereby gaining new insight into aesthetic and cultural practices.¹⁷ The upshot is that historical theatre-making processes and understandings of performance can reveal the ontology and metaphysics upon which they are founded. In other words, studying theatre and performance can shed light on an understanding of the history of Being.¹⁸ On the other hand, performance can also draw upon philosophical thought explicitly in order to shape the creative process.¹⁹ If a particular epistemological method or approach provides a faithful account of the world—even if this only be through a useful metaphor—then it may also open up new conceptual frameworks through which artists might approach their work and conceive of themselves as conscious beings.²⁰ Phenomenology can therefore be brought into dialogue with a practical rehearsal—not simply remaining as a theoretical tool for performance analysis.²¹ There is a danger, however, that scholars search for—and inevitably find—examples that fit their particular theory or critical approach to performance and overlook counter-examples that might be identified in other case studies. For this reason, Laura Cull warns against simply “applying” philosophy to performance as it can lead to self-confirming performance theory as well as bring a fixed understanding of what philosophy is in the first place.²²

13 Heidegger 1962, 279-311.

14 Heidegger 1971.

15 For an in-depth discussion of the phenomenological method in practice, see Van Manen 2016; for a discussion of Heidegger’s philosophy of art, see Young 2004.

16 Cull and Lagaay 2014, 15-33; Grant, McNeilly-Renaudie, and Wagner, forthcoming.

17 Carlson 1993; Fortier 1997; Reinelt and Roach 1992.

18 Johnston 2017b

19 Johnston 2018.

20 See Zarrilli 1995, 8-10.

21 Indeed, growing interest in the relationship between theatre and phenomenology is manifest in a special issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies*. Schneider and Skjoldager-Nielsen 2012. Also see Reinelt and Roach 1992, where the editors place phenomenology as a paradigm for critical theory and performance.

22 Cull and Lagaay 2014.

Ibsen and The Question of Being

Nevertheless, the philosophical search for the meaning of being has many parallels in Ibsen's drama. His oeuvre lays out a search for "the self"—whether in an inward quest for transcendence, an examination of conscience and reaching toward the nature of consciousness, or in an outward exploration of social and political tensions. But such an elusive search is obstructed and suppressed for many of Ibsen's protagonists. On the surface of it, none of the characters in *The Master Builder* face their "own-most being" resolutely because they have become absorbed in their own worlds to the detriment of those around them. Halvard Solness, the master builder, manipulates his immediate associates and family through small enactments of power (and possibly mysterious emanations of his will). He is driven by a fear of the next generation nipping at his heels—especially in young draftsman Ragnar, for whom he refuses an employment reference and testimonial. Solness has lived through the immeasurable loss of his own children and broods over an unpayable debt to his wife for the tragedy because he feels responsible for the fire that indirectly caused their death—even though this is not logically possible. He develops the belief that he has the ability to influence others telepathically and bring about his will through purely desiring things to be so. The arrival of the twenty-three year old Hilde (whom it appears he seduced a decade ago) awakens his self-belief and urges him to act on his desires. He climbs to the top of the tower of his newest building construction—a new home built for his wife—in order to place the ceremonial wreath atop of the tower as is customary at such an opening. In conquering his fear of dizzying heights, in achieving the seemingly impossible, he loses his life.

The given circumstances of the play reveal how each character is captive to the constraints in which they find themselves: Solness to his fear, Aline to her loss, Hilde to her fantasy, and Ragnar to his suppressed achievement, and so on. And yet still, Ibsen offers a picture of humanity's relationship to "the Absolute"—a metaphysical power that Solness confronted at the top of a tower ten years ago and apparently also strives with at the end of the play—and our ability to be with and communicate with one another (an extension of themes from his early plays about vocation and responsibility in his earlier play, *Brand*). In this sense, *The Master Builder* follows a philosophical inquiry into duty and freedom, ageing and youthful potential, grief and closure, and transcendence and "letting be" what is. For this reason, it is appropriate to turn to philosophy as a lens in so far as it might give an account of these conflicting demands on existence. Of course, a philosophical interpretation of Ibsen's drama is not new. Brian Johnston, for instance, argues that Ibsen's later plays followed a cycle investigating the various stages of developing self-consciousness of the world spirit as articulated by G.W.F. Hegel.²³ Walter Benjamin interprets Ibsen's exploration of building "homes for human beings" in this play in opposition to modernist approaches to building and renunciation of human attributes to the environment.²⁴ Others offer a Nietzschean reading of Ibsen's drama as an attempt to overcome a guilt

23 Johnston 1992.

24 Benjamin 2003, 221.

ingrained in the (slave) Christian resentment through an act of self affirmation.²⁵ The interpretation below offers a broader approach: developing phenomenology is appropriate in this case because it can help to ask the existential-ontological questions about building and dwelling and account for the actions of each role in the play rather than just the protagonist.

Ibsen also explores the nature of creativity. For example, Solness' quest is to turn his art into something useful in human terms—building homes for people rather than numbers and providing the structures for the possibility of happiness. On the surface of it, Solness has realized the many shortcomings in contemporary architecture. He yearns for more than pragmatic shelters for families—even though he has made a career out of exactly that. It is significant that his foray into the mass-production of houses came after his (and Aline's) family home burnt down and the garden was divided into lots. As mentioned, he believes that the cost of his business success is the personal pain that he has suffered. In the end, he endeavours to build castles in the clouds—rejecting societal conventions, norms, and duties in favour of an elusive freedom. But this is precisely because he cannot reflect upon, or come to terms with, his *own-most* being: the fact that his career will come to an end, the fact that he has experienced much sacrifice and loss in order to gain his expertise and acclaim, the fact that he has closed himself off emotionally from his world yet imagines a causal connection between his innermost wishes and key events that have turned his life around.

Building and Dwelling

In practice, theatre phenomenology should begin by investigating the actor's own "being there". One might identify elements of Being-in-the-world and describe each phenomenon through personal experience in relation to *The Master Builder*. The text (including the contemporary socio-political environment) can provide a touchstone for a corresponding aspect of the way we encounter being. Such exercises could be developed over a number of years if in a conservatoire context or in a shorter time-frame of rehearsal as required. In this way, the work might inflect or supplement actor training and offer a new vocabulary for its processes. On a smaller scale, it can be applied through exercises of self-investigation in rehearsal.

Heidegger's lecture at the Darmstadt Symposium on "Man and Space" in 1951, entitled "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" is pertinent to the theme.²⁶ Writing more than half a century after Ibsen, Heidegger's meditations on space are useful in approaching this play partly because *The Master Builder* takes "building" as its essential theme as we will see. Heidegger also attempts to think about the nature of building against the context of a national housing shortage following the Second World War, where there was an urgent need for homes for the German people. He puts off the broader practical political and technical problems of this crisis to ask what building is in essence. The obvious answer is that humans build structures so that they can dwell in them. But it is not that simple. Not

25 See Kaufman 1972; Hinden 1972; and Helland 2009.

26 Heidegger 1978, 343-63.

all buildings are directly made for dwelling—factories, offices, and other public buildings, for instance. It follows that one must consider exactly how buildings allow for dwelling in the first place. The examination below will alternate between exploring Heidegger’s reflection on dwelling and how they might open up Ibsen’s text for the actor.

At the opening of *The Master Builder*, the stage contains the plainly dressed workroom between the inner rooms of the house and outwards to the hall. At the back is the draftsmen’s office and around the stage are various pieces of modest furniture, books, papers, tables, water etc. The shaded lamps provide a focus on the work of drawing up plans. The book-keeping area occupied by Kaia standing at her desk is separated from the draftsmen at the back, perhaps adding gendered regions of the stage. The bodily frames of these employees are stooped over their work. And the outwardly displayed carefulness of Knut’s clothing shows his propriety and ageing tradition, and the neatness of the younger couple perhaps a humbleness and diligence.

Heidegger’s account of “building” offers some clues for exploration here. For him, the post-war public housing shortage and its underlying causes both sever the link between building and dwelling.²⁷ This is because humans have forgotten the true meaning of these terms in the face of a pressing practical need. He claims that the etymology of *bauen* (building) can be traced to an archaic word for “being”. Therefore, the way that people dwell is bound up in the way that they “are”—how they exist, and who they are both as individuals and as a community. Building is a particular way of Being-in-the-world and is a specific mode of dwelling. It is a way of nurturing both the natural and man-made world. According to Heidegger, the modern epoch has failed to recognise this connection because it conceives of the problem merely in technical terms (e.g. perhaps in terms of budget efficiency or project simplicity). Yet building is not simply an operational response to a need for homes; it is part of a tradition. It is a way for a community to experience being-together from an historical past into the future. Architecture, therefore, is not universal and unchanging in terms of function, but highly contextual and regionally specific.

In rehearsal, each actor could ask, “*what* is built in this play?” and “*what is disclosed* through the dwelling of each character?” In fact, there may well be multiple worlds overlapping. Kaia and Ragnar inhabit a world where they are about to set off on their lives together. Knut is in a world that is slowly drawing to a close where he wants to set things right. It is as if Aline is in a ghost world haunted by the past. Hilde is in a fantasy world wanting to claim an impossible kingdom and fleeing from her father. For this exercise, the cast might read a section of a scene, moving on the rehearsal room floor and freezing at any given point, letting the characters step forward to answer a series of questions. What is each character building at this particular moment? What is disclosed about dwelling in the moment right now? The ensemble might map how specific events in the play alter what they are building. How do they *change* what they are building throughout the play? What are the major turning points in a “way of being” for each character? A series of tableaux could represent these points.

27 Ibid.

Then, focusing in on the everyday activities of dwelling, the actors might attend to various objects in the scene, describe them, and feel them. One could think about how they are used and in what context. Following this, one might consider how these objects fit into a broader set of objects indicating a specific world. One could explore the intersection between the world of accounting, medicine, architecture, home-making etc. at various moments. How are those objects observed in the scene connected through human action? A specific example could be when Hilde arrives in Act I and searches around the room, looking at things in order to get some sort of a picture of this man that she met ten years ago. Next, one might think about objects that are no longer present—Aline’s dolls, for instance. They could be seen as a metaphor for her lost children, but on deeper inspection consider how they represent the loss of self for her, or a childhood and happiness left behind. Through improvisation, each character could articulate their relationship with an object—how it makes them feel, what desires it spurs on, what world it brings them to, what it allows them to build.

The ensemble might consider the function of “constructing” at play here (in Heidegger’s conception of the “ontic” solution to building rather than any deeper attention to our relationship with dwelling). Ragnar draws up plans for the firm. Knut calculates tensions and angles for Solness. Kaia counts the ledger and settles credits and debts. Dr Herdal attends to his patients. But there is something that falls short in “constructing” in this sense—or rather that it is not essential to dwelling; it is perfunctory and tends to overlook meaning. What technical mode of constructing does each character carry out? How might they use this perfunctory action as a means of escaping a deeper relationship with Being—both in relation to their own self and Being-with others there in their world.

Similarly, one might explore “space” in relation to dwelling for a scene. Each character could walk around the space and narrate or demonstrate their disposition towards different areas of the scene. What thoughts, experiences, and emotions come out when they encounter each area? For instance at the beginning, is the workspace a kind of prison for Ragnar and his family? He is not held there against his will, but rather confined by the career of draughtsman and seeking praise from the master. For other characters, the nature of confinement is different. What is it about this place that allows its inhabitants to dwell? The location of the first act is both workspace and homespace with its different areas for different characters. Consideration could be given to how character is stopped from “being at home” in this space.²⁸ Each of these themes could be developed, for example, by encouraging the actors to externalize their reactions, perhaps even in a physically abstract way, improvising a sense of what it is like to “be at home”, demonstrating how they behave and move in different worlds, or creating a physical depiction around the types of equipment found in this world.

The Fourfold

In the Second Act, the *mise-en-scene* is a small drawing room in the same house. At the back is a glass door leading to a verandah. Note that the area

²⁸ In Heidegger 1962, 233-234, *Unheimlich* is also translated as “uncanny” as well as “not-being-at-home”.

represented on stage makes its way to the exterior as the play unfolds. There is also a bay window with flowers and a console table with mirror. The setting is domestic and perhaps “feminine”—Aline is attending to the flowers and moving quietly through the space in a nurturing and preserving role. It is early in the morning and the master builder is inspecting his young draftsman’s plans. He holds another person’s life in his hands—with further ramifications, if one is to take Kaia and Knut into account. Although neither Solness nor Aline speak, he follows her occasionally with his eyes. Kaia arrives with the news that Knut is gravely ill and taken to bed.

In this section, Heidegger’s discussion of *das Geviert* (“the Fourfold”) that informs his conception of dwelling is relevant.²⁹ Inspired by Friedrich Hölderlin, the Romantic poet, he articulates a mysterious unity in our experience of Being.³⁰ Heidegger considers the way that we dwell on the earth, under the sky, as mortals waiting for divinities to arrive.³¹ Dwelling enables the Fourfold through a productive opposition between the finite and the infinite. Our living within the spaces of the earth for the duration of our life brings the nature of Being to light. This gathering “lights up” the world as every individual moves through space and time within their daily activities. In other words, different aspects of the world—the earth, sky, gods and mortals—are gathered together in each experience of being, although these aspects can be brought into focus individually. Earth is the supporting ground, provides a physical sense of being, and sustains us by watering and providing for us. The sky is the firmament under which humans live and gives the seasons, the path of the sun, the movement of the stars, and the rhythms of the environment that surrounds them. But in gazing upwards, mortals notice that they are both “here” and “beyond”. The heavens themselves stand in for eternity and a horizon for apprehending space. This leads to the third element of the Fourfold: mortals. Mortals always have a finite existence. But in remembering our certain and immanent death, one can come to terms with our essential being. Although there is “nothing” at the heart of being in itself, facing up to this fact and acting resolutely, one can grasp meaning from that limited being. The inevitability that life will one day come to an end actually gives meaning to every moment. Finally, there are “divinities” who have fled the earth. They create and provide the earth—they have left behind that which allows mortals to live—although mysteriously concealed in the world that surrounds them. In another sense, one might think of the gods as “divine destinies” or laws holding the fabric of society together. These are not simply subject to “public opinion” but are much deeper and eternal laws that demand to be obeyed.

The Fourfold essentially allows humans to be in space—the space within which dwelling takes place. Conversely, the act of dwelling sustains the Fourfold in its unity and gathers each aspect together. If carried out in an attentive way, dwelling involves tending to the earth so as to maintain it without exploitation. In

29 Young 2006; 2002, 92-102.

30 There are parallels here with Stanislavski’s use of mystical terms in relation to acting through religious connotations in terms such as in ‘communion’ (which is lost when translated as ‘communication’); Stanislavski 2008, 229-57.

31 Heidegger 1978, 351-53.

this sense, as Heidegger notes, building is not merely perfunctory constructing, but a “preserving” of Being:

In saving the earth, in receiving the sky, in awaiting the divinities in initiating mortals, dwelling appropriates as the fourfold preservation of the fourfold. To spare and preserve means to take under our care, to look after the fourfold in its essence. What we take under our care must be kept safe. But if dwelling preserves the fourfold, where does it keep the fourfold’s essence? How do mortals make their dwelling such a preserving? Mortals would never be capable of it if dwelling were merely a staying on earth under the sky, before the divinities, among mortals. Rather, dwelling itself is always a way of staying with things. Dwelling, as preserving, keeps the fourfold in that with which mortals stay: in things.³²

Turning back to Ibsen, the creative ensemble can ask how the world is gathered in rehearsal of *The Master Builder*. One might think about the “preserving” actions that each character takes at any given moment. What do they “care” for? What do they attend to? Aline is a good example in the way that she tends to flowers, prepares the house for guests, and preserves the memory of her lost children in the empty nurseries of the house. Speaking and listening is also an attentiveness in that it preserves, reflects and brings the past to presence. Note how Solness does not like to talk about the past and rarely brings it up. The cast might play with various sections of the scene to have each character listen or not listen to those around them. Further experiment might explore “tending” to different things past, present, and future—it could be a memory, a burning present desire, or a hope for the future. The key is to think about how this “preserving” guides action in the here and now.

Next, the process could explore different aspects of this strange notion of the Fourfold. What is the sustaining “earth” here? Each actor could simply consider the materiality and everyday needs that sustain their character. What do they need to survive? How do they cultivate for their environment, home, or work-place? They could explore this in a series of improvisations about being “grounded” in the earth. How does each character stand? How do they move and manipulate and order their surroundings? How do they rely on the apparent stability of “things” there in the character’s immediate lifeworld?

What is the horizon of the play or how one can think of the “sky” as it is manifest here? What is the “beyond” for each character? The ensemble could consider the limits of this world depicted, whether it be the new building looming in the distance or the confining tasks of the master builder’s work. What are the natural rhythms that underpin the world of the play? What are the ebbs and flows of each character’s day? How do those harmonics affect the way that they move and respond? Perhaps for this set of questions, the cast might use an “image theatre” technique sculpting human bodies in the space to depict an answer.

Each actor can then think about instances of “mortals” and mortality that rise up from the text. The most obvious example is Knut’s impending death, but also Solness and Aline’s ageing. Does a fear of death haunt each character? How does this affect their actions and tasks? What are the triggers that spring the

32 Ibid., 353.

thought of death to the front of their mind? How do they react and suppress it? The cast could rehearse part of a scene and get each actor to vocalise (abstractly) and physicalise a reaction at such trigger points as they encounter them, before continuing on with the scene.

Finally, the process might consider the “gods” at play here. One can begin to glimpse divinity in Solness’ attempt to transcend the moral demands of religious convention and accepted behaviour. Or rather, he offends a divine order not simply in terms of arbitrary social norms but something much deeper in trying to become a god himself. There might be a complex piety such as Aline’s which in many ways tries to cover up a sense of guilt and loss. What is the nature of Dr Herdal’s belief in medicine? What is the mystical force that pulls Hilde forward in her pursuit of Solness? In what way does Kaia see Solness as a kind of divine presence? Where does Knut see consolation in his dire circumstances? The cast could act out a scene silently and imagine each character’s actions being guided by a silent divinity. At times, they might resist and others surrender to the gods controlling each activity. The director might conduct a “meditation” exercise where each actor considers these questions and allows the answers to inform their imagined performance.

Making Space

In the final act, the scene has moved to the outside deck area of the house. A set of stairs leads to the garden below with tall trees spreading their branches towards the house (incidentally, which Ibsen calls the “dwelling house” in his stage directions). In the distance is the lower part of the new villa Solness is building for his wife and himself. An old wooden fence forms a boundary at the back of the space before a street and tumble down cottages. Various benches and outdoor furniture adorn the stage together with some tools. Perhaps this is more a public setting with its outward vistas. It is evening with sunlit clouds—a liminal atmosphere of twilight, intimating a fairytale kingdom in the sky above.

Heidegger’s conclusions on “man and space” are germane to this final act. For him, a building is that which allows for spaces of dwelling to occur. Heidegger gives the example of a bridge. It gives a sense of space by being stretched across a river and is one of many possible sites for such a crossing. It is not simply a functional construction, nor object of symbolic meaning. It is an example of the gathering power of the Fourfold in so far as it allows for dwelling. It gathers the earth, sky, mortals, and gods into a “thing”:

The bridge lets the stream run its course and at the same time grants mortals their way, so that they may come and go from shore to shore. Bridges initiate in many ways. The city bridge leads from the precincts of the castle to the cathedral square; the river bridge near the country town brings wagons and horse teams to the surrounding villages. The old stone bridge’s humble brook crossing gives to the harvest wagon its passage from the fields into the village and carries the lumber cart from the field path to the road. The highway bridge is tied into the network of long-distance traffic, paced and calculated for maximum yield. Always

and ever differently the bridge initiates the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks and in the end, as mortals, to the other side. Now in a high arch, now in a low, the bridge vaults over glen and stream—whether mortals keep in mind the vaulting of the bridge’s course or forget that they, always themselves on their way to the last bridge, are actually striving to surmount all that is common and unsound in them in order to bring themselves before the haleness of the divinities. The bridge gathers, as a passage that crosses, before the divinities—whether we explicitly think of, and visibly give thanks for, their presence, as in the figure of the saint of the bridge, or whether that divine presence is obstructed or even pushed wholly aside.³³

Space is therefore more than something that stems simply from connecting particular locations—it gathers different regions together. Heidegger suggests that building creates and allows us to apprehend particular space in the first place. Space needs to be created in order to be experienced. Thus, for Heidegger, the paradigm of a dwelling is the Black Forest farm house.³⁴ He draws on a very personal experience of place linked to a specific cultural and folk tradition which sustains and preserves the surrounding land and provides shelter for its inhabitants. Dwelling in this sense is to “make oneself at home”. It is also a form of thinking because of its openness to being as preserving and sustaining. Dwelling represents the gathering of the Fourfold as a mode of being. It makes space for Being.

A rehearsal of this section of the play might ask: in what way does each character “make space”? Thought can be given to the spaces that are “founded” in the play. The ensemble could create a scene playing with different magnitudes of space, from clumping together in a tiny part of the stage to using the vast expanses available. How are particular “locations” founded? What spaces are separated from one another? What is needed to bring them together? The work of Solness’ firm does so literally, of course. And he is constructing a new house for his wife—with many rooms although he claims that it will never be a home for him. In what does the contentment of each of the characters rest? What stands in the way of that contentment and fulfillment in happiness? The many social interactions and conversations in the play build a world for these characters and for the audience as they reveal themselves to one another in conversation. Conversely, the cast might ask what closes off space in the play? To this end, each actor could physicalise a “shutting down of space” for another through an improvisation. As well as “building”, what destructive forces operate in the world here? Perhaps lust, duty, fantasy, or even self-interest. Solness loses sight of the fact that he has a world right in front of him. At the heart of the inevitable events that unfold, there is a refusal by the characters to make space for one another that propels the drama. These questions should be explored in a physical way. The actors could experiment with being close to the rest of the ensemble, gravitating to the people and places of comfort. Then each character

33 Ibid., 354-55.

34 Ibid., 362-63.

might move away from those that they want to avoid. This part of the rehearsal could be a moved reading or silent improvisation.

A Phenomenology of *The Master Builder*

In order to avoid simply “applying” philosophy to this case study, one must also ask, “what phenomenology does (or might) *The Master Builder* offer?” The answer depends on each interpretation of the text in production. In Ibsen’s text, the “truth” when presented in performance is indeterminate. Many questions remain. Was Solness really responsible for the fire at his former house? Was he really able to control the minds of others such as Kaia and Hilde? Or perhaps was it Hilde who had cast a spell on Solness all those years ago as she returns to claim the soul of her victim. Solness made a Faustian pact with the devil (or troll, perhaps) and it is now due to be repaid. Did this ecstatic moment between Solness and Hilde happen all those years ago, or is it a fantasy of a young girl, struggling to find her own freedom, suppressed by the stifling restrictions of her father’s home? Is Solness really losing his mind and susceptible to fragmented memory recall or is he privy to a mysterious power? Is Aline truly conflicted by duty or perhaps involved with Dr Herdal herself? What is to be made of Ragnar’s revenge in having all of his fellow builders neglect to witness his master’s impotence? Is it possible that Solness did indeed achieve transcendence even though his mortal body plummeted to earth?

Heidegger’s articulation of “truth” as ἀλήθεια is relevant here, because each choice in rehearsal is a moment of revelation and concealment.³⁵ Every action taken in rehearsal and performance closes down other possibilities. On this account, truth is not a correspondence between propositions and states of affairs, but rather a “happening”; truth is the event of disclosure.³⁶ This connects to the way in which humans might dwell “poetically” through opening up possibilities of being and foregrounding language and meaning, which makes our existence and apprehension of the world possible in the first place.

In the process of rehearsal, actors rarely work in isolation, of course. By coming together as an “ensemble” of theatre makers (including the extended creative and technical teams), rehearsal is never about “individual being” represented on stage but constitutes a collective and collaborative act gesturing towards something larger. Nor can the concept of “character” be reified as a “thing”: practical exploration only ever finds “being there” through action—never as a static transcendental ego. Each of the exercises above should be taken as experiments in various aspects of dwelling rather than a system of building a determinate character or role. What is learnt in the experiment and used as an embodiment of the role may very well be discarded by the performance in production.

One might therefore ask how a theatrical exploration can “push back” on Heidegger’s phenomenology and offer something new to the philosophical conversation. Firstly, the power of theatre phenomenology is in approaching Being through the specific being of the given circumstances. There is no other

35 Ibid., 115-38.

36 Johnston 2011b.

way. However, an artistic approach can gesture beyond representation in a way that ordinary language cannot. In order to do so, one must attend to one's own being in order to get at Being. Secondly, Heidegger's return to a folk tradition, the theme of "homeland", and his description of the revealing experiences of his cabin in the Black Forest do not transfer neatly to this play. Ibsen articulates a different hope for "making space". One may very well experience a different paradigm of Being in the present time in each particular place that differs from any that have gone before. Thirdly, a Heideggerian approach brings something useful through its illuminating vocabulary and way of questioning when it comes to the meaning of Being—a pathway that is also central to the creative task of the actor. Each rehearsal, however, may inflect this vocabulary or offer new ways of describing our relationship to Being that may not always follow Heidegger's path.

Whereas the characters in *The Master Builder* go about building a world, actors approaching each role do so in a double sense—not only in terms of creating a fully fleshed-out character with purposive action in the given circumstances, but also in communicating with the audience and constructing a dialogue of self reflection—of philosophy in action. Following this phenomenological approach, one can say that performance opens up a set of possibilities, meanings, and locations for being. The performance ensemble creates a connection between people, place, and history. In this sense, the process of building a character is akin to constructing a bridge (to take Heidegger's famous example).³⁷ It establishes locales and makes room for the possibilities and activities of dwelling. "Building" in this way *allows* those places to come in to being rather than simply connect what already existed. But the process is not an internal, psychological, analytical task simply involving an actor's work on self; it involves creating a world that crosses over to the audience and fellow performers. In this way, the theatrical event also uncovers something essential about dwelling. Dwelling in the theatre has the potential to "found" a way of being by gathering people together and allowing Being to come in to presence.

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³⁷ Heidegger 1978, 353-59.

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“almost invisible until now”

Antigone, Ismene, and the Dramaturgy of Tragedy

KRISTINA HAGSTRÖM-STÅHL

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses Sophocles' *Antigone* in relation to its Hegelian legacy, engaging with the play from a directorial perspective. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Anne Carson, Bonnie Honig, Peggy Phelan and Cecilia Sjöholm, I attempt to envision a contemporary mise en scène that repositions feminine subjectivity within the dramaturgy of tragedy. Centering on the relationship between Antigone and Ismene, as well as on the possibility of revaluing Ismene's position in terms of political and dramaturgical agency, I hope to challenge dramaturgical conventions that assume binary, heteronormative relations as the primary framework of interpretation for female characters, and death and destruction as the only possible outcome for what is positioned as feminine. This resituated reading of the drama examines the function of embodied performance in processes of meaning-making, and offers dramaturgical structure as a site for strategies of resistance.

KEYWORDS

dramaturgy, tragedy, Hegelian dialectics, feminist theory, performance practice

“almost invisible until now” ***Antigone, Ismene, and the Dramaturgy of*** **Tragedy¹**

Elle pense qu'elle va mourir, qu'elle est jeune, et qu'elle aussi, elle aurait bien aimé vivre. Mais il n'y a rien à faire. Elle s'appelle Antigone et il va falloir qu'elle joue son rôle jusqu'au bout...²

—Jean Anouilh

Cast firmly in an Oedipal tragedy, Antigone and Ismene nonetheless point to a different form of theatre sisters might one day invent.³

—Peggy Phelan

...they give utterance to the inner essence, they prove the rightness of their action (...) these characters exist as human beings who impersonate the heroes and portray them, not in form of a narrative, but in the actual speech of the actors themselves.⁴

—G.W.F. Hegel

What would it mean to stage a contemporary feminist performance of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which takes not only Antigone but also Ismene seriously in terms of political and dramaturgical agency? And why is this possibility so rarely considered? As Bonnie Honig suggests in her call to reconsider Sophocles' tragedy with the potential of sororal conspiracy and solidarity in mind, *Antigone's* history of reception and interpretation since Hegel (including feminist readings) points to near-universal agreement about Ismene as a mere "anti-political character who lacks the courage or imagination to act when called upon to do

1 Honig 2013, 170.

2 Anouilh 1946/1996, 10.

3 Phelan 1997, 15-16.

4 Hegel 1807/1977, 444.

so,” and who is therefore perpetually disregarded.⁵ Likewise, Simon Goldhill shows how post-Hegelian feminist analyses have tended to silence, dismiss, or avoid Ismene.⁶ Instead, dominant readings posit Antigone as the play’s lone heroine and (self-annihilating) political force, locked in an adversarial relationship with Creon as her primary interlocutor.

In the following essay, I would like to investigate the potential of a *mise en scène* that re-envision *Antigone* beyond the canonized and, in my view, coercive dramaturgy which privileges this reading of Antigone as isolated, autonomous, and death-bound, and which, I argue, is deeply entwined with the play’s philosophical legacy in the Hegelian and post-Hegelian tradition. Among other things, I hope to point to some of the challenges as well as the significant possibilities of valuing Ismene as an agent – and subject – within the drama. Were the character of Ismene and the relationship between the sisters considered important in a dramaturgical capacity – that is to say, in relation to the very structure or core of the reading of tragedy as dramatic form – I believe the conceptualization and positioning of Antigone as the play’s primary or singular figure of femininity would shift. Likewise, a different position would be granted to Ismene. Such re-evaluation would also have implications for conceptions of political action and the forms of resistance that Antigone is often thought to embody. Potentially, the very notion of dramatic conflict (or, in Hegel’s terms, “tragic essence”) as a dialectical affair would shift, too.

As such, I propose a re-situated reading of *Antigone*, oriented toward performance practice, which seeks to create space for female and feminine subjectivity, agency, and relationality, while critiquing a dramaturgical logic that assumes binary, heteronormative relations as the only framework of interpretation for female characters, and disappearance and death as the only possible outcome for what is positioned as feminine. This attempt takes into account the philosophical-discursive legacy of the play as well as feminist reworkings of that legacy (as Goldhill argues, it is through feminist readings of *Antigone* that “the inheritance of Hegel has been most explicitly negotiated”⁷), and employs what Cecilia Sjöholm, citing Adriana Cavarero, calls “alternative interpretative strategies” that would enable us to “discern the feminine subject buried in patriarchal society.”⁸ It looks for glitches and tears in the “net,” which Anne Carson invokes as an image for Sophoclean dramaturgy⁹ – small slippages which he himself, arguably, provides.

One central premise for my proposal is that “discursive practices” – to borrow Freddie Rokem’s term¹⁰ – within philosophy and performance have affected the canonization of the *Antigone* and with it the dramaturgical framework resulting from the play’s history of performance and reception, which arguably conditions meaning-making in contemporary performance practice. A second,

5 Honig 2013, 151.

6 Goldhill 2012, 232-33.

7 Goldhill 2012, 231.

8 Sjöholm 2004, 33.

9 Carson 2015, 8.

10 Rokem 2010, 3.

or counter-premise, is that performance practice, in turn, has the ability to affect and transform certain conditions and meanings that may seem given within theoretical discourse. My “alternative strategy” of interpretation assumes the dramaturgy of tragedy – by which I mean, beyond the ordering of events, the formal and dramatic structure by which an account is given and experienced, and meaning is made – as a potential site of resistance, and advocates for a repositioning of the feminine within this structure. In short, following Phelan, it “points to a different form of theatre.”¹¹ Such a reading entails searching at the margins and tracing the hidden, the unseen.

Antigone, according to Honig, “has a constitutive role in the formation of modern continental philosophy and democratic theory since Hegel,”¹² and indeed few plays are as commented-upon or as far-reaching in their theoretical and philosophical impact. However, as Joshua Billings points out, while the turn to tragedy around 1800 shapes speculative thinking, it simultaneously transforms the role of tragedy to become philosophical.¹³ And although this transformation may be situated in a larger paradigmatic shift toward thinking about art in “philosophical and often metaphysical terms” beyond the realm of the aesthetic, still, for the idealists, “tragedy held a privileged place” due to the fact that it came with an already established theoretical-philosophical system, articulated through Aristotle’s *Poetics*.¹⁴ The turn to tragedy within continental philosophy can thus be understood as responding to an already existing discursive (rather than dramaturgical) structure, even though it is in the dramatic core of tragedy, articulated through conflict, that Hegel locates the tragic “essence” that also shapes the core of dialectical thinking. In this tradition, “philosophical” readings rarely contend with dramaturgy, or with *Antigone* as a play; rather, as Honig shows, the drama and its constitutive components (plot, character, thought, to cite the first three *elements* that Aristotle lists in order of importance¹⁵) become *tropes*, or the play is “harnessed to, and in turn licenses” lines of inquiry central to philosophy.¹⁶

Furthermore, the positioning of *Antigone* as representative of tragic essence entails a “turn” reflecting the stakes of modernity. What makes *Antigone* (in which interest was scarce before 1800) so attractive to modern philosophical thought, Billings suggests, is its combination of “ethical conflict, political context, and foregrounding of gender relations.”¹⁷ Significantly, I argue, within this framework, notions of conflict, context, and relationality are conceived as dialectical – as are questions of ethics, politics, and gender. If the conflict between Antigone and Creon articulates an “original essence of tragedy,” it is because it manifests “the conflict of two substantive positions, each of which

11 Phelan 1997, 16.

12 Honig 2013, 181.

13 Billings 2014, 2.

14 Billings 2014, 1-2.

15 Aristotle 1987, 37-38.

16 Honig 2013, 185.

17 Billings 2014, 12.

is justified, yet each of which is wrong.”¹⁸ In Hegel’s words, “...each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*, while on the other hand each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and *damaging* the equally justified power of the other.”¹⁹ In their innate and paradoxical entanglement with ethics, the characters’ downfall results less from hubris than from one-sidedness: “both are equally right, and therefore in their antithesis, which is brought about by action, both are equally wrong.”²⁰ The simultaneous mirroring and incompatibility of two positions produces the conflict, expressed through action, that will eliminate one part and most likely also destroy the other. Or, as Hegel puts it: “The action, in being carried out, demonstrates their unity in the natural downfall of both powers and both self-conscious characters.”²¹

In this manner, Hegel’s idealization of the *Antigone* brings about a shift in the Aristotelean legacy, creating a theory of tragedy attuned to – and providing support for – his own theory on dialectics as well as his developing notion of history (for such conflicts and paradoxes can, according to Hegel, be historically situated – indeed the notion of historical progress is based in dialectical movement wherein clashes between normative systems produce paradigm shifts²²). One could say that Hegel engenders what he claims to uncover as tragic essence (and similarly, as Judith Butler remarks, “Antigone emerges as a figure for Hegel (...) only to become transfigured and surpassed in the course of Hegel’s description of what she does”²³). As tragic drama the *Antigone* does not necessarily or inevitably call for readings privileging only two central characters, operating in antithesis; however, as Billings notes, idealist readings have shaped contemporary understandings of tragedy.²⁴ Regardless of whether ensuing readings of the play agree with Hegel’s particular argument regarding character and the stakes of politics and ethics within the play, the dialectical framework, and the understanding of conflict, have had a lasting hold.

My aim here is not to locate an originary or “true” understanding in place of existing dominant readings, nor is it to negate the role and importance of the philosophical legacy of the *Antigone*. I wish to highlight and complicate this genealogy, which is constitutive for my own directorial reading of the play. A purely discursive and dialectical focus on the dramatic text, however, risks producing a form of categorical neatness which overlooks – and arguably does violence to – explicit claims pointing elsewhere within the play. The binary logic informing this interpretational practice also tends to underscore and reproduce patriarchal structures and misogyny prevalent in idealist philosophy as well as the (discursive and non-discursive) practices of modernist theatricality (not to mention psychoanalytic theory).

18 Roche 2006, 12.

19 Hegel quoted in Roche 2006, 12.

20 Hegel 1807/1977, 448.

21 Hegel 1807/1977, 448.

22 Roche 2006, 12.

23 Butler 2000, 12.

24 Billings 2014, 12.

For the conflict between Antigone and Creon is no symmetry of “substantive positions”, but must be seen as always already marked by difference and gendered positionality. Hegel’s notion of tragic essence is equally bound up in the transgression, excess, and contamination that is pervasively linked to femininity and female gender; his argument, as S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė point out, has the potential to work “as a mechanism for female exclusion.”²⁵ This is because the feminine, as Cecilia Sjöholm writes, “incarnates a tension between the ethical domain and that which can neither be included in it nor controlled by it,” and thus its agents constitute “disruptive threats” to the community, from which they must therefore be excluded.²⁶ In the *Antigone*, this has to do with the appeal on Antigone’s part to divine rather than human law; in that it “exceeds the ethical order” the divine is regarded as “lack or failure” in that same order, and Antigone becomes part of a pattern in Greek tragedy of women opening up to such combined lack and excess.²⁷ In the context of modern philosophy, this conflict may be translated into a threat against the ethical. “Modernity,” Sjöholm concludes, “has striven in vain to contain these excesses.”²⁸

In this reading, the feminine is always both too much and too little, impossible and death-bound. Tragic female characters, as embodiments of the feminine, are destined to self-destruct; as Sjöholm puts it, the feminine “must be excluded” in response to its positioning as transgressive and threatening. Viewing tragedy as a cultural product of Athenian society, she writes that the significance of Antigone as heroine must be measured against the invisibility of women in that society and their exclusion from the spheres both of democracy and tragedy: “The question is not why female characters are flawed or evil, but why they appear at all.” Are not these female characters mere projections by men, for men, positing the female/feminine as “a threatening fantasy of the Other,” who will inevitably be punished (through “unheroic,” suicidal death) for her transgressions?²⁹ I would tend to concur with Sjöholm on the latter but would add that this positioning cannot be connected to character formation alone – it is intimately connected to questions of dramaturgy, canonization, and the performativity of theatrical performance.³⁰ The performative function of femininity and female characters in tragedy must, I argue, be at the heart of any feminist consideration of *Antigone*. For me, as a director, the question is not *per se* why female characters appear, but rather what we can do with the premise that tragedy, as we know it, appears to need singular, ostensibly “heroic” female (or feminine-positioned) characters who perform transgressive acts only to be dispensed with violently and/or at their own hands.

Similarly, Sjöholm notes that the violent end met by so many of tragedy’s female characters “appears to be motivated by a cause *internal* to tragedy

25 Wilmer and Žukauskaitė 2010, 3.

26 Sjöholm 2004, 30.

27 Sjöholm 2004, 34.

28 Sjöholm 2004, 34.

29 Sjöholm 2004, 33.

30 Hagström-Ståhl 2016, 73-84.

itself” (and not simply by “(patriarchal) society’s desire to dominate,” a view with which Hegel appears to have agreed).³¹ This “cause” may be linked to the dramaturgical element of catharsis – certainly, male characters also routinely face a violent end. Moreover, Sophoclean dramaturgy may be seen as coercive in a manner that isn’t explicitly gendered; as Carson remarks in the preface to her translation of *Antigone* it has “a quality of tidiness that can be terrifying,” and she asks, rhetorically, “Why did anyone think they could escape?”³² However, this internal mechanism cannot be entirely disassociated from patriarchal society or masculinist discourse, which reserves a particular, if paradoxical, “place” for femininity. As suggested earlier, the formal and measured dramaturgical structures of tragedy are undeniably and intimately paired with the violent transgression and excessive desire that Carson suggests constitute tragic essence, and which tend to be linked to the feminine.³³ Unlike modernity, tragedy seeks to unleash rather than contain these excesses, displaying the disastrous consequences. The unleashing does not in itself constitute a transgression or violation of the “core” of tragedy, and nor does disaster; both are part of the what the drama “needs” to work. However, modernist discourse following Hegel has intensified and transformed the linkage within tragedy between femininity, destruction, and death (as when Lacan suggests that Antigone’s relationship to Creon is one of dependency rather than opposition because he “provides the occasion for her to meet her antecedently formed death wish”³⁴), and with this transformation the position of femininity becomes increasingly fixated and its potential for dramatic and political agency increasingly curtailed.

Phelan remarks that as long as the drama remains in the grip of the “masculine Imaginary” the dramaturgy of *Antigone* will “reproduce the static suffering of tragedy.”³⁵ Unless challenged, and due to the iterative tendencies of both canonization and theatrical performance, this premise will perpetuate itself to the point of meta-commentary, as when in Jean Anouilh’s 1944 version of *Antigone*, the character of the Prologue concedes that Antigone might have liked to live, but there is nothing to be done – a character by that name will be required to play its role to the end. The challenge, however, is not merely to rehabilitate Antigone – or, for that matter, Ismene – as trope or character. Instead it consists in interrogating the given circumstances that create a fixed position for Antigone while rendering Ismene invisible – and then allow oneself to imagine otherwise. These characters may constitute “a product of a society dominated by men, a threatening fantasy of the Other,” but as Sjöholm writes, nevertheless “Greek literature (...) lets female ‘countercultures’ shine through.”³⁶

One such form of counterculture emerges through Honig’s reading of moments where “Antigone plots and conspires with her sister,” giving rise to an

31 Sjöholm 2004, 54.

32 Carson 2015, 8.

33 Carson 2006, 7-9.

34 Honig 2013, 171.

35 Phelan 1997, 15.

36 Sjöholm 2004, 33.

interpretation of the play that emphasizes “tragedy’s own exploration of the problem of political agency as action under conditions of (near) impossibility,” rather than suffering. Foregrounding “solidarity of action in concert among equals,” Honig envisages female characters as the subjects of such action.³⁷ Here, Ismene is figured as responding to Antigone’s plans to transgress Creon’s edict with resistance rather than passivity, agreeing with her cause but disapproving of her method. In order to spare her sister, Ismene performs the first burial of Polynices herself – but does so in secret, avoiding detection. When Antigone is caught in the act of performing the second burial, and Creon confronts Ismene, she readily admits: “I did the deed I share the blame.”³⁸ In response, Honig rightly asks: “Why has no one for hundreds of years or more taken her at her word?”³⁹

Support for a different reading of the character of Ismene and a new interpretation of the play as a whole is, she argues, present in the text – it simply needs to be *articulated*; what becomes intelligible and plausible to the audience is a matter of the actors’ interpretation of the subtext and intentionality of the characters’ utterances and dialogue. Thus, the relationship between Antigone and Ismene can be understood in radically different ways, depending on the actors’ portrayal: “the same words, differently delivered, could support either possibility.”⁴⁰

Indeed the first scene of *Antigone* – the “prism” through which Honig reads the play⁴¹ – presents the central ethical conflict of the drama through the facet of the relationship between Antigone and Ismene. This relationship, in turn, is distilled in relation to principal plotlines. Its opening line, in which Antigone addresses Ismene (“O Ismene / O one and only sister”⁴²) establishes Ismene’s position as unique and their relationship as one of primacy. Furthermore this scene presents Ismene as an equal, together with whom Antigone wants to act. The two female characters are given space for sustained exchange during which the play’s central agents are introduced and the given circumstances are fleshed out without interruption. Such a set-up indicates a centrality of character, and that the sisters’ difference in approach to the principal dramatic conflict will be of bearing in the denouement of the play’s plot and action. This is hardly insignificant, and to a spectator of the play can be overlooked only with difficulty.

As Honig points out, although Antigone is set on a course of action, “she does not just go out and do it” but turns to Ismene, seeking help and support.⁴³ From the outset a simultaneously agonistic and conspiratorial relationship is established between the sisters, setting the scene for two different possible courses of action – Honig suggests that the pair “act in concert in ways that

37 Honig 2013, 152.

38 Sophokles 2015, 29.

39 Honig 2013, 164.

40 Honig 2013, 166.

41 Honig 2013, 153.

42 Sophokles 2015, 13.

43 Honig 2013, 163.

(...) complement *and* compete.”⁴⁴ Rather than recasting Antigone and Ismene as the new adversaries of the play (which would be falling in line with the dialectical tendency), however, Honig instead emphasizes solidarity and reads both figures as more complex and ambivalent than most interpretations to date will allow.

Similarly, my motivation in foregrounding the relationship between the two women is to question the premises that cast them as opposites rather than as differentiated equals. I too see the potential of seeking in *Antigone* the distinctly non-Hegelian possibility of “action in concert among equals,” and view the conflict of the sisters as allowing for the co-existence of love, identification, and competition, as well as a form of opposition in which the parties, significantly, do not destroy each other. The possibility of more than one position of femininity and female agency brings to bear on the question of dramaturgy; even if Antigone chooses a course of action that results in her death and elimination, this is not the only imaginable trajectory for a (female) character seeking to honour a dead brother whose dignity in death has, arbitrarily and for political purposes, been denied.

Furthermore, that dead brother, Polynices, ceases to be the only or even the primary object of Antigone’s love and devotion, if we can perceive that the life and death of both sisters are at stake in the course of the drama. The “sororal solidarity” of which Honig speaks is manifested through the actions of both sisters, and Antigone’s insistence on taking full responsibility for the double transgression of Creon’s edict – so often made into an example of her extreme autonomy and individuality – comes to express “a commitment to life, not just death” in that she is sacrificing herself not only for her dead brother but also for her living sister.⁴⁵ Likewise, in a form of sacrifice which hitherto has perhaps never been acknowledged as such, Ismene forms an agreement with Antigone to go on living while her sister dies. The scene that the sisters perform in the presence of Creon, in which Ismene attempts to share the blame for the burial as well as persuade Creon to let Antigone live, becomes “a double entendre that is nothing short of brilliant” as it sees Antigone effecting a reversal in her attitude toward Ismene: “Antigone affirms the path she earlier demeaned as cowardly: that of survival.”⁴⁶

As Butler suggests, Antigone herself speaks at the price of death (“Her language is not that of a survivable political agency”⁴⁷), but in this counter-reading it is as if Antigone simultaneously has the capacity to think critically about her own forms of utterance, as well as to admit the value of what appears to be an inversed position. Such a reading effectively destabilizes and displaces the presumed Hegelian “essence” of tragedy, allowing as well for more than one position of subjectivity accorded to a female character. It is essential to recognize that the received perception of Ismene as passive, non-political, and non-transgressive also confirms and fixates Antigone’s course of action as

44 Honig 2013, 154.

45 Honig 2013, 154-55.

46 Honig 2013, 165.

47 Butler 2000, 28.

transgressive; traditionally, the two sisters are played out against each other, with Ismene simply vanishing the moment that Creon decides she is no threat and therefore may live. In such a framing her disappearance from the play confirms an already established assumption that she has refrained from action, countered no edict, broken no law. In a sense, she becomes a non-agent of the drama, insignificant to its dramaturgical or political meaning. However, allowing for an alternative dramaturgical imaginary where Ismene’s character (including her relationship to Antigone) is concerned, her absence from the seemingly inevitable tragic outcome may signal a countercultural glitch, an opening in Sophocles’ dramaturgical “net”, and is not, as such, opposed to the position of Antigone.⁴⁸

As Mark Griffith shows, Antigone – considered, as he writes, the “true ‘hero’” of the play by “most modern audiences” – also disappears “from view and from consideration” during the last third of the play,⁴⁹ leaving Teiresias and the Chorus to “take over from her as the voices of piety – and paternal authority.”⁵⁰ As such, neither Antigone nor Ismene could sustain any conventional protagonist status; instead the play disposes of them each in their own way. However, while Antigone is confirmed dead, Ismene, who is left – despite her own protests and lamentations – to go on living without her sister, remains at large at the end of the play. We really have no idea what happens to Ismene, the one principal character who is unaccounted for at the conclusion of the final scene. For this reason, Ismene as character and agent embodies a certain radical potential: her survival, however marginalized, signals the possibility of escape. Her survival and non-return effectively challenge the notion, articulated by Carson, that Sophoclean dramaturgy “tucks in every stray thread.”⁵¹

The question is how to convey this “alternative interpretative strategy” to an audience presumably familiar to some extent with established receptions of Sophocles’ tragedy. According to Honig, “intonation is everything,”⁵² but from a directorial perspective I can only partially agree. While Honig’s attention to the work of the actor (like Hegel’s) is brilliantly invigorating, and while her careful reading is fully plausible from a discursive and “against the grain” (or countercultural) dramaturgical point of view, the non-discursive workings of theatrical performance do not automatically comply with the intentions underlying such re-interpretation. The process of signification enacted in the encounter between actor(s)/performance and spectator(s) tends to exceed the intentionality of the performance makers and, as such, an interpretive meaning cannot be pre-determined as precisely as Honig appears to wish. A counter-canonical staging must also take into account received interpretations of the drama and be specific in its manner of addressing these. Some performance matters, which Honig attributes to intonation and individual acting choices, are, moreover,

48 Anne Carson refers to Sophoclean dramaturgy as a “net.” Carson 2015, 8.

49 Griffith 2010, 112.

50 Griffith 2010, 131.

51 Carson 2015, 8.

52 Honig 2013, 166.

rarely conveyed through those particular means.

Instead, if the audience is to reorient their understanding of the plot or their own emotional and identificatory investment, a counter-dramaturgical staging must be established as a framing, or given/enabling circumstance, of the performance as a whole. Thus, while intonation and textual interpretation of existing scenes are an essential part of supporting or challenging an aesthetic and interpretive framework that is established and developed through iterations of scenic utterance, the manner in which Antigone and Ismene come to engage a spectator relies not only on the verbal utterances of the actors playing these roles, but also on the extra-textual – unknown or perhaps hidden – components of the play.

For example, while plausible, the possibility that Ismene could be responsible for the first burial of Polynices is nowhere mentioned in the play but must be inferred by other means. Otherwise, how is an audience to surmise that during her first absence from the stage, Ismene is in fact off scattering dust over her brother's dead body? And how would an audience be able to perceive the subtext of her admission, or the double entendres of her interactions with Antigone, if no premise has been established for understanding the performance in this manner? Ismene's ability to function as a political and ethical agent is admittedly also a challenge if, as the existing manuscript indicates, she is only present in a mere two scenes before seeming to vanish without trace or comment. Were one to attempt to stage the play with this premise, the reimagining would have to reach far beyond the intonation of specific lines. Honig concedes that her effort at "recrafting" the play may necessitate "re-plotment and genre-bending"⁵³ but doesn't quite suggest how.

I argue that one must go further still: the kind of re-envisioning or establishing of a counter-culture that would grant subjectivity to both sisters, while enacting the far-reaching consequences for plot, dramaturgy, and dramatic conflict of their collaborative-yet-agonistic actions, requires imagining not only beyond genre but beyond the limits of representation in the structure of tragedy as we know it. It requires imagining beyond the structures of the visible, in terms of how vision and visual regimes have come to operate and condition spectatorship in modernist theatricality – for the relationship between Antigone and Ismene is a struggle with visibility and visuality. As Phelan points out, the inability to see and visualize sororal affinity is no mere problem of reception, but "the consequence of a Sophoclean-Oedipal blindness" from within which "the allegiance that might pass between women cannot be dramatized theatrically or psychoanalytically, that is cannot be imagined."⁵⁴ As long as heteronormative (if in one case potentially incestuous) relationships – between Antigone and her uncle, her father, her brother – maintain primacy as locus of conflict, affinity and desire, the dramaturgy of *Antigone* will only reproduce "the tragedy of desire within the paternal symbolic."⁵⁵ In a similar vein Honig writes that if the relationship between Antigone and Ismene, "has been almost invisible until

53 Honig 2013, 194.

54 Phelan 1997, 15.

55 Phelan 1997, 15.

now,” it is in part “because readers and spectators (...) have trouble imagining a female agency that is agonistically and solidaristically sororal and not merely subject to male exchange.”⁵⁶

What happens between Antigone and Ismene requires re-invention and re-plotment not only of *Antigone* but of the terms of theatrical performance and philosophical tradition as well. Performance practice is perhaps in a unique position to undertake this work, given its ability to communicate through and beyond the textual, and to include corporeality, gesture and gaze into its processes of meaning-making and utterance. For if we are to believe Hegel, after all, “the performance [of tragedy] displays to the audience – who are also spectators – *self-conscious* human beings who *know* their rights and purposes, the power and the will of their specific nature and know how to *assert* them.”⁵⁷ Can feminine subjectivity and agency be included in this description of theatrical performance? If so, and if we can imagine, with Phelan, that Antigone and Ismene in their corporeal manifestation suggest “another way to play this drama,”⁵⁸ variations on the canonical understandings and enactments of *Antigone* may enter the stage.

“Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.”⁵⁹ Returning us once more to the question of “tragic essence,” Carson attributes tragedy’s core and *raison d’être* to its audience’s (rage and) grief, as well as to needs born out of that grief. Excessive emotion and transgression are central to what tragedy “does,” but Carson also posits the audience’s emotional identification with tragic action as central to its impact. In her argument, tragedy meets a contemporary need to frame the audience’s own emotions and to let these be played out with actors as stand-ins for ourselves; the role of the actor is to enable, through action, “a mode of deepest intimacy of you with your own life.”⁶⁰

In the context of envisioning a restaging of *Antigone* that foregrounds the two sisters and their relationship, I ask myself what feelings of grief and rage could be stronger than those arising out of the futility of action, out of helplessness before a disastrous but preventable course of events? Ismene perhaps embodies the ultimate expression and position of rage and grief within the play: despite all her efforts to prevent further tragedy, her sister is killed and she becomes the very last of the family line. Despite her resolve, she agrees to let Antigone die and to go on living with her loss. Even within the canonical framework for understanding *Antigone*, as spectators we should want to ask ourselves: what will become of Ismene? Yet, none of this plotment is discernible in the extant dramaturgy of the play – Ismene’s loss cannot be recognized, her grief cannot be envisioned, because she is not a discernable subject. Her position at the play’s conclusion is one of absolute negation, excluded from the dialectical

56 Honig 2013, 170.

57 Hegel 1807/1977, 444.

58 Phelan 1997, 16.

59 Carson 2006, 7.

60 Carson 2006, 7.

struggle for recognition and subjecthood, and cannot itself be seen or even really marked as absence.

Should we accept that through her presumed initial failure “to act when called upon to do so”, Ismene herself confirms or perhaps even initiates the process of erasure and exclusion of her character (and that as such, she too becomes destined to perform her role until the end)? This may be the case if we accept that the only recognizable form of (political or dramatic) action is undertaken by singular actors, in direct and overt opposition, at the price of death or annihilation. However, one of Honig’s several contributions to the reading of Sophocles’ tragedy is her offering of an alternative framework for political and dramatic action, such that Ismene too may become an agent in the stakes of the play. Meanwhile, Honig’s emphasis on “acting in concert” prevents this reframing of the play, which brings Ismene’s dramaturgical arc, her actions, and her grief into focus, from becoming an opportunity to rescue her character in order to substitute Ismene for her sister, that “other” (non-)protagonist. Instead, recognition of – perhaps even identification with – Ismene’s position entails an engagement with absence and non-visibility, as well as resisting the impulse to centralize her perspective, thereby eclipsing others.

Repositioning the feminine within the structure of tragic dramaturgy means affecting that very structure and its performative regimes. Such transformation also (re-)touches the function of transgression in tragedy, so that it too may be considered in relation to dramaturgy and Sophocles’ stray threads. If escape is possible, there are variations on – or transgressions of – *Antigone* that are as yet unknown. My investigation of a *mise en scène* begins there, in the simultaneous immediacy and as-if conditionality of theatrical performance. What form it takes remains to be seen.

AUTHOR

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Review

Hvad med teaterhistorien? (What about Theatre History?)

Edited by Erik Hvidt and Per Lykke.

Selskabet for Dansk Teaterhistorie, Copenhagen: Multivers, 2016, 287 p.

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Publications concerning theatre history are common, the subjects shift from singular productions to attempts to grasp the world history of theatre. Some of them aim to be used as textbooks at universities, others aim for a broader reading circle amongst theatre connoisseurs like biographies of famous directors or actors. When it comes to theatre history research, the aim is often twofold. Besides shedding new light on and offering interpretations of periods of theatre history, they are a ground for development and investigations of historiographic theories and methodology. But how often do we ask the question: has our contemporary theatre any use of theatre history knowledge?

The anthology *Hvad med teaterhistorien?* has this question as its starting point for the 15 articles and interviews. The texts are mostly based on Danish theatre history, but there are some comparisons with examples from other European countries. The answers are given not only by theatre researchers or teachers, but also by practitioners such as directors, actors, dramaturges, choreographers, and critics. Some of the practitioners have a background in theatre studies and some of the researchers have also worked as dramaturges and directors. Interestingly, some of the contributors are not of Danish origin, but work regularly in Denmark (for example German director Peter Kupke, or director Mick Gordon from Northern Ireland). These contributions offer an

opportunity for an outsider's view on the Danish stage tradition that enrich the collection of articles.

One of the risks with such a book could be that it primarily celebrates a glorious history, but what is important here is that the authors really take advantage of the possibility to make a statement. The dancer and choreographer Dinna Bjørn's article concerns the Bournonville tradition and how it could be redefined and expanded. She analyses the way Bournonville has been danced and poses the question when it started to be a tradition. In an excellent way she presents a successful cooperation between researchers, archivists, and practitioners. The article is followed by theatre critic Anne Middelboe Christensen's article about the preservation and uses of archival resources for researching the Danish Royal Theatre's history, noting the characteristic smell from the cuttings of reviews from the daily papers. She too emphasizes the need for and possibilities with a Bournonville study centre in Copenhagen.

Dramaturge, theatre researcher, and translator Bent Holm digs into the relations between King Frederik VII, his extra private wife (!), the Ottoman Empire, and the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. The article goes far off from the theatre auditorium to European politics and Holm concludes by noting the importance of seeing one's own history in a global perspective and questions the various historical "filtres" such as different issues of morality, gender, and sociopolitics. What he shows is that the theatrical event, both on the stage and off, can be used as a point for focalisation.

Theatre researcher Ulla Kallenbach takes up the possibility of finding new ways to analyse theatre history. Surveying a range of examples from recent books on theatre history and their different perspectives, she remarks that the willingness to expand theatre history to a global study could result in central topics in European theatre history such as Comedia dell'arte becoming peripheral and no longer a topic for deeper research. She proposes a new research perspective to connect theatre history with the cultural history of imagination in the intersection of stage performances and play scripts.

Associate professor Stig Jarl has, as a departure point, an article in the weekly cultural newspaper *Weekendavisen* from 2011 about the rumours that the university was going to reduce teaching in theatre history and that they no longer were interested in Danish culture. Jarl, who has an insider view from the Theatre and Performance Studies Department at Copenhagen University, maps out the developments and changes of the teaching of theatre history, a development that is similar to other western departments in the field. Firstly, the discipline has, through the years, expanded its programme towards new fields such as theatre sociology and performance analysis, where the term 'performance' also stands for a broad perspective of what events can be analysed. Secondly, the development is that theatre and performance history no longer can be restricted to the nation or western theatre. And thirdly, this expanded theatre history has to be covered with less teaching hours and meet the demands from the government that education should lead to jobs.

A number of the contributions to the book are interviews with theatre practitioners conducted by editor Per Lykke. This gives a complementary view

on theatre history from the practitioners' side, and what use they have of their knowledge. The first is with Swedish actress Stina Ekblad who undertook her actor training in Denmark and still makes guest appearances on the Danish stage and television. She talks about the preparation work she does for a new role and that she almost takes on the role as a researcher and reads a lot of material connected to the play. As an actor who, first of all, focuses on the text, she is very sensitive when the wording is problematic and in the best cases she has had the possibility to discuss it with the translator. But she also takes up the importance that theatre history has for her main place of work, The Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, where young actors could learn from older actors from generation to generation, especially regarding the theatre's tradition of the spoken language. Ekblad questions classical plays being placed in a contemporary setting without problematizing or even understanding the consequences.

The Danish stage directors Peter Langdal and Kasper Holten seem to take the same standpoint. In their interviews, they both note the necessity of translating classical plays into a contemporary context and they highlight the importance of understanding how the play was produced and received by the original audience and "translate" situations in the play into something similar in our time. I lack here a critical analysis of how well they succeed in transforming classical plays into our contemporary society.

The theatre and opera researcher and dramaturg Magnus Tessing Schneider's article takes up the same issue when he writes about a historically informed dramaturgy. He finds that Peter Konwitschny's production of *Don Juan* was a modern staging that took its starting point in the opera's own challenges of eroticism, sexuality, and moral authority rooted in the late Enlightenment. He juxtaposes this example against what he calls 'postmodern stagings' in which the opera is merely material that can be used and not interpreted.

The Swedish director Staffan Valdemar Holm also talks in his interview about the importance of knowing and understanding the play's historical background. But he also gives a more playful example of reusing theatre history. When he staged Strindberg's *Miss Julie* in Copenhagen in 1992 with the group *Nyt Skandinavisk Forsøgsteater*, they also planned to publish a fictive theatre history with arranged photos from performances that had only appeared in their imaginations.

The book *Hvad med teaterhistorien* with its shifting perspectives on Danish theatre history gives important answers to questions such as who should write history, how can it be used adequately, and how can it be important for contemporary stagings. It gives good examples on building relations between practitioners and theorists, and opens up new ways of writing theatre histories.