



The Presence of Elsewhere

Christel Weiler, 18 September 2010

Under the title “The presence of the elsewhere in the now (*Die Gegenwart des Anderswo im Jetzt*)”, the festival *Theaterformen*, which took place in Braunschweig/Germany in June 2010, devoted a full weekend to debating issues of colonialism and racism. Within the context of this colloquium, which opened up diverse, partly conflicting perspectives on the topic’s complexity in talks, debates, performances and video installations, a dramaturgy of heterogeneity allowed visitors to carve their own itinerary amongst people and things. The following considerations should be understood as an initial ex post mapping of an individual path through events. In the process, lines are of necessity drawn to reading and theatre experiences that were and are relevant at other times and in other contexts.

0. “We are faced with the great task of an intercultural alphabetization. And in the process, we are all learning a new language.”¹

1. Points to consider

The acknowledgement of a “presence of the elsewhere”, i.e. of a coeval Other, immediately brings us face to face with an absolutely fundamental question: how to speak and write in order to make explicit from which perspective, given which background (my) speaking and writing occur? Is it at all necessary to disclose “perspective”? Does this not automatically foreordain a certain “tendency”? How can generalizations and affronts be avoided? If I acknowledge that my counterpart has come here from an “elsewhere”, then our encounter, as a process of convergence, is a mutual challenge. Acknowledging the “elsewhere” pledges one to hesitation, to caution; it pledges one to the avowal that, from the perspective of the respective “elsewhere”, each pronouncement can and may, indeed maybe must, appear questionable.

¹ Mark Terkessidis: *Interkultur*, edition suhrkamp 2010, p. 10 (transl. Maud Capelle).

2. Mission

The one performance at the *Theaterformen* festival that most impressed me – full and immediate disclosure – was *Mission*, presented by Bruno Vanden Broecke. Not only was I favored with a magnificent acting performance. Not only – from my perspective – is this text by David van Reybrouck (translated by Rosemarie Still and also played in German specially for the Braunschweig performance) an admirably complex piece of literature. What takes place in these more than one and a half hours has by now become so rare in theatre that it deserves special mention: it is an actor's simple address to and facing of the audience, the ability to transfer spectators into a rare state of concentration, to take them along into a space of thought and images that mutually question one another. Vanden Broecke, alias "A Missionary", tells of a life between Africa and Europe, between poor and rich, between God and men, between town and country, between the highly technologized Western world and the necessity to make one's best with and from what is available.

In this mental to and fro, his speech very gradually creates in spectators themselves an interspace – possible only in theatre? –, a site that makes it possible to perceive and discern that this figure onstage can only speak this way because his encounter with various worlds and realities has made him relinquish all (apparent) certitudes. Yet it would be mistaken and careless to file the evening away under the heading "tales from a missionary's life". The very quality of this work (the text, the acting, the successful final *coup de théâtre*) is in fact to uncouple the notion of "mission" from the activity of a missionary and ask earnestly, i.e. without a trace of embarrassment, to what purpose we find ourselves here on this planet, with what mission – in the sense of a task – we have made the place homely – or by now sometimes unearthly – for ourselves. When, at the end, Vanden Broecke looks upwards and asks (I quote from memory) "What can I still ask of you? Give me your tears. At least give me a sigh. God!", his subsequent long and haunting scream for "God!" is more expression of despair than invocation and certainty that this imploration could ever be heard. When, at the end, the stage opens up to the back and the gaze falls into a space that can only be described as desolate and (god)forsaken, what is communicated is an avowal of human failure, a lack of any "mission" that would care equally about the wellbeing of man and nature.

3. Reverberation of the scream

Some weeks later at the Hau 1 in Berlin, on the “Ars moriendi” stage. The actors present on stage are preparing for their “last walk”, more concretely they are all repairing to their awaiting coffins. Before one of the actresses closes the lid of her coffin for good, she briefly makes a reappearance and says (I quote from memory): “Maybe the death of God is a mistake. It has not yet been proven.”

I wonder: is theatre making serious talk about “God” possible again? In the humanities, at any rate, a renewed turn to theological issues seems to be taking place: Berlin’s Center for Research in Literature (*Zentrum für Literaturforschung*) points to the most recent publication on the religious implications in the work of Walter Benjamin, which considers and recognizes in their relevance for contemporary reflection some of the author’s notions and concepts that had long been only reluctantly accepted – such as creation, law, guilt and life.²

4. Yet more importantly

However, what currently seems to me more important for the debate on theatre in postcolonial spaces is the abovementioned creation of an interspace. What Vanden Broecke/the “Missionary” practices/provokes, is an enduring irritation of certitudes; he allows the spectator to dwell in dubiety. One could also say: with his narration of episodes and interspersed questions, he holds everything in such suspension that at the end, all that is left is an inescapable and uncomfortable question, which is: what am I here for? What am I doing here? What are we humans doing here on this planet? Each separately and all of us together?

Whither do we go with this question once the performance has come to an end? How do we leave the interspace and where to? Where can possibilities of an answer be found? Or, in a first step, could it be more meaningful to let ourselves be led by the irritation and grant it further space? Thus, at least for a while, to be without certitudes and in flux? Should we rather stall, stutter, come to a halt, stand still? Have we become interspaces ourselves?

With a view both to the current basic principles of performing arts and the state of the world, André Lepecki writes in the foreword to *Planes of Composition*, edited jointly with Jenn Joy: “[O]ur current condition, where a hyper-mobilization of the planet is under way,

² Daniel Weidner (ed.): *Profanes Leben. Walter Benjamins Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 2010.

primarily fuelled by well-tested colonialist and capitalist policies and dynamics, demands the creation of a political phenomenology of heterogeneities – a theory that acknowledges the reality of the irregular, the proliferation of dynamic eccentricities, and thus challenges the very notion of centre upon which colonial and postcolonial melancholic and neo-liberal kineticism gain their organizational and hegemonic force.”³ Lepecki explicitly references the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk who, in volume 3 of *Spheres*⁴, attempts to unfold the state of the world starting from the notion of “foam”. Sloterdijk writes: “Almost nothing and yet not nothing. A something, if only a web of hollow spaces and subtle walls. A real actuality, yet a contact-shy formation, which at the slightest touch cedes and bursts. This is foam as it manifests itself in everyday experience. Through the whipping in of air, something liquid, something solid, loses its density; what appeared self-contained, homogenous, stable, morphs into loosened structures. ... How should a first definition of foam thus read? Air in unexpected places? ... In foam, buoyancy forces come to bear that trouble upholders of established conditions.”⁵ According to this, theatre – and more particularly this performance of “Mission” – could be characterized as an exemplary site of the generation of foam, understood in the positive sense.

5. Another kind of interspace

The missionary’s questioning and reflecting is linked with “home leave”. He leaves his mission post, goes to his family and at the same time enters confinement. His arrival “home” is – at least to begin with – marked by abstinence from any news from the outside world. Rather, his gaze turns inwards, to his own inner space. “Home leave” as defined by the missionary thus proves a useful notion in the attempt to differentiate interspaces. It denotes a respite – the missionary takes time to reflect, to take a breath – and at the same time the remoteness from all places believed to be safe – it creates distance in all directions. What thus occurs is, in coming home, the removal from a place called “Heimat”. In this case, “home leave” thus goes hand in hand with the feeling of “homelessness”, of non-belonging. Rather, what happens in the “homeland” and within family gradually becomes foreign and questionable itself. And: coming home – so we learn – is not necessarily tied to a place.

Maybe what we carry away from the theatre can best be called a positively valenced foam formation. It is a fragile awareness of something that is yet to find shape. Retaining this

³ André Lepecki, Jenn Joy (eds.): *Planes of Composition*, Seagull Books 2009, p. VIII.

⁴ Peter Sloterdijk: *Sphären III, Schäume*, suhrkamp 2004 (transl. Maud Capelle).

⁵ Ibid., p. 27/29.

image, the performance also grants us a type of foam-wrapped “home leave”. We could transport the interspace out of the theatre and extend it into our daily life – provided we ourselves have become more porous.

If we give credence to Mark Terkessidis’ considerations on the topic of “interculture”, then our survival in a feverishly evolving world requires a new awareness which, referencing architect Aldo van Eyck, he calls “in-between-awareness”⁶. As spectators touched, moved and frothed up by theatre, we could play our part in shaping this new awareness, at least for a while.

6. Reverting to “Mission”, pausing at language

The festival’s program leaflet stressed that Bruno Vanden Broecke would present the play in German specially for its guest performance in Braunschweig. With an unmistakably foreign accent, he did indeed proceed to weave his way into and through his hosts’ language with great virtuosity. The very fact that the actor was not expressing himself in his native tongue contributed to the particular attention his speech was granted. Halting and brittle, it gave the well-known a new sound. In addition, his special effort garnered him further admiration. Yet what about the dancers, performers and speakers who had traveled from South Africa? Were they equally invited to take part in shaping the interspace? As far as I remember, no headsets had been provided with which to simultaneously listen to the theatrical address in a second language. The festival thus presented itself with an ambivalent gesture: on the one hand it successfully invited guests from South Africa to take part in the event, on the other hand these very guests were excluded from following the perspective of a “colonizer” – as which the missionary is also to be seen. Yet if theatre aims to contribute to cutting across discursive boundaries, it must become multilingual, and issues of translation and translatability are part of its (new?) tasks. Otherwise, it only practices a further form of exclusion.

7. Repeatedly demanded sensitization for one’s own speech

Authors such as Grada Kilomba – in her talk on Sunday 6 June 2010 in Braunschweig and in her most recent book *Plantation Memories* – or also Mark Terkessidis in the previously mentioned Suhrkamp publication *Interkultur* again and again point to the fact that seemingly simple questions such as “Where are you from?” can carry racist connotations.

⁶ Terkessidis: *Interkultur*, p. 219.

That the question “Where are you from?” could be formulated in an offensive manner may at first seem strange. Why should I not be allowed to ask where you come from? What should the conversation between us start with, when we meet for the first time? The question of a traveler to the person he meets on the way – is it not all too natural? First we ask where from, then where to, in order to gain first indications as to who the other is. Could we settle with asking only “where to”? Would it suffice to know that a common stretch lies ahead? Do we need to know where we are going in order to communicate? What does the very notion of a route imply? Can we imagine an encounter that would not immediately question the other? That would not interrogate him, but acknowledge him without question?

8. All this for what?

In the best of senses, in order to not take one’s own position on the world’s large stage too seriously or too importantly. But also: in order to think about what purpose on earth theatre could serve, what we need it for. Do we really need it? At the end of *The Thrill of It All* – Forced Entertainment’s most recent work – one could think that the show must go on precisely because there is no alternative. The thought of really not playing tomorrow, of lying down in the street in refusal, as put by one of the young actresses in *Night Witch*⁷ – would that thought really be entertained in earnest by a company such as Forced Entertainment? Are we, are the players prisoners in our own system?

9. Almost reassurance

Perusing the programs of current theatre festivals, one could almost feel reassured as to the state of the world: *Theaterformen* in Braunschweig, *Theater der Welt* in the Ruhr-Region – a brightly colored mix, a true orgy of interweavings, which leads us to think: all is well.

One of the first newsletters sent out by *Theater der Welt* stated: “The *Theater der Welt* artists come from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and Oceania. They live in megacities, come from emerging nations, natural paradises and crisis regions. They work alone or in a collective as directors, choreographers, performers, dancers or musicians. Some are well-known greats, others are performing for the first time in Europe. Even if they are very different, they all have one thing in common, they share with us the time we live in.”

⁷ *The Night Witch* is the title of Tamer Yigit and Branka Prlic’s new work, premiering at the Hau 3 in Berlin on 25 June 2010.

The history of the Aztecs is at last being addressed in Mexico, Nijinsky has finally reached Thailand, township dramas equal Chekhov's and Ibsen's swan songs to the family in tragic content (a questionable notion), former Moroccan nightclub singers show us that there are also combative women in Arabic countries – nothing is lost.

One could come to the conclusion that we are a world community of “artists of life”, that we are all playing theatre and that it is what unites us. The baroque topos of the world as stage has only one catch: we lack the belief in a God who settles everything in our best interests. The gods/directors who stage and take responsibility for the overall spectacle are highly earthbound. This is due not least to the fact that we have the necessary financial means (and thus also the power) to afford this way of thinking. Could shared time really be the lowest common denominator we can agree on? No, we are not all equally equal at the same time. Even dwelling in interspaces, viewed from other perspectives, seems no more than a self-indulgent game. Unless from it arises the insight into new exigencies.