



## In favour of not-understanding!

Kai Tuchmann, March 7, 2011

*The Kulturstiftung des Bundes funds collaborations between city theatres in Germany and theatres from abroad. The Mainfranken Theater in Würzburg has started a collaboration with the Burkinan C.I.T.O. Theatre. Kai Tuchmann, currently executive dramaturge of the Mainfranken Theater, reflects on this international collaboration.*

I would like to reflect in this short essay on the terms 'culture' and 'translation' in order to gain a strategic orientation for artistic practice. I believe that, quite often, there is a strong tendency in international artistic collaborations to stress those aspects that connect us to the other party, i.e. those that can be translated. Instead, I would like to suggest the possibility of emphasising aspects that separate us from each other, i.e. those that cannot be translated. I strongly believe that when it comes to any kind of international artistic collaboration, the only way to face each other on an equal footing is by focusing on our irreconcilable differences – at least regarding the semiotic aspect of the encounter, as meeting on an equal economic level is impossible in any case when it comes to collaborations between Burkina Faso and ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of our collaboration with the C.I.T.O. Theatre in Ouagadougou/Burkina Faso, terms such as "intercultural" or "transcultural" are used frequently in order to describe the project. However, what is the meaning of

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<sup>1</sup> In this context it is very interesting to take a look at the casting process of our project. The management of the C.I.T.O. expressed their concern that one of their actors, a perfect fit from our artistic point of view, might, once in Germany, try to disappear and stay on in Europe without documents. Such an incident would certainly cause the exclusion of the C.I.T.O. from further collaborations with European partners and lead to painful damages to their budget. It would also cast the *Bundeskulturstiftung* in a poor light. The 'bare facts' should never be completely neglected. International projects never simply take place on the level of semiotics or aesthetics but are strongly influenced by economic injustices, travel restrictions, and the like. It is for this reason that international projects should not be used to cover up these 'bare facts'.



such a concept of culture? And moreover: What do the prefixes “inter” and “trans” attempt to grasp? Don’t they suggest a certain translatability of entities, those being German and Burkinan “culture”?

The claim for originality of the concept of culture, however, seems to be more than dubious, as culture is not something static or essentially established but continuously mixed, remixed and sampled, something that is in permanent negotiation. If we destabilise the concept of culture in this way, the concept of translatability can hardly be sustained. In my opinion, the notion of the translatability of culture is subject to an hegemonic order. The process of translating is not necessarily a mutual one. Rather, it seems to quite often be a construct of those who dominate it, thus safeguarding their own interpretation of the world. In contemporary, international artistic exchanges, it is the concept of humanity and human rights from which common grounds and identities between the collaborating parties are drawn. The fact that these concepts, quite often, appear to be the anthropologization and juridification of Western living conditions and Western perspectives is, unfortunately, frequently forgotten.<sup>2</sup> Humanity and human rights aren’t really identities or similarities but quite often concepts of domination, which are closely connected to concepts of translation, as notions of humanity serve as the building blocks for contemporary international collaborations.

In this context, I would like to refer to “Sind Menschenrechte teilbar? Menschenrechte zwischen den Kulturen”, a lecture given by Alfred Hirsch on February 2, 2011, during the meeting “Kultur und Konflikt” held by the Goethe-Institut. Hirsch refers to the ambivalent use of the term human rights, which in Western discourse always becomes an ethical or juridical entity. However, the concept of human rights can always only be one of these two things. As long as it is

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<sup>2</sup> It is not my aim to question the constructive character of human rights. However, it cannot be denied that only recently human rights have been the justification for military interventions. The war in Afghanistan, for example, has been justified by the claim to liberate Afghan women. It is because of this political exploitation of the concept of human rights by Western nations that I think it unsuitable for any kind of artistic strategies.



applied ambivalently, it inevitably becomes the material for an arbitrary, i.e. hegemonic usage. Furthermore, Hirsch extracts the inherent definition of the term “human being” from some of the key documents of the human rights discourse, from the “Habeas Corpus Amendment Act” (1679) to the “Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen” (1789). It is the definition of the white, heterosexual, psychologically and physically unchallenged man.

It is obvious that the concept of human rights maintains fuzzy boundaries, and it is certainly this circumstance which made Hannah Arendt state that human rights failed most urgently when they were needed the most, namely when faced with the flow of refugees during World War II. It is for the same reason that Giorgio Agamben demands to think about human rights with respect to the refugee, not the citizen, thus arguing for a fundamental reassessment of political philosophy.

In his inaugural lecture within the capacity as the August Wilhelm Schlegel Visiting Professor at Freie Universität Berlin, Stefan Weidner pointed to the manipulative stance of our dominion which is based entirely on translation.

“I consider it a totalitarian characteristic of our age that we cannot bear not-understanding [...]. That we have turned the desire-to-be-understood, the obligation-to-be-understood, into the ideology of our time [...]. In a world shaped by the Western culture of understanding, in which, for political reasons, Islam is constantly being compelled to explain itself, the translatable [...] aspect naturally comes to dominate, although this runs contrary to the attitude of many Muslims to the Koran in the past and even more so in the present [...]. If we can understand something, we can tolerate and accept it; follow it, as we say. But woe betide that, which we cannot understand – the burqa women, for example”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Weidner, Stefan: *Art & Thought* (93). 2010.



Weidner also discusses how, post-9/11, all translations of the Koran were sold out. This beautifully reflects how American and European communities believe in the power of translation and in finding in them answers to questions posed by the dynamics of our time. Weidner juxtaposes the sold out Korans with the refusal of dealing with commentaries, paraphrases or any other kind of secondary literature on the Koran, which would have resulted in a much deeper and solid understanding of it.

To conclude, I would like to take a brief look at the inner principles of art. Isn't it the untranslatable, those things that escape the means of translation, that are constitutive for any kind of artistic process? Adorno arranges his concept of negative hermeneutics around the notion of the enigma that art perpetually proposes to its recipients. According to Adorno, art is conceived by a 'comprehending incomprehension'. According to this idea, which I am happy to pursue, art can always only be irritation, never translation.

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Translation in collaboration with Annalena Schott and Saskya Jain.