



## On the Myth of Authentic Representation: Blackface as Reenactment

Joy Kristin Kalu, October 29, 2012

Authenticity on stage and within every other aesthetic framework is always constructed. Authentic representation, authentic speech, undisguised self-promotion, widely prevalent these days in the theatre as well as in film and especially on television, always corresponds to a specific staged effect of immediacy, incompleteness, spontaneity, reality and imperfection. During their performances, these amateurs or ‘experts of the everyday,’ heard, seen and put on stage everywhere, do not simply present themselves *as they are*. Rather, they pursue a performance convention that aims at exhibiting their amateurism or, specifically, that produces this media-friendly version of amateurism in the first place. This convention grows more complex with every reality television show, as the audiences, increasingly skeptical and practiced in recognizing these staging strategies, constantly demand new evidence that will allow them to lose themselves a little longer in this illusion of the ‘real.’

The production of the play *Unschuld (Innocence)* by Dea Loher, which premiered on 29 September 2011 at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin and is still part of their repertoire, will in the following serve as my stage to question current ascriptions and concepts of authenticity with reference to the practice of blackface. This production by Michael Thalheimer featured two white actors from the ensemble of the Deutsches Theater who were painted black to embody African immigrants from Loher’s play and, therefore, the *foreign* and the *other*. The production fueled the debate on the use of blackface on German stages. Its rhetoric is currently determined by a dichotomization of authentic self-presentation on the one hand, and the representation of difference and the appropriation of the foreign on the other. This becomes amply clear in such phrases as “authentic representation” and “authentic casting,” used in reference to the casting of black performers to play black dramatic characters. There is even a radio interview with Ulrich Khuon, artistic director of the Deutsches Theater, that is entitled “Not everything has to be cast authentically.”<sup>1</sup> The aim of this essay, in contrast, is to question these oppositions

---

<sup>1</sup> Deutschlandradio Kultur interview with Ulrich Khuon on 11 January 2012: “Nicht alles muss authentisch besetzt sein.” URL: [www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/fazit/1649995](http://www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/fazit/1649995). Last accessed: 20 September 2012.

and shed light on their hierarchical implications. However, I would first like to focus our attention on a few aspects of the history of blackface and the present blackface debate in Germany, which will be crucial to my argument.

Blackface or blackface minstrelsy describes a practice that goes back to nineteenth century American minstrel shows and formed a part of vaudeville performances well into the 1930s. Here, white performers painted their bodies black to portray black characters in sketches that showed them in a stereotypical and derogatory manner. Vaudeville gained widespread popularity at the end of the nineteenth century, i.e. after the abolition of slavery (1865), and was usually composed of a large variety of show and acrobatic segments, also including minstrelsy elements. I would like to point out, however, that by that time there were also individual cases of black performers and show troupes, but their performances were limited to minstrel sketches. These black performers, too, generally performed in blackface and were forced to continue this colonially-influenced structure of representation.<sup>2</sup> Their stereotypical embodiment of *blackness* was therefore by no means more authentic or more authentically staged than that of the white performers.

From its inception, then, blackface was a racist practice of entertainment. Its political dimension, i.e. legitimizing the white majority's preservation of power, was always part of its concept. It is for this reason that blackface simply cannot be understood as a neutral theatrical sign for marking difference – even today and even in Germany. While minstrel shows did not shape the German culture of entertainment of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Germany, too, has a colonial history – one that remains remarkably underexplored. In fact, stereotypical and degrading representations of black people existed in Germany as well, especially in film, for example in many of the adventure movies of the Weimar Republic and, even more so, in the colonial feature films of the National Socialists.<sup>3</sup>

In 2011 the debate on the use of blackface in German theatres, merely smoldering until then, flared up. It was triggered by the, in my opinion, absurd and tragicomic poster advertising the play *I'm Not Rappaport* at the Schlosspark Theater, starring Dieter 'Didi' Hallervorden and Joachim Bliese. The poster showed a grimacing Didi next to Joachim Bliese with black paint and a dumbfounded expression on his face. The discussion, which initially took place mostly on the Facebook page of the Schlosspark Theater, gathered momentum when Hallervorden and his Schlosspark team responded to the allegation of

---

<sup>2</sup> See Karen Sotiropoulos. *Staging Race. Black Performers in Turn of the Century America*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2006. 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Tobias Nagl. "Fantasien in Schwarzweiß. Schwarze Deutsche, deutsches Kino." URL: [www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/afrikanische-diaspora/59355/schwarze-deutsche-im-film?p=all](http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/afrikanische-diaspora/59355/schwarze-deutsche-im-film?p=all). Last accessed: 20 September 2012.

racism merely with incomprehension and justified their choice by stating that no black actor had been available for the role.<sup>4</sup>

In February of this year Bühnenwatch activists, who had found each other through the protest against the use of blackface at the Schlosspark Theater, challenged the *Unschuld* production at the Deutsches Theater. They organized an intervention, in which over forty people stood up and left the theatre at the first appearance of a performer in blackface. After the performance, they also distributed handbills pointing out the racist dimensions of blackface to the remaining audience. Since then, staff members of the Deutsches Theater and Bühnenwatch have met for several talks, which, among other things, evidently led to the removal of the blackface element from *Unschuld* at the end of March. The performers of the black immigrants are now painted white instead.

In my view, the arguments of the blackface critics on the one hand and of the defenders of unrestricted artistic freedom on the other can be summed up as follows: the opponents of blackface ask that the offensive dimensions of the practice be acknowledged, thereby taking into consideration those spectators whose feelings might be hurt. They further criticize the exotic appropriation and promotion of otherness and foreignness through members of the white social majority and demand that black actors, glaringly underrepresented on German theatre stages, be included in ensembles, enabling them to correct these clichés that are also perpetuated in the theatre. The advocates of unrestricted artistic freedom, in turn, champion the ur-theatrical process of representing otherness which, after all, does not only affect the depiction of black characters. They emphasize that they must remain free to choose the means to achieve this process. They also proclaim that theatrical means could and should 'hurt' once in a while if they are to move anything. Furthermore, some of them feel that the casting of black actors in black roles made little sense, as this inversely implied that black actors were limited to those roles, thus discriminating against them once again.

I would now like to address the fraught and undeniably highly political question of *who can represent whom and in what way* with the help of three theses, albeit without pretending to be able to provide answers. Rather, as mentioned in the beginning, this is an attempt to dissolve the opposition between authentic self-presentation and representations of difference in terms of otherness.

---

<sup>4</sup> For details on this debate see for instance: "Netzgemeinde wettert gegen Hallervordens Schlossparktheater." 9 January 2012. *nachtkritik.de*. URL: [http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6457%3Anetzgemeinde-wettert-gegen-hallervordens-schlossparktheater&catid=126%3Ameldungen&Itemid=84](http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6457%3Anetzgemeinde-wettert-gegen-hallervordens-schlossparktheater&catid=126%3Ameldungen&Itemid=84). Last accessed: 24 October 2012.

**First thesis: In my opinion, blackface is a theatrical practice which does not have to be preempted or abolished per se. Rather, its repetition enables the production of new and entirely different meanings.**

Unquestionably, blackface is a racist practice with the capacity to offend. Yet, as with every other historically loaded process of representation, the possibility of producing difference – and thus something new – always inheres within the repetition of a convention. Processes of repetition, which clearly determine our contemporary art and culture at all levels, be it as parody, citation, reenactment, remix or remake, do not merely invoke something that has already been presented or created along with their familiar meanings, but they put it in a new context and, with the help of small or not so small shifts, demonstrate the instability of meaning. From pop and minimal art of the 1960s to numerous strands of contemporary appropriation art, we can trace the growing trend to productively emphasize difference. In this sense, performances of repetition often produce an inherent instability that can irritate the spectators and make them aware of their own perceptual conventions. Travesty performances in which the citation of ‘typically female’ qualities through male performers ideally demonstrates the theatricality and constructed nature of femininity in itself might serve as an example here.

Repetition can thus lead to re-signification, add new meanings to performances and thereby undermine conventions. As such, the case of blackface performances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has shown that while black performers had to perpetuate the degrading minstrel show logic in order to even be allowed to perform, they succeeded in conveying messages to their black audiences to which their white counterparts had no access. Without attempting to romanticize this theatrical form – i.e. the painting black of black performers during segregation – or to disregard the insults contained within it against the performers and black audience members, I mention this example, which also forms a part of the history of blackface, to show that repetition, even when it ascribes otherness, always also leaves space to attack those hierarchies that brought forth these offensive conventions. In this sense, blackface can be seen as a specific form of reenactment, not in terms of the re-petition of a single performance but as the renewed performance of a theatrical convention whose historical, social and aesthetic dimensions can thus be opened up for discussion and renegotiated.

Coming now to my critique of the opposition of the authentic self and the different other, blackface with black performers in this sense was not at all a more authentic variation. Rather, this self-representation served to reenact ascriptions of otherness that enabled the greatest possible difference.

In light of the above, I am arguing for an openness towards historically loaded processes, also as an enthusiastic spectator of, for example, New York's Wooster Group's blackface performances of recent years. After all, it is part of theatre's big potential that aesthetic and social dimensions always overlap on stage. To conceive of performance as a political space of negotiation thus allows for the possibility, perhaps through citation, of generating new meanings for old processes.

I now want to introduce my second thesis which, in contrast to the first, speaks to my own painful experience through theatrical signs and uses that pain as a benchmark. In this section I will focus specifically on the *Unschuld* production and its intention as articulated by the artistic director Ulrich Khuon in various interviews. The ostensible goal of the production was to bring to light and criticize the practice of racist ascriptions rather than, as it was accused of doing, perpetuating it<sup>5</sup>

**Second thesis: The use of blackface in the *Unschuld* production could indeed serve as a fruitful process for addressing and critiquing the ascription of otherness – if it was not coupled with other offensive processes of representation, which together create a racist effect.**

Michael Thalheimer's productions famously pay no heed whatsoever to authenticity. The performers remain mostly stationary amidst minimalist and highly artificial arrangements, all attention focused on their speech and speech patterns. The smallest gesture becomes pregnant with meaning in these geometrically straightforward constellations and bears the potential of producing a strong effect. Besides the black paint, the representation of the African immigrants does not differ significantly from that of these other characters. The performers speak without accent and use language with striking virtuosity. The black make-up covers only their faces and backs of their hands, displaying clearly the white rims that give away the masquerade. Moreover, the colour – applied with care at the beginning – is not touched up over the course of the almost two-hour performance, thus becoming increasingly used up and smeared, dissolving and spreading among the performers on stage thanks to their movements and sweat. It is a process to which we can, in fact, attribute a self-reflexive moment or even a distancing from the meaning of this colour.

However, what shocked, offended and deeply upset me as a spectator is the so far barely discussed fact that Peter Moltzen, playing the immigrant Fadoul, repeatedly slips into the posture, movements and mimicry of a monkey, imitating its sounds along with it. The

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example Ulrich Khuon in an interview with Arte on 14 April 2012: URL: [www.arte.tv/de/2151166,CmC=6593816.html](http://www.arte.tv/de/2151166,CmC=6593816.html). Last accessed: 20 September 2012.

recourse to this cliché, which goes back to eighteenth century quasi-scientific, craniometric studies proclaiming that black people were genetically closer to monkeys than white people and which enjoyed great popularity during National Socialism, astonished me. To invoke this cliché as a theatrical means for characterizing a character can only be interpreted as the degradation of that character, which furthermore is not at all motivated by the content of the play or the context of the production. So why reduce the black character to a racist cliché? And in what way does this contain a critical moment?

Contrary to the way in which the fragility of blackface is addressed in the production, the updating of the monkey cliché undoubtedly reveals a racist dimension. If we apply the American historian George M. Fredrickson's definition of racism as the absolutization of difference that serves as motive for the abuse of power, the following process seems to underlie racist practices: difference is identified, then retrospectively biologized in order to manifest this fundamental divide, which then serves as justification for discrimination and violence.<sup>6</sup> The *Unschuld* production displays this same violent structure of racist degradation, because the 'monkey business' is not shown as fragmentary at any point but is situated firmly within Thalheimer's directorial concepts as an overstated, albeit uncommented, use of a theatrical sign. The figure of Fadoul is stigmatized: as the ultimate other, characterized by an unbridgeable difference, it moves far away from the spectators – regardless of whether he is in blackface or whiteface.

Here, difference coincides with authenticity: the other is ascribed an animalistic authenticity that, according to this production, a white performer would never even be able to embody without creating the largest possible difference through recourse to a cliché. The hierarchy, not merely represented but *created* here, extends beyond the stage and unfolds its offensive potential there. This shows that the people responsible either counted on an audience composed as homogeneously of white members as the ensemble of the Deutsches Theater, thus assuming that this depiction would not significantly offend anyone, or, far worse, that the racist offensiveness towards a minority was clearly calculated and deemed inconsequential.

With a view to the constitution of the audience and the ensemble I will now introduce my third and final thesis, which I will present only briefly here.

---

<sup>6</sup> "My theory or conception of racism, therefore, has two components: *difference* and *power*. It originates from a mindset that regards 'them' as different from 'us' in ways that are permanent and unbridgeable. This sense of difference provides a motive or rationale for using our power advantage to treat the ethnoracial Other in ways that we would regard as cruel or unjust if applied to a member of our own group." George M. Fredrickson. *Racism. A Short History*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002. 9.

**Third Thesis: In order to break open the hierarchical structure of representation of otherness, theatres should simply presuppose audiences that are as heterogeneous as the German society and that wish to see representations on the stage that correspond to their multicultural and multiethnic realities off the stage.**

Instead of staging productions that assert a more or less unbridgeable difference through means of estrangement or that depict otherness by casting the other, and thus achieves some kind of pretense of authenticity, a heterogeneous ensemble in which roles would be assigned in an unconventional and colourblind way could offer entirely new possibilities: if only otherness would not be shown on German stages as more foreign than it is in the daily lives of most of the audience members, the self and the other could actually be painted in more subtle shades than in black and white.

--

Translated by Saskya Jain