

Theatre and social reality – is there a political theatre today?

By the end of the 20th century ideologies as such, distinct models of explanation and well-defined utopias and even the criteria of critique had become doubtful if not obsolete. This, of course, had and still has an impact on theatre and performance, namely on political theatre and performance. Theatre cannot any more, as it has done in the 60s and 70s, claim a place *outside* of society in order to criticize it and to create a distinct alternative vision – in the postmodern view of the world there is no such place outside the social, cultural, symbolic order. This means that, as Philip Auslander puts it, “postmodernist political art must position itself *within* postmodern culture, it must use the same representational means as all other cultural expression yet remain permanently suspicious of them” (Presence and Resistance, 23). Auslander follows Hal Foster in calling the performance art that operates from *within* the representational system “resistant performance” (a term that also Marvin Carlson among others adopts), in opposition to “transgressive performance”. Assuming that theatre, namely realistic theatre that is, works with the same representational means which are basic for political and social representation, hierarchies, power structures and so forth, it should always deconstruct its own representational means, if not, it reassures given structures instead of criticizing or subverting them.

The postmodern theatre of the 80s and 90s is characterized by deconstructing traditional representational categories such as presence, illusion, identity and so forth. And most of it actually does contest hierarchical structures, objectivities, perceiving conventions.

But, apart from feminist and queer performance, the outstanding representatives of postmodern theatre do not intervene in politics or in social questions in a more concrete manner.

What about today? There seems to be, at least in Germany, a growing interest in a more immediate access to political and social issues in theatre and performance. On the other hand, the society of spectacle we are living in seems to adopt or pocket every subversive impulse for its own purposes, integrating it into the next event or the next winter collection. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri put it, referring to political and economic power:

“The structures and the logic of power in the world of today are completely immune against the “freeing” weapons of the postmodern politics of difference [...] the postmodern politics of difference is not only inefficient concerning the practices of imperial governance, they may, on the contrary, even support it.” (Empire, 155)

On the other hand the globalized, capitalist society we are living in depends very much on the system of representation and theatricalization that nowadays is re-enacted to a large extent by the media – I am referring to what Guy Debord calls the society of spectacle. According to Debord the spectacle is characterized by the objectivation of everything – everything is turned into goods and images -, by the passivity of the spectators/citizens - it is a mode of perception, of passive consumption that is (reality becomes “a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation”, the spectacle is “the opposite of the dialog” he says), and it by definition conceals its own construction. This concealing of the construction is a crucial point, I believe, and the more so as this is a point where theatre may intervene in the theatricalization of social or political life: revealing the construction, mobilizing the spectator and thus questioning the basics of the spectacle.

In fact, contemporary German theatre seems constantly looking for new forms of theatricality that don't reproduce the mechanics of the spectacle, that don't represent reality in an illustrative or illusionary way and thus reaffirm the established. It deconstructs the means of the media, of conventional representation, identity, presence; it works on activating the perception of the audience, on mobilizing the gaze, pluralizing perspectives, challenging the responsibility of the spectator for what he or she sees.

Apart from this general tendency I want to have a closer look at some performances that reflect on contemporary social and political conditions in a more evident and direct way: Events and performances of Christoph Schlingensiefel, René Pollesch and Rimini Protokoll.

1. Christoph Schlingensief: The Production of Uncertainty

The spectacular events of Christoph Schlingensief exhibit the spectacular character of politics and the media on the threshold of theatre and political activism. Most of these events in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century take place in public urban space. Best known, I suppose, is his foundation of the political party “Chance 2000” during the election period 1998, called “Wahlkampfzirkus 1998” (circus of the election campaign). This campaign revealed the theatricality and spectacularity of “real” political campaigns, the more so as he actually did found this party and did run for the elections, so you could never be sure if he meant it or not, you had to decide by yourself, thus questioning your own understanding of politics and the difference between “real” politics and “performed” politics, a difference that in times of the media has been blurred.

In 1997, Schlingensief initiated a project in Hamburg, called “Passion impossible: 7 Tage Notruf für Deutschland. Eine Bahnhofsmision” (7 days emergency call for Germany. A Mission at/of the railway station” – alluding to a service helping old or disabled people at the station and to a missionary task in general). It is the first time (apart from *documenta X*) that Schlingensief leaves the theatre, after the opening night, and moves with his actors, friends, colleagues onto the street, in to public space: “let’s leave the theatre, let’s get out of here, out into life, into real life” is what he says. In this case, he moves for seven days into a former police post next to the Hamburger Schauspielhaus and the main station of Hamburg; a neighbourhood with lots of homeless people and junkies. Proclaiming “we want to help!” they install a soup kitchen and beds for the people from the street and an open stage where everyone who wants to may say whatever he or she wants to say. Apart from that, they start different actions on the street every day, for example a demonstration in the pedestrian area or to the city hall, calling upon the passers by to “make your own images! You are artists, make your own pictures!” These actions have the character of a parody and at the same time seem to be altogether earnest – you never know, you can never be sure.

The intervention in public space restructures this space: the pace of the passers by is interrupted, public space is disturbed and reconstituted as a space of the unknown and of communication or, at least, the possibility of communication, a function of public urban space that has been reduced very much in the last decades. But the strongest effect of these interventions is the disturbance they produce: disturbance of the norm, of the usual, the familiar, the known, of the categories of perception. The public is confronted with situations

which remain uncertain: you never know, is this theatre or is it reality, is this parody or is he serious about it? Thus, the production of uncertainty is the main means of disturbance and interference.

Another of Schlingensiefel's events in public urban space took place in Vienna in 2000.

In 2000, for the first time after the World War II, a party of the extreme right entered the Austrian parliament and even the government: Jörg Haider's FPÖ. Their election campaign was dominated by very outspoken xenophobia. As a reaction to this, Schlingensiefel created, in the course of the Wiener Festwochen, "Ausländer raus! Schlingensiefels Container" (Foreigners out!) in front of the opera house, in the center of Vienna. As a basic form, he used the means of "Big Brother", the at the time new European TV-format with just ordinary people shut in a container for weeks, being observed by TV-cameras all around the clock, and the TV-spectators having the possibility to select one of them each week and throw him or her out. So Schlingensiefel constructs a container in the public square and shuts in twelve asylum seekers (real asylum seekers, as he proclaims) for six days. They are observed all around the clock by six web-cams and the public is called upon to select – by phone or internet – two of them each day to be expelled from Austria: "Select your Foreigner! Select his number! Throw him out of the country! Each day, two of them are expelled!" is what you can read on posters and in the net. In the internet, you can moreover see photographs and the biographies of the 12 (some of them have two or even more biographies) and, of course, the life stream of the web-cams in the container. Around the container, there are posters put up with slogans of the election campaign of the FPÖ, such as "Stop the foreignness" or "Vienna must not become Chicago"; and there is the possibility to look at the foreigners through holes in the wall – a peep show.

The confinement of a certain ethnical group of people inside a container of course not only refers to Big Brother, but also to nazi-concentration-camps; the container is actually also called an "interactive concentration-camp"; the project was supposed to be called "First European week of concentration", which was changed into "Bitte liebt Österreich!".

So what Schlingensiefel works on here is at the same time the open or subsurface xenophobia of European societies and the mechanics of the media society, or, you may say, the overlapping of the two: the principles of surveillance, selection and exclusion or elimination.

It is an obvious political action he takes, he intervenes politically in public space, intervenes in national politics, and he involves the public directly, on the actual urban site as well as through the internet, he makes us his accomplices, thus questioning the responsibility of the spectators for what they see.

And again, the difference between art and politics, between fiction and reality is blurred: Some parts of the event clearly have a satirical character, but on the other hand you are never sure: Are they really asylum seekers? Where do they come from? Are they really being expelled from Austria? What has their representation – their given names, numbers, biographies – to do with themselves, with their personal reality?

And moreover: Should I intervene? Should I go up there and take the poster “Ausländer raus” down? Is this a good action, a reasonable provocation or does it reproduce what it intends to criticize?

Schlingensiefel says that he creates inconsistency, contradictions, because resistance is of no use any more – “Widersprüchlichkeit statt Widerstand”. But of course this inconsistency he produces is also a kind of resistance, a resistance from *within* the structures of the spectacle. He wants to destroy the clean image of Austria, he wants to create a “Bilderstörungsmaschine”, a machine that disturbs and disrupts the existing images and thus calls upon the spectator to scrutinize his own position as spectator – as spectator of this event and as spectator of xenophobia in every day life.

Actually this criticism of new nationalism and xenophobia by means of exhibition and exaggeration provoked the most diverse and tempered reactions and very lively discussions on the site of the container – public discussions on the street.

So it is an outspoken political critique, an intervention in public space, it exposes the mechanism of the media, and it challenges each one of us as spectator as to our personal voyeurism, our prejudices, judgements, and, above all, our responsibility for what we see, our responsibility as passive consumers of the spectacle.

2. René Pollesch: Text machine, disruption and the subject

The playwright and stage director René Pollesch is one of the best known and most successful representatives of contemporary German theatre and he is said to be the “last anti-capitalist” in theatre, or to have created an altogether new form of political theatre. His plays treat of the life in a globalized capitalist world that is purely reigned by economics. His figures try to deal with their position in a society that has become a market, assigning them only a place as producers of goods or as goods. The exploitation of the traditional capitalist system has yielded to new forms of exploitation: exploitation of the body as a sex object or as an interface for information, exploitation of the self by yourself, exploitation of your feelings, of

your mind, ideas, creativity, exploitation of your image and so forth. The exploitation means the objectivation of the self, the complete inclusion of the subject in economic patterns, its transformation into an object, a product.

Pollesch's plays in fact are very precise analyses of contemporary social, economic, urban and technological structures and changes and their impact on the subject. At the same time they are an analysis of the constitutive representational means of the society of media, especially TV, and of theatre.

He takes up the form and structure of daily soaps and transfers it into the theatre, at the same time adopting and exposing its functioning, the principle of the serial is basic for his theatre. He produced daily soaps, e.g. in Hamburg in 1999 ([www.slums](http://www.slums.com)), and also his productions in the Prater in Berlin during the last six years are organized like TV-series: the same setting for several plays in the course of one year, the personae always very much alike, always the same group of actors, the same costumes, the same way of acting, moving, speaking, and more or less always the same topics.

The base of his plays are theoretical texts about political, social and economical matters, taken from contemporary gender-, queer-, postcolonial-, visual-, urban- and political studies. Fragments of these texts are cut together with the linguistic material of everyday culture – sentences, slogans, words, expressions from TV, films, publicity, pop-songs, everyday language and so on.

This Montage results in an intertextual pattern which, in analogy to the other theatrical means, is characterized by a serial, repetitive structure: lots of syntactical and word-repetitions, anaphors, and so on. Pollesch creates an intertextual, de-personalized discourse that seems to reproduce and thus exposes the principles of industrial – serial and de-personalized, that is – production of modern society.

Although the centre of the texts is in a way the subject, its body, feelings, thoughts, Pollesch doesn't create psychological characters, on the contrary, he deconstructs the centrist subject by means of this linguistic montage, creating a machine of speech and voices that presents the contemporary subject as written by, constituted by the cultural texts and social, economic conditions.

The effect of the de-personalized, automated production is reinforced by the high speed the actors speak in and the – again - repetitive intonation pattern they all adopt.

Yet another aesthetic mean is the disruption: Abrupt and unmotivated changes in volume - all of a sudden they scream a few words, falling back to a normal level equally suddenly - and abrupt interruptions by another actor are characteristic; also the sudden screams when

someone has forgotten his or her text – all of a sudden they will all scream out loudly, then take up their line again. Spoken scenes are abruptly and without motivation as to the content interrupted by sudden, loud music or by music and movement or dancing.

This clip-like aesthetic, the trash-aesthetic of costumes and mask, the recycled dazzling surfaces, hysterical outbreaks, the lost or empty subjects, – Pollesch analyses the society of the spectacle by its own means, exposing its functioning and questioning the frame of theatre as representation.

At the same time, the textual and representational ‘machine’ is contrasted by the very subjects on stage, their bodies and voices. By the same means that he uses in order to deconstruct and denaturalise the mechanisms of contemporary society and media, Pollesch also insists on the human subject as at the same time *sub-ject* to the representational (economical etc.) order and as resistant to it. Because the high speed, the sudden screams, the disruptions, hysterical gestures, hoarse or lost voices are also a way of manifestation of the body of the subject as real, as desiring and as fragile and perishing.

3. Rimini Protokoll: Social reality on stage?

Yet another way of dealing with social reality in theatre is the documentary theatre of Rimini Protokoll. Rimini Protokoll is a group of free-lance theatre directors who have worked together for six years: Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel.

Basically what they do is to work with people who are not actors but who, in their professional or private life, have something to do with the topic Rimini Protokoll is working on in the respective play. They “take” these “experts of everyday life”, as they call them (“Experten”), directly from social reality, so to say, and put them on stage, thus transferring social reality directly on stage, into the context of theatre. In “Zeugen”, “witnesses” (Berlin 2004) for example, dealing with the theatricality of court and court cases, Rimini worked with advocates, jury men, observers of law suits. In “Sabonation” (Bruxelles 2004), which is about the bankruptcy of the Belgian state airline Sabena, they work with experts on this issue: former employers, now unemployed, pilots, stewardesses and stewards.

In “Dead Line “ (Hamburg 2003), which deals with death in our contemporary society, they work with people from the funeral services, with a preparator, a stonemason, a funeral musician. The people on stage represent the organization of Death in our society, included are

moreover interviews with a nurse from a hospice and a widower who had nursed his wife until her death, that is to say, personal experiences with dying.

An important point is, that these people are not used as extras or as mere proof of authenticity, but are taken seriously as experts for their lives and in a certain area – as much on stage as during rehearsal. The text, the whole performance is developed together with them and with the material they bring in – Haug, Kaegi, Wetzels research, investigate in their respective topic, take documentary material from different origins (like technical literature, interviews etc.), and put this material together with the knowledge, experiences, memories, ideas of the people they work with. What they don't do is to use the "experts of real life" as some kind of raw material to be transformed into art, they do create an aesthetic performance, but the theatrical means are mostly used to stage the experts as themselves, to concentrate on their stories and on their individual way of telling these stories, to expose the experts as individuals and to protect them at the same time. Reality is not used to create a new kind of theatre, but the theatrical means are used to approach reality in a new way.

Nevertheless, there is also a transformation going on, of course. Putting the reality "as such" on stage transforms this reality, not by dramatizing it, but the attention which is drawn onto this reality is different from the one in every day life – and thus the reality is transformed into something in between reality and theatre, thus blurring the difference between reality and theatre and questioning our categories of reality and fiction, of the real and the theatrical.

Furthermore, the reality is worked on by selecting, cutting and pasting elements, fragments, parts of this reality, thus structuring and contextualizing the material and by setting it on stage in a certain way, mainly by exposing basic theatrical mechanisms such as speaking to an audience. In short, reality is only to a certain extent brought "as such" on stage, it is at the same time theatricalised in a reduced and obvious way. Thus theatre is questioned as to its relation to reality and at the same time the theatricality of "real life", of the society of spectacle, of economic, social or political ongoings, is questioned. Moreover, the spectacularity of theatricality is confronted with the personal, subjective experiences and memories of the individual human being.

Their first work "Kreuzwortselsel Boxenstopp" (Frankfurt 2000) reflected on the connection of age and car racing and Rimini worked with four old ladies from the old people's home next to the theatre. The spoken texts were a mixture of information about Formula 1 and about the every day life of the ladies in the home for the elderly. Age, illness, physical decay, slowness,

femininity thus is confronted with the image of youth, speed, physical functionality, male virility. But these issues are not simply opposed to each other but rather interwoven, among others by means of a fictive narration about a group of racing drivers who, although already old, start for a last time in a race. Through this technique of interweaving different levels of authenticity and fiction the spectator is never certain of the actual status of the performance nor the performers: are they telling the truth? Did this really happen to them? Is this real? Rimini Protokoll thus questions our own categories of reality and fiction, theatricality and authenticity. At the same time they give a voice to those who in social reality are put aside, who in a society of youth, speed and functionality are excluded.

In our context a work from 2002 is especially interesting, it is called “Deutschland 2” and deals with the theatricalization of politics in contemporary society. On the 27th of June, starting at 9 o’clock in the morning and continuing until after midnight that same day, 200 citizens of Bonn (the former site of the German Bundestag, the parliament) speak out loudly the speeches which are at exactly the same time held by the politicians of the Bundestag in Berlin in Bonn. The speakers in Bonn are connected by headphones to the politicians in Berlin and try to speak as simultaneously as possible the speeches held in Berlin.

The relationship of politics is thus reversed: those normally represented by politicians now represent the politicians; those who normally are passive spectators of the spectacle of politics on TV are now active, those normally absent in this spectacle are now in the limelight. “Deutschland 2” thus not only is an ‘exercise in democracy’, but deals with the very fundamentals of representational democracy in a society of the media. It exposes what in every-day politics remains concealed: the act of representation itself, of political representation as well as mediated representation, which nowadays is basic to politics – there are no politics without the representation of politics.

Theatre in this case answers with De-Theatricalization to the theatricality of politics in the media: the task of speaking is executed with concentration and sobriety, some of the speakers try to perform a political speech in their gestures or manners, the means of political (self-) representation are thus exposed, and at the same time the means of theatrical representation as embodiment are questioned.

In 2005 Helgard Haug and Daniel Wetzlar worked - for the first time - with a dramatic text: Friedrich Schillers “Wallenstein”, which they staged for the Mannheimer Schillertage; (the performance was invited to the Theatertreffen in Berlin in 2006). But they don’t actually stage

the play, but look for equivalences to aspects or characters of the play in the world of today. What does this play have to do with ourselves? What about war experiences or war memories in our society? When do we or did we obey, when did we disobey? What do intrigues, the gaining or losing of power look like today?

Thus, Haug and Wetzl find a former candidate for mayor of Mannheim who lost all political power through an intrigue and, on the other hand, the director of the police in Weimar who had been kicked out of the “Volkspolizei” (the police of former eastern Germany) due to political reasons shortly before the “Wende” (reunification of Germany in 1989). They find two American veterans from the Vietnam War who are now activists in the anti-war movement in the US, a former German flak soldier (WW II), and a German soldier who was supposed to be part of the NATO troops in Kosovo but who failed in the preparation camp. They find, as a contemporary correspondent to Gräfin Terzky, the owner of an agency for illegitimate affairs who takes the phone calls on stage (“accessibility is my capital” she says), and an electrician who knows the whole of Schiller by heart and demonstrates how he uses to learn the poems, verses and odes at home.

Following the three parts of “Wallenstein”, Haug and Wetzl create a performance *along* “Wallenstein”, probably telling more about the significance of Wallenstein today than any ‘modernist’ staging of the play ever could. The experts on stage tell us their stories of power, war, betrayal, obedience, disobedience and revolt. About how the image of a politician is created – e.g. taking photographs with the children of his brothers and the dog of the neighbour in order to create the image of a family man – and how it is destroyed again by means of intrigue. Or about how the simulation of a military mission can be so realistic that an experienced soldier freaks out. Or about how poetry can be life-saving. One of the veterans tells us the story of his mission in Vietnam, about an especially brutal commander who in the end gets killed by his own soldiers – an act of human disobedience in an inhuman war, at the limits of what can be represented.

Thus, the stories that are told on stage reveal to us personal memories of very different people – different from one another and different from ourselves -, existential turning points in life, demonstrate the blurring of reality and fiction in real life and question representation as to its limits. We are confronted with stories from an unmediated life that at the same time is displayed as being itself theatrical – and in the gaps that this sincerity opens, we may get a glimpse on those fragments of the self and of reality that are not covered up by representation.

What is important is that Haug and Wetzel concentrate on the “experts” and on what they have to say – they give them time and space to tell their stories, reducing the other theatrical means in order to open up this space for every single one. Reality thus is not illustrated or reproduced, but exposed by the protagonists themselves of this reality. The spectator does not only learn new things about reality, but he or she may see reality in a new way.

4. Conclusion

The given examples of contemporary German theatre do work politically by intervening in one way or the other into social and political reality and simultaneously enacting what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls “politics of perception”: mobilizing and questioning the position of the spectator and his responsibility as a witness for what he sees.

Jean Luc Godard once said that what enters the equation is not a “political film” but “a film that is made in a political way”. Relating this to theatre we may argue that what’s relevant is to make theatre in a political way, and this means in fact questioning the very symbolic structures that underlie social orders - a critical theatre must also be self-critical.

And “making theatre in a political way” in my point of view also refers to the working process. A strictly authoritarian structure won’t allow you to question authoritarian structures in “real life”, because you are re-enacting them in the same moment you are intending to criticize them. The active and creative part of the actors in the production process of Pollesch or Rimini Protokoll is basic for the content of the plays and for the effect of the performance itself - they would never attain the standing and presence on stage they do attain if they were mere executors. And this standing, presence, conviction (whatever you may call it) they transmit is fundamental for the quality of the performances and for their critical impact.

Schlingensiefel, Pollesch, Rimini Protokoll – among others – do find new ways of relating to social reality by theatrical means, questioning conventional representation and perception patterns, questioning the position of the spectator and offering new views on reality. Thus, their performances actually do work as “Bilderstörungsmaschinen” – they disturb the existing images, the way they are produced and received, and open up possibilities of “making your own images” in a different way.

Literature:

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