

Tiltrædelsesforelæsning

Re-Membering the Demos

– Dramaturgies of Facts and Affects in Contemporary Performance



Àlex Serrano and Pau Palacios © PASQUAL GORRIZ

Re-Membering the Demos

Dramaturgies of Facts and Affects in Contemporary Performance

Af Peter M. Boenisch

Theatre in Post-Democratic Times

Two decades into the twenty-first century, the research and the study of dramaturgy, and likewise every theatre maker, confront some grand challenges: What is the place and the potential of dramaturgy – and, by extension, of theatre at large – in our contemporary digital, globalised and ever more populist and anti-democratic world?¹ Perhaps Swiss theatre-maker Milo Rau, the former investigative journalist who founded his company *International Institute of Political Murder* in 2007 and in 2018 became Artistic Director of NT Ghent, gave the most succinct response. The first of the ten commandments of his much discussed *Ghent manifesto*, which he published on starting his tenure at Ghent, reads: “Theatre is not just about portraying the world anymore. It’s about changing it.” (NT Gent 2018). Rau’s 2016 production *Five Easy Pieces*, which was shown at the Aarhus ILLT festival in May 2019, outlines his corresponding dramaturgic position which he himself describes

1) This text is based on my inaugural lecture as Professor of Dramaturgy at Aarhus University, given at the Department of Dramaturgy and Musicology on 25 June 2019. I suppose that to ask such big questions is what you do on such an occasion. But these precisely are the questions that have preoccupied me in my research for some time now – and they appear to become ever more pertinent for the future of our subject as well as for theatre as such.

as the “poetics of a globally conceived theatre of humanity” (cf. Rau 2019). *Five Easy Pieces* evolves from Rau’s earlier re-enactment pieces such as *The Last Days of the Ceausescus* (2009) and *Hate Radio* (2011), the latter a piece about the instigation of the Rwanda genocide through hate preachers on local radio stations. The piece tackles the Belgian national trauma of child murderer Marc Dutroux, who, despite a former conviction for abduction and rape, killed further victims in the mid-1990s. It is performed by seven children aged 8 to 13, and one adult director-interlocutor-figure. They play Dutroux’s father, parents of the victims, and a police investigator, offering monologues based on original interviews conducted by Rau and his team. In this retelling of the actual events, the children – whose number and age corresponds to Dutroux’s victims – give presence and hence remember those who have died and disappeared. At the same time, the performance is structured according to a clever meta-theatrical dramaturgy that in itself maps – like in most of Rau’s pieces – onto our unbalanced, undone contemporary global world order, where Rau usually emphasises aspects of neoliberal neo-colonialism. Not only does he discuss Dutroux’s upbringing in the then Belgian colony of Congo, but the children’s journey in the performance – from the initial casting scene to the finale – also conveys the path into submission and conformity with the adult world that our children are subjected to in our society. Rather than a monstrous exception, the rape and murder of the children thus becomes a cruel metaphor for how our neoliberal and neo-colonial late capitalist world order operates.²

Rau’s carefully constructed, semi-documentary re-presentations of traumatic, disavowed events in our society stand paradigmatically for a dramaturgic politics of remembering, which uses the theatre stage to revisit collective traumata – not only of a singular case such as the Dutroux-murders, but also of our neoliberal world order at large. His pieces allow for the representation (and hence allow us to remember) what and whom we have forgotten – or, rather, whom and what we usually prefer to forget. To this effect, his productions rely on the same affective economy that characterises the constant manipulation of present-day audiences and ‘media consumers’. Fully exploiting and amplifying the performative (vocal, physical, expressive) dimensions of performance, Rau’s dramaturgy effectively enacts the very inequality of systemic power relations that the stories reveal. Yet, at the same time, having ‘cute children’ enact the Dutroux’ murders pushes the affective buttons of our spectatorial engagement with the performance, denying the conventional normative, critical position opposite the piece and its propositions. From us, as spectators, Rau’s pieces hence remember the victims and the ‘real’ traumatic events narrated on stage, but they also demand that we re-member our relation to what we see performed on stage, not least our complicity and our responsibility, as democratic citizen.

Such a complex spectatorial relation that the permanent presence of live video in Rau’s productions additionally triggers and exposes, is characteristic for the dramaturgic politics of facts and affects in contemporary performance I want to interrogate here: a dramaturgy that responds to the challenges of our contemporary world by ‘re-membering the demos’, as I proposed in the title of this lecture. With this, I allude to Wendy Brown’s important study *Undoing the Demos*, published a year ahead of the Brexit vote and the election of Trump into the White House (Brown 2015). Applying Michel Foucault’s critical analysis of biopolitics, Brown traced, as her subtitle suggested, “neoliberalism’s stealth revolution”. Focusing above all on a number of court cases and decisions, she demonstrated how the neoliberal agenda has reshaped individual subjectivity and agency, which were once the foundations of democracy. Now, they conform to the terms of a

2) For a more detailed discussion, see Boenisch 2019.

strict market logic, conceiving of “human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only and everywhere as *homo economicus*.” (2015, 31). This ideologically formed mind-set has eroded the traditional democratic *homo politicus*, who had his and her roots in enlightenment thought, but also in Christianity and the values of the ancient Greek republic. Broadly speaking, the core value of liberty, alongside a deliberative ethics of moral reflection that was tied to the values of community and society at large, have all given way to an imperative of economisation that characterises the late, financial capitalism of the present: growth, competition, and the enhancement of capital – understood in the widest sense, following Bourdieu, far beyond money and bank accounts – have become sole concerns (ibid., 26).

Together with their absolute privilege of the singular individual, they have hence ‘undone the demos’ that used to be the foundation of democratic society. More recently, German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz further investigated this comprehensive undoing of what Brown describes as ‘the fiber and future of democracy’ (ibid. 9), in his study *Society of Singularities* (Reckwitz 2017). We should note that this neoliberal undoing of the demos has actually not resulted in turning us into secluded singular monads, but much rather involves us in a permanent competition against each other, resulting in a wide sociocultural, intersectional rift that is affectively highly charged. As Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa-Santos has argued, globalisation has furthered the paradigmatic aspect of Western modernity in establishing what he terms “abyssal lines” between guarded spaces of belonging and unbelonging, part-taking and exclusion, which cannot be crossed without sanction (de Sousa Santos 2014). Democracy’s class-based society, in its modern formation, had been based on the constitutive contradiction between ‘capital’ and labourers, from the Marxian ‘proletariat’ in the factories to the postmodern ‘cognitariat’ engaged in service industries in front of screens and computers. The global world order of neoliberal capitalism is meanwhile grounded in such a socio-political abyss that splits every ‘demos’ and every community. A recent large-scale investigation by Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB) offers further sociological insight into this divide as it manifests itself within our Western societies between what the authors term ‘cosmopolitical’ and ‘communitarian’ positions (De Wilde e.a. 2019). This aporia today threatens the very foundations of Western liberal, humanist democracy in a way that perhaps even Brown did not foresee only a few years ago. No serious theatre-making, nor any study and research of theatre, media and dramaturgies, can ignore these sociocultural parameters.

In precisely this contemporary post-bourgeois, and potentially post-democratic context, Rau’s *Ghent Manifesto* stands as an important document reflecting on, and offering a response to the role of the theatre institution within such a paradigmatic change. I now want to turn to some further theatre performances that I see outlining a vision of theatre as a vital institution to ‘re-member’ the demos, hence to bring together again this community of free, common citizen, in a way that echoes Judith Butler’s suggestive outline of the power of assembly, published at the same time as Wendy Brown’s book (Butler 2015). A dramaturgic politics of re-membering hence works on two levels: On the one hand, we ought to understand the ‘re-membering’ very literally as theatre’s capacity to bring the members of the community together again – as a spectating community, in other words: as a ‘public’, a notion we might contrast with Reckwitz’s diagnosis of singularisation. On the other hand, such a ‘public community’ of individual members is also always imagined, and requires imaginary and symbolic foundations, hence shared stories and narratives, as we know from Benedict Anderson as much as from Lacan and Žižek and more recently Yuval Noah Harari: Therefore, the actual meaning of the word to remember, in its reference to memory, to ‘not forgetting’, comes into play as well.

The cultural function of theatre as an institution in our Western societies always has been the transmission of cultural memory, and the shaping of traditions through stories and the relations that they open up. This makes theatre appear as conservative to some, in a negative way, often in a common juxtaposition to ‘performance’. This view perceives theatre as perpetuating, above all, the Western, white and male elite hegemony – through its canon (the works that you should know in order to engage with theatre), its practices and conventions (not least as ‘art’ that seems to presuppose a certain entrance qualification, quite different from going to the cinema or to the football pitch), and finally also with regards to its institutions and their symbolic value (one should think of the temples of a secular cult called culture, most manifest perhaps in the architecture of theatre buildings, and their prominent place within the space of the city). Against this position, the theatre productions I shall turn to now demonstrate theatre’s capacity to also make us reflect – through their dramaturgies of re-remembering – on how and what theatre ought to remember in order to re-member the demos.

Re-remembering the Present: Beyond the Silence of the Abyss

Like Rau’s *Five Easy Pieces*, the 2018 production *Paisajes para no colorear* (‘Landscapes, not to be coloured’) by the Chilean company La Re-Sentida involves a cohort of young performers. Yet, a striking contrast reveals a peculiar blind spot in Rau’s sweeping critique – that is the central position of Rau himself. His dramaturgic intervention and ingenuity as critical voice of our conscience are outright hypostases, again entirely corresponding to the prevailing neoliberal economy of singularised affective attention, yet in this instance without critical deconstruction. In La Re-Sentida’s production, the force and figure of director Marco Layera almost disappeared in the work’s formal structure. Quite tellingly, in a postshow discussion I attended in Berlin, Layera said only a few sentences, leaving the stage almost entirely to his nine female performers aged 13 to 17.³ Layera and his company, which the former university lecturer in philosophy founded in 2008, have over recent years become a regular presence at European festivals. Already eight years before Rau’s *Ghent manifesto*, the company had produced a play called *Trying to make a play that will change the world*, which discussed precisely some of the big questions that underpin this lecture, too. Influenced as much by Brecht, the documentary theatre tradition, and new European aesthetics of re-enactment by artists such as Rimini Protokoll and Milo Rau, the programmatically named La Re-Sentida had, in previous productions, tackled in their peculiar style of ‘reality-fiction’ of clearly fabricated pseudo-re-enactments topics relating especially to the Chilean Pinochet dictatorship, but also to the romantic glorification of toppled Allende. Their previous pieces were, as a result, controversially received in Chile, and caused even some vocal protest and rejection among Chilean expat communities when shown in Europe.

Their new work, *Paisajes para no colorear*, was inspired by workshops that the company undertook in disprivileged areas of Santiago, where they worked with teenagers in youth centres. Here, they met young girls who told their stories about mobbing and bullying, about sexual abuse and being perceived primarily as sex objects, about suicide, brutal force in youth care homes, and enforced marriage, about being let down by their mothers and older sisters, their lesbian coming out, the violent suppression within a rigorously Catholic country, and their unreturned love for their fathers who ignore them, but also stories about rape and being raped aged 10 and then being forced to carry out the child, as abortion is illegal. Layera eventually gave their voices, their stories and their

3) As part of the 2019 “FIND”-festival at Schaubühne Berlin, on 6 April 2019.

memories the stage. The text was generated from the recorded memories of the 140 girls who were originally part of these workshops, while the production is performed by a fluctuating group of nine performers from a group of around 20 who La Re-Sentida had picked from the workshop participants. For the audiences, it remains unclear whether the narrated stories are those of the girl who speaks them – except for one case where the name of a teenager is used whose case of being suffocated by guards in a youth home had made press headlines; a moment that is also re-enacted in the performance. In the final scene of the production, the screen projection at the back of the stage shows a list of names of Chilean teenage girls who have been murdered, raped, who committed suicide, or who remain disappeared, thereby remembering those who are usually forgotten and erased.

This piece was a scream of these young girls, and very much resonated with the current atmosphere in which young people such as Greta Thunberg prominently take political initiative against the establishment. The dramaturgy of *Paisajes para no colorear* combined a hard-hitting politics of fact with a powerful affective force. In contrast to Rau's *Five Easy Piece*, the performers here did not just act within an authorial dramaturgic frame, but they owned the story and the authority over the piece's dramaturgy; they represented their stories, on their own terms. This difference resulted, most of all, from the piece's non-hierarchical dramaturgy that allowed ownership and an empowerment to speak out within the theatrical frame of representation – all the more so since it so clearly contrasted with the lack of any such power these girls were experiencing in their daily lives. The performance then ended with the words: "Thanks for listening. No adult before has listened to us for 90 minutes." After the performance I saw at Berlin, at this point, the audience almost collectively broke out in tears, and people jumped from their seats to give the nine young performers standing ovations, which in Germany is not something that usually happens. In return, the performers also were moved to tears.

The contrast to Rau's production also brings us back to the question of remembering. *Five Easy Pieces*, similar to most of Rau's productions, confronted the audience with a disavowed memory or cultural trauma – the Dutroux case here, and in other pieces homophobic murders, persisting neofascism and neo-colonialism, or periods of civil war and genocides. Instead of the 'cultural memory' activated and passed on in the production of canonical classics by Shakespeare, Goethe or Ibsen, the attention shifts – right at the central cultural institution of the theatre stage – to the underside of the official high-brow culture, to silenced memories and absences. While a similar politics of memory was in place in earlier pieces by La Re-Sentida as well, where they playfully confronted recent Chilean history while also, like Rau, displaying a highly self-referential meta-theatrical level, *Paisajes para no colorear* shifted from silenced memories of the past to the silenced stories of the present. These silences directly result from the neoliberal 'undoing' of the demos: these are stories and voices which we do not seem to hear – because we do not get to hear them, usually, but also because we do not want to hear them. Despite the omnipresence of social and other digital media, over the past decades, the new era of globalisation has multiplied such enforced silences on a global dimension. In fact, the contemporary global neoliberal ideology reveals its most powerful force not where it aggressively distorts and manipulates as in populism and fake news, but where it obfuscates, silences and creates absences: where it refuses to see and to listen, therefore withdrawing the right to be present, to present, and to be (re)presented within what Peter Sloterdijk aptly termed the "glass cupola" of global capital (Sloterdijk 2013), confining one to the role of the passive, voice-less and name-less spectator from the outside.

Contemporary performance may have the capacity to 're-member the demos' by remembering



PAISAJES PARA NO COLOREAR
ES DE CUATRO AÑOS INAGUADA
MIRA ANTES DE ESCUCHAR
PORQUE EL PAPAJO SEPARA
LUNA Y SOL DE ELLOS

those who are thus prevented from taking part (and from taking their part) in our present world order. It may thereby shift what Jacques Rancière, in an important extension of Foucault's biopolitical perspective, has described as the aesthetico-political 'partition of the sensible' (Rancière 2004). It may re-distribute the belonging to an assembled community, and re-member what, whom, and how we remember: theatre may thus become a place that reflects on our 'sensible', in this Rancièrian sense, on what it usually excludes, while also extending opportunities to 'par(t)-take'. It is important, though, to note that the 'abyss' of partition no longer separates – as in the 20th century ideas of 'First', 'Second' and 'Third' Worlds – the Global North from the South. By 'undoing the demos' everywhere, globalisation has brought such seemingly impenetrable frontiers (whether as deep abyss or transparent glass cupola) directly within our communities that have lost their common ground, as the example of Marco Layera clearly demonstrates: the division is no longer simply between Germany, Denmark, Western Europe on the one side, and Latin America, Chile, on the other. Rather, even within the city of Santiago, there is a very tightly guarded frontier that would usually have prevented Layera from ever communicating with these young girls, while himself being celebrated at important theatre festival in the North.

We can therefore note a fundamental consequence for theatre as an agent of re-membering: remembering no longer is necessarily about the past, about bringing 'our' past into the present, against the horizon of a future to come. Much rather, it is about remembering those present without representation on the other side of the abyss. It is about crossing borders and connecting spaces, about remembering those negated on the other side of the glass wall – and equally those who are absent, who can no longer be put on stage in person and be given a voice, because the 'undoing' has resulted in their vanishing. Against such an abyss of being silenced and excluded from the 'sensible', *Paisajes para no colorear* performs an act of un-forgetting that is, in a temporal sense, rather immediate. As philosopher of art Peter Osborne has argued, the paradigm of the contemporary, of what he describes as the 'postconceptual' period after the dominance of postmodernism, is characterised by a shift from a modern and post-modern politics of time (generally predicated on the idea of the forward move to a usually better future), to a politics of space within a shared present – of which we here find a clear instance, with the guarded spaces, borders, and frontiers (Osborne 2013).

Theatral Autopsies of the Nameless

Where Milo Rau and La Re-Sentida remembered the traces of obliterated stories and of eradicated lives through a performative dramaturgy, another, complementing pair of theatre productions will show us different approaches to remembering the absent: the poetic theatricality that re-presents the vanished as ghosts, and the forensic research into bodies (and blatant gaps) of evidence. *Amarillo*, by the Mexican artist collective Teatro Línea de Sombra, founded in 1993 by Jorge Vargas, who previously studied with Etienne Decroux and the Odin Teatret in Europe, confronts the Western, sentimental longing for the exotic – symbolised by Tony Christie's 1971 eponymous pop tune – with the gruesome reality of those who have paid with their lives for their attempts to find their way to Amarillo, as they tried to cross what has become known as the 'wall of shame' between Mexico and the US. The short 60-minute piece draws on interviews, letters, testimonies and remains of those who have gone on this journey in pursuit of their 'American dream' of El Dorado – some surviving, most of them disappearing without a trace. The performance also gives a voice to those who have stayed behind in Mexico: the wives and loved ones, who perhaps received a short letter, a phone call, but rarely saw those who had left again, and who are even more rarely remembered.

At the back of the stage, we see a huge impenetrable wall, in front of which there are simple objects that refugees use on their trail – water canisters, torch lights, backpacks, trainers, cans of tuna, pain killer tablets. In the course of the performance, more and more sand pours onto the stage from punctured plastic bags that are hanging, like ripped out hearts from above, and covers the objects. At the beginning, a man, the actor Raúl Mendoza, gets up from between these objects, and introduces himself as ‘Juan – or Pedro, Fernando, Manuel, Hugo, Javier, José, Luis’, as he runs and leaps ever more breathlessly against the wall, again and again. This Everyman from the American South confronts the audience, as the house lights remain on: “I look at the North, yet the North doesn’t look at me – What are you looking at if I’m nobody?” In a gesture that’s repeated throughout the performance, his hands trace his body with gestures that perform its eradication – hanging, the slitting of the throat, shooting. Meanwhile, camera projections of his face at the back wall superimpose, thus blurring his individuality into multiplied layers of the many. Meanwhile, at the side of the stage, we see bundles of possessions that are tied together, in rows of shelves like in a police evidence storage. The four female performers slowly take out these bundles of possessions from the shelves, then carefully untie them, read out the date and place noted, and use the clothes, shoes and other objects to give those unknown ‘John and Jane Does’ whom they once belonged to, a body on stage, for a brief moment, as they start dialogues with Mendoza, who stands in for the vanished loved one.

Teatro Línea de Sombra thus use an associative, non-linear dramaturgy of collage that combines storytelling, music, the intriguing yet impenetrable live poetry throat chanting by Jesús Cuevas, and projections of news clips, documentary footage and facts; again, we see lists of names of those who have vanished, here by the means of the uncountable photocopied missing persons notices with their grainy photographs of faces that are put up in the streets by desperate friends and relatives. Most memorably, the piece employs physical theatre and object theatre: the sand becomes the ground for painting, water bottles and torch lights become elements of a sculptural memorial. Through these theatrical forms,⁴ the company invents a dramaturgic mode that is able to remember the vanished bodies, and to create images that tell, remember and hold their eradicated stories. In a visceral, poetic, and affective way, the production is able to convey the monstrosity, or at least gesture towards the monstrosity that lies behind these forgotten memories. Aptly, *Amarillo* recites *Death*, a poem by the late Harold Pinter, which he included in his 2005 Nobel Prize lecture, hinting at a cognate politics of facts and affects that is also an ethics of re-membling (Pinter 2005). As Teatro Línea de Sombra perform fragments of memories of personal identities, and evoke hints of individuality and individual fates, they never reduce the story to the autobiographical. Instead, they underline that these are the erased memories of an uncountable number of nameless, desperate refugees who have vanished. For Jorge Vargas, *Amarillo* was the starting point to shape a dramaturgic approach he calls the “archaeological autopsy” of a community, which he applied since in a number of works for which he researched and worked with local communities, about issues such as migration but also drug-related murders.

Amarillo seems to confront and engage with, as a direct response, the current US president’s verbose agenda of a border wall to shield the US from Mexican refugees. Yet, the piece in fact was already created back in 2009, and has since toured to numerous festivals around the world. The

4) Following the German approach of theatricality studies (*Theatralitätsforschung*) as pioneered by the late Rudolf Münz and Helmar Schramm, I maintain the terminological distinction between a fake and deceptive ‘theatricality’, and the ‘theatricality’ generated by the dynamics of movement, meaning, and spectatorial affective perception (see Boenisch 2015, Ch. 2).

fact that it was not this theatre production, but only the loud shouted threats from the man in the White House that have brought the issue eventually into our field of vision and perception so that there now has been a new European tour of the production in 2019, tells as much about the marginality of theatre in our present global mediated circles of attention, as it demonstrates the power of the dominant politics of erasure. As a response, it reinforces the imperative for such a theatre of re-memberance to exist, and to insist on this kind of theatre work. From a European perspective, there is, however, no need to point the finger to the US president's wall obsession. The European Continent is, rather conveniently for its politicians, guarded by the natural 'wall' of the Mediterranean. It is this abyssal border which the final example tackles. In place of the poetic multimedial theatricality evoked in the dramaturgy of Teatro Línea de Sombra's *Amarillo*, the Catalan Agrupación Señor Serrano uses a dramaturgy that separates out, on the one hand, a journalistic fact-based criticality based on research, and on the other hand, a more metaphoric, emotional, and affective engagement of the audience. Their resulting 2016 piece *Birdie* shifts in a space in-between. The trio around Alex Serrano, which was founded in 2006 and in 2015 received the Silver Lion at the Venice Biennale, commented on this production:

[N]owadays the situation regarding refugees and migrant people is so desperate that it seems it requires a direct, resolute, assertive or even virile approach. But this is exactly what we want to avoid. (Agrupación Señor Serrano 2016, 3).

In order to address the audience's critical sensibility as well as their emotional intelligence, they thus felt the need to avoid a straightforward affective appeal to the audience's anger, their shame and guilt – "guilt works great, it is so satisfying", the company says, "all those feelings you can find in the pit of the stomach" (ibid.). At the same time, the pure documentary presentations of facts, statistics, and speeches just as much "were making us feel like we were doing the right thing; we were feeling the right thing; we were thinking the right thing" (ibid.) – which was comforting but of course the wrong thing.

The original prompt for *Birdie* came from an image taken in 2014 in the Spanish exclave of Melilla in North Africa, on the Moroccan coast. It was taken by a local activist photographer, José Palazón, and subsequently distributed by Reuters, eventually winning several awards for news journalism (cf. Kassam 2014). The photograph shows a group of well-dressed locals playing golf in Melilla, while in the background, a number of African migrants try to climb the fence that separates the European exclave territory from 'proper' Africa. A police officer on a ladder, on the right hand side of the fence, tries to get them back down. For their production, Agrupación Señor Serrano rebuilt, on a table, a three-dimensional scale model of this picture, similar to a model railway. Using live video, image editing and object theatre, their production analysed minute details of the image, such as the angle of the flying golf ball – was it hit targeting the migrants on the fence? They researched through bird-tracking software about the species of birds that can be seen in the image, and their migration patterns; they collated information about the grass and the trees, and their history. The spectators also got to see the social media profiles of the golf players, which gave an insight into their daily lives. The brand of the sport shoes they were wearing, as well as the mobile phone used by the border police guard in the image, were all equally identified, catalogued and dissected. Airplane radar records allowed to identify the plane traffic in the sky above Melilla, crossing Africa and Europe, at the precise moment the image was taken. These minute, exactly documented facts kept reminding the audience that there is, in fact, a border-less freedom – both of nature, the migration of birds, plants and trees, and equally a freedom of trade and capital, where

goods and commodities circulate freely between continents, as do tourists and business travellers with great ease. Furthermore, this dramaturgic approach demonstrated that there is an ubiquity of memories, records, and documents available, most of it directly by an easy search on the internet and its ever growing archive of such 'big data'. Thus it was possible to research many details, for instance about the policeman on the fence – his identity, career, shift patterns, his private life, statements he made in media interviews. However, there was no trace to be found about the guy with the red sweater hoodie on the fence – he and the other depicted migrants could not be 're-membered', they again were evidence of the power of erasure, undoing and ignoring. It was impossible to find out what had become of them; they did not seem to exist.

As it continues, *Birdie* then shifts from such forensic factual reconstruction to a juxtaposed metaphoric re-presentation of the event, a re-imagination that exploited in particular the associative link of the golf birdie and Hitchcock's movie *Birds*. In some edited interview sections with the classic director that were shown, Hitchcock not only gave a good lesson in image analysis but also described the audience's irrational fear of the birds – something that seemed just as well to express today's widespread fear of the alleged 'flood' of migrants. *Birdie* culminated, eventually, with a tableau of some 1,000 toy animals, forming a refugee trail towards a fenced border, while there was also a trail of travelling commodities, goods, arms and military equipment for whom the border barriers opened. The image evoked the contemporary version, and also perversion, of the biblical story of Noah's ark, yet here was no saving ship, but the abyss of a golf hole.

Autonomous art and/as the response-ability of dramaturgy

These four productions offer us four different, equally pertinent answers to the big questions I raised at the beginning. They propose dramaturgies for a theatre that is a place where a community of individuals, a demos, comes together and assembles in order to 're-member'. Of course, theatre in itself will not be able to succeed where politicians and we as people fail – in overcoming the social, economic, and political abyss of our time. I am doubtful about theatre that entirely defines its mission through what Shannon Jackson has influentially described as 'social work', in its crudest instrumental sense (Jackson 2011). Much rather, we should use all our power to defend the legacy of enlightenment culture in its true spirit of Western citizenship whose roots date back to ancient Greece, and Greek theatre: that is the absolute autonomy of theatre as *mythos*, as a medium for telling and retelling stories – nowadays no longer within a ritualistic-religious sphere, but within the secular realm of a humanist 'culture', of education and *Bildung*. Autonomy means that art, and theatre, can, should, and must remain the perhaps one remaining space that is to be kept free from the all-encompassing utilitarian rationality and functionality of a biopolitical governmentalism that perpetuates the neoliberal ideology of 'undoing'.

The notion of autonomy, however, would be greatly misunderstood if interpreted as a shutting off from reality, as celebration of wilful ignorance and of an aesthetic ivory tower. On the contrary, it is precisely the autonomy of art that is the prerequisite for our civic responsibility towards the demos, following Hans-Thies Lehmann's still highly pertinent reflections of 'response-ability' as duty as well as an ability to respond (Lehmann 2006, 185f.). As Slavoj Žižek similarly emphasized, once more drawing on Sloterdijk's metaphor:

"Our ethico-political duty is not just to become aware of the reality outside our cupola, but to fully assume our co-responsibility for the horrors outside it." (2017, 5). Theatre assumes this civic duty of our global present precisely through its original means of telling and showing, and thereby offering for our experience and understanding – the obverse, thus, of ignorance. On the very basis

of its autonomy, theatre, by means of its live and living performativity, and the commonality of its aesthetic experience in the here and now, is a most powerful laboratory to cultivate and share a common experience of the world around us through the stories that are being told. They connect us through our senses, as much as our minds, with existential realities that are not our own, yet which are our duty to acknowledge and assume responsibility for – and thereby go much further than feeling mere empathy for the ‘other’, as the bourgeois logic of ‘identification’ would suggest.

This sensory and experiential understanding allows us to imagine a certain relation with these others as one of us – whether it is the girls from Santiago, or the immigrants on the fences of our borders. Even in an age of fake news and an omnipresent ‘affective pollution’, theatre will thus employ a dramaturgy of facts as well as affects, not leaving this powerful and effective tool to the hands of the hegemonic neoliberal monopoly. Of course we must be constantly aware that as a domain of affect and experience theatre is also highly attractive for the neoliberal agenda, where experience is one more thing to be sold and turned into profit. It is therefore even more important for our theatre institutions as well as for theatre pedagogues and researchers to offer shared theatrical experiences that reach beyond immediate ‘singular’ gratification – experiences that may instead prove uncomfortable, but will remain unforgettable sensory experiences that relate us, as spectators, to the ‘common’ and not least to those beyond the abyss, thereby beginning to make us re-member and eventually undo the undoing of the demos. An autonomous dramaturgy deals with counter-hegemonic knowledge, with a ‘dissensus’ and a different ‘partition of the sensible’, as Rancière would express it. Such a shift in perception triggered by art and theatre may then become the ground for change in the sphere of politics. Theatre’s work on the semiotic and phenomenological and hence essentially dramaturgic level, may become the first step to intervene in the abstract, anonymous power of our global economy of medial attention and undoing.

This is then the prime aim of theatre as civic function of culture: to offer a place to think and to re-member, which above all means to think differently, creatively, and critically, in order to challenge and advance the common of society. No wonder that present neo-totalitarian governments from Turkey to Brazil and even the UK start by closing down and shutting away creative arts education. The stories embodied on our stages synthesise facts, fictions and affects, and this constitutive ambivalent, dialectic nature of performance, lays the ground for prompting reflection – about us, and about ‘the other us’ whom we encounter in the shared performed memory space of the theatre, shared beyond the abyss with the otherwise depersonalised, silenced others. Through this power of relationality theatre has the capacity to re-member the community of the demos of our global world, in its full complexity and contradictory nature. As a laboratory for the re-membering of the demos, theatre may bring forth different memories, and hence an alternative ‘mythos’ – a different epistemology, as it is exemplarily called for by de Sousa Santos, and perhaps even glimpses of a different ideology. As US-American director Anne Bogart reminds us, “Those who can formulate the stories that make the world understandable will redefine the experience of those who live in it.” (Bogart 2014, 5) As such, theatre may just be the tool we urgently need to foster again a global solidarity across borders, to re-constitute a common demos, beyond the seemingly inexorable horizon of pure singularity that sees itself as relieved from any commonality, and from any response-ability. For the dramaturgs of our global 21st century present, there is thus no excuse to attempt anything less.

Peter M. Boenisch

originally from Munich/Germany, is the new Professor of Dramaturgy at Aarhus University. Between 2003 and 2018, he worked in the UK. His main research areas are theatre direction and the political dimensions of dramaturgy.

References

- Agrupación Señor Serrano, 2016. *Birdie*. Press dossier. Barcelona.
- Boenisch, Peter M., 2015. *Directing Scenes and Senses: The thinking of Regie*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- , 2019. The hopeless courage of confronting contemporary realities: Milo Rau's 'globally conceived theatre of humanity', in Peter Eckersall and Helena Grehan, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 243-246.
- Bogart, Anne, 2014. *What's the Story: Essays about art, theater and storytelling*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Brown, Wendy, 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Butler, Judith, 2015. *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- De Wilde, Pieter, e.a., eds, 2019. *The Struggle over Borders: A Political Sociology of Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, Shannon, 2011. *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Kassam, Ashifa, 2014. 'African migrants look down on white-clad golfers in viral photo'. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/23/sp-african-migrants-look-down-on-white-clad-golfers-in-viral-photo> (access 14 August 2019)
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies, 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- NT Gent, 2018. *Ghent Manifesto*, <https://www.ntgent.be/en/manifest> (access 31 July 2019)
- Osborne, Peter, 2013. *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. London and New York: Verso.
- Pinter, Harold, 2005. *Nobel Lecture*, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2005/pinter/25621-harold-pinter-nobel-lecture-2005/> (access 1 August 2019)
- Rancière, Jacques, 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London and New York: Continuum.
- Rau, Milo, 2019. *Das geschichtliche Gefühl: Wege zu einem globalen Realismus* (Saarbrücker Poetikdozentur für Dramatik). Berlin: Alexander Verlag.
- Reckwitz, Andreas, 2017. *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten: Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Sloterdijk, Peter, 2013. *In the world interior of capital: Towards a philosophical theory of globalization*. Trans. Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: Polity.
- Sousa Santos, Boaventura de, 2014. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Žižek, Slavoj, 2017. *The courage of hopelessness: Chronicles of a year of acting dangerously*. London: Allen Lane.