



Article

Contemporary Art, Representation and Remediation

Gold Rush. Photo: Søren Meisner

Contemporary Art, Representation and Remediation

By Erik Exe Christoffersen

There are some features of FIX&FOXY's work that suggest that it may be meaningful to talk about contemporary art as something other than simply theatre.

First, in many cases the company has taken its starting point in films: from *Pretty Woman*, *The Gold Rush*, *Triumph of the Will*, *The Great Feast*, *Twin Peaks*, *Rocky* to *The Deer Hunter*.

Second, many productions involve non-professionals, for instance prostitutes or young people, thereby extending the concept of the actor. This also means that the director's craftsmanship and leadership, as well as the spectator reception itself, take on other technical and ethical dimensions in relation to the meaning of the work.

Third, many of the performances use video, which makes the performances cross-medial.

Fourth, many of the performances involve the spectators, which affects the staging as a work and makes the spectator relationship itself part of the work. There are several performances that are in a borderland between workshop and theatre, such as *Ungdom* (Youth) or *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will).

Fifth, there is an internationalisation inspired by German and British theatre. The company also aims to sell concepts and performances abroad that deal with international issues. This is a new form of theatre network, so to speak.

Sixth, and lastly, FIX&FOXY interacts with other media, the identity of the actors and cultural expressions, expanding the possibilities of theatre and its relations to the contemporary. The act of representation itself and forms of representation and their effects and techniques are continuously an artistic enquiry. One of the explanations for this is that FIX&FOXY actively relates to globalisation, which in simple terms means that one must constantly actively relate to from where one looks at the world, through which eyes and glasses.

To put it simply: FIX&FOXY is contemporary art that combines art forms and (tentatively) adopts a self-conscious position and relationship to the contemporary.

In this article I try to see a connection between these different features that I consider characteristic of contemporary art.

There is a historical development in this, which can make it quite complex because it is a matter of slow changes. The arts of theatre, music, visual arts, literature are obviously different in the way they mediate a given material. The creation of form and meaning has become an active practice. In the 1960s, an interest emerges in how the concept of art can have an impact on the individual art forms and, in particular, the relationship and influence between art forms. For example, between theatre and visual arts or between theatre and music. These influences have led to new hybrids, such as installation theatre, visual theatre, theatre concert and remediated theatre, which "translate" one medium into another. This development also means that we can talk about theatre and non-theatre that "play" with the fact that the performers can represent themselves, as opposed to the actor who represents a fictional character or figure.

Focusing on the Mediatisation of Theatre

The disintegration of traditions and cultural identities by globalisation means that contemporary art must consciously consider its own “voice” and position, as well as its tools and effects in relation to the situation of the audience. This is what is known as conceptualisation. Different materials, media, spaces and actors are involved and the relationship between art and non-art is itself a boundary that is difficult to define. Something that is obviously not art is remediated as art. It is a “method” that goes back to the *ready-made* scandal linked to Marcel Duchamp: he selected certain objects that he called art. How was it possible to transform, for instance, a snow shovel or a urinal into art and have these objects exhibited in an art museum? This actually only happened in the late 1950s, some 30–40 years after they had been labelled *art* by Duchamp.

Remediation is slightly different from a traditional staging of a dramatic work. The term originates from Bolter and Grusin (1999), and means that old media such as record player, cassette recorder, slide and film projector, etc. are taken over or overpainted by new digital media. They distinguish between two remediation strategies. *Immediacy* utilises transparency, and the spectators see through the medium as if it were not there at all and immerse themselves in the manufactured reality. This creates an immediate closeness to the fictional world. *Hypermediacy*, on the other hand, creates an awareness of the medium, where the media screen draws attention to itself and allows the spectators to experience the reality and workings of the medium. Both strategies create a relationship (identification or distance) between sender and receiver. My point is that FIX&FOXY utilises both strategies, creating both intimacy and media reflexivity. This establishes an emotional and bodily experience of the fiction and at the same time an awareness of the remediation’s construction of the act of representation (see also Jeppe Kristensen’s article on *Love Theater*).

Remediation moves the dramaturgical elements from one medium to another, and this process becomes part of the new narrative. This creates a transparency in the presentation as with palimpsest. The concept of remediation is related to staging, and both concepts indicate that an everyday occurrence is given a new form and effect. The point of talking about mediation instead of staging is to emphasise that remediation has a duality and alternation between intimacy and media reflexivity.

When prostitutes take the lead role in *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.) without any preparation, a version is created that is characterised by the reality of the performers and at the same time by the fiction as part of our consciousness. Ethical questions follow: What and which actors can be staged? Are there any limitations that need to be taken into account? Who ultimately represents whom? FIX&FOXY has resolved this ethical challenge in different ways that touch on contemporary discussions about the relationship between identity, person and role.

Pretty Woman Ltd.

Pretty Woman A/S (Pretty Woman Ltd., 2008) was performed in containers at Halmtorvet in Copenhagen, as a remediation of the film *Pretty Woman* (1990) starring Richard Gere and Julia Roberts. The play followed the script and the role of the rich man was played by Swedish actor Anders Mossling, while the prostitute, Vivian, was played by a street prostitute hired on the street before each performance and staged through an earpiece in relation to lines and movements. The prostitute was paid for one hour of the entrance fee, equivalent to the street price. The risk of not knowing who would be participating was part of the concept’s reality effect.

The stage was very intimate and small, with a view of the stage through a glass frame. Exactly one hour was allotted, which was videotaped and shown on TV-screens above in front of the audience. The piece was thus video, theatre and a version of the original film. The performance was

conditional on a series of coincidences and possibilities: the fictional layer was recreated through a staging that, through wireless ear microphones, created a delay in the lines and an artificiality between actor and role. The spectator could not forget that this was a remediation, created here and now, presented and commented on. There were certain omissions in relation to the film and specific changes, for instance the male protagonist is on a bicycle and not in a car. The female actor also demonstrated a lack of status, fragility and daring. The entire live recording was carefully planned in terms of camera angle, editing and zoom, and approximately resembled the original film.

The remediation of the plot meant that the performance simultaneously represented the identity of the performers and engaged the spectators in reflection through direct address to the audience.

It is obvious to see the effect of presence created by remediation in the context of what Charles Taylor (2002) has called the *ethics of authenticity*. He argues that this has been a prominent feature of staging over the last 50 years. The authentic is that which is consistent with itself and is what it says it is. The *ethics of authenticity* strives to be true to its own inner “voice” and seeks to realise personal potential in the best possible way. This can be found particularly in the creative industry of the cultural sector, in art and in self-help books with the title: *Find yourself*. The paradox is that authenticity is always a remediation and an effect which means that reality becomes “reality”.

The actor's qualities of presence, the interaction between the spectators' expectations and the actual event created an interaction between *Pretty Woman Ltd.* and the surrounding environment and not least the cultural public, where the performance generated considerable debate. Some politicians and critics called the performance “social pornography” (Pernille Fram, SF's spokesperson on culture from The Socialist People Party), and Hans Hauge, from the conservative daily newspaper *Jyllandsposten* criticised that the Danish Arts Council had supported the performance with DKK 987500 (132.515. Euro). The critic Per Theil lamented the lack of professional actors (*Politiken* 30 October 2008). The prostitutes were in fact unknown Swedish actors, claimed Lars Wredstrøm in the daily *Børsen* (3 November 2008). The directors maintained that the Swede in question, who played the role at the premiere, was in fact a prostitute, but had played the role before (Tue Biering in *Politiken*, 8 November 2008). The Arts Council's Committee for Performing Arts defended the production as an interesting experiment that “moves outside the framework of established theatre and meets the women in their own environment” (www.kunst.dk/kunstradet/). The playwright Christian Lollike emphasised that “the media coverage is part of the work, just like the process” (*Politiken* 8. November 2008).¹

The performance was neither a romanticisation of the prostitutes nor a process of emancipation for the participants. The ethical dilemma of the original, between the prostitute and the societal power controlled by money was recreated, but the reality of the actor differed from the established role image (Julia Roberts). *Pretty Woman Ltd.* staged prostitution and theatre as different modes of observation. After the performance, the spectators went home, while the prostitute went back to work on the street.

The transfer from the film medium to the theatre medium requires a certain amount of effort on the part of the participants, and remediation must have a necessity that concerns both the film that is recreated and the action itself, which is a form of rethinking and reworking. Mediatization makes the world visible, and every mediatization involves choices and emphasises new selections and rejections. A particular mediation creates meaning as a particular communicative relation with

1) All translations from sources not previously translated into English are by Marianne Ølholm.

the spectators. Theatricality and authenticity are effects presented side by side in an enactment that tests art against non-art. These are stagings that can be provocative, create surprise, generate sensory and bodily experiences and confront other affective forms. The distance and difference between the original model and the performance act becomes an utterance orientated towards the effect and not a “content”. One could say that it is the process and the concept itself that becomes a point of debate.

This conceptualisation extends the medium of theatre so that the relation of meaning becomes an exchange and a bodily and cultural encounter in a specific space (containers on Halmtorvet, Kbh.). Theatre becomes a mediatisation of this particular space and precarious encounter.

Dynasty FO

The American series *Dynasty* from 1981-1989 hit the world's TV screens, and *Dollars FO* (*Dynasty FO*, 2009) was a remediation of the TV-series, which was recreated in the Faroe Islands with local volunteers, cast on the same day as the filming. There was no fixed script, and events and locations emerged during filming. In preparation, the actors were questioned about their private lives, they sang and talked about their aspirations, talents, hobbies, etc. Fragments of this were written into the script.



Dynasty FO

The difference between the original and the local version was evident. In 14 days, 21 Faroese participated in 7 episodes of *Dynasty*, in 7 different locations, broadcasted via the internet on its own website and simultaneously shown in the evenings in the homes of the participants with friends and family. The social significance for the participants was emphasised by the party and celebrations that followed.

*“The Faroe Islands are largely a closed society, but when we talk about *Dynasty*, it opens up narratives that would otherwise be difficult to tell. The dream is to create an X-ray of Faroese society through something as trivial as a soap opera. And the actors’ own stories will be woven into the episodes. In this way, the cast will see themselves in new roles in each other’s homes. And we hope to create new encounters that wouldn’t otherwise happen. Their lives will be completely changed when they have been in an episode like this. Just like it happens in all reality programmes.”* (Tue Biering, Politiken, 2 August 2009)

In *Dynasty FO*, there were a number of breaks with classical film language codes that normally create coherence in fictional time and space: organisation of foreground and background, relations in space, entrance and exit. The real locations were visible: a private residence, a shop with signs, a football field, natural areas, etc.

The remediation showed the local identity of the actors and their pleasure in participating in the staging. The acting was deliberately inadequately rehearsed. The actors’ obvious mistakes when they correct themselves, accidentally look into the camera etc. were not edited out. In the performance space, notes were placed with crosses indicating where the actors should stand when saying their lines, which were brief and in English with a local accent. Dialogues between characters were often without eye contact and clearly more oriented towards the reality of the recording than the reality of the fiction.

There were many breaches of illusion: scenographic elements such as cardboard signs, a cardboard glass, a cardboard horse with added real sound etc. and the landscapes were sometimes filmed photographs. The performers wore small name-tags indicating their roles, and photographs of the original characters in *Dynasty* were shown. Costumes and wigs were only partially covering and private clothes were visible, as were camera men and microphones. Sometimes interviewers questioned the cast members about the role.

The random incidents, mistakes, misunderstandings, etc. created a *vulnerability* that emphasises an element of risk for the actors, who were used and challenged in relation to their secret dreams. This created a transparency between the fiction and the participants, making their personalities visible. It is this authenticity effect that is interesting in the context of the series’ ironising of the so-called *Method Acting* and the idea of becoming a star for a night.

Triumph of the Will

FIX&FOXY’s *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will, 2012) was a remediation of Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph des Willens* from 1935, commissioned by Adolf Hitler about the five-day Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg in 1934. It is a propaganda film that is only partly documentary. The opening shot shows an aeroplane in the sky, an image of the “saviour” coming to earth in a monumental staging. The film follows the people’s accommodation in tents, preparation for the “initiation” and the mass spectacles with religious overtones, drawing the participants into the congress, which ends with the total surrender to the will and triumph of the *Führer*. The masses are like an aesthetically sensuous and anonymous subject. The film is original in its use of camera angles, editing and staging through lighting and a graphic use of space and crowds.

In *Triumph of the Will*, the spectators sit on wooden benches, and at one end a miniature model city, a small tent camp and other settings have been built. An actor (Anders Mossling) portrays the film’s characters and at the same time acts as a kind of director and narrator. He asks the audience to participate in a re-mediation and directs them around so that they can be recorded on video,

which is subsequently shown on a large screen. The spectators are extras, “playing” the 700,000 Nazis at the congress, and at the same time they are spectators of the video film, which is shot and shown scene by scene. The spectators see themselves staged and projected onto a large screen.

The actor, Anders Mossling, confesses that he is not a Nazi, but that he finds the film beautiful and fascinating and is looking forward to making this remake. Dressed in brown overalls, he explains: “We’re going to get down on our knees and wave and smile.” Camera positions are strictly defined, and the audience is kindly but firmly ordered to perform simple actions. “It’s not dangerous, don’t play, just wave!” You cannot help but smile, and a discrepancy arises between what is happening in the room, where the spectators are smiling at the situation, and the edited material on the screen, which shows an enthusiastic reception of Hitler.

Later, the spectators are instructed to sit around a campfire in a tent camp, eat soup and wash dishes. They carry spades and flags and take part in ceremonies, learn to march in rubber boots and to perform the Nazi salute. Three members of the audience are dressed in costumes and filmed against the backdrop of a green screen, and then everything is projected onto the screen with a background from the film.

The Ethical Choice

As the performance progresses, a cheerful atmosphere develops among the spectators as a result of the community and the tasks. “Some people don’t want to participate, and that’s fine,” says Mossling. There is no compulsion, and they sit a little off to the side. Most of them want to, but slowly a suspicion creeps in. Are you being seduced into participating in something you should not be involved in? Can you be part of a remediation and at the same time distance yourself from *Triumph des Willens*?

The actor interacts with the audience. The audience interact with each other in the space where they are filmed and edited into the context of the film. There is an interaction between the original film, which we either know or imagine, and the remake, which for good reasons can only be a poor reconstruction that nevertheless astonishes by its resemblance. Finally, there is an interaction between the theatre and video media and between the spatial and the filmic surface of the projection. The quality of the performance lies in the fact that these different forms of interaction are not entirely “innocent” and disrupt the spectator’s sensory perception and intellectual and ethical reflection on the Nazi cultural heritage.

The effect of the performance lies in the space between film and theatre, where the spectators are split between being participants and observers. The original film is certainly disturbing, but the remediation is a process that creates intimacy and community, where the context of the film partially fades into the background. At the same time, the process is staged so that the manipulation is demonstrated more and more prominently. It ends with the film’s total endorsement and the Hitler salute: first we have to walk in step and put our right hand on the shoulder of the person in front. We have to keep our arm raised, create some distance and lift our legs as we walk, and there it is! It’s both ridiculous and alarmingly disturbing.

The camera crew always knows exactly where and how to film. Every single shot is planned, with camera positions and angle, cropping, distance, format, lighting, foreground/background ratio, etc. This instruction is normally hidden, but here it is visible, and the audience sees the tricks and effects that create the filmic result. At the same time, the spectators are “inside” the theatre’s performance space, where they do not have to “act”, but where the filming utilises their presence. The result is seen almost simultaneously with the filming, creating a feedback loop between the

performance and the filming. The remediation's identification with the film's "masses" is a way of creating a bodily understanding of the mass effect of the five-day Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg in 1934.

A Doll's House as Home Theatre

FIX&FOXY's *Et Dukkehjem* (A Doll's House, 2014) was based on Henrik Ibsen's drama (1879). This is not a remediation of a film, but of Ibsen's theatre and drama form, which originally had no audience participation or authorial direction. Ibsen's theatre convention uses the fourth wall and pretends that the spectators are not present. FIX&FOXY breaks this convention by staging the performance in private homes with non-professional actors in the leading roles of Helmer and Nora, and with the audience sitting around the actors. They are without any prior instruction or preparation. You can say that the private home and the actors are remediated in the performance. It is the technique of remediation applied to a traditional dramatic material.

We are standing on Store Møllevvej on Amager, Kbh. in front of a new housing complex. A woman in the Royal Danish Theatre's uniform and logo checks off the 30-35 spectators, and the actors Troels Thorsen, Thomas Hwan and Kitt Maiken Mortensen from the theatre introduce themselves, shake hands and introduce the evening's event. Ulla and Klaus have agreed to take part without knowing in what capacity. The contract stipulates that their apartment should be able to accommodate a certain number of spectators, and the furniture and decor are the theatrical setting. The whole concept requires trust, a good atmosphere and a certain amount of risk due to the unpredictable elements.

The actors lead the spectators up to the apartment with large windows, good views, art on the walls, beautifully designed lamps and furniture and two balconies. The spectators are placed in the corner sofa, on the floor and wherever there is space. The couple sits on the sofa and the actors question them. He is a banker working in risk assessment and she is a creative designer with her own clothing company. She has a slight penchant for chocolate and sweets. Unlike Helmer and Nora, they have no children.

The staging was created on the fly by the three actors with a script in hand, and they played the other roles in the drama: Dr Rank, Mrs. Linde and Solicitor Krogstad. The actors did not know the couple or the apartment and started by asking questions related to Nora's secrets in the text. "Do you have secrets from your husband?" The Nora actor replied: "I keep some chocolate in a drawer."

The actors outline the story in *A Doll's House* and stage the married couple, who repeat individual lines and actions. In Ibsen's drama, there is a conflict between Nora and Helmer. They are both hiding something from each other, she confides in Mrs. Linde. After they were married, Helmer fell ill. Nora borrowed money from lawyer Krogstad and signed in her father's name so that they could travel to Italy and Helmer could be cured of the illness that the doctors said he must not know about. He recovered and they have lived happily, although Nora knows that Helmer is strongly opposed to borrowing money and taking on debt. Krogstad now threatens to reveal Nora's forged signature. Nora tries to conceal the story to the end, and tries to enlist the help of the friend of the family Dr Rank, but he reveals to Nora that he is in love with her and therefore she cannot avail herself of his help. Krogstad and Mrs. Linde decide that the past can no longer be concealed. Nora ends up leaving her husband and children to find herself. This is an ethical dilemma. Is it right or wrong for her to leave the children? Ibsen at one point made an ending where he allowed Nora to return but regretted it and forbade the use of this version. As Ibsen said, he did not know



whether Nora became insane, an artist, a nude dancer in a circus or returned home. It was up to the audience to discuss the possibilities.

During the staging in the flat, there is music, and a few actions are played in slow motion. Other actions take place between the spectators, who are moved around during the performance. The performance is continually interrupted, and questions are asked about the couple's private life to suggest certain similarities and differences to Helmer and Nora. Similarly, a certain duality is also created between the actors and their roles. Actor Thomas Hwan, who plays Dr Rank, emphasises that Ulla is talented and that they have a good rapport. He enjoys acting with her and looks forward to the scene where she *exposes* herself to him. However, Kitt Maiken Mortensen asks him to tone down his enthusiasm, even though Rank is in love with Nora.

The two leads slowly immerse themselves in the fictional universe. The professional actors improvise, direct, rearrange and lead the couple and the audience around the real space of the apartment. The performance constantly slides between fiction and the real situation, just as we as spectators are both "flies on the wall" and drawn into the fiction: for example, we have to hide like children at the end of Act 1, when Nora plays hide-and-seek with her own children. It seems quite comical when 35 adults try to hide behind cushions or behind a curtain or a sofa. At the beginning of Act 3, we are at a party with Nora and Helmer. It is the masked ball, where everyone is dancing, drinking beer, and playing drunk up and down the stairwell. Back in the apartment we get to the showdown.

Helmer rejects Nora when the truth comes out, and she is deeply hurt by his reaction. It is a confrontation between bourgeois law and order and the law of love. Later, when Krogstad regrets and returns the promissory note, Helmer wants to forgive her, but for Nora they are now strangers to each other. The play ends with Nora choosing to leave the "doll's house" to investigate reality, and she slams the door provocatively.

Ulla and Klaus, who have been together for 18 years, are happy with their home and the parrot squawking in the background. Could they imagine a secret being revealed that would have those consequences? At first glance, they do not think so, but it creates a kind of contemplation and reflection for the two of them and for the spectators. The final scene becomes touching as it is played by a couple who in no way want to end up where Nora and Helmer end up.

The performance establishes an aesthetic space of reflection that is different from that of classical theatre, where there is a separation between the stage and the audience. The spectators are part of the stage and are momentarily drawn into the fictional space but are also observers of the protagonists' identification and the actors' direction. It becomes a demonstration of how the disaster of the fiction is confronted with their reality. What if the Nora performer actually walked out? The dramatic conflict is mirrored in the actual relationship, where differences and similarities become the performance's field of tension.

Between Fiction and Reality

After the performance, we talk about the performance with other spectators, and Klaus shows his tame parrot, which he holds in his hand like a little lark and which is happy to be stroked. One of the actors tells us that this is the third home they are playing in, and that they have met very different couples. The dramatic structure itself is fixed, but there are big differences in how the interaction between the persons-in-characters and the spectators and the space takes place. One spectator remarks that it was great, for example, to hear the parrot in the cage squawk at just the right moment when Nora is considering whether suicide is the only solution. Another says that

dancing down the stairs in the hallway was quite a challenge. It was funny when a man in the street answered back to Klaus, who was calling after Nora out of the window.

Ibsen's opposition between the woman and the man, who follow two different laws, is clearly more or less dissolved, and the binary opposition between family and society does not have the moral weight. This also means that Nora's exit from her husband and children becomes neither an evil nor a good act. The intensity of the performance lies in the interference between fiction and reality.

The Ethical Dimension: Good vs. Evil

FIX & FOXY has been criticised for exploiting vulnerable performers and placing them on a stage where they are exposed and observed. They have also been accused of conflating social and artistic issues. There has been a dispute about morality and ethics, which are themselves concepts that are perpetually under debate. FIX & FOXY has been part of this discussion, as this anthology shows, but it is interesting to see how this complex issue is given artistic expression in the performance *Det gode vs. Det onde* (Good vs. Evil), Aalborg Theatre (2020)². The performance can be said to be a reflection on the ethics of theatre as an act of representation, written and staged by Tue Biering.

What is the difference between ethics and morality? Morals are the norms of *good*, truthful behaviour and a universal and unchanging value. But the question is who can or should define morality in a world that seems to be in constant change and influenced by different forces? This is, of course, a question that also relates to whether there is any overarching control at all. Ethics is an investigation of existing norms, but without necessarily judging what is good or bad. Ethics is therefore a dynamic and changing social construct that is negotiable and dependent on the contemporary world and one's own position. *Good vs. Evil* is a reflection on the binary of good/evil itself, which seems limiting.

The three actors are dressed in white costumes. They are super flexible and take turns playing the same role: *Hans*, who is illustrated by a wig that they can take turns wearing. In addition, a handful of extras play multiple roles and functions. The actors seem rather unsure of the concept – they are all pale and their bodies are displayed as “real and imperfect”, sometimes even completely undressed. They balance between being persons and roles. Their judgement of good or evil relate to how they feel. The character of *Hans* and the actors are slightly ashamed of being neither balanced nor perfect. They belong to the so-called *privileged white class*.

Hans has grown up with images of good white heroes and bloodthirsty Indians, as well as Germans, Russians, blacks, Mexicans and other *bad guys*. Good animals are kittens and small dogs, while snakes, spiders are evil. However, black cats can be evil, as can dolphins, which appear good but can actually be devious, and therefore are more evil than the otherwise evil sharks. These are exceptions that complicate binarity.

The performance begins with a *pure* white stage, which is slowly invaded by real and fictional characters and a chaos of objects: a sofa, a tent, a chair, a tree. A goat appears, the good Bilbo Baggins from *Lord of the Rings*, the *evil* Darth Vader from *Star Wars*, and good children quote Greta Thunberg. A “good” spectator is given the task of intervening and beating the “evil” actors with a plastic club each time one of them says the famous word *complex*. So the playwright may also be

2) *Good vs. Evil* is written and directed by Tue Biering, but is not a FIX&FOXY production. Cast: Marie Knudsen Fogh, Ena Spottag and Jacob Moth-Poulsen. Scenographer: Nicolaj Spangaa. Assistant director: Jara El Baz.

“evil”. The spectator is later thrown out because it is “bloody annoying” to be interrupted like that in the long run. Is it her or the actors who are “evil”? It turns out that the “spectator” is a staged extra who returns in the final applause as “good”. The white-clad actors are showered with all sorts of things – blood, vomit, semen – while the empty stage is gradually smashed as the actors, in a fit of rage, inadvertently kick a hole in the back wall or throw a wooden cross, causing a hole in the stage floor whereupon the devil himself appears and sits down nicely on a sofa with Bilbo Baggins and Darth Vader.

Good and evil is a polar dramaturgy known from fairy tales, myths, popular films, political programmes, etc. But the complex reality emerging on stage has disrupted the performance, so that no one can identify good and evil anymore. What about our mobile phone? Is it “good or evil”? What about the climate? Is nature “good or evil”? The questions keep piling up. The same goes for the basic situation: the actors are on stage and the spectators are in their seats. Is this in itself a story of “good” versus “evil”? Are the spectators being abused when some of them are pulled up on stage? Are the actors “evil or good” because they are acting in the theatre? Or are the spectators the good/evil ones?

Biering’s *Good vs. Evil* stages the conflict so that it becomes not just an abstract moral question, but an ethical investigation of dramaturgy, representation and the actors’ relationship to themselves, and to what and who the actors can and may represent to the spectators. The classic conflict-based dramaturgy is often referred to as the *good story*, and it is obvious that it functions as a demarcating factor in relation to other dramaturgies as for instance the irrational and rambling speech of the madman. The good story can simply be characterised by the fact that the conflict is both recognisable and highlights new perspectives, and that it creates a turnaround and new insight in an elementary dramaturgy where the ending is a form of purification (catharsis). But the *good dramaturgy* devised by Aristotle is, in Plato’s view, *evil* and a kind of illusion that distracts attention from the essential, which is the world of ideas beyond the material surface of the world. In *Good vs. Evil*, we are approaching a dramatic breakdown. As one of the actors says:

“I have doubts about my role in this performance – I have doubts about what I am sensing. Yes, that’s something I have to say”, she continues, “I’m just saying what’s in the script. Now I’m getting it all mixed up and can’t remember my line. I apologise.”

Is that last line also in the script? Several times along the way, the actor stops and gets cues from the prompter, but is this also part of the dramaturgy of the performance? Sometimes it leads to absurdities: Can you say that the male gender is evil? Will it require a sex change to become good? Are all adults evil, as the Greta character says: *“Shame on you! You have ruined my childhood!”*

We are caught in the narratives, and reality cannot be grasped directly, but only through (seemingly evil or good) representations that can be put together and create effects, meanings and realities. You can smash the stage, as the avant-garde did, and believe that it serves the good, but does it really?

The Complex Dramaturgy

The performers are actors, a few spectators and stagehands who intervene on stage without any direct connection to the main narrative. The staging is a network of simultaneous actions. An epic dramaturgy is used in which the direction is pronounced: *He says* and then the line. The role is only rudimentarily represented with a wig, a costume and a little make-up. In a scene where the

three actors are supposed to represent black people, it becomes clear that not all expressions are equally good (or bad) and some forms are offensive, such as *blackfacing* where a white actor is made up black. *Good vs Evil* articulates the moral distinction between good and evil, while an ethical reflection shows the impossibility of distinguishing between good and evil. There are poles that can be twisted and turned and seen from both sides, and it is “annoyingly complex” – almost evil. The actors long for some kind of simplicity and unity, but they cannot escape the complexity. They sit silently and thoughtfully while the stagehands clear the stage, wash the floor and fix the wall. They do not seem to find a solution. One snaps his fingers and everything goes dark, without the spectators knowing whether it is good or evil.

Dark Noon

Dark Noon (2019) has an enunciation that continues this problem of representation, speaking in multiple “voices” and from different positions. On a narrative level, it tells the story of how the Wild West was conquered, but at the same time, it includes other narratives that revolve around the cultural discussion of identity and representation.

Many people have grown up with Westerns and a classic representation between good and evil, heroes and villains. In *Dark Noon*, South African actors portray the classic scenes from their own experience: the immigration, the encounter with the natives, the emergence of a civilisation where lawlessness reigns, the creation of the railroad, gold digging dreams, the establishment of the city and the rise of slavery. All but one of them are actors with dark skin who are made up white to play the emigrants from Europe, and it is their narrative and view of the “conquest of the West” with famine in Europe in the early 1800s that sparked the emigration to “God’s country”.

FIX & FOXY’s staging is a remediation of a Western, reminiscent of a film I saw in the mid-sixties: *How the West Was Won* (1962) – an epic Western that follows a family for generations on their journey west. It is an epic narrative with sections on the struggle for survival with Native Americans on the prairie, civil war, and the lawless rampage to build the railroad.

Dark Noon uses video presentation, changing narrators, a dynamic set design that becomes a city, direct audience response, and the ongoing involvement of a handful of spectators. Role changes are used with simple devices such as wigs, hats and costume parts or make-up without total transformation with partial masks, just as houses are transparent as obvious backdrops. The staging is fully cross-medial and includes singing, dancing, mime and theatricalised fights and shootings. All at high speed, with the performers are practically running around the large stage with fantastic vigorous energy.

When spectators enter the stage, the presentation becomes even more complicated, because the video projection clearly affects several of the spectators, who become unsure of which medium or fiction they are part of. Are they acting for the camera or for the spectators? Perception changes from the opening scenes, where the spectators have a panoramic view of the action, to the confusing cityscape at the end.

The white makeup becomes an indirect commentary on *blackfacing*, which is used by non-black people to portray a caricature of a black person. In the United States, blacks were portrayed by white actors as stupid, happy and morally corrupt, and blacks were best served by being under the guidance of whites. In the US, *blackfacing* declined in popularity in the 1950s and 1960s and was generally considered disrespectful and racist by the beginning of the 21st century. With the conquest of the West from a South African perspective, a fundamental contradiction between an African and Western view of history is formed. Tue Biering explains:

“When we make theatre, 99.9 percent of everything we do is representation. We have an actor who represents something else, may be a different age, a different gender, a different being. And I’ve always been fascinated by the fact that when I see myself portrayed through another human being, I can see myself more clearly. Because I am represented by someone else.” (Simon Løber Roliggaard, Politiken, interview, 9 May 2019)

Biering has done several performances where the performers tell their own stories, but there is also power in telling the stories of *others*.

“I’ve always been in the role of the privileged, so now I wanted to give that privilege to these actors who have always been asked to tell their own dark story to people like me. Now they have to tell my story and the audience’s story and at the same time bring their own heritage and their own reflections into that story (...) white face paint is a choice I made. But skin colour is a very basic starting point for almost all segregation, so it is, all things considered, interesting to approach it in this way. Also from their point of view.” (Ibid)

The act of representation becomes polyphonic as the players take on different roles from the Western universe and are made up white and at the same time South African. The simultaneous actions on stage, where the actors talk about their backgrounds, contributes to disorienting our sense of representation because we lose track of things and lose the central perspective. The scene is viewed polycentrically.

Overpainting and Remediation

What is characteristic of FIX&FOXY’s remediation is a kind of overpainting. A familiar narrative constitutes an utterance, and the remediation becomes a new utterance, with a certain transparency to the underlying original. The spectators can reflect on the difference between the original and the present version, where the actors and performance spaces become part of the new dramaturgy of the remediation.

This means that these are utterances of multiple artistic “voices”, each of which is ignorant of the other’s “speech”. They are organised into a whole, but do not necessarily speak the same language or say the same thing. One could call it a polyphony of voices: it could be chaos, but the different utterances are interwoven in a staging that creates a unity that allows the individual utterances to contradict each other or to be parallel. A recognisability and a dramaturgical polyphony emerge. Thus it becomes clear that given modes of observation intervene in each other’s narrative with unexpected perspectives.

I would therefore argue that FIX&FOXY’s dramaturgy contains several simultaneous representational effects. *First*, there are referential reality effects that refer to the reality that is re-presented. *Second*: There are references to the organisation and management of the artistic and creative process. *Third*: There are references to the artist as a kind of institution with a given status and authority that expresses itself in the work. *Fourth*: Works create and are part of a poetics of contemporary art that contains a specific address and relation to the spectators and combines different media (cf. Kyndrup, 2008, p. 83).

In continuation of these considerations about remediation, we can summarise FIX&FOXY’s poetics, and at the same time point to some general conditions for the theatrical medium and contemporary art that can be theoretically and practically useful.

Singularisation and Poetics

FIX&FOXY belongs to a theatrical generation that reinvents the theatrical situation. All facets of theatrical production can apparently be rethought, and there is no single method; on the contrary, each work is singular in that it creates its own codes, rules and relations that are made visible as an act of representation: Who tells what, about whom and to whom? Who is the sender and who is the receiver and what is the medium? This means that the relationship between sender and receiver is incorporated as part of the dramaturgy of the work, where the spectators are actually co-creators. The so-called reception theory, with scholars such as Umberto Eco and Wolfgang Iser, introduced concepts such as indeterminacy and empty spaces in the dynamic open dramaturgy, which allows the spectators to create independent meaning. This approach has implications for modes of address, and it becomes possible to work cross-aesthetically and interweave different media, as for example the theatre's use of video as a live recording that is projected in the room, allowing for *close up* in the theatre.

Apparently, there are no universal, conventional or normative devices, and each staging creates its own framework, rules, spaces and situations.

This conceptual approach means that the director chooses the identity and behaviour of the actors, media, texts, music and spectator positions, etc. In this way, each staging becomes unique by virtue of the chosen materials, narratives and artifice. This is how FIX&FOXY can be considered *contemporary art*³, where utterances create communicative effects: artificial or so-called reality effects.

Some things may seem more real than others, and different hierarchies can be constructed in the work, where the choice of rules can be decisive. Rooted in avant-garde, event art, performance art and post-dramatic theatre, contemporary art emphasises the relation to a given social context and often addresses directly the identity and position of the recipient. It has been called relational art, interactive and immersive theatre, as opposed to the abstract and closed character of modernist works, with a summarising term: contemporary art. At the same time, there is the difference that contemporary art can actually also use quite classical dramaturgical approaches.

Representation and Remediation

Theatrical forms of representation are actions that operate in relation to reality, whether it is true, fictional or an illusion. It is a statement that is a social address and therefore an important part of a democratic society. Acts of representation can be offensive, seductive, exclusionary, didactic, emancipatory or, for example, moralising. Representations also express a fundamental dichotomy between what is present and what is represented, which is secondary and derivative to what is real. The suspicion of representations is difficult to escape, as the one who speaks assumes a kind of authority that offers an understanding of reality. There is a power relation involved in being able to assume this authority, where some may feel misrepresented or unrepresented. The representation can be experienced as humiliating or just simply wrong. In any case, representation is a problematised practice in contemporary society due to the 'banning' of certain expressions that are assumed to be offensive to certain identity groups. This is a problematisation or critique that FIX&FOXY helps to highlight, among other things by emphasising that there are several dimensions to acts of representation.

3) My view on the aesthetic relations of contemporary art is mainly inspired by Juliane Rebentisch (2020). *Samtidskunstens teorier. En indføring*. Informations Forlag, Copenhagen. Reference is also made to Kyntrup, M (2008) *Den æstetiske relation* and De Duve, T (1998) *Kant after Duchamp*.

Representation can be discussed as artistic quality, but also as power in relation to who has the right to express themselves and why. It is about freedom of expression also for marginalised groups, who often have no opportunities to express themselves artistically. Is it an ethical artistic device to bring people on stage? Certainly, but it is also an ethical device to disrupt well-known norms, traditions and codes of good art.

Contemporary art, as in FIX&FOXY's version, can be disturbing, strange or attractive. The performers themselves create a kind of narrative that reflects the contemporary world and at the same time create an artistic distance from the norms, conventions and "moral truths" that we define ourselves through. This makes it possible to rethink the relationship between the particular *immediacy* of the individual and the *hypermediacy* of the community.

Erik Exe Christoffersen, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

Works Cited

- Barthes, R. (2004). *Forfatterens død og andre essays*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Bolter, J.D. and Grusin, R. (1999). *Remediation*. Cambridge.
- Christoffersen, E. E. (2009) *Verdensteatrets forhandling af fremmedhed Thatrum Mundi Ur-Hamlet*. In Baggesgaard, I. Krøgholt and L. Philipsen (eds.), *Hvad er verdenskunst?* Aarhus: Klim.
- De Duve, T (1998). *Kant after Duchamp*. The MIT Press
- Fyhn, M. (2009). *Fra kliché til stolte kolleger*. Interview with Biering, T in *Politiken* 8.11.2009.
- Kyndrup, M (2010.) *Teatret: medialitet, udsigelse – og hamlet*. *Peripeti* Vol. 14.
- Kyndrup, M. 2008. *Den æstetiske relation*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Rebentisch, J. 2020. *Samtidskunstens teorier. En indføring*. Copenhagen: Informations Forlag.
- Rolloggaard, S (2019). Interview med T. Biering in *Politiken* 9.05.2019.
- Taylor, C (2002). *Modernitetens Ubehag - Autenticitetens Etik*. Forlaget Philosophia



Dark Noon. Photo: Søren Meisner