Johan Thom

Notes on The Crossing

A site-specific public performance in Bayreuth, Germany, 5 December 2015
Performed by Barbara Baier, produced by Johan Thom and Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth

1 Scene

An older blonde woman dressed in black. She walks alone on the pavement next to a quiet street in the small German town of Bayreuth. She seems deep in thought and suddenly begins to sing. At first she appears joyous, hopeful even. Her crystal clear voice lovingly describes her baby boy (she mentions that someone else may have left him with a person named Steva – perhaps the child's minder has left him with his father?). The mood quickly turns: She lifts her hand to her face touching her neck, check and forehead. He will never return. Overcome with grief she stops singing as she repeats the phrase: "So he is dead".

This momentary outburst of private feelings happens so quickly, inexplicably, that most members of the public will never even notice it. Besides, even if they do, how are they to make any sense of it?

2 Abstract

Children do not as rule die in operas. And, in the oeuvre of Wagner, myth and high drama always trumps the banal realities of everyday life, social-economic politics and suffering.[1] Of course, it is too delicious a prospect to engage with this aspect of Wagner's operatic legacy in Bayreuth, to ignore. All the more so when one is conceptualising a performance artwork for an academic conference with the provocative title Art of Wagnis – Christoph Schlingensief's *Crossing of Wagner* and *Africa.*[2]

Two things are clear from the start: I wanted to work with the operatic form, or to be more specific with the live performance of song; and secondly, the idea of a "crossing" should somehow be central to the artwork itself. For me the term crossing is understood both in a territorial sense (as in crossing over the boundary that separates one distinct region or territory from another) and, perhaps more darkly, also as a metaphor for death (to cross over from the realm of the living to that of the dead). In life these otherwise discrete meanings of the term often overlap. For example throughout the ages humankind has been in awe of individuals that are willing to brave the unknown by travelling

1 I follow Adorno's reasoning here who states that "Wagner's oeuvre comes close to the consumer goods of the nineteenth century which knew no greater ambition than to conceal every sign of the work that went into them, perhaps because any such traces reminded people too vehemently of the appropriation of the labour of others, of an injustice that could still be felt". In this way Adorno argues that the work of art becomes a self-contained, magical object (Adorno 2005/1952). Also see Peter Osborne's discussion of the gesamtkunstwerk as a totalizing, metaphysical force (2005).

2 I first saw Schlingensief's work at the Venice Biennale in 2003 when I happened upon a bunch of seeming lunatics engaged in a pole sitting contest slap-dash in the centre of the garden just outside the international pavilion.

Barbara Baier during performance in Bayreuth. Photo by Johan Thom, 2015.

to distant lands and foreign places. Such long journeys are commonly beset by all kinds of perils – from losing your luggage to losing your life. All the more so, when you are not simply a modern day tourist or an explorer seeking the thrill of experience for its own sake, but a destitute refugee seeking a brighter future elsewhere, far away.

This then brings me back to the opening statement: Children do not die in operas. It is something of a taboo, as one of the researchers at Iwalewahaus patiently told me after my initial enquiries into the subject.[3] Only a few weeks before I started conceptualizing the artwork the world was confronted by the death of a child by way of an image. On the second of September 2015 the drowned body of Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi was discovered on the beach and photographed by Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir. This by now iconic image still gives me nightmares. Perhaps more than anything, I identify so deeply with the image because it reminds me of my hopes and fears for my little boy (Luca Thom, by now almost three years old). I still wonder what could possibly motivate me to undertake such an uncertain course of action as the parents of Alan Kurdi, risking the lives of my entire family in the process? How deeply desirous must one be for an improvement in your lot before you take the first step, leaving everything you know and care about behind you forever? I truly hope to never find out.

Leoš Janácek's *Jenufa* (1904) is one of the very few operas where the death of a child stands central to the narrative. In brief, the central character Jenufa is left with child after her lover Steva spurns her. Kostelnicka, her aunt by marriage, realizes that Jenufa's future is now very bleak indeed. In a desperate bid to change Jenufa's lot, Kostelnicka decides to secretly murder the child. She slips the baby into a freezing river,

3 Fabian Lehman and I had long conversations about this exact problem once I began discussing this work with him.

where later, during Jenufa's wedding celebrations, the villagers discover the little body and bring Kostelnicka to justice.[4]

For *The Crossing*, I asked a trained opera singer resident in Bayreuth, Barbara Baier, to restage a single scene from the opera in public: Jenufa wakes up and wonders where her child is. After interrogating her aunt she is told that the child has passed away from illness during the night. Unaware of any deceit, Jenufa is left free to grieve and finally, to marry – thus restoring her tarnished reputation and securing a better future for herself. It must be added that, at least initially no one with the exception of Steva and Kostelnicka are aware of Jenufa's plight – she is hidden away to conceive the child in private.

To be clear, in *The Crossing* I draw no easy analogies nor formal or moral equivalences between Jenufa, the work of Schlingensief and finally that of the photograph of Alan Kurdi. Rather I am interested in an open-ended exploration of the deeply fraught social relationship between hope, grief, memory and representation. And more specifically, of how, to what effect and by which means do these relationships get played out in public and in private? As Susan Sontag might have asked, what are we really to make of the pain of others? She concludes *Regarding the Pain of Others* by turning again to the dead, who, despite everything we may think about their representation, our memories of them and their relative place in our world, will always have the last say:

> These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses – and in us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? "We" – this "we" is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through – don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine. That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right. (Sontag 2003)

What Sontag does not say is that it would be a mistake to view the relative stillness of the violent dead as some kind of restful peace, or worse, as consent. Because there can be no consolation, no hope and no future for them, ever, their eternal silences is truly nothing less than fury at utter loss incarnate.

Bibliography

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Osborne, Peter. 2005. Walter Benjamin. *Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, Vol. 2 – Modernity. London, New York: Routledge, 307–308.

Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 97–98.

4 In the opera Jenufa does not in fact marry Steva, the father of the child. She marries Laca, his younger brother who, in a jealous fit of rage, previously disfigured her face with a knife. Also this union is only possible exactly because Kostelnička tells him that although she was pregnant, Jenufa's child has died (a lie that she then proceeds to make into a reality).

Johan Thom

'A luta continua (Victory etc.)'

A site-specific intervention in mixed media (wood, cardboard, paint, cloth), Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth, Germany, 2015

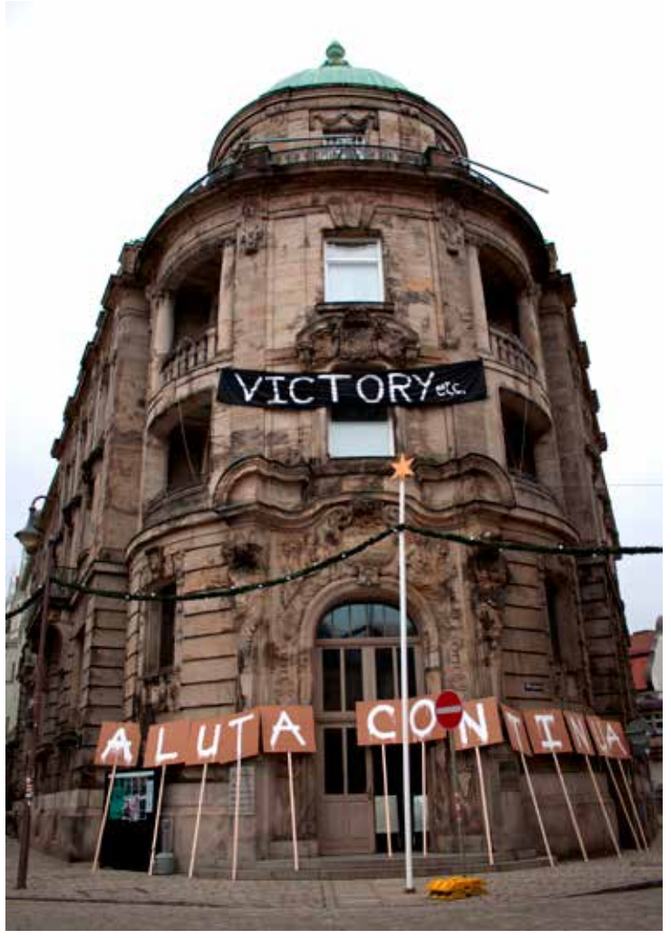
This artistic intervention is based upon a creative re-reading of the political slogan "A luta continua, vitória é certa" (The struggle continues, victory is certain). Historically this political slogan is associated with Mozambique's armed struggle for independence from Portugal from the early 1960s until 1975. To be specific, the slogan is considered the political rallying cry of Samora Machel, the erstwhile leader of the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique or Frelimo.

During the recent student protests against the rising costs of tertiary education in South Africa this slogan was often appropriated by students and their various supporters, appearing in social media on handmade posters in shorthand form simply as "A luta continua". In this particular form, the slogan does not make explicit the possibility of victory, leaving instead the rather dispiriting possibility of a never-ending struggle. However, I think it may well be argued that the obverse is also true – that contemporary South African students are deeply aware of just how naive any hope for singular and total victory appears today.

By replacing the second part of the slogan "é certa" with the term "etc." (et cetera) I wish to playfully shift the meaning of the original slogan into a somewhat humorous even self-critical statement that encapsulates elements of all the aforementioned (the history of the slogan, its appropriation and conditional re-deployment in the present post-revolutionary moment). Today victory is no longer certain and nor is it understood as being the sole outcome of any revolutionary, anti-colonial struggle: instead it is joined by a host of other possible outcomes and post-colonial narratives, some of which have become all too familiar. In this regard, although the term "et cetera" is mostly understood as meaning something to the effect of "and other related things", at least one of the more discrete meanings inherent in its usage is the idea that the unspoken, or absent, terms it stands in for are so well known that it would be a waste of time to include them in full. In this way, the modified slogan embodies a form of cynicism born from our familiarity with the disappointing, even wholly fatigued socio-cultural and political narratives and realities that have become the hallmarks of the post-revolutionary moment (the debt-ridden, corrupt post-colonial regime, the contemporary neo-colonial, capitalist sell-out of principals, assets, land and services et cetera).

Lastly, this artistic intervention is a meditation on the possibility of art to defamiliarize otherwise commonplace, accepted ideas, forms and meanings. In as much, the work seeks to celebrate the fearless capacity of contemporary art to generate creative space for imaginative journeys into an unfamiliar future, an etc. that signals space to explore, imagine and complete existing ideas without reifying the familiar.

Art cannot pray in the church of fear.
In memory of Christoph Schlingensief (1960–2010).



Installation view of *Aluta Continua (etc)*, site specific intervention as part of the conference *Art of Wagnis:Christoph Schlingensief's Crossing of Wagner and Africa*, held at Iwalewahaus, Germany, 4-6 December 2015, Photographic credit: Johan Thom

Wagner · Schlingensief · Africa