THE VIOLENCE OF CULTURE

Erwin Jans

"Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. (...) A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies." Victor Turner's famous words are characteristic of a certain humanism and universalism in the field of interculturalism. One can however ask the question if Turner's vision is not too idealistic and too unproblematic, too harmonious and too much based on a high level of academic perfection in human knowledge and understanding, communication and cultural exchange. What does really happen when cultures or cultural practices meet? Is it a dialogue or a conflict? Is there room for negotiation or is there only a clash? Do they give each other the space to express themselves in their uniqueness or is it a struggle of power to set the terms of the exchange?

Many sites of tension remained unarticulated in Turner's project: tensions between art and culture, between the individual artist and the community he belongs to, between the economically strong and economically weak societies, between hegemonic and minority cultures etc. The place where these cultural clashes occur is not in the first place the academic environment but the everyday reality of the contemporary metropolis. It is the modern city, with its cultural and intellectual life, its social and economical mobility that, provides the constitutive framework for these encounters. This more complex view on interculturalism is expressed by the Mexican artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena in his 1979 performance 'The Loneliness of the Immigrant'. Gomez-Pena wrapped his body in a floralpatterned batik crisscrossed by ropes. He put himself on the floor of a public elevator. The package had the shape of a human figure. Gomez-Pena stayed in the elevator for twenty-four hours. To one of the walls a text was attached that was only noticed by a few people: 'Moving to another country hurts more than moving to another house, another face, another lover... In one way or another we are or will be immigrants. Surely one day we will be able to crack this shell open, this unbearable loneliness, and develop a transcontinental identity.'2 It is an ambiguous text. Does it refer to a general situation? Is the package on the floor the shell that has to be cracked open? By whom? The performance raises many questions, especially on communication with the public. The fact that on the one hand the public is completely helpless and troubled in its confrontation with the wrapped up artist (and sometimes even reacts in an aggressive way) and on the

other hand that the artist is mute, anonymous and invisible goes against all the premises set out by Victor Turner. 'The Loneliness of the Immigrant' can be read as a kind of allegory of the cultural clashes in an urban multicultural environment.

This is not the place to investigate the complex genealogy and the even more complex dissemination of the concepts of interculturalism and multiculturalism, cultural diversity and cultural difference, and of so many other concepts that were and are developed to describe and analyse the contemporary cultural practices in the metropolis. Naming is not without danger. What are we talking about when we talk about intercultural theatre? Does it refer to an artistic reality? Or does it only create a kind of artistic segregation between theatre on the one hand and intercultural theatre on the other hand? Is it a world vision and a philosophy or does it only refer to the colour of the skin of the makers? The French theatre researcher Patrice Pavis edited an anthology called 'The Intercultural Performance Reader'. In his introduction he tries to define the field of interculturalism. In order to do so he lists a number of theoretical concepts: intercultural, intracultural, transcultural, ultracultural, precultural, postcultural, metacultural. He than concentrates on the field of theatre and makes a distinction between intercultural theatre, multicultural theatre, cultural collage, syncretic theatre, postcolonial theatre and theatre of the fourth world. It is not difficult to add more categories: third world theatre, immigrant theatre, ethnic theatre, and a name that is used in Holland and recently also appeared in Flanders 'allochtonentheater'. Is this list of concepts an indication of the diversity and the richness of the intercultural field? Maybe. But it could also be a sign of intellectual and academic confusion and embarrassment.

The notion of interculturalism forces us to rethink the relationships between culture, politics and economics. What are the repercussions of this on the autonomous field of the arts? The work of art can be, using once more the vocabulary of the anthropologist Victor Turner, a liminal or liminoid space, a transitional space where existing and fixed cultural identities are questioned, decentred, dislocated and opened up to a process of doubt, reflexivity and change. But at the same time the field of art is not a garden of Eden protected against ideology, power and interests. The world of art and culture, artistic institutions, musea, art galleries, theatres, publishing houses,... all reproduce to a certain extent the mechanisms of exclusion of the society they belong to. This has enormous consequences for non-western artists or for artists living in Europe and coming from the ex-colonies or the migration countries. There has always been an interest in the other cultures. This interest has had and still has a multitude of names: orientalism, exoticism, primitivism, ethnic art, world music,... but these names stand

for processes of commercialization, fetishism, commodity, processes of appropriation of the other into the same. All this has serious consequences for the position of non western artists or for immigrant artist in the artistic scene of the west.

It is the notion of culture itself that has to be examined. In many contemporary discourses knowledge of and respect for one's own culture and the culture of the other are articulated as efficient non-violent strategies against racism and xenophobia. But we should no forget that a long intellectual history intertwines the notions of culture and national character on the one hand and race on the other hand. It is only after the second World War that the use of the word race became highly problematic, but not its underlying concept, as Paul Gilroy makes clear; 'After 1945, the effects of the Nazi genocide made respectable academic opinion shy and cautious about openly invoking the idea of racial difference in purely biological terms. In those conditions, the concept of culture supplied an alternative descriptive vocabulary and a more acceptable political idiom with which to address and simplify the geographical, historical, and phenotypical variations that distinguished racialized inequality.'3 In other words: the terrible injustice, the violence and the brutality justified by the ideology of 'race' found shelter under the roof of 'culture'. It should make us aware of the complexities and ambiguities involved in the fluency with which the word 'culture' is used in all kinds of contemporary political, cultural, social, sociological,... discourses.

Let me return to one of the decisive moments in the construction of the western theatre, that was also one of the decisive moments in the construction of western culture: the emergence of Greek civilization. The 'wonder' of Greek civilization and its artistic, intellectual and political achievements have been celebrated as the single most important source of western culture. The word 'wonder' tries hard to ignore the troubling question about the sources of Greek civilization itself. This question of origins is the question of culture and of identity par excellence. In a challenging essay on the tragedian Aeschylus the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare raises an intriguing and disturbing question concerning the origins of Greek culture. Why, Kadare asks, was the ancient Greek civilization so obsessed by the Trojan War? Why from Homer to the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, so many of the stories that were told were in one way or another stories about that war that took place so many centuries earlier? The answer Kadare gives is purely hypothetical but impressive and provocative in its assumptions on culture and cultural identity: 'In the same way as someone recal-Is a long forgotten crime committed in his youth, the Greek people, at the moment of its full maturity, woke up to the regret over a crime committed in its youth. Eight hundred years earlier it had suffocated the Trojan people in its sleep. 4 Greek other hand that the artist is mute, anonymous and invisible goes against all the premises set out by Victor Turner. 'The Loneliness of the Immigrant' can be read as a kind of allegory of the cultural clashes in an urban multicultural environment.

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literature and Greek tragedy are, according to Kadare, ways of dealing with this crime, ways of dealing with the collective guilt of the Greek people for having destroyed another culture. From that moment onwards Greek literature and Greek tragedy are haunted by the ghosts from the burning ruins of Troy. What impressed me in this hypothesis of Kadare is his vision on culture, on what culture is and what it excludes, and on how what is excluded comes back and defines and defies by its very exclusion that culture. What Kadare tells us about culture or civilization is that it is always based on a crime that is forgotten, denied or repressed. In other words: culture and violence are deeply involved. To understand better what is at stake when the word 'culture' is used we should get aware of its traumatic and explosive contents. I use words like 'trauma' and 'explosion' on purpose to refer to the physical and psychic destructions involved in those contemporary conflicts that have (national, ethnic, religious,...) cultural identity as their main issue.

We use the word 'culture' when we talk about the highest achievements of mankind: the arts, philosophy, science, our political institutions. For the 19th century English writer and thinker Matthew Arnold, culture was the reservoir of the best that was known and thought in a society. He believed that culture could soften, although not neutralize, the destructive effects of a modern, aggressive and materialistic urban life. By reading Homer, Dante and Shakespeare, by listening to the Flemish polyphony, Mozart, Händel and Beethoven, by looking at paintings or sculptures by Van Eyck, Michelangelo and Da Vinci, we keep permanently in touch with the best that mankind created. By doing so we get a deeper understanding of ourselves, our tradition and our society. We also use the word culture to talk about the highest personal ideal: the ideal of being a 'cultured' or a 'cultivated' person. However being an ideal, culture is also always, as Werner Hamacher points out convincingly, 'culture's shame for perhaps not being sufficiently culture': 'No culture is Culture, culture itself, no culture can measure up to its claim to be culture. (...) It is, therefore, not a possession, this culture, but a projection and a reproach, an attempt to reach a goal - itself, that other - that is by definition unattainable: ever another culture, and each time guilty of not being the other culture and of not being whole.'5. Culture is always a split concept, a permanent conflict between its realisation and its goal, its ideal and its insufficiency. Culture in other words introduces from the onset conflict in cultures and conflict between cultures. The consequences of this interpretation of culture are far reaching. Culture is used as a polemical term for the distinction between culture and non-culture, culture and nature, culture and barbarism,... and thus as a weapon in the struggle against other cultures, as an instrument of denunciation and barbarization of other cultures: 'Culture is always also a declaration of war.'6

The above mentioned miracle of the fifth century in Athens was historically partly due to the national pride of Greece after having defeated the Persians in the 5th century B.C. It is one of the great achievements of Greek civilisation to have given a voice to the defeated. This achievement took place in Aeschylus' tragedy 'The Persians'. Aeschylus, who distinguished himself as a warrior during the Persian Wars and lost a brother in battle, gave voice to the pain, the misery, the lament of those who were defeated. The tragedy is a proof of the humanism and the deep empathy the Greeks were capable of. With these words the messenger in the tragedy announces the defeat of the Persian army: "O cities of wide Asia! O loved Persian earth,/ Haven of ample wealth! One blow has overthrown/ Your happy pride; the flower of all your youth is fallen./ To bring the first news of defeat's an evil fate;/ Yet I must now unfold the whole disastrous truth:/ Persians, our country's fleet and army are no more" (Aeschylus, vs. 130). But in his English translation Philip Vellacot misses an important point, that is brought to the surface in the French translation by Paul Mazon. Here the last two lines run as follows: "Et pourtant, il me faut déployer devant vous toute notre misère, Perses: l'armée barbare tout entière a péri!" (Eschyle, vs. 117) The Persian messenger uses the word the Greeks used to talk about the others: the barbarians. The Dutch translation by Herman Altena uses "the non-Greeks" as translation. (Aeschylus, vs. 61) It is in the end not a Persian who is speaking - for how could he refer to himself as a barbarian? - but a Greek. In any case it shows the antagonism (the 'symbolic' violence) between Greeks and Persians even at a moment where the highest point of empathy (of being 'cultivated') was reached.

This silencing of a difference at the heart of Greek culture was repeated once more in the 19th century. In his highly discussed, but thought provoking book "Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization" Martin Bernal analyzes the major shift that took place in the study of Greek civilization in the first half of the 19th century. He makes a distinction between what he calls the Ancient Model and the Aryan Model. According to the Ancient Model the ancestors of the Greeks had lived around the Aegean in idyllic simplicity until the Phoenicians and rulers from Egypt arrived and acquired territories, built cities, and hounded dynasties. They introduced many of the arts of civilization, notably, irrigation, various types of armaments, writing and religion. Already in the 5th century this idea of cultural dependence was not much appreciated by the Athenians, as the panhellenic, anti-barbarian passions clearly proof. The other model, the Aryan Model, sees Greek civilization as the result of the conquest of the Aegean basin from the north by the Hellenes, speakers of an Indo-European language. The Aryan Model took over from the Ancient Model in the beginning of the 19th century because, according to Bernal, it fitted into the new cultural

identity Europe was constructing in that period. Bernal distinguishes four different forces affecting the social and ideological environments of scholars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: (1) the establishment of the paradigms of progress; (2) the triumph of romanticism; (3) the revival of christianity; and (4) racism. Bernal adds: 'Although it was only one of four factors behind the fall of the Ancient Model, racism became the major ideological force by which the Aryan model achieved and maintained its dominance from 1850 to 1950.'7 That period is the period of imperialism and colonialism that saw the emergence of racist theories and ultimately fell into the abyss of fascism and nazism leading to the extermination camps during the second World War.

In his study Martin Bernal looks for a compromise model. Accepting the argument of the Aryan Model that Greek is fundamentally an Indo-European language and that at a certain stage the Aegean basin must have been substantially influenced by the north (as a result of conquest or migration), he does not want to exclude the possibility of substantial cultural influence from the south and the east as well: 'It is plausible to suppose that, rather than being the result of a pre-Hellenic substrate, the non-Indo-European elements in the Greek language and culture were largely later Semitic and Egyptian superimpositions on an Indo-European base. Possibly these were the result of conquest and elite settlement around the Aegean, and certainly they came from trade and diplomatic contacts between Egypt and the Levant, on the one hand, and the Aegean, on the other'. 8 This is not the place to go into the details of Bernal's thesis and the arguments of his critics. What his analysis makes clear is that a pure origin of culture does not exist and that purity (and for the same reason racism) is not a fact but always a political or ideological rewriting of fact. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy formulates it as follows: 'Every culture is in itself "multicultural", not only because there has always been a previous acculturation, and because there is no pure and simple origin, but at a deeper level, because the gesture of culture is itself a mixed gesture: it is to affront, confront, transform, divert, develop, recompose, combine, rechannel.'9

If the essential gesture of culture is conflict and confrontation, it implies that what we call culture and especially the dialogue between cultures (inter-culturality or multi-culturality) always hides the possibility of aggression, power relations and feelings of superiority. Returning to my field of profession I want to focus on a theatre performance from the eighties that on the one hand was praised as a model of intercultural understanding, but that on the other hand also has been interpreted as a culturally imperialistic and eurocentric work of art: 'The Mahabharata' by Peter Brook. For more than three decades the celebrated direc-

tor Peter Brook has been manifesting his interest in working with theatrical traditions and actors from other cultures. In many projects he showed his ability to communicate with actors from very different cultural backgrounds (European, American, African, Asian,...). Towards this intercultural communication he takes a humanist and utopian position. Brook makes a rough distinction between three forms of culture: the culture of the 'state', the culture of the 'individual' and the culture of 'links': 'Both cultures - that of the state and that of the individual - have their own strengths and achievements, but they also have strict limitations due to the fact that both are only partial. At the same time both survive, because both are expressions of incredibly powerful vested interests. Every large collectivity has a need to sell itself, every large group has to promote itself through its culture, and in the same way, individual artists have a deeply rooted interest in compelling other people to observe and respect the creations of their own inner world.'10 The state as well as the individual are, according to Peter Brook, characterized by clearly defined interests and by a will to defend those interests. Recognizing the merits and the force of the cultures of the state and of the individual, Brook chooses explicitly for what he calls the 'third' culture, the culture of 'links': 'It has the force that can counterbalance the fragmentation of our world. It has to do with the discovery of relationships where such relationships have become submerged and lost - between man and society, between one race and another, between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between humanity and machinery, between the visible and the invisible, between categories, languages, genres. What are these relationships? Only cultural acts can explore and reveal these vital truths.'11 It seems that in the culture of the state and the culture of the individual certain truths and relationships are submerged or ignored, that can only be revealed by a culture of links, i.e. a culture of relationships. An important dimension of the culture of links is the dialogue with other cultures. Brook expresses his great expectations from such an intercultural dialogue. The same did Victor Turner in the quotation that opens these reflections. This understanding was what Peter Brook was after in his staging of the great Indian epic 'The Mahabharata'. The performance became the central reference in the ongoing debate on the possibilities and methods of an intercultural theatre.

But by Third World critics the merits of this kind of intercultural exchange were very profoundly questioned. The most passionate and fierce criticism was articulated by the Indian critic and director Rustom Bharucha. His analysis was a 'cold shower' 12 for well meaning western interculturalists. Bharucha makes clear from the outset in what tradition he places Brooks performance of 'The Mahabharata': 'It was the British who first made us aware in India of economic appropriation on a global scale. They took our raw materials from us, transported

them to factories in Manchester and Lancashire, where they were transformed into commodities, which were then forcibly sold to us in India. Brook deals in a different kind of appropriation: he does not merely take our commodities and textiles and transform them into costumes and props. He has taken one of our most significant texts and decontextualized it from its history in order to 'sell' it to audiences in the West'. 13 For Bharucha the work of Peter Brook continues the British imperialistic and colonial enterprise in India. In saying so he stresses the often hidden or ignored unequal socio-economic structures underlying the so called intercultural exchange. Bharucha articulates very explicitly that intercultural projects still execute an (often unconscious) colonial agenda: 'as much as one would like to accept the seeming openness of Euro-American interculturalists to other cultures, the larger economic and political domination of the West has clearly constrained, if not negated the possibilities of a genuine exchange. In the best of all possible worlds, interculturalism could be viewed as a 'two-way street', based on a mutual reciprocity of needs. But in actuality, where it is the West that extends its domination to cultural matters, this 'two-way street' could be more accurately described as a 'dead end' 14'. Bharucha is most convincing when he points to the economical and political power relations that underlie intercultural exchange. Bharucha's detailed analysis and criticism of the performance remains an important document that should make us aware of the many traps of intercultural communication and of culture/multiculturalism as such. Bharucha himself does not completely avoid the trap of seeing culture as a closed entity. One could ask the question at what point one is familiar enough with another culture to deal with its cultural and artistic achievements? How much knowledge of context and history is needed? Could Brook ever reach the level of understanding Bharucha wants him to reach? Does Bharucha have that level of understanding himself? Through merely belonging to the Indian culture? Or through study? Is one ever familiar enough with one's own culture? Is culture something one has or can have? To avoid these crucial but difficult questions, culture is often defined in reductive terms. The more however a culture perceives and defines itself in terms of purity, unity, sameness, health, authenticity, race, ethnicity, national or cultural identity,... the more a culture denies its fundamental and original trauma, its violence against and its exclusion of the other. Belonging to a culture than means literally partaking in a crime, prolonging a criminal scene. It means that there is no such thing as a healthy, a pure or a sound culture. Because of the crime that is committed there is something fundamentally 'unheimlich' ('uncanny') in culture. Culture can therefore never be a place where we are at home, a 'domus', where we feel members of the same family, of the same herd, of the same blood, of the same race. Extreme right, racist and fascist discourses try to 're-domesticate' the multicultural public space, try to recreate a pure domestic space only for family members, a space that never existed and whose existence as an ideal is only possible because of the repression of initial violence and exclusion. There is no culture of the domus any more. There is only the culture of the polis, of the metropolis. The polis is the culture of what the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls 'the mêlée' (the mixed). In a essay about and for Sarajevo, one of the recent tragic names of this 're-domestication', Nancy writes: 'A city does not have to be identified by anything other than a name, which indicates a place, the place of a mêlée, a crossing and a stop, a knot and an exchange, a gathering, a disjunction, a circulation, a radiating (un étoilement). The name of a city, like that of a country, like that of a people and a person, must always be the name of no one; it must be the name of anyone who might be presented in person or in the own right (en propre). (...) The "proper" name must always serve to dissolve the ego: the latter opens up a meaning, a pure source of meaning; the former indicates a mêlée, raises up a melody: Sarajevo.' ¹⁵ The melody of Sarajevo was however suffocated in a brutal screaming for ethnic cleansing.

Western culture (and maybe culture itself) is by definition urban culture. We can't talk about modernity without talking about the modern city and the way it fundamentally changed our perception of ourselves in relation to the other, to the others, to other cultures. It is in the streets of the modern city that culture meets its traumatic history. Walking through the city of Brussels, as I do every day, I am confronted with the Belgian colonial past and its marginalisation of Africans in Belgian society; with the immigration from North-Africa and the social disruption of a whole community; with the consequences of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe; with the European and Belgian laws concerning political and economical refugees... The public space in the modern multicultural city has become the scene of our traumatic and violent history.

Let me return for a moment to Kadare. He seems to argue that there is a moment of maturity in cultural development. That moment of maturity is the moment of recognition of the initial crime that founded culture. Is it possible that at the beginning of this third millennium there are certain signs of the maturity Kadare was talking about? The maturity to face the crimes underlying culture? The maturity to face colonialism, imperialism and its terrible consequences? To face fascism, nazism, Auschwitz? To face racism, xenophobia and intolerance in all its visible and invisible appearances? To face the challenges and the complex demands of the multicultural society? The rescue of culture lies in its affirmation of cultural self suspicion, says Werner Hamacher¹⁶. Culture is always in crisis, because it is crisis itself. At the height of the political and cultural achievements in the age of Pericles and the Acropolis, Greek tragedy confronted the Greek citi-

zen with "das Unbehagen in der Kultur", the uncanny in (his) culture. It is important that a culture gets aware of the symbolic violence at work in its very heart. It means that a culture has to rethink and reconstruct itself. A culture of the mêlée is a culture based on a new set of questions, as is made clear by Paul Gilroy: "Can we improve upon the idea that culture exists exclusively in localized national and ethnic units - separate but equal in aesthetic value and human worth? What significance do we accord to the histories of imperialism and white supremacy that are so extensively entangled with the development of modern aesthetics, its storehouses, collections, and museums and the anthropological assumptions that governed their consolidation? How, if we can reject the over-simple diagnoses of this situation offered by ethnic absolutism, might we begin to frame a trans- or cross-cultural criticism? What role does expressive cultural creativity play in mediating or even transcending racialized or ethnically coded differences? What recognition do we give to the forms of non national and cross-cultural practice that are already spontaneously under way in popular-cultural en disreputable forms, many of which have supplied important resources to the trans-national social movement against racism?'17

Let me concentrate for a moment on the Flemish theatre - my professional field of work - and list some concrete questions that can be asked, not to accuse or to condemn but to open up a discussion on this symbolic violence that is also a violence of representation. How many actors and directors of Morrocan, Turkish or African origin are working in the Flemish theatres? How often performances in the Arabic language or in other languages are programmed? Are the new urban subcultures an artistic expressions represented on the official stages? What kind of strategies are developed to communicate with new audiences? Are there many youngsters of non-European origin in the theatre schools? If not, what are the reasons for their absence? Do journalists and critics write in a well informed way about non-European theatre or dance performances? Do our theatres stage non-European plays? Do festival organisers visit the festivals in Beyrouth, Damas and Tunis or do they only go to Berlin, Avignon and Edinburgh? What is the role and function of government policies in all this? These are questions that involve the notions of power and representation, of cultural identity and artistic assimilation. Creativity is not a human faculty that is developed outside of the socio-economic and political ideological context. It is always also related to mechanisms of cultural dominance, recognition and exclusion, to the laws that regulate the positions of the centre and the margins in the artistic field.

When we talk about a multicultural society we have to take it seriously on all levels, politically as well as culturally. Only than we have a possibility to deal

with the trauma's of history and to reach out for what the sociologist Paul Gilroy calls 'a different view of culture, one which accentuates its plastic, syncretic qualities and which does not see culture flowing into neat ethnic parcels but as a radically unfinished social process of self-definition and transformation.' Or in the words of Nancy: 'The mélange, therefore, is not. It happens; it takes place. There is mêlée, crisscrossing, weaving, exchange, sharing, and it is never a single thing, nor is it ever the same.' 18 That theatre and performance can play an important role in this culture of the 'mêlée' is also the point of view of Una Chaudhuri: "Like the theatre, which must always negotiate some kind of meeting between the heterogeneous orders of text and performance, of the written and spoken, the intercultural project must reconcile the claims of disparate orders of being, various temporalities, historicities, ethnicities. This resemblance suggests that the view of theatre as a modelled differentiality could also be the site where the future of interculturalism might be imagined.' 19

NOTES

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- 17 Gilroy, o.c., pp. 247-248.
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