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PERFORMING MEMORY. BETWEEN DOCUMENT AND PARTICIPATION

From Text to Performance (and Back)

It is commonly accepted today that documentary as a distinct visual genre established itself with the development of photography and film by the 1930s, fuelled by the belief in the possibility of immediate and direct representation on the one hand, and humanitarian progress on the other. Although the two founding ideas have since been questioned within the very field itself, in the early twenty-first century, documentary works still constitute a substantial, if not growing, part of contemporary art.¹ The spirit of our age, however, does not reveal itself in the desire to capture reality as it is anymore, but is rather steering in the direction of re-creating reality, or as philosopher Robin George Collingwood once put it, re-enacting history.² Hence, the documentary is not so much about textual, or visual representation these days, as it is about experience and expression (presentation) that embraces subjectivity, and creativity. This is at least partly due to the changes we have been facing in the postmodern era, which is very much performance- and memory-oriented.

The notion of collective memory has been introduced to social sciences and humanities as a negative of the modern conception of history. Among the first advocates of the category, one should list the French sociologists, Maurice Halbwachs, and Pierre Nora. The former is usually considered responsible for developing

the concept of collective memory (*mémoire collective*), by which he defined the shared knowledge of the past, actively framed and transmitted within social groups and communities.³ The latter has expanded the idea by pointing to the localised nature of collective memory, which he referred to as *lieux de mémoire*, that is sites of recalling and remembering the past (not to be reduced to physical places), be them history books, literature, anniversary celebrations, photographs, or memorials.⁴ Whatever the particularities of the two approaches, the assumption by which they are led is common (and shared with a number of other scholars): as it comes to the way people refer to historical experiences, it has nothing to do with an objective reality, but is actively constructed, re-constructed, or even invented, and passed on in the form of discourses, narratives, and images, by means of politics, education, culture, and everyday praxis.

Nevertheless, what the current documentary trend has in common with its predecessors is the underlying need – of both artists, and arts recipients – to assure themselves that what they create, see, or experience (*sic!*) is not mere fiction, but has a meaningful connection to real life, be it past, or present. This crave for authenticity (or truth) is nowadays quite obviously stimulated by the modern digital media, developing virtual realities and social networks, and the simulacrum effect of it all on human life, which blur the boundary



1. *Import/Export*. Białystok, April 2014. Photo by Bartosz Tryzna, courtesy of Stowarzyszenie Edukacji Kulturalnej WIDOK

between reality and fiction.⁵ The figure of arts recipient as an experience seeker is perhaps one of the most overt manifestations of this need for “something real”.

As the status and conventions of documentary art are historically variable, today’s document-based practices undoubtedly owe a lot to the paradigmatic shift in the humanities and social sciences widely referred to as the performative turn. A Polish proponent of this paradigm, Ewa Domańska, argues that, among other changes, the performative turn indicates a shift in the ways of approaching the past: from attempts to discover the historical truth, to various modes of engaging with it in the present.⁶ As Richard Schechner has put it in his seminal work on performance: “Although performance studies scholars use the »archive« extensively – what’s in books, photographs, the archaeological record, historical remains, etc. – their dedicated focus is on the »repertory«, namely, what people do in the activity of their doing it.”⁷

Thus, what a performance studies scholar would investigate into is not the representation of documented facts in art, but the process of their re-enactment (namely, how the representation has been constructed). Indeed, many a contemporary artist does exactly that:

takes historical material, and – through storytelling, performance, or video, to mention but a few exemplary genres – re-creates the past, as it was recorded in interviews, diaries, or official documents, often in order to engage a broader public with certain historical narratives via a “here and now” experience of art. Although they may not be aware of Collingwood’s writings, these artists fully accept the assumption that history is never directly available to a researcher (be her an academic scholar, or an arts practitioner). Instead, approaching any historical event always involves contemporary perspective, and largely depends on one’s creativity and imagination.

Collingwood (a First World War survivor himself) introduced the idea of re-enactment both as a concept, and as a method of historical enquiry. He argued that the historian’s work goes beyond documents and artefacts from the past, and that the knowledge of the past is always indirect, mediate, and inferential, meaning that it is never accessible as an empirically perceivable fact. For Collingwood neither relics, nor testimonies were enough; he wanted the historian to re-enact the past in one’s own mind – in order to discover the thoughts and motivations (perhaps even the emotions)



2. *The Method of National Constellations*. Białystok, June 2015. Photo by Marcin Onufryjuk

of historical actors at the time of the event. Hence, re-enactment is not intended as a method of explaining the past, but rather of understanding the past from the contemporary point of view. It is a creative process of reinterpreting and reinventing the past, which necessarily involves imagination (however limited by the historical evidence), and critical thinking.⁸

The performative turn has put the idea of re-enactment (which for Collingwood meant primarily intellectual, rational operation) in a new, practical and embodied context. In the theatrical field, it has resulted in a variety of performances that reject the dramatic text: either by resorting to a non-dramatic piece – such as an authentic historical document, an interview with a witness, or a literary reportage – adapted for the stage, or to a dramatic work re-adapted for the stage in a new, critical manner – all these in order to break the theatre conventions and the habits of the audience (namely, their alleged passivity), and ultimately, to reveal the ideology and power relations inherent in the institution of theatre.

However, it is important to stress here that though the performative turn is commonly explained as a response to the insufficiency of the metaphor of “the world as a text” as a means of understanding our times

(including genocide, terrorism, technological development, ecological threats, etc.), it does not so much eliminate the text from the cultural practices, as changes the relation that theorists, researchers and practitioners establish with the text, and encourages social scholars and humanists to reach for art as an alternative to scientific representations of the world.⁹

This approach seems to be well encapsulated in the concept of a German composer and theatre director Heiner Goebbels (befriended by the dramatist Heiner Müller), who has dubbed the result of this shift “theatre of the text”. According to Goebbels, in such a theatre – exemplified by Müller’s work – texts reveal themselves on stage, and need no illustration. The text remains autonomous, even if other theatrical means, such as visuals, or music, or professional acting, are employed. Goebbels believes that literature is much more free than theatre, meaning that the reception of a literary work is significantly less conventionalised than that of a theatre piece, and should resort to this freedom when staged. It is the freedom of the reader to refer to one’s own thoughts and feelings, and not the thoughts and feelings that have been imposed on him or her by theatre.¹⁰ Elsewhere, Goebbels presents his tactic of treating a text



3. *Prayer. A Common Theatre*. Białystok, July 2016. Photo by Paweł Tadejko

like a landscape; he writes: “To treat the text as a landscape means not to pass through it superficially in the manner of a tourist or, to remain in the picture, to grab hold of it from inside a moving car, but to travel through it like an expedition. Or to look at the text, in the words of Walter Benjamin, as a »forest in which the reader is the hunter«.”¹¹

Goebbels stresses the active role of the reader, or theatre spectator, who is not expected to interpret the text any more, but to experience the text via theatrical performance. The difference between interpretation and experience is that the latter is not restricted to intellectual operation – which requires certain cultural skills, of course – but opens a way (or even multiple ways) to the kind of understanding that may be called practical, or embodied, and which is much more democratic.

Modes of Participation in Theatre

Another democratising consequence of the performative turn for the artistic field, and for theatre in particular, is the arrival of the participant, non-professional, expert of the everyday,¹² as an agent in the creative process. Leaving aside merely receptive (passive) participation,

a number of contemporary theatrical practices engage the arts recipient directly, turning her or him into an active partaker in at least three distinct ways: as a protagonist, as a user, or as a collaborator.¹³

The protagonist is a participant who provides art with content matter, co-creates its substance: lends one’s personal heirlooms, tells the story of his or her life, shares private memories. A performance may rely on the accounts collected through interviews, or workshops with so-called ordinary people, who in this way either become the characters in a dramatic piece, though personally do not appear on stage (in such an instance, they may be played by professional actors), or participate as non-professional actors, and tell their histories from the stage themselves, as experts of the everyday, often with a certain degree of improvisation. That kind of use of source materials, such as interviews, personal documents, photographs, or other historical records, is typical of documentary and verbatim theatre, which nowadays seem to be earning both recognition, and popularity (just like nonfiction literature).

On-stage participation brings theatre into the territory of cooperation that, depending on a project, takes on either a more collaborative, or directed (ani-

mated) form. In the latter case, the participant becomes a user who allows to be placed in a structure designed by an artist, be it an installation, or a social (relational) situation.¹⁴ This kind of contribution might mean that the participant becomes the living material of art, or a tool in the hands of the artist, who makes use of her or him – together with their memories, emotions, or material belongings – merely for their own artistic purposes. This is not a rule, though, and the user may well retain autonomy, and cooperate with the artist on the partner basis.

The collaborator takes an active part in the creative process. Projects of that kind are based on cooperation between artists and non-artists, and usually resort to a workshop formula, which, at least to some extent, undermines the sense of the very division. In contrast to popular acting classes, by “workshop” I refer here to purposefully created situations of collective work, symmetric communication, reaching concerted solutions, learning one from another, and not to the acquisition of this or that technical, semi-professional skill by means of instructed training. In a collaborative project, the artistic situation is being constantly defined by the participants themselves, who are free to choose the repertory of action. It is them who decide what and how they want to contribute to the project. The artist’s responsibility, on the other hand, is to equip them with the conceptual, or expressive tools that will allow them to expand their own creative potential, or reach other values they desire.

Each of the above roles taken by the participants – of a protagonist (or content provider), a user (animated by the artist in a theatrically constructed situation), or a co-creator of a theatrical piece (enjoying a certain degree of agency and autonomy) – not only creates a need for distinct and, at least to some extent, original methodology of direct audience/public engagement, but also has the capacity of opening a different entry point into the memory work – the process of engaging with the past – both on the individual, and collective level. For that reason I also like to look at these roles through the lens of sociological imagination – as a sort of identity devices that, in accordance with Charles Wright Mills, enhance the participant’s ability to find connections between the individual, biographical, and the collective, structural, or historical.¹⁵

At this point, I would like to refer to my own experience as an academic sociologist working with participatory theatre projects, mostly in collaboration with

a playwright and director Michał Stankiewicz, and observing the practice from the inside. Together we have produced two documentary projects which refer to certain historical, and at the same time traumatic events: *The Method of National Constellations* (2014–2016), and *Prayer. A Common Theatre* (2016–2017). In addition, I would like to include an earlier participatory play by Stankiewicz, *Import/Export* (2013–2014), which I only observed. What the three projects have in common is that they all resorted to documentary, as well as participation, and all appealed to sociological imagination. Each of them, however, represents a different mode of participant’s involvement (as already briefly introduced), and a different usage of historical documents. Each of them also illustrates a distinct possibility, in which documentary materials (texts, or narrations of different kind) can be translated into performance. For *Import /Export* the keywords would be: personal stories (or narrations), experts of the everyday, and staging of experience; for *The Method of National Constellations*: structured interaction, immediate performance, and situation; for *Prayer. A Common Theatre*: polyphonic narration, (post)memory,¹⁶ and creative agency.

Life Histories and Experts of the Everyday

Import/Export engaged young Chechen refugees, who told their stories from the scene. The narration combined script and spontaneity. The scripted part was based on interviews with the participants, which had been done beforehand, and “rewritten” by a professional script writer (playwright) and director, so as to construct a piece of theatrical quality. On one hand, the stories of the refugees were used as a material for art; on the other, within the structure of the project, the refugees took the role of the experts of the everyday (in contrast to actors, no matter professional, or amateur).

The piece may be seen as both documentary, and participatory theatre. Following Grant H. Kester, it can also be referred to as dialogical, or conversational, as it created a fluid structure of communication between the otherwise potentially conflicted groups:¹⁷ the Chechen participants, and the mostly Polish audience, as well as, though on another level, between the participants, and the artists involved in the project, including the director, set designer, VJ, and others.

Considering its social dimension, *Import/Export* introduced into the public sphere the voices and narratives that are usually excluded, and it did it not only in a direct, but also empowering way – instead of being represented (in art, or by an artist), the participants provided the content for the theatre piece, spoke from the scene, and interacted with the audience by themselves. (Fig.1)

Whereas *Import/Export* rested on evoked life histories of the very participants and their personal on-stage performances, hence, required their long-term commitment, *The Method of National Constellations* made use of existing historical documents, and engaged a random (for the lack of a better word) public by temporarily moving them from the position of bystanders, to the position of protagonists.

The Users of the Situation

The Method of National Constellations was based on an original script that recalled the events largely excluded from the present-day official politics of memory in Poland, namely the pacification of a few Belarusian villages in the multiethnic region of Podlasie in the aftermath of the Second World War by a nationalist and anti-communist partisan troop led by Romuald Rajs, also known as Bury. The script referred to both the official and unofficial records of those events – the protocols of the National Remembrance Institute, and interviews with witnesses.

In *The Method of National Constellations* at one time up to 10 persons took active part. They were people who simply came to the performance, but they were not exactly incidental partakers, as they intentionally and consciously had chosen to come (and stay, as they could have withdrawn at any time), but they had not been engaged in the project before that either. Hence, within the project's "universe", they were called the Users of the Situation. If there was an audience, the spectators were referred to, in contrast to the users, as the Observers of the Situation. During the performance, the participants moved around a hexagonal board, as they were instructed, via headphones, by the Narrator which field to step in, and how to act as one of the pre-scripted role-characters in a given situation/scene. The role-taking made the basis for the performance dynamic, however, it seems that the core of the participants' experience was not so much "walking in someone else's

shoes", as the embodiment of their acting (and undergoing)¹⁸ within the "here and now" of the performance. In addition, the roles in the performance were transitory, so that it was impossible to identify with any of them throughout the event.

On the narrative level, as I already mentioned, the performance was set in a specific, local context of a divided collective memory. However, it seems to be comprehensible also out of that context, on a more universal level, as a relational "microcosm" of an ethnic, or religious conflict. For translated into the language of drama, the historical happenings were reduced to the very basic structure of relations and interactions between the actors of those happenings, and the participants were in fact provided with very little information about the motifs of the protagonists, or the socio-political background of the events. That created a space for their own experience both of the historical, and present situation, the distant past, and the immediate social and theatrical reality, giving way not only to a more embodied insight, but also to a more empathetic understanding. (Fig. 2).

In contrast to the structured narration and directed participation of *The Method of National Constellations*, *Prayer. A Common Theatre* provided the participants with an opportunity for a more autonomous and creative involvement; it also left more space for chance and spontaneity.

Polyphony and Agency

Prayer. A Common Theatre was inspired by *Chernobyl Prayer* – one of the books by Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, the 2015 Nobel Prize winner. She was awarded "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time".¹⁹ The reward dedication points to the important function of both her work, and much of the contemporary nonfiction literature, which is memorialisation of human experience, especially one of trauma, violence, and abuse.

Typically of Alexievich, the book consists of a number of "monologues" and "choirs", in which people of different social and political backgrounds talk about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986. Although the reportage is titled (at least in its Polish translation) *Chernobyl Prayer. Chronicle of the Future*, and it brings about a number of universal, ecological, and post-humanistic themes, it is essentially a book about the

past, one of the author's "monuments to human suffering and courage". Alexievich has turned a polyphonic narration into her distinctive writing style, and a very powerful means of literary expression. Hence, with our performance, we attempted to adopt the reportage not only in a participatory (democratised) manner, but also in a text-oriented way. We thought that there was no better formula to "translate" the polyphonic composition of the book to a theatrical piece than by inviting the readers to share their reading experiences with us, between themselves, and with the audience.

Methodologically, the project also combined documentary and participatory theatre practice. Each performance was prepared within a time span of about a week in cooperation between an artist, a sociologist (myself), and the participants invited from within a local community (so far we have worked with seven groups, each from six to thirteen people, in five different places in Poland). The participants were asked to read the book and each chose a passage of approximately half a page to learn by heart. Within the structure of the performance, they shared their selected and memorised passages with the audience, as well as gave reasons for their choices, which was done in a more spontaneous manner. In addition, they appeared on stage in random order, so that the dramatic (in a theatrical sense) quality of the performance was minimised. Before the performance, both the choices of passages, and the reasons behind them had been collectively and individually explored in the course of workshops, rehearsals, and discussions. As they varied a lot from performance to performance, the content of each spectacle was different. Because in fact the participants co-created the theatre piece, the entire endeavour may be regarded as an attempt at a more democratic artistic practice. (Fig. 3).

Theatre as a Site of Memory

Pierre Nora famously claimed that memory can sustain only when it is performed, practiced, repeated. If this is the case, any historical, documentary theatre may be seen as the location of live memory, or referring to the terminology of that author, as a sort of a *lieux de mémoire* – a space where the past is collectively recalled and remembered. However, in the case of participatory theatre, it is not necessarily one past, or memory, but – like in the examples from my own practice that I have presented – a multitude of positions, voices, and narra-

tives, not infrequently divided, or even conflicted. This is only possible because, as Nora himself, in a somewhat perplexing manner, pointed to:

Contrary to historical objects (...), *lieux de mémoire* have no referent in reality; or, rather, they are their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs. This is not to say that they are without content, physical presence or history; it is to suggest that what makes them *lieux de mémoire* is precisely that by which they escape from history. In this sense, the *lieux de mémoire* is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations.²⁰

In other words, *lieux de mémoire* are sort of "open forms" that, for one thing, need to be actively filled with re-enactments of the past; for another, are potentially inclusive of different memories of the past. As far as theatre is concerned, both can be reached with participation. But when we think of documentary, the question remains: Do participatory theatre practices bring us any closer to the past? Or, perhaps, what kind of past(s) do we access with these methods?

A partial answer seems to be implicit in the analysis of the category of *lieux de mémoire* provided by a Polish sociologist, Andrzej Szpociński. Observing a change in historical culture that we are facing nowadays, he points to the processes of its theatricalisation, connected, of course, to the expansion of performance in culture at large. Theatricalisation, for one thing, means that it is the senses that are the most important in experiencing the past, and not the intellect that used to be needed to decode cultural meanings. This is congruent with the democratic tendency in contemporary culture, which manifests itself, among other instances, in the reduction of the artistic experience to emotions.²¹ But, according to Szpociński, theatricalisation also means that the major function of performance is making it possible for the spectator, and/or participant, to become part of a community – an ephemeral one, created "here and now" by those present. And though the participants and spectators of a performance may also build imagined connections with certain protagonists and events from the past, the sociologist claims it is not a necessary condition for recalling and remembering the past, or turning a theatrical piece into a site of memory.²²

Notes

- ¹ Julian Stallabras, "Introduction // Contentious Relations: Art and Documentary," in *Documentary. Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Julian Stallabras (London, Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT Press, 2013), 12–21.
- ² Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).
- ³ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (New York: Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980).
- ⁴ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," trans. by Marc Roudebush, *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.
- ⁵ Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation," in *Jean Baudrillard. Selected Writings*, edit. by Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166–184.
- ⁶ Ewa Domańska, "»Zwrot performatywny« we współczesnej humanistyce," *Teksty Drugie*, 5 (2007), 48–61.
- ⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 1.
- ⁸ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 214–220.
- ⁹ Domańska, "»Zwrot performatywny«,," 52.
- ¹⁰ Heiner Goebbels, *Przeciw Gesamtkunstwerk* (Kraków: Ha!art, 2015), 50.
- ¹¹ Heiner Goebbels, "Text as Landscape," *Performance Research*, 2 (1997), https://www.heinergoebbels.com/en/archive/texts/texts_by_heiner_goebbels/read/240.
- ¹² The term has been coined by a German theatre trio Rimini Protokoll in reference to participation of non-actors (representatives of varied social groups, such as call-centre workers, track drivers, or academics) in their performances. See Florian Malzacher, "Dramaturgie opieki i odbierania pewności. Historia Rimini Protokoll," in *Rimini Protokoll. Na tropie codzienności*, eds. Miriam Dreyse and Florian Malzacher (Poznań, Kraków: Fundacja Malta, Korporacja Ha!art, 2012), 21.
- ¹³ See also Katarzyna Niziołek, "Partycypacja i dialog jako demokratyczne praktyki artystyczne," in *Kultura od nowa. Badania – trendy – praktyka*, eds. Grzegorz D. Stunża and Krzysztof Stachura (Gdańsk: Instytut Kultury Miejskiej, Uniwersytet Gdański, 2016), 28–38. For the analysis of the historical development of participatory aesthetic and practices, see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London, New York: Verso, 2012).
- ¹⁴ For more on the relational aspects of contemporary art see Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. by Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).
- ¹⁵ Charles Wright Mills, *Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.
- ¹⁶ The concept of postmemory was initially developed by Marianne Hirsch in her book *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). According to Hirsch, "postmemory" describes the condition of a person, or a collective, such as a generation, who remembers other people's memories, especially ones of traumatic events, which have been handed down to them within families, local communities, or the larger culture.
- ¹⁷ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces. Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004).
- ¹⁸ The distinction between acting and undergoing has been made by John Dewey, who claimed that being an agent and a recipient are two inseparable sides of human experience, including that of art. See: John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 2005).
- ¹⁹ https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/press.pdf.
- ²⁰ Nora, *Between memory and history*, 23.
- ²¹ Daniel Bell was one of the first sociologists to diagnose this process. See: Daniel Bell, *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
- ²² Andrzej Szpociński, "Miejsca pamięci (Lieux de mémoire)," *Teksty Drugie*, 4 (2008): 19.

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