Using Recorded Images for Political Purposes

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Today, more than ever before, the availability of recorded images and the interactive opportunities they provide have made it possible for theatre professionals to focus on form and aesthetic approach. Such artistic work with recorded images still essentially relies on the use of digital, video or film images on stage. Theatre stages are full of screens and offer countless visual experiences that may be fascinating or even aggravating. Among members of the artistic team, there are now a number of comparatively new functions such as 'video artists' or 'image directors'.

This might lead us to the hasty conclusion that form takes pride of place, in some new updated version of art for art's sake. It should be recalled, though, that technical devices have always been used on stage. In the twentieth century, however, they acquired a higher degree of autonomy; they were freed from a purely functional dimension (such as lighting the actors) to achieve an artistic function of their own. They became free-standing elements of the language of theatre. In this development, recorded images powerfully contributed to the transgression of boundaries between the arts at the end of the twentieth century. This kind of transgression had actually already been experimented with by the avant-gardes in the 1920s and 1970s. No theoretical consideration on the use of media on stage can ignore the fact that as a living art, theatre is a hybrid that has always incorporated other arts and new techniques.

That said, technologies developed so fast during the twentieth century that their use on the stage resulted in the blurring of commonly recognized landmarks. When faced with performances where no actor is present, many spectators will wonder whether it is actually 'theatre' they are witnessing. With *Stifters Dinge* by Heiner Goebbels (2007) or *Les Aveugles* in Denis Marleau's version (2002) – to mention two examples that led to heated debate – it is difficult to determine which standards of reception should be used. Indeed, in both examples there is no actor on the stage. In Goebbels' play, human presence is limited to that of technicians who at the start set up the device through which pianos will play on their own, shift on the stage and produce all sorts of visual and sound effects. For Maeterlinck's play, Denis Marleau also did away with the actor's physical presence and used instead the filmed images of two comedians' faces (for all twelve characters); these images were then beamed onto moulds of their faces on stage. The absence of any human presence and the use of clues and traces fit the diffuse *angst* to be perceived in the text. While in the case of Goebbels, theatre becomes an installation that erases any narrative plot, with Marleau narrative and action are no longer carried by

living actors inhabiting the same space-time continuum as the audience. This completely upsets the conventions of drama. Whether they are called 'postdramatic' theatre (Lehmann 1999), theatre in crisis, or the end of theatre, such experiments – taken to the extreme in the instances mentioned, where no living actor is to be found on stage – show that technologies in fact open new perspectives.

Yet, if media have changed the language of theatre, they have also transformed the way we perceive it. We are invaded with images, caught in an unending movement, and we expect the theatre stage to reflect this frenzied pace; to offer a diversified focus of attention. Instead of our eyes focusing on a fixed point as had become the norm since the sixteenth century, we now shift to multiple focuses. A diversity of actions, or rather of activities, on stage and a multiplication of images are current features found in many performances. In most cases we can think that what is at stake is to capture the attention of an audience all too used to the promptings of new technologies such as 3D movies or interactive television and internet surfing. Yet, this might also be part of a quest for a new kind of theatre if we think, along with Bertolt Brecht, that 'theatre, literature, art must [...] create the "ideological superstructure" of actual and effective changes that affect the way of living in our time' (Brecht 1999: 17).[1]

Fruitful Outlooks

In agreement with contemporary perception frames, recorded images in the theatre have contributed to a renewal of the practice of scenography. Through screens, video monitors etc., images have long been part of the context in which we live. But several stage devices now present instead of three-dimensional elements a backdrop on which digital images are projected. The possibilities these images offer (very slow, almost imperceptible transformations, changing only parts of the images...) make it possible to interfere in the narrative by taking on a descriptive dimension, for instance, or some detail that no longer has to be shown in the actor's acting.

In *Sous le volcan* (2009), as directed by Guy Cassiers and based on Malcolm Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano*, images projected onto the screen which cut through the bare stage both describe places and, along with sound effects, create atmospheres. These are images (both stills and videos, sometimes computer-enhanced) that Cassiers brought back from the very locations in Mexico where the novel takes place. He produces combinations, cuts and juxtapositions apt to take the audience inside the mind of the Consul (the main character played by Josse De Pauw). A mind soaked in spirits, where the course of events is blurred and leaves only traces for the senses: colours, shapes, sounds. Cassiers' images show a world falling apart, a world in which subjective and objective dimensions are confused. Indeed, while spectators slip into the mental deterioration process that calls up the character's visions and hallucinations, they perceive the climate of anguish that prevailed during the Second World War. 'I combine visual and sound elements,' Cassiers writes in the written presentation of the performance. And images indeed do take on the task of describing and contextualizing – both

within and outside the narrative – dimensions that are often left out of theatre performances, while actors play and talk. As he shows on the screen a glass being filled, for instance, Cassiers frees the actual acting of any mimetic dimension, yet he also establishes a succession of very dense interactions between stage and screen so that the device of recorded images is integrated into a renewed theatre language. It is thus not recorded images as such that change theatre language but the connections and interdependence between what can be seen on the screen and what is acted on stage.

In most of his recent productions (*Shakespeare is dead get over it*, 2008; *Bérénice*, 2009; *Pleurez, pleurez mes yeux*, 2010), Philippe Sireuil has a rather different approach: digital images are used in his research on a classical repertoire (namely Shakespeare, adapted by Paul Pourveur, Racine and Corneille). *Bérénice* explores the passion between Titus and Berenice, which is defeated by raison d'état since Titus, on becoming emperor, sends Berenice into exile. In Vincent Lemaire's scenography, the stage was divided by a huge canvas on which the image of the actor-character slowly turned into a classical statue (video by Benoît Gillet). This was an allegory of this rigid law, which in turn appeared more and more worn by time. As such, there was a reciprocity between the slow transformation of the image on the screen and what Sireuil exposed through the words spoken by his characters, namely, that an external constraint irremediably spoils what we are and turns it into nothingness. From this reciprocity, which increases both the slowness and the burden of what is being acted out on stage (the split between love and power), some sort of immense nostalgia emerges. The audience's attention is not strictly speaking caught by the screen, which only seems to offer a fixed image that is part of the setting. But the spectator's gaze repeatedly stumbles upon this long canvas that obstructs the exit. Now, having looked elsewhere for a while, they will notice that the image has changed. They will then look alternately at the stage and at the screen (where the actor-character is slowly turning into a crumbling statue). Through his direction, Philippe Sireuil makes this sort of circling from outside delicately clear. Digital images are used here in a quasi-autonomous way and renew the dialectics between text and stage as theorized by Bernard Dort at the end of the 1980s:

> Thus the issue of text and stage has shifted. The question no longer concerns which of them will prevail. Their relationship, like the relationships among the various components of the stage, can in fact no longer be conceived in terms of union or subordination. A real competition, an active contradiction unfolds in front of us, spectators. Theatricality is no longer only this 'thickness of signs' mentioned by Roland Barthes. It is also the shifting of these signs, their impossible conjunction, their confrontation before the eyes of the audience of this *emancipated* representation. (1988: 183)

Inscribing digital images in the staging of *Bérénice* is a way of meeting the challenge Dort points to at the end of his study, namely, how the audience can be 'activated,' yet

probably in a less radical sense than the Brechtian practice that prevailed in the 1980s and 1990s. Now fully integrated into theatre aesthetics, recorded images no longer strike viewers as an alternative or competing language which would, for instance, highlight the loss or paucity of communication in our society, as was largely the case in the 1970s and 1980s when videos started to be widely used on the stage. Instead of a dialectical relation or the 'confrontation' mentioned by Dort, we now have an interaction that relies on a multiplicity of forms and produces more diverse effects.

Testifying and Narrating

Recorded images can thus become components in a network of narrative techniques while preserving some creativity on the part of the audience. In *The Lobster Shop* by Jan Lauwers (2006), they contribute to moving the narrative forward through means other than words uttered on the set. In his analysis of 'stories' and storytelling, at one point Lauwers chooses to restrain the actors' play to screen the fatal scene that leads to a child's death. The bias is more realistic here: the projected images are less formal than the performance on the set and more openly suggest violence. While actors are lying on the half-lit set and hum softly, on the screen two children on a beach engage in wrestling while their parents are strolling nearby (several actors of Needcompany can be identified). Is this really a game? The innocuous context of a family walk may suggest it. Yet the sound effect considerably amplifies the blows. Doubt sets in and is soon confirmed by the look of concern that appears on the faces of the adults on screen. After a while, one of the children falls and does not get up. The adults cannot bring him back to life. This is where the film stops and the actors resume their acting.

Strictly speaking, the film is not necessary for the audience to understand what is at stake in the story told by Lauwers, but it makes its context explicit; without it, the spectators would not know in what circumstances the child died and how this could trigger a sense of guilt. More importantly, it represents a moment of focalization that operates at a different level from the rest of the performance. The play sets out to discuss the grave topic of the child's death and its destructive effect on parents and their environment. Lauwers uses an aesthetics that combines songs, dancing and moments marked by ironic lightness. The stage creates both distance and empathy. United by the adhesion called for by songs and dances, stage and audience are involved in the story, though from a distance. The performance is perceived as fiction and aesthetic achievement, since Lauwers refuses any direct or mechanical effect of art on the world. This gap, this distance is necessary for aesthetic pleasure. It can be described as the locus of mediation.

But then the video cancels this gap. It brings the audience closer to those 'people' on the screen who come across much less as characters. Here, Lauwers plays on the mimetic or indicial dimension that is commonly associated with photography and film. The figures on the video are only partly those on the stage. Next to the actor playing the part of the dead child's father we can see Lauwers with two children, none of

whom are visible on the set. Some empathy is thus prompted by the video, creating some sort of identification within a performance from which it is banned, which triggers reflection. While the singing, dancing and acting on the set lead to the audience's adhesion and create a sense of community brought together by art, the video suddenly breaks this aesthetic movement. It brings the audience back to a form of loneliness in front of a violence that is hard to understand. It calls for individual thinking. The use of video in *The Lobster Shop* belongs to a realistic approach that is only a limited part of the performance as a whole and calls upon an ethical questioning on the part of the audience. As with Sireuil, images 'activate' the audience beyond the boundaries of the performance towards an ontological form of reflection (on humankind, violence, freedom...).

Critical Function

While it is easy to associate such 'activation of the audience' with a Brechtian heritage, effects in Lauwers' play are geared more to meditation than to social critique. Yet in other cases the use of recorded images can lead to a more perceptible critical dimension.

In *Hamlet* as directed by Thomas Ostermeier (2008), filmed images are shown at two levels: in some scenes they are projected on a screen behind the characters, in other instances they are doubled in the foreground but with a fuzzy effect so that the mimetic effect is not obvious. The point is less for the audience to see, recognize or even identify than to stage a perspective. Usually Hamlet himself holds the camera and films characters and himself in some monologues. Imagined by Ostermeier as some dangling and uncouth teenager galvanized by the injustice his father was a victim of, the character is unfailingly accompanied by a camcorder through which he looks at the world. This world as a show by which Hamlet feels repulsed is somehow authenticated by the director beyond the character's subjective point of view. As he uses a microphone to let his actors speak and inserts variety-like songs, Ostermeier reviews the play in light of our contemporary context dominated by reality shows. Here, again, the recorded images are thus fully inscribed among theatre codes but are also an object used by theatre. Through his approach to the play, Ostermeier gives a theatre dimension to filmed images and reaches a synthesis of living art and recorded images – a synthesis achieved through the art of theatre.

Ivo Van Hove's approach to *Romeinses tragedies* (2007) ('Roman Tragedies', after Shakespeare) goes almost in the opposite direction. Here a huge screen hangs over the proscenium and the audience is caught in the simultaneous projection, in close-ups or semi-close-ups, of characters acting on the set. Through a realistic kind of acting that borders on caricature, the actors, who are often positioned directly in front of the audience, strengthen this transposition into the media world that underpins the staging. Stage acting, including as it does recorded images, tends to be obliterated. Through a

mimetic quest parallel to that of the television set and the media world into which the political world dissolves, form is meaning. Writing for the stage is influenced by the codes of the media world. As recorded images contribute to suppressing the distance between the viewers and the viewed scene, having spectators up on the stage increases the identification process and connects with the fascination for reality shows that is so typical of our times. Theatre language and recorded images are thus combined and produce a redundancy effect. The blurring of theatre codes and the highlighting of televisual codes point to the disappearance of both the private and the public realms as they are replaced by the realm of the media.

As it heightens our awareness of the general levelling of perception modes enforced by the media, this way of using recorded images somewhat conceals theatre in its essential dimension of a poor or archaic art. Indeed, for a performance to occur, all that is needed is for an actor and a spectator to be physically present in the same place and united by convention in a common process. If it becomes dependent on media, it tends to disappear, at least in its basic principles, and to adjust to what it exposes.

Political Uses

One of the oldest uses of recorded images in the theatre is part of political theatre. While agitprop largely used documents such as newspaper articles to illustrate its political message, it was probably Erwin Piscator who already in the 1920s extensively experimented with films in the theatre. As he wanted to break away from the myth of art 'offered' to the people, Piscator tried to achieve a synthesis of form and message in the shape of political theatre, or, as he put it at the time, epic theatre. In his staging of the play *Drapeaux* (1924), written by Alfons Paquet in 1918 and focusing on the trial of anarchists in Chicago in the 1880s, he used projected photos and texts that 'drew the lesson of the action' (Piscator 1962: 58). In doing this, he was trying to go beyond the decorative function of recorded images to 'organically' connect film and 'scenic events' (ibid. 64), a goal he had not yet fully achieved in *Drapeaux* but which governed his following attempts.

Piscator used films that he saw as documents testifying to reality, such as the mobilization of soldiers, a parade of European leaders, views of attacks with flame guns and of corpses. He thus showed archive images which, at a time when war films were neither common nor as he said 'fashionable', would 'shake proletarian masses awake' (ibid. 65). He used films to show the validity of historical materialism. Ways of including recorded images were thus duly considered: cinema was to show the interdependence of individuals, society and history.

As he further experimented with this documentary approach, Piscator fully exploited the more realistic dimension that immediately distinguished cinema from theatre. He clearly preserved the specificities of both arts and set them in a dialectical relation. The 'as if' theatre convention was still useful to expose a process – the voting of military credits, for instance – while filmed images introduced a more general social dimen-

sion, as they showed the first casualties. In such alternation, the audience's modes of perception were being transformed. Indeed, the film created a gap (Piscator used the word 'surprise') that changed the role of the spectator. The discursive mode (that of the plot, of the narrative) was suspended and the audience had to establish a link between what is said and what is shown. Now this connection belongs more to emotions and feelings than to reason. The sight of bodies on the documentary images creates a relationship to reality that modifies the spectators' position. They are more easily affected. Piscator clearly played on mimesis and catharsis but channelled them towards a political message. All his later experimentations would similarly try to reach the emotions of spectators.

Whether films are didactic, dramatic or provide comments, according to the functions Piscator described (ibid. 166-168), they must be used to find new 'analysis and information techniques'. So the director saw archive films as evidence of reality and used them on the stage as testimonies. He in fact relied on such testimonies to prompt the audience to think about the gap between what is shown on stage and the projected images. He somehow retrieved for recorded images a status that Benjamin had described as lost in his famous 1935 text. But it was also in the 1930s that propaganda techniques were further developed using cinema. And while Piscator did consider his political theatre as a kind of propaganda – i.e. theatre serving politics – Benjamin, like Brecht, had a somewhat different approach: their political theatre was a praxis, a theatre engaged in a consubstantial process with the reality into which it was inscribed. Indeed, Brecht commented on Piscator's work as follows:

> So Piscator does not use the passage from speech to image, which is still abrupt, he merely adds to the number of spectators in the theatre room the number of actors who, while still on stage, stare at the screen [...]. (1999a: 16)

As it combines sensitive questioning (through shocking images) and critical reflection, Brecht's theatre was less directly didactic, relying as it did on a distancing effect. In this respect, while he acknowledged the contribution of technology, and of cinema in particular, to epic drama, Brecht remained rather suspicious about the use of films on stage. Indeed, cinema is likely to foster the kind of illusion and identification that the Brechtian model is supposed to fight: 'What matters is that as it presents a real environment, cinema should not do away with the pleasure to be found in the dialectical game between two- or three-dimensional elements' (Brecht 1999b: 22). Brecht would thus favour the projections of still images and other similar devices such as posters or drawings. On the other hand, his narrative experiments largely borrow from cinematographic techniques such as cuts, framing and editing. He felt that these devices, more closely related to a scientific age, made it easier to perceive contradictions and ideas that underpin his works.

Tools to Represent the World

Similar questions related to ways of presenting reality in a political perspective motivated the enterprise Groupov launched back in 1980. Feeling that they did not have any reliable tools left to represent the world, this Belgian collective initially worked on what they considered to be remains. After exploring representations of the world based on one kind of truth in this vein (through Paul Claudel and Brecht, among others), however, in 1994 they turned to current events and started staging a major performance based on the Rwandan genocide. Recorded images could not be bypassed here, since a significant part of the performance consists of showing how the Rwandan genocide was presented in the media. Speeches and audiovisual images are therefore an important component in *Rwanda 94* (2000). But the now commonplace use of televisual images to inform and testify is radically turned inside out by their presentation in the theatre. Indeed, the point was to show how the media participated in manipulation both in Rwanda and in Europe. During the performance, next to repeated calls to murder broadcast by Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, we see how in Europe images that reported real facts (beheadings with machetes, for instance) were lost in the flow of media news. The performance deconstructs the impact of media by exposing how they play on perception frames. On the set, a lecturer, Jacques Delcuvellerie, starts a long speech in response to media subscribing to an essentially ethnic distinction with: '*Hutus, qu'est-ce que cela signifie? Tutsis, qu'est-ce que cela signifie?*' (What does it mean to be a Hutu? What does it mean to be a Tutsi?). But theatre will also show the constraints limiting the media: the journalist called Bee Bee Bee, a central character in the narrative interlaced in *Rwanda 94*, will not be able to broadcast the television programme resulting from what she has gone through to understand genocidal mechanisms.

As a constant element of the performance, media images are subjected to a critical dramatic deconstruction resulting in a crystal clear message as can be seen in the words of one of the characters in the Chorus of the Dead:

> DEAD 2. –
> Hear them, beware
> Look at them, but do not trust
> These machines that spread information
> They infect our hearts
> And pollute our minds
> A sly hyena starts mooing
> Like some cow
> We are in their lair
> Please beware. (Groupov 2002: 51)

We can see here how the theatrical relationship (in the sense of communication and, specifically in *Rwanda 94*, of a partial participation of the audience) is not considered to

be in a dialectical connection with media communication but clearly set above it. This is still obviously the case with the sequence dealing with 'electronic ghosts'. In the plot, one of the elements that leads the journalist into her search for the truth is the scrambling of her television programme with close-up images of victims of the genocide calling for the truth to be established. In contrast to the way Piscator used filmed documents, these images are artefacts, but in the plot they function as though they were parts of reality, whose origins nevertheless remain something of a mystery (since they include dead people talking).[2] *Rwanda 94* uses television as an object and exposes its mechanisms. Eventually, while the journalist will not broadcast her programme, the performance is there for us. It retains the freedom of its duration (six hours) and will be shown to various audiences outside the previous censorship enforced in the world of media.

In the relationship between theatre and media, theatre uses recorded images as material and eventually displays its greater power to create a political effect[3]: instead of the dominant discourse that defined the Rwandan genocide as a tragedy nobody could do anything about, what is set out in *Rwanda 94* is a sense of co-responsibility. Without developing an alternative truth, the performance shows a plurality of approaches to the genocide, thus questioning dominant notions about the individual and the social dimensions. Through a political set of symbols constructed on stage and the use of media images, *Rwanda 94* denies that society consists of isolated individuals and shows how everyone interacts in the web of relations that make up human society. For instance, members of the Chorus of the Dead move about in the room and address their testimony to small groups of spectators, which involves them more closely. This is but one example, but the interdependence of individuals as the matrix of society is one of the leading ideas of the performance that can transform established principles of perception. Indeed, it puts spectators in the position of being always already involved.

A Subversive Meshing

Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué's *Photo-Romance* (2009) develops a completely different way of using recorded images. Set in the oppressive context of present-day Lebanon, the two artists' work aims at developing critical analyses without actually enforcing them. In fact, it is this very double bind imposed by the historical situation that is staged and leads to a new artistic form.

Theatre performance is not questioned as a way of showing the world that would no longer be appropriate to our perceptual frames. It is not modified by the use of media that would open up spectators' imaginary world, disturb their expectations or multiply viewpoints. Media images are the very material of the performance in a clearly political perspective. Here the 'performance' is anchored in its actual referent, namely, the social and political situation in Lebanon.

In *Photo-Romance*, the use of recorded images does not attempt to recreate a more real referent for an imaginary character, as for instance in Thomas Ostermeier's *Hamlet*. It

makes it possible to interlace a fiction that through its articulation in the plot presented on stage creates a new perception of the Lebanese situation. Recorded images are not used as documenting evidence either. On the contrary, they construct a story which the artists, already in the title of the performance, relate to the most popular fictional genre to be found today – the photo-romance. The performance is indeed inspired by this narrative mode in which the plot develops through a succession of photos while characters' words are framed in bubbles.

From the beginning of the performance two characters, played by Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué, are sitting in wide armchairs on one side of the set. On the other side stands a big screen. In between, at the back of the stage, a third character sings or plays an instrument. The dialogue between the first two characters immediately provides all the components of the situation. The young woman meets an agent of the Lebanese censorship board in order to be authorized to complete and broadcast her film. A discussion follows in which the censor demands that the director justify the construction of her film and her artistic options. In order to win him over, the woman shows the already filmed images. As she has to justify the editing or the shooting, there are several freeze frames that turn what is shown on the screen into a photo-romance rather than a film.

Yet what is accounted for by the plot's internal constraints (her defending the film) takes a different dimension for the audience. Freeze frames make it possible for the director to comment on the film in progress, and her discourse can be heard in two ways. Within the plot it is meant for the censor who develops counterarguments, which already points to the situation of creation in Lebanon. Everything is scanned to try and detect the lightest indication of non-conformity. The director's answers apparently rely on a reading of the edited shots that seems to be limited to their narrative value. However, the way she speaks conveys a false good faith, a false naivety.

Photo-Romance plays on this gap between the uttered words, the images commented upon and the effect produced by them. Beyond the dead phrases used on stage by the two characters with opposed intentions, the audience perceives that elements in the filmed images can be read differently. Spectators then become more actively involved and deduce a third narrative that is less fictional and is directly related to the Lebanese situation. From a number of clues to be found in the dialogues, projected images and comments on them – but also in the absence of things, in what is not said and not shown – spectators construct a more critical representation of Lebanese society. *Photo-Romance* thus develops at the crossroads of three narrative constructs with different fictional status.

Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué found part of their inspiration in Ettore Scola's film *Una giornata particolare* (1977). Though coming somewhat later than the Italian neorealist school, Scola's film conveys the feel of the late 1930s in showing the latent repression that weighed on Italian society and particularly on marginalized members such as women and homosexuals. The film recounts the meeting between a woman (the mother of several children, worn down by a meaningless life) and a rejected homosexual,

who are left alone for a day as others have gone to a fascist demo.

The film on the screen of *Photo-Romance* transposes the plot of *Una giornata particolare* to a Lebanese context with Islam assuming the role of fascism, as women are still confined to household chores and have no rights to their own opinions or pleasure, and homosexuals are still repressed. However, neither the dialogues nor the projected images expose the social and political situation; it has to be induced from tonalities, hesitations or avoiding questions that touch upon sensitive areas, to which the spectators' attention is thus directed. When, for instance, the character of the director explains the connection between her film and Ettore Scola's, the censor's response clearly indicates that the reference to Scola is a sign of legitimacy – all the more so as she adds technical or aesthetic developments about her using a pre-existing work. She subtly concludes: 'All our work is based on the notion that there is nothing new to be invented.' Though this is not laboured, we can see how such an answer fits into the dominant conservative ideology embodied by the censor.

Only careful decoding can reveal the critical dimension within the filmed images. The first images seem to be lifted from a TV news programme. The screen is split and shots of two different demonstrations are shown next to each other. But the commenting words also deserve our attention as they tell us that these demonstrations are organised by the 'two main rival forces in the country' and aim at 'deciding on the identity of Lebanon'. To this end it is further stated that they will converge on a square in the city centre to show 'that there is not one Lebanon but two.' Irony can only be perceived through careful decoding. Indeed, the European spectators' eyes are immediately drawn to those newsreels that they soon understand as a clue to a problem, a conflict they have heard about.[4] These sequences tell them that there is an unresolved issue in this country that is still more or less at war. Now we cannot miss the irony and critical dimension in the commentary – heard in Arabic but with French subtitles: two opposed demonstrations converging to assert their opposition together and turn it into the foundation of Lebanese identity. The underlying criticism is aimed at the media as much as at the recurrent motif of conflicts in Lebanon: identity. Criticism is prompted by irony, and irony is a figure of speech that relies on a permanent double-entendre. Spectators have to supply the missing information, detect the gap and bridge it. The fact that the whole city is out in one or the other of the two demonstrations expresses a bi-polarity with no room for an alternative. People have to belong to one side or another, or else be marginalized. Irony brings out the issue of identity while nothing is explicitly said, but the validity of this is questioned straight away. Such irony points to the problem without actually mentioning it and sets up a reading protocol for the performance as a whole. It makes spectators active and prompts them to play a part in what is about to happen.

The still images shown on the screen point to concrete physical references, those of today's Lebanon (the fiction is set in 2007): streets, rooms within houses, and even the two characters construct a realistic representation of the context. The film, edited into stills, focuses on the two protagonists – the housewife, who is a ghostly presence in a

patriarchal society, and the former activist who brings out the situation of the left in Lebanon. They carry the names of the authors, Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué, which further blurs the all too neatly fictional dimension of the narrative and introduces some sort of continuum between the extra-diegetic reality of Lebanon: what is acted out on the stage and what is shown in the film. The momentum of the performance relies on the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality. But the process is oriented.

We should also mention that the images are filmed without a soundtrack: in the diegetic context this indicates that the film is not finished. Sitting at a small desk under the screen, and under Arab music, the director reads the replies, which prevents too immediate and too obvious an effect of reality, that of the realist film relying on identification. Such uncoupling of words and images introduces a distance that prompts spectators to pay greater attention to what happens in the gap. Indeed, this is where criticism can step in. Cut off from images, the former left-wing activist's words take on a different value; they seem not to belong to the sort of normal flow to which we are used. Consequently, the political dimension is foregrounded. Rabih Mroué (the character in the film) refers to the many clans and factions that undermine Lebanon while the country seems affected with recurring amnesia: 'Nothing is remembered,' he says. Echoing the marginal situation of the two rejected characters, the film shows a paralysed society that is stuck between extremes (fundamentalism and capitalism) and infected by some minor or ordinary fascism that is conveyed by the introduction of drawings into the film. These drawings point to the family scene that is defined by prejudices, intolerance and moral rigidity. Again, thanks to those commented-upon computer-manipulated drawings, criticism is hidden under the plot and the apparent naivety of its presentation. As can be seen, Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué use various visual props to expose a collective responsibility, without attempting to develop any systematic discourse.

The performance comes across as a quest in action that relies on spectators' active involvement. The audience follows what is said and debated on the stage, and in order to understand it has to formulate assumptions, for *Photo-Romance* is anything but didactic. While Lebanese censorship is clearly present on the stage, the performance deflects attention to a diffuse social censorship for which common people are responsible. Instead of a critique of a system, the performance proposes a questioning of people that make up society, their silences, their tacit agreements, their adhesion. *Photo-Romance* thus shows a local and regional totalitarianism, and through its very form it wagers on the possibility to use forms to ends they were not intended for.

Indeed, through the entwining of theatre and recorded images, the artists question the common assumptions underlying political theatre, about which it was generally agreed that its function is to expose the oppression of one group by another. Now as the issue of representation is the very material of their performance – not just its outcome – Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué contribute to a new paradigm of political theatre. In committed or political theatre, recorded images are often used to testify, as evidence of some reality. Not so in *Photo-Romance*. In earlier performances as well, Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh had already questioned the very notion of representation (e.g. in *Qui a peur de*

la représentation? 2006). But the questions they raise – How can we tell a story? How can we speak up today? What is a film? What is theatre? – are also related to a concrete situation. The real is not a vague and undefined world but Lebanon in a context defined by war, fundamentalism and capitalism. Their theatre never conceals its specific anchoring but directs attention to ways of conveying this reality, of providing readings of it that determine a way of acting upon it.

All these elements (theatre, cinema, photos, music...) are taken apart on the stage. Artists thus expose both the media and the way they work. Art organizes representations, but it can also introduce critique into dominant representations. For Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué, the point is to show that all forms of spectacles and images are relative by foregrounding their nature as constructions that involve choices made on the basis of objectives and interests. As a consequence, no representation can be held as true. The way the two Lebanese artists have worked presents choices and positions that underpin representations. In doing this, they indicate that choosing a representation is indeed a choice that involves a responsibility. This is their way of providing a subtle criticism of this ordinary fascism they perceive in Lebanese society.

Beyond the frequently repeated question 'how can we *say* the world of today on the stage?', *Photo-Romance* attempts to say what is socially 'unsayable' or cannot be said because of specific circumstances. We understand why *Photo-Romance* is less to be received as a performance than as a process, namely, the dismantling of images and discourse. In this, it is also part of the new artistic forms that no longer rely on a finite object. But this form is also political. First, as we have seen, because it works on the juxtaposition of images and drawings as well as of images and words rather than on their logical articulation, it makes a number of critical statements against Lebanese society without ever organizing them into a traceable and therefore easily censored discourse. Next, as they explode the fixed status of any kind of representation, Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué provide an answer to a Lebanese society that is stuck between conflicting truths where no alternative voice can emerge. In this respect *Photo-Romance* does belong to a new paradigm of political theatre which, as I have shown elsewhere, no longer proposes the representation of a pre-established political construct (Delhalle 2006). This political theatre for today is no longer defined by a unifying answer. Founded on a sociology that aims at renewing the vision of the collective and individual subject, it now posits itself as the new locus of political experience, a praxis that subverts dominant frames of perception. In short, it is a form of theatre that takes some distance from the myth of absolute progress where the collective dimension – the 'we' – is always in an overbearing position, as a somewhat abstract ideal. If it still has an effect on the political principles of our vision of the world, it is no longer as the relay of some party or movement but through repeated breaks – to resist assimilation – and an ongoing debate in which all data are ceaselessly questioned. This new paradigm of political theatre is no longer focused on the issue of power and power relationships but stresses a reticular perception of our being in the world.

As it points to the responsibility of every member of a society in the social process,

Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué's approach becomes subversive to various degrees depending on the audience. It can easily be imagined that the impact of the performance will be greater with a Lebanese audience. If we want to conclude on the transformation of the aesthetics of theatre under the influence of media, a work such as *Photo-Romance*, which combines an ancient art (theatre) and recorded images, shows the conditions in which theatre can be political today. If this political theatre (also to be found in *Rwanda 94*) uses representations, which is common in contemporary theatre, its effects can act on cognitive structures. In a nutshell, it develops from the assumption that cognitive subversion can contribute to a change in social reality.

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NOTES

1 All quotations from French sources have been translated by the translator of the article, Christine Pagnoulle (University of Liège).

2 For an analysis of these sequences, see Delhalle (2007).

3 In this respect, see Delhalle (2006).

4 I will only consider this European perspective although the artists' ambition is obviously that their production can also be received in Lebanon.

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