

Research programme – second funding period

In the second phase of funding, the aim will be to further delineate the guiding concept “Verflechtungen von Theaterkulturen / Interweaving Performance Cultures” and to probe its scope and its productiveness. In doing so, we will have to avoid stretching it in such a way that it becomes applicable to virtually any performance, thus losing all heuristic force. Faced with a wealth of case studies such as carried out by the International Research Centre’s Fellows and scholars, it is necessary to establish in each case what exactly is being interwoven, how this interweaving takes place, to what purpose it is being undertaken, what function it fulfils, and, most importantly, in what context it is being carried out. Only on this basis does it become possible to develop a theory directed at cross-cultural comparison/culture-comparative theory.

In developing such a theory, however, we will have to take into account the specific dynamics of cultural processes. All over the world, more and more new forms and types of interweaving are currently coming into being. While some of these interweaving practices make it obvious that a diversity of strands are being entwined, others make such use of localisation that the performance as a whole is barely recognisable as the result of interweaving and appears “local” through and through. Tadashi Suzuki’s bilingual productions in the 1980s and 1990s, making use of Japanese and English-speaking (American and Australian) actors, were clearly recognisable as products of interweaving processes. This also applies to his various versions of *The Bacchae*. Instances of interweaving were clearly apparent to Japanese and non-Japanese audiences alike. By contrast, the last version (staged in 2009) forewent obvious markers such as non-Japanese actors and the use of two languages. In addition, other instances of interweaving were carried out in such a way as to barely be recognisable as such. Critic Tamotsu Watanabe, who had seen the earlier versions of *The Bacchae*, wrote: “Comparing it to the first performance, as theatre, the register changed completely. Today, the performance I saw was just like Noh drama“ (*Teatro*, July 2009, p. 34).

As this example shows, modes of interweaving evolve, as do their functions and their effects. We therefore operate on the assumption that “Interweaving Performance Cultures” will remain a highly productive field of research in years to come, presenting us with constant fresh challenges and new problems. Its potential as an exemplary field of research with regard to culture-comparative/cross-cultural/comparative cultural investigations is far from fully exhausted.

Taking into account current, newly emerging forms of interweaving also appears necessary as the only way to further verify our starting hypothesis: namely that the term “Verflechtungen von Theaterkulturen / Interweaving Performance Cultures” – better so than the term “intercultural theatre”, which we associate with post-colonialism – makes it possible in the first place to conceptually apprehend a development rooted in a time posterior to post-colonialism and incorporating a “double critique” in Khalid Amine’s sense.

As this development has emerged, or is emerging, at different times in different places, unfolds in different ways, and leads to different results, it seems indispensable to continue our research for a further six years following the first funding period. We are not dealing with a “completed” development, but rather with one that is in flux. We will be considering both regions for which post-colonialism constitutes a still-valid paradigm and regions which, each in their own way, are in the process of moving beyond it. Where cultural interweavings can no longer accurately be described as “postcolonial”, other asymmetrical relations and dependencies come into play, for some of which a precise terminology remains to be established. In order to accommodate these considerations, in the years ahead we will continue connecting questions relating to the interweaving of performance cultures with debates relating to globalisation and its politics: to what extent has it been possible to overcome paternalistic forms of exchange? In what way has emancipation from the cultural codes of post-colonialism produced new inequalities? Against the background of such questions, it seems an urgent task to determine the contribution made by processes of interweaving to the development of a new paradigm, its consideration or its critique – often in close contact with political, economic, and legal discourses.

The case studies carried out to this day have confirmed our starting hypothesis that such processes of interweaving in no way lead to a homogenisation of performance cultures but rather increase their diversity. With regard to the above-

mentioned development of a theory of post-postcolonialism, our interest goes more particularly to these manifestations of diversity. This brings us face to face with a major problem. On occasion, our Fellows have very rightly noted that they were working with terms and concepts originating in Western theories, and therefore investigating phenomena of their respective performance cultures from the perspective of theories overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, developed in the West. Sporadically, they introduced a term originating from the theoretical context of the culture being investigated that appeared essential to explaining the phenomenon at hand.

One such case was the Daoist term *qi*, which from a Chinese perspective is fundamental to the investigation of performances. Initially, this word was used to denote steam rising from a pot of millet – i.e. matter's most tenuous degree of visibility. However, in China *qi* holds a variety of meanings, for example the life force which is transitioning from the visible to the invisible, matter that can always pass into the realm of the spiritual, the pneuma that forms the basis of all material things – which is why *qi* can be taken as given in all living things. A distinction is made between an inherent, native *qi* and an acquired *qi*, gained through special exercises and techniques of the self. The notion of *qi* is tied to medical discourse as well as to the philosophical concept of yin and yang, which according to the Chinese view explains the relations between all things. This term has no equivalent in German or in English. Translating it with the word “energy” or “spirit” would entail a misleading reduction.

This raises the question of the extent to which we are capable of grasping precisely what aspects of interweaving makes them interesting and relevant for the culture in which they arise if we embed them in a theoretical discourse that has been created in the West. Especially when dealing with non-Indo-European languages, it should be borne in mind that a wholly different type of grammar is at play. In its “structure”, the Chinese language thus refers to a wholly different way of thinking. Words are heuristic tools that allow us to capture specific qualities in the objects of our investigation. One could even describe them as lenses whose individual polish and hue make us perceive these objects in a very specific way, determining the aspects that will strike us as essential and the questions that will guide our investigation.

We are made aware of this problem on a daily basis since we all use English terminology even though most of us are not native speakers. This is already reflected in the name of our research centre: “Verflechtungen von Theaterkulturen” became “Interweaving Performance Cultures”. Why? While in German-speaking theatre studies the word “Theater” encompasses all performing arts and cultural performances in a wider sense, in English-speaking theatre studies the word “theatre” merely designates dramatic theatre. If such differences can appear in the respective semantic fields of two Germanic, hence related, languages both referring to the same Greek word, it can only be assumed that there will hardly be an Indo-European equivalent, even less so an English or German equivalent, for non-Indo-European terms, which developed in specific cultural contexts.

While we emphasise diversity when it comes to our objects of study, our exclusive use of English terminology carries with it an unwelcome homogenisation. Just as we coined the term “transformative aesthetics” for the German word “Wirkungsästhetik”, which does not exist in English, we believe a truly culture-comparative/cross-cultural/comparative cultural approach requires us to find or invent English equivalents or manageable circumlocutions for guiding concepts that are fundamental to dealing with performances in other languages. As always in translation, these will not be true equivalents but rather attempts at mediation and thus approximations. Just as we have hitherto applied terms taken from the context of Western theory to instances of interweaving in non-Western cultures, we will apply these newly developed heuristic tools to the most varied processes of interweaving. We will thus find out which hitherto overlooked aspects of artistic practices of interweaving – not only in our own culture – they make visible and what new analytic possibilities they create.

While theories developed in the context of post-colonialism are almost exclusively rooted in Western concepts, the development of post-postcolonial theories must widen its scope and seek new pathways with regard to its constitutive terminology. In this sense, the research centre is to become a laboratory for a wholly new kind of theory formation. Without such a new approach, it would be difficult to find out what differences exist in the way cultures generate (not only) artistic knowledge. The investigation of interweaving performance cultures should thus lead to an interweaving of academic cultures.

In future, case studies must be methodologically set up in such a way as to avoid working with Western – non-Western dichotomies (“the West and the rest”). This does not mean that instances of interweaving involving Western cultures should be excluded. Simply, the mere fact that a text created in a Western culture is being used in a production in an Asian, Latin American, or African country should not lead to the conclusion that a process of interweaving is at play. Today, when *John Gabriel Borkman* is being performed in Japan or *A Doll’s House* in China, there is no ground to report an instance of interweaving performance cultures. One such instance was given in 1909, when *John Gabriel Borkman* was first staged in Japan in Kabuki style, or at the first Chinese performance of *A Doll’s House* (1914). Today, Ibsen’s dramas – just as Shakespeare’s, Chekhov’s, and Brecht’s plays – are firmly established in Japan’s Shingeki repertoire and China’s Huaju repertoire. (By contrast, if a play by a European playwright is staged in a traditional theatre form such as Noh theatre, Kunqu opera, or Kathakali, we are indeed dealing with an interweaving of performance cultures – albeit an intra-cultural interweaving of various Japanese, or Chinese, or Indian performance cultures.) In such cases, it would only be possible to speak of “interweaving” if these texts were the inalienable “estate”, the “property” of the author’s nation. Shakespeare would thus “belong” to the English, Ibsen to the Norwegians, Chekhov to the Russians, and Brecht to the Germans. Even were this problematic assumption to be made, nobody would think of speaking of interweaving – much less of intercultural theatre – if Peter Stein were to stage Shakespeare, Peter Hall Chekhov, Giorgio Strehler Brecht, or Luc Bondy Ibsen. Tacitly, the “right of ownership” is extended to all Western nations. This makes possible the assertion that any staging of a “Western” text within a “non-Western” culture involves “intercultural theatre”. Without doubt, such labelling is intended to safeguard the interests of “the West” and maintain its dominance.

We thus do not take as our starting point instances of interweaving between “Western” and “non-Western” performance cultures, but rather instances of interweaving between specific performance cultures. A Brazilian production of *The Bacchae* that refers among other things to an Indian celebration (Boi Bumba) and the Candomblé does indeed present an interweaving of theatre cultures – albeit within a single country. Referencing very specific performance cultures is a prerequisite for developing a theory “after post-colonialism”. This does not mean that power relationships should be ignored. Rather, it makes it possible to chart them in a much

more highly differentiated manner than before, when they were and sometimes still are reduced to antagonisms between “the West” and “the rest”.

Such differentiation appears particularly important in light of the fact that we still operate on the assumption that, in processes of interweaving, aesthetic processes are closely linked to social, political, and often also spiritual processes – in this sense, we are dealing with transformative aesthetics. Our interest thus centres on the specific form of interweaving and the possibilities it creates for effects or transformations. Here again, case studies form the basis for developing an adequate theory.

With a view to this objective, Matthias Warstat’s ERC project “The Aesthetics of Applied Theatre”, which took up residence at the Institute of Theatre Studies on 1 December 2012, is also of great interest. The project and the research centre share a similar notion of theatre. Unlike traditional transformative aesthetics, which suggested they could achieve far-reaching effects in a unidirectional fashion, i.e. “from the stage down”, the assumption is that every performance unfolds as an encounter and an interaction between performers and spectators – its course and its effects can thus neither be fully planned nor foretold. The risk of unintended or even counterproductive effects can therefore never be ruled out. The various effects intended by different types of so-called applied theatre (including e.g. community theatre, theatre for development, drama therapy, or theatre in education) are therefore in no way to be understood as projectable or controllable, notwithstanding the claims repeatedly brought forward by advocates of such theatre forms for purposes of legitimation. In a culture-comparative/cross-cultural/comparative cultural investigation, carried out on the basis of case studies in Europe, Israel/Palestine, the USA, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, the project “The Aesthetics of Applied Theatre” plans to identify the relations between aesthetic, political, and ethical aspects specific to each situation, posing the question of the possibilities of aesthetic experience and political encounter under the conditions of a strict instrumentalisation of theatre.

One of the ERC project’s working hypotheses is that the aesthetic, political, and ethical implications of applied theatre are related to one another by issues of power. The relation between “theatre therapist” and “client”, “facilitator” and “playgroup” holds the threat of similar paternalistic structures to those that

occasionally shaped the interweaving of performance cultures on a global scale. On the other hand, advanced forms of applied theatre equally operate as laboratories for a new, more egalitarian relation between players of different cultural traditions.

As the project (scheduled to span a period of five years) operates at a culture-comparative/cross-cultural/comparative cultural angle, focuses many of its individual studies on interweaving processes, and centres on the notion of transformative aesthetics, we offered Matthias Warstat an association with our research centre. Both parties reckon that this association will prove highly productive. It will allow the research centre to include forms of interweaving that to date have been considered only occasionally – e.g. projects on disability theatre or projects dealing with violence and performance – yet hold the promise of important insights especially regarding the development of a theory on transformative aesthetics.