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Everything and nothing

*TODAYulysse*s (Jan Ritsema & Bojana Cvejić/Kaaaitheater)

‘What was it about?’ This is a question you are often asked about a performance by someone who has not seen it. In the case of *TODAYulysse*s it is not easy to give an answer. ‘About everything and nothing’, is an inadequate answer and yet it is a good summary of what Jan Ritsema and Bojana Cvejić presented for us to see and ponder on at the Kaaaitheater Studios.

If one were to base one’s search for the main theme, thread or content on the actual script of the performance, one would become lost in an abundance of ideas, images and feelings. If, however, one tries to concentrate this multiplicity by setting out the underlying philosophical concepts, one is then denying that there was actually anything to be seen or heard. This deadlock might perhaps be eliminated by means of a comparison.

One could compare *TODAYulysse*s to an inner thought process. By this I do not mean an unspoken reasoning starting from a particular formulation of the problem and which is intended to unravel and solve it. An inner thought process is more a semi-spontaneous, reflexive occurrence in which arises a network of notions, whereby one cannot say exactly when it started nor when it finally ended.

It is not really possible to identify the beginning and the end of *TODAYulysse*s because it is not a performance in the classic sense. After all, a performance presupposes something that can be presented, something that is visible to the spectator. In other words, that which is put forward must be made into an image. The image is an intermediary between an active pole - the actor - and a receptive pole - the audience. The performance starts when the actor steps forward (in a manner of speaking), when he releases a prepared image into the audience.

‘We are the image!’ shouts Jan Ritsema during the performance. Actor and audience are no longer clearly distinct poles that become involved with each other through the image, but two more or less different realities whose convergence results in an image. The image is no longer the starting point for the performance, but a product of it. Or as Jan Ritsema says, ‘The more the connection between the two realities that come together is distant and close, the stronger the image will be.’

The consequence of this is that the clear marker for the start of a performance - the presentation of the first image - is no longer there. If, in addition, both the actor and the audience are image, it is not only the actor who is watched but also the audience. The receptive pole becomes active too. How can one identify the beginning if the activity is divided between several sources and the beginning is no longer explicit? Is there still any sense in referring to the ‘beginning’ of a play if it is no longer clear who is watching and what they are watching?

This does not of course mean that there is no first sentence with which the performance starts. Bojana Cvejić’s first words are, ‘Shall we start?’ This is immediately followed by the observation that a beginning has in this way already been made. But it is a beginning that bites its own tail and demands a second, ‘true’ beginning. Yet it is at the same time a fully-fledged beginning because it sets the tone for the whole performance.

The reasons that it is difficult to pinpoint the beginning also apply to the end. The image is not complete when the actor and audience leave the theatre. The production of the image carries on in the bar, at home, when watching another performance, etc. The image is essentially never complete.

Just as in an inner thought process, the elements of *TODAYulysse*s are highly heterogeneous and do not develop in a linear pattern. *TODAYulysse*s is a collection of philosophical ideas, acted-out excerpts from films, anecdotes, jokes, reflections on theatre, songs, and so on, threaded together in fragmentary form. An image catches hold of the atmosphere of an idea, a word latches onto a tone,

a joke undermines a relatively imperturbable construction, a few lines from a song save the situation. Ultimately they are all words, words that set each other in motion, that clash, that evoke each other, that are separated by a gulf, that love each other. Ideas as extracts that never crystallise but are, on the contrary, interrupted halfway and never picked up again, or else are given a strange turn at a later time. An image that stops just short of being a summary of what had been said before and thereby refers to something else.

One might call this intellectual sloppiness or avant-garde laziness, if it were not for the fact that a sort of unity or 'idea' does ultimately take shape. On leaving the theatre the spectator does indeed have the feeling that 'something' remains, but this 'something' cannot really be defined. The spectator is not the victim of associative freewheeling, but moves, rather, in several partly overlapping concentric circles.

One circle, for example, revolves around the concept of 'image': to what degree does an image represent reality? To what extent is direct contact with reality possible, meaning contact without the mediation of the image? How real is reality (Bojana Cvejić naked on stage?)? Another circle might be that of knowing: the symptom and the fetish as the resurrection of that which one does not wish to know, belief as the highest form of wisdom regarding that which one cannot know, modernity as the knowledge that is completely transparent to itself. Then there is the circle round the concept of the 'boundary': to what extent is a boundary meaningful? To what extent is a boundary necessary? In connection with this there are bits of writing on identity, entertainment and sentimentality, nature and artefact, landscapes, etc.

So *TODAYulysse*s is not a postmodern word-game in which the most diverse language games are set alongside each other as equals, but which ultimately results in a great void. Nor is it a purely deconstructionist experiment in which each fragment only takes on a meaning on the basis of the whole, which embraces both the explicit and the implicit. Postmodernism and deconstructivism have most certainly made breaches, which this play gratefully makes use of. But Ritsema and Cvejić build something up again; they create. But their creation is not a construction whose skeleton is clearly visible, rather a cloud whose outline is constantly changing. Despite its changing form and impalpability, this cloud is quite solid: it can black out the sun and it can produce rain.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, two of Ritsema and Cvejić's favourite philosophers, define this cloudy entity as follows: 'We no longer believe in an original totality, nor in a totality of intention. We no longer believe in the monotony of a pale evolutive dialectic that professes to restore order to the parts by rounding off their sharp edges. We only believe in totalities when they are on the sidelines. And if we encounter such a totality next to the parts, it is a whole comprising these parts that does not totalise them, a unity between these parts that does not unite them. It adds itself to the parts as a new, separately formed part.'¹

So the sort of unity they advocate is not the result of adding together its constituent parts, because these parts cannot be added together. Nor is it a unity from which these parts ensue because there is no such thing as a common characteristic. The parts cannot be reduced to one another. '... all the parts are produced as dissymmetrical sides, changed directions, closed boxes, non-communicating vessels, compartments, where even the contiguities are distances and the distances confirmations, pieces that do not come from the same puzzle, but several puzzles brusquely mixed together, always

¹ Translated by the author.

Original quotation: 'Nous ne croyons plus à une totalité originelle ni à une totalité de destination. Nous ne croyons plus à la grisaille d'une fade dialectique évolutive, qui prétend pacifier les morceaux parce qu'elle en arrondit les bords. Nous ne croyons à des totalités qu'à côté. Et si nous rencontrons une telle totalité à côté de parties, c'est un tout de ces parties-là, mais qui ne les totalise pas, une unité de toutes ces parties-là, mais qui ne les unifie pas, et qui s'ajoute à elles comme une nouvelle partie composée à part.' DELEUZE, Gilles & GUATTARI, Félix, Capitalisme et Schizophrénie. L'Anti-Oedipe, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1972, p. 50.

local and never specific, their conflicting edges always forced, damaged, interlocked, always leaving remnants.²

The parts are distinct from each other, but this does not mean they cannot in some respects overlap. According to Deleuze and Guattari, structures, organisations and sedimentations are not distinguished from one another by clearly delineated boundaries and oppositions, but by gradients, migrations and proximity zones. The unity of these various parts is to be found in the communication that takes place between the different elements, in the temporary junctions that are formed, and also in the equal number of rifts that occur between these elements. 'The whole ... that applies to the parts by initiating only aberrant exchanges between non-communicating vessels, transverse unities between elements that keep all their difference in their own dimensions.'³

Seeing that this rhizomatous occurrence of encounter and moving apart gives rise to the most varied forms and structures, one cannot speak of a uniform unity. It is a unity that can only be ascribed to multiplicity. It is a crumbly unity.

Deleuze and Guattari's unity is moreover a dynamic unity in the sense that it only exists in activity or, rather, in productivity. The unity lies precisely in the movements that bring the various structures together or make them fall apart. It is never the result or final point of a movement, nor the static starting point of a movement or the movement itself. The unity is not a point but an event.

In this context I can refer to the odd experience that occurred to me when, after watching the performance, I read the script. The indefinable whole that had clearly made itself felt during the performance was suddenly much less evident. It was as if one could no longer see the wood for the trees. So what exactly is the importance of 'performing' in this performance? Despite the minimal style of acting and the lack of signs that point out that acting is going on (set, costumes, stage), it appears to be crucial that these fragments are 'spoken'. There has to be acting. In this case the written words do not have enough force to bring about the event that creates a meaning. This does not mean that literature is not capable of this Deleuzian productivity (the writings of Deleuze and Guattari themselves are a fine counter-example of this), but that Ritsema and Cvejić have written a piece that is intended exclusively for theatre.

In *TODAYulysse*, Ritsema and Cvejić succeed in giving theatre a philosophical and theoretical foundation without the play becoming a slave to theory.

Judith Wambacq

Conceived, written and acted by Bojana Cvejić and Jan Ritsema
Produced by Kaaithheater

² Translated by the author.

Original quotation: '(...) toutes les parties sont produites comme des côtés dissymétriques, des directions brisées, des boîtes closes, des vases non communicants, des cloisonnements, où même les contiguïtés sont des distances, et les distances des affirmations, morceaux de puzzle qui ne viennent pas du même, mais de puzzles différents, violemment insérés les uns dans les autres, toujours loceaux et jamais spécifiques, et leurs bords discordants toujours forcés, profanés, imbriqués les uns dans les autres, avec toujours des restes.'

DELEUZE, Gilles & GUATTARI, Félix, Capitalisme et Schizophrénie. L'Anti-Oedipe, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1972, p. 51.

³ Translated by the author.

Original quotation: 'le tout (...) qui s'applique à elles (les parties) en instaurant seulement des communications aberrantes entre vases non communicants, des unités transversales entre éléments qui gardent toute leur différence dans leurs dimensions propres.'

DELEUZE, Gilles & GUATTARI, Félix, Capitalisme et Schizophrénie. L'Anti-Oedipe, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1972, p. 51.