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REALISTIC ART AND THE CREATION OF ARTISTIC TRUTH

Rolf Bossart

In this chapter, I discuss the artistic means Milo Rau uses to interpret the world and I examine how his oeuvre opens possibilities for the transformation of cultural, social, and political conditions. I do this with reference to three major productions, namely *Empire* (The International Institute of Political Murder 2016), *Hate Radio* (Berliner Festspiele-Theatertreffen 2011), and *The Congo Tribunal* (The International Institute for Political Murder 2015).

Milo Rau's work follows an antithetical structure, which points to an existential tension of the human condition per se. In his pieces, the audience simultaneously experiences attraction and repulsion that is deeply linked to this existential tension of being human. His work translates the existential into the general, without the dissolution of the individual into the general and without making the general unimportant in the face of the individual. Rather, it examines how the existential and the general constitute each other mutually. And yet they do not converge, but remain in antagonism to each other.

Thus, Rau links the academic question of the justification of representation in theater to the practical reality of the tension between representation and immediacy. With reference to his children's play *Five Easy Pieces*, he once framed this tension between representation and immediacy as follows: 'Working with ten-year-olds as a director, you have to seduce or urge them to do on stage what you want. The criticism of these theater techniques becomes simultaneously a criticism of reality again' (Rau 2017: 106).

It is not enough to make the tensions of human ambiguities the starting point of the artistic endeavor. The point is to resist any attempts at their harmonization and the destructive fantasies in the course of the material debate. Out of theater, the representation of tension succeeds because it is not important for him to show something concrete, but to show everything in its concrete form or incarnate into the bodies marked by history and fate. Specific talents – a manic and egalitarian interest in almost everything, a photographic memory, and dialectic – give him an unmistakable sense of what can stand for the broken whole and what disintegrates into its individual parts. 'In doing so, he does not think either his audience or himself are on the safe side, but always puts all points of view up for discussion', as it says in the jury's statement on the Peter Weiss Prize of the city of Bochum 2017.

Right is mixed with wrong, hate with fun, ideologies dwell in affects, beauty appears in banality. In Rau's work, the complex and dialectical arrangement of material and thoughts is always tied together by one familiar, simple thing; for example a famous TV picture, the mainstream pop music of his youth, the adversary format of the trial, the five acts of the tragedy, a simple children's melody, the crucifixion scene. With this 'almost bursting enrichment and ultimately humble simplicity of the fugal structure' (Rau 2017: 14), the *The International Institute for Political Murder* (IIPM) aesthetic is popular and elitist in a positive sense, which is why criticism sometimes disagrees as to whether it is all too simple or too complex, too trashy or too intellectual.

Rau trusts iconic images, symbols, institutions because he recognizes in them the condensation of the spiritual, social, and emotional substance of a society, which must be read analytically as an expression of violence and repression as well as affirmatively as attempts at mediation and reconciliation. After all, it is the always open possibility of mediating opposites that constitutes the depth of Rau's theater: that the view into hell and into heaven, as in the late medieval

representations of the Last Judgement, is always open. Or, to say it in Rau's terms: in order for Cynical Humanism to become a Repeated Catastrophism, a Global Realism and a precise framework of expectations for the future are needed.

The reenactment (Hate Radio), the tribunal (The Congo Tribunal), the allegorical narrative (Empire/The Europe Trilogy); all these framings direct the theoretical penetration of the material, the design of the stages, the guidance of the actors, the expectation of the audience. Although they demand submission to their rules, they can also lead the individual who enters the stage extended by the frame out of the direct identification of himself. For an ecstatic moment it – and with it the audience – can step out of what it has become and re-enter and continue with a different relationship to its actions. Milo Rau's stage does not transform bodies into ideas, but it shows the corporeality of ideas. It does not transform fate into freedom, but 'fate into narrative' (Rau and Brossart 2017). The repetition is not a category of coercion that calls for ecstatic liberation, but rather a variation that wrestles new perspectives from the given. The ecstasy, on the other hand, does not call for intoxication, tearing out and unfolding, as happens again and again in self-destructive forms of religion, politics, and art, but enables movement as a symbolic act of entering and leaving. The repetition enables ecstasy, the ecstasy frames the repetition anew. I will now explore the work of Milo Rau through the case studies of Empire (2016), Hate Radio (2011), and The Congo Tribunal (2015). These examples are also meant to indicate the great diversity and differences in his artistic work.

Memory and condensation: Hate Radio (2011)

At the origin of The Last Days of the Ceausescus, Milo Rau's first big reenactment, stands the iconic picture of the Romanian dictator couple in the improvised courtroom. For Hate Radio, he chose the opposite approach. The piece deals with the 1994 genocide in Rwanda committed by the Hutus against the Tutsis. Images with piles of corpses form the collective memory of this historical incident. But Rau decided to approach the subject from another angle, devoid of images. This allowed him to develop a completely different visual language of the genocide. In search of a place devoid of images, he came across the radio studio of Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM). It was a postmodern, young radio with popular local presenters – and a white Belgian host – who broadcasted reportages, joked around with his guests, and played cool music. All young people knew this radio station at the time, including the later victims of the genocide. At a certain point in time, the radio studio started to incite genocide; in the beginning only subtly, later more and more openly. Between quiz shows and hit parade songs, the hosts aired racist speeches and called for the persecution and extermination of Tutsi neighbors. The show was produced in a radio studio, of which we have no pictures. Rau's stage designer made a detailed reconstruction of the studio, based on the information of two former radio hosts; the then very popular Valérie Bémériki and the Belgian Georges Ruggiu. For his research, Rau visited both in prison. In conversation with Valérie Bémériki, she compared herself with the apostle Paul and his transformation from Saul to the purified apostle. The conversations showed how the narrative chosen by the witness relates to his situation. In their first conversation, Bémériki was very welcoming, probably as a strategy to achieve amnesty and/or a reduction of punishment. Later, her request for retrial was rejected. In the second interview, she was completely different. Hence, there are better and worse moments for interviews. It turned out that in the case of the genocide of Rwanda, 20 years later was the right time. Thus, every event has a favorable time to be dealt with. In Germany, for example, it was impossible to talk to witnesses and survivors about the World War II atrocities in a productive way until the 1960s. Changing political constellations and time shape the collective memory, and suddenly certain things can be voiced that were silenced before.

With the exception of the white Belgian radio host, all actors casted for the show were Tutsi. The fact that the victims should speak this good-humored hate discourse was very important. That the actors on stage called for the destruction of their own ethnic group could only have an impact if they did it honestly, that means, if their laughter was real. They really had to do this transgression, this perversion. Of course, this turned out to be incredibly difficult, especially since the piece was also played in Rwanda itself. Even more difficult was the decision to change or Europeanize certain things; on the one hand, because Rau worked with actors living in exile in Europe, and on the other hand to avoid the exoticism that always threatens a European audience with material from Africa. For example, they played songs from Nirvana in the studio, although everyone knew that this had hardly been the case in the real RTLM. When the crew went to Kigali, Rwanda they were worried that they would all be torn apart as historical liars in anticipation of a purely documentary piece. In Rwanda they played, among other places, at the central genocide memorial in the capital. But surprisingly, the people – survivors of the genocide, representatives of victim associations, etc. – came afterwards and thanked Rau and said, ‘That’s exactly what happened’, even though the songs weren’t right, although they were based on the dubious testimonies of the perpetrators, although they were greatly shortened. Apparently, with his selective approach and the dramatic intensification, Rau struck a chord in the collective memory.

Documentary theater is committed to the truth of the details. Thereby it often loses sight of the overall picture. Milo Rau, deliberately detached himself from the source materials and created a condensed, artificial situation. But precisely through this approach the work of art can express a historical feeling in its entirety. For by approaching the audience in a slightly alienated way, the situation known to all does not generate identification, but reflection on why the artificially alienated appears more real than reality. The reenactment, as Rau understands it, is an attempt to show an overall picture close to the historical facts, but in a deliberate deviation from historicity, so that one can at best say: not everything has happened in this way, but it is nevertheless true, because it can show something new in an already known matter.

Fate and unity: Empire (2016)

While the first two parts of the Europe Trilogy: The Civil Wars draw inspiration from Chekhov and The Dark Ages from Shakespeare, Empire works with the subject matter of the tragedy Medea. It reveals the Europe Trilogy’s mythological basis. In contrast to historical narratives, myths reveal the ‘dramatic unity of humanity’, which is the common leitmotiv of all three plays. In Homer there is no doubt that Trojans and Achaeans suffer a common fate in the collapse of Mycenaean civilization. In Euripides’s The Trojan Women too, the Athenian catastrophe in the Peloponnesian War, brought on by hubris following the victory over the Persians, is understood as a mythic recurrence of the Achaean catastrophe after the defeat of Troy. This same clarity about the intertwined fate of east and west can be seen in the Platonic myth of Athens and Atlantis, etc. The world of the historical, scientific narrative, on the other hand, is an open field – a multiplicity of peoples and civilisations driven by fear and greed, by interests and instincts, a power struggle between man and man, ruler and subject, tribe and clan, nation and nation. A world of this kind perpetually threatens to break up into individual and national centers of power, which rise and fall without any apparent reason, without any sense of the ‘dramatic unity of humanity’. The Europe Trilogy attempts to give this outmoded sense of the unity of humankind a current form on the stage: the actors tell their own family histories – which have been recounted in conversations and rehearsals and been put into writing by Milo Rau in the context of civil war, exile, the experience of power, and powerlessness, family conflicts, etc. – as if the text had come over them, as if it did not belong to them alone, as if the point was not to tell one’s own story but to give an example, and not to have a personal story but a fate. A

personal experience often directly becomes a historical one, and the personally spoken account a quotation of the classical, and vice versa. The individual conception of the trilogy, however, leaves no doubt that the fates being negotiated are not exchangeable, but are only these specific ones. The narratives of the actors in *The Civil Wars*, *The Dark Ages*, and *Empire* are not an open field. They do not revolve around contingencies and possibilities, free decisions, and opportunities seized or missed. Milo Rau releases them from the basic ideological narrative of the liberal meritocracy, the order of which has a place neither for failure nor for suffering. Thus these narratives also do not set an 'abstract', collective history against a 'concrete' individual, one that is truer according to a postmodern reading. Rather, one's own story proves in its banal as well as its special moments to be a real and therefore controversial and problematic embodiment of European history as world history. The incredibly focused, almost meditative atmosphere in which this takes place leads – certainly after a viewing of all three plays – to a perhaps astonished, but surely astonishing 'Ecce Europa!' The trilogy's obvious relation to classical tragedy does not arise from the theory of catharsis through compassion, which Aristotle did not develop until after the decline of the tragedy, but from what must have been the actual effect on the contemporary ancient audience: the shuddering at one's own fate in light of the fate of the hero. The accent lies on the gentle shock which triggers the insight that what we see on the stage may not completely result from a series of individual actions or political acts, but may rather be co-determined by humanity's common fate which, consequently, strategies of individual autonomy or collective autarchy are insufficient to overcome. The philosophically relevant point is that the persons on the stage present their own stories with a consciousness of themselves as part of the universal story. The tragic moment in this causes one to shudder at one's personal inability to escape the collective fate. Yet it also places one in a larger context and ensures that the freedom of the self to have to create purpose and meaning on its own – a freedom that in this depressive age has become a heavy burden – loses its arbitrary and solipsistic character.

What is also tragic, in the broadest sense, is the circumstance that the individual stories do not paint a picture of an innocent diversity, but that each for itself instead takes on the assertion of a conflicted, impossible unity (Europe or humanity?) as a task for the future, but above all as a bearing and enduring of the guilt of the ancestors. The heroic moment of the drama lies in this free act of humility, which is the necessary basis for any constructive notion of unity. The actors of the Europe trilogy offer an impressive counter-image to the nihilistic-narcissistic terrorists of our times for it is this guilty and painful past – one's own and that of society – which the suicide-murderer must destroy. In his narcissistic mania, he is unable to bear or endure anything, shudder at anything, or grieve. And so, what manifests itself in this contradiction is ultimately nothing less than the tragic, fundamental question of humanity, which the modern age, for all its effort to prevent and suppress suffering, has never been able to fully solve. Under what conditions can the suffering we experience make our soul wise or fill it with hate? The at once beguiling and oppressive magic of the Europe trilogy comes from the fact that its audience is ready to grapple with this question.

Truth and justice: The Congo Tribunal (2015/2017 film)

The following question was at the origin of The Congo Tribunal project: what exactly keeps this eternal civil war going, which has cost the lives of 5–10 million people, according to the various estimates? The research confirmed the suspicion that the main reasons are the Congo's mineral resources that are vital for the world economy. Mining companies, warlords, politicians, and many other actors have benefited from this unstable situation for years. After the fall of the long-standing dictatorship of Mobutu, Congo introduced a new Code Minier on the initiative of the World Bank in the late 1990s. Mining rights were sold to only a few companies. Above all, Canadian, German, and

Swiss companies were the lucky ones that were granted large concessions and could permanently put pressure on a weak government to enforce poorer working conditions and expulsions for new developments. In such a heated and often lawless situation, massacres repeatedly occur that do not entail any clarification. In total, there are 1000 cases of mass expulsion, mass rape, or mass murder for which there is no Court of Appeal – since international economic law exists on paper but is not institutionalized.

During the preparatory research for The Congo Tribunal, Milo Rau's team became witness to a massacre of children and women – the Mutarule massacre near the provincial capital of Bukavu, where the tribunal was later to take place. He decided to select this and two other cases and tried to bring them to a tribunal of national and international judges. In addition to the massacre of Mutarule, the tribunal also heard a case involving the Canadian gold company Banro, including illegal expulsions by the company. The third case dealt with the Bisie coltan mine, in which the fatal relationship between war economy and international intervention was the issue.

Rau asked lawyers and judges from the Congo and the International Court of Justice in The Hague to outline the legal basis for the tribunal: an international business law composed of national law and local land law, the Congolese constitution and international human rights law, a utopian legal institution at eye level with the global economy. The tribunal took place in two hearings, each divided into three sessions: three days of negotiations were held in Bukavu, the center of the civil war region in eastern Congo, and another three days in Berlin. Since human rights activists, displaced farmers, and former rebels appeared in Bukavu and put their lives in real danger with their statements, a complex witness protection program was developed in cooperation with the UN, including a complete body veil, vocoder, and safe houses. Since there was an indirect complicity of the UN troops in the case of the massacre of Mutarule, because they had withdrawn from the village of Mutarule the night before the massacre for inexplicable reasons, a few days before the start of the tribunal the New York UN headquarters demanded that this case not be dealt with. Rau refused. As a response, the UN withdrew witness protection from the tribunal. As a consequence it had to be organized with the help of the local, totally corrupt police – a very questionable but inevitable process, typical of the dubious way in which all these projects take place.

This example and many others, documented in the book *The Congo Tribunal*, show that every step of the way, they came across a variety of interdependencies and guilt relationships, knots that seemed almost impossible to dissolve. Rau worked in Bukavu with the government, the opposition leader, paramilitaries, corporate representatives, small miners, rebels, and farmers.

Everyone took part in the tribunal and almost everyone somehow regarded himself or herself as a victim. Simultaneously, depending on the perspective, they were also accomplices. The testimonies of the witnesses were extremely open, and as a result, two experts were abducted and both the Interior Minister and the Mine Minister of the South Kivu Regional Government were dismissed (a province about the size of Germany).

This brings us to the most frequently asked question in connection with *The Congo Tribunal*: why did these people participate in the tribunal at all; a tribunal without any legal consequences? And why was the media and audience interest in Central Africa and worldwide so overwhelming? Why did people trust a theater tribunal and participate in it, even if they put their lives in danger? The answer is simple: there is no other possibility to speak the truth. The German newspaper *Die Zeit* wrote in its critique of the piece: 'Where politics fails, only art helps'. With *The Congo Tribunal*, Rau has done something that was not only felt to be urgently necessary by the actors, but that is not possible in reality because it does not yet exist in any form. Together with local and international lawyers, Rau has created a utopian legal space. The Congo Tribunal brought together domestic law, human rights, and

international commercial law. This 'chamber mixte' opened a space for negotiating the local effects of economic crimes on a global level; with real judges, jury members from all over the world, dozens of witnesses, 1,000 spectators, in the center of the civil war area, accompanied by international reporters. The vic-tims called this 'fictional institution' because there was no other. And through her invocation she became real, she realized herself.

This is the teaching of art: anything is possible if you only want to. Or as Milo Rau repeatedly emphasizes: 'Realism, as I understand it, does not mean that something real is depicted. Realism means that the depiction itself becomes real – even if what is depicted is in the future, i.e. comes, as it were, from the space of collective hopes'. The idea of The Congo Tribunal was to use a symbolic action to show an institution at work that doesn't exist, but that should exist. It was a propaganda action on a global scale, almost the positive counter-image of the show trials that Rau was tracking down in the 'Moscow Trials'. If we have a globalized world economy that has concrete effects on local populations, we also need a global legal system that can offer law at the local level. Think global, act local – as the multinationals have been doing for decades. And this is what Rau means when he repeatedly uses the term 'global realism' in relation to The Congo Tribunal: a realism at eye level with the world economy that not only describes realities, not only postpones collective assessments, but ultimately creates new realities.

Looking back, it is interesting that Rau was always told that it was impossible to ever make such a tribunal: 'Who pays for it, who protects it? You're all in mortal danger'. Ultimately, however, these voices have spurred Rau on to prove that it is possible and that there is a legal basis for imposing economic debt, which is always 'complex' and 'diffuse', on actors and sanctioning them. The world economy is describable, it is sanctionable – that is the doctrine of global realism and its political continuation. The exchange with Jean-Louis Gilissen, the President of the Congo Tribunal's Court of Justice, was very important in this context. He has already worked closely with Rau at Hate Radio. As a founding member of the International Court of Human Rights, Gilissen once faced the same problems. Everyone had advised them against this at the time, talking about the political, legal, and financial impossibility of such a project. People said, 'Jean-Louis, you are crazy. There is no government behind you, there are no laws, you need a billion euros'. Ten years later, they had the laws, the buildings, the money and brought the Rwandan genocides to justice. At first everything is a crazy idea. First everything is art, propaganda, hope. Because the factual, as terrible as it is, was humanly possible – so too is the alternative always possible. And so, thanks to the steadfastness of people like Gilissen, international law is spoken today in The Hague. And, thanks to the steadfastness of the Chief Investigator and Attorney General, Maître Sylvestre Bisimwa, who is also Chairman of the Congolese Bar Association, the Congo Tribunal is already being continued today.

Social imagination, as realized in The Congo Tribunal means appropriating existing discourses, formatting them, radicalising them, closely guiding them, and putting them in a space where suddenly their meaning becomes completely open once again. And in order to make Rau's artistic approach with reference to the concept of realism even clearer, I would like to conclude with the following quotation: 'Realistic art has a transformative power. It is able to turn an unconscious action into a conscious one, hence it has the capacity to bring it under scrutiny of morality and politics. The realist must make unacceptable suggestions; images that force us to see what we do not want to see or that are just too beautiful to bear. For me, this is the only way to create realistic art: It aims for the transformation of the world and of history, despite the entire, frustrating ambiguity of every position' (Rau 2018: 183).

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