Myth Interrupted:
Scenographies of the Real against the Real.

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In his essay Myth Interrupted, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy defines myth as follows:

> comprised within the very idea of myth is what one might call the entire hallucination, or the entire imposture, of the self-consciousness of a modern world that has exhausted itself in the fabulous representation of its own power (Nancy 1991: 46).

Nancy's starting point for such a condemnation of myth is what he perceives as the most monstrous material implications its power can provide: the Holocaust.

> we shall never return to the mythic humanity of the primal scene, no more than we shall ever recover what was signified by the word "humanity" before the fire of the Aryan myth (Nancy 1991: 46).

To Nancy then, interrupting myth would imply annulling power and pausing the human. But in the first instance, it is the 'interruption of […] the stage upon which we represent everything to ourselves [:] the passing of time […] a consciousness, a people, a narrative' (Nancy 1991: 44–5). In other words, Nancy asks to abandon 'myth [as] something given, something that precedes, which constitutes precedence itself, and on that basis origination' (Nancy in Carlson 2008: 135).

Evidently, such proposition would seem to pose radical problems to the practice of theatre, in which mythical figures of power have been centrally maintained, created, blown out of all sorts of proportions. And indeed, these have coalesced with larger forces of coercion into archetypal figurations of individualities and communities. To myth one should somehow relate, identify, and learn to be oneself accordingly. So how would one relate to a performance that would interrupt myth?

Though theatre's response to the Holocaust has never been clear (if there ever was one) after it occurred, in the last decade new theatre practitioners brought about to tackle the subject to better interrupt it in its larger mythical dimension in multiple ways. Significantly here, the strategies they employed tackled directly reality by either borrowing from it or infiltrating it, and thereby interrogating the continuing importance of myth in a growingly power-subjugated society. Perhaps the most important example to cite is Christof Schlingensief's *Hamlet, This is your Family, Nazi-line* (2001). Schlingensief's Hamlet is by no means the most visually hyperrealistic piece of performance: the scenery and costumes are all verbatim 1930s Nazi Germany. But from the start we are told that the actors on stage (in a theatre-house) are not actors but ex or current neo-Nazi members. The tension coming from the stage is not fictional or enacted, it is one of reality itself, troubled with our own presence and participation in it.

Christof Schlingensief, *Hamlet, This is your Family, Nazi-line,* 2001.

Christof Schlingensief, *Please Love Austria,* 2000.

Schlingensief took this unusual hyperrealism further with a site-specific piece, one year prior to Hamlet, called *Please Love Austria* (2000), though this is one of a few other titles such as *Foreigners Out.* The work comprises of shipping container posited by the opera house of Vienna. The containers have been turned into temporary accommodations. Inside live a group of immigrants who are not permitted to be in Austria and are due to be deported. Schlingensief managed to collaborate with one of the main Austrian TV channels to make of his shipping containers a reality-TV show in which, every week, one of the inhabitant of the containers would be excluded by public vote and deported. Here reality is more than a part of the work, it is foundational to the work and its reception, and it is a reality much troubled that forces us to revise some very common understandings of power and its pervasively neutral invasion of the individual. At the same time, we are forced to recognize the value in suspending this very deceptively anonymous and authoritative power that legalizes or deports individuals on a much different basis that we may as normal citizens. But can we still accept the same power mechanisms once these are in the hands of individuals? And are these mechanisms not activated by individuals anyway?

This doubling up of reality in which we as individual witnesses of the work become the site of intersection and collision between this twofold reality is a strategy which is often operated by the company Ontroerend Goed. Taking place in tents, hotels and other sorts of locations for temporary inhabitation, *Internal* (2007) opened with all its performers addressing their audience in this way:

> 'Dear Spectator, We are five performers in search of a partner. We'd like to invite you to the next performance of Internal, our individual playground […] We guarantee you an intimate and highly personal treatment. Please, inform us in time if you are unable to control your feelings. We will provide an elegant and discrete solution'

Following this declaration, individual performers approach individual audiences and take them to an isolated location: a smaller tent, a hotel room, etc… There, the blind date situation becomes clearer: sitting around a table, performer and audience member engage in a conversation where the performer's seductive task is supported by serving alcohol to the audience member. Audiences then face a dilemma again linked to reality: the calculated attempt at producing an intimate encounter becomes so intimate that one is impelled to consider real outcomes to the performance which will never in fact happen.

Ontroerend Goed, *Internal*, 2007

Thus, in turning to the real these practitioners seek to strike at their audience the same reality excessively schematized so as to trigger a consideration of the real in terms of its power relations. Whilst audiences were uncomfortably placed in the position of the State and its power of deportation in Schlingensief's *Please Love Austria*, *Internal* conjures a similar but microscopic version of this by positioning their audiences in a normative power situation but where the mechanisms are made explicit: one person is most clearly engaging another into flirt by means of seduction and of the reality-troubler that is alcohol. Subjugated by the performer's apparent sincerity and truthfulness in seducing us, the alcohol makes us join in even though the emphasis on who is manipulating the encounter makes it clear that no 'partner' will be found.

Ontroerend Goed like Schlingensief, affirm a normative situation of power relations to better weaken it. This disavowal, or subversive affirmation, enables the works to raise and jolt the myth of authoritative power: as the usually collective and neutral State power is handed to individuals, and the usually individual power of seducing another is handed to a collective ethos of activity, both macro and micro structures of power-based interactions and relations are shifted to a quasi unbearable point of inclusion. They activate the interruption of myth by making us 'think our world in terms of this [mythological] "lack"' (Nancy 1991: 47): that is 'to cross over the discontinuous thresholds that separate the empirical order from the symbolic order, from the imaginary order, and finally from schematism' (Nancy 1991: 47, 54). In other words, the interruption of myth does not consist of a naïve attempt at working aside from myth but rather orchestrates the affirmation of the absence of myth. And to Nancy, this would then invoke new forms of individuality and collectivities which he details in his other essay *The Inoperative Community* where, indeed, power is not the operative mechanism of the human assemblage.

Now, in *Please Love Austria* this is also achieved at a scenographic level through the use of shipping containers. The grafting and fixing of

such an object of transit in the middle of the static and architecturally flamboyant opera-house in Vienna denote of a displacement: that which is normally used for transporting goods over large distances, is now serving the purpose of temporary accommodation that is simultaneously a waiting room for deportation. Arguably, shipping containers are not only one of the key device behind global economy but also a deceptive platform for human traffic. Though paralyzed here, they continue to serve such traffic only in more conspicuous ways. We may then become more critical of an object we take for granted. In Rimini Protokoll's *Cargo* (2006), the shipping container becomes precisely the object of attention vis-à-vis the workers that support it.

Rimini Protokoll, *Cargo*, 2006

Cargo locates audiences in a shipping container fixed on a truck, and which comprises of a transparent (one-way mirror) wall. The truck takes audiences on a journey from one country to another, by following the routes shipping containers take inland. Audiences thus continuously attend to industrial sites and endless trails of shipping containers around which anonymous workers are loading, unloading, repairing, etc.... Again, no fictional dimension exists in the work. Rather, audiences follow everyday activities that are normally unattended for. In this way, they become aware of the human agency around shipping containers: bodies serving containers, but also contrived by their routes (which is the audience's position, stuck in a container).

However, the nomadic experience that audiences have in *Cargo* becomes, over time, a conscious realization of how the mobility of containers has predominance over that of bodies. In other words, the possibility for containers to traverse most countries is not one that exists as easily for people. In turn, this highlights the privilege granted to goods and commodities rather than to human mobility. In addition, the protagonists of the work remain nameless, anonymous figures, zombies pushing enormous objects around without knowing their owners, under the spell of an anonymous power: a workforce turned into commodity

(as exemplified, again, by the audience's position). But this is not actually *represented* in the work rather it is progressively felt and thought through. As such, it applies Nancy's interruption of myth in terms of repelling the most discursive dimension of power: representation. For if there is no longer a narrative, a consciousness, an identity to grasp, how can there be something still represented?

This subversive criticism is key to performance artist Heinrich Lüber who achieves in his work the troubling of both individual and collective power-based structures by deceptively presenting what would seem like archetypal representations. Lüber's performances are deceptively simple: usually taking place over an hour, Lüber grafts his body onto buildings via prosthetics in order to sustain static yet vertiginous positions. Furthermore, he dresses with a bespoke outfit that is a perfect reproduction of the uniforms found within the specific building he is attached to: sometimes the uniforms of those maintaining the building (cleaners, workers, etc…), sometimes the garments of those operating from the building (secretary, businessmen, etc…). In *Performance in Zurich* (2003), Lüber stands still on top of a copy of himself situated on the corner of a building's roof. At first, as always with his work, one may think of two statues, inanimate objects. But observing the work over some extended period of time will allow to detect slight shivers coming from Lüber's body. This enables audiences to perceive a living presence and to distinguish it from the inanimate clone. As a result, the vertiginous position the artist takes initiates some anguish in audiences: their first reaction is to move away as if his body may well fall over them. The seemingly risky situation he is in becomes somehow ours.

Heinrich Lüber, *Performance in Zurich,* 2003

Lüber's work is reminiscent of monuments and their construction of archetypal identities to which collectives and individuals alike are expected to adhere. But the power figures he seems to present to us are also totally anonymous and short-lived. More importantly, they are almost literally unstable, edging on collapse. Whilst he exteriorises that which is

Heinrich Lüber, *Performance in Baden,* 2000.

commonly not visible from the outside (the workers operating the building from within), this is not aimed at producing a clear public statement but actually to dethrone the public value of archetypal identities on both collective and individual level. Indeed, the groups his outfit refer to are now shown to be passive and disempowered, and at the same time, his own individual identity is similarly expelled. By interrupting the power figures and their mythical dimension of functionality, Lüber upsets their pretension to define collective and individual identities accordingly. Now subversively paused, these are shifting attention towards other relational modes of being. They trigger reflections on the individual and the collective, the internal and the external, in terms of 'the outside [becoming] the inside [and] the spacing of the dis-position of the world […] our disposition and our co-appearance' (Nancy in Egginton 2006: 79).

> Neither 'presence' nor 'truth' [but] rather a way of binding the world and attaching oneself to it [:] nature communicating itself to man […] does not need to be interpreted [as] it is beyond the dialectic element […] and the given [,] the logos [,] a logic, a language, any kind of structure [;] it is […] emotive like an infant, before it is a fixed narrative [, it is an] *incantation* […] that gives rise to a world in the advent of a language [:] neither dialogue nor monologue [but] the unique speech of the many […] of nature as humanity and of humanity as nature (Nancy 1991: 49–50, 54).

In borrowing the real, performance may then strike a fundamental blow against the cultural narratives and fictional ideologies surrounding us. Although these are blatantly found on the outer skins of buildings and urban landscapes, they can also be exposed in the deep bowels of

these human constructions. Moving from outdoor to theatre-houses, the company Vivarium Studio has made such hyperrealism the core ethos of all their works. In *La Mélancolie des Dragons* (2008), hyperrealistic acting is paired with real dead trees surrounding the stage, a real car and a dog. In contrast, the entire floor is covered with cotton wool, badly mimicking snow, which the dog keeps reminding us by biting into and playing with the material. Somewhere, between reality and illusion, a mobile home is attached to the car: mostly empty the object has one wall entirely made of glass evoking a space between a shop window and a small size shipping container (as in Rimini Protokoll's *Cargo*).

Torn between two realities, the mobile-home encapsulates a transitoriness that reigns on all levels of the piece. Indeed, a small narrative informs the work: a group of friends in a car gets lost in a forest, in winter. In the middle of this white nowhere, they search for ways of dwelling but this is a long and never-ending drift. The layer of cotton wool itself is slowly rolled up, the car displaced further and further away on the stage until being covered with white sheets, and the useless mobile-home effectively becomes the only inhabitation, yet one where each and every one of them can only ever merely go through. It also remains an exterior habitat prone to continue drifting in the forest.

Vivarium Studio, *La Mélancolie des Dragons,* 2008

Moments of extreme fiction, illusion and theatricality are constantly undermined by hyperrealistic, often allegedly accidental, moments. Within the confines of the controlled and entirely human construction that is the theatre-house, this irresolvable break brings forth an escape from all confinement, all personal and collective narrative that would be based on an impersonal and authoritative order. The container that is the theatre is put into a drifting motion like the mobile-home. It now affirms the

> singularity of a nomadic, floating subjectivity that rests on the spatio-temporal coordinates that make it possible […] to coincide with nothing more than the degrees, levels, expansion and extension of the head-on rush of the 'outside' inwards (Braidotti 1994: 145)

To understand then how such interruption of all myths, of sedentariness itself, would formulate a new social project within the current state of civilization, one may turn to Les Ballets C. de la B.'s *Wolf* (2003) where the nomadic is made to traverse architecture. In its original creation, *Wolf's* scenographer Bert Neumann had, as a set, the entire lower floor of an actual tower-block kind of building placed centre-stage. Broad washes of white light illuminate the entire stage evenly and constantly throughout the piece.

Ballets C. de la B., *Wolf,* 2003

No change or transformation of scenery ever occurs. However, throughout, three groups of beings populate and permeate the fragment of building onstage: a group of performer/dancers, a group of musician and a group of dogs. All three groups collide at many points and merge slowly into one that remains constantly transiting across the space. The internal spaces created by the architectural set are never inhabited. But all three groups are constantly mutating, changing clothes, ways of behaving and connections between them. Significantly, performers and musicians are growingly corresponding with the dogs. Parallels between dogs and humans are rather explicit here. Sometimes leashed, the dogs are more and more let free onstage (often confronting audience members as a result); firstly choreographed and clearly positioned in space, performers and musicians increasingly navigate without precision, breaking into sub-groups while the performers are less and less ordered and clearly improvising more and more.

If dogs are 'unrepeatable singularities […] only « present » in an almost indiscernible co-presence with what they threaten' (Ridout 2006) – that is the human control – then in *Wolf* performers and musicians precisely also come to threaten their own control and that of others around them. Unsettled and unsettling, they interrupt the social meaning of the architectural foundations they used to occupy. No longer coerced, the larger group all beings onstage come to create has no singular identities but an array of ever-changing appearances. This, in turn, reflects the process, structure and ethos of the company: a collective made of multiple groups, never the same from show to show, an open-ended collective that does not fall under any particular definition or identity.

From the interruption of myth – that is tampering with or 'touch[ing]' the 'ghosts' of the 'myths' of 'Man' (Serres in Carlson 2008: 136) – one may then find individualities and collectivities that 'strike a new relationship to the non-human' (Braidotti 1994: 37):

> find[ing] our being less in the category of the human […] and more in the on going process that [Michel] Serres calls "hominescence" [where the subject is] always under construction […] fundamentally relational, interactive, and evolving […] irreducibly inceptive [, an] ever-changing character [which enacts] its continual departure from any fixed place [and performs] the resistance of the human to placement or belonging [, to] any belonging that defines property and place, and any property or place that depends on belonging (Carlson 2008: 137).

Borrowing the real to collapse its fictional and mythical ideologies moves the human environment into 'a sudden topological change' (Bey 2003: 130) and the ever-changing creations of 'Temporary Autonomous Zone'[s] (Bey 2003) where hominescent alterity amongst beings may be invigorated. As a result, behind any myth interrupted lies the injunction, or 'indispensable task' (Nancy 1991: 47), of extracting the human from the real, only to be re-introduced as a generative question mark addressed to both the human and the real: that is,

> the emergence of a world, and of a humanity in and through that world, that can no longer be (if it ever was) understood adequately according to the old divisions of subject and object, activity and passivity, or, correlatively, according to the character and conditions of solely human intelligence and agency – all of whose localities and delimitations may once have served a project of mastery and possession that now grows untenable (Carlson 2008: 136).

The task of the artist seeking to interrupt myth then revolves around

> a process that, while bringing forth a new humanity, does not yet know what humanity it is going to produce and, likewise, cannot possibly know exactly what humanity 'does' that producing (Carlson 2008: 137).

In other words,

> The best we can do in designing and lighting a set turns out to be: nothing at all … It's not a process of building, but of destroying obstacles that stand in the way of the latent form (Brook in Baugh 2005: 197).

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