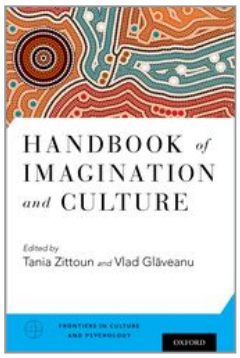

Handbook of Imagination and Culture
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Theater and Imagination to (Re)Discover Reality

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Abstract and Keywords

Imagination plays a central role in theater. This chapter first examines how psychology has apprehended theater—as a metaphor, a tool, a cultural experience and as a sociocultural practice. It then examines the particular case of documentary theater, a genre used to bring on stage informative contents aimed at developing the viewer's critical stance. Altogether, the authors propose a sociocultural understanding of imagination, and thus show how more specifically the theatrical choices made in the recent play *Décris-Ravage* triggers the viewers' active imagination, invite them to reflect on the knowledge they have, or initiate a movement of further exploration. Finally, the authors sketch the consequences for an understanding of theater as a cultural form, and of imagination.

Keywords: imagination, theater, documentary, cultural experience, dialogical

Imagination can be defined as “the process of creating experiences that escape the immediate setting, which allow exploring the past or future, present possibilities or even impossibilities.” (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, p. 2). With such a working definition, we easily join the basic assumptions of dramaturges and theater authors, namely, that imagination is a constitutive part of theater. Whether it takes the form of a religious mass communication event in ancient times, or that of an exclusive contemporary opera, theater uses shared signs and poetical language to suggest situations, which are then “filled in” by the audience’s imagination (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011). Documentary theater is a minor branch of dramaturgy used in different political and historical contexts to bring on stage informative contents considered as missing within mainstream media and literature, and aimed at developing the viewer’s critical stance. At first sight, the communication of factual information seems incompatible with imagination. Or is it? In this chapter, we reflect on this from the double perspective of dramaturgy and sociocultural psychology. We first review how psychology has been considering theater and propose a sociocultural psychological perspective of imagination, which allows us to reflect on the practices of theater. We then propose to examine the challenges facing documentary theater, and more specifically examine the theatrical choices made in the recent play *Décris-Ravage* (Rosenstein, 2014) to approach historical truth through fiction. We suggest that by triggering the viewers’ active imagination, such forms of theater can invite them to reflect on the knowledge they have, or initiate a movement of further exploration. We finally sketch the consequences for our understanding of theater as a cultural form, and of imagination.

(p.224) Theatre in Psychology

Theater is the birthplace of collectively created imaginary worlds (Artaud, 1985). Combining culturally shared signs and poetical language, theater is an invitation to an audience to collectively participate in a situation represented on stage. Dramaturges and theater directors developed different strategies to fill what director Peter Brook called “the Empty Space" between the scenic events and the audience (Brook, 1995).

Despite the obvious role of imagination in theater, in current psychology, theater has not had a very central role. There have been, however, various attempts to articulate theater and psychology, along four main lines. The first understands theater as a metaphor to address some phenomena to be studied by psychology and social sciences. The second one, probably the more important here, defines and analyzes the cultural experience of the viewer. The third one, pursuing this line with some reflections about the goals of theater, considers theater as a technique or a tool with emancipatory or educational functions. And the fourth one, probably the most recent, proposes to consider theater as a sociocultural practice.

Theater as a Metaphor

Theater has existed under various forms in most human societies, from ancient times until now. An essential feature of social life, it usually offered a specific time and space separated from daily life, where some of the drama or important issues of that society were represented to the group. With all kinds of variations, again, a specific group was in charge of carrying that representation, whether embodying characters or presenting them to another group, constituting the audience, which in some cases could also be part of the show. These basic features of theater—a stage, actors, some form of representation of contents otherwise not so clearly exposed, in a specific time and space—has inspired many authors. Basically, it offers a very useful metaphor to describe many other social or psychological phenomena.

The most complete development of the theater as a metaphor has been proposed by sociologist Erwing Goffman, who considers professional or institutional interactions as taking place on a form of stage, during which social actors manage each other’s face, yet knowing they can retreat to their backstage, where their mask can be released:

> The perspective employed in this report is that of the theatrical performance; the principles derived are dramaturgical ones. I shall consider the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them. In using this model I will attempt not to make light of its obvious inadequacies. The stage presents things that **(p.225)** are make-believe; presumably life presents things that are real and sometimes not well rehearsed. More important, perhaps, on the stage one player presents himself in the guise of a character to characters projected by other players; the audience constitutes a third party to the interaction—one that is essential and yet, if the stage performance were real, one that would not be there. In real life, the three parties are compressed into two; the part one individual plays is tailored to the parts played by the others present, and yet these others also constitute the audience. (Goffman, 1956, preface)

Goffman's analysis left a considerable imprint in the social sciences, and some expressions have become colloquial among social scientists, for instance related to impression management. The idea of social role has also been largely spread, as well as the very notion of "social actor." In everyday life as well, the idea of "playing a role" is commonsensical (Walsh-Bowers, 2006, p. 662). However, Goffman's view has been criticized for not taking into account psychology, analyzing only what was visible in interactions (Scheibe, 2000, p. 3), or more thoroughly, being based on a simplified view of theater (Walsh-Bowers, 2006). Some critical perspectives in the social sciences have tried to propose alternative metaphors—which only underline the strength of Goffman's (for a historical reading of the metaphor of theater in the social sciences, see Walsh-Bowers, 2006).

On a more psychological plane, theater as metaphor was also used to describe the unconscious. Freud was a great reader of classical theater plays. He proposed to see the unconscious as a stage where conflicts take place—these conflicts, such as the oedipal triangle, are mostly described through theatrical metaphors themselves (Assoun, 2006). This metaphor was used by other authors (J. McDougall, 2004), although

psychoanalysis is also used to analyze theater as a form of daydreaming or working through of experience (Courtney, 1989; G. McDougall, 2003). The problem of these metaphors, precisely because they are metaphors, is that they do not consider the link between theater and nontheater or between theater and personal or social life. This is what we need to examine.

Theatre as a Cultural Experience

Not only can theater be seen as a metaphor for social and psychological life, it can also be understood as a sociocultural activity itself. From such a perspective, imagination starts to be considered as playing an important role in theater.

Theater is a performed art, usually with an important verbal component, and includes the play of actors, the display of the stage, colors, lights, and rhythms. A theater play offers, for a viewer, a cultural experience, comparable to listening to music, watching a movie, contemplating a painting—it is a socially and culturally, temporal experience, during which the person accepts to be guided by the semiotic and material configuration of cultural elements—an artistic artifact (Kadianaki & Zittoun, 2014; Kuhn, 2013a; Tisseron, 2013; Winnicott, 2001b; Zittoun, 2012, 2013).

(p.226) As cultural experience, a theatrical experience has for a viewer thresholds, which facilitate the transition from everyday life to the theatrical experience. These are usually quite ritualized: entry in a specific building, possibility to have a drink at the bar, eventually abandonment of one’s coat to cloakroom attendants, process of finding a seat, the perception of the changes of light and lowering of conversations, and the temporary renouncement of judgment to be able to “enter” the play and the imagination it demands. Usually, a symmetric outgoing threshold exists, with the fall of curtains, change of light, applauses, light on in the audience, and departure. Even when contemporary forms of theater play with these formats, it is usually in reference to these (Mervant-Roux, 1998, 2009).

For the viewer, following or participating demands a certain number of activities (Zittoun, 2013, 2016). In effect, between these thresholds occurs the cultural experience per se: the moment at which the spectators “leave” their seat to experience the play. This experience of living the proximal

sphere of the theater to enter psychologically in the distal experience of the played or displayed role is allowed by imagination (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Imagination is precisely triggered and supported by the theatrical apparatus.

One description of these dynamics of imagination is given by Vygotsky in his *Psychology of Art* (Vygotsky, 1971). Questioning the spectator's experiences of art, Vygotsky suggests that art (including literature poetry, painting, or architecture) is a social tool to act on people's unconscious or emotional experiences. His reading lies, on the one side, on a psychological hypothesis, inspired by German *Ganzheit* psychology and, on the other side, on an aesthetical hypothesis. The psychological hypothesis is that people get maximally involved in an activity if they are emotionally engaged, and that the most powerful mean to bring people to emotional engagement is imagination. In art, imagination creates powerful emotions (and these support imagination), in such a way that there is no bodily discharge and that action follows:

> [I]t is this delay in the external manifestation of an artistic emotion which is the distinguishing characteristic of an artistic emotion and the reason for its extraordinary power. . . .The emotions caused by art are intelligent emotions. Instead of manifesting themselves in form of the fist-shaking or fits, they are usually released in images of fantasy. (Vygotsky, 1971, pp. 211–212)

It is interesting to note that Vygotsky writes about "intelligent emotions"; in that context, the expression actually describes "cultivated" emotions, that is, emotions enabled by the mastery of complex semiotic systems, and then guided by the cultural work—it is not a basic affective reaction.

The second part of Vygotsky's analysis notes that works of art usually function because they create a contradiction that eventually finds a solution: contradiction between form and content, between emotions lived by a character and another one, between a person's life and social constraints. As a result, a work of art creates an imagination in the reader or viewer, which stirs powerful emotions in him or her. As the piece progresses through the temporal span of its duration, the **(p. 227)** conflict is worked out—expanded, explored, dissolved,

reversed—and the viewers experience the same evolving contradictions; the emotions awakened by the art therefore go through the same transformations. It is this experience of tensions and resolutions that Vygotsky calls catharsis, in a very different meaning than as simple discharge: “catharsis of the aesthetic response is the transformation of affects, the explosive response which culminates in the discharge of emotions” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 215).

If the premise that all theater pieces are based on a contradiction and are in that sense cathartic can be discussed in the light of new forms of theater, the important idea here is that of potential transformation of the person through the imagination, triggered and transformed by the art experience. This transformation works because of the limited duration of the cultural experience, framed by these thresholds that allow the spectators to safely engage in this “little madness” (Kuhn, 2013b; Winnicott, 1989, 2001a; Zittoun, 2006). It is also enabled by the meeting of the viewers, with their biographical trajectories and knowledge about theater and its language, within a specific sociocultural environment (Benson, 2001; Carneiro, 2013; Dewey, 1934). Psychosocial studies of the theater hence show how people’s interest in and commitment to a theater play depends on their level of education, interest for complexity, and proximity to the theater world (Konijn, 1999): hence the meeting, in the theatrical space, of these two “infinities” of subjective world and sociocultural world, through the prism of this transformative artifact (Valsiner, 2014).

But what are the specificities of the theatrical form over other cultural experiences? Theater has specificities as a cultural form, first as a live art, and second as a specific tradition, as theater studies also show (Mervant-Roux, 2006). Three features can be highlighted.

First, one of the specificities of theater over other cultural experiences is that it is part of the live or “living arts” or the performing arts: each representation is unique and nonrepeatable; whatever happens during one performance is due to the unique performance of actors acting for or with a specific audience, reacting specifically to the experience they are offered. The role of the actor has been emphasized by Vygotsky. Drawing on Diderot, Vygotsky sees the actor as creating emotions in the viewers, by mobilizing their own

affects and, by means of a mastery of aesthetics, the techniques employed to create these. This allows for the "dualism of the actor," who can display and create an emotion by means of art, while feeling very differently—the actor can play love while being full of anger with the partner on stage (Konijn, 1991, 1995; Vygotsky, 1971, p. 236). This work on or with emotion is also specific to a given social and historical context:

> The actor creates on the stage infinite sensations, feeling or emotions that become the emotion of the whole theatrical audience. Before they become the subject of the actor's embodiment, they were given a literary formulation, they were borne in the air, in social consciousness. (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 241, as quoted in Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 334)

(p.228) A second feature is that, in this respect, there is no external editing to the one made by the actors—the sentence, the movement done by an actor as it unfolds cannot be changed if it was not as planned, and in that sense there is always some improvisation on scene—the actors knowing how to deal with unexpected events—one of them stuttering or missing an entrance, a baby crying in the audience, and so on. This aspect has not, to our knowledge, been theorized in the social sciences. Yet, it is fundamental to the understanding of theater: that it is a dialogical process. Actors are sensitive to the atmosphere, the quality of listening, the laughter or absence of laughter. Members of the audience can be aware of the frailty of the actors on stage and try to support them. A good performance of a given play depends not only on the actors' shape, quality of interpretation, and technical support but also on the reception, attention, and reaction of the audience, which can in some cases enhance the performance, or in others ruin it.

A third feature, in comparison to a musical or a dance performance, is that it deeply multimodal. Theater can or mostly does use words, bodies, spaces, objects, sounds, music, and colors. Contemporary theater still oscillates with the most extensive use of means—multimedia, projection, and so on—and most minimal forms (Grotowski, 2012). Yet, theater relies on the physical presence of actors on a stage playing through space and sound. From there on, every semiotic code can be used more or less thoroughly and systematically. Although the

multiplicity of semiotic means co-present in interactions has been identified by studies of multimodality (Jewitt, 2014; Kress, 2009), it is cultural psychology that has tried to account for how these are perceived and used by people to make sense of their environment. Hence, drawing on Lotman's notion of semiosphere (Lotman, 2000), as well as on C. S. Peirce's work (Peirce, 1974), Valsiner builds a theory of sense making where every component of our environment is, in a cultural world, meaningful: posters, arrangements of buildings, clothes, movements, and even landscapes (Valsiner, 2014). As complement, psychoanalysis has been attentive to the dynamic made possible by the space opened by the theatrical experience, for instance, suggesting that the specific soundscapes created on stage can carry specific emotions and associations (G. McDougall, 2003, p. 114).[1]

As a whole, a sociocultural psychology of experiencing theatre could account for framed, dialogical experiences of guided imagination, orchestrated by the various semiotic modalities displayed on stage and in the theater hall, some deliberately manipulated by the director and actors—light, music—and some others simply there—the space, its resonance, the quality of the chair, and so on. All these experiences participate, minimally at the periphery of our consciousness, to the theatrical experience. However, affordances are not always experienced similarly (Gibson, 1986; Glăveanu, 2012; Zittoun et al., 2013). Hence, for one specific member of the audience, given that person's trajectory, some elements might be more or less important, perceived or ignored, made sense of or understood as noise; and again, depending on the person's life trajectory and art experience, these different semiotic lines and dialogical encounters will be more actively guiding the experience. They may enter in resonance one with the other and be redundant, or have different or contradictory evolutions; they will guide the experience: as one **(p.229)** and harmonious (or overly simple), as locally highlighted, or as likely to create frictions or discomfort. This, finally, leads the audience member to react, emotionally, but also at time, through different modes of externalization, to the play—coughing, moving on the chair, laughing, trying to cross the actor's gaze, clapping. This, in turn, may reorient the performance. Finally, theater experiences can also be later reflected on, discussed, and used as symbolic resources (de

Saint-Laurent, 2017). Altogether, theater creates a dialogical experience.

Theatre as a Tool

Although the work of the theater is not always fully understood, its tradition of being seen as active in the construction or the maintenance of the social group, its capacity to represent problems, its double role of engaging emotionally charged imagination and allowing distantiation, and its dialogical nature made theater a very powerful tool to those interested in transmitting ideas or changing people.

One classical example is that of Jacob Levy Moreno, a psychotherapist and sociologist, who developed psychodrama as a way to intervene in people's ability to deal with their personal and social life. His analysis of people's lives in various social "atoms" suggests that they can experience all kinds of disequilibrium, in situations that correspond to ruptures in the life course (Zittoun, 2006; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). Such disequilibrium can take place within a role, or between roles, between thought and actions, or within relationships. Moreno's psychotherapy offers people, whether alone, in a relationship, or in groups, to experience a form of creativity enabling them to explore this disequilibrium to its maximum and hence experience a catharsis (Moreno, 1940). Theatre thus becomes a mean to appease one's actual life and relationships. The tradition of using theater as a basis of psychotherapy, that is, as a tool for change for audiences actually are invited to play themselves, is still quite present in France (Selz & Fognini, 2014), the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Theater is also used as a pedagogical tool, at schools or at universities, for general knowledge but also for specific interventions, for instance, to sensitize people to cultural diversity or social inequalities (Jackson & Vine, 2013; Medina & Campano, 2006; Nicholson, 2011), in prison as a way to empower people (Bottoms, 2011), or in companies' interventions (e.g., Clark & Mangham, 2004). Altogether, the use of performance in education and therapy has been reread in the light of an epistemology that aims to confer agency to audiences and patients (Holzman, 2014).

Theater as Sociocultural Practice

A fourth approach to theater, and a limit case of this dialogical evolution, is that of social scientists and psychologists using theatrical means. This can take two main **(p.230)** directions. On the one side, theater can be a means to collect data. Alex Gillespie and artist Robb Mitchell, together with Kevin Corti and other colleagues, have thus developed the cyranoid experiment, drawing on a Milgram's proposition, presenting a theatrical performance in public spaces (universities, art galleries) to generate the experience for viewers and to collect data on social interactions (Corti & Gillespie, 2015; Raudaskoski & Mitchell, 2013).

On the other hand, researchers can use theater as means to present and share their theoretical, epistemological, or empirical findings. Holzman (2014) and Gergen and Gergen (2011) have thus argued in favor of a performative psychology to communicate its finding, that is, through theater, music, or multimedia. The main arguments for a performative psychology is to render findings more accessible to nonspecialists, to create more emotional and embodied communication to foster dialogue with audiences, and to suggest modalities of action. Also, because aesthetic performances have a different regime of truth, that is, admit that they demand an active work of imagination, they allow a communication that does not imposes "truth"; rather, it invites a reflection on its status and invites the viewer "to consider this way of seeing the world" (Gergen & Gergen, 2011, p. 295). According to the authors, such performances also allow the presentation and exploration of more dense material, with its emotional charge, inherent ambivalence, and contradictions, and altogether allow more polyphony and interdisciplinary work (Gergen & Gergen, 2011, pp. 295–296). The turn to performative psychology follows a more general movement in social sciences, currently developing innovative methodologies and diverse participatory modes (Denzin, 2001; Keohane, 2014; Lury & Wakeford, 2012).

An alternative to this type of work is that in which theater directors or writers themselves collaborate with researchers from social sciences for writing, conceiving, or staging their plays. The University of Neuchâtel has thus undertaken a series of events under the label "theater of knowledge," in which all the plays result from the collaborative work between artists and social scientists. In some cases the shows can then be the occasions of collecting more data, emphasizing the

dialogical nature of any work of this type. The present chapter grew out of the collaboration of the two authors within that frame.[2]

Synthesis: Theater as Guided Imagination

Whether simply conceived as a metaphor of the world, offering a cultural experience, or actually engaging people as means of transformation, reflection, and dialogue, theater is possible only because people engage their imagination—imagination that we have defined as momentary detachment of the here and now of a given sphere of experience (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). More specifically, we have conceptualized imagination as a loop—when we imagine, we “loop out” of a given situation —here, sitting in a specific chair in a packed theater—to temporarily explore another one—this “other stage” of the fiction, which is a co-creation of what the stage and the actor propose, and what the **(p.231)** viewers puts into it—their knowledge of similar situations or of theater conventions, emotions, memories, worries, and so on. The viewers “loop out” when they, during or after the play, come back to their initial situation—now a bit changed by that loop.

To go back to these four psychological approaches of imagination, we may say that, first, when a social psychologist such a Goffman proposes theater as metaphor for describing the social world, he demands a loop of imagination from his readers. Seen as a cultural experience, second, theater obviously functions by means of the audience’s active imagination. Third, when theater is conceived as a tool for change, it also depends on the active work of the imagination of an audience temporarily willing to see the world differently. Fourth, as a sociocultural practice, theater is meant to bring performers, spectators, as well as social scientists, to engage in new practices, have new experiences, and develop new perspectives. Hence, if imagination is the process of temporarily disengaging from the here and now of a given socially situated experience, sociocultural psychology sees theater as a technique of triggering, demanding, and guiding the imagination of an audience. This brings us now back to the particular case of documentary theater.

Imagination in Documentary Theater

Documentary theater is a minor branch of dramaturgy used in different political and historical contexts in which authors or groups of artists bring on stage informative contents, considered absent within mainstream media and literature. Outstanding examples appeared in the Berlin of the 1920s, when innovative directors such as Erwin Piscator (1914–1929/1978) Bertolt Brecht (e.g., 1930) or Franz Jung, began to insert informative or testimonial documents, texts on economic theory, or filmic documents in their shows. They did so not only to make public concealed facts about the social and political crisis that the newborn parliamentary democracy in Germany, the Weimar Republic, was enduring after World War I but also for the aesthetic reason of creating a shock, a clash of genres that would stimulate the critical mind of the viewers and their emancipation against political propaganda. They were thus stepping further into the 19th century breach opened up by realism in literature, criticizing classical theater stereotypes, it's incapacity or unwillingness to represent what they considered the real protagonists of historical changes: economy, modern wars, crowds, and the unconscious or invisible dynamics of change. Although this theater was aimed as provoking critical thinking in the audience, collage became so fashionable, that national socialist propaganda started to use such technique. In that sense, in the terms defined earlier, documentary theater can be seen as a "tool" or as a sociocultural practice. But is also generates powerful cultural experiences, as we will now see.

Today, documentary theater based on history has taken different routes. Two dominant forms can be identified: one spectacular form, following the path of contemporary museography; and a second one based on dramatized and staged individual testimonies.[3]

(p.232) In regard to the first one, new technologies, access to archival documents through public data and the Internet, and the equipment of most large theaters allow immersive experiences. The viewers are "immersed" in a specific time and space, in a fascinating and emotionally captivating experience, as if they were there in the real drama of history or in the social crisis. Paradoxically, the use of archival material provides the guarantee of truthfulness of the experience. In a second type, the "effet de réel" (Barthes, 1968) is created by proximity with "authenticity": here, the viewer is exposed to some "authentic" testimony carried by

actors, which allows viewers to meet “witnesses of history” (e.g., diaries, letters), or by nonactors, invited as direct witnesses of the “real drama.” Either way, a great abundance of “factual” information is provided to construct the reality status of the event, to guarantee its “truth” status, and to immerse the viewer emotionally. The paradox is that it provides the same kind of emotions produced by fictional melodramas, cautioned by its reality status.

The case of documentary theater thus raises a paradox: usually built on material gathered through methodological techniques typical of the social sciences, it represents them using the aesthetical and semiotic modes allowed by stage languages. Necessarily triggering the audience’s work of imagination, it however primarily aims at bringing people—the audience, and at times, the actors and the theater crew—to new understandings about the world. Hence, whereas documentary theater was initially proposed to stimulate the critical mind of the viewers and their emancipation from mass culture, many contemporary choices impress the viewers, immerse them, and maintain them in a passive, if not credulous, stance (Rancière, 2011). How, then, to resolve the problem of the documentary theater of “constructing a verisimilitude” relation to the past, without making the audience captive of a fictionalized version of “truth”? How, then, to use imagination to bring people to experience, learn, or reflect on some social, historical, or political reality? This, we suggest, is achieved through a different route; it is what one of (Adeline Rosenstein) has developed over the years, and we will now present this choice which consists in replacing the abundance of “real material” with the more deliberate use of the imagination of the viewer.[4]

A Statement: Documentary Theatre That Shows No Documents

Adeline Rosenstein is the author and director of *Décris-Ravage*, which literally means “Describe-Depredate,” a documentary theater play about the “question of Palestine.” It retraces the history—the construction and the transformations—of the so-called Palestinian problem, since 1799. The theater play is written on the basis of diverse material: the work of historians, especially French historian Henry Laurens (Laurens, 1999, 2002, 2007, 2011, 2015), and their typical sources (archival material, pictures), and of geographers; theater plays from the Arab world that illustrate various aspects of the Palestine question; interviews realized with intellectuals or artists that spent some years or their life in Israel and came back to Europe; and the transcript of a “Truth Comission”, organized by a non **(p.233)** governmental organization, Zochrot, a public encounter between former soldiers who were active in 1948 in the southern area and participated in the destruction of Arabic villages, and survivers of this expulsion.

The theater play itself is constructed in episodes, each of them corresponding to a section of history. In 2015, the four episodes can be summarized as follows. The first episode starts in 1799 and narrates Bonaparte’s discovery of the Middle East, the first massive murders of the local population, the unsuccessful conquest of Syria, and the development of Bonaparte’s “image” as a victorious conqueror of the Orient with the birth of Egyptology. The second episode examines the events from 1830 until the last decades of the century, in Greece, Algeria, and Syria; the first Palestinian uprising and the Crimean war in 1834; and as the Ottoman reforms and emancipation of non-Muslims of the empire. The third episode expands from 1882 to 1914 and examines the idea of “race” in Germany and the various “isms” (e.g., slavism, turquism) that flourished in those years. Palestine was a mass-pilgrimage touristic destination; yet the tourists did not come to see its modernity, but their own imaginary biblical past. Finally, the fourth episode explores the years leading to First World War under the idea of the “ethnic engineering,” the Herero and Nama genocide committed by Germany, and the Armenian Genocide. The episode closes with the three contradictory promises made by the British Empire, which offered Palestine

simultaneously to the French, to the Arab revolutionaries, and to the Zionist movement.

How to represent such complex events over 200 years, covering thousands of kilometers, national and international histories, events moving at different speeds, conflicting interests and opposing worldviews, all coinciding in what, retrospectively, appears to be the making of the fate of a region of the Middle East? In other words, how to represent history?

The intentions of one of us as theater director, Adeline Rosenstein, are to preserve and cultivate the dialogicality and complexity of the material and to actively mobilize the imagination of the audience. The strategy is to “circumvent” the events, to “turn around” the events, rather than simplify them. A first decision is thus to represent each event from a multiplicity of perspectives: that of the poet, the witness, the historian, and so on. The second decision concerns the historical material. The history of the Middle East and its relation to Europe has been widely illustrated; there is a great abundance of easily available accounts, pictures, maps, and chronologies—from the spectacular painting of Napoleon on his camel (Gérôme, 1867) to contemporary maps representing movements of populations in the Middle East, passing by touching black-and-white “authentic” pictures of nomadic tribes or recent journalistic images of war crimes. The second decision of the director was *not* to show any of this historical material on stage. This needs now to be explained.

The reasoning is, first, that most members of contemporary audience have been, as part of their educational trajectory and daily exposure to the media, exposed to a great amount of these images. Often without knowing it, we have “seen” images of the once-dreamed palace of the Orient, camels and dunes, or maps of Israel and its challenged borders.

Second, these images themselves are problematic. As has been discussed in the criticism of Orientalism, these representations of a dreamed Orient or the **(p.234)** past beauty of ruins and temples are mostly inaccurate or, more precisely, constructed to promote a certain romantic representation of the Orient. In addition, many of the more ethnographic material, such as pictures of Old Jerusalem of 1900 or of local tribes, cannot be understood without careful

description and commentaries—for instance, on the specific belonging of protagonists that can be deduced from details of the costumes. In other words, these pictures cannot be used to represent or evoke the historical truth because they have been constructed to promote a certain version of the past, or cannot be understood without a commentary that does the same (Sontag, 1978).

Third, the materials more recently made to give simple visualizations of the conflicts in the Middle East in various media have become more and more complex. This paradox has been the target of satirist and commentator Karl Sharro, as for instance in Figure 11.1, created to mock “those types of diagrams that became quite popular to explain geopolitical dynamics around the Middle East [and] was intentionally done to look absurd and to highlight the myth that ‘the Middle East is a complex place that we can’t understand’ ” (private communication, reported with courtesy of the author).

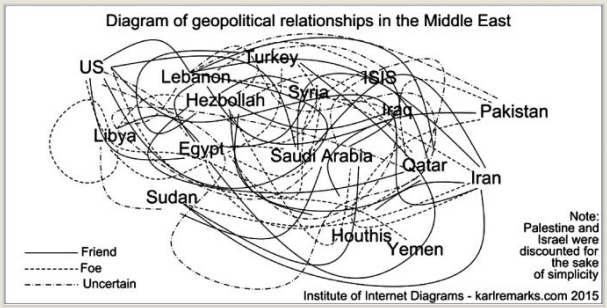

Figure 11.1. Diagram of geopolitical relationships in the Middle East.

(Source: karlremarks.com.)

Fourth, beyond the problem of each of the type of sources, the amount of material to reconstruct the perspectives of the many protagonists involved in 200 years of history would be gigantic, and even with parsimonious choices, such an accumulation risks overwhelming viewers and saturating the stage. Rather, and although, as mentioned previously, contemporary documentary theater dominantly uses such historical and artistic material on stage to create effects of “truth” by immersion, this was avoided altogether.

For these various reasons, Adeline Rosenstein made the choice to convoke the audiences’ active imagination. Rather than showing images, the actors on stage either play as if they were showing them, or evoke them through other semiotic modalities. First, the visible is made invisible. Hence, the main

historical line is narrated by the director in the style of a conference. The location of the narrator on stage progressively moves along the piece, the further back being associated with the oldest events. Her notes are held on a music stand; behind her stand three **(p.235)** white doors. Punctuating her talk, the narrator throws balls of wet white Kleenex on these doors behind her—these stick with a spongy noise. The narrator comments on these as if they were PowerPoint projections; for each “projection”, she “describes” the image meant to be seen, referring to actual archival documents (for instance, “here you can see the picture of an old man”). Some members of the audience can “see” or imagine the evoked pictures, while others are more sensible to the actual movement itself and what it evokes.[5] Other actors play, mime, or dance other missing images. One striking scene is the “carto-choreography” of the Mediterranean region. Conceived in collaboration with geographer Julia Strutz (cf. Strutz, 2014) and played by an actress gesturing the contours of vanishing borders in space, as well as movements of population over time, it gives a striking idea of borders moving over the centuries. The actors also comment on the fact that it is impossible to represent maps of these regions without referring to the maps the audience already know, that is, accepting as fact the divisions of territories of which the genealogy has precisely been controversial. Many viewers actually comment on the fact that they have “seen” these maps and that the lines and surfaces imagined by them as the actors move eventually “remain” in the space, allowing them progressively to “see” the maps to deploy, and the layers progressively create an imaginary complex network.

A second technique used is to make abstract ideas concrete. In one scene, the narrator mentions the abstract number of 2,500 executed prisoners by French troops in Jaffa, 1799. Here, to make such a number “concrete,” the narrator slows down the narration to try to figure out which space on stage would take a dead body. She then patiently counts, step by step, how many bodies could be lined on the width on the stage, then its depth, then piling them up to the ceiling, until she gets to the approximate number of actual deaths. Again, many interviewed viewers explain having “seen” the room filled with bodies and feeling the mass murder it represented. On the same line, the actors “explain” concepts such as “race” or

“event,” using for that the traditional semiotic systems of theater—clown and mime.

The play also borrows a few sequences from theater plays of the Arab world on Palestine. Here, the technique could be one of “thickening” or reambiguing language. These short scenes are indeed suddenly interrupted by one of the actors, questioning the meaning of a word; this is each time followed by another scene representing an academic or a native speaker trying to interpret the meaning of the word. Of course, the meaning depends on the context and the position of the speaker, thus revealing the necessary nontransparency of the language and its sensitive role in geopolitical misunderstandings. Yet again, the viewers are invited to “see” the possible meanings and scenes that could follow from these conflicting interpretations.

Hence, for Adeline Rosenstein, the complexity of the layers of history and diversity of perspective could not have been shown. In contrast, because scenes, maps, and images are simply evoked and guided by gestures and words, it is up the members of the audience to imagine these scenes, drawing on their own stock of images, experience, and knowledge. Paradoxically, through the “vaporization” of existing images, the concretization of abstract ideas, and the superposition **(p. 236)** of meaning, these complex realities have to be actively imagined, modified, and superposed by the viewer. The otherwise empty stage becomes a “space for thinking” (Perret-Clermont, 2015), which the viewers can fill with their imagining; during the piece, these are held in the mind and become bearable.

The fact that the members of the audience are conceived as active co-constructors of the play, even though it is documentary theater, has implications on the level of what is “learned.” The play does not “teach” facts or information; it also does not simply invite to criticize existing representations. It proposes material that has been transformed, according to a process that resemble the dream work—condensations of meaning, displacement of representational modality, figuration of the abstract into concrete, and construction of new scenes to make it consistent while obviously not respecting realistic temporalities (Freud, 2001a, 2001b). Theater offers an empty stage that functions as intermediary space—proposing actors’ movements and speech, it actually needs to be inhabited with

the viewers' imagination, memories, and experiences (Winnicott, 2001b). As a consequence, viewers can have the experience of having been the actual authors of the layered fresco they imagine; this could, in turn, invite them to realize that they did indeed know much more than they thought—they themselves provided the images, maps, and memories that actually composed that fresco—while also experiencing doubts about that very process and the relevance of these images.

This has an implication that the experience of the play is often only triggering a process of exploration that continues after the play. Hence, some viewers told the authors that they started to look for the images, information, and maps in the days that followed. Also interviewing viewers just after the play or a couple of days later, one student collaborating on the project realized that their remembered imagination tended to be clearer with time (Eufemi, 2015)—as if it gave the viewers time to revise them, speak about them, reflect on them, as in the narration and secondary elaboration of dreams (Freud, 2001b).

In sum, one of the difficulties of working with complex historical material is its *distance* to the spheres of experiences of the viewer—a presentation of a distance world, maps of a too complex reality. An option often taken by documentary theater is to "immerse" the viewers by means of their emotions, or by simplification (e.g., the good versus the bad). In contrast, the choice here has been to create another form of relationship to these distant and complex realities: that of triggering their construction though the viewers' imagination, which demands an active creation on the basis of the images and knowledge the viewers might actually have already internalized without being aware of it. Theater thus appears as a jointly constituted cultural artifact that convokes, guides, and liberates the viewers' (as well as the actors') imagination, which fills in the stage, where it is guided by words, movements, sounds, lights, and space. All these semiotic constructs can thus be seen to feed in the individual loops of imagining, which are emotional and embodied experience. Hence, distant realities might become closer for the audience because they have been precisely constructed on the basis of the viewers' experience.

(p.237) Opening

In this chapter we have tried to combine our knowledge about theater from the perspective of a dramaturge, author and actor, and a cultural psychologist. We have especially reflected on the case of documentary theater, which in itself is thought-provoking: How can fiction be created on the space of a stage in order to document the reality of history of social facts? This consideration brought us to reflect both on theater and on imagination itself.

First, reflecting on theater as cultural experience, we saw that it is necessarily a situated activity that demands the active participation of everyone—including the viewers. After the audience is gathered and the show starts, the audience is invited to the leap of faith required to jump into the thinking space that is the stage. Actors, through the semiotic codes they master—play with gestures, bodies, space, language sounds, melodies, rhythm—evoke and propose shapes and figures; these necessarily have to be inhabited by each viewer's active loops of imagination. For imagining, the viewers use the guidance of what is proposed on stage, as well as all the semiotic resources they are disposed of (e.g., images seen, stories heard, personal experiences, movies, factual knowledge), and recompose them in new ways. Hence, paradoxically, the less the theater "shows," the more the members of the audience become the co-authors of the play they see—with all the pleasure and frustration this might also cause.

Second, this exploration enriches our understanding of imagination. If imagination can be conceived of as looping in and out of the here and now of an experience, then documentary theater can be seen as a specific form of guidance of imagination. In other words, loops of imagination can be triggered by the ritual opening of a play; they are nourished by the previous experiences of the viewer, but they are also orchestrated by the unfolding play. The texts, the changes of style and pace, the use of the space, mime, dancing movement, and props such papers and lights are all semiotic languages. We also have shown how specific techniques can be used to guide the semiotic work of the viewer, techniques that can be seen as parallel to those of the dream work—the displacement of images into other semiotic modes; the concrete figuration of abstract ideas; and the unfolding of condensed expressions. As these different semiotic modalities and operations unfold through time and space, and combine

with each other, they create the unique semiotic field that guides and channels the experience of the spectator. In that sense, theater, in all it variation, is a complex mode of orchestration of human experience (Baucal & Zittoun, 2013)—a sophisticated guidance of imagination.

As a conclusion, our joint reflection comes to see theater as a complex form of guided imagination. As such, depending on its modalities, the material it privileges, and the perspectives it adopts, it either can guide the audience toward their inner experience and toward an alternative world, or as we have explored here, can present an alternative way to explore the past and illuminate the present, and initiate further movements of exploration.

Notes

(1.) For psychoanalysis, theater experience demands a form of dream work. “Theatre in this sense is structured daydreaming in which the omnipotence of fantasy can be brought into contact with the frustrations of reality and worked through” (G. McDougall, 2003, p. 114).

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New Theatre of Knowledge productions are in preparation, with social scientists and research participants involved in the creation of the plays. See www.unine.ch/theatre-connaissance.

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(4.) We will, however, not draw on the growing field of theatrical studies, especially present in the French speaking world. The interested reader can consult Carneiro (2013); Kempf, Moguilevskaia, & Collectif (2013); and Mervant-Roux (1998, 2006), as well as issues of the journal *Etudes Théâtrales*, or *Agôn.*

(5.) In this section, when talking about the viewer’s experience, we refer to informal conversations of members of the audience with the two authors, as well as a series of interviews done by a group of students along the representations in La Chaux-de-Fonds, and especially Odel Alvarez, Dimitri Degen, Séverine Desarzens, Virginia Eufemi, Olivier Lamon, Alisa Steinhauser, and Jules Raynal, who wrote reports on these, as well as Franca Bianchi and Jérémie Blanc; also useful were the interviews done by Constance de Saint-Laurent with viewers in Brussels (see de Saint-Laurent, 2017).

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