

THE EMPIRE OF SPECTATORS ON SUPERAMAS' *EMPIRE* (ART & POLITICS)

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1.

The theatre's proscenium arch has been lowered and replaced by another familiar view framing the stage: a wide letterbox window, left open in a black wall. The spatial setting of cinema invades the theatre, suggesting distance, framing, and flatness even before the show has started. What follows is a re-enactment of scenes and intrigues from a Napoleonic battle, each time with a white panel serving as a background. There is the heroic style complete with impressive costumes and lights, but also sickening violence, contempt, racism, lust, rape: all this compressed in a few expressionistic *tableaux vivants* – postcards' nostalgia meets the snappy aesthetics of a movie trailer. A commentary voice recounts the Battle of Aspern-Essling in 1809, in which 40.000 men lost their lives in hardly two days time. 'It is the bloodiest battle of its time and even to this day the Austrian and French military both claim victory on the field.' Bloody and unsolved, this battle is an uncomfortable metaphor for the conflicts that underpin representations of the new Europe, as an alternative founding myth somewhere between the French Revolution and the Congress of Vienna, astray in the dust of history.

History, politics and representation are recurring themes in the work of the French-Austrian (!) collective Superamas, whose large-scale and complex *Empire* (Art & Politics) is as impressive as much as disturbing performance. The Napoleonic re-enactment is only an upbeat to the steady raising of tricky questions – is Superamas bent on writing a counter-history of Europe's modernity? Yes, but the consideration that the new Europe, civil society and a democratic notion of art came into being around the same time, mainly serves as background to the question of how different conceptions of history influence our current view on the

world and ourselves. The message therefore is to be sought in the form, in the subtle deconstruction of representational regimes, in the reflections on the place where the dust of history is being poked up. A theatre in Paris?

The re-enactment of the Battle of Aspern-Essling by Superamas is considerably charged because so many details shatter the heroic image of war. Whether this approach leads to an 'authentic' account or not, it does produce an interesting contrast with the historical re-enactments of the numerous Napoleonic societies for living history. From the declaration of intent of the society Forum Aspen 1809: 'Everybody, who always had probing questions on historic events, which could not be answered by any book, might be able to find the right answer together with us in practice. With living history it is possible to put oneself into the atmosphere of the Napoleonic period.' And: 'To make sure: The Forum Aspern is neither a right wing society nor a hard drinking 'Schützenverein'. There is no political activity within the FA whatsoever.'²

Unlike a living history re-enactment, as spectators we do not find ourselves within the same landscape as the participants – with Superamas the logic of procession and participation has yielded to distance. The remoteness of an all too large theatre space turned into a cinema, of two centuries of history, of doubt about grand narratives, but also of a certain indifference towards exposure to all this violence and its significance. What does all this say about us spectators? To paraphrase: where do we find ourselves when we watch?

2.

Moments later the re-enactment turns out to be a staging by Superamas (as characters in *Empire*) at

the invitation of the French ambassador, whom we meet at the following party where the show and the demand for an authentic evocation of history are also the topic of conversation. A motley crowd gathers at the party, contemporary and particularly jet set, but not devoid of dissensus. Besides politicians and diplomatic guests, celebrities and artists are present (the re-enactment team of Superamas, for this occasion led by homosexual Flemish director Johan Janssens), each with their idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. Superamas place their stories side by side and jumbled up, foregrounding contradictions and multiple meanings in an almost literary manner, although it is rather witty humour and the ignitable cocktail of clichés than in-depth psychological exploration that interests Superamas.

Our global condition is literally captured in the mix of English, French, Arabic, Portuguese and Farsi – which are not always subtitled, thus broaching the subject of ignorance that spreads out to culture and politics in a broader sense. But at the party language is also official speeches (the ambassador), bad jokes that supposedly create a shared horizon (guests trying to make conversation), personal tragedies wrapped up as human interest just like the emo-supplements of newspapers prescribe, or indifference to someone else's name (Ibrahim is systematically addressed as Abraham). All kinds of details disclose violence, ignorance and condescension, slumbering in simple doings. In a hurricane of clichés that makes up the context, this noise is all the more striking. Tangible as an undercurrent in the speeches, the chatter, the gossip and the jokes at the party is a counter-history of the capitalist empire with its global financial currents, its colonial history, migration and racism, outpourings of national representational logics, etcetera.

But first of all the party is a place where people gather, a community of self-declared free individuals, all inhabitants of what Peter Sloterdijk calls the 'crystal palace'. They live in a post-historical world, have no lack of comfort, are able to realize themselves endlessly as consumers and revel in the cult of celebrities. Their mobility is evenly unlimited, allowing them to network eagerly, to involve themselves in the urge for armed democratization or to cherish the ideal of a multicultural society. *Empire*

(*Art & Politics*) talks about that other empire: the elite of spectators that live in the crystal palace and want to be oh-so-much more than spectators – but without having to tamper with their welfare system's perverted logic of exclusion and the comfort they enjoy within it.

The remote witnessing and the paradoxical character of their moral comfort appear from various stories and activities of the guests at the party: the ambassador's naïve humanism, the celebrities' charity work, the artists' politically correct discourse, the female student's armchair-activism. To rouse their good intentions the ambassador has also invited a Somali refugee as an experience expert to deliver a sincere and emotional account from the 'outside'.

The inhabitants of the crystal palace lack a horizon; they have become eternal *tourists* troubled by boredom. The world has been wholly conquered as an image, the global view has been saturated by the mediation of images, information and formats of all sorts. Uncertain situations become sparse, Sloterdijk writes, 'the demand for experiences of difference floods the markets. Only thoroughly insured "civilizations" have been able to make a start with this aestheticisation of the uncertainties and pitfalls which form the criterion of post-modern life forms and their philosophies.'³

3.

The desire for experiences of difference is often at stake in contemporary art, whether or not related to contemplation on the luxury of one's own spectatorship. Does this art then have a better – more authentic, more truthful, more complex, more disquieting, more significant... – view on our globalised world than, say, the TV-news or the intercontinental tourist?

There is yet another protagonist in *Empire* (*Art & Politics*), who ties together the different scenes and levels: a camera, operated by a cameraman with assistant and soundman. When the re-enactment reaches its end, the camera rolls into the obscure performing area to scan dead bodies with a search light. Later the camera is present at the ambassador's party to record the guests' doings – or do they need the camera to perform their act? The actual film we don't get to see. As a symbol

for the comfortable position of remote witnessing, the focus is on the camera itself, conspicuous in its obscene taciturnity. The camera is reminiscent of the detached eye of the TV-news, constantly serving us the fiction of an omnipresent view on the world with the aid of an imperturbable 'testimonial machine'.⁴ The camera puts into perspective the moral comfort of the elite of spectators, might even be a stand-in for the viewer on stage, as a guarantee that in the end everything will be accessible and comprehensible in a compact form. That art's desire for truth is not without paradoxes either, Superamas realizes all too well. By lining up as characters in their own show the members of Superamas are undeniably part of the empire they are trying to evoke. But also as a collective of artists Superamas see the necessity of questioning 'art as problem tourism'.

Halfway through *Empire (Art & Politics)* we are treated to a fictitious documentary, which leads them with their camera to Afghanistan, to enter into dialogue with a colleague, Iranian filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf. For that matter, the idea for this film was also conceived at a party where the artistic jet set was assembled. The film that is shown turns out to be anything but the expected documentary or politically correct art film – even if it explicitly relates to these genres.⁵ More likely it is an ironic self-portrait: the members of Superamas literally reveal themselves as cowboys, driven by an exoticist and pornographic desire for the 'real', seasoned with a good deal of machismo.

Phantasms of proximity do not quite offer an alternative to Superamas' acknowledgement that as artists they are themselves part of the empire of spectators and needing to relate to it in some way or another. How to broach this consciousness of one's own perspective beyond Christian self-reproach and beyond irony?

4.

Back to the party. In *Empire (Art & Politics)* Superamas is not only bent on ironically assailing the desire for consensus and the univocal interpretation schemes of a leftist art world and ditto critical theory. In the end all the characters are shaped and haunted by their spectatorship, by the contradictions of their global condition and of their personal lives and desires. These personal traits and

individual lives turn each character into walking contradictions, which also cloud the clichés they appear to stand for at first sight. In particular the all too crude stereotyping gives rise to the question of embodiment, putting the undisturbed spectatorship of the characters at risk – and unlike the disembodied camera people are of course neither machines nor pictures. What language punctures the flatness of the characters and resonates with their bodies and has inscribed itself into their history? In at least three scenes the relation between corporality and desire for truth is explicitly brought up for discussion.

All the characters are burdened with an overwrought sexual desire, which can hardly be curtailed as the party progresses and the liquor flows. Their impulsive deeds no longer keep pace with their noble words. With no effort all party guests seem to agree on that point. Moments later this so-called 'universal' language of bodily desire is also shown as a grotesque truth when all guests participate in a Brazilian dance. One can't help thinking of the commercial 'Do the mojito with Bacardi', in which dance as a universal means of communication canalizes desire and sublimates it into global exoticism.⁶ Ultimately two truths are at odds: boisterous sexuality gnaws at decorum but with the same ease it folds itself towards a sleek cultural imagination, it even acts as its motor.

Although the characters are stereotypical, the acting in *Empire (Art & Politics)* is in no way exaggerated – as opposed to Superamas' *BIG*-trilogy. Furthermore it sides professional actors and dancers with amateurs and 'experience experts', but without a difference in treatment. On the level of casting and direction that's why the personal history of the performers and the narrativity of their bodies are brought up in an ambiguous way. Mark that, as the ambassador has invited a Somali refugee to his party, the members of Superamas (as characters) have hired Arabian actors for their Napoleonic re-enactment – but of course they were cast by Superamas for *Empire (Art & Politics)* in the first place. Encounters with others and with the world, which have sometimes clung violently to the body and which reshape it into a singular narrative, make the characters as well as the actors into who they are – and there is some oscillation between both.

Photo: Giannina Urmeneta Ottiker



At the ambassador's party the Somali refugee tells his story emotionally, a traumatic history permeated by violence. It makes a lasting impression and in this moment he proves to be the actual outsider amidst the elite of spectators, because he stands in the world differently. The story jumps out and draws the line for the endless parataxis of perspectives in *Empire (Art & Politics)* – but is this the moment of truth? Although Jamal Mataan may very well be a Somali refugee in real life, bringing a fictionalised version of his life story on stage, this background does not appear as such from the show. Reversing this line of thought actually offers us an unexpected view on the other characters and actors. For instance, American actor Davis Freeman plays an American weapons freak and he seems cut out for the part – is this just metier or does the observation reach deeper? An indeterminate zone regularly appears between embodiment, fictionalisation and crude stereotyping, while the accurate casting makes subtle use of the actors' 'own' language to demonstrate how uncannily close the reality of global capitalism actually is – it unexpectedly acts up in the body, also among the spectators who are inside the crystal palace.

While the party comes to an end, the ambassador receives a message from the doctor via his wife – he has prostate cancer. By this sudden proximity of death he momentarily forgets all roles he has thus far played with a great deal of fervour, ranging from ambassador and host over father and husband to philanthropist and adept of the lifestyle cult. Do personal tragedy and the awareness of mortality also lead to modesty about one's own perspective on the world and regarding the pain of others?

5.

Where do we find ourselves when we watch? As a spectator one is unable to do anything but surf on the confusing flood of situations and opinions, feelings and thoughts served by Superamas in *Empire (Art & Politics)*, while the resistance against clichés turns out to be an apt motor for self-observation. Superamas does not aim for overview, but for a diagnostics of time as an immersion in numerous contradictory experiences, with the small truths and many questions they raise. Superamas are not believers, they couldn't care less about transparency, settled truths or a clearly defined ideological framework – for them art only becomes critical when it pairs analysis with an irreducible heterogeneity. With *Empire (Art & Politics)* they manage to push this vision beyond ironic pose and its interminable relativity – or at least to its very edge. Is theatre then a place for experiences of difference?

The show ends with fireworks, an astounding series of light and colour configurations. The camera's search light and the luminous globes which decorated the ambassador's party – as symbols of detachment, overview and universality, associated with the Enlightenment – transform into thousands of splinters to descend into the theatre as yet another distant spectacle. As if this sight places them outside time the fourteen performers stiffen while they join the spectators in the audience in gaping at that marvellous sky above their crystal palace.

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Notes

- 1 The premiere of *Empire (Art & Politics)* took place at La Villette in Paris on June 19th, 2008.
- 2 <http://www.baulesch.at/fa1809/2003/index-e.htm>
- 3 Peter Sloterdijk, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*, Frankfurt am Main, 2005, pp. 149-150
- 4 Cf. Frank Vande Veire's analysis of the TV-news as a Christian ritual, in: *Neem en eet, dit is je lichaam. Fascinatie en intimidatie in de hedendaagse cultuur*, Amsterdam, 2005, pp. 209-210 and 224-225.
- 5 On the relationship between desire for truth and the documentary in an artistic context, cf. Tom Holert, 'Die Erscheinung des Dokumentarischen', in *Dokumentarische Strategien in der Kunst*, Karin Gludovatz (ed.), Wien/Köln, 2004.
- 6 The commercial can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RFxGn6Cak>