

**Athens Institute for Education and Research  
ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series  
ART2016-2038**

**Babel Re-Play: Preliminary Findings of a Collective  
South-African/Swiss Art Research Project**

**Cynthia Kros  
Research Fellow  
Capital Cities Programme  
University of Pretoria  
Associate of History Workshop  
University of the Witwatersrand  
South Africa**

**Georges Pfruender  
Professor, Chair of Art and Theatre Education  
Institute for Continuing Education and Counselling  
School of Education  
University of Applied Sciences and Arts  
Northwestern Switzerland**

**Margarete Jahrman  
Professor, Gamedesign  
Zurich University of the Arts  
Switzerland**

An Introduction to  
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. This paper has been peer reviewed by at least two academic members of ATINER.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

**Kros, C., Pfruender, G. and Jahrmann, M. (2016). "Babel Re-Play: Preliminary Findings of a Collective South-African/Swiss Art Research Project", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: ART2016-2038.**

Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:  
www.atiner.gr  
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm  
Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research. All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the source is fully acknowledged.  
ISSN: 2241-2891  
7/11/2016

**Babel Re-Play: Preliminary Findings of a Collective  
South-African/Swiss Art Research Project**

**Cynthia Kros**

**Georges Pfruender**

**Margarete Jahrmann**

**Abstract**

The paper critically reviews work in development (performances, urban games, and theoretical and literary texts) from Babel Re-Play, a trans-disciplinary research project launched in Switzerland and South Africa in 2015, led by Jahrmann, Kros and Pfruender. Inspired by the profusion of artistic projects and philosophical ideas generated by the story of the Tower of Babel (among which the "Babel" writings of the Swiss author Dürrenmatt) in the setting of Babylon, we are testing their performative potential in the context of modern cities. Through a series of actions (urban games, play scenarios with and in towers) of which we produced film sketched, we analyse possibilities for setting narratives and myths concerning the city in productive dialogue with those generated around the Tower, in cities of the North and South. Babel Re-Play focuses on staging Knowledge/mediation, and approaches of play as a method and a framing device for potential inter-action with places/persons, to extract new stories and new knowledge concerning narratives of the urban, and present them in formats of film /film installations.

**Keywords:** Re-Playing of Myths, South-North dialogue, urban games, play and art actions in the city, film as tool for research, Tower of Babel, Friedrich Dürrenmatt.

**Acknowledgments:** This paper has been developed in response to the Colloquium/Workshop "Babel Re-Play" held at the Centre Dürrenmatt on April 8/9, 2016. Specific contributions are acknowledged in the paper

In this paper we discuss the origins of *Babel Re-Play*, some of its theoretical foundations and working methods, and two short films that have so far been produced in Johannesburg and Zurich respectively as part of the research programme. One was created in South Africa under the direction of Mwenya Kabwe with performance artists, Vanessa Cooke, Khutjo Green, Tshego Khutsoane and musician Jill Richards, and shot and edited by filmmaker Jurgen Meekel. The team in Switzerland consisted of Samuel Dématraz, Margarete Jahrmann and Georges Pfruender. Both teams attempted through the production or reproduction of texts and staging of play situations to catch aspects of the Tower of Babel in the contexts of contemporary Johannesburg and Zurich respectively.

Our methodology and conceptual foundation owe something to previous projects in which we have been involved, including *Fundbüro* in which we experimented through play-setting with the collective production of stories, developed and communicated over considerable distance between two research groups based in South Africa and France respectively. In making films that are stimulated by 'play' in a sense that is described more fully below, we have followed what both Michel de Certeau and Jacques Derrida have characterised as a turn to fiction that ideally allows for a fertile release from conventional historiography, at least temporarily, allowing multiple stories to co-exist and multiple meanings to emerge.

Drawing on a plethora of perspectives and insights, we wish to offer possibilities for new experiences of, and narrative approaches to urban spaces. Allowing narratives to be traded between two places, in this case Johannesburg and Zurich, makes allowance for social realities and tensions to be observed, described and analysed with a double lens: the immediate and the distant. We wish to construct the dialogues between partners in the South and North without having to operate within parameters that have been set by the latter, which is often the case.

### **Context and Historical References**

*Babel Re-Play* is an emanation of an international arts-based research initiative that we launched in South Africa and Switzerland in 2013 called *Construction Site/ Chantier*. The Tower of Babel came to mind as one of the most famous construction sites. Believed to have been located in the ancient City of Babylon many meanings have been ascribed to the story of the foundation of the Tower. One of the interpretations we have embraced concerns people leaving behind their nomadic traditions to create a new, durable form of dwelling that would prove to be the catalyst for new imaginaries and narratives of the "urban". We saw the citizens of Babylon attempting to write themselves into the landscape with an impressive architectural gesture. The tower, visible from a great distance, would be the ultimate reference point for the city, and its citizens, but would also exterritorialise the "other" – those unable to claim a part of it.

De Certeau (1988), in his famous passage describing the voyeur on the 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Centre (an infamous re-play of the myth of the Tower of Babel although de Certeau did not know it yet) demonstrates that the voyeur's sense of a commanding view is, in fact, an illusion and perhaps only the symptom of the pride that comes before the "Icarian fall".<sup>1</sup> What the voyeur sees is a mere "fiction of knowledge" produced by the flattening out of the real complexities below. De Certeau is warning scholars and writers not to impose their agendas or interpretations on a city from which they are often distanced and even aloof. It is those who are pursuing their everyday lives in the city that the voyeur cannot see who are the real authors, continuously shaping, re-shaping and sometimes undoing the texts while they weave past and present together through gestural and verbal referencing.

The commanding view that has been aspired to for centuries, deceives the voyeur/city planner into believing that it is possible to plan a rational and perfectly functioning city – the belief that is at the heart of the dream of modernity. Another reading of the Tower of Babel that we favoured was that of the disastrous failure of modernity. Bruno Latour's (1991) paradoxical critique of the Modern, with some similarity to de Certeau's insistence on the importance of acknowledging complexity, argues that western Europeans in seeking to be "modern" have created artificial boundaries between themselves and the "others" and between themselves and the natural world. Latour proposes that the "Moderns", as they style themselves, consider the possibilities of border crossing and the incorporation (or internal acknowledgment) of other perspectives that could end the guilt and isolation that the "Moderns" have effectively brought on themselves. Theorists of the South have demonstrated how much can be gained by those who are economically marginalised or invisible in the official registers from border crossings and from creative, what de Certeau (1988) calls "tactics", employed from outside the "master narrative". Among many others,<sup>2</sup> AbdouMalik Simone (2004 and 2014), Homi Bhabha (2012), Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010), and Gayatri Spivak (1988), have analysed the consequences of economic marginalisation, pointing to the potential emergence of new imaginaries. Congruent with our own view of the Construction Site, Simone, for example argues that while the cities of the South are "incomplete" in comparison with the well-finished cities of the North, the former provide more opportunities for people living on their margins, maintaining that for them it is better that the city remains an "incomplete project" (Simone 2014: 330).

### **South North Dynamics and Ethics**

As is well known, the Babel myth is actually situated outside the South North binary, in ancient Mesopotamia, although it has been appropriated by the North stepping in to portray itself as the centre of the civilising project. *Babel*

---

<sup>1</sup> The phrase "Icarian Fall" is de Certeau's.

<sup>2</sup> For a range of theorists from the south see Parnell and Oldfield, 2014.

*Re-Play* wishes to offer tactics to re-visit the myth outside the boundaries set by conventional readings.

We have not put other scenarios aside, and will no doubt return to them in future work. But we have become most absorbed for the present in reading towers as a physical manifestation or symptom of a city condition (see also the sizzling description of the performing tower in Philip Kerr's (1995) *Grid*). We wish to think more precisely about the tower in terms of a relationship and connection/disconnection established as a mode of being that informs us as much about ourselves as inhabitants of the city as about its planners, proprietors or builders. What is the influence of the built environment on our ways of being and performing, and what is our reciprocal impact on the buildings (the way they are changed through habitation and re-appropriation that may not be in line with the architect's original agenda)? Simondon's (2007) observations of the power of 'transduction' – how one system's interaction with another is changed while simultaneously changing the other – are apposite here, as is Emmanuel Levinas' insistence on the ethical obligations and responsibilities that are imposed by one's encounter with "the face" of the other (Morgan 2011 and see also, DeLillo's 2007 novel).<sup>3</sup>

### **Dürrenmatt and the Global South**

In the course of our explorations we (re) discovered the work of the great Swiss playwright, Friedrich Dürrenmatt whose recurring reflections on, and drawings of Babel have acted as catalysts and inspiration for our research. His play, *An Angel Comes to Babylon* (hereafter *Angel*) seemed to us to be a parody of the modern state that portrays the devastating defeat of a version of the modernist dream. The productive exchange that took place between Senegalese filmmaker, Djibril Diop Mambéty and Dürrenmatt over the former's adaptation of another of Dürrenmatt's plays known in English as *The Visit*, impressed us with the possibilities that stories have to travel, to transform and to abandon the notion of national border controls, established in what Mambéty provocatively called the "patrimony of the mind". In an interview with N. Frank Ukadike, referring unapologetically to his transposition of the *The Visit*, Mambéty admonished: "You must not expect me to cut the patrimony of the mind into pieces ..." (Ukadike 1999). We are trying, in the spirit evoked by Mambéty to imagine freer forms of South North co-existence and interdependency.

The discussion at the colloquium/workshop concerning the character of the beggar Akki in Dürrenmatt's *Angel* who outwits the king and his executioner, and is seen at the end fleeing the imminent devastation about to be unleashed by the building of the tower, with his optimism and poetic view of the world intact brought out some of the South North dilemmas. If Akki is understood as

---

<sup>3</sup> DeLillo's *Falling Man* explores the aftermath of the fall of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre and the impact on the characters' relationships with the other in a sense that recalls Levinas.

playing the part of the plucky, marginalised citizen who never succumbs to draconian laws, and successfully manipulates the vanity and myopia of the better off inhabitants of Babylon, might he be construed as representative of the South? And if he is, in the mould of the kind of people brought to light by AbdouMalik Simone and others, whom we embrace at least metaphorically for their autonomous, creative spirit, are we romanticising what is, in reality, the dreadful and debasing poverty of beggars in the cities of the South – and, for that matter, in the North? Should we regard Akki simply as a cypher for Dürrenmatt’s philosophical speculations about artistic independence, as Ulrich Weber pointed out at the colloquium/workshop was, in all probability, Dürrenmatt’s intention? What would happen if we did as Mambéty did with the female protagonist of the *Visit* and recalled Akki from his adventures further (although not exactly in) the North, and forced him to live off his wits in some abject-seeming ghetto of the South? We accept with Mambéty that Dürrenmatt’s themes of corruption, unchecked power and the collaboration with evil of those who think they have no choice because of their powerlessness are hardly restricted to the countries of the North. We recognised easily enough that Dürrenmatt’s painting entitled *The Bankers* that has been given pride of place in the gallery of the basement of the Centre Dürrenmatt has universal meaning. But there is a danger of once again simply positioning the South in relation to the North. How can we get out of the endless loop that Kuan-Hsing Chen portrays in *Asia as Method* as one where the South is always framed by the reactive narrative of imperialism and nationalism? As a way forward, Waagied Charles suggested at the colloquium/workshop, that we need to look carefully at the local and to be determined about setting our own agenda in the South. We have to consider how we speak from within.

## Play

As a productive tactic to open up new horizons - for looking with fresh eyes and an open mind - at the local - urban texts and contexts - we are taking Dürrenmatt’s advice ("*meine Freiheit als Künstler besteht darin, dass ich mit dieser Welt spiele*") to organize play settings to serve as exemplary sampling situations from which stories could emerge as a result of concrete inter-actions with urban texts/contexts. This approach to play is informed by theories and experiences relating to "Deep Play" from anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s famous article on Balinese cock fights (1972, 2016). It is a motivation mechanics of play aware of how the player’s position in social hierarchy deeply influences a play result (see also Brian Sutton-Smith on rhetorics of power in play (2001)). As Geertz reminds us, that play is experienced as an embodied act of social relation. Deep play beyond physical presence can then be analysed through the method of what Geertz famously pioneered as "thick description". By definition, thick description is a very dense view of certain actions, close to an incorporation of the matter investigated.

Through a series of play scenarios with, and in towers we have been analysing possibilities for re-staging and enacting images, imaginations, narratives and myths concerning the city as social design. When organizing and realizing play scenarios, we wish to think of them in their dynamic qualities of perceived, conceived and lived. Henri Lefebvre (1991) introduced these notions in his *Trialectics*<sup>4</sup>. According to him, social spaces are gradually perceived, conceived and lived. Carried over to the context of *Babel Re-Play*, spaces are explored through play settings in regard to social and cultural history; in the act of performance, hidden stories are revealed, and activated, and potentialities for transformation are explored. Each situation is considered particular, revealing something unique, yet with connection points to a bigger narrative. Each one is a sample from which we wish to learn.

Margarete Jahrmann, co-initiator and partner in "*Babel Re-Play*", who has organized a number of activist interventions in urban contexts, considers such play settings as a method of immersive research: it requires the full immersion of the researcher in a play situation, which is carefully accompanied by self-observation and context observation, and which results in the accuracy of the terminology developed in a discipline. The research team allows that such proximity to "the subject researched" can then be brought into a forum of critical debate.

In the South North exchange we cannot avoid being aware of the complexities when we call for play as a mode of learning in, and from the environment through the production of play situations. In the colloquium/workshop we discussed the questions of who sets the rules? Do players all have the same degree of agency? Who will get to do the reporting and documenting of the play? As we work through these issues as two teams – Swiss and South African – we have begun to discuss the pitfalls of exoticism, and how we might render visible insidious stereotypes – perhaps through humour (see for example Jean Fisher, Jain Rohit).

### **Film as Tool for Research, Principles of Aesthetics**

Film became our medium for allowing multiple stories to emerge and co-exist without prejudging them. Developing the film in a context of play allows us to adopt an exploratory approach to the place, the context and the setting of the rules. The stories are not predetermined and could only appear as consequence of play: stories are told in the playing of the game in line with the "cock play" described by Geertz (1972). It is through this double movement that the film comes into existence: we are telling of the story whilst involved in

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Henri Lefebvre's *Trialectics* common social spaces are simultaneously perceived, conceived and lived. "The bourgeoisie and the capitalist system thus experience great difficulty in mastering what is at once their product and the tool of their mastery, namely space. They find themselves unable to reduce practice (the practice sensory realm, the body, socio-spatial practice) to their abstract space, and hence new, spatial, contradictions arise and make themselves felt." (Lefebvre 1991: 63)



the play situation. The two short films, which went through an intensive editing process, seem to exist in their present form as layered texts. We understand our work with film as a form of collective research, which operates with the mode of extraction and sampling (see below), brought together in a laboratory setting where experts from different disciplines analyse, re-organize and reconfigure these extracted fragments into new constellations of meaning. This context is informed by the video series *Sans Doute, Ceci n'est Pas Réel*, made by Yohann Queland de Saint-Perne (one of the members of the *Construction Site/Chantier*) who has been testing protocols and approaches to filming as a sampling technique for the production of new meaning. In *Babel Re-Play*, we are developing protocols for determining the nature and sedimentary composition of the urban environments we are studying.

We emphasise that we conceive of the films as "bricks" (in the Tower) – that is as basic units, which will serve as reference points (setting protocols and rules) for the production of further units. We operate on what we think of as a principle informed by Babel mythology, where, as the brick was fired it became an essential element that would allow a tower, or a city to emerge.

It became clear to us in the course of making our films that towers do not stand apart, but are performed, and through their visual presence and the possibilities they offer (or refuse) for interaction allow for conditions under which they too may be tested or sampled.

David Peimer remarked at the colloquium/workshop that the Tower of Light (built to impress upon the citizens of Johannesburg the prowess and reach of the modern city – see below) does not dominate the scene. Despite its flamboyant imperialist history, the Tower has become invisible to most of its passers-by and seems stranded on its own mismatched island on the university campus, which was developed after the exhibitionary context which the Tower had been central to for decades was relocated. During the brief spell of our performance, it was reactivated and sent us back to the historical archives looking for the stories of its original potency – which turned out to be much exaggerated. Access to the towers that appear in both films, including this one, was often rendered difficult by their custodians, and rules designed to protect secret installations or 'data' or, again as in the case of the Tower of Light – its supposed vulnerability to desecration. Towers retain their sense of being insidious structures of power whose facades we breach at our own risk.

### **Principles of Aesthetics**

As practicing artists and theorists, we recognize the concern for the aesthetics as important component of the development of this art/research project, which is often overlooked, and which we need to give consideration at much greater depth as we progress. We propose that the drive to respond with precision awareness to principles of contemporary aesthetics – for example, considering with care the visual and auditory qualities and impact of our films - has sharpened our research focus, and enabled the development of further

conversations concerning the status of work produced: if we are indeed recognizing the need of "located" actions and, in response, create "situated" work realized in each place by a team anchored in the location of production, then we could expect that "difference" become also visible in the visual and textual characteristics of a work .

The dimension of beauty is on our eyes a pertinent part and integral element in context of the discussion of patrimony of mind earlier mentioned: As pointed out by a number of theorists, such as Anthony Appiah (Appiah 1994), access to global cultural capital has meant to artists from the South as conditioned by and according to standards set in the North. Arjun Appadurai (1988) reminds us that these "traffic criteria" need to be surfaced when we wish to critically engage with what is brought into a global visibility.

When talking about aspects of aesthetics in a "located" way, Sarah Nuttall (2006) suggests that "geographical contingencies of beauty and ugliness" need to be brought into conversation. Ultimately, there are ideological boundaries to the imagination that must be acknowledged, and surfaced as productive matters of concern in the making of and discussion of works created in collectives of artists from the South and the North. Resisting the tendencies of the "empire writing back", we see the need of continued discussions under what auspices collective production can occur. Whilst assuming that such collective undertaking will always be a place of insecurity, which, taken as a productive challenge, can "produce ways of freshly defining and recognizing "beautiful" things" (Rita Barnard 2006). As also suggested by Mbembe (2001), we wish to set for this collective work as its centre of meaning making "futurity rather than than pastness" and use the form of film making as our joint "capacity to aspire".

In our project, we observed for instance that in the South African film interactions took place between voices and bodies, whereas in the Swiss film there was a different way of playing that involved the technological and the digital. There is a great motivation from the South African team to build in a next stage a theatre play from the various fragments of the play situation to be performed in theatres whilst in Switzerland the work will be further shaped towards an exhibition format in an art venue.

Besides the discussion about formats, types of circulation of material produced, we see the need of continuous conversations about our differing notions and comprehensions of aesthetics, which in turn will inspire art work with new potentialities.

## The Films



### *Johannesburg*

For the Johannesburg team, the character of Nebuchadnezzar in Dürrenmatt's *Angel* exercised a particular fascination. It appeared to correspond both humorously, and with considerable pathos to the public profiles of several prominent national and local leaders in South Africa. There was a strong resonance for us with some of the university principals (charged with maintaining the ivory tower) who were faced with voluble student protest at the time we were making our film in late 2015 and early 2016. In at least two cases principals were taken hostage by the protestors.

Dürrenmatt's Nebuchadnezzar is shown in an undignified struggle to retain his throne through a perpetual round of musical chairs with his rival Nimrod who is intent on exchanging his role as footstool for that of monarch. But Dürrenmatt's king is also a dreamer whose ambitions are frustrated by the petty politicking of his Ministers, the dubious loyalty of the theologians, convoluted foreign policy, the uncontrollable proliferation of poetry, and an indomitable street wisdom that de Certeau would have recognised and perhaps applauded, concentrated in the character of the wily beggar, Akki. Nebuchadnezzar is defeated, however not only by all these formidable obstacles, but also, as was pointed out at the colloquium/workshop by his own inability to relinquish power. Neither is it simply personal pride or greed that makes such a renunciation impossible. Without power Nebuchadnezzar cannot realise his dream of building the 'rational city' as the basis of the "New Order" to which he aspires (Dürrenmatt 1964: 67, 90). It is this bitter paradox that

Nebuchadnezzar interprets as God's injustice, and in opposition to which he resolves to build a tower.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a supremely "rational" city from which not only beggars, but also poets and other troublesome intellectuals have been eradicated is fundamentally a dream of modernity, arguably in its most severe version as it tips inexorably towards totalitarianism (see Bauman 1989). As we interacted with our locations in Johannesburg, from working among the debris and residue of our own imperial past, we recognised signs of the ultimate failure of early twentieth century aspirations to modernity. We also became aware of their mute but obdurate persistence. We realised that we were inadvertently disturbing those unpredictable ghosts of which de Certeau and Luce Giard write (1998).

Perhaps the contradictions were most evident on the location we chose for the re-enactment of Nebuchadnezzar in his decline, that is the site of the Rand Steam Laundries and Cleaning and Dyeing Works in the Johannesburg suburb of Richmond, once proudly proclaimed as being the largest establishment of its kind in the whole sub-continent', but now mostly a debris field with only a dilapidated tower-like structure once used to purify water from the borehole surviving (Heritage Report 2016). The buildings were torn down in flagrant violation of a provincial heritage order in 2008 by the Imperial Group, a car dealership company, which intended to build a showroom on the site, but was prevented from doing so by the public outrage that followed the razing of the Laundry.

For this location, de Certeau and Giard's observations on the indelible imperfections still visible on the rejuvenated skin of the "new" Paris seem particularly apt. They summon: "Heterogeneous references, ancient scars, (which) create bumps on the smooth utopias" (1998:133). The Richmond Laundry site was, as one of Johannesburg's noted heritage custodians and commentators, Neil Fraser remarks: "one of the last local examples of steam-driven industry" (Heritage Report 2016), but it was also a place: "where South African history converged" (Fraser 2016). Sensitive, well-informed heritage custodians like Fraser and fellow leading heritage campaigner, Flo Bird knew that the site had also been used by the amaWasha, originally a tightly run guild of migrant isiZulu-speaking men from what is now KwaZulu-Natal who did laundry for the residents of Johannesburg on the banks of the stream in the vicinity, known as the Braamfontein Spruit. Bird and Fraser also knew that the amaWasha had been broken up and dispersed for a number of reasons, which included relocation by the local authorities, ostensibly for health reasons, and by the competition from new technology and its capitalist owners, which stood to gain from the amaWashas' enforced loss of proximity from their market (Fraser 2016; van Onselen 1982).<sup>5</sup> Fraser, Bird and others have lobbied for the creation of some form of memorialisation that would recognise the history of the amaWasha as well as of the steam laundry (Bird and Gaul 2015). They appear to be contemplating an exercise that once again is effectively captured

---

<sup>5</sup> Note the titles of van Onselen's two-volume work on the social history of early Johannesburg – *New Babylon* and *New Nineveh*.

by de Certeau and Giard: "The ghost is exorcised under the name of 'national heritage'". Its strangeness (for which we, the authors of this paper, might substitute – its deep contradictions and occasional instances of jarring symbiosis) is converted into legitimacy (de Certeau and Giard 1998: 133-134).

As records of the meeting of members of the Heritage Trust with representatives from Imperial show, little progress has been made towards persuading the company, now allegedly incapacitated by a slow-down in the economy to undertake any new unassisted development or commemorative projects (Bird and Gaul 2015). "We would consider a major retailer as well as a combination of smaller businesses like coffee shops and dry cleaners – anyone who would lend credibility and credence to the area" Thando Sishuba, head of Imperial Properties is quoted as having said, apparently looking to the future of gentrification rather than to the past of converging - or diverging histories (*Live Journal* 2011).

Consequently, all that is left is what appears to be the truncated tower mentioned above, ridiculing, in our eyes, as we play around it on a hot summer's morning in 2016, the pretensions of tower-makers – the pioneers of modernisation long dead, commemorative projects that aspire to say something which brings diverging histories together, the expansionist ambitions of Imperial – the car company as well as the Empire of which this city was once part, and the builders and guardians of the Ivory Tower less than four kilometres away, in the shape of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).

The other tower we brought into play, the Tower of Light is located on the campus of this same university. It is considerably larger in scale than the tower on the laundry site, but as we discovered neither as tall nor imposing as it was meant to be.<sup>6</sup> It still evokes affection from older residents of Johannesburg who have somehow grafted the original intentions of its designers onto its unyielding concrete frame. "Clearly there is a visionary component to this tower, which because of its association with electric lighting, cast a magic spell over the Johannesburg of my youth" writes Clive Chipkin, architect and author of the well-respected *Johannesburg Style* (1993: 108).<sup>7</sup> But now the tower, erected for the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg in 1936, sponsored by the Electric Supply Commission and the Victoria Falls Power Company (Kruger 2013) stands as a kind of oddity – a base for the campus security guards and the home of a pie shop on the ground floor – stranded as it were on the so-called West campus, itself the product of a past plan to extend and modernise the university.

What are the properties of the Tower nowadays? It was supposed to "stand as a blazing torch in the surrounding veld landscape" to light up the "70 mile belt of gold mines on the Rand" (Lee 2015: 97); to advertise the benefits of electricity and of the Empire. According to Jennifer Robinson, considerable effort was expended on making sure that people who were then known at

---

<sup>6</sup> The Tower was originally supposed to be built of steel, but concrete was used; it was supposed to be 200 feet tall, but is only 150, and the elevator that was supposed to be installed to take visitors to the top never was.

<sup>7</sup> See also Chipkin's impressively detailed text on the surrounding Exhibition.

"Natives" would be able to attend the Empire Exhibition, and evidently, despite the devastating legacies of imperialism, they did in large numbers, reflecting, Robinson surmises, some of the "ambivalences" that the African elite felt towards "modernity" (2003: 762). For Robinson, the Empire Exhibition represents a moment when cosmopolitanism, and also, by implication, a common pride and excitement about the "modern metropolis" (2003: 761) that had arisen in the space of a mere fifty years were fleetingly experienced. The conclusion to her article might be read as nostalgia for that moment, experienced as she surveys the hardening of spatial segregation, both as a fact of post 1936 South Africa, and as a kind of obsessive analytical approach to the history of urban space that has endured up to the time of writing. (See also Parnell and Mabin 1995). We had never noticed until we made our film that Robinson found so much to console herself in the brief history of the Empire Exhibition and what might have been.

In the film, the Tower of Light, after the team's experience with the University in negotiating for its use, became the stage for playing out, and then attempting to toss aside the voluminous protocols of bureaucracy. In *Angel* the "Formal One" (who is really the Hangman) observes cryptically, after an ode to Akki's occupational constancy: "Bureaucracy, beggary and hanging – these three are the hidden framework of the world" (Dürrenmatt 1964: 58).

The third location in the South African film is a re-enactment of Jean-Paul Marat in his bath, writing about Nebuchadnezzar whom his revolutionary zeal would have caused him to despise. The Marat scene<sup>8</sup> was filmed in a house in the Johannesburg suburb of Auckland Park, founded in Johannesburg's "Victorian era" as the publicity sources inform us (Joburg.org.za 2016), close to the site of a house designed by the famous British architect, Herbert Baker and once inhabited by Julius Jeppe, knighted for his role in pioneering the development of the city. Behind the Marat house, unseen in the film, but present in our consciousness, is the 237 metre high television tower popularly known as the Brixton Tower, considered to have been one of the engineering feats of his regime by a man often described disparagingly as the 'architect' of apartheid, prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd.

The Marat scene, which began as a light-hearted way of reading some of my (Kros') own work into the text of the film, suggested by the Johannesburg team, became or offered in retrospect at least, an autoreflexion on my role, both as an intellectual in the wider world beyond the film, and as one of the contributors to what we might provisionally call the script. The scene has begun to prompt a consideration of several facets alluded to by Derrida in his discussion of the "anguish of writing in the face of what is experienced as divine abandonment and the loss of certainty (Derrida 1978: 9). The writer's anguish partially arises from having to make choices about what to "inscribe" and the apprehension about what will be unmasked and what meanings revealed through the writing. Derrida describes moving away from working within the "domain of empirical history" as a kind of necessary "break", which

---

<sup>8</sup> We discovered after filming this scene that Marat was born in Neuchâtel then a Prussian principality, now part of Switzerland and the location of the Colloquium.

is, made nonetheless in the interest of a long term "reconciliation with the hidden essence of the empirical" (Derrida 1978: 13), which for us carries suggestive echoes of Geertz's notion of "deep" meanings (as above).

Fellow anthropologist, James Clifford notes in his erudite introduction to *Writing Culture*, acknowledging several philosophical treatises including Derrida's, that the crisis of ethnological writing arose from the realisation that it is not possible to speak from the "mountain top" (for which we might substitute "the tower"). "We ground things now, on a moving earth. There is no longer any place of overview ... from which to map human ways of life", and: "Human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate, and subvert one another" (Clifford 1986: 22). It is at this moment with the sense that a vertiginous Icarian Fall may be imminent – which Clifford would certainly have welcomed - that we leave off this discussion of *Babel Re-Play Johannesburg*.

### *Zurich*



The Swiss film sequences were each developed to function as a brick with specific protocols concerning length, visual composition, and sound track. The criteria for the selection of sites to be filmed were based on stories circulated in the media offering imaginaries of utopic and dystopic qualities, and considerations of towers in the contemporary moment. As a criteria for the selection of potential sampling sites, we wished to recognize a dimension of the interconnectedness to a topic pertinent in the dialogue South - North. Despite the optimistic rhetoric concerning the progress of the "decolonising" agenda, we are aware that material wealth produced the South is still being



largely hoarded in the North. Major mining companies, such as Xtrata and Glencor have their headquarters in Switzerland where core decisions are taken about the opening or closing of mines, and the wages workers are to be paid. We see how profits gained elsewhere are invested into our towers. The control and surveillance capacity of the digital communication system is another example, demonstrating that the North seems set to continue its agendas, and build towers of control which become ever more powerful with greater global impact.

We selected the Prime Tower Zurich, a 126m high building inaugurated in 2011, as one of the "sampling" sites because of its sleek and arrogant (architecture, and its fame as a defining landmark for Zurich. On its website, it announces that "tenants primarily include clients from the upscale services sector" (<http://primetower.ch/facts-figures/architektur>). The building is inaccessible to individuals without special permits, with the exception of the restaurant situated on the top floor, where guests are welcome provided they have a valid reservation. The restaurant manager forbade us to film the city for reasons of "data control". When looking down through the room sized window panes on the broad railway paths cutting through the city, and the intricate road systems winding over bridges and through the industrial area of the city, on which cars circulated in an ant-like activity, we wondered what data needed to be protected from whom.

A second site we selected was the oil fired electricity plant at Chavalon, which had been active between 1965 and 1999. It was built on a Mountain side, to ensure fumes to disappear without harming inhabitants in the valley. The 120 tall chimneys are among the highest in Switzerland. Part of the complex is also a whole village specifically built for employees. The fuel was imported via pipelines from the Italian harbour of Genoa. Closed in 1999, in 2012 it claimed a financial bonus from the State for benefitting the environment through non-production. According to their calculations, the environment was thus spared 170 000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> through its non-functioning. A major part of its infrastructure is now being dismantled by a contingent of workers mostly from Portugal, due to asbestos hazard. The Power Plant faces an uncertain future. Our filming happened outside the perimeter of the construction site, but was nevertheless brought to a stop, as the foreman considered our presence an infraction of the rules. The Portuguese workers, who had been involved in the dismantling for some two years, talked with humour about the call for silence imposed by the enterprise, noting that they were good enough to work here as long as they did not speak.

A third site is the satellite station in Leuk - the biggest parabolic antenna system in the Alps, which came to fame though the Snowden revelations as a core spying facility of the CIA – a totalising tower of information gathering. Built by funds from the Swiss Government, a part of the facilities were sold to a company with alleged links to the US Government. Filming in the facilities proved a difficult task; which satellite dishes to film was part of the negotiations led with local staff in Leuk as was the length of our visit (less than



30 minutes). We kept on wondering, whether it was feared that through filming we might render data transactions visible.

We wished each sequence to tell its own story, using the camera as a one-eyed player to interact with a site, to explore its structures and surfaces, and to thus break down the seemingly sleek appearance of a building. Installing Go Pro cameras as body extensions, we moved through selected sites according to pre-scribed protocols. We thus wished to explore ways of re-visiting, re-playing the frog-eye gaze of surveillance. These sequences were enriched by standard images of fragments of the building, filmed over differing periods, varying from minutes to hours.

Dürrenmatt's musing on State power, and his desire to imagine "the worst possible scenarios" came to us as pertinent context reading when preparing and working on the film sequences. The famous speech Dürrenmatt delivered on the occasion of the Award giving ceremony in honour of recently released Vaclav Havel in 1990, painting an image of Switzerland as a huge prison where prison guards were prisoners and vice versa, echoed strongly as we came to research about and film in the above mentioned sites.

The film sequences were further layered with relevant text fragments from Dürrenmatt, extracts from WhatsApp conversations with our South African colleagues, and our own musing on contemporary towers, and about possible play setting with and against towers.

The film was conceived as part of an installative and situated work. Two performers would play tarot (a card set with images and texts from the film was specifically designed for this purpose) and reveal to each other stories emerging from the cards, which in turn would inform the choice of which film sequence to show. These stories ranged from personal experiences of visiting the sites projected on film, commentaries on texts circulated in the media concerning a site, or insights into "hidden" histories extracted from archives.

Our aesthetic principle in this performance/film projection was to bring different times together, and thus address the complexity of "telling" a building. By introducing differing perspectives – without prioritising one over the other – we thus wished to offer possibilities of disrupting the master narrative (see Lyotard (1984) *The Postmodern Conditions*). We also wished in this way to protect the work from wide circulation, and insist on its status as "site and context specific", as each showing would be a unique moment of a performative act coupled with projected film sequences.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we wish to offer an insight into a work-in-progress situation as we shape texts about the context, format and protocols of visual sketches. Besides identifying processes and methods employed in a collective research project, we are also interested in rendering visible types of possible dialogue spaces artists and theorists can imagine embarking on when located in a South North exchange. This includes the conscious drive to disrupt master narratives

(including those that describe the relationship between the South and the North); being alert to deep and multiple meanings – being prepared to accept *diverging* rather than *converging* histories if necessary, and allowing for differing notions and understandings of aesthetics that arise from different social and cultural contexts. In the context of this collective project, the unveiling of the self in relation to the other contains, beyond the obvious individual aspects also potentialities at social and political levels.

As mentioned above, we consider these films prototypes, which will be expanded, as sampling, applied to areas we are now actively investigating to tackle the invisible – the control/surveillance, the towers that cannot easily be seen but inform our ways of crossing the city. We believe that an important component of the "Babel myth", the multiplication of languages, and the resulting pitfalls of misunderstanding and potential for new meaning, now part of our conversations within the teams, will take on new contours in the next sequences.

## References

- Appadurai A (1988) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Appiah KA (1994) *In my Father's House – Africa in Philosophy of Culture*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bauman Z (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Barnard R (2006) *The Place of Beauty: Reflections on Elaine Scarry and Zakes Mda*. In *Beautiful Ugly*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Bhabha H (2012) *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bird F, Gaul W (2015) Rand Steam Laundries, Richmond Update. In *Current Issues: Johannesburg Heritage Foundation*. Retrieved from [Joburgheritage.co.za/currentissueshtml](http://Joburgheritage.co.za/currentissueshtml). [Accessed: March 17, 2016].
- Chen Kuan-Hsing (2010) *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Chipkin C (1993) *Johannesburg Style: Architecture and Society 1880s – 1960s*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Clifford J (1986) Introduction in Clifford and G. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Advanced Research Seminar*.
- De Certeau M (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 1*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- De Certeau M, Giard L (1998) Ghosts in the City. In de Certeau, Giard and Pierre Mayol (eds.) *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2*. Translated by Timothy J. Tomasik. Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press (pp. 133-143).
- DeLillo D (2007) *Falling Man: A Novel*. New York: Scribner.
- Derrida J (1978) *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dürrenmatt F (1964) *An Angel Comes to Babylon and Romulus the Great: Two Plays by Friedrich Dürrenmatt*. Translated by William McElwee. New York: Grove Press.
- Fraser N (2016) "Laundry Lamentations". *Joburg, My City, Our Future*. Retrieved from [goo.gl/5gAJBq](http://goo.gl/5gAJBq). [Accessed: March 17, 2016]

- Geertz C (1972) Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight *Daedalus. Myth, Symbol, and Culture* 101(1): 1-37.
- Heritage Report (2016) *Rand Steam Laundries Heritage Report*. Retrieved from [goo.gl/IwIEAs](http://goo.gl/IwIEAs). [Accessed: March 17, 2016]
- Joburg.org.za (2016) Retrieved from [goo.gl/eEkfff](http://goo.gl/eEkfff). [Accessed: March 17, 2016]
- Kerr P (1995) *The Grid*. New York: Warner Books.
- Kros C, Pfründer G (2015) A consideration of two projects from the Fundbüro art research initiative. *Journal of Artistic Research* 7.
- Kruger L (2013) *Imagining the Edgy City: Writing, Performing and Building Johannesburg*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Latour B (1991) *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes (We Have Never Been Modern)*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Lee C (2015) Johannesburg. In S Isenstadt, M Maile Petty, D Neumann (eds.), *Cities of Light: Two Centuries of Urban Illumination* (pp. 96-100). London and New York: Routledge.
- Lefebvre H (1991) *Lefebvre, The Production of Space*. Translated by D Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Lyotard J-F (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Live Journal* (August 16, 2011) The Rand Steam Laundries, Cleaning and Dyeing Works. [Accessed: March 17, 2016]
- Mbembe A (2001) The Thing and its Double. In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Morgan M (2011) *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nuttall S (2006) Rethinking Beauty. *Beautiful Ugly* (pp. 8-30). Durham and London: Durham Press.
- Parnell S, Mabin A (1995) Rethinking Urban South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21(1): 39-61.
- Parnell S, Oldfield S (2014) *The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*. Milton Park, Oxford: Routledge.
- Robinson J (2003) Johannesburg's 1936 Empire Exhibition: Interaction, Segregation, and Modernity in a South African City. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29(3): 759-789.
- Simone A (2004) People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg. *Public Culture* 16(3): 407-429.
- Simone A (2014) The Missing People: Reflections on an Urban Majority in Cities of the South. In S Parnell and S Oldfield (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*. Milton Park, Oxford: Routledge.
- Simondon G (2007) *L'individuation psychique et collective*. Paris: Aubier.
- Spivak G (1988) *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Retrieved from [goo.gl/2Mbp4Q](http://goo.gl/2Mbp4Q). [Accessed: 5 July 2014]
- Sutton-Smith B (2001) *The Ambiguity of Play*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Ukadike NF (1999) The Hyena's Last Laugh: Interview with Djbril Diop Mambéty. *Transition* 78 8(2), 136-153.
- Van Onselen C (1982) *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.