

Colloque *Re-membering the Body*
Institut d'ethnologie / Musée d'ethnographie
Neuchâtel, 6-8 septembre 2012

Troisième panel | Corps & Graphie

Communication

Making Theatre Biographies: What Body and Mind Choose to Remember

Miriam Cohn, Doctorante FNS, Seminar für Kulturwissenschaft und Europäische Ethnologie, Université de Bâle

This paper bases on ethnographic fieldwork for a PhD-study on theatre-projects in contexts of migration. As this study is part of a research project on intangible cultural heritage, the question how the tradition of doing theatre is transmitted (or re-created) is central in my investigation. In this paper I will argue that theatre is transmitted in a biographical way, in which embodied, tacit and discursive knowledge work together. The material I am drawing on are three theatre-projects in which I did participant observation and interviews. The three projects include two projects with young people that addressed the issue of migration (one in the context of school, the other as a youth-club at the municipal theatre) and which both developed a co-authored play, as well as an English-speaking group that performed in the British Christmas Pantomime tradition using an existing script. Despite many differences most key aspects concerning the transmission of theatre are the same for all three groups. My leading question will be “what kind of documentation is necessary to transmit theatre?”

Several authors have shown that theatre includes both enduring and ephemeral elements. Diana Taylor suggests two according separate but interlinked memory systems: The archive and the repertoire. For Taylor the archival memory exists as “... all those items supposedly resistant to change” (2002:19), such as documents, maps or CDS. It is typical for the archive that the source of knowledge is separated from the knower and hence can be constantly re-interpreted. In the three groups such archival documentations included filming, photographs and written texts. Here, films and photographs were usually taken of one the final performances. They served as souvenirs for the participants, as means of self-representation and of advertising the show (for example on facebook). They therefore possessed a kind of final quality. Texts (scripts, notes of directors and actors and texts written by the actors) however were linked to the process of rehearsing, were changed, reinterpreted and adapted throughout the process. Despite the fact that many stage directions were noted in the script, it would probably be difficult to gain the “correct” impression of the staging, as the notes were often general, not up to date and missing information (for example concerning timing). The information of the scripts thus would leave space for interpretations by an outsider while serving as a memory-aid for the insiders of the groups. General information sufficed, as remembering the staging refers to Taylors (2003: 20) other memory system, the repertoire, which “enacts embodied memory” and to which belong for example gestures, movement or oral expressions. Central aspects of the repertoire are that it requires presence and participation, that its actions are constantly changed and that it allows for individual agency – aspects which are crucial for rehearsing and performing.

While notes concerning staging and text provide an aide-memoire, the actual remembering is strongly linked to body-memory: Performing emotions and characters draws on memories how the body has responded to the same emotions or characters in a prior situation. Therefore, each interpretation of an act is both individually coined and understandable by others.

As I realized during my fieldwork, the transmission of theatre exceeds learning how to act and includes learning how to watch theatre and to behave “correctly” in a theatrical context. Performing and watching others perform are therefore strongly interlinked as they both draw on embodied memories to interpret actions. Very often, single images and impressions remain in ones mind after a performance and are shared with others in discussions. What remains of a performance (be it by watching or performing) therefore belongs to both tacit perceptions and discursive theatre-knowledge.

The transmission of theatre therefore bases rather on impressions than documentations. I would say that it is by establishing a theatre biography that a person “learns” about theatre. In these theatre biographies prior experiences are linked and evaluated and theatrical networks are established. Here, too, memories from the archive and the repertoire as well as embodied and discursive knowledge meet. As a part of a persons’ identity, these biographies consist of a narrative thread with a beginning and an open end. They serve as a means for self-representation but also for negotiating theatre experiences. It is in this context that documents such as videos or photographs play a role: They serve as reminders that can be re-interpreted and that therefore make sense of events and impressions that are constantly negotiated in the process of developing a theatre biography.

Reference:

Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas.* Durham, London: Duke University Press.