

Am Parsifal von Jonathan Meese teilnehmen : eine Ermittlung der pragmatische Anthropologie zwischen zeitgenössische Kunst und Schauspielkunst

Maxime Le Calvé

Summary

This doctoral dissertation interweaves the fields of anthropology of art and that of performance studies to examine the work of Jonathan Meese around the drama Parsifal. Through several ethnographic inquiries presented as a series of narratives and analysis, this monograph addresses the singular destiny of an artistic project that I followed in participant observation between 2014 and 2017: the conception of a staging for the opera Parsifal. This event allows the telling of the story of a paradoxical encounter between a contemporary artist, Jonathan Meese, born in 1970, and an artist of the past, Richard Wagner (1813-1883), two controversial polemicist creative figures in the Germany of their own times.

The show was to take place in the 2016 edition of the Bayreuth Festival. The staging, with scenography and costumes, was designed by Meese and his team, and presented to the intendants. But the affair did not turn out as planned: they were not accepted for the Festival and the breach of contract was the occasion for a lively controversy. Yet the encounter took place, as a design process, in the performance of the artist, and brought forth another opera - the Mondparsifal - presented in Vienna and Berlin in 2017.

Jonathan Meese holds an important position in the contemporary art landscape in Germany. A prolific visual artist, he has made his character the central medium of his work, by a permanent mise en abyme of his position as a great artist, between romantic genius and art "brut". He is famous for his provocative speeches - he proclaims the "dictatorship of art" and performs Hitler's salutes in an aesthetic

influenced by the punk movement. Playing with the ambivalences of the Richard Wagner legacy, Meese brings into his work the figure of the Bayreuth master since the beginning of Wagner's' career – along with pop-culture figures and fairy-tales characters. The exploration of the stakes of his engagement by the Festival shows that the association of these two characters, by the strange resonance that it produces, has the potential to update a part of the heritage of Richard Wagner: the radical and total dimension of his controversial work. However, the ethnographic survey carried out among the Wagnerians, at the Richard-Wagner Circle of Paris and the Bayreuth Festival, shows that this heritage is the subject of a complex set of tensions that make renewal difficult. Personal concerns and long-established aesthetic musical values, discourses related to musical excellence, elitist worldliness and touristic convenience, favour a stiffening of public expectations.

The first-person narrative of the staging's conception depicts the professional team struggling with the requirements of this encounter between contemporary art and musical drama. Significant divergences were observed as to how to proceed together on the "path" of creation - until the final presentation. I describe how the images of the staging emerge in the discussion space, how different media is used to let them evolve or to fix them temporarily. I show the cyclical evolution of the "versions" taken up at each session, as well as the skills of the collaborators of the artist in this effort of distributed cognition.

Among the theoretical tools that allowed me to depict the artist's methods at work, the most crucial were the mode of descriptions of action "in the making", as well as the aesthetic of Erika Fischer-Lichte's performatives, and the pragmatics of tastes and attachments of Antoine Hennion. I also borrowed, throughout this investigation, from the concepts of the anthropologists of techniques Tim Ingold and Bruno Latour, as well as the theory of the "instauration" of Étienne Souriau. These were particularly useful for me to revisit the aesthetics of the atmospheres of Gernot Böhme, confronting it with the way the artist Meese performs his "antagonistic invocations" during his performances.

Finally, I used ethnographic drawing to relate the rehearsals of the contemporary opera *Mondparsifal*. Through drawings, theoretical approaches, and ethnographic narrative this dissertation stays linked with the study of atmospheres as a central element in the account of the processes of creation. This interdisciplinary inquiry highlights the singularity of Jonathan Meese as an artist and theatre producer while engaging with larger questions about polemical creative processes.

Keywords : Ethnography, anthropology of art, creative process, contemporary art, opera, Jonathan Meese, Bayreuth Festival, atmospheres.