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Tourist Trap: The Laterna Magika's Oeuvre as a Topographical Document of the Czech Nation

The Prague-based Laterna Magika theatre company, now in its forty-fifth year, has survived post-Stalinism, the Prague Spring, the cultural crackdown that followed known as “normalization,” the Velvet Revolution, and now, sadly, the death of its founder, Joseph Svoboda. Many scholars have discussed their work as a stunning example of central European design¹ and in particular as an extraordinary set of productions that choreograph interactions between live performers and video images, a kind of work I call “dialogic media.”² This analysis discusses their productions in terms of the cultural work they perform for their nation. It argues that the Laterna Magika’s work over the last four-and-a-half decades functions as a library of travel guides that shift in relation to the internationalist discourses through which its funders, designers, performers, and audiences constitute themselves.

None of their productions announce their nationalist agenda. They very much resist what Homi Bhabha describes as the production of nation as narration. They refuse to narrate what he calls the “scraps, patches and rags of daily life...into the signs of a coherent national culture” (Bhabha, 145). Not only do they choose subject matter that has nothing to do with daily life, they won’t even narrate the themes they do choose. The Laterna Magika has uttered very few words of any kind and only twice

¹ See, for example, Jarka Burian’s work especially Chapter 7 of his *Leading Creators of 20th-Century Czech Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

² Phaedra Bell, “Dialogic Media and Intermedia Exchange,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* Spring (2000) 41-55.

spoken any Czech since 1958. Nevertheless, despite its seeming a-nationalism, their work has performed a range of topographical services for its nation.

Since its inception, the Laterna Magika has been representing its nation – not for Czechs, but for the outside world. Founder Joseph Svoboda described their first productions as “publicity” (Svoboda, 110) for the then post-Stalinist government who hired the company to create exhibits for the nation’s pavilions at the 1958 Brussels and 1967 Montreal World Expos. This early work literally provided what was then Czechoslovakia with its representational topography. The Laterna Magika’s long history of support from the post-Stalinist Czech governments did not win them much love from Prague’s intelligentsia, but this did not prevent Václav Havel from using the set for the production they were rehearsing, *Minotaurus*, as the press conference room for the Velvet Revolution – a revolution that was very televised indeed. The Laterna Magika again provided the outside world with the topography of its nation’s re-birth place. Even now in their very own space (now next door to the National Theatre), 90% of their 300 audiences per year consist of foreign tourists (Tošovský 1999). The Laterna Magika still functions as a cultural representation of their nation to curious foreigners.

Although Svoboda described the Laterna Magika’s early work as “publicity” for the Soviet-era governments, their work did resist the authority that created it precisely through its topography. The same attribute that enables their popularity among foreign tourists today also endeared them to their Soviet-era funders: namely, their abandonment of language. This abnegation of language distanced them nicely from the Czech-language theatre so central to the bourgeois Czech nationalist movement of the 19th century.

Furthermore, the themes that they could communicate non-verbally would never attract the attention of the censors, even during the harsh years of “normalization” following the Prague Spring. These palatable themes included fantasies like *Wonderful Circus*, classical stories that many Europeans know like *Odysseus* and *Minotaurus*, and non-narrative dance pieces like *Puzzles*.

They situated this “harmless” content, however, in a topography of oligarchy. This topography consisted of a stage space occupied by silent dancers who performed in front of video images projected on enormous screens. The dancers performed as though inside these filmic spaces, often appearing to effect the world through which they traveled. In *Odysseus*, for example, the live dancers appear to slay the onscreen Cyclops by thrusting a spear at the projected image of his eye. Such interactions produce a double movement characteristic of dialogic media productions. On the one hand, the proximity of the performer to the screen flattens the illusion of depth that cinema normally achieves. The three-dimensional live performers reveal the world on screen as a world without space, a no-place or “utopia.” On the other hand, the action of slaying the beast endows the flat image with a new and different illusion of depth. Throwing that spear replaces cinema’s perspective-based illusion of depth with an action-based endowment of depth and contiguity with the space of the stage. This inter-media exchange draws a stark distinction between flat screen and deep stage and simultaneously erases that distinction.

The Laterna Magika represented their nation as a place where Gods, monsters, clowns, and ghosts loomed in an enormous no-place. The mere mortals without language, heroes and clowns themselves, at once revealed the flatness of that world and endowed it with depth and contiguity through their actions.

In their first 1999 production, *The Trap*, the Laterna Magika stopped mapping their nation as oligarchy and started mapping the anxiety of the new capitalist cultural globality in which they and their nation now participate. The tourists who travel to Prague to seek what some web sites “cultural programming,”³ no longer visit the capital of a Soviet satellite of course, but rather the capitol of a nation amidst the forces of a globalizing capitalism working to shape the landscape in its image.

The Laterna Magika is working hard to represent that nation to its foreign paying customers, and as it turns out their expertise in dialogic media places them in a unique position to accomplish that daunting task.

Frederick Jameson’s characterization of what he calls “the spatial peculiarities of postmodernism” can help illuminate why the Czech Republic has become so difficult to represent topographically. He describes the oddities of this “new space” as “symptoms and expressions of a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself” (412-413). Representing a nation through performance under such circumstances presents the challenge of disclosing the various frames of this “multidimensional set of radical discontinuous realities” into which the Czech subject has been inserted.

According to Homi Bhabha, The Laterna Magika can locate that national identity Between such “frames.” “Cultural globality,” writes Bhabha, “is figured in the in-

between spaces of double-frames: its historical originality marked by a cognitive obscurity; its decentred ‘subject’ signified in the nervous temporality of the transitional, or the emergent provisionality of the ‘present’” (216). The *Laterna Magika* uses video images in a new screening mechanism to establish such sets of frames between which the Czech “postmodern body” finds itself “inserted” (Jameson, 412-413).

The live dancer-hero of *The Trap* does not interact with images from in front of their screens but rather penetrates the onscreen space as never before. The video images in this piece are front-projected onto a sheet of 50% transparent mirror plastic folio that dissects the stage at a forty-five degree angle sloping downstage like a very raked second stage. Another panel hanging from the flies directs the reflected light back down through the one-way mirror such that the video image creates a wall of light behind it (Tošovský, 2000). The live performers dance inside this wall of light behind the one-way mirror.

The Trap performs its cultural globality between two sets of double-frames. One set functions diachronically and the other synchronically. Diachronically, the dancer finds himself in the “emergent provisionality of the ‘present’” of a virtual world that doubles reproduction with violence over the course of the show. Synchronically, he dances in between the video’s projection and its reflection that come to function in this topography as the global conquests of tourism and of unified European subjectivity respectively.

According to the program, the images in *The Trap* represent the “virtual world” created through digital media technologies. This virtual world of sexy women and violent video games seduces yet another hero named “The Boy,” into its dangerous territory.

³ For examples see <http://www.marys.cz/ticketidx.asp>, <http://www.jomys.com/culture.html>, http://travel.yahoo.com/p-travelguide-826086-prague_the_arts_and_festivals-i, and

The first half of the production finds our hero in a series of pas de deux with videated women who morph into cats or burst like bubbles before biological reproduction can supplant cultural reproduction. These women seduce The Boy into their world and disappear violently at the culmination of their dance. The *Laterna Magika* depicts these matches as clear cases of techno-biological miscegenation. The program explains à la Spike Lee that, “the encounters experienced there [in the virtual world] only confirm that, however attractive, virtual women are not the right thing.” The second half of the production yields their tragic offspring: the video arcade. The Boy shoots at abstract targets that become more and more anthropomorphic until the video he shoots at resembles security footage from a subway station in which the passengers function as his targets. These sequences double the violence of The Boy’s penetrations of the virtual world’s sexual partners but reverses those images’ movements from human to inhuman. This virtual world, the ultimate femme fatale, invites The Boy’s sexual penetration to reproduce itself in a venue that results in simulated sniper attacks.

With its position of The Boy in relation to the video and its references to pornography and interactive gaming, this “virtual world” in *The Trap* clearly consists at least in part of the Internet, a technology that both critics and proponents of globalization acknowledge as instrumental in that process. Anti- and pro-globalization activists alike frequently characterize the globalizing force of the Internet as the democratic opponent to the anti-democratic globalizing force of multinational corporations.⁴ Such associations

<http://www.marys.cz/ticketidx.asp>.

⁴ Corporate watchdog organization, The Corporate Europe Observatory, for example, cites the Internet as facilitating “a new model of cooperation” among “environmentalists, international solidarity campaigners, feminists, artists and many others” (Balanyá, Belén, et al.,183). Pro-free-trade Newspaper commentators also understand the Internet as a foe to corporate power. *The Financial Times*, for example, dubbed one Internet-based resistance movement that defeated the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) “Internet Guerillas.”

might lead one to expect this production to map out Czech globalization resistance movements that international journalism has captured in the form of mass demonstrations on the streets of Prague during World Bank, IMF, and EU meetings.

The Trap, however, depicts the Internet as a globalizing technology that enables late capitalism and its gallop across the globe. The program identifies the very entryway into the virtual world as a commercial tool: the billboard. It also associates *The Trap*'s virtual world with global conquest. "You will probably agree," reads the first sentence, "that with the invention of the steam engine in the 19th century mankind started its conquest of this planet and that on the threshold of a new century and a new millennium this process is acquiring such dimensions that it is gradually getting out of control." As a history of technology and colonialism that analysis starts a few centuries late. As a history of tourism, however, it functions more accurately. The 19th-century's "steam engine" for both trains and ships did indeed move a greater proportion of the European population around to foreign lands. The bourgeoisie began tracing the steps of the crusaders and the conquistadores. This elision of capital conquest and tourism in the program expresses itself topographically in the set's synchronic doubling of the global conquests of tourism and European Unity.

The Trap establishes these double frames through the video images' double quality as at once projections through and reflections against the one-way mirror. With its projection the video documents the space of global capital through the trope of tourism. With its reflection it documents global capital through its discourse of European Unity.

Tourists do not go on their cultural conquests unarmed. They collect their spoils with another great 19th century technology: the camera. Today, movies on the handi-cam

have joined still photography in the tourist's arsenal. Walking through Prague now almost always means entering the shot of at least one tourist's vacation saga. Tourism functions as conquest when the tourist mistakes the two-dimensional images she acquires on video (or in stills) with an acquisition of the place itself. This act of dimensional confusion closely resembles the confusion that besets the tourists watching *The Trap*. *The Trap* mimics this confusion by inviting the tourist in the audience to mistake the video projection through the one-way mirror for a space in which The Boy dances.

Just as tourism succeeds in its conquest through the misprision of image for place, multinational corporations are working to conquer central Europe through the misprision of Europe as a unified subject. Key corporate lobbyists for EU expansion into the Czech Republic and other Central and Eastern European countries have themselves drawn parallels with earlier Western European colonial endeavors. "It is as if we had discovered a new South-east Asia on our doorstep" said Keith Richardson of the European Roundtable of Industrialists, describing his excitement about expansion into Central Europe (Balanyá, Belén, et al., 29). One of the most important issues to the corporate lobby is the power of the EU to "speak with one voice" (Balanyá, Belén, et al., 66) – in other words, unified European subjectivity. In their position paper for the Intergovernmental Conference of 1996 the ERT [European Roundtable of Industrialists] states, "the IGC [Intergovernmental Conference] should equip the EU with a strong and unified voice on all matters of external economic relations...The all-important Common Commercial Policy should be extended to ensure unified negotiating positions on all external commercial issues, including trade in services, investment and the protection of

intellectual property.”⁵ Lobbyists like the ERT hope that the Intergovernmental Conference will confuse the interests of the elite with those of everyone in Europe.

The video images’ reflective function documents this international corporate ideology of unity. The largely non-Czech and largely European audience watches itself in a literal mirror-stage – a raked mirror stage. Before and after the show and at intermission, the lighting design forces these spectators to see themselves reflected in the steep slant of the folio. Up to three hundred ninety-seven travelers primarily from EU nation states suddenly see themselves unified in their image as a coordinated collective audience, a united European body. Between those reflective moments, the video images of the virtual world replace that reflection. If their reflection weren’t illusorily whole enough, the video provides cinematic transcendental subjects with whom they’re invited to identify. Namely, it provides those dangerous sexy ladies who keep exploding or morphing on impact and then change the space into a shooting gallery where the targets turn out to be human. And this time, unlike in the earlier productions, the dancer’s body does not interrupt this transcendental unifying image. He’s no longer in front of them but rather behind them: between their projected and reflected frames.

The live performer in *The Trap* dances in a triangular wedge of space filled with a world of light he cannot see the way the foreign tourists in the audience can. This hero must memorize its topography and choreograph his movements to match what they alone can see. “Structural change inevitably means changes in employment patterns; jobs are destroyed in some areas but protected and created in others,” admits the ERT in their

⁵ The corporate lobby failed in this case to extend the scope of Article 133 of the Maastricht Treaty which empowers the EU Commission “to negotiate on behalf of member states in matters concerning international trade in goods” and the ERT’s Keith Richardson describes Europe as “poorer and weaker because of this failure” (Balanyá, Belén, et al., 66-67).

1999 publication, *The East-West Win-Win Business Experience*. This corporate lobby nevertheless tries to downplay the inevitable difficulties that befall those undergoing such fundamental economic shifts, “Any adverse short-term effects within the EU and the CEE are likely to be similar to those resulting from recent restructuring of industry, as a consequence of changes in technology and globalization” (25). Like *The Trap*’s dancer, the mortal heroes of the Czech Republic are re-choreographing their economies and infrastructure in accordance with a vision of the ERT that they may never see.

The topography that the Laterna Magika provides in *The Trap* maps the anxiety of the globalization in which they participate. *The Trap* figures cultural globality between two sets of transitional double-frames: between reproduction and violence in a virtual world over the course of the production and at all times between another marriage of reproduction and violence: a doubled situation of conquest by a projection of tourism and a reflection of European Unity.

The larger frame of Prague’s Czech Republic consistently finds itself figured as a space in-between: a Central European country between East and West, the country whose capital once functioned as the metaphorical midway point between the double Capitols of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a country temporally between one European Union based on international socialism and another on global capitalism.

The Laterna Magika still provides foreigners with the topography of its nation. With *The Trap* the foreigner’s guides to oligarchy have been updated to offer maps of the late capitalist cultural globality in which they now participate.

In its call for papers, this conference’s planners posed a series of questions including these two: “What constitutes a document?” and “What is the relationship

between document and discourse?” This paper doesn’t directly address those questions, but its approach implies answers to them. A travel guide is a kind of topographical document. Like any topography, it describes a given location. Only its particular audience, the tourist, distinguishes it from other kinds of topographies. The *Laterna Magika* obliquely guides the foreign tourist through the Czech nation’s geopolitical landscape with each topographical document it performs.

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