

## Historiography

### Michal Kobialka

Let me begin with a statement that, for me, every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a private and public experience of space that is implicit in it and conditions it.<sup>1</sup> To continue this thought, since history is first and foremost a particular experience of space, no new history should be possible without taking into account this particular experience. In its assumption, this statement resonates to a degree with Henri Lefebvre's recognizable trope of production of space, defined by *spatial practices* (perceived), *representation of space* (conceived), and *representational spaces* (lived).

What is left unspoken here is the ontology of history and space that registers not only the social formations, production of knowledge, and bodies by the forces of past and future in them, but also the pressures for systematic transformations and investigations thereof that materialize within them. The ontology of history and space will always be imbued with the traces betraying the presence of bodies and thoughts that have disappeared, no longer have a language that is intelligible to us, or are glossed over by the memories that will forget them to allow the living to exist elsewhere. . . . "We 'feel free' because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom," says Slavoj Žižek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*.<sup>2</sup> This

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His book on Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre, *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944-1990*, was published by University of California Press in August 1993. He is the editor of *Of Borders and Thresholds: Theatre History, Practice, and Theory* (published by the University of Minnesota Press in February 1999) and a co-editor (with Barbara Hanawalt) of *Medieval Practices of Space* (was published by the University of Minnesota Press in June 2000). His book on the early medieval drama and theatre, *This Is My Body: Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages*, was published by the University of Michigan Press in July 1999. (The book received the 2000 ATHE Annual Research Award for Outstanding Book in Theatre Practice and Pedagogy.)

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statement is a challenge *par excellence*—"a space-clearing gesture" that enunciates the systematic transformation only possible if the ontology of history is expressed not as the excess of language—revisions that change not the contents, but the forms of thought; not as the conglomerate of approaches, but as the structures of scholarly inquiry.

To substantiate this point, I would like to show how such an understanding of history and space has informed historiography—the ethics of a heterological investigation in relation to records, their arrangement, and the writing of history—and its focus on: the manner in which history's objects and subjects are or can be thinkable; on the idea of a historical event, which is produced as a specific narrative; standards of visibility that are designed for, interiorized, and exteriorized by us; the notions of the archive, the fact, and the event; the missing articulation between the living body and Logos; and, finally, on representational practices that are both 'policed' and 'clandestine.'

Why these concerns? Maybe because, despite the fact that a lot has been written about the shifts and transformations in the field of theatre studies, the pressures of the academic everyday life, theory as conceptual vision, globalization, technocapitalism, and resistance to theory (difficult language) make me believe that more needs to be done to perturb that order that reduces higher education to University of Culture, University of Reason, or to its entrepreneurial function.<sup>3</sup> It can be done—for the last three decades, we have studied the works that exposed the fissures both in higher education and in the modernist constructs of history and the archive. Thus, the archive is defined as a place that is produced by an identifiable group sharing a specifiable practice for organizing the materials from "simulacra" or "scenarios."<sup>4</sup> It can be conceptualized as the law of what can be said; the general system that describes the appearance of statements as unique events which have their own duration.<sup>5</sup> It can be seen as a juridical place where "men and gods" command with authority, and social order is exercised through the interpretation of the law.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas these strategies redefined the very foundations of history, there needs to be practice that will exhibit the mediality of the claims on the past and the present, rather than historicizing of records. "For the last century, but especially since World War II, Eurocentrism has been the informing principle in the construction of history; not just in Euro-American historiography, but in the spatial and temporal assumptions of dominant historiographies worldwide. Euro-Americans conquered the world; renamed places, rearranged economies, societies, and politics; and erased or drove to the margins pre-modern ways of knowing space, time, and many other things as well. In the process, they universalized history in their own self-image in an unprecedented manner. Crucial to this self-image was the European Enlightenment's establishment of a paradigm of the rational humanist subject as the subject of history. Armed with reason and science, they

conquered time and space in the name of universal reason, reorganized societies to bring them within the realm of rationality, and subjugated alternative historical trajectories to produce a universal history ever moving forward to fulfill the demands of human progress.”<sup>7</sup>

Historiography enters the stage of discourse. It not only generates different questions that are being asked of a research material, but also, and maybe more important, destabilizes, rather than relativizes the structures of scholarly inquiry. Historiography keeps posing questions regarding the status of history and its methodologies by perturbing the authorities, which controlled the emergence, delimitation, and specification of the objects of study—an event: How is it possible to negotiate between the event, which is described because it is worthy of record, the event, which is brought to our attention by the scholars as worthy of notice, and the event, which is not yet striated by their language and which will soon be effaced by those two other events and lose its privilege of being? Thus, events, which did happen, are always marginalized by a system of the structures of belonging that define what is worthy of being archived, how it is going to be archived, where it is going to be archived in order to maintain a particular visibility of that “event.” Similarly, despite the outcry from those academics who fear the demise of the very foundation upon which the scientific knowledge is built, a fact, its singularity notwithstanding, is defined as a designation of a relation specifying a limit of what can be thought (de Certeau), as a construct linguistically linked to a privilege of being (Barthes), or as an image constructed and verified by science (Vattimo).

Taking a cue from de Certeau and Agamben, I would like to suggest that historiography should draw attention away from seeing the historical archive as a place (de Certeau’s “place” as opposed to “space”)<sup>8</sup> housing a text of what was uttered (with all its complexities), towards seeing it as a moment of enunciation of the formation and transformation of statements. Insofar as this enunciation refers not to a text but to its taking place, the territory of the investigation cannot coincide with a definitive level of linguistic analysis or with the specific domains examined, no matter how deconstructive or interdisciplinary they are. In other words, this enunciation exposes the very aporia of knowledge: “a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension;” between the events and the representation of knowledge (modes of scientific viewing, analysis, and education), culture (modes of belonging and social/political inter-action), and memory (software as message, commercial representation), or between the lack and the excess of language.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, historiography does not consist of the abandonment, or rewriting, of the past every time a new historical strategy presents itself; rather, it is informed by a

practice that questions ever-shifting claims to reality, not by denying reality, but by critically evaluating its claims on the past and the present.

If it is possible to fathom that history is a perpetual movement of reorganization and realignment, the function of a historian is to reveal the relationship between a document and its taking place, between the materiality of a document and the impossibility to archive its language, between the historicity of a document and a scholar's commitment to his/her site where a statement is to be enunciated. If this suggestion can compel considerations about history, the focus of graduate programs in theatre studies will be on the image of higher education as an ethical and political practice; the curriculum as a site through which critical thinking can be connected to the most pressing problems of contemporary society; and pedagogy as an exploration of the forms and structures of thought/praxis of that which is coming into being.

### Notes and References

1. For Agamben, "every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated." Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 1993) 91.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002) 2.
3. For discussion of University of Culture and University of Reason see Marc Redfield, "Introduction: Theory, Globalization, Cultural Studies, and the Remains of the University," *Diacritics* 31 (Fall 2001): 3-14.
4. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 76.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972) 126-29.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 2-18.
7. *History after the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*, eds. Arif Dirlik, Vinay Bahl, and Peter Gran (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000) 27.
8. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 117.
9. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999) 12.