

Abstract

Human Security and the Presentation of the Other in Performing Arts

“Human Security” must be understood and thus tackled as a highly complex phenomenon. It concerns both the security of collectives (nations/states, specific cultural groups, etc.) and the safety of the individual.

I would like to examine the role the performing art works (theatre, film, television, and video) can play both in enhancing and endangering human security. The focus is on the artistic portrayal of the “Foreign” or “aliens” or the “Other”. The depiction of Other social and cultural orders can work in quite opposite ways. The presentation can prepare the ground for a better understanding of the Unfamiliar, of “alien” attitudes, mentalities, customs, in short different ways of life. It can help enlighten the local public, working against ignorance and total neglect, precluding disdain or even hatred of the Other and the misunderstanding of foreign practices, activities, thus reducing the danger of hostile “clashes between cultures”. But it can also have the opposite effect: a misrepresentation of the “Other” runs the danger of establishing as the “Real” some false images of individuals and cultures. The western “orientalistic” conception of the East, in particular the Muslim world, is a case in point. It is bound to entail misjudging intentions and actions of the Other, blur insights into the actual relationship between “Us” and “Them”, and may lead to wrong policies toward “Them” with often catastrophic consequences for both sides. Neglecting portrayals of the Other at all may result in similar negative effects.

Referring to some pertinent instances, my contribution will discuss German theatre makers’ often rather problematic “ethnocentric” approach to the non-western cultural Other.