

Redefining Security through Art: Stepping outside the Boundaries of Identity

In the U.S. post 9-11, we see the intensification of border control, a hardening of the boundary dividing 'us' from 'them.' In "To Reassure and Protect," Didier Bigo recommends moving away from an idea of security that depends on impenetrable barriers. "Protection," he writes, "is not limited to the defense of national interests against those of neighboring states, nor is it necessarily the protection of territory and infrastructures." Bigo proposes redefining security to extend to the protection of individuals and menaced minority groups, whether they are located inside or outside of national boundaries. Protection which cuts across lines of nation and identity, he maintains, can only be achieved through collaborative means.

Theatre and Related Models of Cross-Cultural Performance

Twentieth century theatre practice, in formal ways, has developed diverse methods for making boundaries permeable, between us and them, between actors and audience. In Augusto Boal's model of forum theatre, for example, members of the audience are invited to interrupt the performance to propose new scenarios and, based on their collective experience, to dispute and literally to change the actors' representations. At first Boal simply asked spectators to suggest potential endings for a given play. In the course of one performance, however, a woman in the audience got angry when the actors did not understand her recommendation for dealing with a cheating husband. Boal encouraged her to come on stage and demonstrate herself. Members of the audience thus become part of the play, which Boal characterizes as "a rehearsal for...real life." Since its inception in the 1950s, Forum Theatre has defined popular education in Brazil, being regularly adapted for use in schools, community centres, trade unions and as the tool of solidarity movements.

The model becomes even more complex when the actors come from a completely different ethnic and cultural background than the characters they represent. In *Trilogy of Dragons*, a story of national migration told via Chinese immigrants to Canada, playwright-director Robert Lepage cast Quebecois actors to play the Chinese roles. During rehearsals, Lepage invited members of the Chinese community in Quebec City to view the production and, in a kind of multicultural version of Boal's forum theatre, invited the audience to stop the play, question a particular portrayal, refine an erroneous gesture, or identify a cultural stereotype. This kind of multicultural forum not only enables a collaboration between ethnic communities, but also between fantasy and fact. While we are afraid of being represented inaccurately by others, a greater pitfall is often connected to the way we misrepresent ourselves to ourselves from a need to defend identity and resolidify boundaries. In the case of *Trilogy of Dragons*, both actors and audience step outside of their respective identities to address not only each other's fantasies and misconceptions, but also their own.

Another model of cross cultural presentation can be seen or found in Lepage's solo shows. In *Needles and Opium*, for instance, he parallels the life of a young Québécois with aspects from the lives of Jean Cocteau and Miles Davis. In the more recent Andersen project he connects the invitation of writer-in-residence, extended by the Opéra Garnier to a young author from Quebec, with Andersen's own journey to Paris. Hans Christian Andersen, a man who looked like a debauché, but apparently stayed a male virgin all his life, the man who did not like children but wrote the most beautiful and sad fairy tales for them, whose 200th birthday is presently celebrated throughout the world, went to the Paris Expo in 1867, just as a young Robert Lepage visited the Montreal Expo in 1967. For both the search for their proper identities started with traveling.

As Lepage says: "J'ai vraiment commencé à essayer de comprendre qui j'étais quand je me suis mis à voyager.... Tout va à l'extérieur pour mieux comprendre l'intérieur." Lepage's words echo Von Bredow's statement that: "people should learn about cultural diversity and learn to accept it. This does not mean that they weaken the links to their own culture. On the contrary, it should be possible to understand one's own culture better by seeing it alongside with other cultures" (Von Bredow, 5). Lepage's solo presentations not only provide a model for finding or strengthening one's own identity via the culture of others, but immediate political urgencies are never far removed from his shows.

Fascinated by Andersen, the man from the North, who always traveled to the South, even though the South made him feel uncomfortable, Lepage was inspired by Andersen's trip to Morocco to create a Maghrebian character in the current Andersen project. Thus it was, clad in a dress coat and a whitish blonde wig, that the young author from Quebec remembered explaining to the opening night audience of the Opéra Garnier, who—within the fiction of the play—had come to see his adaptation of *La Dryade*, that the premiere was cancelled, due to a strike by the Parisian custodial staff, after a Moroccan colleague was arrested under very suspicious circumstances. In a subtle way Lepage denounces the treatment of immigrants by French and European authorities and, through insistence on such parallels, provides excellent practical examples of how to implement what von Bredow calls "the common culture of cultural differences" (5).

In seeking ways to expand this cross-cultural model to global crises in human security, we look to the collaboration of Canadian filmmaker John Greyson and South African AIDS activist, Zackie Achmat. Fighting to secure affordable treatment for people living with HIV, Achmat's Treatment Action Campaign joined the South African government in a court case against some of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies. When the government subsequently failed to act on the decision by facilitating the distribution of medication, Achmat, himself HIV+, went on a treatment strike, refusing to take anti-retroviral drugs until anti-retroviral programmes were made available at community clinics in each province. Greyson, who recently created a series of video installations based on Achmat's work, notes that not only can a Canadian audience draw from the example of Achmat's civil disobedience (recognized several

years ago by a Nobel Peace Prize nomination), but that our lawmakers also need to look to the example of South Africa, as its government moves forward to construct new, more equitable, legal frameworks.

Canada serves as a model of multiculturalism to the rest of the world, but accordingly we need to let down our own defenses and examine ourselves through comparative processes. Our objective, through this multi-media presentation, is to identify techniques of cross-cultural collaboration in the performing arts (theatre, music, dance, and film) and address the ways in which these activities might be made to overlap more closely with the work of social and political activists both in Canada and elsewhere in the world. On the one hand, we are concerned with how policies, fuelled by fear and based on misrepresentation, are constructed in a space apart from the lives they either seek to protect or seek protection from. Perhaps the greatest threat to human security lies in the ways that these policies stand to impact on the lives of people in real, even catastrophic ways.

Hollywood Detox: Expanding Public Awareness through Art

“Hollywood has taken over 90% of cinemas worldwide,” to a point where Hollywood’s representation of historical events (from the Crucifixion to the Rwandan genocide) defines how global tragedies are received by a mass audience, both in terms of narrative structure and casting choices.

Filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf points out how, following the revolution in Iran, the Iranian government banned Western films, meaning that paradoxically, despite the negative effects of censorship, Iranian filmmakers were able to produce their own films without competition. On the one hand, Makhmalbaf acknowledges the artificial quality of these conditions: he calls it a “greenhouse situation,” in which the “wind and storm” of Hollywood are prevented from killing new flowers. On the other hand, however, he points out how, after recovering from its habit of consuming Hollywood films, the taste of Iranian audiences changed, leaving moviegoers more receptive to “artistic films.”

While the conditions that allowed the Iranian people to detox from their Hollywood addiction were produced by a revolution with its own repressive ends, it is still important to note the potential influence of filmmakers like Makhmalbaf to expand the understanding of a global audience. While *Hotel Rwanda*, constructed on the model of the Hollywood ‘bio-pic,’ foregrounds the transformation of an unlikely individual into a larger-than-life hero, Makhmalbaf, working with more modest means, uses his art to document the unheroic plight of not one but a whole cross-section of nameless individuals.

A full year before 9/11, Makhmalbaf made a secret trip to Afghanistan, where he witnessed more than 20,000 Afghans dying of starvation. Upon returning to Tehran, he observed his own government’s efforts to expel Afghans from Iran. “When I traveled to other countries,” he explains in an interview, “I understood that the people of the world had no information about the circumstances of the Afghans so I decided to make the

movie *Kandahar* as a vehicle to inform the international community about this country.” At one point, the condition of the displaced people became so dire that Makhmalbaf’s crew had to stop filming in order simply to help the sick and dying, while simultaneously the Taliban government sought to ban Makhmalbaf and his crew from staying in the region.

Placing his art at the centre of an international crisis, Makhmalbaf recruited the refugees to tell their own story. When screened at Cannes, the film’s artistic merit drew attention, giving its director an opportunity to speak to the media. “Over there I did some 300 interviews... I didn’t have time to say all I wanted to say or what the reporters wanted to hear.” Pushing past the surface of the standard sound-byte, Makhmalbaf provided each reporter with a booklet translated from Farsi that contained detailed information on the crisis. As a result of his efforts, the booklet was reprinted in serial form in both *l’Humanité* and *The Guardian* and has since been translated in numerous languages, being reprinted in newspapers across Europe, South and North America, and the Far East. Moreover, in order to ensure greater access to literature about the region, a semi-governmental organization has been established for the translation of other works from Farsi.

Cultural production needs to be acknowledged as a fundamental component in the plans of the Canadian government and the European Union as they devise policies effecting human security. International artists must be enlisted to expand public awareness, as well as resources deployed to ensure that this work is disseminated beyond the boundaries of individual nations. Makhmalbaf says: “Art influences by changing the viewer’s outlook. And when someone’s outlook changes, [their] behaviour changes.” While, short of extraordinary circumstances, it would be impossible to put a brake on Hollywood or challenge the hold the industry enjoys on our collective, global mentality, it remains critical for non-commercial artists to utilize, not only televisual and web-based means, but any means at their disposal to reach a global audience. “It’s not a matter of budget: No one gives big money to an artist to endorse culture. They give big money to get big money in return. Therefore it is better to look for a small amount of money [and innovative means] that can expand culture.”

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