

Maipoo Teatro

Dramaturgies of Decolonisation

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Since March 2007, Kati Röttger has been professor and chair of the Institute of Theatre Studies at the University of Amsterdam. She completed her doctoral studies concerning Collective Creation in the New Colombian Theatre at the Freie Universität Berlin in Germany. Until 1998, she was appointed as postdoc in a research cluster entitled *Gender-Difference and Literature* at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (Germany) where she conducted research on postcolonial theatre of women in Latin America. (See: H. Adler, K. Röttger (eds.). *Performance, Pathos, Política de los Sexos. Teatro Postcolonial de Autoras Latinoamericanas* (1999)). In 1998, she was appointed at the Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz (Germany) as Assistant Professor where she delivered a 'Habilitation' about *Theatre as a Medium of Vision*. Her current research topics include International Dramaturgy and Technologies of Spectacle.

KEYWORDS

Collective creation, decolonial epistemology and aesthetics, transdisciplinary artistic laboratory, docufiction, Colombia

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER

Kollektive Theaterarbeit, dekoloniale Epistemologie und Ästhetik, transdisziplinäres künstlerisches Labor, Dokufiktion, Kolumbien

Summary

This article explores the hybrid, transdisciplinary, and docufictional aesthetics of Mapa Teatro's theatrical work by discussing the theatre project *Anatomía de la Violencia en Colombia* (2010-2014), with a special focus on the performance *Los Incontados: un tríptico* (2014). It will demonstrate that the specific aesthetics of Mapa Teatro's work cannot be seen isolated from the legacy of Colombian theatre and performance history. The claim is put forward that Mapa Teatro transforms the lines of dramaturgies of decolonialisation that can be traced back to previous epochs of Colombian theatre since the 1960s which was deeply concerned with the violent Colombian reality. Against the background of (Latin American) theories of decolonisation, it will become apparent that the theatrical language that the group has developed is closely related to (post)colonial intellectual history and to artistic traditions that are marked by violent frictions between global and local points of view.

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht die hybride, transdisziplinäre und dokufiktionale Ästhetik von Mapa Teatro am Beispiel des Theaterprojekts *Anatomía de la Violencia en Colombia* (2010-2014) mit besonderem Fokus auf die Inszenierung *Los Incontados: un tríptico* (2014). Es wird dargelegt, dass Mapa Teatro Dramaturgien der Dekolonisierung transformiert, die sich bis in die 1960er Jahre zurückverfolgen lassen. Vor dem Hintergrund einer Auseinandersetzung mit (lateinamerikanischen) Theorien der Dekolonisierung wird aufgezeigt, dass die besondere theatralische Sprache der Gruppe im Zeichen einer (post)kolonialen intellektuellen Geschichte und künstlerischen Tradition steht, die von den gewaltvollen Spannungen zwischen lokalen und globalen Perspektiven geprägt ist.



Introduction

In recent times, the work of the Colombian theatre group Mapa Teatro has gained considerable attention from European scholars of Theatre and Performance Studies. This growing interest resonates with the experimental, multifaceted, and politically concerned character of Mapa Teatro's aesthetics that critically engages with dominant practices of performative arts. The group commonly works in what they call their transdisciplinary artistic laboratory. In that sense, the name of the group is emblematic of their intentions. Connotating 'the cartography of theatre', this name suggests the mapping of the limits of theatre that defines their work. In what they call operations of *pensamiento-montaje* (thought-montage) they create migratory spaces where myth, history, and actuality are replaced again and again, mixing up the artistic languages of theatre, opera, cabaret, radio, installation, urban intervention, documentary theatre, and lecture performances. While their work focuses closely on the reality of violence in Colombia and seeks to detect

hidden narratives relating to this, at the same time Mapa Teatro are interested in cultural translations and transpositions of Western sources such as Greek mythologies or the texts of playwrights like Heiner Müller, Samuel Beckett or Sarah Kane into their hybrid theatrical language.

Against this background, Mapa Teatro have been praised for creating an ‘imaginary which dwells in a space of excesses, [...] a wave of multiplicities’ (Palladini 2018: 661, my translation). Such commendation may be seen to stem from the group’s dramaturgy of pasticcio, a combination of diverse elements extracted from their original contexts, which resists mimesis (Villegas 2019). Also of significance is their ‘attempt to denaturalize Western conceptions of historical time as empty and universal, demonstrating the performativity of the boundaries between the past, the present, and the future’, as Malgorzata Sugiera claimed in 2019 in a lecture on *Speculative Fabulations in Decolonial History Writings* (Amsterdam, September, 12).

All these scholars rightly stress the relevance of Mapa Teatro’s unconventional approach to theatrical languages and history. The group tends to reimagine the past by working across temporalities and creating space-time constellations that resist a coherent narrative. While their cross-disciplinary work has generally been assessed from a transhistorical perspective, I want to demonstrate that the specific aesthetics of Mapa Teatro’s work cannot be seen isolated from the legacy of Colombian theatre history since the 1960s. In doing so, I will claim that Mapa Teatro conducts what I would call ‘dramaturgies of decolonisation’ that can be traced back to previous epochs of collective Colombian theatre, which was deeply concerned with the violent Colombian reality. The notion of dramaturgy here refers to the literal meaning of the word: working on actions (Georgelou et al 2017) at the ‘precarious threshold’ where the public sphere and artistic creation necessarily meet to constitute performances as communal events’ (Röttger 2014: 184, 197).

The mobilization of the perspective of decolonisation is informed by a specific need to contextualise the dramaturgies of Mapa Teatro in an epistemic location where the structures of the relationship between colonial power and knowledge may be considered. In the words of Ramón Grosfoguel this means to take into account that ‘all knowledges are epistemically located in the dominant or the subaltern side of the power relations and that this is related to the geo- and body-politics of knowledge’ (2011, no page numbers).

By analysing the performance *Los Incontados: un tríptico* (2014) which is part of the project *Anatomía de la Violencia en Colombia* (2010-2014), I will explore the deep involvement of Mapa Teatro’s work in the violent (post) colonial history of Colombia and its dramaturgical legacy. It will become apparent that the theatrical language that the group has developed is related to a (post)colonial intellectual history and artistic tradition that is marked by the friction between global and local points of view. As such the work of Mapa Teatro has to be understood as a critical intervention in the world of global performance arts from a decolonial perspective. In this sense Mapa Teatro is exemplary of the various ways in which performance always operates on the microlevel of concrete practices as well as in dialogue with the macrolevel of larger socio-political and cultural contexts. This article contributes to the move across discourses and practices in a globalised world, bringing in critical perspectives which open up a broader canon of references for Performance Studies, as such taking ‘seriously the epistemic perspectives/ cosmologies/ insights of critical thinkers [and theatre practitioners] from the Global South’¹ (Grosfoguel 2011).

1. The Global South is a notion defined by the unequal global economic and political North-South divide (Therien 1999).

Mapping the work of Mapa Teatro?

Mapa Teatro was founded in 1984 in Paris by the siblings Heidi, Rolf, and Elizabeth Abderhalden Cortés. Of dual Swiss and Colombian origin, they were raised in Colombia and trained in Europe where they each developed their personal approach through corporeal techniques (Rolf for instance was a student of Jacques Lecoq, through whom he met William Kentridge) as well as through dramaturgy and the visual arts. In 1986 Heidi and Rolf transferred their theatre residence to Bogotá. There they established their transdisciplinary artistic laboratory and from that moment on they started to create temporary communities and to interact with different local actors in site-specific projects. They always use a particular question as a point of departure, generating a central topic that allows them to merge micro-politics and poetics as well as local and global points of view by means of multiform visual and auditive dramaturgies. A telling example of their specific dramaturgical strategies and performative language is the project *C'undua*, realised between 2001 and 2005 in Bogotá. This project illustrates the extent to which the work of the group is clearly linked to and departs from concrete local and political concerns arising from precarious realities in Colombia. Here Mapa Teatro develop a local docufictional theatrical language that is at the same time informed by aesthetic means reaching out to a global repertoire of stories, art forms, and media.

C'undua started from the concrete local problem of gentrification in Bogotá. In 1998 the city government took the radical decision to destroy the old neighbourhood of Santa Inés to transform it into a recreation park. This was seen by many as posing devastating consequences for social life in the centre of the city. According to Rolf Abderhalden Cortés

(2010: 295), Santa Inés, generally called *El Cartucho* (the cartridge), was a stigmatised place, loaded with a long and rich urban history and full of mythologies for anyone in the city. When he was a child living in the prosperous and faraway Northern district of the town, *El Cartucho* sounded to Rolf Abderhalden like a space of anxiousness, *un centro de terror*, causing all kinds of fantasies:

With the decision taken in 1998 to destroy this place completely, to make a *tabula rasa* in order to construct instead a park, a hole covered by green, they brought to an end a part of our history, of our social and urban history which is, definitely, a history of a way of doing, of unknown social practices, of irreplaceable histories of life, of unequalled histories of survival. Finally, a history of a local singularity becoming, by disappearing, a non-place, homogenous and global (Abderhalden-Cortés: 295-296, my translation).

To confront this space of conflict between local (social) and global (economic) interests, Mapa Teatro took several important dramaturgical decisions: they worked on the (devastated) memory of that place, on local and global mythology and narrative, and they worked closely together with those who had been living there. The title of the project recalls this approach. In the Arhuaca mythology of the Sierra Nevada in Colombia, *C'undua* is the name of the mythical space where everybody is transferred after death. Letting the destroyed place speak as a graveyard, Mapa Teatro transformed it together with former inhabitants into a new *escenario de lo real* (scenario of the real). When they started in 2001, they had already been confronted with the total devastation of this space, a space where an utterly mixed group of people developed their own way of life surrounding an *economía de rebúsque* or economy of the black market and clandestine employment. These people were, for example, recyclers, barkeepers, dealers, prostitutes, and also families. Mapa Teatro decided to start from the former residents' funda-

mental memories of the place and to combine these with the myth of Prometheus. Why myth? According to Rolf Abderhalden, myth engenders narratives that return like dreams in a continuous movement of configuration and reconfiguration of significations. Interwoven with the narratives of the former inhabitants, myths served as a substantial part of the architecture of the memory of the *barrio*. The two together, the time of mythology and the space of memory, were meant to form a kind of resistance against oblivion, leaving a trace in the ruins.

In the period between 2001 and 2005, Mapa Teatro developed various projects closely following the process of the ongoing demolition of the neighbourhood, while the construction of the park (*Parque del Tercer Milenio*) started simultaneously. The project finished when the park was inaugurated in 2005. This may be seen as a cynical footnote that exemplifies the conflict between the local interest of the community and government ambitions for a global reach of the area. The park won the award for the best project in a public space during the Biennial of Architecture in Colombia in 2016, something that Mapa Teatro say was an award for a graveyard (Abderhalden Cortés 2010: 302).

In four disparate works that constituted a project entitled *Proyecto Prometeo*, Mapa Teatro gathered testimonies and memories to create a multiplicity of traces consisting of performative acts, archives, and expositions of different kinds. Combining social and artistic research, they approached a small representative group of the heterogeneous *Cartucho* community and formed what they called a *comunidad experimental* (experimental community). In the course of the first year of this project in 2001, Mapa Teatro conducted a *laboratorio del imaginario social* (laboratory of social imagination) together with this community, using Heiner Müller's text *Befreiung des Prometheus* (Liberation of Prometheus) as a departure point. The choice for this text was triggered by the contradictory turn which Müller had implemented into the myth

wherein Heracles finally appears to liberate Prometheus, who in his turn is no longer sure if he wants to be liberated. Here Prometheus does not know if he will be able to live without the eagle that was eating his liver day by day. He fears liberty more than the bird. This contradictory image resonated with the experience of the former inhabitants of *El Cartucho* living in between liberation and banishment. As such, Müller's text served as a ready-made to start the laboratorial work. The text was allowed to be used by the participants as a decontextualised object for the sake of resignification. Everybody involved reinvented their own story, re-actualising the myth by filling it in with their own experiences, lectures, gestures, and visions. All this collectively gathered material was presented during one night in December 2002 within the half-demolished neighbourhood as the play *Prometeo: Ier acto*. Called an *instala-acción*, the stories, sounds, and gestures produced in the laboratory came to life in the presence of an audience composed of former inhabitants of the neighbourhood and people from other parts of the city (Abderhalden-Cortés 2010: 298).

One year later, in December 2003, Mapa Teatro presented the second part of the same project, entitled *Prometeo: 2º acto*. This time, they had worked in a different way. On the ruins of the neighbourhood, they used thousands of bedside lamps to demarcate the streets and walls of some houses of the former inhabitants. Due to the total lack of traces of the former inhabitants living there, they had asked the participants to define the most crucial place in their house and to bring pieces of furniture or related objects for a temporal reconstruction of the *barrio*. During the night, small individual and collective actions alternated with video projections on big screens. The project ended with old inhabitants and participants dancing on the ruins.



Proyecto Prometeo, Act 2
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The third part of this project took place in the theatre of Mapa Teatro, which physically served as an installation in itself and a kind of a metaphor of the disappeared *barrio*. This was achieved by using every room and every corner of the theatre for different acts of remembering. The fourth part of the project, starting in 2004, was realised at two different places at the same time: in a part of Santa Inés and in the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá. The title of this project again referred back to the myth of Heracles: *La limpieza de los establos de Augias* (The cleanliness of the stables of Augeas). With this last project, Mapa Teatro managed to create a remarkable movement of coming and going, a continuous transfer between the original, material space of the project, Santa Inés or *El Cartucho*, and the museum as a space of public significance for the dissemination of images. To achieve this the group worked on the basis

of a huge video-sound-installation that enabled them to cross temporalities and spaces, moving in between the construction space and the museum and providing perspectives from inside and outside the construction site. On one side of an enclosing fence they installed twelve television monitors which transmitted the images of the demolition of the last building of *El Cartucho* on a loop. In front of these ‘windows to the past’ they placed three pillows with integrated cameras inside. The footage from these cameras was directly transmitted to the museum where the images were projected in real size onto a wall. Another camera was installed on the terrace of the only building that had remained preserved. This camera filmed — also in real time — the process of the construction of the park that had been kept invisible from the citizens of Bogotá. In this way, images from the past, present, and future were

Projecto Prometeo, Act 2
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merged, creating heterogeneous time-layers. Simultaneously, the project created a disparate movement of people. Former inhabitants and workers visited the Museum of Modern Arts for the first time in their lives whilst regular visitors of the museum went for the first time to the neighbourhood of Santa Inés. Against all expectations, the cameras on the pillars remained intact until the end of the exhibition. According to Rolf Abderhalden, it was remarkable that the community valued the images created more than the expensive objects of the cameras themselves. The symbolic necessity for memory outweighed economic needs.

In their very last project in *El Cartucho*, called *Testigo de las ruinas* (Witness of the ruins), Mapa Teatro reflected on their own role as artists being at the same time witnesses. Once more the group shared their concern with those who were directly affected by the process of demolition. They invited the very last inhabitant to intervene with an act of farewell and she did what she had always been doing at that place: prepare *arepas* and chocolate milk. Performed as an act of resistance against oblivion, Mapa Teatro assisted this act by creating four displays wherein they documented the images, stories, and testimonies of the destruction process and the transformation of the former neighbourhood into the non-place of the Tercer Milenio Park. The specific dramaturgy of this project started from concrete local concerns and communities, detecting and documenting a silenced (living) history and performing it by using diverse aesthetic means. At the same time, the project was informed by a huge variety of elements of Western repertoire. Through this dramaturgical strategy Mapa Teatro translated the history of *El Cartucho* into a hybrid, transdisciplinary, and docufictional political theatrical language.

The company has applied the same strategy to work with the classical Western genre of opera. In 2014 they staged the opera *Orfeo Chaman* in Bogotá. This work was created together with the European ensemble

for Early Modern music, L'Arpeggiata, led by the Austrian harpist and conductor Christina Puhar: 'An ensemble where opera singers and singers of traditional and folk repertoire, have worked, with enough talent to turn their style and staging, into evidence of a time where creative curiosity does not admit limits' (Mapa Teatro, 2020a1). Departing, once again, from a Greek myth — this time Orpheus — Mapa Teatro combined Western music, ancient Greek, and Amerindian mythology alongside various kinds of narratives from the entire Latin-American continent that are, at first sight, incompatible. For example, an important character in *Orfeo Chaman* is Nahual, Orfeo's jaguar-double who guides him through his ayahuasca ritual to be able to communicate with spirits. However, as a novice, Orfeo was not properly the shaman but rather just undergoing treatment — as more and more tourists do in the Amazon region today. 'This dramaturgical method', the music scholar Daniel

Villegas claims in a forthcoming text, 'references a violent reality without representing it, as the actual challenges of Colombia's indigenous population — destruction of their territories for extractive projects and cocaine production, accompanied with the murder of their social leaders — continue behind the denials of the right-wing presidency again in power'.²

2. I am quoting here a manuscript of a lecture which Daniel Villegas Velez presented in September 2019 in our International Dramaturgy course at the University of Amsterdam: *Orpheus in Latin America: Universality, Mimetology, and Myth*, p.27.

Villegas describes the hybrid, multifaceted theatrical language of Mapa Teatro as a 'certain operation involved in the pasticcio as a form' (2019: 27), referring to the practice of merging fragments out of diverse art works into one new form. I would like to explore to what extent it is justified to discuss the work of Mapa Teatro in the context of aesthetics and dramaturgies of decolonisation. Far from simply trying to label their work with a notion that has recently been broadly discussed and used in Western cultural and political debates, I intend to contextualise the theatrical work of Mapa Teatro in the broader context of a long legacy of decolonial practices in Latin America and specifically Colombia. From this perspective Mapa Teatro do not represent an isolated phenomenon. Their theatrical work needs to be located in the Colombian theatre landscape. Although they have developed a radically idiosyncratic theatre language compared to the form of political theatre developed in the 1970s, they share an engagement with the anatomy of colonial violence and its (untold) histories. Since the 1970s, several theatre groups like La Candelaria, Teatro Libre, or Teatro Experimental de Cali have worked successfully using the method of *creación colectiva* that they developed in the course of a movement called *Nuevo Teatro Colombiano* (Röttger 1992).³ This movement came about in the 1960s from a specific urgency to fight against dependency and for liberation. One of the pioneers, the director of Teatro Experimental de Cali, Enrique Buenaventura (who had also been trained in Paris), was directly inspired by decolonial perspectives brought forward by philosophers and cultural theoreticians such as the pan-Africanist and black American sociologist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois and the

3. For material concerning similar theatre movements across Latin America, one might turn to the writing of Beatriz Rizk (1987).

Martinique-born psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. These thinkers described the effects of coloniality as an operation of tearing or ripping, producing a 'wound in the being' by violent acts which dislocate territories, bodies, memories, and knowledges. Such authors described the cruel, paradoxical situation of being colonised while at the same time not being recognised as colonised. W.E.B. Du Bois for instance introduced the term of second-sight, to describe this peculiar situation for the black American:

The Negro is [...] gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (1997 [1903]: 38).

Frantz Fanon, a pupil of the Afro-Caribbean poet and politician Aimée Césaire, described the violent logics of colonialism with the apocalyptic words: 'For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white' (1986:12). Homi Bhabha echoes this painful dilemma in this introduction to Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* in the following way:

His voice is most clearly heard in the subversive turn of a familiar term, in the silence of a sudden rupture: "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man." The awkward division that breaks his line of thought keeps alive the dramatic and enigmatic sense of the process of change. That familiar alignment of colonial subjects — Black/White, Self/Other — is disturbed with one brief pause and all the traditional grounds of racial identity are dispersed, whenever they are found to rest in the narcissistic myths of Negritude or White cul-

tural supremacy. [...] [T]he very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's *avenging* anger. 'Black skin white masks' is not a neat division; it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once which makes it impossible for the devalued to accept the colonizer's invitation to identity: 'You're a doctor, a writer, a student, you're different you're one of us.' It is precisely in that ambivalent use of 'different' — to be different from those that are different makes you the same. [...] It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness (1986: IX and XVI).

I am quoting Homi Bhabha quite extensively here because his analysis provides striking evidence of Fanon's influence on the core assumptions of postcolonial critique. Bhabha turned the division and displacement that is defined as the space of splitting of the colonised subject into a productive force by coining the term 'third space' (1994: 36). This term refers to a hybrid that is radically heterogeneous and discontinuous, inviting the I and the You to navigate in this third in-between space, which can neither be reduced to self nor to other, nor to the colonised or the coloniser. The third space is moreover a space where notions of space and time can no longer be conceived as homogenous or self-contained.

Parallel to the rise of postcolonial critique at Anglo-American universities, scholars in Latin America have developed a political-intellectual project enabling them to learn from and think together with Latin American realities and actors (Walsh: 31). Here they seek to outline decolonial approaches springing from their own local-global histories. They claimed the construction of the so-called Latin American paradigm of peripheric postmodernism *avant la lettre*. Postmodern concepts like discontinuousness, fragmentation, citation, and heterogeneity

are here seen as in fact deeply imbedded in the paradoxical colonial experience (Richard 1989, Dussel 1993). From this perspective, decolonisation is to be understood as a project of alter-epistemology. Zulma Palermo was one of the first who called for a decolonisation of knowledge against 'epistemological violence' (2010: 81) — a silent form of intellectual 'genocide' engendered by the European colonial legacy of the hegemony of knowledge. That is to say a binary knowledge that can be traced back to the conquest of the Americas and the coloniality of power (Quijano 1999) as the 'darker side of modernity' (Mignolo 2009: 39-55) and globalisation. This revision of the constitution of modernity was brought forward with the foundation of the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality Project in Bogotá (Escobar 2005), uniting a large number of Latin American professionals from different disciplines. It projects a decolonial thinking that implies an 'epistemic and political disobedience that consists of *the appropriation of European modernity while dwelling in the house of coloniality*' (Mignolo 2009: 45, italics mine). With the establishment of the *Grupo de Estéticas* in 2009 in Bogotá, a focus on decolonial aesthetics was added to the project. This group argues that Western European aesthetics since the 18th century have configured a canon of normativity which has classically rejected embodied forms of sensing and perceiving and popular forms of art and culture. By incorporating these normative aesthetics as a key hegemonic concept in the colonial matrix of power, popular forms of artistic expression have been subjugated and colonised subjects have been forced to imitate the Western canon. 'Decolonial aesthetics', consequently, has been conceived as a

double trajectory, that of the artist who is no longer creating on the principle of imitation [...] and that of a set of conceptual, theoretical discourses that on the one hand provide decolonial readings of canonical Western aesthetics (modern, postmodern, alter-modern) and, on the other hand provide, together with artists who are themselves theoreticians and conceptualizers [...] the prospec-

tive trajectories of decolonizing being and decolonizing knowledge (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013:13).

Appearing *in between* modernity and coloniality, decolonial aesthetics seek the re-existence of popular culture and arts through everyday aesthetic practices and senses, alongside being a critical intervention within the world of contemporary arts. Its central claim is that '(d)ecolonial aesthetics departs from an embodied consciousness of the colonial wound and moves towards healing' (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013: 6). This happens through the unveiling of the wound by making it visible and tangible, by giving the 'scream' a voice. This embodied consciousness of the colonial wound reveals the true anatomy of violence intrinsic to the specific entanglement of modernity and coloniality in Latin America: the physical violence of elimination, the economic violence of exploitation, the epistemic violence of naming, and the aesthetic violence of normative values. Decolonial aesthetics prepare the ground for what some writers call the *hacer decolonial* (Órtiz Ocaña/Arias López 2019; Gómez Moreno 2017) — a decolonial 'doing' that invents and searches for critical, hybrid ways of thinking and making art from the perspective of the subaltern. This implies 'making visible decolonial subjectivities at the confluence of popular practices of re-existence, artistic installations, theatrical and musical performances, literature and poetry, sculpture and other visual arts' (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013: 2). This claim goes back to the central legacy of the Latin American social movements which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Inspired by the liberation theology of leftist Latin-American theologians like Leonardo Boff and Marxist theories of dependency contesting exploitation and claiming liberation (Dussel 1977), decolonial aesthetics assert the agency of popular cultures in fighting for independence against colonial and hegemonic powers (Walsh 2018: 16).

The 1960s: The rise of collective creation in Colombia

El Nuevo Teatro Colombiano (The New Colombian theatre) was founded in 1969. One of its most important concerns was to undo mimesis.

If colonial conditions meant being forced into mimesis and being rejected

whilst practicing it, negating mimesis was seen as a potential way out of this bind. What did that mean particularly for the theatre? Theatre as a genre in itself had been violently implanted into the cultural life of the inhabitants of Latin America, having been imposed by the Spanish conquistadors to convert the indigenous people to Christianity. Theatre history in Colombia until the 1960s may be seen as a history of imported or imitated theatre and drama from Europe.⁴

4. For the complex history concerning the relationship between dominating traditions of European theater and the extensive performance traditions of Amerindian and African populations that partly survived through popular festivities and rituals, see Diana Taylor and Sarah J. Townsend 2008: 1-28.

If theatre in Colombia were to overcome the imitation of European theatre, Enrique Buenaventura concluded, it had to confront the drama of violence and the violence of drama that dominated the colonised continent (Taylor 1991). Consequently, the Colombian theatre movement at the end of the 1960s took some radical decisions. Rather than obliging artists to go back to their origins or to deny the violent Christian European acculturation, the complicated entanglement of modernity and colonialism triggered Colombian theatre-makers to use Western theatre techniques to perform the Colombian reality. These theatre-makers transformed the traditional system of creation into *creación colectiva*, going against the hierarchy of the literary text and the social

stratification of separated artistic roles — such as playwright, director, and so on. Instead of staging European or North American drama texts, theatre groups started doing research on defined social problems in certain Colombian communities or across the country, for instance by doing fieldwork concerning the operations of drugs mafias in the countryside. Having gathered documentary material, these theatre-makers started to improvise using narratives, testimonies, documents, and music from a certain region or social group. Theatrical scenes and images were composed from this material which in their turn were combined and edited into performance. Interaction with the audience was a crucial element in this process of researching and performing Colombian realities. These theatre-makers often stayed with those whose testimonies and stories they were collecting, later returning to these communities to present their performances and discuss necessary changes. In this way they created performances within open processes that allowed them ‘to reach a quality of the unknown’ (Buenaventura 1976: 320, my translation) and deliberately included errors and insecurity.

The most prominent performance of that time in Colombia was *Guadalupe años sin cuenta* (1975) produced by the theatre group La Candelaria and performed more than 3000 times inside and outside the country (Röttger 1992). This performance deals with one of the most devastating historical periods in Colombia, known as *La Violencia* (1948-1985), which claimed thousands of lives yet was silenced in official history books. This period of violence began with the assassination of the left-liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948. This event provoked a spontaneous uprising, referred to as the *Bogotazo*, and led to the terrible and cruel period of *La Violencia* due to the conflicting interests of the liberal and conservative parties. *Guadalupe años sin cuenta* recounts the violent conflict between farmers in a region of the Colombian countryside called *Llanos Orientales* and the Colombian government who sent their armies to suppress the uprising of those

who were suspected of being members of the liberal party. This military intervention and the precarious conditions of living in *Llanos Orientales* — characterised by lack of land, poor working conditions, lack of social measures, clientelism, corruption, repression, and extreme violence — triggered the formation of guerrilla movements in the early 1960s challenging the dominance of traditional parties and proposing an alternative ruling order. In 1964 the First Guerrilla Conference of the Southern Front took place, led by the Communist Party, and in 1966 the communist group *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) was fully institutionalised as a guerrilla army. The FARC began to expand their influence by entering into different regions of the country as a social movement. However, they remained mainly a defensive organisation with roots among peasants who, after *La Violencia*, kept facing constant harassment by powerful landowners and ranchers supported by the army.

To construct the performance of *Guadalupe años sin cuenta*, La Candelaria used the collective creation method. Intending to bring the history of violence to light, this theatre group went to *Llanos Orientales* to do research — interview people, collecting testimonies and stories, and, last but not least, learning the specific popular music of that region. All this material was then integrated into the final performance.

Anatomía de la Violencia en Colombia

Los Incontados: un tríptico by Mapa Teatro refers directly back to *Guadalupe años sin cuenta*. This does not imply that Mapa Teatro sticks to the form of political theatre of that time. On the contrary, while *Guadalupe años sin cuenta* was staging the story of the farmer's resistance in a quite epic form, Mapa Teatro denies any coherent fabula. They rather confront the violence by merging different stories and time into a multi-layered collage of images from which unthought-of and unthinkable memories and experiences emerge. Rather than reiterating old theatre practices, the aim of Mapa Teatro is to reconnect the present with specific moments of local political history. Nevertheless, the title of their performance already indicates a certain connection. While *Los Incontados* means those who are not counted or those whose stories are not told, *sin cuenta* means without counting or without story. The title *Guadalupe años sin cuenta* here hints not only at the untold (silenced) history of the *Violencia* and its uncountable victims but also at the story of Guadalupe Salcedo Unda, a liberal guerrilla commander and predecessor of the FARC. In 1957, Unda was assassinated under circumstances that were never brought to light. Uncovering this history, *Guadalupe años sin cuenta* brought up the endless circle of violence that was still present in 1975 by starting and ending the performance with a depiction of this assassination. Meanwhile, the first scene of *Los Incontados* starts at the very moment in historical time where the story of *Guadalupe años sin cuenta* ends, namely in 1965, the year of the inauguration of the guerrilla movement. In this scene a group of children in school uniforms is listening to the radio to hear the (original) voice of Camilo Torres, a radical priest and predecessor of the liberation theology who fought in the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ENA), the National Liberation Guerrilla army:

'It is time to stop the celebration of carnival and start the revolution for real.' On their website Mapa Teatro quote Paul Celan from his poem *Erhört/Answered*: 'Los insepultos, incontados, allí arriba, los niños, están listos para saltar.' (Celan 2014: 85)⁵ ('The unburied, uncounted, up

there, the children, are ready to jump'). It seems as if Mapa Teatro is hinting at a broader political and poetic revolution, taking resistance beyond the violent reality in Colombia.

5. The German original of this quotation is 'Die Un-/bestatteten, ungezählt, droben,/die Kinder,/sind absprungbereit'.

Los Incontados: un tríptico resulted from a research project called *Anatomía de la violencia en Colombia* that was developed between 2010 and 2014. The notion of *anatomía* refers on the one hand to the cartography of the body and on the other hand to the activity of segmenting as in a surgical operation. The group investigated elements of virulent violence in current daily Colombian life, linking these back to the epoch of *La Violencia* in the 1950s. By doing this, Mapa Teatro detected and exposed the wounds identified by decolonial aesthetics, celebrating the force of resistant festivity as an antidote against the vicious circle of violence and the politics of death (Palermo 2010: 80).

The project consisted of three different parts that were brought together in a synthesis in the one-hour performance of *Los Incontados: un tríptico*. The reference to the triptych denotes a threefold trinity: the pictorial aesthetics of the performance; the fusion of the three different parts conducted between 2010 and 2014; and three specific topics that the performance deals with in relation to the ongoing violence in Colombia — paramilitarism, narcotrafficking, and guerrilla armies. Together these three forms of organised violence constitute multiple forms of substate power structures controlling regions all over the country. Like in *C'undua*, the three distinct parts of *Los Incontados: un tríptico* are each based on site-specific research and are informed in different ways by the ethnofictional practices that characterise the work of Mapa Teatro.

The notion of ethnofiction is used by Mapa Teatro to hint at their creative research practice of blending documentary ethnography and fiction that reflects the 'disturbing distance in between [self and other] that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness' (Bhabha 1986: XVI). The first part of the play, *Los Santos Inocentes*, deals with a ritual annual celebration in Guapí on the 28th of December. Guapí is located in the isolated region of Timbiquí on the pacific coast of Northern Colombia, which, to this day, is still disconnected from the rest of the country due to lack of transportation. The festival of the devil that takes place there evolved in quite an idiosyncratic manner. Mapa Teatro describes this anachronistic and somewhat horrifying festive event with the following words:

Men covered with grotesque masks, wearing female clothes and accessories and holding a whip in their hands, run through the streets and hit everybody they encounter on their way. Full-grown men and women as well as children, the majority with African roots, appear to try to escape the strokes, but strangely enough many of them throw themselves to the dirt to receive them. It is a *fiesta*, but nevertheless, for those who have never been there, it could seem to be about something else: a punishment, a collective catharsis, a nightmare, or a paramilitary massacre? (2020b, my translation)

Los Santos Inocentes ('The Holy Innocents) in fact goes back to the Christian liturgical medieval commemoration (on the 28th of December) of the biblical account on Herodes' massacre of the innocent children in Bethlehem to eliminate the newborn Jesus. This specific liturgical moment is merged with the first masked dance that was introduced by the Spanish colonisers: *La Danza de Matachines*, the dance of Christians and Moors. In Guapí, the ritual also resonates with the former presence of the FARC in that region and the counter strike of paramilitary groups who killed approximately 3000 innocent farmers between 1994 and 1996. The climax of the delirious ritual results in a collective shouting:



Mapa Teatro: *Los Santos Inocentes*
© Felipe Camacho / Mapa Teatro

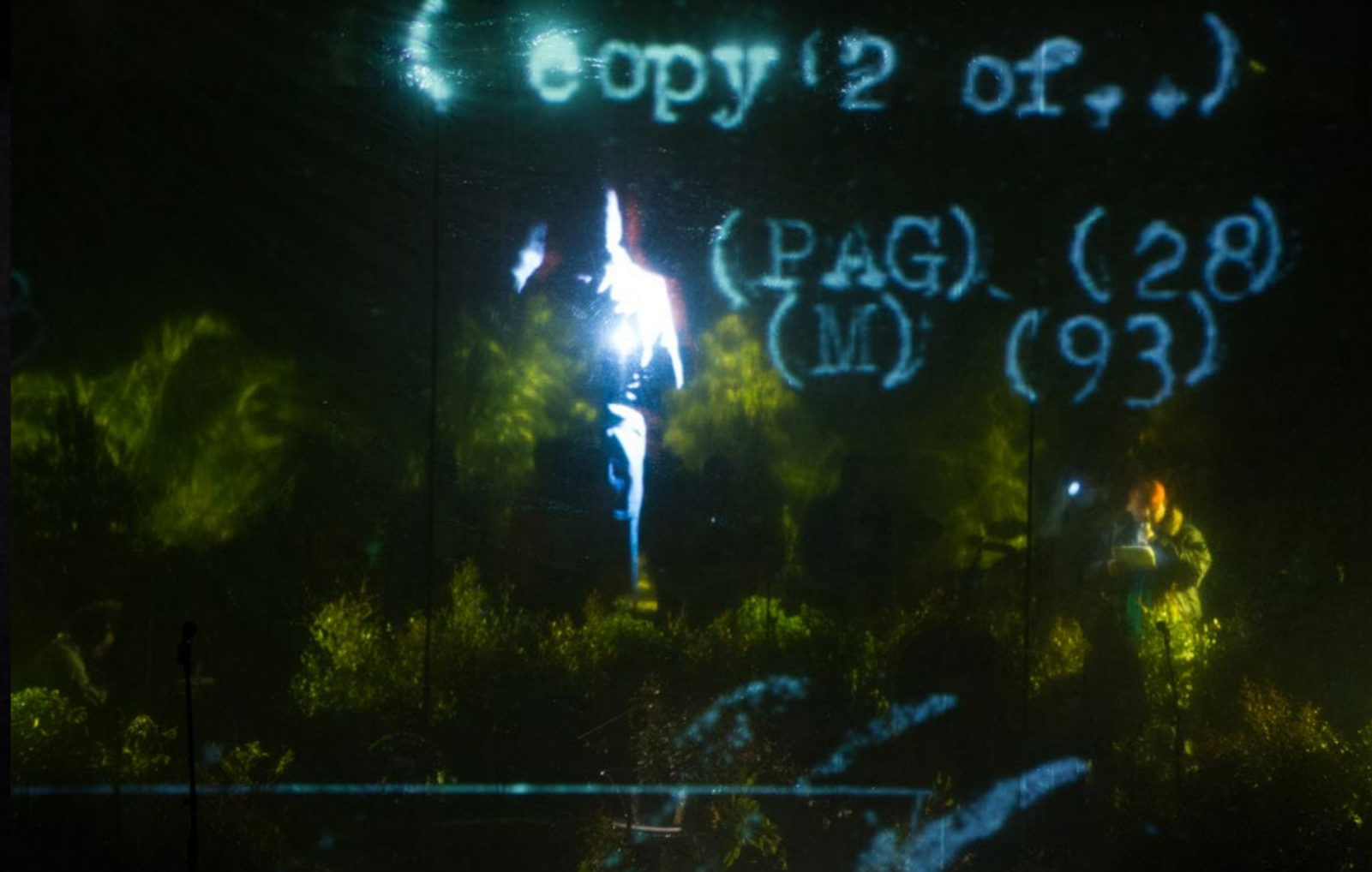
‘Get out of here, paracos (paramilitary), get out of here, guerrillos!’ Additionally, one cannot help thinking of the violence of the Christian colonisation of the indigenous people. Indeed, in this unique act multiple temporal layers of historical violent interventions are closely entangled, echoing cultural, political, and colonial violence throughout history. In a unique way, the event represents the disruptive spatial-temporal experience of postcolonial subjectivities. The fiesta is shaped by many layers and defines a space of being that is wrought from interruption, discrimination, and despair yet at the same time it is also a joyful outburst. ‘En toda fiesta está metido el enemigo’ (In each party the enemy is involved) is used by Mapa Teatro as a headline or motto for this part



of their project. It sums up quite nicely the emotional complexity of this event as its participants hover between the pain of history and festive joy.

In 2009, on the occasion of her birthday on 28th of December, Heidi Abderhalden Cortés decided to change her own birthday ritual radically and went to Guapí. She was so overwhelmed and distressed by the psychedelic multi-layered mixture of violence and festive excess that she decided to document the event on film. This material became part of a delirious cinematographic and scenic montage that was presented in 2010 at the Festival de Teatro de Bogotá, forming the initial idea of Mapa Teatro’s whole project on violence.

"También tocábamos en sus fiestas privadas.
Incluso llegamos a tocar en
la Hacienda Nápoles."



Mapa Teatro: *Discurso de un hombre decente*
© Felipe Camacho / Mapa Teatro

Los Santos Inocentes was followed up by *Discurso de un hombre decente*, the second part of the project. This time, a very specific document served as a departure point — a speech by the drug lord and leader of the Medellín Cartel, Pablo Escobar, that was found in his pocket after he had been killed in December 1993 by a Colombian surveillance team in Medellín. In this document, which was allegedly declared classified by the CIA, Escobar announced that he would become the next Colombian president. Mapa Teatro converted this into a micro-film and a declassified archive and projected this material in the presence of a series of real-life characters to have experienced the terror of narco-trafficking: an international expert on narco-trafficking and violence, a hip-hop musician who lived under the violent domination of criminal

narco-trafficking in Medellín, and the former leader of a music group that had been forced to entertain Escobar and who had become disabled during a bomb attack. These persons were joined by an actor playing the fictional character of a journalist obsessed by narco-trafficking. *Discurso de un hombre decente* was presented for the first time in 2011 as a lecture performance, in coproduction with Kaaitheater in Brussels and Siemens Stiftung, as part of the Spoken Word Festival in Brussels.

The third part of the project, *Los Incontados*, was an installation commemorating the period of *La Violencia* and the guerrilla movement in Colombia, presented in 2014 at the Biennale of São Paulo.

Los Incontados: un tríptico

The one-hour performance of *Los Incontados: un tríptico* superimposes the three parts of *Anatomía de la Violencia in Colombia* like panels. It results in a pictorial palimpsest dramaturgy which is slowly built up in stacked layers of pictorial fragments which merge into one nightmarish hologram on stage; a palimpsest that in the course of the performance more and more will be ripped in shreds. The performance is introduced by a long tableau vivant of about six minutes, depicting the birthday scene of little Heidi in 1965, listening to the radio voice of Camilo Torres in the intimate, private space of a living room.

This picturesque mise-en-scène unfolds in a kind of a small box enclosed by a transparent wall. It reminds us of the old medium of a diorama, invented in the early nineteenth century by Louis Daguerre. The diorama enabled spectators to experience a moving image, looking through a dark tunnel at, for example, a landscape scene painted on an enormous canvas. The painters of these canvases used specific techniques of layering colours and light effects to create the illusion of the landscape changing between dusk and dawn. Later in the nineteenth century, this early cinematographic device was applied in Museums of Natural History to expose scenes with exotic animals or people in a three-dimensional way. At the end of *Los Incontados: un tríptico*, Mapa Teatro confronts the audience with its own exoticism by mirroring the spectators in the transparent fourth wall of the box. The theme of exoticisation is also explored within the fictive figure of the American journalist obsessed by narco-trafficking who consumes and reproduces crime and murder the fascination for a thrill.

According to Mapa Teatro *Incontados: un tríptico* confronts the two entangled topics of the festival of the living and the celebration of the dead:

In different places and times, the *fiesta* has been infiltrated by the actors of the conflict through multiple forms of camouflage. In Colombia, this has changed into a privileged scenario for the eruption of war. For decades, the *fiesta* in its different expressions has been converted and used as a celebration not only of life but also of death (2020c).

Incontados: un tríptico reflects and dissects how the break-out of war and violence has burst into the public, private, and intimate spheres of Colombian citizens' lives, deeply affecting them over decades. The three topics related to *Anatomía de la Violencia en Colombia* — paramilitarism, narco-trafficking, and guerrilla armies — are combined with three narrative lines which run like threads throughout the performance: the birthday, the delirium, and the failed revolution. The dioramic performance space allows these narrative lines to intersect with the topics of the three parts of the triptych in an accumulation of sounds, rhythms, pictures, persons, documents, and shreds of text. These elements are called up again and again like spectres haunting the stage. In the course of the performance, the initial tableau vivant of the private living room transforms into a kind of hybrid third space that is filled up more and more with actors, stories, projections, and voices documenting the anatomy of violence in Colombia, ending in a delirious festive outburst.

This reimagining of past and present works across temporalities and creates a space-time constellation that resists any coherent narrative. Instead, the space of the birthday party of little Heidi will be invaded one by one by the distinct actors of violence, accompanied by the reiterating voice of Camilo Torres, who repeats, again and again, the same sentence: 'It is time to stop the celebration of carnival and start the revolution for real.' By transforming in this way, the theatre space depicts the metamorphosis of the old dream of a revolutionary festival of liberation into a nightmare of violence. The first uninvited visitor of the birthday



Mapa Teatro: *Los Incontados: un tríptico*
© Felipe Camacho / Mapa Teatro



Mapa Teatro: *Los Incontados: un tríptico*
© Felipe Camacho / Mapa Teatro

party is a guerrillero in uniform, entertaining the child with magic tricks and offering her a Che Guevara T-shirt as he emerges out of the smoke produced by a fog machine. This hints to the strong relation of the Latin American version of communist struggle with the international movement is staged by the deployment of children wearing huge heads resembling the faces of Marx, Lenin, Mao, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. These anachronistic pictorial scenes where times and spaces clash, as well as local and global concerns,⁶ are structured once more according to a dramaturgy of shredded palimpsest. The invasion of the child's birthday party is staged via the opening up of the initially closed back wall of the tableau vivant to reveal a back space of the stage.

6. Colombia also served as a more or less hidden battleground for U.S. interests to fight against communism after the Cuban revolution.

Here scenes and images of Escobar's narcotraficking activities and the festivities of *Los Santos Inocentes* are revealed layer by layer, all interfering in the private space of the living room.

These multi-layered discontinuous scenes seem to rise out of a delirious, horrific, cocaine-addicted fantasy yet in fact — loyal to the practice of ethnofiction — most actors involved in the performance were part of the reality they depicted. Mapa Teatro invited several real-life witnesses to take part in *Los Incontados: un tríptico*, keeping the documentary character alive. For example, Don Danilo, the musician who had been engaged by Escobar and suffered injuries during a bomb attack; Jaihhco, a rapper who worked in Medellín whilst it was paralysed by the dreadful and relentless activities of the drug gangs; and children from the Carmenza de Sánchez Institute Martial Band in Bogotá all participated. Such perspectives of concrete local experience of violence were merged during the performance with shreds of global references. The Colombian reality may be seen as a product of a long colonial history and global involvement creating lags of time, space, and collective and personal experience. When one takes into consideration the history of subjugation of the region by global forces of imperialism and

colonialism throughout three centuries, followed by two more centuries of postcolonial domination, one will understand that this reality has had a great impact on the configuration of Colombian identity, generating colonial subjects and subjectivities. Although Colombia stopped being a formal colony in the first half of the 19th century, the end of a colony did not signal the end of colonialism (Taylor 1991, 1). Latin America remained the peripheral 'other' of the Western narrative of global history, a position that Walter Mignolo aptly describes as the colonisation of space and time and the universalisation of Western history (Mignolo 2014). Consequently, *Los Incontados: un tríptico* claims that the violence inherent to the country's history is not confined to Colombia's own borders, but also, and equally importantly, has its roots in the relations between Colombia and international politics. Not only does the dialectical image of the head-parade of communist icons expose this inter-relatedness, the same goes, for instance, for the following text sung by rapper Jahhico referring to Ronald Reagan's declaration of his (failed) 'war on drugs' in 1986:

It's not a secret to anyone that the drug trade has made a few fellow countrymen very rich. Society has never been able to conquer vices. The available budgets and police officers for this battle will never be enough. The war on drugs is lost. If it weren't for hot money and dollars coming into the country, we would be going through a very serious economic crisis. Drug trafficking is the number one globalised business in the world and there is no way of stopping it. All countries buy and sell drugs, even the legalisation of drugs will not stop the drug trade.

Moreover, this intertextual gesture is accompanied by an intermedial interlude projected onto a white screen which is part of the multi-layered scenography. Before the Escobar scene starts, we get to see a fragment of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) — the famous cocaine



Mapa Teatro: *Los Incontados: un tríptico*
© Felipe Camacho / Mapa Teatro

joke that made a great impact on cinema in its time. After being mistaken for a communist, Chaplin's main character, the tramp, is put to jail where he accidentally takes a heaping dose of cocaine during dinner after confusing it with salt.

The short hilarious cinematographic interlude about the destiny of a 'communist' in the 1930s U.S. is counteracted at the end of the performance by a staging of the cruel destiny of a communist in the 1930s at the other side of the world. In the invaded living room space a puppet is left. When an actor starts to animate it, we learn that it represents Vladimir Mayakovsky, famous for his political poems and theatre. The Mayakovsky puppet recounts a dream he had on 3 April 1930, ten days before he shot himself, disillusioned because of the failed Russian revolution: 'The bullet that penetrated Vladimir Mayakovsky's heart also shot to pieces the dream of communism and signalled the beginning of the communist nightmare of the 1930s' (Jangfeldt 2014: 26). This final scene can be seen as an ironic meta-picture connoting the intervention of conflicting U.S. and Soviet interests in Latin America as the peripheral other. However, at the same time, this same scene triggers a meta-reflection on Mapa Teatro's practice of producing political-poetical events through the construction of ethno-fictions and simultaneously exploiting a wide range of disruptive references to a diverse international repertoire of artistic means, media, aesthetics, and ideologies; wrecks of revolution. The Marxist-Leninist myth shattered. The puppet of Mayakovsky recounts a dream which is saturated by ruins. Shreds of images pop up that have already passed by in another context. He is stopped in the metro by secret service officers who accuse him of carrying a bar of soap with him. He is subsequently brought to a tribunal with judges in military uniforms to speak before an audience of children in school uniforms. He is forced to enter a locomotive in which an executioner wearing a hood and holding a whip in his hand forces him to recite his poems by saying 'Sing, poet!'

and whipping him. Mayakovsky decides to recite his worst poems, filled with exaltation and rhetoric. The puppet then declares: 'Then, I, Vladimir Mayakovsky, poet and revolutionary, woke up.' Following this we hear slowly swelling voices saying: 'Get out of here, paracos, get out of here, guerrillos'. Finally, before the curtain closes, the audience is able to read, the following words projected onstage: 'This is a tradition that is lost in time. You have to be from here to feel a little pleasure in the pain'. This clear statement of a local voice which might be a voice from Guapí, yet also the voice of the performance, resonates with the dramaturgy of decolonisation as a practice of decontextualising and recontextualising. This takes up the intertwined threads of references to recompose them again and again into reshuffled images, layered like an archaeological site where the colonial wounds have been covered. As such an anatomy of violence is formed, engendering frictions, including between pleasure and pain.

Conclusion

‘Dramaturgies of decolonisation’ is certainly not a label that has ever been claimed by Mapa Teatro themselves. Why then would it make sense to analyse their work through this lens? I think that in a time when the topic of decolonisation suddenly resonates strongly throughout Western academic and artistic institutions and practices, it is important to stress the specific legacy of this particular position. Indeed this legacy goes back to postcolonial artistic traditions, intellectual histories, and embodied experiences situated in the Global South, in this case in Latin America. Dramaturgies of decolonisation are determined by an ongoing friction between local and global perspectives, as caused by the historic entanglement between modernity and coloniality. While coloniality — the darker side of modernity — preconditions the achievements of (Western) modernity, the achievements of modernity cause the experience of (violent) ruptures, clashes, and discontinuities in the colonised world. When I claim that Mapa Teatro perform a ‘decolonial doing’ as it is defined by recent Latin American theories of decolonisation, I put forward the position that their dramaturgies are based on a geopolitical and bodily knowledge that is marked by colonial difference. Consequently, Mapa Teatro have developed a theatrical language that contributes to the challenges of unveiling epistemic violence. By creating transdisciplinary artistic laboratories where experimental temporary communities are established to do research on forgotten or ignored stories or cases — what we might also call wounds — Mapa Teatro implements a dramaturgy — defined as a way of working on actions — of disruptions. Here Mapa Teatro merge micro-politics and poetics as well as local and global points of view by means of multiform visual and auditive aesthetics that open up sensual perception. •

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