



Art of Cultural Diplomacy as Aesthetic in the Academic Research - Art/Theatre Interface

Cultural diplomacy “refers to the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding.” (Cummings, 2003, p. 1). However, how can we interpret cultural diplomacy and act upon it in and outside academia? How can universities harness the potentiality of cultural diplomacy to transform societies? These are among others the leading questions discussed in the international panel on “the art of cultural diplomacy: cultural diplomacy in and outside academia” linked to international students as ‘students as global citizens’. This discussion panel took place in 2017 May, the 26 in the framework of the 4th Transatlantic Dialogue titled “Creating Human Bonds Through Cultural Diplomacy.” The panel gathered and focused on diverse engagements and activities of international students and student affairs professionals from all continents of the world as potential agents of the art of cultural diplomacy in and outside academia. Our analysis builds on these questions and the objectives of this panel. It discusses from a combined perspective of an academic research – art interface the art of cultural diplomacy as an aesthetic and a means of intercultural awareness and cultural interactions and reciprocal knowledge transfer between academia and the society or the general public. In this connec-

tion, we argue that students' and academics' potentiality as international agents of cultural diplomacy in and outside academia can be observed in the aesthetics of theatre and performing arts. We interpret cultural diplomacy as an art based on the scientific and artistic research interface connected with some aesthetics of theatre and performing arts.

First, this paper discusses cultural diplomacy in connection with the concept of culture in plural from a Cultural Studies perspective. Secondly, the analysis focusses on the art of cultural diplomacy as an aesthetic in the academic research – art/theatre interface. Thirdly and finally, this paper analytically documents two examples of the art of cultural diplomacy in research – art/theatre interface.

1. Culture in plural: cultural diplomacy from a Cultural Studies perspective

As Wolfgang Spitzbart underlines, culture in everyday language and activities encompasses very many facets of the human with divergent meanings and perceptions stemming from diverse viewpoints of the general public and different disciplinary perspectives. Sometimes, the concept of culture is limited to creative activities and forms of expressions such as painting, music, literature, theatre and performing arts (Spitzbart, 2004, p. 1) This already indicates how the concept of culture is multifaceted and diversely understood. Therefore, Claus-Michael Ort (2008, p. 19–38) and Andreas Reckwitz (2004, pp. 1–20) consider it appropriate to speak of culture in plural because “it is all just a construct.” Regardless of the perspective, we argue that culture as a concept and practice consists not only in a repertoire and a range of internalized cultural practices, in the sense of the concept of Bourdieu's habitus as a culturally embodied disposition of skills that corresponds to social, economic, political and cultural habits (Bourdieu, 1987, pp. 97–121). The critical lens of cultural criticism shows in dif-

ferent ways that the concept of culture always suggests a kind of attachment to the elements of culture. The respective individual – as Dieter Haller states – automatically participates and reflectively holds on to elements of culture primarily through birth. In this sense, culture is, according to Sigfried J. Schmidt (2003, p. 19) a “socially binding program [...] of semantic combination or relation of categories and differentiation, [...]” Even if one interprets culture as open and dynamic, it does not escape cultural differences which “tend to be worthy of recognition and protection. [...]” The concept of culture as such always exhibits essentializing levels of meaning” (Sextl, 2013, pp. 15–16) In these terms, there is usually an “unease with culture” (Schneider & Sextl, 2015, p. 7) in people's and social interactions: this is vastly related to overstated and binary cultural differences in cross-cutting antagonisms between ethnic, national, and religious categorizations and othering processes. This is exactly where cultural diplomacy comes in as one of the constructivist and productive approaches beyond the essentialist and populist culture concept.

Cultural diplomacy as a productive approach of culture views “culture as an open and unstable process of negotiating meanings.” (Wimmer, 1996, p. 407) The practice of cultural diplomacy appeals to a cultural conceptualization that “unites all people and enables them to set the cultural landscape in motion and move within it, [...] to bring meaning and utility into understanding and search of compromise.” (p. 418) Nevertheless, to achieve its well-meaning goals, cultural diplomacy implies and appeals to institutional strategies of (non-) governmental and/or diplomatic strategies in the fields of “foreign cultural relations, international cultural relations (ICR), international cultural exchange or international cultural cooperation.” (Ang, Isar, & Mar, 2015, p. 367) Thus, as “in a globalized world cultures can neither be territorially located nor bound to homogeneous communities” (Kimmich/Schahadat, 2012, p. 8), reflections on and the diverse practices of cultural diplomacy as conceived and driven by

University of Luxembourg's "Espace Cultures" go not only beyond conflicting dynamics of cultural identity constructions and unease with culture; the University of Luxembourg's concept of cultural diplomacy is also particularly interested in increasing forms of human and cultural diversities beyond essentializing perceptions and (violent) processes of "othering," exoticizing and diabolizing the "foreigner"/"other," e.g., in today's context of reflexive and societies in Europe.

In this paper, we interpret and situate the socio-cultural potentiality of cultural diplomacy in the academic research – art/theatre interface as an aesthetic and a means of intercultural awareness, cultural interactions and reciprocal knowledge transfer between academia and society. In terms of institutional and people-centered interactions, creative activities such as theatre and performing arts appear to be one of the privileged strategies of the art of cultural diplomacy: a critical aesthetic of theatre and performing arts usually foster a cultural self-perception and self-reflection for a better understanding between different cultures. "Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. [...] A performance is a dialectic 'flow,' that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and 'reflectivity,' in which the central meanings, values, and goals of culture are seen 'in action,' as they shape and explain behaviour. A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammar and vocabularies." (Schechner & Appel, 2012, p. 1)

In connection to this quote and the afore-discussed reflections from the perspective of Cultural Studies, we argue that the development of institutional strategies in promoting and fostering academic re-

search – art/theatre interface can support universities to harness the potentiality of the art of cultural diplomacy as an aesthetic in inclusive and reflexive societies, and act upon it in and outside academia both on the local and international level. In this respect, the conceptualization and the practice of cultural diplomacy of the Transatlantic Dialogue focus not only on international communication and interactions but also on reciprocal knowledge transfer between academia and society on the basis of academic research – art/theatre interface.

2. Art of cultural diplomacy as aesthetic in the academic research – art/theatre interface

Looking back at cultural interactions between East and West during the Cold War, creative activities such as classical music, theatre, dance, and film, etc. diversely helped to maintain connected cultural exchanges between both antagonist and conflicting blocs as documented and analyzed in the volume *Music, Art and Diplomacy: East-West Cultural Interactions and the Cold War* (2017) by Simo Mikkonen and Pekka Suutari. In the words of the theatre scholar Patrick Primavesi, there are also many other contexts and relationships to be reflected upon, which arise, e.g., from contemporary theatre forms to other epochs and cultures, especially about interactions between theatrical practices and their cultural contexts, respective institutions, between political and aesthetic representation and critique of representation, within the framework of social, in the broader sense cultural discourses and also across them (Primavesi, 2018, p. 25). Drawing on this argument, we assert that the potentiality of the art of cultural diplomacy can unfold in, e.g., intercultural theatre aesthetics. It concerns the "the ability of theatre practice to overcome fixed structures of behavior between people and among groups. Theatre practice has the potential to make things flexible again when a particular power position and governance structure have been established.

In this sense, theatre can function as a process of playful empowerment that sometimes may even contribute to political empowerment.” (Primavesi, 2018, p. 94)

According to Georg Schreyögg and Heather Häpfl (2004), for e.g., in “Organisation Studies,” there has been a steady increase of scholarly interest in exploring the relationship between theatre and organizations as a result of various attempts to broaden the scope of organizational analysis and to gain fresh insights into organizational dynamics from a range of new perspectives drawing on art and theatre as metaphors for their work. Seen in this light, our understanding of cultural diplomacy as connected with the aesthetics of theatre and performing arts is based on the model of the theatrical potentiality of negotiating rules of the play or game. We use the term aesthetic concerning artistic practice-based and performative ways of making, structuring, producing, and experimentally transforming knowledge and experience through theatre practice which reveals “real and independent importance outside the realm of art.” (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 214). As a people-to-people-centered and social practice appealing to intercultural awareness and cultural diplomacy in a multicultural and pluralistic society, theatre occurs and contextualizes its artistic potentiality through five “aesthetic dimensions” (McLean 1996, p. 11): Forming, Presenting, Surrendering, Reflection, and Perception. It means, these five aesthetic dimensions are related to the collaborative theatre-making process during the production and how actors and the audience interact. As Heeg (2014, pp. 153–154) emphasizes, individual theatrical processes are exposed in the interplay of “aesthetic experience and construction” in such a way “that what is exposed oscillates between the spheres of art and science;” thus the essence of theatre as an artistic and aesthetic medium of “interruption” (also in the sense of surrendering) and “transgression” (pp. 150–163) brings to the fore about strategies of the art of cultural diplo-

macy. Focusing specifically on the aspects of doing and making new experiences through theatrical and performance role plays, the aesthetic of theatre practice, as Penny Bundy (2001, p. 9) explains, “offers people new ways of seeing and understanding the world in which they operate.” Anna Ostern and Hannu Heikkinen (2001, p. 112) speak in this connection about a doubling or dual-mode of existence between the aesthetic and experience that creates possibilities for insight.

3. Two examples of the art of cultural diplomacy in research – art/theatre interface

The following two examples do not explicitly use the term cultural diplomacy. However, they implicitly appeal to aspects and strategies of the art of cultural diplomacy as discussed above from the perspective of Cultural and Theatre Studies: these aspects and strategies are embedded in the framework of interactions between academics, students, and professionals from non-academic occupations and the general public. The focus on critical strategies of cultural transfers, intercultural awareness and interactions of these examples shed another light on how universities can institutionally harness the potentiality of the art of cultural diplomacy in reflexive and inclusive societies when it comes to dealing with issues of image-making processes, the (de)construction of identities, systems of cultural representation, and compromising on socio-cultural differences and management of diversities.

Example one:

Mentioning abstract elements in this example aims to draw attention to what the practice of cultural diplomacy can practically build on, e.g., at the University of Luxembourg. The discussed aspects of the art of cultural diplomacy can be observed and strengthened in the international research project “Process of Internationalization in Contemporary Theatre” (since 2013), the Luxembourgish lecture series “Theater International” and the master’s program “Theatre Studies and Inter-

culturality” (“Master Theaterwissenschaft und Interkulturalität”) of the University of Luxembourg, initiated and led by Prof. Dr. Dieter Heimböckel and Dr. Natalie Bloch. Both, the lecture series and the Master’s program build on mutual interactions between academic and practical artistic approaches as well as dialogue and exchanges between academia and non-academic professionals in the society. Besides, the scientific and artistic framework of the master’s program, “Theatre Studies and Interculturality,” prepares students for specific theatre professions and a wide range of activities in Luxembourgish cultural institutions (public and private) and abroad. Some results of these projects are documented in the following volumes: “Theatre und Ethnologies. Beiträge zu einer produktiven Beziehung” (2016, “Theatre and Ethnology. Contributions to a productive connection”), “Vorstellung Europas – Performing Europe. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf Europa im Theater der Gegenwart” (2017) as well as the collection “Theater International”. In addition to the project “Processes of Internationalization in Contemporary Theatre” and the above-mentioned lecture series, the Institute has conducted studies including “Kulturelle Globalisierung” (“Cultural Globalisation,” 2010–2013), “Multiling. Identitätskonstruktion in mehrsprachiger Literatur” (“Constructions of Identity in Multilingual Literature,” 2011–2014), both led by Prof. Dr. Georg Mein, and “Regionalität und Globalität” (“Regionality and Globality, 2007–2010”), led by Dr. Wilhelm Amann.

Example two:

The performance “... jusqu’à l’époque cravate” (2016, “... until the tie era”) was created as part of the “Writer in Residence” program initiated by the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies at the University of Innsbruck and the City of Innsbruck. “... jusqu’à l’époque cravate” resulted from a practice-oriented course combining theory and practice and was developed in collaboration with students from Romance Studies at the University of Innsbruck.

The plot of the performance deals with the fated story of four siblings of a deceased king in a kingdom X that is no longer known today. The king had four wives coming from Asia, America, Europa, and Africa, with each of whom he fathered a child. After his death, each mother insisted that her child take the throne. The situation led to a quarrel among the children and mothers that was as uncompromising as seemingly endless. The siblings seated in different auditorium places at the beginning of the performance began their heated argument in the audience before stepping onto the stage. They multilingually argued and spoke in Tyrolean, Ewe, High German, Nawdem, English, and French representing their linguistic backgrounds. Then the griot from West Africa, actually called *Djeli*, appeared as a mediator, playing his musical instrument *Kora*, as if sent by God, to reconcile the children through a theatrical practice. Based on the following content of the quote, the *Djeli* and the students as theater actors reflected on and are looking for a different and alienated perspective on alternative (re) presentation forms in the theatre of the present beyond artistic othering processes: “There must be some view of the matter, one that I can show in Europe and in Africa, one that everyone in the same way understands. Some human, all-too-human, meta- or superhuman code that everyone can read that means everyone, sender and receiver, actor and viewer, but also the viewer in the actor, so also the African viewer in the European actor and the African actor in the European viewer and so on, the critic and the actor in the critic and the viewer in the actor in the critic, there must be that, right?” (Rittberger, 2010, pp. 100–101)

The performance “... jusqu’à l’époque cravate” documents the artistic staging aesthetics of a *Djeli* in pre-colonial theater forms. Already with Sundiata Keita (c. 1214 – c. 1255) began the rise of the artistically talented *Djeli* in the Mali empire between the 13th and 14th

centuries. He was there to proclaim the glorious victories and exploits of the Lion King. He is “memory artist” who stages stories, repeats them, reenacts them, changes them, adapts them depending on the sociocultural and political situation, and passes on the knowledge from generation to generation. The art of *Djeli* was and still is social criticism in general and not partisan by using humor, parody, and subversion.

From another cultural viewpoint from South Africa, the theatre and cultural studies scholar Julius Heinicke demonstrates in his article “The ideal of Rainbow Nation 1. What Theatre Arts and Cultural Policy in Europe can learn from Southern Africa” the potentiality of southern Africa’s Applied theatre which actually includes projects where theatre is used for specific social, educational or political purposes that are clearly defined in advance (Heinicke, 2019, p. 158). For Heinicke, what Europe can learn from southern Africa’s theatre is his transformative potentiality and aesthetics which “are deeply sensitised by the post-colonial discourse” when it comes to “detect (hidden) colonial and patriarchal hierarchies, norms, and dichotomies with specific vigilance, trying to overcome and deconstruct them. And this seems to be democratic in the truest sense,” argues Heinicke. For him, some of this theatre aesthetics from southern Africa combined with some “traditions of theatre and performance of various cultures without labelling them as ‘the own’ and ‘the other’, but rather to use them as a tool of performance techniques” should inspire the capacity of theatre in Europe “as a way of facing up to some of today’s “intercultural challenges due to migratory flows.” (Heinicke, 2019, p. 159).

Concluding words

In the Transatlantic Dialogue context, the implicit practice of the art of cultural diplomacy in theatre can be epistemology questioned from different cultural perspectives by comparatively having a look at the potentiality of some concrete forms of intercultural interactions and theatre and performing

arts project. The discussed approaches show interdisciplinary and multimodal approaches and the adaptability of cultural diplomacy to all disciplines and topics: it combines national, transnational, and global discourses to question explicit and/or implicit perspective. Furthermore, as seen with the examples, the potentiality of the art of cultural diplomacy lies in the creation of diverse methodologies and platforms for co-reflections, mutual learning, and improvements, fostering dialogue between academics and non-academics to influence local and global debates and practices related to forms of human diversities.



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