

A Report to an Academy. A Postcolonial and Ecocritical Performance by Zero Point Theatre

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Abstract

Despite Kafka's deep affection for theatre, his writings are fundamentally antitheatrical. This antitheatricity presents a unique challenge, pushing directors to examine the function of the text within a performance, as well as the practices of acting and directing. With this proposition in mind, made by Martin Puchner ("Kafka's Antitheatrical Gestures," 2010), the present article focuses on the theatre production *A Report to an Academy*, directed by Savvas Stroumpos (Athens, 2021). It will be argued that the Greek director and his group Zero Point Theatre, both well versed in the acting method of Theodoros Terzopoulos, used Kafka's text to foreground the human body as animality and the performing body in a constant state of becoming-animal. Such an "aesthetics of aliveness" on the stage is politically sharp and especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed theatre as biological and social necessity. Alongside, the production revealed a postcolonial and ecocritical Kafka, and *A Report to an Academy* as a collective slave narrative, which brings to light the (post)colonial and ecological hubris of Western civilization.

Keywords: slave narrative, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, Black Lives Matter, trauma, becoming-other

Small totem-like face sculptures make up the minimal setting of the performance of Kafka's *A Report to an Academy* as directed by Savvas Stroumpos in 2021, in Athens. Their blackness immediately reveals the ideological lens of his directorial approach: The monologue is treated as an aesthetic example of Kafka's lasting interest in European colonialism, and more specifically African enslavement, the "genocidal depredations in Africa and the New World" (Frydman 1), which preceded the Holocaust. In the performance, the genealogical connections between Caribbean slavery and the Holocaust are first of all visually set on stage (designed by Spyros Betsis), shaking off any dehistoricized reading of Kafka's text. This Kafka is not only a prophet of the Holocaust but also sensitive to the exploitation of black lives. Stroumpos directed *A Report to an Academy* in the aftermath of the African-American George Floyd's murder by a white policeman in Minneapolis, in May 25, 2020; an event that sparked widespread international outrage, leading to public demonstrations against police violence and institutional racism, as well as demands for increased police accountability, particularly through the Black Lives Matter movement advocating for racial equality.

Black Faces, Red Wounds

The performance interprets Kafka's 1917 monologue as a slave narrative, focusing on the experiences of Red Peter, a "Menschenaffe" (man-ape). This narrative explores both the physical and psychological brutality that Red Peter endures after being taken from his homeland, the "slave-rich Gold Coast" (Thompson 94) in West Africa, now known as Ghana. Red Peter becomes a prisoner of the infamous German wildlife trader Karl Hagenbeck, who, in the late nineteenth century, supplied European zoos with wild animals and indigenous people. These individuals, often described as "primitive," included Sami, Inuit and Nubians. Such "exotic" exhibits satisfied the curiosity of "civilized" European visitors and fed the imperialist narrative of European "superiority." Disfigured and deprived of his original identity and virility, Red Peter is transported to Hamburg by Hagenbeck's slaver and ultimately becomes "a variety ape with human attributes dragged out into the spotlight at world's fairs and brought on Hagenbeck's zoo stages to amaze crowds" (Thompson 94).

More specifically, the monologue follows the narrative arc from slavery to freedom. This move consists of the four chronological stages of a typical slave narrative, from loss of innocence and realization of the present condition of bondage, consideration of alternatives to oppression and the

resolution to be free, as, after all, such narratives are testimonies of free men (Foster 85). Still, in Red Peter's monologue, there is no real freedom attained, just a way out from his bondage, as he explains to the members of the Academy: "No, freedom was not what I wanted. Only a way out; right or left or in any direction; I made no other demand. . ." (Kafka 253–54).

Without real freedom, however, there is no "solution, or a cure" at the end of this slave narrative; thus, no final emotional and mental catharsis. The Report turns into a narrative of the open wound which remains as visible as the large, hairless red scar on Red Peter's cheek (which earned him his name), or the one on his genitalia, both unerasable marks caused by the hunters' shots in the native jungle.

With Red Peter being "[emasculated] beyond repair, the story thematizes its [/his] wound, or its [/his] existence as eternal wound" (Thompson 101–02). Likewise, the structure of Kafka's monologue "remains an open wound" (Menninghaus qtd. in Thompson 101–02) as Red Peter opts for the best possible way out: becoming an entertainer in the music hall industry instead of a caged animal in the Hagenbeck Zoological Garden.

Bleeding Text, Red Textile

Similarly, Stroumpos describes his performance of A Report to an Academy as "a musical theatre of the wound [or trauma]."[1] Like the setting with its colonial resonance, the red colour of the costumes (designed by the actress Rosy Monaki and the director) recalls the bleeding open wounds on the body of this Menschenaffe (man-ape), before they became red scars. As Red Peter comments in his ironic report: "Of course what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it, but although I cannot reach back to the truth of the old ape life, there is no doubt that it lies somewhere in the direction I have indicated" (Kafka 253).

This is the open wound of the text, alien words bleeding from the physical and psychological injury to a body that is a subject, an object but also a colonial project "to be worked on" (Lowton and Higgs 2). The scars on his hairy, black body are marks of a violent Western culture and a racist social structure that commodified his enslaved body and turned it into an exotic(ized) spectacle in the music halls of Europe.

The costumes' redness in the performance manifests that a violent penetration took place before skin healing. As Red Peter confesses: "The

second shot hit me below the hip. It was a severe wound. It is the cause of my limping a little to this day” (Kafka 253). Scars like these have both a personal and a socio-political significance that is expressed through a story told by a disfigured body in an alien language. In the performance, such a text of the red, open wound became red textile.

A Chorus of Red Peters

The text implies that Red Peter is not the only one facing such a fate. He refers to the Zoological Gardens, mentioning animals in barred cages (Kafka 258), and describes his female companion, a “half-trained little chimpanzee,” who has “the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye” (259). He also mentions another male ape of the same name, “who died not so long ago and had some local reputation” (251). In response, Stroumpou created a mixed-gender chorus for the performance (cast: Babis Alefantis, Evelyn Assouad, Giannis Giaramazidis, Ellie Iggliz, Anna Marka-Bonissel, Rozy Monaki, Dinos Papageorgiou).

Unlike other recent stage renderings of Kafka’s Report, which treat this monologue as an individual slave testimony,[2] Stroumpou broadens the perspective of the narrative and its impact. He prefers a multivocal, multi-bodied rendering, turning Red Peter into a collective entity, a choral “I.”

This serves, first of all, the needs of his more or less stable group of performers in Zero Point Theatre, who, above all, explore the psychophysical craft of acting (an issue I will soon return to in more detail), but also his interpretation of the monologue as a collective slave narrative, a text of the collective wound (trauma). As it is often the case in ancient Greek tragedy, a genre in which Stroumpou is well-versed thanks to his long-lasting apprenticeship and collaboration with the renowned Greek director Theodoros Terzopoulos and Attis Theatre, this chorus of Red Peters becomes the collective consciousness of the marginalized and the oppressed. In this performance, Kafka’s text becomes a sort of testimonial theatre that dramatizes a collective story of colonial captivity, enslavement, violence, oppression and survival.

In contrast to prominent figures in twentieth-century Western theatre, such as Peter Brook—who was the first Western director to travel to Africa in 1972–73 (see Ruffini)—Stroumpou does not incorporate African actors or those from the African diaspora into his work. He also does not draw upon the rich and diverse traditions of African theatre and performance (see Igweonu). Such artistic choices would have been unfeasible, even had he

desired them (which he did not), due to the COVID-19 restrictions that were in place in Greece and elsewhere during the rehearsal period for A Report to an Academy.

Stroumpos, thus, wisely avoided the psychophysical exploration of the fallible concept of unicultural “Africanness,” which falsely sees the “single and very large continent” of Africa as a “coherent and monolithic entity or system” instead of the “complex, polysystemic amalgam of many political, linguistic, social, cultural and economic sub-systems” that it actually is (Igweonu 11). In consequence, from the start, he disentangles himself from risky, binary opposites which roughly try to contrast the African theatre from that of Europe, like, for example, “theatre as religious ritual as opposed to theatre as art, theatre as social ritual as opposed to theatre as entertainment, orality versus literacy, text versus performance, etc.” (Igweonu 13).

Instead, he relies on the method of acting developed by Theodoros Terzopoulos. As the latter’s experienced actor and associate director since 2003, he has a deep knowledge of this method of actor’s training, which is not a method of mimicry and mimesis but of metamorphosis and becoming-other, with the Greek god Dionysus as the example par excellence.

Becoming-other, Becoming-apes

Like Dionysus, the ancient god of theatre and transgression of binary opposites, such as human-animal, male-female, order and chaos, the actors in the theatre of Terzopoulos (and Stroumpos) unblock and release their animal energy prioritizing the reptilian brain over the Cartesian brain (Terzopoulos 24); they extend the limits set by the everyday body and break down time and space linearity, causing fractures to the concrete image that the human animal has for the world (14).[3]

Since his 1986 production of *Bacchae* and continuing with his latest work, *Oresteia* (2024), Terzopoulos has blurred the line between man and animal through his acting technique, highlighting the profound otherness of the human condition and its inherent animality. Both Terzopoulos and Stroumpos, master and student, share “with traditional ecology a concern for biological species and the biosphere” but also identify “‘incorporeal species’ that are equally endangered, and an entire ‘mental ecology’ in crisis” (Guattari 71). Adapting such an aesthetic and ethico-political

perspective, Stroumpos, in *A Report to an Academy*, rejects mimesis and mimicry (of apes) for metamorphosis and becoming-other.

As in Artaud's vision, for Terzopoulos and his protégé Stroumpos, theatre is the "key site" to promote an alternative mental and social ecology because "it permits the imaginative reconfiguration of . . . bodily forms, comportments and behaviours and allows the body to act in ways that are profoundly anti-social" (Scheer 42). Dionysian (animal) energy may be destructive, but this is a sort of positive, creative destruction because it combats the present mental ecology, which is in crisis, fighting for a better future, for a new mental and social ecology (Terzopoulos 83). As such, ritualistic and physical violence on stage plays a central role, promoting a "true [mental] ecology" of the "phantasms of aggression, murder, racism, death," one which does not censor them "in the name of great moral principles," but allows their aesthetic expression in art (Guattari 57–58). Terzopoulos and Stroumpos believe, to use Guattari's words, that "Any persistently intolerant and uninventive society that fails to 'imaginarize' the various manifestations of violence risks seeing this violence crystallized in the Real" (Guattari 57–58).

Similarly, in *A Report to an Academy*, Stroumpos revisits the history of Western civilization as a story of arrogant colonization and brutal exploitation of human and nonhuman animals in order to reveal its open wounds: racism, despotic rule and the exploitation of so-called "uncivilised" and "inferior" (sic). In *A Report to an Academy*, the focus is on human and animal exploitation in our impoverished existential territories. His chorus of becoming-apes is a collective entity, which dramatizes a collective testimony of the colonial wound. As Laura Cull explains:

"Deleuze and Guattari insist, . . . , on the distinction between becoming-animal and imitating animals—it is not, they say, a question of one identity or form being copied by another. We do not become-animal by identifying with animals (which risks sentimentality and anthropomorphization), but by finding an affective common ground or 'zone of proximity.'" (112)

Becomings do not destroy neither the human animal body nor the animal body but create a common ground for the two through "proximities between molecules in composition, relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between emitted particles" (Deleuze and Guattari 274–75).

The performing bodies in *A Report to an Academy* are examples of becomings “at their best” for “they compose a new and ‘more powerful body’ rather than destroying either of the other bodies involved” (Deleuze and Guattari 275).

As already discussed, the setting, the black totem-like face sculptures and the red costumes visualize the above, the psychosomatic energy processes taking place in the performing bodies, the latter’s ape-becomings. They also surpass simplistic, allegorical interpretations of a monologue that Kafka himself chose to call an “animal story,” instead of a parable; a story that also “warrants serious consideration along the interpretive lines of New World slavery” because Red Peter’s African home land was the most important departure point of transatlantic slave trade (Thompson 98).

An Animal Story

For Stroumpos, Kafka’s monologue is not a nihilistic allegory of Kafka himself or of the modern artist in general (Theisen 172), or even a Jewish assimilation narrative which allegorically depicts the experience of those Jews in the early twentieth century who were converted to escape antisemitic persecution (Beck 181). Instead of metaphor and symbolism, the director focuses on their opposite, transformation.

Thanks to the central concept and practice of “perpetual improvisation” in Terzopoulos’ acting method (see Terzopoulos 45–54), Stroumpos explored the becoming-animal, which does not symbolize but exists. So, the performers of Zero Point Theatre, as becoming-animals, insist not on the outcome but on the process, not on identity but on the liminal state of in-betweenness, somewhere between animal and human animal. Stroumpos, therefore, avoids superficial imitation, preferring “[e]mbodiment, presence, process, event, force,” that is, the “performative themes of contemporary zoontology” (Chaudhuri, “Performance and Animal Life” 521) and zooësis—a term coined by Una Chaudhuri to valorize our real and imagined encounters with animals, as well as “the vast field of cultural animal discourse and representation” (“Introduction” 6).

As a result, in *A Report to an Academy*, a chorus of energetically powerful becoming-apes fill the stage with their “animal” actions, creating an energetically dynamic, politically sharp “aesthetics of livingness” (Burt qtd. in Chaudhuri, “Performance and Animal Life” 521), sometimes tragic, sometimes ironic. In such a way, “anomals,” like the commodified Kafkaesque Red Peter (from the Greek word “*anomalus*,” which means

uneven but also abnormal and perverted, see Giannachi 84–99), are restored as animals because they are approached for their valued bodies and souls (anima), not for their economic, scientific or entertainment worth.

Conclusion

Kafka's anti-theatricality, which Stroumpos and his theatre group know well, having previously staged *Metamorphosis* (2012, 2013), *In the Penal Colony* (2009, 2014) and the performance *Fragments from Kafka* (2018), invites directors and performers to reconsider their crafts and the role of the dramatic text in performance. As Martin Puchner comments, such stagings of Kafka's works (and there are many internationally) do not reveal the theatricality of Kafka's texts, but theatre's need of Kafka precisely because the latter resisted theatre, however much he liked it and was influenced by it, especially by the Yiddish theatre of the Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe (178).

Additionally, in *A Report to an Academy*, Stroumpos argues that contemporary theatre urgently needs Kafka and his narratives, particularly in the context of rising racist brutality and the challenges posed by the pandemic, which have called its relevance into question. The question, for Stroumpos (as it has also been for his mentor Terzopoulos), "is not to defend the rights of animals or plants, pity the beasts, or experience deep feelings for plants. Rather, it is to be worthy when confronted with the joy or suffering that all beings face, and to forge alliances with non-human beings" (Beaulieu qtd. in Cull 141). This is a much-needed Deleuzian-Guattarian ethics of the social and natural environments, which is not an ethics of compassion but an ethics of solidarity.

Despite the much-discussed connection of theatre with disease and the plague during the pandemic, it could also be argued that the performance reminds us that theatre is above all linked to catharsis (even if it stages a text like *A Report to an Academy*, which, in its structure and themes, is a narrative of the open, bleeding wound), and therefore to health as perceived today: Not as the opposite of illness, but as holistic, biological, mental, social, environmental harmony and balance, a kind of health that is not the exclusive concern of medical practitioners but everyone's responsibility (Bodzinski 4–5).

In short, the pandemic made an urgent call for a non-anthropocentric, post-humanist *modus vivendi*, redefining the power relationship between

“dangerous” man and affected nature as a relationship of harmonious coexistence. Savvas Stroumpos and his group Zero Point Theatre responded to this call by exploring the stage potential of a kind of theatre that can contribute to this direction while fully relying on this “dangerous” human presence.

Endnotes

[1] See here; translation mine.

[2] See, for example, the English Adrin Neatrour’s one-man show in Newcastle (2012) and The Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2013; the much-travelled Kafka’s Ape, directed by the South African theatre-maker Phala Ookeditse Phala and performed by the South African Tony Bonani Miyambo in 2017, or the German Katharina Schmitt’s production in Prague (2018).

[3] For a detailed discussion of Terzopoulos’ method of actor’s training, from an ecocritical and ecosophical perspective, see Chatzidimitriou (2021). For the purposes of the present analysis, I have selectively drawn from this article, relating some of its main ideas to the way Stroumpos worked with his performers in *A Report to an Academy*.

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