

## The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.

**Arun Frontino**

BA Operazioni di Pace. Gestione e Mediazione dei conflitti. Università di Firenze  
MA European Ethnology. Humboldt Universität Berlin.

### Abstract

Durante un Workshop di Teatro del Oppresso ho scritto: “Osservo la realtà, faccio un passo indietro e creo una realtà con coscienza. Osservo, analizzo e creo una immagine della realtà per tornarvi e metterla in discussione”. (Diario di campo)

Può essere messo in relazione il processo di creazione teatrale con la ricerca etnografica? Cosa ne può scaturire? Le intersezioni e i punti di critica reciproci tra teatro dell'oppresso ed etnografia portano ad un arricchimento di entrambe. La mia interpretazione di ricerca etnografica, politicamente impegnata e collaborativa, mi ha portato alle seguenti riflessioni metodologiche. Ho osservato la pratica del teatro, partecipando alle attività di un gruppo di Teatro per sei mesi. Ho presentato la mia analisi e interpretazione dei dati ai partecipanti e ho approfondito temi importanti attraverso interviste. Gli input raccolti e i risultati delle interpretazioni non sono oggettivi e definitivi ma aprono quesiti importanti per la ricerca sociale contemporanea. Ci si muove in uno spazio tra i confini non definiti tra arte, scienza e politica. È proprio la prospettiva dai confini che rende la discussione interessante. A me, studente, il rinnovamento della metodologia nella ricerca antropologica appare indispensabile. L'obiettivo principale è di contribuire alla discussione sul metodo di ricerca collaborativo. Il dialogo tra Teatro dell'Oppresso e Etnografia è interessante e va portato avanti e il concetto di “dialogo” necessita particolare attenzione critica.

During a Theatre of the Oppressed Seminar the Kuringa explained: “I look at reality, take a step back and create a reality with understanding. I observe, I analyse, I create an Image of the Reality to go back to discuss about Reality”. (Field notes)  
Could we put in relation the creation process of theatre with ethnographic research? What could come out? There are many intersections as interesting critique points which can be relevant for both. My understanding of ethnographic research, political and collaborative, brought me to the following methodological questionings. I observed theatre practice participating at the activities of a theatre group for six months. I presented my analysis and interpretation to the partici-

*Arun Frontino –The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

pants and I did interviews to deepen specific themes. The inputs collected are not objective ones and the results does not aim to be definitive but to reflect on questions of contemporary social science. We move and observe the space on the not clearly definable borders between arts, science and politics. My point of view is that this perspective from “inside” the borders makes the discussion interesting. To me as a scholar the re-thinking of the methodology of anthropological research appears as a must. The goal is to contribute to discussion about collaborative ethnography. The dialogue between theatre of the Oppressed and ethnography is interesting and needs to be explored further and the concept “dialogue” needs specific critical attention.

**Parole chiave:** Ricerca collaborativa, Metodi etnografici, Empowerment, Performance, Rap-presentazione.

**Keywords:** Collaborative Research, Ethnographic methods, Empowerment, Performance, Re-presentation.

---

### The Ethnological Perspective

The picture re-presents a view on a Forum theatre which is a Method of the Theatre of the Oppressed.

*1-Re-presentation of “Warum!?”, a Forum Theatre about precarisation, Ljubljana 2012*



*Arun Frontino –The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

My view is characterised by the ethnological knowledge that I bring into the field. Contemporary ethnology and consequently ethnography have to deal with the question of how to understand and analyse contemporaneity itself and the changing of society. For us, scholars, this is the context in which we have the opportunity to experiment and explore new spaces. I would like to put my attention on the points of intersection and critique between theatre, in the specific case the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) and ethnography. I think that this research can be a relevant moment of reflection and evolution for both disciplines, but also for me in my role of researcher and actress. Exploring, along the path of the, so discussed, borders between politics, science and arts. The exploration is inspired by two concepts: ethnography as cultural critique and performance.

The ethnographic method is the constitutive characterisation of ethnology. The practice of ethnography and the connected concept of “culture” are at the origin of reflections and developments which characterised the discipline in the last years, in the era of the “post-”: post-colonial, post-modern, post-traditional, post-national, post-migrant... As Marcus and Fischer (1999), Faubion and Marcus (2009), Lassiter (2005), Rabinow and Marcus (2008) pointed out field experiences and the reflection about them, also about descriptive methods and writing, brought to a confrontation with the rhetoric of power. The potentiality of cultural critique (through de-familiarization<sup>1</sup> and juxtaposition<sup>2</sup>) that resides in it. (George Marcus & Michael M. J. Fischer 1999)

Conquergood (1992), Denzin (1999) and Madison & Hamera (2006) think about an interesting proposal after the crisis of re-presentation in ethnography in the seventies: performance ethnography. Conquergood (2002) critique to dominant academic knowledge questioned the understanding of critical analysis as a distant observation from “above”, that did not give relevance to the body and emotional knowledge. He proposed to reorient the attention to the knowledge generated from the body<sup>3</sup>. The predominance of written products of science becomes critical attention and can be seen as an inheritance of the enlightenment project of modernisation. The Geertzian metaphor of culture as a text<sup>4</sup> and the following understanding of field research as “reading model” results ethnocentric and needs to be revisited. As Conquergood (2002) claimed we need to give more space to feelings and emotional experiences to achieve complexity. As he sustained, writing is the characteristic act associated with ethnography. Here I want to discuss the performance of this act and the presentation of other methods of research and other ways to elaborate and present the results. In the last years many authors discussed this issue and proposed to critique the intersection between theatre and ethnography and the methodological potential which arises from them<sup>5</sup>.

Arun Frontino –*The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

I see ethnography as a method to observe and analyse “reality”<sup>6</sup> and I want to create an exchange, a dialogue, with the method of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), which is an aesthetic inquiry of “reality”.

The name “Theatre of the Oppressed” says a lot about the method: “Theatre” underlines the art at the creative level, the main subjects are the “Oppressed” (in this resides the political aim to intervene in society) and “of the” means not only that it is made for but also that it is made by the oppressed. The method was “discovered”, as he used to say, by Augusto Boal (1989) in the Brazilian context of the fifties. In times of dictatorship, Boal and his colleagues experimented a theatre that treated local themes and not oriented to follow European standards. A theatre where participants should have the possibility to discover their own strategies to solve conflicts. The assumption is that we live in a “culture of oppression” and through theatre techniques we could be more conscious about it and empower ourselves. The method is nowadays spread all over the world, it is still developing and it grew in different ways of acting (Newspaper Theatre<sup>7</sup>, Invisible Theatre<sup>8</sup>, Forum Theatre<sup>9</sup>, Legislative Theatre<sup>10</sup> and Rainbow of Desire<sup>11</sup>). All methods are based on “Image Theatre”<sup>12</sup>. As Leucht and Santos (2012) explained TO is a collection of methods which aims to modify “reality” through aesthetic explorations and to observe “reality” critically, to improve consciousness about social facts and stimulate action.

TO is a method to understand and re-present realities, trying to bring the people to be conscious that we cannot re-produce reality. This is a big Theme of Ethnology too, as Fabian (1990) argued. Reality is created through perception, interpretation and re-presentation<sup>13</sup> and we better talk of realities. (Fabian 1990) TO explicitly is a method to change “reality”, this is interesting for us, scholars dealing with politics and research and the consciousness that we always change “reality” analysing and re-presenting it. I was interested in the process of interpretation and definition of realities, the same in the actors as in the researcher and I found interesting the attention of TO to the aesthetics and power distribution in it. The idea is to deepen the two concepts of Ina Maria Greverus (2006) and Paulo Freire (1996) of Performing Culture and “Culture of oppression”. I think that is important to discuss the distribution of power connected with the acts of interpretation, giving a meaning, evaluating phenomena, the processes through concepts are impressed in the discourse. Attention to this is important for the researcher as for the actors of research. Maria Greverus (2006) observed the developing of the relation between object and subject that forms, that creates, that practices the object asking how the communication works in a post-modern context. Through an aesthetic process we create an abstraction that then is impressed in the discourse. Greverus (2006) points at the relation between anthropology and art, between rational and aesthetic knowledge, in the communication about “reality”, which is at the same time a product of imagination and of experience. There are similar pro-

Arun Frontino –*The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

cesses in art, especially in the surrealism, as in anthropology. “Juxtaposition” and “de-familiarisation”, “construction” and “de-construction” and “othering” are common concepts. The proposal also in the Publication of Greverus and Ritschel (2009) is to use the concept of “performing culture” instead of “writing culture” to have an other perspective on the debate and to put the attention on the field experience where the “othering” begins. The aim is to switch from a “to be spoken of” (Tyler 1991) or “to be written at” (Fabian 1990) kind of research to a “to be spoken with” one. To improve that “we need to focus on the approach in the field and don’t underestimate the sensational experience combined with imagination, and the aesthetic processes proceeding the dialogue”. (Greverus 2006, 41, auth.trans.) As we can see around the reflections of Anderson (2006), Appadurai (1990) and Crapanzano (2003) imagination is a fundamental theme in contemporary discussions in the discipline. Here as imagination the creation, the creative process that we go through to abstract and reflect “reality” is intended.

My thesis is that the intersections between Theatre, in this specific case TO, and ethnography can contribute to this discussion and bring us to interesting questions. I think that it is important to think about the two aspects of field research: the data collection and the data interpretation and presentation, we need to have a critical look at the whole research process.

Quetzil E. Castañeda (2006) published<sup>14</sup> a paper in which he propose a methodological reflection on the connections between TO and ethnography<sup>15</sup>, about the performance of field research and the difference from a sterile data collection. In his work he focuses on a concept of TO which was inspiring for me: the “spect-actor”<sup>16</sup>. His proposal is to substitute this to the classical one of field researcher to develop a new experimental field research basing on the invisible theatre (a part of TO methods) techniques<sup>17</sup>.

### **Dialogue and collaborative research**

As already mentioned a concept that I would like to focus on is Dialogue. There is a constitutive debate in contemporary ethnography about the approach with the field, the relation between ethnographer and “subjects”, the communication between them and with the public. Lassiter (2005) and Marcus (1997) reflected about how the word “dialogue” became a slogan, many ethnographers adopted this metaphor in the process of field research and writing but fewer made the further logical step trying to give space to research subjects reactions in the final product. Anthropology and ethnography are trying these days to redefine their political activism in a multi-situated context of shifting fields. In these context we have to take advantage of the possibility to build a public anthropology from “below”. Without an active, grass-roots, collaborative, social anthropology is going to fail. Marcus (1997) and Lassiter (2005) claimed that Collaborative anthropology is

*Arun Frontino –The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

the chance to bring back field research at the centre of work motivated from political activism. It is clearly a proposal of a method for an anthropological project of social equity and citizenship. The role of the ethnographer as an expert with the right distance from the field becomes a collaborative role involved with the field. The question is how this could be put into practice and how to really involve the subjects in the research agenda. Objectivity and political motivation is a very debated theme in contemporary scientific research. We as students grow in a time in which it is difficult to think about when there was a clear separation between intellectuals and activists.

“It’s hard to think of another time when there has been such a gulf between intellectuals and activists; between theorists of revolution and its practitioners. Writers who for years have been publishing essays that sound like position papers for vast social movements that do not in fact exist seem seized with confusion or worse, dismissive contempt, now that real ones are everywhere emerging.” (Graeber 2002, 2)

I choose the field with a political aim, a critique could be that in this way there is a lack of objectivity and critical distance, on the other hand I experienced through this work how this distance is false. Lassiter (2005) confirmed how Feminist, post-colonial and post-modern approaches already experimented how to involve the public in the act of writing and researching. These are interesting starting points to work on. Lassiter (2005) defines collaborative ethnography as an approach that emphasizes explicitly collaboration at any step of the research process: project, field research and writing. In this context I think that TO methodologies can contribute to the discussion and bring interesting results.

Reflections about “dialogue” in the practice of ethnographic methods and methods of the Theatre of the Oppressed. Inputs for a collaborative research.

Mine is a methodological reflection, I try to re-think ethnographic method through a “dialogue” with TO practice. I especially focused on the concept of collaborative research (see above). I tried to think about the significance and the meanings of dialogue in the practices and at the same time I have tried to stage a dialogue between the two. To do this I observed and participated at the activities and actions of the Theatre-space “Kuringa” and its network. For six months I took part at the developing process and the public viewing of a forum-theatre piece about the precarization of society and contemporary changing of the concepts of work. I also took part in other Workshops and Festivals which helped me to understand the field. All these observations were collected and documented in field notes, pictures, videos and discussed in interviews and conversations with the participants. I was at the same time actress and public and also researcher and subject of research. I acted in the local group of Moabit working on precarization and with the piece we took part at two international TO festivals in Lubljana and Pula.

Arun Frontino –*The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

In addition I followed part of the work of the “TOgheter”<sup>18</sup> project and many activities in the network of “Kuringa”. After a first interpretation of data I presented them to the participants that had the possibility to criticise and comment them. I have to say that the time for this part of the elaboration was shorter than the collection of data because I had a deadline, here I have to make an auto-critique. The analysis concentrated on methodological aspects and did not deepen the amount of results coming out from data. I see this as an inspiration for further work. Another criticism that I have to do to my work is that the result of the research is written and the time at the end to discuss the product with the actors was not much because of the deadline. The format was given by the academic context, but I think that it would have been appropriate to produce also something in a different format.

Ethnography and TO both have the aim to analyse and re-present realities, this happens through a creative process, a fiction. They also could have in common the political aspect to re-present the subjects perspective, the final goal of empowerment of the participants. Many other researchers beside me have pointed intersections between theatre and ethnology, between performance and cultural critique. Part of this debate concentrated along two concepts: ethnodrama<sup>19</sup> and ethnotheatre<sup>20</sup>, those ones focus on consensuality, participation, dialogue especially in the last part of research: presentation/publication. I found those approaches inspiring but I think we need to widen the focus on the whole research process, how to make this collaborative from the beginning till the end.

Augusto Boal (2007) says that the human being is theatre. This affirmation is anthropologically relevant and assumes an intersection between the two disciplines. TO techniques analyse oppressive aesthetic and social conditions in society. Through this they trigger process of awareness of the actors, an empowerment through creativity. Participants can explore their own experiences from another perspective, developing representations, images of them which are never objective but always subjective, dense of interpretation and in continue transformation and discussion. The creative process of theatre brings to the construction of a metaphor of “reality” and gives the possibility to create a distance to analyse it from a new perspective. The aesthetic process allows to analyse the context and stimulates discussion, so that the individual realities are explored and exchanged. Participant observation has also the aim to construct the perfect distance to analyse “reality”, actual debates are discussing this.

Through the practice of TO interesting points raised, here I want to focus on the aesthetic process in research, the importance of body, the power relation in the role constellation between researcher, subjects and public. Purposes coming from the contemporary ethnographic debate was on the other hand interesting for this experience. The possibility of a collaborative research and conflict as perspective to analyse society.

*Arun Frontino –The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

## The aesthetic process

*2-Re-presentation of "Hotel Europa", Forum Theatre of the European project TOgether, Berlin March 2012.  
Photo Mir Mubashir.*



I observed that Images have a different influence on observer than words, they leave more space for individual associations and interpretation differing from the one of the producer of the image. Images, in this case theatre images, can stimulate dialogue. They are also expressions of power relations in society. In TO spectators are invited to create images of their own life and of their imagination of it. This was very interesting to observe as an ethnographer.

Aesthetic process in TO is the process in which the individual becomes an active producer of images, sounds and concepts instead of a passive consumer. (Field notes) There are two relevant levels in this proceeding: the perception of "reality", observation through creativity raises the density of analysis, and the production of "reality", subjects (actors and public) become active, it is an empowering process. Boal (2002) said that Art characterizes every human being, it is not an activity for few, but it is a faculty that allows the understanding of the world surrounding us. Art is a research process, the results raising from it are relevant for social science and so it is also for ethnographic research.

An aspect that I found interesting from TO research process is the research through the body, experiencing results of research. We worked on experienced issues that we explored through the body and through senses and we performed

*Arun Frontino –The practice of the "Theatre of the oppressed" from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*



them to analyse the context, to discuss about them and to change them. About the importance of the body to understand the social and about the exclusion of it in academic research published Didier Fassin (2007) and about the relevance of senses and emotions Sara Ahmed (2004).

Research is not only an intellectual act but also a physical and emotional one. We have to consider this not only for the research itself but also for the interpretation of data and the presentation (from the side of the researchers as well as from the side of the public). Through imagination and physicality the spectrum of possible analysis methods has a larger variety and the results could be more dense and allows every single participant to express himself and take part in the process without barriers of language, ignorance, shame or any other barriers. The aesthetic process in TO is creating a metaphor of “reality”, abstracting it, create the distance to observe it and at the same time involves everybody in its analysis and interpretation.

An interesting point raised in a Workshop, which I took part in an International TO Festival in Pula, about the tension between union and difference in social movements was the work we did on experienced conflicts as starting points to observe complexity of social phenomena. The Manchester school and Gluckman (1965) treated these issues and discussed the importance of looking at conflicts to understand the dynamic of society, to avoid a static research and to have a research that can understand social change. I wont share Gluckmans position about the functionalist interpretation of society but I found the idea of focussing changes and conflict a fundamental contribute to anthropological research. TO focuses also the conflict, oppression, experienced by the actors, to create an understanding of social “reality”. TO analysis is not orientated to a result but on the research process itself. My opinion is that most researches should have this re-orientation.

As I already mentioned Dialogue was the concept I wanted to explore among the two disciplines. In TO as in ethnography the opposite poles of distribution of power among the actors, the researcher and the public are dialogue and monologue. TO proposal is to empower the participants through the TO techniques to stimulate dialogue. Essential to dialogue is the possibility and the will to change things, the aim is to create a space to discuss realities and oppression to modify it deeply. The concept of dialogue requires an equal distribution of power. A question that came up to me as researcher is how to give true equal voice and power to all the participants of the process. Difficulties in this sense are multi-faced. Theatre techniques can give a big impulse in the empowerment, they break down limitations to participate given from language, instruction level, access to information, character marks etc. But also in theatre practice there can be problems with effective distribution of power. For example the Joker should be the figure that leads the process of Forum Theatre, that should keep the balance of power but sometimes this does not happen and it becomes a role of power that influences the

*Arun Frontino –The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

spect-actors a lot. I observed cases where instead of giving the actors the space to tell their stories the tendency was to tell stories about them, because of the dramaturgical needs or because of the lack of time or other stress situations. In this way there is no empowerment. We can put in relation the role of the Joker and the role of the researcher. Sometimes contextualising and putting on stage the experiences of oppression because of the difference of instruction and access to information caused differences too. We saw that there were differences, related to the grade of experience in TO, in whom intervened in the scenes. The group of TO practitioners is nearly the same in many activities, people know each other and this provokes a difference with the ones of them that have no experience or doesn't know the others. In TO as in ethnology it is important to avoid a top-down definition of oppressed, stigmatising them instead of leaving them the power to recognize their own oppressions and to act against them. TO assumes that we live in a culture of oppression, unequal distribution of power in society is reproduced and maintained through it. As a ethnology scholar I need to put the attention on the risk of an essentialistic understanding of this concept of culture. The risk is to stigmatise oppressed instead of empowering. The paradox is who defines the "oppressed"?

Who has the instruments to recognise his/her condition as oppression? In which way can we sustain this? Who is excluded from this process? I will bring an example that illuminate this risks coming from the practice:

"A Joker in India was asking a woman whom she saw as oppressed in the play.

The woman told him: "nobody"..He continued:" Did anything happen in your life that you feel that you are under injustice?" The woman said: "No, for instance my husband just beats me when it is necessary." We find this relation in many societies, including ours. It is about education and stigmatization. Sociologically this is an oppression but for theatre of the oppressed it is not yet. We just can call somebody oppressed when this person is more or less conscious, not totally conscious of the structure and power, but the perception is important. We do not work for them, we want they to do something about their condition." (Transcript "Workshop - introduction to TO", Berlin March 2012)

We need to put critical attention on the concept of dialogue used in the practice of TO as well as in ethnography. The word dialogue is becoming a slogan in both disciplines. This was underlined by Lassiter (2005) and Marcus (1997) and Marcus & Fischer (1999) in the debate that brought to the proposal to substitute the word dialogue, which is too full of different questions raised in the last time, with the concept of collaboration and re-thinking the role of the researcher<sup>21</sup>.

I took part in a "Kuringa" project with a TO local group in Berlin-Moabit exploring the theme of precarization in contemporary society. We elaborate our working experiences focusing oppression, tried to contextualize them and transformed them into a theatre act, a Forum Theatre. This experience brought me to reflect about my roles and the collaboration between the subjects. The Joker of

the group defined TO as a “dialogue with the spect-actor”, an aesthetic form of collaboration, a real exchange, a process of analysis of the realities on stage to change the conditions in “real” life. Forum Theatre re-interpretates the separation between actors and public, this should be overcome because it comes from a colonial concept of theatre. The public and the actors become “spect-actors”, at the end there is no distinction any more, everyone collaborate to the idea of the show.

I think this is an inspiring input for ethnography too. Can we compare the roles of participant observant, readers and subjects to that? Of course this assumption has its limits that has to be explored in the practice but the opening of the collaboration in this sense allows to widen the context and the density of the research. We could improve empowerment through research. We create also more space for reflexivity on the results opening the work to always new discussions. There is no more the concept of definitive result but the result is in the process of research.

Through the opening to the intervention of the public and the exchange of roles, every single human being can have more perspectives and deepen the interpretation. The political aim to re-think hierarchies, and distribution of power, to sustain awareness of power dynamics and input for change could be achieved. Following this method the subjects are more involved with the Themes of research raised (from their own selves), have the possibility to identify with them and the constructed “reality” becomes their “reality”. The role of researcher is not more distant from the others, it is integrated in the creative process, collecting all the voices and the sensations of all participants and hers too. We need to question how we can redefine the researchers role with this new perspective and how to deal with the typical written form of ethnography. How, and if, we can translate results got with these techniques to a written form or if the written form is replaceable? In contemporary academic world a theatre show wont be recognized in the scientific debate but I think that we could change this. Looking at the practice

I have to say that the roles are more ingrained that we think. It is difficult for people to exchange and to give up their roles, they stuck in the discourse and every day-knowledge. Roles especially come up and are reproduced in stress situations.

### Conclusion

“The intellectuals error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned [...] that is, without feeling the elementary passions of the people” Antonio Gramsci (1971) “Proximity, not objectivity, becomes an epistemological point of departure and return.” (Conquergood 2002, 149)

Arun Frontino –*The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

*3- Intervention of the Spect-actor-researcher in a scene of "Hotel Europa". Berlin, March 2012.  
Photo Mir Mubashir.*



This research proved that “dialogue” between ethnography and TO is relevant for both, connections can bring to important evolution and critique of the two. I experienced a way to analyse the precarisation process of German society starting up from experiences. Through TO techniques we collected individual stories and interpretations of them. Performing images, discussing the results with an open public and reflecting in which way this influences everybody’s realities we can contribute to a collaborative understanding of them.

My ethnological view brought into the field critical attention to real power distribution in the process. Observing from the borders and interspaces we can explore entanglements and dynamics of social realities. Precarisation of German society is a complex phenomena, to understand it we explored it with workers living in Germany making theatre. We can create a deeper understanding of the context and sustain change only analysing it together with the people who are involved.

In this experience interesting inputs for contemporary debate in social science came up, relevant points raised that need to be deepened. This work should be seen as a part of a process. These reflections can be fruitful especially thinking about collaborative research. Ethnology should be opened to other disciplines to develop new methodologies after the crisis of representation. The fundamental inheritance of anthropology is to focus on power relations in the process. The practice of TO allows reflection about an empowering and collaborative kind of research. I found it interesting to work on the concept of spect-actor, overcoming a

*Arun Frontino –The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

colonial understanding of theatre (and of ethnography), re-thinking the separation of the roles in public (readers) and actors (subjects and researcher) and trying to create a collaborative research-space. Key concepts are dialogue and conflict, they come together. The attention should be moved to social change, to look at the dynamics and at the same time giving inputs to change. To do this the perspective of conflict is important. Conflict is a precondition of dialogue. Ethnography as well as Theatre are often based on monologic systems instead of dialogic ones. In Anthropology, the proposal is to substitute this imposition with a collaborative form to generate knowledge. We need to re-think our role of researcher and the power distribution related to it, also through the concept of spect-actor. I was at the same time actress, public and researcher. I brought my experience into the field, I experienced other roles and I tried to collect the results.

An important point coming from the Theatre is to overcome the concept of an exclusive, written, distant, objective knowledge and to look at the performed, subjective knowledge of the body, to imagination and creativity. The kind of Theatre I practised puts attention to experiences and interpretation of every single actor and works on a collaborative analysis and discussion of them. The experience proved the importance to re-think the concept of critical distance in the research process, the proposal is to substitute the mainstream objectivity of the researcher with awareness empowerment of all the participants to contribute to the collaborative re-production and analysis of complex realities. It is important to focus on aesthetic process, to switch from the writing of culture to the performing of culture. We are looking for a collaborative way to create a metaphor of individual realities to sustain the process of understanding of them. For this process imagination, creativity and the knowledge of the body are new spaces to explore and become fundamental to the inquiry of contemporaneity. In this way we can achieve the political aim of research, working with the desire to change of every single spect-actor, to define with them their experiences of conflicts and situations of oppression.

### Note

1. “Defamiliarization by epistemological critique arises from the very nature of traditional anthropological work: going on the periphery of the Eurocentric world where conditions are supposed to be more alien and profoundly revising the way we normally think about things to come to grips with what in European terms are exotica. The challenge of serious cultural criticism is to bring the insights gained on the periphery back to the centre to rise havoc with our settled ways of thinking and conceptualisation.”(Marcus and Fischer 1999,138)

Arun Frontino –*The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

2. “The idea is to use the substantive facts about another culture as a probe into the specific facts about a subject of criticism at home.” (Marcus and Fischer 1999,138)
3. See Williams (1983), Comaroff and Comaroff (1997), Certeau (2002), Gilroy (1993), Douglass (1855)
4. See Geertz (1977)
5. “Early theorists interested in this intersection include Turner (1985), Goffman (1959), and Schechner (1985), each of whom recognized that human existence is performed and performative and noted how the in-depth study of culture makes rich fodder for dramatization. Collectively, early theorists working at the boundaries between social science and performance articulated not just the performativity of everyday life but also the power of performance as a mechanism for interpreting and translating research findings—a practice that has developed into the field of performance ethnography... More recently, practitioners and theorists such as Conquergood (1991, 1992, 1998), Denzin (1997, 2003), and Madison (2005) have worked to theorize and formalize performance ethnography as a practice... multiple theorists working at the intersection between performance and ethnography locate performance ethnography firmly as a radical, emancipatory practice, aligned within a critical methodological paradigm.” (Rossiter and Godderis 2011, 655)
6. “are to underline that human perception of reality, also the scientific one, cannot be objective and neutral but we always create one.” (Fabian 1990)
7. Newspaper theatre puts on stage news leading to a critical interpretation of them and to an open discussion. It was developed in times of dictatorship in Brazil. The actors use the words of the newspaper and create personal images with them.
8. “as theatre in an un-revealed form, to a chance audience, not conscious of their condition of spectator. An interpenetration of fiction into reality and of reality into fiction: all those present can intervene at any moment in the search for solutions for the problems being treated. The Invisible show can be presented in any location where its drama could really occur or has already occurred (in the street or the square, in the supermarket or

the fair, in the queue for the bus or the cinema . . .). Actors and audience meet on the same level of dialogue and power.” (Augusto Boal 2006, 6)

9. Forum Theatre, as Boal (1989; 2002; 2006) used to say, is one of the most democratic methods in TO. It consists in a show created by the actors by TO improvisation techniques. After the first showing the public (spect-actors) is invited to intervene and substitute an actor to modify the scene and to discuss about it.
10. “Legislative Theatre is a set of processes which mixes Forum Theatre and the conventional rituals of a parliamentary chamber or assembly, with the objective of arriving at the formulation of coherent and viable bills of law. From this starting point, we then have to follow the normal route for their presentation in legislating chambers and put pressure on the legislators to approve them”. (Augusto Boal 2006, 6)
11. “Collection of theatrical techniques and exercises designed to harness the power of the "aesthetic space" (the stage) to examine individual, internalized oppressions and to place them within a larger context.”(Augusto Boal 1995, xviii)
12. “Image theatre is a series of games and exercises designed to uncover essential truths about societies and cultures without resort, in the first instance, to spoken language – though this may be added in the various” dynamizations “of the images.”(Augusto Boal 2002, xxii)
13. Epistemology of “re-presenting” underlines the ethic and moral responsibility in front of the public/readers meaning the act of representing and constructing the subject at the same time. (Linstead 1993)
14. “The invisible Theatre of Ethnography: performative principles of Fieldwork.” (Castañeda 2006)
15. Theatre of the Oppressed.
16. “At that moment [of the performance] she was at one and the same time, Actor and Spectator she was Spectator. She was Spect-Actor. In discovering theatre, the being became human. This is theatre - the art of looking at ourselves... In this usage, all human beings are Actors (they act!) and

Spectators (they observe!) ...Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society.” (Augusto Boal 2002)

17. “This point from which to think and theorize fieldwork is an approximation of the ontology of fieldwork; or, to state it differently the, performativity of fieldwork is the ontology of fieldwork .The tracing of the performativity (or performative ontology) of fieldwork has sought to displace the disciplinary assumptions that dichotomize -subjects- and -objects-, -us- and -them- -here- and -there-”(Castañeda 2006,98)
18. “The TOgether Project is a partnership between experienced practitioners of Theatre of the Oppressed of Germany (KURINGA), Croatia (Pula-Forum Festival), Portugal (GTO-Lisbon), Scotland (Active Inquiry) and Spain (Pallapupas), with collaboration of practitioners from Italy (Kriila TDO) and France and external evaluation of Bologna University. The initiative aiming to overcome the shortage of continuing and more structured qualification of the various techniques of the method...The theme chosen for this aesthetic research is the crisis in Europe...”(Kuringa - Mission n.d.)
19. Ethnodrama is the written script which consists of “dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interviews, participant observation, field notes, journal entries, and/or print and media artefacts such as diaries, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and court proceedings”(Saldaña 2005, 2)
20. Ethnotheatre is the staged script, which uses “the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre production to mount for an audience a live performance event of research participants’ experiences and/or the researcher's interpretations of data””(Saldaña 2005, 1)
21. “At a time when anthropologists have in their sights a redefinition of anthropological activism within much more multifaceted, multi-sited, and shifting field contexts (Marcus 1995), we should not forgo the opportunity that most of us have for building a public anthropology from the ground up and from the centre out...Without this grass roots collaborative action, this larger public anthropology is bound to fail. Indeed, the time is ripe for us to develop the potential for writing texts that speak even more directly to our consultants’ concerns that are no doubt global in their interconnectedness to a wider political economy but, like those of an activist or applied anthropology (Wulff and Fiske 1987) and those of participatory

Arun Frontino –*The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*



action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000), community-based. Collaborative ethnographic practice has the potential to pull academic and applied anthropology, feminist and post-modernist approaches, and Americanist and other anthropological traditions into the same stream, fashioning an engaged anthropology.”(Lassiter 2005, 97)

### Bibliografia

- Ahmed, S. (2004). Collective Feelings Or, the Impressions Left by Others. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21 (2), 25–42.
- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New Edition. Verso.
- Appadurai, A. (1990). „Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy“. *Public Culture* 2 (2), 1–24.
- Atkinson, P. (1990). *The Ethnographic Imagination: Textual Constructions of Reality*. Routledge.
- Boal, A. (2007). Theatre, human beings. In *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader*. Routledge.
- Boal, A. (1970). The Joker System: An Experiment by the Arena Theatre of São Paulo. *The Drama Review: TDR* 14 (2), 91–96.
- Boal, A. (1989). *Theater der Unterdrückten. Übungen und Spiele für Schauspieler und Nicht-Schauspieler*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Boal, A. (1995). *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*. Routledge.
- Boal, A. (1998). *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics*. Psychology Press.
- Boal, A. (2002). *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Routledge.
- Boal, A. (2006). *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. Routledge.
- Castañeda, Q. E. (2006). „Social Thought & Commentary: The Invisible Theatre of Ethnography: Performative Principles of Fieldwork“. *Anthropological Quarterly* 79 (1), 75–104.
- Certeau, M. de. (2002). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press.
- Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. E. (1986). *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press.
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff J.L. (1992). *Ethnography And The Historical Imagination*. Westview Press.
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff J. L. (1997). *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*. University of Chicago Press.

Arun Frontino –*The practice of the “Theatre of the oppressed” from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

- Conquergood, D. (1992). Ethnography, rhetoric, and performance. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1). 80–97.
- Conquergood, D. (2002). *Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research*. TDR (1988-) 46 (2) .145–156.
- Crapanzano, V. (2003). *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology*. University Of Chicago Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (1999). Interpretive Ethnography for the Next Century. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28 (5) .510–519.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln Y. S. (2005). Series Editor's Foreward. In *Ethnodrama. An Anthology of Reality Theatre*. Bd. Volume 5. Crossroads in Qualitative Inquiry. Altamira Press.
- Douglass, F. (1855). *My Bondage and My Freedom ...* Miller, Orton & Mulligan.
- Evens, T. M. S., & Handelman D. (2006). *The Manchester School: Practice and Ethnographic Praxis in Anthropology*. Berghahn Books.
- Fabian, J. (1990). Presence and Representation: The Other and Anthropological Writing. *Critical Inquiry* 16 (4).753–772.
- Fassin, D. (2007). *When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of AIDS in South Africa*. University of California Press.
- Faubion, J. D., & Marcus G.E. (2009). *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be: Learning Anthropology's Method in a Time of Transition*. Cornell University Press.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed*. Penguin UK.
- Geertz, C. (1977). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Harpercollins UK.
- Geertz, C. (1987). *Dichte Beschreibung. Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme*. Suhrkamp.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Harvard University Press.
- Gluckman, M. (1965). *Custom and Conflict in Africa*. Blackwell Pub.
- Graeber, D. (2002). *The New Anarchists*. The Anarchist Library.
- Greverus, I.-M. (2006). *Ästhetische Orte und Zeichen. Wege zu einer ästhetischen Anthropologie*. LIT Verlag.
- Greverus, I.-M. & Ritschel U. (2009). *Aesthetics and Anthropology: Performing Life, Performed Lives*. LIT Verlag.
- Lassiter, L. E. (2008). Moving Past Public Anthropology and Doing Collaborative Research. *NAPA Bulletin* 29 (1) .70–86.
- Lassiter, L. E. (2005). Collaborative Ethnography and Public Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 46 (1). 83–106.
- Leucht, C., & Santos B. (2012). *Handbuch Forumtheater. In der Arbeit mit Jugendlichen in ehtnisierten Konflikten*. RAA Berlin.

Arun Frontino – *The practice of the "Theatre of the oppressed" from an ethnological perspective. A dialogue.*

- Linstead, S. (1993). From Postmodern Anthropology to Deconstructive Ethnography. *Human Relations* 46 (1). 97–120.
- Madison, D. S., & Hamera J. (2006). *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*. SAGE.
- Marcus, G.E. (1997). The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scène of Anthropological Fieldwork. *Representations* (59). 85–108.
- Marcus, G.E., & Fischer M. M. J. (1999). *Anthropology As Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mieczakowski, J. (1995). The Theater of Ethnography: The Reconstruction of Ethnography Into Theater With Emancipatory Potential. *Qualitative Inquiry* 1 (3) . 360–375.
- Rabinow, P., & Marcus G. E. (2008). *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Duke Univ Pr.
- Rositer, K., & Godderis R. (2011). Finding the Necessary Distance Theorizing Ethnographic Research–Based Theater. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 40 (6) . 652–681.
- Saldaña, J., (Ed.). (2005). *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*. Altamira Press.
- Turner, V.W., & R. Schechner. (1988). *The anthropology of performance*. Paj Publications New York.
- Tyler, S.A. (1991). “Das” Unaussprechliche: Ethnographie, Diskurs und Rhetorik in der postmodernen Welt. Trickster-Verlag.

**Arun Frontino**

Contatto: frontina@gmx.de