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Looking à Skantze: the Spectator's turn

Nicolas Whybrow

'To know something is to understand its topography, to know how to chart it.
And to know how to get lost'.

(Susan Sontag on Walter Benjamin)

If itinerancy suggests travel and mobility, it simultaneously carries a sense of *error* or *errancy*: a tendency to err or, alternatively, hold views at variance with orthodoxy (which orthodoxy itself might consider to be a form of erring). So the actual or figurative journey upon which the itinerant would embark is perhaps most accurately defined as a form of deviation: a mistaken turn on the one hand, a deliberate wandering off the beaten track on the other (both of which may turn out to yield surprises). The question then is: where does such a 'mis-step' or, as the case may be, *faux pas* get you? Since the French word *pas* can imply a form of negation, as well as meaning 'footstep', the (social) blunder or 'false step' of the *faux pas* may be simultaneously 'not wrong' or 'not false'.
[n.1]

Getting off on the wrong foot may turn out to be absolutely the right thing to do, then, and, arguably, this is precisely where P.A. Skantze's meditation on the itinerant nature of spectatorship begins. [n.2] That is, it commits an unforeseen error – a typographical one – that holds the promise of performing for the reader what the book is partly, but crucially, about. Making no bones about the debt she owes to Walter Benjamin, the author invokes, as she kicks off her argument on the inherently itinerant nature of spectatorship, one of the critical tropes or *figures* with which he is most associated: the 'semi-conscious wanderer' that is the '*flânuer*' (p.4). But, ooh-er, that should be '*flâneur*', shouldn't it, not '*flânuer*'? And, as if she were trying to make up her mind about which way to go (to err/-uer or not to err/-eur), or simply to reassure the reader of her credibility, two lines later we are offered the correct spelling for comparison. By the bottom of the page, though, it is clear which way we're headed in this imaginary

tussle – the author’s foot quite possibly forced by a hapless copy editor – with six further mis-spellings of the word seemingly clinching the argument. An inadvertent textual stumble or mis-step that echoes, as Jason Groves points out, the Benjaminian suggestion of the single step holding ‘a capacity for deviation that promises to initiate unanticipated trajectories of thought, writing and movement’ (2012: 46). Thus may it be for the intinerant spectator-*flânuer* as for the suitably tripped up (or tripping) reader. And, if making a virtue out of something so apparently trifling (let alone errant) as a typo seems like an odd way to commence a book review, then it is, again, a move that is in keeping with an approach developed by Skantze herself, whereby the supposedly marginal, incidental or plain *off-beat* gradually proves itself to be rather intriguing.

Benjamin aside, the other main influence on Skantze’s spectating and writing is introduced a few pages later in the form of the author W.G. Sebald (as reflected in particular in his novel *Austerlitz* and the associative, conjectural, meandering story of a journey on foot that is *The Rings of Saturn*). Admiring that which she identifies as a pronounced sense of human *caring* in his method of attentive contemplation and narrative construction – a concept that will emerge for her as a central ethical principle of the act of spectating [n.3] – she also highlights ‘reanimation with intent’ as a key aspect of his practice of ‘staging memory’, which, in Michael Taussig’s words can include ‘defective storytelling’. Importantly, for Taussig there has to be ‘a swerve in the writing itself because the writing *is* the theory and the swerve is what trips up thought in a serpentine world’ (cited p.8, my emphasis). Staging memory is also a distinctly Benjaminian notion, of course, one he mentions in his ‘Berlin Chronicle’. The idea that ‘memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre’ (Benjamin 1997: 314) points not only to a performative function when it comes to the enactment of memory but also a particular relationship to the past in which, as Gilloch cites, ‘the Then and the Now come into constellation like a flash of lightening’, adding that it is ‘a pause, a moment of interruption and illumination in which past and present recognise each other across the void which separates them’ (Gilloch 1997: 113).

Skantze attempts to pin down the mechanism of a memory-moment in microcosm in her disquisition on the role of simultaneous translation in the interpreting of foreign language performances (Chapter 2). Referring to an 'odd, backwards logic' that springs into action in the flawed reception of only semi-familiar language, she describes how at the moment of incomprehension 'the mind runs backwards over the phrase to see what you have missed. Sometimes fortunately in this backward review the mind finds the part that you have missed or misapprehended [...] hastily reassembles the phrase and moves again in forward motion' (p.79). For her, staging memory is analogous to 'the effort of making sense of a performance in a foreign language [which] has awakened my sense of how much construction and reconstruction I discount or engage in unconsciously in any moment of reception or interpretation' (p.80). And, she adds, 'struggling, I am also emancipated' (in the sense of Rancière's renowned 'emancipated spectator'). The significant point here perhaps: the way attention is being drawn to the machinery of spectating itself; that active spectating simultaneously and self-consciously implies raising the meta-question 'what do we actually do when we spectate?'. Or, to frame the act retrospectively, explicating, as Skanze herself puts it, memories of 'how I saw what I saw when I saw it' (p.25). Ultimately this concern is at the heart of the book, whose evident aim is to assert spectating as a *practice*, and for that practice, in turn, to be seen as a viable, indeed essential, form of self-reflexive research. [n.4]

The itinerancy in play as a structural component of such engaged spectating usefully puts paid to the myth of 'passive reception' that tends to accompany analyses of what audiences do and that drives so much of the current discourse on participatory or 'immersive' turns – the imperative of direct, first-hand, self-aware taking part. The inquisitive spectator is in fact never passive it is implied and the author proceeds to show this by mapping for the reader an affective topography, an itinerant pilgrimage, of contemporary European performance experienced by her over a number of years. This includes all manner of internationally-renowned companies, shows and venues, but also

pays close attention to aspects relating literally and metaphorically to the act of 'getting to' the performances in the first place. As Pilkington and Nachbar have observed: as spectators, 'we always arrive in the theatre on foot', therefore a preceding 'journey is constitutive to every theatre event [...] The walk to the theatre an anticipation of the event to come' (2012: 30-35).

So, having lured us sideways through one of her several 'weathered thresholds' – a further Benjaminian trope (and the title of her introductory chapter) that issues an invitation first to linger, then cross over [n.5] – Skantze's chapters deliberately crabwalk their way towards the discussion of a range of performances by attending to both everyday details experienced along the way – the unpaved dusty road on an industrial site leading to the then new Teatro India in Rome, for example – and more general issues such as the trials of foreign language learning. As each chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that these observations and reflections en route are not incidental but all form part of a larger critical narrative of trans-national/cultural spectating and spectacle. For example, a comment relating to the tendency to persist at international festivals such as Avignon with categorisations based on nationhood (in the manner of world's fairs or Olympic games), [n.6] serves as the prelude to a discussion of the way a 'South African production' such as Handspring's *Ubu and the Truth Commission* itself becomes subject to forms of itinerancy. This occurs by virtue not only of the defamiliarising use of puppetry as convention, or the apparent mismatch of Jarry's controversial play and post-apartheid reconciliation, [n.7] but also by being presented in a succession of 'elsewheres'. [n.8]

Spectating's *complexity* – a term that embraces the dual sense of 'difficulty' and an embodied navigation of spatiality – incorporates the central motifs, on the one hand, of the theatre-goer's active crossing of national-cultural borders and, on the other, the performance's capacity to engender a negotiation of national-cultural difference and overlap. [n.9] Of course, one thing that might strike the reader, as we accompany

Skantze on her trans-European circuit of festivals and performances, is a certain whiff of exclusivity: an 'international jet-setting' which, one fears, may well be helping her neatly to put in place her particular theory of itinerancy. The sceptic's question, in other words, is: is itinerancy intrinsic to spectating *per se* or merely to the author's personal predilection for Euro-theatre-hopping? [n.10] Her reference in Chapter 4 to checking the itineraries of international touring dance companies so as to be enabled to visit certain *cities* to view performances (p.174) points to an element of fetishising travel. Moreover, the seriously contested premise of the traditional *flâneur* as a (male) figure of white, European, bourgeois leisureliness, whose immersed-yet-detached perspective oozes urbane exclusivity doesn't exactly help to dispel that particular whiff of spectating privilege.

But, ultimately, what Skantze is proposing and delineating for us is way too important and thoroughly thought-through to be seriously haunted by such reservations. Her take on viewing does indeed appear to work well in relation to certain kinds of performances and they are, without wishing to pigeon-hole unfairly, those that correspond loosely to the (new-ish) post-dramatic theatre of Hans-Thiess Lehmann's coinage (though Skantze herself makes no use of that term herself). As Alan Read summarises, key features of PDT (as he abbreviates it) include 'a theatre informed by cultural practices other than traditional drama [...] not conducted through action but states [...] a theatre of tableaux of metamorphoses and of landscape' (2013: 56). Arguably, then, it is a theatre of innovation and progress, representing a critical evolution of the art form (beyond 'action, speech, dialogue') and, therefore, a theatre that truly matters. Significantly, Read's PDT list also identifies that 'spectators are asked to become active witnesses', so Skantze is perhaps implicitly making the case – as an elaborated counterpart to Lehmann's study – for a form of 'post-dramatic spectator' whose very being and outlook are marked by an itinerancy that seeks to answer the call to active witnessing. Thus, the author's own mobile 'way of life' merely epitomises that which the 'new spectator' has become, and her desire to travel to cities to see and assimilate performances is

indicative of a form of intrepid and inquisitive commitment (or ‘lived auto-ethnography’) that looks, via the practice of spectating, to integrate the spectacle of new theatre into the expanded field of contemporary living.

Such an approach corresponds, moreover, to one that is integral to a further Benjaminian figure, that of the storyteller-as-sage, who necessarily leaves home so as to be able to return with enriching tales to relate of events experienced ‘elsewhere’ (Benjamin 1999a: 83-107). In some ways the storyteller figuratively echoes the itinerant enterprise and experience of many a theatre and performance academic these days as he or she navigates, as a necessary function of the profession, an international circuit of not only performances but conferences, workshops and festivals, to say nothing of establishing working collaborations with colleagues on other continents. However, where such an internationalist outlook appears often to be driven by institutional pressures to participate in a competitive ‘global knowledge industry’, P.A. Skantze succeeds in maintaining a refreshing air of independence (again reminiscent of Benjamin whose *oeuvre* academia struggled to accommodate in his lifetime). This emerges not only via a highly original itinerant approach to witnessing and writing about performance but also insofar as the author has resisted the more conventional institutional constraints of the scholarly publishing industry by subscribing to the open access policy of Punctum Books, who offer free electronic downloads and cheaply-priced print copies. As such, *Itinerant Spectator/Intinerant Spectacle* also makes a welcome case for the free exchange and circulation of creative and critical ideas, which amounts in itself to a form of itinerancy and is clearly antithetical to any notions of exclusivity.[n.11]

Notes

1. See Lavery and Whybrow (2012: 1).

2. It is also that which inaugurates the theatre spectacle itself, for, as Adrian Keir points out: 'From the moment Sophocles's Oedipus limped his way across the tragic stage, theatre has done its thinking on its feet, however scarred and swollen they may have become (for 'Oedipus' means 'swollen foot' in ancient Greek)' (2012: 22-29). In her discussion of *Oedipus at Colonus* at the Teatro India in Rome, Skantze ponders the fact that '[u]p and down the side of the theatre one could see the body of a foot and its heel [...] as if heroes had left the sign of their imperfection behind them in feet of clay' (p.53).

3. Both Sebald and Benjamin can be said to be 'born under the sign of Saturn', as Susan Sontag puts it (with regard to the latter), which implies a temperament and quality of observing that forces the speed of modernity to become pedestrian: 'things appear at a distance, come forward slowly' (in Benjamin 1997: 14). As a method this permits, as Benjamin himself states, 'the simultaneous perception of everything that potentially is happening in that single space. The space directs winks at the *flâneur*' (2002: 418-19).

4. If the operation of language provides one example of a revelatory memory-moment, a truly epiphanic, as well as 'corporeally affective', one in the personal history of Skantze's spectating occurs as she watches a dance company's performance of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Witnessing a particular 'visual moment' that vividly 'broke open Lorca's story' for her, she describes 'a dance that infers the condition of stilted, misshapen, broken female bodies under patriarchal, Catholic, Franco fascist regime, and then the inference extends into associations of women caught under the regime of ballet/modern dance and its cadaverous customs, of girls still under the thumbs of disappointed women everywhere' (p.180).

5. There is a further mis-step involved in the translation 'weathered threshold' – not of Skantze's making and quite possibly deliberate on the translator's part – which supplies an additional resonance or 'stumbling stone' in the context of deviation. Appearing as a term in a review by Benjamin of Franz Hessel's 1929 book on *flânerie* in Weimar Berlin

(*On Foot in Berlin*), there is no actual reference to a 'weathered threshold' as such, merely the sniffing out of a threshold or doorway ('*die Witterung einer einzigen Schwelle*'). In fact, according to the image conjured, this is meant in the manner of a dog compiling for itself an olfactory scent-map of the local neighbourhood (as dogs do). Where 'weathered' may have come into play in the translator's mind is that *Witterung*, here referring to 'scenting' or 'sensing', is a cognate of both 'weather' (*Wetter*) and 'decaying' (*verwittern*), but since it is not applied adjectively to *Schwelle* (threshold), it is far more the act of memory-sensing involved that is significant: a faint, lingering memory being the doorway to an unexpected encounter (Benjamin 1999b: 263).

6. '[T]he talk on the street continues the tag of nation by referring to the work as the German offering, or the Lithuanian or the South African' (p.12).

7. 'The players and puppeteers demanded of the spectator that we shift, we make the transition, between the "real" stories of horrors narrated by the puppets only then to move into the realm of mean-spirited slapstick from the culpable Pere and Ma Ubu' (p.24).

8. 'Even in imagination I can see how *Ubu and the Truth Commission* would be a different play in Johannesburg than in London or Avignon' (p.29).

9. Tim Supple's multilingual Shakespeare adaptation *The Dream*, involving the integration of seven languages, might serve as a good example here (p.100).

10. Would Skantze have been able to come up with a similar theory based on a limited viewing of UK theatre, for instance? She is after all implicitly disparaging of the (stay-at-home) British theatre scene, which she sees as continuing to be wedded to naturalism and where '[e]ven the "extreme" theatre of writers like Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill follows along an action, speech, dialogue trajectory' (p.194).

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