

“A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake” (2014), directed by Michael Lessac, USA: Saboteur Media.

Film review, by Stefanie Kappler, Durham University

What do South Africa, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo have in common? A history of conflict and violence respectively, one might say, but not much more. And still, a team of theatre directors, composers and actors took the story of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) around the world in a theatre play to explore its impacts on post-conflict societies elsewhere. They then made a film, “A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake”, to capture not only the performance itself, but also its interaction with the diverse audiences. In that sense, the viewer is confronted with two different levels of understanding: one level derives from the performance itself, but another one emerges from the film’s focus on the theatre play. The viewer is thus constantly moving between the theatre performance and the film’s reflection on it, and the friction between those two levels creates a tension that makes the viewers constantly balance one against the other.

The point of departure for the idea of develop a travelling theatre piece might be a simple one: sometimes one’s own traumas render so vulnerable that it is too hard to talk about them directly. Instead, somebody else’s story might be an avenue to access this pain and at the same time provide the language needed to talk about the universal experience of loss, suffering and conflict. As we know from various studies on the importance of art therapy for dealing with trauma, the arts can provide a means and language to do so (cf. Appleton, 2001; Baker, 2006; Bennett, 2005).

By zooming in on the perspectives of the young interpreters of the TRC, the theatre play (and with it, the film) picks an interesting perspective of in-betweenness. At the beginning of the film, there is a conversation among the interpreters who used to work in the TRC. They discussed their own position in the commission, which for them was often awkward. Whilst they were expected to be detached and non-emotional in the face of the traumatic narratives they had to translate, they felt deeply involved in the systems of injustice that had shaped their society for decades, if not longer. Being an interpreter for the TRC also meant for them that they had to confront a traumatic body of knowledge on a daily basis.

It is this tension between insider and outsider (cf. Smyth, 2005), attachment and detachment (cf. Lemay-Hebert and Kappler, 2016), self and other (cf. Kinnvall, 2004), that shapes the role of the interpreters in this performance. This tension is, then, also reflected in the discussions that the touring of the theatre play triggered in Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Interestingly, as the director Michael Lessac emphasised to me (skype interview, 8/12/17), the play toured to those different locations upon invitation rather than as the result of an executive decision of the film team.

In this context, the focus on the role of language is interesting: on the one hand, as the use of interpreters in the TRC demonstrated, being able to speak about suffering in one’s native language can be key to being able to express oneself with the necessary nuance and depth. On the other hand, the interactions between the film crew and diverse audiences directly after the performances were partly done with interpreters to allow for that nuance, but partly also in English, giving an advantage to those whose first language is English. This certainly points to the challenges in multi-lingual contexts

where meanings might differ not only socio-culturally, but also linguistically. This is how we can understand the importance of music as it is being used in this play and the film, composed by the famous South African musician Hugh Masekela. Not least building on the late composer's popularity within South Africa and internationally, the film very clearly shows how powerful music can be in expressing things that are hard to say in a foreign language, or cannot be said at all.

What the film does not suggest is that the performances in the different contexts went smoothly. Instead, as the film does not hide to show, there were difficult moments. Those happened partly in the interaction with audiences who sometimes felt the South African process of bringing about reconciliation through truth-telling was not applicable to their own context and would risk further alienating those who feel they have been treated unjustly in the post-conflict situation. Partly, however, tricky situations also took place within the crew itself. The film manages to capture moments in which the actors are not merely actors, but human beings who have been subject to oppression and injustice in their own society. This manifests in arguments and power imbalances between the actors themselves. A very powerful moment in the film is when a member of the audience is captured stating that he saw the white actors talking more than the black actors. The intervention is certainly an illustration of some of the underlying issues of racial inequality that South Africa is confronting up to this day, in addition to inequalities between rich and poor, male and female, old and young (cf. Gaventa and Runciman, 2016). This scene in the film shows that conflict and inequality are not just 'out there', but deeply embedded in all social identities, and also in all kinds of social institutions, including the arts sector. The honesty and self-reflection that the film brings to the table is therefore a refreshing alternative to the narratives that often tend to romanticise the TRC or the arts sector (both in South Africa and more globally as well) as being free from discriminations.

At the same time, one wonders what it is that the arts do that other mechanisms cannot achieve? First, it seems that theatre, as this film so powerfully demonstrates, is able to express complex emotions that are sometimes difficult to deal with through conventional processes of peacebuilding. The latter often do not allow for understanding individual stories, which at the same time can have a universal dimension. The performance staged in "A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake" allows for exactly this balance between the personal and the public, the specific and the universal. Second, it does so by avoiding binary representations of perpetrator and victim, shying away from labels and categorisations. Hence, one remarkable feature of the film is that it does not tend to ascribe guilt or shame to particular societal groups, but instead emphasises the need to listen to the human voice (not the ethnically-, racially- or religiously-defined voice). In that sense, individuals, as heard in the film, do not speak as representatives of an ethnic or other social group, but as humans who have experienced conflict and violence in a personal and particular way. This certainly helps in terms of accessing different sides to each conflict, confronting the issue that, in many cases, one side tends to be publicly recognised as perpetrators of crimes and hence does not feel welcome to engage in a process where they risk being stigmatised as perpetrators alone. Third, connected to this, and I feel this is crucial for understanding the message of the film, is its ability to acknowledge suffering, no matter who is experiencing it. Indeed, the acknowledgement of suffering can be a key element of transitional justice and reconciliation (cf. Ross, 2003). However, the very act of turning a story into artwork (a theatre piece in this context) deems the story worthy of attention and being listened to. For somebody's story to be taken to other conflict contexts and discussed there can be a sensitive, but nevertheless very important step to being taken seriously.

This is not to say that working through the arts does not bring its own challenges. A crucial question is how suffering can be turned into an aesthetic product without romanticising or trivialising the experience itself. Can trauma ever be ascribed an aesthetic feature? Pointing to the notion of “active spectatorship”, Little (2017) here speaks about “ethical witnessing” (p.43), where the roles between witness-audience and actor-survivor are not collapsed, but also no longer neatly separated. Little suggests that plays addressing trauma and violence indeed require a specific aesthetic strategy in order to convert “passive audience members into responsible action-oriented witnesses” (Little, 2017: 50).

It would certainly have been interesting to hear more feedback from the South African domestic audience to the film itself and how they felt about its staging globally. Another crucial question that the film raises is about the accessibility of different groups in different locations through artwork. While it is probably true on a more global level that artwork attracts certain sections of the population more than others (and not all sections of the population tend to feel equally welcome in theatre spaces), working in divided societies poses the additional challenge of getting the different conflict parties in the same room. In fact, this turned out to be an unsolvable issue in the divided city of Mitrovica, Kosovo, which is, roughly speaking, divided between the Albanian southern part of the city and, across the river Ibar to the north, the Serbian population. Here, separate performances had to be made on either side of the bridge (Michael Lessac, skype interview, 8/12/17). In contrast, the theatre crew managed to find a creative solution in the almost-as-divided city of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They ended up screening the performance outdoors against the backdrop of the famous reconstructed bridge that had been destroyed during the war in the 1990s. And whilst the bridge does not strictly connect between the Bosniak and Croat part of the city (it sits within the Bosniak part alone), moving the play outside the confines of a theatre space certainly opens up new possibilities of using public spaces and, in an optimistic spirit, challenge the binaries inherent in the use of the segregated cityscape (cf. Björkdahl and Kappler, 2017).

To conclude, I would highly recommend this documentary film as a way of engaging with the potential of the arts to engage with conflict that is different from the institutional truisms that a bureaucratised international peacebuilding field professes. For everyone with an interest in the ways in which individual stories connect to a bigger whole and how conflict-induced trauma can be addressed by theatre work, this film is a must-see. It might not give the viewer the full picture of the different contexts featured, but it captures accurately the difficulties that transitional justice projects face when encountering the personal stories of those traumatised by the past. And whilst “A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake” certainly takes an interest in the shared collective experiences, it also provides an in-depth reflection of the difficulties, not only when emotions are translated from one person to another, but also in different national contexts with their own complex histories. The ongoing touring of the film to other post-conflict zones will continue to testify to not only those challenges, but also the opportunities that arise when people connect to the stories of supposed strangers.

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