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On the Borders of the Document: Trip to Turakia

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This study focuses on documentary boundaries through the analysis of a set of documents related to the French theater company Turak. We describe as artistic documents the different documents that circulate during the creation of a play: videos, photos, medias articles, and comments on social networks, among others. There is, of course, an initial documentary collection comprised of the documentation for the production of the performance, studies, readings of scientific or non-scientific works on which the company relies to create the play. At different stages of artistic creation, the theater company designs documents that are useful for the pursuit of creative reflection, notebooks, videos, photographs, etc. The theater company also develops documents aimed at promoting the play for professionals and the public (medias kits, video teasing). Finally, the audience also produces many documents on a performance: photos, videos and comments on social networks.

How could we define the status of these different documents? If Jean Meyriat's (1978) distinction between document by intention and document by attribution allows a first categorization of this documentary set, it is not sufficient to determine the status of all the documents. To be sure, according to Meyriat (1981) the document exists only if it is activated by a user; however, we can question the nature of the regimes of activated senses that seem to blur the boundaries of the document.

Between fiction and documentaries, all these artistic documents lead us to the frontiers of the documentary regime and the imaginary regime. The theater company also plays with the documentary codes by organizing in particular exhibitions on Turakia, which combine fictional and documented narratives. In addition to the theatrical performances, it creates museographic spaces that present objects and inhabitants of Turakia, thus proposing an anthropology of an imaginary people. It thus seems that the artistic perspective can reveal a hybrid—or rather, multiple—document that contains a fictional dimension *a fictional document* which sets in motion an imaginary of the real. By a mirror effect, reality arouses imagination and the imaginary brings out the real by bringing artistic lighting to the world.

The Turak Theater Company: Staging the Object as a Document

Created in 1985, Turak created a theater based on the imagined past of used objects. For Michel Laubu, the founder of the Turak Theater Company, it is a question of using everyday objects to reinvent universes and speak of an imaginary country, Turakia. In Laubu's words, the Turak Theater Company seeks to explore

the “back room of memory,” that is to say, all those tired objects that no longer serve anyone, those who hang out in the attics but which people cannot bear to get rid of. The idea of giving a second life to these objects

pleases me. To make a plane with an old chair, for example. It is to make the extraordinary with the ordinary. (Mestre, 2017)¹

The Turak Theater Company thus views the object as a document of a forgotten existence that briefly reappears to be transcended into an imaginary universe.

Indeed, according to the definition of the document given by Robert Escarpit (1976), we can envisage the metamorphosed objects of the Turak theater company as documents. For Escarpit, five elements are indeed essential to define a document. The document is primarily an object that contains information, the information is structured in a human or machine-readable manner, the document is transportable and reproducible, it has a purpose, and its content is finished. These characteristics defined by Escarpit are found in Turak theater objects, which are documents that contain information of a past existence metamorphosed (structured) by the artists; Turak objects are transportable and can be reproduced; their purpose is essentially artistic.

The object-documents of the Turak realize an archeology of the daily life, for Michel Laubu: “During this archaeological work, it is not a question of telling an event or an anecdote, but rather of bringing to light an ignored world within these rediscovered daily objects and letting the story tell itself” (Hufnagel & Laubu, 2015, p. 9).² Thus, for the Turak, as for Escarpit, the document is therefore an anti-event. “Every event is a human event. During these last millennia man has elaborated to escape this constraint an anti-event which is the document” (Escarpit, 1976, p. 59).³ Indeed an event arises in an unpredictable way; it happens while a document is produced, defined and predictable. The object document represents the physical form of a memory. Memory is a key concept for the Turak Theater Company. Laubu:

As a child, I was long occupied in disarticulating flashlights and reorganizing the precious elements on shoe boxes. I loved and I always love this poetry there, this confrontation between the created object strange and the everyday of the elements that compose it. The finished system was always completely useless, but had to be in working order. The rules of the game settled, a world was woven, took shape around this assembly. Structuring, associating other simple or transformed

¹ « ...“l’arrière boutique de la mémoire” c’est à dire l’ensemble de ces objets fatigués qui ne servent plus à rien, ceux qui traînent dans les greniers mais dont les gens n’arrivent pas à se débarrasser parce qu’ils y sont attachés. L’idée de donner une seconde vie à ces objets me plaît. De faire un avion avec une vieille chaise par exemple. C’est faire de l’extraordinaire avec de l’ordinaire. »

² « Au cours de ce chantier archéologique, il ne s’agira pas de vouloir raconter un événement ou une anecdote mais plutôt de mettre à jour un monde ignoré, au sein de ces objets quotidiens redécouverts et de laisser l’histoire se raconter. »

³ « Tout événement est un événement humain. Au cours des derniers millénaires, l’homme a élaboré pour échapper à cette contrainte un anti-événement qui est *le document*. »

objects, another world took shape with another logic, its own coherence. (Hufnagel & Laubu, 2015, p. 9)⁴

Throughout its creations, the Turak Theater Company develops a mythology of the everyday, like Roland Barthes (1957), who is interested in the language of everyday things and for whom such objects speak, the Turak is interested in what remains when everything is forgotten. The Turak implements a staggered semiology in the imaginary universe of Turakia by staging the life of objects in social life in Turakia thus artistically realizing Saussure's proposal of a science of the signs in the midst of social life.

Document-objects and Ethnology

The Turak Theater Company thus realizes an archeology of everyday life that relies on document-objects. These objects, which are essential documents for the staging, make it possible to construct an ethnology of the imaginary country Turakia by studying Turak's staging of Turakian tribes, flora and fauna, habitat, political systems, etc.

According to Lévi Strauss (2011, p. 44), ethnology is "one of the ways to try to understand man." It is the "distant look" that defines "the essence and the originality of the ethnological approach." Thus, for Lévi-Strauss, the ethnologist must "look very far, towards very different cultures" of his own, and at the same time learn to "look at his own culture from afar, as if he himself belonged to a different culture."⁵ In this way, the observer must have a zoom lens, so to speak, in order to be able to approach the distant and to distance the near. This ethnological look is at work in the Turak Theater. For Michel Laubu, "Turakia is only a reflection of the world around us. Like a puddle in which we look at what surrounds us after a shower. The theater is the place from which one looks at the world, the world in which one tries to live at



Still from the video for [Lighthouse Keepers and Other Small Lights](#) (click to view)

⁴ « Enfant, je restais longtemps occupé à désarticuler des lampes de poche et à en réorganiser les précieux éléments sur des boîtes à chaussures. J'aimais et j'aime toujours cette poésie là, cette confrontation entre l'objet étrange créé et la quotidienneté des éléments qui le composent. Le système terminé se révélait toujours complètement inutile, mais devait pourtant être en état de marche. Des règles du jeu s'installaient, un monde se tissait, prenait forme autour de cet assemblage. Se structurant, associant d'autres objets simples ou transformés, un autre monde prenait forme avec une autre logique, sa propre cohérence. »

⁵ « ... la réflexion anthropologique qui consiste, d'une part à regarder très loin, vers des cultures très différentes de celle de l'observateur, mais aussi, pour l'observateur, à regarder sa propre culture de loin, comme s'il appartenait lui-même à une culture différente. »

best” (Mestre, 2017).⁶ The object-documents make it possible to construct the distanced view of the world; they are both the traces of a forgotten world and the supports of a new imaginary that reflects the real world. The field of the ethnologist stage director is the imaginary territory of Turakia, which is anchored in real territories (the settings of the shows, such as the islands Lofoten in Norway in the play *The Lighthouse Keepers* or Brittany for *Carmen*). The anthropologist Bernard Müller brings the profession of ethnologist closer to that of stage director. According to him, “Whether it is a director or a master of rituals, the performer relies on a knowledge of his environment that hinges on more than one point on that of the ethnologist’s understanding of the social fact” (Müller, 2013, p. 75).⁷

The ethnological approach continues in the setting up of exhibitions, collections of object-documents collected in Turakia that constitute documentation about this imaginary country. These exhibitions or installations are presented either independently or in parallel with a show. They can be housed in a museum, an exhibition or art gallery, a library or in a theater hall where the company plays. The documents, ethnological objects of Turakia, are thus meeting places at the crossroads of the arts and sciences.



Photos taken at the theater La Criée in Marseille

Multiplicity of the Turakia document

The crossroads is at the heart of the concept of “triviality” elaborated by Yves Jeanneret. For Jeanneret (2008, p. 13), the definition of triviality rests in turn on the ideas of circulation and exchange, which are at the basis of the crossroads:

⁶ « La Turakie n’est qu’un reflet du monde qui nous environne. Comme une flaque d’eau dans laquelle on regarde ce qui nous entoure après une averse. Le théâtre, c’est l’endroit d’où on regarde le monde, ce monde dans lequel on essaye de vivre au mieux. »

⁷ « Qu’il s’agisse d’un metteur en scène ou d’un maître des rituels, le faiseur de spectacle s’appuie sur une connaissance de son environnement qui rejoint sur plus d’un point celle de l’ethnologue sur le chemin de la compréhension du fait social. »

Men create, perpetuate and share cultural beings that they elaborate by working the forms that the latter can take and by defining the way in which these forms make sense: it is thus our knowledge, our moral values, our political categories and our aesthetic experiences. It is an idea that I summarize by the notion of triviality, without hearing the term in the pejorative sense which is often attributed to it, which would want us to evoke what circulates widely in society to devalue it. I use here the notion of triviality as a descriptive category. To speak of triviality does not mean that one will be particularly interested in the banal, the hackneyed, or the base. But rather that culture will be taken on one side: by the fact that objects and representations do not remain closed on themselves but circulate and pass into the hands and minds of men. This choice is not, however, absolutely neutral. It suggests that these objects enrich themselves and transform themselves through social spaces. And even they become cultural by the very fact of this creative circulation.⁸

For Michel Laubu (2002, p. 3), the notion of crossroads is also fundamental in object theater, which is “at the crossroads of the plastic arts, music, dance, theater and sometimes the physical sciences.”⁹

So, the document here is undefined because it seems to be intrinsically rhizomatic and multiple; its nature is close to the rhizome and multiplicity. This was previously proposed by Roux (2016). The multiplicity is rhizomic, without origin, without identifiable germ, without last production, always a new node that comes to add and modify the apparent organization of its whole. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “A rhizome does not begin and does not end; it is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, intermezzo” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p. 36).¹⁰

As a rhizome of which any point can be connected with any other, this first object-document found by chance (traces of the past of the object) enters into connection with other document-objects that will serve as building material

⁸ « Les hommes créent, pérennisent et partagent les êtres culturels, qu'ils élaborent en travaillant les formes que ces derniers peuvent prendre et en définissant la façon dont ces formes font sens : il en est ainsi de nos savoirs, de nos valeurs morales, de nos catégories politiques, de nos expériences esthétiques. C'est une idée que je résume par la notion de trivialité, sans entendre ce terme dans le sens péjoratif qui lui est souvent attribué, en fonction d'un jugement répandu, qui voudrait qu'on n'évoque ce qui circule largement dans la société que pour le dévaloriser. J'use ici de la notion de trivialité comme d'une catégorie descriptive. Parler de trivialité ne signifie pas qu'on s'intéressera particulièrement au banal, à l'éculé, ou encore au bas. Mais plutôt qu'on prendra la culture par un certain côté : par le fait que les objets et les représentations ne restent pas fermés sur eux-mêmes mais circulent et passent entre les mains et les esprits des hommes. Ce choix n'est pourtant pas absolument neutre. Il suggère que ces objets s'enrichissent et se transforment en traversant des espaces sociaux. Et même qu'ils deviennent culturels par le fait même de cette circulation créative. »

⁹ « ...au carrefour des arts plastiques, de la musique, de la danse, du théâtre et des sciences physiques quelquefois. »

¹⁰ « Un rhizome ne commence et n'aboutit pas, il est toujours au milieu, entre les choses, inter-être, intermezzo. »

in the creation of an imaginary universe, a reflection of the real world. Thus, the theatrical world, based on object-documents, constructs a documentary set (or rhizome document) which raises the question of documentary status and the value of the document.

Indeed, the documents that are the basis of the theatrical universe come into connection with other heterogeneous documents, such as, for example:

- The company's communication documents: "teaser" promotional videos that document an artistic creation and that are themselves artistic objects. Example: [Teaser for the play *Une Carmen en Turakie*](#), made during the creation of the show and which presents a stage of work "in progress," the musical distortion of *Carmen* shifted in an oceanic environment
- Books: *The Turak Object* (Laubu, 1999), which mixes the poetic and documentary regimes
- *An Encyclopedic Trip Through Turakia* (Hufnagel & Laubu, 2015), which plays with the codes of the encyclopedia, and thus with the purely documentary regime (division into the chapters: transport, politics, fauna and flora, habitat, trades, etc.) and with the poetic regime that characterizes Turakia
- Exhibitions and installations in museums
- Sound landscapes: the exploration of a new imaginary territory in Turakia is linked to the exploration of a real territory of residence creation and to the elaboration of a sonorous and musical territory. Example: ["Sans Phare," by Laurent Vichard](#)

This documentary set can be described as a rhizome document insofar as the Turak universe brings forth a multiplicity of documents without hierarchy.

Conclusion

The multiplicity of documents leads us to the boundaries of the document and questions the status and value of all these documents. For this study we have focused on a small part of the documents produced by the company Turak, but we could also question the documents produced by the public and the media, including the circulation of videos, images and comments on social networks. Boundaries of documents lead us to think that maybe like thought, document is "doomed to fiction because it is meant to deny something absent" (Quignard, 1993, p. 73).¹¹

¹¹ « la pensée est vouée à la fiction parce qu'elle est vouée à nier quelque chose d'absent »

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