

Reiteration, Rehearsal, Repetition

Rebecka Thor

Reiteration

Even if I know what the two actors are speaking about, I am unsure of what is meant, for in *In the Light and Shade of the Ornaments—a Rehearsal* (2015), the past becomes the present through just a seemingly small shift. The work is about labour migration from Sudeten Germany to the Swedish glassworks from 1938 until circa 1948. In the text that is read aloud, words such as *race* indicate a time gone by, as does the description of the solidarity of the workers' movement, working actively to transport and employ the refugees from Sudeten Germany. Yet, despite this, there are several occasions on which I think that what is described is our present. It is a history that repeats itself, that mirrors itself in itself.

In the Light and Shade of the Ornaments—a Rehearsal consists of two video screens placed on a patterned wallpaper, inspired by a glass by the architect Josef Hoffman. In one video two actors read a script, packed with facts, witness accounts and stories of the Sudeten Germans' immigration to Sweden and their relationship to the glass industry. The story is divided in two chapters: a first one with a historical background and an account of the Swedish Workers' Movement's involvement; and a second chapter on the glass industry and its art and design history, as well as how these trends spread geographically. Parallel to this, the second video loops as a sort of

manual projection of slides, where two hands rifle through a thick pile of pictures that relate to the script's narrative.

The work revolves around the population known as Sudeten Germans. This is a German-speaking population from the Czech Republic that was expelled after the end of the Second World War. However, even before the war many social democrats and communists fled to Sweden, as the region was annexed by Nazi Germany. In Sweden, an "Aid Committee for Sudeten German anti-fascists" was organised, which provided refugees with everything from the travel to legal aid and work. Many of these refugees who came earlier, and the labour migrants who came later, ended up in the glassworks of Småland after the war. The Swedish glass art that would become so renowned rests on these workers' skills and knowledge.

Jacques Derrida has argued for a view of the archive as a raw material rather than a totalitarian repository of historical truth. The history that we encounter in the archive is thus a material from the past from which we can picture the future. *In the Light and Shade of the Ornaments—a Rehearsal* can be understood as a desire to relate to history in such a way. Where the past becomes both the now and the future. The work tells something that was, associates it to today and can open up for a discussion of what we want the future to look like. Yet it also asks the viewer the question of how

our present will be historicised and reminds us that if we do not act today, we cannot deny our passivity tomorrow.

The work by Ingela Johansson has the word *rehearsal* in the title. It refers concretely to the recordings' single take and its effect on the result, retaining the actor's verbal mistakes, the dropping of script's pages and the hands' fumbling with the pictures that are shown. Yet the word acquires another meaning, which for me is even more important, precisely in history's reiteration. The French root of *rehearsal* consists of *re* (iteration) and *hercier* (to harrow), and creates a movement from the harrowing of the field in agriculture to the harrowing questions of nationality and belonging that resurface again and again.

Rehearsal

The pictures and the recited text run in parallel. The actor's monotonous reading and the simplicity of the set design are placed alongside the photographs that are flicked through on the second screen. At first the pictures appear to be mostly illustrations of the script, but soon they develop into agents of their materiality and create their own narrative. Picture follows picture, like word follows word, sentence follows sentence, until a story emerges. It is these stories that create a parallel to that which the script communicates, both in the sense that the facts blend with the witness accounts and that it is a history that unfolds in the first part and then is taken over, from a different perspective, in the second. Despite this there is something that is not right in the story, when the fact-rich history writing, with references to academic texts as well as interviews with descendants of key people, and pictures are shown to be equally impotent. The script is a subjective testimony and the pictures are a sample from an unknown entirety. The representation of wholeness is, however, itself misleading, for what could repeat that which was, in all its aspects? The work operates as an incomplete witness who presents a process and creates a historical writing from a

certain perspective. Ever since Herodotus formulated historical writing as a concept, the dictate of saying what is has been laid as a foundation for our understanding of temporality, and at the same time the difficulty in apprehending what was. The testimony is the ground for historical writing—the question is, what is included as testimony and what do we do with it? Which histories can be told and which listened to? And first of all, how do we administer this knowledge? It is in this last question that the work intervenes—for when we listen to this narration we can learn something of the past, but also of our present.

Demanding some breathing space has effects; life is contrasted with the notions of quality of life. Beyond this lies the overarching question of who is deemed able to contribute to a society and who puts stress on it, as well as the further question of to whom a society is accessible. It is hard to imagine a supportive workers' movement that would fight to bring vulnerable people here in our time. Yet it is plausible to think that something labelled as a national speciality rests on an international tradition or knowledge.

At an airport, on the way to Jordan and Palestine, we look for a present to take with us. Among wooden Dala horses, cured salmon and vodka, there is Kosta Boda's snowball candleholder, as a summary of Sweden—the darkness, the snow and the glass. My colleague buys three of them. Our guide in the ruins of Petra looks mostly surprised when we hand it over some days later.

Repeat

It is also our view of history that is at stake—how it engages us and our present. The model of a Hegelian history, grounded in the progress of reason, stands in contrast to an understanding of the past and the present as an eternal spiral that does not always lead forward. History repeats itself, it is said, but maybe it is not so much a repetition as it is a retake. Retakes allow differences, clarifications and corrections;

it is not the same but there are similarities. These similarities not only exist between then and now, but also between then and then, between parts of the history that are passed down and parts that are forgotten. The white armbands that Sudeten Germans were forced to wear after 1945, marked with an *N* for Němec, German, and a nazi symbol on the back, marked them out and excluded them from everything from entering school to buying the newspaper. They were marked as perpetrators, like the perpetrators marked their victims during the war.

Němec literally means dumb or “he who does not speak (a Slavic language)”. They were old Europe’s strangers — as Ella Shohat has spoken of the internal other in relation to the contemporary external others. The Jews were the symbol for these internal others, but also the Roma, Sudeten Germans and other groups. Many of these peoples live for generations in different nations without being granted full citizenship. The dumbness remains, allegorically and actually.