

Editorial: On Stormy Contextual Seas

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In Ruben Östlund's Palm d'Or-winning film *Triangle of Sadness* there is an exchange between a 'Russian capitalist' and an 'American communist' on a \$250 million yacht. The latter is the unconventional captain of an ultra-luxury cruise, the former is a passenger. The latter quotes Marx, Lenin and Mark Twain, the former Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. This ideological battle is especially delightful in contrast to the format and setting: the captain's dinner aboard the yacht, which resembles a late capitalist microcosm with the super-rich (and white) passengers at the top, the managerial team and staff directly engaging with the patrons in the middle, and the crew from developing countries – those working in the engine room, scrubbing floors and toilets – at the very bottom of the symbolic and physical hierarchy. This contrast is further reinforced with the tempest unfolding – the elegant dinner descends into a chaos of seasick passengers, shattered glassware, broken furniture – while the two protagonists on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum continue their exchange calmly and with pleasure as if nothing was going on. The Marxist captain and the capitalist Russian bond over a quote from Lenin: 'Freedom in capitalist society always remains about the same as in ancient Greece. Freedom for slave owners,' quotes the captain. 'I know. Vladimir Lenin. School,' replies the Russian. They bond, and venture into the captain's cabin, and the Russian takes hold of the microphone and calls on the public address to the passengers to pay taxes. Now the pampered, the polished and the posh struggle to control their bodily functions as the mighty waves jolt the vessel, tossing them against walls and furniture. The Marxist American, the capitalist Russian and the raging sea appear to stage a subversion – a morality play for the super-rich – within this microcosm whose order, governed by wealth and privilege, seemed unshakable moments ago. Yet, as soon as the sea quietens, a pirate ship appears, the pirates throw a hand grenade onto the deck of the yacht and straight at the feet of the couple of arms manufacturers on a luxury cruise holiday. One of them picks it up, excited to recognize their own brand. A split second later the bomb explodes, and the yacht sinks.

In Östlund's satire the contrast between the format – the ideological debate the Russian capitalist and the American Marxist are calmly conducting – and the setting grows starker as the luxury yacht transforms into a shipwreck. While the place remains the same throughout this part of the film, the fast-changing circumstances alter the resonance of the debate: from a critique of capitalism and a morality play to an absurd, almost pointless, academic squabble in the face of disaster – whereby the complicity of the left has not been left untouched either. This sequence reminds me of a point attributed to the writer Gore Vidal that I often use as a tip for my

playwriting students. And in this context, it could be paraphrased as follows: could you have two characters in a film (or play) discussing Marxism and capitalism for a prolonged sequence of time? The adaptation of the answer would then be: only if they are aboard a luxury yacht (in the original it is a train), there is a storm raging and a hand grenade is about to explode on the deck (in my recollection of the original it was a bomb underneath the train carriage).

The relationship between format and setting is about dramaturgy, but it is also about context and its relation to meaning-making. A lot has been written in our field, as well as in literary theory and criticism, about the relationship between the text (or other artistic forms) and the context, especially when it comes to historical and geographical decontextualizations and recontextualizations. Arguably, the contextual level is fully established when the work meets the eye(s) of the beholder(s). The relationship between form and content, on the one hand, and context, on the other, shapes the ideological level of the work and the meaning-making process. Yet the film sequence described above, as well as the varied contributions featured in this issue, point to an even more complex and dialectical relationship. Contextual dimensions of a work are ever-competing chronotopes, to echo Bakhtin – the authorial and the audience spatio-temporal frames being the most obvious. Yet contextual dimensions are also embedded in the work itself and embodied in its non-textual dimensions. And at times they are as shift and unsettled as the stormy sea in *Triangle of Sadness*.

In the featured articles, contextual levels emerge variously through text, body, memory, authorial presence and absence, and set design and technology. The issue opens with Shonagh Hill's "Circles of Women": Feminist Movements in the Choreography of Oona Doherty' that explores the range of feminisms circulating in the work of the Irish choreographer Oona Doherty, examining complex identities (beyond the singular analytical focus) of the post-conflict society. There is also a notion of embodied context memory whereby gender histories and the era of the Troubles are held in the dancers' 'bones'. Hill examines and problematizes various aspects of decontextualization in Doherty's work, drawing from a range of cultural contexts – from the Māori ceremonial haka dance and freestyle street dance krump, to contrasting ballet and hip-hop routines, to *écriture féminine*. The article reflects critically on recontextualization as a means of celebrating 'marginal femininity', its capacity for solidarity and for reawakening the radical potential of second-wave feminism, while also acknowledging the 'invisibility of whiteness' that often inhibits this potential.

Şeyda Nur Yıldırım's article 'Staging Theatre Historiography: The Afterlives of Ottoman Armenian Drama in Contemporary Turkish Public Theatre' is set in the context of competing political and aesthetic agendas of the public and the independent theatre sector in Turkey and their engagement with neglected Armenian history and memory. While scholars focus on the more politically provocative independent scene, Yıldırım argues that public theatres are doing a complex work of inscribing Armenian cultural presence into Turkish theatre history, revealing equally complex and often contradictory approaches to the post-Armenian Genocide context. At the centre of her article is the nineteenth-century dramatist Hagop Baronian, who

contributed to the Armenian theatre renaissance, but never had a chance to see his plays staged. In his afterlife, in the 2000s, however, he has been taken out of the minoritarian cultural discourse and recontextualized within the mainstream Turkish national theatre as a major dramatist. To describe the politics of this de-/recontextualization, Yıldırım proposes the notions of ‘national abjection’. Adaptation emerges as the key strategy in this process – not only in the dramaturgical journey from text to performance, but also in the ideological journey. Yıldırım foregrounds political dimensions of theatre history narratives as various forms of de-/recontextualization emerge, enabling both homage and erasure. Abjection, she argues, is at the core of the adaptation process, ‘continuously negotiating, challenging, forming and transforming the borders of the adapted text and the source text, or perhaps the mainstream and the minoritarian’.

In her article ‘The Forgotten History of Our Times: Revisiting Utpal Dutt’s *Titu Mir* in Contemporary India’, Mallarika Sinha Roy focuses on the bard of Indian twentieth-century theatre and the 2019 revival of his play *Titu Mir* by the ensemble group Theatre Formation Paribartak. Through text and performance analysis, Sinha Roy demonstrates how the play’s original challenge to the conservative Hindu history-writing practice, which delegitimizes anti-colonial struggles led by Muslims as mere religious fundamentalism, becomes eerily topical in the context of the current Indian right-wing government and its anti-Muslim stance. The relationship between context and form is explored, as she reads Dutt’s political theatre from a feminist perspective. Drawing from Elin Diamond’s notion of the gestic feminist critique and Dutt’s strong interest in Brecht, the article examines how *Titu Mir* offers a critique of both colonialism and patriarchy and how its 2019 revival resonates with a newly found political dimension.

Ashis Sengupta also revisits a past production – Abhilash Pillai’s 2006 stage adaptation of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* – to offer a kaleidoscopic reading whereby history, the original performance context and the present moment of analysis intersect. ‘Abhilash Pillai’s *Midnight’s Children*: Performing Politics through Optics’ explores how this stage adaptation deploys the visual language of Bollywood movies as a challenge to prevailing aesthetics in Indian theatre’s anti-technological bias of the time. Pillai’s cinematic choices are seen as translation devices in transposing the novelistic material onto the stage, but also a means of foregrounding contextualization. The author identifies Pillai’s scenography as ‘multisensorial’ in its capacity not only to theatricalize Rushdie’s prose but also to foreground political resonances of the work past and present. The optics that the cinematic approach brings to the stage adaptation of Rushdie’s novel highlight politically provoking contextual analogies, such as Indira Gandhi’s proclamation of a national emergency (1975–7) cancelling elections and curtailing civil liberties and the ‘current BJP-led NDA government’s flagrant violation of democratic institutions without clamping emergency rather officially’. ‘Chutnification of history’ is the evocative term Sengupta proposes to describe the rich kaleidoscopic relationship between text and context and between politics and aesthetics that takes place in this stage adaption, where ‘the abundant mixing of the tangy elements of history ... collapses the past and the present into a palimpsest’.

Margaret Hamilton's 'In the "Display Case": (Capitalist) Realism and Simon Stone's "Zoological" Ibsen' deals with form and context in the contemporary staging of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* by the Australian director Simon Stone. The article explores how Stone redefines the intrinsic realism of the play. Hamilton draws on Mark Fisher's notion of capitalist realism whereby consumption has become ideologically neutralized, including human experience as an object of consumption. Positioning Stone's staging in relation to versions of *The Wild Duck* by Katie Mitchell and Thomas Ostermeier, Hamilton proposes the idea of the 'variants of realism' that further foreground 'the reach and political implications of the appellation'. We might also reflect, alongside her, to say that this positions realism as a context-specific form. The article points out that in Stone's staging of Ibsen's text a 'specific zoology or study of familial behaviour' reinforces 'an ideological *reality effect* dependent upon the representation of normative political social beings and the experience of immobilization intrinsic to contemporary modes of spectatorship'. Hamilton's article brings us right back to the 'reality effect' of *Triangle of Sadness* – and capitalist realism pushed to the absurd.

Also, this is the point when you stop reading the editorial if you do not like spoilers.

Only a handful survive the shipwreck and they are stranded on what appears to be a deserted island in the middle of nowhere. The hierarchy changes as the person with most skills to survive in the wilderness takes charge, and this happens to be a middle-aged Asian cleaning lady – from the very bottom of the pecking order on the luxury yacht. A kind of matriarchy begins to take hold when it transpires that the desert island is just an undeveloped part of a luxury resort. On the other side they find a small beach and the metal door of the elevator that leads to the resort and to the restoration of the order that prevailed prior to the shipwreck. The ending is ambiguous for many reasons, but I will limit the spoiler to this image of the metal door between different 'variants of realism' – a passage to salvation and Hades gate of sorts – signalling no escape from the capitalist variant.