

Babel Re-Play

Coordinated by Cynthia Kros and Georges Pfruender

Introduction:

Through various genres of writing, the production of art works and performance actions, a collective of researchers and artists located in Africa (South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya and la Réunion), South America and Switzerland wish to reclaim the myth of the Tower of Babel as a productive topicality so as to think a contemporary moment of the urban and aspects of “cittitude” from perspectives of the Global South.

This project is part of a larger cross-disciplinary research initiative, “Construction Site/Chantier” anchored at the University of Pretoria in the Capital Cities Programme, with participants from a number of tertiary institutions and art venues. “Construction site/chantier” is undertaking an investigation of manifestations of the modern in cities of the Global South. The initiative draws on a range of disciplines including anthropology, history, psychology, environmental studies and architecture, but relies on the catalysing force of the arts.

This concept paper will present various entry points for the Babel Re-Play art research project, and will sketch formats for works to be produced over an estimated period of three years, organised in two phases (chapter: Babel-Re-Play: Our meta-scenario).

About the origins

The story of the City of Babylon and the Tower of Babel originated in Asia at a moment when its civilisation had unique expertise in cultural production, which would influence the making and thinking of societies in the East, West, North and South, with echo powers across thousands of years.

The City and the Tower of Babel were inscribed through the acts of the “homo faber” into a landscape, as a built environment contained against “the rest” (the non-built). Babylonians left behind their nomadic traditions to create a new form of dwelling, which as a consequence, would also be the catalyst for a new societal organisation. Through the act of building (from the conceptualising of a plan to the execution of the constructions) the citizens of Babel wrote themselves into the landscape as “other”, and entered into a history that can be traced from a beginning – the act of construction – through a narrative of protocols and logic associated with urban life, whilst leaving their relatives - the nomads - “outside History”. Is this the start of the inverse relationship where the North steps in to portray itself as the solidly constructed, centralising and civilising project, sending the “others” into the wilderness outside of history?

Constructing a tower – in its verticality a strong signage of the urban communicated beyond the city limits - would testify to extraordinary human expertise and competencies: the ability to apply specific techniques to a larger set - from the burning of a brick which, as a defined normative unit allows for the multiple in the techniques through which each brick is joined with the whole; the scaffolding for

vertical extensions; and the capacity to organise groups with different skill-sets to operate together in the creation of the construction. Whilst the construction of this tower with its ultimate ambition of reaching the heavens did fail, it succeeded in leaving a memory that has not been effaced over centuries,¹ thus we have deduced that such ambition can become “realistic”, doable, if given the right kind of context. For some reason – and we might quote Dürrenmatt “what can be thought can no more be unthought”. The knowledge of the spectacular punishment that befell the builders of the Tower is not a sufficient deterrent against re-starting the enterprise of creating the absolute and definitive tower.

The residues left from the legend contain the following: consequences of an ambition to realise an impossible dream; the agency of the collective; the challenge to power; the meaning of punishment; the productive consequences of failure (such as the appearance of multiple languages and cultures); and the consideration of the perspectives of those “left out” of the Tower’s precinct at its zenith, or subjected to its cruel surveillance as it felt itself weaken and about to topple.²

Babel Re-Play; Connect to the Global South

It seems a fitting approach for a research collective, many of whom are based in the Global South, to seize this fact with all its consequences: Babylon/Babel must start in the non-West – after all, it migrated to the West away from its origins, and **we intend to go there to reclaim it**, to see what has become of it in the way that Senegalese filmmaker, Djibril Diop Mambety went looking for a character of his who had been exiled abroad and found her, somewhat the worse for wear in Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit*.

Recent history has shown that the Tower and the material remains of its city have become a prized object invoked, respectively, to elevate the status of a dictator, to show profound indifference to works of the “Other” and to obliterate history so as to uphold a completely different destiny. Thus, we have Saddam Hussein – in his moments of wild ambition – conceiving of a scheme to excavate Babylon and put his imprimatur on every brick in the style of Nebuchadnezzar; the Americans setting up a military camp on the city’s ruins, and now Islamic State seeking to annihilate this very past with bulldozers – as if mechanical tools had the power to extinguish a myth.

Babel/Babylon continues to be one of the most important points of reference today, as it has always been, but it is not susceptible to singular symbolic ownership. What we really see, from the examples above is that despite the endeavours of dictators, invading armies and a self-proclaimed caliphate, Babel/Babylon continues to exist ‘in a space outside the binary’ of north-south.³ In the end, as Mambety observed of his character, there has been so much traveling back and forth that it doesn’t make sense

¹ Zumthor, P. *Babel ou l’Inachèvement* p.136 « L’unovers possède sa mémoire propre, au ein de laquelle s’inscrit notre histoire mais dont la richesse dépasse infiniment celle-ci. Cette ,émoire véhicule les grands thèmes, les directives archétypale.. »

² Zumthor, P. *Babel ou l’Inachèvement* ;P.163 :Les nomades antiques se seraient bien gaussés de nos prétentions à toucher ainsi le ciel ! Mais il n’y a plus au monde de nomade que le peu qu’il en subsiste au fond de nous, envers et contre l’Histoire. »

³ Kuan-Hsing Chen in *Asia as Method – Towards Deimperialization* talks about strategies to overcome the binaries established between colonizer and colonized, which seems to keep both parties in a stasis, suggesting that by introducing narratives which render visible differing subjectivities patterns of guilt and dependency could be broken.

to talk of it as belonging exclusively to either, but we fetch it back as we need to, unapologetically.

Every ruler, every group of lobbyists, archaeologist, historian, poet or artist probably speaks of something different when evoking the city and the Tower and we truly believe that “by multiplying the number of subject positions, a different history can be articulated”.⁴ We have no wish to undertake a mapping of “abstract and universal theoretical frameworks” that would reveal a singular coherent meaning for Babel, but desire to set up a productive environment for story telling (visual stories with accompanying text based investigation), like Dürrenmatt’s *Stoffe*,⁵ which will “confront the phenomena and problems of lived realities... which we can identify and act on points of intervention”.⁶ Past and present perspectives on Babel will be considered.

Looking back towards the North, we see the Tower assuming the shape of Fortress Europe, harshly impacting on the Global South. Without wishing to paint a Domsday scenario, we know that that Tower contains the seeds of its own destruction, and unless new paths are created towards and out of it, the building will fall and suffocate its frightened occupants.

Dürrenmatt and Babel Re-Play

When we started our journey of investigation to shape a project, Dürrenmatt’s texts and drawings came as revelations. As playwright, essayist and visual artist, he had been trying to tell the story of Babel in various formats over a long time. He acknowledged his despair at not being able to put what he saw as the essence of the myth into words that would capture his terrifying sense of what had happened to the world, and the self-defeating reaction of his own country in the wake of the Third Reich and Stalinism. Babel would, however continue to appear in various shapes in his plays, essays and drawings, and develop, like a root system across his work. The play, *An Angel comes to Babylon* is one such example in which the author attempts to find the reasons for the building of the tower – a “most grandiose and senseless” enterprise.”⁷ A later play, *Der Mitmacher*, is set in an environment we could identify as the “inverted Tower”, where the characters are drawn to collaboration with the “underworld”, partially willingly, partially fatalistically.⁸ The system is stronger than the protagonists. The Tower of Babel is the title of the second collection of *Stoffe*. Six drawings also exist of various states of the advance of the building and decay of the

⁴ see Chen: ‘Taiwanese Nationalism’ in *Asia as Method*

⁵ reference to *Stoffe* from Dürrenmatt, further elaborated in the next chapter

⁶ Returning to the Third World’ in *Asia as Method*

⁷ Dürrenmatt’s comments to *Angel comes to Babylon* : The present comedy attempts to provide the reason, why it came to the construction of the Tower of Babel ; an enterprise – according to the myth - of most grandiose yet senseless nature ; all the more important (to consider this) as we see ourselves today to be drawn into similar enterprises. (...) .According to plans, the building of the Tower should be the subject of my next play (...). All are against the Tower, and yet, it comes into being. (translation GP)»

⁸ in the postface of the play *der Mitmacher* «At point zero, the colossal effort of the tragic hero to try to motivate his acts becomes caduc. Belief, recognition, intellect become but senseless accidents. As if touched by a slight breeze, the collaborators drift from seemingly unmoving waters - without awareness first, yet without possibility of resisting the currents. (translation GP)»

Tower. Ulrich Weber, specialist of Dürrenmatt's oeuvre and researcher at the Literaturarchiv Bern, speaks of three meta-topics at work across texts and images concerning Babel:

- the rebellion of the king, in which the tower becomes the symbol of standing against the powers of heaven,
- the ambition of the master architect to realise the ultimately perfect construction or system,
- the participation of the workers in an enterprise, which they never wished to be part of, yet, for many different reasons, in which they agree to cooperate, becoming enslaved as they do so.

Dürrenmatt's creative and analytical writings continue to echo globally, including in Africa. Topics he had appropriated from "elsewhere and other times" – Babylon and Minotaurus, for example – are translated, through his immense talent as an "imaginator", into the contemporary moment. As such, they invite us to create the possibilities of "talking back" – not in the format of re-production or re-performance - but through re-play and counter-play, which contain the potential for subversive energy of which we think he would have approved.

The Visit, which we have mentioned above, was daringly transformed by Djibril Diop Mambety into the film *Hyènes*. From Mambety we learn, that when he went to fetch Anna/Claire from Europe he wasn't thinking in terms of needing to redeem or save her from the clutches of a European artist, or of having to use a European template in order to be able to make his own work. We interpret Mambety as saying that he had to find a way taking up the story - resuming it from where he had left it off some time before - **not** because he experienced the psychological inadequacy of the colonised, but because in today's world it was inevitable that a character like Anna/Claire would have spent time in Europe or the USA, have married into the financial classes and undergone aesthetic surgery before returning home to settle an old score. In a conversation with N. Frank Ukadike⁹ Mambety explains: "I had the freedom and confidence to marry his (Dürrenmatt's) text with my film and make his story my own... there is no longer room for ethnic peculiarities; there is only room for talent. "

Babel Re-Play: our meta-scenario

Following Mambety, we believe that Dürrenmatt's work remains a rich source for inspiration and intertextual exchange. The potential for further creative energies to be brought into dialogue with Dürrenmatt's work might also come from the caveat that Dürrenmatt himself never thought of any of his works as finished (The Tower of Babel always under construction) – thus inviting further engagement. Theodore Ziolkowski, in *Dürrenmatt's Fiction Introduction*¹⁰ writes the following: "In sum, Dürrenmatt is not so much a dramatist or writer as, rather, an irrepressible creative energy whirling around a core of a few basic images or *Stoffe* and precipitating itself in the course of fifty years in varied forms and modes. Whether it expresses itself in drama, prose, or ink drawing, however, one immediately recognizes the unique

⁹ N. Frank Ukadike, "The Hyena's Last Laugh" *Transition* 78 (vol 8, no 2, 1999) pp 136-53 Copyright 1999, W.E. Dubois Institute and Indiana University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2903181>

¹⁰ http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/durrenmatt/vol2_introduction.html

stamp of his energy.”

Just like those bricks from the historical Babylon, recycled and reclaimed by consecutive generations, the bricks Dürrenmatt left us from his wrestling with a monumental Babel project, provide us with material to be recycled, recuperated, reimaged and even recast.

As a pilot, and an example of one of the directions we hope to go in, we attach a short story which Cynthia Kros created as a response to her readings of: *Dürrenmatt: the Happy Pessimist; L’Epidemie Virale en Afrique du Sud* (Dürrenmatt) and *Babel ou L’Inachèvement* (P.Zumthor).

We wish to work with elements we identify as typically Dürrenmattian as the generative power informing the Babel Re-play project.

The three stages of our meta-scenario:

1. providing a protocol and raw substance towards the burning of the bricks to be brought to the construction site.
2. creating binding elements between bricks (that which links one unit of storytelling to the next)
3. producing a blueprint for the architecture of a Babylonian tower.

We imagine the bricks to be fabricated with the various soils of the “local”, and, as Mambety suggests, to be strongly anchored in narratives that are fully owned by their creators. Though these bricks are brought into a normative shape by protocols (the genre of film and the type of approach to filming will notably part of the “reglemented”), they possess their own characteristics and individual signatures, and it is possible that they might come with varying degrees of potential for resistance and durability.

The binding material, which will allow one brick to be firmly placed on another, will be a meta narrative of sorts – of the type of the “materials” Ziolkowski identified.

The blueprint for the architecture, which we imagine coming into play in the second stage of the project – once we have created sufficient numbers of bricks to work with - would come as a virtual/digital construction, governed by protocols, yet confronted with unknown parameters in the way it emerges, which will provide many surprises and even allow for potential failures. Failures, Dürrenmatt maintains, are productive parts of the on-going creative process. Not unlike the moon moon moon project of Ai Wei Wei and Olafur Eliasson, the creation of the Tower will be in the hands of both recognised and yet to be discovered contributors. And, as always, some of the bricks will hold, whilst others will necessarily be removed from circulation, rendering the tower project fragile – perhaps after the fashion of its progenitor. We wish to be inspired by Dürrenmatt’s multiple perspectives on social, political and cultural realities, at the level of narrative units (the bricks) and, at the level of the meta-narrative (the tower), while being aware, that as soon as we try to grasp them, they

elude us. The elements can never be fixed. They have the same quality as memory – always shifting.

Visible outcomes:

Phase 1: our bricks are units of stories will be visually performed and filmed. The bricks, according to our protocols, exist as film clips, but can be composed in many ways – stories scrolling down the screen, fixed images brought into sequences, documented performances, visual stories told by means of film – each of which can be screened at art venues, or downloaded as YouTube clips, owned by the producing artist, but made available under precise conditions to the organisers of the Babel Re-Play project

Phase 2: An interactive website will be created, in which these units of visual stories will be brought into an emerging structure, which each contributor will have an influence over shaping further. This website will tell stories of Dürrenmatt, Babel, and of the various contributing artists and researchers, and will become a space of creation, archiving, and of thinking radically across disciplines.

What we wish to achieve at the Centre Dürrenmatt:

In 2015, the first bricks will be showcased and an overview of the entire project will be presented in dialogue with the Literaturarchiv Bern.

Parallel to this, we would like to organize in association with the Centre Dürrenmatt a seminar with members of the Universities of Bern/Basel and Pretoria.

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Contributing parties :

Cynthia Kros and Georges Pfruender: Coordination of the project and text/image contributions

Ulrich Weber, Literaturarchiv: Text on the Tower of Babel motif in Dürrenmatt's oeuvre

Catherine Gfeller, artists: creation of a video consisting of texts and images

Samuel Dématraz, film maker, artist, film producer: creation of a video and filming/directing/editing two videos of performances in Johannesburg and Sao Paolo.

Mwenya Kabwe, theatre director, playwright, actor based in Johannesburg: creation of a performance piece "Babel Re-Play

Vanessa Cooke, theatre director, actor based in Johannesburg: contribution to the performance piece "Babel Re-Play"

Tshego Khutsoane, performer, playwright based in Johannesburg : contribution to the performance piece "Babel Re-Play"

Khutjo Greene, actor, theatre director based in Johannesburg: contribution to the performance piece "Babel Re-Play"

Donna Kukama, artist, based in Johannesburg: performance Babel.

Yohann Queland de Saint-Perne, artist based in la Réunion: video "Mirador"

Artists based in Sao Paolo who will contribute works: still to be confirmed.

Annex 1:

New Babel Thoughts

What if the true folly of the Tower of the Babel was not the tower 'inachevée', but the tower that is successfully built and finished that puts Nebuchadnezzar on eye level with God? And remember I had an image of God idly playing with the remote control when the builders of the Tower burst in on him? And now I find that Dürrenmatt also thought that God was somewhat absent minded – 'inclined, again and again, to forget his own creations...God's grace is incomprehensible not only to ourselves, but to God as well.' So what if we were to come upon God in his celestial living room and he looked at us blankly and said: 'who are you?' Would he say: 'who the hell are you?' Dürrenmatt explained that he felt that he had to give his fiction 'the worst possible turn'. Would this be it?

Then let's imagine that the tower builders had to pick their way back down and tell everyone on the ground – wait, I think Dürrenmatt would have them broadcast the news on TV – that God had forgotten all about them – hadn't even really bothered to blast their tower to smithereens, trusting to the natural elements to accomplish the task for him. Would it be allowed to go out on the eight o'clock news uncensored like that? No, Nebuchadnezzar always insisted that the national censor went everywhere with those who did things in his name – he didn't even allow the bricks that the tower was built out of, each inscribed with his name, to be laid before passing censor inspection in case one of the inscribers had tried to get away with an extra curlicue casting doubts on the authenticity of the signature and therefore putting the whole social order of Babylon in jeopardy. And so, even before the builders had got back to earth they had been compelled to fashion a new version of what had happened.

'Vive le Babylon!' the news anchor person always began. Actually on the night that the builders got back to earth he said it twice. This is because he was a *verschlüsselt*. That means either we have to decode him or we have to decode his message. Then the image of the news anchor person cut away to an advert for a Swiss bank, assuring potential clients of complete secrecy and confidentiality as always, and reminding the viewers that the Swiss bank had been financing the Tower of Babel for the fifty years it had taken to build it and had erected a three hundred and forty storey high advertisement.

Only the most perceptive of viewers would have noticed that the graphic of the Tower projected onto the green screen behind the news anchor person wavered a bit or that it resembled a skyscraper that Stalin had once made a gift of to the Polish. 'Today,' intoned the news anchor person, 'the first builders returned to Ground Zero (was that an inadvertent slip?) to report on the completion of the tower and the first meeting with God in human history. We have the images that follow, but have not been able to authenticate them.' There followed some flickering indistinct pictures of a bearded man of unusual stature bending down to shake hands with a group of hard-hatted construction workers in a foggy sort of ambience. The banner at the bottom of the screen read in large white letters on red: 'First meeting with God' and then: 'Nebuchadnezzar to begin talks'.

The news anchor person explained that it wasn't possible to reveal much of what had been said in the meeting yet and conferred with expert opinion from around the table in the studio with frequent cut aways to the same images of the builders labouring on the Tower that had been seen for the last couple of decades, and a young Nebuchadnezzar declaring that he would lead the nation to where no man had gone before. One of the experts was a banker from Zurich in the usual sober attire except for his brightly coloured tie. He agreed that it wasn't possible to say much for fear of causing the currency to inflate out of all proportion. Another of the experts was a political analyst from South Africa with a very shrill voice who was one of the children born out of a White black and Black black alliance shortly after the outbreak of the deadly virus that had happened sometime towards the end of apartheid. The political analyst still sometimes suffered consecutive cold chills and hot flushes as an inherited malady caused by the virus. That may have accounted for his shrillness. He said that if the content of the conversation that had taken place between God and the builders were revealed now, various international alliances might be threatened and that a great deal of diplomacy would have to take place, although the South African government retained its commitment to transparency. At this the banker from Zurich tugged a little uneasily at the knot in his coloured tie. There was, of course, also a woman expert on the impact of Divine revelation on gender relations. She said that until the content of the conversation had surfaced, it was impossible to say what the ramifications would be, but that the signs thus far were not encouraging. (The news anchor person quickly intervened before she said more.)

The most surprising of all the expert guests was the Minotaur – surprising because he rarely showed his face, least of all on national television. Commentators afterwards were later to remark what good terms he seemed to be on with the banker from Zurich although they made a striking contrast – the hideously ugly Minotaur and the suave banker. The Minotaur probably said more than all of the other guests put together, but nobody, not even the most astute of the TV commentators, could discern precisely what it was that he had said. The banker from Zurich kept nodding as if in agreement though and at one point laid his hand on the Minotaur's forelimb. Later the Minotaur was to distance himself from the banker, claiming that he had never laid eyes on him before that evening, and that, in general he tried to have as little as possible to do with human beings because, although he sympathised with their endeavours, one of them at least had tried to kill him while on some sort of misguided royal mission.

By the time the tower was finished and Nebuchadnezzar's dream thus realised, the latter was already showing signs of the insanity that was to destroy him. So it was risky to have him on real time TV. They sometimes employed a double. But that night the national broadcaster decided to take a chance. Perhaps if he were incoherent viewers would think merely that he were intoxicated through having seen his ambition materialise. To everyone's surprise, Nebuchadnezzar spoke as clearly and compellingly as he ever had about his dreams. It was only towards the end that things took a slightly disturbing turn. As the camera zoomed in on to his craggy, but still splendidly handsome face, huge tears rolled from his eyes, down the furrows of his cheeks and splashed onto his regal attire. The cameras were switched off just too late and several viewers heard him sigh deeply and say: 'after all I've done...' before their screens went blank to be followed almost a split

second later with the message that said 'The evening news proudly brought to you in association with the Swiss Bank'.

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Annex 1: Story by Cynthia Kros