

Liberty and Death: Pirates and Zombies in Atlantic Modernity

Veranstalter: Alexandra Ganser, University of Vienna / Austrian Science Fund; Gudrun Rath, University of Art and Design Linz / Austrian Science Fund

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The international conference „Liberty and Death: Pirates and Zombies in Atlantic Modernity“, held at the IFK – International Research Centre for Cultural Studies in Vienna –, was organized by Alexandra Ganser and Gudrun Rath in cooperation with the IFK and the FWF (the Austrian Science Fund). The conference brought together scholars from the US, Haiti, Switzerland, Germany and Austria. JEAN COMAROFF (Harvard University) served as a general respondent. The goal was to examine the figures of the zombie and the pirate in a transatlantic realm and focused on their cultural-historical functions for empire and nation building, for legal discourses and the history of ideas, as well as for contemporary media critique and artistic research. Throughout the two days, the conference participants discussed the entangled cultural history from trans-disciplinary perspectives.

In their concise opening remarks, ALEXANDRA GANSER (University of Vienna) and Gudrun RATH (University of Art and Design Linz) drew a bow from the frequent appearances of zombies and pirates in recent popular media and films as figures of ambiguity (between life and death, violence and adventure, power and resistance) to their roots in early colonial times. By elaborately juxtaposing the zombie and the pirate, Ganser and Rath pointed out similarities but also differences between the two: Both figures have been cast as figures of exception (Giorgio Agamben) who were discursively located beyond law and state while simultaneously playing a substantial role in the processes of nation building in the context of the colonial endeavors. By evoking critique

and imaginaries of resistance or exotic means of escape, zombies and pirates have negotiated (post-)colonial relations for centuries. Zombies thematize histories of enslavement and rebellion, while pirates were used to articulate colonial adventure and exploitation on the one hand and the idea of a resisting collective beyond established power relations on the other. In the context of an „Atlantic modernity“ (Stephan Palmié), the Caribbean marks the crossroad in the circulation and transformation of the two figures which were understood as meta-tropes by Ganser and Rath: important keys for understanding the formation of our globalized world, which is based on the early colonial times and its imaginaries and politics.

In the conference's first keynote lecture, RICHARD FROHOCK (Oklahoma State University) explored notions of extreme violence in historical English piracy narrations. In his talk, he pointed out that violence played both narrative and actual roles in the context of conquest, and the reports of exceeding brutality were used to characterize national types, or rather: to brand the enemy. In the subsequent discussion, this point was further examined by highlighting how the depiction of extreme violence positioned the pirates outside of law and society and thereby concurrently served to form the „Enlightened“ European nations (morally) in contrast to this cruelty.

After lunch, LAËNNEC HURBON (Université d'État d'Haïti) opened the first panel entitled „Modelling a Conceptual History“ with his talk on forms and functions of the zombie figure in Haitian culture. Hurbon's vantage point was the assumption that the emergence of the zombie figure in Haitian *vodou* can be seen as the „afterlife“ (*Nachleben*, in Didi-Hubermann's sense) of slavery. He stated that the myths of zombification in both Haitian *vodou* and contemporary popular US-American culture refer to the fragility of life and of identity. In her successional talk, SONJA SCHILLINGS (University of Giessen) focused on maritime law and the history of the concept of race. She argued that pirate law had a tremendous influence on creating and systematizing distinctions on the basis of race for expanding European em-

pires. Leaning on Hugo Grotius' distinction between *piratae* and *praedones* (pirates and privateers), Schillings pointed out how a notion of whiteness was constructed in 17th century law and discourse by the different treatment of European „traitors“, non-European „alien invaders“ and „Barbary buccaneers“ in court and legal discourse. The following discussion focused on the interdependencies of the emergence of the modern nation state and the appearance of racism. KIERAN MURPHY (University of Colorado at Boulder) added to the formation of modernity by focusing on the simultaneity of enslavement and exploitation of the Caribbean and other colonies, and the Enlightenment movement in Europe. This is what he called the “tragic mode of history“, following C.L.R. James. Murphy then traced this tragedy of colonialism in contemporary re-emergences in popular culture. According to him, the film series *The Walking Dead* evokes the „tragic mode of history“ by reenacting not only enslavement but also by pointing to the early settlements of buccaneers and *flibustiers* in the Caribbean.

The first day of the conference ended with a reception and the possibility to chat and continue discussions on previously raised questions over a glass of wine and snacks. The reception was accompanied by an installation by the Viennese artist ANTONIA PROCHASKA (Vienna) entitled „THE MONSTER INSIDE ME.“ In a small chamber, where only up to four people could experience the installation at a time, sentences taken from zombie movies and interviews with zombie experts were projected on a screen made of golden emergency blankets. The darkness of the room, the sizzling of the emergency blankets and the pathos of the isolated sentences offered a reflective space to think about ways of dealing with catastrophes, crises and horror.

The second day of the conference commenced with a panel entitled „Contemporary Remediations.“ FLORIAN KRAUTKRÄMER (Braunschweig University of Art / Mainz) opened by introducing the figure of the “cosmopolitan.” Based on the idea of the “cosmopolitan vision” (Ulrich Beck) and by linking to globalization and globalism, he claimed that zombies ignore personal and national

borders and contemporary zombie-centered films such as *World War Z* (2013) can be read as evoking imagery from the recent refugee crisis. Furthermore, a parallel can be drawn to video piracy in which the pirate can also be seen as a borderless, somewhat global figure. In the discussion, the enabling potential of video piracy was demonstrated by way of highlighting its involvement in the making of the Nigerian film industry Nollywood and the subsequently emerging local piracy. EUGEN PFISTER (Bern University of the Arts) then turned the attention to the figure of the pirate. By discussing multiple historical examples, he illustrated the emergence of a classical yet ahistorical pirate narrative, in which the pirate is characterized as an outlaw who redeems him/herself by way of a benevolent act. Pfister argued that while earlier games such as *Pirate Adventure* (1978) or *Sid Meier's Pirates!* (1987) closely conform to this narrative pattern, later games like *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013) usually foreground ideas of individualism as opposed to social responsibility. In the discussion, questions about the narrative potential of video games were raised and it highlighted the way in which the game's rules, the gameplay mechanics, and the performance of the player also contribute to the understanding of the plot.

Following lively and productive conversations over lunch, the conference turned to the topic of „Artistic Research.“ First, SYBILLE PETERS (Hamburg) elaborated on her idea of „paralogistics.“ Paralogistics, which „access logistical system through backdoors, through waste and ruins, passages that open up in the frictions logistics is trying to overcome“ (Peters), were explored in cooperation with the artist collective *geheimagentur* and the FUNDUS THEATER. By asking Somali pirates questions formulated by children, Peters and the artist collective explored attempts to intervene into government and corporations-controlled systems present at Hamburg harbor with paralogistical practices. Projects such as „Hamburg Port Hydrarchy“ and „The African Terminal“ aimed at transferring power back to the people and uncover the non-transparent nature of dominant logistical systems. Antonia Porchaska, who had

shown her installation during the reception on the previous day, introduced the audience to the thought process as well as the technicalities of her project. Inspired by her own fascination with horror and frightening creatures, she was driven to delve further into the world of fictional monsters and narratives of apocalypse by way of conducting and recording (zombie) expert talks, a book chronicling her endeavor, and an exhibit, of which the conference audience was able to enjoy in an slightly altered version. The discussion highlighted the numerous links between the two projects. The emergency blanket, for example, which was seen in some of Peters' images and used prominently in Prochaska's work, struck out as an object of transition between life and death.

After a well-deserved cup of coffee, the conference audience returned for the second keynote speech. Due to scheduling conflicts, DORIS GARRAWAY (Northwestern University) was not able to come to Vienna but the audience had the great pleasure of viewing her lecture by way of a pre-recorded video. Garraway's talk focused on the establishment of the monarchy in Haiti after the revolution in late 18th / early 19th century and explored it through "metaphorical zombification." As the abstract reads, "the zombie came to represent the threat of a metaphorical return to the living dead of slavery via the tragic persistence, in the postcolonial era, of the colonial sovereignty of commandment and dispossession." In the discussion in which Garraway participated via Skype, it became apparent that her way of approaching the zombie figure from a metaphorical perspective, demonstrated how the conference covered different approaches to the figure of both the zombie and the pirate. From its historical beginnings in Haitian *vodou*-culture to a more abstract usage to understand post-revolutionary formations of society, the figures serve as a valuable contribution to discussions about sociopolitical contexts and historical developments.

The conference drew to a close with a general summary lead by Jean Comaroff, Alexandra Ganser and Gudrun Rath. Upon jokingly remarking that we all felt somewhat "zombified" from two days of excellent input, Co-

maroff pointed out the historical contingency of zombies and pirates. While stressing that they inhabit a particular rather than a universally inclusive kind of Atlantic Modernity, examining the two figures separately as well as in combination turned out to have an exceedingly productive effect. Rath highlighted the conference's successful attempts to finding the similarities between the two figures but she also raised the questions about the yet unexplored manifold differences. It was then pointed out by Peters that – for example – in popular culture, the pirate's violence is often-times rather covert as opposed to the zombie, whose violence is expressed more visibly. While the zombie is not only extremely violent itself and frequently born out of violent acts, the pop-culture pirate often resorts to relatively un-brutal treasure hunts. A communality which loomed over the conference in general was that of the connection to slavery, and Ganser pointed to the importance of stressing the relevance of modern day slavery. This was further underlined by Comaroff's remark on the zombification of labor in South Africa, meaning the enslavement of labor forces and the increasing invisibility of labor. The discussion was closed by a poignant statement by Frohock, who stressed the contemporary political relevance of zombies and pirates. The stories spun around both figures are about creating uneven power relationship through force and violence and rewrite the narrative into a respectable and easily accessible form. Frohock therefore stressed that although a multitude of texts discussed in the context of the conference might be in archives and rarely read by a larger audience, they, as well as contemporary variations, need to be analyzed critically and watched carefully.

The conference successfully combined interdisciplinary perspectives to analyze the versatile figures of the zombie and the pirate. The talks from a wide range of expertise (from history and literature to media and game studies, and artistic research), and the opportunity to elaborate on thoughts in the subsequent fruitful discussions and shared breaks cumulated in the general summary at the end of the second day. This summary effectively tied loose ends together and provided the op-

portunity for all participants to draw conclusions from two days of rich input. In general, the conference highlighted the complexity of zombies and pirates, explored historical origins and representations in Atlantic modernity, demonstrated how they can be used in art and activism and explored multiple forms of contemporary re-mediations. By stressing their individual specificities as well as the similarities and differences, it became apparent that these potent figures were and can still be read to negotiate cultural imaginaries and social structures relating to power hierarchies, violence and inequality, but also to forms of resistance.

Conference Overview:

Opening

Alexandra Ganser (University of Vienna/FWF), Gudrun Rath (University of Art and Design Linz/FWF): Figures of Liberty and Death. Pirates and Zombies

Keynote I

Richard Frohock (Oklahoma State University): From Hawkins to Jenkins: Interpreting Violence in English Piracy Narratives

Panel I: Modelling a Conceptual History

Laënnec Hurbon (Université d'État d'Haïti): La figure du zombie et la mémoire de l'esclavage outre-Atlantique

Sonja Schillings (University of Giessen): Traitors and Aliens: The Invention of Race in British Pirate Law

Kieran Murphy (University of Colorado at Boulder): Tragedies of the Caribbean. Zombies, Pirates, and the Tragic Mode of History

Reception

Antonia Prochaska (Vienna): Installation „THE MONSTER INSIDE ME“

Panel II: Contemporary Remediations

Florian Krautkrämer (Braunschweig University of Art/Mainz): Cosmopolitain Figures

Eugen Pfister (Bern University of the Arts): „Don't eat me! I'm a mighty pirate!“ – Cultural Imaginations of Piracy in Video Games

Panel III: Artistic Research

Sybille Peters (Hamburg): Paralogistics – From Somalian Pirates to the African Terminal

Antonia Prochaska (Vienna): „THE MONSTER INSIDE ME“ – 11 dialogues about drastic aesthetics, the fictional monster and boredom in the midst of the apocalypse

Keynote II

Doris Garraway (Northwestern University): Raising the Living Dead in Postrevolutionary Haiti: The Case of the Monarchy of Henry Christophe

General Summary

Jean Comaroff (Harvard University), Alexandra Ganser (University of Vienna), Gudrun Rath (University of Art and Design Linz)

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