

Claudia Breger

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Complexity Soap. Tales of Globalization in René Pollesch's *Tent Saga*¹

René Pollesch has yet to be discovered by North-American based scholars, but I would not hesitate to call him the most interesting playwright and director in contemporary German-language theatre. His unique productions thematize issues of gender, sexuality, and changing social relations in a world of neo-liberalist globalization. The plays are particularly known for the ways in which the actors, who keep a Brechtian distance from the characters impersonated and share some directorial privileges (see Pollesch 182), sample theoretical discourses in stylized multi-media settings (SHOW IMAGE). In the critical reception of Pollesch's theatre, this “discursivity” is usually cast as a move away from narrative, that is: as deconstructing, or even radically undoing, plot as a hierarchical organization and explanation of events, coherence, and closure. There is no doubt that Pollesch's theatre in fact accomplishes such a goal in many ways. Nonetheless, I would like to suggest here that this is only half of his theatre's story, and possibly not its most interesting part.

Pollesch's theatre developed out of a larger German postmodernist avant-garde, which has been dominated by the fight against a “theatre of representation.” The

¹ I would like to thank Heitor Martins for the *in loco* research on the novelas shown during Pollesch's stay in Brazil, and Kathryn Brooks for both bibliographical and linguistic assistance.

proponents of this struggle tend to closely associate representation, as well as the realm of the symbolic in general, with narrative, and to theorize it in opposition to a subversive mode of performance which transgresses the borders of the symbolic through its focus on the body. Often, this promise is also tied to the actual presence of the body of theatre, vis-à-vis its mediation in film, television etc. (see, e.g., Fischer-Lichte). As we will see, Pollesch himself is clearly influenced by this theoretical configuration, and his plays reiterate a critique of narrative, not least in its status as “representation.” At the same time, already Pollesch’s well-known fascination with discourse, that is: language as a medium of working through social configurations, distinguishes him from most of his colleagues in the contemporary German theatre scene (e.g. Castorf, Schlingensiefel). More surprisingly, Pollesch’s plays are also characterized by a multi-faceted return of narrative – as both topic and poetic model. In particular, Pollesch has associated many of his recent works with the genre label “soap,” including the productions from the 2003/2004 globalization tetralogy *Zeltsaga (Tent Saga)* that are at the center of my talk today: *Telefavela* and its two follow-up pieces *Svetlana in a favela*, and *Pablo in der Plusfiliale*, which loosely translates into U.S.-American realities as “Pablo in K-Mart.” *Telefavela* is, of course, a composite of “favela,” that is: a poor, often irregular urban neighborhood, and *telenovela*, the locally as well as internationally successful Latin-American model of television soap opera. Specifically, we are entering the world of Brazilian novelas: Pollesch started writing this series of plays during a stay in Sao Paulo in November/December 2003.

A recent critical article on Pollesch’s theatre discusses his references to television soap as genre “hybridization,” but ends up discarding its importance. As Lengers claims,

Pollesch's project of mixing soap opera and theatre reflects the "post-pure condition" of theatre in the age of media, but is ultimately undertaken in the service of the higher development of the (my word) 'species' of theatre. According to Lengens, Pollesch's plays resemble soap opera only in "superficial" ways; rather than functioning as "an affirmative copy of the television format," they undertake a "subversive medial masquerade" (150). I completely agree that Pollesch's use of soap opera is not "affirmative," but I think that his critical practice is not captured by the implied dichotomy between affirmative television soap and the higher art form of subversive theater performance. As I want to show here, Pollesch in fact uses soap opera as a constitutive element of his work. Mixing the postmodern discontent with narrative with the discontents of an apparently post-narrative condition, he starts developing the genre of the *telenovela* into new forms of narrative, more adequate for the age of what Pollesch analyzes as that of neo-liberalist globalization. In particular, his plays are interested in the ways in which these global changes affect technologies of subjectivity. With its melodramatic focus on issues of love, soap opera is well suited for this project.

Telefavela and its two follow-up pieces quote, and re-play a telenovela, about which we know merely what the performers on stage tell us. (I call them performers in order to designate the interplay between "actor" and "characters" functions that accompanies the plays' constant switching back and forth between performance and commentary modes – more about this in a moment.) Based on the information I was able to gather so far, it seems likely that Pollesch re-arranged individual genre motifs into his own plot rather than substantially referencing a concrete Brazilian telenovela; however, there are some resemblances between his plot and one of the main stories in *Laços de*

Familia (Family Ties), the prime time Globo-channel novela shown while Pollesch was in Brazil. In any case, we are presented with the fiction of a particular novela, that is: with plot fragments and summaries that are connected through names as well as recurring themes.

Repeatedly, the performers introduce each other, respectively the audience to the novela: “This saga is about family members who destroy themselves” (Pollesch 105, see also 76). It is about Pablo, who will inherit a huge empire one day, but who mysteriously disappeared in the favelas as a kid (66), and about “a Contessa who loves Pablo, her subordinate.” He, however, uses his employment with her in order to get hold of her property, “getting around all laws,” and tries to, literally, “leave these crimes open as a possibility of love” (152-3). That is: Pablo argues that he steals her credit cards in order to have something that reminds him of her. Faced with this claim, the *contessa* “slowly goes mad; she cannot think anymore.” (153)

Immediately following this statement, the same player offers a theoretical contextualization of this plot: “While in Eastern Europe, the planned economies have collapsed, in the West, the social treaties, which had been negotiated over several decades, are being canceled.” (153) Unlike the telenovela plot, this statement can be traced back to its source since the print edition of *Tent Saga* explicitly names its theoretical reference points, a selection of essays on economic deregulation, the “informal” organization of contemporary society, and migration. One of these essays, written by two left-wing German political scientists, Altvater and Mahnkopf, offers an explanation for the encompassing geographical gesture performed by the player’s reference to “the West.” Thus, the authors criticize the common narrative that discusses

the “informal sector” of Southern societies in the context of “development” issues, and argue that we should highlight the “dynamic of global transformation” which produces “structural analogies” between this “informal sector’ and the so-called “‘crisis of normal labor conditions’ in what is traditionally understood as the West (20).

With these authors, Pollesch’s play highlights a tale of globalization, without ignoring the importance of local configurations. In his particular social place of informal domestic employment in Brazil, Pablo’s answer to the global “crisis” is a strategy that “some would call a feminization of survival techniques.” He himself calls it “love” (Pollesch 72; see Altvater and Mahnkopf 23). As this act of renaming may suggest, Pollesch’s contemporary world of informal relationships, in which “actionable laws or rules” no longer exist (Pollesch 68), is beyond the reach of what would conventionally be called *true* love stories. “What is it about this true love, of which you keep telling me?” one player asks the other in *Svetlana in a Favela*. “You can tell the same thing over and over again,” the other replies, “but you can’t live anything permanently any longer.” (109) In other words: The story of true love seems to be the paradigmatic victim of a condition beyond story in general. In Pollesch’s plays, the notion of a “coherent life” has become visible as a “phantasm,” (172), and thus, the performers can’t identify with the stories produced by Hollywood: “I can’t pick up the film that is my life at the movies any longer” (129).

Dreamworks, and Disney, make a lot of money with these phantasms of love (116), but the performers insist that if anyone can still tell a story about Pablo’s life, it is not them but the police (129). That is: In the post-narratable condition, narrative seems to win its “real” significance as a technology of discipline. Therefore, Pollesch’s performers

argue for a move away from narrative: “I don’t want to know you as narrative, but as reflection,” in “thinking about you” (129, 116). Reflecting on the production they are engaged in, the performers wonder whether they can show the complexity of real life (69), that is: “how we act as a chaos of technologies.” (172) Certainly, they don’t want to replay the narratives of discipline on stage, since they doubt that a simple declaration of critical intent will in fact change their effects. Thus, the performers declare that they don’t do “representational theater”: “We only *say* this here,” and don’t mimetically embody the events discussed. (164) After all, the “precarious work relationships” of neo-liberal society “simply don’t tell [say] you anything as a narrative.” (164)

However, it is not that easy to get rid of narrative. Its return happens in more than one way. One of these re-entry points is, actually, the very “non-representational” nature of Pollesch’s theatre. Thus, the alignment of mimesis and narrative in the context of the quote I just gave is based on a notion of narrative, or high degrees of narrativity, as speech acts characterized by their focus on a coherent story rather than discourse (see, e.g., Prince). At the same time, this alignment is at odds with a long poetological tradition – from Plato to Genette and beyond – which is based precisely on the opposition between *mimesis* and *diegesis* or also “showing” and “telling” (see Genette, 163). In line with this tradition, one reviewer of *Telefavela* writes that the action is “narrated more than performed” in this play (Mansmann). And she certainly has a point: Pollesch employs Brechtian alienation strategies, namely the use of actors as on stage commentators, in a way that has effects not simply of “mediation,” but of “properly narrative” mediation, for example through the use of the past tense. Thus, the performers establish temporal

coherence and orient the spectator when they introduce the scenario at the beginning of *Telefavela*: “Everything began when Pablo was almost a child still” (66).

But narrative re-enters the stage not only as an alternative to mimesis, it also returns through the latter’s return itself. The performers don’t entirely forego impersonation; rather, they switch back and forth between the modes of commentary and performance and thus do – momentarily, but again and again – impersonate the roles of their soap characters. In articulating their desires, they perform discontent with the diagnosed, and poetologically endorsed, post-narrative condition. Again and again, they talk about their longing for a coherent life, as well as other comforts often associated with narrative: understanding or explanation, documentation of individual lives etc. (see, e.g., 172, 129, 76, 126) etc.

In many passages, these desires are theorized as a nostalgia for a different society that apparently could be narrated, as “old thoughts“ of “old[-style] subjects“ (81, see 87). This rhetoric has tempted critics to charge Pollesch with “cultural pessimism” (Wirth, 130). But it is not quite that simple. First of all, the performers’ desires for a narratable state of affairs are not merely leftovers of another age, but also seem to be produced exactly by the diagnosed post-narrative condition: “This formless shit is so complex, you don’t know the ropes any more and wish for a coherent love story.” (90) Furthermore, the “old” modes of subjectivity are repeatedly marked as “bourgeois phantasms” or “norms” (see, e.g., 110, 123, see 85). Rather than a better past, the nostalgia of Pollesch’s performers seems to reference promises once made by problematic ideological configurations.

At the same time, it would be too easy to assume that overcoming one's nostalgia for narrative is the "politically correct" answer to the neoliberalist condition. In Pollesch's theatrical world, not only narrative, but also its contemporary impossibility is theorized as ideologically suspicious. Thus, one of the performers references another point developed in Altvater's and Mahnkopf's article quoted above, namely that the subject who develops neo-liberalist "technologies of the self" is easily controlled in the sense of Michel Foucault's concept of "gouvernementalité" (28). "I can't be a transparent [*übersichtlich*] subject any longer," she says, "and I don't want to be a complex/opaque [*unübersichtlich*] subject that is well governable" (173, see 114). "That's simply too close to the government's position." (118)

Is there a solution to this dilemma? Possibly, Pollesch's performers suggest, stories could be told in new ways that would make them more appropriate tools of conceptualizing contemporary society and subjectivity. Metonymically displacing the initially developed dichotomy between "story" and "reflection," one of the performers suggests: "I don't want a bullshit story to narrate this, I want my mind to narrate this to me." (166). If narrative can, in fact, mediate critical processes, maybe it is not futile that the contessa, endangered by madness, "tries to create a story that would enable her to understand his [Pablo's] reality." (124) Rather than categorizing his deeds in bourgeois terms of crime and punishment (106), she attempts to make sense of his abusive use of words that don't mean anything to him, like "love" (110). Following his own stories (see 70), she constructs a story in which his misuse of romantic vocabulary wins a new significance as a *catachresis* in the sense developed by Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler,

that is: as an empowering solution to the lack of a literal term for his marginalized desires and survival strategies (see Butler 144, referencing Spivak).

With Pablo and the contessa, Pollesch and his team “invent a story,” something “coherent,” in order to “create an image” of his “reality” (109). Explaining his behaviour as a consequent answer to his situation, they graft a theoretical narrative onto the soap opera plot, and, vice versa, a soap plot onto the theoretical narrative of neoliberalist globalization. Referencing Homi Bhabha, the resulting genre “hybrid” wins its cultural power exactly through the productive, non-harmonizing, negotiation of its divergent elements. On the one hand, it deconstructively robs both the soap story and the theoretical narrative of their respective totalizing claims on the spectators’ minds and fantasies. On the other hand, it combines their respective forces in the construction of a “love story” (121), which, in integrating social analysis, corresponds better to the informal organization of society. “Maybe a love story, in order to fit into the complex informal frame around us, would have to be a story, in which transient characters briefly profit from each other.” (90, see also 115, 117).

Whereas the “bad,” inadequate stories are identified with Hollywood cinema in Pollesch’s plays, these new stories, which try to make sense of social actualities, are associated with alternative film production (Svetlana makes her own films in the favelas, see, e.g., 106). How does the telenovela fit into this picture, which, in the world outside Pollesch’s plays, is dominated by media corporations (with Rede Globo as Brazil’s one major player)? Pollesch’s plays *use* the genre more than they actually analyze it as a media phenomenon, but there is an interesting textual moment in which a player seems to mix up different levels, speaking of “this Brazilian telenovela or investigation of

Brazilian reality” (106). We may be tempted to dismiss this identification as expressing a pre-critical view of media narrative as a representation of social realities. However, it also connects to a growing body of research on Brazilian telenovelas, which, far from endorsing such a pre-critical view, stresses the close, multi-directional interconnections between the worlds of the novelas and those of its viewers, including the flow of fashions as well as the negotiation of topical social issues (e.g. Machado-Borges, Tufte). Unlike North-American soaps, Brazilian telenovelas dominate prime-time television, thus occupying a much more central socio-symbolic place. Also unlike North-American soaps, they prominently feature issues of class conflict, and Pablo embodies one of telenovela’s most prominent hero types: the “malandro,” an “anti-hero from a favela” who “uses his charm on women to get their money” and who is not a revolutionary or rebel, but “a specialist” in escaping the law (Tufte, 98, 103, in part quoting Vink).

But the telenovela’s potential to participate in the negotiation of social realities is based on its serial form as much as its content. Telenovelas are “*open works*,” not fully shot when first opening, they unfold in a process depending on audience response (Tufte, 87). Emphasizing repetitions over simple linearity, they also feature a form of temporality conducive to psychological processes of “working through” issues and fantasies (I would argue that this is a very crucial aspect of Pollesch’s use of the form). Closure, that is the moment of resolution which stabilizes, and privileges, a particular plot move, is deferred seemingly endlessly – although Brazilian telenovelas do end after five to eight months.

Despite Pollesch’s ongoing efforts to serialize theatre, the traditional format of the one evening-show continues to haunt his productions (after all, spectators still need to pay individually for each night at the theatre). Negotiating the conventions of closure vs.

its serial deferral, his performers dramatize the contingency of, as well as the violence implied, in any narrative cut-off: “Why doesn’t anybody tell me when this is over? Why doesn’t anybody tell me: The end, thus, when this is finally over? Is this the end?” (132). And so forth, for another while, until they decide to shoot each other. This “resolution” of *Svetlana in a favela* re-plays the one chosen in *Telefavela*, where all major performers suddenly die in the last five minutes. Such references to tragedy of course violate the genre rules of television soap with its inclination towards happy endings. But importantly, Pollesch does not simply substitute the dream factory’s positive closure with a negative one (see 107). Rather, his transformation of tragedy into farce parodies the notion of resolution itself. In *Telefavela*, characters keep talking after their death, in *Svetlana in a Favela*, the viewer is reminded of the following soap chapter, and *Pablo in der Plusfiliale*, the last part of this series, displaces closure altogether, ending with the performers’ resolution to work on better integrating theory into their lovemaking. The soap opera of neo-liberalist society cannot simply be resolved. --- Thank you.

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