

TO REACH HISTORY, WE NEED IMAGINATION

Interview with Mieke Bal

Interviewer Henri Zeigo

At the beginning of September, the Estonian Literary Museum held the 9th annual conference of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (CEES) under the heading “Perception and Performativity in Arts and Culture in the Age of Technological Change”. During the conference we had a great chance to listen to a presentation by a famous cultural analyst Mieke Bal, who is also well-known for her visual artistic approaches. Mieke Bal works at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) and gives lectures all around the world. Her interventions in visual art have been influential.

Mieke Bal, recently I visited your website and I found that your interests are very widespread, starting with movies, arts, exhibitions, and literature and ending with cultural theories. Why haven't you specialised in a narrower field?

Actually, I am highly specialised, but not in a single field, but in a kind of approach or idea, which is narrative. I have specialised in narratives all my life. That is what I have been doing, looking at narratives in different art forms, languages, and cultural modes.

This also includes disciplines. But you know, disciplines have been created almost arbitrarily as separate departments and approaches, but narrative is everywhere. I am a specialist in narrative. I have to study all these fields, otherwise you might get such a silly idea that only literature has narrative. And that is clearly not true.

We can meet narratives in journalism and television and in everyday uses. For example, when a child comes home from school and tells his or her mother a story about what happened during the school-day. So, narrative is a very important tool for communication.

In fact, I come from literature, but then I discovered that this is not the only place where narrative functions. I have always liked to look around the corner and see what the neighbours do. Should I call myself with one name, I'd call myself a cultural analyst. And artistic work is a part of that.

From an artistic point of view, I can see that visual art is something that is more often represented in your works. Are videos on screens your preferred medium for communicating narratives?

No, not anymore. Originally, I started making videos and documentaries as a way of getting closer to people from other cultures. For instance, I started to make movies of internal migrants inside their own culture, and that helped me to better understand migratory culture. The world changes so quickly whereas publications come out years after writing them. For me making a movie *with* people, instead of *about* people, helps to achieve an interaction that is more intimate than making a survey, observation, or other kinds of academic approaches.

I have visited a lot of museums in Amsterdam. I noticed that many of them use plenty of high-tech solutions and screens to retell a story from the narrator's perspective. Is this a kind of trend that all museums should follow to present their history, the artworks they host, and thereby reach the audience?

I think the problem between art and audience is deeper than what screens can do. Screens can give information, but they cannot make people interact with art more comfortably. And this is why in my presentation I was advocating for changing the museum displays in the sense of theatre, by hanging paintings low and putting seating in front of them – such as benches, so that people can sit and take the time to enjoy art, which is never encouraged in museums. I have had an experience where I could do this in the Munch Museum in Oslo, and it made all the difference. People spent some 20 minutes with a painting. This is a way that looks very different from walking around and taking a snapshot and moving on. It is very important to encourage audiences to take the time to look at paintings they are interested in and do



Photograph by Alar Madisson 2019.

it as long as they feel comfortable. But to do that you must make them feel comfortable enough to make those choices. So this is my intervention, and it is an artistic and social practice in museums at the same time.

I remember that in your presentation you said that, to reach history, we need imagination. Does video art help us go back to history, let's say to the 19th century, and make it more understandable to the audience?

Generally, I think museums and the documentary videos shown are informational. That does not really help us get back to the past. Rather it gives you an idea of what it was like, but it does not make you a part of that. What I try to do with my videos is to make the audience a part of interaction, of staging the past. So, in my work I was not trying to get back there, but rather

to make it come to us. To make the past come to the present and to show the presence of the past.

At this conference you made Don Quixote's story come from the past to the present. Why did you choose this famous piece of literature over many others?

Because of the madness. I think it is a book on and of madness. And "Don Quixote" is about war, violence, and slavery more than about anything else. This is completely the same today. There are over 50 million slaves in the world today; 70 percent of them are women. We do not realize that in Libya there are slave auctions, public sales of slaves today. So "Don Quixote" is about today. In this book there is a story of a man who was on a ship that was going back to Spain after having won a battle, and the ship was taken by corsairs. And this one guy was taken, the rest went on to Spain. So, he became a slave. Now this happened to the author, Cervantes: he was on his way back from the battle and he and his brother were taken in slavery. And this happened in the late 16th century.

This is also happening today, to people who are captured in these boats of immigrants who are crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Either they drown or they are captured, taken back to Libya where they find their way to the slave auctions. I do not know what is worse. So, it is very actual.

In your videos we saw that Sancho was presented as a woman. I assume this choice in the cast was made deliberately, was it not?

Yes, of course. In the novel Sancho Panza is the helper. Someone who is always there when he is needed. Usually Don Quixote is described as a nobleman and Sancho belongs to the working class. So, there is a distinction between classes where Don Quixote criticizes Sancho because of his way of speaking, claiming that he is not sophisticated enough. But in their discussions, Sancho appears to be very smart. So, to use a woman as a Sancho is to do justice to the women who have devoted their lives to supporting their husbands. So many women are being underestimated, because they have sophisticated education. And this character shows that it is not an issue. A woman can also choose to get away from such an old male setting. This woman in the video is from Latin America, which is different from Central Europe, and she has an accent. No matter she is smart and helpful. In this

scene she offers solidarity when Don Quixote needs it, but the main point is that when he collapses, she holds him and shows empathy instead of only helping him technically. On the other hand, it is an allusion to the role of women and also shows that women can do everything. It is very important socially to help in difficult situations.

What do you want to achieve, who do you want to reach with this project?

This project has actually 16 screens [at the conference we saw 4 screens and stories]. This is a massive exhibition. It takes plenty of technology and benches to sit on. It is going to be displayed in its entirety in Sweden and in Spain from the end of October until the holidays in December, and in the UK (Leeds) in January and February. I do not know how far it will take me, but I am going to technically finish it. I will go around and give lectures. My project never really finishes.

I know that you have also studied French. And many actors in these videos were also originally from France. This makes me wonder about your relation to French culture.

It comes from way back when I was a child. My mother could not cope with the family situation, but she had very cultural interests. French chansons was one of the aspects she was interested in. She played these records at home and so I got acquainted with French culture at an early age. When I went to study French, there was no particular reason for that. I just had to get out of home and find an excuse to go to France for holidays. So I said I would study French if I were let go. I was really taken by the idea, because I love this language and I like the sound of it. Therefore, I got hooked on the cultural background. And the literature is beautiful, but this is not what I am particularly interested in. I am also interested in Spanish and English literature. I do not believe in cultural segregation. What I like about being in Europe is our diversity of languages and cultures. It enriches your thoughts, like walking around in Tartu where I have never been. It is a different experience. It adds to my knowledge and insight into a smaller city that has history. I find it more interesting than French.

You have also said you like visiting Nordic countries. Why is that so?

Recently I have been invited to give lectures there. When I gained an international reputation I received invitations from Russia to Scandinavian countries, and I have been to Tallinn earlier. I have worked a lot with Norwegian institutions, such as the Munch Museum, but I also received a very warm welcome in Sweden where they were incredibly receptive to my ideas. I was also in Denmark, so Iceland is the only Nordic country I have not been to. But there are also other places in Europe with which I am happy to collaborate. I enjoy collaboration.

For my work, see my website at **www.miekebal.org**.