

Konferenzen etc.

"Australia – Making Space Meaningful"

A note *on Australia Week* in Hamburg from 3-10 October 2004

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„Far away in Australia“ was the name of Simon Storey’s one-man-piece, which was one ingredient of the opening night of our conference “Australia-Making Space Meaningful” to spice the evening’s program. Talking about food, as we all know, tastes differ. For some members of the audience the actor’s five episodes revolving around the question of what kind of events and ideas shaped ‘the Australian character’ tasted sweet and brought smiles to their faces. For others, I dare to be more specific, by saying predominantly for our Australian guests, Simon Storey’s opening line “I’m an Aborigine” left a sour taste in their mouth for the entire evening. Puzzled, afraid of having insulted our foreign visitors on the very first evening, but curious nevertheless, I inquired into the matter. The following day I questioned individuals regarding their responses to last night’s performance. The simple answer was. “You can’t do that;” that is claiming to be an Aborigine as a white person. That those five episodes cannot offer a sufficient answer to the question why Australians are the way they are and the play therefore has to rely on stereotypes and satire apparently had not been evident (enough). One scene, at the BBQ, was univocally hilarious: a ‘bloke’ wearing a singlet, thongs and a cork hat, tossing things on the barbie, can’t be serious, can it?

Indigenous culture is an important cornerstone of Australia’s identity. Does it mean being a white person does not allow you to talk about indigenous culture at all or was Simon Storey’s approach simply wrong? Another conflict on this issue arose when Dr. Eleonore Wildburger gave a talk on “Creating (intercultural) Spaces” and Dr Anita Heiss challenged her authority in this field – at least recognition of the fact that an indigenous person, this is Dr Anita Heiss, was part of the audience would not only have been appreciated but is standard practice in Australia today. For me, these scenes served as eye-openers to how sensitive the issue of indigenous culture in Australia is.

What also struck me was how far one incident can travel that is to say what wide repercussions it can have. I would like to refer once more to the conference opening. Among to speakers was the Australian Ambassador to Germany, Pamela Fayle. She commenced her speech by apologizing that her knowledge of the German language was not sufficient to give her talk in German and therefore she would deliver her speech in English. This must have left a durable impact on the Australian author Alex Miller, who was part of the audience, as he wrote an article on this event

published in the weekly online magazine *NewMatilda.com*.¹ He suggested in this article to imagine the German ambassador addressing his audience in Australia by stating that he does not speak English. His article again triggered responses from readers for example stating that this comment did not come as a surprise. One reader expressed that the Head of Austrade for Latin America at a function organised by the Australian embassy did not speak Spanish. Moreover, a point also raised by Alex Miller, Pamala Fayle did neither talk about nor talked on behalf of indigenous Australians in her opening address. Is silence the right strategy to deal with indigenous issues? Is it only a touchy topic in academic discourse remote from Australia's daily concerns? The answer has to be no since thinking about it and arguing about it is the starting point far away in Australia or far away from Australia.

Finally, I would like to mention a small number of anecdotal encounters during Australia week in Hamburg more close at hand but nevertheless of great value. For example, there was a trip to the medieval town of Lüneburg with a number of our Australian visitors and students from the University of Hamburg. Observing the landscape from the train window, Alex Miller commented on the various hues of green which, in his view, were so different from Australia. There were lunches and dinners, coffee breaks and functions offering opportunities to continue discussing the meaning of space, to make friends and contacts or to browse through the displayed publications outside the elliptical library of the Warburg-Haus, the venue of the conference. And there was another person with a cork hat; a woman (Wiebke Störtenbecker) delivering not only lyrical words but also a pavlova cake to the conference convenor, Prof. Dr. Gerd Dose, for his birthday

The days were long and short at the same time. Lost in these perceptions of time the conference's focus on how to make space meaningful was illuminated from a great variety of perspectives - ranging from 'enchanted islands', environmental ethics, female space, space on screen, Tiwi Space to a site of Reconciliation. The conference was framed by an exhibition of Tiwi art in the Museum for Ethnology, during which the artist Pedro Wonaeamirri performed and introduced us to the art of body painting. Although his journey from Melville Island north of Darwin to Hamburg as well as coping with the impressions of the urban environment and the demanding time schedule of the conference must have been exhausting, Pedro seemed to develop a sense of belonging, of feeling at home when he was mixing his natural colours and painting his wooden sculptures. He was able to create an atmosphere of tranquillity through his painting and his comments on what he was doing. It is these engagements with, through and in space(s) that reverse the notions of distance and closeness and allow for an approximation.

¹ Miller, Alex (22 December 2004) "The New Imperium" website:
<http://www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetailmagazine.asp?ArticleID=278&CategoryID=39>