

Tradition as Trade Mark.

Politics of the Oberammergau Passion Play

Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation, Nymphenburg Castle (Munich), 12.–14. Sept. 2018

Conference report

(Jan Mohr, Céline Molter, Dominic Zerhoch)

With its nearly 400 years of passion and theatre history and its touristic significance, Oberammergau is repeatedly addressed in different research contexts. However, hitherto there are hardly any cooperations or even a constant discussion context on this topic. The international and interdisciplinary conference "Tradition as Trade Mark" was organised by the PIs of the DFG funded project "The Village of Christ. Institutional Theoretical and Functional Historical Perspectives on Oberammergau and its Passion Play in the 19th to 21st Centuries" and was hosted by the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation, Munich.

Looking ahead to the next passion play season in 2020, the organisers, the PIs Jan Mohr and Julia Stenzel as well as the project team members Céline Molter and Dominic Zerhoch, aimed to include as many different professional perspectives as possible in the discussion: The conference participants from Germany, England and Israel represented the research areas of theatre studies, performance studies, German studies, political science, religious studies, Protestant theology, modern European history and ethnology. The conference languages were German and English. The programme was complemented by a public roundtable discussion at the Jewish Museum in Munich and a public evening lecture by Otto Huber, the longstanding second director of the Passion Play.

In their opening statement, **Julia Stenzel** and **Jan Mohr** discussed the title of the conference. In "Tradition as Trade Mark", two terms are combined, each of which is suitable for itself to indicate the tension structure in the Oberammergau Play. In 'Tradition', the relationship between the centuries-long continuity of the play and the constant work on redesign and updating is addressed. Thus, change in a paradoxical construction contributes to ensuring and stabilizing continuity first and foremost. The metaphor 'trade mark' can be associated with moments of recognition, expectability and reliability, but also with quality standards that can assume the character of unique selling points. The economic and legal contexts called for in the English 'trade mark' are not unfounded either, insofar as the self-description of the play as a genuinely aneconomical affair generates an economically effective and globally successful 'trade mark' on the one hand, and makes strategic marketing for self-preservation necessary on the other.

In the following opening lecture **Julia Stenzel** (Theatre Studies, University of Mainz) discussed the representation of passion in film. She started from the basic assumption that although Oberammergau's filmic representation does achieve evocation, the 'bodily' evidence of the place - and of the Passion Play, for which, moreover, a film ban had always

been in place - is not accessible to the recipient. Early American Passion Play film adaptations ('hagiopics') from around 1900 attempted to establish a claim to authenticity, among other things by showing footage of everyday scenes from Oberammergau. In her intermedial analysis, Stenzel traced how the new medium of film and the new viewing habits established also changed the way Passion play actors were portrayed in souvenir photographs.

The second speaker in the first panel was the political scientist **Mariano Barbato** (University of Münster), who, based on Andreas Reckwitz's singularity model contrasted Oberammergau with the (current) papacy as singularities. In this perspective, both institutions consistently work on validating the plausibility of their uniqueness. On this basis, Barbato asked why both had a pronounced constancy – which also means that they were successful in their aspirations – and worked out structural parallels but also differences in the respective possibilities and strategies of a self-removal. In particular, the question of the comparability of the papacy and Oberammergau with his Passion play as institutions provoked a lively discussion.

In the evening, the conference participants met at the Jewish Museum Munich for a public **roundtable discussion** led by the curators Marie-Luise Wallis and Jutta Fleckenstein. For 2020, the Jewish Museum is planning an exhibition on the tableaux vivants of the Passion Play, which, as a formative part of the Oberammergau productions work like Old Testament prefigurations. In the run-up to the exhibition, an exchange with the organizers and participants of the conference had been arranged with the curators. The event was also attended by Otto Huber, second director of the past three Passion Play seasons, and Constanze Werner and Andrea Sorg from the Oberammergau Museum. In particular Otto Huber's emotional pleas for the recognition of the efforts since 1990 to ban anti-Jewish contents from the Passion play made clear the explosiveness of the living images for the interreligious reception of the play and the necessity of dealing with its discursive function. This also raised the question to which extent the Living Images in Oberammergau can still be understood in their function as pre-figurative interpretations of Christian salvation, given an increasingly eroding knowledge of the Bible in today's society. In the didactic framework of the planned museum exhibition, according to one of the discussion results, the aesthetic texture and quality of the Living Pictures could also be emphasized.

Joshua Edelman (Religion Studies/Performance Studies, University of Manchester) opened the second day of the conference with a lecture on Anglophone perspectives on the passion play in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In his broad historical and geographical overview, he traced how the Passion play from Catholic Bavaria was reinterpreted and made consumable by (and for) the predominantly Protestant Anglophone visitors.

Dominic Zerhoch (Theatre Studies, University of Mainz) traced the spatial representation of Oberammergau in travel brochures of the 1934 Passion Play. In an extended scenographic perspective, he showed how textual and pictorial strategies ascribed specific characteristics to the already hybrid space, thus evoking ideas ("geo-code") and

generating expectations even before the physical appropriation of space. This allowed various actors to characterize Oberammergau as a Catholic place of pilgrimage, but also as the destination of an alpine adventure holiday, and to instrumentalize it for propagandistic purposes, thus addressing heterogeneous target groups.

Sharon Aronson-Lehavi (Performance Studies, Tel Aviv University) brought about a change of perspective. She opened her lecture with film scenes from a documentary showing the 2010 Passion Players visiting the Holy Land. The lecture dealt critically with the "Judaization" of the 2010 Passion Play, which staged the Last Supper as a Passover. Aronson-Lehavi also traced a historical excursion the representation of Jewish religious performances in the medieval Passion Play. As an outlook, she presented various depicted and photographic confrontations with Passion motifs by Israeli artists.

Based on the Oberammergau Passion Play, **Toni Bernhart** (German Studies, University of Stuttgart) discussed and deconstructed the term 'Volksschauspiel' (community play), which is common in cultural studies. Although it can be intuitively understood in a pre-scientific sense, it has not yet been systematically and descriptively clarified. Precisely because the Oberammergau Passion has always been cited as a prime example of a folk play, Bernhart used it to show how little the assignments of this label were coordinated in the tradition of German Studies and its prehistory in the 18th and 19th centuries. The lecture also pointed out the discrepancy between scientific categorizations, which are subject to genuine writing, and oral traditions. However, the subsequent discussion was particularly raised by the vagueness – and thus also the specific efficiency – of an attribution of "old". Conceived in the sense of 'pre-historic' or 'pre-historiographical' (which is, evading historiographical determination of origin), the attribute of age, which has advanced to become an essential characteristic and unique selling point of the Oberammergau Passion tradition, can serve various expectations and is open to different cultural-historical modellings.

Céline Molter (Ethnology, University of Munich / University of Mainz) presented impressions and observations from her current ethnographic research in Oberammergau. In her talk she analyzed the casting of actors for the Passion Play 2020, which took place in summer 2018. Using the example of the media reception of the 'Wilhelm Tell' production of 2018, she described the multilayered production of space and meaning in the Passion Play Theatre in the run-up to the coming Passion Play season. and showed how the preparation for an actor's choice for Passion Play took place as an interplay of on- and off-stage discourses. The tendencies that became clear during the 'Wilhelm Tell' performances have been confirmed, as we know by now, insofar as the players who were cast for prominent roles will also occupy important leading roles in the 2020 Passion.

In a panel dealing with fictional literature on Oberammergau, **Martin Leutzsch** (Protestant Theology, University of Paderborn) provided an overview of the fictional narrative texts throughout Europe referring to the Oberammergau Passion Play or other Passion Plays. Based on this overview, which was stupendous in its very breadth and unprecedented so far, he reconstructed commonalities of literary Passion Play constructions in a discourse-historical approach. The leading question aimed at moments of similarity between the

respective Christ actor and his 'historical' model. Such parallels can be designed not only in a physical sense, but also as a personal attitude and can also lead to social marginalization. Leutzsch laid a focus on historically changing ideals of masculinity. In a gender-theoretical perspective, he showed how in the Passion Play texts historical ideas of Jesus and the fictional construction of the Jesus actors converge. Jesus' succession, it could be summed up, is designed in the Passion Play stories as a performance achievement, in the narrated play itself as well as beyond it.

With Hans Blumenberg's study "Arbeit am Mythos" ('Working on the myth') as a starting point, **Jan Mohr** (Medieval German Studies, University of Munich) discussed a narrower section of the fictional narrative texts on Oberammergau. Blumenberg determines the myth in its cultural functional value, which lies in the fact that the myth orders the disordered and unmanageable diversity of the world and makes it accessible to description. In this sense, Jan Mohr interpreted various approaches to the Oberammergau theme as work on the unclarified origins and institutional tensions of the Passion Play. For example, the tradition of the historical persons who brought the plague into the village provides contradictory information. A group of literary debates with Oberammergau begins with these contradictions by inserting the historical persons into fictional stories and thus making suggestions 'how it could have been' (Luis Trenker, *The Miracle of Oberammergau* [1960]; Bernard Newman, *Death in the valley* [1934]). When the unity of village and passion play already represents an established institution, it can embody cultural-critical alternative concepts, which in turn can be used for moralizing and ultimately restrictive role, family, and social models. This is the case in a post-war narrative explicitly addressed to the "youth" (Elisabeth Dreisbach, *Cornelia experiences Oberammergau* [1952]).

The second conference day was completed by a public evening lecture. The organizers attracted **Otto Huber**, second play director of the past three seasons, for a lecture on continuity and change in the Oberammergau Passion Play. Huber is not only the author of scientific and popular publications on the Passion play, but has also been rooted in the Oberammergau play tradition for generations. Thus, his lecture brought an emic perspective into the conference participants' more distanced debate on Oberammergau. The ensuing lively discussion made once again clear the multilayered importance of the Oberammergau Passion for the villagers and the polyphonic attitudes it provokes. At the same time, there were indications that the term "Trade Mark" chosen for the conference title was entirely dependent on the view of the beholder and could suggest an intentionality that might not do justice to the discursive and functional historical plurality of the play in its historical dimension.

The last day of the conference was opened by **Robert Priest** (Modern European History, Royal Holloway University, London) with a lecture that, based on thorough archival work, reconstructed the manifold and changing forms of alliances that could be formed in the debate about the Passion Play and its performance. In three synchronous cuts, Priest analyzed the social and institutional tensions that characterized the Oberammergau Passion

Play in the 19th century – among the citizens as well as between parish, church, the various legal institutes, the (free) state Bavaria, and the Bavarian king. In 1829 a parish priest vehemently protested against the performance of the play and won the archdeacon and the regional court for his position, which the village community countered with a letter to the state government in Munich. In 1860, in an effort to make a serious impression on foreign visitors, the text produced by Alois Daisenberger in 1850 was revised once again; finally, in 1890, the Gospel tradition and the ecclesiastical-theological position were opposed to the local traditions in Oberammergau and the Daisenberger version of the text, and again the village was able to assert itself against demands for a revision. The village community's consistent reference to its own tradition can be interpreted as an argumentative strategy to preserve autonomy in dealing with its own passion play – a perspective that could easily be extended to developments in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The final lecture of the conference was given by **Evelyn Annuß** (Theatre Studies, Free University of Berlin). She investigated how discursive-structural moments of the Passion Play were taken up as a quotation of form in the Thing plays of the Nazi era. In the focus on Christ as the pastoral father figure, the functional role of the antagonist is omitted, whilst the people take this place; the opposition of father figure and broad mass leads to a verticalization of the drama-internal communication. In this structure of a pastoral dramaturgy the planners of the Thingspiele could perceive impulses for their concept of mass affirmation and human leadership. Just like the Passion Play at least suggests the abolition of a boundary between players and spectators, the Thingspiele aimed at performative inclusion, which was meant to serve the participative integration regime in the sense of Nazi ideology. The organizers of the Thingspiele were also able to see offers in the Passion Play in the sense of disciplining techniques: The fact that drinking, smoking and applause were explicitly undesirable – albeit not to be suppressed – was intended to steer the perception away from individual needs and towards the depicted homogenized mass in which a homogenized popular body was pre-figured. The fact that the concept of the Thingspiele ultimately failed after a short time was less due to problems of technical implementation than to the exaggerated claim of the theatre people who wanted to use too large a space. Nevertheless, during the consolidation phase of Nazi power, important functional loans could be made to the Oberammergau Passion Play before the cinema was largely established as the new leading medium of Nazi propaganda from 1936 onwards.

In a final discussion moderated by the project group, individual aspects of the conference discussions were taken up again. The participants also asked themselves what role their own research might have in the understanding of Oberammergau as a trade mark. In particular, the attribution 'old' was dealt with in recourse to Toni Bernhart's lecture on folk theatre, the specification of which as pre-historiographical has advanced to an essential characteristic and unique selling point of the Oberammergau Passion.

The organizers look back on a successful conference which allowed for a productive interdisciplinary exchange. Nevertheless, it has also shown that the phenomenon of

Oberammergau in its complexity has by no means been discussed conclusively. The conference, whose papers are to appear in an English conference volume, can only represent an approach for the further measurement of the thematic field.