

ITEMP – Imagineering violence: Techniques of Early Modern Performativity in the Northern and Southern Netherlands 1630-1690.

Introduction of topic

Our project concerns the cultural representation of violence in the Low Countries and its relation to theatrical techniques, in the period between 1630-1690. The project has two foci: 1) the (technical) staging of violence within actual theater plays, 2) the theatrical representation of violence in public spaces. The latter concerns both the theatricalisation of actual violence (e.g. executions), and the theatrical representation of violence in visual media and at public events (e.g. etchings, royal entries). Both subprojects will investigate similarities and differences between the Northern and Southern Netherlands, as well as those between the secular and religious sphere in both areas.

While the Low Countries of the 17th century had left behind most of the gruesome violence as executed in the early stages of the Dutch Revolt, violence was still a major theme throughout many spheres of society. The theater was an important place where views on violence were both confirmed and contested. Through contestation specifically, theater plays could function as a way by which new worlds could be imagined. Reality, how it was depicted on stage, and the public's expectations and perception of both, interplayed with each other incessantly. This process is captured in our term 'imagineering' - a combination of *imagining* and *engineering* - pointing to the claim that theater and its techniques are not only representing, but also shaping the cultural framework of a society.

We want to structure the analyses of the practice of 'imagineering' along the axis of several themes that as yet seem to be central to the cultural representation of violence: secularization, exotification, scientific impact, and market incentives. There are many changes in the attitudes towards violence in the 17th century, and the challenge is to incorporate these in an analyses of theater and theater-techniques. Significant changes are amongst others: the end of mutilation accompanying non-capital punishments by 1650 in Amsterdam, the end of the intra-European religious wars and a greater focus on warring 'non-European' states, the rising importance of the siege as Europe's central battlefield, and new views on the experience of pain and suffering. In the field of theater, violence was a popular subject in plays that drew on the new technical possibilities to create awe-inspiring spectacles. These were directed at immersing the public through a multi-medial stimulation of the senses. Even though by the end of the century classicist thought gained importance in the theater, such plays didn't lose any of their attraction to the spectators and were still being performed regularly.

Currently, we are looking at two 'test' cases. For the public sphere this is the triumphal entry of Cardinal-infante Ferdinand in Antwerp (1635). It will be studied along issues concerning the secular-religious divide, as well as the exotification of violence. The imagining of violence is ambiguous in this case. For one, the entry borrows violent imagery from the ancient Roman column in order to portray Ferdinand as the classical triumphator. The arch dedicated to him is adorned with broken prisoners of war, the trampled corpses of enemy soldiers, and weapon trophies adorned with impaled heads. Yet the following arch, depicting the Temple of Janus, also lamented the horrors of war, making use of the same violent imagery. Secondly there were many references to the violence of the classical triumph throughout the entry, but the

use of actual severed heads and prisoners was now reduced to their theatrical equivalent. Furthermore the way in which these trophy heads refer to public executions of criminals on the one hand, and co-construct the narrative of a non-christian, Ottoman enemy on the other, can serve as an example for how the imagery of violence shows contrasting meanings which are interwoven within a broader cultural framework.

The second case now, for theater, is Govert Bidloo's, *Het Zegepraalende Oostenryk, of verovering van Offen* (1686), on the fall of Ottoman Buda to the Habsburg army. Here the same tendency to simultaneously honor the conqueror and to lament the consequences of violence can be found. Both are imbedded in a complex of perspectives and verbalized by personifications whose monologues are alternated with *tableaux vivants*, in a total of five acts. Whereas personifications are usually involved in action and dialogue, and *tableaux* help the spectators to interpret them along rhetoric principles, this play turns the dynamic around. Bidloo does what he is famous for, staging a spectacle. But the monologues offer an ingenious web of opinions, balancing between honoring and criticizing triumphant Austria. At the same time, the 'othering' of the muslim enemy is surprisingly not fully exploited. We will study the importance of these particularities, along with the processes of identification that were aimed at, and the way in which bodily immersion was put to use.

As to the central concept to our study, violence, we are still looking into creating a working definition without getting lost in strictly theoretical works. There's the distinction between the Dutch 'geweld', relating to the old-Germanic word for (military) might, and the English 'violence', relating to the Latin 'violare' - to infringe upon, to cross a border. As of now, our selection is mostly limited to physical violence inflicted upon bodies, as well as enslavement and imprisonment. However, the focus will remain on the body rather than on relying on Bourdieu's view of 'symbolic violence' (imposition of norms by dominant class on others, focusing on discourse - see also Gramsci).