

From:

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Chaos in the Contact Zone

Unpredictability, Improvisation and the Struggle for Control in Cultural Encounters

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Cultural encounters are often being stylized not only as experiences of uncontrollability and unpredictability par excellence, but also as challenges to planning and predicting. The history, the different forms and the consequences of this phenomenon are the main issues discussed in this volume. The contributions show that chaos and control are not mutually exclusive in the “contact zone” (Mary Louise Pratt); on the contrary, they stand in relation to each other – be it as a competence or as an interpretive scheme.

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The Emergence and Domestication of Chaos in the Contact Zone

“The Rusty Giant from Rostock” or the “Koloss von Züros”

STEPHANIE WODIANKA

RÉSUMÉ

Ces réflexions introductoires se basent sur l’analyse du projet d’art »Zürich transit maritim«. Il nous servira d’exemple pour démontrer les interrelations entre improvisation et contrôle dans le contexte d’une rencontre qui résulte dans un »chaos arrangé« : La grue rostockienne au Limmatkai de Zurich crée un lieu de contact entre le maritime et l’alpine, le socialisme et le capitalisme, l’art et le pragmatisme, entre »Heidiland« et »Ostseeküste«.

In her path-breaking book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt¹ introduced the resonant term “contact zones”, which she defined as

social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today. (4)

The work across disciplines on contact zones, borderlands, transculturation, migration, cultural and commercial traffic have expanded the term far beyond

1 Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Pratt's original formulation, and the focus on contact zones is indeed gaining new attention these days through the migrations to Europe.

With our book "Chaos in the Contact Zone: Unpredictability, Improvisation and the Struggle for Control",² that originated at the eponymous conference at the Graduate School "Cultural Encounters and Discourses of Scholarship" (Rostock University), we aim to accentuate a special aspect of contact zones: the interrelations between and the staging of control, unpredictability and improvisation. Cultural encounters are repeatedly depicted as experiences of uncontrollability and unpredictability par excellence, but also as challenges to planning and predicting. The history, the different forms and the consequences of this phenomenon shall be at the heart of the articles. In contact zones and in the discourse about them, narratives and interpretive schemes design cultural encounters in the way that they predict confrontations with the unpredictable. On the one hand, the (paradoxical) prediction of the unpredictable may give way to a potential threat; on the other hand, it helps actors to declare a state of exception that legitimizes their behaviour. For the travelled and travellers, the explored and explorers, the contact zone becomes a topos of probation, in which improvisation seems to be the key skill in the struggle for control. In the same way, narratives and images that illustrate individual and collective abilities to cope with the unpredictable influence such interpretive and evaluative retrospectives on cultural encounters.

Cultural encounters continually elicit an impulse or represent a laboratory for control, prudence and planning. This concerns, for example, strategies in diplomatic encounters or warfare, medicine and genetics, educational concepts and legislation, travel guides and oracles. The prescient or retrospective struggle for control can also take on forms that are unpredictable and unexpected and thus cause chaos. Chaos and control are not mutually exclusive in the contact zone; on the contrary, they stand in relation to each other – be it as a phenomenon, a competence or an interpretive scheme.

Our book seeks to understand the cultural evaluation of chaos and control, (un-)predictability and improvisation. In order to closely examine topical and contemporary role allocations – for example the roles of imperial 'benefactors'

2 The coordination of the conference in September 2015 was realized by Dr. Andrea Zittlau and Jakob Peter, thank you so much for your engagement! Without the precious, competent and reliable editorial assistance of Dr. Tanja Schwan, Julian Mark Ihling and Jule Stein the publication of this volume would not have been possible. Furthermore, we want to thank Susannah Ewing Bölke for the highly professional and thorough proofreading.

and the opposing ‘conquered’ – it is necessary to integrate culturally specific codes and interpretive schemes into our reflections and to ask for different perspectives.

Whether ‘random’ cultural encounters gain or lose value through their lack of planning and prediction depends on their culture-historical evaluations and aesthetic representations. Moreover, the prophetic or teleological framing of narratives of cultural encounters may lead to re-evaluation and legitimacy as well as devaluation. Connotations of chance and planning, spontaneity and predictability, are culturally and historically diverse.

I will give an example for this – a recent one which is connected to our university town, to Rostock: the art project “Zürich transit maritim”.³ As everybody will notice upon entering the city, the harbour loading cranes characterize our region’s maritime landscape and are symbols of two things: one the one hand they represent both the marine heritage of our Baltic city, so that local and regional associations have their sights on preserving the coastal landscape in its natural and ecological aspects, as well as its maritime infrastructure, that is, those port facilities that represent Rostock’s military and particularly economic importance thanks to the city’s location at the Baltic Sea. That these facets are likely to be basis for conflict is obvious. The protection of the coast and its landscape collides frequently with the interest of preserving or restructuring the harbour facilities. On the other hand, Rostock’s loading crane symbolically represents a nostalgia for the former GDR or, au contraire, memories of the economic and ideological downfall of its regime and its shipyards at the Baltic Sea: the crane in Rostock’s Neptun shipyard is rusting away, is not moving and working any more; it is unemployed just like many of workers who used to be employed at the shipyard. It is a memorial for them, some of whom are not quite sure anymore, thinking back, whether the Turnaround improved their lives or made them worse.

Often, such a ‘heritage’ both fulfils the function of cultural memory and embodies underlying values, norms and identities. It connotes a certain relation to time, that is, a special relation to the past and to the future, and the wish to withstand and resist time. The familiar sense of inheriting something or someone establishes contact between people: sometimes it is the occasion for a family to reunite, sometimes it invokes conflicts. The same is true for cultural heritage: it can be the starting point for cooperation, but also the reason for conflict, compe-

3 See the documentation of the project on “Zürich Transit Maritim.” 6 October 2016. <http://www.zurich-transit-maritim.ch/de/ahoi/> and “Zürich Transit Maritim.” 6 October 2016. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zürich_Transit_Maritim.

tion and even destruction. The duty to preserve, the right to preserve, the object of preserving and the question of how to preserve well, can give reasons for 'chaos in the contact zone'. Heritage is not a fact, but rather always a personal, legal or cultural construction of being involved in or connected to something. In this sense, heritage is always 'invented tradition'. Heritage brings not only people and cultures, but also facts and fictions together: and that is why art is an important agent of memory, and of 'controlling' the past or of making it unpredictable.

In 2014, while the local inhabitants of Rostock were arguing whether the harbour cranes were worth being preserved as maritime heritage or whether they were just eyesores preventing nature from naturally growing over the GDR past, the Swiss artist, Jan Morgenthaler, had one of the 90-tonne, rusty cranes transported from Rostock to Zurich and rebuilt in the core of the city at the Limmat Quay in front of the Town Hall Café. The costs of the project were about 700,000 Swiss francs. The crane added a new aesthetic dimension to Zurich, a dimension that did not fit obviously into the heritage of Heidi's home country. Rostock's newspapers as well as national and international ones reported about it as "Der Koloss von Züros"⁴ and the "Rusty Giant of Rostock". "Zürich transit maritim" is the name of this project which founded a fictional and factual Swiss-German, maritime-alpine contact zone.

4 "Koloss von Züros: Rostiges aus Rostock polarisiert." *Baublatt* 23 April 2014. 6 October 2016. <http://www.baublatt.ch/aktuelles/news/koloss-von-zueros-rostiges-aus-rostock-polarisiert>.

Illustration 1: “Im Gegenlicht der strammen Grossmünstertürme: Zürichs Hafenkran”



Source: Bühler, Urs “Zürcher Hafenkran ist errichtet. Er steht.” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 17 April 2014. 13 February 2017 <https://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/er-steht-1.18285953>.

The crane was not all, though. Six months before, four huge bollards had been embedded in concrete – or as they say ‘archeologically laid open’ and from the roof of a 126-meter high-rise building a horn had been roaring every other day at a volume of 143 decibels and a reach of 17 km. This sonorous sound turned the stomach of Zurich’s inhabitants and appeared to announce the arrival of a deep-sea ship. The website and open-air events invited renowned scientists and experts to declare the maritime objects (bollard, horn, crane) to be finds from an almost forgotten past: a pseudo-archeological background had been uncovered, which, at the same time, founded an archaeology of the future. According to the initiators of the project, mysteries of the past were not to be solved, but surprises could be expected. The artist affirmed that the project did not answer the question of when ships sailed to Zurich, but raised the question of when ships will come in. The ‘predicted unpredictability’ was part of the project from its beginnings.

On the one hand side, the project draws on Zurich’s prehistoric sea location: some 30 millions years ago, the region around Zurich was covered by a sea. On the other hand, it brings up Zurich’s function as *entrepôt*, which existed until the end of the 19th century.

These attempts to make Zurich an *entrepôt* between the North Sea and the Mediterranean were most influential in the 20th century (Teuscher)⁵, evoking pseudo-archeological explanations, thus the project's title: "Zürich transit maritim". In the 1920's and 30's this vision did not back away from almost anything, as a historical photo collage from 1938 shows. Black smoke is emitting from an ocean steamer that is approaching Zurich's old city centre. Without any irony or explanation of how the steamer got there, the caption says: "He who has no part of the sea, has no part of the world's best things."

In the transcultural context between Rostock and Zurich, the title word "transit" in the name of the art project connotes not only the maritime visions of the 1930s but also something different that is linked to our current interest: "transit" was nearly impossible in the GDR, and especially at Rostock Port where the crane originally stood – it was a highly controlled contact zone. From 1961 to 1989, the area around the port was hermetically fenced off in order to demarcate borderland. At the same time, it was one of the few intercultural places in GDR. The installation thus shows: maritime heritage changes according to its location, to its cultural context and in transcultural transition. It is able to link two seemingly opposing worldviews. In Rostock, the crane represents maritime heritage as well as the bankrupt GDR shipyards and unemployed workers; in Zurich, the crane is maritime heritage that was 'excavated' thanks to Swiss multi-millionaires.⁶

The Zurich crane is an *Ossi*, a citizen of the ex-GDR: as a three-legged socialist in the capitalist capital of banks, the crane led to many conflicts. Discussions about the loading crane from Rostock gained unpredictable dynamics and an intensity that not only surprised the artist himself, but also went beyond every expectation the art project had aimed for: is it art, or is it dust? How far can art go? What is art allowed to do? Does it destroy Zurich's cityscape? Is it justified to spend so much money on a rusty object? Is this maritime 'Ossi-object' able to put into question all the values that Switzerland stands for? Is it a 'guilty' object, because of its use in the weapons industry? All these questions fired the discussion about the "rusty giant from Rostock" or the "koloss von Züros".

5 Teuscher, Andreas. *Schweiz am Meer. Pläne für den 'Central-Hafen' Europas inklusive Alpenüberquerung mit Schiffen im 20. Jahrhundert*. Zürich: Limmat Verlag, 2014.

6 The Stadtrat Martin Waser invested 120.000 Franken to make the project safe. The relevant SMS-communication with his wife is public, cf. "Zürich Maritim eine Liebesgeschichte" 6 October 2016. <http://www.zurich-transit-maritim.ch/de/ahoi/zurich-maritim-eine-liebesgeschichte/>.

But in the end the harbour crane disappeared from Zurich. “Zürich transit maritim” was an ephemeral project. All the archaeological finds were intended from the beginning to disappear again in 2015. As planned, the portal crane in Zurich’s city centre was dismantled – on January 19th, 2015 it disappeared from the cityscape. With the help of several construction cranes and experts from Rostock, it was scraped and melted down. That was to be expected. As a work of art, as a performative contact zone, it is still expressing a potential, a tense atmosphere of unpredictability and struggle for control. By the way, also the Eiffel Tower in Paris was intended to be demolished after the World Exhibition of 1889. Sometimes the motivation for artistic creation is not to last for eternity, but rather to address destruction, to domesticate it by controlled demolition planning it. The ephemerality is also part of the professional and profitable merchandise campaign of ‘Zürich transit maritim’, which by selling souvenirs overcomes its own paradox: inhabitants and tourists who care to preserve this cultural heritage can purchase coat hooks and handles in the shape of miniature bollards, paper cranes for home crafting and sea salt. A Swiss columnist⁷ comments on it:

Devant la grue de Rostock, l’occasion peut-être de se demander pourquoi les Zurichois ont une telle envie de prendre le large [...] pour un moment, pour jouer. Seraient-ils saisis d’un léger ennui à l’idée de célébrer *ad vitam aeternam* le modèle helvétique figé dans la perfection? Qu’ils prennent garde cependant: les saltimbanques troublent parfois les certitudes.⁸

The project took on a momentum of its own and received surprising reactions: a motion submitted by the national conservative, right-wing populist party SVP kept the city of Zurich busy for weeks. According to the motion, any port material such as cranes, bollards or horns should be legally and forever forbidden to enter the city again; the ‘maritime’ should never again be a fictional or a factual part of the cityscape; *tabula rasa* for further maritime-alpine cultural contact: struggle for control. Shortly after, Zurich’s inhabitants voted on the motion.

7 Pilet, Jacques. “La chronique de Jacques Pilet: Zurich sur mer.” *L’hebdo* 13. March 2014. 20 November 2016. <http://www.hebdo.ch/hebdo/opinions/detail/zurich-transat-maritim-projet-artistique>.

8 “In front of the crane, you have to ask yourself why the Zurichers feel so much like taking to their heels [...] for a moment, as a game only. Is this supposed to mean that they are bored with celebrating *ad vitam aeternam*, the Swiss model of perfection? They should be a careful: entertainers do sometimes unsettle certitude.” (Translation: Christoph Behrens)

In a panel discussion that took place at the end of the art project in order to again summarize the different positions, a second incident happened that represents potential of “Zürich transit maritim” and the relation between control and improvisation. The artist Jan Morgenthaler was subjected to a vehement verbal attack because of his art project by SVP president Mauro Tuena. Morgenthaler did not reply to the insults nor did he argue with him, au contraire: he spontaneously thanked Tuena for his passionate resistance during the previous months. He and his party had become part of “Zürich transit maritim”.

You were like a lighthouse for us, Mr. Tuena, a reliable companion. It is something unique, Mr. Tuena, you became a work of art yourself. Whatever you may say, you are part of the project. (Rohrer)⁹

Art is not only able to evoke unpredictable, dynamic discussions, art is also able to domesticate the momentum of its own critics by appropriating their critique. In this case, opponents became teammates in the board game called contact zone that revolved around the harbour crane.

Art – in its literary, performing, painted or musical forms – sets the stage for unpredictability, improvisation and control. Improvisation has indeed become the expression of artistic genius since the 19th century: one who plays an instrument very well knows how to improvise. In Germaine de Staël’s novel *Corinne ou l’Italie* from 1817, there is a very famous scene, to such an extent that Francois Gérard and many others have painted it: the main character Corinne, a *poeta laureata*, comes to painfully realize that her intercultural love to the English Lord Oswald of Nelville is impossible because the latter has already given his promise to an English lady and Corinne, herself half Italian, half English, seems not to fit into the cultural conventions. Corinne’s struggle for control in her intercultural love relation within a contact zone is an improvised lyre-song at the Cap de Misène. Improvisation becomes in this way an expression of the desire for the unpredictable, and at the same time for utmost domestication and control – even and especially in contact zones.

9 Rohrer, Jürg. “Die Heftigkeit überraschte alle.” *Tagesanzeiger* 14 January 2015. 20 November 2016. <http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/zuerich/stadt/Die-Heftigkeit-ueber-raschte-alle/story/14134381>.

I will leave my art perspective on our topic here to prepare the stage for the variety of other perspectives represented by the articles of this volume:

The importance of narratives of origin as hermeneutic instruments of control in contact zones is shown by **Nathan Wachtel** (Paris). The confusing new geographical knowledge and the encounter with the unknown American people led Europeans of the age to integrate them into biblical narrations: the “Theory of the Jewish Indian” offered an explanation for the existence of the ‘discovered world’ and its inhabitants by declaring the Native Americans to be descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The American population became part of the narrated and predicted history of humanity in the holy scripture. This colonial appropriation of the New by the Old World is on one hand a typical and sad example of colonial hegemonies. On the other hand the “Theory of the Jewish Indian” is – compared to scientific discourse since the middle of the 19th century – a narrative that accorded some dignity to the Native Americans, often negated by the successive social theories and their established hierarchies of races and cultures.

The early modern theories proposed to explain the origins of the Andean populations are also in the centre of interest of **Peter Burschel’s** (Göttingen/Wolfenbüttel) article. His starting point is the book “Miqweh Israel” (“The Hope of Israel”), written by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israël in 1650, which identifies the inhabitants of America as descendants of the Hebrews. Burschel focuses here on a special phenomenon: the interpretations of their appearance and the attribution of ‘whiteness’ and ‘purity’. He demonstrates that the perceived reliability of the narrated cultural, ethnic and religious continuity was basically grounded on the white skin of the supposed Hebrews which seemed to make evident a ‘pure’ cultural reproduction.

Olaf Reis’ (Rostock) starting point is the contact zone that came into existence when the wall came down between East and West Germany. As he shows in his article “Islands in the Maelstrom – East German Families Coping with Chaos in the Unification Contact Zone”, many East Germans experienced this kind of social change as ‘chaos’ requiring new cultural practices. The interview-based analysis of family narrations focuses on parent-child relations and on the impact of the balance of relatedness and separatedness between the family and society. The article shows the functionality and variety of family relationships and their narratives for the struggle for control in the unification contact zone.

The retrospective interpretation of cultural encounters as an experience of misunderstanding is the focus of **Christina Brauner’s** (Bielefeld) work. Cultural misunderstanding can be functionalized as a narration which permits cultural and communicative practices of exclusion: the “communauté de rire”. The com-

munity is stabilized in its identity by the laughter about narrations of cultural misunderstanding. The article presents a typology of misunderstandings in historiographic fields. Two examples in the contexts of Portuguese expansion and of the Enlightenment show the varieties of misunderstandings between fate and intention – and their functionalization as well as their early critique in the context of colonisation.

Josef Estermann (Luzern) also discusses cultural misunderstanding, here with a focus on the conception of time in Andean philosophy. In contrast to western conceptions of time, Estermann characterizes the Andean time concept and worldview via the metaphor of “walking backwards into the future, facing the past”. He calls for mutual respect for the otherness of worldviews and philosophies of time to make cultural encounters fruitful and to avoid ‘chaos in the contact zone’. The underlying problematic opposition between “western” and “non-western” time concepts illustrates the inherent risk of postcolonial approaches as a special way of ‘controlling’ the interpretations of cultural encounters: In order to deconstruct binary constructions of non-western otherness, it sometimes leads back to the construction of a homogeneous entity of western culture – and to narratives about the incompatibility of cultures.

Sünne Juterczenka (Berlin) shows in her article “Toward a Multiplication of Perspectives on Early Modern Cultural Encounters” the necessity of innovative historiographic approaches. The special challenge here is the often fragmentary and unilateral source material and the contradictory interpretations and perspectives (of historical agents as well as between historical agents and scientists, and between academics and non-academics). This ‘chaos in the contact zone’ should not be homogenized by master narratives or hegemonic interpretations. Juterczenka pleads for historiographic approaches and forms of representation that give space to this heterogeneity and contradiction – for example through innovative forms of narration or by exploring alternative sources.

Yvette Sánchez (St. Gallen) shows in her paper that transcultural contact situations involve a permanent negotiation process, which entails contingent (in Giorgio Agamben’s sense), thus unpredictable outcomes. The zone itself is a concept that favours subversive chaos and escapes clear, separating boundary lines. Several transareal (Ottmar Ette) scapes (Arjun Appadurai) show a marked network character. Sánchez illustrates those entanglements by bringing up such cases as the highly diverse BRICS grouping. The member states are tentatively negotiating some sort of cohesive control, not only on the economic and political, but also on the cultural floor, while their bonds of former times may certainly be called either chaotic or nearly non-existent.

Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya (London) shares this interest in the contingency and unpredictability of cultural encounters and their outcomes. She focuses in her paper on the material and popular cultures to explore phenomena of the cultural encounters of the Portuguese with South Asians in Sri Lanka, generally perceived through written and archival historical sources. She shows that in this contact zone innovative 'hybrid' artist forms emerged. The chaos of colonial cultural encounter generated not only instability and disorder: luxury ivory objects and *baila* music testify to artistic domestications of the unknown. As cultures are not stable entities, the results of a cultural encounter cannot be predicted as a 50/50-mixture, but can only be interpreted retrospectively (and by doing this 'controlled') by scholarly description.

The article "Enriching Repertoires. Code-Blending and Linguistic Transfer in the Contact Zone" by **Anja Voeste** (Giessen) focuses on the (un)predictability of language contact. She shows via different examples (for example the grammatical errors of Silvia, Queen of Sweden, Bantu languages in southern Africa, hearing children of deaf adults in the U.S) the difficulty of predicting the linguistic outcomes of cultural encounters. As linguistic behaviour is always influenced by manifold factors such as emotions, groups and identities, the scholar's 'struggle for control' has to be conscious of the dynamics of culture and the limits of scientific 'predictability'.

Performative unpredictability is addressed by **Uwe Zagratzki** (Szczecin): American black music is characterized by flexibility, adaptability and performativity. Its different music styles (blues, jazz, soul, rap) represent encounters between Afro-, Euro- and Latin-American cultures from the 19th century to the current day. The article shows how improvisation has here become a strategy of controlling the ritual. Improvisation in black American music is a subcultural bricolage in different historical contexts combining musical transformation and conservation – by the narrative of unconventional order.

This book aims to show the variety of "Chaos in the Contact Zone" – not as a fact, but in its narrative, performative and dynamic potentials for cultural encounters and for scholarly discourse.