

SITUATIONS PAPERS

A commissioned response to Susan Hiller's *Psychic Archaeology*, 2005

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Susan Hiller
Psychic Archaeology, 2005
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Susan Hiller's hallucinatory moving-image installation investigates the superstitions that surround ethnic and religious stereotypes. The artist's initial research centred around the history of the Jewish community in 12th and 13th century Bristol, who lived just outside the inner, but within the outer wall of the city, under the protection of the Castle. In this work, Hiller combined excerpts from feature films of the 1920s to the present-day with a mesmerising sound-track.

She suggests, "*current hostility toward immigrants, foreigners and asylum seekers throughout Europe has deep roots in what might be called our 'psychic history'. Social attitudes are governed as much by unconscious, as by conscious conditioning. An acknowledgement of the hidden power of founding stereotypes and archetypes seems an appropriate way for an artist to begin to 'see' the problem*"

There are art works that confirm and neatly express what you already knew. There are works that rupture and frustrate what you knew. And there are works that not only rupture, but surprisingly expand and transcend what you only thought you had known: Susan Hiller's *Psychic Archaeology* (2005) is such a piece.

Not that I'm an expert on anti-Semitism, let alone Judaism and the history of Jews in Europe. But I had a feeling – possibly typical of Germans of post-War generations who have tried to understand what led to the Holocaust – that I had a general grasp, at least. Now I know I really didn't. And it's not just because of the hard facts that I learned from Hiller's video piece: for example, that England was the first European country to officially expel Jews from its territory. But it's because of the 'soft' particularities that Hiller weaves into a network of interlocking sequences: the spectrum of cultural archetypes and stereotypes that have existed about Jewish identity since the Middle Ages (and possibly longer), evidenced in the way they appear and are twisted and reassembled in 20th and 21st century film. All of this material was 'out there', but it has (at least to my knowledge) never been brought into this kind of perspective, which is so unsettling because, like a dream, it hints at the desires that connect things that had seemed distinct, and disturbs the distinction between different protagonists (and at least since her collective dream-in organised for *Dream Mapping* of 1974, Hiller is an expert when it comes to the logic of dreams). Precisely because archetypes (as ciphers of cultural tradition) and stereotypes (as tropes of prejudice and propaganda) appear deeply intermingled in films and the tales they are based on, the pressing question is raised – how we can learn to distinguish them without resorting to illusory distinctions between the authentic and the fake. And as Hiller made me realise, I'm closer to the source of that question than I would have thought, courtesy of childhood Saturday afternoons spent in front of the TV watching films about heroic knights.

The idea of the project *Thinking of the Outside* was to commission artists to realise new works in response to Bristol's historic or imagined landscape. This synced with Susan Hiller's interest in

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the history of Jews in Europe. Over the last three years, she had been working on her expansive *J-street project*, filming and photographing the 303 roads, streets and paths in Germany whose names refer to a Jewish historic presence, effectively producing a mental map of German provincialism, and ambivalence.

In Bristol, her attention turned to a notable detail about its Jewish population in the 12th and 13th centuries. The Jews lived under the protection of Bristol Castle, inside of the outer, but outside the inner city wall, topographically marking their precarious status as a minority that was under the protection of the ruling power (in return for extra taxes imposed), but only as long as it appeared advantageous on fiscal, or propagandistic terms – making clear that ‘Thinking of the Outside’ inevitably means to think of what is ‘inside’ as well, and who has the power to delineate that difference.

A small building is tucked in one corner of what is now a public park. From the outside, it looks like a cross between a chapel and a public lavatory. A small tourist information panel informs us that it is in fact the only remaining functioning building of the former castle: it consists of two small, cross-arched porches that used to be adjacent to the King’s Hall, and the private chambers of the Monarch; one of them built between 1225 and 1230, the other in the 14th century. It is here where Hiller’s video was congenially sited as a two-screen installation.

Upon entering the first of the two parallel spaces, a video projection filled the blank arch at the back of the room; the soundtrack of that first projection could be listened to on headphones, while the soundtrack of the second projection, which one encountered after passing through the first and turning around a corner into the second space, was on loudspeakers. This had the effect that one could neither fully see both projections, nor hear both soundtracks at once, and yet their lights and their sounds overlapped and ‘leaked’ into each other. This was also echoed by the flickering of a few candles, and the way the two videos actually interrelate: because the first of the two is shorter – about four minutes – and more specifically related to English medieval history, while the second – 18 minutes – encompasses a broader range

of European history from the Middle Ages to the Present. In a way, the first loop relates to the second like a ‘site-specific’ trailer to a more globally encompassing ‘feature’, locating it like an ‘establishing shot’ locates a plot, allowing the story to unfold.

That first projection, with a simple text panel sequence, confronted possibly a majority of its viewers with a fact hitherto unknown to them, or ‘overlooked’: that, as mentioned, England – by a decree of Edward I issued on 18 July, 1290 – was the first European country to expel the Jews from its territory. However, that information is not illustrated BBC-feature style with re-enacted scenes and a fatherly voiceover explaining what happened. Rather, what is actually seen is the way this history is reflected, as if in a weirdly warped mirror, in post-World War II ‘dream factory’ production – scenes from *Ivanhoe* of 1952 – and how this production in turn is warped again in our visual memory.

We all know the story of King Richard the Lionheart, heroically off to fight the crusade, while his evil brother John, in his absence, attempts to take over the crown. The scene from *Ivanhoe* (1952: Dir. Richard Thorpe) shows John delivering a demagogic speech in Bristol Castle’s King’s Hall, accusing Richard of secret bonds with the Jews, who’s ‘soiled’ blood threatened the English, and he demands the Jews, and Richard with them, to be thrown into the sea (John actually did take Bristol Castle as his headquarters, and he actually did imprison Jews, and did impose enormous fines on them in 1210, to solve his financial problems).

The scene of John’s speech appears twice: once in English, once in the dubbed German version. This doubling eloquently plays on the way the rasping German of a demagogic speech inevitably conjures up a reference to German fascism, how the sound of the language itself has been affected by history. On another level, the doubling of English and German versions is also quite haunting for me, personally: how can it be that I remember seeing the film on TV when I was a kid, but can’t remember the anti-Jewish speech? And on top of that, oddly, the figure of Isaac of York, a bearded old man who appears as the moneylender, is stored in my childhood memory as a kind of pagan Merlin figure, a wizard. How can that be? Maybe I simply

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don't remember because the Jewish references were not part of what interested me in such a film as a child? Or was it that the scenes had been censored for German afternoon TV, in an awkward attempt to 'save' the audience from the complex issues of anti-Semitism? This would fit with the German's '50s and '60s attitude of 'moving on', present in the German entertainment industry of that time: of simply avoiding, where possible, any reference to Nazi past, and replacing it with escapist stuff (like the 'Heimatfilme' – romantic family feel-good pictures set in the Alps). In any case, what was, not least for a kid like me, escapist stuff – knights and maidens and castles – is suddenly interspersed with scenes of burning houses, and horror-film-type shaky hand camera footage of burned-down ruins. The reason why so little remains of Bristol Castle is that it was demolished by order of Oliver Cromwell in 1665 – whose verbal guarantee, one year later, allowed Jews in England again to practice their faith openly. This piece of information resonates with Hiller's piece as does the fact that the only other part of the Castle that was saved from Cromwell's order was St. Peter's Church, which was bombed by the Germans during World War II. The ruin is now located at the centre of the Castle Green park and the shaky footage Hiller uses was actually filmed around the empty shell of the church: a visual marker of fear and destruction, linking the 20th century with earlier ages. I have to think of W.G. Sebald's thesis that the Germans after WWII failed to create appropriate literary representations of the air raids because that denial was a kind of unconscious 'trade-in' for the denial of the Holocaust ('we didn't know'). And I have to think of my mother's stories of being 'ausgebombt' – losing home due to air raids – twice as a child in my hometown Mainz, and of pogroms against Jews in Mainz: in 1096, in 1283, and in 1938.

The second looped projection is a rhythmic, musically edited meditation, a hallucinated symphony on the representation of Jewish archetypes and stereotypes in 20th and 21st century film: from *Der Golem* (1920: Dirs. Carl Boese, Paul Wegener) to the recent film version of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004: Dir. Michael Radford), starring Al Pacino as Shylock. Its structure is not that of a didactic line of reasoning but of a dream: scenes that seem unconnected are intertwined

nevertheless, connected by music and voices that 'leak' from one scene into the other, while the warm crackling white noise from the soundtrack of early films reoccurs like the aural marker of memory, signifying its ambivalence between fullness and emptiness, storing and forgetting. But the logic of this 'dream' does not become absurd: even as we watch it consciously and awake, it continues to have the kind of 'natural' logic that you experience in a dream while you're actually dreaming it.

The cycle of the loop starts with money changing hands, a tumultuous scene on the Rialto Bridge in Renaissance Venice, people thrown into the water, cellos and a furiously accusatory speech on the soundtrack quoting the Old Testament's book of Ezekiel about God's forbiddance of usury – the excuse for the pogrom against Jews. This is followed by Jeremy Irons spitting into Al Pacino's face, a moment in which the scene turns from black and white to colour. Hiller altered the scenes she used subtly, but substantially: the scene, in the original, is of course not in black and white but she made it so, so she could insert this colour rupture – the visual equivalent of the traumatic break of the 'real' into the projective status of stereotypes. In fact Hiller made everything black and white to emphasise the aura of memory, the long ago and far away and yet closely familiar, except for these specific clashes of colour into black and white that reoccur a couple of times later in the piece: when Ingmar Bergman's Jewish money lender-cum-magician is screaming out of frustration and horror after being insulted and hit by the anti-Semite stepfather in *Fanny & Alexander* (1982); and in 'magic' sequences where spirits are conjured up or demons appear.

The 'Jewish miser' stereotype is accelerated to a grotesque Dickensian caricature impersonated by none other than the epitome of Britishness, Sir Alec Guinness, in a scene from *Oliver Twist* (1948: Dir. David Lean): big hooked nose, in dirty rags, fake smile while holding up the hand for a bribe, smile dying once coin received – a shockingly blunt stereotype of the vile Jew just three years after the end of Nazi terror. The money-lender-motif continues in a scene from *Der Dybbuk* (1937: Dir. Michael Waszynski): a Jewish father is counting money, while his baby daughter is soothed by the mother, and – cut – 18 years on, the baby has

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become a grown-up girl, but father is still counting money, ignoring his daughter.

The Jew as wizard; the Jew as Samsonian strongman: both of these motifs are intertwined in the figure of the Golem, the clay ancestor of Frankenstein's monster, brought to life by the cabbalist Rabbi Loew, with a magic piece of writing (*Der Golem* of 1920). In Werner Herzog's *Unbesiegt* (*Invincible*) of 2001, the strongman Zische Breitbart, taking off his blond wig and Viking helmet on a Berlin stage, reveals himself to be not a new Siegfried, but a new Samson, answered by chants of 'Judensau' from the SS-officer audience. It's an absurd scene, embarrassing in its naïve attempt to create a 'positive' image of the manly Jew who fights back against violent persecution. And one could even laugh, if it wasn't so horrible, at the sight of Nostradamus – a 'secret' Jew – scribbling notes while watching a puddle in which visions of the evils of the 20th century appear – from Nazis to a starving African child to early 90s Saddam Hussein – before exclaiming 'Hister, Hister', and painting a blood red Swastika on a medieval arched wall, just like the one the video is projected onto: prophecy kitsch meets Nazi kitsch, an irresistible tabloid-type combination.

Much more sophisticated, and brilliantly ambivalent, is the scene of Klaus-Maria Brandauer as the famous psychic Hanussen in Istvan Szabo's eponymous film of 1988. (Hanussen allegedly predicted Hitler's rise to power, and met him on several occasions, but once the Nazis found out he was Jewish, he was arrested and murdered in 1933). We see the clairvoyant in a public appearance, blindfolded; he holds his palm on envelopes to answer questions written inside of them:

"Shall I be a Member of Parliament?",

he reads out; he hands away the envelope again and turns his head towards the ceiling, as if he suddenly sensed a second, much more important level of the vision:

"Member of Parliament?! Where?"

"In the Reichstag?"

He walks a few steps forward, impulsively takes off the blindfold: "But sir?" – a short, mocking smile,

"The Reichstag? The Reichstag is no longer there. It will soon be in flames. I see flames in its dome. The sky over Berlin is red!"

Hanussen switches to a rasping scream:

"The whole building will be ablaze. The only question is: who has set it alight? The Reichstag will burn!"

With hindsight of the way the Nazis made propagandistic use of the Reichstag blaze, blaming it on the Jews, the scene turns all the more gloomy. There is, however, one scene in *Psychic Archaeology* that is maybe even more haunting – from *Der Golem*: a simple image of people walking in a line, disappearing into a dark tunnel, to the hollow, ethereal sound of crashing cymbals.

All in all, the piece – in different ways with different viewers – has the power to excavate what's buried in our unconscious, from childhood onwards – mixed up with the terrifying and seductive aura of fairy tales and legends (as, for example, in my case, the 'Isaac-of-York-as-Merlin'). But what do we make of this wild yet seamless flow of scenes: of 'wizard', 'miser', 'clairvoyant', 'moneylender' and 'strongman', and what does this tell us about the connection between archetypes and stereotypes? Can we dare to ask what is perhaps the most difficult question of all—why were the Jews the 'favourite' scapegoats for all kinds of contradictory accusations and persecutions, that they stole Christian children and cannibalised them, or sullied the holy Host, or poisoned the wells, that they were anarchic communists or ruthless capitalists?

One might well doubt whether or not this is a question any work of art can even try to answer – but *Psychic Archaeology* certainly makes it visible: at least for any viewer affected by the seductive power of the stereotypes, the magical allure of the archetypes, and the reality of a chilling effective dream-like logic that weaves them together; for any viewer willing to admit that there is no 'clean', detached viewing position, that they have inflected and infected us so that, in a way, we have already taken part in weaving them together like this in the first place.

The importance of fairy tales as both a medium for, and a 'documentation' of, the formation of

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stereotypes is confirmed by an essay that Arnold Zweig published in 1936, on the tale *'Der Jude im Dorn'*¹, which the Brothers Grimm had included in their collection. It tells the story of a labourer defrauded of his wage who manages to obtain the money from a Jew instead of his master. The point of the story is that he feels perfectly entitled to trick the Jew, as he himself had after all served his master dutifully for three years. As Zweig points out, the tale encapsulates a 'classic' characteristic of anti-Semitism (and it's no coincidence that the fairy tale stems from around 1500, the time of the German *'Bauernkriege'*, the Peasant Wars): the anger of the masses against oppression by the ruling class is coupled with their 'internalised' willingness to submit (and their fear of retribution) – and so their anger is deflected instead onto the Jews, which allows them to run riot without any risk of arousing their masters' wrath. Of course this is just one aspect of anti-Semitism, but in any case it becomes clear that there is a 'decipherable' relation between the logic of tales and that of social reality. Archetypes are cultural motifs that persist and recur in relation to what is new and embodies change. The 'Modern' has a 'hidden' connection to the archetypal, the ancient, in order to differentiate itself from the merely recent (think, for example, of Le Corbusier's references to Greek architecture). In that sense and on another level, the Jewish people in Diaspora have the characteristics of a Modern people: they value education, they have developed, due to trade and diasporic conditions, an advanced social flexibility, yet at the same time their religious belief is archaic. Thus they appear, as the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel put it, "to be in touch with ancient elemental powers that other peoples had lost contact with."²

Stereotypes bespeak the disavowal of the connection of the ancient to the Modern. They recur again and again as a resistance against the 'frightening' aspects of modernisation. They are attempts to dehistoricize the uncanny mixture of connections between the ancient and the modern, by 'translating' the ancient into the wickedly 'magic' and the modern into the wickedly 'clever', and to endlessly reiterate that 'translation'. Susan Hiller has used as her basic material film scenes that are still ambivalent enough to reveal that the difference between archetype and stereotype thus

largely depends on the actual connections made between history and the present.

Ultimately, archetypes and stereotypes can never be neatly distinguished: they retain a 'secret' connection to one another, or, to put it differently: archetypes can easily be turned into stereotypes, and – much less easily – vice versa. Watching *Ivanhoe* as a kid, I could, apparently, 're-imagine' a moneylender as a wise wizard. As in a dream, I traded one stereotype for another. The effect of *Psychic Archaeology* is to make that process a reflexive one: it brings all of these stereotypes together, thus on one level allowing their full power of seduction to unfold so that viewers become totally immersed, but on another level, exposing the reiterative character of stereotypes precisely by reiterating, 'quoting' them (because we are and remain aware that Susan Hiller has not 'made this up', is using actually existing films). And so, as we find ourselves frightened by giving in to the pleasure of that immersion, we resurface confronted with our own entanglement in the recurrence of stereotypes.

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Biography

Jörg Heiser is an art critic who lives and works in Berlin. Heiser is associate editor of *Frieze* and a frequent contributor to several German language newspapers. Recent publications include: *Contextualize!* (Kunstverein in Hamburg, Dumont 2003); *Richard Artschwager* (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König 2002) and *Painting At the Edge of the World* (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis 2001).

- 1 Arnold Zweig, 'Der Jude im Dorn', in: *Die neue Weltbühne*, Prag, Zurich, Paris, XXXII No. 23, 4 June 1936, pp. 717-721, No. 24, 11 June 1936, pp. 744-747, quoted in: Otto Fenichel, 'Elements einer psychoanalytischen Theorie des Antisemitismus', pp. 35-57, in: Otto Simmel (ed.), *Antisemitismus*, Frankfurt: Fischer Wissenschaft 2002 [1993], p. 39.
- 2 Otto Fenichel, op. cit., p. 44 (my translation).

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