

Were we better in the future? The criticality of storytelling in Kat Válastur's choreographic work

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Este artigo explora a potencialidade de *storytelling* como instrumento coreográfico na obra de Kat Válastur *The Marginal Sculptures of Newtopia* (2014-2016). *Storytelling*, na senda de Benjamin e Haraway, pode ser explorado na desconstrução de sentidos e narrativas lineares estabelecidas e, em última instância, no questionamento de conceitos políticos ancorados no substrato da teoria crítica ocidental, que, por sua vez, condicionam práticas discursivas e de produção de conhecimento. Errante em *timelines* históricas e geográficas fictícias, a coreógrafa Válastur propõe futuros distópicos tangentes à ficção científica e «fabulação especulativa» (Haraway, 2017) nos três mundos coreográficos que constituem a sua trilogia *The Marginal Sculptures of Newtopia*. Enquanto instrumento coreográfico, como se traduz esta contaminação de *storytelling* na discursividade do gesto e do movimento? Qual a potencialidade coreográfica na desestabilização da temporalidade linear que subverte as condições históricas materiais, da coexistência ficcional de realidades e dimensões paralelas, e da imaginação de possíveis fisicalidades para futuros distópicos?

CHOREOGRAPHY / STORYTELLING / WALTER BENJAMIN / DONNA HARAWAY / KAT VÁLASTUR

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Storyteller*

In his well-known essay *The Storyteller – Reflections on the Work of Nicolai Leslov* (Benjamin, 1968: 83-109), Walter Benjamin lays his central claim for the relevance of storytelling as a way not only for the communicability of experience, but also for the staging, exploring and performing of new

thoughts and concepts. Through the figure of the storyteller – who according to Benjamin may well be embodied as the traveller (the wanderer, the flâneur) or the craftsman – personal experience may be shared and perpetuated through remembrance and retelling, a process from which meaning can be extracted. Through his own storytelling, Benjamin explores dream worlds, fantasy, travel, estrangement and play, staging new topologies of thinking beyond nature, status quo and historical conditions. If dreams have the ability to disintegrate linear narratives and cannot equate real life, they are also able to suspend natural laws of time and space, which then become shattered and fractured, as well as substances, figures, desires and constraints. Thus, storytelling also plays a role in deforming existing narratives and, ultimately, destabilizing political concepts that remain anchored in Western critical epistemologies and that impair the potentiality to think, voice and perform otherwise.

This text wishes to reflect how storytelling operates as a choreographic tool in the work of Greek choreographer Kat Válastur, namely, in two works of her retrospective *We were better in the future* (Haus am Uber, Berlin, 2017), *Gland* (2014) and Kat Válastur's *walk+talk* (2016) – anchoring her performances in a woven net of “criticality” (Rogoff, 2006) which destabilizes the experiential and theoretical ground on which the audience stands.

The retrospective *We were better in the future* (2017) focused on Válastur's choreographic series *The Marginal Sculptures of Newtopia* (2014-2016), which comprised the works *Gland* (2014), *Ah! Oh! A Contemporary Ritual* (2014) and *OILinity* (2016), and included a parallel program of performances and installations, namely, a short solo work entitled *Kat Válastur was better in the future* (2017). This solo was created upon Kat Válastur's *walk+talk* lecture performance (2016), commissioned by Philipp Gehmacher that premiered in the 9th Tanznacht Berlin Biennale. A closer look into Válastur's pieces *Gland* and *walk+talk* will set the tone for this reflection. I will address Válastur's *walk+talk* instead of its later version entitled *Kat Válastur was better in the future* (2017), since *walk+talk* was conceived as a lecture-performance, thus, a privileged format to unveil the choreographer's methodology and creative process. With its structure of *talking while moving*, this piece not only discloses Válastur's work indebtedness to fictional layers of storytelling, as it exposes the uncanny and complex constellation of references that informs her practice, such as literary, scientific, artistic, and philosophic discourses, among others.

Válastur's body of work raises questions that will not be answered here in detail, but that are worth setting forth. How may storytelling in choreography open new lines of thought, and thus be a vehicle for the production of new subjectivities and knowledge? How to perform the translation between the linguistic mental layer of storytelling and embodied choreography, and how does it encounter the public? How to unpack the political potentiality of such choreographies construed upon disrupted temporalities and futuristic "newtopias", where parallel dimensions coexist and multiple entry points for criticality are presented? In the current context of contemporary disarray, what are the possibilities of fruitful contamination of such discursive choreographic practices towards an extended public debate?

Wandering in a dramaturgical space built upon imagined topographies and fictional timelines, Válastur choreographs dystopian futures embedded in a sort of science fiction and "speculative fabulation" (Haraway, 2017). In fact, the three choreographic worlds that constitute *The Marginal Sculptures of Newtopia - Gland* (2014), *Ah! Oh! A Contemporary Ritual* (2014) and *OILinity* (2016) – share a common concern about spatiality, and result from the encounter of the body with fictional topological force fields it inhabits and that contaminate all compositional elements: from the scenography, to lights' design, soundscape, and the dancers' movements.

Moreover, departing from storytelling as a structure to organise dystopian worlds, Válastur's choreographies convey a montage of references with constellations of meanings that nonetheless highlight the choreographer's discursive criticality, subtly addressing issues such as the climate crisis, the critic of late liberalism, or the relevance to decolonize Western epistemology.

In her own words, "when the work is vivid in the mind, when it is still a spiritual condition, it exists as an Utopia", refers Válastur. Etymologically, "utopia" derives from the Greek οὐ ("not") and τόπος ("place"), meaning "no place" (Válastur, 2014a). Thus, Válastur's work departs from an imagined *topos* that exists virtually as a fictional mental construction. "The moment utopia is materialized", notes Válastur, "it is transformed into a place, therefore into a land, and since it is a land that only I can imagine, it is a new place in the world. Let's call this place 'Newtopia' " (*ibidem*).

Accordingly, her solo *Gland*, the first on her trilogy *The Marginal Sculptures of Newtopia* (2014-2016), is anchored in a *newtopia* as an



GLAND, BY KAT VÁLASTUR, 2014 (KAT VÁLASTUR), [F] DOROTHEA TUCH

uncanny fictional architecture – the *Gland machine* – that articulates traces of science fiction, as well as historical and artistic references in a two-dimensional event: the *dimension a* which is the choreographic event performed in the theatrical realm, and the *dimension b* which is a complementary layer online in Válastur’s website.

The second work, entitled *Ah! Oh! A Contemporary Ritual*, a choreography for six dancers performed in darkness with an industrial electronic soundscape, evokes the spatial circularity of traditional dance rituals. The performers seem to embody a dystopian fictional condition in a post-apocalyptic landscape, and the evidence of their trauma lies in some kind of oblivion, which is reflected on stage in the impossibility both of physical connection and oral communication. Movement is then the only source and means of expression in what seems to be a contemporary ritual evoking an end-of-time human community.

The third work, *OILinity* is a choreographic essay for three performers that evokes the crude oil dependence of Western societies. The dancers are disturbingly simultaneously human being and matter, and their gestures are animated by the fluid quality of oil, mimetically expressing the materiality on which they thrive. Hidden and uncanny sculptures punctuate the scenario, becoming idols and objects of desire in their



AH! OH! A CONTEMPORARY RITUAL, BY KAT VÁLASTUR, 2014 (SHAHAR LEVI, LEYLA POSTALCIOGLU, ANNEGRET SCHALKE, ROMAIN THIBAUD-ROSE, ENRICO TICCONI, MARYSIA ZIMPEL), [F] DOROTHEA TUCH

anonymity and strangeness. These objects condition the dancers' gestuality and echo, Válastur notes, "the spinning melancholia" of desire and consumption in the form of a "cylindrical object that has nothing more in mind than preserving its own system" (Válastur, 2016a), as a metaphor for the alienating tendency of capitalism.

I will now come back to the solo *Kat Válastur was better in the future* (2017), more specifically, to the choreographer's lecture-performance in the cadre of the *walk+talk* Berlin, an event for four choreographers curated by Philipp Gehmacher. As the title suggests, the *walk+talk* project presupposes that the invited choreographers should talk about their work while performing it. Thus, each lecture performance becomes a singular event, wherein each artist moves while talking about her method, ideas and references related to her choices of physicality, movement quality, vocabulary and methodology. As Gehmacher proposed, *walk+talk* is supposed to be a "practice that speaks about one's practice. It is less about description and explanation than speaking becoming a gesture itself, a gesture of utterance running parallel to the movement" (Gehmacher, 2013). Moreover, Gehmacher focuses not only on the singularity of personal discourses and practices, but also in exposing the



OILINITY, BY KAT VÁLASTUR, 2017 (NITSAN MARGALLOT), [F] DOROTHEA TUCH

radical intertwinement between the curated pairs of choreographers' works. With this in mind, each *walk+talk* evening presents two pairs of choreographers, in a minimum of two evenings' presentation, which means four different *walk+talk*'s by four different choreographers set into relation. Following Gehmacher's curatorial conditions, the *walk+talk* stage scenarios are bare and empty and there should be neither sound-scape, nor light design.

And so it was on that evening at the Ufer Studies in Berlin: the stage was reduced to a rectangular platform covered with white linoleum and the only sound heard from the choreographer's voice and movement. Válastur appeared to the audience dressed casually, in black pants and a floral-patterned shirt, with her reddish voluminous hair. She carefully approached the stage and slowly raised her right leg, holding it still for some time before entering the stage, in a clear sign that she was about to enter a "new world", demarcating the transition between the off-stage territory and her fictional "newtopia". She then stepped onto the stage and began to walk along its limits: the figure of a white female exploring the bare stage was an inalienable reference to the Western white colonial explorer, in the long tradition of historical oblivion here and now transposed onto a futurist setting. The audience heard the amplified sound of

her breathing in the same rhythm as her walking steps, with a deeper exhalation as if she were walking under special atmospheric conditions demanding greater physical effort. Adding to the awkwardness of this figure, Válastur performed eccentric bird-like head movements. She stopped in the centre of the stage staring at the audience and conveying a hybrid figure of a woman with bird's head, and she slowly turned her back to the audience. Bending her torso, Válastur stared at the audience with her head between her legs, and began to describe the landscape she had been wandering about in, as if a storyteller, with plenty of irony and uncanny humour:

Everything is still unexplored! All this green here... I have been wandering around this landscape until I reached this river, but then I saw that on the other side the nature is green, so I decided to go there. I stepped on six rocks, crossed the river and arrived to the other bank. The nature is so green...! The trees, the plants, the flowers... all share the same shade of green... So I decided to lie there and spend some time for a while. Later on, I realized that there were no animals around, no birds, no insects or rats, not a human soul... except me! (Válastur, 2016b)

And she proceeded:

It was a bit weird, but ok... I said "I'll stay here for a while", but then I felt like that somehow my body was intoxicated... this green was toxic. So I was alone there in this tropical landscape, and I thought that I had to find a way to get out of there. And then I heard a tiny little sound and I decided to follow that sound. But I realized I couldn't move, my body was really stiff [...]. And, finally, after crawling for a while with this stiff body, I finally found this very small, very, very small little lake and the water there was crystal clear. So, I really felt the need to put my hands inside the water, wash my hands and clean my face. (*ibidem*)

While telling the last part of the story, Válastur's bodily movement was contaminated by the fictional dystopian landscape it inhabited, thus, while moving as if she was trying to escape from that place, hers was not a conventional human movement, rather that of a strange creature whose gestures one could probably relate to a being in-between an animal and an automaton. She proceeded on to telling other short stories, narrating science-fiction events along with strange scenarios and

parallel realities, while performing related uncanny figures, in-between the human and the nonhuman. Then, she suddenly stopped. Unexpectedly, and for the first time, she addressed the audience directly in the first person, and explained: “I start a lot with stories. I need to be somewhere to create a certain condition to my body”, referring how she usually takes a collection of stories and references from different disciplinary fields (such as literature, science, politics, philosophy, travelling, among others) as points of departure for her creative work.

Válastur’s *walk+talk* unveils the relevance of storytelling in her discursive practice, something not evident when first attending her choreographies. This lecture performance has a close relation to her piece *Gland*, as the fictional narratives brought about in *walk+talk* are precisely those of *Gland*. However, in *Gland’s dimension a* there is no voicing on stage, just movement, and in *Gland’s dimension b* (online) one discloses a woven net of complex and exciting references put into relation. Thus, *walk+talk* offered an insight into the complexity of meaning underlying Válastur’s artistic and discursive practice.

In *Gland’s dimension a* the public firstly encounters a minimalist setting composed of two light grey perpendicular walls, placed slightly diagonally in relation to the audience. Dressed in neutral clothes (grey jeans, basic shirt and sneakers), Válastur suddenly arises through one of the walls’ limits, as if she had just jumped from another parallel dimension into that “space” of the stage. Walking perpendicularly along the walls while sliding on the floor, she explores the spatial setting and its multiple dimensions as if there was no gravity force, with a virtuosity capable of simulating such impossible earthly condition. The piece endured on what seemed a wandering in the form of abstract and strange movements, punctuated by small events which the public could relate to *Gland’s dimension b*.

On the web, the *dimension b* opens with the image of an architectural vertical section of the *Gland machine*, exposing its topography by naming its five levels (from top to bottom): “The Castle”, “The Room with the Masks”, “Down by the Chromium River”, “The Asphalt Sphinx” and “The Miracle of Nutrition = The Ritual of the Infrared” (Válastur, 2014b). Each one of the *Gland machine’s* architectural layers corresponds to a chapter in Válastur’s storytelling, disclosing the strangeness of *Gland’s* multiple dimensions. The image of the *Gland machine* is, then, paired with a lateral text that the reader may scroll in order to activate Válastur’s voice, thus becoming a complicit listener to her storytelling.



GLAND, BY KAT VÁLASTUR, 2014 (KAT VÁLASTUR), [F] DOROTHEA TUCH

The story is built upon a multiplicity of hybrid and virtual scenarios wherein the narrator navigates, and where a series of events take place.

From the text one may access to other linked references, expanding lines of thought not only with regards to the *Gland* piece, but also to Válastur's politically implicated interests. Thus, for example, in the written text the word “prehistoric” has a hyperlink to an excerpt of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales* (2002, first edition 1899). That novel is based on Conrad's real journey through the Congo river under the colonial Belgian possession, a metaphoric investigation into the darkness of European colonialism, its human horrors and atrocities. Moreover, the word “castle” offers the hyperlink to a drawing of the Neo-Sumerian Ziguratt de Ur as a reference to Iraq War. Furthermore, the chapter “The Room with the Masks” starts by recalling CERN's Super Proton Synchrotron construction in the late seventies, from which Válastur develops a fictional sci-fi story relating a young female scientist Anatolia Turgoski, to Picasso's painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* and a synchronous strange happening which she then named the “Aluminium Vision” mutation. In addition, the text continues to open several alleys of connection: the word “king” opens a thread to Franz Kafka's essay “An Imperial Message”; the word “water” connects to a text referring

an ecological catastrophe of toxic chromium dumping in China; the expression “a black hole” is the hyperlink to a video in loop of Alice in Wonderland falling through a hole; and the expression “dimensional equality” connects to a film excerpt showing Fred Astaire dancing on the walls and ceiling, disrupting the gravity force, a quotation of her own movements in *Gland*’s choreography. These are just some examples of a proliferous and imaginative storytelling that engages this *Gland machine*, conveying complex woven threads of meaning to *Gland*’s *dimension a*.

Curiously, in *Gland*’s choreography the spectator cannot immediately perceive a relation between the complexity of these references and the choreography itself, as her gestures are neither illustrative nor representational, which renders the work enigmatic and abstract. However, there are signs, micro gestures and movements within a constellation of meaning, that relate the choreography to the fictional and virtual landscapes of *dimension b*. As in a dream, the uncanny is fused with anxiety and mystery, displacing the threshold of rationality, as well as the subject’s physical and psychic self-consciousness and autonomy. Reflecting on *Gland*, Válastur raised the following question in her website: “[w]hat would it be if the transformation of Utopia to what I have named ‘Newtopia’ is not a virtual condition but a visual condition in which the body acts in order to transform utopia into a real place?” To which she answers: if the theatre is a place for Utopia, a body may “act as a gland and transforms the ‘not yet place’ into a new place for the existence” (Válastur, 2014a).

Although not being political *per se*, her work is sensitive to the pressures of history, time and society. Thus, it tries to articulate what results from these “suffocating” contemporary conditions, “by restraining and forcing them to produce a multiplicity of vibrations inside the body, which will motivate it in a series of endless kinetic units” which she calls “dance units” (Válastur, 2009). Those meticulous micro-movements are articulated in the search for a personal process towards an artistic end, thriving for essential qualities, precision and acuteness.

By proposing post-apocalyptic “newtopias”, Válastur underlines the complexity of the contemporary metabolic context that prevents clairvoyance towards future spatial, social and political landscapes to come. Addressing these complex entanglements, Válastur’s work tries to carve out new spaces from which one can contest normative foundations, render legible some of the infrastructures underlying endless wars, capitalism’s spinning and hopelessness melancholia and its alienating and

permeable (neo-)colonialism, while offering a stage for discussing utopian or dystopian worlds.

We were better in the future is, then, an ironic statement, which I borrow in the form of a question to title this reflection. Will we be better in the future or will the future be a strange place from where we will be gazing back on the debris of the past?

As a statement that subverts historical linearity, or the empty and homogeneous time of positivism, *We were better in the future* and *The Marginal Sculptures of Newtopia* are theoretically influenced by the cyber-futurist theories of Nick Land (Land, 2011) as escape routes to continental philosophy. Therefore, they also activate a historical conversation about futurity, technology, performativity, politics and capital, along with the radical theoretical responses of accelerationism and speculative realism, which speed and exacerbate neoliberal capitalism uprooting, alienating, decoding and abstractive tendencies.

In addition, having at their core a disruption of the historical continuum, Válastur's "newtopias" also invoke Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (Benjamin, 1968: 253-264). In this encrypted and complex essay, Benjamin criticizes historicism idea of a continuum of time and progress and its additive methodology. To the medieval theologians, the impossible attempt to master a "genuine historical picture as it flares up briefly" (Benjamin, 1968: 256) was one of the causes of great sadness and melancholia, particularly because historicism generally empathized with the victorious of history and their heirs, thus, those who had the power to write and voice history. With this in mind, Benjamin reminds us how "there has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism" (*ibidem*) and, as an alternative to historicism, Benjamin argues how historical materialism should move away as much as possible from this process of historical transmission, calling for a history fulfilled by the experience of the here-and-now, that explodes the temporal continuum. To "seize the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'", but "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (*idem*, 255), as a "tiger's leap into that which has gone before" (*idem*, 261). In addition, in his much acclaimed reading of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* (1920), which he names the "angel of history", Benjamin reiterates his alternated view of the past and progress, and how historical materialism should not only predict a revolutionary future, but mostly, save the past:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise [...] propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (*idem*, 257-258)

“Be aware of the past in order to visualize the future”, one reads in Válastur’s notebook available on her website (Válastur, 2009). Moreover, in *Gland’s* fictional machine, one encounters a precise reference to Benjamin’s “tiger’s leap” (Válastur, 2014 b), a jump into and from the historical past, as a way of rewriting it and reimagine the future.

Reimagining the future while calling out the past has also been the purview of Donna Haraway who calls for an engagement in a practice of storytelling as world building, a practice “in which the stories do not reveal secrets acquired by heroes [...]” but that “would instead proceed by putting unexpected partners and irreducible details into a frayed, porous carrier bag”, encouraging conversations and transmutable encounters able to reconstitute all those partners and details. Those kind of nonlinear stories that “do not have beginnings or ends; they have continuations, interruptions, and reformulations – just the kind of survivable stories we could use these days” (Haraway, 2008: 160).

We live in an entangled and troubled era of late liberalism and racialized nationalisms demanding new voices, new stories, new performances, ones no longer premised on the divide between culture and nature, subject and object, science and humanities because, as Bruno Latour has brilliantly shown us, at the end, “we have never been modern” (Latour, 2002). Given the present anthropological and planetary climate crisis, rooted not only in the grand divides set forth by the Enlightened modernity, which laid the legal and historical grounds for centuries of Western imperialism, colonialism and a globally pervasive toxic capitalism, but also in the crisis of the alterity of language inherent to the Western cogito, it is vital both to question past narratives and concepts, as well as to enact the ability for other voices and bodies to be heard and staged. This woven net of implicated existences entails the understanding that all things, living and nonliving, are interdependent. So, ours is not a time for monolithic knowledge, but a moment that requires a “parliament of bodies” (Preciado, 2017) and of matter, hybrid networks and practitioners in a reassessment of the current situation,

in order to deconstruct narrative boundaries, decolonize knowledge, and engage in an embodied criticality. This criticality, as Rogoff as brilliantly proposed, may be seen as a process that while being able to use the analytical set of tools and knowledge from the critique, collapses the binaries of “inside” and “outside” [...] “replacing them with a complex multi-inhabitation” (Rogoff, 2006), and tries to performatively inhabit the conditions it examines.

Choreography creates such a *Spielraum* (Benjamin, 2008: 45) for criticality, a room for play that the body performatively inhabits, and where it offers displaced expressions of the world. In fact, new constellations of thought and affect are mobilized when every gesture – each with a multiplicity of meaning – enters into a new relation to another. “What if”, asks Válastur – “there is no meaning but only gesture?” (Válastur, 2014a). Embracing storytelling as a tool for staging new thoughts and concepts, through both staged performances and online disrupted narratives that link a woven constellation of thoughts, images and videos through her own voiced fictional stories, Válastur’s choreographic “newtopias” reiterate their performative criticality.

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