

Abstract

Tropo Obscura: A Peep-Show of Historical Perversity is a creative arts project that combines multimedia installation and ficto-critical writing in its meaning making process. This multidisciplinary approach brings together the previously opposing worlds of emotive, sensory driven knowledge and rational intellectual knowledge in a novel way to review historical East/West relations. The question raised in the installation and book is whether we in the West have forgotten our historical role in colonialism and empire and thus become unaware of recycling repressive colonial paradigms in our present engagement with Asia. The book follows the themes and structural logic established in the installation and completes the performance of what was left unspoken in the installation. The starting point of this historical examination begins in the installation space; in the first chapter, this beginning translates as an examination of Victorianism and high Empire through the representations of Victorian technologies of surveillance, control and domination as exemplified in the camera, museum cabinet, Expositions Universelles and the peep-show. Moving to the colonial context of the Netherlands East Indies, the book discusses the historical relationship between coloniser and colonised as unearthed in the Dutch film archives, with film dating from as early as 1912 up until 1945. From here, contemporary East/West relationships are addressed against the historical backdrop of colonialism. The first relationship examined is traditional mask dancer Ibu Sawitri's relationship to her own Indonesian history that began under Queen Wilhelmina and ended under the New Order government of President Habibi. Then follows a discussion of Ibu Sawitri and my engagement as a dancer in the 'contact zone,' the focus being on my experience of living and learning dance in Indonesia and my observations of bringing the dance back to an Australian postcolonial performance scene. In the last chapter I discuss contemporary cross cultural relationships with direct reference to colonial ideas of miscegenation and European domination. Historical and contemporary desires about the exotic Other are juxtaposed in order to see in what ways we in the West and Asia are actively engaged in reproducing limiting historical stereotypes. The book concludes that as members of the privileged West we have to a large extent forgotten and left unexamined our historical past and that there is a pressing urgency, particularly in Australia, to re-examine our role in history in order to avoid repeating past injustices. *Tropo Obscura*, then, is an attempt at remembering.