

## A rabbi's passion, a hajj's play.

# Oberammergau and its Passion Play between performed history and histrionic place

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As a case study, the article focuses on the debate on Oberammergau and its Passion Play in the Anglosphere, namely England and the US, which started in the mid-nineteenth century. Proceeding from notions of the play as a theatre that claims for itself the un-theatrical status of a truth-maker, I am approaching the debate about this 'other' theatre of religion via the perspective of the English ethnographer Richard Burton and the American Reform rabbi Joseph Krauskopf. In their respective descriptions, Oberammergau becomes a microcosm of religious and historical differences: While Burton points at the histrionic nature of the play and the theatricality of the village, taking it as a symptom of tacit secularization and the touristification of religion, Krauskopf regards the Passion Play as an effective dramatization of the historically untrue and anti-Jewish gospel stories. The reconstruction of their respective notions allows observation of the construction of religious alterity in the process of scientization.

### I. An 'other' theatre?

"Be prepared for general discomfort: for a bad climate of raw cold or heavy rain, of close heat or stifling sun, breeding deep mud and light dust; for bad lodgings and worse feeding [...]."<sup>1</sup> This not particularly inviting description comes from a travelogue from the late nineteenth century by the British explorer, geographer and ethnographer Richard Francis Burton, who was as articulate as he was well-travelled. However, the area described as downright hostile and far from civilization, an area, whose people and traditions still await scientific mapping, is located in the heart of Europe. Burton is referring to the Upper Bavarian hinterland, the Ammergau, whose inhabitants maintain what was at that time already a centuries-old tradition deeply rooted in Western Christian culture: the dramatic presentation of the passion of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Legend has it that, in 1633, the community of the village of Oberammergau made

plague vows, undertaking to stage a Passion Play every ten years. With two exceptions in 1770 and 1940, the first because of a general ban on plays at the instigation of the Catholic Church, the second for well-known global political reasons, the old oath has always been fulfilled. Over the course of time, the play went from being a local matter concerning only the inhabitants of Oberammergau to an event of national and then international interest. Moreover, since the middle of the nineteenth century, Oberammergau and its Passion Play have served time and again as a starting point or as a template and even sometimes as a model for comments on the theatre of the modern era. Theatre historian and reformer Eduard Devrient, for example, considered the play as a corrective for the degenerate theatre of his time;<sup>3</sup> Georg Fuchs even used it programmatically as a model for a theatre of the future (*Theater der Zukunft*).<sup>4</sup> An obvious reason for such hyperbole was its stylization as the last Passion Play with a continuous performance tradi-



Fig. 1: Audience of the Oberammergau Passion Play 1880, photo taken from the stage, with Kofel Mountain in the background, Gemeindecarchiv Oberammergau, 9. 3. 104 PAS 1880 Fo I/2b.

tion since the early modern period (in many sources the play is even described as a living Middle Ages<sup>5</sup>, and the village community has never attempted to dispel this prestigious misunderstanding): Oberammergau and its play become a privileged discursive location for retrospective utopias. Another, albeit less obvious reason is even more interesting from a theatre studies point of view: With the dawning of modernism and modernity, frameworks and demarcations of the theatrical became an issue in European theatre. They were repeated affirmatively in discourse and practice, while on the other hand they seemed increasingly to collapse and to become blurred. In 'Oberammergau' those frame-

works and demarcations are performatively put up for negotiation. Here, a form of theatre seems to take place that refers to the origins of theatre in the collective experience and in religious service, a theatre that relates to community, believed religious truths and their ritual reenactment. To put it simply: to a theatre in which the frameworks, which would collapse again in the theatre of modernity, were still fluid. One could say that it refers back to a pre-dramatic space: whoever travels to Oberammergau expects a different theatre, an 'other' theatre perhaps.

I am approaching the debate on the 'otherness' of the theatre of the Passion and the theatricality of the village from a

point of view that presents itself as a 'foreign' one: via the perspective of an ethnographer as a kind of professional stranger and a rabbi as an exponent of a religion different from that of Oberammergau, where, in late nineteenth century, Christianity counts as the religious paradigm. In their descriptions, Oberammergau becomes a microcosm of religious and historical differences. Burton talks of Oberammergau as of a theatricalization of the religious, different from an ordinary Christian church service as well as from the procession and rituals he witnessed at Mecca decades before and then estimated as 'authentic'. In contrast, in the report of native German rabbi Joseph Krauskopf the Passion Play figures as a theatrical manifestation and emphatic reenactment of a centuries-old misreading of Jewish history, literature, and religion.

## II. The Rabbi and the Ethnographer

In 1880, Richard Burton enters a territory which is by no means untouched by modern tourism.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, his expectations are different to those of the traveller to Africa searching for the sources of the Nile or the orientalist mimicking the pilgrimaging dervish which Burton had embodied at another time.<sup>7</sup> However, the unfamiliar role of the tourist with a Baedeker in one hand and opera-glasses in the other<sup>8</sup> remains ethnographically fractured. Even as a civilian traveller Burton asks questions that address comparative religion and culture: "My object was artistic and critical, with an Orientalistic and anthropological side; the wish to compare, haply to trace, some affinity between this survival of the Christian 'Mystery' and the living scenes of El-Islam at Meccah."<sup>9</sup> Burton thus more or less explicitly points out that it is the specific theatrical quality of two different kinds of cultural performance that, in his view, invites comparison.

Twenty years and two Passion Play seasons later a traveller with very different motivations gives a considerably friendlier verdict on Oberammergau:

With a mountain scenery that is almost Palestinian as a background, the village has the appearance of a bit of Judea transplanted into the heart of the Bavarian Alps.<sup>10</sup>

This picturesque description comes from the pen of the noted Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf who had emigrated from Germany to America at the age of fourteen. As a Jewish teacher, he taught Reform Judaism in his new, chosen homeland. After his return from Oberammergau, he gave sermons on his trip which were considered worth publishing: "The addresses were given in Dr. Krauskopf's synagogue at Philadelphia, but unlike most sermons they well deserved publication."<sup>11</sup> In fact, his sermons came out in 1901 under the title *A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play*. The rabbi depicts his first day in Oberammergau as a physical communion, as a journey to the historical times of the legendary life of Jesus:

I seemed to breathe the very air of Palestine; to have walked the very streets of Jerusalem; to have held converse with ancient-day dreamers and enthusiasts, one of whom I was to see, the following day, nailed to the cross, a martyr and a God.<sup>12</sup>

The tourist's view of the Bavarian village that appeared to reincarnate ancient Judea, then the immersive going-native, and finally the journey into the past of the Jewish people, as the rabbi narrativizes his experience, are disrupted as the play begins. Krauskopf's interest in a Christian tradition, initially shaped by the unspecific curiosity of a traveller, is thus transformed into a desire for enlightenment. For him, it is impossible to become involved without consequences. The play now appears to him as a *mise en*

*abyme* of the Bavarian Jerusalem Oberammergau which he himself reconstructed as a kind of theatrical heterotopia.<sup>13</sup> He feels confronted with the foreign, disconcerting view of himself as the stereotypical Jew and feels urged to take a stand:

I had made myself believe that I had come as a tourist, to look at the Passion Play as I might look at any other spectacular performance, as I might look at the William Tell play in Switzerland, or at the Hiawatha play in Canada. But I could not. The moment the play began, and the opening hymn was sung, and the opening lines were spoken, the tourist turned critic; the traveler, theologian; the cosmopolitan, Jew.<sup>14</sup>

Krauskopf who came as a spectator is now doubly involved in the events, firstly because the distance to the location of the historical events and their protagonists is reduced. Here the rabbi reproduces a cliché that Eduard Devrient had already used decades before: the path to Oberammergau becomes the path to the founding story of Christianity, the story of the passion. However, in the rabbi's view, the Jewish side of that story is excluded; and here the rabbi is involved a second time. In contrast to Jesus, the Marys, the disciples and even Pilate, who – according to the topos – are reincarnated by the villagers, Judas is only represented. In his examination of the dramatic presentation of 'the Jew', Krauskopf acts out a core problem of modern experience of the theatre: the phenomenon of illusion against one's better judgement.<sup>15</sup> In participating in the performance, the rabbi is not entangled in an oscillation between belief and disbelief. Instead, he reports on the dismantling of the illusion<sup>16</sup> – not by means of the presentation but because of a truth claim which, from the rabbi's perspective, must be unjustified. He sees how strangers take possession of his people's story, how they (in the literal sense) incorporate it in order to invert it in the

theatrical illusion and to authenticate this inversion anew each time the Passion Play takes place. As prefigured by Abraham Geiger, one of the first and formative authors of reform Judaism, Krauskopf criticizes the de-Judaizing of the historical Jesus: In Geiger's view, "Christians had replaced the human and empathically Jewish Jesus of history with the divine Christ of creed and myth, demonizing the true people of Jesus – his fellow Jews – as *deicides*".<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, while Burton allegedly remains uninvolved and adopts a professionally distant attitude towards both the Muslim and the Christian form of cultural performance, the rabbi considers himself to be doubly entangled as a person. It is precisely the assumption of worldly consequences of the Oberammergau histrionics that forces him, the rabbi, to reflect on bible historiography and to take up a perspective of comparative religion. He is concerned with the historicizing correction of the myth held to be true by the Christian West that his people are guilty of the death of the Lamb of God; a myth that is authenticated time and again in Oberammergau by theatre as an untruthful truth-maker<sup>18</sup> whose power Krauskopf experiences at first hand and observes in the behaviour of other spectators.

Hereinafter, I will not focus on a mere comparison of the reports of Burton and Krauskopf, whose respective trips took place twenty years apart, let alone a reconstruction of actual historical performances. Instead I aim to elaborate on the divergent presuppositions of two verdicts on Oberammergau. The Christian salvation story that is to a significant extent reenacted in the play, the performance history of the play as well as the numerous personal stories of the visitors (recorded in diaries, theatrical or religious manifestoes, biographies and travel reports) share a common characteristic: from a scientific-rational point of view they are located in the quasi mythical space of

what is possibly true, yet perhaps only invented. Thus, the question arises of how the theatrical presentation of a narrative like the Passion of Christ that is located between story and history can stimulate notions of 'theatre' as a wide-ranging cultural model.

I begin with Burton's travel report and its connection to his earlier pilgrimage to Mecca. In a second step, I will juxtapose it with that of the rabbi. In doing so, I do not only aim to describe two forms of the inversion of the other in the early days of tourism. Viewed abstractly, both of them relate to the question of the conditions and the conditionality of theatrical illusion and participation.

### III. The Passion Play: Ethnographic tinted spectacles

The philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schütz compares the ethnographer to a theatregoer:

Jumping from the stalls to the stage [...] the former onlooker becomes a member of the cast, enters as a partner into social relations with his co-actors, and participates henceforth in the action in progress.<sup>19</sup>

To the theatre historian, Schütz' metaphor seems to be anachronistic at first sight, for the relation of spectating and acting in the theatre is commonly understood as a fluid, perspective-dependent and historically contingent construction. However, in the light of Schütz' theory of the ethnographer as a professionally estranged traveller, the metaphor which is, at first glance, stolidly old-fashioned, gains descriptive power. Schütz claims that the ethnographer must remain a stranger even in the process of mimicry, appropriation and adaptation of the culturally distant, in order to describe the foreign as something distinct and idiosyncratic. In

presuming a kind of theatre in which the viewing and acting spaces are clearly separate, Schütz' model thus assumes a voyeuristic participation of the viewer in the events on stage. In this way, it also assumes characters that are not aware of their fictionality and who make the performers disappear.

However, in describing the ethnographer's activity in analogy to a jump onto the stage, the model is then again transgressed. The ethnographer who enters the events on stage is an activated viewer, for it is not the boundary to fiction that he crosses. Instead, he moves from voyeur to a spy who appears to the actors of the 'doing culture' as one of their own, which he is not, can never become and does not want to become. He is the only one who is aware of the 'play' character of the events on stage, the only one who is aware of his role-playing, who can thus describe reality as 'cultural perfor-

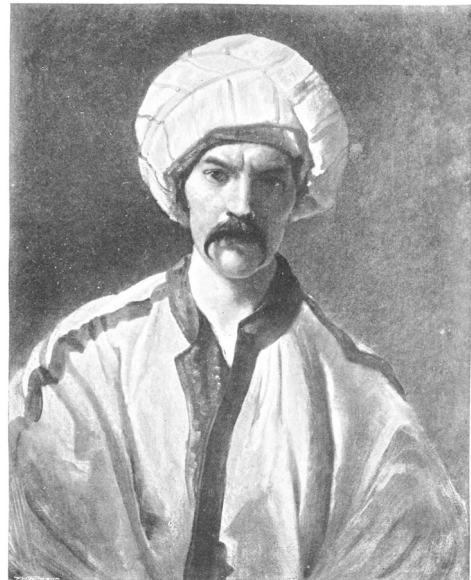


Fig. 2: Richard Burton as Mirza Abdullah. Image from: Isabel Burton, *The Romance of Isabel, Lady Burton, the Story of Her Life*, London 1897, no page number.

mance' and truth as historically contingent. The coming home of the ethnographer, in which he reconstructs the other's 'reality' for those who stayed at home, remains incomplete; the other continues to stick to him and makes him 'homeless'. Otherness, even strange-ness becomes the *signum* of the ethnographer and he himself becomes the protagonist of a hero's journey, even before Susan Sontag's idea of Claude Levi Strauss as a paradigm of the self-reflexive turn in anthropology.<sup>20</sup>

On his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1853, Burton immerses himself in the Arabian other; he makes himself into a stranger in order to reconstruct this other; and he ultimately achieves his goal as a researcher-pilgrim: "There at last it lay, the bourn of my long and weary pilgrimage, realising [sic] the plans and hopes of many and many a year."<sup>21</sup> However, his journey and his aim resemble those of the Muslim pilgrim only at first glance; Burton's joy and overwhelming emotions on his arrival are those of a player who has perfectly mastered the rules of a game. The encounter with the *arcantum* is playful only for him who perceives it as fiction, but not for the faithful hajji. Burton's description of the procession around and the path into the Kaaba can be illustrated by Schütz' metaphor of the ethnographer stepping as a stranger into the other's play as outlined before:

I may truly say that, of all the worshippers who clung weeping to the curtain, or who pressed their beating hearts to the stone, no one felt for the moment a deeper emotion than did the Haji from the far-north. [...] But, to confess humbling truth, theirs was the high feeling of religious enthusiasm, mine was the ecstasy of gratified pride.<sup>22</sup>

Burton's actions as a spy, the violation of the *arcantum* is, however, deadly serious; discovery could lead to his death, but "[t]his did not, however, prevent my carefully obser-

ving the scene during our long prayer, and making a rough plan with a pencil upon my white *ihram*."<sup>23</sup> The inscription on the white, unsullied pilgrim's robe can be read as a reconstruction of the other for those who stayed at home and, at the same time, it proves the impossibility of the reconstruction. The masquerade testifies to its own transgression; by the inscription it is, at the very same time, marked as a costume and designated as a piece of evidence. If one considers the primary and usual meaning of the Arabic word 'ihram' – a sacred state – then an even broader aspect of the transgression is added: *ihram* is etymologically identified as the boundary of a *temenos* that directly encircles the body and makes it, as well as the space directly surrounding it, into a mobile sacred space



Fig. 3: *Ihram* (state of purity). Image from: Richard Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage*, no page number.

This boundary is profaned and overwritten, in the literal sense, by the ethnographical gaze. It does not (as it does for a believing Muslim) testify to a liminal state, but instead appears as a medium of the Western gaze and as a proof that Burton has succeeded in making the jump on to the stage of the hajj. And just as Schütz claims that the home-comer is not able to ever completely divest himself of the strange other, thus remaining 'homeless', the unbelieving hajji after his return goes on wearing Arab-style clothing, maintains Arab daily routines and speaks Arabic.<sup>24</sup>

When, some thirty years after his memorable trip to Mecca, Burton travels to Oberammergau in August 1880, he hopes to find a Christian version of the religious pattern of behaviour that he himself participated in at the end of the hajj in Mecca. His *Glance at the Passion Play* (as the report is laconically titled) claims to present a foreign view from a distance. However, this distance is, for the main part, ironic. The account is rife with comparisons, some serious, others less so: Lake Starnberg becomes, en passant, a miniature of Lake Tanganyika, the impressive local mountain called Kofel becomes a poor reproduction of the Corcovado, and the inhabitants of Ammergau, "hard handed" and "hard headed"<sup>25</sup> as they are, remind the world traveller of the inhabitants of Iceland. Far from the picture of the noble savage that the travel literature on Oberammergau conjures time and again well into the twentieth century, he depicts the natives as arrogant and extremely shrewd. Accordingly, Burton's depiction lacks the fascination with the exotic that informed his report on the Arabian journey: he is aiming for an "Oberammergau with the varnish off".<sup>26</sup>

The ironic-to-cynical comparisons remain indebted to a colonizing gaze. The foreignness of Central Africa, South America or Iceland may be relativized by the

comparison with Upper Bavarian districts, but this does not make Bavaria one foreign country among others. Instead, it is turned into a theme park. The world is concentrated here *en miniature*; the countryside does not stand for itself, for Burton, it seems to point to its extra-European model. Thus, the report presents Ammergau itself as the theatrical framework of a specific theatrical event: the Passion Play that both historically, as well as according to its self-image and its foreign image cannot be aligned with the conventional theatrical frameworks of its time. It opens the door to metaphorical transfers and can thus become a theatrical utopia which, as already mentioned, it actually did.<sup>27</sup>

The experimental design of the trip to Oberammergau, which was very different to that of the journey to Mecca, is also reflected in Burton's attitude as a foreigner; he makes no attempt to adapt himself as he did preceding his journey to Mecca. Scraps of the Bavarian dialect and overheard conversations are not classified academically as ethnographic finds, but as tourist's souvenirs; Burton the home-comer proudly shows off his holiday photos. Against the background of this unheroic or even post-heroic attitude of the ethnographer, whose 'jump on to the stage' no longer requires any mimicry, the description of the Bavarian uplands as 'dwarfish' acquires another meaning: there is no danger of being discovered because here, unlike in Mecca, the role of the viewer is intended from the outset. Thus, Burton does not come as a masked ethnographer, incognito, but as a tourist under his own name. Oberammergau cannot become a stage for him because he is relegated to the audience from the beginning. Not only the passion, but also the village itself claim the visitor's acceptance of their theatrical setting. Thus, Oberammergau becomes a fake for Burton – one might almost say it becomes a simulacrum. The

mimicry of the ethnographer also comes to nothing here because the village itself already incorporates “the histrionic phrase, the theatrical form”<sup>28</sup>. The notorious comment that the bible story is not only not studied, but lived by the villagers, as Eduard Devrient already wrote in the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>29</sup> can be read in Burton as the disappearance of Borges' territory in the map.<sup>30</sup> And Burton himself stages this disappearance in a series of overheard conversations:

Q. Is that Pilate?

A. No, that's Nicodemus.

Or, – [...]

Q. What will become of that boy?

A. He may rise to be a Caiaphas, a Pilate, or even a Christ.

Q. And that girl?

A. Martha, a Mary Magdalen, or even a Muttergottes.<sup>31</sup>

The play itself thus at first glance obtains the status of a *mise en abyme* – Burton also highlights this structure by repeatedly quoting the play of the mechanicals in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Passion players (so it is implied) are most definitely acting the passion and they are aware of the fictionality of the play. Burton accordingly also discusses the performance as a theatre critic and applies the same standards as to other performances at that time. In addition, he purports to be a profound expert in the Jewish roots of monotheism, a religious studies expert and a historian, who, in view of the subject, demands historical awareness and adherence to the original text. From this point of view, the Passion Play is overrated rural folk theatre (Burton also uses the Shakespeare quotations to highlight the imperfect nature of the performance); elsewhere he compares it to a Punch and Judy show.

However, when viewed more closely, Burton's textual re-enactment of the Ober-

ammergau play within a play works very differently. The actors, he alleges, disappear behind their roles even in day-to-day life; however, this has nothing to do with the players adapting themselves to the figures of the salvation story, but instead with the close connection between the play and the assignment of roles and the social structure – the politics – of the village community. The roles designate status, they are “roles of everyday life”.<sup>32</sup> This connection foils the observation by the ethnologist as a spy, for the roles of ‘watching’ and ‘playing’ are clearly assigned, and it is the role of the spectator-pilgrim Burton loathly takes on.

Thus, it is not surprising that Burton is hardly able to find any common ground between Oberammergau and Mecca: “The former is unreal, at best imitative realism. The latter is the living and breathing representation of what has changed but little for the last two centuries.”<sup>33</sup> Instead of the theatre of the foreign he was looking for he finds a theatre for foreigners: “Oberammergau” and its passion are – in Burton's view – “performed by a company of hereditary and professional players”; the hajj he considers to be performed by “a moving multitude of devotees”.<sup>34</sup> Burton does not encounter the ‘foreign’, he is himself marked as a foreigner and revealed to be a spy as soon as he arrives. The ethnographer can no longer be a hero.

#### IV. The rabbi and the theatre as an untruthful truth-maker

Burton does not travel to Bavaria of his own accord; his wife persuaded him and also wrote a travel report. Despite the two reports being identical in places, they differ fundamentally.<sup>35</sup> Isabel Burton, née Arundell, describes a pilgrimage that begins in Munich and ends with a church service after the play. The template for her perception is not only historical-cultural contexts, but also often



her own imagination and her childhood in a conservative Catholic parental home.<sup>36</sup> The presentation of the biblical figures on stage becomes a metaphor for the real presence of Christ as the mystery of the Roman Catholic denomination. The re-enactment of the passion brings forth an act of compassion. The comparison of the play with subjective imagination does not, however, hinder the integration of ethnological knowledge. This kind of informed immersion or ludic fictionality<sup>37</sup> brings Isabel Burton's description close to the report of Joseph Krauskopf twenty years later even if at first glance it seems very different. Krauskopf's journey, which he initially undertook as a tourist, gradually became a journey into his own past, which in retrospect appeared to himself as a pilgrimage: "The cosmopolitan [grew] Jew".<sup>38</sup> Significantly, the rabbi's report begins with the journey home and his last look at a crucifixion group at the entrance to the village:

That proud monument had a tragic fate. When being carted to its site up the mountain road, the wagon slipped on one of the steep inclines, the statue of St. John fell to the ground, unfortunately upon the body of the sculptor, its creator, and crushed him to death.<sup>39</sup>

The whole travel report is in large part a symbolic rereading of this accident: just as the sculptor is crushed by his sculpture, so is the creator of Christianity, Judaism, crushed by its creation:

[H]is creative genius it was that gave it its colossal dimensions; it was his mallet and chisel that sculptured the towering grandeur of Jesus, and, in return, Christianity fell upon him when on its ascent to eminence, when on its rise to power, and pressed him down, down, and crushed him—not to death, for the Jew is not of mortal clay—crushed him to the dregs of the earth.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 4: Girl adopting a 'Mary'-like Pose, Gemein-dearchiv Oberammergau, 9. 3. 106 PAS 1900 106/4; photographer unknown.

For the rabbi, the Passion Play becomes a symbol of this historiographical process, of the story of the victors that is performatively substantiated again and again in the mimetic repetition. The success of this substantiation is supported by a centuries-long evolution of the people of Oberammergau, their psycho-physical adaptation to the play which does not lessen, but is instead perfected from generation to generation. According to him, Oberammergau is a microcosm of the biblical world; the biblical figures and the biblical landscapes can be found here not in a diminished form, but in a concentrated and thus more authoritative shape. Unlike Burton, who found in Ammergau the whole world but Palestine, who saw the villagers as Icelanders, but by no means as ancient Semites, the rabbi feels like he has been transported back to biblical times and into

Jewish landscapes: "The people seem to belong more to the past than to the present."<sup>41</sup> Just as the ancient Jewish women hoped to give birth to the messiah, the mothers of Oberammergau hope to bear a "John", a "Mary" or even a "Jesus".<sup>42</sup>

Like Burton, Krauskopf sketches out the shaping and definition of daily life by the Passion Play – but without Burton's irony. The danger of the play, he claims, lies in its specific authenticity, which does not exhaust itself in an evocation of the past, but instead results from the centuries-long adaptation of the villagers to the sacred events. Unlike Burton, the rabbi accords the play not only the ability to produce theatrical illusion. To him, in addition, the Oberammergau passion is performatively subjecting historical events fraught with consequences to an interpretation whose claim to absolute authority makes the play mere terror. In Krauskopf's view, the experience of the Passion Play has an effect of negative catharsis on its spectators as well as on its actors. In combination with the presence of the holy figures beyond the theatrical framework, any rational or critical view of the biblical narrative is suppressed. Thus, the ship of credulity can be given a major overhaul in the illusion of Oberammergau:

Many an one, I felt, had brought his craft of credulity into the dry-docks of Oberammergau, much the worse for its having been tossed and beaten by the tempestuous seas of modern research, and was having it overhauled, was having its leaky places pitched, its ropes stretched, its masts reset, its sails mended, its bolts tightened, ready for a cruise of another decade of years in the waters of blind belief, for another decade of years never to think it worth his while to hear the Jew's story, to hear the Jew's version of what is recorded against him in the New Testament, of what is enacted against him in the Passion Play of Oberammergau.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, the inhabitants of Oberammergau merge with a fiction that claims a special kind of truth; the theatrical illusion itself moves from being the appearance of the real to being another reality. The medium of this reciprocity is the theatre in which the passion always has taken place as a visualization of an intangible truth; and here the rabbi seems to be referring to the earlier text on Oberammergau by theatre historian Eduard Devrient mentioned above, which he, the German emigrant, could certainly have known. Devrient reflects on the beginning of the play:

Das war unläugbar Gottesdienst. Der priest-erliche Chor hatte uns in diesem symbolischen Vorspiele den ganzen Umfang des Erlösungswerkes dargestellt. Die Ammergauer nennen den Chor: ‚Die Schutzgeister‘, wol in einer dunklen Vermischung der Begriffe von den vermittelnden guten Geistern ihrer Sagen und Märchen, von ihren Heiligen und endlich ihren Priestern; nur die Weihe, welche in den Functionen dieses Chores liegt, ist dem Volke klar. Es ist ein künstlerischer Ritus, der sich hier vollendet.<sup>44</sup>

That was undeniably a church service. The priestly choir presented us the whole scope of the work of salvation in this symbolic prelude. The people of Ammergau call the chorus 'the guardian spirits', perhaps in an obscure mixture of the terms from the good intercessional spirits from their myths and legends, from their saints and finally their priests; only the consecration which is among the functions of this chorus is clear to the people. It is an artistic ritual which is completed here.

While Burton describes a play within a play and thus narrates his trip to Bavaria as a visit to the theatre, the rabbi describes a journey into another reality which is not exposed as a 'mere' play in the Passion Play but recurs in concentrated, intensified form. The Passion

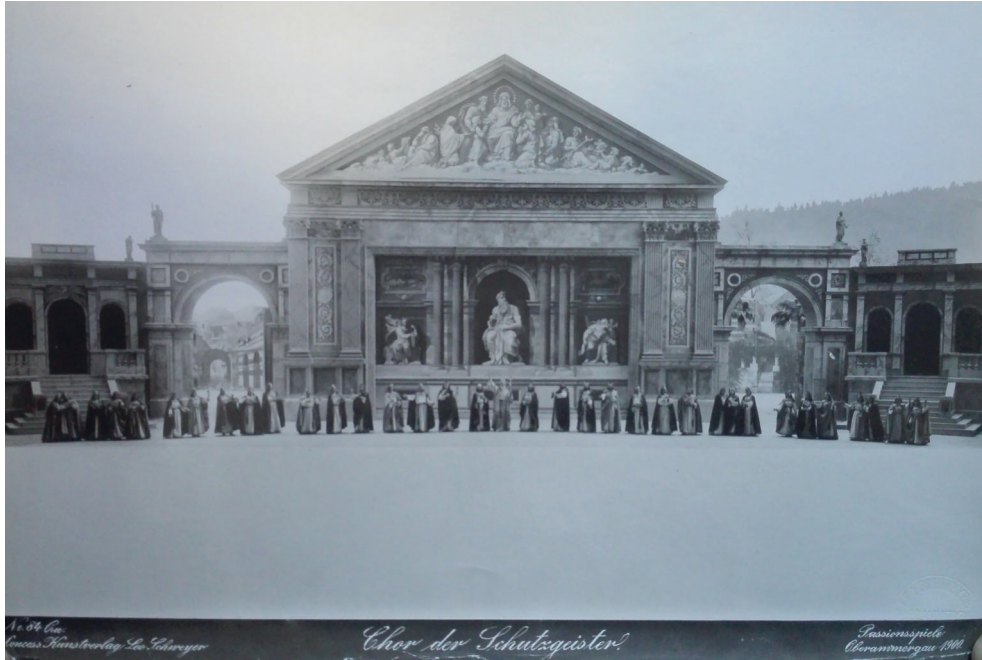


Fig. 5: “Chor der Schutzgeister” (1900), photograph by Leo Schreyer. Gemeindarchiv Oberammergau, 9. 3. 106. PAS 1900 106/2 No. 48 Qu.

Play as the mimesis of the passion story is embedded in the life of the villagers. Therefore, it is not surprising that Krauskopf does not say much about the performance itself. The description of individual scenes and the rough settings as monumental and the presentation as almost terrifyingly authentic instead become the impetus and the starting point for general bible criticism in the tradition of bible historians such as David Strauß, for a re-reading of the Christian foundation myth under the auspices of modern scholarship.<sup>45</sup> With Strauß in the background, the rabbi uncovers logical contradictions in the text and names the pagan backgrounds of Christian *theologoumena*. The theatre of Oberammergau acts as a truth-maker for the alleged truth of Christian bible hermeneutics and historical interpretation. It is not a theatrical illusion in

which the viewing subject simultaneously believes and does not believe, instead it claims to be illusion in the service of truth. The purely perceptive illusion may remain theatrical, but the transcendental illusion – the illuding of reason – remains intact and is authenticated by the theatrical illusion which visualizes it. The aesthetic truth of the play accordingly purports to be the authentication of an absolute truth; for the players and viewers it becomes identical to it, at least for the duration of the play.

[I]t is but a small step for these humble, pious people to pass from kneeling before a Christ-image of wood and stone to worshipping an impersonator of Christ of throbbing flesh and pulsating heart and blessing hand and godly speech.<sup>46</sup>



Fig. 6: "Alleluja": Anton Lang as rising Jesus – the man turns into God (1900), Gemeindarchiv Oberammergau, 9. 3. 106 PAS 1900 106/4.

Thus, the practice of passion-playing repeats what occurred in the life of the historical Jesus. Just as Jesus became the messiah, so the actor playing Christ becomes the incarnation of the saviour:

Tall and graceful; with long, blond [!], flowing locks [...]; a kindly, yet earnest look; majestic, as he sat upon the colt [...] benignly dispensing his blessings upon the people to the right and left with graceful waves of the hand, – it was a presence as august as it was entrancing.<sup>47</sup>

The worship of the actor playing Christ "was not the love and reverence of a play, – it was real and intense."<sup>48</sup>

By describing Johann Zwink alias Judas as the only 'player' in the play, the only actor in whom the 'lived' aspect of the roles does not prove to be true, Krauskopf pinpoints

the core of the story that is rewritten from the victors' point of view. And the perfection of Zwink's acting thus appears as confirmation of the historically untrue picture drawn by the New Testament: "[A]s unlike as the real character of Johann Zwink [...] is to the Judas of his impersonation, so unlike was the real Judas of Kariyoth to the Judas Iscariot of the Passion Play or of the gospel stories."<sup>49</sup> The uncovering of the illusion is thus not due to the dissatisfaction with the play as a play, but rather to the gap between historical truth and the truth depicted on stage. During the play, the whistle of a locomotive on the nearby railway line becomes, for the rabbi, the protest of modernity against the irrationalism of the play: "this modern engine-shriek [...] sounded like a modern protest against this vilification of one of the disciples of Jesus."<sup>50</sup>



Fig. 7: “Der Verrath” – Judas Kiss (1900), detail, photograph by Leo Schreyer. Gemeindegarchiv Oberammergau, 9.3.106 PAS 1900 106/3, No. 11 Fol.

## V. Conclusion: Faith, truth, and history

A woman called Hermine Diemer saw the play in the same year as the rabbi. In her travelogue, she also mentions the whistling of a locomotive disturbing the play. She also describes the whistle as the intrusion of modernity; like the rabbi, she perceives the collision of the modern present and the real presence of the origin story located in an absolute past in the Passion Play. However, from the perspective of a practising Christian, Diemer describes the disturbance as an unwanted interruption of her religious experience. Academic rationalism and the mystery of belief remain uncommunicated and incommunicable; belief becomes disbelief when it desires to know:<sup>51</sup> “Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” [Jh 20,29] – the rabbi inverts the

biblical word in line with a modern, enlightened belief: “Faith is mighty, Truth is mightier, but mightiest of all is the Faith that rests on Truth.”<sup>52</sup> The illusion we believe in against better judgement<sup>53</sup> substantiates a doubtful truth even for the doubting. The rabbi fears the resistance of an irrational belief to reason if it is confirmed by a physical view in the image, but even more in the human body; and he fears the resistance of the illuded perception to reason if it is confirmed by irrational religious truths.

The epistemic metaphor of the encounter with the foreign as a theatrical experience, which was referred to by Schütz and Burton, allowed Krauskopf’s notion of theatre as a truth-maker (yet an untruthful one) to be considered in a new light. Thus, the location of the traveller in a theatre of the foreign begins to oscillate. For Burton, the ethnographer, the Passion Play, which presumes a conventional theatre framework with the division of the community into foreigners and natives, spectators and actors, becomes a pale imitation of what was formerly a vital religious tradition. For the rabbi, it is a warrantor of the continuity of its traditions that are based on fundamental historical misrepresentation. Krauskopf even fears the power of an absolute illusion stripped of its reflexive element. While Burton points at the histrionic nature of the play and the theatricality of the village, taking it as a symptom of secularization, in Krauskopf’s report the Passion Play figures as a dramatization of the historically untrue and anti-Jewish gospel stories. The reconstruction of their respective notions allowed an observation of the construction of religious alterity in the process of scientization – be it as a historicization of the Christian bible, as in Krauskopf, or as a comparative view on Islamic and Christian theatres of religion, as in Burton.

Krauskopf’s nightmarish vision of the play whose religious earnestness turns into

terror is in sharp contrast with the debate on the Passion Play of Oberammergau as a means of goodwill and inter-confessional understanding, if not inter-religious unity, as it was claimed by major protagonists of American liberal Protestantism in the inter-war period.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, it can hardly be read today without thinking of the catastrophes of the twentieth century – in particular if one is aware of how Oberammergau and its discoverers, namely theatre reformer Eduard Devrient, were instrumentalized by National Socialist propaganda, and how many of the villagers and Passion players engaged in the Nazi movement.<sup>55</sup> Ironically, it was the Judas of the 1934 tercentennial play, Hans Zwink, who turned out to be the “lonely anti-Nazi” of Oberammergau.<sup>56</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Richard Burton, *A Glance at the Passion Play*, London 1880, p. 14.
- 2 In fact, the history of the Passion Play reaches far back to medieval and early modern times. For an overview, see e.g. James Shapiro, *Oberammergau. The Troubling Story of the World's Most Famous Passion Play*, New York 2000. For a more general account of the European Tradition of *Passionsspiel* see Michael Henker, Eberhard Dünninger, Evamaria Brockhoff (eds.), *Hört, sehst, weint und liebt. Passionsspiele im alpenländischen Raum*, Innsbruck 1990.
- 3 See Eduard Devrient, *Das Passionsschauspiel in Oberammergau und seine Bedeutung für die neue Zeit*, Leipzig 1851; Eduard Devrient, *Das Passionsspiel in Oberammergau. Eindrücke und Betrachtungen aus dem Jahre 1850*, ed. Hans Ruederer, Munich 1922.
- 4 Georg Fuchs, *Die Revolution des Theaters. Ergebnisse aus dem Münchener Künstlertheater*, Munich/Leipzig 1909; Georg Fuchs, *Die Sezession in der dramatischen Kunst und das Volksfestspiel, Mit einem Rückblick auf die Passion von Oberammergau*, Munich 1911. The nationalist and war-glorifying side of his ideas is evident in a later text: Georg Fuchs, *Das Passions-Spiel und seine Wiedergeburt im Weltkriege*, Berlin 1916.
- 5 For the myths surrounding Oberammergau and its Passion Play, see Shapiro, *Oberammergau*, pp. 101–136 as well as Jill Stevenson, “Affect, Medievalism and Temporal Drag. Oberammergau's Passion Play Event”, in: Stanley D. Brunn (ed.), *The Changing World Religion Map. Sacred Places, Identities, Practices and Politics*, vol. 4, Heidelberg 2015, pp. 2491–2515. A stylisation of the village as medieval can paradigmatically be seen in M. Vornamen ausschreiben Elan, ‘Letters to a Lady’, in: R. Vornamen ausschreiben Calwer (ed.), *Oberammergauer Blätter. Oberammergau, Weekly News, Revue d' Oberammergau*, Serie I, Oberammergau, Munich 1890, pp. 11–16.
- 6 See for an overview Shapiro; more specifically lately Joshua Edelmann “Spiritual Voyeurism and Cultural Nostalgia. Anglophone Visitors to the Oberammergau Passion Play, 1870–1925 and 2010”, in: Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. (ed.), *The Oberammergau Passion Play. Essays on the 2010 Performance and the Centuries-Long Tradition*, Jefferson 2017, pp. 66–87; Leanne Groeneveld, “‘He showed Himself in response to your longing’. Women Spectators at the Oberammergau Passion Play”, in: Precious Stearns McKenzie (ed.), *Women Rewriting Boundaries. Victorian Women Travel Writers*, Cambridge 2016, pp. 133–164.
- 7 For biographical details of the life of Richard Burton, see Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man. Richard Burton and the Victorian World*, Cambridge 2005. Kennedy aims “to demythologize and rehistoricize Burton's life” (p. 6), instead of stressing the exceptionality of this Victorian eccentric, as most of his biographers tend to: “for all his unusual talents and contrarian character, he was very much a man of his time” (p. 2), she states. For nineteenth-century European travels to the African continent see the excellent study by Anke Fischer-Kattner, *Spuren der Begegnung. Europäische Reiseberichte über Afrika 1760–1860*, Göttingen 2015.

- Doron Bar, Kobi Cohen-Hattab, "A New Kind of Pilgrimage. The Modern Tourist Pilgrim of Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century Palestine", in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 39 (2003), pp.131–148.
- 8 See Michael Grimshaw, *Bibles and Baedekers. Tourism, Travel, Exile and God*, New York 2008; Michael Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism. Crossroads, Destinations and Encounters*, London, New York 2011.
- 9 Burton, *Passion Play*, p. 13.
- 10 Josef Krauskopf, *A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play. A series of six lectures. With three supplemental chapters bearing on the subject*, Philadelphia 1901, p. 23. See also Edelmann, "Spiritual Voyeurism". For a historical review of Krauskopf's lectures, see Paul Carus, "A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play", *The Open Court* 10 (1903), Article 12. Available at: <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/ocj/vol1903/iss10/12> [last accessed 05/18/2018].
- 11 C.G. Montefiore, "Dr. Krauskopf on the Oberammergau Play", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 14/1 (Oct., 1901), pp. 141–147, here p. 141. Philadelphia was the birthplace of American reform Judaism, which has roots in mid-nineteenth century and central Europe, namely Krauskopf's country of origin, Germany; a major exponent of the German movement was Abraham Geiger, who introduced the image of the historical Jesus as a Pharisee to the discourse. See Susannah Henschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, Chicago 1998, pp. 229–242; Christian Wiese, Walter Homolka, Thomas Brechenmacher (eds.): *Jüdische Existenz in der Moderne. Abraham Geiger und die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Berlin 2013.
- 12 Krauskopf, *Rabbi's Impressions*, p. 38.
- 13 Concept according to Michel Foucault, "Of Other Space", *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984), pp. 46–49; The concept underwent a broad and heterogeneous reception in the humanities, especially in theatre studies.
- 14 Krauskopf, *Rabbi's Impressions*, p. 31.
- 15 See e.g. Lambert Wiesing, "Von der defekten Illusion zum perfekten Phantom. Über phänomenologische Bildtheorien", in: Gertrud Koch, Christiane Voss (eds.), *...kraft der Illusion*, Munich 2006, pp. 89–102, here p. 89.
- 16 For the Brechtian origin of the expression and its relevance for recent perspectives in theatre studies, see Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, "(Un-)Glauben. Das Spiel mit der Illusion", in: *Forum Modernes Theater*, 22/2 (2007), pp. 141–151.
- 17 Sonja E. Spear, "Claiming the Passion. American Fantasies of the Oberammergau Passion Play, 1923–1947", in: *Church History* 80 (4/2011), pp. 832–862, here p. 845. See also Henschel, *Abraham Geiger*, pp. 78–83. After finishing this article, I became aware of the constitutive historiographic study on Krauskopf, his sources, and his reception in the context of transnational reform Judaism by Robert Priest, "A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play: Joseph Krauskopf, Antisemitism, and the Limits of the Transnational Jewish Public Sphere around 1900", to appear in: *Jewish Social Studies* 24 (1/2019).
- 18 For the notion of untruthful truth-makers, see David Sherman, "Self-deception, Deception and the Way of the World", in: Clancy W. Martin (ed.), *The Philosophy of Deception*, Oxford 2009, pp. 82–103, here p. 92.
- 19 Alfred Schütz, "The Stranger", in: *American Journal of Sociology* 49 (6/1944), pp. 499–507, here p. 503.
- 20 See Susan Sontag, "The Anthropologist as Hero", in: *The New York Review of Books* (September 1963), pp. 82–87.
- 21 Richard Burton, *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah, Vol. III: Meccah*, London 1865, p. 199.
- 22 Burton, *Pilgrimage*, p. 199 f.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 288.
- 24 See Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man*.
- 25 Burton, *Passion Play*, p. 13.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 See e.g. Rudolf Münz, *Theatralität und Theater. Zur Historiographie von Theatralitätsgefügen*, Berlin 1998. Stefan Hulfeld: *Theatergeschichte als kulturelle Praxis. Wie Wissen über Theater entsteht*, Zürich 2007. Tracy C. Davis, Thomas Postlewait, "Theatricality. An Introduction", in:

- Tracy C. Davis, Thomas Postlewait (eds.), *Theatricality*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 1–29.
- 28 Burton, *Passion Play*, p. 50.
- 29 Cf. Devrient, *Passionsspiel Oberammergau*.
- 30 See J.L. Borges, *A Universal History of Infamy*, trans. by Norman Thomas de Giovanni, London 1975.
- 31 Burton, *Passion Play*, pp. 50–51.
- 32 See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York 1959, pp. 17–36.
- 33 Burton, *Passion Play*, p. 161.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- 35 The Burtons were one of the first noted globetrotting couples who saw themselves as ethnographers and scientists. They had been futilely hoping for publication of their adventures in the form of a four-eyes report all their lives. Nevertheless, there are several editions of Richard's report (the latest dates from the *Passionsjahr* 2010), and one of Isabel's (published in 1890 as: *The Passion-Play at Ober-Ammergau*, London 1900; a shorter version appeared slightly earlier as: "The passion play at Oberammergau", in *The New Review* 2 (1890), p. 546–551. Cf. Mary S. Lovell, *A Rage to Live: A Biography of Richard and Isabel Burton*, New York 1998, Edelmann, "Spiritual Voyeurism".
- 36 See Lovell, *Rage to Live*.
- 37 For a definition, see the excellent study by Sabrina Eisele, *Entgrenzte Figuren des Bösen. Film- und tanzwissenschaftliche Analysen*, Bielefeld 2016, pp. 12, 109, 163.
- 38 Krauskopf, *Rabbi's Impressions*, p. 31.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 42 Cf. Krauskopf, *Rabbi's Impressions*: "If we could read the hearts of the Oberammergau mothers, I have no doubt but that we would find graven there most fervent prayers that they might live to see their children either as Jesus upon the cross or as Mary or John at his feet, —just as the pious mother of Israel of old was in the habit of praying that the expected Messiah might be vouchsafed to her, or, if a daughter be born instead, that she might be worthy of becoming the Messiah's bride" (p. 24).
- 43 Krauskopf, *Rabbi's Impressions*, p. 34.
- 44 Devrient, *Passionsspiel*, p. 15.
- 45 See David Friedrich Strauß, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*. 2 Vols., Tübingen 1835/1836 (trans.: David Friedrich Strauß, *The Life of Jesus*, trans. by Marian Evans, New York 1860). David Friedrich Strauß, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft*. 2 Vols. Tübingen, Stuttgart 1840–1841; Krauskopf, *Rabbi's Impressions*, pp. 36, 44.
- 46 Krauskopf, *Rabbi's Impressions*, p. 46.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 79. The difference in Zwink's acting in comparison to the other Passion players was already topical at that time.
- 50 Krauskopf, *Rabbi's Impressions*, p. 78 f.
- 51 Hermine Diemer, *Oberammergau and its passion play, a retrospect of the history of Oberammergau and its passion play from the commencement up to the present day also full description of the country and the manners and costumes of the people*, Munich, Oberammergau 1910.
- 52 Krauskopf, *Rabbi's Impressions*, p. 14.
- 53 See Wiesing, "Phänomenologische Bildtheorien", p. 89; Müller-Schöll, "(Un-)Glauben".
- 54 For a profound analysis, see Spear, "Claiming the Passion", pp. 833–840; for the reaction on the Catholic side, see *ibid.*, pp. 834–844.
- 55 See e.g. Helena Waddy, *Oberammergau in the Nazi Era. The Fate of a Catholic Village in Hitler's Germany* Oxford 2010; Spear, "Claiming the Passion", pp. 854–857; Evelyn Annuß, *Volksschule des Theaters. Nationalsozialistische Massenspiele*, München 2018.
- 56 See Spear, "Claiming the Passion", p. 859.