

HENRIËTTE RIETVELD

COLONIALISM RESCALED

Ons Wereldrijk (Our Empire)

Hotel Modern

Theater Rotterdam, Netherlands

December 2019

Hotel Modern's
Our Empire,
Theater Rotterdam,
Rotterdam,
Netherlands,
2019. Photo:
Bas Czerwinski

On February 25, 1605, Steven van der Hagen, first admiral of the Dutch East India Company, landed on Ambon, one of the Maluku Islands in Eastern Indonesia, and captured a Portuguese imperial fortress. For centuries the Maluku Islands were the only place in the world that produced cloves—aromatic flower buds worth more than their weight in gold. Europe had gotten a taste and now couldn't get enough. Other nearby islands produced equally coveted nutmeg and mace. The Portuguese,



the English, the Spanish, the Dutch—they all vied to acquire and trade the valuable spices produced on the Indonesian islands, and they weren't afraid to use brutal force against the local population (and each other) to get what they wanted. Inequitable trading eventually became violent conquest, and following van der Hagen's arrival, the Dutch colonized Indonesia (formerly "our India" in Dutch vernacular) for the next 340 years.

Our Empire, a new multimedia production by the Dutch performance collective Hotel Modern, which opened its tour at Theater Rotterdam in December 2019, explores the brutal colonization process perpetrated by the Dutch East India Company in Indonesia from 1600 to 1680. The production marks the first in a proposed trilogy on Dutch colonial history in the archipelago. The puppets inhabit dioramas of villages, trees, rainforests, rice fields, and ships. These tiny and crude yet beautiful figures are operated by the performers with a concentration and delight reminiscent of child's play. A large screen magnifies the action on stage. Another table is reserved for Arthur Sauer, composer and musician, surrounded by a wide range of musical instruments (and a giant heap of celery), which he uses to produce a lively score.

Hotel Modern, founded in 1997 by Arlene Hoornweg, Pauline Kalker, and Herman Helle, produces work that investigates and unveils the scale and systematic nature of violence and war through disturbingly playful manipulations of miniature puppets and models projected onto screens.¹ The artists who comprise Hotel Modern are all white Dutch—and so am I. It appears to me that this production—the presumptive "our" in the title says it all—is mainly aimed at a white Dutch audience, calling for increased awareness and acknowledgment of the atrocities committed by the Dutch in the name of profit and nation, and their legacies and ramifications on white Dutch society and identity. Watching white adult performers preciously play with, but also manipulate and assault, tiny brown puppets is deeply uncomfortable and implicates the performers, turning the audience into active witnesses—urging the Rotterdam spectators to consider both their country's and their individual roles in the perpetuation of oppressive systems.

Hotel Modern's previous productions, *The Great War* (2001) and *Kamp* (2005), explored histories that have been etched into Western memory through personal narratives, through stories and images in books and newspapers, and through documentaries and movies on the screen. In *The Great War*, life in the trenches during World War I was presented through the perspective of a puppet soldier—the lens of the camera morphed into his eyes as he witnessed the devastation of war. Banal and horrific letters from a serviceman to his mother accompanied the visuals. *Kamp* presented a day and a night in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Using three thousand delicately handmade puppets, and focused on daily routine rather than an individual narrative, the company highlighted the horrifying scale and efficiency of the camp's destructive machinery.² By presenting the creation of familiar visuals live in front of the audience, Hotel Modern emphasized

the power of visual representations of violence on perception and memory, and, moreover, the subjectivity of their construction and framing.³

It's been fourteen years since *Kamp* premiered, and while the artists employ the same style and techniques, Hotel Modern have shifted their approach with *Our Empire*.⁴ Rather than reconstructing familiar footage, the company finds unexpected ways to present a violent past that has been obscured, buried, and negated. The atrocities committed by the Dutch across the world in the name of trade, prosperity, and empire, underwritten by capitalist and white supremacist structures—and their legacies—rarely go acknowledged in the Netherlands and are still underrepresented in our history books. When King Willem-Alexander made official apologies to Indonesia in the spring of 2020, they covered only the horrors committed during Indonesia's independence war seventy-five years ago; not a word was said on the periods preceding and following it.

Walter Benjamin suggests that “history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance.”⁵ Remembrance is an active process, shaping and reshaping memory. A brutal colonial past has shaped Dutch society, yet it is seldom actively remembered. In a recent interview with reporter Annemieke Bosman, Helle said, “It is very painful when nobody knows about it . . . that it's not seen as Dutch history. And all of it is national history, including the wretchedness.”⁶ By uncovering and presenting a complicated, compromising past, Hotel Modern entreats its audience to consider the subjective production and reproduction of history. *Our Empire* is an intricate and complicated history lesson. It presents the different powers at play in early colonial times, highlighting complex events in different locations, while acknowledging the fragmentary nature of the stories presented. As in their earlier productions, the simultaneous onstage creation transformed into enlarged projections underlines the constructed nature of the performance—and the historical narrative more broadly.

The production begins with a forthright personal introduction. Helle exposes his family's ties to Indonesia: using family heirlooms and pictures, he tells us his great-grandfather was a captain on a ship and settled there. Helle's parents were both born in Indonesia. Using his familial history as a springboard, the production dives into a past that cannot be represented by such material remnants. The distant past is presented as fragmented and episodic, the product of a parsing of archives and personal narratives. The impossibility of representing the past realistically is reflected in the design of the dioramas and the puppets. Their artifice is frank. Materials include cardboard, flowers representing trees, and cocktail umbrellas. The only props true to life are the spices. The puppets are constructed out of wire, with meticulously crafted heads that express individuality and emotion.

Our Empire shifts between different narrative modes, sometimes drawing us in to follow the story line of an individual (using close-ups and first-person narratives), other times zooming out to see the bigger picture (using camera pans and long shots). As we



Hotel Modern's
Our Empire. Photos:
Pauline Kalker



Hotel Modern's
Our Empire. Photo:
Bas Czerwinski

move into the past, the first story we are presented with is that of a local chief who details how the Portuguese were the first to land, and how he wants to get rid of them. When the Dutch arrive, they agree to work together. A naval battle ensues, complete with cinematic shots of model ships and puppets operating tiny cannons. The vivid animations are reminiscent of action movies, yet their live production on stage prevents immersion. After the victory, the Dutch remain on the island and enforce a trade monopoly, obliging the islanders to trade only with them. The coerced signing of a contract, preventing the local people to trade with anyone else, and the destructive and violent retribution by the Dutch when that contract is breached, is a repeated trope in the production highlighting how systemic bureaucracy and the drive for profit were used as excuses to displace and destroy whole societies.

Hotel Modern doesn't shy away from showing disturbing incidents of violence. The bombing of ships, the burning of villages, the repeated stabbing of a villager, the rape of a woman, the massacre on Banda and the subsequent enslavement of Bandanese women and children, are shown in gory—if tiny—detail, and dramatically scored by Arthur Sauer. While on the screen two puppet soldiers are in bloody combat, on stage a performer manipulates them as if they were action figures. Horrific sounds of bones breaking make their way through the speakers, produced by Sauer visibly cracking celery. The production of the animation and the use of juxtaposition creates a level of distance that makes it easier to process unimaginable atrocities—this production is concerned not with individual suffering but with the scale and systemic violence of colonization.

Occasionally the audience is offered relief from the brutality. One sequence starts with a shot of a person working in a rice field outside the fortress of a powerful Sultan. A Dutch emissary, carried in on a litter and bringing a gift, is refused entry at the gate. The same sequence is repeated several times, and the number of gifts grows—and, seemingly, so does the puppet's big sheep's nose. When the Dutch are finally allowed entry, the visit is presented like a modern-day royal visit—including an excited and slightly frantic reporter puppet detailing the proceedings in front of the camera. One of the gifts offered to the sultan is a Mondrian painting—a witty touch that at the same time defamiliarizes, bringing the performance into the here and now by presenting a modern painting that has become a symbol of Dutch national pride. When the Sultan refuses to sell his rice solely to them, the Dutch make their way out. The camera rests on the sultan appreciating the painting.

The puppet of the sultan is a hornbill (magnificent birds with colorful beaks that featured in various local myths). In *Our Empire*, the ordinary Indonesians are represented as human puppets, whereas those with more power and privilege are presented as animals. Indonesian leaders are portrayed as hornbills, Chinese merchants as cats, and the Europeans as white sheep. Representing the powerful as mythical, colorful, and cuddly animals marks them out and humanizes the ordinary people of Indonesia. The choice to turn the colonizers into sheep can be interpreted in several ways: Are they wolves in sheep's clothing, or mindless followers of the oppressive mercantile regime run by the East India Company? Arguably this reduces the perpetrators' agency, diminishing personal culpability. At the same time, this design highlights how thoughtless individuals can participate in and reinforce a destructive system.

The performers' concentration and precision make the simple and beautiful puppets come alive. Their performance is at once reminiscent of the occasional callousness of child's play and the cruelty of the colonizers. Watching white adults play with brown puppets—their game playing at times resonating as a disturbing joy in the violence they perpetrate on these tiny representations of suffering human beings—is disconcerting and uncomfortable to watch. Throughout, the collective implicates not only the white Dutch audience, but they also implicate themselves. They at once present and embody cruelty, placing the spectator in a position of witness. However, I remain unconvinced the Hotel Modern's aim was to make me feel uncomfortable about white performers enacting violence on the representation of brown bodies. Do they, by performing this violence, perpetuate it? It is not ethically acceptable for white actors to perform characters of color, and neither should it be okay for them to puppeteer them. While the production attempts to humanize the Indonesian puppets, this attempt fails because of the white bodies animating them. The use of puppets rescales colonial violence and unveils its systemic nature, yet on a metalevel the white performers condition the reading and reception of the piece. Aesthetically, Hotel Modern reproduces the inequities and blind spots they seek to make evident. *Our Empire* brings an important history to

the forefront, but it does so without including collaborators of Indonesian descent on stage. The production at once lays bare systems of oppression and emphasizes the stories and agency of the Indonesian people, but inevitably they are told through a white Dutch perspective.

It is clear that Hotel Modern's project is based on extensive research, and their care and personal investment in a recalibrated historical narrative is evident. The artifice in the design and distance afforded by scale highlight systems of oppression, delivered with discomfort at witnessing the enactment of extreme violence. *Our Empire* claims a space for distant and abhorrent events in Dutch national history and urges for a larger awareness of the past and how it affects the present. In other words, Hotel Modern seeks to create an opportunity for what Benjamin dubbed the dialectical image, in which past, present, and future converge. In performance, the past is brought into the present in order to reshape the future—a future of increased self-awareness and acknowledgment on the part of the white Dutch audience. Yet this is also where it falls short: its white Dutch framing risks perpetuating colonizing processes rather than exposing them.

NOTES

1. Hotel Modern comprises Herman Helle, Arlene Hoornweg, and Pauline Kolker. For more information visit www.hotelmodern.nl.
2. In 2007, *Theater* featured a photo dossier of *Kamp*. See "Portfolio: Hotel Modern, *Kamp*," *Theater* 37, no. 2 (2007): 90–101.
3. In "Playing Soldiers at the Edge of Imagination: Hotel Modern and the Representation of the Unrepresentable," Professor Maaïke Bleeker investigates how Hotel Modern's "representation of the unrepresentable" highlights how imagination (and the unimaginable) is mediated by visualization. See *Arcadia: International Journal for Literary Studies* 45, no. 2 (2011): 277–96.
4. *Kamp* is still performed, including an annual performance in Rotterdam on May 4, Remembrance Day in the Netherlands.
5. Walter Benjamin, "On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 471.
6. My translation of a quotation in Herman Helle, interview by Annemieke Bosman, "Het Gesprek—Herman Helle en Arthur Sauer," *Opium*, NPO Radio 4 / AVROTROS, December 20, 2019, www.nporadio4.nl/fragmenten/audio/372920-het-gesprek-herman-helle-en-arthur-sauer.