Border crossings: Austrian Literature as danced by the Japanese Dancer Saburo Teshigawara

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I only would believe in a god,
who knows how to dance.
(Friedrich Nietzsche)

In order to conduct a proper examination of the issue of border crossings it is necessary to have a clear awareness of the territories under discussion, particularly with regard to transdisciplinary works where 'otherness' becomes visible. In the present article I will examine the concept of border crossing in multiple respects. My object of investigation is a video-production by the German director, Jan Schmidt-Garre. In this video the Japanese choreographer, Saburo Teshigawara, dances to the narration of "The Bound Man" written by the Austrian writer, Ilse Aichinger. The dance is accompanied by the music of the Russian composer, Dimitri Shostakowich (string quartets number 13, 14 and 15).

Initial Considerations

As the description of my object of investigation makes clear, border crossings occur in the following fields: art forms (literature, dance, music), media (written text, video - including audio), languages (body-language, languages of images etc.) and cultures (Austrian-German, Japanese, Russian). It is obvious that art productions which investigate border crossing must take into account the special nature of transdisciplinary works – where several disciplines meld into one. The transdisciplinary approach differs from that of pluralism of the 1960s and 70s. The term transdisciplinarity refers to a dialogue between methods and not an exclusion of one from the other; it deals with interrelations and interrationality.[1] What Wolfgang Welsch calls 'transversal reason' follows the search for the points, transitions and interfaces where different lines interconnect. Welsch talks in his definition of transdisciplinatity about a *modus operandi* that provokes transver-

sal relations between different systems.[2]

To follow the principle of transgression, it is necessary for a critic to develop a process of analysis that takes into account the various borders crossed in art forms, media, language, and culture. Because of this, critics accustomed to focus solely on the written word will soon become aware of their limitations – they will, for example, only be able to describe body-movements and images with words, and will be unable to "quote" the originals.

Before embarking on such a process of analysis, it is necessary therefore to consider whether, in order to be able to explain the relations between text, image, body, space, energy and sound in a satisfying way, conventional models and theories will suffice, or whether more fitting concepts will first have to be designed. To ensure full understanding from a transdisciplinary perspective, it is necessary to establish in text, dance, film and music particular contact points where these transdisciplinary moments occur.

In the present investigation I assume that in the attempt to cross borders, the awareness of limitations will be sharpened and new frontiers be created – in terms of perceiving art as well as regarding methods of analysis. As a result a new horizon will be opened up. The performancepart analysis in this paper is partly influenced by the work of Patrice Pavis and Hans-Thies Lehmann.[3]

The narration

The base of the production is a narration of the Austrian writer, Ilse Aichinger, born in 1921.[4] "The Bound Man" tells the story of a man, who one sunny day awakes in a meadow and discovers that he has been tied up. A thin twisted string has been wound skilfully round his body. The grace of his movements delights the animal-tamer of a circus, who asks the Bound Man to perform in his arena. His movements arouse the public's enthusiasm and make the tightrope walkers redundant.

One day a wolf escapes from the circus enclosure. The Bound Man succeeds in overpowering him with the magic of his movements. The public wants to see this happen in the circus and urges for a performance with another wolf. The Bound Man and the circus director know that such fights do not belong in the

circus ring, but they cannot resist the urgings of the spectators. Greatly concerned that he will not survive this fight, the circus director's wife cuts through the Bound Man's cords and in so doing destroys his sense of equilibrium. Unable to move freely, the Bound Man is at the mercy of the wolf, which, when it gets ready to leap on him, has to be shot.

Literature and Dance

Ilse Aichinger's narration is used for part of the dance film. Less than one quarter of the original text is created in eleven images. These images occur repeatedly in different guises, forming the base of the dance. The story is reduced to a minimum.

The relationship between literature and dance history in the Western world has existed since the very beginnings of ballet. The stories of Don Quixote, Romeo and Juliet and Faust, etc. existed in the collective memory long before they were gathered together, written down, elevated to literature and finally introduced on the dance stage. In dance the so-called ballet of actions attempts to retell these commonly known stories with the help of pantomime. In such a way, literature is translated into another system of signs. On the other hand, the desire to find nonverbal forms of expression in literature has been a theme since Goethe and Schiller. Again, at the turn of the 19th century, this topic plays a key role in the so-called crisis of language. Like avant-garde literature, which turns away from large-scale actions, modern dance movements dissociate themselves more from ballet of actions. Following expressionism in painting and poetry, new representation methods concentrate on subjectively shaped moods.[5] Although the attraction of using literary materials as a source of dance did not diminish, the treatment of the sources from the 19th century till the present day has changed considerably as far as composition is concerned.

In the postmodern era, stories are no longer told from the beginning to the end. There is no concern about retaining narrative continuity and totality. The fragment stands in the foreground, breaking and freeing space. The new dance avails itself of literary motifs and images, which unfold sense in an individual way and in new contexts, developing a specific language of physical-spatial expression.

As discussed earlier, the dance I am focussing on does not follow the original narration strictly, but picks out certain elements that are most suited to the form of a dance. In this way, Aichinger's writing style reads very much like the directions of a choreographer, as she describes in detail the body movements of the Bound Man. On the other hand, Aichinger's writing also allows space for visual representations to occur. This is also true of modern dance texts. Contemporary 21st century dance follows the maxim that it should be neither explanatory nor narrative, and yet nevertheless remain evocative.

Linearity and composition

As already explained, the Bound Man dance production does not follow the conventional model of a gradual unfolding of events. Parts of the first lines of the narration are read out by the author. In the next picture, a danced version of the text is presented. Thus, there is a linear break, since the dance marks its own beginning. The action ballet does not retell the familiar written text, but translates it into certain images.
In terms of composition, the Bound Man dance production works with shortened parts of an already existing text. The choice of the music is made from existing material — no new music has been written to accompany the narration and dance; the string quartets numbers 13, 14 and 15, composed in the nineteen seventies by Dimitri Shostakovich, were considered a suitable accompaniment for the dance and the narration and, like the text, have been inserted in parts and into the total composition, the music itself, thus, being reinterpreted to fit the piece. The choreographer creates a totally new piece from his existing body technique and movement as does the film director, who creates out of the existing elements a meaningful whole.

As far as the different possibilities of various art forms are concerned, it is necessary to say that dance, music, and also theatre in performance, are ephemeral works of art. In other words, they can never be repeated exactly. The performance is tangible and physical, perceived concretely in time and space, as it can never be on a film or video recording for example. In a similar way, literature cannot operate with physical phenomena, since it is always possible to regress into the text. Concerning the musical composition in the Bound Man production, one can observe that the film director is not concerned with retaining the musical structure and tension of the original. Single parts are taken out of the whole, sometimes they are conjoined with other disparate segments, because the dance dramaturgy requires a more rhythmical section, for example. In this way the original musical sense loses its validity and is converted into a new sign with a different meaning.

Composition of images

In the filmic production three space- and genre-shots built the base for composition. In all we see twenty-five images, which alternately show lectures, dance pieces and musical performance. First a dancer, moving naturally and freely, appears in colour. These shots are alternated with black-and-white shots of the writer, reading under artificial light, and the performing music quartet, seen from a bird's eye view. As far as temporal distribution of the scenes is concerned, special attention has been given to the dance-scenes. Sometimes the dance is accompanied by a soundtrack of the reading writer or performing quartet.

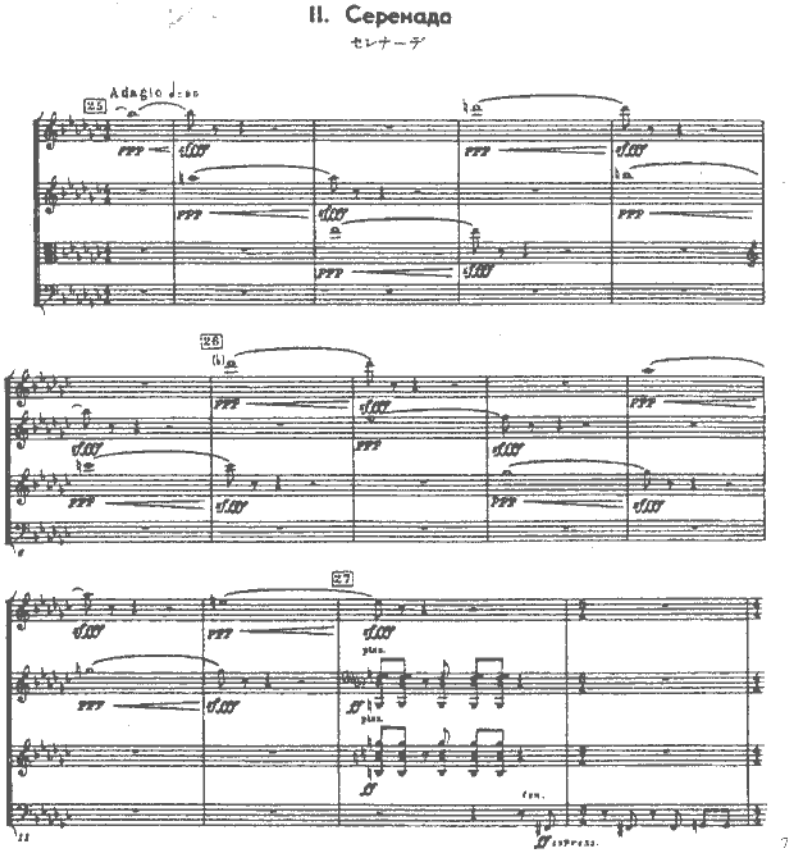
Space and energy

Black-and-white film, used in the shots of the writer, is also used in the four images showing the performing string quartet. As with the reading scene, the performance of the string quartet takes place in a closed space. Thus, they contrast strongly with the shots of the dance, which takes place in a free open space, and is shot in colour. Little "non animal energy" is used in the work overall (the Japanese theatre director, Tadashi Suzuki, distinguishes between "animal-" and "non animal energy" in artistic productions in connection with modern and premodern societies and theatre[6].) Only one strong stage light illuminates some parts of the dance presentation. In the remaining parts, light, space and sound are taken from nature (daylight, moonlight, meadow-space, open air theatre, a river bank, a forest, noises and the singing of wind, insects, crickets and night birds). The human voice and different bodies (male, female, the body of classical ballet and the body of contemporary dance) enrich the natural energy, as do the moving bows of the musicians as they play Shostakovich's music. These

musicians are clearly valued in this work because of the body movements they make when they perform.

Music in movement

In four scenes, the string quartet musicians can be seen from a bird's eye view. Shot in black-and-white, they sit around a desk. Neither the faces of the musicians nor the shapes of the instruments are of interest to the camera. The view from above catches the bow-movements of the string musicians with their sforzato upstrokes, followed by expressive pizzicato movements. In another image pow-



erful up- and down-strokes emphasise the staggered nature of the performance, one musician starting after another. In such a way, this film illustrates the corporal dimensions of Shostakovich's music.

In the Beginning was the Word

Although, in the total conception of this work, physical expression plays a pre-eminent role, the text is nevertheless given to us, both visually and aurally, before we see the dance. The binding is first described in words, and only then does the dancer translate it into physical pictures.

> The Bound Man
>
> He awoke in the sun. Its light fell on his face, so that he had to close his eyes again; it flowed unhindered down the embankment, collected in brooks and caught into itself swarms of mosquitoes, which flew up and around his forehead, circled, tried to land, and were overtaken by new swarms. When he wanted to chase them away, he noticed that he was bound.[8]

The dance of the Bound man

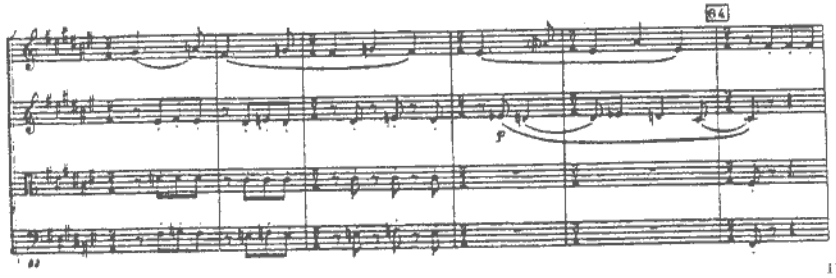
The camera fixes on a body lying on a meadow. The initial movements are natural ones: the wind moves the grasses, natural silence dominates the beginning of the scene, until a cello-solo signals the first movements of the dancer's limbs and accompanies his attempts, as a bound man (the bonds are invisible), to stand up.

The Japanese dancer and choreographer, Saburo Teshigawara, understands the movements of the Bound Man as movements between points, which limit the life of each individual human being. "He is bound, he has thus an outermost point, a border, beyond which he cannot move. I call this point 'the peak'. Watch my movements, this way and that. These three points are his peaks; up to those points, he can move. When he comes to a peak, he pushes away to another point

of his body. The spent energy shoots in the body from one point to the other." [9] Teshigawara studied classical ballet for ten years, ten "boring" years, as he designates it, before he turned to the study of new forms of expression. "In a normal choreography you are expected to count. I do not like this. There is no need to count out. It works out anyway. Why? The breath determines the length, not the counting."[10]

Counting, respiration and impulse

In his way of estimating the length of different periods of movement, Saburo Teshigawara is working along similar lines to Shostakovich, who pushes conventional bar patterns in the music to their borders, and also conducts using methods that extend beyond a rigid habit of counting. The excerpt from the following score shows the change after each bar, to which the dancing actor is expected to respond:



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Thus, the breath conducts the rhythm and cadences of both the music and the dance, and forms the base of each musical expression or gesture of dance. In an encounter in the work with a historical antagonist, represented by the Spanish ballet dancer, José-María Nevada, different approaches to movement impulses highlight the otherness between classical ballet and the dance technique of Teshigawara.

The written text describes the fight with the wolf, which ends with the victory of the Bound Man, as following:

> He felt as if he was lightly intoxicated and had lost the freedom of his limbs, his deadly weapon. The only liberty left to him in this fight was to adapt each bending of his limbs to their bonds. This is the liberty of the panther, the wolf and the wild blossom that sways in the evening wind.[12]

The film shows a nocturnal scene in the forest, in which the wolf and the Bound Man meet. It is particularly in this scene that the relationship of the body with nature, of which Teshigawara speaks repeatedly, is evoked. In the cold of the night the breath of the dancers can be seen, the calling of the night birds seems to form a new composition by themselves, and the moon throws a mysterious light upon the nocturnal fight. In the Allegretto and 3/4 bar of the third movement of the fourteenth quartet, as the wolf appears, the cello plays underneath. Although the movements of the wolf and the Bound Man give the impression of a fight, they are also moving in harmony. In the Adagio, the woman moves in synchronicity with the Bound Man dancer at the river bank. In the musical transition from minor to major, the moon is at its brightest.

Nevada comments on the different dance styles of his own and Teshigawara's work:

> Saburo says that the movement of the wolf begins at the head and stops with the tail, the movement starts with the head, the legs are unimportant. That is difficult for me, I have to concentrate on it, in the classical ballet we don't have such a concept.[13]

Art and Nature

As referred to earlier, in contemporary dance productions, stories are not retold in the way they were in conventional ballet. Instead, fragments and breaks characterize the dance of today, evoking pictures and emotions. This is not only due to the desire for a new form of expression, but is also a sign of the fact that the language of dance has limitations, particularly when attempting to translate complex dialogues into different systems of signs. Accordingly, in the Bound Man production the choreographer opted to present the dialogue scene between the Bound Man and the circus director's wife not by the use of the words they spoke,

but by showing the underlying mutual attraction between them. This is shown by movements in and to the water and evokes images of harmony with and of nature. The literary text describes the scene as follows:

> When the woman brought him his meal at the riverside and asked him how long he wanted to travel with them, he gave no answer. [...] She asked him whether he felt it was ridiculous to remain bound but he replied, no, it did not seem ridiculous to him. So many travel with the circus, elephants, tigers and jokers, why not a bound man, too.[14]

This scene also takes place at the riverside in the film. The dancer connects vividly with the movement of the water, kneeling at the river bank, cupping his hands to take water from the river and imitating its undulating movements. Again the film director takes great pains to ensure the public can hear the sound of the moving water. Teshigawara comments on this movement thus:

> Waves are perfect, one splashes only a little with the hand and the water makes everything perfectly. This is already nearly a miracle: the water makes perfect semi-circles, it is beautiful, the Bound Man enjoys it, and the woman can also enjoy it.[15]

Encounter of gender, artistic discipline and culture

In the scene with the wolf, two different bodies encounter each other. These two bodies belong, on the one hand, to the classical ballet-trained Spanish dancer, José-María Nevada, and, on the other, to the Japanese experimenter of movements, Teshigawara, a dancer who has turned away from the classical ballet. In the artistic dialogue with the woman, the contrasts between the two present themselves clearly. The German performer, Corinna Harfouch, is an actress and this performance represents the first time she has used her body as a dancer in her work. In an interview she stresses the great importance of respiration, which the choreographer emphasised during movement rehearsals.[16] "The dancer", says Teshigawara, "should not perform an external figure, but should begin performing from the respiration and from what happens inside the body."[17] This concern

for what occurs internally has also led Teshigawara to reflect on the limits of movement.

> I dreamed of a dance without movement. But how could I get to this point? In our world everything moves. Even if I stand still, something moves — for example, my heart still goes on beating. There is no such thing as perfect silence.[18]

Western critics often want to read into Teshigawara's concern with silence and nothingness, a parallel to the beliefs about time as found in Japanese Zen Buddhism. The choreographer himself weakens this cliché with the realization that all cultures and serious art contain references to the proximity to nature and the nature of time. His credo reads:

> Free yourself from counting. Neglect rehearsed figures. Create peaks, high peaks. There is no fixed point, no scale. Create many peaks. Peak into yourself or move through your own body and behind yourself![19]

Modification by Omission or an End without Words

While the beginning of the Bound Man production seems unable to start without written text, in the middle of the production, parts of the texts were read, but not told with dance, and replaced by emotions and images instead. By the end of the production, the work is completely emancipated from its literary model. This is done not by modifying the text, but by breaking off prematurely. In her reading the writer ends with a reflective lament concerning the Bound Man's new condition:

> Had he been sufficiently on his guard against his liberators, against this compassion, that outwitted him? Had he been lying for too long at the river? It would have been better if she had cut the cord at any other time than this. [20]

The end of history is left in the hands of the dancers. It is the woman, who shoots

the wolf with a pistol and facilitates the helpless man now lying on the soil — no longer called the Bound Man — as he learns to move in long-forgotten ways. She straightens him and moves his limbs carefully. The man's body remembers its old freedom, and he moves off, first moving unstably, but then more and more confidently, into the distance.

Conclusion

To write about something seen and heard to somebody who has not seen or heard it, inevitably involves subjectivity. This is also true of the film camera when it records a theatrical or dance performance. In that way postmodern productions, with their characteristics of simultaneity and multilayered system of signs, are severely edited when the camera comes into play. The camera takes over the decision-making process as far as choosing which picture to focus on and which sound to follow.

In the attempt to analyze a filmic dance production, focussing on transgressions of borders in art forms (literature, dance, music, film), language, gender and cultures, it has been revealed that it is necessary to start with limited fields. Nevertheless, when discussing art or culture it is not possible to maintain the image of a culture, art form, language, etc. as an isolated phenomenon. Wolfgang Welsch finds a great number of connections between different cultures, he argues that the concept of culture is not a closed term. Modern societies are per se highly differentiated and it is therefore impossible to achieve uniformity. Today's cultures are deeply entangled with and continually penetrate one another. The concept of transculturality intends a culture whose pragmatic accomplishments exist not in delimitation, but in the ability to link and undergo transition.[20]

Transitions in culture and art forms were followed by the analysis of the video production of "The Bound Man", where the Japanese dancer, Saburo Teshigawara, acknowledges the cultural influence of Zen-Buddhism on his reflections on time and movement in his art, but at the same time underlines the universality of this concern in all cultures and art forms. In this sense, art development in the context of globalization does not have to face the threat of uniformization. Diversity in the mode of single cultures does indeed disappear, but a new type of diversity arises – no longer through a juxtaposition of clearly

delineated cultures, but rather from within transcultural processes. The analysed music-dance-literature-film production shows clearly that differentiation in art no longer follows national stipulations, but – for the very first time – genuinely cultural developments.

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1 Cf. de Toro, Alfonso (1999): Überlegungen zu einer transdisziplinären und transtextuellen Theaterwissenschaft im Kontext einer postmodernen und postkolonialen Kulturtheorie der 'Hybridität' und 'Trans-Medialität'. In: *Maske und Kothurn. 45. Jg.*, Heft 3-4. Wien, pp.23-69.

2 Cf. Welsch, Wolfgang (1996): Transculturality – The Form of Cultures Today. In: *Le Shuttle: Tunnelrealitäten Paris-London-Berlin,* ed. Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, pp. 15-30.

3 Cf. Pavis, Patrice (2003): *Analyzing Performance Theater, Dance, and Film.* Translated by David Williams. The University of Michigann Press, Michigan; Lehmann, Hans-Thiess (2001): *Postdramatisches Theater.* Verlag der Autoren, Frankfurt am Main.

4 Aichinger, Ilse (1991): *Der Gefesselte: Erzählungen (1948 - 1952).* Frankfurt am Main. (=Fischer Taschenbücher. 11042.)

5 Thurner, Christina (1999): *In den Büchern, in den Körpern.* Zürich.

6 "[...] most contemporary theatre is modernized; non-animal energy is fully utilized. Lighting is electric. Elevators and revolving stages are operated by electricity. The building of the theatre itself is the end-product of a variety of industrial activities from its concrete foundation to the props and scenery it contains. Japanese Noh theatre is one surviving example of pre-modern theatre in which almost no non-animal-energy is used. Take music for example. In the modern theatre, it is recorded and reproduced through amplifiers and loud-speakers. In Noh theatre, the voices of the dancer-actor and the chorus and the sound of the instruments played on stage are conveyed directly to the audience. Costumes and masks for Noh plays are made by hand, and the stage itself is built based on traditional principles of carpentry. Although electricity is used for lighting nowadays (which I still object to—in the old days the Noh was lit by candles and tapers), it is minimal, unlike the elaborate and

colourful lighting of modern theatre. Noh theatre is pervaded by the spirit of creating something out of human skill and effort, so much so that the Noh can be said to be the epitome of pre-modern theatre! It is a creation of animal-energy." Suzuki, Tadashi (2002): Culture is the Body. In: *Blesok No. 29*, Volume VI.

7 Shostakovich, Dimitri (2002): *String Quartets*. Vol. 5 [Nos. 13, 14, 15] Opp. 138, 142, 144. Zen-on-score. Zen-On Music, Tokyo, p.80.

8 „Er erwachte in der Sonne. Ihr Licht fiel auf sein Gesicht, so dass er die Augen wieder schließen musste; es strömte ungehindert die Böschung hinab, sammelte sich zu Bächen und riß Schwärme von Mücken mit, die tief über seine Stirne hinwegflogen, kreisten, zu landen suchten und von neuen Schwärmen überholt wurden. Als er sie verscheuchen wollte, bemerkte er, dass er gefesselt war." Aichinger, Ilse: Der Gefesselte. In: *Meine Sprache und ich*, p. 12.

9 Teshigawara, Saburo (2001): Interview in: *Still Move*. Video. Inter Pars Media. München.

10 ibid

11 Shostakovich, Dimitri (2002): String Quartets, page 60.

12 „Wie in einem leichten Rausch fühlte er, daß er die tödliche Überlegenheit der freien Glieder verloren hatte, die Menschen unterliegen läßt. Seine Freiheit in diesem Kampf war, jede Beugung seiner Glieder der Fessel anzugleichen, die Freiheit der Panther, der Wölfe und der wilden Blüten, die im Abendwind schwanken." Aichinger, Ilse (1991): *Der Gefesselte*, p. 25.

13 Nevada, José-María (2001): Interview in "Still Move". Video

14 „Wenn die Frau ihm das Essen an den Fluß brachte und ihn fragte, wie lange er noch mit ihnen ziehen wolle, gab er keine Antwort. Sie glaubte, dass er sich zwar nicht an die Fessel gewöhnt hätte, aber daran, sie keinen Augenblick zu vergessen – die einzige Gewöhnung, die die Fessel zuließ. Sie fragte ihn, ob es ihm nicht lächerlich scheine, gefesselt zu bleiben, aber er erwiderte, nein, lächerlich scheine es ihm nicht. Es zögen so viele mit dem Zirkus, Elefanten, Tiger und Spaßmacher, weshalb sollte nicht auch ein Gefesselter mitziehen." Aichinger, Ilse (1991): *Der Gefesselte*, p. 21.

15 Teshigawara, Saburo (2001): Interview in *Still Move*.

16 Harfouch, Corinna (2001): Interview in *Still Move*.

17 Teshigawara, Saburo (2001): Interview in *Still Move*.

18 ibid

19 ibid

20 „War er doch nicht genügend auf der Hut gewesen vor seinen Befreiern, vor diesem Mitleid, das ihn einwiegen wollte ? War er zu lange am Fluß gelegen ? Hätte sie die Schnur doch lieber in jedem anderen Augenblick durchschnitten als gerade in diesem." Aichinger, Ilse (1991): *Der Gefesselte*, p. 28.

18 Welsch, Wolfgang (1996): *Grenzgänge der Ästhetik*. Stuttgart. (=Reclam Universalbibliothek 9612), p. 272.