The In-Betweenness of the Spoken and Unspoken "Asian Century"

Beri Juraic

It was a hot summer day when I entered the performance space in the old metalworks of Offenbach, a city bordering Frankfurt. On the floor of this vast industrial hall divided into two by a black curtain with a window hole there were clearly demarcated lines with VR headsets placed in the circle. I put on the heavy VR headset while observing others doing the same through goggles. Soon after geometrical shapes of all sorts began circulating around me, I felt very constricted in my place, and it seemed like other participants were not moving much either. The soundscape was quite monotone, but I felt its invisible presence touching my ears. The shapes moved faster and faster around me. Progressively, one cubed shape grew increasingly larger, until I was completely absorbed in its black, nightmarish void. This is how the first half of Koizumi Meiro's Prometheus Bound ends.

This VR performance was presented at the Theater der Welt 2023 in Frankfurt am Main and Offenbach, Germany, in July 2023 as part of Koizumi's Prometheus Trilogy. Inspired by Aeschylus's tragedies, the trilogy also includes Prometheus Unbound, shown at the Museum Angewandte Kunst (Museum of Applied Arts) as part of a major exhibition titled Incubation Pod; Dreaming Worlds; and an outdoor VR installation, Prometheus the Fire-Bringer.[1] Koizumi writes that the curator, Soma Chiaki, suggested the myth of Prometheus (Koizumi 2023, 27). Soma was the first non-Western and first female curator of Theatre der Welt since the festival's inception in 1981. In the following paragraphs, I explore these performances as a state of *in-betweenness* from which a sense of discomfort emerges with the spoken and unspoken sounds. I suggest that this state of *in-betweenness* can directly reflect on the Asian Century project.

Is the idea of the Asian Century a dream, or is it a different reality? Philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō theorizes about *in-betweenness* as an ethical problem by using the Japanese word ningen (人間), meaning "people." He explains that this Japanese word is written using two characters: the first character representing a person and the second meaning "between" (Watsuji 1996, 10).

Following from that, *in-betweenness* offers an alternative relationship to the idea of the "Asian Century." We keep coming to certain frames, certain ideas, because in our present situation of crisis after crisis, of precarity, we are nostalgic about the past yet cannot really imagine the future. Echoing Ong Kian Peng in the final contribution, whose work draws inspiration from Asian philosophies, I feel uneasy about the Asian Century. Considering the Asian Century as a state of *in-betweeness* allows us nevertheless to forge dynamic connections as we keep moving away from and coming back to it. The VR ecosystem can help actualize this journey.

I consider the VR ecosystem as an amalgam of movable agents, including creators and curators, viewers and participants, funding and presentation structures, and the devices used in the performances themselves. I would argue that VR performances involve *in-betweenness,* created from within the VR ecosystem, as a time/space between virtual and real, sleeping and being awake, immersive and static, human and nonhuman languages, and visual and postvisual. The agency of VR subjects and objects thus also have potential to reveal political implications of the Asian Century.

When considering Koizumi's work on the Western myth, which was set by the curator Soma Chiaki, who is herself in the position of *in-betweenness*, this sense of movement becomes concrete. Soma's movement in between two cultures—the Asian (Japanese) and European (German)—deals with the *in-betweenness* of different theatre festival structures, curating the Theatre Commons festival in Tokyo and Theater der Welt 2023 in Frankfurt/Offenbach at the same time. The multiple languages that need to be negotiated in between the artist, the curator, and these festival structures as well as public and private funding bodies point to this moving away and coming back to the Asian Century. In an online presentation about Theater der Welt 2023, Soma states that she had to fit her curatorial intentions within existing institutional structures in Germany. Many of the works in the festival were funded through both private and public bodies from abroad for their original creation, but also for presentation abroad.

In the brouhaha of such a complex VR ecosystem, there are various needs to marry fundamentally different actors. In the process, artists', curators', and, ultimately, viewers' and participants' voices might be lost. When experiencing Koizumi's work, I cannot escape the bare audibility of Asianness that emanates from the noise of the language mediated by images in a similar vein to which Da Ye Kim described the drowning of Asian directors' voices at the award ceremony. How might the Asian Century sound? This sound arguably illuminates the

problematic cultural infrastructures of the festival, VR, and the Asian Century.

As I was taking off my heavy VR headset after the first half of Prometheus Bound, the mist on the surface of my eyeglasses demonstrated that even an object could exist in this state of *in-betweenness,* between the air-conditioned performance space and the heat emerging from my head inside the heavy headset. I also felt droplets sliding down my face. Suddenly, the curtain that was dividing the space revealed a wooden structure with a long window and seats inside. The festival staff invited us to take a seat and put on headphones. I noticed several video screens underneath the window hole. New participants were arriving and putting on their VR headsets. They could not see us and I could not hear them, as I was now wearing headphones. As I witnessed other people struggling to move like I did only moments ago, I observe on a separate video screen a person with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) speaking/narrating with a computer-generated voice about a borderless world that merges dreams and hopes, fears and joys, machine and human, past and future, into one. However, gradually, in a more empathetic tone, I heard lines such as "all humans cry over one person's death," culminating with a final warning about humans losing the ability to move and speak. The line "there is a crowd of people staring into space with hollow eyes" established the strange dystopian and utopian nature of the performance (Koizumi 2023, 17).

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Figure 5. An installation view of Koizumi Meiro's VR performance Prometheus Bound (2019) at Theater Commons'20, Daiba Civic Center, Tokyo, 2020. Photograph by the artist.

The choice of a Greek myth is significant here in relation to the Asian Century. Who is speaking in Prometheus Bound, and in whose language? How and who (de)mythologizes the Asian Century in various places and cultures, both within and outside Asia? In Frankfurt, I felt forced into the state of in-betweenness, between Asia and the rest of the world, enveloping me in an uncertainty about this use of the Greek myth. In Prometheus Bound, this uncertainty enforced my own immobility. I connected to a VR machine that was both painful and joyful, followed by hearing a monotonous sound and voice over headphones. Koizumi explains that the "pain is a manifestation of the mortality of the body which is fundamentally different from that of Prometheus" (Koizumi 2023, 27). Infrastructurally, evoking the mortality of my body is problematic because the computer-generated language sounded like a white, able-bodied male.

Along the same lines as expressed by Chee-Hann Wu in her contribution, I became part of the spectacle of disconnect between the sound and the image of the ALS person and myself.

I am also restricted by the performance infrastructure as I try to navigate the *in-betweenness* of the spoken and unspoken moments. Precisely when I am aware of this constriction and imperceptibility, I can imagine an alternative to the problematic infrastructures of (de)mythologizing. The computer-generated voice guided me not to listen to my own body but also made me aware of the bodies of others absent from the performance space.

I felt the absence of the peripheries of Asia in the second piece, Prometheus Unbound, in the conventional space of a museum. It dealt with the visual and aural presence of Vietnamese migrants who lost their jobs in Japan during the pandemic and could not return home. Following the "unbound" of the title, it allowed only five participants to move around freely. This presented a significant barrier to access due to ticket costs, and the number of participants made it feel exclusive rather than inclusive. Even I had to be persistent to experience it. Paradoxically, this might have been a part of the artistic intent and infrastructure. Through juxtaposing the sound of languages, Koizumi wanted me to be in the same precarious position as migrants, in a state of *in-betweenness.* I can certainly recognize this as a first-generation migrant in the United Kingdom. Once I was in the room with a headset on, a series of images of resting Vietnamese migrants appeared, hovering over a real bed in the middle of the room. I could hear their sometimes mundane, sometimes strange dreams and stories of fear, joy, and hope spoken in broken Japanese against the machine-like English translation. Such VR imagery points to the precarity of the Vietnamese migrants. However, at times, I felt that the work imposed "the pleasures of toxic embodiment offered by witnessing racial suffering" to reflect Nakamura, in this case, on the migrant suffering (Nakamura 2020, 61).

The absence of the Vietnamese language in favor of the Japanese is noticeable, and I find myself destabilized, in a state of *in-betweenness,* aware of the war of languages permeating the world. Furthermore, verbalizing the Asian Century also comes with a privilege. Participants in VR performances at international performing arts festivals can engage with Asia because they have the privilege of access, but they are also on the outside, as they are removed from the embodied experience of Asia. If only I was able to listen to the sound of Vietnamese!

In the end, through Koizumi's trilogy, we can imagine the sound of the Asian Century as a cry over the human loss of the capability to listen and speak. In between listening and

speaking, the idea of the Asian Century becomes muted and isolated. The loneliness coming out of the sounds in these VR works suggests a feeling of being pushed into one's own separate world where one can listen only to oneself. It seems that the Asian Century is therefore capable of listening only from inside itself. As I am reading the published text of Koizumi's Prometheus the Fire-Bringer, I am struck by the following aural image: "butterfly's color vision cells are implanted in the human retina" (Koizumi 2023, 61). The hollowed eyes have been replaced by butterfly color vision, creating a hybrid being that lets out a cry to break the human-centered experience, to break this isolation. However, the sound bites of retreating into oneself still echo through our world; even the Asian Century wavers in between these spoken and unspoken languages.

Beri Juraic was awarded his PhD in Theatre from Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts at Lancaster University, UK. He co-convenes the Asian Theatre Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research.

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Note

1 These three parts of the trilogy premiered in Japan between 2019 and 2023 at Aichi Triennale and as part of Theatre Commons.