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THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES TO CYBER THEATRE

Abstract: The article addresses the question of integration and dispersion in theatre. Theatre is the art of representation, so it is presented as unified and integral, starting with Aristotle's principle of three unities, through Shakespeare, Calderón de la Barca's *The Great Theatre of the World* or Erwin Piscator and Walter Gropius's model of total theatre. With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, theatre changed, not only by itself but also by necessity, becoming diffuse and imprecise. It broke with one of its foundations: the encounter between spectators and actors in a designated space. Theatre ceased to be a place of performance and the stage was moved to nowhere. Digital theatre assumed an anti-Aristotelian order; the classical principle of the three unities of place, time and action was broken. However, even though the pandemic shook the foundations of theatre and theatre used all the means offered by new technologies, the fundamental concepts of theatre and theatrical space were not abolished.

Keywords: theatre, cyber theatre, new technologies, virtuality, coronavirus

The changes that have come about recently have drawn a vertical line in today's world or (for sure) in the one to come. When the year 2000 marked the turn of the century, the world was still immersed in the experience of the 19th century. Perhaps the most significant of the changes took place 19 years into the new century. What is now perfectly known to everyone, COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have put the whole world on edge and truly marked

the beginning of the 21st century. Nothing up until now has made a greater impact. Changes often happen slowly and gradually, but sometimes they come as a breakdown or shock, and usher us or force us into a new perspective. The end of the 20th century was marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and, consequently, the whole Soviet Block. Even though many countries were still unified and resisted new social structures, changes did not take long to manifest themselves and a new system was underway. Theatre, which has gone through a lot too, also made the necessary changes. But perhaps it wasn't until the onset of the coronavirus pandemic that theatre – just like other institutions – changed its point of view, not only on its own, but also out of necessity. Theatre, a structure which is as monolithic as it is traditional, had to adopt two principles which had already been latent but had not come to the fore: fragmentation and totality. Theatre, which is the art of representation, always manifests itself as if it were a seamless and integral unity. The stage, however small it may be, always aims to show the world in a compact way, as if the world could be shown within a few hours and in one place. It was Greeks who demonstrated that it was possible (with their unity of time, unity of place and unity of action by Aristotle). Such an arrangement has been intact ever since. It is all presented in one place – on the stage. It can be easily seen in Shakespeare, Calderón *The Great Theatre of the World*¹ or Total Theatre² by Walter Gropius and Erwin Piscator, a project that aimed to meld two dimensions (the creative aesthetic and the physical) in one. The idea that Piscator and Gropius had was nothing less than to give theatre integrity (from its comprehensive nature) and lend it supreme expression – a project that was as utopic as it was unattainable. And this brings us to the question: What theatre isn't like that? What theatre isn't utopic or unattainable in a way? It was about integrating something that was dispersed in various places and which diverged from its centre, the stage and the script, even more so in the imagination of the audience.

Theatre was at a crossroads at the turn of the century. The question: 'What would theatre look like at the beginning of the 21st century?' was nothing more than an unresolved mystery. But it continued voicing its experience from the beginning of the 20th century. The change was not so obvious, because, even though theatre is a rebellious form of art, at the same time it aims to manifest its "indestructibility" in the sense that it has to maintain the form it has had ever since, otherwise "it will not be theatre". The reality of COVID and new social norms which we now face highlight the appearance of a theatre whose

¹ P. Calderón de la Barca, *The Great Theatre of the World*, Dramatic Publishing Company, London 1990.

² J. Navarro de Zuñiga, *Walter Gropius: Teatro total de Walter Gropius = Walter Gropius's Total Theatre*, Rueda, Madrid 2004.

stage is that of dispersion and imprecision – to put it in the words of Deleuze and Guattari – a rhizomatic theatre.³ It's a theatre that breaks away from one of its sacred foundations, the encounter between audience and actors⁴ in a designated space. Once its central character was lost, the stage was moved nowhere. It left the theatre as a point of reunion, even the mediatization of the virtual reality was abandoned and it jumped onto an open space of a “cloud”. We leave Gropius's Total Theatre to enter a fragmented theatre, broken into pieces, whose recipient, the one who used to watch it in the audience now has to piece it together through an “apparatus”.⁵ Having seen it through its fragmented nature, he disseminates it even more and deconstructs each of its fundamental parts. The actor is no longer the same, the stage isn't a stage anymore, the script is no longer necessary, nor is scenography. In short, it's a fission of the three unities. Based on these premises, this article is going to revise the experience of a theatre which isn't entirely new – on the contrary, the experience which aimed to remove all the principles of theatre which we have mentioned and which nonetheless remained immovable and firmly rooted. We have enjoyed such experience of theatre in the last two decades of the 20th century, through the first two decades of the new one. It has shaken the foundations and used all the means that new technology could offer, but it has never done away with the fundamental notion of theatre and theatre space. In this discourse we are going to look at the rationale behind it and support ourselves with some criteria to analyse and understand it.

According to Jean Duvignaud, theatre is rediscovery of society.⁶ The Argentinian theatre critic Jorge Dubatti adds that an essential element of theatricality is, among other things, coexistence.⁷ We could add new forms, such as cyber theatre or new signs of theatricality, to this characterisation of theatre, but in doing so we would undermine a traditional definition of theatrical performance, since we are, once again, dealing with the dialectic of modernity and postmodernity, a polemic between a traditional art form and new possibilities for interpreting a theatrical event. This context makes us reconfigure the panorama of the contemporary theatrical scene. The presence of a specific act of performance, which could be called cyber theatre and its per-

³ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987.

⁴ J. Dubatti, *Filosofía del teatro I: convivio, experiencia, subjetividad*, Atuel, Buenos Aires 2007.

⁵ G. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, transl. D. Kishik, S. Pedatella, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2009.

⁶ J. Duvignaud, *Sociologie du théâtre. Essai sur les ombres collectives*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1965.

⁷ J. Dubatti, *El convivio teatral. Teoría y práctica del Teatro Comparado*, Atuel, Buenos Aires 2003, p. 50.

formance – cyberdrama, becomes part of this conflict and breaks completely with traditional perception of theatrical art, aiming to undermine the concept of a society in a phase of hyperreality.⁸ We need to emphasize that new forms of online artistic creation, such as interactive drama, cybersoap, webisodic, etc., are now emerging, forming part of this polemic.

In his book *Voix et images de la scène: pour une sémiologie de la réception*,⁹ Patrice Pavis argues that one of the main issues of a theatrical sign and its referents concerns the definition of the status of the contemporary stage and recalls that, according to Roman Ingarden, the problem of reception of a theatrical work concerns three levels of reality:

- a) reality represented by language, which cannot be visualised and consequently becomes the referent of language transferred to stage;
- b) reality directly presented on stage, which can be visualised not by the text but by staging (an actor);
- c) indirectly presented reality, in which text and an actor appear on stage alternately, presenting the work and its forms.¹⁰

Referring to Pavis's concept, we need to mention that a spectator gives a new meaning to the text that has been spoken by an actor and transforms a real object (located on stage) into a sign, into a referent. Paraphrasing Pavis, we can say that what a spectator sees on stage is a discourse on an object that does not become its own referent, but is its illusion. In this sense, the spectator becomes a victim of referential illusion, e.g., they believe that they see (a figure of) Hamlet, his costumes, the places he is in, and so on. They forget that in reality they only see an actor with his accessories, in simulated situations, his particular behaviour. Analysing the issue more deeply, we need to say that a spectator does not really perceive a referent of the object, but rather an element of the category of that object of which it is a part. This is the basic concept that will allow us to accept that virtual play is possible in theatre and that it takes place not only as confrontation with reality, but also as transformation of aesthetic plans on stage.

Theatre is living bodies that produce their own poetic materiality. Cyber theatre is virtually transformed bodies that produce themselves through the virtuality of their own poetic “transmateriality”. According to modern aesthet-

⁸ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. S. Faria Glaser, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1994.

⁹ P. Pavis, *Voix et images de la scène: pour une sémiologie de la réception*, Presses universitaires de Lille, Lille 1985.

¹⁰ R. Ingarden, *The Functions of Language in the Theater*, in: *The Literary Work of Art. An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, p. 379.

ics, traditional theatre cannot exist without real bodies (actors) and without participation of others (spectators), but we need to note that with the use of elements, techniques and means inherent in virtual mechanisms, theatrical play transfers all its materiality to other planes. There has been much discussion about the theatralisation of life. Among other things, the media are responsible for transforming the experience of life into theatre, turning it into a scene, thus contradicting a traditional concept of theatre. For this reason, contemporary theatre cannot tell ordinary stories that would be unattractive to a spectator. Due to the virtualisation of stage spaces, this possibility is brought into the space of hyperfiction. The reality becomes “zoomed” in reality shows, in public political events, in the whole mass media culture, which completely dominates daily life in Latin America. This theatralisation of life itself leaves little space for theatre to capture spectator’s attention through simple, ordinary stories.

Theatre is expression of dailiness, and nowadays also of “beyond-dailiness” of what happens in another dimension of experience. Therefore, theatre is forced to express the “beyond-dailiness” and it can do it thanks to the digital world, since theatre is becoming not only a product of technology, but also a concept that results from it. An event in theatre must be theatrical. A theatrical performance should be defined by the essence of theatre. As Jerzy Grotowski writes: “By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, ‘live’ communion”.¹¹

What are the means of expression of theatre? Dubatti says these are stage movements of the body. In cyber theatre, these means of expression take a different form. Peter Brook opposes technological intermediation, saying that theatre needs someone who says something, does something with their body in order to exist in the perception of another person (a so-called phenomenon of eyewitnessing).¹² Cyber theatre abolishes the event of co-existence. Virtual stage presupposes an event that is in the realm of “trans-reality”, transformed reality. Virtual stage is thus the product of abolishing traditional stage reality and giving new meanings to elements that are presented there. So, we are dealing with the construction of metatheatre and metatheatricity. It means that virtual theatre (virtual theatricality) does not exclude crossing the boundary of an event of coexistence. The encounter now takes place in a different, unrecognized space-time, in carriers that are not real but virtual, which are intercon-

¹¹ J. Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. E. Barba, Routledge, New York 2002, p. 19.

¹² P. Brook, *The Empty Space*, Touchstone, New York 1996.

nected. Theatre rejects the condition which presupposes the presence of an actor and a spectator, and imposes a change in stage space and its dimensions.

Virtuality, therefore, can lead us to an “unconcentrated theatre”; perhaps we have travelled all the way to “theatre of dispersion”, to “theatre of non-competition”. In this way, virtual theatre is always transformed into an open structure in the sense of Umberto Eco's *Open Work*.¹³ From this perspective, a work takes on new dimensions as a result of virtualisation of certain theatrical methods. Brook has developed the notion of theatre in an “empty space”. We need to distinguish between theatre as a concept and as forms of theatricality and to ask the following questions: Is virtual theatre real theatre? Is virtuality a form of theatre? Is virtuality a form of theatricalisation of everyday life and reality? Does virtuality assimilate theatrical forms? Is digital theatre possible?

The concept of coexistence is suspended in virtual space in such a way that virtual theatre forces us into a new type of experience in the face of completely transparent art. Coexistence goes into the background and individualisation, which dominates the spectator-performer relationship, takes on greater importance. We mean theatrical spaces that proliferate in holographic images – in this sense, theatre becomes pure performative interaction and thus we return to the “theatre of action”.

Theatre is created by a set of objects necessary for dramatic activity, but not every element can become an element of theatre. In fact, virtuality is not a theatrical element. However, undeniably, the use of certain technologies allows us to think of theatre as digital or virtual. The poetic matter of metaphysical theatre, far from digital environment, is identical to its nature. Therefore, in Brechtian terms, digital theatre assumes the anti-Aristotelian order. The classical structure of the three unities in theatre, time – place – action, is broken.

Theatre in this sense is deprived of its identity, becoming a living event, transformed into a realm of different planes (virtual, digital, etc.). In Latin American theatre, the development of aesthetic that would transcend these boundaries is hampered by uneasy access to technology and its excessive cost. However, these types of performances are testimony to a new perspective on theatrical creation in Latin America.

The form of e-theatre expresses the fluidity of a border that previously seemed impossible to cross, and highlights the fact that holographic technology has been precisely determined. The experience of coexistence is modified and multiplied by virtual worlds. According to Dubatti, the problem of virtuality is that it is devoid of certain spontaneity, since what makes a virtual event

¹³ U. Eco, *The Open Work*, transl. A. Cancogni, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1989.

something objective is not an interface. Performativity and transformativity add spontaneity to virtuality. So, we see virtuality as a living body, deconstruction and construction of signs, holography of events. A theatrical event can be understood as an act created on stage if, in a digital context, the stage itself is subjected to development and multiplication.

We are moving from ex-audit to in-audit culture, from ex-visu to in-visu, and this is one of the main problems of contemporary art, because theatre should give new meaning to all these processes and to each of them individually. In order for a theatrical work to be understood, it should be presented/visualised in theatre. Theatrical text is a fixed and static unity that becomes dynamic when put on stage through actors' actions. Virtuality is not constituted as static unity, it is dynamic in its essence and subject to modification, as an actor must also confront an experience different from creation, as it is not an exercise but reproduction of actions and forms of representation.

In the Latin American tradition, experience of culture is not based on written text, but is dynamic in its essence, which is why tradition is part of "hot culture" and "cold culture". There is a tension between tradition and new forms of social and cultural presentation, but it gives rise to other modes of communication. Of course, virtualisation of stage spaces does not remove these tensions, but it does introduce a new language of aesthetic experience, to which it gives new directions and meanings.

In auditory and visual culture (as in the case of Latin America – where one does not read, but only sees and hears), writing theatrical text for a certain kind of theatre breaks with an oral tradition. It should also be noted that, for the Latin American cultural context, this tradition seems too static and not coherent enough. Thus, we are dealing with a kind of an interconnection that comes from the word itself, but the word that has no basis in either time or space, that moves without retaining any constitution, referent or meaning in space-time.

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PODEJŚCIA TEORETYCZNO-KONCEPTUALNE DO CYBERTEATRU (streszczenie)

Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie integracji i rozproszenia w teatrze. Teatr jest sztuką reprezentacji, więc przedstawiany jest jako jednolity i integralny, poczynając od zasady trzech jedności Arystotelesa, poprzez Szekspira, *Wielki teatr świata* Calderóna de la Barca czy model teatru totalnego Erwina Piscatora i Waltera Gropiusa. Wraz z wybuchem pandemii koronawirusa teatr uległ zmianie, nie tylko sam z siebie, ale również z konieczności, stał się rozproszony i nieprecyzyjny. Zerwał z jednym ze swoich fundamentów: spotkaniem widzów z aktorami w wyznaczonej przestrzeni. Teatr przestał być miejscem przedstawiania, a scena została przeniesiona donikąd. Teatr cyfrowy założył porządek antyarystotelesowski, została zerwana klasyczna zasada trzech jedności: miejsca, czasu i akcji. Jednak pomimo tego, że pandemia wstrząsnęła fundamentami teatru a ten wykorzystał wszystkie środki, jakie miały mu do zaoferowania nowe technologie, nie zostały zniesione fundamentalne pojęcia teatru i przestrzeni teatralnej.

Słowa kluczowe: teatr, cyberteatr, nowe technologie, wirtualność, koronawirus

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