Spectators or Participants? A Major Creative Shift in Performing Arts or a Change of Status? (Remarks on a Process)

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Abstract: This article is a reflection of my research on the Anatomic Theatre. I question the theatre performance in the digital culture that makes out of this specific artistic procedure - to place the viewer as a Witness or as a Participant - one of the accommodating narratives of the theatre. Theatre direction is thus a μεταφορά ("transport" in Gr.), a theoretical vehicle that would result in a practice where viewers' position towards performance is disputed between being Spectator or Participant.

Key words: spectator, theatre, performance, perspective, identification, representation, consubstantiality, digital culture

Spectators have since long been considered as receivers of an event, of a thought, created, materialized and presented to them. Or of an object called work of art and crafted purposefully to split from its creator and get a status either by "navigating" at random or being fixed in a museum, a library, a cinema hall.

Being a receiver is an unrecognized status in relation with the event. People are supposed to be viewers and manifest a certain acknowledgement towards what is to be seen. But their quality as spectators comes from a constraint: they should be there to see, which is not felt as such.

See and View

Most of the theatre treaties and other theoretical, esthetical works consider spectators as *viewers*. People are aware that they would come to special places to see, to witness what is to be presented on stage. Several words describing

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different activities, among which we see a theatre performance, are part of theoretical and professional language: theatre, theory, and theatrical. They all have to do with the idea of seeing, viewing. A *spectator* is someone who sees but has also a point of *view* about that experience. Very often this proves to be a mere impression. The creators of an event called "theatre production", "theatre performance", "performance" are always compelled to comply with space limits in the case of conventional/traditional theatre buildings. How they think theatre viewers will focus on the event is not such a long history. Spectators too have to follow certain spatial restrictions. If we talk about an in-door ticketed event, the number of viewers who buy their tickets may be aware that there are "good", "very good" or "best" seats in a theatre. However, their number is limited. The visual experience is therefore dependant on both the seat and the *focus* you are able to exert when watching a theatre performance.

Let us remember some basic facts. One of the oldest descriptions of what theatre means is in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, one of the oldest known treatise on theatre. Gods asked Brahmā to create "a sort of entertainment to see and listen to". Theatre is also called here as "an object of entertainment and amusement", "something like a play". However, the two essential characteristics stay the same for any performance: "the visual" and "the audible". (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 25, see note 13) The critics who compared this first ever reference to theatre to Aristotle's *Poetics* or to later theoretical writings on theatre, had to take into account the context within which they were wrote and their addressees:

So, with Aristotle, we can assume a manifest address in the *Poetics* to the potential playwright (in contrast to the actor) or poet, but the address to Plato and the continuing discourse of philosophy in the Greek schools is even more pronounced. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* codifies procedure and possibility most explicitly for the director or supervisor of a company, at times shifting its address to the playwright, but its immediate addressees, the sages who question Bharata, are part of a far more imposing fiction that is essential to the work.(Graham 191)

As both treatises concern not only the kind of discourse they were based on but also their destination, one may easily see that the visual experience is differently reflected by the two: while in the Indian treatise it is more developed, in the Aristotelian writing it is less. While oriental traditions based their visual presentation of the performance on the body and the colors (masks, body painting, colored lights etc.), the Western tradition of theatre acknowledged a strong influence of Aristotle but also of Greek and Roman creativity in Architecture and Visual Arts, especially Painting.

Therefore, one of the key-issue of the Western theatre was thought to be the *perspective*. Renaissance architecture and various schools of master-painters developed an outstanding sense of framing the visual and channel the viewers' focus on objects (from buildings to domestic objects painted on canvas or shaped in ceramics) in relation with the space. Not so rare were the techniques to create illusions, false perspectives, and absorption of the spectator into the work (a painting, for instance, or a certain inclusion of the spectator into the action on theatre stage). Psychology of vision credited since not so long that "we are remarkably good at recognizing pictures of objects as representations of the objects." It is not so surprising then that many of the researches and experiments in visual domain have been conducted with regard to pictures of objects than to the objects themselves. (Wade; Swanston 243) This has a strong effect upon spectators' ability to recognize and visually appropriate objects and parts of stage set especially when they are seated at distance or when their perspective on the visual ensemble of the stage is distorted.

One of the questions for creators or organizers of a theatre production was and still is to shape the representation according to the visual perspective of the spectator. As we know, this is not always the case especially where the theatre space or the stage imposes constraints often impossible to overcome. What is more, the need to reduce the *distance* between spectators' area and the stage has often been responded to by artificial procedures and maneuvers and not through an intimate, "natural" proceeding sprung from the director's *vision*.

Symbolic Form and Representation

In fact, when we talk about a theatre director's vision, one of the director's difficulties from the very beginning concerns the *type of representation* s/he is going to put to work. Spectators are included in it in different ways. According to the choice that has been made, the representation will make visible what Ernest Cassirer names "the presence of the content". Hubert Damisch carries on the idea (Damisch 30) to acknowledge the *directing* factor within representation as a symbolic form:

> Ce n'est que par et dans cette représentation que devient possible ce que nous appelons le donné et la présence du contenu" (Cassirer 12, *apud* Damisch). Encore faut-il, pour qu'on soit en droit de parler de symbolisme, au sens le plus actuel du terme, que cette représentation, procédant comme elle le fait d'une manière de *mise en scène*, ou de scénographie naturelle, et d'une puissance de signifier antérieure à toute position d'un signe singulier, soit prise dans un réseau de

relations qui obéisse à un principe de constitution propre, lequel imprimera à son tour sa marque sur toutes ses productions. Les « formes symboliques » n'ont, en dernière analyse, pas d'autre but, ni d'autre effet, d'autre *produit* que celui-là: "*la conquête du monde comme représentation*" (Cassirer 13 *apud* Damisch)

The symbolic dimension of a theatre production is taken into account mostly when it comes to modern versions of classical texts. The presence of the content means the actual form the representation will present to audiences, which are not aware about it, but led to discover it within of process of witnessing the performance. What does Cumberbatch's Hamlet (2015) mean compared to Olivier's (1948), for instance? Does the former interpretation give justice to the director's vision and content of representation and differentiate on the same grounds from the latter's?

Spectator's Identification With…

Another key-issue that painters and theatre directors address from different perspectives, cultural and visual, is the *identification factor*. Kenneth Burke made a sound analysis of what this means and to what this lead: *consubstantiality* (Burke 21). In the case of spectators, the identification process follows specific paths in cinema or theatre and the consubstantiality is the result of "acting together" in the normal process of life, a result active when participating to a performance. In a study dedicated to film, David Blakesley proceeds from Burke's ideas to detail the process:

> Identification is inherently an acting-together of subject-object, with identity a constructed middle ground in the symbolic (visual and verbal) realm where individual identity can be played out, reformed, channeled, encoded, visualized, and even asserted as if it were a verbal and visual proposition. (Blakesley 124)

This process is differentiated according to the physical place of the spectator. The function the theatre director ascribes to him/her says something important about the type of consubstantiality the director is looking for, but not too much about the kind of *participatory act* as such.

Witness and/or Participant

Boundaries between witnessing and participating are not always as clear as one may suppose them to be in the artistic practices. In fact, contemporary artistic and performance practices make these boundaries a dynamic "acting together" that would eventually get the shape of a visual representation which s/he would (not) identify with.

Theatre performance in the digital culture makes out of this specific artistic procedure - to place the viewer as a Witness or as a Participant - one of the accommodating narratives of the theatre. Theatre direction is thus a *μεταφορά* ("transport" in Gr.), a theoretical vehicle that would result in a practice. Michel de Certeau identifies these artistic practices originated from narratives as narratives of "voyage", which are, in fact, "pratiques de l'espace". De Certeau made this important discovery, highly significant for our theme here, that:

> L'espace serait au lieu de ce que devient le mot quant il est parlé, c'est-à-dire quand il est saisi dans l'ambiguité d'une effectuation, mué en un terme relevant de multiples conventions, posé comme comme l'acte d'un present (ou d'un temps), et modifié par les transformations dues à des voisinages successifs.

His concluding remark is that "space is a practiced place" (De Certeau 173) and we can think that a place for spectators, in order that they be real participants, is not identical with the seat but with *his/her practice of that space*. Actual theatre performances would either try to give spectators a new status as witness living in the digital culture, or would put them in the position to practice a place chosen for a specific artistic practice.

In fact, a major shift from the old visual habits of perspective and representing things and human body in space is taking place: towards a new paradigm of consubstantiality heavily challenged by the actual habits of IT devices, that would make spectators be, simultaneously, together, but physically separated. Theatre performance is heavily trying to respond to a much faster technological process than the artistic process of practicing spaces. However, globalization should be mentioned as some of the new artistic practices actually reinstall, on a digital culture level, the ancient Greek acting together in the amphitheatres or law courts in the cities.

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