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20th Century Theatrical Heritage: The Escape from Illusion

Abstract: In this article the author refers to the escape of illusion in the contemporary theatre as a result of the destruction of the Italian stage historical conventions in the series of the "theatrical revolutions" of the 20th century. The "anti-illusionist theatre models" of the greatest stage artists at the end of 20th century, Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor and Peter Brook, are discussed as the examples of the post-modernist crisis in theatrical representation connected with the logocentric domination of the word and faith in the rational order of things. The 20th century "anti-illusionist" theatrical heritage is based not only on significant changes in the language and acknowledged conventions as well as styles, but mainly on the idea of a non-mimetic space of a liberated performance demonstrating "visual musicality" from the "intercultural" perspective.

Key words: anti-illusion, post-modern theatre, theatrical heritage, Tadeusz Kantor, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson

The post-modernist shift in culture (and ideology) over the last decades has resulted from the need to reject all models that "falsify" reality (born on the Italian stage from the spatial perception of the world). In return, we have been offered the transformation of the static space into a process, and have seen it given a temporal dimension (mutability, motion, etc.). This is different from the "spatialization" of time that could be identified as the essence of modernism.[1]

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[1] V. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, New York 1988, pp. 72–73.

Constructing spatial models, the modernistic theories of the theatre have attempted to reduce live performances, with their excess of significance and impurity, to the purity and unambiguity of the "machines for the production of significance."[2] Post-modern anthropologists of the theatre have aimed at concentrating on whatever diverges from all rules, knocks down divisions and schemas, destroys pre-theatrical attitudes and all presuppositions… and thus everything that is the definition of performance as described by Chomsky[3] (in reference to language), especially in a theatre that is fated to a game of chance.

Against the Italian stage, "modernist" theatrology has invented the super-arbiter, a competent structuralist, semiologist and phenomenologist placed in the audience with all his apparatus for seizing and freezing the significances in a polymorphic, multivariant spectacle. Post-modernism, in turn, moved towards a multi-perspective consciousness (the principle of relativity) and the examination of a multivariant reality, understood as an unlimited collection of *performances*: an infinity of multidirectional open-ended processes.

The popularity in post-modernist anthropology of the ritual and "the theatre of the ritual" studies (as the most distinct and conventionalized forms of *performance*[4]) involves the renewed temptations of a lost order and the rigors of dogmatic convention, identified with "supercultural" techniques and therefore easier to regraft onto the western theatre.

In the well-known book *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook carried out his familiar division into Deadly, Holy, Rough and Immediate Theatres.[5] The Holy Theatre was an expression of the dream, frequent in the 1960s and 1970s, of the rebirth of authentic links between the modern stage and the ritual and myth. In much of his mature theatrical activity, Brook appeals directly to myth and ritual, giving expression to his faith in the supremacy of the ideas of co-participation and community. The most famous manifestation of this attitude was his 1985 *Mahabharata*.

In *Mahabharata*, Brook indeed created a new intercultural model of the work.[6] The epic space and Universalist interpretation enforce a sort of double, extensive reception of the action: in the context of the "great history of mankind" contained in the Hindu epos, and in the Shakespearian "theatre of the world." The very creation of the action, on the other hand, creates

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[2] See: K. Elam, *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London 1987.
[3] N. Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, New York 1968.
[4] See: R. Schechner, *Performance Theory,* New York 1988.
[5] P. Brook, *The Empty Space*: *The Theatre Today*, London 1968.
[6] See: D. Williams (ed.), *Peter Brook and "The Mahabharata." Critical Perspectives*, London 1991.

a third variety of space: fairy-tale, desacralized, non-dramatic acting, above ritual and theatre.

In this fairy-tale-Shakespearian interpretation *Mahabharata* is the most dazzling realization of the idea of the de-limitation of culture in the theatre of our time, where neither historical nor national conventions any longer determine the actual understanding between stage and audience, where a subconscious region of anthropological identity becomes the guarantee of intercultural understanding.

The still-vital dream of a return to ritual as the source of the Theatre of the Future can be explained as a transmogrification of the post-naturalist understanding of the theatre (as the creation of literature) into a neo-symbolist belief in the theatre as a creation of myth (in both cases we are dealing with a fabular model that exists independently and prior to staging).

The Derridian theses that the theatrical space is an "undecided space" involved in the "impossibility of unambiguity" and that "the audience becomes a stage unto itself, presenting only what it can itself understand and in a language that it understands perfectly"[7] correspond perfectly with the self-consciousness of contemporary theatre, and with the state of mind of the latest theatrology trends.

An important trait of the contemporary theater is the crisis that has been ubiquitous since the times of the Renaissance and Baroque, the very principle of theatrical representation connected with the logocentric domination of the word, and faith in the rational order of things. These ideas have been completely domiciled in the latest theories of the theatre, inspired by post-modernism and deconstructionism.

For the semiologist Patrice Pavis, the ideal of post-modernism in the theatre turns out to be the work of Robert Wilson, supplemented by the principle of unrepeatability and impermanence of the performance, propagating the diffusion of the work's identity through its immersion in political, social and "intercultural" contexts.[8] The category of "anti-textuality" as the "post-Artaudian" criterion has been used in turn by Bonnie Marranca in her description of Robert Wilson's "theatre of images."[9] Marranca calls Wilson's theatre, a theatre of the art of *assemblage*. In her opinion, Wilson – like every deconstructionist – refuses to accept "the absolutism of language."[10] Excluded from its normal contexts and deprived of the stability of significant structures, the word functions as an element of the poetics of sounds (with the principle of insistent repetition at work). The Dadaistic principle of *collage* also domi-

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[7] J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, Chicago 1978.
[8] P. Pavis, "The Liberated Performance," *Modern Drama* 1982, No. 1, p. 62.
[9] B. Marranca (ed.), *The Theatre of Images*, New York 1977.
[10] *Ibid.*, 41.

nates the visual sphere of the performance. Marranca calls the *Letter to Queen Victoria* "an exercise in the acuity of sensory perception."[11]

If the construction of the Wilson's *Letter to Queen Victoria* can indeed be compared to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the message itself can be placed only in a cultural context in which all boundaries of internal order have been effaced and all orientation points and opportunities for logical accumulation removed.

To the degree that Wilson's theatre can be called a "deconstruction of representation," Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death is based on the principle of the "desemantization of the message."[12] Henri Gouhier's definition, "*Représenter c'est rendre présent par des présences*"[13] (presentation is presence in the present) is totally inadequate to Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death, the essence of which is precisely the "impossibility of making the present" both the dead "literary pre-existence" of the spectacle (drama, fable, characters), and the subjective memory of what-was. Neither does the semiologists' definition "theatre is the spatialization of literature" (Kowzan[14]) fit the assumptions of Kantor, who used linguistic citations from Witkiewicz's *Tumor Brainowicz*, visual references to Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* and the prose of Schulz in *The Dead Class* to create possibilities (even for an instant) of the ostentatiously substitute existence of the dead pupils in moments when the class came to life and the photograph of memory dissolved.

On the other hand, the main idea of the play can be embraced in the formula of the "Impossible Return" to a dead past, of which the only vestiges are accidental and worn-out "Photographs of Memory."[15] In the Theatre of Death there is no fable or a causal line of action. There is, on the other hand, a sort of rhythm of passage from the dead, motionless time of the school photographs to the series of images which, like a film, offer a delusive promise of continuation in the future. The moving photographs ("Photographs of the Dead Class;" "The Grand Toasts") return in a set order created by the conjunction of the image and sound: the Parades of the dead pupils around the schoolroom benches as well as their slow rising in the benches are accompanied by the sentimental, old-fashioned *François* waltz; there are successive lessons ("Autonomous Segments" – where the role of the teacher calls on one of the students), the keening Jewish prayers (the "cheder"), and the voices from the school's past in the form of "historical hallucinations." At the end of the per-

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[11] *Ibid.*, 42.

[12] See: K. Pleśniarowicz, *The Dead Memory Machine. Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death*, Aberystwyth 2004.

[13] H. Gouhier, *L'Essence du théâtre*, Paris 1968, pp. 15–20.

[14] T. Kowzan, *Sémiologie du théâtre*, Paris 1992.

[15] See: K. Pleśniarowicz, *op. cit.*

formance, Kantor ostentatiously stops the spinning of the spiral of activity in a series of freeze-frames from the "Theatre of the Automata."

It is precisely the spiral that seems to be the most adequate graphic model for the development of the theme of impossible memory in Kantor's Theatre of Death. Furthermore, it makes it possible to grasp the rules of the artist's theatrical procedure, especially the rhythms of progression and regression, according to a more or less permanent arrangement of certain repeatable situations or images which seem again and again to come up and be passed by, in an established sequence as the cycle turns. The nearer the end of the performance (and the center of the spiral), the more they become gradually fading echoes, which distinctly suggests the winding-in of the spiral rather than its infinite expansion. Its leftward movement agrees with the direction of all the "Parades" of the dead pupils around the benches, as in the symbolism of a dream.
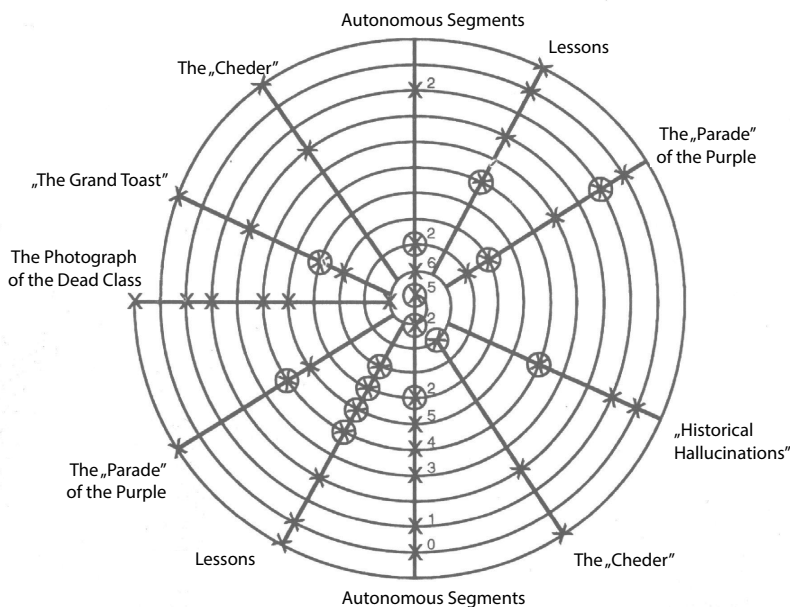

Fig. 1. *The Dead Class:* The Spiral of Return
Source: K. Pleśniarowicz, *The Dead Memory Machine. Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Death*, Aberystwyth 2004, p. 207.

The spiral of impossible memory in Kantor's Theatre of Death means the impossibility of going forward, the impossibility of the future of the performance.

Kantor's séance has a quite refined construction with many rhythms built in: aural and visual, semantic and emotional. The rules of the rhythmic repeatability of the sequences of sounds and spatial images recall the principles of visual musicality. Attempts at just such a description of the structure of the *Dead Class* approach most closely, it seems, the mystery of the masterpiece and its worldwide triumph.

Out of the legacy of the Great Theatre Reform of the turn of the 20th century, there remains, on the one hand, an ideal model of the closed and repeatable authorial work that triumphs over its temporal nature. On the other hand, a competitive model has been established of eternally incomplete communication and an open field of the co-creation by many authors, including the audience. These opposed conventions have defined the boundaries of the contemporary theatre, between the creation and co-presence.

Repeatedly destroyed in the cycle of "theatrical revolutions,"[16] but in fact indestructible, the Italian stage has immersed contemporary theatre in the insoluble spatial contradictions: open and closed, unity and diversity, secularity and the sacred, and above all, symmetry and asymmetry, the eternal order of the theatrical image and the living, thinking, feeling actor who shatters that order. Here, two model solutions have been possible: the truth of making the present or the convention of representation.

Post-Cartesian dualism imposed on the modern drama the tension of the "two theatres," the internal and the external.[17] To grasp that tension it has been necessary to relativize action understood in the Aristotelian sense, in favor of a subjective perspective, the introduction of epic commentary or assigning the director a privileged position as the constructor of the dramatic form.

Literary theories of the theatre (rhetorical,[18] phenomenological[19] or semiotic[20]) have endeavored to reduce the living play to a model of unchanging repeatability: the rhetorical pattern of ideal action, the principle of the "re-creation and representation" of appropriate layers of drama, or rules for the "spatialization" of literature as a result of the necessary translation of a linguistic scenario into a multiplicity of spatio-temporal theatrical materials. Yet the explosive dictionaries of signs and grammars of fables of the semantically frustrated European theatre have never allowed anyone to forget about its close associations with the practices of community life, which that theatre

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[16] See: D. Bablet, *The Revolutions in Stage Design in the XXth Century*, Ann Arbor 1977.

[17] See: S.J. Tharu, *The Sense of Performance. Studies in Post-Artaud Theatre*, New Delhi 1984, pp. 16–19.

[18] See: G. Freytag, *Die Technik des Dramas*, Leipzig 1922.

[19] See: B. Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity. The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor*, Bloomington 1982.

[20] See: T. Kowzan, *op. cit.*

had been trying for several centuries to imitate, merging its own rhetoric and the need for its social authentication into a bizarre unity.

Autonomic theories of the theatre (both the earlier modernistic and the new post-modern ones) looked for a model outside literature and language – above all, they sought it in quasi-musical works which made possible the "permanent" designation of time, space, and the movement of the actor. On the other hand, there was an attempt to define and distinguish the supra-theatrical spectacle, postulating a movement away from *a priori*, a model abstraction towards the magma of life, counting on a sometimes extreme relativism and the absolutization of the subconscious. Relativity, multiple perspectives, multivariance – these were the theatre's new frames.

The twentieth-century theatre has fulfilled the aim of moving from a space of the Italian stage that is "mathematically correct, but psychophysiologically unreal"[21] towards the space subject (in line with the development of cognition) to the ubiquity of the ordered disorder.[22] This is additionally explained by the need to escape from illusion.

As much, then, as traditional illusion was a social category of the reception of the play, so contemporary anti-illusion turns out to be an individual psychological category of reaction to a play (no longer a spectacle, but an activity, *performance*). Spatial anti-illusion is a result of the psychologization of the principles of theatrical convention, making them dependent on the direct relation of the stage and audience. Anti-illusion is not merely a deliberate trick of the "Second Theatre Reform" of the 1960s and 1970s, but rather a permanent element in the contemporary definition of theatricality reconciled to the traditional Italian stage (while for the reformers of the age of social ferment, the guarantee of anti-illusion was the abandonment not only of the framework of the Italian stage, but also of the closed space of the theatrical auditorium itself). Theatre has ceased to be a mirror held up to reality, and has become a model part of reality. This has been facilitated by three dimensions of anti-illusion in the theatre at the close of the twentieth century:

(1) in time: the collapse of tradition and the protagonist's involvement in this – instead of acting; the destruction of the scenic form of the presentation and the director's, actor's and playwright's involvement in this – instead of in creativity; the scattering of the formerly concentrated action in an unending spiral of possible contexts that go beyond the frame of the production;

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[21] See: A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, Vol. 4, New York 1957.

[22] See: S.H. Kellert, *In the Wake of Chaos: Unpredictable Order in Dynamical Systems*, Chicago 1993.

(2) in space: the domination and unlimited nature of the "co-represent-ed;" the paratheatrical and open-ended dialogue of work and idea; autotelic conventions (in the relation of the theatre to itself) instead of conventions of representation (in relation to the world), through the assertion that the only making present of the subject may be a decon-structed form of presentation;

(3) in the domain of action: the absence of an active individual, who has been replaced by an undefined collective subject (both the sender of the play and the audience invited to cooperation); the unlimited play of the senses within the intercultural collective: beyond cause, beyond the individual, finally beyond its historical time.

It is hardly surprising that the main, and in fact obsessive, subject of the twentieth-century theatre is the polymorphous character of death: tradition and form, protagonist and the world. Yet at the same time, the theatre of the turn of the century, the fruit of both Reforms, is shifting again towards theat-rical practice, related (even if polemically!) to the transformed, indestructible Italian stage, the model of "pure" theatricality. This is another stage in the eternal struggle with the "literariness" of imitative action, with its unvarying hope for the achievement of the autonomy of the theatre in formulas speak-ing, for instance, of the "theatre of images" (Wilson),[23] "theatre of memory" (Kantor),[24] or theatre of naive experience" (Brook).[25] It is, finally, an incessant proposal to widen the frame of theatrical convention as a non-mimetic space, a space of anti-illusion that sets free the authentic, liberated performance.

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[23] See: B. Marranca (ed.), *op. cit.*
[24] See: K. Pleśniarowicz, *op. cit.*
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