

Image-based theatre: a new pedagogy for a “new” theatre

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Figures 1, 2 and 3 - *Beware Of Pity*. Director: Simon McBurney. Schaubuhne, Berlin (Germany). Photo: Oana Monica Nae.

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Abstract: This article captures the one-hour presentation, discussions and interactive dialogue at the conference: *The theatrical function of the image and its relation to the other elements of staging*. Pedagogical approach. The main idea of the conference is that nowadays the context of performing arts claims a reconsideration of the pedagogical approach of the profession of theatre director.

I will recall how the “job” of theatre director has emerged in 19th century as a logical result of the industrialisation. Bringing electric light into theatre auditoriums, building bigger theatres with wider stages, the appetite of the public for elaborate and realistic staging using 3D props and complicated machineries – all this imposed the necessity of a man who has or develops the skills and knowhow of staging. And that’s how the history of the world theatre was re-written in the 20th century – The Century of the Director. Moreover, the two most influential theatre people of the last century where both directors and professors: Konstantin Stanislavsky and Bertolt Brecht.

But what about our 21th century? Is theatre still “a play ground” for the directors? My theory is that the performing arts today are erasing the “traditional” patterns of theatre makers under the pressure of the new role that theatre is claimed to perform in society. The theatre of Digital Era needs to have the same “pixeled” structure as every other human creation.

That’s why I strongly believe that the pedagogy of theatre must be reconsidered and reorganized having as its central idea the dichotomy between the dramatic and the post-dramatic structure of the play. After all, as Peter Brook said: “A play is a play.” As support for demonstration and discussions I will use Meyerhold’s theory on how to construct a performance, Schlemmer’s diagram on types of performances, Brecht’s remarks on dramatic theatre vs. epic theatre, Lehmann’s theory on post-dramatic theatre and Erika Fischer-Lichte’s arguments on transformative aesthetics. I will use images from shows staged by outstanding theatre directors, which marked or/and are marking how we make and look at theatre today.

Keywords: Performing Arts. Theatre Pedagogy. Director’s Work. New Technologies. Dramatic Vs. Post-dramatic Theatre. Narrative.

*“Is this the real life?
Is this just fantasy?
Caught in a landslide
No escape from reality
Open your eyes
Look up to the skies and see...”*¹

Arts, theatre – as an escape from reality? I think this is no longer an option. Neither for the spectator, nor for the artist. Due to the fact that today, there is no reality, but only images. In other terms: today there are not images– just the same unique reality which is infinitely re-generating itself. If this postulation is valid, and if “theatre is the mirror of our times”, is the mirrored image a true or a false one? Who could answer?

Between artists’ subjectivity and the objectivity of sensible world, new images emerge, reshaping life. Is this “the brave new world” imagined by Miranda? It looks rather like a dystopia. Does the failure of every utopia have as a consequence the collapse of the theatrical dream? Are we are still embracing an art that no longer exist because we could not accept to let it die? Is theatre kept alive by the idea of art only in the artist’s mind? I do not think so. What I strongly believe is that an era has ended (decades ago), while another one has begun, but theatre is still captive in its old habits – more specifically as practice, pedagogy and critical thinking. To move forward is to re-establish the power of art to reconstruct the world. And this is going to be possible only if we start from the pedagogy of arts, not from the cultural product. Most of our students are less than 20 years old. They are learning, in universities or academies, the art of making theatre yesterday or today. But its spectators aren’t born yet. When they will graduate, in five, six or seven years, we’ll face another generation, with a distinctive “repertoire” of images and other types of technologies to approach

¹ Queen – Bohemian Phapsody.

it. Even today, it is not fair to ask the spectators to turn off their devices when entering the auditorium while, on stage, the artistic team is using sophisticated applications.

I would like to emphasise that it is not about bringing new technologies into theatre. Over time, performing arts have always embraced what was new in terms of architecture, stage technique, lighting and so on. This has been done. It is about re-organising the whole structure of theatre performances to harmonise with our capacity to perceive time and space simultaneously, from different perspectives. This is what technologies have brought into our everyday life: we are surrounded by tons of information – most of them visual – which have no immediate connection with one another, but nevertheless they are being delivered to us simultaneously. And this fact has dramatic consequences – literally speaking. That's why we have to reconsider the main idea of "image" in order to understand how it is, or how it can be used, in today's theatre. The image has a paradoxical status: it is far more imprecise than the written language but it is infinitely more complex than words. It is, at the same time, empty of meanings/full of meanings. So, how does an image become meaningful, or what makes it expressive?

Let's start from the beginning. In theatre, the beginning is Aristotle and his idea that every art is an imitation of reality. Mimesis. And let's presume, for the sake of argumentation, that this allegation is still true. Mimesis means two things: one meaning is connected to the psychic, while the other involves the social power through an action, a behaviour, a word or an image inducing its correspondent. And this is the particular status of art or theatre, which embeds such power in the law of dramatic genres, the structure of stories and the representation of an action made by characters, action that bursts out emotions in the audience. That's why it is so important to understand how and why theatre is fashionable over time, generating new formulas, in order to keep in touch with the psychic and social powers.

First in film and television, now in theatre, the implication of technique changes the premises of art by provoking the notion of “mimesis” (as the imitation of a real possible action). It is not enough to use the visual power or experimental means of expression to illustrate old stories in a new way. More than that, it is necessary to make use of them for the purpose of restoring the entire representative order of theatre, so deeply damaged. Let’s introduce the notion of image in this equation, so that we can discuss the idea of image in terms of the presence or absence of “the other”. If theatre is mimesis, it must be someone or something “real” (veridical truth) reflected in the “mirror” of the stage. What about the images that have no external correspondent? For example, a white screen (yes, in theatre the ancient *trompe l’oeil* (“fool the eye” in English) horizon has been replaced by cyclorama screens), or the “black out” (or *heblu*, as it is known in French theatre). We can define them as “neutral images” but we can’t deny their function in theatre. Every director uses these artificial images – just as the composer employs the pause between sounds in order to create music. What’s the point to use a curtain? Just kill the light for a shorter or a longer period of time and this simple sign, this “image/non-image” will change the rules of the game (other time, other place, than back again – just in a blink of light). In other words, it has a narrative function. And an aesthetic one. The contrast between the “neutrality” of a lighted screen on which nothing is projected and the sounds that underline a very specific and clearly cognoscible action has the power to amplify the theatricality using a counter-reality effect. (This specific technique is used by British director Katie Mitchell). Such methods are borrowed from television or film, but have nothing to do with their sources. The goal is totally theatrical and it is born from the ability/necessity to de-structure the image from its real context and to re-construct it, with a greater impact, on stage. This fragmentation is the opposite of the sequential structure of the dramatic (Aristotelian) theatre and entails the focus of the scenic action on the essence, on the meaning instead of emphasising the form.

The transformation of the mimesis concept to an anti-mimesis (Brecht) or post-mimesis/post-anti-mimesis (post-meta-theatre) is a consequence of the transformation of how the audience identifies itself with the story/action or characters of a theatre show. This also meant replacing the traditional effects achieved by identification with the extra-scenic elements (plot, characters) by the direct identification with the artist that stage up the play (director's vision and aesthetics). This kind of performance is no longer based on the mimesis concept but it is directly dependent/ contained in a specific shaped "emotional" form.



Figure 4 - *Gulliver's Travels*. Director: Silviu Purcarete. National Theatre, Radu Stanca, Sibiu (Romania). Photo: Mihaela Marin.



Figure 5 - *Hamlet*. Director: Robert Lepage. State Theatre of Nations, Moscow (Russia). Photo: Sergey Petrov.

We can all agree that theatre for the sake of the artist is a remote dream of the “childhood” of the vanguards. New forms of theatre bring the idea of re-mastering the spectators in terms of receptivity and interactivity by forcing them to give up to illusion and empathy. It is step forward from the Brechtian epic theatre, where the *verfremdungseffekt* was based on the fragmentation of the action with the help of songs or placards. In post-dramatic theatre, the visual continuity of theatre is rejected. The image itself can be divided or multiplied, and this technique eliminates the necessity of classical time and space unities. The scenic action is re-constructed from parts or segments perceived in separate registers (of the eye, ear or emotional) not as a rational discourse, but as a result of the inner psychology or motivation of the characters.

Let us not forget, even for a moment, that due to its ambiguity, the image is highly manipulative. And in theatre, this power is doubled by the artists’ intentionality. The most efficient and yet unsophisticated technique of manipulation is based on the use of

the actor's body to create shocking images which replace the narrative, the verbal language. Consequently, the spectator must be active in relation with the actors, better said, with the performers. The sensorial impact is utterly powerful and the show becomes a personal experience. In terms of Jacques Rancière, he emancipates himself, filling up the distance between those who are and those who aspire to be. A puppet, like a burlesque actor in film, is an aesthetically established figure, a hero of the pure spectacle flew in the face of traditional psychology. Its function is not the embodiment of a human being, but to make itself the instrument that derailed every fable. The puppet/object body cuts the links between cause and effect, action and reaction, because it throws the elements of the moving image (action) into contradiction (the function becomes a conflict), it becomes a dramaturgic machine or a means for transforming one fable into another. But these "pure" situations are not the rediscovered essence of the image: they are the result of those operations whereby the theatre thwarts its own powers.

In fact, we can talk about the two different ways of using images in theatre: one is based on linking images one to another for the purposes of narrative continuity and meaning (classical narrative); the other uses images for their autonomous power (in terms of temporality), generating essential discontinuities and ambiguities on the stage. The movement-image (action-based theatre) and the time-image (a post-dramatic, static image that has no "mimesis" behind it). The movement-image, the image organised according to the logic of the sensory-motor schema, is conceived as a being but one element in a natural arrangement with other images within the logic of the set (an assembled organic structure) similar to a finalized (a final oriented structure) coordination of our perception and to action and reaction. The time-image is characterised by a break with this "classical" logic, it is intended to be perceived as an "appearance" of pure optical and sound situation. It is an image that is strategically disconnected from a possible whole, which no longer links up to another actual image (previous or subsequent),

but only to its own virtual and sufficient image. Each time-image is split off from other image in the same show. And in fact, this “isolation” opens itself up to its own infinity. The audience is forced to transform itself from the spectator into a spectatorship. Hence, what creates the link between those images is the absence of the link. The “blind angle” between images leads to a re-arrangement from the void and not an “instinctive” arrangement. Between these two artistic images there is a definitive rupture that is a reflection of the condition of both the artist and the audience, which no longer fits the available responses. Because art is no longer a reflection of life.

Today, our brain trained to perceive art has the ability to translate the scenic action not as the gaze captures them but as we feel them, like a fluid vibe born from theatricality, as they come alive, long before that we order and logically qualified them as intelligible action, object or people, due to their narrative and/or descriptive attributes. Every art based on image is, in fact, the art of telling a story. That’s why theatre should give up to traditional happy ending of the tale or the moral ending of tragedy. In fact, should discard the Aristotelian structure – the cumulative arrangement of “necessary and verisimilar” actions that drive the characters from fortune to misfortune (tragedy) or otherwise in comedy. Fable as a careful construction logically based on conflict and recognition. But the fact of life, in the real life, Logic is Illogical. True life is not about fables and actions with a permissible ending but situations which are open in every sense of direction. Life is not a dramatic equation, structured like a progression of actions and reactions, but a sinuous path built up from multiple micro or macro movements. A very good example, as the Russian theatre and film director Eisenstein emphasises, is the Japanese art. Due to the ideogrammatic principle of Japanese language, the double character of an artistic image is put altogether: the direct and indirect meanings are combined in one visual sign, melting both meanings. The combination of elements sound/image sound/sound, image/image produces a meaning that contradicts the mimetic value of the elements represented in the

so to speak Aristotelian theatre. This new “sign” is fundamentally based on both the skills and the aesthetics of the director – the art of montage is shifted to the conflict/contradiction of the staging elements, not of the text (in terms of plot or characters). It is a fusional language that does not recognise the difference between “substratum” and sensible components.

The verosimilarity and the necessity are no longer needed. What matters is the special proximity and the temporal authenticity. The status of theatre was questioned and contested by the *avant-garde* in the '50s and '60s. Between *happening* and *performance*, it was re-enacted as “living art” (*arts vivants* or *artes en vivo*). But the mutation is much deeper than a new name. In fact, we are witnessing the migration of theatre from the “past tense” to an unlimited “present continuous tense”. And that happens due to the visual elements that unites both what is real (I am seeing here and now) and surreal (I was there in that moment), because we take for granted the authenticity of the image (especially the projected one). The theatrical element becomes a part of a dialectically structured action, but a singular and powerful “ideogram” having the function to stimulate the brain in its both aspects: the logical and the emotional one.

No doubt, the post-dramatic theatre is a theatre of “here & now” and “then & there” altogether. In this paradigm, which implies a reconsideration of the structure and the form of the show, the text is no longer an absolute necessity. By contrast, the visual has gained more and more pre-eminence. The connotations of images as a symbolic message are so strong that they transcend the denoted image (the image itself, as we can see it). We have to add that connotations don't have to do not with one another, nor they necessarily complement one another. Off course, they are not chaotic, anarchic, but may be seen as “individuated” because we have different image “lexicons” rhyming with their own understanding of the cultural codes. As Roland Barthes said more than half century ago, **image-based arts** are the result of an anthropological evolution as an effect of the informational boom.

We have to look to the future. As much as we admire the past, nostalgia means involution, not evolution. It kept us prisoners in classical plots, cardboard characters (naturalistic or psychological), past expressive codes of construction and ridiculous motivations of actions. This is why we have to pay attention to those who are trying to create a language of images. Otherwise, the role of the director will be reduced to an illustrator of a play. Furthermore, we should not praise the “new drama” based on standardised plots which offers to the audience the glorification of “spectatorship” through the superficial identification with the characters. This cynical complacency is a dreadful attitude, too. Modern directors have the tendency to underline over and over again their vision. And this is sad. When one fears that his message might not be clear, it is his fault, so that we cannot talk about the incapacity of the audience to get it. Just a fine line, a flow is all that is needed, instead of heavy images, sounds and accents. What matters is the fragility of emotions, the intangible relation between artists and spectators.





Figures 6 and 7 - *Faust*. Director: Silviu Purcarete. National Theatre, Radu Stanca, Sibiu (Romania). Photo: Mihaela Marin.

It is important that it is not enough to put together different arts, it is not about mixing procedures or means of expression specific to different arts. It is about an alchemic process based on a denominating process (like in Grotowsky's *via negativa*). One has to give up to all unnecessary details in order to find out the principle, the common fundamental unity of imagistic and sensorial elements of a show. This “morphemes” have the capacity, as Artaud believed, to reach the audience at a visceral level, without being “translated” by the conscious mind, generating a catharsis or an “ecstatic explosion” of the audience as a whole.

New theatre is based on the idea of a new language of images. That does not mean that an “old” art was replaced by a “new” art. It is the statement of a new paradigm, a new status of arts. In my opinion, good theatre always searches for complexity – a complexity that involves every aspect of reality, artistry and politics, digging

deeper and deeper in ourselves. The “novelty” of post-modern art is nothing more than a required episode and the edifying narrative through each era built its own “mythologies” through arts. And it is a response of each art re-affirming its own “youth”. By adapting, it demonstrates its perennial essence.

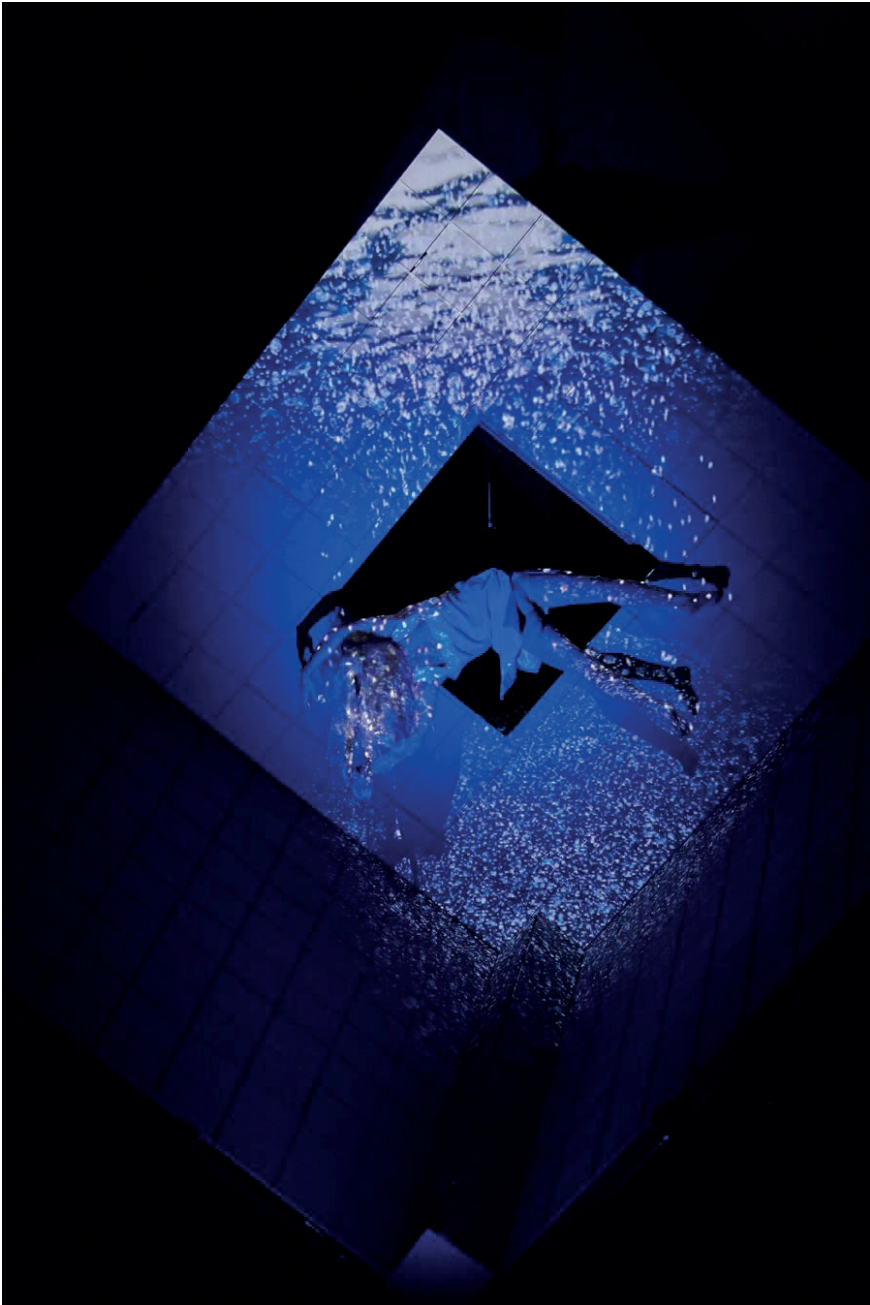


Figure 8 - *Hamlet*. Diretor: Robert Lepage. State Theatre of Nations, Moscow (Rússia).
Foto: Sergey Petrov.