Dialogue of Arts in the Contemporary Theatre. The Rhetoric of Expression in Plastic Arts and in Performing Arts

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Abstract: In the plastic art and not only, colors have significant functions with regard to the perception or even to the symbolism of temperament. In many cultures on various geographical coordinates, the reception and the interpretation of colors is taken into consideration only when they are dynamically distinguished. Various types of expression that make us access various levels of perception, of rhetoric, of candidness, of sensation etc. Looking retrospectively on this empathic theory, generations of estheticians struggled with a large amount of pseudo-problems. This plea over expression (be it facial or gestural) in the context of plastic art or of theatrical art has a particular significance and, of course, it steadies both the receptor and the artist. We see nevertheless that, in the day-to-day life, the expression has a primary, unequivocal sense, and above all one takes into consideration the way in which a plastic artist and an actor treat and interpret reality. Let us not forget that the main attributes of communication are the expressive features. The expressive quality presents a real platform that rises the interest of a plastic artist or actor, because it allows him to grasp and to understand his own experience, which does nothing but contribute to the formal configurative that he will draw up.

Key words: Fine Arts, Performing Art, Expression, Perceptible, Symbolism.

“He was walking with his hands crossed behind him, with his shoulders drawn down and tense, with his shoulder blades almost united; he looked like a partridge young, fried and served on a piece of toast. It seemed that only his neck was advancing, and his whole body got its impulse from his chest.”

As an exercise of imagination, we will work with this quotation, which we will project into a plastic frame, or even into a theatrical one, and we will get a cluster of expressive and obvious characteristics submitting our attention to the register of image motion. In other words, we observe the way of

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expression by the sum of the movements given, but, at the same time, it manifests in a similar manner in the context of picture shapes. We draw your attention on a determinant factor, the one that the expressive characteristics result only when we focus our attention on the motion of images.

Otherwise, the multitude of distinguished qualities have a generic appearance, for instance: we meet the attribute of pettiness, greenish, roundness, or even diligence, - all these materialized in in individual circumstances, but they spread a certain level of experiences and in no way a particular experimentation. In another order of ideas, we can create an exercise of imagination referring to the meaning of the dynamics in the performing arts – by observing the strain, the intertwining, the flexibility, the swinging, or even the solidness – some generalized elements, but this time they are no longer enclosed by the vision itself. The characteristics of the dynamics may be considered to be structural, such as, for instance: in the vision, in the concretization of a group of sounds, or maybe even in the palpable receptivity. All these qualities lay out and categorize the functioning of the human mind.²

In the plastic art and not only, colors have significant functions with regard to the perception or even to the symbolism of temperament. In many cultures on various geographical coordinates, the reception and the interpretation of colors is taken into consideration only when they are dynamically distinguished. Various types of expression that make us access various levels of perception, of rhetoric, of candidness, of sensation etc. Rudolf Arnheim mentions that “we define the expression by the ways of animate or inanimate behavior disclosed by the dynamic appearance of the perceptual objects or phenomena.”³

The expression in plastic arts and/or in the performing arts from a historic perspective or even in the contemporary landscape must be differentiated on an extended area, or on a reduced one, by the filter of perceptibility and, respectively, of esthetics. If we consider at a lower level those elements that are currently destined to it, then we will start from the supposition that in the absence of expression we will be given a cognitive background that can also be expressed. What can be “read” on the physiognomy or even the gestures of a person reflects what is going on inside such a person, in the state of mind that s/he is transmitting. For instance, we
know that the elements of nature, such as stone, wood, clouds etc., which are expressionless elements of nature, we will be able to speak about expression only in the figurative manner, by comparison to the human features.

We know for sure that an expression of a face or of a certain gesture may play an indispensable role in a theatrical play or in a visual art work. In order to understand the role of facial expressions and gestures we shall take an example from our daily life: when a dog and his master are trying to establish their relationship, it is at the same time antagonistic and reciprocal – and how else than by an uninterrupted interpretation of the companion’s external behavior, having a total control over his own behavior. That is what we may consider a significant victory, if we consider the fact that the master or the dog only sees a combination of muscles, a sum of movements in various directions. Of course, we will wonder what kind of link is being created between the physical and the psychological description, which on the other hand do not present a comprehensible profile? In the end, why should we become sad when we see a sad face or why are we touched by beatitude when we meet an ecstatic physiognomy?

In another order of ideas, we remind the reader that, starting from the 18th century, an extremely interesting phenomenon developed more and more, such as the recognition by the type of facial expression. Plastic art signals an ample series of individual portraits, but also ensembles of portraits in various compositions, and in that sense we can mention one of the most illustrious painters, Francisco Goya (1746-1828), who left us the famous phrase “The sleep of reason produces monsters,” an artist about whom the famous writer Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) affirmed, after having seen one of his paintings, that “on each of these faces, Goya imprinted the contempt that he feels for them. You must be a genius to persuade the king of the contrary, who is too stupid to notice that the painter of the Court condemns him in the eyes of the whole world.”

The attention given to facial expression does not occur only in plastic arts and in the art of gestures, but also in other fields, such as literature, for instance Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801), in his work bearing a tinge of amusement Physiognomic Fragments for the Promotion of Knowledge and the Love of Mankind. The philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753), or Charles
Darwin (1809-1882) were as well among the protagonists of some remarkable essays on this topic.

Further on, in support of our plea we will try to see through the filter of associationnisme, and here Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) distinguishes an expression which usually includes forces in action. Otherwise, in order to clarify the meaning of the author’s postulate, we will underline the fact that it is intended to orient us and at the same time to justify the reason why we identify expression in the inanimate matter. To the continuation of this associationist theory of thought we will bring up a noble example, worthy to be taken into consideration – here, Arnheim revealed his consideration about the temple columns. He claims that when we direct our gaze towards the columns, we will already know from a previous experience that they achieve mechanical pressure and counterpressure. Also by an exercise of imagination, we can transfer ourselves in the stead of the columns and we could feel how those forces act upon and inside our bodies. By a projection of our own kinesthetic sensations on the bearing poles, both the relevant pressures and the stresses remembered from memory will tend to stimulate responses in other parts of the consciousness as well. He evokes the fact that “When I project my wishes and forces onto nature, I do that also with the way that such wishes and forces make me feel, that is, I project my pride, my courage, my tenacity, my agility, my self-assurance, my calm self-contentedness. Only in that way my empathy with nature may really become an esthetic empathy.”

Thus, either we speak of a state that we illustrate in a two-dimensional format, or when one plays a role on stage, we must observe which type of expression coincides with such a state of mind that we want to reproduce. One can usually perceive how one is determined by the other, but the expression cannot be perceived as directly as the shape or the color, says Arnheim.

Looking retrospectively on this empathic theory, generations of estheticians struggled with a large amount of pseudo-problems. Questions that imprinted human conscience, such as: do feelings exteriorize in the images of plastic artists or in the sounds emitted by actors that they created, or are such feelings expressed only when a person looks at the work or listens to the interpreted pole? Does the plastic artist or the actor necessarily have to be in a
state of lethargy to be able to create the painting or the role? In order to be able to emanate “emotion” does one have to be under its power?

This can be taken as a presupposition on the one hand, but, on the other hand, we can admit that we identify a visual expression in any thing or phenomenon with a certain logistics. Rudolf Arnheim gave a few examples: “A steep rock, a willow tree, the colors of sunset, the cracks in a wall, a falling leaf, a flowing spring, even a simple line or color, or the dance of an abstract form on a cinema screen have as much expressivity as the human body and they can help the artist equally well.”

It is true that, on the one hand, the human body can help him better, because it is in itself an extremely sophisticated conformation, but it is equally difficult to minimalize the bodily functions in a context of reduction and establishment of the simplicity of shape and dynamics which is on the other hand really an expression with a prominent visual impact. We should also mention that there is a charge of non-visual associations.

It is worth going forward with an extremely suggestive example: Van Gogh had created, at some time, two drawings – the first was entitled “Sadness” and it illustrated a female nude sitting with her head between her arms, and the second drawing represented a few leafless trees, with gnarled roots. Subsequently, the artist sent a letter to his brother Theo, in which he told him that he intended to express the same feeling in both cases, and he claimed that “adhering to the ground in a convulsive and passionate manner, and nevertheless being half-way uprooted by the storm. I wanted to express something form the fight for life of that pale and thin feminine figure, as in the black, twisted, and gnarled roots.” In a short plastic comment, we will facilitate the conception over the roots that lead, to a certain extent, to abstractization, but we will point out as well that those almost abstractized roots will capacitate the beholder’s perception, and the message suggests a hegemonic regime with regard to the fiduciary drawing. We will conclude that both in plastic arts and in the performing arts, the human body is not considered to be the easiest, the most comprehensible or malleable, but it is thought to be redundant in view of the materialization of the visual expression.

In contemporary times, in the plastic arts and theatre respectively, the priority of physiognomy features still holds valid, and this should not come as
a surprise. To complement things, this time from a psychological perspective, we will affirm that the human senses are not recording and storing instruments working in the background. Psychology defines them as being forwarded by the organism as complementary methods for the responses to the environment, and the organism itself is directly interested in the sum of forces acting in the environment at the three levels: their place, power, and orientation. On the other hand, the forces are repugnant or with a profitable stake, and their determinant is the effect which actually has a contributive role and a decision-making factor in which we call expression.\(^\text{10}\)

This plea over expression (be it facial or gestural) in the context of plastic art or of theatrical art has a particular significance and, of course, it steadies both the receptor and the artist. We see nevertheless that, in the day-to-day life, the expression has a primary, unequivocal sense, and above all one takes into consideration the way in which a plastic artist and an actor treat and interpret reality. Let us not forget that the main attributes of communication are the expressive features. The expressive quality presents a real platform that rises the interest of a plastic artist or actor, because it allows him to grasp and to understand his own experience, which does nothing but contribute to the formal configurative that he will draw up.\(^\text{11}\)

We maintain the registry of apology for expression in the artistic ambiance, we slightly move the debate on to an educational niche, of course, with vocational direction. As far as the artistic education is concerned, both with regard to the plastic arts and performing arts, and not only, it is imperiously necessary to pay attention to the way in which we train the students in arts and how we can show them the way to the evaluation and evolution of their sensitivity considering such characteristics and their initiation in the context of labeling expression as a guiding dogma for each pencil line or hachure, for each painting gesture, for each move made on stage etc. We mention nevertheless the fact that there are academic teaching staff with high professional formation who apply such methods. It is true that there is also a segment of students who get sudden emotions where they not only do not progress, but are really under the sign of refutation. From immemorial times and until the present day, we know that a student draws after a model, while he is requested to rigorously stabilize the positioning, the proportion,
the realization of the contour lines starting from the relative points of shape building, volumetric solution, hachure and, finally, by a visual grammar acquired with time, expressivity is emitted. Categorically, the student must centralize their attention on the distinctive notes in the repertoire of the technique and geometry of the model or even of the object perceived by the student. In contemporary times, more often than not the young artist catalogs the model, the object, the free theme as being enclosed in a configuration of masses, of plans, but also of orientations – therefore, we are again in the presence of the technic-geometric binome. This kind of lesson or teaching is based on preferential precepts, which are often met in mathematics, including in the natural sciences, and in no case in the spontaneous vision, although it is sometimes taught in that manner as well.

In what follows we shall plead for the symbolism of shape and not the achievement proper, but here it is worth mentioning that within a lesson about how something should be drawn and what value is subsequently attributed to it, both for a plastic artist and for someone who does not have such status of creator, a simple circle is not just a continuous curve line which touches all the points located at an equal distance from the center, but it is in fact a vigorous, consolidated, compact element. From the moment the student realizes that circularity is not the same thing as roundness, they are able to make that drawing which includes from the start a structural order or a logistics under the patronage of the essential concept of expression of a thing. That is how roundness acquires the value of artistic expression, and circularity is governed by the technical-geometrical solution subordinated to reasoning. As an exercise of imagination, we will stop for a moment at the artificial focus on simplistic shapes, but also on the given colors, which affect the student’s situation of not being able to choose a certain configuration from the ample palette of configurations, equally plausible and viable. It is in fact a topic that reaches the dimension of expressivity and it consequently may serve the ideal proposed in the identification of shapes.\(^{12}\)

Another relevant point is the registry of symbolism in an artistic context and we will propose for debate all the aptitudes of the perceptive faculty, which have a general aspect – in one way or the other, we perceive the blueness in any blue spot or the velocity in any object rushing into space.
One can say the same thing in the case of expression. We imagine seeing on stage an act that presents us a mother who is guiding the first steps of her baby, so we will observe tenderness as a basic characteristic incarnated in a particular circumstance and, therefore, it can be considered as a sequence that symbolizes sensitivity, tenderness, and finesse. It is etched in our mind that the term “expression” is directly linked to the “symbol”, with which actually it shares a mutual regime. We catalog this example as one of maximum relevance, because the prerogative of expressing or symbolizing an object or even a phenomenon in general lines by aid of private images is achieved both by formal conformation and by the given subject, only if it appears.¹³

One should nevertheless underline the fact that, with artists in general, the more they have a cluster of artistic experiences subordinated to the perceptual platform, the more the latter tends to be hazier. One can see therefore how symbolism may acquire another value and is outside the subject. On the one hand, in the interpretation of Sigmund Freud it can be inventoried as having a heteroclite content, far from the way we perceive symbolism in art. “He treats symbolism not as a relation between a concrete image and an abstract idea, but rather as a relation between equally concrete objects, such as a dagger and a falus.”¹⁴ It should be understood that all the references to organs and to functions of the human body are vital for our mind, and they succeed in making a universal creation by aid of art.

For example, when we examine the primordial themes of imaging, predominantly the concept of creativity is manifested by the visual impact and continues by making up the compositional dimension, while we analyze the details. There is no doubt the compositional structure reveals the oscillating and cinematic themes of storytelling. The visual sense not only will record the entity of energy delivered, but more often than not it will reconstitute in our minds a real configuration of efforts, and understanding an external thing will be outrun by the impact on the beholder. “The forces characterizing the significance of the narration come to life in the spectator’s mind and produce that kind of active participation that distinguish the artistic experience from the passive reception of information.”¹⁵

We will conclude by admitting that we do not know what will happen in the future, maybe we can just make up some frames in our imagination,
maybe we can speculate a certain type of expression. No artistic trend, no movement, no style means the *summum* of the art. We will never be able to say that the Renaissance is better than the Antiquity, or that Rococo is stronger than the Baroque, or that Romanticism is more complex than Realism, or Cubism is more analytical than Futurism, or that Impressionism is more pictorial than Expressionism, or that Figurative is more correct than the Abstract, or the modern age as compared to contemporaneity and so on – none of the above can be said that it is the acme of art. Each of them is correct in its way, and each of them is a point of view, it is as looking at a mountain all around it, at ground level and from the sky, from different angles, but it is still the same mountain.