“Animating” the Stage - Stage Elements

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Abstract: In modern days, new acting spaces have become popular through the artistic expression and diversity of means they offer to the actors so that they get closer to their audience, sometimes ignoring the dramatic text and using it more like a pretext in a given context. The act of creation is now motivated by the possibility it offers its creator to artistically acquire new knowledge and discover new forms of expression to render aspects of contemporary life. Art is not a product, it is a perpetually changing process in time and space. All the artistic research arises from unanswered questions, from an unrefrainable need to express oneself in the new context: cinema, artistic films, documentary films, modern and contemporary performances, visual culture and associated culture, body and space, public space, video editing/processing.

Key words: physicality, space, image, performance.

A Space of Images and Physicality

The new ways of using dramatic signs have resulted in “purging” the process and making the performance win its independence not by totally eliminating the dramatic text, but by turning and reshaping it through artistic means borrowed from music, visual arts, dancing, or the media. These tendencies have been adopted by theorists that are also researchers and practitioners and particularly by those that have double specialties, such as designer/scenographer, or director/choreographer. They bring to life the aspects of contemporary life, proving very imaginative in using stage elements that animate their performances, from unbelievable video projections to the brutality of nowadays street language. There are essay-stagings on conscience

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and identity in which reality and illusion merge into one another to create a universe that goes beyond time and space to generate emotion. Experimenting fractured stories inserted in holograms has created a stage language that combines artistic expressivity with new technologies and virtual reality to build an impressive sensory experience. The text becomes a pretext; the interest of the public has been turned towards other types of performances under the influence of the image culture.

Space is most important in all stage performances, but it has long been used in many other ways than it was initially designed. Space, movement, lighting, form and time are basic components of expressivity and they all arise from a personal need for dynamism as an expressive quality of artistic representation. What I personally think brings physicality and image together is the anticipation and conscious challenge of artistic response that create a highly impressive effect. My assertion is based on the fact that image as part of the visual language has a powerful psychosocial impact, not only an aesthetical one, as it contains basically unlimited communication means. The contemporary audience is more open and more vulnerable to image (virtual or not) as its mystery seems to lie exactly in its lack of mystery. The body on stage is the primary manifestation of man’s unity in space and it has to undergo a “purging” of every kind of language before creating a new one. The actor or the dancer has to go back to elementary movements, the simplest and most natural, before discovering new movements. In a world in which technology has been used increasingly, stage performances are in search for new means of existing. Placed in an artistic context, the gestures in body language contain very powerful expressivity. Analysing the connection between the actor and his body by adjacent elements, such as body expressivity and dance theatre, I have become aware of the fact that performing is based on image and movement that both lie within the human being. The audience is not interested in space geometry, but in rationally and emotionally getting involved into the stage dynamics. The stage is a space of precise backgrounds and unprecise feelings; what is seen is based on movement, as philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty stated. We see only what we watch. Stage experiments are continually being theoretically and practically approached by great directors, while
performances are defined and analysed as related to the past and tradition, as well as to the present orientation in which all forms of stage structure deny old canons and promote new experimental models. Throughout history, a multitude of body metaphors have been discovered: body as a symbol, acting body, object body, text body, absent body, machine body, and lately the cyborg or the bionic body.

Since Artaud’s theories and Grotowski’s, Brook’s and Barba’s experiments, stage performances have concentrated on physicality establishing new connections and relations between text and body. I have noticed lately that contemporary performances use various combinations of words and gestures, or are based mainly on movement, regaining their freedom of expression by own means. Beyond the need for freedom and innovation, gestures result in an essentialized grammar. Contemporary stage semiotics sees gesture as a sign in itself, separated from the spoken language, and the stage not as a space of words, but of gesture and body expression. Basically, “body art is that particular art that explicitly uses the artist’s own body to visually, sensorially and sometimes viscerally comment on his identity and that gives life to social meanings of the body and its means of expression.”

Due to digital information and technology, the human body has undergone a series of changes regarding the visual aspects of a performance, imposed mainly by the present day media logistics. The visual representation of the human body on the contemporary stage unveils a virtual reality, an unfathomable space where physicality does no longer imitate a real action, but rather simulates it, as if in a virtual reality field. The hypermediatization of the human body, such as private webcam facilities or computer games that simulate basic human activities, leads to a need for transposing the real through technology, for digitally simulating it. In postmodern visual theatre expressions, the multimedia performances aim at extending and enriching themselves by exploring the huge variety of contemporary communication means. The multimedia performance is based on our ever changing relations with time and space using recorded there and then fragments within the now and here live show.
The most important trends in contemporary theatre, in which stage performances become almost a performative art, aim at redefining physicality offering new experiences to the audience. Instead of dialogues, present stagings try to create the simultaneous experience of body memory within a unitary space in which the actor’s and the spectator’s responsibility are higher and their participation is more active. Theatre is undoubtedly based on both actors and audience, on their interdependence and interference within the playing stage space. Theatre is a manipulative art. Whatever its expressions: movement performance, comedy, one-man show or drama, theatre has a message, meanings and feelings that it conveys to the audience, despite the latter's willingness to receive them or not, visually and emotionally. The human body has become the most direct means of expression through which messages are sent to an audience to confuse it.

The different approach to stage signs results in a radical process in which the performance regains its independence not by necessarily eliminating the text, but more by changing it and giving it new dimensions by means borrowed from music, visual arts, dancing and the media. If the mixture of languages that are present in a performance allows the presence of the particular characteristics of postmodern theatre which imply certain “stylistic impurities” that ensure expressivity, the audience's attention is drawn towards the visual structure seen as a priority compared to the spoken language. In the modern perspective, the fragment of a movement image gains a particular value, the perception is based on movement, and the observer has to keep changing his focus points and respond to the various visual requirements.

Thus, the audience, having plunged into the performance they watch, which stimulates their capacity to identify with certain events on stage, have the feeling they are confronted with similar actions to those they have experienced themselves. The actor eventually loses his initial function; he becomes a conveyer, an intermediary, while the audience become witnesses. The needs this new situation generate are well supported by Artaud’s statement: “The spectator is placed within the action itself, feels and almost touches the performance so that the contact between spectator and performance is reestablished. [...] Action and acting area extend over the entire
space.” This type of theatre refuses to be a theatre of illusions (expressed in gestures, movements and body postures), but decomposes movement into articulated segments, banishing the idea of a classical visual story. The result will be a stage discourse built from unbelievable units, arbitrary random moments during which the actor’s body interacts with elements around him (objects, sounds, etc.). The body symbols and expressivity lose importance, as the given situations partly deprive them of their usual impact.

The stage is turned into a space the moment a moving human body appears on it, that articulates and transforms the space. The space remains an acting space only if it bears rhythm and to the extent it attracts attention in a searching movement. The most inspiring performances are obviously those that use the space in a predetermined manner in which movements give it a new structure, or where new places are created or the acting goes beyond the limits of the given space. For instance, the Romanian director Silviu Purcărete’s Faustus was staged in a factory hall no longer in use. Within this space the spectator can watch the witches’ sabbath through the opening of a backstage wall, while the rest of the performance develops on three other levels. The spectator is free to move from one acting space to another and get closer to what almost magical performance he likes most. And the stage illusion takes place in a collective ritual. Visually, the performances keep getting closer to or farther from the audience, and the images are perceived in a direct manner. Lehmann asserts that the “metonymic space” is that particular space in which fiction is an extension of reality. The postdramatic theatre aims at partially turning experiences into direct experiments by creating common spaces and involving the spectator in the acting space by proximity and touch. Thus the audience gets into a direct contact with the performance and a feeling of initiation is being created. Robert Wilson, on the other hand, proposes a moving world characterised by dominant physicality. His perspective creates artificiality, and the constant search for appropriate gestures does not encourage the natural psychological flow that helps the audience emotionally identify with the performance.

Art and society go hand in hand in formulating and imposing norms, expectations and ideologies by specific means. Taking the human body as a
starting point, we may notice that, on one hand, the works of art represent the history of the evolution of body models, and, on the other hand, philosophy, anthropology, theology, psychoanalysis and medicine have formulated with the passage of time increasingly sophisticated theories on human body and its aspirations, the body projects of the human being.

This perspective on the body has been recently advanced by the performance theatre as well. Performance and performing are in a broader sense integrating esthetics of the living. Firstly, because the body we own proves no longer at hand. It is overpromoted by the media, it seems to have been engulfed into a complexity of information, of daily images. We are constantly invaded by virtual bodies that impose a certain perspective on our bodies and on ourselves. If we get to rediscover our real bodies again, we will enjoy them and our body reality. I find that the only appropriate expression of the image of the human soul is the body itself. The body is the expression of our identity in its most complex meaning. If today’s performances focus mainly on the idea of body, it means they aim at regaining identity and offer it to the public by this process of embodiment. We may say the focus moves to understanding embodiment, being “in” the body, and to the fact that human experience relies completely on using one’s body in a variety of ways.

Incarnation of the word on stage has been less often mentioned lately; incarnation of the body on stage has been preferred as well as a real revival of the body we own. The motivations of these manifestations largely vary from exhibitionism to exorcising traumas in which the artist’s body becomes the object of the performance. A pioneer in this new stage trend was the German artist Oskar Schlemmer that theorised the experiences of physicality in the body-environment relationship in his drama workshop within the Bauhaus School (Staatliches Bauhaus). We have plenty of taboos regarding our body, which leads to our unconsciously offering ourselves to complex manipulations. A theatre performance has to draw attention on the events around us. Communication by means of the artistic act is simply a refreshing of our ideas on ourselves, and, from the perspective of its creator, it is a refreshing of stage expressions, of stage language, of daily research and interests. In my view, it would be ideal to have the actors give natural
responses to outer stimuli and try to redefine their bodies by precise gestures and keen observation. Because, after all, theatre is about the human being and his constant searches from the inner into the outer world, about how real the idea of limit is, the way we felt in the past and the changes it has undergone to the present day. I think that theatre is considerably reactive to the times it reflects. I may say that, from among most spiritual manifestations, theatre has often given the impression of agonizing, but, after a series of tormenting periods, it has (re)activated its language to approach fundamental topics in its specific manner. We should not give strict definitions to all types of expression; the final goal is high quality performances and the real need for changing something for the better in the audience.

In experimental stage manifestations there arises the need for using new languages, but there is yet no distinct structure within which they can be constantly encouraged to develop, which leads to the fact that only very determined innovative actors follow this path. In a world dominated by televisual image, using video projections in theatre or dance or presenting media installations in art galleries raise serious concerns to the critics who see art as becoming derisory, monotonous together with the message it conveys. The audience is instinctively more interested in things it knows, but it is also open to new things if they are presented with innovative performances. The innovations, such as video projections, moving images and more physicality, are accepted on contemporary stage if the above are not mere illustrations or visually impressive, but perfectly integrated and if they help enrich the audience’s imagination that has its inner mechanisms of adapting to novelty. As a consequence, the images will be perceived in a fragmented manner starting from the personal dialogue that grows from the projections that activate the subconscious. Based on the inner dialogue, interactivity and communication through technology, performances become a means of actively taking part in society life, and the performer, a means of positive contamination and conveyance of energies with motivating potential. With the passage of time, image has been used differently because of the necessity to turn human experience into symbols. If we can be constantly aware of our relation with time in a digital era, theatre can become a very powerful tool for
progress, both for the artists and the audience, in an attempt to actively approach the world we live in that forces us to take an attitude towards it.