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The contemporary scenography as an introspective architecture

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ABSTRACT

Referring to a paradigm shift in the twentieth-century European theater, Erika Fischer-Lichte identifies a change of internal communication from an external relation to a communication between action and audience. Creators such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, to whom the theatrical creation is based on the resolution of space problems/dynamics, find a scenic space apart from pictorial and illusory logics that frees itself from the illustration of a linguistic speech. It's an interior universe with individual laws that doesn't follow exterior references capable of definition or limit. In 2012, Didier Plassard uses the term *Abstract* to define a contemporary scene condition where the exterior give place to an introspective architecture in a search of an interior space, legitimized by individual references and finding discourse on subjectivity. It proposes the use of interpretation towards a veiled and interior truth, which introduces a poetic and critical order in reality.

Despite the theatrical expression characterized by a passage from the inside to the outside of the scene, the occupation, form, materiality and plastic expression of its space took an opposite direction: from the exterior to an interior, creating an introspective architecture.

Keywords: Space; Interior; Abstract; Poetic; Subjectivity

Referring to a paradigm shift in the twentieth-century European theater, Erika Fischer-Lichte identifies a change in the structure of theatrical communication from a focus on stage, centered on characters and their interaction to an external relation, an interface between action and audience (Fischer-Lichte, 1997, p. 41). In this understanding of theater emerges a sense of shared experience where the result of the interaction between stage and the spectator mind is a major force in the way we cogitate a theatrical experience.

Georg Fuchs labels this theater occurrence as a "dramatic experience" (*apud* Fischer-Lichte, 1997, p. 41), created only in the moment when it is being experienced by the viewer, who has to

complete it and define it. In this mode, the dramatic work happens neither in the book nor on the stage by itself, but inside the viewer. It's in the mind of the audience triggered by the entire event features that the truly dramatic moment is created.

This understanding creates for scenography a peculiar place of importance in the sense that it is a powerful device of communication that could influence the entire experience. The scenography language is not autonomous in regard to the performance, but adds its own expression as a microcosm of amazing possibilities and is able to create meaning in a unique way. It's role in performance is no more a complement of a text, a suggestion of a space for an action but a creation of a visual universe that is part of the performance identity, and like in the major visual arts of our time, contemporary scenography opens a dialogue with the audience searching the use of personal interpretation rather than general identification. Contemporary scenography designs not in a mimetic way but towards a veiled and interior truth, and in this sense, in an introspective mode.

In the performing arts the characterization of space is a major factor in the relationship that sustains the encounter. David Wiles reaffirms this way of conceiving the space from the point of view of its potential to produce a discourse that goes beyond itself:

Space is not a passive receptacle in which objects and forms are posited...

Space itself is an object [of creation]. And the main one!

Space is charged with energy.

Space shrinks and expands.

And these motions mould forms and objects.

It is space that gives birth to forms!

It is space that conditions the network of relations and tensions between objects.

Tension is the principal actor of space. (Wiles, 2003, p. 13-14)

Space supports and creates the performative act and has an artistic, poetic and critical root. By space I mean not only the physical and geometrical characteristics of the location but also all possible

characterization in order to create an environment or atmosphere as an identity of that space. The environmental dimension that accompanies every action gives it a kind of discourse that intersects the other parts of the event.

I understand Scenography as the field that constructs, creates, reflects and reinvents scenic spaces that could be any space where some kind of performative experience occurs. Each scenic space has its own character defined by the location, the materiality of the environment, the way that it is occupied, the objects that we can see and those we cannot, the light that permits its revelation and sometimes even its atmosphere conditions. Consequently, I understand scenography as a spatial creation and I also assume that the building or place where the performance occurs, as well as the stage where it is presented or represented, are variables of the same system in equation: the spatial characterization of an event.

It's the scenographic environment as an inhabited space that leads and allows a stage experience in the sense that only with the recognition of some sort of stage we can interpret the reality before our eyes with an artistic dimension. What we hear we understand in a given formal context, what we see is manipulated by a permanent three-dimensional relationship and therefore the messages that we interpret from a performance are a result of the spatial dynamics where we experience.

Scenography as the spatial characterization of a performative event shares with architecture the possibility of triggering diverse experiences, starting from a given material form and ending in a conceptual frame or vice-versa. But architecture, in spite of its capacity to generate some contemplation state, is created towards an exterior existence, the forms are projected for action, for physical spaces that are lived with real bodies and merge in with the life of the city or community and not necessarily or exclusively in the individual consciousness. Scenography has its own specificity and on a first instance its context inside a work of art places it inside a process that, as in others arts, is a process of looking into ourselves. Scenography is in the course to self-reflection and contributes to an act of looking into oneself, providing a privileged access to our

mental and emotional state. This route is opposite to external observation that is privileged in architecture because even when architectural thinking creates interior spaces, they are not necessarily designed to rescue the self-interior mental state. Scenography is. It's a kind of spatial creation that results in a form of reality existence designed to operate in an individual, interior and unique experience of the mind, a project to a reflective looking inward. And that's why some directors that transform the language of the stage since the beginning of the twentieth century understand scenography not as a representation of an architectural space that can be identified in real life but instead as a visual and spatial universe that escapes identification and proposed introspection.

Vsevolod Meyerhold was one of them, and he realized that the space for individual interpretation could address a key role in the aesthetic dimension of the work. He recognized staging as the spatial resolution of problems and dynamics and delineated the *mise-en-scène* based on relationships, geometric schemes of movement, form and structure complicity, as well as discourses of presence: a living space in a persistent equation apart from illusory logics that frees itself from a linguistic speech. Béatrice Picon-Vallin titled one of the chapters of a set of essays on Vsevolod Meyerhold: To see and give seeing; the vision against the illustration where Picon-Vallin advocated Meyerhold Theatre as a temporal and spatial construction of ideas in opposition to illustration:

This very vivid vision he infused within his collaborators has nothing to do with the illustration type of image. Meyerhold himself writes, in a radical way: to become a director, you need to stop being an illustrator. (Picon-Vallin, 2006, p.89, my translation)¹

The work of Meyerhold moves from the illustration of life, focused in an exterior sense of the world, to design a multidisciplinary experience in which a unique space has numerous possibilities of communication inside each of us. The contemporary stage created by the changes of the beginning of the century rethinks the spatial quality of a performance

from a way that can be considered exterior (since it pursues a vision of a recognizable and standardized world) to an interior one, legitimized by individual references that lead to interpretation, subjectivity and introspective relations.

In fact, looking at the work of creators like Meyerhold, we find proposals where the power of interiority and an inner state leads to a more customized, rich and intense experience of the performing arts: *External action in the new drama becomes [...] useless. "We want to penetrate behind the mask, behind the action, in the intelligible character of the person, and distinguish his inner mask".* (Meyerhold, 2008a, p. 174, my translation.)²

His work presents environmental structures for a different use of spatial language onstage, regarding the viewer as a catalyst and the builder of his own vision through its inner analysis. His project intended to sabotage the contemplative passivity of the audience by offering an intriguing universe, different from the everyday life: an interior universe with individual laws that don't follow exterior references capable of definition or limit.

This universe, neither standardized nor expected, could raise enough thought-provoking questions to lead the audience beyond superficial recognition. This artistic research that allows answers is a discovery of a new appreciation: the consciousness of the self by gazing at the other.

In 2012, Didier Plassard used the term "Abstract" (Plassard, 2012, p. 14) to define a contemporary scene condition in an attempt to refocus the concept of post-dramatic theater supported by Hans-Thies Lehmann. Plassard takes in this matter a general characterization of the abstract domain, the absence of a mimetic relationship between the work and the world in which we live, as understood by the visual arts. He says that, in the context of theatrical creation of the twentieth century, a form of passage to abstraction occurs, comparable to the one that crossed the arts in the first decades of the same century. With the establishment of abstract art, the autonomy and absolute value of the produced objects emerged definitely, in the sense that the visual identification or recognition did not lead nor to their production nor to their existence. These works use shapes, surfaces and concrete volumes

which aspire to be the origin of an interior dialogue. Its effects result from the interaction between the audience and the specific elements of language itself, and not the ability to mimic or replace other objects.

Plassard's proposal to designate as abstract this last theatre echoes of performative arts due to a common feature: the use of "dissociation mechanisms" (Plassard, 2012, p. 18). The author argues that this "dissociation mechanisms" do not erase the resurgence of classic forms, but it can aggregate the new dramatic forms distinguished by Lehmann: self-reflection, decomposition or separation. Plassard distinguishes dissolution of the narrative as one of the most clear dissociation operations, a transformation process through which the variety of actions, textual or not, fails to merge into a whole organized by a narrative. But the dissociation of visual elements from an identifiable space or from an universal logic of occupation can also be a major axis in the contemporary performance space.

The dissociation approach triggers a kind of fragmentation that is not only a way of organizing a set of information but also a process of spectator inclusion. After a dissociation procedure it is necessary, and even involuntary, an aggregation process, in which the spectator reconnects his experience, leaving the imagination to corrupt the ordinary logic. Meyerhold also recognizes the importance of dissociation resonances in his work: *The fantasy of the onlooker is the one which should fill-in the picture. We should be guided by the associative capability of the spectator.* (Meyerhold, 2008c, p.331, my translation)³

The scenography of some of the avant-garde proposals is by associative process an inhabited system in balance that navigates in a constant mutation. The more degrees of interior associations can be made, the richer is the process of constructing meaning:

Based on the associative capability of the spectator we can build, rather than images of immediate clarity, combinations capable of creating certain associations. The more intricate are these combinations, the greater it is the success. (Meyerhold, 2008c, p.332, my translation)⁴

We can think of abstraction and dissociation, identified by Plassard and celebrated by Meyerhold, in close relationship with contemporary scenography and understand it as a set of aesthetic relations where the association and the interpretation of spatial reality creates meaning. This kind of *space* doesn't depend on its materiality, nor is defined exclusively by its design or geometric qualities, but by its action. It cannot be captured completely in pictures or descriptions; it's a processual space that functions as an operating mode.

The scenographic space has a sense of a non-permanent project with no final configuration because this space is not controlled neither by the one who designs it neither by the one who inhabits it. And though often based on very strict intentions and assertive aesthetics, it doesn't end in its form or materiality, which is controllable and capable of external representation. It is an open project, established by internal and private reactions of the people who experience it, in the logic of Umberto Eco's proposal for the open dimension of the work of art. The recognition of the spectator - as someone who invests meaning in the work that is being presented - sets a new relationship with the stage and with the aesthetics of space in particular.

The spectator understood as producer and not as a receiver became in fact a sort of dramaturgical axis of the XXnd century's visual arts and that is why Johannes Meinhardt identifies a self-reflexive turn as a central factor that caused a fundamental change of attitude:

The most important factor in the history of abstraction was the self-analytical and self-reflective turn of modernist painting. Abstract painting in its radical sense, as it was developed between 1913 and 1917 (mainly by Vassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian), didn't arise from a gradual transition in a slow movement of abstraction, stylization and geometrization from a figurative painting; it resulted in a fundamental change of attitude ... (Meinhardt, 2005, p. 6, my translation)⁵

The same could be proposed for contemporary scenography: a fundamental change of attitude.

Breaking a canonical tradition of background linked to scenography induces a referential shift that takes the visual dimension of the stage to the field of suggestion, evocation and interpretation. Privileging the freedom of association instead of reproduction, accuracy and detail, this *space* is, simultaneously, a mirror of everyday life and a product that aims to create small grafts in the common place.

What changes in a revolutionary way in the scenography as a unrestricted spatial conception, it's not necessarily what it does or the way it is done in terms of materiality but how it is understood and how one responds to it. Investigating the consequences of a certain introspective mode is also questioning their *modus operandi*. The creation founded on dissociation gives rise to symbolic operations that have a dual nature, creating dynamics only possible by their metaphorical condition, with similarities with poetic discourse. They can play with contrasts, incongruities and contradictions, resulting in an expressive resource, which manifests itself in a spatial dimension - as architecture - but ruled by a poetic order.

Jan Mukarövký identifies poetic language not as a special kind of standard language but as an independent format. It has, from the point of view of the lexicon, syntax, distribution and evolution, an autonomous structure where several standard languages can coexist or even intersect.

Poetic language is not therefore a variant of the standard language. But that fact does not deny the close relationship that exists between them - relationship that consist, first of all, in the fact that the language standard serves as background for the poetic language. (Mukarövký, 1975, p.320, my translation)⁶

The creation of places for performance, spatial by nature and creative by inherence, meets the poetic discourse as an independent system. Following this thought we can assume the universe of architecture, for example, as a standard language that establishes special relationships with scenography, that is a poetic discourse grounded in freedom and in introspection. The foundation of these features is the disruption of the norm and the questioning of the standard: *The systematic violation of the norm*

allows the poetic use of language; without that possibility, poetry would not exist.´ (Ibidem)⁷

It's interesting to think that could be the *abstract* concept, which has proved to be so significant in visual arts, to open doors and facilitate a contemporary scenography full of independence and resonances with poetic skills.

If we look at scenography as a poetic creation - a unique space with its own rules of formation - it could be described as an introspective architecture that ceases to solve a figurative problem with exterior references to reach an individual and poetic interpretation path.

This predisposition does not constitute an aversion to any kind of reality representation and does not necessarily mean that the entirely scenic spaces should be converted to a disorderly strangeness. The recognition of the poetic value as the result of its abstract condition leads mainly to a change in attitude of how scenography is produced, how it integrates the performative event and how the public receives it. This question also arises in the field of linguistics regarding poetry. In spite of the deep relationship that mankind has with realism, poetry is independent of reality, and cannot be organized or determined through it. Nevertheless reality can be a component of poetry.

The theme of a poetic work cannot be evaluated according to its relationship towards the extra-linguistic reality entering the work, but instead is part of its significant aspect (by this we do not intend to assert that his relationship with reality cannot become one of the factors of poetic structure ...) (Mukarövský, 1975, p.326, my translation)⁸

To Mukarövský, the poetic language remains different from the standard language and has a curious significance and purpose: the update of linguistic manifestation. He elucidates that update is precisely the opposite of automation. The automation of any form is made through an inconsistent and continuous way, while an update comes from specific acts, from awareness of their intentions, and from questioning participation. Automation defines schemes, rules and assumptions

and the update implies a conscious deviation of these characteristics. From this point of view we can propose that the poetic structure of a scenography, as an introspective architecture, aims to update scenography as an artistic manifestation at the core of performing arts.

The scenic space is not only the materialization of theatrical expression but it drives and molds the entire experience, legitimizing its critical intervention and creative point of view. This development of scenography no longer illustrates a linguistic discourse or emphasizes identification of a familiar place; it increases, complements and questions the drama with a parallel dimension of reality.

In spite of Erika Fischer-Lichte proposing that the theatrical expression presents a passage from the inside to the outside of the scene, addressed in the beginning of this text, it seems that the way we conceive a scenography for a performance takes an opposite direction: from the exterior to interior, from exterior references to an inside echo in each viewer, that cannot be defined or delimited and finds discourse on subjectivity. The twentieth century embraces it categorically as an universe with its own laws, sustained by an introspective operability that serves the performance as a spatial artistic expression.

Endnotes

¹ `Essa visão muito viva que ele infundia a seus colaboradores nada tem a ver com a imagem-ilustração. O próprio Meyerhold escreve, radical: *para se tornar um encenador, é necessário deixar de ser ilustrador.*´ (Picon-Vallin, 2006, p.89)

² `La acción exterior en el nuevo drama, la manifestación de los caracteres, se hace inútil. "Queremos penetrar detrás de la máscara, detrás de la acción en el carácter inteligible de la persona, y distinguir su *máscara interior*".´ (Meyerhold, 2008a, p.174)

³ `La fantasía del espectador es la que tiene que completar el cuadro. Hay que orientarse por la capacidad asociativa del espectador.´(Meyerhold, 2008c, p.331)

⁴ `Basándonos en la capacidad asociativa del espectador, podemos construir, en vez de imágenes de claridad inmediata, combinaciones capaces de crear determinadas asociaciones. Cuanto más finas sean estas últimas, mayor será el éxito.´ (Meyerhold, 2008c, p.332)

⁵ `O mais importante factor para a história da abstracção e na história da abstracção foi a viragem auto-analítica e auto-reflexiva da pintura modernista. A pintura abstracta, no seu sentido radical, tal como foi desenvolvida entre 1913 e 1917 (sobretudo por Vassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevitch e Piet Mondrian), não surgiu numa transição gradual, num movimento lento de abstracção, estilização e geometrização da pintura figurativa; ela resultou de

uma mudança fundamental da atitude...”(Meinhardt, 2005, p.6)

⁶ “A linguagem poética não é, pois, uma variante da linguagem-padrão. Mas essa circunstância não nega a estreita relação que existe entre elas – relação que consiste, antes de mais, no facto de a linguagem-padrão servir de fundo à linguagem poética.” (Mukaróvský, 1975, p.320)

⁷ “A violação sistemática da norma possibilita o aproveitamento poético da língua; sem essa possibilidade, a poesia não existiria.” (*Ibidem*)

⁸ “O tema de uma obra poética não pode ser avaliado segundo a sua relação com a realidade extra-linguística que entra na obra, antes faz parte do aspecto significativo desta (e com isto não pretendemos afirmar que a sua relação com a realidade não possa chegar a ser um dos factores da estrutura poética ...).” (Mukaróvský, 1975, p.326)

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