

PERAET 2021**International Scientific Conference «PERISHABLE AND ETERNAL: Mythologies and Social Technologies of Digital Civilization-2021»****PERPETUAL VS. PERMANENT: THEATRE AND DIGITALIZATION – FRIENDS OR FOES?**

Liudmila A. Borbotko (a)*, Ekaterina M. Vishnevskaya (b)

*Corresponding author

(a) Moscow City University, Moscow, Russian Federation, ludmilaborbotko@gmail.com,

(b) Moscow City University, Moscow, Russian Federation, kate.vishnevsk@yandex.ru

Abstract

The article regards communication mechanisms of theatre as a social institution and pillar of culture targeted at preserving current moral values as well as forming new cognitive and moral ones meeting the challenges of today's meaning the digitalization of art in particular. The analysis of the communication space of theatrical discourse characterized by conventionality and regularity reveals its principle constituents that ensure the addressing vector goes from the playwright to the audience through the intermediary of the director and the company. The audience is a mandatory element of the system and their reactions are regulated by the communication code signaling of the performance being successful or a failure. The audience is majorly silent due to the communication code restricting them in the way they manifest their emotions and impressions. Still their reactions are principal though non-verbal. The research findings prove relevant due to theatre answering the digital challenges through new theatrical forms and technologies like the emerging immersive, and implying actors-audience interaction, and VR-performances. The latter suggest the audience is moving and interacting with real objects against the synchronized video. New formats employed prompt theatre is developing within the promotes digital framework preserving its essence and still corresponding to the communication code and longstanding canons.

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1. Introduction

Since its origin theatrical communication has been reflecting real life incarnating it on the stage. Theatre performance is of conditional (quasi-real) nature. In other words, the performance presented to the audience is staged though being identical to real life. Stage realization of theatre never aims at distracting the spectators from reality but to portray it through the intermediary of artistic expressive means transmitting a variety of multimodal messages of different formats (Van Leeuwen, 2017). Theatre proves one of the most socially relevant art forms actively responding to all vicissitudes around: along with music it demonstrates the capacity to effect change, and thus to be an instrument of social ordering (DeNora, 2017). Its normativity and compliance with the long-settled canons ensure theatre remains one of the most ritualized forms of art and attribute it to the social and cultural background (like, answering all social demands and imbuing moral values through professional arts (Vikulova et al., 2018).

2. Problem Statement

Theatre being strictly ritualized and socially attributed triggers the changes it is exposed to as a performative art. As a consequence, the article regards the issue of whether the trends towards digitalization are able to eliminate the “ontological nature of the performance” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 7), that fails to be autonomous from either the cast or the audience to emerge through their immediate interaction in real time.

To start with, the nature of theatre implies the audience is mandatory. A performance stands for a communication event shown in the theatre room which is not only a container but rather a place where “a discourse space functions as a physical one due to its topos and the point the speaker is located” (Plotnikova, 2018, p. 33). Communication within the set framework of theatre is of systemic nature as it implies certain purposefulness and strategies realized by the participants (Zheltukhina et al., 2018). Thus, every spectator at the performance becomes a constituent to the space, the latter being discursive and communication simultaneously.

Theatrical communication realized within such space features viewers’ specific behavioral pattern regulated by the communication code – literally “a complex system of principles determining the verbal behavior of both communicators in a communication act” (Kluev, 2002, p. 112). Communication code implies a communication act is realized within the theatre space characterized by communicators’ special verbal conduct meaning a set of conventional and unconventional verbal actions of an individual or a group of people – literally, of the aspects of homo lingualis (“human within language”) (Zheltukhina et al., 2016). Such actions are often attributed to memory being not only a physical property, but also a socio-cultural phenomenon (Tivyaeva, 2017).

The latter claims one of the specific features of theatrical communication is its regularity. Kluev (2002, p. 28) emphasizes the majority of communication acts being regulated which is convenient for the communicators. Theatrical discourse is no exception here.

Its regularity determines the participants to a communication act. In other words, it is the communication code that draws the addressing vector from the playwright to the audience through the director and the company. Though the audience will definitely express their attitudes, there is certain

verbal unidirectionality: the audience consciously assumes a silent role; while the company is responsible for the communication being realized (Zheltukhina, Vikulova et al., 2017; Vikulova & Borbotko, 2017).

Moreover, it is due to a range of conditions stipulated by J. Ostin (1986) that determine how successful the communicators are whilst interacting. The scholar postulates the relevance of a generally accepted conventional procedure which ensures the deserved result and implies certain remarks uttered by specific persons in specific circumstances.

Besides, successful interaction is due to supportive factors such as the ability to understand and interpret the context, to apply background knowledge which is majorly socially determined (Bobyreva et al., 2017).

3. Research Questions

To accomplish the goal the following research questions were posed:

- 1) What are the norms and rules theatrical communication comply with to be successfully realized?
- 2) Which constituents of theatre communication space are mandatory and what are the mechanisms of their interaction?
- 3) How has the role of audience changed against the digitalization of the modern society?

4. Purpose of the Study

The main research purpose was to define and analyze communication mechanisms realized within the framework of theatrical discourse as a system as well as their correspondence with the demands of the modern digital era.

5. Research Methods

The research implies the use of the following methods all of them being creative and art-based (Freeman, 2018): deductive and inductive logic analysis of theatrical discourse constituents and production directed at defining the impact on the addressee within the framework of theatre communication space (audience being the target group), descriptive method (generalization, interpretation, and classification). The latter allows to approach both the new and the seemingly explored issues from unexpected angles discovering and employing new techniques (Suleimanova & Petrova, 2020).

6. Findings

The traditional theatre space is majorly divided into the auditorium and stage for the actors to play in front of the audience. However, the theatre stage in the usual sense has not always served as a place where plays were dramatized. XVII–XIX centuries saw theatre calling for a special area, a “theatre place” like spring platforms, where the scenes were performed.

Modern theatre is growing more and more subject to innovations of various types that distance it from the image of traditional theatre. Today sees the performance leaving the customary framework of stage: technology is no longer just one of the elements of the production but gives the performance a completely new spatial-temporal form. Another outcome of digitalization of theatre and its digital mediation is the change in the understanding of the mechanisms and principles according to which the performance “works” (Van Nort, 2020).

Besides, if traditional theatre claims the actor's play to be the principal means of expression, then it is with the introduction of technology that human is “obscured” by screens, projections, and special effects. The latter contribute to the enchantment as a typical feature of theatre in its essence and certain suspension of the rational (McEvoy, 2021) being closely intertwined with the reality.

What is left unaltered is the mission of theatre that “thrashes one’s feelings” as Lehmann (2006) aptly puts it. While affecting the audience, theatre tends to realize a number of functions, in particular, entertaining, axiological, regulating, conventional, cognitive, creative, social and cultural, educational, pedagogical, developmental, esthetic, etc. The theatre proves special concerning the ways the abovementioned functions are realized namely through the intermediary of the artistic means system. It is the realization of social and educative functions of theatre that contributes to fundamentally changing the addressee’s views. Consequently, one of the key tasks of the communicative space of the modern theatre is “developing the general communicative culture of people against the new conditions of the modern educational environment within the expanding media space” (Vikulova, 2018, p. 43). The latter is a transmitter of media culture that realizes a great impact on the recipient through a three-dimensional matrix that combines three “worlds” – real facts, information and symbols (Zheltukhina, Klushina et al., 2017).

In its turn, the entertaining function of theatre being one of the specific features of theatrical discourse is at the same time “one of the key values of mass culture” (Karasik, 2013, p. 34). At the same time, the categorical feature of being entertaining is due to the increase in the gaming component in various social practices. As Karasik (2013) sees it, “the ultimate goal of mass culture is its being targeted at entertainment, and enjoyment here and now” (p. 42). The verbal image of mass culture features systematic bathos and platitude, even vulgarity.

Theatrical discourse being double coded is surely directed at attracting a larger number of theatre-goers – both connoisseurs and general public. Additionally, theatre apparently belongs to mass culture being one of segments of leisure industry.

Mass culture has been gaining momentum since the XX century, which is obviously attributed to technical means emerging to replicate any work of art, regardless of their status, aesthetic value or time of creation (Shapinskaya, 2015, para. 2). Nevertheless, replication of theatrical performances is questionable since “performances are not for a moment material artifacts that can either be fixed or reproduced, they are ephemeral and exist only in the moment” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 137). As a consequence, the performance cannot be saved to be later replicated in the future, because otherwise the performance ceases to be itself.

Contradicting E. Fischer-Lichte’s claim, Benjamin (1988) emphasizes the difference between reproduction as a typical feature of art and technical reproduction, characteristic of mass culture, since the

work of art “has always been reproducible. What is made by man is amenable to human reproduction. There have always been copies: apprentices did it to master their skills, while masters opted for replicas to make their works widely acclaimed” (pp. 152-167). Therefore, the reproducibility of art is a product and logical consequence of mass culture being the culture of industrial society.

Positively, digital technologies and replication as the consequence contribute to promoting theatre as an art form as even those viewers who cannot actually visit the performance, get an opportunity to admire it online.

Nevertheless, the triumph of technical innovation hides “the latent conflict between the moment of life and the seemingly flat surface of virtual electronic time” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 260). Every play staged is an immediate event that cannot be reproduced in comparison with an artifact. Such moment of performing is always live no matter which approach to performance is chosen (postdramatic or traditional). It encourages the company’s willingness and aspirations for experientialism and responsiveness (Crossley, 2018). It claims for the live presence of the audience as the performance acquires its final form due to the joint efforts of the theatre company and the latter.

Hence, even theatre is exposed to various technological changes, it is necessary to take into account that mechanical reproduction sees art dispersing, turning into many copies, which means the loss of authenticity as a measure of value or even as a significant concept in art (Shapinskaya, 2015, para. 5).

Let us now consider active application of reproduction technologies which allow modern directors to open up a huge scope for action maintaining at the same time the convenience and comfort of work routine.

Maksim Didenko and Sergey Aleksandrovsky, theatre directors who can rightly be considered innovators, claim the relevance of technological achievements applied to theatre. Aleksandrovsky employs digital technologies to reject the existing established theatrical conventions and to affect the human brain directly. Brecht-Meyerhold-Yampolsky law prompts the director to deduce the following formula: Performance is never an outer action, but an inner process, the result of the viewer’s cognitive activity (Orlova, 2018). In this case, technology proves a projection of human thought.

Nowadays sees new theatre genre emerging and shifting the previous boundaries. The latter allows the audience to admire the quintessence of various art forms - cinema, television, installations, video games.

Gamification of theatre results in a simultaneous rejection of actors performing on the stage, as well as of the stage itself. Instead the gameplay turns into “nomadic performativity” (Butucea, 2020).

Another change is the transition from the “watching spectator” to the “acting” one. The outcome is a VR-performance, which brings theatre and cinema together. Some scenes are to be viewed through VR glasses that bring the audience to various spaces shot in 360° panoramic format. At the same time, the audience enjoys the opportunity to choose the angle, focus and form of viewing. Aleksandrovsky sees the perspective of VR performances in realizing audience’s experience with no limitations to interactions even via video.

Participating in an immersive performance is no less memorable both for viewers and actors. The concept of immersivity implies the effect of full immersion, involving the viewer as a full participant of

the plot. Such performance tends to resemble a promenade, an adventure game, a quest or even a computer game.

So, what makes post-drama immersive performance differ from the usual theatre production? Does it reflect the digital revolution shaking theatre? Let us support the answer to the questions above with the description of the first immersive musical “Black Russian” based on the unfinished novel by Aleksander Pushkin “Dubrovsky” directed by Maksim Didenko.

The first difference is the role of the audience. The latter is no longer speechless viewers, left motionless due to the communication code regulating their behavior. Any minute may find the actors starting direct interaction with the audience. In its turn, silence is not merely a regulation, but a full-fledged action as participants to the communication act keep on interacting, even if wordlessly. Silence mirrors inner monologue and can be also regarded as a way of transmitting messages.

The immersive “Black Russian”, as well as VR-performances, provides the audience with the opportunity to choose and create the plot themselves: the beginning of the performance sees all viewers of the “Black Russian” divided into three groups following different routes suggested by the play characters. Each group is provided with a different mask – of owls, deer or foxes. It is up to the spectators themselves to choose the route, but having made the choice they cannot divert from it. Still, initially they have no idea what is in store for them on the route.

Masks that one cannot take off till the performance finishes is actually the symbol of mystery, enigma. Masks reveal the aspiration to remain incognito and simultaneously the way to depersonalize the audience: you are no longer you, but the protagonist.

The category of space is also undergoing changes losing its traditional structure. The ramp that usually functions as a permanent boundary between the auditorium and the stage is lost in immersive theatre. The latter even lacks the usual curtain which is literally distancing the audience from what is going on the stage. One of the features that characterizes the theatre of the present is that the space can become “a kind of an independent protagonist” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 181), while mystery serves as the instrument of its organization. Since immersive theatre features no auditorium in the traditional sense as well as there is also no the so-called “fourth wall” separating the actors from the audience.

Promenade theatre develops in four different locations simultaneously. The director of the “Black Russian” empowers the audience with the chance to choose this or that plot, move from one location to another and sometimes even to impact the ongoing action. Being inside the ancient Moscow mansion of the Spiridonovs, which made the home to Pushkin’s Troyekurov, the viewer travels around the mansion even calling on the barn and strolling into the forest.

Finally, the digital age has affected the text that used to be the most inviolable component of theatrical communication. Traditional repertory theatre can be easily defined as the theatre of the text, while in contemporary immersive “Black Russian” “language does not stand for the characters’ speeches, < ... > but as a kind of autonomous theatricality” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 30). Language forms are part of the expressive means, which are the transformation of media and information technologies. Maybe that is why there is little text in the “Black Russian”, as it is replaced by synesthetic implementations.

7. Conclusion

The findings obtained and summarized claim that theatre is intrinsically directed at attaining “the Pinocchio effect” as the company is prompted by the desire for a game to be transformed into real life, or conversely, for everyday life to be transformed into a “real little game” (McGonigal, 2003). Meanwhile, it was Pinocchio as C. Collodi’s book character who aspired to make a real little boy. Theatre is similarly multi-faceted: it is real (coming as a real-life show) in contrast with radio performances; at the same time the theatre of today’s is shaken by disputes concerning its relevance and genuineness. A set of digital changes theatre is being exposed to aim at destroying the barriers, regulations and the usual routine prescribed by the theatrical communication code provoking “in every viewer an affective experience of the diversity of the undone, of the unmanifested” (Denikin, 2021, p. 141). Nevertheless, theatre managed to preserve its enigmatic nature and to satisfy its real purpose defined as ensuring a magical impact is produced on the viewers, leaving them deeply impressed even against the looming digitalization and post-dramatic prospects.

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