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Theatrical Dialogue in the Digital Age: From Director's Theatre to the Theatre Onscreen

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to its inherent nature, theatre has been better able than other artforms to resist the challenges presented by information and digital culture, which are based on the principle of reproduction. Since a theatrical text is created anew each time, an audience can enter into a real-time dialogue with a concrete group of players recreating an authorial concept. This is true even when, as in director's theatre, a director's interpretation is performed by different acting companies. Today, however, the hubris of theatre critics and enthusiasts, who value unmediated dialogue as a pre-condition of theatrical pragmatics, has collided with the novel theatrical practice of live broadcasting, which was preceded by the standalone genres of radio and television plays. As a performance art, theatre possesses characteristics of a virtual object, where the information about such an object exists only in the memories of audiences or professional critics. In becoming digitised, theatre loses its former character – the uniqueness of presence in a concrete theatrical here-and-now that can never be repeated – and acquires a new mode of existence within a movie theatre represented in Russia by the Theatre HD project, which translates the theatrical educational mission into the digital age by involving new participants in creative dialogue.

KEYWORDS

dialogue, theatrical communication, performance, theatre, director's theatre, digital age, Theatre HD

Introduction

Contemporary theatrical practice is faced by two diametrically opposing trends: on the one hand, the emergence of small-scale theatrical forms (chamber performances, theatrical laboratories, immersive theatre) that strive to reduce the distance between director, actors and audience; on the other, the beaming of theatrical performances into cinema houses, where viewers potentially number in thousands and the traditional form of theatrical dialogue between the audience and the stage disappears. Here dialogue implies communication of a special type, involving a subject-to-subject relationship between the sender and the recipient. Historically, dialogue was understood in terms of communication between two – and, later, three – actors in Ancient Greek theatre. Aristotle's theory of *catharsis* expanded the notion of dialogue as a reciprocal emotional connection between the audience and the dramatic action. This connection gave rise to theatre's specific sociocultural mission: to be a podium, a socialising medium, etc. Since classical antiquity, which gave birth to the professional theatre, the pragmatics of dramatic performance – and of theatre in general – was aimed at moulding civic feelings to produce an experience of unity (here Voltaire's phrase "the nation is gathered in the stalls" comes to mind). In contemporary culture, theatre acquired another dimension, being described according to marketing concepts as a product or a type of service, whose quality is evaluated by quantitative markers – in this case, an increasing audience size.

Thus, in a theatrical context, the concept of dialogue is used to describe the theatre's essential function. Here we can and should talk about multiple dialogic connections: for example, such dialogues exist within the text of the play, in the connections that are formed between the actor and the portrayed character, between the actor and the place of action, as well as in many other communicative functions that fuse to bind an audience to the stage. The stage itself forms the location in which multiple dialogic connections unfold to result in the creation of a performance. The performance, a constant and central feature of theatrical events, serves as a vehicle for semantic meanings both in the traditional stage/audience communicative schema, as well as in the contemporary digital approach that is based on the new communicative agents of camera and screen.

The system of audience expectations has always depended on a type of theatrical communication, which, in the decades prior to the digital age, was defined in terms of the concept of director's theatre. The concept of "director's theatre" referred to here, following Bradby and Williams (1988), is analogous with the phenomenon of "auteur cinema", in which a director takes on the role of the dominant creative figure and the ultimate "author" of the resulting piece.

Prior to the emergence of director's theatre as the dominant form, theatre was characterised by a two-element system. Director's theatre overcomes the text/actor dichotomy, replacing this duality by the playwright/actor/director triad. This development increased both the quantity and quality of dialogic connections emerging within the theatrical text, within the relationships between the actors and other actors, and in their relations to the characters – as well as to the stage itself,

which, since Antoine's Théâtre Libre, has become a character in its own right. Thus, despite the changing components of theatrical communication, the existence of a dialogue between the audience and the performance (stage) remains both necessary and sufficient to define theatre as an art form.

As a participant in a theatrical dialogue in pre-digital and digital age, the actor is always a performer, who articulates the text or performs an action. Simultaneously a person signified by the text (who has to methodically construct the character based on the reading of the text) – and a person that signifies the text anew within each interpretation. According to Patrice Pavis (1987/1991), mimetic action creates the impression that it is the actor who creates a word or an action; in reality, these are dictated by the text, the narrative, the acting style or the improvisation. The actor plays with the spoken word, placing it according to the prescribed meaning of a mise-en-scene, addressing the audience through dialogue, but without the right to answer. Here, it should be noted that the experimental approaches of contemporary interactive theatre do offer the audience the right to answer: this right is provided by the new conventions that have emerged in such practices as "promenade performance" or "quest performance", in which the traditional distinction between an actor on the stage and the audience in the theatre auditorium ceases to function. However, these kinds of interactive dialogical approaches are for now not possible in the new digitised forms.

Therefore, when applied to the theatre, digital technology "works" with the other participants of the dialogue – the literary or musical (as in opera or ballet) text, the skills of the actors, the audio-visual framing of the performance – but not with the audience. Instead, the audience enters into a new kind of pragmatic relationship with the video director.

Here we are faced with a question: what type of theatre (traditional, psychological, stylised, experimental, interactive) best maintains its integrity when filmed and digitised? The analysis of the Theatre HD platform shows that the earliest participants in this experiment all belonged to opera and ballet – that is, the most stylised theatrical genres. The Metropolitan Opera in New York, which was the first major venue to adapt its performances for cinema houses, successfully continues this practice to this day.

Since every new artistic phenomenon is based on human abilities, without which artistic dialogue is impossible, it is important to try to evaluate the preconditions for the successful translation of theatrical performances into video broadcasts.

Theatre and Technologies of Reproduction: Resistance and Acceptance

Throughout its millennia-long history, theatre as a social institution and an art form – along with all types of associated communication framed by stage and audience – has been in constant flux. However, one thing has remained constant: the presence of the main participants in dialogue consisting of the performance and the audience. While the semantic concepts of performance, the acting techniques and the theatre's mission undergone constant change, theatrical pragmatics has remained almost constant: the theatre has preserved its position as a socially and culturally relevant form of communication thanks to the *immediacy* of theatrical interaction.

The active role of the audience remains a necessary precondition for meaningful theatrical communication. According to the semiotician Yury Lotman, theatre is the only form that demands the existence of the physically and temporally present addressee, changing the text in response to perceptions of audience signals, e.g. silence and vocal signs of approval or disapproval (see: Lotman, 1998, p. 589). Unlike other art forms, which only *presume* an addressee (viewer, listener, etc.), theatrical performance is an open dialogue unfolding in real time, in a concrete place, in front of the audience.

Obviously, in translating theatrical performance on screen, the theatre's main component – immediacy of interaction in a situational context – is irrevocably lost. Screened theatre ceases to be a performance art in the critical sense that no audience is present during the actual creation of the performance.

What, then, is left of the theatre if the performative quality of its art is lost? Can the history of theatre help us to rediscover phenomena and trends that have predetermined its relationships with the various technologies of reproduction – auditory in radio theatre and visual in cinema, which transferred the three-dimensional theatrical space into the two-dimensional frame of the screen or one-dimensional auditory space of radio?

The development of technologies capable of documenting and reproducing spatial and temporal art of the theatre coincides with the birth of director's theatre, which radically changed the elements of theatrical communication increasing the complexity of interaction.

The sociocultural situation of the late 19th century from which director's theatre emerged had been shaped by the age of industrial revolution that created a new type of culture: a realist culture striving to find causal connections between the social circumstances and inner lives of characters on the basis of the development of character. In the pre-director's theatre age, literature in general – and the author-playwright in particular – dominated the theatrical synthesis (the sole exception was the brief emergence of commedia dell'arte that excluded dramatic narrative as a literary genre). Director's theatre, conversely, presupposes at least two authors. Exploring the nature of theatre, the blogger Pavel Rudnev notes that pre-director's theatre is an author's theatre. The theatre takes a play, previously written, and tries to bring it to life as effectively as possible, filling it with the actors' emotions. Here, the actors seem to be trying to recreate the playwright's idea, the theatrical model that he had in mind when writing the play, by carefully considering the stage directions (Rudnev, 2014). It should be noted that such declamatory theatre comprises an excellent pre-processed product for radio performances. Pre-director's theatre viewed the original dramaturgical literary or music text as a representation of a universe, since this theatre existed within the confines of logocentric culture. However, the entire history of director's theatre (from Duke von Meiningen's theatre till today) was in many respects a fight against the logocentrism of creative culture (Nemchenko, 2008, p. 83), one that resulted in inevitable conflicts between the playwright and the director. Director's theatre problematised the relationship to the literary text offering the director opportunity to become something more than just an

interpreter of the dramatic text: a reader, a narrator, a literary critic and an architect of theatrical space.

For Konstantin Stanislavsky, when the stage ceased to be a podium for re-enaction to become a living world (Rudnitsky, 1981, p. 42), the key artistic component was authenticity (physical, historical or psychological). In this context, written words became transformed into the organic psychological and physical expression of an actor/character. Conversely, for Vsevolod Meyerhod, authenticity – as well as the text itself – were excluded from aesthetic principles. Meyerhold's concept of stylised theatre offered a new convention of communication with the audience. In place of forms in which an actor played a preacher and the stage formed a kind of a pulpit, he turned to theatrical forms such as the medieval street theatre, the travelling show, and the circus. The resultant critique of contemporary theatre – aimed especially at the psychological theatre – addressed all the main elements of theatrical synthesis: playwriting, acting and scenography. According to Meyerhold's stylised approach, the power of the theatre's primaeval elements consists in the power of the masque, gesture, movement and intrigue (Meyerhold, 1968, p. 213).

In replacing psychological theatre with stylised acting methods, Meyerhold carried out a reduction of the theatrical language, which was typical for the avant-garde artistic practices in general. Meyerhold's aesthetic revolution coincided with the avant-garde upheaval in art, when the development of new artistic languages went hand in hand with changes in artistic pragmatics: now art was supposed to take the audience's perception into serious consideration by consciously constructing it. Meyerhold considered that stylised theatre produces a type of performance in which the audience, comprising a fourth creative element in stylised theatre (after playwright, actors and director), actively uses its collective imagination to creatively fill in the hints presented on the stage (Meyerhold, 1968, p. 212).

Similar ideas can be found in the manifestos of Antonin Artaud, who proclaimed that, in adding a different language to the language of words, he was trying to recreate its ancient magical power (see: Artaud, 1938/1993, p. 121).

Some of those who oppose the translation of theatre onscreen interpret this process as a destruction of the communicative field uniting the stage with the audience, which was established in director's theatre, seeing it as a return towards the stage that preceded director's theatre, the obligatory "fourth wall" now represented in the form of a screen. It was director's theatre that proclaimed the radical shift in the spectator's position within theatrical communication. The elimination of stage lights, which had served as a kind of wall between the audience and the stage, made it possible to draw the spectator into the action as an additional medium of expression. By becoming involved in the dramatic action themselves, the audience was transformed into an indispensable participant, whose absence would make a performance impossible. Antonin Artaud describes the uniqueness of each concrete performance as one of the characteristics of theatrical communication, which strives to become a meaningful one-act event subject to all demands and sharing all circumstances, in which chance plays an important role (Artaud, 1938/1993, p. 189).

This characteristic of every single performance is also described by Meyerhold through the concept of the variability of a theatrical text, in which performance can be interpreted as a specific invariant realised through a number of other variants (see: Lotman, 1998, p. 589).

Alongside the co-creation enacted by the actors and the spectators, we can discuss the relationships emerging *within* the audience. In this case, the recipient of theatrical communication is not represented by an isolated individual spectator, but rather by the audience as an organic whole. According to Anne Ubersfeld, the spectator is never alone: while watching the performance, his gaze also touches upon other spectators, whose gazes, in turn, touch upon him. Thus, as a psychodrama and a type of social interaction, theatre holds both of these paradoxical threads in its hands (Ubersfeld, 1992, p. 196). Exploring theatrical communication, Lotman drew particular attention to the specific "theatrical vision", which focuses on the "as if" existing stage objects and excludes "as if" non-existing ones (a sound technician sitting across, the ropes holding the stage sets, the neighbouring spectators) (see: Lotman, 1998, p. 589). It is exactly these non-existent stage objects that would become the elements of theatrical synthesis when translating performance onscreen.

How the Theatre Supported Screen Art

The development of screen-based artforms was partially supported by the theatre. Thus, performances produced according to biomechanical principles were based not on the spectator's psychological involvement, but rather relied on the pragmatics of stage acting preferring it to the pragmatics of emotional immersion. In these performances constructed as a fixed system of *mise-en-scènes*, close shots and editing, we may establish a connection between Meyerhold's theatre and the new cinematic artform.

Movement, which was one of the main discoveries of cinema, dominated Meyerhold's theatrical performances. By referring to movement, the director developed artistic techniques that no longer required the actors to produce emotions to "inject" into the audience. Unlike psychological theatre, the logic of narrative movement did not represent a linear narrative; rather, it followed the temporal and rhythmical structure of separate episodes, as can be seen in Nikolay Gogol's *Revisor* (The Government Inspector), Alexsander Griboedov's *Gore ot uma* (Woe from Wit) and others. Referencing cinema, the director compared episodes with the wide shot, changing the scenes according to lighting and musical rhythms. In refusing to use figurative stage sets (the stage as a podium), he provided audiences with an opportunity to focus on the energy produced by actors' bodies.

One of Meyerhold's constructive techniques was to break the whole into its parts, a play into its episodes: for example, noting that Alexander Ostrovsky's five acts were divided into 33 episodes contraposed to each other, providing great advantages in terms of influencing audiences (Meyerhold, 1936/2016, p. 715).

Thus, the editing principle employed to organise the theatrical reality (space and time) was realised within the gamut of director's theatre. The theatrical experiments

themselves typically dealt not only with an interpretation of a literary text, but with a new understanding of the theatrical performance as a spectacle created on the basis of laws of technical production, a spectacle that could organise society in a certain way by shifting the consciousness of its audience. Editing as an expression of the discreet nature of events and of the fragmented nature of the world was understood as the operative structure of art. It is not by chance that the young theatrical innovators who would later move to cinema – Grigori Kozintsev, Leonid Trauberg, Sergey Eisenstein – were interested in music halls, variety performances and circus. What united these artistic practices was their rejection of a plot: the whole was constructed rhythmically rather than thematically. Eisenstein even noted that cinema comprises the current and next phase of the theatre (Eisenstein, 1997, p. 2).

According to Oksana Bulgakowa, editing in theatre was understood in two ways. One was to follow an approach developed by the constructivists, who applied the concept of construction to all artistic phenomena (depending on the specific area, differences existed only in the materials subjected to disassembling and assembling, as well as in the corresponding techniques utilised for the purpose) and interpreted such construction as a combination of ready-made parts of architecture, performative episodes or film editing. On the other hand, theatre borrowed the idea of editing from cinematic art, but only in one aspect – as a tool for creating multi-plot narrative structures with parallel lines of action. Viewed from this angle, editing in theatre does not differ substantially from editing in cinema (Bulgakowa, 1988, p. 99). Theatrical editing was almost always presented as a destruction of narrative dramaturgical continuum, as a division of a single storyline into different episodes. This resulted in the bouncing and syncopal rhythm of the performance, with breakages, segmentations and new assemblages, as well as in the possibility to transfer action from one plane to another, from the aesthetic reality to non-aesthetic one. The use of dynamic connections/ jumps between the planes and of unexpected transitions inside the performance is interpreted as an organising principle (Bulgakowa, 1988, p. 103).

Meyerhold's cut-and-edit theatre transformed the stage into a complicated mechanism that could be observed without an emotional response to what was going on: the emotions provoked were mostly those of astonishment and delight in the precision of the actors' movements and the director's inventiveness. Since Meyerhold was not interested in the traditional movements of the soul, atmosphere, stage breathing, half-tones used in psychological theatre, the director's stylised theatrical aesthetics became a nourishing medium for future onscreen translations. Interestingly, video recordings of rehearsals and fragments of performances by Stanislavsky and Meyerhold preserved in *Gosfilmofond* provoke very different impressions: the film medium has turned Anton Chekhov's characters played by great Maria Lilina, Olga Chekhova, Vasily Kachalov and Ivan Moskvin into the wonderful and expressive performers of the *text*; however, these recordings completely fail to communicate the revolutionary character of Stanislavsky's innovations. On the contrary, video recordings of Meyerhold's *The Government Inspector* showcase the biomechanical capabilities when we witness the pantomime of the Postmaster with letters spilling out of his clothes, the intricate movements of Khlestakov's hands taking the bribes or

the functional construction of nine doors corresponding to the number of scenes in the performance. The bribe episode was developed by Meyerhold in the technique of eccentric clownery. The action begins when all the nine stage set doors half-open simultaneously, the hands of the officials reaching through to offer wads of cash. Combined with the architecture of the stage set and the close shots of mise-en-scenes, the acting techniques employed by Igor Ilyinsky, Erast Garin and Vasily Zaychikov resemble popular eccentric comedies of the silent film era featuring Max Linder, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd.

While the greatness and the innovative character of Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) performances is beyond doubt, the only sources of information apart from photographs that we have about them are critical pieces written by the spectators and theatre historians. In this respect, video recording *of* the performance adds nothing to the stories *about* the performance: on the contrary, the stories become fuller and richer because they provide us with the differing viewpoints. MAT video archives present theatrical works as an ethnographic material lacking any grounding. It is possible that the very nature of MAT texts resisted video recording due to the lack of specific shooting techniques. Cinema shines when there is an external movement; the cameras of the early 20th century could not preserve and transmit the *internal* movements.

Conversely, Meyerhold's archives perfectly correspond with the descriptions of his performances, even preserving the capability of producing an emotional response. This is due to the fact that the various manipulations – grotesque, extravaganza and pantomime – are all techniques that transmit *movement*, making them more accessible to cinema. Another reason why Meyerhold's fragments were successfully translated onto film (it is a great regret that so few of these pieces have been preserved) is that the director followed the logic of musical development subjecting lighting and imagery to this principle. Rigorous use of time and space required an economy of movements, stark precision, mathematically calculated concordance between the actors, a merging with the performance's collective and choral principle: these are the achievements that allowed a theatrical text to be translated onscreen.

This principle also applies to the Brechtian performances, in which the theatrical text carries an intellectual rather than psychological load. The archive of Brechtian performances (cinematic fragments from the "Berlin Ensemble" repertoire, Robert Sturua's production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* at the Tbilisi Shota Rustaveli Theatre, recordings of Yury Lyubimov's productions) prove that the more rational the organisation of the performance and the more open its structure, the better suited it is to be transferred from the theatrical space into other media.

The development of director's theatre with its anti-Aristotelian stance resulted in the accentuation of separate elements of theatrical synthesis and the accentuation of visual, musical and plastic components of the performance. This practice of differentiating and re-integrating different elements of theatrical performance produced a new theory of theatre, described by the concept of "postdramatic theatre" developed by Hans-Thies Lehmann in application to theatrical developments after the 1960s (Lehmann, 1999/2013, p. 76). According to Pavel Rudnev, Lehmann

logically and terminologically draws upon the theatrical practices of Brecht and Mueller, Artaud, Kantor and Grotowski, presenting post-drama not as a sudden fad but as a logically inevitable development of Bertolt Brecht's anti-Aristotelian stance that had emerged as a result of the rejection of the duplication of reality in psychological theatre (Rudnev, 2013).

Thus, postdramatic theatre ceases to be text-centric, treats mimesis with suspicion and, in this respect, inherits the traditions of stylised theatre. Lehmann also characterises the general scheme of the movement towards post-drama in terms of a movement from the theatre-story to the theatre-drama (Lehmann, 1999/2013, p. 76). In the theatrical synthesis, the idea of an actor as a central character is also to be treated with suspicion. An actor, according to Lehmann, is no longer merely an actor, but rather a "performer", who offers his presence on stage for contemplation. Thus, theatre audiences do not witness acting that mimics real-life role-relationships, but rather a real living human being performing a chain or a bundle of actions, which serves the same function for performance as tricks in the circus. In other words, here is we are dealing with an actual action, not a theatrical image of an action (Ibid.). Lehmann's theory legitimises the artistic practices of Grotowski, who, in striving to find sincerity in theatre, realised that it can be achieved by abolishing the source of the lie – that is, the role. Based on the experience of director's theatre, Lehmann shows that the postdramatic theatre changes the relationships between the theatre and the everyday life. Director's theatre, as a theatre of interpretation, has always relied on the relative border between the performance and the everyday life.

In this way, postdramatic theatre equalises both the everyday and the theatrical spaces. According to Gilles Deleuze, even the most mechanical, routinised, habitual, stereotypical repetition finds its place in a work of art. This is because a repetition is always dislocated relative to other repetitions if it manages to extract a difference out of them. For Deleuze, there is no other aesthetic problem than that of the insertion of art into everyday life. The more our daily life appears standardised, stereotyped and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the more art must be injected into it in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition (see: Deleuze, 1969/1998, p. 293). It is worth noting that theatre has traditionally tended to be seen as in opposition to the everyday life: both in its spatial organisation, in the regulation of the audience's behaviour, and of course in the spectacle itself. Cinema, that emerged as a democratic art and that interests us a technology of translation of the theatrical text onscreen, also offered a set of rules to regulate communication, but not practices of the everyday (food in the cinema hall, regular clothing, etc.).

The Theatrical Text: Means of Preservation

The question concerning how to preserve the value of theatrical statements – including concrete performances – has been always complicated by the situational nature of the theatrical event – and, therefore, of theatrical communication itself. During the 20th century, theatre was presented with the possibility of documenting its events through filming and radio broadcasting. However, many theatrical

professionals treated filming techniques with a certain contempt. A symptomatic example of such attitude concerns the story of Alexander Shiryaev, a dancing teacher who also performed at the Mariinsky Theatre. Shiryaev, who understood the possibilities of filming ballet dancing, asked the Direction of the Imperial Theatres for the permission to film standalone dances and entire performances. However, his request was categorically rejected by the theatre management. As a result, Alexander Shiryaev became a pioneer of puppet animation: his desire to film dance was stronger than any prohibition.

While the theatre was sceptical in its treatment of new cinematic possibilities, this latter new art form, conversely, interpreted theatre as an event to be screened, as a readily available "raw material" of film. Here, dancing was especially attractive. Cinema's uniqueness among other art forms lay in its possibility to reproduce and document, to preserve time through the movements of the camera. As an art of movement, dance corresponded directly with cinema's core characteristic. We know that the Lumière brothers were enchanted by the dancing of Loie Fuller, as testified by their *Danse serpentine* [Serpentine Dance]. According to Alla Kovgan, director, video artist, curator and founder of Russian *Kinotanets* [Cinema Dance] dance festival, cinema was "born to dance". Kovgan thus considers all great cinema directors to be choreographers in some way (Vasenina, 2016).

The dialogue between theatre and cinema depended on the technical capabilities of the latter. While silent cinema experimented with video dances, sound cinema explored and developed its capabilities through music-based theatrical genres, such as musicals. Kovgan explores the pre-WWII American musical films based on their two central figures: Fred Astaire and choreographer Busby Berkeley. For the former, the screen provided only technical means to an end, while the latter treated it as an expressive medium in its own right. Thus, according to Ekaterina Vasenina, when playing roles in his own movies, Astaire stipulated that the shots should be life-sized and with minimal number of cuts – as a result, Astaire's routines were often single-shot. Although Astaire was not particularly interested in cinema language, he had a clear understanding that he was working in film, not on the theatrical stage. Vasenina remarks that Astaire had an absolutely remarkable feeling of space and borders of the frame. Understanding that time has a different meaning in cinema compared to the stage, his routines were never overlong (Vasenina, 2016).

In this respect, the American director-choreographer Busby Berkley was the complete opposite of Astaire. According Vasenina, his first love was the cinema: his routines were only possible on-screen. Showing no interest in the uniqueness or virtuosity of individual dancers, he selected dancers of the same height and similar appearance, insisting on them having the same facial expression. With as many as a hundred girls on set at once, he made them practice ad nauseam, arranging them in geometrical shapes and then replacing the shapes with graphical lines (Ibid.). This use of dance would facilitate the further development of cinematic language. Not by chance, avant-garde cinema explored the other art forms, such as abstractionism in painting and drawing or cubism (*Ballet mécanique* [Mechanical Ballet] by Fernand

Leger, *Diagonal-Symphonie* by Viking Eggeling, *Rhythmus 21* by Hans Richter, *Study Nr. 6* and *Optical Poem* by Oscar Fishinger).

Since a theatrical text is created anew every time, its documentation is always problematic: what *can* be reproduced in theatre? Of course, it is a verbal dimension expressed in word/sound.

Radio Theatre

It has already been mentioned previously that the development of the theatrical language within director's theatre coincided with the industrial – and, later, technological – revolution. Although, the new technologies for communication and information transmission were originally used solely for utilitarian purposes, very soon the creative and expressive capabilities of radio began to be explored. Quite naturally, artistic radio broadcasts turned to the performance arts – and, therefore, to the theatre. Radio theatre is the result of the first proper "meeting" of a theatrical play and media. Real-time broadcasting of performances and the rapidly emerging new genre of radio drama, functioned, on the one hand, as a redacted version of live theatre; on the other, as a means of preserving and archiving. In radio plays, theatre returned to its pre-director's past, with the actors performing in service to literature. However, according to Pavis, when electroacoustic explorations are combined with the strict rules of theatrical drama, the result is a highly powerful and original work, proving that radio drama is already an established genre with a bright future ahead of it (Pavis, 1987/1991). The pragmatics of radio theatre is found in its educational mission. It is not by chance that the first Soviet radio dramas dealt with historical characters or broadcasted ideological proclamations. For example, the first radio drama in Russia (1925) *Vecher u Marii Bolkonskoy* [Evening at Maria Bolkonskaya's] was dedicated to the 100-year anniversary of the Decembrist uprising, while the years of the first five-year plans saw the performances of *Torf* [Peat] by Arseny Tarkovsky, which explained to the audience why it was important to mine peat and protect the forests. When staging Tarkovsky's poem, director Osip Abdulov historically grounded peat mining by using the text of the decree issued by Peter the Great, who had first launched peat harvesting in Russia. During their heyday, radio plays attracted far larger audiences than traditional live theatre performances. The democratisation of the audience presupposed a reliance on famous actors, especially on who possessed recognisable and unique voices. The perceiving subject found him/herself in a situation of behavioural freedom: freedom of movement, freedom to fill in a theatrical image carried by voice and sound. Thus, for years the voice of Nikolay Litvinov became the popular voice of Soviet storytelling.

The 1960s were a decade that saw many famous directors working on radio – for example, Anatoly Efros who produced plays featuring Vladimir Vysotsky: first *Kamennyi Gost'* [The Stone Guest] and later *Martin Eden.* The 1980s began with the *Portrait of Dorian Grey*, a radio play produced by Anatoly Vasiliev, where the main voices belonged to Vsevolod Meyerhold's actress Maria Babanova, and Innokenty Smoktunovsky. The practice of radio drama reproduced specific ways of working with the text, where the lack of immediate connection with the audience and

elimination of the physical space of the auditorium was compensated by the freedom of association and the immersion in the semantics of voice which carried not only the traces of biological body (anatomical, vegetative, hormonal), but also, in the view of Oksana Bulgakowa, allowed a "localisation" of a socio-historical body, providing information on social background, upbringing and class reflected in orthoepy and prosody (Bulgakowa, 2015, p. 3). According to Roland Barthes, the sensation brought by the sound of a familiar voice in radio play is akin to the pleasure of finding the flesh of the voice that had died in the text (Barthes, 1989, p. 283).

Television Theatre
Comprising yet another channel for documenting/archiving theatre, television, like radio, developed from the technology for news transmission towards an exploration of artistic capabilities. Here the theatrical performance again becomes a ready-made product transferred onscreen as a recording, a process later to be followed by the emergence of a new theatrical genre: the television play. Becoming a part of a television program, theatre acquired a new communicative form, a form of "pre-Lumière cinema" – that is, a form of individual viewing.

By being transferred onscreen, theatre and all its elements – the actors, the playwright, and the director – address the viewer directly in his or her everyday space. The television play broke everyday monotony, allowing the viewer to enter a festive space. However, when performances are shown in a non-specialised space, they must attract the viewers and hold their attention by changing their original temporal and rhythmical characteristics.

The educational mission of television drama is obvious both in the scope of its audience, and in the way it introduced the viewers to the famous and, more importantly, less famous texts, directors' concepts and acting achievements. The lack of immediate dialogue with the audience is replaced by an opportunity to see in detail the staging, the actors, the reaction of live audience, if the play is recorded. This opportunity emerged thanks to the use of close-up shots discovered by the film. However, according to Pavis, since close-ups are designed for a small screen, a theatrical director working with the pre-existing theatre or television play can either choose to reduce the most prominent theatrical features using cinema effects to make acting and staging appear more natural, or, conversely, to accentuate these features (Pavis, 1987/1991). On the one hand, the audience of television drama is freed from the disciplinary practices of theatre auditorium – on the other, it is "non-free" compared to the spectator in the theatre, because its experience is conditioned by the pre-arranged semantic accents added by the producer and the operator through camera movements and editing. It is in the tele-theatre, where the most important methods of on-screen existence of a theatrical text, such as framing, close-ups and master shots, were worked through.

Theatre HD
The Theatre HD project is a logical extension of the cultural transformations of the 20th and 21st centuries, when theatre has entered the space of old (analogue) and new (digital) media, encountering and being transformed by the cinematic

experience, participating in the development of a new artistic language, and later taking part in radio and television experiments. At least two forms of theatre can be seen in practices of tele-theatre: live streaming (direct broadcast of a theatrical performance) and an innovative form (creation of a new genre), where the tele-performance becomes a synthesis of theatre and technical mass media. Thus, Theatre HD is based first of all on the broadcasting tradition. The name given to this means of organising a theatrical event in Anglo-American discourse is "event cinema", pointing not so much towards the characteristics of a theatre event translated onto screen, but rather in terms of its nature as a cinema event, when all the elements are changed: from public to content (the peculiarities of the "event cinema" are well documented in the materials of The Live Cinema Conference at King's College London on 27 May 2016 (Atkinson & Kennedy, 2016b). Systematic analysis of live theatre broadcast as an emergent hybrid form is still in development. Among the few academic publications on the topic, Martin Barker's (Barker, 2013) and Lauren Hitchman's (Hitchman, 2018) studies can be mentioned. For instance, Hitchman engages the discourse of remediation and the ideological contexts of "liveness" (following Benjamin and Frederic Jameson), noting that

> the live theatre broadcast can be seen as an attempt to transpose the stage onto the screen. … This transposition is not as neutral as might first be assumed, and is, instead, a form of adaptation. In the process of adaptation, the live theatre broadcast becomes a new medium, one with its own ontology and, resultantly, its own unique mode of audience perception (Hitchman, 2018, p. 183).

The Theatre HD project translates performances of the top world theatres to the large screens of cinema houses across the globe (here we are talking about the performances of The Metropolitan Opera, UK's National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, The Globe, La Comédie-Française, Bolshoy Theatre, etc. Digital technologies not only provide a communication bridge between the theatrical text and the audience, which was already possible in the tele-theatre, but also an experience of the audience and performance as co-existing in a single space. This way, "event cinema" becomes interesting not only as an object of market studies (as a growing market segment), but also in terms of its aesthetic qualities and impacts on the audience experience (see: Atkinson & Kennedy, 2016b).

Naturally, this project has provoked sceptical reactions from conservative theatrical critics, who believe that theatre can only exist as an unmediated communication with the audience. The pronouncements of Western critics were essentially the same as those of their Russian counterparts: "The critics argued that you could never capture the heartbeat of a live production, that if you couldn't smell the Brylcreem to be showered in spittle sitting in the front row, then it wasn't the real thing" (Battersby, 2016). However, the project's success shows that the critics' fear of massification and mechanical reproduction of theatrical art turned into mass product proved to be unfounded, as expressed in the newspaper headlines, such as: "Live theatre on the big screen: The fear that streaming plays in cinemas would

cannibalise theatre sales has largely been disproven" (Ibid.). First and foremost, this project performs an educational mission by enlarging the theatrical audience. Matilda Battersby notices the democratic character of the project only regarding one theatre, the NT:

> In seven years, 6 million people have watched NT Live productions and its reach has grown to more than 2,000 cinemas in 55 different countries. It streams not just from its own theatre but from affiliate stages from the Wyndham and the Garrick, to the Old Vic and Manchester International Festival (Battersby, 2016).

The project overcomes the oppositions of centre/periphery and homeland/overseas, bringing the best global theatre performances everywhere. "The audience for a single live broadcast of a Shakespeare production by the RSC is about the same as the audience for an entire year at the Royal Shakespeare theatre in Stratford." That's according to the RSC's deputy artistic director Erica Whyman, who was speaking at the recent British Theatre in Hard Times conference. "The upside is so massive and the exponential reach so great that we can change who the audience is," said Whyman (Gardner, 2015).

The project has been operating in Russia since 2006, when the Metropolitan Opera first started streaming its performances. In 2009, the British Royal Theatre also began digitalising its performances; in 2012, the Russian company CoolConnections launched its broadcasts of world masterpieces, beginning with the performance of *Frankenstein* staged by Danny Boyle for the Royal National Theatre. During its 4-season run, the performance was watched by 58,000 spectators in 70 cinema houses across Russia, including in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Kaliningrad, Voronezh, Yekaterinburg, and Novosibirsk. Undoubtedly, the project's success was assured not only by the names of Danny Boyle and Jonny Lee Miller, but also by Benedict Cumberbatch.

In addition to its educational mission, Theatre HD performs another important service: since the broadcasts are streamed in real time (taking into account time zones), it provides awareness of global humanist solidarity. In this case, we can see the shift in theatrical communication: instead of the simple audience/stage dialogue, there is a more complex, mediated encounter with the performance, where the director, the playwright, the broadcast producer and audience are united through the screen. Just like director's theatre created a new author in addition to the playwright, Theatre HD creates a new communication between the theatrical director and broadcast producer.

Theatre HD project is a complex process of creating a new performance, since it is not possible to just set up a few cameras and expect a piece of theatre to work onscreen. "We have to give an experience to an audience that is better than in the theatre," says Tim van Someren, a camera director who has captured *As You Like It*, *Frankenstein* and *War Horse* for NT Live. "I do mean 'better', because in cinema you're guided. You won't get splattered by blood in *Macbeth,* but we will show you the best moments" (Battersby, 2016).

The effect of "being present" at a performance achieved in cinematic broadcasts is not just a technical gimmick; rather, it is a new form of communication that has to be analysed. How is this effect created – the effect in which the "fourth wall" destroyed by the avant-garde director's theatre is replaced by the screen?

Nelly Kogut, a researcher specialising in theatre in the digital age, proposes to describe the Theatre HD phenomenon through the concept of "medialised theatre" (Kogut, 2019).

Medialised theatre that utilises cinematic and screen tools operates not by using an event itself – that is, an object on screen – but rather with the characteristics of an image. The audience enjoys a feeling of "being present" at the performance because broadcasts utilise six or seven cameras positioned at various points throughout the auditorium: usually two or three cameras are positioned on rails at the centre and on both sides of the stalls allowing them to move about one and a half meter to the right or to the left while simultaneously zooming and making turns. At the centre of the stalls there is another camera on crane spanning the space inside the stage and above it, allowing to create expressive panorama shots. The other cameras are positioned throughout the stalls, and sometimes on the balconies; they are mostly used to create wide static shots (see: Kogut, 2019).

The Theatre HD project not only changes the form of theatrical communication by replacing the traditional dialogue with a simulated presence in virtual space, but also qualitatively solves the issue of preserving the theatrical text, which, at the time of great actors and playwrights remained only in literary memoirs of their contemporaries.

The theorists and practitioners of mediated theatre, such as radio and television theatre, accepted the drawbacks of the unmediated dialogue with the audience while centring their experiments on the improvement of technical possibilities of transmission. Brecht already wanted to make the listener not just the one who listens, not to isolate him but to engage him into a relationship (see: Brecht, 2014, p. 19). Walter Benjamin, who had experienced radio work, also meditated on the necessity and possibility to connect with the audience when introducing the concept of mediated communication as an immediacy of any spiritual communication, calling it magical (see: Benjamin, 2012, p. 10). This immediacy is virtual and depends on technical capabilities. Theatre HD's cardinal difference from television play is not so much the fact that it transfers theatrical texts from the private into the public sphere, but, rather, that it manages to overcome the impenetrability of the television screen that had destroyed the traditional theatrical dialogue. The technical capabilities of Theatre HD allow the audience to become actual witnesses of a theatrical event, since in broadcasts all mise-en-scenes are amplified: the cinema viewer experiences the performance as more perfect, because it does not depend any more on his or her place being at the gallery or in the stalls.

Theatre HD and television drama have one factor in common: the performances chosen for broadcasting tend to be the successful ones, staged by the famous directors and starring the top actors. By broadcasting the performances, the project's authors perform an operation of translating the works that do not belong to mass culture in

terms of their content into the space of mass culture, which relies on reproduction for its existence. Both television plays and Theatre HD share their education mission and attract wider audiences to the theatre.

Conclusion

The starting point of this research was the problem of theatre's existence in the digital age. Can the theatre remain a *theatre* without an immediate interaction between the audience and the stage?

- Theatre is an art without a permanent text; an art based on dialogic relationships between the stage and the audience. A dialogue is a communicative form grounded in subject-to-subject relationship. The conducted research brings us to the conclusion that the entire history of theatre, from antiquity to Theatre HD, is a history of increasing the complexity of the connections and the number of participants in a dialogue.
- The history of theatre was described as following the three stages: pre-director's, director's and postdramatic theatre.
- The participants in the pre-director's theatre included the playwright, the actors and the audience. This type of theatre was dominated by the dramaturgical principle (with the rare exception of commedia dell'arte).
- Director's theatre complicates communicative connections through the introduction of a new dialogue participant (the director), who, in turn, recreates the theatre's synthetic nature turning literature into a spectacle, a performance. Avant-garde theatre of the early 20th century activates a dialogue with the audience by destroying the "fourth wall". It was the director's avant-garde theatre that developed the techniques of action breaks, editing, defamiliarisation (see: Chubarov, 2018, p. 233), producing an illusion of "being present" in the digital incarnation of theatre.
- As predecessors of Theatre HD, radio theatre and television theatre are similar in their ability to penetrate the most private spaces. In terms of the development of theatrical language, radio plays and television plays relied on models that represented the shift from the pre-director's to director's theatre and from the pre-Lumière to the Lumière cinema.
- Television play is a direct predecessor of Theatre HD. Here we witness the emergence of a new communicative partner – that is, a television screen that destroys the dialogue between the stage and the audience.

Theatre HD is a project launched in 2006. Its goal is to livestream the best theatrical productions by renowned venues in cinema houses. The radical novelty of this project lies in the simultaneous unfolding of theatrical performance and cinema broadcasting, thus creating an experience of being present within the theatrical dialogue. The project's educational mission is obvious, as testified by the scope of its audience: a new audience is formed that is interested in the "sense of shared

experience, the value of being part of a shared community with shared tastes" (Atkinson & Kennedy, 2016b).

It also created a new technique for documenting the theatrical text. The viewer becomes a participant in a dialogical communication, in which the main roles are played by the cinema producer and the camera that transcends the limits of ordinary human vision.

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