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THE STAGE AS THE CHRONOTOPE OF MEMORY

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Abstract: According to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory, the chronotope represents the essential connection between time and space as artistic values in literature. Because the chronotope represents the place where time becomes space and space becomes time, the theatre, in general, and the stage, in particular, may be considered an artistic bipolar background for this bipolar confrontation. The memory of a theatrical act does not relate to a certain objective reality but to a subjective and fragmented one. In other words, it needs the spectator's memory as well as the characters' memories, just as any act of translation needs the translator's linguistic and cultural background. Staging a dramatic text may be considered as an inter-semiotic and inter-systemic negotiation between two discursive arts. As opposed to the memory of a museum, or of an archive, the stage becomes the place where the past turns into present. In the case of the theatre, the memory is a perfect architecture developed on three levels: the memory of a past event, the memory of an imagined past, and the memory of the audience. All these levels of memory combine perfectly on stage, and more than that, they perform in an artistic mixture as there could be seen in the plays belonging to The New European Drama represented by Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill. The study tries to analyse the relationship between the dramatic text, the theatrical show and the audience perspective, emphasising the function of memory.

The study is an attempt of proving the possibility of considering the stage as a chronotope that was generated by the affective memory in the case of emitting, performing and receiving a dramatic text. The purpose of the study is to define the theoretical relationships between the dramatic text and the onstage performance from the perspective of the discursive configurations that characterize them. Both are semiotic system of artistic representation, but their structure and functions differ. The study is meant only to develop the analysis of both semiotic systems as discursive forms of expression that, in the process of onstage performance, generate an inter-semiotic negotiation. It is not a linguistic analysis but an interdisciplinary one, between two arts – literature and theatre.

Before starting, it is important to define the term chronotope, because it represents the link between the dramatic text and the stage where the theatrical show is to be performed.

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Generally speaking, the chronotope means time and space altogether; the essential connection of the temporal and spatial relationships as used in literature. The literary connection functions as a concrete ensemble of the two concepts. When used in a chronotope, time is condensed and becomes artistically visible, while space is intensified and becomes part of time. Time is revealed by space and space could be measured and understood by time. Thus, time becomes space and the space becomes time. The chronotope could be considered as a literary category of a simultaneously artistic representation of content and form being in a continuously inter-relation with the remitter and the receiver.

In the case of aesthetics and literary theory, Kant defined time and space as indispensable forms of any kind of knowledge, starting with the perceptions and the elementary representations. Everything that is represented by the senses becomes a phenomenon and, thus, a process of knowledge (Kant 91-93). Mikhail Bakhtin used Kant's theory and furthermore he did not consider time and space as transcendental forms of knowledge but forms of reality revealed in the artistic process in the case of the narrative text (Bakhtin 295). Starting from this point, the analysis that will follow will be applied on a dramatic text and on its representation on stage, considering both as forms of reality generated by memory.

The dramatic text is a discursive form of artistic representation. As a discourse, the dramatic text is made of other individualized discourses that interact defining the dramatic reality. This reality is created by the verbal manifestation of all the discourses that are connected to one another. The hermeneutics of the verbal text is able to analyse the inter-relationships between the discourses at a linguistic and literary level. Besides the communicative intentions that any discourse may presuppose, the dramatic discourse exceeds the linguistic level of representation (Chafe 86). It becomes the object of the dramatic representation.¹ It presumes the intention of influencing and modifying the receiver (Mills 5). Those that take the dramatic text as a pretext and change it into a dramatic representation are the actors and the director. Their performance is intended to influence the audience. They link their artistic discourses to the audience discourse. Thus, the stage becomes the place where the past is turned into present because of the author, the characters and the audience. It is a place of convergence of all verbal and non-verbal semiotic forms of artistic performance and reception. The general meaning of the dramatic text is rendered in connection with other semiotic systems: music, mimicry, gestural language and proximity, all represented on stage. The inter-relation among all these semiotic codes of performance is possible because of their syncretism. The stage performance becomes possible and functions as a materialized form of the dramatic text. It is received by the audience as an artistic act generated by the superposition of the significant heterogeneous structures which perform simultaneously generating a tri-dimension perspective. The new dimension focuses on creating the illusion of reality. Any performed reality is based on memory. The stage is the place

¹ Each character uses a specific language in order to represent a certain and unique point of view regarding reality, defining his/ her discourse. The characters' discourses function as references for their acts and reactions. Being textually expressed, they create an inter-textual dramatic discourse which was depicted and made of other discourses.

where the memory of the author inter-acts with the memory of the director, of the actors and of the audience. Thus, the stage is revealed as an act of memory and not as an object of memory.

The Stage as the Chronotope of Memory

For the artistic performance on stage, memory is paradoxical. On one hand, as an artistic form, the memory of stage representation is fragmented, and, on the other hand, it tries to update the theatrical performance. Theatre, in general, is related to the past, to what happened before, at a particular moment in time, and, from this point of view, the stage performance could be seen as an attempt of unification between the past and present, a process based on memory.

The stage performance is an artistic act that belongs to the present but it actualizes the past. In its turn, it may be partially actualized by the audience by means of words and images. The audience needs them both in order to realize real performances of memory. The theatrical experience, from the audience perspective, represents a hypothesis of irreversibility. The present moment of stage representation also contains the inherent possibility of disappearing and, implicitly, the memory of the same act as a unique chance of preservation. That is why the memory of theatre is a subjective one, sometimes incorrect, as the whole memory of life, because the theatrical experience is, at least, an experience of life. The memory of theatre is a result of subjective and personal preservation but also an artistic re-creation. The stage may be considered a place of exposing the ruins of the past, of lacking the actual happening that any past event may have; but it is this lack that supposes the interference of the imagination of those who take part in the stage performing and in the stage receiving of the artistic theatrical act.

Generally speaking, theatre is an act of the present moment, but its material belongs to memory. It is a theatre of multiple memories which are organized in a perfect artistic architecture based on three levels. All the levels are representations of affective memory because all of them develop as artistic acts in the process of theatrical creation (Stanislavski 216). The dramatic text reflects the affective memory of the author, the stage performance needs the affective memory of the director, the actors and the artistic reception is based on the affective memory of the audience. What happened once must be re-lived again and again. One simple and insignificant event from real life may be turned into an artistic act by the interference of a creator. At each level mentioned before, there is a creator or even multiple creators: the author, the director, the actors, the people from the audience. Any act of creation is subjective (*ibidem* 254). By re-living the particular event that generated first the dramatic text, then the performance on stage and later the reception by the audience, the artistic act becomes reality itself. It is not performing the event but being the event, living it as it would happen for the first time. This artistic process takes place on stage, the place where the dramatic text meets the audience only because of the performance on stage due to the actors, the director, the sound engineer, the light effects director, and so on. All the creators involved in the theatrical performance need to translate the meaning of the source discourse (the dramatic text) into the language of their specific discourse (gestural, musical, based on mimicry, light or proximity). Their act is to perform a text, to establish a

relationship among the “pluralities of performances” generated by the dramatic text, connecting them in an artistic network. (Barthes 160) The entire process is a negotiation among different semiotic discourses in order to find a common language of artistic representation. This new language makes possible the inter-semiotic transposition from one discourse into another.

The theatrical transposition implies the dramatic discourses, the performing discourses and even the discourse of the audience reception. There are two phases of theatrical negotiation. The first one interacts at the level of spatial-temporal network, involving the dramatic text and the stage performance. The stage becomes the place where the chronotope evolves. The dramatic text supplies the stage performance with discursive fragments. These fragments are parts of the auctorial discourse. The transition from the auctorial discourse, which includes the characters’ individualized discourses, to a performing discourse is made possible by the transfer of the dramatic authority to the performing discourse of the actors. The structure of the theatrical representation is emphasised by the other non-verbal semiotic discourses: the actors’ performance, the music, the light, the sound effects, etc. The purpose of using other semiotic expressive systems is to multiply the reality that develops on stage.

The second phase of theatrical negotiation implies the audience’s perception. The negotiation becomes a fusion of two horizons, of the stage performance and of the audience reception. According to Paul Ricoeur’s theory, the reception of a literary text represents a crossing between two temporalities – one of tradition and one of the reception. (Ricoeur 31) Using Ricoeur’s theory, the second phase of the theatrical negotiation could be considered a crossing between the two temporalities that perform at the same time – the theatrical act and the theatrical reception. More than that, those temporalities also perform on stage. In other words, the stage performance and the audience reception happen at the same time, in the same place.

Combining the two phases of any theatrical negotiation, the theatrical performance represents the inter-relationship of all the artistic discourses implied, making the stage a real chronotope. The artistic discourses described before are, in fact, aesthetic forms of expressing the affective memory. Thus, the stage, the place where time and space combine each other, represents the chronotope as the image of the affective memory.

In-Yer-Face Theatre

During the nineties, a new theatrical trend developed. It was called New European Drama or New Writing. It was represented by authors such as the British Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill or the German Marius von Mayenburg. According to Antonin Artaud, who wrote the first manifest of “the theatre of cruelty”, as he called it, the theatre will never be able to return to itself, unless giving the spectator the utopian sense of life, that only a staged play could perform, but not from a delusive perspective, as it happened before, but from a real and personalized perspective, giving a certain meaning to reality (Artaud 74). The British critic Aleks Sierz considers that this particular theatrical movement is a very aggressive one, impossible to ignore or avoid, having the only purpose to shock the audience, to

shake the audience's mind till the message was understood. (Sierz 37-45) Being against the conservatory type of theatre, the authors wanted to put an end to all the theatrical conventions used before. They considered that it had come to a point of changing the old patterns, of introducing new themes, new structures, new means of performing, in the attempt of seducing, shocking and provoking the audience. Most of the dramatic texts focus on the plots about the hard human existence in the huge cities. They develop themes such as racism, madness, suicide, sexuality, drug addiction, any type of abuse. Most of the subjects presented on stage seem depicted from the newspaper columns, or seem one of the items heard every day on TV news. The intention of the contemporary playwrights is to take the shine off the so-called perfect society they live in and to make the audience see the hidden side of reality. The language used is vulgar and slangy. All the dramatic texts, when performed on stage, determine strong reactions, because they invade the personal space and time of the people watching.² No one seems to feel comfortable anymore. The audience cannot but take part in the show, turning into a new character. The stage is enlarging, overstretching its limits to the seats, provoking the reaction of people in the audience. Everyone is participating. Taking any example of a dramatic text developed into a stage performance proves that this new style of theatre is meant to break away from the naturalist theatre and to introduce and perform reality on stage. The same reality also includes the audience who is now considered a character to whom the other characters had to relate. It is not only the dramatic text that is taken into consideration, but performance itself is no longer acting, but being.

Taking into account one of these dramatic texts and the way it was transformed into a stage performance shocking the whole audience, the two phases of the theatrical negotiation could be identified. The text under discussion is "Blasted" by Sarah Kane.

Summarizing the play, one can notice that the plot is very simple, even trivial and prosaic. The action takes place in a luxurious hotel in Leeds. This is the only setting used during the performance on stage: a hotel room. Ian, a racist middle aged journalist, tries to seduce Cate, a twenty one, simple-minded woman. Their relationship shortly turns into a real violent scene when Ian rapes his girlfriend. The rape starts a real domestic war between the two characters. They are now fighting in a very brutal way. Finally, Ian kills Cate. His violent act is another starting point for the second part of the play, when the aggressor becomes the victim, suggesting that any act of violence must have repercussions influencing the whole universe. The opening of the play is made into a naturalistic type of world, but very soon it is changed into a nightmare. It is the moment when a Bosnian soldier, armed with a sniper's rifle, comes suddenly in the room. From now on, the performance breaks

² Nudity and the different types of aggression and abuse are the most common themes selected by contemporary writers. The victims are described as accomplices of the aggressors, who later become victims themselves. The image of man is now promoted instead of the image of the woman, which was preferred by the writers of the 80's; but it is not the man as in Ibsen, Pirandello or Chekhov. The typology of the masculine characters includes impotent fathers, abusive husbands, disorientated teenagers, emphasizing the crisis of masculinity.

into a series of disturbing short scenes. The action is increased, so is the violence and the succession of scenes. The soldier is the third character, apparently very different from the others; but, in fact, he is another copy of a common man. The same violence is displayed by all of them. The action is twisted. The violence is turned into brutality and horror, culminating with physical pain, torture and cannibalism. The luxurious hotel room is now a cell of hell. In this case, hell is not metaphysical but hyper-real. The soldier eats Ian's eyes, causing Ian's death, and then he kills himself. In the terms of brutality and violence, the play was considered a parallel between the war in Bosnia and the domestic war; in other words, between emotional and physical violence. Death is seen as a leitmotive with all its multiplied forms of fulfilment: suicide, murder, slaughter. The reality onstage is related to reality offstage in the following example.

Cate: It's not all right to kill yourself.

Ian: No, it's not.

Cate: God says it's a sin.

Ian: There is no God.

Cate: How do you know?

Ian: There is no God. There is no Santa Clause, not even fairy tales, nor...nothing... fuck.

Cate: There must be something.

Ian: Why?

Cate: Otherwise it doesn't make sense.

Ian: Don't be stupid. It doesn't make sense anyway. There is no reason why God should exist, only because it's better for us if he does (Kane 32).

The auctorial discourse is turned into the characters' discourses, then the audience is adjusting to the types of discourses that perform onstage. There is a theatrical negotiation between the author and the actors and then between the actors and the audience. The two phases of this type of negotiation collide this time. The people in the audience could become characters on stage at any moment. They could talk about suicide, death, God and Santa Clause just as Kane's characters. In this play, perfectly called "Blasted", Sarah Kane strives to represent onstage what most of the time is only implied offstage, or even relegated. What the audience considered to be theatrical proves to be reality. Offstage becomes onstage, the margins are moved to the center. All the other semiotic systems are used to perform and to show exactly the reality that is now everywhere on and off stage. The performance onstage was so impressive that it left the critics reeling, thus creating one of the biggest theatre scandals in London.

The study "The Stage as the Chronotope of Memory" linked two artistic perspective: literature and theatre. Both are semiotic system of artistic representation. They carry out a discursive form of expression, considering that the stage is the place where the dramatic text reveals its qualities and turns into a performance. As a performance it uses other semiotic systems in order to create the illusion of reality. But the stage may also be the place where the time of the past events meets the present of the performance and of the reception, with the only purpose of becoming reality. It is also the place where the memory of the event is

inserted into the affective memory of the director and then of the actors, later into the affective memory of the audience. In order to perform or to understand the artistic process the events must be inter-connected with the previous events. No one is innocent in this matter. The illusion of reality that comes from the dramatic text is turned into reality on stage. This new type of reality could be accessed by all the people involved. It is not imagined, it is performed and magnified. The stage makes possible the configuration of an inter-textual theatrical context, based on the chronotope as the mixture between time and space, based on the affective memory on those who generated the chronotope. Analyzing the syncretism of both artistic structures (the dramatic text and the onstage performance) the conclusion is that each one is meant to highlight the other in a continuous inter-systemic, inter-semiotic and inter-discursive dialogue.

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