

Contemporary Theatre in “Post” Perspective: Postdrama as the Antisemiotical (R)evolution?

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Abstract: One of the main goals of both contemporary theatre and theatre theory is to overcome the traditional semiotical perspective, strongly based on structuralism. Since the 80s and following this idea, theatre artists and theorists have been thinking theatre from a post-structuralist and even deconstructivist point of view. This perspective has introduced important streams in theatre theory, such as feminism, post-marxism and postmodernity, and has given place to the phenomenon known as “post-dramatic” theatre. Having this in mind, this essay deals with some of Julia Kristeva’s reflections about semiotics, post-structuralism and postmodernity to discuss if this so-called “post-drama” breaks with the traditional theory, or if it is merely another form of postmodern provocation.

Résumé: Un des objectifs principaux du théâtre contemporain et de la théorie du théâtre est de dépasser la perspective sémiotique traditionnelle qui s’appuie fortement sur le structuralisme. Depuis les années 80, artistes et théoriciens du théâtre repensent le théâtre d’un point de vue poststructuraliste et même déconstructionniste. Cet effort a introduit des courants importants dans la théorie du théâtre, tels que le féminisme, le post-marxisme et la postmodernité, et a fait place au phénomène appelé théâtre “post-dramatique.” Cet essai s’intéresse à quelques-unes des réflexions de Julia Kristeva sur la sémiotique, le post-structuralisme et la postmodernité, afin d’examiner si le théâtre post-dramatique rompt avec la tradition théorique ou s’il n’est qu’une autre forme de provocation postmoderne.

Keywords: Artaud – theatre of cruelty – Kristeva – abjection – Derrida – Brecht – Postdramatic Theatre – Hans Thies Lehmann – *mimesis*

The theoretical roots of something new: how is the interest in post-theatre born?

From Aristotle to Nietzsche, there has always been something in theatre that has strongly interested philosophers; and from Sophocles to Peter Brook or Robert Wilson, theatre artists have thought about their art in a way that has sometimes been more theoretical or philosophical than creative. However, as with other fields of human thought, twentieth-century art has maximized these philosophical and theoretical positions and has exceeded the limits of the preceding definition of theatre in order to achieve an authentic revolution. This

post-avant-garde revolution has shaken up the traditional, ontological definition of theatre not only in an evolutionary artistic way, but also in the philosophical conception of how its essences could lead on to something artistically new, a virgin space for scholars and philosophers where they could renew their thought and even their previously-held ideas about traditional questions such as mimesis, structure, sign or canon.

Of course, the attention given by philosophy to forms of representation related to the rise of Semiotics after the Second World War has displayed a theoretical and terminological apparatus that has allowed a more scientific approach to questions traditionally treated from a descriptive and sometimes uncritical point of view. Structuralism, for example, has led to important advances in theatre analysis, especially applicable to its performative expression, and, of course, semiotics has found an attractive and almost ignored field of study, traditionally monopolized by literary studies. Moreover, theatrical companies working in the second half of the twentieth century were also researching ways to avoid the presence of literature and even words in drama, and trying to find a form of specifically theatrical – or performative – evocation of sense and meaning. In this artistic context, the work of the first poststructuralists such as Julia Kristeva has been crucial, especially her objective of configuring a less symbolic and more instinctive and connotative semiotics that indicated a relation between sign and reality similar to the ruptural mimesis of contemporary performance. It should also not be forgotten that the Kristevian concept of “abjection” has a relationship with the Artaudian Theatre of Cruelty (the genesis of almost all theatrical revolutions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries), since this avant-garde artist demonstrated through his confrontation with bourgeois drama that the theatrical revolution could only be born through close proximity with marginalized artists who were capable of creating new ways of signification and work out of the limits of the symbolic order, turning their object (art) into trauma.

It is Jacques Derrida who, in the mid 1960s,¹ first takes interest in Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and writes an almost classical paper on the theory of contemporary theatre that explains the relationship between Artaud and the new forms of signification that would arrive later : “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” (Derrida 208-223). Artaud’s theatrical theory must be placed in the 1920s in an artistic stream that was strongly opposed to realist-figurative theatre, and should also be related to the ideological opposition to the *dominant* forms of literary, bourgeois and commercial theatre. However, Derrida much like Julia Kristeva later on, is actually attracted by the Artaudian concept of *cruelty*, and is specially interested in two of the defining lines of this concept : a) theatre as direct presentation, not as *representation*; that is, theatre as (sacred) life; and b) theatre as a new language.

¹ *Writing and difference* was first published in 1967.

In his essay, Derrida points out most of the elements and debates that would progressively be discussed in contemporary theatre's theory and practice. Nevertheless, Derrida does go as far as to propose the keys for a deconstructive reading of classical theatre, and he does not look very far away from Artaud when showing his support for a desirable renewal of drama in terms of the presence of cruelty. Did Derrida not see a possible deconstruction of theatre in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty? Or otherwise, was Derrida's interest in Artaud caused by the intuition that only a vision like *cruelty* could remove the old structures of theatre and redefine its essential elements in order to prove that a *de-centered* theatre based on another concept of subject was possible?

This paper takes this last question as a hypothesis and point of departure for a discussion about how contemporary theatre could break with (*deconstruct*) antique structures of drama by maintaining its semiotic definition and by rooting the review of its languages in the maintenance of the concept of *meaning* and *interpretation*. In fact, the theatrical application of postmodern doubt about the subject and the significant presence of sign has led to a review (and commonly a rejection) of the traditional structures of "drama," marked by their *central* categories, such as *character*, *conflict*, *time in progression*, and *space of reference*. This doubt has made artists since the 1920s redefine the ontological status of theatre : without characters, stories, conflicts and deals, can theatre still be considered a *representation*? What does it represent? How can the old and hackneyed *mimesis* be integrated into postmodern thought and art?

All these questions converge in today's performing arts and comprise the first great critique of Aristotelian theatre after Bertold Brecht. And this critique has been made, in part, by "pure philosophers" interested in "different" performing "artists" working within the limits of the traditional definition of theatre. Performing against the *canonical drama* or against drama and theatrical text itself in order to prove that theatre is more than written words and to show that *scenic* semiotics are most probably the real basis of theatrical processes of signification.

Consequently, this *bouleversant* point of view consists in the convergence of theatre artists' interest in Artaud's work (specially the so-called revolutionary companies: Living Theatre, Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor among others) and theatre artists also influenced by postmodern thought in the 1980s (Pina Bausch, Peter Brook, Müller, Sarah Kane). However, as shown above, this revolutionary theatre also attracts art philosophers such as Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Alain Badiou or Julia Kristeva, all of whom strive to give sense to these artistic forms placed at the limits of the traditional definition of art as representation. This is how a new conception of artistic semiotics is born within a redefinition of the concept of art and new research on the social and communicative position of artists. Furthermore, a new and more active and creative definition of audiences is needed in order to lead them to their new role in the face of new forms of decodification

In his well-known book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans Thies Lehmann established an interesting point of view when he manages to describe a total concept simply through

the name that he confers upon this *new* theatre (*new* and not so *new*; that is, *contemporary* but also *post* anti-Aristotelian theatre, or *anti-dramatic* theatre) that is the object of his analysis. “[P]ostdramatic” as a term or name certainly has its detractors, but its descriptive capacity is undeniable.² Lehmann speaks about a theatre that is not exactly *drama* because:

- 1) It has broken with the structures of drama, applying to theatre the postmodern abolition of the concepts “*structure*,” even “*structured structure*,” and “*subject*,” by breaking with the character as a *central* element of theatre and life, and by forcing to rethink the roles of the audience and the stage;
- 2) It is constructed by means of a renewal of the concept of *mimesis*, redefining performing arts from the point of view of a scenic re-presentation or a new kind of *mimesis* constructing a *possible world* which is not read through the old simulation-agreement, but through a simple disbelief-agreement;
- 3) Strongly influenced by French thinkers related to post-structuralism and semiotics (the *Tel Quel* group and Kristevan thought, for example), contemporary theatre from the 1970s has questioned the traditional *language* of theatre in order to attest to the necessity to redefine other *languages* giving sense to the performance itself.

However, this *postdrama* or this *contemporary theatre*, this *new theatre*, IS theatre. Or rather, it demands our consideration of it as a *performing art*, and seeks to escape from its traditional dramatic or textual definition and to open itself up to a general *scenic* conception. Postdramatic theatre reaches a redefinition of the concept of theatre itself although it abolishes its own defining categories (structure and subject, mimesis, language) because it does not abolish the concept of sign. More precisely, it does not reject a hermeneutic possibility in the process of making theatre or in the process of *receiving* or *reading* theatre. In short, *postdrama* does not reject theatre as a kind of communicative process derived from its essential need for the spectator’s *co-presence* and its development *hic et nunc*, in time and space. Thus, the break with structures of drama and the construction of a new *mimesis* or *fiction* is rooted in the preservation of the concept of *sign*, at least in a hermeneutic sense.

Postdrama as (a new) sign

For many reasons, those who think that a semiotic perspective in theatre studies

² “Face à un mode foncièrement différent dans l’emploi du signe théâtral, il semble judicieux de nommer ‘postdramatique’ un secteur significatif du nouveau théâtre. Dans le même temps, le nouveau *texte* de théâtre qui, lui, réfléchit sans cesse sur sa constitution comme construction du langage est souvent un texte de théâtre ‘ayant fini d’être dramatique’. En faisant allusion au genre littéraire qu’est le drame, le titre ‘théâtre postdramatique’ indique l’interdépendance continue entre théâtre et texte, même si ici le discours du théâtre occupe une position centrale et que, de ce fait, il n’est question du texte que comme élément, sphère et ‘matériau’ de l’agencement scénique et non en tant qu’élément dominant. Il ne s’agit là en aucune manière de quelque jugement de valeur ou de quelque a priori” (Lehmann 20).

has been already superseded are correct; at least, they are correct in a meta-theoretic sense. However, the basic affirmation of the semiotics of theatre has not yet been refuted. Tadeusz Kowzan was right when he said that everything on stage signifies something, which recalls the famous and attractive quote from Roland Barthes about theatre’s “density of signs.” Everything is theatrical sign, even things which consciously refuse their theatrical definition and even performances where there is an attempt to break with the traditional enciphering and deciphering of drama. When then do they break? Surely they break with a specific use and stylization of dramatic sign, with the use of sign that is directly determined by the structure of drama, and this is relatively new.

In the great revolution Bertold Brecht brought about in theatre, and contrary to Lehmann’s opinion, what he calls “dramatic theatre” has its *raison d’être* in a characteristic use of the sign. This use is determined by the fact that it “takes place” (action) at the same time that it is performed in the presence of the audience. This is the *essence* of the theatrical sign, and it is universal (if it is not that way, then it is not theatre). In *dramatic theatre* this characteristic definition of the theatrical sign shares space with the disposition of some structured fictional categories that strongly influence the definition of theatre itself. They are the classical and Aristotelian notions of character, conflict, time, objective, etc., all of which are related to a confused and unstable notion of *mimesis* that in essence causes the willing suspension of critical sense which Brecht correctly identifies with the Greek *catharsis*. It is against these *dramatic* elements of theatre and against the social-political position of theatre at his time that Bertold Brecht involves himself.

However, Lehmann’s *postdrama* places in crisis the essence of all these dramatic structures in order to show that theatre does not require them to make its “simulation” (French *simulacre*) on the stage, because they only define *how* this simulation is done and *what is told* through it. The *post-* stresses the fact that what really defines theatre is *how* the significant codes of performing arts force a specific reception, a concrete hermeneutics that can only be modified by putting in doubt the status of the theatrical sign itself, after (and only after) the structures conforming the Aristotelian *mimesis* are definitely abolished.

This is the reason why postdramatic theses are more anti-Aristotelian than Brecht’s paradigm, because postdramatic puts firmly into question the main concepts of the dramatic illusion in order to show that *another form of illusion* is possible through a redefinition of the audience’s agreement (“We are at the theatre”), redefinition coming from a profound review of the scenic language.

This is, actually, one of the main things claimed by Artaud in his *Le théâtre et son double* when he asks for a “new language” next to Oriental theatre’s codes and described as follows :

It is not a question of suppressing the spoken language, but of giving words approximately the importance they have in dreams. . . . Since it is

fundamental to this language to make a particular use of intonations, these intonations will constitute a kind of harmonic balance, a secondary deformation of speech which must be reproducible at will. Similarly the ten thousand and one expressions of the face caught in the form of masks can be labeled and catalogued, so they may eventually participate directly and symbolically in this concrete language of the stage, independently of their particular psychological use. Moreover, these symbolical gestures, masks, and attitudes, these individual or group movements whose innumerable meanings constitute an important part of the concrete language of the theater, evocative gestures, emotive or arbitrary attitudes, excited pounding out of rhythms and sounds, will be doubled, will be multiplied by reflections, as it were, of the gestures and attitudes consisting of the mass of all the impulsive gestures, all the abortive attitudes, all the lapses of mind and tongue, by which are revealed what might be called the impotences of speech, and in which is a prodigious wealth of expressions, to which we shall not fail to have recourse on occasion. There is, besides, a concrete idea of music in which the sounds make their entrance like characters, where harmonies are coupled together and lose themselves in the precise entrances of words. From one means of expression to another, correspondences and levels of development are created – even light can have a precise intellectual meaning. (94-95)

Artaud has nothing to object to the existence of “meaning” and, consequently, he defends the use of sign in theatre, although it must be a kind of sign far removed from western stages. This is the reason why Derrida and similarly the artists of the 1960s and 1970s are interested in Artaud’s writings. Derrida sees in Artaud the possibility of recuperating the origins of Western theatre because what Artaud proposes is an *avant-la-lettre* deconstruction of dramatic structures. But he does not reach his goal, because Artaud focuses upon the redefinition of a new theatrical language and, despite his attempts, he does not totally overcome the binary oppositions of performance-text and life-representation; he only proposes the elimination of the first term in each opposition in order to supposedly redefine a new “use” of *word* in theatre and a new concept of *mimesis* far from its “naïve form” and next to a Nietzschean-Artaudian “imitative concept of art, with the Aristotelian aesthetics” in which the metaphysics of Western art comes into its own” (Derrida 295). As Derrida asks,

Is this to say that Artaud would have refused the name representation for the theater of cruelty? No, provided that we clarify the difficult and equivocal meaning of this notion The stage, certainly, will no longer represent, since it will not operate as an addition, as the sensory

illustration of a text already written, thought, or lived outside the stage, which the stage would then only repeat but whose fabric it would not constitute. . . . Cruel representation must permeate me. And non representation is, thus, original representation, if representation signifies, also, the unfolding of a volume, a multi-dimensional milieu, an experience which produces its own space. Spacing [*espacement*], that is to say, the production of a space that no speech could condense or comprehend . . . thereby appeals to a time that is no longer that of so-called phonic linearity, appeals to "a new notion of space" and "a specific idea of time." (299)

Artaud initiates a break with the traditional categories of drama (character, structure) but still maintains something similar to conflict (what is, then, *cruelty*, but an extreme conflict between theatre and audience?) and does not even doubt the significant presence of the theatrical sign. However, the main opposition of theatre, the truly defining element of theatrical representation is the opposition audience-stage, which appears to be unchallengeable because without such a dichotomy theatre ceases to exist. In fact, Artaud's "First Manifesto for Theatre of Cruelty" discusses the audience in these terms: "THE PUBLIC : First of all this theatre must exist" (99).

In the same sense, neither Artaud nor Derrida imagine a theatre without signs. They could not: Artaud never neglects the opportunity for hermeneutics, for interpretation and decoding performing arts.

This is the reason why postdrama re-takes Artaud in order to redefine theatre, and why most of Derridean elements of postmodern thought are present in contemporary theatre and constitute the roots of the main critique (and destruction) of traditional dramatic structures.

What Artaud and after all Derrida have shown is that theatre can be considered without taking into account traditional structural categories (usually binary oppositions) and have finally opened the door to a new opposition, present in the theatrical field and in society itself, between drama and postdrama.³ In fact, the question today is whether postdrama demarcates a new theatrical paradigm (on the understanding that the deconstruction of dramatic categories will have been successful) or postdrama is only a

³ "Parmi les raisons extérieures pour lesquelles il convient pourtant de continuer à lire le nouveau théâtre en relation et en opposition aux catégories du 'drame', on peut citer la tendance de la critique quotidienne qui – dans son appréciation du théâtre – opère avec un critère normatif dominé par la polarité des valeurs 'dramatique' versus 'source d'ennui'. Souvent même plus de façon occulte, le besoin d'intrigue, de divertissement et de suspense se sert des règles esthétiques du concept du drame traditionnel pour mesurer à cette même aune le théâtre qui, manifestement, se dérobe à ces exigences" (Lehmann 46).

genre (on the understanding that only formal modifications of theatrical semiotics will have been).⁴ Only time will tell.

How to proceed from a renewal of semiotics to an essentially new theatre

As shown above, “postdramatic” represents for Lehmann a basically semiotic concept, which allows for a questioning of the status of the structural categories of drama. Moreover, Lehmann recognizes that postmodern elements such as the fragmentation of narratives, the heterogeneity of styles, a certain hyper-naturalism, grotesque aesthetics, or the employment of a new kind of expressionism, are not, by themselves, what define postdrama because they can be found in modern and contemporary dramatic plays. For Lehmann, “Seule la constellation des éléments décide en fin de compte si un moment stylistique peut être considéré comme inherent à une esthétique dramatique ou postdramatique” (31). In other words, it is the “constellation” of relationships among signs that will define postdrama, constructing for this new theatre its own *grammar* if Derrida’s term is employed. Did Artaud therefore speak about a *grammar* in this sense when he spoke about the elimination of Text?

In fact for Lehmann, when Lyotard (12) writes about a new theatre called “energetic” because it has no meaning but force, intensity or presence, he is not aware that this kind of indefinable energy is perceived through signs, through a kind of *mise en scène* (organization of performing languages) (Lehmann 44). This “energy” has to do with new exigencies being placed upon a new spectator. The new audience for the new theatre has to learn to interpret a new language on stage in a new receptional way, although all these languages are based of course on our present semiotics of the world, our current languages, and on our contemporary codes of communication. Without these, theatre would be impossible, because *understanding* (even when free, or open, or different or other) is indispensable for the existence of theatre itself because it gives sense to the present of the (indispensable) public.

Theatre is (Derrida has attested it) a language and energy, defined as nothing, is nothing. It is therefore better to consider theatre as a language, even though the concept

⁴ “Si dans le paysage théâtral des dernières décennies, la série de phénomènes qui problématisent les formes traditionnelles du drame et de ‘son’ théâtre, justifient l’emploi d’un nouveau *paradigme du théâtre postdramatique*, le mot y indique la délimitation négative commune des techniques de jeu fort variées du théâtre postdramatique envers celles du théâtre dramatique. Ces travaux théâtraux sont également paradigmatiques parce que, éventuellement même à contrecœur, ils sont généralement reconnus comme témoignages authentiques de leur époque et développent une force de ‘critérisation’. Le concept de paradigme ne devrait pas favoriser l’illusion selon laquelle l’art, en son mouvement de va-et-vient, se laisserait enserrer comme la science dans la logique évolutive des paradigmes. En discutant sur les moments stylistiques postdramatiques, il serait toujours facile d’attirer l’attention sur ce que le nouveau théâtre partage avec le théâtre traditionnel qui subsiste. Un nouveau paradigme est constitué par la cohabitation quasi inévitable de structures et d’éléments stylistiques ‘futurs’ et des composantes traditionnelles” (Lehmann 31).

of language should be redefined in order to integrate new contemporary or postdramatic theatrical codes.

The word as text, the main element questioned by postdrama (as by Artaud) in its claim for a more performative, represents a more *scenic* theatre. *Verbal language* then is more autonomous, but it does not give up being language. This renewed *speech* in contemporary theatre, as the main quality of human beings, is the key to understanding a de-centered subject that is able to de-centre the other dramatic categories and our own perception of what happens on stage, a de-centered subject that becomes aware of its body and all the possible significances of the body as a sign. Lehmann insists on this idea of the awareness of the body as a contemporary substitute of verbal codes (in fact, dancers such as Pina Bausch or Merce Cunningham have provided the key for the renovation of theatre). In this sense, the “density of signs” is constantly subverted by the use of a paratactic relation amongst them (an absence of hierarchies is one of the “rules” of post-dramatic theatre) which allows a new “*sémantique des formes*” (Lehmann 129) for inanimate beings and also for human beings. Everything on stage is expected to construct its meaning from a renewed point of view, giving place to a constant play with a spectator who should *read* theatre in a *productive* sense (he or she must produce what is not performed), and to a post-dramatic *mimesis* generated by the post-dramatic theatrical sign, a *mimesis* that is still action, because from a Lehmannian perspective the reality of contemporary theatre begins with the elimination of the triangular relationship drama-action-imitation, where theatre becomes victim of drama and where reality loses its meaning because of its perpetual repetition.

A sign in post-drama is definitely and ostentatiously iconic, simultaneous and polysemic. The sign in post-drama does not refuse and those who want to kill theatre should take note that *iconicity* means *representation* and, therefore, everything on stage *is* theatre. Post-drama presents a particular possible world on stage (external or internal-psychological, as Artaud stipulated), and, unlike traditional drama, this possible world has to be constructed by the hermeneutic ability (or “theatrical competence” as Marco de Marinis would say) of the spectator simply employing the elements provided by the stage manager. It is his or her art to control the use of the signs in his or her theatrical language to win the audience’s attention in order to express a sense that should be perceived by the same audience as something general, intuitional, free, and possibly susceptible of being interpreted in the same intuitional and free sense. Contemporary theatre, then, does not mean anything: it means what each participant wants it to mean. The magical, the fascinating question of this meaning is that post-dramatic grammar leads always to common interpretations and even common misinterpretations for unitary languages. Why? Because in this theatre the new language, whose main devotee was Artaud, has succeeded and because this theatre has been able to break the old structures of traditional theatre, a theatre that, since the nineteenth century, has been clearly insufficient when enabling dialogue with all the facets of the complex society and art of the twentieth and, above all, the twenty-first century.

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