

On The Verge of a New Fusion: Theatre Space – Digital Space

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Abstract: We live in an era more and more attached and inclined towards a technological system which makes inevitable the fact that this system is becoming a part of the performing arts, characterized lately by impressive visual dimensions. The new concept of the 21 century, *digital scene*, represents just one step into a completely unknown world and at the same time, a completely vibrant world, in which we recognize the availability of the visual capacity. Through this text, we aim to define digital space, how far is it from the theatrical forms, if it can approach them in some way and how spatiality is being perceived. We investigate the possibility of the theatre to have its own leverage on this path, so we can decide if the digital transfer could determine theatre to repress its survival instinct and, in the end, *to be silenced*. At the same time, we aim to discover versions of digital theatre or theatrical versions of the digital world. We also speak about how theatre „speaks” or „shuts up” on digital platforms; how much theatre has transformed lately its mechanisms and if we could perceive the possibility of an ascending, so we can affirm that the theatre has become or it’s about to become a more accessible and visible art, almost being worthy of a cinema film notoriety. Silence, a rare condition of our century, can become theatre’s more characteristic and fatalist mood, a theatre that is very connected to the physical can risk its place by being out of its comfort zone and pushed into an unfinished world. If the theatrical forms have the capacity to survive in this transformational context, we could actually talk about an evolution of these forms towards ones that can determine theatre reform itself. In regards to this, starting from this point where theatre transforms its language, we can make an imaginative travel, invoking a possible future for a *silenced theatre* that can be silenced also by a new artistic structure, placed somewhere between theatre and film – digital theatre or online theatre.

Keywords: theatre space, digital space, theatre, film

To define theatre space in 21 century implies a high risk of limiting examples, since the concept of space changes increasingly its conditions. Space is a chameleon component. Although, the theatre represented some centuries ago was a theatre with its classic scene distanced from the audience by a curtain, today we relate differently, being aware of some diversity. The transformation of the space wasn’t possible just because of a change necessity, but also because of a renewal of the relationship between theatre space and the public. The performance concept implies new interactions with the audience, making this audience an active one or, sometimes, the

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core of the action. We can recall some hybrid space forms that go beyond theatricality – Forum Theatre, Happening, performances, interactive video installations etc. Susan Sontag is making a remark about Happening, she observes that it is a “theatre for the painters”¹, meaning these happenings are being “described as animated paintings or, more precise, as animated collages.”²

But, in which moment or in which conditions a space becomes theatrical? Peter Brook, in his book *Empty Space*, observes: “I could take any empty space and name it an empty scene. A man is crossing this empty space while another is watching him, and this is all that it’s needed for a dramatic act to begin.” In other words, space dramatizes itself with the presence of an actor and an observer (audience). But can space be theatrical just with the presence of an audience?

Although theatre space has adapted over time, because of the context of the last two years, space dramatically changed its course. This fact caused the digitization of theatre space. For example, E-theatrum is a digital platform of Romanian “online” theatre. So, we are witnessing a transfer between theatre and the digital, and this transfer is not quite random in a time when New Media abounds in Romanian theater shows. Directors, scenographers are experiencing the theater space in a way that gives this space digitization through the technological resources of the video and light design. Though, the digital element that’s part of a performance didn’t appear instantly, it materialized along the way. Since the 20th century, this digital thing expressed itself in discreet ways. “In 1965, Klüver³ worked with John Cage and Merce Cunningham in one of the earliest multimedia stage events, Variations V, for which Klüver devised a sound system that reacted to movements, sounds, and projections through complicated system of photoelectric cells and microphones. (...) This system anticipated the computer-controlled interaction between live performance and sound effects commonly seen in theater and dance since the early 1990s”⁴.

Filming a theater show is not a simple thing to do nowadays, especially if there’s a wish to keep a theater hall’s effect. Artists from “Radu Stanca” National Theatre of Sibiu made “The Digital Scene” which is another kind of digital platform where there’s professional filming of a theater show, that looks a lot like a movie. We’re talking about a digital transfer that keeps the theatrical space pulse. Russian Director Timofey Kulyabin who has created *The Three Sisters*, mentioned in an interview the difficulty of filming a theatre show, but also he points the advantages of

¹Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, trad. Mircea Ivanescu, Ed. Vellant, Bucharest, 2016, p. 309.

²*Ibidem*.

³Johan Wilhelm Klüver (Billy Klüver) was a Swizz Electrical Engineer who experimented the Arts, founder of the *Experiments in Art and Technology*.

⁴Michael Rush, *New Media in Art*, 2nd Edition, Thames & Hudson World of Art, London, 2005, p. 37.

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doing that: “This multi-sensory experience is lost in the film version. (...) I was able to help focus the watcher’s attention in a way that actually enhances the experience.”⁵ The spatial dimension is the first thing that’s being changed by this transfer. The digital scene’s audience doesn’t have the overview freedom (at least, not from its will); when a specific frame is on foreground, the others are silenced, away from the public’s eye, as if it doesn’t exist. In this context, digital space appears like a world of itself, almost moving away from theatre rules and being close to a cinematic language. The show being transferred to the film rules creates two types of freedom – the director’s freedom in coordinating the public’s perception and attention and the public’s freedom in detaching itself anytime from viewing the show, the audience is no longer trapped in a theater hall. For example, in a theater hall, the silence moments of an actor are connected to the public’s silence, are intimately connected and they are influencing each other. A theatre hall’s silence becomes the silence of a community that’s being shared by everyone in the hall. Even if the digital exposes much better the actor’s feelings, through the closing camera in the intimate moments, it also individualizes them. In digital space, everyone is feeling the sensations, reactions and silences alone.

One of Katie Mitchell’s frequently used methods is to incorporate a filming camera in a theater show and then use screen-projections of close-up images. This method is also used by the Romanian Director Radu Afrim in the show *The Forest of the Hanged*. In this way, the intimacy of the theatre hall is taken by the camera and the camera multiplies the intimacy of the gestures and facial expressions, that now are being perceived on a large scale. We’re close to an area that is being exploited for some time by the Romanian theatre space and this area is New Media in theatre or how to integrate the digital component in theatre space. Before finding a meaning in theatrical arts, the New Media arts have had an existence by itself, also having a technological support that kept them updated. In 2021, *Anarchy Dance Theatre* Company from Taiwan proposes an interactive-video performance, *Seventh Sense*, where the digital space that’s incorporated in the dance space, “reacts” to the movements of the performers in real time⁶. The concept of immersive art appears, which is frequented in the last years. We can also talk about here about TeamLab, a group that was created in 2001 in Tokyo, which aims to mash art and technology up together and produce a different kind of goo, creating installations out of light, projections and interactive technology, taking inspiration from pre-modern Japanese

⁵A Sergei Elkin’s interview, for *The Theatre Times* magazine, 2018, web source: <https://thetheatretimes.com/art-doesnt-exist-to-be-liked-an-interview-with-russian-stage-director-timofey-kulyabin/>

⁶Web source: <https://hyperallergic.com/57879/this-digital-dance-space-reacts-to-performers-movements-in-real-time/>

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art”⁷. One of TeamLab’s projects is *Interactive Magnetic Field Theatre*, which is an interactive digital installation⁸.

Theatre shows that are updated to the current demands, integrate a technological component in its structure, creating a whole design network which amplifies the sensory experience – scenography, video design, light design, music etc. Technology eases the creative process, but, besides these technical facilities, how can digital media aesthetically integrate itself in the theatre space? One of the most possible questions we can ask is: “What story are we trying to tell and how does the inclusion of digital media help us tell that story effectively?”⁹ At the same time, “the inclusion of digital media into a production can radically change the meaning and dynamics of performance. (...) The conjunction of performance and new media has and does bring about genuinely new stylistic and aesthetic modes, and unique and unprecedented performance experiences.”¹⁰ Digitization is not a caprice or a cheap accessory or a free thing, but it has an extremely important role and that is to accord to the show’s rhythm and to contribute to its form, almost being like a character. For example, in Robert Wilson’s shows the architectural constructions, the lights, video design, are all assembled in a geometry of the theatre space, which fusions with the digital media almost in a mathematic way. The effects of this fusion are creating spectacular images that seem like animated paintings.

There are lots of Romanian Theatre Directors that cannot work without a scenographer, a light designer or a video designer, because their interaction on an aesthetic level contributes substantially to the final result. Plus, there is possible that most of the Directors have been light designers or video designers. Klaus Obermaier is one of the artists known for his Multimedia performances, interactive installations etc. He is also a director and a composer. In Romania, theatre directors who connect to the digital media, integrate it as an essential part of their artistic discourse. Directors like Bobi Pricop (*UFO* at Bucharest National Theatre; the show uses a cinematic language, powerfully inclined to digital media), Botond Nagy (*Hedda Gabler*, Sibiu National Theatre), Radu Afrim – in most of his performances he works with video designer Andrei Cozlac, with whom he created symbol-shows, with great powerful visuality supported by the video-mapping subtly inserted into the show (*Tattoo*, Sibiu National Theatre, *The Lady from the Sea*, *The Butchery of Jov*, *Delhi Dance*, *Three Sad Pieces*, all created at Iasi National Theatre), Silviu Purcarete – his remarkable *The*

⁷Eddy Frankel, article *TeamLab: The Tokyo „Ultra-Technologists” Creating Totally Immersive Art*, published by *Time Out Magazine*, 2017, web source: <https://www.timeout.com/london/art/teamlab-the-tokyo-ultra-technologists-creating-totally-immersive-art>

⁸See web source: https://www.teamlab.art/w/interactive_magnetic_field_theater/

⁹Alex Oliszewski and Daniel Fine, with Daniel Roth, *Digital Media, Projection Design & Technology for Theatre*, Routledge USA, 2018, p. 5.

¹⁰*Ibidem*.

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Ploughman and the Death, a show where he worked with visual artist Andrei Cozlac. He creates an excellent universe in which he uses a great part of video, and the digital component has its own reactions to the theatre space. We're talking here about interactive digital space that has a very determining role in show's structure and there are very numerous examples of how the digital communicates with the theatrical spatiality. "For example, the interactive digital media can be a live video capture of another performer, or a digital avatar the performer converses with or controls. Interactive digital media is also any kind of motion capture where the performer directly controls the media"¹¹. In of his installations, *Fluid Memory*, video designer Andrei Cozlac proposes to Iasi public an interactive video installation accompanied by a narrative voice which tells a text that seems to be from a past journal. The public can physically interact with this installation through finger-touching of the liquid and Petri vessels, which creates the power of controlling the visual and textual dimension of the video installation. We can perceive here the nuance of a theatricality that's being expressed through the sound background with the text which connects with the digital media, and all this creates a symbiosis. A very frequented method of the artist is video-mapping, which is suppose to project on surfaces. This method determines theatre space to be animated and to have volume, creating numerous visual effects. The video-mapping is certainly a way through which theatre space, by connecting with digital space, transforms itself and can have a visual capacity that sometimes it's hard to imagine.

Digital space will certainly evolve in the future, considering that space which reflects the technological potential and its instruments keep it updated. Can this fusion between theatre space and digital space, be the theatre of the future? A theater of avatars, of holograms and of ultra-technological instruments, a VR (Virtual Reality) theatre – theatre space meets virtual space, but how will this meeting evolve? It is very possible that in the future will be more and more types of interactions between theatre space and digital space, creating a rich and impressive visual dimension, without limits.

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¹¹Alex Oliszewski and Daniel Fine, with Daniel Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 7.