

## Theater in a post-literate world<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The theater, as a living art, has always reflected certain aspects of society, and the great dramaturgical writings function as precise x-rays of pressing problems faced by the society of their time. Today, even if they stage plays from Antiquity or the Middle Ages, theater creators want to stage current realities with fundamentally human values and themes, which have always accompanied us and will never disappear. However, contemporary theater faces a series of problems, or rather particularities, unprecedented in history, most of them revolving around new technologies and the impact they have on society in general and theater in particular. The present work wants to inventory the most recent phase of a phasing based on the relationship between technology and culture, phasing that divides the cultural evolution into three stages, according to the preferred state of the word in social communication, namely: the spoken word (oral culture) the word written (literate culture) and the illustrated word (post-literate culture), the current one.

**Keywords:** culture, digitalization, new media, image, post-literature

It is already a truism that "today's youth" tend to use graphic and photo-video images more than words when communicating with each other. This trend is the product of the widespread spread of smart mobile phones and the rapid development of *social media* platforms. The combination of the two factors offers instant multimedia messaging possibilities, both for private and public communications. The principle "a picture is worth a thousand words" has become a universal motto, and technologies have made the production and distribution of images easier than ever. Today it is easier to show (what, how, when and with whom) than to describe in our own words, and to interact more quickly with people miles away than with those in the same room. Sometimes people correspond digitally even when they are sitting at the same table, because the virtual environment offers different means of expression. Therefore, the whole system of social communication has changed radically in the

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Ioana ILAȘ BODALE was supported by the project "Program to increase performance and innovation in doctoral and postdoctoral research excellence" - "PROINVENT", Contract no.62487/3.06.2022-POCU/993/6/13-Code153229, financed by The Human Capital Operational Programme 2014-2020 (POCU) Romania.

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course of a few years, and the phenomenon does not affect only the young, but people of all ages alike.

Another reason why this trend is growing is the biological truth that images are generally more engaging, more memorable and faster to assimilate than text (Tufte, 1997). Visual content can convey complex emotions, (Ackerman & Puglisi, 2012) complicated ideas and extensive information in a fast and effective way. The use of new technologies makes them extremely easy to share and redistribute.

These new communication tools, specifically *social media* applications are developed by teams well trained in information technology but who also have considerable expertise in the psychological mechanisms that make their products highly addictive. The companies that manage these platforms not only make use of the latest discoveries in the field, but function as research institutes that are constantly studying the most effective methods of multimedia production, distribution, and consumption in social interactions. *Instagram*, *Twitter* and *YouTube* have become more than just channels through which people discover and share cultural content. Many theater companies or institutions of conventional culture use the respective platforms because they facilitate the exposure of niche products and train a new type of interaction between producers and consumers. But the fact that, in these environments, anyone can publish, and the comment sections can be more attractive than the commented object, have given rise to new cultural phenomena, much more participatory and democratic than traditional environments, where the demarcation between the public and the author is practically dissolved.

Of course, the separation between author and viewer is still perpetuated, but the democratization of these *mass-media* has generated new cultural vectors. Individuals periodically emerge from among content creators whose power to "culturalize" the public is stronger than that of specialized institutions. Many influencers have made an impressive career offering demo versions or *reader's digests*<sup>2</sup> of materials originally recorded verbatim that few have the patience or time to go through in the original format. The effect is indeed a familiarization of the public with textual information but also an abandonment of reading in favor of watching video productions.

There are countless studies aimed at the impact of new technologies on behavioral changes in the consumption of cultural products such as music, film, books or theater, and it is not necessary to analyze statistical data to realize the mutations that digital media has caused within these industries. For example, in music, the reorientation of consumers from the purchase of physical materials such as vinyl records, tapes or CDs to the purchase of music *online*, through download or *streaming platforms*, has not only changed the recording medium used, but also the way in which

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<sup>2</sup> *Catchy* - term used to denote a musical production considered attractive at the first hearing, or without considerable effort on the part of the listener.

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that listeners relate to artists and their creations. Even artists have changed their approach to their own work. Back when recordings were extremely expensive, musicians spent considerably more time preparing and developing compositions before releasing anything. Most bands practiced and tested their creations in bars, clubs or small concert halls long before releasing a new album, and were very selective about what they put on the playback media. Today, anyone can upload their home-recorded, half-finished productions to the *cloud* at no cost. Thus, the amount of music available has grown exponentially, while the quality has remained constant. There is so much music to explore, and so easy to tune into, that music lovers are no longer willing to listen to the same piece multiple times before deciding whether they like it or not. Listeners are no longer forced by technology to go through certain productions in a certain order, and this freedom has made the time spent with the less *catchy*<sup>3</sup> productions decrease to zero. Practically, creations whose value requires an initial effort, no longer have the same chances of being discovered, and this phenomenon has changed the consistency or density of artistic products.

How new technologies have affected the consumption of theater is the subject of much research and there is a growing bibliography dealing with the use of multimedia, telepresence or interactive immersion elements in performance productions. Relevant for this paper is the impact of *live streaming*<sup>4</sup> platforms or the distribution of recorded theatrical productions. For example, the platforms *National Theater Live*<sup>5</sup> and *Digital Theater*<sup>6</sup> claim to have enabled theater productions to reach a larger audience beyond the physical confines of a theater, and to enable people who cannot physically attend a *live performance* to experience production from the comfort of their own home, thus increasing accessibility. In reality, however, the experience these platforms offer audiences is more akin to television and cinema than to the art of theater performance.

And social networks influence theater consumption, especially when they are used in marketing activities to advance conventional performances. Advertisements, reviews and likes of online posts with and about shows greatly influence consumer choices, perception and interpretations.

So the impact of digital platforms on theater consumption is complex and presents both benefits and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that digital platforms expand the boundaries of theatrical productions and make them more accessible or spectacular. On the other hand, there is the potential for digital platforms

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<sup>3</sup> *Live streaming* - term used for the transmission of live video and audio images of (an event) via the Internet.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ntlive.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.digitaltheatre.com/>

<sup>6</sup> McLuhan, Marshall, *The Gutenberg galaxy: the making of typographic man*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1962, p. 2

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to undermine the unique experience of *live theater* and contribute to a decline in physical attendance.

The effects of technology on culture have concerned several prominent researchers, and we have an important heritage that helps us interpret the observations listed above. Some of the most important theories are from the great visionary Marshall McLuhan, who although he wrote in the 60s, he is extremely relevant to what is happening today. For McLuhan, the printing press, invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century, had a profound effect on the way people think and understand the world.

In 1962 he publishes "*The Gutenberg galaxy: the making of typographic man*" in which he theorizes the transition from an oral culture, to a culture of the written text and the implications of this change for human knowledge and consciousness, and in which he uses for the first time the concept of post society - literate, but without going into details. The work focuses on the transition from oral to written culture and one of his arguments is that the press created a new type of person that he called the "typographic man", in contrast to the "scribal man" or alliterate. This type of person is characterized by a linear, rational and individualistic way of thinking, produced by the printed word. He argues that print encourages focus on individual words or sentences, and less on the context in which they are embedded. This leads to a fragmentation of thought and a loss of the holistic perspective and interconnectedness typical of an oral culture. He also argues that the development of typographic media led to the emergence of a type of knowledge, one based on abstract principles and universal laws. This knowledge is detached from the particularities of experience and is transmitted through books that are themselves abstractions of reality, and form a "second nature" that overlaps the natural world and shapes our perceptions of it.

These ideas are extremely relevant today, especially in the context of digital technologies, and especially the fact that McLuhan predicted that new media would produce an oral-like culture based on a holistic and relational way of thinking, visible in the new forms of communication, which, although they use the text, are based on an interaction and a spontaneity specific to orality. In the same way, we can talk about a return to the sensory way of experiencing the world, which we can find in the development of virtual reality technologies or other forms of technological immersion.

Two years after "*Galaxy Gutenberg*" in 1964, Marshall McLuhan publishes another work that has become a mandatory reference for all communication sciences "*Understanding Media: The Extensions Of Man*" in which he explores the various ways in which new media (then) shape human consciousness and social interaction. And although he does not mention it explicitly, McLuhan develops in this book the

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concept of the "*post-literate world*"<sup>7</sup> mentioned in his earlier work. In this book he details the transition from written culture, where the printed word was the primary mode of communication, to other forms of media such as television, film and digital technologies. This shift represents a transformation in human culture of the same magnitude as Gutenberg's press, as it alters the ways in which we perceive and interact with the world around us. Among other things, he believes that electronic media will create a more "tribal" and interconnected, less individualistic society, where people are less isolated and more connected to each other through shared experiences provided by media.

He suggests that new technologies are having a major impact on the way we think. In a post-literate world, knowledge is no longer transmitted through words, which Noam Chomsky considers a building block of thought, but rather through images, sounds, and other forms of sensory experience, and this makes understanding our view of the world to become more fragmented and subjective as we are exposed to a greater variety of perspectives and interpretations.

Returning to digital technologies, we see that they have led to a proliferation of content types, such as memes or viral clips, made to be consumed at speed and can be shared on various social networks. Following McLuhan's idea, we say that the new media have reshaped human consciousness in particular ways. The world is no longer understood through an affiliation to a certain set of well-formulated ideas, and reformulated by a succession of authors defined as in written culture, but through a fluid construction of conceptual particles, illustrated audio-visually, whose representativeness to the world is provisional and ideological or cultural provenance is irrelevant.

McLuhan remained famous for making us aware that the medium through which a message is transmitted is more important than the message itself, and the way information is communicated changes the way it is received and understood. But this paper mentions him for the theories that the technologies involved in informing an individual change his perception of the world and that different environments have different effects on how we think, feel and behave. Just as Gutenberg's press generated the "typographic man" with a specific mental structure, so digital media create new archetypes that the theater must hold.

Another important theorist who talks about the crucial relationship between culture and technology is Neil Postman, who in 1985 argues that television, as the dominant communication medium of the 20th century, transformed social discourses in a way that diminished informational quality. and people's ability to engage in meaningful and serious discussions. He argues that television has produced a decline in print culture, which values rational and analytical thinking over emotional thinking,

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<sup>7</sup> Postman, Neil, *Amusing ourselves to death: public discourse in the age of show business*, Penguin Books, New York, 2006, pp.78-89

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and print media such as books, newspapers, or other printed materials encourage logical analysis and argumentation. "Television has come to have the status of a "meta-medium" - a tool that directs not only knowledge about the world, but also knowledge about the methods of knowledge"<sup>8</sup>.

In their desire to keep audiences hooked, producers and advertisers realized that visuals and emotional appeals were far more effective methods of capturing viewers' attention than long-winded rational arguments, so they turned news or newsletters into a entertainment with an emphasis on dramatic imagery, emotional stimulation and sensationalism instead of factual accuracy and rational analysis.

Even when addressing important issues, under the guise of simplification and accessibility, television reduces complex issues and ideas to bits of sounds, slogans and images that can be easily consumed and soon forgotten. The same entertainment value is given to political shows, where candidates are judged on how likable, charismatic or stage presence they are, and on policies and ideas. Television has created a culture of passivity and entertainment where people are more interested in entertainment than participating in civic life through constructive discussion.

Regarding the use of new media in the promotion of value culture "television does not expand or amplify literate culture. He attacks her. If television is a continuation of anything, it is of a tradition started by the telegraph and photography"<sup>9</sup>.

Even though Postman is talking about the state of America in the mid-1980s, the same discourse can be applied to much of today's new media content, and even though the Internet has replaced television as the dominant means of communication, the methods Postman is talking about remain. Although new media have the potential to be tools for disseminating valuable information, the laconic character, exaggerated sensationalism, oversimplification, and emotional character of television is only exacerbated in the online environment. On most social platforms it is difficult if not impossible as a user to engage in nuanced discussions and address complex issues. Instead, its viral nature is an excellent medium for the propagation of misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories that undermine democracy and trust in institutions. Furthermore, most apps use information curation algorithms that are based on a profile and the results only display results that reinforce pre-existing beliefs, like an echo chamber that translates into an artificial lack of diversity in public discourse.

The portrait of the new theater spectator would not be complete if we also mentioned its postmodernist character, formulated with great eloquence by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. This character is defined by a rejection of any "grand narratives"<sup>10</sup> and a proliferation of fragmented knowledge systems. In the

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<sup>8</sup> Idem, p. 84

<sup>9</sup> One's attempt to explain the nature of human existence, history, and culture through a discourse that attempts to provide a comprehensive and unified view of reality and to explain the meaning and purpose of human life.

<sup>10</sup> Short version of a work-related story, experiences or issues, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/>

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postmodern world, knowledge is no longer centralized or unified, but rather exists in a network of locally valid claims and counterclaims. And this fragmentation of knowledge is closely related to the emergence and development of new media, which has facilitated people's access to and creation of information, but which has also led to overwhelming amounts of information, respectively, to an erosion of traditional sources of authority.

One's attempt to explain the nature of human existence, history, and culture through a discourse that attempts to provide a comprehensive and unified view of reality and to explain the meaning and purpose of human life.

So contemporary theater has to take place in a complicated world where writing and reading are not the most important forms of culturalization, and I don't think they ever were. We are talking about a return to the oral nature of culture, although for more and more people, speech becomes textual and words are replaced by multimedia content.

Although it was based on "text" for a good part of history, the theater always had an oral character and performers constantly use spoken word, song prosody, and other forms of vocal expression to tell stories and convey desired meanings and emotions. However, the tendency of theater is to become more visual and physical, relying on movement, gestures and other non-verbal forms of pluri-seasonal communication. Although it is essentially live art, it is increasingly incorporating technology such as projections, soundscapes and interactive elements to engage audiences in more spectacular ways. While the form and content of theater will change to reflect an ever-evolving world, its fundamental purpose, to bring people together to experience stories, has and will always remain the same.

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