

Theatrical metaphor in a „woke” and „cancel” culture

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Abstract: In this article we explore the complexity of the metaphor in contemporary theatre, emphasizing its importance in the context of "woke" and "cancel" culture. We argue that, historically, theatre has been a medium in which the metaphor has played an essential role, serving as a means of creative expression and challenging seemingly immutable realities. In the modern era, theatre faces new challenges, including pressures to be socially responsible and inclusive, which can limit the use of metaphors. We emphasize the need for artistic freedom in theatre to enable a deep exploration of human complexity and to keep theatre relevant and accessible. It also discusses how current pressures can drive self-censorship in art, but we emphasize that creativity can flourish even under constraints, suggesting that metaphor can evolve to remain relevant in the face of social change. By calling for ongoing dialogue in the theatre community about the role of art and freedom of expression, we highlight the importance of adaptation and innovation in the face of contemporary challenges, maintaining theatre as a vital space for reflection, introspection and social change. We conclude with the question: If there is a space where the metaphor and the actor can take on new meaning, challenge and innovate in a way that balances the respectful approximation of diversity and inclusion with the unceasing desire for artistic exploration.

Keywords: metaphor, woke / cancel culture , censorship, adaptation.

This study is motivated by concerns about the medium and long term potential trajectory of the theatre as an art. We are living in a period in which we are witnessing a constant development of artistic expression, but at the same time we are witnessing commercialization trends and a certain triviality,

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an aspect that proposes an analysis of the relevance and necessity of the use of metaphors in the Romanian theatrical landscape of the year 2024.

Theatre, historically speaking, has been a space where the metaphor has manifested itself in its most diverse and challenging forms. Aristotle identifies metaphor as essential for poetry, considering it a proof of genius, since "by far the most valuable is the gift of metaphors. Above all, he alone cannot learn from others, and it is also proof of a happy predisposition: because making beautiful metaphors means knowing how to see the similarities between things" ¹. If it was initially perceived this way, during and after the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century, the metaphor took on a new life. It was used as a means to push the boundaries of language and challenge seemingly immutable realities. In this dynamic, Charles S. Peirce highlights the importance of meaning and action, suggestive of the way theatre uses metaphorical symbols to convey stories or themes, "In origin, any symbol is either an image of the signified idea or a reminiscence of a some individual occurrence, person or thing, related to its meaning, be it a metaphor" ².

Modern theatre theory and critics assume the role of interpreters of this metaphorical language, both in evaluating the creativity of the authors and the authenticity of the actors, and in influencing how the audience receives and processes the metaphors of the stage. The freedom associated with the interpretation of metaphors remains a distinctive feature of theatre as an art, allowing for a dynamic range of both emotional and critical reactions to the staged material. The successful implementation of metaphor in theatre

¹Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ed. IRI, Bucharest, 1998, trans. DM Pippidi, pp. 97-98.

²Charles S. Peirce, *Meaning Action*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 1990, trans. Delia Marga, p. 365.

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depends not only on the author's ability to conceive powerful images, but also on the depth with which the director, actor and production team can materialize those visions.

The Metaphor, at its core, is a connection between the real and the abstract, providing means to explore and understand complex concepts in intuitive and deeply resonant ways. In theatre, metaphor does not exist as a simple figure of speech, it becomes a force capable of shaping the audience's perception and reaction to the presented themes. As Paul Ricoeur states in *Living Metaphor* , “ metaphor rests on a characteristic of the code, namely polysemy; it somewhat adds to the polysemy when, ceasing to be an innovation, it becomes a metaphor for current use, then a cliché; the circuit is then closed between langue and parole. This circuit can be described as follows: initial polysemy equals language; living metaphor equals speech; the metaphor in current use is equal to the return of speech to language; later polysemy equals language.”³This capacity for transformation is strictly necessary in theatre, where the complexity of human experience is often explored through symbolic and metaphorical layers.

The strategic use of metaphors as fundamental structures of dramatic texts intensifies the emotional and cognitive connection between stage and audience. Furthermore, the evolution and interpretation of metaphor over time can be a barometer for cultural and artistic changes, indicating how theatre adapts and responds to these changes in its continuous effort to be relevant and accessible.

The arts have always found creative ways to overcome their limitations, and sculptors are no exception. Keeping in mind the specificity of

³Paul Ricoeur, *Living Metaphor*, Ed. Univers, Bucharest, 1984, trans. Irina Mavrodin, p. 84.

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the static, spatial art of their creations, they sought to enrich the sculpture with the dimension of time, something that music and theatre intrinsically exploit. Thus they resorted to a subtle strategy: the suggestion of the climax.

An iconic example of this method is the sculpture *Laocoon and his sons*, which captures the moment immediately before the tragedy reaches its climax. The fatal bite of the serpent is inflicted, but the final cry is hinted at and imminent, not fully expressed, 'He utters no fearful cry, as Virgil sings of his Laocoon; the opening of the mouth does not allow us to assume it; it's more like a stifled, tormented sob.'⁴This mechanism leaves room for the viewer to use their imagination to project and extend in space that moment of paroxysm. The process, even if often unconscious, involves him personally in the artwork and adds a temporal dimension to a predominantly spatial environment.

Similarly, in theatre, metaphor operates on an equivalent principle, making the aforementioned bridge between performance and spectator. Theatre, as with Laocoon's sculpture, often presents tense moments that are not developed to their logical conclusions on stage. Instead, the show embraces ambiguity and invites the audience to fill in the blanks, to explore undetermined possibilities, to collaborate with those on stage thus becoming co-creators of the ultimate meaning. Metaphor in this context functions as an emotional and cognitive catalyst that invites active participation, it is an appeal from the stage to the imagination and individual emotion of each audience member.

The artistic integrity and socio-cultural impact of a performance is dependent on the use of metaphors in a free and unfettered way. Restrictions

⁴Lessing, *Laocoon or on the limits of painting and poetry – Essays*, Ed Univers, 1971, trans. Lucian Blaga, p. 155.

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on the use of metaphor could limit dramaturgy's ability to critique, challenge norms, and initiate dialogue. The pressures or instinct to create a type of commercial theatre aimed at selling tickets can restrict or even censor creative freedom. Metaphors should not be "corrected" just because they might offend or provoke, theatre is a field where we should be free to confront sometimes unpleasant aspects and test our beliefs. Grotowski, suggests two simple criteria for evaluating the authenticity of the theatre: "I don't understand/I understand, I understand but I don't believe" ⁵. These criteria suggest that theatre should be based on sincerity and communication, something that censorship or limitations on metaphors might prevent from being achieved.

In this sense, a potential danger is increasingly being felt regarding the freedom necessary for theatre to fulfill its purpose. The "cancel" phenomenon culture " and the "woke" current bring into debate the limitations and sensitive contexts in which metaphors can be used, raising questions about their utility and relevance in an artistic environment that strives to be inclusive and socially responsible.

The freedom to use metaphors in theatre is also a matter of respect for human diversity and complexity. Through metaphors, playwrights can express experiences and emotions that may be difficult to articulate in literal terms, which is a key aspect of empathy and human connection. Ultimately, banning or censoring metaphor in theatre not only hinders art, but more broadly limits human discussion and understanding. When the freedom to use metaphors is unfettered, theatre can serve as a catalyst for introspection, reflection and social dialogue.

⁵ Jerzy GROTOWSKI, *Towards a poor theatre*, Ed. Unitext, Bucharest, 1998, trans. George Banu and Mirella Nedelcu- Patureau , p. 117.

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Therefore, in order to fulfill its cultural mission and remain a vital force in society, contemporary theatre must preserve its creative autonomy and protect its ability to use metaphor freely. Through the continuous transformation and reinvention of metaphorical language, theatre has the ability to keep pace with the evolution and expansion of human complexity. This constant dynamic between the theatre and the audience is paramount in keeping the interest alive and ensuring that the messages conveyed have impact and consequence in the souls of the spectators.

According to the journalist Petre M. Iancu, in an interview given to HotNews, the "culture of cancellation", which we can unfortunately also call the "culture of annihilation" if we are more severe, is a revolutionary formula for social exclusion and censorship of people or works of art accused, often unjustly but sometimes rightly, of being discriminatory, of propagating ideas, words or memes that offend one group or another; while the "woke" movement is that ideological grouping that determines what exactly is offensive, what words are allowed in the public space, what thoughts, what ideas, what opinions or what facts, sometimes even trivial, are rated as admissible or inadmissible, expressible or inexpressible, tolerable or intolerable in public space;"⁶ In this sense, theatre faces increased pressures in terms of freedom of expression and the use of metaphor. The term *woke* has taken on an increasingly strong political and social connotation, being often associated with left-wing activism, progressivism, and movements that address issues such as racism, sexism, or homophobia.

⁶ <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-25376485-video-dezbatere-hotnews-despre-cancel-culture-fenomenul-woke-noua-revolutie-culturala-maoista-versus-reactii-nedreptatea-sociala.htm>, accessed 01.03.2024

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An argument against the potential limitations these trends could have on theatre would be that, while the intentions are often positive, promoting an inclusive and diversity-sensitive language, these pressures can also lead to a certain self-censorship in art. The theatre, which for centuries has been a space where taboos or sensitive issues could be brought before the public through metaphors and allegories, could begin to avoid addressing subjects that could be considered provocative or offensive in the context of the *woke current*.

This kind of reluctance could limit the artistic experience and prevent drama from reaching its potential to address and challenge important social issues, because the essence of theatre has always been to push boundaries and question existing beliefs. At its core, theatre should be a haven of free expression, a place where society can be subjected to analysis and scrutiny in a constructive and creative way. When artists feel compelled to self-censor or alter content to conform to emerging social norms, this can lead to a reduction in the diversity of voices and viewpoints in theatre and, by extension, society.

We believe that it is the duty of theatre to reflect and interrogate socio-cultural behaviors and norms, giving the audience the opportunity to reflect on them from a different perspective. When artistic specificity is limited by the fear of offending, the potential of theatre to serve as a social tool and influence change is diminished.

Maintaining such an environment means recognizing that theatre art not only reflects society, but also builds it. Through its challenges, theatre can contribute to the advancement of social discourse and the evolution of collective consciousness. In this sense, it is essential to view metaphors not as threats to common sensibility, but as tools for deepening understanding and empathy between people.

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We do not consider certain aspects of the *woke culture* and the *cancellation phenomenon to be wrong cultures* , where some traditional metaphors may be avoided or rejected if they are considered representative of ideas or histories that are now viewed as offensive or harmful. For example, in books, films, or plays, metaphors that relate to racial or gender stereotypes can be discouraged and replaced with ones that promote equality and diversity.

It can be seen that in the theatre, interpretations that might contain language or images currently considered insensitive or offensive are beginning to be avoided, even if in the original context they could be seen as part of a valuable cultural heritage. An example is explored by Mediafax in an article reporting that "The *Nutcracker Ballet* of Tchaikovsky and M. Petipa , is considered racist for it's Oriental and Asian dances. Several British institutions chose to change it, while the Staatsballett in Berlin decided not to schedule the performance." ⁷. At the same time, plays that address themes such as belonging to a certain gender or racial identity and the fight against discrimination are promoted. Critics of these changes may refer to these avoidances and transformations as "ideological propaganda", feeling that the deliberate selection and promotion of certain ideas in art serves a particular political agenda, at the expense of free expression and historical or artistic complexity.

The communist period was characterized by explicit and institutionalized political censorship, where the theatre was strictly controlled by the state to ensure that the works presented corresponded to the regime's ideology and policies. Prohibited topics ranged from explicit criticism of the

⁷ <https://www.mediafax.ro/cultura-media/epoca-cancel-culture-baletul-lui-ceaikovski-in-mijlocului-unui-scandal-rasist-20375882> , accessed 03.06.2024

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regime, to any form of expression of dissent or depictions of Western lifestyles. Censorship in those days was often absolute, with no room for interpretation or negotiation.

In contrast, today's type of self-censorship or boycott derives from an evolved social consciousness and often manifests itself through the voices of representative groups that wish to promote diversity and inclusion. These modern social pressures aim at fair and respectful representation of different groups and communities, unlike communist censorship which aimed at suppressing any point of view that contravened official doctrine.

While communist censorship was imposed from the top down and aimed at maintaining political power, contemporary censorship is often enforced in the name of progressivism and respect for marginalized groups. In the case of modern theatre productions, this can lead to contortions in casting, where the actor's identity must match the character being played as closely as possible to avoid accusations of "whitewashing"⁸, "ableism"⁹ or other forms of misrepresentation.

Official state censorship is not currently found in many democratic societies. However, there is a kind of moral and social boycott that makes its presence felt and which, although not institutionalized, can decisively influence the theatre industry.

⁸ Whitewashing - the process of trying to minimize or ignore the contributions and experiences of people of color, especially in media and history, through the predominant or exclusive representation of white people.

⁹ Ableism is a term that describes discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities.

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This calls into question the basic principles of acting, which presuppose an actor's ability to explore other people's situations and psychologies, which may be different from their own personal experience or identity. At its core, acting is about empathy, transformation and the exploration of the human condition, an aspect that knows no limits imposed by the individual peculiarities of the actor.

While sensitivity to representation is necessary in order to promote equality and a fairer society, it is imperative to strike a balance between these emerging social beliefs and the artistic principles of freedom of expression and creativity. Art, including theatre, must have the freedom to interrogate, challenge and express human diversity without being limited by prejudice or artificial constraints, thus guaranteeing the perpetuation of a dynamic and progressive cultural environment.

In conclusion, in the face of new social pressures, actors may face dilemmas of artistic authenticity, social responsibility, and freedom of creative expression. Is it only the directors' responsibility to manage these complexities, or should the actors have a say in this socio-cultural dynamism?

This modern context seems to question the power of metaphor in art – if its meaning and purpose is lost, what remains of theatre's ability to offer new and challenging perspectives? Are we in an era where artists are directed to create according to a preconceived script by very vocal groups, thereby losing the essence of free exploration? Does this path suggest that we have to operate within the limits set by others, to be creative only within the restrictive framework imposed from the outside?

However, perhaps the current challenges do not mean the end of creativity or metaphor, but rather an opportunity for redefinition and adaptation. Creativity could flourish because of these very restrictions, forcing

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artists to find new methods and approaches to express powerful and relevant messages. It is possible that the inherent power of metaphor and creativity in theatre manifests itself in the ability to remain relevant even under somewhat restrictive conditions.

Creativity can find its way even under constraints, but can it express itself freely and reach its full potential when the solitude of the stage is replaced by the spotlight of public judgment? Metaphor may be destined to take on a new guise, translating universal essences through the lens of accepted terms, but at what cost?

Isn't there a space for metaphor and actor to take on new meaning, to challenge and innovate in a way that balances a respectful approach to diversity and inclusion with a relentless desire for artistic exploration? We believe that it is the duty of the entire theatre community, from pedagogues, actors, directors, screenwriters to spectators, to engage in a continuous dialogue about the role of art in society and how it can respond to contemporary challenges, while respecting both pluralism and freedom of expression.

It remains to be seen how creativity and metaphor will adapt and evolve in this context, but it is essential to recognize that this process of adaptation can be the source of new artistic expressions and new ways of understanding the world.

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