

# Short invective on theatre and virtuality: Five things I don't want to hear anymore

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Who has read both the famous Brenda Laurel's book on interface design (*Computer as Theatre*, 1993), and the Gabriella Giannachi's *Virtual Theatres* (2004), would have at least noticed that the former quotes Aristotle's theory on tragedy (*Poetics*), while the latter don't even mention it in the index, and focuses on hackers, videogame and installation art. Although both scholars did a great job – I do really suggest to read those books – it would be understandable if the reader were a bit confused.

The disorientation is an offspring of the similarity: similar things are harder to discern one from another. The notions of digital virtuality and theatre, because are so close (as I pointed out in my *Teatro e mondo digitale*, 2003), if come close to each other, multiply their denotative power, producing such a mass of meaning to implode and create a sort of 'meaning black hole', where anything is adsorbed and disintegrated. We discuss of simulation and representation without a break; we point at aesthetic values using sociological categories; we act like artists and talk as engineers. Of course, confusion is often a ground to build new ideas. Nevertheless, while artists make their confusion, I think scholars would be better to making some sense.

From a phenomenological point of view, there are three notion linked at digital language (postmodernism, dislocation, virtuality) which meets three basic theatrical notions (actors, stage, audience), and as scholar I could report the results.

From an aesthetic point of view the issues seems to me more complex and harder to discern. So I start with few refusals, five things that I wish do not hear again.

## 1 ... here is the digital theatre revolution

Revolutions are made out of contents rather than prosthesis. In art, I think that the mirage of a very open work of art, wholly horizontal, has been abandoned. Big firms now dominate videogaming, which has been often named as example of it. The net isn't a work of art but rather a commercial enterprise.

Nevertheless, as Leo De Bernardinis once said, I believe in fringes, areas on the net where (out of the mainstream) one can experiment. Digital revolution cannot be a brand or a logo. A holographic computer game doesn't bring any revolution: a real artist can.

In theatre art, revolutions have never been made only by gimmickry but by ideas. That we need.

## **2 ... and then I saw Michelangelo dancing salsa in Sistine Chapel**

I fear to hear this report after a technological aided visit to a museum. More and more often theatre has been named as a "tool" to improve the experience of attending at a museum or at an historical site visit. From audioguide to augmented reality, the visitors are threatened with more and more technical equipments, which ought to dramatise their visit. Therefore, we could end up in front of the Rosso Fiorentino's *Deposition*, with a goggle showing, indiscriminating, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *La ricotta*, a 3D reconstruction of the Golgotha, and an interactive movie where you can talk to the Magdalena who tells what she thinks about Dan Brown's conspiracy of Holy Grail.

This information hubbub only conceals an intellectual aphasia, which cannot say anymore anything about the work of art. Multiplying the audience's point of view, we disguise the tragic absence the point of view we need to understand the reality. Do we want be post-modern forever?

An experience, is dramatic when enquires the quality of the presence, hence the actor's identity, there and then. Immersion is the opposite of feeling dull; it means concentration. I trust my digital guide if it can build up a deeper relation with the environment, with the work of art. But if it is designed to make me chat with some other guy in the room or even to end up dating with the one that has liked my same pieces, well, it is only a mere product, it turns myself in a consumer, and the museum in a supermarket. We do not need it.

## **3... let's make a CDROM on theatre**

Some scholars still think that theatre studies have to face the contemporary digital culture with a simple translation of traditional contents in digital format. I definitely reckon that there are some good CDs made as teaching aids in theatre education, but *don't* think they could have place in a scientific publication record. Moreover, I have seen a large number of product that looks quite ridiculous (a slide show presented as the ultimate frontier of joining research between multimedia and theatre iconography, thousands of text based documents burned on CDROM allegedly an hypertext only because some hot-word and few jpegs , etc.). This foolishness comes out of a misunderstanding, so that theatre scholars prefer being immobile and wonder at most how the digital media can interfere in their own research topics. It is a conservative attitude, because doesn't challenge the discipline. At most, it tries to popularize the knowledge (which I find even paternalistic).

Opposite, as theatre scholars, we have to wonder how we can contribute, with our knowledge, our skills, to the creation of the new digital media's language. So, the theatre studies may improve their relevance and their cultural impact. It is important to focus on how theatre's codes, languages, production methods, research and analysis, could intervene actively within the computer science evolution. Are we ignorant and dull? Otherwise, we would have realized that some of the most important research laboratories in the world, since ten years, are asking this sort of contribution.

#### 4... let's make a virtual reality theatre production

On practitioners' side, this is equivalent to what I said above about scholars. It denotes a conservative soul that pretends to be "modern". It is like someone saying "I want a show with blonde actress only", or "I want a wholly fine gold painted set". Style isn't an accessory and it doesn't exist a "digital theatre" genre a priori. Here it is worth to accept Croce's opposition to genre. First, we make theatre art, then, and only for cataloguing and phenomenological purposes, we can gather similar experiences together. As Brecht said, we have to represent a word that can change. Once we have our point of view, we can decide which languages and effects ought to be used for better results. Otherwise, it is like scrabble: first, we have a set of letters and then we compose words. We could score a lot, but we hardly get any poetry.

Umberto Artoli stated that Futurism's passion for machines and technology (sometimes heroically naive), besides dissolving late romantic features, was directly opposed to positivism, was a symbol of a deeper metaphysic tension, which Bergson would have later called cooperation between mechanic and mystic.

#### 5 ... the project provides an interactive experience

The question is rather how we can have a non-interactive experience, and grounds on the vagueness of the term interactivity (more used, more meaningless). I even wonder how we can have an interactive narration. Narrative needs someone who takes responsibility of the plot (a point of view). If too many speakers talk at the same time we hardly get a clue of what they say; if I talk to myself, better you call the nuthouse. Moreover, as soon someone try to explain the notion on interactivity, you bet, at some point, he will refer to theatre, to the audience gathered together in one specific place, to the actors interacting each other, to improvisation and - even worst - to Commedia dell'Arte. Therefore, on those bases, I would say that the most interactive experience is to take the bus on rush hours.

Going past this exemplification – up to know – the best discussion on interactive artistic experience is led by Murray within the frame of procedural author.

To avoid the above confusion, better to underlie the distance between the words theatre and drama. Even if we are aware that there is a point in their semantic range where the two words overlapped and denote the same thing, there are differences in the extremes.

The former, *theatre*, is the art of vision, the language of space, the experience of here and now, the relation with audience. When we join this term to digital multimedia, this space gains new qualities. Peter Brook named *quality* as the fourth dimension of our life; Cubism found inspiration in a non-Euclidean's four dimensions geometry; Schlemmer thought he could reach a sort of classicism of human body through the study of its relation with space. Research on digital virtuality, cyberspace, artificial agents, they may all be recapitulate in the principle of identity between actor and stage (which was best defined by Prampolini in 1924 as actor-space). Rather than promulgate the apology of artificial here we see the chance of a new sensing stage. Here I think the best results have been obtained by contemporary dance (i.e. Palindrome), which have a separate place in history of theatre. Because dance deals with movement in space (since Renaissance there is a strong relation between harmonic proportions and architectonic proportions). A number of measuring techniques have allowed the dancers to play within an augmented (dense) space exceeding the three dimension, while light, sounds, images, display the relation between the body and those new dimensions.

However, I would not call those performances *drama*, the latter word, which means design, score, writing, the language we use to imitate the word through actions. In drama, the convergence is manifest on theoretical base but rather scarce on applications. Here, I believe, it is worth to invest our energy. The notion of “procedure” is the most interesting cultural development on the century: the way we represent processes – not data – through algorithms. Hence, there is a deep relation between drama and procedure. I would even say that every play (text), whatever is its form, is a procedure written in a given codified language, we may run in the moment we want producing a performance. Is a play-writer a coder? Here I just note that we could read (and maybe interpret) drama through the lens of the algorithm, and that some computer procedure could be improved if produced with a bit more drama knowledge.

However, it is not just a question of languages and methods. What turns a coder in an author is the meaning. As Greimas said, meaning is the result of a dialectic process. Theatre, enriched by this procedural attitude can establish this dialectic. Now, once we have overcome the Eighties, postmodernism and its vulgarizations, I would like a theatre that uses the notion of procedure to produce the meaning, instead of disintegrating it.

Let us go back to consider “writing”, to talk about meaning again. To the *random* function raised at an aesthetic level, let us oppose the strong notion of *plot* as a production of meaning.