Views on Absence/Presence:

Theater and Technology

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Proposals for a conversation

Transformations regarding the issue of absence / presence, now a common concern on the contemporary stage, have their possible antecedents in the sociocultural turn occurring during the twentieth century, with global effects. The emergence of new media alters the positioning of the subject and his or her perception as an individual and social member of a collectivity, bringing about shifts in aesthetic perception, both for those who see a production as for those who produce it. Thus, nowadays, one experiences a reversal of roles: the spectator has become increasingly active, becoming part of the work, and being able to transform it. If the spectator is increasingly present in the game the artist proposes, the latter has sought by his absence his own mode of acting.

The manipulation/use/production of technological devices offers multiple games, or forms of play that can give rise to ludic experiences or suggest other issues not yet experienced. The incorporation of tablets, cellular phones, laptops, screens, projectors and other devices compose sonorous and visual landscapes that become intrinsic materials of a dramaturgy, acting not only as scenographic objects. To manipulate these devices is to put yourself in a conflict zone where failure - a way of experiencing absence - is a given that permeates the entire game.

The (intangible) presence of images resizes how the other senses and devices are touched, such as the emergence of the tactile eye. One enters an ambiguous zone

in which to operate devices is also to be operated by them. The freedom in these maneuvers is located in an area where there are certain watchwords to initiate the event. There are certain fields of tension that we must access, laws to which we must acquiesce for the game happen. This is not a matter of inert devices, whether by their own structure or by what the technological apparatus implies: one manipulates the apparatus, and by extension the image. An object proposes all sorts of manipulation, in which we must demarcate territories, configure attitudes, weave relationships that can, in certain contexts, be composed of programmed actions. In this sense, an apparent absence is suggested that proposes that the spectator be active in an environment that can open up indefinitely, with the ability to escape and navigate in other places.

The particular life that each object brings is negated as it is programmed to perform certain functions on the scene. The presence of bodies by means of images, voices or other devices sometimes binds itself to a program that the spectator cannot <u>not</u> choose. There are cases where the only way to not accept something is to press the off-button, thereby disconnecting from the object. Devices invite you to play, to experience all kinds of relationships, but one needs *mastery* to deal with the instructions laid out to play it. Touch and contact are confused: managing the apparatus (dis)poses different bodily actions.

The present article discusses these issues addressing three aspects of this complex universe: the text as a technological device; the mixture, or merger, of the physical body with images through the use of videographic masks; and scenic spatiality as a poetic resource. Permeating all three instances - the presence of the spectator as an active participant.

Text, device and technology

Writing intended for the theater today, as Danan points out, is elaborated on the fringe of a "fragile dramaturgy and its absence or near absence. Between a theater of pure text material and the one that seeks to maintain a dramaturgical principle" (2012, p. 53). Following this path, we can speak of a contemporary dramaturgical device in which technology is situated not only in the management of electronic objects, but in the very way in which dramaturgy is composed: articulated in

a space in which alive and inert, machine and human are not antinomic givens, but rather emerge as space open to all possibilities. In the sense used here, the dramaturgical device aims to produce an event like a thing, "but a thing to which something else still adheres" (Heidegger, 1998, p. 12). Effecting a shift in Heidegger's approach to the work of art to the territory of the drama, we would say a dramaturgical device promotes an opening that destabilizes the relationship between the earth and the world, questioning the everyday discourse founded on mechanical reproduction, and the empty talk that rigidifies the original vitality of things. This device convokes absence, since to reveal an action is at the same time to deal with concealment. To create a dramaturgical device is to open crevices, to create an event in which "things acquire their own delay and urgency, their remoteness and proximity, breadth and narrowness" (Heidegger, 1998, p. 43). To open a space is to create a world and let the "earth be earth (...). Earth is what, in essence, is closed. To prepare the earth means: to open it up as something that has been closed" (Heidegger, 1988, p 44-45.). From this perspective, to constitute a dramaturgical device is simultaneously to give rise to a world and take care of the earth. It's unveiling and concealment, presence and absence, because "the world is founded on earth and earth bursts through the world" (Heidegger, 1998, p. 47). We could give the dynamism opening/closing the name of action.

A text-device does not necessarily have to deal with apparatus, since the technology it involves has to do with its plasmation, with how to set it up with experiences that summon up lives, the establishment of worlds, making up a host of intricate actions that involve the work and also the person who creates it. Thus, for example, in the plastic-arts devices that artist Fred Eerdekens creates, words are redolent of absence - which does not signify lack, but a way of looking through shadow. The artist creates sculptures in which shadow brings hidden manifestations to light, forming a non-transparent language, moving away from "formal language, purely mechanical, operational, devoid of any ambivalence" (Byung-Chul, 2014, p. 12). The word carries within itself its own negation, the necessary resistance to coercive injunctions hell-bent on making it smooth, flat, without depth or roughness. The word that emerges from this absence, from the shadow that originates from the light projected on an object, brings together world and earth.

In Eerdekens' book *Life Itself Is Not Enough* (Fig. 01) there is an arrangement

composed of clothing, glass, steel and a light projector, from which flows the word traversed by the shadow, a kind of absence that reveals life. According to the artist: "When words are written (as opposed to spoken), they are used in the absence (and because of the absence) of something else. Later, when the text is read, it will be the absence of the author." Eerdenkens refers to Samuel Beckett as a source of inspiration for his creations. In Beckett, technology is not only about the devices and media supports necessary for the attainment of his drama, but also the manner in which the agency of dramaturgical device is expressed. There is a path, which comprises *En Attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) to *Soufle* (*Breath*), in which absence(s) and technology(ies) have been experimented (lived) by the author in different configurations of his textual devices.

Figure. 01: *Life Itself Is Not Enough*, Fred Eerdekens (1999), in
http://www.magda-gallery.com/fr/life-itself-not-enough-fred-eerdekens

A dramaturgical device, by employing technological objects, invokes the diverse deaths to which we are subjected to in our daily lives. We are urged, daily, to dispose of thing, to exercise transparency, placing ourselves in a kind of presence (present) in which absence rhymes with obsolescence through scarcity. As Milton Santos tells us:

> Our time enshrines the multiplication of the sources of scarcity, whether by the overwhelming number of objects on the market, or the incessant call to consume. Each day, in this era of globalization, a new object is presented, that is shown to us to whet our appetite. (2001, p. 130-131).

To compose a dramaturgical device is to deal with absence in the sense of making

"come into the world what originally escaped the world, its foundation and its abyssal depth" (Haar, 2007, p. 87). It is to configure something through a language that brings out the game between veiling (absence) and unveiling (presence) that transits in more than one sense.

The skin as a screen, the skin as simulation

Technology can enhance the relationship of absence/presence, to the extent that bodies tend to lose mass, becoming volatile objects in pure images. In artists such as videoperformer Otávio Donasci and director Denis Marleau, this issue expands when they question the effects of man-machine hybridization

Figure. 02: Videotango, Otávio Donasci, 2011), in
http://www.performanceartebrasil.com.br/imagens/

Donasci creates an atmosphere that expands human potential and externalizes the connection between biological and technological rhythms. The body-image conjunctures of his videocreatures (Fig. 02) transforms the skin on screen, enabling the creation of a third being - a hybrid - through the communion between body (present) and face (absent). Videographic masks become mirrors to offer the spectator moments of strangeness and reflection, associating *specimen* (appearance, its form) and *spectrum* (specter, apparition) with technology, spatially increasing the double abstraction.

The screen as skin simulates and dissimulates, hides and displays the artificial reinvention of real sign systems. A passage that is no longer real, not the truth, but

hyper-real promoting simulated models of possible realities. For Baudrillard, "simulation is nothing more than to feign not to have what we have," to make it seem real, to imitate. On the other hand, to dissimulate is "feign what we don't have," to suppress the appearance of that which you wish to hide (1981, p. 9). Such duplicity creates an aesthetic confluence, a body-image that is an attempt to give us back the awareness of the limitations of human control over the body, especially confronted by the multiple hybridisms of post-human concepts.

Fig. 03: Les Aveugles - Les Fantasmagories Technologiques, Denis Marleau,2009, in
http://www.lhebdoduvendredi.com/article/9011/les_aveugles_ou_quand_technologie_
rime_avec_dramaturgie

If for Donasci technological masking is guided by the duality of the body (present) and face (absent), for director Denis Marleau skin as simulation allows the unfolding of the animate and inanimate, life and death, the real and the virtual. In his performance *Les Aveugles - Les Fantasmagories Technologiques* (*The Blind - Technological Phantasmagoricals*) (Fig. 03), by removing the body from sight, thereby replacing the *physis*[1] by *techné*, he refers us to the notion of presence given by the ghost, an endless loop, a repetition of the last image the dead. The mask and the ghost are permeated by two worlds: the natural and the supernatural.

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[1] The Greek word *physis* can be translated as nature, but its meaning is broader. It also refers also to reality, not reality as ready and finished, but to one in movement and process, which is born and develops, to the eternal fount, perennial, from which everything flows and to which everything returns. *Techné* is a knowledge distinct from technique in the general sense. It is not limited to the pure contemplation of reality, but to activity interested in solving practical problems, in serving as a guide for men in their struggle to improve survival, to cure diseases, construct tools and buildings and such.

The ghostly promotes *cibridism*, the amalgam of cyber and hybrid featuring technologies that enable us to inhabit two worlds simultaneously. Be it real, be it virtual, cybrid behavior frees itself from rigidly determined space, which allows videographic images to alter time/space and elevate the figure to the potency of an entity. In turn, the body as an entity carries and produces virtualities, creating an effect of presence and reorganizing the previous problematic (obsolete body) in a post-human interpretation of control over nature, the body a virtualization in response to the finitude of existence. In contemplating the skin-simulation nourished by videographic masking, we re-enforce Levy's notion (1996) of actualization,[2] which takes its point of departure from a dynamic of forces and purposes that seem to anticipate a universe predisposed to relieve us of the body burden.

Videographic masking, with its base in the binomial absence/presence, reflects the moment through which the concepts of post and transhuman walk in the quest for total domination of nature and new relationships within what may someday exist: the dream of transcendence with the machine, the fusion of life in a biotechnological fabric.

Poetic landscape, scenic spatiality

The use of different supports such as the body, installation, photography, video, and the computer in the representations of objects and figures has broadened the horizons embraced by the concept of "genre painting."[3] An example is director Heiner Goebbels' work *Stifters Dinge* (Fig. 04), a play without actors in which the scenic elements become protagonists of a theatrical performance. Making use of actions involving light and elements of nature, the kinetics of mechanical and servo-controlled devices, the presence of acousmatic voices (disembodied voices), Goebbels plays with public perception, turning into mist rain that pours down on stage, and making it dance to the sound of five pianos playing without the presence of pianists.

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[2] For Pierre Levy (2001), actualization is the creation, the invention of a form from the dynamic configuration of forces. The virtual is not opposed to the real, but rather to the actual.
[3] Genre painting is a sober style, realistic, committed to the description of routine scenes, themes of daily life, household chores, or even landscapes. The portrait, landscape and still life are related to this pictorial style.

Figure. 04: *Stifters Dinge*, Heiner Goebbels, 2013, in
http://www.omm.de/veranstaltungen/festspiele2013/RUHR-2013-stifters-dinge.html

One of the inspirations for this proposal is landscape art, where the spectator can trace the path of his own gaze through a mosaic of fragments and situations. The absence of the human figure in *Stifters Dinge* frees the imagination of the public and establishes a poetic founded in perceptual relations of the stage to the scene, leaning on what Goebbels called the "aesthetics of absence," which can be achieved by the radical action of eliminating the actor from the stage or by strategies that reduce his role as protagonist, as a way of destabilizing or minimalizing the importance of a relationship between human presence and scenic elements, among other operating procedures. Goebbels engenders a "drama of perception": an artistic view in which "the spectator is involved in a drama of experience, rather than looking at drama in which psychologically motivated relationships are represented by figures on stage" (2010, p 05).

The director Robert Wilson makes use of the genre portrait as a poetic device in his *Voom Portraits* exhibition, using high definition plasma screens affixed to the walls like paintings. By appropriating the space and time of videographic language to draw his portraits, Wilson ended up creating real living-pictures, provocative video portraits whose images are transformed slowly before the eyes of the beholder.

In *Voom Portraits* (Fig.05), Wilson tends to use frames in medium shots and close-

ups to establish the space on the video screen, different from what is traditionally done on the Italian stage, which usually requires spectator distance for the appreciation of scenic images, as if it were in front of a landscape (or a general plane). However, as Wilson himself says, "I broke those rules in theater and video, and I started working spatially with the three traditional art forms: portraiture, still life and landscape" (Wilson, 2012, p. 35).

When Wilson conceives a scene as a "three-dimensional painting [it] makes things work as still life and the actors as full-length portraits in motion" (Lehmann, 2007, p. 133). The division and the framing of the scenic area leads the audience to construct some genre or another, which can be managed either by lighting control, as well as by the spectator's perceptual choice. By taking the entire spectrum of scenic composition in front of us we face a landscape in constant transformation, where actors and objects are arranged so that spectators perceive tensions between the forms and create their own interpretations.

Figure. 05. Voom Portraits, Robert Wilson (2007), in
http://www.justjared.com/photo-gallery/2416975/brad-pitt-boxers-03/

The bodies on the screens of *Voom Portraits* are just images, and like the recorded voices reproduced by speakers in *Stifters Dinge*, they produce an effect on the spectator that evokes the presence of physical bodies. However, as Gerald Sieg-

mund (2007a, 2007b) tells us, what, in fact, the public sees, hears or perceives is absence: a gap that is not exactly a fault, or deficiency, but rather a place in which the subject comes into existence through marking out a space for his desire. Precisely because there is this absence, the senses are spatialized and the whole environment in which the spectator (and the actor) meet becomes part of their corporeality.

Even though they are in different parts of the stage environment, the scenic elements are connected in an exchange of affect between the audience and the stage, setting up a recursive structure, which incessantly returns upon itself in a feedback process, and that causes space to bend - like the intricate coiling of a labyrinth that creates cavities, depressions, and gaps - configuring a privileged place for the development of the subject's relationships with the world. This structure tends to develop spatially autonomously, in correspondences and at contact points, giving increasingly more importance to the visual dimension of the scene, where the readings and interpretations of the spectator and the interactions between the elements on stage interpenetrate and construct meaning in a conflicting or harmonious way.

In conclusion

On the contemporary stage, absence and presence are resized by technological devices that virtualize life, capable of creating realities and temporalities distinct from the here and now. From this perspective, dramaturgical territories are configured by the use of scenic devices and by how they articulate and structure the scenic text. The scenic arts bring into play the body, either by physical presence or by arrangements that permit the skin to act as canvas or simulacrum. Space is problematized, engendering a (non) territory that involves the spectator to relate to the work, contributing various readings.

The friction between theater and technology establishes what Rancière called "the disappearance of the performer and the appearance of the public." The search for an active spectator ends up coming to an emancipated spectator, one who calls into question the opposition between looking and acting. The spectator not only looks, but also goes beyond looking: "he observes, selects, compares, interprets.

He relates what he sees with many other things that he saw on other stages, in other kinds of places" (Rancière, 2012, p. 17).

Performer and spectator, above all, are interpreters and active translators regarding what they see and what they feel, they are and make themselves present, even while catching a glimpse of absence. Both dialogue with the media apparatus constituting a co-presence, accepting the projection of what was already present as the embodiment of an (a)temporal reality.

Beyond being intersections of language, we can say that, through various technological contributions, we reach a virtual theater scene, mediated, one that calls into question not only the artist's body and the presence of the spectator, but also the form of contemporary scenic sensitivity.

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