

**Contemporary theatricality and the civilization of virtual performance. Presence,
participation and digital image**

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Summary

We are constantly surrounded by digital screens and, as members of contemporary society, we experience, in a highly degree, a strange feeling that reality has multiple dimensions. The idea that digital and virtual worlds change, in an unprecedented way, our habits of living, our perception of time and space as predetermined categories, became an obvious truth. If we are to accept this point of view, which urged the writing of this PhD thesis, than it becomes more accurate the paradoxical or counterintuitive limits that marked our approach: we were embarked on analyzing, in a most scientific way, a field the more familiar to everybody, the more unknown in its very core essence. And nobody can accurately predict what this digital revolution means for the future of human spirituality. Put it in another words we faced the situation to be in debted to many collateral fields: IT or digital and virtual technologies, philosophy (as we have to face ontological dilemmas related to time and space categories), communication (because we had to try to understand how this new cultural product, the digital theatre, communicate itself and is received by public at large) and, last but not least, the art field, meaning contemporary theatricality. To keep all these multiple perspectives upon the theme in a required balance and trying to preserve our clear view and skip the unwanted and incorrect digressions into related fields, imbued by theatricality, such as video games or education, meant a real intellectual and spiritual challenge.

The first chapter paid attention to Marshall McLuhan's sentence "The medium is the message". This sentence has not only defined our way to connect each other but also has given us an important and valuable tool to research the world. Our knowledge is moulded by the mechanisms we acquire it and this simple truth becomes more visible when we confront ourselves with the gap between generations. Before digital revolution the only available medium to get information was the book which shaped people's reality in a certain way. The knowledge was perceived as something definitely shaped, with certain boundaries of time and a linear flow towards an anticipated direction. The generation usually called "the native digital" has a completely different perspective on the topic as they embraced this new medium and its characteristics: it reveals a superimposing of the perceptions, (visual, auditive and dynamic), simultaneity of multiple messages, endless flow of information and so on. As a general rule, technology and art are perceived as antagonistic, but the new developments show their profound connection. Art and theatre, in particular, should and would reflect the technological standards. As

we have mentioned, postmodernism questioned all the ranking list of cultural values, trying to reverse the oppositions and connect rhizomatically the different types of art in a way hardly to be predicted before. We simplified an extremely complex cultural process by this presentation, maybe in an unreasonable manner, but theatre remains the mirror of its epoch and thus all the challenging qualities of posthuman society or digital and virtual technology have to be reflected by it.

The fundamental question which stands at the core of this type of analysis could be the following: does digital theatre, (a new hybrid artistic form) deserve to stay next to the theatre as we always knew it, with all its traditional characteristic? In addition, another question dealing with the same problem is: should or could the screen replace the classical “fourth wall” of a stage, keeping in mind that the screen functions, in a metaphorical way, as a very flexible, permeable wall? Even if any hierarchy is no longer acceptable and art remains the land of freedom, of assuming emotional and intellectual risks, we still feel the need to examine this new form of theatre in order to find “its place”. There are many possible answers to this dilemma but one of them proved itself more relevant: the logical relationship under which all forms of theatre should function is “both... and” instead of exclusion.

As it was mentioned before, the theoretical chapters followed the evolution of few elements which shape any theatrical performance – theatricality, time, space, the relationship between actor and audience, in terms of artistic approach and emotions etc. It becomes beyond any doubts that its main features still remain unchanged, because we are dealing with the same need and strive of the character to come to life and the same hope – of finding an important truth or reconnect with their own emotions, through actor’s playing – from the audience’s part. The differences are related to the practical means of creating and recreating this truth, because the *hic et nunc* dimension of theatre is no longer required or necessary. Thus, the very strict limited time span of a play changed and augmented in an unusual way: timezone differences (which could alter the quality of connection of audiences to the energy of the play, even their ludic disposition) or the sense of creating the play duration through personal negotiations, as it happens in virtual theatre. More than that, video images help the public to connect easier to other moments, related to the plot, possibility hardly to be achieved on a classical form of theatre.

Space and time always assumed each other, since space can be crossed only in time, but, if we deal only with space dimension, it is also important to underline that art impregnate irreversible a place. The stage will always have something strange, unearthly, due to the aura – to borrow the

well known term coined by Walter Benjamin – which lingers for so long after the play stopped. As a consequence, if the audience attend a digital theatre performance, inside their own house, or from other places, inappropriate for a deep, meaningful, artistic connection, all the show's data will be changed and we could talk about a loss. This kind of audience has another way to approach art, ask for a different rhythm, for interactivity, features which put an important mark on contemporary theatricality, in favor of performance, happening and so on. We'll underline, once again, that stage and theatre hall had no connections points, and "the fourth wall" has functioned as the only means of communications. This reality has changed when speaking about digital and, especially, virtual theatre. The new audience is invited on stage to choose its perspective and to create themselves that "perfect space", different of the shadow of a theatre hall.

The virtual medium changes the perspective, from a panoramic view, an outside one, which let the public to understand and evaluate the entire image, to an inside one. This point of view, also called in epic literature "avec" narrative perspective, allows audience to relate subjectively to surroundings, to express their inner feelings, but also diminishes power of synthesis. The switch of perspective means that the audience loses control over the entire picture in a postmodern way of feeling. More than that, digital and virtual space lack the richness of reality and it cannot become familiar to anybody, as a personal space usually does. Therefore, we could call it a non-space, similar to those from an airport when everybody is a passer-by. This impossibility to appropriate a space, to make it your own, is expected to change the aesthetics of theatricality, but it is impossible to predict the extension of this process.

The contemporary audience is defined as restless, willing to risk more than usual and interact with the artistic space and actors, to explore, (and there are many examples of TV reality shows, which promote common people, or social media content creators, to prove us right). To balance all these features remains an important ideal, always desired, since contemporary theatrical experiments could be far too radical and induce uncomfortable feelings to an unaware public, incapable of detachment. If the public keeps a safe distance it will conduct them to involve in a rational, abstract manner, and this is considered the fundamental condition of the aesthetics analysis. To sum up, this change is, probably, the most important in the new theatricality because it makes impossible for the public to connect each other into a real communion as it happened before, in a theatre hall. The importance of this communion was also emphasized by Johan Huizinga, among others, when questioned the essence of that power which connects the audience

on a sports ground and makes them to feel and react in such a different manner than in any other space or context.

As we mentioned repeatedly, every element which contributes to an artistic creation is transformed in digital medium but, probably, the audience response suffered to the greatest extent. The lack of co-presence actor-audience, specific to a mediated medium, has obvious impact over the possibility to create the synergy experienced in a theatre hall. This is an important issue because the level of attention and ability to focus oneself will be part of the possibility to reach the catharsis feeling. It is necessary to grasp the meaning of interactivity in virtual medium in opposition with classical way to relate to art. Because we consider this topic, probably most obvious at the first sight, a key to understand the profound loneliness which defines the contemporary people's life. We are in a constant communication process with each other, to an unknown level before, but, nonetheless, we are constantly longing for a "real human touch" and, also, resent social media as an artificial medium. Another aspect deserves to be emphasized in regard to this: even if the audience is reduced to a single person, (as it is the case of virtual environment), or multiplied to a countless number in digital medium (if the theatrical performance is delivered online, than any person, worldwide, could sign in as a participant) we cannot afford to neglect a simple truth – contemporary art addresses to individuals, more than to a community with same interests and values. And this implies a new approach to the public response regarding art and theatre, as such. In order to make the idea clearer, we could parallel it with the debate around the most suitable space to be proficient at work – open space, a more private one or even work from home. Each of them has its advantages and disadvantages, but, if the open space has been regarded previously as more suitable (it was considered to improve communication among team, to create a better team work), nowadays the common opinion is slightly different. Symbolically speaking, this could be a consequence of contemporary individual trying to block the endless digital images which put a real pressure on us and consume our energy.

The changes of contemporary theatricality become visible when we distinguish among theatrical performance's specific versus characteristics of film or TV show, on one hand, and the differences between the same theatre play experienced in both live and digital version. Which of them reflects in a higher quality the deepest feelings and emotions and which of them is better received by contemporary audience, are questions to address ourselves.

The third chapter represents an essential case study. It is about *Digital Stage*, a video-on-demand theatrical platform, a valuable cultural product created by “Radu Stanca” Sibiu National Theatre. The need for its appearance comes from the difficult context, sanitary, social and so on, of pandemic year 2020, and becomes a proof that any burden is a potential blessing in disguise. The platform streamed online the 27th edition of The Sibiu International Theatre Festival, which took place in 2020. Our concerns were related to the features of a festival, in general, and of Sibiu International Theatre Festival, in particular.

We usually approach a festival as a living organism which increases and falls in the same time with the community it belongs. In other words, there are so many invisible strings to pull a festival towards constant success or, on the contrary, to doom it in oblivion or artificiality, and all of them are mastered by the community within it develops. The human background of respective community, in social, cultural terms, as well as the economic potential, are powerful leverage in regard with a festival. To create an important cultural event requires a constantly hard work, and also a top management, capable to grow the cultural taste of local or temporary public. In order to prevent the hardships in its development, it is important to respect a fragile balance between local potential to open up, at any level, and the impact generated by a heavy tourism in that particular period of time. More than that, an important goal for the entire community is to preserve during the entire year the cultural energy developed by the theatrical event, through many other cultural events. This artistic flourishing aims to strenghten the level of community’s cultural expectations but, in the same time, to develop new ones and to produce an economic growth because of a constant flow of tourists. A possible pattern for this development was settled by Edinburgh International Festival wich succeeded in developing cultural events during entire year and increased the cultural offer up to the point to transform Edinburgh into a constant European cultural capital. Sibiu had the advantage to be appointed European Cultural Capital in 2007, and, from that point, all the cultural events, besides the international theatre festival, increased in number and value, as well. One of the specific marks of theatre festival from Sibiu is its dual form of presentation, having both indoor and outdoor events.

As we have mantioned before, the year 2020 or the pandemic year of COVID-19, when we faced lots of sanitary restrictions, brought an important set-back in festival’s organization. Constantin Chiriac, the founder and the president of The Sibiu International Theatre Festival, detailed so many times about the insecurity of those moments and the urge to found the most

efficient way to honour the commitments already engaged with the theatre companies, and also the desire to fulfill audience's expectations, eager to joy and to meet their beloved artists. The best solution was to create the Digital Stage platform which made possible the streaming of Festival's performances not only in ten days, as usually the Festival lasts, but during the entire year. This decision was an act of generosity which alleviated insecurity of those difficult moments. It is not to be neglected another possibility, to succeed in making them theatre goers.

This could be just another story with a happy ending or an example of how we should face all the life's challenges. But, besides this potential role model, to show us how to surpass a difficult moment, the *Digital Stage* represents so much more. It represents a necessary step to grasp the contemporary epoch's sensibility, which became an important problem to sort out, regardless that difficult moment in our recent history. Besides, to deny or just underestimate the impact of digital and virtual reality upon our lives is almost pointless. And thus, the *Digital Stage* gives to theatrical movement and to the public at large, from Sibiu and beyond, a chance to cultural fulfillment. And a chance to understand, and flourish from theatrical point of view within our epoch's demands.

We explored, in the last part of the thesis, the theatricality of digital medium from aesthetics point of view, by analyzing few performances posted on *Digital Stage – Uncanny Valley, Three sisters. Monologues; Live, Autobahn* – and few others presented both as live performances, filmed during stage representation, and as theatre-film creations – *Tom and Jerry 2.0; Partners in crime; Mindblindness*. Besides the first one, *Uncanny Valley*, produced by Rimini Protokoll Company, a performance invited in The Sibiu International Theatre Festival, the rest of them are produced by Radu Stanca National Theatre of Sibiu and reveal the quality of the artists. Our main topic was to follow how these performances (directors – Andrei și Andreea Grosu, Florin Piersic Jr., Mariana Cămărășan, Bobi Pricop etc.) shed lights on new theatricality, on the elements specific to its language: blurring the distinction life-lifeless, the space-time delimitations, changing the perspective during filming, the inside-outside changing of the scenery, the richness of visual effects, the possibility to transmit emotions in such different ways to the public etc. One could say these are characteristics of cinematography as well, and the movie-theatre is a hybrid without a distinct identity, and this could be a serious drawback. There is a solid ground regarding this opinion since the performance, once recorded, it will function as a movie and could be revisited in the same conditions, but there are also important distinctions. One of them comes from the montage, specific to movies, and the live recording of a theatrical performance.

We embrace the idea that any trying to shed lights on the challenges of contemporary theatricality is right because it reveals author's intellectual journey, to say the least. We share joy and even happiness when we are part of a performance, live or digital, – regardless our status, as actors, directors, light designer and so on, or simple audience – and this state of mind and of heart is hard to define. So, we simply call it the magic and spell of theatre. And any doctoral dissertation has the duty to protect and reflect this magic.