

# Aspects

Text – space – time – body – media

## Text

### *Chora-graphy, the body-text*

The new theatre confirms the not so new insight that there is never a harmonious relationship but rather a perpetual conflict between text and scene. Bernhard Dort talked about the unification of text and stage never really taking place, saying that it always remained a relationship of oppression and of compromise.<sup>1</sup> Being a latent structural conflict of any theatrical practice anyway, this inevitability can now become a consciously intended principle of staging. What is decisive here is not – as is often implied by the popular and unquestioned opposition between ‘avant-gardist’ theatre and ‘text theatre’ – the opposition verbal/non-verbal. The wordless dance may be boring and overly didactic while the signifying word may be a dance of language gestures. In postdramatic theatre, breath, rhythm and the present actuality of the body’s visceral presence take precedence over the logos. An opening and dispersal of the logos develop in such a way that it is no longer necessarily the case that a meaning is communicated from A (stage) to B (spectator) but instead a specifically theatrical, ‘magical’ transmission and connection happen by means of language. Artaud was the first to theorize this. Julia Kristeva pointed out that Plato in his *Timaeus* develops the idea of a ‘space’ that is meant to render a logically unsolvable paradox thinkable in an ‘anticipating manner’, namely the paradox of having to think of being also as becoming. According to Plato, there was at the origin a conceiving, receptive (maternally connoted) ‘space’, not logically comprehensible and in whose womb the logos with its oppositions of signifiers and signifieds, hearing and seeing, space and time was differentiating itself in the first place. This ‘space’ is called ‘chora’. The chora is something like an antechamber and at the same time the secret cellar and foundation of the logos of language. It remains antagonistic to logos. Yet as rhythm and enjoyment of sonority it subsists in all language as its ‘poetry’. Kristeva refers to this dimension of the ‘chora’ in all processes of signification as the ‘*Semiotic*’ (as distinguished from the ‘*Symbolic*’). What is emerging in the new theatre, as much as in the radical attempts of the modernist ‘langage poétique’, can therefore be understood as attempts towards a *restitution of chora*: of a space and speech/discourse without

telos, hierarchy and causality, without fixable meaning and unity. In this process the word will resurge in its whole amplitude and volume as sonority and as address, as a beckoning and appeal (Heidegger's 'Zu-sprache'). In such a signifying process across all positings (*Setzungen*) of the logos, it is not the destruction of the latter that is happening but its poetic – and here theatrical – deconstruction. In this sense, we can say theatre is turned into *chora-graphy*: the deconstruction of a discourse oriented towards meaning and the invention of a space that eludes the laws of telos and unity.

A history of the new theatre (and already of the modern theatre) would have to be written as the history of a mutual disruption between text and stage. From this perspective, Brecht's theses on the 'literarization' of theatre, developed in the 1920s, appear in a new light, too: they are equally, although with different intention, aimed at the presence of the written text as an interruption of the self-sufficient imagery of the stage. An interesting example for the theatrical treatment of literary text can be found in the work of Giorgio Barberio Corsetti. Corsetti, one of the most distinguished minds of the Italian avant-garde theatre, worked on Kafka for many years. His thesis, too, is: the theatre needs the *text as a foreign body*, as a 'world outside the stage'. Precisely because theatre increasingly extends its borders with the help of optical tricks and the combination of video, projections and live presence, according to Corsetti, it must not get lost in the permanent self-thematization of the 'opsis' (visual presentation). Rather, it has to refer to the text as a quality that resists the scenic image. Corsetti explicitly refers to Meyerhold, Grotowski and The Living Theatre. In his theatre works the performers do not embody particular persons. A critic described Corsetti's realization of Kafka's *Description of Struggle* as follows:

Sometimes they – the actors – are one and the same person with three people, sometimes monsters with multiple heads and arms, . . . sometimes only an element, a 'building block' in a complicated body machine, sometimes a projected film 'shadow' of a person takes on a surreal life of its own.<sup>2</sup>

The unreal room evoked in Kafka's text finds its correspondence in tilting boxes, revolving walls, steep staircases the actors are having to struggle up, and the alternation of shadow play and corporeal presence. Interior and exterior intertwine just as in Kafka's text. Theatre here does not interpret individuals and the narrative threads of a text but articulates its language as a disturbing reality on stage, which for its part is inspired by the text's idiosyncrasies.

The *principle of exposition* applied to body, gesture and voice also seizes the language material and attacks language's function of representation. Instead of a linguistic *re-presentation* of facts, there is a 'position' of tones, words, sentences, sounds that are hardly controlled by a 'meaning' but instead by the scenic composition, by a visual, not text oriented dramaturgy. The rupture between being and meaning has a shock-like effect: something is exposed with the urgency of suggested meaning – but then fails to make the expected meaning recognizable.

The idea of an exposition of language seems paradoxical. Nevertheless, since Gertrude Stein's theatre texts – if not earlier – we have the example of a language that loses its immanent teleological temporality and orientation towards meaning and becomes like an *exhibited object*. Stein achieves this through techniques of repeating variations, through the uncoupling of immediately obvious semantic connections, and through the privileging of formal arrangements according to syntactic or musical principles (similarities in sound, alliterations, or rhythmic analogies).

Apart from collage and montage, the principle of polyglossia proves to be omnipresent in postdramatic theatre. Multi-lingual theatre texts dismantle the unity of national languages. In *Roman Dogs* (1991) Heiner Goebbels created a collage made up of spirituals, texts by Heiner Müller in German and by William Faulkner in English (*The Sanctuary*), and French Alexandrine verses from Corneille's *Horace* (performed by the actress Cathérine Jaumiaux). These verses were being sung more than recited, the language perpetually tipping over from beautiful perfection into broken stuttering and noise. Theatre asserts a polyglossia on several levels, playfully showing gaps, abruptions and unsolved conflicts, even clumsiness and loss of control. Certainly the employment of several languages within the frame of one and the same performance is often due to the conditions of production: many of the most advanced creations of theatre can only be financed through international co-productions, so even for pragmatic reasons it seems obvious to bring the languages of the participating countries to prominence. But this polyglossia also has immanent artistic reasons. Rudi Laermans has pointed out that for Jan Lauwers it is not enough to state that his theatre is multilingual. For, this circumstance does not explain why his performers have to use sometimes their mother tongue but sometimes also a foreign language, so that the 'difficulty with language communication' arises not just for the spectators. Lauwers establishes a shared *space of language problems* in which the actors as well as the spectators experience the blockades of linguistic communication.

Frequently we are made aware of the physical, motoric act of speaking or reading of text itself as an *unnatural, not self-evident* process. In this principle of understanding the *speech act as action*, a split emerges that is important for postdramatic theatre: it provokes by bringing to light that the word does not belong to the speaker. It does not organically reside in his/her body but remains a *foreign body*. Out of the gaps of language emerges its feared adversary and double: stuttering, failure, accent, flawed pronunciation mark the conflict between body and word. In the reading-performances of Theater Angelus Novus, however, the sheer duration of the *Iliad* reading (22 hours) entailed that after a certain time the sensual and vocal sound world of speech seemed to separate from the people reading. The words were floating in space by themselves like the sound of certain Tibetan 'singing bowls' as you circle their rim – like an autonomous sonorous body that hovers above it in the air. Jacques Lacan has advanced the thesis that the voice (just like the gaze) belongs to the fetishized objects of desire that he refers to with the term '*objet a*'. The theatre presents the

voice as the object of exposition, of an erotic perception – which produces all the more tension when it contrasts so drastically with the horrifying content of battle descriptons, as in the case of the Homer reading.

### ***Textscape, theatre of voices***

A term that could capture the new variants of text should carry the connotation of the ‘spacing’ understood in the sense of Derrida’s ‘espacement’: the phonetic materiality, the temporal course, the dispersion in space, the loss of teleology and self-identity. I have chosen the term ‘textscape’ because it designates at the same time the connection of postdramatic theatre language with the new dramaturgies of the visual and retains the reference to the landscape play. Text, voice and noise merge in the idea of a *soundscape* – but of course in a different sense than in classical stage realism (e.g. Stanislavsky’s stagings of Chekhov’s plays). By contrast to the latter, the postdramatic ‘audio landscape’ Wilson talks about does not mimetically represent reality but creates a space of association in the mind of the spectator. The ‘auditive stage’ around the theatre image opens up ‘intertextual’ reference to all sides or complements the scenic material through musical motifs of sound or ‘concrete’ noise. In this context, it is illuminating that Wilson occasionally remarked that his ideal of theatre was the union of silent film and radio play. This, he said, was a matter of opening the frame. For the respective other sense – the imaginary seeing in the radio play, the imaginary hearing in silent film – a boundless space opens up. When we are watching (a silent film), the auditive space is boundless, when we are listening (to a radio play) the visual space is boundless. While watching a silent movie, we imagine voices of which we can only see the physical realization: mouths, faces, the facial expressions of the people listening, etc. When listening to a radio play we imagine faces, figures and shapes for the disembodied voices. What we are talking about here is that the space of the stage and the more comprehensive sound space together create a third space that comprises the scene *and* the theatron.

*From sense to sensuality* is the name of the shift inherent to the theatrical process. And it is the phenomenon of the live *voice* that most directly manifests the presence and possible dominance of the sensual *within* sense/meaning itself and, at the same time, makes the heart of the theatrical situation, namely the *co-presence of living actors*, palpable. Owing to an illusion constitutive to European culture, the voice seems to be coming directly from the ‘soul’. It is sensed as the quasi-unfiltered mental, psychic and spiritual charisma of the ‘person’. The speaking person is the *present person* par excellence, a metaphor of the ‘other’ (in the sense used by Emmanuel Levinas) appealing to the responsibility of the spectators – not to a hermeneutics. The spectators find themselves exposed to the ‘meaningless’ (*sinnfrei*) presence of the speaker as a question addressed to them, to their gaze as corporeal creatures. But often postdramatic theatre does not so much aim to make us hear the one voice of the one subject but rather realizes a *dissemination* of voices, which incidentally is by no means exclusively tied to electronically or otherwise ‘technically’ arranged fragmentations. We find the *choral*

bundling and the *desecration* of the word; the exposition of the *physis* of the voice (in screaming, groaning, animal noises) and the architectonic *spatialization*. Whether we think of Schleef, Fabre and Lauwers, of Matschappéj Discordia, Theatergroep Hollandia, La Fura dels Baus or Théâtre du Radeau – simultaneity, polyglossia, chorus and ‘scream arias’ (Wilson) contribute to the text, frequently becoming a semantically irrelevant libretto and a sonorous space without firm boundaries. The boundaries between language as an expression of live presence and language as a prefabricated material are blurred. The reality of the voice itself is thematized. It is arranged and made rhythmic according to formal musical or architectonic patterns; through repetition, electronic distortion, superimposition to the point of incomprehensibility; the voice exposed as noise, scream and so on; exhausted through mixing, separated from the figures as disembodied and *misplaced voices*.

Traditionally, the vocal sound as an aura around a body, whose truth is its word, promised nothing less than the subjectively determined identity of the human being. Hence, playing with the new media technologies that decompose the presence of the actor and especially his/her corporeal and vocal unity is no child’s play. The electronically purloined voice puts an end to the privilege of identity. If the voice was classically defined as the most important instrument of the player, it is now a matter of the whole body ‘becoming voice’. An explicit experience of the auditive dimension emerges when the tightly sealed whole of the theatre process is decomposed, when sound and voice are separated and organized according to their own logic, when the body-space, the scenic space and the space of the spectator are divided, redistributed and newly united by sound and voice, word and noise. Between the body and the geometry of the scene, the sonic space of the voice is the unconscious of spoken theatre (*Sprechtheater*). The theatre of drama, the *mise en scène* of textual meaning, does not bring the auditive semiotics to prominence in its own right. Reduced to transporting meaning, the word is deprived of the possibility to sketch a sonic horizon that can only be realized theatrically. In postdramatic theatre, however, the electronic and corporeal/sensory disposition newly discovers the voice. As it makes the presence of the voice the basis of an auditive semiotics, it separates it from meaning, conceiving of the sign-making as a *gesticulation of the voice* and listening to the echoes in the dungeons of the literary palaces. This is a *sono-analysis* of the theatrical unconscious: behind the slogans the scream of the body, behind the subjects the vocal signifiers. It is not ‘I’ but ‘it’ that is speaking, namely through/as a complex machinized composition (Deleuze’s ‘agencement’). Thus, in the work of John Jesurun the stage becomes an environment of light structures and auditive structures. From the very first moment, a text machine of voices, words and associations is working at rapid speed with lightning fast responses and connections, practically without pause. Fragments of a plot can be intuited. From the field of indeterminacies individual dialogues, disputes, declarations of love, etc. become discernible. Political and private matters mix. Jesurun’s theme – communication, the uncanniness of language – conveys itself through the form more than the content. In his work, too, the voices are

often ‘purloined’ through invisible microphones and heard from elsewhere. Sentences fly back and forth, orbit, or create fields, which produce interferences with what is visually presented. Who is speaking just now? One discovers the moving lips, associates the voice with the image, reassembles the fragmented parts, and loses them again. Just as the gaze moves back and forth between body and video image, reflecting on itself in order to find out where fascination, eroticism or interest attach themselves – i.e. experiencing itself as a video gaze – thus the hearing constructs another space inside the optical space: fields of references, lines crossing the barriers. Beyond the lost sentiment, precisely in the machinism, at points of rupture, the longing for communication suddenly articulates itself, the distress at the impossibility (difficulty, hope) of breaking through the wall, the sonic wall of untranslatable languages. A ‘human’ moment flares up, the whole subject is momentarily found when the gaze has located the voice and returns it to the body – the moment of the human. Then the mechanism of sounds, reactions, electric particles, image and soundtracks takes over again.

## **Space**

### ***Dramatic and postdramatic space***

In general it can be said that dramatic theatre has to prefer a ‘medium’ space. Tendentiously dangerous to drama are the huge space and the very intimate space. In both cases, the structure of the *mirroring* is jeopardized. For the stage frame functions like a mirror that ideally allows a homogeneous world of the viewers to recognize itself in the equally coherent world of the drama. A theatre, on the contrary, in which not the transmission of signs and signals but what Grotowski called ‘the proximity of living organisms’<sup>3</sup> dominates perception, runs counter to the distance and abstraction essential to drama. If one reduces the distance between performers and spectators to such an extent that the physical and physiological proximity (breath, sweat, panting, movement of the musculature, cramp, gaze) masks the mental signification, then a space of a tense *centripetal* dynamic develops, in which theatre becomes a moment of *shared energies* instead of transmitted signs. The other threat to dramatic theatre is the vast space with a *centrifugal* effect. This can be a space that outweighs or over-determines the perception of all other elements simply through its enormous dimensions (e.g. the Berlin Olympia Stadion in Grüber’s *Winterreise*) or a space that eludes being mastered by perception because actions simultaneously take place in different locations, as in ‘integrated’ theatre. Common to all open forms of space beyond drama is that the visitor becomes more or less active, more or less voluntarily a co-actor. The solo performance of *K.I. from Crime and Punishment* staged by Kama Ginka (as seen in 1997 in Avignon) turned the space that only had a few fragmentary props into a scene of real address of the present spectators. They were individually contacted, taken by the hand, asked for help and drawn into the playful hysteria of the actress (Okzana Mysina)