

Kantor's Theatre of Exteriority: A Philosophical Approach

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I.

As Hegel already wrote in his *Ästhetik*, drama appears to the philosophers as "the most perfect of the arts," because it combines "the objectivity of epos and the subjective principle of lyrical poetry [. . .] in the immediate presence of action."¹ This action comes "from inside the character" (and so it must have a psychological nature); but the audience can only see it from outside, "on the ground of the *substantial* nature of the aims, individuals, and engagements," that is, as an appearance. But for Hegel, the written drama, that is, the literary aspect of theatre, is not enough: "For the work of art to come to life," it requires "the complete scenic performance." Only in this way, we can see "the exterior side of the place, of the milieu, but also of doing and happening." This exteriority is the very peculiarity of the entire theatrical event, and it is possible only on stage, not on the written page. Because of *this special irreducible exteriority*, the artistic event we call theatre appears to be "the most perfect" from the perspective of the philosophical tradition "coming from Kant," which is interested not only in "an analytical work about truth" but also in "the other critical tradition" which "asks itself: what is our moment? What is our field of possible experience?" and tries to build "an ontology of the moment, and ontology of ourselves."²

Theatre interests such a philosophy because of the *apparent opposition* between two principles. First, theatre's "sensible matter,"³ that is, "the speech," or, generally speaking, the very actual human presence, "is the only element worthy of the exposition of the spirit." Thus, theatre seems to be destined towards a strong integration with its object; human life represents human life, sentiments signify sentiments, actions and words indicate actions and words. This fact seems to warrant a *special truth*. Secondly, this "spirit," or in a more empirical way, human life, is "exposed" by theatre only *from outside*. We can perceive the behaviour and the speech of characters, but not their thoughts, sentiments, or intentions unless they choose to tell us by articulating them to another character or using the technique of *a parte*. But we cannot tell if they are being honest. A character may also be mistaken about its feelings or change its mind. In theatre (different from what happens in the novel or in poetry), the characters are opaque to us. Theatre is the art *par excellence* of the "real presence" of the human being, but this presence is an *exteriority*.⁴

This is an important *limit* of the theatre, as opposite to the *omniscience* of the narrator of the novel, or the *interiority* of the lyrical poet, and even to the *psychological truth* of music. What is philosophically interesting in this limit? This limit of exteriority is precisely the limit of the "ontology of our field of possible experience." The experience of human life, even of our own lives, is always more or less external; nevertheless, it makes sense to us. To exist means

literally to stay outside. The so-called "continental philosophy of this century (from Heidegger to Levinas) understands that we are "beings of distance" characterized by a condition of "exile," "alterity," and "exteriority." Different arts have tried to represent this situation, but theatre has embodied it in its structure.

II.

Not all contemporary theatre knows the truth of this limit nor dares practice it. Showing the groundless exteriority of the theatre (and the groundless exteriority of humankind) is always dangerous. It seems simpler and more reassuring for theatre's authors and interpreters to rely on conventional wisdom, to pretend that theatre can present "the real inner life" of its characters. Contemporary theatre is important when it dares build a theory of action, image, and fantasy as *external life*. Tadeusz Kantor's theatre is one of the most radical efforts in this direction, as Pirandello's, Beckett's, and Grotowski's theatrical works were in very different ways.

Kantor was conscious of the relevance of his theatre. When he spoke of the "theatre of death" and compared his actors to corpses, when he combined theatre and photography, when he spoke about his "room of memory" as the source of his scenic images, when he explained his characters as ghosts from a subjective past, he was always thinking about theatre not as a tool to penetrate the "psychological life" of his characters. On the contrary, Kantor described the scene as a projection of flat images, coming out of a memory *not represented*, acting only as a "limit of the word."⁵

Kantor not only spoke about this concept, but he realized it in his theatre using a number of different, though similar, devices. I will identify some of them in this essay. The first, and most evident, is the use of his own person, the presence of the author on stage. His figure, dressed in black, moving among the actors was impressive and innovative. Kantor did not participate in the action on stage. He was a spectator, a member of the audience as it were. He was a spectator in the "sacred space" of the action, although at a different level of reality. He functioned as a bridge between the world of the performance and the world of "reality." For example, he conducted the rhythm of his actors as a music director conducts his orchestra. The presence of Kantor on stage deserves theoretical attention. It was not the "empirical author" Tadeusz Kantor, but rather it was his appearance, or him "quoting" himself, that hovered around the stage. Thus, it was "uttered" in the text of the performance, though it did not belong to the order of a representational practice. It was the "enunciated enunciation" of the performance, in the same way as the narrator using the first person (and not the empirical author, Marcel Proust) is the protagonist of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. On stage, even though Kantor was the "I," what the audience was able to see was Kantor's exteriority, the "I" spoken, not the "I" speaking. But, of course, on stage, the two aspects of himself, the speaking and the spoken, could not be divided. Kantor was the *real* author of the performance, and also the author of this aspect of the performance that generated the presence and the

appearance of "the author." But the audience could only see the *visible* author, his allusions to and quoting of himself. As usual, Kantor was well aware of this metaphysical conflict. He wished to complicate it further presenting in *Today Is My Birthday* an actor who functioned as his double. This work was performed after Kantor's death, and the double functioned not as a counterfeit of the visible author, but as a sign of his absence.

Inside the performance, Kantor acted as a witness. He watched the action with all the attention one must devote to witnessing a crime or a secret act. But he observed a fictional event, a creation of himself. By remaining on stage and assisting the course of events he conceived and organized, Kantor revealed to us that beyond the visible surface of the performance, there was *nothing*, or perhaps there was only Kantor in person, the master of the ghosts on stage. The characters were only images in his mind, fragments of his memory. We could see him *and* the images inside him, but they were nothing more than the images of an old man and several actors. Life existed elsewhere. The witness is always a solitary figure. By watching Kantor, we were witnessing, rather than penetrating, the appearance of his memory. The representation of memory is not memory, but a new fact, affected by the weakness and perversion of memory and not by its authenticity. To witness is to betray. Presented to others, interiority becomes exteriority and necessarily false. But the artist *must* witness. The artist is obliged to betray. Expression is desired because it is the means towards exteriority. The stage is the site of this necessary betrayal.

The same effect, that is, the exhibition of metaphysical inconsistency and the personal desire for representation, was also achieved in Kantor's theatre with the help of, for example, mannequins, machines, objects, one-dimensional scenery, cadaverous make-up of the actors, the repetitive structure of the performance, and stereotypical characters. It is not possible to discuss all these devices here. What is important to note is that all these devices work against the *referential illusion* embodied on stage.

III.

These qualities were generally observed by Kantor's audience and were often described as an "oneric" or "surrealistic" style. I believe, however, that one cannot understand Kantor in terms of "style." What is fundamental here is not an aesthetic choice, but an ontological one. The aim of Kantor's performance was more ambitious than mere decorative effect. Kantor attempted to show his mode of perception of reality as a mnemonic surface. In the Western tradition of art, the theatrical fiction was always thought of as "an imitation of action and of life."⁶ The life and the action *imitated* are not real, but it seems important to think about them as if they were. This means that every representation had to be constructed in such a way that a *possible world* corresponded to it. *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, and even *Waiting for Godot* each correspond to a possible world. The plays provide an account of what *happens* in these worlds. A world must be a

consistent place, where people exist with definite identities, where one can find objects, towns, and gods more or less similar to our own.

Aristotle says that in the "possible world" of a drama, there must be "an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it."⁷

The Aristotelian description is very broad and applies more or less to all European theatre, including the most "experimental" dramas such as the works of the Living Theatre, Beckett, Pinter, and Ionesco. In most of Kantor's productions, however, the action "imitated" had neither a beginning nor an end, because what was "imitated" could not be considered an action in the Aristotelian sense. What began and ended in Kantor's work was not the "imitation of an action" but the "action of imitation." Furthermore, Kantor's productions did not construct a "possible world" in the strictest sense of the term. Objects and characters in his works were not stable, consistent, autonomous, or definite. No site corresponds to this in a production. "Wielopole" was not a possible world, because it lacked the metaphysical qualities for it.

Kantor was well aware of this peculiarity. Thus, he would not refer to his productions as "representations." Instead, he preferred an obscure term, the French phrase *séance dramatique*, which means "dramatic session." A session, in the language of politics, law, and business signifies a time of work. The word "drama" derives from the Greek verb "draomai," meaning "to do" or "to act." A similar reference to action may be found in the word "fiction," which comes from the Latin verb "fingere," an intensive form of "facere" or "to do."

I do not refer to these etymological roots for their reference to Antiquity. I do believe that Kantor worked to establish a different root for theatre, not an imitation or a reproduction of a possible world, but an act of memory, able to summon the personal images of the artist and to present them to the audience. But the summoning and the production were not intended to recreate this memory as a reality. On the contrary, they are images, or more precisely, dead and fragile ghosts. This is the nature of memory, and perhaps it is also the nature of the appearance as a whole.

We are accustomed to think of exteriority as seduction in the mode of fashion, television, and advertising. With Baudrillard and Lyotard we learned to imagine the exteriority of the world as a seductive surface, which captures us in a fake world of simulacrum. Although this may be true, exteriority is also what betrays us by placing us outside, leaving our traces in the world, and reducing us to insignificant stereotypical expressions. Kantor dared speak to us about the dangers of exteriority at the very moment he defended his memory and constructed the significance of his images. He was capable of understanding his

interiority as exteriority and revealing this to us. For this reason, his theatre was not simply innovative, but also great.

Notes

1. S. III, Sez. III, Cap. 3, III, 1. (my translation)

2. This quotation and those that follow come from a lecture given by Michel Foucault at the Collège de France in 1983. It was published in the *Magazine littéraire* 207 (May 1984). (my translation)

3. Hegel, loc. cit.

4. I allude here to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation: the "real presence" of God is believed to be present in the Eucharist. See George Steiner, *Real Presences* (1989).

5. Cfr: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*.

6. Aristotle, *Peri poietikès*, 50 a 20.

7. *Ibid.*, 50 b 35. See also Bernard F. Dukore, *Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974) 38.

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Fig. 16. Tadeusz Kantor's drawing for *The Machine of Love and Death* (1987). Courtesy of Anna Halczak.