

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

Theses of doctoral dissertation

Kornélia Deres

Theatre, technology, intermediality

The aesthetics of moving image in contemporary theatre

Doctoral School of Literary Studies

Head of the Doctoral school: Dr. Géza Kállay PhD

Comparative Literary Studies Doctoral Program

Head of the Doctoral programme: Dr. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák DSc

Opponents:

Dr. habil. Attila Kiss PhD

Dr. Péter P. Müller DSc

Members of the Committee:

Dr. György Eisemann DSc (chair)

Dr. habil. Veronika Darida PhD (secretary)

Dr. László Földényi F. DSc

Dr. László Bengi PhD (substitute)

Supervisor: Dr. habil. Zoltán Imre PhD

Budapest, 2015

Research Questions and Methods:

The doctoral dissertation focuses on the aesthetic and perceptual effects of moving images in theatre performances from an intermedial perspective. The research is built on the hypothesis that theatre is able to stage and reflect the various modes of human sensorium by integrating different forms of media. The rise of moving image and its rapidly spreading technologies like cinema, video or television rewrote the edges of human imagination during the 20th century as special cultural, economical, technological achievements of the era. One of the main questions of the research is how the influence of moving image on theatre as an artistic medium could be described in terms of perceptual conventions and watching habits of spectators.

From this respect it is highly important that during the last decades digital technologies have integrated into everyday cultural practices and therefore played a crucial role in acknowledging the multi- and interspective feature of perception. The belief in a linear, progressive and teleological way of perceiving and representing the world has become less and less an experience which seems authentic in our mediatized environment, and it has also influenced contemporary theatrical forms in many ways. Hans-Thies Lehmann even connected the rise of postdramatic theatre to the politics of perception which characterize society in the media era, claiming that the spread of media in everyday life since the 1970s has led to entirely new and complex forms of theatre. So contemporary spaces framed by various media made us aware of theatre as a special place capable of collecting, showing and reflecting different forms of media.

Although international discourses and research in Theatre Studies have been focusing on the concept of theatrical intermediality for many decades, there have been little interest for this research in the Hungarian field of Theatre Studies. There are practical reasons for the lack of interest, as there are only few Hungarian theatre makers who consciously apply the possibilities of medial forms in theatre. However, it is crucial to see that on the one hand from the beginning of the 21st century there seems to be more and more theatre makers in Hungary who think about theatre in a complex, visual, technological media context and their aesthetics are based on this experience. On the other hand during the previous decades, there were collectives rather outside of the Hungarian theatre canon which integrated the tradition of performance art and dealt with the conventions of representation, narration and perception from an intermedial perspective. These two reasons led to the decision to focus on the contemporary Hungarian possibilities of theatrical intermediality and its connections to European and North-American traditions. Besides this I found important to examine those

contemporary European theatrical forms which build on special dialogues among film and video effects.

The integration of technological media into theatre performances has always been influencing how we can think about theatre, in terms of the expected behavior of spectators, possibilities of representation on stage, or the perception and staging of reality. During the 19th century torches, candles and oil lamps were replaced by gas light in European and North-American theatres, which also posed important questions about the position of spectators and actors. Later the appearance of silent and sound film and their commercial-cultural expansion urged theatre practitioners and theoreticians to define the specificity of the medium of theatre and to differentiate it from new technical-artistic media forms. Moving image and its technologies offered new ways for theatrical representation as well: from the beginning of the 20th century more and more theatre makers (e.g. Meyerhold, Piscator and Brecht) started to integrate projections of moving and still images into their productions, which also led to new ways of manipulating space and time. By the end of the century video and digital technology allowed the live modification of images and sounds, as a result of which performers and their live video images posed crucial questions about the blurring borders between live and mediatized presence.

The interconnectedness of theatre and media history (or most specifically theatre performances and moving images) can be highlighted by such examples as the theatre backgrounds of the first experimental film directors, their techniques and strategies borrowed from theatre practice, for instance stop tricks by Georges Méliès or montage of attractions by Sergei Eisenstein. In addition the expansion and commercialization of cinema influenced American vaudeville performances at the early 20th century as well, especially the structures, topics and characters of the scenes. The introduction of video camera during the 1950-60s had a considerable effect on performance art as well, as a result of which the physical body of the performer more and more often interacted with its moving image.

These examples show that when we would like to examine the mediality of theatre we should also focus on the specific historical-cultural backgrounds connected to possible definitions and recognitions of a medium. In my doctoral dissertation theatre is examined as a performative situation which is perceived as aesthetic action. Regarding moving images in theatre, I will focus on techniques which allow live mediation (i.e. happening without perceptible time difference), and on media aesthetics and perceptual frames defined by particular television and film genres. I believe that these points cover the research area where the influence of moving image on theatre forms could be examined productively. Within this

research paradigm I analyse four theoretical nodes of intermediality: narration, representation, presence and media aesthetics. The examination is inspired by the hypothesis that digital technologies and other media forms in theatre and performance space create new ways of representation, dramaturgy, structuring of images and sounds, positioning of the body in space and time. The new structures and dramaturgies of bodies, images and sounds point to the contemporary ways of perceiving time and space.

Structure of the Dissertation:

The dissertation consists of five chapters, each of which is focusing on a concept that plays a crucial role regarding the integration of moving image into theatre. Within the five chapters I examine Hungarian, European and North-American contemporary performances which share common and unquestionable connections in terms of aesthetics, moreover, they point to changing perceptual and sensual habits in theatre influenced by technological media.

Chapter I deals with the theoretical background of the research by analyzing the dynamical relationship among the three concepts in the title (theatre, technology, intermediality): the relevant connections between theatre and media technology; the paradigms of media-specificity and intermediality; perceptual expectations and competence. The chapter is to examine the mediality of theatre when it comes to theatrical narration, representation or perception formed by moving image technologies. It is crucial to see that the integration of moving images into theatre influences the conventions of theatre, therefore the interconnectedness and performativity of various media forms characterize the productions to be examined in the following chapters focusing on the staging of intermediality.

Chapter II examines the staging of various layers, concepts and experience of time through the integration of technical media where a gap appears in which the binary oppositions of memory and imagination, the real and the imaginary are suspended. I focus on theatrical landscapes of the Hungarian Moving House Company and the American Wooster Group by dealing with the representation of various models and experiences of time. It is especially important how the interplay of technological media and bodies in theatre calls attention to the fact that the representation of contemporary human experience cannot only and/or mostly happen through linear, progressive narratives, and points also to the resensibilization of the senses.

Chapter III examines the role of moving images in narration, and focuses on how the appearance of moving image is able to establish multiperspective and intermedial theatrical

narration. Live or recorded moving images appeared on stage together with human bodies created new ways of dramaturgy, which also enabled the multiplication of narratives. It is highly interesting from this respect that how theatre can become a place of parallel or rival points of view and can create a special net of narratives in a shared space and time. The chapter focuses on productions by theatre directors Viktor Bodó and Frank Castorf, examining the eye of the camera, the net of theatricality and narrative fractions, and how these phenomena result in the staging of a system which reflects contemporary perceptual habits and which could be interpreted through intermedial fractions.

Chapter IV deals with the dynamically changing frames of presence and their theoretical reflections by examining those cases in which the games of presence question the binary opposition of presence and absence, the live and the mediatized. It is crucial to see that the use of various audiovisual media forms does not suspend the special liveness of performances. Even on the contrary: it can expand the concept of liveness onto mediatized environment. The chapter focuses on the German-British collective Gob Squad's productions which show how the relationship of actual and virtual presence reflects on the fact that the media-specific approach of theatre based on exclusion cannot be appropriate in many cases.

Chapter V focuses on the questions of theatrical and film representation, with a special emphasis on the representation and staging of violence as a liminal phenomenon. Through body art tradition and productions by Hotel Modern and Kornél Mundruczó I examine the effect of watching violence in performances when reception oscillates between contemplation and disgust. In these cases the use of moving images partly plays a role in suspending and recontextualising the intimacy of human presence. However, the effects of violent visions have strong connection with the intermingling layers of the real and the illusionary, as a result of which besides the pain the responsibility of the spectators can be staged as well.

Therefore the dissertation can help to understand the way moving image influenced medial frames of theatre, and how it can be detected in Hungarian theatre. Although the concepts of theatricality and technology have always been influencing each other, it was the rise of digital technologies which brought about the reflection of changing human perception and sensation on a daily basis which also point to new positions of human subject. As a result the concepts of theatricality, the representation of the body, theatrical dramaturgy and narration, the perception of time and space, the borders of theatrical imagination are rewritten by technological media. This insight also provides a productive way of interpreting special, hidden parts of Hungarian theatre history.