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**The Spectator's Sensory Perception in Contemporary Theatricality:
Dialogues with Bakhtin / *A percepção sensorial do espectador na
teatralidade contemporânea: diálogos com Bakhtin*¹**

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ABSTRACT

The object of this article is the organization of current society, affected and impacted by technology, a scenario in which the sensory apparatus is deeply affected by different modalities of interactive communication. In this context, this text presents a reflection on the ways in which the spectator inter-acts with scenic propositions and an analysis of the experience as viewers of a Robert Wilson's spectacle. This reflection evidenced the differentiated levels of perception achieved by these researchers/spectators at the time of reception. In a dialogue with the Bakhtinian theory, the article proposes reflections on otherness and on the interaction between spectator and work in the theater context.

KEYWORDS: Spectator; Contemporary theatricality; Sensory perception

RESUMO

O presente texto tem como objeto a organização da sociedade atual, afetada e impactada pela tecnologia, cenário no qual o aparato sensorial é profundamente afetado por diversas modalidades de comunicação interativa. Nesse contexto, apresenta-se uma reflexão sobre as formas pelas quais o espectador interatua com as proposições cênicas e uma análise sobre a experiência enquanto espectadores de um determinado espetáculo do encenador Robert Wilson. A reflexão desenvolvida evidenciou os níveis diferenciados de percepção alcançados por estes pesquisadores/espectadores no momento da recepção. O artigo propõe, no diálogo com a teoria bakhtiniana, reflexões sobre a alteridade e a interação entre espectador e obra no campo do teatro.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Espectador; Teatralidade contemporânea; Percepção sensorial

¹ This paper results from a review and extension of Robson Rosseto's doctoral dissertation, titled *Interfaces entre Cena Teatral e Pedagogia: a percepção sensorial na formação do espectador-artista-professor* [*Interfaces between Theatrical Scene and Pedagogy: Sensory Perception in the Development of the Spectator-Artist-Teacher*]. It was published in 2018 by Paco Publishing House.

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Introduction

This article results from the authors' ascertainment that new technologies have advanced and produced effects on contemporary subjects, who are characterized by the sociocultural diversity that is reflected on stage productions and their reception. It is important to highlight the impacts this situation has on the perceptive potential of viewers, who have at their disposal several different possibilities of experiencing a wide range of information abstracted from the symbolic plane and supported by the intersection of sensations and senses.

When we refer to the notion of subject, we understand it from a Bakhtinian perspective as a dialogical and alteritary being. It is a social subject, a singular being in its complexity, constituted by others, through language, in dialogical relations. It is not subjected by social spheres, but is rather constituted by them and constitutes them as well (VOLOŠINOV, 1973).² Thus, society has a dialogical nature and, similar to subjects, is in constant movement. This allows social interactions to alter the ways subjects relate with others and with the world.

Current society is characterized by fast changes that abruptly traverse the daily life of subjects astonished by new information, patterns of behavior and social expectations, causing them to continuously elaborate and re-elaborate ideas and concepts toward new social interrelationships. In the same way, the materialization of poetic production is shaped by social logic and digital culture, yet it does not lose its potential to transgress rules and institutions in operation (BRAND, 2018).

Indeed, faced by this new reality, it is possible to see the destabilization of discourses that pervade behavioral mechanisms and affect human actions that are immersed in the technological universe which lean towards an increasing spectacularization of life and, in this vein, of social, economic and cultural inter-relations. It is timely to emphasize here that scenic writing operates in the interaction between the spectator and the theatrical scene, insofar as it reflects the contemporary situation that is marked by the phenomenon of sensation and perception of subjects as social constructs.

² VOLOŠINOV, V. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973.

This article is interested in the relations between Bakhtin and Theater, well investigated in Brazil by Gonçalves (2013; 2014; 2015). The discussion focuses specifically on the field of sensory apparatuses. This perspective is not much studied, especially in its relation to theater. We seek to investigate their operation in contemporary theatricalities and, beyond them – seeking some theoretical grounds in reception studies –, to understand viewers’ agency, their answers, positionings and function as subjects who participate in the theater performance. The article is divided into two sections, both of which are in dialogue with the dialogical theory (Bakhtin and the Circle). In the first section, we discuss the epistemological bases that will foster our understanding of the sensory perspective; in the second, we articulate elements related to an experience in a Bob Wilson show and aspects concerning theater viewers nowadays.

1 Contemporary Theatricality: The Sensory Apparatus

According to German philosopher Christoph Türcke (2010), in general terms the sensibility of contemporary subjects is anesthetized. This is due to the several distinct image stimuli that invade their daily life, a fact that may be compared to the condition of chemical addicts who have a limited perceptive ability. According to Türcke (2010, p.19), similar to the way drugs affect their users, new technologies interfere in the way present-day subjects are and live. Besides, contemporary audiovisual “machine gun” that causes their dependence must be made explicit.

That events themselves are explosive, flashily organized, or that they have shouted headlines similar to extra editions in the past is not enough anymore. The audiovisual medium needs to mobilize all the specific forces of its genre and to deliver the news with all the violence of a multisensory injection so that it reaches the point it seeks: the ultra-saturated sensory apparatus of contemporary people.³

³ In Portuguese: “Não é mais suficiente que os acontecimentos sejam por si só explosivos, confeccionados de forma chamativa, ou que tenham as manchetes gritadas como nas edições extras de outrora; o meio audiovisual necessita mobilizar todas as forças específicas de seu gênero e ministrar a notícia com toda a violência de uma injeção multissensorial, de forma que atinja o ponto que almeja: o aparato sensorial ultrasaturado dos contemporâneos.”

Although subjects are completely responsible for their acts – or, as Bakhtin says, we have no alibi in being (cf. Bakhtin, 1993)⁴ –, the Bakhtinian point of view on otherness allows us to state that we are enticed by these image stimuli, constituted by them, and are therefore interlocutors in an endless process of technological transformation. In this regard, we resort to the concept of “society of the spectacle,”⁵ created by French thinker Guy Debord, the leading exponent of the Situationist International (SI).⁶ Debord and his SI companions were committed to holding new perspectives on the Marxist theory in the context of the modernization of the French society especially after World War II, which was followed by the capitalist society of the 1960s, characterized by consumerism.

Impelled by this conception, Debord examines the “mediatic spectacularization” and defines the “spectacle” based on the set of social relationships that are mediated by images, which by their nature lead to passivity and the acceptance of the effects of capitalism. In the same direction, according to the author, viewer’s critical and reflexive thinking is appeased by work and capitalist art, since “[...] the more they contemplate, the less they live; the more they accept to recognize themselves in the dominant images of need, the less they understand their own existence and their own desires” (1998, p.24).⁷ This concept derives from Karl Marx’s⁸ notion of “fetishism of commodities,” a term used in *Capital*, published in 1867.⁹ According to it, “[t]he mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore, in their use value. Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determining factors of value s” (2010, p.82).¹⁰ In other

⁴ BAKHTIN, M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Edited by Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993.

⁵ *The Society of the Spectacle* was written in 1967. It is the most known work of post-Marxist philosopher Guy Ernest Debord (1931-1994).

⁶ The Situationist International was established in Italy in 1957 as a political and artistic movement. It published its manifesto in 1960 and aimed to abolish the notion of art as a specialized activity apart from society. In general, the activists fought against spectacularization and wanted to obtain people’s active participation in all fields of social life, especially culture.

⁷ In Portuguese: “[...] quanto mais ele contempla, menos vive; quanto mais aceita reconhecer-se nas imagens dominantes da necessidade, menos compreende sua própria existência e seu próprio desejo.”

⁸ German philosophers Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) analyzed the capitalist society and reflected on the institutions that regulated it and on human relations. They developed a set of ideas that would become the basis for Marxist theory.

⁹ More precisely, the concept is found in section 4, titled The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof, of Chapter 1, titled Commodities. This chapter is in Part I, titled Commodities And Money, of Book I, titled *The Process of Production of Capital*.

¹⁰ MARX, C. *Capital: volume I*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010. (Marx & Engels: Collected Works; v. 35).

words, when a commodity is produced, it loses its relation to work and acquires a life of its own as it obtains an exchange value determined by the market.

In the same vein, for Bakhtinian thought, the essence of human character is social relations, in which the other is always a basic premise. Thus, Sobral (2017, p.20) points out that:

The Marxist formulation of value appears in the Bakhtinian thinking as the evaluation inherent to every human act. A relevant characteristic is the fact that it goes beyond the strictly economic realm although Marx was not limited to it, when he revealed that value was so reified in capitalism that the relation between persons becomes a relation between objects. The difference lies in the fact that the Circle brings this notion to the concrete acts of identifiable concrete subjects, something about which Marx was not concerned.¹¹

Adorno (2002) updates the Marxist concept of fetishism when he states that the fetishism of commodities merges with the fetishism of cultural commodities, a conception based on the new techniques of dissemination of the process of cultural industry,¹² which tends to the manipulation and alienation of taste: “[p]eople who blindly slot themselves into the collective already make themselves into something like inert material, extinguish themselves as self-determined beings. With this comes the willingness to treat others as an amorphous mass” (ADORNO, 2005, p.198).¹³ In this sense, we may say that in a capitalist society subjects are dominated by the process of production, which automates their interests, yearnings, and needs. This is a typical effect of the fetishism of commodities and is inherent to the manufacture of products.

This concept, which combined Marx’s thinking with Psychoanalysis,¹⁴ interests TÜRCKE, the heir of the Frankfurt School.¹⁵ With a focus on the media context that

¹¹ In the original: “A formulação marxista do valor se faz presente no pensamento bakhtiniano como a valoração inerente a todo ato humano, tendo como característica relevante o fato de ir além do econômico estrito, ainda que Marx não tenha se limitado a este último aspecto, ao revelar ser o valor reificado no capitalismo de modo tal que a relação entre pessoas é transformada em relação entre objetos. A diferença reside no fato de o Círculo trazer essa problemática para os atos concretos de sujeitos concretos identificáveis, o que não estava na ordem das preocupações de Marx.”

¹² Term coined by Adorno in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (ADORNO, 2002[1944]), a work co-authored with Max Horkheimer (1885-1973). [HORKHEIMER, M.; ADORNO, Th. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr; translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.]

¹³ ADORNO, Th. *Critical models: interventions and catchwords*. Translated by Henry W. Pickford; introduction by Lydia Goehr. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud’s (1856-1939) studies were used to elucidate psychological factors that “reified” persons in the capitalist system, suppressing their capacity to think and to be aware of their own actions.

characterizes the contemporary society of sensation that is materialized in fetish, TÜRCKE (2010) states that the audiovisual machine unremittingly sends image-shocks and imposes itself on the human sensory apparatus. Due to an outburst of stimuli that cause the production and the release of adrenalin, these shocks, in an abrupt way, reach the viewers who are anaesthetized in their limited sensations of perceptive subtleties. In this context, we may say that these effects lead to profound changes in the social, economic and cultural spheres. This is caused by new information and communication technologies, which speedily affect subjects who are connected in the virtual space and are excited by media phenomena. As to computers, we agree with TÜRCKE when he says that:

[...] they no longer tend to be only a general work tool, but they also represent a technical junction, a social meeting point and an individual neuralgic one. Data processing and transmission, television and telecommunication, work and leisure, concentration and distractions, feeling “cool” and “dumb,” observed and ignored are all mixed to the point of undifferentiation. Downloading data, sending them and receiving them begin to represent the activity *par excellence*. The compulsion to occupation is defined as a compulsion to transmission, which, on the other hand, also becomes a fundamental form of expression. To transmit means to be noticed: to be (2010, p.44).¹⁶

This perspective, which fosters the understanding that in contemporary society being is transmitting, irradiating, being noticed in order to become existent, is easily identified in platforms of social network,¹⁷ a phenomenon that inaugurates a new paradigm of current communication and highlights users’ need to impress, “shock” in

¹⁵ The Frankfurt School was a group of intellectuals who, in the first half of the last century, proposed a line of thinking known as Critical Theory. Their objective was to exercise criticism of the capitalist system, the media phenomena and the cultural market as to how they shape the ways of social life. The most prominent members of the School were Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin, among others.

¹⁶ In Portuguese: “[...] já não tende a ser apenas um instrumento geral de trabalho, mas também a representar o entroncamento técnico, o ponto de encontro social e o nevrálgico individual, em que processamento e transmissão de dados, televisão e telecomunicação, trabalho e atividade de tempo livre, concentração e distração, ser ‘bacana’ e ‘por fora’, observado e ignorado, se misturam até a indiferenciação. Baixar dados e enviá-los e recebê-los passa a significar a atividade por excelência. A compulsão à ocupação é especificada em uma compulsão à emissão. Ela transforma-se, entretanto, em uma forma vital de expressão. Emitir quer dizer tornar-se percebido: ser.”

¹⁷ Badoo, Facebook, Google +, Instagram, MySpace, Onlyfreak, Skype, Stayfilm, and Twitter are some examples. A study conducted by Nielsen in the first semester of 2013 indicated that Brazilians are the most frequent users of social networks in the world when compared to markets, such as China, the United States, and India. Nielsen is an American-German company whose headquarters are in York. It is present in more than 100 countries. In Brazil, the company works in partnership with IBOPE, the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics.

order to be noticed. TÜRCKE (2010, p.45) understands that “individuals are so deeply penetrated with technology that a person can but be transformed into a transmitter of the self; their personal irradiation is obscured by an ethereal one, affecting the very phenomenon of being-there”.¹⁸

From the Bakhtinian perspective, this phenomenon in social networks may be understood as an exaggerated demonstration of our need of others as subjects of otherness. Thus, the effect of virtual communication is the exercise of otherness in a process of identity construction. As Bakhtin says,

[E]verything that pertains to me enters my consciousness, beginning with my name, from the external world through the mouths of others (my mother, and so forth), with their intonation, in their emotional and value-assigning tonality. I realize myself initially through others: from them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.138).¹⁹

For TÜRCKE (2010), the cybernetic relationship, when compared to the state of dependence, is characterized as the modern opium of people who, in their expectations of daily life, are insatiable for the “unprecedented,” which vanishes when they are disconnected from the virtual world. In this context, marked by ephemeral lifestyles and points of view, audiovisuality is co-responsible for subjects’ limited ability to perceive, represent, imagine and think today’s world, whose social norms are traversed by transience: one needs to conform to these social norms in order to re-define, improve, and adapt the self.

The population affected by social dynamics experiences accentuated anxiety that exerts continuous effects on their sensory perception, which derives from the rhythm of instant life and multisensory technological devices. In dialogue with Bakhtin and the Circle, we can realize that “[n]ew means of representation force us to see new aspects of visible reality, but these new aspects cannot clarify or significantly enter our horizon if

¹⁸ In Portuguese: “a tecnologia vai tão fundo no indivíduo que cada um não pode senão metamorfosear-se em um transmissor de si próprio, então sua radiação pessoal é obscurecida por uma etérea, que abala o próprio fenômeno do estar-aí.”

¹⁹ BAKHTIN, M. From Notes Made in 1970-71. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp.132-158.

the new means necessary to consolidate them are lacking” (BAKHTIN/MEDVEDEV, 1978, p.134).²⁰

The sensory apparatus immersed in digital technologies and under their impact comes to affect people’s interaction, especially the way they communicate with one another, moving through a sensory circuit. As we take into account the urgent rediscovery and re-education of senses, we bring *touch-screen* interfaces to this discussion as they have altered perception and human relationships in an irreversible manner. In terms of manipulating information, these interfaces are directly associated with touch, determining the use of new sensorialities and the reconfiguration of social relationships.

2 Contemporary Viewers: Reflections beyond the Sensory Perspective

We understand that viewers are distinct audiences who come together with their own interests. They form micro-communities, as they are gathered in the same space and have the same purpose: to enjoy a performance, something that may trigger subjective elements related to social life. We thus ask, “How is reception by viewers actualized in the current society context?” We now analyze the audience of a theater festival in order to have an in-depth reflection on it.

The diversity of productions in a theater festival requires that viewers choose those that interest them. Year after year, the universe of options leads to a conflict over which play to choose/prioritize among the others. The task of selecting is generally strenuous even when they have predefined groups and shows as parameters: they know the groups’ trajectories and have a special interest in the line of research of some companies. Additional anxiety is caused by suggestions of plays that viewers had not selected before going to the festival, making them feel overwhelmed by the vast quantity of options of plays performed in traditional and alternative places.

In a market society, the relation between supply and demand is established in a recurrent way in the context of artistic productions. The audience is viewed as consumers and the work of art as a commodity. We must emphasize that the dynamics

²⁰ BAKHTIN, M./MEDVEDEV, P. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*. Translated by Albert J. Wehrle. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

of consumption – a practice that has become commonplace in capitalist societies – interferes in the purchase process and in the pleasure of watching theater performances. This means that the connection between the performance and the audience is guided by the same fluidity found in the logic of commerce.

Following Vološinov (1973),²¹ we can argue that the subjects' choices are determined by their social purview, constituted by their dialogical relations, that is, by the voices and spheres that constitute them (family, work, institutions, among others). Thus, as viewers are attracted/driven to a theatrical space and share this encounter with artists, they absorb, in their own way, the poetic space. In fact, the appreciation of art enlarges viewers' perception in a constant process of change. However, even if the new technologies have expanded the way they feel and relate to others, "the audiovisual bombing makes senses numb. Sensations create the need for stronger ones" (TÜRCKE, 2010, p.68).²² It is worth emphasizing that the artistic experience is a phenomenon of perception that is different from the demands of daily life. For this reason, although viewers are in this agitated context of new technologies and are imbued with a perceptive competence that dialogues with contemporary theatricality, they actively and participatively establish different modes of reception.

Which contemporary theatricality are we examining? To clarify this question, we resort to philosopher Giorgio Agamben's words: "[t]hose who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it" (2009, p.41).²³ Thus, he understands the contemporary as someone who does not coincide with their epoch, because "[t]he contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time" (2009, p.45).²⁴

²¹ For reference, see footnote 2.

²² In Portuguese: "o bombardeio audiovisual faz os sentidos ficarem dormentes. As sensações criam a necessidade de outras mais fortes."

²³ AGAMBEN, G. What Is the Contemporary? In: AGAMBEN, G. *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*. Translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009. pp.40-54.

²⁴ For reference, see footnote 23.

Therefore, dialoguing with Bakhtin (1990),²⁵ we may affirm that contemporaries hold their gaze on their chronotope in order to understand the mystery, affecting and being affected by the tensions of interactions. In other words, to be a contemporary is to manage to see from outside, which renders it necessary to take distance from the present. Darkness asks for disclosure – that which makes their own time unfamiliar, displaces it, problematizes it in an untimely manner.

Contemporary theatricality resides in the tension caused by displacements. This means that it creates noise intended to incite viewers to think what they have never thought and feel what they have never felt before. Stage experiences allow the crossing of borders in a process in which rules and norms are transcended. Up to this point, they were considered unquestionable by viewers, who now become surprised by novelty. The notion of theatricality “does not concern only theatrical events. It is melded with a wealth of practices and phenomena in social life, language, the arts, literature, philosophy [...]” (GONÇALVES; PEREIRA, 2018, p.13).²⁶ These phenomena are always in movement and pulsate with interdisciplinarity.

The art of participation materializes in the work (be it individual or collective) of artists-researchers interested in announcing the interactive potential of artistic creation, especially when it is disconnected from the product, as its unique objective. It must be emphasized that the process of building the dramatic action establishes a commitment between actors and the audience. The force of interactive action in current stage productions increases the participant role of viewers by interfering, conducting or altering the theatrical scene, thus shifting the gazes to the processes of reception and the very act of contemplating productions (GONÇALVES, 2015). Contemporary theatrical staging has been comprised of multiple codes in an intertwining of cultures and epochs.

We also need to point out hybridism and the presence of the body in scene between scenic representation and performance. This is where construction and structure are presented as dissociated from the idea of a narrative thread. Theater and performance are interwoven in contemporary propositions and invite viewers to produce senses by navigating in the real and symbolic space.

²⁵ BAKHTIN, M. Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990. pp.4-256.

²⁶ In the original: “não diz respeito apenas ao evento teatral, mas confunde-se mesmo com uma gama de práticas e fenômenos - na vida social, na linguagem, nas artes, na literatura, na filosofia [...]”

According to Josette Féral (2008), in the contemporary theatrical scene basic elements of performance are adopted: the performer gives room to the actor; stage action substitutes the dramatic text for representation and visual aspects. Besides, performance may be understood to remodel the scenic language as the specular reception of the audience has become fundamental. Therefore, Féral uses the term “performative theater” to refer to these elements of performance, which we often find in contemporary scenic spaces. In regard to the relation between actors and viewers, Féral states:

In performative theater, the actor is summoned to ‘do,’ to ‘be present,’ to take risks and to show the ‘doing,’ that is, to assert the performativity of the process. Viewers’ attention turns to the production of gestures, the creation of form, the disintegration of signs and their continual reconstruction. An esthetics of the presence is established (2009, p.209).²⁷

In view of that, many contemporary performances transcend the space of communication or information, which was limited to the invitation the audience received to share an artistic experience. An example is *The Old Woman*.²⁸ Directed by Robert Wilson, it involves the audience throughout the show and provides the actors with the opportunity to experience it. Wilson’s stagings are characterized by the use of different resources, such as lighting associated with music and gestural expressions, and the loss of protagonism of the text, which is the opposite of what happens in the naturalist theater, marked by the hierarchy of the dramatic work.

A 12-scene show, *The Old Woman* is based on the theme of death. The protagonist is an old woman, whose body is found in the home of a writer who is bewildered by that sight. The narrative contours are guided by visual language, which also guides the audience, the witnesses of the plot. Another resource was the use of the English and Russian languages, with subtitles in Portuguese. This fact demanded the audience’s attention, but had little interference in their enjoyment of the show,

²⁷ In the original: “No teatro performativo, o ator é chamado a ‘fazer’ (*doing*), a ‘estar presente’, a assumir os riscos e a mostrar o fazer (*showing the doing*), em outras palavras, a afirmar a performatividade do processo. A atenção do espectador se coloca na execução do gesto, na criação da forma, na dissolução dos signos e em sua reconstrução permanente. Uma estética da presença se instaura.”

²⁸ The play was performed at Teatro Paulo Autran (SESC Pinheiros, São Paulo) from July 24 to August 3, 2014. It is an adaptation of the homonymic work by Russian writer Daniil Kharms, interpreted by ballet dancer and actor Mikhail Baryshnikov and actor Willem Dafoe.

especially because the words were precisely used throughout the scenes. As regards the staging of *The Old Woman*, Wilson makes the following comment:

I began to give form to the play with lighting, scenery and movement, and then I began to slowly introduce the text. [...] Generally, I begin with lighting and then movement, later adding elements of text and sound (2014).²⁹

Several resources are used as stimuli to entice the audience, among which are chairs and windows that float in space with musical, verbal and visual effects; the rigorous and detailed movement of the body; the use of silence or minimalist music; the stylized settings and lighting that enhance visualization. These resources were used with precision, generally surprising the audience through a disquieting and appealing aesthetics. Our involvement with the show also occurs in relation to the spheres that constitute the theatrical event itself and its subjects:

Aesthetic contemplation and ethical action cannot abstract from the concrete uniqueness of the place in being that is occupied by the *subiectum* of ethical action as well as by the *subiectum* of artistic contemplation (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.24).³⁰

Wilson seeks to minimize the rationalistic thinking of the audience by compelling them to contemplate the show through their senses toward an artistic fruition. Through visual constructions, we feel we have paintings before our eyes as the director plays with illusion, making an uninterrupted use of colors. This is when several senses are simultaneously required, breaking expectations, since the unpredictable is happening in every scene. As the simultaneous manifestation of varied senses is required, the multiplication of sensations is enjoyed. Bakhtin emphasizes that:

The aesthetic act gives birth to being on a new axiological plane of the world: a new human being is born and a new axiological context – a new plane of thinking about the human world (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.191).³¹

²⁹ In the original: “Comecei a dar forma à peça em termos de luz, cenário e movimento, e passei a inserir o texto devagar. [...] geralmente começo com a luz e depois o movimento, adicionando elementos de texto e áudio posteriormente.”

³⁰ For reference, see footnote 25.

³¹ For reference, see footnote 25.

For their artistic creations, several present-day directors resort to syncretic procedures, based on different artistic languages that actualize an esthetic conception. For Herman Parret, a syncretic work of art is necessarily synesthetic: “the ‘objective’ syncretism of the arts is ‘subjectively’ reflected in the synesthesia of the aesthetic experience” (2001, p.205).³² Here we need to present the concept of synesthesia. According to researcher Sérgio Roelaw Basbaum, “the origin of the word synesthesia is Greek (*sin* + *aisthesis*), and it means the gathering of multiple sensations (instead of, for example, *anesthesia*, which means no sensation)” (2002, p.19).³³ The stimulation of a sense stirs other sensations, because the ability to fuse or mix several senses is inherent to synesthesia. For instance, among many other possibilities for the intermingling of the senses, synesthetic subjects see colors when they listen to sounds, feel tastes when they are touched, smell odors when they look at colors, feel pain when they taste a specific food.

Parret (2001) states that the syncretism of an artistic production corresponds to the synesthesia of the aesthetic experience. Thus, Bob Wilson dialogues with the concept presented by Parret as the staging of *The Old Woman* used a set of sensations through lighting, volume, sound, and movement. Taking this into consideration, we may ask, “To what extent did this theater production cause viewers to experience synesthesia?”

Synesthesia refers to a phenomenon that is anchored in the sensibility and permanent association of the senses, through which a given sensory modality automatically provokes a perceptive experience of another sensory modality (DAMASIO, 2000). In this sense, it is possible to state that the stage production reached its objective as it aroused in the audience a number of emotions resulting from perceptive sensibility. Nevertheless, we still ask, “May a syncretic work of art be experienced synesthetically by non-synesthetic viewers?”

Richard Cytowic (1997), Simon Baron-Cohen and John Harrison (1997) as well as Damasio (2000) understand that constitutive synesthesia manifests itself in childhood

³² In the original: “O sincretismo ‘objetivo’ das artes reflecte-se ‘subjectivamente’ na sinestesia da experiência estética.”

³³ In the original: “a origem da palavra sinestesia é grega (*sin* + *aisthesis*), e significa a reunião de múltiplas sensações (ao invés de, por exemplo, anestesia, nenhuma sensação).”

in almost every case and persists throughout the lifespan. According to Cytowic's studies (1997), the estimated prevalence for synesthesia is 1:25,000 – when synesthetes are compared to people who are considered normal. On the other hand, Cytowic points out that we are, to some extent, somewhat synesthetic, as synesthesia is a general property of the human perceptive apparatus. As the mixed and global nature of the senses determines reception, which is individual, even a non-synesthetic viewer can somehow have reactions that derive from synesthesia.

The syncretic construction or the synesthetic suggestion offered by the stage production appeals to the bodies of viewers who, mobilized by the perceptive force, dialogue with the scene as they are touched by the aesthetic production. Throughout Bob Wilson's show, the scenes provoke an interaction, the viewer's dialogue between two or more sensory modalities. This way, the authors/viewers understand that this show makes possible the communicability and intersection between perceptive channels that favor reception with some degree of synesthetic possibilities. Here, based on the Bakhtinian perspective, we must broaden the discussion to aspects related to the aesthetics of a work of art:

We must be able to feel in a work the resistance of the reality of being *qua* event [...] Behind the transgredient moments that constitute artistic form and artistic consummation, we must vividly feel the presence of that possible human consciousness to which these moments are transgredient and which they cherish and bring to consummation; besides our own creative or cocreative consciousness, we must vividly feel *another* consciousness -- the consciousness upon which our creative self-activity is directed as upon an *other* consciousness. To feel this means to feel the form, to feel its saving power, its axiological weigh – to feel its beauty (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.200; emphasis in original)³⁴

The appropriation of technologies mediated by art allows differentiated perceptive interactions: the spectator's senses are sharpened through hearing and vision; touch, smell and taste are also summoned by the aesthetic existence. The scene that is anchored in the dramatic text gradually loses its power due to the expansion of the possibilities of dramaturgic narratives. Throughout the course of history, stage

³⁴ For reference, see footnote 25.

transformations have imposed, mainly because of their complexity, the active participation of viewers in the production of senses.

Conclusion

In contemporary theater, viewers experience and perceive themselves. Besides, depending on the demands of the plays, they are invited to face their own questions, contrasting those who choose to feel safe and remain on the brink of fear, anxiety or risk. By choosing the means that aim at distraction from daily life, the latter viewers remain in their comfort zones. These two profiles of viewers coexist, but viewers are no longer considered passive addressees. They are now understood as active agents who participate in the production of sense in the final construction of artistic production.

Thus, contemporary viewers are identified with the current scenic context, somehow confirming what Bakhtin (1990) stated in one of his first texts: “Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself – in the unity of my answerability (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.2).³⁵ The perceptive skills of the viewers who participate in contemporary performances activate a process of continuous development of cognitive and symbolic capacities. Current scenic productions break expectations by placing the audience on the stage, presenting them gaps to be filled and experienced.

Contemporary stage production may be understood as a sensory-conceptual web based on presence-experience. It is established as a privileged space for an in-depth reflection on sensory perception. In this sense, the production of different ways of experiencing life through art has increased in our current society, making possible the actual dialogue between digital technology and the experience of daily life. The digital principles are impregnated in daily life through the perceptive field, establishing new sensory modalities and expectations in the social interrelations. This process defines the ways subjects see and reflect on the world. We resort to Sobral to complement this reflection:

³⁵ BAKHTIN, M. M. Art and answerability. *In*: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990. pp.1-3.

[...] the experience in the human world is always mediated by the subjects' situated and evaluative actions, which confers meaning on them from the given world, the world as a concrete materiality. [...] this is not about proposing the relativity of values; on the contrary, it is about the fact that values are always values for subjects, between subjects, in a given situation. Thus, without denying the given reality of the world, the subjects' actions also postulate it or, in the case of aesthetics, create it (2017, p.22).³⁶

The way the audience organizes thought and knowledge has a direct relation to the reorganization of senses offered by new technologies, especially digital ones. This characteristic of the contemporary scene approximates theatrical production with stage performativity and establishes flexible and direct relations with viewers in an intense interactive and perceptive process. In Bakhtin's terms, the author and the audience take a specific responsible and responsive attitude. The encounter between doing and contemplating is essential in the context of contemporary theater performances, which are characterized by an aesthetics that privileges the voices of the participants.

As we consider all we have discussed, it is now clear that in contemporary theater performances, viewers establish several bonds with the artistic creation, which allow them to have their own versions of the events. They are responsible for the autonomy that is given to them, which even includes choosing the places from which they will contemplate and/or interact. In addition, the active participation of the audience is encouraged by their interaction through varied sensory resources that sharpen their capacity to receive the information proposed by the actors in the scenic space.

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³⁶ In the original: “[...] a experiência no mundo humano é sempre mediada pelo agir situado e avaliativo do sujeito, que lhe confere sentido a partir do mundo dado, o mundo como materialidade concreta. [...] não se trata porém de propor a relatividade dos valores, mas, pelo contrário, o fato de que o valor é sempre valor para sujeitos, entre sujeitos, numa dada situação. [...] Portanto, o agir do sujeito, sem negar a realidade dada do mundo, também o postula ou, no caso do estético, o cria.”

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Statement of authorship and responsibility for published content

We declare that for the construction of the paper “The Spectator's Sensorial Perception in Contemporary Theatricality: Dialogues with Bakhtin”, we access the research *corpus* and actively participate in the elaboration of results. We further declare that we have reviewed and approved the final version of the paper, in its Portuguese and English versions. The authors: Robson Rosseto and Patricia Pluschkat.

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