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The Erotics of Scenario. On the Construction of the Subject in Postmodern Theatre

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Abstract: Set in the postmodern culture cadres that Lyotard talked about twenty years ago, we are witnessing an accelerated mistrust of a conspicuous value. In fact, all this mistrust has occurred amid a radical overthrow of the way we were accustomed to perceiving the values of modernity. Having its starting point in philosophy, falling into disuse that postmodernity propose grows like a wave that appeared after a stone was thrown into the water. Theatre has not escaped from postmodern articulation, and its subjects have inevitably passed through the postmodern reconfiguration filter. In this article, we will talk about the subject of eroticism, trying to outline our thesis on the idea that the comprehensive synthesis of the receiver in relation to the postmodern performance is based on the construction of the subject folded on the identification of some indicators. Considered as a cultural construct, eroticism is eliminated through its discourse and requires scenarios to be fully understood and recognized. The question inevitably arises: to what extent can we talk about these scenarios in the postmodern performance?

Key words: eroticism, postmodern, body, scenario, transgression

The postmodern discourse inevitably leads to a reassumption and reformulation of modernity, so speaking about postmodernity inevitably takes

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THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

into consideration a rethinking of modernity. Many of the modern cultural artefacts have evaporated in the postmodern device, resulting in tonic configurations nearest to an extraordinary “wow” or vague “aha”. About the impressions of the viewer-public in the post-modern era, we can launch the idea of this latter effect of “aha”, that Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, referring to the plastic arts, spoke many years ago. As for the theatre performance, things are not different. To the question “did you enjoy the show?”, an interrogation that is under the sign of ambiguity and a certain lack of essence, the answer no longer balances between yes and no, nor does it approach the territory of an “interesting”, but it enunciates a “wow” or “aha”, as ambiguous and lacking in substance as the interrogation they formulate.

We propose a discussion on the subject of the erotic in relation to its take-over on the performing arts for two reasons. The first reason consists in a subtle analysis of the insertion of this subject into the postmodern theatre, camouflaged in a more or less controlled manner, around the concepts of obscenity and pornography. The second reason takes over some of what we are proposing through the first one and consists in the recovery of some definitions that can be associated with the concepts that we will discuss (eroticism, obscenity, pornography) pointing their relations with the postmodern theatre.

Our approach is based on a simple, but essential question: what is postmodernism? The pertinence of this interrogation makes things stand on a vast dial, the cardinal points of which will fit us into the inner territory of our subject. If we ask ourselves what postmodernism is, we will soon find out that there is a limit beyond which our question is no longer relevant in addressing, our effort consisting in this particular identification of our own characteristics triggered only in the comparative register. So, if we are going to identify the particularities of postmodernism, we will take over the elements specific to a later modernity that we have to formulate from a current perspective. In essence, the dilemma that we must reflect upon is the following: is postmodernity a rupture from modernity or, on the contrary, is it a radicalization and transformation of the premises launched by modernity and an extension of its own conclusions?

Even so, we can't not notice that postmodernity places the subject in a different, original and attractive key, reverses relations, and subjects lay down residual levels with new meanings that lead to new explorations. We can easily notice that there is an invasion of sexuality in all media channels and sometimes the transfer of those concepts to the performing arts is visible and easy to identify. A full understanding of the process is made on the adoption

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

of situations that become scenarios. But what is really abandoned in the process of understanding, by adopting a model? How do the *rest* of the ideas which are the main subject of the translation itself recovers? Starting from these questions, we will try to provide a possible answer, on a delicate but exciting subject in the context of postmodernity - eroticism.

To delimitate our argumentative framework in a more visible way, we will start our discourse from conceptual fixation and contextualization to the postmodern understanding around the concept of eroticism. The discussion about eroticism must retrieve the perspective of two other important concepts which are important in the economy of our argumentation – obscenity and pornography. In this regard, we can say that the audience always determines the obscene character of a situation. The isolation in a perimeter of any matter of morality makes everything that goes beyond this crop to be classified as obscene. The exemplification of a well-known casuistry provided by Romanian literature is eloquent in this case, if we think about the cases of Goga and Eliade. The two Romanian writers stayed in prison for their poetry and novel, so things were really serious on the pornography subject. But how could the theatre bring to the audience something that is related to the obscene character?

In the postmodern atmosphere, sexuality remained just a word and eroticism an unclear concept structured mainly on a romantic vision. Much more incisive and having its visible accents is pornography. If we follow the history of the theatre, we notice the permanence of the subject of love, but the perimeter of exposure is always connected and adapted to the historical context. Symmetrically, the comprehensive perimeter is limited by the conceptual extension of what is wanted. In other words, we can ask in postmodernity whether the lecturer perceives what the author wanted to convey. Even the fundamental myths of love which are hyper-used in human history, such as Zeus and Europe, Tristan and Isolde, or Romeo and Juliet, do not transfer the public perceptions to the pornography issue. It seems that there is a general understanding that we are dealing with the subject of love, which means that the delimitation of the erotic is automatic.

If we apply the grid of a semiotic analysis provided by Eco¹ in *Lecturer in fabula* and *Limits of Interpretation*, we should trigger our analysis from the territory beyond the topic text. Thinking this way, the theatre appears in this

¹ See Umberto Eco, *Lecturer in fabula*, Italian translation by Marina Spalas, Universe Publishing House, Bucharest, 1991.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

register of interpretative alternation in relation to the lecturer, situated in the continuity of a beyond that became a subject of decipherment. In the paradigm of modernity, the idea of a semiotic interpretation that casts the subject out of the textual area is already fixed. How is postmodernism different than modernism in terms of theatrical discourse on the subject of eroticism that is undergoing our analysis? Before answering this question, some theoretical contours on postmodernism are needed, with an accent on performing arts.

The theatre show placed in the postmodern configuration takes over the determinations of theatre understood in general terms. The spectator is present and assimilated by the performance without knowing the set postmodern coding. There are also other clues that will make the spectator be introduced, even without knowing, into the postmodern ramp. In fact, we are dealing only with clues, as these are the ones designed to produce the interpretation and reformulation of the message in the original postmodern note that the performance will install. Unlike classical theatre's usage of codes, postmodernity articulates a series of scenic clues in the structure of the dramatic opera. In relation with what we said above, any transfer and assembly in the postmodern device of the classical love-story of Romeo and Juliet or Tristan and Isolde, will be received by the public as a subject of a substantial love.

The postmodern insertion makes the aesthetic assembling that gives the receiver the criteria for understanding. So here we can think that a series of scenic fireworks as well as modes of interpretation of the characters will take over the clue function in the process of understanding the subject. Eroticism is difficult to represent (and to understand) because we do not have a clear theoretical approach on this subject. Even so, the modern construction of the concept of eroticism preserves the ambiguity and comprehensive relativity of the receiver. The geography of placing the concept on the informational map that the theatre show puts into play makes eroticism be associated with the theme of sexuality and from here to find various conceptual extensions in pornography and obscenity. Postmodernity seems to be a game without rules. The establishment of the norm, of the criterion is in the note of intentionality.

We should bear in mind that postmodernity engages in the cultural register the notion of consumerism. We are tempted (and by time it has become a habit) to qualify the postmodern era as one of consumption. In theatre, we sometimes observe this in disqualifying the classical codes of theatre in terms of individual interpretation of performance. Why? Maybe just for the simple

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

fact that postmodernity allows this by giving a kind of mark of opportunity and openness. The insertion of eroticism into the theatre is difficult to identify.

Let's reflect on eroticism now. We would be tempted to believe that eroticism could be, at any time, the subject of a conceptual confusion, that the boundary between the concept and its conceptual derivatives – such as love, pornography, sexuality, perversion, intimacy, seduction – retains a fundamental characteristic of eroticism and that it can stand as an identifiable substitute of the erotic function. But eroticism is bounded by love by the way we behave towards the other, or, in other words, in the way we encounter the other. Lacan said that the other's encounter is taking place as soon as the desire manifests itself. I feel it and maybe I love the other without knowing it, since I want it. This way of love *in absence* brings us back to our theory that eroticism leaves a rest or occupies a place of rest. The theatre itself can place the idea of eroticism in its scenic device. Once on the stage, the idea is transferred to the receiver as a whole.

If love is a choice, then eroticism is more unexpected than we think it is. But its authentic, volatile and indecisive authenticity lies precisely in the conceptual recovery of a *rest*, something that is left unnoticed and undetected. In the direction of universal theatre, love has this character of universality, while eroticism rests in the regime of the individual, always depends on a certain situation, on certain factors. The erotic looks at the other, which rests in my seduction, in my jealousy and in my imagination for the crucial moment of meeting with the other. Awaiting this encounter, I feel the irreversibility of the moment and the conceptual exhaustion of anything that could be likened to eroticism. The cultural construction of this something we call eroticism places us in the concrete device of the ineffable daily, we have to overcome the whole to think and feel the rest. We will take some of Georges Bataille's theories of eroticism², starting from the premise that his work remains a reference on the subject of eroticism.

For Bataille, the existence of eroticism depends on a fundamental conceptualization: people are discontinuous beings, always striving to persist in a sense of continuity. People, says Bataille, are led by a primary desire to experience continuity. This is what makes eroticism go beyond the superfluous stages of love, which are ephemeral and subjected to the effect of passing, oblivion, overcoming. Transgression is a key concept in Bataille's reflection.

² See Georges Bataille, *Erotismul*, Translation from the French language into Romanian by Dan Petrescu, Nemira Publishing House, 2006.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Eroticism is based on the idea of transgression. In Bataille's conception, transgression occurs only when a subject has internalized the taboo. Therefore, "the drama of transgression takes place within the subject" and manifests itself as a "paradoxical combination of pleasure and pain."³ Finally, Bataille claims that people produce transgression through ritual, so that the cut-out that occurs through the violation of the taboo – the factional practice of transgression – limits the insatiable desire for an experience of continuity.

Eroticism, configured in its entirety as a cultural construct, offers subtle reflections of understanding among the receiver. But more than that, in order to be bound by contextual concepts that can be associated with the comprehensive report, eroticism needs scenarios. After all, the stage reveals the erotic subject.

Can we talk about conceptual transparency in the case of eroticism? The relativity of the transfer of significance between transmitter and receiver is in fact the initial reformulation of the conceptual meaning. In other words, eroticism in the theatre is much easier to reproduce from its very beginning in its pornographic form, to be assimilated by the receiver on this level. The surface of comprehension cancels critical thinking. The spectator is faced with some kind of openness of significance and is not urged to apply a critical view to this significance. In other words, the spectator is taken over by a ready-made conceptual form, which is reformulated and transferred to him in this form. What at first glance has emerged as a playful play has quickly become the transfer device of the subject.

Postmodernism in the theatre is based on the amplitude of the object and its resignification. One of the most eloquent examples of this theory will turn our attention to the body. On the other hand, the relation between eroticism and body is a fundamental one in the process of understanding the erotic framework. The body seen as an object in the postmodern theatre becomes a functional premise under the conditions of a double action. The first one is to reduce to the point of annulment the distance between the body and its significance, or a radical increase of this distance.⁴

³ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

⁴ "The theater finds itself in the position of having to objectify what it is that can be construed as human, while trying at the same time to either radically reduce or eliminate the distance between the human being and its representation, or else radically increase the distance so that, as with Brecht, representation stands apart from the human being as a transparent process." (Cf. Erickson, Jon, *The Fate of the Object. From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art and Poetry*, The University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 54).

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

We see in this idea the possibility of dehumanizing the body or, in a hermeneutic register, a possible “dehumanization of the limit”. Gordon Craig identified at one point a solution for amplifying and rendering a clear symbolic note of this dehumanization: replacing the actor with a puppet, whose non-human character, together with the two virtues of silence and obedience, provides an adequate precondition for understanding the idea-symbol of humanity.⁵

The idea of transforming the body into an object forces us to create an interrogation about the body itself: can a non-substantive body think? In other words, starting from the function of irreducibility of the body, can we think that the process of putting-into-object will make possible a critical reflection upon the concept of body? On these two questions lies the concept of phenomenological reduction on which the postmodernist perspective, taking over the synthesis of modernity, fixes it upon the actor. Thus, the actor is at the center of the theatrical act, in his double perspective – meaning or body.

If we mentioned the phenomenological reduction, we will also talk about the erotic reduction, only to sense the common point of the two phenomenological exercises. We identify this common point in the perspective of desire. Erotic reduction is a concept present in the writings of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion.⁶ In erotic reduction, the remainder of the action is offered as an ungrounded desire and without goals. Marion states that the reason I love another is entirely based on my decision to love for no reason beyond my decision to give love. On the other hand, eroticism responds, as I said earlier, directly to an axiological scale in love. The reason I love, by activating eroticism, is that I see something I want and this I want only for myself. Eroticism thus responds to a value perceived in the act of love. Thus, the reason why I love, in eroticism, is that I want a *summum bonum* perceived in love for myself.

As for the phenomenological reduction applied to the actor’s play, we can say that his function is essentially proportional to his action of widening his action in an undefined horizon and the desire for a cultural synthesis between the scene and the division of his life.

⁵ “On one extreme, there is Gordon Craig’s solution: replace the actor with the Ubermarionette, whose nonhuman character and whose two virtues of ‘silence and obedience’ provide the only adequate basis for a ‘symbol of man’, since no particular actor with his or her eccentricities can really be such a symbol, with the twin intention of purity and universality.” (*Ibidem*)

⁶ See Jean Luc Marion, *Fenomenul Erosului. Șase meditații despre dragoste*, French translation by Maria Ica Jr., Deisis Publishing House, 2006.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Postmodernity brings on stage the heterogeneity and confluence of the arts that identify a convergence in the theatrical device. In this synthesis, the actor no longer brings the individual, but expresses significance. The receiver uses the phenomenological reduction to produce cultural synthesis. The subject transposed into the theatre performance is restricted to the object of perception. The receiver will think about the subject in the perspective of a re-construction folded on the indicators to be provided. Eroticism, in this case, will balance its reformulation into the pornographic device and the obscene in order to interrupt their conceptual diffusion.

The fact that the actor acts with his own consciousness on his object indicates the situation of something which is more surprising – the uncertainty of the subject. Talking about the effects of postmodernity from the point of view of philosophy, Michel Maffesoli noted this uncertainty of the way the subject behaves in the postmodern era.⁷ By now transferring this feature of insecurity to the subject of eroticism, we can formulate the idea that postmodern theatre adds to the spectator's performance the synthesis of a cultural identification. But even in this synthesis, we can find the conceptual ambiguity, the relativity of the essence. As for eroticism, it is clear that things are more confusing, as the conceptual extension takes over in a comprehensive way the notions of pornography and obscenity. The receiver is tempted to always cast the subject out. That is why eroticism is always camouflaged and unfinished.

Pornographic image does not need decoding. It is provided in a simple device that amplifies the comprehension trajectory of the viewer as the evidence replaces the analysis. Pornography does not need scenarios, as eroticism needs to delineate. Visual pornography excludes the comprehensive process, summing up a reduction in its own territory of reduction fixed in the framework of synthesis. We could say that pornography allows jumping in its

⁷ “The subject, as happened in history, is no longer mastering it anywhere, anytime. The exploitation of nature, that of its own body as that of the surrounding nature, is no longer the only recognized value. There floats in the air of the era a kind of ‘spending’ of ‘joy’. In fact, whatever it is said to be ‘spreading’ to either one or the other, whether in nature or in a particular situation, is a characteristic of time. Expression, however trivial it is, is particularly significant for the loss of the modern ‘ego’, enclosed in its identity, in a wider entity: the ‘tribe’ of affection, the matrix nature, all that reminds of the nullness whose aspect fertile is highlighted by various forms of mysticism.” (Maffesoli, Michel, *The Eternal Clipa, The Return of Tragic in Postmodern Societies*, Preface by Professor Ioan Dragan, Translated by Magdalena Tălăban, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 127).

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

own nucleus. There is no need for cutting, enveloping, disclosure – visible as in the case of eroticism. Pornography does not *mean* something, it only *shows* and shows itself in the essence that should not be made essential.

Michela Marzano in *La pornographie ou l'épuisement du désir*⁸ expressly states that there is no link between eroticism and pornography. More than the dichotomy of significance between the two concepts, Marzano states that while erotic work is interested in sexual representation – the “mystery of sexual encounter, the enigma of the body and the secret of desire” – the image equates to the destruction of desire and individuality, with the transformation of individuals and bodies into consumer objects, or in other words, in “individuals-machines without humanity or desire.”⁹ Here again, in the register of difference, postmodern theatre’s articulation of the idea of transforming the body into consumer objects.

We find that the transition from eroticism to pornography has led to the formation of a culture of obscenity, which is based on philosophical arguments belonging to Plato, Herbert Marcuse, Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, etc. Sexuality was the starting point for this process. Psychoanalytic, philosophical and historical studies show us that the basis of these changes lies primarily in the process of civilization of human nature. Process that Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille, and Herbert Marcuse assert was possible through organized work, which is responsible for our separation from animalism, or according to the Hegelian philosophy, the work for the Other. The inhibition of primary instincts (the instinct of life-Eros and the instinct of death-Thanatos), through the “sexual interdiction” and the “interdiction of death” under the rule of reality, led to the transgression. Transgression governed by the ‘pleasure principle’ given by eroticism. The power of sexual discourse, analyzed by Michel Foucault, is the one that brings obscene language into culture. Parallel to a civilizational and repressive culture, a free

⁸ Michela Marzano, *Pornography or Exhaustion of Desire*, French translation by Oana Scoruş, Bucharest, Nemira, 2010.

⁹ *Idem*, p.34. The author then states: “The erotic work – writes the researcher – aims to ‘touch’ what causes each individual to abandon the other and to want to meet him, what ‘fails’ and what ‘takes place’ during this meeting. It respects both the imagination and maturity of the spirit of the reader or spectator, as well as the inner life and the fullness of the represented subjects. A pornographic work, in turn, is a product that proposes a speech about sex capable of transforming sexual intimacy into an object of knowledge and consumption. He is not interested in either the mysteries of the encounter or the enigma of the body, but only to bring to the fore the machine-individuals without any humanity or desire.”

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

and obscene culture is formed under the sign of pornography – prostitution being a key element in this process.

However, postmodernism is also the element which, starting from sexuality and sexual discourse liberation policies, introduced pornography and obscenity into the culture of the individual. Culture that is otherwise governed by the principle of consumption and production, which is subject to “exchange value” and “symbolic value”. In these parameters, pornography is the central element of what has been generated under the sign of “punishment”. The insertion of pornography into the narrative represents, for the postmodern culture, the perverse way the pornographic device puts into practice the panoptic surveillance that it exerts on the consumer.

In relation to obscenity, eroticism transfers the discussion to the ethical sphere. We have seen that both in the case of pornography and nudity, the look amplifies the comprehensive function, and the conceptual fixation of the two is conferred by the ethical representations of the view. The naked body placed in the boudoir, ready to be covered by clothes, does not fall into the pornography register just as it cannot be understood as obscene. Even when viewed, the person who does this action reconfigures and adapts the state of view (and thought) to the context in which that action takes place.

The object’s physical transfer to any of the three devices – erotic, pornographic, obscene – moves the conversation to a reformulation and a new reflection upon the subject of reception. In fact, we have to do with the alienation of the idea starting from the object’s stage. The actor’s work in the postmodern theatre will produce the significance of the idea and the permanence of its character. Since the idea of eroticism is divulged and recovered at the reception level, the immediate connection of this idea to the play on stage can make the receiver understand the “postmodern” respirations of pornography or obscenity. It is important for the tension of the idea to be preserved, just as it is important for the receiver to keep updating the information as it changes.

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THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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