

## From Dramatic Text to Visual Dramaturgy

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**Abstract:** As a system of signs or of signifying practices aimed at engaging with another system of signs and of signifying practices, the one belonging to the stage, the performance text found its postdramatic equivalent in visual dramaturgy. The critical attention is directed at the image or at the perceived relationship between body, space, sound, light and objects. The mission of visual dramaturgy is represented by the association between *the viewer* and *what is being viewed*, the semiotics of the visual, post-narratology, the phenomenology of the body or of the gaze, serving a single aim: organising the action in order to have it performed.

**Key words:** dramatic text, auctoriality, visual dramaturgy, postdramatic, image, semiotics.

A different kind of literature, written in order to be seen, spoken and listened to, in variable proportions, evolving generously from Homeric dimensions to concise and laconic forms, dramaturgy has a double and somewhat ambiguous status: it is literature, therefore a finished product, but it is also raw, flexible and adaptable material for the performance.

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Dramatic literature finds its justification in performance. The specific nature of dramatic literature consists in the reality constructed by the author through interior and exterior images, dramatic composition, subject-matter and dramatic conflict, through the structure of dialogue and monologue, through the character converted into type, hero, antihero, prototype, archetype. A dramatic script is a theatre universe in its text form, a literary structure based on several dramaturgy principles: the separation of roles, dialogues, dramatic tension, character action, space/time directions.

Some studies have tried to define the predeterminations that influence the author before the staging of a text – the constraints of the era, the vision of space and time, the dramaturgic storyboard – and the dramatic text appears firstly as a reality that can be perceived in its materiality and musicality, rather than the mere signifier of something else.

The first and most obvious signs of departure from the text, of emancipation from the supremacy of the auctorial mould, became visible with Meyerhold, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – the characters' moods were not expressed in the tone of voice, the text was recited in a colourless tone; in his theatre, based eminently on movement, everything was targeting sight, the dramatic action was transformed into pure dynamism. The text would turn into a mere pretext for the director to create a theatrical universe outside the author's given structure. As a director – and therefore the author of the performance – he was assuming the right to rework the work; of the 19 plays he staged, seven were reworked. Such violent deviations – which, on the other hand, were proof of an extraordinary visual imagination – were criticised and

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labelled by some of the critics of the era as formalist experiments take to extremes.

Nowadays, contemporary theatre practice no longer involves the existence of a text created with the purpose of being performed on stage, and the interest has been deflected towards non-dramatic material, in which the rules of classic dramaturgy are upended and in which new models of writing are proposed, with specific narrative dynamics.

Form tends to obey content and to bring back into conversation the term coined by Umberto Eco in relation to the *open work*, a territory open to the world, to interdisciplinarity. “In order to be defined, the object must be related back to the total series of which, by virtue of being one possible apparition, it is a member. In this way the traditional dualism between being and appearance is replaced by a straight polarity of finite and infinite, which locates the infinite at the very core of the finite. This sort of ‘openness’ is at the heart of every act of perception. It characterizes every moment of our cognitive experience.”<sup>1</sup>

Hans-Thies Lehmann uses the term *postdramatic* in order to designate the present current in contemporary theatre which is obviously disassociating itself from the notion of drama in the diachronic sense of action. A script that fixates on the here and now, on detail and the everyday, but also on universality, otherness, globalisation.

Postdramatic theatre reunites all contemporary theatre performances, departing from the classic dramatic model, which it deconstructs. Text

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<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, *Opera deschisă*, Paralela 45, Bucharest, 2006, p. 47 (our translation).

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becomes thus an instrument, among all others, an instrument which operates through words, but which engages space and corporality to the same extent.

The occurrence of this flaw in the cohesive force that unites the dramatic text with the stage, in the congeniality of the two essential elements of performance, is also reflected in the relationship between the director and the playwright. The two no longer work in a relationship of mutuality, as the functions in contemporary theatre have variable geometries and these matrices are capable of transfer, while the characters, although they continue to belong to the author, are manoeuvred by the director's semiotics.

Technology makes possible everything that the imagination dictates, the creators' worlds become differentiated and drift apart, the dramatic text morphs under the action of a distinct vision, of the message of an individual consciousness.

The text is a system of signs or signifying practices meant to engage with another system of signs and of signifying practices, the one belonging to the stage. It can therefore be stated that the relationship between the dramatic text and the stage text is complementary, competitive or conflicting, but it is never a relationship of obedience or pre-eminence. The constitutive segments of a theatre production become autonomous and the artists become specialised, the positive consequence being the diversification of the dramaturgic axes of creation, and, therefore, a multitude of resulting performance variables.

Theatre moves its exploration laboratories from the table of the first reading to the stage, and from the stage to unconventional spaces, inviting the spectators to join in the search for the meaning of the dramatic plot. The search

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becomes a collective one, and it is also included in the performance, the main aim being to refresh the relation between the spectator and the spectacle, to privilege the visual, the gaze. The continuum text/author-director-performance no longer works today, and textocentrism<sup>2</sup> is losing ground, as theatre is increasingly contaminated by cinema, opera, video design, light design. Today's theatre, which brings in other arts or parts of the new technologies, puts the spotlight on the spectacular, and the revelation of the text, of the word, is replaced with the revelation of the more effective, less filtered, more accessible image. Aesthetic renewal treads multidisciplinary artistic territories, and theatre rises to the occasion, through the unconditional call to visuality, which takes on part of the text's responsibilities.

A currently common phrase, "a picture is worth a thousand words", attributed to Confucius, made famous as a slogan used by advertising executive Fred Barnard and transferred to the performing arts, justifies the replacement of the notion of dramatic text with that of performance text, with a reading according to this particular code of the visual dramaturgy, which uses visual, choreographic and transdisciplinary patterns.

Besides the progress and advance of stage techniques, the director's hegemony influences to the same extent the manner in which the performance text is devised, influences its status and its place in the ensemble of means of communication in performance.

In an analysis of the foundations of modern dramaturgy, Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu stated that "after the wave and the vogue of

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<sup>2</sup> Term launched by Patrice Pavis in 1996, describing the dominant place occupied by text in certain theatre productions.

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*happenings* and of collective creation, of document-theatre, of narrative-theatre, which populated the landscape of the 70s, textless theatre, pure performance, seduced several directors. Dramatic writing was being overshadowed by stage writing. The interest for the theatre text was challenged in the name of modernity, which was essentially absorbed in a cult of the image. The artisans of this de-sacralisation, of this devaluation of the play picked up, provocatively, Antoine Vitez's formula: 'I believe one can make theatre out of anything.' His act of faith was understood by epigones as the need to adjust the text in such a manner that it fits the pattern of the show. Therefore, the text is functional in the show, but it no longer directs it, it no longer informs it. The stage is no longer serving the text, but instead the text adapts to the theatre devices."<sup>3</sup>

Currently, playwriting and creative writing residences no longer have as their objective composition or dramatic analysis; the domain of playwriting is shifted towards the process of stage performance in itself, and the main concern is to find an as great as possible ability for disseminating a text's ideatic potential. Nowadays, dramaturgy can no longer be autonomous, waiting patiently for the footlights, it is instead written and created by authors who leave their ivory towers, go on the internet and publicize their creations.

On the other hand, at some points in the contemporary evolution of dramaturgy we find the situation in which the creation process becomes the actual material of the performance, the text is produced "on sight", it is in progress, being written together with the company of actors, and the emphasis

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<sup>3</sup> Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu, *Auteurs, écritures dramatiques*, in *Écrire pour le théâtre, Les enjeux de l'écriture dramatique*, Paris, CNRS, Paris, 1995, p. 13 (our translation).

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is on improvisation and on the actor's right to fight their positioning in the show. Devising theatre (collaboration – collective creation), specific to the alternative, independent, experimental, socio-political and community theatre, means, in this case, a shift of authority from the written text to other artists in the theatre and to a shared artistic leadership where a shared source and a shared responsibility exist.

In an attempt to provide a complete definition of contemporary dramaturgy, Joseph Danan<sup>4</sup> proposed a division dictated by its very status. The first layer is the creation itself, the dramatic structure, the second is represented by the semiological vicinities (meanings, idiolect, subtext, referential framework), and the third, which covers the first two, is generated by the process of shifting the text matter towards performance. He speaks of a plural visual dramaturgy, that of corporal modelling, of sound, stage design, light design, of exponential dramaturgical perspectives that serve a single purpose: organising the action in order to have it performed.

Visual dramaturgy and media dramaturgy – the latter being created by the collection of meta-performance technologies – move away from the mimetic representation of reality, but theatricality preserves its duality intact, despite the segmentation undergone by the dramatic matter: it is, on the one hand, real, because it is tangible, but it is also fictional, because it represents a reality that is external to it.

Organisation for staging applies to all texts, and nowadays is the mission of the dramaturge, who (at least in German-speaking countries, since

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Danan is a French writer, professor and playwright, author of *Qu'est-ce que la dramaturgie?*, published in 2010 at Actes Sud – Papiers.

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Lessing) is part of the institution's organisational chart and has to process the play text for each production. Together with the director, or prior to receiving the director's concept, the dramaturge recomposes the ensemble, intervenes in the relations between the characters, emphasises a certain pace and outlines the central theme. To the extent to which the stage text is (re)created, this individual becomes the intermediary between the creation team and the audience, between the author and the director, between the director and the critics, in charge of the possibility and the potential for transferring meaning from the realm of the text to the visual realm of the stage.

In Romania, this practice does not have a long history; not long ago, the dramaturge's work was assigned to literary managers, but lately several theatre professionals have developed skill in the area; among them, playwright Visky András (with over 40 adaptations for stage at the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj), Anca Măniuțiu (also an author of dramatic scripts), Daniela Dima and Raluca Rădulescu, joined by the directors who "tailor" the performance material on their own. They are those who ensure the transition of narrative poetics dominated by language and structured in sequences towards a performance-based aesthetic.

As a form of cultural production, the lack of a uniform character of the texts in postmodern performances shifts therefore the critic's attention towards the visual or towards the perceived relationship *between* body, space, sound, light and objects. The attention given to the visual construction of the performances and of the functional relations between the manipulation or the exhibition of the body and the manipulation of space must be seen as very important from the point of view of the history of contemporary performance



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arts. Visual theatre and the theatre of images (represented first and foremost by Pina Bausch, Robert Lepage, Societas Raffaello Sanzio and Silviu Purcărete), spectacular in their hybrid and versatile contents, create meaning through performance – a meta-theatrical approach, based on the developments in film, television and view-mode technologies, which have influenced the theatre-goers' visual culture. The politics of this type of theatre goes beyond the aesthetic processes and relies heavily on accessibility, without being able, however, to free itself from certain tendencies towards gimmickry.

There are directors (from Robert Wilson to Thomas Ostermeier, from Mihai Măniuțiu to Radu Afrim, from Frank Castorf to Joël Pommerat<sup>5</sup>) who choose autonomous texts, free from stage contingencies, and who usually stage texts based on works belonging to genres other than drama, such as novels, essays, correspondence, or use adaptations that significantly change the initial structure, depending on the focus of interest of the moment.

“It bothers me that I have to choose a text”, Radu Afrim stated in an interview. “One should have to choose an idea. A thought. An image. Teamwork, according to the new standards, should not start from a text, but instead from an idea. Whatever we want to speak about. Chekhov spoke about what he wanted to speak. We, in our own words, or without words, what would we like to speak about?”<sup>6</sup>

Along the same lines, Italian director Romeo Castellucci almost totally rejects text, and his shows become indeed challenges in terms of

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<sup>5</sup> Joël Pommerat even calls himself a “stage writer”, since text is, in his opinion, “the trace that the performance leaves on paper.”

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.uniter.ro/radu-afrim-nu-am-nostalgia-anilor-de-inceput/> (our translation).

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performance. Reliance on the force of the image, this is his way of mastering the audience. The director even states that he would like to have other means of transmitting the narrative construction to the viewer, as his images find as many interpretations as there are spectators in the house.

“I truly believe in the role of the spectator”, the director states, “in the contact with the audience and in shared/communicated creation. A show does not have substantiality, it lacks an object, it is the most fragile artistic language that we can imagine, because in the end the stage remains empty and barren. What is left? Each spectator’s experience. Each spectator is a sum of objects, of shapes, of colours, of sounds, of lights; but without their personal experiences, their scars, whatever is seen on stage is useless. It is the spectator that gives life to a show, not the other way around.”<sup>7</sup>

Another *enfant terrible* of the stage, director and playwright Rodrigo Garcia, approaches, in all his shows, text hybridization. His productions display a discontinuity of form and a juxtaposition of apparently unrelated texts – from play fragments and meditative reflections to lyrical episodes, recipes and football commentary. He brings in a reinterpretation of the idea of auctorality, beyond the relationship text-performance. Defining “dramatic” as something that has a connection to fiction, the would-be author is the audience, and the dramatic script should be revised depending on the signals coming from the audience, rather than depending on the relationship between the two elements.

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<sup>7</sup> Romeo Castellucci, *La quinta parete/ Le cinquième mur*, in *La dramaturgie visuelle et les résidus narratifs chez Romeo Castellucci*, <http://www.alepreuve.org> (our translation).

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In the absence of the onslaught of text, today's postmodern or postdramatic spectator has the opportunity to reduce the visual performance to that particular meaning which harmonises and vibrates with his/her own emotions, as the stage reference continuously replicates its shape-shifting contact possibilities.

Visual dramaturgy does not eliminate text completely (Castellucci himself worked for a while with a dramaturge, Piersandra Di Matteo), but instead translates it into a more or less autonomous stage form, into a *corpus* operating according to predetermined composition rules, with an implicit logic, oriented towards the audience – and this system of controlling the stage code has its origins in classic dramaturgy. It is only the signs that have changed, the visual creator no longer operates with the meaning of the word, but instead with the modelling of the body, media inserts, sounds, colour, on the same text, processed differently and dealt with as a phonic, musical, rhythmic matter.

“What changed”, says Patrice Pavis, “is the status of the visual: the visual no longer accompanies the listening of the text, it does not stop at illustrating, explaining or clarifying it. On the contrary, sometimes it complicates it to the point of ambiguity. Space and the visual are a signifying matter, a structure of abstract and formal spatial relations, a device in itself. And visual dramaturgy should recognise these formal structures and lend them a cultural, ideological meaning, connected in historicity.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire de la performance et du théâtre contemporain*, Armand Colin, p. 108 (our translation).

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This refers to associating *the viewer* with *what is being viewed*, precisely the task of visual dramaturgy, as perceived by Maaïke Bleeker<sup>9</sup>, who focuses on the one hand on the semiotics of the visual and on post-narratology, and on the other hand on the phenomenology of the body, of the gaze and of kinaesthetic empathy.

The two structures, fundamentally different, produce interaction and are part of a more complicated mechanism, that of the universe of meanings that involve graphic, iconic codes, language, receptors, communicators – all of them subject to *pragmatics*<sup>10</sup> seen as the relationship between signs and their users. In our case, the relationship between visual dramaturgy/sign and viewer/receptor.

This is not a new theory, George Steiner proposed it in the 80s in his book, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*, in the chapter about cultural topologies: “The discipline [...] of semiology addresses any imaginable medium and system of signs. It asserts that language is just one of multiple communication mechanisms – graphic, acoustic, olfactory, tactile, symbolic [...]. The life of the individual and of the species depends on the reading and quick/accurate interpretation of an array of vital information. There exists a vocabulary, a grammar, maybe even a semantic of colours,

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<sup>9</sup> Maaïke teaches at the Drama Studies Department of the Utrecht University; she developed this theory on visual dramaturgy in her work *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking* (2008).

<sup>10</sup> A branch of semiotics that studies the aims, effects and implications of the use of linguistic structures by speakers.

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sounds, smells, textures and gestures, just as complicated as those of language.”<sup>11</sup>

We find ourselves, thus, inside a system in which objectives are not eliminated, but instead reoriented; words, language, free themselves from their semantic burden and become independent vehicles (“words are means, means for reaching a purpose”, says Pina Bausch. “Words are not the real purpose.”<sup>12</sup>).

When, in 1954, Ronald Barthes defined theatricality as “theatre minus text”, he foreshadowed its authority and influence over all contemporary art forms. For this reason, the great experiments and successes of postmodern theatricality can be identified in those circumstances where theatre operates with visual polyphonies and finds as a partner for dialogue the freedom to effect capital changes and associations.

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<sup>11</sup> George Steiner, *După Babel. Aspecte ale limbii și traducerii*, Univers, Bucharest, 1983, p. 75 (our translation).

<sup>12</sup> In an interview quoted by Michael Huxley and Noel Witts, *The Twentieth-century Performance Reader*, Routledge, London, 1996, p.63

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