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THE DIGITAL GENERATION AND THEATRICAL SPECTATORSHIP

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KEYWORDS: theatre spectatorship, digital generation, theatre audiences.

ABSTRACT

The null hypothesis on which this thesis is constructed states that the wide scale access to digital communication technologies has determined, amongst those exposed, especially the young, significant mutations concerning their positioning towards traditional cultural products, especially theatrical ones.

Noticing the distance young Romanians, in great number, have put between themselves and the theatre social world, be it the world of performances, be it the tangent one of criticism, we have decided, first by our master's dissertation, followed by this thesis, to explore the phenomena which occurred in the field of theatre reception; to find out what are the influences of the digitalization process and the liberalization of media contents on the young spectators.

The event which first sparked our interest in this direction is an anecdotal one and we will retell it here, albeit it does not fully comply with the established customs of academic research in order to place under its auspices the whole following undertaking: In 2007, I was working as an editor specializing in cultural matters for the regional edition of a national newspaper. At one of the morning meetings, the editor in chief handed me a compact disc, telling me that I must write a review of *Logodnicele aterizează la Paris*. I tried to explain the fact that it's useless to print a review for a performance which premiered more than six years ago, especially since there were ample reviews back in the day, but the answer was an unexpected one: "But we have photos!". Noticing my perplexity, the editor in

chief explained the slightly embarrassing situation we found ourselves in: the day before, one of our photographers used his press ID to take his new girlfriend to a night at the theatre, promising that he will write about the performance. I protested, but it was all in vain. „The matter is settled. Look at the pictures and write! It’s theatre, anyway. Nobody reads it.” Afterwards, while being a member in the team of a project meant to reunite research and creation in the field of performing arts¹ and working hands on with both theatre students and young spectators I could observe that truly, outside a small group of people directly involved in theatrical production, the lack of interest was growing ever bigger, ever more visible.

Going beyond the anecdotal and reading the European cultural consumption barometers, we’ve noticed the progressive hemorrhage of Romanian theatre audiences towards other artistic fields, conjoined with a dramatic increase in the number of those who state that they would like to be more active spectators. This paradox has sparked our curiosity regarding the phenomenology of the apparent generational change and has convinced us to start a more detailed investigation in order to better draw a panorama of the mutations occurred in the youngsters’ cultural consumption behaviors.

The aforementioned research project materialized itself in September 2011, when the Theatre and Television Faculty in Cluj, with the support of the National Council for Scientific Research (CNCS) have organized the first Romanian conference in the field, *The Digital Generation International Conference*, which I’ve helped organize and following which the first Romanian volume dedicated to the young generation’s mythologies, self-representations and cultural practices was published.

¹ *Dramaturgia Cotidianului*, research and creation project initiated at the Theatre and Television Faculty in Cluj-NapocaTeatru by prof. dr. Miruna Runcan and conf. dr. C.C. Buricea-Mlinarcic, financed, between 2009 and 2011 by a CNCS grant (n.n.)

The present thesis synthesizes our observations from the past years and aims to find possible means to narrow the gap between theatre and its young audiences. The work is separated in two investigative directions: a theoretical, prospective-speculative one, which tries to draw the portrait of the Digital Generation and to scan the human implications of the digitalization process, and an empirical one, aimed to explore the cultural consumption attitudes of young Romanians.

The first chapter, starting with the first ample study regarding the Digital Generation, Don Tapscott (1998, 2009), aims to describe the general framework which sparked this generation, both internationally and locally, as well as to detail two of the most frequently brought up accusations against its members: an epistemical crisis and a moral one, trying thusly to dialectically delineate the generation gap and find a reconciling synthesis.

In the last section of this chapter, we've focused our attention on the marketing studies and the ways in which the Digital Generation is viewed by those whose jobs depends on the constant analysis of, and adaptation to, the consumers' needs and demands. Here, we've tried to mark the main traits of the young people as consumers and to showcase the principal forces which configure their consumption.

The second chapter, continuing and extending an older undertaking², attempts a communicational approach to the digitalization phenomenon, centered on the specificities of digital communication media like blogs, forums, social networks and content sharing platforms.

Starting from the recent example, the case of a virally-distributed video clip, we've proceeded to construct a communicational model befitting the virtual space, by which to explain the apparent discursive deconstruction specific to this milieu. The conclusions of this

² see Pedestru (2009)

approach have allowed us to prefigure a set of implication that, in our opinion, the communicational mutations have had on some fundamental paradigms of human-information interaction.

The third chapter tries to explore and build upon one of our own theoretical artifacts: “the mithosphere”, a concept we consider necessary in order to better circumscribe the kaleidoscopic, dynamic, interconnected and apparently chaotic characters of the Digital Generation’s mindset. We have developed the concept by constantly placing it in opposition with a series of tangent approaches, retaining, from each one, that which seemed relevant in order to formulate a series of postulates aimed to close the section concerning the digital generation and open, each time, new possible directions.

The fourth chapter comprises the proper audience investigation, where we try to sketch the portrait of the “young, digital, spectator”, by both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as to identify the dynamics of his relationships with the theatrical world. The undertaking starts from a quantitative enquiry, using Likert scales, aimed to scan the young spectators’ and potential spectators’ main cultural consumption attitudes, followed by a more detailed series of interviews with three distinct groups of subjects. During these interviews, we have selected and discussed a set of recurring themata, such as the concept of culture, the actor, the theatre’s perceived educational/formative value, but also the most common reproaches against the Romanian theatrical phenomenon.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the conclusions, presented in a descriptive-prescriptive way. Here, we’ve tried to find possible strategies for the reactivation of young audiences, both from the point of view of production and promotion of the theatrical event and from that of the critical agendas and the institutions’ attitudes towards their spectators. Also, in this chapter, we’ve mentioned and briefly presented the research directions that we

plan to further undertake or that we would like that other researchers and teams undertake.

Due to the assumed prospective-speculative character of our investigation, as well as to the fact that a large number of studies appeared following the beginning of our research phase and during the thesis' elaboration period, we've only mentioned those sources which we've considered relevant for the specific problems approached. Thusly, we've decided to compile a general field bibliography of the most recent works, to serve both for our further undertakings and for those of others who would accept the challenge to focus their attention towards this "in progress" generation.

Unavoidable, due to the closeness, both of age, and of context, our position has been, during the entire research, a delicate one: simultaneously analyst and, involuntarily analysand. Because of this, it may be that some of our interventions are more radical, more polemical or more panegyric than usual. It is a risk that, "volens, nolens", we must assume.

Also, our thesis cannot claim to be exhaustive. By testing a new territory, it's principal goal is, in our opinion, that of starting debates and bringing to light problems which the contemporary Romanian theatrical world avoids or refuses to acknowledge.