

Babeş-Bolyai University
Faculty of Theatre and Television

Doctoral school: THEATRE AND FILM
Domain: THEATRE AND PERFORMING ARTS

**FROM THE TECHNOLOGICAL PERFORMANCE TO THE IMMERSIVE
PERFORMANCE**

- towards a theatre of the audience and space –

Doctoral thesis summary

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2017

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KEY WORDS

Theatre, technology, digital, interactivity, participation, immersion, non-linearity, space, spectator, installation, video projection, virtual, corporality, sensation.

SUMMARY

The thesis aims at analysing the way in which the digital technologies have influenced, over the time, the live arts, and identify the nature and the roads that these influences have built.

The two working hypothesis are the fact that the new technologies' influence, especially the digital ones, is not so much important through their actual presence in the performance, as hardware, but, mainly, through the structural changes that they bring along, as software; secondly, the work emphasises the fact that the recent forms of theatre amplify the theatre's *sine qua non* principle, *hic et nunc*.

INTRODUCTION

The thesis analyses the common evolution of the new technologies and the new forms of performance at the beginning of the 20th Century. Although these researches did not involve a direct form of communication between scientists and artists, the same ideas were at the core of both their interest. As Stephen Wilson states in his volume *Art + Science Now*¹, this fact is due to a common *zeitgeist*, which was influenced by the socio-political characteristics of the times.

As the arts have integrated ideas and means of the new technologies, new forms of performance were born (happening, performance art, installation art multimedia performance), and these have brought, themselves, essential influences on the evolution of traditional performance. The usage of these new instruments or mediums in the art world produces important structural changes, especially on the theatre space and the relationship with the audience.

The way in which the ideas have travelled over centuries and conversed in discoveries, theories and became materialised, and the way in which the technical apparatus diversified and socially extended, extremely fast, compared to other era's discoveries, are the

¹ Stephen Wilson, *Art + Science Now*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2010, p. 15.

signs of a “natural” evolution, which was foreseen and waited for, for a long time. Unavoidably, the integration of these new technologies in the arts was equally fast.

More than that, more and more annalists of the connection between science and art underline another important aspect, the fact that science and art are not as opposing domains as they might seem. A series of themes and points of general human interest belong to both of them, unifying them in their intentions and investigations. Also, another essential aspect for the relationship between the theoretical and practical research in science and art is the fact that, if initially, the technological discoveries were integrated by the artistic productions, subsequently, the world of science started to use the artists’ imagination, in order to identify new needs and research roads, in their common investigations.

The chapter contains a short history of computers, from the calculating machines from the 30s and the ones used for military purposes in the 40s, until the 80s, when the computer and the first network applications had reached public use. What seemed to be a SF utopia, became a household reality in only approximately 50 years. And it was only the beginning of an era in which, rapidly, the digital replaced the analogue, and the immaterial the material.

Based on the idea that the true evolution and revolution resides in the organising of the system itself, respectively in its goal of combining a multitude of elements into one, one of the key concepts of this digital world is nonlinearity. Ted Nelson coins the term *hypertext* in 1963, which he defines as a “nonlinear writing”² created through the hyperlink. Nelson sees the computer an instrument that mirrors the way in which the connections are made in the human brain, through informational interdependency, as “everything is interconnected”. The nonlinearity of the system, which is probably the most important element in Nelson’s discovery, will open the possibility for the creation of works in which the user will have the freedom of choosing her own order of lecture, without being forced to follow a trajectory pre-established by the author³.

The second key concept of the digital era is **interactivity**. Its starting point resides in one of the main characteristics of hypertext, which is the HTML format (hypertext mark-up language). In connection with the user, “hypertextualities introduce a performative dimension to the acts of reading and viewing. In order to be engaged with, hypertexts need to be acted

² Ted Nelson, *Hypertext*, in Randall Packer and Ken Jordan (ed.), *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, New York and London, W.W.Norton & Company, 2001, p. 159.

³ Randall Packer & Ken Jordan (Editori), *op. cit.*, p. 155.

upon, and reading hypertext becomes equivalent to putting into action”⁴, writes Gabriela Giannachi.

Definable as “the ability of the viewer to directly manipulate and influence her experience of media”, interactivity was strongly used in the performance art of the 60s, 70s and 80s, but also in the 90s, alongside the hypertexts, the widening of the public access to internet and the usage of digital technologies in the live arts, in general. Interactivity and audience participation have been used in many practical and conceptual ways, until the re-labelling into *specta(c)tor*. Term used initially by Augusto Boal in his *theatre of the oppressed* in the 70s, to define the spectators which become active and participate in the theatre act, it is more and more used by the practitioners and theoreticians of different interactive forms of performances, in order to refer to the new, active, role of the spectator.

The paper continues with a series of examples of interactive works and visits the research of theatre makers who search for the spatial reconfiguration of the relationship between the performance and the audience, from Richard Wagner to Adolphe Appia, Max Reinhardt, Enrico Prampolini, László Moholy-Nagy, Erwin Piscator and Meyerhold, to later focus on performance art and, more important, on installation art.

Firstly named “Environments“ by Allan Kaprow in 1958, after more and more artists in the 80s started to create installations, they have become a form of art. Characterised by the fusion of mediums and the interest in activating the audience, through interactivity and immersion, **it is an art which includes, unprecedented, the spectator in the same medium which she observes**. The audience participation, its removal from passivity (which is a goal itself of installation art), in the search of the artists to offer their audience an active experience, becomes the most important inspiration for live arts, in their recent history.

The paper aims at underlying the essential impact installation art has in the development of theatre, with which shares basic characteristics: the theatre’s *hic et nunc* is one of them, as installation art is the only one more ephemeral than theatre, as it depends on the physical presence of the user in the performative space and time, inside the work of art.

This participatory dimension manifested in installation art, this search for interactivity and the fusion of elements is part of a wider history, a common search of the arts and science of the 20th Century.

⁴ Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres. An Introduction*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 13.

THE SPECTATOR

The chapter analyses the way in which the new technologies have influence the theatre performance in relation to the audience, underlying the way in which the theatre creators from the last decades and in the present relate to the *spectator-space* dyad represents the most important change in the history of performance art.

The hypothesis on which this chapter is based on is the fact that the most important impact which the new technologies have on performance art are audience participation and immersion in the work's space-time, making the participant to be "part of the game".

Starting from the idea that all audiences "participate" and that theatricality is a historical characteristic of the European society, the research will follow the point that participation and immersion are not just the prerogative of the new theatrical forms, but are enhanced by them.

The chapter brings into discussion the "paradox of the spectator", starting from the theory of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (born 1940) from his essay *The Emancipated Spectator*. "There is no theatre without a spectator" and, at the same time, "being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons: [...] Being a spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing just as he is separated from the possibility of acting"⁵, writes Rancière. The theoretical positioning of Rancière has the major positive effect to bring back to public debate the presence and the "part" played by the audience and to question their qualities.

The chapter emphasises a series of examples from different artistic fields, which "activate" the spectator, in museums, literature, social networks, video gaming and film.

The *Story of Berlin* and DDR Museum in Berlin, Germany, are strong examples of museum which, being more than collectors of exhibits to be presented in classical ways, rely on directing and set design. They recreate a series of historical situations and invite the spectator to experiment those situations, trough interactive mediums, with rules and possibilities to be discovered by the user.

In literature, interactivity is exemplified though Mark Amerika's hypertextual novels. His trilogy represents a series of online novels which are to be red with the intervention of the user, who choses links in order to move on to the next page. The second and the third novel contain more and more complex mediums, including sound, space design, animations etc., highly resembling to video games.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, translated in English by Gregory Elliott, London, New York, Verso, 2009, p. 2.

The social networks and video games are other areas using interactivity. One of the common elements in the two social networks presented here is the fact that these are virtual environments which aim at imitating reality, as reality itself is what, eventually, the user wishes to control and to act upon. The users enter these virtual worlds through an avatar, whose name and body characteristics they decide upon, pay a monthly subscription and can participate to various activities, just like in real life. The element of fiction is, on one hand, almost reduced to zero (through the imitation of reality), but is also enhanced (as the action takes place in a virtual environment), causing a shortcut so that the mirage of action and control over can be installed. Over seven million people are part of secondlife community.

The paper also visits the interactive technologies of video gaming, adopted by the art world as well, focusing on devices which translate the movements of the user in visual information, from Nintendo Wii to Playstation Move and Kinect. The latest has been widely used in installations and theatre performances, especially dance theatre, as it allows the identification of the movement and position of a user and the digital signals can trigger numerous real time visual, sound and other type of effects.

Interactivity was also used in film, despite the fact that it represents, by its nature, a fixed form, upon which one cannot intervene in real time. *Kinoautomat* was the first interactive movie in the world and was realised in Czechoslovakia between 1966 and 1967. For eight times, the movie stops, and the spectators can choose between two possible ways for the story to continue, by pressing a red or a green button. The option which receives more votes will be projected. The paper continues with an analysis on the film *eXistenZ* (1999), written and directed by David Cronenberg, as being a possible model, although a fictional one, for the “total immersion”. The film tells the story of a game, *eXistenZ*, through which the users enter a world highly resembling to reality, which they effectively access, with their entire body, while their bodies remain inert in the real world. The film postulates, therefore, an apparent paradox: the reality as supreme fiction but, especially, a model of total accessing of a fictional space-time. The game, tested now for the first time, is being directly experienced by the participant, and the experience is physical, as not only the mind, but the body of the user is involved, as well. More than in installation art, the participant doesn't just enter a physical space offered by an artistic product, but an entire world.

This would be the fictional image of the “total spectator”, a spectator who can physically access the performative space, who keeps her own body, is integrated in the game, can directly and totally interact with other spectators; a spectator who has a series of characteristics prescribed by the fictional situation (some lines she will use, some types of

personality), but who has total decision making powers and who can take the game to results which can surprize the author herself.

And the philosophy behind this fictional situation begins to be more and more accessed by the new forms of theatre which have identified, already, practical solutions to offer the spectator the experience of immersion in the space-time of the performance. This shift from being a witness to direct experimentation is strongly manifested in theatre productions such as the ones created by the British company Blast Theory.

Therefore, the chapter dedicated to the audience and the various artistic attempts to activate the spectator, through technologies, closes with a series of examples of performances produced by this company, performances which are at the limit between game and artistic practice (a border line which also represents a point of interest in the company's research). *Uncle Roy All Around You*, one of Blast Theory's performances from 2003, is „game in which online and street players collaborate to find Uncle Roy before being invited to make a commitment to a stranger”⁶. The users can be both online and on the streets of the city where the performance takes place. The street users check-in in an office, where their photos are taken and they leave all their belongings. They receive a mobile computer and have 60 minutes to find Uncle Roy. He sends them messages with different meeting points in the city, marked in red on the virtual map from the computer. The players must press the „I am here” button in order to receive more clues. The online players also receive the mission to meet Uncle Roy. They are represented by an avatar on the virtual replica of the city, which they can see in detail, through photos, by pressing on the available icons. The performance encourages the virtual players to support the ones on the street with clues.

The game ends when the participant managed to reach Uncle Roy's office. Here, both her and the virtual player who got here, are asked if they would agree to make the promise to the other one to be there if in a crisis. The promise will last for 12 months and is available only if both parts agree, in which case they are asked to exchange their postal addresses.

“You go home, reevaluate yourself, the one once loved and lost, the nature of memory, time's winged chariot, cities and surveillance, «virtual» realities, the fallibility of computers, the boundaries of bodies and space, the nature of life and its relationship to performance, the meaning of art. Cry like a baby. Realize, again, just

⁶ <http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/uncle-roy-all-around-you/>, accessed: February 14, 2015.

how new and unprecedented such work is, and how timeless and humbling is the experience of great art.”⁷

These are the words which conclude Steve Dixon’s mammoth-size study on digital performance, an obvious praise, emotional and moving, to Blast Theory, even more as this last chapter, dedicated to this performance, is journal like, subjective, written based on his direct experience, as a participant.

What creates such a strong effect? One thing can be certainly stated: the spectator is, in this recent stage in the evolution of theatre, “the main character”. She and her experience are at the core of practical and theoretical research. Related to the history of theatre, we can talk about an enhancement of this interest and effect, which has always existed.

Through **eliminating the border of the fourth wall**, the spectator is invited, like in installation art, to “enter” the space of the work of art and to experience it directly. This is what brings by the second major change, the invitation to participation: the spectator, with her numerous new names, from specta(c)tor to participant, is *activated*. She is not just an observer, but is part of the “situation”, to which she participates. And based on the capacity of the creators to create an environment which invites the spectator to come in, we can further discuss the effect of immersion. And the immersion of the spectator in an environment, her *presence*, as a state of *being* in a certain moment, in the *here and now*, is enhanced. Not so much as escapism, an escape from one reality in order to live in another, but as an enhancement of the being in the moment, this is how we can see this effect.

THE SPACE

The first great change that the recent history of theatre space goes through is the usage of video projections. From still images to moving images, from projections to the usage of monitors, what is generally referred to as “video projection” seems to be the most visible and often used presence in the space of technological theatre. The paper offers a short history of its usage, from the invention, in the 17th Century, of the “magic lantern”, considered to be the predecessor of the video projector, and, going through the “cinefication” of the theatre, proposed by Meyerhold and his experiments with image projections and, later, Erwin

⁷ Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance. A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, The MIT Press, 2007, p. 669.

Piscator's performances, credited to be the pioneer of the usage of video projections, followed by Emil František Burian. The chapter later focuses on the "Lantern Magika", imagined by the Czech set designer, Josef Svoboda, a form of nonverbal theatre, with performances combining film, dance and "black theatre", which has later become a brand of Prague and Czech Republic.

The projection of live images is the next step in the evolution of the projections on stage. The theatre creators have welcomed this new technical possibility: the **The Wooster Group** company in their *Hamlet* (2007, 2012) or Laurie Anderson in *Dal Vivo* (1998). The paper continues with the investigation of the combining of live and pre-recorded projections and the becoming of a "hybrid space of the video image" in the performance of creators such as Robert Lepage, The Builders Association, Simon McBurney.

The next step in the history of projections and space is the presence of live projections from other spaces than the stage where the performance occurs. The theatre performance, therefore, starts to cross the limits of conventional space, traditionally dedicated to the performance, even if only "virtually". It is one of the first important moments of questioning the localization and de-localization of theatre and the space conventions which have accompanied it throughout its history. Therefore, we are witnessing a breakthrough in the canonical usage of space and time. For instance, in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1995) based on Gertrude Stein, and directed by Cheryl Faver at The Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre, four actors on a stage in New York, playing the parts of three Fausts and one Mephisto, were interacting with the actresses playing Annabelle and Margareta, who were physically on the stage of the Opera in Paris. The images of the two women were projected in real time on a screen placed on the stage in New York, through videoconference software.

The chapter concludes, regarding the usage of video projection on the theatre stage, pre-recorded or live, by discussing "the visual turn" announced by W. J. T. Mitchell in 1994, with the fact that we are witnessing the moment of a possible *imago-centrism* in theatre, after the two anterior moments, the *texto-centrism* and the *stage-centrism*. Starting from this assumption, a possible effect of digital technologies on theatre performance would be a **dynamic stage**, through inviting the video projections on its stage and manifested on different levels: dynamic image wise, architectural and time wise, as the image and space changes can be produced rapidly, just like in film.

In the virtual theatre space, this effect is enhanced. The chapter visits a series of works which use virtual technologies, starting from the usage of virtual set design.

The main change that occurs with new software such as Isadora, allows theatre creators to realise and manipulate real time stage images, based on signals from the stage, most of the time from the movement of actors or dancers. **Klaus Obermaier**, Austrian media artist, director, choreographer and composer, is one of the most renowned artist specialised on the usage of *motion capture technology*. *Le Sacre du Printemps*, from 2006, is a performance in which all the projected images are created or generated in real time: a software captures the movements of the dancer but also of the musical instruments in the orchestra and, based on these signals, generates video projections which become the 3D set design of the performance, which the audience is watching through special glasses.

The paper marks the shift from set design to environment, revisiting productions of Blast Theory, in order to underline not only the breaking of the fourth wall, but also the removal of productions from more or less traditional spaces and the placing them in the public area. In *Ryder Spoke* (2007), the participants ride a bike during the night and record and listen to stories about their and other participants' lives.

The “ultimate” manifestation form of the theatre space is the internet. The dematerialization, which we have followed, seems to have reached a maximum point, surpassing even the passage from a traditional space, built for theatre, to alternative spaces and, later, such as evoked in the performances of Blast Theory, to public spaces.

The best examples in this regard are **MUDs**, „multi-user dungeon”, which describe a group of virtual reality systems with multiple creators, interactive, text based⁸, and **MOOs**, systems based more on communication than gaming, which invites its members to contribute to this “world”⁹. In both cases, the users enter this world through one or more avatars. Systems which have become known as being at the limit between “identity, performance and community”¹⁰ and defined by Dixon as Bakhtian carnival spaces, they open the discussion on a possible *internet space*, a place in which Sherry Turkle states that we build our identities, where “we project ourselves into our own dramas, dramas in which we are producer, director and star”, in which the users become not only authors of texts, but also authors of themselves, manifesting fluid and multiple personalities¹¹.

An important theme is being opened, therefore, in the context in which Dixon underlines the fact that the MUDs are starting to be seen as new stages in philosophical research on one of the most debated themes, of the self and of the identity, being seen as “a

⁸ http://www.cc.gatech.edu/classes/cs8113e_99_winter/lambda.html, accessed: April 8, 2015.

⁹ *Idem*.

¹⁰ Steve Dixon, *op. cit.*, p. 470.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 471.

space to rehearse, explore, reconfigure, and act out different permutations of one's self and identity"¹².

In theatre, Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance, *Chamelons 3: Net Congestion* (2000), was performed in the internet, as the audience was able to follow it on computers and to send instant messages in order to be in contact with the performance.

The chapter ends with a visiting of the concept of experience, which is at the core of the new theatrical forms. The analysis is based on a wide series of psychological research which proves the fact that investing in activities-experiences (such as a trip or going to the cinema, theatre, opera etc.) versus investing money in buying products, produces a stronger and longer lasting effect. The first explanation relies on the fact that, after buying a product, the pleasure disappears relatively soon, once habitude is installing, while as an experience such as a trip is a happiness trigger for a much longer period, through remembering. Another motivation why experience induces a more enhanced state of happiness is the fact that it produces a stronger feeling of vitality, of "feeling alive", both during the experience and when looking at it retrospectively.

Therefore, participatory art, which can include various means of manifestation, from participatory theatre performances to installations or exhibitions, represents a form which comes to respond on a double level to the human needs identified by this research on what produces happiness and liveness, an experience which could be labelled of being of "second level". On one hand, participation to any kind of artistic event already represents, based on this theory, an investment in an experience-like activity. More than that, when the event is a participatory one and invites the participant to become part of that event, the experience is enhanced, as it can be planed only to a certain degree, after which the element of surprise, the unpredictable and the ineffable come by.

The chapter dedicated to space and the way it enhances the audience's experience ends with a recent example in which coexist most of the principles discussed so far. Opened in 2013, the exhibition *David Bowie Is* is a strongly immersive experience, which forcefully uses elements from installation art, but also has a strong dramaturgy. The experience offered by this exhibition, much more than viewing a series of archive objects, is conceived on more levels, but with the same goal: to enter the different states-situations which Bowie himself has experienced. We have chosen this example also for the fact that the usage of technologies

¹² *Ibidem.*

starts to be much less obvious and totally subordinated to the dramaturgic request, without being, therefore, a demonstration, but a creative space-time for a direct experience.

We can, therefore, conclude by stating that in a relatively small time line, at least compared to the long history of theatre, respectively in just a few decades, theatre and, especially the theatre space, have gone through a major change, marked by the technological *boom*.

The dynamic theatre space and image have reached a highlight with the usage of video projections, whose extremely rapid technological evolution, both accessibility wise and functionality wise, have guaranteed them being adopted by the majority of theatre creators in the last decades. A form of *imago-centrism* and *de-materialisation* can formally concentrate the description of this type of theatre pursuits, alongside the search for physical approach between performance and spectator, through the breaking of the fourth wall.

But, in an apparent paradox, although many theatre creators still follow the path of the usage of more and more evolved technologies, just as many creators renounce at the usage of technologies from their creations, focusing, instead, on a format of re-materialisation and on the offering an experience for the spectator.

TOWARDS AN IMMERSIVE THEATRE

The immersive theatre is a participatory theatre form, recently created, at the beginning of 2000, which includes the spectator in the performance, transforming her from observant into participant, respectively “co-creator” or “co-actor”. The border between stage and audience is abolished, as both actors and spectators share the same space. It is a theatre which puts the spectator in the *theatre situation*. The spectators move through the spaces of the performance, interact with the actors and/or other participants, are in contact with the environment which surrounds them. The usage of technologies is reduced almost to zero and to “invisibility”.

Sleep No More is the most recent and successful production of the British company Punchdrunk, which premiered in New York in 2011 and is being performed ever since, uninterruptedly. Based on William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, it is performed in an old warehouse, which was transformed by the company in an abandoned hotel. The participants receive a white mask, which they will have to wear all through the performance, and the indication not to talk. With these singular indications, the spectators are allowed to enter in groups, every 15 minutes. “After admission, guests embark upon an individual journey and

may stay inside the performance for as long as they wish. Following the culminating moment of the performance guests are welcome to stay on at the Manderley Bar.”¹³

Just like in all immersive performances, and like in installation art, “the rules of the game” are not announced. The spectators can move around freely through the 100 rooms specially designed, on the six floors of the hotel, where they can enter the rooms, search through the closets and drawers and / or follow the 26 actors from the cast, the “residents of the hotel”.

Each room is designed in detail and represents elements, scenes or situation from Shakespeare’s play: an abandoned asylum, surgeries, children’s rooms, a cemetery, shops, a ball room, a taxidermy workshop, a bloody bedroom etc. “In some [rooms] you meet actors who perform, in others you simply search for clues, details, read books, documents, search through closets, try on clothes, type, open each drawer and, when you see a door, you better look for what it’s behind it”¹⁴, writes Cristina Foarfă.

The actors, who wear costumes, but not masks, perform scenes from Shakespeare’s play, and the performers can decide if they follow the actors or investigate the rooms. The story is being reconstructed in the rhythm and the order of each spectator. There are, however, scenes such as the scene of the ball, which are being performed integrally and at which all the spectators can watch together, as they take place in larger spaces.

The reviews from important papers in New York are all praising the performance, the reactions of the spectators are equally enthusiastic and the performances are sold out.

The same amount of enthusiasm is being raised also by YOU ME BUM BUM TRAIN, a performance which was first presented in 2004, in London, created by Kate Bond and Morgan Lloyd. It is one of the most successful performances in the recent history of London. After its huge success, it reopened in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2015.

The spectators, named “passengers”, enter the performance alone, one by one, every five minutes¹⁵. They move through different spaces, each with a different theme and set designs. In each of these spaces there are volunteer-actors who, sometimes, wear costumes. In this individual trip, the spectators are invited to enter a situation and to face it, becoming

¹³ <http://sleepnomorenc.com/tickets.htm>, accessed: March 24, 2013.

¹⁴ *Idem*.

¹⁵ Dominik Maxwell, *You Me Bum Bum Train at the Old Foyles Building, WC1*, in *The Times*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/you-me-bum-bum-train-at-the-old-foyles-building-wc1-xpdwpv3cnmk>, accessed: May 10, 2017.

the main character¹⁶: you can end up driving an excavating machine, be the host of a TV show, rob a bank and experience life inside a fridge, cook in a restaurant's kitchen, give a talk about a contemporary art work that you have never seen before, conduct a chamber orchestra¹⁷.

The length of each scene is approximately two or three minutes and many participants recall the fact that they were rapidly taken from one situation to another. Therefore, in less than one hour, a passenger improvised throughout about 20 different scenes. Here, too, the details of the set design are carefully treated.

The paper underlines the fact that the most common effect shared by the participants is that **you get to do things that you would have never thought you were capable of and meeting with the self**. Numerous participants note the fact that the experience they had during this performance have brought them back memories or sensations from the past, which they had forgotten, or that it put them in the state to meditate upon themselves. And the **state of excitement** that participants feel is another constant.

Departing from the idea that immersion itself is not only a characteristic of immersive theatre, but enhanced by it, compared to traditional theatre, the paper concludes with the fact that all functions or categories of traditional theatre (text, directing, acting, space, spectator) are **enhanced** by the strategies of technological theatre and, later, enhanced even more by immersive theatre.

Even though technologies are still being used in many performances, immersive theatre uses its essence, without using them effectively.

We have notice that, regarding **text**, there are two main characteristics given by the technological performance: the fact that it is no longer a starting point for the performance and that it manifest more as script. On a structural level, its main characteristic is non-linearity. The immersive theatre maintains these characteristics and enhances them, this form of theatre being an investigative one: the spectator is the one who makes her way throughout the performance and identifies her own narrative line. We can, therefore, speak of an auto-linear relation to the text.

For **directing**, the organic construction of the performance is a request enhanced in technological theatre, where all elements must meet in order to create the wanted effect. In

¹⁶ Mark Lawson, *You Me Boom Boom Train: my trip with the Kafkaesque theatrical cult*, in *The Guardian*, September 23, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/sep/23/you-me-bum-bum-train-my-trip-with-the-kafkaesque-theatrical-cult>, accessed: May 9, 2017.

¹⁷ Andrew Dickson, *Best Theatre of 2012, NO 9: You Me Bum Bum Train*, in *The Guardian*, December 11, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/dec/11/best-theatre-2012-you-me-bum>, accessed: May 9, 2017.

immersive theatre we have noted the fact that the abandonment of control by the director is even stronger once, during the performance, most of the control relies on the spectator. The director gives up on the supreme authority over the performance and becomes a *metteur en situation*: is the one who creates the situation which the spectator will enter.

The **actor**, in technological theatre, especially through the presence of video projections, has been seen as competing against the images, which seemed to seize the image of the stage. But the usage of live technologies has bought back the focus on the presence of the actor. We can discuss, from this moment, about an enhancement of the presence of the actor on stage and, implicitly, about an enhancement of the *hic et nunc* effect: with the fusion of all the elements of a performance and the higher rate of interdependency between them, the relation between the body of the actor and the live digital technologies underlines the fact that the action happens *here and now*. In immersive theatre, we have called her guide-actor, a *metteur en scene in real time*, during the performance. Being in a close relationship with the spectator, the actor becomes a guide in the investigations of the spectator, and the model could be Grotowski's "saint actor".

Regarding the space and the relation to the audience we witness the most important changes. The reconfiguration of these relations represented the main quest in the changes that theatre space went through during the technological phase, as a follow up of the endeavours of theatre practitioners from the beginning of the 20th Century. The most wanted goal was represented by the breaking of the fourth wall.

Space wise, the technological theatre had brought at least two main changes: a form which we have called *imago-centrism*, through the creation of a dynamic stage image, and a stronger and stronger *de-materialization*, through the shift from the hard materials used in design to projected images. These enterprises were followed by immersive theatre: the imago-centrism in technological theatre is mirrored, in immersive theatre, by the great attention given to the set design details. The "stage image" remains, therefore, important, but is turn into 3D, returning to the usage of hard materials. In fact, the set design becomes even more "realist" compared to traditional theatre, as the intimacy of the relationship with the audience no longer allows the approximation of the traditional theatre set design, which is always far from the spectator. The space becomes an *inclusive* one, as it physically includes the spectator in the stage event, the long desired wish of the redefying of the relationship between performance and audience being reached, through the dissolving of the fourth wall.

The **spectator** is, therefore, in the centre of the attention. The tendency of the technological performance, like in installation art, to invite the spectator to enter the space of

the artistic work and to directly experience it, to have an active spectator, who intervenes in the performance and, more than that, who has control on the way it evolves and becomes, this way, a co-author, is enhanced in immersive theatre. Starting with the observation that, like in installation art, the spectator must identify the rules herself, we can consider that this spectator has the function of a *detective*. This characteristic, supported by the fact that she has the freedom to make her own way and experience through the performance, becomes a substantial enhancement of the control the spectator has over the performance and, especially, over her own experience. More than that, it is important to underline the fact that we can also speak of an investigation towards inside, a self-investigation, as the majority of the one who narrate their experience mention the fact that were surprised by the resources they have identified in their own selves: the investigative endeavour, in this type of performances, refers not only in deciphering the situation in which the participant is being part of but, especially, in finding in herself the resources to incarnate it. The immersive theatre spectator is, therefore, activated, has control over the performance and her own experience, is a detective looking for clues about the performance and about herself. She is, finally, a co-creator of the performance at which she directly participates, and this participation can be seen as a mirror for the training of her function as a co-creator of her own world.

Regarding the *sine qua non* principle of theatre, *hic et nunc*, the paper notes the fact that it is also enhanced both by technological theatre and, stronger, by immersive theatre, through the fact that both digital technologies and, later, immersive technologies, manifest through the *experience* they offer the audience.

In the immersive theatre, the spectator participates directly to the action and, more than that, becomes the main character of the performance. The spectator no longer *assists*, but is the one who executes the action. Therefore, the *here and now* define not only the action, but also (and especially) the experience of the participant. And this state, enhanced by the first-hand experience, creates the state of *presence*.

The demonstration is endorsed by Allan Kaprow's notion on art, which doesn't represent a form of escapism, as it is not a "promise of perfection in some other realm", but "a way of living meaningfully in this one"¹⁸. For that, the aim of his work is to be "a form of «self-knowledge», not as a strengthening of self-present identity, but as «the passage of the self to the egoless self. Lifelike art in which nothing is separate is a training in letting go of

¹⁸ *Apud* Laura Cull, *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance*, New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013, p. 173.

the separate self»¹⁹. This positioning encourages us to affirm the fact that the most important effect of experiencing an immersive theatre performance could be the accessing of the being in the present.

Going deeper into the identifying what, more exactly, confers this state of presence and, therefore, how does immersion manifests, a possible answer would consist in the **body-sensorial quality of the experience, by the activation of the body of the participant and of all his senses, through the direct experience offered by the immersive theatre productions.**

Therefore, the paper analyses the way in which, if traditional theatre focuses on activating two senses, the sight and the hearing, the immersive experiences try to act upon all senses, simultaneously. The paper brings in discussion two theories which discuss the way in which the activation of senses functions, through corporal experience. On one side, there is the (SYN)AESTHETICS, conceived by Josephine Machon, an aesthetic of synesthesia, which she sees as most strongly materialised by immersive theatre. It “activates the *thinking body*, the aspect of the human body which is capable of communicating *and* interpreting in the live performance moment; a sensory intellect which exists within the body and follows its own rules of logic that are both separate from *and often intrinsic to* cerebral intellect²⁰, like instinctual reactions. More than that, Machon speaks also about the activation of the sixth sense, “where the fusion of cerebral and corporeal cognition encourages the full sentience of the human body, drawing on intuition, to make sense/*sense* of the unarticulable²¹. This connection to the “ineffable essence”, as Deleuze names it, or the activation of the “extra-conscious perception”, as Henri Bergson refers to it, would be aftermaths of a unitary activation of the body and the senses, but also of the combination between this activation and the state of consciousness.

Here enters the second theory, SESELELAME, defining the alternative way in which the Anlo-Ewe speaking people of Ghana, in West Africa, refer to the senses and, in all, to the knowledge system, based on the anthropological studies by Kathryn Linn Geurts. As opposed to western culture, which follows the five model view on the senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch), “*seselelame* is [in exchange] a generalised feeling within the body «which includes both internal senses (such as balance and proprioception) and external senses, as

¹⁹ Laura Cull, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

²⁰ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres – Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013, p. 106.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

well as other perceptual, emotional, and intuitive dimensions of experience»²². Gerts's studies speak about "societies and cultures where the body, mind and spirit are not divorced from one another" and proposes a different perspective of the way of being and perceiving the world, in everyday life and in art – "accepting that the artistic is a heightened expression of the otherworldly within the everyday"²³.

The direct experience of the body, through the activation of the senses, which we consider to be essential for immersive theatre, combined with the state of reflection of the spectator-detective, is what enhances the state of presence. And this *living in the present*, of the *here and now*, which opens the path for introspection, can be considered to be the most important result of an immersive theatre experience and one of the possible explanations for the enthusiasm that it generates.

Therefore, the main characteristics of digital technologies, interactivity, non-linearity and immersion, absorbed by technological theatre, incarnate the searches of theatre practitioners from the beginning of the 20th Century, to bring the audience closer to the performance, through the rethinking of the theatre space. Later, the immersive theatre enhances these practices, renouncing at the effective usage of the technological apparatus, but maintaining their principles and taking them further, through the strong effects obtained by the direct, unmediated relationship between the body of the spectator and the work of art and, therefore, through the organic activation of her senses.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 111.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 113.