7.5 Black boxes in times of pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic and the acceleration of remote-digital transmissions of theatre

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✕ ~~Abstract~~

The advent of the global pandemic, caused by COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease, 2019), established a necessity for social isolation among people, impacting various sectors, among them the cultural sector, with physical spaces closed and their activities suspended. On the other hand, the need for quarantine and physical withdrawal of individuals, ended up promoting the use of digital tools for the establishment of social interactions, both at work and at leisure. This situation provoked a rush in search of a remote medium for the production of scenes, which boosted the number of shows transmitted digitally. It is in this context that an investigation is proposed on the structuring of this theatrical performance through the media apparatus, and the expansion of the notion of presence in an increasingly connected world.

Keywords: arts, Brazil, scene arts, pandemic, theater.

1. Theater and virtuality

What are the consequences of a phenomenon whose categories, that were previously organized by physical interaction in person, are now organized by technical images, and when even the notion of presence is virtualized? Are we facing another theater, another artistic form, or just the subsequent transformation of an activity that goes back thousands of years?

Considering this panorama, we intent to analyse some examples of this remote-digital theater both before and after the advent of COVID-19 and how the pandemic accelerated this process of transmediality between the scenic apparatus and a multimedia scenario.

How can this impact the process of creating images and (re)translating text into images, through the actor on the scene, which is now (re)organized, (re)translated and (re)transmitted through the mediatic technical image.

To understand for the best what a virtual theater would be, we first need to think about the term that adjectives it, that is, to think what 'virtual' means. Let's start, didactically, by analyzing the term on the dictionary.

> *Virtual adjective*
> *ALMOST 1 almost a particular thing or quality; (…)*
> *COMPUTER 2 describes something that can be done or seen using a computer and therefore without going anywhere or talking to anyone. (Cambridge, 2008, p 1621)*

Initially, this second definition can already indicate one of the points of our discussion here. Virtual theater, therefore, would be all that set of theatrical actions, which takes place through computer means: digital media, such as social networks, websites, platforms streaming video.

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But as artists and art educators, I believe we must seek a wider understanding. Therefore, I'm much more interested on that another meaning also linked to the term virtual, found on the same dictionary: *virtual* as an almost a particular thing or quality. It means that virtual could be understood as something that exists as a potency, in the philosophical sense of becoming (*devir* in Portuguese, *devenir* in French and Spanish), as the possibility and the potential of change.

In this sense, we can consider art as a virtuality. Art is a way of producing new forms to view the world, forms that are worlds in potential, worlds to become, therefore, worlds in becoming. Then we can say are virtual worlds. Art is by this definition, also a virtuality. Talking about virtual theater then, it's to talk about the meeting of two virtualities, the virtuality of art, which empowers us new worlds, with the virtuality provided by informational technology, which simulates the world through computer, digital, technological means.

Therefore, Theater is a virtuality that is inserted both in time and in space and works with visual, auditory, olfactory and often also tactile senses and tastes. If theater allow us new ways to see the world, what are the transformations and impacts of this mediation of theatrical art by the digital medium? They are enough to establish their own characteristics and different?

Over the last decades, numerous artistic actions, as well as academic analyses, dealt with the relationship between art and cyberspace.

Arlindo Machado, still in the 1990s, already discussed about presence in cyberspace, as well as the relationship of art with technological tools and if it was important for an artist to know and operate the necessary programs and devices to formulate his work. Machado's text, by itself, rescue the issue of technological devices such as *black boxes*, an expression used in the previous decade, either in *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* (*Philosophy of the Black Box*) by Flusser (1985) or the *Boîtes noires* (*Black Boxes*), by Edmond Couchot (1990). "[These] devices are black boxes that simulate human thinking, through scientific theories, which, like human thought, exchange symbols contained in its "memory", in its program. Black boxes that play at thinking." (Flusser, 2018: 40; translated by the author[1]).

The impact seen throughout the twentieth century of the theater's dialogue with other languages, resulted in a post-dramatic theater that presents a fluid notion of theatricality, leading to aesthetic hybridisms, as Lehmann (2007) points out, mixing incorporating characteristics of different manifestations and directly influenced by which Flusser will point out as technical images. How then this relationship with digital media and profusion of scenic content production through these media can transform theatrical action?

For the realization of this remote theater, the action of the artists, the scene, needs be captured by a device, in this case a camera, passing through a transmission via digital media, to then be displayed on another device (TV, cellphone, computer, tablet...). The spectators will have to relate, themselves with similar questions. Will they watch the scenes in full screen, or even in the background, while performing other activities? They can be hidden, or have their images shared as well. In in some cases, they could interact, make comments. But they also will have to deal with possible limitations, related to the technical capacity of the device and the speed of connection to the internet network.

2. Remote connections and the COVID pandemic

The advent of the global pandemic, caused by COVID-19, established a need for greater isolation between people and, with that, boosted the search for transmitted actions through digital media. But it must be clear that the notion of a virtual theater is already discussed and performed scenically long before we are in isolation, flooded by lives and the like. Over the last few decades, the experiments in the which the scene seeks to present itself through other means.

However, how to maintain this same potentiation relationship of presence, in an exchange through digital media, of virtual environments. Maybe through conversation, through the exchange for videoconference between the artists, in a mutual celebration, stimulating the public to celebrate together, including participating in specific moments, through tools of Digital communication.

Serving as an example of this remote interactions of theater through the digital field for decades, the British-

1. Aparelhos são caixas pretas que simulam o pensamento humano, graças a teorias científicas, as quais, como o pensamento humano, permutam símbolos contidos em sua "memória", em seu programa. Caixas pretas que brincam de pensar. (Flusser, 2018, p. 40).

German Group *Gob Squad* was producing the work *Show me a good time* to be launched in 2020, where the audience would watch from within the theater an interaction in real time of artists broadcasting scenes live in different locations in the city. "In Show Me A Good Time, Gob Squad send out time-travelling, shape-shifting explorers into a strangely unfamiliar reality, to find out how to go on and where, amongst the dust and the dirt, a good time might be found again" (Gob Squad, 2020, n/p).

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impediment of the public's presence in the theater building, the group reorganized the work in a 12-hour live event broadcasted from the HAU - Hebbel am Ufer theater, in Berlin (6 pm to 6 am local time), where only one person stood on stage, in front of an empty audience, interacting with the other artists by videoconference, while the remaining artists circulated around the city with personal protective equipments trying to interact safely with other persons on public open areas.

The play was lately presented as originally conceived with part of the audience at the theater, but the group choose to maintain the live streaming version simultaneously, which leads us to another important issue, that is the realization of hybrid plays, where in addition to the virtual modality, there is a resumption of the face-to-face audience.

In those cases, presential and remote modes coexisting simultaneously. At the center is the notion of *telepresence* in the Greek sense of *téle* as of distance, and the Latin *praesentia*, which means being ahead, being within reach. On one hand, there are those who inhabit the *théatron*, the place where one can see the event within reach. On the other, there are the remote spectators on their *tele-théatrons*, places from which the event is seen from a distance. At the same time, we see the actors performing the same kind of interaction, between those present on the stage, in direct contact with other actors and actresses through a telepresence. If the face-to-face viewer is invited at a certain moment to participate in the scene on stage, the one who watches at home could be summoned to participate from a web chat, or by telephone, in this case we see again the radical *téle*, as something away, next to *phoné*, of sound, expressing a distant communication by sound. The theater then functions as a vortex, a force of attraction that seeks to intertwine these presences in the search for the scenic event.

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▸ Figure 7.5.1 – *Show me a good time*
▸ Source: Gob Squad, 2020. Photo by Dorothea Touch.

I mention now a work done by me, at the end of 2020, with students from the Theater course at UFT. In the play, called "Delírios de uma vida quarentenada" (Delusions of a Quarantine Life). Even not promoting an active participation of spectators, the structure of the show sought to maintain a direct connection, where even pre-recorded actions were included in the present moment, that is, everything was presented at the same time as the spectators were watching.

▶ Figure 7.5.2 – *Delírios de uma vida quarentenada* (Delusions of a Quarantined Life)
▶ Source: author's archive.

If we understand that the feeling of presence, the presentification, happens when spectator finds himself in the same space and time in which the action is being performed, the presence in the virtual field maintains the temporal axis, but expands the spatial relationship to any place where individuals can connect, in the same cyberspace, to the same time.

But even the temporal axis is relatively maintained, as the connection needs to be realized at the present moment, but the use of technological devices can expand the image of the artists through time, but always in a link with the present, when the connection is held.

The notion that everything that happens in the scene could happen while you watch and, therefore, anything new could happen. Everything is virtually possible, whether in the artistic sense, as well as in the transformation of our homes into virtual audiences.

Effectively, the stability of the internet connection is another risk that appears in this modality, since it depends on the operation of appliances that require power and connection. But honestly, also in a large theater, if there is no light, most of the shows could not be continued. If the solution on the presential stage can often be the use of emergency lights or even candles, in the case of a virtual scene, we might need to make use of personal chargers and mobile data packages to give continuity to a scene.

3. In conclusion

We're already heading to the end of the conversation, so it's worth reinforcing that, more than that a discussion about one or another modality of scene construction, about one or another show, the key is to understand what is inscribed in this concept, what it encompasses what we can understand as virtuality and theater. Techniques and forms, like this as devices, they transform, change, but if we understand the logic with which they relate, we will be able to adapt and relate to future developments, which we barely glimpse.

Whoever owns the device does not exercise power, but who programs it and who carries out the program. The game of symbols becomes a game of power. It is, however, a hierarchically structured game. The photographer exercises power over who sees his photographs, programming the receivers. The photographic apparatus exercises power over the photographer. The photographic industry has power over the camera. And so, ad infinitum. In the symbolic game of power, it is diluted and dehumanized. This is what "computer society" and "post-industrial imperialism" are. (Flusser, 2018, p. 40; translated by the author[2]).

In this Flusserian perspective, where the ontological elements of technical images render the phenomena that manifested before them obsolete, what would be the impacts of this digital transmission of the theater, of this remote-digital theater, in the theater itself and in the notion of theatricality?

When Flusser spoke about our relationship with the virtualities, many of us were not even born, so like digital cameras, cell phones, and even the internet. But his speech resonates perfectly today, not because Flusser was a prophet, but because he knew explore the concepts and relationships that were already there, presented, in the formulation of the gadgets. Relationships that were already willing and that only intensified

The artistic manifestations and, among them, the theater, reflect the relationships of their time and make use of the technological advances of each the time. Since the architecture of Greek theaters, great works use knowledge and technology to their advantage, passing by the machinery of medieval theater, to the use of perspective in Renaissance art that exerted influence theater, with the construction of scenarios designed in geometric proportions, creating an illusion of depth, which were benefited by a front stage theater model.

In the modern era, the use of lighting and numerous technological innovations was always presented at the theatrical spectacles. It is reasonable, therefore, that in a society which a large part of the interactions takes place through digital media, then the virtual interactions would also appear in the theatrical making.

When Euripides lowered a large basket, supported by ropes and pulleys, carrying an actor from the ceiling to the stage of the Greek arena he was able to shape the image of a god, who descended from heaven to enter the scene. *Deus ex Machina*, a god that was present by the machine. Today the biggest entertainment venues have numerous automated poles, capable of suspending scenarios and actors, making them even fly about the audience. But the principle remains the same, to make something visible to us imaginary. We may consciously know that the actor is not flying, but we are able to imagine this. A flight that has no real effect, but exists as a possibility, as a virtuality.

While in the scenic black box, numerous resources are used to build playfully the theatrical scene - the use of lighting, changing sets, trapdoors, elevators and poles that make small elements or even character appear or disappear – in the technological black box, we have access to other tools, as the recombination of images and sounds, as long as the artist seeks to play with the device, in order to explore possibilities not foreseen in its original programming, thus, producing new scenic virtualities.

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2. Quem possui o aparelho não exerce o poder, mas quem o programa e quem realiza o programa. O jogo com símbolos passa a ser jogo do poder. Trata-se, porém, de jogo hierarquicamente estruturado. O fotógrafo exerce poder sobre quem vê suas fotografias, programando os receptores. O aparelho fotográfico exerce poder sobre o fotógrafo. A indústria fotográfica exerce poder sobre o aparelho. E assim ad infinitum. No jogo simbólico do poder, este se dilui e se desumaniza. Eis o que são "sociedade informática" e "imperialismo pós-industrial". (Flusser, 2018, p. 40)