

The theatrical space in *The Human Voice* by Jean Cocteau

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Abstract: *Each piece has a spatial framework that is organized around the main character, being considered a landmark of the situation of the statement. Through space, the text is juxtaposed with the stage representation, the latter representing the materialization of a fictional universe valued through a directorial conception. .*

The Human Voice by Jean Cocteau relates a telephone conversation between two characters about whom nothing is known (name, age, social status, etc.). A woman is talking on the phone with her ex-lover who is going to marry another woman, which leads her to despair. The protagonist is identifiable with her mood (deep depression), which is reflected by space (scattered objects in the room). The space represents an external projection of the character's state of mind. Decoding spatial elements at the text level is necessary for an appropriate stage interpretation, according to the author's intention.

Key-words: space; fiction; object; theatricalization; convention;

1. Introduction

Each play, both at textual and at stage representation level, has a spatial framework that anchors the characters in the reality of the auctorial microcosm. The theatricalization of a dramatic text requires the existence of a physical space where the dramatic action is exhibited through the actor's performance. If in the case of a novel it is sufficient to imagine an action space, the theatrical text, on the other hand, requires the existence of a physical plan in which the theatrical play takes place in real time by investing the spectator in fiction.

In other words, the theatrical space is a complex reality that includes on one hand a repertoire of decoded signs in the text and transposed into the stage representation, on the other a physical place of the presence of the actors in their relationship with the audience.

2. Objectives

In order to achieve an adequate directorial conception, a study of the chronotope at the level of the text is necessary. We chose the theatrical space as an object of study because, unlike time, it is concrete and has a reference in reality, being the first to connect the spectator to fiction.

In this approach we intend to analyze the following elements:

- decoding the spatial circumstances of the dramatic situation both in the scenic indications and in the dialogue;
- identification of spatializable objects and their positioning in relation to the actor;
- analysis of the rhetorical functions of space;
- analysis of the way in which the space is transposed in the musical score.

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3. Spatiality in drama

In order to construct theatrical space, it is necessary to determine in the text all the elements that can be spatialized and their role in the dramatic situation:

- semi-lexical fields: place names (Spain, France, Paris, castle, ramparts, room, roof, etc.);
- representative paradigms for a certain type of dwelling as well as for the social position of the character (for example, in Jean Cocteau's *Human Voice*, the existence of the telephone in the 1930s indicates a modern and practical dwelling in the urban environment; the white gown - an elegant woman);
- the positioning of the bodies of the actors on the stage, their positioning in relation to various objects, the speed of moving from one place to another, reveals features of the characters, the relationship between them, types of conflicts (direct or veiled). As for the typology of the scenic spaces, we can have a subjective space of the spectator built on the basis of his perception on the actors' play and / or an objective space that reproduces a referential place imitating a "real" or assumed place as such.

The theater space is not empty. In the text, some elements can be represented on stage (starting with the bodies of the actors and ending with objects, accessories, decorations, etc.) being mentioned in the scenic indications or in the dialogue, others are only suggested by objects that are part of their semantic field (for example, the presence of a tower or a wall that suggests the greatness of a castle, the narrow space is rendered by the presence of panels that frame the scene). The object can only be defined by its positioning in relation to the character, by its degree of closeness or distance to the character. In *The Human Voice*, the protagonist, by the inability to control and influence the course of events, becomes the possessor of a defective energy that attributes her the non-identity of an object.

There are three categories of theatrical objects in the dramatic text:

- a utility object that appears in the scenic directions and in the dialogue (for example, a sword if talking about a duel);
- decorative object that can be referential / iconic by reference to history (a portrait of Napoleon);
- symbolic object with rhetorical function: the metonymy or metaphor of the psychic or socio-cultural reality. The object can be a metonym for a character or feeling.

In other words, the object's role is twofold: on one hand it can be a concrete decorative presence, on the other, it can have a rhetorical function (metonymy and metaphor). The most frequent rhetorical role of the object in the theater is the metonymy that illustrates the image of a referential reality.² In *The Human Voice*, the frequent fall of the telephone line represents a metonymy of the social realities of the 1930s, a period when deficient telephony is a means of communication that facilitates the transmission of a message, but at the same time reduces it until its meaning is lost. At the same time, it is also a metaphor for a faulty, truncated communication which intentions are no longer accepted by the recipient. Metonymy can also play a role in anticipation of events (for example, in *The Human Voice*, the presence of the woman alone in her apartment and her depression state reveals her predisposition to suicide).

In brief, anything that takes up space can act. Therefore, a semiotic analysis is needed to determine in the text all the elements that can be spatialized, so that subsequently passing through the musical score, they can be represented scenically by an appropriate interpretation. Stage directions give us clues about the scenery, as well as the historical period or the time of day when the action takes place while in dialogue, time and space are represented by deictics.

² Anne Ubersfeld. 1996. *Reading theater I*. Paris: Belin Publishing House, p.146.

3.1. Spatiality in *The Human Voice*

The Human Voice is a one-act play by Jean Cocteau, staged by Jean-Pierre Laruy in Comédie Française. The work is adapted as a lyrical tragedy by Francis Poulenc, in 1959, under the same title. The protagonist (of whom we know almost nothing - name, age, social status, etc.) is a woman who talks on the phone, carrying out an incomplete, truncated dialogue with her former lover. Through a poor communication medium, the play presents a difficult romantic break. The plot connected to a metaphysical reality is by spatial reference a projection of the characters' interiority.

Emotionally, Jean Cocteau has always loved the idea of a space in which his inner world can be exposed without fear. Since childhood, he patronized his intimate space (his room to which his parents did not have access), expanding and restricting it until he saw time distorting it.³ For Cocteau, space remains the element that connects drama to the subjectivity of its heroes. In this sense, in *The Human Voice*, the subjective spatial frame connects the viewer to the inner universe of the protagonist defined by suffering. As Michel Lioure says, Cocteau's theater represents "the stubborn search for a moral reality or a metaphysical reality".⁴

In Cocteau's play, the space frame gives us the most relevant information about the character's construction. Jean Cocteau's collaboration with the group of six (Francisc Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Germaine Tailleferre) was beneficial for the implementation of a new aesthetic concept founded by "poetry in theater" that designates an effective language the times, the protagonist's soul state is identifiable with the space ("the chamber of a crime" - stage directions of *The Human Voice*), while the suffering is timeless.

Joseph Courtés talks about the importance given to deictic analysis as a mediator between the textual and the enunciative plane, these relating the dramatic action and the spatial coordinates of the drama to the the present of the enunciation.⁵ Indices of space are expressed by demonstratives (eg this one, that), presentative adverbs (here / there, near / far, etc.), by placing the subject in relation to the designated object. The degree of proximity or distance of the subject to the designated object gives us clues about the character's mood.

André Petitjean talks about two types of spatiality (mimetic and diegetic) in the dramatic text, represented by deictics that designate the position of objects or characters in relation to the one who speaks. Both objects and characters can be located close to the speaking subject (mimetic spatiality) or elsewhere (diegetic spatiality)⁶.

Here are some examples from *The Human Voice*:

"... là... au téléphone, depuis un quart d'heure, je mens"⁷(... here ... on the phone, for a quarter of an hour, I'm lying).

"Mais avec cet appareil, ce qui est fini est fini"⁸(But with this phone, what is over is over).

The adverb "là" (here) and the predetermining "cet" (this) indicate a mimetic spatiality. The protagonist refers to a certain space or object. It can be deduced that the character is in their vicinity.

"Dites à cette dame de se retirer!"⁹ (Tell this lady to retire!)

³ Claude Arnaud. 2003. *Jean Cocteau*. Paris: Gallimard Publishing House, p.20.

⁴ Michel Lioure. *Reading modern theater, from Claudel to Ionesco*. Paris: Nathan Publishing, p.76.

⁵ Joseph Courtés. 1995. *Semiotic discourse analysis*. Paris:Ellipses Publishing House, p. 268.

⁶ André Petitjean. 1992. "The figuration of space and time in theatrical dialogue." In: *Practices: linguistics, literature, didactics*. nr. 74, p. 107.

⁷ Jean Cocteau. 2000. *The Human Voice*. French & European Publishing House, p.15.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p.14

⁹ *Ibidem*, p.3.

The predetermining cette” (this) indicates the diegetic spatiality: the woman speaks of a lady who is elsewhere and acting at the same time with the speaking subject.

As far as the phone is concerned, this is the heroine's refuge and executioner. On one hand, it is a way to remember her happy past, and on the other hand, it is the means by which her lover announces her that their relationship has ended. The phone, this technical intermediary that fragments the language by making communication difficult, is an expression of the device's lack of empathy in the face of human weaknesses. According to the playwright's instructions, the two essential elements for staging are the phone and the colour. The dominant colour is white, which should erase any reference point. (In the East, white is the colour of mourning).

3.2. The musical transposition of the space in *The Human Voice* by Francisc Poulenc

Any state of soul (anguish, melancholy, ecstasy, exaltation, agitation, etc.) is rendered at the bodily level through movements (slower or faster), gestures (wide or restricted), voice (verbal flow, frequency of breaks, etc.). This mode of bodily manifestation takes place at a rate that, in turn, projects a personal space of the moving body.

In *The Human Voice*, Francisc Poulenc plays the spatiality of the musical score through the rhythm. The music illustrates the rhythm of the body of the protagonist who transcends the voice. In this case the role of the personal rhythm is to organize the alternation of soul states of the protagonist (the transition from anguish to hope, from agitation to calm, from the despair of the present to the nostalgia of remembrance of the past) through the repetition of melodic-rhythmic formulas. In Cocteau's play, through its connection with space, the body, acquires an importance equal to that of language. The body, through the voice, becomes the subject of the play.¹⁰

Poulenc alternates between treating the voice in a recitative style, representing the inflections, the natural flow and the pauses of the speech in a telephone conversation and the melodious phrase in extremely dramatic passages (when the protagonist sings the suicide attempt from the previous night).¹¹ The recitative passages clearly provide the libretto, while the passages similar to the aria illustrate the passion and anguish of the soprano. All these alternations of states project the lonely space of depression in which the heroine is captive. Spatialization through rhythm variations of vocal writing helps maintain the dramatic effect of Cocteau's text.

4. Conclusions

For a director it is essential to understand the relationships that are established between the levels of dramatic writing and those of the musical score. The role of the director is not reduced to the simple scenic transposition of the action of a play, but consists in interpreting the directions offered by him and improving them through the means of scenic expression. In other words, we need to create a set design that enhances the space in the show, so that the significance of the text is revealed and the role of the playwright in the show keeps its importance.

Currently, prose theater and musical theater are going through a crisis in terms of staging. As we move into modernity, the price for alienating the author's intention is paid. Starting from an excess of originality or an attempt to integrate the piece nowadays, more and more directors are moving away from the playwright's intentions by adopting an artistic

¹⁰ Marie-Claude Hubert. 2008. *Theater*. Paris: Armand Collin Publishing House, p.186.

¹¹ Renaud Marchart. 1992. *Poulenc*. Paris: Seuil Publishing House, p. 252.

conception that distorts the text (a depressed woman becomes a prostitute, the classic don Juan is surrounded by inflatable dolls, the naive hero transformed into an idiot).

In other words, the return to the text is a real life jacket and one of the keys to a desirable reform that theater and opera need. As a result, our approach is aimed at a discussion of the technique of staging a play by Jean Cocteau and transposed musically by Francisc Poulenc with the help of an in-depth study of the text at all possible levels (linguistic, dramatic, sociocultural, psychological, philosophical, ideological, etc.). Discursive decoding allows us to formulate the intentionality of the text and arrive at a reasoned interpretation.

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