

# The expression of temporality in *The Human Voice* by Jean Cocteau

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**Abstract:** According to Anne Ubersfeld, theatrical time is an image of time and history and especially of individual psychic time that passes events through the filter of sensitive experience. In Jean Cocteau's play, *The Human Voice*, in particular, time is determined by the character's individual experience. For example, in *The Human Voice*, the breaks marked by the fall of the telephone line refer to a subjective time of the character that is not related to the actual duration. The crisis of the protagonist takes place between the first interruption of the telephone line (this marks the woman's discovery that she was deceived) and the last (the winding of the telephone wire around the neck and the death of the character). Remembering the past is a way of rejecting the present when the feeling of being abandoned has become unbearable.

**Key-words:** character; experience; temporality; crisis;

## 1. Introduction

In the theatrical work, time and space merge into a whole that the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin called chronotope, defining it in *Problems of Literature and Aesthetics*<sup>2</sup> as the spatio-temporal connection exploited from an artistic point of view. Space contributes to the unfolding of time by making it visible while, in turn, the former becomes recognizable and measurable due to time. All the elements of temporality, both at the level of the text and in the stage representation, are represented by the spatial elements. In other words, the spatio-temporal rhetoric represents the configuration within which the time works, which in turn constitutes an integral part of the meaning of the theatrical work.

The theater, both at the textual level and at the stage performance, involves two distinct temporalities, one belonging to the stage performance (one - two hours or more in the case of other cultures), the other to the represented action. Theatrical time can be understood as a relationship between the two, a relationship that dramatizes history by transposing it into a representation, transforming it into a microcosm whose coordinates are established by the author.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Objectives

The principal objective of this study is to analyze the role of temporality in the construction of the character in order to achieve a directorial conception in accordance with the authorial intentionality. Therefore, we propose to debate the following issues:

- decoding the temporal circumstances of the dramatic situation both in the scenic indications and in the dialogue;
- analysis of the evolution of psychic time superimposed on rhythm variations;
- analysis of the way in which the time is transposed in the musical score through various melodic-rhythmic formulas.

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<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics*. București: Univers Publishing House, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Ubersfeld. 1996. *Reading theater*. Paris: Belin Publishing house, p. 151.

### 3. Temporality in drama

Theatrical time is not easily noticeable either in writing or in terms of representation. He is not independent and can only be valued by engaging the whole set of signs of theatricality, starting with the actor's play (rhythm, pauses, etc.) and ending with decorative elements (lights that suggest various moments of the day, trees that refer to the season in which the action takes place, the existence of a clock indicating the passage of time, the regularity of sounds - for example, the ringing of the phone in *The Human Voice*, etc.). Stage indications, in turn, can indicate the passage of time during the action (changes of seasons, the passage of hours, the transition from day to night). A large number of events that take place in a confined space can give the impression of a long period or a temporal confusion. And the characters' speech contains meanings of time. The reappearance of expressions (such as "pour la dernière fois"- for the last time, "mille fois"- a thousand times) marks the repetitive nature of the passionate situation, while "jamais" - never, "toujours"- always, indicate the irremediable and the relentless.

The time in the theater is related to a here-now of the enunciation situation that articulates the characters and the action of the intrigue in an authorial microcosm and that marks the spectator's present involving him through the conventional pact, in the realities of this microcosm.<sup>4</sup> Theater is an art of the immediate that is valued through the present of the artistic act. The immediacy of the performance, however, means not only the present of the utterance but also the reference to a past theatrical action, its movement here-now inscribing the theatrical fact (text and stage performance) in a certain temporal frame with some limits. It is what Joseph Courtés calls the temporality of the situation of enunciation determined by the relation of the time of the action of the drama with the present of the utterance.<sup>5</sup>

Theatrical time is an overlap of images equivalent to an overlap of meanings: an image of historical time, individual experience and a ritual ceremony. The rhythm of temporality consists in the need to observe separately, each of these images without dissociating them. Therefore, only a thorough study of textual joints and how they work can lead to the decoding of theatrical time.

Temporal indices mark a situation of simultaneity (adverb - actually, now, etc.), of anteriority (adverb - yesterday, / before, once, formerly / recently; definite determinants - day, month, etc.) or which will take place (tomorrow / the day after tomorrow, soon; definite determinant - the month, the next day, etc ..), reported at the time of enunciation. Temporary indices can include a lasting value (combien de temps), a repetitive value (how long) or a punctual character (depuis, depuis quand etc- since, since when.).

#### 3.1 Time in *The Human Voice* by Jean Cocteau

In Cocteau's play, time is determined by the character's individual experience. The breaks marked by telephone cuts refer to an arbitrary time that has nothing to do with the actual passage of time. The crisis occurs between the first cut of the phone (the discovery of the lie) and the last (the winding of the telephone wire around the neck followed by the final blow and the death of the woman).

The temporal deictics realize the continuous coming and going of the present utterance and the evoked events. Remembering the past is a way to reject the present. Here are some examples at the discursive level:

"Il doit être onze heures et quart."<sup>6</sup>(It must be eleven hours and a quarter). This is the first clue at the time of utterance.

<sup>4</sup>Anne Ubersfeld, *op.cit.* p. 166.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Courtés. 1995. *Semiotic discourse analysis*. Paris:Ellipses Publishing House, p. 259.

<sup>6</sup>Jean Cocteau. 2000. *The Human Voice*. French & European Publishing House, p. 9.

“Hier soir [...] j’ai pris un comprimé [...] À neuf heures.”<sup>7</sup> (“Last night I took a pill at nine o’clock...”)

“Un mardi vingt-sept. Ta dépêche était arrivée le lundi soir, le 26. Tu penses bien que je connais ces dates par coeur”.<sup>8</sup> (A twenty-seventh Tuesday. Your dispatch arrived on Monday night, the 26th. You think I know these dates by heart.)

We note the temporal precision with which the character remembers his past. The accuracy with which this woman evokes the events suggests the obsession of her love passion and places her in time. She tries to delay time, hoping to divert her boyfriend's decision to end the relationship. The verbs “aller” (to go) and “venir”(to come) no longer express a physical movement, but a movement in the mental time of the character, which leads to a process of loss of initial meaning. The two verbs acquire abstract values.

As for the phone, this is the heroine's refuge and executioner. On the one hand, it is a way to remember their happy past, and on the other hand, it is the means by which their boyfriend announces that their relationship is over. The telephone, this technical intermediary that truncates language making communication difficult, is an expression of the device's lack of empathy in the face of human weaknesses.

### **3.2 Temporality in *The Human Voice* by Francisc Poulenc**

In Francisc Poulenc's monodrama, the element of convergence between music and drama is represented by the establishment of a relationship between rhythm (periodization of intrigue by marking recurring elements) and voice (both in recitative and in melodic moments). The rhythm is the one that situates the drama in the psychic space-temporality of the character. It varies depending on the mood of the character. At the moment of exposing the dramatic action, the rhythm is more alert, taking over the flow of speech through the sixteenths, while, in the moments of lyrical effusion, the triplets mark a dilation of time. Time, being arbitrary, has no equal flow.

*The Human Voice* manages to impose itself as a drama, due to the play of the main character and imposes itself as an opera thanks to the orchestra.<sup>9</sup> The latter must reproduce in a sensual way (according to Poulenc's instructions) all the accumulation of states that cause the protagonist to react in various ways. The music, corresponding to the protagonist's obsession, is rhythmized by the repetition of melodic sequences that give the feeling of a circular tempo.<sup>10</sup> The ringing of the telephone is played by the xylophone and the interruptions of the telephone connection, made by bow blows on the strings of the violins. The voice is the one that due to its shape provides the model of the irreversibility of time. In addition to consciousness and perception, the voice is the mechanism that connects the past to the present through a linguistic continuum. In the case of the character in *The Human Voice*, only the voice can reproduce / express all the dimensions of his experience through the cumulation of affections that accompany it. The human voice is at the origin of time.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Gustave Kobbé. 2008. *Tout l’opéra, Dictionnaire de Monteverdi à nos jours*. Paris: Robert Laffont Publishing House, p. 616.

<sup>10</sup> Renaud Machart. 1992. *Poulenc*. Paris: Seuil Publishing, p. 159.

#### 4. Conclusions

“Il y a en vérité un Cocteau en tout créateur, un embryon de disponibilité qui le pousse à devenir autre, à sortir de lui-même pour y rentrer afin d'engendrer des figures irréelles”<sup>11</sup>

Speaking of Jean Cocteau, Claude Arnaud describes the playwright's intellectual and creative versatility as a rare quality. His artistic encyclopedism determines him to collaborate closely with composers who transpose his texts into music. From this point of view, Francisc Poulenc fully corresponds to his aesthetic ideal, managing to reproduce the essence of the play.

In *The Human Voice*, these variations of rhythm superimposed on an alternation of moods of the character denounce the existence of a subjective time. Rhythm is the element of congruence between Jean Cocteau's play and Francis Poulenc's lyrical tragedy. The composer transposed in the musical score a variation of the tempo by alternating the elements of agogic, letting the voice expose in the most humane way possible, the time passed through the filter of the sensitive experience of the character. Her love obsession, going from anxiety to despair, dilates and compresses time by denouncing a character with maniac tendencies.

The director's mission consists in coordinating / guiding the interpretation of the singer actor towards the rendering of different moods through a varied rhythm (rhythm of movements by fixing the duration of pauses, adjusting the flow of speech). The rhythm manages to create almost a score for the actor, with its points of support, intonation, tempo, pauses and accelerations, causing the viewer to become aware of the passage of time.

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<sup>11</sup> Arnaud, Claude. 2003. *Jean Cocteau*. Paris: Gallimard Publishing House, p. 17.

“There is in truth a Cocteau in all creator, an embryo of availability which pushes him to become other, to go out of himself to return there in order to generate unreal figures.”