

Forms of Public Sphere: Theatre as a Collective Social Builder

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Abstract: Artistic expressions have a close relationship with the society in which they are embedded. For the theatre this is even more true according to the very nature of live experience that the theatre is proposing to a community. This paper has the intent to inquire the complex relationship between arts and society by its forms and theoretical narratives. Theatre as an institution has the potential to innervate society, or the community, through a practice of sharing creative work and the legitimation, or censorship, of cultural expressions, choosing between the different leanings which theatrical productions can represent. Compared to other forms of collective narration such as cinema, for example, theatre is radically different in its realization, in the nature of its communication with the audience, in the type of commitment required of the actors, and in the type of executive production. What makes theatre different, is its relationship with reality, its requiring a physical *co-presence* which is realized in a performance, the *live* performance and the presence of the gaze of spectators.

Key-words: *Institutions; Politics; Theatre; Values; Public Space*

Introduction

Theatre is a powerful and radical manifestation of the relationship between the creative deed and society². However, it also represents institutionalization. For Nietzsche³, Western theatre, Greek tragedy, was born from the spirit of music: at the origin of theatre was an emotional language which loved representing what society often did not dare reveal about itself. In a tragedy, a people can recognize themselves and reflect on their own condition: the importance of classical tragedy lies in the ability to let a society understand the bounds of reason. It could perhaps be said with some confidence that there can be no theatre in the absence of a society. The relationship which founded this partnership lies first of all in the very principles of representation and, secondly, in the search for an authenticity which both modern and contemporary societies tend to deny the individual by virtue of increasingly complex superstructures. The more complex and rationalized society became⁴, the more the forms of relationship between individuals and institutions were structured in bureaucratic forms distant from the concept of community as traditionally understood. In analysing theatre as an expressive and organizational form, it is necessary to distinguish between the two fundamental dimensions which make it up: on the one hand, theatre as a dramatic art, and on the other, theatre as an institution. In this paper the second issue will be analysed, being this a crucial issue for social sciences.

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² See G. Simmel. 1998. *Filosofia dell'attore*. Pisa: Ets.

³ See F. Nietzsche. 1977. *La nascita della tragedia*. Milan: Adelphi.

⁴ See on this: M. Weber. 1961. *I fondamenti razionali e sociologici della musica* [1921]. "Economia e società" V. Milan: Edizioni di Comunità; V. Pareto. 1968. *Traité de sociologie générale: Œuvres complètes*. Genève: Droz; A. Schutz. 1979. *Sulle realtà multiple. "Saggi sociologici"*. A. Izzo (ed). Turin. Utet; Ferrarotti, F. 2020. *La socialità fredda*. Chieti. Solfanelli; M. Merleau-Ponty. 1945. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard; P. Bourdieu. 1979. *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

1. Theatre as a Social Institution

Theatre in the sense of a “dramaturgic production” becomes part of the process of social change by interpreting it through forms suited to new expressive needs. These can alternatively take on forms of ferocious criticism of the dynamics of power, become observers of resistance, reach aphasia, or stage the unspeakable by manifesting their active presence in a dialectic with structures, contradictions, conflicts and the conditions which individuals live in society by summarizing them in a collective production of meaning and practices. Let us think, to name but a few, of the forms of theatre that have followed one another over time and in different societies, from the first sacred representations to medieval religious theatre, popular Elizabethan theatre, which in Shakespeare has its most universal representative of the history of theatre ever; from the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*, which became popular in Europe by virtue of its nomadism, to the Elizabethan theatre of the 17th century in Britain which culminated with Shakespeare's production; or even the Renaissance theatre of Machiavelli, the theatre of Racine and Molière but also that of Artaud or Jouvet in France; Lessing's “humanizing” theatre which transformed *Tragödie* into *Trauerspiel*, or Brecht's epic version in Germany; arriving at the dramas of Ibsen and Strindberg in the Scandinavian area or the theatre of the absurd by Beckett and Ionesco which brought to the stage the aphasia of modern communication. All manifestations of the universal character of human action and, at the same time, of its placing itself in dialectic with the social context from which they emerge.

In addition to production in dramaturgic terms, however, it is necessary to remember that dramaturgic production is not theatre until it finds a realization on stage: when it leaves the written text and becomes an embodied word. In this process, a different version of theatre comes into play, theatre as an “institutional organization” – and the spatial-architectural conception of theatre. The role played by theatre as an institutional organization is as crucial as the dramaturgic production since it constitutes the institution for the realization of the dramaturgy but also functions as a hinge between the “subjective” dimension of the author's production and the collective dimension of realizing the work: it is a detonator of meaning and the place to consecrate a work which, from dramaturgy becomes theatre, set design, direction, choir, and word. Elements without which a literary work would remain as words on paper. Subsequently, in this process, based on the collective or elitist recognition of the “theatrical space” of realization, based on the “degree” of very “representativeness” which theatre comes to define in the social fabric in which it operates, and in relation to the collective approval which it enjoys – or otherwise, it can be understood whether it is a consolidated reality in a process of consolidation, or a form of expression which is not collectively significant, but experimental, one which produces slivers of creativity that are not yet socially “digestible”. A national theatre is the institutionalization of the balance between these expressive forms, a laboratory which acts as a crossroads between the production, creation, consolidation and celebration of expressive forms in both mature and auroral forms, which knows how to position itself in a dialectic with the needs, national trends and international comparisons, and which sanctions the institutionalization of a certain theatrical form of expression.

Therefore, it is of fundamental importance when it comes to the cultural education of a country, the cultural normalization of certain forms of expression, and it can consolidate forms of expression by literally pulling them out of the niches of experimentation to deliver them to the reality of the general public. What does the concept of institution imply? An institution is the organization of a collective need in the form of “social regulations”, “instances which mediate the social production of meaning and which allow stylizations of evaluation and norms

to become binding”⁵. The institutionalization process carries out “a mediation between ideas and the structuring of behaviour, creating an ‘order’ with a series of dimensions which delimit its ‘property space’ and are important in analysing institutions since they determine the content and effects of institutions on social processes”⁶. In turn, institutions are the result of social processes which determine their content, and this content is the result of the mediation between ideas, the idea of a behaviour, and its realization in the social fabric. This mediation translates into a series of possible dimensions which, again according to Lepsius, delimit its “property space”⁷. These dimensions are fundamental in analysing institutions and also the interaction between institutions.

The dimensions defined by Lepsius as the “property space” of institutions are:

1. The *development of rationality criteria* which an institution responds to: “In the process of institutionalizing a conception of value, ideas become maxims of action with claims of validity towards completely different men, with their own interests and motivations. [...] these maxims of action are rationality criteria. Their pursuit in a given action situation counts as ‘rational’ for the realization of a legitimate guiding idea [...]. In the context of their institutionalization, the concepts of values and guiding ideas are concretized through the development of rationality criteria which, in certain situations, make them relevant for action”⁸. In this sense, the rationality criteria are a part of the institution, but are related to the dominant idea of rationalization, consequently, in the contemporary neoliberal society the dominant rationality criteria correspond to criteria of economic rationality. As for theatre as an institution, we can assume that it meets the criteria of economic rationality on the one hand – marketing and “ticketing” and box-office sales of reruns, but also the balance between the production dimension and dramaturgy. So, in this sense, for theatre as an institution the concept of action will be linked to the choices of the billboard, to the sale of productions but also to the consolidation, from a dramaturgic point of view, of an idea of theatre (*of consumption or creation*).

2. The *differentiation of the validity contexts of institutions*: “The rationality criteria to which the action must be oriented do not apply in the abstract, but always and only within a limited action context. The effectiveness of a rationality criterion is therefore linked to the corresponding structuring of an action situation. The process of institutionalization includes not only the concretization of a guiding idea, but also always the determination of its validity context”⁹. As regards theatre as an institution, this second dimension translates into the various political, social and economic conditions which the institution itself is located in. Suffice to think of the different conditions of theatres in countries at war, or in a state of dictatorship, which legitimize the position of theatre within the context of conflict or social commitment. We can think historically of Brecht’s epic theatre, Piscator’s political theatre, or contemporary theatre in the Soviet Union¹⁰.

3. The *institution’s power to sanction*: the figure of the regulation of behaviour based on the institution itself, to validate its purported legitimacy. That is, in the case of theatre as an

⁵ R.M. Lepsius. 2006. *Il significato delle istituzioni*. Bologna: Il Mulino, p. 74

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 74-5.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 75.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁰ M. Shevtsova. 2018. Il teatro politico in Europa. Da Est a Ovest, 2007-2014. *Mimesis Journal. Scritture della performance*. 7 (1): 5-23 (<https://journals.openedition.org/mimesis/1255>).

institution, the ability to operate as a legitimizing institution of performances, or rather of the “narrative” choices which each theatrical proposal makes in terms of direction, languages, and therefore potential impact on the audience. The type and power of sanctions – wrote Lepsius – are an element of the institutionalization process and in the case of theatre as an institution they concern the degree of “subversiveness” which a theatre agrees to stage. This subversiveness can concern both themes and form, but above all languages, which, the more they detach themselves from the dominant culture of that specific social and political context, but also economic, the more they are likely to be categorized as subversive. In fact, the perception of subversiveness changes from context to context, and is resolved in the specific distance of an artistic expression from the context in which it operates. In itself, the concept of subversiveness is also a relational concept, above all for the arts.

4. The *externalization of contingencies*, that is, the expectation of relevance which the institution can “expect” to achieve in guiding behaviour. “Actions which refer to a guiding idea are therefore oriented towards valid rationality criteria and, based on these, they elaborate the problems which arise in the action context. [...] An institutionalized guiding idea is all the more effective the more it succeeds in successfully externalizing the contingencies connected to its validity and immunizing itself against the opposition that derives from it”¹¹. For example, in the case of theatre as an institution, the externalization of contingencies takes place in the degree of regulation of expressive behaviours which corresponds to the more or less democratic dimension of a particular political-cultural system. The degree of conflict accepted in the staging becomes the threshold of the acceptable. We can think of the many cases of censorship, the various levels of conflict embodied by theatres, think of the distinction between permanent theatres and off-theatres, but also of the forms of collective theatre, social theatres, and the specific role which all of these different types of theatre play within the cultural system. The different types of audience they address, and the socio-political-cultural coordinates with which they are also intertwined in terms of support.

5. The *structuring of the potential for conflict between institutions*: this is generally high given that each institution generates rationality criteria within it which are usually in contrast with one another, while the areas of validity in which they try to impose themselves intersect. “Concepts of value and guiding ideas are generally incompatible, otherwise they would not be differentiated. [...] This differentiation of competence and delegation of action dramatizes the guiding ideas, increases their validity and structures the potential for conflict between opposing institutions”¹². In theatre this can occur between the various types: resident theatres, popular theatres, social theatres, research theatres, theatres of diversity, therapy theatres. Theatrical forms of expression which respond to often different logics, and that can generate conflict processes, especially if located in neighbouring territories or spaces, as bearers of different approaches.

To sum up, the property space of institutions is equivalent to the definition process through which the institution itself configures its importance within the social system, defining its legitimacy and ability to orient collective behaviour. As regards the form of this process within the dynamics of the establishment of theatre as an institution, we must take into account the structures on which it depends in terms of subsidies and appreciation (politics on the one hand, spectators on the other), the dominant culture in which it operates (neoliberalism,

¹¹ M.R. Lepsius. 2006. *Il significato delle istituzioni*. Bologna: Il Mulino, p. 78

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

totalitarianism, democracy) but also of the society it recalls, in terms of values, relationships, and culture.

2. Recapturing space as a social right

According to Duvignaud, the theatrical discourse is deeply embedded in life and its difficulties, not only at a psychological level which is reduced to relationships between individuals, but in the infinitely wider and more complex field of social groups and manifests in attitudes believed to be authentic but which are instead “rigged”; behaviours which involve actions that differ from our motivations, real obstacles which are the result of the crystallization of aspirations that were once free but which have become institutionalized or hardened, of values which are venerated without knowing what they represent and without recognizing the harm they can do¹³.

In this sense, theatre as an institution has the potential to innervate society, or the community, through a practice of sharing creative work and the legitimation, or censorship, of cultural expressions, choosing between the different leanings which theatrical productions can represent. Compared to other forms of collective narration such as cinema, for example, theatre is radically different in its realization, in the nature of its communication with the audience, in the type of commitment required of the actors, and in the type of executive production. The invention of the Lumière brothers, from its appearance as the “seventh art” in the panorama of the expressive arts, was immediately seen as an expressive form destined to supplant theatre by virtue of its ability to scroll images at speed. And yet this never happened. Theatre has passed unscathed, like the salamander in the fire, through every era to renew itself in the languages of every contemporaneity and to give back to the city and society its other-than-self.

What makes theatre different, even today, from cinema and literary fiction is its relationship with reality, its requiring a physical *co-presence* which is realized in a performance, the *live* performance and the presence of the gaze of external individuals: which we can temporarily define as spectators. Presence, wrote Carlo Sini in his book on *The Dynamic Arts* “has a twofold nature, that is to say, it is always a sign which refers to something else; it is remembrance and preparation or a striving towards having to be. Every presence is spatialized and temporalized backwards and forwards. [...] every presence is kinesis, movement; presence means transit and threshold”¹⁴. While in the cinema and in literature the concept of reality draws confirmation from a given naturalistic narrative, and for this reason, ends up poorly correlated to the context; in a theatrical performance, the reality being represented must be “adapted” to the context in order to take on substance. A second area of differentiation are the aspects of production-enjoyment: the “reproduction” characteristic of cinema has a “finished” technical structure which does not undergo any variation in relation to the presence or absence of spectators, nor in relation to their number; in theatre, however, the co-presence in space, the sharing with the spectator of the time span of the performance of the play, the shared breath, constitute the dialectic of the ongoing creative process. Theatre generates a temporal space of sharing in a horizontal sense, participated in, and the spectator is an integral part of the representation, his or her response to the performance changes the performance itself in the very making of it. In this sense, the study of theatrical work can offer much food for thought on the state of social participation and the ability of the arts to return shreds of social sense,

¹³ J. Duvignaud, J. Lagoutte. 1974. *Le théâtre contemporain. Culture et contre-culture*. Paris. Librairie Larousse, p. 9.

¹⁴ C. Sini. 2003. *Le arti dinamiche. Filosofia e pedagogia*. Milan: Cuem, pp. 140-141.

especially in a society which is about to digitize and bring many of the formal and informal relationships which make up social life onto a digital platform.

3. Sociological perspectives on Theatre

Sociological reflections around theatre have enjoyed good fortune since the 1960s, a period of cultural ferment which led to the cultural revolutions of 1968 in Europe, and to Woodstock in 1969, both emblems of a renewed awareness of collective living, of the demolition of relational and social norms, experienced as constricting and stale, of female emancipation and refusal of authority in the name of a vaunted equality and social opportunity between generations, the sexes, and social classes. In that period, the analysis of theatre as performance, as a collective manifestation, seems to have marked a crucial passage for the understanding of the new generations, who embodied the needs or aspirations of the society to come. In this sense, we can find different possible sociological orientations for a research into theatre and its reception in a territory in terms of expansion of the collective imagination, but above all the conception of the theatrical medium as *communication* and a direct relationship with the society of which it is a part in terms of contingent reality, but also of its belonging to the human, collective condition without cultural, linguistic and political confines. If we retrace the production of sociological analyses of the dynamic arts, and especially theatre, we find studies which are substantially rooted in post-1968 experiences, therefore fully involved in the collective processes of the development of culture and social practices. In the 1990s up to the first decade of the 2000s, hence for around thirty years, theatre was the subject of few sociological studies. To deal with the behaviour of the new generations, studies of a drug or drugs, of groups of youth culture and subculture and habits of distinction were preferred. Theatre, and the arts in general, no longer seemed to inspire great interest in sociological studies, due to a social transformation in the sense of a progressive individualization of acting. An exception was the sociology of literature studies, rooted in the Marxist social studies developed first by the Frankfurt school, especially with Löwenthal¹⁵, then further developed with the studies of G. Lukács¹⁶ and L. Goldmann¹⁷. On the other hand, the plastic arts and the dynamic arts seem to have been “specially supervised” and considered separate practices, enjoying a partial autonomy from social practices in a sociologically observable sense, since they questioned the sphere of creativity, still investigated above all in psychological terms. Creativity understood as a collective reality would be the object of study in sociological research in a more substantial way only between the 1970s and ‘80s, initially with the works of Howard Becker who did not speak directly of creativity but defined artistic work as “collective action”, in which artists and art operators created collaborations on the basis of conventions, *modi operandi* that were known to the art world. And these forms, Becker continued, are elaborate ways of cooperation between specialized personnel. But how do they come to decide on the terms of this collaboration? On the basis of conventions, that is to say, consolidated ways of acting which suggest the correct length of a musical or a play, the appropriate size of a painting or the shape of a sculpture in every kind of artistic work. Conventions are determined by collective action, which in the arts represents the custom of the *modus operandi*¹⁸.

In contemporary society, as opposed to the artistic process, collective action has been portrayed in favour of individualized mass action, hence a progressive disappearance of the

¹⁵ L. Löwenthal. 1977. *Letteratura, cultura popolare e società*. Naples: Liguori.

¹⁶ G. Lukács. 1967. *Il dramma moderno*. Milan: Sugarco.

¹⁷ L. Goldmann. 1971. *La création culturelle dans la société moderne*. Paris: Denoël.

¹⁸ H. S. Becker. 1974. Art as Collective Action. *American Sociological Review* 39 (6), pp. 770-771.

collective phenomenon initially in favour of a private reality, which has progressively transformed and moved into the media up to the present day, in which the new social and collective networks are conceived and regulated by digital platforms through social networks. There is therefore a reticular relationality, that is to say, the Worldwide Web favours the formation of communities, on platforms, which are however characterized by virtuality, by the absence of the body. The progressive shift from real communities to mediated virtual communities represents, in sociological terms, an oxymoron, since the community is exactly the place of the relationships of recognition between individuals, the place of belonging and physical proximity. The virtual community indicates a distant belonging, a virtual belonging, therefore, a mediated belonging, not one that is real in classical terms. In this transformed reality, on the other hand, there is a renewed social interest in theatre as a place for socializing, erudition and confrontation. A place of “discovery” for the very young generations of the logic of the presence, of relational intelligence and of the rules which must be made explicit tacitly since they belong to collective practices in transformation. Theatre, like museum institutions, assumes an unprecedented functionality in this social landscape, a fundamental social importance as they rediscover the functions of the institution as a place for the interception of, response to an organization of collective needs. With the end of the time of cultural institutions as elitist places, these same institutions have made a radical relational and pedagogical U-turn. And even theatre seems to respond to this need of institutions to open up to the most disparate audiences, by bringing the pedagogical energies and strategies of other structures into play. At the same time, theatre is a place of aggregation for those adult generations who were also formed through the reflection and social commitment of theatre which, starting from the 1960s, became a place of social resistance, a place of celebration, in a radically different reality from what it represented throughout the entire previous century.

Theatre today is potentially a place for the reconstruction of sociability and civic sense, of belonging and collective celebration. In this sense, it has also regained a sociological meaning which, however, must be rediscovered and given value. The theatrical action is also collective for two different types of issue: on the one hand, in the concrete terms of putting together and realizing a show, the result of work shared between set designer, costume designer, director, technicians, actors, organization and marketing, press releases, up to box offices and masks, and so on and so forth; on the other hand it means belonging to a group, with knowledge of it and the ability to read and interpret a cultural, political, value cross-section.

Furthermore, from a sociological point of view, two different types of theatre have been defined in terms of collocating its relationship with society in structural terms: a type of theatre which Duvignaud has defined “of consumption” and a second type of theatre “of creation”. An imaginary line is drawn between the two which acts as the ultimate limit to a reassuring imagery, which provides the viewer with the alibi for a reassuring, deresponsibilized, entertaining presentation of oneself which never questions either the form or continuity of society, as opposed to a type of theatre which, on the other hand, arises from conflict, which interrupts all continuity and always presents itself in “unexpected” forms¹⁹. The forms of the theatre of creation are corrosive of the social surface: they show the consequences that social conventions have on the personal events of single individuals; they are slaps in the face of the spectator and his or her beliefs, they put up ferocious criticisms of social models, subverting their reassuring and dominant image within a certain civilization. This type of theatre, writes Duvignaud, can only be understood within a state of synchrony, that is, within the context of the system from which it emerges and which it challenges.

¹⁹ J. Duvignaud, J. Lagoutte. 1974. *Le théâtre contemporain. Culture et contre-culture*. Paris. Librairie Larousse, p. 10.

In addition to this first fundamental distinction between types of theatre, which highlights the relationship both with society in the broader sense with the spectators: on the one hand of continuity and approval of the social system as it is, on the other of conflict and a potentially subversive critique of the social system; we can also define a second order of distinction which concerns the theatrical medium as an instrument of “communicative artistic action” one which affects the behaviour of the individual, or rather the action of the individual within the context of social conventions.

Theatre is, therefore, a crucial and fragile institution both of a community and of a wider collectivity when it comes to extend its meaning beyond the territorial dimension. Theatrical creation stands out from everyday life because it is the result of a multiple creation: the result of the will of a playwright, the creative efforts of a set designer, the artistry of the actors, the mastery of a director and the complicity of the spectators. First and foremost, theatre is a ceremony, says Duvignaud, realized in its exteriorization. “Man is the only dramatic species [...]. Every natural and spontaneous reality becomes social and cultural in theatricalization, which is to say, in the representation of oneself, in front of our own eyes and those of others [...] to represent is equivalent to creating being and accumulating a collective substance”²⁰. The term *hypocrite*, in Greek *ὑποκριτής*, designates the “actor”, the one who simulates feelings, simulates a thought, who “plays” a character, and this same imaginary character, writes Duvignaud, can represent the intermediate region between truth and a lie which the European intellect cannot imagine because it constructs its truth through an abstraction, because its intellect is rigidly constructed on the idea of an objectivity which in fact prevents us from knowing the complexity of reality. Only the *hypocrite*, the simulator, can represent that action which contributes to the realization of incomplete, unfinished societies, societies which will only be able to achieve completeness through the plausible reality of the imaginary character.

The relationship with deception, Goffman wrote, is exactly the process of awareness activated by an individual in society: “An individual may be taken in by his own act or be cynical about it. These extremes are little more than the ends of a *continuum*. Each provides the individual with a position which has its own particular securities and defences, so there will be a tendency for those who have travelled close to one of these poles to complete the voyage.” Taking up the concept of “persona”, mask, Goffman quotes Park: “We enter the world as individuals, acquire character and become personae [masks]”²¹, and in this sense, theatre is the “donning” of social masks repeated most in the routine of daily life; masks which, for every society, embody vices, virtues, and widespread human types in diverse ways. The mask, writes Sini, is the threshold:

With the disguise of the mask, deception and fear come into play [...] with it is created the hither and the beyond, the “double” and the fundamental duality of the divine and the human, of the earth and of the heaven, of the mortal and the immortal. This is also the original theatrical function of the curtain [...] A threshold of the hither and thither, a mask behind which there is something which looks, namely, a gaze, behind the mask²².

But if for Goffman everyday action is equivalent to a game of roles and masks, to knowing how to act with conviction with respect to the mask worn, to skill in staging the character, Carlo Sini’s reflection on the mask goes deeper, goes beyond the individual and observes the social impact of the creative dimension of theatre in terms of self-awareness of a

²⁰ J. Duvignaud. 1970. *Spectacle et société. Du théâtre grec au happening, la fonction de l’imaginaire dans les sociétés*. Paris: Denoël, p. 17.

²¹ R. E. Park, in E. Goffman. 1969. *La vita quotidiana come rappresentazione*. Bologna. Il Mulino, p. 31.

²² C. Sini. 2003. *Le arti dinamiche. Filosofia e pedagogia*. Milan: Cuem, p. 20.

society and its dynamic, relational and power interweavings: the mask is the instrument of a *unifying transformation*, it creates a relationship between a person and another being²³ and defines the threshold between worldly reality and extra-worldly or divine reality.

According to Durkheim, the soul of society resides in religious thought, its ability to organize collective living in tacit and explicit norms according to a system of actions to which positive or sanctioning value is attributed, and which contribute to the collective construction of the social structure and shared meanings. Compliance with these norms occurs by virtue of the clear distinction between worldly and otherworldly facts, which in fact inhibits their transgression given that they are perceived as rules defined by a higher order. At the same time, writes Durkheim, these same rules can be overcome by the collective force released in rites, that is, the collective effervescence which transforms individuals into collectivity, eliminating separations by virtue of an energy reached in moments of extraordinary affectivity or collective irrationality, also attributable to higher forces. Durkheim refers to religious festivals, processions, and rites²⁴, but also the energy, which Duvignaud defines as *unifying*, of the theatrical representations of creation is the expression of an emotional consonance achieved by virtue of a collective experience.

In 1956, Georges Gurvitch published a pamphlet entitled *Sociologie du Théâtre* in which, for the first time, the study of theatre as sociological research in the field was postulated. Gurvitch presented the sociological problem of the gap between sociological theory and practice in the field of social research as potentially surmountable by theatrical “technique”: in other words, Gurvitch wrote, “it is necessary to introduce consciously calculated ‘theatricality’ everywhere: as much in an investigation, as in an interview, the theatrical element can find its place without encountering too many obstacles.” Gurvitch’s position must be clearly collocated in the situation in which the most recognized sociology in those years found itself, that is, a predominantly quantitative sociological approach, which therefore showed evident weaknesses, highlighted by Gurvitch in terms of a lack of understanding of the complexity of social relations. In this sense, “the combination of theatre with the ‘scission test’ or that of an ‘effective collective effort of a team’,” wrote Gurvitch, “could allow the experimental verification of the existence of multiple ‘Wes’ in a group, as well as their degrees of intensity (mass, community, communion)”²⁵. The most relevant and still valid observation of Gurvitch’s insight is the reflection which concerns the need for research, as well as theatre, to look at society. The reciprocal gaze understood as a dialectical exchange between worlds which refer to collectively constructed meanings.

4. Theatre, civil participation and politics

As a necessarily organized collective form, theatre can be a precious spy for the wellbeing of a society and its political tendencies. If on the one hand theatre participates in the foundation of public space, on the other it is also a “tool” of social reproduction, like all cultural institutions. Therefore, it reproduces daily practices and the dialectic tendency, or the isomorphism tendency, to refer to the term used by Goldmann²⁶, with a socio-political-economic context, or it can help to reveal hidden truths, collectively repressed thoughts.

The theatre technique, as a transposition of experience into a device which exalts the essence of human relationships in exponential forms within a phantasmal process of verbal and

²³ See K. Kerényi. 2017. *Miti e misteri*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.

²⁴ See É. Durkheim. 1912. *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. Paris: Felix Alcan.

²⁵ G. Gurvitch. 1956. *Sociologie du théâtre. Les Lettres nouvelles*, 5 (2), p. 42

²⁶ L. Goldmann. 1971. *La création culturelle dans la société moderne*. Paris: Denoël.

non-verbal embodiment, is the art of manifesting what is not socially manifest. That is to say, it shows the hidden through the mask, which becomes a form of “negative” of society. A form of that which the collective reality cannot manifest without paying the consequences in terms of social disorder, revolution of values, rethinking of the practices of cohesion and exclusion of a society in political, economic, cultural and social terms. In other words, theatre understood as a complex performative form of individual states and experiences in their intertwining and relapses within the contexts and community of which they are an expression, can be active drivers for a change in social perception. In performative practice, which involves an intersection of the body, action and reflection in a representative synthesis, individuals review the specific forms of their collective life and can make themselves aware of them, activating an emotional and reflective process which produces experience. The eventual experience becomes the place of foundation of the new possible and the new collective forms of reality by virtue of those emotions and that effervescence which pervades individuals in a collective practice and makes individual distances “fall away” in favour of forms of cohesion and unprecedented closeness. The emotional involves unison in an experience which, in a dazzling synthesis, changes things forever. Nothing goes back to the way it was, the individual parts of the whole find different forms, new kinds of logic, and the performative power of theatre and politics have in common exactly this ability to involve in unison and change the fate of collective practices. The historical avant-garde movements understood this very well, in the Futurist parable its transformative power is experienced in speed, in Artaud, in the “power of the essential”.

According to Marcuse, the subversive power of emotions must pass through language, that is, the revolution of what is represented passes through the remixing of the representable, in the experimentation of expressive languages²⁷; according to Badiou, on the other hand, theatre “reaches the real through the material simulacrum of the conflict between different possibilities”²⁸ and its beating heart lies in the poetic vision of the whole. Both of them from a position of Hegelian dialectic, they see the possibility of a social transformation beginning, one from the innovation of language, the other in the dialectic of conflict.

According to Badiou’s philosophical approach, theatre is “a State affair”. A State affair which at the same time reveals the state of society, of its significant intertwining but also the continual changes of meanings and social priorities. For Badiou, the process of exemplifying the theory that theatre is a State affair passes through those specific practices which unite theatre to political practice. The elements in common between politics and theatre are public practices, the relationship with spectators or an audience, practice understood as action, in acting terms for theatre, in legislative and executive terms when it comes to politics. Politics is realized in presence, like theatre, writes Badiou, and this specific fact makes the realization of both a process to be completed, a process which is unfinished. Badiou distinguishes between Theatre with a capital T and “theatre”, that is, the possible forms of theatre which have different potentials. Theatre with a capital T is capable of entering the life of citizens, upsetting their certainties through the performance of the art, an Audian cruelty of realities silenced by convention; “theatre” is, instead, in the language of Badiou, the theatre of entertainment, which does not speak *to* society, but *of* society. It creates no discomfort, it questions no social

²⁷ H. Marcuse. 1964. *One dimensional man: Studies in Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 5-7.

²⁸ A. Badiou. 2014. *Rhapsodie pour le théâtre*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. (there is no page as the consulted text was an online text)

conventions, it awakens no one from their daily sleepwalking, but cradles them and protects them from waking up²⁹.

Conclusions

In their reality of collective facts, theatre and society share some surprising affinities, whether we intend society as a social structure, or we see it beginning from groups of a cultural or social belonging. These common elements are the rituals of collective life and the schemes of the social roles which shape society. Every society refers to social frameworks and to a global structure which presupposes a certain orientation, that is, a series of behavioral patterns, *habitus* according to Bourdieu, which make the belonging to society or restricted social groups explicit and consolidate it.

In this sense, the importance of a sociology of art and theatre lies exactly in the need to integrate the rational collective practices of a society with its symbolic actions, with the expressive and narrative production which society makes of itself.

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²⁹ Idem.

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