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Hans-Thies Lehmann

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From Logos to Landscape: Text in Contemporary Dramaturgy

Hans-Thies Lehmann

At an artform's moment of 'origin' nothing can yet be taken for granted; it can thus be rewarding to reflect on the earliest theories of theatre and the position of the text within it, when trying to understand the most recent developments in the art of theatre. Let me start with a short historical reflection on the significance of text for theatre in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Whilst the text has been traditionally considered as playing a leading role in the theatre, it is now no longer the case that a theatre based on text is considered either the rule or the standard. Reading the *Poetics* shows that even at that time the text was not considered as the exclusive support or vehicle of meaning and sense. For Aristotle it is part of the *Melopoeia*.* Text in the theatre has always been considered in its dimension as sound, music and voice. Certainly, from antiquity until the end of the nineteenth century (and beyond) a strong tradition indeed favoured a 'logocentric' view of theatre practice. But we have to consider clearly what we mean by this statement. Aristotle remarks that tragedy first of all consists of events or *pragmata*. The pragmata, and not man, constitute the object of theatrical 'imitation' – if I may translate the term 'mimesis' in this simplifying way. The *Poetics* declares explicitly that it is not characters that are imitated in theatre but their actions; and this is true to such a degree that Aristotle is able to note that tragedy can even exist without character but not without action, happenings, occurrence.

* ***Melopoeia*: the part of dramatic art concerned with music**

> The most important of these elements is the structure of events, because tragedy is a representation not of people as such but of actions and life (*praxeon kai biou*). . . . It is not, therefore, the function of the agent's actions to allow the portrayal of their characters; it is, rather, for the sake of their actions that characterisation is included. So, the events and the plot-structure are the goal (*telos*) of tragedy, and the goal is what matters most of all.
>
> (Halliwell 1987: 37)

Even if we understand 'without character' as 'without specially marked character', the speaking individual uttering its interior life by means of language is here obviously not of primary interest. At the same time theatre is based largely on *melos*, chorus and singing – to the discontent of Plato as well as, to a lesser extent, Aristotle. It would be tempting to read Aristotle's notions in the light of a certain (post)modern theatre practice that operates without characters, presenting occurrences instead, and is based largely on musical and poetic structures.

But let us continue to question the notion of text and *logos* in the *Poetics* and especially the intriguing fact that Aristotle seriously holds that tragedy is able to unfold its total efficacy through reading alone, without any *mise-en-scène* (*opsis* is the term that Aristotle uses to refer to what is presented to the eyes of the public). Having established the hierarchy of the elements – *mythos* (plot), character, *dianoia* (thought) and speech – the text of the *Poetics* continues:

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> Of the remaining elements, lyric poetry is the most important of garnishings, while spectacle (*opsis*) is emotionally powerful, but is the least integral of all to the poet's art: for the potential (*dynamis*) of tragedy does not depend on public performance (*agon*) and actors.
>
> (*Poetics* 6; Halliwell 1987: 38–9)

While text as expression of character seems to be of small importance, the text of tragedy seems to be all-important, stage and acting superfluous. Nevertheless the two statements are not incompatible. The order of events, the pragmata of the myth, is governed by a structure and logic. It is the act of reading that grasps this hidden order in the turmoil of the tragic action. These considerations throw light on the peculiar way in which text and word have dominated the European theatre tradition. Logocentrism is about structure, order and *telos*, not simply about the word. Priority and the power of the Logos is essential for the classical theatre, in so far as Logos signifies a peculiar mixture of god, order, logic, causality, origin, father-image and word. Only to the degree to which the text is considered as the privileged place of a certain *architecture* is it assigned the highest place in theatre.

Opsis, the domain of the visual, is, on the contrary, for the logocentric tradition the privileged if not the exclusive domain of the possibility of confusion, muddle of elements, sensuality without sense, loss of structure; in short: absence of art and rational structure. According to Aristotle, it is at least degraded and denied, judged to be the most artless and the most insignificant part of the theatre. (Consider such a statement in view of today's theatre practice: it would more or less amount to the affirmation that theatre is the least interesting part of theatre. And I cannot help, incidentally, but think of many a theoretician today, who, I am sure, in all secrecy holds exactly this opinion....) The ultimate value is Logos, but there is no Logos without architecture: base and support, hierarchy and connecting elements, structure, articulation and coherence in view of reason, purpose and function, order in view of *telos* which allows an architecture to have a unity.

Now I shall allow myself to jump in a quick time-switch to what has been emerging in the new theatre since approximately 1970. It can be considered as the rediscovery of a space and a speech without *telos*, hierarchy, without structured meaning and inner unity. From this point of view the rich diversity of theatre practice during the last decades becomes understandable. Within this short history, it seems to me that – notwithstanding the fact that some artists followed such a course – there was neither something like the complete loss of words, nor a sudden re-entering of text into the theatre. What took place instead was the complicated and meandering development of new visions of multiple logos and a new kind of architecture – or an architecture of theatre. Theatre was and is searching for and constructing spaces and discourses liberated as far as possible from the restraints of goals (*telos*), hierarchy and causal logic. This search may terminate in *scenic poems*, meandering *narration*, *fragmentation* and other procedures – the longing for such space, a space beyond *telos* is there. Logically such a space is itself 'placed' on the borderline of logic and reason, on the threshold between what is thinkable and what is beyond reasoning. It was, however, made thinkable in certain ways with the help of the notion of '*chora*', a term developed by Julia Kristeva (1974) with reference to a famous passage in Plato's *Timaeus*, where Plato tries somehow to conceptualize a logical or pre-logical 'space' that gives room to the play of being and becoming of all reality and that precedes every possible distinction:

> third[ly], space (*chora*) which is eternal and indestructible, which provides a position for everything that comes to be, and which is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning and so is hard to believe in.
>
> (*Timaeus* 52; Plato 1971: 70)

This notion of *chora* – the philosophical and aesthetic implications of which I must skip here – has the advantage of reminding us that in a certain way the space of theatre is and always has been a choral space; theatre, even as monodrama, cannot be separated from the chorus and is always

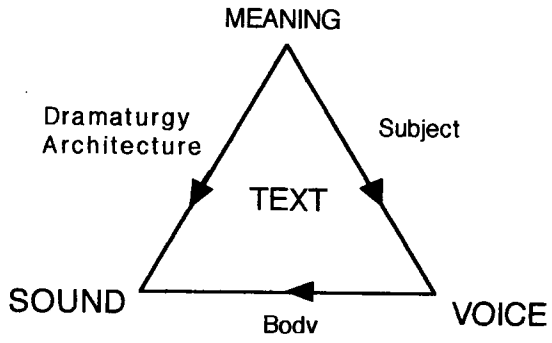
something like a choreo-graphical inscription. Our formula 'the rediscovery of theatre as *chora*' implies a status of language defined by a multiplicity of voices, a 'polylogue', a deconstruction of fixed meaning, a disobedience of the laws of unity and centred meaning. It amounts to a different kind of architecture and music of the theatre while in the fields of the arts we observe strikingly similar developments. Let me just refer to the texts which Jacques Derrida wrote on the architectures of Bernard Tschumi or Peter Eisenmann (1987: 477 ff.) or to the attempts to liberate the idea of music from the logos of composition in order to regain the dimension of unmanipulated sound, silence, chance. Talking of the 'deconstructionist' architecture of the 'Folies' of Tschumi in the Parc de la Vilette, Derrida speaks in strikingly theatrical terms of an 'architecture de l'événement' and continues: 'La dimension événementielle se voit comprise dans la structure même du dispositif architectural: séquence, sérialité ouverte, narrativité, cinématique, dramaturgie, choréographie' (The sense of event is woven into the very structure of the architectural composition: sequence, open seriality, narrativity, cinematography, drama, choreography) (1987: 478) The architect Daniel Libeskind influenced an outstanding choreographer like William Forsythe deeply by the seemingly disorganized patterns of his architectural drafts. On the other hand it is possible to understand the work of John Cage as one concerted attempt at destructuring the practice and concept of music in such a way that a 'theatrical' event replaces the necessity, structure and logic of composition. Whilst meaning vanishes in a text which approaches silence through words, in architecture the centre is silenced. The arts make obvious what is perhaps the hidden unconscious intention of all poetry: the silence of logos, silence as a structural interruption of any continuity of logos.

If there was an age of theatre dominated by Logos, the appearance of Artaud was certainly its caesura. But even for Artaud the simplistic antagonism of 'text or scene', voting for or against the word, had never existed. Instead he aimed at a radical dissolution of the logocentric hierarchy. It is in this context that language, like all elements of the theatre (gesture, lighting, scenery, props), undergoes a process of de-semanticization. Body, rhythm, breathing, the here and now of the unthinkable presence of the body, its eroticism, these undermine the Logos. This body is at the same time the place of suffering and pain, the mute body of a – wrestling. Walter Benjamin and Florens Christian Rang tried to establish the speculative but fascinating idea that the theatrical dialogue of conflicting voices is a derivative of the mute wrestling of the sacrificial animal. By retransforming the structure of dialogue into a multidimensional and poly-logic space of articulation, the new theatre also rediscovers elements of the ritual dimension, a different kind of communication that renders possible an experience, which the mind is not able to recuperate easily. This tendency in more moderate forms is also to be found in the ways in which contemporary theatre practice – not only in the radical avant-garde – redefines the role of text. The text is no longer the centre. Where it appears as such, we very often find attempts to alienate it, to twist and distort it, to perforate and dismember it, to degrade and humiliate it by use of slang and so forth. In Germany, for example, this is true for directors like Frank Castorf, Martin Kusej, Leander Hausmann, Jürgen Kruse and Einar Schleef. It depends on the individual director and production if these destructions work as a purgatory from which the text emerges in a new light or, like the attempt of a final damnation, as a burning and burying of the word. With other directors like Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor, John Jesurun, or, in Germany again, Schleef or Christoph Marthaler, the speech is transformed into versions of choral murmur. New approaches to the text, so it seems, are often detected by a radical musicalization of the language material. An auditive space is opened, which calls upon the spectator/ audience to synthesize the elements presented. Therefore the communication process of the theatre is changed dramatically. Theatre does not try to make the voice of the human subject heard; the exceptions like the unique Klaus Michael Grüber confirm this general

rule. Theatre instead produces a *dissemination* of voices or a re-focusing in a *choric structure*. We find an *architectonic espacement* of the text and often the *profanation* of the word. Each of these phenomena would require (and would be worth) a separate analysis, as well as the re-emergence of *monologue/ solilogue*, the new *polylingualism, simultaneity* or the new role of *narration*.

We could easily confirm these descriptions in the work of so much contemporary theatre of the highest and most demanding standards – Jan Lauwers, Matschappij Discordia, Hollandia and Jan Fabre; Fura dels Baus, Terzopoulos, Forced Entertainment, Raffaelo Sanzio or Théâtre du Radeau; English, Italian, American, or Scandinavian avant-garde theatre. Let me point out one consequence which seems to me to be of special importance. The new textuality of the theatre (or the textuality of the new theatre) produces a peculiar shift of axis: it does not probe the traditional centre of theatre-discourse, the dialogue with its implication of dialectic order and intersubjectivity. However, dialogue does not simply vanish. If we take into account the three levels of text in theatre (linguistic text; text in a wider sense of *mise-en-scène* as analysed by theatre semiotics; and finally what Richard Schechner calls 'performance text', meaning the specific structure of the whole theatre-event) then we can make the important observation that while the dialogue *on* the stage is fading, dialogue returns with a new emphasis *between* stage and audience. Theatre rediscovers its unique chance of direct communication because – contrary to all other art forms – here the moment of producing the art is also the moment of its reception. The audience of the new theatre finds itself as addressee of a personal history, it finds itself interwoven in ritual-like processes, it experiences its own presence sharply because it is confronted with extreme length of performances or unusual places, has to deal with provocations of many kinds. Even if many of these practices are meanwhile worn out, especially the direct provocation, the basic change in the whole notion of theatre which is implied in the *shift of axis from dialogue within theatre to dialogue between theatre and audience* remains valid. If theatre used to be defined as a kind of fictive cosmos presented to a public by means of theatre signs, theatre now tends more and more to be defined as a special and unique *situation* - not in the sense that Maeterlinck or an existentialism of confinement gave to this term, but in the sense of the construction of a theatrical moment where a kind of communication different from everyday talk could possibly, virtually, structurally happen. This is in fact a far-reaching change in the whole notion of theatre and theatricality opening up to new enquiry, artistic and theoretical, into practically every single aspect of theatre aesthetics beyond the alternative 'happening' *or* structured work. Small wonder that under these circumstances it is no longer the themes of fiction and illusion that hold much attraction for theatre artists, but instead (for example) the theme of the intrusion of the Real into the theatre (Emil Hvratin*). I am tempted to say that the development I have just outlined reacts against the overwhelming power of secondary mediated perception. Media reality is the rule, theatre the exception. While the majority of media-dramaturgies want to make us forget the process of producing images, theatre is structurally centred on the moment of visible, audible production of its images in such a way that solipsism and collective experience cease to be unbridgeable opposites for an audience.

* See Emil Hvratin (1994) *Jan Fabre*, Paris, pp. 69ff.



• Figure 1: text in theatre

The text in theatre (see Fig.1) shows three aspects: meaning, sound and voice. It is related to the human subject, to the dramatic or theatrical event with its order or architecture, and to the human body on stage, the theatrical body. While the architecture tends towards aleatoric devices and decomposition, the subject tends away from the centred Ego towards the murmuring voice of the unconscious (from meaning towards voice), and the body-voice loses its orientation by sense and meaning (direction voice-sound). On the whole a fading of the pole of meaning takes place as well as a certain musicalization of the human voice tending towards sound-patterns (Gertrude Stein). The line of the subject is weakened. Of course, new questions must arise here; for example: Does the voice by transformation into collective sound-patterns acquire new meanings? Does a new kind of speaking subject replace the Ego? The diagram might be of some help in starting to analyse certain developments just because it is simple and must be modified in the course of detailed description.

Looking now not for a diagram but for a term that signifies in some ways the new status of text in the theatre, I find one notion particularly convenient. Why not speak here of *textual landscape* [*Textlandschaft*]? Such a term would first of all point to the notion of *espacement* (Derrida) and at the same time refer to Gertrude Stein's important notion of landscape play* and take into account that the rich diversity of new ways to work with text in the theatre are closely connected to the dimension of the visual. It seems to be useful to consider the stage as a kind of landscape, closely connected to a visual dramaturgy, a term favoured by Knut Ove Arntzen. Let me add here that I consider visual dramaturgy as the other side of textual landscape. Visual dramaturgy is not to be understood as a text-free and exclusively visually dominated practice, but signifies an *opsis*, which is without hierarchical dependence, connected to text as itself a spatial and architectonic quality, which I prefer in other contexts to qualify as *postdramatic*.

* See Gertrude Stein (1967) *Look at the Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1909–45*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Theatre studies have begun to take into consideration these changes and to move from privileging philology to a 'scenology', to speak in Patrice Pavis's terms (1996: 182), a shift which is obviously only tracing a historic development. Since about 1880 the text has been received as an extremely variable element used differently by each director. However, the radicalization of this new freedom in the theatre of the 1980s produces a certain perplexity even with very open-minded theoreticians. Pavis sees in positions like my own the danger of a new '*position scéno-centriste*' (1996: 188–93) even if he accepts many of its elements. But perhaps there is not so much danger for the text even if it becomes the object of deformation and distortion. It could well be that this kind of trial by ordeal is in fact the true life of the letter. And we may also remember the great French critic Bernard Dort who insisted that the holy union of text and stage never really happens and that a certain relation of suppression and compromise proves to be inevitable.

To summarize:

1 The text opens up to dispersion of the logos in such ways that the meaning of A (stage) is no longer communicated to B (audience), but rather a specific theatrical situation is being set up/ built, which carries the possibility of a different kind of communication. This wider sense of communication implies only the possibility and not the necessity of the production of meaning.

2 Types of this textuality, largely woven in a network of intertextual cross-references (which open up even wider the unity of any text) are chorus, narration, monologue/ solilogue, collage, montage, polyglossia, and simultaneity.

3 The new ways of the text can produce a textual landscape that is closely connected to visual dramaturgy, the intrusion of the real, and the reduction of the fictional cosmos.

To conclude, fear for the text is unnecessary. From the very beginning the primary interest of theatre as such was the physical presence of the body, which by its overwhelming emotional surplus is always able to dominate any text and any verbal or non-verbal order of the scene. In the period of

the literary theatre this surplus had been blocked and diverted. Contemporary theatre, leaving behind the absolute dominance of the text, does not by any means abandon poetry, thoughtfulness or the glamour of speech, but brings back into focus the de-semanticizing potential of body and visuality as such. No doubt, taking a look at the present situation of theatre in general, there seems to be a certain exhaustion of creative energies. The necessary process of de-literization perhaps lost too many of the great potentials of the text. But these are impressions of the day. Even the radical project of visual dramaturgy will have been part of the history of text in theatre. The most outstanding theatre work of these years, from Fabre and Jan Lauwers, Robert Lepage, Kantor, or Wilson to Peter Stein, Grüber, Brook, or Mnouchkine, favours more or less 'traditional' forms – all worked themselves through the text. In the best cases, to put it to the edge of its immanent silence.

Today computer systems are the most powerful agents of change in the status of text in the 'cybernetic machine' – as Roland Barthes called the theatre already in 1963. This may cause anxiety, but I do not doubt that the struggle between electronic idiocy and new ways of theatrical communication can also produce any number of new possibilities. We can only hope that those new forms of what are in many ways 'inhuman' textures and electronically produced hypertexts will develop within the peaceful *Agon* of a theatre. Otherwise we might really have to see the catastrophe of what may be called 'electronic capitalism' in order to verify the prophecy of Heiner Müller: 'When the discothèques are empty and the academies have disintegrated, then will the silence of theatre, which is the ground of its language, be heard again.'

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