

Spectators' Journeys

Immersions in Experimental Theater

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This article looks at two theatrical performances from the point of view of their spectators. The act of going to the theatre is in itself a journey immediately followed by the confrontation of an unknown world during the performance. This article questions the position and roles of the spectators in contemporary, interactive performances, where spectators become central within the theatrical set-up. It analyzes two plays, *Le Bardo* and *EUX*, both presented at La Chartreuse in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. The two plays present spectators with mixed territories of actual, fictional and virtual, and accentuate immersive processes by using virtual or augmented realities. The article argues that in those apparatus, spectators must undertake an intro-directed journey and renegotiate their own sense of being there, while remaining at the center of attention. This allows them to appropriate the territories with which they are confronted and eventually participate in the plays, in a process similar to that of the traveler.

Vois sur ces canaux / Dormir ces vaisseaux
Dont l'humeur est vagabonde;
C'est pour assouvir / Ton moindre désir
Qu'ils viennent du bout du monde
(Charles Beaudelaire, *L'invitation au voyage*)

In the theater, a play is an ephemeral event which unites, in a unity of time and place, various human beings (artists, technicians, spectators), who come from diverse backgrounds and will, after the play, follow their own trajectories. The theatrical event, in itself, is a result of the co-presence of those individuals (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). The sum of the actions and reactions of all participants creates the play as an event as well as an object. It is generally accepted that the participants of a theatrical event have a clearly defined role: with the help of technicians, the actors present situations to spectators who observe them. However, in some contemporary experiences, notably with the use of virtual technologies in the theater, one can observe small shifts in the theater encounter and the casting of roles. We want to observe two cases of plays making extensive use of virtual technologies in this essay, both produced by and presented at the CNES of La Chartreuse in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, and discuss the “invitations to the voyage” they offer to their participants.

Limiting expectations

E.U.X and *Le Bardo* were both presented at La Chartreuse, a laboratory for theater writings. The presentation leaflets of both plays did not explain what the theatrical apparatus would consist of, but were specific on the fact that only a spectator at a time could enter the plays. This laboratory mode, as well as the presentation of works during either probes or festivals, incited spectators to take a risk by going to those plays. They were expecting alternative forms of theater, without knowing what the rules of the game would be. The absence of many information gave an incentive to the spectators to discover the plays without many preconceptions, and to eventually engage entirely with the plays. *EUX*'s playwright, Eli Commins, noted in an interview the importance of keeping a mystery about the nature of the plays, in order to leave a greater range of reactions from the part of the participants:

One important aspect of these systems is the fantasy and the expectations. If you tell people it is going to be an immersive situation, some people are so eager to play that game that they immerse themselves. The person was already projecting before the text started. Some people just refused to get in there [...] Reactions were generally

quite strong. They ranged from deep anxiety to pleasure (Commins, 2010).

In addition to presenting the work as a game whose primary players are the spectators, this remark shows us to which extent the play is experienced through the body of the spectators. Their reactions are not only intellectual, but mostly physical. In Europe, the forms of theater to which we are mostly accustomed also completely immerse their spectators: since Wagner and the construction of his opera house in Bayreuth, at the end of the XIXth Century, spectators are asked to remain silent. Only the stage is lit, and everyone's attention is directed in its direction. As in the cinema, the spectators forget their bodies during the time of the play. They do not direct their attention to their surroundings, but rather towards the illuminated stage. Their bodies are left alone so that their minds can concentrate fully on an object which they experiment primarily through sight and sound, and analyze intellectually.

Experimenting the plays through one's sensorium

E.U.X and *Le Bardo* request that the bodies of their spectators occupy other spaces. Indeed, both plays are labyrinths through which participants must make their own way, using mainly their vision, but also hearing, touch and proprioception. Rather than subscribing to the dichotomy of body and mind to appreciate the intellectual immersion into a play, they rather ask their spectators to engage fully in the plays by the means of all their bodily senses. The plays must be appreciated both intellectually and physically to make sense to their spectators. If they are observers coming from the outside, as the term "spectator" suggests, they only observe themselves in the midst of the object-play presented to them. In those theatrical situations, they become participants in an apparatus which they do not know, or control. In *E.U.X*, the participants are invited to experiment and sense the play via Virtual Reality helmets. They enter a virtual world reminiscent of gaming universes, which they can explore by pointing their gaze in any direction and by walking. Indeed, they are pushing a cart (in the virtual world, a wheelchair), which connects their movements and pace to the computer graphics that they see through the helmet. They are surrounded by actors and technicians who monitor their movements and reactions, but who they cannot

see. Their senses are stimulated throughout the play: they are spoken to directly, being addressed by their first name; they are pushed to draw on their own clothes; they are lied down on a table, before they can continue their journey in the galleries where they are virtually walking; they are touched by strangers, etc. It has been remarked about CREW's work that: "in this hybrid experience, the perception of the own body is pushed to the extreme, causing a most confusing corporal awareness" (Vanhoutte and Wynant, 2009). In *Le Bardo*, participants also have to walk through a labyrinth, entering several rooms, each activating different senses. One is entirely dark; another one has an inclined plan on which to walk; on yet another, participants cannot decipher whether the characters are embodied by actors or are mere video projections, etc. Although participants are not delved into a virtual world through VR helmets, *Le Bardo* uses cinematic techniques, such as optical theater and video, to alter the perceived reality. Participants cannot make sense of the reality of their immediate surroundings. Both experiences, heavily drawn on focusing on corporeal awareness, force participants to use their sensations, their sensorium, in order to fully understand the plays. In this type of immersion, participants experience the fiction of the play as a situation to which they are directly confronted and to which they must react, thus transforming it into a real situation, affecting their personal immediate decisions.

Perceptions and sensory renegotiations

The focus on one's body and perceptions, in a play, must open territories and possibilities that are not common in theater where spectators forget about their own bodies. Bergson studied perceptions and attention in relation to memory in *Matter and Memory*. His thesis is here summarized by Crary (2001, 317):

To sketch very briefly, *Matter and Memory* demonstrates that attention always operates on two axes. One is an attentiveness to the flow of external sensations and events while the other is attention to the way in which memories coincide with or diverge from "present" perception.

From this summary, we can induce that participants, during the play, try to match the sensations they are experiencing with ones

they already know, in an attempt of making sense of their surroundings. Being mediated and augmented by the use of immersive technologies, there is a confusion for the spectators as to what pertains to the real and what pertains to the actual. For example, one sees that they are walking on hard tiles when in fact they feel that they are stepping on a carpeted floor. Although relying on their senses, participants are lead to doubt them. From then on in the performance, the spectators remain in a state of uncertainty about what can happen to their own bodies. It can be argued that spectators experiment sensory renegotiation during the play. The disruption of sensations may trigger a re-organization of the information received from sight, sounds, smells and proprioception and create impressions of synaesthesia. It "literally means *co-sensation* and [...] refers to one or more (emotionally) related sensorial qualities" (Wynant, Vanhoutte and Bekaert 2008, p.160). It is often referred to as an intermingling of the senses, a shift in sensorial perception. It comes from the Greek *sunaisthêsis*, *simultaneous perception*. With it, as Frank Popper (2007, p.162) points out: "all sensorial inter-relations are possible".

(Im)materiality

Those discrepancies between various senses, in both plays, open up thresholds between the awareness of the materiality of one's body and the immateriality of the experience. Both aspects are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. Rooted in the bodies of the participants, the play develops in their imaginations and fantasies. After the event, the memories of the play seem to remain ungraspable, difficult to transmit through words or images, to remember accurately, to live again mentally. A sense of an unattainable real pertains to those plays, as if they had happened at the intersection of the actual, the real and the virtual. They have a dream-like quality, which is not new in the theater, and has been explored, among other plays, in Calderon's *Life is a Dream* or Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Those plays, created before social codes silenced theater audiences, presented characters for whom the boundaries between dream and reality had faded, if not disappeared. The position of the characters on a threshold between two states frees the play from certain conventions, and eases the acceptance of unreality-like events, opening spaces to explore, and leading to happy encounters or disastrous transformations. In *E.U.X*

and *Le Bardo*, no character played by an actor enters liminal spaces in between realities as in those plays. However, the participants themselves are thrown into those spaces, watched by the actors and technicians, who observe their very moves in order to react to them. The state of liminality is also reinforced in *Le Bardo* by its theme. To create this play, the company was inspired Antoine Volodine's book, *Bardo or not Bardo*, which refers to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the *Bardo Todhöl*. This book accompanies the dead for 49 days -each of those days represented scenically in *Le Bardo* by a room through which the spectator must walk- until their reincarnation or escape from its cycle.

Liminal states

Those states are reminiscent of the state of betwixt-and-between conceptualized by Turner and described by Fischer-Lichte as "the experience of a crisis, [which] is primarily realized as a physical transformation, in other words a change to the physiological, energetic, affective and motoric state" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p.117). Those changes are the locus of opening new possibilities, of accidents, or, as Julie Sermon reads the work of Eli Commins, as a place for the *kairos* to strike:

Ce temps qui, par opposition au temps mesuré par les horloges et les calendriers (kronos), renvoie à un moment singulier, décisif: celui où le destin frappe, mais aussi, où s'offrent des occasions à saisir, où s'ouvrent des brèches dans lesquelles activement s'engouffrer. (Sermon, 2008).
This time which, in opposition to the time measured by clocks and calendars (kronos), refers to a singular, decisive moment: the moment when fate strikes, but also the moment to seize opportunities, when breaches open in which one must actively dive.[Translation mine]

The *kairos* would suppose the ability from spectators, technicians and artists to seize unplanned opportunities to create something new, thus simultaneously co-creating common territories and living a unique experience. However, although the plays seem to transport the participants into such a state, where transformations are possible and where the actuation of the play seems to stand on

an ever-changing threshold, which is triggered by the reactions of each participants, the plays are also created according to a fixed structure, and the time of the *kairos* soon meets the real constraints of the time allotted to the play. The labyrinthine path of the plays, on one hand, helps the spectators' sense of being lost in space, but on another hand, maintains them on a planned path, and, to a certain extent controls their whereabouts and their movements. In *Le Bardo*, a participant enters the apparatus every seven minutes, and must remain alone at all time. This particular structure leaves no space for unplanned developments which would exceed the allotted seven minutes. A similar structure is found in *E.U.X*, where the structural choreography makes two participants exchange their goggles every twenty minutes. In both play, the timing is tight and the sense of freedom of participation only an illusion.

Co-construction

If participants have an acute sense of how their bodies react to the plays, how do they, in turn, consider the bodies of the actors who are present in the play? Apparently, the actors do not take on the main roles: the participants do. Are the actors apprehended only by their phenomenal bodies, or are they seen as embodying characters? Which role are the actors playing, and how are those roles perceived by participants who are not only spectators in those plays? Erika Fischer-Lichte has been arguing that postdramatic plays permit to perceive the actors' bodies in their phenomenality, thus creating shifts, moments of betwixt-and-between (Turner 1995, p.95) which actualize the theatrical experience :

The question is what perceptual multistability achieves. [...] Whenever such a shift takes place, there is a rupture, a discontinuity. The order of perception, which the spectators have initially followed, is upset and even destroyed and another one has to be established. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p.87).

Again, the limits between the actual and the virtual are not clear for the participants, nor are the limits between the real and the fictional. When, as in *Le Bardo*, an actor summons you to forget who you are, and to imagine you become a twig, while gently touching your

neck or your arms, the fiction of the plays matter little and the phenomenal body of the actor who touches the participants takes more importance than his fictional character. What matters is not how the action evolves in the play, but how the relationship between the actors, the visible technicians and the participants are constructed. Those relationships are of proximity, and, if possible, trust. The building of trust between the various individuals who are present in the theatrical event can fail or succeed, but it is this process which collaborates to create a feedback-loop which, in turn, allows chain of reactions to occur, from which the play can develop. In *E.U.X.*, to reinforce the feedback-loop and offer a distancing from the bodily experience they just had, each former-spectator is invited to stay in the space of the performance to observe an other participant's journey through the play. There, spectators can confront their sensory memories of the play with someone else's experience of the same material. There, they can see that the play, the event, is radically different from one participant to another, depending on their reactions and the amount of trust they manage to build with the actors and technicians. The processes of becoming at play depend on this trust, and on a letting go off control from the part of the participants. Participants and artists present in those immersive performances deeply influence each other, and therefore influence the performance itself. Deleuze defined processes of becoming as such (2004, p.262-263):

A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification. [...] To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination [...]. Finally, becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation. [...] Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance.

The immersive processes at play in those two experience lead to an alliance between all the participants in the event. Actors and participants influence each other, react to each other and, through the actions that they lead, challenge the course of the play. At each moment, the actors, the participants and the play, by their presence in

the same space, enter processes of becomings. Each participant, by entering the apparatus of the plays and by experiencing his/her own journey, has an impact on the way the actors react, as well as on the future representations. In this sense, the creative process of those plays is never finished, and is reinvented for each performance. Despite a rigid structure, those plays permit the encounter of artists and participants, in a moment of co-creation. Each spectator appropriates the territories they cross in order to get to know them, and by this action redefine those territories.

Conclusion

It may seem paradoxical to speak of a spectator's journey. Indeed, the spectator, from Latin *spectare*, is the one who watches, who observes, whereas the journey implies the idea of the movement of traveling from one place to another. Yet, the immersive plays we have discussed show us that a spectator can travel through the territories presented by the plays: they explore, experiment, experience through their senses and build relationships with the people they encounter. In a liminal state mixing real and fictional, actual and virtual, the participant – spectators are lead to embrace the play through their bodily sensations, and experience its immaterial impacts on their memories. The immersive, immaterial experience is reminiscent of our contemporary uses of virtual technologies: one can spend a whole day reading, writing, creating, discussing, playing on a computer, turn it off and possess nothing tangible to present to a third party. They experience is similar with those plays: all actions have been carefully planned and monitored, yet the imagination of the participants, triggered by their sensorial perceptions, pertain to the domain of fantasies, of unspoken memories. No caption, visual or audio, could transmit an idea of the experiences lived during the plays. As a consequence, perhaps, the experience of the plays is always ready to be re-lived, re-traversed, to create a new form, to be co-created again. The artists offer their apparatus by presenting the plays, but the plays only exist when they are activated by the actions and reactions of participants who accept to immerse themselves in those worlds. As Russell West-Pavlov states, "This space is not the pre-existing stage upon which human life is played out. [...] The world creates us, as we create it, in relations of reciprocity" (West Pavlov, 2009, p.242).

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