

## *SPECTATING/PARTICIPATING. MODES OF SPECTATORSHIP*

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*Abstract: This paper questions ways of approaching spectatorship in contemporary critical discourse and stage practice in performing arts, by looking at writings of Jacques Rancière and Hans-Thies Lehmann and putting them in relation to contemporary theater productions. We are interested in exploring how the emancipated spectator of Rancière is embodied and how political theater is redefined by theater makers who combine their social-political or civic interest with a commitment to developing theatrical devices that translate this interest into form and dramaturgy.*

**Keywords: performing arts; politics; spectatorship; emancipation; ethics .**

Participation is a notion well known to theatre theorists, infusing the critical discourse of this discipline over the course of last years. Participatory art wishes to operate on the level of audience activation, reinforcing a strong active – passive binary. However, we argue that spectating presupposes participating in a spectacular situation, and that participation can embrace a wide array of forms in the theatrical devices. In other words, participation is not equivalent to mere audience interactivity, and the discussion around this term should take into account a cultural paradigm built around dissent rather than consensus, as some recent works suggest.

In his article *Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community*, Jacques Rancière points out to the fragility of a group of people seen as connected: “The human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, I would say a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of the ‘being together’.”<sup>1</sup> The being together in a theater audience is hard to pinpoint, as audience members relate subjectively. It is therefore questionable whether one can truly look at theatre audience as a monolith, a solid body receiving a signal and reacting singularly to this signal. On the contrary, dissent is seen as a fertile ground for reflection. It is Rancière who notices the dual regime of spectatorship: “the tension between being together and being apart plays on a double level. The artistic ‘proposition’ conflates two regimes of sense – a regime of conjunction and a regime of disjunction.”<sup>2</sup>

The theatre of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a theatre less concerned with opposing a doctrine, be it aesthetic or political, but rather a theatre questioning the notions of togetherness, community and history.

### **100%**

Rimini’s Protokoll project *100%* seems to play with precisely “the incalculable tension between political dissensuality and aesthetic indifference”<sup>3</sup> theorized by Jacques Rancière.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, Art&Research, volume 2, no. 1, summer 2008, p. 4

<sup>2</sup> idem, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> idem, p. 14

Adapted to a number of international stages, the core of the project is a reinterpretation of the Greek notion of polis.

The production eludes theatrical metaphors and brings the audience on stage: the first step of the project is to look up statistics about the city's population and physically embodying these statistics by putting on stage 100 performers / citizens in a synthesis of the real polis: every percentage characterizing the respective city is made visible by an equal number of non-professional performers hired to act in the production as 'themselves', as mere citizens.

The audience is mirrored by the performers and viceversa, and the effect is impacting and disturbing. Audience interaction techniques ensure that the stage and the audience communicate, and that one recognizes itself in the other. The performance dramaturgy plays with the authentic identity of the performers, and includes verbal communication between performers and audience members, as well as monologues and embodying statistics through stage movement. For example, one yes/no question is answered by performers on stage by positioning themselves to one of the stage sides, according to their answer (yes to the right, no to the left). Simple sociological devices create, in the case of this ambitious project of Rimini Protokoll, a ground for asking questions about identity and belonging to a community. *100%* is a project about difference and cohabitation, about otherness and self-definition.

It is not unimportant that their project is a nomadic one, travelling from one city to another, adapting its structure to the realities of a certain space. In the age of globalization and media supremacy, a project like *100%* seems to tackle precisely the gaps and limitations of public discourse and to question the in-betweens of values such as unity, diversity, cohesion, integrity. As Hans-Thies Lehmann notices: "A certain paralysis of public discourse about the basic principles of society is striking. There is no current issue that is not 'verbalized' *ad nauseam* in endless commentaries, special broadcasts, talk shows, polls and interviews – but we find hardly a sign of society's capacity to 'dramatize' the uncertainty of its really founding and fundamental issues and principles, which are after all deeply shaken. Postdramatic theatre is also theatre in an age of omitted images of conflict."<sup>4</sup> What Rimini Protokoll does is to eliminate the external exegesis and to focus on the objects of this exegesis.

Power relations, dramaturgical structures and conventional plots are insufficient to describe a contemporary reality considered dramatic, spectacular and performative in itself. Who are we and how do we see ourselves? How do we relate to fellow citizens and how do we articulate a community embracing our differences? These are all questions that transgress passive and active audiences and articulate a new mode of spectatorship.

Borders between active and passive spectatorship are to be questioned, especially in the case of performances toying with the notions of audience and using non-conventional theatrical devices. Interactivity per se is not an indication of active spectatorship, if it is limited to addressing a question to an audience member and slightly adjusting the next line according to the audience member's reply. In this case, interactivity might heighten the audience involvement, as for some audience members this type of experience might be perceived as new and original. However, the frequency with which audience interaction is

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<sup>4</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theater*, Routledge, 2006, p. 183

used to advertise a show and the actual interactive devices might deter audiences from becoming active and involved due to saturation or disappointment.

Rimini Protokoll's experimental approach to performance and audience involvement can offer a sample of new theatrical thinking, in which performance mixes aesthetics, politics and ethics, and touches upon what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls an 'aesthetic of responsibility': "The basic structure of perception mediated by media is such that there is no experience of a connection among the individual images received but above all no connection between the receiving and sending of signs; there is no experience of a relation between address and answer. Theatre can respond to this only with a *politics of perception*, which could at the same time be called an *aesthetic of responsibility (or response-ability)*."<sup>5</sup>

We argue that new approaches of spectatorship need not be included in an active – passive binary, but need to be seen in a complex relation with conjunction and disjunction. As described by Olivier Neveux, postdramatic theatre is based on a network of questions, embodying dissimilarity: "Dans son entremêlement d'esthétiques et d'orientations singulières, dans l'addition de projets et de pratiques dissemblables, bref dans son hétérogénéité même, le postdramatique témoigne, justement, du champ de forces postmoderniste: d'un réseau de questions, d'axes dominantes, plus ou moins intégrés."<sup>6</sup> This specificity of postdramatic theatre is to be considered in relation to contemporary productions and theatre makers that are not necessarily postdramatic. Approaching audiences with an extra-aesthetic goal is a noticeable in theatre-making of the last decade, even for productions that don't qualify as postdramatic. And indeed, a project such as *100%* stands for a different paradigm, one not so much preoccupied with dramatic structures and their potential dissolution, but one reflecting on the fragile connections between aesthetics, ethics, politics and on the connections between art and social realities.

Emancipated audiences, as theorized by Jacques Rancière, are audiences perfectly aware of their condition, fully accepting their role as observers, voyeurs and acknowledging the relationships created by this position. For the French writer and philosopher the dichotomy between seeing / passive and doing / active is no longer a working one, and he calls for an interrogation of these conventional opposition: "L'émancipation, elle, commence quand on remet en question l'opposition entre regarder et agir, quand on comprend que les évidences qui structurent ainsi les rapports du dire, du voir et du faire appartiennent elles-mêmes à la structure de la domination et de la sujétion."<sup>7</sup>

Being a mere audience member is no longer a stigma, as opposed to participatory art: "[...] ce que signifie le mot d'émancipation: le brouillage de la frontière entre ceux qui agissent et ceux qui regardent, entre individus et membres d'un corps collectif."<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, a model for a new mode of spectatorship emerges, one where acknowledgement of the differences between audience member and performer, as well as the knowledge of the dissimilar involvement each of these implies structure a new way of existing as audience, a way of existing that is not completely outside the domain of ethics we

<sup>5</sup> idem, p. 185

<sup>6</sup> Olivier Neveux, *Politiques du spectateur. Les enjeux du théâtre politique aujourd'hui*, Éditions La Découverte, Paris, 2013, p. 39-40

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, La Fabrique éditions, 2008, p. 19

<sup>8</sup> idem, p. 26

mentioned beforehand. Alan Read, a theatre practitioner and theorist working in community theatre for a number of years, is interested in the ethics of performance and considers that ethical concerns “are nothing to do with a religious idea of morality but are the recognition that the audience is the predisposition of the performer and that the one cannot do without the other.”<sup>9</sup> How ethics are redefined as to incorporate both the audience member and the performer as interconnected entities, responding to the other, symbiotic, is, we think, a key specificity of the emerging new model of spectatorship.

Emancipation (Rancière) and ethics (Read) are extra-aesthetic notions, generally employed in sociology, philosophy and humanistic sciences, and less to describe the field of the performing arts. The fact that the current critics and theorists choose to resort to the extra-aesthetic to deal with the aesthetic is a major component in the discussion about contemporary theatre and how it redefines spectatorship. Contemporary spectatorship is no longer considered passive in terms of audiences’ lack of interaction with the performers. Also, the fact that there is no intersection between the dramaturgy of the piece and the audience is not an issue leading to passivity. Active spectatorship doesn’t manifest itself through verbal or physical interaction with the performers, this being a literal, superficial perspective on what it means to be an active audience. On the contrary, active audiences are aware of their role as observers, of those-for-which-the-performance-takes-place. They are not inferior or superior to the performers, they simply have different tasks to perform in order to ensure that the theatrical communication is efficient.

According to Alan Read, theatre need to embed ethical and political aspects to be able to become more than pure aesthetics: “At a time when seeing has become believing it is worth reminding theatre that its responsibility is still to disrupt, not to acquiesce with this spectacle. Theatre images carry this potential, but unmoored from ethical and political consideration, they can be disregarded as aesthetic niceties.”<sup>10</sup> His view echoes the critical discourse of Hans-Thies Lehmann and Jacques Rancière. All of these theorists consider ethics, politics and emancipation as fundamental issues for contemporary theatre, whereas aesthetics almost becomes a nuisance, a black sheep whose dominance should by all means be avoided.

It is in this direction that a new model of spectatorship is being shaped both by stage practice and critical discourses. Rimini Protokoll’s *100%* project perfectly embodies the new emancipated audience, aware of their condition as observers, watchers, however intricately connected to the performers on stage. The performers are mere citizens playing themselves, concretely embodying their identity on stage. It is being and being aware of that matter in the artistic proposal of Rimini Protokoll, and playing, interpreting, acting out are anachronisms in this case. Emancipation, ethics and politics are all major components in this project touching upon the core values of democracies, questioned by globalization and regionalization: citizenship, identity, community, tolerance, hierarchy, otherness, acceptance, homogeneity, disruption, dissimilarity, difference.

Rather than dramatizing the statistics, Rimini Protokoll choose to create theatrical devices to confront and dissemble dichotomies. The audience / performer dichotomy is the first to be disrupted, since all are equal citizens and none of them is interpreting a role. The

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life. An Ethics of Performance*, Routledge, 2005, p. 33

<sup>10</sup> idem, p. 54

passive / active dichotomy is the next to be eliminated, since audience is encouraged and offered the opportunity to speak out their personal view and to help better trace the statistics. A dynamic flux circulates between performers and audience, and it is in this perpetual communication that lays the efficiency and relevance of *100%*.

“Each of the elements is insensible and nonsensical alone. The sensual arises from their relation to the whole.”<sup>11</sup> Alan Read refers to the interconnectivity of theatrical elements in general, but we would like to emphasize that this interdependency is even more obvious in the case of projects such as *100%*, projects deeply rooted in a reflection about the role of theatre in today’s society, that take this reflection and embody it in what might be called radical, innovative or experimental devices. What is clearly articulated is a new mode (and perhaps a model) of spectatorship, grounded in the belief that ethics, politics and emancipation are notions fully applicable to aesthetics, a mode of spectatorship promoting audiences that are open, aware and critical.

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<sup>11</sup> idem, p. 66