

## **Disinhibition of the public through happening-performance (II.)**

### **Steps to overcome the prejudicial condition of canonical art-reception: immobilism in traditional spectatorship, evicted from his part to be played in the poietic of the art-work and convicted to a “dead angle”- aesthetic – perspective**

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**Abstract:** *The paper tackles the impact of the stage performance upon the public, the algorithm through which the theatrical event entered in the captivity of mass-manipulation and the development of the dramatic concepts, aiming to decode the implied power-relationship between scene and audience, thanks to the evolution of philosophical thinking from genuine skepticism to modern rationalism, from judgment of taste to critical judgment and social activism. Further, there was studied in psychological key the consequences of the dual division of the show-space, the sociological markers in theater architecture and the pattern of Wagnerian scenic space, allowing insights in the history of mentalities and in the pattern of art-reception.*

Key-words: *skepticism, Aristotle, catharsis, Chorus, protagonist, René Descartes, dubito, Eugène Ionescu, Augusto Boal, oppression.*

#### **1. Anatomy of the theatre / opera, in terms of the spatial distribution in the hall**

In the performances witnessed by playwright Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793), the spatial boundary was stable, remaining unchanged, showing a single meaning: that the fixed frame favored the oppressive positioning of the stage in front and, at the same time, *opposite* to the tidy in rows arranged sitting-area reserved for the public; the constraint was *only* of spatial nature; the spirit of integration, the ritual

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pulse of the two bodies - actors & spectators - was mutual, promise for a lean debate, while the dialogue conveyed a sinuous, unfocused deployment. The ambit was ruled by an almost perverse equivocation proved by the two counterparts: on the one hand, the protagonists appeared on the stage seeming comfortable, loose, springy, cultivating divagation, improvising humorous hints and then reshaping the speech in front of a hectic and regardless audience, constantly on the move; on the other hand, the public, witnessing an *abnormal* behavior - judging by current criteria –, “*in a detached play into the play*” (Adrian Marino, *op. cit.*, p. 614), watched the show “*with an ironic modesty*”, as if it tried to undo temporarily the solid coherence of the fixed, conventional space. Highly popular dramatic performances, trapped under the sign of *Commedia dell'arte*, offered - by means of this amplified improvisatory apparatus – “*compensation for escape, release of personality, moral and intellectual freedom*”. (*idem*, p. 615) The themes of these plays, written in colloquial Italian, rich in picturesque details, replacing “proper” comedies of classical type, cultivated events, feelings and experiences of common interest for both sides (lay artists of humble background and general public). When in the show, between the two ancient social bodies, interferes the presence of the middle class (bourgeoisie), the stories become satirical more alert, the protagonists specialize their parts, recognizable by the worn masks according to the new social facts and tempt each other, putting the newly born class at test. The fact that the performers were wearing masks gives to the attendants opportunity to recognize the character on the spot and to anticipate his part, making them able to participate in an interactive mode to the shaping of the impromptu. Andrea Calmo (1510 – 1571), Venetian actor and dramatist, is considered to be one of the forerunners of this carnivalesque theatrical formula, subjecting the dramatic intrigue to spontaneous happenings and not excluding the involvement of the public, who had, in certain phases, the freedom to choose the outcome of the enacted stories. The *Commedia dell'arte*- trend allow us also to catch a glimpse into the cores of an unconscious quest for happening-performances, firstly expressed by facetious touches in a burlesque language, which were holding the attendant at ease, grading unhindered the show as well as his fellow citizens, in temporary performance locations, namely the town streets or markets, where the boundary between stage and spectator disappeared.

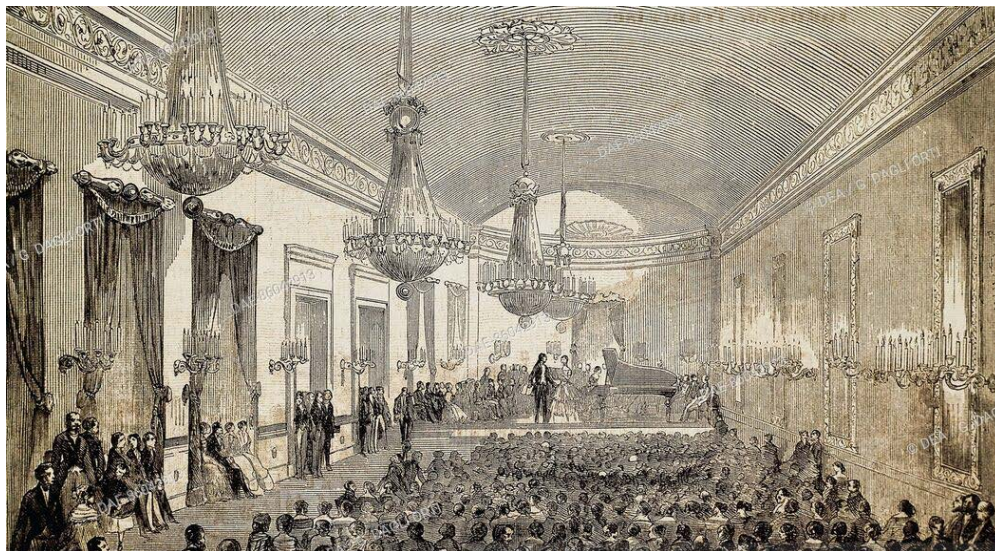


Fig. 1. Pleyel Concert Hall in Paris, June 1855

Starting with Richard Wagner (1813-1883), the opera performance defies (in an aesthetic negotiated way) the traditional scheme of the genre, due to the built in complexity aroused by the divagating syncretism and by the unbridled abuse of symbolic shielding, creating an inconceivable mixture. During the seemingly celebration of his immanent and, at the same time, transcendent ritual-like compositions, the partition, or - more precisely - the foggy power of auctorial authority is subduing drastically the two parties as well, involved in the entertainment: artists / protagonists / and spectators. The ideology embraced by his musical drama cannot be undermined and left to the capriciousness of the spreading, cheap Mozartian enthusiasm, to the fading “nonsense” tolerated there, a mere gesticulation of an establishment mirroring. Wagner demanded from the stage’s representatives a *sine-qua-non* condition: a high level of education and musical culture, in addition to exquisite canto-skills for his dramata. Therefore, in approaching the musical drama, the composer emphasizes exclusively on the ascendant of the protagonist and uses a generous form of permanent deception to hide, in an elusive manner, the passive part offered to the spectator present in the hall; the performer’s overpower will marginalize the attendants, pouring into them the conscience of their own limits and lack of value (Nietzschean individuation), dismantling their own Ego and provoking in them self-despise under the psychedelic incantation of the “Infinite Melody”. Semantically, Wagner opens space to oppressive forms, especially through the perfectionism of maximum

caliber performances claimed by role interpreters (= stage actors); at such performances, the attendant will be able to keep track only by a recitative lecture. At this point, the incentive that made the attendant to be receptacle of the work of art is to accept the humble posture of leaning pressed to the backrest of his paid seat in the concert hall, in order to follow from that sole angle – the aesthetic “dead angle” - the conveyance of the message, of the mystery, of the adjacent intellectual code; it was that very message in front of which, not long ago, he has felt confident, not drained out, like now, because he understood his own involvement, to be part of it.

## 2. The pattern of Wagnerian scenic space as appliance for colonizing the audience

*“While the theater [i.e. Music Dramas (emphasis added / italics mine)] has sometimes been seen as a site of authority and discipline, with actor and audiences conforming to the requirements of the playwright’s text, performance has been credited with disrupting and dishonoring the traditional sanctities of author, text and actor, and generally undermining the illusionist techniques of realist theater.”* (Regan Stephen, „Politics and performance. The legacy of Raymond Williams”, in Lizabeth Goodman /Jane De Gay (eds.), *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 52)

The particularity depicted by the Wagnerian drama is that it is offered as a narrated story and rerun the same in terms of the plot, important being the selection of the order of priorities in deploying the peculiar art-work components by observing the chain of dramaturgical plans, inferable taken as granted. The assembly of interrelated leitmotifs and scenic events have a mythical source (see the Grail of Medieval Novels). Drawn up without contingency to the content of the perpetually dramatized ensemble of everyday circumstances, experienced at first hand by the average man, the plot-deployment drive him into disarray, persuading him to contemplate the theatrical experience as a burden added to his own life experiences: *“Actions of a kind and scale that attract dramatic comparisons are being played out in ways that leave us continuously uncertain whether we are spectators or participants[...] It would be moreover easier, one can often feel, if only actors acted, and only dramatists wrote scenarios. But we are far past that.”* (Regan Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 57).

The life of the citizen enacts a drama in itself, being offered to him as a show-up of happenings, that very drive turns up to be challenging - and sometimes brutal –on every day scale.

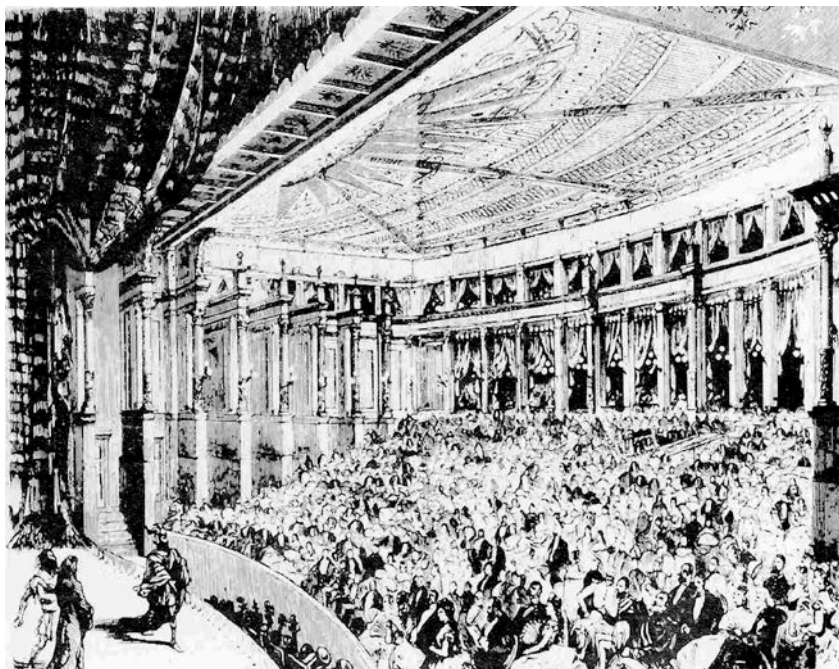


Fig. 2. *Festspielhalle, Bayreuth, 1876*

On the stage, however, the theme of a drama, the intrigue, the action are representations, which do not involve the average man, in his quality of spectator. Isolated, driven by spell in a state of hypnosis, the spectator evacuates himself out of the unique, unrepeatable, real-life experiment, grasped and got through by own risk, letting himself be prey to the manipulation of the “dead-angle”- perspective. Just as he was evicted from the poetics of the art-work by diminishing till disappearance his active contact-area with the protagonist, he was also driven out of the quest of his own life, so he was forced to appropriate a mythical-historical epic and the events of a story, by means of (fictive) representation, throwing him in the territory of legends or fantasies, and no less—it could be asserted, by analogy – in a “politically” controlled zone. The spectator becomes a convicted fellow, oppressed, because he constantly lives in two parallel worlds: in an unreal one and in a real counterpart, leaving his Self and Ego prey to dissolution.

Based on a performative orientation clear-cut for stage and theater, the protagonist refers in a different way to the narrated plot than the spectator, emphasizing his Ego by the fact that he is active part in the action. To his outlet impetuses he responds firstly with the presence of his physical body, then with the help of words. A range of practiced body postures (body-in-torsion vs. body-repose, body-immobility, body-hold, body-in-a-blocked-state, body-distance, fake body)

cancels somehow his approach to the dry aspect, canonically shaped of the art-work, practicing forms of individualizing while enacting his part; The very part will help him stimulate his psychic capacities, such as self-expression, self-esteem, leadership. The actor, as protagonist, plays his part in a “masterly” way in front of the spectator, inducing him subliminally a type of behavior that the latter should follow in real life. Hence take shape the magnetism of the relationship between the two counterparts: the one fulfills the function of a model and of a modeling instance, the other embodies the apprentice to be trained” by the model and thanks to him. The second one will feel oppressed by the disparity created by the degree of perfection with which the first played his part. Placed in the frame of his own part, the spectator will enter the show-room with the obedient face of the “loser from the streets”, who is bearing in his mind the icon of the (still) un-asserted leader-model, which means that he possesses the potential capacity of performance, that he contemplates on a full scale at the protagonist, craving (in silence) to become like him.

But this will never happen. Controlled by the space of the showroom, the spectator becomes operational in the frame of the environment, according to his rightfully deserved expectations; he is seized by the psychological pattern of mass-mentality, corresponding to the status of the antique chorus. The playwright (as author) and the protagonist check by an implied policy the way certain meanings disappear from the look of the spectator, while other certitudes sparkle out, they constantly feed the scheme of his attitude, leading to passivity and immobilism, knowing that they will receive allegiance all the time. But for how long... ?

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