



Discursive Migrations From Media Into Play: A Political Agenda For Contemporary Drama

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1. Brief introduction

The fact that my first statement – as announced in the title for this conference - is about discursive migrations from the media into the theatre, means that I see both these social practices as being different - supposedly - in nature and purpose.

However, it also means that for various reasons they have been negotiating boundaries between themselves and flirting with each other all along, especially during the twentieth century and also nowadays. It has been so in satirical agitprop theatre on topical issues published (or due to have been published) by the press, or in formally projecting newspaper cuttings and films onto screens or backdrops: a device first used by Piscator and some avant-garde theatre groups in Russia in the twenties, and adopted (more elaborately) by many current theatre productions with videos and other multimedia apparatus). [\[1\]](#)

So, I am not elaborating on an unrecognised issue, never raised before. However some recent theatrical experiences have brought it into the limelight. Indeed, both David Hare's plays *Via*

dolorosa

, 1998 (about the Middle East) and

Stuff happens

, 2004 (about the launching of the war in Iraq), among other theatre ventures (such as *Guantanamo*

),

[\[2\]](#)

fuelled the old skirmishes between history and drama, as well as between reportage and fiction.

It is obviously the source material that draws a significant distinction between these two poles. Indeed, there is a considerable difference between writing plays about a private theme (ordinary domestic life, a common love affair, even a specific social problem) probably based on real lives but anonymous to the wider public, and picking up issues, events and people that can be reasonably recognised by the audience. This is so even if the imitation / quotation from reality takes the form of a parable or historical allusion as did *The Crucible* (1953), by Arthur Miller, on the McCarthy era, or

The Jew

(1966), by Bernardo Santareno, on the Portuguese political situation under Salazar.

In fact, the use of public figures and of recent historical events in drama, be it staged or (much more dangerous) shown on television (as documentary drama, documentary theatre – or, better, “theatre of fact” as David Edgar called it (1988: 53) - , has steadily aroused reservations for political, diplomatic and moral reasons mainly over the last four decades.

This was recently the case with a play in Portugal – *O magnífico reitor* (2001) (*His Excellency the Dean*)

written by the current Minister of Foreign Affairs – Diogo Freitas do Amaral – about a Portuguese University Dean and, later on, Minister, in the late sixties that everyone recognised as our former Prime Minister, Marcelo Caetano, of whom, incidentally, the author had been an elective disciple. However, the author maintained he was really a fictional character: an allegation that Caetano’s daughter was unwilling to confirm, however. Moreover, the play ended up as being somewhat contradictory over the students’ riot, and it succeeded in attracting hostile remarks from both sides of the political spectrum, although it was the right wing (indeed the author’s main lineage) that was outraged by the production, especially since it attracted not only massive audiences but also the interest of the media.

A more complex affair was David Fanning and Anthony Thomas’ TV documentary *Death of a Princess*

1980, about a fictional journalist who investigates the real execution of a Saudi princess. It raised political discomfort over trading and diplomatic links with Saudi Arabia and eventually led Sir Ian Gilmour (the then Lord Privy Seal) to tell the House of Commons that “the so-called dramatisation or fictionalising of alleged history is extremely dangerous and misleading, and is something to which the broadcasting authorities must give close attention” (*apud* Edgar 1988: 48).

The same grumble of discontent may be read in Richard Gott’s article in the *Guardian* (6 August 1980) on the same issue:

Well, what is it? Fact or fiction? History or current affairs? Scarcely a night goes by nowadays without Edward VIII, the Reverend Jim Jones, Winston Churchill, or some other famous or infamous figure from the recent past, appearing on the television screen. Significant episodes in their lives are then presented in fictitious form (“artificial, counterfeit, sham”), or, rather, in a mishmash of fact and fiction and producer’s whim. It is a profoundly unsatisfactory development in the use of television. (*apud* Edgar 1988: 49).

Richard Gott went on to accuse television producers and writers of usurping the function of historians, claiming to explain “what actually happened” in history, a role for which they are neither qualified nor competent.

However, as David Edgar explains:

These arguments (...) are (...) based on severe misconceptions about history itself and the playwright’s relationship with it. (...) [D]rama-documentary is, primarily, not a journalistic but a dramatic medium (...) which has been developed by writers in response to the changing world about them (Edgar 1988: 49).

Even if we concede that this argument attempts to respond to critiques such as these of media productions involving documentary drama, the fact is that the clear-cut definition that separates journalism from play writing is, indeed, not shared by all political writers who engage with current affairs in order to denounce (or at least call attention to) facts they consider reproachable.

In David Hare's *Acing up*, a diary on his experience as an actor in *Via dolorosa*, he constantly underlines the importance of the theatre audience, claiming that "the play – he means *Via dolorosa* – only works if the audience feels me to be an honest reporter". (1999: 254)

But reporting is itself a matter of dispute, even if the reporter is only passing on information with no (or at least minimal) personal intervention. A curious example is an experience that aimed to be a plain quotation of historical records. This was the case of David Edgar's drama-documentary of the Watergate affair (*I know what I meant*, TV Granada, 1974), in which he edited the White House tape transcripts into a 45-minute television play. Although every word spoken on screen had actually been spoken in reality, as the author asserts, the simple fact of choosing what to keep and what to suppress represented the playwright's value judgement. Along the same line of argument, the actors' gestures, moods or inflections necessarily translated their point of view (or, at least the author and director's standpoint) on the case. And although he was apparently only transcribing, Edgar admitted that in the end, the performance led to the idea that Richard Nixon was very probably deluding himself when he declared he was not aware of what had been going on. Indeed, it was as if he had been deceiving himself all along. But another quite different explanation could have been given about the case: that Nixon was deliberately deceiving everybody instead. But this was not the idea that the documentary put forward.

Of course, this is something that embraces not only play writing (when the author's choice is deliberate), but also a piece of journalism or a study in history.

However, I would like to focus only on contemporary theatre in its dialogue with the media. I would therefore like to approach my argument on «discursive migrations» in two main stages by:

1. Recalling the reasons for launching documentary theatre in the 1920s, and its trajectory since then when related to the media: both by addressing some of the most heated debates on political and social conflicts, and by making use of technical means and discursive modes used by the media to report on current events;

2. Considering whether this kind of interaction has been evaluated as serving the theatre or

rather as emptying it of its own specificity.

2.

Arguments for the theatre as document

When writing a new Foreword to the 1963 edition of his *Political Theatre*, Erwin Piscator claimed that: "(...) the subject of this book is an attempt to answer the eternally topical question which Brecht formulated as follows: 'How can the theatre be entertaining and instructive at the same time? How can it be taken out of the hands of intellectual drug traffic and become a place offering real experiences rather than illusions?'" (1980: vii).

It is no wonder that the ascendancy of naturalism that Piscator advocates for his Proletarisches Theater (1920/1) may be discerned in this declaration. Even if he agreed that naturalism was not revolutionary, it is obvious – also for him - that a play like *Die Weber (The Weavers, 1892)* by Gerhart Hauptman turned the theatre into a political platform.

Indeed Otto Brahm in 1889, following Antoine's adventure in Paris (Théâtre Libre, 1887), directed the newly founded Freie Bühne in Berlin, indicating his policy to be against the restrictions of censorship and the pressures of commerce. He advocated that, "The selection of plays and the style of production [would] promote the aims of a new living art, avoiding virtuosity and empty routine" (*apud* Piscator 1980: 26). A year later, however, another society (also formed by subscribing members) was to be launched, initially committed to a more notorious political activity - the Freie Volksbühne (1890) – aiming at a more accessible art for the working class. However, some political dissention within the group eventually led to an unexpected but successful commercial venture under Max Reinhardt's direction (1915-1918).

The way Piscator recalls this socialist venture indicates how theatre could be, for the workers' cause, a step forward after the techniques of the media had been fully adopted in their class struggle:

It is curious how long it took the workers' organizations to come around to a positive attitude to the theatre. They used all the media of communication which bourgeois society offered; they created (if only on a modest scale) a press of their own. They entered Parliament and made their contribution to affairs of state. The theatre, they disregarded (Piscator 1980: 30).

Two sets of reasons are indicated by Piscator to explain this lack of attention. On the one hand, in artistic matters, the proletariat of the 1870's and 1880's was still under the spell of bourgeois standards (therefore, unable to accept the notion that theatre could say something about the "ugly" daily struggle). On the other hand, tickets were expensive, and therefore beyond the workers' reach. Incidentally, it is curious to note that the Director of the Deutsches Theater (L'Arronge) in the early 1880's used this latter argument when trying to convince the censors that Hauptmann's play *Die Weber (The Weavers)* would not stir up social disturbances. Indeed, it is said he invoked the fact that "the seat prices in his theatre [were] far beyond the means of the sectors of society on which *The Weavers* might have (...) an inflammatory effect" (*apud* Piscator 1980: 31).

But the 1880's not only took slices of workers' lives into the theatre, they also changed the technical aspects of the theatre by introducing electrical stage-lighting and the revolving stage, thus favouring a decisive change in its potential for innovative technical and aesthetic solutions.

In two different geographical, political and cultural milieus at the end of the 1910s and beginning of the 1920's, theatre makers became intent on launching a kind of theatre addressing topical issues such as those carried in newspapers although they did not relinquish the idea of entertainment and direct appeal to the audience, ideally from a working-class origin. This happened in both Moscow, with the Blue Blouse theatrical troupes (1919-1928) [3] - in which Meyerhold's constructivism and biomechanics and Eisenstein's circus acrobatics were active influences - and Berlin, with Erwin Piscator and his Proletarisches Theater.

The new artistic protocol involved in these proposals – agit-prop of the Proletkult and pre-expressionism – epitomized the new age after the Bolshevik Revolution, both in its political and technical aspects: a rejection of naturalism and engagement with new technical stage devices, but also, and decisively, a new aesthetics in obvious avant-garde terms.

In 1920, Piscator was trying to define a new approach to play-writing for his Proletarisches Theater,

[4]

aiming to create a theatre that could respond to the real problems of German society. No wonder he was disappointed with the inefficiency of the theatre, especially when compared to the impact of the press:

The theatre still lagged behind the newspapers, it was never quite up to date, it never intervened actively enough in the events around it, it was still too much of a rigid art form predetermined and with a limited effect. What I had in mind was a much closer connection with journalism and with day-to-day events. (Piscator 1980: 48)

The repertoire Piscator had in mind for his Proletarisches Theater was not easy to find or write anew, and the technical conditions in which it worked could not respond to the ambitious political programme Piscator had in mind. Moreover, his insistence on propaganda (instead of “art”) was not easily accepted by his own party. Thus, the venture ended in 1921.

Only after one season did Piscator return to the professional scene in Berlin, taking over the direction of the Central-Theatre, a venue that was associated with light entertainment but where he directed plays by Tolstoy (*The Power of Darkness*), Gorky (*Smug Souls*) and Romain Rolland (*The Time will come*), attracting quite another audience and practising plain naturalism.

Two seasons later, in 1924, the Volksbühne was in need of a director, and Piscator was invited, probably due to what could have been thought of as a less radical commitment to political theatre. But his interest in the theatre as a political platform had not diminished and he seized this new opportunity to launch a new theatrical form, based not only on a fresh dramaturgical pattern, but also on the use of the newest technical devices available, which he came to consider “epic theatre”.

Indeed Piscator had his first successful attempt at a brand new type of staging in 1924 with *Flags*,

based on a play written in 1918 by Alfons Paquet,

[\[5\]](#)

a journalist and travel writer. The play dramatizes the abortive campaign for the eight-hour day among immigrant workers in Chicago in 1886. The same issue was to be dealt with by Brecht later in

St. Joan of the Stockyards

, 1929-31. However, although Piscator was addressing a historical fact, the problem was taken to be quite topical at the time he staged it, since laws passed in Germany in 1923 had not yet been put fully into practice.

The well-equipped stage of the Theater am Bülowplatz favoured his use of the three main technical resources that marked this production at the Volksbühne, thus marking it a breakthrough in a new theatrical aesthetics: (1) projecting screens were mounted at either side of the proscenium arch (where slides of the historical characters were shown, as well as strips of newspapers); (2) the revolving stage favoured a multiple set for the nineteen scenes of the play (still making it possible to work on two different height levels in simultaneous scenes); (3) titles were flashed onto the screen to link scenes (a device much used by the silent cinema).

Curiously, when recalling his experience as a member of the audience viewing this production, Leo Lania [\[6\]](#) commented on the new tendency he detected in Europe in its coming to terms with a new era when socio-critical pamphlets and journalistic reports attempted to respond to an increasingly demanding political agenda, leaving novels and other literary works aside. Indeed, the art seemed to have passed its romantic aura, and tried to come to terms with the search for “new objectivity” and “reportage” that could be found in Joyce, Dos Passos or Alfred Döblin.

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The latter, who had enjoyed Piscator’s direction of

Flags

, wrote favourably about it in his “The construction of epic works” (1929), welcoming the new epic form as the herald of a “New stage” (

apud

Piscator 1980: 75).

In his next production Piscator moved more decisively on in his theatrical experiments. He made use of the framework of a revue as a loose dramaturgical grammar in line with his idea of popular theatre: *R.R.R. (Red Riot Revue)*. It was commissioned by the party and had Felix Gasbarra as dramaturg, opening in May 1924. It included music,

[\[8\]](#)

songs, acrobatics, projections, statistics and short sketches and it was to become the real standard agitprop revue. At the same time it tended to show social types (the bourgeois and the proletarian figured as compère and commère, from the operetta) voicing opposing viewpoints on the scenes presented onstage. It was not very different from the device so often used nowadays on television, where politicians from different parties face each other and are confronted with news on current political affairs on which they are supposed to comment.

Although a financial disaster as a performance (for entry was free for the unemployed, and Germany was going through a very difficult social crisis), the theatrical model of the *R.R.R.*

proved to be valuable and lasting for future politically committed theatre. Many other theatre productions have used this particular performance “grammar” in two major combinations: either as a professional cluster of playwrights, actors and technicians (making use of technical effects that combin film clips and projections with live action), or as a looser blend of amateur and professional artists aiming at plain street agit-prop activity or a large-scale mass production. Incidentally, this latter option was first taken up by Meyerhold in his *Storming of the Winter Palace*, in 1920.

As an aside, I should mention that when Piscator was confronted with the suggestion that he had got his ideas from the Russians, he declared:

In fact, I was quite ignorant of what was happening on the Soviet stage at [that] time (...). I never heard that the Russians had employed film with the same function I have had in mind. In any case, the question of priority is irrelevant. It would merely prove that this was no superficial game with technical effects, but a new, emergent form of theatre based on the philosophy of historical materialism which we shared (Piscator 1963: 93).

However, it is true that Meyerhold also made use of constructivist, tubular sets, captions and slogans, film and projections in his theatre ventures in the early 1920s.

Piscator’s next performance in 1925, *Trotz alledem (In Spite of Everything)*, derived its title from a quotation made by Karl Liebknecht, after the collapse of the Spartacus uprising and shortly before his assassination. At the Grosses Schauspielhaus, Gasbarra and Piscator together staged the production which made use of films kept in the archives of the Reich that proved to be a brutal statement of the horror of war. So “the whole performance was a montage of authentic speeches, essays, newspaper cuttings, appeals, pamphlets, photographs, and the film of the war and the revolution, of historical persons and scenes” (Piscator 1963: 94).

It is precisely when considering the importance of film in “epic theatre”, that Bertolt Brecht (in 1927) characterizes it as an «optical chorus» (Brecht 2001: 7) and as favouring the appearance of “naked reality (...) the good deity of the revolution” (*Ibidem*). Nine years later (in 1936), Brecht was to consider “the integration of documentary film material into theatre [as bringing] forth the *Verfremdungseffekt*. The on-stage actions are alienated by juxtaposition with the more general actions on the screen” (*Ibidem*

10).

Again, as an aside I would like to call attention to the translation of V-Effekt as an “alienation effect” in English, coined by John Willet’s edition of *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1964), but which is quite misleading. Indeed Fredric Jameson recently explained that the English word “alienation” is

Entfremdung

in German, and he concluded that the correct translation should be “estrangement” in order to match its Russian ancestor

ostranenia

= making strange. (Jameson

1998: 86-87)

[\[9\]](#)

In 1933, during an International Olympiad of Workers’ Theatre that was held in Moscow, the British agit-prop groups formed in the late twenties realised how far behind they were when compared to the Germans, who not only had professional qualifications (they were well-trained in artistic skills), but were also sponsored by trade unions and politically leftwing parties. So when coming home to England, Ewan MacCall, [\[10\]](#) the director of the Red Megaphones, realised how much they had to learn from training techniques and theatrical theories (Adolphe Appia and Vsevolod Meyerhold, among others) in order to raise their professional standards of performance.

Indeed agit-prop theatre in Great Britain in the late twenties and early thirties came under the banner of the Workers’ Theatre Movement who performed street theatre for the unemployed or for those going on strike (particularly in the cotton industry). They engaged in a kind of instant theatre, dramatizing day-to-day issues, representing social types in cardboard figures, and using minimal props and costumes. An extensive and accurate rendering of these movements was published in 1985 under the title of *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Workers’ Theatre Movements in Britain and America*, by Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove.

In 1934, coinciding with the arrival of Joan Littlewood in Manchester, Ewan MacCall’s group adopted the name Theatre of Action, [\[11\]](#) and both Ewan and Joan, very much inspired by Leon Moussinac’s recently published book *The New Movement in the Theatre* (English translation 1931), decided to change their priorities when staging plays. Indeed, besides moving indoors, they decided to pay attention not only to the political content of their

performances, but also to a more elaborate dramatising technique and to a more demanding artistic mastery. Thus, a constructivist set at different levels, the convergence of speech, movement and lighting and a proficient acting style came together in the staging of

John Bullion – a Ballet with Words

(a re-adaptation of an anti-war play called *Hammer*

). They followed this with

Fuenteovejuna

(translated as

The Sheepwell

), in 1936, and

The Good Soldier Schweik

(from the German adaptation of Jaroslav Hasek by Piscator), in 1938.

Later on, as a touring company called Theatre Union, and after the War in Europe had been declared, Ewan and Joan put on their most ambitious Living Newspaper called *Last Edition: A Living Newspaper Dealing with Events from 1934-1940*

(1940), full of fantasy, satire, agit-prop, music-hall, folk songs and dance. Yet it was obviously modelled on a theatre that emulated an important medium in those times: the newspaper. All the members of the group had to carry out research at the Reference Library in Manchester, collecting as much information as they could on topics that were divided up among them, so they were all involved with the media. Moreover, it shows how much they owed to the conception of an ensemble. In order to avoid censorship, since Neville Chamberlain was not portrayed as the establishment required, they turned into a club which was quite successful.

Later on, in 1953, Joan Littlewood established her Theatre Workshop set up in 1945 in East London (at the Theatre Royal, in Stratford). There she staged classics such as Shakespeare, Jonson, Molière, Ibsen or Chekhov, alongside Sean O'Casey and Brecht. Indeed, the first professional production of Brecht in Britain was precisely Theatre Workshop's *Mother Courage* in 1955,

[\[12\]](#)

but for various reasons neither Joan nor anybody else was happy with the result, and this artistic failure was followed by a significant change in the company with several actors leaving and, in a way, destabilizing the group.

However, new energy came from new playwrights who created very interesting plays for the Theatre Workshop repertoire. These included Brendan Behan (*The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*)

and Shelagh Delaney (*A Taste of Honey*)

, as well as the performance
Fings ain't wot they used t'be
, in 1959, that was a terrific success.

Moreover, in 1963, another successful production was transferred to the West End and came to mark the turning point in the company's career. As many would stress, it meant general recognition of the company's quality and was its most memorable show; but as others preferred to say, it also meant a betrayal of the company's original intention. Indeed, *Oh What a Lovely War*

[\[13\]](#)

seemed to go back to the anti-war campaign in which both Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacCall had been involved. It took its idea from a radio programme called

The Long Long Trail

, based on songs from the First World War. The songs used included patriotic recruiting songs, comic accounts of army life, but also bitter parodies of hymns and the "gallows humour" of men about to die. As for the performance of the Theatre Workshop, a version was made out of factual data from official records and war memoirs threaded through with popular songs of the period. On the screen across the stage, information about casualties and other terrifying facts were shown as news flashes.

But, as Clive Barker maintains, the main idea was not really to protest against war, but rather to present "a celebration of human resourcefulness in the face of the most appalling catastrophic conditions. So Joan celebrates courage, humour, comradeship, the triumph of life over death and the international solidarity between soldiers" (*apud* Goorney 1981: 126).

If the basic idea conforms to what Barker has written, the transfer made it seem even more removed from a critique of the belligerent tendency of capitalism, since a new ending was invented. Indeed, a previously cynical remark about the war disappeared in favour of a buoyant close with a reprise of songs in a nostalgic vein. It was no wonder that Ewan MacCall would consider it "the ultimate failure of Theatre Workshop", attracting a bourgeois audience and distancing itself from the real working class. Gradually the company as an ensemble broke up, although it kept staging plays until the early 1970's.

3

Theatre and the mass media in our present society

Therefore, these examples of documentary theatre, be they agit-prop ventures or more elaborate living newspapers, have borrowed resources associated with the mass media, by using information on current events, flashing news onto screens, commenting by using different devices (narrators, compères, and so on), using songs and other radio successes. The aim is generally to insist on placing theatre in an elective relationship with what is taking place in the world, and using theatre as an efficient form of communication. All the more so for those who defend theatre as a means of increasing our knowledge of the world and acting to change it.

It is a fact, however, that the relationship between the mass media and our present society is different from what it was in the 1920s or 1960s, since television has become not just an element in our cultural environment, but – quite probably - the environment itself, “the cultural context” as Philip Auslander would put it (1999: 2). [\[14\]](#)

Therefore it is on the relationship between the theatre – as live event – and television or video (together with other mass media) that I would like to focus, and attempt to see whether a possible interaction between them makes them rivals or partners, even if we admit that it was decided a long time ago that they really diverge. As Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests, they differ in at least in three aspects “the actor-spectator relationship, the modes of perception and reception, and the materiality of the signs employed” (1996: 95).

A further gap may have been created in the late 1960s, coinciding with social and political turbulence. Indeed theatre tended to look for diversity in unusual locations, resorting to processions, interacting with the audience, converting a performance into improvised demonstrations (the Living Theatre in Avignon in 1968), and so on.

Indeed, as Erika Fischer-Lichte points out, the difference between theatre and technical-electronic media is visible in the importance accorded to spatiality and corporeality in theatrical communication (citing Klaus Michael Grüber, Peter Zadek, Pina Bausch or Robert Wilson among others). Yet, she admits, acoustic effects in the theatre have progressed considerably through technical innovation, although the possibilities demand artistic creativity and efficiency in their use on stage.

When comparing theatre to the media, Herbert Blau goes still further than Fischer-Lichte in stressing their hostility: “[of one medium in another] so as to respond to a new hierarchy of communication media in a society. This means, in the case of live events, for instance, they borrow devices from the mediated form that is the dominant medium at the time. As we have

seen, this was the case of the 1920s, when the theatre made use of the press for its early documentary performances.

Auslander explains that the general response of live performances to the oppression and economic superiority of mediated forms has been to become as much like them as possible" (1999: 7). That is the case, for instance, with football matches or rock concerts where huge screens and videotapes of the events themselves turn the spectators present at the stadium or theatre venue into TV viewers (although somewhat schizophrenic ones).

What may be at stake here is to decide which – a live event like theatre, or television – is "stronger" in its symbolic capital, or, in other words, which enjoys more cultural prestige. We should note, for instance, that some recent theatre productions in Portugal are extensions of TV products rather than the other way round: phenomena like *Conversa da treta* (*Trash Talk*) or *Gato Fedorento*

(
Smelly Cat

) are eloquent examples of how much theatre is replicating television.

Can we then ultimately agree with Herbert Blau, Eric Bogosian and Peggy Phelan among others, when they claim that a live performance is ontologically different and placed in a better situation to function as a site of cultural and ideological resistance?

Another more striking argument is Sally Potter's, when she claims, regarding women's performances in London in the early 1980s, that "live performance [in the possible bodily discourse it engenders] always possesses a subversive and threatening quality, even when that performance involves the most traditional and highly codified roles, such as the graceful ballerina or the raucous comedienne, which seems to have been designed only to 'reinforce stereotypes and gratifying male desire'. [15] Real physical presence, says Potter, exerts a counter-power even here" (Carlson 1996: 169, 170). However, I must admit that this interpretation of bodily discourse seems to me quite disputable.

As regards the need for a resistant performance art in the cultural context of post-modern thought, Marvin Carlson admits that the key to this strategy remains problematic and the game is necessarily dangerous for "it plays as a double-agent, recognizing that in the post modern world complicity and subversion are inextricably intertwined" (Carlson 1996: 173).

No wonder then, that Baz Kershaw subscribes to the difference between the possibilities of transgressive politics in Brecht's – modernist, avant-garde - theatre (1999: 70) against the only possibly resistant politics of post-modernist theatre because it seems to operate from within the system (and is therefore liable to be implicated in the dominant cultural formation).

This kind of declaration takes it for granted that nowadays the theatre is a system based on professional careers for practitioners in general and that it depends upon publicity for its marketing. As such, therefore, it is an expensive commodity and has to be supported either by the State or by commercial sponsors. Apparently there would be no possibility of amateur productions, leftist politics or risky ventures. But, in spite of all this, I would support Hamlet's idea, that "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (*Hamlet*, I, v, 174-175). And in order to prove it, it would be enough, for instance, to think of Brazil and, more specifically, of Augusto Boal's theory and practice (theater of the oppressed, legislative theatre or invisible theatre) or, not to mention other parts of the world, the so-called "Third World".

It is true, however, that practically all the studies on current theatre – be they to build up a theory, design a history or proceed to a performance analysis – only deal with professional productions, even when reporting on fringe or underground performances, seen as the implicit "other". This circumstance sets in motion an agenda for theatre studies that is necessarily dominated by mainstream considerations.

Within this context, a second distinction tends to be drawn between those in favour of a theatre based on the written text (with more or less interference from other arts coming together on the stage) and those that adopt technological and artistic devices relying on images, screens, the paraphernalia linked to (tele)visual culture, and all those implicated in the technological tribe.

Indeed, we should note the difference between a theatrical mode that uses elaborate technological effects befitting the media (as with the exceptional mastery of Giorgio Barberio Corsetti or of the Wooster Group), and the one that is more interested in making use of issues that are newspapers headlines or that are major news stories for their political intent and capacity to attract a larger audience, which is not always so dependent on more sophisticated technical means.

But should we have to opt between these two possibilities: text versus image? And should we take it for granted that a more elaborate production (using multimedia resources) is indisputably light entertainment, devoid of a more political purpose? And how should theatre that intends to address the political debate of our time ignore the specific media discourse and the dominant mode?

It is curious to note, for instance, what a politically committed theatre director like Bernard Sobel says about Bob Wilson's theatre:

Je pense que Bob Wilson est un grand metteur en scène politique. C'est lui qui réalise matériellement le projet esthétique de Brecht (...) il a pu réaliser les rêves de Brecht (Sobel 1993: 56,57)

It is also a good point when Béatrice Picon-Vallin, eager to defend the new technical possibilities granted the present day theatre, refers to the fact that in the past electricity came to favour a more demanding artistry from the actor on stage. She therefore praises the current use of video in productions by Corsetti, Robert Lepage, Denis Marleau (*Les trois derniers jours de Fernando Pessoa*, 1997), the Wooster Group and others. In her opinion, the video (besides other image inventors like hidden cameras, etc.) is linked to a logic based on fragmentation, atomisation, and montage, which is a reliable mimesis of urban life, and therefore has a place onstage, if theatre is to document our way of life. However, despite discarding the opposition between text and image, she advises:

L'image projetée sur les écrans au théâtre est du côté de l'excès, de l'abondance. La scène doit gérer cet excès à l'intérieur de sa dramaturgie, et veiller à ce qu'il n'aveugle pas. Mais au contraire, aiguise le regard; en jouant des prouesses technologiques, elle ne peut évacuer, sous peine de tomber dans l'illustratif ou l'anodin, l'appel à une prise de position politique, au sens large du terme, sur la société d'images qui est la nôtre, à un questionnement sur les pouvoirs et les dangers de ces images, sur la nature du réel, et sur les gouffres ouverts par le virtuel.

Les possibilités sont immenses, tant que le théâtre demeure le théâtre, pour reprendre la formule de Meyerhold – c'est à dire tant que l'acteur polyvalent reste le noyau central, que les écrans sont des objets pour le théâtre, que la technique est partenaire et non souverain. (Picon-Vallin 1998: 35)

How to reach this balance? How to afford financial and technical possibilities, including imaginative co-creators with technological expertise to add to those other artistic functions that have been specific to theatre productions?

An expressive example of this possibility was, for me, the outstanding production *Rwanda 94*, by the Belgian company Groupov, directed by Jacques Delcuvellerie that opened in 2000, after five years of preparation. It was a prodigious fresco about the genocide in Rwanda lasting six and a half hours and binding together in a brilliant and powerful way the politically inquisitive and documentary theatre (of Piscator, Brecht or Peter Weiss) and the most vehement and distressed form of the Athenian choral tragedy, thus creating a sombre oratory as a symbolic reparation for the million dead. Its main focus was the TV news, for that was the beginning of an inquiry into what had happened, but it came to include not only TV reportage, but also a living testimony (by a survivor on stage), a conference (a brilliant study in the history of colonialism), sketches of interviews, a grand-guignol design for nightmarish scenes, and the sublime Bisesero

[\[16\]](#)

cantata. A persistent voice would ask about the mass media: “Will they talk about?... Will they say that ... ? Let them not forget to say that...”.

The performance offered itself as a formulation of tragedy in the scientific era, allying the lament to the most disturbing questioning of responsibilities, thus anatomising forms and contents of media discourse and representation. One of the scenes presented on a huge screen at the back of the stage (amplifying a TV screen) may be an example of how to analyse an excerpt of a TV report. A child is facing his mother, repeatedly telling her to stop pretending. Only later will we learn the context of that scene. His mother was being forced to bury her child alive. So when reporting on an event, how far will the explanation to of that image go? How comprehensive can the display of violence and cruelty be on TV?

4.

A political agenda for the theatre

While a slow march is in progress to make words and technical devices converge to promote what is the best in the theatre for specific purposes besides simple entertainment, we have witnessed a resurgence of political plays relying on some of the documentary processes I mentioned at the beginning of my paper. Transcriptions of conversations (in courtrooms or in political summits), quotations from documents, interviews, and snippets of information have been the basis of several plays recently staged in London addressing momentous events and debates.

Nicolas Kent, artistic director of the Tricycle Theatre in London staged “tribunal” plays, as he calls them, in which extracts from inquiry or court transcripts are dramatised on stage. [\[17\]](#) More recently he addressed the Hutton inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly as the basis for *Justifying War*

(2003), and later used the spoken evidence of those who had been released from the American prison in Guantanamo, collected by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo, and transformed it into *Guantanamo*

(2004). For all this activity Michael Billington considers the Tricycle “the home of documentary drama”.

[\[18\]](#)

Concerning US policy on the Middle East, Afghanistan and Iraq, two of the plays by David Hare which I mentioned earlier in this paper, caught much of the media’s attention.

I would just like to add a few words about *Stuff Happens*, a play by David Hare on the launching of the war in Iraq, directed by Nicholas Hytner for the National Theatre (Olivier) that opened in September 2004. Michael Billington and Ian Herbert, among others, considered it the most important cultural event of the year for various reasons. And besides pointing to a resurgence of political theatre in London, the performance involved the press (and the media, in general) in several ways. It made use of press interviews (with Rumsfeld, Bush and other top members of the Bush Administration), as well as reports and scraps of information published or shown by the media, alongside other devices which documentary theatre makes use of. But the press was further involved for another reason: breaking the agreement critics have with theatre managements of only publishing the review after the opening night,

The Guardian

decided to invite politicians – some of whom appear as characters in the play – and other public figures to the preview, and decided to collect – and publish - their opinions about the production. It goes without saying what the critic – Michael Billington – felt when he saw what the newspaper, he has been working with for about 40 years, did to anticipate the “review” he was supposed to publish...

Curiously enough, the production did not turn to TV screens, videos, or other more elaborate media resources. However, it kept some of the leading procedures of epic theatre, despite blending them in Hare’s particular way of addressing the audience: declarations in advance of what would be shown or said, as if quoting headlines; minimal set design (a long table and many chairs); simple costumes, actors on stage during the whole performance (with only two or three exits and entrances, specially of Bush coming out of the helicopter in his surrogate military costume); no music except for one song. And I must say I found that aspect somewhat

incomprehensible. It could have been interesting in such a production which relies on so many words, to enhance the end of part one by using an attractive melody. However, to allow Condoleezza Rice to step forward and win the appreciation of the auditorium by singing *Amazing Grace*

, as if she (and the values she represents) symbolized the repressed African-American citizens seemed to me a bit too provocative and compliant. Incidentally, I also think that the construction of Tony Blair on stage representing his involvement in the invasion and occupation of Iraq seems to have followed roughly the same line of interpretation.

A tiny detail about stage symbols: they were practically nonexistent. Nevertheless, I thought the representation of three power symbols at the rear of the stage were very peculiar: the door at 10 Downing Street, the White House and an oil derrick (as an image projected on a backdrop). The oil derrick - representing not only Bush's family ties, but also the corporations behind his policies – seemed to be taken from films from the 1940s indicating a new source of financial power. In a certain way it downgraded the shape of current images of oil pumping (could it be to comment on Bush's parochialism?). Regarding the first two props, it was curious to note that the single door was much higher, broader and stronger than the "little" White House. But then, we were at the Royal National Theatre and a theatrical production like this can indulge in a political critique, although, as I see it, both the director and the playwright set themselves limits as to the image they were transmitting.

In the audience, we were able to see many of those who had participated in the large demonstration of February the 15th, 2003. They were exhilarated by the fact that theatre could address something so polemical, so near their own experience and commitment.

And even if we can agree with David Hare's statement at the end of the 1970s, to the effect that theatre alone cannot mobilise conscience or radically change social and political situations, [\[19\]](#) it still affords a chance to raise questions and relate us to the world around us: a living document to prompt a response that goes beyond the entertainment industry and connects us to history in the making.

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[1] Cf. Béatrice Picon-Vallin (Dir.), *Les écrans sur la scène*. Lausanne: Éditions L'Age d'Homme, 1998.

[2] Play by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo presented at the Tricycle Theatre (2004).

[3] Cf. John McGrath, *A Good Night Out*, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27, for a description of the activities of the Blue Blouses.

[4] The Proletarisches Theater was founded in 1920 in Berlin by Piscator and writer Hermn Schüler as an agitprop (agitation propaganda) group. Its standard performances were made up of sketches with typed characters, simple dialogue and direct appeals to the audience. Its first production included three sketches: *The Cripple, At the Gate* and *Russia's Day*.

[5] 1881-1944

[6] He filmed *Three penny opera* in 1930.

[7] 1878-1957

[8] The music was composed by Edmund Meisel (1874-1930) who became a celebrated composer of musical scores for films. The score for Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* marked him out as a pioneer in film music.

[9] He does, however, admit that another possibility could be «defamiliarization». (*Ibidem*)

[10] His real name is Jimmy Miller.

[11] In the USA a troupe like Federal Theater Project, part of Roosevelt's New Deal, had a Living Theatre Unit whose plays were researched and produced by unemployed newspaper and theatre workers.

[12] A misunderstanding arose between Joan and Brecht (V.Goorney 1981: 102) and the performance opened at the Tor and Torridge festival at Barnstaple.

[13] For a more detailed analysis of this performance see Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1990, pp.59-85.

[14] We could however go still further by pointing out a major advance towards the digital in computer-arts practices. (Cf. Giannachi 2004)

[15] Sally Potter, *About Time*, Catalogue, London, Institute for the Contemporary Arts, September, 1980: "The ballerina's physical strength and energy is communicated despite the scenario; the burlesque queen's apposite and witty interjection transforms the meaning of what she is doing and reveals it for the 'act' it is". (*apud* Carlson 1996: 170).

[16] Bisesero is the hill where some fugitives had taken shelter.

[17] He did so, among others, with the Srebrenica and the Nuremberg war crime trials (1998), with *Half the Picture*, a reconstruction of the Scott inquiry into the arms to Iraq affair in 1993, and *The Colour of Justice*, 1999, about the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, by staging verbatim extracts of that inquiry.

[18] *The Guardian*, May 25, 2004.

[19] See David Hare "The play is in the air: On political theatre" (1978), in *Writing Left-Handed*. Boston: Faber & Faber, 1991, pp. 24-36.