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Theater and the Spirit of the Age, or From the Ghost in Hamlet to Mr. Spock

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Abstract: The article examines the way theater constantly reinvents itself in relation to science and technology, opportunistically employing the means of each era in order to survive and to critique the spirit of the age. Theater emerges as a hybrid space of miracle, in which scenic illusion is born from an ingenious alliance between art and technology. Within the logic of the "Double Great Divide" and the "Constitution" (Latour), theatrical performance becomes a critical instrument that metabolizes social and epistemic transformations, yet preserves its essence through the uniqueness of the living encounter between artists and audience. The post-dramatic (Lehmann) marks the shift from text to event, from drama to technological experiment and shared experience, consolidating theater's status as a paradoxical form: opportunistic and critical, ephemeral and at the same time atemporal.

Keywords: theater, science and technology, scenic miracle, cultural opportunism, uniqueness, post-dramatic, illusion, hybridity.

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"We do it wrong, being so majestical,
To offer it the show of violence;
For it is, as the air, invulnerable,
And our vain blows malicious mockery."
William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Theater is, in its essence, a space of miracle. Even in modernity – in a world where science and technology have taken over much of the territory once occupied by religion – the theatrical performance remains a place of the natural in which supernatural things can "happen." The ghost of the murdered father recounts to Hamlet the modus operandi employed by Claudius, the usurping murderer. Marcellus, one of the guard officers, observes that, beyond all imagining, this apparition is invulnerable – *like air*. Though he knows that spirits of the night can be easily frightened away, Marcellus cannot help but react with a deeply human impulse: to speak loudly, to drive the spirit off, even while, at the same moment, he is curious and would like to see it more closely. Then again, the guard officer quickly understands that against such an apparition, human powers are simply useless. Curiosity mingled with a kind of fear – sometimes impossible to name – these are the essential ingredients of that alchemical stirring of the soul, born from the mere act of sitting in a theater.

For generations of directors, the question of how to stage the Ghost has been, and remains, one of the biggest challenges. From a speaking shadow cast upon a wall, to holograms and other sophisticated video projections, this apparition has always been part of what defines theater as a space of miracle. Even though we know how it is done, our human reactions under the effect of the theatrical performance remain, in some ways, deeply similar to those of Marcellus. Enormous amounts of theoretical studies have been written about theatrical convention – about how we respond when we see a story come alive and unfold before our very eyes – and yet that ghostly something we keep circling in our attempts to define it lingers always in shadow, just as generative of curiosity and awe as the spirit of the slain king. And the miracle can only be achieved here through ingenuity, through science, and through technology – which means that the very idea of theatrical performance carries these dimensions within its essence. All the more so, in an age when

the concept of drama has lost its cognitive power, and technology has come to occupy much of the space once held by what Lehmann calls the "normative trap" of drama.[2]

In modernity, as we know so well, scientific and technological discourse has largely absorbed what once belonged to the realm of faith and empathy. There exists today, beyond any doubt, a veneration of technology and science – just as there are believers of every kind, from the moderate to the fundamentalist. Countless "priests" of research move through the public sphere, and whatever they say becomes the story of the day, an essential building block in the architectures of belief that contemporary people construct for themselves. Scientific discourse does not exclude miracle at all; on the contrary, it places miracle squarely within the normalcy of the age. Miracle has acquired an explanatory foundation. The "wonder" still exists, but now we know where it comes from and how it is made, what its component parts and structure are. Following the broader processes of human emancipation, miracle too has been secularized and democratized – but that does not mean it has lost its aura of fascination. It is simply read and received differently now. In the spirit of the age.

The old belief in religious miracle – in all its variations and guises – has migrated toward belief in the "miracle" of science. Following a generative mechanism much like that of the religion-church tandem, science and technology are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Technology is not merely an application of science and research; it is part of a process of dynamic co-evolution. One celebrated example is the steam engine, invented before any coherent theory of thermodynamics had been formulated. And once a scientific paradigm has achieved coherence, that does not bring development to a halt – neither horizontally nor vertically. Its success lies precisely in "the promise that there are still many problems to be solved", problems not yet even formulated, according to Thomas S. Kuhn.[3]

The same author uses the phrase "scientific promise," which naturally calls to mind both the umbrella of credibility and the generative capacity of a given statement or concept, as well as a certain contemporary mystique

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[2] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

[3] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 23.

surrounding the idea of the frontier, a territory of understanding that shifts forward, step by step, with each new discovery. There are also serious scholars who study the explicit relationship between science and religion. Stephen M. Barr argues that there is no war between science and religion, but rather between religion and the philosophy of scientific materialism. Examining Big Bang theory, unified field theory, the anthropic coincidences, Gödel's Theorem, and quantum theory, Barr speaks of scientific materialism being cast into the shadow of doubt, and of new interpretations of Judeo-Christian claims about Creation and the universe.[4]

It is fairly clear to many of us that we live in an age where the pathos of self-pity forms a significant part of the spirit of the times. The attitudes of many people oscillate between complaint, neurosis, and a kind of eroticism of pessimism and catastrophic visions. Vast territories of theoretical thought, no less than those of artistic expression – culminating in the endless commentary on absolutely everything – abound in texts analyzing dissolution, anomie, crisis, estrangement, alienation. The macro view, positioned at vantage points situated outside the society that produces these thoughts and texts, is very difficult to achieve. Such a perspective would need – if it were to respect the rigors of current norms of dialogue – a very well-prepared arsenal of answers when called to account for the sin of generalization. Bruno Latour assumes this position, from an anthropological standpoint, and sees in Western modernity both a form of despair and one of self-punishment. More precisely, modern people "like to frighten themselves with their own fate." And they are easy prey to a profoundly toxic pleasure – a "morbid delight in being perpetually in crisis." Latour also offers a portrait of the way modern man sees himself: as a kind of "Spock-type mutant."[5]

Let us recall who we are talking about. The character from the Star Trek series and films is a hybrid being, half Vulcan, half human. His non-human side makes him an adherent of pure logical judgment, entirely free of any trace of emotion; while the other part of his being, the human part, renders him occasionally vulnerable to doubt and sensitivity. In childhood, on the

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4 Stephen M. Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

5 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 114.

planet Vulcan, Spock was the target of bullying from peers who mocked him for showing signs of sensitivity, for being unable to think and act solely on the basis of implacable logic. On Earth, humans found him inflexible, governed only by cold, logical reasoning. Mr. Spock could not feel at home anywhere – on neither of the two planets – even though he was, by birth, the result of the meeting of those two worlds. Latour sees him as a metaphor for modernity, which cannot manage to feel comfortable in any of its own capacities. A mutant, perpetually equidistant from its own axis, afflicted by countless moments of melancholy.

If we accept Bruno Latour's perspective as one of the reference points for this discussion, then theater, like all the other arts, lives in modernity under a false disenchantment. To better understand this phrase, we must recall two defining concepts from the argumentative framework of the French philosopher and anthropologist. He sees in what he calls the "Double Great Divide" a clear-cut separation that modernity has imposed between Nature and Society.[6] In other words, modern people believe there is a radical distinction between the objective, natural world – which would exist independently of us – and the social, cultural, subjective world. In modern science, the researcher studies "Nature" as something pure, separate from social conventions or passions, even while he himself exists thoroughly within them. The other component of the Great Divide is the chasm between moderns and pre-moderns, or between moderns and anti-moderns – with the former viewing the latter as "the others." By failing to draw a clear distinction between Nature and Society, by mixing subjectivity with objectivity and reality with imagination, "the others" are considered by moderns to be inferior, even if that is not necessarily the word used.

The second concept is the "Constitution", a notion that carries no juridical meaning here, but rather functions as a fundamental charter, or more precisely as an order of discourse, in the sense Foucault intended.[7] The "Constitution" is a vast set of unwritten rules, an ensemble of implicit conventions, a kind of tacit contract that moderns observe without ever

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[6] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 10–15.

[7] Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse". In Young, Robert. *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (Routledge & Keegan Paul, Boston, London and Henley, 1981).

spelling it out. It is, in short, the regulation of the relationships between human beings, nature, society, sciences, and politics, the entire edifice of written and unwritten conventions that contain the human presence in the world. Although modernity both generates and enforces the "Double Great Divide" and the "Constitution," establishing that from a certain point onward the world is disenchanted – centered into an era of rationality and the crisis of religious narrative – Latour firmly contradicts this claim. He holds that we live in a world of hybrids, of biotechnologies, of media, of communication in all its forms, none of which excludes fascination and enchantment, with the difference that the objects of that fascination have changed.

As long as we speak of theater, then, keeping Latour's argumentative toolkit in hand, we might say that "belief" in the fiction of scenic representation – the capacity for, or the fascination of, identifying with the exemplary character of the narrative or the figures from a dramatic text – has not disappeared; it has migrated. A certain kind of emotion arising at the encounter between spectator and the scenic representation of a story has not succumbed; it has moved into a different zone of reception. In fact, we do not know – and will never know – what the face of this "belief" looked like hundreds of years ago. It may be nothing more than something we project backward toward those times, something we wished had existed, so as to feed our nostalgia, our abysses of doubt, our desire for an auroral period to have once been. And the glimmer of this thought makes us hope, or believe, that modernity, post-modernity, and all that follows have not lost fascination with theatrical performance itself, but have shifted their attention toward the aesthetic, technological, political, social, and critical dimensions of the theatrical phenomenon as a whole. Perhaps this becomes most visible with the emergence of what we call post-dramatic theater,[8] understood as a space of event, of multimedia technological spectacle, of experiment in every form.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, for a modern audience to "believe" a narrative in the (let us say classical) sense in which they once did, before modernity had fully and comfortably installed itself in the world. The spectacular evolution of science, the democratization of vast territories of art and knowledge, the unprecedented acceleration of everything connected

[8] Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 85–100.

with communication, all of this has profoundly undermined the sovereignty of the dramatic text. Fascination has migrated toward a far more sophisticated aesthetic, fragmented narratives, the technical performance of producing illusion, the experience undergone by the spectator. The word "illusion," like many others, has itself passed through a spectacular metamorphosis. Under the pressure of societies in profound transformation, of political correctness and the various amendments to the "Constitution," illusion can now mean experience, new perspective, a filter through which things can be seen differently, an intermedial frontier, and the list could go on. "Spectacle," in turn, has evolved enormously in its range of meaning, coming to designate everything connected with the human presence in the world. Guy Debord sees it as something that "presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as an instrument of unification."[9]

In a sense, the spectator has become – in theater no less than in his condition as a citizen of the city and the world – an increasingly pampered and demanding customer. As scenic illusion becomes more sophisticated, more spectacular, more "obese,"[10] the spectator grows more dependent on it, on its persuasive, narcotic-in-a-fascinating-sense dimension. On the other hand, the spectator-as-customer is, day by day, considerably more technologically competent. And this is entirely natural, given the everyday universe in which he lives. He is exposed to scientific discourse and its practical applications – when he is not himself a direct consumer of them – throughout the entire day. His growing proficiency in using smart devices produces, directly and inevitably, a heightening of the exigency with which he arrives at his encounter with the space of scenic representation. Illusion and its technical production become harder to execute in ways that can still generate acceptance of theatrical convention, or even the simple scenic unfolding of a story.

Theoretically, the contemporary spectator is disenchanted, both prey to a psychology put through its paces in an age of breathtaking democratization, and hounded by those who commercialize every "advance" of science and technology in every imaginable way. We return to Mr. Spock, as a metaphor

[9] Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris : Gallimard, 1992).

[10] Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris : Gallimard, 1976).

for the contemporary individual: on one hand, still a "slave" to primary emotions; on the other, numbed by the rationalism of the age. The "hounders" are all those who, in one form or another, attempt or manage to bring to market, into everyday life, every new scientific "discovery," every gadget, every device that lightens some effort, every substance that balances or repairs some part of the vast tableau of things "without which one cannot live." This list grows, quite literally, by the minute.

But in practice, as Latour observes, disenchantment is merely a term from the arsenal of modern self-pity. Fundamentally, fascination has remained alive, only pointed in different directions through our lives filled with hybrid products. Spectators spend tens and hundreds of hours with their hearts in their mouths following the endless stream of series made available on streaming platforms. Those same spectators everywhere have found their psychologist, their doctor, their teacher, their counselor, their universal dictionary, their treasury of culinary recipes, their personal trainer, their conversation partner, and so much more, in contemporary Generative Artificial Intelligence programs.

Under these conditions, part of the deep nature of theater is changing. It is no longer a mirror of the world in the sense we understood that expression many years ago. It has become, rather, a critical mirror of the "Constitution." The theatrical performance transforms in depth, but remains the same in essence. On one hand, it renews its arsenal of means, galloping cheerfully into the hybrid universe of contemporaneity; on the other, it critiques its epoch with all its might. It makes full use of the spirit of the times – both in its content and in its means – precisely in order to dismantle it. In the end, the entire history of theater is a history of profoundly opportunistic survival. Theater accompanies humanity across the centuries, aping it, critiquing it, praising it, ritually killing it, and reviving it in the same breath.

In the sense in which Baudrillard perceives things when he speaks of the "evil genius of the social," one might say that theater carries through the ages this paradoxical freight of immorality that denounces immorality. Or that denounces itself. A public confession that ensures salvation. The more "spicy" the confession, the more obscene the details of the telling, the greater the success. Because "[…] in the spectacle of all things, through the perversion

of reality, the spectacular distortion of facts and representations, the triumph of simulation is just as fascinating as catastrophe, and in fact that is what it is: a vertiginous subversion of all effects of meaning."[11]

All of this, of course, holds if we explore the eternally pessimistic slope, the one that laments disenchantment, that plays along with self-pity, and offers the satisfaction of contemplating disaster. There is also the brighter slope: of beauty, of the celebration of forms, of stories about splendor, hope, and salvation. In its thoroughly opportunistic nature, theater offers everything a human being could wish for; personal and communal experiences, the denunciation of evil, therapy, entertainment, splendor, and much else besides. It does, however, carry one limitation that massively narrows its chances of becoming a mass medium. It is constrained by its space of performance. To preserve its essence and the advantage of its uniqueness, theater as a living phenomenon requires the real, physical presence of artists and audience in a particular place at a particular moment. And this fact – however theoretically or practically blurred or dismantled – endows theater with that something-hard-to-define which contains, even in the most minute quantities, ritual and ceremony.

Unlike film, theater cannot resort to the revolutionary solution of "Cinema at home!" Or it can — but only at a rather limited scale, in its radio forms, or in its cinematic and televisual extensions. Experience has shown that in these circumstances theater has not dramatically surpassed the chamber scale of impact. Or, to soften a possibly overreaching verdict, it has not managed to achieve more than niche-level impact. Which may be something perfectly intelligible and acceptable for the hybrid age in which we live. But it is precisely this limitation that turns out to be one of the keys to its survival.

Theater, at its core, has remained something you have to go to, in order to come into contact with it. It does not come to you. Or it does, in its activist variants, in community participation, in social programming. But, like the church, it is ultimately a performance you have to attend. You have to be there. In present conditions – where the cinema is at your home, where taxes and bureaucratic affairs are sorted online, where shopping is the same, where visits to the great museums can be made from an armchair in front of a high-performance screen – the places where you actually have to go in order to

[11] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 100.

access what they offer are growing fewer. And this seemingly banal fact confers upon the theatrical performance a specificity that can either dissolve into its own definitions, or remain suspended in the air, drifting on the ascending currents of meaning from every age. After all, to push the metaphor a little harder, one might say that an act of this immoral and unserious magnitude has no need to give an account to anyone.

The consubstantiality of performance with technology has, in large measure, also produced the passport that has guaranteed theater its free passage through the ages. And this observation does not refer only to the contemporary, post-dramatic period. If we remain faithful to Lehmann's terms, theatrical performance belongs to the same family as technology even from the pre-dramatic period. Theater-makers have always done everything in their power to produce the "wonder," to bring before the audience the "ghost" that generates curiosity and awe. And from a certain moment onward – the time science and technology began to conquer the mental and emotional spaces once occupied by religion – theater transformed itself into a sublimely opportunistic institution: one that critiques the spirit of the times with great depth, while making full use of that spirit's means, both to survive, and to help each successive age metabolize its leaps in knowledge.

Gershom Scholem speaks of the subtle, subversive relationship of the mystic with religious authority. To all appearances, the mystic – the believer who has withdrawn from the world and surrendered entirely to a personal, unmediated relationship with the divine – is someone who refuses, denounces, and anathematizes the institutional organization of belief and the institutional relationship with the divine. Scholem speaks of the harshness and the scope of the condemnation that mystics of old times directed at any form of authority that assumed the mediation of the relationship between the human being and the divine. Yet at the same time, Scholem says that this subtle, subversive mechanism is part of something very complex and paradoxical, lying at the very foundation of the idea of religion. Although anathematizing, condemning, and critiquing religious authority – finding fault with all its forms of existence – the mystic works diligently at nothing less than the authority's consolidation and perpetuation.[12]

[12] Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Shocken Books, 1965).

Theater always operates, by its very nature, in the spirit of its time. However contemporary it may be, however urgent, militant, or socially engaged, it is paradoxically atemporal, even as it "works" at the very heart of the age it questions. It lies beyond time, however much we try to synchronize it. When it is at the center of the present moment, it cannot escape – even if it wanted to with all its might – the weight of its centuries. It is as though one hoped to make a platypus look like a laboratory mouse. Theater is, in many ways, like the mystic. It denounces, condemns, and anathematizes the deviations of humanity, its institutions, its conventions; in a word, everything we might call the "Constitution." But it makes all this noise precisely in order to perpetually increase and consolidate the edifice and standing of that very Constitution. And, by no means least, its own standing.

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