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Live video relay in postdramatic theatre

I will examine the problem of live video relay in contemporary theatre, using the performance of *Sardinia* as the basis of my research. The show premiered a few months ago at the “Kostolanyi Dezso” Theatre in Subotica (Serbia), directed by Andras Urban. *Sardinia* was based on the contemporary text by Istvan Beszedes, a fragmentary, absurdist, philosophical drama with elements of an extremely grotesque, surrealist humor. The plot is enacted in a prison, and a few stories are interwoven with it: the arrival of the president is awaited, an Unknown whom everyone considers to be a Messiah appears (but it turns out he is a drunken helmsman), a theatre play is prepared etc. These narrative currents provide a frame for different discussions – about the meaning of existence, innocence, sin, guilt, the passage of time, corporality and spirituality, punishment, the function and aesthetics of theatre, power etc. Various modes of technology are used for multiple purposes. On the level of meaning, using live video relay problematizes social control, political totalitarianism and the absence of freedom; it also questions the alienation of the human being in the circumstances of the vast influence of technology and new media in society, and the notion of split identity. On the level of form, which will be my primary concern here, this way of radical technologisation and theatralisation dissolves the theatrical mechanism and indirectly poses questions about the relationship between the live and the mediated play, the very nature of live as well as mediated performance etc.

Live relay of the action on stage, visible or invisible to the audience, implies greater complexity of performance structure. Live video relay is a more complex practice than using pre-recorded video material, since its relation towards live action is more provocative and ambivalent. Because of this complexity, I think that the act of live video relay is always a part of postdramatic practice, even in cases of more or less traditional drama, as in *Sardinia*,

because live relay instantly disturbs the traditional Aristotelian structure, denies illusion, and deconstructs and analyzes the basic premises of traditional theatre language.

In *Sardinia*, the stage is defined by monitors and video screens, of which there are four. Two monitors are at the front of the stage and two larger video screens are at the back. They constantly show the action on stage, its different parts, from different angles; some of them are visible to the audience, some are not. Cameras that are capturing and relaying the action are sometimes visible; but most of the time they are not. In his book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann writes that in postdramatic theatre the use of live video relay is frequent.¹ Lehmann poses the essential question: What is the function of giving the audience the opportunity to simultaneously observe live action on stage and its live transmission on screens? His answer is that this practice deconstructs *live* theatre, it reveals theatre as an illusion and as a machinery for creating technical effects. Also, as Lehmann writes, this practice raises questions about the theatralization of technology – mechanics, reproduction and reproductibility become theatre material, which problematizes the notion of presence.²

I think that using live video relay is the stage articulation of the theoretical problem of the relation between live and mediatized performance as well as of the relation between theatre and technological media, which is essential in postdramatic theatre. This problem inspires intense discussions and disagreements among theorists like Philip Auslander, Peggy Phelan, Patrice Pavis and others. They disagree over questions like: should theatre and technological media be partners or rivals? should theatre compete with film and television in the naturalistic presentation of real life or should theatre find its own path and its own means of expression? should theatre act as a place for resistance towards the huge influence and omnipresence of the mass media? and so on. I think that most directors who apply live video relay stand on the side of those who advocate for the synthesis and co-existence of theatre and electronic media, silencing those who dramatically and romantically see theatre as the place of resistance against technology. Peggy Phelan, for example, has pleaded for pure theatre, *uncontaminated* by technology (contamination is the term used by Auslander, who stands on the other side). Phelan stands for the idea that liveness is the great privilege of the performance, a specificity that performance should preserve at any price. She writes that the “performance’s

¹ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramsko kazalište*, CDU i TKH, Zagreb i Beograd, 2004, 295.

² *Ibid.*, 305.

independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically and linguistically, is its greatest strength.”³ She also writes that the performance’s only life is in the present: “Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.”⁴ In reviewing Phelan’s thoughts on these relations between performance and technology, Steve Dixon remarks that her interpretation is close to Roland Barthes’ views in terms of its humanistic and even emotional approach. Phelan, as Dixon remarks, considers theatre as a diminutive. David fighting the Goliath of mass media and technological capitalism.⁵ Peggy Phelan, as well as Susan Sontag, authors who represent the urge for the independence of theatre from technology, considering that this independence is its greatest strength, use Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction” as the starting point for their argumentation: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be... The presence of the original is the prerequisite for the concept of authenticity.”⁶

Contrary to these attitudes, Philip Auslander denies the existence of a binary opposition between live and mediated performance, affirming that theatre directors should not run away from using technology on stage, and that using live video relay on stage has a much stronger effect than not using it. His argumentation is in great part based on Benjamin’s essay, but on its different, even somewhat contradictory aspects (it is interesting to observe that, as Steve Dixon in his book *Digital Performance* mentions, both sides in this discussion are using the same essay to defend opposing views). Auslander relies on Benjamin’s thesis: “The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated.” Using this idea of Benjamin’s as the starting

³ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, Florence, 1993, 149.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵ Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance (A History Of New Media In Theater, Dance, Performance Art, And Installation)*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2007, 123.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction”, online essay on the Internet address <http://design.wishiewashie.com/HT5/WalterBenjaminTheWorkofArt.pdf>, 2.

point of his argumentation, Auslander writes: „The use of giant video screens at sporting events, music and dance concerts, and other performances is another direct illustration of Benjamin’s concept: the kind of proximity and intimacy we can experience with television, which has become our model for close-up perception, but which is absent from these performances, can be reintroduced only by means of their ‘videation’.. Even in the most intimate of performance art projects, in which we may be only a few feet away from the performers, we are still frequently offered the opportunity for the even greater intimacy of watching the performers in close-up on video monitors, as we can experience true proximity only in televisual terms. This points to another of Benjamin’s postulates: that the quality of the original’s presence is always depreciated by reproduction.”⁷

Auslander denies the existence of clear ontological distinctions between live and mediatized events: “Although my initial arguments may seem to rest on the assumption that there are (distinctions between live and mediatized forms), ultimately I find that not to be the case. If live performance cannot be shown to be economically independent from mediatized forms, in what sense can liveness function as a site of cultural and ideological resistance, as Bogosian, Phelan and others claim?”⁸ Here I have to mention the necessity of being cautious in understanding and using interpretations as a starting point of further discussions. For example, Auslander misinterprets Patrice Pavis’ thoughts, radicalising and pushing them forward to the extent that they are not Patrice Pavis’ thoughts anymore.⁹ Though theorists like Pavis are critical towards using new media in theatre, they are rarely totally exclusive, rarely victims of complete reductionism. But let us get back to Auslander. His idea is to deny the existence of the binary opposition live/mediatized performance. In tending to prove this thesis, he begins from the opposite angle – the existence of such an opposition - which he then overthrows as not valid. In discussing Pavis’ writings, Auslander misinterprets them. Pavis did use the term *contamination* of the theatre by the new media, but he did not define the influence of the new media on theatre as negative. In other words, Auslander’s interpretation of Pavis’ discussions are not true to their original.

Having in mind Pavis’ discussions, Auslander writes: “All too often, such analyses take on the air of melodrama in which virtuous live performance is

⁷ Philip Auslander, *Liveness (Performance In A Mediatized Culture)*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ During my presentation at the conference in Belgrade, Pavis himself pointed out this remark, claiming that Auslander’s interpretation of his writings are not really true.

threatened, encroached upon, dominated, and contaminated by its insidious Other, with which it is locked in a life-and-death struggle. From this point of view, once live performance succumbs to mediatization, it loses its ontological integrity.¹⁰ But Pavis never was that reductive. Auslander simplifies, even banalizes Pavis' writings which he uses as the starting point of his theory! In his book *Theatre At the Crossroads of Culture*, Pavis considers the differences between the essence of theatre and the media: "Theatre tends towards simplification, minimalization, fundamental reduction to a direct exchange between actor and spectator. Media, on the other hand, tend towards complication and sophistication, thanks to technological development; they are by nature open to maximal multiplication."¹¹ Later on, Pavis does indeed write about the technological and aesthetical contamination of theatre, but he never writes about it reductively and melodramatically, as Auslander claims. On the contrary, Pavis asserts that theatre authors should experiment and should find a new scenic language: "In this overview of technological and aesthetic interference between theatre and the media, it has been shown, even if in a rather mechanical way, that theatre cannot be 'protected' from any media and that the 'work of art in the era of technical reproduction' (Benjamin, 1936), cannot escape the socioeconomic-technological domination which determines its aesthetic dimension. Technological and aesthetic contamination is inevitable, whether as effective interaction of media techniques or as the frantic desire to maintain the specificity of poverty of theatre (Grotowski). *The time has passed for artistic protectionism and the time has arrived for experiments with different possibilities*. The most marked influence of the media has been found in aesthetic reflections on the notion of technological progress and mass diffusion; this reflection can thus be materially linked to production, diffusion and reception. Such reflections on these practices of performance and visual representation cannot allow themselves to be overawed by the technical complexity of the media and the socioeconomic phenomena of the culture industry, but should rather examine, from the perspective of an aesthetics of form, the processes of semiotic transformation from one form to another, the emergence of meaning in these contaminations and the dynamism of practices of performance and representation in the media of our time."¹²

The point of these reflections of Pavis is that live performance cannot avoid the influence of the socioeconomic-technological circumstances which constitute our time of technological reproduction. He concludes that it is impossible

¹⁰ Auslander, op. cit., 41–2.

¹¹ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre At the Crossroads of Culture*, Routledge, Florence, 1991, 98.

¹² *Ibid.*, 128–129.

to consider theatre outside of media context: “We would do theatre a disservice by measuring it against media grounded in a technological infrastructure that it has done without; we would also endanger its specificity... There is no point in defining theatre as ‘pure art’, or in outlining a theatre theory that does not take into account media practices that border on and often penetrate contemporary work on stage.”¹³ We have made clear that Auslander’s argumentation is highly problematic. He springs from misinterpreted Pavis’ thoughts and the essence of his analysis is proving the opposite. It is absurd to base one’s theory on proving the opposite, if one attempts this by denying an argument that is wrongly interpreted in the first place.

In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann also recognizes the importance of the problem of the relation between live and mediatized. He points out that theatre directors frequently, implicitly or explicitly, ask the question: Why is the image more fascinating than the reality? In searching for the answer to this question, Lehmann refers to Vivian Sobschak, whom he quotes: “The image is stolen from real life... The image unchains desire from other circumstances, from real bodies, and moves it towards a dream world... That other world is free from the weight of reality... Disembodiment is the important consequence of electronic space.”¹⁴ As opposed to this, as Lehmann suggests, theatre refuses that disembodiment and relief. The confrontation between these two practices, with the live video relay in theatre, indicates the weight of the live body in theatre.

In *Staging the Screen*, Greg Giesekam also analyses live video relay in theatre. While discussing more generally the use of technological media in theatre, he makes the distinction between *multimedial* and *intermedial* practices. According to him, multimedial practice is simpler, and the relation between live and mediatized performance is not as complex as it is in intermedial practice. Intermediality presents multiple meanings, therefore live video relay is an intermedial practice, in Giesekam’s categorization. Giesekam does not mention the term *postdramatic theatre* at all, although his study deals with authors and performances which definitely are, in Lehmann’s sense of the term, postdramatic.

So, Giesekam writes that in intermedial theatre, the play with live and mediatized is always present, which is the result of the essential need of the authors to examine the notion of presence and authenticity: “All this challenges assumptions about authenticity that are frequently found in discussion of performance and problematises notions of the ‘real’ or its representability,

¹³ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁴ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *op. cit.*, 295.

an issue which also informs their use of media in the work. It is based on a sense that all performance is an act of mediation and on scepticism about the notion of any performance being immediate... The self-reflexive use of video in several productions operates, then, as part of a general interrogation of representational practices that pervades their work.”¹⁵

When speaking about this problem of authenticity of performance, which is one of the central issues in performance studies, the notion of *hypermediacy* is very important. It was used by Bolter and Grusin (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin) to describe the eclecticism, the concurrence of different information and texts in works of art. Hypermediatic work draws attention to the fact that art *always* involves mediation of some sort. At the basis of hypermediality, for theatre artists who use it, is the fact that every medium is a medium. They are playing with this fact. Gieseckam writes that hypermediality is an extension of a more general subversion of notions of immediacy.¹⁶

Live video relay, along with hypermediacy in theatre, imply scepticism towards the notion of immediacy. That scepticism is close to Auslander, whom I will quote here again. He continually denies any binary opposition between live and mediatized, which is the essence of the problem. Auslander writes that live performance always includes mediatized performance, both in the technological and epistemological senses: “Live performance has become the means by which mediatized representations are naturalized, according to a simple logic that appeals to our nostalgia for what we assumed was the immediate: if the mediatized image can be recreated in a live setting, it must have been ‘real’ to begin with. This schema resolves (or rather, fails to resolve) into an impossible oscillation between the two poles of what once seemed a clear opposition: whereas mediatized performance derives its authority from its reference to the live or the real, the live now derives its authority from its reference to the mediatized, which derives its authority from its reference to the live etc.”¹⁷ Auslander adds that the paradigm that best describes the current relationship between the live and the mediatized is the Baudrillardian paradigm of simulation: “Nothing separates one pole from the other, the initial from the terminal: there is just a sort of contraction into each other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapsing of the two traditional poles into one another: an

¹⁵ Greg Gieseckam, *Staging The Screen (The Use of Film and Video in Theatre)*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, 119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁷ Auslander, *op. cit.*, 38.

IMPLOSION. This is where simulation begins.”¹⁸ The result of this implosion, as Auslander writes, is that a seemingly secure opposition is now a site of anxiety, the anxiety that underlines the desire of many performance theorists to reassert the integrity of the live and the corrupt, co-opted nature of the mediatized (Phelan, Pavis, Bogosian).

I have used live video relay in the performance of *Sardinia* as the starting point for these theoretical discussions on the status, functions and meanings of mediatized performance in theatre. Here, as is obvious, we have almost detached theory from practice, theory becoming a new, almost independent body, with practice being used only as a stimulation and impulse for building a theory which can be applied to understanding the practice. But it also can stand on its own as pure theory, just as practice can surely subsist without this theory. My own belief is that the one influences the other, each giving the other the possibility to grow. As an intermedial and postdramatic performance, *Sardinia* is a search for new possibilities of theatre expression. This kind of theatre is very aware of the radical changes in society due to globalization and the huge influence of the mass media. It confronts them, reflecting on its own position in these changing, different social and cultural surroundings. Contemporary theatre, the theatre which is aware of social changes, understands that it cannot compete with technological media in creating illusion, so it searches for new paths and new meanings, by deconstructing illusion and problematizing technology. The challenge of postdramatic theatre is not the imitation of media language, but the search for new means of presentation, new meanings in a mediatized society.

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¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

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Summary

Live video relay of the action on stage, visible or invisible to the audience, implies great complexity of performance structure. In this paper, I use the performance of *Sardinia* at the “Kosztolanyi Dezso” Theatre in Subotica as the basis for discussing live video relay in postdramatic theatre. Referring to Philip Auslander, Patrice Pavis, Peggy Phelan, Hans-Thies Lehmann and Greg Giesekam, I examine the key problems implied by the use of live video relay in theatre. Using live video relay in theatre is a kind of stage articulation of the problem of the relation between live and mediatized performance, as well as of the relation between theatre and the new media, which is the object of my research in this paper.

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VIDEO-PRENOS UŽIVO U POSTDRAMSKOM POZORIŠTU

Rezime

Video-prenos uživo radnje na sceni, vidljiv ili nevidljiv za publiku, podrazumeva veliku složenost scenske strukture. U ovom radu koristim predstavu *Sardinija*

pozorišta Deže Kostolanji iz Subotice kao osnovu za raspravu o video-prenosu u postdramskom pozorištu. Upućujući na Filipa Auslandera, Patrisa Pavisu, Pegi Felan, Hansa-Tisa Lemana i Grega Gisekama, istraživaću ključne probleme koje pokreće upotreba video-prenosa u pozorištu. Upotreba video-prenosa uživo u pozorištu je vrsta scenske artikulacije pitanja odnosa između žive i medijatizovane izvedbe, kao i odnosa između pozorišta i novih medija, a to je predmet mog istraživanja u ovom radu.