
playing with speech devices – the utopia of an understanding

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: She graduated in Philology and Economic Science (Fribourg, Germany). In 1998 she arrived in Barcelona with a contemporary playwriting grant. In Barcelona, on several occasions, working with the director and theoretician Frithwin Wagner-Lippok, she has staged plays by German contemporary playwrights, such as Falk Richter, Igor Bauersima, Sybille Berg, Roland Schimmelpfennig, Kathrin Röggla, Anja Hilling, Elfriede Jelinek and Oliver Kluck (Festival Grec, Festival de Sitges, Nau Ivanow, Espai Escènic Joan Brossa, Festival Videoart loop, Antic Teatre, Teatre Tantarantana). Since 2006 she has developed several research and creation projects (including lectures, publications and workshops as an active member of the working group Performance as Research IFTR [International Federation of Theatre Research] and GTW [Theatre Science Society in Germany]). Doctoral thesis presented at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (2018). She teaches at the Institut del Teatre, on the MUET master's degree, and at Eòlia.

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Abstract

As Michel Foucault argues, in recent years the elements of theatre have been increasingly analysed as devices. The concept of device points to the analysis of power relations in the form of cultural “power-knowledge” and the possibilities of its (aesthetic) subversion.

The critical potential of modes of speech on stage and their discursive exposition lie in the fact that they contain theatrical devices concerning the performance speech and the discourse of the “characters”, and they relate to them in a concrete way; in other words, by playing. These hybrid modes of speech play with the language and therefore set out the utopia of an understanding. They relate to the physical part of the text material, to a “music of meaning”, to a gesture of a mode of speech that is not at the service of a representation of characters or their individual expression. In this framework, it is worth highlighting the game with the devices, i.e., an ongoing willingness to play with the theatre elements as a playful use of oral gestures.

Keywords: device, speech gesture, game, social media, lie, truth

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Hello, liars! I don't believe you at all. Everything is different. You are all liars! I know the truth. There's no point in keeping on lying to me. They told me. A little while ago they came to see me and told me: yes, it's true, we are all liars. Only if you stop lying can we all live well. Throughout my life, I've knelt down before you and begged you to stop lying. [...] I have all the evidence. It is here, in my heart. And I'm sorry, I can't take any more. That's why I'll pull out my heart [...]. That's why it would help me a lot if you could leave a like. Thanks also to my sponsor. [...] (Bonn Park, 2020)

The excerpt comes from Bonn Park's new play *Wie es euch Algorithmus* ('In Your Algorithm', 2020) and illustrates in a humoristic tone everybody's desire for truth, and how the longing for truth can be corrupted even for the sake of its public effect. Given the rapid digital spread of fake news, the issue of truth or lie becomes even more burning and relevant. However, truth and lie do not exclude each other with the bluntness suggested by the illusion of a logic of dichotomy, which mistrusts complex realities. More than seventy years ago, Adorno even advocated a productive closeness between truth and lie in art, as he realised that "art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth" (Adorno, 1974 [1951]: § 143). In contrast to the magician of past times, artists admit that they do not present anything real, any truth, but illusions, albeit illusions behind which real and truthful conditions emerge. We can wonder how far this artistic paradox of truth and lie is still valid today, in the context of a self-representation and a culture of comments almost obsessively driven, in which what mainly matters is the ratification in public opinion, and we do not even know how it has been formed. In social media, the traditional dichotomy of *true* and *false* and its paradoxical reproductions seem transformed by the voting dictated by approval rates, so that the appearance statistically created becomes reality and defines new ones. The communicative power and appeal seem to make an epistemological concept of truth obsolete. What is taken as truth is determined by a policy of speech and comment within networked societies, subject to an eagerness of constant efficiency.

According to the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (Reichert, 2020), “we post our articles online, and people write comments. Everybody has an opinion. And always with the potential camera in front of them: political opinions are today introduced as a performance.” The effort is no longer focused on the objective correction of a statement but on its capacity for communication and acceptance by the net. As an “opinion”, statements must no longer be imposed based on objective criteria but rather on communicative and aesthetic criteria, collectively established in some way and at some moment; that is, in a non-conclusive way and under nobody’s responsibility. An alienated speech, without a subject, is formed in the force field of anonymous criteria, flanked and stimulated by commercial interests. Within the discourse so alienated in a society in which the media excitations revolve around themselves, both the concept of truth and the identity of the users gradually melt with the commercial interests of the net. Can theatre appropriately negotiate the issue of truth and lie under these circumstances? In other words, when the limits of critique and protest and the limits to distinguish between true and invented, i.e. between reality and fiction, are increasingly blurring? In view of the likes and fake news, this issue currently becomes even more urgent. If critique is expressed in an increasingly populist way as a shitstorm and like, which *serious* critique is still possible? Thus, the aim is to generate a utopia of a new understanding and a distinction based on criteria under the *actual* circumstances.

Drawing on the current relations of social communication, critique and criteria seem to become part of an anonymous sphere of social power that turns opinion debates into public self-representations, while framing and controlling the concepts and linguistic forms used. Michel Foucault (1978) designates under the name of device the complex made up by the specific knowledge and invisible power structures in which it is expressed. As Kathrin Röggl (2015: 72) notes, to the extent that what is critical belongs, in the form of distinctions between true and false, to “lifestyle and self-representation, while it demands the last iPhone and designer clothes” and, therefore, insofar as critique is also absorbed by the production of knowledge and the aesthetics by neoliberal capitalism, it also becomes part of a social and commercial device. Within theatre, then, we must consider that critique is subject to a social and aesthetic theatre device. This is why a theatre that criticises lifestyle does not need to be critical: probably, this very critique also forms part of a device, a theatre device. The concept of device, also within the theatre space, provides for an analysis of the power relations with few conditioning factors, while relating – as we will show – to the possibilities of *aesthetic* subversion. It first points to *knowledge* about theatre and the art of performing, to power discourses within theatre studies and the (conditioned) behaviours of the actors, critics and spectators, who are influenced by these discourses: theatre has a device character because, as Lorenz Aggermann (2017: 12) states, “it cannot be ontologically classified either as a play or as a scenic realisation, event or performative event, as it is obligatorily based on the materialisation of a previously conceived order.” In this respect, theatre can be conceived as an aesthetic device, and the scenic realisation

as “a both possible and necessary materialisation of this order” (Ibid.: 12). However, we must distinguish between an aspect of theatre that breaks with the rules and another that consolidates them: as a device, Aggermann continues, theatre itself follows “an intrinsic calculation based [...] on regulatory techniques, such as performance and dance techniques, which [...] an actor or dancer must learn through rehearsals and exercise so as to be able to work proficiently within the aesthetic device. The promise of freedom to which we subject the aesthetic devices generally involves an eminent standardisation, even in avant-garde and subversive practices” (Ibid.: 19). Under these circumstances, critical theatre must always distance from itself: it must find paths to continue being emancipatory, critical and resistant despite its own character of device and must strive to remain constantly focused on its relation with critique and put it on the table.

If theatre itself forms part of the device that it criticises, we will not find the possibilities of aesthetic subversion in its issues but in the attitude/treatment of theatre with itself. A way of managing the division between device and critique lies in the idea of the game (seriously). In this way, a critique inspired by the game would not aspire to destroy what exists or itself as a device but to *limit* the existing power-knowledge complexes and the abuse of power they bring about. As Foucault (1992: 25) himself states in his famous essay *What Is Critique?*, what is critical is not legitimated by the very fact of power but by its excess: thus, critique is, in the end, “the art of not being governed in this way.” Thus, this type of critique pursues the ethical objective of resistance where power gets out of control, which Foucault defines as “insubordination”. It does not pursue insubordination or overthrow, but the moderate limitation of power-knowledge that appears in the “devices”, which act symbolically as structures of social networks. This affects the regulations and discourses and the heterogeneous elements, such as statements, rules, practices and institutions, in which the “device” itself relates these elements. Although devices themselves perform critique, there emerges, according to Foucault’s substantiation on what is critical, a resource to subtract (a little) power from itself: as Rainer Winter (2007: 213) writes, Michel de Certeau speaks “of an art of the rural population of Brazil which manifests itself in miraculous stories” and shows a rebellion against the religion that is imposed on them. Thus, it turns the Christianity imposed by missionaries into an exaggerated superstition, while subverting its power-knowledge: “This resistive use of an imposed system shows how the subordinated groups adapt to the prevailing ideas and forms and use them to achieve a space of game for themselves.” In the way the device is dealt with lies a character of game in terms of what is critical, which generates such a relationship of performance with the given (theatre) structures, which at the same time affirms and undermines them. As Winter (2007: 213) continues explaining through de Certeau, in the context of the aforementioned miraculous stories, we can “understand as resistive” a praxis of treatment of performance of the theatre rules “in the sense that it does not let itself be colonised or totally controlled by the imperatives and the rhythms of the modernising thrusts of commercialisation and the global information and communication flows.”

In theatre, where power-knowledge is usually linked to language, the spoken text becomes a “regulatory technique”, but so does *speech* itself, the forms of *appearance* of this text, in which powerful traditions are preserved. These oral forms can be considered as forms of game and can change against the habitual theatre use; in other words, they can challenge through the game in the sense of a resistive use. As it is not subjected to the obligation of producing eternal truths, theatre can deliver itself to the game of possibilities. This concept of game also includes the idea of the prevalence of a truth which is relevant for the performer when performing and/or playing, not a dogmatically established truth but a critical review of prevailing truths, rules and guidelines: the resistive use of the device *speaking in theatre* becomes, in this way, a paradigm of the “[specific] connection of material elements (bodies, objects, spaces) as well as immaterial and discursive elements (movement, sound, voice)” (Siegmond, 2019). For this reason, this specific connection is the “paradigmatic place of negotiation” (Aggermann, 2017: 23) as such. In practice, the aim is to look at points of fracture and union of this connection “where suddenly the condition of device of art (as such) appears and becomes visible” (Siegmond, 2019). Thus, the objective of this “updated” critique is not the disappearance and collapse of the devices but rather the explicit – and playful – *presentation* of the form and structure of the rules that lend cohesion to and explore the social and its devices in theatre.

In a scenic realisation as a place of reflection often verbally co-structured, the game with *speech* becomes an opportunity to play with the device that performs there, for instance, deliberately uncovering the rules of the oral gestures common in theatre. Here we can criticise and negotiate the power relations concealed in the language and the devices of the public discourse as an invisible framework of the social and theatrical self-representation. This is why it would be necessary to question, thresh, analyse and “practise” speech as such, instead of placing it at the service of devices to increase its efficiency.

In practice, it means a radicalisation of Brecht’s alienation effect and, above all, the idea of making visible what is strange in normality, while making it a curiosity. Brecht’s legacy and the double self – the division of the actor’s self in the character and the one who shows and comments on it – have given way in contemporary theatre to many selves – that amalgamate the actor and the character –, which continuously challenge the norm of the individual subject and have turned it, to some extent, into a schizophrenic subject in the new norm. The performative/epic ways of performing (according to the perspective, we can call them one thing or another) no longer revolve around the scenic reconstruction of alien realities but around the generation of situations of performance in which, as Bernd Stegemann (2011: 107) argues, the performative actors present themselves, “problematise” their situation “in front of spectators” and “thematize the issue of the content of reality of the games that emerge there.” As Doris Kolesch (2016) describes, today “the media role game [...] is experienced as an expression of a supposed real self,” according to which something “radically new with the body of the actors” emerges, as they enact and reflect, not just what is socially given, but

they *themselves* become “a platform, a place of debate, a place of exploration, overexposure and superimposition of human representation and character designs, which do not only come from daily and theatre fields, but also from cinema, sitcoms, computer games, YouTube videos and the fine arts.” In this respect, a playful use of the oral gestures can also use genres that are completely alien to theatre and conceive the discursive presentation of these oral gestures as a resource to generate situations of a theatre game. The example of our own project *work in progress, no has d'avorrir(-te) – els implicats vol.2*, presented in spring 2020, enables an insight into how this expressive game with oral gestures might be.¹ The production is based on the text *die beteiligten* (‘the involved’) by the German playwright Kathrin Röggla (2010). Based on the documented case of a kidnapping that caused a great scandal in Austria, the typical mechanisms of the mediatised society are negotiated. Within the long lines of the characters, reality and fiction mix, and they – like the performers in the realisation – seem to expose themselves to an anonymous overpressure that relates, with a partly comical effect, to social pressure, commercially stirred, to participate in social media.

The written text itself reveals an ongoing reflection of “wanting to speak now too,” a verbiage of the characters/performers that reflects a permanent concern for self-representation. This is also apparent in the game of the performers, but here it exaggerates the stress of the performance until the grotesque: they are asked to exploit any small pause that the other makes while speaking to continue speaking themselves from the moment their own text has been interrupted by another performer. They always speak using the conditional, and are thereby they overcome as characters and performers. They keep changing between a realistic, epic and performative way of performing, halfway between the psychological game, the documentary text performance and the presentation of social stereotypes. Moreover, as fictional characters and as actors, in other words, as members of a *real* society, they are overcome by the current discourse of identity politics and their aspirations to emancipation.

The use of speech within the performance culminates at the end of the scenic realisation in a fragmentation, in a tergiversation and in a strange agglutination of the text, when the four performers stand in front the audience, with white flapping miniskirts, white shirts and long blond wigs, while revealing the oral mechanisms: this decadence is presented in two phases.

First they utter complete sentences, but totally out of place:

I would say that the similarities are surprising

she couldn't be me because she doesn't have enough character to be

it would be like this, everybody erases the ambiguities, grey zones are not longer permitted in this society, only black or white

what a nonsense!

only black or white, but sometimes it would be necessary.

1. The project was conceived together with Frithwin Wagner-Lippok and presented from 20 to 23 February 2020 at the Antic Teatre, and on 27 February 2020 at Can Felipa, in Barcelona.

This returns the recognisable lines as sentences, whose exposition creates a pathway towards the deep mechanisms of speech and unmasks it as a speech without a subject and de-individualised by repeating the rules. This first playful deconstruction still takes place at the level of the text but also reveals the components of the obvious speech and the apparently obvious meanings it encompasses. The decadence of speech has so far worked here as a metaphor of the destiny of the speeches, which, by circumvallating the self *evade* the control of their protagonists.

Slowly, the actors play with the individual sentences, dismember them successively into separated syntactic elements, later in words and in syllables, until at the end they only utter consonants and vowels, banged and released as if they were the keys of a piano, with the result of a new sound unknown within the whole. While at a first level of performance the postdramatic doubt on the centrality of the subject and his/her text is still reflected, the ulterior radicalisation of a second level leads to the doubt about the human being as an object of theatre in him/herself. Performers continuously invent new tonalities and sound associations that develop their own extravagant life and with time become increasingly creative. Throughout this process, the performers move from the centre of the stage to its sides while moving as remote-controlled beings; they move head forward along the walls, in fragmented and strange forms, without an apparent motivation and without an identifiable objective. They move like “unconscious” animals and plants, always there, as if every time they needed to infuse a different *raison d’être* into them. The performers seem to be subjected to this transformation: we can only hear unarticulated whispers, shouts and screams that recall animals rather than human beings. A closeness between natural species and animals becomes apparent.

This decomposition of the worlds and syllables, and towards the end even of phonemes, radicalises the dissolution of the context until the complete dissolution of the capacity to speak itself. The decomposition also affects the movements; that is, the creaturity, the body appears as a condition of any speech and any thought. This opens up a connection with a theatre in which the human being is no longer a linguistically proficient subject but a creature — a theatre of the *posthuman*: the individually separated gesture, despite appearing as a chorus, by reaching the complete linguistic decomposition leaves behind any negotiable issue and story. But, at the same time, it is also a linguistic renewal: within the space of possibilities it playfully opens, it diverts towards the field of reinvention and creatural recreation, while undermining the dichotomy between rule and non-fulfilment: the (postdramatic) contrast between representation and performance. The real material of this fragmentation, based on the documentation of a crime and the later media abuse of the victim, is “elaborated” and “embezzled” in its turn, so that what is mechanical and inhuman also performatively bursts into it: in the final scenic situation, we no longer see people but anonymous gestures, which are not those social gestures that Brecht could alienate but incomprehensible natural “gestures” that have ceased to obey any biding code beyond the moment. In this way, this scene celebrates, as a rehearsal, the falls and

abysses of a future (posthuman) theatricality of the mere becoming – of processes, affections and tensions – without human effect.

In this way, on the one hand, a posthuman context opens and, on the other, a critique of theatre by theatre becomes possible: the *rules* which are valid for the treatment – both social and theatrical – of reality become visible and, therefore, can be the object of critique through the game with overflowing oral gestures that take on a strange life of their own, as well as the corresponding attitude of the actors (the rules are subverted). What resists the deconstruction is the material. Faced with the self-critique of theatre, which in our example appears as critique of oral gestures, only what is corporal is maintained. The babbling body remains as a fragile “nature” protected from critique. This becomes visible as an inevitable reality in the theatrical “use” of the material that introduces by the real “abuse”: in this way, it prevails over the theoretical analysis in the same way that it is necessary to consider and respect it in the future in daily life. Behind the liberal masks that all of them – again, both characters and actors – bear, “capitalist dreams of career and power, envy and human animosity are hidden; in short, greed of ascension of neoliberal undertone [...] behind its so loved idealistic utopia (and critique)” (Biller, 2020: 49). According to this quotation, the “destruction of speech” makes visible the obligatory nature of information and social success as device, which the direction of the performance attempts to reconstruct as an overloading theatre device. In this way, the text becomes twofold: that of a character and, at the same time, of the performer who documents the character. The performer splits into two or duplicates into character and commentator. The realities of the performer and of the character fuse, and the need to document or introduce the character from a position “of his own” becomes impossible because the person himself has become this character. The point of view becomes untenable, and *performing* with the positions remains the only way out.

With this, speech not only occurs between the characters (like in text-based theatre) and between actors and audience (like in postdramatic contemporary theatre) but here it also *thematizes* the *social* and *theatrical* practice of the discourse and its social and technical devices: speaking in a known language, speaking in an understandable, high and clear manner, listening, letting others speak, highlighting what is important and discarding what is not, avoiding or hiding mistakes, and so on. Rules that are valid between the characters and between actors and spectators.

The performatively alienated fulfilment of these rules – for a special emphasis, exaggeration or also systematic non-fulfilment – provides for their revelation in a *joint action between the stage and the audience*. In this way, the moment of meeting – as a foundation of a relational aesthetics – is recognised as a properly relevant form in terms of its aesthetics. The meeting becomes a space of possibilities, a space of game of both a spatially and materially social and specific situation, as a practice of an aesthetic reflection. Alongside the structural conditions, the material conditions of the communicative situation between spectators and performers can also be experienced. The disintegration of what is obvious, which is palpable in the strange

improvement or in the fragmentation and tergiversation of the spoken text, relates to the corporal aspect of the text and the speakers themselves. The corporal *gesture* of speaking does not exhaust itself in the performance or in the relation between the stage and the audience, but rather appears as an emerging event at the moment of the meeting.

The script of a new utopia of understanding led, first from the lie, to a critique of the subliminal hypocrisy of the dialogues, which possibly only points to the statement (*I like*) and is an autistic monologue that turns around itself. Provided this hypocrisy can be seen as part of the devices — also and precisely of theatre —, the destruction and flight of the old speech gestures that work (but that are possibly at the service of this hypocritical device) also lead to new forms and perspectives of the social. However, the most radical critique that seeks this scenic realisation in the final scene is not only directed to the space between human subjects but also between human and non-human actors as “protagonists” of a broader ecological context. The processes of transformation and game to which this critique alludes exceed the social critique that remains within the human sphere. They can be seen as a symptom of a new ecological self-perception of theatre creators: the co-founder of the interdisciplinary platform Das Theater des Anthropozän (‘The Theatre of the Anthropocene’), Frank Raddatz (2020: 12), claims that transformation is one of the key concepts. He calls “anthropocenic certitude” the idea that “the history of humans cannot be separated from the history of animals (or plants, stones and machines).” This is why, he continues, the aim would be to “unite the imaginary and the destiny of the earth” (Ibid.).

The corresponding term of transformation and transformer also appears in (*Life on Earth can be sweet*) *Donna*, the most recent production by the playwright and director René Pollesch (2019), in which, resuming Brecht’s street scene (see Brecht, 1986), the actor Martin Wuttke says about himself: “I am not a performer, but a transformer.” As a “post-human” person, the “transformer” is no longer seen as an active and creative entity but focuses on the possibility of kinship and solidarity.

Thus, performing with openings beyond the human subject appears as a need to achieve a new utopia of understanding (oneself). Liberation also lies in the game, in other words, to take the freedom of bringing into play theatre as a whole, as argued by Nikolaus Müller-Schöll (2016: 31); that is, challenging *everything* at *every* moment, being able to lose oneself in a performance that nobody controls, and for theatre “to itself take the freedom, without further justification, of creating any type of theatre or of creating one beyond all the known theatre” so that “the very foundations seem to shake.” In this idea, the transformers-actors find themselves committed to the critical use of performance of the rules as an ecologically reflected critique.



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