

# The Ignorance of Participation as an Act of Poetic Resistance: Introduction to the Manifest of the Company FFF: The Friendly Face of Fascism

On Roger Bernat's and Roberto Fratini's manifest *FFF: The Friendly Face of Facism. For an Aesthetics of Devices*, which you will find, revised and updated by the authors with respect to previous versions, in the "Documents" section <[PDF link](#)>

Carmen PEDULLÀ

ORCID: 0000-0002-9919-5324. Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna, Italy  
[carmen.pedulla@gmail.com](mailto:carmen.pedulla@gmail.com)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Carmen Pedullà holds a PhD in Visual, Performative and Media Arts. She obtained her PhD at the Università di Bologna in March 2019 with the thesis "Languages and paradigms of participation in Europe. With three focuses on Teatro de los Sentidos, Roger Bernat\_FFF and Rimini Protokoll". She is currently continuing her research work on European participatory theatre.

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

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## Abstract

The following introduction seeks to provide some of the main characteristics of the scenic poetics set out in the manifest *FFF: The Friendly Face of Fascism. For an Aesthetics of Devices* that Roger Bernat and Roberto Fratini present in the journal *Estudis Escènics*.

Although the participation and involvement of the spectator are the main features of the poetics of the company, the authors emphasise in the manifest certain opposition to and betrayal of participation based on the emancipation and festive illusion of the audience (in opposition to what happened in 1960s and 1970s theatre). The participatory devices conceived by the company create systems in which the spectators-dependants can fulfil or distort the instructions conveyed by the dramaturgical design while being able to develop critical thought faced with their role and fictional stance. In this way, there is an *ignorance of participation*, which is the company's stylistic hallmark.

The manifest, in this respect, very clearly sets out its idea of participation, based on a mobilisation of the audience far removed from the principles of disinhibition. Fratini and Bernat stress the importance of inhibition faced with disinhibition to understand participation as pure aesthetic data, a format that enables the social and political role of the spectators to be re-imagined.

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**Keywords:** participation, audience, spectator, emancipation, device, system, inhibition, disinhibition, ignorance, political theatre

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*In a world where participation is a fact, yet almost never real,  
theatre should tackle the not at all easy task of deploying  
a participation that manages to become real  
without being necessarily a fact (or precisely because it almost never is it).*

Bernat, Fratini, 2016: 97.

Before the manifest that Roger Bernat and Roberto Fratini present in the "Documents" section of this journal was produced, we became familiar with the poetics of the Catalan director through some of the programmatic writings that clarified his poetic orientation — mainly *Per deixar de fer teatre d'una vegada per totes* (Bernat, 2002), *Las reglas de este juego* (Bernat, 2008) and *Instrucciones de Uso* (Bernat, 2010) — and laid the foundations of an extensive reflection on theatre mechanisms. The path taken in the writings indicated a radical transformation in the conception of the theatre event: in his first artistic phase Bernat conceived a theatre defined by critics and scholars as one of "irritation" (Massip, 2013: 235, 248-249) until reaching an independent theatre that was "anti-conventional" and "anti-representative" (Serrat, 2012: 307), "essayist" and "undisciplined" (Sánchez, 2005: 311-313). Since 2008 Bernat has begun to devote himself to a theatre of solitary spectators or solitary actors — understood as *social animals* — given that the Catalan director focused on its relationship with the audience and even more on the poetic breakdown of the role of the spectator, hidden in the "dark mass" of the audience (Bernat, Duarte, 2009: 9). The pieces were intended to be games whose rules and instructions made up the fabric of the development of the theatre event: the "plot of stage directions" and "the dramatic text" formed "a set of rules of the game" (Bernat, 2008: p. 3), and the spectators were its sole protagonists. It is then when *FFF: The Friendly Face of Fascism*, which Bernat currently directs, was founded.

With the manifest *FFF: The Friendly Face of Fascism. For an Aesthetics of Devices* the same principles, which at the turning point of the 2008 poetics still seemed acerbic and yet to be defined, reach a clear expression. Perhaps

because, after eleven years of artistic activity in the framework of participation, the director's stance has become clearer in terms of the economy of relationships, engendered by the interactive protocols; perhaps by the meeting, on Bernat's anti-conventional and radical path, with Roberto Fratini,<sup>1</sup> a subtle soul in unveiling the elements for a criticism of participation as a "paradigm of our use of reality";<sup>2</sup> and perhaps because each production, from *Domini Públic* (2008) to the latest, *Flam* (2019), has increasingly helped clarify the meaning and malice of the acronym FFF: The Friendly Face of Fascism. Trying to uncover the meaning of FFF involves not only giving the right space of meaning to the acronym but also approaching the multiform sides that shed light on the company's poetics, and clarifying, at the same time, its position in the expanded framework of participation as a socio-cultural phenomenon, in a society and artistic community in which the individual's *auto-design* — as Boris Groys emphasises (Groys, 2010: 17) — imposes an increasingly stronger and uninhibited coming together of artists and audience.

The acronym FFF, apart from being, as the manifest itself stresses, the occasional name of the company formed by Roger Bernat, Roberto Fratini, Txalo Toloza, Cristóbal Saavedra, Ana Rovira, Marie-Klara González and Helena Febrés, encapsulates the symbolic framework of all the conceptual, aesthetic, philosophical and political principles that move in the ins and outs of the current version of the society of the spectacle. FFF alludes, in other words, to a skilful system of *theatrical and social conspiracy*.

FFF assumes and shares the need (or the *diktat*) of the audience mobilisation, formulating it maliciously according to its own orientation. Its way of interpreting it is unique, given that the company "does not produce shows but rather designs devices." In fact, all the FFF poetics is based on the philosophical concept of *device*, according to Michel Foucault's theory, taken up by Giorgio Agamben: the device is both the system and the design that will shape the scenic events, in which the spectators are the sole protagonists called to confront the difficulty and responsibility of the *fair choice*. In this sense, the device constitutes the plot and "open" dramaturgy of the productions, organising options of actions that the spectators can fulfil, or distort, through some resources, almost always technological, aimed at ensuring the framework of interaction.

Then, as the manifest itself emphasises, the substantial distinction between device understood as *system* and device understood as *technological instrument* becomes clear. FFF assumes both meanings, subsuming them under the general meaning of a gesture of programming: FFF generates *architectures of the possible experience* or *architectures of the possibility of experience* in which the spectator is the main performer, and the distinction between "digital space" and "physical space" loses importance to create a "blended space" (Benyon, 2014: 79).

1. Roberto Fratini has formed part of the company FFF since 2012, when he was the dramaturge of *Pendiente de voto*.

2. It is a definition that Roberto Fratini made public on the occasion of the roundtable *Forme della Partecipazione*, held in the framework of the project *Il teatro partecipativo di Roger Bernat*, carried out by Cristina Valenti with the participation of the author of this article at the Centro Teatral La Soffitta (Bologna, Italy, 30 March 2017).

The manifest also highlights the key role of *interaction* established between the spectators and the device: the spectators manipulate the device and it manipulates the spectators. It is a relationship of *dependency* that involves both parties: the instrument — without which the spectators do not know which actions they have to carry out — and the spectator — indispensable for the design proposed to reach any degree of materialisation.

In this way, the figure and the stance of the *spectator* is clarified: the manifest specifies under which conditions FFF takes on the challenge of mixing up actors and spectators, encapsulating the function of both in the paradox of the *dependant-user*. The manifest highlights the character of the *dependency* in the first case and of the *mediated action* in the second. Therefore, the device is an instrument that enables control to be exercised over the dependants and, at the same time, leaves open the possibilities of a interpretation (in both senses, exegetic and acting), potentially dissident, indocile or clumsy, although always mediated by the technological apparatus that the interpretation itself enables, with which it limits its reach.

The FFF spectators are not a perfect blend of actor and spectator but they embody what, according to the theory of semiotics, is the role of subject and of receiver: they inhabit the sphere of the “enunciate” and, at the same time, that of the “enunciation” of the pieces (Greimas; Courtés, 1979: 208). Consequently, it could be said that the FFF spectator manages to be, according to a semiotic meaning, a spect-actor: *subject* and *receiver* of the performative event.<sup>3</sup>

In *Domini Públic* (2008), for instance, the spectators are the pawns in a life-size game of self-representation, a “game of life”, in which their answers correspond to a movement in the space, in relation to that of the other participants. In *Pendiente de voto* (2012) the participant is the deputy called to vote on political issues concerning society. In *Numax-Fagor-Plus* (2014) the spectator must give a voice to the words of the former workers of the factories, the only ones that enable the times and meanings of the workers’ fight to be remembered or revived. In all the aforementioned productions there is a moment in which participants form part of the theatre play as protagonists (subject) and, at the same time, there is a moment in which they are called to mark a distance with what they are experiencing (receiver); usually this act of distancing and self-awareness occurs in the middle or at the end of the pieces.

Only at the end, in fact, do the spectators really understand what their role has been, because the device has created moments explicitly aimed at questioning their position, making them doubt their traditional role, and the role acquired only for the performance that has just ended.

FFF “places participation into abysm” (Palmeri, 2016: 39), leaving the possibility for participants to be ignorant of their participation through a process of estrangement. A condition that does occur, for instance, in one of the latest FFF productions, *No se registran conversaciones de interés* (2016-2017),

3. On this concept, see the semiotic analysis of the role of the spectator in the FFF productions (Pedullà, 2019: 151-232).

in which the spectators, motionless and seated in armchairs, must choose the channels of narration — via headphones — of what the actresses are explaining on the stage. In this participatory mechanism the spectators face the action of the actor, who is a medium for the choice and understands the complexity and difficulty of their role: whatever channel they choose, they will never be able to follow all the dynamics explained on the different channels. In this way, the spectators question their role and their very participation: they do not realise it at the time when they recognise it as a means of estrangement. It is, in other words, a distancing from themselves, as *spectators* — in the sense of voyeurs — as *actors*, according to the meaning of an actor mobilised through a participation that seeks to free the spectators from inhibitions. In contrast, the process of ignorance of FFF enables one to distance oneself from the preconceived ideas that gravitate to the concept of participation and to get closer to the work of a spectator who cannot be an *actor*, in the sense of an individual called to become a mediator of what he or she sees and hears during the play: the responsibility of one of the most difficult roles, not only in theatre but also in society.

Thus, it becomes clear how the manifest, although in principle it states that it practises mobilisation, ends by just causing an *inhibition*, related to a criticism of the role of the spectator. The poetics created by FFF seems very distanced from the principles of disinhibition and emancipation of 1960s theatre and its demand for immediacy and pleasure. And it also seems very distant from the imperative to participate in contemporary times, which very often becomes forms of “pay adventures” (Fratini, 2018: 20).

It could be argued that Roger Bernat, making the critical view of the philosopher Jacques Rancière his own, tries to provoke in the spectators of his participatory theatre an “emancipation from the role of spectator” (Bernat, 2016: 217) whose first objective is the role itself — social, cultural, commercial — of spectator: in an essay written by Bernat along with Roberto Fratini we read: “participatory dramaturgy is not offering a collectivisation of disinhibition (which is an infallibly fascist feature) but the active and conscious form of constructing new models of shared inhibition” (Bernat and Fratini, 2016: 93). The systems conceived by FFF generate an inhibition as an instrument of *perplexity* of the individual faced with that role of spectator that, according to the artists, represents, in the end, a character, a fiction. The aim is, therefore, to confront spectators with the awareness of their fictional role and therefore foster a critical reading of it.

It is curious that the manifest that Roger Bernat and Roberto Fratini present in this journal is inspired by the *Manifesto Canalla*, of La Fura dels Baus (1983), and by the *10 Items of the Covenant*, by Laibach (1983). The two manifests feature, in different modalities, anti-conformist and extreme elements: La Fura’s manifest dates from a period of great cultural effervescence, and feeds off the cultural legacy of theatre groups such as Comediants and Els Joglars, who in the 1970s already practised different modes of participation.<sup>4</sup>

4. As Iago Pericot notes: the 1970s were a period of great cultural effervescence, after forty years of dictatorial censorship: “People thought more of the receiver than the sender and tried to look at aspects of theatre that until then had been prohibited” (Pericot, 2006: 123-124).

La Fura dels Baus took the audience's participation to extreme levels, proposing theatre actions of hyperstimulation — also violent or provocative — in order to remove them from their passivity. Laibach, in contrast, refers to 1980s Slovenia, full of nationalist rhetoric, when Yugoslavia was breaking up and, using as a theoretical basis the theses of the psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek, pupil of Jacques Lacan, proposes an industrial martial music, with the clear objective of denouncing the aesthetics of power and inertia, the representation of the dominion and annulment of the individual in the collective. Laibach does not propose keeping an ironic distance from the system but *takes the system too seriously*.

FFF, in its turn, produces systems in which the operation mechanisms of several social contexts are expressed (the square, the factory, the chamber of representatives, the theatre, etc.). The spectators are not removed from their passivity, as happens with La Fura dels Baus, but inhabit, experience and sometimes endorse, following Laibach's model, all the systems of manipulation to which they are subjected. In fact, what most interests FFF is “to reflect on the construction of the legitimisation of power” (Bernat, 2017) and it does so in the microcontext of the theatre that, as Bernat always points out, continues to be “the only place of confrontation of the audience with themselves as a group” (Bernat, 2015).

The programmatic and conclusive statement that “FFF is the audience made form” enables us to understand the meaning related to all the constitutive principles of the poetics professed by the company: the audience is dispossessed of all the potential of emancipating dishinhibition to be considered dependent on a system formed by a manipulating interaction. And through the same design, the device offers the dependant countless possibilities for interpretation. Participation, in other words, manages to be a *format* dispossessed of content and only based on its purely aesthetic principle can it recover its ethics: participation understood as a pure form questions its own congenital mechanisms, which enables a process of self-criticism of the spectators and their role in the scenic, social and political context.

The FFF manifest responds, in conclusion, to the urgency of being the trigger of the expression of a skilful machine of scenic and social conspiracy. Roger Bernat and Roberto Fratini invite readers, dependants, users and spectators to move closer to fiction aware that it forms part of what we are and of what we experience as an act of poetic resistance. And they seem to suggest, between the lines, that only in the critical distance can participation become *vision* and *political thought*.



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