

Theatre in a Pandemic: Notes for a Theory of Social Distancing as an Aesthetic Category*

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has generated a broad supply and demand of “responses” to and interpretations of the current situation. In the artistic field, lockdown has fostered extimacy and rewarded a series of more or less performative “community” and relational initiatives. Balconies, linked or recorded and shared through mobile phones in real time, have been redefined as spaces for participation in rituals and cultural practices of a collective nature. Specifically, in this article my aim is to reflect on performance and relational aesthetics in a lockdown and post-lockdown situation; that is, subject to logics such as social distancing or other protocols of sanitary and responsible behaviour. In this respect, I will emphasise the metamorphosis of performance, born under the sign of criticism of institutional frameworks, into one of the main channels of community production/expression.

Keywords: theatre, performance, relational aesthetics, social media, public space, Covid-19

* This article forms part of the activities of the research project PERFORMA2. Metamorfosis del espectador en el teatro español actual [PERFORMA2. Metamorphosis of the Spectator in Today's Spanish Theatre] (PID2019-104402RB-I00) (2020-2023), funded with a grant by the Ministry of Science and Innovation in the framework of the Plan Estatal de Investigación Científica y Técnica y de Innovación 2017-2020 (State Plan for Scientific and Technical Research and Innovation 2017-2020). It also falls within the project COVID-TECA. Hemeroteca de humanidades sobre el impacto socioeconómico y la incidencia cultural de la pandemia de coronavirus [COVID-TECA. Inventory of the socioeconomic impact and cultural incidence of the coronavirus pandemic] (CV20-45329), funded by the Consejería de Transformación Económica, Industria, Conocimiento y Universidades (Regional Ministry of Economic Transformation, Industry, Knowledge and Universities) of the Junta de Andalucía.

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The romanticisation of the quarantine is a class privilege.
(Seen on one of the millions of balconies photographed
and shared in 2020)

Introduction

In a just short period of time the pandemic has created a wide supply and demand of responses to and interpretations of the current situation. With the arrival of the virus, especially in Western European countries, an increasingly voluminous body of theory began to be expressed about the effects of the coronavirus on our societies.¹ In general, biopolitical reflections — state control —, economic reflections — sustainability and defence of public services, the future of neoliberalism, the commitment to investment in R&D&I— and others of an ecological, psychological and, of course, medical health nature have prevailed.² Apart from the obvious process of metaphorisation, which also prompted an interesting dialogue with Susan Sontag, epidemiology has become a kind of metadiscipline, offering a broad conceptual repertoire for the analysis of this “new normal”.

In the cultural field, reflections have been confined *grosso modo* to assessing the economic survival of certain sectors, to advocacy via #apagóncultural (cultural blackout) and, above all, to its hyper-visibility in the new media as

1. A good illustration of this boom is the title of “palabra del año 2020” (word of the year 2020) given in Spain to *confinamiento* (lockdown). Moreover, if we read the other candidate words on the website of the Fundéu RAE (29/12/2020), we can see the degree of implementation of the Covid semantic field: coronavirus, infodemic, resilience, Covid-19, telecommuting, conspiranoia, (a) tiktok, statuephobia, pandemic, health workers and vaccine. For Fundéu, “there are many words that could define 2020, but there is one that has affected us on an equal footing: *confinamiento*.”

2. Anyone who wants to explore the formidable body of theory produced throughout 2020 can consult the “Hemeroteca de humanidades sobre la pandemia de coronavirus (covid-19)” launched in March by the Unidad de Excelencia Iber-Lab of the University of Granada <<https://iberlab.ugr.es/hemeroteca-covid19/>>. Apart from providing an extensive archive, this initiative has been consolidated through the research project COVID-TECA. Hemeroteca de humanidades sobre el impacto socioeconómico y la incidencia cultural de la pandemia de coronavirus, directed by the professors of the University of Granada Ana Gallego Cuiñas and José Antonio Pérez Tapias.

a backdrop or soundtrack to the lockdown.³ Paradoxically, by claiming its social function, a considerable number of agents and institutions have promoted an instrumental interpretation of culture in the midst of the pandemic, either as an economic driving force — for domestic tourism, for example —, refuge-meeting point or escape valve for the population. In the midst of a state of emergency, a series of practices created to guarantee and promote compliance with measures such as social distancing and other health regulations became very prominent. In particular, extimacy behaviours, theatrical/dramatised events and more or less performative relational initiatives were promoted and symbolically rewarded from balconies and other indoor spaces.

Theatre in a Pandemic: A Panorama at a Click

In his recommended essay “Reinventar el teatro”, Juan Coulasso poses the following questions: “Will the invention of a new Pandemic Theatre soon be possible? Will we theatre practitioners develop a new kind of digital empathy?” (2020). Naturally, this article does not aspire to provide an effective answer, nor does it seek to discuss the appropriateness or correctness of the legal framework imposed during and after lockdown, although it would deserve a critical analysis. In a way, I set about speculating on the consequences of the pandemic for the living arts; in particular, for performance and relational aesthetics in a situation of lockdown, easing and re-lockdown; that is, subject to legal and medical logics and protocols of sanitary and “responsible” behaviour.⁴

For Franco Berardi, the virus is a kind of “universal re-coder” (2020: 172) whose scope is also manifested in the performing arts, which it has “impacted” economically and aesthetically. The state of emergency caused the physical closure of theatres and the suspension of face-to-face shows, but not their disappearance. Theatre already had notable antecedents in the breakdown of co-presence through the use of new technologies such as immersive theatre or transmedia productions. Salvage microcapsules soon appeared on the social media; live broadcasts and views on platforms such as Scenikus or YouTube and Vimeo channels followed; content was released on the websites of theatre institutions and venues; alliances were forged with gamification or other leisure activities; specific online apps and projects were developed during the state of emergency... Without seeking to be exhaustive, I would just like to mention some interesting creations that emerged in the Hispanic sphere.

Along with streaming services or the creation/opening of repositories, RTVE’s Laboratorio de Innovación audiovisual (RTVE Lab) developed specific content that exploits the creative possibilities of telepresence and

3. The continuous allusions to past pandemics and calamities as a stimulus for the cultivation of the arts can be interpreted as praises for the confined creative self. For example, *The Decameron* or *The Plague* became mandatory references in almost any cultural section (without forgetting Artaud’s well-known text “The Theatre and the Plague”). In general, the old dichotomy that set the concentration of the lockdown and the dispersion of a hyperstimulated subject against each other was falsely referenced.

4. The production *Nueva Normalidad* (NN) (2020), by La Fura dels Baus, is an illustrious — and controversial — example of a “prophylactic” piece, designed as an institutional homage to health staff.

post-production. Specifically, it made several productions — *Cervantes VR* or *Escena 360°* — designed to be enjoyed with a specific app and virtual reality glasses. In March 2020, the Teatro de La Abadía launched #Teatro-Confinado, which was followed in June by #Teatro(Des)Confinado: “live online experiences for restless viewers”. Beyond Spain, the web application AudiodramaApp stands out, which defines itself as the “first web app for listening to radio drama by episodes” (<https://www.audiodramapp.cl/>). The website, an initiative of the Chilean theatre company Legión Escénica, was launched on 17 August 2020 with a version of the play *Romeo y Julián* in fourteen episodes (direction and script by Carlo Urra López).⁵

Recently, the Cabosanroque company, formed by Laia Torrents and Roger Aixut, premiered *Audioguia per a supermercats en temps de pandèmia* (in the Festival Temporada Alta in Girona (13 November-22 December 2020), an audio walk for a single listener — well equipped with mask — who downloads the audio file and listens to the thirty-minute piece while shopping in the supermarket. Perhaps *Escenario 0* (Irene Escolar and Bárbara Lennie, HBO, 2020) should also be mentioned, an “anthology” of “six plays re-imagined by filmmakers.”⁶ The six versions of plays already premiered on stage combine a theatrical and cinematographic discourse in a very different way from mere recorded theatre, or from a theatrical film or series.

Similarly, among other examples of expanded theatricalities are projects that use platforms such as WhatsApp or the now famous Zoom. On 20 December 2020, the cyber theatre piece⁷ *Mentir la verdad* was released (<https://www.eventrid.cl/eventos/mentirlaverdadchile/mentir-la-verdad-chile-19-30hs>). This “virtual theatrical game experience” live on Zoom has been conceived as a leisure device in which five actors tell the same anecdote to the spectators connected in the hall. After listening to all the stories, the audience debate who it really belongs to and vote for the corresponding actor or actress. For their part, Santiago Loza (text) and Guillermo Cace (directing) used WhatsApp to set up *Amor de cuarentena*, a project with the participation of Dolores Fonzi, Jorge Marrale, Cecilia Roth, Leonardo Sbaraglia and Camila Sosa Villada. Over the course of two weeks, spectators received daily text messages, audios, images or videos featuring one of the actors of their choice, who introduced small variations on Loza’s text.⁸

5. At the close of 2020, AudiodramaApp offered five plays: in addition to the aforementioned piece by Carlo Urra, the playwright has also shared *HabanaGarrobo* and *Citaci3n*. Other radio theatre experiences were *Carolina* (Popurrí Producciones, Isidora Aguirre) and *Bello futuro* (Teatro Síntoma, Gerardo Oettinger). There are plans to make five more plays available to the public during 2021.

6. All the “re-imagined” plays are from contemporary Spanish theatre: *Los Mariachis* (Pablo Rem3n and Lino Escalera), *Hermanas* (Pascal Rambert and Diego Postigo), *Mamm3n* (Nao Albet and Marcel Borràs), *Todo el tiempo del mundo* (Pablo Messiez and Carlos Marques-Marcet), *Vania* (Àlex Rigola and Carla Sim3n) and *Juicio a una zorra* (Miguel del Arco and Clara Roquet).

7. According to Grande Rosales, in cyber theatre the “dramatic action is restricted to the on@line interaction and actors are transmuted into digital avatars” (2015: 12).

8. For more information, I recommend “El teatro se reinventa por la pandemia”, an article by Justo Barranco published on 10 August 2020 in *La Vanguardia*, where he brings together some of the main theatre events that emerged during the pandemic (especially in Catalonia). In addition to outlining a panorama of theatre that explores new formats due to Covid-19, Barranco analyses this situation with prominent theatre agents such as Francesc Casadesús or Roger Bernat, the latter reflecting that: “This pandemic, if in addition to deaths has left us anything, is a great change in our way of acting, of relating, and as theatre reflects on how we relate, it was inevitable that it would adopt new formats” (2020).

Today we can certainly speak of a normalisation of direct contact between audience and actors, even of a tradition easily traceable to the start of the 20th century. For this reason, I think it makes sense to ask ourselves about the effects of the pandemic for (post-)Covid theatre. In keeping with Anxo Abuín, any question about a supposed “essence” of theatre in a post-dramatic context — “Can there be a theatre without an audience? Can there be a theatre without actors? Can there be a theatre without a shared physical space? Can there finally be a theatre without shared real time?” (2008: 46-47) — takes on, in my opinion, renewed interest due to the “forced” absence of non-permitted contacts.⁹

Notes from the Balcony: Social Distancing and Relational Practices

On theatre and new media, Lehmann speaks of a high tech theatre “that increasingly expands the limits of representation” (2013: 387). Similarly, a low tech modality could be established in a sense different from its *povertà* meaning, as a consequence of the spread of portable technologies and social networks, which have possibilities for live broadcasting. Cybnauts feel a greater possibility of agency in the production, reception and manipulation of contents. This optimism results in the rise of amateur creativity and the well-known do it yourself or let’s do it together practices. However, these productions do not respond to “analogue” models, in which the possession of the play and its performance in spaces meant for this purpose determine its consumption; on the contrary, amateur producers make their creations *circulate* for free in order to achieve the broadest dissemination.

In an article published in *La Vanguardia* just two weeks after the state of emergency decree (14 March 2020), the writers wondered if the pandemic could be the catalyst for new isms and spoke of “the magic of balconies” and “the balconism to come” (García et al., 2020). Everyone is aware that behind the images arriving from Italy or other places, all kinds of cultural consumption experienced a great boost — usually through platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime or Filmin and, to a lesser extent, through repositories of institutions that temporarily made their catalogues available to any registered user free of charge. In addition, the meme and the viral talent show was promoted as a role model for residents of housing blocks. Iván de la Nuez offers a valuable reflection on this cultural “hypertrophy”:¹⁰

9. Specifically, this expulsion of the body is one of the central tenets of the essay *Los cuerpos rotos. La digitalización de la vida tras la covid-19*, by Enric Puig. In one way or another, the performing arts in a pandemic have to face questions very similar to those posed by the philosopher and director of La Escocesa: “What does a body offer us today? What good is the body to us in a pandemic scenario, a situation that forces us to protect our own from others through obligation, but also prudence? Is our body just another tool, the usual one, with which we have become accustomed to relating, to experimenting, to living up to now, but which we should aspire to replace one day? Is it in contrast about something fundamental for us, something essential that we can and should never renounce?” (2020: 18-19). In the same vein, Pedro Bennaton insists on a stimulating exercise in criticism and theatrical activism: “How do we recover the body and the bodily contacts that go beyond the image? Theatre cannot be reduced to the screen; it cannot reduce its errors only to the dropping of the connection” (2020).

10. In an interesting personal chronicle of the pandemic, Diana Miranda explains that she feels “zoomed in” (2020), a techno-enthusiastic and obsessive condition that, based on a longing for theatrical presence, leads to hyperactive online behaviour.

In Spain we have already experienced three weeks under a declared state of war that mixes physical withdrawal with a vertigo that drags us from blink to link, from zapping to sampling. Consuming, sharing and producing a culture that continues to favour its imposition over our intuition, its depredation over our selection, its indigestion over our digestion (2020).

In the midst of this “great binging” of content, it should be noted that the rise of relational practices in micro-communities of residents and the scientific meta-story have produced an unforeseen or, perhaps, disregarded consequence: the metamorphosis of performance, born under the sign of the criticism of institutional frameworks, into one of the main channels – promoted and even subsidised – for community production/expression through channels enabled for this purpose such as MS Teams, Skype, Zoom, Instagram and YouTube. In addition, the state of emergency has encouraged the practice of a series of leisure and festive initiatives in which the balcony, an urban architectural element – this last word could be emphasised –, is going to almost completely dominate. In the cultural panorama of the first lockdown, the #challenge, the selfie and the hypermemetic logic coexist with the appropriation/remediation of a range of resources and more or less performative forms.

Certainly, this taking on of content producer functions by the “social factory” (Martin, 2012: 40) creates circulation and recognition systems that are relatively autonomous from official media. Thus, “non-professional” participation options contribute to challenging the limits between the artistic and the non-artistic. In a media ecosystem like the current one, prosumers not only interpret, through their own cultural and technological skill, what type of material they are dealing with, but also what possible modifications or effects they can undergo, and in what spaces, media or networks they would work best. Of course, this does not mean the disappearance of borders or absolute de-territorialisation; new centrings and new forms of destabilisation are put forward, such as peer-to-peer productions or, closely related to the meme, appropriationist and recontextualising strategies. This “global” competence is not exclusively conditioned by the arbitration of the Academy or by its institutionalisation processes, since economic and prestigious logics such as the digital celebrity will also act, and success is not governed by sales, or even by the always suspicious “quality”, but by visibility, following and public exposure.

According to Fischer-Lichte, the performativity of the balcony-space would be justified by the “creation of specific spatial configurations that offer previously unknown or untapped possibilities to negotiate the relationships between actors and audience, and new possibilities of movement and perception” (2011: 226). It would not exactly be a kind of site specific theatre or theatre on location in which “the site itself is shown in a new light” (Lehmann, 2013: 206). Balconies, connected “at a glance” or recorded and shared through mobile phones in real time, have been redefined as spaces for “neighbourhood therapy” (Núñez and Rua, 2020), mainly through artistic-political rituals of a collective nature: clapping or pot banging at 8 pm

— or was it also at 9 pm? —, the screening of strongly localised audiovisuals — the Holy Week processions shown on Andalusian façades —, the theming of the Feria de Sevilla — and, of course, “traditional” creation — improvised or planned concerts, accessible from our analogue and digital windows.¹¹

Similarly, “the performative space is always in itself an atmospheric space” (Fischer-Lichte, 2011: 234) that precisely highlights the character of an event in which the subjects are not mere witnesses of what happens but rather experience the atmosphere in an active and transformative manner, particular and biased in equal measure. In this regard, it is useful to mention the essay *Le ParK* by Bruce Bégout, who provides a suggestive comment and analysis of the contemporary *metaPark*. For the French writer, “all the distinctive functions of parks appear completely intermingled: to protect, isolate, enclose, entertain, study, domesticate, classify, group, exterminate” (2014: 29). In a sense, we could see the state of emergency and the protocols established to guarantee the lockdown of the population as processes of cultural stabling designed to compose a kind of “neurourban” psychogeography¹² of which only fragmented scenes, ephemeral connections and symbolic consumptions will be known to the rhythm of “#Resistiré 2020” (Warner Music Spain).

Thus, in this intersubjective relationship, in that asymmetric exchange of gazes and locked down bodies, processes of homologation and stereotyping of behaviours and images are produced. In fact, there are rewarding mechanisms that make certain ways of doing visible to the detriment of others that will be made invisible or, in a pandemic, banned for violating the law or an undetermined notion of what the law allows. As Enric Puig explains:

Most of the gestures that we (re)produce, most of our actions, are not the work of an operation of creative freedom, but quite the opposite: they are the realisation of patterns that can be traced back to concrete forms of collective institution that ultimately have a core ideological reason (2020: 82).

However, I should qualify this domesticated vision of creative balcony micro-societies, in which citizens will express themselves identically through media that are as widespread as they are opaque. For example, apart from the usual techno-utopian or, at least, celebratory statements, Franco Berardi values in these media “their power of solidarity, grouping and liberation [...] a collective investigation of a psychoanalytic, political, aesthetic and poetic nature on an enormous scale” (2020: 159-160). Thus, users of social media become producers of added value through the use of, participation in, and exchange of content. The business model does not consist of the creation

11. Videos, memes and photographs are many and easily found in any search engine. In my presentation during the Symposium “I’m Playing!” I screened the report “Feria de Abril en los balcones”, available on *La Vanguardia* channel on YouTube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-pX85dRCf4>>. For me, the video perfectly illustrates this issue.

12. Bégout considers that this neuroarchitectural conception is inherent in *Le ParK*: “Streets should be seen as if they were synaptic channels, and crossroads, as chemical connectors. A new geography is highlighted, an unknown continent appears where interior and exterior exchange their positions in the midst of an unusual cortical synchronisation. The cartographic analogy between the layout of a city and the rugged terrain of the brain has no value as long as we do not transcend the link between urban meanders and cerebral alleys” (2014: 108).

and individual possession of data, but of massive, voluntary and open circulation or, rather, the desire to freely generate and share (Martín, 2012: 29-30).

In terms of the new intersubjective modes of production that are being developed during the pandemic, it is worth recalling Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of "interstice", an intersubjective space in which creator and audience come into contact to produce creative possibilities other than those determined by the conventional means of communication (2006: 16). The article "La estética de la pandemia", by Jorge Carrión, seems to point in this direction. Carrión compares the Zoom multi-screen with the balconies of building façades. According to the Catalan writer, both "share the absence of individual protagonism, a geometry without privileges" (Carrión, 2020). However, in opposition to the democratising and egalitarian theses about online gregariousness, it should be noted that, although most of these practices are aimed at the production of devices or spaces for horizontal sociability, an implicit and, sometimes, explicit hierarchy persists in every act of communication, a prior positioning of the interlocutors. Even in the most markedly anti-disciplinary projects, there is an individual or group – be it the discoverer, the promoter or the administrator – around which the execution of the piece orbits. The communities of users that are established around certain interests and creations do not interact harmoniously, but "enter into resonance or communication only in ritual events [...] that propose a series of fleeting, intense and at the same time distant participations" (Laddaga, 2010: 24).

Even at the risk of falling into a mere *boutade*, I think of other relational manifestations fostered by lockdown: collective training in gardens with swimming pools, community production of barbecues or durational performances featuring home delivery bicycles. Even theoretically "progressive" and participatory approaches, which deploy strategies conceived to question a certain bourgeois, mercantile and solipsist vision of art, have been assimilated by neoliberalism without great contradictions. This is undoubtedly one of the great dangers of relational art and, in Flavia Costa's terms, "a symptom of the time": a deactivating force of confrontation (in contemporary art) that "dilutes its heterogeneous, that is, critical and inassimilable potential" (2009: 12).

Coda

In the aforementioned essay by Coulasso, the Buenos Aires playwright comments that theatre – he specifically refers to Argentinean theatre – has been carried away by the "urgency" of technique (2020) and is impelled by a resultism that seeks to exorcise a kind of *horror vacui* through online hyperactivity and hyperexposure accessible from any device with an internet connection. On the verge of completing the first quarter of the 21st century, it would not be unreasonable to argue that the society of the spectacle has colonised almost all areas, temporalities, spaces and social and cultural imaginaries – productive and unproductive, public and private. In this way, the spectacularisation of intimacy, so characteristic of the hyperconnected subject, leads to the standardisation/reproduction of repertoire subjectivities. These apparently consensual behaviour models will maintain the

libertarian-rebellious appearance of the first stages of the web: the self that expresses itself directly through unregulated channels and formats. However, while a reproductive culture of certain “indoor” practices and discourses is consolidated, there is a noticeable establishment of a “relational pedagogy” encouraged from top to bottom in which interventions are described/prescribed in the public (cyber)space suitable for a Covidian context.

However, if performance and certain performance art expressions or happenings came to break the delimitation of theatrical roles and spaces, the materiality/signicity of the event, I wonder in what ways dissent could be worked against the normalised and institutionalised proliferation of procedures aimed at a “responsible” commonality. For example, the mere sight of a couple walking hand in hand down the street without a mask or gloves can provoke a reaction equivalent to the armed “walks” of Francis Alÿs through Mexico City or, at the very least, the shout — and subsequent denunciation — of a committed and exemplary citizen from their balcony or window. Or we could also think the other way around: what kind of symbolic and economic rewards do/will the achievements that scrupulously comply with such standards receive. In my opinion, it is paradoxical — even shocking — how far a collaborative practice can be standardised under the pretext of complying with an action protocol based on formal criteria such as the percentage of social immunity, the number of ICU beds available or the capacity to identify a new outbreak.

On the other hand, the apparent dematerialisation of human and affective relations has gone hand in hand with a regulatory praise of semiotic hyperproductivity and hypervisibility of affection. This artistic hypersocialisation, dominated in its first wave by practical relations within a context of forced lockdown and the aforementioned “balcony rituals (routines)”, has not only been well fed (back) by the media but has also consolidated a process of discipline and homogenisation of subjectivities. In addition to the observance and strict application of the law, the different authorities found in the meta-narrative of the balconies and in the applauseology a way to ensure social distancing. In this reading, it does not matter if fibre optic is lacking or if the windows overlook an interior patio. Any class distinction is therefore subsumed by the good vibe and democratising meta-story of creative urban balconies. As Alberto Santamaría eloquently puts it, “when critical tools turn into a gentle restorative and regenerating cream, perhaps we should be vigilant” (2019: 19).



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