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Impersonal Presences: tones of human in the landscape-scene

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ABSTRACT – Impersonal Presences: tones of human in the landscape-scene – Considered as an acting feature, presence is generally approached from the actor's perspective. Disrupting this conception, this work intends to grasp presence as a relational, not a personal quality. For this purpose, two performances will be analyzed: Heiner Goebbels's *Stifters Dinge* and Claude Régy's *Variations on death*. Created as landscapes, both performances develop a non-anthropocentric aesthetics of the scene and allow envision presence as a perception phenomenon and from the point of view of the audience activity.

Keywords: **Presence. Landscape-Scene. Non-Anthropocentric Aesthetics. Goebbels. Régy.**

RÉSUMÉ – Des Présences Impersonnelles: les tons d'humain sur la scène-paysage – Considérée comme une propriété de celui qui joue, la présence est généralement abordée du point de vue du travail de l'acteur. En rupture avec cette conception, l'article cherche à penser la présence comme une qualité relationnelle, et pas personnelle. Pour cela, deux spectacles seront analysés: *Stifters Dinge* de Heiner Goebbels et *Variations sur la mort* de Claude Régy. Composés comme des paysages, l'un et l'autre développent une esthétique non anthropocentrique de la scène et aident à penser la présence comme un phénomène de la perception et par le prisme de l'activité du spectateur.

Mots-clés: **Présence. Scène-Paysage. Esthétique Non Anthropocentrique. Goebbels. Régy.**

RESUMO – Presenças Impessoais: tons de humano na cena-paisagem – Por ser considerada como uma propriedade daquele que atua, a presença costuma ser abordada do ponto de vista do trabalho do ator. Rompendo com essa concepção, o artigo pretende compreender a presença como uma qualidade relacional, e não pessoal. Para tanto, serão analisados dois espetáculos: *Stifters Dinge*, de Heiner Goebbels, e *Variações sobre a morte*, de Claude Régy. Compostos como paisagens, ambos desenvolvem uma estética não antropocêntrica da cena e permitem pensar a presença como um fenômeno da percepção e pelo prisma da atividade do espectador.

Palavras-chave: **Presença. Cena-Paisagem. Estética Não-Antropocêntrica. Goebbels. Régy.**



Life in not something personal (Deleuze; Parnet, 1998, p. 6).

My gaze is clear like a sunflower.
It is my custom to walk the roads
Looking right and left
And sometimes looking behind me,
And what I see at each moment
Is what I never saw before,
And I'm very good at noticing things.
I'm capable of feeling the same wonder
A newborn child would feel
If he noticed that he'd really and truly been born.
I feel at each moment that I've just been born
Into a completely new world... (Pessoa, 1946, p. 24).

When used in the field of theatrical practices and studies, the notion of presence experiences a semantic unfolding. The presence in scene is not limited to the mere fact of being present, but it also designates a way of being present. "From the verb to be (*being present*) to the verb to have (*having presence*)" (Féral, 2012, p. 14, author's translation), presence becomes, therefore, an inborn or developed quality of the actor, an attribute of his person. That is, in this case, presence is not a state only, but an intensity, and as such it can be evaluated and compared, as the actor's being present, as Josette Féral claims, "[...] is more than the banal being of any person there" (Féral, 2012, p. 14, author's translation).

For being considered as a property of the one who performs, presence uses to be thought from the point of view of the actor's work. Remembering Pavis's rubric (2008, p. 305): "[...] having presence is, in the theatrical jargon, knowing to captivate the attention of the audience and to impose oneself". The one who has presence is the one, as it is said, who steals the scene, knows how to become the center of the sonorous and visual attention of the audience in the stage. This frequent definition involves three elements: the actor, the spectator and the attention. There is a strong emphasis on the first, the one who has the *gift*, little is said of the second, and even less of the attention, or the tension, that binds actor and spectator.

Considering presence as a phenomenon of the perception, it is intended in this work to emphasize the construction of attention by means of spectacles in which the actor, literally, does not occupy a central position within the



scenic composition. It is, therefore, a matter of understanding how the mode and principles of composition of a spectacle, including all the elements of which the staging makes use, affect the perceptive position of the spectator, what will make possible a reflection on the presence from the point of view of the spectatorial activity.

If today there is a compelling need of (re)thinking the concept of presence in the performing arts, this cannot be considered isolated, but within a set of dramaturgical and aesthetic mutations that work the contemporary scene. Although several theories and practices of acting and performance have questioned this definition of presence, it cannot be denied that it remains consensual and deeply rooted in both the state of spirit of the actor and the spectator. It is assumed here that the difficult detachment in relation to this conception, bound and focused in the figure of the actor, does not concern only the performance itself, but an anthropocentric vision of the theater to which the *attribute-presence* is strongly linked. Based on this assumption, it is sought to analyze how the decentralization of the human figure can suggest another conception of presence in the field of the performing arts. In other words: how to (re)think the presence from a non-anthropocentric scene? The hypothesis at stake is that the decentralization of the actor must not be thought as weakness of its importance; on the contrary, as a potentializing of its presence.

Within the criticism to the Aristotelianism that characterizes much of the modern and contemporary theatrical thought, the weight of the text centrism, assigning to the text a matricial and central value within the representation, seems not to be such a problematic aspect anymore. It remains, however, a less addressed question and with which perhaps one has more difficulty to deal with, which is the main place of the actor within the scenic composition. Resulting from an experience of the perception, the presence cannot be considered in an absolute way: *an actor has or does not have presence*. The attention that binds actor and spectator emerges from a set of conditions, involving all the elements of the performance. According to this perspective, it would be inconceivable to think the phenomenon of the scenic presence taking in account only the body of the actor and the characteristics of his work, without considering the conditions in which he becomes present in front of the spectator: the type of lighting, the distance that separates him from the audience, his positioning and movement inside the scenic space, the

chromatic codes of the scenography etc. All these conjugated elements make possible, or not, the existence of presence.

Deleuze said that “life is not something personal” (Deleuze; Parnet, 1998, p. 6); it is dared to say here that presence is not either. Neither state, nor property. Neither being, nor having... and if, when surrendering to the virtues of the impersonality, we could merely say: there is presence.

The Personhood of the Scene and the Anthropocentric Scene

Like other arts, in the Western theater there is an anthropocentric ideal inherited from the Renaissance and modern culture. Breaking with the medieval theocentrism, the anthropocentrism, as described by Daniel Ploughed when referring over all to the History of painting, brings to the surface the need to think and represent a world that is “commensurable to the man” (Arasse, 2004, p. 67, author’s translation), that is, to the human scale, taking man as center and unit of measure. In painting, this is clearly translated with the concept of the picture introduced by Alberti: “[...] an open window through which I can represent history, establishing the size that I want to give to men in my painting” (Alberti, 1992, p. 115, author’s translation). Everything indicates that Alberti, a great reader of Aristotle, uses here the word history referring to the Aristotelian *muthos*, what consists of saying that, in the pictorial Renaissance perspective, the world is read and understood through the prism of human actions. In this sense, the anthropocentrism not only establishes a thematic preference for human actions, but it also establishes – and the technique of the perspective is the main tool of this transformation – a way to read the visible, mobilizing and directing the eye of the spectator to the man in action.

In theater, the anthropocentric ideal is conjugated, in an even more tangible way, with the Aristotelian precepts. Assigning to history a chaining of actions developed by characters, a foundational value within the tragic composition, Aristotle (1999) suggests a model of representation guided by human actions, which must be linked according to a causal logic. In this way, the philosopher links the production of meaning of the work to the evolution of fable inscribed in the text, assigning to the other components of the representation a secondary value. Furthermore, it cannot be forgotten that the Aristotelian paradigm of dramatical composition is all thought from a



supposed reaction of the reader/spectator, that is, the action is constructed in function of a result: *catharsis*. All the means used by the dramatic author must converge to the cathartic goal. Therefore, it is an “emotional device” (Mervant-Roux, 1998, p. 66, author’s translation) that tries to reach two specific feelings: pity and terror. These two feelings can and must emerge, according to the philosopher, not from the spectacle itself, but from the story contained in the text. All the procedures suggested by Aristotle aim at effects of surprise and play with the spectator’s expectation. This is the tension that generates and guides the attention of the Aristotelian reader/spectator, and is what can be called dramatism. It is worth noticing that it is not only a literary model of drama that we inherit from the *Poetics*, but a way of composition of the action that establishes and nurtures a causal expectation in the spectator, that is, a type of spectatorial activity based on the idea that being attentive in the theater is to follow a story, to understand how and why that happens with this or that character (a logic with which we still coexist nowadays not only in the theater, but also in several audiovisual practices). The Aristotelian dramatic system assigns to the actor/character a central position in the representation, since being a carrier of the text he also is being the carrier of the meaning of the work and its main conveyor. It is this way that, within the Aristotelian logocentric perspective, the speaking body of the actor becomes the focus of the spectator’s look, who moves from one character to the other as the utterances circulate between them.

When we speak of an anthropocentric perception of the representation, we speak of a way of composition of the scenic writing that thinks and positions the actor as the main conveyor of the meaning of the work. Despite the questioning of the linear and causal construction of the Aristotelian model, it is observed that the need of counting on the actor as the center of the scenic composition still is hardly questionable. It is assumed here that the personal character of the presence is intrinsically linked with the responsibility of the meaning that the Aristotelian tradition assigned to the figure of the actor. This responsibility would justify a whole series of scenic writing and reading codes with which we were used, such as: looking at the actor who is speaking, assigning a prominence position to the one who speaks, avoiding the simultaneity of sayings, speaking high and clearly, developing expressive and significant gestures capable of attracting the look... a set of procedures, carried through almost mechanically, that direct the audiovisual attention of the

spectator to the speaking body and put the other elements of the scenic composition to its service.

The Landscape-Scene and the Possibility of a Non-Anthropocentric Aesthetics

Even if the authority of the text and the principle of causal and linear construction of the action proposed by the Aristotelian dramatic model has been quite criticized, the spectatorial activity¹ and the anthropocentric aesthetic generated by it have been little criticized.

However, there is a text, a conference by Gertrude Stein in 1934, entitled *Plays*, that questions this type of spectatorial activity. It could be considered as the matrix of a non-anthropocentric aesthetics. In this excerpt, Stein, with no apparent theoretical pretension, describes her relationship with the theatrical art from her point of view as a spectator. Her reflection starts from the observation of a nervousness when watching theater plays, a result of a mismatch between the play's action and the spectator's emotion:

The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience.

What this says is this.

Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So, your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play (Stein, 1998, p. 244).

Based on this observation, Stein establishes the possibly responsible factors for this mismatch between action and emotion and creates, thus, a real study of her behavior as a theater spectator. The author reports three factors. First, she assumes that the submission of the temporality of the scenic action to the temporality of the fictitious action hinders her to create her own secular relation with the work. Another point is the difficulty of looking and listening at the same time, without the competition between these two senses making her lose the thread of the story. Finally, she considers that the fact of having to quickly become familiar with the characters – to identify who is who in the stage and the roles of each one in the plot – removes her from the present time of the action. This exercise of chasing the information of the story is what

generates, according to Stein, a nervousness, an apprehension that detaches her from the experience of the spectacle itself, without allowing her the time-space of contemplation. In short, it is like the fact of having to follow and understand a story throughout the representation hindered the emotion of following its real course, hindered, so to speak, the synchronization between the emotional time² of the spectator and the time of the sonorous and visual perception of the work. It is observed that all the obstacles described by Stein are linked with the existence of a story and the fact that the spectator feels in the duty of following and understanding this story. Without entering into a theoretical debate, Stein tackles the central artery of the Aristotelian system: *muthos* and its relationship with the spectator.

This is the reflection that leads her to suppose the idea of a *landscape-play*, refusing the principle that, to compose a play, it is necessary to tell a story:

The landscape has its formation and as after all a play has to have formation and be in relation one thing to the other thing and as the story is not the thing as any one is always telling something then the landscape not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail, the story is only of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway. And of that relation I wanted to make a play and I did, a great number of plays (Stein, 1998, p. 264).

Setting the story in a rearward position, Stein suggests, with her idea of landscape-play, a way of action composition that creates the possibility of a non-anthropocentric scene. That is, a scene planned in a correlational way, without hierarchy between the elements in presence, without having first and second plane, center and periphery. The coexistence with the *avant-garde* of the painting of her time – Stein was a great expert and collector of pictures –, exerts a strong influence on her work, particularly affected by Cézanne's thought:

Until then, for me, the composition consisted of a central idea in relation to which the other elements were accompaniments or additional, without never existing by themselves, and Cézanne brings the idea that in a composition one thing is always as important as the other one. Each part is as important as the whole. This caused quite an impression on me...

[...] Look, just like he could create an atmosphere and it was not only the realism of the characteristics, but the realism of the composition that was

important. Because, after all, for me, a human being is as important as another human being, and it can be said that a landscape presents equal values, a grass tuft has the same value the same as a tree (Stein, 1987, p. 18, author's translation).

In fact, one of the basic characteristics of the composition of a landscape is the lack of a center. In it, as in a constellation, everything is correlated, without the existence of a central element that captures and focus the attention of the spectator. This is why, referring to Stein's intuition, when pointing to Robert Wilson's theater, Lehmann quotes Elinor Fuchs, who suggests that there might be "[...] the crystallization of a type of representation that stimulates and is based on the faculty of hugging landscapes with the look. Its structures do not follow the lines of the conflict and the resolution, but draw multipurpose spatial relations" (Lehmann, 2007, p. 134, author's translation).

Another basic characteristic in the composition of a landscape is the horizon. "There is no landscape without horizon" (Collot, 1988, p. 11, author's translation). The horizon outlines the scale of the landscape. An imaginary line specific to the human perception, the horizon is translated as a double visual effect. While it marks the closing of our field of vision, it suggests the presence of a non-visible space, creating, therefore, a tension between what we see and what we cannot see, between the finitude of the real perception and the imagined infinite. For suggesting an infinitely great space, out of the reach of the human vision and intangible, the presence of the horizon transforms the nature of the human actions, as they, not being central, are perceived as movements inside a whole, and not as a narrative focus of the image.

It is already perceivable that a suggestion of a landscape-scene, supposed by Stein, can affect the conception of presence, in the extent that its acentric composition, tending to the infinite, liberates the actor from his position of semantic mast of the theatrical work. The emergence of a non-anthropocentric scenic aesthetics, suggested in detail in Stein's reflection, reverberates in so many other signals.

The *Impersonnage* and the Specter of the Actor's Absence

It is not from nowadays that the signs of an "alternative vision to the anthropocentric ideal" vision of the scene (Lehmann, 2007, p. 134) inherited from the Renaissance and modern European culture hover. What was called

crisis of the character is symptomatic of this trend. The untying of the being and of his will to act, the loss of identity and the blurring of the individualizing traces of the characters, or better of the *impersonnages* (Sarrazac, 2012a) that inhabit the modern and contemporary drama, already question the statute of the presence of the actor.

The Pirandellianism, as Jean Pierre Ryngaert emphasizes, already reveals “[...] the emptying of the characters and the displacement of figures who are poorly embodied or relegated to the narrative lack of use” (Sarrazac, 2012b, p. 137). The search for the author of the six Pirandellian characters, rambling through the four corners of the theater, is already in fact a metaphor of the actor in search for his place in the scene, once destitute of his narrative function.

Maeterlinck’s dramatical work also announces the phantasmatic character of the presence of the actor. The first didascalia of *The Blind* sets the tone of the issue. How to represent scenically those impassive figures, “with the elbows in the knees and the hands in the face”, already condemned to the darkness of the forest where they were lost? How to make present in the scene those beings almost figures, luminous specters threatened by the gloomy landscape? How to think the notion of presence from beings that define themselves by the fact of being in full disappearance?

Yet, we can think of plays where the characters are introduced by letters in alphabetical order, as it is the case of the Sarah Crane’s *Crave* cast: A, B, C, M. When replacing the name by a letter, the author omits all the personal information that identify the characters. The enunciating is nothing more than voices, sonorous reminiscences wandering through a mental space, since nothing is known of the body that supports it. Similar to the mouth loosen from the body in Beckett’s *Not me*, the letter-voices also bring the question of the dissociation between sonorous and visual presence, another aspect under which one can think the presence in face of the challenges of the contemporary theatrical writing. Ultimately, these challenges question the need of the actor in scene when, like in Heiner Müller’s *Description of an image*, the author does not designate any enunciating of the word. “Who speaks here? This is the question that underlies” (Sarrazac, 2012, p. 139). The theater stage director must think if the absence of an enunciating does not create the possibility of an actor absence. The actor, as Ryngaert defines, “[...] must take on these pale

figures to which a supplement of flesh and tight contours would give a resolute and false existence of character in excess” (Sarrazac, 2012, p. 139).

To these dramaturgic indications of a non-anthropocentric aesthetics, which would question the physical presence of the actor, it can be added several theoretical premonitions. In fact, the possible absence of the man in the stage is an idea that hovers the theatrical thought for over a century. First, a short text by Kleist published in 1810, called *On the marionette theater*, could be remembered. In it, the author speaks of his fascination for the marionette’s mechanic gracefulness which, in contrast with the live actor, cannot allow itself to be carried away by no form of sentimental instability (Kleist, 1998).

Maeterlinck, in turn, calls for “[...] a shadow, a projection of symbolic forms, or for a being that would have a live appearance without being really alive” (Maeterlinck, 1901, p. 395, author’s translation), something that would replace the human being, as, continues the author, “the absence of the man seems indispensable” (Maeterlinck, 1901, p. 395, author’s translation). In this same sense, Craig, a critic of the realistic performance of his time, speaks of the *übermarionette* as a way of exceeding the actor’s limits, searching in the effigy the reliability and the precision of the movements.

Indeed, what is at stake for the three afore mentioned authors is not literally the extinction of the actor and his replacement for inanimate beings. What seems to be clear in its various purposes is the search for a limpid movement, a vibration of the life free from the weight of the matter. Speaking of Kleist, Plassard observes that “[...] the author has little interest for the real marionettes: what attracts him are the curves and the ellipses that their limbs draw when dancing, is in this abstract perception of this drawing that, according to him, we must search the work of art” (Plassard, 1992, p. 27, author’s translation). Everything indicates, as Plassard describes, that Craig’s *übermarionette* is inscribed in the continuity of Kleist’s intuition: “[...] dead matter, but crossed by the blow of the spirit, the *übermarionette* erases the flesh and the work of the actor to produce a quintessence of its image, a mediation between here and beyond” (Plassard, 1992, p. 53, author’s translation).

The search for the essentiality of presence, manifest in these authors’ provocations, reverberates in Stein’s reflections: “I was not interested in the manufacturing of people’s reality, but in their essence or, as a painter would say, for their value” (Stein, 1987, p. 11, author’s translation).

The concept of tonal value, to which Stein refers, is generally used in painting to assign the intensity degree of a tone in relation to the light (or to the shade), visually establishing the density, the consistency of an object, but also its part of transparency and immateriality. Transposing this concept to the theatrical composition, associating it more specifically with the issue of presence, requires a study of the way how the actor's body is worked in the space-time of the representation by the other components of the theater stage director's pallet.

Without assigning to this *quintessence* of presence a mystical character, and without associating it with a possible actor's geniality, it is now intended to analyze how this tone of the presence can be worked through mechanisms that transform our habits of scene reading. For such, it will be addressed two spectacles that develop, in quite diverse ways, non-anthropocentric aesthetics, considering "new arts of reading and looking" (Didi-Hubermann, 1998, p. 221) for the scene. They are *Stifters Dinge* (2007), from Heiner Goebbels, and *Variations on death* (2003), from Claude Régy, text by Jon Fosse.

The Disclosing of the Things in Heiner Goebbels's *Stifters Dinge*: thinking presence from the absence

Emblematic for its radicalness, *Stifters Dinge* is a spectacle without actors. The choice for starting by its analysis does not translate a will to present it as a model of what one tries to call non-anthropocentric aesthetics, but as a need to think presence from the absence, trying to understand how this affects the perceptive behavior of the spectator.

In Heiner Goebbels' trajectory, *Stifters Dinge* is inscribed in the continuity of a research baptized by him as *aesthetics of the absence*, which began with the spectacle *Eraritjatijaka*. In this, the actor Andres Wilms would leave the stage and, thanks to a camera that followed him, we could see him live leaving the theater, crossing the city and arriving to his bedroom. While the images of the absent actor were projected in a screen, a concert developed in the stage. Half an hour later, the walls of the scene were displaced, disclosing a hidden plane of the stage where we found the actor on a bedroom-like set. Involving the spectator in a game of expectations between virtual and real presence, Goebbels could evidence through this spectacle how much the absence of the actor in the stage modifies the spectator's attitude and quality of perception:

When there is no one else in scene to take over the responsibility for the presentation and the representation, when nothing more is shown, this is when the spectators begin to discover things themselves. The absence of performers, who often suck all the attention to them monopolizing the visual field, suddenly allows the public to liberate their sense of discovery. Only the disappearance of the performers creates the emptiness where this freedom and this pleasure become possible (Goebbels, press release³, author's translation).

From this observation, Goebbels makes a second step with the creation of *Stifters Dinge*. In the spectacle, the German theater stage director invites the spectator to enter in a world animated by things (the title means *Stifters's Things* in English), in which visual and sonorous micro perceptions proliferate. The only feat is technical. The artist creates a gigantic and beautiful entirely motorized gadget made of metals, twigs, tracks, swimming pools, screens, smoke, debris of a piano, light and projections. This strange hybrid landscape is orchestrated by the noise of machines, tribal chants, Lévi-Strauss's voice and an actor reading excerpts from a Stifters' novel. All the elements have their own life and move at the same time, occupying and exploring the three dimensions of the scene, as it can be seen in the picture below (Image 1).



Image 1 – Stifters Dinge's hybrid landscape, Heiner Goebbels, 2007. Source: photo by Mario Del Corto.

The screens are displaced cutting the vision that one has of the space. Water bubbles, smoke exhales, the stack of piano carcasses set under tracks



advances towards the audience... As in a landscape, the movements are simultaneously juxtaposed and with no causal relation, without favoring any of the produced perceptions. The proposal brings with it an ecological dimension, but that can be considered more as a consequence than the *message* of the play. The political purpose of *Stifters Dinge* is expressed less through the advocacy of an ecological cause than through the wish to transform the vision and hearing of the spectator, leading him to perceive the world without the mediation of the human presence. More than representing a dehumanized world, Goebbels tries to transform the theatrical scene in a *museum of the perception*:

When one is able to make the attention of the spectator to focus on the noise of a rock slowly dislocating, it can be said that there is a real discovery of 'things', something close to an experience of the nature (Heiner Goebbels excerpt during the spectacle's press conference in the 2008 Avignon Festival)⁴.

However, it is not enough to put things in movement for the spectator to find them. If it is possible to speak of a transformation of the spectatorial perceptive position in face of *Stifters Dinge*, it is necessary to consider that Goebbels develops a detailed work of composition that transgresses the habits of writing and reading of the scene. All the techniques of which theater makes use are there convoked, nothing is random, everything is thought, combined and devised.

From the Italian stage, projected in function of the perspectivist construction of the look, it was inherited the scene picture limiting the field of vision of the audience, the opposition between the proscenium and the stage background and a centripetal logic of occupation of the scenic space. These are the main axes through which anthropocentrism could be translated scenically. Often, we coexist with these codes, which are expressed in the mere way how the actors occupy and move in the space, without us realizing that. In this sense, it is worth saying that the boldness of *Stifters Dinge* is not translated solely by the absence of actors, but for the rupture with certain principles of scenic composition that it generates.

It is noticed, first, the emptying of the geometric center of the scenic space, a point that is traditionally aimed at and favored for the positioning of the actor. In the occupation of the scenic space, there is a tendency to centralization, a centripetal logic and dynamics of positioning and displacing in space and a (unconscious) refusal of the bordering zones of the floor. In

Stifters Dinge, there is no center because the visible dimensions of the scene, however frontal, are always in full reconfiguration. The incessant movement of the things constantly modifies the zones of visibility of the spectator, the look is always reframing without the possibility of setting in a convergence point.

The second disregarded space convention in *Stifters Dinge* is the separation between the downstage and the backstage, responsible for a hierarchic division of the vision planes (it is generally said of the first and second plane). No matter how much this consideration can seem formal, it is doubtless that the shaping of our look, since the invention of the linear perspective, is conditioned by the compartmentalization in planes. It suffices to notice that most of the TV and publicity images with which we coexist are ruled by this logic of supremacy of what is in the front. In *Stifters Dinge*, there is a continuity between the planes, three-dimensionality is worked in all the senses without allowing the creation of a hiatus between the front and the background of the stage. All the front of the scenic space is worked in a creeping way by the presence of immense bubbling water puddles. From this lower aquatic plan emerges a stack of twigs and pianos whose verticality is accentuated by the ascending movement of smoke. That is, as the look distances, it is raised. The depth is conjugated to the verticality, creating a continuous movement of the look and preventing a hierarchy between the first and the second plane of the scenic composition. The material limits of the scenic box (floor, ceiling and walls) are concealed by the shade, the projections, smoke and the water, so that the space dimensions seem infinite, so that the look is worked by an effect of horizon of the scene. There is frontality, but it is an immersive frontality, in contrast with the model to the Italian way, that frames the vision and separates the object-scene from the subject-spectator. Just like before front of a landscape, the spectator feels at the same time in front and already inside of what he contemplates.

Finally, the third characteristic of *Stifters Dinge*'s composition is the simultaneity of the actions, a simultaneity that is constant and demands that the look interlaces through the emptiness between the actions instead of skipping between them. Indeed, the simultaneity is not uncommon, but most of the times we see spectacles that use simultaneous actions as an effect, a moment of the performance. In *Stifters Dinge*'s case, it is worth highlighting that simultaneity is not an effect of the stage, but a constant principle of the spectacle's composition, promoting the vagrancy of the look.

The combination of all these mechanisms, here exposed briefly, is what promotes the discovery of the things. In this sense, even though there are no actors on the stage, there is presence. An impersonal presence that is expressed through things, in the agitation of the piano keys, in the bubbling of the water, in the coming and going of the handles... All these micro perceptions, usually buffered by the existence of the actor and the preponderance of the story, here are sublimated, like each detail were perceived with a *zoom*. And if all these sensations have a little of hallucination, it is not, as Deleuze would say, because “[...] the presence imitates the hallucination, but because it is hallucinating” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 170 author’s translation).

It is not the Aristotelian surprise, but we can speak, paraphrasing Fernando Pessoa, of an *essential baffle* of being aware that what one sees is what was never seen before. One baffles in front of the revealing of things, when things appear to life, like when the child discovers the displacement of the small electric train, or when one sees an orange shade never seen before dawning from the sky, or when, looking to a twig, one finds in it the micromovement of a walking stick. The phenomenon of the presence happens in this micro revealing of the things. The dramatism here emerges from these amazements in front of life and the immediate possibility of its disappearance. Goebbels uses to speak of *drama of the perception*.

Super Presence in Claude Régy’s Variations on death: presence and slowness

If *Stifters Dinge*’s non-anthropocentric aesthetics is constructed from the absence of actors, one cannot make of Goebbels ‘choice a *sine qua non* condition to speak of landscape-scene and decentralization of the human figure in stage.

Thus, it would be inappropriate to think that the development of a non-anthropocentric aesthetics disdains the actor’s work. On the contrary, the displacement from the center requires from the actor a keen listening of everything that is around him and a constant awareness of the reciprocal affectation between his body and the other elements of the scenic writing. It is about the development of a porosity and an expansion of the micro perceptions experienced during the performance, a work that the French director Claude Régy has been improving along his rigorous trajectory.

Régy speaks of a “super presence”, a presence that is born from the distancing, that emerges when “[...] the actors seem excluded from the stage [...] as a prolongation of the presence towards the infinite” (Régy, 1999, p. 54, author’s translation). From his actors, Régy demands the same rhythmic and millimetric accuracy that Goebbels applies to the orchestration of his machinery.

I found out that every millimeter counts in the image. If we are alert to move and speak, if we are alert to everything that happens around, alert to the other living beings that are here, but also to the volume, to the quality of the light, to the noise that one produces, to the dust in suspension to everything, the heating, each modification, no matter how little it is, and wherever it is produced, reverberates in the set of the image in all points of the space. This is about an accuracy of the image, the bodies in the space, the bodies in relation to the objects, and of each body in relation to all the others. It is a sensitive interdependence (Régy, 1999, p. 68, author’s translation).

It is with this rigor and keen sense of the imagetic composition that Régy, in a play of 2003, addresses the text of the Norwegian author Jon Fosse, *Variations on death*. With no division in acts or scenes, the play’s action creates a floating temporality, a mental space crossed by nameless enigmatic figures of which we only know whether they are men or women, young or old. The phases of the life seem to mix in an extensive interlacing of dialogues of *ritornellos*. This way, the text elaborates a poetics of memory, in which it is not known whether those beings exist or existed, whether they are alive or dead as they speak. Such dramaturgy raises two basic questions to the theater stage director: how to scenically translate a mental space? How to make present beings of a doubtful existence, reminiscences of the existence, circulating in the thresholds between life and death?

For the scenography of this spectacle, Régy imagines, together with the scenographer Daniel Jeanneteau, an empty space to the side of a black hole. For this, they transform the architecture of the great room of the Théâtre de La Colline in Paris, formed by a frontal room with a fixed structure with a deep scenic box facing a big plateia. When entering in the room, which was remodeled for the spectacle, we come across an immense white platform that overflows from the habitual the scenic box, swallowing, like a wave, the ten first rows of the audience. Softening the walls of the scene with black fabric, the scenography conceals the geometric limits of the stage; therefore, one has the impression that the impressive white platform floats amidst the complete

darkness. From the background of the stage, in as extremely slow walking, bodies, like silhouettes that appear in the horizon of a road. The luminous and chromatic contrast, as it can be observed in the pictures below (Image 2 and Image 3), between the environmental blackness and the radiant white floor, creates a horizon effect.



Image 2 and Image 3: Effect of horizon in Claude Régy's *Variations on death* (text of Jon Fosse), Théâtre de la Colline, 2003. Source: photos by Brigitte Enguerrand.

When looking to the back of the scene, we have the impression of being in front of the infinite (that is, we have the conscience that what we see is only one side of the visible, like one side of the cubes described by Merleau-Ponty (1945)), and seeing bodies coming from beyond, mirages amidst a desert-like landscape. We could hardly speak of entrances of the actors of the stage or imagine them leaving the backstage. “Nothing duller and more embarrassing, says Régy, than an actor entering into the scene like he was crossing a door” (interview of Claude Régy *apud* Guinebault-Szlamowicz, 2002, p. 500). In Régy's *mises en scènes*, entering and leaving the scene always happens like becoming visible or invisible.

The sensation of space vastness creates the scale of the landscape and relativizes the place of the actor in the stage. There is, indeed, a plastic continuity between the bodies and the floor, like those figures, there erect, were luminous reflexes of the horizontal platform. Threatened by a disturbing

immateriality, the human bodies emerge like carnal specters, encircled forms in white in full appearing or disappearing, no one knows for sure.

Once again, everything is a matter of composition. “Composition. Composition. This is the only definition of art” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1991, p. 99). Without possible mysticisms, it should be understood how the auric impression that escapes from the bodies is produced in *Variations on death*.

Like he defines himself, Claude Régy is a creator of empty spaces⁵. An empty space is not synonymous of an unoccupied zone, but of a space in which the distances between the bodies are perceived as intensity vectors, as in a magnetic field. In *Variations on death*, it is essential to observe how the bodies move through the immense white platform, only occupying its borders and leaving its center empty. This way, long diagonal lines are drawn between the bodies in scene. As the characters come and go, they form pairs, triads, quartets. The lines traced by the actors’ movements produce geometric figures: from the dot to the line, the line to the triangle and so on. The principles of space occupation are the symmetry and the contrasts between long and short distances (as we tried to reproduce in the sketch below), what causes the elongation of the spectator’s look, which expands from one end of the scene to the other (Image 4). This way, it is a game between the emptiness and the full in a space ruled by tensioned distances is created. Distance is here thought and perceived as what, at the same time, links and separates us. As suggested by Paul Zumthor (2014 well, p. 15), distance is “[...] the space that is born from the awareness that I have of this double effect”.

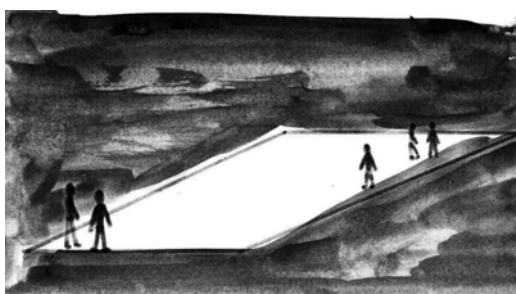


Image 4 – Sketch: the floor balance in *Variations on death*. Source: the author.

The aesthetics of *Variations on death* brings to the surface a physics of the scene⁶ that stimulates a specific visual attention: instead of focusing separately on each one of the bodies, as the sayings come and go between them, the look infiltrates in the *between* bodies.

To this we must add that in *Variations on death* the vectorial extension of the vision field is equally conditioned by the lighting. Without spots, the luminous drawing of the spectacle aims homogenizing the vision that we have of the stage, like this were unanimously illuminated by the sun. Coming with great intensity from behind the scene, light floods the floor, giving a clear contour to the silhouettes, whose long shades seem to drain off along the floor. The tight and clear costumes accentuate this phenomenon. Sculptured by the light, the bodies enter our retinas like luminous irradiations. It is perceived a phenomenon of symbiosis between the light and the matter, without knowing whether those beings, apparently photophagic, emerge from the light or whether the light emerge from them.

What matters is that there is a magnetism of a hypnotic character there. A magnetism that results from the space vastness, the luminous saturation, but also from the slowness with which the bodies compose space geometry.

It is also worth emphasizing that one of the basic principles of Claude Régy's aesthetics is slowness, which applies both in the actors moving and speaking. However, as Féral observes with pertinence, the slowing down becomes a factor of potentializing of the presence in Régy's aesthetics.

The time of creation is the time of slowness. Indeed, the slowing down of the gestures allows to fight against the naturalism and the representation. It 'de-realizes' the movement and compels the actor to leave his quotidian until reaching a differentiated state. The slowing down accentuates by itself the presence in space, in duration, in sounds, in perceptions, suspending the imaginary of the actor and the spectator. Such slowing down is carrier of an immateriality feeling, immateriality of the body and the performance that characterizes Claude Régy's spectacles so well. This state - which is neither ecstasy nor trance - sharpens the presence of the actor who becomes, thus, written and said word. It opens the inner and intimate space of the actor for that one, immense, from beyond. The actor becomes permeable to all dimensions and then fills the floor, however empty of his presence (Féral, 2015, p. 326).

One of the major consequences of this *derealization* of the movement, pointed by Féral, is the transformation of the nature of the scenic action that, when slowing down clearly, unties from its narrative value. Thus, when the actors walk through the stage, they do not represent characters who move with an intention or goal. They just walk, like leaves that fall from the trees or like clouds that transit. Without having to render account to the fable, action

becomes pure movement, liberating the body of the actor from the responsibility of being the interpreter of the story.

In this sense, slowness, subtly conjugated to spatial and luminous factors already analyzed, is what depolarizes the presence of the individual's body. The slowed down tension is so intense that it ends up flooding the scenic space, in other words, it *depersonalizes* the presence. It is impossible to say, in front of a Régy's spectacle, that an actor has more presence than another – just like one would not say that the plant has more presence than the stone – because presence is what they create together. This is what happens between them, between them and everything that is around. Nobody has the presence. It exists.

Bodies-Traces

There is presence. It is the time, that, converted into space, separates and binds the *impersonnages* projected by Fosse, “I do not write characters, I write the human” (apud Sarrazac, 2012a, p. 201). And, so that the human manifests in the stage, presence needs to leave the person, to be unloaded from the body, so that it is emptied and moves away.

The aura that is revealed both in Stifters' things and in the photophagic bodies of *Variations on death* is “[...] the index of the detachment itself, its effectiveness and its sign at the same time” (Didi-Hubermann, 1998, p. 204).

Inventing new ways of reading and looking at the scene, Régy and Goebbels give to the bodies a value that is different from the rigid center, thus creating bodies-traces. Returning to the prism of the landscape, it can be remembered here an interesting precept of the aesthetics of the Chinese traditional painting, in which one of the major concerns was the value of man inside the landscape.

When one inserts characters in a landscape, the traces used to draw these characters must be in accordance with the ones that are used to draw the mountains, the rocks, the trees, the plants, etc. [...]; therefore, it is not about describing bodies, but conveying their spirit, in communion with the landscape (Cheng, 1989, p. 132).

In Chinese landscape paintings, the bodies appear like scratches, pigments or fragile geometric forms that indeed seem to sprout from or to draw out the natural elements. These traces, “a unique weft of space and time”



(Didi-Hubermann, 1998, p. 204), exist as in the vision of landscape suggested by Stein for being linked to the whole. And this sensitive interdependence, returning to Régy's expression, manifests by a certain degree of immateriality that potentializes the image and makes possible the phenomenon of the presence.

Although these bodies-traces are not positioned nor conceived as the center of the attention, they awaken a disturbing fascination, often hypnotic, a grasping of the retina to the live thing that, in a literal blinking of the eyes, can stop being. "When seeing is feeling that something inescapably escapes to us, that is: when seeing is losing. Everything is there" (Didi-Hubermann, 1998, p. 34).

Just like the contemplating of a passing soap bubble, the look to the scene "[...] opens us to an emptiness that looks at us, concerns to us and, in a certain sense, constitutes us" (Didi-Hubermann, 1998, p. 31), an experience that we could baptize as drama of the presence.

Notes

- ¹ In this aspect, we cannot forget the importance of Pirandellian and Brechtian reflections.
- ² The emotion, if we understand it etymologically from the Latin *motio*, is movement (not a result), therefore it can be considered that when Stein speaks of emotional time she refers to the duration of a movement.
- ³ Available in: <<http://www.vidy.ch/sites/vidy.ch/files/imports/DV/DV-stiftersdingeFR.pdf>>. Accessed in: 01 December 2013.
- ⁴ Available in: <<http://www.theatre-video.net/video/Conference-de-presse-du-5-juillet-1223>>. Accessed in: 20 November 2016.
- ⁵ *Empty Spaces (Espaces vides)* is also one of the essays on theater written by Claude Régy.
- ⁶ It can be here remembered the known exercise of Jacques Lecoq, the balance of the floor, in which the actors must balance the polos of the stage like their presence weighed on the ends of the floor.

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