

Digimodernism in theatre: perspective and narrative

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ABSTRACT. The goal of the research is to explore the narrative in new media language and look for a similar strategy of sense construction in some recent Latvian theatre productions to illustrate the impact of digimodernism on theatre. The concept of perspective is viewed both from the perspective of the space and from the perception of the audience. The conclusions are based on comparison of communication patterns in theatre and new media.

KEYWORDS:
digimodernism,
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language, theatre,
narrative, perspective,
sense-construction.

The digital era has created a new form of textuality defined by British cultural critic Alan Kirby first as pseudomodernism (Kirby 2006), later as digimodernism (Kirby 2009), manifested in both literature and art. According to Kirby, digimodernism is a vision inspired by computers, mobile phones, and interactive television transferred to culture. The new media language theorist Lev Manovich defined the impact of digitalisation in a similar way to Kirby's thesis:

“[...] the visual culture of a computer age is cinematographic in its appearance, digital on the level of its material, and computational (i.e., software-driven) in its logic” (Manovich 2001: 165).

Kirby points out that the digimodernism bears some superficial resemblances to postmodernism, for example, the non-linear, non-sequential nature of the postmodern narrative. Digimodernism shares postmodernism's preoccupation with the category of “the real”. However, Kirby regards digitalisation as a tendentious step towards a solipsistic subjectivity – he even compares it to autism.

“Where postmodernism ironically juxtaposed high culture with low culture, in the name of the postmodern value of anti-elitism, digimodernism aggressively champions low over high culture – and it does so not ironically but sincerely, making the low elite” (Kirby 2009: 271).

Digimodernism, according to Kirby, is a set of aesthetic characteristics consequent on that process and gaining a unique cast from their new context; a cultural shift, a communicative revolution, a social organisation; a technologically-inspired vision and

the new form of textuality – digital texts are by nature always coming into being and are therefore open-ended.

One of the leading theories in contemporary theatre research is Hans-Thies Lehmann's theory of post-dramatic theatre that was introduced a considerably long time ago, in the 1990s (*Postdramatisches Theater* was published in German in 1999). In this theory, the principles of text production are identified differently as in dramatic theatre. Lehmann's theory understands the 'text' as the totality of every story-creating tool (Lehmann 2006: 147). Digimodernism looks at the text in a similar way as Lehmann's theory. Both Lehmann and Kirby point to the tendency of audience's shift from the passive observer to a co-creator (Kirby 2009). However, looking at certain stage productions in Europe, the influence of digitalisation on the language of theatre is so impressive that it is worth looking into as a substantive phenomenon. Moreover, the term "post-dramatic theatre" embodies extremely different forms of performing arts at different periods and thus does not determine a single, identifiable form. Applying the key principles of Kirby's theory in analysis of selected productions allows for a partial revision of Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of post-dramatic theatre, and also prompts the thesis on digimodernism as one of the contemporary tendencies in theatre. Nevertheless, if we want to talk about digimodernism in theatre, first, it is very important to understand whether the influence of digitalisation has a decisive role in the creation of the message, or not. Thus, fundamental categories of theatrical language – space, time, character, narrative – are becoming relevant. The goal of the article is to explore the narrative in new media language and look for a similar strategy of sense construction in selected theatre productions. The concept of perspective is viewed both from the perspective of the space and from the perception of the audience.

According to the top contemporary theatre semiotician Patrice Pavis, digitalisation can make the performance more powerful and the use of digital technologies for stage practice, in productions, seems to be an unavoidable and developing field, making the performances more cinematic than ever before. The use of media in theatre, according to Pavis, "are to intensify the perception and to make it more complex and more immersive" (Bartkeviča-Mellēna 2018).

That is true, digital technologies do open up a variety of opportunities. For instance, video as a part of the stage set-up expands the playground, or allows displaying the space of consciousness of a protagonist. Alternatively, the use of cameras allows you to show an actor's face in close-ups, to create a "parallel reality". The Lithuanian director Artūras Areima also confirms the invasion of technologies:

“I use technologies in my performances, but not more than any of us in our daily lives. Simple similitude – all the technologies in our lives now seem to signal simple things: in the past, the theatre used carriages, so on the stage there used to be a real horse, a real tank, motorcycles, etc. Therefore, now we aren’t excited when someone uses a typewriter on the stage. Now, the typewriter is a PC. TV screens replace paintings, hay is a chaise lounge or a massage chair... I think that all the things I mentioned are a natural, progressive change. It’s quite similar to how fashion is changing. We know that it isn’t just material change. It’s also a change in mentality.”¹

What does “a change in mentality” mean? Areima explains:

“When social media (like Facebook, Messenger, Skype, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.) appeared, our mind transmissions became faster than before. But our information is being trimmed, or we just make it much “easier”, shorter. Shortcuts appear. [...] That’s why the duration of performances becomes shorter, plays are shorter, punctuation marks disappear, and we begin to communicate by using digital visuals (camera, photographs, etc.). We are spending a lot of time in front of our TV screens, or PC, where all the visual spots, all the things we see on the screen, are already zoomed in. That’s why we use video projections in performances – so that audience could assimilate all the information mentally, as they do in their everyday lives. Today, the human brain cannot absorb a panoramic view. One needs someone else’s help, from the side, a constructor who could help to build the image and become the new dramaturge.”²

From its very origins, theatre deals with subjective perceptions of objective phenomena. The subject-object relationship can be expressed as follows: theatre creates the illusion of a new reality – the performance – and the viewer is the subject who takes on this new reality.

Let us compare this model of communication and virtual reality. Traditional cinema or text-based theatre aims, at all costs, to maintain the illusion for the duration of the performance. In contrast, new media aesthetics have a surprising affinity to 20th-century leftist avant-garde aesthetics. For example, “Bertolt Brecht’s strategy to reveal the conditions of an illusion’s production, echoed by countless other leftist artists, became embedded in hardware and software themselves” (Manovich 1996). New media also embodies other principles of modernism – abstraction, subjectivism, and the already mentioned reflexiveness or estrangement. However, the influence of new media is much greater than art that was once influenced by left avant-gardists.

“And even in the visual dimension – the one dimension that new media “reality engines” share with traditional illusionistic techniques – things work very differently. New media

1 Conversation between the author and A. Areima on Messenger, 22.04.2018.

2 Ibidem.

changes our concept of what an image is – because it turns a viewer into an active user. As a result, an illusionistic image is no longer something a subject simply looks at, comparing it with her memories of represented reality in order to judge the reality effect of this image. The new media image is something the user actively goes into, zooming in or clicking on individual parts with the assumption that they contain hyperlinks” (Manovich 2001: 167).

In the theatre, too, sometimes the audience is involved in a performance as the user of digital technologies, and very directly. For instance, during the production *To Be/Not to Be. Estonia after 100 Years* at the Estonian Russian Theatre (2018), the votes of the audience using a mobile app is what determines the contents of the next scene. Interactivity forces the viewer to replace the so-called thought space³ or thinking perspective with an impulsive action. Labels such as “immersive”, “participatory” and “interactive” have become commonplace. Therefore, Manovich raises a rhetorical question – does it work aesthetically, if illusion is subject to action, and depth – to surface (Manovich 2001: 187–189).

Alan Kirby has also expressed concerns about the loss of perspective of both space and thinking in art:

“The content of pseudo-modern films tends to be solely the acts which beget and which end life. This puerile primitivism of the script stands in stark contrast to the sophistication of contemporary cinema’s technical effects. [...] Whereas postmodernism favored the ironic, the knowing and the playful, with their allusions to knowledge, history and ambivalence, pseudo-modernism’s typical intellectual states are ignorance, fanaticism and anxiety” (Kirby 2006).

In the context of the theatre, the issue of aesthetics appears in the question of whether the digimodernist narrative, as a meaning-making strategy, reflects the childish primitivism mentioned by Kirby. If a narrative was once perceived as a sign system, there are two dimensions – the syntagmatic or “real narrative”, and the paradigmatic or a range of choices from which narrative is selectively constructed. For computer users, the paradigm is databases or a structured set of data held in a computer. Quoting Manovich:

“As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies” (Manovich 2001: 199).

3 The processes for understanding meanings requires the mind to organise information, establish relationships, and make connections between objects, ideas, events and relationships (Gaines 2006: 179).

New media reverses the relationship between the dimensions of the narrative. The database (or the paradigm, or a source) has a given material existence, while the narrative (the syntagm) is dematerialised. “Paradigm is privileged, syntagm is downplayed. Paradigm is real, syntagm is virtual” (Manovich 2001: 260).

In my opinion, similar principles are applied in contemporary stage directing. Typical features include the rejection of causal narrative, fragmentation as a narrative strategy and the performative view of narratives. One of the trends in theatre is to materialise the paradigm or the sources of the choices of the production’s creators. The spatial distribution often tends to be “flat” or screen-matching – that is, the depth perspective of the stage space is replaced by video effects, or scenography requires the focus of action to be in the foreground. The concepts of “downstage” and “upstage” are often replaced by the terms “top” and “bottom”. The paradigm is also becoming the voice of the main message.

The Structure of the Narrative⁴

S y n t a g m		P a r a d i g m	
New Media	Theatre	New Media	Theatre
Text generated by the user, processed image, web page content, etc.	The way the verbal text is combined with characters, spaces, scenography, costumes, sound and lighting.	Databases	Creator’s intelligence, contemporary and historical context, sources of inspiration, etc.

A chrestomatic example of changes in the spatial perspective and the paradigm as a meaning vehicle in the 2018/2019 season could be the performance *Blow, The Wind* directed by Elmārs Seņkovs in the Latvian National Theatre (2018).

It is a tragic love story written by the Latvian poet Rainis based on folk songs about an orphan and a maternal daughter, and a drunk groom. The characters in the play are real people in a real environment. In his remarks, Rainis reveals the basic idea of the play – a contrast between an ethical ideal and power. For the future, the nation needs a unity of ethics and power that is impossible in real life. The director’s choice is to raise the narrative to the level of ideas (Seņkovs 2018) by using two metaphors. The first one relates to the darkest years of stagnation – the early 1970s, and finding the courage to promote a national culture in art. Incidentally, the director Elmārs Seņkovs purposefully

4 This table was created by the author of the article.



Blow, The Wind. Directed by Elmārs Seņkovs (Latvian National Theatre, 2018). Photo by Kristaps Kalns

selected the music of composer Imants Kalniņš, written for the iconic film *Blow, Wind* (dir. Gunārs Piesis) that was based on a play by Rainis. The other metaphor is the National Song Celebration, which gains the strength of a symbol in the performance and is intended as an essential part of the identity of the nation (Seņkovs 2018). The scenography consists of a compressed open-air stage stair platform with a mute choir of a hundred dancers dressed in national costumes. In the mind of the average Latvian, this scene functions as a sign or a symbol of national identity. However, in reality it is only a superficial impression, since the spatial perspective of the original “image” is lost and compressed on the theatre stage. Nevertheless, if compared to Ancient Greek theatre, “the choir’s symbolic capacity and “live scenography” are the strongest impulse that directs the performance as “a tragedy with a catharsis-raising power” (Ulberte 2018). On the other hand, the characters of the play have the secondary or even contextual meaning – it is rather the story about Rainis’ message than the embodiment of the play as a new reality on stage.

A brave experiment is the staging of *Roberto Zucco* based on the motives of the play by Bernard-Marie Koltès, directed by Laura Groza-Ķibere (Liepaja Theatre, 2019). The performance is a conceptual rejection of the narrative or by paraphrasing Manovich – the choices of the director are a natural enemy of the story written by Koltès. The character of the pathological killer Roberto Zucco played by Egons Dombrovskis, is portrayed, according to costume artist Jolanta Rimkutė, in a similar way to the avant-garde artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986). The whole performance is a mix of Beuys' works – both live and video. Dramaturgy has only remained a source of inspiration for performatively addressed situations. Visuality, as a meaning vehicle, is clearly expressed in set design by Mārtiņš Vilkārsis, which features mixed quotes by Beuys and Koltès. The key to the setting is the duality highlighted at every level of the performance. The stage is a literal embodiment of Baudrillard's implosion – a fusion of differences, contradictions and opposition that breaks down the boundary between reality and appearance, and rejects the possibility of certain meaning (Auslander 1996: 203). The audience's response shows that most did not understand this concept. The young generation knows nothing about Beuys, but the older generation cannot perceive the fragmentation in stage language.



Roberto Zucco. Directed by Laura Groza-Ķibere (Liepaja Theatre, 2019). Photo by Mārtiņš Vilkārsis



Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*. Directed by Dita Lūriņa-Egliena (Liepāja Theatre, 2019).
Photo by Justīne Grīnberga

The theatre-directing debut by actress Dita Lūriņa-Egliena – Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* (2019, Liepāja Theatre) – marks the equilibration between the paradigm and syntagm. Namely, the cherry orchard is an allegory in the appearance of seven crystal chandeliers that resemble the chandeliers of a traditional spectator's hall in traditional theatre buildings. Chekhov's characters look like ghosts that move through the dust. They are like allusions – there are several references to Chekhov's popular productions and iconic cultural personalities. The director defines the genre of production as a “ghost sonata”. A sonata is a cyclic composition with vivid dramaturgy, tonal development, and internal conflict. The narrative of the performance is based on the principles of the sonata, as well as the choreography of Alexander Limin and the compositions of Dmitriy Marin. The culmination of the sound score is a cannonade of battered chandeliers – the dividing line of the ages. In general, the performance is about the unavoidable dialectic of art and life, about the changing world of theatre and changing the system of values in society. It is symbolic that the “outgoing” Chekhov heroes – the Ranevsky family – emerge from the depths of the stage, coming out of an ancient bookcase. The “new-comers” – Lopahin, Yepihodov – jump out of the hatch in the foreground. In addition, Lopahin has his own “spiritual vertical”, or rope ladder, on which he climbs to shatter crystal chandeliers, an attribute of the bygone era. The performance does not moralise or dramatise the situation, as everyone here is obsessed with art – both those who have grown up surrounded by luxury and bohemia, and those who have bought their place in the cherry orchard for money.

Performances based on the principles of the new media language or digimodernism are characterised by fragmentarism and a performative view of narratives. Moreover, the narrative is not formed by a causal relationship between verbal and visual levels, but is a liberal montage of the imagination and association on the applied theme of the creators with visually-readable messages. The authors usually leave it up to the audience to work out the meaning or engage in a deeper search for philosophical content.

The ability to perceive and understand the author's idea becomes possible when the recipient has learned the language of that type of art, and this language is increasingly adapted to the perception of the digital generation. Even if digital technologies are not used.

The narrative of digital technologies depends on how complete the databases are and how advanced the user's skills are. In the theatre today, narrative depends on the director's "databases" or their intellectual capacity, the emotional sensitivity and the spiritual horizon, which is still crucial.

Nevertheless, in post-dramatic theory, the term "digimodernism" helps to distinguish and characterise a certain means of theatre production.

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Skaitmeninis modernizmas teatre: perspektyvos ir naratyvas

SANTRAUKA. Skaitmeninė era sukūrė naujas tekstualumo formas literatūroje ir mene. Prieš dešimt metų britų kultūros kritikas Alanas Kirby'is jas pavadino skaitmeniniu modernizmu, kuris, pasak jo, pamažu užima postmodernizmo vietą. Konkrečiuose pastatymuose išvelgus pamatinius Kirby'io teorijos principus, galima iš dalies reviduoti Hanso-Thieso Lehmanno postdraminio teatro sąvoką ir skaitmeninį modernizmą įvardyti kaip vieną iš šiuolaikinio teatro tendencijų. Su šiuo klausimu tiesiogiai susijusios fundamentalios teatro kalbos kategorijos, tokios kaip erdvė, laikas, personažas ir naratyvas. Straipsnyje siekiama patyrinti naratyvą, išreikštą skaitmenine kalba, ir paieškoti panašių strategijų teatro pastatymuose, jas suvokiant kaip skaitmeninio modernizmo išraiškos formas. Jei naratyvą suvoktume kaip ženklų sistemą, galėtume išskirti du lygmenis: sintagminį, arba „tikrąjį naratyvą“, ir paradigminį, arba pasirinkimų tinklą, iš kurio naratyvas kuriamas selektyviai. Naujųjų medijų kalboje paradigma ir sintagma susipina, taigi paradigma tampa reikšmių nešėja. Panašių principų galima išvelgti moderniojoje teatro režisūroje. Straipsnio autorė daro išvadą, kad skaitmeninis modernizmas teatre gali keisti vizualiąją scenos erdvės perspektyvą, konkrečiai – tokias sąvokas kaip „scenos priekis“ ir „scenos giluma“, dažnai jas pakeičiant „viršumi“ ir „apačia“. Taip erdvė tampa plokščia kaip ekranas. Tuo metu pagrindinė perspektyva, arba naratyvas kaip reikšminės konstrukcijos strategija, vis dar priklauso nuo teatro kūrėjų kaip interpretatorių intelektualinio pajėgumo ir emocinio jautrumo.

REIKŠMINIAI

ŽODŽIAI:

skaitmeninis modernizmas, naujųjų medijų kalba, teatras, naratyvas, perspektyva, *sense-construction*.