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The search for an actor by the language of theatre

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Abstract

This text proposes a reflection on theatrical language based on 1925's Antonin Artaud's text *Manifesto in A Clear Language* (Artaud, 1976) and on his proposition that an actor should be an *affective athlete* or an *athlete of the heart* (Artaud, 1994: 133-141). We follow Artaud in his quest for a language in theatre that is not the literary language, but a symbolic language that only an actor that thoroughly controls his body, emotions and energy (an *affective athlete*) is able to accomplish and that makes theatre a powerful tool of transformation, in opposition to being a bourgeois entertainment. We state that an actor is the one who makes *actions*, for that we think of *physical actions* in Stanislavski's system for actors' preparation; we also think of Arjuna's action in Peter Brook and Jean- Claude Carrière's *Mahabharata* (Carrière, 1987), first staged in 1985. In order to understand what a *clear language* might be, we look upon Heidegger's proposition that *language is the house of Being* (Heidegger, 2011: 1) and his conception of truth as *Aletheia* (Heidegger, 2000: 227-250). Since this language that Artaud proposes is also obscure with dreamlike aspects, we bring Carlos Castaneda's experience with the sorcerers' way of perceiving the world (Castaneda, 1991).

Key words: Theatre, language, action, *affective athlete*.

Resumo

Este texto propõe uma reflexão sobre a linguagem teatral baseada no *Manifesto numa linguagem clara*, de Antonin Artaud de 1925 (Artaud, 1976) e em sua proposição de que um ator deve ser um *atleta afetivo* ou um *atleta do coração* (Artaud, 1994: 133-141). Seguimos Artaud na sua busca por uma linguagem no teatro que não é a linguagem literária, mas uma linguagem simbólica que só um ator que controla completamente seu corpo, emoções e energia (um *atleta afetivo*) é capaz de realizar e que faz do teatro uma poderosa ferramenta de transformação, em oposição a ser um entretenimento burguês. Afirmamos que um ator é aquele que faz *ações*, pois pensamos em *ações físicas* no sistema de Stanislavski para a preparação de atores; também pensamos na ação de Arjuna no *Mahabharata* de Peter Brook e Jean-Claude Carrière (Carrière, 1987),

encenado pela primeira vez em 1985. A fim compreender o que uma *linguagem clara* pode ser, lançamos um olhar à proposição de Heidegger de que *a linguagem é a casa de ser* (Heidegger, 2011: 1) e de sua concepção da verdade como *Aletheia* (Heidegger, 2000: 227- 250). Uma vez que essa linguagem que Artaud propõe também é obscura com aspectos oníricos, trazemos a experiência de Carlos Castaneda com a maneira dos feiticeiros de perceber o mundo (Castaneda, 1991).

Palavras chave: Teatro, linguagem, ação, *atleta afetivo*.

1. Introduction

There is a passage in Mahabharata (Carrière, 1987) that tells of a moment before war. A war between cousins: Arjuna, who is a great archer, and his brothers, the *pandavas*, against the *kauravas*, their cousins. The *pandavas* have returned from a long exile. They aim to reign in this ancient India. They have chosen Krishna as a counsellor, although he cannot take part in the battle. Once in the battlefield, Arjuna looks at his supposed enemies but he sees only familiar faces, those who he has loved so much in his childhood: teachers, relatives, companions... he wants to give up the fight, so Krishna takes him away for a long talk, he says there is no difference between victory and defeat, that he must act, but he must not think about the results of his actions. This way of acting has no bonds with the past, the future or with moral issues.

Peter Brook (1985) staged Carrière's Mahabharata, in a production that lasted nine hours, and in 1989 would become a film. Peter Brook talks to Margaret Croyden about his Mahabharata conception:

What is brought out in 'The Mahabharata is that there is a certain world harmony, a cosmic harmony that can either be helped or destroyed by individuals. And so one must try to discover what his place is in the cosmic scheme and how he can help to preserve the cosmic harmony rather than destroy it, knowing that the cosmic harmony is always in danger, and that the world goes through periods of lesser or greater danger. We, too, are living in a time when every value one can think of is in danger. What is the role of the individual? Must one act, or withdraw from the game? (Brook, 1985: 29).

What does it mean to act on this world, keeping the harmony rather than forcing our own imprints? What does *Krishna* mean when he urges *Arjuna* to act? And though the epic poem tells the story of the Hindi civilization, Brook staged a play after it. For this play he directed 21 actors from 16 different countries. Ryszard Cieslak, the legendary actor who staged Grotowski's (1987) early works, played *Dhritarashtra*, the blind king, who sees the war through the eyes of *Krishna*, here played by Maurice Bénichou (in the movie, the god will be played by Bruce Meyers). So, the epic battle is also staged and narrated. This one of many possibilities presented by theatre: making the spectator see through his own eyes and then see through the eyes of another, creating empathy and detachment, identification and strangeness, making him feel and suddenly stop to reflect about what he has seen. Does theatre have the power to affect individuals, to make them change the world, create harmony on earth or, at least, to get to know themselves better? In 1977, Brook criticized some aspects of current time

theatre, this meaningless bourgeois theatre that is made from the literary texts and whose only purpose is to amuse a bourgeois audience:

Most of what is called theatre anywhere in the world is a travesty of a word once full of sense. War or peace, the colossal bandwagon of culture trundles on, carrying each artist's traces to the overmounting garbage heap... We are too busy to ask the only vital question which measures the whole structure: why theatre at all? What for? ... Has the stage a real place in our lives? What function can it have? What could it serve? (Brook, 1977: 45-46)

Grotowski (1987) said that theatre was as an encounter: some deep communication that must happen between actor and spectator. Antonin Artaud (1994) proposed that theatre should be alchemical, able to transmute substances, to transform people, powerful as the plague. But how do we achieve this powerful, meaningful theatre? To reflect on this question, we are taking Grotowski's definition and throwing our gaze to the actor, the one who acts, who makes actions. This statement might look redundant, but it is very important, for since Stanislavski that systematized the actor's work and his preparation, we know that an actor has a unit of work, like a musician plays notes, an actor plays actions, or *physical actions*, as Stanislavski called them, followed by Jerzy Grotowski (1987).

For an actor, it takes a long apprenticeship to understand a *physical action* in his work. He must get to know his way on stage and in life in order to let go of what is not necessary, transforming himself in a tool to theatre, this powerful alchemical theatre. This action is responsible for a theatrical language on stage, that is not the literature, not the great poets' words being recited, it is a partition of physical actions created by the actor and orchestrated by the director. This action is maybe like *Arjuna's* action. It is more important than the battle, more important than inner reasoning. As actors we know the reason a character must act, even if we don't agree with it, we do it. *Medea* will kill her children and the actor will do her best to perform a perfect action. She will put aside her personal opinion and feelings and lend herself to *Medea* the way Arjuna lends himself to battle. The actress will know the time when she can give her opinion, creating theatrical means to do so. Like *Arjuna*, she must enter the battlefield and fight. Having defeated her fears, fruits of the future, of the past, and of her ego, she will be capable to accomplish a passage among worlds, between the real and the unreal. This passage is a transformation. The actor needs to accomplish that passage and to keep on changing constantly, walking among worlds: stage/ audience, fiction/ reality, character/quotidian self.

2. *Manifesto in a Clear Language* by Antonin Artaud - December 1925

If I believe neither in Evil nor in Good, if I feel such a strong inclination to destroy, if there is nothing in the order of principles to which I can reasonably accede, the underlying reason is in my flesh. I destroy because for me everything that proceeds from reason is untrustworthy. I believe only in the evidence of what stirs my marrow, not in the evidence of what addresses itself to my reason. I have found levels in the realm of the nerve. (Artaud 1976: 49).

In Western world, more specifically in Greece, written language has become popular in the Vth Century B. C. (Havelock, 1963), the time when great tragedies were written: Aeschylus's Prometheus, Sophocles' Oedipus and Antigone; Euripides' Medea. That was the time when the great philosopher Plato proposed the idea of truth as fundament, it means that one might achieve the truth that resides somewhere, immutable. When we write we perpetuate what is written, it acquires a sense of permanence. The words are outside us *representing* our thoughts that no longer belong to the present (as in oral language). Those written thoughts might remain to the future. The written word becomes the law, it is not changeable. It is final. It represents the truth and it settles the fundament. That is our heritage. These written words ordinate our thoughts, reflect the clear *discursive reason*, the truth. Our experience of the world is measured by the parameters of reality, *where* truth works. Sensible and intelligible worlds become divided, heart and mind, body and soul, subject and object, me and the others. Is there a place for art in this world? Is there a place for art in Plato's Republic? And thus, the poet was banished.

Antonin Artaud (1976) was an actor, director, creator, and poet - banished from society, condemned to live most of his adult life in asylums. Artaud became so addicted to laudanum that he lost his teeth. Artaud (1976) was so angry, he pestered against theatre that was made in his time. This bourgeois theatre that was a representation of the text to which the bourgeoisie attended in order to have some fun. For Artaud (1976), theatre came from the *Sacred*, it became profane but still strictly linked to its origin. Theatre meant rituals and transcendence. This theatre should have happened before the existence of a fundament, for it belonged to an ancient way of reasoning, with no place for representation but where truth was the experience itself happening here and now: only once. This kind of theatre should have transformed both actor and spectator, *stirring their marrows*. For this theatre to happen this metaphysical reasoning must be destroyed.

I now feel capable of evaluating the evidence. There is for me an evidence in the realm of pure flesh which has nothing to do with the evidence of reason. The eternal conflict between reason and the heart is decided in my very flesh, but in my flesh irrigated by nerves. In the realm of the affective imponderable, the image provided by my nerves takes the form of the highest intellectuality, which I refuse to strip of its quality of intellectuality. And so, it is that I watch the formation of a concept which carries within it the actual fulguration of things, a concept which arrives upon me with a sound of creation. No image satisfies me unless it is at the same time Knowledge, unless it carries with it its substance as well as its lucidity. My mind, exhausted by discursive reason, wants to be caught up in the wheels of a new, an absolute gravitation. For me it is like a supreme reorganization in which only the laws of illogic participate, and in which there triumphs the discovery of a new Meaning. This Meaning which has been lost in the disorder of drugs and which presents the appearance of a profound intelligence to the contradictory phantasms of the sleep. This Meaning is a victory of the mind over itself, and although it is irreducible by reason, it exists, but only inside the mind. It is order, it is intelligence, it is the signification of chaos. But it does not accept this chaos as such, it interprets it, and because it interprets it, it loses it. It is the logic of illogic. And this is all one can say. My lucid unreason is not afraid of chaos. (Artaud, 1976:49).

After Plato, the truth is related to evidence, to reasoning and lucidity (light). Plato, through the *Myth of the Cave* (Platão, 2016), tells us about the truth that we may be unable to look directly into. Plato's metaphysics led Western civilization to believe in an ultimate truth, that is a way to guarantee the law in a world where the only sure thing is death. Before Socrates, truth was understood as *Aletheia* (Heidegger, 2000). Lethe was one of Hades' rivers, flowing into the realms of death, of forgetfulness. So, for the Greeks truth was named after a river containing the prefix A, that implies a negative. What is the negative of forgetfulness? What does one remember when one dies? A river flows... it might be a clue to understand this word. Heraclitus in the old texts talks about truth in a perpetual movement of appearing and concealing itself (Heidegger, 2000). This old conception of *Aletheia* shelters the presence of *Mystery*, something that we might never understand and that defies our lucidity. We dare to use Artaud's words and say that *Mystery* resides *in the realm of pure flesh, which has nothing to do with the evidence of reason* (Artaud, 1976: 49).

I renounce nothing of that which is the Mind. I want only to transport my mind elsewhere with its laws and organs. I do not surrender myself to the sexual mechanism of the mind, but on the contrary within this mechanism I seek to isolate those discoveries which lucid reason does not provide. I surrender to the fever of dreams, but only in order to derive from them new laws. I seek multiplication, subtlety, the intellectual eye in delirium, not rash ratiocination. There is a knife which I do not forget. (Artaud, 1976: 49).

What does Artaud mean by not to *surrender* to the *sexual mechanism of the mind*? Could it be this fetishist way of looking at the mind and reason, that dominates all the other phenomena? We look upon a mind that could be misunderstood by our inner dialogue that describes our perception of reality, ordering it and excluding all phenomena that does not apply. All the exception must be adapted to the concepts that compose our language and our understanding of truth and reality. How do we perceive reality? How do we perceive ourselves? And how are we perceived by others? When we look at a table, what do we see? We all might think and agree we see *table*. And what if we look at a different table? We still see *table*. In our minds we nominate it, we create the concept “table”; we might even add an adjective: *different table*. When we look at a table we think we know what table is, once being able to name it. So we can recognize the *table concept* in many different tables, what makes us *table experts*. That kind of reasoning allows us to become *experts* in a lot of things.

Although, in our minds, words might match the images, and although that way we feel very safe in our description of the world, if we look into to Artaud’s text we might find out that there are more aspects to it. There are so many unknown aspects to it. There are so many things our logic mind cannot understand: mystery. In addition, there is so much we do not understand about ourselves: mystery inside us, shadows that we dare not to see, keeping the knife halfway into dreams, which I keep inside myself, which I do not allow to come to the frontier of the lucid senses (Artaud, 1976).

Carlos Castaneda was an Anthropology student at the University of California UCLA in the 1960s that had his world turned upside down by his encounter with a Toltec master who presented him a world of sorcery. Castaneda (1974) talks about two world descriptions. According to his master, Don Juan Mattus, ordinary human beings usually live their lives based on a current description of the world learned from childhood, our parents present us their knowledge, by accepting this knowledge we become “partners” (in Spanish: *socios*), so we make a partnership in knowledge (*Sociedad*: society). And thus, there is the sorcerers’ description and in order to learn it

we must learn how to *see* instead of *look*. Don Juan explains to Castaneda that we all have kind of an energetic aura, a luminous egg, that goes beyond our skin limits. In the back of this aura (between our physical *scapula*) there is a spot called the “point of assemblage”.

By keeping this point in the same place, the humanity agrees to a certain vision of the world, in which we look at things and agree about their boundaries for instances: we agree that a table is a table. When we dream, our point of assemblage moves, and we see the world with less definition. The sorcerers’ description of the world looks more like a dream: things do change constantly, make the world a very unsafe place. When a sorcerer sees the world, he sees its impermanence. One could think of quantum physics, so a sorcerer probably sees things somehow like a physicist sees the movement of atomic and subatomic particles and waves through a powerful microscope. In the beginning, Don Juan does not know how to describe to Castaneda the way sorcerers see the world, for our usual words do not describe this kind of world, that is more like a dream. It is a mysterious world and we can talk about it using poetry, a language that is different from everyday language. Artaud (1994) proposed that theatre should have its own language, a language similar to Egyptian hieroglyphs, because theatre should allow us into this shady, dreamy world.

How hard is it, when everything encourages us to sleep, though we may look about us with conscious, clinging eyes, to wake and yet look about us as in a dream, with eyes that no longer know their function and whose gaze is turned inward. (Artaud, 1994: 14).

This way consciously looking at things and defying the urge to *sleep* looks very similar to what Castaneda (1974) describes as *seeing* in opposition to *looking*. *Seeing* might be to look as in a dream, *with eyes that no longer know their function and whose gaze is turned inward*. So maybe the world is not as stable as we think it is when we look at it. Art is always there to prove it. If we look at the *Sacred Family*¹, the cathedral in Barcelona designed by Gaudi, it is melting even though it is made of concrete. It looks like a dreamscape.

Sorcerers believe it is the position of the assemblage point which makes modern man a homicidal egotistic, a being very involved with his self-image. Having lost hope of ever returning to the source of everything, man seeks solace in his selfishness. And, in doing so, he

¹ The cathedral in Barcelona was designed by Gaudi who worked on it from 1883 to 1936, when he had to interrupt the construction because of the civil war.

succeeds in fixing his assemblage point in the exact position to perpetuate his self-image. It is therefore safe to say that any movement of the assemblage point away from its customary position results in a movement away from man's self-reflection and its concomitant: self-importance. (Castaneda, 1994: 12).

To perpetuate our self- image is a way of keeping the world safe, of escaping from change, being death the ultimate change. *We look for permanence. We do not want to die.* Our current western way of reasoning does rarely include the acceptance of our mortality, neither the acceptance of our little importance as passing beings. Maybe if we change our language, the way we talk to ourselves about the world, we change the way we perceive the world.

Let us keep following Artaud in his *Manifesto in a Clear Language*:

That which belongs to the realm of the image is irreducible by reason and must remain within the image or be annihilated. Nevertheless, there is a reason in images, there are images which are clearer in the world of image-filled vitality. (Artaud, 1976: 49).

Antonin Artaud once said to a friend he was through with writing (Artaud, 1977), he said he didn't know how to do it anymore, so his friend's daughter, listening to the conversation, offered to teach him how to write since she was learning it herself. She bought him a calligraphy notebook and Artaud trained the traces and the letters: *da, de, da, do, du.*

Our writing is made of phonetic representations. How does this kind of thinking affect our perception of the world and our experiences in the world? Artaud noticed that other civilizations had different kinds of writing, such as hieroglyphs, a written language that contains images and that relate to the sacred. Those symbols describe a world with more possibilities and more alive than the meaningless phonetic representations. He claims that theatre should have a language of its own, equivalent to *Hieroglyphs* (Artaud, 1994).

There is in the immediate teeming of the mind a multiform and dazzling insinuation of animals. This insensible and thinking dust is organized according to laws which it derives from within itself, outside the domain of clear reason or of thwarted consciousness or reason. In the exalted realm of images, illusion properly speaking, or material error, does not exist, much less the illusion of knowledge:

but this is all the more reason why the meaning of a new knowledge can and must descend into the reality of life. (Artaud, 1976: 50).

How do we name things? According to Artaud, symbols are a much more complex and accurate way to name thing. Written words or even words seem not to be enough. Juliette, in love with the son of her family's greatest enemy, said: "what's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet." (Shakespeare, 1997: 992). According to Martin Heidegger,

Language is the house of Being. In its home, human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying. (Heidegger, 2011: 1).

We inhabit language, we perceive through language. From the moment we are born, we learn to name things, thoughts, ourselves. We learn through mimesis then later we will learn how to write. Artaud went through this process again late in his life, for to exercise guardianship of the language, poets and thinkers must create and recreate it. Their language is alive and never static, its movement guarantees our sense of impermanence.

The truth of life lies in the impulsiveness of matter. The mind of man has been poisoned by concepts. Do not ask him to be content, ask him only to be calm, to believe that he has found his place. Only the madman is really calm. (Artaud, 1976: 50).

Whenever we find a final answer to the questioning in our thoughts, we create those little truths that we call concepts. Those little truths help us to appease the fear of death, the fear of the mystery, the fear of the darkness within and outside ourselves. Heidegger reminds us that Heraclitus, the Obscure, sees the truth as *Aletheia*, in movement in the river of forgetfulness, veiling and unveiling itself (Heidegger, 2008), that is what makes him enlightened, this capability to observe and not to surrender to the anxiety of concluding. There are no certainties and that is the only possible peace of mind.

In this sense, art is very subversive, especially theatre, for the masterpiece in theatre is the human being and the language he/ she develops on stage. If we show our audience dream possibilities, maybe we can take them in our dream. How can we achieve such language? We must empty ourselves from these certainties, prejudices, and concepts. In the documentary by Brook (Brook, 2004), Peter Brook shows a mud doll he acquired

in one of his trips, it is empty and smiling, and he says that this is a metaphor to acting. The *empty doll* has empty space inside, that what the actor must create, an empty space, where life can happen, without self-affirmation. It must be a flight (fall) into the mystery, into unknown possibilities that might catch the audience's interest, those possibilities might surprise them.

Meditation can be a tool to stop, or to reduce the importance of the verbal thinking. What is our mind beyond words? In Zen Buddhism there are *koans*, questions with no answer that go beyond the logic, that a master uses to help his disciple, for instances: "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" Or the disciple asks: "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" In addition, the master answers "Moo!" Could we go back to Artaud and his Dada words? And if we lose our names and shape, what will we become? How is the world that is not described by our logic language?

3. Final considerations

To break through language in order to touch life is to recreate the theatre, the essential thing is not to believe that this act must remain sacred, i.e., set apart - the essential thing is to believe that not just anyone can create it, and there must be a preparation. (Artaud, 1994: 13).

The performer integrates the spectator in his work / world, establishing a common language between them that makes this world possible, a language that goes beyond words. Artaud proposed that the actor should be an *Affective Athlete*; he should be able to control his energy and to send energy beams from specific parts of his body to specific parts to the spectator's body (Artaud, 1994). That would be literally a language that comes from his *marrow*. That would be a living art, a living theatre in opposition to the dead theatre or bourgeois theatre criticized by Peter Brook (Brook, 1977) and by so many others, that theatre where the spectator is going to observe a drama from which he is essentially separated. This alchemic actor, affective athlete constantly looks for that possibility to reveal himself, of happening in the world that is his art, that possibility of revelation.

But *there must be a preparation*. The actor accomplishes a practical search, looking for a mental/ physical state, a state of promptness, as a piece of soil ready to be fecundated, a blank canvas. In practical experience, some techniques, as the use of neutral mask, as proposed by Jacques LeCoq (1987), help the actor into that state of promptness, for it hides his face. Our faces are so familiar, we identify ourselves with our faces, reaffirming our identities. Putting on a mask that hides our face, changes our knowledge about ourselves. It is like breaking the mirror of illusion. An actor wearing

a neutral mask must relearn each movement, from how to look to how to walk or to manifest feelings. Another technique to get to that neutrality state is meditation and the control of internal chattering, observing our inner dialogue, detaching ourselves from our thoughts. The quietness of the mind allows us to be connected to the events of the present time, with the flow of the universe.

When the actor breaks the mirror of self-illusion and stops identifying himself with his thoughts, he creates a much more flexible self, able to adapt to the many situations required on stage, but to achieve this, an actor must prepare. When we read Artaud (1984), we cannot forget his fascination for Bali theatre, where every blink of the eye has a meaning, where every movement is realized with rigour and precision. When Artaud (1984) talks about the actor as an affective athlete, he is also thinking of that rigour. This actor as an affective athlete searches for precision, for such a control of his body and energy that will allow him to take the spectator with him to this other world, a dreamlike world, in which this spectator will be faced with mystery, danger and shadows.

We are thrown in that open that is born from the tension between the unexpected and the precise, between the discipline and the passion, with which the actor tries to work. An actor uses rigorous techniques to prepare himself the same way as a warrior such as Arjuna practices with his arch. But many times, he will be faced with the unexpected, the battlefield will be chaos, or he might end up in a cliff; situations in the which only the unusual will be able to save him, so he must give up his search for permanence and accept the unexpected. That war is game, as a child's game, extremely serious, and that affective athlete's function is to invite the audience for this game; a game in which both are in danger, in danger of breaking their mirrors of illusion and meeting their shadows.

In theatre, an actor lives a role, it might be called a character, but that character is not an agent of literary fiction, and many times, the character is not even linked to a literary work. The character on stage is the actor's Work, this language he has developed. The character is not internal, nor external to the actor, character is him and another at the same time. This possibility of being another is tempting, the idea of melting, of becoming One is almost a religious idea. It is in that direction that the actor tries to abandon the duality feeling with which we have been educated, in this western metaphysical way of seeing the world, it is necessary to go beyond the search for foundation and to allow ourselves to be integrated in a more dynamic process of world, a process where the movement of birth and death, of unveiling and concealing constitutes the same action, like the symbol of Yin and Yang, that it is divided,

however each divided part contains the seed of the other and both are in the same circle, in the same movement.

To look for this movement in his art, the actor needs to resign to countless internal concepts and to turn into something new. Grotowski (1987) said that an actor should undress before the audience, performing an act of *sacrifice*, a *total act*. The actor tears off his daily mask in order to accomplish this *total act*. But as the actor undresses, he is hidden under the form of something new that has appeared from him and whose existence is still a mystery, and that mystery that starts from the naked actor finding his language, his way of communication towards an alchemical encounter with the audience.

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