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## THE THEATER AND THE PLAGUE IN ALGORITHM NETWORKS


O TEATRO E A PESTE NAS REDES DO ALGORITMO

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## **The theater and the plague in algorithm networks**

**Abstract:** This article aims to analyze some of the manipulative effects of internet connectivity, along with what Vilém Flusser pointed out as an advancement of an immaterial culture, which depletes the spectator-internaut of their decision-making capacity. We then propose, in theater making, the resumption of the ideas of Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty, especially in its relationship with the plague.

**Keywords:** theater; digital medias; devices; Vilém Flusser; Antonin Artaud.

## **O teatro e a peste nas redes do algoritmo**

**Resumo:** Este artigo se propõe a analisar alguns dos efeitos manipulatórios da conectividade internética, junto ao que Vilém Flusser apontou como um avanço de uma cultura imaterial, que esvaziam a capacidade decisória do espectador-internauta. Propomos então, no fazer teatral, a retomada das ideias do teatro da crueldade de Antonin Artaud, principalmente na sua relação com a peste.

**Palavras-chave:** teatro; mídias digitais; aparelhos; Vilém Flusser; Antonin Artaud.



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What is the problem that the use of Networks imposes on its users? Are they, the Networks, composed of neutrality in their content and uses?

Remorseless killing at the initiation of artificial intelligence has been the subject of nail-biting concern for various members of the computer-digital cosmos. Be wary of such machines in war and their displacing potential regarding human will and agency. For all that, the advent of AI-driven, automated systems in war has already become a cold-blooded reality, deployed conventionally, and with utmost lethality by human operators.

The teasing illusion here is the idea that autonomous systems will become so algorithmically attuned and trained as to render human agency redundant in a functional sense. Provided the targeting is trained, informed and surgical, a utopia of precision will dawn in modern warfare. Civilian death tolls will be reduced; the mortality of combatants and undesirables will, conversely, increase with dramatic effect.

The staining case study that has put paid to this idea is the pulverizing campaign being waged by Israel in Gaza. A report in the magazine *+972* notes that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) has indulgently availed itself of AI to identify targets and “dispatch them” accordingly. The process, however, has been far from accurate or forensically educated (Kampmark, 2024).

In our understanding, it is urgent to think about the use of the Networks so that their effect is not negative and against humanity, as Kampmark warns us concerning the use of AI tested by Israel in the current conflict against Gaza. Educating to survive brings us closer to the dossier Theater Education and the End of Worlds theme.

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Appreciating a work of art presupposes and requires contemplative action from the one who observes it. Let us think about vinyl records to recall an example from the past that has gradually been returning. When I listen to a particular record, I often choose it, thinking about just one song, but its format leads me to listen to the entire work (or at least one side of the record), encountering other songs.

It is, therefore, a choice that is purposeful in the action-movement toward the work—choosing a record, in the example given—but it also needs to be receptive—being willing to receive the artistic proposal that is presented to you—so that we can then reach the reflective stage—our reaction to the work, whatever it may be. Some of these songs please me, others not so much, but the fact is that I end up enjoying something that I might never have heard in an environment pre-programmed to offer only what would supposedly be defined as “to my taste.”



“Well, I confess that today I listen to everything on Spotify or YouTube, anywhere,” is what you might be saying to me right now, but the fact is that if these works are everywhere, it is actually because they are nowhere, i.e., our hands cannot reach them. Vilém Flusser pointed out this detachment of materiality in information production in the search for an immaterial culture.

If this was successful, there would be no more forgetting; then human history would in fact be a linear progression. An ever-growing memory. Today we are witnessing the attempt to produce such a culture without things, such an ever-growing memory. Computer memories are an example of this. A computer memory is a non-thing (Flusser, 2017, p.57).

The computer is a good example of this. Things are the hardware, the physical parts that make up the machine, while non-things refer to software, the programs that operate it. The term computer itself comes from computing, making calculations. The first computers occupied entire rooms and buildings, while today, we have computers with enormous data processing capacity in our pockets. These computers play music, take photos, and make videos, with editing and programming capabilities performed in fractions of a second.

This miniaturization is part of a growing immateriality. Our cell phones are no longer devices we use for telephone communication but rather vehicles of interaction, so we are constantly connected, inhabiting the space of the networks uninterruptedly. It is no wonder that we need increasingly powerful batteries and more efficient chargers so that we are never disconnected.

At this point, we need to consider our adaptability and mental plasticity. What are the impacts of being constantly connected to this virtual, immaterial environment? We are still immersed in the process, and it may not be possible to identify the effects clearly. However, it is a fact that we are increasingly blurring the boundaries between materiality and virtuality. Our relationship with these non-things, with this immaterial medium, is increasingly becoming inseparable from our reality.

Paraphrasing McLuhan, the “medium” is the hermeneutics of the phenomenon. The hermeneutical consequences of the “medium” are still not entirely clear to us. To quickly understand the problem, we need to do a similar exercise and think three-dimensionally with the mentality of two: photography is not a portrait of the landscape, but an apprehension of image units based on the rules of the devices. Our mental overview tends to associate the final formation of the device (the technical image) with the structure of what is observed. Similarly, the Western dynamics of knowledge are derived from the alphabetic culture, to such an extent that the alphabet as a horizon for the intellect to “surf” goes,—when language is thought of as an instrument—, unnoticed (Freiberg, 2021, p. 181).

The images I see on my cell phone and the photos I take are just sets of informational data, zeros, and ones, processed by the device when I press the capture button. It reads the data and then reconstructs a technical image from this data. Likewise, we can return to the music issue, paraphrasing Leandro Freiberg’s argument. The reproduction of music on digital devices is the



capture of sound units generated from data processing, i.e., from the rules of the devices; we lose the context of the creative process that the artist used.

However, let us not demonize digital technology. What we are arguing here is the need to delve deeper into this discussion so that we can consider appropriate regulation. Algorithms once again confront us with an ethical and political problem: their use for mass destruction, as the epigraph warns us.

Thus, what should we do? For the authors of this text, one of the pieces of advice to follow comes from Edgar Morin: Dissatisfied with the ongoing genocide in the Palestinian territory of Gaza perpetrated by individuals descended from Jews who were victims of genocide, the master invites us to bear witness; to bear witness as a way of resisting, “facing it head on” so as not to forget (FEPAL, 2024).

From this perspective, art and education can function as a space for resistance, facing the impacts and (re)formulations that current media relations can generate. That is why we believe it is essential that art educators study and train on this topic, both for their training and to think about their teaching program. We believe that mastering digital technologies is essential both to know how to use communication in a world permeated by them and to place the ethical and political debate on their uses on the international agenda.

In art and art education, there is a danger that this digital communication relationship will empty artistic propositions regarding the subjectivity of those involved. Because, as the text in the epigraph points out, which problematizes a war without the human element, the same tends to happen with (human?) relationships.

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Algorithms may be objective, but they hide the subjectivity of those who program them, and, with all due respect for the repeated use of the term, they hide the possible objectives of those who manipulate them. A relationship is established that shapes reality, modeling it with data from devices to obtain greater control, which, in turn, gradually empties our decision-making process. Always under the justification of efficiency, productivity, and the best performance with the least expenditure.

The freedom to decide to press a key with the tip of the finger is shown as a programmed freedom, as a choice of prescribed possibilities. Whatever I choose, I do so according to the prescriptions.

It looks, accordingly, as though the society of the future without things would be split into two classes: those programming and those being programmed. Into a class of those who produce programs and a class of those who behave



according to programs. Into a class of players and a class of puppets (Flusser, 2017, p. 60).

“So the way is to become programmers. Control the game so as not to be controlled by it?”

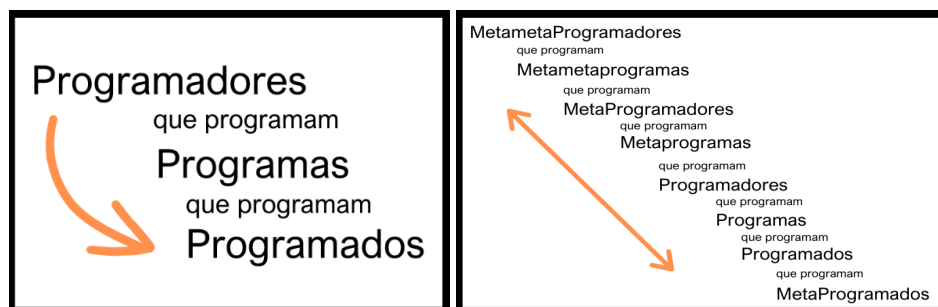
The problem goes beyond this because this logic does not only affect the programmed individual. When the programmer programs the device, they, in turn, do so based on the possibilities defined by the device’s structure.

Because what those programming do when they press keys in order to play with symbols and produce information is the same movement of the fingertips as the one carried out by those being programmed. They *too* decide within a program that could be called the “metaprogram” (Flusser, 2017, p. 60, our emphasis).

“So the programmer is also programmed?”

That is right. This relationship becomes even more complex as technological advances lead us to increasingly automated production of super devices, where we lose the ballast of human influence in their creation. Our cell phones, for example, are a set of proto-devices<sup>1</sup>, in the sense of previous devices, such as chips, processors, camera mechanisms, and video and audio playback, built by factories with robotic production lines. All of these proto-devices, in turn, add metaprogramming to the device’s programming. Metaprogramming, precisely because it is beyond the programmer. Therefore, even if we learn to program, we must be aware that we program from now on but from an already programmed, metaprogrammed superstructure.

Figures 01 and 02 - Flowcharts



Source: Gustavo Henrique Lima Ferreira and Carmina Mendes André, 2024

Following the idea of our cell phones, when we think of metaprograms, we can talk about the leading operating systems, such as Android or IOS, which serve as a reference for programmers to program the applications we use. These metaprograms, in turn, are the production of metaprogrammers, who programmed the operating systems. These were programmed from metametaprograms, which were programmed beforehand by metametaprogrammers. Its result is that between programmers and programmed, we naturalize the relationship with the programs, in

<sup>1</sup> We use the term proto-device as Vilém Flusser spells it in his writings.



what Flusser called a programmed or programmer Totalitarianism, where we can no longer even say where the limits of this programming relationship are.

So that I never, while making decisions, pressing keys, come to the limits of the program. The keys at my disposal are so numerous that my fingertips can never touch all of them. Hence I get the impression that I am making completely free decisions. The totalitarianism doing the programming, once it has realized itself, will no longer be identifiable by those participating in it: It will be invisible to them. It is visible only in the embryonic state it is in today. We are perhaps the last generation to be able to see the way things are going (Flusser, 2017, p. 61).

When we talk about the so-called “digital natives,” I think we touched on this point. I do not know exactly how old you are since you’re talking to us right now, but we who write here were born in the last century. We can remember our first accesses to the Internet, between the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, first in libraries or schools, and then when we had a computer at home. It was common for us to think in terms like “going online” and even at what times we could go online since dial-up connections not only made it impossible to use a landline phone but also generated costs for the call pulse, which varied in price depending on the time of day.

“There was an internet happy hour, was that it?”

That is almost right. The happy hour was at dawn, when the network only charged for one pulse, regardless of use.

“Very good, you could use it as much as you wanted. However, let us get back to the subject. What does this story have to do with this totalitarian programming.”

The truth is that today, we do not even think about “going online.” It hovers like an existence beyond us. We go to sleep, and our cell phones remain connected. Refrigerators are now manufactured with full internet connectivity and programs capable of analyzing your consumption and automatically ordering groceries in the online supermarket. If we previously calculated the moment to deliberately “go online” today, our deliberation needs to be to get off it and go offline. “We may be seeing the beginning of a form/content inversion in this sense, that is, a person’s online life becomes content for their offline life” (Cesarino *apud* Viracasacas).

“In other words, I only pay attention to the ‘existence of the internet’ precisely when I lose access to it.”

Exactly, because being online has become the norm. Internet totalitarianism is nothing more than a facet of this programming totalitarianism. This process has also led to the virtualization and digitalization of relationships. While internet connectivity allows us to come together in ways that were previously unthinkable, we need to think about how these relationships affect us, not only in digital exchanges but also in how they condition our relationships and, in our more specific case, in how they can condition our artistic and educational activities. We need to dance to the beat, but if we only dance to the steps, we can fall into a meaningless, automatic repetition.



The astonishing development of the media and digital technologies since the second half of the last century has been changing cultural processes and created the basis for a new cycle of globalization and cultural exchange between nations and cultures worldwide, whose consequences we are still adapting to today. In this increasingly smaller, more integrated world, only culture can distinguish us and is a powerful asset for our development, democratic life, social justice, economic development, and sustainability (Ferreira, 2022).

This is Juca Ferreira, who was Minister of Culture twice, between 2008 and 2010 and between 2015 and 2016. His speech brings up two critical points for our reflection. The first is planetary interconnectivity, which intensified cultural exchanges at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been intensifying throughout the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today, we not only have access to materials produced in multiple parts of the globe, but we can also interact virtually, uniting spaces and individuals thousands of kilometers apart.

For centuries, if we wanted to witness a cultural action, we would need to be present where it took place until reproducibility techniques were established. We had access to records of these works.

Technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record. The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover. [...] These changed circumstances may leave the artwork's other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue the here and now of the artwork (Benjamin, 2019, pp. 56-57).

We did not necessarily need to be in front of the musicians to listen to music, but we could hear it through the grooves marked on a vinyl record manufactured on an industrial scale. Even so, this new relationship remained tied to a notion of presence and physicality. We had to handle the record actively and put it on to play. We knew precisely the limits of the content we had access to. I could only listen to those records that were available to me. In the same way, the songs on the radio were not defined by me but by the station's programming. The same can be said for television, which has become omnipresent in our lives in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The transmitter-receiver relationship was evident even if it was not the subject of reflection. We were passive in the face of the cultural content presented. At most, we could choose who would be the broadcaster, change the channel, tune into another radio station, choose another record, movie, play, etc...

Commercial and sociopolitical factors indeed influenced this content, often determining which works could or could not be broadcast. However, I want to emphasize that this curation was not hidden. We dealt with a very well-established relationship between the audience's passivity and the content generator's activity.

With the advancement of the Internet, this relationship was dissolved, and we began to seek out content actively. Interactions have horizontalized without explicit mediation.





“Our interference as an audience has become greater, is that it?”

Yes, but this does not mean there is no control over the broadcast. It is just that this control has become fluid. The availability of content on the Internet has raised another issue, that of its organization. If before we were limited to what was directly offered to us, now we can search for what interests us. We feel that we can access everything and everyone at any time. Digital media presents us with an illusion of totality, but this totality is subject to programming. We have an illusion of choice when we are presented with programmed content.

If there are directions that someone could choose, these routes depend on mechanization, becoming more complex than the forks in the road through which we navigate. Certain algorithmic choices point to content that is visible—or not—to the public, the counterpoint of which becomes the probability that certain materials will never find any eyes if they are not included in these recommendations (Ladeira, 2019, p. 167).

The reality is that, even if no more content were produced anywhere, any of us would still only be able to handle a tiny fraction of it. The content is potentially infinite, but what is scarce is our attention.

“That must be why everyone is discovering they have ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)”.

This fight for attention is contaminating our daily lives. Social networks have become a battlefield where we fight for every click, like, and subscription to make ourselves visible. In the logic of social networks, only when we are seen do we become alive.

The previous model had many limitations and constraints. However, we cannot fall into the trap of thinking that we now have an effectively plural model when we have replaced a leash that pulled us in a single direction with a virtual halter that leaves us free but restricts our gaze. Texts and audio, especially images and videos, multiply exponentially at extreme speed until they are exhausted. In this sense, I believe images deserve to be highlighted in this discussion. I propose that we approach the term *image* in a broader sense, encompassing both those static images and videos, and understanding these are formed of images in movement. Let us do this so we can talk again with Flusser when he inferred that our relationship with images occurs in a mediation process between humanity and the world.

Human beings ‘ex-ist’, i.e. the world is not immediately accessible to them and therefore images are needed to make it comprehensible. However, as soon as this happens, images come between the world and human beings. They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens: Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings’ lives finally become a function of the images they create. Human beings cease to decode the images and instead project them, still encoded, into the world ‘out there’, which meanwhile itself becomes like an image - a context of scenes (Flusser, 2018, p. 17).



This process that Flusser intuited has intensified with the expansion of digital tools and data transfer speed. Networks based on the exchange of images are the most popular, especially those structured around transmissions of short videos. We effectively have this idea of a set of scenes that take the place of representation of the world and spread through a viral process. The number of followers and likes measures the relevance of its content. In practice, the filter is the number of interactions. The important thing is to be the first in shares and a trending topic (the topic, the subject, in trend).

“And is it worth dancing to the music?”

This is an important question. This phenomenon is part of the excessive exploitation in a model of a society guided by the accumulation of capital found in the space of social networks, not a place of community but a chamber for cultivating individuality, which, as Byung-Chul Han points out, “It is destroying the public sphere and heightening human isolation. It is not the precept ‘Love thy neighbor’ but narcissism that governs digital communication” (Han, 2018, p. 86).

In this total erosion of the collective, while some humiliate themselves in exchange for money, those who watch and encourage this humiliation also reveal a need for interaction and, more than that, assume a position of control in a reality where we are increasingly stripped of decision-making capacity. The search for influence and exercise of control over others reveals how much our virtual connectivity does not connect us at all in how it is structured. Quite the opposite.

Today, the subject achieves liberation by turning itself into a project. Yet this amounts to another figure of constraint. Compulsion and constraint now take the form of performance, achievement, self-optimization, and autoexploitation. We are living in a singular phase of history when freedom itself entails pressure and coercion (Han, 2018, p. 87).

This model serves the platform itself very well since it increases engagement and generates more profit. While someone prostitutes themselves on the screen for a multitude of clients, the digital platform acts as a pimp. Ultimately, those who submit on screen and those who give orders serve the same master. Some believe they are domineering because they inflict humiliation on those on screen. However, the truth is that their performance in watching, clicking, and paying for virtual “gifts” generates as much profit for the platform as the actions of those humiliating themselves on screen. “Contemporary society is not a world of ‘Love thy neighbor,’ where we all realize ourselves in concert. Instead, it is an achievement society that enforces isolation. The achievement subject exploits itself until it collapses” (Han, 2018, pp. 87-88).

Anyone and everyone can become a creator of content and knowledge. All they have to do is put their words, voice, and art on the web. Furthermore, that is it, it will be there forever. However, if anyone and everyone put their art, voice, and words on the web, what guarantees that it will be read, heard, and seen? The truth is that in the world of interactions, more than writing, one needs to be read; more than speaking, one needs to be heard; more than making art, one needs to be seen,



appreciated, commented on, shared, and made viral. Therefore, more than quality art and content, attracting attention becomes the first criterion.

In this process, a phenomenon becomes viral not only because it spreads quickly but also because it is replicated, in multiple variants, by new carriers who take it for themselves and become other potential epicenters of the process of going viral. Here, we return to the notion of *positive convexity*. This process of going viral causes these networks to numb our relationship with non-digital nature, drawing our attention to screens, which take the place of experience. Our performance is now measured by our ability to interact on these networks, influence our posts, and have increasingly up-to-date knowledge. We need to post and share to show that we exist in this environment. In this sense, a dislike is worth as much as a like since, for the logic of the attention economy, the important thing is to interact. Even if many people share something to criticize, the need for criticism demonstrates attention to that message and reinforces its potential to affect it. If this message spreads, even if most people react negatively, a small portion only needs to show genuine interest to have enough engagement to become profitable and even be normalized.

In this accelerated and immediate process of networks, a phenomenon emerges at the same speed that it runs out and is quickly replaced by others, maintaining the logic of generating profits for the platform, which in the end, is the one that really wins. No matter how much money a content creator may make, it will only be a small fraction of what they make the network earn with their exposure. We have normalized people humiliating themselves for crumbs.

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“And now, who can save us?”

If the waves rock our boat from side to side, let us take advantage of this swing to throw ourselves between past and present, trying to find a way to face the alienation of networks in pre-digital writings. In this circular exercise of (re)taking the past to (re)think about our current and future moments, Antonin Artaud’s writings on “The Theater and the Plague” (2006) can be an exciting starting point for this moment when a pandemic virus has ravaged the world.

“And what plague is this that he talks about?”

While Artaud lived through the influenza pandemic in 1918, in his text, he (re)assembles the relationship with the plague in past centuries, briefly unraveling a thread that starts with one of the last outbreaks of bubonic plague, in 1720, going back to cases from antiquity, such as the plague that struck Athens in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. His concern, however, is not with a historical overview but with thinking about the relationship between the disease and its phenomena, which, in turn, reveal a lot about the crises that emerged in the current pandemic.



A social disaster so far-reaching, an organic disorder so mysterious—this overflow of vices, this total exorcism which presses and impels the soul to its utmost—all indicate the presence of a state which is nevertheless characterized by extreme strength and in which all the powers of nature are freshly discovered at the moment when something essential is going to be accomplished (Artaud, 2006, p. 21).

The term crisis used here does not refer to the economic context, although it could, but instead evokes the sense of sudden and intense manifestations of an emotional and/or nervous nature that we experience socially, as well as the notion of splitting, the crisis as a process of rupture with habits and/or beliefs previously adopted. “[...] For there can be theater only from the moment when the impossible really begins and when the poetry which occurs on stage sustains and superheats the realized symbols” (Artaud, 2006, p. 21). By bringing up, albeit briefly, the ideas of plague and crisis, based on Artaud, the objective is to find a way to face the alienation that internet navigation wants to place on us.

“But what is the difference between this infestation and going viral?”

At first glance, the relationship with going viral may seem similar since this involves taking content from its latent state to the extreme of visibility. However, the effects of this infection are where I separate the two relationships. Artaud defended the notion of plague based on transforming the being in the face of something that invades and necessarily transforms it. An infection that drives dormant images and transcends.

In the true theater a play disturbs the senses’ repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt (which moreover can have its full effect only if it remains virtual), and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic (Artaud, 2006, p. 24)

This is where art must act; more specifically, in our case, we can say that it is where theatrical education must place itself. We are proposing that theater education can be a means of combating the alienation of networks and that theater education in the university field, where we work, to be an emancipatory education, needs to confront this logic of capitalization of our subjectivities at the risk of its emptying. The objective of theater within this informational field on networks should not be to seek more likes but rather to confront the logic of likes themselves. “If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people are localized” (Artaud, 2006, p. 23).

It is necessary to understand the logic of these tools so that we can find and even create inputs through which we can work on creation, in the sense that Artaud puts it, where:

The theater restores us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and gives these powers names we hail as symbols: and behold! before our eyes is fought a battle of symbols, one charging against another in an impossible *melée*; for



there can be theater only from the moment when the impossible really begins and when the poetry which occurs on the stage sustains and superheats realized symbols (Artaud, 2006, p. 21).

In this sense, the viral does not presuppose creation but only dissemination. A biopolitical action on-and-from the network, it is not a plague, but rather a controlled contagion. It is a weapon of mass distraction. Thinking about the plague is precisely thinking about how to dismantle this weapon. “The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures” (Artaud, 2006, p. 21).

We take Artaud’s writing on the plague as a glimpse of possibilities, assuming the event and using the disruptive capacity of stagecraft so that through staging and teaching from-and-with the scene, we can awaken the relationships dormant by the viral, pestilent domain of this universe of digital images-techniques.

The theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go: like the plague it reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature. [...] In the true theater a play disturbs the senses’ repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt (which moreover can have its full effect only if it remains virtual), and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic (Artaud, 2006, p. 21).

In an environment dominated by technical images, I return to Artaud’s defense of theater as a way of infecting and exhausting this relationship: just like the plague, theater attempts to rebuild the link between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what exists in materialized nature.

“The theater like the plague is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure” (Artaud, 2006, p. 28).

However, once again, the debate about ethics and politics is present since the problem of the uses of technology has been keeping any sensible person awake at night since the creation of the atomic bomb. Furthermore, Artaud poses the question that will not be silenced:

And the question we must now ask is whether, in this slippery world which is committing suicide without noticing it, there can be found a nucleus of men capable of imposing this superior notion of the theater, men who will restore to all of us the natural and magic equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe (Artaud, 2006, p. 29).

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Since Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, some have feared the unbridled explosion of information.



Different social groups have raised different criticisms of the new instrument. For example, copyists and “paperworkers” (who sold handwritten books), and professional storytellers all feared - as had happened with handloom operators during the Industrial Revolution - that the printing press would deprive them of their livelihood. The clergy, in turn, feared that the press would encourage ordinary lay people to study religious texts on their own rather than heeding what the authorities told them. They were right (Burke, 2002, p. 174).

“So, are technologies a problem or not?”

First of all, we need to differentiate the idea of technology from computing devices, digital networks, and media. The term technology comes from the study of *techné*, of a technique. In other words, the study of an art or a craft, which in turn will lead to the formulation of specific methods, processes, and instruments for its development as a technique.

Secondly, it is also necessary to emphasize that theatrical production has always used the technological advances of each era throughout history. From the architecture of Greek theaters, great works have used knowledge and technology to their advantage, from the machinery in medieval theater to the use of perspective in the Renaissance.

This use of perspective in the visual arts began to influence theater. Sets designed in geometric proportions were constructed, creating an illusion of depth, which benefited from a front-stage theater model.

In the modern era, technological innovation has always been present in theatrical expression, from lighting and the automation of mechanisms to using projections and audiovisual resources on stage. Therefore, It is reasonable that in a society where most interactions occur through digital media, this virtual coexistence would also be present in theatrical production.

Just as in the black box theater, numerous resources are used to playfully construct the theatrical scene—the use of lighting, changing sets, trapdoors, elevators, and rods that make small elements or even sets of characters appear or disappear—in the technological black box, we have access to other tools, such as the recombination of images and sounds, as long as the artist seeks to play with the device, even exploring possibilities not foreseen in its original programming. Thus producing new scenic virtualities.

When Euripides lowered a large basket, supported by ropes and pulleys, carrying an actor from the ceiling to the stage of the Greek arena, he was able to give shape to the image of a god who descended from the heavens to enter the scene. *Deus ex machina*, a god who makes themselves present through a machine. Today, the largest theaters have countless automated rods capable of suspending sets and actors, making them fly even over the audience. However, the principle remains the same: making something imaginary visible to us. We may consciously know that the actor is not flying, but we can imagine this flight. A flight that has no real effect but exists as a possibility, i.e., it exists as virtuality.



Accepting this virtuality of the scene also means assuming that the entire process of performing/transmitting a theatrical action in a digital technological medium confronts this becoming of theater with the virtualities of networks that simulate human relations through devices and technical images.

*“Two virtualities?”*

These two issues are linked by the advance of immateriality, gradually gaining the status of reality and shaping our relationships. The confrontation of theatrical virtuality with the virtuality of the universe of technical images presents itself as a possibility of exposing the artificiality of these relationships, the simulacrum of networks. Once again balancing between past and present, we update Brechtian distancing, now considered in conjunction with our relationship with the mediated reality, bringing to the stage the discussion about this mediatization in a multimedia performance.

In multimedia and Brechtian performances, everything starts from and returns to reality through questioning that seeks to analyze the situation. Therefore, the essential work of distancing results from analyzing reality and its perception by the artist and the spectator (Féral, 2015, p. 237).

This multimedia distancing, presented by Josette Féral, can manifest in two primary ways. Either through the reproduction of reality on stage, without any sensitive work on the image, where the image takes on meaning on stage through contextualization and by relating it to other systems of scenic meanings with which it is immediately found. Alternatively, through the reproduction of reality outside of its relations in a fragmented, non-continuous manner, which can result in an explosive multiplication of the image's content and a slowdown and even immobilization of the image.

It is precisely because the media authorize, more than any other spectacular form, such an extreme, almost absolute approximation between the stage and reality that reality is suppressed there. By reproducing reality so accurately, by adapting to it, they end up taking its place, swallowing it; the mediatized reality is nothing more than a simulacrum, an illusion, a point of view, an escape route (Féral, 2015, p. 239).

Once again, we understand theater as a form of confrontation. By adopting the logic of Brechtian distancing, we propose, in metalanguage, an unveiling of the operation of the simulacrum of networks. Employing the virtuality of theater as a re-presentation and re-creation of the world as a way of exposing the virtuality of digital devices, which hides its simulative nature and tries to appear as an immaterial reality.

\*



This confrontation needs to be part of not only theater production but also theater teaching. Understanding the place of theatrical representation and the virtualities of the scene in a relationship of media metalinguistic distancing concerning the virtuality of technical images is justified precisely because this simulacrum is increasingly successful in taking the place of reality.

How many people believed in false narratives such as the distribution of erotic baby bottles by public entities or even camped out for months in tents at the entrance to military barracks, believing that within 72 hours, there would be an intervention by higher powers to prevent Brazil from falling into the clutches of communism. All of this was only possible due to interactions on social networks, which led these people to isolate themselves from reality.

The television generation and the generic “digital natives” phagocyte their subjectivities in the perverse and postmodern navigation of the consumption of technical images of the world. They are closer to the employees of devices than practically any other generation has been. [...] Let us imagine the psychic catastrophe that it means to abandon a “young person in the world” in the face of the powerful attention conglomerates. In other words, does childhood not have the right to cognitive integrity? Would our senses have remained the same after 65-70 years of television, almost 40 years of computers, and 20 years of cell phones? (Freiberg, 2021, p. 173).

Revealing the illusory nature of this relationship allows us to confront the alienation of-and-in networks. Like lighthouses that indicate the path to be followed in navigation, we need reference points in reality so that the current does not drag us out to sea and we drown. We can throw ourselves along the path as long as we keep Ariadne’s thread that leads us back to the labyrinth’s entrance. Otherwise, we can get lost entirely. If we do not have these references, we will fall into an unreal world, a complete fantasy. If we do not have this ballast, we have no possibility of questioning. We are capable of believing that the earth is flat. We fall into an extremely dangerous place. We enter the rabbit hole once and for all with no way back.

“So theater making and teaching would be like a port, a reference lighthouse?”

We do not believe it. If we follow Artaud’s lead, the idea is precisely for theater to cause chaos in this totalitarian program. It creates, like the plague, a dizzying disorder. We return to the problem of immersion and normalization of relationships in which any thing/information/event/person is transformed into data, into information. At the same time, we feed on this data, just as we feed the networks with us, in the form of data. Moreover, in this cycle, we increasingly reproduce data that are the repercussions of what we feed on. A frenetic production, with less and less time for reflection, which also reveals our gradual loss of the ability to grasp reality as if it were historical.

“History no longer exists; historicity loses its importance because it is no longer possible to be imagined from an imperialist and unitary point of view because it renounces a powerful point of view that would give it meaning” (Féral, 2015, p. 240).





This loss of centrality and historical concatenation of thought results in the increasing fragmentation and immediacy of our actions on these networks. I sent a message to someone, but they have not responded yet. Let me see if they have seen it yet. Furthermore, if they have, then why did not they say anything? I posted a photo and a video, and nobody liked it; nobody commented. I need to look at X, formerly Twitter, to know what is happening; I have to look at WhatsApp because someone might have sent an important message. Furthermore, the Theater acting like the plague, taking the disease of connectivity to the extreme, making it sick. “It appears that by means of the plague, a gigantic abscess, as much moral as social, has been collectively drained; and that like the plague, the theater has been created to drain abscesses collectively” (Artaud, 2006, p. 28).

This need for being constantly connected to what is happening manifests itself in FOMO, fear of missing out, which can be translated as “fear of being left out.” The counterpart of FOMO would be the so-called compulsion to emit. The feeling that the experience is only valid if it is shared and exposed. There is no point in going to your favorite singer’s concert if you do not post a photo or a video. Even if that means you miss out on enjoying the moment and the concert.

Going to lunch at a restaurant only makes sense if you post a nice picture of your food. Furthermore, if you are traveling, you need to take posed photos, no matter where you are, in a compulsive and even disrespectful attitude, as happened with the museum in the former Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz, which “asked visitors to stop taking frivolous photos in a place where ‘hundreds of thousands of people were murdered’” (Agência EFE, 2019).

Once again, theater presents as a possibility to challenge this acceleration by focusing on personal exchanges and affection. “It appears that by means of the plague, a gigantic abscess, as much moral as social, has been collectively drained; and that like the plague, the theater has been created to drain abscesses collectively” (Artaud, 2006, p. 28). On stage, we can suspend and subvert reality. Be it physical reality or the simulated immaterial reality of networks. Furthermore, presence is the virus that plagues and can rot the illusion and the “idea that autonomous systems will become so algorithmically attuned and trained as to render human agency redundant in a functional sense” (Kampmark, 2024). Presence is what will bring humans back into relationships. Once again, the actor gives himself to martyrdom, as in the idea of the “athlete of the heart” (Artaud) or the “actor-saint” (Jerzy Grotowski).

The need to produce non-stop is also an attempt to fill the gaps between increasingly fragmented points. But without time for reflection. In a torrential rush of information, where everything arrives at the same time and with the same importance, be it the sharing of a speech by the president, a cooking recipe, the lineup of the soccer team, or the good morning message in your aunt’s group.

“But how do we solve this madness and this lack of meaning, then?”

First of all, we assume that we are living in a virtual pandemic. When everything happens simultaneously and potentially with the same importance, we cannot turn it off at any moment



since notifications are like a box of surprises, equally harmless and frightening, until you open them with a click. Just as we assume the like to combat the logic of validation through likes and we assume virtuality to combat the simulacrum of networks, we also need to assume the fragmented and oscillating character, faced with a flow of decentralized information that unhealthy influences our journey.

The answer?

“In the theater as in the plague there is something both victorious and vengeful” (Artaud, 2006, p. 23).



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