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RASHOMON: DIVERSIFYING PERSPECTIVES ON SPECTATORSHIP IN THE THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Abstract

What is the relationship between theory and practice in the Theatre of the Oppressed? Just as the poetics of the oppressed is based on the assumption that acting/being on stage is “active”, as opposed to spectatorship being “passive”, so it may be claimed that the knowledge emergent from practice is inherently active, compared to the passive, vicarious knowledge proposed by theory, critique and reflection. Yet, in what way is such a practice-led or experience-based claim to knowledge more compelling or less conclusive than one based on observation, non-involvement and critical distance? In what way exactly is the knowledge of ‘doing’ inherently more or less profound than the knowledge of ‘seeing’? In this article, the author investigates the relationship between theory and practice through the analogous relationship between spectatorship and acting in the Theatre of the Oppressed. The claim that is presented in the paper is that spectatorship is more important to the Theatre of the Oppressed than its practitioners and theorists (including Boal) might like to acknowledge. By rethinking the importance of spectatorship, the author demonstrates the importance of seeing theory and practice as a continuum, rather than as ideologically separate domains.

Key words

theatre, theory, practice, spectatorship, Theatre of the Oppressed

“Nothing happens in the real world unless it first happens
in the images of our heads.”

Gloria Anzaldúa

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Introduction: The Knowing-Doing Divide

What is the relationship between theory and practice in the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)?² While it may seem self-evident that practitioners do the practice and academics do the theorising, a closer look at this relationship reveals that theory and practice do not inhabit watertight compartments, nor are they opposite to each other. Yet, it is not uncommon to come across statements such as: “Practitioners act, whereas academics talk or write”, which seem to imply that the talking and writing is somehow hollow or elitist, as opposed to the practice, which is seemingly more grounded and closer to reality. The knowledge offered by theorisation is fashioned as passive, as “merely” observing from a distance, in comparison to the idea that practitioners understand what they do by virtue of being in the midst of it. Of course, not every practitioner may agree with these views or express them in these terms, but they are nevertheless regularly heard. Given that the established worlds of academia have often used the voice and authority of scholarship to silence or render inaudible the voices of marginalised peoples, there is undoubtedly a power dynamic at work, placing representatives of “theory” and of “practice” at odds with each other at different historical junctures. Curiously, the mistrust of theory seems to persist, despite the growing presence of a number of texts on TO authored by practitioner-cum-scholars, with varying degrees of involvement and backgrounds in both TO practice as well as in academic fields.

The anxiety towards academic scholarship and the implicit duality or opposition between theory and practice is worth some reflection. In many ways, an analogy can be drawn to the relationship between spectatorship and acting in TO. Just as the poetics of the oppressed is based on the assumption that acting/being on stage is “active”, as opposed to spectatorship being “passive”, so it may be claimed that the knowledge emergent from practice is inherently active, compared to the passive, vicarious knowledge proposed by theory, critique and reflection. Just as spectatorship can be overcome through its transformation in the figure of the “spect-actor” and through the participatory group working process that forms the backbone of TO, it might be argued that the receptive, distanced nature of theoretical study may be overcome or activated through an engagement with the practice.

2 This is a fully revised and expanded version of an essay previously published as: Bala, Sruti. ‘De-stultifying spectatorship in the theatre of the oppressed.’ In Klöck, Anja (ed.). *The politics of Being on Stage*. (Hildesheim etc.: Olms, 2012), 229-246. A Spanish translation of this article is forthcoming in Joffre-Eichhorn, Hjalmar (ed.). *Mirando el Teatro del Oprimido desde Bolivia* (La Paz: FES, 2015).

Yet, in what way is such a practice-led or experience-based claim to knowledge more compelling or less conclusive than one based on observation, non-involvement and critical distance? In what way exactly is the knowledge of 'doing' inherently more or less profound than the knowledge of 'seeing'?

In this article, I would like to investigate the relationship between theory and practice through this analogous relationship between spectatorship and acting in TO. In an environment where ideas such as creativity, innovation, novelty, flexibility, participation and collaboration have become mantras for entrepreneurship and docile soft tools of corporate governance rather than ideals of collective struggle and conscientization in the Freirean sense, I believe it is crucial to be circumspect about the concepts we use in relation to the contexts they circulate in. It is also necessary to occasionally re-examine the central principles of the practice in the light of contemporary challenges. The claim I would like to offer in this essay is that spectatorship is more important to TO than its practitioners and theorists (including Boal) might like to acknowledge. By rethinking the importance of spectatorship, I hope to thereby also demonstrate the importance of seeing theory and practice as a continuum rather than as ideologically separate domains.

The words 'theatre' and 'theory' etymologically share the same origins: *theatron*, *theo-ria* and *thea-mai* all belong to the classical Greek, departing from *the-in*, which connotes ways of seeing, including specific orders and arrangements of recognizing, perceiving, spectatorship and the activity of the gaze. Theatre and theory thus both signify different but inter-related processes of making phenomena visible or worth seeing, into objects and states of recognition. Seeing and doing are thus not opposites, whereby one ultimately transcends the other, but a continuum across which we need to keep moving in both directions, depending on the needs and urgencies of the contexts.

Spectatorship: A State to be Overcome?

One of the foundational distinctions TO I have trouble unconditionally agreeing with is the differentiation between acting or any involvement in the theatrical action being an activating, empowering process on the one hand, as opposed to spectatorship, on the other hand, being passive or receptive. When Boal writes:

In order to understand this poetics of the oppressed one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people – ‘spectators’, passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action. (Boal, 1998: 122)

there is an apparently straightforward distinction maintained between passive spectators and active actors. In Boalian theatre theory, it is the actor and not the spectator who ultimately bears subjectivity and agency with a transformative power. Spectatorship in itself therefore remains a state to be overcome. Wherever spectatorship is spoken about, particularly in the texts by Boal (and so often reiterated by practitioners), it is often understood as “de-activation” (Boal, 1995: 41), “vicarious experience” through over-identification with the protagonist (Boal, 1998: 34), a state of subjugation, with an acceptance of self-imposed “finished visions of the world”³, and thus a condition marked by the lack of ownership of the means of dramatic, aesthetic production, from which the Poetics of the Oppressed offers a possibility of transformation (ibid, 122).

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From a feminist perspective, this negative marking of spectatorship is an oddity. After all, have we not learnt that much of the politics of the objectification of women has to do with the power of the gaze, often male, mostly heterosexual? Have we not experienced time and again that women’s presence in public spaces is often reduced to women’s bodies being framed as objects and projections of visual pleasure, or conversely, as undesirable objects, unworthy of any pleasure? The pleasure or power of looking is predominantly allocated to men, and women are principally marked by the way they are looked at, thus as “image” rather than as the bearer of the gaze. As numerous feminist scholars and activists have argued, women’s own imaginations of themselves are so seeped by a sense of being the objects rather than the subjects of looking, acquired through centuries of patriarchal structures, that they are often only able to see themselves through the eyes of others, through how they believe they appear to others. The task of much feminist critique has thus been to work at ways of learning to be subjects of spectatorship, as well as learning to see without objectifying the other. Therefore, how could spectatorship, even in the narrower theatrical sense, be defined in this restricted way as a subjugating or inferior position, when it offers the opportunity to train the gaze as a mode of subject formation?

3 Here in reference to Paulo Freire’s critique of conventional education, see Freire, Paulo: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

Patriarchy as the oldest form of empire extends beyond the interpersonal relations of men and women alone. It is closely tied to other histories of objectification, oppression and control. Symbolic violence accompanies physical violence and cannot be simply overcome by assuming a procedure of accomplishing a certain transformation from passivity into action. Frantz Fanon, one of the most insightful thinkers of colonialism, wrote eloquently about how the recuperation of a sense of selfhood historically marked by colonisation is not a one-way road that moves with confident steps from passivity and subjugation to agency and self-expression. Rather the psyche of the oppressed learns to wear the mask of the oppressor as a way to get by in the world (an idea captured accurately by the title of one of Fanon's books, *Black Skin, White Masks*) (Fanon, 2008). The process of decolonisation is marked as much by the unleashing of a painful and messy psychic inner life as it may be marked by material achievements and ownership of the means of production and stages of action. It makes monsters of the colonisers and turns the colonised against others. The process is neither simply achieved nor can it be easily declared as complete. How then does TO hold on to the notion of the transformation of the passive spectator into a conscientized actor as a one-way road leading to the rewards of freedom, agency and self-empowerment? Should we not be wary of this institutional validation of a very limited kind of agency, of the validation of agency by calling it a form of freedom?

In the 21st century, it seems even more difficult to accept the division of emancipated action vs. passive spectatorship when considering events that have profoundly shaped the disparities of the world. When the devastating images of Abu Ghraib circulated around the world, public outrage focused at times more on the images than on the acts they captured. As Jacqueline Rose unflinchingly put it, "it felt as if exposing this reality, rather than the reality itself, was the worst offence" (Rose, 2007: 160). The acts became horrifying, as it were, only in the moment when they were transformed into images, thus invoking a spectatorship. When we speak of the growing rift between the haves and the have-nots, between the Global North and the Global South, we often refer to the absence of attention and visibility to the problems of the Global South. We use metaphors of the ruling powers "looking away" from or "turning a blind eye" to the injustices and inequalities around the world. Surely, these cannot be written off as empty turns of phrases. The work of looking is the effort of paying attention to something in order to usher it into the spectrum of the visible. In the present time, the regime of visibility is often complementary to the regime of value. Entire industries cater to influencing what people see, to catching their attention as viewers, to measuring

every miniscule aspect of their activity as spectator-consumers. That which is worth seeing, has a chance of being valued (sometimes as commodified value), protected, kept alive. Spectatorship is thus not passive, but powerful, it bears consequences, it implies recognition, which might counter the threat of erasure.

The Diversity of Spectatorial Practices in TO

In what follows I will share some instances and examples of how spectatorship, far from being a state of receptivity and subjugation, which ought to be overcome, is crucial to the poetics of the oppressed. Although spectatorship may have been allocated the ideological status of passivity in the vocabulary of TO, it recurs in many different ways in the practice as well as in the way its impact is assessed.

1) *The Many Eyes of the Forum*

The Forum offers a central platform of spectatorship in TO. One often comes across statements such as: “There is no spectatorship in a theatre of the oppressed session: there are only active observers” (Boal and Epstein, 1990: 35). What is not given its due recognition in such formulations, is that the empowering potential of the notion of the “spect-actor” is related not only to stepping on the stage and becoming active, but also equally to the act of being recognised by an audience. Every act of a “spect-actor” necessitates a certain form of spectatorship. This is provided by the forum, which serves as a collective witness to the improvisations on stage and gives feedback once the intervention is completed.

2) *Jokers and Actors are Spectators too*

The role of the joker, and concomitantly, the forum actor/actress, can be interpreted as another important form of spectatorship. The joker serves as an intermediary between the forum and the actors, and is thus a vigilant spectator of both, in the sense of being constantly alert to responses by the forum and by “spect-actors”. They are not meant to express their own opinion but be observant facilitators, i.e. ask open questions to the audience to elicit their participation. The joker is a third party presence outside the conventional relation between audience and actors. The task of the joker in the system

of TO is to introduce the rules, to dynamise audience participation using small exercises, and steer the reflection and intervention process when the forum is opened. She accompanies, but does not lead the forum interventions. The joker is spectator in the mode of critical observer and questioning note-taker.

The theorisation of the joker in the research literature as well as in Boal's own writing highlights the joker's role as activator, facilitator, 'difficultator' and mediator.⁴ Equally important, however, is the joker's role as spectator, i.e. as someone who explicitly does not step into the scene and propose solutions, but who engages with the action simply by paying attention. To assert that this mode of spectatorship is active, would be tautological, since it would imply there is a passive spectatorship of the joker, and that it is possible to distinguish which qualities of spectatorship are active or passive. Since this is not the case, it is more useful to describe spectatorship in terms of a range of practices. The joker "does" spectatorship in a different way than the forum does.

There is a qualitative as well as a quantitative difference between their modes of spectatorship. The joker views the performance with previous knowledge of the scene and its dramatic turns, whereas the forum sees it for the first time. The joker watches the "spect-actors" intervene in the same way as the rest of the forum does, although her task is to be vigilant about the questions that the intervention generates, rather than imagine how to resolve the crisis depicted. If the spectatorial practice of the forum can be described as witnessing, then the practice of the joker can be described as observing, scrutinizing, providing the distance that allows for reflection. Similarly, the actors on stage also have moments of holding back, watching, reflecting, which go hand in hand with the moments of dialogue or physical interaction.

3) *The Gaze of the Cop in the Head*

Another modality of spectatorship is to be found in the concept of the "cop in the head". This concept concerns internalised oppressions that manifest themselves in the actions of the protagonist, i.e. cultural or social institutions and mechanisms, by which structures of domination and control are internalised to the extent that the use of force or violence is not necessary and people become submissive, seemingly of their own accord. The concept of the

4 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Chapter 5: "Development of the Arena Theater of Sao Paulo".

cop in the head is developed in the therapeutic methods of the Theatre of the Oppressed, outlined in Boal's book *Rainbow of Desire* (1995). It is interesting that the concept, which is historically closely connected to Gramsci's notion of hegemony and Althusser's idea of interpellation, is formulated as a force of surveillance and control, as someone watching over the protagonist, monitoring their actions and inculcating fear and self-censorship. The cop in the head is thus an absent spectator, a phantom presence that can be heard and palpably felt but cannot be seen or caught. It marks a mode of spectatorship that precedes the dramatic action and provides its backdrop. The phantom presence within the protagonist prevents her from taking action or pursuing her will. The cop in the head is a spectator within the actor, taking on the form of a surveillance inspector. In the system of the TO, the concept is translated into several techniques in image theatre, where workshop participants begin with a story of internal oppression, and identify the cops in their head, and personify them through other participants in image exercises and dynamisation sequences, thus allowing the cops in their heads to be externalised, and in turn be watched and monitored by the protagonist, in order for their power to be diminished or dissipated.

For example, the cop in the head may be an inner voice that tells a woman that she is too fat or ugly and that she must not eat in order to stay slim. The image exercises would generate a situation where these internal watchdogs are played by participants and where the protagonist would confront them. The cop in the head marks a mode of spectatorship within the system of the Theatre of the Oppressed, powerful though negatively connoted. It demonstrates that spectatorship in the guise of internalised psychological self-surveillance can even inflict harm and stand in the way of empowerment. This too stands in contrast to the idea that spectatorship is "passive", for passivity would imply inaction, i.e. not even the capacity to do harm.

4) *The Co-Pilot: the skill of non-judgmental viewing*

A further spectatorial presence in TO is in the figure of the "co-pilot". Spectatorship is an integral part of not only the forum, but also in the preparation of a scene and the group workshop and rehearsal process. In several exercises such as the ones outlined in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992) and in *Rainbow of Desire* (1995), Boal makes use of the concept of the co-pilot to refer to participants in the theatre of the Oppressed working process, whose task is to listen to and accompany the participant sharing her story. The co-

pilot is an empathetic and sensitive listener and marks a function that is crucial to the early stages in the elaboration of a theme. When participants work in pairs, one tells a story and the other listens and tries to understand the situation, without passing any judgements on the outcome or the behaviour of the person narrating the story. During image exercise sequences, there are brief presentations to co-pilots, who serve as consultants and observers in the process. The act of listening emphasises the auditory aspects of spectatorship, which are crucial to the practice of TO.

5) The Onlooker: the Spectator on Stage

The figure of the onlooker, sometimes also called the tritagonist, might be described as the spectator on stage. The onlooker is neither protagonist, nor antagonist, neither directly oppressed, nor oppressor. This character is physically present on stage, when an act of injustice takes place. S/he may not necessarily be directly affected, but could potentially play an important interventionist role. The tritagonist plays a spectator or witness within the scene. The onlooker or tritagonist is a recurring figure in many TO narratives. By virtue of bearing witness to a particular situation and being physically present or in proximity to the protagonist, the onlooker suddenly takes on great importance in the forum. This figure complicates the theorisation of spectatorship, in as much as it does not rest easily within the conventional separation of audience and actors that forms the basis of Boal's notion of aesthetic space. To some extent, it also unsettles our understanding of the "spect-actor", because when a "spect-actor" replaces an onlooker on stage, s/he does not simply transit to the position of actor but also transitions from one spectatorial practice to another, and this is not in contrast to but in continuum with a so-called "active" intervention.

6) Assessing impact in terms of changes in perception

Spectatorship recurs in TO in the way the impact of TO is articulated. When practitioners speak of the positive effects of TO, it is notably often described in terms of the vocabulary of 'seeing'. We claim evidence of impact when, for instance, a participant in a TO process says: "TO changed my view of the world", or "I gained a new perspective on the societal problems", or "the workshop opened my eyes". These are not mere mannerisms of speech, but indications that the practice of TO offers a change in habituated patterns of

perception, which may eventually form the basis for a change in mechanised patterns of behaviour.

Merely a matter of perspective?

In the TO rehearsal technique called *Rashomon*, participants offer multiple perspectives of the same event, all of which are watched by everyone without comment or intervention. This too is a study in seeing and observing without being compelled to action. The technique specifically helps to address distortions and assumptions in perceptions of others, which may lead to conflicts, by confronting various versions of reality with each other. It is of course widely known that the technique is inspired by Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film by the same name. The film tells the story of a rape of a woman from the perspective of different persons involved in the incident, leading to completely different filmic versions. The film has been canonised for its unique filmic narrative techniques, and has become synonymous for situations where conflicting viewpoints exist together. Yet, it raises ethical and political questions when examined from the point of view of the woman, whose integrity and body has been violated.

The lesson I learnt from the TO technique of *Rashomon* is that truths are plural, each valid in its own way. Yet when placed in connection with the film plot of *Rashomon*, a certain brutality behind this seemingly liberal idea is revealed. From the point of view of the woman who was raped, it is surely unacceptable that the rape is treated merely as a matter of perspective, with each person's view accorded its own validity? If her experience of this extreme violation of subjectivity is ultimately placed in relation to and thereby made equivalent to those of others, then the *Rashomon* effect implies not an innocent shifting of perceptions, but the failure to recognise that a woman's experience of violence is silenced through the logic of the relativism of perspective. Does the equality of all spectators' perspectives mean they all bear the same consequences? By labelling spectatorship as one homogenous kind of theatrical experience, such questions of asymmetry in different kinds of spectatorship are unfortunately brushed aside.

The view that spectatorship is a state to be overcome, can thus itself be a stultifying view, since it undervalues the complexity of spectatorship in itself. I would like to therefore suggest that spectatorship is as important as acting in the TO, that it need not be simplistically seen in opposition to acting, or

knowing, or in terms of the active-passive binary, but that it involves a wide range of practices and subject positions, from reception (absorbing, taking in, understanding), to perception (using senses to make sense of the world), to surveillance or to imaginative inquiry. The work of spectatorship, the work of perceiving and making things worth perceiving, complements the work of becoming “spect-actors”. I have tried to show that while theorisations of TO commonly depart from spectatorship as a passive state, which is overcome through action, thereby posing the distinction between spectatorship and acting as an ideological one, the practice of TO in fact reveals an immense diversity of modes of spectatorship. Historically, this might have legitimate reasons and have made sense in a time when the opposition to military dictatorship meant calling upon a subjugated population to take action. My argument is not against taking action, or that spectatorship and reflection should be privileged over action. Just as there is a multitude of possible acts, so there is a multitude of possible ways of looking. The theory of TO need not be viewed as a static set of rules, for which Boal forms some kind of ultimate unquestionable figure of authority. Just as we recognise the need to keep developing and adapting the repertoire of TO according to the vastly different contexts and terrains of the world’s problems, so we ought to recognise the need to simultaneously develop the concepts of TO and be alert to the operations to which they are put to use. Spectatorship and acting, just like theory and practice, thus form a dynamic multi-directional continuum of seeing-acting-knowing-doing.

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RAŠOMON: DIVERSIFIKACIJE PERSPEKTIVA GLEDALAŠTVA U POZORIŠTU POTLAČENOG

Apstrakt

Kakav je odnos između teorije i prakse u Pozorištu potlačenih? Baš kao što se poetika potlačenih zasniva na pretpostavci da je gluma/ bivstvovanje na sceni „aktivno“, za razliku od gledalaštva koje je „pasivno“, može se tvrditi da je znanje koje dolazi iz prakse inherentno aktivno, u poređenju sa pasivnim, vikarijskim znanjem koje predlažu teorija, kritika i razmišljanje. Kao što se gledalaštvo može prevazići kroz transformaciju u lik „onog koji gleda i glumi“, „spect-actor“, a kroz proces participativnog grupnog rada koji formira okosnicu toga, moglo bi se tvrditi da se receptivna, distancirana priroda teorijskog rada može prevazići ili aktivirati kroz angažovanje sa praksom.

Na koji način je takav zahtev za znanjem koje je inicirano praksom ili iskustvom više ili manje ubedljiv od onog zasnovanog na posmatranju, neučestvovanju i kritičkoj distanci? Na koji način je znanje „delanja“ više ili manje duboko od znanja „gledanja“? U ovom radu, autor istražuje odnos između teorije i prakse kroz analogni odnos između gledalaštva i glume u Pozorištu potlačenog.

U radu se iznosi tvrdnja da je gledalaštvo važnije Pozorištu potlačenog nego što to praktičari i teoretičari (uključujući Boala) priznaju. Promišljanjem značaja gledalaštva, autor ukazuje na značaj posmatranja teorije i prakse kao kontinuuma, pre nego kao ideološki odvojenih domena.

Ključne reči

pozorište, teorija, praksa, gledalaštvo, Pozorište potlačenog