

**MYTH CARRYING MATTER AND ITS
SCENOGRAPHIC POTENTIAL.
THE NEW SACRALITY
OF IMMEDIATE REALITY**

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Abstract: The article traces the scenographic potential contained by the matter of objects, respectively non-objects used in emblematic manifestations such as the site-specific event, the installation and the experimental performance. These manifestations become the ideal mediums through which the artistic object manages to assimilate information from its distant past, inevitably also reflecting the force of the myth, which has nourished art for centuries.

Keywords: heterotopia, mirror, object, materiality, scenographic potential, myth.

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Currently, there is a rather fine line between different fields that use image expressiveness as the main language, and the new framework thus consolidated contains a magnetism which is to engage new visions of scenographic concepts, implicitly gaining new dimensions. This visual augmentation through materialities resorts to meanings which belong to *beyond scenography* concept (Hann, 2019, p. 7). This *extended* ambient (Krauss, 1977, p. 282) manages to activate the lifeblood of the original roots of perception in relation to the matter vibration and the overlays of content which it communicates to the viewer. Through art's dependence on its past and the energy it needs to breathe fantasy, it repositions itself, permanently gravitating around the shapes that brought it to life.

I will argue the recent values assimilated by the image through the concept proposed by Michel Foucault, *heterotopia*, which contains *multi-dimensional realities* that paradoxically manage to exist and signal complementary contents. This new imagined space is made possible through materialities such as the mirror surface, which trigger a beautiful conversation between the real and the imaginary - a dialectic about the object's existence or non-existence, about its meaning in different spaces: the theatre stage, the exhibition space, or the manifestations of land art.

The directions proposed by structuralist, anthropological and philosophical thinking, represented by the studies of the great theorists of the 20th century, will determine an essential transformation in the performance field. The new means of expression discovered by using these new directions will bring unexpected expressiveness to the surface. The analyses proposed by Roland Barthes, the study of archetypes suggested by Carl Gustav Jung, the

anthropological studies led by Claude Lévi-Strauss or the theories of philosopher Michel Foucault bring into discussion new perspectives that will determine essential changes in the aesthetics field. The epoch's great shows will be restated following the route of the new analyses, applying the psychoanalytical filter and the clues offered by the new theories. Following these transformations, the physical or gestural theatre will be born, in which the show is no longer seen as a social necessity, but as an anticipation of future societies. The theatrical space is completely reconsidered, purged of everything that does not contain a genuine symbolic charge. The stage design conveys through scenic simultaneities charged with a particular dynamism, by stripping the magic box and actively asking the viewer to decipher the creative act. The emerging image will constantly appeal to the senses altogether, all the while being perfected by the use of scientific information that quickly integrates into theatrical language.

Heterotopia is a concept defined by Michel Foucault carrying an immense mythical weight, with those fantastic stories that speak of the sacred origin of matter. Hence, we discover a potential distant past, through which man partially bequeathed events of his existence on earth, otherwise destined to be forgotten, to the present, as Lévi-Strauss testifies (2005, p. 18). We identify the fundamental human need to imagine worlds and to be in control of an infinite universe that is not defined by chaos, but by order, symbol and meaning. Through these stories, we become familiar with the sacred force contained in the object, a dimension easily assimilated by theatrical space through scenography.

Foucault uses the term heterotopia to describe spaces that have multiple layers of content and multiple unnatural relationships with notions that magically become visible in the real environment. This way, reality can contain several apparently incompatible ambiances in one, just like theatre does, with different spaces coexisting simultaneously on stage. A representation of an apparently utopian space or rather a parallel one, containing a significant amount of distortions that make it possible to perceive it as real.

Heterotopia has the ability to juxtapose several locations that are incompatible in one real place. Therefore, theater brings to the rectangle of the stage a whole sequence of places that are not related to each other; the same way, a cinema is a rectangular hall with a three-dimensional space projected onto a two-dimensional screen behind it. (Foucault, 1998, p. 181)

In his arguments, Foucault relies on epistemologist Gaston Bachelard's analysis of the space in which we live, which is not a huge void, but a place impregnated

with the reflections of the experiences manifested in the past, which contain the dreams, desires and fears of humanity. This space contains that vibe of myth, with its fabulous stories and characters, with all the ancient beliefs about what the mystery of the universe actually meant.

The mirror is the example through which Foucault explains the connection between heterotopia and the bizarre reflection that belongs to a fantastic realm. Through this material that becomes the medium, an undeniable dialogue between real and unreal space is generated, through an inexhaustible transfer of meanings. By assimilating these pulsations, theater becomes a sanctuary that will permanently preserve its original sacredness, organically adapting to the new challenges of the present. (Foucault, 1998, p. 179)

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As a visual vehicle of symbols, the image is also the medium through which the code for representing the world is developed, as well as the object in which it materializes. That is why we discover different types of visuals that convey different messages: social, emotional, informal etc. All codes are decipherable in close connection to certain social practices, from images representing divinity to commercial behaviour, such as advertising images. Deciphering the code requires an aesthetic initiation and, in ideal conditions, the image puts aspects of a forgotten world under the microscope, like the non-sites created by Robert Smithson, such as Spiral Jetty, a sculpture made outside (Great Salt Lake of Utah, USA, 1970) or Corner Mirror with Coral, an installation set inside an exhibition space.

To me, an object is a product of thought, you know. It does not necessarily mean the existence of art. So I would say that objects are as real as angels are real. So I can't accept that as a category. Mainly, you're dealing with art, and my view of art springs from a dialectical position that deals, I think, with something that exists or doesn't exist. Those two areas, those two paths—the existent and the non-existent. (Robert Smithson in Norvell, 1969, p. 124)

The works proposed by Robert Smithson are referred to (by him) as non-sites and integrate the idea of non-objects, with immense scenographic potential. The sculpture *Corner Mirror with Coral* proposes a concrete space, made of three mirror surfaces that reflect one by one the space around them, multiplying the reflections of the coral fragments and the perimeter of the room. As Foucault argues, by merging the real image with its reflection, Smithson creates the illusion of an object, a non-object. The coral extracted from its natural environment seems to be floating in the air, turning into an object of fantasy, as if detached from the surrealist paintings made by Magritte. The exposed material loses its immediate meaning, gaining a new dimension, a new meaning, which magically intertwines the object's real substance with its reflection, reshaping both reality and its meaning.

The whole idea relating to objects is something I find to be a pernicious myth. It's like believing in fairies or something, you know. It just doesn't exist. The mind is conditioned that way and needs the certainty of the mental construction of an object, but there is no object, like you would say that a painting by Kazimir Malevich is an object. It explicitly tells you that it is a non-object. But in this case, there is not even a place to speak of. The place has been abolished by the very density of the material. However, insisting that something is an object seems to be based on the need to find a positive answer. And there is no answer there. It's just a question. (Smithson in Norvell, 2001, p. 130)



Corner Mirror with Coral (1969)

The ideal mediums through which matter manifests

The myth still makes itself noticed in the cultural space of the modern world, through the manifestations of various artists who discover a new sacredness beyond the immediate reality.

Joseph Beuys yet again speaks about the illusion of the object, using a mythical-metaphorical language, going beyond the limits of reality and fiction, managing to synthesize in his work concepts containing something that seemed impossible to integrate before. By making an impressive number of innovative performances that appeal to the magic of ritual, relying on the construction of an organic mask, which carries us from the physical plane to the spiritual one, Beuys conveys new information about the matter content.

Motivated by a utopian belief in the power that human creativity radiates into the universe and art's power to bring about revolutionary change, he envisioned the whole of society as a great work of art. Beuys believed each person could make their creative contribution to this grandiose project, if they are forced to enter a space that hides meanings. Beuys consciously exploits the mythical force which, through the theories he brings to light, becomes generative of change. "When the image is no longer just illustrative, it becomes a metaphor or a living character." (Picon-Vallin, 1998, p. 28)

The aesthetics proposed by him organized both raw materials, such as metal or wood, and materials of an organic nature, such as fat, blood, wax or animal hair, the so-called *shamanic* objects, discovering otherwise lost meanings in the exhibited objects. Believing that art plays an integral part of everyday life, Beuys tries to convey different emotions through unusual materialities, such as the fat used in the Fat Chair installation. A strange object that seems to breathe, reshaping itself through temperature changes induced in the exhibition space. A conversation between a trivial wooden chair, a lump of fat and a sloppily twisted wire. A bizarre juxtaposition that exudes a strange tension, inviting you to ask yourself endless questions about each exposed subject. It is not a comfortable chair. It is an object that we use every day when we eat or rest for a few minutes. A piece of furniture that we don't analyse, we just use. Because its shape indicates a minimum degree of comfort, the object conveys an essential piece of information about the rigidity of the position it imposes, imagining an intermediate, almost violent position of the human body in its failed attempt to relax. The chair cancels

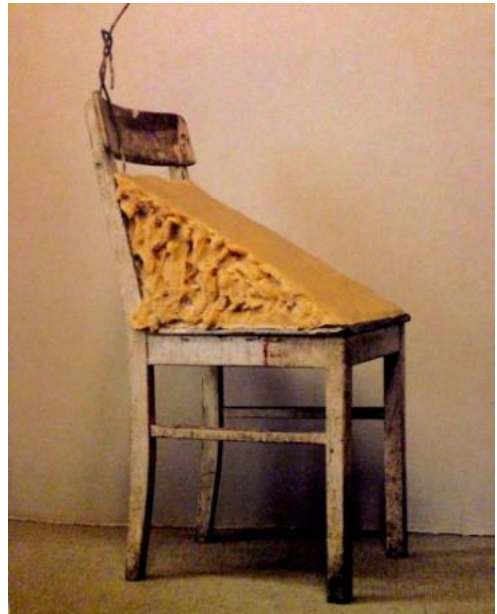
any activity and, in this context, as it is accompanied by a pile of fat, it becomes a violent *non-object*.

Fat can mean a surplus of energy of the human body, or its inactivity. But for Beuys, fat represents the essence of the artistic spirit, a fascinating story that has not been properly checked, but which became his formative myth as an artist. The story actually refers to a trauma that Beuys experienced during the Second World War, when the plane he was piloting had been shot down in the Crimean Peninsula region. He managed to survive with the help of a tribe of Tatars, who applied a thick layer of animal fat on his body, then wrapped him in a blanket to keep his body warm, thus protecting him from freezing. After the war, Beuys turns this story into the myth of his transformation into a creator, alluding directly to the myth of Christ reborn. Fat became the saving substance and, through it, Beuys turned into the total artist that combined life and art through matter.

Thus Beuys seeks the truth in those primitive societies and in the methods through which they proposed purification, resorting to the purity of matter. The artist, who undeniably influences theater through his accomplished happenings, also touching the depths of the human being and bringing the problems of the individual and his identity in the creative process into discussion.

Another artist who searches for the roots contained in matter through the image, scenic this time, is the Italian director Romeo Castellucci. It constantly investigates that relationship between the scene, the object and its materiality which contains in itself a mythical force that the director manages to extract and transmit to the audience.

Castellucci's theatre, initially through Società Raffaello Sanzio company, co-founded by him along with Claudia Castellucci, Chiara Guidi and Paolo Guidi, becomes the ideal place where the experiment manifests itself. It is the space



*Fat Chair (Fettstuhl) Joseph Beuys
(1964–1985)*

where different fields of art intertwine in a perfect symbiosis. The image conceived in this way appears cut from a realm that has nothing to do with everyday life, but with the magic of imagination, permanently redefining the role of art in society.

In his first aesthetic shows, Castellucci approaches aesthetics that remind us of Joseph Beuys or Gilberto Zorio and Jannis Kounellis, exponents of the Arte Povera movement. Influenced by their creations, he will explore the meanings contained in matter, seeking to convey information about the origin of things and the new values it contains in the contemporary show. The new concept that the Cesena experimental theatre company Societas invoked will reshape the stage image, all the while destroying the meaning theatre had built based on the power of the word. A new philosophy is born, one which integrates a poetics of the theatrical image that this company proposed, in which the image becomes a scenic manifesto and an emblematic exponent of the new theatrical ritual. (Castellucci in Semenowicz, 2013, p. 6)

The next period the Company experiments focuses on the theme of the ancient myths of Mesopotamia and the means of communication through symbols born before the Greek tragedy. It represents a return to pre-theatrical spectacular



manifestations, to a pre-tragic thinking that used the purity of matter and the expressiveness of the body in relation to the stage. These are the concepts that will form the basis of the theatre proposed by Castellucci.

Hey Girl! (2006) Romeo Castellucci

Created in 2006, *Hey Girl!* is a show that speaks to the consistency, flexibility and information of matter. A show that conveys information about the transformations of matter and life, like the fat used by Joseph Beuys. A certain type of coming into being through a viscous substance that comes close to the velvety texture of human skin, from which woman is born. The matter of the cocoon does not leave us, it continues to transform through a slow decomposition during the show unfolding, unfolding this character's life stages on stage. This becomes the initial mold in which Romeo Castellucci pours, one after the other,

the personalities of mythical figures such as the Virgin Mary, Joan of Arc or Juliet, allowing us to further meditate on the transformations of life.

Therefore, the performative order, focusing the viewer's attention on the materiality of the performance, does not come into conflict with the order of idea in Castellucci's theatre. Tearing similarities apart is the foundation of montage that restores the image's prior power. Thus, iconoclasm does not contradict image; it is more of an attempt to introduce it under new conditions. It is an aesthetic project—an attempt to create a new language, aside from harmony and in an effort to look for cracks in the mimetic notion of representation. (Semenowicz, 2013, p. 35.)

The moment the setting dematerializes so as to enable a mechanism scene to happen, the object regains its importance. The latter's matter possesses a certain power to maintain cultural coordinates and raise questions about the individual's report to the outside world. In this particular context, texture is a good of action's time and space. A medium holding the ability to condensate social, cultural and philosophical phenomena, integrating the viewer into a symbol-clad space.

In scenographic art, a multitude of visions have dissolved over time in several directions: through the architectural field, through the avalanche of trends in painting, but also in the musical sphere, in performance, land art, film or the new realm of digital art. The new theatrical space expressiveness becomes unlimited in this context and, given the aforementioned blurring of the boundaries between fields, the manifestations of the artists involved gain more freedom to reformulate their new performative visions.

The three aforementioned artists' works help us step into an unknown realm that comes to life through materialities. The complexity of sensations and ideas is expressed by means of the objects' materiality, at the same time allowing the gaze to recognize the accurate dimension of the real or imaginary place (Yannis Kokkos in Banu, 2009, p. 25). Through the scenographic object, the scenic space becomes the medium through which fundamentally human experiences are transmitted. The scene transforms objects into symbols, and their matter gains back the depths of past meanings.

Humans are only just beginning to go back to discerning visual meaning as a primary mode – or method – of communicating in a context where there is more than one form or 'level' of perception. In this sense of overlapping visual correspondences, we can speak of multi-dimensional realities (Robert Wilson in Picon-Vallin, 2001, p. 54)

The aesthetic machinery created by overlapping multiple scenic realities turns into the main tool of transmitting essential information about the conceptual content. This is how a new universe is shaped, allowing us to experience the reality of life in a new manner, governed by unique experiences and feelings. The scenic image holds infinite power, in the sense that it can transfigure reality and equally preserve the elementary qualities of its initial model. „Theatre is rather a journey through the unknown, towards the unknown. What myself and those of a similar mind have tried to do over the years has been to hold high the scandal of the stage and to keep it constantly vibrating.” (Castellucci in Marshall, 2002)

An image creator will constantly call upon the memory of matter to perfect their creation, drawing along our experiences from the distant past. It is the artist's permanent struggle with symbols and their force to exist in the minds and souls of the viewers, where they are to be reflected. The sacred energy the stage contains is not exhausted, but assimilated by the present age, through the sincerity of the artistic act it shows and the primary simplicity through which the stage space continues to convey stories.

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