

The Empty Space in Theatre and Psychoanalysis

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ABSTRACT

The notion of empty space in this work was defined on the basis of theoretical investigations in the fields of theatre, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and theory of space. Understanding of the empty space in theatre was based onto the theories of a British director Peter Brook, while the theoretical postulates of Jacques Lacan were taken from the field of psychoanalysis. Concept of the emptiness, which Peter Brook defines as the ultimate condition for emergence of the truly theatrical experience, was analyzed in a relation to Lacan's most intriguing concept of the Real. The emptiness needed for the theatrical act was associated with the subject's inner emptiness, which upon Lacan has *extimité* character. The notion of empty space, necessary for creating the "new" (in theatre likewise in psychoanalysis), was also connected with the notion of "minimal difference" defined by a French philosopher Alain Badiou. Badiou's psychoanalytic interpretation of the *new* gave grounds for the comprehension of the empty space in a wider context, as a key element in constructing and reconstructing of the contemporary social and everyday reality.

The main objective of this work was to give a specific psychoanalytical reading of the concept of empty space in theatre in order to illuminate different roles that theatre could have inside and outside of its own professional background. Another aim was deepening and encouraging further inquiries in the obviously akin fields of theatre and psychoanalysis.

Keywords: empty space, theatre, psychoanalysis, the Real

INTRODUCTION, OR, WHY SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT THE EMPTY SPACE?

Space is a kind of a liminal domain, while the empty space is its more radical form. However, what is actually so radical in the concept of space, or the empty space? Why should we think about the empty space or better, what can we expect from that concept? It is possible to think about the empty space from several different aspects, formal logic, philosophical, psychological, artistic, or even religious. But, the question is what we can expect from something that is actually "nothing". Nevertheless, it would be naïve of us, if we do not put that nothing in quotes. Exactly those quotation marks, the intention that there is something more that we wanted to mark, something inexpressible that the word alone can't convey, that is the reason we are still thinking about the empty space. Do we expect to finally explain, define, or, to say in a psychoanalytic way to symbolize that loss? Based on different definitions, primarily from philosophy and psychoanalysis, the

thesis that has been established is that the empty space is a metaphor for presenting “that” very part of reality that is always escaping us, that is incomprehensible, but which is, at the same time, a kinetic energy for our process of knowing, something that keeps us “cognitively” active, that forces our relationship to the reality, and to ourselves.

Finally, the thesis of this work is that it is important to think about empty space, explore it, mainly because our epoch is substantially rooted in some kind of empty space. Michel Foucault defined the 20th century as a period dominated by space, but, according to author’s belief, the beginning of 21st century is much more an epoch of empty space. If in Foucault’s time space got its political and social dimension, if the project of “spatial turn” discovered the idea of space in an everyday experience [1], if the space was materialized in here and now, today the term of space has lost that material depth. The surface of a contemporary spectacle is a process which on one side strengthens the feeling of emptiness in a spatial experience, while, on the other side, the contemporary subject almost half a century distant finally realizes and lives its fate of the empty postmodern subjectivity. [2] Namely, if the Real is truly back, something that Hal Foster implies in his book titled *The return of the Real* 1996, as well as Slavoj Žižek in his philosophical reading of Lacan and interrogating of the Real in the book with the same title 2006, and, if on the wider plan, outside the customs and habits of neoliberal concept that we all refrain from, we acknowledge that we do not have any ideological project for an individual to accomplish, [3] again to say in psychoanalytic manner, process of the subjectivization in symbolic order, then there is still a possibility that we are trapped in a traumatized experience of emptiness in the Real. It is also a fact that we are bombed more than ever with various different narratives and that there is a diversification of all possible ideologies present on the scene. Still, each of us under the rose knows that the surface of those symbolic I lies in the *nothing*, in the empty space. And, while the offer of different ideological (symbolic) projects is bigger, the horror of the “real” presence of empty space is more rooted. However, comprehending that emptiness as a space of potential is the real reason for analyzing the empty space in this work, especially of Peter Brook’s empty space.

EMPTY SPACE AS A LIMINAL CONCEPT (IN PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS)

In the 20th century some concrete, scientific theories of space were formed. Nevertheless, the space still remains conundrum and term which involves the series of speculative thinking. In comprehending the notion of space some questions arise, if space and empty space exist as such, if space is reality separated from man’s experience, or it is only *a posteriori* construct of human mind?

Two most influential theories in philosophy dealing with those questions, whose phenomenological validity is justifiable even today, are Leibniz’s theory of relational space and Newton’s theory of absolute space. According to the first one the space as such doesn’t exist. It exists only as a system of a relation among things. There is a matter, which takes place and different positions in regard to its own spreading. The second theory confirms the existence of space that is homogeneous, isotropic, infinite, three-dimensional, that exists apart from all other things contained in that space. The first theory of course excludes any idea of empty space, while the second is essentially based on the idea of empty space. Leibniz has invested an enormous effort during his

correspondence with Newton to question the existence of absolute space. In his opinion empty space is pure imagination, which can be speculated about in the same way as the space of universe. Namely, in Ancient Philosophy the emptiness was also the term used for cosmic and transcendent, except the Atomist School of Leucippus and Democritus who thought that emptiness is reality as much as matter. [4]

However, if the empty space really existed, then it would have meant that there is nothing in that space, so the space alone would have been something. But, it is hard to imagine that space is something, some substance, or tangible reality, because, if space represents something like that, it would be possible to destroy it, or to change it for some other substance. Furthermore, it would mean that one can imagine the existence of a space as such, which would actually be impossible, at least according to Immanuel Kant. So, since it is impossible to imagine non-existence of space, and because the existence of empty space is also logically impossible, the phrase “empty space” alone becomes a kind of a metaphor just for impossible, for representation of that logical breakdown that we are confronting with every time we think of infinity, death or unconscious in psychoanalysis.

The idea of unconscious is a concept that represents exactly that logical breakdown for the conscious thought, mostly because for the rational thought it is hard to assume that right in that conscious part, Cartesian part which we are not used to doubt, that right there is some emptiness, dark blot, unknown, or even to assume that all our psychic apparatus is constituted thanks to that unconscious part. Therefore, psychoanalysis has confronted us for the first time with the fact that there is some gap in “Cogito ergo sum”, some empty space between two “I”, one in “I think”, and the other in “I am”. Lacan called this empty space the Real, and that is a key concept for his theoretical system of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. RSI theory describes the way in which the subject experiences or comes to know reality. According to this theory there are three ways for doing that. The first way includes understanding through language, and that knowledge belongs to the Symbolic order. The second is Imaginary, which means the knowledge seized by images. And the third is the Real, the knowledge impossible to achieve. For this impossible kind of knowledge, it is only possible to mark the space, and that space is what Lacan has called the empty space. So, the Real is emptiness, nothing, impossible, that which is not meaningful, but still something that powers and maintains Symbolic and Imaginary order. [5] In a relation to reality, which is a set of subjective phantasies, the Real is a part of reality with traumatic effects it has upon the subject, and which the subject strives to fill with phantasmic contents. Hence, the first role of empty space in psychoanalysis is to denote a space for the impossible Real.

Lacan used one more characteristic of the empty space. In the very core of the Lacanian subject is emptiness, which has a specific *extimité* character, because it is experienced by the subject at the same time as outside and as interior. Lacan has created a special word *extimité* for this character of the innermost place of the subject, which is a compound of *intimacy* and prefix *ex-* which stands for something that is outside. However, it is interesting that the word (*extimité*) itself is not enough. For defining the subject's core the notion of empty space is also necessary. Lacan here used the double character of space, which is in human mind simultaneously present as a subjective feeling, but as an objective reality also, as an inner form, just as an outside one.

EMPTY SPACE AS REAL

Even if Peter Brook did not acknowledge that his term of empty space had anything in common with the Freud's term of unconscious [6], even if at the lecture given in 1998 at the British Psychoanalytic Society he made the connections between theatre and psychoanalysis on some other places, the standpoint of the authors of this work is that the empty space is the real connection between these two fields.

According to Brook, the crux of theatrical experience is in the unknown: „If the theatre has anything to offer it is a taste of something that can't be explained and can't be defined, but which can be experienced as a concrete reality“, [7] and that already shows that the theatrical mystery has something in common with the enigmatic term of Real. The Real, having the character of impossible, demands the idea of empty space.

However, what directly makes a connection between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Brook's notion of theatre is an attitude towards reality. Emptiness which permeates the theatrical reality according to Brook is a space of the invisible, which exists on the stage parallel with the real space-time. Exactly that, he claims, is a thing which forever divides the theatrical and filmic experience. „In the theatre, the imagination fills the space, whereas the cinema screen represents the whole, demanding that everything in the frame be linked in a logically coherent manner. Emptiness in the theatre allows the imagination to fill the gaps “. [8] This conception of reality in the theatre, where the emptiness is a driving element, highly resembles Lacanian theory of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. Lacan's reality is also not a whole entity, or a causal continuity, but it includes the number of gaps, cuts, discontinuities, which Brook, likewise psychoanalysis, defines as emptiness. Žižek says: “Reality is never given in totality; there is always *emptiness* in its centre that is filled with monstrous phantoms”. [9]

The structure of reality in both cases is identical. There is some emptiness in a whole, visible picture of reality, which because of its traumatic character (fear of empty space) forces the creation of new scenic images, new phantasmatic scenes that have been made in order to fill that empty space. Parallel between Peter Brook's empty space and Lacanian Real is almost absolute. The key psychoanalytical term is in a direct relation to the one most essential in theatre, which makes distinction between the filmic and all other arts. Eventually, both terms are defined as an empty space.

Brook says that the empty space is present in another specific moment, which is always “a present” moment, and which is always identified within that authentic theatrical experience of “silence” in which the audience is recognizing “the irresistible presence of life“. This presence of life is a feeling in which, for the moment, something in the experience of reality becomes truly real. That exciting moment is a kind of detachment from the everyday reality. In silence of this very moment the invisible becomes visible, and it is a true reason for which the *high-quality* theatre exists. That is a moment when communication between the actors and the audience is established, what is actually an ultimate goal of every theatrical work.

„All human impulses towards what we call in an imprecise and clumsy manner "quality", come from a source whose true nature we entirely ignore but which we are perfectly capable of recognizing when it appears either in ourselves or in another person. It is not communicated through noise but through silence“. [10]

Communication is, therefore, the second reason thanks to which Brook uses the term empty space, and it is the same attempt to overcome ambivalent relation inside-outside (*extimité*), which Lacan uses for describing psychoanalytic position of the subject. Every communication as such has that *extimité* character because of its realization in the emptiness between two subjects, but also in the subjects alone. For overcoming this double character of the communication, Brook has used the term of empty space just because of its property to be in a domain of subjective feeling, but at the same time in a domain of concrete reality as well. For, communication in theatre is not only an individual experience of the actors or the audience, but the collective act, which is materialized in the emptiness of the theatre's physical space. [11] Namely, this kind of communication in which all of a sudden a meaning comes up, is not something that is defined and has duration, but it happens in a moment, it is elusive, not in a domain of a language, nor the Imaginary, but in the Real; and that is, then, nothing else but the empty space.

So, besides the fact that the term *empty space* is used in the theatre and likewise in psychoanalysis, the reasons (logical, discursive...) for its usage are identical. In both fields the subject of inquiry are impossible terms, something unknown, inexpressible. On the other side, those terms are never only psychological, but are in some way always materialized in reality, and because of that they have that *extimité* character. The empty space conceptually balances between the possible/impossible, outside/inside responses as well on both previous requirements.

„In order for something of quality to take place, an empty space needs to be created. An empty space makes it possible for a new phenomenon to come to life, for anything that touches on content, meaning, expression, language and music can exist only if the experience is fresh and new. However, no fresh and new experience is possible if there isn't a pure, virgin space ready to receive it “. [12]

Especially important view on the subject of empty space in Brook's theory is that the emptiness has a creative potential, that the empty space is a prerequisite for the emergence of anything that could have an authentic quality, deliberated of *a priori* constructed narratives. This aspect is a value that could be analyzed in a context of contemporary social theory, which is a topic of the next part of the work.

EMPTY SPACE AS A NEW

Since the sixties of the last century the project *Spatial Turn* has expanded the notion of space. Its proponents have the intension to understand and describe the social processes and changes from the spatial aspect, and that is a theoretical background of this work as well. The empty space is, because of that, seen as a paradigm of contemporary society, as a cause the same as a consequence of contemporary social movements. Simultaneously, besides the fact that the empty space is marked as a negative concept, it could also have a positive index.

Processes that establish a feel of emptiness and depict the paradigmatic character of empty space are virtualization and spectatularization. These processes are, in some context, also mentioned by Slavoj Žižek in the text “Welcome to the Desert of the Real”, where he investigates the relationship between contemporary society and reality/Real. The Real is distanced from the everyday experience of reality by

virtualization, in which the real reality is experienced as virtual, and by spectacularization as the only way of dealing with the Real. One of the examples, which Žižek uses are so-called cutters – people who have the irresistible need for cutting their own bodies in order to finally feel alive and overcome the virtual character of reality. [13] Another example is the collapse of the World Trade Centre, the event which is spectacular to such an extent, most of all, because it is the only way for the Western Society to confront with the real horror that happened. [14]

Virtualization is produced by theatricalization of the Real, and its strength increases the doubt and encourages the passion for the Real. The Real could here be very easily understood as some real, authentic part of reality. But, Žižek just tries to avoid this simple division of reality on the virtual and some hidden, real reality which exists under the surface of that virtual layer, and which is a subject of contemporary subject's passion. He says that, what forces the cutters to behave violently is not trying to escape the virtual in order to grasp the Real on the other side, but the virtual self is already filled with the Real as its spectacular (empty) effect. This means that the virtual self consists of the Real as its own emptiness. At the place where the subject expects the content there is nothing, and this is the main problem of the process of virtualization. On the other hand, the problem of spectacularization is that it serves as a tool for preventing the direct confrontation with the Real, i.e. the empty space. Therefore, the process of creating contemporary image of reality is based on creating the empty space, and on trying to avoid acknowledgment that there is nothing under the rich surface of the spectacle. The place we mask, and in whose masks we recognize the essence of its own and/or social reality, is the empty space.

Žižek wrote the above mentioned text one year after the collapse of the WTC. His intention is the so-called “passion for the Real” in contemporary society described as a violent act:

„If, then, the passion for the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular *effect of the Real*, then, in an exact inversion, the 'postmodern' passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real.“ [15]

Therefore, the postmodern plethora of appearances today has the outcomes in the symptomatic violent return to the Real. This of course doesn't leave much room for the apprehension of the empty space as a creative and potent. Meanwhile, Alen Badiou, French philosopher has a specific comprehension of the concept of the Real. He sees the Real as a new. In the widely famous book *The Century Badiou* with the expression “the passion for the Real”, he actually describes the intentions of the whole 20th century. He says that the 19th century was the epoch of creating big ideas, which the 20th century should have put into practice, so “the passion for the Real” is recognized as a process of a constant purification, which should have ensured the direct contact with the Real. But, this process led the 20th century to all the violence and horrors that happened, and the main reason for that is that the Real was comprehended as an identity, as some authentic content. Therefore, Badiou proposes the Real figured as an emptiness and process of its seizing not purification but what he is calling a method of “minimal difference”. This method is explained the same as Bertolt Brecht's distancing method. The distancing is an emergence of emptiness, a gap between what is real in performance and what is acted out, and this is actually what Badiou calls new and access to the Real that is not violent.

This emptiness in a process of stratification of reality surface, in Badiou's way of thinking, is the same as in Brook's comprehension of theatrical reality, called the gaps. The emptiness is a way of non-violent dealing with the Real, and as such, it is a space of real potential, a space for creation the new. Brook's theory of an empty space is relevant primarily to the theatrical practice. It is actually presenting itself as an extremely important and fertile ground for rethinking and questioning some wider social frameworks and procedures.

When the empty space is in question it appears that the acceptance of emptiness is a price of the quest for the Real. Therefore, there is no authentic, hard core of reality that could be grasped even if we have penetrated through the surface of contemporary meaninglessness, because underneath the spectacle layer there is an empty space again. But, that emptiness as such is authentic. It's what Peter Brook teaches us – the same as a contemporary social theory based on psychoanalytic tradition.

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[2] Hal Foster, in his book *The Return of the Real*, as methodological approach uses the logic of the term *parallax*, which actually means that our understanding of history depends on our state, or our position in the present.

[3] This could be read as a logic immanent to the post-socialistic territories (that authors also belong) which today lack (and in some way need) an ideological concept on wider scale.

[4] This and the next paragraph is partially taken from the term paper Slađana Milićević has written during the course *Theoretical Principles of Developing of Architecture and the City* – selected chapters, at doctoral studies at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia.

[5] „The real is 'the impossible' (S11, 167) because it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way. It is this character of impossibility and of resistance to symbolization which lends the real its essentially traumatic quality“, Evans D: *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2006, pp. 163;

[6] „...there is an invisible world which needs to be made visible. There are several layers of invisible. In the twentieth century we know only too well the psychological layer, this obscure area between what is expressed and what is concealed. Nearly all contemporary theatre recognizes the great Freudian underworld where, behind the gesture or the words, can be found the invisible zone of the ego, the super-ego and the unconscious. This level of psychological invisibility has nothing to do with sacred theatre. "Holy Theatre" implies that there is something else in existence, below, around and above, another zone even more invisible, even farther from the forms which we are capable of reading or recording, which contain extremely powerful sources of energy“, Brook P: *The Open Door*, Theatre Communications Group Inc., New York, 1995, pp. 70;

- [7] Brook P: Does Nothing Come from Nothing?, Ernest Jones Lecture given by Peter Brook in 1994 at The Edward Lewis Theatre, UCL, London
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- [9] Žižek S: Ispitivanje Realnog (Interrogating the Real), Akademska knjiga (Academic Book), Novi Sad, 2008, pp. 281; (authors' translation)
- [10] Brook P: The Open Door, Theatre Communications Group Inc., New York, 1995, pp. 70;
- [11] "Another aspect of the empty space is that the emptiness is shared: it's the same space for everyone who is present", Brook P: The Open Door, Theatre Communications Group Inc., New York, 1995, pp. 6;
- [12] Brook P: The Open Door, Theatre Communications Group Inc., New York, 1995, pp. 4;
- [13] "Far from being suicidal, far from indicating a desire for self-annihilation, cutting is a radical attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality...", Žižek S: Welcome to the Desert of the Real! (Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates), Verso, London and New York, 2002, pp. 10;
- [14] „And the same 'derealization' of the horror went on after the WTC collapse: while the number of victims - 3,000 – is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see - no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people...“, Žižek S: Welcome to the Desert of the Real! (Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates), Verso, London and New York, 2002, pp. 13;
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