

# Theatre as a Figure and a Place of Cultural Memory

Lidija Kapushevska-Drakulevska  
 Blazhe Koneski Faculty of Philology  
 Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Macedonia

**Abstract:** Cultural memory is the starting point for studying culture. Theatre, on the other hand, is a multidimensional play with memory; it is an emblem of a certain culture, and of the overall blending of various discourses within it. Hence the relation between theatre and memory is rather complex and multifaceted.

Theatre is a medium synthesising text and performance, speech and gesture (play, acting), as well as establishing direct, at least doubly articulated communication: among the actors on stage on the one hand, and between the actors and the audience on the other. They are all *subjects of theatrical memory*.

Theatre not only uses memory in order to create the plot, develop the characters or establish communication with the audience, but also becomes a *figure of memory* itself: a culturally modelled, socially mandated (iconic, narrative, etc.) memory image (Assman). Additionally, theatre may be considered a *place of memory*, as well. But theatre is not a simple mnemonic of repeating reality—it is not merely a simulacrum, but also a quotation of reality; it does not aim to copy or memorise reality, but to represent it and interpret it critically. This is particularly true of the contemporary rough *theatre of brutality*.

**Keywords:** theatre, cultural memory, play, mask, figures of memory

*If we still dwelled among our memories,  
 there would be no need to consecrate sites  
 embodying them.*

Pierre Nora

The art of memory as *techne* and discipline with a tradition of its own has been considered the core of culture ever since the legend of the Greek lyricist Simonides of Ceos, the founder of mnemonics. According to Renate Lachmann, literature is *the mnemonic art par excellence* since it establishes and records cultural memory. It is also an *act of memory*—it inscribes itself “into” and creates the site of memory made up of texts (Ллахман, 2004). Accordingly, drama or theatre is also an *ars memoriae*: from the first ritual plays to postmodernist performances, from documentary to street theatre and happenings, from history plays to the trendy theatre of brutality, they are all, more or less, founded on the phenomenon of memory as a unity of strategies and practices of

memory (*mneme*), recollection (*anamnesis*) and oblivion (*amnesia*).

In Renate Lachmann's study expounding the role of *recollection* as a cultural phenomenon in the act of creation, we find that if memory (*mneme*)<sup>1</sup> is related to the art of preserving, what must not be lost in oblivion, recollection (*anamnesis*) is the category that helps recover what fell into oblivion (2002, p. 439).

In his cult classic *1984*, George Orwell describes a shredding machine that is to destroy all inconvenient memories. This terrifying dystopian vision is not too far off the historical truth of our times: we live in a digital age when memory, more than ever, is most distinctly separated from us and continues to *flow* somewhat independently since virtual media and the information world are deprived of the human experience; the computer stores, it does not remember (Остен, 2005, p. 94). "Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image," states Pierre Nora (1989, p. 13), whereas according to Derrida, digital writing/storing/archiving of texts and information becomes a great metaphor for the universal human memory.<sup>2</sup>

Organic memory, based on natural human abilities - psychological, intellectual, physical, etc., has been increasingly pushed to the margins and seems a superfluous, anachronous proceeding as compared to the sovereign power of electronic media. "Man is only completely a man when he remembers," could be a variation of the famous Schiller quote, whereas Wystan Hugh Auden wrote that "[h]uman beings are blessed with the power to remember" (1990, p. 388).

When *emotional memory* as a substitute of man's subjectivity and identity is clearly in danger, theatre is

one of the few social institutions attempting to foster and develop the art of memory. Since, regardless of how we read, interpret and/or experience theatre, it keeps imposing itself as a very specific place; a place "overladen" with all sorts of emotions (Лужина, 2013, p. 153). The German thinker Manfred Osten believes that theatre is a traditional institution of memory, such as libraries, museums or opera houses, whereas the American theatre director and comparatist Herbert Blau stated that "Where memory is, theatre is"; even though theatre does not, in fact, aim only to store/archive, but also to incite into action and revision of the powerful yet false hegemonic systems of modernity, of history, of reality, of democracy, or of civilisation (Кулавкова, 2009a, p. 255).

Theatre, with its tendency towards the reality of here and now, is a favourable medium for memory, even though the theatrical present is in a seeming collision with the past as a function of recollection—implicit in the notion of memory. However, nothing seems more natural than the emergence of the past: it arises because time passes. It so happens that tomorrow *today* is already a thing of the past. It has become *yesterday*. This is what we encounter in Assman's study *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (2005, p. 37). According to Nora, "[m]emory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present"; "memory is life (...) in permanent evolution" (1989, p. 8). This concept of memory corresponds completely to the function of the stage and favours the justification of the relationship between theatre and memory.

The relationship between theatre and memory is very complex and multifaceted, especially since, unlike the other arts, the dramatic art includes active involvement of flesh-and-blood humans on the stage of

life here-and-now. As Jelena Luzhina states, theatricalisation—or, more simply—the inscenation of the dramatic narrative, instead of narrating its parts, need present them live (Лужина, 2008, p. 289). Theatre is a medium that synthesises text and performance, speech and gesture (play, acting), but it also establishes direct, at least doubly articulated communication: among the actors on stage on the one hand, and between the actors and the audience on the other. They are all *subjects* of theatrical memory.

Theatre not only uses memory to create the plot, develop the characters or establish communication with the audience, but also becomes *a figure of memory* itself, according to Magdalena Bogouslavska in her study dedicated to *somatic memory in the laboratory of theatre* (Богоулавска, 2008, p. 297). Memory is the source and the tissue of actorial creativity—a self-transcendence of sorts—since while developing the character, the actor employs his/her own subjectivity based on two different manners of remembering: 1. Discursive or verbal, and 2. Non-discursive, somatic, evoked by gesture and movement. It is precisely through the individual and intersubjective experiences preserved in the actor's psyche, mind and body that the interpretation is carried out and the stage character is formed, Bogouslavska concludes (2008, p. 298).<sup>3</sup>

Something similar occurs in the field of reception, that is, in the manner of memorial reflection of the stage character—the character of the spectator of the play. According to Mirushe Hoxha if, ideally, the spectator truly receives the presented experience in his/her own self, the experience will leave an eternal trace in the storage of his/her incorporated motivation, that is, in his/her *recessive body*, at the

behest of which his/her future *ecstatic* bodily functions may echo in the context of social practices. When the actor's body makes an offering to the spectator's body, theatre becomes a breeding ground for new results, at least of its own history. Theatre then really turns into an *act of the most deeply-rooted, genuine love between two human beings*, as Grotowski once said (Хоџа, 2000, p. 81). According to Antonin Artaud, "theater is a passionate overflowing, a frightful transfer from body to body," but this transfer, claims he, "cannot be reproduced twice" (as quoted in Derrida, 2001, p. 315). Hence Derrida's view of "[t]heater as a repetition of that which does not repeat itself," that is, of "theater as the original repetition of difference" (316).

The very *repetition* that is inscribed in the nature of theatre and the dramatic act indicates that each theatrical performance is a reactualisation either of a previous performance, or of a situation, or, literally, when historical themes are being represented—of history itself, of every event passed, Ivica Baković notes (2011, p. 13) and refers to Marvin Carlson, according to whom the close relationship between theatre and memory might be identified in numerous different cultures since myths, legends, historical events, etc., were actualised and recorded in various cultures throughout the world, that is, the *collective memory*, precisely through the dramatic act of repetition. In each culture, drama, more than any other literary genre, is related to presenting, always anew, narratives that carry particular meanings for the audience, Baković concludes (2011, p. 14).

According to Katica Kjulavkova, collective memory is a memory shared with the Other. It does not necessarily correspond to reality, being an

informational, educational, socio-cultural and ideological/political construct. Collective memory is a *medial culture of remembering*—earlier, the role of a medium was played by oral tradition (2009a, pp. 252-253).

Theory distinguishes several types of collective memory: 1. *Mimetic memory*; 2. *Communicative memory*, transmitted orally and concerning the recent past; 3. *Memory one shares with one's contemporaries*, and 4. *Cultural memory*, concerning the past institutionalised in contents as part of culture (Assman, 2005, pp. 22-24). The concept of *cultural memory*, even though last in the typology, is an umbrella term: this type of memory is cultural because it may only be realised institutionally, artificially, and it is a memory since, in relation to social communication, it operates as individual memory operates in relation to consciousness (Assman, 2005, p. 26).

Memory is “collective, plural, and yet individual,” Nora believes (1989, p. 9). Undoubtedly, “[a]ll memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person” (Sontag, 2003, p. 67), but the individual, on the other hand, is tattooed both by the memory of the community s/he belongs to - nation, race, ethnicity, culture, tradition, history, etc., - and by the memory of humanity as a whole, ultimately, so that, apart from what one has experienced, one also encounters the memories of others (according to Saint Augustine). Thus, each dialogue of the lyrical subject with his/her own identity also implies a dialogue between the self and the Other, between the individual and the collective experience, since in the very wealth of subconscious associations one could expand one's own experience ad infinitum and include everything that

might be the contents of some consciousness. Memory is a kind of time travel.

For these purposes, in the literary (dramatic) text there are several typical techniques or proceedings of the memory principle, such as: evocation, reconstruction, reproduction, repetition or merging the time of the archi-text with one's own time. It is a specific literary/dramatic view of time: as immobile, stopped time allowing the author to plunge into an irrational, mysterious, magical world made of dreams and apparitions. The dialogue of the chronotopes in the dramatic (literary) discourse established as a dialogue between the “small” and the “great” time (to use Bakhtin's terminology), or between the human and the historical time, allows the dramatist to co-exist in two worlds at once: the everyday world and the world of memory.

In this sense, one of the most paradigmatic theatre props acting as a transhistorical marker of the unity between individual and collective memory, between the temporal and the eternal, is the *mask*. The mask is a synonym for *persona*. And *persona* in Latin refers to the actor's other name, the character s/he plays, states Kjulavkova in one of her studies. She goes on to say that the mask is shaped like a human head, but it may also personify various other characters, such as the characters of animals, gods or forces—cult, totemistic or animistic representations (2009b, p. 213). In Bakhtinian terms, the mask may also be the *chronotope of the threshold* between this world and the next. In that case, it is a death mask playing the role of the deceased. But, in addition to satisfying certain stage and theatrical conventions, the mask is above all an autonomous, independent prop allowing for greater

freedom in acting/playing, and immediately instigates the double or multidimensional play with identity.

The *play* is the essential part of the theatrical plural, dramatic, stage, rhetorical, melopoetic, optical and modelative semiosis (Кулавова, 2001, p. 216)<sup>4</sup>. This is the very aspect Roger Caillois refers to. In his "The Classification of Games", he, among other things, speaks of *mimicry* as a type of game that includes stage plays and dramatic interpretations. According to Caillois, "[a]ll play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not of an illusion (...) then at least of a closed, conventional, and, in certain respects, imaginary universe," not merely in the sense of covering reality and simulating a fictional universe, but also in the sense of "man's penchant for disguising himself, wearing a mask, or *playing a part*." "[T]he subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another" (2006, p. 135).

This feigning of otherness may go so far as to blur the lines between identity and alterity and they swap places, that is, one becomes, transforms into the other, the actor identifies with the role, or the dramatic character s/he creates on the stage. For instance, the pattern of stage transformation, of taking on the form and the role of another (acting, pretending, playing antics) allows for men to play the roles of women and vice versa, for women to play the roles of men, so that, in time and in suitable circumstances, they come to identify more with the stage role than with their original identity. Thus, the distinction between acting, the fictional world, and reality gradually disappears, and illusions of identities are created (Кулавова, 2009a, p. 223).

It is a matter of double articulation of the crucial question for the subject of the theatrical play, which is always a question about *who plays what*. In other words, the abovementioned double articulation of the text (as a unity of *intertext* and *metatext*) pervades both memory models: the *model of feeling* and the *model of remembering*. Additionally, the new (subsequent) role is transformed into a *live cultural memory practice* of sorts, seen as storage or an archive of reality and history, an archive filled by each subject in the triad they form: the participant, the witness and the absentee. Hence memory, in addition to being mimetic (iconic, referential), verisimilar to the past (or the historical reality), is also phantasmagorical (free, dynamic), generating a new cultural artefact.

Roger Caillois underscores the pleasure of being someone else or of representing someone else (that is, insists on the aesthetic function of playing), but, when it comes to theatrical play, the actor, according to him, does not insist on making others believe that he *really* is King Lear or Hamlet, but the rule of the game "consists in the actor's fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. The spectator must lend himself to the illusion without first challenging the decor, mask, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself." Hence, Caillois concludes, "[m]imicry is incessant invention" (2006, p. 137).

In other words, theatrical play demonstrates and proves that in theatre there is a coupling between the memory and the imagination images, in the spirit of Lachmann's thesis of *ars memoriae*, according to which memory is not a mere slavish evocation of the past, but also a creation of *loci memoriae*, an act with great

imaginative power. Authorial dramaturgy insists on carrying out the theatralisation of specific facts or events as creatively as possible. Thus, dramatic truth always has to be “subjective” and *defamiliarised*, rightfully concludes Jelena Luzhina (2008, p. 288) in a study dedicated to dramatic/theatrical memory. She goes on to say that due to this *defamiliarisation*, which theatre skilfully employs, the words, facts, situations, emotions, the *memorabilia of the past* fixed in the dramatic situation and then presented on stage come into effect in the most literal sense: they become not just visible and recognisable, but also highly impressive. Additionally, the *defamiliarised proceedings* give us back the privilege to react impulsively once again—as if seeing or experiencing them for the first time, Luzhina concludes (2008, pp. 288-289).

So *defamiliarisation* (to employ a Russian formalist concept) is a crucial element for theatre through which the stage action is ideated and secured originality and irreproducibility, and the motto “each time as the first time” is a watchword immanent to the essence of theatre as art. That is why theatre is a unique *place of memory*.

Theatre, then, is seen as a *place of memory* (*lieu de mémoire*) as well. Places of memory are hybrid and “mutant”, according to Nora. They are intimately bound with life and death, with time and eternity; like a Möbius strip, the collective and the individual, the profane and the sacred, the immutable and the changeable appear on an unbroken spiral (1989, p. 19). According to Nora, “[c]ontrary to historical objects, however, *lieux de mémoire* have no referent in reality; or, rather, they are their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs. This is not to say that

they are without content, physical presence, or history; it is to suggest that what makes them *lieux de mémoire* is precisely that by which they escape from history. In this sense, the *lieu de mémoire* is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations” (23-24).

Theatre is not a mere mnemonic of repeating reality—it is not just a simulacrum, but also a quotation of reality; it does not aim to copy or memorise reality, but to represent it and interpret it critically. This is particularly true of contemporary rough theatre of brutality in which “the rough is also a dynamic stab at a certain ideal,” as Peter Brook states (1968, p. 85). According to Brook, the language of theatre “corresponds with our age”; hence the roughness in it—because nowadays it is “livelier and holiness deadlier than at other times” (119). Hence the specific function of memory in contemporary *theatre of violence*.

The twentieth century has shown that violence is humanity’s *shared place of memory*. In this sense, Jelena Luzhina speaks of the “slap” this trendy theatre, called New European Drama, gives to the world. In fact, this theatre, apart from aiming to shock, provoke, scandalise, gives humanity the opportunity to face the ugliness (the reverse side) of its existence—in space and time that is “here” and “now” (2004, p. 7). Theatre of brutality is not merely a simulacrum of negative reality, but also a generator of such negative reality since remembering violence means repeating, that is, rewriting the violent act, as well as critically reproducing the *barbaric practices* of the modern world, Kjulavkova believes and concludes that the theatre of negative reality is a perverted memory of

contemporary reality (2009a, p. 235). She adds that theatre has become *living violence* at the moment it allowed the pathogenically dehumanised reality to be rewritten in it (237).

As a “child of the nineties”, the coincidence of New European Drama with *the real* is absolute, paranoid, Baudrillard would say *terroristic*, since terrorism as a rule is expressed as *terrorism of the real* (Лужина, 2004, p. 8). This trend in drama first appears in the United Kingdom and is associated with the name of Sarah Kane. Other representatives include: Mark Ravenhill, Patrick Marber and Martin McDonagh (UK and Ireland); Marius von Mayenburg (Germany); Lyudmila Razumovskaya, Vassily Sigarev and Nikolay Kolyada (Russia), as well as Dejan Dukovski and Biljana Sribljanović (the Balkans). Their ugly, brutal, shocking, provocative, subversive plays need, in fact, be treated as a *generational revolt* of sorts, staged against the conservatism not only of established theatres, but also against established art *as such*, Luzhina states in one of her studies. She concludes that they are plays founded exclusively on *negative categories*: there is no space in them, no characters, no action, no tension, no emotions, no beginnings or ends, no great and important story, no decisive events, and, especially, no live and immediate communication. But there is plenty, an abundance of violence, violence of all kinds; nothing but *sheer violence*. In this type of dramaturgy all cruelties and all violence of this miserable world are gathered, and then recapitulated and multiplied (2003, p. 103).

Lužina sees the portent of the abovementioned collective feeling of hopelessness or the collective spleen (*Zeitgeist*) of the current violent age in Bernard-Marie Koltès’ play *Roberto Zucco*, written/performed

in 1998 and given the soubriquet “*Hamlet of the twentieth century*”, even though other such portents appeared much earlier—with Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, etc. (According to Peter Brook, Elizabethan theatre is the roughest theatre of all times.) In this sense, one must stress the contribution of Antonin Artaud and his *post-metaphysical theatre of cruelty*. “I employ the word ‘cruelty’ in the sense of an appetite for life,” he states, “a cosmic rigor and implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of a living whirlwind that devours the darkness, in the sense of that pain apart from whose ineluctable necessity life could not continue; good is desired, it is the consequence of an act; evil is permanent” (Artaud, 1958, p. 102).

So cruelty, for Artaud, is another name for life, and life itself—as the artist’s occasion to action—its crucial projection (Paić, 2009, p. 210). According to Derrida, Artaud wants to put an end to the mimetic concept of art and the Aristotelian aesthetics at the heart of Western metaphysics (Derrida, 2001). Since, if that which is called *cruelty* is still a mystery to us, Derrida states, it is so just because theatre heretofore has been a place of separation of body and spirit, of the real and the imaginary, of creature and being. As opposed to that, contemporary brutal, vulgar, aggressive and violent theatre does not allow to be manipulated by the mega-global *icons* of idealised reality or by the institutionalised black-and-white images of a reality dualistically divided into democratic and totalitarian, peaceful and terroristic, civilised and barbarian. The world is a hybrid intertext of civilisation and barbarism, humanism and cannibalism, sacredness and profanity, rightfully writes Katica Kjulavkova (2009a, p. 236).

The theatre of our times, as paradoxical as it may sound, does not appear as a simulacrum of reality any more, but is itself a *reality*; it does not imitate reality, but is a *living reality* itself. Theatre and reality inscribe themselves one into the other: reality into theatre, theatre into reality (Ќулавкова, 2009а, p. 235). Hence the phrase In-Yer-Face Theatre—as an indication of its ambiguity. Theatre does the only thing it seemingly can: *it strikes back*, Luzhina concludes (2004, p. 10).

Thus, theatre becomes a syncretic space striving not just to memorise the barbarity of the modern world in order to keep it memorised (memory for memory's sake), but to an ethically, socially, culturally and civilisationally higher purpose: theatre of negative reality, on the basis of the actualised collective and cultural memory, intends to actualise the issue of ethics, that is, of the humanity of mankind, and thereby contribute to the forestalling of the mass escalation of barbarism throughout the “civilised” world of today (Ќулавкова, 2009а, p. 243). And that, of course, is the noble and dignified function not just of theatre, but of art in general.

Translated by:  
Kalina Janeva

#### ENDNOTES

- [1] Ivan Djeparoski, in his text “A Post-Modern Approach: Literature and Memoirs as Memory and Archive” (*Blesok* no. 87, November-December 2012) refers to the classic *Concise Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytical Terms* by English & English, in which *memory* is defined as: “1. A general *function* of animating and reanimating past experience, with more or less determined insight that presents experience as a kind of animation. 2. The scope of things a person can remember: storage and memory. 3. Every past experience that we can remember (English & English, 1958).”

- [2] For the role of digital media in theatre see: A. Stojanoska, “The New Face of Theatre Museology, or the Past in the Future”, *Theatre and Memory* (Conference Proceedings), ed. J Lužina, Skopje, Faculty of Dramatic Arts, 2007, 225-234.
- [3] Particularly for the nowadays ever-so-popular ambient theatre, recognising the whole space with the inside of the body is typical. It represents feeling the space, through which the connection between the space and the body in the surroundings where the actor is, is established (К. Петровска-Кузманова, „Фолклорот во македонската драма во втората половина на XX век“, *Развојот на македонската литература* (Зборник на трудови од меѓународниот научен собир „Развојот на македонската литература“, Скопје, 25-26 октомври 2006), Скопје, Институт за македонска литература, 2011, 135.
- [4] Where playing is concerned, it is necessary to mention *dance* (but also ballet) as well, as a shared place of humanity's cultural memory, as an aestheticised body language, as forgetting the story, but remembering the movements, as the synergy of play and history (see: К. Кулавкова, „Од тело до култура: семиотички концепти на танцовата уметност“, *Задоволство во толкувањето*, Скопје, Макавеј, 2009, 271-277). As a factor of collective self-identification, dance is related to ritual and pagan practices, to folk culture and to the forms of carnival communication, including the tradition of fairs, as well as the ancient tradition of Macedonian *skomrahs*, but that is another topic altogether. A separate research topic would include *theatre festivals* as part of the collective cultural memory.

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