Theater, is it Real? Thoughts on the notion of the Real in contemporary stages

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ABSTRACT – Theater, is it Real? Thoughts on the notion of the Real in contemporary stages – This article focuses on the possible outcomes that may unfold when personal narratives have been intentionally applied on stage to generate a tension between the ideas of reality and fiction in performance. The article uses theoretical references that conceptualize the notion of the 'Real' – from the social context of the 1960s to the present – and follows the thoughts of philosophers like Debord, Baudrillard and Rosset with the aim to consider theater and performance as artistic fields that have the potential to interrogate totalizing statements about the truth in today's world.
Keywords: Personal Narratives. Reality. Fiction. Truth. Theater of the Real.

RÉSUMÉ – Le Théâtre, c'est Vrai? Réflexions sur le réel dans la scène contemporaine – Cet article porte une attention aux possibles conséquences de l'utilisation de récits personnels dans la scène, lorsqu'ils sont pris afin de provoquer une tension entre la réalité et la fiction au moment de l'événement scénique. Utilisant comme références les formulations qui examinent la conception du réel – du contexte social de 1960 à nos jours –, bien que la pensée de philosophes tels que Debord, Baudrillard et Rosset, ce texte réfléchit sur le théâtre et la performance comme domaines artistiques capables d'interroger l'affirmation totalisant sur la vérité dans le monde actuel.
Mots-clés: Récits Personnels. La Réalité. La Fiction. La Vérité. Théâtre du Réel.

RESUMO – O Teatro, É Verdade? Ponderações sobre o real na cena contemporânea – Este artigo dedica atenção aos possíveis desdobramentos do uso de narrativas pessoais em cena, quando tomadas no intuito de provocar tensão entre realidade e ficção no instante do acontecimento cênico. Utilizando como referência formulações que ponderam acerca da concepção do real – do contexto social dos anos 1960 aos dias de hoje –, a partir do pensamento de filósofos como Debord, Baudrillard e Rosset, busca-se refletir sobre o teatro e a performance como campos artísticos capazes de interrogar a afirmação totalizante sobre a verdade no mundo atual.
Palavras-chave: Narrativas Pessoais. Realidade. Ficção. Verdade. Teatro do Real.

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[...] that there is not simply one story for the universe, but, instead, a collection of possible stories, all equally real[1].
Truths are illusions that forgot they are so[2] (Rocca, 2006, p. 50 e p. 55).

As soon as the performance was over the small stage would become empty. Maria Carolina Vieira[3] and I, the two actresses of the play, would go out the front door of the theater, let a few minutes of silence go by and return. From then onwards, the theatrical ritual would carry its course as usual: some applauses followed by the audience slowly exiting the performance space. Certain spectators would remain, however, as if they felt something was lacking, waiting to be said, done, or shown. As if some form of explanation was still missing.

"Were they actually real stories – lived by us, the actresses – that which we expressed once the caricatured acting style was abandoned? Were there moments in the performance in which we stopped performing? And in these moments, was it true what we said and talked about?" It was such questioning that was raised by the remaining part of the audience.

This brief account expresses a little about the experience I had when participating in the staging of the performance *A Ponto de Partir*[4] ("About to Leave"), which was directed by Ligia Ferreira and created based on the writings of Ana Cristina César, a *Carioca* (a Rio de Janeiro native-born) poet linked to the movement known as "*literatura marginal*" (marginal literature). In this play, Maria Carolina and I performed elderly women which would return into their youthful bodies when remembering their past.

A sense of temporal transposition was emphasized and illustrated through the different performing styles we deployed. The elderly women were performed with a caricatured acting style as a counterpoint to a realistic performance, applied in moments the characters were of young age. In addition to these performing techniques, the dramaturgy was fragmented and created from poems, letters, and journals by Ana Cristina César as well as personal writings (letters and journals) from the actresses of the play.

The performance took place in a very small stage, in which some props were arranged as shown in Figure 1. Amongst such props, there was a mailbox. The elderly characters named Adelaide Vieira and Adelaide Silva performed actions that indicated the unsettling waiting for the arrival of a letter (Figure 2). As they waited for this letter to appear, the characters

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would reveal to the spectators a suitcase full of old postcards. The two 'Adelaides' would then handle the postcards and distribute them to the audience whilst recollecting stories of their youth and interacting with each other in ways that disclosed an old friendship.

We attempted to build a state of *non-acting* as we switched performing styles and deconstructed the elderly characters: we abandoned the created body and vocal identities and began talking to the audience *as if we were ourselves*. This game, or interplay, which was proposed by the director, consisted of mixing different acting techniques with personal stories of the actresses tangled up within Ana Cristina's texts, and brought an autobiographical touch to the work. This interchange was the reasoning behind the questions that were often asked at the end of the performances: at various moments in the play we began narrating accounts in order to foster doubts related to the possible personal side of what we were talking about, in the spectators' minds.

Figure 1 – Play 'A Ponto de Partir'. Picture: Camila Ribeiro.

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Figure 2 – Play 'A Ponto de Partir'. Picture: Camila Ribeiro.

The focus of the reflection I present here as *is the theater real?* was born from my interest in researching personal narratives used as a strategy to explore the boundaries between the real and the fictional in theatrical performance. It was not by chance that it became the theme directing my academic and artistic research. Thus, the reflections I offer here were taken from excerpts of my master's dissertation entitled "*Narrativas pessoais: possibilidades de confronto com o real na cena",* or *Personal Narratives: possibilities of facing the real on stage* (Marina, 2012).

I feel an enhanced sensibility towards works that carry within themselves the artist's personal touch. This happens not only when I perform, but also as a theatre spectator for, in my view, this personal tone enables unsettling feelings to arise in the audience. I am referring to facing a certain uneasiness when considering the possibility of the narratives unfolding on stage being *actually personal*, and therefore, *true narratives*. These are performances that explore a state of apprehension when facing *what truth the theatre is actually revealing*, similarly to the way it seemed to generate confusion in the spectators of "*A Ponto de Partir*". What is at stake within this personal dimension is an unsettling relationship with what we can call "*real*", since the performance presents situations or stories that do not seem to be artistically shaped. Such perception of the possibilities that arise from exposing on stage an interweaving link between fiction and reality will serve as a starting point for the reflections of the present work.

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The emergence of the *irruption of the real*[6] seems to be one of many strategies used in contemporary theatrical stages[6] for it offers a potential to promote a break that transgresses, or at least, disturbs the boundaries between the roles of the actors (agents of the dramatic action) and spectators (receivers of such action), turning both into agents and receivers. The endeavour to disrupt such *roles* is not novel and has been explored by several theatre makers throughout different eras[7]. Nevertheless, despite being thought and rethought of, would this still be one of the prerogatives that stimulates artists working with the "real" in performance: to incite the audience to find themselves confronted with the possibility of witnessing a concrete truth (that is, non-performance), even if it is theatrically established? After all, is theatre *true*? Or rather, what is the meaning of *truth* in theatre? Which *truth* can or should be *explored* on stage? What propels actors, *non-actors*, and performance makers to openly and publicly expose their desires, fears, dreams, and personal histories in front of an audience of strangers?

Is such a search for a dimension of the '*real*' in theater – led by the use of personal stories –, an opportunity to create a reflection on the complexity of representational modes in today's society? Is this a possibility to question the theatre itself as a meeting point, a structure and place of social legitimacy, pondering over the subtle limits between art and life, spectacular and pragmatic reality, stage and spectator? Unsurprisingly, there is no definitive answer to such questions, but it is possible to take them as an initial provocation towards the development of a study that explores the idea of *the real in theatre, and the dimension of personal narratives used as an expression of truth*. In this way, it becomes conducive to consider, even if in an introductory and unfinished attempt, the historical approaches concerning the notion of *truth on stage*.

The Truth in Theater, a Historical Discussion

The question raised in this article, *After all, is theater real?*, may seem fruitless. However, it takes reading some of theater's seminal history books to realize that words such as *verisimilitude, veracity, realism, reality, effectiveness, illusion, illusionism* have been raised, permeated and driven heated discussions about how this intended truth reflected on the scope of theatrical practice over the centuries. That is, the question of *truth on stage (what it is, what kind of truth* is practiced on stage, *why and how to achieve*

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it) is related to the social effectiveness of theater, its function, its aesthetic, pedagogical, socio-political and doctrinal scope. In short, these are questions that until this day seek to address which conception of *truth* is capable of producing an interface between stage and audience, theatre and social environment.

Thinking of a historical perspective related to the search for some level of *truth* in theatre, Jean-Jacques Roubine (2003, p. 113) states that "Each generation, deep down, experiences the need to invent a new system of conventions that will give, for some time, the illusion of life, before being in its turn perceived as such and rejected in the name, precisely, of life". Thus, different strategies were developed from discussions related to interrogations on how to make the stage come *alive, to be true, credible or real.*

For Aristotle, for instance, "[...] the work of the poet does not consist of telling what actually happened, but rather things that could happen, or could be possible from the point of view of verisimilitude and necessity" (Aristotle, 2007 p. 39). In Ancient Greece, therefore, it would be *verisimilar* what was *possible* or, as Guénoun (2004, p. 30) points out, "Verisimilitude and necessity result from what could be called a *logic of actions* [...]". In the Aristotelian context it is not what has actually happened or *the real* that is essential for the construction of dramatic development, but the idea of *verisimilitude*. The truth appears in this way not as the *real* (factual) but as a concept that expresses a persuasive force due to an internal structure, which makes one accept the development on stage as *true*. In other words, it responds to an internal perception of the receiver. Therefore, fiction may (or may not) be true, despite not being real.

In the 20th century, until the mid-1970s, theatrical discourses began to address the idea of *truth* as being something attainable, a platform that could (and should) be reached and revealed through art, but also that did not refer to the factual or to the immediacy of everyday *reality*. Hence, one of the strategies for achieving the *truth* on stage, and which recurrently appeared in the discourses of recognized theatre directors such as Stanislavski, Brecht and Grotowski, was the use of a proximity between the life experiences of the protagonists and the overall universe on stage. Such proximity took place in the theater in different ways due to different ideological postulations, as described by Philip Auslander in his article *Just Be Yourself* (1997).

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Auslander analyzes in a very pertinent way the development of self-referentiality strategies that the aforementioned directors required from their performers as well as the processes of exposure of the artist's *self* in contemporary theatre. The most striking, from my point of view, is that the propositions of Stanislavski, Brecht, or Grotowski regarding the actor's presence on stage, even if marked by ideological differences, invariably culminated into a perspective of a *totalizing presence* of the artist, one that is not contradictory nor discontinuous, and which speaks to the conception of the existence of a *totalizing truth* of mankind (one that is beyond everyday facts)[8]. Nowadays, however, Auslander argues that the *truth* or the *personal touch* that each artist brings to the stage is no longer associated with an essentialist notion, neither of art nor of mankind, but with an idea that deals with discontinuity. Auslander (2007, p. 36) summarizes the ideas presented by the aforementioned directors:

> It has not been my purpose to discredit the theories under discussion here, for they remain valuable and provocative conceptions of acting and its functions. I only want to indicate their dependence on logocentrism and certain conceptions of self and presence. Stanislavski states that the actor's self is the basis of performance, but his own working out of this idea leads him to the posit that the self is produced by the very process of acting it is sad ground. Brecht would have the actor partly withhold her presence from the character she plays in order to comment on it. To do so, however, the actor must endow another fictional persona with the authority of full presence, a theoretical movement which makes Brecht's performance theory subject to the same deconstructive critique of presence as Stanislavsky. Grotowski proposes the actor's body as an absolute presence which banishes difference, but does not take into account the action of difference within the body itself. it is not a question of discarding these theories or of ironing out inconsistences within them, but one of recognizing that they are subject to the limits of metaphysical assumptions on which they are based. if we are to use them, we must realize that, like metaphysics, they demand that we accept these assumptions on faith.

In line with these reflections, I believe that the notion of *truth on stage* varies. However, it is often established in the confrontation between art and life, artists and spectators, stage and audience. Such confrontation can restore the autonomy of theatrical practice and its simultaneous insertion in empirical life, as well as foster the drive for establishing performance as an

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experience, a living experience, a *happening* (Lehmann, 2007) for artists and the audience, through the autonomy of the theatrical language.

Hence, following these considerations, one can say that contemporary discourses are not so much related to the *status* of the object (narrative) presented on stage, whether it is actually *real* or *fictional*, but rather to the pertinence of interrogation, of the investigative insights that it allows to pose. This exciting disturbance of uncertainty, with the possibility of constructing doubt (more than an assertion) on stage about the *real*, fostered a series of contemporary artistic performances that place their creations on the frontier between reality and fiction. Within this context, the term *self-fiction* emerges as a insightful strategy to accommodate this confrontational zone.

In one way or another, the three directors mentioned by Auslander held the motivation of using the idea of the "personal" in order to achieve a truthful substance on stage. As discussed above, what changes in this case are the conceptions about the notion of *truth* (which defines how aesthetic proposals can foster effective exchanges between artists and spectators) and, consequently, the ways of apprehending the personal dimension and transform it into its performing equivalent.

As Auslander points out, aesthetic proposals do not wear out because they are wrong or limited *per se*, but because social and media contexts change. In this way, additional aesthetic forms are required in order to create a configuration that dialogues with their surroundings. In relation to contemporary performance works, such a perspective implies a critical positioning regarding the society of the spectacle and the audiences' thirst for something real and authentic. Stanislavski, Brecht and Grotowski's audiences' thirst simply differs from the ones experienced by present-day spectators.

However, it is necessary to acknowledge that their research stimulated and are now reflected on performing processes that appear in contemporaneity. The changes that took place in the theatrical context of the twentieth century raised three layers that defined distinctive acting styles: *representation, presentation/showing doing, and being.* I understand the *representation* level to be situated in the field of realistic performance, in which there is a character to be performed and in which the pragmatic nature of the staging is not so eminent. The *presentation/showing doing* is

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linked to a meta-theatrical performing style, in which the pragmatic character of the performance is evident. Lastly, I view the layer of *being* as a search for *non-acting*, in which the factual reality intends to be present. Perhaps the most remarkable transformation is the change from a predominantly representative theater, from Stanislavski, to a predominantly performative theater, such as that of Tadeusz Kantor[9].

Personal Narratives, Truth and its Reflections on Contemporary Stages

What I am attempting to defend is that contemporary creations using *personal narratives* of the performers on stage do not necessarily employ only one resource of acting style. Instead, they seek to articulate these different strategies in performance: *representation*, *showing doing*, and *being*. This is what we used to do in the play "*A Ponto de Partir*", described above. In this sense, it is likely that, contrasting to the metaphysical perspective guiding the work of the directors mentioned by Auslander, contemporary aspirations are less about revealing some hidden truth and more about making resonate on stage the *effects of reality*.

One can say that the *irruption of the real*, which has invaded a series of stage productions, highlights confrontations between *reality and fiction* through diverse and distinct strategies. My aim in this article is not to exhaust the theme of the *real* in contemporary theater, but to create a window which focuses on such exploration – that of the *real* –, from the perspective of the use of *personal stories on stage*.

The newest work of actress Bárbara Biscaro[10], *As mulheres insolúveis* (*The insoluble women*), which premiered in August 2019 during the *II Camaleoa Festival - Mulheres Fazendo Arte*[11] (Women Making Art), is an example of a contemporary production that explores the real using personal stories. Biscaro invites the audience to arrange personal objects that she carries inside a suitcase, onto a rectangular fabric on top of which she develops her performance. The objects trigger narratives that are shared and randomly selected by the actress through games and devices triggered in performance. For example, at a given moment, Biscaro calls a volunteer from the audience, warning that this person would have his/her life exposed and thereafter, she does a tarot reading for that participant (Figure 3). However, the cards have links to Biscaro's personal story and were invented and manipulated by the

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actress. Thus, the performance begins to intertwine the experiences of the performer and that of the spectator. The audience is responsible for judging the truth (or lie) of the mystical narrative that unfolds in front of them while the tarot cards are being *read* out by the artist (Figure 4).

Figure 3 – Performance As Mulheres Insolúveis. Picture: Mariana Smania.

Figure 4 – Performance As Mulheres Insolúveis. Picture: Mariana Smania.

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Sergio Mercurio is another performer who uses his personal experiences to compose performances. In his first work, *El Titiritero de Banfield*, the puppeteer begins the performance with the following words:

> When I was a boy
> I lived in a neighbourhood
> which survived the imminence of the asphalt,
> if it was raining in the back of my house,
> a generation of frogs used to come together
> which I had baptized with different names
> along with my grandmother.
> This Banfield of mud and gutters
> was a neighbourhood of boys who used to steal fruits
> escaping the brutality of an Italian man.
> It was a neighbourhood of dirty children climbing
> on the milkman's truck and travelled for free
> for almost two blocks.
> I looked at it with absorbing eyes
> maybe because of my parents who dreamed of
> another childhood for this boy they had
> and wouldn't let him be part of that imagery.
> And I was too adult for the fantasy.
> I grew up in the years of prohibition in Argentina
> ...and like everyone else, I've been accumulating a lot...
> of dreams and wounds.
> But one day, not far away, I discovered that these dreams could be healed.
> That's how I started my path
> And today, for now... I think more than ever that puppets have life
> (Mercurio, 1995, p. 3).

The play develops from frames in which foam puppets perform and sometimes play with their puppeteer: Sergio Mercurio. The Argentine artist's work impresses with the depth and subtlety of the stories presented by his puppets. In other words, the sensitive and provocative narratives that these artificial beings – foam characters – express. What displaces a totalising perception of *truth* is precisely the *real* part of the performance created by Mercurio, in which the narratives do not appear as an invention but as reflections and conflicts *truly experienced* by the person presenting them in contrast to the *representational* game of puppets and fictional beings. Once again, it is not only up to the spectator to precisely locate the real or fictional part of the narratives. This is because Mercurio's

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performance, which is significantly guided by fictional constructions, is also based on moments in which he speaks directly as an actor with the audience, and even with the puppets he manipulates. Such dynamics of the performance's composition provides an ambiguous feature to his narrations.

The assumption guiding the reflection presented here is to be found precisely in the uncertainty about what is considered to be *real*. As Lehmann (2007, p. 165) states with regard to the exploitation of the real in post-dramatic theater:

> [...] the essential is not the affirmation of the real itself (as in the sensationalist products of the pornographic industry), but the uncertainty, through undecidability, as to whether what is at stake is reality or fiction. It is from this ambiguity that the theatrical effect and the effect on consciousness emerges.

The use of personal narratives on stage in the examples mentioned, presents such ambiguous tension either as preconception or as consequence of its creation. It can be assumed that this search for such effect in contemporary theater stems from the fact that, in everyday life, people encounter a problematic dilution of boundaries between the real and the fictional. The 2018 elections in Brazil can be taken as the most explicit proof of such phenomenon. When facing this problem, questions regarding the possibility (or impossibility) of establishing such boundaries invaded discourses seeking to reflect sociological, anthropological, cultural, artistic, and even political areas. In theater's case, it triggered performative creations attempting, either explicitly or implicitly, to critically approach the staged reality of our current society.

The fact that I am centring on performances developed from the exploration of personal narratives of the artists who are on stage, allows for the actress, the actor, or performer, to become central figures in the discourses of this research. The importance of this agent is enhanced, considering that the recognition of *the story being told on stage be real, really experienced by the one who reports it.* This implies the need for a physical and immediate presence of the subject of the events; it is he (the immediacy of his presence) who has the competency to entail and denote *reality* to the theatrical event. To paraphrase Silvia Fernandes: "[...] in certain experiences of contemporary theater the material concretization of the presence of the

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actor was prioritized [...] in opposition to the mimetic, abstract relationship, of representation with what it represents" (Fernandes, 2013, p. 4).

I believe that an act of play, of game, is built through such use of personal narratives in these approaches to artistic creation. This game allows for a possibility of setting uncertainty to the concept of the real and questioning the totalising dimension about the truth. In other words, it is possible to identify in the artistic conceptions of contemporary theatrical proposals, such as those I have been quoting, that it is more important to *problematize* the notion of truth (even if this is related to the personal field of the artist) than *affirming* a specific truth to the audience. This is done in order to sustain the tension located between the fields of fiction and reality, as well as between the personal and social spheres, so that the two poles of the continuum are constantly being questioned. Or, in Matzke's words (2006, p. 195):

> At a time when the impossibility of distinguishing between the real and the staged is becoming a problem (of everyday life), it is no longer about whether something is real or true, but about a differentiation between the different degrees of staging; not about unmasking social reality as staged, but about an attempt to respond to social complexity with the means of the stage and in equal degree of complexity.

After all, what is the real? Is this a definable or understandable concept? I began this article with a reflexion on the use of *personal narratives* on stage as a manifestation of the *real* and as an artistic possibility to contrast the relations between fictional construction and pragmatic life. Following these thoughts, it becomes eminent to trace some parameters about the notion of the real illustrated in this work (even though I recognize the impossibility of exhausting such a question). For this, I take as a starting point the conceptions of Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard and Clément Rosset. The first two present a more sociological approach, which problematizes the dimensions of reality within the context of post-industrial society. The latter discusses the *real* from a philosophical perspective. Following this discussion, I will seek to draw parallels between such approaches and their possible developments in the theatrical fields addressed here.

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The Real in Social Relations and in Contemporary Performance

One of the most cited thinkers regarding the relationship between *fiction and reality* in contemporary society is Guy Debord. The French theorist proposed, within what became known since the 1960s as a situationist movement, that we are inserted in a daily life that was invaded by the *spectacular* logic, in which "everything that was *directly* experienced became representational" (Debord, 1997, p. 13, my emphasis). In this context, the boundaries between real and spectacular, fact and fiction, are no longer capable of being defined because "[...] the lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle and resumes in itself the spectacular order to which it adheres in a positive way. [...] reality appears in the spectacle, and the spectacle is real" (Debord, 1997, p. 15). Such statements display the idea of mediation: human relations no longer materialize without the interference of media models, i.e., they start to be shaped according to such models and an emptying of *reality* derives from it.

Debord also states that human achievement within this society, guided by economic reason, and in which the values of goods and consumption is prevalent, initially went through "a degradation of *being* to *having*", and that, currently, this dynamic suffered "a generalized slippage from *having* to *appearing to have*" (Debord, 1997, p. 18). The spectacle, which is present in all aspects of everyday life, is linked to the idea of appearance, which is twice as distant from the attainment of being. The consequence of this dynamics is that everyday life ceased to be real, ceased to be an experience directly lived, and became a spectacular representation: "When the real world is transformed into simple images, the images become real beings and efficient motivations of a hypnotic behavior" (Debord, 1997, p. 18). This perspective pointed out by Debord is crucial: we imagine, dream and live our social life according to the models proposed in advertisements for soft drinks, clothing brands and cars, or in the social network *posts* of our friends and idols. Hence, facing this second-hand life, the personal testimonials expressed by the person who lived them in the here and now of performance, have a potentially subversive character.

Debord problematizes this form of social relations, among others, for he considers it to be a positive order, since the spectacle presupposes no more than an attitude of "[...] passive acceptance that, in fact, it has already

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obtained for its way of appearing without reply, for its monopoly of appearance" (Debord, 1997, p. 17). Due to the fact that it is so linked to the image and to what he calls passive contemplation, the spectacle closes the door to the possibility of dialogue, of living, of exchanging experiences between the subject and the world of the senses. It implies the "concrete fabrication of alienation" (Debord, 1997, p. 24) in which "a part of the world is represented to the entire world and is superior to it" (Debord, 1997, p. 23). The spectacle is thus based not on lived experience, on the real, but on representation, on the "affirmation of all human life as simple appearance" (Debord, 1997, p. 16). This representation to which society is subjected to, its spectacularizing character, is not innocent for, "[...] seen in its various locations, the spectacle clearly shows totalitarian specializations of social discourse and administration [...]" (Debord, 1997, p. 39), therefore, it corroborates and encourages the social logic of consumption, as well as hegemonic discourses.

This shattering of the possibility of apprehension and experience of the *real* is seen with equal pessimism by Jean Baudrillard. For this French thinker, society started to be organized around *simulations*, abstractions without a clear reference and without any form of *reality* to which they can mimic.

In this sense, Baudrillard understands that *representation* is construed as an activity that counts on a reference from which the abstraction arises, but he affirms that "[...] today the abstraction is no longer that of the Map, of the double, it is generated from the models of a real without origin nor reality: hyper-real" (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 8). He then proposes that abstractions and images "no longer have a clear principle of localization" (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 10), so Baudrillard no longer speaks in representation, but in *hyper-reality*. In relation to this aspect, Baz Kershaw (1999, p. 93) states:

> The situationist theorisations of the society of the spectacle commonly picture the commodifications of consumerism, amplified by the madiatisation of culture, as a screen of alienation placed by power between the people and reality. disruption of the spectacle would expose the system of domination and simulate a revolution through which popular desire for freedom would be satisfied. from a starting point sympathetic to situationism, Baudrillard, through the late 1970s and into the 1980s extended its premises through a logic in which the spectacle of simulation became the only reality. […], he demonstrates a brilliant pessimism in

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arguing that the 'procession of simulacra' in the capitalist overproduction of commodities and images finally entirely banishes the real by representing nothing other than their own, simulated, reality.

In the words of Baudrillard himself (1991, p. 71), contemporary social relations go through a "universalization of a dissuasive system" that provokes a "chain reaction of simulacra, a simulation in which all the energy of the *real* effectively sinks" (1991, p. 73).

Icons or symbols become hyper-real objects because they are fabrications that no longer have a *real* entity behind them. This is the case with manufactured cities, such as Las Vegas, with theme parks and, nowadays, the same could be said of reality shows and political advertisements, which operate in a hyper-realistic logic, according to Baudrillard's conception. They are abstractions without a referential, they are not realities, nor are they representations (they do not refer to any entity external to itself), they are *hyper-realities*, *simulations* that have destroyed the possibility of the *real*: "[...] pretending or dissimulating does not transform reality, the difference between what is real and what is fake continues to exist. However, simulation blurs this distinction. [...] Simulation is reduced to the signs that proves it" (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 10 and p. 13). Baudrillard also states that simulation:

> It is the secret of a discourse that is no longer only ambiguous, as political discourses can be, but that translates the impossibility of a certain position of discourse. And this logic is neither of one party nor of the other. It goes through all discourses regardless of their will. [...] Thus the hyper-realists fix in a hallucinating verisimilitude, a real from which have fled all sense and *charm* and all the depth and energy of representation (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 27 and p. 34).

Due to its lack of ability to apprehend the real, or possibility of living with the real, one might say that the society Debord and Baudrillard were looking at has moved away from the dimension of the present. This is because of the *spectacular* logic and the *simulations* in which it was situated. The conception which sees the spatio-temporal location of the real as occurring at the place and time of the present moment is defended by Clément Rosset (2008, p. 64):

> Deprived of immediacy, human reality is, naturally, also deprived of the *present*. Which means that mankind is deprived of a *tout court* reality, if we

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believe what the stoics say about it, whose strong point was to affirm that reality was conjugated only in the present. But the present would be too unsettling if it were only immediate and primary: it is only accessible through the bias of representation, therefore according to an interactive structure that assimilates it to a past or a future thanks to a slight displacement that erodes its intolerable vigour and only allows its assimilation in the form of a double which is more digestible than the real in its first roughness.

Based on these studies, I follow the understanding that the *real* is a present event – immediate, capable of being lived and experienced – which moves it away from the spectacular order. That is, the *real* is delimited by the verb *being*, unlike the spectacle, which is linked to the *appearing*. *Representation*, in turn, is construed as a referential to a *real* that is, therefore, not present.

It is undeniable that the findings of the three theorists mentioned above, highlight the *real* as an extinct or endangered concept. In the framework of contemporary society, it seems difficult to locate the *real* (direct experiences; natural and not socially and mediatically fabricated) in everyday life. Even so, it is to this category of the *real* (present, immediate, which *is* instead of *appearing to be*) that I refer to when I mention such concept (although I recognize the difficulty of its realization in contemporary world).

In one way or another, it seems tempting to use Rosset's delimitation of the real for a reflection (and a *defence*) of how the exploration, or the search, for the real in theater can be arranged in subversive ways. Rosset says that the loss of a human relationship with the real lies in its withdrawal from the present, from the immediate time and space, on its escape from the *here and now*. Most of the plays that explore the irruption of the real, including performances that use personal narratives such as those mentioned above, are based on the idea of a *happening* (the theatre highlighting and valuing the present time and immediate space) and on the possibilities of being able to shape the theatrical encounter as an experience (for artists and audience). In this sense, the consideration philosopher Rosset posits – that by denying the present, mankind denies reality –, becomes a central concern that appears in the discourses of theatre scholars that have explored the *real* on stage, such as the American Josh Fox (2007, p. 181):

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> Getting to a question about reality, i think actors are aiming at something called 'truth', which is very difficult to understand or combine. and that truth is a kind of communal event that has all these contradictions built into it. and in the united states right now, we have this fundamental crisis of truth. it is very hard to figure out when it started, but it is really crazy right now. our entire electoral system is in chaos. our president is the greatest liar of all times and nobody cares. it has gotten to a point, where you just expect the lie what is going to be on television and there is no sense of actual reality or morality. and it is extremely depressing, but beyond that, it is very disorienting, because you don't know, how to combat that. so it is nice about theater that is a place where you might be able to restore same sense of belief.

In this quotation, Fox speaks of truth as a communal event which can be present in theatrical settings. On the other hand, the theater is the place of the spectacle, of performance, par excellence. Would it not be then another reproducer of the spectacular order, of *appearing* instead of *coexisting*? Wouldn't the theater be the main artistic vehicle of reproduction of falsehood, in which a passive and positive reception of the spectacle is granted to the spectator, a feature so criticized by Debord? On this aspect Kershaw (1999, p. 39) comments:

> From this angle, disempowerment is written into the texture of everyday life because everything – including our consumption of the past – may be turned into a commodity, with the result that there may appear to be no value system apart from commodification. […] considered as purpose-built houses for simulation, theater buildings and their products obviously can fit easily into this pessimistic vision of the contemporary culture emporia.

It is important to emphasize that, for Kershaw, there is a distinction between theater and performance. Within this distinction, the artistic construction of the former tends to be totalitarian and related to what Debord calls passive contemplation of the spectacle. Performance, on the other hand, would contain in itself the potential for subversion, to a greater degree. However, would there be a possibility of constituting a space of questioning the *spectacular* order, even in the case of performances presented in theaters, with frontal division between stage and audiences? Would it not be possible for the theater to transgress pure representation and generate an artistic conformation based on *being* rather than *appearing*? In my point of view, the plays I mentioned in this work show this desire to break with *representation* and seek to transform the theatrical situation into

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a *present* event in which actresses, actors, performers, when presenting themselves on stage with their *personal stories,* aim to just *be*. This enhances theatrical performance as a moment of encounter (a present event). Could this movement transform the theater into a place of *experience* instead of *appearance*?

In the introduction of the book *Reality Strikes Back, Tage vor dem Bildersturm*, which brings together several articles and interviews with German theatre practitioners regarding the *emphasis of the real* in contemporary performance, author Kathrin Tiedemann raised questions that are crucial at this time:

> So, how to explain all this? The 'real people' that recently appeared on 'Big Brother' and for whom some feel either despise or compassion should attract people much more than 'authentic actors' on stage? Where does this sudden hunger for reality come from? Does the theatre thus assume a function of mediatic criticism? Because of it, does it become political or does it merely state the factual? Does it impose, wherever possible, its most important qualities, the power of imagination to produce another possible world?[12] (Tiedemann, 2007, p. 7).

Some reflections, such as Annemarie Matzke's[13] quotation, highlighted earlier, suggest possible answers to these questions. For Matzke, the theater, when attentive to the spectacular order of society, does not invest in its negation, in the negation of *representation*. To consolidate itself as a critical action, it is set between performing the *real* (being) and *representing* it. It does not seek to unmask the complex networks of *representations* and *simulations* that take place in everyday social life, although it seeks equally complex means of elaboration. This type of theatre, in which the works mentioned above can be examples of, is not defined as being *real*: rather, it elaborates a game in which reality and fiction interpolate, are in friction, and generate a diffuse perception in the audience by mixing empirical life and fictional construction.

Marvin Carlson (2010, p. 65) says that: "What these parallels seem to suggest is that it is very difficult and especially useless to try [...] to draw a clear distinction between the 'real world' of 'responsible' human action and the imaginary field of play or performance". Matzke and Carlson thus imply that theater does not exclude the *spectacular* from its processes, but rather problematizes it. Similarly, Hal Foster (2001) in pondering the

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Avant-guard and Neo-Avant-guard movements in the visual arts defends that, to a certain extent, there is a reiteration of the mercantile logic in such movements as a means of not adhering to it, but of making it evident:

> [...] the objective is neither an abstract denial of art, nor a romantic reconciliation with life, but a continuous examination of the conventions of both. Thus, more than false or circular and if not affirmative, in the best of cases the avant-garde practice is contradictory, mobile, if not diabolical. The same is true for the neo-avant-guardist arts at its best [...]. 'Painting is related to art and to life' says a famous Rauschenberg motto. 'Neither is done (I try to work on the gap between the two)'. Notice that he said 'gap': the work will sustain a tension between art and life, not re-establish itself in a way that means reconnection between the two (Foster, 2001, p. 18).

Foster's considerations are not dissonant with the idea that, for a theater which is conscious of the cultural context that surrounds it, the pure idea of *representation* can no longer fulfil a critical role. In this way, art, in its conception, has sought to situate itself *between* the appearing to be, and the real. To defend this argument, I would like to highlight the words of José Sánchez (2007), for whom "the representation of reality is, in fact, a very distinct problem from the irruption of the real". This is because the first does not make visible its own processes of construction; on the other hand, the latter at least aims to draw attention to the possibility of there being a conscious construction of discourses. That is, *representation* implies presenting an image of the real, a process different from the *irruption of the real*, which installs an ambiguity in the scene by problematizing fiction. This problematization entails a quality of shock and surprise that emerges in performance when it creates, for some moment, a real event, instead of simply addressing it.

Within this perspective, the motivation in some proposals of contemporary theater is to investigate, among other things, the spectacular quality inserted in everyday life. In other words, to highlight the spectacle of daily life, in which we find ourselves inserted *passively*, so that, by becoming aware of this dynamics, it is possible for us to feel its ideological and emotional effect.

Consequently, the attempt to join artists and audiences together can be taken as one of the central elements of contemporary proposals, since this encounter allows to problematize the relationship between art and life

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itself. This is because it focuses on the theatrical event as *happening in the present*, allowing for discussions to be generated on the possibilities that arise from this encounter within theater, and its ability to critically engage audiences with contemporary society. The greatest challenge is to establish a productive tension between the staging's condition of being both a social encounter and a performance[14].

Could this so-called *thirst for authentic realities* mentioned by Tiedemann – which seems to have caused the surge of reality shows, as well as the promotion of documentary cinema in a way never seen before and, especially, the live broadcasting of social networks – be a reflection of a concrete sensation, even if not conscious, that everything we live is *spectacular*, in Debord's sense?

Could the affirmation of theater as a meeting place, in which a restlessness is verified in order to provoke a counterpoint between *a happening* and a theatrical *representation*, be a strategy that seeks to question this spectacular aesthetics leading to the logic of *all is fictional* in the media? One possibility is that such theater proposes to create a tension between the boundaries of fiction and reality showing that, in aesthetic spaces, these two fields overlap, and that one cannot always rely on everything that the eyes see, and the ears hear.

As initially highlighted, to Matzke (2006) it is no longer a question of something being immediate or staged, but what impression of immediacy is produced. Or, one might even say, it does not matter much whether what the theater shows is the truth or a lie, but rather the depth of doubt that it is capable of instigating. For this to happen, it is vital to expose the processes of construction of these effects of authenticity, shaking the spectators, not in the literal sense of the 1960s, but by displacing their role of observers. That is to say, making him or her feel part of what takes place in the performance precisely because he/she is being confronted with the possibility of *presences* instead of *representations*. Consequently, the spectator is left wondering how to react to these events, aesthetically or morally, since for him/her it is no longer possible to clearly distinguish how much of reality and of fiction he/she experiences.

"To the audience", comments Oscar Cornago, after "being confronted with different realities (theatrical and existential) it is granted the need to

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choose how much truth and how much deceit there is in each part" of what he/she witnessed (Cornago, 2005, p. 13). This is a question that does not seek a definitive answer but proposes a confrontation with the extra-theatrical realities of those who take part in the event. The irruption of the real ends up promoting a break that transgresses the security of the audience. The audience ends up losing control over its reception process, over its own ways of operating the acts of gazing and enjoying the theatrical event, as it is confronted with the possibility of witnessing a real narrative, although, in any case, still theatrical.

Thus, certain proposals on stage allow (although this is not a rule) an understanding or, at least, a glimpse of the theatrical spectacle as a phenomenon distinctive from the *society of the spectacle*. The difference lays in the fact that the intention behind performances created outside the purely *representational* logic – as is with the examples presented at the beginning of this article – is precisely to make the audience conscious of the spectacular logic that exists in theater and in life. In this sense, the audience is co-responsible for the arrangement of these performances, while the spectacle of daily life, as suggested by Debord, operates exactly in the opposite direction, one that is of alienation and of perceptual numbness.

According to Helga Finter (2007), this is because the spectacle present in everyday life (and here we include *reality shows*, dating websites, social networks and some proposals of documentaries) intends to be real, natural, while a performance that explores *irruptions of the real* on stage, tries to stress its theatricality. In Finter's words (2007, p. 18):

> This concept of a critical theatricality allows not only to unravel the amalgamation between theater and spectacle, but also to understand the political and critical impact of contemporary theatre. '[...] the theatricality of the aesthetic field is distinguished from that of everyday life in several points: [...] it allows [to the spectator] a critique of the society of spectacle, since the spectator can produce within it the experience of their desire to observe'.

Hence, this is why it becomes so essential for contemporary theater, including the plays mentioned here, to illustrate that authenticity, the real, can be constructions. In this way, Vasquez Rocca's (2006, p. 52-53) proposal is materialized: "[...] fiction does not refer to reality in a

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reproductive mode, as if it was previously given, but refers to it in a productive mode, that is, it establishes it".

Therefore, I believe that the search for the real in performances which depart from personal narratives has at its core the aim to question the current order. That is, to ponder about the society of the spectacle in which everything is representation, appearance and, hence, merchandised. However, there is no certainty or guarantee that this critical impulse will be established. As mentioned in this article, theater can also unfold into a hyper-real spectacle and reproduce the plots of observation through a spectacular logic, falling into the logic of the market that sells illusions with the stamp of truth.

Notes

[1] In order to keep the flow of reading I opted for setting all quotations in English, considering that the ones I translated appear in notes in their original version. The original in Spanish: [...] de que no existe simplemente una historia para el universo, sino una colección de historias posibles para él, todas igualmente reales.

[2] The original in Spanish: las verdades son ilusiones de las que se ha olvidado que lo son [...].

[3] Personal website: <https://corpotempo.wixsite.com/maria>. Accessed in July 02nd 2019.

[4] The play was performed in various events and festivals, mainly: Mostra Local Festival Palco Giratório – SESC-SC; 17. Festival Isnard Azevedo – Floripa Teatro; Festival de Teatro de Campo Mourão.

[5] The term appears in theoretical texts such as Sánchez, Catani, Fèral and Cornago.

[6] In this article I consider the term 'comtemporary' from the year 2000 onwards.

[7] See: Guénoun (2004, p. 18; 19; 38; 50).

[8] I disscuss this theme in depth in *Por um estado de não atuação: reflexões sobre o real do trabalho atorial* (Marina, 2016).

[9] My proposal to see the differentiation between the representational (semiotic) and the performative, between text and event, stems not from a Manichean viewpoint, but bearing in mind that they are two sides of a single process of

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creating signs on stage. In this respect, Fischer-Lichte's consideration is pertinent: Translation: Accordingly, the semiotic and the performative do not form a pair of oppositions, but a relation of reciprocity. Semiotics is related to the performative, to such an extent, as this represents an essential condition for the production of meaning, and the performative cannot escape the semiotic, to such an extent, as its act of constituting reality and the effect that it evokes on the participants, at least in part, are related to specific processes of constituting meaning, or specific meanings, that can be attributed to these acts. The research perspectives that have introduced the semiotic and performative turn are thus closely related to each other and complement each other. (Fischer-Lichte, 2001, p. 20). The original in German: Das semiotische und das performative bilden entsprechend nicht ein oppositionspaar, sondern ein wechselverhältnis. Das semiotische ist auf das performative bezogen, insofern dieses eine wesentliche bedingungen für dir möglichkeit von bedeutungserzeugung darstellt und das performative kann des semiotischen nicht entraten, insofern seine wirklichkeitskontituierenden akte und die wirkung, die sie bei den beteiligten hervorrufen, wenigstens zum teil auf spezifische prozese der bedeutungskonstitution bzw. auf bestimmte bedeutungen, die diesen akten beigelegt werden können, züruckgehen. die forschungsperspektiven, welche die semiotische und die performative wende eingeführt haben, sind also eng aufeinander bezogen und ergänzen sich gegenseitig (Fischer-Lichte, 2001, p. 20).

[10] Barbara Biscaro's Blog: <http://barbarabiscaro.blogspot.com/>. Acessed in July 02nd 2019.

[11] More information can be found in: <https://www.lascamaleoas.com/mostra-camaleoa>. Accessed in July 02nd 2019.

[12] The original in German: Und doch, wie passte das alles zusammen? Die 'echten menschen', die man gerade noch bei 'big brother' für ihre naivität gegenüber der medieninszenierung wenn nicht verachtet so doch wenigstens bemitleidet hatte, sollten einen auf einer theaterbühne auf einmal mehr interessieren als 'echt schauspieler'? woher kommt dieser plötzliche hunger nach realität? übernimmt das theater damit eine funktion der medienkritik? wird es daduch politisch oder konstatiert es nur das faktische? beraubt es sich womöglich seiner wichtigsten qualitäten, der kraft zur imagination, zur herstellung einer andere, möglichen welt?

[13] Researcher, actress and founder of the feminist collective *She She Pop*. Her work operates in the interface between documentary theater and performance.

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[14] A deep reflection on the possibilities of theater being perceived as a social gathering, and not only as a static event, is developed by Richard Schechner (1994, p. 40-86) in his book *Enviromental Theater*.

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