

A Scene of Exception: neotechnological theater in Belo Horizonte (Brazil) and Buenos Aires (Argentina)

Mariana Lima Muniz

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – UFMG, Belo Horizonte/MG, Brazil

Jorge Dubatti

Universidad de Buenos Aires – Buenos Aires, Argentina

ABSTRACT – A Scene of Exception: neotechnological theater in Belo Horizonte (Brazil) and Buenos Aires (Argentina)¹ – This paper examines theater shows *Play Me* by Rodrigo Campos, premiered in Belo Horizonte, and *Distancia* by Matías Umpierrez and *Las Ideas* by Federico León, premiered in Buenos Aires. In the three shows, elements of digital media are used to momentarily replace the physical presence of actors. The micro-poetics of these productions are exceptions in the theatrical scene of two cities known for a lively theater scene, in which the coexistence of spectators and performers in the same space is appreciated. As exceptions, however, they shed light on an idiosyncrasy of the theater present in the two cities in relation to the neotechnological scene: the appreciation of coexistence and co-presence despite the absence introduced by the use of novel technologies.

Keywords: **Theater Cartography. Neotechnological Scene. Coexistence. Real/Virtual. Absence/Presence.**

RÉSUMÉ – Exception Scène: le théâtre neotechnologic à Belo Horizonte (Brésil) et Buenos Aires (Argentine) – Cet article analyse les spectacles de théâtre suivantes: *Play Me* par Rodrigo Campos, première à Belo Horizonte, *Distancia* par Matías Umpierrez et *Las Ideas* de Federico León, créé à Buenos Aires. Ces spectacles ont en commun l'utilisation d'éléments de l'œuvre média digitale, à quelques moments, en remplacement de la présence de corps de l'acteur. Nous avons trouvé ceux micro-poetics représentent une exception dans le contexte théâtral de ces villes et aspire à la convivialité entre les organismes vie des artistes et le public à l'événement théâtral. À titre d'exception, cependant, révéler une idiosyncrasie du théâtre de ces villes sur la scène neotechnologic: l'appréciation de la coexistence et de coprésence par l'absence causés par les nouvelles technologies.

Mots-clés: **Théâtre Cartographie. Neotechnologic Scène. Convivialité. Réel/Virtuelle. Absence/Présence.**

RESUMO – Cena de Exceção: o teatro neotecnológico em Belo Horizonte (Brasil) e Buenos Aires (Argentina) – O artigo analisa os espetáculos *Play Me*, de Rodrigo Campos, estreado em Belo Horizonte, *Distancia*, de Matías Umpierrez, e *Las Ideas*, de Federico León, estreados em Buenos Aires. Eles têm em comum o uso de elementos das mídias digitais que atuam, em alguns momentos, em substituição à presença do corpo do ator. Identificamos que as micropoéticas desses espetáculos representam uma cena de exceção no contexto teatral dessas cidades, que primam pelo convívio entre os corpos viventes no acontecimento teatral. Como exceção, no entanto, revelam uma idiosincrasia do teatro de ambas as cidades em relação à cena neotecnológica: a valorização do convívio e da copresença através da ausência provocada pelo jogo com as novas tecnologias.

Palavras-chave: **Cartografia Teatral. Cena Neotecnológica. Convívio. Real/Virtual. Presença/Ausência.**

Introduction

This paper is situated in the field of contemporary theater critique and aims to contribute to studies on the cartography of Latin American theater. The procedures and motivations of three artists (two from Buenos Aires and one from Belo Horizonte) using digital media in their productions are investigated, along with the effects produced by digital media on the relationship established between actors and spectators, particularly in reference to binomials real/virtual and presence/absence.

Studies on theater cartography require researchers to dive into the theatrical scene they intend to analyze and describe what they observed on the field. According to theater cartography, in order to critically examine the theatrical productions of a given city one needs to experience them intensely and continuously, either as a performer, a spectator or a critic. Belo Horizonte and Buenos Aires were chosen for the continuous experience the authors have had as performers, researchers, and spectators in a host of contemporary theater productions of both cities.

The Cities

Buenos Aires is the capital of Argentina and one of the main venues in the international cultural scene. The city is known for its numerous commercial (mostly musicals sponsored or supported by companies), institutional (shows funded by government cultural agencies), and independent productions (paid for mostly by self-sustained groups without government or private support).

Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, is located outside the center stage of theatrical shows in Brazil, currently situated in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. But theater tradition runs strong in two main fronts in this century-old city: commercial theater (usually comedies with significant box-office appeal) and group theater (shows developed by theater collectives following different aesthetics). Both are funded with grants from Culture Incentive Law. A third stream of productions comes from the minds of performing arts graduates trained in local technical and higher education institutions. These productions are often the first step in the profes-

sional careers of many performers and nurture the creation of new theater collectives.

When compared to Buenos Aires, where spectators can choose among more than 300 shows in any given Saturday evening, Belo Horizonte offers a more modest yet consistent number of shows throughout the year. Every weekend, in addition to itinerant productions coming from Rio and São Paulo, the city hosts about a dozen locally produced shows. From January to March, however, more than a hundred local productions hit the stages as a result of the *Campaign for the Popularization of Theater* and the *Summer with Contemporary Arts* programs. Leaving aside the controversies looming over the two programs, the first months of the year are known in Belo Horizonte for the concentration of theater events. In Buenos Aires, despite specific events and festivals, much greater numbers are sustained throughout the entire year.

While in Buenos Aires theater productions are staged from Monday to Monday in a number of different venues, the active days of theater season in Belo Horizonte decreased steadily over the decades, and are limited today to stretches going from Thursdays to Sundays. The state capital of Minas Gerais has three municipal theaters, two of which recently reopened, and a number of private venues, most of which built from the auditoriums of traditional private schools in Belo Horizonte. In addition to these sites, local theater groups individually or collectively struggle to maintain alternative venues in East Belo Horizonte to stage productions of their own and of other theater collectives. Commercial theater in Buenos Aires concentrates on the famous *Calle Corrientes* and surroundings. Many cultural centers located chiefly in the poorer regions of the city continuously offer a range of spectacles. A surprising number of alternative venues managed by theater groups may be found in the district of Abasto in central Buenos Aires.

Our analysis examined independent and institutional theater in Buenos Aires and group theater in Belo Horizonte. These segments were chosen for the similarities between their modes of production and for the studies these groups have developed on language in theater and on the outcomes of their productions.

Neotechnological Theater

The qualifier *neotechnological* placed next to the word *theater* in the title of this paper does not mean to disregard the fact that technology has always been a part of theater, from the masks and cothurni in classical Greek tragedy to the shows streamed live today. And that is why it cannot be understood as something pertaining to the technology scene, since technology and theater have been common elements in a longstanding tradition. Comprehending technology in broader terms helps prevent mistaking it for an element present only in recent productions or a deviation from theatrical tradition. The relationship with technology is an element in the tradition of theater that is often used as a resource to amplify the presence of actors (as in the case of the masks and cothurni mentioned above). *Neotechnological* refers, therefore, to the use of digital media² resources in theater to revolutionize the connections between people from distinct parts of the world and considerably increase the rate by which data and audiovisual resources are shared.

The term *digital media* is used here in opposition to *analog media*, also known as mass communication media (television, cinema, radio, etc.). Digital media differs from analog media principally for the absence of a material base.

In general terms, analog media had a material base: in a vinyl record, sound was recorded in the grooves of a vinyl surface [...] In digital media, the physical support practically disappeared, and data are converted into sequences of numbers or digits – thus digital – interpreted by a processor inside a computer able to perform extremely complex calculations in a fraction of a second (Martino, 2014, p. 10-11).

The introduction of computers in the 1940s led to the development of artificial intelligence and the ability to respond to a wide range of binary stimuli and correlate them to provide new answers to new questions. The possibility of having computers interacting in a network – the Internet, developed in the late 1960s – significantly changed the way people relate to the world and to each other, and introduced new possibilities of creating narratives in this new medium.

*Hypertext*² deconstructed the sequential linearity of books, creating multiform and multispatial narratives (Murray, 2003), as observed in the

analysis of the three productions selected. Additionally, the ability to plunge into the fictitious environment of *cyberspace*³ expands spatial coordinates through *ubiquity*, the “[...] presence, everywhere, of digital media connected in a network, establishing connections to any space at any time” (Martino, 2014, p. 12). The expansion of spatial and temporal coordinates, a trait shared by the productions analyzed here, develops through widely distributed technologies, ranging from wireless Internet connection and *Skype* to software programs such as *Word* and free-access audiovisual editing software. These resources combined have allowed users to interact with the narratives presented in games, text from webpages and blogs, social media, etc. Janet Murray characterized digital environments:

Digital environments are procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic. The first two properties make up most of what we mean by the vaguely used word *interactive*; the remaining two properties help to make digital creations seem as explorable and extensive as the actual world, making up much of what we mean when we say that cyberspace is immersive (Murray, 2003, p. 78).

Campos, Umpierrez, and León induce a sense of immersion and interactivity by manipulating the physical space in which the scenes occur (the maze in *Play Me* and the little room in *Las Ideas*) and feelings of ubiquity through the many screens used in *Distancia* and *Las Ideas*. Additionally, the interferences of spectators viewing the show on the Internet in scenes of *Play Me* radicalizes the ability of the audience to interact with the performers, as discussed ahead in this paper.

Immersion broadens the perception of reality in a movement to virtualize relationships, spaces, and bodies. In this context, two main contradictory perspectives emerge. The first fears the dehumanization of human relations, as illustrated by books such as *Brave New World* (1932) and the British series *Black Mirror* (2011 - 2014), to name a few. These conflictive and uncontrolled relationships with technology and technical apparatuses report back to the principles ruling the relationship between men and these objects, as André Lemos described (2013, p. 40):

Technology is, at the same time, a profane instrument (a transgression of natural order) and a magical, symbolical power (transforming the world). [...] This is, without a doubt, what we experience in cyberculture, since contemporary civilization mixes fear and wonder for technological objects.

Jean Baudrillard (1978) reflected on the loss of contact with reality brought about by continuous exposure to a succession of simulations that end up creating *hyperreality*, driven by consumer society and reinforced by image worship, the main themes present in the productions analyzed in this paper and materialized in digital media in the form of fictionalized real images in *Las Ideas*, the inability of the actresses to touch each other in *Distancia*, and the anonymity of the Internet viewers intervening upon the plot of *Play Me*. While discussing the embodiment of God in religious icons, Baudrillard reflected on the idea of simulacrum, an important element to understand the poetics analyzed here:

[...] the whole system floats, converted into a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference (Baudrillard, 1978, p. 13, our translation from Spanish).

Means of communication do not exist outside consumer society, and often take a leading role in the creation of simulacra: “[...] in simulacra, images of daily life cannot replace or represent reality, but become themselves references of what is real” (Martino, 2014, p. 261). The discussion of virtual versus real is in the core of the neotechnological scene presented in this paper.

Pierre Levy postulated a second perspective on the influence of digital media and its consequences, a non-catastrophic perception of the increase of virtualization in society. To Levy (1999), virtualization implies a movement of heterogenesis or becoming-other; virtual is not the opposite of real; and virtual is not synonymous with false or absent, but rather a latent possibility, reality or presence.

In its current use, the term virtual is usually employed to express the pure and simple absence of existence, presupposing ‘reality’ as a material realization, a tangible presence. [...] The word virtual has its roots in the Medieval Latin word *virtualis*, which by its turn derived from *virtus*: strength, power. [...] In philosophical rigor, virtual is not opposed to real, but to current: virtuality and currency are merely two different ways of being. [...] Possible is identical to real, the only thing it misses is existence (Levy, 1999, p. 10, our translation).

In *Play Me* and *Distancia*, the physical presence of actors is substituted with a latent presence mediated by broadcasting technologies developed

with the popularization of the Internet. Since the advent of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s, browsers and interaction programs became much faster and more accessible to a wider audience. Through reasonably simple tools and intuitive interfaces, users became able to create, modify, and share content on the web. Improved computer interfaces and access to the web – and participatory culture – have driven and modified various segments of society, including the arts and theater in particular. Participatory culture has been defined as the “[...] potential any individual has to become a producer of culture, either by recreating existing content or producing previously unpublished content” (Martino, 2014, p. 11). The performers analyzed in this paper established a fluid relationship with cyberculture and narratives germane to cyberspace, while appreciating interactivity, hypertext, and the convergence of the virtual and physical worlds – the online and the offline.

The relationship between theater and media culture has been studied since before the popularization of digital media. It is not hard to view the common threads analog media such as the cinema and television have with theater productions in the 20th century. The use of projected images pioneered by Piscator in the early 20th century is a relevant resource in contemporary theater. In addition to the use of analog and digital media in theater, the creative and communication procedures adopted in cinema, television, computers, and theater have reciprocally affected each other. These reciprocal effects may be understood as an element of *convergence culture*, an idea postulated by Henry Jenkins (2009) to name a cultural process in which individuals establish connections between elements belonging to various media and languages. American researcher Amy Jensen stated that it is impossible to perform a consistent analysis of theater in her country from the 1970s onwards without considering it as an element inserted in a media-influenced culture. In Jensen’s words:

These interactions between live performer and digital technology demonstrate that the use of media technology challenges traditional notions of what a performer’s body might be and what a theatre space might include. More important, they challenge what the notion of presence means in a contemporary theatrical space infused with media technology (Jensen, 2007, p. 12).

The presence discussed by Jensen connects to binomials real/virtual and presence/absence observed in the neotechnological theater scene analyzed in this paper, since – as in the American theater scene visited by her – the three examples shown here disrupt traditional ideas of body and theater. Before examining the chosen productions, it seems relevant to address issues pertaining to the ontology of theater and understand the disruption that the use of technology as a substitute for the physical presence of actors introduces to the area of theater studies. To do so, we resorted to the studies of two Latin American authors, whose productions appreciate the coexistence and the poiesis of theatrical endeavors: Jorge Dubatti e Ileana Diéguez Caballero.

Source Theater, Liminal Theater, and Cross-Theatralization

In 2016, Argentinian professor and critic Jorge Dubatti published the book *Teatro Matriz, Teatro Liminar*. More than ten years after publishing the trilogy *Filosofia do Teatro I, II, and III*, in which Dubatti addressed the ontology of theater, the critic saw the need to discuss the plurality of contemporary feelings, procedures, and phenomena related to the field of theater. Is everything theater, after all? This is the main question around which the book is built. And to answer it, the author worked with the ideas of source theater, liminality and theatricality.

According to Dubatti, Source Theater is (2016a, p. 5, our translation):

[...] a greater formal, ontological-historic, foundational and generational framework from which other frameworks have stemmed throughout history, which includes all events in which the joint and combined presence of coexistence, bodily poiesis, and spectatorship are recognized. It is an ancestral framework that lives today, which allows one to state that everything touched by theater is transformed into theater, and everything can be transformed into theater.

Therefore, Source Theater is defined by the co-presence of the living bodies of performers, technicians, and spectators in the same space-time coordinates involved in the poetics of an event of spectatorship. Dubatti (2007) understands *poiesis* as a double (the unfolding of the real relationship between performers and audience into fiction), despite the fact that fiction might resemble reality in documentary theater and other performances.

Therefore, it is not aesthetics that defines what theater is, and much less issues related to *quality* or the degree to which theater conventions are present. However, there is a series of theatrical/performative events that share the characteristics of Source Theater and concurrently surpass the modern concept of theater closely related to the idea of drama. Dubatti considers these events (2016a, p. 17, our translation) for their liminality.

Therefore, we believe the idea of liminality carries two values: 1) it surpasses modern taxonomic categories favoring rationalist and exclusionary categorization (theater comprises solely dramatic theater and its somewhat canonic and closer variants), which are not particularly valid to consider concrete phenomena belonging to praxis (in opposition to closed thinking systems, the idea of liminality includes a wide range of non-prototypical and non-canonic phenomena); and 2) unveils the inner frontiers of canonic theatrical events, including absolute drama.

The idea of liminality plays a key role in the analysis of the micro-poetics³ of the productions reviewed in this paper, as they momentarily replace physical coexistence with coexistence mediated by technology and challenge the idea of coexistence present in Source Theater. Liminality surpasses rooted categories that might disregard the constant tensions existing between art/life; real/fiction; natural body/poetic body (producing *poiesis*); representation/non-representation; and presence/absence in current theater.

The Mexican critic Ileana Diéguez Caballero examined her theatrical experiences as a spectator in Peru, Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico in the first decade of the 21st century in her book, *Cenários Liminares*. During her research, the author speculated whether the phenomena she was analyzing might be categorized as art. To do so, she resorted to the idea of liminality from social anthropology and attempted to apply it to art.

I am interested in studying the liminal condition residing in a portion of current theatrical manifestations, intersected not only by other forms of art, but also by different scenic architectures, theater designs, philosophical perspectives, ethical and political positions, *universos vitales*, social circumstances (Caballero, 2016, p. 21).

Thus, her idea of liminality is close to Dubatti's and stresses theatrical manifestations intersected by other forms of artistic production – digital media, in our case – altering Source Theater.

Before theater – understood as Source Theater – anthropology looked into theatricality as an element present in a vast array of human activities: “[...] theatricality is a human condition consisting of the ability human beings have to organize the gaze of others and produce a political gaze or a politics of the gaze” (Dubatti, 2016a, p. 9, our translation).

If theatricality is seen as an essentially human activity devised to organize the gaze of others, the reach of theater may be extended to encompass what Dubatti called Cross-Theatralization. Cross-theater-action, i.e., an activity that intentionally includes theatricality, but is not in itself an artistic event. Cross-theatralization is present in nearly all activities of daily living, advertising, sports, politics, education, etc.

I call cross-theatralization something that is often seen in contemporary society: all order has been theatricalized, and theatrical strategies are needed to more effectively master social theatricality. [...] Cross-theatralization is a central idea we cannot ignore. This means that working with theater today includes, among other things, conversing with cross-theatralization. It is impossible to propose a theatrical practice that does not establish tensions, struggles, and arguments, and complementarily seduction, in multiple shapes, with the phenomenon of cross-theatralization (Dubatti, 2016a, p. 14, our translation).

Cross-theatralization manifests invisibly via its means and procedures. It is part of consumer society’s modes of political and social organization. It creates a theatrically studied reality, a fiction disguised as reality or hyperreality, in reference to the idea developed by Baudrillard (1978). In cross-theatralized hyperreality, digital media and other means of communication play a pivotal role. Deterritorialization provoked by the growing virtualization of relationships appears to have two sides. If on the one hand it allows the emergence of collective intelligence through participatory culture, on the other it tends to blur localness, territoriality, and coexistence, all of which important elements in theater. These elements of cross-theatralization exist in the productions of Campos, Umpierrez, and León. Their shows seem to ponder: if everything is theater, can theater become reality? By evincing the hyperreality of consumer society mediated by the digital universe, the theater scenes of Belo Horizonte and Buenos Aires reclaim coexistence and territoriality even when mediated by new technologies.

It is important to realize, as noted by Ileana Caballero (2016) in the end of her book, the risks of understanding images and representations in opposition to existence, presence, and reality. This thought echoes the ideas proposed by Levy (1999) and issues discussed previously in this paper. Representation may be thought of as the delegation of presence, not as absence. Image presentifies that which is absent. In the same sense, the physical presence of an actor, by itself, does not give access to reality in opposition to representation. According to Ileana, “[...] sheer physicality or objectuality cannot ensure the abolition of simulation, repetition or perpetuation of a presentified (and petrified) absence through representation” (Caballero, 2016, p. 187).

This point is relevant to situate theoretical discussions on the neotechnological scene as it is analyzed here, since it expands the definition of theater through liminality, theatricality, and cross-theatralization. The question “*is this theater?*” thus becomes secondary in the critique of the productions analyzed in this paper, particularly because, although they resort to neotechnological elements, the shows do not renounce coexistence between living bodies: “Theater may include technological elements [...], but cannot renounce coexistence” (Dubatti, 2015, p. 99).

Each of the productions is briefly described below with specific attention to the ties between them elicited in our comparative critique.

Distancia³

Distancia premiered in 2013 at Centro Cultural Rojas in Buenos Aires. The show was directed and conceived by Matías Umpierrez, a young multidisciplinary artist who has been working with the relationship between theater and new technologies since the early 21st century. The show consists of niches covered by screens, onto which windows are projected showing the images of four actresses in four different cities of the world streaming live on Skype. The actresses simultaneously talk to their lovers, without being connected to each other. They speak of loneliness, absence, and the distance that sets them apart (Figure 1).

A band behind the projection screens plays to the audience. It is a live show, nothing is previously recorded, neither the projections, the actresses

or the music. At the end of the show, the screens collapse, and the audience realizes that one of the actresses was physically present in one of the niches.

Dubatti (2014b) used this production as a case study to establish the difference between coexistence e techno-existence in the review written when the production premiered. Coexistence was defined as the sharing of equal space-time coordinates by the parties involved in a situation of spectatorship in a theater event. Techno-existence, by its turn, was described as the mediation of spectatorship by technology, in which the space or time coordinates of the parties involved are different, such as in the cases of television, cinema, projections, voice recordings, etc. According to Dubatti, theater requires coexistence and *Distancia*, as it temporarily replaces the physical bodies of actresses, sharpens the desire for co-presence of living bodies.

The most moving aspect of *Distancia* [...] is that instead of exalting the wonders of technologized life, it evinces its limits: the four women approach the pain and the deterioration of their love relationships because the co-existential bond between lovers does not exist territorially (Dubatti, 2014b. p. 133, our translation).

Matías Umpierrez lives in many cities, although recently Madrid has been his most frequent address. Interactions in his professional and personal life occur mostly through social media. Since he first started working with theater, his aim has been to understand how different means of communication and technological apparatuses modify and reframe the relationships between people. In *Distancia*, the artist attempted to communicate with contemporary spectators immersed in virtuality.

[...] I need to interact with inquisitive spectators. [...] The idea was that the audience did not have to understand the show but to fragment it. Part of virtuality relates to the act of fragmenting. Fragmenting is needed because the virtual cosmos is nearly infinite and constantly grows. It grows incessantly, while we grow. That is why we have tools such as *Google*, which is our way of fragmenting reality. I was also interested in broadening the scope of the set, not only in physical or virtual terms, but also in terms of information. This is why the production is filled with hyperlinks (Umpierrez, 2016, p. 25, our translation).



Figure 1 – Picture of a scene of *Distancia*, by Matías Umpierrez.
Photographer: Sandra Cartasso. Source: director's collection.

The use of streaming in *Distancia* elicits an alteration in the time-space relationship of the theatrical experience. The actresses and spectators share the same time coordinate, while their space coordinates are significantly different. Real spaces are shared (the theater and the houses the actresses are in), but this dilated space precludes touch, for example. Since touch is disallowed, attention is drawn to the distance separating them, despite the fact that the images carry a sense of presence with them and are broadcast in real time. Distance lies in the root of the complaints uttered by the actresses: the distance from their lovers; the exclusion of touch; having a relationship mediated by technology; and techno-existence replacing coexistence. The hyperlinks used in the show reveal the ubiquity of mediated contemporary life, and simultaneously reinvigorate the feeling of having direct contact with others. Deterritorialization of dialogue and other traits of cross-theatralization present in remote communication technologies such as Skype demonstrate, in *Distancia*, the impossibility of an absolute substitute for co-presence in relationships.

Distancia is one of the few shows premiered in Buenos Aires in the second decade of the 21st century to work on the absence of actors as both theme and artistic procedure by using digital media. Interestingly, although technology was used to subtract presence, it is the will to coexist that is ul-

timately stressed and nostalgically revived. In the face of globalization and deterritorialization introduced by virtual spaces and their presences/absences, theater reaffirms the need for territorial contact between living bodies, even when it deterritorializes presence and institutes absence. *Distancia* seems to establish a dialogue with generations profoundly resentful of absence and virtuality, who are eager for presence and touch.

Las Ideas, the production analyzed below, does not remove actors from the scene at all. Instead, it amplifies their presence by reducing the space in which performance occurs, fictionalizing initially real images and playing endless image loops. The show deliberately provokes confusion between binomials real/virtual, true/lie, fiction/reality, art/life, and thus relates to *Distancia*.

Las Ideas

Las Ideas is presented in a small studio located behind Federico León's house, in the district of Abasto, Buenos Aires. This fact in itself draws attention to the need to territorialize the scene. Spectators have to ring the intercom to enter the director's home and cross the backyard that leads to the room in which the show is performed. In the words of *El Clarín's* critic Mauro Libertella:

[...] home is an institutional space that always condenses family history between its walls, a place refractory to the crowds often implied in a theatrical proposition [...]. In this case, therefore, not only an intimate space is conquered, but the cast is also reduced to a minimum: two friends, León and Julián Tello, talking and thinking about ideas for a future hypothetical theater production [...] (Libertella, 2016, online).

Las Ideas exposes the process of creating a theatrical piece through constant free association of ideas, debating what is real and credible and working with images as an infinite mirror showing different realities.

In a very small room, some twenty spectators watch Julian and Federico seated across a ping-pong table with computers, keyboards, sound-editing equipment, cell phones, and table tennis paddles. The table is folded and one of its halves is fixed vertically to serve as a projection screen.

Federico León has worked with theater and cinema in Buenos Aires since the 1990s. His works consistently delve into the relationship between

theater and cinema and intermingle the processes and codes of both. In *Las Ideas*, the constant use of prerecorded images was an idea considered from the outset of the creative process. According to León:

We were recording all the time. [...] Some material is real, for when you start filming you are obviously interested in recording something. The idea was to shoot without knowing whether we would use it. One day we decided to use the material, because it would be interesting to see what had happened in past days. So, we did it, and fiction won again (León, 2016, p. 40).

In “fiction won again”, León referred to the process of re-filming the recordings made during the creative process. After watching the footage, León scripted the material and shot the scenes again with special attention to technical aspects of filming, fictionalizing the footage and drawing the thin line between reality and fiction examined in *Las Ideas*: “Before adding the filmed footage to the piece we did a lot of work with lighting, camera, and actor performance. It is not real material. The whole time we were fictionalizing even what could be actually real” (León, 2016, p. 40). The idea was to explore the identities, images, and gestures of daily life framed in a work of fiction. The bodies, discourse, and themes refer directly to creative idleness and digression.

We work the whole time between reality and fiction: Julian is Julian, I am myself, and at the same time I am not myself. [...] I also meant to set up fiction from real moments, but then I take them where fiction needs (León, 2016, p. 40).

The dramaturgy of the production – intentionally chaotic, without a clearly set conflict, and an endless loop of free associations – is centered on the relationship between reality, fiction, and verisimilitude. This central point is mostly expressed through work with images. Images are used in a deceptive mirror reflecting to infinity – the images of images. The mirrors are positioned in a way not to allow the distinction between the actual actors and their images. The contrast between reality and fiction unfolds and embraces the relationship between real and virtual, connecting *Las Ideas* to *Distancia*. In a paradigmatic moment (Figure 2), the two actors are in the same position as their images projected on the ping-pong table, as if they were facing an infinity mirror. Federico then stands up and draws on the

projected image with a piece of chalk. According to Libertella (2016, online):

As in a magic show, spectators are constantly wondering: is that true or just a part of the performance? This is the narrative thread of the show, an abstract and speculative narrative thread, nearly void of action. And that is why the play is called *The Ideas*.



Figure 2 – Picture of a scene of *Las Ideas*, by Federico León (to the right).
Photographer: Ignacio Iasparra. Source: director's collection.

By treating the images as their doubles, *Las Ideas* places the physical presence of the actors on an equal footing with their projected images. Although the actors are not removed from the scene, as in *Distancia*, their importance is resized, while perspectives around reality and truth are rescaled and often merged. The confusion between truth and lies, image and reality is also explored in *Play Me*, the last production contemplated in this paper.

Play Me

Play Me is a web video performance⁴ directed by Rodrigo Campos with students graduating from *Centro de Formação Artística* – CEFAR (non-degree acting program) in 2012. Rodrigo Campos is a multidisciplinary

performer working in Belo Horizonte since the 1980s. He was invited by the students at CEFAR to direct their end-of-course performance. At the time, Campos was developing a project centered on web-based games called *Play Me*. During the process, he offered to incorporate *Play Me* to the CEFAR end-of-course piece.

Many of the changes that had to be made to the original project served to elicit commonalities between the productions analyzed in this paper. When *Play Me* was strictly an Internet project, the actors met on the set and the entire process was thought without considering the presence of an audience *in loco*⁵. But the spectators had to be included when it became an end-of-course project of a group of graduating actors, thus further reinforcing Dubatti's definition of Source Theater, in which the coexistence in the same space-time coordinates of the parties involved in the performance is indispensable. This potentially anecdotal fact ended up revealing the need for coexistence in a theatrical production faced with techno-existence. In the words of Rodrigo Campos:

Theater without an audience *in loco* is not theater, and I am not the only one saying it, this idea has existed for some time. There was some pressure from the actors and the institution to make this change. It is tradition; it must have sounded odd, having a graduation ceremony with no one there to see it. I, too, found it odd and agreed with them immediately (Campos, 2016, p. 5).

The statement above implies that the main difference felt by the individuals involved was that, in order for it to be theater, spectators and actors had to share the same space-time coordinates. The decision was then made to have two versions of the production, one to be seen by the audience *in loco* and another to be recorded and streamed on the web.

Play Me takes place in the various rooms of a house. Each of the spaces is characterized by a theme. A character/avatar called Vic (played by an actor or actress) enters a student house to find accommodation. In this context, Vic interacts with the people in the house and the situations presented in each room. The audience *in loco* follows Vic and is in the same position of the avatar while watching the scenes. On the web, the camera replaces the gaze of the avatar, offering a subjective relationship with the scene in which the audience occupies the place of the main character: “[...] when the

avatar turns to the camera and asks, ‘what should I do next?’, it is as if one were turning to oneself to ask the question” (Campos, 2016, p. 7).

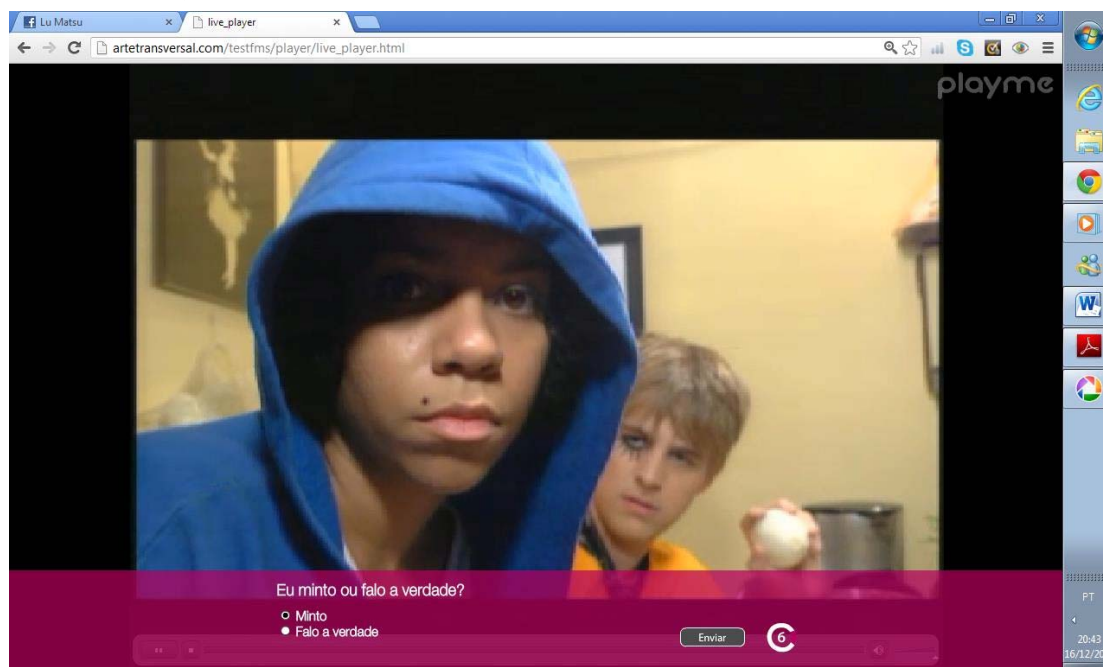


Figure 3 – Screenshot of *Play Me* by Rodrigo de Campos, performance delivered on the web in 2012. Screenshot captured by Lu Matsu. Source: director’s collection.

Each space and situation pose a different ethical dilemma or circumstance of oppression, and the avatar has to decide what to do in each case. Interaction with the audience happens when these decisions have to be made (Figure 3). These direct interventions place the audience in the shoes of the main character, and their choices affect the development of the play.

When *in loco*, the spectators are engaged to choose from two or three possible solutions to the conflict presented. In the web-based show, Vic looks at the camera and the choices are shown to remote spectators watching the play on the web. The spectators can choose from the given options or suggest other possible actions. In the shows with the audience *in loco* and streamed on the web, the different choices made by the spectators did not lead to substantial change in the scenes. Nonetheless, they revealed the responses of a collectivity faced with various ethical conflicts and yielded a background question that might be worded as follows: to what degree would you be willing to submit to be accepted/loved by a group? And conversely, to what degree are you willing to be abusive toward someone who wishes to have something that only you can give him/her?

Interestingly, a marked difference was observed in the behavior of the audience *in loco* and spectators on the web. When in the same room as the actors, the audience tended to be more politically correct and make choices that precluded violence or the humiliation of the character. By their turn, spectators on the web deciding over the same issues chose responses that led to situations of submission, oppression, and violence. Anonymity on the web seems to have a role here. In the presence of others, we know who is around us; we can see each other's faces and gestures; we can see who chose what; and we can promptly judge those choices. On the web we hide behind the decisions of the majority. And in this majority, we are desubjectified and deidentified, thus sparing us from the judgment of the collectivity. This is the opposite of the participatory culture alluded to previously. A participatory culture not only produces and democratizes wisdom and knowledge – thus making them participatory, it also intensifies perverse responses, manifested today with the presence of haters in social media. Without the watchful eyes of others, perversity emerges along with the desire to see how far the actors (physically in a different space coordinate than the audience) are willing to go. Staff members and spectators who watched both versions of *Play Me* had the same impression:

The audience and the actors unanimously agreed that people were watching each other as they made their choices during the play. [...]. It was collective censorship in effect. The Internet makes you anonymous, it allows you to let your monster out. People were much more perverse on the web, much crueler, and possibly truer (Campos, 2016, p. 10).

In *Play Me*, the avatar guides the gaze of the audience through the eyes of the camera. The spectators delegate the actions they could take to a non-human agent – the avatar/camera – as the scenes unfold from the viewpoint of this nonhuman element and its choices. More than just having passive spectators watch a complete and complex situation and relate or not to the characters, the idea in *Play Me* is to have the audience relate directly to a concomitantly human and nonhuman element, the avatar/camera. The spectators act and suffer from the consequences of acts perpetrated against them and respond to the presented circumstances. As in a game, conflicts are resolved in each instance of the web video performance based on their responses. And similarly to a game, the avatar has a clear goal: to go through the entire house and be accepted there. The character's actions are

guided by this overarching objective, and the responses to the presented situations help the avatar succeed or fail. As discussed above, the chosen responses vary depending on the degree of submission and emotional, psychological, and physical violence the audience is willing to let the avatar/camera endure.

Distancia, *Play Me*, and *Las Ideas* occasionally remove actors from the scene and alternate these absences with moments of co-presence and coexistence. They impart a strong sense of ubiquity and immersion through virtuality, understood here as something that exists as a possibility and is not physically present. Notions of absence and presence are challenged in the three productions with the use of digital media. The shows also value coexistence and territoriality through techno-existence and deterritorialization, and shed light on the cross-theatralization of contemporary society in the media and in the production of simulacra driven by the contrasting dynamics between reality/virtuality/verisimilitude.

The Neotechnological Scene: an exception

Analyzing the impact of new information technologies on the contemporary theater scene of Belo Horizonte and Buenos Aires was a particularly challenging assignment. The two cities were severely affected by economic and political crises in the period of time covered in the study (second decade of the 21st century), and funding to theater productions decreased significantly. Budget cuts considerably impaired the development of neotechnological productions, known for their relatively higher cost. This fact drew attention to the need to continuously fund cultural initiatives and foster the development of neotechnological theater, although such reality is still far from materializing in the two cities studied and in most of Latin America.

In this sense, the comparative analysis involving Buenos Aires and Belo Horizonte – two Latin American capital cities that despite their differences share similar modes of production – enabled the verification of the existence of a neotechnological scene, albeit with fewer cases than other forms of theater. This study was carried out from 2012 to 2016 in Belo Horizonte and included frequent attendance to local theater productions. The authors went to more than thirty shows in Buenos Aires in 2016. Among the various productions the authors attended as spectators, the three

analyzed here stood out for their links with the neotechnological scene. It is evidently impossible to cover the entire theater scene of the two cities and find all the productions that might fit into the studied theme. Nonetheless, no other shows were found during fieldwork or in published theater reviews. Comparatively, many more productions do not resort to streaming or the temporary subtraction of performers from the scene. Neotechnological theater may be seen, therefore, as an exception to the rule of co-presence of audience and performers that characterizes most of the theatrical productions in the two cities.

Technology is used in the analyzed shows to fragment and augment space. Spectators are led to interact with the performance while stepping on a thin line between reality and virtuality, absence and presence. Familiarity with virtual languages enhances one's ability to converse with the productions. Dialogue is at times direct (through interventions similar to the ones in *Play Me*) and sometimes indirect (such as in *Distancia* and *Las Ideas*). Be it through rejection or acceptance, the relationship with technology proposed in the three shows is not different from the one we are faced with in our daily lives.

The theater scene of the two Latin American cities is responding to the increased virtualization of relationships in society, reaffirming the importance of coexistence and expanding the idea of reality to include that which is distant, out of reach, yet close to the eyes and objectively establishing a relationship with us.

Notes

- ¹ This paper is the outcome of *Project Theatrical Creators of Belo Horizonte and Buenos Aires: the neotechnological scene*, funded by CAPES (Senior Traineeship 2016, supervised by Prof. Jorge Dubatti from Universidad de Buenos Aires) and FAPEMIG (Universal Request 2015).
- ² "Hypertext is a set of documents of any kind (images, text, charts, tables, video clips) connected to one another by links" (Murray, 2003, p. 64).
- ³ The word *Distancia* is spelled here in Spanish since this is the original name of the show.
- ⁴ Term used by Rodrigo Campos to describe his production.

- ⁵ *In loco* is an expression used by Rodrigo Campos in an interview. It was used here to reinforce the role of space coordinates in the form of coexistence proposed in the show.

References

- BAUDRILLARD, Jean. **Cultura y Simulacro**. Trad: Pedro Rovira. Barcelona: Editora Kairós, 1978.
- BLACK MIRROR. Criado por Charlie Brooker. Produzido por Charlie Brooker e Annabel Jones. Reino Unido: Channel 4 (2011 -14). Netflix (2016 – presente). HDTV 1080i. (44 – 89min). Color.
- CABALLERO, Ileana Diéguez. **Cenários Liminares**: teatralidades, performances e políticas. Uberlândia: EDUFU, 2016.
- CAMPOS, Rodrigo. **Rodrigo Campos**: entrevista [mar. 2016]. Entrevistadora: Mariana Lima Muniz. Belo Horizonte, 2016. Entrevista concedida ao Projeto *Criadores teatrais de Belo Horizonte e Buenos Aires*: cena neotecnológica, financiado pela FAPEMIG e pela CAPES.
- DUBATTI, Jorge. **Filosofia del Teatro I**. Convívio, Experiencia, Subjetividade. Buenos Aires: Editora Atuel, 2007.
- DUBATTI, Jorge. **Filosofia del Teatro II**. Cuerpo Poético y Función Ontológica. Buenos Aires: Editora Atuel, 2010.
- DUBATTI, Jorge. **Filosofia del Teatro III**. El Teatro de los Muertos. Buenos Aires: Editora Atuel, 2014a.
- DUBATTI, Jorge. Convívio y tecnovívio: el teatro entre infância y babelismo. **Revista Lamparina**, Belo Horizonte, v. 1, n. 5, p. 102-114, 2014b.
- DUBATTI, Jorge. Teatrológica y Epistemología del Arte: para una cartografía radicante. **Revista Pós**, Belo Horizonte, v. 5, n. 10, p. 94-111, nov. 2015.
- DUBATTI, Jorge. **Teatro-matriz; Teatro-Liminar**. Estudios de Filosofía del Teatro y Poética Comparada. Buenos Aires: Atuel, 2016a.
- HUXLEY, Aldous. **Admirável Mundo Novo**. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1982.
- JENKINS, Henry. **Cultura da Convergência**. São Paulo: Editora Aleph, 2009.
- JENSEN, Amy Petersen. **Theatre in a Media Culture**: Production, Performance and Perception since 1970. Jefferson, North Carolina; London: MacFarland & Company, 2007.

LEMOS, André. **Cibercultura**: tecnologia e vida social na cultura contemporânea. Porto Alegre: Sulina, 2013.

LEÓN, Frederico. **Frederico León**: entrevista [jul. 2016]. Entrevistadora: Mariana de Lima e Muniz. Buenos Aires, 2016. Entrevista concedida ao Projeto *Criadores teatrais de Belo Horizonte e Buenos Aires*: cena neotecnológica, financiado pela FAPEMIG e pela CAPES.

LEVY, Pierre. **Que es lo virtual?** Barcelona; Buenos Aires; México: Editora Paidós, 1999.

LIBERTELLA, Mauro. Sobre *Las Ideas*: el teatro es verdad. **El Clarín**, Buenos Aires, 22 de Abril de 2016. Disponível em: <https://www.clarin.com/escenarios/el-teatro-es-verdad_0_SkweJz3dP7l.html>. Acesso em: 16 ago. 2017.

MARTINO, Luís Mauro Sá. **Teoria das Mídias Digitais**: linguagens, ambientes e redes. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 2014.

MURRAY, Janet H. **Hamlet no Holodeck**: o futuro da narrativa no ciberespaço. São Paulo: Itaú Cultural; UNESP, 2003.

UMPIERREZ, Matías. **Matías Umpierrez**: entrevista [jul. 2016]. Entrevistadora: Mariana de Lima e Muniz. Buenos Aires, 2016. Entrevista concedida ao Projeto *Criadores teatrais de Belo Horizonte e Buenos Aires*: cena neotecnológica, financiado pela FAPEMIG e pela CAPES.

Mariana Lima Muniz is an actress and theater director. She is a Full Professor in the Department of Photography, Theater, and Cinema of the School of Fine Arts of Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), and works in the Theater undergraduate and Arts graduate programs at EBA/UFMG. She holds a doctoral degree in Theater by Universidad de Alcalá de Henares (Spain) and a post-doctoral degree by Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina).

E-mail: marianamuniz32@gmail.com

Jorge Dubatti is a theater critic and a Professor of Universal Theater History at Universidad de Buenos Aires. He has authored several books on the theory and critique of contemporary Argentinian theater.

E-mail: jorgedubatti@hotmail.com

This unpublished text, translated by Leonardo Pittella Alenquer and proofread by Ananyr Porto Fajardo, is also published in Portuguese in this issue.



Received on November 30, 2016

Accepted on August 21, 2017

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International. Available at: <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>>.