



Fiction and Reality in the Theater, based on the Ideas of Vilém Flusser

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ABSTRACT – Fiction and Reality in the Theater, based on the Ideas of Vilém Flusser – The article discusses the relationship of tension between fiction and reality in contemporary theater, based on the concept of performative theater and in relation to the philosophy of Vilém Flusser, using examples of recent staging and based on the analysis of renowned researchers. The notions of fiction, reality, intellect, and conversation in Flusser's philosophy are mobilized to suggest that contemporary theater is a kind of differential performative intellect, configuring not a representation but an expansion of reality itself.

Keywords: **Vilém Flusser. Theater and Philosophy. Performative Theater. Fiction and Reality. Theatrical Language.**

RÉSUMÉ – Fiction et Réalité dans le Théâtre selon les Idées de Vilém Flusser – L'article examine la relation de tension entre la fiction et la réalité dans le théâtre contemporain selon le concept de théâtre performatif et en relation avec la philosophie de Vilém Flusser, en utilisant des exemples des mises en scènes récentes, aussi bien que d'analyses des chercheurs reconnus. Les notions de fiction, réalité, intellect et conversation dans la philosophie de Flusser sont mobilisés pour suggérer que le théâtre contemporain est une sorte d'intellect performatif différentiel, conçu non pas comme une représentation, mais une expansion de la réalité elle-même.

Mots-clés: **Vilém Flusser. Théâtre et Philosophie. Théâtre Performatif. Fiction et Réalité. Langage Théâtral.**

RESUMO – Ficção e Realidade no Teatro a partir das Ideias de Vilém Flusser – O artigo aborda a relação de tensão entre ficção e realidade no teatro contemporâneo a partir do conceito de teatro performativo e em relação com a filosofia de Vilém Flusser, utilizando-se de exemplos de recentes encenações e baseando-se em análises de reconhecidos pesquisadores. As noções de ficção, realidade, intelecto e conversação na filosofia de Flusser são mobilizadas para sugerir que o teatro contemporâneo é uma espécie de intelecto performativo diferencial, configurando não uma representação, mas uma expansão da própria realidade.

Palavras-chave: **Vilém Flusser. Teatro e Filosofia. Teatro Performativo. Ficção e Realidade. Linguagem Teatral.**

Introduction

The notions developed by Vilém Flusser, although object of concern in philosophy and in the communication realm worldwide, are little present in the theatrical debate. Nevertheless, some of his best known concepts – such as apparatus, worker, superficiality, post-history and his discussion around the technical image – could yield a dense reflection on contemporary theatrical practice, if placed in perspective with the inherent theatrical studies accumulated in our field.

This article aims to suggest one of the many possibilities of analysis of contemporary theater based on the philosophy by Vilém Flusser. The option was to focus attention on a fundamental concept of his thinking, that one of fiction, which, although not as recognized as the others mentioned previously, is a basic element of his entire philosophical understanding of the world. As fiction is an essential component of theatrical discussion, it also emerges as a concept that is quite proper for an introduction to the possible relations between Flusser's philosophy and theater¹. For that, some initial notes on how the tension between fiction and reality presents itself in contemporary theater are required.

Fiction and Reality in Contemporary Theater

It is impossible to talk about the relation between the real and the fictional in contemporary theater in a generalizing or totalizing way, given the diversity of experiences that have been made with this relationship, which indicates, in advance, at least a state of instability between the poles real-fictional. Perhaps, the closest to a generalization is to say that fiction has been constantly displaced from the center of the theatrical event to its edges, and reality – or rather, different ways of framing reality – has been taking over its place. Or, as the theater researcher Luiz Fernando Ramos points out, there is a

[...] dominant tendency, be it in the cinema, theater and performance, to draw maximum valorization of documentary elements over the fictional ones, of urban spaces and their historical meanings over spaces considered conventional, of performative and biographical elements over artifices of characterization and masking (Ramos, 2011, p. 70).

An example is the field that has been named *theater of the real*, a set of procedures, also quite diversified and rarely mobilized all at the same time, which trigger sort of outbreaks of the real on the scene. Open theatrical and performative manifestations, permeable to (and permeated with) the real, which show a desire for reality on the scene and testify a kind of decline of fiction as the major reason for the theater.

Among other remarkable procedures of the theaters of the real – such as the presence of non-actors on the scene and the coexistence, for long periods of experimentation and rehearsal, with specific populations or social segments –, the development of shows based on the collection of accounts, exclusively from members of the theater group, has been one of the most performed practices in this field. Combined with the use of audiovisual media, it characterizes a way of diversifying the voices in a staging, mixing the discourse of a group of actors with the direct statement of marginalized sectors or the ones holding little social visibility. This is the case, for instance, in *Glória* (2018), performed by the *Compania Toda Deseo*, in which the sociologist, teacher and indigenous activist Avelin Buniacá Kambiwá appears on the scene through the use of a video-recorded testimony. The testimony of an indigenous woman, about the historical use of theater as a weapon of religious and cultural domination in the early days of Brazilian colonization, brings tension and kind of puts in check not only the enactment itself, but the theater as a whole. It is the theatrical institution itself that is denounced, as subservient to interests of domination, exposing a fracture between the practices of enactment, driven by the church since previous times, and the reality of the indigenous peoples, still subjugated at present times.

For Silvia Fernandes (2013), a researcher with a long and important background and who has recently become a reference in studies about the emergence of reality in the scene, these theaters prioritize experiences and public situations that seek to attach reality to the set of enactment mechanisms, making use of the least amount of mediations possible. According to Fernandes (2013, p. 410), “[...] it appears that the inclusion of the excluded – non-actors and non-citizens – is the last straw in the representation paradigms”. Oscillating between the reality reproduction territory and that one of its direct annexation, theaters of the real place theatrical fiction in a situation of collapse, as the presence of people

authentically involved in an extreme social situation appears on the scene more as an indication than as a symbol of that same situation.

The outburst of the real on the scene is one of the most mentioned aspects within what has been named *performative theater*. Its main characteristic is the crossing or miscegenation with the performance, resulting in a contemporary scene that destabilizes the theatrical signs and exposes the theatricality of the events. For the researcher Josette Féral, who coined the term, it is about the absorption, by the theater, of elements and characteristics of the performance, an art whose birth is marked precisely by the refusal of representation. This comes up to a situation that is at least tense.

In contemporary, performative theater, there is not exactly a refusal towards fiction, but rather a handling of the parameters that define it, displaying procedures that institute the fictionality even within the field of the real. The interest of the performative theater is not in fiction itself, established by theatrical codes, but in the game with these codes, which causes a continuous sequence of inlets and exits into and out of fiction. Thus, an object, a subject, an action, exist or act in contemporary theater in the dubiousness of being what they are and, in the next moment, serving as a sign, between the real and the fictional.

An example is found in the presentation *Preto* (2017), by *Companhia Brasileira de Teatro*, directed by Márcio Abreu. In one of the scenes, a black actress stubbornly announces that she will perform certain cliché actions: “now I’m going to sing for you ...”, “now I’m going to dance for you ...”, insists the actress. She prepares herself on the scene to carry them out, but these actions never really materialize. The procedure not only denounces stereotypes of Brazilian black women but operates exactly this disjunction between fiction and real action, in a game with the expectations of a theatricalization that never takes place. The actress-performer instills an indecision in the scene, moving between systems of representation (theatrical / social), focusing her action now as real, then as fictional, without ever deciding what it is really about at that moment. Therefore, there is not only a deconstruction of the theatrical signs by reality, but also and inversely, a disruption of the real by fiction, since her own condition as a black woman is treated with the malleability of a fiction.

This type of oscillation between fiction and reality is understood, in the formulations linked to the performative theater, as an attribute of the way in which the actor's corporeality / corporeity is presented, which, together with an approach of scene objects and other staging materials in its materiality, creates a performative completeness. The term *performative theater* itself highlights the priority that these material aspects hold in contemporary theater, with the matter of the presence, through the actor's corporeality, at the first instance. It is the execution of concrete actions, those carried out by the actor more than by the character, that seize our attention in the theater and the actor appears on the scene above all as a performer, in which his technical skills and his playing ability are placed in the foreground. In the theater that Féral names as performative, the actor kind of engages their body, personality, and their subjectivity in a particularly different way from the way he could engage through the fiction of a character. In fact, one of the conclusions reached by the author about the performative theater is precisely that this theater establishes what she calls "aesthetics of the presence":

In the performative theater, the actor is called to 'do' (doing), 'to be present', to take risks and to show the doing (in other words, to affirm the performativity of the process). The viewer's attention is placed on the execution of the gesture, the creation of form, the dissolution of signs and their permanent reconstruction. An aesthetics of presence is established (*se met en place*) (Féral, 2015, p. 131).

If in the analyzes that bring the theater closer to the performance, it is evident that there is a notion of presence in which the body tends to appear with autonomy in relation to a fictional referent, in the studies that are based on a more historicizing reading of the theater, this characteristic leap to the eye even more visibly.

This is the case of the analysis that Hans-Thies Lehmann (2007) carries out in the book *Teatro Pós-Dramático*. The term is the subject of debate and controversy, with Féral openly opposing the nomenclature because she considers it to be poorly accurate. But, regardless the controversy surrounding the accuracy of the term, the fact is that Lehmann's definition of post-dramatic theater is exactly in the interstice between fictionality and the act of presenting theatrical elements in their materiality, reinforcing the perception that fiction is displaced from the

center of contemporary theater. The proximity of Lehmann's post-dramatic theater proposal to everyday life is underlined by Marvin Carlson, when he affirms that there is, in this theater, an increasing importance

[...] from the incorporation of human and non-human materials, from real life in the performance. Take the mimesis and a narrative text and all that is left to prevent the post-dramatic theater from falling apart and become the raw material of everyday life is the fact that it is presented to the public in a theatrical or performative paradigm (Carlson, 2015, p. 589).

Unlike Féral, Lehmann does not underline a possible connection between fiction and the materiality of the presentation, preferring to directly prioritize the materiality of the actor's body at the expense of the fictionality of a plot, storyline or character. Strongly influenced by the concept of *presence production* from the philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2007), at the center of Lehmann's thought is the idea of a systematic opposition between logos and presence, between the logos and the energetic capacities of a presence that does not convey meanings, but that still guarantees the power to attract our attention, grab it at a sudden, without the mediation of reasoning, and provide, precisely through this, an authentic experience.

The presentation *Escombros da Babilônia* (2014/2017), by the *Núcleo de Teatro do Espaço Comum Luiz Estrela*, offers a good example of typical post dramatic theater procedures. Product of collective creation, counting on about 109 people in the cast, the process started from the life-course of Luiz Estrela, a homeless poet who was brutally murdered in 2013, to compose a dense spectacle and an intense relationship with social issues. Instead of telling Luiz Estrela's private story, the collective opted to present a myriad of scenes and passages that denounce the situation of oppression over homeless people, users of the public mental health system, blacks and LGBTQi's, in addition to references to the country's political moment.

With a dramaturgy composed of a series of manifestos, the actors and non-actors in the cast made direct reference to their social personas. Some actors circulated among the public as types, but did not even compose characters, helping to establish a theatrical ambience, sometimes chaotic, rather than creating dramatic developments. There were few moments with a dialogue, the attendants were constantly asked to participate in the scenes. The very number of people involved in the enactment, taking to the streets

around the building occupied by the collective in conjunction with the gigantic number of spectators, collaborated to establish an atmosphere of public event. In fact, the enactment was closer to a political manifestation than to a conventional theatrical presentation with the audience configuring not a set of spectators, but the collective body of a massive protest.

The same characteristic of tension between fiction and reality in contemporary theater has been noticed by several other important authors, critics, and analysts, such as Jean Pierre Ryngaert, Erika Fischer-Lichte, José da Costa, Denis Guénoun, Luiz Fernando Ramos and Jean-Pierre Sarrazac. Each one, following their own way and mobilizing different theoretical sources, testify that a striking characteristic of contemporary theater is the play with the composition of the frameworks, of the parameters that define the limits of reality and theatricality, cluttering and shuffling its borders.

What perhaps still needs to be evidenced is the situation of extreme tension generated by this situation. This is because, on the one hand, the dividing line between theater and reality has become permeable and often contiguous, and on the other we continue to find strange behaviors organized in the form of spectacle, in the form of presentation (restored behaviors, in Richard Schechner's terminology), and insisting on framing them as extra-daily². There is no doubt that it is not a matter of daily reality, but how to define this unique reality established by the theater, since the constant oscillation between real and fictional disallows the use of the notion of fiction as the component that permanently determines such events? In a theater that calls for the overcoming of drama, performativity, the emergence of the real, it is as if fiction appears as a threat, on the verge of returning to the scene at any time. This tension between fiction and presence is the locus from which contemporary theater draws most of its strength and creativity.

So, what are theatrical groups and collectives doing when they start their shows? They are trying to deal with the disconcerting difficulty of defining the reality status of that moment, that event, in which fiction is no longer at the center, but on the peripheries of the event. The challenge of establishing a framework that defines what theater is now is much greater, since fiction, which previously carried out this operation, no longer counts as a central element, but a peripheral one, and there is nothing left but the presence to be manipulated for so much. What the actor or actress does is

to try to implant a kind of atmosphere, of intensity, of an environment that is not that of daily life, that is not that of everyday life, and they do this using their performance strength as a way of creating tension with peripheral fiction that threatens to put itself back. It is as if the actor or actress, handling his performativity, corporeality, and presence, tried to stop the return of fiction that, like repressed desire, returns as a neurosis, screaming deafeningly in the anteroom of consciousness. At least partially, what mobilizes viewers in contemporary theater has to do exactly with witnessing this clash between the actor and the staging, handling the elements of the scene in their materiality, against the threat of the return of fiction to the center of the theatrical event.

Each presentation is an attempt, sometimes successful, sometimes not, to establish this kind of parallel reality, although *parallel* is not a very precise definition, as the points of contact between the reality founded by the show and the surrounding daily life are many and evident. In any case, it is a question of establishing a universe that struggles to exist with its own statute, distinguished from everyday life and independent on the centrality of the notion of fiction; it is about sharing an experience that must be intense for both the actor and the spectator/audience.

It can be objected that the creation of an extra-daily sphere has always been the challenge of the theater, at any time; it has always been the call for an absence (the immateriality of a climate, an environment, a fiction) through presences (the actors and spectators gathered in convention)³. However, what differentiates our period is that this extraordinary sphere is no longer installed relying exclusively on a previously established idea of fiction, which gave body and reason to the event in previous moments. The theater is no longer imitation of the real for a long time! A considerable part of the current theater effort concerns dealing with the problem of how to establish this extra-dailyness starting, and each time even more, from material elements of the show, the game with the immediate concreteness of the scene: objects, scenarios, light, the situation created on the scene, the corporeality and integrality of the actors, the participation of the attendants.

Most studies on this situation in the theater have avoided a direct discussion about the definition of reality itself, since it would require interlocking and never conclusive philosophical contributions. The

definition of the real is far from being a peaceful point in any philosophical system, or even in the so-called harder sciences, such as physics or chemistry. However, perhaps this is precisely the necessary move to make in order to advance the situation of tension generated between fiction and reality in contemporary theater. This is the path this text treads on, opting for investigating the bias of reality and fiction in Vilém Flusser's thought.

Reality Is Language

Perhaps, the best way to present the idea of fiction in Flusser would be to start from his well-known statement that "fiction is the only reality [...] reality is fiction, and fiction is reality" (Flusser, 1966, n.p.)⁴. However, the origin of this statement must be sought in his first published book, *Língua e realidade*, whose first edition dates from 1963. Like any attentive philosopher of that period, Flusser was also enmeshed in the philosophy of language, deeply marked by the ideas of Wittgenstein. The very name of the book gives clues about its writer's concern, that is, the relationship between what we call reality and language.

In an eminently phenomenological approach, Flusser will state that what we call real or reality is nothing more than a linguistic aspect, a result of language⁵. Anything that actually exists in the world is only accessible to us if it is allocated within some structure of organization of the thought, among which language is the first and most important. The objective world is perceived primarily through the senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste), constituting itself as raw data. If such raw data carry something that makes sense to them; if there is anything in themselves that relates them to each other in a logical or causal way, such possible relationships, such meanings that can be established between raw data can only be understood by the human being based on a cognitive structure. The language, especially one's mother tongue, is the first and most important of these structures. Any and all other data organization systems are a result from this first structure, the language.

Flusser defines the intellect as the field that transforms raw data into language, articulating them through linguistic rules. The minimum element of language is the word, and the intellect works by transforming raw data into words. The raw, immediate data is inarticulate. To enter the field of

intellect, they must be articulated in the pre-existing system, they must be transformed into words.

But, not all the data we receive are *raw* type, sensory. In fact, we were born into a world that has already been largely encoded in words, and the vast majority of data that reaches our intellect, the vast majority of information at our disposal, consists precisely of words (Flusser, 2007).

Thus, reality would have two types of data, the inarticulate raw ones and those already articulated in words, the former tending to become the latter. In the words of Flusser (2007, p. 49):

If we define reality as 'data set', we can say that we live in a double reality: in the reality of words and in the reality of 'raw' or 'immediate' data. As the 'raw' data reach the intellect itself in the form of words, we can still say that reality consists of words and words in *statu nascendi*.

Although Flusser pictures reality as double, it is necessary to recognize that the center of the philosopher's attention is the field composed of words. It is what is possible to infer from the argument throughout the book *Língua e realidade*. The part of reality made up of raw data tends to become the part of reality made up of words, raw data are "words in *statu nascendi*". We can say that, for Flusser, raw data that we capture through the senses exist, but they are not yet fully real; to enter reality, the raw data must be organized in language; reality is not restricted to language, but is composed from the structuring of raw data within language. Or, even if the reality is twofold, the reality that concerns us human beings, the only reality that we can recognize and with which we can work with, is that transformed into language, which has already been transformed from raw data into words. It is this part of reality that Flusser considers the core of what is properly designated as Reality, although it is not only that.

However, it turns out that words are always symbols that refer to something other than themselves. Words are always metaphors; they replace what they refer to, look for or point to something that participates in the extra-linguistic world. Words, hypothetically, point to things in the real world, supposedly, point to a reality; same reality that does not exist outside the parameters of a language. Thus, Flusser (2007, p. 50) will say that:

The words are apprehended and understood as symbols, that is, as having meanings. They substitute something, point to something, are seekers of something. What do they replace, what do they point out, what do they

look for? The naive answer would be: 'Ultimately, reality'. The most sophisticated answer from existentialists and logicians would probably be: 'nothing'. The answer of this work [the book *Língua e realidade*] will be: 'Once they point out to something, replace something and look for something other than language, it is not possible to talk about this something'.

Words are, therefore, cracks in access to the unknown, to elements that are inaccessible if not through words; cracks that we open in speech or in writing, but through which we never penetrate. When we speak or write, we are always referring to something that is not possible to speak or write about. If words are in place of something, it is because that something in itself is inaccessible to us; if it were not, there would be no need for these substitute symbols to which we designate *words*. What the word does is to make it possible to understand and work with data that we would not have access to except through the word. It is a mediation, carried out by the intellect, between raw data and reality. It is responsible for attaching raw data that reach the intellect to reality.

Flusser deals exactly with this annexation of new data to reality, through language, in the final chapters of the book *Língua e realidade*. If reality is the set of words plus the set of raw data that tend to become words, the act of creating and refining the language is, precisely, an act of creating and refining reality itself, or at least that part of reality to which we have access, the part of reality carried out in language. For Flusser, when a given language modifies grammatical rules, creates, or adopts new words, improves its structure, it expands the real, it is capable of conceiving new raw data that it hoped as a potential to become reality.

Flusser mentions several levels through which the language is improved, one of the most important being *conversation*, a process in which several intellects promote the authentic crossing of sentences and words, creating increasingly comprehensive language networks which characterize, for example, the field of science. In fact, as we will see shortly, it is the exchange process itself carried out in the conversation that comes closest to the concept of reality itself for Flusser. But the ground on which the conversation reaches a greater degree of creation and expansion of the language, therefore, of creation and expansion of reality, is that of poetry, which he defines from his origins in the Greek language, of establishing or

producing something. Poetry “*is the effort of the intellect in conversation to create language*” (Flusser, 2007, p. 181). For Flusser, poetry is the state of the language that allows him to get into things that have not yet been accomplished, because they have not yet become words and language, and to pull out new realities from there.

Poets “[...] are the channels through which nothing is spilled over the tongue, fulfilling itself in it. Poetry is the place where language sucks up potential, to produce reality” (Flusser, 2007, p. 184). The language, this set of words and raw data made real in words that we call reality, is surrounded by nothing on all sides, by raw data that have not yet been made real in words. Poetry is the instrument of language that penetrates in this involving nothing and absorbs pieces of that nothing for reality: “[...] the poet represents the tip of the wedge that the conversation forces into the unspeakable” (Flusser, 2007, p. 187).

As a component of the conversation, poetry, the act of creating reality, should not be understood as a process of a lonely individual, reflecting on the world and allowing himself to create new words, new concepts, etc. Ultimately, Reality is not just the language and the word within the intellect. Flusser is not exactly an idealist, for whom reality would be restricted to thought, accessible exclusively to personal and theoretical understanding of the world around. Even because the Being, the Self, is not the same as the intellect, it is not only this very particular and personal way of articulating words among themselves in the intellect, raw data among themselves in the perceptual channels of the senses and raw data and words in this passage from sensory perceptions to intellect.

The Self still has a kind of existential abyss, which is even more difficult to talk about than the raw data that have not yet become words. It is the immense abyss into which everything that could have become reality precipitates, but it did not. For example, everything that a person thinks, but does not express in words, in a conversation or in public writing, escapes into this abyss of unrealized possibilities and that is also part of the Being, part of the Self as well. As Flusser states,

[...] the intellect carries on its shoulders, like Atlas, a world of silence, into which thoughts (sentences) flow and into which they evaporate. Talking about this superstructure of the intellect is even more difficult than talking about its infrastructure. All words trying to mean it are flaws because they

are intellectual. This world of 'spirit', 'intuition', 'immediate vision', forms the crown of the tree of the Self. Nothing more can be said about it, except that it is the sense, that is, the direction in which the thoughts of the intellect run. [...] Being supra-linguistic, it is supra-real, and in this sense: unreal, from the point of view of the intellect (Flusser, 2007, p. 62).

The Self, the Being, may be composed mostly of this abyss, much more than intellect. No matter what you are, a beggar, a scientist, a bricklayer, an artist (it is not about the education level), if there is something a person does, probably in an uninterrupted way, it is thinking (and thinking in the form of words) – dreams, vertigos, chimeras, talking with the buttons, daydreaming, wandering – and all this flow tends to disappear in this abyss of the Being. At the end of a life, it is a whole universe of possible realities that is lost forever.

There is only one way to stop this flow of the disappearance of the real in the abyss of the Being: conversation, or legitimate conversation, to use a term more appropriate to the Flusserian vocabulary. The legitimate exchange of ideas, the construction of understandings, networks of exchanges of thought, which thickens language and, consequently, reality. Conversation is the real possibility of an incomplete thought approaching a more elaborate formulation and then becoming a reality. Conversation that can take place in any area: between artists, builders, scientists, and beggars⁶.

Thus, nothing more important, fundamental, to create reality than the establishment of these networks of legitimate conversation, not *small talk*, to use another term with which Flusser, appealing to a well-known expression of Brazilian Portuguese, designated the opposite of conversation: the non-expansive use of language, which only repeats what is already established in the rules of language, composed of conversation debris. Ultimately, Reality is the conversation itself; not the language that organizes words in the intellect, but the shared language, spoken between the Selves, a living language, which allows the sharing of the Selves and allows the expansion of reality⁷.

Flusser does not directly address the issue of fiction in *Língua e realidade*, but it underlies throughout his text as a logical result of the argument. Such a creative act of language (poetry), which may occur in science, art, or any other field in which legitimate conversation takes place, erodes the common status of fiction. Fiction is usually understood as an

inadequacy of the concept towards reality, as a displacement of the language in relation to the concrete world in which it is referenced. Fiction is what does not correspond to reality. However, as reality is language in conversation, made up by words and grammatical rules, and since words are substitutes for immediate data that are directly inapprehensible, then everything that is expressed by words in a conversation (reality, therefore) is obviously fiction. The only things in the world that could not be fiction are the raw and immediate data, which in turn do not yet constitute reality because they are not yet articulated in the language.

Reality Is Fiction

Flusser does not come to this statement, that reality is fiction, in *Língua e realidade*. He will do so explicitly only in the aforementioned article *Da ficção*, written a few years later (1966). Here, the core of his argument lies in the idea that what we call *reality* is in fact the confluence of several points of view that, apparently contradictory, complement each other – which characterizes a legitimate conversation. Each point of view can be considered fiction by the other, so that Flusser arrives at his sentence, previously mentioned, that “reality is fiction and fiction is reality”. The philosopher recognizes that such a statement is a contradiction in terms: “the meaning of fiction is non-reality; the meaning of reality is non-fiction. [...] If I say, ‘fiction is reality’, I establish a sentence that negates the meaning of its terms, therefore a meaningless sentence” (Flusser, 1966, n.p.).

Flusser’s example to illustrate his sentence is that of possible points of view in relation to a table. Flusser says that, from a certain point of view, the table is undoubtedly a solid object, composed of wood, on which it is possible to rest other objects that are equally solid. However, from another point of view, from quantum physics, for example, the table is a fairly empty electromagnetic field on which other equally empty electromagnetic fields float. Other points of view on the table are still possible: industrial object, work of art, etc. Each of these points of view is a reality within their respective discourses, that is, within the language structure of each field, but fictions within the others. It is unreal to want to determine which of these points of view is more real, truer. And the philosopher adds that:

The situation can be characterized in the following terms: from the point of view of physics it is the apparently solid table, but in the hollow reality, and from the point of view of the senses, it is the apparently hollow table, but solid in the living and immediate reality. Asking which of these points of view is most 'true' is meaningless. If I say, 'fiction is reality', I affirm the relativity and equivalence of all possible points of view (Flusser, 1966, n.p.).

Flusser's conclusion, therefore, is that reality is the complementary sum of all possible points of view about something. The reality of the table lies in the confluence of the possible discourses about it. In other words, the table itself is not a reality, since it is just raw data; the reality is the legitimate conversation about what the table is. The essayist will then use one of his best-known metaphors, that of the onion. If we eliminate each of these points of view about the table, just like removing layers of an onion, what remains of reality is the same as what remains of the onion: nothing. The center of what we call *reality* is composed of nothing. What encompasses this empty center, however, is composed of fictions that are reality in their original discursive contexts⁸.

Flusser would not return to address fiction directly, as a topic, in any of his future texts (although the book *A dúvida*, published only after his death, can be partially understood in this sense). Despite this, his conception of fiction will accompany him in all his later reflections, like an invisible thread that supports his philosophy. It can be said that Flusser meets his own request and starts to formulate a philosophy that is recognized as fiction⁹.

A First Possibility of Approach

What is looked for in this segment of the article is to establish relations between what Flusser calls intellect, the interplay process between fiction and reality that this intellect carries out, as well as the conversation that can arise from the confrontation between intellects and the procedures performed by contemporary theater for the creation of shows, encompassing the spectacular event itself. Obviously, it is not intended to exhaust all possibilities of relationship, but to outline some general lines that allow reflecting on the theatrical nature itself, open to future expansions.

Flusser's philosophy on fiction could generate, as a first immediate response to contemporary theater, an attitude of condemnation. It would be possible to affirm, in this perspective, that the attempts to make a theater stripped of fiction are useless, unreachable, and even without purpose. Since reality is always composed of fictions, the attempt to make reality emerge in the midst of fiction, through, for example, the notion of presence, would itself be a fiction. Any action on the stage is always a representation, it is always a fiction necessarily created to articulate the inarticulate of the real. The escape from the characteristic representation of contemporary theater, which was outlined in the different perspectives of theater analysis presented at the beginning of this article, would be impossible, since the very reality to which this theater would be fleeing, composed of words that are symbols that are set in place of something incomprehensible, it would always be a representation.

By supposedly giving up fiction in the name of reality, through, for example, focusing on the physical presence of actors and actresses, or on the materiality of objects and actions, or even on the use of true statements – which can be understood as an attempt to present immediate raw data on the stage, stripped of language that previously articulated them –, what is being done is, in fact, only reaching another fictional layer. Removing fiction from the theater in the name of presence would be the same as peeling the onion, in Flusser's metaphor: what would be found at the end would not be reality, but nothing, so that the only way for theater not to be fiction would be to stop existing. Fiction would always have its space guaranteed within the theater, no matter how much one wants to separate from it.

From the perspective of what was pointed out about Flusser's philosophy (that is, within its own language structure), this formulation is logically correct. However, those used to Flusser's writing style may not be surprised by the following inversion: even if this formulation is correct, it is not the most exciting one! This is because it simply serves to disqualify contemporary theater, as a frustrated, naive, and innocuous attempt on renewal. There is another possible and much more fruitful reading, which is to identify the theater as a different kind of intellect in itself.

A Performative Intellect

In this perspective, the first step to be taken may be to assume that the way theater manages to access the real is a possibility precisely because it is a fiction. In other words, it is necessary to allow the fiction of a direct contact with reality, proposed by the centrality of the presence and materiality of actions and objects in contemporary theater, the chance to achieve itself in a certain level of language. In other words, it is necessary to acknowledge the possibility that the performativity in contemporary theater really reaches a level outside the sense, pre or post linguistic, even though this is logically an error, a fiction, a vain and unachievable search at other language levels. It is necessary to acknowledge the fiction that the possibility of discarding fiction through performance is real.

When contemporary theater establishes different ways of making the real emerge on the scene – presence of non-actors and appeal to true testimonies, conveyance between systems of theatrical and social representation, prioritization of corporeality and the presence of actors and actresses, materiality of objects, transformation of the theatrical event into a political act and the whole range of actions carried out in the dubiety between real and fictional –; when it intends to perform actions that do not depend on an *a priori*, that do not depend on something previous, like a previously established fiction, performing actions in short, what the theater is trying to do is to put raw material in front of the viewer, raw data that have not yet been established as a word and therefore are not yet real. It is to force the entrance, in the theatrical setting, of that part of reality not yet transformed into language, the part of reality composed of raw data that tends to be transformed into words, in Flusser's terms. The contemporary theatrical spectacle, therefore, performs the same process as the intellect: it transforms raw data into language.

Thus, the performativity in contemporary theater in a certain way fulfills the poetic function of that wedge of language that enters the involving nothingness and pulls reality from there, which Flusser tells us about; it is a manifestation of poetry in contemporary theater, bringing into reality what is still inert, outside the fiction which is reality. This is the poetic function of contemporary theater: transforming raw data into reality, by placing non-fictional actions in a medium based on fiction. In the same way as poetry is the channel through which “nothing spills over the language, becoming achieved within itself”, “the place where the language

sucks potentiality, to produce reality” (Flusser, 2007, p. 184), performativity is the instrument of language of the theater that penetrates this involving nothing and draws reality from there.

This is not a uniform process. As in the intellect, where the creation of new words makes use of the transformation or interrelation of existing words, reorganizing thoughts and regrouping phrases, the poetics of bringing new things to reality in the theater also uses pieces of the established theatrical language, already fully organized. Hence, the oscillation between fiction and reality in the performative theater, the use of pieces of plots, ellipses, repetitions, deconstruction of words and phrases. It is the way in which the raw data of presence, corporeality, and other forms of emergence of the real is framed by theatrical language. In the same way that the intellect does not only work with raw data, but also with already established words, the theater also does not deal only with presence or performance, but also with fragments of fictions, that is, with words in the Flusserian sense, elements that are already language. However, as the theater is that kind of differential performative intellect, it has its own elements that are not restricted to words. For example, it also works with gestures, actions, relationships, colors, lights, sounds, materials and other unusual components, which assume, in this performative intellect that the theater is, the same functions that the word has in the intellect according to Flusser’s perspective. Mixing raw data and elements already encoded in fiction, the theater creates new realities.

The permeability of this framework, allowing fragments to pass between theater and reality, is analogous to that of the intellect itself, in Flusser’s perspective: a game between what is already real, is already a word, and the raw data that is ongoing to turn into words, that is being drawn into the intellect to become reality. It is, therefore, also an unstable, tense framework, like any creative poetic act of reality, in which raw data and fiction sometimes contradict and oppose each other, and do not always result in a harmonious work.

But, in Flusser’s perspective, there is another characteristic of the theater that brings it closer to the creation of reality. Not only is the movement of attaching raw data to reality, framed by fiction, that the contemporary theater performs, is similar to the work of the intellect to create reality, as well as this process is placed for spectators’ observation in

assembly, in a proper situation of conversation. No doubts that each individual has an intellect, but the situation of theatrical presentation organizes them in two major fields: actors and audience. Placed in presence, in a convivial act, according to Jorge Dubatti's instigating terminology, they constitute a moment of legitimate conversation, in which different, sometimes opposing points of view, go into dialogue.

As in Flusser's example, in which the reality of a table is the result of the confluence of possible points of view about it, in the theater, reality is, in the last instance, a result of the theatrical act configured by the intersection of the points of view of actors, actresses and audience. Not only is performativity the poetic wedge that absorbs unachieved raw data into theatrical reality, a process identical to that of the intellect, but the presentation, gathering actors / actresses and spectators together, puts this creation into conversation, in a process of legitimate exchange with other intellects, expanding and densifying reality. The struggle for barring the return of fiction to the center of contemporary theater, carried out by actors and actresses through the performativity of their actions, corresponds to the attempt to prevent the theatrical encounter from falling into *small talk*, conversation debris, in a use not expansive of the language, just repeating what is already established in the rules of theatrical language; corresponds to the attempt to maintain the theater as a space for legitimate conversation. Contemporary theater creates new realities while transmitting that creation into the conversation. The contemporary theatrical practices, such as breaking down barriers between audiences and actors, are experiments of hybridizing views about reality, therefore relativizing reality itself.

This characteristic, present in all contemporary theater that calls for the emergence of reality by different means, is quite evident in the moments when the public is invited to participate directly in the enactment. This is what happens in the spectacle *Preto*, already mentioned, whose first scene is composed precisely by inviting a spectator to take the stage to help with the setting of the scene, staying on it and answering a series of questions about his/her perception of black identity. Or, in the play *Fauna* (2016), by the group *Quatroloscinco*, in which a spectator is asked to participate in a conversation whose topic comes from him, from his personal position. Experiments that show the struggle to maintain contemporary theater as a space for legitimate conversation.

Finally, a brief consideration regarding the fugacity of the theater. As is well known, transience is one of the aspects most pointed out as characteristic of the theater. A theatrical event is, in itself, not uncatchable, even though we have ways of registering its manifestation, such as recording presentations, for example. What a video apprehends is the disappearance process of the theatrical manifestation itself. And what we have left as study material for a show, or what remains in the form of articles discussing an enactment, theater criticism or even informal conversations between people who have seen the same presentation, is, in general, much more scarce than the countless feelings, thoughts and, even more, incommunicable and sometimes incomprehensible sensations that take place inside us during a truly significant theatrical event for us. There is something ineffable, inapprehensible in the theater.

Perhaps, this fugacity of the theater is made of the same immaterial that composes that Being's existential abyss about what Flusser tells us, where everything that could have become reality precipitates, but it did not. Thus, it points to a kind of fundamental impossibility of reality, which not even a legitimate conversation, as it is a theatrical manifestation that touches us deeply, is capable of achieving. In any case, we have no other option but to continue the establishment of these networks of exchanges, of these legitimate conversations, which configure the expansive use of theatrical language, as a way to make the invisible emerge from the visible, for a fleeting, immaterial and ephemeral instant. , where the unachievable is achieved!

Notes

- ¹ Another concept that would also generate expressive interconnections between Flusser's philosophy and the theater is certainly that of game. However, this would require a discussion, internal to Flusserian studies, about the importance of this concept in the general scope of Flusser's thought, which would go beyond the dimensions and focus of this article.
- ² The use of the term *extra-daily*, as well as that of *extra-dailyness*, later on, should not be understood, in this article, in the sense conferred by Eugenio Barba's Theatre Anthropology, as a technique of the actor related to a pre-expressive basis of performance. Rather, it refers to a behavior that differs from

everyday actions and through which it is perceived, with evidence, that it is theater, approaching, therefore, the use of *restored behavior*, investigated by Richard Schechner.

- ³ In fact, this is the trajectory chosen by Erika Fischer-Lichte (2013), in the text *Realidade e ficção no teatro contemporâneo*, published in Brazil by *Revista Sala Preta*, in which she claims that the tension between reality and fiction has always been a constant in theater, at any time, but understanding that contemporary theater constitutes an *emerging form* in which the spectators' perception is marked by the transit between an order of representation and an order of presence, causing a state of instability to arise. José A. Sánchez's (2007) study, *Prácticas de Lo Real en la Escena Contemporánea*, also corroborates the idea of a permanent tension between real and fictional, arguing that important aesthetics of theater history arose precisely from an experimentation of this tension, as realism, symbolism and naturalism.
- ⁴ The quote is from the article "Da ficção", published primarily in *O Diário de Ribeirão Preto*, São Paulo, on August 26th, 1966. It is one of the many texts by Vilém Flusser that fit in a frequent situation: articles originally published in newspapers and never republished in another vehicle, currently available only through the internet. In such cases, quote pages cannot always be retrieved. The full reference of the article, as well as the conditions in which it was accessed, can be found at the end of this text.
- ⁵ Notice that it is not so much about opposing or differentiating the terms *real* and *reality*, as in some philosophical currents inspired by Platonism or, quite differently, in fields such as Lacan's psychoanalysis. In fact, this differentiation never mobilized Flusser's reflections and, in his philosophy, real and reality are used more often as synonyms. What mattered to Flusser was to reflect on how language and reality (or the real) are formed simultaneously, insofar as neither language nor reality exist previously, one without the other.
- ⁶ Samuel Beckett may be dealing exactly with this abyss of the Being, where unrealized words fall, in *Esperando Godot*, precisely from a dialogue between beggars that never becomes reality.
- ⁷ This conception of Reality is a fundamental mark of Flusser's (2008) thought, even in later moments, when the essayist was concerned with the topics that earned him public eminence. A striking example can be found in the book *O universo das imagens técnicas: elogio da superficialidade*, in which he argues that a way to overcome the mastery of devices over society would be the creation of

a *cosmic dialogue* of human beings, superior and more competent than machines. It is as if the philosopher made an appeal to reality, replacing a world taken over by the automation relations imposed by omnipresent devices.

- ⁸ In this statement by Flusser, it is also possible to recognize the beginning of a topic that he will develop later, in the already mentioned book *O universo das imagens técnicas: elogio da superficialidade*. If nothing is found in the center of reality, it is in the superficial layers of reality, the only things that it is actually composed of, that we must concentrate our efforts of understanding.
- ⁹ Books such as *Natural:mente* and *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* can be mentioned as examples of Flusser's philosophical fiction, as well as several of his newspaper articles, such as *A vaca*, published in the Literary Supplement of the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo, in 1961, therefore prior to *Língua e realidade*, which already reveals its approach to fiction. This tendency towards a related philosophy of fiction is recognized by several researchers and, not by chance, an important book of comments on Flusser's thought, organized by Gustavo Bernardo (2011), is precisely called *A filosofia da ficção de Vilém Flusser*.

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