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'I'm Sleeping'

The metaphor of sleep as a dramaturgical directive in performance

DANAE THEODORIDOU

During the creation of my work *50'00"–Short Stories*, I ask the performers to create stories for the stage, which they obsessively narrate, one after the other without stop, for precisely 50 minutes, until the clock that counts the event's duration rings. One day, during our rehearsal, P. goes up to his microphone and declares:

I am sleeping. What you hear may never have happened. It may be a lie. A dream. Something I wanted to happen but it didn't. It may symbolize something. It may be a parable. I don't know. I am sleeping. And I have the right to say whatever I want. WHATEVER I WANT. (Theodoridou 2009)

I stand there looking at him, trying to understand what he is doing. Is he asleep? Is the utterance 'I am sleeping' a performative one? Does it do what it says? What kind of sleep is this? What kind of story is this? How can one witness one's sleep-words? What is this space they create? And what kind of events could be created within that space?

It constitutes a common ground in today's discourses on performance that contemporary works more often than not operate well away from Aristotle's demands for strictly linear, causal connections among a limited number of incidents; away from the demands for unity, wholeness and completeness, as these were expressed in his *Poetics* and were more or less faithfully followed by classical and neoclassical dramatic theatre. It is also commonly accepted that contemporary works constitute an appropriate response to the fragmentation of the modern world. Because if indeed:

after the death of the God (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard), and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berners-Lee),

the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database. (Manovich cited in O'Gorman 2006: 12)

Seen as the necessary development of a poetics and aesthetics of our contemporary fragmented database, performance works today are characterized by a voice other than the unified and complete voice of earlier dramatic forms, by a voice that lacks a previous sense of authority. This voice is, according to Jean Pierre Sarrazac, more a hesitant one full of questions, doubts and palinodes (Sarrazac cited in Turner and Behrndt 2008: 191); a voice of the multiplication of possibilities; an uncertain voice that presents the process of shaping and communicating its compositions as a live act. Similarly, the dramaturge Marianne van Kerkhoven argues that what constitutes a common case today is a dramaturgy that exposes the vulnerability of its building blocks, appearing as a process of solving puzzles and learning to deal with complexity (1994: 146). Tim Etchells calls this dramaturgy a dramaturgy of 'separation and combination' and describes it as a process wherein one leaves things unconnected in parallel tracks. Within such dramaturgy, individual parts of a work are allowed an autonomy and interact with each other in this autonomy. The distinct fragments in such cases speak across their gaps and resonate in terms of each other (Etchells 2010). Turner and Behrndt also discuss works that challenge the possibility of coherent storytelling and are organized according to a different compositional logic from that of the linear story. Here, the relationship between structure and content is

described as a dynamic one and is continually kept in process constructing a composition in time and space, as opposed to an event understood as prefixed and resolved (Turner and Behrndt 2008: 29–30). As they note, these works have become quite common particularly in the past twenty years. Based on an episodic structure that lacks linear plot development and owes little to the convention of causality, such works consist of unconnected episodes rather than unified actions, even when they preserve a certain, stable seriality in the way they construct their fragments.

Performance artists, dramaturges and scholars have often expressed thoughts such as the above when approaching performance through its fragmented structure. For this fragmentation constitutes one of the strongest characteristics of contemporary theatre and dance works and has often been able to offer a useful tool for their analysis. The suggestion here, though, is to approach works where what we get is ‘a cluster of parallel, intersecting, juxtaposing, colliding stories and narratives, producing new narratives from their very collisions’ (Turner and Behrndt 2008: 33) from another direction, other than the notion of fragmentation, in order to acquire a more insightful understanding of the dramaturgical processes involved in them. These processes relate both to the making of these works (dramaturgy of the making) as well as to their reception by the audience (dramaturgy of the spectator). And it is important to clarify from the very start that when I use the term ‘dramaturgy’ here I refer to the working on and creation of actions, as suggested by the etymology of the term deriving from the Greek ‘drama’, that is action and ergon, or work. I am then interested in the ‘drama-turgy’ (‘action-creation’) that takes place in the rehearsal studio while making a work, on stage while performing it but also in the auditorium while spectating.

I am sleeping. What you hear may never have happened. It may be a lie. A dream. Something I wanted to happen but it didn’t. It may symbolize something. It may be a parable. I don’t know. I am sleeping. And I have the right to say whatever I want. WHATEVER I WANT.

Drawing on the opening passage of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, Roland Barthes speaks about the statement ‘I am asleep’ as a grammatical scandal. This constitutes for him a paradoxical sleep since ‘to say “I’m asleep” is in effect, literally as impossible as to say “I’m dead”’ (1989: 280). At the same time, Valentina Valentini argues that to say ‘I am asleep’ within the frame of performance denotes exactly the time and place where the work takes place because ‘time in contemporary performance is “dream-time”, the condition between sleeping and waking, the moment before awakening’ (1994: 122). Departing from such thoughts, the aim here is to look closer at this grammatical scandal, at the paradoxical sleep wherein live works take place, and to suggest this half-sleeping, half-waking state as a useful perspective for approaching dramaturgical modes involved in performance today. In other words, the aim is to discuss the metaphor of sleep as able to offer significant insight into dramaturgical processes that relate both to the making of a work as well as to its reception by the audience.

‘The essence of metaphor’, according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, ‘is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another’ (1980: 5). And although metaphor for most people belongs to the realm of poetic, imaginative, rhetorical and, in general, extraordinary language, it is important, the two writers argue, that we reintroduce it not only as a constitutive part of our ordinary language but also as a notion that, apart from language, strongly characterizes the way we live too. Metaphor is pervasive in our everyday life and it immediately affects our thoughts and actions from the most mundane to the most complex ones; ‘the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor’, Lakoff and Johnson conclude (3).

Take, for example, the metaphor ‘argument is war’. It results in us thinking about arguments through articulations such as the following: ‘He attacked every weak point in my argument. His criticisms were right on target’, ‘I’ve never won an argument with him’, ‘You disagree? Okay, shoot!’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 4).

This immediately affects the way we also practise, experience and eventually *do* an argument, through victories and defeats, attacks, defences, counter-attacks, etc. Now imagine, for example, a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are its performers, and the aim is to work on the balance, rhythm and aesthetics of this dance in an effective way (4–5). In such a culture, people would view, carry out and experience arguments quite differently; they would *do* them differently.

If metaphors indeed affect deeply and directly the way we do and act on things, what would it mean to see contemporary performance not as building blocks communicating through their gaps – as the above-mentioned overused metaphors of fragmentation have it – but as a night's sleep? What would change in the actions (whether mental or physical) through which we think, create and experience such works?

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Barthes discusses the opening passage of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* in order to discuss works that rest on the provocative principle of the disorganization of time. 'A man who is asleep [read: that Proustian sleep that is half-waking]', he notes, 'holds in a circle around him the course of the hours, the order of years and worlds ... but their ranks can mingle, can break' (1989:281). Focusing particularly on the moment that is half-sleeping, half-waking, the moment one emerges from sleep, Barthes wishes to delve deeper into another kind of logic sleep establishes, a logic of vacillation, de-compartmentalization. In this logic, one attempts to organize what is in fact a disorganization.

Working, performing, spectating in this sleeping state constitute indeed a paradox. Such sleep has nothing Freudian about it, nothing oneiric, although occasionally it may as well refer to the depths of our unconscious. It is a sleep that can be created, performed, watched;

it is a consciousness of sleep as disorder; a consciousness out of order, intermittent wherein the logical carapace of time is attacked. And here is where the significant difference lies: approaching performance through its fragmented nature means understanding contemporary works mostly through a structural element that focuses particularly on works that consist of several more or less interrelated bits and pieces. Approaching performance through the metaphor of sleep means taking a much broader perspective that focuses more on the (dis)organization of time in a work, whether this is a fragmented one or not; it means being attentive towards different rhythms, recurrences, repetitions, hesitations, things that are too long and things that are too short, things stressed and things accelerated. Valentini describes this dramaturgy as one where 'objects replace actions, situation replaces narration and images, words, objects and sounds appear divided into fragments and blown-up in time and space without any logical order' (1994: 118). The narrative space, in these cases, is 'on the threshold of time', according to her. Meaning here is always dismissed and delayed because of dynamic leaps that disconnect and repeatedly change the rhythm. Every element eludes itself because of continuous shifting, movement, opening, splitting, breaking the unity, staging oppositions without any solution (122). Just like in dreams.

Such a logical revolution in the process of artistic creation can sometimes provoke reactions of stupidity, according to Barthes. Referring still to the opening passage of *In Search of Time Lost*, he mentions a publisher's response after reading Proust's manuscript: 'I don't know if I've gone completely blind and deaf, but I can't see any interest in reading thirty pages on how a Gentleman tosses and turns in bed before falling asleep' (1989:281). The interest, however, is crucial for Barthes. Such a working method opens 'the floodgates' of time, as he aptly notes. Once chronology is shaken the work becomes a highly complex system of moments that suspends the imposed categories through which we observe the world most of the time while

¹ It's worth also mentioning here the sleeping phase of REM (Rapid Eye Movement), characterized by random movement of the eyes and the tendency of the sleeper to dream vividly. This phase is also known as paradoxical or desynchronized sleep, because of its physiological similarities to waking states. In this sense, it fits quite accurately the way Barthes and Valentini also discuss the time of performance. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rapid_eye_movement_sleep, accessed 18 December 2015.

awake. And we are looking at it (both from the inside, as makers, and the outside, as spectators) as if we'd look at the stars in the night, as a constellation of awakening. The work no longer comes to us as an object but as a practice, Barthes posits. We, thus, proceed to another type of knowledge, which for him is equally methodical and scientific. A type of knowledge that, similar to mathematics, departs from an 'as if'. We venture a hypothesis and explore the wealth of what follows from it. In this way, Barthes concludes, we can expect to learn more about the work than by merely considering it as object already written by others (289–90).

I am in Athens, working on a new project. It's called *50'00"–Short Stories* and its performers are asked to reconstruct mundane experiences into stories for the stage, which they obsessively narrate one after the other without stop for precisely 50 minutes, until the clock that is counting the event rings. We are in the studio. It is a bright, sunny day; the sound of a flea market is loudly heard from our open windows. I ask everyone to improvise or write new stories. All kinds of stories are being narrated either by one, two, three or four voices together; they are announced by their title and then are spoken, in a process similar to that of the reading of a book full of short stories. At some point, somewhere among the *Thoughts I Did While Walking*, *Be Ready* and *I Kiss You Like We Used To Kiss*, one of them goes up to the microphones we use for our narrations and declares:

I am sleeping. What you hear may never have happened. It may be a lie. A dream. Something I wanted to happen but it didn't. It may symbolize something. It may be a parable. I don't know. I am sleeping. And I have the right to say whatever I want. WHATEVER I WANT.

In my sleep, I stand still looking at him sleeping, for a long time.

Robert Stickgold, expert on issues of sleep and cognition, discusses sleep as a process that sews the pieces of our memory together. Contrary to any views that may consider sleep as a passive period of doing nothing, Stickgold stresses the powerful activity of sleep and the cognition processes involved in it. Sleep, he argues,

extracts the gist of our experiences and works towards getting the rules of what is happening to us, creating the meaning of our lives.

Referring to experiments that demonstrated the improved memory, sharpness and effectiveness of people who had 'slept on' specific questions or issues, Stickgold posits that sleep and especially the time of dreaming constitute highly active processes of the brain, which try to process, stabilize, enhance, intergrade memories and information at multiple levels figuring out what it's all about and throwing out all the rest.¹ This does not happen by actually dreaming of issues we are dealing with in our waking life, but by reproducing in different forms dispersed elements (some music, a recurring element, etc.) more or less loosely connected with them. In this way, he concludes, we also imagine possible futures (Stickgold 2010).

In May 2015, I go to the theatre to sleep in Kris Verdonck's and Alix Eynaudi's *EXIT* this time in a quite literal sense. We enter an auditorium full of pillows where the two artists invite us to relax and even sleep if we want, while watching a repeated sequence of movements performed by Eynaudi, and listening to Rutger Zuydervelt's soundscape, created especially for this work. In other words, with the witty title *EXIT*, Verdonck and Eynaudi ask us to exit our ordinary way of experiencing life and theatre, and enter an alternative one through sleep. For almost an hour we are left in a very comfortable space in front of a stage-dream: the repeated, simple, short and slow dance of a performer, her exits and entrances onstage after the completion of each sequence, the indiscernible changings of lights from blue to red to darkness, the ever evolving soundscape of relaxation of Zuydervelt. In the programme notes, the artists express their aim to explore the physically passive, still state of spectatorship and the high mental activity it involves. More particularly, they refer to their aim to delve deeper into what they describe as an 'altered' state of consciousness, a state of attentiveness different from that of daily life before and after a performance. It is exactly this altered state that Barthes also describes, through the metaphor of sleep, as the moment

between sleeping and waking. In this case, Verdonck and Eynaudi seem to follow Barthes' suggestion in a literal way in order to see what emerges. Verdonck discusses sleeping as 'quality time, quality of living, learning, understanding, evolving'. And he refers to the fact that sleep is absolutely underestimated in times of neoliberal acceleration, when it is considered as a waste of potentially productive time. Sleep, as he notes, is something anarchistic, not in a destructive way, but in 'dangerously constructive' one. And he continues:

If we want to understand the world that surrounds us, sleep is essential. To be able to take good decisions in our lives, we have to 'sleep on it'. Our way of living and the way society is organized does not permit us to take time to sleep, and thus, to make the right decisions. Without sleep, our ideas and knowledge become superficial, like mass-produced products, and are therefore easily overruled. It's a beautiful contradiction: by doing nothing we are more productive and our knowledge is more profound. We become less fragile. Taking the time to sleep well increases the quality of our lives and of our ideas. (Verdonck 2015)

The political implications behind the act of sleep become obvious here. The programme notes also refer to the search for rest and Paul Lafargue's *The Right to Be Lazy*, published in 1880. What value does our society attach to relaxation, rest, silence, sleep and laziness? Are we not caught up more than ever in the relentlessness of production and consumption? How can performance contribute to the empowerment of ideas that resist the dominant neoliberal politics of 'no alternative' and produce alternative futures to them, altered states of consciousness? David Maayan also describes performance's affect as a waking dream, as the moment just before the world gets put nicely together again and things become familiar again (1994). It is exactly such a moment that seems ideal for creating new familiarities and ways of living and understanding life (and theatre).

The suggestion here, then, is to reintroduce Barthes' grammatical scandal of the phrase 'I'm asleep' as a performative utterance that,

as soon as it is said in the frame of theatre, enters us into a state of conscious sleep wherein our experience of the work is shaped. The suggestion is to see the metaphor of sleep as a dramaturgical directive in performance. And to create and watch works following the rules of a badly organized taxonomy, a disorganized time, similar to that of dreams; highly aware of the gaps, repetitions, hesitations, recurrences involved in our effort to grasp the world, to seize and define everything that we encounter. In order to imagine possible alternative futures.

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