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THE POSTHUMAN THEATRE OF GISÈLE VIENNE

The main purpose of my thesis is to introduce the Polish reader to the theatre of Gisèle Vienne which, since more than twenty years, remains an important idiom in the current landscape of performing arts in Europe and beyond.

The aim of the dissertation is a two-fold analysis of the artist's practice: firstly, to describe a distinctive semiotic system of Vienne's theatre; and secondly, to examine what political meanings it evokes – produced, shown, and interpreted in a specific socio-political context: the Western world at the turn of the 20th and 21st century, the era of the Anthropocene.

I incorporate into my observation and analysis of Vienne's theatre the experience of heterogeneous identity and self-reflection. Between December 2016 and November 2017, I engaged in a process of participant observation, following the creation of the performance *Crowd* (2017). Therefore, my thesis, while being a "performance biography" that becomes a research study of the theatre of Gisèle Vienne, is also a story about the process of writing (a fieldwork) that is not free from the influence of personal experience.

In the methodology I adopted, I refer to the category of situated knowledges proposed by the American feminist theorist and philosopher Donna Haraway in 1988 as a response to the need for a new critical theory. Situated knowledges “require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of <<objective>> knowledge”¹.

In such a perspective, it is crucial to recognize not only the angle from which the cognitive process begins (it is important whether one looks from below, above, from the side, or from the centre), but also the intertwined dependencies in which the object and the subject of study are entangled and the changing dynamics of this relationship. Haraway writes about the “epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating”, where “partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims”².

Hence, my “report” from *Crowd* is also a trace of movement, a documentation of a path leading to knowledge situated by personal experience. Participation in the rehearsals for the performance verified the research process empirically and affectively. Initially, my role was limited to being a witness. Later, I took the opportunity to participate in the daily warm-up sessions together with the dancers. This experience became a source of extra-discursive knowledge, letting the body speak as a sensitive receptor that allowed me to formulate questions that might not have come up if I had limited my research to theoretical investigations on the basis of the collected material.

¹ Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), p. 592.

² *Ibidem*, p. 589.

The matrix of the portrait of Gisèle Vienne's theatre is formed by the archive I composed. Scripts and video recordings, a rehearsal diary, performance brochures, interviews with the artist's past and present collaborators conducted during the rehearsal period, private letters, professional memories, as well as passing images of the cities and theatres where rehearsals took place and the daily routines that constituted them form a register of impressions and a reservoir of memory.

My thesis is divided into four chapters. In the introduction, I present Gisèle Vienne in the context of the visual and performing arts of the turn of the 20th and 21st century, which shaped her theatrical idiom, her sensitivity, intellectual interests and multidisciplinary approach to theatrical practice. In portraying Vienne, I draw on conversations I conducted with the artist and her collaborators, deliberately adopting a close-up perspective that reduces distance, attempting to penetrate into the intimate biographical concrete.

The starting point of the first chapter (Landscape) is the question: where do we come to Gisèle Vienne's theatre from? In the context of the Anthropocene landscape, I define the distinctiveness of Vienne's practice within the broader panorama of contemporary artistic practices, focusing on the posthuman turn in the performing arts.

In the second chapter (Darkness), I look at Gisèle Vienne's theatre as a laboratory that explores darkness as a place of “becoming a subject”, of experiencing a disturbed reality, of abolishing the opposition between the living and the dead. Vienne explores the darkness, while touching upon phenomena that violate norms. The darkness becomes the space for an intimate narration about hidden human dispositions.

In the third chapter (Figures), I ask who emerges from the darkness of Gisèle Vienne's theatre. Her protagonists combine attributes of both twenty-first century everyday life and its phantasmagorical bodies. Their subjectivity is liminal, their corporeality porous. The performers and puppets form a group of outsiders endowed with a particular kind of stage presence. Can we see in them the potential for a new, posthuman community?

The fourth chapter (Desire) is an analysis of the affective dynamics produced in the relationship between the performers (figures) and the viewer in the context of two landscapes (external – landscape of the Anthropocene, and internal – darkness). The tension between the visible and the invisible juxtaposes the orders of the explicit, the normative, and the unconscious, provoking excess. Vienne's theatre, by asking about the possibility of transgression, encourages the viewer to produce their own projection of that which makes them anxious.

After presenting Gisèle Vienne's semiotic system of theatre in the final chapter (Dissolving boundaries), I ask what political meanings her theatre produces. What kind of cognitive reaction does it provoke? How can the dissolving of boundaries lead to the creation of new territories of resistance and forms of active social protest?

The attachments to the thesis are: the excerpts from a rehearsal diary, a list of performances, a glossary, and image boards.