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TYPOLOGIES OF EVERYDAY THEATRICALITY – A GAME AND A MOVIE

Abstract. This paper studies the virtual theatricality as a part of everyday theatricality, through a specific number of case studies: a computer game and a movie. Virtual theatricality is the type of role assumption produced at the level of the individual imaginary; here, communication is split by an interface; the virtual role assumption is perfectly conscious and allows the interaction with the character created by the one with whom the communication is carried out, but never with the individual as such.

Key words. theatricality, RPG, Charlie Kaufman, audiences

Virtual theatricality

Theatricality is the use of the term theatrical imagination to describe the quality of the dramatic art to transform the imitation of an action into a new creative experience, a vision and a revelation shared both by the actor and by the audience.

Virtual theatricality is the type of role assumption produced at the level of the individual imaginary; here, communication is split by an interface; the virtual role assumption is perfectly conscious and allows the interaction with the character created by the one with whom the communication is carried out, but never with the individual as such. This is one of the most pervasive and easily identifiable typologies of theatricality, preceding in principle the invention of the technology that has generated the virtual media. For instance, a great part of the classic epistolary novels use the techniques of the imaginary role construction and of their deconstruction

put against the universe of the narrative "reality" (with respect to this, the best known example is Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons,* not accidentally dramatised or screened so recurrently during the last decades of the 20th century. Starting with the cinematographic art and ending with computer games, all forms of artistic expression – should we agree on the fact that the computer game is one of the latest such forms – use virtual theatricality, independently or together with one of the other two categories. In its turn, this is divided in more subclasses, and each of these may be illustrated and explained by a case study.

Nicolae Mandea[1] claims that "if we accept that defining for the concept of theatricality are the relationship between the observer and the observed and the performance of presence by a theatrical act of a virtual reality, we obviously enter the territory of the communication mediated by the contemporary multimedia techniques". Starting from this statement and, particularly, by sustaining the rapport spectacle/spectator, in the case of virtual theatricality, the question concerns the estimate of the spectator's involvement in the multimedia event, which, unmistakably, cannot be so easily quantified. Does the receiver of the performance remain exclusively a spectator, or is his/her participation an immersive one, involving – albeit subconsciously – the need of instant answer, of "actio" in a

role symmetric to the actor's? Obviously, we should accept the fact that virtual theatricality is more complex than the mere use of certain projections in the dramatic performances.

To what extent is the spectator-user (player) involved in an RPG[2]? Evidently, (this happens) to a far greater extent than in the classic silent atmosphere in the auditorium, where the regular meaning identification and analysis processes take place. However, undoubtedly, feedback may be obtained, the same as in a theatre or a cinema, in relationship to the type of characters involved in the game, to the decisions they make throughout the plot, to the time spent "logged in". Furthermore, in the video game, and particularly in the role play, the actor and the spectator merge, since one cannot watch a game, cannot observe its storyline and evolution without getting involved directly, without interacting as a character. Evidently, there is also the situation in which someone witnesses the manner in which someone else plays a game. However, such cases are so rare that they are not worth taking into consideration, particularly since they do not support the idea of theatricality: merely watching does not mean role assumption.

Similar to the theatre and to the movie, computer role play is constituted in a parallel, coherent world, which has to offer a storyline. Depending on the

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1   Mandea, Nicolae – *Teatralitatea un concept contemporan (Theatricality a Contemporary Concept)*, UNATC Press, 2006, p. 134

2   The term RPG denotes Role Playing Game, a type of game in which the participant undertakes the role of a fictional character.

choices made by the player throughout the play, the scenario may modify, however without impact on the central story, the relational elements of the story staying the same. The frame and typology are identical from the beginning to the end: the Middle Ages, vampires, Mafia etc. The player initially creates an avatar-character who will be his/ her representation in the game, whom he/she will control throughout the action, via numerous choices: you're good, you're bad, you're a magus or a gladiator, a man or a woman, you talk to the other characters or you apply them the death strike as soon as you meet them. The characters evolve differently, depending on the number of points gathered, on the experience, on the time in the game, on the number of victories or defeats.

Both the RPG player and the theatre spectator share the desire of facing a fictional world. However, to what extent does role assumption work and what is its relation to theatricality?

"The process of secondary identification taking place in cinema theatres depends paradoxically on distance while in the case of games we encounter something more than just intimacy. Identification is replaced by introjection – the subject is projected inward into an "other". We do not need to complete imitation to confuse the "other" with the "self". The subject (player) and the "other" (the onscreen avatar) do not stand at the opposite sides of the mirror anymore – they become one. (...) During the game, the player's identity ends in disintegration, and the merger

of user's and character's consciousness ensues"[3]

Consciously, beyond a certain laps of time (starting from one hour now and then, to periods consistently allowed during a day), any individual assumes one role or another, which resembles purely accidentally and superficially the real persona, at the level of clothing or gender. (These are) Social roles, bearing their own behavioural, clothing and rhetoric structure, or private roles, differentiated by means of their own idea of evolution, situation, relationships and discourse[4]. At the theatre, such a role assumption takes place at the level of the spectator's identification with one character or another, or with a certain situation. Similarly, in the case of computer games, too, we are dealing, in a compulsory manner, with the denegation effect, i.e. "the assiduous burdening, by the spectator, of the product represented by the stage discourse with the mark of non-reality in relation to daily existence"[5]. The difference is that, in

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3 Filiciak, Miroslaw, 'Hyperidentities", in Wolf J.P., Perron, Bernard, eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Routledge, N.Y./ London: 2003, p. 88.

4 With respect to this, see Goffman, Erving, *Viaţa cotidiană ca spectactol (The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Editura Comunicare.ro, 2006.

5 Runcan, Miruna, *Pentru o semiotică a spectacolului teatral (Towards a Semiotics of the Theatrical Performance)*, ed. Dacia, collection Biblioteca Teatrul Imposibil, Cluj, 2005, p. 52.

this case, the computer interface (the prefabricated program, the game stylistics and aesthetics etc.) substitutes only partially the fictional universes of the theatre or movie show; control decisions concerning the plot are almost simultaneous with the interpretation of the situation and arise unbiased from the virtual role assumption. In other words, the spectator's role laps over the actor's, the player entering consciously in a parallel, fictional world, vested as such, where information is processed throughout the entire story. He/ she builds his/ her own character, guides and controls him/ her, in order to acquire new skills, to develop him/ her and, in the end, in order to win the game.

Case study:
Vampire: The masquerade – Bloodlines

In order to support the concept of theatricality, we will discuss a certain game, whose principle of construction applies perfectly to the RPG typology, but whose borders have crossed – long before the actual creation of the game – the virtual computer world, being something real in the beginning.

Vampire: The masquerade – Bloodlines[6], VTMB, is a role playing game, inspired from a "live action role playing game". Of course, this new series of terms requires an amplification, which, in fact, we hope

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6 Additional information on this game is available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vampire:_The_Masquerade_%E2%80%93_Bloodlines

will manage to clarify to a certain extent the elements of virtual theatricality, too. A "live action RPG" is a game requiring the compliance with a series of set rules and applying in the players' real life, becoming a style of living. The development of the game depends on the players' decision in their private life, in their relationships with the other mates. However, they are not allowed to bend the rules set by a book that one can buy from bookstores. In Romania, such a game had no kind of success, nor had it in any of the European countries. On the other hand, America, the country inventing the "reality show", promptly embraced thus type of entertainment, which has become, by the role assumption required by the rules, a lifestyle adopted by the fanatics of the simulacrum.

VTMB is based on *The World of Darkness* created by the company White Wolf, which is the redesign in the real world of the universe later on retrieved in VTMB, according to preset rules, including clans and hierarchies, a parlour game at an ampler scale. *Bloodlines* attempts to persuade the players that they can change the surrounding world by the choices they make, whether we are talking about

the manner of approaching a task (the violent alternative or sneaking behind the enemies) or about the manner in which they communicate with the NPCs[7].

Strictly owing to these choices, *Bloodlines* has five different endings. The path to be travelled by the player in order to reach one of these endings is full of obstacles. Even if we are talking about the personification of vampires, the world birthing the character directed by the player is as real as possible: it includes art galleries and tunnels, nightclubs and Chinese districts. The alter ego (in already common terms, "the avatar") in the game may be selected from among seven vampire clans (of the 13 existing in the pen & paper universe that inspired the game), all clans pertaining only to the Camarilla, the so-called "good guys" of the VTMB universe.

Apart from the choice of the clan, which dictates the game approach, the player has to choose the character's sex, the non playing, programmed characters (NPC), reacting differently throughout the game, conditional on this initial choice. The development of the game depends at first hand on the player's choices: the dialogue with another character provides multiple answers to the various answers and missions proposed, all these choices depending unavoidably on the player's personality and not on the character's.

At this point, the elements of virtual theatricality crop up; they are defining for this type of game, which, in fact, substitutes the primary forms of theatricality of childhood games and which, for the generations born after the 1990s, represent an astounding share of entertainment. Furthermore, a great part of the RPGs, and many other types of computer games, borrow from the film and the theatre dramatic vehicles, character typologies, as well as actors.

Case study: *Synecdoche, New York*.

Whereas, obviously, the RPG computer game is a coherent form of everyday life theatricality, would there be any possibility to define the cinematographic theatricality within the same category? The answer is evidently affirmative, to the extent to which the movie uses a "meta-referentiality", suggesting the cinematic copy of society. One such perfect example is in Charlie Kaufman's

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7 NPC or "Non Playing Characters" are the characters with whom the hero interacts throughout the game, generated by the computer and impossible to control by the player.

films[8]; in what follows, we will discuss particularly *Synecdoche, New York*.

Our topic does not relate to the quality of the movie, which is, in any case, rather difficult to challenge, nor does it deal with the personal choice of cutting excessively long scenes, in order to double the message of the movie. The main issue tackled by Kaufman is the confusion between life and art and the reverse, the conclusion relating to the role assumption. The identification with the character that we "perform" fictionally is real if we choose to introduce equality in the relationship observer/observed.

Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is the manager of a small dramatic company who had planned a stage adaptation of a new version of the famous play *Death of a Salesman*. The beginning of the movie places the main character during the dress rehearsals and of the premiere. However, in his private life, things are far from perfect; his wife leaves him taking away their daughter, Olive. Furthermore, he is also suffering from a series of strange health disorders, since he is also an increasing hypochondriac. When he least expects it, an unusual event occurs: he wins the famous Mac Arthur prize – a prize to which a considerable amount of money is

attached. Starting from this, he decides to direct a ground-breaking play, founded on an extreme realistic system; a gigantesque production, including a huge casting team, to be performed in an abandoned hangar in Manhattan, where a small-scale replica of New York would be built; the topic of the play is just the everyday life in the famous American metropolis. Whereas, at first hand, this should have stimulated him, Caden gradually loses the contact with the real world, becoming the prisoner of a misleading world, in which real life would be mistaken with the imaginary one, at the level of total role assumption.

Clearly, the analysis of the movie will start from the title, precisely because we are dealing with the suggestion from the very beginning of the key of interpretation. According to the Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian[9] the word *synecdoche* is a noun denoting "figure of speech made of the expansion or contraction of the meaning of a word by using the whole instead of the part (and the reverse), the particular instead of the general, the general instead of the particular, the material from which something is made instead of the thing etc." The dictionary definition itself, related to Kaufman's movie, calls for the idea of theatricality comprehended in the meaning of our thesis: fictional identity assumed as role through an interface, in our case the cinematographic studio that

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8 Charlie Kaufman is the script-writer for the movies *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, *Being John Malkovich* and, especially, *Adaptatio*n, an authentic poetics of the new type of postmodern scenario. *Synecdoche, New York* is also his directing debut.

9 DEX, online version, http://dexonline.ro/ search.php?cuv=sinecdoca

reproduces, gradually, in a laboratory jar, the "everyday" identity of the city.

The first mark of meta-referenciality in the movie does not arise from the objects that will become symbols, from the character's job (i.e. director), or from the first scene of theatre in the theatre. Undoubtedly, the primary signal shall spread in all these, but it is released by the first scene between Caden (the director) and Hazel (the girl at the box-office, in love with Caden, the one with whom he will start an affair, but who will stand by him, accepting the role playing games proposed by the director):

> "Caden: You're not an idiot."
> Hazel: Then you say: In fact, Hazel, you're very bright, and I love your eyes.
> Caden: In fact, Hazel, you're very bright.
> Hazel: Oh, am I?
> Caden: And I love your eyes.
> Hazel: Do you? Oh, you're a darling.
> Caden: Then what do I say?
> Hazel: I can't say what then you say.
> Caden: Why?
> Hazel: Because it's dirty."

It is the first form of role proposal, even if from a character different from the one who will later on claim and demand the assumption. However, the function of the character Hazel is given away right from this scene: she is the motor and promoter of the creation of the synecdoche, at all of its levels.

Unfortunately, we do not have the space necessary to analyse each symbol and take of this movie, which would be worth a sequential study. However, similar to Goffman's use of an interpretation-supporting frame on the society, Kaufman applies the "key" frame on all the aspects of the main character's life. He is able to see himself and identify, in the first half of the movie, with seemingly unrelated characters, for instance those in a drug advertisement. Later on, the characters in the advertisement shall be retrieved their place and relation to the characters in the movie.

As the plot progresses, reality becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from fiction; in other words, the main character starts taking real life scenes and transforming fiction in reality, compelling the actors to play their own parts. "We need to investigate. You know, to really discover the essence of each being", the director says to his actors. Furthermore, his own life reaches a point where it is guided by some king of deceit resulting from theatricality, from the imminence of the observation, of the "exterior eye that dictates the frame".

Caden, a hypochondriac, uses the disease excuse in order to prove to himself that he is closer to death; death is one of the main topics of the "study" represented by the "grand directing design": when he feels like crying, he use the "tear substitute", drops that stimulate his emotional relief. The moments of privacy start being invaded by real persons in the director's everyday life; such persons play the part of the voyeurs. Caden's life gradually turns from an observer's existence to one of the observed. The two functions merge for a great part of the movie, and in the end they substitute one another completely. After the first half of the movie, we see Caden with an already

well delineated design: "I won't settle for anything less than the brutal truth. Each day I'll hand you a scrap of paper. It'll tell you what happened to you that day. You felt a lump in your breast. You looked at your wife and saw a stranger, et cetera." When asked by the actors "When are we gonna get an audience in here? It's been 17 years", the leading character answers by involving his own being in the grand plan, in the copy of the reality he wants to create.

One of the important moments of the story is the employment of the person to play Caden, in other words the employment of the competitor I, which turns into the confrontation with the double. Only at a second watching do we observe, at the level of the picture control, the presence, now and then, of an extra shoulder or of a character sitting on the other side of the road. This is the one in audition for Caden's role, who, in his turn, reveals himself in order to change the equation – this time from the observer into the observed – after he admits having spent twenty years in observation of his character. In the end, the imitation becomes so real that the character's role attains values of "vampirism" of the "auctorial" self.

Things grow ambiguous at the level of the frames, too: the kitchen at home is identical with the one in the setting; the real spectators need several seconds of adjustment in order to understand whether they are watching the plot in the movie or the plot of the play in the movie, "en miroir".

La mise en scène becomes monstrous the more the story progresses: new rooms are added to the setting, new characters emerge incessantly; everything starts looking like a giant building from which a wall has been removed. But will it stay like this? Looking from the opposing sidewalk, Caden is revealed the existence, in reality, of the "fourth wall", made from the walls that delineate the "theatrical" residences from the outside world. Therefore, the leading character will erect this wall, too, in his own mise en scène, so that the spectator should be physically separated from the characters he sees, similar to the voyeur lurking inside a house.

While the construction becomes outlined and augmented, Caden's personal life declines. Whereas in the beginning his wife, Adele, leaves him, taking away their daughter, Olive, towards the end, the meeting of Olive, on her deathbed, points out the perverted distance between the two characters, a distance also installed at the language level: Olive speaks German, and Caden English. The scene stands for the lies and compromises that people need to undertake during their life, the roles that they have to play and not those they deliberately choose.

Death, one of the central themes, is illustrated extremely graphically in this scene, by the drop of a petal from the tattoo on Olive's hand. Again, we are dealing with the mistake of representation for the reality, at the object level.

Nevertheless, such ambiguity – equal to the total virtual role assumption – is

generated when character Ellen appears, the former wife's maid, whose place is taken by Caden in reality, as he goes each night to clean Adele's apartment. Since this is one of the aspects in his everyday life, the leading character-author feels he needs to include it in the script. Subsequently, he employs an Ellen whose place he will occupy in his own play.

The end of the movie is enlightening, in the sense of Shakespeare's phrase "All the world's a stage; And all the men and women merely players". Caden has the revelation of his own mise-en-scène when the actor-voyeur playing him and mistaking, in his turn, reality for fiction, choose suicide: "There are nearly 13 million people in the world. I mean, can you imagine that many people? And none of those people is an extra. They're all leads in their own stories. They have to be given their due."

Death, away from which characters run throughout the movie, gradually surfaces: Caden mistakes himself for Ellen, he forgets about his role of director; he start living in one of the "rooms" of the setting and no longer knows dying, unless directing indications are provided to him on how to do it. In fact, the hour of the beginning of the movie plot is identical with the hour of its end. Kaufman pictures a man's life, relating to human existence, in the form of a single "fictional" day, buried in the virtual theatricality.

In the end, *Synecdoche, New York* is perhaps the most complex example for the definition of the concept of everyday drama in the terms of role assumption. The simulacrum in the movie is the performed virtual. Cinematographic drama is obviously subject to the virtual theatricality. We live in the age of simulation, when the old concept of "mimesis" attains new valences.

An integral part of the globalised society, virtual theatricality can be provided with an artistic function, both in the theatre and in the cinema, as screenplay structure, as writing technique of montage, as video image turned into a character, parallel and simultaneous dimension, or as mere fictional role assumption, mediated by (and under protection of) an interface.

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