ACCESSOIRES DE SCÈNE

STAGE TECHNOLOGIES AND TECHNICAL OBJECTS AS THEATRE

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Introduction

Stage props are a rather peculiar types of objects. They are improper objects. They represent things in the real world yet they often lack the function and technical usability everyday tools, utensils, devices and instruments would – (fr) comparable à les choses qu'on comprends comme des elements de la sphère du »dispositives«. There are several types of theatre properties. Scenographic decorations for example cannot be called a stage prop as long as they have a merely iconic, inert and stable purpose within the scene. Stage decorations are all parts of the stage that set a situation but are not being dealt with during the performance – they are not part of the actions displayed. In short: Stuff that is merely present on stage does not qualify as a stage prop. Those items, on the contrary, are entangled with both the actions of the players and the perceptions of the audience: Stage props constitute, mediate, enable, express or represent actions to be fulfilled. They are part of the dramatic plot.

As Andrew Sofer defined it:

> »[T]he prop is best understood as embodying a volatile ›temporal contract‹ established between actor and spectator for the duration of performance.«[1]

This makes them difficult to handle in as far as there has to be a certain aesthetic economy of the stage prop. Certainly the most famous example of such an aesthetic economy of the stage prop would be a concept famous Russian playwright Anton Chekhov remarked – in describing the representational law of the so called »Chekhovs Gun«:

> »One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep.«[2]

This class of objects provides access to the scene, it opens a dramatic space and conveys what literary critique ans slavist Gary Saul Morson would describe as a "foreshadowing" of action beyond the narrow confines of the expected plot.[3] Stage props, are a vital parts of the performance (and in case of dramatic theatre often already the drama). But again, there are several species of stage props:

(a) those which are objects also in the real world, a naturalistic approach [fig.1: Yoricks Skull Lauren Olivier's movie »Hamlet« 1948];

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[1] Andrew Sofer, The Stage Life of Props, p. ix.

[2] Correspodence with Aleksandr Semenovich Lazarev, 1 November 1889; Чехов А. П. (1 November 1889), [Resource unclear: nescio ubi legitur]

[3] Sideshadowing and Tempics. Gary Saul Morson. Tempics and the Bias of the Artifact. Time is of the essence. All of us directly experience our lives as opening ... 1998.

(b) those which are abstractions and allusions of the items offstage (e.g. a gun made of wood [fig. 2: theatre prop »wooden gun«]; or a throne that is only a black cube; [fig. 3: Chair for Brecht's »Leben des Galileo« Berliner Ensemble, property of Heiner Müller] a ball that represents Yorick's skull for example).

My topic today is the relation of this particular cultural entity: The stage prop with the representational and social dynamics which Gilbert Simondon described as technical objects. Certainly, Simondon, especially in *Du mode d'existence des objéts technique* published in the middle of the 1950, he differentiates between (1) religious, (2) aesthetic, and (3) technical objects. On first glance, it seems obvious, that theatre props qualify as aesthetic objects of the first order. But, there are several reasons, why I will not resort to his class of aesthetic objects. And here's some visual argument, why theatre spaces are fundamentally technical spaces [fig. 4,5.6: Atlanta Fox Theatre and the switch hub for 2500 light bulbs].

Firstly, I take my cues from german theatre historian Helmar Schramm's perspective on the theatrical space. In 1996 in his book *Carnival of Thinking. Theatricality in Philosophical Texts of the 16th and 17th century (Karnvel des Denkens. Theatralität im Spiegel philosophischer Texte des 16. Und 17. Jahrhunderts, Berlin 1996)* he delineated how the stage in itself became increasingly mechanized in the 17th century – a veritable "machine room" with cranes, lifting ramps and revolving stages [fig. 7: Sabbatini's »Cloud Machine«].

Secondly, we may resort to Gilbert Simondon's notion of the (fr) »hypertelie« of objects: It fits extremely well with the specialized function of stage props.[4] The spectrum comprises concrete and abstract things and must be differentiated even further. In the sphere of technical objects, there is this ever narrowing kind of specialization of objects.

And thirdly, the parallelism of social rules and technical infrastructures on stage will be suggested as a model of, as Bernard Stiegler put it, »a theatre of individuation«. The isolated and dense production of rules with the help of no small number of technical mediations provide a thought experiment for the reflection of Simondon's philosophy of social technology.

1) The first section concentrates on the theory of *stage props as dramatic objects* from theatre studies and will discuss a famous dog and mist example

2) The second section of the talk turns to the *social theory of technical objects in Simondon's writings*

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[4] Take for example the letter in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's »Emilia Galotti«: the letter is not being read by Galotti and thought it is the only driver in the narration throughout the drama. (Due to this property it can be seen as a pre-cinematic predecessor of hitchcocks McGaffin; which is an objet, that is void – except for it's function to push the story along, to get the narration going). So, within the spectrum of concrete and abstract props there is an other class of props to be found: tangible ones and imagined ones. This forms another analogy to simondon's technical and imagined technical objects. today I will give you an example of such an intricate object and it's function in the field of individuation, transformation, and narration.

3) Eventually I will focus on *individuation and technological rituals* in a third section.

1) Stage Props as Dramatic Objects

One of the essential problems in stage prop theory in theatre studies seems to be the question of the materiality of the object in question. In a semiological tradition, the romanist and theatrologist Anne Ubersfeld has argued that, the boundary between object and non-object is by no means as clear as it may seem. With other semioticians of the second wave, for example, Anne Ubersfeld represents in an almost semi-pragmatic perspective: „Au théâtre, il n'y a que des objets". In her rather influential book *Lire le théâtre II. L'école du spectateur* she continous her argument as follows:

> »[…] nous dirons que l'objet scénique est une chose figurable sur la scène et manipulable par les comédiens. […] deviennent objets par le travail producteur du comédien des choses qui n'ont guère vocation d'objets : telle partie du décor, telle parties du corps de l'acteur, des animaux (par exemple le caniche de *La Cerisaie* mise en scène par Giorgio Strehler), voire des êtres humains […].«[5]

In the writing of Anne Ubersfeld the mode of existence of stage props is stratified: An item exists on the level of a dramatic text, and then it exists on the level of the stage, and furthermore through these modes of existence it emerges as a mental image in the stream of conciousness of the spectators. It is important to understand that the phenomenality of the prop on stage is not necessarily coupled with the actual presence of the item in the space of the scene: It is sufficient when actors talk about it, when there's an acoustic signal that signifies the presence or even when the actions performed are being transformed by an imaginary thing (think for example of pantomimes handling imaginary window screens or walls or the like).

Let me now give you an example of such a complex arrangement of an object, more precisely, let me show you how an acoustic signal, a visual element, and the sudden appearance of an actor distribute to such a notion of stage props – while the stage prop itself, the very object, whatever it may be, is never actually on the stage. It only exists in the mind of the spectator.

Where about to see a snippet from Faust [fig. 8: »Faust« ➔ »kernel of the brute«-scene]: You hear a dog barking. auditive object. You see fog on stage. Stage fog as a quite interesting aggregate as a stage prop. you hear a dog screeching. your hear an explosion. "so this, then, was the kernel of the brute" (transl. from german »Pudel's Kern« = »the poodle's nucleus«). And here comes Gründgen's in the role of Mephistopheles – who is not to be mistaken for a human being. I'd like to throw in another notion of Andrew Sofer on this problem:

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[5] Ubersfeld, Anne, *Lire le théâtre II. L'école du spectateur*, Paris, Belin, coll. « Lettres Sup », Marie-Christine Bellosta, (dir.), 1996, p. 109.

»[…] the object must be visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance. But it is not enough for an object to be handled by an actor; it must also be perceived by a spectator as a prop—in other words, as a sign. Indeed, theater can be defined as that mode of perception in which spectators consent to see things as representing things other than themselves: an actor as King Lear, a chair as Lear's throne, and so on.«[6]

2) Social theory of technical objects in Simondon's writings

What is noteworthy, is, why Sofer, as an example, names the actor who, in his example, represents King Lear. One has to shed light on such an idea of materiality on stage. As Erika Fischer-Lichte defined it, using the words of Rudolf Arnheim: »With the replacement of production theories by theories of materiality, the actor becomes the substance in the hands of the director, becomes the ›prop of props‹ (Rudolf Arnheim)«[7] And, what is more, the item which it represents is being connected with »the abstract connotations associated with the object it respresents. These ›real world connotations (royalty, say, in the case of a throne) then *replace* that represented object in the mind of the spectator. For Bogatryev, the onstage throne is thus not merely the sign of an object (throne) but the ›sign of the [represented] object's sign‹ (royalty). Any stage chair is thus doubly abstracted [...].«[8] With the replacement of producer theories by theories of material, necessarily the understanding of what an object is changes. In Henning Schmidgens reading of Simondon he relates the terminoloygy of objects to a certain kind of theatrical dimension by quoting the following sentence from *Du mode d'existence des objets technique*: »The object tuns out to be a ›theater of a certain number of mutual relations of causality««.[9]

Let us meditate on that the last section of the sentence for a while. In Simondon's texts it reads like this: »the technical object, the issue of an abstract work of organization of sub-sets, is the theatre of a number of relationships of reciprocal causality.«[10] In Simondon, one of the early ideas of what a technical object is, has to to with a basic transformation of natural causes. Simondons notion in this case ist, that technological objects come into the world bei making principle out of a natural or social event. Take, for example, a thunderstorm: A struck of lightning which hits a tree and ignites it. The fire that comes into the world from the event of lightning is then transferred into the principle of firing by hand with a flintstone that transfers a spark to the tinder to rekindle the campfire. From this basic principle, then, differentiations of techniques

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[6] Andrew Sofer, The Stage Life of Props, S. 31.
[7] Erika Fischer-Lichte, Lemma »Dinge«, in: Metzler Lexikon der Theatertheorie, S. 62.
[8] Sofer, p. 7.
[9] »Sinn ist hier vielmehr als eine dynamische Relation von Potentialen zu verstehen, die im technischen Objekt buchstäblich *realisiert* ist und sich dort durch »innere Resonanzen« entwickelt. Das Objekt entpuppt sich dabei als »Theater einer bestimmten Anzahl wechselseitiger Kausalitätsbeziehungen« und wird zum Schauplatz struktureller und funktionaler Konflikte, die sich nach und nach oder plötzlich lösen, d. h. in einen Zustand münden, in dem das Objekt »nicht mehr mit sich selber kämpft«. Henning Schmidgen, »Das Konzert der Maschinen. Simondons politisches Programm«, in: ZKM 2.2012, pp. 117-134, p. 126.
[10] Simondon 1980, p. 22.

firing arise, leading to other ebbts, leading to different technological objects. In the Faust scene, the acoustic event, the »barking dog«, is being translated into »stage fog« and then into the character of »Mephisto« (acoustic signal [dog], visual signal [fog], emergens of a human shape that is not human [Mephisto]). Mephistopheles himself is, according to his own statement, a principle. That is why, when Faust asks the metaphysical entity: »Well, now, who are you then?« Mephisto answers: »I am part of that force that always wills the evil and always produces the good«. Thus, this kind of transformation in Goethes drama can be read as a universal scepticism towards the arising mechanical sphere in the industrial phase at the beginning of the 19th century. Goethe, in *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* published in 1821: »The mechanical system rolls over like a thunderstorm, slowly, slowly, but it has its direction.« What lies behind this quote is a general distrust against the industrial revolution and the technological change Goethe anticipates for the time ahead. And, what is even more: The Mephistopheles Character becomes thus a perfect allegory for Simondons Theory, how a technological object in the first place comes about: it is an »event«, turned into a »principle«. Vice versa the principle embodied in the caracter of Mephisto is a technological one (a sort of ethical algorithm, or more precisely, the equivalent to Maxwell's Demon between the equilibrium of good and evil).

3) Individuation and technological rituals

Props convey an aspect of ontological duality: they are things that represent other things. Even if a telephone, say, signifies a telephone on stage, it is far from being a telephone in the realm of the real. Due to their symbolic existence, props are comparable to technical objects which are currently part of our everyday agency. If we e.g. look at mobile phones, their imaginary presence is an aggregate of (a) circuits and switch points as well as (b) iconic representations on a graphical user interface. Meanwhile, we do not only deal with such symbolic objects; we trade and communicate, we store and consume them. Thus, the sphere of digital objects can be described in analogy to stage props.

The problem of individuation is that of a fundamental conflict between the inner convictions, necessities and rules of an individual in comparison (and oftentimes in contrast) to the laws, values and restrictions of the social collective the individual lives in (that is roughly speaking what Simondon sees as the milieu). As Bernard Stiegler put it, „it is a question of differentiating becoming as future [avenir], which is also to say, this time in a more Simondonian language, of negentropizing the entropic becoming that is constituted by accidental chance." (Stiegler: p. 47). As long as individuation is never an event (événement) but rather a process. It can be characterized as a medium (or rather a filter) in order to minimize the intangible chaos of social

rules concerning behaviour. These of which are active in a certain milieu at a certain point in history. The process of indivicuation as a conflictive scenario of »becoming a self« (=ideity) irritates the relation of social convention and personal necessities. Exactly this conflict cata-lyses the phase-shift (dephasage) throughout the process of individuation. As Jacques Garelli writes in his article »Transduction et information«:

> »L'individu apparaît, dès lors, comme l'acteur, mais aussi le théatre, le champ opératoire, et non le terme ou le produit d'un processus d'individuation. C'est ainsi que l'individuation, en son mouvement temporalisateur, devient seule ontogenèse.«[11]

The spectaculariy of the being an individuum results in the ever re-appearing conflict between personal valus, needs and ethis and public opinions on these needs. The negotiation thus must always be a performative one. But, as Bernard Stiegler puts it in *The Theatre of Individation: Phase-Shift and Resolution in Simondon and Heidegger*:

> »The structure and order of the objects and the performed actions related to these props tend to negantropize everything which is the psycho-social form of entropy.«[12]

And Stiegler continues:

> »The question is then to agree on this point: what are these resources? Or rather, what will these resources have been and to what type of new initial resources, constituted quantically [quantiquement] by a leap, can they give rise? Such a reinitialization can only yield an individuation as a quantum leap and it is in the worry [inquiétude] attentive to the necessity of this leap that I attempt the transductive relation of the Simondonian phase-shift and the Heideggerian resolution, constructing, in one way or another, the new theater of individuation— understanding that here to construct means to individuate what is already there as preindividual potential.«[13]

On the other hand this kind of order can not be maintained. It is transitory and ephemeral.

Outlook

Like Rainer Maria Rilke writes in the eighth Elegy part of the *Elegies de Duino*:

> »Et nous : toujours et partout spectateurs,
> tournés vers tout et jamais au-delà !
> Cela nous submerge. Nous y mettons ordre. Cela s'écroule.
> Nous y remettons ordre et nous écroulons nous-mêmes.«

»And we: spectators, always, everywhere, turned toward the world of objects, never outward. It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it, then break down ourselves.«[14] When the verb »to arrange« resp. »order« is such underscored in the snipped from Hamlet, that we analysed above, the audience's focus is being shifted to the structured aggregate of things and actions, which shape the very phenomenality of the scene. Furthermore, it shifts from »in actu«-

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[11] Jacques Garelli, »Transduction et information«, in: Gilbert Simondon, Une pensée de l'individuation et de la technique, Bibliothèque du Collège international de philosophie, Albin Michel, 1994.
[12] Bernard Stiegler, p. 51
[13] Ibid.
[14] Rainer Maria Rilke, The Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus. A Dual Language Edition, ed. and transl. by Stephen Mitchell, New York 2014, S. 51.

perceptions to the most basic function of all systems: order. While »order« as a function is very different to the mere presence of an object. And, in this context, I'd like to give you a historical example for the purpose of illustrating, why order is not necessarily an *a priori* property of a »existing thing« (in the sense of a physical and material entity). In the middle of the 15th century it is neither a skull, nor a brute, nor or a blood drenched handkerchief, nor a cup of poison, nor a broken jug that stands at the very center of an arising philosophy of existence: It is a spoon. When Nicholas of Cusa first publishes his *Idiota de mente* in 1450 (among several other so called »Idiotenschriften«) at the beginning of chapter II one can find the famous spoon-metaphor. Against neoplatonic ideas of ›archetypal images‹ (Urbilder) Nicholas of Cusa develops his argument between an orator, a philosphus, and a common layman (the latter being the »idiota«). At that time »idiota« is still a term without any negative connotations. It refers to a person whose knowledge is neither based on (a) abstract wisdom nor on (b) scientific epistémé, but consists of (c) a skillset of practices. The practical knowledge of this idiota (the layman) becomes an ideal, an image of perfection, during the 15th century – a mode of knowing, opposed to humanistic education (and yet part of it). And I quote Nicholas of Cusa:

> »Having taken a spoon in hand, the Layman said: ›A spoon has no other exemplar except our mind's idea [of the spoon]. For although a sculptor or a painter borrows exemplars from the things that he is attempting to depict, nevertheless I (who bring forth spoons from wood and bring forth dishes and jars from clay) do not [do so]. For in my [work] I do not imitate the visible form of any natural object, for such forms of spoons, dishes, and jars are perfected by human artistry alone. So my artistry involves the perfecting, rather than the imitating, of created visible forms, and in this respect it is more similar to the Infinite Art.«« [15]

The interpretation of the spoon allegory is, that there's not archetypal image in the layman's mind which forms a blueprint of the object named »spoon«. The spoon rather emerges as the absent but necessary practice: a movement of the body in need of a tool in order to finalize a task. (In this case: »spooning« a soup, or what have you). In the imagination of the spoon-maker there is no shape of a spoon and, according to Cusa, he does not imitate nature. In his mind he sees the desired action („using [X] [16] in order to get to the soup") and he fills the void (=[X]) bei inventing something that fits the need of the desired action – the invention of the spoon replaces this absence in this context of agency. The scene, where Mephisto enters Faust's laboratory described above, refers to the present reality (the gap between retention and protention) and –step by step– slips into obsolescence.

————— And if the contract fails, individuation rises.

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[15] De mente 2: 538, 62

[16] It would be better to express this void according to actual set theory as the so called »empty set« which can be written like so: {...} or simply {}.

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