

# The Apparatus and Programming of the Event: For an Architecture of Participation

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## Abstract

In the contemporary European theatre context, the involvement of the spectator as an integral and decisive part of the scenic realisation is a widespread practice, capable of redefining the theories and praxes of theatre language. The material contribution of the spectator is an intrinsic part of the scenic writing, sometimes as co-creator with the actors or as the sole creator and protagonist on stage.

This article reflects on the concept and role of the apparatus in productions exclusively aimed at the pleasure of the spectators. The apparatus, understood following Michel Foucault, as a “set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge” (Agamben, 2009: 2), changes traditional playwriting: the apparatus provides for the introduction of the programming activity in theatre. Consequently, the apparatus is the dramaturgy of the scenic event, with the provision and organisation of the event in each phase, reconciling it with the action of the spectator. Using some technological devices (tablet, headphones, remote controls, etc.), the spectator follows the instructions and questions, thereby contributing to the scenic realisation. Depending on the forms of the apparatus, it changes how the spectator is included in the participatory dynamics programmed. In some cases, the form assumed by the dramaturgical concept is that of a complex design with the construction of a *sensory, spatial poetics* or of the *imaginary* or by re-writing reality; in others, it is the *net*, which originates an *architecture* of the experience lived by the spectator, the sole protagonist on stage.

Based on these reflections, we will explore different participatory paradigms in order to analyse how these provide for specific modes of relationship: between the spectator and the participatory performance; between the spectators; and between the spectator and him or herself. We will provide specific examples of each typology, which will enable us to establish a broad vision of the languages characteristic of participation and of the mutations that it involves in the theatrical linguistic codes.

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**Keywords:** apparatus, participation, spectator, programming, dramaturgy, net, architecture, space, language, paradigm

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## The Apparatus and Programming of the Event: For an Architecture of Participation

### Premise

The participation of the spectator has become one of the prevailing imperatives in the European theatre panorama. Performative experiences that provide for the direct involvement of the audience in the scenic dynamics are increasingly common, sometimes partially, as co-creators in the presence of the actors, and others wholly, as sole protagonists in the stage context.

It is legitimate, as the theatre anthropologist Piergiorgio Giacchè argues, for the participating spectator to be the natural, albeit forgotten, objective of theatre and that “participating as a spectator [...] is the essence of the theatre experience and is at the same time what differentiates theatre” (Giacchè, 1991: 9). Moreover, it is unquestionable that the proliferation of participatory experiences increasingly reveals a congenital aspect of the performing arts that defines the theatre relationship: the spectator always participates, either sitting in the stalls watching what is happening on stage or partially or wholly involved in the material realisation of the event.

What makes a difference, then, is not whether theatre spectators participate or not but how they are called on to participate in the scenic context. In this respect, the notions of *apparatus*, *net* and *architecture* that enable us to focus the analysis on how the participation of the spectator is articulated take on a substantial value. This is the starting point of this article.

### The Apparatus: For a Dramaturgy of Participation

Reflecting on the modes through which the participation of the spectators in the scenic field is revealed enables us to explore, in the first place, the theatre relationship based on the positional value attributed to them.

Although the spectator is always a co-producer of the performance (De Marinis, 2008: 49-61), the most recent participatory experiences at a European level seek to stress, by making the spectator’s contribution explicit, which varies depending on the forms of participation chosen by the

companies. From the *performative experience* (Sofia, 2010: 140), which refers to a conventional participation, spectators experience a *factual participation* that manifests their contribution (Pedullà, 2021: 18) and notably changes their positional value.

This condition is greatly determined by the action of the apparatus, which, understood as “the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge” (Agamben, 2009: 3) modifies traditional playwriting. The etymology of *apparatus* suggests that the term reflects a function of power, shaping something that takes on a new and different status, which is achieved thanks to its direct intervention.

The proliferation of participatory experiences produces a notable change in the overall conception of the scenic machine: different degrees of participation of the spectator in the scenic dynamics proposed emerge, which in their turn establish a different position and relationship of the spectators with the actor/s and with the whole scenic system. This articulated combination of the characteristics that define the materiality of the scenic involvement of the spectators is called *dramaturgy of participation* (Maravala y Lopes Ramos, 2016: 151-169), in which the action of the apparatus to determine different degrees of the theatre relationship and the power intrinsic to the participatory mechanisms stands out.

The apparatus intervenes in the relationship between spectators and actors/performers and offers many possibilities: from the creation of itinerant and multisensory tours to random and partial forms of participation of the audience or even the transformation of the spectators into the sole protagonists on stage. What the apparatus produces, following the different modalities that we will analyse next, are modes of participation in which the form, as Nicolas Bourriaud’s shows us, “can only come about from a meeting between two levels of reality” (Bourriaud, 2010: 24). In our case, the level of the design of the apparatus and of the materiality of the stage. What then is the action exercised by the apparatus on the role and position of the spectator?

The apparatus organises the stage and the participatory experience of the user following a plot; in other words, it builds the dramaturgy of the performance, setting up and organising the scenic dynamics in each phase, reconciling it with the action of the spectator.

The action of the apparatus, along with the special typology of intervention of the spectator, the relationship between actors and spectators and the spatial and temporal characteristics of the participatory events, contributes to defining different forms of participation. Thus, participatory theatre cannot be defined as a single theatre but rather responds to the multiplicity of the different forms that characterise it. Consequently, participation must be understood as “a field” in which “the dynamic form” (Frieze, 2016: 3) produces different types endowed with specific forms and languages which, depending on our viewpoint, will constitute real paradigms.

In the contemporary theatre panorama some of the main participatory paradigms can be identified: the *immersive paradigm*, which in its turn can be *multisensory* and *itinerant*, the *interactive paradigm*, the *spect-actorial*

*paradigm*, and the *participated paradigm*. The paradigms mentioned here belong to two different typologies: the immersive, interactive and participated paradigms form part of *co-participatory* modes of involvement, in which spectators interact with the actors or performers as co-participants. In contrast, the spect-actorial paradigm belongs to a mode of total participation, in which spectators are wholly responsible for the realisation of the event, without the intervention of the actors. In this way, the spectator is the sole protagonist, along with the remaining spectators, in the scenic dynamics.

It is worth pointing out that the participatory paradigms can be linked to a variable degree of hybridisation. Therefore, one or more typologies can coexist in the same performance, although different sub-sets, with their own characteristics, can coexist in the same paradigm.

### Writings of Participation: The Paradigms

The first paradigm, the *immersive paradigm*, refers to artistic projects that invite spectators to give themselves to an experience in which they are the protagonists, accompanied by the performer. Two different typologies of this paradigm can be distinguished: the first refers to the experiences with a marked *multisensory* dimension; the second is characterised by an *itinerant* dimension. Spectators are invited to go on tours, mainly urban, so that they have experiences beyond their daily routines.

In general, the term “*immersive*” exalts the spectator’s *experiential dimension*, which will be different for each one. Also important is *the meeting* between the spectator and the other spectators, the performers and the spatial and temporal dimensions distanced from reality and projected as imaginative dimensions, in one space-time or another.

An example of the multisensory type of this paradigm is embodied by the many scenic creations of Teatro de los Sentidos, directed by the Colombian anthropologist Enrique Vargas. Let us look at an example in *Pequeños ejercicios para el buen morir*: here the spectators, after having chosen whether to cross the world of the living or the dead, are blindfolded and let themselves be guided by the performers. In another production by the company, *El hilo de Ariadna*, the spectators cross a labyrinth alone and from time to time come across some performers within micro-worlds, created as stages within their journey.

In her analyses of immersive theatre, Josephine Machon notes that “immersive experiences in theatre combine the act of immersion-being submerged in an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated-with a deep involvement in the activity within that medium (Machon, 2016: 29-30).

The practice of immersion means that the spectators are involved in an environment that is completely different from the known environment – reality. It can be a tour through a labyrinth or a journey through the world of the dead: in both cases, the spectator is catapulted into a space and a time that correspond to a precise dramaturgical design. The medium, in this case, does not consist of a technological device but rather corresponds to a precise

set design and spatial construction, and to a dramaturgy of perception, defined in detail. The spectator's process of reception is, therefore, bound to be transformed: from a semantic level (making sense), related to a cognitive perception, it moves to a somatic level, related to a body perception (sense making) (Machon, 2016: 32-33).

The synergy between these two dimensions exalts the evocative capacity of the experiences, which targets the memory of the spectator's body, with the involvement of all the senses. In fact, the scenic poetics of Teatro de los Sentidos involves the creation of a sensory dramaturgy. In it, spectators, the *travellers*, build their journey, accompanied by the actors, the *inhabitants*, who transform themselves to some extent into those who provide them with their experience. The smells and sounds, both in *Pequeños ejercicios para el buen morir* and *El hilo de Ariadna*, accompany the spectator's journey to carry out a fusion between semantic and somatic perception, capable of creating an *alternative* space and time.

The space that houses the spectators' journey plays a key role. It must be suitable to transform itself into an environment that can be crossed and, in some cases, inhabited. They are meticulously conceived environments: the inhabitants of Teatro de los Sentidos are craftspeople skilled in the creation of spaces and objects, real worlds halfway between the dreamful and the imaginary. Along with being a refined sensory poetics, it is at the same time a poetics of the imaginary, a bridge between the reality and the environment in which the travellers are immersed. We find an example in *Dopo* (2015), a sensory installation by Gabriella Salvaterra, an artist and inhabitant of Teatro de los Sentidos. The set spaces built enable travellers to cross them until discovering the profound meaning of inhabiting them. The spectator has the feeling of entering an alternative world, in which "the ambiguity of the image, what it suggests and evokes" (Salvaterra, 2018) guides and stimulates their journey. It crosses different spaces: on the one hand, a space built and mediated by the guide of its inhabitants — i.e., the actors —, which, as well as showing, suggests; on the other, an inaccessible space concerning the intimacy of the experience built by the spectators on their journey.

Although the spatial dimension has a key role in immersive multisensory creations, the same happens with the temporal dimension, different and separated from the real dimension. A temporality that, as Belvis Pons suggests, refers to the Greek concept of *kairos*, "a time without a time" (Belvis Pons, 2016: 122). It does not follow a chronological sequence but is close to a temporality that belongs to the realms of imagination and evocation.

Moreover, as anticipated at the beginning, there is another type of the immersive paradigm that is not based on a multisensory poetics but is characterised by a text-based dramaturgy, developed in an itinerant dimension. We are referring in this case to all those experiences that propose the format of the exploratory path in an urban or landscape context, in which the story told through headphones by a recorded voice is the guide to the whole tour. Such is the case, for instance, of *Remote X*, a production by the Berlin group Rimini Protokoll, in which spectators tour the streets of a city guided by a recorded voice that transmits the instructions. In this case, the participatory

apparatus proposes the possibility of a escape from the outdoor space of the city: the scenic plot invites the spectators to look at the silent mechanisms through which the beat and ongoing pace of a city develops, or to reflect on the meaning of being guided by “a faceless voice”, or to wonder about the value of forming part of a group without ever having direct contact with it, as well as questioning themselves about the meaning of life. In other words, it seeks to focus the attention on all those characteristics that form part of the life of each human being, as well as the pace of the city: they exist and yet they often pass unnoticed. The spectators experience a participation that the directors of the group call “avatar participation” (Kaegi, 2016: 127). This engages the individual in taking a tour, guided by a recorded voice, and therefore being called on to confront the idea of materiality and artificiality, intrinsic to the device.

The second paradigm, the *interactive paradigm*, is defined as a discontinuous participation of the spectator, called for or voluntary, and, in some cases, only in parts or fragments of the event. In most creations spectators take on their conventional position, sitting in a seat in the stalls, and can be invited by the actors to take part in some of the scenic dynamics, with different modalities, provided by the participatory apparatus. What this particular typology of participatory paradigm highlights is the interaction between actor and spectator. Let us consider in this case the production *Flam*, by Roger Bernat / FFF, which explores different nuances of the world of emotions and in which spectators form part of the scenic dynamics in some moments of the production. There are cases in which the spectators literally replace the actors on stage, as in *Gob Squad's Kitchen. You've Never Had It So Good*, by the company Gob Squad. Here the spectators, chosen at random by the actors in the stalls, become the performers, constantly recorded by video cameras, which send the images to a monitor located on stage. In other cases, the spectators can influence the result of a process of choice. Such as the case of the production *Amleto*, by the company Collettivo Cinetico, during which the spectators have to choose the best candidate to embody Amleto: the intensity of the applause determines who wins the role.

In the aforementioned cases, what stands out is the will to highlight the contribution of the audience by making it explicit, and their action will intervene and determine (in some cases only apparently) the scenic writing of the performance. It is actually a process that takes consequences of a conatural trait of the theatre relationship to its most extreme in order to try to set out the necessary and indispensable involvement of the spectators and show, at the same time, the snares that are implicit in the stance of the individuals with respect to what they see on stage. It seems that the mechanisms intrinsic to the apparatus pose a silent question that cannot and must not be ignored: “Why do you participate?” In this way, a kind of short circuit takes place between vision, action and reaction, which is the necessary premise of the third paradigm, the spect-actorial.

Although in the *interactive paradigm* the contribution of the spectators is partial and framed within a broad dramaturgical design, in the *spect-actorial paradigm* the participation of the spectator is whole, as he or she is the sole



protagonist on stage, along with the other spectators. Also in the case that the production involves the presence of one or more performer, the action corresponds to the spectator, who has the task of completing the production through some specific questions or instructions. The spectators, following the different steps of the scenic dynamics, must be aware of the process that guides the action, while also having the possibility of plotting: whether they decide to take part in the dynamics proposed or they find them strange, the spectators are making a choice and by virtue of it they will contribute to the performance.

In this field, according to a semiotic reading of the part attributed to the spectators, they take on the dual active role of subject and recipient (Pedullà, 2021: 23), which also responds to the dual composition of the term and distinguishes them from both professional actors and non-professional actors or *non-actors*. The scenic apparatus has a precise dramaturgical design that adds substance thanks to the intervention of the spect-actor. The dramaturgical writing can be understood as a complex architecture based on the interventions of the spect-actors.

The spectator has in this way different and peculiar participatory experiences as a player (*Home Visit Europe*, by Rimini Protokoll; *Domini Públic*, by Roger Bernat / FFF), as a member of the parliament called to make decisions for the future of the citizens (*Pendiente de voto*, by Roger Bernat / FFF), or a former worker that revives the words of the working class struggles (*Nu-max-Fagor-plus*, by Roger Bernat / FFF). These are only some examples of the participatory situation experienced by the spect-actors, in which they have to confront the different situations to complete the performance.

In order to understand the work underpinning the dramaturgical design of the spect-actorial creations, it is useful to refer to the notion of net. The net, understood as web, is made up of knots, i.e., pages connected by links, which in their turn connect to other pages. A net can be linear, with aligned knots, or can have binary and non-binary hierarchical systems, according to the different possibilities of the actions imagined. The arrangement of many of the spect-actorial productions is similar to the model of the net, in which articulated structures create the texture of the apparatus, which advances by opening or closing, depending on the spectator's response or reaction. The scenic apparatuses derive from the format of the digital nets to create and imagine actions and relationships, which due to their form and content differ from the usual face-to-face relations. It is, in short, about digital relationships, mediated by an apparatus that very often isolates the participants, and expresses the mutation of contemporary societies in which the alternative spaces to weave relationships, such the social media, prevail.

In this respect, the work of conceiving web spaces always takes on greater importance, arranging the overall structure of the spaces and the particular type of enjoyment of the user: in other words, it has to create an architecture of the experience that provides for the main actions to be developed, in which the separation between real space and virtual space loses its meaning: “[...] there is no such thing as a separate web. Information has gone mobile and has bled into physical space: cross-channel ecology is



where pseudo-modernism meets postdigital, producing a new need for place and meaning” (Resmini, 2012).

The role of information architecture, as Andrea Resmini notes, consists of the creation of web spaces that are not separated from reality (i.e., virtual) but are rather hybrid, inevitably mixed with the materiality of the real.

Another tangible process in the spect-actorial experience is that they have hybrid spatial dimensions, in which each component is necessary for the development of the performance, which predict modes of involvement, contents, actions and possible interactions between the spectators. The apparatus takes on a function and a meaning when it enters into relationship with the spectators, i.e., when a presupposed action results in the scenic writing of the performance.

According to this modality, the dramaturgical process transforms itself: it takes on the traits of an architecture finalised with the user’s participation, in which the coexistence of different spaces and times is anticipated: those programmed by the apparatus and, at the same time, those present in the external reality of the scenic event.

The action of the spectators responds to a plan already programmed by the apparatus, where the space for free choice by the participant is minimal. The spectators can decide not to take an active part: the risk exists, albeit very rare, that they will make this decision. In this process, the spectators take on the role of mere executors:

The apparent opposite of creating positions of (reasonably) informed agency for participants is to create positions in which their actions are manipulated, because they cannot be said to have sufficient information to intend the consequences of their actions. The result might be to create experiences, but not experiences of choice [...] (White, 2013: 62).

Gareth White highlights an interesting ambiguity: the experience produced by a stage conceived as an apparatus is not the result of its free choice but seems guided by a mechanism that is increasingly different. At the beginning, spectators believe they can choose freely but in the course of the performance they realise that they are a mere cog in a system that already presupposes their action (they know what but not how). It is in this minimal space where the most interesting aspects of a form of “manipulated action” are framed.

Of special note among the possible readings of the manipulating function of the apparatus is one that relates it to a sophisticated power system. In this respect, Óscar Cornago, resuming Maurizio Lazzarato’s thesis on the forms of subordination to the machines, distinguishes a “social subjection”. He refers to the identification of each participant, according to their responses, which shape their role, their work, their political positions, and so on, and the “mechanical” or “molecular” servitude that acts on the pre-individual relations (Cornago, 2016: 200).

As Lazzarato points out, “the mechanical servitude confers on capitalism a kind of omni-power, as it crosses the roles, functions and meanings

through which individuals recognise and align themselves” (Lazzarato, 2008: 115).

This mechanism, characterised by the interaction of individuals in society, is materialised at a scenic level when the spectators accept the rules of the theatre game. They follow the steps marked by the participatory apparatus, and find in this procedure an implicit logic. It is likely that, while the spectators carry out the instructions, they realise that the apparatuses have a manipulating nature. This is one of the most interesting and subversive aspects of the participatory apparatuses.

The nature of manipulation of the apparatus should be considered in the field of the theatre game, based on some given rules that lead the spectators to temporarily assume a role in which they realise that they are being led. Participants, in this way, must face doubts and questions: in other words, the apparatus challenges their role as spectators and makes them question the nature of their participation. In that moment, the spectators, aware of the manipulating logic to which they are subordinated, can move away from it and make way for the sphere of critical thought. We are therefore dealing with participatory apparatuses that, along with encompassing instruments for their very criticism, enable the spectator to experience the complexity of the corresponding role, which Roberto Fratini defines as *amletico* (Fratini, 2017).

From this point of view, the apparatus appears as an instrument endowed with endless consequences and that has very different participatory modalities, along with different possibilities of intervention by the spectators.

The most interesting aspect is not whether the spectators decide to participate in the scenic dynamics — which does not happen in most cases — but that they realise the manipulative nature of the scenic apparatuses, through the instrument of the “heterodirection”: the questions posed to the participants of *Domini Públic* or the instructions in *Home Visit Europe* offer options that to some extent had been already anticipated, in which the spect-actor has to choose which position to assume and how to adhere to the participatory dynamics. The implicit procedure aspires to foster a conscious and critical viewpoint by the spectators, who, aware of being subject to a mechanism that governs them, feel stimulated to acknowledge analogous procedures of manipulation present in social and collective life. In other words, the action of the spect-actor does not only influence the scenic development but contributes to creating a critical view in those who are both creators and observers. In the case of the spect-actorial paradigm, the participation of the spectator does not coincide with an act of liberation or redemption but rather responds to an exaltation of the question indicated in the interactive paradigm: the spect-actors are called on to ask why they participate and to question themselves as “good executors of the norm”.

The paradigmatic models analysed envisage that the spectators are not previously ready for what will happen to them in the performance but discover the dynamic during it.

However, it is different in the creations that belong to the *participated paradigm*: in most cases, the spectator not only participates in the scenic

dynamics but also in the process of creation that precedes the performance. This mainly occurs when the companies organise workshops. As they are participated events, it would be most appropriate to speak of participated projects, which include both workshops and the final scenic event.

One of the peculiarities of this paradigm does not lie in the fact of disorienting or displacing the spectator — a characteristic of the paradigms previously analysed — but aspires to re-establish a visible relationship between actor, spectator and community of reference. The participated paradigm manages to be representative of productions and tours of so-called *social theatre*, in which theatre manages to be an active instrument in the involvement of marginal subjects or in uncomfortable situations, such as in theatre in prisons, or in the field of physical and psychical marginalisation.

Among the modalities of participated involvement we find the workshops, which seek to unite a group of different people through the joint work between the participants and the artists of the companies, to eventually make a final production. An example of this, among the most recent productions in the Italian theatre panorama, is the project *Futuri Maestri* by the Teatro dell'Argine. A creative work that lasted two years, from 2015 to 2017, during which thousands of young people wrote the words of the future. The project ended with a show of “thousands of white voices” in which young people explained “their idea of the future” (Teatro dell'Argine, 2017).

### Participatory Devices: An Invitation to Exit

It seems clear that there are different modalities of practising, articulating and writing the participation of the spectator: this is characterised by being an instrument with a format capable of playing with the position and role of the spectator.

As we have analysed, the notions of *apparatus*, *net* and *architecture* enable us to focus some of the main modes of practising participation, defined according to some participatory paradigms. The apparatus originates the overall design of each event and appears with different modalities. It is an arrangement similar to the model of the net, which advances by opening or closing, according to the reaction of the spectator. In this way, the overall structure of the spaces and the particular type of enjoyment of the users are anticipated through the creation of an architecture of participation.

In the spect-actorial paradigm, as we have analysed, the participation understood according to the notions of net and architecture is more apparent. In fact, the spectators become the sole protagonists: they are responsible for carrying out the dynamics proposed following the instructions given. In the immersive paradigm, in contrast, the role of the spectators is that of travellers who are guided by the actor *inhabitant* through an intimate journey of discovery and are invited to re-read the reality surrounding them. Here, the apparatus involves a design articulated through the construction of a poetics of the senses, and of the imaginary in the case of multisensory creations; and a re-writing and re-reading of reality when they are immersive-itinerant performances. In the interactive paradigm, the spectator is one of the decisive

cogs to influence and modify the scenic dynamics and make the relationship established between the audience in the stalls and the actors on stage visible. In contrast, the spectator takes part in the dramaturgical process and also in the realisation of the final performance.

Thus, it is possible to distinguish between a *participated theatre*, in which the participation of the spectator must include the project and scenic field, and a *participatory theatre*, in which the participation of the spectator is random or complete, but in any case the spectator discovers the participatory dynamics during the scenic event. In this way, the participation, connatural to the theatre relationships, becomes the element that demands the responsibility of the individual, who is invited to take charge of theatre.

The brief excursus of the participatory paradigms shows how the format of participation produces a change in the status of the spectator, trying to fill the ambiguity innate to the duality of the term *spect-actor*. In other words, participatory apparatuses exalt the issue and the urgency of the “exit” of the spectators from themselves:

Theatre is not like football, it is something else as a place of exit. Theatre has an ancient magic because it was the first intervention of man after the game; and it is a brother of poetry, as a “ruled game” played with individual mastery, to the point of becoming memorable. [...] It is the marvel of exiting (Meldolesi, 2008: 311, 312).

Claudio Meldolesi’s words, although they refer to the experience of theatre in prison, invite us to reflect deeply on the key role of theatre in society. They seem prophetic as they show the centrality of theatre as a place of exit while suggesting, according to our perspective, how difficult the task of the spectators is, even more evident in the participatory practices: exiting themselves and not returning.



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