

The Transmission and Reception of the Values of the Ancient Greek Culture in Theater via "Digital Dialogue"

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Abstract¹

Our age is characterized by the instantaneous transmission of information and the redefinition of distances and boundaries of human relationships and communication. Theater, as a "sensitive indicator of reality", does not remain unaffected, but seeks new ways of expressing the "timelessness" and "universality" which brings viewer's consciousness. Dialogue as a key feature of theater, through the conversation of the actors in the context of the dramatic text, as well as through the bidirectional communication between actors and spectators, influences and is influenced in production, output and reception of the performance, by the introduction of digital media, new technologies, even of Artificial Intelligence. "Old" values such as democracy, equality, equity, freedom and peace find new ways of emerging and updating through dialogue into a new reality between the transmitter and receiver of the "digital age". The creation and reception of messages is happening with different rhythms and new ways, eliminating the space-time distances and shaping this hybrid form of theater that we call "Digital Drama".

Keywords: dialogue, theatre communication, values, digital drama

The values and messages that are processed, cause conflicts and are promoted through ancient drama, as pointed out by Theodore Grammatas, are the pretext that will offer viewers "*the opportunity to try and succeed in overcoming the here / now of their existence and to reach the elsewhere / past of the myth*" (Grammatas, 2011: 40). Still, how does this transcendence change and how much is it affected when the "here and now" of the modern viewer concerns the present age of information, the abolition of space-time distances and the redefining of the boundaries of human relations?

Let us attempt to approach this transcendence by having the dialogue as a central axis, that is, one of the basic structural characteristics of the ancient drama. Let us try to approach the dialogue in "then and now", both in the texts and in the theatrical performances, but also in the light of the special and unique theatrical communication.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes man from other animals through the ability of speech, pointing out that "*the simple voice expresses only sadness and pleasure. This is the reason why it exists in all animals. [...] The purpose of the speech, however, is to clarify what is beneficial and what is harmful, and therefore what is right and what is wrong. This is, in fact, what distinguishes man from other animals*" (Aristotle, *Politics* A 2. 1252 b27 – 1253 a 38). Simultaneously, in his *Poetics*, when referring to the dialogue, in which

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Aeschylus was the first who gave a leading role in the ancient tragedy, he mentions the correctness of the use of the iambic meter, proving its daily use in conversations between people (Aristotle, Poetics, 1449 α 4). Finally, in his *Rhetoric* he characterizes the iambic as the daily speech of the Athenian citizens (Aristotle, Rhetoric C. 8.1408 32).

We can make a "timeless" leap into the current reality of the modern viewer. First of all, it is important to remember that the theater was considered the basic educational tool for the ancient Greek citizens and bearing in mind that the main goal was the participation of the spectators in the plays "by means of pity and fear in order to lead to the "catharsis" through the reception of the messages, values and patterns of behaviour (Grammatas, 2011: 67-68). The modern viewer is fully acquainted with the new reality of transmitter and receiver of the "digital age" and "social networks". On the one hand, he has learned to create and on the other to receive messages with different rhythms and new media, eliminating the distances of space and time (Prensky, 2001: 4) and greatly remodelling his linguistic communication and consequently the dialogue.

Values such as democracy, equality, equity, freedom and peace are looking for new ways to highlight and update their "timelessness" and "universality". The Theater as a sensitive indicator of reality does not remain unaffected, but instead constantly seeks new ways to capture and shape the needs of modern society and play its educational role (Manovich, 2009: 319-331) through the experiential reality, the stage depiction and the bidirectional communication.

In this context, the research and cultural programme "Ancient Drama & Digital Age Tragedy 2.0" took place at the Michael Cacoyannis Foundation in October 2018, in the framework of the Act: "Establishment and Promotion of International Institutions of Contemporary Culture in Attica". Among others, the program sought to ask questions by making comparisons between the Dance of Ancient Tragedy and Technological Pluralism, but also between Ancient Masks and Avatars. Among the activities of the Program was the performance "Prometheia", a multimedia adaptation of the myth of Prometheus in which fire is replaced by digital technology². "Prometheus is now free and wandering. The gods are dead. After giving the (fire) technology to the people, during his imprisonment on the rock, he observes them: with the (fire) technology they try to live well, to exceed the limits, to reach the further. They feel omnipotent. They are players and toys, and the game of the world continues"³.

At this point, it would be useful to make a brief reference to theatrical communication, the "dialectic of the text" and the "dialectic of the play" (Grammatas, 2017: 61-69) so that the influence from the rapid evolution of technologies and digital achievements can be more clearly seen. Then we can refer more specifically to the remodelling and redefinition of "dialogue" today. In other words, the function of theatrical communication (Wells, 1970: 25) must be understood in the light of the three communication relations created between a playwright and a text addressed to a spectator, between a director and a writer, and finally between an actor and a spectator. So we see that the theatrical communication, and consequently the "dialogue" that develops, is multidimensional.

The dialogue between actors, between director and actor, but also between actors and viewers is also influenced by the new possibilities of digital media (Chapple & Kattenbelt, 2006: 12-15). The prevailing conditions due to the pandemic of the new coronavirus SarsCov-2 accelerated changes that might possibly take place in the theater in the future (Timplalex, 2020: 43-54). Theatrical productions that were scheduled to be performed during the previous two years took place via live streaming. Moreover, other plays were

² Tsiriyiotaki, E. (2018). "Tragedy 2.0: Ancient Drama and Digital Age at MCF". <https://www.ertnews.gr/eidiseis/politismos/tragedy-2-0-archaio-drama-kai-psifiaki-epochi-sto-imk/> [in Greek]

Kriou, M. (2018). "Ancient Drama is transferred to the digital age". https://www.athinorama.gr/theatre/2530796/to_arxaio_drama_metaferetai_stin_psifiaki_epoxi/ [in Greek]

³ Excerpt from the Press Release of the Michael Cacoyannis Foundation for the promotion of this action.

designed during the pandemic for this purpose and under this online condition⁴. The result was sometimes reminiscent of cinematography and other times of simple video recording, each of them with its own distinct features that are not required to be analyzed at this point (Dunne, 2021). Furthermore, it is important to note that the audience quickly became accustomed to this way of transmitting the theatrical plays. However, even if the staged message may catalyze distances via the internet and reach the most geographically distant viewer, are we able to talk about bidirectional theatrical communication? Nevertheless, internet speech and distance communication are an indisputable reality (Patsalidis, 2020). Undoubtedly, this reality affects the way people around the world receive, process and transmit messages. The influence of the meaning of the previously mentioned universal and timeless values is expected.

We observe that the utilization of the most advanced technologies can affect the production, but also the operation of the dialogue in the theatrical texts. It is worth starting with a flashback as far back as 1920, when the Czech writer Karel Capek first used the word "robot", which has since been associated with his name, in his work "R.U.R: Rossum's Universal Robots" (Roberts, 2006: 168). It is a "new utopian collective drama" as he calls it, narrating the construction by man-scientist of hundreds of thousands of robots with artificial intelligence, which dominate/obsess the world and wipe out the human race (Christoforou & Müller, 2016: 237-238).

One hundred years later, his compatriot playwright David Kostak oversees the first play written by Artificial Intelligence, entitled "AI: When a Robot Writes a Play", which premieres on February 26, 2021⁵. The story of the theatre play is about a robot that goes out into the world to learn about society, human emotions and death. The text was created by the Artificial Intelligence system GPT-2⁶ developed by Elon Musk's company OpenAi⁷ and it is the first result of the THEaiTRE research project. The interesting part of this project is that a huge amount of data retrieved from the internet was used; it included theatrical texts of the world repertoire and simple dialogues between everyday people which developed on social networking platforms (Davis, 2021).

The structure of the theatrical text seems to have been based on the concept of dialogue. Initially, two interactive phrases were given to the system, which enriched them through an algorithm. During the project, the researchers noticed the absence of a logical plot in many parts of the script. Also, the algorithm showed that sometimes it could not distinguish the difference between male and female and between man and robot (Rosa et al., 2021: 60). The reason for this is that artificial intelligence programs, although highly advanced, within their many, varied and impressive capabilities, are still unable to grasp and decode the true meaning of words and sentences (Sakaguchi, Le Bras, Bhagavatula & Choi, 2020: 8738-8739). They can distinguish symbols, they can use them to construct groups of symbols that are recognizable (words) and have "noticed" that they are often used, but are not able to make sense of them (Hao, 2021). At this point, it would be useful refer once again to Aristotle and the characteristics he noted that make man "a social being". Among them, there is the ability not to produce sounds, but to give meaning to them, to determine the useful and the harmful, the fair and the unfair, the good and the bad (Aristotle, *Politics* A 2. 1252 b27 – 1253 a 38).

⁴ Indicatively, we mention the first performance of the Research Stage of the National Theater of Greece, the "Medea" by Euripides (Medea's Song) directed by Martha Fritzila. The performance started on January 10, 2021 and was designed to be exclusively livestreaming. <https://www.n-t.gr/el/events/oldevents/Medea>

⁵ Official website of the project: <https://theaitre.com/>.

⁶ More about GPT-2 language model:

Radford, A., Wu, J., Child, R., Luan, D., Amodei, D., & Sutskever, I. (2019). Language models are unsupervised multitask learners. *OpenAI blog*, 1(8), 9.

https://cdn.openai.com/better-language-models/language_models_are_unsupervised_multitask_arners.pdf

Johnson, K. (2019). "OpenAI releases curtailed version of GPT-2 language model". *Venture Beat*, August 20, 2019

<https://venturebeat.com/2019/08/20/openai-releases-curtailed-version-of-gpt-2-language-model/>

⁷ Official website of the company: <https://openai.com/>

However, the first play "written" by artificial intelligence, developed in eight scenes, with two faces, is a reality as in this first attempt human intervention was eventually limited to 8-10% (Rosa et al., 2021: 60-62). As science advances and the possibilities of Artificial Intelligence increase and evolve, the number of these works will also increase, thus creating a new reality for the first of the previously mentioned theatrical communication relationships between author and theatrical text, intended to be performed in front of spectators.

The transition to the "elsewhere and the past" presupposes the knowledge and understanding of the "here and now". Social media, distance communication platforms and the constant evolution of the possibilities of technologies and digital media create a new reality, a new here and a new now that inevitably not only transforms and reshapes the concept of dialogue, but also the concept of communication in general (Grammatas, 2015: 624-627). Communication in turn, will affect the transmission and reception of values. All the data and reflections, as developed in the context of this study, make necessary a rudimentary reference to "Digital Drama", this hybrid form of theater first introduced by Janet Murray in her book "Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace". This is essentially the new form of drama that is still under development and will continue to evolve its capabilities in parallel with the technological tools. It is a new interactive way of creating, editing, presenting and sharing the theatrical experience through the use of the possibilities of digital media and New Technologies. Digital Drama's development requires the use of the internet and multimedia, as - according to Murray- it focuses on the production of a play using sources from the Internet, its recording on digital video and its enrichment with other techniques provided by Information and Communication Technologies, such as music, effects, animation, and even digital storytelling (Murray, 1997: 271). Therefore, through the many and different possibilities provided by digital technologies and the internet, we can create an entire theatrical performance, even without the physical presence of actors or their replacement by avatars.

In summary, the modern age of rapid development of new technologies and the internet renews and reshapes art, communication, education, but also society in general. Timeless and universal values, as expressed in the Ancient Greek Culture, find new ways to exist today. Dialogue -as the dominant way of people's communication in any form- is also changing. The Theater as a mirror of society is not unaffected. Actors from different parts of the world can play together in real time, while the audience can see their performance as if they are really in front of it. This gives a new dimension to the development of relationships and social networking that are part of the essence of Theatre. However, even if the changes that take place are serious, even if Artificial Intelligence succeeded in writing its first Theatrical Play, technology cannot intervene in the core of this complex cultural phenomenon that we call "Theater". Finally, technology cannot alter the communication codes or replace the human need for live and bidirectional communication.



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