

From Argentina: Periferal Objects

By Halima Tahan

Although I am going to refer to the Argentine group **Periférico de Objetos** (Peripheral Objects), I want to mention that in South America there are a great many manifestations – many of which are very interesting and worthwhile– that from the aesthetic-ideological viewpoint have faced long and risky searches when it comes time to produce their words that transgress the conventional boundaries of their trade. One can mention the Colombian group **Mapa teatro** and its excellent *Proyecto Prometeo*, the Brazilian **Teatro da Vertigem** whose latest production, *Territórios do rio* was the result of a hard and long investigation.

Basically self-reflexive and interartistic, these “works” present scenic configurations of great complexity, resorting to a principle of “polyhedral composition” in the interpretation.

Faced with the shifting geography of scenic contemporaneity, I consider that **a critic’s job** is submitted to tremors and risks, to the same upsets and vicissitudes as its object of attention.

He or she also needs time to investigate and reflect in order to be able to articulate his or her own strategies to broach and respond to the challenges of “inventing” knowledge, in the perspective of keeping updated a space for conversation with the creators of the contemporary scene.

Even though it is perfectly natural that new criticism corresponds to these new theatricalities, one must corroborate in practice how this process is carried out in specific situations, where its productions come to life, and how the flow of this new “criticism” circulates: what are the factors that stimulate it and what are those that limit it. The Seoul conference is an exceptional place for us to analyze these and other questions together.

PERIPHERAL LOCATIONS / CHANGES OF PERSPECTIVE

For Peripheral Objects –a canonical group of reference in Argentine theater– being peripheral alludes to a geography of limits, to the place of the inappropriate, to a particular way of *seeing* things that implies the decentering of view –an oblique view fighting to make visible “that which culturally can in no way or under any pretext become so.”

The initial efforts of the group were dedicated to searching for “the possibility of decentering the view in the theater of objects, of leaving behind certain established and well-travelled codes ... of taking responsibility for what what happening on stage” by showing the manipulators as “opinion agents of their own work.” Doing this they managed to make people and dolls have the same dramatic level on stage; the manipulator is not only shown, thereby making the sham obvious, but he is also pragmatically incorporated into the scene.

For those in the periphery there is a scenic task that belongs to the object “when in the role it fulfills, an actor could not do it any better.” The actor yields to the object, fiction reaches another dimension through this performance. The question is inverted when the actor executes a dramatic action because he has more possibilities than the object: thus protagonism between subject and object is shared and the dialectic between the two becomes more complex for both.¹

At the heart of the creative process put into motion by this theatrical group, even from its very beginnings, there is an exploration of the link between the manipulator and his object. From the tension produced between the two tied together by an invisible cord, from a particular *entre-deux* they generate emerges the theatricality proposed by the troupe that combines two aspects which are, in principle, contradictory: the beautiful and the sinister. Here beauty is presented in a style unto Rilke as the beginning of something terrible,

“something terrible that we can still withstand” and the sinister, the bearer of mystery and incomprehensible enigmas, appears as a condition and the very limit of beauty.

Gastón Baty wonders about the limits between the work of an actor and that of the puppet –where does the limit of the actor stop and that of the object begin? It was there, in this ambiguous interregnum, this frontier zone, that *El Periférico* began to seek new procedures and strategies.

But what procedures, what kind of operations to carry out in order to obtain their scenic task? *El Periférico* sets in motion a system of withdrawals and variations; the relationships that a traditional theater of objects proposes (for example, the stable link between the manipulator and his object, between the manipulator and the public) are all submitted by the group to a game of continuous variation whose scenic possibilities nourish each other, generally speaking, and the constructive principle of their theatrical proposals. This system of withdrawals is compensated for by an intense dramatic movement generating new scenic options.

Among this repertory of objects made by this collective we can find those that can be classified as: found, risky, inexorable ... and a recognizable hierarchy: the dolls, for example, exercise a powerful fascination in the group and occupy a preponderant place. Graceful and powerful, according to their own devotees, they possess a great dramaticity that “emerges from their anthropomorphism, making possible an instantaneous evocation of the human and the real;” associated with paradise lost of childhood, recognizable and close to us, they bring a very special charge to the scene. They are antique porcelain dolls that belonged to very old people or to those who are no longer around; “they have a particular way of transmitting time and death.” The fact that the object is found and is incorporated into the scene for its artistic use without any modification carries a fundamental importance. The real is incorporated into the space of fiction and from which stems the challenge.²

The Route Taken

The trajectory of the group has recognizable phases: the first goes from '89 to '95 and can be described as concentrating on producing small format shows; the second, since '95 to 2002, can be characterized by its expansion; and the third by its international projection in which the group opens up and each one of its members begins to generate his or her own productions in addition to continuing with the group itself.*

The appearance of *El Periférico de Objetos* with Alfred Jarry in the Buenos Aires theatrical arena was not fortuitous. Having left behind the norms and producing on the margins of the legitimate zone for the great theater of the epoch marked affinities with the iconoclastic Jarry, who they put on stage in *Ubu Rey* (1990). Although not as radically as our famous precursor, the group presented new things to the local scene: it broadened the boundaries of the theater of objects by incorporating these from a new perspective and also by opening this type of theater to adults.³

In *El hombre en la arena*, despite the identity of titles, this story by Hoffman was elaborated in a fragmented form. During rehearsals, this central reading began acquiring a peripheral reading: that of Sigmund Freud.

It was this work by Freud on Hoffman's story, Veronese (one of the directors) says, that wound up “driving the action and moving it away from the literary event.” Finally, the theatrical production turned out to be a witches' sabbath, a ritual of interment and disinterment of characters that fought to reach the surface of a huge box of dirt that was the

* Here we refer to some of the works of the first and second phases that fit what we are positing.

stage setting” while the actors-manipulators, dressed in black, mournfully marked their theatrical actions.⁴

In the spectators’ imaginary the association of the tragic years of repression inevitably loomed. The stage showed the ominous, *that which* had been jealously hidden during the years of terror in Argentina. The creators had no explicit intentionality in this respect, but “since the sinister was an element we lived with during those years,” the *Periféricos* state, “it is impossible for these signs to be read any other way in Argentina.”⁵

The indirect theatricalization of the traumatic “dirty war” during the military dictatorship hangs reality in suspension, opens a gap, and makes evident the symbolic debt associated with the inversion of the traditional funeral rites. The victims return and keep returning until they are given the dignified burial they deserve, until they find a place in historical memory, incorporating into it the traumatism of these deaths.

Their next production, *Cámara Gesell* (1994) showed a relevant change: the canonical authorial references gave way to the writing of Daniel Veronese, to a story he defines as “microsocial” comprised of “brief and cruel” scenes. In *Cámara Gesell* the modalities of evil are investigated as are their manifestations in what is familiar and in daily life. The sinister expands again. This time, the objects and the manipulators are joined by an actress who plays the role of Tomás, the child protagonist probed and experimented on through the entire piece. Up until this piece, one could speak of small format spectacles, but from here on, the group began another stage.

In the **second stage** of the road taken by *El Periférico* space, content, and the interpretative possibilities are enlarged. This was achieved by multiplying those who speak onstage, by incorporating the projection of images, and by intensifying the participation of the actors. The scene thus become more complex and gains plasticity and movement. The visual richness of the spectacle is no longer abstract, as the images do not make the scene unreal but rather accentuate its materialness.

Máquina Hamlet (1995) was a bursting out: space was ostensibly broadened, and in addition to the small dolls –that represent the drama of Hamlet- others, very large ones, are added that duplicate the image of the actors themselves. The theater reproduces itself, *Periférico* is included in the scene by means of a small screen with its name written on it and in which the same objects are represented over and over and over as they get smaller and smaller. The projection of images and texts in off accentuate the heterogeneity of this staging of Heiner Müller by updating it peripherally. The radical in Müller’s work is exacerbated here; for the group, staging Müller was a political decision, but, before everything else, it was a “decision of peripheral aesthetics” since the German author’s poetic and ideological seekings identify him with this.

The system of creation that *El Periférico* sets into motion from the sinister is found in *Zoedipous*, a good sample of their efficacy, since in this staging, the objects have a special intensity having to do with a “perturbing spirit.” The myth of Oedipus in a peripheral version needed a long route before coming into being; they began with Sophocles who was displaced by other readings; finally, the “Kafkain particularity pushed by Deleuze and Guattari” was what sent them “to the Oedipic place with total naturalness.” Delving into the myth meant broadening the repertory of objects and updating one of the basic questions of the team: “how will the public react to an object radically perturbed and taken out of its role and brutally exposed on stage?”. During the process of working a disquieting alternative appeared: “the possibility of manipulating organic matter.” In *Zoedipous* animals are onstage: a live chicken and a dead one (one ready to cook which the actors ate onstage) as well as blown up projections of insects which incisively contributed to the the overall anxiety.⁷

The barroque, now recognizable in certain recurring traits in these peripheral stagings, grew in *Máquina Hamlet* and culminated in *Monteverdi método bélico* (*M.M.B.*, for short), the last group work based on the madrigals of Monteverdi and of Segismondo D'India. In the *règie* of this peripheral opera, technology plays a fundamental role with regard to the objects whose repertory acknowledges the impact of this radical change. The objects have increased and demand large scenic places for their incorporation (in *M.M.B.* there is a 4-meter tall doll) and making them move requires a precise operating technique. The peripheral opera –terrain in which, this group enters for the first time- presents traits of excess and chaos, violence and provocation which generate shrill counterpoints and unexpected lapses. The second stage of *El Periférico de Objetos* culminates in this megaspectacle, encouraged on by a heretical force, the very force that many years earlier united this group in a small, peripheral theater in Buenos Aires to stage the powerful *Ubu*.

If, as we said before, the relation between subject and object is central in the aesthetic-ideological production of this group, it should be observed more closely. This relationship – with strong cultural, philosophical and psychoanalytical connotations- transcends the relationship between the manipulator and theatrical objects. This relationship, inscribed in the name of the troupe, marks its identity: *El Periférico de Objetos* (The Periphery of Objects).

The “peripheral” instance indicates, among other things, the decentered place from which one views, an oblique view that struggles to make visible what is culturally prohibited; and then there are the “objects” that, upon being named, are subjectively instituted. Object or thing viewed from a frontal perspective appears clearly in front of us, but submitted to a peripheral view that divides up and refracts into multiple shadows and reflections. The peripheral view sets into motion the machine of desire that impregnates and distorts it, making it confusing and upsetting.

Why, fundamentally, should this peripheral proposal be inscribed in the new theatricalities which are the subject of this conference?

Let us return to the object, the thing. The scenic game is not set into action by an absence (as is the paradigmatic case of Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*) but by a presence. The object is exposed in all its materiality. For example, in the opera *Monteverdi Método Bélico*, this is accentuated even more; the objects became technological and some were of gigantic proportions –the corporeal machines realizing disruptive trajectories; there is violence, chaos and pornography on stage. As a matter of fact, this piece breaks with all classic rules that stipulate the omission of the object or terrifying event. It is through exhibition itself that the object makes “visible its own indifferent and arbitrary character.”⁸ It is the proximity not the absence of the Thing, as in *Godot*, which stirs up uneasiness, perturbation, anguish, because the *Thing in itself* materializes emptiness. The object can function charismatically or repulsively, but more than due to the properties of the object, this difference has to do with the place it holds in the symbolic order.⁹ The obscene and ominous eminent in peripheral productions have to do with the presence of an “inert, non dialectizable dimension” to the point of being considered that the theater proposed by *El Periférico* simply dramatized the space of the inert and repulsive presence.*

* This text is accompanied by images of the works referred to herein.

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Notes

1 María Castillo, “Aquí están, esto dicen”, interview, en *Teatro al Sur* N°3, Bs.As., 1995.

2 Idem.

3 Emilio García Wehbi was in charge of adapting *Ubu Rey*; the design of the dolls and direction of the staging of the work was by A. Jarry.

4 Idem.

5 Daniel Veronese, “Periférico de Objetos...” in *Teatro al Sur*, N°5, Bs.As., 1995, p.30.

6 Veronese, Op. cit., p. 31.

7 Veronese, Op. cit., p. 32.

8 Zizek, Slavoj, *Mirando al sesgo* p. 238.

9 Idem, p. 239.