The Rupture that Shakes the Institution: The Mute Character in the Utopia of Performance

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We understand manifestations of muteness in today's capitalist mise en scène – that keeps and encourages the status of exception (of an artwork) via mechanisms of management, surveillance, administration, classification and selection – as a consequence of the depoliticisation of life. Manifestations of muteness in the realm of performance might mean resistance against the existing. However, we are not interested in the mute character as a potential stage(d) representation of the excluded ones, but as a factor able to influence the opening of a space in which silenced voices can be heard.

Staging and performing the mute character go hand in hand with a series of questions: How do we open the delimited stage space? How do we establish the conditions for the muted voices to be heard, while at the same time avoiding the trap of representation? How do we gain the space-time of speaking? How do we act outside of the institutional paradigm? And how do we face the audience's muteness? The article addresses these questions through a fragmented analysis, starting from the premise that the mute character might make a rupture in the spectacle's canon of speaking at any cost, which exactly proves the mute character's performative potential that is able to politicise a stage situation, and also takes effect beyond the very performance.

The article is divided into six sections: Muteness as a performed gesture; The redundant acting body; Beckett's absurd: the garrulousness of muteness; The space beyond: a space of excess; The overturn of the dramatic into self-reflection; Toward conclusions: the need to articulate speech in common.

Two performances are in focus: Via Negativa's *Last Rehearsal for the Generation* and Simona Semenič's *The Second Time.* Premièred in 2014, both have foundations for thinking the mute character in the context of institutional critique.

The institutional critique in *Last Rehearsal for the Generation* takes its path by reversing the role, function and position of the actor/actress, by intentionally confronting

performing and acting paradigms, by layering both cognitive and sensible inputs for such critique, and by rethinking the performers' own position within the existing conditions. Silent characters in that context draw attention to the key importance of speaking, of public articulation of thought and critique, of the possibility of acts that follow a reflection.

"No longer a dramatic theatre text", *The Second Time* has the paradoxical effect of discouraging the spectator's view (gaze) from what should be theatre as a spectacle complex based on a dramatic text; rooted in the text, the performance "redirects" or converts that view into a sensation of contemplative nature, into, so to speak, a live reflection: it is intentionally encouraged, as the spectators' are placed into a situation of having to read the text individually, whether silently or aloud.

The mute character, similar to Samuel Beckett's "internally" garrulous figure, makes an incision into the existing without speaking. He/she breaks its expected, protocolar streams, thus opening a space of critique as a multidimensional, schizophrenic space, a space not only here and now, but also there and beyond. The muteness redirects the focus from the verbal to the language of body, movement and dance and, at the same time, paradoxically, distracts the attention from the image, relativises it, relativising the very gesture of watching, which is a major feature of the subversion of the canonised theatre format (of formatted, conventional watching and the domination of visual language).

Only when the performance somehow establishes/anticipates the absence of *ἀρχή* (manifestations of domination, governance), when it loosens or breaks down the convention, it thus enables a dimension of self-determination of everybody (when the performance offers cues for the self-establishing of its co-participant, when it is possible to actively place oneself into it – not only watching it or "participating" following the instructions of a superior instance), only then is it possible to qualitatively (politically) and not just symbolically (artistically) switch from the political impotence (muteness) of representation into the political language of a live event – the language unavoidably perpetuated across the space-time of such a performance. Then, we are certainly not (only) in theatre anymore.

The rupture of muteness takes effect in all directions and triggers a politicisation of the situation in the performance and beyond it. The *space beyond*, affirmed in such a situation, is a space of barbarianism, of excess, a space outside of the (neo) liberal paradigm of the culture industry (Theodor Adorno), outside of the police order (Jacques Rancière); it is a space of utopia. The *utopia of performance* – what we experience during it and what we take with us upon leaving it – *is realised in schizophrenia as a possibility of thought*, in the space-time of a cut that moves us away

– between fragments of the (performed) internal split of its protagonists – from the perversion of spectacle. In order to exempt ourselves from the spectacle's economy, we have to be able to enter the utopia of performance and co-create it, too. The condition for that is to speak, with our voice and bodies.