

REVIEW

by

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of the PhD thesis by SNEJANKA MIHAYLOVA

**“Theater of Thought: Intersection Between Philosophy, Theater and
Performative Arts Practice”**

PhD in Philosophy Taught in English Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski

Snejanka Mihaylova’s thesis “Theater of Thought: The Intersection of Philosophy, Theater & Performative Arts Practice” is a well-structured and ambitious interdisciplinary study aiming to investigate connections between theatre and philosophy through the notions of acoustic thought and collective thinking. It offers a view of these as an alternative form of theatre and performance which can be understood as a philosophical practice in the specific context of Italian feminism in the second half of the 20th century. A third, hermeneutic, dimension concerns the recollection of absent voices and underscores the importance of the collective thinking for self-transformation and bringing about societal changes.

The argument is complex and, as the author introduces her term “theatre of thought” to denote a process, independent of the act of staging and mise-en-scene, it calls for a philosophical gestalt switch to enable a re-consideration of the fundamental idea of theatre and performance accepted by the theatre studies perspective. Such a term necessarily establishes the thesis as a predominantly situated within the philosophical discourse, with the idea of theatre employed to denote a specific form of philosophical practice. Thus, the concept of theatre of thought is distinguished from postmodernist internalisation and even negation of the conventional form of the theatrical process (e.g. Grotowski). In fact, taking issue with what she calls “the genius artist”, the author expresses her critical attitude towards of “avant-garde” theatre which she sees as the embodiment of the male perspective to be rejected by the feminist collective thinking practice.

In order to construct her argument, Mihaylova engages in a diachronic examination of key philosophical ideas about the nature of human thinking, considering

in detail both ancient philosophers – Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle – and the modern theories of Heidegger, Sartre, Arendt, Levinas and others. The development of the concept of acoustic thinking is presented thoroughly and with the support of a strong etymological analysis of concepts relevant to the acoustic thinking (e.g. rhythm, Heidegger’s *Stimmung*). The detailed consideration of the genesis, development and characteristics of Italian feminism and the work of its leading figures provide a specific context for the notions of the acoustic thinking and the voice, while the intellectual output of Carla Lonzi is singled out as a case study exemplifying the concept of “theatre of thought”.

The thesis consists of two parts, containing a total of nine chapters (168 pages). Each chapter is divided into subchapters, a decision which contributes to the clarity of the argument and guides the reader seamlessly through the complexity of the research matter. In Part One, entitled “Acoustic Thought: From Representation to Voice” Mihaylova aims to reconstruct the acoustic genealogy of thought by engaging with cornerstone philosophical theories. In chapter one she discusses theatre as representation in the light of the concept of listening, considering Plato’s allegory of the cave and Aristotle’s *Poetics*, with emphasis on the notion of mimesis as innate behaviour; she argues that acoustic thinking begins with the pre-Socratics, namely Heraclitus’s ideas of flow and rhythm. Chapter two evaluates different ideas of the ethos of the thought process in western metaphysics, in particular the fundamental ontology of Heidegger and the notion of thinking as listening, his opposition to Sartre’s existentialism, as well as Levinas’s perception of listening as presupposing a relationship with the Other. Chapter three introduces the work of Adriana Cavarero and the ethical dimension in relation to Levinas’s idea of the responsibility arising from the encounter of the self with the irreducible Other. Cavarero is analysed in terms of her emphasis on the voice as an attribute of the uniqueness of the Other. Chapter four focuses on the work of Cavarero, relating acoustic thought from the perspective of the lack of a voice and the dichotomy between the written as stable and eternal and the inherent invisibility and permeability of the voice. Here, Mihaylova offers an interesting allegorical interpretation of the story of Narcissus and Echo (in its Ovidian form) as two conflicting notions of sight and voice. The discussion of the finding of the voice

continues in chapter five which accentuates on the work of Luisa Muraro and considers in detail the theories of female subjectivity and the symbolic order of the mother as a language.

In Part Two, entitled “Thinking-in-assembly: theater’s methodologies in the Italian feminist movement 1970-1990”, the author crystallises the idea of theatre of thought within the framework of feminist theories and practices in Italy 1970-1990. In chapter six and seven, Mihaylova considers two events to contextualise the emergence of the voice in feminist philosophy – the Women’s Revolt group, founded in 1970, Autocoscienza (practicing of self-consciousness), and the foundation of the feminist collective Diotima at the University of Verona in 1983. She discusses the phenomenon of “thinking-in-presence” as defined by Chiara Zamboni which embraces the feminist difference in place of the neutrality of traditional philosophical discourse and manifests itself through collective, communal cognitive endeavour. Chapters eight and nine are dedicated to the work of Carla Lonzi, an art critic who rejected the power relations and autonomy that, in her view, characterised the work of the critic. Her book, *Self-portrait* (1967-9), compiling interviews with various artists, is presented by the author as a “unique conceptual performance”, a performance of potential situation where only space-time of the thought is present. A posthumous work *Armande, that’s Me!*, published in 1992, is seen by Mihaylova in the light of Lonzi’s interest in theatre, and is offered a treatment as a unique “radical hermeneutic” of unmediated personal experience, responsibility and awareness of the self.

The body of the thesis is flanked by comprehensive introduction and conclusion, comprehensive bibliography and an apt selection of figures (18 images), mainly related to the examples of the Italian feminist philosophical practice.

As evident from the author’s publication record, as well as her practice as a performance artist and her first-hand experience of Italian philosophy and cultural practices, she possesses an in-depth knowledge that enables her to approach the research question with the necessary proficiency. As a truly interdisciplinary study, the thesis offers a number of valuable contributions to the academic fields of both theatre studies and philosophy. Establishing the original concepts of “acoustic thought” and “theatre of thought” – essentially performative aspects of philosophy intrinsic to the process of

vocalization – Mihaylova presents a new take on the interface between performance/theatre studies and philosophy by incorporating aspects of feminist theory and social and political activism. The introduction of the Italian feminist thinkers to the Bulgarian reader is of special importance – not only has their work remained relatively unfamiliar in Bulgaria, but the work of Carla Lonzi has certainly not yet been considered as an example of alternative theatricality. The annotated list of publications by Diotima, included in chapter seven, is also a valuable reference. Furthermore, the genealogy of philosophical discourse that draws on thinking as a collective practice which is defined as acoustic and can manifest itself as theatrical, as proposed by the author, can have an impact on the understanding of theatre as a transcendental concept that reaches beyond the stage (re)presentation.

Mihaylova's work resonates with contemporary theoretical and practical concerns raised by gender and feminist theories and concepts, such as the voice of the subaltern (in the sense proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), pertinent not only to postcolonialism but also to theatre studies where women and other underrepresented communities accentuate the importance of the voice as means of resistance and asserting one's identity and a sense of belonging to a community. Thus, this study is a timely contribution and its publication as a monograph will no doubt be of interest for both philosophy and theatre studies readership.

In relation to further work on the thesis for the purpose of publishing it, there are a few points I would like to mention, which the author might want to consider when preparing her monograph. In her conclusion, Mihaylova mentions that she was halfway through her research project, she realised she needed an example and found it in the Italian feminist Carla Lonzi and her *Self-portrait*. The choice of example/case study is apt and attests to the author's excellent ability to construct and defend her theory. However, it might be beneficial, for the sake of continuity of the argument, to investigate in more detail how the specific aspects of the philosophical theories (both ancient and modern), considered in the first part of the thesis, are reflected in the works of the Italian feminists, including Lonzi. Also, a monograph might benefit from putting the concept of "theatre of thought" through the prism of a wider array of theatre theories, not excluding but possibly complementing Italian feminism. For example, around the

same time when the feminist groups established themselves (1970s), the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal together with Panagiotis Assimakopoulos developed the concept of the invisible theatre. Even though adhering to some extent to traditional ideas of theatrical experience, this practice clearly occupies a liminal space, dispensing with the conventional mise-en-scene and replacing it with an audience participation in which the spectators and actors mix and the former perceive the event as unstaged. Although not necessarily an illustration of the “theatre of thought”, considering socially and politically engaged practices which alter and to some extent also internalise the spatial and temporal continuity of the theatrical event, such as Boal’s, might enrich the study by establishing parallels with philosophical practice and theatre as thinking-in-assembly as revealed in the work of the Italian feminists.

To conclude, Snejana Mihaylova’s thesis “Theater of Thought: The Intersection of Philosophy, Theater & Performative Arts Practice” is an original, well-researched and valuable study and I recommend the acceptance of the thesis and the awarding of a PhD degree to its author.

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