

ERWIN PISCATOR'S TOTAL THEATRE AS A REVOLUTIONARY IMMERSIVE AUDIOVISUAL TOOL: THE PARADIGM OF HOPPLA, WIR LEBEN! (1927)

CAROLINA MARTÍNEZ-LÓPEZ

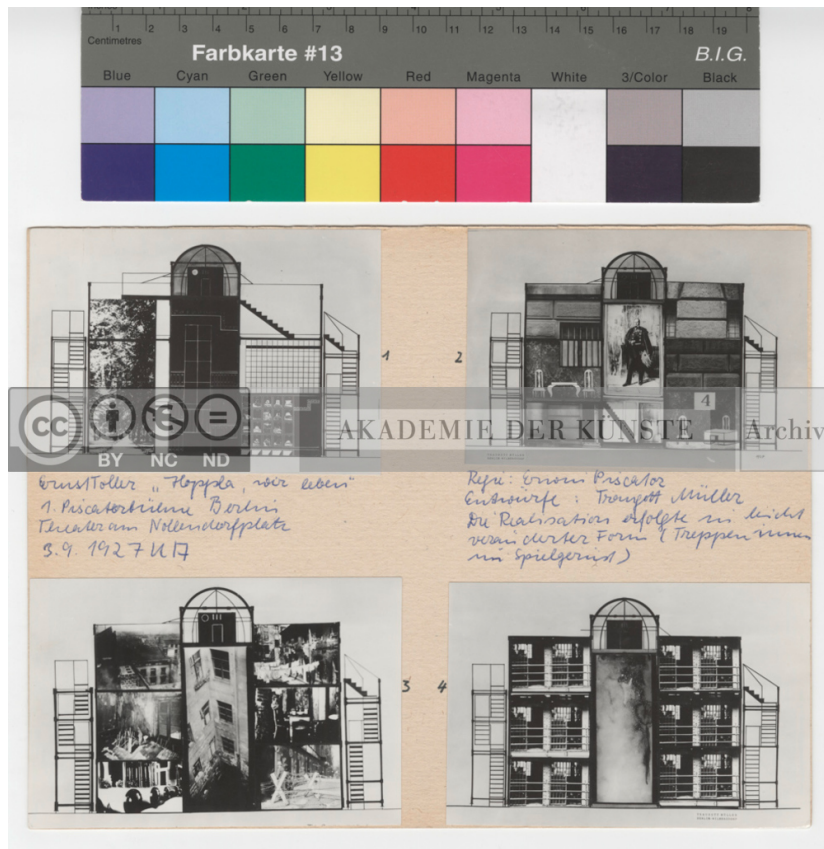
RAMON GIRONA

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN THEATRE AND FILM

This article explores the immersive dimension of the increasingly fashionable dialogue between theatre and film.¹ Contrary to common assumptions, this dialogue is not a new phenomenon, but one that can be traced back to the very origins of cinema, when the real world of the stage and the magical world of film began to collide in projects such as the road movie *Le Raid Paris-Monte Carlo en Deux Heures* [From Paris to Monte Carlo in Two Hours] (1904), which Georges Méliès made for the Folies-Bergère cabaret to insert into one of its shows, creating an almost alchemical chemistry between the action on screen and what was happening on stage (Gieseckam, 2007). This dialogue has continued right down to the present day in the form of all kinds of experiments incorporating the techniques and technologies of each era, including video and contemporary multimedia art,

not only in experimental productions but also in mainstream and institutional theatre.

The first significant moment in this relationship (Picon-Vallin, 1998) would take place in the 1920s in the newly established Soviet Union and in the Weimar Republic, two specific socio-political contexts that reflected a new world, whereby the use of the cinematic image in theatre and its immersive potential took on a revolutionary dimension. Before Erwin Piscator's use of the technique in Germany, it had already been experimented with in the USSR in Sergei Tretyakov's adaptation of *На всякого мудреца довольно простоты* [Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man] (Aleksandr Ostrovsky, 1868), directed by Sergei Eisenstein—who included his first short film, *Дневник Глумова* [Glumov's Diary] (1923), in the production—and *Земля дыбом* [The Turbulent Earth] (Tretyakov, 1923), directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold. A couple of years later, with *Trotz alledem!* [Despite All That!] (Felix Gasbarra and



Piscator's work plan for *Hoppla, We're Alive!* (1927), based on Traugott Müller's stage design. Original in Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Online: <https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/1820727>. Creative Commons

Piscator, 1925), the German director would begin introducing moving pictures into his work. However, while Meyerhold (2008) would defend totality, the active participation of spectators and the extension of the performative space against Soviet socialist realism to the very end, it was Piscator who would systematise the use of film as a cohesive element in an ideal of total theatre that was immersive (before the concept as such existed), profoundly connected to historical avant-garde movements and placed at the service of Marxist ideology. This would make him an important link in the chain running from the birth of cinema right down to contemporary work by creators of political and documentary theatre, such as Brazil's Christiane Jatahy or Switzerland's Milo Rau, who continue to use video and

cinema in their productions with the aim of promoting political transformation. In his ambitious project, Piscator would have the support of the architect Walter Gropius, who would design a Total Theatre (1927) for him in accordance with his expectations. Although the project would never actually be completed due to budgetary, technical and political obstacles, the director would implement many of its elements, which would go onto become key components of modern and contemporary theatre, in his Piscator-Bühne² (Piscator Theatre). His first production to include such elements was *Hoppla, Wir Leben!* [*Hoppla, We're Alive!*]³ (Ernst Toller, 1927), which is analysed here as a paradigm of the Piscatorian dispositive.⁴

TO BUILD WITH LIGHT: GROPIUS'S UTOPIAN PROJECT FOR PISCATOR

The interwar period was a productive time for the proposal of stage designs that sought to meet the needs of a new approach to theatre that reflected the socio-political reality of the 20th century, an approach that could overcome the great crisis of late-19th-century bourgeois drama (Szondi, 2011) and compete with the nascent film industry, but without eschewing cinema. Most of these proposals were associated with the various historical avant-garde movements that viewed theatre as the ideal catalyst for the new artistic techniques and trends, but also as a tool of ideological dissemination.⁵ Models and plans for these designs were displayed at the first international theatre exhibitions—such as the International Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques in Vienna (1924)—reflecting this questioning of the techniques, art and politics of theatre.

These utopian experiences could be described as the product of a collective investigation conducted across Europe, as they all shared a desire to overcome the physical and psychological limitations of the human being, representing a new, global way of relating to the world (Prieto, 2021). The terminology of totality that would ultimately be developed to define these experiences would be provided by László Moholy-Nagy with his notion of “*Theater der Totalität*” [Theatre of Totality]⁶ and “*Gesamtbühnenaktion*” [Total Stage Action] (1924: 48, 52), which he saw as an active combination of technology, machinery and socialism. Despite the fact that none of these projects would come to fruition,⁷ they would have a decisive influence on the introduction of technical innovations to the stage, given the vital importance of the new uses of lighting, time and movement—constituent elements of cinema—that gave rise to a new theatrical architecture.

Gropius’s proposal of a Total Theatre (1927)⁸ for Piscator is paradigmatic because it combined the earlier conceptions of this idea and would be built upon in innovative projects such as those of Barkhin and Vakhtangov (1930-1932) for Meyerhold’s Sohn Theatre in the Soviet Union, or Gaetano Ciocca’s projects in Italy for a Fascist theatre for the masses. Although Piscator’s notion of total theatre was not consolidated until he began working with Gropius and founded the Piscator-Bühne, the seeds of the idea had already been present since his work with the Proletarian Theatre on *Russlands Tag* [Russia’s Day] (Lajos Barta, 1920). He dreamed of scaffolds, mechanical devices, rotating platforms and multiple levels that would allow him to show different scenes simultaneously, and the use of film projections that could be combined with still photos, newspaper cuttings and other information to expand the historical and documentary narrative, enriching or subverting the action in a dialectical approach. Everything would be functional, neutral and industrial and would be triggered by the projec-

PISCATOR SYSTEMATISED THE USE OF FILM AS A COHESIVE ELEMENT IN AN IDEAL OF TOTAL THEATRE THAT WAS IMMERSIVE (BEFORE THE CONCEPT AS SUCH EXISTED), PROFOUNDLY CONNECTED TO HISTORICAL AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENTS AND PLACED AT THE SERVICE OF MARXIST IDEOLOGY

tions (on multiple changing surfaces), facilitating a fluid relationship between audience and stage. His idea was to create “an apparatus that would incorporate the latest lighting, the latest sliding and revolving scenery, both vertical and horizontal, numerous projection boxes, loudspeakers everywhere, etc. For this reason I really needed a new building” (Piscator, 1978: 179). Following his instructions, Gropius designed a building that would represent the synthesis of stage art and technology to perfection, with the aim of mobilising the masses. It was an oval-shaped theatre with twelve columns (Gropius quoted in Piscator, 1978: 181-183), architecturally based on the figures of the ellipse and the circumference, so that the stage could be adapted to three basic theatre models (the proscenium stage, the arena stage and the thrust stage), and so that the entire audience (around 2,000 spectators), positioned concentrically around the ellipse (which could rotate like a moving panorama), would be able to enjoy the same acoustic and visual conditions, ensuring the spectator’s immersion in the action and preventing any separation between the real and fictitious worlds. The architect proposed projections all over the space, including the walls and ceiling,⁹ with the installation of screens and projectors just as Piscator had envisioned, in order to “build with light” (Gropius, qtd. in Piscator, 1978: 183). To this end, in a second stage of the project the architect Stefan Sebök would add a latticed metal dome (inspired by the first planetarium, designed

by Walther Bauersfeld, in 1922) that would allow overhead and perimeter projections using a cyclorama in the form of roll-up screens between the pillars supporting the dome, “so that the spectator can find himself in the middle of a raging sea or at the center of converging crowds” (Gropius qtd. in Piscator, 1978: 183). In this way, the flat surface of the film projection would be “superseded by the projection space.” And as a result, the real space of the spectator, neutralised by the removal of the light, “filled with illusions created by the projectors, itself becomes the scene of events” (ibid.), abandoning the one-way view of cinema and theatre of the era. To complete the idea of totality and the organic relationship between the stage action inside and society in the street outside, the façade of the theatre would be made of glass.

PISCATOR’S CINEMATIC THEATRE, A NEW THEATRE FOR A NEW HUMAN BEING

Although Gropius’s design could not be built, with his Piscator-Bühne the director was able to put many of the ideas of total theatre into practice at the service of revolutionary ideology, which he had already been testing since his time with the Proletarian Theatre (1920- 1921), and especially since the production of *Fahnen* [Flags] (Alfons Paquet, 1924), at the Volksbühne in Berlin.

From the outset, Piscator (1978) became aware that a theatre was not political merely because of the topic addressed. As Lehmann (2016) would point out a century later, and “in contrast to the dictatorial principles of the normal run of theatres” (Piscator, 1978: 195), a horizontal approach to production, creation and reception was also needed. The transformation therefore involved a change to the space, but also to the ways of doing plays (in conjunction with film) to break the boundaries of the stage and reach the masses, altering reality and the human being’s role in it. This required the development of a new theatre art, which in addition to being created collec-

tively,¹⁰ needed to express the Marxist mission and turn the auditorium into a “party meeting hall” (Piscator, 1978: 343) where the audience, in a communal experience, would see their reality reflected and react to it. The First World War and the various revolutions of the period had changed humankind, and so the new theatre art had to change its perspective and address a new collective self: the masses, driven by new laws yet to be formulated. Individuals would be transformed into types, and heroes depicted in their social role, in contrast to bourgeois theatre. This was the birth of what would be known as “epic theatre”, later consolidated by Brecht, in which this new human being had to be represented (in a non-cathartic way) by a combination of professional and amateur actors—generally proletarian workers—who shared the ideology of the play and effectively merged with it. The scripts became multiple dialogues of materials, to which the film and sound effects were added, in a staging style that advocated a new “expanded” concept (Sánchez, 2011) of theatre that would really begin to gain currency in the 1960s, and that would become standard practice in so-called “documentary theatre” (Weiss, 2017).

In this revolutionary theatre—where the director is merely another member of the team behind the dispositive—all the elements will be interrelated dialectically in order “to take reality as its point of departure and to magnify the social discrepancy, making it an element of our indictment, our revolt, our new order” (Piscator, 1978: 188), with film as its organic unifier. Kra-

ALTHOUGH GROPIUS’S DESIGN COULD NOT BE BUILT, WITH HIS PISCATOR-BÜHNE THE DIRECTOR WAS ABLE TO PUT MANY OF THE IDEAS OF TOTAL THEATRE INTO PRACTICE AT THE SERVICE OF REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY

nich (1929/1933) explains that in the first decade of the 20th century the Hamburg and Stuttgart opera houses already had projection systems, as did some comedy and variety theatres, and by the 1920s, around 15 theatres in Germany had them, although they were used mainly as a spectacle. Piscator would be the first director to systematise the use of film in theatre, justifying it on the basis of his plays' content and objective (both of which were always revolutionary). Although he himself explained that in his theatre period in Königsberg (1919-1920) he had already conceived of the transformation of the stage through film in general terms (Piscator, 1978: 97), it would not be until *Despite All That!* that he would fully incorporate it into his work.

HOPPLA, WE'RE ALIVE! AS AN IMMERSIVE DISPOSITIVE FOR THE MASSES

In search of a new venue where he would be able to make his political theatre a reality, Piscator and his team moved to the Neues Schauspielhaus theatre on Nollendorfplatz, to which they added a new projection box in order to project films from behind the stage with four projectors simultaneously, turning it into Piscator-Bühne's first home. The venue's inaugural play, on 3 September 1927, would be *Hoppla, We're Alive!* by Ernst Toller. This piece was chosen by Piscator after he failed in his efforts to get another author, Wilhelm Herzog, to provide him with an original script that was to be written specifically for their debut in the new building. In both Herzog's unrealised proposal and in Toller's play, what the director was looking for was material that would allow him to analyse the essence of Germany's November Revolution, "to show all the factors involved in its rise and fall" (Piscator, 1978: 206).

Toller's play begins in a prison, after the failure of the German revolution, were the protagonist, Karl Thomas, shares a large cell with a group of revolutionaries: Eva Berg, Albert Kroll, Frau Meller

and Wilhelm Kilmann, all of whom, like Thomas himself, are condemned to death. However, they are all pardoned at the last moment by the new government of the Weimar Republic. The tension of this experience results in a mental breakdown for Karl, who is committed to an insane asylum where he will remain for the following eight years, from 1919 to 1927. When he is released he visits Kilmann, now the finance minister in the Weimar government. In his new position of power Kilmann treats Karl dismissively, telling him that times have changed and the revolution is a thing of the past. He also meets up with Eva Berg, Albert Kroll and Frau Meller, who still believe in the revolutionary cause. The flame of revolution has not gone out, Eva tells Karl in response to his defeatist attitude; it is merely burning in a different way. When Frau Meller gets him a job as a bellboy at the Grand Hotel, Karl is confronted with the changing world, symbolised by the radio tower on top of the hotel. For Karl, the tower is an unfathomable sight, as he has spent the past eight years cut off from the world and its many changes. Now he can bear witness as the radio station segues from the flawless transmission of an orchestra playing jazz live from the Hotel Mena House in Cairo to a news report on the flooding of the banks of the Mississippi. While working in the hotel, Karl bumps again into Kilmann, who on meeting him in public pretends not to know him. Karl then decides to kill him, but just when he is about to shoot, a student protester beats him to it. He chases the killer and fires his gun at him, but the student manages to escape. Finally, Karl is captured by the police and charged with Kilmann's murder. Unable to prove his innocence, he ends up in prison, where once again he meets up with Eva Berg, Albert Kroll and Frau Meller, this time all in separate cells. Still firm in their convictions, they try to convince Karl of the worthiness of their cause, but Karl, now desperate, unable to make sense of this new world and lacking the revolutionary spirit of his prison mates, decides to hang himself.

Toller's play has several points in common with his own life. He also participated actively in the revolutionary uprisings of 1919 and was sentenced by the Bavarian government, in his case to five years in prison. And upon his release he no doubt felt much of the same disillusionment experienced by Karl Thomas upon his discharge from the asylum. However, unlike the protagonist in his play, Toller made use of his time in prison to build a reputation as a playwright (Benson, 1984). The similarities between Toller and the character he created would have a dramatic coda, as Toller would end up committing suicide after settling in the United States. In acknowledgement of his passing, Piscator would dedicate the play to "My friend Toller" (Piscator, 1978: 334).

This personal dimension of the play is what Piscator seemed to detect and criticise as contrary to his purposes: "the documentary material was overlaid with poetic lyricism, as was always the case in Toller's work" (1978: 207). Between Herzog's proposal—a mere succession of documentary data with no drama or plot, according to Piscator—and Toller's excessively personal play, the director seemed to be looking for a middle ground that would reconcile the two extremes, a formula that would support his aim "to derive the fate of the individual from general historical factors" (1978: 211). The age of the self was over, Piscator argued, and this was as true for a play's authorship—the end of the lone, omnipotent creator—as it was for a play's storyline. "His [Toller's] formative years lay within the period of Expressionism," observed Piscator (1978: 210). As Lorang (1987) points out, beyond the personal elements he detected in *Hoppla, We're Alive!*, Piscator was critical of both naturalism and Expressionism. Naturalist plays, Piscator believed, "are no more than clichés [...] poor photographs taken by bourgeois amateurs," while in Expressions he identified "above all a lack of symbolic precision, the manifestation of a repressed psyche in people still clinging to the coattails of capitalism" (Lorang, 1987: 154).

Nevertheless, as noted above, in *Hoppla, We Are Alive!* Piscator saw the possibility of representing the social character of an era, if the storyline, excessively focused on the self of the protagonist, could be restructured. Thus, rejecting both naturalism and Expressionism and aspiring to turn theatre (the art form) into a tool to educate the proletariat,¹¹ Piscator—together with the stage designers Traugott Müller and Julius Richter—proposed various stage design solutions that would preserve the plot of Toller's play but position it in a context that could transcend the protagonist's particular experience. These strategies included the use of film—which was already hinted at in Toller's script, as will be discussed below—but also an arrangement of the stage that broke with traditional theatre.

The staging for *Hoppla, We Are Alive!* reflects the *Zweckbau* principle of stage design, the aforementioned purpose-built construction that he had previously attempted with Gropius, in opposition to traditional set construction (Loup, 1972: 70). Piscator wrote that for *Hoppla, We Are Alive!* he wanted the construction of the set to reflect the construction of the plot: "Toller had managed to hint at a cross-section of society in the choice and grouping of the settings. We had come up with a stage-set that would display this cross section and lend it precision" (1978: 210). The result was an arrangement of scaffolds with various levels, resembling the cross-section of a building still under construction. A central room with a high ceiling, similar to an elevator shaft, was connected on each side to three units that represented other rectangular spaces, resulting in a total of seven areas that could be present seven scenes performed simultaneously or in an alternating, juxtaposed way. The central room was crowned with a dome, where the radio station in the Grand Hotel scene was located (Loup, 1972).

The aim to transcend the traditional proscenium stage thus found one of its structural, expressive, and even ideological solutions in this



Hoppla, We're Alive! (1927). Act V, scene I (prison). Photo: Sasha Stone. Original in Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der FU Berlin. Online: <https://wikis.fu-berlin.de/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=719885707>. Creative Commons

architecture; however, as noted above, this aim also involved the use of film images and sound as essential components.

Piscator (1978: 236-240) defined the functions of cinema very precisely in *Rasputin, die Romanovs, der Krieg und das Volke, das gegen sie aufstand* [Rasputin, the Romanovs, the War and the People Who Rose Against Them] (Aleksey Tolstoy and P. Schtschezolev, 1927), the theatrical production he directed immediately after *Hoppla, We're Alive!* However, even in *Hoppla*, moving pictures served the function of transporting the protagonists—and with them, the audience—beyond the rectangle of the stage. And just as he did in *Rasputin*, in *Hoppla* Piscator attempted to transport the

audience by means of three types of film footage, each of which served a specific function.¹²

The first function involved filming a series of scenes specifically for the play. Thus, “the forecourt, the open-air storage area, even the street in front of the Theater am Nollendorfplatz were the scene of shooting for two whole weeks” (Piscator, 1978: 212). The aim of this footage was to provide a physical extension to what was happening on the stage, like a kind of continuity editing—in the sense of the purpose that this type of editing is given in classical cinema. This interplay between stage performance and film was intended to break the boundaries of the theatrical rectangle, to transport the actor playing the role, and

the audience with him, literally beyond the limits of the space established by traditional theatre. An example of this practice can be found in the moment when Karl, now cured, is about to leave the asylum. On the stage, Karl is interviewed by Dr. Lüdin, before being discharged. The theatre critic Paul Fechter, who attended the play's première, describes how the interview ends, establishing the connection between the live performance on the stage and the filmed segment: "Karl puts his hat on and leaves. The frontal screen comes down quickly [occupying the stage] and Karl appears in the film [projected onto the screen] walking down winding streets" (Loup, 1972: 198-199). In Toller's script, this cinematic interlude following Karl's departure from the asylum, which needed to illustrate the protagonist's shock at the sight of the big city and its technological advances, was supposed to be expressed in a series of images: "Big city in 1927/Trams/Motorcars/Metro/Aeroplanes" (Toller, 2019: 28). In Piscator's notebook, next to these references there is a handwritten note, "Postdamer Platz" (Piscator, 1927), one of the most emblematic public squares in Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s, an icon of modernity that leaves Karl in shock.¹³

The second function of film in the play involved the production of a series of abstract film sequences: "in place of music in sound there was to be 'music in movement.' At the point where Thomas is talking about the conception of time represented by eight years, a black surface was to dissolve in rapid succession into lines and then into squares (ciphers for days, hours and minutes), thus expressing his conceptions." However, according to Piscator himself, lack of time prevented him from putting this film interlude together (1978: 212).

The third function was to turn film into the essential means of connecting the human being—Karl, in this specific example—to history and its evolution. According to Piscator: "There is one particular point where the film has an even greater

measure of dramatic and functional significance: this comes at the dramatic fulcrum of the play, and touches on the central idea: the impact of today's world on a man who has spent eight years isolated behind bars. Nine years have to be shown with all their terror, stupidity and triviality. Some conception of the enormities of the period has to be given. The impact will not register with its full force unless the audience sees the yawning chasm. No medium other than film is in a position to let eight interminable years roll by in the course of seven minutes" (1978: 211-212). In the cinematic segment included at this moment, the following film excerpts were shown:

On screen, scenes from the years 1919-1927, intercut with shots of Karl Thomas in his hospital gown, walking up and down in an asylum cell. / 1919 – Treaty of Versailles/ 1920– Wall Street bombing in New York. Men go mad. / 1921 – Fascism in Italy / 1922 – Famine in Vienna. Men go mad. / 1923 – Inflation in Germany. Men go mad. / 1924 – Death of Lenin in Russia. Intercut with the newspaper headline: "Frau Luise Thomas died tonight." / 1925 – Gandhi in India / 1926 – Conflicts in China. Conference of European heads of state. / 1927 – A clock face. The hands turn. First slowly... then more and more quickly. / Noise: clock (Toller, 2019: 23).

Based on these three ways of using film footage in Toller's play, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, the objective of totality that underpinned Piscator's theatre project clearly entailed a subversion of the traditional space of the stage, with the erasure of its boundaries. Film would become a key element of this endeavour. Karl's discharge from the asylum offers a good illustration of this objective, as described above. But breaking through the physical boundaries of the theatrical space was not enough. Piscator also tried (using a technique that was surprisingly close to the Expressionism that he expressed such a critical view of)¹⁴ to express the characters' feelings, their inner selves, without having to resort to the clas-

sical convention of the inner monologue. To this end, he proposed to use abstract film footage, as noted above.

But once again, these two facets of the human being—which could be characterised as the outer self and the inner self—were not enough to understand the full complexity of human existence. To do this, it was ultimately necessary to connect both *selves* to broader historical factors that would help the audience to understand the character's outer behaviour and inner feelings, but also the historical moment being represented.

In Piscator's approach, the human being was embedded in the historical timeline, absorbing the legacy of the past, acting in the present and projecting into the future, shifting seamlessly from the personal or individual to the general (historical, political and social) context, and from the general to the individual context. In 1924, for example, Lenin died, but so did Karl's mother, Frau Luise Thomas; and the depiction of Karl's madness while locked up in the asylum is intercut with major historical events—from the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 to the conflicts in China and the conference of European heads of state in 1926—that suggest that “men went mad,” as we are told in the caption repeated several times in this film sequence.

The complexity of human experience and of human society drives Karl to take his own life, but as Piscator makes clear, “Thomas is anything but a class-conscious proletarian,” and although the play's plot focuses on him, the whole play is an *argumentum e contrario*, demonstrating the collapse of the bourgeois world order (Piscator, 1978: 209). In other words, Karl's attitude is not important, or it is only important as a depiction of the attitude towards life and politics that the proletariat should not take. What matters is an understanding of the economic, political and social context, the Weimar Republic's betrayal with its siren songs invoking democracy (Kilmann) and the recognition that the failure of the November Revolution was merely one chapter in the proletariat's

ongoing struggle for freedom. The working class must be able to adapt to the changing times and to new media technologies, to the new propaganda, and to continue the fight like Eva Berg, Frau Meller and Albert Kroll, the class-conscious proletarians (Piscator, 1978: 209).

AN INTERMEDIATE GENRE BREAKING BOUNDARIES AT THE SERVICE OF THE REVOLUTION

It could be argued that Piscator's oeuvre constituted a new genre straddling the borderline between theatre and cinema, in which the motion picture began being used in a different way. This is hinted at in Balász's (2010) review of *Hoppla, We're Alive!*, in his description of the fluidity between the images and what was happening onstage, or in the review by the critic writing for the newspaper *Germania* (quoted by Braun, 1982: 155), who suggests that the German director expanded the scope of the theatrical experience by showing time and space with “a telescopic vision”. In addition to being the product of the need to *tell the story* of a new global situation in a new way, this new use of moving images in theatre was the consequence of changes resulting from the birth of cinema itself. On the one hand, stage directors realised that theatre could no longer challenge the realism of the cinematographic image, and on the other, as Deleuze (1984) points out, drawing on Bergson, this new technology had forever changed our perception of the world and of ourselves in that world, creating a movement-image and a time-image in human consciousness that would leave an indelible mark on our conception of theatre as well.

In Piscator's productions, and specifically in *Hoppla, We're Alive!*, it is possible to identify a set of features that have since become common to the theatre-film relationship, related mainly to how the combination of recorded media and live performances multiplies the focus and enriches the

interactions and meaning of the plays. The most significant of these are: the creation of a new space out of a mixture of different spaces and of a new timeframe combining past, present and future in a break with the classical narrative structure; the transformation of “representation” into “presentation”; the movement of the performers from the world on the screen to the world on the stage (and vice versa) via an indeterminate middle ground, thereby acquiring new qualities of presence (Lehmann, 2016; Picon-Vallin, 1998; Fuchs, 1985); and the multiplication of ways of seeing/perceiving/reading the work. In this sense, Piscator anticipated Bourriaud’s notions of relational aesthetics (2006), and Rancière’s (2010) idea of an emancipated spectator, as well as theories of spectatorial agency (Klaver, 1995).

Finally, in terms of their spatial dimension, Piscator’s immersive strategies could be traced back even to the pre-cinematic era, and its influence would extend to the “expanded cinema” of the 1960s,¹⁵ and all the way to contemporary multimedia practices that constitute a continuation of Wagner’s total artwork (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) (Jordan & Packer, 2003). These practices evade any possibility of a frame analysis (Goffman, 1986) because they weave together a complex network, in keeping with contemporary notions of heterogeneity, which (like the human in history and in the world) encompasses the spectator, and because their objective is to break boundaries and, in Piscator’s case, to transform reality. As shown throughout this article, there could only be one objective of the revolutionary theatre to which Piscator dedicated his work: “ultimately, [revolutionary theatre] has no mission other than to make people [the proletariat] aware of what is vague and incoherent in their unconscious” (Piscator, 1978: 133). ■

NOTES

- 1 Although the many elements that film took from theatre in its initial quest for its own language are obvious (see Romaguera & Alsina, 2007), in this article the focus is on influences in the opposite direction, i.e., what theatre took from film.
- 2 This was the name given to the various theatre companies operated by Piscator in Berlin from 1927 to 1931, where he would present his total theatre stage productions.
- 3 The English translation used for the title of the play in this article is a literal rendering of the German original, as the title used in the English translation of Piscator’s *Political Theatre* (1978) (*Hoppla, Such Is Life!*) does not reflect the meaning of the original.
- 4 The term *dispositive* is not used here in its Foucauldian sense (*dispositif*), but in the sense applied to the term by Albera and Tortajada (2015: 44) as “a schema, a dynamic play of relations which articulates discourses and practices with one another,” and which can be described based on the three concepts that must be “understood in their reciprocal relations: the spectator, the machinery, the representation.”
- 5 A precursor to these movements can be found in Romain Rolland’s *Le théâtre du Peuple. Essai d’esthétique d’un théâtre nouveau*, published in 1903 (Prieto, 2021).
- 6 All translations of titles and quotes in German, Spanish and French are the authors’.
- 7 One precursor that did see the light of day was the Beyruth Festpielhaus. Designed by the architect Gottfried Semper and by Wagner himself for *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1862), it would end up being developed by Otto Brückwald (Prieto, 2021).
- 8 Walter Gropius Archive (Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University) and Bauhaus Archiv (Berlin). An animated video made by Javier Navarro de Zuvillaga and Javier Núñez for the exhibition *Arquitecturas Ausentes del siglo XX* (Madrid, Ministry of Development, 2004), can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/59497126>.
- 9 A modern version of this would Stan VanDerBeek’s *Movie-Drome* (1965).

- 10 Piscator's usual co-workers in this "dramaturgical office" would be Bertolt Brecht, Leo Lania, Walter Mehring and Ernst Toller.
- 11 "I also now clearly understood the extent to which art is merely a means to an end. A political, propagandistic, educating means" (Piscator, 2001: 61).
- 12 The published script indicates a prologue and four cinematic interludes (Toller, 1983 and 2019).
- 13 The nature and authorship of the film footage used by Piscator in the play constitute another line of research beyond the scope of this article, particularly in relation to the archive footage. In the same year that Piscator premiered *Hoppla!*, Walter Ruttmann released his film *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt, 1927). In his director's notebook, a handwritten note about the play's technical crew mentions Kurt Oertel, whom Piscator identifies as the director of the film work for the play (the fiction footage) (1978: 202), but Ruttmann's name also appears (1927), although he is not mentioned in Piscator's book. Did Piscator use excerpts from *Berlin* to illustrate Karl's shock upon seeing the modern city? Or does the fact that the play and the film premiered around the same time rule out that possibility? One thing that both productions definitely shared was the same music composer, Edmund Meisel (1927).
- 14 Lorang (1987: 154) once again points out that Piscator subsequently reconsidered his "excessively harsh view" of Expressionism.
- 15 Documented by Mekas (2017) and conceptualised by Youngblood (1970). For more information on this question from a post-cinematic perspective, see Martínez (2021).

REFERENCES

Archives of Erwin Piscator. Archiv der Akademie der Künste. Berlin. <https://archiv.adk.de/>

Albera, F., Tortajada, M. (2015). The Dispositive Does Not Exist! In F. Albera, M. Tortajada (eds.). *Cine-Dispositives: Essays in Epistemology Across Media* (pp. 21-44). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

- Balázs, B. (2010). *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn.
- Benson, R. (1984). *German Expressionist Drama: Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser*. London: MacMillan Press.
- Bourriaud, N. (2006). *Estética relacional*. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo Ed.
- Braun, E. (1982). *The Director and the Stage: From Naturalism to Grotowski*. New York: Holmes & Meier.
- Deleuze, G. (1984). *La imagen movimiento*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Fuchs, E. (1985). Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-Thinking Theatre after Derrida. *Performing Arts Journal*, 9(2-3), 163-173.
- Giesekam, G. (2007). *Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goffman, E. (1986). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Klaver, E. (1995). Spectatorial Theory in the Age of Media Culture. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 11, 309-321.
- Kranich, F. (1929/1933). *Bühnetchnik der Gegenwart. Vol. II y II*. Munich, Berlin: Oldenbourg.
- Lehmann, H-TH. (2016). *Teatro posdramático*. Murcia: CENDEAC (Centro de Documentación y Estudios Avanzados de Arte Contemporáneo).
- Lorang, J. (1987). Fenómenos escénicos y teatrales en la Alemania de los años veinte. *Debats*, 22, 151-157.
- Loup, A. J. III (1972). *The Theatrical Productions of Erwin Piscator in Weimar Germany: 1920-1931*. Doctoral thesis. LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses, 2348. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University. Retrieved from: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/2348.
- Martínez, C. (2021). Reflexiones en torno a las experiencias cinematográficas expandidas como formas de escenografía virtual utópicas. *Escena Uno. Escenografía, dirección de arte y puesta en escena*, 14.
- Mekas, J. (2017). *Cuaderno de los sesenta. Escritos 1958-2010*. Buenos Aires: Caja Negra.
- Meyerhold, V. (2008). Coloquio con un grupo de jóvenes arquitectos. In J. A. Hormigón (ed.), *Meyerhold: Textos teóricos* (pp. 241-244). Madrid: Asociación de Directores de Escena.

- Moholy-Nagy, L. (1924). Theater, Zirkus, Varieté. In W. Gropius & L. Moholy-Nagy, L. (eds.), *Die Bühne im Bauhaus. Bauhausbüchern*, 4. Munich: Albert Langen Verlag.
- Jordan, K., Packer, R. (eds.) (2003). *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*. New York: WW Norton & Co.
- Picon-Vallin, B. (1998). Hybridation spatiale, registres de présence. In B. Picon-Vallin (ed.), *Les écrans sur la scène: Tentations et résistances de la scène face aux images* (pp. 9-35). Paris: Éd. L'Âge d'Homme.
- Piscator, E. (1927). Director's notebook for *Hoppla, Wir Leben!* / Ernst Toller/ Bearbeitung der Piscator-Bühne. Piscator-Sammlung 265. Archivs Akademie der Künste Robert-Koch Platz. Berlin. Permalink: <https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/1820653>.
- Piscator, E. (1978). *Political Theatre*. New York: Avon Books.
- Piscator, E. (2001). *El teatro político*. Hondarribia: Hiru.
- Prieto, J. I. (2013). *Teatro Total: arquitectura y utopía en el período de entreguerras*. Buenos Aires: Nobuko.
- Rancière, J. (2010). *El espectador emancipado*. Buenos Aires: Manantial.
- Romaguera, J., Alsina, H. (2007). Teatro y cine. In J. Romaguera, H. Alsina(eds.), *Textos y manifestos del cine* (pp. 433-449). Madrid: Cátedra.
- Sánchez, J. A. (2002). *Dramaturgias de la imagen*. Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha.
- Sánchez, J. A. (2011). Dramaturgia en el campo expandido. In M. Bellisco, M. J. Cifuentes, A. Écija (eds.), *Repensar la dramaturgia* (pp. 19-37). Murcia: CENDEAC (Centro de Documentación y Estudios Avanzados de Arte Contemporáneo).
- Szondi, P. (2011). *Teoría del drama moderno (1880-1950). Tentativa sobre lo trágico*. Madrid: Dykinson.
- Toller, E. (1983). *Hoppla, Wir Leben!* Berlin: Deutschen Theaters Berlin.
- Toller, E. (2019). *Hop là! Nous vivons!* Paris: Hachette.
- Youngblood, G. (1970) *Expanded Cinema*. New York: P. Dutton & Co., Inc.
- Various Authors. (1927). *Programm der Piscatorbühne*, no. 1.
- Weiss, P. (2017). Notas sobre el Teatro-Documento. *Revista Conjunto*, 185. <http://casadelasamericas.org/publicaciones/revistaconjunto/185/03PeterWeiss.pdf>

ERWIN PISCATOR'S TOTAL THEATER AS A REVOLUTIONARY IMMERSIVE AUDIOVISUAL TOOL. THE PARADIGM OF HOPPLA, WIR LEBEN! (1927)

Abstract

This article explores the immersive dimension of the increasingly fashionable dialogue between theatre and film. It is a dialogue that can in fact be traced back to the very origins of cinema, and that has continued right down to the present day in the form of all kinds of experiments incorporating the techniques and technologies of each era. A key turning point in this relationship would take place in Germany's Weimar Republic, a very specific socio-political context in which the use of the cinematic image on stage and its immersive potential would be vested with revolutionary overtones. It was the director Erwin Piscator who systematised the use of film as a cohesive element in an ideal of total theatre profoundly connected to historical avant-garde movements and placed at the service of Marxist ideology. This would make of him an important link in the chain running from the pre-cinematic era right down to contemporary political and documentary theatre, as his work would begin to exhibit a set of characteristics—starting in particular with the production *Hoppla, We're Alive!* [*Hoppla, Wir Leben!*] (Ernst Toller, 1927)—that would leave an indelible mark on the interaction between the stage and the screens.

Key words

Theatre-Cinema; Immersiveness; Piscator; Political Theatre; Revolutionary Theatre; Dispositive; Masses; Proletariat.

Authors

Carolina Martínez López holds a PhD in fine arts from Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha and is an associate professor in the Performing Arts and Audiovisual and Multimedia Communication degree programs at Universitat de Girona (ERAM). S UdG's Contemporary Art Theories research group. Her lines of research include the relationships between cinema, theatre and dance, focusing in recent years on virtuality and immersion. She is the author of several articles published in academic journals, including *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos* and *Imagofagia*. She is the anthologist, editor and translator of the book *El Universo dereniano. Textos fundamentales de la cineasta Maya Deren* (Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2015/2020), and a member of Valladolid International Film Festival Selection Committee. Contact: carolina.martinez@eram.cat.

EL TEATRO TOTAL DE ERWIN PISCATOR COMO HERRAMIENTA AUDIOVISUAL INMERSIVA REVOLUCIONARIA. EL PARADIGMA DE HOPPLA, WIR LEBEN! (1927)

Resumen

Este artículo se encuadra en la dimensión inmersiva del, cada vez más en boga, diálogo entre teatro y cine; un diálogo que, en realidad, se remonta a los inicios del medio cinematográfico y que se ha prolongado hasta nuestros días en forma de todo tipo de experimentos que han ido incorporando las técnicas y tecnologías de cada época. Un punto de inflexión clave en esta relación tendrá lugar en la alemana República de Weimar, un contexto sociopolítico muy concreto que hará que el uso de la imagen cinematográfica en la escena y su vocación inmersiva adquieran tintes revolucionarios, siendo el director Erwin Piscator quien sistematice el uso de la película como elemento cohesionador en un ideal de teatro total profundamente ligado a las vanguardias históricas, y al servicio del ideario marxista. Esto hará de él un eslabón clave en la cadena que iría desde la precinematografía hasta las propuestas actuales de teatro documental y político, en el que se empezarán a vislumbrar una serie de características —especialmente a partir del montaje *Hoppla, Wir Leben!* [¡Alehop, estamos vivos!] (Ernst Toller, 1927)— que marcarán indefectiblemente la interacción entre la escena y las pantallas.

Palabras clave

Teatro-Cine; inmersividad; Piscator; teatro político; teatro revolucionario; dispositivo; masas; proletariado.

Autores

Carolina Martínez López (Cuenca, 1978) es doctora en Bellas Artes por la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha y profesora contratada doctora en los grados de Artes Escénicas y Comunicación Audiovisual y Multimedia de la Universitat de Girona (ERAM), y miembro del grupo de investigación Teories de l'Art Contemporani (UdG). Sus líneas de investigación, girando en los últimos años en torno a lo virtual y lo inmersivo, se centran en las relaciones entre el cine, el teatro y la danza. Es autora de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas, como *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos* o *Imagofagia*. Es antóloga, editora y traductora del libro *El Universo dereniano. Textos fundamentales de la cineasta Maya Deren* (Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2015/2020), y miembro del comité de selección de la Semana Internacional de Cine de Valladolid. Contacto: carolina.martinez@eram.cat.

Ramon Girona Duran holds a PhD in theory and contemporary culture from Universitat de Girona (UdG) and is an associate professor in the Cultural Communication and Advertising and Public Relations degree programs at the same university. He is also a member of the UdG's Contemporary Art Theories research group. His lines of research focus on the relationship between cinema and propaganda, and virtuality and immersion in early cinema. He is the author of various articles published in academic journals, including *Historia y Comunicación Social* and *Public Relations Review*, and he has published the books *Frank Capra* (Cátedra, 2008), *Why We Fight de Frank Capra. El cinema al servei de la causa aliada* (Ediciones de la Filmoteca, 2009) and *El cinema de propaganda als EUA/El cine de propaganda en EE.UU.* (UOC, 2010/2015). Contact: ramon.girona@udg.edu.

Article reference

Martínez López, C., Girona, R. (2023). Erwin Piscator's total theater as a revolutionary immersive audiovisual tool. The paradigm of *Hoppla, Wir Leben!* (1927). *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 35, 33-46.

Ramon Girona Duran (Olot, 1965) es doctor en Teoría y Cultura Contemporánea por la Universitat de Girona (UdG) y profesor agregado en los grados de Comunicación Cultural y Publicidad y Relaciones Públicas de esa misma universidad. También es miembro del grupo de investigación Teories de l'Art Contemporani (UdG). Sus líneas de investigación se centran en las relaciones entre el cine y la propaganda, y lo virtual y lo inmersivo en el cine de los orígenes. Es autor de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas, como *Historia y Comunicación Social* o *Public Relations Review*. Ha publicado los libros *Frank Capra* (Cátedra, 2008), *Why We Fight de Frank Capra. El cinema al servei de la causa aliada* (Ediciones de la Filmoteca, 2009) y *El cinema de propaganda als EUA/El cine de propaganda en EE.UU.* (UOC, 2010/2015). Contacto: ramon.girona@udg.edu.

Referencia de este artículo

Martínez López, C., Girona, R. (2023). El teatro total de Erwin Piscator como herramienta audiovisual inmersiva revolucionaria. El paradigma de *Hoppla, Wir Leben!* (1927). *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 35, 33-46.

recibido/received: 22.04.2022 | aceptado/accepted: 24.11.2022

Edita / Published by



Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com