

**Babarczi Katica**

## **Exploited Heterotopias**

### **Absztrakt**

Az alábbi írás a tér és szerep kapcsolatának azon területét igyekszik feltérképezni, ahol az egyénnek nincsen előre meghatározott szerepe. Létezik-e olyan tér, amely nem követel meg semmilyen viselkedésformát, sokkal inkább kiüresít, felfüggeszt és egy olyan határvonalat képvisel, ahol az egyén hétköznapi szerepei eltűnnek. Az utazás, a közlekedés pontosan ebbe az átmeneti tartományba tartozik, még akkor is, ha azt lépten nyomon igyekeznek kihasználni...

### **Szerző**

**Babarczi Katica** a Szegedi Tudományegyetem magyar-angol szakos hallgatója. Főbb érdeklődési területei: performancia-kutatások, továbbá a képzőművészet és az irodalom kapcsolata. E-mail: [kisbolygo@gmail.com](mailto:kisbolygo@gmail.com)

## Exploited Heterotopias

As the title suggests, I make an attempt to study spaces in which our roles are not determined, 'pre-determined' – which is obviously problematic, since the function of a given space also suggests the role we are supposed to take when we enter it – for example in a cinema we are expected to be spectators, while in a shop we are consumers of certain products. I'm looking for such spaces that empty the presence of the individual as much as it is possible; a space that does not presume any performative acts, a space that introduces some kind of suspension. My example, *public transportation*, is ordinary and therefore capable of examining whether such space exists at all.

The basic concept of my paper was inspired by the public transportation in Budapest where the Budapest Transport Service (BKV) decided to get the attention and sympathy of customers by recording the voices of famous Hungarian actors to inform people through loudspeakers. The travelers not only get information about the bus stops but are also informed about the location of the theatres and other cultural institutions closest to each and every bus stop in the capital city. <sup>[1]</sup>

There are several aspects that can be discussed in this popular act of the Transport Service but I only use it as an example in the following train of thoughts and would rather focus on the 'phenomena' of travelling both from the aspect of an undetermined space and the ambiguous role we play (or not play) in it. Thus I turn to theories not only belonging to the field of performance studies but also to studies of visual culture in order to support my choice of topic.

### Everyday scenery

Let's say that we travel without companion from one point to another. On our way we are exposed to impulses of several kind: noises from the street, odors of people around us, the scenery of being pushed by others (strangers), the fragments of conversations we catch and of course the loudspeaker that informs us where we actually are and what is about to come. Since most of the people do not listen to or read anything while travelling, they only let themselves be influenced by thoughts and associations that come up during their way. Among these thoughts there are personal ones ("Did I switch off the Tv?") and also reflections to the actual situation that they are in ("I would never wear boots like that! I hope he is not about to sit next to me!").

In the 'state' of getting somewhere our only role is to be patient and sit or stand as everyone else does and look outside the window or at others. In this sense we are modern *flâneurs* of buses, trams etc.

As a member of the crowd that populates the streets, the *flâneur* participates physically in the text that he observes while performing a transient and aloof autonomy with a »cool but curious eye« that studies the constantly changing spectacle that parades before him. [2]

Rignall's definition of the *flâneur* would perfectly fit in this context if all the passengers would consciously observe each other with intellectual curiosity but instead of idealizing an everyday scenery on the means of public transportation, I draw a parallel in a different way. While the flâneur does not have a destination, the traveler does; the flâneur is on the move (walks around) while the passenger is in a standing/sitting position on a moving vehicle. Still, both are observers of others but in the case of everyday travelling the passenger is not a conscious observer, while he is also the object of observation. Travelling is a passive state of being, the state of being exposed to looks and the 'urge' to look, but nothing more. At this point we cannot avoid calling for roles: whether *sincere or cynical* [3], the seen-unseen, the observer-observed roles are simultaneous and not explicit, until the point we realize the irony of being nowhere (indefinite localization) among strangers, and we don't move just look, and we are nothing else but our clothes, like dozens of mime actors on a moving stage.

The stage, the setting [4] is homogeneous, audience and performer are the same, there is no hierarchy between roles. The problem is that being watched by others and watching others in a public setting, as if everybody was a doll or machine with reduced abilities to react, is more than artificial. The only reminder that we are individuals is our *personal front* [5] that is also deprived of speech patterns and gestures, and thus only made up of appearance.

It is self reflection that makes us performers in this case. We know the rules that have to be considered, we pay attention to what we can do and shouldn't do on a bus, and we take care of our appearance and behavior to a certain extent. If we accept that this 'passive activity' ('*being travelled*' meaning *to travel*) is always a conscious choice to do, then we also accept that it also belongs to the category of performance. In Marvin Carlson's words, "all human activity could potentially be considered as 'performance', or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself." [6] Besides this statement that can be applied to anything and therefore criticized in some way, there is another requirement by Carlson which narrows the notion of performance: Performance is always performance *for* someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self. [7] Applying these ideas to travelling we can conclude that it is also a way of performance and a mode of being alienated from performance, at the same time meaning that the passenger is on the margin between fulfilling a role and a disposition to it. (Being a passenger presumes a certain attitude that complies with the

requirements of how to behave and act in a public space but it is still a passive, unconscious behavior that practices self-reflection by the mere observation of others.) The former can be explained by Richard Schechner's words, while the latter by taking a closer and more precise look to the space I have already mentioned earlier.

If we try to categorize traveling, it certainly belongs to our daily routines, and in a general sense it is a kind of ritual of our everyday habits. Ritual, both in its common and its ceremonial sense, is considered to be a crucial notion regarding performance studies. Let's see whether a bus travel can fit in the category of performance in its ritual sense.

Richard Schechner gives three patterns:

1. Gathering.
2. Playing out an action or actions.
3. Dispersing <sup>[8]</sup>

In the case of my example it is problematic to apply these patterns since the setting is a bus, which is in movement, and it is only a tool for individual purposes that only meet in the sense that everyone wants to arrive somewhere. There is no action on the bus but suspension and dispersion is constantly present in each bus stop. Whether we approach it in terms of theatre (Schechner) or in other ways, bus travel does display certain aspects of a ritual, or even theatre: considering that it is a repetitive act – gathering of people again and again; going and arriving, doing it day by day.

When we take a closer look at the space where the passengers are, it can be regarded as a place that does not exist, indefinite and therefore *heterotopic* in the foucauldian sense: it cannot be determined by geographical markers since its moving, "it creates a space that is other", that only exists for those who are in it and thus its entering is also an exclusion from any other spaces <sup>[9]</sup>. In brief, this kind of heterotopic feature also reasons the formerly mentioned suspension that implies a kind of *transformation* <sup>[10]</sup> of the individual in some respects. In our case it is the meeting with the situation that the setting of the bus represents: waiting, watching and being watched by others. On the one hand the individual is deprived of his identity and becomes a member of 'consumers' (as far as using means of transformation can be considered consumption), a part of a mechanism that is only working with his participation. On the other hand the passengers also 'function' as the audience of the everyday scenery staged by themselves. Some say that "all social interactions are staged" <sup>[11]</sup> especially if they are organized to have theatrical traits.

It is obvious that the purpose of the Transportation Service I have introduced in the first part of my essay was not (only) to make the information more audible and therefore more accessible, but rather to popularize itself and use well-recognizable voices as advertisements. Still, the profile within which this marketing behavior is presented, the image that it is meant to carry is worth of our attention.

On the web page of BKV the report on this service uses the language of daily papers and 'promotes' the passengers to be 'the audience' or 'travelling audience'. <sup>[12]</sup> This 'nomination'

implies that the task of ordinary people is to be receivers or audiences to the “show” even on the bus. We have already experienced this impression when advertising screens occurred in cafés, pubs and on trams, but now it has been made explicit that the customers, the consumers are the members of the audience.

The problematic aspect of this notion is only the crucial requirement that it is a matter of choice to become a member of the audience, meaning that it is the decision of the passenger whether he looks at or listens to the information and thus becomes a receiver. If we take into consideration that these kind of advertisements or marketing tricks “heil” individuals who answer by reading, watching or listening to them, we have to accept the althusserian thought on ideology: the traveler is the one who chooses to become the audience by simply listening and paying attention:

(...) ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” [13]

Becoming subjects and being subjected [14] to information means that we cannot avoid to become members of audience when they want us to do so, and if it really works, we are members of the audience in a double sense. On one hand we listen to the loud-speaker and let the information flow into our mind, while on the other we are observing the other travelers on the bus as if they were participants of the ongoing play and as if we were not.

## ‘Intertextual weekdays’

When travelling by bus in Budapest and listening to the loud-speaker one may get the feeling of a stylized journey to somewhere. The characteristic voices of actors are immediately recognizable, well-articulated and theatrical, obviously because they are trained to handle their voice (utterance, pronunciation, tone, emphasis etc.). However, besides the surprise that instead of familiarly distorted words coming from loudspeakers we hear comprehensible information, we can also identify the individuals to whom these voices belong to, and perhaps even link them to plays or movies. All these voices belong to professional actors, and whether we hear Barbara Hegyi, Eszter Nagy-Kálózy or Péter Rudolf, Béla Szerednyey and Kornél Pusztaszeri, it is hard to decide if the passenger is the witness of stylistic exercises or his journey is mocked with irony, since these voices are sometimes suspiciously serious, unreliably playful or strangely erotic. These characteristics also reflect the intention of those who came up with the idea to reform this aspect of traveling that implies naivety in a certain sense: the passenger is imagined to travel with joy if he recognizes some entertaining voices in the most boring minutes of his everyday life, and he is also supposed to trust these voices (because of their origin) and thus the Transportation Service.

Let's presume that most of the people know these voices from movies and as the ordinary passenger is first interrupted by the familiar sound, the atmosphere of movies is invoked. In literature we would call this effect an intertextual phenomenon (e.g. a certain work of art is not directly quoted, but the manner of the language or the actual element of the plot definitely refers to another text), but in performance studies we can only talk about it as the overlapping of frames (referring to Gregory Bateson <sup>[15]</sup>). The voices of actors belong to the context of theatre and when they reach us outside the usual contexts of theatre, TV or cinema, the situation may result in a confusion by the mixture of spheres: reality has an intercourse with fiction in an unusual way, on the level of senses. Some travelers may question their presence in reality by the feeling aroused by the simple voices of famous actors, or they may think that something is going on without their knowledge and they suddenly have become the members of an unexpected event.

The voices (belonging to another sphere, to a theatrical context) make the traveler question that he/she is taking part in an everyday activity, since he is used to the fact that these voices only appear in mimetic actions, in movies, theatrical plays etc., where he is only a spectator. The context of a simple bus travel is 'theatricalized' and therefore questions the individual's role in his/her own context or, in other words, this simple effect alienates him from the role of a spectator and tinges his originally perceived reality of travelling on a bus with a sense of illusion. At the same time the traveler is distanced from his own self, he suddenly becomes aware of his performance. This phenomenon is called "restored behavior" by Richard Schechner <sup>[16]</sup> referring to the moment as a "certain distance between 'self' and 'behavior'" <sup>[17]</sup>

Restored behavior is "out there," distant from "me." It is separate and therefore can be "worked on," changed, even though it has "already happened." (...) Restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances. These difficult terms express a single principle: The self can act in/as another; the social or transindividual self is a role or set of roles. <sup>[18]</sup>

At this point the passenger may clarify his status in reality and his destination in order to get back his certainty which is managed by defining his actual role and the situation he is in. The poetic motif in this train of thoughts is that all these reactions and feelings may occur in one momentary impression while travelling and hearing something that rearranges the passenger's original world.

We may also question the reliability of the announced information since the voices imply a certain illusory theatricality:

- (a) that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and
- (b) that that which is denoted by these signals is nonexistent. <sup>[19]</sup>

The signals in this context are the voices that imply the presence of an ongoing play, although it is "only" our ongoing life. (This kind of reversed reaction also explains our reversed reaction to real life happenings.) Bateson suggests that

a man experiences the full intensity of subjective terror when a spear is flung at him out of the 3D screen (...) at the moment of terror there was no questioning of “reality” but still there was no spear in the movies house (...) The images did not denote that which they seemed to denote, but these same images did really evoke that terror which would have been evoked by a real spear [20]

In an extreme way of thinking there is a chance that this man would not fear in a real situation like that, because he would question reality and the possibility that it happens to him in the same way as the passenger questions the reliability of announced information, because the origins (identities) of the sounds do not belong to his everyday experiences, but to a markedly theatrical sphere. Hypothetically this kind of skepticism can also be explained by the fact that mimetic visual patterns condition us to experience things that otherwise would never happen to us and thus once we face them in reality we do not expect them to be true. In other words, the simple fact that some passengers are only accustomed to articulated and playful voices when listening to media, it is possible that they would handle the information they get through the loudspeaker as if it belonged to the sphere where the voice is familiar from. [21]

Turning to an example of Gregory Bateson where he suggests that the dreamer would never state that he is just dreaming in the state of dreaming, [22] I would argue that it is possible to make such a statement in our dreams, but this phenomenon still supports the Epimenedes’ paradox that the self-reflection, while dreaming, still belongs to the territory of dreams.

There is the possibility to make metastatements, but they lose their grounds as being trapped in their own context.

In the case of the bus-example the passenger may pose a meta-question, but it is ‘urged’ from outside the actual space. He questions his reality and the reliability of the information he gets only because the origins of the voices do not belong to the territory he is in, and do not have the feature to be trusted (since they belong to the context of illusion, theatre). As a result, the outcome is not that of the dreamers (whether he questions the dream’s reality or not, he wouldn’t wake up, since the question is still a dream) but rather the act of decision making, such as not listening to the obvious information, which is impossible.

I started this essay by analyzing not only the issue of overlapping spheres in everyday traveling, but also the role of the traveler who is exposed to the ‘attack’ of impulses and who is also suspended on the way and therefore forced into different kinds of experiences of him/herself and others. I mainly focused on the hypothesis that travelling can be considered as a state of suspension, which is exploited and thus transforms a ‘nonexistent’ space into a uniquely theatricalized reality.

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