
“...I, Me! ... Are the Dirtiest of All Pronouns!”

Victoria SZPUNBERG WITT

szpunbergwv@institutdelteatre.cat

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Playwright and professor of playwriting at the Institut del Teatre and the Obrador of the Sala Beckett. In 2000 she was invited to take up International Residency at the Royal Court Theatre with her first play. Since then, her plays have been premiered in diverse national and international festivals and theatres and have been translated into over ten languages. As well as her career as a playwright, she has worked with different choreographers, written dramaturgies and theatre adaptations, has directed plays, and produced pieces for radio and sound installations. She has also participated in theatre and education projects and worked at the Escola de Teatre Social Pa'tothom. In 2013 she received the Max Award (Catalan playwriting).

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

Italo Calvino, in one of the six lectures he prepared for Harvard University, published in the book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Penguin Modern Classics), specifically in “Multiplicity”, cites the Italian writer Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973): “...I, me! ... are the dirtiest of all pronouns! The pronouns! They're the lice of thought. When a thought has lice, it scratches, like everyone who has lice... and they get in the fingernails, then... you find pronouns: personal pronouns...”

Based on this quote, an irreverent critique of personal pronouns, we briefly and informally review some of the trends or dramaturgical resources in our current theatre, with special emphasis on “dramaturgies of the self”.

Keywords: autofiction, fiction, Italo Calvino, Pina Bausch, Rimini Protokoll, Harold Pinter, César Aira, haptic gaze, Angélica Liddell, educational theatre

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Italo Calvino, in one of the six lectures he prepared for Harvard University, published in the book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Penguin Modern Classics), specifically in “Multiplicity”, cites the Italian writer Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973): “...I, me! ... are the dirtiest of all pronouns! The pronouns! They’re the lice of thought. When a thought has lice, it scratches, like everyone who has lice... and they get in the fingernails, then... you find pronouns: personal pronouns...”

Calvino’s book is a splendid and erudite lesson in literature. We could talk for hours about each of the concepts he develops, but here at the Institut del Teatre we refer to this quote from Gadda on personal pronouns because we find it both timely and provocative and stimulating. A real revolt against a current trend that turns the dramaturgical undertaking into a self-referential, narcissistic and egotistical exercise. I’m referring to the increasingly widespread productions focused on talking only about the author himself or herself, from an endogamous place and reduced to the “I, me! ... are the dirtiest of all pronouns!”

The documentary series *The Century of the Self* by the British journalist Adam Curtis is also highly eloquent, and explains how, based on Freudian theories, capitalism creates manipulation mechanisms to reduce the citizen to an individualistic consumer. This individualism, which is based on a narcissistic obsession with one’s own wellbeing and the search for self-expression, reinforces an egocentric gaze away from what would be a more collective ethic. What Curtis explains is how psychoanalytic theories that try to understand hidden urges are used to control this ego force and manipulate it for the benefit of the market, especially through the work of Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, who became the first public relations agent and worked towards mass manipulation, always appealing to the hidden desire of the individual. It is very interesting to see how Bernays works with multinationals by advising them on creating advertisements or mechanisms of all kinds, on some performative utterances, in order to reach the unconsciousness of citizens and satisfy their ego in order to make them consume.

Later, with the total perversion of these theories, capitalist strategies were based on an idea of falsely free infinite desire. As long as citizens concentrate on their own desire and focus on themselves, the market can create all kinds of products that satisfy them.

If we combine this individualistic outlook, the obsession with self-expression of the self with the need to contemplate one's navel, and add to it the trend of proposing dramaturgical starting points which are based only on the first person, we have the perfect cocktail to abandon imagination and knowledge, which, after all, are essential foundations of writing.

I don't want this to be confused with the form of the monologue or dance solos; in any case we don't mean that the discourse is limited to one performer or character. I'm also not exactly talking about autofiction (which starts from a personal experience or pretends to be a personal experience to then create a fiction). However, I sense that misunderstood autofiction (when it is an end in itself rather than a resource) becomes a kind of confessional exercise, a dramaturgy of the self, or an opportunity to convert our lives, no matter how miserable they are, into the main thematic lines of artistic productions.

Autofiction is actually as old as literature. And, in theatre, pieces have long been written based on what happens to the performers, their reflections, their lives... Pina Bausch was already doing this in the 1970s, but she was doing so as a starting point for a stylisation and a development, not as a point of arrival. Does the opinion of someone who appears on stage have that much value? Or does it limit productions?

Another terminological definition that has been used for a long time to talk about this kind of theatrical exercise is "the conquest of the real", the "haptic gaze" according to Derrida, where the eye is able to touch its object as if it were real. "Experts in everyday life" that the German-Swedish company Rimini Protokoll uses in its productions, where there are no actors who represent reality, but the intention is to present reality itself, to present instead of representing, with people who tell us about their life: because no actor will be able to reproduce a real experience better than those who have lived it. Or when Angélica Liddell self-references in *Te haré invencible con mi derrotada*, she herself presents her suffering body and compares herself to the cellist Jacqueline du Pré. Liddell presents her frustration at not being the talented cellist and, instead of representing Du Pré's life, foregrounds herself, injures herself and presents the real pain, the real body. But, is it a pain really at risk if it is protected by the whole stage? Protected by a civilised audience? By productions that cost millions?

I dance with my mother, I talk about my village, I tell an anecdote about my childhood, we've all been through this. In fact, excuse me for telling you about one of my plays: in 2007 I myself released a trilogy based on my family's experience in the last Argentinean dictatorship. This trilogy led me to very intensely ponder on what right I, a survivor of a brutal dictatorship, have to mention anything related to those abysmal events. Who am I to talk about what I haven't seen? I conducted extensive research into the topics of fiction and historical tragedies. And although I was talking about my family, I wasn't only talking about my family; in fact, I even fictionalised them, I didn't mention

their real names. Above all, I talked about how to survive horror, from a point of view that always tried to dialogue with the historiography and bibliography around these events.

In fact, what we have called "the conquest of the real" also has to do with the legitimate desire to create a theatre of social criticism. Sometimes, however, this legitimacy begins to be suspicious when it becomes a limiting pressure that comes from theatres and subsidies: to create theatre that explicitly and obviously covers current social issues, and to do so from a purely thematic and educational place. There is a socio-documentary trend of constant activism, as if we artists had to deal with issues, expose them, even provide conclusions, which is rather what politicians should do: to address social issues and find solutions. Argentinean writer César Aira said so in an interview in the newspaper *Ara* a few days ago, where he argued for "art for art's sake" and "playing for the pleasure of playing": "Fine feelings kill literature. So don't expect me to praise democracy or human rights because I'm not interested in them in the slightest. As a citizen, yes, but as a writer, no" (*Ara*, 9-10-2021).

Pinter said the same in his speech, when he received the Nobel Prize in 2005:

In 1958 I wrote the following: 'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.' I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false.

And later added:

But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.

It is interesting how Aira and Pinter distinguish their citizen self from their artist self. That is to say, the demand for truth that they call for as citizens, according to their points of view, should not always be applied to the artistic experience.

If what is currently called for is an educational and instructive theatre, which sets out a topic directly and, to that, we add the tendency to talk about the self as the point of arrival... I ask again: Where is the imagination? Where is the knowledge? Where is the fiction? Where is the game?

In any case, we don't have time to analyse these issues, which, after all, tend to be confined to cyclical fashions and trends, but I would like to make a call to recover theatre. I don't know exactly how, and it is good to always ask the question: what is the "how" that challenges us? Perhaps we should never stop revising the canon, which should not be the totalising, hegemonic, castrating canon. Reviewing the canon. Revisiting it. Perhaps creating

collective dramaturgies. Recovering the game, because playing is not trivial. Because perhaps, to save us precisely from the simulacrum outside, from the simulacrum that penetrates our most intimate and, of course, social life, we need to recover conserved rather than conservative forms. Between us and the world, between us and the audience, there is an immense range of imaginative possibilities and ways of constructing layers of fiction.

Because I like playing, contradicting myself, entering into paradox, I will end with a quote that partly contradicts what I have said thus far. Yes, I quote a lot, I quote because I love giving the other person the floor, and it is also a way of standing outside my viewpoint or expanding it. So, I will end with a quote that might seem to contradict what I have been saying: "I dare not only speak of myself, but to speak only of myself: when I write of anything else, I miss my way and wander from my subject" (Montaigne: *Essays*, Book III, Chapter V, 1581).

It is clear that we are talking about a Renaissance philosopher, the starting point of his doctrine is scepticism, the right to doubt... A doubt that does not deny the cognoscibility of the world. His contemporaries were also Racine, Corneille... And, in England, Shakespeare!



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